

A movie poster for the film 'A Queen's Spy'. The top half features a man, Sam Burnell, in medieval armor, looking intensely at the viewer. He is holding a sword, of which only the hilt and a portion of the blade are visible on the left. The background is a dramatic scene of a stone castle or fortress at night, with a sky filled with intense orange and red flames, suggesting a fire or battle. The bottom half of the poster is dark, with the title 'A QUEEN'S SPY' written in large, metallic, block letters that appear to be resting on a surface of sparks or embers.

SAM BURNELL

A QUEEN'S
SPY

Table of Contents

Dedication
Introduction
Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen
Chapter Fifteen
Chapter Sixteen
Chapter Seventeen
Chapter Eighteen
Chapter Nineteen
Chapter Twenty
Chapter Twenty-One
Chapter Twenty-Two
Review's would be really appreciated.

OceanofPDF.com

For All My Children

Jules
Saffron
Savannah
Spyke

OceanofPDF.com

Introduction

The mist still clung to the fields and stole the colour from the trees as the men gathered for the hunt. A mounted man looked down from the top of the hill towards the group; although a mile distant, he could hear the muffled conversations, the laughter and the barking dogs. Holding his own horse still, he waited, although not for long.

The pack broke and a group of riders headed up the hill towards him. He recognised the man at their head. "This time, Robert..." He was ready for the confrontation, and was surprised when the group of riders slowed and stopped a good distance away. Too late, he realised what their intention was. He turned his horse and spurred it towards the tree line but he was too late; the crossbow bolt sprung forward with deadly accuracy, tearing through the horse's neck.

The dying horse collapsed, taking its rider to the ground with it. Managing to free his feet from the stirrups, the man avoided being crushed, but the fall was hard and he felt the sickening snap as his left arm broke. The horse had nearly made it to the trees and he crossed the remaining distance quickly, ducking inside the leafy sanctuary, hearing the hooves pounding up the hill behind him.

Leaning against a tree, eyes closed he fought to stay conscious; pain from the break engulfing him. He had been stupid, so bloody stupid. What had possessed him to think his brother would do no more than confront him? He knew Robert better than that. Now they would run him to ground and he couldn't even give himself the satisfaction of a fighting end. Richard bit back an exclamation as he pushed the broken arm inside his jacket. Bloody brilliant! Could this day get any worse?

With the arm supported the pain lessened. He could hear the men now, thrashing their way through the small wood, shouting and screaming. It wasn't going to be long before someone found him. Drawing his sword, he stood ready.

As he watched, one of Robert's men tethered his horse at the forest's edge and began to walk towards him. Richard stood quietly; the man walked straight past him.

Don't turn around...keep walking. Richard's eyes were on the horse. Could he make it?

But turn around the man did and only feet from Richard whose blade he found leveled at his chest. In a straight fight, Richard would not have waited, but with a broken arm he didn't weigh his chances of success that highly.

The man looked like a servant, not one of his brother's companions.

"Hold; this is not our argument," Richard said.

The man took a careful step backwards, and as he did so, a horse came crashing through the undergrowth.

"Jack, have you seen him?" the rider yelled. "Robert has placed twenty-five pieces on his head."

Jesus, Harry! I was wrong: today could indeed get worse. Harry was his cousin and his brother's lap dog and most ardent admirer.

Then the unexpected happened. Jack, the man who stood at Richard's sword point, signalled him to be quiet and turned to Harry, who had not seen his quarry propped against the tree. Grabbing Harry's foot from his stirrup, he threw him over the horse's back to land on the forest floor. Richard did not need a further invitation; he caught the reins the man threw at him and hauled himself into the saddle. Turning the horse, he joined his rescuer and the pair sped off down the hillside.

Chapter One

France 1552 A.D.

The sea was stormy, which was bad – both for those who earned their living from its depths and those who wished to travel over its surface. Jack was in the latter category. A storm, lasting three days, had kept the boat he was to take to England tied securely in the harbour, while Jack loitered in the ale houses of Dieppe, trying to amuse himself with his scant supply of coins. Lodging at the Firkin, an English-owned inn, he waited with other travellers for the winds to die and the white topped waves to lessen their furious pounding of the sea defences.

Jack entered the inn and found the smoky air heavy with the odour of dampened wool, stale food and sea coal, which crackled in the fire. The room with its low ceiling and haphazard arrangement of benches and tables was warm and friendly; the contrast with the inhospitable evening outside was stark. Most customers sat in small groups, the benches pulled in a semi-circle around the fire. The benches that were vacant were those against the shadowed walls.

Pulling the rain-sodden cloak from his shoulders before the damp could seep through to the clothes below, Jack shook what he could of the water from it. Shabby with the years of being slept in, ridden in and fought in, the splotted mud could detract little from it that time and use had not already claimed.

“Hey!” exclaimed a voice loudly.

Jack turned and found a red-faced priest, splashed with mud and water, who he had not immediately seen as he closed the door. Mumbling an apology, he made to pass and return to his room on the floor above.

“And what sort of apology was that?” The little man caught Jack’s sleeve in a wiry grasp.

“I said I was sorry,” Jack said tersely.

“Well you don’t sound as if you mean it.”

“What do you want me to do?” Jack wrenched his arm free.

The priest looked up at him from under bushed eyebrows and a forehead wrinkled like the leather of an ill-cured hide. Small black eyes narrowed as a thought occurred to him. "Sit down." The priest's voice was used to commanding from the pulpit.

"What for?" Jack snapped.

"Because I asked you to. Now sit down." A naked leg protruded from his robes, pushing a stool.

Jack, too puzzled to refuse, took the offered seat, depositing his saturated cloak over the end of the bench.

"I take it you weren't off anywhere in particular?" the priest enquired further. Jack shook his head in reply. "Well, you don't look much like good company do you?"

"Should I be?" Jack's annoyance had not completely subsided. A sinewy, tough hand reached for his cloak. He was not going to sit and be berated by an old cleric in dirty vestments with an attitude that matched the weather.

"Now just hold your tongue will you?" A look of long suffering creased the priest's face. "Now I'll make a deal with you. Match that and we'll spend a pleasant evening together, which is the least you can do for soaking a poor old man." Three coins appeared on the table.

"Poor old man? There's an ox beneath that robe. You'll get no sympathy from me." Jack couldn't keep a slight smile from his face.

"I'm not asking you for sympathy, just to match that." A bony forefinger, almost skeletal beneath papered skin, prodded the largest of the three coins.

Looking at the coins, Jack recognised them for what they were: enough to pay for half a pitcher of ale. He wondered if the priest habitually passed his evenings at the expense of others. He was well enough acquainted with the game to know that holy orders would not bar the cleric from guzzling his ale at twice his own rate. But then, he had little money left and it was an option preferable to returning to his room to wait and see if morning brought pleasant weather.

"I don't know why, old man, but I'll match you," Jack conceded.

"Call me Felix, my son." The priest grinned, a little too triumphantly for Jack's liking.

As Jack busied himself ordering ale, the priest observed him closely with dark, shrewd eyes. The blond hair, darkened by water, was probably, he thought, as lustrous as a May dance maiden's when dry. The younger man wore a brown leather jerkin, its stitching slightly frayed at one shoulder, the

elbows and front smoothed and darkened with the dirt of wear. The only evidence of care was on the wide, polished sword belt and shining quillons. Possibly once a soldier, the priest mused, and now probably for hire; recent times did not look as if they had been too kind.

Jack was surprised to find how easy a companion Felix was, and he talked freely as they shared the pitcher of warm ale. He was further surprised, and a little ashamed, when the jug emptied and Felix insisted on paying in full for a fresh one. The discourse so far had covered such general topics as the ill health of the English monarch, the continued strings of power held by Northumberland, the price wars that had starved some of those lucky enough to survive the sweating sickness, plus the inevitable conversation about the ferocity of the storm that continued to rage outside.

“There you go, my son,” Felix said, filling Jack’s cup and then his own.

“Felix, pray don’t say that. No one has ever called me son; I would rather you didn’t change that now.” Jack avoided his gaze.

Felix, under white-flecked eyebrows, observed him closely for a moment. He saw the dark look that had descended over the fair features. But, after a lifetime of inquisitive confessions, he no longer saw any barrier to his curiosity and brushed aside Jack’s warning words. “Ah, so that’s your curse is it? There was no harm meant, lad.”

“No, the harm was done years ago,” Jack spoke to himself and drained his cup, attempting to cover his discomfort.

Felix could see the pain Jack was feeling was often felt. Sympathy, however, was not the required medicine. “Troubles you, does it?” he asked bluntly.

“Wouldn’t it bother you?” Jack threw back.

“Well, that does depend, doesn’t it? I know nothing about you. Tell me something and I’ll think on it.” Felix refilled Jack’s emptied cup. “Now, don’t you look at me like that. There is nothing here to be wary of, only an old man who tries to serve God as best he can. Come on, lad, tell me something of yourself.”

Jack opened with a barb sharpened with bitterness and loaded with resentment. “My mother lives in St Agnes’s Abbey.” He watched with some satisfaction as Felix’s eyebrows rose towards his reduced hairline. He had used the words often enough to know the reaction they produced; Felix’s, although mild, was as he had come to expect. “Not then, of course, not

when she bore me. Before that she was a lady in waiting.” Jack paused. “Fitzwarren’s lady found out and she went to St. Agnes’s after I was born.”

Felix interjected, “Ah, so you’re a Lord’s bastard, are you?” He didn’t flinch as Jack cast iced-blue eyes on him when he bestowed the title he so resented.

“Makes no difference,” Jack insisted. “Fitzwarren had four sons; there was never a shortage of heirs. I was, shall we say, an unwelcome sight to his lady. Fitzwarren would have had me in the house but not her. So he placed me in his brother’s household where I was brought up waiting on his sons.” Jack stopped; this was as far as he ever went.

Felix heard the bitterness in his voice. He sighed. It was the way he supposed sadly. It was not an uncommon tale and during his life it had been recounted to him over and over. Some bore the brand openly and cursed humanity for it, seemingly uncaring; some carried it secretly and silently, ever afraid of discovery. A few laid it to rest and shrugged off the faults of their fathers. Felix doubted if Jack fell into the latter category.

“Not a happy life, eh?” he said, prompting Jack.

“I did better than most, I suppose. What they learnt, I learnt; what they did I did but,” Jack paused smiling widely at the memory of it, “better.”

Felix heard the arrogance of his claim, but decided to allow him it. “So you made no friends with them then?”

“Something like that. The youngest, Harry, went to London and I followed. I had no wish to stay.” Jack shrugged.

Felix was curious. Jack’s face told him that the younger man had said as much as he was prepared to. He tried another question to see if it would unlock more. “Did you get on with Harry, then?”

Felix got a blank expression and a shake of the blond head for his trouble. Undeterred he persisted. “Did you meet your brothers again?” This time he got a reaction.

One corner of Jack’s mouth twisted in a wry smile. “Oh yes.”

Felix pressed. “Go on. You said there were four sons.”

“Aye,” Jack said, “Peter, Robert, William, and Richard.”

“You know them all then?” Felix asked.

“Peter was heir, but died young; broke his neck in a fall from a horse. I never knew him.” A voice devoid of emotion gave a factual account. “William joined the church young, but the other two...” Jack’s voice trailed off.

“So, which of the other two, Richard and Robin, did you meet first?” Felix said.

“Robert,” Jack corrected.

Felix sighed “Richard or Robert then, which first?”

There was a pause. “Robert,” Jack said. “Harry went to London and I went with him, as I said. Harry used to hunt with one of his cousins, a right arrogant bastard he was, Robert Fitzwarren.” He pronounced his brother’s name with malicious precision.

“Ah, your brother.” He knew from Jack’s tone there was no love there.

“Aye, but he didn’t know it and I wasn’t about to enlighten him. He’d have had me whipped to death.” Jack stopped again. “I was no more than Harry’s servant.”

The explanation was unnecessary; Felix already had a good grasp of how the arrangement had worked. Seeing the light in the other man’s eyes he leant across the table. “There’s a story here, am I right? Go on, lad, tell it.”

Jack turned serious eyes on him. “You’re not interested.”

“I am, lad,” Felix said sincerely, for he was.

Jack, reassured by Felix’s words, smiled; albeit small he had an audience, something Jack could not resist. “You are right at that; there is a story.” Stretching his shoulders, he settled himself back at the table. “There was a hunt. Harry said we’d join Robert that Saturday. There was naught unusual in that, but,” Jack paused for effect, “he said Richard Fitzwarren would be there.”

“Ah, your other brother,” Felix said nodding. “Younger or older than Robert?”

“Robert became heir when Peter died. Richard is...Hell, you know, I’m not sure if he’s the youngest of the four or not.” Jack frowned as Felix’s explorations led to the discovery that his knowledge of his brother was incomplete. “Anyway, that’s beside the point. Harry knew there was some feud between the pair. I had heard as much but I didn’t know why. I still don’t know what the crux of it was, but I can tell you that there’s something serious there. Harry told me that the previous time they met, Robert left with half of his ear missing. Needless to say, Harry was looking forward to watching the sparks fly.”

“You don’t like Harry?” It was more an observation than a question.

Jack paused recollecting his former master. “No. He was an idiot. Robert had him following like a puppy. He borrowed money from him, abused him

and still Harry went back for more.” Jack stopped suddenly. His eyes returned from the past to focus on Felix’s face.

“Go on, lad, you can’t leave me there,” Felix prompted.

Jack looked at his listener’s eager face and continued with his story. “I’d never seen Richard before. I was looking for someone who looked like me, or Robert.” Robert was added as an afterthought. “So when we arrived I was holding Harry’s horse, and I could see Robert surrounded by his usual retinue, including Harry. There was no one else there who looked like he could be Richard. Then the horn blew and Harry summoned me to bring his horse. I asked then where Richard was. He laughed and told me that he hadn’t dared to show up. It was obvious that this had been what Robert’s flock had been laughing about. I suppose I was disappointed, but not for long.” Jack took a drink grinning. “You see, he was already there, up on the moor.”

“How did you know it was him?” Felix asked.

“I knew it must be him when Robert saw him and held up his hand for his rabble to stop. He looked nothing like Robert, believe me.” Jack leant towards Felix in a confidential manner. “Robert looks like the scraps from a bantam fight, you know what I mean, all colour and baubles.”

Felix nodded, grinning. “I know the type, all piss an’ wind.”

“Exactly. Richard, he was in the distance, mind, was black: cloak, boots, jacket, hair, horse, the lot. He sat up there on the moor, leaning slightly forward in the saddle, watching Robert. Harry rode up to join Robert and I followed, more than a little curious by now I can tell you. Robert yells at the top of his voice, ‘We have our quarry!’” Jack paused, looking closely at Felix to see if he comprehended the implication of Robert’s intent all those years ago, not convinced he added, “meaning Richard.”

“Yes, lad, I’m with you. Get on with it,” Felix said briskly.

Satisfied with his listener’s understanding, he continued. “The group, on Robert’s command, went bellowing up the hill after him. There were trees as you crested the top of the moor about a quarter mile ahead, and Richard was riding towards them, not quickly though. Robert demanded a bow. Now I’ll give the arsehole this: he was a fine shot. Richard saw what he meant to do and turned his horse to the trees, but he was too late. I saw the animal later, straight through the neck clean as you like.” Jack sat shaking his head at the memory of it. He reached for the jug to fill the cups.

Felix moved quicker. "I'll do that, lad. Did he get to trees then?" The story paused in the wake of a fresh assault of white lightning, followed by a seemingly cataclysmic boom.

The volley subsided and Jack took up the tale once more. "The horse fell, I saw it go down, and the rider seemed to go under it. Robert rode like hell across the moor. I was at his side when he got there and I expected to see a man pinned beneath the beast. Anyway he wasn't. He must have stayed low so we couldn't see him and made it into the cover of the trees. Robert was as mad as the devil. He was sure he had trapped his brother." Jack stopped, laughing at the memory of Robert's blustering wide-eyed disbelief. "Anyway, Robert orders his men to flush him out; there wasn't much, maybe half an acre or so of wood in a hollow. They ride off round the back of the trees to try and drive him to Robert. I couldn't believe it; I knew for sure he meant to take the man's life."

Jack stopped, the story running on before his eyes, denying Felix a narrative.

"So you did something, eh?" Felix prompted him again.

"Aye. Aye, I did. They went off to my left and right, but I knew he must have gone straight into the trees from the horse; it made sense because it was the closest path to cover. So I sought to follow him. Maybe, I thought, I could find him first."

"Did you?" Felix said.

"If you'll let me, I'll tell you," Jack complained. Felix nodded enthusiastically. "No, he found me. I wasn't dressed well enough to be taken for one of Robert's followers and he took me for a servant, or a stable hand or such like. He was behind me; I must have walked straight past him." There was still a measure of disbelief in Jack's voice as he recalled how he had missed the man. "He said, 'Hold; this is not our argument.' I turned and Richard was leaning against a tree. He had a goodly cut on his forehead and had his left hand tucked into his jacket – I found out later that he broke it in the fall – but he still had a sword in his right hand, levelled at my chest. I can tell you, my heart stopped."

"What did you say? Surely you said something," Felix said eagerly.

"I did what all men should do when faced with Richard Fitzwarren and three foot of drawn steel, or woe betide them. I backed away."

"Aye, lad, that's what you know now, but what about back then?" Felix directed Jack's mind back to the time in the woods on Harlsey Moor.

“I knew if he was anything like Robert he would have been taught well. I was going to invite him to take my horse when Harry comes crashing through the undergrowth yelling at me had I seen Richard. Robert had placed twenty-five pieces on his head. I raised my hand to signal Richard to be still where he was. Harry, the sop, rides up to me. I’m standing at his stirrup looking up at his child’s face. He was so pathetic, no idea what game he played for Robert.” Jack paused, shaking his head. Felix didn’t interrupt; he knew the other would continue. “I grabbed his leg; I’ll never forget the surprise on his face as I threw him out of the saddle. He lay on the floor wailing like a babe.” Jack was smiling broadly again. “Richard still stood there watching. He hadn’t moved and there was an odd look on his face. I threw the reins at him and we rode out of the woods like the devil was on our tails, and I suppose it was.” Jack chuckled as he dwelt on Harry’s downfall.

“So did you tell him who you was?” Felix drew Jack’s attention back.

“I didn’t, not then. We finally pulled up outside the village...” Jack’s mind drifted back to the misty road again, two horses sweating and steaming in the morning air stamping and pulling at their bits as their riders forced them to a halt.

Richard pulled his mount in front of Jack’s. “I am Richard Fitzwarren, as you might have guessed, and I believe I owe you my thanks for the horse.” The horse below him wheeled and pulled turning to its other flank. With difficulty, Richard pulled the agitated animal back to square it with Jack’s mount. “You have sacrificed your position for me. Your master will not welcome you back.”

Jack thought Richard was reaching for money. “No, you are not indebted to me.”

“Here, it’s all I have.” Richard held in his hand the sword he had previously levelled at Jack. He threw it horizontally over the short distance between the horses and Jack intercepted the scabbard. Richard’s horse wheeled round again, pushing itself against Jack’s, which took fright at the collision. It was only with extreme effort that he stopped the excited animal from taking flight.

“Make sure they give you a good price for it. Adieu.” With that Richard released the reins on the animal and horse and rider disappeared from view.

“You followed?” Felix asked.

Jack looked up, drawn back from the past. “No.” He shook his head. “I don’t know why. God, I didn’t know him from Adam, it seemed so...” Jack couldn’t find the words and was saved from having to, by a whip crack and tumultuous roar from the elements.

“Ah, so that’s where you got it from. I was wondering.” Felix pointed at the sword, turning his head sideways he tried to read the carved inscription that ran along the quillons. “What’s it say?”

“Orderint dum metuant,” Jack supplied.

Felix stopped him from supplying the translation. “I know, lad, I’m not as stupid as I look. Let them hate, so long as they fear, am I right?” Jack nodded and Felix smiled happily. “Anyway,” he continued, “did you catch up with him again?”

“I did. I spent a year in London or thereabouts keeping low and out of Harry’s way. It wasn’t easy; he wanted my blood.” Jack grinned. “Eventually I went to France. There was a small village near Paris called... God, I can’t think of the name of it...”

“Never mind the name, my son,” Felix smiled weakly at his slip. “Sorry, lad.”

“Huh.” Jack had missed Felix’s closing words, he continued. “Anyway, there was a festival with a local champion swinging a sword around. Well, I was short of money and I won myself a fair purse. I didn’t know Richard was there. He said later he recognised the sword and set out to get it back. He bloody well challenged me!” The indignation in Jack’s voice was still fresh as he recalled it. “I couldn’t fight him. After some minutes he stopped and walked towards me...”

“Why?” Richard said, lowering his blade. “I’ve seen your skill. Why won’t you exercise it on me?” Then he smiled, in recognition. “Harlsey Moor! Thank you again for the horse. I see you put that to good use,” he tapped the steel in Jack’s hand with his own blade.

“You remember?” Jack found himself struck partially dumb again in the presence of his brother.

“Of course.” Richard turned to the crowd and yelled, “All bets are off.” He threw an arm around Jack’s shoulder. “Come, let me repay you properly.”

Late into the night, with alcoholic courage, Jack had told Richard his secret. Richard had risen from the table and stood looking at Jack. "You have my commiserations," he had finally said and left the inn.

"Well, what did you expect?" Felix asked looking at Jack as he spilled ale over the table in an effort to blindly fill the cups. Jack shrugged and sighed. "You were in awe of the man. I bet you were making a Harry of yourself all night, eh? So what's he like then, this brother of yours?" Felix asked.

A twisted smile crept onto Jack's face. "Ah well, that is the question. I don't know. He keeps his own counsel; what he thinks and what he does are for his own ends. I just try and keep off the sharp side of his temper mostly."

"Are you still with him then?"

Jack nodded.

"And how do you get on?"

"Not well, not as brothers," Jack said moodily.

"Not as equals is what you meant, isn't it?" Felix observed shrewdly. Jack said nothing but looked at Felix wondering at his words. "Who carried the curse, eh? Do you treat him as equal, eh? From what you said, you don't. You had a picture of him in your mind from when you met him in the woods, didn't you? You lived with the memory of that meeting for two years, and in that time, knowing nothing about him, you made him the brother you never had. Cast a mould that the man wouldn't fit into..."

"Shut up," Jack yelled outraged.

"I only speak the truth, don't take on," Felix said. "Takes an odd un like me to see it sometimes. The one you met in woods doesn't exist, only here,"

Felix tapped his head with a bony finger.

"I don't have to listen to this," Jack said angrily.

Felix laid his hand soothingly on Jack's arm, smiling. "Too late, lad, I said it."

The old man's manner drained the anger from him and he lowered himself back onto the seat, his head dropping into his hands. It was something he had never considered. Jack took a long drink; he didn't want to consider it.

Felix watched the brooding face before him, immersed in thoughts he had provoked, struggling with the possibilities. It was a melancholy not

overly helped by the alcohol.

Felix judged that it was time for a change of subject. "So, are you bound again for England?" It was a fair assumption, there being many travelers congregated at the inn waiting for the storm to break.

"Aye. Richard has a group of men with him that he hopes to hire, and I can tell you the prospect of money would be pleasing," Jack said, allowing the discourse to change path.

"What have you been doing in France then?" Felix enquired.

"Since I joined him, same thing," Jack replied bleakly.

"Why leave France then?" Felix asked.

"We outstayed our welcome." Jack looked up and sighed. He could see Felix wanted all the details, and he could see no harm in providing them.

"We were hired last to protect a mill of all things. Comte Riberac had five mills, two had been burnt to the ground and he had mind to keep the last three standing. Turns out the mills belonged to the villages, not to the Comte. He was trying to levy a tax on the villages for all sacks ground, to claim them as his by right," Jack provided.

"And?" Felix prompted.

"Well, let's put it like this, we didn't get paid. Richard had all the carts with the Comte's ground corn in driven into the middle of the village market. Those carts were picked over and emptied in a trice," Jack said darkly.

"A Godly thing to do," Felix said nodding.

"That's as maybe, but it's left me with no money to my name and what I did have hocked," Jack complained moodily.

Neither saw the man Jack had provided with a horse on Harlsey Moor approach and stand quietly at the end of the table. Richard Fitzwarren had been listening to the conversation for a few minutes before he decided to speak. "Is this a private moment? I would hate to interrupt." The silken voice, cool with indifference brought both heads up from table.

"No, sit if you will." Jack's voice bore a weight of resignation.

Felix grinned. He looked at the man who was about to join them: dark hair; immaculately dressed; the expression bored, but the eyes telling of a quick intellect; reservation and confidence; and, yes, arrogance, thought Felix as he saw the tight smile Richard bestowed on Jack, opposite in many ways to his fair companion. This must be the brother, but there was naught of his brother in his face. Jack had been blessed, by his mother by all

accounts, with a fair, smiling countenance. The brother had a fine face, dark skin, almost black hair and steel-grey eyes, the contrast sharp with the friendly blue he had looked into earlier. The darker brother was the taller and of slighter build, though Felix judged him no less powerful than his stockier sibling. Jack, dressed in fustian and old leather, made a stark contrast to the man now sitting next to him.

Smiling with inward satisfaction, Felix settled back to enjoy the evening. No one spoke. Heaven's forces regrouped, and surged forward with a charged assault of turbulence. The rolling cannonade drowned all noise in the inn. Jack flinched.

Richard reached for the pitcher and tipped it to inspect the contents. He looked at the priest. Hard steeled eyes told of an inquisitiveness not quite matched by his manner, the corner of his mouth twitched to a smile that carried no humour with it. "Well it looks as if I shall have to supply the ale if you want to continue with the spiritual guidance of the fair Polynices."

Felix looked at the expensive crested ring on the hand Richard used to summon a fresh pitcher; no wonder Jack was a little envious.

Jack met Felix's eyes, a weak smile on his face, as if apologising for what was about to ensue; his brother was turned away, employed in the task of obtaining another pitcher. "Meet my brother."

"I'd guessed," Felix said quietly.

The brief exchange had not, however, been missed by the newcomer, who, turning back, addressed Felix smiling. "Half-brother to be precise."

The ale arrived and Felix took the task of filling the cups. Richard, accepting his, addressed Jack. "So, have you been regaling..." He paused, turning to the priest who supplied him with his name. "...Felix with tales of our family heritage then?"

Jack, about to speak, was stopped by Felix who broke in first. "Jack was telling me how you met, a very interesting tale."

"A most interesting afternoon if I recall, and an expensive one," Richard replied lightly, his tone still that of the disinterested.

"Expensive?" Felix queried.

"I lost a horse, a sword and gained a dependent...eventually." Richard, smiling, clapped Jack on the back.

It was too much for Jack. A black expression settling on his usually lightly humoured features, he rose from the table, glowered at Richard and without a word turned on his heel and left.

“You’re a cruel one, aren’t you?” Felix exclaimed slamming his cup back on the table with some violence, watching his evening’s entertainment mount the stairs leading to the rooms above.

Richard looked up, the smile gone from his face. “Am I? Oh, probably.”

“It’s not Jack’s fault.” The words were gauged to produce a reaction.

Richard cast an assessing gaze on Felix before replying. “Not Jack’s fault for being a bastard, or not his fault that he cannot accept me? I will accept that Jack cannot possibly be called to account for the former.”

“Both.” Felix had not expected such an accurate response from Richard. “You want him to leave you?” Felix asked.

“It had crossed my mind.” Richard’s fingers idly turned the cup in his hand.

“That’s why you’re so cruel to him?” Felix was back in his stride again and leaning across the table continued, “That and you don’t want him on your conscience. You’ve walled yourself up in here.” Felix tapped his head for the second time that evening. “No space for another in your life, is there?”

“Do you normally make such rapid judgement on meeting people?”

“Sometimes,” Felix said. “I have only what Jack tells me to go on, unless...”

“No, I am in no need of confession. Trust me, my soul is well beyond redemption,” Richard said smiling lightly.

“Dark words. A man who believes he is beyond salvation must feel well-damned indeed. So you’d prefer to meet the devil alone, is that it?” Felix asked, drawing on his power of office to deliver a rebuke to a man who spoke so blasphemously of his own salvation.

“We are all damned, I believe, and require salvation to save our souls. Don’t lecture me. I have Jack to council me in the error of my ways, which are, as I am sure you will have heard, not inconsiderable.” Richard’s voice was light, the tone not matching the words. “It was probably you who sent Jack to his bed in a bad mood, rather than me. What exactly did you say to him?”

“Just told the lad a few truths, nothing probably he didn’t know already,” Felix said.

“You don’t miss much do you?”

“It’s a talent.” Felix shrugged his shoulders. “Age and experience and a love of God,” he leant towards Richard, “who tells us that...”

Richard cut him off. "I know: love thy brother..."

"Precisely," Felix said nodding as if that was the answer they had been seeking all night.

"It's not that easy." Richard's voice was no longer detached.

Felix looked up quickly at the first hint of confession. "I can see that. He has you cast as something you are not. Well, you might be, I don't know much about you, but I doubt it. Jack can't help it. Give him time, don't force him away because he begs to be a part of your life," Felix concluded, then drained his cup.

"I force him away for his own safety. He does not beg to be a part of my life, he cannot be. He will remain as he is, displaced, and he will stay so while he has me to remind him of his inferiority." Richard's voice was weary, and he sounded as if he was reciting an often-stated fact.

"Why make him feel inferior then?" Felix asked bluntly.

"By the saints you know so well, I do not; he does it himself," Richard replied, exasperated.

"Aye, well, that's the fault of how he was raised. Sees you as someone to obey, to follow; he can't help that."

"That may be so." Richard drained his cup. "Here, I'll leave this, I am sure you will empty it." Smiling he rose to leave.

Felix pulled the pitcher towards him and settled down to empty it and muse on an interesting evening.

Richard pushed open the door to his own room. The man sitting by the fire looked up at his entry.

"A good night?" Dan enquired.

"In a word, no." Richard dropped his cloak over the back of a chair and sitting on the edge of the bed began pulling boots from his feet. Dan sensed his mood and said nothing else, busying himself collecting the discarded clothes as the other flung himself face down on the bed and spoke no more.

Chapter Two

The Duke of Northumberland, the most powerful man in England, was nervous. He found himself pacing outside the bedchamber of his young King. The coughing fits had worsened over the last week; the small body had lost weight, and the boy was more and more exhausted and unable to move. He had been unwell since the turn of the year; it was now February and there were serious concerns for his recovery.

Northumberland had felt he had little to fear. The last real threat to his power, Somerset, had ended on the block in January 1552 and Northumberland's favour with the King had been secured. Parliament's measures to quell unrest, backed by military force, had secured a peace in the realm, if only an uneasy one. The country remained troubled – harvests for successive years from 1549 had been disastrous, the sweating sickness had descended on the capital, prices were high, and debasing the coinage twice, once in '49 and then again in '51, had destroyed faith in the currency, but these were, he believed, minor troughs; times had been worse. England would develop and grow under his careful and guiding hand. He had all he could want. The power was his; he had succeeded.

However, the pivotal point of his power, the keystone upon which it relied, was crumbling. Edward VI, King of England, was dying. To be cheated of it all by death seemed such a cruel turn of fate. Northumberland needed Edward; without him his fall was sure; he had made too many enemies by his own hand as he rose to his supreme goal.

The door opened quietly and Northumberland was joined by Henry Sidney, his son-in-law and the King's close friend. Edward feared the doctors, who had yet again forced their ministrations on his shattered body, and had wanted the comfort of his friend's company.

"Well, Henry, what news?" Northumberland asked.

Henry Sidney shook his head; still he did not meet the Duke's enquiring gaze. Tired himself he dropped into a chair by the fire, any proprietary forgotten.

"Henry, tell me," Northumberland demanded.

"He is dying." Henry supplied the information the Duke wanted quietly.

“By God, they know not what they say,” the Duke boomed.

Henry tried to grasp the Duke’s sleeve, but the other had launched himself so rapidly at the door, that he missed, catching instead a handful of the ermine trimmed cloak. He pulled on it sharply. “No, no you can’t.” Henry said, drawn from his seat by the effort required to stop the Duke.

“Why?” Northumberland turned angrily on him, hauling the fabric from Henry’s hand.

“He doesn’t know. He doesn’t know. To tell him may...Please spare him this. Wait until they emerge, but please...” Henry pleaded; he had a genuine love for Edward.

“Yes, yes...Sit down.” Northumberland moved to seat himself opposite Henry. “You are right: the boy is ill. There is no need to add to it with the lunatic ravings of these so-called medics. He needs peace and rest; this has always served him good before. Lad is exhausted. I have told them he needs to be left alone. Time and the Lord will see him well.” The Duke spoke to himself, uttering the reassurances he needed to hear. Perhaps their vocalisation would lead to their reality.

For the first time Henry experienced a bitter dislike of his father-in-law.

Since February, Edward had worsened and the Duke had finally acknowledged what the doctors had told him. Edward, though, variously accepted and denied it. He had been ill so often during his life that he had come to expect recovery. As Edward’s life force ebbed, all the power, all Northumberland had worked for was slipping through his fingers; to Northumberland his own loss felt physical. Worse than that, he was being forced to bend to the will of Henry VIII. Every time he walked under the portraits of England’s largest monarch, he was sure they were laughing at him.

Northumberland was desperate, and what he was doing bore this out. Under the Succession Act 1544, Henry VIII had left a son as his heir. If Edward died childless, the throne passed to Mary, and then to Elizabeth. If this failed, the crown would go to the male descendants of Henry’s younger sister, Lady Frances Grey. This was the Duke’s key, and his plan was both simple and crude: Lady Frances was blessed with daughters only, as such there were no eligible male heirs. So, to generate one in whom the succession could be lodged, Northumberland married his son, Guildford Dudley, to the eldest daughter, Jane Grey. If Guildford could get the girl with child quick, then he had another heir.

In May he held a Devise, signed by Edward, leaving his crown to the male heirs of Lady Frances Grey. Hopefully the brat, Jane, could be brought to bed of one before Edward died. He closed his ears to the legality of the document. For him the signature and seal of Edward were enough to carry its weight. Legally the document could not stand, flouting as it did the Succession Act of 1544, and also because it named as heirs non-existent persons. Northumberland relied on time, time for Jane to produce him an heir, and then the document could be safely amended to name the child, and time hopefully for Edward VI to see it born. Northumberland wondered if the portraits still laughed at him; if they did he was no longer aware of it.

Time was not on his side. In June, the Duke accepted the imminent death of Edward; it was a matter of weeks, if not days, he had been told. There was no way Jane and Guildford could produce the heir he needed. Northumberland had the Devise changed, the privy councillors forced by himself and Edward to sign the amendment. The heir to the throne was now the Protestant Lady Jane. Northumberland began to draw support to his cause. Lady Jane must ascend to the throne of England, and Catholic Mary, the chief rival to his scheme, must be secured, when the time came, in the Tower.

Nothing but a shadow in a darkened doorway, Jack had watched as Richard Fitzwarren ducked through the low inn entrance. That had been over an hour ago, as dusk filled the gap between day and night.

He wondered at the night's outcome. It was after all this meeting alone that had brought Richard, Jack and twenty-one hired men back across the narrow waste of sea between France and England to London. Jack harboured the fervent hope that it would lead to their hire, and soon. His back ached; the chill night air carried with it a cold damp that had begun to penetrate his body.

A taper in a first floor window flickered and Jack returned his attention to the room and his task of observing those within the Inn, and those who may be outside watching. Three others of a likely look had entered shortly after Richard arrived; too well dressed they walked with swift purpose, without camaraderie or companionable banter, setting themselves apart from the other patrons who ambled to the door. Illuminated by steady flame, men's faces, lurid in the candlelight, could be seen as they passed the open window. Jack concluded, correctly, that in this room a meeting was

being conducted, with, among the participants, his brother. Whatever else he fancied Richard's shortcomings were, a lack of intelligence was not one. He would not provide his lit form as a recognisable portrait framed by the embrasure for any other concealed observer. One man though had no such qualms. He was elderly and dressed in folds of rich russet, their luxury deepened by the fire's glow. The harshness of age lined his face, the dynamism of youth long since lost, ruddy wine-reddened cheeks heightened by the contrast with the grey shroud of once brown hair.

Jack turned his eyes to the street again, attentive to detect others, like himself, who spied on the night's work. A drunken sailor in his inebriated staggering collided with the inn wall opposite and spent some time sitting in the gutter before he could gather his wits and balance and clamber back to his unsteady feet. The drunk moved slowly from the street, using as support the wall that had caused his original collapse, and was now so vital in preventing a plummet from the vertical. Jack concluded it could not be a ruse; to act the drunk in such a manner would seem too contrived for a sober man.

Three men left the inn; light from the interior momentarily split the street in half before the door closed once more. Jack guessed they were drinkers from the downstairs room. After a hasty conversation in the fresh air of the night, the group split and two staggered off to Jack's left, the remaining man urinated up the inn wall before departing.

Jack shifted his weight again, leaning with his other shoulder against the wall. Prepared for a longer wait he was surprised, as the blood circulated back fully into his left arm, when Richard emerged from the door. From the preparations and the time of waiting for the meeting he had expected a long one, not an hour's rapid discussion concluded before the night was late.

Jack watched Richard disappear from sight. He walked slowly, a figure of no particular note in the night. Darkly clothed, as was his style, his obscurity was ensured. Minute inspection was required of the observer to see the finery of the cloth, the expense of tailoring, the high quality of the few jewels and the arrogance of manner; only then would he concede that this was a man of some note. Jack glowered at his retreating back. The cuts in expenditure that Richard had forced on Jack, he thought bitterly, he had not turned on himself.

Unable to absent himself until sure all had left, Jack remained. The man with the grizzled fringe emerged, pausing briefly on the threshold of the

inn; he looked nervously about him and then ducked back inside. Some minutes later, a carriage drew up in front of the door and Jack's view was blocked as an unknown number boarded. The springs tipped to the weight of the new burden; he suspected three had stepped up from the street. After a long while, when Jack was wondering if all had departed with the grizzled man, two more emerged from the door. Young, less than his age, well dressed and extremely in their cups they staggered in unison, heads together sharing some quiet and slurred conversation, the gist of which Jack could not make out. He judged they were part of the trio who had walked purposefully and soberly to the inn earlier. Jack saw a servant extinguish the tapers in the room above; it was his signal that his night's work was done, for none now remained. Looking carefully up and down the street and listening for others, Jack assured himself he was temporarily alone and vacated the doorway, slipping into the dark shadows that clung to the walls and gutters.

Richard he found, as he knew he would, back in the hired room in Aldergate Street, just outside the city walls. He was seated at the desk writing, a pile of sealed letters sitting neatly in front of him. Richard signed the last and applied the seal to the folded sheet. Jack removed his cloak and cast it absently on the bed from where it slithered to a heap on the floor, Richard noting its careless journey.

"A good night's work?" Jack asked, pulling a chair loudly across the floor.

"Well, that rather depends on who you are." Richard placed the letter with the rest. "If you are the King of England or rank yourself as a contestant in the hierarchical race to claim the succession, then I would say it was not a good night's work." Richard settled back in the chair. "However, if perchance you were out to sell your labours to the highest bidder, then yes, it was a good night's work." Richard paused. "I have completed my sordid tasks."

"Shall I take it from that then that we are employed? I should hate to have to go back to France penniless." The emphasis on the final word was sufficient for the implication of blame not to go unnoticed. "In fact, come to that, I don't want to go back to France, penniless or not."

Richard ignored the implication. "And I thought you enjoyed France?" The guarded grey eyes warned Jack that this was not to be an easy conversation. When he chose, Richard made being difficult an art at which

he excelled. Tonight looked set to be another of partial information, half-truths, falsehoods and omission, nothing straightforward or simple.

Jack continued, curiosity the uneasy victor, "Do we stay in London, or are we to move elsewhere?"

Richard asked, "Why? Do you not want to remain in London, Jack?"

Jack sighed allowing Richard to change the subject. "Not particularly, my mind would be eased, however, if I knew where Harry was, and your brother for that matter. London is a dangerous place for both of us."

"If it helps any, Robert is in Kent hunting, which, as you know, is one of his favourite passions, even if I do not agree on occasion with his choice of quarry. Your master, Harry, plucked temporarily of the finery of my dear older brother, is here in London." Richard watched Jack's face to gauge his reaction.

"Harry is no worry on his own; he'll act only as Robert's message boy, eager to please as always. You have not been idle then. Can I assume you also wish to avoid the hounds?" Jack asked.

The sarcasm was not lost on Richard. "On the contrary, I am looking forward to meeting cousin Harry. I admit it has been a while, but I am sure he will remember me."

"What! Are you out of your skull? We're barely back and you want them snapping at our heels," Jack blurted. The look on his brother's face rang of mischief but whether it was aimed at himself or Harry, he could not tell.

"I am quite sane," Richard said.

"Why? We are back in England and on the edge of penury, and you... you...want to start a private war?" Jack said angrily.

"That is exactly why I wished to see Cousin Harry. Penury, as you rightly point out, is an unpleasant state. I am going to propose he make us a loan," Richard said.

"A loan! You are bloody mad!" Jack stood so quickly the chair toppled and banged to the floor.

"A loan is perhaps the wrong word, loans being generally repaid. However, I think you'll find Harry most agreeable to my terms. Jack, worry not, I shan't ask you to deliver my letter to Harry," Richard said evenly, still smiling at the reaction he had provoked by his revelations, adding, "Let's just say that there are many who profit from insurrection. However, it is rarely those who thought to directly involve themselves. Harry has ever

made bad decisions; one more at my behest will not overly change matters will it?"

"As you will," Jack said sighing. "You'll do as you please."

"Jack, you are no fun. It's all black and white with you. There are no shades of grey, are there? Settle your temper," Richard said

"By the saints you aimed to anger me! What did you expect me to say?" Jack scooped the chair from the floor. "Go on, tell me more."

"We will be here three days more. Dan has already delivered my invitation to meet with Harry and I don't expect he will want to keep me waiting." Richard had his brother's full and undivided attention.

"Why would Harry wish to meet with you?" Jack asked slowly.

"To keep his head," Richard said innocently.

"Give me strength!" Jack said through clenched teeth. "You'll not leave me like this. What are you up to?"

Richard sighed, "I thought you were about to wash your hands of my intended deeds."

"I was...you drew me back." Jack was not about to be diverted again. "Why will Harry be so keen to meet you?"

"As you so rightly pointed out, I am rapidly running short of coinage, which is a most unhappy state. However, Harry, I believe, still has a good hold on his father's purse strings, would you not agree?" Richard said as if explaining the obvious to a child.

"He always had when I was with him; the old man was constantly bailing the bastard out, more to keep him from turning back up at his door if you ask me." Jack was about to add more, but stopped himself. He was not about to allow Richard to steer him to new conversational pastures.

"As you say he can raise capital when required, and that is a facility he will have to exercise quite soon," Richard paused. "Poor unfortunate Harry has allied himself with Northumberland's conspirators."

Jack's eyes narrowed. "It may have escaped your attention, brother, but is that not what we have done?"

"Absolutely not," Richard said indignantly. "We have been merely hired by Lord Byrne to allow him to fulfill his part of this most treasonous bargain.

Harry also, it appears, is in the market for men to support Northumberland, and hence marks himself as the Duke's man. He has high

hopes of advancement and will not let me, or the requirement to hand over a quantity of gold to keep his treasonous intent secret, stand in his way.”

“Do I gather from this that Harry knows not of your employer?” Jack said smiling. So, Richard would play with poor Harry then. Well, a more deserving recipient for Richard’s temper and acid tongue he could not think of, the only sorrow being he was not likely to witness the meeting.

“He is not likely to either in the immediate future. Byrne is a worried man who hedges his bets considerably. We are to leave London in three days and take ourselves to his manor, there to wait further...instructions. He wishes to keep us out of sight until required so half the men will work as labourers, six will join his household, including us, and the rest will take up residence in the village. He wishes to lend a small help should Northumberland take the day, but should he lose, he needs to be able to cover his tracks and wants not an army camped in his fields, drawing the stares of all.”

Jack nodded seeing now how Harry could be deceived.

Richard continued. “So, we shall be safely hidden from view, and undoubtedly Harry will try to track me down, but unfortunately he will not be able to find me. Byrne is not likely to admit to my existence and we shall temporarily vanish into England’s green fields.”

“Whatever you ask for from Harry, add an extra ten pieces to it for me.” Jack was grinning broadly.

“You will understand now why I ask you to keep yourself out of sight until we leave,” Richard said seriously.

“Aye, don’t worry; it will be worth a few days of boredom if you can get this over on that bastard,” Jack said a little too quickly. Richard raised his eyebrows slightly as Jack bestowed on Harry his own title for the second time that evening.

“So, as you can see, I have not been lazing here as you suspected,” Richard said, a malicious smile on his face.

“Well you act like it,” Jack said to fill the silence, which was uncomfortable to only one of them.

“Possibly. But I am supposed to be idle, rich, careless, carefree, frivolous...Have I missed anything? Ah yes, you think I spend too much as well,” Richard added. “Whatever opinion you hold of me, I mind not, but I do mind when you share it so freely.”

Jack took the rebuke silently. Richard's voice told him of the danger that lounged before him, danger that bitter experience had taught him to avoid. "You've made your point," he said roughly, avoiding his brother's gaze by studying the frayed stitching on the inside of his left boot.

"Ah well, enough of me." Richard's tone was light again, "So, how did you spend your evening? See anything of any interest?" Richard turned the subject to a fresh track, much to Jack's unconcealed relief.

"The only one I saw clearly was an old man, grey hair at the front," Jack indicated where he meant with his hand. "Looks like a bloody badger, about your height, well fed. He called for a carriage; I didn't see how many boarded. Three others went to the inn soon after you, didn't look the normal type to go to such a place, two left drunk. I don't know where the third went," Jack said.

"Anyone else watching?" Richard asked.

"Yes, but I didn't see them. The old man stuck his head out of the door and a carriage turned up," Jack said apologetically.

"Would you recognise any of them again?" Richard asked.

"The old man; it was too dark to see the others clearly," Jack said shaking his head.

"The old man was Lord Byrne if you're interested," Richard supplied.

"Looks a right nervous type," Jack observed.

"Oh he is. Just got himself a young wife. He has no desire to embroil himself too deeply in plots." Richard reached for a book that lay closed on the desk; the conversation was finished.

Richard did not look up as Jack left.

Richard had come to know of Harry's activities through his recent revival of a network of which he had been a part before he left England. At the age of fourteen Richard Fitzwarren had been placed by his father in Thomas Seymour's household. Seymour, ever ambitious, would eventually marry Henry VIII's widow. However, long before that, he was involved in all kinds of intrigue, often knowing what the powerful would do before they had even made up their own minds on a course of action. Over the years, he had developed a network of informers and spies the length and breadth of the country, well-paid and reliable sources supplying him with useful information. Richard had worked for him, originally as a scribe, but eventually condensing communications and reporting directly to Seymour

on information received. Seymour did more than that; many of those who wrote to Seymour or visited on a regular basis became well acquainted with Richard Fitzwarren and knew him as Seymour's man. So, when he returned to England's shores it had taken only a short time to renew some of these links. Seymour was now gone, but his old informants were largely still in place and were delighted by the prospect of increasing their earnings once more. Richard had little else he could use to change his fortune; he would have to use what information he could, where he could, and take what opportunities it offered.

That Harry wanted to meet his cousin, and in the near future, was proved correct when a note in the hand of Jack's former master was delivered to Dan where he waited, propping up the wall of the customs house. Jack did not know of the message's arrival. Having promised to keep out of sight, he was doing just that whilst exploring the dubious charms of the landlord's most prized asset, Molly. The girl was on a promise that Jack was hoping to fulfill with Richard's success; he held little doubt that he would not bend Harry to his will.

Evening air chilled the warm exhaled breath, clouding it in front of the man as he stood leaning against the wall of the customs house on the bank of the Thames. That this was a poor district, lifeless during the night apart from those of nocturnal villainous tendencies, had not escaped Richard's attention when he had selected the area. During the daylight hours it thronged with the business of loading and unloading, haggling and arguing, yelling, bartering, and all the commercial activities associated with the ends of seafaring voyages. Now they had all departed from the scene. The area was studded with low quality ale houses, frequented by the unfortunate, and the unwitting, and the lawless, eager to relieve the insensible sailor of more than the cost of his ale. But near the customs house there were no such establishments; the scene was still, broken only by the occasional bark and angry growl of dogs foraging for the last few scraps ground under foot during the daylight.

Harry left his comrades and most of his self-confidence tethered with his horse; his courage decreasing step-by-step, he walked to meet the man who threatened his liberty.

Richard had used his surname only in the note, and Harry quite reasonably believed he was being summoned by Robert for his sin of

ambition. What Richard was unaware of was that, for once, Harry was acting at his father's behest, and not at Robert's; the latter was no part of plot for the crown. Harry's greatest fear was not discovery by opponents of Northumberland, but by Robert, whose wrath he feared more than anything else that could be brought to bear against him. Harry's overwhelming dread of the meeting was increased by the forlorn and dangerous stage selected by Richard.

Harry saw the man leaning, as the message had told he would be, against the customs house wall, and still, as he approached, he expected to meet and face Robert. The other did not know that Harry's fear was temporarily misplaced.

A cart, the remains of a smashed barrel its only contents, the staves twisted by some careless impact, cast lurid ragged shadows in the moonlight across the wall. Richard stood among the contorted darkened lines, his form broken and difficult to discern in their camouflage. It was not until he was close that Harry began to wonder who stood in front of him. Dark dress was not Robert's style, whose definitive characteristic was flamboyance. In two more paces he also realised that this man would fit easily within Robert's frame. Now Harry believed he faced a messenger from the man he feared and his confidence took an upturn, the dread of the meeting lifting slightly, such was his fear of Robert Fitzwarren. Richard said nothing. It had been a while, so he gave the other time for recognition to fully dawn and watched as, in all its revealing colours, it lit and then settled on Harry's puffy, well-fed face.

"You..." was all Harry could say when he finally regained the use of his tongue. Richard chose still not to speak, but smiled malevolently at his proposed benefactor.

"So you're back. Robert will be pleased about that. Is this what you do now, sneak about in darkened corners amongst the slime and filth, eh?" Harry's confidence increased; he had no great fear of Richard.

"If you would so describe your company," Richard said lightly.

"I know what you want, but I have satisfaction in knowing you'll not live to spend it," Harry spat back.

"So, it may be true," Richard said lightly. "Who can tell? However, I am proposing a lavish funeral and require funds to provide for it, so..."

"I have your money." Such had been Harry's fear of Richard's brother; he had come prepared.

“Such bad grace, Harry. I shall trust your honour and count this at my leisure later.”

“I hope to be present when Robert finds you; your head will be severed from your body, have no fear of it,” Harry threatened. For Harry the meeting had gone on long enough already.

“I have little fear of death, Harry, do you?” Richard took a quick step forward to bring him within inches of Harry’s face. “Give my brother a message, will you when you tell him of our...chance encounter? Tell him that when we meet, I shall take more than his remaining ear.”

Harry said nothing else, keeping his eyes on Richard until he judged himself a safe distance from his aggressor, then he turned on his heel and strode from the docks. Richard waited until he was out of sight before walking to the quay. Dropping suddenly to his knees, Richard swung himself easily over the edge, his weight on a hemp rope tied to the mooring bollard above. He dropped down until his feet landed softly in the small rocking boat moored at the rope’s end.

“Well he’s right mad now, isn’t he, and he’ll be back off to your brother, Robert, fair sharp,” Dan commented as Richard seated himself.

“I am counting on it, Dan,” Richard smiled.

“One of these days that brain of yours will be spread all over the ground. That’s where you’re going end up if you keep trying to play like this,” Dan growled. Thick veined hands grasped the oars and began to propel the boat back in the direction it had come from.

“You worry too much, Dan. It’s inevitable that Harry will tell Robert of our encounter. He hopes already to offset the loss he has made tonight, and more, with the blood that runs in my veins. That’s why he was so eager to part with this,” Richard tapped the bag of coins inside his jacket. “Knowing his greed and offering the possibility of catching myself was part of the bargain I placed. Even now, I have no doubt Harry has men riding to all the escapes he thinks I might take, hoping to waylay me as I run to spend his gold. But Dan...I have no intention of being caught.”

“Aye, that’s as may be tonight, but there’ll be other nights, mark it.” Dan drove the oars hard into the black silken surface of the water, exercising his annoyance by moving the boat a pace faster through the water.

Harry sat astride his horse as two men rode slowly back to pull up next to him. The nearest shook his head. “No sign, Sir. From what you say he

could be living in there.” The man cast a glance back over his shoulder to the dock lands.

Harry’s mind had already cast Richard Fitzwarren in the mould of low life; he could visualise him sneaking amongst the dirt and filth. “Tomorrow get down here and find out where he is. There’s a purse for the man who brings me news of his whereabouts, and make that known amongst the others. I will have him,” Harry barked. Surrounded by his own men he felt sure of himself once more, and he turned his horse back in the direction of comforts so alien to the present setting, and yet so necessary to Harry: goose feather pillows, malmsey and raging fires.

The men did search most earnestly the following day, spurred by the promised purse. However, enquiries amongst the lowest levels of London society brought scant information regarding the man Harry’s men sought.

Chapter Three

At Sion House on the Thames, the ready pawn, Jane, waited to be moved one or maybe two paces forward. Northumberland was there too, in conversation with Jane's father, Henry Grey, Duke of Suffolk. The subject, as always, was a further assessment of the strengths and likely success of Northumberland's subversion of the succession, dissecting, county by county, the likely support and assessing which could be counted on.

"If it comes to it, we can hold London against Mary. Her support is confined to the north. The Protestant cause will pull southern counties to us, cutting her off before she can draw them from the north, and we will take the day." Suffolk summarised the discussion.

"Aye, Mary's papacy will bring her no support on that front I agree. We must be prepared," Northumberland replied thoughtfully.

"Can we count on Cranmer?" Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury, was an ardent supporter of the reformed religion.

"Has he any choice?" Northumberland asked. "He knows the block waits if Mary has her way, and Ridley knows that as well." Ridley, Bishop of London, was an adherent of Cranmer's.

"They are powerful men, John, and they can pull many to our side. We need to nurture their support," Suffolk said.

"I need do no such thing!" Northumberland replied angrily. "Understand this," Northumberland leant forward, "Mary will throw the altar cloth over all of England the first day she puts a toe on the steps to the throne. All Protestants will suffocate under its weight. Cranmer and Ridley cannot afford to hesitate. It is Jane and the reformed religion or a heretic's end. I should say it would not be a difficult choice."

Suffolk was not intimidated by Northumberland's attitude. "Can I take it from that, that your policy on publicising the state of Edward's health has changed? I assume that there are still only a few who know how perilously close to death he is."

"Word will spread soon amongst our supporters. They need a little time to consider the alternatives. I will have five hundred men of my own, and that number should be insignificant with the support our cause should draw.

You forget, Henry, times are changing. Here is an opportunity that for many comes even rarely in a lifetime. Those who stand with us know where our favours will lie when Mary is in the Tower. I rely on the Protestant cause yes, but more than that, Henry, I rely on ambition. Ambition is the key."

Henry sat back in his seat, and considered John's words. There was not much he could say, for it was ambition that had led him to marry Jane to Northumberland's son. Henry saw two men behind the throne of England, Northumberland father-in-law of the Queen, and himself with a closer tie.

"So, how fares Jane?" Northumberland asked after a lengthy pause.

"Jane is much improved. Some minor ailment I am told laid her low last week," Henry said quietly.

"Good, that is good. We cannot have another in ill health." Northumberland's interest in the health of his son's new wife was no idle enquiry. He wanted to know whether the girl had become a willing participant in the scheme.

The answer Henry should have given was no; Jane fought with her new husband, refused to speak to him and for the last week had been shut in her room for fear of her yelling to anyone who would listen what her father planned to do with her. Jane had no illusions that it was for her father and Northumberland that she was to be made monarch. She recognised that she was a pawn and had told her father on the last occasion she had spoken to him that he should take a look in a mirror for she was sure he would see the strings that Northumberland had a tight hold of.

Henry sat back in his chair. He was sure Northumberland was losing his political charm. He made assumptions about the support he would receive and did little these days to consolidate it. Henry's suspicions that he had allied himself to the wrong camp were always with him; the arrogance of the man he now supped with did not help allay his fears.

The purse that Harry offered did not go unclaimed. In the end, it was the prize of one man; that he did not live to take possession was due to his fatal misjudgement of the ability of his quarry. At Harry's direction, his men searched alehouses, brothels and all places where men who had slipped from the last rung of the ladder of humanity sought obscurity. One, Peter Hardwood, avoided looking in the dock land. He took himself instead on a tour of the usurers, moneylenders and pawnbrokers, the mont-de-pi   of London. Harry had described a man outcast and short of money. Well,

maybe he had borrowed, thought Peter, who from times spent as a collector of debts for a previous master knew the market place well, and most of those who operated within it.

Mya the Jew was his first call after the bells had struck noon. Peter always thought of him as half a man, so short and spare of frame he was almost a dwarf, and yet he lacked the ill-proportioned limbs of that breed. But whatever lack of physical presence Mya's God had blessed him with, he had greatly endowed him with what lay between his ears.

Items for sale were kept in the front part of the shop under the watchful eyes of two very unlikely shop attendants. Here all manner of chattels crowded the uneven wooden shelves: household pewter of varying quality, pots and pans of all sizes. A lute with two broken strings vied for position with a pile of assorted bridles, candleholders and two sooty oil lamps. There was a display of ill-matching brown earthenware plates, jugs and bowls and, out of reach of straying fingers, cheap women's jewelry hung from a nail-spiked board, next to a long and worn display of boots a cobbler would despair at.

Wheat prices had doubled in '50, and bad harvests in the two successive years had kept prices high. Mya, Peter supposed, must fare well from the misfortune of the common man. When times were hard, men needed money. To start with, they took the coins home and fed their families, then, as life tumbled towards hopelessness, they needed money for the oblivion of the alehouse. As Peter waited to see Mya, he wondered how many of the shelves were packed with trinkets that had been rendered superfluous by the death of their owners in the sweating sickness epidemic that had taken so many lives in '51.

Scenting profit, the withered usurer listened hopefully to Peter's questions, head tipped back in an effort to defy his lack of height and look into Peter's face. No, he had not seen such a man. Of course, he scoffed back at Peter, he had a good memory for all who owed him money, and the one Hardwood sought was, most unfortunately, not among them.

Peter thanked Mya briskly for his time. His hand about to lift the curtain so he could duck back from Mya's inner sanctum to the shop, something caught his eye.

Behind the cloth that partitioned the back part of the shop, and where Mya conducted private business, gems and other items of worth were neatly stacked on shelves under the Jew's watchful gaze, the owners and marks

loaned against them neatly transcribed in Mya's books. Some would be without owners, redemption time long past, payment not made; for some the owners would still remain hopeful of possessing again the goods they had been forced to leave in return for scant coinage.

Peter had spent now three years in Harry's service. He knew well his master's worship and fear of Robert Fitzwarren, and had seen that man on many occasions. He immediately recognised the Fitzwarren crest engraved in the silver work of a sword hilt. The sword lay horizontally along the back of a shelf it shared with a selection of ladies trinket boxes. Next to the hilt stood four matched silver goblets, not of the current fashion, but nevertheless all containing a good portion of the valued metal. Their surfaces had been tainted by the acidic touch of fingers, the marks contrasting with the high shine from the weapon. It had not been there long Peter concluded.

Peter turned back to Mya. "It appears you might be able to help me after all."

Mya lifted his eyes to Peter's face and smiled. "That would be most fortunate, how tell me?" Mya's eyes followed Peter's up to the shelf where the sword lay.

"Mmm...The man you seek is not the one who brought that; he does not fit the description you gave. However there may be some connection. My records could be checked..." Mya left the sentence unfinished.

"For a price." Peter grinned. He liked the way Mya did business. It was direct and to the point; anything and everything had a price. Currency tendered, Mya smiled toothlessly and turned to the half-completed and most current page in the ledger. The blank lines still following the entry told Peter that Mya had not been in possession of the item long. Mya confirmed that he had received it less than two days ago. The name entered on the page was, of course, a lie, and the description Mya gave of his customer initially seemed unlike the one Peter had been given by Harry. Then a sudden light lit his memory; in the picture in his mind, sun glinted off gold-blond hair and danced in laughing blue eyes: Jack.

Peter was aware that his master's former servant had left his employ rather suddenly. From this it appeared that Jack must be with the man that Harry now sought. Richard Fitzwarren must have sent Jack to Mya's to obtain money on his behalf. Peter smiled inwardly, pleased that he had been right. A man short of money always ended in places like this, tendering his

last possessions for enough to keep him in the alehouse for a few more nights. This was worth money indeed.

Peter handed Mya his remaining coins to ensure he shared this gem with no one else and, with a promise of more, rapidly retrieved his horse and made his way quickly back to Harry.

Jack's careless disposal of his sword had been borne of physical desperation when Molly finally refused to live on promises any more. Jack had been forced to find coin, and that coin had been provided by Mya. As soon as Richard gave Jack the money he had asked for, Jack set off to redeem what was his. But the shop was now being watched. Peter was rewarded sooner than he would have let himself dream when Jack swung down from his horse and ducked through the low door into the dim confines of Mya's shop. Jack emerged after conducting the rapid transaction. Armed once more, he pulled himself back into the saddle, and turned his horse from the pawnshop.

He was not in a hurry and Peter, now with three of Harry's men to help him, had little difficulty following him. Still aware of Richard's words to keep his head down, Jack returned to the inn – leading Harry straight to Richard Fitzwarren.

Harry wanted Richard alive; he wished to deliver the ultimate gift to Robert to toy with as he wished. As for Jack, Harry's eyes had clearly conveyed the message that the demise of the man could not happen soon enough.

“Tonight, Jack, be ready to leave. I want to be at Byrne's tomorrow.”

Richard was arrayed on the window ledge, absently watching the street below.

“I shall be glad to be out of here,” Jack said absently.

“How will you cope, Jack?” Richard asked looking carefully at his brother. “We are to spend weeks, perhaps months, quietly in the country. If a few days in an inn have driven you to distraction, how does that prospect please you?”

Jack shot Richard a dark look. “I shall be again at mine own control, not forced to hide away out of sight while you decide our fate.”

“Ah, so you see your fate in my poor and inadequate hands; now that is a worry,” Richard said, his voice mocking. “Do you think I am equal to the

task?”

“I agree it is a worry,” Jack said sarcastically.

“The remedy is in your own hands,” Richard said lightly.

“Fate has brought me so far. I shall wait and see where it takes me next,” Jack declared.

“Fate!” Richard was annoyed. “Fate is the excuse of the uninventive, the unimaginative and the ignorant. I had no idea you were all three! Fate in this instance means, I assume, that you will wait and see what is brought to you by my efforts. I feel much like a bantam with a bet on it. Thank you, however, for the confidence.”

“I only meant...” Jack tried, but they were poor words and he had never intended to complete the sentence.

“Leave it, Jack, and me. Go. Find some place comfy and contemplate the future and what place, if any, you have in it,” Richard said still angry.

“God...I will be ready this night. I’ll not stand and listen to more of your twisted words.” Jack left, slamming the door hard in its badly fitted frame.

“Was it something I said?” Richard enquired wearily of the room.

The Duke of Suffolk was also at that moment being tried by another difficult conversation. Jane was still at Sion House in quiet retreat as befitted a newlywed. Unfortunately, Jane was not acting as a newly wedded daughter should.

“Jane. I hear your argument but, Jane, understand this, if nothing else: the act is done; the time is past. You are married to Guildford. Edward will name you as his successor, and your reason, your philosophy, your morals and your bloody ideals matter naught. They cannot change it.” Suffolk’s head ached with the desperation of his arguments.

Jane said nothing, but turned in a swirl of rose velvet to gaze moodily from the window.

Suffolk advanced to stand behind his daughter. “Fathers are set to try and gain the best for their children. I admit, as you constantly remind me, that this is an opportunity for me, but why can you not see it as an equal opportunity for yourself?”

Jane still stood staring from the window.

Suffolk saw her lack of words as an improvement on the tirades she had previously thrown at him. Maybe the girl was finally seeing sense. He continued, “Jane, you are sensible. Tell me then what you propose to do

when the time comes. Admit it, there is little you can do.” That concluded Suffolk’s case and he left his daughter staring from the window, and saw not the tears slide with anguished abandon down her young face.

Peter had heard plenty of tales and alehouse gossip about Robert Fitzwarren’s feud with his brother, and of the death he had attempted to deliver at Harlsey Moor. The reason for the deep and rancid hatred that lay within Robert had remained the subject of conjecture: some childhood transgression, some woman; whatever the true reason, it had never come to light. Conversations on the matter had dwindled steadily after Richard Fitzwarren had left England’s shores and Peter had even heard rumour that Richard had met his death in France. Peter himself had been a part of the pack that had pursued Richard when Jack, for some reason unknown, had changed sides and rescued him from, according to Harry, the certain death he had been about to deliver. Of Richard, Peter knew little. Most tales from Harry and Robert cast the man he now pursued as a coward and a trickster, who spent his life skulking in the gutter and would turn tail and run as he had done at Harlsey Moor, rather than face an adversary. No honour, no courage, a weasel of a man.

Peter Hardwood made his first mistake in believing he had little fear from the man he would capture and return to Harry in exchange for his pension.

Peter had already made discreet enquiries of the landlord and, on promise of recompensing him for, “any damage which might ensue”, knew the room where their prey was. Jack he had seen walking the short distance to the stables; he had kept himself out of sight and the other had not seen him; Jack’s ability he did not underestimate, having served with him. He had to risk losing him though for Richard was his quarry; Jack was merely something his master would prefer to have stopped from breathing. He could deal with Jack later.

The third door along the corridor belonged to the man they sought, who by all accounts, for they had watched the inn since their arrival, had not left his room. Peter nodded and two men took up positions either side of the door, flush against the wall. Peter himself knocked quietly but firmly. There was a muffled reply from within, which he took to mean he should admit himself. Signalling to the others to hold their positions he unlatched the

door letting it swing open on its hinges. There was only one occupant, seated reading by the fire. Peter smiled; this was to be easy.

“Jack, back so...” Richard was on his feet in a moment, his sword drawn.

“Your mistake,” said Peter smiling viciously. “So you’re Fitzwarren?”

If the man before him had not nodded, smiling, he would have believed he had the wrong room. Expecting the filth of gutter-life he was faced with a vision of tall elegance, whose dark eyes showed no fear.

“I’d lay down your blade for it’ll do you no good. Willy, Gad...” the two waiting outside obeyed the command. Richard heard the whistle of steel as swords drew and they entered behind their leader.

“Now, put up your blade or you’ll be regretting it.” Peter’s level blade underlined his point.

“The odds seem in my favour. I shall take them I think,” Richard replied.

“I give you one more chance.” Peter was no longer smiling, hoping now that the man would not take it. He did not. With a jarring crash of silvered steel, Richard brought his sword quickly up under Peter’s, making his aggressor’s arm flail wildly in the air. Peter’s face displayed desperation as he fought to regain control of his sword arm and bring the blade back in front of him to protect his torso before it was too late. It was too late.

Richard’s blade slid easily through leather jerkin and then on, neatly, through ribs to pierce the beating heart of Peter Hardwood. In the second it took for Richard to withdraw his sword from the dead man and for the corpse to hit the floor, Peter’s men set on him. The attacker to the left had the advantage of a shorter distance and was able to aim a crashing blow, designed to sever head from shoulders. The technique was clumsy, relying on power for its deadliness. Richard stepped nimbly back, withdrawing his sword from the dead man and avoiding the lethal arc prescribed before him. His sword, running with the crimson of Peter’s blood, deflected the thrust from the second man. As the other’s blade hit the hilt, Richard threw the force of his body round and heard the blade snap. The move was perfect but its execution was flawed, for as he spun to break the blade he brought himself to face the man whose ill-aimed death sweep he had easily evaded. In the second before the blade broke and his sword was employed and locked, the tempered steel sliced into the flesh of his right shoulder. The man leered, exposing a row of glistening black stumped teeth, but believing the game was his proved fatal. Richard’s jacket took the brunt of the force

and the wound was not deep. Dropping his sword from the weakening right grasp into his left hand, he brought the blade heavily into the man's left arm. It was not a lethal blow but he reeled from it, his body bending to its force. Richard leveled the blade a second time and forced its point into gut and intestine. The man doubled then sagged to the floor, hands clasped to the gashed wound in his midsection. Richard turned instinctively to protect his right side from the assailant whose blade he had severed. He had no need; the man's body slithered from the short knife Dan had pulled across his throat.

"I told you, but do you bloody listen?" Dan moved to the man kneeling with both hands clenched to his guts and moaning loudly. He drew a knife blade quickly across the hairy throat.

Jack saw Dan dispatch the kneeling man and knew that the fight was done. "Bloody hell!" Jack took the sword from his brother and dropped it heavily on the floor. "Are you alright?"

Richard pulled away from Jack's helping hands. "Do you know how much good steel costs?"

"I'm sure you are going to...Jesus! It's Pete! He's Harry's man! He was with Harry before I left. How the hell did he track us here?" Jack demanded. "This is just great! I told you what would bloody happen and you didn't listen. Shit, why do you have to fuck everything up?"

Richard sat on the bed as Dan examined the wound. "Jack has..." He pulled the sleeve away none too gently. "...got a point."

"Yes." Richard flinched from Dan's ministrations. "Alright, you get to bloody well say I told you so," he finished through gritted teeth.

"It's not deep," Dan said bluntly.

"I'm so pleased..." Richard retorted.

"What the hell are we going to do now?" Jack asked. "We need to get out of here right quick."

"Take the men to Carney Bridge." Richard stopped as Dan yanked a makeshift bandage round his arm. "God! Could you be a bit more careful?"

Dan just grunted, "Collect the men together and go to Carney Bridge."

Another rough tug. "Jesus, Dan, you've made your bloody point! I'll send word to you, Jack. Now go before anyone else turns up."

Chapter Four

Jack worried all the way to Carney Bridge and once there he continued to torment himself. Richard's men had been split into three groups while residing in the city; six were with Richard, eight were billeted at the Fox and the remaining seven awaited their arrival at Carney Bridge. Joined once more, they would move swiftly to Lord Byrne's manor; or at least that was the plan. Now Jack was not so sure. Riding with twelve men at his back, he was uncertain what they would do when they arrived. Jack felt strangely exposed, the feeling prickling up and down his spine; never before had he found himself alone with the solitary role of command. He was plagued with the knowledge that there was no longer a certain, definite course of action, and worse, he was dubious about his own ability now that he was faced with the necessity to assess it. He refused to comment to those who rode beside him; there were only three people who knew of the day's events and Jack had no intention of sharing the news. They would feel leaderless; without their master the thread that held them would break and they would disintegrate back into their component parts, becoming again the rabble they once were. And within that rabble there were plenty of factions. There was Alan, a hard and cruel man, and it was well known that to keep on his good side was a sound idea. He had held some rank in the King's army, but for some reason he didn't care to share he had deserted, but he still constantly craved the rank and power he had once held. Robby was one of Alan's men. A petty thief, he'd been in and out of goal most of his life in between a sporadic mercenary career. He kept close to Alan seeming to think that would ensure an easier life. There were others though loyal to Richard if not particularly keen on Jack. There was Dan who had been with Richard since boyhood and others who owed him their life or liberty such as Marc and Froggy Tate. Jack knew he could rely on them to follow his brother's instructions.

He knew he lacked the physical energy and force of will his brother exercised, along with the natural obedience due to him as a Lord's son and doubted that the men would follow his command. Richard had negotiated their hire with Lord Byrne and it was unlikely that a Lord would accept a

man with no name and no standing in Richard's place. Jack damned fate, and anything else that got within vocal reach on the journey.

Harry's thoughts that day were also turned to Richard, although they were not tinged with concern but coloured crimson with hatred. The assault at the inn was swiftly reported back, although the details were vague. There had been a fight; Harry's messenger had seen a commotion as he waited for the return of his fellows but neither they nor the man his master wanted had appeared. Harry yelled but his temper was ineffectual. The man knew only that the men Harry had sent were missing, and the landlord had left the yard of the inn yelling for the watch. Having no wish to be implicated the messenger had made a judicious exit at this point. Clothed in the righteous indignation of the wronged; Harry rode with a not inconsiderable escort to the inn to ascertain what had occurred, eager still to present to Robert with the ultimate prize.

The sight that met his greedy eyes was not the one he had anticipated. Three men, good men at that, had been piled in a bloody mess on the back of a market barrow in the courtyard of the inn. On the top of the pile of lifeless, tangled limbs, lay Peter. On his back, arms flung akimbo, head tipped back, mouth open in a silent exclamation of surprise; he stared at his master for the last time. Harry, still on his horse, was unable to take his eyes from the twisted wreckage of his servants. A dog stood patiently licking Peter's paled hand hanging over the cart's low wooden side, its grubby fur streaked with crimson from the thick globules that had leaked through the barrow.

"You..." Harry recovered himself and yelled at the two men deep in conversation behind the barrow. One, dressed simply, was talking rapidly, arms thrown wide in an expression of helplessness; the other, in military garb, was listening, arms folded and nodding. Both looked up at Harry's shout; annoyance showed on the soldier's face.

"You, come here," Harry addressed the one of rank, pointing arrogantly with his whip. The soldier exchanged another brief and quiet word with the man he had been quizzing and walked slowly past the blood-laden barrow to stand in front of Harry's horse. He eyed the man's finery and cost of his clothes and decided to wait for the next address rather than speak himself.

Harry waved his whip expansively over the barrow; the words would not easily form. "These..." He paused, his eyes had been drawn back to Peter's

unseeing gaze and it took a moment for him to break away from the dead stare. "These are my men. What happened? Where is the culprit?" Harry's voice was loud and the soldier could not decide if the edge it bore was generated by the unsettling scene or by a temper about to break.

"That, Sir, is what I have been attempting to find out. If these were your men mayhap you can provide an explanation." The soldier's interest in Harry kindled as he looked up into the puffy emotion-confused face. Harry's eyes were unable to prevent themselves from flicking back to Peter's face. It seemed to be pleading with him, begging for help. Tearing his eyes from it, he stared at the white trembling fingers grasping the whip. He had not heard the soldier's words.

"These are all your men?" the soldier tried again.

"Yes." The answer was reaction only; Harry's composure was still not fully recovered.

"What were they at here?" the soldier persisted.

"Trying to find...a criminal," Harry stammered, "a man who, it appears, is now also a murderer. Do you have him?" Harry leant forward in the saddle, his mind conjuring up a picture of a fourth corpse. A pleasing image, of a partially dismembered, disfigured and bleeding body floated into his mind's eye to replace the horror in the cart; it disturbed him not at all.

"That, Sir, was what I was trying to find out from the landlord," the soldier said patiently gesturing back at the man who had been helplessly waving his arms about. "He let the room where this deed took place, to one he has no name for, and it appears that person is no longer here. The man can describe him; perhaps the description could help you to put a name..."

"You fool!" Harry yelled, a nasty sneer sliding across his features. "I know well who is responsible." He hadn't wanted to reveal the identity of the man he sought, but the moment was too much. "Richard Fitzwarren is who you seek for this day's work, and let that be known."

Roughly he yanked the reins in his hands and the leather straps tightened as the startled horse was hauled away from the courtyard. More questions would follow but Harry was not prepared to be grilled by some underling in a common yard in front of his both living and dead retinue. No, they would have to wait until later; perhaps by then they may even have found the cur.

Away from the yard his path was blocked by a glut of street children fighting boisterously over fruit fallen from a market cart. The owner had

abandoned his seat on the cart and was bobbing up and down among them, retrieved, unspoiled fruit clasped to his chest, a free arm aiming ineffectual blows at any ragged urchins who came too near. Harry took in the scene in a second. None of the children had heard his approach. The ugly sneer he had turned on the soldier spread once more across his lips. Cruelly he spurred the horse forwards, flesh squashed as easily as ripened fruit below the iron-shod hooves. The stallholder fled, his wares falling forgotten from his arms as he threw himself from the advancing horses.

Dan had served Richard since he was a child. Mat, although he had only been with Richard some two years, had been saved from a sword point by the master and was equally loyal. They had bundled Richard from the inn in London and made good their escape before the soldiers turned up, relocating to another inn some five miles distant. Although Richard's injury was not bad, he had lost a fair amount of blood and was certainly not fit for a long ride. Mat, at Richard's direction, had returned to the original inn; spending two hours all eyes and ears. After Harry had left, two of his men had remained drawn to the scent of ale. Mat had joined them. A curious observer with coin for ale he had been welcome.

Dan met Mat in the inn downstairs. It was a quiet place frequented by local folk. Patrons scattered in small clustered groups of twos and threes amongst the tables, filling the inn with the low undertone of conversation, the words indiscernible. The blacksmith's huge hands dwarfed the cup he held as he used it to gesture to the wheelwright who had joined him in friendly conversation. Farm workers, knees browned with soil, hands tinted with ochre, spoke in tired voices. The landlord finally brought cups and a jug of ale drawn from the barrel in the corner.

"Well?" Dan said.

"Harry's men alright; the place is crawling. Bastard turned up himself while I was there," Mat replied.

"Are you sure no one saw you, did not connect you?" Dan asked.

"It isn't me you should worry about," Mat said grimly.

Dan cast an enquiring look at his companion. "Go on?"

"Ah well now, who do you think, eh?" Mat paused for effect; he could already see the suspicion forming on the other's face. "Aye, you're right. Put his sword in hock, didn't he, and got himself followed, stupid bastard."

“Ah, for Christ’s sake!” Dan bowed his head and covered his face with his hands. “Has he got no bloody sense?”

“Apparently not.” Mat lifted his drink. “And the master?”

“A fouler temper I have never seen him in, which is why I am down here and he’s...” Dan’s looked to the ceiling.

“He has some of the devil in him, that’s a fact.” Mat took a lengthy draught. Belching he continued. “You going to tell master how Harry found him then? I bloody would. Jack doesn’t use this,” Mat tapped his head with a thick hairy forefinger.

Dan nodded in agreement. “I’ll tell him if he asks. Jack’s no fool, but put him in the same room as the master and he doesn’t know whether to run round yapping like a pup or bite.”

“Well I wonder what he’s at sometimes.” Mat pointed a finger sternly at Dan to underline his words. “He’s no pup. He’s a bastard and it’s in his bloody nature to want what he hasn’t got. Master knows that as well. It vexes me though why he puts up with him sometimes.”

“However it’s been mixed, they’ve the same blood in them, and that counts for something,” Dan said firmly. There was more he could have said, more he knew, but he couldn’t share it.

“Not bloody much, judging by the fact that Robert wants to bleed every last drop from them both, blood kin or no,” Mat scoffed.

“Well that’s it, isn’t it?” Dan said leaning forward. “Perhaps the master doesn’t want another brother itching to put a blade through him. It’ll go one way or the other. I hope for their sakes and ours they’ll stand together.”

“If Jack acts like this again he’ll be standing alone,” Mat said bluntly.

Dan sighed. “There was no intention in what he did. It’s as you said: he didn’t think.”

“I’m sure you’d not be so quick to defend me.” Mat was angry that Dan did not share his disgust at Jack’s foolishness.

“I don’t defend him, Mat. Jack’s here because the master wants him here and while that’s the case I’ll follow his wishes.” Dan gestured with the jug for Mat to present his cup back for a refill. “Now, let’s see if a little more of this will lessen some of that temper of yours.”

Mat sighed and pushed his cup forward. “Well, it’s the way I feel. The master would have either of our hides for an act such as that.”

“That’s as may be.” Dan used an easy voice, aimed at calming the other’s temper before it flared again fuelled by drink. “But let’s drink to the

fact that as yet we have avoided it.” Dan paused and placed the jug carefully back on the table. A memory coloured in his mind and a grin spread across his face. “Although, if I do recall, there was a moment when you almost managed it.” Dan looked at the furrows on Mat’s brow and his grin widened. “How did it go again? Ah yes, I remember...One wench, one husband, three brothers and more kinfolk than gather at a market. Fair did try and start your own war that day didn’t you?”

Mat nodded as he recalled the incident, a smile spreading across his own face as he remembered how a tumble in a hayfield in France had brought the whole village out. Armed with forks, sticks, rolling pins and anything they could find to thrash the English who they thought were set to despoil all their womenfolk.

“No sense of humour, that was their problem,” Mat chortled. “Mind you, she was fair worth it. If I had the chance again I’d take the lot of them on for her.”

“As I recall your wenching cost me a right good stab in the arse with a hay fork trying to keep you in possession of your manhood,” Dan said with mock seriousness.

While Dan and Mat shared the evening, Jack sat alone. A sludge of unidentifiable vegetables hid at the bottom of the bowl below a thin layer of lukewarm broth purporting to be rabbit stew. Jack stared at the greasy surface as it cooled; the dark wheaten bread in his right hand forgotten, as was now the desire to eat. What was he going to do? It was the only thought he found himself capable of; he could not move beyond it. Breathing deeply he pushed his hair back out of his eyes and looked around him for the first time since the light had disappeared from the sky. In the shadows he recognised the faces of the men he had ridden with, waiting and sitting in groups. He saw some glance over at him surreptitiously. If they caught his eye, they looked quickly back to their companions. He knew not what to do. The questions from the men he had ignored or, when pressed, spat back at them contemptuous answers until they had stopped asking, for which he was thankful.

Well you’ve buggered it now, Richard, haven’t you? Jack thought. Pete was Harry’s man all right. He was there because you thought you could best Harry. I told you that it was bloody mad, but oh no, you wouldn’t take heed would you? And now what do you expect me to do? Jack silently

cursed his absent brother. It didn't help. He still did not know what he was going to do.

"Do you want that, eh?" The voice from above him filtered through his angered thoughts "You'll still have to pay, whether you eat it or not." The woman's voice above him increased in intensity. "I said, do you want it or not?"

Jack looked up at the pock-marked face. Grey, grease-matted hair snaked from beneath the once white cap. A lace edge, frayed away, hung over the wrinkled, dirty forehead in a curtain of straggling threads. Jack said nothing but he matched the crone's stare. Pulling a coin from his belt, he sent it skittering across the table. A bony knuckled hand snatched it, ending the spinning dance. She muttered something, tucked the coin from sight and turned, leaving Jack once more alone. Straightening his back from the slump his body had been drawn into by the weight of his thoughts, he pushed the bowl away. Some of the partially congealed contents slid over the rim to join the thick heavy veneer of dried food and spilt ale already on the table.

Jack resolved to do something, but characteristically decided to put off the decision until the following morning. He turned his thoughts to whether he should rent a room for himself above the Inn or share the communal quarters with the rest of the men. Though he badly wanted to divorce himself from his questioning companions, it was not possible. Jack, as usual, had scant coin in his pocket. He was forced to share the room that doubled as a store with twelve other men, several empty barrels, a broken plough and jumbles of household debris the owner thought still of some use. But the room was dry, and well heated by the number of slumbering bodies.

Around him, Jack could hear other sleepers grunting as they pulled covers tight to fend off the cold blast of air that heralded Mat's entrance, but it was only Jack who was awake enough to sit up. Mat had already retreated from the fetid quarters by the time Jack got to his feet. Stooping he retrieved his fallen cloak and wrapped the folds tightly around himself. Stepping over the sleeping men, he followed Mat.

"You stand there and look the innocent don't you, eh?" Mat challenged.

Jack said nothing, his confusion growing as his mind groped for some fact to allow him to understand Mat's aggressive tone.

Mat did not leave Jack ignorant for long. He was too eager to let the other know of the mistake he had made and that there was no doubt as to where the blame lay. He had long contemplated during the cold silent journey from London, the expression on Jack's face when he told him. Even in the half-light before the dawn fully crept over the low hills, he was rewarded.

"Why the master trusts you with anything I have no idea! You're a bloody fool, Jack, and a dangerous one at that," Mat finished. Aye, the bastard knows what he's done now all right. Let him suffer for it awhile, Mat thought. Mat also carried with him Richard's instructions for Jack, and the means, in the form of a weighty silver purse, to carry them out. The aim was to divide again what Jack had reunited, to break down the band into smaller groups, none of which knew where the others resided, the only link between them being Jack who directed them, and Richard who instructed him. The division was simple enough. Small groups were dispatched during the day to locations specified by Richard, and given custody of a portion of the money they were due: enough for lodgings, enough for wine and women, enough to keep them until they were contacted again. Two groups were dispatched as journeying labourers who came every year from the villages to work on the fields. A few more new faces would not be commented on. There was some general complaint. No one fancied weeks of toil over the plough for labourers wages. However, as he pointed out, Jack's portion of the coins made them the best-paid farm workers in all of England, a point none could disagree with. They went, on foot; soil turners didn't own horses. A third party went, under the guise of traders, to a village where yearly a horse fair gathered. For a few weeks they gathered and variously drank, wenched and insulted each other boisterously in the haggle over horseflesh; the horses from those who had left on foot went with them. Jack had thought Richard had been idle, as he had been when in London, and now he knew a little of what had occupied his time.

Mat passed on the detail verbally to Jack after he returned to the inn. Jack's face was grimly set, his back straight, the strain of the initial shock gone from him. The morning's work had made a considerable dent in the money Mat had passed to Jack, who guessed it comprised almost Richard's entire stock of coins. Jack calculated that Richard must have scant means for his own support, having passed on almost all of what he had.

Jack eyed Mat who had remained with him as he had executed the plans during the morning “Has he enough?” It was the first reference to his brother that had been made since Mat had spoken harshly to him before daybreak.

“Aye, Dan’s with the master, don’t worry about that,” Mat said. Jack had done well this morning. If there had been a need within him to make recompense for what he had caused, he had set out on the right path. The instructions that had been passed on had been executed without fault. Jack brooked no argument that day from anyone and by midmorning they were all departed separately from the inn at Carney Bridge.

There were only the two of them left now. Following Richard’s instructions, they stopped at the inn at Carney Bridge for two more nights, and then they made the short and uneventful journey to Lord Byrne’s manor.

Jack judged the manor when it came into view to be an affluent enough place. Hazeldene’s walls were in good repair, fences stood sturdily and the land around was ordered and well controlled. Hazeldene had grown from an original Norman stronghold to more of a country residence. Wings had been added in an unplanned manner, the outline in the last light of the afternoon showed rooflines at a dozen differing levels. In one wing the low sun glinted in the diamond glass panelled window, its uneven facets reflecting the light like the rippled surface of water. Byrne, assessed Jack, was not short of money. His nerves had returned again as they rode up the final stretch towards the gate, unsure of the reception he would receive. Their horses moved at a slow amble. Jack could see that the gates to the enclosed courtyard stood open, but until he turned a slight bend in the path ahead he was denied a view of the interior.

“Looks like a pleasant enough place to spend a few weeks, doesn’t it?” Mat said inclining his head towards Jack.

Jack merely nodded, his thoughts elsewhere, not looking forward to the encounter with Byrne. It was only four days since they had left London and there was a good possibility that the communication Richard was supposed to have sent to Byrne to advise of their arrival had not preceded him. The moment would not be one to relish if he had to inform their employer that, albeit temporarily, the mercenary leader he had hired was indisposed. The even more unpleasant knowledge that this was his fault dogged Jack’s every

waking hour. The agony of it was worse because, whichever way he looked at it, he could see no way that he would have acted differently. Richard warned him and he had casually ignored his words and left the inn. If the warning had been couched in stronger terms, or even if he had been aware that Peter was trying to find their lodgings, Jack would still, he was sure, have decided he could outwit Harry's lackeys and exchange his sword for silver. It was a hard and bloody lesson indeed.

The two horses, side by side, turned the bend in the path. Jack's view of the courtyard was not complete, but Mat, who had ridden round the outside, was the first to see fully into the confines of Hazeldene.

"There, Jack, near the stable door! It's the master's horse," Mat said quickly.

"Dan could have ridden it here," Jack replied.

"Maybe," Mat said, his eyes intent on finding a further sign of his master.

Jack's mind ran through the possibilities; the most favoured one, that his brother had preceded him, he did not want to hope for.

Their horses drew level with the gate and passed on beneath the Norman arch. Jack was loosening a foot from a stirrup as his mount drew to a stand when the evidence came to him of Richard's presence. Behind him he could hear his brother's level voice in pleasant conversation with another; the words he could not discern, but the sound of it was unmistakable.

Jack dropped from the saddle and turned, a little uneasily towards the brother he had almost killed with carelessness. Richard was descending the stairs from what was probably the main hall; his partner in conversation, a young woman, was standing smiling in the doorway. Richard had evidently been taking his leave of her.

Jack was not prepared for this encounter. Did Richard know how Harry's men had found him? If he did, the pleasant expression on his face as he approached did not tell him so.

"I trust the journey was a pleasant one?" Richard dropped down the last two steps. Jack, temporarily lost for adequate words, said nothing. Richard continued. "Dan," Jack turned to see the big man lumbering towards them, "will show you where to go? I will no doubt see you later."

"Where are you going?" Jack said recovering himself.

Richard stopped; his grey eyes met Jack's for the first time. "To while away some pleasant hours in the company of a lady," he said. His face lost

its pleasant expression and he added, “The cost, however, is very cheap: a few lessons of chess.”

Oh God, he knew. The thought avalanched through Jack’s brain as he watched his brother turn his back and ascend once more up the stairs towards the hall door.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Five

After some enquiry Jack discovered that Richard had been allocated quarters within the main house. He found the general area and, in the process of trying to locate the precise room, met Dan as he rounded a corner. The big man came towards him, blocking his path. Behind Dan were only two doors, one on either side of the passage, which then came to an abrupt end. "I want to see him," Jack said quietly.

"You can't," Dan growled firmly but equally as quietly.

"Why not?" Jack retreated a step down the corridor as Dan continued to come towards him.

"Why do you think?" Dan said angrily.

"He seemed..."

Dan did not let him finish. "Seemed all right this afternoon, eh? Is that what you were going to say?" Dan brought his face close to Jack's. "And if he's all right you can set yourself on a journey to heal your own soul. No point in Jack suffering if rest of the world's back to rights, is there now? Well, you don't look too closely do you, eh?"

Jack didn't wait for Dan to conclude his lecture but ducked under his right arm and spun quickly past him to the nearest door. The expression on Dan's face told him he had the right room. It took only a second for him to turn the ringed handle, lifting the latch on the inside, and slide through the opening, closing the panel behind him. Dan stood alone in the corridor. His hand hovered near the door for only a moment before dropping back to his side. He would wait; he doubted very much that Richard would wake. The wound was not bad but the ride to Hazeldene had been punishing. The laudanum induced sleep was one Dan did not expect Richard to rise from before the dawn.

A single candle lit the room; its flicker in the draft of air was the only movement. Stationary on the threshold, Jack watched the sleeping man. Richard was obviously not immobile in slumber for the sheets were in disarray. Though grasped in a sleep-clenched hand, they had slithered from his naked body. So, Jack gained his first knowledge of something his brother must have taken pains to conceal.

The brand from the lash, long since healed, spoke to him in parallel wheals from the exposed back. Sweat pooled then ran in minute rivulets down the tracks of the whip marks, further dampening the sheets he lay on. Jack stared, comprehension dawning of another gap in his knowledge of his brother's life. Drawing eyes at last from the signs of punishment, he looked at the bandages that covered the fresh wound. Even in the dim candlelight, the skin's pale hue still showed. Hair, darkened to raven with perspiration, clung to a cheekbone, its dark veil hiding the expression of the sleeper. Richard breathed out and Jack held his own breath as he watched the other's body shake with the exercise of his lungs. Jack no longer wished to wake him. The picture was one of total exhaustion; his bodily torment could only increase in consciousness. Subdued, Jack turned and left, quieter than he had entered, the candle flame hardly recording the closing of the door.

The dark angry eyes of Dan were waiting for him. But as Jack took care to soundlessly drop the latch back, Dan knew his charge remained undisturbed.

"You're employed as a stable hand, Jack. Go and find Mat and act like one." Dan spoke quietly, a kinder tone in his voice.

"I'm sorry," Jack said shaking his head.

"No need, lad," Dan said. "You didn't drive him to make this journey. What you may have started by accident, Jack, master's trying to finish with intent."

Jack did not look up as he spoke. "Was no accident, Dan; it was foolish carelessness. I've no excuse; I just wanted to..." his words drifted away.

"I'm sure you'll have the chance to apologise, but remember, when you do, duck. He's the temper of the devil in him still, even if he's got a little less blood than he used to have to fire it with," Dan said.

"What did he say when he found out it was my fault?" Jack asked.

"Like I said, keep yourself at arm's length. Let's just say he wasn't best pleased," Dan replied.

When they reached the top of the darkened stairs, Dan laid a hand briefly on Jack's shoulder and watched as he descended the spiral, moving slowly out of sight.

Jack did as Dan had bidden and found Mat. Together, although solitary in their thoughts, they got inconspicuously but thoroughly drunk amongst the straw and feed in an unoccupied stall in the stables.

Harry's anger had lost its volatile edge and was now simmering, waiting to be resurrected to its full passion. The deception had been one thing but the death of his men had fuelled the vigour he put into locating the man he now wanted to personally tear limb from limb. Robert could have the pieces once Harry's vengeance was complete. To this end, he had not told Robert but, with difficulty, kept the information to himself. Among his men he tripled the value of the purse, ensuring that discrete and constant enquiries continued in an effort to locate the brother of Robert Fitzwarren.

Betsy remembered the blood; it had been on his shoulder. "Told me he'd been skinning rabbits, but I didn't believe him. He was in a right hurry. I said to Nev, didn't I, Nev, that I didn't believe him, skinning rabbits and with a gentleman's sword on his belt. Most like been skinning owner of it, if you ask me. That's what I said, wasn't it, Nev?"

Nev, the beleaguered landlord of the Swan, nodded.

"Well now, what'll you be having, lads? This is an establishment after all," Betsy said, smiling as one of the men dug his hand in his pocket for coin.

The connection had been made once more. The two men grinned at each other as Betsy filled a jug.

Byrne had taken to Richard in a way the younger man found nothing short of annoying. At Hazeldene, he lacked male company. The sons of his first marriage were now gone, along with many of the male servants. The most recent up-turn for Byrne had been the addition of a new wife, but she had added only women to the household and Byrne was now feeling a little outnumbered. Richard and the men he had brought to the manor brought male vigour back to the house, something that had been too long absent for Edward Byrne's liking. The ruse he played on his new wife, Judith, helped. Passing Richard off as his cousin meant Byrne could indulge himself with the man's company as an equal, and not have to play master, as he knew he should.

Looking at Richard, Edward Byrne could not help but feel sorrow at his own lost youth. His once athletic frame had sagged and the sharp and agile mind he had taken such pride in had begun to desert him. The effect Richard had on Byrne was to force his sluggish brain to think once again. He spent hours now, seeking out ideas and running them to their various conclusions in his mind. And this was where his current problem now lay.

More and more did his thoughts dwell on Northumberland, and no longer as the inevitable victor in a race for control of the crown. Richard had forced his lazy mind to consider the outcome. Mary he had always perceived as old, Catholic, unpopular and merely a reminder of a bygone era, lacking support or the authority to direct any. Northumberland on the other hand was already in favour: beloved of the dying monarch, Edward, and influential with the powerful. That he should champion Edward's choice of successor had seemed natural. Until now, the only issue for Byrne and his confidants was how to help, how to ensure that, as the Duke rose, they too would follow him. They saw Duke for what he was: a self-seeking nobleman with a lust for more power than was his right. But they allowed him his weakness; as long as they too could all scramble aboard the royal train and take a controlling role in the nation's affairs.

But Byrne had been listening to Richard and had begun to credit Henry's eldest daughter with more respect than he had previously given her. He had been surprised to find out that Mary, her loyalist supporters about her, had gone into retreat. He wondered if she knew how mortally ill Edward was. Richard was sure she did, and thought she was more aware and better informed than the Duke gave her credit for. It was known that Mary and Edward got on passably well. Byrne had heard this and had, in his ignorance, attributed it to an old lady's desire to keep her pension. Richard had raised his eyebrows when Byrne had said this and then laughed uproariously. Mary might, Richard said when he had stopped laughing, be playing just as critical a political game as Northumberland, albeit in skirts. The more Byrne considered it the more he had to admit that the woman might be more of a threat than he had ever thought her to be.

Byrne had met with Lord Whickham who had the role of coordinating some of the conspirators. "Communication," he had emphasised to Edward, "is essential. We must all be aware of the time when it nears. Your manor lies in a line," Whickham had prodded the map, "with Percy here, London here, myself here and..." his finger had hovered for a second over the map as his geography temporarily eluded him, "ah yes, and Darcy here."

Byrne's face had fallen as Whickham informed him that they proposed to use Hazeldene as a central point where they could have meetings and from where news could be circulated amongst them. Hazeldene would be used to pass on the direct news of any move Northumberland himself made. Byrne had quickly realised that this would link him too closely with the plot;

should any of this become known, he would easily be identified as a ringleader. He guessed correctly that none of the others wanted to take this risk and that he had been nominated at some previous meeting, in his absence. He protested; his manor was not that convenient; surely Percy was best placed for this task. But he was overruled.

“We’ll need a network, Byrne, and I think you’re just the man to set it up,” Whickham had said.

Byrne had smiled bitterly at that. Whickham gave him names of men, members of the conspirators’ households who could, he hoped, be trusted, and would transport the information. Byrne had ridden back from the meeting with a heavy heart and a sense of dread. However, the journey gave him the time he needed to think, and when his horse breasted the opened gates at Hazeldene, he had found a solution. Now all he needed to do was find the man to carry it out.

Edward found Richard perched on the low wall at the back of the stables, the last rays of the afternoon sun still warming him. “Your man said I could find you here.” He sat next to Richard. “I’m just back from Whickham and I have work for you.”

Richard’s face showed mild interest as Edward handed the paper Whickham had given him along with the instructions, which had been his own to carry out. He added his own twist, telling Richard he wanted him to organise the meetings and transfer of information from Assingham, a neighbouring house, hoping to draw attention away from his own involvement.

“You’ll have seen the place, about a mile and a half distant,” Edward said.

“He’s not on your list.” Richard was still scanning the paper.

“Who’s not?” asked Edward confused.

“The owner of Assingham,” Richard replied, “Peter de Bernay, I believe.”

“Of course he’s not,” Edward said condescendingly. “Assingham is de Bernay’s House. He’s Mary’s man. But he’s been away for months and not likely to return. His lady is there and a few servants.”

“I fail to see why we risk sneaking to an unfriendly manor to pass information. We risk being seen and followed,” Richard commented refolding the paper.

“God, no one will suspect that information is being passed from the Duke through one of Mary’s supporters! Anyway, I leave it in your hands.” Edward rose, the other man’s tempered gaze unnerved him. “You have your instructions.” He took his leave of Richard, eager to wash his hands of the matter and hopeful Richard would not further question his use of the other manor and all that Whickham requested he do would be completed.

Richard watched him leave. Poor simple Edward, did he really think he could throw the scent of insurrection away from his own house by such a poor plan as this? Standing and stretching he set off to find Dan. He had taken a fancy for a ride in the late afternoon sun. Assingham came into view, not that it provided a pleasant sight for the eyes, poor mean structure that it was. Its origins were probably Saxon, and it had not been treated to the Norman building scheme visited on Hazeldene’s past. A wooden-roofed stone hall sat matronly over the ramshackle huts and walls of the manor that ran from its flanks. All parts of the main stone building had been used as lean to walls, saving materials and lending to the extensions some rigidity; the sprawl lessened in height as the distance from the hall increased. Richard’s horse had drawn itself to a voluntary stand and he leant forward, arms crossed, elbows on the saddle, picking out the tiny movements in the distance, which comprised the life at Assingham.

Jack resided at Hazeldene following a subdued routine for four weeks before he was admitted once more to the company of his brother. He knew, from Dan, that Richard had recovered from the wound he had received in London.

Jack drove the fork, without much enthusiasm or vigour, into the hay, lifted the fodder shoulder high and dropped it into the cart where it was raked into some order by Marc. Shaking the fork free from the twisted grass stems he found Richard walking slowly towards him across the yard. Immaculately dressed as usual, he was in stark contrast to Jack who sported soiled knees and a crown of hay sprigs.

Richard leant against the partly loaded cart and watched as Jack stabbed another forkful of hay to death before loading it into the cart. More twisted stems of summer grass fell from the bundle and snared themselves in the fair hair. He looked more like a scarecrow than ever Richard mused, but he did not voice his thought and suppressed a smile. Marc was one of Richard’s men and his eyes brightened with the prospect of the coming

conversation; it was well known that the master treated his bastard sibling with little more than contempt.

“I have a mind to ride to the village; Dan presses me to take you with me,” Richard said casually.

“Why?” Jack asked embedding the fork deep in the hay.

“Is that why am I going to the village, or why should I take you with me?” Richard asked.

“Either would be a start,” Jack grunted.

“Why I want to go out is my business. Why you’re going is because Dan feels it would be good for your soul,” Richard replied.

Richard delivered instructions to ready two horses, and then he turned away, leaving Jack watching his retreating back.

“Well, you’ll be having a nice afternoon.” Marc’s chuckles brought him a withering look from Jack.

The horses were ready, standing side by side, groomed, saddled, eager for some exercise, their ears twitching and eyes darting with equine curiosity. Jack was inspecting some frayed stitching in the loop of the harness on Richard’s horse, when his brother arrived. The Arab, named Corracha for his fiery spirit, pulled his head away from the unwanted attention.

“Such attention to detail! I didn’t think you would take to your role so well.”

His brother’s words, spoken so close, so quietly, almost made him jump. Suppressing the reaction, Jack took a deep breath, giving himself time to bury the retort, which threatened to burst forth. Re-buckling the strap with care, and untying Richard’s horse, he turned and handed the reins to his brother, knuckles white on the leather.

Richard took the offered horse and led it clip-clopping over the cobbles to the middle of the courtyard before he mounted. “Are you coming then?” Richard called down as he moved Corracha expertly sideways, crossing the gap between them. Richard turned to the gateway. Drawing the horse up, he set it towards the opening.

“Shit!” Jack’s horse was still tethered. Dragging the reins free, he vaulted into the saddle. The slender neck twisted to face the gate and follow in the direction Richard had gone. Before his feet were secured in the stirrups, he had forced the mare to a brutal run.

Jack caught up only when Richard slowed the pace, a mile or so distant from Hazeldene. He pulled his horse to a jolting halt next to Richard's. Corrachá had enjoyed the scant exercise. He wanted more and stood throwing his head, threatening to snap the reins from his rider's hands. The short journey had taken its toll on Richard; sweat beaded on his forehead and lank strands of raven hair clung wetly feathered on one cheek. In the four weeks he had been at Hazeldene, Richard had given his body as much chance to recover as possible, and had ridden little.

"Well, despite Dan's fears I haven't fallen off yet," Richard said breathing heavily.

"Only by bloody luck," Jack countered.

"Oh you think so, eh?" Richard said setting his heels to the horse again.

This time though Jack was in the lead his horse pounding on over the soft earth, clods flying from her hooves as her legs moved easily beneath her in agile flight. Feeling the first break in her stride, Jack finally slowed, lessening her pace gradually until she bore him at an ambling walk.

A snort from velvet nostrils behind him met his ears. His brother must have caught him up. Jack, still angry, refused to look round. His horse, Ebony, set a pheasant from its concealed retreat in the dried grass and thicket of the previous summer. She raised her head at the sudden squawking explosion. A loud neigh and sudden stamping of hooves came from the nervy and considerably more highly-strung Arab.

Looking round at the horse's exclamation, he found Corrachá without his rider. A glance behind told him that Richard had taken no immediate fall. The Arab must have followed his own animal after its rider had departed from the saddle. Jack moved in slowly and caught the reins of the spooked horse, then began to retrace his journey.

Glancing back up the gentle quiet slope he had descended, he quickly found what he sought. An untidy black heap some way distant on the grassy hill could be nothing else but his brother. Tightening his grip on the Arab's reins and forcing his own tired horse back to a gallop, Jack made his way to the tangle of cloth that was now propped up on one good elbow, looking up at him. Jack supposed the delay in his arrival had allowed Richard to recover from the pain of his fall.

"Hello, nursemaid," Richard called up cheerfully, his nonchalance feigned.

Jack remained on his horse. "Would you like a hand up?"

“No, I think I would prefer to remain here a while if that’s all right. The pretence will be that this spot provides a most excellent view. The reality is that I think I’ve broken my arm.” Richard’s words drew Jack’s eyes to the arm laying behind his back, the palm of the hand facing in entirely the wrong direction. Jack dropped from the saddle, looping the Arabs reins over the pommel of his own horse, relying on Ebony’s obedience to keep them on the hillside. Crouching down in front of Richard, Jack found he could see very little of the extent of the injury. In the fall, the cloak had wrapped around his body and Richard now lay on the edges his body trapped within the folds.

“You want me to help?” Jack said rocking back on his haunches.

“Looks like I have little choice,” Richard said, a weak smile on his strained face.

Jack nodded, with his right hand he took hold of the front of Richard’s doublet and shirt, lifting him far enough to pull the tangled folds of the cloak free. Richard’s head was near his ear and he heard the pained gasp as he extracted the cloth. Instead of laying him back, he held him there, half sitting propped against his own body.

“Well it is both good and bad,” Jack said, giving his brother time to recover from the recent pain.

“Go on,” Richard said weakly, his breath still ragged.

“It’s not broken, which is good,” Jack said, running his hands over the unresponsive limb. “But the bad news is...”

Richard screamed, even though Jack attempted to make the replacement of the shoulder swift and clean, giving Richard no time to protest or struggle in apprehension. The shoulder back in place, Jack waited, supporting the lighter form of his brother against his right shoulder. Richard’s breathing was harsh and painfully uneven. After a time he tried to push himself away, but the strength he needed had drained from his remaining good arm, and he slumped back, his face again pressed to Jack’s shoulder. Jack smiled, knowing his brother was not enjoying his moment of helplessness. Levering him forward he sat back. Richard knelt, swaying a little, in front of him, his skin ashen.

“If I didn’t know better I would say you had...just made another attempt to get rid of me.” The words were meant with humour, but the effort of speaking them took away any lightness there might have been.

“Do I take it that was meant as thanks?” Jack asked.

“Thanks? No...I do not think...thanks is a word that readily springs to mind...I would give thanks only at this moment for one thing...” Richard swallowed hard, taking a deep breath to try and settle his body’s rhythm back towards normality.

“What’s that then?” Jack enquired.

“Unconsciousness,” Richard replied. “Where did you learn to do that?”

“Calves are often born with their legs like that,” Jack said cheerfully.

“God, you practised on animals! I am so pleased you shared that knowledge with me after the event,” Richard said. With his good arm he lowered himself shakily back to the grass and lay looking up at the clouds.

Jack retrieved the cloak and threw it towards his brother. It was accepted and Richard pulled it with his good arm over his chilling body.

The pair remained there for a long while. Neither spoke: Richard because he finally slept and Jack, although he longed to, because he did not want to break the uneasy sleep. Jack lay on his back. He did not sleep, but stared unseeing; his liquid blue eyes mirrored the sailing clouds.

The afternoon was waning when Richard turned his head and blinked sleepily at his brother. He grunted against the stiffness and painful resistance of his tortured muscles, an immediate reminder of the afternoon’s events.

“God, I thought I had just had a dream. Unfortunately it appears it was real,” Richard groaned. “Either that or for my sins on earth, which are many, I have been delivered to the depths of hell.”

“That’s probably where you deserve to be. How do you feel?”

“Like shit.” Richard stiffly pushed himself to sit up. “I know, before you say it, I have no one to blame for this but myself. Don’t I know it!”

“I was going to say no such thing,” Jack replied with satisfaction. “It was obvious; I didn’t think I needed to tell you.” With exaggerated ease, Jack stood and brushed the remnants of the meadow grass from his jacket. “Are you stopping there all night?”

“I am not sure I have a choice,” Richard replied, still sitting, his weight taken on his remaining good arm.

He didn’t look very comfortable Jack thought. “Here...” He extended a hand. Richard grasped his wrist and Jack pulled him smoothly to the vertical. “To the village another day then?” Jack said standing back while Richard straightened his aching, complaining muscles.

Richard rubbed his face with one hand and pushed tangled hair back from his eyes. "Come on, nursemaid, I want to go to bed." There was a slight smile on his face as he turned towards his horse, which had remained throughout the afternoon obediently standing next to its companion. "Here's your chance to redeem yourself." Richard stood near Corrachá. Turning his head slightly, he looked back at Jack. "There is no way I can get up here. Come on, I'm not very often helpless; enjoy your moment."

"I am not enjoying it, but you are starting to tempt me to leave you here."

"Ah well, at least we are back on the same easy terms as always," Richard said exasperated. "Jack! Stop being so bloody prickly."

Jack, a little guiltily at the accuracy of the observation, moved to lift Richard into his saddle. "I think I too would like to get you back, then you can make someone else's life a misery." Jack lifted himself smoothly onto his own horse. Suddenly he blurted the words that had been burning inside him all day. "I regret what happened; if you cannot forgive me I shall leave." He looked across to make sure Richard was listening. "But do not keep me here to torment me."

"Have I been tormenting you? I think you've been doing a fine job of that yourself; you needed no help from me." Richard turned his horse to draw level with Jack's. "I'm confident, even if you aren't, that it won't happen again. Please spare me and the rest of the world the repentant. There is little of value or use to be gained from it, for either of us; the competent is much preferred." Jack took his words in silence, a response beyond him. "God, Jack, can I not say it plain enough. Bloody well forget it. It's in the past in my mind. Let it be the same in yours."

"Sorry," Jack managed.

"I was just being..."

Jack cut him off, a weary smile on his face, "Your usual self. Yes, I know. Come on, let us get back before Dan starts to believe I have tried to rid the earth of you again."

Dusk was fast approaching. Hazeldene showed in dark outline against a sky bereft of light, its detail stolen from the eye.

"I still must get to the village, shall we try this again tomorrow?" Richard broke an almost companionable silence.

"Are you sure you want to repeat today?" Jack asked.

“I would view tomorrow an improvement on today if I could remain in the saddle, if I didn’t have to rely on your calving talents and if you would ride with a slightly easier conscience. You make for poor company. Despite what you think, I prefer you as a rash fool rather than a repentant sinner; the halo does not sit well,” Richard said.

“And I thought I was on my best behaviour,” Jack said innocently.

“Spare me it tomorrow,” Richard said. “Oh no, there’s Dan come to see if I’ve tripped and grazed my knees again.” Jack also had seen the man on horseback approaching on the thick-set horse. “Don’t tell him of my encounter with the grass or I’ll be confined to my room tomorrow.”

Jack returned Richard’s conspiratorial grin. Whether the day had eased the tension that Jack felt was between them remained to be seen. Richard could see Jack still struggled with it. He could not forget, nor did Richard, as it happened, wish him to, but at least the subject was buried in a shallow grave; time would place further layers over the insubstantial scattering of platitudes until it was well sunk within their minds.

The following midday found them in the village, Richard leading them to an inn. In the recent past, unless he had ridden abroad before alone, Jack could think of no time he could have been there. Richard bade Jack remain in the yard with the horses, a little less officiousness in his tone than the previous day.

Jack amused himself watching the rounded behind of a tavern wench bob up and down as its owner busied herself washing what appeared to be furs in the horse trough. Such was her vigour that much of the ground round the trough was mired with water. Beyond the pond glittering tracks ran across the yard to find new cracks and dips to explore; Jack stepped sideways to preserve the dryness of his feet as one such minor river branched from the delta at the troughs source and set a course towards him. The move, when he looked past the hessian clad buttocks, gave him a view into the inn where he could see Richard in close conversation; he did not recognise the short man, clothed in ragged poverty he was talking to. Jack looked back at the maid of the large behind to avoid any accusation of spying; Richard had already told him bitingly that his reasons for coming here were private.

"I thought you weren't coming. Aye, it's a long time since I saw your face," the short man said, shifting his weight and leaning heavily on the stick he carried.

"A while," agreed Richard. Smiling he gestured the man to seat himself.

"I'll not stop. I have what you want, but I can't figure why you want it."

The man dug beneath the layers of dirty fabric and retrieved a packet wrapped in pigskin and tied tightly with cord.

"Steven, my thanks," Richard said, deftly exchanging it for coins.

"Ah, I wish I could say no to you." The old face was sad.

Richard clapped the man on the arm. "The world is, as you know and I have found, out most wholly unfair."

Steven looked up at that, but Richard was looking from the window. "Why do you want it? It'll do you no good. I can't see the use of it. It'll do you no good against Robert either. If he knew you'd got that, he'd not rest till he'd flayed you. You be careful."

A slight smile wandered onto the younger face. "And do you think he'll manage to flay me?"

Steven's face cracked into a toothless grin. "Ah God, lad, no, I suppose not; never could, never will."

"Well, your confidence cheers me." Richard smiled.

Jack did not have long to wait before Richard returned to the yard, squinting as he emerged in to the light, and bade Jack join him. Jack did not ask about the man Richard had met. The day was going well, why make it take a turn for the worse.

Ale arrived and Jack filled the cups from the pitcher. "So, back to Hazeldene next?" he enquired to start the conversation off on a safe and neutral line.

Richard was swilling his drink round the cup, his thoughts elsewhere. Jack did not press his question but waited. At last the other sat back. Arms folded, Richard observed his brother. "Tell me something, Jack. Why do you stay? For let us not lie, it's not for love of myself, is it?"

Jack shrugged caught off guard.

Richard continued. "No reason at all then?"

"I haven't got a lot of choice at the moment: Harry will be after both of our hides. Why do you ask?"

“Idle curiosity naught else. There must be some reason.” Richard leant across the table. “Do you not feel sometimes that you would like to make the world a fairer place? It has treated you badly hasn’t it? Would it not be just to take what should have been yours? Would it not be easy to take what I have?”

“What do you mean? You have nothing anyway,” Jack said confused.

Richard laughed. “I have quite a lot: a name, money, power.”

“Where exactly?” Jack laughed. “You’re the third son of a family that’ll have naught to do with you. I would say that makes your position in this world little better than mine.”

“I am pleased to see you hold me in such high esteem,” Richard said.

Jack sensed that the previous conversation, whatever it had been, had been closed by Richard. He was still confused but caution told him not to pursue it. Instead he said, “We’ve been here for weeks now. Any signs yet of any plans to move?”

“Death is not as timely as you would like?” Richard asked.

“I wish it on no one; do not imply I do. I just wanted to know if we are to be called to act.”

“Byrne returns from London today. I shall know more then. There is a message network to which I am not privy. Yet,” Richard’s face showed a slight smile, “worry not, Jack, as soon as I know I will run to find you. Either way, we get paid, and that is, after all, the crux of the matter. I would have thought you would have preferred the opportunity to take the money without having to wield steel to earn it.”

“Aye, that would suit me fine.” Jack drained his cup and reached for the pitcher once more. “I just like to know what’s happening. This place is so far removed no news passes here.”

“Which, as it happens, is a good thing, don’t you agree? No one is going to track us immediately to Hazeldene. I have a task for you. Here...” Richard pulled from his loosened jacket a purse and passed it to Jack who accepted the coins with a puzzled look. “It will take you a couple of days. You know where they all are. Go and make sure they have not squandered what you gave them and are languishing in penury.”

“When?” Jack stowed the coins quickly out of sight.

“Well, now would seem as good a time as any, wouldn’t it? This village is well on the road you need to take,” Richard said. He had a bundle of letters, which he was going to deliver himself, but something made him

change his mind. “These,” he slid the package across the table to Jack, “need to be delivered in two days. You will meet a man here who’ll have letters for me. Please, Jack, don’t lose these; our future depends on them.”

“Don’t worry. Two days time you say. I’ll be here,” Jack said accepting the bundle.

Richard told him what the messenger’s name was and what he looked like, hoping that Jack wouldn’t let him down. The letters Jack would collect were coming from London, from some of Seymour’s old contacts. One in particular was well placed in Northumberland’s household, and any news from that quarter was not only interesting but could be valuable as well.

Chapter Six

The main doors to Hazeldene's hall stood open, sweet fresh air being drawn to the house's welcome embrace. Richard leant on the cool stone frame, arms crossed in front of him, and looked out across the yard, watching Byrne's wife, Judith, colourful, careless and expensive, skipping to a horse, which was being steadied by Dan. A second woman descended from it, a little unsteadily.

The new arrival was Catherine De Bernay, aged thirteen, and daughter to Peter de Bernay, owner of the manor at Assingham, just two miles away. The girl lacked still the proportions of a woman's figure and was all elbows, knees and knuckles, with not a spare scrap of flesh on her. Dresses hung from two bony boy's shoulders and seemed to hardly touch the body again except to expose a jutting hip. The whole unhappy appearance was worsened by her unnatural height, and there was little in the way of pleasant features to alleviate it.

The two women, arms linked, made their way across the yard to the steps. Richard stepped back into the shadow of the arch and neither of the approaching women saw him as they ascended the steps.

"You must come..." Judith was pleading, her attention on her companion and not on the man she was about to walk into. "Oh! You gave me such a fright!" Judith's eyes devoured Richard's face, her manners temporality forgotten. "Catherine, forgive me. This is Edward's cousin Richard," Judith said smiling what she hoped was her most charming and winning smile at the man in the shadows. Catherine smiled politely into the unsmiling face and found herself turning quite red under the unfriendly gaze he turned on her.

"Ladies." Richard bowed most flamboyantly before descending the steps from the hall. A mild look of disappointment crossed Judith's childish face at his departure. When she returned her attention to her companion, her face and voice had lost its animation. The slight smile Richard had fixed on Judith dropped immediately from his face as he walked down the steps.

While the lady of the house entertained her friend, one of Richard's men slipped unobserved into the Byrne family chapel. Robby had been there before, and although he had taken nothing the first time, the pull of the silver plate was more than he could bear. He took only one item, stowing it away beneath his jacket; there were another eight on the shelf above the altar; no one would notice that once there had been nine.

Harry leant forward across the table, eyes pig-like in their intensity and sparkling with anticipation. A podgy fat slicked hand held a partly consumed chicken leg.

"You found him! By God tell me where."

The master's enthusiasm was marked by both of the men who stood before him.

It was Hal who spoke, his voice holding a ring of pride in their success. "I told Spratty here we'd find him, and we did. Wasn't easy like, Sir, and we've had a right run around I can tell you, but find him we did for you."

Harry's impatience burst from his greased lips. "Tell me, man! You'll be paid, have no fear. Now tell me where."

Hal cast a glance at Spratty who was examining his boots and looked unlikely to supply his master with the information in the face of Harry's temper. Hal was forced to continue relating what Betsy, erstwhile landlady of the White Horse, had told them.

Harry looked perplexed; his small eyes narrowed further. "Where is he now then?" his fat jowls demanded. "Did he live?"

"Yes, Sir. He stopped at the White Horse two days and then went north.

We tracked him though, me and Spratty did, and he's with Lord Byrne at his manor Hazeldene near..."

Harry cut off the stumbling Hal. "Byrne...Byrne..." He considered the name, rolling it maliciously off his tongue, Hal and Spratty temporarily forgotten.

Slowly, and with care, the wrappings were removed from the paper. Dry and cracked with age it had survived so long; to wreak its destruction now with carelessness was not the reader's intention. The document inside, trusted to a priest so long ago, refused to be pressed flat, and the reader had to review the contents along each angled section of the paper. It was a deposition, forced from Fitzwarren by his conscience and a well-meaning

little priest, documentary evidence that he vowed to set right the wrong he had perpetrated on himself, his wife and his son.

You never quite got up the courage though did you? Richard mused. His father's signature was unmistakable, the last letters snaking their way under the seal, which almost, but not quite, obscured the all-important date. He had known of its existence, known what it spoke of, but proof of that act had been beyond him until now. Richard's smile broadened at the irony of it. To him it was worthless, only vengeance could be wrought from its revelations. Was that his purpose, he wondered. Did he simply dress it up in some other guise simply to salve his own conscience? Maybe.

Richard threw himself on his back on the bed. Was this how Jack felt? Was he falling prey to what he so despised in his half-brother? No! A hand balled to a fist, paper cracked. *No, your sin will not damn me.*

It was not until spring changed to early summer that two letters arrived from Peter de Bernay: one for Gavin, erstwhile keeper of Assingham in its master's absence, and another for Anne, its lady. Her daughter came in hard on the heels of the messenger.

"Mama it's from father, is there a letter for us?" Catherine asked.

"Yes," Anne said, turning away from the child who was trying to read the words over her arm. "A minute child let me read."

She turned leaving Catherine with the messenger, pacing slowly as she read the brief words. Peter hoped she and their daughter were in good health and that all was well at Assingham. Several badly formed halting sentences spoke of his wish to return. However, he stressed that his duty was owed to the Lady Mary and so he was unable to predict his return. He promised to write soon and closed "your husband."

Anne whipped the hardly used sheet over, hoping perhaps for more on the reverse and found nothing save her name. Reversing it again she reread the brief correspondence.

"Mama, can I see? When is he coming home?" Catherine said coming close and trying again to view the letter.

"Here child," Anne passed the page to Catherine who devoured the few lines.

"Oh mama why doesn't he come home, it's been months. He promised me a new pony, you know I have outgrown Clover, he promised." Catherine complained.

"I think your father has more on his mind than ponies Catherine." Anne scolded.

Catherine stomped from the hall. To cheer her melancholy spirits, Catherine took her mare, Clover, and the pair trotted out in the bright May sun.

"My lady Catherine, good day to you."

Catherine recognised the approaching rider: Edward's cousin. Last time they had met, his unfriendly gaze had made her face burn; her skin flushed red at the memory of it. "What a pleasant surprise." The response was automatic and she sounded far from pleasantly surprised. "And what brings to Assingham?" Catherine was in no mood for company, and hoped he didn't stop long.

"A pleasant day, naught else. It seemed a pity to waste it inside so decided a ride abroad was in order. You were of the same mind?" Richard enquired.

Catherine almost told him of the unwanted news but thought the better of it, the man was a stranger, and not one she was sure she liked. "Yes, I was, and Clover," she patted the neck of the horse affectionately, "needed the exercise." The height of Richard's Arab dwarfed her own pony and she found she had to look up a long way to meet those unfriendly eyes.

Their horses came to a slow and mutual halt, busying themselves catching mouthfuls of lush summer grass from the enriched green line of foliage that attended the stream.

"Shall you have time to visit Hazeldene again while I am there? Judith bid me ask you if I should see you." Richard enquired, his mind only part on the conversation.

"I'm sure I will, Judith is teaching me needlepoint," Catherine remarked absently. *He'll go in a minute, she thought. He has as much interest in me and Assingham as I have in him.* "If you will excuse me..." Catherine tugged none too gently on Clover's reins but the animal would have none of it and stood solid, straining its head towards the unfinished meal. "Damn you, Clover, move!" she said sharply. When the horse still ignored her, she resorted to jerking on the reins and pleading with it. "Clover! Please, Clover, please..." Richard's grey eyes were alive with amusement. Catherine tried again but the stubborn animal refused to obey. Embarrassment and frustration finally got the upper hand and tears welled

up unwanted in her eyes threatening at the slightest sharp movement to spill forth in tell tale tracks down her cheeks

“Catherine, I think...” Richard ventured.

“I care not what you think, Sir! I wish you to leave my father's land.” She stared him full in the face, and cursed herself silently, for now he could plainly see her wet lashes and the rosy bloom of embarrassment and anger upon her face.

“Good day to you, Lady Catherine.” With exaggerated ease, he turned his horse away from the grass. Bringing it to a halt again he regarded her silently for a moment before adding, in a deceptively casual manner, “Do not turn your child's temper on me, Catherine, for it's not my fault you cannot control your beast.” With that final remark, he spurred his horse on and disappeared into the trees on the far side of the stream.

Catherine waited until the horse's haunches had disappeared into the wood before rubbing a sleeve across her dripping nose and cheeks. Clover, unmoved by the encounter, continued to tug vivid green clumps from the stream bank. “You, my dear animal, have a lot to answer for.” Dropping from the saddle, she stared into one liquid brown eye. “You could at least look sorry for what you've done.”

Jack made his return the following day. Richard was away and Dan he found eating with Robby and Marc.

“Shift over, Robby,” Jack said.

Robby obliged, joining Marc on another bench, and Jack settled himself next to Dan.

Dan informed him that the master was out, and no, he didn't know where he was. Jack settled for passing what meagre news he had collected from the men to Dan. On the whole, he was happy they would all stay where they were for a few more weeks, but after that, they would grow restless. The only problem he had come across was that Alan had duped Froggy into allowing him to use all of the group's money on a dice game. Froggy was ready to leave so fearful was he of the master's wrath. Jack had managed to replace some of the lost silver, and informed them curtly that they were farm labourers, so they knew where the remainder would come from.

Alan, Jack had spoken to alone. He had shrugged off Jack's rebuke, telling Jack that he was no worse than him. Jack was renowned for being a willing participant in any game where coins swapped hands, and it was also

known that he often lost heavily. Alan had no way of knowing that Jack's most recent losses had led him to a pawn brokers, and to Richard almost ending his life on Peter Hardwood's sword. Faced with his own error in another, Jack had felt his temper rise. Alan had turned away; he held the bastard brother in no great esteem. Rational thought had been lost to Jack's mind. Wheeling the heavier man round with a brutal grip on his shoulder, he had delivered an accurate and teeth-cracking punch. Alan had no chance to deflect the blow or lessen its impact, and had been sent staggering backwards to lose his footing and end sitting down heavily at Jack's feet.

"Must have been a bit of a shock to Alan then," Dan observed. He had no particular liking for the man. While he respected his skill with a knife, trouble started too easily around him. He had set himself up as a minor leader who regarded himself as below the master but somewhere definitely above Jack, for whom he harboured a dislike he did not bother to hide. That was probably a mistake, Dan reflected, for where the master nursed his temper and used it harshly but sparingly, Jack's ruled his head all too often. Alan would bear a grudge; it would remain to be seen how he exercised it.

"I'm sure it was, but the bugger deserved it. Anything of interest happened here while I've been away?" Jack said accepting a lump of fresh warm dark bread from the loaf Dan held.

"Ah well, let me see. Aye, master's horse threw a shoe," he eyed Jack a slight smile on his face, "but not his rider again." Jack looked innocently back at Dan. "Mat's down at blacksmith's now." He paused, "Then there was Byrne back yesterday. Nothing's happening yet mind by the looks of it." Dan stopped when he heard the voice in the doorway.

"Robby!" Richard said. It was only one word but it was enough to make Robby stand, his meal forgotten in front of him.

Insolence and anger in the form of Richard leant dangerously against the doorframe darkening the room. Robby said nothing; his jaw moved as if trying to form a forgotten word, hands clasping and unclasping before him.

"Struck dumb?" the hard voice asked. "That's a shame for now you will be unable to offer me a defence."

Robby's eyes widened. "...I..."

Richard moved from the doorway to face Robby across the table.

"I will give you a chance." The cross of the knife's hilt rose between them. Cool fingers released their slender hold and the point embedded itself

in the table with a soft thud. "Take the knife before me and I shall judge you innocent."

"And...and if I don't?" Robby stepped back, but his way was blocked by Marc.

The smile Robby received in reply had nothing of humour in it. The master simply placed his hands palms down on the table, waiting.

Licking his lips, Robby wiped his sweating hands on the front of his jacket, then moved to match the master's stance.

Jack stopped breathing, eyes not leaving his brother's impassive face.

"Whenever you like," the master invited.

Robby breathed heavily, his eyes dropped to the knife. So close, so close...

There was a flash of movement and a second thud, a soft, sinister noise. Even Jack found he winced at it. The knife was in Robby's hand, pinning it through flesh and bone to the table.

The latch lifted. Dan shouldered the door hard, forcing the chair behind it to squeal across the boards. He found Richard flat on the floor, his face within folded arms, a wine pitcher next to him.

"Go away," Richard said quietly.

"Get up." Dan kicked the wine jug, sending a fuming spray of liquid over the prone man. "I knew you were drunk when you took Robby on, and I see you've come here to finish."

"I said go away."

Dan grunted. A huge hand scooped an arm from the floor and began to pull Richard to his feet. He was not as drunk as he had assumed. The lithe form twisted free, moving quickly to stand a pace away. "Ha! I don't need your help."

Dan dropped back and fell into the chair. He spoke sadly, "You have a lot left to learn."

"You wish to teach me a lesson?" Richard laughed. "What in? Humility, for that is not for me. Perhaps honour, no, that was beaten from me long since. Surely you could not think morality? Too late, the corrupt cannot become once more pure. Or maybe faith, possibly faith for I confess I have none. Could it be charity, could it? No, I have had enough of charity's acid kisses. Then it must be hope, oh no..." He faltered, and laughed harshly. "Hope then, that inspires the spirit, holding the promise of trust, belief,

confidence..." An arm outstretched caught the fire surround. He sagged against it, and from there slowly to his knees. "Am I such a despairing, desperate, lamenting fool? Ruined and undone? For hope is most surely dead."

Dan sighed. "You're drunk."

"Very." The voice was weary and resigned. "You came to find out why Robby ended up with a knife through his hand?" Dan nodded. "Ask Marc, and leave me alone."

"I will ask him, but I've a mind to sit here a while," Dan replied.

"Please, please, leave me to mine own torment for pity's sake," Richard begged.

Dan sighed but stayed where he was until Richard succumbed to a drunken, uneasy slumber. Throwing a cover over the younger man he retrieved the paper, lying near an outstretched hand he had waited patiently for.

"God no..." He spoke on a breath to the quiet room. Folding the confession, he took it into his care. No wonder the lad was blind drunk.

Dan returned to Richard's room early the next morning. Richard lay, head pillowed on his arm, where he had slept, beneath crumpled covers and in front of the now dead fire.

"You know about Robert then?" Dan asked.

"I knew. Surely you cannot be so naïve as to believe Robert's pure hatred springs from some childhood incident?"

"No..." Dan considered his answer. "I thought it was because of Lady Elizabeth."

"Oh no, Robert's hatred is for selfish reasons. He would not trouble himself over things that affected him so little, although I admit it didn't help."

Richard rubbed hands over his face. "There is some humour is there not?"

"Is there?" Dan asked sarcastically. "Go on, tell me what happened and then I'll share what I know."

Richard looked for a moment as if he would resist, but then began, surprising Dan. "I went back home, penitent and most humble. My father knew I was not guilty of assaulting Elizabeth; it was well known by then that I was Seymour's scapegoat. It was Seymour who laid his filthy hands

on her, not me, but accusations like that don't bury themselves easily, and I am sure there were plenty who chose to believe it. Anyway, my father uneasily accepted me until he could find some way of disposing of me. Robert...Well, Robert set out to encourage me to leave sooner, and lost half of his ear for the trouble." There was a bitter smile on his face. "I suffered a goodly beating as well. Steven, Lord bless the fool, told me then, saying it pained him to see Robert, base born bastard that he is, heir – and a poor one at that. Simple fool! He thought the truth would triumph and took his case to my father, told him that he knew his wrong and that he should put the world to rights before he left it."

Dan waited for the other to continue.

"As it transpires that great man, William Fitzwarren, my father, decided to conveniently forget my innocence. I rode out with him and Robert, the pretext I cannot remember. Robert knocked me to the ground and tied me to a tree. My father whipped me until he thought I was dead. He told me it was for the shame I had brought his name, but that was not the reason. Steven helped me and I left." The tale was told without emotion, a recitation of facts now years old. "And you followed me to London."

"I thought your father banished you for what they accused you of with Elizabeth. Robert let it be known that Seymour had whipped you for trying to take her honour. I did not know it was your own father. Sweet Mary!" Dan was shaking his head.

"Oh Seymour did, but that was nothing compared to what I received at my father's hand. I don't want pity. We had a bargain; I've traded my cold bloody facts now give me yours."

Dan was shocked by the cold expression that Richard levelled on him. "Aye, I found out from the priest, years before, when he thought your father was about to put right the wrong. As you know – he didn't. It was too bloody late by then. Robert was about twelve, everyone believed him to be William's son. There was no way it could be changed; he had well and truly saddled his bastard on her. The priest told Robert too. He believed the boy could not carry it on his conscience and would persuade his father to set right what had happened. Robert's mother had been well placed with the Abbey, and a substantial donation made by William would make sure she'd not be leaving. He banished the priest, and then your father supposed that the only ones who knew were himself and Robert, but I knew, and so did Steven, and then you too. No wonder he tried to kill you."

“Why didn’t you tell me you knew, even after we left?” Richard asked.

“Why? It was an old crime. There was no way it could be set to rights, and not on the word of a priest long since gone. There is no proof; it could have only caused...”

Dan was cut off by Richard’s bitter laughter. “There is nowhere left within my soul for more pain; it could have been no worse.” He paused steadying his thoughts. “There is proof now though, or was. I suppose you’ve got it.”

“Aye, here...” Dan threw the paper across. “I didn’t think you would want just anyone reading it. What do you propose to do with it?”

Richard laughed. “Fate has dealt me a neat hand has it not? I wait until dear father dies and lay claim to what Robert has.”

“No you won’t,” Dan said.

“Why not?” came the sharp reply.

“Because it belongs not to you. Despite what you said, you have a conscience.”

Richard nodded slowly. “I want Robert to believe I will do that, and he will. He will find out soon enough from Harry, if he doesn’t know already, that I am back, and he will track me down.”

“That’s a fair bet after what you did in London to Harry,” Dan pointed out unnecessarily.

“I meant that to be the general outcome.” Richard was folding the paper carefully back up. “I want this not at all, but it seems to want me. I almost fed it to the flames. Be damned with them all, I can make my own way, my own fate, my own future. I need no such curse as this will surely bring.” He smiled. “But it seems the curse is as much mine as anyone’s.” Richard looked away from Dan’s face; he had seen the other’s expression harden. “Please, allow me a little indulgence in self pity.”

“He will not let you live because of what you know,” Dan stated the obvious.

“What he doesn’t know is that I can prove it, and that I have also found something, or someone else. For some reason William kept that piece of information close to his own heart. Only four people know who his real heir is. Two of us are in this room.”

“He had more than one bastard, but the one he placed with his brother is the child of his wife,” Dan supplied.

“That I was a little unsure of until recently,” Richard said quietly. His eyes had wandered back to his hands. “For which I can be forgiven. There is little family resemblance is there?”

Dan shrugged, that was true unless you had met Eleanor, William’s wife, dead some fifteen years now. Richard must barely be able to remember the woman. “Jack is made in the image of Eleanor.”

Richard seemed a little shocked by his statement, but did not pursue it. “If he finds out the truth that he was born on the right side of the sheets he will try and take what should have been his. Jack is fertile ground for jealousy and hate to grow in.”

“God, I know he’s not perfect, but why don’t you tell him?” Dan concluded.

“Are you mad? He has difficulty accepting me as his brother. How can you expect him to accept that? Then he will be killed, believe me,” Richard said.

“On the sword of one of his kin folk, be it Robert, or even by our father’s hand.”

“He’ll find out sooner or later, believe me it would be better if you told him. Explain to him about your father, help him,” Dan pleaded.

“In time I will. Just give me time. When Jack finds out the truth he’s not likely to sit around and consider the alternatives. He’ll be out of that gate and on a journey to see his father that will not end well,” Richard said wearily. “Let me gather some coin and establish a place for us then we will be in a better position to...”

“Aye and when’s that likely to be? You are not being fair. He is your brother, and you are running short on blood kin who don’t wish to kill you. If you don’t tell him sooner rather than later I will,” Dan pressed.

“All right, I will, in time I will,” Richard conceded, lying back on the floor, his eyes unfocussed.

“Tell me something,” Dan paused. “Jack, is he just a pawn to deliver vengeance on your father, or do you have some liking for him?”

Richard smiled. “You know the answer to that.” Dan didn’t, but the grey gaze, which did not quite see him, stopped him from asking further.

Chapter Seven

Jack was called to go to Richard's room in the late evening when all had retired from the hall. There had been some scant entertainment provided by Judith accompanied by one of her ladies on a lute. The lady clearly thought she could sing, and clearly could not. Thankfully, for the audience's sake, after only three tales of courtly love, Edward bid his wife rest her voice. It occurred to Richard that had Jack been present he would have been blowing bubbles in his beer as Judith warbled through her tales of chivalry and romantic love.

Jack found Richard with a cloak draped over his arm.

"Going somewhere?"

"We are going somewhere. Do you fancy a walk before bed? It's a new moon and a pleasant evening," Richard said.

Jack smiled; Richard sounded in good humour. "It's a fine night for a stroll," he agreed. He lifted the latch, pulling the door open a fraction, but Richard was shaking his head and pointing behind him. Closing the door again, Jack followed Richard to the opened window.

"And what great offence hath the door committed that you no longer wish for its services?" Jack enquired quietly as he leant from the window to observe respectfully the long drop to the ground.

"The door none, but the passage has eyes," Richard replied lightly. "Go on then, drop to the sill and go round the corner to the right; it's like walking down stairs after that."

Richard's room occupied the corner of the house. Directly to the right of the window lay the sharp turn in the stone signalling the end of the wall. Looking thanklessly at his brother, Jack lowered himself slowly out, his arms bearing the weight of his body until his feet found security on the upper frame of the window below. Keeping his body hard against the contoured stone, breathing shallow and even, Jack slid his feet carefully along the ledge until his fingers finally found the corner. The roughened masonry felt cool and coarse against his cheek. Moving by touch, he edged closer to the worn corner, extending his arm to the invisible. The northern

facing wall was subject to the full punishment metered out by the weather and his fingers felt the scooped out sandstone blocks, eroded away under pressure from the wind, and of slits between the blocks where mortar had crumbled. A good hold secured with his left hand, his fingers locked to the stone. He moved to step round the corner. It was the trickiest part of the journey; his right foot was unable to find secure purchase on the smooth west-facing wall.

The north wall provided no window embrasure to apply his weight to, but offered cracks, dusty with crumbling masonry. He rubbed his foot in the unseen joint, seeking a more secure hold, and heard pebbles skittering from their lofty perch. He moved to the left allowing room for Richard to join him on the rocky stairs, smiling a silent greeting as his brother rounded the corner, and together they began a careful descent.

Richard's progress was quicker his moves made with a confidence born of familiarity, and gave his brother the notion that he had travelled this route before. Jack was slower, more cautious, testing the firmness of cracks and fissures offered by the wall before trusting his full weight to their temporary keeping. He dropped finally into the long grass where his brother waited. The vertical descent had brought them to the foot of the mighty Norman defences outside the security of the curtain wall, no longer within the stone embrace of Hazeldene.

It was a mile and a half directly across the fields and Richard led them quickly to their destination. Dressed in folded grey the incandescent disc of the moon showed little light to reveal their passing.

Finally, Richard signed Jack to stop, pulling him down low. Before them, Assingham was picked out in relief, depthless black against the dulled pearl night. The only detail not lost to the dark was due to a defective shutter from where leaked the pale yellow light from a taper.

Richard dropping to sit in comfort turned to Jack. "Well, this is Byrne's chosen spot. What do you think?"

A rustle of stems told that Jack had settled beside him. "I am, in more than one sense, in the dark."

"Byrne has been instructed to relay the messages, which will support this endeavour. To throw the hounds a foreign scent we are using Assingham to relay messages. With such as Byrne at the helm, if this venture succeeds it will be a bloody miracle that the Pope should be interested in. He fears to

forge the links too firmly in case the day goes Mary's way, and has shirked his task to me. Any questions?"

Jack merely shrugged his response.

"Well, dear brother, what you don't know is that Assingham's Lord is a staunch supporter of Mary and, I believe, currently at that lady's side."

"This is not sounding so good." Jack commented.

"I think it sounds like more trouble than its worth. Why not have your meetings in the forest over there?" Jack asked pointing in the direction of the forest he knew was there but could not see.

"Because he pays, so unfortunately he calls the tune, and the tune, as unpleasant as those created by his wife, is here," Richard said dryly. "It does, however, have one or two curious advantages, doesn't it?"

Jack couldn't see what advantages there might be, but didn't voice the thought.

"So who do you suppose will take the day, Mary or the Duke?" Richard changed the subject.

Jack shook his head in the dark. "I know not and care not as long as we get paid."

"Point well noted, although your desire may be thwarted if the Duke loses." He paused long enough to give Jack time to absorb that. "If you were to lay a bet, where would you place your coin?"

Richard's enquiry was a little too lightly put. Jack's guard was raised; the question was not as idle as it seemed. "Can't say. I know something of the Duke, but what strengths Mary has I know not."

"I agree," Jack, shocked at the concurrence of his brother, was pleased all the same.

"Who would you choose?" Jack asked, interested in his brother's thoughts, and wondering if for once he would share them. There was no reply, only Richard's laughter, and Jack turned from interested to irritated.

"Both," Richard said after his laughter had subsided. "Come, let us deliver a message."

Deft fingers produced a small square of neatly folded parchment, brightly dazzling against the grey of night. Richard did not share the cause of his amusement. Pushing himself up and beckoning Jack to join him, they set out to Assingham.

Later that night after Richard and Jack returned to Hazeldene there was a fire in the empty stalls in the stables. The alarm was raised quickly and all the animals were safely removed, but before the fire was out, it took with it a goodly section of the roof and the end wall collapsed.

Anne De Bernay had been working on the household accounts since early morning. Sore and with a back stiffened by immobility, she laid the pen to rest and straightened from the desk groaning. A satisfied smile beheld the ink drying on the last entry in the accounts as glossed wet faded to matte black. The book closed, she laid it on one side of her desk. It was at that point that Gavin came to announce Judith Byrne's unexpected arrival.

The mean hall provided for its owners and guests with six high-backed chairs pulled in a semi-circle around the fire. The wall they made providing the only seclusion from the rest of the hall, which, by necessity, was where all ate and slept, save its lady and absent lord. Judith was there now, her embroidered skirts arranged to spill in neat and even folds over her knees, silver threaded flowers finding themselves picked out in the firelight.

Judith did not stand to greet Anne; it had taken too long to arrange her dress in such a fashion as to avoid most of the filth on the floor.

"I am here to ask a favour, Anne. You can say no. I don't mean to impose on our friendship, but you see part of our stables burnt down last night," Judith said, carefully pulling her riding gloves from her fingers.

"I am sorry to hear that. How can I help? If its labour you need, or materials, we have plentiful supplies of timber, certainly..."

Judith interrupted. "Nothing so costly to you, my dear. We need some space." Judith saw the puzzled look on Anne's face and continued.

"Edward is having them rebuilt, but on a different plan. They were too small anyway for our needs and much in need of renovation as it was, so Edward wants to pull the remains down and start again. Well, it was my idea really and Edward liked it. We would much appreciate it if you could spare some space in your stables. I noticed they were half empty and if you could it would save us much trouble. Don't worry about feed, Edward said he'd send up one of his men to look after them, plus a cart of food so it wouldn't cost you anything." Judith stopped suddenly, convinced of a positive result.

"We have plenty of space, and I do not suppose a few more horses around would make any difference. Of course I don't mind, Judith." Anne

smiled.

Richard left Hazeldene shortly after Judith had departed for Assingham and headed into the forest. He approached a clearing where a stone circle from another age still showed through the briar of the forest floor. In the centre another horse was tethered loosely, its rider sitting on top of one of the druids' stones, impatiently tapping a whip against a riding boot and occasionally casting his eyes around, expectant of a visitor.

"Well, you're Derby's man, I believe. What a pleasant morning it is, do you not agree?" said Richard conversationally.

"Do you have it?" the man snapped. "The time is late. I had thought you were not going to arrive. I have a hard ride ahead of me, so if you will hand it over I would be on my way."

"Oh yes, I have it." Richard handed over a sealed square of white parchment. The other took it without paying any attention to its contents.

"Next time, see if you can arrive a little earlier, man. Otherwise I shall have words with your master." Mounting his horse, he swiftly disappeared from view.

Richard watched him leave, gazing thoughtfully after him and made no effort to depart for some minutes. "I own no master save mine poor self," he said, his only audience the trees. The network, small albeit, was established.

Messages were received from Whickham and left in simple code for collection by the other conspirators' lackeys. On arrival from Whickham the man was directed to deposit them in stables, as directed by Richard who intercepted all communications, as he must to keep Edward informed.

Richard was also in communication with Derby. A sworn adherent of Mary's and confident of success, he had been interested to receive a letter from an informant in the Duke's camp. Eager to cover all possible angles, Derby had agreed to send regular messengers to meet with Fitzwarren's man and collect what information he had. Richard took what pieces of information he gleaned from Whickham and his own network, elaborated on them and penned letters to Derby. That was how Mary, soon to be Queen of England, first heard the name Richard Fitzwarren, offering what small service he could along with his ever-lasting loyalty.

The first news was no news at all to Derby and Mary. She had her own sources and more than a few of the powerful were either less than confident

of the Duke's success or saw him as a less than desirable leader, which was what he aimed to be: a King without a crown.

Catherine, returning from the kitchens, saw an unknown boy unloading a cart drawn by a tired, dusty-looking horse.

"M'lady," he snatched his cap from his head as he saw her.

"Has Lord Byrne sent you over from Hazeldene?" Catherine enquired, her mother had told her of the fire at Hazeldene.

"Yes, m'lady," the boy replied.

"They're already here. Joseph brung 'em over early," the boy said.

"Oh, I see." Catherine walked round the cart and entered the stable. Where only three pairs of nostrils would normally have appeared from the stalls, there were now eight. A pair of enquiring eyes looked down at her as open-handed she offered some food from the hay box. A gentle, velvet mouth rubbed across her palm to take the offering. The whiskered skin brushing her hand made her giggle.

"You want some more?" Catherine put her head on one side to match the horse's own attitude. "Here then, but don't think I've a mind to stand here and feed you all day." The horse returned for a third helping, the large nose snorting as its mouth found nothing in the open hand. "One last one, then no more; your friend here will get jealous, and I can't show any favouritism. That would not be fair, would it? I must treat all my guests alike," Catherine said giving the horse an extra large handful.

"Assingham must be a tiresome place, Lady, if you find you have to resort to conversations with horses, and my horse at that."

Catherine spun round to face the speaker; the voice, lazy and arrogant, was unmistakably Richard's. Catherine hurriedly brushed the stray strands of grass from her skirts, trying to regain her composure. Please let him not have heard all of that. The man must think me such easy prey.

"Why, Richard, good morning. I had not expected to see you at Assingham." Catherine fought to keep her voice level.

"My horse is being stabled here for the time being so I wanted to reassure myself he was suitably housed." To her horror, Richard walked towards her down the narrow passage in front of the horses, blocking her exit.

Recognising his master, Corrachá moved back to where he had stood earlier, his head now between Richard and Catherine, nuzzling

affectionately at Richard's hand.

"Well as you can see, perhaps this is not what he is used to, but I am sure he will be comfortable. If you would excuse me I have other things to attend to," Catherine said briskly.

"Of course," Richard said absently. Rather than retreating down the passage to allow her out, he merely stepped to one side, leaving her no choice but to squeeze past. Skirts in hand, Catherine hurriedly closed the gap between them turning slightly sideways to move past and make good her escape.

Richard caught her arm by the elbow, trapping her between him and the stable wall behind her.

"Please, Sir..." Her voice was high, holding the shake of nerves, but still he held her elbow fast against her tugs. She could feel his breath on her face he was so close. Suddenly, smiling broadly, he released her arm and turned away, leaving Catherine staring at his back. Red faced, composure shattered, Catherine fled the stables in a flurry of skirts. She had met him three times and he had reduced her to tears on two of them. Damn him to hell.

Catherine avoided the courtyard, having no wish for another encounter with Edward's cousin. The mere thought of him still made her anger rise, and the ever-present possibility of an unexpected meeting anywhere around Assingham made her nervous. Twice, whilst embroidering that evening, she had looked up, sure someone was watching her. The meeting that afternoon had more of an effect on her than she was prepared to admit.

It was a difficult decision. Harry wanted the snivelling piece of filth under his foot, a bleeding pile at his feet, but luck, it seemed, had saved him. Byrne, a name he had heard but, until now, had never noted, was a supporter of the Duke who, at Whickham's direction, was waiting to come to his support when needed. The slime was the support Byrne hoped to offer. Harry, similarly placed by his own ambition, could not act. He needed his men near. Edward was ill. It could be soon, very soon now.

The alternative was to wait, but Harry feared that Richard would slip back into obscurity from Byrne's side, or worse, he could perish in the fighting before Harry's knife could be applied to him. Thus torn, he decided to reap what immediate benefit he could, and this decision brought him to the current conversation.

Invited by an urgent message, Robert Fitzwarren sat perched on a table edge while Harry poured him wine. Retrieving his own glass, Harry seated himself, not too close, to the other man.

“Well, Harry,” Robert raised the crusted cup and drained half its contents.

“What’s so secret a tale as makes you dismiss your servants?”

“I have news,” Harry paused, “much to your liking I would have thought.”

“Don’t tell me that doxy, Annie, has a sister?” Robert was bored.

Harry was annoyed. “Your brother is back.”

“That had better not be spoken lightly,” Robert said menacingly.

Harry heeded the warning edge and avoided prevarication. “He is employed by a Lord Byrne, and resides at Hazeldene.” Harry gave Robert all the scant facts he had and then waited. Robert, hands clasped white-knuckled behind him, gazed from the open window at the pin-pricked night of London.

His words Harry did not hear.

“This time, Richard. This time...”

A nail-bitten hand turned the letter over again. Within the elaborate sentences was Northumberland’s decision to keep Edward’s imminent death a secret, and details of his supporters who were gathering forces to help the Duke hold the city. These she knew were true. Edward still lived, teetering on the brink, but as yet, he had not breathed his last. Mary lifted the page and, before she sent the page spiralling to the eager lick of the flames, observed the penned name once more: Richard Fitzwarren.

In time, word of Edward’s death would be also delivered to her by this route, and this would be news to Mary.

Chapter Eight

Jack took the offered card, storing it tightly behind the other three he held, a thumb and forefinger slid the edge to peek at him from the back of the hand. With great effort, he prevented himself from scowling at the three of clubs. His other cards were two lousy fives and an errant knave. Was he prepared to lay more on a pair of fives? Looking up, Jack hoped to read his opponent's face but instead he found a pair of grey eyes already watching him intently.

"Well?" Richard said.

Jack sighed. Releasing his grip on the cards, he let them tumble from his fingers. "It's yours."

Richard collected the discarded suits, placing them with the rest of the deck, and added to the pack the few cards he had held.

"Hey, now no!" Jack exclaimed. "It's only sporting to let me see what I lost against."

Richard smiled. "I think not."

"The game is up. There is naught left to win," Jack protested.

"There is always something to win; there are always stakes left to play for." Richard expertly split the deck in two and reunited the parts.

Richard moved to re-deal but Jack motioned to stop him. "Would you have me in penury?"

Richard shrugged.

"What's our move, do you know yet?" Jack enquired, wondering if Richard would share his knowledge.

"We wait." Richard idly started to sort the cards back into their houses.

"I begin to wonder if this is a folly," Jack said reaching for the jug.

"I don't see why that should bother you as we shall be paid either way, folly or not," Richard said placing aces on top of the kings. "Another game?"

The game ended when Jack laughed bitterly at his misfortunes, casting the cards towards the victor in defeat. "I should have known better than to be further tempted. You are begot of the devil..."

“We are our father’s sons,” was all Richard said.

“Well that’s true enough,” Jack accepted, and then, “What’s he like...our father?”

“Arrogant, selfish, cruel, miserly are only a few words that come to mind to describe him...there is much of him in Robert,” Richard supplied.

“I often wondered what would happen if I turned up at his door. There’s always a possibility he might not turn me out on my ear. After all he placed me in his brother’s household; a lot do worse than that, you know,” Jack said. This was the first time Jack had ever talked of his family.

“If I was in your place I can see how tempting it would be. But William Fitzwarren is not a kind man and blood ties, as I know to my cost, don’t mean a lot to him,” Richard said.

It was not the reply Jack had wanted. “It might not be so.”

“Jack! I turned back up at his door cap in hand once and the man left me for dead! My own father! He had not an ounce of pity in his soul as he laid the lash on me.”

“Jesus! It was your own father who put those marks on your back!” Jack blurted, letting Richard know his secret was no more.

Richard’s eyes narrowed. “Dan told me I had had a midnight visitor. Nothing is bloody sacred with you is it? Anyway that is my...our father’s handiwork.”

“Surely there must have been some reason for him to do that...! You don’t set at someone like that without good cause,” Jack said.

“There was and, little brother, you are not going to find out tonight what it was either so don’t bother asking. But the crux of the matter is that you can expect nothing less if you cross his path, please believe me on that,” Richard said earnestly. “Being tied to the Fitzwarren clan is no way forward for us, the way forward for us is money.”

“And as you can see a surplus of gold coming out of my arse is one of my constant worries,” Jack said sarcastically.

The reply when it came was five neatly dealt cards landing atop of each other. Reluctantly he took them into his keeping, meeting Richard’s mild enquiring eyes over the top of three knaves, and two smiling queens.

“Have my name, and all the curses it so rightly deserves, if you can win it.” In Richard’s hand was not a coin but a ring. Gold and black crested and stamped with seeded rubies and emeralds the shield’s centre was a sun, represented by a cold diamond.

Jack smiled, his eyes sparkling with more warmth than the crushed coal. "I have, by your own hand, three knaves." With precision he laid them face up. "And two pretty queens." He set them separate from the laughing trio. "I think the test for us both would be to see what you hold."

"Nothing," Richard laughed, losing his hands he let tumble a poor array of unmatched low-numbered cards, not a painted face among them. "You look disappointed?" Jack did. "You expected aces? I have none. This time you hold all the cards. It's a game of chance, Jack."

Richard had the final word. He rose from the table, leaving Jack alone with the disarray of cards, and the sparkling monogram of power.

Catherine sat staring from the open shutters in her room as the day outside drew to an end. The trees in the foreground found themselves still painted by a dipping sun while those more distant had cloaked their branches already with evening shades.

A rider emerged breaking the neat undisturbed edge where trees met meadow and urged his horse on to a gallop, heading towards Assingham. He was too distant for her to make out the rider's features. A messenger from her father, she thought, but then, no, it was only recently that they had received a letter from that quarter. Perhaps it was something from Judith, her neighbour at Hazeldene, but Judith's home lay not in the direction he came from.

Puzzled, Catherine watched as the rider disappeared from the view afforded by her window. By now he should be in the courtyard. No one came. Leaning out of the window she could see no movement below, hear no exchange of voices; even the snorting horse and jangle of bit and bridle were absent. Frowning she made her way to the hall to the yard, emerging from the hall, Catherine found no sweating horse and dusty rider, only John, a bucket of water in either hand, making his way to the kitchens.

"John, there was a rider approaching. I saw him from the window," Catherine said.

"I'm sorry, m'lady, there's been no rider stop here, not that I knows about anyways and I've been working out here all the while." John, stopping to speak to her, slopped water over the rims of the filled buckets.

"I must have been mistaken. It did look like he was coming here but I suppose he must have ridden past."

John shrugged.

Catherine watched his retreating back for a moment, then an unmistakable snort and stamp met her ears: the disobedient but highly forgivable Clover. A soft shod foot moved automatically before she winced at the memory of her last visit; indecision delayed her advance.

Silently she spoke to her flagging courage. *It's my home and I shall go where I wish.*

Martha, the kitchen maid, watched the girl make her way towards the stables until John blocked her view. "And where's lady long legs off to now then, eh?" Martha received one of the pails from John's hand.

"Ah now, leave lass alone, Martha. You've never got a good word to say for her." John tipped the remaining pail allowing its contents to join Martha's in the tub in the kitchen corner.

"Well, she's hardly a fit daughter for his lordship now, is she? Of marrying age and she slides around the place and hardly ever has a word to say for herself. The master will be hard pushed to find any to take her off his hands."

"God love us, woman, with a tongue like yours wagging there's no room for anyone else, is there?" John ducked and avoided the fist aimed at his ear.

"Get away with you."

John grinned as he reached the door.

Some four miles distant, Alan was employed, but on his own business not his master's. He smiled and watched the rumps of the two retreating horses as they left him. Cold silver stowed near his skin warmed his heart, and his blood surged with the force of his victory. It was a pity that when they fell on him, he would be ignorant of Alan's part in his downfall. Ah well, the purse he held more than made up for that loss of satisfaction, but then, perhaps he could contrive to be there.

"Alan, are you coming or stopping?" Alan glowered at the short-barrelled form of Froggy Tate. The horses he led behind him were already saddled and loaded with their possessions. "Who was that then?" Froggy continued and spat in the direction of the retreating horseman.

"Nothing. Give us here." Alan pulled the reins roughly from Froggy's hand and led the horse away before mounting.

Froggy spat again. Thoughtful eyes flicked between his companion and the distant movement along the road, which marked the departed riders.

The two men who were disappearing from view were Hal and Spratty, Harry's men who had just concluded a most satisfying transaction with Alan, and were sure now that they were not far from laying their hands on their master's prey.

Courage renewed, Catherine made her way to the stables. Looking down the passageway in front of the stalls, she saw a figure emerge from halfway down the stable's length. It appeared as only a darkened shape in the dim light and Catherine assumed it was one of the stable lads, but what light there was caught on polished metal revealing a sword at his side. As she watched, he dropped to his knees, and prised the planking from the front of a stable door. Moments later his task finished, he moved away quickly, disappearing inside a vacant stall.

Five long minutes passed and still he did not show himself. Catherine took a step into the gloom but hurriedly changed her mind. He must still be in there somewhere and she had no wish to meet an armed man in the dark. The only sounds that met her ears came from the horses at the far end. The first two stalls in front of her were empty and the remaining ones housed the horses from Hazeldene. Behind her, she heard John making another trip with pails of water, and she made up her mind to walk forwards and identify the person who was trespassing within the stables. If she screamed, John would hear. It was likely only a man sent over by Lord Byrne. Her feet, in soft leather shoes, made little noise on the clean straw, and the rustle of her skirts on the wood wall was camouflaged by the noises from the beasts within. From several paces away she could see into the stall her visitor had moved into; it was empty. What had he been so interested in? It was a simple door of heavy construction made to withstand more than the occasional insult from a hoof. Vertical planks, a hand's span wide, were fixed with nails to a wooden frame. Her fingers felt up the door. She had seen him remove a plank and lay it momentarily on the floor before replacing it, but nothing gave to her touch.

Some minutes later, a smoking candle from her desk on the uneven floor, she was searching in earnest, determined to find its secret. The wood that had been removed was clearly visible now. Most of the planks ran from top to bottom of the door, but one in the corner was cut a foot or so from the bottom and the timber was bruised where it had been prised out, and on more than one occasion judging by the damaged grain.

Pushing a knife between the planks, she found that little pressure was needed to force it out of place, and from behind it fell a parchment, settling quietly on the floor in front of her knees. She pushed the paper quickly into her pocket and, wood back in place, made a hasty retreat to her room.

The candle re-lit on the desk, her door locked, Catherine stared at the paper lying in front of her. In the centre was a wax seal, the blurred impression a testament to hasty application. Sliding a flat knife gently between wax and paper, she encouraged the seal to pop away intact from the lower sheet. Her hands hovered over the parchment. Well, you have stolen it and opened it, you might as well read it.

The few lines it contained were hurriedly written, the haste proven by the splutters the protesting pen had left on the page, but the script was still legible and neat.

The single sheet contained few lines in all. It was neither addressed nor signed.

We would be pleased to accept your gift, and look forward to your visit soon. The weather has been unpleasant here, but we hope it will improve when you join us. Hopefully there will be some good hunting to be done, which will entertain you during your stay.

Catherine read it twice. Had it been addressed and signed she would have believed she was reading some private correspondence between friends or maybe businessmen meeting to discuss trade and pass away some of the summer in each other's company. But these vital marks were omitted, and the method of its delivery placed further suspicion on the meaning of the words. Reaching for more wax she refolded the sheet adding a few drops under the seal and pressed it down to close it again.

One more person was thus admitted to that small ring privy to the information sent north from London.

"I'll not ask how you got that." Dan took the offered ring from Jack's outstretched hands.

"Would you believe me if I said I won it at cards?" Jack offered smiling.

"Somehow no, but I'll give it back to him." There was an odd expression on Dan's face.

Jack continued. "All right, would you believe me if I told you I was forced to win it at cards, for that is the truth of it."

"I would believe that," Dan grinned.

"It was Richard's poor idea of a joke." Jack made to leave.

There was something in Jack's voice that made Dan stop him. Catching an arm he asked, "Are you sure...?"

"Yes, Dan, I'm sure. Richard likes to remind his half brother of his bastardy; it keeps me in my place. He spun me a yarn about how bad our father is. I think he only said it to stop me turning up at the family seat and finding out about his shameful past." Dan could tell from Jack's tone he wasn't being serious.

"Ah you're wrong there," Dan said.

"What? Wrong about our father or Richard's shameful past?" Jack said grinning.

"Stop being bloody clever," Dan said hotly.

"He told me that it was his father who had tried to whip him to death. I don't suppose you'd know anything about that, would you?" Jack said folding his arms.

"No," Dan said too quickly. "I know nothing about that."

"Yeah, right," Jack said sarcastically. "I'll find out one way or the other, mark my words. So why don't you just sit yourself down and tell me now?"

Dan sighed. "There is something, what I cannot tell you, but it colours the way your brother treats you."

Jack was a little shaken. Here was something indeed. "Tell me."

"That family of his, and yours for that matter, have a lot to answer for. I've known your brother a lot of years, and he's not as cruel or as arrogant as you sometimes think."

"Tell that to Robby," Jack said quickly.

"Well he should have kept his thieving fingers to himself, better some quick justice than having the bloody assize involved."

"True. Don't think I haven't noticed you're trying to change the subject. Now just what is it you won't tell me?"

Dan had already begun to retreat, and despite the pleas he would supply Jack with nothing else. Jack had no intention of giving up though. If Dan wouldn't tell him then perhaps Richard might.

The note she had replaced had vanished, she was sure, at night, and if there was to be another, Catherine wanted to see its delivery. Alan had assured her that tonight would be clear, but cold. As it turned out it was more than that, it was windy, and born on the gusts was an unseen mist of moisture that drenched fields, trees and animals.

The blanket wrapped tightly around her, Catherine sat and watched, the only activity was that of the rabbits emerging from burrows to graze nervously. Catherine was about to abandon her perch on the window ledge becoming uncomfortably aware of the damp working its way through her wrap, when her eyes were arrested by a movement in the tree line.

Water darkened the leather glove that held the pine branch aside as the horse stepped lightly from the fold of the trees. Assured that all was quiet, he pressed his heels lightly into the horse and it trotted out. The branch, released, sent a shower of heavy rain to soak the carpet of sponged needles. The mare was fresh and she covered the distance to Assingham quickly, the sound of her passage dulled by soft earth beneath her hooves. Cautious though, the rider dropped from the saddle and led her the final distance, bringing her to the back of the stables.

Even at that pace, he covered the ground almost as quickly as Catherine could pass through the house. She left her room and quickly descended the wooden stairs. The hall was quiet, the fire burnt down, the dim light picking out the sleepers who were all laid near it to gather the last of its warmth. Lifting her skirts, she crossed the last of it at a dash to reach the pitch-dark entrance to the stables.

He waited, listening, silencing the mare with a calming hand. Tying her reins to the soaked wood, he dropped to his knees and disappeared inside Assingham. Still low, his weight on his knees and hands, he waited, his eyes adjusting to the blackness within. Knowing then where to go he moved swiftly and with purpose to deliver the message to the keeping of the woodwork.

Catherine felt sure the man had left. His mission complete she told herself he was unlikely to wait around. Cautiously she moved into the space running in front of the stalls and stared down nervously at the planking forming the door to the empty stall.

Was there another message? Yes! Even in the dark, the whiteness of the paper when it fell to her feet was unmistakable. Snatching it from the floor it disappeared inside of the folds of her dress. Hastily replacing the panel, Catherine headed directly for her room. Neither the sleepers in the hall nor the dogs arrayed with them heeded her as she alighted the stairs.

The small square of parchment looked very much like the previous one. It bore something akin to a seal but the impression was again blurred and gave no hint as to the crest or letters. The short flat blade hovered over the parchment. She had lifted the seal of the previous one without breaking it.

Could she manage it again? The edge of the knife went under the soft wax, the last had sprung apart from the paper whole and intact with little persuasion but this one was firmly attached. A different angle with the knife failed also to persuade it to free itself. Her attempts had damaged the seal and little curls of red showed where the knife had scored the molded wax. It was obvious to anyone now that it had been tampered with.

The sealing wax on her desk was a markedly different colour from that attached to the letter, but...Catherine smiled. Taking the candle from the pewter holder and cleaning the debris of wax from its circular dish, she scraped the seal from the parchment into the dish.

The square of parchment when unfolded revealed an even briefer message than the last one. It stated simply:

Three nights hence.

Carefully she held the pewter dish near the fire's dying flames; the wax returned to liquid that could be poured back onto the parchment where the original seal had been.

Catherine watched the blob of red begin to solidify before taking her ring and pressing it lightly into the wax, turning it so as to remove any impression of the crest. The seal, she had to admit, was not as substantial as its predecessor. Much of the wax had remained in the bottom of the candleholder, coating it in a dull red veneer, but the impression was like the previous one, indistinct and unclear.

The courtyard was already lit by the dim and uncertain light that heralded the coming of dawn when the parchment was returned to its hiding place.

Small fingers pushed a stem of straw into the wood of the door; she would know now if the planking had been removed. Catherine slept well into the morning until she was woken by Martha enquiring after her health. Further investigation revealed the note gone.

A day later, Catherine, employing the same tactics, found another short note, which read:

Our hearts are heavy.

Catherine was mystified.

Jack threw a saddle up onto the back of the horse, leaning under the horse to retrieve the girth strap he recognised the polished boots approaching across the courtyard. "I told you Assingham was too much of a risk."

Richard, one hand idly smoothing the Arab's mane, fixed a hard frown on his brother. Jack noted that amongst the rings was the one he had given to Dan. "Why do I get the feeling I am not going to like this. Go on, tell me what happened."

"What happened, my oh-so-well-planned brother, is that a lady, who, I will remind you, had been dissuaded from visiting her stables, is not only still frequenting them but was in fact occupying one of the stalls when I paid a visit last night."

"Ah!" Richard said.

"What do you mean, 'Ah!'?" Jack stood and faced his brother.

"Well, I think we can fairly assume Lady Kate was not on a midnight stroll, but by all accounts we should make our move soon. She may know something is going on but not what. I doubt the pretty lady can read, let alone make any headway with the code. Her father's away. I can see no real problems. Next time you go, find a diversion," Richard finished pleasantly.

"A diversion? Like what exactly?" Jack enquired.

"I leave it to your imagination," Richard smiled. "I slipped with a lit torch in the stables. Now it's your turn."

"Thanks, thank you very much," Jack said sarcastically. Richard had turned to leave, but Jack stopped him. "Richard?"

"Yes," Richard said, mildly curious at the other's tone.

They were in the middle of the yard, and somehow this didn't seem the right place.

“Nothing, nothing that can't wait until I get back.” Jack threw himself into the saddle and set the horse towards the gate.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Nine

Catherine was sitting in the hall after darkness fell, promising herself one final look in the stables before retiring. She had to admit that if her visits became any more frequent it would begin to look very odd indeed. John had already given her a queer sideways look when he caught her crossing the courtyard for the third time that evening.

She had just got to her feet when she heard shouting and screeching coming from outside. Running from the hall she found the kitchen boy standing in front of the open hen house door, surrounded by feathers, which were escaping from within. As she watched, the fox left the hen house, running straight between the boy's legs and then past Catherine, so close she felt it brush against her skirts.

"How the devil did that beggar get in there?" John yelled as the lively beast made a neat escape round the back of the kitchens.

John followed pitchfork in hand. "It's fenced off he'll not get out now."

His confidence was misplaced. The newly constructed fence, which had been built to protect the chickens from just such a predator, showed a wide breach. Some hundred yards on the other side the fox could be seen in the moonlight, making for the safety of the woods.

"Well I'll be...! That little beggar must have been hungry to set at a fence like that; shows what bloody crafty buggers they are." John watched the fox as it made its final bound for safety.

The kitchen boy retrieved eight dead hens. Carrying them by the feet, a twitching wing protruding from the mass of untidy feathers, he took them to the kitchen.

"Ah well, could have been worse, although we lost some good layers there, I'll have that fence fixed, so there'll be no more of them crafty devils in here." John came up beside Catherine, but she was not listening.

Walking back across the courtyard she turned towards the stables, leaving John behind the kitchens, effecting hasty repairs. Inside the stables, it was too dark to see if the straw was still in place and she reprimanded herself for not having the foresight to collect a light from the hall first. In the dark she had the eerie feeling of being watched, but she barely hesitated

before dropping to her knees and pulling her knife from her waistband. She inserted it into the crack between the planking by feel and the wood slipped through her fingers, dropping to the hardened earth with a clatter, but it was followed by no paper, no tell tale white square. She felt on the floor in front of her skirts for the parchment but found nothing. The message was gone.

Replacing the board, she realised exactly when it had been taken. It had been quickly removed, unnoticed by anyone, whilst a fox was wreaking havoc in the hen house. "Our hearts are heavy" had to mean something to someone, but what? Rubbing her hands down the front of her skirts to remove the dirt from them, she returned to her room with a black look on her face.

The invite to attend Hazeldene for a meal with Edward and Judith in a few days time arrived at midday for Catherine and her mother, delivered by Jack in the guise of a stable hand. Anne bid him go to the kitchens whilst she penned a reply.

"I don't want to go mama." Catherine bleated.

"Why not?" Her mother asked exasperated, "I thought you were becoming friends with Judith"

"She doesn't like me, she was horrible last time I went. Please don't make me go." Catherine pleaded. She had no intention of being absent from Assingham any evening in the near future.

"Alright, we won't go if you are so set against it. I myself would rather not either, Edward is tiresome and Judith never stops talking about herself, I can think of better ways to spend an evening." Anne conceded. She penned a reply and gave it to the callused hand of Hazeldene's man.

Judith received Anne's letter from Jack as she sat sewing in the garden. Edward, seeing the messenger's return, hurried to the garden to enquire of his wife if their guest was coming.

"Anne says she cannot come," Judith said, trying to pull the needle through several layers of unyielding material. She gestured with her head to where the letter lay discarded on the table beside her. "See for yourself."

Edward scanned the brief words. "I was looking forward to a bit of good company and a reason to break out some decent wine," Edward said absently, and he turned and walked slowly back to the house.

He found Richard in the stables talking to Jack. "I know," was all Richard said as Edward approached.

"I cannot see them harmed, Richard," Edward said, sorrow on his face, desperate for a solution and hoping to pass the responsibility on.

"There are a dozen people at Assingham: old men, women and boys. I feel they will not closet themselves in the main house and make us lay siege on the place. They will fall to their knees and beg for mercy, the lady and her daughter included," Richard said turning now to give Edward his full intention. "Perhaps you should consider the consequences of your actions before you launch down that road again," he added.

Edward looked up into his face. "God, I know. It's just..." He didn't finish. Edward's anguish had increased. Using Assingham for messages was one thing, but now word had come that it was to be used as the centre from which to co-ordinate and launch the support towards Northumberland, cutting off Mary from her followers and preventing them from coming from the north. Assingham had, by his own deeds, been committed.

"I know all the glory and none of the guilt; that's why you pay me," Richard said harshly, then added the words Edward's conscience wanted to hear, "I will see to them."

Edward's mind was eased. "Everything is as we arranged. I have heard from Geoffrey; he is moving as planned. All will go well I am sure." Still muttering to himself he rose and left.

That Assingham was to be used at all was Edward's own doing. A posting stage was required where Northumberland's supporters could gather, and where they could form an initial headquarters before they moved to help ensure that Lady Jane was declared Queen. Assingham, like Hazeldene, was conveniently placed, but Edward would not have the mercenary hoards massing at Hazeldene; that would taint him permanently. Better that it was elsewhere, then if the plot failed, he could to an extent exonerate himself. Jack watched Byrne retreat, a look of loathing on his face. "If weak-willed men like that aim to take the reins of England, I'm worried."

"He is a small man with a loud mouth and big ambitions," Richard said.

"But you'll not have to put up with him for much longer; it's a soldier's life for you again, Jack. That at least should mean I have one happy person around me."

“Would you lay a wager on us getting out of this in one piece,” Jack said, and then added, “and paid?”

“Whether you like it or not, you are part of it. We poor fools must act within the rules laid by others,” Richard said. “Edward is a fool. He thinks if he keeps all the conspirators away from his door, should this plot fall around Northumberland’s most noble ears, he will be safe.” Richard shrugged. “I wouldn’t lay a wager on that myself, which is why mercenary armies operate on a retainer, and our fees are more than half paid. As for the rest, it is in the laps of the Gods. The outcome of a race to claim a throne is never a safe wager. We shall have to wait and see. Ah well, amusement awaits. I will off and quip merrily with Edward, see how much his stomach can stand. We meet as arranged tomorrow,” Richard said, his eyes bright. Jack knew he would not spare Edward.

Jack stood. “You want me to go and pass the word?” he asked.

“Absolutely, let us relieve your companions from their daily toil, and make sure we play our part well. I don’t want them running into Edward’s son Geoffrey. You know where I want them?” Jack nodded his response. “Well let us just hope that Byrne’s companions are as well organised as we intend to be.”

“Richard?” Jack said. “I’ve spoken to Dan. There’s much both he and you won’t tell me. Would now not be a good time to tell me?”

“What before we die in the foray? That would be very noble of me would it not?” Richard said, then added, “But today I don’t feel particularly noble.”

Jack tried another track. “Dan has told me much already.”

Richard’s eyes narrowed but he said nothing.

“Tell me; I think I have a right to know.” Jack was closer to the truth than he knew.

Richard was not smiling. “It sounds as if you know everything already.”

Jack avoided the trap. “I just wanted to know why.”

“Why?” the word came on an angry gasp. “What exactly did Dan tell you?”

“He told me why you couldn’t accept me.” Jack hoped he hadn’t betrayed his ignorance.

“Well, if that is so, you would never ask me why.” Richard spoke quietly and Jack realised he had lost.

“Damn you! Damn you to hell! Why can’t you treat me equally? Why must I be so lowly, such a fool in your eyes for God’s sake?” Jack said furiously.

“Because, little brother, we are not equal.”

Richard grabbed Jack’s shoulders, pushed him back and pinned him to the wall, which creaked against the weight. Jack could only struggle against the hold, surprised at the power of it. He was unable avoid the blow when it came. His feet were neatly kicked from under him delivering him to the mud at his brother’s feet. A boot jammed itself hard across Jack’s throat.

“We can play this merry dance to its ultimate end, or,” Richard threatened, “you can refrain from ever mentioning this again.”

Grey eyes watched the blue ones retreat beneath his stare. Satisfied he stepped back. Jack, a hand to his throat, did not move.

“Here, get up,” Richard offered a hand.

Jack, confused, took it and stood, wary now.

“It’s not your fault.” Richard rubbed his head as if trying to ease the ache that had settled there. “You know not where you tread and Dan is not helping matters, forgive me.”

Jack watched him leave. *What the hell was going on? There was something here for sure, but what?*

“And I thought you might just be a goner there,” mused Robby moving from the back of the stables. Jack spun round at the sound of his voice. “What did he catch you at then?”

Jack was relieved that Robby had not heard the exchange. Still rubbing his neck he said, “Questioning his actions, the usual.”

“Aye, well, he’s a bad tempered cur that one. If you ask me he’s waiting for a knife in the back; it’ll happen, mark me.” Robby moved to lean against the cart where the master had so recently stood.

“Do you think so?” Jack’s thoughts were elsewhere.

“I do. Alan say’s he’ll not last. What do we need him for anyway? He does bugger all. If we were on our own we could make twice as much and not have him on our bleeding backs.” Robby spat in Fitzwarren’s direction.

Jack’s attention was now most fully Robby’s. “You might be right there, but I can’t see what we can do about it.”

“Aye, well, maybe there is something. Alan has a notion. We’ll just have to wait and see, but I can tell you I’m with him,” Robby confided.

“What exactly is Alan doing?” Jack moved closer to Robby, the ache in his neck forgotten.

Robby saw Jack’s hard eyes and wondered if he had gone too far. No, Jack loved his brother not at all. “I can’t say, but my money is on Alan. What about you?”

Jack was shocked. He was being asked if he would support Alan against Richard. He was careful. “I hear what you say, but I can tell you I don’t think Alan has a chance against Fitzwarren. Do you?”

“He doesn’t need to have; there’s someone else will do that for him.” Robby knew he had said too much this time, and uncertainty settled in his eyes.

Jack moved to allay it. “Well, that would change things, wouldn’t it? But who?”

Reassured by Jack’s potential support he continued, “Well, that I don’t rightly know, but Alan said it had something to do with something that happened before he left London. What, I can’t say. But does it matter? If someone is happy enough to get rid of him for us, all the better, and I for one would follow Alan.”

Jack wondered if Robby knew he had recently levelled Alan to the ground. He doubted it. Otherwise the man would not be so eager to share Alan’s plan. “Well, there is much in what you say, Robby. Who else is with you? Dan? Mat?”

“Nah, not them. Mat’s a right shifty bastard, and Dan, nah, he’s Fitzwarren’s man all right. But Gavin’s with us and Froggy Tate, and Alan thinks the rest’ll follow when he’s gone like. And you?”

Jack grinned. “What do you think, eh?”

It was enough for Robby, who clapped him on the arm, being careful to use his good hand.

The following day, while Jack was busy organising the men, Catherine was less well occupied. The needlework had lain in front of her, untouched, for hours, and she had retired to her room early, for she could not stand to sit in the hall and watch the slow evening routine of the household. She knew she had another hour to wait before the house was fully asleep, and even so, she was prepared already. Wearing an old, dark grey dress she had folded two cloaks, both dark in colour, one to warm her and one to spread over the gaps in the planking to ensure she would not be seen, and both lay

ready on her desk. She was confident that in the gloom of the stable, even if someone did look up, they would be unable to see her in the stable roof.

Finally, she dared to venture down the stairs and move quietly through the sleeping hall and into the stable. During the afternoon, Catherine had looked carefully at the route she would take to climb into the roof, but in the dark the foot and handholds could not be seen at all clearly. Hoisting the cloak above her head she threw it upwards to her hiding place in the roof. She misjudged it and it came straight back down, providing an unwelcome slap in the face. The second attempt was successful, leaving her hands free to make her ascent.

Jack was supposed to be on his way to deliver final directions, but it had taken longer than he had thought it would to find Dan, who, at the master's direction, had been to the village.

"Thank you for your words of wisdom." Jack sat down heavily next to Dan. Leaning across he helped himself to a greasy slice of mutton.

"Aye, I heard. Did I say to you to go and share it? No, I bloody didn't. If it helps you any, what you got is nothing compared to the roasting he gave me. I regret it as much as you do," Dan said through a mouthful of chewed meat.

"I'll not be putting up with it any longer anyway," Jack said.

Dan's eyebrows raised. "How's that then?"

"I'll leave; it's as simple as that. He doesn't want me here and I bloody well don't want to be here having my arse kicked every time there's something to answer for. No, my mind's made up." Jack had no intention of leaving, but he hoped the threat might prompt Dan to say more.

"Aye, well, it's your choice," was all Dan said.

It was not the response Jack had wanted. "I thought you might have something to say."

"Like what? You want me to persuade you to stay; to run and tell the master? The world has more in it than the likes of you." The big man left the table.

Well, that went bloody well. He was going to have to try a different tack.

Jack didn't much fancy asking Richard again. He had much more chance with Dan; he just needed to find the right approach. Jack's thoughts were interrupted as Robby moved into Dan's seat.

"I heard you're leaving. Is that right?" Robby said.

“Aye, maybe.” Jack was in no mood for Robby’s company.

“Well don’t. Anyhow, not just yet, eh.” Robby’s words reminded Jack of his earlier conversation with the would-be plotter.

“Oh, aye, and Alan’s going to lead us,” Jack said.

Robby missed Jack’s sarcasm. “Aye, and soon. Alan says it’ll not be long now.”

Jack’s attention was riveted on Robby. “You’ve seen Alan then? I thought he was waiting at the village?”

“He come over like last night to have a little word with a couple of us,” Robby confided.

“You and Pierre, am I right?” Jack probed.

“Aye, he’s with us I reckon.” Robby nodded enthusiastically.

“So what’s Alan’s plan then?” Jack asked.

“Oh now, he said I couldn’t tell anyone. He only told me. Pierre doesn’t know, but all you need to know is that we’ll be rid of him bloody soon,” Robby said triumphantly.

“And Alan is going to lead us is he?” Jack’s sarcasm again missed by Robby.

“Aye, that’s it,” Robby said, pleased.

“I thought you were gone,” Mat said from the doorway.

Jack turned as Mat moved in and sat down. Robby had already slid down the bench away from Jack. “I was just going.” Jack stood moodily.

“What was up with him, eh?” Mat asked Robby when Jack had gone.

“Nothing that I knows about,” Robby said and returned his attention to the platter in front of him.

Did Alan intend his coup to coincide with the Duke’s? There was something laughable in that but Jack buried it. He knew that the “something to do with London,” of Robby’s previous conversation was probably Harry, but how Alan had made the connection he didn’t know.

It was not as easy as she had thought it would be. Standing on top of the stable partition Catherine had thought she would be able to pull herself over the edge of the protruding platform. The distance was much greater than she had judged and she could just get her hands firmly around the edge of the platform. She tried to pull herself up, getting half an elbow over the edge, but her feet swinging in mid air above the stable partition could find nothing to push against. The dry wood forced splinters into her hands as she

tried to pull her weight over the edge, but fear of falling into the dark stable below overcame the increasing discomfort in her hands as she heaved herself up, pausing for breath when she felt secure with one knee firmly on the planking.

The structure groaned under the new weight but it did not give way. The cloak spread out over the planking and the straw arranged around her, Catherine settled down to wait, laying flat on her stomach so she could peer easily down the length of the stables.

“It’s done.” Jack strode none too confidently into Richard’s room pulling riding gloves from his hands. “They will be where you want them, God willing, in a day.”

“Well hopefully not God willing. I would hate to trust this venture to a fatalistic hand, or to God’s fickle will.” Richard kept his back to Jack, watching the darkness descend with a slowness characteristic of the weeks around the solstice. “You can wait or join me, the choice is yours,” Richard said, as if he had been considering it for some time.

“The meeting tonight, you want me to go?” Jack was a little surprised, but pleased none the less.

Richard nodded confirmation. “And I apologise for my earlier behaviour.”

“Accepted,” Jack said with relief. “And as for tonight you leave me little choice. To stay is to frustrate myself asking you questions which you will, for the sake of it, never answer.”

“That is exactly why I wish you to go, to save myself being hounded for morsels of information half the night. Anyway, you do me wrong.” Richard grinned at Jack. “I am most forthcoming, helpful and amiable.”

Jack recognised the apology and, although surprised by it, grinned back. “And a bloody liar. Go on, get your arse out of that window before I help you with a push. Go on.” Before his words were finished he found himself berating an empty room for his brother had vanished from sight. Tucking his gloves into his jacket front, Jack prepared to join him on the dark traverse.

In the dark, time is difficult to calculate, especially if the moon cannot be seen to provide guidance as to the passing of the hours. Catherine had no idea how long she had lain in the loft. The stable roof she was surprised to

find was warmer than she had thought, and several times she had to stop herself getting just too comfortable and falling asleep.

When a man came crawling through the hole made by the removed planking at the back of the empty stall, followed quickly by a second man, Catherine was instantly alert. She had a perfect view of the vacant stall and watched as they moved swiftly to the security of darkness in an unoccupied box. They had disappeared so far into the shadows that, after a time, Catherine was unsure if they were still there; she could see no movement and the horses were surprisingly still. It was some time before three more arrived, less carefully than the first two and with no fear of being observed. The three stood in the stall propped against the partition wall, but their low mutterings were not decipherable from the distance of her lofty perch.

Then one of the first to arrive spoke from the darkness. "Well, gentlemen, good evening."

The effect was physical. Catherine's eyes widened and breath caught painfully in her throat; immobile she watched, transfixed. The three men turned instantly, seeking the speaker.

"Fitzwarren," one of the later arrivals said, "I hear our plans have changed. So when do we move?"

"Tomorrow," Richard replied. "Assingham is an easy target with women and old men. If the work is done right there will be no escapees to run and tell of the happenings here. I will lead the advance as planned; every thing is as we agreed. Geoffrey, you will follow us as arranged?"

Geoffrey Byrne, Edward's son, nodded.

"So, it's come; the King is dead," one of the other three, darkly dressed, voiced what everyone was thinking.

There was a quick guarded conversation amongst the three. "We meet tomorrow then."

Richard nodded.

The business of the night concluded, the three left through the back of the stall and Catherine heard the noise of horses moving away into the distance. Richard also appeared to be standing quietly listening for the retreat of the visitors before moving to leave himself. His companion moved from the shadows to join him.

Catherine lay unmoving in the dark, listening to the last retreating horse.

Assingham to be taken by force! The King dead! Tired though she was, sleep was beyond her as she tried to think what to do, for even now that she

was aware of their intent, she could find no plan of action that would frustrate it.

Mary was asleep but soon the house was alive with tapers and fires, the courtyard was lit by torches in brackets as men led sleepy horses from the stables to dispatch their messages, informing Mary's loyal followers that the time was now. Northumberland believed he still controlled news of the death. Edward had been dead for a little less than a day. The young king's body lay still in the royal bed, one hand flung behind the pillowed head and one palm open on the coverlet, looking only a little less alive than the Edward of a week ago.

His brother's apology and, for once, openness, had fired Jack's determination, and he had made up his mind about something that had plagued him all afternoon: Robby. He found him easily, woke him and pulled him, half asleep, outside and into the shadows near the kitchens. Robby rubbed the sleep from his eyes, and swayed a little, the evening's ale having not fully left him.

"Robby! Robby!" Jack gave him a good shake.

"God, Jack, what do you want? What's happened?" Robby groaned.

"Nothing as yet, Robby. I want to know what Alan's at?" Jack said firmly.

"I told you earlier that Alan said just to wait. I can't tell you anything more than that. Is that what ye got me up for?" Robby said angrily.

Jack ignored Robby's irritation. "Come on, there's no harm in telling me, is there? It'll be done in a day."

"Why are ye so keen to know?" Robby said, suspicious now.

"I want to know what Alan's at. We all need to know when to act." Jack was not fooling Robby who took a step back.

"I dunno. I dunno. I'm not too sure I trust you. Leave it, Jack, will you? I told you I said I wouldn't say," Robby said nervously.

Jack smiled. "Robby, ah...no, Robby." Jack quickly caught hold of the man's arm as he made to duck past him. "Tell me, tell me now and I'll let you go. I'll say nothing to Alan or Pierre, but if you don't..."

Robby understood the threat, but the terror of what might happen to him at Alan's hands was worse than his fear of Jack, and he writhed against the grip. He held his own for a fair while, delivering a goodly black eye and a

bleeding ear to his aggressor before he found himself face down in the yard with the weight of the other man on top of him.

“Now,” Jack gasped from the effort of the fight, “tell me.”

A break in the arm just below the elbow encouraged Robby to tell Jack what he wanted to know, the pain of splintered bone too much.

Knowing now where he wanted to be, Jack set off, reasoning that it was the route he would have used later in the day anyway, so if Robby had not spoken the truth, he could continue and carry out Richard’s bidding.

Hal and Spratty knew the road he would take. They knew him as one of Harry’s household, tied now to a worthless master, Richard Fitzwarren, and not as the bastard brother of the same. He was not their goal, but a goodly prize, and one which, with sufficient persuasion, would lead them to Robert’s own brother.

Alan had set the trap for Jack, not for the master. This way, he reasoned, he got both of them. He’d told Robby to let Jack in on his plans and had guessed rightly that Jack would beat the rest from Robby to protect his worthless brother. From Jack, Hal and Spratty would find Fitzwarren, and once he was gone, no one would stand in his way. He didn’t tell the others that Jack was to be the first target; there were some of the stupid fools actually liked that conceited bastard. No, this part he kept to himself. Jack was the key. It was almost too easy. Hal would recognise Jack, having seen him in Harry’s household, and Jack himself had kindly acquainted Alan with everyone’s movements over the next few days, so he knew exactly which roads he would be travelling down.

Chapter Ten

“But mama...” Catherine pleaded, “it is the truth.”

Anne sighed, “Your imagination runs away with you child. Martha has been telling me you have been playing childish games in the stables. It’s time Catherine that you started to act like a lady, you’ll have your own house and children soon, you need to stop your games.”

Jack’s thoughts were elsewhere and he was totally unprepared when his foot seemed to catch in a bush. He soon realised that it was no ordinary bush, because it gripped him hard and began to pull him from the saddle. Arms flailing, Jack fell into the violent embrace of his ambushers. An ineffectual blow landed on his cheekbone as he fell but the boot that contacted with his stomach achieved the momentary paralysis they required. Two more kicks ensured he stayed down and one to the head delivered his mind to blackness. Robby, under duress and the threat of a slit throat, had told Jack where Harry’s men would be waiting for Richard and Jack had ridden into the trap set for him. Alan, had he known, would have doubled up in laughter.

Consciousness painfully returned, but too late. His hands were tied efficiently behind his back, and worse, the second bond that held him immobile was round his neck, pinning him to the tree. If he moved he choked; if he sagged from his standing position he would hang himself, slowly, but hang himself no less. Unable to turn his head against the rope, Jack’s eyes strained right and found a man lounging against a tree at the edge of his vision. The location of another, he found as the rope was jerked tighter, was behind him.

“You should thank Hal here for holding you up until your legs would work.” The man behind him said.

“Now as you see,” Hal moved to face him, beady eyes observing him maliciously from under a greased cap of hair falling to obscure his eyebrows. “We have you at a disadvantage.”

Jack did not reply; he couldn’t.

“You’ll be wanting to know what we’re at, eh?” Hal said.

Still Jack could not speak, though watery eyes fixed a steady gaze on his aggressor.

“He’s a quiet one, Spratty.”

The man who had been behind him came into view, idly pulling leaves from a freshly ripped sapling branch. “Oh, I think he’ll squeal soon enough. Where’s Richard Fitzwarren?”

The branch stripped of twigs and sharply notched served them well enough and eventually Hal was forced to untie the rope, convinced that if Jack sagged further, their questions would be permanently left unanswered.

Catherine knew she couldn't go to the Byrne's for help. If Edward's cousin Richard was involved then so might Edward be. Instead she turned to John, hoping he would know what to do, hoping he would believe her.

“What do you mean you've locked her in her room!” Martha said to John.

“Just that. I've locked her in. Bloody hell, it's for her own good. Such as she's raving about would have her tied to a stake and her heels warmed I'm telling you,” John said sitting down heavily on the only chair in the kitchen.

“No...” Martha said rounding the table, all eyes and ears. “What's she said?”

John ran his hand through his hair. “She's lost her wits, shouting and ranting she didn't make much sense. What can bring such things on Martha?”

“Well it could be the black arts, you never know...tell me what has she said.”

“Well I did get from her that the King's dead...”

“Lord have mercy no...” Martha interrupted. “What else?”

“She has been meeting with men in the stable at night...!”

“Men! What's his lordship going to say about that!” Martha gasped.

“Aye I went straight to Lady Anne, she was terrible upset and told me to lock the girl in her room.” John said.

“You did the right thing, John, telling Lady Anne. It's probably no madness that's beset her; she's probably breeding!” Martha said folding her arms.

“She said she'd been there many nights. I pray you're not right, Martha. What should we do?” John was appalled.

“Send one of the lads to get Mistress Stump from the village; she'll know what to do with her,” Martha said. “I'll tell Lady Anne that it might be an idea for the best.”

“Mistress Stump, yes, yes, I'll do that.”

Mistress Stump was duly called on and agreed to see the lady first thing the following day.

“Where?” A dirty hand clawed into Jack's hair and lifted his face from the mud.

“Where?” His blue eyes shut the world out again.

“God, Spratty, I told you you'd done too much. He's past it already.” Hal angrily thrust Jack's face back into the mud and turned his eyes upward. “Now what do you propose, eh?”

Spratty twisted the whip in his hand, his eyes not meeting Hal's, and with childish hurt complained, “Well, he said something, didn't he?”

“He said, Spratty, that we'd never catch his brother, which I grant you is something. But we aren't after his bleeding brother are we?” Hal stood and glowered at the unrepentant Spratty. “Well we wait until he comes round and...”

“You wait! We've been here most of the bloody day and all you've managed is to knock the bloody life out of him. I'm going to check on the horses. And be a bit more careful with that.” Hal slapped away the branch that Spratty still clung to; it was no longer dark brown but reddened.

“He told me; he told me,” Spratty yelled jubilantly, less than an hour later.

“Well don't tell the whole bloody world. Where?” Hal's anger quietened by necessity.

“Assingham, we passed it...”

“I know where it is!” Hal snapped. “That's about three miles back. Small place I remember.”

Spratty was not listening; he was still jumping up and down round the prone body yelling, “You told me. You told me. You told me...”

Spratty insisted they leave Jack tied to the tree and Hal conceded. It was a safe bet he would be dead within the half hour. Before they left, Hal helped himself to what coins Jack had, and a letter. Hal could not read but he knew enough to know that these things sometimes had a value. The letter

was one entrusted to Jack by Richard, to be handed over to Derby's messenger, arranging a meeting he was not now going to keep. Within its lines was also a message for Peter de Bernay that his wife was safe and would be returned to his care later. Richard was fairly hopeful that he could extricate the lady and her daughter somehow from Assingham and having a grateful friend within Mary's camp would certainly do no harm.

Locked in her room with no one answering her desperate pleas Catherine finally climbed from the window and hid in the only place she could think of: the hayloft. Catherine did not hear the arrival of the riders. The effect of the last two sleepless nights had overtaken her and she was blissfully unaware that the advance party, which should have been led by Richard, had been overtaken by an impatient and overzealous young man. Eager to show his mettle to the dozen or so followers, he led them down on Assingham before Richard had made his move.

Richard leapt down from his horse and flung the reins in the face of someone standing in the gloom. He quickly crossed to where a man sat arrogantly on top of a barrel of beer, most of its contents spilt across the ground.

"Ah, Fitzwarren, it seems I have saved you a job," the man on the barrel said. "Join us, there is plenty for all." He indicated the barrel with his full flagon.

The upraised vessel, violently ripped from his hands, spilt its contents over jacket and hose before landing with a metallic clank against the kitchen door.

"Geoffrey, I would be appreciative if, in future, you did as you were told, rather than doing as you wish to satisfy your childish temperament." Fitzwarren's voice was hard.

Byrne's son resorted to bravado. "You should thank me. I have but saved you a task. The men were restless. To have delayed further would have been to ask for trouble," he blustered.

"Geoffrey, I shall certainly not thank you. This is a matter I have not finished with, but as there is much to do I shall postpone the moment, which, when it arrives, is one you will most sincerely regret," Fitzwarren said. Then he added mockingly, "So, prepare to provide me with a full

account, if you will, of how you heroically and with much danger to yourself took and subdued this well-manned and armed manor.”

Geoffrey looked relieved. The confrontation was to be postponed and Richard’s attention was turned back to the night’s work. Richard had already set off towards the hall and Geoffrey was left with no option but to step quickly after him, following puppy like, his arrogance left behind on the beer barrel.

The fire still burned in the grate in the hall and several tapers were still lit so the light was enough for the eyes to clearly pick out the bodies, laying in the sticky mass of their own blood. The half naked form of Martha, her milky eyes open and gazing sideways blindly, lay spread like a starfish on the floor, her face partially obscured by the quantity of blood that covered it, loosed as it had been from the gaping wound at her neck. The lady Anne lay on her front, bereft of her dress with a shift only rucked up under her arms. Hands outstretched in front of her she’d been trying to crawl away before the blade in her side had ended her escape. Richard’s face hardened as he saw the scrapes her nails had made on the wooden floor as they had raped her.

John was a small distance away, dead at the foot of the table where he had been playing cards, an ugly incision at the nape of his neck visible as his body lay over the scattered sticky deck.

There was silence. Geoffrey said nothing as he stood behind the unmoving Richard, waiting for his next instructions. When Richard did move, he was so fast that Geoffrey never saw the blow coming, felt only its force as it knocked him backwards. “You knew my orders,” Fitzwarren blazed above him. “Don’t tell me this farmhouse provided such resistance that it required the murder of all those who were in it!” Richard’s boot connected accurately with Geoffrey’s body causing him to gasp in pain.

“It seems I no longer feel like postponing the moment.” There was another kick and a gasp from the prone man. Richard leant over Geoffrey, his face betraying nothing, contrasting sharply with the contortions that were exhibited on the boy’s pain-stricken face. “A simple question, Geoffrey, and I would like a simple answer, and the one you give I hope for your sake is the one I would like to hear. Tell me, are there any survivors after your little show of force to impress your men, or did these poor folk put up such resistance that it necessitated the death of all of them?”

Geoffrey refrained from answering, his body rigid, braced for the next impact.

“You are not talking to me, Geoffrey. Am I to take from that that you saw fit to slay the entire inhabitants?” The look on Geoffrey’s face told the world clearly that no one had been spared when they burst into the manor.

Richard hauled the protesting Geoffrey to his feet and pushed him up against the wall. “Luckily I have other things to do; however, as you slaughtered them, you can remove them. Now, Geoffrey!” Richard pulled him away from the wall and sent him sprawling across the hall to roll over Martha’s body.

Spratty, despite complaining hugely, lost possession of Jack’s horse, even though he argued it was his as he had done all the work getting him, meaning Jack, to talk. But Hal would have none of it, something that served Hal better than he could have imagined.

When forced to take flight he dug his heels in and the agile mare took him quickly away, ahead of Spratty. He was further saved because Dan and Mat wanted the man who was wearing Jack’s sword, Spratty’s consolation for the lost horse, which was how Hal escaped and Spratty found himself on his back, a sword point at his throat. He lived long enough to take Dan and Mat back to Jack, but died there on the twisted blade he had so recently laid claim to. Dan cut Jack down and poured water over his face, washing away some of the blood and mud.

“Bloody hell, Jack, are you alright?” Dan said concerned. “What did they want? Jesus, he’s in a right state,” he muttered. The lad’s back was stripped of flesh and his neck had already thickened and swollen with the bite of the rope. “Did they just rob you?”

Jack shook his head.

“What then?”

“They wanted Richard,” Jack managed.

“Why?” A suspicion formed. “Could they have been from Harry?”

Jack nodded, drinking from Mat’s wine flask.

“What did you tell them?” Dan said.

Jack lowered the flask, but didn’t reply.

“Go on tell me, there’s no shame. I can see you didn’t damn well tell them anything willingly,” Dan said quietly.

“Assingham. It was all they got,” Jack said, adding, “Alan sent them.”

Haltingly he explained how Robby had told him of Alan's plans to rid himself of Richard.

"Well, that isn't so bad. It'll take more than a few of Harry's best to get near him at Assingham," Dan said thoughtfully. "Can you manage?"

Jack was given little choice as Dan on one side and Mat on the other pulled him back to his feet.

"Mat, take Jack back, will you? I'll go on and meet with the rest as planned."

Mat started to complain but Dan's raised hand stopped him. Jack shook off the supporting arm as his senses under the wine's sweet ministrations re-ordered themselves.

Jack's surge of life and energy was short lived. He was badly beaten, that Mat would not deny, and it was with regret that they stopped before they reached Assingham. Jack, unable to ride further, insisted they stop, while Mat wanted to go on, it not being much further. Mat was eager to return to the action, be a part of it, and took little persuading to leave Jack and ride posthaste to find the master.

Jack laid on his side in the moss-cushioned grass. He would have preferred Hazeldene, would have preferred a bed, but this would do. His mind wandered. Tonight they had moved to Assingham and there was no room for him there; tomorrow he would go.

Chapter Eleven

Soon the manor was the scene of organised activity. The looting, drinking and raping, which had been the tone whilst Geoffrey was in control, were replaced by order and control. Riders left with messages; horses were stabled in the stalls below Catherine; tables in the hall were set together and around them men sat talking in studied quiet voices. Geoffrey, enlisting the help of those who had arrived with him, moved the bodies and piled them in the courtyard, away from the food and drinking water.

“He’s young, Richard,” Edward Byrne said, excusing his son. “He’ll learn. After the beating he got tonight I do not think he will repeat his mistake in a hurry. I know what he did could have gone badly wrong, but his impatience and pride have caused no great loss save a few peasants.”

“Your son,” Richard began slowly, “is a fool. His pride and vanity lead his brain, and that is no way to conduct any kind of campaign. His actions impress me not in the least. If this is an exhibition of his manhood and ability,” he said gesturing to the pile of dead servants, “I hope he never rides with me.”

Byrne was hurt. “Richard, do not be too harsh; he will learn.”

“For your sake I have not been. Otherwise, you, son, would adorn the top of this bleeding pile now, as do the ladies you wished to save.”

Edward was sorry for Anne and Catherine, but what could he do? He’d tried; it was not his fault. If her husband had not been a supporter of Mary then this would never have happened. He chose to change the subject. “Well,” he began, “all else seems to be going according to the plan. The others, do you know when to expect them? All seems ready for their arrival.”

Richard did not answer and the other man began to feel extremely uncomfortable in his presence. Edward was saved as Richard’s eyes alighted on the unexpected figure of Mat dropping from his saddle.

Richard nodded acknowledging Mat’s presence, a puzzled expression settling on his face.

The master was in close conversation and Mat hung back at a respectful distance. The old man looked worried, his face was creased with it. Mat, however, cared little for their employer's state of mind. He brightened as the master moved from Edward Byrne and crossed the yard to meet him.

"Mat, why are you not with Dan?"

Mat's smile faded only slightly as he recounted the tale, and gave what brief details he had.

"You left him?" It was all the master said. "That was an error, Mat. Correct it." Richard turned on his heel and left him.

The hands that untied the horse from where she had spent the night were white and unsteady; wine no longer held the pain in suspension. Jack grimaced as he got into the saddle, but he was used to riding, and by the time he had covered the distance to Assingham, he was surprised at how much more tolerant his body was being of its recent abuses.

Jack's journey, by necessity, was slow, and because he knew of the plan he kept within the confines of the trees. From their leafy sanctuary he did not emerge until he was almost upon Assingham. Mat missed him, but continued to search, not daring to return without the bastard.

Jack knew sense should stop him riding to the gates of Assingham. He had no way of knowing whether the plan had been executed poorly, or not at all. Sense though was overborne by a lack of care. He hurt, and he wanted to get off this knacker of a horse, and Assingham was closer than Hazeldene.

Hal waited and watched, Jack's stolen mare secured well in the seclusion of the trees, and himself flat on his stomach, concealed from view by the high grass. The problem was he could not identify the man he wanted, and he had to find him now. He could not go back empty handed, and worse, without Spratty.

All morning he had lain there, and by a process of slow elimination he was beginning to narrow the field. So close was he and so quiet was the morn he could on occasion catch the shouted names.

Then the impossible occurred and the man with the maiden's hair, who should be dead, rode to the manor. Hal spared a brief thought for Spratty. Jack's survival surely meant Spratty was dead. Ah well, the man was a maniac anyway.

“Ah yes, yes, yes,” Hal spoke quietly to himself, golden head would go and report perhaps to the man he sought. Hal’s eyes widened and his interest increased. A man, taller than the blond, stocky, bearded and with a snarl of brown hair, stopped him and helped him from his horse. Hal watched, a second man, elegant, speak to him from some distance. This was probably Fitzwarren thought Hal.

The plan had not been flawed and appeared to have been executed, for Jack was challenged before he reached the gates. Marc’s shout was his pass, and slowly he made his way to the courtyard.

He quickly saw the piled corpses and realised that this had been no sanctuary to those who had lived at Assingham. Marc moved in and took the reins, helping Jack to lower himself to the ground. “Jesus, you’re in a state! Where’s Mat? He went back for you.”

Jack shrugged and Marc swore.

“Mat shouldn’t have left you. What happened?” Marc said quickly.

“I’ll tell you later,” Jack managed.

“Master was madder than hell. Thought he was going have someone’s blood,” Marc continued.

“What at?” Jack said.

“Not what, who,” Marc supplied.

Jack’s heart stopped; this was all he needed.

Marc grinned. “For once not at you; at Mat for leaving you.” Jack did not appear to register his words. “Do you hear?”

“He hears.” Both men turned to see the master, his face dark, his eyes without humour. “Marc, get him inside. When he can, bring him to my room.” It was a dismissal.

Shortly after Jack had left the yard there was a commotion. Richard heard the noise and was soon at the scene of the disturbance. Two of his men posted as look outs had intercepted a rider and when he wouldn’t answer their questions and they further found a heavily sealed letter on his person they dragged him back to Assingham.

“Take him inside and lock him up,” Richard had ordered taking the papers into his keeping.

Dan was back at Assingham and leant now against the desk in the room Richard had made temporarily his own: Anne’s room. Richard was seated at

the table busy examining dispatches that littered the wooden surface before him, only a small part of his mind given over to the conversation.

“Like you said she’s in the stable,” Dan said.

“Did she see you?” Richard asked.

“No. She’s curled right back in the corner like a scared mouse. What are you going to do with her? It’s only a matter of time before she either comes down herself or someone finds her up there and tomorrow the place will be swarming with men. Someone will see her,” Dan replied.

“You have met her before at Hazeldene haven’t you?” Richard was forced to turn more of his concentration to the issue.

“Well, I suppose she would recognise me. I’ve been around when she has been visiting and once I escorted her back here. I know where you are heading and I’m not sure that she’ll trust me. I can get her out of here, but only if she agrees to trust me. I don’t fancy my chances of getting her out kicking and screaming.”

“Well, out she must go and stay, at least until the country declares for Mary. My charity knows no ends does it? I entrust you to save the lady and take her somewhere safer, and take Jack with you as well,” Richard instructed.

Dan faced Richard squarely. “And where are you going to dispose of her now you have arranged her untimely death, and Edward thinks his son killed her?”

“I hadn’t given it much thought. It wasn’t at the top of my list of current priorities. Any suggestions?” Richard asked wearily.

Dan gave the matter some thought as he made his way down the steps from the master’s room. The idea that had been lingering there for some moments as a possibility, began to take the form of a course of action. The Abbess at St Agnes’s, although a good two-day ride, would provide the girl with sanctuary. It was about time Jack paid the place a visit as well.

Jack passed Dan hurrying down the corridor, a hand pointing to a door behind him.

“He’s in there,” Dan said.

“Thanks.” God, he ached. Even after half a day’s uneasy sleep he did not feel much improved.

“Before you ask, yes, I hurt like hell.” Jack dropped down onto the top of a coffer, careful not to lean his back against the wall.

“Well, it appears, brother, that we are on the wrong side,” Richard spoke from where he stood near the fire, watching paper burn on hot wood.

“Now that’s nothing new is it?” Jack’s voice was tired. “So what’s changed?”

“London has declared for Mary. We have been lucky enough to intercept a messenger carrying this news to her at Framlingham. The ships have mutinied and turned and Northumberland has stopped his advance. He’s at Cambridge now. His mistake was leaving the city,” Richard mused.

“Who knows?” Jack asked.

“At the moment - Northumberland and a few others. The messenger made the mistake of meeting Froggy and Marc first. I feel it is the moment to change sides and very quickly; we are only hours ahead of the news.” Richard added more curling paper to the flames.

“Do you know, it surprises me not at all that our plans have been bugged up again.” Jack was past caring. “So how do you plan to get us out of this then? Exactly what do you intend to do?”

“Ride for Mary; take this letter,” Richard held up the recently won letter, “Kneel and place myself and my men at her disposal. She knows not as yet that her position is so strong,” Richard replied.

“And do you think that Lord Byrne is about to let you ride out of here once he realises you have turned against him?” Jack unhelpfully pointed out.

“He will have no choice. Half the men here are mine. He is unlikely to be able to prevent us leaving if we wish to, is he now? Who is going to stop me? Geoffrey? I think not.”

“True,” Jack observed. “And me?”

“Find Dan and go with him. Meet us at Framlingham, if we are still there,” Richard told him.

“And if you’ve still got your head,” Jack said darkly.

“Have some faith. I believe the lady will give me a hearing,” Richard said. He stopped and looked carefully at Jack. He did indeed look like hell, his face bruised, clothes ripped, and all the flesh he could see was streaked with the blood raised to the surface. “Jack, Dan has told me what happened and I thank you for your care. Please don’t take this the wrong way, but I knew about Alan’s plans.”

“You knew...!” Jack blurted.

“Froggy Tate told me days ago that not only had Alan met with someone, he didn’t know who, but that he was spreading the word that they would be rid of me. Surprisingly enough, not everyone wants to see me cold in the ground. Alan told Froggy that I had committed murder when I was in London and that it had finally caught up with me. Froggy wasn’t convinced that the pair Alan had been talking to were the King’s men and came to tell me so.”

“I don’t believe you knew and did nothing! Why didn’t you tell me?” Jack said in disbelief.

“What exactly would you have me do? Froggy was to tell me if he heard anything else, and in the meantime, I decided to avoid riding down the south road alone. And that, Jack, is what you should have done. I could also ask why you didn’t damn well tell me,” Richard demanded.

“I didn’t tell you because I thought this might prove my worth, but all it seems to have shown is that I can be hung from a tree for half a day and survive,” Jack said moodily.

“Look, time is not on our side. Go, meet with Dan and get out of here before the place starts falling over itself trying to stop us leaving. I’ll see you again at Framlingham,” Richard said, and then added, “and, Jack, take care.”

Fixing what he hoped was a reassuring smile on his face, Dan popped his head slowly over the edge of the hayloft. Thankfully, she didn’t scream as he had feared she would. The girl looked at him, her face drawn, resignation painted on its features. Fear there appeared not to be as she matched his stare but not his friendly smile.

“We need to get out of here as soon as the horses are ready. I’ll come back for you,” Dan said.

It took some time, even under the cover of the mass of men and activity, to maneuver three horses from the courtyard and tether them at the back of the stables. Catherine wordlessly allowed him to lift her from the perch and lead her out through the stable, to where Jack held the reins. The three mounted and made their way in no great hurry across the fields and towards the sanctuary of the woods.

Chapter Twelve

Richard, as he said he would, pulled his men out of Assingham. By the time Geoffrey and his father realised they had been duped and that the hired troop were abandoning their cause, it was too late. They could only scream at the backs of the disappearing men.

Richard was the first to abandon Northumberland; the early warning of disaster being provided by Mary's messenger. Others too would leave, some too late to save themselves. He was confident of acceptance when he arrived in Suffolk, sure that the dispatch he held would smooth his path. At this point the Queen's party, although resolute and confident, did not know the full extent of their strength. Had they known they would have moved on the capital immediately. As it was, they waited at Framlingham.

The date was the 16th of July, two days since Northumberland had reached Cambridge. Richard knew time was not on his side. He had to change allegiances before Mary became aware of the full extent of her victory. This would be on the 19th when the news broke that the crews on the ships that Northumberland had sent to Yarmouth to cut off her escape had mutinied, and London had declared for Mary. Richard arrived at Framlingham, only some thirty-five miles from Assingham, in the late hours of the 16th. He bid his men camp outside with the other growing forces billeted there, and went to declare his allegiance to Mary Tudor and deliver the dispatch.

The Earl of Derby was a shrewd man who had not waited to see the tide turn and had placed himself with Mary from the outset. She had declared herself Queen on July 9th and he had the comfort of knowing he was one of the first to refer to her by that title. Now he considered the latest communication from Fitzwarren. The man, whoever he was, was now at Framlingham and craved a personal audience to "bring her majesty most welcome news." Derby couldn't dismiss him as Fitzwarren had proved most accurate before. If there was more, he needed to know about it sooner rather than later. He sent for Fitzwarren.

The lady had not slept for two days, as had none of them, thought Derby, his weary legs transported him up the stairs to the rooms she was

occupying. One of the guards posted at the door bid him enter.

“Do not stand on ceremony at a time like this. Come what news,” Mary snapped.

“Nothing but good news, Your Majesty,” he smiled.

“Tell us, what developments,” she said briskly.

“Word has finally come that London has declared for Your Majesty.” Derby said he spoke quietly as he brought her the first firm knowledge of her accession to the throne.

“Praise Mary,” she spoke on a whisper, her right hand steadying her on the desk. “Can it be?” Then, “How has this news come?”

“From a source so we know to be reliable,” Derby said, then he added, “although the delivery was not via our normal courier.”

“What do you mean? Could this be false news, a ruse to make us leave this stronghold?” Mary asked.

“I don’t think so. The document appears genuine and the code used proves this. However, if you remember we received a communication two days since from Richard Fitzwarren detailing Northumberland’s movements from London,” he began, and paused.

“Yes, I remember,” Mary said sharply. “There was little in his report that we didn’t already know but it confirmed our other sources. Anyway what’s he got to do with this?”

“Well Fitzwarren delivered the dispatch. I haven’t as yet had chance to question him. I wanted to bring you the news as soon as I could.”

“Who is he?” Mary enquired.

“Little known by all accounts. Richard Fitzwarren is his name. I believe he has a mercenary band with him, camped now with your other followers. I suspect he is probably a soldier of fortune who craves advancement, but to be fair he’s not alone there.”

“It is not always easy to separate the wheat from the chaff,” Mary agreed. “He has performed us a service.” Mary hesitated. “Bring him to me...” She turned back to the papers before her and the Earl cursed his tired limbs as he moved back again to the stairs.

The Earl did not descend fully into the hall but remained a dozen steps up the stairwell, inviting Richard to join him, saving his legs the extra work. Richard handed his sword over to the guard in response to the outstretched arm and lightly bounded up to join him, receiving a twisted smile for his youth.

“Your Majesty.” Richard knelt in the firelight; he spoke no more, waiting for her words.

“Rise, please. You have, it appears, tried to do us a service with your reports, and the news in this dispatch you have brought to us is most welcome,” Mary said standing now behind the desk. “How did you come by it?”

“Your messenger was set upon by some of Northumberland’s men. Myself and my men were on our way to Framlingham and were able to offer assistance,” Richard lied smoothly.

“Hmmm...” Mary was unconvinced, “and the messenger?”

“Injured, Your Majesty, but he bid me at any cost to bring this letter to you at Framlingham,” Richard supplied.

“A convenient story. I wonder if the messenger was lucky or unlucky to come across you on the road.” Mary gestured for him to stand.

“These are hard times, Your Majesty. It is difficult to determine friend from foe,” Richard said rising in one smooth movement.

“An extremely shrewd observation, especially from one who comes to join us so late in the day, and who has been able to pass us information that can only have come from the heart of Northumberland’s camp. The Earl tells me you have further news,” Mary commented astutely.

“Your Majesty, Northumberland has marched to Bury St Edmunds. However, scouting parties have shown him the strength of Your Majesty’s support and he has been forced to drop back with his main force to Cambridge where he resides now. He awaits reinforcements, which will not come. His initial intentions were to attack, and capture Your Majesty, but the Earl of Arundel has withdrawn his support and marches as we speak to join Your Majesty, a blow that makes Northumberland falter.”

“How do you know this?” the Earl demanded.

“I have my own lines of communication, and I am most willing to place them at the disposal of Your Majesty.” Richard still knelt.

The Earl had moved close to Mary. “Your Majesty, there is much to do...”

“Yes, yes, we must take council.” Mary said, “Derby go and confirm this report and take...?”

“Richard Fitzwarren, your Majesty,” Richard supplied.

“Yes, Fitzwarren...with you,” Mary added absently.

Richard returned to the camp his men had set up in the grounds of Framlingham and waited to see if the news he had brought would secure his position. Lying on the dried summer grass, his saddle for a pillow, he closed very tired eyes and slept. He awoke when Mat gently shook his shoulder. "You're wanted, master," said the accented voice.

The master sighed and turned to look up at Mat, whose form made a good shield from the midday sun. "If I had wanted to sleep all day I would have told you, idiot," but there was no malice in his voice.

"We took a vote," Mat grinned, then added, "and none was brave enough to wake you. It's your own fault."

Richard gave him a withering look and forced himself to his feet. Looking down at his clothes he sighed. They looked ridden in, fought in, slept in and worse: not a happy state in which to meet your new employer. He strode off to requisition a tent, which was where the Earl's messenger found him, stripped to the waist over a pale of water. Mat told him to enter at his own peril; the messenger chose to ignore the dishevelled soldier and throwing back the tent flap entered.

"I'll have your ears, Mat," said the man inside, water running down his body.

"Sir, my name is Robert Ashley and I have a message from the Earl of Derby," he announced. Ashley balked at the lash marks on the man's back. "The Earl bids you attend him immediately." Retreating he added, "I will await you outside." He recognised the man, but from where?

"You've still got your ears then," Mat observed as Ashley emerged.

"How did he get those scars? It's a wonder he lived." Robert moved to stand by Mat.

"Dunno," Mat replied shrugging. "But you can bet man who gave them to him isn't breathing."

Ashley chose to stand some distance away and wait for Fitzwarren, and wait for some time he did. When Richard emerged and cast his cool gaze on Ashley, he remembered him. He had collected a communication from him and supposed him a messenger. Before Fitzwarren joined Robert, he summoned Mat to him, and said something. Finally he joined Ashley and the pair moved off to meet the waiting Earl.

"You proved accurate in the finest detail," the Earl said bidding Richard be seated. "How did you have such information in advance of us, man?"

“That is my trade, my lord. You would not steal it from me would you?” Richard replied casually.

The Earl guessed correctly that Richard would probably say no more. “Her Majesty is preparing to move to London, and her followers will bring her to the city. Do I take from your words yesterday that you still intend to lend your support to Her Majesty?”

“Those were my intentions,” Richard said.

“Your men, they are retainers, tenants on your farm?” he ventured.

“No, they are my men: soldiers in my pay.” Richard knew the Earl had by now ascertained that he belonged to no household within the area and would have already tagged him with the all-encompassing name of mercenary.

“Mmmm,” was all the Earl said.

Richard waited.

“Would this be a correct assessment?” The Earl leant back in his chair. “Stop me if I am wrong.” He paused. “I know not from whence you came; however, I venture that you arrived in the area at Northumberland’s bidding, hired to rise against Her Majesty and support the Greys.” The Earl stopped Richard from speaking with a raised hand. “But, for whatever reason, you changed sides, left Northumberland and paved the way for your acceptance here with what I grant you was useful information. Ensuring that dispatch reached us from London was vital.” The Earl concluded, “Have I accurately assessed the situation?”

Richard smiled, palms open. “You have me, my lord.”

“I thought as much,” the Earl said, smiling openly himself, pleased at his accurate assessment.

“Well despite that, Sir, your presence here has been noted by Her Majesty and she would receive you before she leaves for London. Loyalty is a changing commodity at the moment. Can you give me assurances that yours is not of a fleeting nature?” the Earl said.

“I can give you lengthy assurances as to my good character, and my loyalty, expound upon my virtues until you fall asleep. However, they would remain unproved would they not, and an empty truth is but a lie. My lord, I am sure you do not want to listen to them,” Richard said.

“Well said. I have listened to fawning too much of recent. Be off. I will send for you again,” the Earl said good-humouredly. “Before you go I would like to know a little more about you. From where do you hail?”

Richard, in a corner for once, was forced to recount his personal history, with enough hard facts for the Earl to later substantiate. At the end of the interview, the Earl was convinced Fitzwarren would be a valuable asset and he was determined to have him working for him.

It was just over a week later when Jack started picking his way through the tents and bedrolls of Mary's variously sleeping and celebrating supporters.

They stretched out in every direction and he had not seen the like of it since the battlefields of Europe. It was well we changed sides, he thought to himself. He would not have liked to fight this mass, even though the majority were badly armed tenants. The sheer weight of them would have forced the Duke into quick submission, and Jack never liked being outnumbered. It was sometime before he spied a face he recognised among the many. Froggy Tate was crouching down at a fire, poking at the dying embers.

"Where is he?" Jack said leading his horse up to Froggy.

"You're back then." Froggy nodded at a tent behind him. "I tell you," Froggy continued, "this is not a bad change of scenery." He waved around him, the air of celebration led each night to drunken revelry, which was to most men's tastes.

Jack smiled. "I'll not be long and I'll join you." He ducked inside the tent to find Richard on the bed writing. It was still pleasantly warm inside, the night air and the slight chill of the July evening had not yet snuck beneath the canvas folds. Jack dropped to sit cross-legged on the rugged floor. Jack had decided not to tell his brother where they had left Catherine. Dan had persuaded Jack to keep the information he gave to his brother as minimal as possible, the less to pick fault with, he had reasoned. Jack had agreed wholeheartedly. Jack's skin was only slightly stained now with the blue-green hue of the bruising Harry's men had delivered and his back had healed well.

Richard looked up at length. "Well?"

"Done. She's safe. And us? Have we changed our colours?" Jack asked.

"It does appear so, for tomorrow I meet the Queen," Richard said smiling.

Jack was impressed. "Better wear your best boots then," he said smiling, then Jack put the question, the answer to which he dearly wanted to know.

“Well, may I ask where Alan is?” He had not seen him and was sure he would not have survived the discovery of the scheme.

“Ah, don’t be too disappointed, Jack, but he’s here, and still believes his intentions remain undiscovered. If he still has contact with cousin Harry, I would like to be the first to know about it. He still believes Tate is one of his devotees,” Richard said carefully.

“That’s if Froggy doesn’t change sides on you,” Jack pointed out. “That shit Alan should be cold by now.”

“I’ve told you why he isn’t yet, and my reasons why I want him to stay that way: hearty, hale and after my blood. Do you understand?” Jack did not reply. “As for Froggy, I have not relied entirely on my natural charm. Silver is the coin of Froggy’s heart and I do not believe that Alan could outdo me,” Richard smiled.

“Well, whenever you have what you want, promise me the opportunity of a personal score I wish to settle.” Jack’s eyes flashed blue.

“You will, I trust, be able to wait peaceably for your vengeance?” Richard asked.

“We will have to see, won’t we?” Jack stood stretching, feeling still the ache in his back, which had subsided now to a dull, uncomfortable reminder.

“If you don’t need me, I am off to join in the celebrations with Froggy.” The implication of his words was clear; Froggy was Alan’s shadow. Richard sighed.

The camp mood was one of battle victory, which Jack found odd because there had been no battle. This had its pleasant side, for the dead and dying, which normally accompanied soldiers’ camps, were absent. Beer in hand he wandered with Alan and Froggy through the myriad tents and camps that composed this forest of Mary’s loyal supporters.

“There’s Mat,” Alan said pointing.

“Aye, what’s this then?” Froggy said as they approached a closed ring of loudly cheering men and pushed companionably to the fore to find the reason for the noise.

Mat moved up to stand near them. “Good to have you back, Jack. That one there’s been in for four turns now. Go on, me money’s on you.”

The game they come upon was fighting with staffs and the current victor stood in the middle of the ring waving the purse he had just taken over his

head, grinning broadly. Jack appraised him. A broad man, he wore only hose and shirt, which clung to him with sweat. Thick veined forearms showed beneath sleeves that were pushed back. He fought on strength Jack guessed.

“Come on, who’ll come and give Dale here a bashing?” challenged a man entering the ring.

Jack waited.

A man was pushed into the ring by his friends. Obviously drunk, he tripped over a divot, much to the mirth of all watching, before staggering to face Dale.

“I’ll not fight you,” Dale laughed and dodged a drunken swing that threatened to pitch his assailant face down in the mud.

“Get him out of here,” he said, pushing the man backwards, gently sending him into the arms of the laughing crowd. “Come on,” he held the purse above his head, “I’ll bet the lot against the next man to enter the ring.”

“Go on,” Mat jabbed Jack in the ribs, receiving a hard look but Jack remained unmoved. Mat, full of ale, yelled, “Here, he’ll fight you,” and pushed Jack. The attention of the crowd was drawn and they fell back respectfully around Jack.

“I will have your balls for this, Mat,” Jack said angrily, his arms still folded unmoving.

“Ah, a challenger,” yelled Dale, moving across the ring, asking with mock formality, “And you are, Sir?”

Jack didn’t move.

“Having second thoughts? A little shy, eh? Well that’s to be expected,” he laughed. “Come on, anyone else; this pansy won’t do.”

Jack took the hint and stepped forward.

“Ah you’ve changed your mind,” said Dale. “And you are?”

“Why do you want to know?” Jack asked pleasantly.

“Oh, I like to know the names of the men I’ve beaten,” Dale said with good humour. There was an appreciative laugh from the crowd.

“Well I’m the man who’ll take your money,” Jack said smiling.

There was an “ooh” from the crowd. It was spoiling for a good fight.

“You’re a sure one,” Dale said, lifting his staff from where it was impaled in the mud and moving in on Jack.

Jack unbuckled his sword belt and laid it on the ground. Dale's eyes narrowed as he viewed its fine finish and the jewels adorning it. "Who'd you steal that from then?" he asked, circling Jack.

Jack chose to ignore the comment.

"Let's see if you're as pretty a player as your sword suggests," Dale said. There was a brief pause and then they began. Dale launched into an attack, which Jack parried with ease, taking his time to judge his opponent's strength.

Mat leant with a drunken sway towards Alan. "Easy money! I got ten on him to win."

"If he knew that he'd lose to spite you," Alan said, his eyes not moving from the contestants. His money was on Dale, who he hoped would give the bastard more than a good beating.

The game was over quickly. Dale, too sure of his strength and having had easy prey all evening, launched in with heavy strokes meant to drive the opponent backwards until he could take no more of the hammering. Dale only made two strokes. Jack deftly forced the first away and stepped under the second, swinging his staff neatly at the back of Dale's knees and taking the big man down.

Jack stepped back; the crowd cheered. Dan went to toss the purse to Jack, but Jack stopped him yelling, "Hold. Best of three."

Dale nodded, his grin broadening. "A gentleman as well! You'll not catch me out again."

And he was right. Jack took the fall in the second bout and lay prone on the grass with Dale's staff pointed at his throat. The crowd roared appreciation at the champion's resurrection.

"He did that on purpose," Mat complained loudly.

"Twenty silver pieces I take the winner," Richard yelled as Dale raised Jack to his feet. This drew a murmur from the crowd; this was half a year's wages, bet by a man too well dressed to be of their kind.

Mat cringed as he heard the silken voice of his employer behind him and stepped aside to let him into the ring.

"No," said Jack, walking towards Richard.

"Hey, if he wants to lose his money to us, let's not stop him," Dale called.

"I can't change my mind; they'll skin me," said Richard. Mat was already scraping in his jacket for fresh coins for his next bet. He'd put all

on. He paused in thought. Master or Jack? He had no doubts Jack would overcome Dale. Master was a right cunning dirty bastard when he wanted to be. The master he concluded.

Jack, sighing, turned back to the ring and grinned at Dale. "Ready?" he called, Dale nodded.

Dale lost, as Mat had predicted, but keeping his self-respect, after Jack prolonged the game. This time he offered his arm to Dale to raise him from the grass. "Well won..." Dale paused; he still did not know his name.

"Jack," Jack said smiling. "Keep your purse. You fought more than I for it; you earned it not me. I will have his," Jack said pointing at Richard with his staff.

"Good luck to you," Dale said slapping Jack on the back as he departed the ring. "My money is on you."

Richard handed his jacket to Mat, and leaning over his ear said too loudly. "If you bet with this I'll not pay you for a year."

Jack and Richard moved close. "Shall we give them a goodly show?" Jack enquired quietly.

Richard smiled, "Most certainly, my sweet Polynices." Word had spread and more of his men had joined the spectators; the pair turned their backs on each other and took up stances a few paces apart.

"To the death," yelled Richard.

"To your money," yelled Jack and the fighting began in earnest, with a speed the spectators had not witnessed that night. Dale, standing on the sidelines, realised very soon that he had only won his second bout and remained in the ring so long during the third due to Jack's grace, and not his own skill.

Richard continued to force the point, making no allowances for the rough treatment Jack had suffered.

Jack's blue eyes narrowed. *All right, so that's how you want to play, is it* ? Jack hardened; forced to place the full weight of his body behind the swings, as Richard was doing.

They fought for ten minutes, sweat pouring down both men, the crowd variously silent and cheering. Jack almost managed at one point to disarm Richard but was forced away before he could complete the move by a hard kick in the stomach, which sent him staggering backwards. It was becoming painfully clear to Jack that the game on one side was being played in earnest.

Their staffs locked and Jack used all his strength to pull his brother close. "What the hell are you doing?"

The reply was a flashed smile, and he received for his moment's inattention an elbow jammed painfully hard in his ribs. Gasping Jack backed away. *He bloody means it*, thought Jack. Despite the effort, Richard was still breathing evenly; he stood waiting for Jack to move.

The brief interval gave Jack time to look around; he recognised many of the faces in the circle that had grown about them. He didn't want to lose in front of them all. But winning would not be easy. If he dropped his guard a lethal blow would get through. Richard would expect him to stop it; he had made that clear. Jack finally bowed out by wrong footing himself and falling backwards to land on his back inches beneath an aimed swing. He stayed down, a hand on his ribs feigning minor injury from the fall. The crowd cheered. Mat smiled and staggered off to collect his money. Alan scowled, and Dan in the ring of spectators shook his head.

Richard, staff still in hand and breathing hard now, stood over his brother. "You didn't have to do that."

"I know; it has not made me a rich man has it." Jack scowled up at his brother. "What the hell were you doing?"

"I was curious." Richard extended his arm and Jack took it, pulling himself from the earth. The crowd cheered at the generosity of the victor.

"What do wish me to prove to you, exactly?" Jack demanded, anger in his voice as the pair stood close. Richard did not reply, but released his grip on Jack. "Another test of my loyalty?" Jack said and left the ring, retrieving his sword as he went, receiving another cheer from the crowd for his entertainment.

Dan saw the master approach. He was not an easy figure to miss in this crowd. Taller than most men, his lithe darkly dressed form stood out amongst the farm-clad peasants and the liveried colours of household servants. He had been searching for Richard for almost an hour, and now that he had found him, he wondered what to say. Dan had been Richard's sworn servant since he had been so appointed by Richard's father. In the man now approaching him, Dan could see naught of the boy he had cared for, save for the confidence of manner, which had always been there.

Dan squared his shoulders and made to stop Richard's advance. "I have looked..."

Richard cut in, "Seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you," he quoted.

"Richard, we must talk." Dan caught Richard's arm.

Richard turned to look at him, his face dark. "Ask, and it shall be given to you."

"Be serious," Dan growled in no mood for the others feigned frivolity.

"Only the insane take themselves quite seriously," Richard said, but he did not pull from Dan's grasp.

"Aye, well I wonder sometimes if you're not..." Dan released Richard. "Tell me why you did it."

"Did what? I was unaware that I had done anything this fine day," Richard replied amiably.

"You know what you did," Dan glowered at him from under thick dark brows.

"I am afraid you will have to enlighten me," Richard said, his voice still light.

"I've heard about the fight the other night with Jack. What exactly are you trying to do, drive him from you?" Dan said angrily.

"Nothing passes you by does it," Richard replied wearily.

Dan ignored him. "And another thing, weren't you going to tell Jack once this was over?"

"Was I?" Richard asked.

"You bloody well know you were,"

"So you keep telling me. Look, soon enough Robert will find out from someone that my bastard sibling is with me. He will know straight away who he is. If I tell Jack don't you think that would force the hot-headed fool to confront him sooner rather than later?"

"Jack's not the prize idiot you keep making out you know." Dan was angry now. "You're not the only one who can play games you know. Catherine, the girl from Assingham, you want to know where we took her?"

"Where?" Richard asked warily.

"She's at the Abbey," Dan growled. "So, are you going to do anything?" he pressed the point again.

"What would you have me do?" Richard questioned. "No, no, don't tell me; I can guess. However, I am not my brother's keeper."

"You're right there for once, aren't you. But he's sure as hell yours. He nearly got himself killed trying to save your neck! For Christ's sake, don't

make an enemy out of him as well,” Dan said. “I know your reasons, but you’re wrong, very wrong.”

“Alright I’ll talk to him,” Richard said at last.

“You’d bloody better.” Pushing his hands into his jacket Dan turned his back on Richard and headed for the camp. Richard watched him go, a slight smile at one corner of his mouth. It was Dan’s unerring mission in life to prevent him from stepping from the path. The problem was it was the right path as Dan perceived it, and not as Richard saw it. The man would expect nothing less now from him than to put right the wrong he reasoned Richard had committed. And, as he believed that Dan would carry out his threat, Richard had no choice.

The Abbey! He should have seen that coming. Jack believed his mother to have entered the Abbey after giving birth to him. A few questions or a simple enquiry would start Jack down a new path. Richard assumed correctly that this hadn’t happened...yet.

Chapter Thirteen

“We will leave in two days when the appropriate arrangements have been made, and move to London,” Mary said. “It is our wish that you join us on our procession south.”

“As Your Majesty wishes,” Richard said, kneeling still at her skirt hem.

Mary held out her hand absently to Derby. He knew what she wanted and retrieved the roll of parchment from the table and placed it in her small hand. “As a sign of our appreciation, and your continued good service and loyalty to our cause, it is our wish that you have this.” She handed the Latin script to Richard.

“It is our wish that the demesne be yours along with all rents and duties,” Mary said royally.

“Your Majesty is too kind,” Richard replied humbly.

Mary looked down at him, but said nothing. Few could blame Mary for trusting little. Her whole life had been subject to her father’s whims and desires, and she had been witness to his harsh and cruel treatment of her mother. Constantly unsure of her position, her status never secure, she had been left tight lipped and hard of face.

“Your Majesty,” ventured the Earl of Derby quietly, “there is much to attend to if I could...” He let his words trail off, his hand indicating the pile of waiting papers.

“Yes, yes, of course. Richard Fitzwarren, we shall look to see you on our journey to London.”

Richard heeded the dismissal and bowed his way from the chamber.

Walking down the stairs to retrieve his sword from the guard below, he absently tapped the scroll against the palm of his hand, the vaguest trace of a smile at the corners of his mouth.

Jack, waiting for Richard, was leaning idly against a wall amongst the throng of Mary’s supporters gathered around the main gates. Finally, he saw his brother’s unmistakable form emerging from between the door in the gate, flanked by two guards. Jack pushed himself from the wall and moved quickly through the crowd to intercept Richard.

“Well,” Jack said impatiently.

“Here.” He handed the papers to Jack who unfurled the heavy velum pages.

“It’s in Latin,” Jack said, his pace slowing as he read. “Here,” he handed the papers back. “I cannot fathom it.”

“You should have paid more attention to your tutor, Jack,” Richard said absently.

Jack scowled. “All right, suppose you tell me what it says.”

“I can’t,” Richard replied. “I haven’t read it myself.”

“You must have some inkling,” Jack protested. Getting no reply he continued sarcastically. “So, you just strolled in there, no one said a word, they merely handed you that and, not remotely inquisitive, you asked no questions and left?”

He received only a withering look, and was forced to wait until they returned to Richard’s tent before his brother decided to finally study the documents. After a lengthy read, which tried Jack’s patience immensely, Richard looked up smiling.

“Come on then, tell me,” Jack said impatiently.

“It appears I have a manor and land at Burton near Lincoln, with forest, two mills and all rents from the village and farm land thereabouts,” Richard said.

Jack was amazed. “How you managed that I don’t...”

“I thought you wanted to know.” Richard looked up from the papers darkly.

“Yes, sorry, continue,” Jack said through tight lips.

“And a house in Chapel Street in London,” Richard concluded.

“Well that’s an improvement on our present situation. What will you do next?” Jack asked eagerly.

“I have little choice in that. I have to accompany Mary to London as she makes her triumphal entry to the city. However, in view of this,” Richard indicated the papers, “I think I shall send half of the men to Burton, to find out what I have and what it’s worth.”

The bestowal had peeked his curiosity, and if asked, Jack would have left immediately. Burton could not be, he thought, more than a day’s ride from Framlingham. They could be there tonight, appraise the place and be back here before the procession to London. “So when do I leave?”

“Did I say you should go?” Richard said shortly.

“No. I just thought that as you were going to London I would...” Jack’s words trailed off.

“You have what you wanted to know. Now if you don’t mind, I would like to go to sleep.” Richard considered the discussion completed and stretched out on the bed seeking solitude.

Richard knew he had been wrong to dismiss Jack so shortly. He knew what he should do, and Dan was probably right: he should tell Jack the truth; he had no right to keep it from him. He would have to hope that Jack could control his temper and stop himself from riding straight into the not so welcoming arms of his family. That would be a sure end to Robert’s problems.

Mat knew where Jack had gone. He wasn’t far: in the next village at the inn. Richard waited until dusk and rode the short three miles to the village. He found his brother as he knew he would, on his way to being insensible with drink, balancing a serving wench on one knee and tankard of ale on his other.

Richard had, for once, got his timing wrong. He had estimated that by the time he arrived, Jack would be very much the worse for alcohol. However, Jack had spent much of the late afternoon perched on a hill outside the village, a victim of his own thoughts and had not descended until the sun was low in the sky.

Jack met his gaze immediately as Richard walked across the low-beamed room to join him. “Bess, go and get me more beer; there’s a good girl. Looks like I’ve some company.” He gave the girl a playful smack as she rose from his knee, and turned to face his brother. “So, why the interest in my whereabouts?” Jack said quietly.

“I’ve come to apologise,” Richard said seating himself opposite.

“Don’t humour me; I am past that,” Jack retorted hotly. His anger was still high and worsened, Richard estimated, by alcohol.

Bess came back with a refilled jug of ale and another clay tankard for Richard, which she set down. She made to return to her seat on Jack’s knee, but he pulled her close. “Come back in a while. I have some business, but I’ll not be long.” He winked and smiled at her.

“You be sure not to be,” she said retreating without fuss.

“If you would rather...” Richard said.

“Say what you have to and leave,” Jack said roughly.

“I don’t have anything to say,” Richard replied.

“God, you are enough to drive me mad!” Jack half shouted at him across the table. “If you’ve come here to pain me further, don’t bother. Please leave.”

Richard said nothing. He filled his tankard.

Jack, his voice still unsteady and edged with temper, asked, “So you are just going to sit there all night?”

“It seemed the safer option. Otherwise I risk you misconstruing anything I do say,” Richard replied.

Jack buried his head in his hands. “God have mercy on me. Why did I know this would be my fault.”

“What would you have me say?” Richard pressed the point.

Jack, head still in hands, his voice strained, said, “I would have you say you are an ungrateful, arrogant bastard, who treats me less like...” Jack didn’t finish; the words wouldn’t come.

There was a long pause.

“Less like a brother and more like a...? Go on,” Richard prompted helpfully, then when there was no response, finished his attack, “Well, I let you call me brother. Is that not enough? Master then it is.”

“You came to mock me further. I had thought for a moment, but no...” Jack’s voice cracked, along with his taught temper. He aimed the blow accurately across the table, and it landed with painful accuracy, knocking Richard from his seat.

Palms pressed to his temples, Jack ran his hands brutally through his hair. “Richard, you stupid bugger, why do you make me so angry?”

“Feel better now? I bloody well hope so,” Richard said through gritted teeth.

“Come on,” Jack helped him from the floor and back to the seat at the table.

“He’ll be alright,” Bess said hovering behind Jack.

“Yes, he’s always all right,” Jack replied.

“Looks like he’s worth a bit,” she continued. “Should I get him a bed for the night do you think?”

“And I thought you were all mine,” Jack said turning a smile on her.

“Well of course. I just thought...” she said reproachfully.

“Don’t worry, I know exactly what you thought. That’s what he thinks I think as well,” Jack said quietly.

“Do I?” Richard said.

“Yes you do!”

“And that, before you say anything, I will admit was my fault,” Richard said.

“Hurt?” Jack asked.

Richard produced a crooked smile; the sarcasm was not missed. “Like hell.”

“Good. Now you know how it feels,” Jack replied smiling widely. He again ran his hands through his already untidy hair. “Why do you try me so?” he asked, his anger spent. “Mostly what I do is meant with good intent. Why can’t you believe that?”

Richard looked across the table and wondered again if there was anything of himself in Jack. Likeable, with an easy manner and charm, little reserve and prone to the irrational, Jack constantly demanded something from him that he was not prepared to give: trust. What he was, because of the way nature and God had sought to place him on earth, meant Richard could not give it. His bastardy drove his need to prove himself, to belong, often overwhelming the reasons for his actions. Time and again, unconsciously it would strike at Richard, until he could clearly see his brother’s handicap, the irony being that Jack had no handicap to bear.

Richard finally shrugged in reply to Jack’s question; the look on the other’s face told him that it was not sufficient answer. His tone serious for once, his words finally giving voice to the edge of the truth of his feelings he said, “It is not easy, Jack, to have lived without you for so long. You place yourself in my life as my protector and my tormentor. Sometimes I know not what you want.”

Jack reached across the table and clasped his brother’s wrist with his hand. Richard joined him in the bond. “I want no more than this,” Jack said, his voice uneven.

You are drunk, Richard thought, but he did not say it, ending the moment instead with, “So shall I take it my money is safe?”

Jack laughed as he was meant to and the tension subsided. “Tell me one thing will you?”

“Maybe,” Richard replied.

“Who the hell is Polynices? You’ve called me that twice. I need to know if I should be offended or not.”

Richard's smile broadened to a grin, "Polynices was the brother of Eteocles. They fought in single combat and both were verily slain." Richard felt there was no need to add that Polynices's sin was having turned traitor.

"I'm not sure if that helps much," Jack said.

"Anyway, this is not why I came here tonight. There are two things I need to talk to you about. I am sorry for my behaviour earlier. I would like you to go to Burton, find out what we have what it's worth and send a report down to me in London. I'm following Mary as she enters the city and it could be a long journey so send one of the men with the report to Chapel Street and I'll pick it up when I get there."

"You'll need to give me a letter of representation. Otherwise no one will take me seriously when I get there," Jack said nodding his agreement to the plan, secretly pleased with the trust placed in him.

"Not a problem. Find out what kind of annual income we can expect from this place, if any. I suspect it's a fairly small place and not up to supporting much more than its own upkeep, but it's a start." Richard said.

"It's a bloody good start I'd say. You have certainly moved yourself up in the world. This time lets try and hang on to it though," Jack said warningly.

"If I was ever cautious, Jack, we would not have ended up with Burton in the first place. It's a game of chance we are playing and as the rewards are high so the stakes must be as well," Richard replied.

"Well let's hope your luck holds out eh?" Jack emptied his pitcher. "So what else did you want to talk about?"

Richard's shoulders dropped; this was a conversation, now that he was faced with it, he knew he didn't want to have. He easily avoided it, calling for more ale and refilling the cups, Jack forgetting about it soon enough. The pair returned to the camp raucously drunk. Dan received the body of Jack as it slid from the horse's saddle and Richard carried him to the tent, his own feet a little unsure. He dumped Jack on the bed none to carefully and slept soon after on the rug spread floor.

Hal, seeing that Fitzwarren was surrounded by his own men and heading to Framlingham, had cut his losses and returned to his master with what news he had. Harry turned the letter Hal had delivered over in his hand. The shit! London had declared for Mary with Cecil himself making the declaration. Harry knew his father had pledged himself to the Queen, so he

had no worries with the change of policy. It affected him little. What really annoyed him was that Richard had allayed himself to Mary long before the tide had changed, and in his hand he held the proof of it. It was the letter Richard had given to Jack, that was later stolen by Hal. The shit had been playing both sides for as much as he could get, and had ended up the better for it he did not doubt. The letter also passed a message to Peter de Bernay that his wife, Anne and daughter Catherine, were safe within his care. That information could be useful in tracking him down, thought Harry. He would see Robert. There had to be something they could do. He had no doubt Robert would not let the matter rest.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Fourteen

On the 22nd of July 1553, Mary, Queen of England by the Grace of God left Framlingham; her household and gathering supporters moving slowly toward London. Many of those who had gathered followed her; others returned after the revelry to their farms and villages. Harvest time was upon them, and that would wait for no man and certainly no queen.

Richard was bound for London and left with the gaggle of supporters that followed the triumphant Mary, whilst Jack made for Burton. It was Jack who arrived at his destination first. It would take Mary until the 3rd of August to enter the city as she made various stops along the way including Ipswich and Colchester. Richard had asked Jack to go to Burton. It seemed a safe destination and Jack, desperate to find out what the place was like and to prove his own worth, had left quickly.

Burton was a small fortified manor house, nestling in a lap of green land surrounded on three sides by forest and on the fourth by a stream. A mile, maybe two, from the manor was the village of Burton. It was small and typical of English villages, although Jack did note the stone church and a market place – trade meant money.

It had been with cold humour that Richard had found out that Robert Hastley, previous owner of Burton, and apparently loyal to Mary, had been feeding information to Northumberland's supporters. When he had realised the folly of his actions, Hastley had fled to Scotland, leaving Mary free to give one traitor's property to another of the same kind. Richard did not share this information with Jack.

There remained a small staff at the manor house. When Jack dismounted in the courtyard he was met by a fat man and a priest. Jack had bid Mat ride ahead by a day and inform the inhabitants of his pending arrival, and he saw him too, accompanying the overweight retainer. Jack looked around the confines of the walled courtyard, his eyes taking in the defences, maintenance and structure of the heavy curtain wall.

"I am Guy Thomas. I used to be Robert Hastley's cofferer. I am now," the man paused unsure of himself faced now with Jack who he erroneously assumed to be the new master of Burton, "at your service," he completed,

bowing stiffly, the top half of his body pivoting with difficulty around the unyielding bulk of his ample girth.

Guy saw that Jack was fairly well dressed, a soldier by the looks of him, tall with sun-bleached blond hair, his manner hinting at the power that beat beneath the surface. Guy's throat and mouth dried, his eyes flicking uneasily over the group of armed men at Jack's back.

"You have books of account?" Jack enquired.

"Of course," stammered Guy.

"Good man. What say we have a look at them over a beer," Jack said, smiling and clapping Guy on the arm. "Have someone stable these horses will you and show my men around."

Guy nodded and indicated that two men cowering in the doorway should comply.

Jack made to follow him, but the priest stepped in. "A word if I may," he ventured. Jack cast his eyes over the man of God who stood in his way. Although ageing he had an active air about him. Jack had little time for the clergy. It was, after all, they who had cursed him, but this man looked like he might have had to work for his living, unlike the larded religious upholders he despised.

"Of course," Jack said amiably, "but perhaps after I have looked around."

The priest nodded. "I will wait if that is acceptable."

Jack raised his hand in assent and followed Guy in.

The courtyard contained only two exits, one through the main gate, by which they had just entered and another up wide steps into the main body of the manor. Jack followed Guy up these and through wooden doors, directly into the main hall. It was not large; the main features were a fireplace along one wall and a dais at the far end. Jack looking up at the eastern wall found the remains of a decrepit minstrel's gallery. The remaining exit from the hall led into a corridor, which Guy informed him went to the kitchens. He followed Guy up narrow spiral stairs to the next level.

The first room was clearly awaiting the return of its master. Books lay on the table, clothes still hung over a chair and the remains of the last fire still lay black in the grate. It was obviously the room occupied by Robert Hastley and his wife. The next was of a similar layout, the furnishing simpler, and the bedchamber contained three beds. Again the room seemed to be sadly awaiting the return of the children who would never come back.

The third room was where Guy kept his books and Robert had obviously used it for conducting his business. The final chamber on this floor had been converted into a family chapel and the ornaments of prayer still stood on the altar.

Jack spent most of the day poring over the books, asking questions and receiving answers from Guy. When he looked up to stretch his aching back he saw from the window that the light of the day was disappearing fast, but he felt at last in a position to inform Richard of what he had at Burton. He rubbed his tired eyes.

Guy finally found the courage, and ventured nervously. "Can I assume that my services will still be required?" There he'd done it at last he thought. His wife would never have forgiven him, and would have berated him all night if he'd gone home without the answer to that question.

"Ah, Guy, there is a question," said Jack fishing inside his jacket for a document which lay therein. "Here, this is from your new master. I am sorry if I have deceived you into believing it was myself."

Guy took the document and read the short words from Richard Fitzwarren, authorising Jack to act on his behalf.

"It does say that in his absence that you are to act for him," Guy said, laying down the page.

"Does it indeed?" Jack was tired; he knew exactly what it said, having stood over Richard as he penned it, pleased with the trust placed in him.

"Am I to assume he will often be absent? I know little of this man. Perhaps he has lands elsewhere?" Guy ventured. His confidence growing he tried to find a little about Robert Hastley's replacement.

"What he does, Guy, is his own business. However, since I appear to be in charge of this delightful place, consider yourself hired. How much did Hastley pay you again?" Jack had seen the amount penned in the books and recalled it instantly.

"Ten a year," Guy answered.

Right answer, thought Jack. It had been a minor test of the man's honesty.

"Can I assume that eleven would be acceptable?" Jack enquired.

Guy nodded, a smile on his face. His wife would be pleased when he got home.

"Oh God," Jack exclaimed. "I forgot. I need an inventory of all the stores. Can you do that for me by the morning? I've ten men down there;

they'll riot if the beer runs out. I take it there is enough for a day or so?"

"I believe so," Guy replied.

"Good, otherwise you'll find me lynched in the yard," Jack said good-humouredly. "Shall we continue in the morning?"

Guy nodded his agreement and the pair made their way downstairs to the hall where he found his men had been amply supplied with beer already, and then he spied the priest, still waiting.

Jack had forgotten him. "Forgive me. You wanted to talk. Please sit. I'll stand if you don't mind; I've been stooped over a desk too long."

The priest sat, glad at last to take the weight off his feet. "I know nothing of Fitzwarren," said the priest, "and I would like to know your intentions so I can convey them to the village. They are worried by such change, and know not how you lean."

"Lean?" echoed Jack confused.

"Yes, Robert Hastley was a Catholic and most of the village hereabouts is too," the priest said, as if that supplied sufficient explanation.

Jack took another drink. "Ah, religion," he said.

"Well?" the priest asked.

"Sorry, I am a little tired, and you are?" Jack said.

"You can call me Jamie; that's what everyone else here calls me," he answered.

"Well, Jamie, I'm Jack and I care not. I think I can say with some certainty that Fitzwarren will care little either. As long as the rents get paid do as you please," Jack said.

The priest looked relieved.

Jack continued, "I am sorry you had to wait so long to know that. Can I offer you something?" Jack gestured towards the beer.

"I'll not say no to your hospitality," Jamie said.

"Come and join me while I find if that rabble have left us any," Jack said.

Richard received Jack's summary of Burton on the 6th of August at the house he had acquired for his good works in Chapel Street. Burton, he reflected, re-reading Jack's letter, was not going to make them rich. However, it would provide a reasonable income, sufficient to support itself with some left over. It was a start, and if nothing else it would allow him to remain in the country.

Northumberland had handed himself over to Mary. He had been prepared to face a lingering traitor's death but the new monarch had dealt with him clemently and he was allowed the block. Northumberland was transferred to the next world with speed by the headsman. The unfortunate victim of Northumberland's desire to govern England, Lady Jane Grey, was interned in the Tower, awaiting Mary's pleasure, although there was little doubt in anyone's mind as to what that would be.

It was during this time that the plans were laid for Mary to marry Philip of Spain. The majority of her councillors favoured Edward Courtenay, who had his own tenuous claim to the throne as a direct Plantagenet descendent. An ardent Catholic who had spent most of his adult life as a prisoner, he was restored to grace on Mary's ascent to the throne. Although the Council leant in Courtenay's direction, and he was a particular favourite of Gardiner, Mary herself favoured Spain. By the end of September, negotiations were in full force. The official proposal of marriage would be received, delivered by Renard the Spanish Ambassador, in mid-October. Renard perceived the Queen's sister, Elizabeth, to be a threat to the marriage plans and began to plague Mary to find a solution to this problem on the block. Her advisors, themselves unsure about the suitability of a Spanish marriage, and less sure about Spain's sovereignty in England, advised Mary that the match was unpopular with the people. They argued that such a move would force the people to favour Elizabeth, who regarded her as both an upholder of Protestantism and a suitable candidate for Courtenay's hand, which would secure an English heir.

Elizabeth was still resident at her London house, Durham Place, having been in the city to take part in Mary's coronation procession. Her position had of recent times been elevated from one of minor royalty to heir to the throne.

But Elizabeth recognised it for the shallow sham it was. Mary would marry as soon as she could, of that Elizabeth had no doubt, and she would then be returned to her former status. She also saw the danger of her position. Mary had no liking for her and saw her as an imminent threat, something that secretly pleased Elizabeth. Further, there was the religious clash. Mary, devoutly Catholic, could not abide Elizabeth's Protestantism. Elizabeth understood the strength of her position, and the possibility of gaining the crown was to her very real. To achieve it, she smiled wryly to

herself, she had only to keep her head, and that might prove a none-too-easy task.

Kate Ashley, Elizabeth's confidant and governess, advised they move to the Buckinghamshire house at Ashridge, and Elizabeth agreed that it would be safer to retreat there and remove herself from court life. This was exactly what she intended to do after a decent interval had elapsed between Mary's coronation and her departure. After all, she did not want her actions at leaving the city to be seen as overly hasty and borne from a desire to be at a safe distance from Mary.

"Not that one, Kate, it makes me look fat," Elizabeth said pointing to one of the dresses laid out on the bed.

"It does not," objected Kate.

"Well, it doesn't matter. I shall wear the green one anyway," Elizabeth said. "I will better blend in to the scenery."

Elizabeth was preparing to attend Mary at a masque in the palace gardens that evening. Kate retired taking the dress to have a hem repaired.

Elizabeth, idle for once, wandered from the bedchamber into her drawing room. The windows were flung wide open and she could see the sun playing on the pond in the garden below. Elizabeth stood looking down for a long time before a feeling began to grow over her that she was not alone. Her back stiffened as she became certain of the fact and she listened carefully, but the only sound in the room to reach her ears was that of her own shallow breathing.

Turning slowly her eyes met those of the intruder who was leaning against the doorframe leading to her bedchamber. Elizabeth's hand went to her chest and she inhaled sharply but the call she could have made caught in her throat.

"So I was wrong." She met his grey eyes and smiled, his returned smile warmed her with the memory of the joy of his company.

"Wrong?" he echoed.

"I had thought you were long dead by now, so you are either a ghostly apparition, a product of my imagination or,' she paused, "I was wrong." Elizabeth added, "How did you get in here?"

"The same way I intend to leave," Richard said removing a chestnut leaf, which had lodged itself in his sleeve.

Elizabeth turned to look at the opened door leading to the balcony. "You didn't?" She laughed. "You haven't changed. You will break your neck. If

you would but ask I shall allow you use of the door.” Catching his hand in hers, she drew him to the window seat. “It is still good to see you. I have not heard your name mentioned for so long. The last I did hear was that you were in France.”

“That was true until very recently,” Richard said.

“Oh, Richard, don’t stand there like some gallant. I pine for good company.” She roughly pounded the velvet cushion indicating where she wanted him. “Standing there you look as like to leave me at any moment.”

Richard sighing complied. “The lady still likes her own way I see.”

Elizabeth ignored his comment. “So what brought you back to England’s shores?”

“Northumberland’s money in the main,” Richard said. He could still see the girl’s face in the woman’s features.

“No! You opposed Mary? Ah now, that’s funny,” she said laughing. “My Chevalier to the last.”

“That’s not funny,” Richard said half seriously.

“I am sorry.” Elizabeth gasped at her tactlessness. She continued trying to undo her words. “I knew, and yet, I cannot blame my youth. I was naught but wrong.”

“It’s long ago. There is no forgiveness to ask for,” Richard said quietly.

“There is. I was stupid, nothing more than a village idiot,” There was a long pause while Elizabeth examined her ringed fingers. When she looked up again there was an apologetic smile on her face. “Let’s talk of other things. We are still friends I think?”

Richard nodded, returned her smile, and watched a moment of relief flit across her face.

She continued reassured, “So, if you were with Northumberland how have you still got your head?”

“I am like you, adept at self-preservation. I changed sides in the final hour, rendered the lady some service, pledged my loyalty and here I am,” Richard said giving the briefest summary.

“Do I have the feeling there is slightly more to this than you are saying?” Elizabeth enquired.

Some time later, she watched his departure through the garden. She had consigned his memory to the deepest recesses of her mind, sure he was by now dead. She had not seen him since she had been in Sir Thomas

Seymour's house in Chelsea. God, how long ago was that? Four, no, five years ago. Lord, he had changed so little. It had been so long ago.

Richard Fitzwarren's father was close friends with Thomas Seymour, and his son, Richard, was attached to his household. Seymour married King Henry's widow, Catherine Parr, and Elizabeth was then taken into his care. Richard and Elizabeth became close companions; Elizabeth had little opportunity to make many true friends and Richard was among the few.

Then, what had started out as a game with Seymour asking for Elizabeth to kiss him, as a daughter should her stepfather, ended with him tearing her dress from her shoulders. Elizabeth had run screaming from the garden and Seymour, when so accused, had laid the blame on Richard who was often in her company. He had been believed, and Seymour himself had delivered the sting of the whip. The truth didn't come from Elizabeth who was too afraid of Seymour but oddly enough from Seymour's own wife, Catherine. By then it was too late. Richard had been banished from the house and had returned to his father's estate, his reputation permanently tarnished.

Elizabeth was still musing over her visitor when Kate returned with the dress, its hem repaired.

"Elizabeth, come on, you shall be late," Kate said laying the dress on the bed and smoothing out the creases. "Elizabeth?"

Elizabeth turned, "Sorry, Kate, I was elsewhere,"

"I can see that," Kate said slowly. "What is it that makes you look so?"

Elizabeth smiled mischievously and swept across the floor, her skirts swirling around her. Kate, surprised, followed her. "I've had a visitor," Elizabeth announced.

"A visitor. Who? I saw no one admitted," Kate said puzzled.

"A most handsome gentleman, Kate. Ah, if only you had been here," Elizabeth played moving away from Kate's advance.

"Tell me. Do not play games," Kate said with more authority.

Elizabeth contemplated her reply for some moments. "Lord of the forest by all accounts, an elfin form he was, and one I thought long lost to me," she said still twirling round, skirts spinning.

Kate was now completely confused by her mistress's words and more than a little worried by Elizabeth's apparent light-headedness. Elizabeth, seeing that Kate was beyond comprehension, said, "Richard! You remember."

Kate searched her memory, but still remained nonplussed. “Elizabeth, you confuse me. No one called this afternoon. Who do you speak of?”

“Lord, you are slow, Kate. Richard Fitzwarren.”

Kate looked aghast for second. “Fitzwarren! Here in this room. No.”

“Yes, yes, yes,” laughed Elizabeth continuing to dance around the room.

“How did he? He didn’t...” Kate said advancing on Elizabeth lost for words.

Elizabeth turned on her governess a hard light in her eyes. “He was most charming, as he always was. He was nothing less than a gentleman, and do not accuse him of being other.”

Kate took the warning. “How did he get in?”

Elizabeth didn’t reply but merely pointed to the open window. Kate walked to look out into the garden. They were two floors above the ground; it would have been a perilous climb. Her eyes were caught by a green leaf on the balcony and a snapped twig from the towering chestnut that dominated the back of the house. Lord, that would be some feat to make it the distance from the tree to the safety of the stone balcony. Kate turned back to Elizabeth. “That boy always did like the dramatic.”

“Oh, I think you’ll find he’s no boy, Kate,” Elizabeth said.

“Now you be careful. He was not sent from you before for no good reason. We all saw what he was at. Mark my words, lady,” Kate chided.

Elizabeth’s face darkened as she descended on her governess from across the room. “Who am I, Kate?” Kate didn’t answer, but bit her lip. “Exactly, and I shall for a change do as I please. Anyway it is too late: he serves me now. I have little enough at my disposal, Kate, and what poor stuff I do have I must make use of as best I can,” Elizabeth finished.

“What have you done?” Kate said.

“I have done nothing. It is Mary who has raised him up. Ah Lord, if only the cow knew what she’d done,” Elizabeth laughed.

Hal’s feet hurt, wriggling his toes again he found that only two on the left foot could move, so jammed were they into the leather. Hal cursed himself for throwing his old pair of shoes away. The conviction that these would slacken with wear had been wrong. Hal hopped from foot to foot as he waited for his new companion, David, who was Robert Fitzwarren’s man.

Robert had suspected Richard would come to London, and in this he had been right. He set his men to find him by enquiry, and they were also to ask for an Anne and Catherine de Bernay who might be with him.

David arrived back. "Nah, nothing. This'll take forever," he snarled. He had no love for the task, and was sick of asking questions of people, sure that if the man they sought did not wish to be found he would not be using his own bloody name. Mind, that was why Hal was here, at least he had seen this cur his master wanted taken.

"Where next?" Hal asked, as the pair walked through the filth of London rotting in the July heat.

"How the hell should I know," David said hotly, spitting into the gutter.

"Master said he was with Mary." Hal was talking to himself; thought was not one of David's strong points. "Well me brother's wife, Nancy, is a cook in Derby's house here in London. Mayhap she could find out," Hal concluded.

"How's that going to help? She's not like to know him is she? And Derby's not in the bloody city is he?"

"No, damn you, but she might know someone, who might be able to ask someone, who might be able to get someone to find out," Hal snarled though clenched teeth.

"That's a lot of might's," David pointed out spitting again.

"Got any better notions?" David shook his head. "Come on then." Hal wanted to get his weight back on his arse in the saddle and off his sore feet.

Chapter Fifteen

Jack set to work again to try and slowly absorb all there was to know about Burton. He had viewed the books of account kept by Guy, and satisfied himself of the basic fabric and security of the place; now by degrees he must acquire a detailed knowledge.

“So let’s look at the land. How is it apportioned?” Jack asked.

Guy, nodding, went to retrieve a smaller ledger from the shelf. “It’s all in here.” He opened the book part way through. “The rents are here.” Guy tapped a column with a round finger. “This is those who’ve paid.” He moved his finger to another neat row of figures. It was nearly completed.

That was a shame, Jack thought: Hastley had already seen the income.

“Mmm...” Jack turned the page back over. “When’s the next rent due?”

“January each year, but it’s a poor time, and we don’t often see much coming in till later in the year,” Guy said, turning the book back to the current year.

Jack turned the pages back again and looked at the rents. “There’s been a bit of a rise wouldn’t you say? What’s the tenure?”

“The demesne lands, all at will, with the exception of here,” Guy pointed to two entries at bottom of the page. “These are leasehold: one to the blacksmith and one to the priest, Jamie. You met him yesterday.”

“Jamie rents land at the back of the church. He works it with some of other villagers, poorer types you know, and collects money. Look, he’s a good payer, always first.” Guy was on the defensive Jack noted. “See, always pays up prompt. Previous master, begging your pardon, thought it a profitable arrangement.”

“Do you think rents need to rise?” Jack said looking up, closely studying Guy’s face.

“They rose last year. I am sure you know prices are on the up. We had no choice but to increase them, but if you want to do it again, well that’s not for me,” Guy said.

“You do not think it a good idea?” Jack enquired.

“It’s been a poor harvest last two years, another and well I don’t know if you’ll get the money in,” Guy said.

Jack wondered whose side he favoured. Had Guy been Hastley's man, or did he side with the tenants? He would have to wait and see. Otherwise it was difficult to judge the basis for his words.

"I will think on it," Jack said. "Markets, when are they held?"

"Last Saturday in the month," Guy said.

"What trade?" Jack asked, his eyes still cast over the pages.

"It's small. Most take to Lincoln: wheat, corn, beets, usual. Hastley would buy from market, encourages tenants like," Guy said.

"You will ride out with me. I would like to see for myself the extent of the land, see exactly what there is," Jack said closing the book and leaning back in the chair. Guy nodded. Jack wondered idly how many men it would take to get him in a saddle. Two probably he concluded.

The two had been out most of the afternoon. Jack was mildly amused by Guy's growing discomfort on the horse he had been loaned. He had been unable to resist coaxing his eager mount into a quick trot. Mat's horse, on loan to the large man, had moved quickly of its own volition to keep pace, and Jack had to turn his face away to hide his mirth as the man slid from side to side in increasing danger of meeting the grass.

Guy had introduced Jack to the tenants he called over from the fields. Some stood nervously not looking up from the soil, some eyed him some suspiciously, and a few had hidden he noticed. He was not enjoying being on display, and tired quickly of his new role. They passed the church on the return journey. "Hold. Didn't you say Jamie had land hereabouts?"

"Aye, up there. Can you see?" Guy said pointing.

"Wait here, Guy; I won't be long."

There were three men working, and initially he did not recognise the form of Jamie who was stooped over a bucket, filling it with rocks from the turned mud.

"Aye, lad, and how's your head then?" Jamie said grinning, after experiencing Jamie's capacity for drink. Jack had made a mental note to be careful if there was ever another occasion.

Jack returned the man's grin and slid easily from the saddle. "Not as bad I bet as yours," he replied tying his horse to the remains of a gatepost.

"Out seeing what's yours and what isn't, eh?" Jamie said, straightening and rubbing filthy hands down his stiff back.

"So, is this mine then?" He kicked at a stone at his feet.

“Aye, that’s yours, all these bloody rocks are, and if you want them I’ll not stop you coming and taking them,” Jamie said. “Not so bad over there,” he pointed to where the field banked down towards the stream, “but up here it’s always been poor. Water washes the soil off,” he continued shaking his head. “I had a thought to plant hawthorn or the like over there, give it a bit of shelter from wind and like, but I don’t know. It’ll bring in birds.”

“I’m no farmer. Don’t ask me for advice,” Jack said.

Jamie looked up at the taller man before him. In the light he looked different. He had taken him for older in the dim interior of the hall, had not seen fully the corn flower blue of his eyes nor the pale summer blond hair. Jamie was reminded of a woman he had once known, she was the only one he had seen with hair like that, fine and yellow. “I can see you’re no farmer; this gives it away you know,” Jamie lifted his stick from the mud and tapped the sword with it. “What are your plans then?” Jamie enquired.

“Plans?” Jack echoed. “I had not considered it; wait for word from Richard for the moment.”

“God, you’ve got Guy with you have you,” Jamie said spying the fat man on the horse.

“He’s been fairly helpful. You don’t like him?” ventured Jack.

“Guy’s all right, all bluster and wind though. Hastley gave him too much freedom; made himself unpopular I can tell you. Bet he was fair frightened you’d not keep him on. Can you imagine him making a living for himself,”

Jamie chortled at the thought of it. So he was more Hastley’s man than the tenants’. Jack stored the information. Jamie dumped the bucket and straightened again. “I can’t stand with you all day, lad. God keep you, and come and share a beer if you will.” Jamie smiled and turned to retrace his steps back to the stony field.

Jack’s report, when Richard received it, was extremely detailed. *He has been busy*, thought Richard, who for once found himself impressed with the results of Jack’s endeavours.

Alice knocked gently on the door and then admitted herself to Kate’s presence after an appropriate interval. “Yes, what is it, Alice?” Kate said without looking up from the needlework on her knee.

“There is a man in the kitchen, madam. He says it’s about the bill for the cloth you ordered last week, says it wasn’t settled, madam. He’s causing a right fuss and Frederick thought it best to send for you, madam,” Alice said.

Kate pushed the needlework roughly aside and pulled her sleeves down, "I'll be down directly, Alice," Kate said rising. "I am sure I have the account here," she murmured to herself, pushing papers aside on the table, which doubled as her desk when they were at Durham Place. "Ah," she exclaimed, the account coming to hand immediately.

Kate descended the steps to the kitchen, paper in hand. "I do not know on what authority you come, but this was most surely paid, and I have the account here," she said briskly.

"Ah, well, me master says as how it's still unpaid m'lady and I have this here, but seeing as I can't read..." The man held out a paper in his hand and Kate moved to study the document. She looked at the words, confused for an instant. It told of a sale of five horses, two pigs and of fodder for the feeding of stock.

"But this is..." her voice trailed off as she looked up and stared with instant recognition into the slate grey eyes under the hood. Fitzwarren! There was a moment's silence before she continued, stepping back from him, "Yes, you are right; there has been an error. It will take me but a moment to calculate this right, and I will send you back with a note for your master. Come, follow me and bring that bill with you," Kate said and led him from the kitchen, and the watchful eyes of Frederick and Alice, into her temporary office. Once behind the closed door Richard pushed the hood back from his head and bowed smiling at Kate.

"Elizabeth told me you'd come calling," Kate said roughly.

"Only with the best intentions," Richard said. "You still cannot trust me can you, Kate? Do you still blame me?"

"No, it was not your blame to take, Richard. I knew the truth of it as soon as you were gone," Kate said appraising the figure before her. "Well, Elizabeth was wrong," she said stepping back from him.

"Yes, she did say that she thought I breathed no more," Richard said.

"No, not that, she said you'd not changed. Well, I don't know whose eyes she looked through, but you're not the young rogue I remember," Kate said.

"I can assure you, Kate, I am more of a rogue than ever," Richard said smiling, and Kate found herself blushing.

She turned quickly from him, and made a pretence of stowing the unneeded account back amongst her papers. Her composure recovered she faced him again. "So what brings you here this night?" she enquired,

moving to settle herself back in the chair she had occupied before Alice disturbed her needlework.

“News for your mistress, and,” Richard paused, “I wanted to see if you still held me in such low regard.”

“News first then we’ll discuss my feelings toward you,” Kate said.

Richard nodded and settled himself easily on the edge of Kate’s desk, “Mary rejects Courtenay, and turns to Spain and Philip. It is expected that a proposal will be received from that quarter soon. The Council, anxious to secure an heir however, have not rejected Courtenay and are considering him as a suitable match for Elizabeth. He remains Gardiner’s favourite, which stands him in good stead. There is move afoot to unearth again the evidence collected against Anne Bolyn, and use it now to question Elizabeth’s legitimacy. It is the same as before; there is nothing new. Renard is hoping to possess the evidence to force Mary’s hand but he has an interesting adversary it seems in Gardiner, who wishes to use the papers to persuade Elizabeth into the match with Courtenay. Also, Elizabeth is attracting Mary’s disfavour. It appears she failed to attend mass again and the Queen doubts her belief in the faith.”

“Damn the girl! I told her to be careful. She only needs to make a show to keep Mary happy. I did not know she’d done it again. Her actions are so foolish; sometimes I wonder at the girl’s sense,” Kate said angrily.

“It’s probably a small matter, but one close to Mary’s heart,” Richard agreed.

“I will talk to her. Is that all?” Kate enquired.

“I have no other news, but when I do, I will most assuredly bring it to you,” Richard said and paused before continuing, “So Kate, do you still dislike me so?”

“Ah, Richard, no I suppose not. When they told me it was you who pursued Elizabeth in the garden that day and tore her dress, I was a willing victim of their words, too ready to believe. I didn’t know it was Seymour.” Kate paused before going on, “Elizabeth didn’t confide in me for weeks and then of course it was too late, and the poor girl had to face the knowledge that everyone knew.”

“That was not your fault, Kate,” Richard said slowly.

“Elizabeth has placed her trust in you, so I shall do the same,” Kate said smiling.

Richard returned her smile, and lowering himself from the desk took her hands and raised her from her seat. "Now," he said, pulling her close, "about that note you were going to write for my master."

Kate pulled away, blushing again. "Get you from my rooms and stop being such a rascal."

Richard pulled his hood up again and bowed before Kate led him back to the kitchen and saw him from the house.

She returned to her room, passing Elizabeth's door. On a whim, Kate turned back and opened it. Her mistress was reading by the fire, and looked up.

"What is it, Kate?" she enquired.

"I just thought you'd like to know I've had a visitor," Kate crowed, laughing. She made a rapid exit, closing the door with a slam as Elizabeth rose to pursue her.

The spade sunk into the top crumbly layer of soil easily, but stopped abruptly as the blade struck solid unyielding stone below. For the umpteenth time that day, Catherine used a word she would have been hauled before the Abbess for using. Removing the spade she tried again, and again struck rock, jarring her shoulders painfully in their sockets. Kneeling down she cleared the top surface to expose the rock. It was too big this one to lift out. Wedging the spade under an exposed edge she tried to prize it from its spot. It moved not at all. Too much of it was still held secure by the damp brown earth around it. Catherine stabbed the spade down into the soil. The metallic clang that answered her told her how far the slab's bulk extended below the surface. Scraping with the spade, Catherine cleared most of the surface soil away, allowing her to lever the rock from its earthy grip. The stone removed she hefted it to a pile of pebbles and rocks at the end of the vegetable garden to be. Her fingers were sore. Splinters from the spade handle had penetrated into her palms and blisters stood out from the skin on the pads of her hands. The sun had begun to dip in the sky. Please, God, she prayed silently, let it be time to leave the fields for vespers and, more importantly, after the church service, a meal.

"Laborare est orare," the Abbess had said. "To work is to pray," and had ordered Catherine to work in the fields. It was not her normal daily pastime, but she supposed she had brought it on herself. A sour attitude and her thanklessness for the temporary home provided to her had led her to incur

the displeasure of the Abbess. She could not remember the whole of the lengthy lecture delivered by the Abbess who forced her to kneel on the stone flagging throughout, but “Laborare est orare,” she had been told would remind her of the need for purity in thought, word and deed, which, she decided, was wrong. All day she had stood outside and, on reflection, concluded she had very few pure thoughts at all. In fact most of them verged very much on the blasphemous. It was as well the Abbess was not able to read minds as well as the novice’s scrawled Latin.

The spade went in again, again it struck rock and her hand sliding down the rough-hewn handle gathered more splinters as trophies of Laborare est orare. Catherine threw the spade across the part-dug patch and sat down on the warm earth, her back against the pile of stones she had excavated. Closing her eyes, she allowed her muscles to finally relax. Stopping work was sure to bring her before the Abbess; some nearby tattletale would be quick to note her inactivity and report Catherine’s shortcomings. After her failure at labour they would lock her in a cell, and in this weather the protection of stone walls from the wind seemed most attractive.

“You have been with us...?” the Abbess paused expecting Catherine kneeling before her to provide her with the answer.

“Three months,” Catherine sullenly replied.

“Yes. And you repay our kindness and care of you like this and contrive to be disruptive. Why, Catherine, why?” the Abbess enquired.

“I have told you I am not...”

The Abbess cut her off. “Yes, not part of this order, I know. Not that line again, please, Catherine. It is becoming a little tedious, and you cannot deny the fact that this order has held out the hand of friendship to you, given you a home and, if you would allow it, a purpose in life. Catherine, what do you want?” The Abbess waited but no reply came. “Should I turn you out of the abbey, free you as you perceive it? Where would you go? You are penniless; you would starve soon enough. You have to accept that the only home for you is here, with us. Where do you think you could go? Accept us and accept your life.”

Catherine continued to stare sulkily in front of her. “How do I know I have nowhere to go?”

“Well it sounds as if the world of men may have destroyed your life. I have sent letters at your request, and we must await the replies. For the moment, Catherine, accept what the Lord has given to you: a good and

productive life. Now, I am sure you have lots to think about and I propose you do so over the next few days. Go to your cell and remain there, then come back and see me and let me hear your thoughts.” The Abbess finished and Catherine hid a smile: no more digging.

Catherine lay on the hard bed and stared up at the whitewashed ceiling above her. It felt good to lie still. Outside she could still hear the noise of work around the abbey: the creak of the cart carrying firewood to the warming room, she knew, was drawn by the stooped form of Sister Agatha. It reminded her of the hard work required of the nuns. Distant kitchen noises met her ears, as did the pungent aroma of cooking as it began an assault on her, reminding her of an urgent need to feed her rebelling stomach. Catherine turned on her side, away from the window, away from the abbey, away from the inhabitants and stared fixedly at the wall. Should she give in? Should she make this her home? No, it was not her home, but then her home, Assingham, had been destroyed and everyone she knew slain. Probably her father was dead too for she had heard no word from him yet, but there was still time; she just had to wait.

Richard was still in London, based chiefly in his new house in Chapel Street. His talent for intrigue and information had not gone unnoticed by Derby and Richard was now attached to his household, the Earl feeling that it was wise to know for whom Richard Fitzwarren was working. So Richard continued to buy and supply information for his new masters. His activities also allowed him to make enquiries on behalf of people that Mary Tudor would most wholeheartedly disapprove of.

Jack turned the letter over in his hand and then tossed it back on the table, where it had already lain for eight weeks. It was from Richard to Peter de Bernay. The contents he could only guess at, and he had been instructed to deliver it when he returned Peter’s daughter to her father. Richard wrongly assumed she would be expected, unaware that Jack had never delivered his last letter to Derby’s man but instead had let it fall into Hal’s grubby paw. However, even if that letter had made it, the message it contained for Peter de Bernay regarding the safety of his wife could never have been delivered. Catherine’s father had been involved in one of the few skirmishes with Northumberland’s men and was numbered amongst those who lost their lives.

Jack had found plenty to occupy himself to avoid taking Catherine back to Assingham; it was a task that appealed not at all. He knew he would eventually have to go, but not today. Jack delayed the journey until the letter was twelve weeks old, and only then did he find himself at the gates of St Agnes's.

He was aware of the cold morning air, heavily laden with damp, which had already soaked into his riding cloak causing it to hang even heavier on his shoulders. Jack was still aware of Dan's words hinting that there was some mystery surrounding Richard. What it was he couldn't guess at. His mother, he knew, had gone to the Abbey, but he had never known the woman and had never cared to find out anything about her. He would enquire after her this time. She had been a part of his father's household and perhaps she could tell him something about his family that he didn't know.

The abbey was in a quiet valley recess outside the village of Marsden and Jack could see its towering church spire for a long distance before he reached the main door.

"Well here goes, Jack," he said to himself and dismounted at the gate.

His presence was announced to the Abbess and he didn't have to wait long until he was admitted to her private quarters. Bowing after he entered, he kissed her ring and then rising said, "It is good to see you again."

She grinned a little toothlessly. Leading him to a chair beside the fire she bade him sit while she busied herself pouring wine.

The lady saw no need to run through time-honoured pleasantries. "I can find little reason for you to come calling other than the lady you so kindly, if a little hurriedly," her tone was acid, "left with us."

Jack, who had been settling down for some general conversation, which he could use to steer round to the subject he was interested in, was a little taken back by her bluntness.

"You'd be right," he replied, unable to think of anything else to say on the moment. "Richard wishes me to take her back to Assingham."

The Abbess paused while he took a drink and pretended not to notice the grimace on his face produced by the crude beverage. "Ah yes, your brother. We had no chance to talk when you were here last. Tell me about him. Believe me, goings on here are mundane to say the least. You left in such a hurry last time I was left only with questions." Wriggling her shoulders she settled back into the chair.

“You were left with only with questions! I think it’s me who has the questions,” Jack said. “My mother came here in...”

The Abbess interrupted. “I knew Marie very well. We were friends, she and I, close friends. I was saddened when she died last year.”

“Last year!” was all Jack said.

“Yes. Why? Did you want to see her? Left it a bit late didn’t you?” the Abbess said with deliberate cruelty.

“It looks like I did,” Jack sighed.

“Why? What did you want to know? We were friends; perhaps I can help,” the woman prompted eagerly.

“I wouldn’t have thought so,” Jack said.

“Don’t be so worried. What have you to fear from me? Nothing you say can be heard outside these walls. Satisfy my curiosity.” Jack still did not look like he wanted to share his thoughts. Sighing she continued, “She remembered your brother, Richard. Of course he was a babe then.”

“That was when Marie was Eleanor’s waiting lady, before I was born.” He was a little curious, but his voice bore still an edge of resentment.

The Abbess ignored it. “No, no, it was after you were born. She kept Marie with her until she was brought to bed of Richard.”

Jack sat forward.

“I thought he was older then me?” Jack said a bit shocked by this revelation.

“Where did you get that from? You’re the elder by a year and a half.”

Jack sat back in the chair; it was of no matter really he supposed.

“So how do you find Richard then?”

Jack’s eyes narrowed at her direct question. “Why do you want to know?” he snapped back.

“Idle curiosity, I told you. I suppose there could be nothing but discord between you. Richard has reasons to resent you, and you have plenty yourself against that family,” she sighed shaking her head. “He told me that you were not easy company, and I can see why.”

Jack’s confusion stopped him speaking. The Abbess took it as acceptance of her words and continued, “What will you do now?”

“What do you mean? You’ve seen Richard? When? Where?” Jack was now bolt upright.

“He came to see Marie, a month or so ago, I suppose. I find it hard to keep track of time. He wanted to make sure that when you came here you

would find out the truth, Jack. He charged me with that task as Marie was dead. He doesn't feel that he could tell you himself."

"Tell me? What is it I don't know?" Jack leant forward.

"Oh I'll tell you, sure enough, and for no other reason than someone else won't. Just still yourself, Jack, and shush; it's not a time for you to talk." She stopped, considering carefully how to continue. "Marie was young; Eleanor was beautiful, though she found herself fat with her first born, Peter. William turned himself to Marie. Eleanor knew but it suited her well then that he leave her alone and he did. Eleanor was brought to bed of Peter. It was William's first son, his heir and he worshipped the child and mother. Marie found then she was pregnant, and although she hid it as long as she could, Eleanor found out and would have got rid of her, but William says that no child of his would be thrown out on the world alone, and so she stayed. By then Eleanor was pregnant again and Marie gave birth a month before Eleanor was brought to bed of you. Now shush, Jack, and listen!" Her voice raised and commandingly, stilled his words. "Mortally ill she was and they feared for her very life, but she recovered a little. She hated Marie for her bastard was still in the house and William would not get rid of it. Eleanor said it was an affront against God and she could never be well again while it was under her roof. They fought. Eleanor continued to state she was too ill to leave her room and stayed there. Your father saw then that she was not in danger of her life, but had made it appear so to get her way with him. William was mad, and indeed got rid of the bairn, but not Marie's. No, he sent Eleanor's babe to his brother's house and placed Marie's in the cradle. There was little difference then. You were a little smaller being a month younger and Eleanor had hardly seen her child so long had she lain in bed. The only ones who knew were the priest and Marie. The priest, poor man, pressed his conscience terribly for what he had done. Eleanor recovered right enough and took the babe in the cradle as her own. Marie always believed that William intended to reverse his deed, but the stupid man had never considered that, and as soon as Eleanor accepted Marie's child as her own it was too late. Marie was well pleased with the arrangement and Eleanor did not mind her presence now that she thought the bastard was gone. Eleanor fell pregnant again; this time she was brought to bed of Richard. So, as you see, you are the eldest. Marie's only mistake was to mention it to William. He had forgotten it in his own mind, acted as if it had never happened, and he was terrified someone else would find out.

He set Eleanor against Marie, which wasn't hard. Before she knew it, she was here. Her child stayed where William had placed him, and you, well you know where you remained."

Jack was sagging against the arm of the chair.

"So you see after Eleanor's first born Peter died," she was smiling, "Marie's bastard son, who, by all accounts I have heard, is marred by Marie's sin, is accepted as William's heir. And you, Eleanor's lost child, are equally coloured by William's sin."

"And Richard knows this?" he managed at last.

"Of course." Her words were a little sharp. "Why else would he come to see me? He wanted the same as you will want now. Proof. And I have none. There is only my own word, which is worth little, and as I told him, I will not speak outside these walls. So, knowing the truth is of little help."

"How does he know?" Jack's face was ashen.

"I don't know, but such family deeds as William committed have a habit of returning to haunt the living." She looked closely at him, but his eyes were unfocused and he did not see her.

"I don't know whether to believe you," he said at last, still pale.

"Why not? Why should I lie? If I were you I should be asking myself what your brother is likely to do," she said quietly.

"Hah," Jack choked. "Which one would that be? I seem to have a few to choose from."

"One that is heir one that would be and one that can never be," she said quietly.

Jack turned his eyes sharply on her. "Are you saying that is why Richard was here? Does he intend to make himself heir over Robert?"

"That is not what I said." She was smiling again.

Jack stood, his temper risen too far for him to sit still. "Tell me, is that why my brother keeps me at his side, so he can remove Robert and make himself Fitzwarren's heir?"

She did not recoil from the outburst, but her face hardened. "Don't walk back into the world with that conviction. It doesn't seem likely does it. Otherwise he would not have bid me tell you truth. I don't know what is in your brother's mind any more than you do, so don't judge him on your own presumptions."

Jack dropped back into his chair, head in his hands, "Jesus, how can all this be?"

“Quite simply, unfortunately.” The sight of him saddened her, all this trouble wrought on him by deeds long since past. “I knew your mother and I can tell you something which may cheer you. For a start she didn’t name you Robert, no that was William who insisted on naming the child after his father. No, she named you John for her brother. Smile John Fitzwarren, for that is your name. And if any of that family ever saw you who remembered Eleanor, they would know you for a son of hers. All the others were coloured for William, but not you,” she said.

Jack was the only man to have got unbelievably drunk at St Agnes’s since the masons had finished laying the stones. She supplied him with the means and left him to take what solace he could in it. Catherine was forgotten. Told swiftly by the Abbess that she was to be escorted back to Assingham, she was left all night unable to sleep, in her room, denied the chance to ask questions.

The ride to Assingham was one that Jack could never remember; his thoughts were too confused. He paid little attention to the route they travelled and even less to the girl who rode next to him. He was eager only for one thing: to deposit his charge at Assingham and return to find his brother. He made the pace cruel. Arrival at Assingham was not the end of his problems. There they found two men who were holding the place, awaiting the steward of Peter de Bernay’s brother who had taken over the manor on his brother’s death. Didn’t they know? The manor had been overrun when Northumberland tried to take the crown and by all accounts all were slain, yes even the lady and her daughter. The master had died in a run in with Northumberland’s troops as he fought to put Mary on the throne. There was no one left. If they wanted to wait until the steward came they could, but he wasn’t expected for another few weeks. They could lodge at the village.

Jack knew he couldn’t leave her there. He was going to London; he was going to talk to Richard and the unwanted burden joggling beside him was his brother’s problem as well. He would have to take her with him.

“Stop. Stop please...” Catherine wailed.

God, was she never going to shut up! Jack yanked the reins of her horse, drawing it level with his own. “We’ll stop when we find somewhere. You don’t want to spend the night by the side of the road do you?”

“But it hurts,” Catherine begged.

“Freezing to death by the side of the road’ll hurt a damn sight more. Now come on.” Jack pulled the reins again, forcing her horse to keep pace with him.

Then the rain started.

Catherine slammed the door of the room they had rented for the night and turned on her companion. “What the Hell are you doing? You have no idea where you are going to take me, have you, no idea at all? We should have stopped at Assingham it would have only taken a small while to sort things out.”

The girl did not understand that he could not have left her at Assingham, did not comprehend that they thought her dead and that the estate now belonged to another relative.

“Come and sit down over here.” He patted the seat in the snug near the fire.

“I’ll light a fire, we’ll have something to eat and I will try to put your mind at rest.” Jack busied himself building a fire while Catherine stalked moodily around the room.

It was typical of most inn accommodation. It had a low ceiling and a floor that meandered from the horizontal with a mind of its own, a bed and no other furniture, but with the luxury of a fire in one corner. Catherine sat on the edge of the bed in the chilling room and watched Jack light the fire. She did know him and yet she knew little about him. She had assumed he was part of Judith’s household at Hazeldene, and in some form or other was a friend, or had been directed by one to help her escape from Assingham. There had been little said when they had taken her to the Abbey. She had been too afraid, too shocked and her thoughts had been her own. Now she was not so sure about him. He would tell her nothing about Assingham or Hazeldene or her father or Judith, and had ignored all her questions. The jacket he wore was plain; once of good quality it could now only be described as serviceable. Her assessment of the boots he wore was the same. Possibly he was a retainer, or a minor officer in a household, but the sword that now lay on the floor next to him as he added more wood to the flames twinkled exquisitely in the glare from the fire. The hilt was both jewelled and engraved and did not fit with the man she had thought of as a stable hand at Hazeldene.

There was a knock at the door. Jack looked sternly across the room at Catherine and gestured to her to remain seated while he collected the tray of food that was waiting outside.

Kicking the door shut with the heel of his boot, he turned back with the tray, "Come and join me by the fire and have some wine and food." He knew Catherine must be hungry; neither of them had eaten all day.

He stepped over to Catherine, lowered the tray so she could see the steaming plates of food, hoping to tempt her. "Please come and have some food with me. Let's call a truce." He smiled and Catherine involuntarily found herself smiling back. His manner was so easy there seemed nothing of the villain in him.

Jack pushed the tray away and poured two goodly measures of wine from the jug, holding one out to Catherine. "Feel better?" he enquired settling down on the floor in front of the fire, using his cloak as a pillow. It was a planned move. Catherine had the seat and sat over him; the reverse seating arrangements might have intimidated the girl further. Anyway, women in his experience liked having men lying at their feet.

"Yes, thank you," Catherine said.

"Please trust me." Jack propped himself up on one elbow and reached out to lay his hand on hers. "While you are with me no harm will come to you. I will look after you," he assured her. Catherine met his gaze and found herself smiling back against her deepest intention. "I will take you to London and Richard will help you, I promise."

Catherine jerked her hand back. "Richard? Not Edward's cousin?" There was terror in her eyes. After that the conversation was loud and short. It ended when Jack left the room slamming the door behind him.

It wasn't his bloody fault was it? No. If anyone was to blame for the lady's current situation it was probably his brother. Hands on the balustrade Jack's eyes roamed the room of the inn below; it was several minutes before he realised where his eyes had come to rest. His mouth twitched to a smile. The girl, sensing the eyes on her from above, was smiling invitingly up at him. Pulling her shoulders back, her breasts, only partly cupped within her bodice, added to the invitation, which played across her face.

Jack was busy when Catherine, her temper cooled, went in search of her escort. She found him in the ingle nook, buried beneath a woman who was sat astride him, skirts round her waist and bodice slowly, but surely on its way to meet them. Catherine watched, her mouth hard. If Jack saw her he

gave no sign; turning she stomped heavily on the boards and returned to the room.

He did not knock when he returned. He threw his jacket onto the bed. His shirt was untied, the neck wide and hanging lopsided, exposing a shoulder. "You wanted me, my lady?"

From his words she knew that he was more than a little drunk. "Get out. Get out," Catherine yelled, but Jack did not. He was tired, and this room was warm having had the fire lit.

Catherine slept, fully dressed, on the bed, while Jack sprawled out on the floor in front of the fire, not retiring to another room as he had promised.

Catherine felt helpless. She had only one course left to her: to leave the inn and go home. She lay awake for a long time; life in a nunnery had taught her patience if nothing else. Her small bag of possessions lay at the end of the bed; all she had to do was move three steps to the door that she knew was not locked and then make her escape through the sleeping inn. Summoning all of her courage she moved slowly to the end of the bed; her eyes had adjusted to the dark and through the gloom she could make out the bag. Carefully she lifted it from the floor. Looking over to the fire she could see no movement. Keeping eyes on where Jack slept, Catherine took the remaining three steps to the door – and walked straight into the man she wished to avoid. He quickly snared both her wrists. Catherine dropped her bag and struggled backwards against his grasp.

"Let go, let go!" She struggled harder, but the grip was of iron. Unable to move her hands, she kicked out wildly in the dark. The first one missed his body and she nearly fell but the second one connected, drawing an exclamation. Spurred on by this success she persisted. Jack received three good kicks before he decided that enough was enough.

"Stop it or you will force me to...Ah!" Kick number four was enough. If she made any more bloody noise the whole inn would be awake. Releasing one wrist he hit her on the side of the temple, not hard, but enough, he judged, to stop her. The blow connected and Catherine reeled from the impact. Jack still held one wrist and caught her before she hit the floor. Stunned by the blow, her body sagged against him. Picking her up, Jack dropped her none too gently on the bed. It creaked ominously at the impact. Seating himself on the edge, he examined one shin, which still stung with the force of her kicks. Jack's eyebrows raised; the bitch had drawn blood. He had tried to help, and if this was the thanks he got, well sod her. The girl

on the bed groaned...Jack smiled evilly. I hope your head hurts in the morning, he thought.

A partial truce was called the following morning. Jack was too good humoured for her to continue to be angry with him. "Look," he'd said, and showed her the cut on his leg. "You're a bloody vixen, woman." At that she had grinned and the remainder of the journey was easier.

Nancy herself was no help. "And what would you be doing here, you no good bleeding thief?" Nancy had no love for him since his mother had died and Hal had spirited away most of her meagre possessions before his brother's wife could lay claim to them.

"Ah now, Nance woman, don't be so..." Hal tried.

"I'll be what I bloody like! You're not coming through my door. Anyway he's out." Nancy referred to his brother, Will.

"I don't want Will. I've come to see you," Hal said leaning against the doorway, which was blocked by the wide woman his brother had wed.

"Now why would that be, eh? If it's money you can take your tail and be off." Nancy's white fists were balled on her wide hips.

"It's money, Nancy, aye," Hal grinned and held out his hand with four coins in it. Nancy looked from him to the money suspiciously.

"These are yours; I won't tell Will either. I want to know where a friend of mine is, that's all," Hal told her. Nancy, nodding, told him to come back in a week.

When he returned he was disappointed. Nancy stowed the coins under her apron, but all she told him was that Fitzwarren had been at Framlingham. From there he had come to London, but where she did not know. One of Derby's grooms had remembered a fight at Framlingham or some such incident.

Hal need not, as it turned out, have worried about trying to find Richard. One man, now resident at his master's new house at Chapel Street, wasted no time in finding Hal and informing him where he could find his master. Richard would regret his decision to keep Alan by his side, rather than sending him to Burton with Jack.

Chapter Sixteen

Catherine had never been to London and was shocked by the city. Street after street and still they had not reached the middle. She had also expected the centre to be an open expanse of land, like most towns and villages had, and where the markets were conducted. As they rode through the busy streets, she was not sure that Londoners adhered to this tradition. Dotted around were stalls poking out from the fronts of houses and crammed into alleyways; business, it appeared, was conducted all over London, and loudly, judging by some of the arguing merchants they had passed. Jack had taken the reins to her horse, and after obtaining the directions he needed, led her deftly through the mire that was London, leaving her free to gaze about her.

Jack grinned as he continued to answer the barrage of questions she threw his way. He was grudgingly coming to admit a liking for the little brown mouse he had brought from St Agnes's. She had a shrewd mind and a ready wit, which went some way to compensating her for a plain appearance. When she confessed how she had intercepted his brother's messages, it had told him that within that flat chest must be a fair degree of courage. By the time they reached London he felt thoroughly sorry for any part he had played in the destruction of her life. Catherine de Bernay, now believed dead, could be in a far worse position than she believed. Jack had persuaded Catherine that, whether she liked it or not, the only person he could think of who could help her was Richard.

Jack had not seen his brother for three months maybe longer. Yes, he recalled, it had been in July then and it was October now.

"Aye, well I see you're all right then, eh?" Jack said.

The unexpectedness of his visitor furrowed Richard's brow for a moment only. "So, Jack, and how fares Lincolnshire then? Harvest in, stored and safe, your toil at an end, the folk poor but happy?"

"What would you know? You've never been there." Jack's voice was hard.

"And have little intention of ever being there often, but I see it suits you well. Perhaps you have farming stock in you?" Richard said in the same

light tone.

Jack rounded the table. "You know what stock I have in me. We'll play no more games, my deceitful younger brother, will we? You've made a fool of me enough."

"So you finally got around to going to the abbey. I was wondering when you were going to turn up." The smile had fallen from Richard's face.

"A lady of holy orders told me you had been visiting." Jack spat the words at his brother. "Why didn't you tell me, all the time you knew and you never told me, why?"

"If you want the truth I couldn't find it in myself to tell you. I only found out when we were at Hazeldene. I was sure if I told you that it would send you into a fit of temper and straight off to demand what was yours as of right," Richard paused, "and by the look of you I was right about the fit of temper. So now you know everything, what do you propose to do?" Richard said folding his arms.

"It's not what I propose to do; it is what you propose to do that concerns me," Jack retorted.

"I propose to do exactly nothing." Richard's words were clear and quiet.

"You liar!"

Richard had been watching closely, and when Jack made his move, the other was already moving himself to duck under Jack's swing and pull him off balance. A fine-tipped blade with firelight playing along its length appeared in Richard's hand.

Jack stood still. "You would as well."

There was an almost imperceptible nod from Richard.

"Let us take this thread up later, Jack. Cool your blood before I let it for you," Richard advised.

"Tonight you will let me know your mind," Jack said.

Richard's eyebrows raised a fraction. "Now get out, Jack."

A slight sneer rested on Jack's face. "Not before I leave you with a gift: de Bernay's daughter. She is believed to be most wholly dead and is a little at a loss as to what to do." Jack spared no detail in informing his brother just what a miserable wretch he had made of Catherine de Bernay.

Catherine, who was waiting outside the closed door with Dan, heard an obviously heated conversation, though the actual words exchanged were lost to her.

Jack now emerged, and without a word, he swiftly propelled Catherine through the door and closed it behind her.

Jack turned to Dan. "Dan, I want to talk to you, and you'll not say no." Dan looked guardedly at Jack. "You know what I'm talking about don't you. And I think you decided to leave her at St Agnes's because you thought there might be a chance of me finding out as well, because you couldn't tell me could you? That cur in there would cut your bloody throat wouldn't he?"

"Aye, lad, I did hope, and I don't know if it is for better or for worse that you know," Dan said sighing.

Richard heard their retreating footsteps on the flags so he knew he was alone with Catherine. He was preparing himself for what was to come: how to answer the expected volley of questions and accusations and the inadequate and unwanted answers he would give.

Catherine dropped, rather heavily, into the offered chair, her hands shaking so fiercely that she dared not take the glass he placed in front of her.

"I am most sorry about the circumstances of your recent life, Madam; it was not by my design that you should be here now," Richard said simply and evenly.

Catherine turned to look at him. He could see in the depths of her brown eyes the temper and anger that would soon grow to triumph over the fear she felt.

"Could you tell me, Sir, where my father is?" Catherine asked, her voice unsteady.

Richard answered her with a simple statement of fact. "Your father, my lady, appears to be dead and has been since you were interned in the Abbey. His lands and manor at Assingham have passed to a kinsman, I know not whom. I know only what Jack has just told me. More I will endeavour to find out. You are, in simple terms, believed dead. It was assumed you had perished when the manor was taken by Northumberland's supporters. Do not doubt me, my dear, for it was I who identified your body as one of those in the courtyard. It seemed a good idea at the time because it meant that no one would set themselves to look for you. The hope was to return you to your father unharmed. However, circumstances are such that it cannot be."

Richard was sorry at his choice of tableware. He neatly side-stepped the expensive Italian glass as it was hurled at him, to smash against the stone

wall, a stain spreading slowly down the stone from its ruby contents.

“You, your family...Judith and Edward...they were our friends we trusted you.”

“Did we not do as friends would have done? We took you to a place of safety away from Assingham; if you had stayed there you would surely have perished.” Richard’s voice held the edge of patience tried.

“I do not, nor ever have trusted you,” Catherine yelled at him. “I don’t want to stay here with you.”

“Where exactly will you go? This is London. Do you have friends or family here?”

Catherine answered by avoiding his eyes and mutely shaking her head.

“As I thought. So, I will do what I can. Meanwhile consider yourself my guest, and do your best not to try my patience any further or you will find yourself on the street.”

Richard walked past and left her. From the courtyard he looked back through the window to the room. Catherine was still clearly visible where he had left her, leaning over the table one hand to her eyes. Sighing deeply he turned to leave. He would find somewhere for her to lodge and try and contact her family, as he had promised he would.

Jack ducked under the low-beamed door of the Fox and made his way to the table near the fire where Dan waited for him.

“So you knew all the time and you said nothing,” Jack got straight to the point.

Dan avoided Jack’s eyes. “Aye. What she told you is true; that was how William took his revenge on Eleanor for wanting her own way with him.”

“So what I was told at St Agnes’s was true. That changes a few things, don’t you think?” Jack said dryly.

“Like what?” Dan exclaimed.

“He treats me like shit and all the time he knew I was his blood brother. He knew that Robert was no heir, yet he kept me by his damned side so he could take what isn’t his. Now don’t tell me you don’t know that as well,” Jack retorted hotly.

“If that’s what you think, I’ll leave you now.” Dan stood. “I’ll talk to you but not on those terms.”

“Oh for God’s sake, Dan, sit down,” Jack sighed. “Sit. Maybe you can change what I think, but I doubt it.”

Dan sat. "It's a natural enough thing to think, I suppose. Richard only knew for sure when we were at Hazeldene. He suspected before, but until then he had no proof of it."

"He can prove it!" Jack's eyes met Dan's again over the table.

"Oh, aye, he can now. So what are you going to do Jack, eh? Are you going to crash in and demand he give you what he has to prove it and then go and tell William Fitzwarren you're his rightful heir, eh? You'll live not long enough to step inside the house. Or are you going to take your bloody anger out on Richard for not sharing this with you, when there's nothing he can do? Or are you just going to drown yourself in this bloody vinegar for a few days and hope someone's going to tell you what to do?" Dan was fairly angry himself.

"This is not my fault; don't act as if it is," Jack said roughly.

"Aye, right now you think you're fair blameless, but Richard always had a hard time trusting you. Ask yourself if he were wrong in that. I see you admit that, eh? Well now you know," Dan growled.

"All right, what would you have me do then?" Jack said hotly.

"Nothing. There's nothing to do right now is there?" Dan said with finality.

"What? You expect me to just sit here and let him treat me like this, and wait until he finally gets round to taking Robert's place? If that's your advice, keep it," Jack snapped.

"He isn't going to take Robert's place," Dan replied patiently.

Jack eyed him carefully. "I have no reason to believe that."

"Yes you do. It's what you want to do, isn't it? All you can see is what should have been yours and you want it, you want to go and take it? Well tell me why Richard hasn't done just that himself. He can prove Robert is not the heir, prove that he is. He can do all that, but only if you're bloody well dead. You're not dead, are you Jack? And I can tell you master thinks right highly of keeping you in one piece; that's why he wanted you to leave him. He believes you will find out and get yourself killed, either trying to take what you believe is yours, or trying to kill him, or even by Robert's hand if he finds out who you are," Dan said. "And from the sound of what happened today you've fair started on that course."

"So he never intends to act on this?" Jack said in disbelief.

"He wants nothing from his family. To him they're dead and he'll make his own way. He has a score to settle with Robert, but that's all. He fears it,

Jack. He went to the abbey to make sure you found out the truth. If he wanted to set himself up as heir he would have made damned sure you never found out the truth wouldn't he?" Dan reasoned.

"What do you mean he fears it?" Jack said confused.

"Aye, such as this could catch hold of you tight, it could drive your life for you. Look at what it's done to you already," Dan said. "When he found out we'd left that girl at the abbey he went there himself. He were right mad at me, I can tell you. I persuaded him it was time you knew the truth, but he couldn't tell you himself, so he arranged for the abbess to tell you when you collected the woman. I've been expecting you to come charging through the gates for weeks."

"Why didn't he tell me himself?" Jack demanded.

"He couldn't."

"I think I'll ask him for myself. I'm seeing him later on tonight." Jack was still unconvinced.

"I wouldn't if I was you; you've nothing to gain right now, Jack," Dan warned.

As it was, Jack could not ask Richard; on his return to Chapel Street, he found his brother gone, the destination unknown.

Richard's destination was Ashridge in Buckinghamshire. He made the journey slowly, walking for most of the time next to a horse that the vendor had assured him would butcher well. Over the animal's hollowed back were loosely tied two bundles of possessions and his wares: ribbons, buttons and trinkets.

Elizabeth resided at Ashridge in a state of constant agitation, always on the edge of conspiracy, with Renard trying to find concrete evidence against her. More by luck than by design, she managed to distance herself far enough to evade implication. Although currently she was allowed her freedom, she knew her mail was intercepted and that spies had infiltrated the ranks of her household. Richard's visits, if discovered, could be enough to orchestrate her downfall.

"My lady," Kate said. "There is a peddler downstairs. Cook has made him a meal in the kitchens. Why do you not come and see what he sells; you may enjoy the distraction."

Elizabeth's eyes narrowed. "A peddler you say, Kate."

“Indeed, my lady,” Kate replied. “Today I believe he only has wares for yourself.”

“Has he?” Elizabeth’s heart raced. “Perhaps you are right, Kate.”

Elizabeth went to the coffer at the end of her bed and lifted the lid, retrieving a dozen coins from her dwindling supply. Then she thought better of her rash action and replaced all but one.

The pair made their way to the kitchen where, as Kate had rightly said, there was a peddler seated at the servants’ table. Stepping inside Kate soundlessly closed the door behind them.

“We have but a few moments. I am constantly watched and they have changed my household so often I know no longer who is spying on me,” Elizabeth said hurriedly.

“Well, it appears your sister will wed, the date they imply is next July; Renard will feel a little safer when the Queen is married,” Richard supplied.

“Not much. He will feel safe only when my head rolls from the block,” Elizabeth said bluntly.

“News comes to my ears that Sir Thomas Wyatt is planning action in January. He has much support against those who oppose the wedding. He is proposing to march on the city, and has organised risings in other areas to coincide with his action. I do not know yet if he proposes to champion your cause, for if he does and fails...” Richard’s words trailed off.

“I know well what sister Mary will do then. Do you think he may succeed?” Elizabeth enquired.

“I doubt it. He can raise a fair force to fight with him, but I do not think it sufficient to take London, and that is what he would have to do, take and hold the city. That is no mean feat,” Richard replied.

“I will make note then not to be in London at the time,” Elizabeth said smiling.

“Renard, I believe, is changing tack. He cannot, it seems, persuade the Queen to dispense with you, and so he is now trying to persuade the Church to intervene on his side.” Richard paused for a mouthful of food. “He has papers, false or true I do not know, relating to the circumstances of your birth. He hopes to use them to have you removed by Parliament as rightful heir.”

“There is nothing new in those rumours,” Elizabeth responded.

“Ah, but what is new is that someone is going to try and use them to press home their cause. This approach may gain sympathy from the Queen. Her hatred of your mother is well known. If Renard is careful, he may be able to place a sufficiently damning case to make Parliament move against you. This will not happen immediately, and times do change. If by then Mary is married to Philip and conceives, Parliament may be persuaded it has little use for you,” Richard said.

“Harsh words,” Elizabeth replied. “Is there anything else you can tell me? News is not a commodity to which I have access any more.”

“There is still a move to marry you to Courtenay. It is seen that this would provide England with an English heir if Mary leaves no issue,” Richard told her.

“Yes, we know this. And the Earl of Devon, has he been involved yet in making advances for my hand?” Elizabeth asked.

“No, in fact he has been especially quiet on the matter. I believe he fears the wind may change and you are too dangerous a lady to be linked with, despite his personal ambition, although I think you will receive a visit to discuss the matter in the near future,” Richard said.

“He is no man at all. Have you met him?” Elizabeth said.

Richard smiled. “Confinement in the Tower for most of his life has left him...”

“A complete fool!” Elizabeth finished for him. “The man has no wit and even less intelligence.”

“Despite that they believe you will agree, as it will secure your position. However, should you produce an heir, the crown would miss you out and go to your issue, with the Earl as protector,” Richard said.

There was a light tap on the kitchen door, Kate’s signal that they would not be alone for much longer. Richard produced some coloured ribbons and passed them to his future Queen.

“He what!” Robert’s eyes were wide and David winced, involuntarily backing a step away from his master.

“Like I said, Sir...” David tried feebly.

“Shut up, man, I heard you. Get out. I want to know where he goes and what he does.” David obeyed, eager to be no longer in Robert Fitzwarren’s presence.

“What will you do now?” Harry asked stupidly. He was seated by the fire, doublet undone, streaks of grease gracing his shirt front.

“What can I do? He’s bloody ingratiated himself with Mary, a loyal and obedient servant. Not exactly easy to have him killed, is it? No one would have noticed or cared before if one more piece of snivelling filth bled to death. But now my clever little brother has Mary’s favour, and is at court. Would you believe it! She knows not what a viper she has near her.”

“Well maybe a word here or there would help; your father knows Cecil doesn’t he?”

“Don’t be bloody stupid. Richard would see that coming.” Robert was livid, sure now that his brother was just waiting for the right moment to trade the information he held over him. Jesus, at court! He could hardly believe it; the shit should be dead by now.

“Apparently he’s there with that bastard he calls his brother. I tell you, Robert, that is one man I wish to see at my feet,” Harry prattled.

“Who’s with him?” Richard snapped.

“Jack. You remember, he turned on me on Harlsey Moor, stole my bloody horse and felled me from behind just as I was about to...”

“Jack! Harry, stop. Who the hell is Jack?” Robert demanded.

“I told you before.” Harry was more than a little put out. “Jack was reared in my father’s house, some bastard of your father’s. Didn’t you know?” Robert shook his head and Harry continued, “Well, as I said he’s with Richard now, and the man has the audacity to call that low life brother.” Harry’s voice droned on but Robert was no longer listening. The circle had been completed, and it had been completed first by Richard it seemed. The man, Jack, that Harry spoke of, if he was with Richard, calling him his brother, he had to be, had to be the one. God damn his father. The child should not have lived. He should have thrown the wretch in the moat.

Christmas came and went, and was little marked at the manor in Lincolnshire. A quantity more wine than usual was consumed and Jack lost more than his weekly quota of money at cards, but there was little else to mark the season. Richard had neither been seen nor heard from. Jack had waited at Chapel Street after his brother’s disappearance and then had moodily taken himself back to Lincolnshire. There he waited until he could stand it no longer. When the first snows of December finally melted he made a cold and unpleasant journey to London, and that was where he

found Richard. But he was beyond Jack's reach, being temporarily resident at the Queen's court.

Elizabeth, as she had told Richard she would, remained at Ashridge in Buckinghamshire, and as predicted trouble broke soon after Christmas. So soon was it after the festive season that Sir Thomas Wyatt had an unforeseen advantage on his hands. His substantial band marched quickly, its ranks ever increasing, on London. As Richard predicated he had no mean feat ahead of him. To succeed Wyatt would have to take and hold the city, forcing Mary into submission. Elizabeth was safer than Richard had hoped, for although any rising against Mary would implicate Elizabeth, Wyatt's main cry was "no to the Spanish Wedding." It would have been far more dangerous had the cry been "Elizabeth for Queen," a sentiment that luckily remained largely unvoiced behind the more immediate goal of preventing an alliance with Spain.

The Queen paced up and down, a rosary hanging from her hands, her face pale and drawn. The captain of the guard entered the room. He was still performing a bow to Her Majesty when she accosted him for news. The rebels it appeared could not cross the river and had backtracked to cross via Richmond bridge, which had given his men valuable time to fortify strategic points within the city. The captain was sure that his men would triumph easily over the rabble, composed largely as it was of peasants, poorly armed and lacking training. Despite this, plans were being made to get the Queen and her immediate household out of London, using the river should the need arise.

Wyatt's attack had been timed to coincide with risings in Kent, the West Midlands and the Welsh Borders, but from reports coming in these had failed to kindle the passion and support they had gathered in London.

Dan heard the noise and moved to the courtyard gate. The streets of London were empty, doors were closed, shutters pulled tight and valuables stashed beneath floors and stairs. The screaming and pounding on the gate continued. Dan slid the small shutter in the gate open and peered out, looking straight into Catherine's wide eyes.

"Let me in!" Catherine shrieked.

Looking past her, he could see the first of the mob rounding the corner at the end of the street. Dan slid the bolts back and opened the wicket gate.

Catherine tripped on the step, but Dan, eager to close the breach, hauled her through the narrow gap. She ended up on her knees in the courtyard.

“Arms!” Dan raised the alarm. “Jesus.” Dan grabbed the girl’s arm and pulled her to her feet, propelling her towards the house. “I didn’t know they were so close.” Catherine ran up the steps straight into Jack who, running to obey the call, was still buckling on his sword belt and not looking where he was going.

“Jack, take her in and look after her; they are upon us,” Dan yelled. The noise was increasing behind him.

“Come on.” Jack took her arm, pulling her into the house and heeling the door closed behind him. They ran down the hall and then through a low arched stone doorway, twisting down a set of narrow steps to emerge in the cellar. A door in the corner of the cellar took them back to the same level as the house and they emerged in the stables.

“We can take horses from here and get out of London if we need to.” Jack peered through the slatted stable wall to see what was happening outside. All seemed quiet. “I thought I’d seen the last of you,” he said, moving quickly to the other side of the stable to peer again through the slits.

Dan burst through the door. “Get her out, Jack. They are through the gate and I’m not losing good men to that rabble; we’re going to pull back. Go,” he ordered disappearing.

“Shit!” Jack saddled two horses in record time. “Here, take the reins. When I open the gate ride like hell...”

Catherine struggled to clamber into the saddle.

“Ah, sweet Jesus! Are you sent to kill us both? Come on, get up.” Jack threw her up into the saddle and they sped from the stable and into the still empty streets behind the house.

Jack pulled the horses up when they were outside the city. Catherine sat shivering on top of the lathered horse.

“I didn’t know what to do; it all happened so quickly. I didn’t know... and then I saw them coming round the corner...” Catherine wailed.

“Slow down, woman, we will worry about the circumstances of our meeting later. Right now we are going to concentrate on getting somewhere a little safer and a lot warmer.” Jack’s mind raced trying to think of where to move from here. They were on the north road and there would be a good chance of running into more of the rabble making their way to London if they stayed with this route. Allowing the horses a few minutes to recover,

they then followed the road for only a short distance before Jack pulled off and continued their journey cross-country.

The Queen continued to receive information when it became available and spent the rest of the time in her private chapel, variously pacing, wringing her hands and praying to the lady.

“What news?”

Three armed men followed Thomas Howard, Duke of Norfolk, into the hall. He knelt before the Queen.

“They advance no further. There is hand to hand fighting in the streets but they cannot press their way past the mounted men, Your Majesty.”

“Praise Mary,” the Queen said and kissed the rosary cross.

Richard moved to address the lesser men who had also entered at the back of the room, fresh returned from the fight. “You think the Queen will triumph?” Richard enquired.

“The day will be ours. They are poorly equipped and badly organised. Two groups we fell upon were concerned only with looting. Wyatt’s band is chiefly comprised of beggars, thieves and vagabonds. When they sense the full danger they are in, or have filled their packs, they’ll leave and we shall chase them down,” the man replied.

“You think they will advance any further?” Richard enquired.

“No. We have managed to make a stand and hold all the central roads; they’ll not manage to pass us. The aim,” he gestured with his arm, “is to hold tonight and then come the morn we will push them back to Richmond Bridge. We hope to fall on them as they slow to cross the river.”

“A good plan.” Richard looked over at the Queen. The terror and depression had lifted on hearing the news and she looked now as if she was approaching hysteria. Her shoulders were not broad enough to stand under the weight of such responsibility. She would shrug it off with relief onto a husband, as soon as she was able.

Meanwhile the half sister of her most gracious majesty was playing cards with Kate at Ashridge.

“I know not what had happened but sure as the Devil, something’s afoot,”

Kate said, turning over a three of clubs. “Mary’s guard was strengthened this morn when another troop of men arrived,” she added.

“I know. I have seen them myself, and I believe you have already told me five times at least. I should be flattered, should I not, that they take such pains to secure my whereabouts,” Elizabeth said cynically.

“It must be that Wyatt has ridden against the Queen,” Kate said. The debate, consisting in the main of wild conjecture, as they had no hard facts to go on, was into its third hour. “Think, my lady, he may triumph. Remember the people oppose Mary, particularly now she plans to marry Philip of Spain.”

“Richard said he thought Wyatt would fail, and until I hear otherwise I will trust his judgement. To do anything else will give Renard the final excuse to persuade Mary to have my head,” Elizabeth said.

“I would like to be a fly on the wall now in the palace,” said Kate maliciously. “I would bet my best dress the old cow is scared to the bone.”

“Hold.” Jack slung the reins into Catherine’s hands. “Right, we’ll stop here tonight. Get yourself down. Davey here will care for the horses.”

Catherine, getting no help to dismount, slithered inelegantly from the saddle and followed Jack to the door. It was dark now, the yard of the inn lit only slightly by the moon.

“Follow me and stay close,” he instructed and they crossed the room and rapidly ascended the low stairs to a room appointed to them above. Jack sat on the bed and looked closely at her for the first time that day.

“Now pray sit and tell me what I have done to deserve this. Spare no detail; I am an eager listener,” he said dropping wet boots on the floor.

Catherine told Jack briefly that she had been lodging in a house, not far from Chapel Street, while Richard contacted her family. The house had been overrun by the mob. The occupants had escaped in a covered wagon, but the driver eventually abandoned his charges and fled. She had found her way then to the house in Chapel Street.

“You were lucky Dan let you in,” Jack observed.

“My thanks are his,” Catherine said sincerely.

“So, what are we to do now?” Jack asked.

“I don’t want to go back to London,” Catherine said quickly.

“A return at the moment is not an option. Richard has the contacts, not I.”

Jack sighed. He could take her back to the abbey, if she would go, or he could take her to the Lincolnshire manor, but that was not a place for a

woman.

“Where would you wish to go, Catherine?”

“I don’t know,” she simply replied.

“Have you had any news from your family?” Jack tried.

Catherine shook her head. “Richard told me he had written and would send word when they replied, but I have heard nothing yet. They still believe me dead I think, and who wants me resurrecting from the grave to be get in the way of a nice inheritance?”

Her tone told him that Catherine was aware now of the seriousness of her situation, and he nodded in grim acceptance of her words.

“You are not much help. Here...” Jack passed her a cup of beer.

There was a long pause before Catherine spoke again. “Richard told me you were a knight. Surely you must know somewhere I could lodge as a guest.” Catherine did not continue; Jack was choking on his beer. “What?” she said annoyed. Jack was still laughing loudly. “Tell me?” Catherine demanded loudly. “Tell me what I said that is so funny?”

“Do I look like a knight?” he finally managed. She did not reply. More seriously he said, “Tell me what you see, lady.”

“I see...” she paused. “This is stupid. What are you trying to say? Just tell me, what was it I said?”

Jack sighed. “I’m no knight. I am landless, penniless and nobody’s heir. I am quite simply no one.”

“That sounds like someone feeling pity for themselves. I am well acquainted with that feeling,” Catherine said bitinglly.

Jack looked up sharply, about to tell her that she had no idea how it felt, then realised before he broke the silence that she probably did. “I am Richard’s brother,” he said simply; it seemed like confession enough.

“Well, I can be forgiven if I had not noted the family resemblance,” Catherine said, still annoyed. “Go on, there is more to it I guess than that.”

“We are of a pair you and I,” Jack said. “We have and yet we have not.”

“And what’s that supposed to mean? Don’t talk in riddles. If you have something to say speak it; do not make me guess at the edges of it.” Catherine was in no mood for riddles.

Her directness shocked him. “All right, lady, I shall tell you, and perhaps you can tell me what to do, for I know not.”

Catherine listened in silence and Jack told the story he last revealed to Felix with the addition of the information he had recently received from the

Abbess.

“Well, I think that we are, as you say, a pair, and both of us need recompense from one man. I will place myself where you best think I can meet him,” Catherine said quietly. “Where will you go?”

Jack didn’t answer.

“Where would you go if I was not with you?” Catherine persisted.

“To Richard’s manor at Burton,” he replied at last.

“Well I should wait there for him. Send word to your brother that I am safe outside London and request he continues to try and contact my family,” she said.

“I cannot take you there,” Jack protested.

“Why not?” Catherine said.

“It is not a place with pretty rooms and waiting ladies. It’s where Richard trains and keeps his men. It is little more than a soldiers’ barracks. I could not close my eyes there and guarantee your safety,” Jack said.

“Well it seems to me, it matters not where I am. At the moment no one can guarantee my safety, and I think you can fairly say I am coping without the assistance of a waiting lady.” Her point made she waited for his reply.

“My lady,” he said ceremoniously from the floor, arms spread wide. “I am at your service, which still, I would like to point out, does not solve our present problem.”

“Take me to Burton. You know the way and you are known there. Surely if you are with me I can come to no harm,” Catherine continued persuasively.

Jack grunted. It was a fair comment and only a day’s ride. He looked again at Catherine, the beginnings of an idea forming in his mind.

They encountered few people when they arrived at Burton. It was too dark and cold for all the men to be out, and those on watch recognised Jack and let him pass without moving from their sheltered posts. Jack handed the horses to Froggy who approached them in the courtyard. He said a few words that Catherine could not hear as the wind quickly whipped them away. Jack avoided the hall and quickly took Catherine to his rooms via the kitchen route.

Only three of the men could have seen Catherine at Hazeldene and he could deal with them. He would tell the rest of them that she was Richard’s niece; whether they believed it or not he didn’t care. The threat would be

clear: touch her, go too near her, harass her and you'll have the Devil himself to pay. Jack hoped it would keep her in one piece.

With Catherine deposited in a bedchamber and left safely behind a locked door, Jack went in search of Mat who knew Catherine from her visits to Hazeldene.

"The fighting was bad then?" Mat said to Jack.

"We fought our way from the house. I had no choice but to bring her with me," Jack said.

"What's she like?" asked Mat.

"A pain in the arse," Jack replied.

Mat grinned. "You should get on well together, having something in common like."

Jack ignored Mat's comment. "So guess who's got the bloody job of making sure she stays in one piece."

"Good luck to you," Mat laughed.

Jack leaned across the table. "No, it will be a joint effort, Mat. Pass the word that she's too precious for horseplay. Richard will start lopping limbs off if it's otherwise."

"And how do you propose I do that?" Mat enquired.

"Tell them she's Richard's niece..." A smiled crossed Jack's face, "No... tell them she's his sister; that'll stop anyone going near her," Jack said. She was another whose life Richard had utterly screwed up, so she might as well join the family proper.

"His sister!" Mat laughed. "I'd like to see master's face when he finds out about this. But I agree, it'll stop the lads going within spitting distance of her. His sister..." Mat continued to chuckle.

Chapter Seventeen

A letter had been dispatched by rider to Catherine's lodgings in London, bearing the lady's word that she was safe outside the city. A second brief note was sent to Richard at Jack's insistence, telling him that she awaited news from him at Burton. Meanwhile, Catherine remained within Jack's rooms, reading what books there were, occasionally playing chess and arguing. Convinced that Richard would send for her as soon as the city was safe, Jack forbade her to leave the rooms, having reservations about Catherine's continued security. There was in fact little else to do; the weather was foul. Gales hugged the manor for a week and rain tried to penetrate every room. In some places it had a goodly degree of success.

Jack found Catherine seated by the fire as he had known he would. "I hope this is good news," he said passing her a parchment newly arrived from London.

"So do I. Another week in here and I shall go mad." She tore the seal without looking up. "My chess has improved, though."

"Well, that wouldn't have taken much," Jack said hovering expectantly, hoping that very soon he would be rid of his responsibility.

Catherine frowned. The note was a brief one from Richard, bidding her to remain where she was until he sent for her. There was a post script for Jack telling him in no uncertain terms what he thought of his actions in taking Catherine to Burton.

"Well come on," Jack said, his impatience showing as usual.

Catherine looked sheepishly up at him, holding out the parchment. "Here," she handed over the sheet. "It appears your brother likes us not at all on our own, and combined, well..."

Jack took the letter and read for himself. "What!" he exclaimed, looking down at her accusingly. "You said he would send for you! Sweet Mary, I knew coming here was a fool's idea."

"Well, I thought he would. You know him damn sight better than I do. Don't lay the blame on me," Catherine replied angrily. "Do you think I want to spend any longer locked in here?"

“What the hell am I going to do now? Richard in a bad mood is not good. I told you he would object to you coming here. What the hell am I going to do now?”

Robert tapped his fingers idly on the desk edge. This was news indeed, but how to use it? He could not confront Richard; if he did that he risked being undone. No, it had to be someone else. But how? Richard had been seen visiting Elizabeth’s house twice. He knew about the time Richard had spent at Thomas Seymour’s house, and how he had taken the blame for that man’s assault on the young princess. That Richard had kept in touch with Elizabeth surprised him a little, but the reasons for his actions could be none other than his brother’s own treasonous intentions. All he had to do was prove it, and prove it to the right man. Harry had been right: his father did know Cecil, but that was of little use. Cecil had fallen rapidly from favour and his father was becoming useless as his invalidity increased. He also had a secret worry that his father, if he saw his younger son’s success, may revel in it to Robert’s detriment.

That left Renard. He did not know the man but it was clear that he was pushing hard for Mary to consign her sister to the block. Others, like Gardiner, were still erring on the side of caution, arguing for the marriage of Elizabeth to Courtenay. Robert cared little, but wondered if Renard would be interested in a man, professed as loyal to the crown, who sought out Elizabeth’s company.

Elizabeth’s household was preparing to move again. It was a regular occurrence and the packing arrangements were well practised, the disruption just part of everyday life.

She had received a correspondence, delayed somewhat, from Wyatt who had urged her to move to the more fortifiable residence at Donnington. His messenger, the Earl of Bedford’s son no less, had arrived with a flourish born of his unswerving belief that Wyatt would triumph over Mary, and proudly feeling he was bringing Elizabeth the first news of her succession. Elizabeth greeted him less than enthusiastically, dismayed by this direct contact, and had damned Wyatt for his carelessness. Her sense of foreboding had been proved right when a letter arrived, summoning her to Mary’s court. It seemed that, as Elizabeth had feared, Mary was well aware of the communication.

Elizabeth had taken to her bed, convinced at last that she was undone. Wyatt had unwittingly linked her solidly to the uprising, despite her attempts to keep her head low. She was convinced Mary would condemn her to the Tower and shortly after take her head. Kate could not shake her melancholy and urged her to go to London and state her innocence before Mary. To do otherwise was to confirm her guilt; it was her only chance. Elizabeth refused, and lay in bed succumbing to fear for her life. Elizabeth remained in bed and pleaded illness as her reason for ignoring the summons, which had arrived from the Privy Council on 29th January.

“Please, Elizabeth, you have ignored them for long enough. They will not tolerate it much longer. Ride to London and plead your case with Mary,” Kate begged; she was beside herself now.

“I dare not,” Elizabeth wailed from beneath the bed sheets. “God that I had advisors to tell me how to act.”

“We have waited long enough; we must make our own moves. By stopping in here you are just playing into the Council’s hand and confirming your guilt.” Kate was close to tears brought on by days of fruitless reasoning, cajoling, threatening and arguing. She had slept little since the summons to court. Leaving the princess, she made her way to the kitchen and found Alice running to meet her, skirts held high and a look of terror on her face.

“Alice slow down. What news?” Kate said taking the girl’s shoulders.

“A delegation from the Queen, my lady, to see Mistress Elizabeth. They have just ridden in. Lord Effingham is with them and they demand an audience.”

Kate, too weary for hysterics herself, squared her shoulders and sighed. “I will see them, Alice. Go to the kitchen and make sure cook is aware of our new guests.” Alice turned to obey. “And, Alice, find out how much wine we have left. I intend to serve a quantity to our guests tonight.”

Kate rose from her curtsy. Lord Effingham came forward from the delegation, who were still standing in their travelling clothes in the hall. “I insist on seeing my niece immediately,” he said without pleasantries.

“She is greatly unwell, my lord, and has been in bed these three weeks past,” Kate said, eyes downcast, the picture of obedience.

“Go and see your lady and tell her that the time for excuses is long past. I demand an audience. Tell her if she will not see me I will personally have the door to her bedchamber broken down,” Lord Effingham said.

Kate bobbed a departing curtsy. "I will go and see how she fares, my lord."

"My God, they've come to convey me to the Tower." Elizabeth's face was stricken.

Kate was taking no more and bullied Elizabeth to dress. "I have ordered wine for your guests, told them you have just woken and will see them presently. You will apologise for your delay and insist they stay at Ashridge as your honoured guests. Strength, Elizabeth, take courage; all will be well. Your illness was a little convenient following on so soon after Wyatt's failure and suspicions have been roused. You must play your part well, lady," Kate said. "You can do it."

Elizabeth, forced finally into a corner, came out fighting. She did indeed play her part with brilliance. Lord Effingham, on leaving his audience with her, announced to his son that he believed Elizabeth would remain a thorn in Mary's side for not much longer at all. A messenger was dispatched to London and Mary stating that the princess was indeed in ill health, and perhaps even mortally so.

Elizabeth had turned the tables brilliantly on Effingham. After their second meeting he conceded that she was too ill to travel and said she should remain at Ashridge until more fully recovered. Elizabeth insisted that she must go to London and see Mary. She told him it was her dearest wish, punctuated with so much coughing that Lording Effingham had backed away from the bed. He was convinced she wished to make her peace with Mary and that this could be her dying wish. Elizabeth smiled widely when he was gone, feeling she had managed to reassert a small degree of control over the situation. While she continued to remain at death's door, preparations for her departure took three days to complete and the journey to London, a scant thirty miles, took a further eleven, so slowly did they have to travel. Of her illness there was no doubt. Following two more reports from Effingham there was a feeling that Elizabeth was not long for this mortal world. Mary, devout and pious, convinced herself that Elizabeth must be afforded a final opportunity to save her soul and sent a priest to accompany her on her journey. Elizabeth was counting heavily on softening Mary.

Jack's bad temper continued, and for two more days he avoided Catherine's company, which wasn't difficult as Catherine remained

confined in the room he had appointed to her. If she thought his moodiness was solely directed at her, she was wrong: Jack's thoughts were on his brother, and the seemingly impossible task of confronting him. He was in London now, of that Jack was fairly sure, but he had no way of contacting him. He was therefore forced to wait until his brother decided he would come to Jack, and when that would be, Jack did not know. Since Framlingham, some seven months ago, they had met only once. Since then he had, Jack was sure, made efforts to avoid another meeting.

Jack stood now in the open doorway of the room Catherine occupied. "So have you recovered your humour then?" She spoke from where she sat on the floor, idly turning a bishop in her hands from the chess set.

Jack moved in and closed the door. "I have a plan to avoid my brother's wrath. On hearing of his return I shall pen him a neat note and leave it pinned to the door. I intend to be elsewhere when he reads it."

"I thought you wanted to see him," Catherine commented.

"Oh I do, but on my own terms, not on his, for once," Jack said seating himself on the end of the bed. "Anyway, less of my errant brother, for I can do little about him at the moment. My present problem is yourself, sweet lady." Jack eyed her critically. He was sure no one would be believe there was a woman's body beneath the clothes she wore, in fact he was not entirely sure there was. The appearance was of a gangly youth whose limbs had not yet filled. A goodly covering of grime had removed any polish there might have been.

"It appears we are most wholly stuck with each other, until I hear otherwise, and you cannot stay up here any longer."

"I tried to tell you that before."

"I know, the persuasion, however, for my change of mind has come from elsewhere." Jack smiled. "You are ruining my reputation as a rogue and a womaniser."

"How?" Catherine was not following his reasoning.

"It's thought I am keeping you up here for my own lewd pleasure." Jack smiled further as he saw revulsion on her face. "So, as you can see, if I'm not careful they'll be trying to force me to share you soon." Catherine said nothing.

"Oh don't look so struck." Jack moved to sit opposite her. "I am, as it happens, teasing you, which is nothing compared to what those beggars down there'll give you, believe me. However, they believe that you are

Richard's sister, and you can be fairly sure fear of him will keep their hands off you."

"Sister! Is that the best you could come up with?" Catherine said horrified.

"Welcome to the family," Jack said grinning.

"And you are only fairly sure that will keep me safe?" Catherine asked, concern in her voice.

Jack smiled maliciously. "How fast can you run?"

Elizabeth's fears were finally quietened when she was installed with her household at Whitehall. However, she resided there under heavy guard, a precaution for her safety, Lord Effingham said lightly. Mary's plans to wed were now taking shape; Phillip had arrived in England and the wedding was scheduled for July. The Queen was, on the advice of her council, taking great pains in the time available to finally quash all traces of the rebellion. Wyatt was in the Tower and as yet had not implicated Elizabeth in his plotting. Courtenay, as Richard had predicted, was also residing there; Wyatt had obviously felt he should not share his final months alone. His implication of Courtenay frightened her yet further. She knew well that the means existed within the confines of the Tower to extract any convenient confession and she waited for the moment when he would break, and sign the document that would include her as co-conspirator in a plot to overthrow Mary. The Council, not finished with Wyatt, had yet to examine Elizabeth for her version of events. She knew their summons would indicate that Wyatt had finally been forced to make a confession. There was nothing to do but wait.

At the end of March, Dan rode into the manor courtyard, where he encountered Mat.

"Where's the master then?" Mat asked, taking the reins as Dan dropped from the saddle.

"At court if you please," Dan replied.

"Too much of the bloody good life! He'll come back fat and with manners," Mat quipped.

"Well manners wouldn't be such a bad thing would they?" Dan said. "Where's Jack? I have a message for him."

"In yard round back with Catherine," Mat said.

Catherine! God, was she still here? Dan was sure Jack would have found somewhere more suitable for her by now.

Jack was leaning over the fence, a foot on the lower rail, watching as Martin and Marc swung swords at each other. "For the Lord's sake, Martin, I've seen women in the bedroom fight better than you," Jack jibed.

Martin took the bait. His face reddened. He turned to Jack, a retort forming on his lips, allowing Marc to kick him neatly in the back of the knee.

Martin was sent into the mud and found a sword pointing threateningly at his chest.

"You bastard," Martin cursed Jack.

"The lesson is: do not get distracted, and do not lose your temper." Jack grinned as Marc pulled Martin from the mud.

"Well, Mat said I'd find you here," Dan said coming to stand next to Jack.

"Dan! What news from London?" Jack said clapping Dan on the back.

"Master's still there. I don't know what he is up to and I don't want to know. Wyatt's in the Tower and not long for this world. Mary's got Elizabeth under armed guard at Whitehall and my money says she'll not be long behind Wyatt." Dan pushed himself away from the fence to look past Jack at the figure that stood on his left. His head close to Jack's, he said quietly, and with some passion, "Have you lost your bloody mind? What's she doing here? You must be mad."

"Not mad, Dan. Believe me, I had no choice." Jack looked around him; there were too many about now. "I will tell you later, now hush."

"You still look a might too clean over there, Jack. Get your arse in here." It was Martin, still mad at Jack.

"You've had one good lesson for today; I am sure you don't want a second," Jack said lightly.

"You'll not be giving me no lessons! Get in here. I'll show the lassie there what you are," Martin gestured at Catherine. "With your fancy clothes and your fine manners, you're no man, that's for sure."

"Well looks like you've annoyed him," Dan said, then added, "Mind you, he has a point: you are starting to look these days a little too well fed and little too well dressed to be standing around tilt yards."

Jack turned to look at Dan, a mock hurt expression on his face and a wounded tone in his voice. "Sir, you offend me."

“Go on, teach him a lesson; I could do with a laugh,” Dan said quietly and grinned.

With a flourish, Jack unwound his cloak from his shoulders and dumped it on Catherine. “Hold that, and stay with Dan.” Agilely vaulting the fence he turned his attention to the muddy Martin.

Martin grinned back at him. “You’re not going to forget this, Jack.” His sword was drawn and he began to circle Jack. Jack examined his blade and with his sleeve carefully removed some dirt he found there, a look of mild annoyance on his face.

“Come on, man,” Martin urged. Jack had not made any move. He stood, weight on one foot, sword pointed down, watching Martin and smiling.

“I’m ready, whenever you want to start,” Jack said idly.

“Go on, Martin, flatten him,” Marc urged from the sidelines.

Catherine had moved up to stand next to Dan. “So how are you, Catherine?” Dan said, his eyes still on the players in the ring, and then to Martin, “It’s getting dark. Move your arse or we’ll be here all night.”

Martin finally made his move. Stepping forward agilely, he swung at Jack, who adeptly shifted his weight to his other foot and side-stepped the swing, which whistled menacingly but harmlessly through the air.

Martin swore. “Fancy footwork will not help you.” He swung again and this time Jack’s blade engaged. Catherine watched, hardly breathing. The venom in Martin’s strokes looked too real for her liking. Jack continued to deftly parry Martin’s advances, but made no attack of his own.

“You bloody milksop, have you no balls?” Martin jibed as his attack continued.

“I think,” said Jack lightly, “I have had enough of your insults.”

Catherine did not see the blade move. The speed of Jack’s next moves astonished her. In two steps and four lightning-fast flashes of steel, Jack’s erstwhile assailant stood disarmed, and with a sword-point at his throat. He moved slowly back as Jack continued to walk towards him. Jack grinned and lowered his sword, then turned back to Dan and Catherine. Martin, obviously not finished, decided on wrestling as his next track, so determined was he to get Jack in the mud. He lunged. Jack caught his arm around his neck and deposited him with a rib-jarring impact in the mud in front of him. “Lesson two: don’t be so bloody predictable,” Jack said.

“One of these days they’ll have you by foul means or fair,” Dan said laughing.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Eighteen

Richard had finally come to see them at Whitehall. Kate was thankful and hoped the news he brought was good. He was with Elizabeth while she placed herself nervously in the corridor beyond the room as lookout. It was not long before she heard the door close quietly behind her. She turned to smile at Richard.

“Kate,” he said, taking her hand, “Elizabeth is lucky to have you with her.”

“You brought good news I hope,” Kate said.

“No doubt she will tell you soon, but I have a favour to ask now,” he told her, walking her down the corridor.

“If there is anything...”

He lifted his fingers to quieten her. “I know you would do anything; there is no need to say it. There are a limited number of people you can trust, and I even fewer.” He led her to a window and pointed to a house in the distance. “You see that attic room with the light in it?”

“Yes, I can clearly see it,” Kate said looking at the distant window.

“When it is lit as it is tonight I will meet you in the garden near the briar gate at ten of the clock. You can get there?” he asked.

Kate nodded. “Yes, I am allowed into the small garden, but it is heavily guarded. How do you propose to get in and out?”

“I shall be as of the night, worry not,” Richard said and turned to leave.

Kate, still standing at the window, looked again at the distant attic room, its dim light clearly visible across the housetops. How had he known they could see it from this window? Kate watched him leave and then hurried back to her mistress, keen to learn the news. Elizabeth stood arms folded, a look of consternation on her face.

“Well?” was all Kate said as she closed the door.

“Ah, not much, Kate. It appears Wyatt has not confessed as required just yet, but that is probably a matter of time only. Renard and Bishop Gardiner are still pressing Mary to condemn me to the Tower, but the Council feels there is not sufficient evidence. I am safe here for the time being. I will be requested to attend before the Queen’s Council as I expected, probably after

Wyatt has been executed and there is no danger of his final words being changed,” Elizabeth said.

“Should you petition Mary again for a hearing?” Kate said.

“She didn’t reply to my last letter. However, I can but try. It might be that I can get my case heard before Mary’s Council is set about me,” Elizabeth said.

Kate was disappointed. She had hoped to hear that Mary had finally granted Elizabeth a private audience so she could personally put her case before her sister.

Richard left the way he had come, climbing easily over the ivy-clad wall. It was much decayed beneath the vegetation affording easy hand and footholds. After peering into the quiet street below for some moments, he dropped noiselessly to the ground.

“Feet!” yelled Jack exasperated. Marc altered his stance obligingly, moving his boots back to where they were supposed to be.

“Oh no, I think I shall die. Please save me, Jack,” Dan said, backing off from Marc’s erratic blows.

“Stop taking the piss, Dan,” Jack said, and then, “Feet, for the love of God, do you take no notice of me?”

Jack moved to stand near Catherine, picking his own sword up from where it was propped against the fence.

“Is it heavy?” Catherine enquired.

“What this?” said Jack turning the sword over expertly in his hand. “No, not particularly. Here.” He turned the weapon and handed it to Catherine.

When Catherine wound her hand round the grip and Jack let go, the sword plunged to the ground, so unready was she for the weight of it. Jack made it look feather-light. There was a chorus of laughter from the other side of the ring. Catherine flushed.

“That wasn’t funny,” she complained.

“Sorry,” he said half heatedly.

“Is this a private game or can anyone join in?” There was no mistaking Richard’s silken voice. “Dan, if you please.” He threw his riding cloak at him and Dan obeyed the unspoken order and left. “The rest of you can get out of here as well.”

“Richard! So you’ve finally decided to turn up,” Jack said.

Richard ignored Jack; he slowly removed his gloves and laid them on the fence post. "I am pleased to find the lady suitably entertained."

Catherine stood still, eyes wildly staring at Richard, the sword dropped at her feet.

"Pick it up," Richard said conversationally. He stood in front of her, arms crossed. Catherine did not move. "The first lesson you will learn is that you do as I say." Richard drew his own sword. "The second is, that contrary to popular belief, I do have some family loyalties. Now," the point hovered in front of her face, "pick it up."

Catherine stooped to obey.

"Richard no!" Jack protested, "Don't do this."

"Stay out of this, Jack. Patience I know is not one of your virtues, and the lady is not all she seems," Richard said. Then, addressing Catherine, "Are you?"

There was silence; Jack forgot to breathe.

"Now, let us see what master Jack has been teaching you shall we,"

Richard said. "You do not move? Perhaps you feel I have some advantage over you?" He placed his sword in the mud, point down and stepped back.

"Now does that even things up at little? I am unarmed. You have the advantage."

"Richard, no!" Jack knew where this was leading. Richard ignored him.

"Come on, Catherine, you have no liking for me and I give you the opportunity to strike at me. Why do you not take it? This is what you've waited for is it not?" Richard continued. "Perhaps you think Jack will come to your rescue, do your work for you? Well, I hate to disappoint you there, but he won't."

Catherine shook with rage. "You are a bastard," she hissed.

"No, I think you'll find that is what they call Jack, not me," he said in the same light tone.

"Ignore him," Jack shouted.

Tightening the grip on the hilt, rage swelling within her, knowing she would lose, still she swung the blade true at his head. Her expression changed to one of surprise. She heard Jack yelling, felt the impact of steel on steel jarring her right shoulder and the sword flew from her grip.

"Oh dear," Richard said. "You missed."

"What do you want?" Catherine yelled.

“A bloody explanation, lady, and make it a good one.” Richard’s sword point was pressed against her shoulder.

“Richard, it’s my fault she’s here. You have no argument with her,” Jack tried.

“Leave it, Jack. She knows what I am talking about, don’t you?” Richard pressed the point a little harder into her shoulder but she kept her ground. “Well?”

“I don’t have to answer to you,” Catherine yelled. The steel point was getting close to her skin.

“Perhaps, but under the circumstances I think I have the upper hand, don’t you. Now tell me what you’ve done or believe me...”

“Back off Richard. Now!” Jack leapt over the fence.

“Very well.” Richard did step back from Catherine, but not before he’d forced the sword’s point through the final layers of fabric and into her shoulder. Catherine screamed and dropped to her knees.

“You shit!” Jack stepped towards his brother, his intention clear.

“Do you think so? I have had enough of swordplay for one day. I believe that the lady is in need of some assistance. Do you want to argue with me while she bleeds to death?” Richard said.

Jack hesitated, then dropped to his knees in front of Catherine and pulled her unwilling hand from the bloodied shoulder. “Come on.”

Richard sheathed his sword and looked away.

Dan watched Jack, Catherine in his arms, return to the house then went to find Richard. “What the hell did you do?” Dan grabbed Richard’s arm.

“I don’t know,” Richard pulled from Dan’s grasp.

“Shall I tell you now, or shall I let you work it out for yourself when your clouded brain clears?”

“That was a hard lesson, a graver one than many of the men here have suffered at your hands,” Dan said.

“I have good reason.”

“Maybe, and if so, share it with Jack before he puts a well-deserved knife in your ribs,” Dan growled. “I might even hold you while he does it.”

“All right, go and fetch him then,” Richard snapped.

Richard’s calm reasoning had begun to dampen Jack’s murderous rage. “Ask her! Ask her who pursued her down the streets of London. It wasn’t Wyatt’s rebels, no; it was Robert’s men. Alan set her to plead at the gates

and have them opened, and they were. Fortunately, Dan didn't throw them as wide as Alan had planned, so they had to mount an attack on the walls. And you, dear brother, helped the angel who nearly killed you escape neatly from the back of the house."

Jack stood suddenly, but his brother continued. "Ask her, or ask yourself; it's all there. She likes me not, and with reason. She thinks I put her household to the sword. Alan knew, and she made a willing participant in his scheme. I am not sure yet how Robert found out where she was; that's the only piece of the puzzle I have yet to fit into place. Most inventive of my brother to use Wyatt as a cover for his own plan though, don't you think?"

Jack's face was pale.

"That you were in there then mattered not to her," Richard cruelly pointed out. "And now you know why the lady wished so much to be at Burton; she hoped to find me, and as you know I have been elsewhere, neither in London nor at Burton. She was waiting for me to come here."

Jack sat down heavily. "I don't believe you."

"Yes you do or you wouldn't be sitting there would you?" Richard said.

"But...you think she still means it?" Jack stammered. He believed his brother; it fitted too neatly together to be otherwise. Richard felt sorry for him for once.

"Judging by the fact that she lost her temper when I threatened you, I don't think she wants you dead."

"She believes she has every reason to want you dead, and, Richard, you have never done anything to change her mind. Today will not have helped any. How can I persuade her now that she was wrong?" Jack said.

"Jack," Richard caught his arm, "will you not even allow me, for once, my temper. It is something you revel in yourself often enough."

"What family loyalties did you refer to by the way?"

"The lady almost succeeded in killing you; it is not a state of affairs I found myself happy about." Richard spoke through clenched teeth; his temper had not left him. "Surprised?"

"Yes." Blue eyes stared into grey. "If that's the case, why did you force me from your presence at knife point?"

Richard dropped his gaze to his hands. "Ask yourself what would have happened if you had stayed." He met Jack's eyes again. "I am sorry for it. Such facts as the ones you learnt need time; have I given you enough?"

“I know not. God, Richard...” Jack buried his head in his hands, “What you did today...”

Richard sighed painfully. “For you, for what might not be, for what I have not done, I will try, heaven knows why.”

From the house, Dan watched them talk. They were perched on the low wall of the courtyard, Jack throwing stones in the dust, finally rose and walked away from the house; Richard walked off in the opposite direction.

Separated and prey to their own thoughts, it was late evening before the pair met again. Richard was seated alone at the dais when Jack stepped up and took a seat, pulling from his pocket a deck of cards.

“Why do you try me so?” Jack asked.

“Do I?” Richard replied, raising his head to look at Jack.

He’s drunk, thought Jack, an unusual state for Richard. Perhaps the tables may turn tonight.

“Yes, you bloody do!” Jack placed the deck of cards face down. “Cut.”

“What are the stakes?” Richard enquired.

“If you get the highest card you can beat the living daylights out of me for this; however, if I draw the highest card I would like the opportunity to beat you half to death. You should have told me,” Jack said angrily.

“If I had you would have denied her the opportunity to change her mind, and I think she may.” Richard’s hand hovered over the deck. “Is she alright?”

“What do you think? No, I think we can say she has not taken it too well. Why is everything you do so bloody dramatic?” Jack said annoyed.

“A little dramatic I agree. Sorry, I was drunk,” Richard ventured.

“Were you?” Jack hadn’t realised.

“Very. Allow me some weakness. I fancied meeting neither you nor the lady sober,” Richard smiled, but with little humour.

“So to the cards, if I get the highest card...” Richard cut and held up an eight of clubs.

“A fair hand brother,” Jack said, holding up a queen of diamonds.

“I am undone. Would you like to extract your penance now? I am drunk so it probably won’t hurt so much, or shall we wait,” Richard said resignedly.

“I probably should but not tonight. Richard, promise me instead that you will tell me. I cannot make the right decisions if I don’t know all the facts,”

Jack said.

“A fair comment, alright.” Richard conceded. “Anything else?”

“No more tricks with Catherine,” Jack said.

“Ah, the Chevalier protects the lady to the last,” Richard said.

“Careful,” Jack warned.

“Sorry, yes, I will improve my behaviour,” Richard said.

“What would that be then?” said Jack. “From the wholly unacceptable to merely the unacceptable?”

“Something like that,” Richard said and grinned. Jack could, for some reason, not stop himself and smiled back. “Why, by the way, did you make the unhappy lady’s state worse by saddling her with the brand of being my sister? Was that to teach me another lesson as well by any chance?”

“Ah no. I just thought that it would keep straying hands off her. Both from fear of yourself and a worry that she might share some of your more unwelcome characteristics,” Jack said happily.

“I’ll not ask what those are.”

“Probably best not to,” agreed Jack.

“You want to know about Robert as well am I right?” Richard said levelly.

This was unexpected. Jack’s eyes narrowed.

Richard sighed. “It’s a most unhappy state; you find yourself betwixt nothing,” he opened one empty hand, “and nothing.” The other joined it. “It’s no different for me. The Lady Elizabeth has moved from legitimate to illegitimate at the stroke of a pen, the same is true of you, and there is little that can be done. Have you thought what you would do?”

Jack shook his head.

“There is only one way you can go. Legally establish yourself as heir, sue through the courts of chancery.” Richard sighed again. “You could not win. Your family are backed by too much. Such a claim would fail, and fail maybe after many years. Do you wish to wait your life out on such meagre hopes?”

“There must be something. Surely you can’t expect me to...”

Richard cut him off. “No, I cannot expect you to let it fall from your mind. Robert will track me, of that I am sure and,” a smile lit his face, “it is an encounter I most surely will enjoy.” He stopped again. “There can be only two outcomes.”

Jack looked up at that. “Aye, go on.”

“Either I shall be overcome, in which case the problems will be thine own, or...or my father’s favourite bastard will die at my feet,” Richard said evenly.

“So, as you can see, dear Jack, the chances of me becoming heir slightly outweigh your slender hopes, and on that and on me, you will have to trust.”

“What are you saying?” Jack said slowly, each word carefully delivered.

“I am saying, if I succeed, for a reckoning will come, that I can defer to you,” Richard said quietly, his eyes never leaving his brother’s.

“You mean if Robert dies you would give me all that you inherit!” Jack’s voice was incredulous, and loud.

“Do not share my intended generosity with the rest of the hall, or else I shall have them all placing suits at my door and I have only a limited stock of potential inheritance,” Richard said quickly. “As I said, on that you will have to trust me.” Then, after a lengthy pause, “Will you?”

“You give me little choice,” was the unsatisfactory reply.

Richard dropped his head into his hands, his hair fell to obscure his eyes and his voice held an edge of anguish. “Is it so hard? Trust is not based on choice or lack of it. It is belief, pure simple belief, a singular emotion that it appears neither you nor I can inspire.”

“I will...”

Richard stopped him. “Do not sully such with mere words; they assure me not at all. Actions are what you shall be judged by.”

The pair lapsed into silence, Jack’s thoughts morbidly heavy. Richard reached across, eventually clapping the other on the shoulder to revive his attention. “Let not thy thoughts be melancholy, brother. Here, drink and I will tell you a tale that will much cheer you.” Richard filled both their cups from the pitcher.

“And what would that be then?” Jack spoke again grudgingly.

“One of loyalty,” Richard said, but the words were to himself rather than for his small audience. “Marriage is the tale, who and what and where and why.” Richard smiled. “Surely you did not think I had come to Burton because I craved the country air?”

Jack smiled back. “I can fairly assume that as it would be impossible to find a creature willing to tie themselves to you, that it is not your own state of wedlock you are referring to.”

“Most wholly unfair.” Richard told Jack much that he already knew of the planned Spanish match, and the unavoidable religious split it would produce.

“So, Renard perceives that the Protestant threat is too great,” Richard concluded.

“By that I am assuming you mean Elizabeth?” Jack questioned.

“Something like that. The current grand scheme runs thus: when Northumberland set Lady Jane on the throne he did it via ‘The Devises for the Succession.’ How he got Edward to sign this is still a mystery. However, this purports to make Jane and her heirs the successors to the throne,” Richard said.

“Which would have secured Northumberland’s place. Yes, I know, but it didn’t do it, and I still haven’t quite forgiven the bastard for nearly taking us with him,” Jack said.

“Quite,” Richard said. “The facts are well known. Northumberland fell and Mary is Queen and so on. However, when Northumberland wished to secure Edward’s signature, he went to a lot of trouble and produced a lot more evidence, I suppose with the intent of using it to persuade Edward to sign. The Archbishop of York secured these documents, and I know of only part of their contents, after Edward’s signature was obtained. They contain, amongst other items, documents relating to the circumstances of Elizabeth’s birth, and Renard has a desire to use them to have her removed from the royal scene, playing at great lengths on Mary’s hatred of her mother’s successor,” Richard said.

“Anne Boleyn’s indiscretions are legendary, Henry made sure of that. There is nothing new there,” Jack observed.

“The new thing is that someone has dug out some documentary evidence. False or true, it doesn’t matter. Her parentage has been called into question and someone is prepared to use it. They are being brought south to London for that very purpose. It plays well on Mary’s fears and her hatred of Elizabeth; it might be all she needs to finally make a decision. Renard hopes so,” Richard said.

“So, for whatever reason, and I am sure you have a good one, we are to either help or hinder with the delivery of these documents,” Jack said.

“Correct, almost,” Richard answered smiling.

“Go on.”

“Renard has requested they be brought to him in London. The Archbishop of York, as you know, fell at Mary’s hand. Whether from a desire to save his own neck, I know not, but he divulged the existence and whereabouts of these papers. Renard being everywhere and anywhere became aware of them, and they are to be transported from York to London by some of his men.”

“So you want to intercept them?” Jack said slowly.

“Ah, there is a final complication,” Richard said.

“God, go on,” Jack sighed.

“Bishop Gardiner does not want Elizabeth to fall. He would much rather see her wed to his favourite, Courtenay, and for their heirs to secure an English succession should Mary fail to be brought to bed of a child. It would be more than a little inconvenient if Courtenay’s intended either lost her head or was finally barred from the throne by the curse of bastardy, wouldn’t it? Furthermore, he believes possession of these papers may persuade Elizabeth to wed,” Richard said.

“So they are here to stop the papers reaching Renard, and you are working for Gardiner?” Jack said; he had a feeling he was wrong before he had finished.

“Not quite, but almost. Some of Gardiner’s men will join me here soon, and they, with my help, are to stop them being delivered to Renard and at the same time take them to Gardiner. Who knows when they could be useful in the future. Plus, I feel that Gardiner does not entirely trust me with the task,” Richard said coldly.

Jack smiled. He thought he had finally fathomed it. “Ah, so we are to help ensure that they fall into the correct hands then?”

“An excellent observation. However, there is one final player in this little scene who also wishes to obtain the papers, and prevent them reaching either Gardiner or Renard,” Richard said.

“He’s right not to trust you. I bloody well wouldn’t. So why do you want them?” Jack said; now he had the truth of it.

“Well, despite your accusations, I do have some loyalties,” Richard said coolly.

“Ah yes, Lady Elizabeth,” Jack said. Richard had suffered at her hands, and why he still stood by her, Jack was unsure. “So you’re playing Queen against...” Jack paused “...Queen?”

“Mayhap. They are, after all, most deadly pieces,” Richard said.

“You will not survive this game for long,” Jack said wearily.

“I appreciate the dangers, if Mary knew...” Richard left the sentence unfinished.

“Can I ask but one question?” Jack ventured.

“Go on, why not,” Richard said.

“Does Elizabeth know what you do?”

“No,” Richard said.

“I thought not,” Jack said. “I am assuming you have a plan to palm them away from under Gardiner’s men’s noses without them noticing.”

“I am working on it. The fine cargo will pass this way on its way south, which is useful,” Richard said. “I have already told Renard that there is a scheme to waylay them and his own spies have told him the truth of what I said, and I have a letter from him to the courier, Henry Walgrave.”

“So, both Renard and Gardiner think you are working for them?” Jack said wearily. Richard grinned. “Tell me something: how is it that you know so much? I’ve always wondered and never asked,” Jack said carefully.

“It’s a trade I learnt a long time ago, a very long time ago.” Richard paused.

“Well, are you going to tell me or not?” Jack pressed.

Richard remained stubbornly silent.

“Patience...is not one of my virtues. Get on with it,” Jack said.

“When I was in Seymour’s household I was involved in his ring of spies and confidants. I took some pains to endear myself to them and in many cases we continue to correspond, shall we say,” Richard supplied.

“It’s a dangerous game, but you know that don’t you?”

“I have little else to use to make our way. It’s served us quite well so far. But yes, the path is becoming a little treacherous,” Richard admitted.

“Don’t you mean a little treasonous?” Jack interrupted.

“Well yes, that too, although I suppose it depends from whose side you look at it,” Richard replied.

Richard’s man sat, legs outstretched feet crossed and back against the stone wall of the sheep pen. So far his master’s quarry had not come into view; he had seen only farm wagons, a peddler accompanying a lame horse and field workers using the road briefly on their way home.

Suddenly his body stiffened and his eyes narrowed to focus on the distant sight. Slowly he uncrossed his legs and raised his chilled body from

the ground, his eyes never leaving the most distant point on the road. Rounding the stone structure he mounted the saddled horse tethered there and spurred her homeward.

Richard saw the rider speed past the posting house and discarded his hand of cards onto the table. Jack rising flipped them over; aces smiled up. "That was good timing. I have been saved from poverty again," Jack said as he rapidly collected his cloak and sword.

They headed in the opposite direction to the messenger and shortly after their horses stood side by side, blocking the road.

"You think this will work?" Jack asked uneasily.

"I have no idea," replied Richard pleasantly.

"Well, I suppose there are only two outcomes: either they stop, which would be a good thing, or..." he shifted nervously in the saddle, "they ride right over us, which would most certainly be bad."

The carriage and escort of six riders neared them. When they were at a distance where they could clearly be seen, Richard raised his hand in a signal for them to stop.

"My lord, two riders stand in our way," Captain Davis said through the carriage window. The carriage's pace had begun to slack as the driver awaited orders.

"Do they look like robbers do you think?" Henry Walgrave, Renard's man, and a lord not at all, leant from the window.

"I would doubt it. We vastly out number them and we are in the open; there is nowhere for others to be hiding," the captain replied.

"We will wait here. Ride ahead and see what they want," Walgrave ordered nervously.

The captain gave the command and the carriage drew to a halt. He rode towards the two riders, his eyes scanning the landscape to ensure that his original assessment that there were no others was correct.

"What business are you about?" Captain Davis said.

"My name is Richard Fitzwarren and I must speak with Walgrave." He rode towards the captain. "This letter proves my identity; take it to Walgrave and inform him I wish only a few minutes of his most valuable time." Richard passed the parchment to the captain who wheeled his horse round and returned to the carriage.

The captain gestured for Richard to approach the carriage and he left Jack standing in the middle of the road facing the carriage. Jack watched

the brief exchange through the open carriage window and wondered idly what lies Richard was using.

“Is he deceived?” Jack enquired quietly as Richard arrived back.

“Most assuredly. He believes I am Renard’s man,” Richard replied.

“Come, we have to be part of an ambush party very shortly.” They turned their horses and headed cross-country, following in the steps of the messenger.

When they arrived at Burton manor the courtyard was the scene of smooth, controlled activity; filled with Gardiner’s men, who had ridden from London to join Fitzwarren. Their leader, a man Jack had no liking for, an Edward de Lacon, was there now as they prepared to leave.

“Sir, you are just in time. Your man reports that Walgrave approaches and we are off to spring the trap,” he announced.

“Excellent,” announced Richard exuberantly. “Come, Jack, let us fall on the bishop like the hounds on the fox.”

Twelve men waited in the sanctuary afforded by the trees. The carriage took longer to arrive than it should have as Henry Walgrave had made an unscheduled stop. For his safety, he had changed places with Captain Davis. The riders fell on the band, hoods pulled up, kerchief’s hiding their faces.

Richard led his men in on one side of the coach whilst Edward brought his companions swooping down, yelling and screaming on the other.

Richard uncharacteristically did not play a leading part in the highway robbery, taking up a stance to the rear of the coach his sword point bidding two of Captain Davis’s men to remain where they were. Edward, whooping, held aloft a leather bag, the signal that the deed was done, and as quickly as they had descended, they disappeared into the veiled shelter of the forest, leaving the men to regroup and speed the carriage from the ambush.

Back at Burton, Edward tipped the contents from the leather pouch onto the table. Three documents of rectangular folded parchment fell from within, all sealed.

“It appears that you have been successful, Sir,” Richard said, idly reaching for one of the documents.

“Ah, no Sir. These are sealed and will remain so, so there is no chance of the villainy they contain escaping.” Edward scooped the papers from the table.

“Surely you have some curiosity as to what they may tell us,” Richard said slyly.

“None whatsoever. They contain only slanderous lies and tales of deceit,” Edward de Lacon replied indignantly.

“Well the answer is simple then,” Richard said. “Burn them. I lay mine own fire at your disposal.”

“You have no appreciation of what we have done here tonight, have you, and I will not be goaded into opening these letters for you to slaver over,” Edward said

“Come on, man, we’d all enjoy a bit of entertainment.” Richard received an affirmative murmur from the men in the hall. He turned back to Edward. “Come now, man, we have worked with you; share the spoils.”

“You, Sir, are a dangerous and most treacherous wretch. Lord knows what use you would put these papers to. I can see now why you were not most wholly trusted, and I care no longer to remain in your company,” Edward replied, signaling his men to leave.

“You do not trust my company now you have your precious letters! I am most deeply hurt,” Richard said a wounded note in his voice. “I craved a little scandal and some entertainment, the same as any other poor soul. Come now humor us before you leave. Can I be the only curious cat?”

Edward sensed the challenge in Richard’s words as he was supposed to and detected the slight slur in his speech. “Sir, you are drunk. I will not continue this conversation.” Walgrave’s cargo protectively held under his arm, Edward left. He wished very much to be on the road now he had his prize. He might not have been so hasty if he had known that his departure was also in the mind of the man who had goaded him.

Jack sidled up to Richard. “Do you think he will open those letters and we will be soon undone?”

Richard seated himself on the end of the table, one foot idly swinging as he considered the question. “No, I rely on the fact that when the discovery is made they cannot complain too loudly as they risk implication as traitors. Gardiner can complain to no one unless he implicates himself as a traitor, and Renard will still receive from me what he will hopefully believe are the originals that the Bishop of York held.”

“I do hope you are right,” Jack said over cheerfully.

Richard broke the seal with his knife; he sat cross-legged in front of the fire in the silent privacy of his own room, the door locked against unwanted intrusions. The first packet revealed a single sheet of parchment. Holding it

to the flame's light, he scanned the contents. It was a neatly penned confession in a clerk's hand, detailing the lewd acts committed between this tortured lover and Anne Boleyn. There was nothing in the text of any significance. It was a standard extracted confession statement prepared without the confessor's participation and with the sole purpose of having him sign it. He turned the page over. The neat text continued to fill the reverse, at the bottom was the signature. The blotted, scraped pen strokes clashed wildly with the clerk's tidy and calmly prepared sentences. He stared at the signature. It was a long dead agony now that stared at him from the page and he could feel nothing for that tormented soul. He discarded the paper on the floor and turned to the next. He had to admit mild surprise at the second confession; he had certainly never heard of its existence. It was written in the hand of Anne Boleyn. He read the document thoughtfully.

On the 11th day of the month of September I did lie with him again in mine own bed. Between this time and finding myself with child I did not lie with my husband nor any other man.

The document rambled through dates and events, but it seemed to lack passion and rage, both of which were Mistress Boleyn's most defining characteristics, and yet there was something about it that would not allow him to dismiss it as a fake. Its very existence had surprised him. He knew the lady had hoped for mercy from Henry right up until the moment she was led to the block. He wondered at her motivation for writing it, if in fact she had. Possibly she had written it in return for a promise to keep her daughter safe. The final letter was from Renard to the Archbishop of York, outlining the repeal of the act of parliament that contained Henry's will. Richard discarded this straight into the flames. Picking up the other older documents he seemed to contemplate consigning them to a similar fate and then, changing his mind, folded them away and stowed them back within his jacket.

Chapter Nineteen

Richard was briefly back in London and bent now to light the flame in the lamp holder in the attic room. He had news for Elizabeth that she should hold her ground. It looked like Gardiner would not press for her head, after he had begged the Queen for clemency with Courtenay. Kate saw the light and brushed back the tears. Did he know, she wondered. Still she took the spaniel for its evening walk in the dank garden. It had rained all day, the grass and leaves were wet and her skirt hems weighed heavily as she walked around the small box-hedged garden, the spaniel trailing sullenly behind her having being roused from the fire for its nightly exercise. There was no fear of guards tonight, she thought wryly as she neared the gate, pausing, looking carefully at the ivy-clad recesses of the wall. The dog found him, pulling on the lead to sniff at leather boots.

“Richard,” whispered Kate, “we have no need to fear discovery tonight.”

Her desperate state made her raise her voice to its normal level; she cared no longer and threw caution with abandon to the wind of fate.

“Why, Kate?” Richard stepped forward.

“They took her yesterday to the Tower. I was not allowed to accompany her; the Queen provided ladies of her own to look after her. She was scared to death. The guards laughed, said if she behaved herself they’d allow her to pay her respects to her lady mother. Oh God, and there was nothing I could do, nothing...” Kate finally broke and tears flooded from her eyes. “Do you think they’ll...?” Kate was unable to finish the sentence.

“I don’t think so,” Richard said. He told her the reason he had come. Elizabeth was safe from the immediate threat of Renard, his intentions having being slightly thwarted. His accusations, it appeared, could not be substantiated by the proof he had hoped to find.

“You say there are no guards tonight?” Richard enquired.

“They were taken from the house when Elizabeth was taken.” Kate sniffed.

“Well, what say we retrieve your errant hound and I shall escort you back to the house,” Richard smiled.

The dog, roused from the hedge by their approach, sensed a game afoot and led them a merry dance around the garden until Kate managed to stamp on his trailing lead. She found herself laughing, and was grateful for it.

“This disobedient hound is Elizabeth’s?” he asked picking the dog up.

“No, he is my excuse for venturing into the garden at night, and,” she leant out to absently ruffle the dog’s ears, “a pretty poor one at that. It’s my fault. I spend no time with him and he does very much as he pleases as you can see.”

Richard held the dog up and viewed him squarely in the face. The dog sniffed enquiringly at this new person who had entered his world. “He is not such a bad creature, a little wilful, but you can hardly blame him for that given the company he keeps.”

Richard was not the only one to have found himself in close communication with the Spanish ambassador. His brother also had been awaiting news from the same quarter. Having returned to London, Richard had duly delivered the papers to Renard’s keeping as he had promised to do, receiving thanks for countering Gardiner’s plot.

“That I don’t believe!” Harry said wiping dribbled wine from his flabby face with the back of his hand.

“Well it’s happened and I know not why. I met with Renard; he was most interested. I contact him again and what do I get? A curt note that he has made enquiries and what I allege is of no matter.” Robert’s eyes blazed. “The bloody bastard must have Renard round his finger as well, or else he’s blackmailed the Spanish runt.”

“That wouldn’t surprise me, not after what he did to me,” Harry said not heeding the implication of his words and nodding in agreement with Robert.

The taller man turned narrow eyes on Harry. “What did you say?”

Harry’s face fell on realisation of his own betrayal. Robert knew nothing of his dealings with Richard in the deserted dock lands, or of the wider implication of the threats he had used in his blackmail. Harry had trapped himself. Through a snivelled apology and a cut lip, he told Robert what he wanted to know: that his brother was both a thief and a murderer.

Elizabeth laid down the pen next to the completed page and reviewed her work. Sighing she folded and sealed the letter. It was possible that this

would be her final plea to Mary for her life, asserting that she had played no part in the plot against the Queen and remained a faithful servant. She again requested that she be allowed an audience with Mary, to answer for herself the charges and accusations levelled at her by the Privy Council. Wyatt had, it appeared, remained faithful and she felt such pity for the man after hearing that on the scaffold his final words had been to further state publicly that she had played no part in his plotting,

...neither they nor any other now yonder endurance was privy to any rising before I began, as I have declared to the Queen's Council...

Words bought at what cost she wondered.

The gaolers had a stark sense of humour and placed her in the rooms occupied by her mother before her lethal appointment with the axe. When she had landed from the boat her hand had instinctively sought Kate's, and it was only when she realised that she was finally alone, that her resolve had almost finally left her. How she had managed to remain upright, walking to what she felt was her death, she knew not.

Elizabeth's pleas from the Tower lay on a table, discarded by Mary after she had briefly read the content. Bishop Gardiner stood fidgeting in front of the Queen.

"We understand very well the thrust of your accusations against Elizabeth, my lord bishop, but we wonder if she does have good reason for complaint. So far I have heard little in the way of substantial evidence against her. Despite assurances, Wyatt went, did he not, to his death denying her involvement?" Mary said curtly.

"He did indeed. But, Your Majesty, we did have good reason..." Mary's raised hand stopped his words.

"Yes, we do understand your reasons, but it does not deny that you cannot give us a case against her can you." Mary paused, and the Bishop opened his palms accepting the truth of her words. "Are we to assume then that there is a possibility that in this instance Elizabeth may have no case to answer?"

"Your Majesty, the Privy Council wishes to question Elizabeth again. Maybe then..."

“My lord bishop,” she interrupted, “have you not already questioned her and gained nothing? Why again? We will not be made to look a fool in this matter. Renard indicates that you prolong this because you wish to keep her heir to the throne, and we do most fervently hope that is not the Council’s intention. We want a final answer. What are we to think,” Mary’s withered hand snaked out and retrieved Elizabeth’s letter, “when we receive communications like this? You are making fools of yourselves. You may have one more interview with the lady, then we will know your case if there is one to answer.”

Jack wondered how long it would be before Richard managed to destroy what little they had; if he kept going at this pace it would be soon. Already he had managed, in the brief time since Mary declared herself Queen, to place himself in between those two most wholly opposed sisters, Elizabeth and Mary. Most men would have taken Mary’s kindness and generosity and been happy, but not Richard. Out of some archaic sense of duty, perhaps, he supported Elizabeth. Was it duty, Jack wondered, or was it more simply trying to make sure that they were on the winning side. He had to agree there were plenty of reasons to think that Mary would indeed be succeeded by Elizabeth. If she was, well then, Richard would stand to be rewarded a hundredfold in comparison to what Mary had given him.

It was probably money. He could see no reason why Richard would remain loyal to a girl who had allowed his to take the initial blame for Seymour’s acts and done nothing to stop it. Why Richard was back he did not know; after he had returned to London he had not expected to see him for months. Well, he thought, he was sure he would find out when Richard chose to tell him.

“What are you thinking?” Dan said interrupting Jack’s thoughts.

“Not much, just wondering when these stones are going to fall on my head and imagining how much it will hurt when they do,” Jack replied.

“God, you’re mad. Lord knows what your father drank when he sired you two,” Dan said.

“Ignore me, Dan,” Jack said.

“I do, have no fear of that,” Dan said.

The winds had dropped the following day and the master had decided to hunt. The group of five left mid-morning, heading for the trees that

surrounded Burton, Jack riding close at his brother's side, Mat behind and Dan, with Catherine, bringing up the rear on a horse borrowed from Marc. She had taken taunts before they had ridden out and was determined to keep up and ride well. They reached the trees and Mat held up his hand, signaling Dan and Catherine to wait. Richard and Jack had disappeared from sight into the darkness of the trees.

"Why have we stopped here?" Catherine said to Dan, as her horse stamped at the mud beneath its hooves.

"They must have spied a beast. Probably they'll split and try and force it from cover into the open," Dan said pulling his horse close to Catherine's. "Keep your eyes on the trees. I think I saw something over there."

Catherine shifted uncomfortably in the saddle. They had been waiting now for what seemed like an age, and the inactivity meant the cold was beginning to creep through her clothing and bring out goose bumps on her skin.

"You don't think they have forgotten us do you?" Catherine complained.

"You wanted to come so less of your complaining, lass," Dan said. "They'll be out of there in good time."

"Couldn't we go in and have a look?" Catherine said hopefully. Seeing Dan's face she modified the suggestion. "Maybe just to the edge to see if we can see them?"

"God you've less patience than Jack, if that's possible," Dan said exasperated.

Catherine considered this. "Jack's not impatient; he doesn't strike me so."

"Oh you think so do...There!" Dan tightened his grip on the reins.

"Where?" Catherine said alerting her horse likewise to the possibility of action. Dan pointed and Catherine looked hard into the dim confines of the trees, and then she saw it. After that, the action seemed to happen in the space of a single second.

The hind burst from the trees and paused for an instant, realising the folly of its move, then raced across the open meadow. Two riders, parted by some distance, appeared and turned to converge on the hind as it sped off into the slight valley, trying to make it to the sanctuary of the trees on the opposite slope. Dan had already turned his horse and began to spur it for the chase. Catherine was some way behind him. In front she could see the lead riders beginning to gain on the hind as they neared the bottom of the gentle

valley. There was a small stream, an easy jump for the hind, which made it to the other side with ease. The two riders crossed the water-filled gap in the meadow with equal ease and continued hard on their quarry. Dan was close to the stream but Catherine was well behind still, cursing her tardiness, and the horse below her. Ahead of her she saw Mat, and wondered briefly where he had come from. As the hind made her way towards the trees, Mat came down to meet her, having circled round for this very purpose. The hind wide-eyed with fear and racing for her life saw him and, in her terror, turned back to face her pursuers. Seeing the trap, she veered to the left and headed back towards the stream, directly to where Catherine would make her crossing. Richard and Jack turned and rode across the field with Mat still riding down the slope towards them.

Catherine saw the hind too late. The horse reared preparing to jump the gap in which the stream lay and the hind darted past her saddle. Catherine's foot slipped from one stirrup, and before she could scramble for her balance, she had slithered gracelessly from the side of the horse into the water. As her back hit the water, the narrow gap in the field was crossed by Jack and Richard hard on the trail of the deer, and shortly after by Mat. Suffering no injury in the fall, except a good soaking, Catherine retrieved her horse, which stood hock deep in the water next to its drenched rider. A wet hand pushed dripping hair from her face and gathered the reins, and she climbed back into the saddle. Water ran from a nearly full right boot and trickled from the left, her clothes clung uncomfortably to her body. Uncaring, she turned the horse back towards the spot where she had originally waited with Dan and urged it up the bank. In the distance she could see the hunt; the desperate hind had almost made it back to the sanctuary of the woods. Catherine dug her heels in, attempting to catch them before they disappeared from view for a second time. She kept her eyes on the tree line as she rode up the bank.

Catherine had only a mental note of where the trio had entered the woods, and she rode straight for a gap between two pine trees with less care than she should have used. A low hanging fronded branch slapped hard across her right cheek and then continued to drag bark against her skin, a reminder from nature to lessen her speed. Drawing back on the reins, she slowed the pace, aware of the imminent danger of losing an eye, or worse. Ahead the noise of horses crashing through dried wood and rotting vegetation came to her ears, but the sound seemed to echo from the solid

wood around her and it was no easy task to locate the hunt. Slowing the horse further, she crossed the point where the forest took over completely from the meadowland. She continued in, with no thought for a way out if she should not find her companions. After half an hour of continuing in what she believed was a straight line, Catherine admitted to being lost. There was no longer any noise save from the sound of treetop birds in the dark green canopy above. Turning she made to retrace her steps and return to the meadow, half expecting to be able to see her way back, not realising how far she had penetrated the deer's world. She was surprised to find that the way back was no clearer than the way in had been. Soon doubt pierced her confidence and the realisation dawned fully that she knew not what direction she was going in. The cold of the cloth began to penetrate her body, the lack of sun meant it lay almost as wet as the moment she had emerged from the water. Anger at her foolishness and the humiliation she had brought on herself made her spur the horse on. If she did not get out of here soon they would come and look, maybe, and that she would not be able to forget.

"Come on," she said to the horse. The sound of her own voice in the silence shocked her, but gritting her teeth she began to concentrate on the path she would take. Not wanting to add further injury to herself, she kept her head low over the horse, relying heavily of the fact that her mount, however directed, would not ride directly into the unyielding trees. The horse stopped, refusing to go any further, its path blocked by bramble. The debris of nature was now waist high: fallen branches, sleeping bracken and barbed bramble all around. Catherine knew she had not passed this way before; the forest skirts were not this overgrown. Forced to drop from the saddle she led the horse behind her. The way forward was no longer an option, looking about she choose the easiest route and set out, wondering if they were looking for her.

The deer was slumped over the hind quarters of Dan's horse, tongue extended, a broken arrow protruding from its chest, the steel bolt lodged deep in its heart. Jack was retelling for the fourth time how he had made the shot, how the arrow had arched, missing a branch, and made it true to the target. Mat leant over in his saddle, looking grimly at Dan who nodded back. In the silent exchange, both acknowledged the other's fear that Jack would be nothing short of unbearable for the remainder of the day.

“Aye, well it was a fine shot, Jack, but,” he paused to allow Jack to acknowledge his praise, for it would be the last he got this day, “where’s Catherine?”

“Last I saw she was picking herself out of the water,” Mat said, pointing back to where the hind had fled across the stream.

Jack chuckled. “Back at Burton then, in front of the fire.” He turned his horse homeward, eager to return. “Come, we’ll have that tonight,” he gestured at the carcass on Dan’s horse. “Richard, you’ll not join us?” Jack called over his shoulder seeing his brother turn his horse away.

“I don’t think she went back to Burton; she was fool enough to have followed us into the forest,” Richard gestured behind him. “Take that back to Burton. If she’s there, come back and let me know. I’ll go and see if I can find her.”

Jack shrugged, fairly convinced Catherine would be at Burton drying out.

“I’ll see with you later.” Richard threw back before spurring his horse back towards the trees; they’d learn soon enough that Catherine was not at Burton and join him.

The early March dusk was falling, but deep in the forest, Catherine was not aware of the imminence of night. The horse was still plodding carefully behind her as she led it this way and that through the tangle of undergrowth. Clearings in the trees ahead held out constant false hope of escape. On reaching them she found the thinning of the trees had been caused by the crash to earth by one of the mighty giants, and the younger trees, which had lived weakly in its shadow, had not yet had the chance to fully take its place. She was sure that if she kept going she would find her way out; the trees went all the way to Burton and down to the Lincoln road. If she emerged at either point she could find her way back to the manor.

Richard dismounted when he heard the noise of the horse and rider slowly moving through the woods. Tying his horse to a tree he cast his eyes about until he located the source of the sound. It had been an easy trail to follow, crossing itself twice as Catherine had navigated in two circles back to the same clearing. Richard wondered if she knew of her folly. Leaning with his back to one of the massive oaks, which dominated the forest, he watched the dim form of rider leading a horse approach. If she did not look up, she would trudge past and never see him. He said nothing and waited. Shoulders slumped she marched doggedly on, stopping to circumnavigate a

fallen branch and then continued leading the horse slowly behind her. Still she did not see the watcher. A thicket of knotted bramble and dried brown bracken blocked her advance and she turned left to avoid it, passing within feet of Richard.

“And wilt thou leave me thus? Say nay for shame, to save thee from the blame. Of all my grief and game. And wilt thou leave me thus?” Richard recited lightly to the trees. Catherine stopped abruptly, but the horse took three more steps bumping into her back and forcing her to stumble forwards.

The poet continued, “And wilt thou leave me thus? That hath loved thee so long. In wealth and woe among? And is thy heart so strong, as for to leave me thus? Say nay.”

Catherine tied the horse to an outstretched mossy branch and began to pick her way back towards the speaker.

“And wilt thou leave me thus? That hath given thee my heart. Never for to depart, ’nother for pain nor smart? And wilt thou leave me thus? Say nay,” he continued eyes still lifted to the green gilded canopy above.

Catherine stopped, a hand on a rotting branch as she climbed over the obstacle in her path.

“And wilt thou leave me thus and have no more pity? Of him that loveth thee? Helas, thy cruelty! And wilt thou leave me thus? Say nay.” Richard could hear Catherine making her clumsy path back to him, but did not turn. The noise finally stopped, twigs stopped bending and finally snapping, and he knew she stood behind him now. “Ah, apparently you’ll not leave,” he said turning to observe the dirty, damp form with bright eyes burning from behind lank hair.

“Spare me your words. I know them all already,” Catherine said, a touch of anger still in her voice.

“Do you indeed? Well that’s a trick if you can manage it. Tell me, lady fortune, what will I say next?” Richard enquired happily.

“Don’t,” was all she said.

“Please, come on, what exactly do you think I will say?” Richard insisted.

Catherine sighed deeply. “That I have been a fool, that I have no right to be here, that I have caused trouble no end...that I was probably lucky not to have killed myself.”

“Undeniably a fair assessment,” Richard agreed. “However, I was going to leave that to Jack. You have disappointed me.”

She shook her head. “I know not what then.” Catherine knew the exchange wasn’t finished yet.

“I thought perhaps to tell you that your skills on a horse had improved, and perhaps you should address your directional talents next. Moss for instance,” Richard paused, “only grows on one side of a tree: the north side. A point which should obviously be included in all young ladies’ education in future do you not agree?”

Catherine’s head hung from her shoulders. “I didn’t know.”

“But it’s a lesson well learnt would you not say?” Richard said evenly.

“Can we leave please? I am sorry for what I have done. Believe me, I wanted not to have to have this conversation with you,” she said, unsure whether he was mocking her or not.

“Ah, maybe I should leave again, so unwelcome is my presence,” Richard said sadly.

“Damn you, Richard,” Catherine shouted. “Leave then, the price of salvation is too bloody high.”

“What price is that?” he asked watching her leave.

“That you mock me on every meeting, without need, without reason.” Catherine turned back to face him, her arms thrown wide. “Without provocation, and without mercy.” Catherine pointed at the tree to her left. “North, I know now, thank you.”

Richard watched her make her way slowly towards the dim form of Marc’s horse. “Only one problem with that,” he called.

“What’s that?” she said though clenched teeth. When no reply came she wheeled back again. “What? Tell me.” Catherine stormed back across the short distance to him. “Tell me!”

“You want to go east,” he finally confessed grinning.

“East!” Catherine yelled at him, exasperation and anger warming her cold blood. “You just said north.”

“No, I said that way,” Richard pointed, “is north. I didn’t say go north did I?”

The blow she aimed would never have connected. Richard intercepted it easily and held her wrist in a steel grip. Close together for a second he held her immobile before wrenching her arm up her back and bringing Catherine

to her knees in front of him. Crouching down behind her, he said, "And that way, where your horse is standing, good lady, is east."

Catherine's head hung in front of her, damp tendrils of hair obscured her face. With no energy to move, no fight left to rebel against the grip, she knelt there, the pain in her shoulder feeling like heat spreading through her body. Richard released the pressure on her shoulder and lessened the grip, but did not let go. He brought her own arm still held by his around her waist and lifted her back to her feet. Catherine felt her knees tremble and was forced to stand with her weight against him.

When he spoke, his voice was serious and concerned. "Can you stand?"

Catherine did not reply in words but nodded, a response she would have made, even if both her legs had been severed beneath her. Richard knowing her lie released her wrist but stood close as she swayed slightly when the prop of his body was removed. Her face told a tale of effort and he left her to battle with her will power alone while he went to collect their mounts. The cold had eradicated feeling. No longer did her limbs ache, no longer did her feet hurt, and no longer could she feel the stinging from the lashing the pine branch had given her for being careless.

"I can't..." Both hands on the pommel she tried to get back into the saddle.

Richard, already in the saddle, pulled his horse next to hers. "Here," Catherine took the offered arm and was surprised as he pulled her easily to sit in front of him. "Lass, you are freezing. Have this." He pulled his riding cloak from around his neck and draped it over her shoulders. Catherine pulled its dryness close around her and the pair set off slowly, leading Marc's horse from the forest. It was, Catherine found to her disgust, only a short ride to the Lincoln road, and from there a mile only to the village. The horse's pace quickened in the dim evening light, she saw the darkened outline of the village pass by. The cloak had warmed her and she found herself thanking him for that one piece of kindness. When they arrived in the courtyard, Richard dropped easily from the saddle and Catherine was surprised to find her body would no longer respond to the commands she gave it. Richard reached up, grasped an arm and Catherine dropped from the horse, Richard catching her before she hit the floor.

Catherine realised she was going upstairs. It seemed to be taking a long time; they seemed to wind around and around the stairwell for an age. She began to count the larger blocks of stone that made up the wall, and still

they were not at the top. Then she was in front of the fire, warm, and at last, back at the manor, the cloak had been replaced by a thick blanket, and she lay with her body cradled on cushions.

“Oh, no, my pretty, thou shalt not sleep,” said a voice from the past. Heavy eyelids lifted and through the veil of warm and pleasant sleep she tried, but did not try too hard to look up at the speaker. The effort too much, she cared not for his words. She wanted to go to sleep; she was tired did he not realise that. Not now.

“Ahhh.” Catherine’s mind was pulled sharply back to reality as cold water met the skin on her face. Her eyes were forced by the shock of it to open. “No, please, I want to go...” Her words trailed off. She tried to lift her arm to push away the cold drips that ran down her face, but her arm seemed trapped within the bindings of the blankets.

Richard pulled her to a sitting position. “Listen, Catherine, carefully. You fell in the stream, spent half the day soaking wet in the wind and you are half frozen. You must stay awake; sleep and you’ll not wake again.”

Catherine registered the words in part, and wondered fleetingly if he were mad. She was just tired. He left her then, and sitting there she closed her eyes again. Somewhere in the background she could hear voices, but cared not what the words were. Eyes were still closed against the world when she was picked up, her hand tried to ineffectually grasp at the blanket as it slithered to the floor.

Richard stood back, his arms dripping from the elbows, shirt soaked.

Catherine, still dressed, was submerged almost fully in the hot water he had kicked the kitchen staff bodily to provide. He knelt, elbows resting on the rim of the tub, and looked at her. “Nice?” he enquired.

Catherine did not look at him, but moved down into the hot depths trying to get as far below the surface as possible while still breathing. “Did you feel it necessary to leave my boots on?” she asked a half smile tentatively on her face.

“Foot,” Richard said moving to stand at the end of the tub. The water’s surface erupted as a boot emerged. “Next.” The second was thrown to land discarded by the first, water running to pool on the floor.

“Thank you,” Catherine said.

“Shout before you dissolve and I shall get you out of there,” Richard said. “I hope we can call a truce you and I.”

“A truce?” Catherine repeated.

“Can you not see that you and I are both on the same side?” Richard asked.

Catherine looked away, ashamed. “I suppose I can...A truce then.”

Catherine settled back to trying to get as much of her body into the warmth as possible. Horrendous pins and needles assailed her numbed feet and legs as blood coursed back to cold limbs. But the feeling was soon replaced with a warm glow, and although she was still tired, the overwhelming desire to sleep had gone.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Twenty

On May 19, 1554, Elizabeth finally left the confines of the Tower. Renard had ceased to press for a case of treason to be laid against her and the Privy Council admitted to Mary that there was indeed only insubstantial evidence against her. The Council was also swayed by fears for the succession. Mary remained unmarried and doubts continued about her ability, due to her age, to bear a child for England. Instead, marriage plans instead for Elizabeth were the subject of council conversations as a possible route to securing an heir.

In May, the Court moved to Richmond, and Elizabeth to Woodstock in Oxfordshire. It was an improvement on the Tower, but still she remained as she had done at Whitehall, under close guard. There was to be no doubt in her mind that she remained Mary's prisoner. She was so much a prisoner that her household comprised of six servants only, including Kate. She was not allowed visitors, and Bedingfield, her gaoler, had instructions to keep from her the means to write letters. Elizabeth's communications with Mary were not welcomed. They wished to silence the thorn and leave England's Rose quietly in the wings while the country's main players watched to see if the pending marriage could solve the question of the succession.

Elizabeth and Mary were not the only ones to have been moving. Catherine too moved that May from the drafty rooms at Burton to slightly more comfortable rooms in Lincoln. Richard decreed that it was not suitable or safe for her to remain at Burton. Catherine did not argue. Although no longer afraid of Richard, she was still uncomfortable in his presence and life at Burton was, to say the least, not easy.

How they made the connection he was never sure, but nevertheless Richard found himself linked to the conspirators, Wyatt and Courtenay.

In fact, the night he visited Kate in the garden after Elizabeth had left for the Tower, he had been watched over by a man who followed him back to his house and had then reported the incident to Renard. From that moment a watch was set up on his house, and although for many months nothing damning was revealed, eventually a messenger leaving Richard's house was

traced to Thomas Parry, part of the Lady Elizabeth's household, and the connection was made. The allegations that Robert had made were now painfully confirmed.

Renard had contacted Robert after closer scrutiny revealed that certain papers were not what all they should be. Now Robert found himself meeting with Thomas Pierce, Renard's man.

Thomas Pierce was thin, elderly and a cleric by trade and nature. He observed the expense that stood before him, his mind making a mental tally of the cost of the garb and jewels. It was always useful information, should the need arise to use money.

"It has been asked that I should come and talk about a matter you raised with Ambassador Renard some time ago," Thomas Pierce said shortly.

"That's right. Seen sense has he?" Robert sneered.

Thomas Pierce chose to ignore the remark. "I wish only to know if you can tell me where we may find your brother."

"I don't know," Robert said. "Do you believe now what I told you?"

"It has come to light that there may be something in what you alleged, yes," Pierce conceded.

"Well, issue a warrant for his arrest for treason. A day in the Tower and you'll know for sure that I was right," Robert said hotly.

"Unfortunately no," Thomas Pierce said, folding his hands in front of him. "So you have no idea where he is?"

"What do you mean, 'unfortunately no'? You can't leave him to his devices any longer surely!" Robert exclaimed.

Thomas Pierce sighed. "After Sir Wyatt we have no wish to provide further martyrs for Elizabeth's cause. Mary fears her support dwindles and Elizabeth's increases. We wish to trace your brother but a public execution was not our intent. Mayhap some other charge..." He left the words to hang in the air.

Robert smiled. "Would murder be a valid reason to issue a warrant for his arrest?"

Thomas Pierce nodded smiling. "Some such charge would allow him to be pursued as a common criminal, who may never come to trial."

Robert supplied him with such details as he had about Richard's killing of Harry's men. The bargain was plain. Should they move to arrest his brother then he, Robert, would be informed. Pierce told him they knew of the house in Chapel Street and confirmed their quarry had slipped from

there and that he awaited word on whether he was at Burton. If he was, then of course Pierce would inform Robert.

Meanwhile, Dan slipped the watch who came in search of Richard, stole a horse from the stables of the Fox and spurred the beast from London to Burton to warn the master.

Richard's mistake was that he was too sure that the charge he was to be arrested on was treason; that it would be couched in terms of blackmail and murder, he missed.

Richard grabbed his brother's arm and steered him quickly along the corridor to his own room. Pushing Jack inside he slammed the door.

"What the hell..." Jack protested.

"For once listen," Richard began.

"All I," Jack tried again.

Richard raised his voice a fraction. "For once listen. I will tell you all the bloody facts, and then I will ask you, beg you if needed, to do something for me. I am to be arrested...Shut up, Jack!" Richard raised his hand. "...very soon. The constable's men are in Lincoln now. The charge, I believe, is treason. I want you to go and strike a deal with the constable for your life, the men's lives and Burton, if you can manage it in exchange for me. There's plenty will believe your actions. I want you to do this now." He raised his hand again. Jack's eyes were wide. "Your conscience will be clear." Richard produced a wry smile. "Don't make me beg. It will make no difference; they will have me one way or the other, so take what you can from it. Now, go to Lincoln. There is a price on my head. Claim it. Take Dan with you; he knows already. Go."

Catherine was shopping in Lincoln, and that was where she met Dan and learned what had happened.

"Master is just going to sit and wait for them. I cannot..." Dan was lost for words.

"Maybe he doesn't believe they are really coming for him?" Catherine said.

"He knows alright and just to make sure he's sent Jack here to strike a deal for him," Dan said shaking his head. "I was wrong, I was so wrong. Richard was right. He knew this would happen."

"I don't understand. Jack wouldn't sell Richard out?" Catherine said

“Oh wouldn’t he? I rode over with him just now, and he’s with the sheriff working out what he can get for himself. Look, over there.” Dan pointed and Catherine could see Jack’s horse tethered where some uniformed soldiers waited.

“Dear God, you’re right! We can’t just let them take him; we’ve got to warn him,” Catherine said.

“Listen, lass, he knows well enough they’re coming, but if you want to try and shift him you’re welcome to try,” Dan said.

Catherine slowed the horse too late and it galloped freely, uncontrolled by its rider, over the bridge before the manor, hooves clattering with alarming noise on the springing boards below. The gates stood closed. Closed, thought Catherine; they had never been closed before. The horse ran wildly towards them. Was there anyone here? Too late she made a bid to slow the horse, pulling back roughly. The horse obeyed, its hooves slithering to a jolting halt on the cobbles in front of the gate. Catherine went straight over its head, her flight stopped short by the gate.

“If you have something to tell me I hope you have not just knocked it from you brains.” Richard took an arm and pulled her to unsteady feet.

“There is a warrant issued for your arrest. The Queen’s men are bound this way now,” Catherine blurted, then added, “I saw them.”

“That is most unfortunately true and, alas, not a product of the knock on the head you just gave yourself,” Richard said.

“They won’t be far behind me. I saw them in Lincoln,” Catherine said, and then added helpfully, “There were eight of them.”

“There’ll be more than eight of them by the time they get here. The constable’s not stupid enough to try and take me with eight. He’ll pick up a force from the Bishop of Lincoln,” Richard said, pulling Catherine through the gate. Froggy retrieved her panting horse and the gate was re-secured.

“What will you do?”

Richard said nothing. He propped her against the wall, and when she did not seem in fear of falling left her.

“Master says you are to come with me,” Marc said.

“What?” snapped Catherine; the world had just about refocused itself.

“The master said I’m to take you out of here now. Come on,” Mat said moving to catch hold of her arm.

“No, I stay. I didn’t come here to be bloody ignored,” Catherine hissed at him. “Where’s he gone?”

“He’s in the hall. Now come.” Mat made a grab for her arm. Catherine ducked and ran for the hall. Richard was seated at a chair on the dais, a wine glass in his hand.

“Didn’t you listen to me?” Catherine yelled as she ran through the door into the empty hall towards him.

“What would you have me do?” There was anger in his voice now.

“Leave before they get here would seem the sensible course,” Catherine said, arms apart, leaning across the table to him. “Do you intend to sit here and let them take you?”

“A perfect observation,” Richard replied coolly.

“Why?” she yelled at him. “God, go! You can get away still. I cannot believe you are going to sit there.”

“The lamb to the slaughter,” he said quietly, looking into his glass.

Catherine yanked his shoulder round so he was forced to face her.

“Unhand me, lady. Believe me this will be difficult enough. It is not, I hope you realise, an act I do with pleasure. Now go,” Richard said angrily.

Outside the hall she could hear the noise of horses entering the yard. My God, she thought, they let them through the gates. Richard turned and took her arm in a frightening grip.

“Get thee from my hall.” He released her and pushed her back.

Catherine made her way up the stairs and crawled quietly into the sanctuary of the gallery, through the carved balustrade she could witness the scene unfold below her.

The constable’s men burst through the door, led in by Mat who was talking to one of the uniformed officers. One officer advanced to Richard and she saw him take from his jacket a document and bang it down in front of the seated man. Richard raised his glass in what looked like a toast to the officer. Catherine watched open mouthed as the officer slapped the glass from his hand, wine spilling the length of the table; it glistened like blood on the surface.

More men entered. Alan was with them, and in one corner near the fire, Mat was still deep in conversation with the uniformed officer he had entered with.

Richard was hauled to his feet, and the men watched as his jacket was ripped from him and he stood in his shirt to have his hands bound. Two men

walked behind him, one placed a hand in his back and shoved him forward. As he began to walk across the hall, a man stepped into his path. Catherine could not hear the words but the final comment was a punch to the head, which knocked him to the floor. Awkwardly he got slowly back to his feet, watched by his own men who stood around the hall. They led him out through the kitchens so she deduced they were not leaving but must be using the storerooms as a temporary gaol.

Catherine continued to look on. None of Richard's men were being rounded up. They were still armed, drink had been broken out and the scene in the hall was nothing short of one of revelry and celebration. Had they sold their master? She could think of nothing else but this to account for the strange scene. What to do, where to go now? And where the hell was Jack?

Catherine was startled by the noise of the hall door slamming shut. It was dark now and the hall was lit by tapers. Two men entered the hall and were greeted by a uniformed officer. As soon as the taller of the two discarded his riding cloak she recognised him as Jack. Pressing her face hard against the carved oak she tried to hear the words but could not make them out. What did meet her ears though after some minutes was the unmistakable sound of laughter. The uniformed officer clapped Jack on the back and handed him wine from an opened bottle on the table, and the small group sat down to share a drink and conversation by the fire.

Catherine crawled the length of the gallery and peered down the narrow stairs that led to the hall below; there was no one in sight. Keeping low she made her descent. The old wood creaked loudly despite her careful tread, but the noise brought no one to investigate. The gallery stairs led to a corridor at the back of the hall, which took you either to the kitchens or out to the courtyard; she took the kitchen route. Rounding a corner she heard the sound of voices, and dropping to her knees, she peered round the wall. Two men sat playing cards in the corridor: Richard's temporary gaolers she guessed, and the gaol was one of the storerooms.

Jack's room was unlocked. She breathed deeply as she slid the door open and entered. The shutters were not drawn and some light spilled in from the moon. Catherine knew exactly what she wanted. On a shelf she found a knife and collected a jacket. Carefully descending the stairs she made her way through the deserted kitchen, pausing at the table to retrieve a bottle of wine, which stood open, forgotten apparently by the revellers.

The storerooms, of which there were three, were below the level of the ground at the back of the manor, which kept them cool all year round. Slatted iron grills however did admit some light and these were at grass level. He could be in any one of the three, she thought, crawling along the grass.

“If you make anymore noise you will rouse the constable’s men most certainly,” Richard’s voice met her grateful ears.

“Where are you?” Catherine hissed.

“Down here and not likely to be going anywhere.” Laid flat on the grass she peered into the store. Her eyes, accustomed to the gloom, found themselves staring into those of Richard, his face lit by the moonlight. “So, fair damsel, have you come to rescue me? I do hope not.” Richard’s voice was light and careless.

“I don’t understand. What’s going on? Jack’s here, I think with Dan. He’s in the hall with those men,” Catherine said, then added, “They’re laughing.”

“Ah well, I am a comic figure am I not,” Richard said.

Catherine frowned. He did not sound as if he cared overly much. Then, remembering her acquisitions, she said, “Here, I have a jacket for you. It must be freezing in there.”

“The rats and I are not particularly warm it’s true. However,” he raised his tied hands.

She received a genuine smile from the captive as she slid the knife through the bars to cut his bonds. Touching his skin as she removed the rope she got a good measure of how cold he was.

“I got these as well,” Catherine handed the bottle of wine and the jacket through the bars.

“Ah Catherine,” Richard smiled, “to what shall we drink?”

“To you getting out of here,” she said quickly.

“That, I am afraid, is not possible,” he said. His voice was finally sad in the darkness.

“Why?” Catherine said receiving the bottle back.

“I will give you the simple version. Jack’s dislike of me is well known. On hearing of my pending arrest he contacted the constable, told him my whereabouts, and struck a bargain. The results of which are that, if the men fall under Jack’s leadership and hand me over to the Queen, then he takes

control of the manor and men, and everyone, obviously with the exception of me, is happy.”

“But...”

“Before you confront him he does it with my blessing,” he added.

“Why?” Catherine said exasperated.

“That I cannot say,” Richard said receiving the bottle back.

“Is it something to do with Elizabeth?” Catherine used the scrap of information that Dan had given her.

“Who told you that?” Richard’s answer was confirmation enough.

“That I cannot say,” she mocked him, “but they will take you to the gallows.”

“I do not think they intend me to live long enough to swing from a rope,” Richard said bluntly.

She took the bottle back again and drank.

“Did I hurt you?” asked the voice quietly from the dark.

“Which time?” Catherine answered quickly.

“I am a wretch in a cell; forgive me if you can.”

“I was hoping to have the opportunity to get even,” Catherine said bitterly.

He appeared not to have heard her. “Go to my room when you can. Lift the stone in the grate, take what lies there and give them to Jack,” he said.

“I hope he will have some use for them.”

Chapter Twenty-One

Catherine entered Richard's room nervously. Closing the door quietly behind her, she set the latch back into place quietly and hoped no one had seen her entry. She turned to view, for the first time, the interior. Scantily furnished, for Richard had hardly been at Burton, it contained a bed, desk and two sets of shelves. All was in disarray; the room had been searched already. A book lay on the floor next to the bed, discarded there as the thieves had looked for better loot. Catherine stooped and retrieved the volume, but she was unable to discern its contents, as the language within was French. The pages were laid out in the fashion of poetry, and with more care than had been used to put it on the floor she placed the book back where she found it.

There had been no fire in the grate for some long while, but ash and part burnt wood lingered there still. Catherine used her hands to push the debris out of the grate and onto the hearth. The cracks in the stone flagging beneath were visible and the edge of the poker provided the tool to identify the loose slab and lift it. Anything beneath would surely be burnt she thought. The heat would easily penetrate the slab. But no, the stone fitted well and below was a deep shaft, probably originally leading to the floor below. At full arm's stretch she felt in the darkness. On a ledge in the shaft her fingers ran over a leather texture. Careful not to drop it to the bottom of the shaft, Catherine retrieved Renard's papers. In the blackness she groped around for anything else stowed in the recesses. Her fingers touched something icy cold and her inquisitive hands pressed over its sharpened surface. Wrapping her hands around the palm sized object she lifted it to the light. Despite its dusted coat, Catherine stared wide eyed at the jewelled cross she held, the chain still hanging beneath in the darkness. Without hesitation this time, she pulled it over her head and tucked the precious coldness beneath her shirt.

Jack heard the noise as he passed the door to Richard's room. Who was in there? He lifted the latch silently and the door swung quietly open. Catherine! The filthy figure kneeling near the hearth could be no other. He

watched as soot blackened hands dropped a stone back into place and began to shovel the debris back into the fire. What the hell was she doing here? The question was the herald of the answer, which exploded on its heels. She had done this! She had finally succeeded and taken her revenge against his brother. Richard had been right.

A hand behind him Jack slowly closed the door; the latch clicked loudly, metal on metal as it dropped back into place.

“God, I nearly died,” the dirty face smiled up at him.

“What were you doing,” Jack asked. There was no smile of greeting on his face.

“Richard told me to get...”

You bitch, he thought.

Catherine hesitated. “I was...”

Something told him this was not the place. Roughly, he took hold of her arm, hauling her to her feet. “Out of here.” He pushed her ahead of him towards his own rooms.

Catherine stood in front of him, her hands holding something out.

“Here, Jack, please take it.” What was wrong? What had happened? Had Jack truly turned against his brother? “Please, Jack.”

“And this?” A fist grabbed the cross, gouging the chain into her flesh. He jerked it so hard that she stumbled to her knees before him.

“I found it with the papers.” Catherine’s voice was almost a scream, hands fought to pull the chain from her neck. “Please, Jack. Please...”

Suddenly Jack let her go. Catherine dropped to the floor and as she did he flipped the chain over her head and retrieved the cross.

“Jack...what are you doing?” Catherine cried.

“Why?” His words were agonisingly hoarse. “Why did you set the dogs on him?”

“I didn’t! I came to warn him.” Catherine told quickly how she had met Dan in Lincoln. “Why don’t you believe me, or is it that you have truly deserted him? You were in Lincoln and I saw you in the hall, Jack with those men.” Still no response. “It was you, wasn’t it? God, I wouldn’t have cast you in the role of Judas.”

“I saw this. I know not who to trust,” Jack said, “and that comes from one who is himself the traitor.”

“No, Jack, no.” Catherine got from her knees and went to sit on the edge of the bed near him. “Richard told me you are no traitor and that you do this

at his bidding.”

Jack looked up, half a dark smile on his face. “Did I?” He held the cross up before sliding the chain over his head and dropping the cold metal beneath his shirt. “I saw this and...God, what have I done.” Catherine paused, about to speak but her lips were stilled by the agony on the face of the man before her.

Jack rose from his seat and the cross swung back to lightly pat his chest as he stood. He had given it to Richard during their time in France when their funds were gone. Richard had told him plainly that he would redeem it, to trust him. Jack’s temper had been ignited as his rich and noble brother’s attempt to deprive his bastard sibling of one of the two items of value he possessed. He had told him as much and the argument ended when he flung the cross in Richard’s face. But here it was. Jack ran his hands through already untidy hair.

“I don’t understand why he sat there and waited for them to take him,” Catherine said when Jack found her.

“Don’t you?” Jack said bitterly. “They have connected him with Elizabeth and he thought they came to arrest him as a traitor. He thought he would go to London, be tried and condemned as such. If he left and ran he would have still been branded a traitor and Elizabeth would have been tainted by his deeds. If he was tried and managed to resist confession he could have done as Wyatt did and, with his words from the scaffold, try to keep the lady safe.” Jack lifted his eyes to consider her. “You don’t look like you believe me. Why?”

“Oh, I believe you. I am just surprised. I cannot comprehend why a man like Richard would sacrifice himself like that,” Catherine said.

“What do you mean by ‘a man like Richard’ exactly?” Jack asked, although he knew fairly well what she would say.

“I saw him in the hall, the way he looked, what they did, and I felt sorry for him. But Jack, you know what he is like better than anyone. In whatever he does, he is acting for himself. What you tell me he is doing is so at odds with all else he has done. I would have attributed him with many things, but a conscience, to die a martyr? No, I can’t believe this. There has to be more to it, Jack. He rarely speaks the truth. Are you sure this time you are right? Richard is more apt to watch others suffer than to suffer himself,” Catherine said.

Jack shook his head slowly.

“You don’t agree with me, do you?” Catherine asked, looking at Jack’s saddened face in the firelight. “What about when he sided with Northumberland, a paid mercenary, and all at Assingham were murdered?”

“It was not Richard; it was Geoffrey, Byrne’s son. He was bored from waiting so took some of his men and attacked. Richard kicked hell out of him. Geoffrey’s father thought Richard was set to kill his son,” Jack supplied.

“And my father? He was killed as well, don’t forget,” Catherine retorted.

Jack shook his head. “But not by Richard. He rode into a group of armed men as Northumberland tried to take Mary. You can hardly blame Richard for that can you?” Jack asked

“It could have been his men who killed my father. He’s never denied it. He was on Northumberland’s side then,” Catherine said hotly.

“Stop! Believe me, it wasn’t us. They all left Assingham and went straight to Framlingham without incident, while I took you to the Abbey.”

“But I can’t...He’s...” Catherine trailed off, trying to think of more evidence to support her argument.

“Stop, Catherine, please. I know how you feel. I told you a long time ago that he acts; that you shouldn’t believe what you see. He does nothing himself to make you feel any different. But I know of only one wrongful act he committed against you.” Jack lifted his hand to touch the scar he knew laid under the shirt. “I think you should forgive him.”

“I believe you, but...” her words trailed off. “How long do you think they will keep him here before he goes to London?”

“I do not believe that they intend to take him south,” Jack said.

“But you said he would be tried for treason.”

“No, I said Richard believed they would try him as a traitor. If he did not believe that, he wouldn’t have let them imprison him below. However, they perceive that there may be a danger if another stands on the scaffold and supports Elizabeth. She will start to appear unassailable and Renard, it appears, wants her head,” Jack said very seriously.

“So, what will happen?” Catherine asked.

“I think they will kill him,” Jack said in monotone. “Soon probably. I suspect the constable awaits confirmation of this order.”

“Jesus! It didn’t seem so bad if they were to take him to London, there would have been time, but now...” Catherine said horrified.

“Mat watches for a rider. I believe that will be the moment,” Jack said.

“Does he know?” Catherine asked.

“Richard is no fool. I suspect he knew it was always a risk, but he was willing to take it,” Jack said.

“What are we going to do?” Catherine asked.

“God that I knew the answer. While there is the possibility that there could be a trial, he will not wish to escape. Time is not on my side. That’s why I have Mat posted to give me some warning,” Jack said.

“And you, what do they think?” Catherine asked.

“They think,” Jack paused the pain returned to his face again, “that I wish him dead. Perhaps I did; I no longer know. The deal is they leave me Burton in exchange for my help, but I feel that there is more than a good chance that they will renege on it fairly easily.”

“Do they not trust you?” Catherine asked.

“Oh I think they fairly believe I want rid of Richard and to succeed him here, and at the moment they will argue no different – the men here outnumber the constables. But they’ll not leave a troop of mercenaries with no fixed allegiance for long unchained. I am sure the Bishop of Lincoln perceives me a threat to the peace of the area. Time will tell,” Jack said.

Catherine sighed.

“Pass me those papers. Let us see what Richard had,” Jack said, indicating the wallet, which lay discarded on the floor. Catherine slid it across the floor to him and then watched him in the firelight as he began slowly to study the papers.

“These will not help,” he said sighing deeply. “They are the papers we took from Renard’s hands, and they could be damning to Elizabeth only. God, he gives me the means to betray him further in death.” Jack sat for a moment head in his hands. “Not again, brother, tempt me not for I will not be led astray.” Jack reached for the final packet, separately wrapped from the rest. Catherine waited patiently for him to read.

The paper slipped from his hand, lying on top the pile of evidence against Elizabeth, another testament of bastardy and deceit.

“Jack?” Getting no reply she picked up the paper and read it for herself. “Jesus Christ! Jack is this you? Jack?”

Recovering, he met her eyes, his face pale. “Aye. Let us bury this for the moment.” Jack took the page from her hand and put it inside his jacket. The rest of the painful evidence he fed to the hungry flames.

“Jack, no!” The fire was hot and in an instant there was nothing to retrieve. “He said you could use them. Why did you do that?”

“I could have; they would have brought me money a plenty. They were nothing other than his message to me of what I had done, of what I was.” Jack paused. “But I already knew that.”

“I had hoped. Now what do we do?” Catherine said at length.

Jack did not reply immediately; he was watching the fire still. He held his hand up to still her words, his eyes fixed on the depth of the furnace before him. “I must start to act like a brother; you said you spoke to Richard?”

“Yes, through the window at the back near the kitchens,” Catherine said, eager now and hoping he had some ideas.

“Do you think you can speak to him again,” Jack asked, “without being seen?”

“Yes, it’s dark; it should be easy,” Catherine agreed.

“Go, speak to him. Tell him that you’ve spoken to me. Tell him that I said they will not let him leave here alive. Gauge his reaction, see if he welcomes help and then come back here,” Jack said. Catherine waited. It didn’t seem much of a plan. “Go now, off with you,” Jack said, and then, seeing her disappointment at his own lack of actions, added, “I think better alone, be gone.”

Catherine took the wine with her and silently made her way to the back of the house. For the second time she laid on the grass and stared into the darkness.

“Well, if it isn’t Catherine come again to enjoy my misery,” Richard said.

“Are you all right?” Catherine asked. It had seemed for an instant the right thing to say, but for an instant only.

“Save your platitudes for those who welcome them. Speaking of such, how is that brother of mine?” Richard sounded annoyed.

His brother was about to have a difficult conversation with Robert Fitzwarren; Jack had seen him in the hall and recognised him, but had avoided eye contact with his malicious half brother. Jack was sure Robert would remember him as one of Harry’s men. He had heard his voice as he quipped with his own men, and he heard it again now, outside his room.

Jack did not have to wait long until he faced his brother fully for the first time. The door was flung open with enough force to make it rebound off the wall and Robert stood, framed in the doorway.

"Come in," said Jack.

Robert nodded to those laughing behind him to stay, and shut the door at his back, smiling broadly at the man in front of him. "I'm Robert, Richard's brother, damn the man. I had to come and see you. My thanks are yours."

Jack was careful, very careful. "Why is that?"

"God! The man broke my father's health, dragged our name, my name, through all of the filth of England, conspired against the crown, and tarred my family with treason. You wonder what for?" Robert said, and then added, "Whatever your reasons were, those were mine and I am thankful."

Jack nodded in acceptance of his words, but remained silent. Robert wandered idly to the fire. "So you're the man who poor Harry blames for his failure on Harlsey Moor. Was it as he says and you hit him from behind just as he was about to kill Richard, who was begging for mercy at his feet?"

"Not quite," Jack said moving to seat himself near where Robert stood.

"I thought so," Robert said. Dropping to his haunches he began to revive the fire with the poker, sending fresh vigorous light around the room. Jack could not see his face. "So why did you leave Harry then?" the lazy voice asked him, turning the poker against the hot wood.

"Would you have stayed with him? I was a free man. Why not leave?" Jack said simply.

"And take up with your brother Richard. Yes indeed, why not," Robert agreed.

"Half brother," Jack corrected. He had learnt well from Richard.

"Aye, whatever," Robert said. "My father was always raising bastards. Said he wanted a daughter, and can you believe it, the only girl he ever sired died in infancy. But boys! There's a dozen of them from his loins at least," Robert said, his voice still lazy. Jack ignored his words, knew the lie and the intent behind them. "So what will you do now?" Robert asked.

"I think, after today, I have more than I could want, don't you?"

Robert's eyes met Jack's. "What I can't understand is why leave Harry, take up with Richard, and then turn sides again? That I can't understand."

Jack's face hardened. "Treachery must be a family trait. I have no liking for the master." The term was intentional. "He has done me no favours, and

now I have what was his. It's enough for me. As for him, I care not."

Robert smiled and returned his eyes to the poker. "One of your men tells me this is a house of unfortunates. There another in Richard's keeping, a woman, Catherine de Bernay. Is this true?"

"Aye, she's around somewhere. Why?" Jack asked, trying desperately to think. How could he keep her safe?

"Ah, no reason. I was just thinking that as you have served yourself so well today, the safety of the woman may be of some value to her family, and I have decided to undertake that task."

Ah, thought Jack, here was part of what Robert wanted. He believed Catherine was heir to a manor and land, and obviously thought he could use her to control this. The irony of it was had he known the size of Assingham he probably wouldn't have bothered.

Jack knew he would have no choice. "Seems fair. Where she is now, I can't say but I will find her for you tomorrow. The woman has a sizeable estate. I'm sure she'll be delighted to be returned there." It was a lie but it was what Robert wanted to hear, and it made Catherine valuable, which meant she'd be safe, for the moment.

Robert seemed happy with Jack's acquiescence. Rising he left the poker, hot in the fire. "Well, my thanks again." His eyes were hard on Jack's relaxed face. Jack's impulse was to stand, but he suppressed it, ignoring formality and deferment to this man.

Jack spread his hands wide. "There is no need, but if in serving myself I have done you a service also I am grateful."

"Just one last thing," Robert said.

Here it comes, thought Jack.

"Did you know Richard is a cuckoo?" Jack's face was puzzled. Robert continued. "Aye, my father, Lord knows why, swapped his wife's child for one of his bastard sons begot of I know not who. The bastard was Richard. The child of his wife died I am told, so the case could never be set to rights. Aye, I am as surprised as you. Poor father cleared his conscience of his sin when he died. Didn't you know he was dead? Ah yes some three weeks past. Signed his name to the confession he did." Robert left Jack and made his way to the door.

Robert had neatly solved his problems, making Richard the bastard, who was about to be disposed of, left him with no contender for his place.

“I spoke to Jack; he doesn’t believe they’ll let you leave here.” She spoke the words without realising that she told a man of the immediacy of his death.

“Ah, so I shall be martyred and none shall know my cause.” Richard sounded bored. “I accept; it matters little.”

“If there is no purpose, get out.”

He reappeared before her suddenly and she stopped, surprised by the intensity of the eyes that met hers. “Who will help me? You, Catherine? Please, I shall not dwell on the hope you offer. To hold out a hand to mine enemy is divine, but please, girl, don’t overdo it.” Richard’s voice was heavy with sarcasm.

“No, you misunderstand. Please, there is hope; you must believe me,” Catherine said.

“I believe nothing anymore, Catherine. Please go,” was all he said.

“I can’t believe you can just give up,” Catherine said angrily.

She heard the laugh from below. “Now you attack my very courage and liken me to a will-less idiot. Go, leave me.”

Catherine tried again. “Whatever you seem to think, you’re worth more alive than dead.”

“To who? To myself, no, I think not. To you, I doubt it. To Jack, I hope not.”

“Here.” She passed the bottle through the bars. “If I had seen you like this before I came I would unstopped it and filled it with poison.”

“I am sorry you did not think to put an end to your sufferings in such a fashion. It would be a fitting end to have my demise at your hand would it not?” he replied taking the bottle. “I will not dance for the comfort of your soul, lady.”

“Go to Hell, Richard,” Catherine shouted into the dark.

“Undoubtedly. Tell Jack I will wait for him,” he said laughing.

Jack looked up. “Well?” he asked. Catherine didn’t answer and he read the reply from her face, “Ah, it went that well did it?”

Jack told Catherine of Robert’s visit and of Robert’s plans to take Catherine into his own care.

“I don’t believe what he said any more than he does,” Jack finished.

“Why then?” Catherine asked.

“It was to stop me in any plans I may have to lay claim to Robert’s place. He isn’t sure whether I know the truth, but that was intended to dissuade me if I did,” Jack supplied.

“So that makes Richard a bastard and you...” Catherine stopped.

“It was a brief journey was it not from bastardy to legitimacy and back again?” Jack was smiling. “It makes no difference, Catherine. Anyway how do we know what he said is true?” Jack continued smiling. “Have we seen all the cards he holds? No, we have most certainly not.”

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Twenty-Two

Mat did not wait for an answer to his knock, but burst into the room.

“Riders, they’re at the village. They took a different route and I missed them. I was at Lincoln. I was told the Queen’s men had passed north. Jack, I’m sorry,” Mat gasped.

“God, that’s it then. Jesus help me,” Jack said. He was up, already reaching for his sword.

Mat grabbed the arm that reached for the blade. “What are you doing, lad? You’ll not help like this.”

Jack shook off Mat’s grasp. “I have to do something.”

“You’ll be dead before you draw it, Jack,” Mat said firmly.

“Well, let it be so then,” Jack said buckling on the belt and reaching for a jacket, which was creased and travel stained. It was sad attire to meet his death in, and he discarded it; a shirt would do.

Mat moved to stand in his way as he made to leave. “I’ll not let you do it. Don’t let them take you both in one day, Jack. You can’t stop them.”

“You must listen. He is right. This is misplaced, please,” Catherine pleaded.

“What would you have me do, stand and watch?” There was agony in his voice.

“If it is to be, yes,” Mat said harshly.

The manor’s contingent was assembled in the hall. Richard stood between two men, his hands bound again. All eyes were on the key players and Catherine slipped easily into the group and moved until she was standing behind Jack.

“It’s time, Richard, for you to answer for your crimes,” the constable said. He moved into the centre of the hall and the watchers fell back against the walls. One of the uniformed men came forward to stand in front of Richard. She recognised him as the one who had delivered the blow the previous evening. He drew his sword and stood there expectantly. The prisoner viewed him quizzically. The thirty or so men fell silent.

“Give him a sword,” the man said to the room generally, and one was duly thrown at the prisoner, landing in front of his feet. Another uniformed man moved and cut the bonds.

“Oh shit,” Catherine heard Jack say under his breath.

“That man will be no match for Richard,” she whispered for his ears alone.

“God. I don’t think that this will be a fair fight,” Jack hissed.

Steel clashed with steel and the first sparks flew from the conflict. For several minutes, Richard parried the blows aimed at his body. Catherine watched. There was nothing too difficult to overcome in David’s attack, so why did Richard not move fast and hard? Why was he constantly on the defensive?

“Go on, David, you have him,” someone yelled encouragingly.

The scene began to change and she realised why Richard was adopting such a tactic. Another man stepped into the ring and positioned himself carefully behind David who, at an opportune moment, stepped back into the ring of observers. The contest continued. Richard remained on the defensive, being as economical with his movements as possible. He knew what they meant to do: wear him down then kill him. No, she cast her eyes around the room, probably not kill him; humiliation, utter and complete humiliation was their game.

Jack moved from her side and she grasped his arm. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Watch,” he replied and drew his sword, entering the ring next to Richard’s current assailant, who retreated behind the new entrant.

Richard stood waiting for Jack’s first move. Jack circled him laughing, “I have waited a long time for this.” He continued to circle, his careless attacks only intended to provoke as he continued to verbally goad his brother.

“Have you nothing to say?” Another blow. “Do you want to ask me for mercy as you have made me beg to you on so many occasions.” Another brief blow, parried easily by Richard.

“Come on you bastard talk to me.” Another blow, another parry.

Catherine realised what Jack was doing. The tirade of verbal abuse and limited action was allowing Richard to regain his strength. The charade continued until Gavin, one of Richard’s men, stepped up behind Jack.

Richard locked his sword into the hilt of Jack's and dragged him close; both feigned struggle. "Thanks," Richard said. Suddenly he let Jack go and kicked him hard in the stomach. Jack fell backwards, landing against Gavin, sending the pair of them sprawling to the floor. John, another formerly loyal man, stepped in. Catherine wondered if he still supported his master. The fatal game began again and from the blows aimed by Richard's assailant, there was malice and revenge in them.

Jack stood again near Catherine.

"Your knife," Catherine whispered. Jack turned. "Just do it," she prodded him hard in the back with a finger to make her point. A second later a hilt appeared in his right hand behind his back. Catherine took the weapon.

John had stepped back and Gavin had made a second entry into the ring. The effort of fending off the continuous blows was starting to tell on Richard. Catherine moved to stand in front of Jack. She would judge her moment well. David joined again and heavy hard blows landed against Richard's sword. His shirt was soaked with sweat and his hair hung limply from his head. Soon, very soon, someone was going to break through his guard. David did not remain long, his strength already diminished from the earlier battle, and another stepped in. Catherine studied his face: it was too eager. He had moved in with the intention of making the kill. The pace increased as he tried to break through Richard's defences and deliver the blow. Richard failed to fully deflect an attack and the sword, its speed not fully deadened, made it through his defence and sliced into his left arm. Richard was forced to respond and in doing so began to lose the last of his strength, blood running from the wound.

"Finish him," Jack hissed to himself under his breath. Richard staggered backwards as if off balance. The man's eyes widened as he saw his opening. The feint worked and he raised his sword high, hoping to bring it down on his victim so hard that it would bury itself up to the hilt in bone and flesh. Catherine watched, her body rigid, hoping Richard could still take full advantage of the opportunity he had been given. He did. Dropping to his right knee he avoided the blow and his sword entered between the ribs of his surprised opponent who hung on the sword for an age before Richard sharply pulled it back. The dying man collapsed to the floor. Richard stepped back from the body, his breath coming in ragged gasps from the exertion. The man's death had bought him a few seconds. New entrants

were not so willing to enter now. David stepped aside to allow Gavin to enter again, and Catherine made her move. As she pushed past Jack she hissed, "St. Bede's."

"No," she yelled, knife in her hand. "Turn and face me, Richard, give me that satisfaction."

There was a murmur of voices accompanied by grins. "This will be humiliation indeed." David stayed Gavin's advance.

"She's more than enough reason to want revenge," Alan yelled.

Richard watched her approach, his hands on his knees his breath coming raggedly to his exhausted body. She noted that the blood that ran down the sword blade was his own, running from his hand down the hilt.

"Ah, Catherine, there is some justice in this I suppose," Richard said and smiled.

Jesus God, Catherine thought, he still thinks I am going to try and kill him.

Suddenly the danger she was in dawned on her. He did not see her as his rescuer but as a final foe. Her eyes were drawn again to the blooded sword.

"Shit." She took the biggest risk of her life and swung the dagger at Richard's head. Richard grabbed her arm, twisting it cruelly. Catherine dropped the dagger. For a second their heads were together. "Take me hostage."

He took the opportunity offered. Retrieving the knife from the floor he spun her round, pulling the blade to her throat. "Back away. I think the odds have just changed," Richard gasped.

Two men moved forward.

"No," yelled Jack. "He's got de Bernay's daughter." There was a murmur and they duly fell back and allowed Richard to make his way to the door. Once outside it was Richard who slammed the bar in place, "Come on, that'll not hold." The pair fled down the steps from the hall.

"Here," yelled a voice as the couple fell into the yard. Dan held two saddled horses. "I'm way ahead of you, Catherine," grinned Dan.

They threw themselves into the saddles and dug their heels in.

"St Bede's," Catherine yelled above the galloping horses.

Jack was first at the locked door, ineffectually beating it and cursing like the soldier he was. "He'll go north to the port; I know the bastard too well,"

Jack continued to be in the way as the men tried to use a table to batter the door through.

St Bede's was a short ride, and both horses made it at full gallop. They stood with their sides heaving as Catherine and Richard dropped from the saddles.

"If anyone had deserved my life, it was probably you, and you did say last night that you wished to get even with me," was all he said.

Catherine was piqued. "You scared the shit out of me." She looked at her swelling hand. "And broke my hand by the feel of it, you ungrateful bastard."

"You think you could have taken it," he laughed weakly.

"No," she replied. "Richard, I am not your enemy." She let go of the reins and stepped towards him. Richard swayed and put his arm out, but there was nothing within reach to steady him and he dropped painfully to his knees. Everything had happened so fast that Catherine had no time to observe fully his injuries. Now she saw that his left arm ran with blood, and his shirt clung to his body also soaked with the same. His face pale he looked likely to pitch forward into the mud.

"Shit, come on, Richard." She knelt in front of him and yelled into his face. "Look at me, come on."

His face was deathly white but his eyes did focus on her face. Catherine dragged the weight of his good arm up to her shoulders so he could steady himself.

"Come on, concentrate. Don't do this to me, Richard. Don't pass out. Whatever you do, don't pass out." She hurriedly untied her belt as she spoke, saying anything to keep his dwindling attention. "I'm going to stop the bleeding and Jack will be here soon. Please, Jack, get your arse here. I said St Bede's, let's hope...ugh..." she pulled the belt tight around his upper arm, "...the bastard's not deaf. Come on! Are you still with me? She stared into his eyes. Come on, Jack." She put her hand up and slapped his face. "Richard, talk to me," she yelled at him. Richard swallowed, unable to hold his head up any longer, he fell forward on top of Catherine and lost consciousness.

Catherine could barely move, his weight bearing down on her pinned her to the ground. It took all her strength to roll him off. "Jack," she cried, panicking. God, was Richard dead?

She heard a horse being yanked to an abrupt stop and Jack dropped from it straight into a run. Catherine was pulled roughly away to sit sprawled on the ground as Jack assessed his brother's injuries. He re-tightened Catherine's belt and the pair hauled the body over the horse's neck.

Jack didn't speak to her. He looked sadly at her then struck out. The punch landed before she could speak. He caught her, dropped her none too gently on the grass and left her.

He took the horse with the unconscious figure by the reins and mounted his own and they were gone.

Jack took his brother to a house, long abandoned, in the woods, used sometimes as a hunting lodge, and left him on the floor in the one-roomed building, covered with his cloak. He then rode quickly to the village and left a hasty message with Jamie before setting off back to the manor to join the hunt for Catherine and Richard.

The ruse of sending the pursuers to the port had quickly failed. The riders simply questioned those at the road side. No horses had been seen speeding that way and the group soon saw their folly and headed back. Jack judged his timing wrongly, and found himself forced, at sword point, to dismount in the manor's courtyard on his return.

"Inside, damn you," One of the constable's men growled.

"Who's the women then, eh?" the constable barked back across the hall at him.

Ah, thought Jack, rallying his wits about him. Well there was only one way to find out how bad things were.

Jack's eyes narrowed as he looked at Alan. Traitor, he thought. "You are right: she's a valuable asset," Jack said simply, moving to seat himself comfortably, an air of ease about him as he surveyed the constable.

"She is Catherine de Bernay, a wealthy heiress with lands and a manor at Assingham. How she fell in with Richard I do not know. I had intended to trade her back to her family in return for..." Jack left the sentence unfinished. His brain hurt; he was trying to think so fast. "As you can see, she is not worth much dead, but alive and kicking..."

"Aye, she was kicking all right when your man brought her here." The constable grinned. Jack wondered where she was.

Alan still believed in Jack as Richard's aggressor it appeared, and had not linked him with the escape. His position was secure, at least for the

moment.

“You can prove your words?” the constable said.

Jack thought for a minute. “I believe I can confirm her identity to your satisfaction, yes. I have handed over her care to Robert Fitzwarren; he has undertaken to return her back to her family.”

“So what do you intend to do, Constable? I am in your debt as you can see,” Jack waved his arm around the hall. “I have triumphed this day even if you unfortunately do not have your charge anymore, and I am grateful to you. The deal still stands I assume.”

“Huh, I’ve got men searching. He can’t be far from here, not with a goodly wound as that. I expect to find him bled to death in a field,” the constable said.

You may be right, thought Jack, wondering if his brother was already a corpse. They searched for the remainder of the day, fruitlessly. Robert had joined the search, eager to confirm his brother’s death, but in that he was disappointed. Eventually he took his men and left, taking Catherine with him, hoping for a reward he would receive before he went to heaven. He was sure that the De Bernay family could be persuaded to pay heavily for her return or that he could use her to manipulate her estates.

Jack did not see Catherine again; he returned to the dais and this time he did drink heavily. He wondered where they would go from here. Richard should have returned to London and stood trial and denied Elizabeth’s involvement in his schemes, but that had been undone. They had tried to kill him here instead, and prevent a trial. Or perhaps it had been done on the Queen’s orders. Richard had received royal favours; such a trial would have been humiliating for the crown. Yes, there were more reasons to have him dead than allow him to stand trial. He could implicate too many people. God, Richard, Jack thought morosely, you have lost this time. The stakes were far, far too high. Maybe he had already paid with his life.

Jack put his head back in his hands. He wanted to weep for the utter destruction of it. In the sword ring, he had seen in Richard’s eyes the request. He had asked Jack to end it there, he was sure, but he had pushed that aside.

The table on which his eyes were locked bore no message of advice. He did not hear the door to the hall open, but he felt the coldness of the air it admitted on his face. His mind elsewhere, he paid no attention until he heard the light and uneven footfalls of a man limping towards the dais:

Jamie. He read the message in the other's face, and his head dropped back to his arms. Jamie moved forward until he was close enough for his words to be heard by Jack only.

"Get your arse up, lad," he hissed. "Come on out of this room now before they see. Come on, follow me." Jack allowed Jamie's bony fingers to prod him into mobility and followed the priest blindly from the hall. "Where's your room?" Jamie said. Jack pointed and Jamie continued to push his charge down the corridor, up the stairs and finally through the door. Only when inside did he stop.

Jack stood in the room, arms wrapped around his body, shivering uncontrollably. Jamie moved and dragged a chair over until it was behind Jack

"Sit, lad, come on." Jack didn't move and Jamie was compelled to push him into it. Jack fell forwards in the chair, elbows on knees, head in his hands. Soundlessly he sat there. Jamie sighed, shaking his head. He placed his hand gently under Jack's chin and lifted his head, while Jack looked blindly at him. His fingers caught the chain around his neck and pulled the cross from over his head. Turning Jack's right hand over he placed it in his palm and closed his fingers around it. Looking at him for a long time he wondered if he were lost, and sighing again, he busied himself building a fire in the darkened cold grate.

The day was fresh born when Jamie moved from in front of the fire to look at Jack. He had slept at last, slouched uncomfortably in the chair, the chain of the cross wound round his fingers. Jamie smiled. Maybe not lost then. Jamie left the room and went in search of a man called Dan. Unashamed he kicked several of the sleepers until one admitted to that name and blinked up at him.

"You Dan?" Jamie said quietly.

"Why what's going on?" Dan said, his voice tired.

"Up with you. I've got to talk to you." The man before him made no move to leave his cocoon of blankets. Jamie stooped lower "Now. I have a message from your master." The words were enough. "Come on, follow me." Jamie led Dan from the hall and up the stairs he had pushed Jack up the night before, until they were outside the room Jack slept in.

"What message have you? Does he live? Tell me," Dan said desperately. "Tell me, does he live?"

Jamie shook his head and Dan turned from him, both of his fists pounding into the wall behind him, a gasp of agony escaping his lips, his forehead against the stone. Jamie, although impatient, let him alone with his thoughts and ran through one of his longer prayers as he waited. Finally, he placed a hand on Dan's shoulder. "The message," he said. He saw Dan with an effort gather himself and turn to face him.

"Go on, old man," Dan said almost silently.

"He gave me this before he went, so you'd mark his words." Jamie produced a ring from one of his sleeves and handed it to Dan, who received it wordlessly. "It's for Jack. He said you'd help him, and these are my words not his, he needs help."

Dan turned the ring over in his hand. "Where is he?"

Jamie gestured to the door. Dan took a step towards it, but Jamie stopped him. "He's your master now; you know that don't you?" Dan nodded.

Dan paused when he closed the door behind him, looking at the broken form in the chair. Taking a deep breath he straightened his back and resolved to deal with his own torment later. "Jack, I'm here to help you. If you don't let me you'll be joining him soon. Now get out of there." Dan's words were brutal, and Jack sat there staring at him, the feeling of coldness still on him.

"Up, Jack, now. I served that man most of my life, knew him longer than you ever did. Now he wants you to take his place. Why I don't know, and I'll not question him, but I'll be damned if I'll let you sit and feel sorry for yourself. You will get up and take his place, and if you do it badly, or not at all, I'll kill you myself. UP!" Dan's temper flooded his words, and Jack moved to comply, as he was meant to.

"He sent this for you." Dan opened his palm and held out the ring. Jack carefully took it and held it up to the light. He made to slide it on his right hand, but Dan's hand went out and snatched it back, "You'll not put that on looking like the sack of shit you do now."

Jamie satisfied took his ear from the door and shuffled off.

By mid morning, Dan, by a combination of verbal abuse bullying and physical blows, had managed to coax Jack back into the land of the living, giving him no time for his grief. Dan turned his mind back to years past when his occupation had been to look after his young master and began mercilessly to take Jack's room apart. Clothes were bundled up in his arms,

and when Jack protested as he tried to leave the room with them, Dan threw them on the fire.

“You know you got to make your mark with them today or you’re going to lose your place,” Dan said, still moving around the room, picking things up, discarding them again and moving on.

“Yes, I know that,” Jack sighed. He was fingering the single piece of parchment taken from Richard’s room that he had not burnt. Dan’s eyes rested on it.

“Mat’s with you, and me, which is a good start. I think you could have trouble with Gavin and Alan,” Dan said. The mention of the names was intentional. They gave Jack a focus for his emotions. He too had seen them in the hall, and the moves they had made against Richard. He watched the embers deep in Jack’s eyes burn as the heat was fanned with the fresh fuel of revenge, but the younger man was still quiet. Dan had expected outbursts, recriminations, fury and loss of temper, but of these emotions he witnessed little.

The sun was low, the early darkness of autumn descending soon over Burton. Jack moved to a table where wine stood and reached for a glass. Dan intercepted his arm, “No, not tonight. You’ll need your mind clear to face them if you’re to make your stand.”

Jack turned to look into his face, “I hear you.”

Dan watched him as he walked to stand staring from the window. He could be looking at Richard’s back, he thought sadly. Finely dressed now, Jack looked much like Richard, apart from the stark contrast between black cloth and blond hair.

Evening came and the remaining group of Richard’s men were silent in the hall. A large quantity of beer stood on the tables and they could see Jack, who appeared well drunk, sitting at the dais, where Richard had sat only days before, alone, shunning company.

He did not move. The mood in the hall was expectant. The message had been passed of his brother’s death, and they knew Jack meant to take his place. The reactions had varied when he had appeared in the hall. Friend had become foe when they judged he tried to emulate Richard. Some pitied him; others saw a new light in his eyes and weighed the danger that lay there. Many decided to delay their judgement until they could view his acts.

Jack raised his head; blond hair fell over his eyes. He found his first quarry seated by the fire playing cards, laughing and drinking. Jack watched

Alan and his blue eyes darkened. The man had just won and was raking coins across the boards towards him. Blue changed to black. The cards were dealt again. Alan reached for beer and drank a lengthy draft. Black eyes reflected the yellow dance of the fire. Jack raised himself from the dais and stood above them, pushing the table from in front of him. The scrape of wood on wood drew the attention of some, who turned to see Jack standing alone on the dais. Drawing his sword, the sound of steel on steel got the attention of the rest.

“Alan stand. Our business is unfinished,” Jack said loudly over the silence that had settled.

“What?” Alan said rising from his seat. “Are you mad, Jack?”

Jack lightly jumped from the dais. He stood some paces from Alan, prepared, sober and resolved to commit this execution.

The hall remained silent while Jack taught his remaining followers a lesson in loyalty. Then he stood silently and looked down the length of his bleeding sword at the bodies of two men who would not betray him further, Gavin and Alan. He returned, alone, to the dais, laid the sword on the boards and, seating himself, finally poured ale into a cup. The silence in the hall, moved by small degrees until the noise was back to its previous level as they considered what they had witnessed. Jack cared not if they sought to further challenge him, cared less what they thought of him, and worried not at the quiet words they now exchanged.

Dan, sitting at the end of one of the tables called down to Froggy, partway along, his words clear and loud to be heard by all. “Pass me that jug for the master.” Froggy looked up, met his eye and moved swiftly to comply. Jack heard his declaration, but his face registered nothing. Dan, rising, crossed to Jack and placed the jug carefully and quietly in front of him. “Here.” He placed the ring he had snatched from Jack earlier beside it. Jack’s eyes looked down at the ornament and then back up to meet Dan’s. He did not smile. Dan nodded, a hard but satisfied look on his face.

Review's would be really appreciated.

If you have enjoyed 'A Queens Spy' and if I have entertained you for a few hours it would be fantastic if you could take the time to leave a review on Amazon or Good Reads. Reviews are so important and your thoughtful comments would be gratefully received. I read them all and hope I can look forward to reading yours. At the moment I am half way through the next chapter in the lives of Richard and Jack and I hope you may enjoy the next installment, there follows a brief excerpt from the first chapter.

Sam Burnell.

OceanofPDF.com