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WORLD WITHOUT END

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Table of Contents

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Ken Follett is the international bestselling author of suspense thrillers and the nonfiction *On Wings of Eagles*. He lives in England. Visit Ken Follett's official Web site at www.ken-follett.com.

The PILLARS Of The EARTh

KEN FOLLETT

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To Marie-Claire, the apple of my eye

Contents

Preface

Prologue

Part One:1135-1136

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Part Two:1136-1137

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Part Three:1140-1142

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Part Four:1142-1145

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Part Five:1152-1155

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Part Six:1170-1174

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Preface

NOTHING HAPPENS the way you plan it.

A lot of people were surprised by *The Pillars of the Earth*, including me. I was known as a thriller writer. In the book business, when you have had a success, the smart thing to do is write the same sort of thing once a year for the rest of your life. Clowns should not try to play Hamlet; pop stars should not write symphonies. I should not have risked my reputation by writing something out of character and overambitious.

What's more, I don't believe in God. I'm not what you would call a spiritual person. According to my agent, my greatest problem as a writer is that I'm not a tortured soul. The last thing anyone would have expected from me was a story about building a church.

So *Pillars* was an unlikely book for me to write—and I almost didn't. I started it, then dropped it, and did not look at it again for ten years.

This is how it happened.

When I was a boy, all my family belonged to a Puritan religious group called the Plymouth Brethren. For us, a church was a bare room with rows of chairs around a central table. Paintings, statues, and all forms of decoration were banned. The sect also discouraged members from visiting rival churches. So I grew up pretty much ignorant of Europe's wealth of gorgeous church architecture.

I started trying to write novels in my middle twenties, while working as a reporter on London's *Evening News*. I realized then that I had never taken much interest in the cityscape around me, and I had no vocabulary to describe the buildings in which my characters had their adventures. So I bought *An Outline of European Architecture* by Nikolaus Pevsner. That book gave me eyes with which to look at buildings in general and churches in particular. Pevsner got really passionate when he wrote about Gothic cathedrals. The invention of the pointed arch, he wrote, was a rare event in history, when the solution to a technical problem—how to build a taller church—was also

sublimely beautiful.

Soon after I read Pevsner's book, my newspaper sent me to the East Anglian city of Peterborough. I have long forgotten what story I was covering, but I shall always remember what I did after filing it. I had to wait an hour for a train back to London, so, remembering Pevsner's fascinating and passionate descriptions of medieval architecture, I went to see Peterborough Cathedral.

It was one of those moments.

The west front of Peterborough has three huge Gothic arches, like doorways for giants. The inside is older than the façade, with arcades of regular round Norman arches in stately procession up the aisle. Like all great churches, it is both tranquil and beautiful. But it was more than that. Because of Pevsner's book, I had some inkling of the effort that had gone into this. I knew the story of humankind's attempts to build ever taller and more beautiful churches. I understood the place of this building in history, my history.

I was enraptured by Peterborough Cathedral.

Cathedral visiting became a hobby for me. Every few months I would drive to one of England's old cities, check into a hotel, and study the church. This way I saw Canterbury, Salisbury, Winchester, Gloucester, and Lincoln, each one unique, each with an intriguing story to tell. Most people take an hour or two to "do" a cathedral, but I like to have a couple of days.

The stones themselves reveal the construction history: stops and starts, damage and rebuilding, extensions in times of prosperity, and stained-glass tributes to the wealthy men who generally paid the bills. Another story is told by the way the church is sited in the town. Lincoln faces the castle across the street, religious and military power nose to nose. Winchester stands amid a neat grid of streets, laid out by a medieval bishop who fancied himself a town planner. Salisbury moved, in the thirteenth century, from a defensive hilltop site—where the ruins of the old cathedral are still visible—to an open meadow, showing that permanent peace had arrived.

But all the while a question nagged at me: Why were these churches built?

There are simple answers—for the glory of God, the vanity of bishops, and so on—but those were not enough for me. The building of the medieval cathedrals is an astonishing European phenomenon. The builders had no power tools, they did not understand the mathematics of structural engineering, and they were poor: the richest of princes did not live as well as, say, a prisoner in a modern jail. Yet they put up the most beautiful buildings that have ever existed, and they built them so well that they are still here, hundreds of years later, for us to study and marvel at.

I began to read about these churches, but I found the books unsatisfactory.

There was a great deal of aesthetic guff about elevations, but not much about the living buildings. Then I came across *The Cathedral Builders* by Jean Gimpel. Gimpel, the black sheep of a family of French art dealers, was as impatient as I with discussions about whether a clerestory "worked" aesthetically. His book was about the dirt-poor hovel dwellers who actually put up these fabulous buildings. He read the payroll records of French monasteries and took an interest in who the builders were and how much money they made. He was the first person to notice, for example, that a significant minority of the names were female. The medieval church was sexist, but women as well as men built the cathedrals.

Another work of Gimpel's, *The Medieval Machine*, taught me that the Middle Ages were a time of rapid high-tech innovation, during which the power of water mills was harnessed for a wide variety of industrial applications. Soon I was taking an interest in medieval life in general. And I began to get a picture of how the building of the great cathedrals must have seemed like the right thing to do for medieval people.

The explanation is not simple. It is a little like trying to understand why twentieth-century people spent so much money exploring outer space. In both cases, a whole network of influences operated: scientific curiosity, commercial interests, political rivalries, and the spiritual aspirations of earthbound people. And it seemed to me there was only one way to map that network: by writing a novel.

Sometime in 1976 I wrote an outline and about four chapters of the novel. I sent it to my agent, Al Zuckerman, who wrote, "You have created a tapestry. What you need is a series of linked melodramas."

Looking back, I can see that at the age of twenty-seven I was not capable of writing such a novel. I was like an apprentice watercolor painter planning a vast canvas in oils. To do justice to its subject, the book would have to be very long, cover a period of several decades, and bring alive the great sweep of medieval Europe. I was writing much less ambitious books, and even so, I had not yet mastered the craft.

I dropped the cathedral book and came up with another idea, a thriller about a German spy in wartime England. Happily, that was within my powers, and under the title *Eye of the Needle*, it became my first bestseller.

For the next decade I wrote thrillers, but I continued to visit cathedrals, and the idea of my cathedral novel never went away. I resurrected it in January 1986, having finished my sixth thriller, *Lie Down with Lions*.

My publishers were nervous. They wanted another spy story. My friends were also apprehensive. They know that I enjoy success. I'm not the kind of writer who would deal with a failure by saying that the book was good but the readers were inadequate. I write to entertain, and I'm happy doing so. A failure would make me miserable. No one tried to talk me out of it, but lots of

people expressed anxious reservations.

However, I did not plan a “difficult” book. I would write an adventure story, full of colorful characters who were ambitious, wicked, sexy, heroic, and smart. I wanted ordinary readers to be as enraptured as I was by the romance of the medieval cathedrals.

By then I had developed the method of working that I continue to use to this day. I begin by writing an outline of the story, saying what happens in each chapter, and giving thumbnail sketches of the characters. But this book was not like my others. The beginning came easily, but, as the story unwound over the decades and the people grew from youth to maturity, I found it more and more difficult to invent new twists and turns in their lives. I realized that one long book is much more of a challenge than three short ones.

The hero of the story had to be some kind of man of God. This was difficult for me. I would find it hard to get interested in a character who was focused on the afterlife (and so would many readers). To make Prior Philip more sympathetic, I gave him a very practical, down-to-earth religious belief, a concern for people’s souls here on earth, not just in heaven.

Philip’s sexuality was also a problem. All monks and priests were supposed to be celibate in the Middle Ages. The obvious drama would be that of a man fighting a terrible battle with his lusts. But I could not work up any enthusiasm for that theme. I grew up in the 1960s, and my heart is always with those who deal with temptation by giving in to it. In the end I made him one of that minority of people for whom sex really is no big deal. He is the only cheerfully celibate character I have ever created.

I got in contact with Jean Gimpel, who had inspired me a decade earlier, and was astonished to learn that not only did he live in London but on my street. I hired him as a consultant, and we became friends and table-tennis opponents until his death.

By March of the following year, 1987, I had outlined only the first two thirds of the book. I decided that would have to be sufficient. I began to write.

By December I had a couple hundred pages.

This was pretty disastrous. I had been working on the story for two years, and all I had was an incomplete outline and a few chapters. I couldn’t spend the rest of my life on this book. But what was to be done? Well, I could drop it and write another thriller. Or I could work harder. In those days I used to write Monday to Friday, then deal with my business correspondence on Saturday morning. From around January 1988, I began to write Monday through Saturday, and do letters on Sunday. My output increased dramatically, partly because of the extra day, but mainly because of the intensity I was bringing to my work. The problem of the end of the book, which I had not outlined, was solved by a flash of inspiration, when I thought of involving the principal characters in the notorious real-life murder of Thomas Becket.

As I recall, I finished a first draft around the middle of that year. A combination of excitement and impatience impelled me to work even harder on the rewrite, and I began to work seven days a week. My business correspondence was neglected, but I finished the book in March 1989, three years and three months after starting it.

I was exhausted but happy. I felt I had written something special, not just another bestseller, but maybe a great popular novel.

Not many people agreed.

My American hardcover publisher, William Morrow & Co., printed around the same number of copies as they had of *Lie Down with Lions*, and when they sold the same number they were content. My London publishers were more excited, and *Pillars* sold better there than any of my previous books. But the initial reaction among publishers worldwide was a sigh of relief that Follett had completed his crazy project and got away with it. The book won no prizes—it was not even nominated. A few critics adored it, but most were unimpressed. It was a No. 1 bestseller in Italy, where readers have always been kind to me. The paperback was No. 1 for a week in Britain.

I began to think I had been wrong. Maybe the book *was* just another page-tuner, good but not great.

However, one person believed passionately that this book was special. My German editor, Walter Fritzsche, at Gustav Luebbe Verlag, had long dreamed of publishing a novel about the building of a cathedral. He had even spoken to some of his German authors about the idea, but nothing ever came of it. So he was very excited about what I was writing, and when the typescript came in he felt his hopes had been fulfilled.

Until this point, my work had been only modestly successful in Germany. (The villains in my books were often Germans, so I could hardly complain.) Fritzsche was so enthusiastic that he thought *Pillars* could be a breakthrough book, one that would make me the single most popular writer in Germany.

Even I didn’t believe that.

But he was right.

Luebbe published the book brilliantly. They hired a young artist, Achim Kiel, to do the cover, but when he insisted on designing the whole book, treating it as an art object, Luebbe had the courage to go with his concept. He was expensive, but he succeeded in communicating to the buyer Fritzsche’s feeling that there was something special about this book. (He went on to design all my German editions for many years, creating a look that Luebbe used again and again.)

The first intimation I had that *readers* saw the book as something special came when Luebbe took an advertisement to celebrate the sale of 100,000 copies. I had never sold that many hardcovers in any country other than the United States (which has three times as many people as Germany).

After a couple of years, *Pillars* began to appear on the list of longest-selling books, having made some eighty appearances on the German bestseller list. As time went by, it just stayed there. (To date, it has made more than three hundred weekly appearances.)

One day I was checking my royalty statement from New American Library, my U.S. paperback publisher. These statements are carefully designed to prevent the author from knowing what is really happening to his book, but after decades of persistence I have learned to read them. And I noticed that *Pillars* was selling around 50,000 copies every six months. By comparison, *Eye of the Needle* was selling around 25,000, as were most of my other books.

I checked my U.K. sales and found the same pattern: *Pillars* sold about double.

I began to notice that *Pillars* was mentioned more than any other book in my fan mail. Signing in bookshops, I found that more and more readers told me *Pillars* was their favorite. Many people asked me to write a sequel. (I will, one day.) Some said it was the best book they had ever read, a compliment I had not received for any other book. A British travel company approached me about creating a Pillars of the Earth holiday. This was beginning to look like a cult hit.

Eventually I figured out what was happening. This was a word-of-mouth book. It's a truism of the book business that the best advertising is the kind you can't buy: the personal recommendation of one reader to another. That was what was selling *Pillars*. You did it, dear reader. Publishers, agents, critics, and the people who gave out literary prizes generally overlooked this book, but *you* did not. You noticed that it was different and special, and you told your friends; and in the end the word got around.

And so it happened. It seemed like the wrong book; I seemed like the wrong writer; and I almost didn't do it. But it is my best book, and you honored it.

I appreciate that. Thank you.

—Ken Follett
Stevenage, Hertfordshire
January 1999

On the night of 25 November 1120 the White Ship set out for England and floundered off Barfleur with all hands save one…. The vessel was the latest thing in marine transport, fitted with all the devices known to the shipbuilder of the time…. The notoriety of this wreck is due to the very large number of distinguished persons on board; beside the king's son and heir, there were two royal bastards, several earls and barons, and most of the royal household…its historical significance is that it left Henry without an obvious heir…its ultimate result was the disputed succession and the period of anarchy which followed Henry's death.

—*A. L. Poole,*
From Domesday Book to Magna Carta

PROLOGUE

1123

THE SMALL BOYS came early to the hanging.

It was still dark when the first three or four of them sidled out of the hovels, quiet as cats in their felt boots. A thin layer of fresh snow covered the little town like a new coat of paint, and theirs were the first footprints to blemish its perfect surface. They picked their way through the huddled wooden huts and along the streets of frozen mud to the silent marketplace, where the gallows stood waiting.

The boys despised everything their elders valued. They scorned beauty and mocked goodness. They would hoot with laughter at the sight of a cripple, and if they saw a wounded animal they would stone it to death. They boasted of injuries and wore their scars with pride, and they reserved their special admiration for mutilation: a boy with a finger missing could be their king. They loved violence; they would run miles to see bloodshed; and they never missed a hanging.

One of the boys piddled on the base of the scaffold. Another mounted the steps, put his thumbs to his throat and slumped, twisting his face into a grisly parody of strangulation: the others whooped in admiration, and two dogs came running into the marketplace, barking. A very young boy recklessly began to eat an apple, and one of the older ones punched his nose and took his apple. The young boy relieved his feelings by throwing a sharp stone at a dog, sending the animal howling home. Then there was nothing else to do, so they all squatted on the dry pavement in the porch of the big church, waiting for something to happen.

Candlelight flickered behind the shutters of the substantial wood and stone houses around the square, the homes of prosperous craftsmen and traders, as scullery maids and apprentice boys lit fires and heated water and made porridge. The color of the sky turned from black to gray. The townspeople came ducking out of their low doorways, swathed in heavy cloaks of coarse wool, and went shivering down to the river to fetch water.

Soon a group of young men, grooms and laborers and apprentices, swaggered into the marketplace. They turned the small boys out of the church porch with cuffs and kicks, then leaned against the carved stone arches, scratching themselves and spitting on the ground and talking with studied confidence about death by hanging. If he's lucky, said one, his neck breaks as soon as he falls, a quick death, and painless; but if not he hangs there turning red, his mouth opening and shutting like a fish out of water, until he chokes to death; and another said that dying like that can take the time a man takes to walk a mile; and a third said it could be worse than that, he had seen one where by the time the man died his neck was a foot long.

The old women formed a group on the opposite side of the marketplace, as far as possible from the young men, who were liable to shout vulgar remarks at their grandmothers. They always woke up early, the old women, even though they no longer had babies and children to worry over; and they were the first to get their fires lit and their hearths swept. Their acknowledged leader, the muscular Widow Brewster, joined them, rolling a barrel of beer as easily as a child rolls a hoop. Before she could get the lid off there was a small crowd of customers waiting with jugs and buckets.

The sheriff's bailiff opened the main gate, admitting the peasants who lived in the suburb, in the lean-to houses against the town wall. Some brought eggs and milk and fresh butter to sell, some came to buy beer or bread, and some stood in the marketplace and waited for the hanging.

Every now and again people would cock their heads, like wary sparrows, and glance up at the castle on the hilltop above the town. They saw smoke rising steadily from the kitchen, and the occasional flare of a torch behind the arrow-slit windows of the stone keep. Then, at about the time the sun must have started to rise behind the thick gray cloud, the mighty wooden doors opened in the gatehouse and a small group came out. The sheriff was first, riding a fine black courser, followed by an ox cart carrying the bound prisoner. Behind the cart rode three men, and although their faces could not be seen at that distance, their clothes revealed that they were a knight, a priest and a monk. Two men-at-arms brought up the rear of the procession.

They had all been at the shire court, held in the nave of the church, the day before. The priest had caught the thief red-handed; the monk had identified the silver chalice as belonging to the monastery; the knight was the thief's lord, and had identified him as a runaway; and the sheriff had condemned him to death.

While they came slowly down the hill, the rest of the town gathered around the gallows. Among the last to arrive were the leading citizens: the butcher, the baker, two leather tanners, two smiths, the cutler and the fletcher, all with their wives.

The mood of the crowd was odd. Normally they enjoyed a hanging. The

prisoner was usually a thief, and they hated thieves with the passion of people whose possessions are hard-earned. But this thief was different. Nobody knew who he was or where he came from. He had not stolen from them, but from a monastery twenty miles away. And he had stolen a jeweled chalice, something whose value was so great that it would be virtually impossible to sell—which was not like stealing a ham or a new knife or a good belt, the loss of which would hurt someone. They could not hate a man for a crime so pointless. There were a few jeers and catcalls as the prisoner entered the marketplace, but the abuse was halfhearted, and only the small boys mocked him with any enthusiasm.

Most of the townspeople had not been in court, for court days were not holidays and they all had to make a living, so this was the first time they had seen the thief. He was quite young, somewhere between twenty and thirty years of age, and of normal height and build, but otherwise his appearance was strange. His skin was as white as the snow on the roofs, he had protuberant eyes of startling bright green, and his hair was the color of a peeled carrot. The maids thought he was ugly; the old women felt sorry for him; and the small boys laughed until they fell down.

The sheriff was a familiar figure, but the other three men who had sealed the thief's doom were strangers. The knight, a fleshy man with yellow hair, was clearly a person of some importance, for he rode a war-horse, a huge beast that cost as much as a carpenter earned in ten years. The monk was much older, perhaps fifty or more, a tall, thin man who sat slumped in his saddle as if life were a wearisome burden to him. Most striking was the priest, a young man with a sharp nose and lank black hair, wearing black robes and riding a chestnut stallion. He had an alert, dangerous look, like a black cat that could smell a nest of baby mice.

A small boy took careful aim and spat at the prisoner. It was a good shot and caught him between the eyes. He snarled a curse and lunged at the spitter, but he was restrained by the ropes attaching him to the sides of the cart. The incident was not remarkable except that the words he spoke were Norman French, the language of the lords. Was he high-born, then? Or just a long way from home? Nobody knew.

The ox cart stopped beneath the gallows. The sheriff's bailiff climbed onto the flatbed of the cart with the noose in his hand. The prisoner started to struggle. The boys cheered—they would have been disappointed if the prisoner had remained calm. The man's movements were restricted by the ropes tied to his wrists and ankles, but he jerked his head from side to side, evading the noose. After a moment the bailiff, a huge man, stepped back and punched the prisoner in the stomach. The man doubled over, winded, and the bailiff slipped the rope over his head and tightened the knot. Then he jumped down to the ground and pulled the rope taut, securing its other end to a hook

in the base of the gallows.

This was the turning point. If the prisoner struggled now, he would only die sooner.

The men-at-arms untied the prisoner's legs and left him standing alone on the bed of the cart, his hands bound behind his back. A hush fell on the crowd.

There was often a disturbance at this point: the prisoner's mother would have a screaming fit, or his wife would pull out a knife and rush the platform in a last-minute attempt to rescue him. Sometimes the prisoner called upon God for forgiveness or pronounced blood-curdling curses on his executioners. The men-at-arms now stationed themselves on either side of the scaffold, ready to deal with any incident.

That was when the prisoner began to sing.

He had a high tenor voice, very pure. The words were French, but even those who could not understand the language could tell by its plaintive melody that it was a song of sadness and loss.

A lark, caught in a hunter's net

Sang sweeter then than ever,

As if the falling melody

Might wing and net dissever.

As he sang he looked directly at someone in the crowd. Gradually a space formed around the person, and everyone could see her.

She was a girl of about fifteen. When people looked at her they wondered why they had not noticed her before. She had long dark-brown hair, thick and rich, which came to a point on her wide forehead in what people called a devil's peak. She had regular features and a sensual, full-lipped mouth. The old women noticed her thick waist and heavy breasts, concluded that she was pregnant, and guessed that the prisoner was the father of her unborn child. But everyone else noticed nothing except her eyes. She might have been pretty, but she had deep-set, intense eyes of a startling golden color, so luminous and penetrating that when she looked at you, you felt she could see right into your heart, and you averted your eyes, scared that she would discover your secrets. She was dressed in rags, and tears streamed down her soft cheeks.

The driver of the cart looked expectantly at the bailiff. The bailiff looked at the sheriff, waiting for the nod. The young priest with the sinister air nudged the sheriff impatiently, but the sheriff took no notice. He let the thief carry on singing. There was a dreadful pause while the ugly man's lovely

voice held death at bay.

At dusk the hunter took his prey,

The lark his freedom never.

All birds and men are sure to die

But songs may live forever.

When the song ended the sheriff looked at the bailiff and nodded. The bailiff shouted “Hup!” and lashed the ox’s flank with a length of rope. The carter cracked his whip at the same time. The ox stepped forward, the prisoner standing in the cart staggered, the ox pulled the cart away, and the prisoner dropped into midair. The rope straightened and the thief’s neck broke with a snap.

There was a scream, and everyone looked at the girl.

It was not she who had screamed, but the cutler’s wife beside her. But the girl was the cause of the scream. She had sunk to her knees in front of the gallows, with her arms stretched out in front of her, the position adopted to utter a curse. The people shrank from her in fear: everyone knew that the curses of those who had suffered injustice were particularly effective, and they had all suspected that something was not quite right about this hanging. The small boys were terrified.

The girl turned her hypnotic golden eyes on the three strangers, the knight, the monk and the priest; and then she pronounced her curse, calling out the terrible words in ringing tones: “I curse you with sickness and sorrow, with hunger and pain; your house shall be consumed by fire, and your children shall die on the gallows; your enemies shall prosper, and you shall grow old in sadness and regret, and die in foulness and agony….” As she spoke the last words the girl reached into a sack on the ground beside her and pulled out a live cockerel. A knife appeared in her hand from nowhere, and with one slice she cut off the head of the cock.

While the blood was still spurting from the severed neck she threw the beheaded cock at the priest with the black hair. It fell short, but the blood sprayed over him, and over the monk and the knight on either side of him. The three men twisted away in loathing, but blood landed on each of them, spattering their faces and staining their garments.

The girl turned and ran.

The crowd opened in front of her and closed behind her. For a few moments there was pandemonium. At last the sheriff caught the attention of

his men-at-arms and angrily told them to chase her. They began to struggle through the crowd, roughly pushing men and women and children out of the way, but the girl was out of sight in a twinkling, and though the sheriff would search for her, he knew he would not find her.

He turned away in disgust. The knight, the monk and the priest had not watched the flight of the girl. They were still staring at the gallows. The sheriff followed their gaze. The dead thief hung at the end of the rope, his pale young face already turning bluish, while beneath his gently swinging corpse the cock, headless but not quite dead, ran around in a ragged circle on the bloodstained snow.

PART ONE

1136-1137

Chapter 1

IN A BROAD VALLEY, at the foot of a sloping hillside, beside a clear bubbling stream, Tom was building a house.

The walls were already three feet high and rising fast. The two masons Tom had engaged were working steadily in the sunshine, their trowels going *scrape, slap* and then *tap, tap* while their laborer sweated under the weight of the big stone blocks. Tom's son Alfred was mixing mortar, counting aloud as he scooped sand onto a board. There was also a carpenter, working at the bench beside Tom, carefully shaping a length of beech wood with an adz.

Alfred was fourteen years old, and tall like Tom. Tom was a head higher than most men, and Alfred was only a couple of inches less, and still growing. They looked alike, too: both had light-brown hair and greenish eyes with brown flecks. People said they were a handsome pair. The main difference between them was that Tom had a curly brown beard, whereas Alfred had only a fine blond fluff. The hair on Alfred's head had been that color once, Tom remembered fondly. Now that Alfred was becoming a man, Tom wished he would take a more intelligent interest in his work, for he had a lot to learn if he was to be a mason like his father; but so far Alfred remained bored and baffled by the principles of building.

When the house was finished it would be the most luxurious home for miles around. The ground floor would be a spacious undercroft, for storage, with a curved vault for a ceiling, so that it would not catch fire. The hall, where people actually lived, would be above, reached by an outside staircase, its height making it hard to attack and easy to defend. Against the hall wall there would be a chimney, to take away the smoke of the fire. This was a radical innovation: Tom had only ever seen one house with a chimney, but it had struck him as such a good idea that he was determined to copy it. At one end of the house, over the hall, there would be a small bedroom, for that was what earls' daughters demanded nowadays—they were too fine to sleep in the hall with the men and the serving wenches and the hunting dogs. The kitchen

would be a separate building, for every kitchen caught fire sooner or later, and there was nothing for it but to build them far away from everything else and put up with lukewarm food.

Tom was making the doorway of the house. The doorposts would be rounded to look like columns—a touch of distinction for the noble newlyweds who were to live here. With his eye on the shaped wooden template he was using as a guide, Tom set his iron chisel obliquely against the stone and tapped it gently with the big wooden hammer. A small shower of fragments fell away from the surface, leaving the shape a little rounder. He did it again. Smooth enough for a cathedral.

He had worked on a cathedral once—Exeter. At first he had treated it like any other job. He had been angry and resentful when the master builder had warned him that his work was not quite up to standard: he knew himself to be rather more careful than the average mason. But then he realized that the walls of a cathedral had to be not just good, but *perfect*. This was because the cathedral was for God, and also because the building was so *big* that the slightest lean in the walls, the merest variation from the absolutely true and level, could weaken the structure fatally. Tom's resentment turned to fascination. The combination of a hugely ambitious building with merciless attention to the smallest detail opened Tom's eyes to the wonder of his craft. He learned from the Exeter master about the importance of proportion, the symbolism of various numbers, and the almost magical formulas for working out the correct width of a wall or the angle of a step in a spiral staircase. Such things captivated him. He was surprised to learn that many masons found them incomprehensible.

After a while Tom had become the master builder's right-hand man, and that was when he began to see the master's shortcomings. The man was a great craftsman and an incompetent organizer. He was completely baffled by the problems of obtaining the right quantity of stone to keep pace with the masons, making sure that the blacksmith made enough of the right tools, burning lime and carting sand for the mortar makers, felling trees for the carpenters, and getting enough money from the cathedral chapter to pay for everything.

If Tom had stayed at Exeter until the master builder died, he might have become master himself; but the chapter ran out of money—partly because of the master's mismanagement—and the craftsmen had to move on, looking for work elsewhere. Tom had been offered the post of builder to the Exeter castellan, repairing and improving the city's fortifications. It would have been a lifetime job, barring accidents. But Tom had turned it down, for he wanted to build another cathedral.

His wife, Agnes, had never understood that decision. They might have had a good stone house, and servants, and their own stables, and meat on the

table every dinnertime; and she had never forgiven Tom for turning down the opportunity. She could not comprehend the irresistible attraction of building a cathedral: the absorbing complexity of organization, the intellectual challenge of the calculations, the sheer size of the walls, and the breathtaking beauty and grandeur of the finished building. Once he had tasted that wine, Tom was never satisfied with anything less.

That had been ten years ago. Since then they had never stayed anywhere for very long. He would design a new chapter house for a monastery, work for a year or two on a castle, or build a town house for a rich merchant; but as soon as he had some money saved he would leave, with his wife and children, and take to the road, looking for another cathedral.

He glanced up from his bench and saw Agnes standing at the edge of the building site, holding a basket of food in one hand and resting a big jug of beer on the opposite hip. It was midday. He looked at her fondly. No one would ever call her pretty, but her face was full of strength: a broad forehead, large brown eyes, a straight nose, a strong jaw. Her dark, wiry hair was parted in the middle and tied behind. She was Tom's soul mate.

She poured beer for Tom and Alfred. They stood there for a moment, the two big men and the strong woman, drinking beer from wooden cups; and then the fourth member of the family came skipping out of the wheat field: Martha, seven years old and as pretty as a daffodil, but a daffodil with a petal missing, for she had a gap where two milk teeth had fallen out and the new ones had not yet grown. She ran to Tom, kissed his dusty beard, and begged a sip of his beer. He hugged her bony body. "Don't drink too much, or you'll fall into a ditch," he said. She staggered around in a circle, pretending to be drunk.

They all sat down on the woodpile. Agnes handed Tom a hunk of wheat bread, a thick slice of boiled bacon and a small onion. He took a bite of the meat and started to peel the onion. Agnes gave the children food and began to eat her own. Perhaps it was irresponsible, Tom thought, to turn down that dull job in Exeter and go looking for a cathedral to build; but I've always been able to feed them all, despite my recklessness.

He took his eating knife from the front pocket of his leather apron, cut a slice off the onion, and ate it with a bite of bread. The onion was sweet and stinging in his mouth. Agnes said: "I'm with child again."

Tom stopped chewing and stared at her. A thrill of delight took hold of him. Not knowing what to say, he just smiled foolishly at her. After a few moments she blushed, and said: "It isn't *that* surprising."

Tom hugged her. "Well, well," he said, still grinning with pleasure. "A babe to pull my beard. And I thought the next would be Alfred's."

"Don't get too happy yet," Agnes cautioned. "It's bad luck to name the child before it's born."

Tom nodded assent. Agnes had had several miscarriages and one stillborn baby, and there had been another little girl, Matilda, who had lived only two years. “I’d like a boy, though,” he said. “Now that Alfred’s so big. When is it due?”

“After Christmas.”

Tom began to calculate. The shell of the house would be finished by first frost, then the stonework would have to be covered with straw to protect it through the winter. The masons would spend the cold months cutting stones for windows, vaults, doorcases and the fireplace, while the carpenter made floorboards and doors and shutters and Tom built the scaffolding for the upstairs work. Then in spring they would vault the undercroft, floor the hall above it, and put on the roof. The job would feed the family until Whitsun, by which time the baby would be half a year old. Then they would move on. “Good,” he said contentedly. “This is good.” He ate another slice of onion.

“I’m too old to bear children,” Agnes said. “This must be my last.”

Tom thought about that. He was not sure how old she was, in numbers, but plenty of women bore children at her time of life. However, it was true they suffered more as they grew older, and the babies were not so strong. No doubt she was right. But how would she make certain that she would not conceive again? he wondered. Then he realized how, and a cloud shadowed his sunny mood.

“I may get a good job, in a town,” he said, trying to mollify her. “A cathedral, or a palace. Then we might have a big house with wood floors, and a maid to help you with the baby.”

Her face hardened, and she said skeptically: “It may be.” She did not like to hear talk of cathedrals. If Tom had never worked on a cathedral, her face said, she might be living in a town house now, with money saved up and buried under the fireplace, and nothing to worry about.

Tom looked away and took another bite of bacon. They had something to celebrate, but they were in disharmony. He felt let down. He chewed the tough meat for a while, then he heard a horse. He cocked his head to listen. The rider was coming through the trees from the direction of the road, taking a short cut and avoiding the village.

A moment later, a young man on a pony trotted up and dismounted. He looked like a squire, a kind of apprentice knight. “Your lord is coming,” he said.

Tom stood up. “You mean Lord Percy?” Percy Hamleigh was one of the most important men in the country. He owned this valley, and many others, and he was paying for the house.

“His son,” said the squire.

“Young William.” Percy’s son, William, was to occupy this house after his marriage. He was engaged to Lady Aliena, the daughter of the earl of

Shiring.

“The same,” said the squire. “And in a rage.”

Tom’s heart sank. At the best of times it could be difficult to deal with the owner of a house under construction. An owner in a rage was impossible. “What’s he angry about?”

“His bride rejected him.”

“The earl’s daughter?” said Tom in surprise. He felt a pang of fear: he had just been thinking how secure his future was. “I thought that was settled.”

“So did we all—except the Lady Aliena, it seems,” the squire said. “The moment she met him, she announced that she wouldn’t marry him for all the world and a woodcock.”

Tom frowned worriedly. He did not want this to be true. “But the boy’s not bad-looking, as I recall.”

Agnes said: “As if that made any difference, in her position. If earls’ daughters were allowed to marry whom they please, we’d all be ruled by strolling minstrels and dark-eyed outlaws.”

“The girl may yet change her mind,” Tom said hopefully.

“She will if her mother takes a birch rod to her,” Agnes said. The squire said: “Her mother’s dead.”

Agnes nodded. “That explains why she doesn’t know the facts of life. But I don’t see why her father can’t compel her.”

The squire said: “It seems he once promised he would never marry her to someone she hated.”

“A foolish pledge!” Tom said angrily. How could a powerful man tie himself to the whim of a girl in that way? Her marriage could affect military alliances, baronial finances…even the building of this house.

The squire said: “She has a brother, so it’s not *so* important whom she marries.”

“Even so…”

“And the earl is an unbending man,” the squire went on. “He won’t go back on a promise, even one made to a child.” He shrugged. “So they say.”

Tom looked at the low stone walls of the house-to-be. He had not yet saved enough money to keep the family through the winter, he realized with a chill. “Perhaps the lad will find another bride to share this place with him. He’s got the whole county to choose from.”

Alfred spoke in a cracked adolescent voice. “By Christ, I think this is him.” Following his gaze, they all looked across the field. A horse was coming from the village at a gallop, kicking up a cloud of dust and earth from the pathway. Alfred’s oath was prompted by the size as well as the speed of the horse: it was huge. Tom had seen beasts like it before, but perhaps Alfred had not. It was a war-horse, as high at the wither as a man’s chin, and broad in proportion. Such war-horses were not bred in England, but came from

overseas, and were enormously costly.

Tom dropped the remains of his bread in the pocket of his apron, then narrowed his eyes against the sun and gazed across the field. The horse had its ears back and nostrils flared, but it seemed to Tom that its head was well up, a sign that it was not completely out of control. Sure enough, as it came closer the rider leaned back, hauling on the reins, and the huge animal seemed to slow a little. Now Tom could feel the drumming of its hooves in the ground beneath his feet. He looked around for Martha, thinking to pick her up and put her out of harm's way. Agnes had the same thought. But Martha was nowhere to be seen.

"In the wheat," Agnes said, but Tom had already figured that out and was striding across the site to the edge of the field. He scanned the waving wheat with fear in his heart but he could not see the child.

The only thing he could think of was to try to slow the horse. He stepped into the path and began to walk toward the charging beast, holding his arms wide. The horse saw him, raised its head for a better look, and slowed perceptibly. Then, to Tom's horror, the rider spurred it on.

"You damned fool!" Tom roared, although the rider could not hear.

That was when Martha stepped out of the field and into the pathway a few yards in front of Tom.

For an instant Tom stood still in a sick panic. Then he leaped forward, shouting and waving his arms; but this was a war-horse, trained to charge at yelling hordes, and it did not flinch. Martha stood in the middle of the narrow path, staring as if transfixed by the huge beast bearing down on her. There was a moment when Tom realized desperately that he could not get to her before the horse did. He swerved to one side, his arm touching the standing wheat; and at the last instant the horse swerved to the other side. The rider's stirrup brushed Martha's fine hair; a hoof stamped a round hole in the ground beside her bare foot; then the horse had gone by, spraying them both with dirt, and Tom snatched her up in his arms and held her tight to his pounding heart.

He stood still for a moment, awash with relief, his limbs weak, his insides watery. Then he felt a surge of fury at the recklessness of the stupid youth on his massive war-horse. He looked up angrily. Lord William was slowing the horse now, sitting back in the saddle, with his feet pushed forward in the stirrups, sawing on the reins. The horse swerved to avoid the building site. It tossed its head and then bucked, but William stayed on. He slowed it to a canter and then a trot as he guided it around in a wide circle.

Martha was crying. Tom handed her to Agnes and waited for William. The young lord was a tall, well-built fellow of about twenty years, with yellow hair and narrow eyes which made him look as if he were always peering into the sun. He wore a short black tunic with black hose, and leather shoes with straps crisscrossed up to his knees. He sat well on the horse and

did not seem shaken by what had happened. The foolish boy doesn't even know what he's done, Tom thought bitterly. I'd like to wring his neck.

William halted the horse in front of the woodpile and looked down at the builders. "Who's in charge here?" he said.

Tom wanted to say *If you had hurt my little girl, I would have killed you*, but he suppressed his rage. It was like swallowing a bitter mouthful. He approached the horse and held its bridle. "I'm the master builder," he said tightly. "My name is Tom."

"This house is no longer needed," said William. "Dismiss your men."

It was what Tom had been dreading. But he held on to the hope that William was being impetuous in his anger, and might be persuaded to change his mind. With an effort, he made his voice friendly and reasonable. "But so much work has been done," he said. "Why waste what you've spent? You'll need the house one day."

"Don't tell me how to manage my affairs, Tom Builder," said William. "You're all dismissed." He twitched a rein, but Tom had hold of the bridle. "Let go of my horse," William said dangerously.

Tom swallowed. In a moment William would try to get the horse's head up. Tom felt in his apron pocket and brought out the crust of bread he had been eating. He showed it to the horse, which dipped its head and took a bite. "There's more to be said, before you leave, my lord," he said mildly.

William said: "Let my horse go, or I'll take your head off." Tom looked directly at him, trying not to show his fear. He was bigger than William, but that would make no difference if the young lord drew his sword.

Agnes muttered fearfully: "Do as the lord says, husband."

There was dead silence. The other workmen stood as still as statues, watching. Tom knew that the prudent thing would be to give in. But William had nearly trampled Tom's little girl, and that made Tom mad, so with a racing heart he said: "You have to pay us."

William pulled on the reins, but Tom held the bridle tight, and the horse was distracted, nuzzling in Tom's apron pocket for more food. "Apply to my father for your wages!" William said angrily.

Tom heard the carpenter say in a terrified voice: "We'll do that, my lord, thanking you very much."

Wretched coward, Tom thought, but he was trembling himself. Nevertheless he forced himself to say: "If you want to dismiss us, you must pay us, according to the custom. Your father's house is two days' walk from here, and when we arrive he may not be there."

"Men have died for less than this," William said. His cheeks reddened with anger.

Out of the corner of his eye, Tom saw the squire drop his hand to the hilt of his sword. He knew he should give up now, and humble himself, but there

was an obstinate knot of anger in his belly, and as scared as he was he could not bring himself to release the bridle. “Pay us first, then kill me,” he said recklessly. “You may hang for it, or you may not; but you’ll die sooner or later, and then I will be in heaven and you will be in hell.”

The sneer froze on William’s face and he paled. Tom was surprised: what had frightened the boy? Not the mention of hanging, surely: it was not really likely that a lord would be hanged for the murder of a craftsman. Was he terrified of hell?

They stared at one another for a few moments. Tom watched with amazement and relief as William’s set expression of anger and contempt melted away, to be replaced by a panicky anxiety. At last William took a leather purse from his belt and tossed it to his squire, saying: “Pay them.”

At that point Tom pushed his luck. When William pulled on the reins again, and the horse lifted its strong head and stepped sideways, Tom moved with the horse and held on to the bridle, and said: “A full week’s wages on dismissal, that is the custom.” He heard a sharp intake of breath from Agnes, just behind him, and he knew she thought he was crazy to prolong the confrontation. But he plowed on. “That’s sixpence for the laborer, twelve for the carpenter and each of the masons, and twenty-four pence for me. Sixty-six pence in all.” He could add pennies faster than anyone he knew.

The squire was looking inquiringly at his master. William said angrily: “Very *well*.”

Tom released the bridle and stepped back.

William turned the horse and kicked it hard, and it bounded forward onto the path through the wheat field.

Tom sat down suddenly on the woodpile. He wondered what had got into him. It had been mad to defy Lord William like that. He felt lucky to be alive.

The hoofbeats of William’s war-horse faded to a distant thunder, and his squire emptied the purse onto a board. Tom felt a surge of triumph as the silver pennies tumbled out into the sunshine. It had been mad, but it had worked: he had secured just payment for himself and the men working under him. “Even lords ought to follow the customs,” he said, half to himself.

Agnes heard him. “Just hope you’re never in want of work from Lord William,” she said sourly.

Tom smiled at her. He understood that she was churlish because she had been frightened. “Don’t frown too much, or you’ll have nothing but curdled milk in your breasts when that baby is born.”

“I won’t be able to feed any of us unless you find work for the winter.”

“The winter’s a long way off,” said Tom.

II

They stayed at the village through the summer. Later, they came to regard this decision as a terrible mistake, but at the time it seemed sensible enough, for Tom and Agnes and Alfred could each earn a penny a day working in the fields during the harvest. When autumn came, and they had to move on, they had a heavy bag of silver pennies and a fat pig.

They spent the first night in the porch of a village church, but on the second they found a country priory and took advantage of monastic hospitality. On the third day they found themselves in the heart of the Chute Forest, a vast expanse of scrub and rough woodland, on a road not much broader than the width of an ox cart, with the luxuriant growth of summer dying between the oaks on either side.

Tom carried his smaller tools in a satchel and slung his hammers from his belt. He had his cloak in a bundle under his left arm and he carried his iron spike in his right hand, using it as a walking stick. He was happy to be on the road again. His next job might be working on a cathedral. He might become master mason and stay there the rest of his life, and build a church so wonderful it would guarantee that he went to heaven.

Agnes had their few household possessions inside the cooking pot which she carried strapped to her back. Alfred carried the tools they would use to make a new home somewhere: an ax, an adz, a saw, a small hammer, a bradawl for making holes in leather and wood, and a spade. Martha was too small to carry anything but her own bowl and eating knife tied to her belt and her winter cloak strapped to her back. However, she had the duty of driving the pig until they could sell it at a market.

Tom kept a close eye on Agnes as they walked through the endless woods. She was more than halfway through her term now, and carrying a considerable weight in her belly as well as the burden on her back. But she seemed tireless. Alfred, too, was all right: he was at the age when boys have more energy than they know what to do with. Only Martha was tiring. Her thin legs were made for the playful scamper, not the long march, and she dropped behind constantly, so that the others had to stop and wait for her and the pig to catch up.

As he walked Tom thought about the cathedral he would build one day. He began, as always, by picturing an archway. It was very simple: two uprights supporting a semicircle. Then he imagined a second, just the same as the first. He pushed the two together, in his mind, to form one deep archway.

Then he added another, and another, then a lot more, until he had a whole row of them, all stuck together, forming a tunnel. This was the essence of a building, for it had a roof to keep the rain off and two walls to hold up the roof. A church was just a tunnel, with refinements.

A tunnel was dark, so the first refinements were windows. If the wall was strong enough, it could have holes in it. The holes would be round at the top, with straight sides and a flat sill—the same shape as the original archway. Using similar shapes for arches and windows and doors was one of the things that made a building beautiful. Regularity was another, and Tom visualized twelve identical windows, evenly spaced, along each wall of the tunnel.

Tom tried to visualize the moldings over the windows, but his concentration kept slipping because he had the feeling that he was being watched. It was a foolish notion, he thought, if only because of course he *was* being observed by the birds, foxes, cats, squirrels, rats, mice, weasels, stoats and voles which thronged the forest.

They sat down by a stream at midday. They drank the pure water and ate cold bacon and crab apples which they picked up from the forest floor.

In the afternoon Martha was tired. At one point she was a hundred yards behind them. Standing waiting for her to catch up, Tom remembered Alfred at that age. He had been a beautiful, golden-haired boy, sturdy and bold. Fondness mingled with irritation in Tom as he watched Martha scolding the pig for being so slow. Then a figure stepped out of the undergrowth just ahead of her. What happened next was so quick that Tom could hardly believe it. The man who had appeared so suddenly on the road raised a club over his shoulder. A horrified shout rose in Tom's throat, but before he could utter it the man swung the club at Martha. It struck her full on the side of the head, and Tom heard the sickening sound of the blow connecting. She fell to the ground like a dropped doll.

Tom found himself running back along the road toward them, his feet pounding the hard earth like the hooves of William's war-horse, willing his legs to carry him faster. As he ran, he watched what was happening, and it was like looking at a picture painted high on a church wall, for he could see it but there was nothing he could do to change it. The attacker was undoubtedly an outlaw. He was a short, thickset man in a brown tunic, with bare feet. For an instant he looked straight at Tom, and Tom could see that the man's face was hideously mutilated: his lips had been cut off, presumably as a punishment for a crime involving lying, and his mouth was now a repulsive permanent grin surrounded by twisted scar tissue. The horrid sight would have stopped Tom in his tracks, had it not been for the prone body of Martha lying on the ground.

The outlaw looked away from Tom and fixed his gaze on the pig. In a flash he bent down, picked it up, tucked the squirming animal under his arm

and darted back into the tangled undergrowth, taking with him Tom's family's only valuable possession.

Then Tom was on his knees beside Martha. He put his broad hand on her tiny chest and felt her heartbeat, steady and strong, and his worst fear subsided; but her eyes were closed and there was bright red blood in her blond hair.

Agnes knelt beside him a moment later. She touched Martha's chest, wrist and forehead, then she gave Tom a hard, level look. "She will live," she said in a tight voice. "Fetch back that pig."

Tom quickly unslung his satchel of tools and dropped it on the ground. With his left hand he took his big iron-headed hammer from his belt. He still had his spike in his right. He could see the trampled bushes where the thief had come and gone, and he could hear the pig squealing in the woods. He plunged into the undergrowth.

The trail was easy to follow. The outlaw was a heavily built man, running with a wriggling pig under his arm, and he cut a wide path through the vegetation, flattening flowers and bushes and young trees alike. Tom charged after him, full of a savage desire to get his hands on the man and beat him senseless. He crashed through a thicket of birch saplings, hurtled down a slope, and splashed across a patch of bog to a narrow pathway. There he stopped. The thief might have gone left or right, and now there was no crushed vegetation to show the way; but Tom listened, and heard the pig squealing somewhere to his left. He could also hear someone rushing through the forest behind him—Alfred, presumably. He went after the pig.

The path led him down into a dip, then turned sharply and began to rise. He could hear the pig clearly now. He ran uphill, breathing hard—the years of inhaling stone dust had weakened his lungs. Suddenly the path leveled and he saw the thief, only twenty or thirty yards away, running as if the devil were behind him. Tom put on a spurt and started to gain. He was bound to catch up, if only he could keep going, for a man with a pig cannot run as fast as a man without one. But now his chest hurt. The thief was fifteen yards away, then twelve. Tom raised the spike above his head like a spear. Just a little closer and he would throw it. Eleven yards, ten—

Before the spike left his hand he glimpsed, out of the corner of his eye, a thin face in a green cap emerging from the bushes beside the path. It was too late to swerve. A heavy stick was thrust out in front of him, he stumbled on it as was intended, and he fell to the ground.

He had dropped his spike but he still had hold of the hammer. He rolled over and raised himself on one knee. There were two of them, he saw: the one in the green hat and a bald man with a matted white beard. They ran at Tom.

He stepped to one side and swung his hammer at the green hat. The man dodged, but the big iron hammerhead came down hard on his shoulder and he

gave a screech of agony and sank to the ground, holding his arm as if it were broken. Tom did not have time to raise the hammer for another crushing blow before the bald man closed with him, so he thrust the iron head at the man's face and split his cheek.

Both men backed off clutching their wounds. Tom could see that there was no fight left in either one. He turned around. The thief was still running away along the path. Tom went after him again, ignoring the pain in his chest. But he had covered only a few yards when he heard a shout from behind in a familiar voice.

Alfred.

He stopped and looked back.

Alfred was fighting them both, using his fists and his feet. He punched the one in the green hat about the head three or four times, then kicked the bald man's shins. But the two men swarmed him, getting inside his reach so that he could no longer punch or kick hard enough to hurt. Tom hesitated, torn between chasing the pig and rescuing his son. Then the bald one got his foot behind Alfred's leg and tripped him, and as the boy hit the ground the two men fell on him, raining blows on his face and body.

Tom ran back. He charged the bald one bodily, sending the man flying into the bushes, then turned and swung his hammer at the green hat. This man had felt the weight of the hammer once before and was still using only one arm. He dodged the first swing, then turned and dived into the undergrowth before Tom could swing again.

Tom turned and saw the bald man running away down the path. He looked in the opposite direction: the thief with the pig was nowhere in sight. He breathed a bitter, blasphemous curse: that pig represented half of what he had saved this summer. He sank to the ground, breathing hard.

"We beat three of them!" Alfred said excitedly.

Tom looked at him. "But they got our pig," he said. Anger burned his stomach like sour cider. They had bought the pig in the spring, as soon as they had saved enough pennies, and they had been fattening it all summer. A fat pig could be sold for sixty pence. With a few cabbages and a sack of grain it could feed a family all winter and make a pair of leather shoes and a purse or two. Its loss was a catastrophe.

Tom looked enviously at Alfred, who had already recovered from the chase and the fight, and was waiting impatiently. How long ago was it, Tom thought, when I could run like the wind and hardly feel my heart race? Since I was that age…twenty years. Twenty years. It seemed like yesterday.

He got to his feet.

He put his arm around Alfred's broad shoulders as they walked back along the path. The boy was still shorter than his father by the span of a man's hand, but soon he would catch up, and he might grow even bigger. I hope his

wit grows too, Tom thought. He said: “Any fool can get into a fight, but a wise man knows how to stay out of them.” Alfred gave him a blank look.

They turned off the path, crossed the boggy patch, and began to climb the slope, following in reverse the trail the thief had made. As they pushed through the birch thicket, Tom thought of Martha, and once again rage curdled in his belly. The outlaw had lashed out at her senselessly, for she had been no threat to him.

Tom quickened his pace, and a moment later he and Alfred emerged onto the road. Martha lay there in the same place, not having moved. Her eyes were closed and the blood was drying in her hair. Agnes knelt beside her—and with them, to Tom’s surprise, were another woman and a boy. The thought struck him that it was no wonder he had felt watched, earlier in the day, for the forest seemed to be teeming with people. He bent down and rested his hand on Martha’s chest again. She was breathing normally.

“She will wake up soon,” said the strange woman in an authoritative voice. “Then she will puke. After that she’ll be all right.”

Tom looked at her curiously. She was kneeling over Martha. She was quite young, perhaps a dozen years younger than Tom. Her short leather tunic revealed lithe brown limbs. She had a pretty face, with dark brown hair that came to a devil’s peak on her forehead. Tom felt a pang of desire. Then she raised her glance to look at him, and he gave a start: she had intense, deep-set eyes of an unusual honey-gold color that gave her whole face a magical look, and he felt sure that she knew what he had been thinking.

He looked away from her to cover his embarrassment, and he caught Agnes’s eye. She was looking resentful. She said: “Where’s the pig?”

“There were two more outlaws,” Tom said.

Alfred said: “We beat them, but the one with the pig got away.”

Agnes looked grim, but said nothing more.

The strange woman said: “We could move the girl into the shade, if we’re gentle.” She stood up, and Tom realized that she was quite small, at least a foot shorter than he. He bent down and picked Martha up carefully. Her childish body was almost weightless in his arms. He carried her a few yards along the road and put her down on a patch of grass in the shadow of an old oak. She was still quite limp.

Alfred was picking up the tools that had been scattered on the road during the fracas. The strange woman’s boy was watching, his eyes wide and his mouth open, not speaking. He was about three years younger than Alfred, and a peculiar-looking child, Tom observed, with none of his mother’s sensual beauty. He had very pale skin, orange-red hair, and blue eyes that bulged slightly. He had the alertly stupid look of a dullard, Tom thought; the kind of child that either dies young or grows up to be the village idiot. Alfred was visibly uncomfortable under his stare.

As Tom watched, the child snatched the saw from Alfred's hand, without saying anything, and examined it as if it were something amazing. Alfred, offended by the discourtesy, snatched it back, and the child let it go with indifference. The mother said: "Jack! Behave yourself." She seemed embarrassed.

Tom looked at her. The boy did not resemble her at all. "Are you his mother?" Tom asked.

"Yes. My name is Ellen."

"Where's your husband?"

"Dead."

Tom was surprised. "You're traveling alone?" he said incredulously. The forest was dangerous enough for a man such as he: a woman alone could hardly hope to survive.

"We're not traveling," said Ellen. "We live in the forest."

Tom was shocked. "You mean you're—" He stopped, not wanting to offend her.

"Outlaws," she said. "Yes. Did you think that all outlaws were like Faramond Openmouth, who stole your pig?"

"Yes," said Tom, although what he wanted to say was *I never thought an outlaw might be a beautiful woman*. Unable to restrain his curiosity, he asked: "What was your crime?"

"I cursed a priest," she said, and looked away.

It did not sound like much of a crime to Tom, but perhaps the priest had been very powerful, or very touchy; or perhaps Ellen just did not want to tell the truth.

He looked at Martha. A moment later she opened her eyes. She was confused and a little frightened. Agnes knelt beside her. "You're safe," she said. "Everything's all right."

Martha said upright and vomited. Agnes hugged her until the spasms passed. Tom was impressed: Ellen's prediction had come true. She had also said that Martha would be all right, and presumably that was reliable too. Relief washed over him, and he was a little surprised at the strength of his own emotion. I couldn't bear to lose my little girl, he thought; and he had to fight back tears. He caught a look of sympathy from Ellen, and once again he felt that her pale gold eyes could see into his heart.

He broke off an oak twig, stripped its leaves, and used them to wipe Martha's face. She still looked pale.

"She needs to rest," said Ellen. "Let her lie down for as long as it takes a man to walk three miles."

Tom glanced at the sun. There was plenty of daylight left. He settled down to wait. Agnes rocked Martha gently in her arms. The boy Jack now switched his attention to Martha, and stared at her with the same idiot

intensity. Tom wanted to know more about Ellen. He wondered whether she might be persuaded to tell her story. He did not want her to go away. “How did it all come about?” he asked her vaguely.

She looked into his eyes again, and then she began to talk.

Her father had been a knight, she told them; a big, strong, violent man who wanted sons with whom he could ride and hunt and wrestle, companions to drink and carouse into the night with him. In these matters he was as unlucky as a man could be, for he got Ellen, and then his wife died; and he married again, but his second wife was barren. He came to despise Ellen’s stepmother, and eventually sent her away. He must have been a cruel man, but he never seemed so to Ellen, who adored him and shared his scorn for his second wife. When the stepmother left, Ellen stayed, and grew up in what was almost an all-male household. She cut her hair short and carried a dagger, and learned not to play with kittens or care for blind old dogs. By the time she was Martha’s age she could spit on the ground and eat apple cores and kick a horse in the belly so hard that it would draw in its breath, allowing her to tighten its girth one more notch. She knew that all men who were not part of her father’s band were called cocksuckers and all women who would not go with them were called pigfuckers, although she was not quite sure—and did not much care—what these insults really meant.

Listening to her voice in the mild air of an autumn afternoon, Tom closed his eyes and pictured her as a flat-chested girl with a dirty face, sitting at the long table with her father’s thuggish comrades, drinking strong ale and belching and singing songs about battle and looting and rape, horses and castles and virgins, until she fell asleep with her little cropped head on the rough board.

If only she could have stayed flat-chested forever she would have lived a happy life. But the time came when the men looked at her differently. They no longer laughed uproariously when she said: “Get out of my way or I’ll cut off your balls and feed them to the pigs.” Some of them stared at her when she took off her wool tunic and lay down to sleep in her long linen undershirt. When relieving themselves in the woods, they would turn their backs to her, which they never had before.

One day she saw her father deep in conversation with the parish priest—a rare event—and the two of them kept looking at her, as if they were talking about her. On the following morning her father said to her: “Go with Henry and Everard and do as they tell you.” Then he kissed her forehead. She wondered what on earth had come over him—was he going soft in his old age? She saddled her gray courser—she refused to ride the ladylike palfrey or a child’s pony—and set off with the two men-at-arms.

They took her to a nunnery and left her there.

The whole place rang with her obscene curses as the two men rode away. She knifed the abbess and walked all the way back to her father's house. He sent her back, bound hand and foot and tied to the saddle of a donkey. They put her in the punishment cell until the abbess's wound healed. It was cold and damp and as black as the night, and there was water to drink but nothing to eat. When they let her out she walked home again. Her father sent her back again, and this time she was flogged before being put in the cell.

They broke her eventually, of course, and she donned the novice's habit, obeyed the rules and learned the prayers, even if in her heart she hated the nuns and despised the saints and disbelieved everything anyone told her about God on principle. But she learned to read and write, she mastered music and numbers and drawing, and she added Latin to the French and English she had spoken in her father's household.

Life in the convent was not so bad, in the end. It was a single-sex community with its own peculiar rules and rituals, and that was exactly what she was used to. All the nuns had to do some physical labor, and Ellen soon got assigned to work with the horses. Before long she was in charge of the stables.

Poverty never worried her. Obedience did not come easily, but it did come, eventually. The third rule, chastity, never troubled her much, although now and again, just to spite the abbess, she would introduce one of the other novice nuns to the pleasures of—

Agnes interrupted Ellen's tale at this point and, taking Martha with her, went off to find a stream in which to wash the child's face and clean up her tunic. She took Alfred too, for protection, although she said she would not go out of earshot. Jack got up to follow them, but Agnes told him firmly to stay behind, and he appeared to understand, for he sat down again. Tom noted that Agnes had succeeded in taking her children where they could not hear any more of this impious and indecent story, while leaving Tom chaperoned.

One day, Ellen went on, the abbess's palfrey went lame when she was several days away from the convent. Kingsbridge Priory happened to be nearby, so the abbess borrowed another horse from the prior there. After she got home, she told Ellen to return the borrowed horse to the priory and bring the lame palfrey back.

There, in the monastery stable within sight of the crumbling old cathedral of Kingsbridge, Ellen met a young man who looked like a whipped puppy. He had the loose-limbed grace of a pup, and the twitching-nosed alertness, but he was cowed and frightened, as if all the playfulness had been beaten out of him. When she spoke to him he did not understand. She tried Latin, but he was not a monk. Finally she said something in French, and his face was suffused with joy and he replied in the same language.

Ellen never went back to the convent.

From that day on she lived in the forest, first in a rough shelter of branches and leaves, later in a dry cave. She had not forgotten the masculine skills she had learned in her father's house: she could still hunt deer, trap rabbits and shoot swans with a bow; she could gut and clean and cook the meat; and she even knew how to scrape and cure the hides and furs for her clothes. As well as game, she ate wild fruits, nuts and vegetables. Anything else she needed—salt, woolen clothing, an ax or a new knife—she had to steal.

The worst time was when Jack was born….

But what about the Frenchman? Tom wanted to ask. Was he Jack's father? And if so, when did he die? And how? But he could tell, from her face, that she was not going to talk about that part of the story, and she seemed the type of person who would not be persuaded against her will, so he kept his questions to himself.

By this time her father had died and his band of men had dispersed, so she had no relatives or friends in the world. When Jack was about to be born she built an all-night fire at the mouth of her cave. She had food and water on hand, and her bow and arrows and knives to ward off the wolves and wild dogs; and she even had a heavy red cloak, stolen from a bishop, to wrap the baby in. But she had not been prepared for the pain and fear of childbirth, and for a long time she thought she was going to die. Nevertheless the baby was born healthy and strong, and she survived.

Ellen and Jack lived a simple, frugal life for the next eleven years. The forest gave them all they needed, as long as they were careful to store enough apples and nuts and salted or smoked venison for the winter months. Ellen often thought that if there were no kings and lords and bishops and sheriffs, then everyone could live like this and be perfectly happy.

Tom asked her how she dealt with the other outlaws, men such as Faramond Openmouth. What would happen if they crept up on her at night and tried to rape her? he wondered, and his loins stirred at the thought, although he had never taken a woman against her will, not even his wife.

The other outlaws were afraid of Ellen, she told Tom, looking at him with her luminous pale eyes, and he knew why: they thought she was a witch. As for law-abiding people traveling through the forest, people who knew they could rob and rape and murder an outlaw without fear of punishment—Ellen just hid from them. Why then had she not hidden from Tom? Because she had seen a wounded child, and wanted to help. She had a child herself.

She had taught Jack everything she had learned in her father's household about weapons and hunting. Then she had taught him all she had learned from the nuns: reading and writing, music and numbers, French and Latin, how to draw, even the Bible stories. Finally, in the long winter evenings, she had

passed on the legacy of the Frenchman, who knew more stories and poems and songs than anyone else in the world—

Tom did not believe that the boy Jack could read and write. Tom could write his name, and a handful of words such as *pence* and *yards* and *bushels*; and Agnes, being the daughter of a priest, could do more, although she wrote slowly and laboriously with her tongue poking out of the corner of her mouth; but Alfred could not write a word, and could barely recognize his own name; and Martha could not even do that. Was it possible that this half-witted child was more literate than Tom's whole family?

Ellen told Jack to write something, and he smoothed a patch of earth and scratched letters in it. Tom recognized the first word, *Alfred*, but not the others, and he felt a fool; then Ellen saved his embarrassment by reading the whole thing aloud: "Alfred is bigger than Jack." The boy quickly drew two figures, one bigger than the other, and although they were crude, one had broad shoulders and a rather bovine expression and the other was small and grinning. Tom, who himself had a talent for sketching, was astonished at the simplicity and strength of the picture scratched in the dust.

But the child seemed an idiot.

Ellen had lately begun to realize this, she confessed, guessing Tom's thoughts. Jack had never had the company of other children, or indeed of other human beings except for his mother, and the result was that he was growing up like a wild animal. For all his learning he did not know how to behave with people. That was why he was silent, and stared, and snatched.

As she said this she looked vulnerable for the first time. Her air of impregnable self-sufficiency vanished, and Tom saw her as troubled and rather desperate. For Jack's sake, she needed to rejoin society; but how? If she had been a man, she might conceivably have persuaded some lord to give her a farm, especially if she had lied convincingly and said she was back from a pilgrimage to Jerusalem or Santiago de Compostela. There were some women farmers, but they were invariably widows with grown sons. No lord would give a farm to a woman with one small child. Nobody would hire her as a laborer, either in town or country; besides, she had no place to live, and unskilled work rarely came with accommodation provided. She had no identity.

Tom felt for her. She had given her child everything she could, and it was not enough. But he could see no way out of her dilemma. Beautiful, resourceful, and formidable though she was, she was doomed to spend the rest of her days hiding in the forest with her weird son.

Agnes, Martha and Alfred came back. Tom gazed anxiously at Martha, but she looked as if the worst thing that had ever happened to her was having her

face scrubbed. For a while Tom had been absorbed in Ellen's problems, but now he remembered his own plight: he was out of work and his pig had been stolen. The afternoon was wearing on. He began to pick up their remaining possessions.

Ellen said: "Where are you headed?"

"Winchester," Tom told her. Winchester had a castle, a palace, several monasteries, and—most important of all—a cathedral.

"Salisbury is closer," Ellen said. "And last time I was there, they were rebuilding the cathedral—making it bigger."

Tom's heart leaped. This was what he was looking for. If only he could get a job on a cathedral building project he believed he had the ability to become master builder eventually. "Which way is Salisbury?" he said eagerly.

"Back the way you came, for three or four miles. Do you remember a fork in the road, where you went left?"

"Yes—by a pond of foul water."

"That's it. The right fork leads to Salisbury."

They took their leave. Agnes had not liked Ellen, but managed nevertheless to say graciously: "Thank you for helping me take care of Martha."

Ellen smiled and looked wistful as they left.

When they had walked along the road for a few minutes Tom looked back. Ellen was still watching them, standing in the road with her legs apart, shading her eyes with her hand, the peculiar boy standing beside her. Tom waved, and she waved back.

"An interesting woman," he said to Agnes.

Agnes said nothing.

Alfred said: "That boy was *strange*."

They walked into the low autumn sun. Tom wondered what Salisbury was like: he had never been there. He felt excited. Of course, his dream was to build a new cathedral from the ground up, but that almost never happened: it was much more common to find an old building being improved or extended, or partly rebuilt. But that would be good enough for him, as long as it offered the prospect of building to his own designs eventually.

Martha said: "Why did the man hit me?"

"Because he wanted to steal our pig," Agnes told her.

"He should get his *own* pig," Martha said indignantly, as if she had only just realized that the outlaw had done something wrong.

Ellen's problem would have been solved if she had had a craft, Tom reflected. A mason, a carpenter, a weaver or a tanner would not have found himself in her position. He could always go to a town and look for work. There were a few craftswomen, but they were generally the wives or widows of craftsmen. "What she needs," Tom said aloud, "is a husband."

Agnes said crisply: “Well, she can’t have mine.”

III

The day they lost the pig was also the last day of mild weather. They spent that night in a barn, and when they came out in the morning the sky was the color of a lead roof, and there was a cold wind with gusts of driving rain. They unbundled their cloaks of thick, felted cloth and put them on, fastening them tight under their chins and pulling the hoods well forward to keep the rain off their faces. They set off in a grim mood, four gloomy ghosts in a rainstorm, their wooden clogs splashing along the puddled, muddy road.

Tom wondered what Salisbury cathedral would be like. A cathedral was a church like any other, in principle: it was simply the church where the bishop had his throne. But in practice cathedral churches were the biggest, richest, grandest and most elaborate. A cathedral was rarely a tunnel with windows. Most were three tunnels, a tall one flanked by two smaller ones in a head-and-shoulders shape, forming a nave with side aisles. The side walls of the central tunnel were reduced to two lines of pillars linked by arches, forming an arcade. The aisles were used for processions—which could be spectacular in cathedral churches—and might also provide space for small side chapels dedicated to particular saints, which attracted important extra donations. Cathedrals were the most costly buildings in the world, far more so than palaces or castles, and they had to earn their keep.

Salisbury was closer than Tom had thought. Around midmorning they crested a rise, and found the road falling away gently before them in a long curve; and across the rainswept fields, rising out of the flat plain like a boat on a lake, they saw the fortified hill town of Salisbury. Its details were veiled by the rain, but Tom could make out several towers, four or five, soaring high above the city walls. His spirits lifted at the sight of so much stonework.

A cold wind whipped across the plain, freezing their faces and hands as they followed the road toward the east gate. Four roads met at the foot of the hill, amid a scatter of houses spilled over from the town, and there they were joined by other travelers, walking with hunched shoulders and lowered heads, butting through the weather to the shelter of the walls.

On the slope leading to the gate they came up with an ox cart bearing a load of stone—a very hopeful sign for Tom. The carter was bent down behind the crude wooden vehicle, pushing with his shoulder, adding his strength to that of the two oxen as they inched uphill. Tom saw a chance to make a friend. He beckoned to Alfred, and they both put their shoulders to the back of the cart and helped push.

The huge wooden wheels rumbled onto a timber bridge that spanned an enormous dry moat. The earthworks were formidable: digging that moat, and throwing up the soil to form the town wall, must have taken hundreds of men, Tom thought; a much bigger job even than digging the foundations for a cathedral. The bridge that crossed the moat rattled and creaked under the weight of the cart and the two mighty beasts that were pulling it.

The slope leveled and the cart moved more easily as they approached the gateway. The carter straightened up, and Tom and Alfred did likewise. “I thank you kindly,” the carter said.

Tom asked: “What’s the stone for?”

“The new cathedral.”

“New? I heard they were just enlarging the old one.”

The carter nodded. “That’s what they said, ten years ago. But there’s more new than old, now.”

This was further good news. “Who’s the master builder?”

“John of Shaftesbury, though Bishop Roger has a lot to do with the designs.”

That was normal. Bishops rarely left builders alone to do the job. One of the master builder’s problems was often to calm the fevered imaginations of the clerics and set practical limits to their soaring fantasies. But it would be John of Shaftesbury who hired men.

The carter nodded at Tom’s satchel of tools. “Mason?”

“Yes. Looking for work.”

“You may find it,” the carter said neutrally. “If not on the cathedral, perhaps on the castle.”

“And who governs the castle?”

“The same Roger is both bishop and castellan.”

Of course, Tom thought. He had heard of the powerful Roger of Salisbury, who had been close to the king for as long as anyone could remember.

They passed through the gateway into the town. The place was crammed so full of buildings, people and animals that it seemed in danger of bursting its circular ramparts and spilling out into the moat. The wooden houses were jammed together shoulder to shoulder, jostling for space like spectators at a hanging. Every tiny piece of land was used for something. Where two houses had been built with an alleyway between them, someone had put up a half-size dwelling in the alley, with no windows because its door took up almost all the frontage. Wherever a site was too small even for the narrowest of houses, there was a stall on it selling ale or bread or apples; and if there was not even room for that, then there would be a stable, a pigsty, a dunghill or a water barrel.

It was noisy, too. The rain did little to deaden the clamor of craftsmen’s workshops, hawkers calling their wares, people greeting one another and

bargaining and quarreling, animals neighing and barking and fighting.

Raising her voice above the noise, Martha said: “What’s that stink?”

Tom smiled. She had not been in a town for a couple of years. “That’s the smell of people,” he told her.

The street was only a little wider than the ox cart, but the carter would not let his beasts stop, for fear they might not start again; so he whipped them on, ignoring all obstacles, and they shouldered their dumb way through the multitude, indiscriminately shoving aside a knight on a war-horse, a forester with a bow, a fat monk on a pony, men-at-arms and beggars and housewives and whores.

The cart came up behind an old shepherd struggling to keep a small flock together. It must be market day, Tom realized. As the cart went by, one of the sheep plunged through the open door of an alehouse, and in a moment the whole flock was in the house, bleating and panicking and upsetting tables and stools and alepots.

The ground underfoot was a sea of mud and rubbish. Tom had an eye for the fall of rain on a roof, and the width of gutter required to take the rain away; and he could see that all the rain falling on all the roofs of this half of the town was draining away through this street. In a bad storm, he thought, you would need a boat to cross the street.

As they approached the castle at the summit of the hill, the street widened. Here there were stone houses, one or two of them in need of a little repair. They belonged to craftsmen and traders, who had their shops and stores on the ground floor and living quarters above. Looking with a practiced eye at what was on sale, Tom could tell that this was a prosperous town. Everyone had to have knives and pots, but only prosperous people bought embroidered shawls, decorated belts and silver clasps.

In front of the castle the carter turned his ox team to the right, and Tom and his family followed. The street led around a quarter-circle, skirting the castle ramparts. Passing through another gate they left the hurly-burly of the town as quickly as they had entered it, and walked into a different kind of maelstrom: the hectic but ordered diversity of a major building site.

They were inside the walled cathedral close, which occupied the entire northwest quarter of the circular town. Tom stood for a moment taking it in. Just seeing and hearing and smelling it gave him a thrill like a sunny day. As they arrived behind the cartload of stone, two more carts were leaving empty. In lean-to sheds all along the side walls of the church, masons could be seen sculpting the stone blocks, with iron chisels and big wooden hammers, into the shapes that would be put together to form plinths, columns, capitals, shafts, buttresses, arches, windows, sills, pinnacles and parapets. In the middle of the close, well away from other buildings, stood the smithy, the glow of its fire visible through the open doorway; and the clang of hammer on

anvil carried across the close as the smith made new tools to replace the ones the masons were wearing down. To most people it was a scene of chaos, but Tom saw a large and complex mechanism which he itched to control. He knew what each man was doing and he could see instantly how far the work had progressed. They were building the east facade.

There was a run of scaffolding across the east end at a height of twenty-five or thirty feet. The masons were in the porch, waiting for the rain to ease up, but their laborers were running up and down the ladders with stones on their shoulders. Higher up, on the timber framework of the roof, were the plumbers, like spiders creeping across a giant wooden web, nailing sheets of lead to the struts and installing the drainpipes and gutters.

Tom realized regretfully that the building was almost finished. If he did get hired here the work would not last more than a couple of years—hardly enough time for him to rise to the position of master mason, let alone master builder. Nevertheless he would take the job, if he were offered it, for winter was coming. He and his family could have survived a winter without work if they had still had the pig, but without it Tom had to get a job.

They followed the cart across the close to where the stones were stacked. The oxen gratefully dipped their heads to the water trough. The carter called to a passing mason: “Where’s the master builder?”

“In the castle,” the mason replied.

The carter nodded and turned to Tom. “You’ll find him in the bishop’s palace, I expect.”

“Thanks.”

“Mine to you.”

Tom left the close with Agnes and the children following. They retraced their steps through the thronged, narrow streets to the front of the castle. Here was another dry moat and a second huge earthen rampart surrounding the central stronghold. They walked across the drawbridge. In a guardhouse to one side of the gateway, a thickset man in a leather tunic sat on a stool, looking out at the rain. He was wearing a sword. Tom addressed him. “Good day. I’m called Tom Builder. I want to see the master builder, John of Shaftesbury.”

“With the bishop,” the guard said indifferently.

They went inside. Like most castles, this was a collection of miscellaneous buildings inside a wall of earth. The courtyard was about a hundred yards across. Opposite the gateway, on the far side, was the massive keep, the last stronghold in time of attack, rising high above the ramparts to provide a lookout. On their left was a clutter of low buildings, mostly wooden: a long stable, a kitchen, a bakery and several storehouses. There was a well in the middle. On the right, taking up most of the northern half of the compound, was a large stone house that was obviously the palace. It was built

in the same style as the new cathedral, with small roundheaded doorways and windows, and it had two stories. It was new—indeed, masons were still working on one corner of it, apparently building a tower. Despite the rain there were plenty of people in the courtyard, coming in and going out or hurrying through the rain from one building to another: men-at-arms, priests, tradesmen, construction workers and palace servants.

Tom could see several doorways in the palace, all open despite the rain. He was not quite sure what to do next. If the master builder was with the bishop, perhaps he ought not to interrupt. On the other hand, a bishop was not a king; and Tom was a free man and a mason on legitimate business, not some groveling serf with a complaint. He decided to be bold. Leaving Agnes and Martha, he walked with Alfred across the muddy courtyard to the palace and went through the nearest door.

They found themselves in a small chapel with a vaulted ceiling and a window in the far end over the altar. Near the doorway a priest sat at a high desk, writing rapidly on vellum. He looked up.

Tom said briskly: “Where’s Master John?”

“In the vestry,” said the priest, jerking his head toward a door in the side wall.

Tom did not ask to see the master. He found that if he acted as if he were expected he was less likely to waste time waiting around. He crossed the little chapel in a couple of strides and entered the vestry.

It was a small, square chamber lit by many candles. Most of the floor space was taken up by a shallow sandpit. The fine sand had been smoothed perfectly level with a rule. There were two men in the room. Both glanced briefly at Tom, then returned their attention to the sand. The bishop, a wrinkled old man with flashing black eyes, was drawing in the sand with a pointed stick. The master builder, wearing a leather apron, watched him with a patient air and a skeptical expression.

Tom waited in anxious silence. He must make a good impression: be courteous but not groveling and show his knowledge without being cocky. A master craftsman wanted his subordinates to be obedient as well as skillful, Tom knew from his own experience of being the hirer.

Bishop Roger was sketching a two-story building with large windows in three sides. He was a good draftsman, making straight lines and true right angles. He drew a plan and a side view of the building. Tom could see that it would never be built.

The bishop finished it and said: “There.”

John turned to Tom and said: “What is it?”

Tom pretended to think he was being asked for his opinion of the drawing. He said: “You can’t have windows that big in an undercroft.”

The bishop looked at him with irritation. “It’s a writing room, not an

undercroft.”

“It will fall down just the same.”

John said: “He’s right.”

“But they must have light to write by.”

John shrugged and turned to Tom. “Who are you?”

“My name is Tom and I’m a mason.”

“I guessed that. What brings you here?”

“I’m looking for work.” Tom held his breath.

John shook his head immediately. “I can’t hire you.”

Tom’s heart sank. He felt like turning on his heel, but he waited politely to hear the reasons.

“We’ve been building for ten years here,” John went on. “Most of the masons have houses in the town. We’re coming to the end, and now I have more masons on the site than I really need.”

Tom knew it was hopeless, but he said: “And the palace?”

“Same thing,” said John. “This is where I’m using my surplus men. If it weren’t for this, and Bishop Roger’s other castles, I’d be laying masons off already.”

Tom nodded. In a neutral voice, trying not to sound desperate, he said: “Do you hear of work anywhere?”

“They were building at the monastery in Shaftesbury earlier in the year. Perhaps they still are. It’s a day’s journey away.”

“Thanks.” Tom turned to go.

“I’m sorry,” John called after him. “You seem like a good man.”

Tom went out without replying. He felt let down. He had allowed his hopes to rise too early: there was nothing unusual about being turned down. But he had been excited at the prospect of working on a cathedral again. Now he might have to work on a monotonous town wall or an ugly house for a silversmith.

He squared his shoulders as he walked back across the castle courtyard to where Agnes waited with Martha. He never showed his disappointment to her. He always tried to give the impression that all was well, he was in control of the situation, and it was of no great consequence if there was no work here because there was sure to be something in the next town, or the one after that. He knew that if he showed any sign of distress Agnes would urge him to find a place to settle down, and he did not want to do that, not unless he could settle in a town where there was a cathedral to be built.

“There’s nothing for me here,” he said to Agnes. “Let’s move on.”

She looked crestfallen. “You’d think, with a cathedral *and* a palace under construction, there would be room for one more mason.”

“Both buildings are almost finished,” Tom explained. “They’ve got more men than they want.”

The family crossed the drawbridge and plunged back into the crowded streets of the town. They had entered Salisbury by the east gate, and they would leave by the west, for that way led to Shaftesbury. Tom turned right, leading them through the part of the town they had not so far seen.

He stopped outside a stone house that looked in dire need of repair. The mortar used in building it had been too weak, and was now crumbling and falling out. Frost had got into the holes, cracking some of the stones. If it were left for another winter the damage would be worse. Tom decided to point this out to the owner.

The ground-floor entrance was a wide arch. The wooden door was open, and in the doorway a craftsman sat with a hammer in his right hand and a bradawl, a small metal tool with a sharp point, in his left. He was carving a complex design on a wooden saddle which sat on the bench before him. In the background Tom could see stores of wood and leather, and a boy with a broom sweeping shavings.

Tom said: “Good day, Master Saddler.”

The saddler looked up, classified Tom as the kind of man who would make his own saddle if he needed one, and gave a curt nod.

“I’m a builder,” Tom went on. “I see you’re in need of my services.”

“Why?”

“Your mortar is crumbling, your stones are cracking and your house may not last another winter.”

The saddler shook his head. “This town is full of masons. Why would I employ a stranger?”

“Very well.” Tom turned away. “God be with you.”

“I hope so,” said the saddler.

“An ill-mannered fellow,” Agnes muttered to Tom as they walked away.

The street led them to a marketplace. Here in a half-acre sea of mud, peasants from the surrounding countryside exchanged what little surplus they might have of meat or grain, milk or eggs, for the things they needed and could not make themselves—pots, plowshares, ropes and salt. Markets were usually colorful and rather boisterous. There was a lot of good-natured haggling, mock rivalry between adjacent stall holders, cheap cakes for the children, sometimes a minstrel or a group of tumblers, lots of painted whores, and perhaps a crippled soldier with tales of eastern deserts and berserk Saracen hordes. Those who made a good bargain often succumbed to the temptation to celebrate, and spent their profit on strong ale, so that there was always a rowdy atmosphere by midday. Others would lose their pennies at dice, and that led to fighting. But now, on a wet day in the morning, with the year’s harvest sold or stored, the market was subdued. Rain-soaked peasants made taciturn bargains with shivering stall holders, and everyone looked forward to going home to a blazing fireplace.

Tom’s family pushed through the disconsolate crowd, ignoring the halfhearted blandishments of the sausage seller and the knife sharpener. They had almost reached the far side of the marketplace when Tom saw his pig.

He was so surprised that at first he could not believe his eyes. Then Agnes hissed: “Tom! Look!” and he knew she had seen it too.

There was no doubt about it: he knew that pig as well as he knew Alfred or Martha. It was being held, in an expert grip, by a man who had the florid complexion and broad girth of one who eats as much meat as he needs and then some more: a butcher, without doubt. Both Tom and Agnes stood and stared at him, and since they blocked his path he could not help but notice them.

“Well?” he said, puzzled by their stares and impatient to get by.

It was Martha who broke the silence. “That’s our pig!” she said excitedly.

“So it is,” said Tom, looking lovely at the butcher.

For an instant a furtive look crossed the man’s face, and Tom realized he knew the pig was stolen. But he said: “I’ve just paid fifty pence for it, and that makes it my pig.”

“Whoever you gave your money to, the pig was not his to sell. No doubt that was why you got it so cheaply. Who did you buy it from?”

“A peasant.”

“One you know?”

“No. Listen, I’m butcher to the garrison. I can’t ask every farmer who sells me a pig or a cow to produce twelve men to swear the animal is his to sell.”

The man turned aside as if to go away, but Tom caught him by the arm and stopped him. For a moment the man looked angry, but then he realized that if he got into a scuffle he would have to drop the pig, and that if one of Tom’s family managed to pick it up, the balance of power would change and it would be the butcher who had to prove ownership. So he restrained himself and said: “If you want to make an accusation, go to the sheriff.”

Tom considered that briefly and dismissed it. He had no proof. Instead he said: “What did he look like—the man who sold you my pig?”

The butcher looked shifty and said: “Like anyone else.”

“Did he keep his mouth covered?”

“Now that I think of it, he did.”

“He was an outlaw, concealing a mutilation,” Tom said bitterly. “I suppose you didn’t think of that.”

“It’s pissing with rain!” the butcher protested. “Everyone’s muffled up.”

“Just tell me how long ago he left you.”

“Just now.”

“And where was he headed?”

“To an alehouse, I’d guess.”

“To spend my money,” Tom said disgustedly. “Go on, clear off. You may be robbed yourself, one day, and then you’ll wish there were not so many people eager to buy a bargain without asking questions.”

The butcher looked angry, and hesitated as if he wanted to make some rejoinder; then he thought better of it and disappeared.

Agnes said: “Why did you let him go?”

“Because he’s known here and I’m not,” Tom said. “If I fight with him I’ll be blamed. And because the pig doesn’t have my name written on its arse, so who is to say whether it is mine or not?”

“But all our savings—”

“We may get the money for the pig, yet,” said Tom. “Shut up and let me think.” The altercation with the butcher had angered him, and it relieved his frustration to speak harshly to Agnes. “Somewhere in this town there is a man with no lips and fifty silver pennies in his pocket. All we have to do is find him and take the money from him.”

“Right,” said Agnes determinedly.

“You walk back the way we’ve come. Go as far as the cathedral close. I’ll walk on, and come to the cathedral from the other direction. Then we’ll return by the next street, and so on. If he’s not on the streets he’s in an alehouse. When you see him, stay by him and send Martha to find me. I’ll take Alfred. Try not to let the outlaw see you.”

“Don’t worry,” Agnes said grimly. “I want that money, to feed my children.”

Tom touched her arm and smiled. “You’re a lion, Agnes.”

She looked into his eyes for a moment, then suddenly stood on her toes and kissed his mouth, briefly but hard. Then she turned and went back across the marketplace with Martha in tow. Tom watched her out of sight, feeling anxious for her despite her courage; then he went in the opposite direction with Alfred.

The thief seemed to think he was perfectly safe. Of course, when he stole the pig, Tom had been heading for Winchester. The thief had gone in the opposite direction, to sell the pig in Salisbury. But the outlaw woman, Ellen, had told Tom that Salisbury cathedral was being rebuilt, and he had changed his plans, and inadvertently caught up with the thief. However, the man thought he would never see Tom again, which gave Tom a chance to catch him unawares.

Tom walked slowly along the muddy street, trying to seem casual as he glanced in at open doorways. He wanted to remain unobtrusive, for this episode could end in violence, and he did not want people to remember a tall mason searching the town. Most of the houses were ordinary hovels of wood, mud and thatch, with straw on the floor, a fireplace in the middle, and a few bits of homemade furniture. A barrel and some benches made an alehouse; a

bed in the corner with a curtain to screen it meant a whore; a noisy crowd around a single table signified a game of dice.

A woman with red-stained lips bared her breasts to him, and he shook his head and hurried past. He was secretly intrigued by the idea of doing it with a total stranger, in daylight, and paying for it, but in all his life he had never tried it.

He thought again of Ellen, the outlaw woman. There was something intriguing about her, too. She was powerfully attractive, but those deep-set, intense eyes were intimidating. An invitation from a whore made Tom feel discontented for a few moments, but the spell cast by Ellen had not yet worn off, and he had a sudden foolish desire to run back into the forest and find her and fall on her.

He arrived at the cathedral close without seeing the outlaw. He looked at the plumbers nailing the lead to the triangular timber roof over the nave. They had not yet begun to cover the lean-to roofs on the side aisles of the church, and it was still possible to see the supporting half-arches which connected the outside edge of the aisle with the main nave wall, propping up the top half of the church. He pointed them out to Alfred. “Without those supports, the nave wall would bow outward and buckle, because of the weight of the stone vaults inside,” he explained. “See how the half-arches line up with the buttresses in the aisle wall? They also line up with the pillars of the nave arcade inside. And the aisle windows line up with the arches of the arcade. Strong lines up with strong, and weak with weak.” Alfred looked baffled and resentful. Tom sighed.

He saw Agnes coming from the opposite side, and his mind returned to his immediate problem. Agnes’s hood concealed her face, but he recognized her chin-forward, sure-footed walk. Broad-shouldered laborers stepped aside to let her pass. If she were to run into the outlaw, and there was a fight, he thought grimly, it would be a fairly even match.

“Did you see him?” she said.

“No. Obviously you didn’t either.” Tom hoped the thief had not left the town already. Surely he would not go without spending some of his pennies? Money was no use in the forest.

Agnes was thinking the same. “He’s here somewhere. Let’s keep looking.”

“We’ll go back by different streets and meet again in the marketplace.”

Tom and Alfred retraced their steps across the close and went out through the gateway. The rain was soaking through their cloaks now, and Tom thought fleetingly of a pot of beer and a bowl of beef broth beside an alehouse fire. Then he thought how hard he had worked to buy the pig, and he saw again the man with no lips swinging his club at Martha’s innocent head, and his anger warmed him.

It was difficult to search systematically because there was no order to the streets. They wandered here and there, according to where people had built houses, and there were many sharp turns and blind alleys. The only straight street was the one that led from the east gate to the castle drawbridge. On his first sweep Tom had stayed close to the ramparts of the castle. Now he searched the outskirts, zigzagging to the town wall and back into the interior. These were the poorer quarters, with the most ramshackle buildings, the noisiest alehouses and the oldest whores. The edge of the town was downhill from the center, so the refuse from the wealthier neighborhood was washed down the streets to lodge beneath the walls. Something similar seemed to happen to the people, for this district had more than its share of cripples and beggars, hungry children and bruised women and helpless drunks.

But the man with no lips was nowhere to be seen.

Twice Tom spotted a man of about the right build and general appearance, and took a closer look, only to see that the man's face was normal.

He ended his search at the marketplace, and there was Agnes waiting for him impatiently, her body tense and her eyes gleaming. "I've found him!" she hissed.

Tom felt a surge of excitement mingled with apprehension. "Where?"

"He went into a cookshop down by the east gate."

"Lead me there."

They circled the castle to the drawbridge, went down the straight street to the east gate, then turned into a maze of alleys beneath the walls. Tom saw the cookshop a moment later. It was not even a house, just a sloping roof on four posts, up against the town wall, with a huge fire at the back over which a sheep turned on a spit and a cauldron bubbled. It was now about noon and the little place was full of people, mostly men. The smell of the meat made Tom's stomach rumble. He raked the little crowd with his eyes, fearful that the outlaw might have left in the short time it had taken them to get here. He spotted the man immediately, sitting on a stool a little apart from the crowd, eating a bowl of stew with a spoon, holding his scarf in front of his face to hide his mouth.

Tom turned away quickly so that the man should not see him. Now he had to decide how to handle this. He was angry enough to knock the outlaw down and take his purse. But the crowd would not let him walk away. He would have to explain himself, not just to bystanders but to the sheriff. Tom was within his rights, and the fact that the thief was an outlaw meant that he would not have anyone to vouch for his honesty; whereas Tom was evidently a respectable man and a mason. But establishing all that would take time, possibly weeks if the sheriff happened to be away in another part of the county; and there might still be an accusation of breaking the king's peace, if a brawl should result.

No. It would be wiser to get the thief alone.

The man could not stay in the town overnight, for he had no home here, and he could not get lodgings without establishing himself as a respectable man somehow. Therefore he had to leave before the gates closed at nightfall.

And there were only two gates.

“He’ll probably go back the way he came,” Tom said to Agnes. “I’ll wait outside the east gate. Let Alfred watch the west gate. You stay in the town and see what the thief does. Keep Martha with you, but don’t let him see her. If you need to send a message to me or Alfred, use Martha.”

“Right,” Agnes said tersely.

Alfred said: “What should I do if he comes out my way?” He sounded excited.

“Nothing,” Tom said firmly. “Watch which road he takes, then wait. Martha will fetch me, and we’ll overtake him together.” Alfred looked disappointed, and Tom said: “You do as I say. I don’t want to lose my son as well as my pig.”

Alfred nodded reluctant assent.

“Let’s break up, before he notices us huddling together and plotting. Go.”

Tom left them immediately, not looking back. He could rely on Agnes to carry out the plan. He hurried to the east gate and left the town, crossing the rickety wooden bridge over which he had pushed the ox cart that morning. Directly ahead of him was the Winchester road, going east, dead straight, like a long carpet unrolled over the hills and valleys. To his left, the road by which Tom—and presumably the thief—had come to Salisbury, the Portway, curled up over a hill and disappeared. The thief would almost certainly take the Portway.

Tom went down the hill and through the cluster of houses at the crossroads, then turned onto the Portway. He needed to hide himself. He walked along the road looking for a suitable spot. He went two hundred yards without finding anything. Looking back, he realized that this was too far: he could no longer see the faces of people at the crossroads, so that he would not know if the man with no lips came along and took the Winchester road. He scanned the landscape again. The road was bordered on either side by ditches, which might have offered concealement in dry weather, but today were running with water. Beyond each ditch the land rose in a hump. In the field on the south side of the road a few cows were grazing the stubble. Tom noticed that one of the cows was lying down at the raised edge of the field, overlooking the road, partly concealed by the hump. With a sigh, he retraced his steps. He jumped the ditch and kicked the cow. It got up and went away. Tom lay down in the warm, dry patch it had left. He pulled his hood over his face and settled to wait, wishing he had had the foresight to buy some bread before leaving the town.

He was anxious and a little scared. The outlaw was a smaller man, but he was fast-moving and vicious, as he had shown when he clubbed Martha and stole the pig. Tom was a little afraid of being hurt but much more worried that he might not get his money.

He hoped Agnes and Martha were all right. Agnes could look after herself, he knew; and even if the outlaw spotted her, what could the man do? He would just be on his guard, that was all.

From where he lay Tom could see the towers of the cathedral. He wished he had had a moment to look inside. He was curious about the treatment of the piers of the arcade. These were usually fat pillars, each with arches sprouting from its top: two arches going north and south, to connect with the neighboring pillars in the arcade; and one going east or west, across the side aisle. It was an ugly effect, for there was something not quite right about an arch that sprang from the top of a round column. When Tom built his cathedral each pier would be a cluster of shafts, with an arch springing from the top of each shaft—an elegantly logical arrangement.

He began to visualize the decoration of the arches. Geometric shapes were the commonest forms—it did not take much skill to carve zigzags and lozenges—but Tom liked foliage, which lent softness and a touch of nature to the hard regularity of the stones.

The imaginary cathedral occupied his mind until midafternoon, when he saw the slight figure and blond head of Martha come skipping across the bridge and through the houses. She hesitated at the crossing, then picked the right road. Tom watched her walk toward him, seeing her frown as she began to wonder where he could be. As she drew level with him he called her softly. “Martha.”

She gave a little squeal, then saw him and ran to him, jumping over the ditch. “Mummy sent you this,” she said, and took something from inside her cloak.

It was a hot meat pie. “By the cross, your mother’s a good woman!” said Tom, and took a mammoth bite. It was made with beef and onions, and it tasted heavenly.

Martha squatted beside Tom on the grass. “This is what happened to the man who stole our pig,” she said. She screwed up her nose and concentrated on remembering what she had been told to say. She was so sweet that she took Tom’s breath away. “He came out of the cookshop and met a lady with a painted face, and went to her house. We waited outside.”

While the outlaw spent our money on a whore, Tom thought bitterly. “Go on.”

“He was not long in the lady’s house, and when he came out he went to an alehouse. He’s there now. He doesn’t drink much but he plays at dice.”

“I hope he wins,” Tom said grimly. “Is that it?”

“That’s all.”

“Are you hungry?”

“I had a bun.”

“Have you told Alfred all this?”

“Not yet. I’m to go to him next.”

“Tell him he must try to stay dry.”

“Try to stay dry,” she repeated. “Shall I say that before or after telling him about the man who stole our pig?”

It did not matter, of course. “After,” Tom said, as she wanted a definite answer. He smiled at her. “You’re a clever girl. Off you go.”

“I like this game,” she said. She waved and left, her girlish legs twinkling as she jumped the ditch daintily and ran back toward the town. Tom watched her with love and anger in his heart. He and Agnes had worked hard to get money to feed their children, and he was ready to kill to get back what had been stolen from them.

Perhaps the outlaw would be ready to kill, too. Outlaws were outside the law, as the name implied: they lived in unconstrained violence. This might not be the first time Faramond Openmouth had come up against one of his victims. He was nothing if not dangerous.

The daylight began to fade surprisingly early, as it sometimes did on wet autumn afternoons. Tom started to worry whether he would recognize the thief in the rain. As evening closed in, the traffic to and from the town thinned out, for most visitors had left in time to reach their home villages by nightfall. The lights of candles and lanterns began to flicker in the higher houses of the town and in the suburban hovels. Tom wondered pessimistically if the thief might stay overnight after all. Perhaps he had dishonest friends in the town who would put him up even though they knew he was an outlaw. Perhaps—

Then Tom saw a man with a scarf across his mouth.

He was walking across the wooden bridge close to two other men. It suddenly occurred to Tom that the thief’s two accomplices, the bald one and the man in the green hat, might have come to Salisbury with him. Tom had not seen either of them in the town but the three might have separated for a while and then joined up again for the return journey. Tom cursed under his breath: he did not think he could fight three men. But as they came closer the group separated, and Tom realized with relief that they were not together after all.

The first two were father and son, two peasants with dark, close-set eyes and hooked noses. They took the Portway, and the man with the scarf followed.

He studied the thief’s gait as he came closer. He appeared sober. That was a pity.

Glancing back to the town he saw a woman and a girl emerge onto the

bridge: Agnes and Martha. He was dismayed. He had not envisaged their being present when he confronted the thief. However, he realized that he had given no instructions to the contrary.

He tensed as they all came up the road toward him. Tom was so big that most people gave in to him in a confrontation; but outlaws were desperate, and there was no telling what might happen in a fight.

The two peasants went by, mildly merry, talking about horses. Tom took his iron-headed hammer from his belt and hefted it in his right hand. He hated thieves, who did no work but took the bread from good people. He would have no qualms about hitting this one with a hammer.

The thief seemed to slow down as he came near, almost as if he sensed danger. Tom waited until he was four or five yards away—too near to run back, too far to run past. Then Tom rolled over the bank, sprang across the ditch, and stood in his way.

The man stopped dead and stared at him. “What’s this?” he said nervously.

He doesn’t recognize me, Tom thought. He said: “You stole my pig yesterday and sold it to a butcher today.”

“I never—”

“Don’t deny it,” Tom said. “Just give me the money you got for it, and I won’t hurt you.”

For a moment he thought the thief was going to do just that. He felt a sense of anticlimax as the man hesitated. Then the thief turned on his heel and ran—straight into Agnes.

He was not traveling fast enough to knock her over—and she was a woman who took a lot of knocking over—and the two of them staggered from side to side for a moment in a clumsy dance. Then he realized she was deliberately obstructing him, and he pushed her aside. She stuck out her leg as he went past her. Her foot got between his knees and both of them fell down.

Tom’s heart was in his mouth as he raced to her side. The thief was getting up with one knee on her back. Tom grabbed his collar and yanked him off her. He hauled him to the side of the road before he could regain his balance, then threw him into the ditch.

Agnes stood up. Martha ran to her. Tom said rapidly: “All right?”

“Yes,” Agnes answered.

The two peasants had stopped and turned around, and they were staring at the scene, wondering what was going on. The thief was on his knees in the ditch. “He’s an outlaw,” Agnes called out to them, to discourage them from interfering. “He stole our pig.” The peasants made no reply, but waited to see what would happen next.

Tom spoke to the thief again. “Give me my money and I’ll let you go.”

The man came up out of the ditch with a knife in his hand, fast as a rat,

and went for Tom's throat. Agnes screamed. Tom dodged. The knife flashed across his face and he felt a burning pain along his jaw.

He stepped back and swung his hammer as the knife flashed again. The thief jumped back, and both knife and hammer swished through the damp evening air without connecting.

For an instant the two men stood still, facing one another, breathing hard. Tom's cheek hurt. He realized they were evenly matched, for although Tom was bigger, the thief had a knife, which was a deadlier weapon than a mason's hammer. He felt the cold grasp of fear as he realized he might be about to die. He suddenly felt he could not breathe.

From the corner of his eye he saw a sudden movement. The thief saw it too, and darted a glance at Agnes, then ducked his head as a stone came flying at him from her hand.

Tom reacted with the speed of a man in fear of his life, and swung his hammer at the thief's bent head.

It connected just as the man was looking up again. The iron hammer struck his forehead at the hairline. It was a hasty blow, and did not have all of Tom's considerable strength behind it. The thief staggered but did not fall.

Tom hit him again.

This blow was harder. He had time to lift the hammer above his head and aim it, as the dazed thief tried to focus his eyes. Tom thought of Martha as he swung the hammer down. It struck with all his force, and the thief fell to the ground like a dropped doll.

Tom was wound up too tightly to feel any relief. He knelt beside the thief, searching him. "Where's his purse? Where's his purse, damnation!" The limp body was difficult to move. Finally Tom laid him flat on his back and opened his cloak. There was a big leather purse hanging from his belt. Tom undid its clasp. Inside was a soft wool bag with a drawstring. Tom pulled it out. It was light. "Empty!" Tom said. "He must have another."

He pulled the cloak from under the man and carefully felt it all over. There were no concealed pockets, no hard parts. He pulled off the boots. There was nothing inside them. He drew his eating knife from his belt and slit the soles: nothing.

Impatiently, he slipped his knife inside the neck of the thief's woolen tunic and ripped it to the hem. There was no hidden money belt.

The thief lay in the middle of the mud road, naked but for his stockings. The two peasants were staring at Tom as if he were mad. Furiously, Tom said to Agnes: "He hasn't any money!"

"He must have lost it all at dice," she said bitterly.

"I hope he burns in the fires of hell," Tom said.

Agnes knelt down and felt the thief's chest. "That's where he is now," she said. "You've killed him."

IV

By Christmas they were starving.

The winter came early, and it was as cold and hard and unyielding as a stonemason's iron chisel. There were still apples on the trees when the first frost dusted the fields. People called it a cold snap, thinking it would be brief, but it was not. Villages that left the autumn plowing a little late broke their plowshares on the rock-hard earth. The peasants hastened to kill their pigs and salt them for the winter, and the lords slaughtered their cattle, because winter grazing would not support the same number of livestock as summer. But the endless freeze withered the grass, and some of the remaining animals died anyway. Wolves became desperate, and came into villages at dusk to snatch away scraggy chickens and listless children.

On building sites all over the country, as soon as the first frost struck, the walls that had been built that summer were hastily covered with straw and dung to insulate them from the worst cold, because the mortar in them was not yet completely dry, and if it were to freeze it would crack. No further mortar work would be done until spring. Some of the masons had been hired for the summer only, and they went back to their home villages, where they were known as wrights rather than masons, and they would spend the winter making plows, saddles, harness, carts, shovels, doors, and anything else that required a skilled hand with hammer and chisel and saw. The other masons moved into the lean-to lodges on the site and cut stones in intricate shapes all the hours of daylight. But because the frost was early, the work progressed too fast; and because the peasants were starving, the bishops and castellans and lords had less money to spend on building than they had hoped; and so as the winter wore on some of the masons were dismissed.

Tom and his family walked from Salisbury to Shaftesbury, and from there to Sherborne, Wells, Bath, Bristol, Gloucester, Oxford, Wallingford and Windsor. Everywhere the fires inside the lodges burned, and the churchyards and castle walls rang with the song of iron on stone, and the master builders made small precise models of arches and vaults with their clever hands encased in fingerless gloves. Some masters were impatient, abrupt or discourteous; others looked sadly at Tom's thin children and pregnant wife and spoke kindly and regretfully; but they all said the same thing: No, there's no work for you here.

Whenever they could, they imposed upon the hospitality of monasteries, where travelers could always get a meal of some kind and a place to sleep—

strictly for one night only. When the blackberries ripened in the bramble thickets, they lived on those for days on end, like the birds. In the forest, Agnes would light a fire under the iron cooking pot and boil porridge. But still, much of the time, they were obliged to buy bread from bakers and pickled herrings from fishmongers, or to eat in alehouses and cookshops, which was more expensive than preparing their own food; and so their money inexorably drained away.

Martha was naturally skinny but she became even thinner. Alfred was still getting taller, like a weed growing in shallow soil, and he became lanky. Agnes ate sparingly, but the baby growing inside her was greedy, and Tom could see that she was tormented by hunger. Sometimes he ordered her to eat more, and then even her iron will yielded to the combined authority of her husband and her unborn child. Still she did not grow plump and rosy, as she had during other pregnancies. Instead she looked gaunt despite her swollen belly, like a starving child in a famine.

Since leaving Salisbury they had walked around three quarters of a big circle, and by the end of the year they were back in the vast forest that stretched from Windsor to Southampton. They were heading for Winchester. Tom had sold his mason's tools, and all but a few pennies of that money had been spent: he would have to borrow tools, or the money to buy them, as soon as he found employment. If he did not get work in Winchester he did not know what he would do. He had brothers, back in his hometown; but that was in the north, a journey of several weeks, and the family would starve before they got there. Agnes was an only child and her parents were dead. There was no agricultural work in midwinter. Perhaps Agnes could scrape a few pennies as a scullery maid in a rich house in Winchester. She certainly could not tramp the roads much longer, for her time was near.

But Winchester was three days away and they were hungry now. The blackberries were gone, there was no monastery in prospect, and Agnes had no oats left in the cooking pot which she carried on her back. The previous night they had traded a knife for a loaf of rye bread, four bowls of broth with no meat in it, and a place to sleep by the fire in a peasant's hovel. They had not seen a village since. But toward the end of the afternoon Tom saw smoke rising above the trees, and they found the home of a solitary verderer, one of the king's forest police. He gave them a sack of turnips in exchange for Tom's small ax.

They had walked only three miles farther when Agnes said she was too tired to go on. Tom was surprised. In all their years together he had never known her to say she was too tired for anything.

She sat down in the shelter of a big horse-chestnut tree beside the road. Tom dug a shallow pit for a fire, using a worn wooden shovel—one of the few tools they had left, for nobody would want to buy it. The children

gathered twigs and Tom started the fire, then he took the cooking pot and went to find a stream. He returned with the pot full of icy water and set it at the edge of the fire. Agnes sliced some turnips. Martha collected the conkers that had dropped from the tree, and Agnes showed her how to peel them and grind the soft insides into a coarse flour to thicken the turnip soup. Tom sent Alfred to find more firewood, while he himself took a stick and went poking around in the dead leaves on the forest floor, hoping to find a hibernating hedgehog or squirrel to put in the broth. He was unlucky.

He sat down beside Agnes while darkness fell and the soup cooked. “Have we any salt left?” he asked her.

She shook her head. “You’ve been eating porridge without salt for weeks,” she said. “Haven’t you noticed?”

“No.”

“Hunger is the best seasoning.”

“Well, we’ve plenty of that.” Tom was suddenly terribly tired. He felt the crushing burden of the piled-up disappointments of the last four months and he could not be brave any longer. In a defeated voice he said: “What went wrong, Agnes?”

“Everything,” she said. “You had no work last winter. You got a job in the spring; then the earl’s daughter canceled the wedding and Lord William canceled the house. Then we decided to stay and work in the harvest—that was a mistake.”

“For sure it would have been easier for me to find a building job in the summer than it was in the autumn.”

“And the winter came early. And for all that, we would still have been all right, but then our pig was stolen.”

Tom nodded wearily. “My only consolation is knowing that the thief is even now suffering all the torments of hell.”

“I hope so.”

“Do you doubt it?”

“Priests don’t know as much as they pretend to. My father was one, remember.”

Tom remembered very well. One wall of her father’s parish church had crumbled beyond repair, and Tom had been hired to rebuild it. Priests were not allowed to marry, but this priest had a housekeeper, and the housekeeper had a daughter, and it was an open secret in the village that the priest was the father of the girl. Agnes had not been beautiful, even then, but her skin had had a glow of youth, and she had seemed to be bursting with energy. She would talk to Tom while he was working, and sometimes the wind would flatten her dress against her so that Tom could see the curves of her body, even her navel, almost as clearly as if she had been naked. One night she came to the little hut where he slept, and put a hand over his mouth to tell him

not to speak, and pulled off her dress so that he could see her nude in the moonlight, and then he took her strong young body in his arms and they made love.

“We were both virgins,” he said aloud.

She knew what he was thinking about. She smiled, then her face saddened again, and she said: “It seems so long ago.”

Martha said: “Can we eat now?”

The smell of the soup was making Tom’s stomach rumble. He dipped his bowl into the bubbling cauldron and brought out a few slices of turnip in a thin gruel. He used the blunt edge of his knife to test the turnip. It was not cooked all the way through, but he decided not to make them wait. He gave a bowlful to each child, then took one to Agnes.

She looked drawn and thoughtful. She blew on her soup to cool it, then raised the bowl to her lips.

The children quickly drained theirs and wanted more. Tom took the pot out of the fire, using the hem of his cloak to avoid burning his hands, and emptied the remaining soup into the children’s bowls.

When he returned to Agnes’s side she said: “What about you?”

“I’ll eat tomorrow,” he said.

She seemed too tired to argue.

Tom and Alfred built the fire high and gathered enough wood to last the night. Then they all rolled up in their cloaks and lay down on the leaves to sleep.

Tom slept lightly, and when Agnes groaned he woke up instantly. “What is it?” he whispered.

She groaned again. Her face was pale and her eyes were closed. After a moment she said: “The baby is coming.”

Tom’s heart missed a beat. Not here, he thought; not here on the frozen ground in the depths of a forest. “But it’s not due,” he said.

“It’s early.”

Tom made his voice calm. “Have the waters broken?”

“Soon after we left the verderer’s hut,” Agnes panted, not opening her eyes.

Tom remembered her suddenly diving into the bushes as if to answer an urgent call of nature. “And the pains?”

“Ever since.”

It was like her to keep quiet about it.

Alfred and Martha were awake. Alfred said: “What’s happening?”

“The baby is coming,” Tom said.

Martha burst into tears.

Tom frowned. “Could you make it back to the verderer’s hut?” he asked Agnes. There they would at least have a roof, and straw to lie on, and

someone to help.

Agnes shook her head. “The baby has dropped already.”

“It won’t be long, then!” They were in the most deserted part of the forest. They had not seen a village since morning, and the verderer had said they would not see one all day tomorrow. That meant there was no possibility of finding a woman to act as midwife. Tom would have to deliver the baby himself, in the cold, with only the children to help, and if anything should go wrong he had no medicines, no knowledge….

This is my fault, Tom thought; I got her with child, and I brought her into destitution. She trusted me to provide for her, and now she is giving birth in the open air in the middle of winter. He had always despised men who fathered children and then left them to starve; and now he was no better than they. He felt ashamed.

“I’m so tired,” Agnes said. “I don’t believe I can bring this baby into the world. I want to rest.” Her face glistened, in the firelight, with a thin film of sweat.

Tom realized he must pull himself together. He was going to have to give Agnes strength. “I’ll help you,” he said. There was nothing mysterious or complicated about what was going to happen. He had watched the births of several children. The work was normally done by women, for they knew how the mother felt, and that enabled them to be more helpful; but there was no reason why a man should not do it if necessary. He must first make her comfortable; then find out how far advanced the birth was; then make sensible preparations; then calm her and reassure her while they waited.

“How do you feel?” he asked her.

“Cold,” she replied.

“Come closer to the fire,” he said. He took off his cloak and spread it on the ground a yard from the blaze. Agnes tried to struggle to her feet. Tom lifted her easily, and set her down gently on his cloak.

He knelt beside her. The wool tunic she was wearing underneath her own cloak had buttons all the way down the front. He undid two of them and put his hands inside. Agnes gasped.

“Does it hurt?” he said, surprised and worried.

“No,” she said with a brief smile. “Your hands are cold.”

He felt the outline of her belly. The swelling was higher and more pointed than it had been last night, when the two of them had slept together in the straw on the floor of a peasant’s hovel. Tom pressed a little harder, feeling the shape of the unborn baby. He found one end of the body, just beneath Agnes’s navel; but he could not locate the other end. He said: “I can feel its bottom, but not its head.”

“That’s because it’s on the way out,” she said.

He covered her and tucked her cloak around her. He would need to make

his preparations quickly. He looked at the children. Martha was snuffling. Alfred just looked scared. It would be good to give them something to do.

"Alfred, take that cooking pot to the stream. Wash it clean and bring it back full of fresh water. Martha, collect some reeds and make me two lengths of string, each big enough for a necklace. Quick, now. You're going to have another brother or sister by daybreak."

They went off. Tom took out his eating knife and a small hard stone and began to sharpen the blade. Agnes groaned again. Tom put down his knife and held her hand.

He had sat with her like this when the others were born: Alfred; then Matilda, who had died after two years; and Martha; and the child who had been born dead, a boy whom Tom had secretly planned to name Harold. But each time there had been someone else to give help and reassurance—Agnes' mother for Alfred, a village midwife for Matilda and Harold, and the lady of the manor, no less, for Martha. This time he would have to do it alone. But he must not show his anxiety: he must make her feel happy and confident.

She relaxed as the spasm passed. Tom said: "Remember when Martha was born, and the Lady Isabella acted as midwife?"

Agnes smiled. "You were building a chapel for the lord, and you asked her to send her maid to fetch the midwife from the village…."

"And she said: 'That drunken old witch? I wouldn't let her deliver a litter of wolfhound pups!' And she took us to her own chamber, and Lord Robert could not go to bed until Martha was born."

"She was a good woman."

"There aren't many ladies like her."

Alfred returned with the pot full of cold water. Tom set it down near the fire, not close enough to boil, so there would be warm water. Agnes reached inside her cloak and took out a small linen bag containing clean rags which she had ready.

Martha came back with her hands full of reeds and sat down to plait them. "What do you need strings for?" she asked.

"Something very important, you'll see," Tom said. "Make them well."

Alfred looked restless and embarrassed. "Go and collect more wood," Tom told him. "Let's have a bigger fire." The boy went off, glad to have something to do.

Agnes's face tautened with strain as she began to bear down again, pushing the baby out of her womb, making a low noise like a tree creaking in a gale. Tom could see that the effort was costing her dear, using up her last reserves of strength; and he wished with all his heart that he could bear down for her, and take the strain himself, to give her some relief. At last the pain seemed to ease, and Tom breathed again. Agnes seemed to drift off into a doze.

Alfred returned with his arms full of sticks.

Agnes became alert again and said: “I’m so cold.”

Tom said: “Alfred, build up the fire. Martha, lie down beside your mother and keep her warm.” They both obeyed with worried looks. Agnes put her arms around Martha and held her close, shivering.

Tom was sick with worry. The fire was roaring, but the air was getting colder. It might be so cold that it would kill the baby with its first breath. It was not unknown for children to be born out-of-doors; in fact it happened often at harvesttime, when everyone was so busy and the women worked up until the last minute; but at harvest the ground was dry and the grass was soft and the air was balmy. He had never heard of a woman giving birth outside in winter.

Agnes raised herself on her elbows and spread her legs wider.

“What is it?” Tom said in a frightened voice.

She was straining too hard to reply.

Tom said: “Alfred, kneel down behind your mother and let her lean on you.”

When Alfred was in position, Tom opened Agnes’s cloak and unbuttoned the skirt of her dress. Kneeling between her legs, he could see that the birth opening was beginning to dilate a little already. “Not long now, my darling,” he murmured, struggling to keep the tremor of fear out of his voice.

She relaxed again, closing her eyes and resting her weight on Alfred. The opening seemed to shrink a little. The forest was silent but for the crackling of the big fire. Suddenly Tom thought of how the outlaw woman, Ellen, had given birth in the forest alone. It must have been terrifying. She had feared that a wolf would come upon her while she was helpless and steal the newborn baby away, she had said. This year the wolves were bolder than usual, people said, but surely they would not attack a group of four people.

Agnes tensed again, and fresh beads of sweat appeared on her contorted face. This is it, thought Tom. He was frightened. He watched the opening widen again, and this time he could see, by the light of the fire, the damp black hair of the baby’s head pushing through. He thought of praying but there was no time now. Agnes began to breathe in short, fast gasps. The opening stretched wider—impossibly wide—and then the head began to come through, facedown. A moment later Tom saw the wrinkled ears flat against the side of the baby’s head; then he saw the folded skin of the neck. He could not yet see whether the baby was normal.

“The head is out,” he said, but Agnes knew that already, of course, for she could feel it; and she had relaxed again. Slowly the baby turned, so that Tom could see the closed eyes and mouth, wet with blood and the slippery fluids of the womb.

Martha cried: “Oh! Look at its little face!”

Agnes heard her and smiled briefly, then began to strain again. Tom leaned forward between her thighs and supported the tiny head with his left hand as the shoulders came out, first one then the other. Then the rest of the body emerged in a rush, and Tom put his right hand under the baby's hips and held it as the tiny legs slithered into the cold world.

Agnes's opening immediately started to close around the pulsing blue cord that came from the baby's navel.

Tom lifted the baby and scrutinized it anxiously. There was a lot of blood, and at first he feared something was terribly wrong; but on closer examination he could see no injury. He looked between its legs. It was a boy.

"It looks horrible!" said Martha.

"He's perfect," Tom said, and he felt weak with relief. "A perfect boy."

The baby opened its mouth and cried.

Tom looked at Agnes. Their eyes met, and they both smiled.

Tom held the tiny baby close to his chest. "Martha, fetch me a bowl of water out of that pot." She jumped up to do his bidding. "Where are those rags, Agnes?" Agnes pointed to the linen bag lying on the ground beside her shoulder. Alfred passed it to Tom. The boy's face was running with tears. It was the first time he had seen a child born.

Tom dipped a rag into a bowl of warm water and gently washed the blood and mucus off the baby's face. Agnes unbuttoned the front of her tunic and Tom put the baby in her arms. He was still squalling. As Tom watched, the blue cord that went from the baby's belly to Agnes's groin stopped pulsing and shriveled, turning white.

Tom said to Martha: "Give me those strings you made. Now you'll see what they're for."

She passed him the two lengths of plaited reeds. He tied them around the birth cord in two places, pulling the knots tight. Then he used his knife to cut the cord between the knots.

He sat back on his haunches. They had done it. The worst was over and the baby was well. He felt proud.

Agnes moved the baby so that his face was at her breast. His tiny mouth found her enlarged nipple, and he stopped crying and started to suck.

Martha said in an amazed voice: "How does he know he should do that?"

"It's a mystery," said Tom. He handed the bowl to her and said: "Get your mother some fresh water to drink."

"Oh, yes," said Agnes gratefully, as if she had just realized she was desperately thirsty. Martha brought the water and Agnes drank the bowl dry. "That was wonderful," she said. "Thank you."

She looked down at the suckling baby, then up at Tom. "You're a good man," she said quietly. "I love you."

Tom felt tears come to his eyes. He smiled at her, then dropped his gaze.

He saw that she was still bleeding a lot. The shriveled birth cord, which was still slowly coming out, lay curled in a pool of blood on Tom's cloak between Agnes's legs.

He looked up again. The baby had stopped sucking and fallen asleep. Agnes pulled her cloak over him, then her own eyes closed.

After a moment, Martha said to Tom: "Are you waiting for something?"

"The afterbirth," Tom told her.

"What's that?"

"You'll see."

Mother and baby dozed for a while, then Agnes opened her eyes again. Her muscles tensed, her opening dilated a little, and the placenta emerged. Tom picked it up in his hands and looked at it. It was like something on a butcher's slab. Looking more closely, he saw that it seemed to be torn, as if there were a piece missing. But he had never looked this closely at an afterbirth, and he supposed they were always like this, for they must always have broken away from the womb. He put the thing on the fire. It made an unpleasant smell as it burned, but if he had thrown it away it might have attracted foxes, or even a wolf.

Agnes was still bleeding. Tom remembered that there was always a rush of blood with the afterbirth, but he did not recall so much. He realized that the crisis was not yet over. He felt faint for a moment, from strain and lack of food; but the spell passed and he pulled himself together.

"You're still bleeding, a little," he said to Agnes, trying not to sound as worried as he was.

"It will stop soon," she said. "Cover me."

Tom buttoned the skirt of her dress, then wrapped her cloak around her legs.

Alfred said: "Can I have a rest now?"

He was still kneeling behind Agnes, supporting her. He must be numb, Tom thought, from staying so long in the same position. "I'll take your place," Tom said. Agnes would be more comfortable with the baby if she could stay half-upright, he thought; and also a body behind her would keep her back warm and shield her from the wind. He changed places with Alfred. Alfred grunted with pain as he stretched his young legs. Tom wrapped his arms around Agnes and the baby. "How do you feel?" he asked her.

"Just tired."

The baby cried. Agnes moved him so that he could find her nipple. As he suckled, she seemed to sleep.

Tom was uneasy. It was normal to be tired, but there was a lethargy about Agnes that bothered him. She was too weak.

The baby slept, and after a while the other two children fell asleep, Martha curled up beside Agnes, and Alfred stretched out on the far side of the

fire. Tom held Agnes in his arms, stroking her gently. Every now and again he would kiss the top of her head. He felt her body relax as she fell into a deeper and deeper sleep. It was probably the best thing for her, he decided. He touched her cheek. Her skin was clammy, despite all his efforts to keep her warm. He reached inside her cloak and touched the baby's chest. The child was warm and his heart was beating strongly. Tom smiled. A tough baby, he thought; a survivor.

Agnes stirred. "Tom?"

"Yes."

"Do you remember the night I came to you, in your lodge, when you were working on my father's church?"

"Of course," he said, patting her. "How could I ever forget?"

"I never regretted giving myself to you. Never, for one moment. Every time I think of that night, I feel so glad."

He smiled. That was good to know. "Me, too," he said. "I'm glad you did."

She dozed for a while, then spoke again. "I hope you build your cathedral," she said.

He was surprised. "I thought you were against it."

"I was, but I was wrong. You deserve something beautiful."

He did not know what she meant.

"Build a beautiful cathedral for me," she said.

She was not making sense. He was glad when she fell asleep again. This time her body went quite limp, and her head leaned sideways. Tom had to support the baby to prevent him falling off her chest.

They lay like that for a long time. Eventually the baby woke again and cried. Agnes did not respond. The crying woke Alfred, and he rolled over and looked at his baby brother.

Tom shook Agnes gently. "Wake up," he said. "The baby wants to feed."

"Father!" said Alfred in a scared voice. "Look at her face!"

Tom was filled with foreboding. She had bled too much. "Agnes!" he said. "Wake up!" There was no response. She was unconscious. He got up, easing her back until she lay flat on the ground. Her face was ghastly white.

Dreading what he would see, he unwrapped the folds of the cloak from around her thighs.

There was blood *everywhere*.

Alfred gasped and turned away.

Tom whispered: "Christ Jesus save us."

The baby's crying woke Martha. She saw the blood and began to scream. Tom picked her up and smacked her face. She became silent. "Don't scream," he said calmly, and put her down again.

Alfred said: "Is Mother dying?"

Tom put his hand on Agnes's chest, just underneath her left breast. There was no heartbeat.

No heartbeat.

He pressed harder. Her flesh was warm, and the underside of her heavy breast touched his hand, but she was not breathing, and there was no heartbeat.

A numb coldness settled over Tom like a fog. She was gone. He stared at her face. How could she not be there? He willed her to move, to open her eyes, to draw breath. He kept his hand on her chest. Sometimes a heart might start again, people said—but she had lost so much blood….

He looked at Alfred. "Mother is dead," he whispered.

Alfred stared at him dumbly. Martha began to cry. The new baby was crying too. I must take care of them, Tom thought. I must be strong for them.

But he wanted to weep, to put his arms around her and hold her body while it cooled, and remember her as a girl, and laughing, and making love. He wanted to sob with rage and shake his fist at the merciless heavens. He hardened his heart. He had to stay controlled, he had to be strong for the children.

No tears came to his eyes.

He thought: What do I do first?

Dig a grave.

I must dig a deep hole, and lay her in it, to keep the wolves off, and preserve her bones until the Day of Judgment; and then say a prayer for her soul. Oh, Agnes, why have you left me alone?

The new baby was still crying. His eyes were screwed tightly shut and his mouth opened and closed rhythmically, as if he could get sustenance from the air. He needed feeding. Agnes's breasts were full of warm milk. Why not? thought Tom. He shifted the baby toward her breast. The child found a nipple and sucked. Tom pulled Agnes's cloak tighter around the baby.

Martha was watching, wide-eyed, sucking her thumb. Tom said to her: "Could you hold the baby there, so he doesn't fall?"

She nodded and knelt beside the dead woman and the baby.

Tom picked up the spade. She had chosen this spot to rest, and she had sat under the branches of the chestnut tree. Let this be her last resting-place, then. He swallowed hard, fighting an urge to sit on the ground and weep. He marked a rectangle on the ground some yards from the trunk of the tree, where there would be no roots near the surface; then he began to dig.

He found it helped. When he concentrated on driving his shovel into the hard ground and lifting the earth, the rest of his mind went blank and he was able to retain his composure. He took turns with Alfred, for he too could take comfort in repetitious physical labor. They dug fast, driving themselves hard, and despite the bitter cold air they both sweated as if it were noon.

A time came when Alfred said: “Isn’t this enough?”

Tom realized that he was standing in a hole almost as deep as he was tall. He did not want the job to be finished. He nodded reluctantly. “It will do,” he said. He clambered out.

Dawn had broken while he was digging. Martha had picked up the baby and was sitting by the fire, rocking it. Tom went to Agnes and knelt down. He wrapped her cloak tightly around her, leaving her face visible, then picked her up. He walked over to the grave and put her down beside it. Then he climbed into the hole.

He lifted her down and laid her gently on the earth. He looked at her for a long moment, kneeling there beside her in her cold grave. He kissed her lips once, softly. Then he closed her eyes.

He climbed out of the grave. “Come here, children,” he said. Alfred and Martha came and stood either side of him, Martha holding the baby. Tom put an arm around each of them. They looked into the grave. Tom said: “Say: ‘God bless Mother.’”

They both said: “God bless Mother.”

Martha was sobbing, and there were tears in Alfred’s eyes. Tom hugged them both and swallowed his tears.

He released them and picked up the shovel. Martha screamed when he threw the first shovelful of earth into the grave. Alfred put his arms around his sister. Tom kept on shoveling. He could not bear to throw earth on her face, so he covered her feet, then her legs and body, and piled the earth high so that it formed a mound, and every shovelful slid downward, until at last there was earth on her neck, then over the mouth he had kissed, and finally her face disappeared, never to be seen again.

He filled the grave up quickly.

When it was done he stood looking at the mound. “Goodbye, dear,” he whispered. “You were a good wife, and I love you.”

With an effort he turned away.

His cloak was still on the ground where Agnes had lain on it to give birth. The lower half of it was sodden with congealed and drying blood. He took his knife and roughly cut the cloak in half. He threw the bloodied portion on the fire.

Martha was still holding the baby. “Give him to me,” Tom said. She gazed at him with fear in her eyes. He wrapped the naked baby in the clean half of the cloak and laid it on the grave. The baby cried.

He turned to the children. They were staring at him dumbly. He said: “We have no milk, to keep the baby alive, so he must lie here with his mother.”

Martha said: “But he’ll die!”

“Yes,” Tom said, controlling his voice tightly. “Whatever we do, he will die.” He wished the baby would stop crying.

He collected their possessions and put them in the cooking pot, then strapped the pot to his back the way Agnes always did.

“Let’s go,” he said.

Martha began to sob. Alfred was white-faced. They set off down the road in the gray light of a cold morning. Eventually the sound of the baby crying faded to nothing.

It was no good to stay by the grave, for the children would be unable to sleep there and no purpose would be served by an all-night vigil. Besides, it would do them all good to keep moving.

Tom set a fast pace, but his thoughts were now free, and he could no longer control them. There was nothing to do but walk: no arrangements to make, no jobs to do, nothing to be organized, nothing to look at but the gloomy forest and the shadows fidgeting in the light of the torches. He would think of Agnes, and follow the trail of some memory, and smile to himself, then turn to tell her what he had remembered; then the shock of realizing that she was dead would strike like a physical pain. He felt bewildered, as if something totally incomprehensible had happened, although of course it was the most ordinary thing in the world for a woman of her age to die in childbirth, and for a man of his age to be left a widower. But the sense of loss was like a wound. He had heard that people who had the toes chopped off one foot could not stand up, but fell over constantly until they learned to walk again. He felt like that, as if part of him had been amputated, and he could not get used to the idea that it was gone forever.

He tried not to think about her, but he kept remembering how she had looked before she died. It seemed incredible that she had been alive just a few hours ago, and now she was gone. He pictured her face as she strained to give birth, and then her proud smile as she looked at the baby boy. He recalled what she had said to him afterward: *I hope you build your cathedral;* and then, *Build a beautiful cathedral for me*. She had spoken as if she knew she was dying.

As he walked on, he thought more and more about the baby he had left, wrapped in half a cloak, lying on top of a new grave. He was probably still alive, unless a fox had smelled him already. He would die before morning, however. He would cry for a while, then close his eyes, and his life would slip away as he grew cold in his sleep.

Unless a fox smelled him.

There was nothing Tom could do for the baby. He needed milk to survive, and there was none: no villages where Tom could seek a wet-nurse, no sheep or goat or cow that could provide the nearest equivalent. All Tom had to give him were turnips, and they would kill him as surely as the fox.

As the night wore on, it seemed to him more and more dreadful that he had abandoned the baby. It was a common enough thing, he knew: peasants

with large families and small farms often exposed babies to die, and sometimes the priest turned a blind eye; but Tom did not belong to that kind of people. He should have carried it in his arms until it died, and then buried it. There was no purpose to that, of course, but all the same it would have been the right thing to do.

He realized that it was daylight.

He stopped suddenly.

The children stood still and stared at him, waiting. They were ready for anything; nothing was normal anymore.

“I shouldn’t have left the baby,” Tom said.

Alfred said: “But we can’t feed him. He’s bound to die.”

“Still I shouldn’t have left him,” Tom said.

Martha said: “Let’s go back.”

Still Tom hesitated. To go back now would be to admit he had done wrong to abandon the baby.

But it was true. He had done wrong.

He turned around. “All right,” he said. “We’ll go back.”

Now all the dangers which he had earlier tried to discount suddenly seemed more probable. For sure a fox had smelled the baby by now, and dragged him off to its lair. Or even a wolf. The wild boars were dangerous, even though they did not eat meat. And what about owls? An owl could not carry off a baby, but it might peck out its eyes—

He walked faster, feeling light-headed with exhaustion and starvation. Martha had to run to keep up with him, but she did not complain.

He dreaded what he might see when he returned to the grave. Predators were merciless, and they could tell when a living creature was helpless.

He was not sure how far they had walked: he had lost his sense of time. The forest on either side looked unfamiliar, even though he had just passed through it. He looked anxiously for the place where the grave was. Surely the fire could not have gone out yet—they had built it so high…. He scrutinized the trees, looking for the distinctive leaves of the horse chestnut. They passed a side turning which he did not remember, and he began to wonder crazily whether he could possibly have passed the grave already and not seen it; then he thought he saw a faint orange glow ahead.

His heart seemed to falter. He quickened his step and narrowed his eyes. Yes, it was a fire. He broke into a run. He heard Martha cry out, as if she thought he was leaving her, and he called over his shoulder: “We’re there!” and heard the two children running after him.

He drew level with the horse-chestnut tree, his heart pounding in his chest. The fire was burning merrily. There was the pile of firewood. There was the bloodstained patch of ground where Agnes had bled to death. There was the grave, a mound of freshly dug earth, under which she now lay. And

on the grave was—nothing.

Tom looked around frantically, his mind in a turmoil. There was no sign of the baby. Tears of frustration came to Tom's eyes. Even the half a cloak the baby had been wrapped in had disappeared. Yet the grave was undisturbed—there were no animal tracks in the soft earth, no blood, no marks to indicate that the baby had been dragged away….

Tom began to feel as if he could not see very clearly. It became difficult to think straight. He knew now that he had done a dreadful thing in leaving the baby while it was still alive. When he knew it was dead he would be able to rest. But it might still be alive somewhere—somewhere nearby. He decided to circle around and look.

Alfred said: "Where are you going?"

"We must search for the baby," he said, without looking back. He walked around the edge of the little clearing, looking under the bushes, still feeling slightly dizzy and faint. He saw nothing, not even a clue to the direction in which the wolf might have taken the baby. He was now sure it was a wolf. The creature's lair might be nearby.

"We must circle wider," he said to the children.

He led them around again, moving farther from the fire, pushing through bushes and undergrowth. He was beginning to feel confused, but he managed to keep his mind focused on one thing, the imperative need to find the baby. He felt no grief now, just a fierce, raging determination, and in the back of his mind the appalling knowledge that all of this was his fault. He blundered through the forest, raking the ground with his eyes, stopping every few paces to listen for the unmistakable wailing monotone of a newborn baby; but when he and the children were quiet, the forest was silent.

He lost track of time. His ever-increasing circles brought him back to the road at intervals for a while, but later he realized that it seemed a long time since they crossed it. At one point he wondered why he had not come across the verderer's cottage. It occurred to him vaguely that he had lost his way, and might no longer be circling around the grave, but instead wandering through the forest more or less at random; but it did not really matter, so long as he kept searching.

"Father," Alfred said.

Tom looked at him, irritated by the interruption of his concentration. Alfred was carrying Martha, who appeared to be fast asleep on his back. Tom said: "What?"

"Can we rest?" Alfred said.

Tom hesitated. He did not want to stop, but Alfred looked about to collapse. "All right," he said reluctantly. "But not for long."

They were on a slope. There might be a stream at its foot. He was thirsty. He took Martha from Alfred and picked his way down the slope, cradling her

in his arms. As he expected, he found a small clear stream, with ice at its edges. He put Martha down on the bank. She did not wake. He and Alfred knelt and scooped up the cold water in their hands.

Alfred lay down next to Martha and closed his eyes. Tom looked around him. He was in a clearing carpeted with fallen leaves. The trees all around were low, stout oaks, their bare branches intertwining overhead. Tom crossed the clearing, thinking of looking for the baby behind the trees, but when he reached the other side his legs went weak and he was obliged to sit down abruptly.

It was full daylight now, but misty, and it seemed no warmer than midnight. He was shivering uncontrollably. He realized he had been walking around wearing only his undertunic. He wondered what had happened to his cloak, but he could not remember. Either the mist thickened, or something strange happened to his vision, for he could not see the children on the far side of the clearing any longer. He wanted to get up and go to them but there was something wrong with his legs.

After a while a weak sun broke through the cloud, and soon after that the angel came.

She walked across the clearing from the east, dressed in a long winter cloak of blanched wool, almost white. He watched her approach without surprise or curiosity. He was beyond wonder or fear. He looked at her with the dull, vacant, emotionless gaze he had bestowed upon the massive trunks of the surrounding oaks. Her oval face was framed with rich dark hair, and her cloak hid her feet, so that she might have been gliding over the dead leaves. She stopped right in front of him, and her pale gold eyes seemed to see into his soul and understand his pain. She looked familiar, as if he might have seen a picture of this very angel in some church he had attended recently. Then she opened her cloak. Underneath it she was naked. She had the body of an earthly woman in her middle twenties, with pale skin and pink nipples. Tom had always assumed angels' bodies to be immaculately hairless, but this one was not.

She went down on one knee in front of him where he sat crosslegged by the oak tree. Leaning toward him, she kissed his mouth. He was too stunned by previous shocks to feel surprise even at this. She pushed him back gently until he was lying flat, then she opened her cloak and lay on top of him with her naked body pressed against him. He felt the heat of her body through his undertunic. After a few moments he stopped shivering.

She took his bearded face in her hands and kissed him again, thirstily, like someone drinking cool water after a long, dry day. After a moment she ran her hands down his arms to his wrists, then lifted his hands to her breasts. He grasped them reflexively. They were soft and yielding, and her nipples swelled under his fingertips.

In the back of his mind he conceived the idea that he was dead. Heaven was not supposed to be like this, he knew, but he hardly cared. His critical faculties had been disengaged for hours. What little capacity he had left for rational thought vanished, and he let his body take charge. He strained upward, pressing his body against hers, drawing strength from her heat and her nakedness. She opened her mouth and thrust her tongue inside his mouth, seeking his tongue, and he responded eagerly.

She pulled away from him briefly, raising her body off his. He watched, dazed, as she pushed up the skirt of his undertunic until it was around his waist, then she straddled his hips. She looked into his eyes, with her all-seeing gaze, as she lowered herself. There was a tantalizing moment when their bodies touched, and she hesitated; then he felt himself enter her. The sensation was so thrilling he felt he might burst with pleasure. She moved her hips, smiling at him and kissing his face.

After a while she closed her eyes and started to pant, and he understood that she was losing control. He watched in delighted fascination. She uttered small rhythmic cries, moving faster and faster, and her ecstasy moved Tom to the depths of his wounded soul, so that he did not know whether he wanted to weep with despair or shout for joy or laugh hysterically; and then an explosion of delight shook them both like trees in a gale, again and again; until at last their passion subsided, and she slumped on his chest.

They lay like that for a long time. The heat of her body warmed him right through. He drifted into a kind of light sleep. It seemed short, and more like daydreaming than real sleep; but when he opened his eyes his mind was clear.

He looked at the beautiful young woman lying on top of him, and he knew immediately that she was not an angel, but the outlaw woman Ellen, whom he had met in this part of the forest on the day the pig was stolen. She felt him stir and opened her eyes, regarding him with an expression of mingled affection and anxiety. He suddenly thought of his children. He rolled Ellen off him gently and sat up. Alfred and Martha lay on the leaves, wrapped in their cloaks, with the sun shining on their sleeping faces. Then the events of the night came back to him in a rush of horror, and he remembered that Agnes was dead, and the baby—his son!—was gone; and he buried his face in his hands.

He heard Ellen give a strange two-tone whistle. He looked up. A figure emerged from the forest, and Tom recognized her peculiar-looking son, Jack, with his dead-white skin and orange hair and bright bird-like blue eyes. Tom got up, rearranging his clothing, and Ellen stood and closed up her cloak.

The boy was carrying something, and he brought it across and showed it to Tom. Tom recognized it. It was the half of his cloak in which he had wrapped the baby before placing it on Agnes’s grave.

Uncomprehending, Tom stared at the boy and then at Ellen. She took his

hands in hers, looked into his eyes, and said: “Your baby is alive.”

Tom did not dare to believe her. It would be too wonderful, too happy for this world. “He can’t be,” he said.

“He is.”

Tom began to hope. “Truly?” he said. “Truly?”

She nodded. “Truly. I will take you to him.”

Tom realized she meant it. A flood of relief and happiness washed over him. He fell to his knees on the ground; and then, at last, like the opening of a floodgate, he wept.

V

“Jack heard the baby cry,” Ellen explained. “He was on his way to the river, to a place north of here where you can kill ducks with stones, if you’re a good shot. He didn’t know what to do, so he ran home to fetch me. But while we were on our way back to the spot, we saw a priest, riding a palfrey, carrying the baby.”

Tom said: “I must find him—”

“Don’t panic,” Ellen said. “I know where he is. He took a side turning, quite near the grave; a path that leads to a little monastery hidden in the forest.”

“The baby needs milk.”

“The monks have goats.”

“Thank God,” Tom said fervently.

“I’ll take you there, after you’ve had something to eat,” she said. “But…” She frowned. “Don’t tell your children about the monastery just yet.”

Tom glanced across the clearing. Alfred and Martha slept on. Jack had drifted across to where they lay, and was staring at them in his vacant way. “Why not?”

“I’m not sure…I just think it might be wiser to wait.”

“But your son will tell them.”

She shook her head. “He saw the priest, but I don’t think he’s worked out the rest of it.”

“All right.” Tom felt solemn. “If I’d known you were nearby, you might have saved my Agnes.”

Ellen shook her head, and her dark hair danced around her face. “There’s nothing to be done, except keep the woman warm, and you did that. When a woman is bleeding inside, either it stops, and she gets better, or it doesn’t, and she dies.” Tears came to Tom’s eyes, and Ellen said: “I’m sorry.”

Tom nodded dumbly.

She said: “But the living must take care of the living, and you need hot food and a new coat.” She stood up.

They woke the children. Tom told them that the baby was all right, that Ellen and Jack had seen a priest carrying him; and that Tom and Ellen were going to go looking for the priest later, but first Ellen was going to give them food. They accepted the startling news calmly: nothing could shock them now. Tom was no less bemused. Life was moving too fast for him to take in all the changes. It was like being on the back of a runaway horse: everything

happened so quickly that there was no time to react to events, and all he could do was hold on tightly and try to stay sane. Agnes had given birth in the cold night air; the baby had been born miraculously healthy; everything had seemed all right and then Agnes, Tom's soul mate, had bled to death in his arms, and he had lost his mind; the baby had been doomed, and left for dead; then they had tried to find it, and failed; then Ellen had appeared, and Tom had taken her for an angel, and they had made love as if in a dream; and she had said the baby was alive and well. Would life ever slow down enough to let Tom think about these awful events?

They set off. Tom had always assumed that outlaws lived in squalor, but there was nothing squalid about Ellen, and Tom wondered what her home would be like. She led them on a zigzag course through the forest. There was no path, but she never hesitated as she stepped over streams, ducked low branches, and negotiated a frozen swamp, a mass of shrubbery, and the enormous trunk of a fallen oak. Finally she walked toward a bramble thicket and seemed to vanish into it. Following her, Tom saw that, contrary to his first impression, there was a narrow passageway winding through the thicket. He followed her. The brambles closed over his head and he found himself in semi-darkness. He stood still, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the gloom. Gradually he realized he was in a cave.

The air was warm. Ahead of him a fire glowed on a hearth of flat stones. The smoke was going straight upward: there was a natural chimney somewhere. On either side of him were animal skins, a wolf and a deer, fixed to the walls of the cave with wooden pegs. A haunch of smoked venison hung from the roof above him. He saw a homemade box full of crab apples, rushlights on ledges, and dry reeds on the floor. At the edge of the fire was a cooking pot, just as there would be in any ordinary household; and, judging by the smell, it contained the same kind of pottage as everyone else ate—vegetables boiled with meat bones and herbs. Tom was astonished. This was a home more comfortable than those of many serfs.

Beyond the fire were two mattresses made of deerskin and stuffed, presumably, with reeds; and neatly rolled on top of each was a wolf fur. Ellen and Jack would sleep there, with the fire between them and the mouth of the cave. At the back of the cave was a formidable collection of weapons and hunting gear: a bow, some arrows, nets, rabbit traps, several wicked daggers, a carefully made wooden lance with its tip sharpened and fire-hardened; and, among all those primitive implements, three books. Tom was flabbergasted: he had never seen books in a *house*, let alone a cave; books belonged in church.

The boy Jack picked up a wooden bowl, dipped it into the pot, and began to drink. Alfred and Martha watched him hungrily. Ellen gave Tom an apologetic look and said: "Jack, when there are strangers, we give them food

first, before we eat.”

The boy stared at her, mystified. “Why?”

“Because it’s a gentle thing to do. Give the children some pottage.”

Jack was not convinced, but he obeyed his mother. Ellen gave some soup to Tom. He sat down on the floor and drank. It tasted meaty, and warmed him from the inside. Ellen put a fur around his shoulders. When he had drunk the juice he fished out the vegetables and meat with his fingers. It was weeks since he had tasted meat. This seemed to be duck—shot by Jack with stones and a sling, presumably.

They ate until the pot was empty; then Alfred and Martha lay down on the rushes. Before they fell asleep, Tom told them that he and Ellen were going to look for the priest, and Ellen said Jack would stay here and take care of them until the parents returned. The two exhausted children nodded assent and closed their eyes.

Tom and Ellen went out, Tom wearing the fur Ellen had given him draped over his shoulders to keep him warm. As soon as they were out of the bramble thicket, Ellen stopped, turned to Tom, pulled his head down to hers, and kissed his mouth.

“I love you,” she said fiercely. “I loved you from the moment I saw you. I always wanted a man who would be strong and gentle, and I thought there was no such thing. Then I saw you. I wanted you. But I could see you loved your wife. My God, how I envied her. I’m sorry she died, truly sorry, because I can see the grief in your eyes, and all the tears waiting to be shed, and it breaks my heart to see you so sad. But now that she’s gone, I want you for myself.”

Tom did not know what to say. It was hard to believe that a woman so beautiful and resourceful and self-sufficient should have fallen in love with him at first sight; harder still to know how he felt. He was devastated by the loss of Agnes—Ellen was right to say that he had unshed tears, he could feel their weight behind his eyes. But he was also consumed by desire for Ellen, with her wonderful hot body and her golden eyes and her shameless lust. He felt dreadfully guilty about wanting Ellen so badly when Agnes was only hours in her grave.

He stared back at her, and once again her eyes saw into his heart, and she said: “Don’t say anything. You don’t have to feel ashamed. I know you loved her. She knew it too, I could tell. You still love her—of course you do. You always will.”

She had told him not to say anything, and in any case he had nothing to say. He was struck dumb by this extraordinary woman. She seemed to make everything all right. Somehow, the fact that she appeared to know everything that was in his heart made him feel better, as if now he had nothing more to be ashamed of. He sighed.

“That’s better,” she said. She took him by the hand, and they walked away from the cave together.

They pushed through the virgin forest for almost a mile, then came to the road. As they walked along, Tom kept looking at Ellen’s face beside him. He recalled that when he first met her he had thought she fell short of being beautiful, because of her strange eyes. Now he could not understand how he had ever felt that. He now saw those astonishing eyes as the perfect expression of her unique self. Now she seemed absolutely perfect, and the only puzzle was why she was with him.

They walked for three or four miles. Tom was still tired but the pottage had given him strength; and although he trusted Ellen completely he was still anxious to see the baby with his own eyes.

When they could see the monastery through the trees, Ellen said: “Let’s not reveal ourselves to the monks at first.”

Tom was mystified. “Why?”

“You abandoned a baby. It counts as murder. Let’s spy on the place from the woods and see what kind of people they are.”

Tom did not think he was going to be in trouble, given the circumstances, but there was no harm in being cautious, so he nodded assent and followed Ellen into the undergrowth. A few moments later they were lying at the edge of the clearing.

It was a very small monastery. Tom had built monasteries, and he guessed this one must be what they called a cell, a branch or outpost of a large priory or abbey. There were only two stone buildings, the chapel and the dormitory. The rest were made of wood and wattle-and-daub: a kitchen, stables, a barn, and a range of smaller agricultural buildings. The place had a clean, well-kept look, and gave the impression that the monks did as much farming as praying.

There were not many people about. “Most of the monks have gone to work,” Ellen said. “They’re building a barn at the top of the hill.” She glanced up at the sky. “They’ll be back around noon for their dinner.”

Tom scanned the clearing. Over to their right, partly concealed by a small herd of tethered goats, he saw two figures. “Look,” he said, pointing. As they studied the two figures he saw something else. “The man sitting down is a priest, and…”

“And he’s holding something in his lap.”

“Let’s go closer.”

They moved through the woods, skirting the clearing, and emerged at a point close to the goats. Tom’s heart was in his mouth as he looked at the priest sitting on a stool. He had a baby in his lap, and the baby was Tom’s. There was a lump in Tom’s throat. It was true, it really was; the baby had lived. He felt like throwing his arms around the priest and hugging him.

There was a young monk with the priest. Looking closely, Tom saw that

the youngster was dipping a rag into a pail of milk—goat's milk, presumably—and then putting the sodden corner of the rag into the baby's mouth. That was ingenious.

"Well," Tom said apprehensively, "I'd better go and own up to what I've done, and take my son back."

Ellen looked at him levelly. "Think for a moment, Tom," she said. "What are you going to do then?"

He was not sure what she was getting at. "Ask the monks for milk," he said. "They can see I'm poor. They give alms."

"And then?"

"Well, I hope they'll give me enough milk to keep him alive for three days, until I get to Winchester."

"And after that?" she persisted. "How will you feed the baby then?"

"Well, I'll look for work—"

"You've been looking for work since last time I met you, at the end of the summer," she said. She seemed to be a little angry with Tom, he could not see why. "You've no money and no tools," she went on. "What will happen to the baby if there's no work in Winchester?"

"I don't know," Tom said. He felt hurt that she should speak so harshly to him. "What am I to do—live like you? I can't shoot ducks with a stone—I'm a mason."

"You could leave the baby here," she said.

Tom was thunderstruck. "Leave him?" he said. "When I've only just found him?"

"You'd be sure he'd be warm and fed. You wouldn't have to carry him while you look for work. And when you do find something, you can come back here and fetch the child."

Tom's instinct rebelled against the whole idea. "I don't know," he said. "What would the monks think of my abandoning the baby?"

"They already know you did that," she said impatiently. "It's just a question of whether you confess now or later."

"Do monks know how to take care of babies?"

"They know as much about it as you do."

"I doubt it."

"Well, they've worked out how to feed a newborn who can only suck."

Tom began to see that she was right. Much as he longed to hold the tiny bundle in his arms, he could not deny that the monks were better able to care for the baby than he was. He had no food and no money and no sure prospect of getting work. "Leave him again," he said sadly. "I suppose I must." He stayed where he was, gazing across the clearing at the small figure in the priest's lap. It had dark hair, like Agnes's hair. Tom had made up his mind, but now he could not tear himself away.

Then a large group of monks appeared on the far side of the clearing, fifteen or twenty of them, carrying axes and saws, and suddenly there was a danger that Tom and Ellen would be seen. They ducked back into the undergrowth. Now Tom could no longer see the baby.

They crept away through the bushes. When they came to the road they broke into a run. They ran for three or four hundred yards, holding hands; then Tom was exhausted. They were at a safe distance, however. They stepped off the road and found a place to rest out of sight.

They sat down on a grassy bank lit by dappled sunlight. Tom looked at Ellen, lying on her back, breathing hard, her cheeks flushed, her lips smiling up at him. Her robe had fallen open at the neck, revealing her throat and the swell of one breast. Suddenly he felt a compulsion to look at her nakedness again, and the desire was much stronger than the guilt he felt. He leaned over to kiss her, then hesitated, because she was so lovely to look at. When he spoke, it was unpremeditated, and his own words took him by surprise. “Ellen,” he said, “will you be my wife?”

Chapter 2

PETER OF WAREHAM was a born troublemaker.

He had been transferred to the little cell in the forest from the mother house at Kingsbridge, and it was easy to see why the prior of Kingsbridge had been anxious to get rid of him. A tall, rangy man in his late twenties, he had a powerful intellect and a scornful manner, and he lived in a permanent state of righteous indignation. When he first arrived and started working in the fields he had set a furious pace and then accused others of laziness. However, to his surprise most of the monks had been able to keep up with him, and eventually the younger ones had tired him out. He had then looked for a vice other than idleness, and his second choice had been gluttony.

He began by eating only half his bread and none of his meat. He drank water from streams during the day, diluted his beer, and refused wine. He reprimanded a healthy young monk who asked for more porridge, and reduced to tears a boy who playfully drank another's wine.

The monks showed little evidence of gluttony, Prior Philip thought as they walked back from the hilltop to the monastery at dinnertime. The youngsters were lean and muscular, and the older men were sunburned and wiry. Not one of them had the pale, soft roundness that came from having plenty to eat and nothing to do. Philip thought all monks should be thin. Fat monks provoked poor men to envy and hatred of God's servants.

Characteristically, Peter had disguised his accusation as a confession. "I have been guilty of the sin of gluttony," he had said this morning, when they were taking a break, sitting on the trees they had felled, eating rye bread and drinking beer. "I have disobeyed the Rule of Saint Benedict, which says that monks must not eat meat nor drink wine." He looked around at the others, his head high and his dark eyes blazing with pride, and he let his gaze rest finally on Philip. "And every one here is guilty of the same sin," he finished.

It was very sad that Peter should be like this, Philip thought. The man was dedicated to God's work, and he had a fine mind and great strength of

purpose. But he seemed to have a compelling need to feel special and be noticed by others all the time; and this drove him to create scenes. He was a real nuisance, but Philip loved him as much as any of them, for Philip could see, behind the arrogance and the scorn, a troubled soul who did not really believe that anyone could possibly care for him.

Philip had said: “This gives us an opportunity to recall what Saint Benedict said on this topic. Do you remember his exact words, Peter?”

“He says: ‘All but the sick should abstain from meat,’ and then: ‘Wine is not the drink of monks at all,’” Peter replied.

Philip nodded. As he had suspected, Peter did not know the rule as well as Philip. “Almost correct, Peter,” he said. “The saint did not refer to meat, but to ‘the flesh of four-footed animals,’ and even so he made exceptions, not just for the sick, but also for the weak. What did he mean by ‘the weak’? Here in our little community, we take the view that men who have been weakened by strenuous work in the fields may need to eat beef now and then to keep up their strength.”

Peter had listened to this in sullen silence, his brow creased with disapproval, his heavy black eyebrows drawn together over the bridge of his large curved nose, his face a mask of suppressed defiance.

Philip had gone on: “On the subject of wine, the saint says: ‘We read that wine is not the drink of monks at all.’ The use of the words *we read* implies that he does not wholly endorse the proscription. He also says that a pint of wine a day should be sufficient for anyone. And he warns us not to drink to satiety. It is clear, is it not, that he does not expect monks to abstain totally?”

“But he says that frugality should be maintained in everything,” Peter said.

“And you say we are not frugal here?” Philip asked him.

“I do,” he said in a ringing voice.

“‘Let those to whom God gives the gift of abstinence know that they shall receive their proper reward,’” Philip quoted. “If you feel that the food here is too generous, you may eat less. But remember what else the saint says. He quotes the first epistle to the Corinthians, in which Saint Paul says: ‘Every one has his proper gift from God, one thus, another thus.’ And then the saint tells us: ‘For this reason, the amount of other people’s food cannot be determined without some misgiving.’ Please remember that, Peter, as you fast and meditate upon the sin of gluttony.”

They had gone back to work then, Peter wearing a martyred air. He was not going to be silenced so easily, Philip realized. Of the monks’ three vows, of poverty, chastity and obedience, the one that gave Peter trouble was obedience.

There were ways of dealing with disobedient monks, of course: solitary confinement, bread and water, flogging, and ultimately excommunication and

expulsion from the house. Philip did not normally hesitate to use such punishments, especially when a monk seemed to be testing Philip's authority. Consequently he was thought of as a tough disciplinarian. But in fact he hated meting out punishment—it brought disharmony into the monastic brotherhood and made everyone unhappy. Anyway, in the case of Peter, punishment would do no good at all—indeed, it would serve to make the man more prideful and unforgiving. Philip had to find a way to control Peter and soften him at the same time. It would not be easy. But then, he thought, if everything were easy, men would not need God's guidance.

They reached the clearing in the forest where the monastery was. As they walked across the open space, Philip saw Brother John waving energetically at them from the goat pen. He was called Johnny Eightpence, and he was a little soft in the head. Philip wondered what he was excited about now. With Johnny was a man in priest's robes. He looked vaguely familiar, and Philip hurried toward him.

The priest was a short, compact man in his middle twenties, with close-cropped black hair and bright blue eyes that twinkled with alert intelligence. Looking at him was for Philip like looking in a mirror. The priest, he realized with a shock, was his younger brother Francis.

And Francis was holding a newborn baby.

Philip did not know which was more surprising, Francis or the baby. The monks all crowded around. Francis stood up and handed the baby to Johnny; then Philip embraced him. "What are you doing here?" Philip said delightedly. "And why have you got a baby?"

"I'll tell you later why I'm here," Francis said. "As for the baby, I found him in the woods, all alone, lying near a blazing fire." Francis stopped.

"And…" Philip prompted him.

Francis shrugged. "I can't tell you any more than that, because that's all I know. I was hoping to get here last night, but I didn't quite make it, so I spent the night in a verderer's hut. I left at dawn this morning, and I was riding along the road when I heard a baby cry. A moment later I saw it. I picked it up and brought it here. That's the whole tale."

Philip looked incredulously at the tiny bundle in Johnny's arms. He reached out a hand tentatively, and lifted a corner of the blanket. He saw a wrinkled pink face, an open toothless mouth and a little bald head—a miniature of an aging monk. He unwrapped the bundle a little more and saw tiny fragile shoulders, waving arms, and tight-clenched fists. He looked closely at the stump of the umbilical cord which hung from the baby's navel. It was faintly disgusting. Was this natural? Philip wondered. It looked like a wound that was healing well, and would be best left alone. He pulled the blanket down farther still. "A boy," he said with an embarrassed cough, and covered it up again. One of the novices giggled.

Philip suddenly felt helpless. What on earth am I to do with it? he thought. Feed it?

The baby cried, and the sound tugged at his heartstrings like a well-loved hymn. “It’s hungry,” he said, and he thought in the back of his mind: How did I know that?

One of the monks said: “We can’t feed it.”

Philip was about to say: Why not? Then he realized why not: there were no women for miles.

However, Johnny had already solved that problem, Philip now saw. Johnny sat down on the stool with the baby in his lap. He had in his hand a towel with one corner twisted into a spiral. He dipped the corner into a pail of milk, let the towel soak up some of the liquid, then put the cloth to the baby’s mouth. The baby opened its mouth, sucked on the towel, and swallowed.

Philip felt like cheering. “That was clever, Johnny,” he said in surprise.

Johnny grinned. “I’ve done it before, when a nanny goat died before her kid was weaned,” he said proudly.

All the monks watched intently as Johnny repeated the simple action of dipping the towel and letting the baby suck. As he touched the towel to the baby’s lips, some of the monks would open their own mouths, Philip saw with amusement. It was a slow way of feeding the baby, but no doubt feeding babies was a slow business anyway.

Peter of Wareham, who had succumbed to the general fascination with the baby and consequently had forgotten to be critical of anything for some time, now recovered himself and said: “It would be less trouble to find the child’s mother.”

Francis said: “I doubt it. The mother is probably unmarried, and was overtaken in moral transgression. I imagine she is young. Perhaps she managed to keep her pregnancy secret; then, when her time was near, she came out into the forest, and built a fire; gave birth alone, then abandoned the child to the wolves and went back to wherever she came from. She will make sure she can’t be found.”

The baby had fallen asleep. On impulse, Philip took it from Johnny. He held it to his chest, supporting it with his hand, and rocked it. “The poor thing,” he said. “The poor, poor thing.” The urge to protect and care for the baby suffused him like a flush. He noticed that the monks were staring at him, astonished at his sudden display of tenderness. They had never seen him caress anyone, of course, for physical affection was strictly prohibited in the monastery. Obviously they had thought him incapable of it. Well, he thought, they know the truth now.

Peter of Wareham spoke again. “We’ll have to take the child to Winchester, then, and try to find a foster mother.”

If this had been said by anyone else, Philip might not have been so quick

to contradict it; but Peter said it, and Philip spoke hastily, and his life was never quite the same afterward. “We’re not going to give him to a foster mother,” he said decisively. “This child is a gift from God.” He looked around at them all. The monks gazed back at him wide-eyed, hanging on his words. “We’ll take care of him ourselves,” he went on. “We’ll feed him, and teach him, and bring him up in the ways of God. Then, when he is a man, he will become a monk himself, and that way we will give him back to God.”

There was a stunned silence.

Then Peter said angrily: “It’s impossible! A baby cannot be brought up by monks!”

Philip caught his brother’s eye, and they both smiled, sharing memories. When Philip spoke again, his voice was heavy with the weight of the past. “Impossible? No, Peter. On the contrary, I’m quite sure it can be done, and so is my brother. We know from experience. Don’t we, Francis?”

On the day Philip now thought of as the last day, his father had come home wounded.

Philip had been the first to see him, riding up the twisting hillside path to the little hamlet in mountainous North Wales. Six-year-old Philip ran out to meet him, as usual; but this time Da did not swing his little boy up onto the horse in front of him. He was riding slowly, slumped in the saddle, holding the reins in his right hand, his left arm hanging limp. His face was pale and his clothes were splashed with blood. Philip was at once intrigued and scared, for he had never seen his father appear weak.

Da said: “Fetch your mother.”

When they got him into the house, Mam cut off his shirt. Philip was horrified: the sight of his thrifty mother willfully ruining good clothes was more shocking than the blood. “Don’t worry about me now,” Da had said, but his normal bark had weakened to a murmur and nobody took any notice—another shocking event, for normally his word was law. “Leave me, and get everyone up to the monastery,” he said. “The damned English will be here soon.” There was a monastery with a church at the top of the hill, but Philip could not understand why they should go there when it was not even Sunday. Mam said: “If you lose any more blood you won’t be able to go anywhere, ever.” But Auntie Gwen said she would raise the alarm, and went out.

Years later, when he thought about the events that followed, Philip realized that at this moment everyone had forgotten about him and his four-year-old brother, Francis, and nobody thought to take them to the safety of the monastery. People were thinking of their own children, and assumed that Philip and Francis were all right because they were with their parents; but Da was bleeding to death and Mam was trying to save him, and so it happened

that the English caught all four of them.

Nothing in Philip's short experience of life had prepared him for the appearance of the two men-at-arms as they kicked the door open and burst into the one-room house. In other circumstances they would not have been frightening, for they were the kind of big, clumsy adolescents who mocked old women and abused Jews and got into fistfights outside alehouses at midnight. But now (Philip understood years later, when at last he was able to think objectively about that day) the two young men were possessed by bloodlust. They had been in a battle, they had heard men scream in agony and seen friends fall down dead, and they had been scared, literally, out of their wits. But they had won the battle and survived, and now they were in hot pursuit of their enemies, and nothing could satisfy them but more blood, more screaming, more wounds and more death; and all this was written on their twisted faces as they came into the room like foxes into a henhouse.

They moved very fast, but Philip could remember each step forever afterward, as if it had all taken a very long time. Both men wore light armor, just a short vest of chain mail and a leather helmet with iron bands. Both had their swords drawn. One was ugly, with a big bent nose and a squint, and his teeth were bared in a dreadful ape-like grin. The other had a luxuriant beard that was matted with blood—someone else's, presumably, for he did not seem to be wounded. Both men scanned the room without breaking stride. Their merciless, calculating eyes dismissed Philip and Francis, noted Mam, and focused on Da. They were almost upon him before anyone else could move.

Mam had been bending over him, tying a bandage to his left arm. She straightened up and turned on the intruders, her eyes blazing with hopeless courage. Da sprang to his feet and got his good hand to the hilt of his sword. Philip let out a cry of terror.

The ugly man raised his sword above his head and brought it down hilt-first on Mam's head, then pushed her aside without stabbing her, probably because he did not want to risk getting his blade stuck in a body while Da was still alive. Philip figured that out years later: at the time he just ran to his mother, not understanding that she could no longer protect him. Mam stumbled, stunned, and the ugly man went by her, raising his sword again. Philip clung to his mother's skirts as she staggered, dazed; but he could not help looking at his father.

Da got his weapon clear of its scabbard and raised it defensively. The ugly man struck downward and the two blades clashed, ringing like a bell. Like all small boys, Philip thought his father was invincible; and this was the moment when he learned the truth. Da was weak from loss of blood. When the two swords met, his dropped; and the attacker lifted his blade just a little and struck again quickly. The blow landed where the big muscles of Da's neck grew out of his broad shoulders. Philip began to scream when he saw the

sharp blade slice into his father's body. The ugly man drew his arm back for a stab, and thrust the point of the sword into Da's belly.

Paralyzed with terror, Philip looked up at his mother. His eyes met hers just as the other man, the bearded one, struck her down. She fell to the floor beside Philip with blood streaming from a head wound. The bearded man changed his grip on his sword, reversing it so that it pointed downward and holding it in both hands; then he raised it high, almost like a man about to stab himself, and brought it down hard. There was a sickening crack of breaking bone as the point entered Mam's chest. The blade went in deep; so deep (Philip noted, even then when he was consumed by blind hysterical fear) that it must have come through her back and stuck in the ground, fixing her to the floor like a nail.

Philip looked wildly for his father again. He saw him slump forward over the ugly man's sword and spew out a huge gout of blood. His assailant stepped back and jerked at the sword, trying to disengage it. Da stumbled another step and stayed with him. The ugly man gave a cry of rage and twisted his sword in Da's belly. This time it came out. Da fell to the floor and his hands went to his open abdomen, as if to cover the gaping wound. Philip had always imagined people's insides to be more or less solid, and he was mystified and nauseated by the ugly tubes and organs that were falling out of his father. The attacker lifted his sword high, point downward, over Da's body, as the bearded man had over Mam, and delivered the final blow in the same way.

The two Englishmen looked at one another, and quite unexpectedly Philip read relief on their faces. Together, they turned and looked at him and Francis. One nodded and the other shrugged, and Philip realized they were going to kill him and his brother by cutting them open with those sharp swords, and when he realized how much it was going to *hurt*, the terror boiled up inside him until he felt as if his head would burst.

The man with blood in his beard stooped swiftly and picked Francis up by one ankle. He held him upside-down in the air while the little boy screamed for his mother, not understanding that she was dead. The ugly man pulled his sword out of Da's body and brought his arm back ready to stab Francis through the heart.

The blow was never struck. A commanding voice rang out, and the two men froze. The screaming stopped, and Philip realized it was he who had been doing it. He looked at the door and saw Abbot Peter, standing there in his homespun robe, with the wrath of God in his eyes, holding a wooden cross in his hand like a sword.

When Philip relived that day in his nightmares, and woke up sweating and screaming in the dark, he would always be able to calm himself, and eventually relax into sleep again, by bringing to mind that final tableau, and

the way the screaming and the wounds had been swept aside by the unarmed man with the cross.

Abbot Peter spoke again. Philip did not understand the language he used—it was English, of course—but the meaning was clear, for the two men looked ashamed, and the bearded one put Francis down quite gently. Still talking, the monk strode confidently into the room. The men-at-arms backed off a step, almost as if they were afraid of him—they with their swords and armor, and him with a wool robe and a cross! He turned his back on them, a gesture of contempt, and crouched to speak to Philip. His voice was matter-of-fact. “What’s your name?”

“Philip.”

“Ah, yes, I remember. And your brother’s?”

“Francis.”

“That’s right.” The abbot looked at the bleeding bodies on the earth floor. “That’s your Mam, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” said Philip, and he felt panic come over him as he pointed to the mutilated body of his father and said: “And that’s my Da!”

“I know,” the monk said soothingly. “You mustn’t scream anymore, you must answer my questions. Do you understand that they’re dead?”

“I don’t know,” Philip said miserably. He knew what it meant when animals died, but how could that happen to Mam and Da?

Abbot Peter said: “It’s like going to sleep.”

“But their eyes are open!” Philip yelled.

“Hush. We’d better close them, then.”

“Yes,” Philip said. He felt as if that would resolve something.

Abbot Peter stood up, took Philip and Francis by the hand, and led them across the floor to their father’s body. He knelt down and took Philip’s right hand in his. “I’ll show you how,” he said. He moved Philip’s hand over his father’s face, but suddenly Philip was afraid to touch his father, because the body looked so strange, pale and slack and hideously wounded, and he snatched his hand away. Then he looked anxiously at Abbot Peter—a man no one disobeyed—but the abbot was not angry with him. “Come,” he said gently, and took Philip’s hand again. This time Philip did not resist. Holding Philip’s forefinger between his own thumb and finger, the monk made the boy touch his father’s eyelid and bring it down until it covered the dreadfully staring eyeball. Then the abbot released Philip’s hand and said: “Close his other eye.” Unaided now, Philip reached out, touched his father’s eyelid, and closed it. Then he felt better.

Abbot Peter said: “Shall we close your Mam’s eyes, too?”

“Yes.”

They knelt beside her body. The abbot wiped blood off her face with his sleeve. Philip said: “What about Francis?”

“Perhaps he should help, too,” said the abbot.

“Do what I did, Francis,” Philip said to his brother. “Close Mam’s eyes, like I closed Da’s, so she can sleep.”

“Are they asleep?” said Francis.

“No, but it’s *like* sleeping,” Philip said authoritatively, “so she should have her eyes shut.”

“All right, then,” said Francis, and without hesitation he reached out a chubby hand and carefully closed his mother’s eyes.

Then the abbot picked them both up, one in each arm, and without another glance at the men-at-arms he carried them out of the house and all the way up the steep hillside path to the sanctuary of the monastery.

He fed them in the monastery kitchen; then, so that they should not be left idle with their thoughts, he told them to help the cook prepare the monks’ supper. On the following day he took them to see their parents’ bodies, washed and dressed and with the wounds cleaned and repaired and partly concealed, lying in coffins side by side in the nave of the church. There too were several of their relatives, for not all the villagers had made it to the monastery in time to escape the invading army. Abbot Peter took them to the funeral, and made sure they watched the two coffins being lowered into the single grave. When Philip cried, Francis cried too. Someone hushed them, but Abbot Peter said: “Let them weep.” Only after that, when they had taken to their hearts the knowledge that their parents had really gone and were never coming back, did he at last talk about the future.

Among their relatives there was not a single family left entire: in every case, either the father or the mother had been killed. There were no relations to look after the boys. That left two options. They could be given, or even sold, to a farmer who would use them as slave labor until they grew old enough and big enough to run away. Or they could be given to God.

It was not unknown for small boys to enter a monastery. The usual age was about eleven, and the lower limit around five, for the monks were not set up to cope with babies. Sometimes the boys were orphans, sometimes they had lost just one parent, and sometimes their parents had too many sons. Normally the family would give the monastery a substantial gift along with the child—a farm, a church or even a whole village. In cases of direst poverty the gift might be waived. However, Philip’s father had left a modest hill farm, so the boys were not a charity case. Abbot Peter proposed that the monastery should take over the boys and the farm; the surviving relatives agreed; and the deal was sanctioned by the Prince of Gwynedd, Gruffyd ap Cynan, who was temporarily humbled but not permanently deposed by the invading army of King Henry, which had killed Philip’s father.

The abbot knew a lot about grief, but for all his wisdom he was not prepared for what happened to Philip. After a year or so, when grief had

seemed to pass, and the two boys had settled into the life of the monastery, Philip became possessed by a kind of implacable rage. Conditions in the hilltop community were not bad enough to justify his anger: there was food, and clothing, and a fire in the dormitory in winter, and even a little love and affection; and the strict discipline and tedious rituals at least made for order and stability; but Philip began to act as if he had been unjustly imprisoned. He disobeyed orders, subverted the authority of monastic officers at every opportunity, stole food, broke eggs, loosed horses, mocked the infirm and insulted his elders. The one offense he stopped short of was sacrilege, and because of that the abbot forgave him everything else. And in the end he simply grew out of it. One Christmas he looked back over the past twelve months and realized that he had not spent a single night in the punishment cell all year.

There was no single reason for his return to normality. The fact that he got interested in his lessons probably helped. The mathematical theory of music fascinated him, and even the way Latin verbs were conjugated had a certain satisfying logic. He had been put to work helping the cellarer, the monk who had to provide all the supplies the monastery needed, from sandals to seed; and that, too, compelled his interest. He developed a hero-worshiping attachment for Brother John, a handsome, muscular young monk who seemed the epitome of learning, holiness, wisdom and kindness. Either in imitation of John, or from his own inclination, or both, he began to find some kind of solace in the daily round of prayers and services. And so he slipped into adolescence with the organization of the monastery on his mind and the holy harmonies in his ears.

In their studies both Philip and Francis were far ahead of any boys of their own age that they knew, but they assumed this was because they lived in the monastery and had been educated more intensively. At this stage they did not realize they were exceptional. Even when they began to do much of the teaching in the little school, and take their own lessons from the abbot himself instead of the pedantic old novice master, they thought they were ahead only because they had got such an early start.

When he looked back on his youth, it seemed to Philip that there had been a brief Golden Age, a year or perhaps less, between the end of his rebellion and the onslaught of fleshly lust. Then came the agonizing era of impure thoughts, nocturnal emissions, dreadfully embarrassing sessions with his confessor (who was the abbot), endless penances and mortification of the flesh with scourges.

Lust never completely ceased to afflict him, but it did eventually become less important, so that it bothered him only now and again, on the rare occasions when his mind and body were idle; like an old injury that still hurts in wet weather.

Francis had fought this battle a little later, and although he had not confided to Philip on the subject, Philip had the impression that Francis had struggled less bravely against evil desires, and had taken his defeats rather too cheerfully. However, the main thing was that they had both made their peace with the passions that were the greatest enemy of the monastic life.

As Philip worked with the cellarer, so Francis worked for the prior, Abbot Peter's deputy. When the cellarer died, Philip was twenty-one, and despite his youth he took over the job. And when Francis reached the age of twenty-one the abbot proposed to create a new post for him, that of sub-prior. But this proposal precipitated a crisis. Francis begged to be excused the responsibility, and while he was at it he asked to be released from the monastery. He wanted to be ordained as a priest and serve God in the world outside.

Philip was astonished and horrified. The idea that one of them might leave the monastery had never occurred to him, and now it was as disconcerting as if he had learned that he was the heir to the throne. But, after much hand-wringing and heart-searching, it happened, and Francis went off into the world, before long to become chaplain to the earl of Gloucester.

Before this happened Philip had seen his future very simply, when he had thought of it at all: he would be a monk, live a humble and obedient life, and in his old age, perhaps, become abbot, and strive to live up to the example set by Peter. Now he wondered whether God intended some other destiny for him. He remembered the parable of the talents: God expected his servants to increase his kingdom, not merely to conserve it. With some trepidation he shared these thoughts with Abbot Peter, fully aware that he risked a reprimand for being puffed up with pride.

To his surprise, the abbot said: "I've been wondering how long it would take you to realize this. Of *course* you're destined for something else. Born within sight of a monastery, orphaned at six, raised by monks, made cellarer at twenty-one—God does not take that much trouble over the formation of a man who is going to spend his life in a small monastery on a bleak hilltop in a remote mountain principality. There isn't enough scope for you here. You must leave this place."

Philip was stunned by this, but before leaving the abbot a question occurred to him, and he blurted it out. "If this monastery is so unimportant, why did God put *you* here?"

Abbot Peter smiled. "Perhaps to take care of you."

Later that year the abbot went to Canterbury to pay his respects to the archbishop, and when he came back he said to Philip: "I have given you to the prior of Kingsbridge."

Philip was daunted. Kingsbridge Priory was one of the biggest and most important monasteries in the land. It was a cathedral priory: its church was a cathedral church, the seat of a bishop, and the bishop was technically the

abbot of the monastery, although in practice it was ruled by its prior.

"Prior James is an old friend," Abbot Peter told Philip. "In the last few years he has become rather dispirited, I don't know why. Anyway, Kingsbridge needs young blood. In particular, James is having trouble with one of his cells, a little place in the forest, and he desperately needs a completely reliable man to take over the cell and set it back on the path of godliness."

"So I'm to be prior of the cell?" Philip said in surprise.

The abbot nodded. "And if we're right in thinking that God has much work for you to do, we can expect that he will help you to resolve whatever problems this cell has."

"And if we're wrong?"

"You can always come back here and be my cellarer. But we're not wrong, my son; you'll see."

His farewells were tearful. He had spent seventeen years here, and the monks were his family, more real to him now than the parents who had been savagely taken from him. He would probably never see these monks again, and he was sad.

Kingsbridge overawed him at first. The walled monastery was bigger than many villages; the cathedral church was a vast, gloomy cavern; the prior's house a small palace. But once he got used to its sheer size he saw the signs of that dispiritedness that Abbot Peter had noted in his old friend the prior. The church was visibly in need of major repairs; the prayers were gabbled hastily; the rules of silence were breached constantly; and there were too many servants, more servants than monks. Philip quickly got over being awed and became angry. He wanted to take Prior James by the throat and shake him and say: "How *dare* you do this? How dare you give hasty prayers to God? How dare you allow novices to play at dice and monks to keep pet dogs? How dare you live in a palace, surrounded by servants, while God's church is falling into ruin?" He said nothing of the kind, of course. He had a brief, formal interview with Prior James, a tall, thin, stooped man who seemed to have the weight of the world's troubles on his rounded shoulders. Then he talked to the sub-prior, Remigius. At the start of the conversation Philip hinted that he thought the priory might be overdue for some changes, expecting that its deputy leader would agree wholeheartedly; but Remigius looked down his nose at Philip, as if to say *Who do you think you are?*, and changed the subject.

Remigius said that the cell of St-John-in-the-Forest had been established three years earlier with some land and property, and it should have been self-supporting by now, but in fact it was still dependent on supplies from the mother house. There were other problems: a deacon who happened to spend the night there had criticized the conduct of services; travelers alleged they

had been robbed by monks in that area; there were rumors of impurity…. The fact that Remigius was unable or unwilling to give exact details was just another sign of the indolent way the whole organization was being run. Philip left trembling with rage. A monastery was supposed to glorify God. If it failed to do that, it was nothing. Kingsbridge Priory was worse than nothing. It shamed God by its slothfulness. But Philip could do nothing about it. The best he could hope for was to reform one of Kingsbridge's cells.

On the two-day ride to the cell in the forest he mulled over the scanty information he had been given and prayerfully considered his approach. He would do well to tread softly at first, he decided. Normally a prior was elected by the monks; but in the case of a cell, which was just an outpost of the main monastery, the prior of the mother house might simply choose. So Philip had not been asked to submit himself for election, and that meant he could not count on the goodwill of the monks. He would have to feel his way cautiously. He needed to learn more about the problems afflicting the place before he could decide how best to solve them. He had to win the respect and trust of the monks, especially those who were older than he and who might resent his position. Then, when his information was complete and his leadership secure, he would take firm action.

It did not work out that way.

The light was fading on the second day when he reined in his pony on the edge of a clearing and inspected his new home. There was only one stone building, the chapel, in those days. (Philip had built the new stone dormitory the following year.) The other, wooden buildings looked ramshackle. Philip disapproved: everything made by monks was supposed to last, and that meant pigsties as well as cathedrals. As he looked around he noted further evidence of the kind of laxity that had shocked him at Kingsbridge: there were no fences, the hay was spilling out of the barn door, and there was a dunghill next to the fishpond. He felt his face go tense with suppressed reproof, and he said to himself: Softly, softly.

At first he saw no one. This was as it should be, for it was time for vespers and most of the monks would be in the chapel. He touched the pony's flank with his whip and crossed the clearing to a hut that looked like a stable. A youth with straw in his hair and a vacant look on his face popped his head over the door and stared at Philip in surprise.

"What's your name?" Philip said, and then, after a moment's shyness, he added: "My son."

"They call me Johnny Eightpence," the youngster said.

Philip dismounted and handed him the reins. "Well, Johnny Eightpence, you can unsaddle my horse."

"Yes, Father." He looped the reins over a rail and moved away.

"Where are you going?" Philip said sharply.

“To tell the brothers that a stranger is here.”

“You must practice obedience, Johnny. Unsaddle my horse. I will tell the brothers that I’m here.”

“Yes, Father.” Looking frightened, Johnny bent to his task.

Philip looked around. In the middle of the clearing was a long building like a great hall. Near it was a small round building with smoke rising from a hole in its roof. That would be the kitchen. He decided to see what was for supper. In strict monasteries only one meal was served each day, dinner at noon; but this was evidently not a strict establishment, and there would be a light supper after vespers, some bread with cheese or salt fish, or perhaps a bowl of barley broth made with herbs. However, as he approached the kitchen he smelled the unmistakable, mouth-watering aroma of roasting meat. He stopped, frowning, then went in.

Two monks and a boy were sitting around the central hearth. As Philip watched, one of the monks passed a jug to the other, who drank from it. The boy was turning a spit, and on the spit was a small pig.

They looked up in surprise as Philip stepped into the light. Without speaking, he took the jug from the monk and sniffed it. Then he said: “Why are you drinking wine?”

“Because it makes my heart glad, stranger,” said the monk. “Have some—drink deep.”

Clearly they had not been warned to expect their new prior. Equally clearly they had no fear of the consequences if a passing monk should report their behavior to Kingsbridge. Philip had an urge to break the wine jug over the man’s head, but he took a deep breath and spoke mildly. “Poor men’s children go hungry to provide meat and drink for us,” he said. “This is done for the glory of God, not to make our hearts glad. No more wine for you tonight.” He turned away, carrying the jug.

As he walked out he heard the monk say: “Who do you think you are?” He made no reply. They would find out soon enough.

He left the jug on the ground outside the kitchen and walked across the clearing toward the chapel, clenching and unclenching his fists, trying to control his anger. Don’t be precipitate, he told himself. Be cautious. Take your time.

He paused for a moment in the little porch of the chapel, calming himself, then softly pushed the big oak door and went silently in.

A dozen or so monks and a few novices stood with their backs to him in ragged rows. Facing them was the sacrist, reading from an open book. He spoke the service rapidly and the monks muttered the responses perfunctorily. Three candles of uneven length sputtered on a dirty altarcloth.

At the back, two young monks were holding a conversation, ignoring the service and discussing something in an animated fashion. As Philip drew

level, one said something funny, and the other laughed aloud, drowning the gabbled words of the sacrist. This was the last straw for Philip, and all thought of treading softly disappeared from his mind. He opened his mouth and shouted at the top of his voice: “BE SILENT!”

The laughter was cut off. The sacrist stopped reading. The chapel fell silent, and the monks turned around and stared at Philip.

He reached out to the monk who had laughed and grabbed him by the ear. He was about Philip’s age, and taller, but he was too surprised to resist as Philip pulled his head down. “On your knees!” Philip yelled. For a moment it looked as if the monk might try to struggle free; but he knew he was in the wrong, and, as Philip had anticipated, his resistance was sapped by his guilty conscience; and when Philip tugged harder on his ear the young man knelt.

“All of you,” Philip commanded. “On your knees!”

They had all taken vows of obedience, and the scandalous indiscipline under which they had evidently been living recently was not enough to erase the habit of years. Half the monks and all the novices knelt.

“You’ve all broken your vows,” Philip said, letting his contempt show. “You’re blasphemers, every one.” He looked around, meeting their eyes. “Your repentance begins now,” he said finally.

Slowly they knelt, one by one, until only the sacrist was left standing. He was a fleshy, sleepy-eyed man about twenty years older than Philip. Philip approached him, stepping around the kneeling monks. “Give me the book,” he said.

The sacrist stared defiantly back and said nothing.

Philip reached out and lightly grasped the big volume. The sacrist tightened his grip. Philip hesitated. He had spent two days deciding to be cautious and move slowly, yet here he was, with the dust of the road still on his feet, risking everything in a stand-up confrontation with a man he knew nothing about. “Give me the book, and get down on your knees,” he repeated.

There was the hint of a sneer on the sacrist’s face. “Who are you?” he said.

Philip hesitated again. It was obvious that he was a monk, from his robes and his haircut; and they all must have guessed, from his behavior, that he was in a position of authority; but it was not yet clear whether his rank placed him over the sacrist. All he had to say was *I am your new prior*, but he did not want to. Suddenly it seemed very important that he should prevail by sheer weight of moral authority.

The sacrist sensed his uncertainty and took advantage of it. “Tell us all, please,” he said with mock courtesy. “Who is it that commands us to kneel in his presence?”

All hesitation left Philip in a rush, and he thought: God is with me, so what am I afraid of? He took a deep breath, and his words came out in a roar

that echoed from the paved floor to the stone-vaulted ceiling. “It is God who commands you to kneel in *his* presence!” he thundered.

The sacrist looked a fraction less confident. Philip seized his chance and snatched the book. The sacrist had lost all authority now, and at last, reluctantly, he knelt.

Hiding his relief, Philip looked around at them all and said: “I am your new prior.”

He made them remain kneeling while he read the service. It took a long time, because he made them repeat the responses again and again until they could speak them in perfect unison. Then he led them in silence out of the chapel and across the clearing to the refectory. He sent the roast pork back to the kitchen and ordered bread and weak beer, and he nominated a monk to read aloud while they ate. As soon as they had finished he led them, still in silence, to the dormitory.

He ordered the prior’s bedding brought in from the separate prior’s house: he would sleep in the same room as the monks. It was the simplest and most effective way to prevent sins of impurity.

He did not sleep at all the first night, but sat up with a candle, praying silently, until it was midnight and time to wake the monks for matins. He went through that service quickly, to let them know he was not completely merciless. They went back to bed, but Philip did not sleep.

He went out at dawn, before they woke, and looked around, thinking about the day ahead. One of the fields had recently been reclaimed from the forest, and right in the middle of it was the huge stump of what must have been a massive oak tree. Thai gave him an idea.

After the service of prime, and breakfast, he took them all out into the field with ropes and axes, and they spent the morning uprooting the enormous stump, half of them heaving on the ropes while the other half attacked the roots with axes, all saying “He-ee-eave” together. When the stump finally came up, Philip gave them all beer, bread, and a slice of the pork he had denied them at supper.

That was not the end of the problems, but it was the beginning of solutions. From the start he refused to ask the mother house for anything but grain for bread and candles for the chapel. The knowledge that they would get no meat other than what they raised or trapped themselves turned the monks into meticulous livestock husbandmen and bird-snarers; and whereas they had previously looked upon the services as a way of escaping work, they now were glad when Philip cut down the hours spent in chapel so that they could have more time in the fields.

After two years they were self-sufficient, and after another two they were supplying Kingsbridge Priory with meat, game, and a cheese made from goat’s milk which became a coveted delicacy. The cell prospered, the services

were irreproachable, and the brothers were healthy and happy.

Philip would have been content—but the mother house, Kingsbridge Priory, was going from bad to worse.

It should have been one of the leading religious centers in the kingdom, bustling with activity, its library visited by foreign scholars, its prior consulted by barons, its shrines attracting pilgrims from all over the country, its hospitality renowned by the nobility, its charity famous among the poor. But the church was crumbling, half the monastic buildings were empty, and the priory was in debt to moneylenders. Philip went to Kingsbridge at least once a year, and each time he came back seething with anger at the way in which wealth, which had been given by devout worshipers and increased by dedicated monks, was being dissipated carelessly like the inheritance of the prodigal son.

Part of the problem was the location of the priory. Kingsbridge was a small village on a back road that led nowhere. Since the time of the first King William—who had been called the Conqueror, or the Bastard, depending on who was speaking—most cathedrals had been transferred to large towns; but Kingsbridge had escaped this shake-up. However, that was not an insuperable problem, in Philip's view: a busy monastery with a cathedral church should be a town in itself.

The real trouble was the lethargy of old Prior James. With a limp hand on the tiller, the ship was blown about at hazard and went nowhere.

And, to Philip's bitter regret, Kingsbridge Priory would continue to decline while Prior James was still alive.

They wrapped the baby in clean linen and laid him in a large breadbasket for a cradle. With his tiny belly full of goat's milk he fell asleep. Philip put Johnny Eightpence in charge of him, for despite being somewhat half-witted, Johnny had a gentle touch with creatures that were small and frail.

Philip was agog to know what had brought Francis to the monastery. He dropped hints during dinner, but Francis did not respond, and Philip had to suppress his curiosity.

After dinner it was study hour. They had no proper cloisters here, but the monks could sit in the porch of the chapel and read, or walk up and down the clearing. They were allowed to go into the kitchen from time to time to warm themselves by the fire, as was the custom. Philip and Francis walked around the edge of the clearing, side by side, as they had often walked in the cloisters at the monastery in Wales; and Francis began to speak.

"King Henry has always treated the Church as if it were a subordinate part of his kingdom," he began. "He has issued orders to bishops, imposed taxes, and prevented the direct exercise of papal authority."

“I know,” Philip said. “So what?”

“King Henry is dead.”

Philip stopped in his tracks. He had not expected *that*.

Francis went on: “He died at his hunting lodge at Lyons-la-Forêt, in Normandy, after a meal of lampreys, which he loved, although they always disagreed with him.”

“When?”

“Today is the first day of the year, so it was a month ago exactly.”

Philip was quite shocked. Henry had been king since before Philip was born. He had never lived through the death of a king, but he knew it meant trouble, and possibly war. “What happens now?” he said anxiously.

They resumed walking. Francis said: “The problem is that the king’s heir was killed at sea, many years ago—you may remember it.”

“I do.” Philip had been twelve years old. It was the first event of national importance to penetrate his boyish consciousness, and it had made him aware of the world outside the monastery. The king’s son had died in the wreck of a vessel called the White Ship, just off Cherbourg. Abbot Peter, who told young Philip all this, had been worried that war and anarchy would follow the death of the heir; but in the event, King Henry kept control, and life went on undisturbed for Philip and Francis.

“The king had many other children, of course,” Francis went on. “At least twenty of them, including my own lord, Earl Robert of Gloucester; but as you know, they are all bastards. Despite his rampant fecundity he managed to father only one other legitimate child—and that was a girl, Maud. A bastard can’t inherit the throne, but a woman is almost as bad.”

“Didn’t King Henry nominate an heir?” Philip said.

“Yes, he chose Maud. She has a son, also called Henry. It was the old king’s dearest wish that his grandson should inherit the throne. But the boy is not yet three years old. So the king made the barons swear fealty to Maud.”

Philip was puzzled. “If the king made Maud his heir, and the barons have already sworn loyalty to her…what’s the problem?”

“Court life is never that simple,” Francis said. “Maud is married to Geoffrey of Anjou. Anjou and Normandy have been rivals for generations. Our Norman overlords hate the Angevins. Frankly, it was very optimistic of the old king to expect that a crowd of Anglo-Norman barons would hand over England and Normandy to an Angevin, oath or no oath.”

Philip was somewhat bemused by his younger brother’s knowing and disrespectful attitude to the most important men in the land. “How do you know all this?”

“The barons gathered at Le Neubourg to decide what to do. Needless to say, my own lord, Earl Robert, was there; and I went with him to write his letters.”

Philip looked quizzically at his brother, thinking how different Francis's life must be from his own. Then he remembered something. "Earl Robert is the eldest son of the old king, isn't he?"

"Yes, and he is *very* ambitious; but he accepts the general view, that bastards have to conquer their kingdoms, not inherit them."

"Who else is there?"

"King Henry had three nephews, the sons of his sister. The eldest is Theobald of Blois; then there is Stephen, much loved by the dead king and endowed by him with vast estates here in England; and the baby of the family, Henry, whom you know as the bishop of Winchester. The barons favored the eldest, Theobald, according to a tradition which you probably think perfectly reasonable." Francis looked at Philip and grinned.

"Perfectly reasonable," Philip said with a smile. "So Theobald is our new king?"

Francis shook his head. "He thought he was, but we younger sons have a way of pushing ourselves to the fore." They reached the farthest corner of the clearing and turned. "While Theobald was graciously accepting the homage of the barons, Stephen crossed the Channel to England and dashed to Winchester, and with the help of baby brother Henry, the bishop, he seized the castle there and—most important of all—the royal treasury."

Philip was about to say: So *Stephen* is our new ruler. But he bit his tongue: he had said that about Maud and Theobald and had been wrong both times.

Francis went on: "Stephen needed only one more thing to make his victory secure: the support of the Church. For until he could be crowned at Westminster by the archbishop he would not *really* be king."

"But surely that was easy," Philip said. "His brother Henry is one of the most important priests in the land—bishop of Winchester, abbot of Glastonbury, as rich as Solomon and almost as powerful as the archbishop of Canterbury. And if Bishop Henry wasn't intending to support him, why had he helped him take Winchester?"

Francis nodded. "I must say that Bishop Henry's operations throughout this crisis have been brilliant. You see, he wasn't helping Stephen out of brotherly love."

"Then what was his motivation?"

"A few minutes ago I reminded you of how the late King Henry had treated the Church as if it were just another part of his kingdom. Bishop Henry wants to ensure that our new king, whoever he may be, will treat the Church better. So before he would guarantee support, *Henry made Stephen swear a solemn oath to preserve the rights and privileges of the Church*."

Philip was impressed. Stephen's relationship with the Church had been defined, right at the start of his reign, on the Church's terms. But perhaps even

more important was the precedent. The Church had to crown kings but until now it had not had the right to lay down conditions. The time might come when no king could come to power without first striking a deal with the Church. “This could mean a lot to us,” Philip said.

“Stephen may break his promises, of course,” Francis said. “But all the same you’re right. He will never be able to be quite as ruthless with the Church as Henry was. But there’s another danger. Two of the barons were bitterly aggrieved by what Stephen did. One was Bartholomew, the earl of Shiring.”

“I know of him. Shiring is only a day’s journey from here. Bartholomew is said to be a devout man.”

“Perhaps he is. All I know is that he is a self-righteous and stiff-necked baron who will not renege on his loyalty oath to Maud, despite the promise of a pardon.”

“And the other discontented baron?”

“My own Robert of Gloucester. I told you he was ambitious. His soul is tormented by the thought that if only he were legitimate, he would be king. He wants to put his half sister on the throne, believing that she will rely so heavily on her brother for guidance and advice that he will be king in everything but name.”

“Is he going to do anything about it?”

“I’m afraid so.” Francis lowered his voice, although there was no one near. “Robert and Bartholomew, together with Maud and her husband, are going to foment a rebellion. They plan to unseat Stephen and put Maud on the throne.”

Philip stopped walking. “Which would undo everything the bishop of Winchester has achieved!” He grasped his brother’s arm. “But, Francis…”

“I know what you’re thinking.” Suddenly all Francis’s cockiness left him, and he looked anxious and frightened. “If Earl Robert knew I’d even told you, he would hang me. He trusts me completely. But my ultimate loyalty is to the Church—it has to be.”

“But what can you do?”

“I thought of seeking an audience with the new king, and telling him everything. Of course, the two rebel earls would deny it all, and I would be hanged for treachery; but the rebellion would be frustrated and I would go to heaven.”

Philip shook his head. “We’re taught that it’s vain to *seek* martyrdom.”

“And I think God has more work for me to do here on earth. I’m in a position of trust in the household of a great baron, and if I stay there and advance myself by hard work, there’s a lot I could do to promote the rights of the Church and the rule of law.”

“Is there any other way…?”

Francis looked Philip in the eye. “That’s why I’m here.”

Philip felt a shiver of fear. Francis was going to ask him to get involved, of course; there was no other reason for him to reveal this dreadful secret.

Francis went on: “I can’t betray the rebellion, but *you* can.”

Philip said: “Jesus Christ and all the saints, preserve me.”

“If the plot is uncovered here, in the south, no suspicion will fall on the Gloucester household. Nobody knows I’m here; nobody even knows you’re my brother. You could think of some plausible explanation of how you came by the information: you might have seen men-at-arms assembling, or it might be that someone in Earl Bartholomew’s household revealed the plot while confessing his sins to a priest you know.”

Philip pulled his cloak closer around him, shivering. It seemed to have turned colder suddenly. This was dangerous, very dangerous. They were talking about meddling in royal politics, which regularly killed experienced practitioners. Outsiders such as Philip were foolish to get involved.

But there was so much at stake. Philip could not stand by and see a rebellion against a king chosen by the Church, not when he had a chance to prevent it. And dangerous though it would be for Philip, it would be suicidal for Francis to expose the plot.

Philip said: “What’s the rebels’ plan?”

“Earl Bartholomew is on his way back to Shiring right now. From there he will send out messages to his followers all over the south of England. Earl Robert will arrive in Gloucester a day or two later and muster his forces in the West Country. Finally Brian Fitzcount, who holds Wallingford Castle, will close its gates; and the whole of southwest England will belong to the rebels without a fight.”

“Then it’s almost too late!” Philip said.

“Not really. We’ve got about a week. But you’ll have to act quickly.”

Philip realized with a sinking feeling that he had more or less made up his mind to do it. “I don’t know whom to tell,” he said. “One would normally go to the earl, but in this case he’s the culprit. The sheriff is probably on his side. We have to think of someone who is certain to be on our side.”

“The prior of Kingsbridge?”

“My prior is old and tired. The likelihood is that he would do nothing.”

“There must be someone.”

“There’s the bishop.” Philip had never actually spoken to the bishop of Kingsbridge, but he would be sure to receive Philip and listen to him; he would automatically side with Stephen because Stephen was the Church’s choice; and he was powerful enough to do something about it.

Francis said: “Where does the bishop live?”

“It’s a day and a half from here.”

“You’d better leave today.”

“Yes,” Philip said with a heavy heart.

Francis looked remorseful. “I wish it were someone else.”

“So do I,” Philip said feelingly. “So do I.”

Philip called the monks into the little chapel and told them that the king had died. “We must pray for a peaceful succession and a new king who will love the Church more than the late Henry,” he said. But he did not tell them that the key to a peaceful succession had somehow fallen into his own hands. Instead he said: “There is other news that obliges me to visit our mother house at Kingsbridge. I must leave right away.”

The sub-prior would read the services and the cellarer would run the farm, but neither of them was a match for Peter of Wareham, and Philip was afraid that if he stayed away long Peter might make so much trouble that there would be no monastery left when he returned. He had not been able to think up a way of controlling Peter without bruising his self-esteem, and now there was no time left, so he had to do the best he could.

“Earlier today we talked about gluttony,” he said after a pause. “Brother Peter deserves our thanks for reminding us that when God blesses our farm and gives us wealth, it is not so that we should become fat and comfortable, but for his greater glory. It is part of our holy duty to share our riches with the poor. Until now we have neglected this duty, mainly because here in the forest we don’t have anybody to share with. Brother Peter has reminded us that it’s our duty to go out and seek the poor, so that we may bring them relief.”

The monks were surprised: they had imagined that the subject of gluttony had been closed. Peter himself was looking uncertain. He was pleased to be the center of attention again, but he was wary of what Philip might have up his sleeve—quite rightly.

“I have decided,” Philip went on, “that each week we will give to the poor one penny for every monk in our community. If this means we all have to eat a little less, we will rejoice in the prospect of our heavenly reward. More important, we must make sure that our pennies are well spent. When you give a poor man a penny to buy bread for his family, he may go straight to the alehouse and get drunk, then go home and beat his wife, who would therefore have been better off without your charity. Better to give him the bread; better still to give the bread to his children. Giving alms is a holy task that must be done with as much diligence as healing the sick or educating the young. For this reason, many monastic houses appoint an almoner, to be responsible for almsgiving. We will do the same.”

Philip looked around. They were all alert and interested. Peter wore a gratified look, evidently having decided that this was a victory for him. No one had guessed what was coming.

“The almoner’s job is hard work. He will have to walk to the nearest towns and villages, frequently to Winchester. There he will go among the meanest, dirtiest, ugliest and most vicious classes of people, for such are the poor. He must pray for them when they blaspheme, visit them when they’re sick, and forgive them when they try to cheat and rob him. He will need strength, humility and endless patience. He will miss the comfort of this community, for he will be away more than he is with us.”

He looked around once again. Now they were all wary, for none of them wanted this job. He let his gaze rest on Peter of Wareham. Peter realized what was coming, and his face fell.

“It was Peter who drew our attention to our shortcomings in this area,” Philip said slowly, “so I have decided that it shall be Peter who has the honor of being our almoner.” He smiled. “You can begin today.”

Peter’s face was as black as thunder.

You’ll be away too much to cause trouble, Philip thought; and close contact with the vile, verminous poor of Winchester’s stinking alleyways will temper your scorn of soft living.

However, Peter evidently saw this as a punishment, pure and simple, and he looked at Philip with an expression of such hatred that for a moment Philip quailed.

He tore his gaze away and looked at the others. “After the death of a king there is always danger and uncertainty,” he said. “Pray for me while I’m away.”

II

At noon on the second day of his journey, Prior Philip was within a few miles of the bishop's palace. His bowels felt watery as he got nearer. He had thought of a story to explain how he came to know of the planned rebellion. But the bishop might not believe his story; or, believing it, he might demand proof. Worse still—and this possibility had not occurred to Philip until after he parted company with Francis—it was conceivable, albeit unlikely, that the bishop was one of the conspirators, and supported the rebellion. He might be a crony of the earl of Shiring. It was not unknown for bishops to put their own interests before those of the Church.

The bishop could torture Philip to make him reveal his source of information. Of course he had no right to, but then he had no right to plot against the king, either. Philip recalled the instruments of torture depicted in paintings of hell. Such paintings were inspired by what went on in the dungeons of barons and bishops. Philip did not feel he had the strength for a martyr's death.

When he saw a group of travelers on foot in the road ahead of him his first instinct was to rein in to avoid passing them, for he was alone, and there were plenty of footpads who would not scruple to rob a monk. Then he saw that two of the figures were children, and another was a woman. A family group was usually safe. He trotted to catch them.

As he drew nearer he could see them more clearly. They were a tall man, a small woman, a youth almost as big as the man, and two children. They were visibly poor: they carried no little bundles of precious possessions and they were dressed in rags. The man was big-boned, but emaciated, as if he were dying of a wasting disease—or just starving. He looked warily at Philip, and drew the children closer to him with a touch and a murmured word. Philip had at first guessed his age at fifty, but now he saw that the man was in his thirties, although his face was lined with care.

The woman said: "What ho, monk."

Philip looked sharply at her. It was unusual for a woman to speak before her husband did, and while *monk* was not exactly impolite, it would have been more respectful to say *brother* or *father*. The woman was younger than the man by about ten years, and she had deep-set eyes of an unusual pale gold color that gave her a rather arresting appearance. Philip felt she was dangerous.

"Good day, Father," the man said, as if to apologize for his wife's

brusqueness.

“God bless you,” said Philip, slowing his mare. “Who are you?”

“Tom, a master builder, seeking work.”

“And not finding any, I’d guess.”

“That’s the truth.”

Philip nodded. It was a common story. Building craftsmen normally wandered in search of work, and sometimes they did not find it, either through bad luck or because not many people were building. Such men often took advantage of the hospitality of monasteries. If they had recently been in work they gave generous donations when they left, although after they had been on the road a while they might have nothing to offer. Giving an equally warm welcome to both kinds was sometimes a trial of monastic charity.

This builder was definitely the penniless kind, although his wife looked well enough. Philip said: “Well, I have food in my saddlebag, and it is dinnertime, and charity is a holy duty; so if you and your family will eat with me, I shall get a reward in heaven, as well as some company while I dine.”

“That’s good of you,” said Tom. He looked at the woman. She gave the slightest of shrugs, then a little nod. Almost without pause the man said: “We’ll accept your charity, and thank you.”

“Thank God, not me,” Philip said automatically.

The woman said: “Thank the peasants whose tithes provided the food.”

Here’s a sharp one, Philip thought; but he said nothing.

They stopped at a small clearing where Philip’s pony could graze the tired winter grass. Philip was secretly glad of the excuse to postpone his arrival at the palace and delay the dreaded interview with the bishop. The builder said that he too was heading for the bishop’s palace, hoping that the bishop might want to make repairs or even build an extension. While they were talking, Philip surreptitiously studied the family. The woman seemed too young to be the mother of the older boy. He was like a calf, strong and awkward and stupid-looking. The other boy was small and odd, with carrot-colored hair, snow-white skin and protuberant bright-blue eyes; and he had a way of staring intently at things, with an absent expression that reminded Philip of poor Johnny Eightpence, except that unlike Johnny this boy would give you a very adult, knowing look when you caught his eye. In his way he was as disturbing as his mother, Philip found. The third child was a girl of about six years. She was crying intermittently, and her father watched her constantly with affectionate concern, and gave her a comforting pat from time to time, although he said nothing to her. He was evidently very fond of her. He also touched his wife, once, and Philip saw a look of lust flash between them when their eyes met.

The woman sent the children to find broad leaves to use as platters. Philip opened his saddlebags. Tom said: “Where is your monastery, Father?”

“In the forest, a day’s journey from here, to the west.” The woman looked up sharply, and Tom raised his eyebrows. “Do you know it?” Philip asked.

For some reason Tom looked awkward. “We must have passed near it on the way from Salisbury,” he said.

“Oh, yes, you would have, but it’s a long way off the main road, so you wouldn’t have seen it, unless you knew where it was and went to find it.”

“Ah, I see,” said Tom, but his mind seemed to be elsewhere.

Philip was struck by a thought. “Tell me something—did you come across a woman on the road? Probably very young, alone, and, ah, with child?”

“No,” said Tom. His tone was casual but Philip had the feeling he was intensely interested. “Why do you ask?”

Philip smiled. “I’ll tell you. Early yesterday a baby was found in the forest and brought to my monastery. It’s a boy, and I don’t think he was even as much as a day old. He must have been born that night. So the mother must have been in the area at the same time as you.”

“We didn’t see anyone,” Tom repeated. “What did you do with the baby?”

“Fed him goat’s milk. He seems to be thriving on it.”

They were both looking at Philip intently. It was, he thought, a story to touch anyone’s heart. After a moment Tom said: “And you’re searching for the mother?”

“Oh, no. My question was casual. If I came across her, of course, I would give the baby back to her; but it’s clear she doesn’t want it, and she’ll make sure she can’t be found.”

“Then what will happen to the boy?”

“We’ll raise him at the monastery. He’ll be a child of God. That’s how I myself was brought up, and my brother too. Our parents were taken from us when we were young, and after that the abbot was our father, and the monks were our family. We were fed, we were warm, and we learned our letters.”

The woman said: “And you both became monks.” She said it with a touch of irony, as if it proved that the monastery’s charity was ultimately self-interested.

Philip was glad to be able to contradict her. “No, my brother left the order.”

The children came back. They had not found any broad leaves—it was not easy in winter—so they would eat without platters. Philip gave them all bread and cheese. They tore into the food like starving animals. “We make this cheese at my monastery,” he said. “Most people like it when it’s new, like this, but it’s even better if you leave it to ripen.” They were too hungry to care. They finished the bread and cheese in no time. Philip had three pears. He fished them out of his bag and gave them to Tom. Tom gave one to each of the children.

Philip got to his feet. “I’ll pray that you find work.”

Tom said: “If you think of it, Father, mention me to the bishop. You know our need, and you’ve found us honest.”

“I will.”

Tom held the horse while Philip mounted. “You’re a good man, father,” he said, and Philip saw to his surprise that there were tears in Tom’s eyes.

“God be with you,” Philip said.

Tom held the horse’s head a moment longer. “The baby you told us about—the foundling.” He spoke softly, as if he did not want the children to hear. “Did you…have you named him yet?”

“Yes. We call him Jonathan, which means a gift from God.”

“Jonathan. I like that.” Tom released the horse.

Philip looked at him curiously for a moment, then kicked his horse and trotted away.

The bishop of Kingsbridge did not live at Kingsbridge. His palace stood on a south-facing hillside in a lush valley a full day’s journey from the cold stone cathedral and its mournful monks. He preferred it this way, for too much churchgoing would get in the way of his other duties of collecting rents, dispensing justice and maneuvering at the royal court. It suited the monks, too, for the farther away the bishop was, the less he interfered with them.

It was cold enough for snow on the afternoon that Philip arrived there. A bitter wind whipped across the bishop’s valley, and low gray clouds frowned on his hillside manor house. It was not a castle, but it was nonetheless well defended. The woodland had been cleared for a hundred yards all around. The house was enclosed by a stout wooden fence the height of a man, with a rainwater ditch outside it. The guard at the gate had a slovenly manner but his sword was heavy.

The palace was a fine stone house built in the shape of the letter E. The ground floor was an undercroft, its stout walls pierced by several heavy doors but no windows. One door was open, and through it Philip could see barrels and sacks in the gloom. The other doors were closed and chained. Philip wondered what was behind them: when the bishop had prisoners, that was where they would languish.

The short stroke of the E was an exterior staircase leading to the living quarters above the undercroft. The main room, the upright stroke of the E, would be the hall. The two rooms forming the head and foot of the E would be a chapel and a bedroom, Philip guessed. There were small shuttered windows like beady eyes looking suspiciously out at the world.

Within the compound were a kitchen and a bakehouse of stone as well as wooden stables and a barn. All the buildings were in good repair—which was unfortunate for Tom Builder, Philip thought.

There were several good horses in the stable, including a couple of chargers, and a handful of men-at-arms were scattered around, killing time. Perhaps the bishop had visitors.

Philip left his horse with a stableboy and climbed the steps with a sense of foreboding. The whole place had a distressingly military feel. Where were the queues of petitioners with grievances, the mothers with babies to be blessed? He was entering an unfamiliar world, and he was in possession of a dangerous secret. It might be a long time before I leave here, he thought fearfully. I wish Francis had not come to me.

He reached the top of the stairs. Such unworthy thoughts, he told himself. Here I have a chance to serve God and the Church, and I react by worrying about my own safety. Some men face danger every day, in battle, at sea, and on hazardous pilgrimages or crusades. Even a monk must suffer a little fear and trembling sometimes.

He took a deep breath and went in.

The hall was dim and smoky. Philip closed the door quickly to keep out the cold air, then peered into the gloom. A big fire blazed on the opposite side of the room. That and the small windows provided the only light. Around the fireplace was a group of men, some in clerical clothes and others in the expensive but well-worn garments of minor gentry. They were involved in a serious discussion, their voices low and businesslike. Their seats were scattered randomly, but they all looked at and spoke to a priest who sat in the middle of the group like a spider at the center of a web. He was a thin man, and the way his long legs were splayed apart and his long arms draped over the arms of the chair made him look as if he were about to spring. He had lank, jet-black hair and a pale face with a sharp nose, and his black clothes made him at once handsome and menacing.

He was not the bishop.

A steward got up from a seat beside the door and said to Philip: “Good day, Father. Who do you want to see?” At the same time a hound lying by the fire raised its head and growled. The man in black looked up quickly, saw Philip, and stopped the conversation instantly with a raised hand. “What is it?” he said brusquely.

“Good day,” Philip said politely. “I’ve come to see the bishop.”

“He’s not here,” the priest said dismissively.

Philip’s heart sank. He had been dreading the interview and its dangers, but now he felt let down. What was he going to do with his awful secret? He said to the priest: “When do you expect him back?”

“We don’t know. What’s your business with him?”

The priest’s tone was a little abrupt, and Philip was stung. “God’s business,” he said sharply. “Who are you?”

The priest raised his eyebrows, as if surprised to be challenged, and the

other men became suddenly quiet, like people expecting an explosion; but after a pause he replied mildly enough. “I’m his archdeacon. My name is Waleran Bigod.”

A good name for a priest, Philip thought. He said: “My name is Philip. I’m the prior of the monastery of St-John-in-the-Forest. It’s a cell of Kingsbridge Priory.”

“I’ve heard of you,” said Waleran. “You’re Philip of Gwynedd.”

Philip was surprised. He could not imagine why an actual archdeacon should know the name of someone as lowly as himself. But his rank, modest though it was, was enough to change Waleran’s attitude. The irritated look went from the archdeacon’s face. “Come to the fire,” he said. “You’ll take a draft of hot wine to warm your blood?” He gestured to someone sitting on a bench against the wall, and a ragged figure sprang up to do his bidding.

Philip approached the fire. Waleran said something in a low voice and the other men got to their feet and began to take their leave. Philip sat down and warmed his hands while Waleran went to the door with his guests. Philip wondered what they had been discussing, and why the archdeacon had not closed the meeting with a prayer.

The ragged servant handed him a wooden cup. He sipped hot, spiced wine and considered his next move. If the bishop was not available, whom could Philip turn to? He thought of going to Earl Bartholomew and simply begging him to reconsider his rebellion. The idea was ludicrous: the earl would put him in a dungeon and throw away the key. That left the sheriff, who was in theory the king’s representative in the county. But there was no telling which side the sheriff might take while there was still some doubt about who was going to be king. Still, Philip thought, I might just have to take that risk, in the end. He longed to return to the simple life of the monastery, where his most dangerous enemy was Peter of Wareham.

Waleran’s guests departed, and the door closed on the noise of horses in the yard. Waleran returned to the fireside and pulled up a big chair.

Philip was preoccupied with his problem and did not really want to talk to the archdeacon, but he felt obliged to be civil. “I hope I didn’t break up your meeting,” he said.

Waleran made a deprecatory gesture. “It was due to end,” he said. “These things always go on longer than they need to. We were discussing the renewal of leases of diocesan land—the kind of thing that could be settled in a few moments if only people would be decisive.” He fluttered a bony hand as if to dismiss all diocesan leases and their holders. “Now, I hear you’ve done good work at that little cell in the forest.”

“I’m surprised you know about it,” Philip replied.

“The bishop is *ex officio* abbot of Kingsbridge, so he’s bound to take an interest.”

Or he has a well-informed archdeacon, Philip thought. He said: “Well, God has blessed us.”

“Indeed.”

They were speaking Norman French, the language Waleran and his guests had been using, the language of government; but something about Waleran’s accent was a little strange, and after a few moments Philip realized that Waleran had the inflections of one who had been brought up to speak English. That meant he was not a Norman aristocrat, but a native who had risen by his own efforts—like Philip.

A moment later this was confirmed when Waleran switched to English to say: “I wish God would confer similar blessings on Kingsbridge Priory.”

Philip was not the only one to be troubled by the state of affairs at Kingsbridge, then. Waleran probably knew more about events there than Philip did. Philip said: “How is Prior James?”

“Sick,” Waleran replied succinctly.

Then he definitely would not be able to do anything about Earl Bartholomew’s insurrection, Philip thought gloomily. He was going to have to go to Shiring and take his chance with the sheriff.

It occurred to him that Waleran was the kind of man who would know everyone of importance in the county. “What is the sheriff of Shiring like?” he asked.

Waleran shrugged. “Ungodly, arrogant, grasping and corrupt. So are all sheriffs. Why do you ask?”

“If I can’t talk to the bishop I probably should go and see the sheriff.”

“I am in the bishop’s confidence, you know,” said Waleran with a little smile. “If I can help…” He made an openhanded gesture, like a man who is being generous but knows he may be refused.

Philip had relaxed a little, thinking that the moment of crisis had been postponed for a day or two, but now he was filled with trepidation again. Could he trust Archdeacon Waleran? Waleran’s nonchalance was studied, he thought: the archdeacon appeared diffident, but in truth he was probably bursting to know what Philip had to say that was so important. However, that was no reason to mistrust him. He seemed a judicious fellow. Was he powerful enough to do anything about the rebellion? If he could not do it himself, he might be able to locate the bishop. It struck Philip that in fact there was a major advantage to the idea of confiding in Waleran; for whereas the bishop might insist on knowing the real source of Philip’s information, the archdeacon did not have the authority to do that, and would have to be content with the story Philip told him, whether he believed it or not.

Waleran gave his little smile again. “If you think about it any longer, I shall begin to believe that you mistrust me!”

Philip felt he understood Waleran. Waleran was a man something like

himself: young, well-educated, low-born, and intelligent. He was a little too worldly for Philip's taste, pehaps, but this was pardonable in a priest who was obliged to spend so much of his time with lords and ladies, and did not have the benefit of a monk's protected life. Waleran was a devout man at heart, Philip thought. He would do the right thing for the Church.

Philip hesitated on the edge of decision. Until now only he and Francis had known the secret. Once he told a third person, anything could happen. He took a deep breath.

"Three days ago, an injured man came to my monastery in the forest," he began, silently praying forgiveness for lying. "He was an armed man on a fine, fast horse, and he had taken a fall a mile or two away. He must have been riding hard when he fell, for his arm was broken and his ribs were crushed. We set his arm, but there was nothing we could do about his ribs, and he was coughing blood, a sign of internal damage." As he spoke, Philip was watching Waleran's face. So far it showed nothing more than polite interest. "I advised him to confess his sins, for he was in danger of death. He told me a secret."

He hesitated, not sure how much Waleran might have heard of the political news. "I expect you know that Stephen of Blois has claimed the throne of England with the blessing of the Church."

Waleran knew more than Philip. "And he was crowned at Westminster three days before Christmas," he said.

"Already!" Francis had not known that.

"What was the secret?" Waleran said with a touch of impatience.

Philip took the plunge. "Before he died, the horseman told me that his master Bartholomew, earl of Shiring, had conspired with Robert of Gloucester to raise a rebellion against Stephen." He studied Waleran's face, holding his breath.

Waleran's pale cheeks went a shade whiter. He leaned forward in his chair. "Do you think he was telling the truth?" he said urgently.

"A dying man usually tells the truth to his confessor."

"Perhaps he was repeating a rumor that was current in the earl's household."

Philip had not expected Waleran to be skeptical. He improvised hastily. "Oh, no," he said. "He was a messenger sent by Earl Bartholomew to muster the earl's forces in Hampshire."

Waleran's intelligent eyes raked Philip's expression. "Did he have the message in writing?"

"No."

"Any seal, or token of the earl's authority?"

"Nothing." Philip began to perspire slightly. "I gathered he was well known, by the people he was going to see, as an authorized representative of

the earl.”

“What was his name?”

“Francis,” Philip said stupidly, and wanted to bite his tongue.

“Just that?”

“He didn’t tell me what else he was called.” Philip had the feeling that his story was coming unraveled under Waleran’s interrogation.

“His weapons and his armor may identify him.”

“He had no armor,” Philip said desperately. “We buried his weapons with him—monks have no use for swords. We could dig them up, but I can tell you that they were plain and undistinguished—I don’t think you would find clues there….” He had to divert Waleran from this line of inquiry. “What do you think can be done?”

Waleran frowned. “It’s hard to know what to do without proof. The conspirators can simply deny the charge, and then the accuser stands condemned.” He did not say *especially if the story turns out to be false*, but Philip guessed that was what he was thinking. Waleran went on: “Have you told anyone else?”

Philip shook his head.

“Where are you going when you leave here?”

“Kingsbridge. I had to invent a reason for leaving the cell, so I said I would visit the priory; and now I must do so, to make the lie true.”

“Don’t speak of this to anyone there.”

“I shan’t.” Philip had not intended to, but he wondered why Waleran was insisting on the point. Perhaps it was self-interest: if he was going to take the risk of exposing the conspiracy, he wanted to be sure to get the credit. He was ambitious. So much the better, for Philip’s purpose.

“Leave this with me.” Waleran was suddenly brusque again, and the contrast with his previous manner made Philip realize that his amiability could be put on and taken off like a coat. Waleran went on: “You’ll go to Kingsbridge Priory now, and forget about the sheriff, won’t you.”

“Yes.” Philip realized it was going to be all right, at least for a while, and a weight rolled off his back. He was not going to be thrown into a dungeon, interrogated by a torturer, or accused of sedition. He had also handed the responsibility to someone else—someone who appeared quite happy to take it on.

He got up and went to the nearest window. It was mid-afternoon, and there was plenty of daylight left. He had an urge to get away from here and leave the secret behind him. “If I go now I can cover eight or ten miles before nightfall,” he said.

Waleran did not press him to stay. “That will take you to the village of Bassingbourn. You’ll find a bed there. If you set out early in the morning you can be at Kingsbridge by midday.”

“Yes.” Philip turned from the window and looked at Waleran. The archdeacon was frowning into the fire, deep in thought. Philip watched him for a moment. Waleran did not share his thoughts. Philip wished he knew what was going on in that clever head. “I’ll go right away,” he said.

Waleran came out of his reverie and grew charming again. He smiled and stood up. “All right,” he said. He walked with Philip to the door and then followed him down the stairs to the yard.

A stableboy brought Philip’s horse and saddled it. Waleran might have said goodbye then and returned to his fire, but he waited. Philip guessed that he wanted to make sure Philip took the road to Kingsbridge, not the road to Shiring.

Philip mounted, feeling happier than he had when he had arrived. He was about to take his leave when he saw Tom Builder come through the gate with his family in tow. Philip said to Waleran: “This man is a builder I met on the road. He seems like an honest fellow fallen on hard times. If you need any repairs you’ll be glad of him.”

Waleran made no reply. He was staring at the family as they walked across the compound. All his poise and composure had deserted him. His mouth was open and his eyes were staring. He looked like a man suffering a shock.

“What is it?” Philip said anxiously.

“That woman!” Waleran’s voice was just above a whisper.

Philip looked at her. “She’s rather beautiful,” he said, realizing it for the first time. “But we’re taught that it is better for a priest to be chaste. Turn your eyes away, Archdeacon.”

Waleran was not listening. “I thought she was dead,” he muttered. He seemed to remember Philip suddenly. He tore his gaze from the woman and looked up at Philip, collecting his wits. “Give my regards to the prior of Kingsbridge,” he said. Then he slapped Philip’s horse’s rump, and the animal sprang forward and trotted out through the gate; and by the time Philip had shortened his reins and got the horse under control he was too far away to say goodbye.

III

Philip came within sight of Kingsbridge at about noon on the following day, as Archdeacon Waleran had forecast. He emerged from a wooded hillside and looked out across a landscape of lifeless, frozen fields relieved only by the occasional bare skeleton of a tree. There were no people to be seen, for in the dead of winter there was no work to do on the land. A couple of miles away across the cold countryside, Kingsbridge Cathedral stood on a rise; a huge, squat building like a tomb on a burial mound.

Philip followed the road into a dip and Kingsbridge disappeared from view. His placid pony picked her way carefully along the frosted ruts. Philip was thinking about Archdeacon Waleran. Waleran was so poised and confident and capable that he made Philip feel young and naïve, although there was not much difference in age between them. Waleran had effortlessly controlled the whole meeting: he had got rid of his guests graciously, listened attentively to Philip's tale, homed in immediately on the crucial problem of lack of evidence, swiftly realized that that line of inquiry was fruitless, and then promptly sent Philip on his way—without, Philip now realized, any guarantee that action would be taken.

Philip grinned ruefully as he saw how well he had been manipulated. Waleran had not even promised to tell the bishop what Philip had reported. But Philip felt confident that the large vein of ambition he detected in Waleran would ensure that the information was used somehow. He even had a notion that Waleran might feel a little indebted to him.

Because he was impressed by Waleran, he was all the more intrigued by the archdeacon's single sign of weakness—his reaction to the wife of Tom Builder. To Philip she had seemed obscurely dangerous. Apparently Waleran found her desirable—which might amount to the same thing, of course. However, there was more to it than that. Waleran must have met her before, for he had said *I thought she was dead*. It sounded as if he had sinned with her in the distant past. He certainly had *something* to feel guilty about, judging by the way he had made sure Philip did not stay around to learn more.

Even this guilty secret did not much reduce Philip's opinion of Waleran. Waleran was a priest, not a monk. Chastity had always been an essential part of the monastic way of life, but it had never been enforced for priests. Bishops had mistresses and parish priests had housekeepers. Like the prohibition against evil thoughts, clerical celibacy was a law too harsh to be obeyed. If God could not forgive lascivious priests, there would be very few

clergy in heaven.

Kingsbridge reappeared as Philip crested the next rise. The landscape was dominated by the massive church, with its round-headed arches and small, deep windows, just as the village was dominated by the monastery. The west end of the church, which faced Philip, had stubby twin towers, one of which had fallen in a thunderstorm four years ago. It still had not been rebuilt, and the facade had a reproachful look. This view never failed to anger Philip, for the pile of rubble at the entrance of the church was a shameful reminder of the collapse of monastic rectitude at the priory. The monastery buildings, made of the same pale limestone, stood near the church in groups, like conspirators around a throne. Outside the low wall that enclosed the priory was a scatter of ordinary hovels made of timber and mud with thatched roofs, occupied by the peasants who tilled the fields round about and the servants who worked for the monks. A narrow, impatient river hurried across the southwest corner of the village, bringing fresh water to the monastery.

Philip was already feeling bilious as he crossed the river by an old wooden bridge. Kingsbridge Priory brought shame on God's church and the monastic movement, but there was nothing Philip could do about it; and anger and impotence together turned sour in his stomach.

The priory owned the bridge and charged a toll, and as the woodwork creaked with the weight of Philip and his horse, an elderly monk emerged from a shelter on the opposite bank and came forward to move the willow branch that served as a barrier. He recognized Philip and waved. Philip noticed that he was limping, and said: "What's wrong with your foot, Brother Paul?"

"Just a chilblain. It will ease when the spring comes."

He had nothing on his feet but sandals, Philip saw. Paul was a tough old bird but he was too far gone in years to be spending the whole day out-of-doors in this weather. "You should have a fire," Philip said.

"It would be a mercy," said Paul. "But Brother Remigius says the fire would cost more money than the toll brings."

"How much do we charge?"

"A penny for a horse, and a farthing for a man."

"Do many people use the bridge?"

"Oh, yes, plenty."

"Then how is it that we can't afford a fire?"

"Well, the monks don't pay, of course, nor do the priory servants, nor the villagers. So it's just a traveling knight or a tinker every day or two. Then on holy days, when people come from all over the country to hear the services in the cathedral, we gather farthings galore."

"It seems to me we might man the bridge on holy days only, and give you a fire out of the proceeds," said Philip.

Paul looked anxious. “Don’t say anything to Remigius, will you? If he thinks I’ve been complaining he’ll be displeased.”

“Don’t worry,” said Philip. He kicked his horse on so that Paul should not see the expression on his face. This kind of foolishness infuriated him. Paul had given his life to the service of God and the monastery, and now in his declining years he was made to suffer pain and cold for the sake of a farthing or two a day. It was not just cruel, it was wasteful, for a patient old man such as Paul could be set to work at some productive task—raising chickens, perhaps—and the priory would benefit by much more than a few farthings. But the prior of Kingsbridge was too old and lethargic to see that, and it seemed that the same must be true of Remigius, the sub-prior. It was a grave sin, Philip thought bitterly, to waste so carelessly the human and material assets that had been given to God in loving piety.

He was in an unforgiving mood as he guided his pony through the spaces between the hovels to the priory gate. The priory was a rectangular enclosure with the church in the middle. The buildings were laid out so that everything to the north and west of the church was public, worldly, secular and practical, whereas what was to the south and east was private, spiritual and holy.

The entrance to the close was therefore at the northwest corner of the rectangle. The gate stood open, and the young monk in the gatehouse waved as Philip trotted through. Just inside the gate, up against the west wall of the enclosure, was the stable, a stout wooden structure rather better built than some of the dwellings for people on the other side of the wall. Two stable hands sat inside on bales of straw. They were not monks, but employees of the priory. They got reluctantly to their feet as if they resented a visitor coming to cause them extra work. The acrid air stung Philip’s nostrils, and he could see that the stalls had not been mucked out for three or four weeks. He was not disposed to overlook the negligence of stable lads today. As he handed over the reins he said: “Before you stable my pony you can clean out one of the stalls and put down fresh straw. Then do the same for the other horses. If their litter becomes permanently wet, they get hoof rot. You don’t have so much to do that you can’t keep this stable clean.” They both looked sullen, so he added: “Do as I say, or I’ll make sure you both lose a day’s pay for idleness.” He was about to leave when he remembered something. “There’s a cheese in my saddlebag. Take it to the kitchen and give it to Brother Milius.”

He went out without waiting for a reply. The priory had sixty employees to look after its forty-five monks, a shameful excess of servants in Philip’s opinion. People who did not have enough to do could easily become so lazy that they skimped what little work they did have, as had clearly happened to the two stable hands. It was just another example of Prior James’s slackness.

Philip walked along the west wall of the priory close, past the guesthouse,

curious to see whether the priory had any visitors. But the big one-room building was cold and disused, with a windblown drift of last year's dead leaves covering its threshold. He turned left and started across the broad expanse of sparse grass that separated the guesthouse—which sometimes lodged ungodly people and even women—from the church. He approached the west end of the church, the public entrance. The broken stones of the collapsed tower lay where they had fallen, in a big heap twice the height of a man.

Like most churches, Kingsbridge Cathedral was built in the shape of a cross. The west end opened into the nave, which formed the long stem of the cross. The crosspiece consisted of the two transepts which stuck out to the north and south either side of the altar. Beyond the crossing, the east end of the church was called the chancel, and was mainly reserved for the monks. At the farthest extremity of the east end was the tomb of Saint Adolphus, which still attracted occasional pilgrims.

Philip stepped into the nave and looked down the avenue of round arches and mighty columns. The sight further depressed his mood. It was a dank, gloomy building, and it had deteriorated since he last saw it. The windows in the low aisles either side of the nave were like narrow tunnels in the immensely thick walls. Up in the roof, the larger windows of the clerestory illuminated the painted timber ceiling only to show how badly it was fading, the apostles and saints and prophets growing dim and blending inexorably with their background. Despite the cold air blowing in—for there was no glass in the windows—a faint smell of rotting vestments tainted the atmosphere. From the other end of the church came the sound of the service of high mass, the Latin phrases spoken in a singsong voice, and the chanted responses. Philip walked down the nave. The floor had never been paved, so moss grew on the bare earth in the corners where peasant clogs and monkish sandals rarely trod. The carved spirals and flutes of the massive columns, and the incised chevrons that decorated the arches between them, had once been painted and gilded; but now all that remained were a few flakes of papery gold leaf and a patchwork of stains where the paint had been. The mortar between the stones was crumbling and falling out, and gathering in little heaps by the walls. Philip felt the familiar anger rise in him again. When people came here they were supposed to be awestruck by the majesty of Almighty God. But peasants were simple people who judged by appearances, and coming here they would think that God was a careless, indifferent deity unlikely to appreciate their worship or take note of their sins. In the end the peasants paid for the church with the sweat of their brows, and it was outrageous that they were rewarded with this crumbling mausoleum.

Philip knelt before the altar and stayed there a moment, conscious that righteous indignation was not the appropriate state of mind for a worshiper.

When he had cooled down a little he rose and passed on.

The eastern arm of the church, the chancel, was divided into two. Nearest the crossing was the quire, with wooden stalls where the monks sat and stood during the services. Beyond the quire was the sanctuary that housed the tomb of the saint. Philip moved behind the altar, intending to take a place in the quire; then he was brought up short by a coffin.

He stopped, surprised. Nobody had told him that a monk was dead. But, of course, he had spoken to only three people: Paul, who was old and a little absentminded; and the two stable hands, to whom he had given no chance to make conversation. He approached the coffin to see who it was. He looked inside, and his heart missed a beat.

It was Prior James.

Philip stared openmouthed. Now everything was changed. There would be a new prior, new hope—

This jubilation was not the right response to the death of a venerable brother, no matter what his faults had been. Philip composed his face and his mind in an attitude of mourning. He studied the dead man. The prior had been white-haired and thin-faced, and he had had a stoop. Now his perpetually weary expression had gone, and instead of looking troubled and disconsolate, he seemed at peace. As Philip knelt beside the bier and murmured a prayer, he wondered if some great trouble had weighed on the old man's heart in the latter years of his life: a sin unconfessed, a woman regretted, or a wrong done to an innocent man. Whatever it was, he would not speak of it now until the Day of Judgment.

Despite his resolution Philip could not prevent his mind from turning to the future. Prior James, indecisive, anxious and spineless, had touched the monastery with a dead hand. Now there would be someone new, someone who would discipline the lazy servants, repair the tumbledown church, and harness the great wealth of property, making the priory a powerful force for good. Philip was too excited to stay still. He got up from the coffin and walked, with a new lightness in his step, to the quire and took an empty place at the back of the stalls.

The service was being conducted by the sacrist, Andrew of York, an irascible, red-faced man who seemed permanently on the verge of apoplexy. He was one of the obedientaries, the senior officers of the monastery. His area of responsibility was everything holy: the services, the books, the sacred relics, the vestments and the ornaments, and most of all the fabric of the church building. Working under his orders were a cantor to supervise the music and a treasurer to take care of the jeweled gold and silver candlesticks, chalices and other sacred vessels. There was no one in authority over the sacrist except the prior and the sub-prior, Remigius, who was a great crony of Andrew's.

Andrew was reading the service in his usual tone of barely controlled ire. Philip's mind was in a turmoil, and it was some time before he noticed that the service was not proceeding in a seemly way. A group of younger monks were making a noise, talking and laughing. Philip saw that they were making fun of the old novice-master, who had fallen asleep in his place. The young monks—most of whom had been novices under the old master until quite recently, and probably still smarted from the sting of his switch—were flicking pellets of dirt at him. Each time one hit his face he would jerk and move, but would not wake up. Andrew seemed oblivious to what was going on. Philip looked around for the circuitor, the monk responsible for discipline. He was on the far side of the quire, deep in conversation with another monk, taking no notice of the service or the behavior of the youngsters.

Philip watched a moment longer. He had no patience for this kind of thing at the best of times. One of the monks seemed to be a ringleader, a good-looking lad of about twenty-one years with an impish grin. Philip saw him dip the end of his eating knife into the top of a burning candle and flick melted grease at the novice-master's bald pate. As the hot fat landed on his scalp the old monk woke up with a yelp, and the youngsters dissolved in laughter.

With a sigh, Philip left his place. He approached the lad from behind, took him by the ear and ungently hauled him out of the quire and into the south transept. Andrew looked up from the service book and frowned at Philip as they went: he had not seen any of the commotion.

When they were out of earshot of the other monks, Philip stopped, released the lad's ear, and said: "Name?"

"William Beauvis."

"And what devil possessed you during high mass?"

William looked sulky. "I was weary of the service," he said.

Monks who complained of their lot never got any sympathy from Philip. "Weary?" he said, raising his voice a little. "What have you done today?"

William said defiantly: "Matins and lauds in the middle of the night, prime before breakfast, then terce, chapter mass, study, and now high mass."

"And have you eaten?"

"I had breakfast."

"And you expect to have dinner."

"Yes."

"Most people your age do backbreaking work in the fields from sunrise to sunset in order to get their breakfast and their dinner—and still they give some of their bread to you! Do you know why they do this?"

"Yes," said William, shuffling his feet and looking at the ground.

"Go on."

"They do it because they want the monks to sing the services for them."

"Correct. Hardworking peasants give you bread and meat and a stone-

built dormitory with a fire in winter—and you are so *weary* that you will not sit still through high mass for them!”

“I’m sorry, brother.”

Philip looked at William a moment longer. There was no great harm in him. The real fault lay with his superiors, who were lax enough to permit horseplay in the church. Philip said gently: “If services weary you, why did you become a monk?”

“I’m my father’s fifth son.”

Philip nodded. “And no doubt he gave the priory some land on condition we took you?”

“Yes—a farm.”

It was a common story: a man who had a superfluity of sons gave one to God, ensuring that God would not reject the gift by also giving a piece of property sufficient to support the son in monastic poverty. In that way many men who did not have a vocation became disobedient monks.

Philip said: “If you were moved—to a grange, say, or to my little cell of St-John-in-the-Forest, where there is a good deal of work to be done out-of-doors, and rather less time is spent at worship—do you think that might help you to take part in the services in a proper pious manner?”

William’s face lit up. “Yes, Brother, I think it would!”

“I thought so. I’ll see what can be done. But don’t become too excited—you may have to wait until we have a new prior, and ask him to transfer you.”

“Thank you, anyhow!”

The service ended, and the monks began to leave the church in procession. Philip put a finger to his lips to end the conversation. As the monks filed through the south transept, Philip and William joined the line, and went out into the cloisters, the arcaded quadrangle adjacent to the south side of the nave. There the procession broke up. Philip turned toward the kitchen, but his way was barred by the sacrist, who struck an aggressive pose in front of him, with his feet apart and his hands on his hips. “Brother Philip,” he said.

“Brother Andrew,” Philip said, thinking: What’s got into him?

“What do you mean by disrupting the service of high mass?”

Philip was flabbergasted. “Disrupting the service?” he said incredulously. “The lad was misbehaving. He—”

“I am quite capable of dealing with misbehavior in my own services!” said Andrew in a raised voice. The movement of dispersal among the monks was arrested, and they all stayed near to hear what was said.

Philip could not understand the fuss. Young monks and novices occasionally had to be disciplined by their more senior brothers during the services, and there was no rule to say that only the sacrist could do this. Philip said: “But you didn’t see what was happening—”

“Or perhaps I did see, but decided to deal with it later.”

Philip was quite sure he had not seen anything. “What did you see, then?” he challenged.

“Don’t you presume to question me!” Andrew shouted. His red face became purplish. “You may be prior of a little cell in the forest, but I have been sacrist here for twelve years, and I will conduct the cathedral services as I think fit—without assistance from outsiders half my age!”

Philip began to think that perhaps he really had done wrong—otherwise why was Andrew so furious? But more important, a quarrel in the cloisters was not an edifying spectacle for the other monks, and it must be brought to an end. Philip swallowed his pride, gritted his teeth, and bowed his head submissively. “I stand corrected, brother, and I humbly beg your pardon,” he said.

Andrew was wound up for a shouting match, and this early withdrawal by his opponent was not satisfying. “Don’t let it happen again, then,” he said ungraciously.

Philip made no reply. Andrew would have to have the last word, so any further remark by Philip would only draw another rejoinder. He stood looking at the floor and biting his tongue, while Andrew glared at him for several moments. At last the sacrist turned on his heel and walked away with his head held high.

The other monks were staring at Philip. It irked him to be humiliated by Andrew, but he had to take it, for a proud monk was a bad monk. Without speaking to anyone else he left the cloisters.

The monks’ domestic quarters were to the south of the cloister square, the dormitory on the southeast corner and the refectory on the southwest. Philip went out to the west, passing through the refectory and emerging once more at the public end of the priory close, within view of the guesthouse and the stables. Here in the southwest corner of the close was the kitchen courtyard, surrounded on three sides by the refectory, the kitchen itself, and the bakehouse and brewery. A cart piled high with turnips stood in the yard waiting to be unloaded. Philip climbed the steps to the kitchen door and went in.

The atmosphere struck him like a blow. The air was hot and heavy with the smell of cooking fish, and there was a raucous din of clattering pans and shouted orders. Three cooks, all red with heat and hurry, were preparing the dinner with the aid of six or seven young kitchen hands. There were two vast fireplaces, one at either end of the room, both blazing fiercely, and at each fireplace twenty or more fish were cooking on a spit turned by a perspiring boy. The smell of the fish made Philip’s mouth water. Whole carrots were being boiled in great iron pots of water which hung over the flames. Two young men stood at a chopping block, cutting yard-long loaves of white bread

into thick slices to be used as trenchers—edible plates. Overseeing the apparent chaos was one monk: Brother Milius, the kitchener, a man of about Philip's age. He sat on a high stool, watching the frenetic activity all about him with an unperturbed smile, as if everything were orderly and perfectly organized—which it probably was to his experienced eye. He smiled at Philip and said: "Thank you for the cheese."

"Ah, yes." Philip had forgotten about that, so much had happened since he arrived. "It's made of milk from the morning milking only—you'll find it tastes subtly different."

"My mouth is watering already. But you look glum. Is something wrong?"

"It's nothing. I had harsh words with Andrew." Philip made a deprecatory gesture, as if to wave Andrew away. "May I take a hot stone from your fire?"

"Of course."

There were always several stones in the kitchen fires, ready to be taken out and used for rapid heating of small amounts of water or soup. Philip explained: "Brother Paul, on the bridge, has a chilblain, and Remigius won't give him a fire." He picked up a pair of long-handled tongs and removed a hot stone from the hearth.

Milius opened a cupboard and took out a piece of old leather that had once been some kind of apron. "Here—wrap it in this."

"Thanks." Philip put the hot stone in the middle of the leather and picked up the corners gingerly.

"Be quick," Milius said. "Dinner's ready."

Philip left the kitchen with a wave. He crossed the kitchen courtyard and headed for the gate. To his left, just inside the west wall, was the mill. A channel had been dug, upstream of the priory, many years ago, to bring water from the river to the millpond. After driving the mill wheel the water ran by an underground channel to the brewery, the kitchen, the fountain in the cloisters where the monks washed their hands before meals, and finally the latrine next to the dormitory, after which it turned south and rejoined the river. One of the early priors had been an intelligent planner.

There was a pile of dirty straw outside the stable, Philip noted: the hands were following his orders and mucking out the stalls. He went out through the gate and walked through the village toward the bridge.

Was it presumptuous of me to reprove young William Beauvis? he asked himself as he passed among the shacks. He thought not, on reflection. In fact it would have been wrong to *ignore* such a disruption during the service.

He reached the bridge and put his head inside Paul's little shelter. "Warm your feet on this," he said, handing over the hot stone wrapped in leather. "When it cools a bit, take the leather off and put your feet directly on the stone. It should last until nightfall."

Brother Paul was pathetically grateful. He slipped off his sandals and put

his feet on the bundle immediately. “I can feel the pain easing already,” he said.

“If you put the stone back in the kitchen fire tonight it will be hot again by morning,” Philip said.

“Brother Milius won’t mind?” Paul said nervously.

“I guarantee it.”

“You’re very good to me, Brother Philip.”

“It’s nothing.” Philip left before Paul’s thanks became embarrassing. It was only a hot stone.

He returned to the priory. He went into the cloisters and washed his hands in the stone basin in the south walk, then entered the refectory. One of the monks was reading aloud at a lectern. Dinner was supposed to be taken in silence, apart from the reading, but the noise of forty-odd monks eating amounted to a constant undertone, and there was also a good deal of whispering despite the rule. Philip slipped into an empty place at one of the long tables. The monk next to him was eating with enormous relish. He caught Philip’s eye and murmured: “Fresh fish today.”

Philip nodded. He had seen it in the kitchen. His stomach rumbled.

The monk said: “We hear you have fresh fish every day at your cell in the forest.” There was envy in his voice.

Philip shook his head. “Every other day we have poultry,” he whispered.

The monk looked even more envious. “Salt fish here, six times a week.”

A servant placed a thick bread trencher in front of Philip, then put on it a fish fragrant with Brother Milius’s herbs. Philip’s mouth watered. He was about to attack the fish with his eating knife when a monk at the far end of the table stood up and pointed at him. It was the circuitor, the monk responsible for discipline. Philip thought: What now?

The circuitor broke the rule of silence, as was his right. “Brother Philip!”

The other monks stopped eating and the room went quiet.

Philip paused with his knife over the fish and looked up expectantly.

The circuitor said: “The rule is, no dinner for latecomers.”

Philip sighed. It seemed he could do nothing right today. He put away his knife, handed the trencher and the fish back to the servant, and bowed his head to listen to the reading.

During the rest period after dinner Philip went to the storeroom beneath the kitchen to talk to Cuthbert Whitehead, the cellarer. The storeroom was a big, dark cavern with short thick pillars and tiny windows. The air was dry and full of the scents of the stores: hops and honey, old apples and dried herbs, cheese and vinegar. Brother Cuthbert was usually to be found here, for his job did not leave him much time for services, which suited his inclination: he was

a clever, down-to-earth fellow with little interest in the spiritual life. The cellarer was the material counterpart of the sacrist: Cuthbert had to provide for all the monks' practical needs, gathering in the produce of the monastery's farms and granges and going to market to buy what the monks and their employees could not provide themselves. The job required careful forethought and calculation. Cuthbert did not do it alone: Milius the kitchener was responsible for the preparation of the meals, and there was a chamberlain who took care of the monks' clothing. These two worked under Cuthbert's orders, and there were three more officials who were nominally under his control but had a degree of independence: the guest-master; the infirmarer, who looked after old and sick monks in a separate building; and the almoner. Even with people working under him, Cuthbert had a formidable task; yet he kept it all in his head, saying it was a shame to waste parchment and ink. Philip suspected that Cuthbert had never learned to read and write very well. Cuthbert's hair had been white since he was young, hence the surname Whitehead, but he was now past sixty, and the only hair he had left grew in thick white tufts from his ears and nostrils, as if to compensate for his baldness. As Philip had been a cellarer himself at his first monastery, he understood Cuthbert's problems and sympathized with his grouches. Consequently Cuthbert was fond of Philip. Now, knowing that Philip had missed his dinner, Cuthbert picked out half a dozen pears from a barrel. They were somewhat shriveled, but tasty, and Philip ate them gratefully while Cuthbert grumbled about the monastery's finances.

"I can't understand how the priory can be in debt," Philip said through a mouthful of fruit.

"It shouldn't be," Cuthbert said. "It owns more land, and collects tithes from more parish churches, than ever before."

"So why aren't we rich?"

"You know the system we have here—the monastery's property is mostly divided up among the obedientaries. The sacrist has his lands, I have mine, and there are smaller endowments for the novice-master, the guest-master, the infirmarer and the almoner. The rest belongs to the prior. Each uses the income from his property to fulfill his obligations."

"What's wrong with that?"

"Well, all this property should be taken care of. For example, suppose we have some land, and we let it for a cash rent. We shouldn't just give it to the highest bidder and collect the money. We ought to take care to find a good tenant, and supervise him to make sure he farms well; otherwise the pastures become water-logged, the soil is exhausted, and the tenant is unable to pay the rent so he gives the land back to us in poor condition. Or take a grange, farmed by our employees and managed by monks: if nobody visits the grange except to take away its produce, the monks become slothful and depraved, the

employees steal the crops, and the grange produces less and less as the years go by. Even a church needs to be looked after. We shouldn't just take the tithes. We should put in a good priest who knows the Latin and leads a holy life. Otherwise the people descend into ungodliness, marrying and giving birth and dying without the blessing of the Church, and cheating on their tithes."

"The obedientaries should manage their property carefully," Philip said as he finished the last pear.

Cuthbert drew a cup of wine from a barrel. "They should, but they have other things on their minds. Anyway, what does the novice-master know about farming? Why should the infirmarer be a capable estate manager? Of course, a strong prior will force them to husband their resources, to some extent. But we've had a weak prior for thirteen years, and now we have no money to repair the cathedral church, and we eat salt fish six days a week, and the school is almost empty of novices, and no one comes to the guesthouse."

Philip sipped his wine in gloomy silence. He found it difficult to think coolly about such appalling dissipation of God's assets. He wanted to get hold of whoever was responsible and shake him until he saw sense. But in this case the person responsible was lying in a coffin behind the altar. There, at least, was a glimmer of hope. "Soon we'll have a new prior," Philip said. "He ought to put things right."

Cuthbert shot him a peculiar look. "Remigius? Put things right?"

Philip was not sure what Cuthbert meant. "Remigius isn't going to be the new prior, is he?"

"It's likely."

Philip was dismayed. "But he's no better than Prior James! Why would the brothers vote for him?"

"Well, they're suspicious of strangers, so they won't vote for anyone they don't know. That means it has to be one of us. And Remigius is the sub-prior, the most senior monk here."

"But there's no rule that says we have to choose the most senior monk," Philip protested. "It could be another one of the obedientaries. It could be you."

Cuthbert nodded. "I've already been asked. I refused."

"But why?"

"I'm getting old, Philip. The job I have now would defeat me, except that I'm so used to it I can do it automatically. Any more responsibility would be too much. I certainly haven't got the energy to take a slack monastery and reform it. In the end I'd be no better than Remigius."

Philip still could not believe it. "There are others—the sacrist, the circuitor, the novice-master…"

"The novice-master is old and more tired than I am. The guest-master is a

glutton and a drunkard. And the sacrist and the circuitor are pledged to vote for Remigius. Why? I don't know, but I'll guess. I'd say Remigius has promised to promote the sacrist to sub-prior and make the circuitor the sacrist, as a reward for their support."

Philip slumped back on the sacks of flour that formed his seat. "You're telling me that Remigius already has the election sewn up."

Cuthbert did not reply immediately. He stood up and went to the other side of the storeroom, where he had arranged in line a wooden bath full of live eels, a bucket of clean water, and a barrel one-third full of brine. "Help me with this," he said. He took out a knife. He selected an eel from the bath, banged its head on the stone floor, then gutted it with the knife. He handed the fish, still feebly wriggling, to Philip. "Wash it in the bucket, then drop it in the barrel," he said. "These will deaden our appetites during Lent."

Philip rinsed the half-dead eel as carefully as he could in the bucket, then tossed it into the salt water.

Cuthbert gutted another eel and said: "There is one other possibility: a candidate who would be a good reforming prior and whose rank, although below that of the sub-prior, is the same as that of the sacrist or the cellarer."

Philip plunged the eel into the bucket. "Who?"

"You."

"Me!" Philip was so surprised he dropped the eel on the floor. He did, technically, rank as an obedientary of the priory, but he never thought of himself as being equal to the sacrist and the others because they were all so much older than he. "I'm too young—"

"Think about it," Cuthbert said. "You've spent your whole life in monasteries. You were a cellarer at the age of twenty-one. You've been prior of a small place for four or five years—and you've reformed it. It's clear to everyone that the hand of God is on you."

Philip retrieved the escaped eel and dropped it into the barrel of brine. "The hand of God is on us all," he said noncommittally. He was somewhat stunned by Cuthbert's suggestion. He wanted an energetic new prior for Kingsbridge but he had not thought of himself for the job. "It's true that I'd make a better prior than Remigius," he said thoughtfully.

Cuthbert looked satisfied. "If you have a fault, Philip, it's your innocence."

Philip did not think of himself as innocent. "What do you mean?"

"You don't look for base motives in people. Most of us do. For example, the whole monastery already assumes that you're a candidate and that you've come here to solicit their votes."

Philip was indignant. "On what grounds do they say that?"

"Try to look at your own behavior the way a low suspicious mind would see it. You've arrived within days of the death of Prior James, as if you had

someone here primed to send you a secret message.”

“But how do they imagine I organized that?”

“They don’t know—but they believe you’re cleverer than they are.” Cuthbert resumed disemboweling eels. “And look how you’ve behaved today. You walked in and ordered the stables mucked out. Then you dealt with that horseplay during high mass. You talked of transferring young William Beauvis to another house, when everyone knows that transferring monks from one place to another is a prior’s privilege. You implicitly criticized Remigius by taking a hot stone out to Brother Paul on the bridge. And finally you brought a delicious cheese to the kitchen, and we all had a morsel after dinner—and although nobody *said* where it came from, not one of us could mistake the flavor of a cheese from St-John-in-the-Forest.”

Philip was embarrassed to think that his actions had been so misinterpreted. “Anybody might have done those things.”

“Any senior monk might have done *one* of them. Nobody else would have done them all. You walked in and took charge! You’ve already started reforming the place. And, of course, Remigius’s cronies are already fighting back. That’s why Andrew Sacrist berated you in the cloisters.”

“So that’s the explanation! I wondered what had got into him.” Philip rinsed an eel thoughtfully. “And I suppose that when the circuitor made me forgo my dinner, that was for the same reason.”

“Exactly. A way to humiliate you in front of the monks. I suspect that both moves backfired, by the way: neither reproof was justified, yet you accepted both gracefully. In fact you managed to look quite saintly.”

“I didn’t do it for effect.”

“Nor did the saints. There goes the bell for nones. You’d better leave the rest of the eels to me. After the service it’s study hour, and discussion is permitted in the cloisters. A lot of brothers will want to talk to you.”

“Not so fast!” Philip said anxiously. “Just because people assume I want to be prior doesn’t mean I’m going to stand for election.” He was daunted by the prospect of an electoral contest and not at all sure that he wanted to abandon his well-organized forest cell and take on the formidable problems of Kingsbridge Priory. “I need time to think,” he pleaded.

“I know.” Cuthbert drew himself upright and looked Philip in the eye. “When you’re thinking, please remember this: excessive pride is a familiar sin, but a man may just as easily frustrate the will of God through excessive humility.”

Philip nodded. “I’ll remember. Thank you.”

He left the storeroom and hurried to the cloisters. His mind was in a turmoil as he joined the other monks and filed into the church. He was violently excited at the prospect of becoming prior of Kings-bridge, he realized. He had been angry for years about the disgraceful way the priory

was run, and now he had a chance to set all those things right himself. Suddenly he was not sure he could. It was not just a question of seeing what ought to be done and ordering that it should be so. People had to be persuaded, property had to be managed, money had to be found. It was a job for a wise head. The responsibility would be heavy.

The church calmed him, as it always did. After this morning's misbehavior the monks were quiet and solemn. As he listened to the familiar phrases of the service, and murmured the responses as he had for so many years, he felt able to think clearly once again.

Do I want to be prior of Kingsbridge? he asked himself, and the answer came back immediately: Yes! To take charge of this crumbling church, to repair it and repaint it and fill it with the song of a hundred monks and the voices of a thousand worshipers saying the Our Father—for that alone he wanted the job. Then there was the monastery's property, to be reorganized and revitalized and made healthy and productive again. He wanted to see a crowd of small boys learning to read and write in a corner of the cloisters. He wanted the guesthouse full of light and warmth, so that barons and bishops would come to visit, and endow the priory with precious gifts before leaving. He wanted to have a special room set aside as a library, and fill it with books of wisdom and beauty. Yes, he wanted to be prior of Kingsbridge.

Are there any other reasons? he asked. When I picture myself as prior, making these improvements for the glory of God, is there any pride in my heart?

Oh, yes.

He could not deceive himself in the cold and holy atmosphere of the church. His aim was the glory of God, but the glory of Philip pleased him too. He liked the idea of giving orders which no one could countermand. He saw himself making decisions, dispensing justice, giving out advice and encouragement, issuing penances and pardons, just as he saw fit. He imagined people saying: "Philip of Gwynedd reformed that place. It was a disgrace until he took over, and just look at it now!"

But I *would* be good, he thought. God gave me the brains to manage property and the ability to lead groups of men. I've proved that, as cellarer in Gwynedd and as prior of St-John-in-the-Forest. And when I run a place the monks are happy. In my priory the old men don't get chilblains and the young men don't get frustrated for lack of work. I take care of people.

On the other hand, both Gwynedd and St-John-in-the-Forest were easy by comparison with Kingsbridge Priory. The Gwynedd place was always well run. The forest cell had been in trouble when he took it over, but it was tiny, and easy to control. The reform of Kingsbridge was the challege of a lifetime. It could take weeks just to find out what its resources were—how much land, and where, and what was on the land, whether forests or pastures or wheat

fields. To take control of the scattered properties, to find out what was wrong and put it right, and to knit the parts into a thriving whole would be the work of years. All Philip had done at the forest cell was to make a dozen or so young men work hard in the fields and pray solemnly in church.

All right, he admitted, my motives are tainted and my ability is in doubt. Perhaps I should refuse to stand. At least I could be sure to avoid the sin of pride. But what was it that Cuthbert had said? “A man may just as easily frustrate the will of God through excessive humility.”

What does God want? he asked himself finally. Does he want Remigius? Remigius’s abilities are less than mine and his motives are probably no more pure. Is there another candidate? Not at present. Until God reveals a third possibility we must assume that the choice is between me and Remigius. It’s clear that Remigius would run the monastery the way he ran it while Prior James was ill, which is to say that he would be idle and negligent and he would permit its decline to continue. And me? I’m full of pride and my talents are unproved—but I will *try* to reform the monastery, and if God gives me strength I shall succeed.

All right, then, he said to God as the service came to an end; all right. I’m going to accept nomination, and I’m going to fight with all the strength I have to win the election; and if you don’t want me, for some reason that you’ve chosen not to reveal to me, well, then, you’ll just have to stop me any way you can.

Although Philip had spent twenty-two years in monasteries, he had served under long-lived priors, so he had never known an election. It was a unique event in monastic life, for in casting their votes the brothers were not obliged to be obedient—suddenly they were all equal.

Once upon a time, if the legends were true, the monks had been equal in everything. A group of men would decide to turn their backs on the world of fleshly lust and build a sanctuary in the wilderness where they could live lives of worship and self-denial; and they would take over a patch of barren land, clearing the forest and draining the swamp, and they would till the soil and build their church together. In those days they really had been like brothers. The prior was, as his title implied, only the first among equals, and they swore obedience to the Rule of Saint Benedict, not to monastic officials. But all that was now left of that primitive democracy was the election of the prior and the abbot.

Some of the monks were uncomfortable with their power. They wanted to be told how to vote, or they suggested that the decision be referred to a committee of senior monks. Others abused the privilege and became insolent, or demanded favors in return for their support. Most were simply anxious to

make the right decision.

In the cloisters that afternoon, Philip spoke to most of them, singly or in little groups, and told them all candidly that he wanted the job and he felt he could do it better than Remigius despite his youth. He answered their questions, most of which were about rations of food and drink. He ended each conversation by saying: “If each of us makes the decision thoughtfully and prayerfully, God will surely bless the outcome.” It was the prudent thing to say and he also believed it.

“We’re winning,” said Milius the kitchener next morning, as Philip and he took their breakfast of horsebread and small beer while the kitchen hands were stoking the fires.

Philip bit off a hunk of the coarse dark bread and took a mouthful of beer to soften it. Milius was a sharp-witted, ebullient young man, a protégé of Cuthbert’s and an admirer of Philip. He had dark straight hair and a small face with neat, regular features. Like Cuthbert, he was happy to serve God in practical ways and miss most of the services. Philip was suspicious of his optimism. “How do you come to that conclusion?” he asked skeptically.

“All of Cuthbert’s side of the monstery support you—the chamberlain, the infirmarer, the novice-master, myself—because we know you’re a good provider, and provisions are the big problem under the present regime. Many of the ordinary monks will vote for you for a similar reason: they think you will manage the priory’s wealth better, and that will result in more comfort and better food.”

Philip frowned. “I wouldn’t like to mislead anyone. My first priority would be to repair the church and smarten up the services. That comes before food.”

“Quite so, and they know that,” Milius said a little hastily. “That’s why the guest-master and one or two others will still vote for Remigius—they prefer a slack regime and a quiet life. The others who support him are all cronies of his who anticipate special privileges when he’s in charge—the sacrist, the circuitor, the treasurer and so on. The cantor is a friend of the sacrist, but I think he could be won over to our side, especially if you promise to appoint a librarian.”

Philip nodded. The cantor was in charge of the music, and felt he should not have to take care of the books on top of his other duties. “It’s a good idea anyway,” Philip said. “We need a librarian to build up our collection of books.”

Milius got off his stool and began to sharpen a kitchen knife. He had too much energy and had to be doing something with his hands, Philip decided. “There are forty-four monks entitled to vote,” Milius said. There had been forty-five, of course, but one was dead. “My best estimate is that eighteen are with us and ten are with Remigius, leaving sixteen undecided. We need

twenty-three for a majority. That means you have to win over five waverers.”

“When you put it that way, it seems easy,” Philip said. “How long have we got?”

“Can’t tell. The brothers call the election, but if we do it too early the bishop may refuse to confirm our choice. And if we delay too long he can order us to call it. He also has the right to nominate a candidate. Right now he probably hasn’t even heard that the old prior is dead.”

“It could be a long time, then.”

“Yes. And as soon as we’re confident of a majority, you must go back to your cell, and stay away from here until it’s all over.”

Philip was puzzled by this proposal. “Why?”

“Familiarity breeds contempt.” Milius waved the sharpened knife enthusiastically. “Forgive me if I sound disrespectful, but you did ask. At the moment you’ve got an aura. You’re a remote, sanctified figure, especially to us younger monks. You worked a miracle at that little cell, reforming it and making it self-sufficient. You’re a tough disciplinarian but you feed your monks well. You’re a born leader but you can bow your head and accept rebuke like the youngest novice. You know the Scriptures and you make the best cheese in the country.”

“And *you* exaggerate.”

“Not much.”

“I can’t believe people think of me like that—it’s not natural.”

“Indeed it’s not,” Milius acknowledged with another little shrug. “And it won’t last once they get to know you. If you stayed here you’d lose that aura. They’d see you pick your teeth and scratch your arse, they’d hear you snore and fart, they’d find out what you’re like when you’re bad-tempered or your pride is hurt or your head aches. We don’t want them to do that. Let them watch Remigius blunder and bungle from day to day while your image remains shining and perfect in their minds.”

“I don’t like this,” Philip said in a troubled voice. “It has a deceitful feeling to it.”

“There’s nothing dishonest about it,” Milius protested. “It’s a true reflection of how well you would serve God and the monastery if you were prior—and how badly Remigius would rule.”

Philip shook his head. “I refuse to pretend to be an angel. All right, I won’t stay here—I have to go back to the forest anyway. But we must be straightforward with the brothers. We’re asking them to elect a fallible, imperfect man, who will need their help and their prayers.”

“Tell them that!” said Milius enthusiastically. “That’s perfect—they’ll love it.”

He was incorrigible, Philip thought. He changed the subject. “What’s your impression of the waverers—the brothers who haven’t yet made up their

minds?”

“They’re conservative,” Milius said without hesitation. “They see Remigius as the older man, the one who will make fewer changes, the predictable one, the man who is effectively in charge at the moment.”

Philip nodded agreement. “And they look at me warily, like a strange dog that may bite.”

The bell rang for chapter. Milius swallowed the last of his beer. “There’ll be some kind of attack on you now, Philip. I can’t forecast what form it will take, but they will be trying to portray you as youthful, inexperienced, headstrong and unreliable. You must appear calm, cautious and judicious, but leave it to me and Cuthbert to defend you.”

Philip began to feel apprehensive. This was a new way of thinking—to weigh his every move and calculate how others would interpret and judge it. A slightly disapproving tone crept into his voice as he said: “Normally, I only think about how God would view my behavior.”

“I know, I know,” Milius said impatiently. “But it’s not a sin to help simpler folk see your actions in the right light.”

Philip frowned. Milius was distressingly plausible.

They left the kitchen and walked through the refectory to the cloisters. Philip was highly anxious. Attack? What did that mean, an *attack?* Would they tell lies about him? How should he react? If people told lies about him he would be angry. Should he suppress his anger, in order to appear calm and conservative and all the rest? But if he did that, wouldn’t the brothers think the lies were true? He was going to be his normal self, he decided; perhaps just a *little* more grave and dignified.

The chapter house was a small round building attached to the east walk of the cloisters. It was furnished with benches arranged in concentric rings. There was no fire, and it was cold after the kitchen. The light came from tall windows set above eye level, so there was nothing to look at but the other monks around the room.

Philip did just that. Almost the whole monastery was present. They were all ages from seventeen to seventy; tall and short, dark and fair; all dressed in the coarse homespun robe of unbleached wool and shod in leather sandals. The guest-master was there, his round belly and red nose revealing his vices—vices that might be pardonable, Philip thought, if he ever had any guests. There was the chamberlain, who forced the monks to change their robes and shave at Christmas and Whitsun (a bath at the same time was recommended but not compulsory). Leaning against the far wall was the oldest brother, a slight, thoughtful, unflappable old man whose hair was still gray rather than white; a man who spoke rarely but effectively; a man who probably should have been prior if he had not been so self-effacing. There was Brother Simon, with his furtive look and restless hands, a man who confessed to sins of

impurity so often that (as Milius whispered to Philip) it seemed likely that he enjoyed the confession, not the sin. There was William Beauvis, behaving himself; Brother Paul, hardly limping at all; Cuthbert Whitehead looking self-possessed; John Small, the diminutive treasurer; and Pierre, the circuitor, the mean-mouthed man who had denied Philip his dinner yesterday. As Philip looked around he realized they were all looking at him, and he dropped his eyes, embarrassed.

Remigius came in with Andrew, the sacrist, and they sat by John Small and Pierre. So, Philip thought, they're not going to pretend to be anything other than a faction.

Chapter began with a reading about Simeon Stylites, the saint whose feast day it was. He was a hermit who had spent most of his life on top of a pillar, and while there could be no doubt about his capacity for self-denial, Philip had always harbored a secret doubt about the real value of his testimony. Crowds had flocked to see him, but had they come to be spiritually uplifted, or to look at a freak?

After the prayers came the reading of a chapter of Saint Benedict's book. It was from this reading of a daily chapter that the meeting, and the little building in which it took place, got their names. Remigius stood up to read, and as he paused with the book in front of him, Philip looked intently at his profile, seeing him for the first time through the eyes of a rival. Remigius had a brisk, efficient manner of moving and speaking which gave him an air of competence entirely at variance with his true character. Closer observation revealed clues to what was beneath the facade: his rather prominent blue eyes shifted about rapidly in an anxious way, his weak-looking mouth worked hesitantly two or three times before he spoke, and his hands clenched and opened repeatedly even though he was otherwise still. What authority he had came from arrogance, petulance and a dismissive way with subordinates.

Philip wondered why he had chosen to read the chapter himself. A moment later he understood. "'The first degree of humility is prompt obedience,'" Remigius read. He had chosen Chapter Five, which was about obedience, to remind everyone of his seniority and their subordination. It was a tactic of intimidation. Remigius was nothing if not sly. "'They live not as they themselves will, neither do they obey their own desires and pleasures; but following the command and direction of another and abiding in their monasteries, their desire is to be ruled by an abbot,'" he read. "'Without doubt such as these carry out the saying of our Lord, *I came not to do my own will, but the will of Him Who sent me*.'" Remigius was drawing the battle lines in the expected way: in this contest he was to represent established authority.

The chapter was followed by the necrology, and today of course all prayers were for the soul of Prior James. The liveliest part of chapter was kept to the end: discussion of business, confession of faults and accusations of

misconduct.

Remigius began by saying: “There was a disturbance during high mass yesterday.”

Philip felt almost relieved. Now he knew how he was going to be attacked. He was not sure that his action yesterday had been right, but he knew why he had done it and he was ready to defend himself.

Remigius went on: “I myself was not present—I was detained in the prior’s house, dealing with urgent business—but the sacrist has told me what occurred.”

He was interrupted by Cuthbert Whitehead. “Don’t reproach yourself on that account, Brother Remigius,” he said in a soothing voice. “We know that, in principle, monastery business should never take precedence over high mass, but we understand that the death of our beloved prior has meant that you have to deal with many matters which are outside your normal competence. I feel sure we all agree that no penance is necessary.”

The wily old fox, Philip thought. Of course, Remigius had had no intention of confessing a fault. Nevertheless, Cuthbert had pardoned him, thereby making everyone feel that a fault had indeed been admitted. Now, even if Philip were to be convicted of an error, it would do no more than put him on the same level as Remigius. In addition, Cuthbert had planted the suggestion that Remigius was having difficulty coping with the prior’s duties. Cuthbert had completely undermined Remigius’s authority with a few kindly-sounding words. Remigius looked furious. Philip felt the thrill of triumph tighten his throat.

Andrew Sacrist glared accusingly at Cuthbert. “I’m sure none of us would wish to criticize our revered sub-prior,” he said. “The disturbance referred to was caused by Brother Philip, who is visiting us from the cell of St-John-in-the-Forest. Philip took young William Beauvis out of his place in the quire, hauled him over to the south transept, and there reprimanded him while I was conducting the service.”

Remigius composed his face in a mask of sorrowful reproof. “We may all agree that Philip should have waited until the end of the service.”

Philip examined the expressions of the other monks. They seemed neither to agree nor disagree with what was being said. They were following the proceedings with the air of spectators at a tournament, in which there is no right or wrong and the only interest is in who will triumph.

Philip wanted to protest *If I had waited, the misbehavior would have gone on all through the service*, but he remembered Milius’s advice, and remained silent; and Milius spoke up for him. “I too missed high mass, as is frequently my misfortune, for high mass comes just before dinner; so perhaps you could tell me, Brother Andrew, what was happening in the quire before Brother Philip took this action. Was everything orderly and becoming?”

“There was some fidgeting among the youngsters,” the sacrist replied sulkily. “I intended to speak to them about it later.”

“It’s understandable that you should be vague about the details—your mind was on the service,” Milius said charitably. “Fortunately, we have a circuitor whose particular duty it is to attend to misbehavior among us. Tell us, Brother Pierre, what *you* observed.”

The circuitor looked hostile. “Just what the sacrist has already told you.”

Milius said: “It seems we’ll have to ask Brother Philip himself for the details.”

Milius had been very clever, Philip thought. He had established that neither the sacrist nor the circuitor had seen what the young monks were doing during the service. But although Philip admired Milius’s dialectical skill, he was reluctant to play the game. Choosing a prior was not a contest of wits, it was a matter of seeking to know the will of God. He hesitated. Milius was giving him a look that said *Now’s your chance!* But there was a stubborn streak in Philip, and it showed most clearly when someone tried to push him into a morally dubious position. He looked Milius in the eye and said: “It was as my brothers have described.”

Milius’s face fell. He stared incredulously at Philip. He opened his mouth, but visibly did not know what to say. Philip felt guilty about letting him down. I’ll explain myself to him afterward, he thought, unless he’s too angry.

Remigius was about to press on with the indictment when another voice said: “I would like to confess.”

Everyone looked. It was William Beauvis, the original offender, standing up and looking shamefaced. “I was flicking pellets of mud at the novice-master and laughing,” he said in a low, clear voice. “Brother Philip made me ashamed. I beg God’s forgiveness and ask the brothers to give me a penance.” He sat down abruptly.

Before Remigius could react, another youngster stood up and said: “I have a confession. I did the same. I ask for a penance.” He sat down again. This sudden access of guilty conscience was infectious: a third monk confessed, then a fourth, then a fifth.

The truth was out, despite Philip’s scruples, and he could not help feeling pleased. He saw that Milius was struggling to suppress a triumphant smile. The confession left no doubt that there had been a minor riot going on under the noses of the sacrist and the circuitor.

The culprits were sentenced, by a highly displeased Remigius, to a week of total silence: they were not to speak and no one was to speak to them. It was a harsher punishment than it sounded. Philip had suffered it when he was young. Even for one day the isolation was oppressive, and a whole week of it was utterly miserable.

But Remigius was merely giving vent to his anger at having been

outmaneuvered. Once they had confessed he had no option but to punish them, although in punishing them he was conceding that Philip had been right in the first place. His attack on Philip had gone badly wrong, and Philip was triumphant. Despite a guilty pang, he relished the moment.

But Remigius's humiliation was not yet complete.

Cuthbert spoke again. "There was another disturbance that we ought to discuss. It took place in the cloisters just after high mass." Philip wondered what on earth was coming next. "Brother Andrew confronted Brother Philip and accused him of misconduct." Of course he did, Philip was thinking; everyone knows that. Cuthbert went on: "Now, we all know that the time and place for such accusations is here and now, in chapter. And there are good reasons why our forebears ordained it so. Tempers cool overnight, and grievances can be discussed the next morning in an atmosphere of calm and moderation; and the whole community can bring its collective wisdom to bear on the problem. But, I regret to say, Andrew flouted this sensible rule, and made a scene in the cloisters, disturbing everyone and speaking intemperately. To let such misbehavior pass would be unfair on the younger brothers who have been punished for what they have done."

It was merciless, and it was brilliant, Philip thought happily. The question of whether Philip had been right to take William out of the quire during the service had never actually been discussed. Every attempt to raise it had been turned into an inquiry into the behavior of the accuser. And that was as it should be, for Andrew's complaint against Philip had been insincere. Between them Cuthbert and Milius had now discredited Remigius and his two main allies, Andrew and Pierre.

Andrew's normally red face was purple with fury, and Remigius looked almost frightened. Philip was pleased—they deserved it—but now he worried that their humiliation was in danger of going too far. "It's unseemly for junior brothers to discuss the punishment of their seniors," he said. "Let the sub-prior deal with this matter privately." Looking around, he saw that the monks approved of his magnanimity, and he realized that unintentionally he had scored yet another point.

It seemed to be all over. The mood of the meeting was with Philip, and he felt sure he had won over most of the waverers. Then Remigius said: "There is another matter I have to raise."

Philip studied the sub-prior's face. He looked desperate. Philip glanced at Andrew Sacrist and Pierre Circuitor and saw that they both looked surprised. This was something unplanned, then. Was Remigius going to plead for the job, perhaps?

"Most of you know that the bishop has a right to nominate candidates for our consideration," Remigius began. "He may also refuse to confirm our choice. This division of powers can lead to quarreling between bishop and

monastery, as some older brothers know from experience. In the end, the bishop cannot force us to accept his candidate, nor can we insist on ours; and where there is conflict, it has to be resolved by negotiation. In that case, the outcome depends a good deal on the determination and unity of the brothers —especially their *unity*."

Philip had a bad feeling about this. Remigius had suppressed his rage and was once again calm and haughty. Philip still did not know what was coming, but his triumphant feeling evaporated.

"The reason I mention all this today is that two important items of information have come to my notice," Remigius went on. "The first is that there may be more than one candidate nominated from among us here in this room." That didn't surprise anyone, Philip thought. "The second is that the bishop will also nominate a candidate."

There was a pregnant pause. This was bad news for both parties. Someone said: "Do you know *whom* the bishop wants?"

"Yes," Remigius said, and in that instant Philip felt sure the man was lying. "The bishop's choice is Brother Osbert of New-bury."

One or two of the monks gasped. They were all horrified. They knew Osbert, for he had been circuitor at Kingsbridge for a while. He was the bishop's illegitimate son, and he regarded the Church purely as a means whereby he could live a life of idleness and plenty. He had never made any serious attempt to abide by his vows, but kept up a semi-transparent sham and relied upon his paternity to keep him out of trouble. The prospect of having him as prior was appalling, even to Remigius's friends. Only the guest-master and one or two of his irredeemably depraved cronies might favor Osbert in anticipation of a regime of slack discipline and slovenly indulgence.

Remigius plowed on. "If we nominate two candidates, brothers, the bishop may say that we are divided and cannot make up our collective mind, so therefore he must decide for us, and we should accept his choice. If we want to resist Osbert, we would do well to put forward one candidate only; and, perhaps I should add, we should make sure that our candidate cannot easily be faulted, for example on grounds of youth or inexperience."

There was a murmur of assent. Philip was devastated. A moment ago he had been sure of victory, but it had been snatched from his grasp. Now all the monks were with Remigius, seeing him as the safe candidate, the unity candidate, the man to beat Osbert. Philip felt sure Remigius was lying about Osbert, but it would make no difference. The monks were scared now, and they would back Remigius; and that meant more years of decline for Kingsbridge Priory.

Before anyone could comment, Remigius said: "Let us now dismiss, and think and pray about this problem as we do God's work today." He stood up and went out, followed by Andrew, Pierre and John Small, these three looking

dazed but triumphant.

As soon as they had gone, a buzz of conversation broke out among the others. Milius said to Philip: “I never thought Remigius had it in him to pull a trick like that.”

“He’s lying,” Philip said bitterly. “I’m sure of it.”

Cuthbert joined them and heard Philip’s remark. “It doesn’t really matter if he’s lying, does it?” he said. “The threat is enough.”

“The truth will come out eventually,” Philip said.

“Not necessarily,” Milius replied. “Suppose the bishop doesn’t nominate Osbert. Remigius will just say the bishop yielded before the prospect of a battle with a united priory.”

“I’m not ready to give in,” Philip said stubbornly.

Milius said: “What else will we do?”

“We must find out the truth,” Philip said.

“We can’t,” said Milius.

Philip racked his brains. The frustration was agony. “Why can’t we just ask?” he said.

“Ask? What do you mean?”

“Ask the bishop what his intentions are.”

“How?”

“We could send a message to the bishop’s palace, couldn’t we?” Philip said, thinking aloud. He looked at Cuthbert.

Cuthbert was thoughtful. “Yes. I send messengers out all the time. I can send one to the palace.”

Milius said skeptically: “And ask the bishop what his intentions are?”

Philip frowned. That was the problem.

Cuthbert agreed with Milius. “The bishop won’t tell us,” he said.

Philip was struck by an inspiration. His brow cleared, and he punched his palm excitedly as he saw the solution. “No,” he said. “The bishop won’t tell us. But his archdeacon will.”

That night Philip dreamed about Jonathan, the abandoned baby. In his dream the child was in the porch of the chapel at St-John-in-the-Forest and Philip was inside, reading the service of prime, when a wolf came slinking out of the woods and crossed the field, smooth as a snake, heading for the baby. Philip was afraid to move for fear of causing a disturbance during the service and being reprimanded by Remigius and Andrew, both of whom were there (although in reality neither of them had ever been to the cell). He decided to shout, but although he tried, no sound would come, as often happened in dreams. At last he made such an effort to call out that he woke himself up, and lay in the dark trembling while he listened to the breathing of the sleeping

monks all around him and slowly convinced himself that the wolf was not real.

He had hardly thought of the baby since arriving at Kingsbridge. He wondered what he would do with the child if he were to become prior. Everything would be different then. A baby in a little monastery hidden in the forest was of no consequence, however unusual. The same baby at Kingsbridge Priory would cause a stir. On the other hand, what was wrong with that? It was not a sin to give people something to talk about. He would be prior, so he could do as he pleased. He could bring Johnny Eightpence to Kingsbridge to take care of the baby. The idea pleased him inordinately. That's just what I'll do, he thought. Then he remembered that in all probability he would not become prior.

He lay awake until dawn, in a fever of impatience. There was nothing he could do now to press his case. It was useless to talk to the monks, for their thinking was dominated by the threat of Osbert. A few of them had even approached Philip and told him they were sorry he had lost, as if the election had already been held. He had resisted the temptation to call them faithless cowards. He just smiled and told them they might yet be surprised. But his own faith was not strong. Archdeacon Waleran might not be at the bishop's palace; or he might be there but have some reason for not wanting to tell Philip the bishop's plans; or—most likely of all, given the archdeacon's character—he might have plans of his own.

Philip got up at dawn with the other monks and went into the church for prime, the first service of the day. Afterward he headed for the refectory, intending to take his breakfast with the others, but Milius intercepted him and beckoned him, with a furtive gesture, to the kitchen. Philip followed him, his nerves wound taut. The messenger must be back: that was quick. He must have got his reply immediately and started back yesterday afternoon. Even so he had been fast. Philip did not know a horse in the priory stable that was capable of doing the journey so rapidly. But what would the answer be?

It was not the messenger who was waiting in the kitchen—it was the archdeacon himself, Waleran Bigod.

Philip stared at him in surprise. The thin, black-draped form of the archdeacon was perched on a stool like a crow on a tree stump. The end of his beaky nose was red with cold. He was warming his bony white hands around a cup of hot spiced wine.

"It's good of you to come!" Philip blurted out.

"I'm glad you wrote to me," Waleran said coolly.

"Is it true?" Philip asked impatiently. "Will the bishop nominate Osbert?"

Waleran held up a hand to stop him. "I'll get to that. Cuthbert here is just telling me of yesterday's events."

Philip concealed his disappointment. This was not a straightforward

answer. He studied Waleran's face, trying to read his mind. Waleran did indeed have plans of his own, but Philip could not guess what they were.

Cuthbert—whom Philip had not at first noticed, sitting by the fire dipping his horsebread into his beer to soften it for his elderly teeth—resumed an account of yesterday's chapter. Philip fidgeted restlessly, trying to guess what Waleran might be up to. He tried a morsel of bread but found he was too tense to swallow. He drank some of the watery beer, just to have something to do with his hands.

"And so," Cuthbert said at last, "it seemed that our only chance was to try to verify the bishop's intentions; and fortunately Philip felt able to presume upon his acquaintanceship with yourself; so we sent you the message."

Philip said impatiently: "And now will you tell us what we want to know?"

"Yes, I'll tell you." Waleran put down his wine untasted. "The bishop would like his son to be prior of Kingsbridge."

Philip's heart sank. "So Remigius told the truth."

Waleran went on: "However, the bishop is not willing to risk a quarrel with the monks."

Philip frowned. This was more or less what Remigius had forecast—but something was not quite right. Philip said to Waleran: "You didn't come all this way just to tell us that."

Waleran shot a look of respect at Philip, and Philip knew he had guessed right. "No," Waleran said. "The bishop has asked me to test the mood of the monastery. And he has empowered me to make a nomination on his behalf. Indeed, I have with me the bishop's seal, so that I can write a letter of nomination, to make the matter formal and binding. I have his full authority, you see."

Philip took a moment to digest that. Waleran was empowered to make a nomination and seal it with the bishop's seal. That meant the bishop had put the whole matter in Waleran's hands. He now spoke with the bishop's authority.

Philip took a deep breath and said: "Do you accept what Cuthbert has told you—that if Osbert were to be nominated, it would cause the quarrel the bishop wants to avoid?"

"Yes, I understand that," said Waleran.

"Then you won't nominate Osbert."

"No."

Philip felt wound up tight enough to snap. The monks would be so glad to escape the threat of Osbert that they would gratefully vote for whoever Waleran might nominate.

Waleran now had the power to choose the new prior.

Philip said: "Then whom will you nominate?"

Waleran said: “You…or Remigius.”

“Remigius’s ability to run the priory—”

“I know his abilities, and yours,” Waleran interrupted, once again holding up a thin white hand to stop Philip. “I know which of you would make the best prior.” He paused. “But there is another matter.”

What now? wondered Philip. What else was there to consider, other than who would make the best prior? He looked at the others. Milius was also mystified, but old Cuthbert had a slight smile, as if he knew what was coming.

Waleran said: “Like you, I’m anxious that important posts in the Church should go to energetic and capable men, regardless of age, rather than being handed out as rewards for long service to senior men whose holiness may be greater than their administrative ability.”

“Of course,” Philip said impatiently. He did not see the relevance of this lecture.

“We should work together to this end—you three, and me.”

Milius said: “I don’t know what you’re getting at.”

“I do,” said Cuthbert.

Waleran gave Cuthbert a thin smile, then returned his attention to Philip. “Let me be plain,” he said. “The bishop himself is old. One day he will die, and then we will need a new bishop, just as today we need a new prior. The monks of Kingsbridge have the right to elect the new bishop, for the bishop of Kingsbridge is also the abbot of the priory.”

Philip frowned. All this was irrelevant. They were electing a prior, not a bishop.

But Waleran went on. “Of course, the monks will not be completely free to choose whom they like to be bishop, for the archbishop and the king will have their views; but in the end it is the monks who legitimize the appointment. And when that time comes, you three will have a powerful influence on the decision.”

Cuthbert was nodding as if his guess had turned out to be right, and now Philip, too, had an inkling of what was coming.

Waleran finished: “You want me to make you prior of Kingsbridge. I want you to make me bishop.”

So that was it!

Philip stared in silence at Waleran. It was very simple. The archdeacon wanted to make a deal.

Philip was shocked. It was not quite the same as buying and selling a clerical office, which was known as the sin of simony; but it had an unpleasantly commercial feeling about it.

He tried to think objectively about the proposal. It would mean that Philip would become prior. His heart beat faster at the thought. He was reluctant to

quibble with anything that would give him the priory.

It would mean that Waleran would probably become bishop at some point. Would he be a good bishop? He would certainly be competent. He appeared to have no serious vices. He had a rather worldly, practical approach to the service of God, but then so did Philip. Philip sensed that Waleran had a ruthless edge that he himself lacked, but he also sensed that it was based on a genuine determination to protect and nurture the interests of the Church.

Who else might be a candidate, when the bishop eventually died? Probably Osbert. It was not unknown for religious offices to be passed from father to son, despite the official requirement of clerical celibacy. Osbert, of course, would be even more of a liability to the Church as bishop than he would be as prior. It would be worth supporting a much worse candidate than Waleran just to keep Osbert out.

Would anyone else be in the running? It was impossible to guess. It might be years yet before the bishop died.

Cuthbert said to Waleran: “We couldn’t guarantee to get you elected.”

“I know,” said Waleran. “I’m asking only for your nomination. Appropriately, that’s exactly what I have to offer you in return—a nomination.”

Cuthbert nodded. “I’ll agree to that,” he said solemnly.

“So will I,” said Milius.

The archdeacon and the two monks looked at Philip. He hesitated, torn. This was not the way to choose a bishop, he knew; but the priory was within his grasp. It could not be right to barter one holy office for another, like horse traders—but if he refused, the result might be that Remigius became prior and Osbert became bishop!

However, the rational arguments now seemed academic. The desire to be prior was like an irresistible force within him, and he could not refuse, regardless of the pros and cons. He recalled the prayer he had sent up yesterday, telling God that he intended to fight for the job. He raised his eyes now, and sent up another: *If you don’t want this to happen, then still my tongue, and paralyze my mouth, and stop my breath in my throat, and prevent me from speaking*.

Then he looked at Waleran and said: “I accept.”

The prior’s bed was huge, three times the width of any bed Philip had ever slept in. The wooden base stood half the height of a man, and there was a feather mattress on top of that. It had curtains all around to keep out drafts, and on the curtains biblical scenes had been embroidered by the patient hands of a pious woman. Philip examined it with some misgivings. It seemed to him enough of an extravagance that the prior should have a bedroom all to himself

—Philip had never in his life had his own bedroom, and tonight would be the first time he had ever slept alone. The bed was too much. He considered having a straw mattress brought over from the dormitory, and moving the bed into the infirmary, where it would ease an ailing monk's old bones. But of course the bed was not just for Philip. When the priory had an especially distinguished guest, a bishop or a great lord or even a king, then the guest would have this bedroom and the prior would shift as best he could somewhere else. So Philip could not really get rid of it.

"You'll sleep soundly tonight," said Waleran Bigod, not without a hint of envy.

"I suppose I shall," Philip said dubiously.

Everything had happened very quickly. Waleran had written a letter to the priory, right there in the kitchen, ordering the monks to hold an immediate election and nominating Philip. He had signed the letter with the bishop's name and sealed it with the bishop's seal. Then the four of them had gone into chapter.

As soon as Remigius saw them enter he knew the battle was over. Waleran read the letter, and the monks cheered when he got to Philip's name. Remigius had the wit to dispense with the formality of the vote and concede defeat.

And Philip was prior.

He had conducted the rest of chapter in something of a daze, and then had walked across the lawns to the prior's house, in the southeast corner of the priory close, to take up residence.

When he saw the bed he realized that his life had changed utterly and irrevocably. He was different, special, set apart from other monks. He had power and privilege. And he had responsibility. He alone had to make sure that this little community of forty-five men survived and prospered. If they starved, it would be his fault; if they became depraved, he would be to blame; if they disgraced God's Church, God would hold Philip responsible. He had sought this burden, he reminded himself; now he must bear it.

His first duty as prior would be to lead the monks into church for high mass. Today was Epiphany, the twelfth day of Christmas, and a holiday. All the villagers would be at the service, and more people would come from the surrounding district. A good cathedral with a strong body of monks and a reputation for spectacular services could attract a thousand people or more. Even dreary Kingsbridge would draw most of the local gentry, for the service was a social occasion too, when they could meet their neighbors and talk business.

But before the service Philip had something else to discuss with Waleran, now that they were alone at last. "That information I passed you," he began. "About the earl of Shiring…"

Waleran nodded. “I haven’t forgotten—indeed, that could be more important than the question of who is prior or bishop. Earl Bartholomew has arrived in England already. They expect him at Shiring tomorrow.”

“What are you going to do?” Philip said anxiously.

“I’m going to make use of Sir Percy Hamleigh. In fact, I’m hoping he’ll be in the congregation today.”

“I’ve heard of him, but I’ve never seen him,” Philip said.

“Look for a fat lord with a hideous wife and a handsome son. You can’t miss the wife—she’s an eyesore.”

“What makes you think they will take King Stephen’s side against Earl Bartholomew?”

“They hate the earl passionately.”

“Why?”

“The son, William, was engaged to marry the earl’s daughter, but she took against him, and the marriage was called off, much to the humiliation of the Hamleighs. They’re still smarting from the insult, and they’ll jump at any chance to strike back at Bartholomew.”

Philip nodded, satisfied. He was glad to have shed that responsibility: he had a full quota. Kingsbridge Priory was a big enough problem for him to manage. Waleran could take care of the world outside.

They left the prior’s house and walked back to the cloisters. The monks were waiting. Philip took his place at the head of the line and the procession moved off.

It was a good moment when he walked into the church with the monks singing behind him. He liked it more than he had anticipated. He told himself that his new eminence symbolized the power he now had to do good, and that was why he was so profoundly thrilled. He wished Abbot Peter from Gwynedd could see him—the old man would be so proud.

He led the monks into the quire stalls. A major service such as this one was often taken by the bishop. Today it would be led by the bishop’s deputy, Archdeacon Waleran. As Waleran began, Philip scanned the congregation, looking for the family Waleran had described. There were about a hundred and fifty people standing in the nave, the wealthy in their heavy winter cloaks and leather shoes, the peasants in their rough jackets and felt boots or wooden clogs. Philip had no trouble picking out the Hamleighs. They were near the front, close to the altar. He saw the woman first. Waleran had not exaggerated—she was repulsive. She wore a hood, but most of her face was visible, and he could see that her skin was covered with unsightly boils which she touched nervously all the time. Beside her was a heavy man of about forty years: that would be Percy. His clothes showed him to be a man of considerable wealth and power, but not in the top rank of barons and earls. The son was leaning against one of the massive columns of the nave. He was a fine figure of a

man, with very yellow hair and narrow, haughty eyes. A marriage with an earl's family would have enabled the Hamleighs to cross the line that divided county gentry from the nobility of the kingdom. It was no wonder they were angry about the cancellation of the wedding.

Philip returned his mind to the service. Waleran was going through it a little too fast for Philip's taste. He wondered again whether he had been right to agree to nominate Waleran as bishop when the present bishop should die. Waleran was a dedicated man, but he appeared to undervalue the importance of worship. The prosperity and power of the Church were only means to an end, after all: the ultimate object was the salvation of souls. Philip decided that he must not worry about Waleran too much. The thing was done, now; and anyway, the bishop would probably frustrate Waleran's ambition by living another twenty years.

The congregation was noisy. None of them knew the responses, of course; only priests and monks were expected to take part, except in the most familiar prayers and the amens. Some of the congregation watched in reverent silence, but others wandered around, greeting one another and chatting. They're simple people, Philip thought; you have to *do* something to keep their attention.

The service drew to a close, and Archdeacon Waleran addressed them. "Most of you know that the beloved prior of Kingsbridge has died. His body, which lies here with us in church, will be laid to rest in the priory graveyard today after dinner. The bishop and the monks have chosen as his successor Brother Philip of Gwynedd, who led us into church this morning."

He stopped, and Philip stood up to lead the procession out. Then Waleran said: "I have another sad announcement."

Philip was taken by surprise. He sat down promptly.

"I have just received a message," Waleran said.

He had received no messages, Philip knew. They had been together all morning. What was the sly archdeacon up to now?

"The message tells me of a loss which will grieve us all deeply." He paused again.

Someone was dead—but who? Waleran had known about it before he arrived, but he had kept it a secret, and he was going to pretend that he had only just heard the news. Why?

Philip could think of only one possibility—and if Philip's suspicion were right, Waleran was much more ambitious and unscrupulous than Philip had imagined. Had he really deceived and manipulated them all? Had Philip been a mere pawn in Waleran's game?

Waleran's final words confirmed that he had. "Dearly beloved," he said solemnly, "the bishop of Kingsbridge is dead."

Chapter 3

"THAT BITCH WILL BE THERE," said William's mother. "I'm sure she will."

William looked at the looming facade of Kingsbridge Cathedral with mingled dread and longing. If the Lady Aliena were to be at the Epiphany service it would be painfully embarrassing for them all, but nevertheless his heart quickened at the thought of seeing her again.

They were trotting along the road to Kingsbridge, William and his father on war-horses and his mother on a fine courser, with three knights and three grooms following. They made an impressive and even fearsome party, which pleased William; and the peasants walking on the road scattered before their powerful horses; but Mother was seething.

"They all know, even these wretched serfs," she said through her teeth. "They even tell jokes about us. 'When is a bride not a bride? When the groom is Will Hamleigh!' I had a man flogged for that but it did no good. I'd like to get hold of that bitch, I'd flay her alive, and hang her skin on a nail, and let the birds peck her flesh."

William wished she would not go on about it. The family had been humiliated, and it had been William's fault—or so Mother said—and he did not want to be reminded of it.

They clattered over the rickety wooden bridge that led to Kingsbridge village and urged their horses up the sloping main street to the priory. There were already twenty or thirty horses cropping the sparse grass of the graveyard on the north side of the church, but none as fine as those of the Hamleighs. They rode up to the stable and left their mounts with the priory grooms.

They crossed the green in formation, William and his father on either side of Mother, then the knights behind them, and the grooms bringing up the rear. People stood aside for them, but William could see them nudging one another and pointing, and he felt sure they were whispering about the canceled wedding. He risked a glance at Mother, and he could tell by the thunderous

look on her face that she thought the same.

They went into the church.

William hated churches. They were cold and dim even in fine weather, and there was always that faintly corrupt smell lingering in the dark corners and the low tunnels of the aisles. Worst of all, churches made him think of the torments of hell, and he was frightened of hell.

He raked the congregation with his eyes. At first he could hardly distinguish people's faces because of the gloom. After a few moments his eyes adjusted. He could not see Aliena. They progressed up the aisle. She did not seem to be here. He felt both relieved and let down. Then he saw her, and his heart missed a beat.

She was on the south side of the nave near the front, escorted by a knight William did not know, surrounded by men-at-arms and ladies-in-waiting. She had her back to him, but her mass of dark curly hair was unmistakable. As he spotted her she turned, showing a soft curved cheek and a straight, imperious nose. Her eyes, so dark they were almost black, met William's. He stopped breathing. Those dark eyes, already large, widened when she saw him. He wanted to look past her carelessly, as if he had not seen her, but he could not tear his gaze away. He wanted her to smile at him, even if it was only the merest curving of her full lips, no more than a polite acknowledgment. He inclined his head to her, only slightly—it was more of a nod than a bow. Her face set in stiff lines, and she turned away to face the front.

William winced as if he was in pain. He felt like a dog that had been kicked out of the way, and he wanted to curl up in a corner where no one would notice him. He glanced to either side, wondering whether anyone had seen the exchange of looks. As he walked farther up the aisle with his parents, he realized that people were looking from him to Aliena and back again, nudging one another and whispering. He stared straight ahead to avoid meeting anybody's eyes. He had to force himself to hold his head high. How has she done this to us? he thought. We're one of the proudest families in southern England, and she's made us feel small. The thought infuriated him, and he longed to draw his sword and attack someone, anyone.

The sheriff of Shiring greeted William's father and they shook hands. People looked away, searching for something new to murmur about. William was still seething. Young noblemen approached Aliena and bowed to her in a constant stream. She was willing to smile at *them*.

The service began. William wondered how everything had gone so badly wrong. Earl Bartholomew had a son to inherit his title and his fortune, so the only use he had for a daughter was to form an alliance. Aliena was sixteen years old and a virgin, and showed no inclination to become a nun, so it was assumed she would be delighted to marry a healthy nineteen-year-old nobleman. After all, political considerations might just as easily have led her

father to marry her to a fat gouty forty-year-old earl or even a balding baron of sixty.

Once the deal had been agreed, William and his parents had not been reticent about it. They had proudly broadcast the news all over the surrounding counties. The meeting between William and Aliena had been considered a formality by everyone—except Aliena, as it turned out.

They were not strangers, of course. He remembered her as a little girl. She had had an impish face with a snub nose then, and her unruly hair had been kept short. She had been bossy, headstrong, pugnacious, and daring. She always organized the children's games, deciding what they should play, and who should be on which team, adjudicating disputes and keeping score. He had been fascinated by her while at the same time resenting the way she dominated the children's play. It had always been possible to spoil her games, and make himself the center of attention for a while, simply by starting a fight; but that did not last long, and in the end she would resume control, leaving him feeling baffled, defeated, spurned, angry, and yet enchanted—just as he felt now.

After her mother died she had traveled with her father a lot and William had seen less of her. However, he met her often enough to know that she was growing into a ravishingly beautiful young woman, and he had been delighted when he was told she was to be his bride. He assumed she had to marry him whether she liked him or not, but he went along to meet her intending to do all he could to smooth the path to the altar.

She might be a virgin but he was not. Some of the girls he had charmed were almost as pretty as Aliena, almost, although none of them was as high-born. In his experience a lot of girls were impressed by his fine clothes, his spirited horses, and the casual way he had of spending money on sweet wine and ribbons; and if he could get them alone in a barn they generally submitted to him, more or less willingly, in the end.

His usual approach to girls was a little offhand. At first he would let them think he was not particularly interested in them. But when he found himself alone with Aliena his diffidence deserted him. She was wearing a bright blue silk gown, loose and flowing, but all he could think about was the body underneath it, which he would soon be able to see naked whenever he liked. He had found her reading a book, which was a peculiar occupation for a woman who was not a nun. He had asked her what it was, in an attempt to take his mind off the way her breasts moved under the blue silk.

"It's called 'The Romance of Alexander.' It's the story of a king called Alexander the Great, and how he conquered wonderful lands in the east where precious stones grow on grapevines and plants can talk."

William could not imagine why a person would want to waste time on such foolishness, but he had not said so. He had told her about his horses, his

dogs, and his achievements in hunting, wrestling and jousting. She had not been as impressed as he had hoped. He had told her about the house his father was building for them, and, to help her prepare for the time when she would be running his household, he gave her an outline of the way he wanted things done. He had felt he was losing her attention, though he could not say why. He sat as close to her as possible, for he wanted to get her in a clinch, and feel her up, and find out whether those tits were as big as he fancied they were; but she leaned away from him, folding her arms and crossing her legs, looking so forbidding that he was reluctantly forced to abandon the idea, and console himself with the thought that soon he would be able to do anything he liked to her.

However, while he was with her she gave no indication of the fuss she was going to make later. She had said, rather quietly, “I don’t think we’re well suited,” but he had taken this for a piece of charming modesty on her part, and had assured her that she would suit him very well. He had no idea that as soon as he was off the premises she would storm in to her father and announce that she would not marry him, nothing would persuade her, she would rather go into a convent, and they could drag her to the altar in chains but she would not speak the vows. The bitch, William thought; the bitch. But he could not summon the kind of venom that Mother spat when she spoke of Aliena. He did not want to flay Aliena alive. He wanted to lie on top of her hot body and kiss her mouth.

The Epiphany service ended with the announcement of the death of the bishop. William hoped this news would at last overshadow the sensation of the canceled marriage. The monks left in procession, and there was a buzz of excited conversation as the congregation headed for the exits. Many of them had material as well as spiritual ties to the bishop—as his tenants, or subtenants, or as employees on his lands—and everyone was interested in the question of who would succeed him, and whether the successor would make any changes. The death of a great lord was always perilous for those ruled by him.

As William followed his parents down the nave he was surprised to see Archdeacon Waleran coming toward them. He moved briskly through the congregation, like a big black dog in a field of cows; and like cows the people looked nervously over their shoulders at him and moved a step or two out of his way. He ignored the peasants, but spoke a few words to each of the gentry. When he reached the Hamleighs he greeted William’s father, ignored William, and turned his attention on Mother. “Such a shame about the marriage,” he said.

William flushed. Did the fool think he was being *polite* with his commiserations?

Mother was no more keen to talk about it than William was. “I’m not one

to bear a grudge," she lied.

Waleran ignored that. "I've heard something about Earl Bartholomew that may interest you," he said. His voice went quieter, so that he could not be overheard, and William had to strain to catch his words. "It seems the earl will not renege on his vows to the dead king."

Father said: "Bartholomew always was a stiff-necked hypocrite."

Waleran looked pained. He wanted them to listen, not comment. "Bartholomew and Earl Robert of Gloucester will not accept King Stephen, who is the choice of the Church and the barons, as you know."

William wondered why an archdeacon was telling a lord about this routine baronial squabble. Father was thinking the same thought, for he said: "But there's nothing the earls can do about it."

Mother shared Waleran's impatience with Father's interjected comments. "*Listen*," she hissed at him.

Waleran said: "What I hear is that they're planning to mount a rebellion and make Maud queen."

William could not believe his ears. Had the archdeacon really made that foolhardy statement, in his quiet, matter-of-fact murmur, right here in the nave of Kingsbridge Cathedral? A man could be hanged for it, true or false.

Father was startled, too, but Mother said thoughtfully: "Robert of Gloucester is the half brother of Maud…. It makes sense."

William wondered how she could be so down-to-earth about such a scandalous piece of news. But she was very clever, and she was almost always right about everything.

Waleran said: "Anyone who could get rid of Earl Bartholomew, and stop the rebellion before it gets started, would earn the eternal gratitude of King Stephen and the Holy Mother Church."

"Indeed?" said Father in a dazed tone, but Mother was nodding wisely.

"Bartholomew is expected back at home tomorrow." Waleran looked up as he said this, and caught someone's eye. He looked back at Mother and said: "I thought you, of all people, would be interested." Then he moved away and greeted someone else.

William stared after him. Was that really all he was going to say?

William's parents moved on, and he followed them through the great arched doorway into the open air. All three of them were silent. William had heard a good deal of talk, over the past five weeks, about who would be king, but the matter had seemed to be settled when Stephen was crowned at Westminster Abbey three days before Christmas. Now, if Waleran was right, the matter was an open question once again. But why had Waleran made a point of telling the Hamleighs?

They started across the green to the stables. As soon as they got clear of the crowd outside the church porch, and could no longer be overheard, Father

said excitedly: “What a piece of good fortune—the very man who insulted the family, caught out in high treason!”

William did not see why that was such good fortune, but Mother obviously did, for she nodded agreement.

Father went on: “We can arrest him at the point of a sword, and hang him from the nearest tree.”

William had not thought of that, but now he saw it in a flash. If Bartholomew was a traitor, it was all right to kill him. “We can take our revenge,” William burst out. “And instead of being punished for it we’ll get a reward from the king!” They would be able to hold their heads high again, and—

“You stupid fools,” Mother said with sudden viciousness. “You blind, brainless idiots. So you would hang Bartholomew from the nearest tree. Shall I tell you what would happen then?”

Neither of them said anything. It was wiser not to respond to her questions when she was in this frame of mind.

She said: “Robert of Gloucester would deny there had been any plot, and he would embrace King Stephen and swear loyalty; and there would be the end of it, except that you two would be hanged as murderers.”

William shuddered. The idea of being hanged terrified him. He had nightmares about it. However, he could see that Mother was right: the king might believe, or pretend to believe, that no one could have the temerity to rebel against him; and he would think nothing of sacrificing a couple of lives for credibility.

Father said: “You’re right. We’ll truss him up like a pig for the slaughter, and carry him alive to the king at Winchester, and denounce him there, and claim our reward.”

“Why don’t you *think?*” said Mother contemptuously. She was very tense, and William could see that she was as excited about all this as Father was, but in a different way. “Wouldn’t Archdeacon Waleran like to take a traitor trussed to the king?” she said. “Doesn’t he want a reward for himself—don’t you know that he lusts with all his heart to be bishop of Kingsbridge? Why has he given you the privilege of making the arrest? Why did he contrive to meet us in church, as if by accident, instead of coming to see us at Hamleigh? Why was our conversation so short and indirect?”

She paused rhetorically, as if for an answer, but both William and Father knew that she did not really want one. William recalled that priests were not supposed to see bloodshed, and considered the possibility that perhaps that might be why Waleran did not want to be involved in arresting Bartholomew; but on further reflection he realized that Waleran had no such scruples.

“I’ll tell you why,” Mother went on. “Because he’s not sure that Bartholomew is a traitor. His information is unreliable. I can’t guess where he

got it—perhaps he overheard a drunken conversation, or intercepted an ambiguous message, or spoke with an untrustworthy spy. In any case he's not willing to stick his neck out. He won't accuse Earl Bartholomew of treason openly, in case the charge should turn out to be false, and Waleran himself be branded a slanderer. He wants someone else to take the risk, and do the dirty work for him; and then when it is over, if treason should be proved, he will step forward and take his share of the credit; but if Bartholomew should turn out to be innocent, Waleran will simply never admit that he said what he said to us today."

It seemed obvious when she put it like that. But without her, William and his father would have fallen right into Waleran's trap. They would have willingly acted as Waleran's agents and taken the risks for him. Mother's political judgment was acute.

Father said: "Do you mean we must just forget about this?"

"Certainly not." Her eyes glittered. "It's still a chance to destroy the people who have humiliated us." A groom held her horse ready. She took the reins and waved him away, but she did not mount immediately. She stood beside the horse, patting its neck reflectively, and spoke in a low voice. "We need evidence of the conspiracy, so that no one will be able to deny it after we've made our accusation. We'll have to get that evidence by stealth, without revealing what we're looking for. Then, when we have it, we can arrest Earl Bartholomew and take him to the king. Confronted with proof, Bartholomew will confess, and beg for mercy. Then we ask for our reward."

"And deny that Waleran helped us," added Father.

Mother shook her head. "Let him have his share of the glory, and his reward. Then he will be indebted to us. That can't do us anything but good."

"But how shall we go about finding evidence of the plot?" said Father anxiously.

"We'll have to find a way to look around Bartholomew's castle," Mother said with a frown. "It won't be easy. Nobody would credit us making a social call—everyone knows we hate Bartholomew."

William was struck by a thought. "I could go," he said.

His parents were both a little startled. Mother said: "You'd arouse less suspicion than your father, I suppose. But what pretext would you have?"

William had thought of that. "I could go to see Aliena," he said, and his pulse raced at the idea. "I could beg her to reconsider her decision. After all, she doesn't really know me. She misjudged me when we met. I could make her a good husband. Perhaps she just needs to be wooed a little harder." He gave what he hoped was a cynical smile, so that they would not know that he meant every word.

"A perfectly credible excuse," said Mother. She looked hard at William. "By Christ, I wonder whether the boy might have some of his mother's brains

after all.”

William felt optimistic, for the first time in months, when he set out for Earlscastle on the day after Epiphany. It was a clear, cold morning. The north wind stung his ears and the frosted grass crunched under the hooves of his war-horse. He wore a gray cloak of fine Flanders cloth trimmed with rabbit fur over a scarlet tunic.

He was accompanied by Walter, his groom. When William was twelve years old Walter had become his tutor in arms, and had taught him to ride, hunt, fence and wrestle. Now Walter was his groom, companion and bodyguard. He was as tall as William but broader, a formidable barrel of a man. Nine or ten years older than William, he was young enough to go drinking and chasing girls but old enough to keep the boy out of trouble when necessary. He was William’s closest friend.

William was strangely excited by the prospect of seeing Aliena again, even though he knew he faced rejection and humiliation once more. That glimpse of her in Kingsbridge Cathedral, when for an instant he had looked into her dark, dark eyes, had rekindled his desire for her. He looked forward eagerly to talking to her, getting close to her, seeing her mass of curls tumble and shake as she talked, watching her body move under her dress.

At the same time, the opportunity for revenge had sharpened William’s hatred. He was tense with excitement at the thought that now he might wipe out the humiliation he and his family had suffered.

He wished he had a clearer idea of what he was looking for. He was fairly confident he would find out whether Waleran’s story was true, for there would surely be signs of preparation for war at the castle—horses being mustered, weapons being cleaned, food being stockpiled—even though the activity would naturally be masked as something else, preparations for an expedition perhaps, to deceive the casual observer. However, convincing himself of the existence of a plot was not the same as finding proof. William could not think of anything that would count as proof. He planned to keep his eyes open and hope that something would suggest itself. This was not much of a plan, however, and he suffered a nagging worry that the opportunity for revenge might yet slip through his fingers.

As he came nearer he began to feel tense. He wondered whether he might be refused admittance to the castle, and he suffered a moment of panic, until he realized how unlikely it was: the castle was a public place, and for the earl to close it to the local gentry would be as good as an announcement that treachery was afoot.

Earl Bartholomew lived a few miles from the town of Shiring. The castle of Shiring itself was occupied by the sheriff of the county, so the earl had a

castle of his own outside the town. The small village that had grown up around the castle walls was known as Earlscastle. William had been there before, but now he looked at it through the eyes of an attacker.

There was a wide, deep moat in the shape of the number eight, with the upper circle smaller than the lower. The earth that had been dug out to form the moat was piled up inside the twin circles, forming ramparts.

At the foot of the eight was a bridge across the moat and a gap in the earth wall, giving admittance to the lower circle. This was the only entrance. There was no way into the upper circle except by going through the lower circle and crossing another bridge over the moat that divided the two circles. The upper circle was the inner sanctum.

As William and Walter trotted across the open fields that surrounded the castle they could see a lot of coming and going. Two men-at-arms crossed the bridge on fast horses and rode off in different directions, and a group of four horsemen preceded William across the bridge as he and Walter entered.

William noted that the last section of the bridge could be drawn up into the massive stone gatehouse that formed the entrance to the castle. There were stone towers at intervals all around the earth wall, so that every part of the perimeter could be covered by defending archers. To take this castle by frontal assault would be a long and bloody business, and the Hamleighs could not muster enough men to be sure of success, William concluded gloomily.

Today, of course, the castle was open for business. William gave his name to the sentry in the gatehouse and was admitted without further ado. Within the lower circle, shielded from the outside world by the earth walls, was the usual range of domestic buildings: stables, kitchens, workshops, a privy tower and a chapel. A sense of excitement was in the air. The grooms, squires, servants and maids all walked briskly and talked loudly, calling greetings to one another and making jokes. To an unsuspecting mind the excitement and the coming and going might be no more than a normal reaction to the return of the master, but to William it seemed more than that.

He left Walter at the stable with the horses and crossed to the far side of the compound where, exactly opposite the gatehouse, there was a bridge across the moat to the upper circle. When he had crossed the bridge he was challenged by another guard in another gatehouse. This time he was asked his business, and he said: “I’ve come to see the Lady Aliena.”

The guard did not know him, but he looked him up and down, noting his fine cloak and red tunic, and took him at face value, as a hopeful suitor. “You may find the young lady in the great hall,” he said with a smirk.

In the center of the upper circle was a square stone building, three stories high, with thick walls. This was the keep. As usual the ground floor was a store. The great hall was above the store, reached by a wooden exterior staircase which could be drawn up into the building. On the top floor would

be the earl’s bedroom, and that was where he would make his last stand when the Hamleighs came to get him.

The whole layout presented a formidable series of obstacles to the attacker. That was the point, of course, but now that William was trying to work out how to get past the obstacles he saw the function of the different elements of the design very clearly. Even if the attackers gained the lower circle, they still had to pass another bridge and another gatehouse, and then assault the sturdy keep. They would have to get to the upper floor somehow—presumably by building their own staircase—and even then there would be yet another fight, in all probability, to get from the hall up the stairs to the earl’s bedroom. The only way to take this castle was by stealth, William realized, and he began to toy with ideas of sneaking in somehow.

He mounted the stairs and entered the hall. It was full of people, but the earl was not among them. In the far left-hand corner was the staircase leading to his bedroom, and fifteen or twenty knights and men-at-arms sat around the foot of the stairs, talking together in low tones. This was unusual. Knights and men-at-arms formed separate social classes. The knights were landowners who supported themselves by rents, whereas the men-at-arms were paid by the day. The two groups became comradely only when the smell of war was in the wind.

William recognized some of them: there was Gilbert Catface, a bad-tempered old fighter with an unfashionable beard and long whiskers, past forty years but still tough; Ralph of Lyme, who spent more on clothes than on a bride, today wearing a blue cloak with a red silk lining; Jack fitz Guillaume, already a knight although hardly older than William; and several others whose faces were vaguely familiar. He nodded in their general direction, but they took little notice of him—he was well known, but he was too young to be important.

He turned and looked around the other side of the hall, and saw Aliena immediately.

She looked quite different today. Yesterday she had been dressed up for the cathedral, in silk and fine wool and linen, with rings and ribbons and pointed boots. Today she wore the short tunic of a peasant woman or a child, and her feet were bare. She was sitting on a bench, studying a game board on which were counters of different colors. As William watched, she hitched up her tunic and crossed her legs, revealing her knees, and then wrinkled her nose in a frown. Yesterday she had been formidably sophisticated; today she was a vulnerable child, and William found her even more desirable. He suddenly felt ashamed that this child had been able to cause him so much distress, and he yearned for some way of showing her that he could master her. It was a feeling almost like lust.

She was playing with a boy three years or so younger than she. He had a

restless, impatient look: he did not like the game. William could see a family resemblance between the two players. Indeed, the boy looked like Aliena as William remembered her from childhood, with a snub nose and short hair. This must be her younger brother Richard, the heir to the earldom.

William went closer. Richard glanced up at him, then returned his attention to the board. Aliena was concentrating. Their painted wooden board was shaped like a cross and divided into squares of different colors. The counters appeared to be made of ivory, white and black. The game was obviously a variant of merels, or nine-men's morris, and probably a gift brought back from Normandy by Aliena's father. William was more interested in Aliena. When she leaned forward over the board, the neck of her tunic bowed out, and he could see the tops of her breasts. They were as large as he had imagined. His mouth went dry.

Richard moved a counter on the board, and Aliena said: "No, you can't do that."

The boy was put out. "Why not?"

"Because it's against the rules, stupid."

"I don't *like* the rules," Richard said petulantly.

Aliena flared up. "You have to obey the rules!"

"Why do I?"

"You just do, that's why!"

"Well, I don't," he said, and he tipped the board off the bench onto the floor, sending the counters flying.

Quick as a flash, Aliena slapped his face.

He cried out, his pride as well as his face stung. "You—" He hesitated. "You devil-fucker," he shouted. He turned and ran away—but after three steps he cannoned into William.

William picked him up by one arm and held him in midair. "Don't let the priest hear you call your sister such names," he said.

Richard wriggled and squealed. "You're hurting me—let me go!"

William held him a little longer. Richard stopped struggling and began to cry. William put him down, and he ran off in tears.

Aliena was staring at William, her game forgotten, a puzzled frown wrinkling her brow. "Why are you here?" she said. Her voice was low and calm, the voice of an older person.

William sat on the bench, feeling rather pleased about the masterful way he had dealt with Richard. "I've come to see you," he said.

A wary look came over her face. "Why?"

William positioned himself so that he could watch the staircase. He saw, coming down into the hall, a man in his forties dressed like a high-ranking servant, in a round cap and a short tunic of fine cloth. The servant gestured to someone, and a knight and a man-at-arms went up the stairs together. William

looked at Aliena again. “I want to talk to you.”

“About what?”

“About you and me.” Over her shoulder he saw the servant approaching them. There was something a little effeminate about the man’s walk. In one hand he carried a loaf of sugar, dirty-brown in color and cone-shaped. In his other hand was a twisted root that looked like ginger. The man was obviously the household steward, and he had been to the spice safe, a locked cupboard in the earl’s bedroom, for the day’s supplies of precious ingredients, which he was now taking to the cook: sugar to sweeten a crab-apple tart, perhaps, and ginger to flavor lampreys.

Aliena followed William’s gaze. “Oh, hello, Matthew.”

The steward smiled and broke off a piece of sugar for her. William had a feeling that Matthew was very fond of Aliena. Something in her demeanor must have told him that she was uncomfortable, for his smile turned to a concerned frown and he said: “Is everything all right?” His voice was soft.

“Yes, thank you.”

Matthew looked at William and his face registered surprise. “Young William Hamleigh, isn’t it?”

William was embarrassed to be recognized, even though it was inevitable. “Keep your sugar for the children,” he said, although he had not been offered any. “I don’t care for it.”

“Very well, lord.” Matthew’s look said that he had not got where he was today by making trouble for the sons of the gentry. He turned back to Aliena. “Your father brought back some wonderful soft silk—I’ll show you later.”

“Thank you,” she said.

Matthew went away.

William said: “Effeminate fool.”

Aliena said: “Why were you so rude to him?”

“I don’t let servants call me ‘Young William.’” This was not a good way to begin wooing a lady. William realized with a sinking feeling that he had got off to a bad start. He had to be charming. He smiled and said: “If you were my wife, my servants would call you lady.”

“Did you come here to talk about marriage?” she said, and William thought he detected a note of incredulity in her voice.

“You don’t know me,” William said in a tone of protest. He was failing to keep this conversation under control, he realized miserably. He had planned a little small talk before getting down to business, but she was so direct and candid that he was forced to blurt out his message. “You misjudged me. I don’t know what I did, last time we met, to make you dislike me; but whatever your reason, you were too hasty.”

She looked away, considering her reply. Behind her, William saw the knight and the man-at-arms come down the stairs and go out through the door,

looking purposeful. A moment later a man in clerical robes—presumably the earl's secretary—appeared from above and beckoned. Two knights got up and went upstairs: Ralph of Lyme, flashing the red lining of his cloak, and an older man with a bald head. Clearly the men waiting in the hall were seeing the earl, in ones and twos, in his chamber. But why?

"After all this time?" Aliena was saying. She was suppressing some emotion. It might have been anger, but William had a sneaking feeling it was laughter. "After all the trouble, and anger, and scandal; just when it's dying down at last, *now* you tell me I made a mistake?"

When she put it that way it did seem a bit implausible, William realized. "It hasn't died down at all—people are still talking about it, my mother is still furious and my father can't hold his head up in public," he said wildly. "It's not over for us."

"This is all about family honor for you, isn't it?"

There was a dangerous note in her voice, but William ignored it. He had just realized what the earl must be doing with all these knights and men-at-arms: he was sending messages. "Family honor?" he said distractedly. "Yes."

"I know I ought to think about honor, and alliances between families, and all that," Aliena said. "But that's not all there is to marriage." She seemed to ponder for a moment, then reach a decision. "Perhaps I should tell you about my mother. She hated my father. My father isn't a bad man, in fact he's a great man, and I love him, but he's dreadfully solemn and strict, and he never understood Mother. She was a happy, lighthearted person who loved to laugh and tell stories and have music, and Father made her miserable." There were tears in Aliena's eyes, William noted vaguely, but he was thinking about messages. "That's why she died—because he wouldn't let her be happy. I know it. And he knows it too, you see. That's why he promised he would never make me marry someone I don't like. Do you understand, now?"

Those messages are orders, William was thinking; orders to Earl Bartholomew's friends and allies, warning them to get ready to fight. And the messengers are *evidence*.

He realized Aliena was staring at him. "Marry someone you don't like?" he said, echoing her final words. "Don't you like me?"

Her eyes flashed anger. "You haven't been listening," she said. "You're so self-centered that you can't think about anyone else's feelings for a moment. Last time you came here, what did you do? You talked and talked about yourself and never asked me one question!"

Her voice had risen to a shout, and when she stopped, William noticed that the men on the other side of the room had fallen silent, listening. He felt embarrassed. "Not so loud," he said to her.

She took no notice. "You want to know why I don't like you? All right, I'll tell you. I don't like you because you have no refinement. I don't like you

because you can hardly read. I don't like you because you're only interested in your *dogs* and your *horses* and your *self*."

Gilbert Catface and Jack fitz Guillaume were laughing aloud now. William felt his face reddening. Those men were *nobodies*, they were *knights*, and they were laughing at *him*, the son of Lord Percy Hamleigh. He stood up. "All *right*," he said urgently, trying to stop Aliena.

It was no good. "I don't like you because you're selfish, dull and stupid," she yelled. All the knights were laughing now. "I dislike you, I despise you, I hate you and I loathe you. And *that's* why I won't marry you!"

The knights cheered and applauded. William cringed inside. Their laughter made him feel small, weak and helpless, like a little boy, and when he was a little boy he had been frightened all the time. He turned away from Aliena, fighting to control his facial expression and hide his feelings. He crossed the room as fast as he could without running, while the laughter grew louder. At last he reached the door, flung it open, and stumbled out. He slammed it behind him and ran down the stairs, choking with shame; and the fading sound of their derisive laughter rang in his ears all the way across the muddy courtyard to the gate.

The path from Earlscastle to Shiring crossed a main road after about a mile. At the crossroads a traveler could turn north, for Gloucester and the Welsh border, or south, for Winchester and the coast. William and Walter turned south.

William's anguish had turned to rage. He was too furious to speak. He wanted to hurt Aliena and kill all those knights. He would have liked to thrust his sword into each laughing mouth and drive it down each throat. And he had thought of a way to avenge himself on at least one of them. If it worked, he would get the proof he needed at the same time. The prospect gave him savage consolation.

First he had to catch one of them. As soon as the road ran into woodland, William dismounted and began to walk, leading his horse. Walter followed in silence, respecting his mood. William came to a narrower stretch of track and stopped. He turned to Walter and said: "Who's better with a knife, you or me?"

"Fighting at close quarters, I'm better," Walter said guardedly. "But you throw more accurately, lord." They all called him lord when he was angry.

"I suppose you can trip a bolting horse, and make him fall?" William said.

"Yes, with a good stout pole."

"Go and find a small tree, then, and pull it up and trim it; then you'll have a good stout pole."

Walter went off.

William led the two horses through the woods and tied them up in a clearing a good way from the road. He took off their saddles and removed some of the cords and straps from the tack—enough to bind a man hand and foot, with a little over. His plan was crude, but there was no time to devise something more elaborate, so he would have to hope for the best.

On his way back to the road he found a stout piece of oak deadfall, dry and hard, to use as a club.

Walter was waiting with his pole. William selected the place where the groom would lie in wait, behind the broad trunk of a beech tree that grew close to the path. “Don’t shove the pole out too soon, or the horse will jump over it,” he cautioned. “But don’t leave it too late, because you can’t trip him by his back legs. The ideal is to push it between his forelegs. And try to stick the end into the ground so he doesn’t kick it aside.”

Walter nodded. “I’ve seen this done before.”

William walked about thirty yards back toward Earlscastle. His role would be to make sure the horse bolted, so that it would be going too fast to avoid Walter’s pole. He hid himself as close to the road as he could. Sooner or later one of Earl Bartholomew’s messengers would come along. William hoped it would be soon. He was anxious about whether this was going to work, and he was impatient to get it over with.

Those knights had no idea, while they were laughing at me, that I was spying on them, he thought, and it soothed him a little. But one of them is about to find out. And then he’ll be sorry he laughed. Then he’ll wish he had gone down on his knees and kissed my boots, instead of laughing. He’s going to weep and beg and plead with me to forgive him, and I’m just going to hurt him all the more.

He had other consolations. If his plan worked out, it might ultimately bring about the downfall of Earl Bartholomew and the resurrection of the Hamleighs. Then all those who had snickered at the canceled wedding would tremble in fear, and some of them would suffer more than fear.

The downfall of Bartholomew would also be the downfall of Aliena, and that was the best part. Her swollen pride and her superior manner would have to change after her father had been hanged as a traitor. If she wanted soft silk and sugar cones then, she would have to marry William to get them. He imagined her, humble and contrite, bringing him a hot pastry from the kitchen, looking up at him with those big dark eyes, eager to please him, hoping for a caress, her soft mouth slightly open, begging to be kissed.

His fantasy was disturbed by hoofbeats on the winter-hard mud of the road. He drew his knife and hefted it, reminding himself of its weight and balance. At the point, it was sharpened on both sides, for better penetration. He stood upright, flattened his back against the tree that concealed him, held the knife by the blade, and waited, hardly breathing. He was nervous. He was

afraid he might miss with the knife, or the horse might not fall, or the rider might kill Walter with a lucky stroke, so that William would have to fight him alone…. Something bothered him about the hoofbeats as they came closer. He saw Walter peering at him through the vegetation with a worried frown: he had heard it too. Then William realized what it was. There was more than one horse. He had to make a quick decision. Would they attack two people? That might be too much like a fair fight. He decided to let them go, and wait for a lone rider. It was disappointing, but this was the wisest course. He waved a hand at Walter in a wiping-out gesture. Walter nodded understanding and sank back under cover.

A moment later two horses came into view. William saw a flash of red silk: Ralph of Lyme. Then he saw the bald head of Ralph's companion. The two men trotted past and disappeared from view.

Despite the sense of anticlimax, William was gratified to have confirmation of his theory that the earl was sending these men out on errands. However, he wondered anxiously whether Bartholomew might have a policy of sending them in pairs. It would be a natural precaution. Everyone traveled in groups when possible, for safety. On the other hand, Bartholomew had a lot of messages and a limited number of men, and he might see it as an extravagance to use two knights to take one message. Furthermore, the knights were violent men who could be relied upon to give the average outlaw a hard fight—a fight from which the outlaw would gain little, because a knight did not have much worth stealing, other than his sword, which was hard to sell without answering awkward questions, and his horse, which was liable to be crippled in the ambush. A knight was safer than most people in the forest.

William scratched his head with the hilt of his knife. It could go either way.

He settled down to wait. The forest was quiet. A feeble winter sun came out, shone fitfully through the dense greenery for a while, and then disappeared. William's belly reminded him that it was past dinnertime. A deer crossed the path a few yards away, unaware that she was watched by a hungry man. William became impatient.

If another pair of riders came along, he decided, he would have to attack. It was risky, but he had the advantage of surprise, and he had Walter, who was a formidable fighter. Besides, it might be his last chance. He knew he could get killed, and he was afraid, but that might be better than living on in constant humiliation. At least it was an honorable end to die in a fight.

What would be best of all, he thought, would be for Aliena to appear, all alone, cantering on a white pony. She would come crashing off the horse, bruising her arms and legs, and tumble into a bramble thicket. The thorns would scratch her soft skin, drawing blood. William would jump on top of her

and pin her to the ground. She would be mortified.

He played with that idea, elaborating her injuries, relishing the way her chest heaved up and down as he sat astride her, and imagining the expression of abject terror on her face when she realized she was completely in his power; and then he heard hoofbeats again.

This time there was only one horse.

He straightened up, took out his knife, pressed his back against the tree, and listened again.

It was a good, fast horse, not a war-horse but probably a solid courser. It was carrying a moderate weight, such as a man with no armor, and coming at a steady all-day trot, not even breathing hard. William caught Walter's eye and nodded: this was the one, here was the evidence. He raised his right arm, holding the knife by the tip of the blade.

In the distance, William's own horse whinnied.

The sound carried clearly through the still forest and was perfectly audible over the light tattoo of the approaching horse. The horse heard it, and broke its stride. Its rider said "Whoa," and slowed it to a walk. William cursed under his breath. The rider would be wary now, and that would make everything more difficult. Too late, William wished he had taken his own horse farther away.

He could not tell how far away the approaching horse was now that it was walking. Everything was going wrong. He resisted the temptation to look out from behind his tree. He listened hard, taut with strain. Suddenly he heard the horse snort, shockingly close, and then it appeared a yard from where he stood. It saw him a moment after he saw it. It shied, and the rider let out a grunt of surprise.

William cursed. He realized instantly that the horse might turn and bolt the wrong way. He ducked back behind the tree and came out on the other side, behind the horse, with his throwing arm raised. He caught a glimpse of the rider, bearded and frowning as he tugged at the reins: it was tough old Gilbert Catface. William threw the knife.

It was a perfect throw. The knife struck the horse's rump point-first and sank an inch or more into its flesh.

The horse seemed to start, as a man does when shocked; then, before Gilbert could react, it broke into a panic-stricken gallop and took off at top speed—heading straight for Walter's ambush.

William ran after it. The horse covered the distance to where Walter was in a few moments. Gilbert was making no effort to control his mount—he was too busy trying to stay in the saddle. They drew level with Walter's position, and William thought: Now, Walter, now!

Walter timed his move so finely that William never actually saw the pole shoot out from behind the tree. He just saw the horse's forelegs crumple, as if

all the strength had left them suddenly. Then its hind legs seemed to catch up with its forelegs, so that they all became entangled. Finally its head went down, its hindquarters went up, and it fell heavily.

Gilbert flew through the air. Going after him, William was brought up short by the fallen horse.

Gilbert landed well, rolled over and got to his knees. For a moment William was afraid he might run off and escape. Then Walter came out of the undergrowth, launched himself through the air, and cannoned into Gilbert's back, knocking him flat.

Both men hit the ground hard. They recovered their balance at the same time, and William saw to his horror that the wily Gilbert had come up with a knife in his hand. William leaped over the fallen horse and swung the oak club at Gilbert just as Gilbert raised his knife. The club hit the side of Gilbert's head.

Gilbert staggered but got to his feet. William damned him for being so *tough*. William drew back the club for another swing but Gilbert was faster, and lunged at William with the knife. William was dressed for courting, not fighting, and the sharp blade sliced through his fine wool cloak; but he jumped back quickly enough to save his skin. Gilbert continued coming at him, keeping him off balance so that he could not wield the club. Each time Gilbert lunged, William jumped back; but William never had quite enough time to recover, and Gilbert rapidly closed on him. Suddenly William was afraid for his life. Then Walter came up behind Gilbert and kicked his legs from under him.

William sagged with relief. For a moment there he had thought he was going to die. He thanked God for Walter.

Gilbert tried to get up but Walter kicked him in the face. William hit him with the club twice for good measure, and after that Gilbert lay still.

They rolled him onto his front, and Walter sat on his head while William tied his hands behind his back. Then William took off Gilbert's long black boots and bound his bare ankles together with a strong piece of leather harness.

He stood up. He grinned at Walter, and Walter smiled. It was a relief to have this slippery old fighter securely tied up.

The next step was to make Gilbert confess.

He was coming round. Walter turned him over. When Gilbert saw William he registered recognition, then surprise, then fear. William was gratified. Gilbert was already regretting his laughter, William thought. In a while he was going to regret it even more.

Gilbert's horse was on its feet, remarkably. It had run a few yards off, but had stopped and was now looking back, breathing hard and starting every time the wind rustled in the trees. William's knife had fallen out of its rump.

William picked up his knife and Walter went to catch the horse.

William was listening for the sound of riders. Another messenger might come along at any moment. If that happened Gilbert would have to be dragged out of sight and kept quiet. But no riders came, and Walter was able to catch Gilbert's horse without too much difficulty.

They slung Gilbert across the back of his horse, then led it through the forest to where William had left their own mounts. The other horses became agitated when they smelled the blood seeping from the wound in Gilbert's horse's rump, so William tethered it a little way off.

He looked around for a tree suitable to his purpose. He located an elm with a stout branch protruding at a height of eight or nine feet off the ground. He pointed it out to Walter. "I want to suspend Gilbert from this bough," he said.

Walter grinned sadistically. "What are you going to do to him, lord?"

"You'll see."

Gilbert's leathery face was white with fear. William passed a rope under the man's armpits, tied it behind his back, and looped it over the branch.

"Lift him," he said to Walter.

Walter hoisted Gilbert. Gilbert wriggled and got free of Walter's grasp, falling on the ground. Walter picked up William's club and beat Gilbert about the head until he was groggy, then picked him up again. William threw the loose end of the rope over the branch several times and pulled it tight. Walter released Gilbert and he swung gently from the branch with his feet a yard off the ground.

"Collect some firewood," William said.

They built a fire under Gilbert, and William lit it with a spark from a flint. After a few moments the flames began to rise. The heat brought Gilbert out of his daze.

When he realized what was happening to him he began to moan in terror. "Please," he said. "Please let me down. I'm sorry I laughed at you, please have mercy."

William was silent. Gilbert's groveling was very satisfying, but it was not what William was after.

When the heat began to hurt Gilbert's bare toes, he bent his legs at the knee to take his feet out of the fire. His face was running with sweat, and there was a faint smell of scorching as his clothes got hot. William judged it was time to start the interrogation. He said: "Why did you go to the castle today?"

Gilbert stared wide-eyed at him. "To pay my respects," he said. "Does it matter?"

"Why did you go to pay your respects?"

"The earl has just returned from Normandy."

“You weren’t summoned especially?”

“No.”

It might be true, William reflected. Interrogating a prisoner was not as straightforward as he had imagined. He thought again. “What did the earl say to you when you went up to his chamber?”

“He greeted me, and thanked me for coming to welcome him home.”

Was there a look of wary comprehension in Gilbert’s eyes? William was not sure. He said: “What else?”

“He asked after my family and my village.”

“Nothing else?”

“Nothing. Why do you care what he said?”

“What did he say to you about King Stephen and the Empress Maud?”

“Nothing, I tell you!”

Gilbert could not keep his knees bent any longer, and his feet fell back into the growing flames. After a second, a yell of agony burst from him, and his body convulsed. The spasm took his feet out of the flames momentarily. He realized then that he could ease the pain by swinging to and fro. With each swing, however, he passed through the flames and cried out again.

Once more William wondered whether Gilbert might be telling the truth. There was no way of knowing. At some point, presumably, he would be in so much agony that he would say whatever he thought William wanted him to say, in a desperate attempt to get some relief; so it was important not to give him too clear an idea of what was wanted, William thought worriedly. Who would have thought that torturing people could be so difficult?

He made his voice calm and almost conversational. “Where are you going now?”

Gilbert screamed in pain and frustration: “What does it matter?”

“Where are you going?”

“Home!”

The man was losing his grip. William knew where he lived, and it was north of here. He had been heading in the wrong direction.

“Where are you going?” William said again.

“What do you want from me?”

“I know when you’re lying,” William said. “Just tell me the truth.” He heard Walter give a low grunt of approval, and he thought: I’m getting better at this. “Where are you going?” he said for the fourth time.

Gilbert became too exhausted to swing himself anymore. Groaning in pain, he came to a stop over the fire, and once more bent his legs to take his feet out of the flames. But now the fire was burning high enough to singe his knees. William noticed a smell, vaguely familiar but also slightly sickening; and after a moment he realized it was the smell of burning flesh, and it was familiar because it was like the smell of dinner. The skin of Gilbert’s legs and

feet was turning brown and cracking, the hairs on his shins going black; and fat from his flesh dripped into the fire and sizzled. Watching his agony mesmerized William. Every time Gilbert cried out, William felt a profound thrill. He had the power of pain over a man, and it made him feel good. It was a bit like the way he felt when he got a girl alone, in a place where nobody could hear her protest, and pinned her to the ground, pulling her skirts up around her waist, and knew that nothing could now stop him from having her.

Almost reluctantly, he said again: “Where are you going?”

In a voice that was a suppressed scream, Gilbert said: “To Sherborne.”

“Why?”

“Cut me down, for the love of Christ Jesus, and I’ll tell you everything.”

William sensed victory within his grasp. It was deeply satisfying. But he was not quite there yet. He said to Walter: “Just pull his feet out of the fire.”

Walter grabbed Gilbert’s tunic and pulled on it so that his legs were clear of the flames.

“Now,” William said.

“Earl Bartholomew has fifty knights in and around Sherborne,” Gilbert said in a strangled cry. “I am to muster them and bring them to Earlscastle.”

William smiled. All his guesses were proving gratifyingly accurate. “And what is the earl planning to do with these knights?”

“He didn’t say.”

William said to Walter: “Let him burn a little more.”

“No!” Gilbert screamed. “I’ll tell you!”

Walter hesitated.

“Quickly,” William warned.

“They are to fight for the Empress Maud, against Stephen,” Gilbert said at last.

That was it: that was the proof. William savored his success. “And when I ask you this in front of my father, will you answer the same?” he said.

“Yes, yes.”

“And when my father asks you in front of the king, will you still tell the truth?”

“Yes!”

“Swear by the cross.”

“I swear by the cross, I’ll tell the truth!”

“Amen,” William said contentedly, and he began to stamp out the fire.

They tied Gilbert to his saddle and put his horse on a leading rein, then rode on at a walk. The knight was barely able to stay upright, and William did not want him to die, for he was no use dead, so he tried not to treat him too roughly. Next time they passed a stream he threw cold water over the knight’s

burned feet. Gilbert screamed in pain, but it probably did him good.

William felt a wonderful sense of triumph mingled with an odd kind of frustration. He had never killed a man, and he wished he could kill Gilbert. Torturing a man without killing him was like stripping a girl naked without raping her. The more he thought about that, the more he felt the need of a woman.

Perhaps when he got home…no, there would be no time. He would have to tell his parents what had happened, and they would want Gilbert to repeat his confession in front of a priest and perhaps some other witnesses; and then they would have to plan the capture of Earl Bartholomew, which would surely have to take place tomorrow, before Bartholomew mustered too many fighting men. And still William had not thought of a way to take that castle by stealth, without a prolonged siege….

He was thinking with frustration that it might be a long time before he even *saw* an attractive woman when one appeared on the road ahead.

There were five people in a group, walking toward William. One of them was a dark-haired woman of about twenty-five years, not exactly a girl, but young enough. As she came closer William became more interested: she was quite beautiful, with dark brown hair that came to a devil's peak on her brow, and deep-set eyes of an intense golden color. She had a trim, lithe figure and smooth tanned skin.

"Stay back," William said to Walter. "Keep the knight behind you while I talk to them."

The group stopped and looked warily at him. They were a family, obviously: there was a tall man who was presumably the husband, a lad who was full-grown but not yet bearded, and a couple of sprats. The man looked familiar, William realized with a start. 'Do I know you?' he said.

"I know you," the man said. "And I know your horse, for together you almost killed my daughter."

It began to come back to William. His horse had not touched the child, but it had been close. "You were building my house," he said. "And when I dismissed you, you demanded payment, and almost threatened me."

The man looked defiant, and did not deny it.

"You're not so cocky now," William said with a sneer. The whole family appeared to be starving. It was turning out to be a good day for settling accounts with people who had offended William Hamleigh. "Are you hungry?"

"Yes, we're hungry," said the builder in a tone of sullen anger.

William looked again at the woman. She stood with her feet a little apart and her chin up, staring at him fearlessly. He had been inflamed by Aliena and now he wanted to slake his lust with this one. She would be lively, he felt sure: she would wriggle and scratch. All the better.

“You’re not married to this girl, are you, builder?” he said. “I remember your wife—an ugly cow.”

The shadow of pain crossed the builder’s face, and he said: “My wife died.”

“And you haven’t taken this one to church, have you? You haven’t got a penny to pay the priest.” Behind William, Walter coughed and the horses moved impatiently. “Suppose I give you money for food,” William said to the builder, to tantalize him.

“I’ll accept it gratefully,” the man said, although William could tell it hurt him to be subservient.

“I’m not talking about a gift. I’ll buy your woman.”

The woman herself spoke. “I’m not for sale, boy.”

Her scorn was well directed, and William was angered. I’ll show you whether I’m a man or a boy, he thought, when I get you alone. He spoke to the builder. “I’ll give you a pound of silver for her.”

“She’s not for sale.”

William’s anger grew. It was infuriating to offer a fortune to a starving man and be turned down. He said: “You fool, if you don’t take the money I’ll run you through with my sword and fuck her in front of the children!”

The builder’s arm moved under his cloak. He must have some kind of weapon, William thought. He was also very big, and although he was as thin as a knife he might put up a mean fight to save his woman. The woman moved her cloak aside and rested her hand on the hilt of a surprisingly long dagger at her belt. The older boy was big enough to cause trouble, too.

Walter spoke in a low but carrying voice. “Lord, there’s no time for this.”

William nodded reluctantly. He had to get Gilbert back to the Hamleigh manor house. It was too important to delay with a brawl over a woman. He would just have to suffer.

He looked at the little family of five ragged, hungry people, ready to fight to the finish against two beefy men with horses and swords. He could not understand them. “All right, then, starve to death,” he said. He kicked his horse and trotted on, and a few moments later they were out of sight.

II

When they were a mile or so from the place where they had encountered William Hamleigh, Ellen said: “Can we slow down now?”

Tom realized he had been setting a fierce pace. He had been frightened: for a moment, back there, it had looked as if he and Alfred would have to fight two armed men on horseback. Tom did not even have a weapon. He had reached under his cloak for his mason’s hammer and then remembered, painfully, that he had sold it weeks ago for a sack of oats. He was not sure why William had backed off in the end, but he wanted to put as much distance as possible between them in case the young lord changed his evil little mind.

Tom had failed to find work at the palace of the bishop of Kingsbridge and at every other place he had tried. However, there was a quarry in the vicinity of Shiring, and a quarry—unlike a building site—employed as many men in winter as it did in summer. Of course, Tom’s usual work was more skilled and better paid than quarrying, but he was a long way past caring about that. He just wanted to feed his family. The quarry at Shiring was owned by Earl Bartholomew, and Tom had been told that the earl could be found at his castle a few miles to the west of the town.

Now that he had Ellen he was even more desperate than before. He knew that she had thrown her lot in with him for love, and had not weighed the consequences carefully. In particular, she did not have a clear idea of how difficult it might be for Tom to get work. She had not really confronted the possibility that they might not survive the winter, and Tom had held back from disillusioning her, for he wanted her to stay with him. But a woman was liable to put her child before everything else, in the end, and Tom was afraid Ellen would leave him.

They had been together a week: seven days of despair and seven nights of joy. Every morning Tom woke up feeling happy and optimistic. As the day wore on he would get hungry, the children would tire and Ellen would become morose. Some days they got fed—like the time they met the monk with the cheese—and some days they chewed on strips of sun-dried venison from Ellen’s reserve. It was like eating deer hide but it was better than nothing, just. But when it got dark they would lie down, cold and miserable, and hold one another close for warmth; then after a while they would start stroking and kissing. At first Tom had always wanted to enter her immediately, but she refused him gently: she wanted to play and kiss much longer. He did it her way and was enchanted. He explored her body boldly,

caressing her in places where he had never touched Agnes, her armpits and her ears and the cleft of her buttocks. Some nights they giggled together with their heads beneath their cloaks. At other times they felt very tender. One night when they were alone in the guesthouse of a monastery, and the children were in an exhausted sleep, she was dominant and insistent, commanding him to do things to her, showing him how to excite her with his fingers, and he complied, feeling bemused and inflamed by her shamelessness. When it was all over they would fall into a deep, restful sleep, with the day's fear and anger washed away by love.

It was now midday. Tom judged that William Hamleigh was far away, so he decided to stop for a rest. They had no food other than the dried venison. However, this morning they had begged some bread at a lonely farmhouse, and the woman had given them some ale in a big wooden bottle with no stopper, and told them to keep the bottle. Ellen had saved half the ale for dinner.

Tom sat on the edge of a broad old tree stump and Ellen sat beside him. She took a long draft of the ale and passed it to him. "Do you want some meat as well?" she asked.

He shook his head and drank some ale. He could easily have swallowed it all, but he left some for the children. "Save the meat," he said to Ellen. "We may get supper at the castle."

Alfred put the bottle to his mouth and drained it.

Jack looked crestfallen and Martha burst into tears. Alfred gave an odd little grin.

Ellen looked at Tom. After a few moments she said: "You shouldn't let Alfred get away with that."

Tom shrugged. "He's bigger than they are—he needs it more."

"He always gets a large share anyway. The little ones must have *something*."

"It's a waste of time to interfere in children's quarrels," Tom said.

Ellen's voice became harsh. "You're saying that Alfred can bully the younger children as much as he likes and you will do nothing about it."

"He doesn't bully them," Tom said. "Children always fight."

She shook her head, seeming bewildered. "I don't understand you. In every other way you're a kind man. But where Alfred is concerned, you're just blind."

She was exaggerating, Tom felt, but he did not want to displease her, so he said: "Give the little ones some meat, then."

Ellen opened her bag. She still looked cross. She cut off a strip of dried venison for Martha and another for Jack. Alfred held out his hand for some, but Ellen ignored him. Tom thought she should have given him some. There was nothing wrong with Alfred. Ellen just did not understand him. He was a

big boy, Tom thought proudly, and he had a big appetite and a quick temper, and if that was a sin, then half the adolescent boys in the world were damned.

They rested for a while and then walked on. Jack and Martha went ahead, still chewing the leathery meat. The two young ones got on well, despite the difference in their ages—Martha was six and Jack was probably eleven or twelve. But Martha thought Jack was utterly fascinating, and Jack seemed to be enjoying the novel experience of having another child to play with. It was a pity that Alfred did not like Jack. This surprised Tom: he would have expected that Jack, who was not yet becoming a man, would be beneath Alfred's contempt; but it was not so. Alfred was the stronger, of course, but little Jack was clever.

Tom refused to worry about it. They were just boys. He had too much on his mind to waste time fretting over children's squabbles. Sometimes he wondered secretly whether he would ever get work again. He might go on tramping the roads day after day until one by one they died off: a child found cold and lifeless one frosty morning, another too weak to fight off a fever, Ellen ravished and killed by a passing thug like William Hamleigh, and Tom himself becoming thinner and thinner until one day he was too weak to stand up in the morning, and lay on the forest floor until he slipped into unconsciousness.

Ellen would leave him before that happened, of course. She would return to her cave, where there was still a barrel of apples and a sack of nuts, enough to keep two people alive until the spring, but not enough for five. Tom would be heartbroken if she did that.

He wondered how the baby was. The monks had called him Jonathan. Tom liked the name. It meant a gift from God, according to the monk with the cheese. Tom pictured little Jonathan, red and wrinkled and bald, the way he was born. He would be different now: a week was a long time for a newborn baby. He would be bigger already, and his eyes would open wider. Now he would no longer be oblivious to the world around him: a loud noise would make him jump and a lullaby would soothe him. When he needed to burp, his mouth would curl up at the corners. The monks probably would not know that it was wind, and would take it for a real smile.

Tom hoped they were caring for him well. The monk with the cheese had given the impression that they were kindly and capable men. Anyway, they were certainly better able to look after the baby than Tom, who was homeless and penniless. If I ever become master of a really big construction project, and earn forty-eight pence a week plus allowances, I'll give money to that monastery, he thought.

They emerged from the forest and soon afterward they came within sight of the castle.

Tom's spirits lifted, but he repressed his enthusiasm fiercely: he had

suffered months of disappointment, and he had learned that the more hopeful he was at the start, the more painful was the rejection at the end.

They approached the castle on a path through bare fields. Martha and Jack came upon an injured bird, and they all stopped to look. It was a wren, so small that they might easily have missed it. Martha stooped over it, and it hopped away, apparently unable to fly. She caught it and picked it up, cradling the tiny creature in her cupped hands.

"It's trembling!" she said. "I can feel it. It must be frightened."

The bird made no further attempt to escape, but sat still in Martha's hands, its bright eyes gazing at the people all around. Jack said: "I think it's got a broken wing."

Alfred said: "Let me see." He took the bird from her.

"We could take care of it," Martha said. "Perhaps it will get better."

"No, it won't," Alfred said. With a quick motion of his big hands he wrung the bird's neck.

Ellen said: "Oh, for God's *sake*."

Martha burst into tears for the second time that day.

Alfred laughed and dropped the bird on the ground.

Jack picked it up. "Dead," he said.

Ellen said: "What is *wrong* with you, Alfred?"

Tom said: "Nothing's wrong with him. The bird was going to die."

He walked on, and the others followed. Ellen was angry with Alfred again, and it made Tom cross. Why make a fuss about a damned wren? Tom remembered what it was like to be fourteen years old, a boy with the body of a man: life was frustrating. Ellen had said *Where Alfred is concerned, you're just blind*, but she did not understand.

The wooden bridge that led over the moat to the gatehouse was flimsy and ramshackle, but that was probably how the earl liked it: a bridge was a means of access for attackers, and the more readily it fell down, the safer the castle was. The perimeter walls were of earth with stone towers at intervals. Ahead of them as they crossed the bridge was a stone gatehouse, like two towers with a connecting walkway. Plenty of stonework here, Tom thought; not one of these castles that are all mud and wood. Tomorrow I could be working. He remembered the feel of good tools in his hands, the scrape of the chisel across a block of stone as he squared its sides and smoothed its face, the dry feel of the dust in his nostrils. Tomorrow night my belly may be full—with food I've earned, not begged.

Coming closer, he noticed with his mason's eye that the battlements on top of the gatehouse were in bad condition. Some of the big stones had fallen, leaving the parapet quite level in parts. There were also loose stones in the arch of the gateway.

There were two sentries at the gate, and both looked alert. Perhaps they

were expecting trouble. One of them asked Tom his business.

“Stonemason, hoping to be hired to work in the earl’s quarry,” he replied.

“Look for the earl’s steward,” the sentry said helpfully. “His name is Matthew. You’ll probably find him in the great hall.”

“Thanks,” Tom said. “What kind of a man is he?”

The guard grinned at his colleague and said: “Not much of a man at all,” and they both laughed.

Tom supposed he would soon find out what that meant. He went in, and Ellen and the children followed. The buildings within the walls were mostly wooden, though some were raised on stone skirtings, and there was one built all of stone that was probably the chapel. As they crossed the compound Tom noticed that the towers around the perimeter all had loose stones and damaged battlements. They crossed the second moat to the upper circle, and stopped at the second gatehouse. Tom told the guard he was looking for Matthew Steward. They all went on into the upper compound and approached the square stone keep. The wooden door at ground level clearly opened into the undercroft. They went up the wooden steps to the hall.

Tom saw both the steward and the earl as soon as he went in. He knew who they were by their clothes. Earl Bartholomew wore a long tunic with flared cuffs on the sleeves and embroidery on the hem. Matthew Steward wore a short tunic, in the same style as the one Tom was wearing, but made of a softer cloth, and he had a little round cap. They were near the fireplace, the earl sitting and the steward standing. Tom approached the two men and stood just out of earshot, waiting for them to notice him. Earl Bartholomew was a tall man of over fifty, with white hair and a pale, thin, haughty face. He did not look like a man of generous spirit. The steward was younger. He stood in a way that reminded Tom of the guard’s remark: it looked feminine. Tom was not sure what to make of him.

There were several other people in the hall, but none of them took any notice of Tom. He waited, feeling hopeful and fearful by turns. The earl’s conversation with his steward seemed to take forever. At last it ended, and the steward bowed and turned aside. Tom stepped forward with his heart in his mouth. “Are you Matthew?” he said.

“Yes.”

“My name is Tom. Master mason. I’m a good craftsman, and my children are starving. I hear you have a quarry.” He held his breath.

“We have a quarry, but I don’t think we need any more quarrymen,” Matthew said. He glanced back at the earl, who shook his head almost imperceptibly. “No,” Matthew said. “We can’t hire you.”

It was the speed of the decision that broke Tom’s heart. If people were solemn, and thought hard about it, and rejected him regretfully, he could bear it more easily. Matthew was not a cruel man, Tom could tell, but he was busy,

and Tom and his starving family were just another item to be disposed of as quickly as possible.

Tom said desperately: “I could do some repairs here at the castle.”

“We have a wright who does all that kind of work for us,” Matthew said.

A wright was a jack-of-all-trades, usually trained as a carpenter. “I’m a mason,” Tom said. “My walls are strong.”

Matthew was annoyed with him for arguing, and seemed about to say something angry; then he looked at the children and his face softened again. “I’d like to give you work, but we don’t need you.”

Tom nodded. He should now humbly accept what the steward had said, put on a pitiful look, and beg for a meal and a place to sleep for one night. But Ellen was with him, and he was afraid she would leave, so he gave it one more try. He said in a voice loud enough for the earl to hear: “I just hope you’re not expecting to do battle soon.”

The effect was much more dramatic than he had expected. Matthew gave a start, and the earl got to his feet and said sharply: “Why do you say that?”

Tom perceived he had touched a nerve. “Because your defenses are in bad repair,” he said.

“In what way?” the earl said. “Be specific, man!”

Tom took a deep breath. The earl was irritated but attentive. Tom would not get another chance after this. “The mortar in the gatehouse walls has come away in places. This leaves an opening for a crowbar. An enemy could easily pry out a stone or two; and once there’s a hole it’s easy to pull the wall down. Also”—he hurried on breathlessly, before anyone could comment or argue—“also, all your battlements are damaged. They’re level in places. This leaves your archers and knights unprotected from—”

“I know what battlements are for,” the earl interrupted tetchily. “Anything else?”

“Yes. The keep has an undercroft with a wooden door. If I were attacking the keep I’d go through that door and start a fire in the stores.”

“And if you were the earl, how would you prevent that?”

“I’d have a pile of stones, ready shaped, and a supply of sand and lime for mortar, and a mason standing by ready to block up that doorway in times of danger.”

Earl Bartholomew stared at Tom. His pale blue eyes were narrowed and there was a frown on his white forehead. Tom could not read his expression. Was he angry with Tom for being so critical of the castle defenses? You could never tell how a lord would react to criticism. By and large it was best to let them make their own mistakes. But Tom was a desperate man.

At last the earl seemed to reach a conclusion. He turned to Matthew and said: “Hire this man.”

A whoop of jubilation rose in Tom’s throat and he had to choke it back.

He could hardly believe it. He looked at Ellen and they both smiled happily. Martha, who did not suffer from adult inhibitions, shouted: “Horray!”

Earl Bartholomew turned away and spoke to a knight standing nearby. Matthew smiled at Tom. “Have you had dinner today?” he said.

Tom swallowed. He was so happy he felt close to tears. “No, we haven’t.”

“I’ll take you to the kitchen.”

Eagerly, they followed the steward out of the hall and across the bridge to the lower compound. The kitchen was a large wood building with a stone skirting. Matthew told them to wait outside. There was a sweet smell in the air: they were baking pastries in there. Tom’s belly rumbled and his mouth watered so much it hurt. After a moment Matthew emerged with a big pot of ale and handed it to Tom. “They’ll bring out some bread and cold bacon in a moment,” he said. He left them.

Tom took a swallow of the ale and passed the pot to Ellen. She gave some to Martha, then took a drink herself and passed it to Jack. Alfred made a grab for it before Jack could drink. Jack turned away, keeping the pot out of Alfred’s reach. Tom did not want another quarrel between the children, not now when everything had turned out all right at last. He was about to intervene—thereby breaking his own rule about interference in children’s squabbles—when Jack turned around again and meekly handed the pot to Alfred.

Alfred put the pot to his mouth and began to drink. Tom had only taken a swallow, and he thought the pot would come around to him again; but Alfred looked set to drain it. Then a strange thing happened. As Alfred upended the pot to drink the last of the ale, something like a small animal fell out onto his face.

Alfred gave a frightened yell and dropped the pot. He brushed the furry thing off his face, jumping back. “What is it?” he screeched. The thing fell to the floor. He stared down at it, white-faced and trembling with disgust.

They all looked. It was the dead wren.

Tom caught Ellen’s eye, and they both looked at Jack. Jack had taken the pot from Ellen, then turned his back for a moment, as if trying to evade Alfred, then handed the pot to Alfred with surprising willingness….

Now he stood quietly, looking at the horrified Alfred with a faint smile of satisfaction on his clever young-old face.

Jack knew he would suffer for that.

Alfred would take his revenge somehow. When the others were not looking, Alfred would punch him in the stomach, perhaps. This was a favorite blow, for it was very painful but left no marks. Jack had seen him do it to Martha several times.

But it had been worth a punch in the stomach just to see the shock and fear on Alfred's face when the dead bird fell out of his beer.

Alfred hated Jack. This was a new experience for Jack. His mother had always loved him and no one else had had any feelings for him. There was no apparent reason for Alfred's hostility. He seemed to feel much the same about Martha. He was always pinching her, pulling her hair and tripping her, and he relished any opportunity to spoil something she valued. Jack's mother saw what was going on, and hated it, but Alfred's father seemed to think it was all perfectly normal, even though he himself was a kind and gentle man who obviously loved Martha. The whole thing was baffling, but nonetheless fascinating.

Everything was fascinating. Jack had never had such an exciting time in the whole of his life. Despite Alfred, despite feeling hungry most of the time, despite being hurt by the way his mother constantly paid attention to Tom instead of to him, Jack was spellbound by a constant stream of strange phenomena and new experiences.

The castle was the latest in a series of wonders. He had heard about castles: in the long winter evenings in the forest, his mother had taught him to recite *chansons*, narrative poems in French about knights and magicians, most of them thousands of lines long; and castles featured in those stories as places of refuge and romance. Never having seen a castle, he imagined it would be a slightly larger version of the cave in which he lived. The real thing was amazing: it was so big, with so many buildings and such a host of people, all of them so *busy*—shoeing horses, drawing water, feeding chickens, baking bread, and carrying things, always carrying things, straw for the floors, wood for the fires, sacks of flour, bales of cloth, swords and saddles and suits of mail. Tom told him that the moat and the wall were not natural parts of the landscape, but had actually been dug and built by dozens of men all working together. Jack did not disbelieve Tom, but he found it impossible to imagine how it had been done.

At the end of the afternoon, when it became too dark to work, all the busy people gravitated to the great hall of the keep. Rushlights were lit and the fire was built higher, and all the dogs came in from the cold. Some of the men and women took boards and trestles from a stack at the side of the room and set up tables in the shape of the letter T, then ranged chairs along the top of the T and benches down the sides. Jack had never seen people working together in large numbers, and he was struck by how much they enjoyed it. They smiled and laughed as they lifted the heavy boards, calling "Hup!" and "To me, to me," and "Down easy, now." Jack envied their camaraderie, and wondered whether he might share it one day.

After a while everyone sat on the benches. One of the castle servants distributed big wooden bowls and wooden spoons, counting aloud as he gave

them out; then he went around again and put a thick slice of stale brown bread in the bottom of each bowl. Another servant brought wooden cups and filled them with ale from a series of big jugs. Jack and Martha and Alfred, all sitting together at the bottom end of the T, got a cup of ale each, so there was nothing to fight over. Jack picked up his cup, but his mother told him to wait for a moment.

When the ale had been poured the hall went quiet. Jack waited, fascinated as always, to see what would happen next. After a moment Earl Bartholomew appeared on the staircase that led down from his bedroom. He came down into the hall, followed by Matthew Steward, three or four other well-dressed men, a boy, and the most beautiful creature Jack had ever set eyes upon.

It was a girl or a woman, he was not sure which. She was dressed in white, and her tunic had amazing flared sleeves which trailed on the ground behind her as she glided down the stairs. Her hair was a mass of dark curls tumbling around her face, and she had dark, dark eyes. Jack realized that this was what the *chansons* meant when they referred to a beautiful princess in a castle. No wonder the knights all wept when the princess died.

When she reached the foot of the stairs Jack saw that she was quite young, just a few years older than himself; but she held her head high and walked to the head of the table like a queen. She sat down beside Earl Bartholomew.

“Who is she?” Jack whispered.

Martha replied: “She must be the earl’s daughter.”

“What’s her name?”

Martha shrugged, but a dirty-faced girl sitting next to Jack said: “She’s called Aliena. She’s wonderful.”

The earl raised his cup to Aliena, then looked slowly all around the table, and drank. That was the signal everyone had been waiting for. They all followed suit, raising their cups before drinking.

The supper was brought in huge steaming cauldrons. The earl was served first; then his daughter, the boy, and the men with them at the head of the table; then everyone else helped themselves. It was salt fish in a spicy stew. Jack filled his bowl and ate it all, then ate the bread trencher at the bottom of the bowl, soaked with oily soup. In between mouthfuls he watched Aliena, riveted by everything she did, from the dainty way she speared bits of fish on the end of her knife and delicately put them between her white teeth, to the commanding voice in which she called servants and gave them orders. They all seemed to like her. They came quickly when she called, smiled when she spoke, and hurried to do her bidding. The young men around the table looked at her a lot, Jack observed, and some of them showed off when they thought she was looking their way. But she was concerned mainly with the older men with her father, making sure they had enough bread and wine, asking them

questions and listening attentively to their answers. Jack wondered what it would be like to have a beautiful princess speak to you, then look at you with big dark eyes while you replied.

After supper there was music. Two men and a woman played tunes with sheep bells, a drum, and pipes made from the bones of animals and birds. The earl closed his eyes and seemed to become lost in the music, but Jack did not like the haunting, melancholy tunes they played. He preferred the cheerful songs his mother sang. The other people in the hall seemed to feel the same way, for they fidgeted and shuffled, and there was a general sense of relief when the music ended.

Jack was hoping to get a closer look at Aliena, but to his disappointment she left the room after the music, and went up the stairs. She must have her own bedroom on the top floor, he realized.

The children and some of the adults played chess and nine-men's morris to while away the evening, and the more industrious people made belts, caps, socks, gloves, bowls, whistles, dice, shovels and horsewhips. Jack played several games of chess, winning them all; but a man-at-arms was angry at being defeated by a child and after that Jack's mother made him stop playing. He moved around the hall, listening to the different conversations. Some people talked sensibly, he found, about the fields and the animals, or about bishops and kings, while others only teased one another, and boasted, and told funny stories. He found them all equally intriguing.

Eventually the rushlights burned down, the earl retired, and the other sixty or seventy people wrapped their cloaks around them and lay down on the straw-covered floor to sleep.

As usual, his mother and Tom lay down together, under Tom's big cloak, and she hugged him the way she used to hug Jack when he was small. He watched enviously. He could hear them talking quietly, and his mother gave a low, intimate laugh. After a while their bodies began to move rhythmically under the cloak. The first time he had seen them do this, Jack had been terribly worried, thinking that whatever it was, it must hurt; but they kissed one another while they were doing it, and although sometimes his mother moaned, he could tell it was a moan of pleasure. He was reluctant to ask her about it, he was not sure why. Now, however, as the fire burned lower, he saw another couple doing the same sort of thing, and he was forced to conclude that it must be normal. It was just another mystery, he thought, and soon after that he fell asleep.

The children were awake early in the morning, but breakfast could not be served until mass had been said, and mass could not be said until the earl got up, so they had to wait. An early-rising servant conscripted them to bring in

firewood for the day. The adults started to wake as the cold morning air came in through the door. When the children had finished bringing in the wood, they met Aliena.

She came down the stairs, as she had last night, but now she looked different. She wore a short tunic and felt boots. Her massed curls were tied back with a ribbon, showing the graceful line of her jaw, her small ears and her white neck. Her big dark eyes, which had seemed grave and adult last night, now sparkled with fun, and she was smiling. She was followed by the boy who had sat at the head of the table with her and the earl last night. He looked a year or two older than Jack, but he was not full-grown like Alfred. He looked curiously at Jack, Martha and Alfred, but it was the girl who spoke. “Who are you?” she said.

Alfred replied. “My father is the stonemason who’s going to repair this castle. I’m Alfred. My sister’s name is Martha. That’s Jack.”

When she came close Jack could smell lavender, and he was awestruck. How could a person smell of flowers?

“How old are you?” she said to Alfred.

“Fourteen.” Alfred was also overawed by her, Jack could tell. After a moment Alfred blurted: “How old are you?”

“Fifteen. Do you want something to eat?”

“Yes.”

“Come with me.”

They all followed her out of the hall and down the steps. Alfred said: “But they don’t serve breakfast before mass.”

“They do what I tell them,” Aliena said with a toss of her head.

She led them across the bridge to the lower compound and told them to wait outside the kitchen while she went in. Martha whispered to Jack: “Isn’t she pretty?” He nodded dumbly. A few moments later Aliena came out with a pot of beer and a loaf of wheat bread. She broke the bread into hunks and handed it out, then she passed the pot around.

After a while Martha said shyly: “Where’s your mother?”

“My mother died,” Aliena said briskly.

“Aren’t you sad?” Martha said.

“I was, but it was a long time ago.” She indicated the boy beside her with a jerk of her head. “Richard can’t even remember it.”

Richard must be her brother, Jack concluded.

“My mother’s dead, too,” Martha said, and tears came to her eyes.

“When did she die?” Aliena asked.

“Last week.”

Aliena did not seem much moved by Martha’s tears, Jack observed; unless she was being matter-of-fact to hide her own grief. She said abruptly: “Well, who’s that woman with you, then?”

Jack said eagerly: “That’s *my* mother.” He was thrilled to have something to say to her.

She turned to him as if seeing him for the first time. “Well, where’s *your* father?”

“I haven’t got one,” he said. He felt excited just to have her looking at him.

“Did he die, too?”

“No,” Jack said. “I never had a father.”

There was a moment of silence, then Aliena, Richard and Alfred all burst out laughing. Jack was puzzled, and looked blankly at them; and their laughter increased, until he began to feel mortified. What was so funny about never having had a father? Even Martha was smiling, her tears forgotten.

Alfred said in a jeering tone: “Where did you come from, then, if you didn’t have a father?”

“From my mother—all young things come from their mothers,” Jack said, mystified. “What have fathers got to do with it?”

They all laughed even more. Richard jumped up and down with glee, pointing a mocking finger at Jack. Alfred said to Aliena: “He doesn’t know anything—we found him in the forest.”

Jack’s cheeks burned with shame. He had been so happy to be talking to Aliena, and now she thought he was a complete fool, a forest ignoramus; and the worst of it was he still did not know what he had said wrong. He wanted to cry, and that made it worse. The bread stuck in his throat and he could not swallow. He looked at Aliena, her lovely face alive with amusement, and he could not stand it, so he threw his bread on the ground and walked away.

Not caring where he went, he walked until he came to the bank of the castle wall, and scrambled up the steep slope to the top. There he sat down on the cold earth, looking outward, feeling sorry for himself, hating Alfred and Richard and even Martha and Aliena. Princesses were heartless, he decided.

The bell rang for mass. Religious services were yet another mystery to him. Speaking a language that was neither English nor French, the priests sang and talked to statues, to pictures, and even to beings that were completely invisible. Jack’s mother avoided going to services whenever she could. As the inhabitants of the castle made their way to the chapel, Jack scooted over the top of the wall and sat out of sight on the far side.

The castle was surrounded by flat, bare fields, with woodland in the distance. Two early visitors were walking across the level ground toward the castle. The sky was full of low gray cloud. Jack wondered if it might snow.

Two more early visitors appeared within Jack’s view. These two were on horseback. They rode rapidly to the castle, overtaking the first pair. They walked their horses across the wooden bridge to the gatehouse. All four visitors would have to wait until after mass before they could get on with

whatever business brought them here, for everyone attended the service except for the sentries on duty.

A sudden voice close by made Jack jump. “So there you are.” It was his mother. He turned to her, and she saw immediately that he was upset. “What’s the matter?”

He wanted to take comfort from her, but he hardened his heart and said: “Did I have a father?”

“Yes,” she said. “Everyone has a father.” She knelt beside him.

He turned his face away. His humiliation had been her fault, for not telling him about his father. “What happened to him?”

“He died.”

“When I was small?”

“Before you were born.”

“How could he be my father, if he died before I was born?”

“Babies grow from a seed. The seed comes out of a man’s prick and is planted in a woman’s cunny. Then the seed grows into a baby in her belly, and when it’s ready it comes out.”

Jack was silent for a moment, digesting this information. He had a suspicion that it was connected with what they did in the night. “Is Tom going to plant a seed in you?” he said.

“Maybe.”

“Then you’ll have a new baby.”

She nodded. “A brother for you. Would you like that?”

“I don’t care,” he said. “Tom has taken you away from me already. A brother wouldn’t make any difference.”

She put her arm around him and hugged him. “Nobody will ever take me away from you,” she said.

That made him feel a bit better.

They sat together for a while, then she said: “It’s cold here. Let’s go and sit by the fire until breakfast.”

He nodded. They got up and went back over the castle wall, running down the bank into the compound. There was no sign of the four visitors. Perhaps they had gone into the chapel.

As Jack and his mother walked over the bridge to the upper compound, Jack said: “What was my father’s name?”

“Jack, the same as you,” she said. “They called him Jack Shareburg.”

That pleased him. He had the same name as his father. “So, if there’s another Jack, I can tell people that I’m Jack Jackson.”

“You can. People don’t always call you what you want them to, but you can try.”

Jack nodded. He felt better. He would think of himself as Jack Jackson. He was not so ashamed now. At least he knew about fathers, and he knew the

name of his own. Jack Shareburg.

They reached the gatehouse of the upper compound. There were no sentries there. Jack's mother stopped, frowning. "I've got the oddest feeling that something strange is going on," she said. Her voice was calm and even, but there was a note of fear that chilled Jack, and he had a premonition of disaster.

His mother stepped into the small guardroom in the base of the guardhouse. A moment later Jack heard her gasp. He went in behind her. She was standing in an attitude of shock, her hand up to her mouth, staring down at the floor.

The sentry was lying flat on his back, his arms limp at his sides. His throat was cut, there was a pool of fresh blood on the ground beside him, and he was unquestionably dead.

III

William Hamleigh and his father had set off in the middle of the night, with almost a hundred knights and men-at-arms on horseback, and Mother in the rearguard. The torchlit army, their faces muffled against the cold night air, must have terrified the inhabitants of the villages through which they thundered on their way to Earlscastle. They had reached the crossroads while it was still pitch-dark. From there they had walked their horses, to give them a rest and to minimize the noise. As dawn cracked the sky they concealed themselves in the woods across the fields from the castle of Earl Bartholomew.

William had not actually counted the number of fighting men he had seen in the castle—an omission for which Mother had berated him mercilessly, even though, as he had tried to point out, many of the men he saw there were waiting to be sent on errands, and others might have arrived after William left, so a count would not be reliable. But it would have been better than nothing, as Father had said. However, he estimated he had seen about forty men; so if there had been no great change in the few hours since, the Hamleighs would have an advantage of better than two to one.

It was nowhere near enough to besiege the castle, of course. However, they had devised a plan for taking the castle without a siege. The problem was that the attacking army would be seen by lookouts, and the castle would be closed up long before they arrived. The answer was to find some way to keep the castle open for the time it took the army to get there from its place of concealment in the woods.

It had been Mother who solved the problem, of course.

“We need a diversion,” she had said, scratching a boil on her chin. “Something to panic them, so that they don’t notice the army until it’s too late. Like a fire.”

Father said: “If a stranger walks in and starts a fire, that will alert them anyway.”

“It would have to be done on the sly,” William said.

“Of course it would,” said Mother impatiently. “You’ll have to do it while they’re at mass.”

“Me?” William had said.

He had been put in charge of the advance party.

The morning sky lightened with painful slowness. William was nervously impatient. During the night, he and Mother and Father had added refinements

to the basic idea, but still there was a great deal that could go wrong: the advance party might not get into the castle for some reason, or they might be viewed with suspicion and be unable to act surreptitiously, or they might be caught before they could achieve anything. Even if the plan worked, there would be a battle, William's first real fight. Men would be wounded and killed, and William might be one of the unlucky ones. His bowels tightened with fear. Aliena would be there, and she would know if he were vanquished. On the other hand, she would be there to see it if he triumphed. He pictured himself bursting into her bedroom with a bloody sword in his hand. Then she would wish she had not laughed at him.

From the castle came the sound of the bell for morning mass.

William nodded, and two men detached themselves from the group and began to walk across the fields toward the castle. They were Raymond and Ranulf, two hard-faced, hard-muscled men some years older than William. William had picked them himself: his father had given him complete control. Father himself would lead the main assault.

William watched Raymond and Ranulf walk briskly across the frozen fields. Before they reached the castle, he looked at Walter, then kicked his horse, and he and Walter set off across the fields at a trot. The sentries on the battlements would see two separate pairs of people, one on foot and one on horseback, approaching the castle first thing in the morning: it looked perfectly innocent.

William's timing was good. He and Walter passed Raymond and Ranulf about a hundred yards from the castle. At the bridge they dismounted. William's heart was in his mouth. If he messed up this part, the whole attack would be ruined.

There were two sentries at the gate. William had a nightmarish suspicion that there would be an ambush, and a dozen men-at-arms would spring out of concealment and hack him to pieces. The sentries looked alert but not anxious. They were not wearing armor. William and Walter had chain mail under their cloaks.

William's guts seemed to have turned to water. He could not swallow. One of the sentries recognized him. "Hello, Lord William," he said jovially. "Come courting again, have you?"

William said "Oh, my God," in a weak voice, then plunged a dagger into the sentry's belly, jabbing it up under the rib cage to the heart.

The man gasped, sagged, and opened his mouth as if to scream. A noise could spoil everything. Panicking, not knowing what to do, William pulled out the dagger and stuck it into the man's open mouth, shoving the blade into his throat to shut him up. Instead of a scream, blood flowed out of his mouth. The man's eyes closed. William pulled the dagger out as the man fell to the ground.

William’s horse had sidestepped away, frightened by the sudden movements. William caught its bridle, then looked at Walter, who had taken the other sentry. Walter had knifed his man more efficiently, slitting his throat, so that he died in silence. I must remember that, William thought, next time I have to silence a man. Then he thought: I’ve done it! I’ve killed a man!

He realized he was no longer scared.

He handed his reins to Walter and ran up the spiral staircase to the gatehouse tower. On the upper level was a winding room for pulling up the drawbridge. With his sword, William hacked at the thick hawser. Two blows were sufficient to sever it. He dropped the loose end out of the window. It fell on the bank and slid softly into the moat, hardly making a splash. Now the drawbridge could not be raised against Father’s attacking force. This was one of the refinements they had thought of last night.

Raymond and Ranulf arrived at the gatehouse just as William reached the foot of the stairs. Their first job was to wreck the huge ironbound oak gates which closed the arch leading from the bridge into the compound. They each took out a wooden hammer and a chisel and began to chip out the mortar surrounding the mighty iron hinges. The striking of hammer on chisel made a dull thud which sounded terribly loud to William.

William dragged the two dead sentries into the guardroom quickly. With everyone at mass, there was a strong chance the bodies would not be seen until it was too late.

He took his reins from Walter and the two of them walked out from under the arch and headed across the compound toward the stable. William forced his legs to move at a normal, unhurried pace, and glanced surreptitiously up at the sentries on the watchtowers. Had one of them seen the drawbridge rope fall into the moat? Were they wondering about the sound of hammering? Some of them were looking at William and Walter, but they did not seem agitated, and the hammering, which was already fading in William’s ears, must have been inaudible from the tops of the towers. William felt relieved. The plan was working.

They reached the stables and went inside. They both draped their horses’ reins loosely over a bar, so the beasts could escape. Then William took out his flint and scraped a spark, setting fire to the straw on the floor. It was soiled and damp in patches, but nevertheless it began to smolder. He lit three more small fires, and Walter did the same. They stood watching for a moment. The horses caught a whiff of smoke, and moved nervously in the stalls. William stayed a moment longer. The fire was under way, and so was the plan.

He and Walter left the stable and went out into the open compound. At the gateway, hidden under the arch, Raymond and Ranulf were still chipping away at the mortar around the hinges. William and Walter turned toward the kitchen, to give the impression that they might be going to get something to

eat, which would be natural. There was no one else in the compound: everyone was at mass. Casually looking up at the battlements, William observed that the sentries were not looking into the castle, but out across the fields, as of course they were supposed to. Nevertheless William expected someone to emerge from one of the buildings at any moment and challenge them; and then they would have to kill him right here in the open, and if that were seen the game would be up.

They skirted the kitchen and headed for the bridge leading to the upper compound. They heard the muted sounds of the service as they passed the chapel. Earl Bartholomew was in there, all unsuspecting, William thought with a thrill; he had no idea that there was an army a mile away, four of the enemy were already inside his stronghold, and his stables were on fire. Aliena was in the chapel too, praying on her knees. Soon she'll be on her knees to me, William thought, and the blood pounded in his head giddily.

They reached the bridge and started across. They had ensured that the first bridge remained passable, by cutting the drawbridge rope and disabling the gate, so that their army could get in. But the earl could still flee across the bridge and take refuge in the upper compound. William's next task was to prevent this by raising the drawbridge to make the second bridge impassable. The earl would then be isolated and vulnerable in the lower compound.

They reached the second gatehouse and a sentry stepped out of the guardroom. "You're early," he said.

William said: "We've been summoned to see the earl." He approached the sentry, but the man stepped back a pace. William did not want him to back away too far, for if he stepped out from under the arch he would be visible to the sentries on the ramparts of the upper circle.

"The earl's in chapel," the sentry said.

"We'll have to wait." This guard had to be killed quickly and quietly, but William did not know how to get close enough. He glanced at Walter for guidance, but Walter was just waiting patiently, looking imperturbable.

"There's a fire in the keep," the guard said. "Go and warm yourselves." William hesitated, and the guard began to look wary. "What are you waiting for?" he said with a trace of irritation.

William cast around desperately for something to say. "Can we get something to eat?" he said at last.

"Not until after mass," the sentry said. "Then they'll serve breakfast in the keep."

Now William saw that Walter had been edging imperceptibly to one side. If the guard would only turn a little, Walter could get behind him. William took a few casual steps in the opposite direction, going past the sentry, saying, "I'm not impressed by your earl's hospitality." The sentry was turning. William said: "We've come a long way—"

Then Walter pounced.

He stepped behind the sentry and put his arms over the man's shoulders. With his left hand he jerked the sentry's chin back, and with the knife in his right hand he slit the man's throat. William breathed a sigh of relief. It was done in a moment.

Between them, William and Walter had killed three men before breakfast. William felt a thrilling sense of power. Nobody will laugh at me after today! he thought.

Walter dragged the body into the guardroom. The plan of this gatehouse was exactly the same as that of the first one, with a spiral staircase up to the winding room. William went up the stairs and Walter followed.

William had not reconnoitered this room when he was at the castle yesterday. He had not thought to, but in any case it would have been hard to think of a plausible pretext. He had assumed that there would be a winding wheel, or at least a reel with a handle, for lifting the drawbridge; but now he saw that there was no winding gear at all, just a rope and a capstan. The only way to lift the drawbridge was to heave on the rope. William and Walter grasped it and pulled together, but the bridge did not even creak. It was a task for ten men.

William was puzzled for a moment. The other drawbridge, the one leading to the castle entrance, had a big wheel. He and Walter could have lifted that one. Then he realized that the outer drawbridge would be raised every night, whereas this one was only lifted in an emergency.

There was nothing to be gained by pondering over it, anyway. The question was what to do next. If he could not raise the drawbridge, he could at least close the gates, which would certainly delay the earl.

He ran back down the staircase with Walter close behind. As he reached the foot of the stairs he had a shock. Not everyone was at mass, it seemed. He saw a woman and a child come out of the guardroom.

William's step faltered. He recognized the woman immediately. She was the builder's wife, the one he had tried to buy yesterday for a pound. She saw him, and her penetrating honey-colored eyes looked straight through him. William did not even consider pretending to be an innocent visitor waiting for the earl: he knew she would not be deceived. He had to prevent her from giving the alarm. And the way to do that was to kill her, quickly and silently, as they had killed the sentries.

Her all-seeing eyes read his intentions in his face. She grabbed her child's hand and turned away. William made a grab for her but she was too quick for him. She ran into the compound, heading for the keep. William and Walter ran after her.

She was very light on her feet, and they were wearing chain mail and carrying heavy weapons. She reached the staircase that led up to the great

hall. As she ran up the steps, she screamed. William looked up at the ramparts all around. The scream had alerted at least two sentries. The game was up. William stopped running and stood at the foot of the steps, breathing hard. Walter did the same. Two sentries, then three, then four were running down the ramparts into the compound. The woman disappeared into the keep, still hand in hand with the boy. She was no longer important: now that the sentries had been alerted there was no point in killing her.

He and Walter drew their swords and stood side by side, ready to fight for their lives.

The priest was elevating the Host over the altar when Tom realized there was something wrong with the horses. He could hear a lot of neighing and stamping, much more than was normal. A moment later someone interrupted the priest's quiet Latin chant by saying loudly: "I smell smoke!"

Tom smelled it too, then, and so did everyone else. Tom was taller than the rest and could see out of the chapel windows if he stood on tiptoe. He stepped to the side and looked out. The stables were blazing fiercely.

"Fire!" he said, and before he could say any more his voice was drowned by the shouts of the others. There was a rush for the door. The service was forgotten. Tom held Martha back, for fear she would be hurt in the crush, and told Alfred to stay with them. He wondered where Ellen and Jack were.

A moment later there was no one in the chapel but the three of them and an annoyed priest.

Tom took the children outside. Some people were releasing the horses to save them from harm, and others were drawing water from the well to throw on the flames. Tom could not see Ellen. The freed horses charged around the compound, terrified by the fire and the running, shouting people. The drumming of hooves was tremendous. Tom listened hard for a moment, and frowned: it was really *too* tremendous—it sounded more like a hundred horses than twenty or thirty. Suddenly he was struck by a frightening apprehension. "Stay right here for a moment, Martha," he said. "Alfred, you look after her." He ran up the embankment to the top of the ramparts. It was a steep slope, and he had to slow down before he reached the top. At the summit, breathing hard, he looked out.

His apprehension had been right, and now his heart was seized in the cold grip of fear. An army of horsemen, eighty to a hundred strong, was charging across the brown fields toward the castle. It was a fearsome sight. Tom could see the metallic glint of their chain mail and their drawn swords. The horses were galloping flat out, and a fog of warm breath rose from their nostrils. The riders were hunched in their saddles, grimly purposeful. There was no yelling and screaming, just the deafening thunder of hundreds of pounding hooves.

Tom looked back into the castle compound. Why could nobody else hear the army? Because the sound of the hooves was muffled by the castle walls and merged with the noise of panic in the compound. Why had the sentries seen nothing? Because they had all left their posts to fight the fire. This attack had been masterminded by someone clever. Now it was up to Tom to give the alarm.

And where was Ellen?

His eyes raked the compound as the attackers pounded nearer. Much of it was obscured by thick white smoke from the burning stables. He could not see Ellen.

He spotted Earl Bartholomew, beside the well, trying to organize the carrying of water to the fire. Tom ran down the embankment and rushed across the compound to the well. He grabbed the earl's shoulder, none too gently, and yelled in his ear to make himself heard above the din. "It's an attack!"

"What?"

"We're being attacked!"

The earl was thinking about the fire. "Attacked? Who by?"

"Listen!" Tom yelled. "A hundred horses!"

The earl cocked his head. Tom watched as realization dawned on the pale, aristocratic face. "You're right—by the cross!" He suddenly looked afraid. "Have you seen them?"

"Yes."

"Who—Never mind who! A hundred horses?"

"Yes—"

"Peter! Ralph!" The earl turned from Tom and summoned his lieutenants. "It's a raid—this fire is a diversion—we're under attack!" Like the earl, they were at first uncomprehending, then they listened, and finally they showed fear. The earl yelled: "Tell the men to get their swords—hurry, hurry!" He turned back to Tom. "Come with me, stonemason—you're strong, we can close the gates." He ran off across the compound and Tom followed him. If they could close the gates and raise the drawbridge in time, they could hold off a hundred men.

They reached the gatehouse. They could see the army through the arch. It was less than a mile away now, and spreading out, Tom observed, the faster horses in front and the stragglers behind. "Look at the gates!" the earl yelled.

Tom looked. The two great iron-banded oak gates lay flat on the ground. Their hinges had been chiseled out of the wall, he could see. Some of the enemy had been here earlier, he thought. His stomach churned with fear.

He looked back into the compound, still searching for Ellen. He could not see her. What had become of her? Anything could happen now. He needed to be with her and protect her.

“The drawbridge!” said the earl.

The best way to protect Ellen was to keep the attackers out, Tom realized. The earl ran up the spiral staircase that led to the winding room, and with an effort Tom made himself follow. If they could lift the drawbridge, a few men could hold the gatehouse. But when he reached the winding room his heart sank. The rope had been cut. There was no way to lift the drawbridge.

Earl Bartholomew cursed bitterly. “Whoever planned this is as cunning as Lucifer,” he said.

It struck Tom that whoever had wrecked the gates, cut the drawbridge rope and started the fire must still be inside the castle somewhere, and he looked around fearfully, wondering where the intruders might be.

The earl glanced out of an arrow-slit window. “Dear God, they’re almost here.” He ran down the stairs.

Tom was close on his heels. In the gateway, several knights were hastily buckling their sword belts and putting on helmets. Earl Bartholomew started to give orders. “Ralph and John—drive some loose horses across the bridge to get in the enemy’s way. Richard—Peter—Robin—get some others and make a stand here.” The gateway was narrow, and a few men could hold off the attackers for a little while at least. “You—stonemason—get the servants and children across the bridge to the upper compound.”

Tom was glad to have an excuse to look for Ellen. He ran to the chapel first. Alfred and Martha were where he had left them a few moments earlier, looking scared. “Go to the keep,” he shouted to them. “Any other children or women you pass, tell them to go with you—orders of the earl. Run!” They ran off immediately.

Tom looked around. He would follow them soon: he was determined not to get caught in the lower compound. But he had a few moments to spare in which he could carry out the earl’s order. He ran to the stable, where people were still throwing buckets of water over the flames. “Forget the fire, the castle is being attacked,” he yelled. “Take your children to the keep.”

Smoke got in his eyes and his vision blurred with tears. He rubbed his eyes and ran to a small crowd who were standing watching the fire consume the stables. He repeated his message to them, and to a group of stable hands who had rounded up some of the loose horses. Ellen was nowhere to be seen.

The smoke made him cough. Choking, he ran back across the compound to the bridge that led to the upper circle. He paused there, gasping for air, and looked back. People were streaming across the bridge. He was almost sure that Ellen and Jack must have gone to the keep already, but he was terrified that he might have missed them. He could see a tightly packed knot of knights engaged in fierce hand-to-hand fighting at the lower gatehouse. Otherwise there was nothing to see but smoke. Suddenly Earl Bartholomew appeared at his side, with blood on his sword and tears on his face from the smoke. “Save

yourself!” the earl shouted at Tom. At that moment the attackers burst through the arch of the lower gatehouse, scattering the defending knights. Tom turned and ran across the bridge.

Fifteen or twenty of the earl’s men stood at the second gatehouse, ready to defend the upper compound. They parted to let Tom and the earl through. As their ranks closed again, Tom heard hooves hammering on the wooden bridge behind him. The defenders had no chance now. At the back of his mind Tom realized that this had been a cleverly planned and perfectly executed raid. But his main thought was fear for Ellen and the children. A hundred bloodthirsty armed men were about to burst in on them. He ran across the upper compound to the keep.

Halfway up the wooden steps leading to the great hall he glanced back. The defenders of the second gatehouse were overcome almost immediately by the charging horsemen. Earl Bartholomew was on the steps behind Tom. There was just time for them both to get into the keep and lift the staircase inside. Tom ran the rest of the way up the steps and leaped into the hall—and then he saw that the attackers had been cleverer yet.

The attackers’ advance party, who had wrecked the gates, and cut the rope of the drawbridge, and set fire to the stables, had performed one more task: they had come to the keep and ambushed all who took refuge there.

They were now standing just inside the great hall, four grim-faced men in chain mail. All around them were the bleeding bodies of dead and wounded knights of the earl’s, who had been slaughtered as they stepped inside. And the leader of the advance party, Tom saw with a shock, was William Hamleigh.

Tom stared, stunned by surprise. William’s eyes were wide with bloodlust. Tom thought William was going to kill him, but before he had time to be scared, one of William’s henchmen seized Tom’s arm, pulled him inside and shoved him out of the way.

So it was the Hamleighs who were attacking Earl Bartholomew’s castle. But why?

All the servants and children were in a frightened huddle on the far side of the hall. Only the armed men were being killed, then. Tom scanned the faces in the hall, and, to his overwhelming relief and gratitude, he saw Alfred, Martha, Ellen and Jack, all in a group, looking terrified but alive and apparently unhurt.

Before he could go to them a fight started in the doorway. Earl Bartholomew and two knights charged in and were ambushed by the waiting Hamleigh knights. One of the earl’s men was struck down immediately, but the other protected the earl with his raised sword. Several more of Bartholomew’s knights came in behind the earl, and suddenly there was a tremendous skirmish at close quarters, with knives and fists being used

because there was no room to deploy a long sword. For a moment it looked as if the earl's men would overcome William's; then some of Bartholomew's men turned and began to defend themselves from behind: clearly the attacking army had penetrated the upper compound and was now mounting the steps and attacking the keep.

A powerful voice bellowed: "HOLD!"

The men on both sides took defensive positions, and the fighting stopped.

The same voice called: "Bartholomew of Shiring, will you surrender?"

Tom saw the earl turn and look out through the door. Knights stepped aside to get out of his line of vision. "Hamleigh," the earl murmured in a quietly incredulous tone. Then he raised his voice and said: "Will you leave my family and servants unharmed?"

"Yes."

"Will you swear it?"

"I swear it, by the cross, if you surrender."

"I surrender," said Earl Bartholomew.

There was a great cheer from outside.

Tom turned away. Martha ran across the room to him. He picked her up, then embraced Ellen.

"We're safe," Ellen said with tears in her eyes. "All of us—all safe."

"Safe," said Tom bitterly, "but destitute again."

William stopped cheering suddenly. He was the son of Lord Percy, and it was undignified for him to yell and whoop like the men-at-arms. He composed his face in an expression of lordly satisfaction.

They had won. He had carried out the plan, not without some setbacks, but it had worked, and the attack had succeeded largely because of his advance work. He had lost count of the men he had killed and maimed, yet he was unharmed. He was struck by a thought: there was a lot of blood on his face for one who was uninjured. When he wiped it away, more came. It must be his own. He put his hand to his face, then to his head. Some of his hair had gone, and when he touched his scalp it hurt like fire. He had not been wearing a helmet, for that would have looked suspicious. Now that he was aware of the wound it started to hurt. He did not mind. An injury was a badge of courage.

His father came up the steps and confronted Earl Bartholomew in the doorway. Bartholomew held out his sword, hilt first, in a gesture of surrender. Percy took it, and his men cheered again.

As the noise died down William heard Bartholomew say: "Why have you done this?"

Father replied: "You plotted against the king."

Bartholomew was astonished that Father knew this, and the shock showed on his face. William held his breath, wondering whether Bartholomew, in the despair of defeat, would admit the conspiracy in front of all these people. But he recovered his composure, drew himself upright, and said: “I’ll defend my honor in front of the king, not here.”

Father nodded. “As you wish. Tell your men to lay down their arms and leave the castle.”

The earl murmured a command to his knights, and one by one they approached Father and dropped their swords on the floor in front of him. William enjoyed watching that. Look at them all, humbled before my father, he thought proudly. Father was talking to one of his knights. “Round up the loose horses and put them in the stable. Have some men go around and disarm the dead and wounded.” The weapons and horses of the defeated belonged to the victors, of course: Bartholomew’s knights would disperse unarmed and on foot. The Hamleighs’ men would also empty the castle’s stores. The confiscated horses would be loaded with goods and driven back to Hamleigh, the village from which the family took its name. Father beckoned another knight and said: “Sort out the kitchen staff and have them make dinner. Send the rest of the servants away.” Men were hungry after a battle: now there would be a feast. Earl Bartholomew’s best food and wine would be eaten and drunk here before the army rode home.

A moment later, the knights around Father and Bartholomew divided, making a passage, and Mother swept in.

She looked very small among all the hefty fighting men, but when she unwound the scarf that had covered her face, those who had not seen her before started back, shocked, as people always were, by her disfigurement. She looked at Father. “A great triumph,” she said in a satisfied tone.

William wanted to say: *That was because of good advance work, wasn’t it, Mother?*

He bit his tongue, but his father spoke for him. “It was William who got us in.”

Mother turned to him, and he waited eagerly for her to congratulate him. “Did he?” she said.

“Yes,” Father said. “The boy did a good job.”

Mother nodded. “Perhaps he did,” she said.

William’s heart was warmed by her praise, and he grinned foolishly.

She looked at Earl Bartholomew. “The earl should bow to me,” she said.

The earl said: “No.”

Mother said: “Fetch the daughter.”

William looked around. For a moment he had forgotten about Aliena. He scanned the faces of the servants and children, and spotted her right away, standing with Matthew, the effeminate household steward. William went to

her, took her arm, and brought her to his mother. Matthew followed them.

Mother said: “Cut off her ears.”

Aliena screamed.

William felt a strange stirring in his loins.

Bartholomew’s face turned gray. “You promised you wouldn’t harm her if I surrendered,” he said. “You swore it.”

Mother said: “And our protection will be as complete as your surrender.”

That was clever, William thought.

Still Bartholomew looked defiant.

William wondered who would be chosen to cut off Aliena’s ears. Perhaps Mother would give him the task. The idea was peculiarly exciting.

Mother said to Bartholomew: “Kneel.”

Slowly, Bartholomew went down on one knee and bowed his head.

William felt faintly disappointed.

Mother raised her voice. “Look at this!” she shouted to the assembled company. “Never forget the fate of a man who insults the Hamleighs!” She looked around defiantly, and William’s heart swelled with pride. The family honor was restored.

Mother turned away, and Father took over. “Take him to his bedroom,” he said. “Guard him well.”

Bartholomew got to his feet.

Father said to William: “Take the girl as well.”

William took Aliena’s arm in a hard grip. He liked touching her. He was going to take her up to the bedroom. There was no telling what might happen. If he were left alone with her, he would be able to do anything he wanted to her. He could rip her clothes off and look at her nakedness. He could—

The earl said: “Let Matthew Steward come with us, to take care of my daughter.”

Father glanced at Matthew. “He looks safe enough,” he said with a grin. “All right.”

William looked at Aliena’s face. She was still white, but she was even more beautiful when she was frightened. It was so exciting to see her in this vulnerable state. He wanted to crush her ripe body beneath his, and see the fear in her face as he forced her thighs apart. On impulse, he put his face close to hers and said in a low voice: “I still want to marry you.”

She drew away from him. “Marry?” she said in a loud voice full of scorn. “I’d rather die than marry you, you loathsome puffed-up toad!”

All the knights smiled broadly, and a few of the servants sniggered. William felt his face flush bright red.

Mother took a sudden step forward and slapped Aliena’s face. Bartholomew moved to defend her but the knights restrained him. “Shut up,” Mother said to Aliena. “You’re not a fine lady anymore—you’re the daughter

of a traitor, and soon you'll be destitute and starving. You're not good enough for my son now. Get out of my sight, and don't speak another word."

Aliena turned away. William released her arm, and she followed her father. As he watched her go, William realized that the sweet taste of revenge had turned bitter in his mouth.

She was a real heroine, just like a princess in a poem, Jack thought. He watched, awestruck, as she climbed the stairs with her head held high. The whole room was silent until she disappeared from sight. When she went it was like a lamp going out. Jack stared at the place where she had been.

One of the knights came over and said: "Who's the cook?"

The cook himself was too wary to volunteer, but someone else pointed him out.

"You're going to make dinner," the knight told him. "Take your helpers and go to the kitchen." The cook picked half a dozen people out of the crowd. The knight raised his voice. "The rest of you—clear off. Get out of the castle. Go quickly and don't try to take anything that's not yours, if you value your lives. We've all got blood on our swords and a little more won't show. Get moving!"

They all shuffled through the door. Jack's mother took his hand and Tom held Martha's. Alfred stayed close. They were all wearing their cloaks, and they had no possessions other than their clothes and their eating knives. With the crowd they went down the steps, over the bridge, across the lower compound, and through the gatehouse, stepping over the useless gates, leaving the castle without a pause. When they stepped off the bridge onto the field on the far side of the moat, the tension snapped like a cut bowstring, and they all began to talk about their ordeal in loud, excited voices. Jack listened idly as he walked along. Everybody was recalling how brave they had been. He had not been brave—he had simply run away.

Aliena was the only one who had been brave. When she came into the keep and found that instead of being a place of safety it was a trap, she had taken charge of the servants and children, telling them to sit down and keep quiet and stay out of the way of the fighting men, screaming at the Hamleighs' knights when they were rough with their prisoners or raised their swords against unarmed men and women, acting as if she were completely invulnerable.

His mother ruffled his hair. "What are you thinking about?"

"I was wondering what will happen to the princess."

She knew what he meant. "The Lady Aliena."

"She's like a princess in a poem, living in a castle. But knights aren't as virtuous as the poems say."

“That’s true,” Mother said grimly.

“What will become of her?”

She shook her head. “I really don’t know.”

“Her mother’s dead.”

“Then she’ll have a hard time.”

“I thought so.” Jack paused. “She laughed at me because I didn’t know about fathers. But I liked her all the same.”

Mother put her arm around him. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about fathers.”

He touched her hand, accepting her apology. They walked on in silence. From time to time a family would leave the road and head across the fields, making for the home of relatives or friends where they might beg some breakfast and think about what to do next. Most of the crowd stayed together as far as the crossroads, then they split up, some going north or south, some continuing straight on toward the market town of Shiring. Mother detached herself from Jack and put a hand on Tom’s arm, making him stop. “Where shall we go?” she said.

He looked faintly surprised to be asked, as if he expected them all to follow wherever he led without asking questions. Jack had noticed that Mother often brought that surprised look to Tom’s face. Perhaps his previous wife had been a different sort of person.

“We’re going to Kingsbridge Priory,” Tom said.

“Kingsbridge!” Mother seemed shaken. Jack wondered why.

Tom did not notice. “Last night I heard there’s a new prior,” he went on. “Usually a new man wants to make some repairs or alterations to the church.”

“The old prior is dead?”

“Yes.”

For some reason Mother was soothed by that news. She must have known the old prior, Jack thought, and disliked him.

Tom heard the troubled note in her voice at last. “Is there something wrong with Kingsbridge?” he asked her.

“I’ve been there. It’s more than a day’s journey.”

Jack knew that it was not the length of the journey that bothered Mother, but Tom did not. “A little more,” he said. “We can get there by midday tomorrow.”

“All right.”

They walked on.

A little later Jack began to feel a pain in his belly. For a while he wondered what it was. He had not been hurt at the castle and Alfred had not punched him for two days. But eventually he realized what it was.

He was hungry again.

Chapter 4

KINGSBRIDGE CATHEDRAL was not a welcoming sight. It was a low, squat, massive structure with thick walls and tiny windows. It had been built long before Tom's time, in the days when builders had not realized the importance of proportion. Tom's generation knew that a straight, true wall was stronger than a thick one, and that walls could be pierced with large windows so long as the arch of the window was a perfect half-circle. From a distance the church looked lopsided, and when Tom got closer he saw why: one of the twin towers at the west end had fallen down. He was delighted. The new prior was likely to want it rebuilt. Hope quickened his pace. To have been hired, as he had been at Earlscastle, and then to see his new employer defeated in battle and captured was heartbreaking. He felt he could not take another disappointment like that.

He glanced at Ellen. He was afraid that any day now she would decide that he was not going to find work before they all starved to death, and then she would leave him. She smiled at him, then she frowned again as she looked at the looming hulk of the cathedral. She was always uncomfortable with priests and monks, he had observed. He wondered if she felt guilty because the two of them were not actually married in the eyes of the Church.

The priory close was full of bustle and industry. Tom had seen sleepy monasteries and busy ones, but Kingsbridge was exceptional. It looked as if it were being spring-cleaned three months early. Outside the stable, two monks were grooming horses and a third was cleaning harness while novices mucked out the stalls. More monks were sweeping and scrubbing the guesthouse, which was next to the stable, and a cartload of straw stood outside ready to be strewn on the clean floor.

However, no one was working on the fallen tower. Tom studied the pile of stones that was all that remained of it. The collapse had to have occurred some years ago, for the broken edges of the stones had been blunted by frost and rain, the crushed mortar had been washed away, and the pile of masonry

had sunk an inch or two into the soft earth. It was remarkable that the repair had been left undone for so long, for cathedral churches were supposed to be prestigious. The old prior must have been idle or incompetent, or both. Tom had probably arrived just when the monks were planning the rebuilding. He was overdue for some luck.

“No one recognizes me,” Ellen said.

“When were you here?” Tom asked her.

“Thirteen years ago.”

“No wonder they’ve forgotten you.”

As they passed the west front of the church Tom opened one of the big wooden doors and looked inside. The nave was dark and gloomy, with thick columns and an ancient wooden ceiling. However, several monks were whitewashing the walls with long-handled brushes, and others were sweeping the beaten-earth floor. The new prior was evidently getting the whole place smartened up. That was a hopeful sign. Tom closed the door.

Beyond the church, in the kitchen courtyard, a team of novices stood around a trough of filthy water, scraping the accumulated soot and grease off cooking pots and kitchen utensils with sharp stones. Their knuckles were raw and red from constant immersion in the icy water. When they saw Ellen they giggled and looked away.

Tom asked a blushing novice where the cellarer was to be found. Strictly speaking, it was the sacrist he should have asked for, because the fabric of the church was the sacrist’s responsibility; but cellarers as a class were more approachable. In the end the prior would make the decision, anyway. The novice directed him to the undercroft of one of the buildings around the courtyard. Tom went in through an open doorway, and Ellen and the children followed. They all paused inside the door to peer into the gloom.

This building was newer and more soundly constructed than the church, Tom could tell at once. The air was dry and there was no smell of rot. Indeed, the mixed aromas of the stored food gave him painful stomach pangs, for he had not eaten in two days. As his eyes adjusted he saw that the undercroft had a good flagstone floor, short thick pillars, and a tunnel-vaulted ceiling. A moment later he noticed a tall, bald man spooning salt from a barrel into a pot. “Are you the cellarer?” said Tom, but the man held up a hand for silence, and Tom saw that he was counting. They all waited in silence for him to finish. At last he said: “Two score and nineteen, three score,” and put the spoon down.

Tom said: “I’m Tom, master builder, and I’d like to rebuild your northwest tower.”

“I’m Cuthbert, called Whitehead, the cellarer, and I’d like to see it done,” the man replied. “But we’ll have to ask Prior Philip. You’ll have heard that we have a new prior?”

“Yes.” Cuthbert was the friendly sort of monk, Tom decided; worldly and easygoing. He would be happy to chat. “And the new man seems intent on improving the appearance of the monastery.”

Cuthbert nodded. “But he’s not so keen on paying for it. Did you notice that all the work is being done by monks? He won’t hire any workmen—says the priory already has too many servants.”

That was bad news. “How do the monks feel about that?” Tom asked delicately.

Cuthbert laughed, and his wrinkled face creased up even more. “You’re a tactful man, Tom Builder. You’re thinking that you don’t often see monks working so hard. Well, the new prior’s not forcing anyone. But he interprets the Rule of Saint Benedict in such a way that those who do physical labor may eat red meat and drink wine, whereas those who merely study and pray must live on salt fish and weak beer. He can show you an elaborate theoretical justification for it, too, but the upshot is that he has plenty of volunteers for the hard work, especially among the youngsters.” Cuthbert did not seem disapproving, just bemused.

Tom said: “But monks can’t build stone walls, no matter how well they eat.” As he spoke, he heard a baby cry. The sound tugged at his heartstrings. It took him a moment to realize how odd it was that there should be a baby in a monastery.

“We’ll ask the prior,” Cuthbert was saying, but Tom hardly heard. It sounded like the cry of a very small baby, just a week or two old, and it was coming nearer. Tom caught Ellen’s eye. She looked startled too. Then there was a shadow in the door. Tom had a lump in his throat. A monk walked in carrying the baby. Tom looked at its face. It was his child.

Tom swallowed hard. The baby’s face was red, its fists were clenched, and its mouth was open, showing toothless gums. Its cry was not the cry of pain or sickness, just a simple demand for food. It was the healthy, lusty yell of a normal baby, and Tom felt weak with relief to see his son looking so well.

The monk carrying him was a cheerful-looking boy of about twenty years, with unruly hair and a big, rather stupid grin. Unlike most of the monks, he did not react to the presence of a woman. He smiled at everyone and then spoke to Cuthbert. “Jonathan needs more milk.”

Tom wanted to take the child in his arms. He tried to freeze his face so that his expression would not betray his emotions. He threw a furtive glance at the children. All they knew was that the abandoned baby had been found by a traveling priest. They did not even know that the priest had taken him to the little monastery in the forest. Now their faces showed nothing but mild curiosity. They had not connected this baby with the one they had left behind.

Cuthbert picked up a ladle and a small jug, and filled the jug from a bucket of milk. Ellen said to the young monk: “May I hold the baby?” She

held out her arms and the monk handed the child to her. Tom envied her. He longed to hold that tiny hot bundle close to his heart. Ellen rocked the baby, and he was quiet for a moment.

Cuthbert looked up and said: “Ah. Johnny Eightpence is a fair nursemaid, but he doesn’t have the woman’s touch.”

Ellen smiled at the boy. “Why do they call you Johnny Eightpence?”

Cuthbert answered for him. “Because he’s only eight pence to the shilling,” he said, tapping the side of his head to indicate that Johnny was half-witted. “But he seems to understand the needs of poor dumb creatures better than us wise folk. All part of God’s wider purpose, I’m sure,” he finished vaguely.

Ellen had edged over to Tom, and now she held the baby out to him. She had read his thoughts. He gave her a look of profound gratitude, and took the tiny child in his big hands. He could feel the baby’s heartbeat through the blanket in which it was wrapped. The material was fine: he wondered briefly where the monks had got such soft wool. He held the baby to his chest and rocked. His technique was not as good as Ellen’s, and the child started to cry again, but Tom did not mind: that loud, insistent yell was music to his ears, for it meant that the child he had abandoned was fit and strong. Hard though it was, he felt he had made the right decision in leaving the baby at the monastery.

Ellen asked Johnny: “Where does he sleep?”

Johnny answered for himself this time. “He has a crib in the dormitory with the rest of us.”

“He must wake you all in the night.”

“We get up at midnight anyway, for matins,” Johnny said.

“Of course! I was forgetting that monks’ nights are as sleepless as mothers’.”

Cuthbert handed Johnny the jug of milk. Johnny took the baby from Tom with a practiced one-arm movement. Tom was not ready to give the baby up, but in the monks’ eyes he had no rights at all, so he had to let him go. A moment later Johnny and the baby were gone, and Tom had to resist the impulse to go after them and say *Wait, stop, that’s my son, give him back to me*. Ellen stood beside him and squeezed his arm in a discreet gesture of sympathy.

Tom realized he had new reason to hope. If he could get work here, he could see baby Jonathan all the time, and it would be almost as if he had never abandoned him. It seemed almost too good to be true, and he did not dare to wish for it.

Cuthbert was looking shrewdly at Martha and Jack, who had both gone big-eyed at the sight of the jug full of creamy milk that Johnny had taken away. “Would the children like some milk?” he asked.

“Yes, please, Father, they would,” Tom said. He would have liked some himself.

Cuthbert ladled milk into two wooden bowls and gave them to Martha and Jack. They both drank quickly, leaving big white rings around their mouths. “Some more?” Cuthbert offered.

“Yes, please,” they replied in unison. Tom looked at Ellen, knowing that she must feel as he did, deeply thankful to see the little ones fed at last.

As Cuthbert refilled the bowls he said casually: “Where have you folks come from?”

“Earlscastle, near Shiring,” said Tom. “We left there yesterday morning.”

“Have you eaten since?”

“No,” Tom said flatly. He knew that Cuthbert’s inquiry was kindly, but he hated to admit that he had been unable to feed his children himself.

“Have some apples to keep you going until suppertime, then,” Cuthbert said, pointing to the barrel near the door.

Alfred, Ellen and Tom went to the barrel while Martha and Jack were drinking their second bowl of milk. Alfred tried to fill his arms with apples. Tom smacked them out of his hands and said in a low voice: “Just take two or three.” He took three.

Tom ate his apples gratefully, and his belly felt a little better, but he could not help wondering how soon supper would be served. Monks generally ate before dark, to save candles, he recalled happily.

Cuthbert was looking hard at Ellen. “Do I know you?” he said eventually.

She looked uneasy. “I don’t think so.”

“You seem familiar,” he said uncertainly.

“I used to live near here as a child,” she said.

“That would be it,” he said. “That’s why I have this feeling that you look older than you should.”

“You must have a very good memory.”

He frowned at her. “Not quite good enough,” he said. “I’m sure there’s something else…. No matter. Why did you leave Earlscastle?”

“It was attacked, yesterday at dawn, and taken,” Tom replied. “Earl Bartholomew is accused of treason.”

Cuthbert was shocked. “Saints preserve us!” he exclaimed, and suddenly he looked like an old maid frightened by a bull. “Treason!”

There was a footstep outside. Tom turned and saw another monk walk in. Cuthbert said: “This is our new prior.”

Tom recognized the prior. It was Philip, the monk they had met on their way to the bishop’s palace, the one who had given them the delicious cheese. Now everything fell into place: the new prior of Kingsbridge was the old prior of the little cell in the forest, and he had brought Jonathan with him when he came here. Tom’s heart leaped with optimism. Philip was a kindly man, and

he had seemed to like and trust Tom. Surely he would give him a job.

Philip recognized him. “Hello, Master Builder,” he said. “You didn’t get much work at the bishop’s palace, then?”

“No, Father. The archdeacon wouldn’t hire me, and the bishop wasn’t there.”

“Indeed he wasn’t—he was in heaven, though we didn’t know it at the time.”

“The bishop is dead?”

“Yes.”

“That’s old news,” Cuthbert butted in impatiently. “Tom and his family have just come from Earlscastle. Earl Bartholomew has been captured and his castle overrun!”

Philip was very still. “Already!” he murmured.

“Already?” Cuthbert repeated. “Why do you say ‘already’?” He seemed fond of Philip but wary of him, like a father whose son has been away to war and has come home with a sword in his belt and a slightly dangerous look in his eye. “Did you know this was going to happen?”

Philip was slightly flustered. “No, not exactly,” he said uncertainly. “I had heard a rumor that Earl Bartholomew was opposed to King Stephen.” He recovered his composure. “We can all be thankful for this,” he announced. “Stephen has promised to protect the Church, whereas Maud might have oppressed us as much as her late father did. Yes, indeed. This is good news.” He looked as pleased as if he had done it himself.

Tom did not want to talk about Earl Bartholomew. “It isn’t good news for me,” he said. “The earl had hired me, the day before, to strengthen the castle’s defenses. I didn’t even get a single day’s pay.”

“What a shame,” said Philip. “Who was it that attacked the castle?”

“Lord Percy Hamleigh.”

“Ah.” Philip nodded, and once again Tom felt his news was only confirming Philip’s expectations.

“You’re making some improvements here, then,” Tom said, trying to bring the subject around to his own interest.

“I’m trying,” Philip said.

“You’ll want to rebuild the tower, I’m sure.”

“Rebuild the tower, repair the roof, pave the floor—yes, I want to do all of that. And you want the job, of course,” he added, apparently having just realized why Tom was here. “I wasn’t thinking. I wish I could hire you. But I couldn’t pay you, I’m afraid. This monastery is penniless.”

Tom felt as if he had been struck by a fist. He had been confident of getting work here—everything had pointed to it. He could hardly believe his ears. He stared at Philip. It really was not credible that the priory had no money. The cellarer had said it was monks doing all the extra work, but even

so, a monastery could always borrow money from the Jews. Tom felt as if this were the end of the road for him. Whatever it was that had kept him going all winter now seemed to drain out of him, and he felt weak and spineless. I can't go on, he thought; I'm finished.

Philip saw his distress. "I can offer you supper, and a place to sleep, and some breakfast in the morning," he said.

Tom felt bitterly angry. "I'll accept it," he said, "but I'd rather earn it."

Philip raised his eyebrows at the note of anger, but he spoke mildly. "Ask God—that's not begging, it's prayer." Then he went out.

The others looked a little scared, and Tom realized that his anger must be showing. Their staring at him annoyed him. He went out of the storeroom a few steps behind Philip, and stood in the courtyard, looking at the big old church, trying to control his feelings.

After a moment Ellen and the children followed him out. Ellen put her arm around his waist in a comforting gesture, which made the novices whisper and nudge one another. Tom ignored them. "I'll pray," he said sourly. "I'll pray for a thunderbolt to strike the church and level it to the ground."

In the last two days Jack had learned to fear the future.

During his short life he had never had to think farther ahead than tomorrow; but if he had, he would have known what to expect. One day was much like another in the forest, and the seasons changed slowly. Now he did not know, from day to day, where he would be, what he would do or whether he would eat.

The worst part of it was feeling hungry. Jack had been secretly eating grass and leaves, to try to ease the pangs, but they gave him a different kind of stomachache and made him feel peculiar. Martha often cried because she was so hungry. Jack and Martha always walked together. She looked up to him, and nobody had ever done that before. Being helpless to relieve her suffering was worse than his own hunger.

If they had still been living in the cave he would have known where to go to kill ducks, or find nuts, or steal eggs; but in towns and villages, and on the unfamiliar roads between them, he was at a loss. All he knew was that Tom had to find work.

They spent the afternoon in the guesthouse. It was a simple one-room building with a dirt floor and a fireplace in the middle, exactly like the houses peasants lived in, but Jack, who had always lived in a cave, thought it was marvelous. He was curious about how the house was made, and Tom told him. Two young trees had been chopped down, trimmed, and leaned against one another at an angle; then two more had been placed in the same way at four yards distance; and the two triangles thus formed were linked, at their

tops, by a ridgepole. Parallel with the ridgepole, light slats were fixed, joining the trees, forming a sloping roof that reached to the ground. Rectangular frames of woven reeds, called hurdles, were laid over the slats, and made waterproof with mud. The gable ends were made of stakes driven into the ground, the chinks between them filled with mud. There was a door in one gable end. There were no windows.

Jack's mother spread fresh straw on the floor and Jack lit a fire with the flint he always carried. When the others were out of ear shot he asked Mother why the prior would not hire Tom, when there was obviously work to be done. "It seems he would rather save his money, so long as the church is still usable," she said. "If the whole church had fallen down, they would be forced to rebuild it, but as it's just the tower, they can live with the damage."

When the daylight began to soften into dusk, a kitchen hand came to the guesthouse with a cauldron of pottage and a loaf as long as a man is tall, all just for them. The pottage was made with vegetables and herbs and meat bones, and its surface glistened with fat. The loaf was horsebread, made with all kinds of grain, rye and barley and oats, plus dried peas and beans; it was the cheapest bread, Alfred said, but to Jack, who had never eaten bread until a few days ago, it was delicious. Jack ate until his belly ached. Alfred ate until there was nothing left.

As they sat by the fire trying to digest their feast, Jack said to Alfred: "Why did the tower fall down, anyway?"

"Probably it was struck by lightning," said Alfred. "Or there might have been a fire."

"But there's nothing to burn," Jack said. "It's all made of stone."

"The *roof* isn't stone, stupid," Alfred said scornfully. "The roof is made of wood."

Jack thought about that for a moment. "And if the roof burns, does the building always fall down?"

Alfred shrugged. "Sometimes."

They sat in silence for a while. Tom and Jack's mother were talking in low voices on the other side of the fireplace. Jack said: "It's funny about that baby."

"What's funny?" Alfred said after a moment.

"Well, your baby was lost in the forest, miles away, and now here's a baby at the priory."

Neither Alfred nor Martha seemed to think the coincidence very remarkable, and Jack promptly forgot about it.

The monks all went to bed immediately after supper, and they did not provide candles for the humbler sort of guest, so Tom's family sat and looked at the fire until it went out, then lay down on the straw.

Jack stayed awake, thinking. It had occurred to him that if the cathedral

were to burn down tonight, all their problems would be solved. The prior would hire Tom to rebuild the church, they would all live here in this fine house, and they would have meat-bone pottage and horsebread for ever and ever.

If I were Tom, he thought, I'd set fire to the church myself. I'd get up quietly while everyone else was sleeping, and sneak into the church, and start a fire with my flint, then creep back here while it was spreading, and pretend to be asleep when the alarm was raised. And when the people started throwing buckets of water on the flames, as they did when the stables burned at Earl Bartholomew's castle, I'd join in with them, as if I wanted to put out the fire just as much as they did.

Alfred and Martha were asleep—Jack could tell by their breathing. Tom and Ellen did what they usually did under Tom's cloak (Alfred said it was called "fucking") then they, too, fell asleep. It seemed that Tom was not going to get up and set fire to the cathedral.

But what *was* he going to do? Would the family walk the roads until they starved to death?

When they were all asleep, and he could hear the four of them breathing in the slow, regular rhythm that indicated deep slumber, it occurred to Jack that *he* could set the cathedral on fire.

The thought made his heart race with fear.

He would have to get up very quietly. He could probably unbar the door and slip out without waking anyone. The church doors might be locked, but there would surely be a way to get in, especially for someone small.

Once inside, he knew how he would reach the roof. He had learned a lot in two weeks with Tom. Tom talked about buildings all the time, mostly addressing his remarks to Alfred; and although Alfred was not interested, Jack was. He had found out, among other things, that all large churches had staircases built into the walls to give access to the higher parts for repair work. He would find a staircase and climb up to the roof.

He sat up in the dark, listening to the breathing of the others. He could distinguish Tom's by its slightly chesty wheeze, caused (Mother said) by years of inhaling stone dust. Alfred snored once, loudly, then turned over and was silent again.

Once he had set the fire, he would have to get back to the guesthouse quickly. What would the monks do if they caught him? In Shiring Jack had seen a boy of his own age tied up and flogged for stealing a cone of sugar from a spice shop. The boy had screamed and the springy switch had made his bottom bleed. It had seemed much worse than men killing one another in a battle as they had at Earlscastle, and the vision of the bleeding boy had haunted Jack. He was terrified of the same happening to him.

If I do this, he thought, I'll never tell a soul.

He lay down again, pulled his cloak around him, and closed his eyes.

He wondered if the church door was locked. If it was, he could get in through the windows. Nobody would see him if he stayed on the north side of the close. The monks' dormitory was south of the church, masked by the cloisters, and there was nothing on this side except the graveyard.

He decided just to go and have a look, to see if it was possible.

He hesitated a moment longer, then he stood up.

The new straw crunched under his feet. He listened again to the breathing of the four sleeping people. It was very silent: the mice had stopped moving in the straw. He took a step, and listened again. The others slept on. He lost patience and took three rapid steps to the door. When he stopped, the mice had decided they had nothing to fear, and started scrabbling again, but the people slept on.

He touched the door with his fingertips, then ran his hands down to the bar. It was an oak beam resting in paired brackets. He got his hands under it, gripped, and lifted. It was heavier than he had expected, and after lifting it less than an inch he had to drop it. The thud it made when it hit the brackets sounded very loud. He froze, listening. Tom's wheezy breathing faltered. What will I say if I'm caught? thought Jack desperately. I'll say I was going outside…going outside…I know, I'll say I was going to relieve myself. He relaxed now that he had an excuse. He heard Tom turn over, and waited for the deep, dusty voice, but it did not come, and Tom began to breathe evenly again.

The edges of the door were outlined with ghostly silver. There must be a moon, Jack thought. He gripped the bar again, took a deep breath, and strained to lift it. This time he was ready for its weight. He raised it and pulled it toward himself, but he had not lifted it high enough, and it failed to clear the brackets. He raised it an inch more, and it came free. He held it against his chest, relieving the strain on his arms a little; then he slowly went down on one knee, then on both, and lowered the bar to the floor. He stayed in that position for a few moments, trying to quiet his breathing, while the ache in his arms eased. There was no sound from the others except the noises of sleep.

Gingerly, Jack opened the door a crack. Its iron hinge squeaked, and a cold draft came through the opening. He shivered. He wrapped his cloak closer around him and opened the door a little more. He slipped out and closed it behind him.

The cloud was breaking up, and the moon came and went in the restless sky. There was a cold wind. Jack was momentarily tempted to return to the stuffy warmth of the house. The enormous church with its fallen tower loomed over the rest of the priory, silver and black in the moonlight, its mighty walls and tiny windows making it look more like a castle. It was ugly.

All was quiet. Outside the priory walls, in the village, there might be a

few people sitting up late, drinking ale by the glow of the fireside or sewing by rushlights, but here nothing moved. Still Jack hesitated, looking at the church. It looked back at him accusingly, as if it knew what was on his mind. He shook off the spooky feeling with a shrug, and walked across the broad green to the west end.

The door was locked.

He walked around to the north side and looked at the cathedral windows. Some church windows had lengths of translucent linen stretched across them, to keep out the cold, but these seemed to have nothing. They were big enough for him to crawl through, but they were too high to reach. He explored the stonework with his fingers, feeling the cracks in the wall where the mortar had worn away, but they were not big enough to give him toeholds. He needed something to use as a ladder.

He considered fetching stones from the fallen tower and constructing an improvised staircase, but the unbroken stones were too heavy, and the broken ones were too uneven. He had a feeling that he had seen something, during the course of the day, that would serve his purpose exactly, and he racked his brains to remember it. It was like trying to see something out of the corner of his eye: it always remained just out of sight. Then he glanced across the moonlit graveyard to the stable, and it came back to him: a little wooden mounting block, with two or three steps, to help short people climb on large horses. One of the monks had been standing on it to comb a horse's mane.

He made his way across to the stable. It was the kind of thing that might not get put away at night, since it was hardly worth stealing. He walked quietly, but the horses heard him all the same, and one or two of them snorted and coughed. He stopped, frightened. There might be grooms sleeping in the stable. He stood still for a moment, listening for the sound of human movement, but none came, and the horses went quiet.

He could not see the mounting block. Perhaps it was up against the wall. Jack peered into the moon-shadows. It was hard to see anything. Cautiously, he went right up to the stable and walked along its length. The horses heard him again, and now his closeness made them nervous: one of them whinnied. Jack froze. A man's voice called out: "Quiet, quiet." As he stood there like a scared statue, he saw the mounting block right under his nose, so close that he would have fallen over it with one more step. He waited a few moments. There was no more noise from the stable. He bent down, picked it up, and hefted it on his shoulder. He turned around and padded back across the grass to the church. The stable was quiet.

When he climbed to the top step of the block he was still not high enough to reach the windows. It was irritating: he could not even look in. He had not finally made up his mind to do the deed, but he did not want to be prevented by practical considerations: he wanted to decide for himself. He wished he

were as tall as Alfred.

There was one more thing to try. He stood back, took a short run, jumped one-footed onto the block, then sprang up. He reached the windowsill easily, and got a grip on the stone frame. With a jerk he pulled himself up until he could half-sit on the sill. But when he tried to crawl through the opening he had a surprise. The window was blocked by iron latticework which he had not seen from outside, presumably because it was black. Jack examined it with both hands, kneeling on the sill. There was no way through: it was probably there specifically to prevent people from getting in when the church was shut.

Disappointed, he jumped down to the ground. He picked up the mounting block and carried it back to where he had found it. This time the horses made no noise.

He looked at the fallen northwest tower, on the left-hand side of the main door. He climbed carefully over the stones at the edge of the heap, peering toward the interior of the church, looking for a way through the rubble. When the moon went behind a cloud he waited, shivering, for it to come out again. He was worried that his weight, small though it was, might shift the balance of the stones and cause a landslide, which would wake everyone even if it did not kill him. As the moon reappeared he scanned the pile and decided to risk it. He began to ascend with his heart in his mouth. Most of the stones were firm but one or two wobbled precariously under his weight. It was the kind of climb he would have enjoyed in daylight, with help near at hand and nothing on his conscience; but now he was too anxious, and his normal surefootedness left him. He slipped on a smooth surface and almost fell down; and there he decided to stop.

He was high enough to look down on the roof of the aisle that ran along the north side of the nave. He was hoping that there might be a hole in the roof, or perhaps a gap between the roof and the pile of rubble, but it was not so: the roof continued unbroken into the ruins of the tower, and there appeared to be nowhere to slip through. Jack was half disappointed and half relieved.

He climbed down again, backward, looking over his shoulder to find a foothold. The closer he got to the ground, the better he felt. He jumped the last few feet and landed gratefully on the grass.

He returned to the north side of the church and walked on around. He had seen several churches in the last two weeks and all of them were roughly the same shape. The largest part was the nave, which was always to the west. Then there were two arms, which Tom called transepts, sticking out to the north and south. The east end was called the chancel and it was shorter than the nave. Kingsbridge was individual only in that its west end had two towers, one on each side of the entrance, as it were to match the transepts.

There was a door in the north transept. Jack tried it and found it locked.

He walked on, around the east end: no door there at all. He paused to look across the grassed courtyard. In the far southeast corner of the priory close there were two houses, the infirmary and the prior's house. Both were dark and silent. He went on, around the east end and along the south side of the chancel until he came to the out-jutting south transept. At the end of the transept, like a hand on an arm, was the round building they called the chapter house. Between the transept and the chapter house was a narrow alley leading into the cloisters. Jack went through the alley.

He found himself in a square quadrangle, with a lawn in the middle and a covered walkway all around. The pale stone of the arches was ghostly white in the moonlight, and the shadowed walkway was impenetrably dark. Jack waited a moment to let his eyes adjust.

He had emerged onto the east side of the square. To his left he could make out the door to the chapter house. Farther to his left, at the southern end of the east walk, he could see, facing him, another door, which he thought probably led to the monks' dormitory. To his right, another door led into the south transept of the church. He tried it. It was locked.

He went along the north walk. There he found a door leading into the nave of the church. It, too, was locked.

On the west walk there was nothing until he came to the southwest corner, where he found the door to the refectory. What a lot of food had to be found, he thought, to feed all those monks every day. Nearby was a fountain with a basin: the monks washed their hands before meals.

He continued along the south walk. Halfway along there was an arch. Jack turned through it and found himself in a little passage, with the refectory on his right and the dormitory on his left. He imagined all the monks fast asleep on the floor just the other side of the stone wall. At the end of the passage there was nothing but a muddy slope leading down to the river. Jack stood there for a moment, looking at the water a hundred yards away. For no particular reason, he remembered a story about a knight who had his head cut off but lived on; and involuntarily he imagined the headless knight coming out of the river and walking up the slope toward him. There was nothing there, but still he was scared. He turned around and hurried back to the cloisters. He felt safer there.

He hesitated under the arch, looking into the moonlit quadrangle. There must be a way to sneak into such a big building, he felt, but he could not think where else to look. In a way he was glad. He had been contemplating doing something appallingly dangerous, and if it turned out to be impossible, so much the better. On the other hand, he dreaded the thought of leaving this priory and taking to the road again in the morning: the endless walking, the hunger, Tom's disappointment and anger, Martha's tears. It could all be avoided, just by one little spark from the flint he carried in the little pouch

hanging from his belt!

Something moved at the corner of his vision. He started, and his heart beat faster. He turned his head and saw, to his horror, a ghostly figure, carrying a candle, gliding silently along the east walk toward the church. A scream rose in his throat and he fought it down. Another figure followed the first. Jack stepped back into the archway, out of sight, and put his fist in his mouth, biting his skin to stop himself from crying aloud. He heard an eerie moaning sound. He stared in sheer terror. Then realization dawned: what he was seeing was a procession of monks going from the dormitory to the church for the midnight service, singing a hymn as they went. The panicky feeling persisted for a moment, even when he had understood what he was looking at; then relief washed over him, and he began to shake uncontrollably.

The monk at the head of the procession unlocked the door to the church with a huge iron key. The monks filed in. No one turned around to look in Jack's direction. Most of them appeared to be half asleep. They did not close the church door behind them.

When he had recovered his composure Jack realized that now he could get into the church.

His legs felt too weak to walk.

I could just go in, he thought. I don't have to do anything when I'm inside. I'll look and see whether it is possible to get up to the roof. I might not set fire to it. I'll just take a look.

He took a deep breath, then stepped out of the archway and padded across the quadrangle. He hesitated at the open door and peeped in. There were candles on the altar, and in the quire where the monks stood in their stalls, but the light merely made small pools in the middle of the big empty space, leaving the walls and the aisles in deep gloom. One of the monks was doing something incomprehensible at the altar, and the others would occasionally chant a few phrases of mumbo jumbo. It seemed incredible to Jack that people should get up out of warm beds in the middle of the night to do something like this.

He slipped through the door and stood close to the wall.

He was inside. The darkness concealed him. However, he could not stay right there, for they would see him on their way out. He sidled farther in. The flickering candles threw restless shadows. The monk at the altar might have seen Jack, if he had looked up, but he seemed completely absorbed in what he was doing. Jack moved quickly from the cover of one mighty pillar to the next, pausing in between so that his movements would be irregular, like the shifting of the shadows. The light became brighter as he neared the crossing. He was afraid the monk at the altar would look up suddenly, see him, bound across to the transept, pick him up by the scruff of the neck—

He reached the corner and turned gratefully into the deeper shadows of

the nave.

He paused for a moment, feeling relieved. Then he retreated along the aisle toward the west end of the church, still pausing irregularly, as he would if he were stalking a deer. When he was in the farthest, darkest part of the church, he sat down on the plinth of a column to wait for the service to end.

He put his chin down inside his cloak and breathed on his chest to warm himself. His life had changed so much in the last two weeks that it seemed years ago that he had lived contentedly in the forest with his mother. He knew he would never feel as safe again. Now that he knew about hunger, and cold, and danger, and desperation, he would always be afraid of them.

He peeped around the pillar. Above the altar, where the candles were brightest, he could just make out the high wooden ceiling. Newer churches had stone vaults, he knew, but Kingsbridge was old. That wooden ceiling would burn well.

I'm not going to do it, he thought.

Tom would be so happy if the cathedral burned down. Jack was not sure he liked Tom—he was too forceful, commanding and harsh. Jack was used to his mother's milder ways. But Jack was impressed by Tom, even awestruck. The only other men Jack had come across were outlaws; dangerous, brutish men who respected only violence and cunning, men for whom the ultimate achievement was to knife someone in the back. Tom was a new type of being, proud and fearless even without a weapon. Jack would never forget the way Tom had faced up to William Hamleigh, the time when Lord William had offered to buy Mother for a pound. What struck Jack so vividly was that *Lord William had been scared*. Jack told his mother that he had never imagined a man could be as brave as Tom was, and she said: "That was why we had to leave the forest. You need a man to look up to."

Jack was puzzled by that remark, but it was true that he would like to do something to impress Tom. Setting fire to the cathedral was not the thing, though. It would be better if nobody knew about that, at least not for many years. But perhaps a day would come when Jack would say to Tom: "You remember the night Kingsbridge Cathedral burned down, and the prior hired you to rebuild it, and we all had food and shelter and security at last? Well, I've got something to tell you about how that fire started…." What a great moment that would be.

But I don't dare do it, he thought.

The singing stopped, and there was a scuffling sound as the monks left their places. The service was over. Jack shifted his position to stay out of sight while they filed out.

They snuffed the candles in the quire stalls as they went, but they left one burning on the altar. The door banged shut. Jack waited a little longer, in case there was still someone inside. There was no sound for a long time. At last he

came out from behind his pillar.

He walked up the nave. It was an odd feeling, to be alone in this big, cold, empty building. This is what it must be like to be a mouse, he thought, hiding in corners when the big people are around and then coming out when they have gone. He reached the altar and took the fat, bright candle, and that made him feel better.

Carrying the candle, he began to inspect the inside of the church. At the corner where the nave met the south transept, the place where he had most feared being spotted by the monk at the altar, there was a door in the wall with a simple latch. He tried the latch. The door opened.

His candle revealed a spiral staircase, so narrow that a fat man could not have passed through it, so low that Tom would have had to bend double. He went up the steps.

He emerged in a narrow gallery. On one side, a row of small arches looked out into the nave. The ceiling sloped from the tops of the arches down to the floor on the other side. The floor itself was not flat, but curved down at either side. It took Jack a moment to realize where he was. He was above the aisle on the south side of the nave. The tunnel-vaulted ceiling of the aisle was the curved floor on which Jack was standing. From the outside of the church the aisle could be seen to have a lean-to roof, and that was the sloping ceiling under which Jack was standing. The aisle was much lower than the nave, so he was still a long way from the main roof of the building.

He walked west along the gallery, exploring. It was quite thrilling, now that the monks had gone and he was no longer in fear of being spotted. It was as if he had climbed a tree and found that at the very top, hidden from view by the lower branches, all the trees were connected, and you could walk around in a secret world a few feet above the earth.

At the end of the gallery was another small door. He went through it and found himself on the inside of the southwest tower, the one that had not fallen down. The space he was in was obviously not meant to be seen, for it was rough and unfinished, and instead of a floor there were rafters with wide gaps between them. However, around the inside of the wall ran a flight of wooden steps, a staircase without a handrail. Jack went up.

Halfway up one wall was a small arched opening. The staircase passed right by it. Jack put his head inside and held up his candle. He was in the roof space, above the timber ceiling and below the lead roof.

At first he could see no pattern in the tangle of wooden beams, but after a moment he perceived the structure. Huge oak timbers, each of them a foot wide and two feet deep, spanned the width of the nave from north to south. Above each beam were two mighty rafters, forming a triangle. The regular row of triangles stretched away beyond the light of the candle. Looking down, between the beams, he could see the back of the painted wooden ceiling of the

nave, which was fixed to the lower edges of the crossbeams.

At the edge of the roof space, in the corner at the base of the triangle, was a catwalk. Jack crawled through the little opening and onto the catwalk. There was just enough headroom for him to stand up: a man would have had to stoop. He walked along it a little way. There was enough timber here for a conflagration. He sniffed, trying to identify the odd smell in the air. He decided it was pitch. The roof timbers were tarred. They would burn like straw.

A sudden movement on the floor startled him and made his heart race. He thought of the headless knight in the river and the ghostly monks in the cloisters. Then he thought of mice, and felt better. But when he looked carefully he saw that it was birds: there were nests under the eaves.

The roof space followed the pattern of the church below, branching out over the transepts. Jack went as far as the crossing and stood at the corner. He realized he must be directly above the little spiral staircase that had brought him from ground level up to the gallery. If he had been planning to start a fire, this was where he would do it. From here it could spread four ways: west along the nave, south along the south transept, and through the crossing to the chancel and the north transept.

The main timbers of the roof were made of heart-of-oak, and although they were tarred they might not catch fire from a candle flame. However, under the eaves was a litter of ancient wood chips and shavings, discarded bits of rope and sacking, and abandoned birds' nests, which would make perfect kindling. All he would have to do would be to collect it and pile it up.

His candle was burning low.

It seemed so easy. Collect up the litter, touch the candle flame to it, and leave. Cross the close like a ghost, slip into the guesthouse, bar the door, curl up in the straw and wait for the alarm.

But if he were seen…

If he should be caught now, he could say he was harmlessly exploring the cathedral, and he would suffer no worse than a spanking. But if they caught him setting fire to the church they would do more than spank him. He remembered the sugar thief in Shiring, and the way his bottom bled. He recalled some of the punishments the outlaws had suffered: Farad Openmouth had had his lips cut off, Jack Flathat had lost his hand, and Alan Catface had been put in the stocks and stoned and had never been able to talk properly since. Even worse were the stories of those who had not survived their punishments: a murderer who had been tied to a barrel studded with spikes and then rolled downhill so that all the spikes went through his body; a horse thief who had been burned alive; a thieving whore who had been impaled on a pointed stake. What would they do to a boy who set fire to a church?

Thoughtfully, he began to collect the inflammable rubbish from under the

eaves and pile it up on the catwalk exactly below one of the mighty rafters.

When he had a pile a foot high he sat down and looked at it.

His candle guttered. In a few moments he would have lost his chance.

With a quick motion he touched the candle flame to a piece of sacking. It caught fire. The flame spread immediately to some wood shavings, then a dried, crumbling bird's nest; and then the little fire was blazing cheerfully.

I could still put it out, Jack thought.

The kindling was burning a little too quickly: at this rate it would be used up before the roof timber began to smolder. Jack hurriedly collected more rubbish and piled it on. The flames rose higher. I could still put it out, he thought. The pitch with which the beam was coated began to blacken and smoke. The rubbish burned up. I could just let the fire go out, now, he thought. Then he saw that the catwalk itself was burning. I could probably smother the fire with my cloak, still, he thought. Instead he threw more litter onto the fire and watched it burn higher.

The atmosphere became hot and smoky in the little angle of the eaves, even though the freezing night air was only an inch away on the other side of the roof. Some of the smaller timbers, to which the lead sheets of the roof were nailed, began to burn. Then, at last, a small flame flickered up from the massive main beam.

The cathedral was on fire.

It was done now. There was no turning back.

Jack felt scared. Suddenly he wanted to get out fast, and return to the guesthouse. He wanted to be rolled up in his cloak, nestling in a little hollow in the straw, with his eyes shut tight, and the others breathing evenly all around him.

He retreated along the catwalk.

When he reached the end he looked back. The fire was spreading surprisingly quickly, perhaps because of the pitch with which the wood was coated. All the small timbers were ablaze, the main beams were beginning to burn, and the fire was spreading along the catwalk. Jack turned his back on it.

He ducked into the tower and went down the stairs, then ran along the gallery over the aisle and hurried down the spiral staircase to the floor of the nave. He ran to the door by which he had come in.

It was locked.

He realized he had been stupid. The monks had unlocked the door when they came in, so of course they had locked it again as they left.

Fear rose in his throat like bile. He had set the church on fire and now he was locked inside.

He fought down panic and tried to think. He had tried every door from the outside, and found them all locked; but perhaps some of them were fastened with bars, rather than locks, so that they could be opened from the inside.

He hurried across the crossing to the north transept and examined the door in the north porch. It had a lock.

He ran down the dark nave to the west end and tried each of the great public entrances. All three doors were locked with keys. Finally he tried the little door that led into the south aisle from the north walk of the cloister square. That, too, was locked.

Jack wanted to cry, but that would do no good. He looked up at the wooden ceiling. Was it his imagination, or could he see, by the faint moonlight, a little smoke drifting out from the ceiling near the corner of the south transept?

He thought: What am I going to do?

Would the monks wake up, and come rushing in to put out the fire, in such a panic that they hardly noticed one small boy slipping out through the door? Or would they see him immediately, and grab him, screaming accusations? Or would they stay asleep, all unconscious, until the whole building had collapsed, and Jack lay crushed under a huge pile of stones?

Tears came to his eyes, and he wished he had never touched the candle flame to that pile of litter.

He looked around wildly. If he went to a window and screamed, would anybody hear?

There was a crash from above. He looked up and saw that a hole had appeared in the wooden ceiling, where a beam had fallen and poked through. The hole appeared as a patch of red on a black background. A moment later there was another crash, and a huge timber smashed right through the ceiling and fell, turning over once in the air, to hit the ground with a thump that shook the mighty columns of the nave. A shower of sparks and burning embers drifted down after it. Jack listened, waiting for shouts, cries for help, or the ringing of a bell; but nothing happened. The crash had not been heard. And if that had not awakened them, they certainly would not hear him screaming.

I’m going to die here, he thought hysterically; I’m going to burn or be crushed, unless I can think of a way out!

He thought of the fallen tower. He had examined it from the outside, and he had not seen a way in, but then he had been timid, for fear of falling and causing a landslide. Perhaps if he looked again, from the inside this time, he would see something he had missed; and perhaps desperation would help him squeeze through where before he had seen no gap.

He ran to the west end. The glow of the fire coming through the hole in the ceiling, combined with the flames licking up from the beam that had fallen to the floor of the nave, now gave a stronger light than the moon, and the arcade of the nave was edged with gold instead of silver. Jack examined the pile of stones that had once been the northwest tower. They appeared to

form a solid wall. There was no way through. Foolishly, he opened his mouth and yelled “Mother!” at the top of his voice, even though he knew she could not hear.

He fought down his panic once again. There was something in the back of his mind about this collapsed tower. He had been able to get inside the other tower, the one that was still standing, by going along the gallery over the south aisle. If he now went along the gallery over the north aisle, he might see a gap in this pile of rubble, a gap that was not visible from ground level.

He ran back to the crossing, staying under the shelter of the north aisle in case more burning beams should come crashing through the ceiling. There should be a little door and a spiral staircase on this side, just as there was on the other. He came to the corner of the nave and the north transept. He could not see the door. He looked around the corner: it was not on the other side either. He could not believe his bad luck. It was crazy: there had to be a way into the gallery!

He thought hard, fighting to stay calm. There was a way into the fallen tower, he just had to find it. I could get back into the roof space, via the good, southwest tower, he thought. I could cross to the other side of the roof space. There should be a little opening on that side, giving access to the collapsed northwest tower. That may provide me with a way out.

He looked up at the ceiling fearfully. The fire would now be an inferno. But he could not think of any alternative.

First he had to cross the nave. He looked up again. As far as he could tell, there was nothing about to come down immediately. He took a deep breath and dashed across to the other side. Nothing fell on him.

In the south aisle, he pulled open the little door and ran up the spiral staircase. When he reached the top and stepped into the gallery he could feel the warmth of the fire above. He ran along the gallery, went through the door into the good tower, and raced up the stairs.

He ducked his head and crawled through the little arch into the roof space. It was full of smoke and heat. All the uppermost timbers were ablaze, and at the far end the biggest beams were burning strongly. The tarry smell made Jack cough. He hesitated only a moment, then stepped onto one of the big beams that spanned the nave and began to walk across. In moments he was wet with perspiration because of the heat, and his eyes began to water so that he could hardly see where he was going. He coughed, and then his foot slipped off the beam and he stumbled sideways. He fell with one foot on the beam and one foot off. His right foot landed on the ceiling, and to his horror it went straight through the rotten wood. A picture flashed into his mind of the height of the nave, and how far he would drop if he fell right through the ceiling; and he screamed as he tumbled forward, putting his arms out in front of him, imagining himself turning over and over in the air as the falling beam

had done. But the wood held his weight.

He remained frozen still, shocked, resting on his hands and one knee, with the other leg sticking through the ceiling. Then the fierce heat of the fire brought him out of his shock. Gently he extracted his foot from the hole. He got on his hands and knees and crawled forward.

As he neared the other side, several large beams fell into the nave. The whole building seemed to shake, and the beam under Jack quivered like a bowstring. He stopped and held on tight. The tremor passed. He crawled on, and a moment later he reached the catwalk on the north side.

If his guess turned out to be wrong, and there was no opening from here into the ruins of the northwest tower, he would have to go back.

As he stood upright, he got a breath of cold night air. There must be some kind of gap. But would it be big enough for a small boy?

He took three paces to the west and stopped an instant before he would have stepped out into nothingness.

He found himself looking through a large hole out onto the moonlit ruins of the fallen tower. His knees went weak with relief. He was out of the inferno.

But he was high up, at roof level, and the top of the rubble pile was a long way below him, too far to jump. He could escape the flames now, but could he reach the ground without breaking his neck? Behind him, the flames were rapidly coming closer, and smoke was billowing out of the opening in which he stood.

This tower had once had a staircase around its inner wall, just as the other one still did, but most of this staircase had been destroyed in the collapse. However, where the wooden treads had been set into the wall with mortar, there were stumps of wood sticking out, sometimes just an inch or two long, sometimes more. Jack wondered whether he could climb down the stumps. It would be a precarious descent. He noticed a smell of scorching: his cloak was getting hot. In a moment it would catch fire. He had no choice.

He sat down, reached out for the nearest stump, held on with both hands, then eased one leg down until he found a foothold. Then he put the other foot down. Feeling his way with his feet, he eased himself down one step. The stumps held. He reached down once again, testing the strength of the next stump before putting his weight on it. This one felt a little loose. He trod gingerly, holding on tightly in case he should find himself swinging by his hands. Each perilous step down brought him nearer to the top of the rubble pile. As he descended, the stumps seemed to get smaller, as if the lower ones had suffered more severe damage. He put one foot, in its felt boot, on a stump no wider than his toe; and when he rested his weight on it his foot slipped. His other foot was on a larger stump, but when suddenly he put his full weight on it the other stump broke. He tried to hold on with his hands, but the stumps

were so small that he could not grip hard, and he slipped, terrified, from his precarious perch and fell through the air.

He landed hard on his hands and knees on the top of the pile of rubble. For an instant he was so shocked and frightened he thought he must be dead; then he realized that he had been lucky enough to fall well. His hands stung and his knees would be massively bruised, but he was all right.

After a moment he climbed down the pile of rubble and jumped the last few feet to the ground.

He was safe. He felt weak with relief. He wanted to cry again. He had escaped. He felt proud: what an adventure he had had!

But it was not yet over. Out here there was only a whiff of smoke, and the noise of the fire, so deafening inside the roof space, now sounded like a distant wind. Only the reddish glow behind the windows proved that the church was on fire. Nevertheless, those last tremors must have disturbed someone's sleep, and any moment now a bleary-eyed monk would come stumbling out of the dormitory, wondering whether the earthquake he had felt had been real or only a dream. Jack had set fire to the church—a heinous crime in the eyes of a monk. He had to get away quickly.

He ran across the grass to the guesthouse. All was quiet and still. He stopped outside, panting. If he went in breathing like this he would wake them all. He tried to control his breathing but that seemed to make it worse. He would just have to stay here until it became normal again.

A bell rang, piercing the quiet, and went on, pealing urgently, an unmistakable alarm. Jack froze. If he went inside now they would know. But if he did not—

The door of the guesthouse opened, and Martha came out. Jack just stared at her, terrified.

"Where have you been?" she said softly. "You smell of smoke."

A plausible lie came into Jack's head. "I've only just stepped out," he said desperately. "I heard that bell."

"Liar," Martha said. "You've been gone for ages. I know, I was awake."

He realized there was no fooling her. "Was anyone else awake?" he said fearfully.

"No, only me."

"Don't tell them I was gone. Please?"

She heard the fear in his voice and spoke soothingly. "All right, I'll keep it a secret. Don't worry."

"Thank you!"

At that moment Tom stepped out, scratching his head.

Jack was frightened. What would Tom think?

"What's going on?" Tom said sleepily. He sniffed. "I smell smoke."

Jack pointed at the cathedral with a trembling arm. "I think…" he said,

and then swallowed. It was going to be all right, he realized, with a grateful sense of relief. Tom would just assume that Jack had got up a moment earlier, as Martha had. Jack spoke again, more confidently this time. “Look at the church,” he said to Tom. “I think it’s on fire.”

II

Philip had not yet got used to sleeping alone. He missed the stuffy air of the dormitory, the sound of other people shifting and snoring, the disturbance when one of the older monks got up to go to the latrine (followed, usually, by the other older ones, a regular procession which always amused the youngsters). Being alone did not bother Philip at nightfall, when he was always dead tired; but in the middle of the night, when he had been thoroughly roused by the service, he now found it difficult to go back to sleep. Instead of getting back into the big soft bed (it was a little embarrassing how quickly he had got used to *that*), he would build up the fire and read by candlelight, or kneel down and pray, or just sit thinking.

He had plenty to think about. The priory's finances were worse than he had anticipated. The main reason probably was that the whole organization generated very little cash. It owned vast acreages, but many farms were let at low rents on long leases, and some of them paid rent in kind—so many sacks of flour, so many barrels of apples, so many cartloads of turnips. Those farms that were not rented out were run by monks, but they never seemed to be able to produce a surplus of food for sale. The priory's other main asset was the churches it owned, and from which it received the tithes. Unfortunately, most of these were under the control of the sacrist, and Philip was having trouble finding out exactly how much he received and how he spent it. There were no written accounts. However, it was clear that the sacrist's income was too small, or his management of it too bad, to maintain the cathedral church in good repair; although over the years the sacrist had built up an impressive collection of jeweled vessels and ornaments.

Philip could not get all the details until he had time to tour the monastery's far-flung properties, but the outline was already clear; and the old prior had for some years been borrowing from moneylenders in Winchester and London just to meet everyday expenses. Philip had become quite depressed when he realized how bad it was.

However, as he thought and prayed about it, the solution became clear. Philip had a three-stage plan. He would begin by taking control of the priory's finances personally. At present, each of the monastic officials controlled parts of the property, and fulfilled his responsibility with the income from that property: the cellarer, the sacrist, the guest-master, the novice-master and the infirmarer all had "their" farms and churches. Naturally, none of them would ever confess to having too much money, and if they had any surplus they took

care to spend it, for fear that something would be taken away from them. Philip had decided to appoint a new official, called the purser, whose job it would be to receive all monies due to the priory, with no exceptions, and then give out to each official just what he needed.

The purser would naturally be someone Philip trusted. His first inclination had been to give the job to Cuthbert Whitehead, the cellarer; but then he had recalled Cuthbert's aversion to writing things down. That was no good. From now on all income and outgoings were to be written in a great book. Philip had decided to appoint the young kitchener, Brother Milius, as purser. The other monastic officials would not like the idea no matter who got the job, but Philip was the boss, and anyway the majority of monks, who knew or suspected that the priory was in trouble, would support reforms.

When he had control of the money, Philip would implement stage two of his plan.

All the distant farms would be leased for cash rents. This would put an end to expensive transportation of goods across long distances. There was a property of the priory's in Yorkshire that paid a "rent" of twelve lambs, and faithfully sent them all the way to Kingsbridge each year, even though the cost of transport was more than the value of the lambs, and anyway half of them always died en route. In future, only the nearest farms would produce food for the priory.

He also planned to change the present system under which each farm produced a little of everything—some grain, some meat, some milk and so on. Philip had thought for years that this was wasteful. Every farm managed to produce only enough of each item for its own needs—or perhaps it would be truer to say that every farm always managed to consume just about everything it produced. Philip wanted each farm to concentrate on one thing. All the grain would be grown in a group of villages in Somerset, where the priory also owned several mills. The lush hillsides of Wiltshire would graze cattle for butter and beef. The little cell of St-John-in-the-Forest would breed goats and make cheese.

But Philip's most important scheme was to convert all the middle-ranking farms—those with poor or indifferent soil, especially the hill properties—to sheep farming.

He had spent his boyhood in a monastery that farmed sheep (everyone farmed sheep in that part of Wales), and he had seen the price of wool rise slowly but steadily, year by year, ever since he could remember, right up to the present. Sheep would solve the priory's cash problem permanently, in time.

That was stage two of the plan. Stage three was to demolish the cathedral church and build a new one.

The present church was old, ugly and impractical; and the fact that the

northwest tower had fallen down was a sign that the whole structure might be weak. Modern churches were taller, longer, and—most important—lighter. They were also designed to display the important tombs and saintly relics that pilgrims came to see. These days, more and more, cathedrals had additional small altars and special chapels dedicated to particular saints. A well-designed church that catered to the multiplying demands of today's congregations would draw many more worshipers and pilgrims than Kingsbridge could attract at the moment; and by doing so it could pay for itself, in the long run. When Philip had put the priory's finances on a sound footing, he would build a new church which would symbolize the regeneration of Kingsbridge.

It would be his crowning achievement.

He thought he would have enough money to begin rebuilding in about ten years' time. It was a rather daunting thought—he would be almost forty! However, within a year or so he hoped to be able to afford a program of repairs which would make the present building respectable, if not impressive, by the Whitsun after next.

Now that he had a plan he felt cheerful and optimistic again. Mulling over the details, he dimly heard a distant bang, like the slamming of a big door. He wondered vaguely whether someone was up and about in the dormitory or the cloisters. He supposed that if there were trouble he would find out about it soon enough, and his thoughts drifted back to rents and tithes. Another important source of wealth for monasteries was gifts from the parents of boys who became novices, but to attract the right sort of novices the monastery needed a flourishing school—

His reflections were interrupted again, this time by a louder bang that actually made his house shake slightly. That was definitely *not* a door slamming, he thought. Whatever is going on over there? He went to the window and opened the shutter. The cold night blew in, making him shiver. He looked out over the church, the chapter house, the cloisters, the dormitory and the kitchen buildings beyond. They all appeared peaceful in the moonlight. The air was so frosty that his teeth hurt when he breathed. But there was something else about the air. He sniffed. He could smell smoke.

He frowned anxiously, but he could see no fire.

He drew his head into the room and sniffed again, thinking that he might be smelling smoke from his own fireplace, but it was not so.

Mystified and alarmed, he pulled on his boots rapidly, picked up his cloak, and ran out of the house.

The smell of smoke became stronger as he hurried across the green toward the cloisters. There was no doubt that some part of the priory was on fire. His first thought was that it must be the kitchen—nearly all fires started in kitchens. He ran through the passage between the south transept and the chapter house and across the cloister square. In daytime he would have gone

through the refectory to the kitchen courtyard, but at night it was locked, so he went out through the arch in the south walk and turned right to the back of the kitchen. There was no sign of fire here, nor in the brewery or the bakehouse, and the smell of smoke now seemed a little less. He ran a little farther, and looked past the corner of the brewery, across the green to the guesthouse and the stables. All seemed quiet over there.

Could the fire be in the dormitory? The dormitory was the only other building with a fireplace. The thought was horrifying. As he ran back into the cloisters he had a grisly vision of all the monks in their beds, overcome by smoke, unconscious as the dormitory blazed. He ran to the dormitory door. As he reached it, it opened, and Cuthbert Whitehead stepped out, carrying a rushlight.

Cuthbert said immediately: “Can you smell it?”

“Yes—are the monks all right?”

“There’s no fire here.”

Philip was relieved. At least his flock was safe. “Where, then?”

“What about the kitchen?” Cuthbert said.

“No—I’ve checked.” Now that he knew nobody was in danger, he began to worry about his property. He had just been thinking about finances, and he knew he could not afford repairs to buildings right now. He looked at the church. Was there a faint red glow behind the windows?

Philip said: “Cuthbert, get the church key from the sacrist.”

Cuthbert was ahead of him. “I have it here.”

“Good man!”

They hurried along the east walk to the door in the south transept. Cuthbert unlocked it hastily. As soon as the door swung open, smoke billowed out.

Philip’s heart missed a beat. How could his church be on fire?

He stepped inside. At first the scene was confusing. On the floor of the church, around the altar and here in the south transept, several huge pieces of wood were burning. Where had they come from? How had they produced so much smoke? And what was the roaring noise that sounded like a much bigger fire?

Cuthbert shouted: “Look up!”

Philip looked up, and his questions were answered. The ceiling was blazing furiously. He stared at it, horrified: it looked like the underside of hell. Most of the painted ceiling had already gone, revealing the timber triangles of the roof, blackened and blazing, the flames and smoke leaping and swirling in a fiendish dance. Philip stood still, shocked into immobility, until his neck started to hurt from looking up; then he gathered his wits.

He ran to the middle of the crossing, stood in front of the altar, and looked around the whole church. The entire roof was ablaze, from the west door to

the east end and all across both transepts. For a panicky moment he thought *How are we going to get water up there?* He imagined a line of monks running along the gallery with buckets, and he realized immediately that it was impossible: even if he had a hundred people for the job, they could not carry up to the roof a quantity of water sufficient to put out this roaring inferno. The whole roof was going to be destroyed, he realized with a sinking heart; and the rain and snow would fall into the church until he could find the money for a new roof.

A crashing sound made him look up. Immediately above him, an enormous timber was moving slowly sideways. It was going to fall on top of him. He dashed back into the south transept, where Cuthbert stood looking scared.

A whole section of the roof, three triangles of beam-and-rafter plus the lead sheets nailed to them, was falling in. Philip and Cuthbert watched, transfixed, quite forgetting their own safety. The roof fell on one of the big round arches of the crossing. The enormous weight of the falling wood and lead cracked the stonework of the arch with a prolonged explosive sound like thunder. Everything happened slowly: the beams fell slowly, the arch broke up slowly, and the smashed masonry fell slowly through the air. More roof beams came free, and then, with a noise like a long slow peal of thunder, a whole section of the north wall of the chancel shuddered and slid sideways into the north transept.

Philip was appalled. The sight of such a mighty building being destroyed was strangely shocking. It was like watching a mountain fall down or a river run dry: he had never really thought it could happen. He could hardly believe his eyes. It made him feel disoriented, and he did not know what to do.

Cuthbert was tugging at his sleeve. “Come out!” he yelled.

Philip could not tear himself away. He remembered that he had been anticipating ten years of austerity and hard work to put the monastery back on a sound financial footing. Now, suddenly, he had to build a new roof *and* a new north wall, and perhaps more if the destruction went on…. This is the devil’s work, he thought. How else could the roof have caught fire on a freezing night in January?

“We’ll be killed!” Cuthbert shouted, and the note of human fear in his voice touched Philip’s heart. He turned away from the blaze, and they both ran out of the church into the cloisters.

The monks had been alerted and were filing out of the dormitory. As they came out they naturally wanted to stop and look at the church. Milius Kitchener was standing at the door hurrying them along to avoid a logjam, directing them away from the church and along the south walk of the cloisters. Halfway along the walk Tom Builder stood, telling them to turn under the arch and escape that way. Philip heard Tom saying: “Go to the

guesthouse—stay well clear of the church!”

He was overreacting, Philip thought: surely they would have been safe enough here in the cloisters? But there was no harm done, and perhaps it was a sensible precaution. In fact, he reflected, I probably should have thought of it myself.

But Tom’s caution made him wonder how far the destruction might spread. If the cloisters were not absolutely safe, what about the chapter house? There, in a little side room with thick stone walls and no windows, they kept the ironbound oak chest containing what little money they had, plus the sacrist’s jeweled vessels and all the priory’s precious charters and deeds of ownership. A moment later he saw Alan the treasurer, a young monk who worked with the sacrist and took care of the ornaments. Philip called him. “The treasure must be taken from the chapter house—where’s the sacrist?”

“He’s gone, Father.”

“Go and find him and get the keys, then take the treasure out of the chapter house and carry it to the guesthouse. Run!”

Alan ran off. Philip turned to Cuthbert. “You’d better make sure he does it.” Cuthbert nodded and followed Alan.

Philip looked back at the church. In the few moments his attention had been elsewhere, the fire had become fiercer, and now the light of the flames shone brightly in all the windows. The sacrist should have thought of the treasure, instead of saving his own skin so hastily. Was there anything else that had been overlooked? Philip found it hard to think systematically when everything was happening so quickly. The monks were moving to safety, the treasury was being taken care of—

He had forgotten the saint.

At the far east end of the church, beyond the bishop’s throne, was the stone tomb of Saint Adolphus, an early English martyr. Inside the tomb was a wooden coffin containing the skeleton of the saint. Periodically the lid of the tomb was lifted to display the coffin. Adolphus was not as popular now as he had once been, but in the old days sick people had been miraculously cured by touching the tomb. A saint’s remains could be a big attraction in a church, promoting worship and pilgrimages. They brought in so much money that, shamefully, it was not unknown for monks actually to steal holy relics from other churches. Philip had planned to revive interest in Adolphus. He had to save the skeleton.

He would need help to lift the lid of the tomb and carry the coffin. The sacrist should have thought about this, too. But he was nowhere to be seen. The next monk to emerge from the dormitory was Remigius, the haughty sub-prior. He would have to do. Philip called him over and said: “Help me rescue the bones of the saint.”

Remigius’s pale green eyes looked fearfully at the burning church, but

after a moment's hesitation he followed Philip along the east walk and through the door.

Philip paused inside. It was only a few moments since he had run out, but the fire had progressed very fast. There was a sting in his nostrils that reminded him of burning tar, and he realized that the roof timbers must have been coated with pitch to prevent their rotting. Despite the flames there seemed to be a cold wind: the smoke was escaping through gaping holes in the roof, and the fire was drawing cold air into the church through the windows. The updraft fanned the blaze. Glowing embers rained down on the church floor, and several larger timbers, burning up in the roof, looked as if they could fall at any time. Until this moment Philip had been worried first about the monks and second about priory property, but now for the first time he was afraid for himself, and he hesitated to go farther into the inferno.

The longer he waited, the greater the risk; and if he thought about it too much he would lose his nerve entirely. He hitched up the skirts of his robe, shouted "Follow me!" and ran into the transept. He dodged around the small bonfires on the floor, expecting at any moment to be flattened by a falling roof beam. He ran with his heart in his mouth, feeling as if he wanted to scream with tension. Then, suddenly, he reached the safety of the aisle on the other side.

He paused there for a moment. The aisles were stone-vaulted and there was no fire here. Remigius was right beside him. Philip panted and coughed as smoke caught in his throat. Crossing the transept had taken only a few moments but it had seemed longer than a midnight mass.

"We shall be killed!" Remigius said.

"God will preserve us," Philip said. Then he thought: So why am I frightened?

This was no time for theology.

He went along the transept and turned the corner into the chancel, still keeping to the side aisle. He could feel the heat from the wooden stalls, which were burning merrily in the middle of the quire, and he suffered a pang of loss: the stalls had been expensively made and covered with beautiful carvings. He put them out of his mind and concentrated on the task at hand. He ran on up the chancel to the east end.

The tomb of the saint was halfway across the church. It was a big stone box standing on a low plinth. Philip and Remigius would have to raise the stone lid, put it to one side, lift the coffin out of the tomb, and carry it to the aisle, while the roof above them disintegrated. Philip looked at Remigius. The sub-prior's prominent green eyes were wide with fear. Philip concealed his own dread for Remigius's sake. "You take that end, I'll take this," he said, pointing, and without waiting for agreement he ran to the tomb.

Remigius followed.

They stood at opposite ends and grasped the stone lid. They both heaved.

The lid did not move.

Philip realized he should have brought more monks. He had not paused to think. But it was too late now: if he went out and summoned more help, the transept might be impassable when he tried to return. But he could not leave the saint's remains here. A beam would fall and smash the tomb; then the wooden coffin would catch fire, and the ashes would be scattered in the wind, a dreadful sacrilege and a terrible loss to the cathedral.

He had an idea. He moved around to the side of the tomb and beckoned Remigius to stand beside him. He knelt down, put both hands to the overhanging edge of the lid, and pushed up with all his might. When Remigius copied him, the lid lifted. Slowly they raised it higher. Philip had to go up on one knee, and Remigius followed suit; then they both stood. When the lid was vertical they gave it one more shove and it toppled over, fell on the floor on the other side of the tomb, and cracked in two.

Philip looked inside the tomb. The coffin was in good condition, its wood still apparently sound and its iron handles only superficially tarnished. Philip stood at one end, leaned in, and grasped two handles. Remigius did the same at the other end. They lifted the coffin a few inches, but it was much heavier than Philip had expected, and after a moment Remigius let his end fall, saying: "I can't do it—I'm older than you."

Philip suppressed an angry retort. The coffin was probably lined with lead. But now that they had broken the lid of the tomb, the coffin was even more vulnerable than before. "Come here," Philip shouted to Remigius. "We'll try to stand it on end."

Remigius came around the tomb and stood beside Philip. They each took one protruding iron handle and heaved. The end came up relatively easily. They got it above the level of the top of the tomb, then they both walked forward, one on either side, raising the coffin as they went, until it stood on end. They paused for a moment. Philip realized they had lifted the foot of the coffin, so the saint was now standing on his head. Philip sent him a silent apology. Small pieces of burning wood fell around them constantly. Every time a few sparks landed on Remigius's robe he would slap at them frantically until they disappeared, and whenever he got the chance he would steal a frightened look at the burning roof. Philip could see that the man's courage was rapidly running out.

They tipped the coffin so that it was leaning against the inside of the tomb, then pushed a little more. The other end came up off the ground and the coffin seesawed on the edge of the tomb; then they eased it down until the other end hit the ground. They tipped it end-over-end once more, so that it lay on the ground the right way up. The holy bones must be rattling around in there like dice in a cup, Philip thought; this is the closest thing to sacrilege

that I've ever done, but there's nothing else for it.

Standing at one end of the coffin, they each took a handle, lifted, and began to drag it across the church toward the relative safety of the aisle. Its iron corners plowed small furrows in the beaten earth. They had almost reached the aisle when a section of the roof, blazing timbers and hot lead, came crashing down right on the saint's now-empty tomb. The bang was deafening, the floor trembled with the impact, and the stone tomb was smashed to smithereens. A big beam bounced onto the coffin, missing Philip and Remigius by inches and knocking the coffin out of their grasp. It was too much for Remigius. "This is the devil's work!" he shouted hysterically, and he ran away.

Philip almost followed him. If the devil really were at work in here tonight, there was no telling what might happen. Philip had never seen a fiend but he had heard plenty of tales of people who had. But monks are made to oppose Satan, not flee from him, Philip told himself sternly. He glanced longingly at the shelter of the aisle, then steeled himself, grabbed the coffin handles, and heaved.

He managed to drag it out from under the fallen beam. The wood of the coffin was dented and splintered but not actually broken, remarkably. He dragged it a little farther. A shower of small glowing embers fell around him. He glanced up at the roof. Was that a two-legged figure, dancing a mocking jig up there in the flames, or was it just a wisp of smoke? He looked down again, and saw that the skirt of his robe had caught fire. He knelt down and smacked at the flames with his hands, flattening the burning fabric against the floor, and the flames died instantly; then he heard a noise that was either the screech of tortured wood or the mad mocking laugh of an imp. "Saint Adolphus preserve me," he gasped, and he took hold of the coffin handles again.

Inch by inch he dragged the coffin across the ground. The devil left him alone for a moment. He did not look up—better not to gaze upon the fiend. At last he reached the shelter of the aisle, and felt a little safer. His aching back forced him to stop and straighten up for a moment.

It was a long way to the nearest door, which was in the south transept. He was not sure he could drag the coffin all that way before the whole roof fell in. Perhaps that was what the devil was counting on. Philip could not stop himself from looking up into the flames again. The smoky two-legged figure darted behind a blackened beam just as Philip caught sight of it. He knows I can't make it, Philip thought. He looked along the aisle, tempted to abandon the saint and run for his life—and there he saw, coming toward him, Brother Milius, Cuthbert Whitehead, and Tom Builder, three very corporeal forms rushing to his aid. His heart leaped for joy, and suddenly he was not sure there was a fiend in the roof at all.

“Thank God!” he said. “Help me with this,” he added unnecessarily.

Tom Builder took one swift appraising look at the burning roof. He did not appear to see any fiends, but he said: “Let’s make it quick.”

They each took a corner and lifted the coffin onto their shoulders. It was a strain even with four of them. Philip called: “Forward!” They walked along the aisle as fast as they could, bowed down by the heavy burden.

When they reached the south transept, Tom called: “Wait.” The floor was an obstacle course of small fires, and more fragments of burning wood fell continuously. Philip peered across the gap, trying to map a route through the flames. During the few moments that they paused, a rumble began at the west end of the church. Philip looked up, full of dread. The rumble grew to a thunder.

Tom Builder said enigmatically: “It’s weak, like the other one.”

“What is?” Philip shouted.

“The southwest tower.”

“Oh, no!”

The thunder became even louder. Philip looked, horrified, as the entire west end of the church seemed to move forward a yard, as if the hand of God had struck it. Ten or more yards of roof fell down into the nave with the impact of an earthquake. Then the whole of the southwest tower seemed to crumble and fall, like a landslide, into the church.

Philip was paralyzed with shock. His church was disintegrating in front of his eyes. The damage would take years to repair even if he could find the money. What would he do? How would the monastery continue? Was this the end of Kingsbridge Priory?

He was jerked out of his paralysis by the movement of the coffin on his shoulder when the other three men pressed forward. Philip followed where it took him. Tom negotiated a way through the maze of fires. A burning brand fell on top of the coffin but fortunately it slipped to the floor without touching any of them. A moment later they reached the opposite side and passed through the door, out of the church into the cool night air.

Philip was so devastated by the destruction of the church that he felt no relief at his own escape. They hurried around the cloisters to the south arch and passed through. When they were well clear of the buildings Tom said: “This will do.” Thankfully, they lowered the coffin to the frosty ground.

Philip took a few moments to catch his breath. In that pause he realized that this was no time to act stunned. He was the prior, he was in charge here. What should he do next? It might be wise to make sure all the monks had escaped safely. He took one more deep breath, then straightened his shoulders and looked at the other men. “Cuthbert, you stay here and guard the saint’s coffin,” he said. “The rest of you, follow me.”

He led them around the back of the kitchen buildings, passed between the

brewery and the mill, and crossed the green to the guesthouse. The monks, Tom's family, and most of the villagers were standing around in groups, talking in subdued tones and staring wide-eyed at the blazing church. Philip turned to look at it before speaking to them. The sight was painful. The entire west end was a pile of rubble, and huge flames were shooting up from what remained of the roof.

He tore his gaze away. "Is everyone here?" he called out. "If you can think of anyone who's missing, call out his name."

Someone said: "Cuthbert Whitehead."

"He's guarding the bones of the saint. Anyone else?"

There was no one else.

Philip said to Milius: "Count the monks, to make sure. There should be forty-five including you and me." Knowing he could trust Milius, he put that out of his mind and turned to Tom Builder. "Is all your family here?"

Tom nodded and pointed. They were standing by the guesthouse wall; the woman, the grown son and the two little ones. The small boy gave Philip a frightened look. This must be a terrifying experience for them, Philip thought.

The sacrist was sitting on the ironbound box that contained the treasure. Philip had forgotten about that: he was relieved to see it safe. He addressed the sacrist. "Brother Andrew, the coffin of Saint Adolphus is behind the refectory. Take some brothers to help you, and carry it…" He thought for a moment. The safest place was probably the prior's residence. "Take it to my house."

"To your house?" Andrew said argumentatively. "The relics should be in my care, not yours."

"Then you should have rescued them from the church!" Philip flared. "Do as I say, without another word!"

The sacrist got up reluctantly, looking furious.

Philip said: "Make haste, man, or I'll strip you of your office here and now!" He turned his back on Andrew and spoke to Milius. "How many?"

"Forty-four, plus Cuthbert. Eleven novices. Five guests. Everyone is accounted for."

"That's a mercy." Philip looked at the raging fire. It seemed almost miraculous that they were all alive and no one had even been hurt. He realized he was exhausted, but he was too worried to sit down and rest. "Is there anything else of value that we should rescue?" he said. "We have the treasure and the relics…."

Alan, the young treasurer, spoke up. "What about the books?"

Philip groaned. Of course—the books. They were kept in a locked cupboard in the east cloister, next to the door of the chapter house, where the monks could get them during study periods. It would take a dangerously long time to empty the cupboard book by book. Perhaps a few strong youngsters

could pick up the whole cupboard and carry it to safety. Philip looked around. The sacrist had chosen half a dozen monks to deal with the coffin, and they were already making their way across the green. Now Philip selected three young monks and three of the older novices, and told them to follow him.

He retraced his steps across the open space in front of the burning church. He was too tired to run. They passed between the mill and the brewery, and went around the back of the kitchen and refectory. Cuthbert Whitehead and the sacrist were organizing the removal of the coffin. Philip led his group along the passage that ran between the refectory and the dormitory and under the south archway into the cloisters.

He could feel the heat of the fire. The big book cupboard had carvings on its doors depicting Moses and the tablets of stone. Philip directed the young men to tip the cupboard forward and hoist it on their shoulders. They carried it around the cloisters to the south archway. There Philip paused and looked back while they went on. His heart filled with grief at the sight of the ruined church. There was less smoke and more flame now. Whole stretches of the roof had disappeared. As he watched, the roof over the crossing seemed to sag, and he realized it was going to go next. There was a thunderous crash, louder than anything that had gone before, and the roof of the south transept fell in. Philip felt a pain that was almost physical, as if his own body were burning. A moment later the wall of the transept seemed to bulge out over the cloisters. God help us, it's going to fall down, Philip thought. As the stonework began to crumble and scatter he realized it was falling toward him, and he turned to flee; but before he had taken three steps something hit the back of his head and he lost consciousness.

For Tom, the raging fire that was destroying Kingsbridge Cathedral was a beacon of hope.

He looked across the green at the huge flames that leaped high in the air from the ruins of the church, and all he could think was: This means work!

The thought had been hiding in the back of his mind, ever since he had emerged, bleary-eyed, from the guesthouse, and seen the faint red glow in the church windows. All the time he had been hurrying the monks out of danger, and rushing into the burning church to find Prior Philip, and carrying the saint's coffin out, his heart had been bursting with shameless, happy optimism.

Now that he had a moment to reflect, it occurred to him that he ought not to be happy about the burning of a church; but then, he thought, no one had been hurt, and the priory's treasure had been saved, and the church was old and crumbling anyway; so why not rejoice?

The young monks came back across the green, carrying the heavy book

cupboard. All I have to do now, Tom thought, is make sure that I get the job of rebuilding this church. And the time to speak to Prior Philip about it is now.

However, Philip was not with the monks carrying the book cupboard. They reached the guesthouse and lowered the cupboard to the ground. “Where’s your prior?” Tom said to them.

The eldest of them looked back in surprise. “I don’t know,” he said. “I thought he was behind us.”

Perhaps he had stayed back to watch the blaze, Tom thought; but perhaps he was in trouble.

Without further ado Tom ran across the green and around the back of the kitchen. He hoped Philip was all right, not just because Philip seemed such a good man, but because he was Jonathan’s protector. Without Philip there was no knowing what might happen to the baby.

Tom found Philip in the passage between the refectory and the dormitory. To his relief, the prior was sitting upright, looking dazed but unhurt. Tom helped him to his feet.

“Something hit my head,” Philip said groggily.

Tom looked past him. The south transept had fallen into the cloisters. “You’re fortunate to be alive,” Tom said. “God must have a purpose for you.”

Philip shook his head to clear it. “I passed out for a moment. I’m all right now. Where are the books?”

“They took them to the guesthouse.”

“Let’s go back there.”

Tom took Philip’s arm as they walked. The prior was not badly hurt but he was upset, Tom could see.

By the time they got back to the guesthouse, the fire in the church was past its peak, and the flames were dying down a little; but nevertheless Tom could see people’s faces quite clearly, and he realized with a little shock that it was daybreak.

Philip started organizing things again. He told Milius Kitchener to make porridge for everyone and authorized Cuthbert Whitehead to open a barrel of strong wine to warm them up in the meantime. He ordered the fire lit in the guesthouse, and the older monks went in out of the cold. It started to rain, wind-driven sheets of water, freezing cold, and the flames in the ruined church faded fast.

When everyone was busy again, Prior Philip walked away from the guesthouse, on his own, and headed for the church. Tom saw him and followed. This was his chance. If he could handle this right he could work here for years.

Philip stood staring at what had been the west end of the church, shaking his head sadly at the wreckage, looking as if it were his life that was in ruins.

Tom stood beside him in silence. After a while Philip moved on, walking along the north side of the nave, through the graveyard. Tom walked with him, surveying the damage.

The north wall of the nave was still standing, but the north transept and part of the north wall of the chancel had fallen. The church still had an east end. They turned around the end and looked at the south side. Most of the south wall had come down and the south transept had collapsed into the cloisters. The chapter house was still standing.

They walked to the archway that led into the east walk of the cloisters. There they were halted by the pile of rubble. It looked a mess, but Tom's trained eye could see that the cloister walks themselves were not badly damaged, just buried under the fallen ruins. He climbed over the broken stones until he could see into the church. Just behind the altar there was a semi-concealed staircase that led down into the crypt. The crypt itself was beneath the quire. Tom peered in, studying the stone floor over the crypt for signs of cracking. He could see none. There was a good chance the crypt had survived intact. He would not tell Philip yet: he would save the news for a crucial moment.

Philip had walked on, around the back of the dormitory. Tom hurried to catch him. They found the dormitory unmarked. Going on, they found the other monastic buildings more or less unharmed: the refectory, the kitchen, the bakehouse and the brewery. Philip might have taken some consolation in that, but his expression remained glum.

They ended up where they had started, in front of the ruined west end, having completed a full circuit of the priory close without speaking a word. Philip sighed heavily and broke the silence. "The devil did this," he said.

Tom thought: This is my moment. He took a deep breath and said: "It might be God's work."

Philip looked up at him in surprise. "How so?"

Tom said carefully: "No one has been hurt. The books, the treasure and the bones of the saint were saved. Only the church has been destroyed. Perhaps God wanted a new church."

Philip smiled skeptically. "And I suppose God wanted you to build it." He was not too stunned to see that Tom's line of thought might be self-interested.

Tom stood his ground. "It may be so," he said stubbornly. "It was not the devil who sent a master builder here on the night the church burned down."

Philip looked away. "Well, there will be a new church, but I don't know when. And what am I to do meanwhile? How can the life of the monastery go on? All we're here for is worship and study."

Philip was deep in despair. This was the moment for Tom to offer him new hope. "My boy and I could have the cloisters cleared and ready for use in a week," he said, making his voice sound more confident than he felt.

Philip was surprised. “Could you?” Then his expression changed once more, and he looked defeated again. “But what will we use for a church?”

“What about the crypt? You can hold services there, couldn’t you?”

“Yes—it would do very well.”

“I’m sure the crypt is not badly damaged,” Tom said. It was almost true: he was almost sure.

Philip was looking at him as if he were the angel of mercy.

“It won’t take long to clear a path through the debris from the cloisters to the crypt stairs,” Tom went on. “Most of the church on that side has been completely destroyed, which is fortunate, oddly enough, because it means there’s no further danger from falling masonry. I’d have to survey the walls that are still standing, and it might be necessary to shore some of them up. Then they should be checked every day for cracks, and even so you ought not to enter the church in a gale.” All of this was important, but Tom could see that Philip was not taking it in. What Philip wanted from Tom now was positive news, something to lift his spirits. And the way to get hired was to give him what he wanted. Tom changed his tone. “With some of your younger monks laboring for me, I could fix things up so that you’re able to resume normal monastic life, after a fashion, within two weeks.”

Philip was staring at him. “Two weeks?”

“Give me food and lodging for my family, and you can pay my wages when you have the money.”

“You could give me back my priory in two weeks?” Philip repeated incredulously.

Tom was not sure he could, but if it took three no one would die of it. “Two weeks,” he said firmly. “After that, we can knock down the remaining walls—that’s a skilled job, mind you, if it’s to be done safely—then clear the rubble, stacking the stones for reuse. Meanwhile we can plan the new cathedral.” Tom held his breath. He had done his best. Surely Philip would hire him now!

Philip nodded, smiling for the first time. “I think God did send you,” he said. “Let’s have some breakfast, then we can start work.”

Tom breathed a shaky sigh of relief. “Thank you,” he said. There was a quaver in his voice that he could not quite control, but suddenly he did not care, and with a barely suppressed sob, he said: “I can’t tell you how much it means to me.”

After breakfast Philip held an impromptu chapter in Cuthbert’s storeroom beneath the kitchen. The monks were nervously excited. They were men who had chosen, or had reconciled themselves to, a life of security, predictability and tedium, and most of them were badly disoriented. Their bewilderment

touched Philip's heart. He felt more than ever like a shepherd, whose job it is to care for foolish and helpless creatures; except that these were not dumb animals, they were his brothers, and he loved them. The way to comfort them, he had decided, was to tell them what was going to happen, use up their nervous energy in hard work, and return to a semblance of normal routine as soon as possible.

Despite the unusual surroundings, Philip did not abbreviate the ritual of chapter. He ordered the reading of the martyrology for the day, followed by the memorial prayers. This was what monasteries were for: prayer was the justification of their existence. Nevertheless, some of the monks were restive, so he chose Chapter Twenty of Saint Benedict's Rule, the section called "On Reverence at Prayer." The necrology followed. The familiar ritual calmed their nerves, and he noticed that the scared look was slowly leaving the faces around him as the monks realized that their world was not coming to an end after all.

At the end Philip rose to address them. "The catastrophe that struck us last night is, after all, only physical," he began, putting into his voice as much warmth and reassurance as he could. "Our life is spiritual; our work is prayer, worship and contemplation." He looked all around the room for a moment, catching as many eyes as he could, making sure he had their concentrated attention; then he said: "We will resume that work within a few days, that I promise you."

He paused to let those words sink in, and the easing of tension in the room was almost tangible. He gave them a moment, then went on. "God in his wisdom sent us a master builder yesterday to help us through this crisis. He has assured me that if we work under his direction we can have the cloisters ready for normal use within a week."

There was a subdued murmur of pleased surprise.

"I'm afraid our church will never be used for services again—it will have to be built anew, and that will take many years, of course. However, Tom Builder believes the crypt to be undamaged. The crypt is consecrated, so we can hold services there. Tom says he can make it safe within a week after finishing the cloisters. So, you see, we can resume normal worship in time for Quinquagesima Sunday."

Once again their relief was audible. Philip saw that he had succeeded in soothing and reassuring them. At the beginning of this chapter they had been frightened and confused; now they were calm and hopeful. Philip added: "Brothers who feel themselves too frail to undertake physical labor will be excused. Brothers who work all day with Tom Builder will be allowed red meat and wine."

Philip sat down. Remigius was the first to speak. "How much will we have to pay this builder?" he asked suspiciously.

You could trust Remigius to try to find fault. “Nothing, yet,” Philip replied. “Tom knows our poverty. He will work for food and lodging for himself and his family, until we can afford his wages.” That was ambiguous, Philip realized: it might mean that Tom would not be entitled to wages until the priory could afford it, whereas the reality was that the priory would owe him wages for every day he worked, starting today. But before Philip could clarify the agreement, Remigius spoke again.

“And where will they lodge?”

“I have given them the guesthouse.”

“They could lodge with one of the village families.”

“Tom has made us a generous offer,” Philip said impatiently. “We’re fortunate to have him. I don’t want to make him sleep crowded in with someone’s goats and pigs when we have a decent house standing empty.”

“There are two women in that family—”

“A woman and a girl,” Philip corrected him.

“One woman, then. We don’t want a woman living in the priory!”

The monks muttered restively: they did not like Remigius’s quibbling. Philip said: “It’s perfectly normal for women to stay in the guesthouse.”

“Not *that* woman!” Remigius blurted, then he immediately looked as if he regretted it.

Philip frowned. “Do you know the woman, Brother?”

“She once inhabited these parts,” Remigius said reluctantly.

Philip was intrigued. It was the second time something of this sort had happened in connection with the builder’s wife: Waleran Bigod had also been disturbed by the sight of her. Philip said: “What’s wrong with her?”

Before Remigius could answer, Brother Paul, the old monk who kept the bridge, spoke up. “I remember,” he said rather dreamily. “There was a wild forest girl used to live around here—oh, it must be fifteen year ago. That’s who she reminds me of—probably it’s the same girl, grown up.”

“People said she was a witch,” Remigius said. “We can’t have a witch living in the priory!”

“I don’t know about that,” said Brother Paul in the same slow, meditative voice. “Any woman who lives wild gets called a witch sooner or later. People saying a thing doesn’t make it so. I’m content to leave it to Prior Philip to judge, in his wisdom, whether she’s a danger.”

“Wisdom doesn’t come immediately with the assumption of monastic office,” Remigius snapped.

“Indeed not,” said Brother Paul slowly. He looked directly at Remigius and said: “Sometimes it doesn’t come at all.”

The monks laughed at that riposte, which was all the funnier for coming from an unexpected source. Philip had to pretend to be displeased. He clapped his hands for silence. “Enough!” he said. “These matters are solemn. I will

question the woman. Now let us go about our duties. Those who wish to be excused from labor may retire to the infirmary for prayer and meditation. The rest, follow me.”

He left the storeroom and walked around the back of the kitchen buildings to the south archway which led into the cloisters. A few monks left the group and headed for the infirmary, among them Remigius and Andrew Sacrist. There was nothing frail about either of them, Philip thought, but they would probably cause trouble if they joined the labor force, so he was happy to see them go. Most of the monks followed Philip.

Tom had already marshaled the priory servants and started work. He stood on the pile of rubble in the cloister square with a large piece of chalk in his hand, marking stones with the letter T, his initial.

For the first time ever, it occurred to Philip to wonder how such large stones could be moved. They were certainly too big for a man to lift. He saw the answer immediately. A pair of poles were laid side by side on the ground, and a stone was rolled along until it rested across the poles. Then two people would take the ends of the poles and lift. Tom Builder must have shown them how to do that.

The work was proceeding rapidly, with most of the priory’s sixty servants helping, making a stream of people carrying stones away and coming back for more. The sight lifted Philip’s spirits, and he gave up a silent prayer of thanks for Tom Builder.

Tom saw him and came down off the pile. Before speaking to Philip he addressed one of the servants, the tailor who sewed the monks’ clothes. “Start the monks carrying stones,” he instructed the man. “Make sure they take only the stones I’ve marked, otherwise the pile may slip and kill someone.” He turned to Philip. “I’ve marked enough to keep them going for a while.”

“Where are they taking the stones?” Philip asked.

“Come and I’ll show you. I want to check that they’re stacking them properly.”

Philip went with Tom. The stones were being taken to the east side of the priory close. “Some of the servants will still have to do their normal duties,” Philip said as they walked. “The stable hands must still care for the horses, the cooks have to prepare meals, someone must fetch firewood and feed the chickens and go to market. But they’re none of them overworked, and I can spare half of them. In addition, you’ll have about thirty monks.”

Tom nodded. “That’ll do.”

They passed the east end of the church. The laborers were stacking the still-warm stones up against the east wall of the priory close, a few yards from the infirmary and the prior’s house. Tom said: “The old stones must be saved for the new church. They won’t be used for walls, because secondhand stones don’t weather well; but they’ll do for foundations. All the broken stones must

be kept, too. They'll be mixed with mortar and poured into the cavity between the inner and outer skins of the new walls, forming the rubble core."

"I see." Philip watched while Tom instructed the workers how to stack stones in an interlocking pattern so that the pile would not topple. It was already clear that Tom's expertise was indispensable.

When Tom was satisfied, Philip took his arm and led him on around the church, to the graveyard on the north side. The rain had stopped, but the gravestones were still wet. Monks were buried at the east end of the graveyard, villagers at the west end. The dividing line was the out-jutting north transept of the church, now in ruins. Philip and Tom stopped in front of it. A weak sun broke through the clouds. There was nothing sinister about the blackened timbers in daylight, and Philip felt almost ashamed that he had thought he had seen a devil last night.

He said: "Some of the monks are uneasy about having a woman live within the precincts of the priory." The look that came over Tom's face was more intense than anxiety: he seemed scared, even panicked. He really loves her, Philip thought. He went on hastily: "But I don't want you to have to live in the village and share a hovel with another family. To avoid trouble, it would be wise for your wife to be circumspect. Tell her to stay away from the monks as much as possible, especially the young ones. She should keep her face covered if she has to walk about the priory. Most of all, she mustn't do anything which could incur the suspicion of witchcraft."

"It shall be done," said Tom. There was a note of determination in his voice, and he looked a little daunted. Philip recalled that the wife was a sharp-witted woman with a mind of her own. She might not take kindly to being told to make herself inconspicuous. However, her family had been destitute yesterday, so she was likely to see these restraints as a small price to pay for shelter and security.

They walked on. Last night Philip had seen all this destruction as a supernatural tragedy, a terrible defeat for the forces of civilization and true religion, a body blow to his life's work. Now it just seemed like a problem he had to solve—formidable, yes; even daunting; but not superhuman. The change was mainly due to Tom. Philip felt very grateful to him.

They reached the west end. Philip saw a fast horse being saddled at the stable, and wondered who was going on a journey today, of all days. He left Tom to return to the cloisters while he himself went over to the stable to investigate.

One of the sacrist's helpers had ordered the horse: young Alan, who had rescued the treasure chest from the chapter house. "And where are you off to, my son?" said Philip.

"To the bishop's palace," Alan replied. "Brother Andrew has sent me to fetch candles, holy water and the Host, as we lost all those things in the fire

and we are to have services again as soon as possible.”

That made sense. All such supplies had been kept in a locked box in the quire, and the box was sure to have been burned. Philip was glad the sacrist was well organized for a change. “That’s good,” he said. “But wait a while. If you’re going to the palace, you can take a letter from me to Bishop Waleran.” Sly Waleran Bigod was now bishop-elect, thanks to some rather disreputable maneuvering; but Philip could not now withdraw his support, and was obliged to treat Waleran as his bishop. “I ought to give him a report on the fire.”

“Yes, Father,” Alan replied, “but I already have a letter to the bishop from Remigius.”

“Oh!” Philip was surprised. That was very enterprising of Remigius, he thought. “All right,” he said to Alan. “Travel cautiously, and may God go with you.”

“Thank you, Father.”

Philip walked back toward the church. Remigius had been *very* quick off the mark. Why had he and the sacrist been in such a hurry? It was enough to make Philip a little uneasy. Was the letter just about the burning of the church? Or was there something else in it?

Philip stopped halfway across the green and turned to look back. He would be perfectly within his rights to take the letter from Alan and read it. But he was too late: Alan was trotting through the gate. Philip stared after him, feeling mildly frustrated. At that moment, Tom’s wife stepped out of the guesthouse, carrying a scuttle which presumably contained ashes from the fireplace. She turned toward the dunghill near the stable. Philip watched her. The way she walked was pleasing, like the gait of a good horse.

He thought again about Remigius’s letter to Waleran. Somehow he could not shake off an intuitive, but nonetheless worrying, suspicion that the main burden of the message was not, in fact, the fire.

For no very good reason he felt sure the letter was about the stonemason’s wife.

III

Jack woke up at first cockcrow. He opened his eyes and saw Tom getting up. He lay still and listened to Tom pissing on the ground outside the door. He longed to move to the warm place Tom had vacated and cuddle up to his mother, but he knew Alfred would mock him mercilessly if he did, so he stayed where he was. Tom came back in and shook Alfred awake.

Tom and Alfred drank the ale remaining from last night's dinner and ate some stale horsebread, then they went out. There was some bread left over, and Jack hoped that today they would leave it behind, but he was disappointed: Alfred took it with him, as usual.

Alfred worked all day on the site with Tom. Jack and his mother sometimes went into the forest for the day. Mother would set traps while Jack went after duck with his slingshot. Whatever they caught they would sell to villagers or to the cellarer, Cuthbert. This was their only source of cash, since Tom was not being paid. With the money, they bought cloth or leather or tallow, and on the days when they did not go into the forest Mother would make shoes, undershirts, candles or a cap while Jack and Martha played with the village children. On Sundays, after the service, Tom and Mother liked to sit by the fire, talking. Sometimes they would start kissing, and Tom would put his hand inside Mother's robe, and then they would send the children out for a while and bar the door. This was the worst time of the entire week, for Alfred would be bad-tempered and would persecute the younger ones.

Today was an ordinary day, however, and Alfred would be busy from dawn to dusk. Jack got up and went outside. It was cold but dry. Martha came out a few moments later. The cathedral ruins were already aswarm with workers carrying stones, shoveling rubble, building wooden supports for unsteady walls and demolishing those which were too far gone to save.

There was general agreement, among the villagers and monks, that the fire had been started by the devil, and for long periods Jack actually forgot that he had started it himself. When he remembered, he would be brought up with a start, and then he would feel extraordinarily pleased with himself. He had taken a terrible risk, but he had got away with it, and he had saved the family from starvation.

The monks had their breakfast first, and the lay workers got nothing until the monks went into chapter. It was an awfully long wait for Martha and Jack. Jack always woke up hungry, and the cold morning air increased his appetite.

"Let's go to the kitchen courtyard," Jack said. The kitchen hands might

give them some scraps. Martha agreed readily: she thought Jack was wonderful, and would go along with anything he suggested.

When they got to the kitchen area they found that Brother Bernard, who was in charge of the bakehouse, was making bread today. Because his helpers were all working on the site, he was carrying firewood for himself. He was a young man, but rather fat, and he was puffing and sweating under a load of logs. “We’ll fetch your wood, brother,” Jack offered.

Bernard dumped the load beside his oven and handed Jack the broad, flat basket. “There’s good children,” he panted. “God will bless you.”

Jack took the basket and the two of them ran to the firewood pile behind the kitchen. They loaded the basket with logs, then carried the heavy load between them.

When they got back the oven was already hot, and Bernard emptied their basket directly onto the fire and sent them back for more. Jack’s arms ached but his stomach hurt more, and he hurried to load the basket again.

The second time they returned Bernard was putting tiny loaves of dough on a tray. “Fetch me one more basket, and you shall have hot buns,” he said. Jack’s mouth watered.

They filled the basket extra high the third time, and staggered back, each holding one handle. As they approached the courtyard they met Alfred, walking with a bucket, presumably on his way to fetch water from the channel that ran from the millpond across the green before disappearing underground by the brewery. Alfred hated Jack even more since Jack had put the dead bird in Alfred’s beer. Normally Jack would casually turn and walk the other way when he saw Alfred. Now he wondered whether to drop the basket and run, but that would look cowardly, and besides, he could smell the fragrance of new bread from the bakehouse, and he was ravenous; so he pressed on, with his heart in his mouth.

Alfred laughed at them struggling under a weight he could easily have carried alone. They gave him a wide berth, but he took a couple of steps toward them and gave Jack a shove, knocking him off his feet. Jack fell hard on his bottom, jarring his spine painfully. He dropped his side of the basket and all the firewood tipped out onto the ground. Tears welled up in his eyes, caused by rage rather than pain. It was so unfair that Alfred should be able to do that, without provocation, and get away with it. Jack got up and patiently put the wood back into the basket, pretending for Martha’s benefit not to care. They picked up the basket again and continued on to the bakehouse.

There they had their reward. The tray of buns was cooling on a stone shelf. When they came in Bernard took one, stuffed it in his mouth, and said: “They’re all right. Help yourselves. But careful—they’re hot.”

Jack and Martha each took a bun. Jack bit into his tentatively, afraid of burning his mouth, but it was so delicious that he ate it all in a moment. He

looked at the remaining buns. There were nine left. He glanced up at Brother Bernard, who was grinning at him. “I know what you want,” the monk said. “Go on, take the lot.”

Jack lifted the skirt of his cloak and wrapped the rest of the buns in it. “We’ll take them to Mother,” he said to Martha.

“There’s a good boy you are,” Bernard said. “Off you go, then.”

“Thank you, Brother,” Jack said.

They left the bakery and headed for the guesthouse. Jack was thrilled. Mother would be pleased with him for providing such a treat. He was tempted to eat another bun before he handed them over, but he resisted the temptation: it would be so nice to give her such a lot.

As they were crossing the green, they met Alfred again.

He had evidently filled his bucket, returned to the site, and emptied it, and he was now coming back for a refill. Jack decided to look nonchalant and hope that Alfred would ignore him. But the way he was carrying the buns, wrapped in the skirt of his cloak, was too obvious to conceal; and once again Alfred turned toward them.

Jack would have given him a bun willingly, but he knew Alfred would take them all if he got the chance. Jack broke into a run.

Alfred gave chase and soon caught up with him. Alfred stuck out one long leg and tripped Jack, and Jack went flying. The hot buns scattered all over the ground.

Alfred picked one up, wiped a smear of mud off it, and popped it into his mouth. His eyes widened with surprise. “New bread!” he said. He began to pick up the others.

Jack scrambled to his feet and tried to grab one of the fallen buns, but Alfred hit him a hefty swipe with the flat of his hand, knocking him down again. Alfred quickly scooped up the rest of the buns and walked off, munching. Jack burst into tears.

Martha looked sympathetic, but Jack did not want sympathy: he was suffering from humiliation as much as anything else. He walked off, and when Martha followed he turned on her and said: “Go away!” She looked hurt, but she stopped and let him go.

He walked toward the ruins, drying his tears on his sleeve. There was murder in his heart. I destroyed the cathedral, he thought; I could kill Alfred.

Around the ruins there was a good deal of sweeping and tidying this morning. Some ecclesiastical dignitary was coming to inspect the damage, Jack recalled.

It was Alfred’s physical superiority that was so maddening: he could do anything he liked just because he was so big. Jack walked around for a while, seething, wishing Alfred had been in the church when all these stones fell.

Eventually he saw Alfred again. He was in the north transept, shoveling

stone chips into a cart, and he was gray with dust. Near the cart was a roof timber that had survived almost undamaged, merely singed and blackened with soot. Jack rubbed the surface of the beam with a finger: it left a whitish line. Inspired, Jack wrote in the soot: “Alfred is a pig.”

Some of the laborers noticed. They were surprised Jack could write. One young man said: “What does it say?”

“Ask Alfred,” Jack replied.

Alfred peered at the writing and frowned in annoyance. He could read his own name, Jack knew, but not the rest. He was riled. He knew he was being insulted but he did not know what had been said, and that was humiliating in itself. He looked rather foolish. Jack’s anger was a little soothed. Alfred might be bigger, but Jack was smarter.

Still nobody knew what the words said. Then a novice monk walked past, read the writing, and smiled. “Who’s Alfred?” he said.

“Him,” said Jack with a jerk of the thumb. Alfred looked angrier, but he still did not know what to do, so he leaned on his shovel, looking stupid.

The novice laughed. “A pig, eh? What’s he digging for—acorns?” he said.

“Must be!” said Jack, delighted to have an ally.

Alfred dropped his shovel and made a grab for Jack.

Jack was ready for him, and went off like an arrow from a bow. The novice stuck out a foot to trip Jack—as if to be evenhandedly nasty to both sides—but Jack nimbly leaped over it. He raced along what had been the chancel, dodging around piles of rubble and jumping over fallen roof timbers. He could hear the heavy steps and grunting breath of Alfred right behind him, and fear lent him speed.

A moment later he realized he had run the wrong way. There was no way out of that end of the cathedral. He had made a mistake. He realized, with a sinking heart, that he was going to get hurt.

The upper half of the east end had fallen in, and the stones were piled up against what remained of the wall. Having nowhere else to go, Jack scrambled up the pile with Alfred hot on his heels. He reached the top and saw in front of him a sheer drop of about fifteen feet. He teetered fearfully on the edge. It was too far to jump without hurting himself. Alfred made a grab for his ankle. Jack lost his balance. For a moment he stood with one foot on the wall and the other in the air, windmilling his arms in an attempt to regain his footing. Alfred kept hold of his ankle. Jack felt himself falling inexorably the wrong way. Alfred held on a moment longer, unbalancing Jack further, then let go. Jack fell through the air, unable to right himself, and he heard himself scream. He landed on his left side. The impact was terrific. By an unlucky chance his face hit a stone.

Everything went black for a moment.

When he opened his eyes Alfred was standing over him—he must have

clambered down the wall somehow—and beside him was one of the older monks. Jack recognized the monk: it was Remigius, the sub-prior. Remigius caught his eye and said: “Get up, lad.”

Jack was not sure he could. He could not move his left arm. The left side of his face was numb. He sat upright. He had thought he was going to die, and it surprised him to be able to move at all. Using his right arm to push himself up, he struggled painfully to his feet, putting most of his weight on his right leg. As the numbness went he began to hurt.

Remigius took him by the left arm. Jack cried out in pain. Remigius ignored him and grabbed Alfred’s ear. He would probably issue some dire punishment to both of them, Jack thought. Jack hurt too much to care.

Remigius spoke to Alfred. “Now, my lad, why are you trying to kill your brother?”

“He’s not my brother,” Alfred said.

Remigius’s expression changed. “Not your brother?” he said. “Don’t you have the same mother and father?”

“*She’s* not my mother,” Alfred said. “My mother’s dead.”

A crafty look came over Remigius’s face. “When did your mother die?”

“At Christmas.”

“*Last* Christmas?”

“Yes.”

Despite his pain, Jack could see that Remigius was intensely interested in this, for some reason. The monk’s voice quivered with suppressed excitement as he said: “So your father has only lately met this boy’s mother?”

“Yes.”

“And since they have been…together, have they been to see a priest, to have their union solemnized?”

“Uh…I don’t know.” Alfred did not understand the words being used, Jack could tell. For that matter neither did Jack.

Remigius said impatiently: “Well, have they had a wedding?”

“No.”

“I see.” Remigius looked pleased about this, although Jack would have thought he would be cross. There was a rather satisfied look on the monk’s face. He was silent and thoughtful for a moment, then he seemed to remember the two boys. “Well, if you want to stay in the priory and eat the monks’ bread, don’t fight, even if you aren’t brothers. We men of God must not see bloodshed—that is one of the reasons we live a life of withdrawal from the world.” With that little speech Remigius released them both and turned away, and at last Jack could run to his mother.

It had taken three weeks, not two, but Tom had got the crypt ready for use as a

makeshift church, and today the bishop-elect was coming to hold the first service in it. The cloisters had been cleared of rubble, and Tom had repaired the damaged parts: cloisters were simple structures, just covered walkways, and the work had been easy. Most of the rest of the church was just heaps of ruins, and some of the walls that were still standing were in danger of falling, but Tom had cleared a passage from the cloisters, through what had been the south transept, to the crypt stairs.

Tom looked around him. The crypt was a good size, about fifty feet square, plenty big enough for the monks' services. It was a rather dark room, with heavy pillars and a low vaulted ceiling, but it was stoutly constructed, which was why it had survived the fire. They had brought in a trestle table to be used as an altar, and the benches from the refectory would serve as stalls for the monks. When the sacrist brought in his embroidered altar cloths and jeweled candlesticks, it would look just fine.

With the resumption of services Tom's work force would shrink. Most of the monks would return to their lives of worship, and many of those who did labor would resume their agricultural or administrative tasks. Tom would still have about half the priory servants as laborers, however. Prior Philip had taken a tough line with them. He felt there had been too many of them, and if any were unwilling to transfer from their duties as grooms or kitchen hands he was quite ready to dismiss them. A few had gone, but most remained.

The priory already owed Tom three weeks' wages. At the full master builder's rate of fourpence a day, that came to seventy-two pence. As each day went by the debt mounted, and it would become more and more difficult for Prior Philip to pay Tom off. After about half a year Tom would ask the prior to start paying him. By then he would be owed two and a half pounds of silver, which Philip would have to find before he could dismiss Tom. The debt made Tom feel secure.

There was even a chance—he hardly dared to think it—that this job would last him the rest of his life. It was, after all, a cathedral church; and if the powers-that-be were to decide to commission a prestigious new building, and if they could find the money to pay for it, it could be the largest construction project in the kingdom, employing dozens of masons for several decades.

This was too much to hope for, really. Talking to the monks and the villagers, Tom had learned that Kingsbridge had never been an important cathedral. Tucked away in a quiet village, it had had a series of unambitious bishops and was clearly undergoing a slow decline. The priory was undistinguished and penniless. Some monasteries attracted the attention of kings and archbishops by their lavish hospitality, their excellent schools, their great libraries, the researches of their philosopher-monks or the erudition of their priors and abbots; but Kingsbridge had none of those marks. The

likelihood was that Prior Philip would build a small church, constructed simply and fitted out modestly; and that might take no more than ten years.

However, that suited Tom perfectly.

He had realized, even before the fire-blackened ruins were cold, that this was his chance to build his own cathedral.

Prior Philip was already convinced that God had sent Tom to Kingsbridge. Tom knew he had won Philip's trust by the efficient way he had begun the process of clearing up and made the priory viable again. When the moment was right he would begin talking to Philip about designs for the new building. If he handled the situation carefully, there was every chance that Philip would ask him to draw the designs. The fact that the new church was likely to be fairly modest made it more probable that the planning might be entrusted to Tom, rather than to a master with more experience of cathedral building. Tom's hopes were high.

The bell rang for chapter. This was also the sign that the lay workers should go in for breakfast. Tom left the crypt and headed for the refectory. On his way he was confronted by Ellen.

She stood aggressively in front of him, as if to bar his way, and there was an odd look in her eye. Martha and Jack were with her. Jack looked terrible: one eye was closed, the left side of his face was bruised and swollen, and he leaned on his right leg, as if his left could not take any weight. Tom felt sorry for the little chap. "What happened to you?" he said.

Ellen said: "Alfred did this."

Tom groaned inwardly. For a moment he felt ashamed of Alfred, who was so much bigger than Jack. But Jack was no angel. Perhaps Alfred had been provoked. Tom looked around for his son, and caught sight of him walking toward the refectory, covered with dust. "Alfred!" he bellowed. "Come here."

Alfred turned around, saw the family group, and approached slowly, looking guilty.

Tom said to him: "Did you do this?"

"He fell off a wall," Alfred said sullenly.

"Did you push him?"

"I was chasing him."

"Who started it?"

"Jack called me a name."

Jack, speaking through swollen lips, said: "I called him a pig because he took our bread."

"Bread?" said Tom. "Where did you get bread before breakfast?"

"Bernard Baker gave it to us. We fetched firewood for him."

"You should have shared it with Alfred," Tom said.

"I would have."

Alfred said: "Then why did you run away?"

“I was taking it home to Mother,” Jack protested. “Then Alfred ate it all!”

Fourteen years of raising children had taught Tom that there was no prospect of discovering the rights and wrongs of a childish quarrel. “Go to breakfast, all three of you, and if there’s any more fighting today, you, Alfred, will end up with a face like Jack’s, and I’ll be the one who does it to you. Now clear off.”

The children went away.

Tom and Ellen followed at a slower pace. After a moment Ellen said: “Is that all you’re going to say?”

Tom glanced at her. She was still angry, but there was nothing he could do about it. He shrugged. “As usual, both parties are guilty.”

“Tom! How can you say that?”

“One’s as bad as the other.”

“Alfred took their bread. Jack called him a pig. That doesn’t draw blood!”

Tom shook his head. “Boys always fight. You could spend your whole life adjudicating their quarrels. Best to leave them to it.”

“That won’t do, Tom,” she said in a dangerous tone. “Look at Jack’s face, then look at Alfred’s. That’s not the result of a childish fight. That’s a vicious attack by a grown man on a small boy.”

Tom resented her attitude. Alfred was not perfect, he knew, but neither was Jack. Tom did not want Jack to become the pampered favorite in this family. “Alfred’s not a grown man, he’s fourteen years old. But he *is* working. He’s making a contribution to the support of the family, and Jack isn’t. Jack plays all day, like a child. In my book that means Jack ought to show Alfred respect. He does no such thing, as you will have noticed.”

“I don’t care!” Ellen flared. “You can say what you like, but my son is badly bruised, and might have been seriously injured, and *I will not allow it*!” She began to cry. In a quieter voice, but still angry, she said: “He’s my child and I can’t bear to see him like that.”

Tom sympathized with her, and he was tempted to comfort her, but he was afraid to give in. He had a feeling that this conversation might be a turning point. Living with his mother and no one else, Jack had always been overprotected. Tom did not want to concede that Jack ought to be cushioned against the normal knocks of everyday life. That would set a precedent that could cause endless trouble in years to come. Tom knew, in truth, that Alfred had gone too far this time, and he was secretly resolved to make the boy leave Jack alone; but it would be a bad thing to say so. “Beatings are a part of life,” he said to Ellen. “Jack must learn to take them or avoid them. I can’t spend my life protecting him.”

“You could protect him from that bullying son of yours!”

Tom winced. He hated to hear her call Alfred a bully. “I might, but I shan’t,” he said angrily. “Jack must learn to protect himself.”

“Oh, go to hell!” Ellen said, and she turned and walked away.

Tom entered the refectory. The wooden hut where the lay workers normally ate had been damaged by the fall of the southwest tower, so they took their meals in the refectory after the monks had finished and gone. Tom sat apart from everyone else, feeling unsociable. A kitchen hand brought him a jug of ale and some slices of bread in a basket. He dipped a piece of bread in the ale to soften it and began to eat.

Alfred was a big lad with too much energy, Tom thought fondly. He sighed into his beer. The boy *was* something of a bully, Tom knew in his heart; but he would calm down in time. Meanwhile, Tom was not going to make his own children give special treatment to a newcomer. They had had too much to put up with already. They had lost their mother, they had been forced to tramp the roads, they had come near to starving to death. He was not going to impose any more burdens on them if he could help it. They were due for a little indulgence. Jack would just have to keep out of Alfred’s way. It would not kill him.

A disagreement with Ellen always left Tom heavyhearted. They had quarreled several times, usually about the children, although this was their worst dispute so far. When she was hard-faced and hostile he could not remember what it had been like, just a little while earlier, to feel passionately in love with her: she seemed like an angry stranger who had intruded into his peaceful life.

He had never had such furious, bitter quarrels with his first wife. Looking back, it seemed to him that he and Agnes had agreed about everything important, and that when they disagreed it had not made them angry. That was how it should be between man and wife, and Ellen would have to realize that she could not be part of a family and yet have all her own way.

Even when Ellen was at her most infuriating he never quite wished that she would go away, but all the same he often thought of Agnes with regret. Agnes had been with him for most of his adult life, and now he had a constant sense of there being something missing. While she was alive he had never thought that he was particularly fortunate to have her, nor had he felt thankful for her; but now that she was dead he missed her, and he felt ashamed that he had taken her for granted.

At quiet moments in the day, when all his laborers had their instructions and were busy about the site, and Tom was able to get down to a skilled task, rebuilding a bit of wall in the cloisters or repairing a pillar in the crypt, he sometimes held imaginary conversations with Agnes. Mostly he told her about Jonathan, their baby son. Tom saw the child most days, being fed in the kitchen or walked in the cloisters or put to bed in the monks’ dormitory. He seemed perfectly healthy and happy, and no one but Ellen knew or even suspected that Tom had a special interest in him. Tom also talked to Agnes

about Alfred and Prior Philip and even Ellen, explaining his feelings about them, just as he would have done (except in the case of Ellen) if Agnes had been alive. He told her of his practical plans for the future, too: his hope that he would be employed here for years to come, and his dream of designing and building the new cathedral himself. In his head he heard her replies and questions. She was at different times pleased, encouraging, fascinated, suspicious, or disapproving. Sometimes he felt she was right, sometimes wrong. If he had told anyone of these conversations, they would have said he was communing with a ghost, and there would have been a flurry of priests and holy water and exorcism; but he knew there was nothing supernatural about what was happening. It was just that he knew her so well that he could imagine how she would feel and what she would say in just about any situation.

She came into his mind unbidden at odd times. When he peeled a pear with his eating knife for little Martha, he remembered how Agnes had always laughed at him because he would take pains to remove the peel in once continuous strip. Whenever he had to write something he would think of her, for she had taught him everything she had learned from her father, the priest; and he would remember her teaching him how to trim a quill or how to spell *caementarius*, the Latin word for "mason." As he washed his face on Sundays he would rub soap into his beard and recall how, when they were young, she had taught him that washing his beard would keep his face free from lice and boils. Never a day went by without some such little incident bringing her vividly to mind.

He knew he was lucky to have Ellen. There was no danger of his taking *her* for granted. She was unique: there was something abnormal about her, and it was that abnormal something that made her magnetic. He was grateful to her for consoling him in his grief, the morning after Agnes died; but sometimes he wished he had met her a few days—instead of a few hours—after he had buried his wife, just so that he would have had time to be heartbroken alone. He would not have observed a period of mourning—that was for lords and monks, not ordinary folk—but he would have had time to become accustomed to the absence of Agnes before he started to get used to living with Ellen. Such thoughts had not occurred to him during the early days, when the threat of starvation had combined with the sexual excitement of Ellen to produce a kind of hysterical end-of-the-world elation. But since he had found work and security, he had begun to feel pangs of regret. And sometimes it seemed that when he thought like this about Agnes, he was not only missing her, but mourning the passing of his own youth. Never again would he be as naive, as aggressive, as hungry or as strong as he had been when he had first fallen in love with Agnes.

He finished his bread and left the refectory ahead of the others. He went

into the cloisters. He was pleased with his work here: it was now hard to imagine that the quadrangle had been buried under a mass of rubble three weeks earlier. The only remaining signs of the catastrophe were some cracked paving stones for which he had been unable to find replacements.

There was a lot of dust about, though. He would have the cloisters swept again and then sprinkled with water. He walked through the ruined church. In the north transept he saw a blackened beam with words written in the soot. Tom read it slowly. It said: “Alfred is a pig.” So that was what had infuriated Alfred. Quite a lot of the wood from the roof had not burned to ashes, and there were blackened beams like this lying all around. Tom decided he would detail a group of workers to collect all the timber and take it to the firewood store. “Make the site look tidy,” Agnes would say when someone important was coming to visit. “You want them to feel glad that Tom’s in charge.” Yes, dear, Tom thought, and he smiled to himself as he went about his work.

Waleran Bigod’s party was sighted a mile or so away across the fields. There were three of them, riding quite hard. Waleran himself was in the lead, on a black horse, his black cloak flying behind. Philip and the senior monastic officials waited by the stable to welcome them.

Philip was not sure how to treat Waleran. Waleran had deceived him, indisputably, by not telling him that the bishop was dead; but when the truth came out Waleran had not appeared in the least ashamed; and Philip had not known what to say to him. He still did not know, but he suspected that there was nothing to be gained by complaining. Anyway, that whole episode had been overshadowed by the catastrophe of the fire. Philip would just be extremely wary of Waleran in future.

Waleran’s horse was a stallion, skittish and excitable despite having been ridden several miles. He held its head down hard as he walked it to the stable. Philip disapproved: there was no need for a clergyman to cut a dash on horseback, and most men of God chose quieter mounts.

Waleran swung off the horse with a fluid motion and gave the reins to a stable hand. Philip greeted him formally. Waleran turned and surveyed the ruins. A bleak look came into his eyes, and he said: “This was an expensive fire, Philip.” He seemed genuinely distressed, somewhat to Philip’s surprise.

Before Philip could reply, Remigius spoke up. “The devil’s work, my lord bishop,” he said.

“Was it, now?” said Waleran. “In my experience, the devil is usually assisted in such work by monks who light fires in church to take the chill off matins, or carelessly leave burning candles in the bell tower.”

Philip was amused to see Remigius crushed, but he could not let Waleran’s insinuations pass. “I’ve held an investigation into possible causes

of the conflagration," he said. "No one lit a fire in the church that night—I can be sure because I was present at matins myself. And no one had been up in the roof for months beforehand."

"So what is your explanation—lightning?" Waleran said skeptically.

Philip shook his head. "There was no storm. The fire seems to have started in the vicinity of the crossing. We did leave a candle burning on the altar after the service, as usual. It's possible that the altar cloth caught fire, and a spark was taken by an updraft to the wooden ceiling, which was very old and dry." Philip shrugged. "It's not a very satisfactory explanation, but it's the best we have."

Waleran nodded. "Let's have a closer look at the damage."

They moved off toward the church. Waleran's two companions were a man-at-arms and a young priest. The man-at-arms stayed behind to see to the horse. The priest accompanied Waleran, and was introduced to Philip as Dean Baldwin. As they all crossed the green to the church, Remigius put a hand on Waleran's arm, stopping him, and said: "The guesthouse is undamaged, as you can see."

Everyone stopped and turned around. Philip wondered irritably what Remigius was thinking of. If the guesthouse was undamaged, why make everyone stop and look at it? The builder's wife was walking up from the kitchens, and they all watched her enter the house. Philip glanced at Waleran. He was looking slightly shocked. Philip remembered the moment, back at the bishop's palace, when Waleran had seen the builder's wife, and had looked almost frightened. What was it about that woman?

Waleran gave Remigius a swift look and an almost imperceptible nod, then he turned to Philip and said: "Who is living there?"

Philip was quite sure Waleran had recognized her, but he said: "A master builder and his family."

Waleran nodded and they all moved on. Philip knew now why Remigius had called attention to the guesthouse: he had wanted to make sure Waleran saw the woman. Philip made up his mind to question her at the earliest opportunity.

They went into the ruins. A group of seven or eight men, made up of monks and priory servants in about equal numbers, was lifting a half-burned roof beam under the supervision of Tom. The whole site looked busy but tidy. Philip felt that the air of bustling efficiency did him credit, although Tom was responsible.

Tom came to meet them. He towered over everyone else. Philip said to Waleran: "This is our master builder, Tom. He's managed to make the cloisters and the crypt usable again already. We're very grateful to him."

"I remember you," Waleran said to Tom. "You came to me just after Christmas. I didn't have any work for you."

“That’s right,” Tom said in his deep, dusty voice. “Perhaps God was saving me to help Prior Philip in his time of trouble.”

“A theological builder,” Waleran mocked.

Tom reddened faintly under his dusty skin. Philip thought that Waleran must have a strong nerve, to make fun of such a big man, even thought Waleran was a bishop and Tom only a mason.

“What is your next step here?” Waleran asked.

“We must make the place safe by knocking down the remaining walls, before they fall on someone,” Tom replied, meekly enough. “Then we should clear the site ready for the building of the new church. As soon as possible we should find tall trees for the timbers of the new roof—the longer the wood is seasoned, the better the roof will be.”

Philip said hastily: “Before we start felling trees we must find the money to pay for them.”

“We’ll speak about that later,” Waleran said enigmatically.

That remark intrigued Philip. He hoped Waleran had a scheme for raising the money to build the new church. If the priory had to rely on its own resources it would not be able to begin for many years. Philip had been agonizing over this for the past three weeks, and he still had not come up with a solution.

He led the group along the path that had been cleared through the rubble to the cloisters. One glance was sufficient for Waleran to see that this area had been set to rights. They moved on from there and crossed the green to the prior’s house in the southeast corner of the close.

Once inside, Waleran took off his cloak and sat down, holding his pale hands out to the fire. Brother Milius, the kitchener, served hot spiced wine in small wooden bowls. Waleran sipped his and said to Philip: “Has it occurred to you that Tom Builder might have started the fire to provide himself with work?”

“Yes, it has,” Philip said. “But I don’t think he did. He would have had to get inside the church, which was securely locked up.”

“He might have gone in during the day and hidden himself away.”

“Then he would have been unable to get out after he started the fire.” He shook his head. This was not the real reason he was sure Tom was innocent. “Anyway, I don’t believe him capable of such a thing. He’s an intelligent man—much more so than you might think at first—but he’s not sly. If he were guilty, I think I would have seen it in his face, when I looked him in the eye and asked him how he thought the fire might have started.”

Somewhat to Philip’s surprise, Waleran agreed immediately. “I believe you’re right,” he said. “I can’t see him setting fire to a church, somehow. He’s just not the type.”

“We may never know for sure how the fire started,” Philip said. “But we

must face the problem of raising the money to build a new church. I don't know—"

"Yes," Waleran interrupted, and held up a hand to stop Philip. He turned to the others in the room. "I must speak to Prior Philip alone," he said. "The rest of you may leave us."

Philip was intrigued. He could not imagine why Waleran had to speak to him alone about this.

Remigius said: "Before we go, lord bishop, there is something the brothers have asked me to say to you."

Philip thought: What now?

Waleran raised a skeptical eyebrow. "And why should they ask *you*, rather than your prior, to raise a matter with me?"

"Because Prior Philip is deaf to their complaint."

Philip was angry and mystified. There had been no complaint. Remigius was just trying to embarrass Philip by creating a scene in front of the bishop-elect. Philip caught an inquiring glance from Waleran. He shrugged and tried to look unconcerned. "I can't wait to hear what the complaint is," he said. "Please go ahead, Brother Remigius—if you're *quite* sure the matter is important enough to require the attention of the bishop."

Remigius said: "There is a woman living in the priory."

"Not that again," Philip said with exasperation. "She's the builder's wife, and she lives in the guesthouse."

"She's a witch," said Remigius.

Philip wondered why Remigius was doing this. Remigius had mounted this particular horse once already, and it would not run. The point was moot, but the prior was the authority, and Waleran was bound to support Philip, unless he wanted to be called in every time Remigius disagreed with his superior. Wearily, Philip said: "She's not a witch."

"Have you interrogated the woman?" Remigius demanded.

Philip recalled that he had promised to question her. He had never done so: he had seen the husband, and told him to tell her to be circumspect, but he had not actually spoken to the woman himself. That was a pity, for it permitted Remigius to score a point; but it was not much of a point, and Philip felt sure it would not cause Waleran to take Remigius's side. "I haven't interrogated her," Philip admitted. "But there is no evidence of witchcraft, and the whole family is perfectly honest and Christian."

"She's a witch and a fornicator," Remigius said, flushing with righteous indignation.

"*What?*" Philip exploded. "With whom does she fornicate?"

"With the builder."

"He's her husband, you fool!"

"No, he's not," Remigius said triumphantly. "They're not married, and

they've only known one another a month."

Philip was bowled over. He had never suspected this. Remigius had taken him completely by surprise.

If Remigius was telling the truth, the woman was a fornicator, technically. It was a type of fornication that was normally overlooked, for many couples did not get around to having their union blessed by a priest until they had been together for a while, often until the first child was conceived. Indeed, in very poor or remote parts of the country, couples often lived as man and wife for decades, and brought up children, and then startled a visiting priest by asking him to solemnize their marriage around the time their grandchildren were being born. However, it was one thing for a parish priest to be indulgent among poor peasants on the outskirts of Christendom, and quite another when an important employee of a priory was committing the same act within the precincts of the monastery.

"What makes you think they aren't married?" Philip said skeptically, although he felt sure Remigius would have checked the facts before speaking up in front of Waleran.

"I found the sons fighting, and they told me they aren't brothers. Then the whole story came out."

Philip was disappointed with Tom. Fornication was a common enough sin, but it was particularly abhorrent to monks, who forsook all carnality. How could Tom do this? He should have known it was hateful to Philip. Philip felt angrier with Tom than he did with Remigius. But Remigius had been sneaky. Philip asked him: "Why did you not tell me, your prior, about this?"

"It was only this morning that I heard it."

Philip sat back in his seat, defeated. Remigius had caught him out. Philip looked foolish. This was Remigius's revenge for his defeat in the election. Philip looked at Waleran. The complaint had been made to Waleran: now Waleran could pronounce judgment.

Waleran did not hesitate. "The case is clear enough," he said. "The woman must confess her sin, and do public penance for it. She must leave the priory, and live in chastity, apart from the builder, for a year. Then they may be married."

A year apart was a harsh sentence. Philip felt she deserved it, for defiling the monastery. But he was anxious about how she would receive it. "She may not submit to your judgment," he said.

Waleran shrugged. "Then she will burn in hell."

"If she leaves Kingsbridge, I'm afraid Tom may go with her."

"There are other builders."

"Of course." Philip would be sorry to lose Tom. But he could tell, from Waleran's expression, that Waleran would not mind if Tom and his woman were to leave Kingsbridge and never come back; and he wondered again why

she was so important.

Waleran said: “Now clear out, all of you, and let me speak to your prior.”

“Just a minute,” Philip said sharply. It was his house, and they were his monks, after all; he would summon and dismiss them, not Waleran. “I will speak to the builder myself about this matter. None of you is to mention it to anyone, do you hear? There’ll be a harsh punishment for you if you disobey me over this. Is that clear, Remigius?”

“Yes,” said Remigius.

Philip looked inquiringly at Remigius and said nothing. There was a pregnant silence.

“Yes, *Father*,” Remigius said at last.

“All right, off you go.”

Remigius, Andrew, Milius, Cuthbert and Dean Baldwin all trooped out. Waleran helped himself to a little more hot wine and stretched his feet out to the fire. “Women always cause trouble,” he said. “When there’s a mare in heat in the stables, all the stallions start nipping the grooms, kicking their stalls and generally causing trouble. Even the geldings start to misbehave. Monks are like geldings: physical passion is denied them, but they can still smell cunt.”

Philip was embarrassed. There was no need for such explicit talk, he felt. He looked at his hands. “What about rebuilding the church?” he said.

“Yes. You must have heard that that business you came to see me about—Earl Bartholomew and the conspiracy against King Stephen—turned out well for us.”

“Yes.” It seemed a long time ago that Philip had gone to the bishop’s palace, in fear and trembling, to tell of the plot against the king whom the Church had chosen. “I heard that Percy Hamleigh attacked the earl’s castle and took him prisoner.”

“That’s right—Bartholomew is now in a dungeon at Winchester, waiting to hear his fate,” Waleran said with satisfaction.

“And Earl Robert of Gloucester? He was the more powerful conspirator.”

“And therefore gets the lighter punishment. In fact no punishment at all. He has pledged allegiance to King Stephen, and his part in the plot has been…overlooked.”

“But what has this got to do with our cathedral?”

Waleran stood up and went to the window. When he looked out at the ruined church, there was real sadness in his eyes, and Philip realized that there was a core of genuine piety in Waleran, for all his worldly ways. “Our part in the defeat of Bartholomew puts King Stephen in our debt. Before too long, you and I will go and see him.”

“See the king!” Philip said. He was a little intimidated by the prospect.

“He will ask us what we want as our reward.”

Philip saw what Waleran was getting at, and he was thrilled to the core.

“And we’ll tell him…”

Waleran turned back from the window and looked at Philip, and his eyes looked like black jewels, glittering with ambition. “We’ll tell him we want a new cathedral for Kingsbridge,” he said.

Tom knew Ellen was going to hit the roof.

She was already angry about what had happened to Jack. Tom needed to soothe her. But the news of her “penance” was going to inflame her. He wished he could postpone telling her for a day or two, to give her time to cool off; but he could not, for Prior Philip had said she must be off the premises by nightfall. He had to tell her immediately, and since it was midday when Philip told Tom, Tom told Ellen at dinner.

They went into the refectory with the other priory employees when the monks had finished their dinner and gone. The tables were crowded, but Tom thought that might not be a bad thing: the presence of other people might restrain her a little, he thought.

He was wrong about that, he soon learned.

He tried to break the news gradually. First he said: “They know we’re not married.”

“Who told them?” she said angrily. “Some troublemaker?”

“Alfred. Don’t blame him—that sly monk Remigius got it out of him. Anyway, we never told the children to keep it secret.”

“I don’t blame the boy,” she said more calmly. “So what do they say?”

He leaned across the table and spoke in a low voice. “They say you’re a fornicator,” he said, hoping no one else would hear.

“A fornicator?” she said loudly. “What about you? Don’t these monks know that it takes two to fornicate?”

The people sitting nearby started to laugh.

“Hush,” Tom said. “They say we have to get married.”

She looked at him hard. “If that was all, you wouldn’t be looking so hangdog, Tom Builder. Tell me the rest.”

“They want you to confess your sin.”

“Hypocritical perverts,” she said disgustedly. “They spend all night up one another’s arseholes and then they have the nerve to call what we’re doing a sin.”

There was more laughter at that. People stopped their own conversations to listen to Ellen.

“Just talk quietly,” Tom pleaded.

“I suppose they want me to do penance, too. Humiliation is all part of it. What do they want me to do? Come on, tell the truth, you can’t lie to a *witch*.”

“Don’t say that!” Tom hissed. “It makes things worse.”

“Then tell me.”

“We have to live apart for a year, and you have to remain chaste—”

“Piss on that!” Ellen shouted.

Now everyone was looking.

“Piss on you, Tom Builder!” she said. She realized she had an audience. “Piss on all of you, too,” she said. Most people grinned. It was hard to take offense, perhaps because she looked so lovely with her face flushed red and her golden eyes wide. She stood up. “Piss on Kingsbridge Priory!” She jumped up on to the table, and there was a burst of applause. She walked along the board. The diners snatched their bowls of soup and mugs of ale out of her way and sat back, laughing. “Piss on the prior!” she said. “Piss on the sub-prior, and the sacrist, and the cantor and the treasurer, and all their deeds and charters, and their chests full of silver pennies!” She reached the end of the table. Beyond it was another, smaller table where someone would sit and read aloud during the monks’ dinner. There was an open book on the table. Ellen jumped from the dining table to the reading table.

Suddenly Tom knew what she was going to do. “Ellen!” he called. “Don’t, please—”

“Piss on the Rule of Saint Benedict!” she yelled at the top of her voice. Then she hitched up her skirt, bent her knees, and urinated on the open book.

The men roared with laughter, banged on the tables, hooted and whistled and cheered. Tom was not sure whether they shared Ellen’s contempt for the Rule or they just enjoyed seeing a beautiful woman expose herself. There was something erotic about her shameless vulgarity, but it was also exciting to see someone openly abuse the book that the monks were so tediously solemn about. Whatever the reason, they loved it.

She jumped off the table and, amid a thunder of applause, ran out of the door.

Everyone began to talk at the same time. No one had ever seen anything quite like that before. Tom was horrified and embarrassed: the consequences would be dire, he knew. Yet a part of him was thinking: What a woman!

Jack got up after a moment and followed his mother out, with the trace of a grin on his swollen face.

Tom looked at Alfred and Martha. Alfred had a bewildered air but Martha was giggling. “Come on, you two,” Tom said, and the three of them left the refectory.

When they got outside Ellen was nowhere to be seen. They went across the green to the guesthouse and found her there. She was sitting in the chair waiting for him. She was wearing her cloak, and holding her big leather satchel. She looked cool, calm and collected. Tom’s heart went cold when he saw the bag, but he pretended not to have noticed it. “There’s going to be hell

to pay," he said.

"I don't believe in hell," she said.

"I hope they'll let you confess, and do penance."

"I'm not going to confess."

His self-control broke. "Ellen, don't leave!"

She looked sad. "Listen, Tom. Before I met you I had food to eat and a place to live. I was safe and secure and self-sufficient: I needed nobody. Since I've been with you I've come closer to starvation than at any time in my life. You've got work now, but there's no security in it: the priory has no money to build a new church, and you could be on the road again next winter."

"Philip will raise the money somehow," Tom said. "I'm sure he will."

"You can't be sure," she said.

"You don't believe," Tom said bitterly. Then, before he could stop himself, he added: "You're just like Agnes, you don't believe in my cathedral."

"Oh, Tom, if it was just me, I'd stay," she said sadly. "But look at my son."

Tom looked at Jack. His face was purple with bruising, his ear was swollen to twice its normal size, his nostrils were full of dried blood and he had a broken front tooth.

Ellen said: "I was afraid he would grow up like an animal if we stayed in the forest. But if this is the price of teaching him to live with other people, it's too much to pay. So I'm going back to the forest."

"Don't say that," Tom said desperately. "Let's talk about it. Don't make a rash decision—"

"It's not rash, it's not rash, Tom," she said sorrowfully. "I'm so sad that I can't even be angry anymore. I really wanted to be your wife. But not at any cost."

If Alfred had not chased Jack, none of this would have happened, Tom thought. But it was only a boyish scrap, wasn't it? Or was Ellen right when she said Tom had a blind spot about Alfred? Tom began to feel he had been wrong. Perhaps he should have taken a firmer line with Alfred. Boys fighting was one thing, but Jack and Martha were smaller than Alfred. Perhaps he was a bully.

But it was too late to change that now. "Stay in the village," Tom said desperately. "Wait a while and see what happens."

"I don't suppose the monks will let me, now."

He realized she was right. The village was owned by the priory and all the householders paid rent to the monks—usually in the form of days of work—and the monks could refuse to house anyone they did not like. They could hardly be blamed if they rejected Ellen. She had made her decision and she had literally pissed on her chances of retracting it.

“I’ll go with you, then,” he said. “The monastery owes me seventy-two pennies already. We’ll go on the road again. We survived before….”

“What about your children?” she said gently.

Tom remembered how Martha had cried from hunger. He knew he could not make her go through that again. And there was his baby son, Jonathan, living here with the monks. I don’t want to leave him again, Tom thought; I did it once, and hated myself for it.

But he could not bear the thought of losing Ellen.

“Don’t tear yourself apart,” she said. “I won’t tramp the roads with you again. That’s no solution—we’d be worse off than we are now, in every way. I’m going back to the forest, and you’re not coming with me.”

He stared at her. He wanted to believe that she did not mean it, but the look on her face told him she did. He could not think of anything more to say to stop her. He opened his mouth to speak, but no words came. He felt helpless. She was breathing hard, her bosom rising and falling with emotion. He wanted to touch her, but he felt she did not want him to. I may never embrace her again, he thought. It was hard to believe. For weeks he had lain with her every night, and touched her as familiarly as he would touch himself; and now suddenly it was forbidden, and she was like a stranger.

“Don’t look so sad,” she said. Her eyes were full of tears.

“I can’t help it,” he said. “I am sad.”

“I’m sorry I’ve made you so unhappy.”

“Don’t be sorry for that. Be sorry that you made me so happy. That’s what hurts, woman. That you made me so happy.”

A sob escaped from her lips. She turned away and left without another word.

Jack and Martha went out after her. Alfred hesitated, looking awkward, then followed them.

Tom stood staring at the chair she had left. No, he thought, it can’t be true, she isn’t leaving me.

He sat down in the chair. It was still warm from her body, the body he loved so much. He stiffened his face to stop the tears.

He knew she would not change her mind now. She never vacillated: she was a person who made a decision and then carried it through.

She might regret it eventually, though.

He seized on that shred of hope. He knew she loved him. That had not changed. Only last night she had made love frantically, like someone slaking a terrible thirst; and after he was satisfied she had rolled on top of him and carried on, kissing him hungrily, gasping into his beard as she came time and time again, until she was too exhausted with pleasure to go on. And it was not just the fucking that she liked. They enjoyed being together all the time. They talked constantly, much more than he and Agnes had talked even in the early

days. She's going to miss me as much as I'll miss her, he thought. After a while, when her anger has died down, and she has settled into a new routine, she'll hanker for someone to talk to, a hard body to touch, a bearded face to kiss. Then she'll think of me.

But she was proud. She might be too proud to come back even if she wanted to.

He sprang out of his chair. He had to tell her what was on his mind. He left the house. She was at the priory gate, saying goodbye to Martha. Tom ran past the stable and caught up with her.

She gave him a sad smile. "Goodbye, Tom."

He took her hands. "Will you come back, one day? Just to see us? If I know you're not going away forever, that I will see you again sometime, if only for a little while—if I know that I can bear it."

She hesitated.

"Please?"

"All right," she said.

"Swear it."

"I don't believe in oaths."

"But I do."

"All right. I swear it."

"Thank you." He pulled her gently to him. She did not resist him. He hugged her, and his control broke. Tears poured down his face. At last she drew away. Reluctantly he let her go. She turned toward the gate.

At that moment there was a noise from the stable, the sound of a spirited horse being disobedient, stamping and snorting. Automatically, they all looked round. The horse was Waleran Bigod's black stallion, and the bishop was about to mount. His eyes met Ellen's, and he froze.

At that moment she started to sing.

Tom did not know the song, although he had heard her sing often. The melody was terribly sad. The words were French, but he could understand them well enough.

A lark, caught in a hunter's net

Sang sweeter then than ever,

As if the falling melody

Might wing and net dissever.

Tom looked from her to the bishop. Waleran was terrified: his mouth was

open, his eyes wide, his face as white as death. Tom was astonished: why did a simple song have the power to scare such a man?

At dusk the hunter took his prey,

The lark his freedom never.

All birds and men are sure to die

But songs may live forever.

Ellen called out: “Goodbye, Waleran Bigod. I’m leaving Kingsbridge, but I’m not leaving you. I’ll be with you in your dreams.”

And mine, Tom thought.

For a moment no one moved.

Ellen turned away, holding Jack’s hand; and they all watched in silence as she marched out through the priory gates and disappeared into the gathering dusk.

PART TWO

1136-1137

Chapter 5

AFTER ELLEN HAD GONE, Sundays were very quiet at the guesthouse. Alfred played football with the village boys in the meadow on the other side of the river. Martha, who missed Jack, played pretend games, gathering vegetables and making pottage and dressing a doll. Tom worked on his cathedral design.

He had hinted to Philip, once or twice, that he should think about what kind of church he wanted to build, but Philip had not noticed, or had chosen to ignore the implication. He had a lot on his mind. But Tom thought about little else, especially on Sundays.

He liked to sit just inside the door of the guesthouse and look across the green at the cathedral ruins. He made sketches on a piece of slate sometimes, but most of the work was in his head. He knew that it was hard for most people to visualize solid objects and complex spaces, but he had always found it easy.

He had won Philip's trust and gratitude for the way he had dealt with the ruins; but Philip still saw him as a jobbing mason. He had to convince Philip that he was capable of designing and building a cathedral.

One Sunday about two months after Ellen left, he felt ready to begin drawing.

He made a mat of woven reeds and pliable twigs, about three feet by two. He made neat wooden sides to the mat so that it had raised edges, like a tray. Then he burned some chalk for lime, mixed up a small quantity of strong plaster, and filled the tray with the mixture. As the mortar began to harden, he drew lines in it with a needle. He used his iron foot rule for straight lines, his set square for right angles and his compasses for curves.

He would do three drawings: a section, to explain how the church was constructed; an elevation, to illustrate its beautiful proportions; and a floor plan to show the accommodation. He began with the section.

He imagined that the cathedral was like a long loaf of bread, then he cut off the crust at the west end, to see inside, and he began to draw.

It was very simple. He drew a tall flat-topped archway. That was the nave, seen from the end. It would have a flat wooden ceiling, like the old church. Tom would have greatly preferred to build a curved stone vault, but he knew Philip could not afford it.

On top of the nave he drew a triangular roof. The width of the building was determined by the width of the roof, and that in turn was limited by the timber available. It was difficult to get hold of beams longer than about thirty-five feet—and they were fiercely expensive. (Good timber was so valuable that a fine tree was liable to be chopped down and sold by its owner long before it was that high.) The nave of Tom's cathedral would probably be thirty-two feet wide, or twice the length of Tom's iron pole.

The nave he had drawn was high, impossibly high. But a cathedral had to be a dramatic building, awe-inspiring in its size, pulling the eye heavenward with its loftiness. One reason people came to them was that cathedrals were the largest buildings in the world: a man who never went to a cathedral could go through life without seeing a building much bigger than the hovel he lived in.

Unfortunately, the building Tom had drawn would fall down. The weight of lead and timber in the roof would be too much for the walls, which would buckle outward and collapse. They had to be propped up.

For that purpose Tom drew two roundtopped archways, half the height of the nave, one on either side. These were the aisles. They would have curved stone ceilings: since the aisles were lower and narrower, the expense of stone vaults was not so great. Each aisle would have a sloping lean-to roof.

The side aisles, joined to the nave by their stone vaults, provided some support, but they did not reach quite high enough. Tom would build extra supports, at intervals, in the roof space of the side aisles, above the vaulted ceiling and below the lean-to roof. He drew one of them, a stone arch rising from the top of the aisle wall across to the nave wall. Where the support rested on the aisle wall, Tom braced it further with a massive buttress jutting out from the side of the church. He put a turret on top of the buttress, to add weight and make it look nicer.

You could not have an awesomely tall church without the strengthening elements of aisles, supports and buttresses; but this might be difficult to explain to a monk, and Tom had drawn the sketch to help make it clear.

He also drew the foundations, going far underground beneath the walls. Laymen were always surprised at how deep foundations were.

It was a simple drawing, too simple to be of much use to builders; but it should be right for showing to Prior Philip. Tom wanted him to understand what was being proposed, visualize the building, and get excited about it. It was hard to imagine a big, solid church when what was in front of you was a few lines scratched in plaster. Philip would need all the help Tom could give

him.

The walls he had drawn looked solid, seen end on, but they would not be. Tom now began to draw the side view of the nave wall, as seen from inside the church. It was pierced at three levels. The bottom half was hardly a wall at all: it was just a row of columns, their tops joined by semicircular arches. It was called the arcade. Through the archways of the arcade could be seen the round-headed windows of the aisles. The windows would be neatly lined up with the archways, so that light from outside could fall, unobstructed, into the nave. The columns in between would be lined up with the buttresses on the outside walls.

Above each arch of the arcade was a row of three small arches, forming the tribune gallery. No light would come through these, for behind them was the lean-to roof of the side aisle.

Above the gallery was the clerestory, so called because it was pierced with windows which lit the upper half of the nave.

In the days when the old Kingsbridge Cathedral had been built, masons had relied on thick walls for strength, and had nervously inserted mean little windows that let in hardly any light. Modern builders understood that a building would be strong enough if its walls were straight and true.

Tom designed the three levels of the nave wall—arcade, gallery and clerestory—strictly in the proportions 3:1:2. The arcade was half the height of the wall, and the gallery was one third of the rest. Proportion was everything in a church: it gave a subliminal feeling of rightness to the whole building. Studying the finished drawing, Tom thought it looked perfectly graceful. But would Philip think so? Tom could see the tiers of arches marching down the length of the church, with their moldings and carvings picked out by an afternoon sun…but would Philip see the same?

He began his third drawing. This was a floor plan of the church. In his imagination he saw twelve arches in the arcade. The church was therefore divided into twelve sections, called bays. The nave would be six bays long, the chancel four. In between, taking up the space of the seventh and eighth bays, would be the crossing, with the transepts sticking out either side and the tower rising above.

All cathedrals and nearly all churches were cross-shaped. The cross was the single most important symbol of Christianity, of course, but there was a practical reason too: the transepts provided useful space for extra chapels and offices such as the sacristry and the vestry.

When he had drawn a simple floor plan Tom returned to the central drawing, which showed the interior of the church viewed from the west end. Now he drew the tower rising above and behind the nave.

The tower should be either one and a half times the height of the nave, or double it. The lower alternative gave the building an attractively regular

profile, with the aisles, the nave and the tower rising in equal steps, 1:2:3. The higher tower would be more dramatic, for then the nave would be double the size of the aisles, and the tower double the nave, the proportions being 1:2:4. Tom had chosen the dramatic: this was the only cathedral he would ever build, and he wanted it to reach for the sky. He hoped Philip would feel the same.

If Philip accepted the design, Tom would have to draw it again, of course, more carefully and exactly to scale. And there would be many more drawings, hundreds of them: plinths, columns, capitals, corbels, doorcases, turrets, stairs, gargoyles, and countless other details—Tom would be drawing for years. But what he had in front of him was the essence of the building, and it was good: simple, inexpensive, graceful and perfectly proportioned.

He could not wait to show it to someone.

He had planned to find a suitable moment to take it to Prior Philip; but now that it was done he wanted Philip to see it right away.

Would Philip think him presumptuous? The prior had not asked him to prepare a design. He might have another master builder in mind, someone he had heard of who had worked for another monastery and had done a good job. He might scorn Tom's aspirations.

On the other hand, if Tom did not show him something, Philip might assume Tom was not capable of designing, and might hire someone else without even considering Tom. Tom was not prepared to risk that: he would rather be thought presumptuous.

The afternoon was still light. It would be study time in the cloisters. Philip would be at the prior's house, reading his Bible. Tom decided to go and knock at his door.

Carrying his board carefully, he left the house.

As he walked past the ruins, the prospect of building a new cathedral suddenly seemed daunting: all that stone, all that timber, all those craftsmen, all those *years*. He would have to control it all, make sure there was a steady supply of materials, monitor the quality of timber and stone, hire and fire men, tirelessly check their work with his plumb line and level, make templates for the moldings, design and build lifting machines…He wondered if he really was capable of it.

Then he thought what a thrill it would be to create something from nothing; to see, one day in the future, a new church here where now there was nothing but rubble, and to say: I made this.

There was another thought in his mind, hidden away in a dusty corner; something he was hardly willing to admit to himself. Agnes had died without a priest, and she was buried in unconsecrated ground. He would have liked to go back to her grave, and get a priest to say prayers over it, and perhaps put up a small headstone; but he was afraid that if he called attention to her

burying place in any way, somehow the whole story of abandoning the baby would come out. Leaving a baby to die still counted as murder. As the weeks went by he had worried more and more about Agnes's soul, and whether it was in a good place or not. He was afraid to ask a priest about it because he did not want to give details. But he had consoled himself with the thought that if he built a cathedral, God would surely favor him; and he wondered whether he could ask that Agnes receive the benefit of that favor instead of himself. If he could dedicate his work on the cathedral to Agnes, he would feel that her soul was safe, and he could rest easy.

He reached the prior's house. It was a small stone building on one level. The door stood open, although it was a cold day. He hesitated for a moment. Calm, competent, knowledgeable, expert, he said to himself. A master of every aspect of modern building. Just the man you'd cheerfully trust.

He stepped inside. There was only one room. At one end was a big bed with luxurious hangings; at the other a small altar with a crucifix and a candlestick. Prior Philip stood by a window, reading from a vellum sheet with a worried frown. He looked up and smiled at Tom. "What's that you've got?"

"Drawings, Father," Tom said, making his voice deep and reassuring. "For a new cathedral. May I show you?"

Philip looked surprised but intrigued. "By all means."

There was a large lectern in a corner. Tom brought it into the light by the window and put his plaster frame on its angled rest. Philip looked at the drawing. Tom watched Philip's face. He could tell that Philip had never seen an elevation drawing, a floor plan or a section through a building. The prior's face wore a puzzled frown.

Tom began to explain. He pointed to the elevation. "You're standing in the center of the nave, looking at the wall," he said. "Here are the pillars of the arcade. They're joined by arches. Through the archways you can see the windows in the aisle. Above the arcade is the tribune gallery, and above that, the clerestory windows."

Philip's expression cleared as he understood. He was a quick learner. He looked at the floor plan, and Tom could see he was equally puzzled by that.

Tom said: "When we walk around the site, and mark where the walls will be built, and where the pillars meet the ground, and the positions of the doors and buttresses, we will have a plan like this, and it will tell us where to place our pegs and strings."

Enlightenment dawned on Philip's face again. It was no bad thing, Tom thought, that Philip had trouble understanding the drawings: it gave Tom a chance to be confident and expert. Finally Philip looked at the section. Tom explained: "Here is the nave, in the middle, with a timber ceiling. Behind the nave is the tower. Here are the aisles, on either side of the nave. At the outer edges of the aisles are the buttresses."

“It looks splendid,” Philip said. Tom could tell that the section drawing particularly impressed him, with the inside of the church open to view, as if the west end had been swung aside like a cupboard door to reveal the interior.

Philip looked at the floor plan again. “Are there only six bays to the nave?”

“Yes, and four to the chancel.”

“Isn’t that rather small?”

“Can you afford to build it bigger?”

“I can’t afford to build it at all,” Philip said. “I don’t suppose you have any idea how much this would cost.”

“I know exactly how much it would cost,” Tom said. He saw surprise on Philip’s face: Philip had not realized Tom could do figure work. He had spent many hours calculating the cost of his design to the last penny. However, he gave Philip a round figure. “It would be no more than three thousand pounds.”

Philip laughed hollowly. “I’ve spent the last few weeks working out the annual income of the priory.” He waved the sheet of vellum that he had been reading so anxiously when Tom walked in. “Here’s the answer. Three hundred pounds a year. And we spend every penny.”

Tom was not surprised. It was obvious that the priory had been badly managed in the past. He had faith that Philip would reform its finances. “You’ll find the money, Father,” he said. “With God’s help,” he added piously.

Philip returned his attention to the drawings, looking unconvinced. “How long would this take to build?”

“That depends on how many people you employ,” Tom said. “If you hire thirty masons, with enough laborers, apprentices, carpenters and smiths to service them, it might take fifteen years: one year for the foundations, four years for the chancel, four years for the transepts, and six years for the nave.”

Once again Philip looked impressed. “I wish my monastic officials had your ability to think ahead and calculate,” he said. He studied the drawings wistfully. “So I need to find two hundred pounds a year. It doesn’t sound so bad when you put it that way.” He looked thoughtful. Tom felt excited: Philip was beginning to think of this as a workable project, not just an abstract design. “Suppose I could afford more—could we build faster?”

“Up to a point,” Tom replied guardedly. He did not want Philip to become overoptimistic: that might lead to disillusionment. “You could employ sixty masons, and build the whole church at once, instead of working from east to west; and that might take eight or ten years. Any more than sixty, on a building this size, and they would start getting in one another’s way, and slow the work down.”

Philip nodded: he appeared to understand that without difficulty. “Still,

even with just thirty masons, I could have the east end completed after five years."

"Yes, and you could use it for services, and set up a new shrine for the bones of Saint Adolphus."

"Indeed." Philip was really excited now. "I had been thinking it would be decades before we could have a new church." He looked shrewdly at Tom. "Have you ever built a cathedral before?"

"No, though I've designed and built smaller churches. But I worked on Exeter cathedral, for several years, finishing up as deputy master builder."

"You want to build this cathedral yourself, don't you?"

Tom hesitated. It was as well to be candid with Philip: the man had no patience for prevarication. "Yes, Father. I want you to appoint me master builder," he said as calmly as he could.

"Why?"

Tom had not expected that question. There were so many reasons. *Because I've seen it done badly, and I know I could do it well*, he thought. *Because there is nothing more satisfying, to a master craftsman, than to exercise his skill, except perhaps to make love to a beautiful woman. Because something like this gives meaning to a man's life*. Which answer did Philip want? The prior would probably like him to say something pious. Recklessly, he decided to tell the real truth. "Because it will be beautiful," he said.

Philip looked at him strangely. Tom could not tell whether he was angry, or something else. "Because it will be beautiful," Philip repeated. Tom began to feel that was a silly reason, and decided to say something more, but he could not decide what. Then he realized that Philip was not skeptical at all—he was moved. Tom's words had touched his heart. Finally Philip nodded, as if agreeing after some reflection. "Yes. And what could be better than to make something beautiful for God?" he said.

Tom remained silent. Philip had not said Yes, you shall be master builder. Tom waited.

Philip seemed to reach a decision. "I'm going with Bishop Waleran to see the king in Winchester in three days' time," he said. "I don't know exactly what the bishop plans, but I'm sure we will be asking King Stephen to help us pay for a new cathedral church for Kingsbridge."

"Let's hope he grants your wish," Tom said.

"He owes us a favor," Philip said with an enigmatic smile. "He ought to help us."

"And if he does?" Tom said.

"I think God sent you to me with a purpose, Tom Builder," said Philip. "If King Stephen gives us the money, you can build the church."

It was Tom's turn to be moved. He hardly knew what to say. He had been granted his life's wish—but conditionally. Everything depended on Philip's

getting help from the king. He nodded, accepting the promise and the risk. “Thank you, Father,” he said.

The bell rang for vespers. Tom picked up his board.

“Do you need that?” Philip said.

Tom realized it would be a good idea to leave it here. It would be a constant reminder to Philip. “No, I don’t need it,” he said. “I have it all in my head.”

“Good. I’d like to keep it here.”

Tom nodded and went to the door.

It occurred to him that if he did not ask about Agnes now he probably never would. He turned back. “Father?”

“Yes?”

“My first wife…Agnes, her name was…she died without a priest, and she’s buried in unconsecrated ground. She hadn’t sinned, it was just…the circumstances. I wondered…Sometimes a man builds a chapel, or founds a monastery, in the hope that in the afterlife, God will remember his piety. Do you think my design might serve to protect Agnes’s soul?”

Philip frowned. “Abraham was asked to sacrifice his only son. God no longer asks for blood sacrifices, for the ultimate sacrifice has been made. But the lesson of Abraham’s story is that God demands the best we have to offer, that which is most precious to us. Is this design the best thing you could offer God?”

“Except for my children, yes.”

“Then rest easy, Tom Builder. God will accept it.”

II

Philip had no idea why Waleran Bigod wanted to meet him in the ruins of Earl Bartholomew's castle.

He had been obliged to travel to the town of Shiring and spend the night there, then set off this morning for Earlscastle. Now, as the horse jogged toward the castle looming up out of the morning mist ahead of him, he decided it was probably a matter of convenience: Waleran was on his way from one place to another, passing no nearer to Kingsbridge than here, and the castle was a handy landmark.

Philip wished he knew more about what Waleran was planning. He had not seen the bishop-elect since the day he had inspected the cathedral ruins. Waleran did not know how much money Philip needed to build the church, and Philip did not know what Waleran was planning to ask from the king. Waleran liked to keep his plans to himself. It made Philip highly nervous.

He was glad to have learned, from Tom Builder, exactly what it would take to build the new cathedral, depressing though the news was. Once again he was glad Tom was around. Tom was a man of surprising depths. He could hardly read or write, but he could design a cathedral, draw plans, calculate the numbers of men and the time it would take to build, *and* figure out how much all that would cost. He was a quiet man, but despite that he was a formidable presence: he was very tall, with a bearded, weather-beaten face, keen eyes and a high forehead. Philip sometimes felt slightly intimidated by him, and tried to conceal it by adopting a hearty tone. But Tom was very earnest, and anyway he had no idea that Philip found him daunting. The conversation about his wife had been touching, and had revealed a piety that had not previously been apparent. Tom was one of those people who kept his religion deep in his heart. Sometimes they were the best kind.

As Philip approached Earlscastle he felt increasingly uncomfortable. This had once been a thriving castle, defending the countryside all around, employing and feeding large numbers of people. Now it was ruined, and the hovels clustered about it were deserted, like empty nests in the bare branches of a tree in winter. And Philip was responsible for this. He had revealed the conspiracy being hatched here, and had brought down the wrath of God, in the shape of Percy Hamleigh, upon the castle and its inhabitants.

The walls and the gatehouse had not been badly damaged in the fighting, he noted. That meant the attackers had probably got inside before the gates could be shut. He walked his horse across the wooden bridge and entered the

first of two compounds. Here the evidence of battle was clearer: apart from the stone chapel, all that remained of the castle buildings was a few charred stumps of wood sticking up out of the ground, and a small whirlwind of ashes blowing along the base of the castle wall.

There was no sign of the bishop. Philip rode through the compound, crossed the bridge at the far side, and entered the upper compound. Here there was a massive stone keep, with an unsteady-looking wooden staircase leading up to its second-floor entrance. Philip gazed up at the forbidding stonework with its mean arrow-slit windows: mighty though it was, it had not protected Earl Bartholomew.

From those windows he would be able to look over the castle walls and watch for the bishop. He tied his horse to the handrail of the staircase and went up.

The door opened to his touch. He stepped inside. The great hall was dark and dusty, and the rushes on the floor were dry as bones. There was a cold fireplace and a spiral stair leading up. Philip went to a window. The dust made him sneeze. He could not see much from the window so he decided to go up to the next floor.

At the top of the spiral stairs he faced two doors. He guessed that the smaller one led to the latrine, the larger one to the earl's bedroom. He went through the larger door.

The room was not empty.

Philip stopped dead, shocked rigid. There in the middle of the room, facing him, was a young woman of extraordinary beauty. For a moment he thought he was seeing a vision, and his heart raced. She had a cloud of dark curls around a bewitching face. She stared back at him out of large dark eyes, and he realized she was as startled as he. He relaxed, and was about to take another step into the room, when he was seized from behind and felt the cold blade of a long knife at his throat; and a male voice said: "And who the devil are you?"

The girl moved toward him. "Say your name, or Matthew will kill you," she said regally.

Her manner showed her to be of noble birth, but even nobles were not allowed to threaten monks. "Tell Matthew to take his hands off the prior of Kingsbridge, or it may be the worse for him," Philip said calmly.

He was released. He glanced back over his shoulder and saw a slight man of about his own age. This Matthew had presumably come out of the latrine.

He turned back to the girl. She appeared to be about seventeen years old. Despite her haughty manner she was shabbily dressed. As he studied her, a chest against the wall behind her opened up, and a teenaged boy got out, looking sheepish. He held a sword. He had been lying in wait, or hiding, Philip could not tell which.

“And who are you?” Philip said.

“I am the daughter of the earl of Shiring, and my name is Aliena.”

The daughter! thought Philip. I didn’t know she was still living here. He looked at the boy. He was about fifteen, and resembled the girl except for a snub nose and short hair. Philip raised an inquiring eyebrow at him.

“I am Richard, the heir to the earldom,” the boy said in a cracked adolescent voice.

Behind Philip, the man said: “And I am Matthew, the steward of the castle.”

The three of them had been hiding here since Earl Bartholomew was captured, Philip realized. The steward was taking care of the children: he must have a store of food or money hidden away. Philip addressed the girl. “I know where your father is, but what about your mother?”

“She died many years ago.”

Philip felt a stab of guilt. The children were virtually orphans, and it was partly his doing. “But haven’t you got relatives to look after you?”

“I’m looking after the castle until my father returns,” she said.

They were living in a dream world, Philip realized. She was trying to live as if she still belonged to a rich and powerful family. With her father imprisoned and in disgrace, she was just another girl. The boy was heir to nothing at all. Earl Bartholomew was never coming back to this castle, unless the king decided to hang him here. He pitied the girl, but in a way he also admired the strength of will that sustained the fantasy and made two other people share it. She might have been a queen, he thought.

From outside came a clatter of hooves on wood: several horses were crossing the bridge. Aliena said to Philip: “Why have you come here?”

“It’s just a rendezvous,” Philip said. He turned around and took a step toward the door. Matthew was in his way. For a moment they stood still, facing one another. The four people in the room made a frozen tableau. Philip wondered if they were going to try to stop him from leaving. Then the steward stood aside.

Philip went out. He held up the skirt of his robe and hurried down the spiral stairs. When he reached the bottom he heard footsteps behind him. Matthew caught him up.

“Don’t tell anyone we’re here,” he said.

Philip saw that Matthew understood the unreality of their position. “How long will you stay here?” he asked.

“As long as we can,” the steward replied.

“And when you have to leave? What will you do then?”

“I don’t know.”

Philip nodded. “I’ll keep your secret,” he said.

“Thank you, Father.”

Philip crossed the dusty hall and stepped outside. Looking down, he saw Bishop Waleran and two others reining in their horses near his own. Waleran wore a heavy cloak trimmed with black fur, and a black fur cap. He looked up, and Philip met his pale eyes. “My lord bishop,” said Philip respectfully. He went down the wooden steps. The image of the virginal girl upstairs was still vivid in his mind, and he felt like shaking his head to get rid of her.

Waleran dismounted. He had the same two companions, Philip saw: Dean Baldwin and the man-at-arms. He nodded to them, then knelt and kissed Waleran’s hand.

Waleran accepted his homage but did not wallow in it: he withdrew his hand after a moment. It was power itself, not its trappings, that Waleran loved.

“On your own, Philip?” Waleran said.

“Yes. The priory is poor, and an escort for me is an unnecessary expense. When I was prior of St-John-in-the-Forest I never had an escort, and I’m still alive.”

Waleran shrugged. “Come with me,” he said. “I want to show you something.” He marched off across the courtyard to the nearest tower. Philip followed. Waleran entered the low doorway at the foot of the tower and climbed the staircase inside. There were bats clustered under the low ceiling, and Philip ducked his head to avoid brushing against them.

They emerged at the top of the tower and stood at the battlements, looking out over the land all around. “This is one of the smaller earldoms in the land,” Waleran said.

“Indeed.” Philip shivered. There was a cold, damp wind up here, and his cloak was not as thick as Waleran’s. He wondered what the bishop was leading up to.

“Some of this land is good, but much is forest and stony hillsides.”

“Yes.” On a clear day they might have seen many acres of forest and farmland, but now, although the early mist had gone, they could barely make out the near edge of the forest to the south, and the flat fields around the castle.

“This earldom also has a huge quarry which produces first-class limestone,” Waleran went on. “Its forests contain many acres of good timber. And its farms generate considerable wealth. If we had this earldom, Philip, we could build our cathedral.”

“If pigs had wings they could fly,” Philip said.

“Oh, thou of little faith!”

Philip stared at Waleran. “Are you serious?”

“Very.”

Philip was skeptical, but despite himself he felt a tiny spurt of hope. If only this could come true! But he said: “The king needs military support.

He'll give the earldom to someone who can lead knights into battle."

"The king owes his crown to the Church, and his victory over Bartholomew to you and me. Knights aren't all he needs."

Waleran *was* serious, Philip saw. Was it possible? Would the king hand over the earldom of Shiring to the Church, to finance the rebuilding of Kingsbridge Cathedral? It was hardly believable, despite Waleran's arguments. But Philip could not help thinking how marvelous it would be to have the stone, the timber *and* the money to pay the craftsmen, all handed to him on a plate; and he remembered that Tom Builder had said he could hire sixty masons, and finish the church in eight to ten years. The mere thought was enthralling.

"But what about the former earl?" he said.

"Bartholomew has confessed his treason. He has never denied the plot, but for some time he maintained that what he did was not treason, on the grounds that Stephen was a usurper. However, the king's torturer has finally broken him."

Philip shuddered and tried not to think about what they had done to Bartholomew to make that rigid man yield.

He put the thought out of his mind. "The earldom of Shiring," he murmured to himself. It was an incredibly ambitious demand. But the idea was thrilling. He felt full of irrational optimism.

Waleran glanced up at the sky. "Let's get moving," he said. "The king expects us the day after tomorrow."

William Hamleigh studied the two men of God from his hiding place behind the battlements of the next tower. He knew them both. The tall one, who looked like a blackbird with his pointed nose and his black cloak, was the new bishop of Kingsbridge. The small, energetic one with the shaved head and the bright blue eyes was Prior Philip. William wondered what they were doing here.

He had watched the monk arrive, look around as though he expected to see people here, and then go into the keep. William could not guess whether Philip had met the three people who lived in the keep—he had been inside only a few moments, and they might have hidden from him. As soon as the bishop arrived, Prior Philip had come out of the keep and the two of them had climbed the tower. Now the bishop was gesturing at the land all around the castle with a somewhat proprietorial air. William could tell by the way they were standing and their gestures that the bishop was being ebullient and the prior skeptical. They were hatching a plot, he felt sure.

However, he had not come here to spy on them. He had come to spy on Aliena.

He did this more and more often. She preyed on his mind all the time, and he suffered involuntary daydreams in which he came across her tied up and naked in a wheat field, or cowering like a frightened puppy in a corner of his bedroom, or lost in the forest late in the evening. It got so that he had to see her in the flesh. He would ride to Earlscastle early in the morning. He left Walter, his groom, looking after the horses in the forest, and he walked across the fields to the castle. He sneaked inside and found a hiding place from which he could observe the keep and the upper compound. Sometimes he had to wait a long time to see her. His patience would be sorely tried, but the thought of going away again without even a glimpse of her was insupportable, so he always stayed. Then, when at last she did appear, his throat dried, and his heart beat faster, and the palms of his hands became damp. Often she was with her brother or the effeminate steward, but sometimes she was alone. One afternoon, in the summer, when he had waited for her since early morning, she had gone to the well, drawn some water, and taken off her clothes to wash. Just the memory of that sight inflamed him all over again. She had deep, proud breasts that moved in a teasing way when she lifted her arms to rub soap into her hair. Her nipples had puckered delightfully when she splashed cold water over herself. There was a surprisingly big bush of dark curly hair between her legs, and when she washed herself there, rubbing vigorously with a soapy hand, William had lost control and ejaculated in his clothes.

Nothing so nice had happened since, and she certainly would not wash herself in winter, but there had been lesser delights. When she was alone she would sing, or even talk to herself. William had seen her braid her hair, and dance, and chase pigeons off the ramparts like a small child. Clandestinely watching her do these little private things, William felt a sense of power over her that was quite delicious.

She would not come out while the bishop and the monk were here, of course. Fortunately they did not stay long. They left the battlements quite quickly, and a few moments later they and their attendants rode out of the castle. Had they come here just to see the view from the battlements? If so, they had been somewhat frustrated by the weather.

The steward had come out for firewood earlier, before the visitors arrived. He did the cooking in the keep. Soon he would come out again and fetch water from the well. William guessed they ate porridge, for they had no oven to bake bread. Later in the day the steward would leave the castle, sometimes taking the boy with him. Once they had gone it was only a matter of time before Aliena emerged.

When he got bored with waiting, William would conjure up the vision of her washing herself. The memory was almost as good as the real thing. But today he was unsettled. The visit of the bishop and the prior seemed to have

tainted the atmosphere. Until today there had been an enchanted air about the castle and its three inhabitants, but the arrival of those thoroughly unmagical men on their muddy horses had broken the spell. It was like being disturbed by a noise when in the middle of a wonderful dream: try as he might, he could not stay asleep.

For a while he tried guessing what the visitors had been up to, but he could not fathom it. Nevertheless he felt sure they were scheming something. There was one person who probably could work it out: his mother. He decided to abandon Aliena for today, and ride home to report what he had seen.

They arrived in Winchester at nightfall on the second day. They entered by the King's Gate, in the south wall of the city, and went directly into the cathedral close. There they parted company. Waleran went to the residence of the bishop of Winchester, a palace in its own grounds adjacent to the cathedral close. Philip went to pay his respects to the prior and beg for a mattress in the monks' dormitory.

After three days on the road, Philip found the calm and quiet of the monastery as refreshing as a fountain on a hot day. The Winchester prior was a plump, easygoing man with pink skin and white hair. He invited Philip to have supper with him in his house. While they ate they talked about their respective bishops. The Winchester prior was clearly in awe of Bishop Henry and completely subservient to him. Philip surmised that when your bishop was as wealthy and powerful as Henry, there was nothing to be gained by quarreling with him. All the same, Philip did not intend to be so much under the thumb of *his* bishop.

He slept like a top and got up at midnight for matins.

When he went into Winchester Cathedral for the first time he began to feel intimidated.

The prior had told him that it was the biggest church in the world, and when he saw it he believed it was. It was an eighth of a mile long: Philip had seen villages that could fit inside it. It had two great towers, one over the crossing and the other at the west end. The central tower had collapsed, thirty years earlier, onto the tomb of William Rufus, an ungodly king who probably should not have been buried in a church in the first place; but it had since been rebuilt. Standing directly beneath the new tower, singing matins, Philip felt the whole building had an air of immense dignity and strength. The cathedral Tom had designed would be modest by comparison—if it got built at all. He now realized that he was moving in the very highest of circles, and he felt nervous. He was only a boy from a Welsh hill village who had had the good fortune to become a monk. Today he would speak to the king. What

gave him the right?

He went back to bed with the other monks, but he lay awake worrying. He was afraid he might say or do something that would offend King Stephen or Bishop Henry and turn them against Kings-bridge. French-born people often mocked the way the English spoke their language: what would they think of a Welsh accent? In the monastic world, Philip had always been judged by his piety, obedience, and devotion to God's work. Those things counted for nothing here, in the capital city of one of the greatest kingdoms in the world. Philip was out of his depth. He became oppressed by the feeling that he was some kind of impostor, a nobody pretending to be a somebody, and that he was sure to be found out in no time and sent home in disgrace.

He got up at dawn, went to prime, then took breakfast in the refectory. The monks had strong beer and white bread: this was a wealthy monastery. After breakfast, when the monks went in to chapter, Philip walked over to the bishop's palace, a fine stone building with large windows, surrounded by several acres of walled garden.

Waleran was confident of getting Bishop Henry's support in his outrageous scheme. Henry was so powerful that his help might even make the whole thing possible. He was Henry of Blois, the king's younger brother. As well as being the most well-connected clergyman in England, he was the richest, for he was also abbot of the wealthy monastery of Glastonbury. He was expected to be the next archbishop of Canterbury. Kingsbridge could not have a more powerful ally. Perhaps it really will happen, Philip thought; perhaps the king will enable us to build a new cathedral. When he thought about that he felt as if his heart would burst with hope.

A household steward told Philip that Bishop Henry was not likely to appear before midmorning. Philip was much too wound up to return to the monastery. Feeling impatient, he set out to look at the biggest town he had ever seen.

The bishop's palace was in the southeast corner of the city. Philip walked along the east wall, through the grounds of yet another monastery, St. Mary's Abbey, and emerged in a neighborhood that appeared to be devoted to leather and wool. The area was crisscrossed with little streams. Looking closely, Philip realized they were not natural, but man-made channels, diverting part of the River Itchen to flow through the streets and supply the great quantities of water needed for tanning hides and washing fleeces. Such industries were normally established beside a river, and Philip marveled at the audacity of men who could bring the river to their workshops instead of the other way around.

Despite the industry, the town was quieter and less crowded than any other Philip had seen. A place such as Salisbury, or Hereford, seemed constricted by its walls, like a fat man in a tight tunic: the houses were too

close together, the backyards too small, the marketplace too crowded, the streets too narrow; and as people and animals jostled for space, there was a feeling that fights could break out at any moment. But Winchester was so big that there seemed to be room for everyone. As he walked around, Philip gradually realized that part of the reason for the spacious feel was that the streets were laid out on a square grid pattern. They were mostly straight and intersected at right angles. He had never seen that before. The town must have been built according to a plan.

There were dozens of churches. They were all shapes and sizes, some of wood and others of stone, each serving its own small neighborhood. The city had to be very rich to support so many priests.

Walking along Fleshmonger Street made him feel faintly ill. He had never seen so much raw meat all in one place. Blood flowed out of the butchers' shops into the street, and fat rats dodged between the feet of the people who came to buy.

The south end of Fleshmonger Street opened out on to the middle of the High Street, opposite the old royal palace. The palace had not been used by kings since the new keep had been built in the castle, Philip had been told, but the royal moneyers still minted silver pennies in the undercroft of the building, protected by thick walls and iron-barred gates. Philip stood at the bars for a while, watching the sparks fly as the hammers pounded the dies, awestruck by the sheer wealth in front of his eyes.

There was a handful of other people watching the same sight. No doubt it was something all visitors to Winchester looked at. A young woman standing nearby smiled at Philip, and he smiled back. She said: "You can do anything you like for a penny."

He wondered what she meant, and smiled vaguely again. Then she opened her cloak, and he saw to his horror that underneath it she was completely naked. "Anything you like, for a silver penny," she said.

He felt a faint stirring of desire, like the ghost of a memory long submerged; then he realized that she was a whore. He felt his face go bright red with embarrassment. He turned quickly and hurried away. "Don't be afraid," she called. "I like a nice round head." Her mocking laughter followed him.

Feeling hot and bothered, he turned down an alley off the High Street and found himself in the marketplace. He could see the towers of the cathedral rising above the market stalls. He hurried through the crowds, oblivious to the blandishments of the vendors, and found his way back into the close.

He felt the ordered calm of the church precincts like a cool breeze. He paused in the graveyard to collect his thoughts. He felt ashamed and outraged. How dare she tempt a man in monk's robes? She had obviously identified him as a visitor…. Was it possible that monks who were away from their home

monastery could be customers of hers? Of course it was, he realized. Monks committed all the same sins that ordinary people did. He had just been shocked by the woman's shamelessness. The sight of her nakedness remained with him, the way the hot heart of a candle flame, stared at for a few moments, would burn on behind closed eyelids.

He sighed. It had been a morning of vivid images: the man-made streams, the rats in the butchers' shops, the stacks of new-minted silver pennies, and then the woman's private parts. For a while, he knew, those pictures would come back to him to unsettle his meditations.

He went into the cathedral. He felt too grubby to kneel and pray, but just walking down the nave and out through the south door purified him somewhat. He passed through the priory and went to the bishop's palace.

The ground floor was a chapel. Philip went up the stairs to the hall and stepped inside. There was a small group of servants and young clergymen near the door, standing around or sitting on the bench up against the wall. At the far end of the room Waleran and Bishop Henry were sitting at a table. Philip was stopped by a steward who said: "The bishops are at breakfast," as if that meant Philip could not see them.

"I'll join them at table," Philip said.

"You'd better wait," the steward said.

Philip decided that the steward had taken him for an ordinary monk. "I'm the prior of Kingsbridge," he said.

The steward shrugged and stood aside.

Philip approached the table. Bishop Henry was at the head, with Waleran on his right. Henry was a short, broad-shouldered man with a pugnacious face. He was about the same age as Waleran, a year or two older than Philip; no more than thirty. However, by contrast with Waleran's dead-white skin and Philip's own bony frame, Henry had the florid complexion and rounded limbs of a hearty eater. His eyes were alert and intelligent, and his face seemed set in a determined expression. As the youngest of four brothers, he had probably had to fight for everything all his life. Philip was surprised to see that Henry's head was shaved, a sign that he had at one time taken monastic vows and still considered himself a monk. However, he was not wearing homespun; in fact, he was dressed in the most gorgeous tunic made of purple silk. Waleran was wearing a spotless white linen shirt under his usual black tunic, and Philip realized that both men were dressed up for their audience with the king. They were eating cold beef and drinking red wine. Philip was hungry after his walk, and his mouth watered.

Waleran looked up and saw him, and a look of faint irritation crossed his face.

"Good morning," Philip said.

Waleran said to Henry: "This is my prior."

Philip did not much like being described as Waleran's prior. He said: "Philip of Gwynedd, prior of Kingsbridge, my lord bishop."

He anticipated kissing the bishop's beringed hand, but Henry merely said, "Splendid," and ate another mouthful of beef. Philip stood there rather awkwardly. Were they not going to ask him to sit down?

Waleran said: "We'll join you shortly, Philip."

Philip realized he was being dismissed. He turned away, feeling humiliated. He returned to the group around the door. The steward who had tried to turn him back now smirked at him with a look that said *I told you so*. Philip stood apart from the others. He suddenly felt ashamed of the stained brown robe he had been wearing day and night for half a year. Benedictine monks often dyed their habits black, but Kingsbridge had given that up, years ago, to save money. Philip had always believed that dressing up in fine clothes was sheer vanity, entirely inappropriate for any man of God, no matter how high his rank; but now he saw the point of it. He might not have been treated so dismissively if he had come dressed in silk and furs.

Ah, well, he thought, a monk should be humble, so this must be good for my soul.

The two bishops rose from the table and came to the door. An attendant produced a scarlet robe edged with fine embroidery and silk fringes for Henry. As he was putting it on, Henry said: "You won't have to say much today, Philip."

Waleran added: "Leave the talking to us."

Henry said: "Leave the talking to me," with the faintest emphasis on the *me*. "If the king asks you a question or two, answer plainly, and don't try to dress up the facts too much. He'll understand your need for a new church without any weeping and wailing on your part."

Philip did not need to be told that. Henry was being unpleasantly condescending. However, Philip nodded assent and concealed his resentment.

"We'd better go," Henry said. "My brother is an early riser, and he's liable to conclude the day's business rapidly, then go hunting in the New Forest."

They went out. A man-at-arms, wearing a sword and carrying a staff, went in front of Henry as they walked to the High Street and then up the hill toward the West Gate. People stood aside for the two bishops, but not for Philip, so he ended up walking behind. Now and again someone would call out for a blessing, and Henry would make the sign of the cross in the air without pausing in his stride. Just before the gatehouse they turned aside and walked over a wooden bridge that spanned the castle moat. Despite being assured that he would not have to say much, Philip had a fluttery fear in his belly: he was about to see the king.

The castle occupied the southwest corner of the city. Its western and southern walls were part of the city wall. But the walls that separated the back

of the castle from the city were no less high and strong than its outer defenses, as if the king needed protection against the citizens just as much as against the outside world.

They entered by a low gateway in the wall and immediately came upon the massive keep which dominated this end of the compound. It was a formidable square tower. Counting the arrow-slit windows, Philip reckoned it must have four floors. As usual, the ground floor consisted of storerooms, and an outside staircase led to an upstairs entrance. A pair of sentries at the foot of the stairs bowed as Henry passed.

They went into the hall. There were rushes on the floor, a few seats recessed into the stone walls, some wooden benches and a fireplace. In a corner two men-at-arms guarded a staircase, set into the wall, leading up. One of the men met Bishop Henry's eye immediately. He nodded and went up the stairs, presumably to tell the king that his brother was waiting.

Philip felt nauseated with anxiety. In the next few minutes his whole future might be decided. He wished he felt better about his allies. He wished he had spent the early morning hours praying for success instead of wandering around Winchester. He wished he had worn a clean robe.

There were twenty or thirty other people in the room, nearly all of them men. They seemed to be a mixture of knights, priests and prosperous townspeople. Suddenly Philip started, surprised: over by the fire, talking to a woman and a young man, was Percy Hamleigh. What was he doing here? The two people with him were his ugly wife and his brutish son. They had been Waleran's collaborators, as it were, in the downfall of Bartholomew: it could hardly be a coincidence that they were here today. Philip wondered whether Waleran had expected them.

Philip said to Waleran: "Do you see—"

"I see them," Waleran snapped, visibly displeased.

Philip felt their presence here was ominous, though he could not have said just why. He studied them. The father and son were alike: big, beefy men with yellow hair and sullen faces. The wife looked like the kind of demon that tortured sinners in paintings of hell. She touched the sores on her face constantly, her skeletal hands moving restlessly. She wore a yellow gown that made her look even uglier. She shifted from one foot to another, darting glances around the room all the time. She met Philip's eyes, and he looked away quickly.

Bishop Henry was moving around, greeting the people he knew and blessing those he did not, but he must have been keeping an eye on the stairs, for as soon as the sentry came down again, Henry looked across at him, saw the man nod, and abandoned his conversation in midsentence.

Waleran followed Henry up the stairs and Philip brought up the rear with his heart in his mouth.

The upstairs room was the same size and shape as the entrance hall, but it felt completely different. There were tapestries on the walls and sheepskin rugs on the scrubbed floorboards. The fire blazed strongly and the room was brightly lit by dozens of candles. Near the door was an oak table with pens, ink and a stack of vellum sheets for letters, and a cleric sat waiting to take the king's dictation. Near the fireplace, in a big wooden chair covered with fur, sat the king.

The first thing Philip noticed was that he was not wearing a crown. He had on a purple tunic over leather leggings, as if he were about to go out on horseback. Two big hunting dogs lay at his feet like favored courtiers. He resembled his brother Bishop Henry, but Stephen's features were a little finer, making him more handsome, and he had a lot of tawny hair. However, there was the same look of intelligence about the eyes. He sat back in his big chair—Philip supposed it was a throne—looking relaxed, with his legs stretched out in front of him and his elbows on the arms of the seat, but despite his posture there was an air of tension in the room. The king was the only one at ease.

As the bishops and Philip entered, a big man in expensive clothes was leaving. He nodded in a familiar way to Bishop Henry and ignored Waleran. He was probably a powerful baron, Philip thought.

Bishop Henry approached the king, bowed, and said: "Good morning, Stephen."

"I still haven't seen that bastard Ranulf," said King Stephen. "If he doesn't show up soon I'm going to cut his fingers off."

Henry said: "He'll be here any day, I promise you, but perhaps you should cut his fingers off anyway."

Philip had no idea who Ranulf was or why the king wanted to see him, but he got the impression that although Stephen was displeased, he was not serious about mutilating the man.

Before Philip could give it any further thought, Waleran stepped forward and bowed, and Henry said: "You remember Waleran Bigod, the new bishop of Kingsbridge."

"Yes," Stephen said, "but who's this?" He looked at Philip.

Waleran said: "This is my prior."

Waleran did not say his name, so Philip supplied it. "Philip of Gwynedd, prior of Kingsbridge." His voice sounded louder than he had intended. He bowed.

"Come forward, father prior," Stephen said. "You seem afraid. What are you worried about?"

Philip could not think how to answer that. He was worried about so many things. In desperation he said: "I'm worried because I don't have a clean robe to wear."

Stephen laughed, but not unkindly. “Then stop worrying,” he said. With a glance at his well-dressed brother he added: “I like a monk to look like a monk, not like a king.”

Philip felt a little better.

Stephen said: “I heard about the fire. How are you managing?”

Philip said: “On the day of the fire, God sent us a builder. He repaired the cloisters very quickly, and we use the crypt for services. With his help, we’re clearing the ruins ready for rebuilding; and he has drawn plans for a new church.”

Waleran raised his eyebrows at that: he did not know about the plans. Philip would have told him, if he had asked; but he had not. The king said: “Commendably prompt. When will you begin to build?”

“As soon as I can find the money.”

Bishop Henry cut in: “That’s why I’ve brought Prior Philip and Bishop Waleran to see you. Neither the priory nor the diocese has the resources to finance a project this big.”

“Nor does the Crown, my dear brother,” said Stephen.

Philip was discouraged: that was not a promising beginning.

Henry said: “I know. That’s why I’ve looked for a way in which you could make it possible for them to rebuild Kingsbridge, but at no cost to yourself.”

Stephen looked skeptical. “And did you succeed in devising such an ingenious, not to say magical, scheme?”

“Yes. My suggestion is that you should give the earl of Shiring’s lands to the diocese to finance the building program.”

Philip held his breath.

The king looked thoughtful.

Waleran opened his mouth to speak, but Henry silenced him with a gesture.

The king said: “It’s a clever idea. I’d like to do it.”

Philip’s heart leaped.

The king said: “Unfortunately, I’ve just virtually promised the earldom to Percy Hamleigh.”

A groan escaped Philip’s lips. He had thought the king was going to say yes. The disappointment was like a knife wound.

Henry and Waleran were dumbstruck. No one had anticipated this.

Henry was the first to speak. He said: “Virtually?”

The king shrugged. “I might wriggle out of it, although not without considerable embarrassment. But after all, it was Percy who brought the traitor Bartholomew to justice.”

Waleran burst out: “Not without help, my lord!”

“I knew you had played some part in it….”

“It was I who told Percy Hamleigh of the plot against you.”

“Yes. By the way, how did *you* learn of it?”

Philip shuffled his feet. They were on dangerous ground. No one must know that the information had come originally from his brother, Francis, for Francis was still working for Robert of Gloucester, who had been forgiven for his part in the plot.

Waleran said: “The information came from a deathbed confession.”

Philip was relieved. Waleran was repeating the lie Philip had told him, but speaking as if the “confession” had been made to him rather than to Philip. Philip was more than content to have attention drawn away from his own role in this.

The king said: “Still, it was Percy, not you, who attacked Bartholomew’s castle, risking life and limb, and arrested the traitor.”

“You could reward Percy some other way,” Henry put in.

“Shiring is what Percy wants,” the king said. “He knows the area. And he’ll rule effectively there. I could give him Cambridgeshire, but would the fenmen follow him?”

Henry said: “You ought to give thanks to God first, men second. It was God who made you king.”

“But it was Percy who arrested Bartholomew.”

Henry bridled at this irreverence. “God controls all things—”

“Don’t press me on this,” Stephen said, holding up his right hand.

“Of course,” Henry said submissively.

It was a vivid demonstration of royal power. For a moment there they had been arguing almost like equals, but Stephen had been able to regain the upper hand with a word.

Philip was bitterly disappointed. At the start he had thought this an impossible demand, but he had gradually come to hope it would be granted, even to fantasize about how he would use the wealth. Now he had been brought back to reality with a hard bump.

Waleran said: “My lord king, I thank you for being willing to reconsider the future of the Shiring earldom, and I will await your decision anxiously and prayerfully.”

That was neat, Philip thought. It sounded as if Waleran was giving in gracefully. In fact he was summing up by saying that the question was still open. The king had not said that. If anything, his response had been negative. But there was nothing offensive about insisting that the king could still decide one way or the other. I must remember that, Philip thought: when you’re about to be turned down, go for a postponement.

Stephen hesitated a moment, as if entertaining a faint suspicion that he was being manipulated; then he seemed to dismiss any doubts. “Thank you all for coming to see me,” he said.

Philip and Waleran turned to leave, but Henry stood his ground and said: “When shall we hear your decision?”

Stephen once again looked somewhat cornered. “The day after tomorrow,” he said.

Henry bowed, and the three of them went out.

The uncertainty was almost as bad as a negative decision. Philip found the waiting unbearable. He spent the afternoon with the Winchester priory’s marvelous collection of books, but they could not distract him from wondering what was going on in the king’s mind. Could the king renege on his promise to Percy Hamleigh? How important was Percy? He was a member of the gentry who aspired to an earldom—surely Stephen had no reason to fear offending him. But how badly did Stephen want to help Kingsbridge? Notoriously, kings became pious as they aged. Stephen was young.

Philip was turning the possibilities over and over in his mind, and looking at but not reading Boethius’s *The Consolation of Philosophy*, when a novice came tiptoeing along the cloister walk and approached him shyly. “There’s someone asking for you in the outer court, father,” the lad whispered.

If the visitor had been made to wait outside, that meant he was not a monk. “Who is it?” Philip said.

“It’s a woman.”

Philip’s first, horrified thought was that it was the whore who had accosted him outside the mint; but something in the novice’s expression told him otherwise. There was another woman whose eyes had met his today. “What does she look like?”

The boy made a disgusted face.

Philip nodded, understanding. “Regan Hamleigh.” What mischief was she up to now? “I’ll come at once.”

He walked slowly and thoughtfully around the cloisters and out to the courtyard. He would need his wits about him to deal with this woman.

She was standing outside the cellarer’s parlor, wrapped in a heavy cloak, hiding her face in a hood. She gave Philip a look of such naked malevolence that he had half a mind to turn around and go back in immediately; but he was ashamed to run from a woman, so he stood his ground and said: “What do you want with me?”

“You foolish monk,” she spat. “How can you be so stupid?”

He felt his face redden. “I’m the prior of Kingsbridge, and you’d better call me Father,” he said; but to his chagrin he sounded petulant rather than authoritative.

“All right, *Father*—how can you just let yourself be *used* by those two

greedy bishops?”

Philip took a deep breath. “Speak plainly,” he said angrily.

“It’s hard to find words plain enough for someone as witless as you, but I’ll try. Waleran is using the burned-down church as a pretext for getting the lands of the Shiring earldom for himself. Is that plain speaking? Have you grasped that concept?”

Her contemptuous tone continued to rile Philip, but he could not resist the temptation to defend himself. “There’s nothing underhand about it,” he said. “The income from the lands is to be used to rebuild the cathedral.”

“What makes you think so?”

“That’s the whole idea!” Philip protested; but at the back of his mind he already felt the first stirrings of doubt.

Regan’s scornful tone changed and she became sly. “Will the new lands belong to the priory?” she said. “Or to the diocese?”

Philip stared at her for a moment, then turned away: her face was too revolting to look at. He had been working on the assumption that the lands would belong to the priory, and be under his control, rather than to the diocese, where they would be under Waleran’s control. But he now recalled that when they had been with the king, Bishop Henry had specifically asked for the lands to be given to the diocese. Philip had assumed that was a slip of the tongue. But it had not been corrected, then or later.

He eyed Regan suspiciously. She could not possibly have known what Henry was going to say to the king. She might be right about this. On the other hand, she could simply be trying to make trouble. She had everything to gain from a quarrel between Philip and Waleran at this point. Philip said: “Waleran is the bishop—he has to have a cathedral.”

“He has to have a lot of things,” she rejoined. She became less malevolent and more human as she began to reason, but Philip still could not bear to look at her for long. “For some bishops, a fine cathedral would be the first priority. For Waleran there are other necessities. Anyway, as long as he controls the purse strings, he will be able to dole out as much or as little as he likes to you and your builders.”

Philip realized she was right about that, at least. If Waleran was collecting the rents, he would naturally retain a portion for his expenses. He alone would be able to say what that portion should be. There would be nothing to stop him from diverting the funds to purposes having nothing to do with the cathedral, if he so chose. And Philip would never know, from one month to the next, whether he was going to be able to pay the builders.

There was no doubt it would be better if the priory owned the land. But Philip was sure Waleran would resist that idea, and Bishop Henry would back Waleran. Then Philip’s only hope would be to appeal to the king. And King Stephen, seeing the churchmen divided, might solve the problem by giving

the earldom to Percy Hamleigh.

Which was what Regan wanted, of course.

Philip shook his head. “If Waleran is trying to deceive me, why did he bring me here at all? He could have come on his own, and made the same plea.”

She nodded. “He could have. But the king might have asked himself how sincere Waleran was, saying that he only wanted the earldom in order to build a cathedral. You’ve lulled any suspicions Stephen might have had, by appearing here in support of Waleran’s claim.” Her tone became contemptuous again. “And you look so pathetic, in your dirty robe, that the king pities you. No, Waleran was clever to bring you.”

Philip had a horrible feeling she might be right, but he was not willing to admit it. “You just want the earldom for your husband,” he said.

“If I could show you proof, would you ride half a day to see it?”

The last thing Philip wanted was to be sucked into Regan Hamleigh’s scheming. But he had to find out whether her allegation was true. Reluctantly, he said: “Yes, I’ll ride half a day.”

“Tomorrow?”

“Yes.”

“Be ready at dawn.”

It was William Hamleigh, the son of Percy and Regan, who was waiting for Philip in the outer courtyard the following morning as the monks began to sing prime. Philip and William left Winchester by the West Gate, then immediately turned north on Athelynge Street. Bishop Waleran’s palace was in this direction, Philip realized; and it was about half a day’s ride. So that was where they were going. But why? He was deeply suspicious. He decided to be alert for trickery. The Hamleighs might well be trying to use him. He speculated about how. There might be a document in Waleran’s possession that the Hamleighs wanted to see or even steal—some kind of deed or charter. Young Lord William could tell the bishop’s staff that the two of them had been sent to fetch the document: they might believe him because Philip was with him. William could easily have some such little scheme up his sleeve. Philip would have to be on his guard.

It was a gloomy, gray morning with drizzling rain. William set a brisk pace for the first few miles, then slowed to a walk to rest the horses. After a while he said: “So, monk, you want to take the earldom away from me.”

Philip was taken aback by his hostile tone: he had done nothing to deserve it, and he resented it. Consequently his reply was sharp. “From you?” he said. “You aren’t going to get it, boy. I might get it, or your father might, or Bishop Waleran might. But nobody has asked the king to give it to *you*. The very idea

is a joke.”

“I shall inherit it.”

“We’ll see.” Philip decided there was no point in quarreling with William. “I don’t mean you any harm,” he said in a conciliatory tone. “I just want to build a new cathedral.”

“Then take someone else’s earldom,” William said. “Why do people always pick on us?”

There was a lot of bitterness in the boy’s voice, Philip noted. He said: “Do people always pick on you?”

“You’d think they’d learn a lesson from what happened to Bartholomew. He insulted our family, and look where he is now.”

“I thought it was his daughter who was responsible for the insult.”

“The bitch is as proud and arrogant as her father. But she’ll suffer, too. They’ll all kneel to us in the end, you’ll see.”

These were not the usual emotions of a twenty-year-old, Philip thought. William sounded more like an envious and venomous middle-aged woman. Philip was not enjoying the conversation. Most people would dress up their naked hatred in reasonable clothes, but William was too naïve to do that. Philip said: “Revenge is best left until the Day of Judgment.”

“Why don’t you wait until the Day of Judgment to build your church?”

“Because by then it will be too late to save the souls of sinners from the torments of hell.”

“Don’t start on about that!” William said, and there was a note of hysteria in his voice. “Save it for your sermons.”

Philip was tempted to make another sharp retort, but he bit it back. There was something very odd about this boy. Philip had the feeling that William could fly into an uncontrollable rage at any moment, and that when enraged he would be lethally violent. Philip was not afraid of him. He had no fear of violent men, perhaps because as a child he had seen the worst they could do and survived it. But there was nothing to be gained by infuriating William with reprimands, so he said gently: “Heaven and hell is what I deal in. Virtue and sin, forgiveness and punishment, good and evil. I’m afraid I can’t shut up about them.”

“Then talk to yourself,” William said, and he spurred his horse into a trot and pulled ahead.

When he was forty or fifty yards in front he slowed down again. Philip wondered whether the boy would relent and return to ride side by side, but he did not, and for the rest of the morning they traveled apart.

Philip felt anxious and somewhat depressed. He had lost control of his destiny. He had let Waleran Bigod take charge in Winchester, and now he was letting William Hamleigh take him on a mystery journey. They’re all trying to manipulate me, he thought; why am I letting them? It’s time I started to take

the initiative. But there was nothing he could do, right away, except turn around and go back to Winchester, and that seemed like a futile gesture, so he continued to follow William, staring gloomily at William's horse's rear end as they jogged along.

A little before noon they reached the valley where the bishop's palace was. Philip recalled coming here at the beginning of the year, full of trepidation, bringing with him a deadly secret. An awful lot had changed since then.

To his surprise, William rode past the palace and on up the hill. The road narrowed to a simple path between fields: it led nowhere important, Philip knew. As they approached the top of the hill, Philip saw that some kind of building work was going on. A little below the summit they were stopped by a bank of earth that looked as if it had been dug up recently. Philip was struck by an awful suspicion.

They turned aside and rode alongside the bank until they found a gap. They went through. Inside the bank was a dry moat, filled in at this point to allow people to cross.

Philip said: "Is this what we came to see?"

William just nodded.

Philip's suspicion was confirmed. Waleran was building a castle. He was devastated.

He kicked his horse forward and crossed the ditch, with William following. The ditch and the bank encircled the top of the hill. On the inside rim of the ditch a thick stone wall had been built to a height of two or three feet. The wall was clearly unfinished, and judging by its thickness it was intended to be very high.

Waleran was building a castle, but there were no workmen on the site, no tools to be seen, and no stacks of stone or timber. A great deal had been done in a short time; then work had stopped suddenly. Obviously Waleran had run out of money.

Philip said to William: "I suppose there's no doubt that it is the bishop who is building this castle."

William said: "Would Waleran Bigod allow anyone *else* to build a castle next to his palace?"

Philip felt hurt and humiliated. The picture was crystal clear: Bishop Waleran wanted the Shiring earldom, with its quarry and its timber, to build his own castle, not the cathedral. Philip was merely a tool, the burning of Kingsbridge Cathedral just a convenient excuse. Their role was to enliven the king's piety so that he would grant Waleran the earldom.

Philip saw himself as Waleran and Henry must see him: naive, compliant, smiling and nodding as he was led to the slaughter. They had judged him so well! He had trusted them and deferred to them, he had even borne their

slights with a brave smile, because he thought they were helping him, when all the time they were double-crossing him.

He was shocked by Waleran's unscrupulousness. He recalled the look of sadness in Waleran's eyes as he looked at the ruined cathedral. Philip had glimpsed the deep-rooted piety in Waleran at that moment. Waleran must think that pious ends justified dishonest means in the service of the Church. Philip had never believed that. I would never do to Waleran what Waleran is trying to do to me, he thought.

He had never before thought of himself as gullible. He wondered where he had gone wrong. It occurred to him that he had let himself be overawed—by Bishop Henry and his silk robes, by the magnificence of Winchester and its cathedral, by the piles of silver in the mint and the heaps of meat in the butchers' shops, and by the thought of seeing the king. He had forgotten that God saw through the silk robes to the sinful heart, that the only wealth worth having was treasure in heaven, and that even the king had to kneel down in church. Feeling that everyone else was so much more powerful and sophisticated than he was, he had lost sight of his true values, suspended his critical faculties, and placed his trust in his superiors. His reward had been treachery.

He took one more look around the rainswept building site, then turned his horse and rode away, feeling wounded. William followed. "What about that, then, monk?" William jeered. Philip did not reply.

He recalled that he had helped Waleran become bishop. Waleran had said: "You want me to make you prior of Kingsbridge. I want you to make me bishop." Of course, Waleran had not revealed that the bishop was already dead, so the promise had seemed somewhat insubstantial. And it had seemed that Philip was obliged to give the promise in order to secure his election as prior. But these were just excuses. The truth was that he should have left the choice of prior *and* bishop in the hands of God.

He had not made that pious decision, and his punishment was that he had to contend with Bishop Waleran.

When he thought about how he had been slighted, condescended to, manipulated and deceived, he became angry. Obedience was a monastic virtue, but outside the cloisters it had its drawbacks, he thought bitterly. The world of power and property required that a man be suspicious, demanding, and insistent.

"Those lying bishops made a fool of you, didn't they?" William said.

Philip reined in his horse. Shaking with rage, he pointed a finger at William. "Shut your mouth, boy. You're speaking of God's holy priests. If you say another word you'll burn for it, I promise you."

William went white with fear.

Philip kicked his horse on. William's sneer reminded him that the

Hamleighs had an ulterior motive in taking him to see Waleran's castle. They wanted to cause a quarrel between Philip and Waleran to ensure that the disputed earldom would go to neither the prior nor the bishop, but to Percy. Well, Philip was not going to be manipulated by them, either. He had finished being manipulated. From now on he would do the manipulating.

That was all very well, but what could be done? If Philip quarreled with Waleran, Percy would get the lands; and if Philip did nothing, Waleran would get them.

What did the king want? He wanted to help build the new cathedral: that kind of thing was appropriately kingly, and would benefit his soul in the afterlife. But he needed to reward Percy's loyalty, too. Oddly enough, there was no particular pressure on him to please the more powerful men, the two bishops. It occurred to Philip that there might be a solution to the dilemma that would solve the king's problem by satisfying both himself and Percy Hamleigh.

Now there was a thought.

The idea pleased him. An alliance between himself and the Hamleighs was the last thing anyone expected—and for that reason it just might work. The bishops would be completely unprepared for it. They would be caught wrong-footed.

That would be a delightful reversal.

But could he negotiate a deal with the grasping Hamleighs? Percy wanted the rich farmland of Shiring, the title of earl, and the power and prestige of a force of knights under his command. Philip, too, wanted the rich farmland, but he did not want the title or the knights: he was more interested in the quarry and the forest.

The form of a compromise began to take shape in Philip's mind. He began to think that all was not yet lost.

How sweet it would be to win now, after all that had happened.

With mounting excitement, he considered his approach to the Hamleighs. He was determined he would not play the role of supplicant. He would have to make his proposal seem irresistible.

By the time they reached Winchester, Philip's cloak was soaked through, and his horse was bad-tempered, but he thought he had the answer.

As they passed under the arch of the West Gate he said to William: "Let's go and see your mother."

William was surprised. "I thought you would want to see Bishop Waleran right away."

No doubt that was what Regan had told William to expect. "Don't bother to tell me what you thought, lad," Philip snapped. "Just take me to your mother." He felt very ready for a confrontation with Lady Regan. He had been passive too long.

William turned south and led Philip to a house in Gold Street, between the castle and the cathedral. It was a large dwelling with stone walls to waist level and a timber frame above. Inside was an entrance hall with several apartments off it. The Hamleighs were probably lodging here: many Winchester citizens rented rooms to people who were attending the royal court. If Percy became earl he would have his own town house.

William showed Philip into a front room with a big bed in it and a fireplace. Regan was sitting by the fire and Percy was standing near her. Regan looked up at Philip with an expression of surprise, but she recovered quickly enough, and said: “Well, monk—was I right?”

“You were as wrong as you could be, you foolish woman,” Philip said harshly.

She was shocked into silence by his angry tone.

He was gratified by the effect of giving her a taste of her own medicine. He went on in the same tone. “You thought you could cause a quarrel between me and Waleran. Did you imagine I wouldn’t see what you were up to? You’re a sly vixen but you’re not the only person in the world who can *think*.”

He could see by her face that she realized her plan had not worked, and she was thinking furiously what to do next. He pressed on while she was disconcerted.

“You’ve failed, Regan. You’ve got two options now. One is to sit tight and hope for the best. Wait for the king’s decision. Take your chances on his mood tomorrow morning.” He paused.

She spoke reluctantly. “And the alternative?”

“The alternative is that we make a deal, you and I. We divide the earldom between us, leaving nothing for Waleran. We go to the king privately and tell him we’ve reached a compromise, and get his blessing for it before the bishops can object.” Philip sat down on a bench and pretended a casual air. “It’s your best chance. You’ve got no real choice.” He looked into the fire, not wanting her to see how tense he was. The idea had to appeal to them, he thought. It was the certainty of getting something weighed against the possibility of getting nothing. But they were greedy—they might prefer an all-or-nothing gamble.

It was Percy who spoke first. “Divide the earldom? How?”

They were interested, at least, Philip thought with relief. “I’m going to propose a division so generous that you would be mad to turn it down,” Philip said to him. He turned back to Regan. “I’m offering you the best half.”

They looked at him, waiting for him to elaborate, but he said no more. Regan said: “What do you mean, the best half?”

“What is more valuable—arable land or forest?”

“Arable land, certainly.”

“Then you shall have the arable and I’ll have the forest.”

Regan narrowed her eyes. “That will give you timber for your cathedral.”

“Correct.”

“What about pasture?”

“Which do you want—the cattle pastures or the sheep grazing?”

“The pasture.”

“Then I’ll have the hill farms with their sheep. Would you like the income from markets, or the quarry?”

Percy said: “The market inc—”

Regan interrupted him. “Suppose we said the quarry?”

Philip knew she had understood what was on his mind. He wanted the stone from the quarry for his cathedral. He knew she did not want the quarry. The markets made more money for less effort. He said confidently: “You won’t, though, will you?”

She shook her head. “No. We’ll take the markets.”

Percy tried to look as if he were being fleeced. “I need the forest to hunt,” he said. “An earl must have some hunting.”

“You can hunt there,” Philip said quickly. “I just want the timber.”

“That’s agreeable,” Regan said. Her agreement came a little too quickly for Philip’s comfort. He felt a pang of anxiety. Had he given something important away without knowing it? Or was she simply impatient to dispose of a trifling detail? Before he could give it much thought she went on: “Suppose we go through the deeds and charters in Earl Bartholomew’s old treasury and find there are some lands that we think should be ours and you think should be yours?”

The fact that she was getting down to such details encouraged Philip to think she was going to accept his proposal. He concealed his excitement and spoke coolly. “We’ll have to agree on an arbitrator. How about Bishop Henry?”

“A priest?” she said with a touch of her habitual scorn. “Would he be objective? No. How about the sheriff of Shiring?”

He would be no more objective than the bishop, Philip thought; but he could not think of anyone who would satisfy both sides, so he said: “Agreed—on condition that if we dispute *his* decision we have the right to appeal to the king.” That ought to be a sufficient safeguard.

“Agreed,” Regan said; then she glanced at Percy and added: “If my husband pleases.”

Percy said: “Yes, yes.”

Philip knew he was close to success. He took a deep breath and said: “If the overall proposal is agreed, then—”

“Wait a moment.” Regan stopped him. “It’s not agreed.”

“But I’ve given you everything you want.”

“We might yet get the whole earldom, no division.”

“And you might get nothing at all.”

Regan hesitated. “How do you propose to handle this, if we do agree?”

Philip had thought of that. He looked at Percy. “Could you get to see the king tonight?”

Percy looked anxious, but he said: “If I had a good reason—yes.”

“Go to him and tell him we’ve reached an agreement. Ask him to announce it as his decision tomorrow morning. Assure him that you and I will declare ourselves satisfied with it.”

“What if he asks whether the bishops have agreed to it?”

“Say there hasn’t been time to put it to them. Remind him that it is the prior, not the bishop, who has to build the cathedral. Imply that if I am satisfied the bishops must be too.”

“But what if the bishops complain when the deal is announced?”

“How can they?” Philip said. “They’re pretending to ask for the earldom solely in order to finance the cathedral. Waleran can hardly protest on the grounds that he will now be unable to divert funds to other purposes.”

Regan gave a short cackle. Philip’s cunning appealed to her. “It’s a good plan,” she said.

“There’s an important condition,” Philip said, and he looked her in the eye. “The king must announce that my share goes to the *priory*. If he doesn’t make that clear, I’ll ask him to. If he says anything else—the diocese, the sacrist, the archbishop, anything—I’ll repudiate the whole deal. I don’t want you to be in any doubt about that.”

“I understand,” said Regan, a little tetchily.

Her irritation made Philip suspect that she had been toying with the idea of presenting to the king a slightly different version of the agreement. He was glad he had made the point firmly.

He got up to leave, but he wanted to set the seal on their pact somehow. “We are agreed, then,” he said, with just the hint of a question in his voice. “We have a solemn pact.” He looked at them both.

Regan gave a slight nod, and Percy said: “We have a pact.”

Philip’s heart beat faster. “Good,” he said tightly. “I’ll see you tomorrow morning at the castle.” He kept his face expressionless as he left the room, but when he reached the dark street he relaxed his control and permitted himself a broad, triumphant grin.

Philip fell into a troubled, anxious sleep after supper. He got up at midnight for matins, then lay awake on his straw mattress, wondering what would happen tomorrow.

He felt King Stephen ought to consent to the proposal. It solved the king’s problem: it gave him an earl *and* a cathedral. He was not so sure that Waleran

would take it lying down, despite what he had said to Lady Regan. Waleran might find an excuse to object to the arrangement. He might, if he thought fast enough, protest that the deal did not provide the money to build the impressive, prestigious, richly decorated cathedral he wanted. The king might be persuaded to think again.

A different hazard occurred to Philip shortly before dawn: Regan might double-cross him. She could do a deal with Waleran. Suppose she offered the bishop the same compromise? Waleran would have the stone and timber he needed for his castle. This possibility agitated Philip and he turned restlessly in his bed. He wished he could have gone to the king himself, but the king probably would not have received him—and anyway, Waleran might have learned of it and become suspicious. No, there was no action he could have taken to guard against the risk of a double-cross. All he could do now was pray.

He did that until dawn.

He took breakfast with the monks. He found that their white bread did not keep the stomach full as long as horsebread; but even so he could not eat much of it today. He went early to the castle, although he knew the king would not be receiving people at that hour. He entered the hall and sat on one of the stone wall-seats to wait.

The room slowly filled up with petitioners and courtiers. Some of them were very brightly dressed, with yellow and blue and pink tunics and lush fur trimmings on their cloaks. The famous Domesday Book was kept somewhere in this castle, Philip recalled. It was probably in the hall above, where the king had received Philip and the two bishops: Philip had not noticed it, but he had been too tense to notice much. The royal treasury was here, too, but that was presumably on the top floor, in a vault off the king's bedroom. Once again Philip found himself somewhat awestruck by his surroundings, but he had resolved not to be intimidated any longer. These people in their fine robes, knights and lords and merchants and bishops, were just men. Most of them could not write much more than their own names. Furthermore, they were all here to get something for themselves, but he, Philip, was here on behalf of God. His mission, and his dirty brown robe, put him above the other petitioners, not below them.

That thought gave him courage.

A ripple of tension ran through the room as a priest appeared on the stairs leading to the upper hall. Everyone hoped that meant the king was receiving. The priest exchanged a few murmured words with one of the armed guards, then disappeared back up the stairs. The guard picked out a knight from the crowd. The knight left his sword with the guards and went up the stairs.

Philip thought what an odd life the king's clergymen must lead. The king had to have clergy, of course, not just to say mass, but to do the vast amount

of reading and writing involved in governing the kingdom. There was nobody else to do it, other than clergy: those few laymen who were literate could not read or write fast enough. But there was nothing very holy about the life of the king's clergy. Philip's own brother, Francis, had chosen that life, and worked for Robert of Gloucester. I must ask him what it's like, Philip thought, if I ever see him again.

Soon after the first petitioner went up the stairs, the Hamleighs came in.

Philip resisted the impulse to go to them straightaway: he did not want the world to know they were in collusion, not yet. He stared at them intently, studying their expressions, trying to read their thoughts. He decided that William looked hopeful, Percy seemed anxious, and Regan was as taut as a bowstring. After a few moments, Philip stood up and crossed the room, as casually as he could manage. He greeted them politely, then said to Percy: "Did you see him?"

"Yes."

"And?"

"He said he would think about it overnight."

"But *why*?" Philip said. He was disappointed and cross. "What is there to think about?"

Percy shrugged. "Ask him."

Philip was exasperated. "Well, how did he *seem*—pleased, or what?"

Regan answered. "My guess is that he liked the idea of being released from his dilemma but felt suspicious that it all sounded too easy."

That made sense, but Philip was still annoyed that King Stephen had not seized the opportunity with both hands. "We'd better not talk any longer," he said after a moment. "We don't want the bishops to guess that we're colluding against them—not before the king makes his announcement." He nodded politely and moved away.

He returned to his stone seat. He tried to pass the time by thinking about what he would do if his plan worked. How soon could work start on the new cathedral? It depended on how quickly he could get some cash out of his new property. There would be quite a lot of sheep: he would have fleeces to sell in the summer. Some of the hill farms would be rented, and most rents fell due soon after harvesttime. By the autumn there might be enough money to hire a forester and a master quarryman and begin stockpiling timber and stone. At the same time, laborers could start to dig the foundations, under the supervision of Tom Builder. They might be ready to start stonework sometime next year.

It was a fine dream.

Courtiers went up and down the stairs with alarming rapidity: King Stephen was working fast today. Philip began to worry that the king might finish his day's work and go hunting before the bishops arrived.

At last they came. Philip got to his feet slowly as they walked in. Waleran looked tense, but Henry just looked bored. To Henry this was a minor matter: he owed support to his fellow bishop, but the outcome would make little difference to him. For Waleran, however, the outcome was crucial to his plan to build a castle—and a castle was only a step in Waleran's upward progress on the ladder of power.

Philip was not sure how to treat them. They had tried to trick him, and he wanted to rail at them, to tell them that he had discovered their treachery; but that would alert them that something was up, and he wanted them all unsuspecting, so that the compromise would be endorsed by the king before they could gather their wits. So he concealed his feelings and smiled politely. He need not have bothered: they ignored him completely.

It was not long before the guards called them. Henry and Waleran went up the stairs first, followed by Philip. The Hamleighs brought up the rear. Philip's heart was in his mouth.

King Stephen was standing in front of the fire. Today he seemed to have a more brisk and businesslike air. That was good: he would be impatient of any quibbling by the bishops. Bishop Henry went and stood beside his brother at the fire, and the others all stood in a line in the middle of the room. Philip felt a pain in his hands, and realized he was pressing his fingernails into his palms. He forced his fingers to relax.

The king spoke to Bishop Henry in a low voice that no one else could hear. Henry frowned and said something equally inaudible. They talked for a few moments, then Stephen held up a hand to silence his brother. He looked at Philip.

Philip reminded himself that the king had spoken kindly to him last time, joshing him about being nervous and saying he liked a monk to dress like a monk.

There were no pleasantries today, however. The king coughed and began. "My loyal subject, Percy Hamleigh, today becomes the earl of Shiring."

From the corner of his eye, Philip saw Waleran start forward, as if to protest; but Bishop Henry stopped him with a quick, forbidding gesture.

The king went on: "Of the former earl's possessions, Percy shall have the castle, all the land that is tenanted to knights, plus all other arable land and low-lying pasture."

Philip could hardly contain his excitement. It looked as if the king had accepted the deal! He stole another look at Waleran, whose face was a picture of frustration.

Percy knelt in front of the king and held his hands together in an attitude of prayer. The king placed his hands over Percy's. "I make you, Percy, earl of Shiring, to have and enjoy the lands and revenues aforesaid."

Percy said: "I swear by all that is holy to be your liege man and to fight

for you against any other.”

Stephen released Percy’s hands, and Percy stood up.

Stephen turned to the rest of them. “All other farmlands belonging to the former earl, I give”—he paused for a moment, looking from Philip to Waleran and back again—“I give to the *priory* of Kingsbridge, for the building of the new cathedral.”

Philip suppressed a whoop of joy—he had won! He could not stop himself from beaming with pleasure at the king. He looked at Waleran. Waleran was shocked to the core. He was making no pretense of equanimity: his mouth was open, his eyes were wide, and he was staring at the king with frank incredulity. His gaze swiveled to Philip. Waleran knew he had failed, somehow, and that Philip was the beneficiary of his failure; but he could not imagine how it had happened.

King Stephen said: “Kingsbridge Priory shall also have the right to take stone from the earl’s quarry and timber from his forest, without limit, for the building of the new cathedral.”

Philip’s throat went dry. That was not the deal! The quarry and the forest were supposed to *belong* to the priory, and Percy was only to have hunting rights. Regan *had* altered the terms after all. Now Percy was to own the property and the priory merely had the right to take timber and stone. Philip had only a few seconds to decide whether to repudiate the whole deal. The king was saying: “In the event of a disagreement, the sheriff of Shiring shall adjudicate, but the parties have the right to appeal to me as a last resort.” Philip was thinking: Regan has behaved outrageously, but what difference does it make? The deal still gives me most of what I wanted. Then the king said: “I believe this arrangement had already been approved by both sides here.” And there was no time left.

Percy said: “Yes, lord king.”

Waleran opened his mouth to deny that he had approved the compromise, but Philip got in first. “Yes, lord king,” he said.

Bishop Henry and Bishop Waleran both turned their heads to Philip and stared at him. Their expressions showed utter astonishment as they realized that Philip, the youthful prior who did not even know enough to wear a clean habit to the king’s court, had negotiated a deal with the king behind their backs. After a moment, Henry’s face relaxed into amusement, like one who is beaten at nine-men’s morris by a nimble-witted child; but Waleran’s gaze became malevolent. Philip felt he could read Waleran’s mind. Waleran was realizing that he had made the cardinal error of underestimating his opponent, and he was humiliated. For Philip, this moment made up for everything: the treachery, the humiliation, the slights. Philip lifted his chin, risking committing the sin of pride, and gave Waleran a look that said: You’ll have to try harder than that to outwit Philip of Gwynedd.

The king said: “Let the former earl, Bartholomew, be told of my decision.”

Bartholomew was in a dungeon somewhere nearby, Philip presumed. He remembered those children, living with their servant in the ruined castle, and he felt a pang of guilt as he wondered what would happen to them now.

The king dismissed everyone except Bishop Henry. Philip crossed the room floating on air. He reached the top of the staircase at the same time as Waleran, and stopped to let Waleran go first. Waleran shot him a look of poisonous fury. When he spoke his voice was like bile, and despite Philip’s elation, Waleran’s words chilled him to the bone. The mask of hatred opened its mouth, and Waleran hissed: “I swear by all that’s holy, you’ll never build your church.” Then he pulled his black robes around his shoulders and went down the stairs.

Philip realized he had made an enemy for life.

III

William Hamleigh could hardly contain his excitement when Earlscastle came into sight.

It was the afternoon of the day after the king had made his decision. William and Walter had ridden for most of two days but William did not feel tired. He felt as if his heart was swelling up in his chest and blocking his throat. He was about to see Aliena again.

He had once hoped to marry her because she was the daughter of an earl, and she had rejected him, three times. He winced as he remembered her scorn. She had made him feel like a nobody, a peasant; she had acted as if the Hamleighs were a family of no account. But the tables had turned. It was her family that was of no account, now. He was the son of an earl, and she was nothing. She had no title, no position, no land, no wealth. He was going to take possession of the castle, and he was going to throw her out, and then she would have no home either. It was almost too good to be true.

He slowed his horse as they approached the castle. He did not want Aliena to have any warning of his arrival: he wanted her to have a sudden, horrible, devastating shock.

Earl Percy and Countess Regan had returned to their old manor house at Hamleigh, to arrange for the treasure, the best horses, and the household servants to be moved to the castle. William's job was to hire some local people to clean up the castle, light fires, and make the place habitable.

Low iron-gray clouds boiled across the sky, so close they seemed almost to touch the battlements. There would be rain tonight. That made it even better. He would be throwing Aliena out into a storm.

He and Walter dismounted and walked their horses over the wooden drawbridge. Last time I was here I captured the place, William thought proudly. The grass was already growing in the lower compound. They tied up their horses and left them to graze. William gave his war-horse a handful of grain. They stowed their saddles in the stone chapel, as there was no stable. The horses snorted and stamped, but a wind was blowing up, and the sounds were lost. William and Walter crossed the second bridge to the upper compound.

There was no sign of life. William suddenly thought that Aliena might have gone. What a disappointment that would be! He and Walter would have to spend a dreary, hungry night in a cold and dirty castle. They went up the outside steps to the hall door. "Quietly," William said to Walter. "If they're

here, I want to give them a shock.”

He pushed open the door. The great hall was empty and dark, and smelled as if it had not been used for months: as he had expected, they had been living on the top floor. William trod softly as he walked across the hall to the stairs. Dry reeds rustled under his feet. Walter followed close behind.

They climbed the stairs. They could hear nothing: the thick stone walls of the keep muffled all sound. Halfway up, William stopped, turned to Walter, put his finger to his lips, and pointed. There was a light shining under the door at the top of the stairs. Someone was here.

They went on up the stairs and paused outside the door. From inside came the sound of a girlish laugh. William smiled happily. He found the handle, turned it gently, then kicked the door open. The laugh turned into a scream of fright.

The scene in the room made a pretty picture. Aliena and her younger brother, Richard, were sitting at a small table, close to the fire, playing a board game of some kind, and Matthew the steward was standing behind her, looking over her shoulder. Aliena’s face was rose-colored in the glow of the fire, and her dark curls glinted with auburn lights. She wore a pale linen tunic. She was looking up at William with her red lips in a big O of surprise. William watched her, enjoying her fright, saying nothing. After a moment she recovered, stood up, and said: “What do you want?”

William had rehearsed this scene many times in his imagination. He walked slowly into the room and stood by the fire, warming his hands; then he said: “I live here. What do *you* want?”

Aliena looked from him to Walter. She was scared and confused, but nevertheless her tone was challenging. “This castle belongs to the earl of Shiring. State your business and then clear out.”

William smiled triumphantly. “The earl of Shiring is my father,” he said. The steward grunted, as if he had been afraid of this. Aliena looked bewildered. William went on: “The king made my father earl yesterday, at Winchester. The castle now belongs to us. I’m the master here until my father arrives.” He snapped his fingers at the steward. “And I’m hungry, so bring me bread and meat and wine.”

The steward hesitated. He threw a worried look at Aliena. He was afraid to leave her. But he had no choice. He went to the door.

Aliena took a step toward the door, as if to follow him.

“Stay here,” William ordered her.

Walter stood between her and the door, barring her way.

“You have no right to command me!” Aliena said, with a touch of her old imperiousness.

Matthew spoke in a scared tone. “Stay, my lady. Don’t anger them. I’ll be quick.”

Aliena frowned at him, but she stayed where she was. Matthew went out.

William sat in Aliena's chair. She moved to her brother's side. William studied them. There was a similarity between them, but all the strength was in the girl's face. Richard was a tall, awkward adolescent, with no beard yet. William liked the sensation of having them in his power. He said: "How old are you, Richard?"

"Fourteen years," the boy said sullenly.

"Ever killed a man?"

"No," he answered, then with a little attempt at bravado he added: "Not yet."

You'll suffer too, you pompous little prick, William thought. He turned his attention to Aliena. "How old are you?"

At first she looked as if she would not speak to him, but then she appeared to change her mind, perhaps remembering that Matthew had said *Don't anger them*. "Seventeen," she said.

"My, my, the whole family can count," William said. "Are you a virgin, Aliena?"

"Of course!" she blazed.

Suddenly William reached forward and grabbed her breast. It filled his big hand. He squeezed: it felt firm but yielding. She jerked back, and it slipped from his grasp.

Richard stepped forward, too late, and knocked William's arm aside. Nothing could have pleased William more. He came out of his chair fast and hit Richard in the face with a swinging punch. As he had suspected, Richard was soft: he cried out and his hands flew to his face.

"Leave him alone!" Aliena cried.

William looked at her with surprise. She seemed more concerned about her brother than about herself. That might be worth remembering.

Matthew came back in carrying a wooden platter with a loaf of bread, a side of ham and a jug of wine on it. He paled when he saw Richard holding his hands to his face. He put the platter down on the table and went to the boy. Taking Richard's hands away gently, he looked at the boy's face. It was already red and puffy around the eye. "I *told* you not to anger them," he muttered, but he seemed relieved that it was no worse. William was disappointed: he had hoped Matthew would fly into a rage. The steward threatened to be a killjoy.

The sight of the food made William's mouth water. He pulled his chair up to the table, took out his eating knife, and cut a thick slice of ham. Walter sat opposite him. Through a mouthful of bread and ham, William said to Aliena: "Bring some cups and pour the wine." Matthew moved to do it. William said: "Not you—her." Aliena hesitated. Matthew looked at her anxiously and nodded. She came across to the table and picked up the jug.

As she leaned over, William reached down, slipped his hand under the hem of her tunic, and rapidly ran his fingers up her leg. His fingertips felt slender calves with soft hair, then the muscles behind her knee, and then the soft skin of the inside of her thigh; then she jerked away, spun around, and swung the heavy wine jug at his head.

William warded off the blow with his left hand and slapped her face with his right. He put all his force into the slap. His hand stung in a very satisfying way. Aliena screamed. Out of the corner of his eye William saw Richard move. He had been hoping for that. He pushed Aliena aside forcefully, and she fell to the floor with a thud. Richard came at William like a deer charging the hunter. William dodged Richard's first wild blow, then punched him in the stomach. As the boy doubled over, William hit him several times in rapid succession about the eyes and nose. It was not as exciting as hitting Aliena, but it was gratifying enough, and within moments Richard's face was covered with blood.

Suddenly Walter gave a warning cry and sprang to his feet, looking past William's shoulder. William spun round to see Matthew coming at him with a knife held high ready to stab. William was taken by surprise—he had not expected bravery from the effeminate steward. Walter could not reach him in time to prevent the stroke. All William could do was to hold up both arms to protect himself, and for a terrible moment he thought he was going to be killed in his moment of triumph. A stronger attacker would have knocked William's arms aside, but Matthew was a slight figure softened by indoor living, and the knife did not quite reach William's neck. He felt a sudden surge of relief, but he was not yet safe. Matthew lifted his arm for another blow. William took a step back and reached for his sword. Then Walter came around the table with a long pointed dagger in his hand and stabbed Matthew in the back.

An expression of terror came over Matthew's face. William saw the point of Walter's dagger emerge from Matthew's chest, tearing a slit in his tunic. Matthew's own knife fell from his hand and bounced on the floorboards. He tried to draw breath in a gasp, but a gurgling noise came from his throat and he seemed unable to breathe. He sagged; blood came from his mouth; his eyes closed; and he fell. Walter withdrew the long dagger as the body sank to the floor. For a moment blood spurted from the wound, but almost immediately the flow slowed to a trickle.

They all looked at the corpse on the floor: Walter, William, Aliena and Richard. William was light-headed after his close brush with death. He felt as if he could do anything. He reached out and grabbed the neck of Aliena's tunic. The linen was soft and fine, very expensive. He gave a sharp jerk. The tunic ripped. He kept on pulling, so that it tore all the way down the front. A strip a foot wide came away in his hand. Aliena screamed, then tried to pull

the remnants of the garment together over her front. The torn edges would not meet. William's throat went dry. Her sudden vulnerability was thrilling. It was much more exciting than when he had watched her washing, for now she knew he was looking, and she felt ashamed, and her shame inflamed him all the more. She covered her breasts with one arm and her triangle with the other hand. William dropped the strip of linen and grabbed her by the hair. He jerked her toward him, spun her around, and ripped the rest of the tunic from her back.

She had delicate white shoulders, a small waist, and surprisingly full hips. He pulled her to him, pressing himself against her back, grinding his hips against her buttocks. He bent his head and bit her soft neck hard, until he tasted blood and she screamed again. He saw Richard move.

"Hold the boy," he said to Walter.

Walter grabbed Richard and put him in an armlock.

Holding Aliena hard against him with one arm, William explored her body with the other hand. He felt her breasts, weighing and then squeezing them, and he pinched her small nipples; then he ran his hand over her stomach and into the triangle of hair between her legs, bushy and curly like the hair on her head. He prodded her roughly with his fingers. She began to cry. His prick was so stiff he felt it would burst.

He stepped away from her and jerked her backward over his outstretched leg. She fell on her back with a crash. The fall winded her and she gasped for breath.

William had not planned this, and he was not quite sure how it had happened, but nothing in the world could stop him now.

He lifted his tunic and showed her his prick. She looked horrified: she had probably never seen a stiff one. She was a real virgin. All the better.

"Bring the boy here," William said to Walter. "I want him to see it all." For some reason, the thought of doing it in front of Richard's eyes was intensely piquant.

Walter pushed Richard forward and forced him to his knees.

William knelt on the floor and prized Aliena's legs apart. She began to struggle. He fell on top of her, trying to crush her into submission, but still she resisted, and he could not get inside her. He was irritated: this was spoiling everything. He raised himself on one elbow and hit her across the face with his fist. She cried out and her cheek turned an angry red, but as soon as he tried to enter her, she began to resist him again.

Walter could have held her still, but he had the boy.

Suddenly William was inspired. "Cut the boy's ear off, Walter," he said.

Aliena went still. "No!" she said hoarsely. "Leave him alone—don't hurt him anymore."

"Open your legs, then," William said.

She stared at him, wide-eyed with horror at the dreadful choice forced upon her. William enjoyed her anguish. Walter, playing the game perfectly, drew his knife and put it to Richard's right ear. He hesitated, then with a movement that was almost tender, he sliced off the boy's earlobe.

Richard screamed. Blood spurted from the small wound. The piece of flesh fell on Aliena's heaving chest.

"Stop!" she screamed. "All right. I'll do it." She opened her legs.

William spat on his hand, then rubbed the moisture between her legs. He pushed his fingers inside her. She cried out with pain. That excited him more. He lowered himself on top of her. She lay still, tense. Her eyes were closed. Her body was slick with sweat from the struggle, but she shivered. William adjusted his position, then hesitated, enjoying the anticipation and her dread. He looked at the others. Richard was looking on with horror. Walter was watching greedily.

William said: "Your turn next, Walter."

Aliena groaned in despair.

Suddenly he shoved inside her roughly, pushing as hard and far as he could. He felt the resistance of her maidenhead—a real virgin!—and he shoved again, brutally. It hurt him but it hurt her more. She screamed. He shoved once more, harder still, and he felt it break. Aliena's face turned white, her head slumped to one side, and she fell into a faint; then at last William spurted his seed inside her, laughing and laughing with triumph and pleasure until he was drained dry.

The storm raged for most of the night, then toward dawn it stopped. The sudden quiet woke Tom Builder. As he lay in the dark, listening to the heavy breathing of Alfred beside him and the quieter sound of Martha on his other side, he calculated that it might be a clear morning, which would mean he could see the sun rise for the first time in two or three cloudy weeks. He had been waiting for this.

He got up and opened the door. It was still dark: there was plenty of time. He prodded his son with a foot. "Alfred! Wake up! There's going to be a sunrise."

Alfred groaned and sat upright. Martha turned over without waking. Tom went to the table and took the lid off a pottery crock. He removed a half-eaten loaf and cut off two thick slices, one for himself and one for Alfred. They sat down on the bench and ate breakfast.

There was ale in the jug. Tom took a long swallow and passed it to Alfred. Agnes would have made them use cups, and so would Ellen, but there was no woman in the house now. When Alfred had drunk his fill from the jug they left the house.

The sky was turning from black to gray as they crossed the priory close. Tom had intended to go to the prior's house and wake Philip. However, Philip's thoughts had followed the same lines as Tom's, and he was already there in the ruins of the cathedral, wearing a heavy cloak, kneeling on the wet ground, saying prayers.

Their task was to establish an accurate east-west line, which would form the axis around which the new cathedral would be built.

Tom had prepared everything some time ago. In the ground at the east end he had planted an iron spike with a small loop in its top like the eye of a needle. The spike was almost as tall as Tom, so that its "eye" was at the level of Tom's eyes. He had fixed it in place with a mixture of rubble and mortar, so that it could not be shifted accidentally. This morning he would plant another such spike, dead west of the first one, at the opposite end of the site.

"Mix up some mortar, Alfred," he said.

Alfred went to fetch sand and lime. Tom went to his tool shed near the cloisters and got a small mallet and the second spike. Then he went to the west end of the site and stood waiting for the sun to rise. Philip finished his prayers and joined him, while Alfred mixed sand and lime with water on a mortarboard.

The sky grew brighter. The three men became tense. They were all watching the east wall of the priory close. At last the red disk of the sun showed over the top of the wall.

Tom shifted his position until he could see the edge of the sun through the small loop in the spike at the far end. Then, as Philip began to pray aloud in Latin, Tom held the second spike in front of him so that it blocked his view of the sun. Steadily, he lowered it to the ground and pressed its pointed end into the damp earth, always keeping it precisely between his eye and the sun. He drew the mallet from his belt and carefully tapped the spike into the ground until its "eye" was level with his eyes. Now, if he had done the job properly, and if his hands had not trembled, the sun should shine through the eyes of both spikes.

He closed one eye and looked through the near spike at the far one. The sun still shone into his eye through the two loops. The two spikes lay on a perfect east-west line. That line would provide the orientation of the new cathedral.

He had explained this to Philip, and he now stood aside and let the prior look through the loops himself, to check.

"Perfect," Philip said.

Tom nodded. "It is."

"Do you know what day it is?" Philip said.

"Friday."

"It's also the day of the martyrdom of Saint Adolphus. God sent us a

sunrise so that we could orient the church on our patron's day. Isn't that a good sign?"

Tom smiled. In his experience good workmanship was more important than good omens in the building industry. But he was happy for Philip. "Yes, indeed," he said. "It's a very good sign."

Chapter 6

ALIENA WAS DETERMINED not to think about it.

She sat all night on the cold stone floor of the chapel, with her back to the wall, staring into the darkness. At first she could think of nothing but the hellish scene she had been through, but gradually the pain eased a little, and she was able to concentrate her mind on the sounds of the storm, the rain falling on the roof of the chapel and the wind howling around the ramparts of the deserted castle.

She had been naked at first. After the two men had…When they had finished, they had gone back to the table, leaving her lying on the floor, and Richard bleeding beside her. The men had begun eating and drinking as if they had forgotten about her, and then she and Richard had taken their chance and fled from the room. The storm had started by then, and they had run across the bridge in torrential rain and taken refuge in the chapel. But Richard had gone back to the keep almost immediately. He must have gone into the room where the men were, and snatched his cloak and Aliena's from the hook by the door, and run away again before William and his groom had time to react.

But still he would not speak to her. He gave her her cloak, and wrapped his own around him; then he sat on the floor a yard away from her, with his back to the same wall. She longed for someone who loved her to put his arms around her and comfort her, but Richard acted as if she had done something terribly shameful; and the worst of it was that she felt the same way. She felt as guilty as if *she* had committed a sin. She quite understood his not comforting her, his not wanting to touch her.

She was glad it was cold. It helped her to feel withdrawn from the world, isolated; and it seemed to dull the pain. She did not sleep, but at some point in the night they both went into a kind of trance, and sat as still as death for a long time.

The sudden ending of the storm broke the spell. Aliena realized she could

see the chapel windows, small gray patches in what had previously been unrelieved blankness. Richard stood up and went to the door. She watched him, feeling annoyed by the disturbance: she wanted to sit there against the wall until she froze to death or starved, for she could think of nothing more appealing than to slip peacefully into permanent unconsciousness. Then he opened the door, and the faint light of dawn illuminated his face.

Aliena was shocked out of her trance. Richard was barely recognizable. His face was swollen out of shape and covered with dried blood and bruises. It made Aliena want to cry. Richard had always been full of empty bravado. As a small boy he had dashed around the castle on an imaginary horse, pretending to stab people with an imaginary lance. Father's knights would always encourage him by pretending to be frightened of his wooden sword. In reality Richard could be scared off by a hissing cat. But he had done his best, last night, and he had been badly beaten for it. Now she would have to take care of him.

Slowly she got to her feet. Her body ached, but the pain was not as bad as it had been last night. She considered what might be happening in the keep. William and his groom would have finished the jug of wine at some point during the night and then they would have fallen asleep. They would probably wake at sunrise.

By then she and Richard must be gone.

She went to the other end of the chapel, to the altar. It was a simple wooden box, painted white, bare of ornament. She leaned against it and then, with a sudden shove, pushed it over.

"What are you doing?" said Richard in a frightened voice.

"This was Father's secret hiding place," she said. "He told me about it before he went away." On the floor where the altar had been was a cloth bundle. Aliena unwrapped it to reveal a full-size sword, complete with scabbard and belt, and a vicious-looking dagger a foot long.

Richard came over to look. He had little skill with a sword. He had been taking lessons for a year but he was still clumsy. However, Aliena certainly could not wield it, so she handed it to him. He buckled the belt around his waist.

Aliena looked at the dagger. She had never carried a weapon. All her life she had had someone to protect her. Realizing that she needed the deadly knife for her own protection, she felt utterly abandoned. She was not sure she could ever use it. I've stuck a wooden lance into a wild pig, she thought; why couldn't I stick this into a man—someone like William Hamleigh? She recoiled from the thought.

The dagger had a leather sheath with a loop for attaching it to a belt. The loop was big enough to go around Aliena's slim wrist like a bracelet. She eased it over her left hand and pushed the knife up her sleeve. It was long—it

reached past her elbow. Even if she could not stab someone, perhaps she could use it to frighten people.

Richard said: “Let’s get away, quickly.”

Aliena nodded, but as she was making for the door, she stopped. The day was rapidly becoming lighter, and she could see on the chapel floor two shadowy objects she had not noticed before. Looking closely, she saw that they were saddles, one of average size and one truly enormous. She visualized William and his groom, arriving here last night, flushed with their triumph at Winchester and wearied by their journey, carelessly lifting the saddles from their horses and dumping them in here before hurrying to the keep. They would not imagine that anyone would dare steal from them. But desperate people find courage.

Aliena went to the door and looked out. The light was clear but weak, and there were no colors. The wind had dropped and the sky was cloudless. Several wooden shingles had fallen from the roof of the chapel in the night. The compound was empty except for the two horses grazing the wet grass. They both looked up at Aliena, then put their heads down again. One of them was a huge war-horse: that explained the oversized saddle. The other was a dappled stallion, not good-looking but compact and solid. Aliena stared at them, then at the saddles, then back at the horses.

“What are we waiting for?” Richard said anxiously.

Aliena made up her mind. “Let’s take their horses,” she said decisively.

Richard looked scared. “They’ll kill us.”

“They won’t be able to catch us. If we *don’t* take their horses they might come after us and kill us.”

“What if they catch us before we get away?”

“We’ll just have to be quick.” She was not as confident as she pretended, but she had to encourage Richard. “Let’s saddle the courser first—he looks more friendly. Bring the regular saddle.”

She hurried across the compound. Both horses were tied by long ropes to the stumps of burned buildings. Aliena picked up the courser’s rope and pulled gently. This would be the groom’s horse, of course. Aliena would have preferred something smaller and more timid, but she thought she could handle this one. Richard would have to take the war-horse.

The courser looked suspiciously at Aliena and laid back its ears. She was desperately impatient, but she forced herself to talk softly and pull gently on the rope, and the horse calmed down. She held its head and stroked its nose; then Richard slipped the bridle on and pushed the bit into its mouth. Aliena was relieved. Richard lifted the smaller of the two saddles onto its back and secured it with rapid, sure movements. Both of them had been used to horses from an early age.

There were bags attached to both sides of the groom’s saddle. Aliena

hoped they might contain something useful—a flint, some food, or a little horse grain—but there was no time to investigate now. She glanced nervously across the compound toward the bridge that led to the keep. There was nobody there.

The war-horse had watched the courser being saddled, and knew what was coming, but it was not keen to cooperate with total strangers. It snorted and resisted the pull of the rope. “Hush!” Aliena said. She held the rope tightly, pulling steadily, and the horse came to her reluctantly. But it was very strong, and if it made a determined effort to resist, there would be trouble. Aliena wondered whether the courser could carry her and Richard. But then William would be able to come after them on the war-horse.

When she had the horse close, she looped the rope around the stump so that it could not move away. But when Richard tried to put the bridle on, the horse tossed its head and evaded it.

“Try putting the saddle on first,” Aliena said. She talked to the beast and patted its mighty neck while Richard hefted the massive saddle and tied it on. The horse began to look somewhat defeated. “Now, you be good,” Aliena said in a firm voice, but the horse was not fooled: it sensed the panic just beneath the surface. Richard approached with the bridle and the horse snorted and tried to move away. “I’ve got something for you,” Aliena said, and reached into the empty pocket of her cloak. The horse was deceived. She brought out a handful of nothing, but the horse dipped his head and nuzzled her hand, looking for food. She felt the rough skin of its tongue on her palm. While its head was down and its mouth was open, Richard slipped the bridle on.

Aliena shot another fearful glance toward the keep. All was quiet.

“Get on,” she said to Richard.

He put one foot in a high stirrup—not without difficulty—and swung himself up onto the huge horse. Aliena untied the rope from the stump.

The horse neighed loudly.

Aliena’s heart raced. That sound might have carried to the keep. A man such as William would know the voice of his own horse, especially a horse as expensive as this one. He might have woken up.

She hurried to untie the other horse. Her cold fingers fumbled with the knot. The thought of William waking up had made her lose her nerve. He would open his eyes, sit up, look around him, remember where he was, and wonder why his horse had called. He was sure to come. She felt she could not face him again. The shameful, brutal, agonizing thing he had done to her came back in all its horror.

Richard said urgently: “Come on, Allie!” His horse was jittery and impatient now. He was working hard to make it stay still. He needed to gallop it for a mile or two, to tire it; then it would be more tractable. It neighed again, and started moving sideways.

At last Aliena got the knot undone. She was tempted to drop the rope, but then she would have had no way to tie the horse up again, so she coiled it hastily and messily and tied it to a saddle strap. She needed to adjust the stirrups: they were the right length for William's groom, who was several inches taller than she was, so they would be too low for her to reach when she was in the saddle. But she could picture William coming down the stairs, crossing the hall, coming out into the air—

"I can't hold this horse much longer," Richard said in a strained voice.

Aliena was as jittery as the war-horse. She swung herself up on the stallion. Sitting on the saddle hurt her, inside, and it was all she could do to stay on. Richard moved his horse toward the gate, and Aliena's horse followed without any prompting from her. The stirrups were out of reach, as she had expected, and she had to grip with her knees. As they moved off she heard a shout from somewhere behind her, and she groaned aloud: "Oh, no." She saw Richard kick his horse. The huge beast lumbered into a trot. Her own followed suit. She was grateful that it always did what the war-horse did, for she was in no state to control it herself. Richard kicked the war-horse again and it picked up speed as they passed under the arch of the gatehouse. Aliena heard another shout, much closer. She looked over her shoulder to see William and his groom pounding across the compound after her.

Richard's horse was nervous, and as soon as it saw open fields in front of it, it put its head down and broke into a gallop. They thundered across the wooden drawbridge. Aliena felt something tug at her thigh, and saw, out of the corner of her eye, a man's hand reaching for her saddle straps; but an instant later it was gone, and she knew they had escaped. Relief flooded her; but then she felt the pain again. As the horse galloped across the field she felt stabbed inside, as she had when the foul William had penetrated her; and there was a warm trickle on her thigh. She gave the horse its head and shut her eyes tight against the pain. But the horror of the night before came back to her, and she saw it all behind her closed eyelids. As they raced across the field she chanted in time with the horse's hoofbeats: "I can't *remember* I can't *remember* I *can't* I *can't* I *can't*."

Her horse angled to the right and she sensed that it was going up a slight slope. She opened her eyes and saw that Richard had turned off the mud path and was taking a long route to the woods. She thought he probably wanted to make sure the war-horse was good and tired before letting it slow down. Both beasts would be easier to manage after being ridden hard. Soon she felt her own mount starting to flag. She sat back in the saddle. The horse slowed to a canter, then a trot, then a walk. Richard's horse still had energy to burn, and it pulled away.

Aliena looked back across the fields. The castle was a mile away, and she was not sure whether or not she could see two figures standing on the

drawbridge looking toward her. They would have to walk a long way to find replacement horses, she thought. She felt safe for a while.

Her hands and feet tingled as they warmed up. Heat rose from the horse as from a fire, and wrapped her in a hot-air cocoon. Richard let his horse slow down at last, and turned back toward her, his horse walking and blowing hard. They turned into the trees. They both knew these woods well, for they had lived here most of their lives.

“Where are we going?” asked Richard.

Aliena frowned. Where *were* they going? What were they going to do? They had no food, nothing to drink, and no money. She had no clothes except for the cloak she was wearing—no tunic, no undershirt, no hat, no shoes. She intended to take care of her brother—but how?

She could see now that for the past three months she had been living in a dream. She had known, in the back of her mind, that the old life was over, but she had refused to face it. William Hamleigh had woken her up. She had no doubt that his story was true, and King Stephen had made Percy Hamleigh the earl of Shiring; but perhaps there was more to it. Perhaps the king had made some provision for her and Richard. If not, he should have, and they could certainly petition him. Either way, they had to go to Winchester. There they could at least find out what had happened to their father.

She suddenly thought: Oh, Father, where did it all go wrong?

Ever since her mother had died, her father had taken special care of her. She knew he paid more attention to her than other fathers did to their daughters. He felt bad that he had not married again, to give her a new mother; and he had explained that he was happier with the memory of his wife than he ever could be with a substitute. Aliena had never wanted another mother anyway. Her father had looked after her, and she had looked after Richard, and that way no harm could ever come to any of them.

Those days were gone forever.

“Where are we going?” Richard said again.

“To Winchester,” she said. “We’ll go and see the king.”

Richard was enthusiastic. “Yes! And when we report what William and his groom did last night, the king will surely—”

In a flash, Aliena was possessed by uncontrollable rage. “Shut your mouth!” she screamed. The horses started nervously. She pulled viciously on her reins. “Don’t ever say that!” She was choking with fury and could hardly spit out the words. “We’re not going to tell anyone what they did—not anyone! Never! Never! Never!”

The groom’s saddlebags contained a large lump of hard cheese, some dregs of wine in a leather bottle, a flint and some kindling, and a pound or two of

mixed grains which Aliena imagined were for the horses. She and Richard ate the cheese and drank the wine at noon, while the horses grazed the sparse grass and evergreen shrubs and drank from a clear stream. She had stopped bleeding and the lower half of her torso felt numb.

They had seen some other travelers, but Aliena had told Richard to speak to no one. To the casual observer they appeared a formidable couple, Richard in particular, on his huge horse, with his sword; but a few moments' conversation would reveal them to be a pair of kids with no one to take care of them, and then they might be vulnerable. So they steered clear of other people.

As the day began to fade they looked for somewhere to spend the night. They found a clearing near a stream a hundred yards or so from the road. Aliena gave the horses some grain while Richard made a fire. If they had had a cooking pot they could have made porridge with the horse grain. As it was, they would just have to chew the grains raw, unless they could find some sweet chestnuts and roast them.

While she was pondering that, and Richard was out of sight gathering firewood, she was scared by a deep voice close to her. "And who would you be, my lass?"

She screamed. The horse backed away, frightened. Aliena turned and saw a dirty, bearded man all dressed in brown leather. He took a step toward her. "Keep away from me!" she shrieked.

"No need to be afraid," he said.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw Richard step into the clearing behind the stranger, his arms full of wood. He stood looking at the two of them. *Draw your sword!* thought Aliena, but he looked too scared and uncertain to do anything. She stepped back, trying to get the horse between herself and the stranger. "We've got no money," she said. "We've got nothing."

"I'm the king's verderer," he said.

Aliena almost collapsed with relief. A verderer was a royal servant paid to enforce the forest laws. "Why didn't you say so, you foolish man?" she said, angry at having been scared. "I took you for an outlaw!"

He looked startled, and rather offended, as if she had said something impolite; but all he said was: "You'll be a high-born lady, then."

"I am the daughter of the earl of Shiring."

"And the boy will be his son," said the verderer, although he had not seemed to see Richard.

Richard now stepped forward and dropped his firewood. "That's right," he said. "What's your name?"

"Brian. Are you planning to spend the night here?"

"Yes."

"All alone?"

“Yes.” Aliena knew he was wondering why they had no escort, but she was not going to tell him.

“And you’ve no money, you say.”

Aliena frowned at him. “Do you doubt me?”

“Oh, no. I can tell you’re nobility, by your manners.” Was there a hint of irony in his voice? “If you’re alone and penniless, perhaps you’d prefer to spend the night at my house. It’s not far.”

Aliena had no intention of putting herself at the mercy of this rough character. She was about to refuse when he spoke again.

“My wife would be glad to give you supper. And I’ve a warm outhouse where you could sleep, if you prefer to sleep alone.”

The wife made a difference. Accepting the hospitality of a respectable family should be safe enough. Still Aliena hesitated. Then she thought of a fireplace, a bowl of hot pottage, a cup of wine, and a bed of straw with a roof over it. “We’d be grateful,” she said. “We’ve nothing to give you—I told the truth about having no money—but we’ll come back and reward you one day.”

“Good enough,” said the verderer. He went over to the fire and kicked it out.

Aliena and Richard mounted—they had not yet unsaddled the horses. The verderer came over and said: “Give me the reins.” Not sure what he wanted to do, Aliena gave him the reins, and Richard did likewise. The man set off through the forest, leading the horses. Aliena would have preferred to hold the reins herself, but she decided to let him have his way.

It was farther than he had indicated. They had traveled three or four miles, and it was dark, by the time they reached a small wood house with a thatched roof on the edge of a field. But there was light shining through the shutters and a smell of cooking, and Aliena dismounted gratefully.

The verderer’s wife heard the horses and came to the door. The man said to her: “A young lord and lady, alone in the forest. Give them something to drink.” He turned to Aliena. “In you go. I’ll see to the horses.”

Aliena did not like his peremptory tone—she would have preferred it if she were the one giving instructions—but she had no wish to unsaddle her own horse, so she went inside. Richard followed. The house was smoky and smelly, but warm. There was a cow tethered in one corner. Aliena was glad the man had mentioned an outhouse: she had never slept with cattle. A pot bubbled on the fire. They sat on a bench, and the wife gave them each a bowl of soup from the pot. It tasted gamey. When she saw Richard’s face in the light she was shocked. “What happened to you?” she said.

Richard opened his mouth to reply but Aliena forestalled him. “We’ve had a series of misfortunes,” she said. “We’re on our way to see the king.”

“I see,” said the wife. She was a small, brown-skinned woman with a guarded look. She did not persist in her questioning.

Aliena ate her soup quickly and wanted more. She held out her bowl. The woman looked away. Aliena was puzzled. Did she not know what Aliena wanted? Or did she not have any more? Aliena was about to speak to her sharply when the verderer came in. “I’ll show you the barn, where you can sleep,” he said. He took a lamp from a hook by the door. “Come with me.”

Aliena and Richard stood up. Aliena said to the wife: “There is one thing more I need. Can you give me an old dress? I’ve got nothing on under this cloak.”

The woman looked annoyed for some reason. “I’ll see what I can find,” she muttered.

Aliena went to the door. The verderer was giving her a strange look, staring at her cloak as if he might be able to see through it if he looked hard enough. “Lead the way!” she said sharply. He turned and went through the door.

He led them around to the back of the house and through a vegetable patch. The shifting light of the lamp revealed a small wooden building, more of a shed than a barn. He opened the door. It banged against a water butt that collected the rain from the roof. “Take a look,” he said. “See if it suits you.”

Richard went in first. “Bring the light, Allie,” he said. Aliena turned to take the lamp from the verderer. As she did so, he gave her a powerful shove. She fell sideways, through the doorway and into the barn, cannoning off her brother. They both ended up in a tangle on the floor. It went dark and the door banged shut. There was a peculiar noise outside, as of something heavy being moved in front of the door.

Aliena could not believe this was happening.

“What’s going on, Allie?” Richard cried.

She sat up. Was the man really a verderer, or was he an outlaw? He could not be an outlaw—his house was too substantial. But if he really was a verderer, why had he locked them up? Had they broken a law? Did he guess that the horses were not theirs? Or did he have some dishonest motive?

“Allie, why did he do that?” Richard said.

“I don’t know,” she said wearily. She had no energy left to be upset or angry. She got up and pushed at the door. It would not move. She guessed that the verderer had put the water butt up against it. In the dark, she felt the walls of the barn. She could reach the lower slopes of the roof, too. The building was made of close-set timbers. It had been carefully constructed. It was the verderer’s jail, where he kept offenders before taking them to the sheriff. “We can’t get out,” she said.

She sat down. The floor was dry and covered with straw. “We’re stuck here until he lets us out,” she said resignedly. Richard sat beside her. After a while they lay down back to back. Aliena felt she was too battered and frightened and tense to go to sleep, but she was also exhausted, and within a

few moments she fell into a healing slumber.

She woke up when the door opened and daylight fell on her face. She sat up immediately, feeling frightened, not knowing where she was or why she was sleeping on the hard ground. Then she remembered, and was still more frightened: what was the verderer going to do to them? However, it was not the verderer who came in but his small brown wife; and although her face was as set and closed as it had been last night, she was carrying a hunk of bread and two cups.

Richard sat up too. They both eyed the woman warily. She said nothing, but handed them each a cup, then broke the bread in two and gave half to each of them. Aliena suddenly realized she was starving. She dipped her bread in her beer and began to eat.

The woman stood in the doorway, watching them, while they finished off the bread and beer. Then she handed Aliena what looked like a length of worn, yellowing linen, folded up. Aliena unfolded it. It was an old dress.

The woman said: “Put that on and get out of here.”

Aliena was mystified by the combination of kindness and hard words, but she did not hesitate to take the dress. She turned her back, dropped her cloak, pulled the dress over her head quickly, and put the cloak back on.

She felt better.

The woman handed her a pair of worn wooden clogs, too big.

Aliena said: “I can’t ride with clogs on.”

The woman laughed harshly. “You won’t be riding.”

“Why not?”

“He’s taken your horses.”

Aliena’s heart sank. It was too unfair that they should suffer more bad luck. “Where’s he taken them?”

“He doesn’t tell me these things, but I’d guess he’s gone to Shiring. He’ll sell the beasts, then find out who you are, and whether there’s anything more to be made out of you than the price of your horseflesh.”

“So why are you letting us go?”

The woman looked Aliena up and down. “Because I didn’t like the way he looked at you when you told him you were naked under your cloak. You may not understand that now, but you will when you’re a wife.”

Aliena understood it already, but she did not say so.

Richard said: “Won’t he kill you when he finds you’ve let us go?”

She gave a cynical smile. “He doesn’t scare me as much as he scares others. Now be off.”

They went out. Aliena understood that this woman had learned how to live with a brutal and heartless man, and had even managed to preserve a

minimum of decency and compassion. “Thank you for the dress,” she said awkwardly.

The woman did not want her thanks. She pointed down the path and said: “Winchester is that way.”

They walked away and did not look back.

Aliena had never worn clogs—people of her class always had leather boots or sandals—and she found them clumsy and uncomfortable. However, they were better than nothing when the ground was cold.

When they were out of sight of the verderer’s house, Richard said: “Allie, why are these things happening to us?”

The question demoralized Aliena. Everyone was cruel to them. People were allowed to beat them and rob them as if they were horses or dogs. There was nobody to protect them. We’ve been too trusting, she thought. They had lived for three months in the castle without ever barring the doors. She resolved to trust nobody in the future. Never again would she let someone else take the reins of her horse, even if she had to be rude to prevent it. Never again would she let someone get behind her the way the verderer had last night, when he pushed her into the shed. She would never accept the hospitality of a stranger, never leave her door unlocked at night, never take kindness at face value.

“Let’s walk faster,” she said to Richard. “Perhaps we can reach Winchester by nightfall.”

They followed the path to the clearing where they had met the verderer. The remains of their fire were still there. From there they easily found the road to Winchester. They had been to Winchester before, many times, and they knew the way. Once they were on the road they could move faster. Frost had hardened the mud since the storm two nights ago.

Richard’s face was returning to normal. He had washed it yesterday, in a cold brook in the woods, and most of the dried blood had gone. There was an ugly scab where his right earlobe had been. His lips were still swollen but the puffiness had gone from the rest of his face. However, he was still badly bruised, and the angry color of the bruises gave him a rather frightening appearance. Still, that would do no harm.

Aliena missed the heat of the horse beneath her. Her hands and feet were painfully cold, even though her body was warm from the exertion of walking. The weather remained cold all morning, then at midday the temperature rose a little. By then she was hungry. She remembered that only yesterday she had felt as if she did not care whether she ever got warm or ate food again. But she did not want to think about that.

Whenever they heard horses or saw people in the distance they darted into the woods and hid until the other travelers had passed by. They hurried through villages, speaking to no one. Richard wanted to beg for food but

Aliena would not let him.

By the middle of the afternoon they were within a few miles of their destination and no one had bothered them. Aliena was thinking that it was not so difficult to avoid trouble, after all. Then, on a particularly desolate stretch of the road, a man suddenly stepped out of the bushes and stood in front of them.

They had no time to hide. “Keep walking,” Aliena said to Richard, but the man moved to block their way, and they had to stop. Aliena looked behind, thinking of running that way; but another fellow had materialized out of the forest and was standing ten or fifteen yards away, blocking their escape.

“What have we here?” said the man in front, in a loud voice. He was a fat, red-faced man with a big swollen belly and a filthy matted beard, and he carried a heavy club. He was almost certainly an outlaw. Aliena could tell from his face that he was the kind of man who would commit violence readily, and her heart filled with dread.

“Leave us alone,” she said in a pleading tone. “We’ve got nothing for you to steal.”

“I’m not so sure,” said the man. He took a step toward Richard. “This looks like a fine sword, worth several shillings.”

“It’s mine!” Richard protested, but he just sounded like a scared child.

It’s no use, Aliena thought. We’re powerless. I’m a woman and he’s a boy, and people can do anything they like with us.

With a surprisingly agile movement the fat man suddenly raised his club and struck at Richard. Richard tried to dodge. The blow was aimed at his head but it hit his shoulder. The fat man was strong, and the blow knocked Richard down.

Suddenly Aliena lost her temper. She had been treated unjustly, vilely abused, and robbed, and she was cold and hungry and hardly in control of herself. Her little brother had been beaten half to death less than two days ago and now the sight of someone clubbing him maddened her. She lost all sense of reason or caution. Without even thinking, she pulled the dagger from her sleeve, flew at the fat outlaw, and jabbed the knife at his great belly, screaming: “Leave him alone, you dog!”

She took him completely by surprise. His cloak had come open when he hit Richard, and his hands were still occupied with the club. He was completely off guard: no doubt he had thought himself safe from attack by a young girl who appeared unarmed. The point of the knife went through the wool of his tunic and the linen of his undershirt and was stopped by the taut skin of his belly. Aliena experienced a flash of revulsion, a moment of sheer horror at the thought of breaking human skin and penetrating the flesh of a real person; but fear stiffened her resolve, and she shoved the knife through his skin and into the soft organs of his abdomen; and then she became

terrified that she might not kill him, that he might stay alive to take his revenge, and so she kept on pushing until the long knife was inside him up to the hilt and would not go in any farther.

Suddenly the fearsome, arrogant, cruel man was a frightened wounded animal. He cried out in pain, dropped his club, and stared down at the knife sticking into him. Aliena understood in a flash that he knew it was a mortal wound. She snatched her hand away in horror. The outlaw staggered back. Aliena remembered that there was another thief behind her, and panic seized her: he would surely take a terrible revenge for the death of his accomplice. She grabbed the hilt of the knife again and jerked. The wounded man had turned slightly away from her, and she had to pull the knife sideways. She felt it slice through his soft insides as it came out of his fat belly. Blood spurted on her hand and the man screamed like an animal and fell to the ground. She spun round, knife in bloody hand, and faced the other man. As she did so, Richard struggled to his feet and drew his sword.

The second thief looked from one of them to the other, then at his dying friend, and without further ado he turned and ran into the woods.

Aliena watched, incredulous. They had scared him off. It was hard to take in.

She looked at the man on the ground. He lay flat on his back with his guts falling out of the great tear in his belly. His eyes were wide open and his face was twisted with pain and fear.

Aliena felt no relief, no pride in having defended herself and her brother from ruthless men: she was too disgusted and repelled by the hideous sight.

Richard felt no such qualms. “You stabbed him, Allie!” he said in a voice between excitement and hysteria. “You did for them!”

Aliena looked at him. He had to be taught a lesson. “Kill this one,” she said.

Richard stared at her. “What?”

“Kill him,” she repeated. “Put him out of his misery. Finish him off!”

“Why me?”

She deliberately made her voice harsh. “Because you act like a boy and I need a man. Because you’ve never done anything with a sword except play at war, and you have to start somewhere. What’s the matter with you? What are you afraid of? He’s dying anyway. He can’t hurt you. Use your sword. Get some practice. Kill him!”

Richard held his sword in both hands and looked uncertain. “How?”

The man screamed again.

Aliena yelled at Richard: “I don’t know how! Cut off his head, or stab him in the heart! Anything! Just shut him up!”

Richard looked cornered. He lifted his sword and lowered it again.

Aliena said: “If you don’t do this I’ll leave you alone, I swear by all the

saints. I'll get up one night and go away and when you wake up in the morning I won't be there and you'll be all on your own. Now kill him!"

Richard raised his sword again. Then, incredibly, the dying man stopped screaming and tried to get up. He rolled to one side and raised himself on one elbow. Richard gave a shout that was half a yell of fear and half a battle cry, and brought his sword down hard on the man's exposed neck. The weapon was heavy and the blade was sharp, and the blow sliced more than halfway through the fat neck. Blood spurted like a fountain and the head leaned grotesquely to one side. The body slumped to the earth.

Aliena and Richard stared at it. Steam rose from the hot blood in the winter air. They were both stunned by what they had done. Suddenly Aliena wanted to get away from there. She started to run. Richard followed.

She stopped when she could run no more, and that was when she realized she was sobbing. She walked on slowly, no longer caring if Richard saw her in tears. He seemed unaffected anyway.

Gradually she calmed down. The wooden clogs were hurting her. She stopped and took them off. She walked on in her bare feet, carrying the clogs. Soon they would reach Winchester.

After a while Richard said: "We're fools."

"Why?"

"That man. We just left him there. We should have taken his boots."

Aliena stopped and stared, horrified, at her brother.

He looked back at her and gave a little laugh. "There's nothing wrong with that, is there?" he said.

II

Aliena began to feel hopeful again as she walked through the West Gate to Winchester High Street at nightfall. In the forest she had felt that she might be murdered and no one would ever know what had happened, but now she was back in civilization. Of course, the city was full of thieves and cutthroats, but they could not commit their crimes in broad daylight with impunity. In the city there were laws, and lawbreakers were banished, mutilated or hanged.

She remembered going down this street with her father only a year or so ago. They had been on horseback, naturally; he on a highly strung chestnut courser and she on a beautiful gray palfrey. People made way for them as they rode through the broad streets. They owned a house in the south of the city, and when they arrived they were welcomed by eight or ten servants. The house had been cleaned, there was fresh straw on the floor, and all the fires were lit. During their stay Aliena had worn beautiful clothes every day: fine linen, silk, and soft wool, all dyed gorgeous colors; boots and belts of calf leather; and jeweled brooches and bracelets. It had been her job to make sure there was always a welcome for anyone who came to see the earl: meat and wine for the wealthy, bread and ale for the poorer sort, a smile and a place by the fire for either. Her father was punctilious about hospitality, but he was not good at doing it personally—people found him cool, remote, and even high-handed. Aliena supplied the lack.

Everyone respected her father, and the very highest had called on him: the bishop, the prior, the sheriff, the royal chancellor, and the barons at the court. She wondered how many of those people would recognize her now, walking barefoot through the mud and filth of that same High Street. The thought did not dampen her optimism. The important thing was that she no longer felt like a victim. She was back in a world where there were rules and laws, and she had a chance to regain control of her life.

They walked past their house. It was empty and locked up: the Hamleighs had not yet taken it over. For a moment Aliena was tempted to try to get in. It's my house! she thought. But it was not, of course, and the idea of spending the night there reminded her of the way she had lived in the castle, closing her eyes to reality. She walked on determinedly.

The other good thing about being in the city was that there was a monastery here. The monks would always provide a bed for anyone who begged it. She and Richard would sleep under a roof tonight, safe and dry.

She found the cathedral and went into the priory courtyard. Two monks

stood at a trestle table doling out horsebread and beer to a hundred or more people. It had not occurred to Aliena that there would be so many others begging the monks' hospitality. She and Richard joined the queue. It was amazing, she thought, how people who would normally jostle and shove one another to get at free food could be made to stand quietly in an orderly line just because a monk told them to.

They got their supper and took it into the guesthouse. This was a big wooden building like a barn, bare of furniture, dimly lit by rushlights, smelling strongly of many people crowded closely together. They sat on the ground to eat. The floor was covered with rushes that were none too fresh. Aliena wondered whether she should tell the monks who she was. The prior might remember her. In such a large priory there would naturally be a superior guesthouse for high-born visitors. But she found herself reluctant to do that. Perhaps it was that she was afraid of being spurned; but she also felt she would be putting herself in someone else's power again, and although she had nothing to fear from a prior, nevertheless she felt more comfortable remaining anonymous and unnoticed.

The other guests were mostly pilgrims, with a sprinkling of traveling craftsmen—identifiable by the tools they carried—and some hawkers, men who went from village to village selling things that peasants could not make for themselves, pins and knives and cooking pots and spices. Some of them had their wives and children with them. The children were noisy and excited, rushing around and fighting and falling over. Every now and again one would cannon into an adult, get a smack on the head, and burst into tears. Some of them were not perfectly house-trained, and Aliena saw several children urinating into the rushes on the floor. Such things were probably of no consequence in a house where the livestock slept in the same room as the people, but in a crowded hall it was rather disgusting, Aliena thought: they all had to sleep on those rushes later.

She began to get the feeling that people were looking at her as if they knew she had been deflowered. It was ridiculous, of course, but the feeling would not go away. She kept checking to see whether she was bleeding. She was not. But every time she turned around she caught someone giving her a hard, penetrating stare. As soon as she met their eyes they would look away, but a little while later she would catch someone else doing it. She kept telling herself that this was foolish, they weren't staring at her, they were just looking curiously around a crowded room. There was nothing to look at, anyway: she was no different from them in appearance—she was as dirty, badly dressed and tired as they were. But the feeling persisted, and against her will she got angry. There was one man who kept catching her eye, a middle-aged pilgrim with a large family. Eventually she lost her temper and yelled at him: "What are you looking at? Stop staring at me!" He seemed embarrassed and averted

his eyes without replying.

Richard said quietly: “Why did you do that, Allie?”

She told him to shut up and he did.

The monks came around and took away the lights soon after supper. They liked people to go to sleep early: it kept them out of the alehouses and brothels of the city at night, and in the morning it made it easier for the monks to get the visitors off the premises early. Several of the single men left the hall when the lights went out, headed no doubt for the fleshpots, but most people curled up in their cloaks on the floor.

It was many years since Aliena had slept in a hall like this. As a child she had always envied the people downstairs, lying side by side in front of the dying fire, in a room full of smoke and the smell of dinner, with the dogs to guard them: there had been a sense of togetherness in the hall which was absent from the spacious, empty chambers of the lord’s family. In those days she had sometimes left her own bed and tiptoed down the stairs to sleep alongside one of her favorite servants, Madge Laundry or Old Joan.

Drifting off to sleep with the smell of her childhood in her nostrils, she dreamed about her mother. Normally she had trouble remembering what her mother had looked like, but now, to her surprise, she could see Mama’s face clearly, in every detail: the small features, the timid smile, the slight frame, the look of anxiety in the eyes. She saw her mother’s walk, leaning slightly to one side as if she were always trying to get close to the wall, with the opposite arm extended a little for balance. She could hear her mother’s laugh, that unexpectedly rich contralto, always ready to break into song or laughter but usually afraid to do so. She knew, in the dream, something that had never been clear to her awake: that her father had so frightened her mother and suppressed her sense of the joy of life that she had shriveled up and died like a flower in a drought. All this came into Aliena’s mind like something very familiar, something she had always known. However, what was shocking was that Aliena was pregnant. Mother seemed pleased. They sat together in a bedroom, and Aliena’s belly was so distended that she had to sit with her legs slightly apart and her hands crossed over her bump, in the age-old pose of the mother-to-be. Then William Hamleigh burst into the room, carrying in his hand the dagger with the long blade, and Aliena knew he was going to stab her belly the way she had stabbed the fat outlaw in the forest, and she screamed so loud she woke up sitting upright; and then she realized that William was not here and she had not even screamed, the noise had only been in her head.

After that she lay awake wondering if she really was pregnant.

The thought had not occurred to her before, and now it terrified her. How disgusting it would be to have William Hamleigh’s baby. It might not be his—it might be the groom’s. She might never know. How could she love the

baby? Every time she looked at it, it would remind her of that dreadful night. She would have the baby in secret, she vowed, and leave it out in the cold to die as soon as it was born, the way the peasants did when they had too many children. With that resolve she drifted off to sleep again.

It was barely light when the monks brought breakfast. The noise woke Aliena. Most of the other guests were awake already, because they had gone to sleep so early, but Aliena had slept on: she had been very tired.

Breakfast was hot gruel with salt. Aliena and Richard ate hungrily and wished there were bread to go with it. Aliena thought over what she would say to King Stephen. She felt sure that he had simply forgotten that the earl of Shiring had two children. As soon as they appeared and reminded him, he would willingly make provision for them, she thought. However, in case he needed persuading she ought to have a few words ready. She would not insist that her father was innocent, she decided, for that would imply that the king's judgment had been at fault, and he would be offended. Nor would she protest about Percy Hamleigh being made earl. Men of affairs hated to have past decisions disputed. "For better or worse, that's been settled," her father would say. No, she would simply point out that she and her brother were innocent, and ask the king to give them a knight's estate, so that they could support themselves modestly, and Richard could prepare to become one of the king's fighting men in a few years' time. A small estate would enable her to take care of her father, when the king pleased to release him from jail. He was no longer a threat; he had no title, no followers and no money. She would remind the king that her father had faithfully served the old king, Henry, who had been Stephen's uncle. She would not be forceful, just humbly firm, clear and simple.

After breakfast she asked a monk where she could wash her face. He looked startled: evidently it was an unusual request. However, monks were in favor of cleanliness, and he showed her an open conduit where clean cold water ran into the priory grounds, and warned her not to wash "indecently," as he put it, in case one of the brothers should accidentally see her and thereby soil his soul. Monks did a lot of good but their attitudes could be irritating.

When she and Richard had washed the dirt of the road off their faces they left the priory and walked uphill along the High Street to the castle, which stood to one side of the West Gate. By coming early Aliena hoped to befriend or charm whoever was in charge of admitting petitioners, and ensure that she was not forgotten in the crowd of important people who would arrive later. However, the atmosphere within the castle walls was even quieter than she had hoped. Had King Stephen been here so long that few people needed to see him? She was not sure when he might have come. The king was normally at Winchester throughout Lent, she thought, but she was not sure when Lent had begun, for she had lost track of dates, living in the castle with Richard and

Matthew and no priest.

There was a burly guard with a gray beard standing at the foot of the keep steps. Aliena made to walk past him, as she had when she came here with her father, but the guard lowered his spear across her path. She looked at him imperiously and said: “Yes?”

“And where do you think you’re going, my girl?” said the guard.

Aliena saw, with a sinking feeling, that he was the type of person who liked being a guard because it gave him the chance to stop people from going where they wanted to go. “We’re here to petition the king,” she said frostily. “Now let us pass.”

“You?” the guard said with a sneer. “Wearing a pair of clogs that my wife would be ashamed of? Clear off.”

“Get out of my way, guard,” said Aliena. “Every citizen has the right to petition the king.”

“But the poorer sort generally are not foolish enough to try to exercise that right—”

“We are not the poorer sort!” Aliena blazed. “I am the daughter of the earl of Shiring, and my brother is his son, so let us pass, or you’ll end up rotting in a dungeon.”

The guard looked a little less bumptious, but he said smugly: “You can’t petition the king, because he’s not here. He’s at Westminster, as you ought to know if you are who you say you are.”

Aliena was thunderstruck. “But why has he gone to Westminster? He should be here for Easter!”

The guard realized she was not a street urchin. “Easter court is at Westminster. It seems he’s not going to do everything exactly the same as the old king did, and why should he?”

He was right, of course, but the idea that a new king would follow a different timetable had never occurred to Aliena, who was too young to remember when Henry had been the new king. Despair washed over her. She had thought she knew what to do, and she had been so wrong. She felt like giving up.

She shook her head to dispel the sense of doom. This was a setback, not a defeat. Appealing to the king was not the only way to take care of her brother and herself. She had come to Winchester with two purposes, and the second was to find out what had happened to her father. He would know what she should do next.

“Who *is* here, then?” she said to the guard. “There must be some royal officials. I just want to see my father.”

“There’s a clerk and a steward up there,” the guard replied. “Did you say the earl of Shiring was your father?”

“Yes.” Her heart missed a beat. “Do you know anything about him?”

“I know where he is.”

“Where?”

“In the jail right here at the castle.”

So close! “Where’s the jail?”

The guard jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “Down the hill, past the chapel, opposite the main gate.” Excluding them from the keep had gratified his mean streak and now he was willing to be informative. “You’d better see the jailer. His name is Odo, and he’s got deep pockets.”

Aliena did not understand the remark about deep pockets but she was too agitated to clarify it. Until this moment her father had been in a vague, distant place called “prison,” but now, suddenly, he was right here in this very castle. She forgot all about appealing to the king. All she wanted to do was see Father. The thought that he was close by, ready to help her, made her feel the danger and uncertainty of the last few months more acutely. She wanted to run into his arms and hear him say: “It’s all right, now. Everything’s going to be all right.”

The keep stood on a rise in one corner of the compound. Aliena turned and looked down at the rest of the castle. It was a motley collection of stone and wood buildings enclosed by high walls. Down the hill, the guard had said; past the chapel—she spotted a neat stone building that looked like a chapel—and opposite the main gate. The main entrance was a gate in the outer wall, permitting the king to come into his castle without first having to enter the city. Opposite that entrance, close to the back wall that separated the castle from the city, was a small stone building that could be the jail.

Aliena and Richard hurried down the slope. Aliena wondered how he would be. Did they give people proper food in jail? Her father’s own prisoners had always got horsebread and pottage at Earlscastle, but she had heard that prisoners were sometimes illtreated elsewhere. She hoped Father was all right.

Her heart was in her mouth as she crossed the compound. It was a big castle but it was crowded with buildings: kitchens, stables, and barracks. There were two chapels. Now that she knew the king was away, Aliena could see the signs of his absence, and she noted them distractedly as she wove her way toward the jail: stray pigs and sheep had wandered in from the suburbs just outside the gate and were rooting around in the rubbish tips, men-at-arms were lolling about with nothing to do but call out insolent remarks to passing women, and there was some kind of betting game going on in the porch of one of the chapels. The atmosphere of laxity bothered Aliena. She was afraid it might mean her father was not looked after properly. She began to dread what she might find.

The jail was a semi-derelict stone building that looked as if it might once have been a house for a royal official, a chancellor or bailiff of some kind,

before it fell into disrepair. The upper story, which had once been the hall, was completely ruined, having lost most of its roof. Only the undercroft remained whole. Here there were no windows, just a big wooden door with iron studs. The door stood slightly ajar. As Aliena hesitated outside, a handsome middle-aged woman in a good-quality cloak passed her, opened the door and went in. Aliena and Richard followed her.

The gloomy interior smelled of old dirt and corruption. The undercroft had once been an open storeroom, but it had later been divided into small compartments by hastily built rubble walls. Somewhere in the depths of the building a man was moaning monotonously, like a monk chanting services alone in a church. The area just inside the door formed a small lobby, with a chair, a table and a fire in the middle of the floor. A big, stupid-looking man with a sword at his belt was lackadaisically sweeping the floor. He looked up and greeted the handsome woman. “Good morning, Meg.” She gave him a penny and disappeared into the gloom. He looked at Aliena and Richard. “What do you want?”

“I’m here to see my father,” Aliena said. “He is the earl of Shiring.”

“No, he’s not,” said the jailer. “He’s just plain Bartholomew now.”

“To hell with your distinctions, jailer. Where is he?”

“How much have you got?”

“I’ve no money, so don’t bother asking for a bribe.”

“If you’ve no money, you can’t see your father.” He resumed sweeping.

Aliena wanted to scream. She was within a few yards of her father and she was being kept from him. The jailer was big and he was armed: there was no chance of defying him. But she did not have any money. She had been afraid of this when she saw the woman Meg give him a penny, but that might have been for some special privilege. Obviously not: a penny must be the price of admission.

She said: “I’ll get a penny, and bring it to you as soon as I can. But won’t you let us see him now, just for a few moments?”

“Get the penny first,” the jailer said. He turned his back and went on sweeping.

Aliena was fighting back tears. She was tempted to yell out a message in the hope that her father would hear her; but she realized that a garbled message might frighten and demoralize him: it would make him anxious without giving him any information. She went to the door, feeling maddeningly impotent.

She turned around on the threshold. “How is he? Just tell me that—please? Is he all right?”

“No, he’s not,” the jailer said. “He’s dying. Now get out of here.”

Aliena’s vision blurred with tears and she stumbled through the door. She walked away, not seeing where she was going, and bumped into something—

a sheep or a pig—and almost fell. She began to sob. Richard took her arm, and she let him guide her. They went out of the castle by the main gate, into the scattered hovels and small fields of the suburbs, and eventually came to a meadow and sat on a tree stump.

“I hate it when you cry, Allie,” said Richard pathetically.

She tried to pull herself together. She had located her father—that was something. She had learned that he was sick: the jailer was a cruel man who was probably exaggerating the seriousness of the illness. All she had to do was find a penny, and she would be able to talk to him, and see for herself, and ask him what she should do—for Richard and for Father.

“How are we going to get a penny, Richard?” she said.

“I don’t know.”

“We’ve nothing to sell. No one would lend to us. You’re not tough enough to steal….”

“We could beg,” he said.

That was an idea. There was a prosperous-looking peasant coming down the hill toward the castle on a sturdy black cob. Aliena sprang to her feet and ran to the road. As he drew near she said: “Sir, will you give me a penny?”

“Piss off,” the man snarled, and kicked his horse into a trot.

She walked back to the tree stump. “Beggars usually ask for food or old clothes,” she said dejectedly. “I never heard of anyone giving them money.”

“Well, how *do* people get money?” Richard said. The question had obviously never occurred to him before.

Aliena said: “The king gets money from taxes. Lords have rents. Priests have tithes. Shopkeepers have something to sell. Craftsmen get wages. Peasants don’t need money because they have fields.”

“Apprentices get wages.”

“So do laborers. We could work.”

“Who for?”

“Winchester is full of little manufactories where they make leather and cloth,” Aliena said. She began to feel optimistic again. “A city is a good place to find work.” She sprang to her feet. “Come on, let’s get started!”

Richard still hesitated. “I can’t work like a common man,” he said. “I’m the son of an earl.”

“Not anymore,” Aliena said harshly. “You heard what the jailer said. You’d better realize that you’re no better than anyone else, now.”

He looked sulky and said nothing.

“Well, I’m going,” she said. “Stay here if you like.” She walked away from him, toward the West Gate. She knew his sulks: they never lasted.

Sure enough, he caught her up before she reached the city. “Don’t be cross, Allie,” he said. “I’ll work. I’m pretty strong, actually—I’ll make a very good laborer.”

She smiled at him. “I’m sure you will.” It was not true, but there was no point in discouraging him.

They walked down the High Street. Aliena recalled that Winchester was laid out and divided up in a very logical way. The southern half, on their right as they walked, was divided into three parts: first there was the castle, then a district of wealthy homes, then the cathedral close and the bishop’s palace in the southeast corner. The northern half, on their left, was also divided into three: the Jews’ neighborhood, the middle part where the shops were, and the manufactories in the northeast corner.

Aliena led the way down the High Street to the eastern end of the city, then they turned left, into a street that had a brook running along it. On one side were normal houses, mostly wooden, a few partly of stone. On the other side was a jumble of improvised buildings, many of them no more than a roof supported by poles, most of them looking as if they might fall down at any minute. In some cases a little bridge, or a few planks, led across the brook to the building, but some of the buildings actually straddled the brook. In every building or yard, men and woman were doing something that required large quantities of water: washing wool, tanning leather, fulling and dyeing cloth, brewing ale, and other operations that Aliena did not recognize. A variety of unfamiliar smells pricked her nostrils, acrid and yeasty, sulfurous and smoky, woody and rotten. The people all looked terribly *busy*. Of course, peasants also had a great deal to do, and they worked very hard, but they went about their tasks at a measured pace, and they always had time to stop and examine some curiosity or talk to passersby. The people in the manufactories never looked up. Their work seemed to take all their concentration and energy. They moved quickly, whether they were carrying sacks or pouring great buckets of water or pounding leather or cloth. As they went about their mysterious tasks in the gloom of their ramshackle huts, they made Aliena think of the demons stirring their cauldrons in pictures of hell.

She stopped outside a place where they were doing something she understood: fulling cloth. A muscular-looking woman was drawing water from the brook and pouring it into a huge stone trough lined with lead, stopping every now and again to add a measure of fuller’s earth from a sack. Lying in the bottom of the trough, completely submerged, was a length of cloth. Two men with large wooden clubs—called fuller’s bats, Aliena recollected—were pounding the cloth in the trough. The process caused the cloth to shrink and thicken, making it more waterproof; and the fuller’s earth leached out the oils from the wool. At the back of the premises were stacked bales of untreated cloth, new and loosely woven, and sacks of fuller’s earth.

Aliena crossed the brook and approached the people working at the trough. They glanced at her and continued working. The ground was wet all around them, and they worked with their feet bare, she noticed. When she

realized they were not going to stop and ask her what she wanted, she said loudly: “Is your master here?”

The woman replied by jerking her head toward the back of the premises.

Aliena beckoned Richard to follow and went through a gate to a yard where lengths of cloth were drying on wooden frames. She saw the figure of a man bent over one of the frames, arranging the cloth. “I’m looking for the master,” she said.

He straightened up and looked at her. He was an ugly man with one eye and a slightly hunched back, as if he had been bending over drying frames for so many years that he could no longer stand quite upright. “What is it?” he said.

“Are you the master fuller?”

“I’ve been working at it nigh on forty year, man and boy, so I hope I’m master,” he said. “What do you want?”

Aliena realized she was dealing with the type of man who always had to prove how smart he was. She adopted a humble tone and said: “My brother and I want to work. Will you employ us?”

There was a pause while he looked her up and down. “Christ Jesus and all the saints, what would I do with you?”

“We’ll do anything,” Aliena said resolutely. “We need some money.”

“You’re no good to me,” the man said contemptuously, and he turned away to resume his work.

Aliena was not going to content herself with that. “Why not?” she said angrily. “We’re not scrounging, we want to *earn* something.”

He turned to her again.

“Please?” she said, although she hated to beg.

He regarded her impatiently, as he might have looked at a dog, wondering whether to make the effort of kicking it; but she could tell that he was tempted to show her how stupid she was being and how clever he was by contrast. “All right,” he said with a sigh. “I’ll explain it to you. Come with me.”

He led them to the trough. The men and the woman were pulling the length of cloth out of the water, rolling it as it emerged. The master spoke to the woman. “Come here, Lizzie. Show us your hands.”

The woman obediently came over and held out her hands. They were rough and red, with open sores where they had got chapped and the skin had broken.

“Feel those,” the master said to Aliena.

Aliena touched the woman’s hands. They were as cold as snow, and very rough, but what was most striking was how hard they were. She looked at her own hands, holding the woman’s: they suddenly looked soft and white and very small.

The master said: “She’s had her hands in water since she was a little ’un,

so she's used to it. You're different. You wouldn't last the morning at this work."

Aliena wanted to argue with him, and say that she would get used to it, but she was not sure it was true. Before she could say anything, Richard spoke up. "What about me?" he said. "I'm bigger than both those men—I could do that work."

It was true that Richard was actually taller and broader than the men who had been wielding the fuller's bats. And he could handle a war-horse, Aliena recalled, so he should be able to pound cloth.

The two men finished rolling up the wet cloth, and one of them hoisted the roll onto his shoulder, ready to take it to the yard for drying. The master stopped him. "Let the young lord feel the weight of the cloth, Harry."

The man called Harry lifted the cloth off his shoulder and put it on Richard's. Richard sagged under the weight, straightened up with a mighty effort, paled, and then sank to his knees so that the ends of the roll rested on the ground. "I can't carry it," he said breathlessly.

The men laughed, the master looked triumphant, and the one called Harry took the cloth back, hoisted it onto his own shoulder with a practiced movement, and carried it away. The master said: "It's a different kind of strength, one that comes from *having* to work."

Aliena was angry. They were mocking her when all she wanted was to find an honest way to earn a penny. The master was thoroughly enjoying making a fool of her, she knew. He would probably keep it up as long as she let him. But he would never employ her or Richard. "Thank you for your courtesy," she said with heavy sarcasm, and she turned and walked away.

Richard was upset. "It was heavy because it was so wet!" he said. "I wasn't expecting that."

Aliena realized she had to stay cheerful, to keep Richard's morale up. "That's not the only kind of work there is," she said as she strode along the muddy street.

"What else could we do?"

Aliena did not answer immediately. They reached the north wall of the city and turned left, heading west. The poorest houses were here, built up against the wall, often no more than lean-to shacks; and because they had no backyards the street was filthy. Eventually Aliena said: "Remember how girls used to come to the castle, sometimes, when there was no room for them at home anymore and they had no husband yet? Father would always take them in. They worked in the kitchens or the laundry or the stables, and Father used to give them a penny on saint's days."

"Do you think we could live at Winchester Castle?" Richard said dubiously.

"No. They won't take people in while the king's away—they must have

more people than they need. But there are lots of rich folk in the city. Some of them must want servants.”

“It’s not man’s work.”

Aliena wanted to say *Why don’t you come up with some ideas yourself, instead of just finding fault with everything I say?* But she bit her tongue and said: “It only wants one of us to work long enough to get a penny, then we can see Father and ask him what we should do next.”

“All right.” Richard was not averse to the idea of only one of them working, especially if the one was likely to be Aliena.

They turned left again and entered the section of the city called the Jewry. Aliena stopped outside a big house. “They must have servants in there,” she said.

Richard was shocked. “You wouldn’t work for Jews, would you?”

“Why not? You don’t catch people’s heresy the way you catch their fleas, you know.”

Richard shrugged and followed her inside.

It was a stone house. Like most city homes, it had a narrow frontage but reached back a long way. They were in an entrance hall that was the full width of the house. There was a fire and some benches. The smell from the kitchen made Aliena’s mouth water, although it was different from regular cooking, with a hint of alien spices. A young girl came from the back of the house and greeted them. She had dark skin and brown eyes, and she spoke respectfully. “Do you want to see the goldsmith?”

So that was what he was. “Yes, please,” said Aliena. The girl disappeared again and Aliena looked around. A goldsmith would need a stone house, of course, to protect his gold. The door between this room and the back of the house was made of heavy oak planks banded with iron. The windows were narrow, too small for anyone to climb through, even a child. Aliena thought how nerve-racking it must be to have all your wealth in gold or silver, which could be stolen in an instant, leaving you destitute. Then she reflected that Father had been rich with a more normal kind of wealth—land and a title—and yet he had lost everything in a day.

The goldsmith came out. He was a small, dark man, and he peered at them, frowning, as if he were examining a small piece of jewelry and assessing its worth. After a moment he seemed to sum them up, and he said: “You have something you would like to sell?”

“You’ve judged us well, goldsmith,” Aliena said. “You’ve guessed we’re high-born people who now find themselves destitute. But we have nothing to sell.”

The man looked worried. “If you’re looking for a loan, I fear—”

“We don’t expect anyone to lend us money,” Aliena broke in. “Just as we have nothing to sell, so we have nothing to pawn.”

He looked relieved. “Then how can I help you?”

“Would you take me on as a servant?”

He was shocked. “A Christian? Certainly not!” He actually shrank back at the thought.

Aliena was disappointed. “Why not?” she said plaintively.

“It would never do.”

She felt rather offended. The idea that someone should find *her* religion distasteful was demeaning. She remembered the clever phrase she had used to Richard. “You don’t catch people’s religions the way you catch their fleas,” she said.

“The people of the town would object.”

Aliena felt sure he was using public opinion as an excuse, but it was probably true all the same. “I suppose we’d better seek out a rich Christian, then,” she said.

“It’s worth a try,” the goldsmith said doubtfully. “Let me tell you something candidly. A wise man would not employ you as a servant. You’re used to giving orders, and you would find it very hard to be on the receiving end.” Aliena opened her mouth to protest, but he held up his hand to stop her. “Oh, I know you’re willing. But all your life others have served you, and even now you feel in your heart of hearts that things should be arranged to please you. High-born people make poor servants. They are disobedient, resentful, thoughtless, touchy, and they think they’re working hard even though they do less than everyone else—so they cause trouble among the rest of the staff.” He shrugged. “This is my experience.”

Aliena forgot that she had been offended by his distaste for her religion. He was the first kindly person she had met since she left the castle. She said: “But what *can* we do?”

“I can only tell you what a Jew would do. He would find something to sell. When I came to this city I began by buying jewelry from people who needed cash, then melting the silver and selling it to the coiners.”

“But where did you get the money to buy the jewelry?”

“I borrowed from my uncle—and paid him interest, by the way.”

“But nobody will lend to us!”

He looked thoughtful. “What would I have done if I had no uncle? I think I would have gone into the forest and collected nuts, then brought them into the town and sold them to the housewives who do not have the time to go to the forest and cannot grow trees in their backyards because the yards are so full of refuse and filth.”

“It’s the wrong time of year,” Aliena said. “There’s nothing growing now.”

The goldsmith smiled. “The impatience of youth,” he said. “Wait a while.”

“All right.” There was no point in explaining about Father. The goldsmith had done his best to be helpful. “Thank you for your advice.”

“Farewell.” The goldsmith returned to the back of the house and closed the massive ironbound door.

Aliena and Richard went out. The goldsmith had been kind but nevertheless they had spent half a day being turned away from places, and Aliena could not help feeling dejected. Not knowing where to go next, they wandered through the Jewry and emerged in the High Street again. Aliena was beginning to feel hungry—it was dinnertime—and she knew that if she was hungry, Richard would be ravenous. They walked aimlessly along the High Street, envying the well-fed rats that swarmed in the refuse, until they came to the old royal palace. There they stopped, as all out-of-towners did, to look through the bars at the coiners manufacturing money. Aliena stared at the stacks of silver pennies, thinking that she wanted only one of those, and she could not get it.

After a while she noticed a girl of about her own age standing nearby, smiling at Richard. The girl looked friendly. Aliena hesitated, saw her smile again, and spoke to her. “Do you live here?”

“Yes,” the girl said. It was Richard she was interested in, not Aliena.

Aliena blurted out: “Our father’s in the jailhouse, and we’re trying to find some way to make a living and get some money to bribe the jailer. Do you know what we might do?”

The girl turned her attention from Richard back to Aliena. “You’re penniless, and you want to know how to make some money?”

“That’s right. We’re willing to work hard. We’ll do anything. Can you think of something?”

The girl gave Aliena a long, assessing look. “Yes, I can,” she said at last. “I know someone who might help you.”

Aliena was thrilled: this was the first person to say *Yes* to her all day. “When can we see him?” she said eagerly.

“Her.”

“What?”

“It’s a woman. And you can probably see her right away, if you come with me.”

Aliena and Richard exchanged a delighted look. Aliena could hardly believe the change in their luck.

The girl turned away, and they followed. She led them to a large wooden house on the south side of the High Street. Most of the house was at ground level but it had a small upper story. The girl went up an outside staircase and beckoned them to follow her.

The upstairs was a bedchamber. Aliena looked around her with wide eyes: it was more richly decorated and furnished than any of the rooms at the castle

had been, even when Mother was alive. The walls were hung with tapestries, the floor was covered with fur rugs, and the bed was surrounded by embroidered curtains. On a chair like a throne sat a middle-aged woman in a gorgeous gown. She had been beautiful when she was young, Aliena guessed, although now her face was lined and her hair thin.

"This is Mistress Kate," said the girl. "Kate, this girl is penniless and her father's in the jailhouse."

Kate smiled. Aliena smiled back, but she had to force herself: there was something about Kate that she disliked. Kate said: "Take the boy to the kitchen and give him a cup of beer while we talk."

The girl took Richard out. Aliena was glad he would get some beer—perhaps they would give him something to eat as well.

Kate said: "What's your name?"

"Aliena."

"That's unusual. But I like it." She stood up and came close, a little too close. She took Aliena's chin in her hand. "You've got a *very* pretty face." Her breath smelled of wine. "Take off your cloak."

Aliena was puzzled by this inspection, but she submitted to it: it seemed harmless, and after this morning's rejections she did not want to throw away her first decent chance by seeming uncooperative. She shrugged off her cloak, dropped it on a bench, and stood there in the old linen dress the verderer's wife had given her.

Kate walked around her. For some reason she seemed impressed. "My dear girl, you need never want for money, or anything else. If you work for me we'll both be rich."

Aliena frowned. This sounded crazy. All she wanted to do was help with laundry, or cooking, or sewing: she did not see how she could make anybody rich. "What sort of work are you talking about?" she said.

Kate was behind her. She ran her hands down Aliena's sides, feeling her hips, and stood close so that Aliena could feel Kate's breasts pressing against her back. "You've got a beautiful figure," Kate said. "And your skin is lovely. You're high-born, aren't you?"

"My father was the earl of Shiring."

"Bartholomew! Well, well. I remember him—not that he was ever a customer of mine. A very virtuous man, your father. Well, I understand why you're destitute."

So Kate had customers. "What do you sell?" Aliena asked.

Kate did not answer directly. She came around in front of Aliena again, looking at her face. "Are you a virgin, dear?"

Aliena flushed with shame.

"Don't be shy," said Kate. "I see you're not. Well, no matter. Virgins are worth a lot but they don't last, of course." She put her hands on Aliena's hips,

leaned forward, and kissed her forehead. “You’re so voluptuous, although you don’t know it. By the saints, you’re irresistible.” She slid her hand up from Aliena’s hip to her bosom, and gently took one breast in her hand, weighing it and squeezing it slightly, then she leaned forward and kissed Aliena’s lips.

Aliena understood everything in a flash: why the girl had smiled at Richard outside the mint, where Kate got her money, what Aliena would have to do if she worked for Kate, and what kind of woman Kate was. She felt foolish for not having understood earlier. For a moment she let Kate kiss her—it was so different from what William Hamleigh had done that she was not in the least repelled—but this was not it, this was not what she would have to do to earn money. She pulled away from Kate’s embrace. “You want me to become a whore,” she said.

“A lady of pleasure, my dear,” said Kate. “Get up late, wear beautiful clothes every day, make men happy, and become rich. You’d be one of the best. There’s a look about you…. You could charge anything, anything. Believe me, I know.”

Aliena shuddered. There had always been a whore or two at the castle—it was necessary in a place where there were so many men without their wives—and they had been regarded as the lowest of the low, the humblest of the womenfolk, below even the sweepers. But it was not the low status that made Aliena tremble with disgust. It was the idea of men such as William Hamleigh walking in and fucking her for a penny. The thought brought back the memory of his big body poised over her, as she lay on the floor with her legs apart, shaking with terror and loathing, waiting for him to penetrate her. The scene came back to her with renewed horror and took away all her poise and confidence. She felt that if she stayed in this house a moment longer it would all happen to her again. She was overcome by a panicky urge to get outside. She backed toward the door. She was frightened of offending Kate, frightened that anyone should be angry with her. “I’m sorry,” she mumbled. “Please forgive me, but I couldn’t do that, really….”

“Think about it!” Kate said cheerfully. “Come back if you change your mind. I’ll still be here.”

“Thank you,” Aliena said unsteadily. She found the door at last. She opened it and scuttled out. Still upset, she ran down the stairs into the street and went to the front door of the house. She pushed it open but she was frightened to go in. “Richard!” she called. “Richard, come out!” There was no reply. The interior was dimly lit, and she could see nothing but a few vague female figures inside. “Richard, where are you?” she screamed hysterically.

She realized that passersby were staring at her, and that made her more anxious. Suddenly Richard appeared, with a cup of ale in one hand and a chicken leg in the other. “What’s the matter?” he said through a mouthful of meat. His tone indicated that he was annoyed at having been disturbed.

She grabbed his arm and pulled. “Come out of there,” she said. “It’s a whorehouse!”

Several bystanders laughed loudly at this, and one or two called out jeering remarks.

“They might give you some meat,” Richard said.

“They want me to be a whore!” she blazed.

“All right, all right,” Richard said. He downed his beer, put the cup on the floor inside the door, and stuffed the remains of the chicken leg inside his shirt.

“Come on,” Aliena said impatiently, though once again the need to deal with her younger brother had the effect of calming her. He did not seem angered by the idea that someone wanted his sister to become a whore, but he did look regretful at having to leave a place where there was chicken and beer to be had for the asking.

Most of the bystanders walked on, seeing that the fun was over, but one remained. It was the well-dressed woman they had seen in the jailhouse. She had given the jailer a penny, and he had called her Meg. She was looking at Aliena with an expression of curiosity mingled with compassion. Aliena had developed an aversion to being stared at, and she looked away angrily; then the woman spoke to her. “You’re in trouble, aren’t you?” she said.

A note of kindness in Meg’s voice made Aliena turn back. “Yes,” she said after a pause. “We’re in trouble.”

“I saw you at the jailhouse. My husband is in prison—I visit him every day. Why were you there?”

“Our father is there.”

“But you didn’t go inside.”

“We haven’t any money to pay the jailer.”

Meg looked over Aliena’s shoulder at the whorehouse door. “Is that what you’re doing here—trying to get money?”

“Yes, but I didn’t know what it was until…”

“You poor thing,” Meg said. “My Annie would have been your age, if she’d lived…. Why don’t you come to the jailhouse with me tomorrow morning, and between us we’ll see if we can persuade Odo to act like a Christian and take pity on two destitute children.”

“Oh, that would be wonderful,” Aliena said. She was touched. There was no guarantee of success, but the fact that someone was willing to help brought tears to her eyes.

Meg was still looking hard at her. “Have you had any dinner?”

“No. Richard got something in…that place.”

“You’d better come to my house. I’ll give you some bread and meat.” She noticed Aliena’s wary look, and added: “And you don’t have to do anything for it.”

Aliena believed her. “Thank you,” she said. “You’re very kind. Not many people have been kind to us. I don’t know how to thank you.”

“No need,” she said. “Come with me.”

Meg’s husband was a wool merchant. At his house in the south of town, at his stall in the market on market days, and at the great annual fair held on St. Giles’s Hill, he bought fleeces brought to him by peasants from the surrounding countryside. He crammed them into great woolsacks, each holding the fleece of two hundred and forty sheep, and stored them in the barn at the back of his house. Once a year, when the Flemish weavers sent their agents to buy the soft, strong English wool, Meg’s husband would sell it all and arrange for the sacks to be shipped via Dover and Boulogne to Bruges and Ghent, where the fleece would be turned into top-quality cloth and sold all over the world at prices far too high for the peasants who kept the sheep. So Meg told Aliena and Richard over dinner, with that warm smile which said that whatever happens, there’s no need for people to be unkind to one another.

Her husband had been accused of selling short weight, a crime the city took very seriously, for its prosperity was based on a reputation for honest dealing. Judging by the way Meg spoke of it, Aliena thought he was probably guilty. His absence had made little different to the business, though. Meg had simply taken his place. In winter there was not much to do anyway: she had made a trip to Flanders; assured all her husband’s agents that the enterprise was functioning normally; and carried out repairs to the barn, enlarging it a little at the same time. When shearing began she would buy wool just as he had done. She knew how to judge its quality and set a price. She had already been admitted into the merchant’s guild of the city, despite the stain on her husband’s reputation, for there was a tradition of merchants helping each other’s families in times of trouble, and anyway he had not yet been proved guilty.

Richard and Aliena ate her food and drank her wine and sat by her fire talking until it began to get dark outside; then they went back to the priory to sleep. Aliena had nightmares again. This time she dreamed about her father. In the dream he was sitting on a throne in the prison, as tall and pale and authoritative as ever, and when she went to see him she had to bow as if he were the king. Then he spoke to her accusingly, saying she had abandoned him here in prison and gone to live in a whorehouse. She was outraged by the injustice of the charge, and said angrily that *he* had abandoned *her*. She was going to add that he had left her to the mercy of William Hamleigh, but she was reluctant to tell her father what William had done to her; then she saw that William was also in the room, sitting on a bed and eating cherries from a bowl. He spat a cherry pip at her and it hit her cheek, stinging her. Her father

smiled and then William started throwing soft cherries at her. They splattered her face and dress, and she began to cry, because although the dress was old it was the only one she had, and now it was blotched all over with cherry juice like bloodstains.

She felt so unbearably sad in the dream that when she woke up and discovered it was not real she felt an enormous sense of relief, even though the reality—that she was homeless and penniless—was much worse than being pelted with soft cherries.

The light of dawn was seeping through the cracks in the walls of the guesthouse. All around her people were waking up and beginning to move around. Soon the monks came in, opened the doors and the shutters, and called everyone to breakfast.

Aliena and Richard ate hurriedly, then went to Meg's house. She was ready to leave. She had made a spicy beef stew to warm up for her husband's dinner, and Aliena told Richard to carry the heavy pot for her. Aliena wished they had something to give Father. She had not thought of it, but even if she had, she could not have bought anything. It was awful to think they could do nothing for him.

They walked up the High Street, entered the castle by the back gate, and then walked past the keep and down the hill to the jail. Aliena recalled what Odo had told her yesterday, when she had asked whether Father was all right. "No, he's not," the jailer had said. "He's dying." She had thought he was exaggerating to be cruel, but now she began to worry. She said to Meg: "Is there anything wrong with my father?"

"I don't know, dear," Meg said. "I've never seen him."

"The jailer said he was dying."

"That man is as mean as a cat. He probably said it just to make you miserable. Anyway, you'll know in a moment."

Aliena was not comforted, despite Meg's good intentions, and she was full of dread as she walked through the doorway into the evil-smelling gloom of the jail.

Odo was warming his hands at the fire in the middle of the lobby. He nodded at Meg and looked at Aliena. "Have you got the money?" he said.

"I'll pay for them," Meg said. "Here's two pennies, one for me and one for them."

A crafty look came over Odo's stupid face, and he said: "It's twopence for them—a penny for each."

"Don't be such a dog," Meg said. "You let them both in, or I'll make trouble for you with the merchant guild, and you'll lose the job."

"All right, all right, no need for threats," he said grumpily. He pointed to an archway in the stone wall to their right. "Bartholomew is that way."

Meg said: "You'll need a light." She drew two candles from the pocket of

her cloak and lit them at the fire, then gave one to Aliena. Her face looked troubled. “I hope all will be well,” she said, and she kissed Aliena. Then she went quickly through the opposite arch.

“Thank you for the penny,” Aliena called after her, but Meg had disappeared into the gloom.

Aliena peered apprehensively in the direction Odo had indicated. Holding the candle up high, she went through the archway, and found herself in a tiny square vestibule. The light of the candle showed three heavy doors, each barred on the outside. Odo called out: “Straight in front of you.”

Aliena said: “Lift the bar, Richard.”

Richard took the heavy wooden bar out of its brackets and stood it up against the wall. Aliena pushed the door open and sent up a quick silent prayer.

The cell was dark but for the light of her candle. She hesitated in the doorway, peering into the moving shadows. The place smelled like a privy. A voice said: “Who is it?”

Aliena said: “Father?” She made out a dark figure sitting on the straw-covered floor.

“Aliena?” There was incredulity in the voice. “Is that Aliena?” It sounded like Father’s voice, but older.

Aliena went closer, holding the candle up. He looked up at her, the candlelight caught his face, and she gasped in horror.

He was hardly recognizable.

He had always been a thin man, but now he looked like a skeleton. He was filthy dirty and dressed in rags. “Aliena!” he said. “It is you!” His face twisted into a smile, and it was like the grin of a skull.

Aliena burst into tears. Nothing could have prepared her for the shock of seeing him so transformed. It was the most dreadful thing imaginable. She knew instantly that he was dying: the vile Odo had told the truth. But he was still alive, still suffering, and painfully pleased to see her. She had been determined to stay calm, but now she lost control completely, and fell to her knees in front of him, weeping with great racking sobs that came from deep inside her.

He leaned forward and put his arms around her, patting her back as if he were comforting a child over a grazed knee or a broken toy. “Don’t cry,” he said gently. “Not when you’ve made your father so happy.”

Aliena felt the candle taken from her hand. Father said: “And is that tall young man my Richard?”

“Yes, Father,” Richard said stiffly.

Aliena put her arms around Father, and felt his bones like sticks in a sack. He was wasting away: there was no flesh beneath his skin. She wanted to say something to him, some words of love or comfort, but she could not speak for

sobbing.

“Richard,” he was saying, “you’ve grown! Have you got a beard yet?”

“It’s just started, Father, but it’s very fair.”

Aliena realized that Richard was on the edge of tears and struggling to maintain his composure. He would feel humiliated if he broke down in front of Father, and Father would probably tell him to snap out of it and be a man, which would make it worse. Worrying about Richard, she stopped crying. With an effort she pulled herself together. She hugged Father’s appallingly thin body once more; then she withdrew from his embrace, wiped her eyes, and blew her nose on her sleeve.

“Are you both all right?” Father said. His voice was slower than it used to be, and it quavered occasionally. “How have you managed? Where have you been living? They wouldn’t tell me anything about you—it was the worst torture they could have devised. But you seem fine—fit and healthy! This is wonderful!”

Mention of torture made Aliena wonder whether he had suffered physical torments, but she did not ask him: she was afraid of what he might tell her. Instead she answered his question with a lie. “We’re fine, Father.” She knew that the truth would be devastating to him. It would destroy this moment of happiness and fill the last days of his life with an agony of self-reproach. “We’ve been living at the castle and Matthew has been taking care of us.”

“But you can’t live there anymore,” he said. “The king has made that fat oaf Percy Hamleigh the earl now—he’ll have the castle.”

So he knew about that. “It’s all right,” she said. “We’ve moved out.”

He touched her dress, the old linen shift that the verderer’s wife had given her. “What’s this?” he said sharply. “Have you sold your clothes?”

He was still perceptive, Aliena noted. It would not be easy to deceive him. She decided to tell him part of the truth. “We left the castle in a hurry, and we haven’t any clothes.”

“Where’s Matthew now? Why isn’t he with you?”

She had been afraid of this question. She hesitated.

It was only a momentary pause, but he noticed it. “Come! Don’t try to hide anything from me!” he said with something of his old authority. “Where’s Matthew?”

“He was killed by the Hamleighs,” she said. “But they did us no harm.” She held her breath. Would he believe her?

“Poor Matthew,” he said sorrowfully. “He was never a fighting man. I hope he went straight to heaven.”

He had accepted her story. She was relieved. She moved the conversation off this dangerous ground. “We decided to come to Winchester to ask the king to make some provision for us, but he—”

“No use,” Father interrupted briskly, before she could explain why they

had failed to see the king. “He wouldn’t do anything for you.”

Aliena was hurt by his dismissive tone. She had done her best, against the odds, and she wanted him to say *Well done*, not *That was a waste of time*. He had always been quick to correct and slow to praise. I ought to be used to it, she thought. Submissively she said: “What should we do now, Father?”

He shifted his sitting position, and there was a clanking noise. Aliena realized with a shock that he was in chains. He said: “I had one chance to hide some money away. It wasn’t much of a chance, but I had to take it. I had fifty bezants in a belt under my shirt. I gave the belt to a priest.”

“Fifty!” Aliena was surprised. A bezant was a gold coin. They were not minted in England, but came from Byzantium. She had never seen more than one at a time. A bezant was worth twenty-four silver pennies. Fifty were worth…she could not figure it out.

“Which priest?” said Richard practically.

“Father Ralph, of the church of St. Michael near the North Gate.”

“Is he a good man?” Aliena asked.

“I hope so. I really don’t know. On the day the Hamleighs brought me to Winchester, before they locked me up in here, I found myself alone with him, just for a few moments, and I knew it would be my only chance. I gave him the belt, and begged him to keep it for you. Fifty bezants is worth five pounds of silver.”

Five pounds. As this news sank in Aliena realized that the money would transform their existence. They would not be destitute; they would no longer have to live from hand to mouth. They could buy bread, and a pair of boots to replace those painful clogs, and even a couple of cheap ponies if they needed to travel. It did not solve all their problems, but it took away that frightening feeling of living constantly on the edge of a life-or-death crisis. She would not have to be thinking all the time of how they were going to survive. Instead she could turn her attention to something constructive—like getting Father out of this awful place. She said: “When we’ve got the money, what shall we do? We must get you freed.”

“I’m not coming out,” he said harshly. “Forget about that. If I weren’t dying already they’d have hanged me.”

Aliena gasped. How could he talk that way?

“Why are you shocked?” he said. “The king has to get rid of me, but this way I won’t be on his conscience.”

Richard said: “Father, this place is not well guarded while the king is away. With a few men I believe I could break you out.”

Aliena knew that was not going to happen. Richard did not have the ability or the experience to organize a rescue, and he was too young to persuade men to follow him. She was afraid Father would wound Richard by pouring scorn on the proposal, but all he said was: “Don’t even think about it.

If you break in here I'll refuse to go out with you."

Aliena knew there was no point in arguing with him once he had made up his mind. But it broke her heart to think of him ending his days in this stinking jail. However, it occurred to her that there was a lot she could do to make him more comfortable here. She said: "Well, if you're going to stay here, we can clean the place up and get fresh rushes. We'll bring hot food in for you every day. We'll get some candles, and perhaps we could borrow a Bible for you to read. You can have a fire—"

"Stop!" he said. "You're not going to do any of that. I will not have my children wasting their lives hanging around a jailhouse waiting for an old man to die."

Tears came to Aliena's eyes again. "But we can't leave you like this!"

He ignored her, which was his normal response to people who foolishly contradicted him. "Your dear mother had a sister, your Aunt Edith. She lives in the village of Huntleigh, on the road to Gloucester, with her husband, who is a knight. You are to go there."

It occurred to Aliena that they could still see Father at intervals. And perhaps he would permit his in-laws to make him more comfortable. She tried to remember Aunt Edith and Uncle Simon. She had not seen them since Mama died. She had a vague recollection of a thin, nervous woman like her mother and a big, hearty man who ate and drank a lot. "Will they look after us?" she said uncertainly.

"Of course. They're your kin."

Aliena wondered whether that was sufficient reason for a modest knightly family to welcome two large and hungry youngsters into their home; but Father said it would be all right, and she trusted him. "What will we do?" she said.

"Richard will be a squire to his uncle and learn the arts of knighthood. You will be lady-in-waiting to Aunt Edith until you marry."

As they talked, Aliena felt as if she had been carrying a heavy weight for miles, and had not noticed the pain in her back until she put the burden down. Now that Father was taking charge, it seemed to her that the responsibility of the last few days had been far too much for her to bear. And his authority and ability to control the situation, even when he was sick in jail, gave her comfort and took the edge off her sorrow, for it seemed unnecessary to worry about the person who was in charge.

Now he became even more magisterial. "Before you leave me, I want you both to swear an oath."

Aliena was shocked. He had always counseled against oath-taking. *To swear an oath is to put your soul at risk*, he would say. *Never take an oath unless you're sure you would rather die than break it*. And he was here because of an oath: the other barons had broken their word and accepted

Stephen as king, but Papa had refused. He would rather die than break his oath, and here he was dying.

"Give me your sword," he said to Richard.

Richard drew his sword and handed it over.

Father took it and reversed it, holding out the hilt. "Kneel down."

Richard knelt in front of Father.

"Put your hand on the hilt." Father paused, as if gathering his strength; then his voice rang out like a peal of bells. "Swear by Almighty God, and Jesus Christ, and all the saints, that you will not rest until you are earl of Shiring and lord of all the lands I ruled."

Aliena was surprised and somewhat awestruck. She had expected Father to demand some general promise, such as to tell the truth always and fear God; but no, he was giving Richard a very specific task, one that might take a lifetime.

Richard took a deep breath and spoke with a shake in his voice. "I swear by Almighty God, and Jesus Christ, and all the saints, that I will not rest until I am earl of Shiring, and lord of all the lands you ruled."

Papa sighed, as if he had completed an onerous task. Then he surprised Aliena again. He turned and proffered the hilt of the sword to her. "Swear by Almighty God, and Jesus Christ, and all the saints, that you will take care of your brother Richard until he has fulfilled his vow."

A sense of doom swamped Aliena. This was to be their fate, then: Richard would avenge Father, and she would take care of Richard. For her it would be a mission of revenge, for if Richard became earl, William Hamleigh would lose his inheritance. It flashed across her mind that no one had asked *her* how she wanted to spend her life; but the foolish thought was gone as fast as it came. This was her destiny, and it was a fit and proper one. She was not unwilling, but she knew this was a fateful moment, and she had a sense of doors closing behind her and the path of her life being fixed irrevocably. She put her hand on the hilt of the sword and took the oath. Her voice surprised her by its strength and resolution. "I swear by Almighty God, and Jesus Christ, and all the saints, that I will take care of my brother Richard until he has fulfilled his vow." She crossed herself. It was done. I've sworn an oath, she thought, and I must die rather than break my word. The thought gave her a kind of angry satisfaction.

"There," Father said, and his voice sounded weak again. "Now you need never come to this place again."

Aliena could not believe he meant it. "Uncle Simon can bring us to see you now and again, and we can make sure you're warm and fed—"

"No," he said sternly. "You have a task to fulfill. You're not going to waste your energies visiting a jail."

She heard that don't-argue note in his voice again, but she could not help

protesting against the harshness of his decision. “Then let us come again just once, to bring you a few comforts!”

“I want no comforts.”

“Please…”

“Never.”

She gave up. He was always at least as hard on himself as he was on everyone else. “Very well,” she said, and it came out in a sob.

“Now you’d better go,” he said.

“Already?”

“Yes. This is a place of despair and corruption and death. Now that I’ve seen you, and I know you’re well, and you’ve promised to rebuild what we have lost, I’m content. The only thing that could destroy my happiness would be to see you wasting your time visiting a jailhouse. Now go.”

“Papa, no!” she protested, although she knew it was no use.

“Listen,” he said, and his voice softened at last. “I’ve lived an honorable life, and now I’m going to die. I’ve confessed my sins. I’m ready for eternity. Pray for my soul. Go.”

Aliena leaned forward and kissed his brow. Her tears fell freely on his face. “Goodbye, Father dear,” she whispered. She got to her feet.

Richard bent down and kissed him. “Goodbye, Father,” he said unsteadily.

“May God bless you both, and help you keep your vows,” Father said.

Richard left him the candle. They went to the door. At the threshold Aliena turned and looked back at him in the unsteady light. His fleshless face was set in an expression of calm determination that was very familiar. She looked at him until tears obscured her vision. Then she turned away, went through the lobby of the jailhouse, and stumbled out into the open air.

III

Richard led the way. Aliena was stunned with grief. It was as if Father had already died; but it was worse, for he was still suffering. She heard Richard asking for directions but she paid no attention. She gave no thought to where they were going until he stopped outside a small wooden church with a lean-to hovel beside it. Looking around, Aliena saw that they were in a poor district of small tumbledown houses and filthy streets in which fierce dogs chased rats through the refuse and barefoot children played in the mud. “This must be St. Michael’s,” Richard said.

The lean-to at the side of the church had to be the priest’s house. It had one shuttered window. The door stood open. They went in.

There was a fire in the middle of the single room. The place was furnished with a roughhewn table, a few stools, and a beer barrel in the corner. The floor was strewn with rushes. Near the fire a man sat on a chair drinking from a large cup. He was a small, thin man of about fifty years, with a red nose and wispy gray hair. He wore ordinary everyday clothes, a dirty undershirt with a brown tunic, and clogs.

“Father Ralph?” said Richard dubiously.

“What if I am?” he replied.

Aliena sighed. Why did people manufacture trouble when there was already so much of it in the world? But she had no energy left for dealing with bad temper, so she left it to Richard, who said: “Does that mean yes?”

The question was answered for them. A voice from outside called: “Ralph? Are you in?” A moment later a middle-aged woman came in and gave the priest a hunk of bread and a large bowl of something that smelled like meat stew. For once the smell of meat did not make Aliena’s mouth water: she was too numb even to be hungry. The woman was probably one of Ralph’s parishioners, for her clothes were of the same poor quality as his own. He took the food from her without a word and began to eat. She glanced incuriously at Aliena and Richard and went out again.

Richard said: “Well, *Father* Ralph, I am the son of Bartholomew, the former earl of Shiring.”

The man paused in his eating and looked up at them. There was hostility in his face, and something else Aliena could not read—fear? Guilt? He returned his attention to his dinner, but mumbled: “What do you want with me?”

Aliena felt a tug of fear.

“You know what I want,” Richard said. “My money. Fifty bezants.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Ralph said.

Aliena stared at him incredulously. This could not be happening. Father had left money for them with this priest—he had said so! Father did not make mistakes about such things.

Richard had gone white. He said: “What do you mean?”

“I mean, I don’t know what you’re talking about. Now piss off.” He took another spoonful of stew.

The man was lying, of course; but what could they do about it? Richard pressed on stubbornly. “My father left money with you—fifty bezants. He told you to give it to me. Where is it?”

“Your father gave me nothing.”

“He said he did—”

“He lied, then.”

That was one thing you could be sure Father had not done. Aliena spoke for the first time. “You’re the liar, and we know it.”

Ralph shrugged. “Complain to the sheriff.”

“You’ll be in trouble if we do. They cut off the hands of thieves in this city.”

The shadow of fear briefly crossed the priest’s face, but it was gone in a moment, and his reply was defiant. “It will be my word against the word of a jailed traitor—if your father lives long enough to give evidence.”

Aliena realized he was right. There would be no independent witnesses to say that Father had given him the money, for the whole idea was that it was a secret, money that could not be taken away by the king or Percy Hamleigh or any of the other carrion crows who flocked around the possessions of a ruined man. Things were just as they had been in the forest, Aliena realized bitterly. People could rob her and Richard with impunity, because they were the children of a fallen noble. Why am I frightened of these men? she asked herself angrily. Why aren’t they frightened of me?

Richard looked at her and said in a low voice: “He’s right, isn’t he?”

“Yes,” she said venomously. “There’s no point in our complaining to the sheriff.” She was thinking of the one time men had been afraid of her: in the forest, when she had stabbed the fat outlaw, and the other one had run away in fear. This priest was no better than the outlaw. But he was old and quite feeble, and he had probably counted on never having to face his victims. Perhaps he could be frightened.

Richard said: “What shall we do, then?”

Aliena gave in to a sudden furious impulse. “Burn down his house,” she said. She stepped to the middle of the room and kicked the fire with her wooden clogs, scattering burning logs. The rushes around the fireplace caught immediately.

“Hey!” Ralph yelled. He half rose from his seat, dropping his bread and spilling the stew in his lap; but before he could get to his feet Aliena was on him. She felt completely out of control; she acted without thinking. She pushed him, and he slipped off the chair and tumbled to the floor. She was astonished at how easy it was to knock him down. She fell on him, landing with her knees on his chest and winding him. Mad with rage, she thrust her face close to his and screamed: “You lying thieving godless heathen, I’m going to burn you to death!”

His eyes flicked to one side and he looked even more terrified. Following his glance, Aliena saw that Richard had drawn his sword and was holding it ready to strike. The priest’s dirty face went pale, and he whispered: “You’re a devil….”

“You’re the one who steals money from poor children!” Our of the corner of her eye she saw a stick with one end burning brightly. She picked it up and held the hot end close to his face. “Now I’m going to burn out your eyes, one by one. First the left eye—”

“No, please,” he whispered. “Please don’t hurt me.”

Aliena was thrown by the rapidity with which he crumbled. She realized that the rushes were burning all around her. “Where’s the money, then?” she said in a voice which suddenly sounded normal.

The priest was still terrified. “In the church.”

“Where exactly?”

“Under the stone behind the altar.”

Aliena looked up at Richard. “Guard him while I go and look,” she said. “If he moves, kill him.”

Richard said: “Allie, the house will burn down.”

Aliena went to the corner and lifted the lid of the barrel. It was half full of beer. She grasped the rim and pulled it over. Beer flowed all over the floor, soaking the rushes and putting out the flames.

Aliena walked out of the house. She knew she really had been ready to put out the priest’s eyes, but instead of feeling ashamed she was overwhelmed by a sense of her own power. She had resolved not to let people make her a victim, and she had proved she could keep her resolution. She strode up to the front of the church and tried the door. It was fastened with a small lock. She could have gone back to the priest for the key, but instead she drew the dagger from her sleeve, inserted the blade in the crack of the door, and broke the lock. The door swung open and she marched inside.

It was the poorest kind of church. There was no furniture other than the altar and no decoration except for some crude paintings on the limewashed wood of the walls. In one corner, a single candle flickered beneath a small wooden effigy which presumably represented Saint Michael. Aliena’s triumph was disturbed for a moment by the realization that five pounds presented a

terrible temptation to a man as poor as Father Ralph. Then she put sympathy out of her mind.

The floor was earth but there was a single large stone slab behind the altar. It made a rather obvious hiding place, but of course no one would bother to rob a church as visibly poor as this. Aliena went down on one knee and pushed the stone. It was very heavy and did not move. She began to feel anxious. Richard could not be relied upon to keep Ralph quiet indefinitely. The priest might get away and call for help, and then Aliena would have to prove that the money was hers. Indeed, that might be the least of her worries now that she had attacked a priest and broken into a church. She felt a chill of anxiety as she realized that she was on the wrong side of the law now.

That frisson of fear gave her extra strength. With a mighty heave she moved the stone an inch or two. It covered a hole about a foot deep. She managed to move the stone a little farther. Inside the hole was a wide leather belt. She put her hand in and drew the belt out.

“There!” she said aloud. “I’ve got it.” It gave her great satisfaction to think that she had defeated the dishonest priest and retrieved her father’s money. Then, as she stood up, she realized that her victory was qualified: the belt felt suspiciously light. She unfastened the end and tipped out the coins. There were only ten of them. Ten bezants were worth a pound of silver.

What had happened to the rest? Father Ralph had spent it! She became enraged again. Her father’s money was all she had in the world and a thieving priest had taken four fifths of it. She marched out of the church, swinging the belt. On the street, a passerby looked startled when he caught her eye, as if there was something odd about her expression. She took no notice and went into the priest’s house.

Richard was standing over Father Ralph, with his sword at the priest’s throat. As Aliena came through the door she screamed: “Where’s the rest of my father’s money?”

“Gone,” the priest whispered.

She knelt by his head and put her knife to his face. “Gone where?”

“I spent it,” he confessed in a voice hoarse with fear.

Aliena wanted to stab him, or beat him, or throw him into a river; but none of it would do any good. He was telling the truth. She looked at the overturned barrel: a drinking man could get through a great deal of beer. She felt as if she might explode with frustration. “I’d cut off your ear if I could sell it for a penny,” she hissed at him. He looked as if he thought she might cut it off anyway.

Richard said anxiously: “He’s spent the money. Let’s take what we’ve got and go.”

He was right, Aliena realized reluctantly. Her anger began to evaporate, leaving behind a residue of bitterness. There was nothing to be gained by

frightening the priest anymore, and the longer they stayed, the more chance there was that someone would come in and cause trouble. She stood up. “All right,” she said. She put the gold coins back in the belt and buckled it around her waist beneath her cloak. She pointed a finger at the priest. “I may come back one day and kill you,” she spat.

She went out.

She strode away along the narrow street. Richard caught up with her, hurrying. “You were wonderful, Allie!” he said excitedly. “You scared him half to death—and you got the money!”

She nodded. “Yes, I did,” she said sourly. She was still tense, but now that her fury had abated she felt deflated and unhappy.

“What shall we buy?” he said eagerly.

“Just a little food for our journey.”

“Shan’t we buy horses?”

“Not with a pound.”

“Still, we could get you some boots.”

She considered that. The clogs tortured her but the ground was too cold for bare feet. However, boots were expensive and she was reluctant to spend the money so quickly. “No,” she decided. “I’ll live a few more days without boots. We’ll keep the money for now.”

He was disappointed, but he did not dispute her authority. “What food shall we get?”

“Horsebread, hard cheese and wine.”

“Let’s get some pies.”

“They cost too much.”

“Oh.” He was silent for a moment, then he said: “You’re awfully grumpy, Allie.”

Aliena sighed. “I know.” She thought: Why do I feel this way? I should be proud. I brought us here from the castle, I defended my brother, I found my father, I got our money.

Yes, and I stuck a knife into a fat man’s belly, and made my brother kill him, and I held a burning stick to a priest’s face, and I was ready to put his eyes out.

“Is it because of Father?” said Richard sympathetically.

“No, it’s not,” Aliena replied. “It’s because of me.”

Aliena regretted not buying the boots.

On the road to Gloucester she wore the clogs until they made her feet bleed, then she walked barefoot until she could no longer stand the cold, whereupon she put the clogs on again. She found it helped not to look at her feet: they hurt more when she could see the sores and the blood.

In the hill country there were a lot of poor smallholdings where peasants grew an acre or so of oats or rye and kept a few scrawny animals. Aliena stopped on the outskirts of a village, when she thought they must be near Huntleigh, to speak to a peasant who was shearing a sheep in a fenced yard next to a low, wattle-and-daub farmhouse. He had the sheep's head trapped in a wooden fixture like a stocks, and was cutting its wool with a long-bladed knife. Two more sheep waited uneasily nearby, and one that was already shorn was grazing in the field, looking naked in the cold air.

"It's early for shearing," Aliena said.

The peasant looked up at her and grinned good-humoredly. He was a young man with red hair and freckles, and his sleeves were rolled up, showing hairy arms. "Ah, but I need the money. Better the sheep go cold than I go hungry."

"How much do you get?"

"Penny a fleece. But I have to go to Gloucester to get it, so I lose a day in the field, just when it's spring and there's a lot to do." He was cheerful enough, despite his grumbling.

"What's this village?" Aliena asked him.

"Strangers call it Huntleigh," he said. Peasants never used the name of their village—to them it was just the village. Names were for outsiders. "Who are you?" he asked with frank curiosity. "What brings you here?"

"I'm the niece of Simon of Huntleigh," Aliena said.

"Indeed. Well, you'll find him in the big house. Go back along this road a few yards, then take the path through the fields."

"Thank you."

The village sat in the middle of its plowed fields like a pig in a wallow. There were twenty or so small dwellings clustered around the manor house, which was not much bigger than the home of a prosperous peasant. Aunt Edith and Uncle Simon were not very wealthy, it seemed. A group of men stood outside the manor house with a couple of horses. One of them appeared to be the lord: he wore a scarlet coat. Aliena looked at him more closely. It was twelve or thirteen years since she had seen her Uncle Simon, but she thought this was he. She remembered him as a big man, and now he looked smaller, but no doubt that was because Aliena had grown. His hair was thinning and he had a double chin which she did not recall. Then she heard him say: "He's very high in the wither, this beast," and she recognized the rasping, slightly breathy voice.

She began to relax. From now on they would be fed and clothed and cared for and protected: no more horsebread and hard cheese, no more sleeping in barns, no more walking the roads with one hand on her knife. She would have a soft bed and a new dress and a dinner of roast beef.

Uncle Simon caught her eye. At first he did not know who she was.

“Look at this,” he said to his men. “A handsome wench and a boy soldier to visit us.” Then something else came into his eyes, and Aliena knew he had realized they were not total strangers. “I know you, don’t I?” he said.

Aliena said: “Yes, Uncle Simon, you do.”

He jumped, as if scared by something. “By the saints! The voice of a ghost!”

Aliena did not understand that, but a moment later he explained. He came over to her, peering hard at her, as if he were about to look at her teeth like a horse; and he said: “Your mother had the same voice, like honey pouring out of a jar. You’re as beautiful as she was too, by Christ.” He put out his hand to touch her face, and she quickly stepped back out of reach. “But you’re as stiff-necked as your damned father, I can see that. I suppose he sent you here, did he?”

Aliena bristled. She did not like to hear Father referred to as “your damned father.” But if she protested, he would take it as further proof that she was stiff-necked; so she bit her tongue and answered him submissively. “Yes. He said Aunt Edith would take care of us.”

“Well, he was wrong,” Uncle Simon said. “Aunt Edith is dead. What’s more, since your father’s disgrace, I’ve lost half of my lands to that fat rogue Percy Hamleigh. It’s hard times here. So you can turn right around and go back to Winchester. I’m not taking you in.”

Aliena was shaken. He seemed so hard. “But we’re your kin!” she said.

He had the grace to look slightly ashamed, but his reply was harsh. “You’re not my kin. You used to be my first wife’s niece. Even when Edith was alive she never saw her sister, because of that pompous ass your mother married.”

“We’ll work,” Aliena pleaded. “We’re both willing—”

“Don’t waste your breath,” he said. “I’m not having you.”

Aliena was shocked. He was so definite. It was clear there was no point in arguing with him or begging. But she had suffered so many disappointments and reverses of this kind that she felt bitter rather than sad. A week ago something like this would have made her burst into tears. Now she felt like spitting at him. She said: “I’ll remember this when Richard is the earl and we take the castle back.”

He laughed. “Shall I live so long?”

Aliena decided not to stay and be humiliated any longer. “Let’s go,” she said to Richard. “We’ll look after ourselves.” Uncle Simon had already turned away and was looking at the horse with the high wither. The men with him were a little embarrassed. Aliena and Richard walked away.

When they were out of earshot, Richard said plaintively: “What are we going to do, Allie?”

“We’re going to show these heartless people that we’re better than they

are," she said grimly, but she did not feel brave, she was just full of hatred, for Uncle Simon, for Father Ralph, for Odo Jailer, for the outlaws, for the verderer, and most of all for William Hamleigh.

"It's a good thing we've got some money," Richard said.

It was. But the money would not last forever. "We can't just spend it," she said as they walked along the path that led back to the main road. "If we use it all up on food and things like that, we'll just be destitute again when it's all gone. We've got to *do* something with it."

"I don't see why," Richard said. "I think we should buy a pony."

She stared at him. Was he joking? There was no smile on his face. He simply did not understand. "We've got no position, no title, and no land," she said patiently. "The king won't help us. We can't get ourselves hired as laborers—we tried, in Winchester, and no one would take us on. But somehow we have to make a living and turn you into a knight."

"Oh," he said. "I see."

She could tell that he did not really see. "We need to establish ourselves in some occupation that will feed us and give us at least a chance of making enough money to buy you a good horse."

"You mean I should become an apprentice to a craftsman?"

Aliena shook her head. "You have to become a knight, not a carpenter. Have we ever met anyone who had an independent livelihood but no skills?"

"Yes," Richard said unexpectedly. "Meg in Winchester."

He was right. Meg was a wool merchant although she had never been an apprentice. "But Meg has a market stall." They passed the red-haired peasant who had given them directions. His four shorn sheep were grazing in the field, and he was tying their fleeces into bundles with cord made of reeds. He looked up from his work and waved. It was people such as he who took their wool into the towns and sold it to wool merchants. But the merchant had to have a place of business….

Or did he?

An idea was forming in Aliena's mind.

She turned back abruptly.

Richard said: "Where are you going?"

She was too excited to answer him. She leaned on the peasant's fence. "How much did you say you could get for your wool?"

"Penny a fleece," he said.

"But you have to spend all day going to Gloucester and back."

"That's the trouble."

"Suppose I buy your wool? That would save you the journey."

Richard said: "Allie! We don't need wool!"

"Shut up, Richard." She did not want to explain her idea to him now—she was impatient to try it out on the peasant.

The peasant said: “That would be a kindness.” But he looked dubious, as if he suspected trickery.

“I couldn’t offer you a penny a fleece, though.”

“Aha! I thought there’d be a snag.”

“I could give you twopence for four fleeces.”

“But they’re worth a penny each!” he protested.

“In Gloucester. This is Huntleigh.”

He shook his head. “I’d rather have fourpence and lose a day in the field than have twopence and gain a day.”

“Suppose I offer you threepence for four fleeces.”

“I lose a penny.”

“And save a day’s journey.”

He looked bewildered. “I never heard of nothing like this before.”

“It’s as if I were a carter, and you paid me a penny to take your wool to market.” She found his slowness exasperating. “The question is, is an extra day in the fields worth a penny to you, or not?”

“It depends what I do with the day,” he said thoughtfully.

Richard said: “Allie, what are we going to do with four fleeces?”

“Sell them to Meg,” she said impatiently. “For a penny each. That way we’re a penny better off.”

“But we have to go all the way to Winchester for a penny!”

“No, stupid. We buy wool from fifty peasants and take the whole lot to Winchester. Don’t you see? We could make fifty pennies! We could feed ourselves *and* save up for a good horse for you!”

She turned back to the peasant. His cheerful grin had gone, and he was scratching his ginger-colored head. Aliena was sorry she had perplexed him, but she wanted him to accept her offer. If he did, she would know it was possible for her to fulfill her vow to her father. But peasants were stubborn. She felt like taking him by the collar and shaking him. Instead, she reached inside her cloak and fumbled in her purse. They had changed the gold bezants for silver pennies at the goldsmith’s house in Winchester, and now she took out three pennies and showed them to the peasant. “Here,” she said. “Take it or leave it.”

The sight of the silver helped the peasant make up his mind. “Done,” he said, and took the money.

Aliena smiled. It looked as if she might have found the answer.

That night she used a bundled fleece for a pillow. The smell of sheep reminded her of Meg’s house.

When she woke up in the morning she discovered that she was not pregnant.

Things were looking up.

Four weeks after Easter, Aliena and Richard entered Winchester with an old horse pulling a homemade cart bearing a huge sack which contained two hundred and forty fleeces—the precise number which made up a standard woolsack.

At that point they discovered taxes.

Previously they had always entered the city without attracting any attention, but now they learned why city gates were narrow and constantly manned by customs officers. There was a toll of one penny for every cartload of goods taken into Winchester. Fortunately, they still had a few pennies left, and they were able to pay; otherwise they would have been turned away.

Most of the fleeces had cost them between one half and three quarters of a penny each. They had paid seventy-two pence for the old horse, and the rickety cart had been thrown in. Most of the rest of the money had been spent on food. But tonight they would have a pound of silver *and* a horse and cart.

Aliena's plan was then to go out again and buy another sackful of fleeces, and to do the same again and again until all the sheep were shorn. By the end of the summer she wanted to have the money to buy a strong horse and a new cart.

She felt very excited as she led their old nag through the streets toward Meg's house. By the end of the day she would have proved that she could take care of herself and her brother without any help from anyone. It made her feel very mature and independent. She was in charge of her own destiny. She had had nothing from the king, she did not need relatives, and she had no use for a husband.

She was looking forward to seeing Meg, who had been her inspiration. Meg was one of the few people who had helped Aliena without trying to rob, rape or exploit her. Aliena had a lot of questions to ask her about business in general and the wool trade in particular.

It was market day, so it took them some time to drive their cart through the crowded city to Meg's street. At last they arrived at her house. Aliena stepped into the hall. A woman she had never seen before was standing there. "Oh!" said Aliena, and she stopped short.

"What is it?" said the woman.

"I'm a friend of Meg's."

"She doesn't live here anymore," the woman said curtly.

"Oh, dear." Aliena saw no need for her to be so brusque. "Where has she moved to?"

"She's gone with her husband, who left this city in disgrace," the woman said.

Aliena was disappointed and afraid. She had been counting on Meg to

make the sale of the wool easy. “That’s terrible news!”

“He was a dishonest tradesman, and if I were you I wouldn’t boast about being a friend of hers. Now clear off.”

Aliena was outraged that someone should speak ill of Meg. “I don’t care what her husband may have done, Meg was a fine woman and greatly superior to the thieves and whores that inhabit this stinking city,” she said, and she went out before the woman could think of a rejoinder.

Her verbal victory gave her only momentary consolation. “Bad news,” she said to Richard. “Meg has left Winchester.”

“Is the person who lives there now a wool merchant?” he said.

“I didn’t ask. I was too busy telling her off.” Now she felt foolish.

“What shall we do, Allie?”

“We’ve got to sell these fleeces,” she said anxiously. “We’d better go to the marketplace.”

They turned the horse around and retraced their steps to the High Street, then threaded their way through the crowds to the market, which was between the High Street and the cathedral. Aliena led the horse and Richard walked behind the cart, pushing it when the horse needed help, which was most of the time. The marketplace was a seething mass of people squeezing along the narrow aisles between the stalls, their progress constantly delayed by carts such as Aliena’s. She stopped and stood on top of her sack of wool and looked for wool merchants. She could see only one. She got down and headed the horse in that direction.

The man was doing good business. He had a large space roped off with a shed behind it. The shed was made of hurdles, light timber frames filled in with woven twigs and reeds, and it was obviously a temporary structure erected each market day. The merchant was a swarthy man whose left arm ended at the elbow. Attached to his stump he had a wooden comb, and whenever a fleece was offered to him he would put his arm into the wool, tease out a portion with the comb, and feel it with his right hand before giving a price. Then he would use the comb and his right hand together to count out the number of pennies he had agreed to pay. For large purchases he weighed the pennies in a balance.

Aliena pushed her way through the crowd to the bench. A peasant offered the merchant three rather thin fleeces tied together with a leather belt. “A bit sparse,” said the merchant. “Three farthings each.” A farthing was a quarter of a penny. He counted out two pennies, then took a small hatchet and with a quick, practiced stroke cut a third penny into quarters. He gave the peasant the two pennies and one of the quarters. “Three times three farthings is twopence and a farthing.” The peasant took the belt off the fleeces and handed them over.

Next, two young men dragged a whole sack of wool up to the counter.

The merchant examined it carefully. “It’s a full sack, but the quality’s poor,” he said. “I’ll give you a pound.”

Aliena wondered how he could be so sure the sack was full. Perhaps you could tell with practice. She watched him weigh out a pound of silver pennies.

Some monks were approaching with a huge cart piled high with sacks of wool. Aliena decided to get her business done before the monks. She beckoned to Richard, and he dragged their sack of wool off the cart and brought it up to the counter.

The merchant examined the wool. “Mixed quality,” he said. “Half a pound.”

“What?” Aliena said incredulously.

“A hundred and twenty pennies,” he said.

Aliena was horrified. “But you just paid a pound for a sack!”

“It’s because of the quality.”

“You paid a pound for poor quality!”

“Half a pound,” he repeated stubbornly.

The monks arrived and crowded the stall, but Aliena was not going to move: her livelihood was at stake, and she was more frightened of destitution than she was of the merchant. “Tell me why,” she insisted. “There’s nothing wrong with the wool, is there?”

“No.”

“Then give me what you paid those two men.”

“No.”

“Why not?” she almost screamed.

“Because nobody pays a girl what they would pay a man.”

She wanted to strangle him. He was offering her less than she had paid. It was outrageous. If she accepted his price, all her work would have been for nothing. Worse than that, her scheme for providing a livelihood for herself and her brother would have failed, and her brief period of independence and self-sufficiency would be over. And why? Because he would not pay a girl the same as he paid a man!

The leader of the monks was looking at her. She hated people to stare at her. “Stop staring!” she said rudely. “Just do your business with this godless peasant.”

“All right,” the monk said mildly. He beckoned to his colleagues and they dragged up a sack.

Richard said: “Take the ten shillings, Allie. Otherwise we’ll have nothing but a sack of wool!”

Aliena stared angrily at the merchant as he examined the monks’ wool. “Mixed quality,” he said. She wondered if he ever pronounced wool good quality. “A pound and twelvepence a sack.”

Why did it have to happen that Meg went away? thought Aliena bitterly.

Everything would have been all right if she had stayed.

“How many sacks have you got?” said the merchant.

A young monk in novice’s robes said: “Ten,” but the leader said: “No, eleven.” The novice looked as if he was inclined to argue, but he said nothing.

“That’s eleven and a half pounds of silver, plus twelvepence.” The merchant began to weigh out the money.

“I won’t give in,” Aliena said to Richard. “We’ll take the wool somewhere else—Shiring, perhaps, or Gloucester.”

“All that way! And what if we can’t sell it there?”

He was right—they might have the same trouble elsewhere. The real difficulty was that they had no status, no support, no protection. The merchant would not dare to insult the monks, and even the poor peasants could probably cause trouble for him if he dealt unfairly with them, but there was no risk to a man who tried to cheat two children with nobody in the world to help them.

The monks were dragging their sacks into the merchant’s shed. As each one was stashed, the merchant handed to the chief monk a weighed pound of silver and twelve pennies. When all the sacks were in, there was a bag of silver still on the counter.

“That’s only ten sacks,” said the merchant.

“I told you there was only ten,” the novice said to the chief monk.

“This is the eleventh,” said the chief monk, and he put his hand on Aliena’s sack.

She stared at him in astonishment.

The merchant was equally surprised. “I’ve offered her half a pound,” he said.

“I’ve bought it from her,” the monk said. “And I’ve sold it to you.” He nodded to the other monks and they dragged Aliena’s sack into the shed.

The merchant looked disgruntled, but he handed over the last pound bag and twelve more pennies. The monk gave the money to Aliena.

She was dumbstruck. Everything had been going wrong and now this complete stranger had rescued her—after she had been rude to him, too!

Richard said: “Thank you for helping us, Father.”

“Give thanks to God,” said the monk.

Aliena did not know what to say. She was thrilled. She hugged the money to her chest. How could she thank him? She stared at her savior. He was a small, slight, intense-looking man. His movements were quick and he looked alert, like a small bird with dull plumage but bright eyes. His eyes were blue, in fact. The fringe of hair around his shaved pate was black streaked with gray, but his face was young. Aliena began to realize that he was vaguely familiar. Where had she seen him before?

The monk’s mind was going along the same path. “You don’t remember

me, but I know you," he said. "You're the children of Bartholomew, the former earl of Shiring. I know you've suffered great misfortunes, and I'm glad to have a chance to help you. I'll buy your wool anytime."

Aliena wanted to kiss him. Not only had he saved her today, he was prepared to guarantee her future! She found her tongue at last. "I don't know how to thank you," she said. "God knows, we need a protector."

"Well, now you have two," he said. "God, and me."

Aliena was profoundly moved. "You've saved my life, and I don't even know who you are," she said.

"My name is Philip," he said. "I'm the prior of Kingsbridge."

Chapter 7

IT WAS A GREAT DAY when Tom Builder took the stonecutters to the quarry.

They went a few days before Easter, fifteen months after the old cathedral burned down. It had taken this long for Prior Philip to amass enough cash to hire craftsmen.

Tom had found a forester and a master quarryman in Salisbury, where the Bishop Roger's palace was almost complete. The forester and his men had now been at work for two weeks, finding and felling tall pine trees and mature oaks. They were concentrating their efforts on the woods near the river, upstream from Kingsbridge, for it was very costly to transport materials on the winding mud roads, and a lot of money could be saved by simply floating the wood downstream to the building site. The timber would be roughly lopped for scaffolding poles, carefully shaped into templates to guide the masons and stonecarvers, or—in the case of the tallest trees—set aside for future use as roof beams. Good wood was now arriving in Kingsbridge at a steady rate and all Tom had to do was pay the foresters every Saturday evening.

The quarrymen had arrived over the last few days. The master quarryman, Otto Blackface, had brought with him his two sons, both of whom were stonecutters; four grandsons, all apprentices; and two laborers, one his cousin and the other his brother-in-law. Such nepotism was normal, and Tom had no objection to it: a family group usually made a good team.

As yet there were no craftsmen working in Kingsbridge, on the site itself, other than Tom and the priory's carpenter. It was a good idea to stockpile some materials. But soon Tom would hire the people who formed the backbone of the building team, the masons. They were the men who put one stone on another and made the walls rise. Then the great enterprise would begin. Tom walked with a spring in his step: this was what he had hoped for and worked toward for ten years.

The first mason to be hired, he had decided, would be his own son Alfred.

Alfred was sixteen years old, approximately, and had acquired the basic skills of a mason: he could cut stones square and build a true wall. As soon as hiring began, Alfred would get full wages.

Tom's other son, Jonathan, was fifteen months old and growing fast. A sturdy child, he was the pampered pet of the whole monastery. Tom had worried a little, at first, about the baby being looked after by the half-witted Johnny Eightpence, but Johnny was as attentive as any mother and had more time than most mothers to devote to his charge. The monks still did not suspect that Tom was Jonathan's father, and now they probably never would.

Seven-year-old Martha had a gap in her front teeth and she missed Jack. She was the one who worried Tom most, for she needed a mother.

There was no shortage of women who would like to marry Tom and take care of his little daughter. He was not an unattractive man, he knew, and his livelihood looked secure now that Prior Philip was starting to build in earnest. Tom had moved out of the guesthouse and had built himself a fine two-room house, with a chimney, in the village. Eventually, as master builder in charge of the whole project, he could expect a salary and benefits that would be the envy of many minor gentry. But he could not conceive of marrying anyone but Ellen. He was like a man who has got used to drinking the finest wine, and now finds that everyday wine tastes like vinegar. There was a widow in the village, a plump, pretty woman with a smiling face and a generous bosom and two well-behaved children, who had baked several pies for him and kissed him longingly at the Christmas feast, and would marry him as quick as he liked. But he knew that he would be unhappy with her, for he would always hanker after the excitement of being married to the unpredictable, infuriating, bewitching, passionate Ellen.

Ellen had promised to come back, one day, to visit. Tom felt fiercely certain that she would keep that promise, and he clung to it stubbornly, even though it was more than a year since she had walked out. And when she did come back he was going to ask her to marry him.

He thought she might accept him now. He was no longer destitute: he could feed his own family and hers too. He felt that Alfred and Jack could be prevented from fighting, if they were handled right. If jack were made to work, Alfred would not resent him so badly, Tom thought. He was going to offer to take Jack as an apprentice. The lad had shown an interest in building, he was as bright as a button, and in a year or so he would be big enough for the heavy work. Then Alfred would not be able to say that Jack was idle. The other problem was that Jack could read and Alfred could not. Tom was going to ask Ellen to teach Alfred to read and write. She could give him lessons every Sunday. Then Alfred would be able to feel every bit as good as Jack. The boys would be equal, both educated, both working, and before long much the same size.

He knew Ellen had really liked living with him, despite all their trials. She liked his body and she liked his mind. She would want to come back to him.

Whether he would be able to square things with Prior Philip was another matter. Ellen had insulted Philip's religion rather decisively. It was hard to imagine anything more offensive to a prior than what she had done. Tom had not yet solved that problem.

Meanwhile, all his intellectual energy was employed in planning the cathedral. Otto and his team of stonecutters would build a rough lodge for themselves at the quarry, where they could sleep at night. When they were settled in, they would build real houses, and those who were married would bring their families to live with them.

Of all the building crafts, quarrying required the least skill and the most muscle. The master quarryman did the brainwork: he decided which zones would be mined and in what order; he arranged for ladders and lifting gear; if a sheer face was to be worked he would design scaffolding; he made sure there was a constant supply of tools coming from the smithy. Actually digging out the stones was relatively simple. The quarryman would use an iron-headed pickax to make an initial groove in the rock, then deepen it with a hammer and chisel. When the groove was big enough to weaken the rock, he would drive a wooden wedge into it. If he had judged his rock rightly, it would split exactly where he wanted.

Laborers removed the stones from the quarry, either carrying them on stretchers or lifting them with a rope attached to a huge winding wheel. In the lodge, stonecutters with axes would hack the stones roughly into the shape specified by the master builder. Accurate carving and shaping would be done at Kingsbridge, of course.

The biggest problem would be transport. The quarry was a day's journey from the building site, and a carter would probably charge fourpence a trip—and he could not carry more than eight or nine of the big stones without breaking his cart or killing his horse. As soon as the quarrymen were settled in, Tom had to explore the area and see whether there were any waterways that could be used to shorten the journey.

They had set off from Kingsbridge at daybreak. As they walked through the forest, the trees arching over the road made Tom think of the piers of the cathedral he would build. The new leaves were just coming out. Tom had always been taught to decorate the cushion capitals on top of the piers with scrolls or zigzags, but now it occurred to him that decorations in the shape of leaves would look rather striking.

They made good time, so that by midafternoon they were in the vicinity of the quarry. To his surprise, Tom heard in the distance the sound of metal clanging on rock, as if someone was working there. Technically the quarry belonged to the earl of Shiring, Percy Hamleigh, but the king had given

Kingsbridge Priory the right to mine it for the cathedral. Perhaps, Tom speculated, Earl Percy intended to work the quarry for his own benefit at the same time as the priory worked it. The king probably had not specifically prohibited that, but it would cause a lot of inconvenience.

As they drew nearer, Otto, a dark-skinned man with a rough manner, frowned at the sound, but he said nothing. The other men muttered to one another uneasily. Tom ignored them but he walked faster, impatient to find out what was going on.

The road curved through a patch of woodland and ended at the base of a hill. The hill itself was the quarry, and a huge bite had been taken out of its side by past quarrymen. Tom's initial impression was that it would be easy to work: a hill was bound to be better than a pit, for it was always less trouble to lower stones from a height than to lift them out of a hole.

The quarry was being worked, no question of that. There was a lodge at the foot of the hill, a sturdy scaffold reaching twenty feet or more up the scarred hillside, and a stack of stones waiting to be collected. Tom could see at least ten quarrymen. Ominously, there were a couple of hard-faced men-at-arms lounging outside the lodge, throwing stones at a barrel.

"I don't like the look of this," said Otto.

Tom did not like it either, but he pretended to be unperturbed. He marched into the quarry as if he owned it, and walked swiftly toward the two men-at-arms. They scrambled to their feet with the startled, faintly guilty air of sentries who have been on guard for too many uneventful days. Tom quickly looked over their weapons: each had a sword and a dagger, and they wore heavy leather jerkins, but they had no armor. Tom himself had a mason's hammer hanging from his belt. He was in no position to get into a fight. He walked straight at the two men without speaking, then at the last minute turned aside and walked around them, and continued on to the lodge. They looked at one another, unsure what to do: if Tom had been smaller, or had not had a hammer, they might have been quicker to stop him, but now it was too late.

Tom went into the lodge. It was a spacious wood building with a fireplace. Clean tools hung around the walls and there was a big stone in the corner for sharpening them. Two stonecutters stood at a massive wooden bench called a banker, trimming stones with axes. "Greetings, brothers," Tom said, using the form of address of one craftsman to another. "Who's the master here?"

"I'm the master quarryman," said one of them. "I'm Harold of Shiring."

"I'm the master builder at Kingsbridge Cathedral. My name is Tom."

"Greetings, Tom Builder. What are you here for?"

Tom studied Harold for a moment before answering. He was a pale, dusty man with small dusty-green eyes, which he narrowed when he spoke, as if he

were always blinking away stone dust. He leaned casually on the banker, but he was not as relaxed as he pretended. He was nervous, wary and apprehensive. He knows exactly why I'm here, Tom thought. "I've brought my master quarryman to work here, of course."

The two men-at-arms had followed Tom in, and Otto and his team had come in behind them. Now one or two of Harold's men also crowded in, curious to see what the fuss was about.

Harold said: "The quarry is owned by the earl. If you want to take stone you'll have to see him."

"No, I won't," Tom said. "When the king gave the quarry to Earl Percy, he also gave Kingsbridge Priory the right to take stone. We don't need any further permission."

"Well, we can't all work it, can we?"

"Perhaps we can," said Tom. "I wouldn't want to deprive your men of employment. There's a whole hill of rock—enough for two cathedrals and more. We should be able to find a way to manage the quarry so that we can all cut stone here."

"I can't agree to that," said Harold. "I'm employed by the earl."

"Well, I'm employed by the prior of Kingsbridge, and my men start work here tomorrow morning, whether you like it or not."

One of the men-at-arms spoke up then. "You won't be working here tomorrow or any other day."

Until this moment Tom had been clinging to the idea that although Percy was violating the spirit of the royal edict by mining the quarry himself, if he was pushed he would adhere to the letter of the agreement, and permit the priory to take stone. But this man-at-arms had obviously been instructed to turn the priory's quarrymen away. That was a different matter. Tom realized, with sinking spirits, that he was not going to get any stone without a fight.

The man-at-arms who had spoken was a short, stocky fellow of about twenty-five years, with a pugnacious expression. He looked stupid but stubborn—the hardest type to reason with. Tom gave him a challenging look and said: "Who are you?"

"I'm a bailiff for the earl of Shiring. He's told me to guard this quarry, and that's what I'm going to do."

"And how do you propose to do it?"

"With this sword." He touched the hilt of the weapon at his belt.

"And what do you think the king will do to you when you're brought before him for breaking his peace?"

"I'll take my chances."

"But there are only two of you," Tom said in a reasonable tone of voice. "We're seven men and four boys, and we have the king's permission to work here. If we kill you, we won't hang."

Both men-at-arms looked thoughtful, but before Tom could press his advantage, Otto spoke. “Just a minute,” he said to Tom. “I brought my people here to cut stones, not fight.”

Tom’s heart sank. If the quarrymen were not prepared to make a stand, there was no hope. “Don’t be so timid!” he said. “Are you going to let yourselves be deprived of work by a couple of bully-boys?”

Otto looked surly. “I’m not going to fight armed men,” he replied. “I’ve been earning steadily for ten years and I’m not that desperate for work. Besides, *I* don’t know the rights and wrongs of this—as far as I’m concerned it’s your word against theirs.”

Tom looked at the rest of Otto’s team. Both the stonecutters wore the same obstinate look as Otto. Of course, they would follow his lead: he was their father as well as their master. And Tom could see Otto’s point. Indeed, if he were in Otto’s position he would probably take the same line. He would not get into a brawl with armed men unless he was desperate.

But knowing that Otto was being reasonable gave Tom no comfort; in fact it made him even more frustrated. He decided to give it one more try. “There won’t be any fighting,” he said. “They know the king will hang them if they hurt us. Let’s just make our fire, and settle down for the night, and start work in the morning.”

Mentioning the night was a mistake. One of Otto’s sons said: “How could we sleep, with these murdering villains nearby?”

The others murmured agreement.

“We’ll set watches,” Tom said desperately.

Otto shook his head decisively. “We’re leaving tonight. Now.”

Tom looked around at the men and saw that he was defeated. He had set out this morning with such high hopes, and he could hardly believe that his plans had been frustrated by these petty thugs. It was too galling for words. He could not resist a bitter parting shot. “You’re going against the king, and that’s a dangerous business,” he said to Harold. “You tell the earl of Shiring that. And tell him that I’m Tom Builder of Kingsbridge, and if I ever get my hands around his fat neck I might just squeeze it until he chokes.”

Johnny Eightpence made a miniature monk’s robe for little Jonathan, complete with wide sleeves and a hood. The tiny figure looked so fetching in it that he melted everyone’s heart, but it was not very practical: the hood kept falling forward, obscuring his vision, and when he crawled the robe got in the way of his knees.

In the middle of the afternoon, when Jonathan had had his nap (and the monks had had theirs), Prior Philip came across the baby, with Johnny Eightpence, in what had been the nave of the church, and was now the

novices' playground. This was the time of day when the novices were allowed to let off steam, and Johnny was watching them play tag while Jonathan investigated the network of pegs and cord with which Tom Builder had laid out the ground plan of the east end of the new cathedral.

Philip stood beside Johnny for a few moments in companionable silence, watching the youngsters race around. Philip was very fond of Johnny, who made up for his lack of brains by having an extraordinarily good heart.

Jonathan was on his feet now, leaning against a stake Tom had driven into the ground where the north porch would be. He held on to the cord attached to the stake, and with that unsteady support took a couple of awkward, deliberate steps. "He'll be walking soon," Philip said to Johnny.

"He keeps trying, Father, but he generally falls on his bottom."

Philip crouched down and reached out his hands to Jonathan. "Walk to me," he said. "Come on."

Jonathan grinned, showing miscellaneous teeth. He took another step holding on to Tom's cord. Then he pointed at Philip, as if that would help, and with a sudden access of boldness, he crossed the intervening space with three rapid, decisive steps.

Philip caught him in his arms and said: "Well done!" He hugged him, feeling as proud as if the achievement were his, not the baby's.

Johnny was equally excited. "He walked! He walked!"

Jonathan struggled to be put down. Philip set him on his feet, to see if he would walk again; but he had had enough for one day, and he immediately dropped to his knees and crawled to Johnny.

Some of the monks had been scandalized, Philip recalled, when he had brought Johnny and baby Jonathan to Kingsbridge; but Johnny was easy to deal with so long as you did not forget that he was essentially a child in a man's body; and Jonathan had overcome all opposition by sheer force of personal charm.

Jonathan had not been the only cause of unrest during that first year. Having voted for a good provider, the monks felt cheated when Philip introduced an austerity drive to reduce the priory's day-to-day expenses. Philip had been a little hurt: he felt he had made it clear that his top priority would be the new cathedral. The monastic officers had also resisted his plan to take away their financial independence, even though they knew perfectly well that without reforms the priory was headed for ruin. And when he had spent money on enlarging the monastery's flocks of sheep there had almost been a mutiny. But monks were essentially people who wanted to be told what to do; and Bishop Waleran, who might have encouraged the rebels, had spent most of the year going to Rome and coming back; so in the end muttering was as far as the monks had got.

Philip had suffered some lonely moments, but he was sure results would

vindicate him. His policies were already bearing fruit in a very satisfying way. The price of wool had risen again, and Philip had already started shearing: that was why he could afford to hire foresters and quarrymen. As the financial position improved and cathedral building progressed, his position as prior would become unassailable.

He gave Johnny Eightpence an affectionate pat on the head and walked through the building site. With some help from priory servants and younger monks, Tom and Alfred had made a start on digging the foundations. However, they were only five or six feet deep as yet. Tom had told Philip that the foundation holes would have to be twenty-five feet deep in places. He would need a large force of laborers, plus some lifting gear, to dig so far down.

The new church would be bigger than the old one, but it would still be small for a cathedral. A part of Philip wanted it to be the longest, highest, richest and most beautiful cathedral in the kingdom, but he suppressed the wish, and told himself to be grateful for any kind of church.

He went into Tom's shed and looked at the woodwork on the bench. The builder had spent most of the winter in here, working with an iron measuring stick and a set of fine chisels, making what he called templates—wooden models for the masons to use as guides when they were cutting stones into shape. Philip had watched with admiration while Tom, a big man with big hands, precisely and painstakingly carved the wood into perfect curves and square corners and exact angles. Now Philip picked up one of the templates and examined it. It was shaped like the edge of a daisy, a quarter-circle with several round projections like petals. What sort of stone needed to be that shape? He found that these things were hard to visualize, and he was constantly impressed by the power of Tom's imagination. He looked at Tom's drawings, engraved on plaster in wooden frames, and eventually he decided that he was holding a template for the piers of the arcade, which would look like clusters of shafts. Philip had thought they would actually be clusters of shafts, but now he realized that would be an illusion: the piers would be solid stone columns with shaft-like decorations.

Five years, Tom had said, and the east end would be finished. Five years, and Philip would be able to hold services in a cathedral again. All he had to do was find the money. This year it had been hard to scrape together enough cash to make a modest start, because his reforms were slow to take effect; but next year, after he had sold the new spring's wool, he would be able to hire more craftsmen and begin to build in earnest.

The bell rang for vespers. Philip left the little shed and walked to the crypt entrance. Glancing over at the priory gate, he was astonished to see Tom Builder coming in with all the quarrymen. Why were they back? Tom had said he would be away for a week and the quarrymen were to have stayed

there indefinitely. Philip hurried to meet them.

As he came close he saw that they looked tired and dispirited, as if something terribly discouraging had happened. “What is it?” he said. “Why are you here?”

“Bad news,” said Tom Builder.

Philip simmered with fury all through vespers. What Earl Percy had done was outrageous. There was no doubt about the rights and wrongs of the case, no ambiguity about the king’s instructions: the earl had been there himself when the announcement was made, and the priory’s right to mine the quarry was enshrined in a charter. Philip’s right foot tapped the stone floor of the crypt in an urgent, angry rhythm. He was being robbed. Percy might as well steal pennies from a church treasury. There was no shred of an excuse for it. Percy was flagrantly defying both God and the king. But the worst of it was that Philip could not build the new cathedral unless he got the stone for nothing from that quarry. He was already working with a bare-minimum budget, and if he had to pay the market price for his stone, and transport it from even farther away, he could not build at all. He would have to wait another year or more, and then it would be six or seven years before he could hold services in a cathedral again. The thought was too much to bear.

He held an emergency chapter immediately after vespers and told the monks the news.

He had developed a technique for handling chapter meetings. Remigius, the sub-prior, still bore a grudge against Philip for defeating him in the election, and he often let his resentment show when monastery business was discussed. He was a conservative, unimaginative, pedantic man, and his whole approach to the running of the priory conflicted with Philip’s. The brothers who had supported Remigius in the election tended to back him in chapter: Andrew, the apoplectic sacrist; Pierre, the circuitor, who was responsible for discipline and had the narrow-minded attitudes that seemed to go with the job; and John Small, the lazy treasurer. Similarly, Philip’s closest colleagues were the men who had campaigned for him: Cuthbert Whitehead, the old cellarer; and young Milius, to whom Philip had given the newly created post of bursar, controller of the priory’s finances. Philip always let Milius argue with Remigius. Philip had normally discussed anything important with Milius before the meeting, and when he had not, Milius could be relied on to present a point of view close to Philip’s own. Then Philip could sum up like an impartial arbiter, and although Remigius rarely got his way, Philip would often accept some of his arguments, or adopt part of his proposal, to maintain the feeling of consensus government.

The monks were enraged by what Earl Percy had done. They had all

rejoiced when King Stephen had given the priory unlimited free timber and stone, and now they were scandalized that Percy should defy the king's order.

When the protests died down, however, Remigius had another point to make. "I remember saying this a year ago," he began. "The pact according to which the quarry is owned by the earl but we have quarrying rights was always unsatisfactory. We should have held out for total ownership."

The fact that there was some justice in this remark did not make it any easier for Philip to swallow. Total ownership was what he had agreed with Lady Regan, but she had cheated him out of it at the last minute. He was tempted to say that he had got the best deal he could, and he would like to see Remigius do any better in the treacherous maze of the royal court; but he bit his tongue, for he was, after all, the prior, and he had to take responsibility when things went wrong.

Milius came to his rescue. "It's all very well to wish the king had given us outright ownership of the quarry, but he didn't, and the main question is, what do we do now?"

"I should think that's fairly obvious," Remigius said immediately. "We can't expel the earl's men ourselves, so we'll have to get the king to do it. We must send a deputation to him and ask him to enforce his charter."

There was a murmur of agreement. Andrew, the sacrist, said: "We should send our wisest and most fluent speakers."

Philip realized that Remigius and Andrew saw themselves as leading the delegation.

Remigius said: "After the king hears what has happened, I don't think Percy Hamleigh will be earl of Shiring much longer."

Philip was not so sure of that.

"Where is the king?" Andrew said as an afterthought. "Does anybody know?"

Philip had recently been to Winchester, and had heard there of the king's movements. "He's gone to Normandy," he said.

Milius quickly said: "It will take a long time to catch up with him."

"The pursuit of justice always requires patience," Remigius intoned pompously.

"But every day we spend pursuing justice, we're not building our new cathedral," Milius replied. His tone of voice showed that he was exasperated by Remigius's ready acceptance of a delay to the building program. Philip shared that feeling. Milius went on: "And that's not our only problem. Once we've found the king, we have to persuade him to hear us. That can take weeks. Then he may give Percy the chance to defend himself—more delay…."

"How could Percy possibly defend himself?" Remigius said testily.

Milius replied: "I don't know, but I'm sure he'll think of something."

“But in the end the king is bound to stand by his word.”

A new voice was heard, saying: “Don’t be so sure.” Everyone turned to look. The speaker was Brother Timothy, the oldest monk in the priory. A small, modest man, he spoke rarely, but when he did he was worth listening to. Philip occasionally thought Timothy should have been prior. He normally sat through chapter looking half asleep, but now he was leaning forward, his eyes bright with conviction. “A king is a creature of the moment,” he went on. “He’s constantly under threat, from rebels within his own kingdom and from neighboring monarchs. He needs allies. Earl Percy is a powerful man with a lot of knights. If the king needs Percy at the moment when we present our petition, we will be refused, quite regardless of the justice of our case. The king is not perfect. There is only one true judge, and that is God.” He sat back, leaning against the wall and half closing his eyes, as if he were not in the least interested in how his speech was received. Philip concealed a smile: Timothy had precisely formulated Philip’s own misgivings about going to the king for justice.

Remigius was reluctant to give up the prospect of a long, exciting trip to France and a sojourn at the royal court; but at the same time he could not contradict Timothy’s logic. “What else can we do, then?” he said.

Philip was not sure. The sheriff would not be able to intervene in this case: Percy was too powerful to be controlled by a mere sheriff. And the bishop could not be relied upon either. It was frustrating. But Philip was not willing to sit back and accept defeat. He would take over that quarry if he had to do it himself….

Now there was an idea.

“Just a minute,” he said.

It would involve all the able-bodied brothers in the monastery…it would have to be carefully organized, like a military operation without weapons… they would need food for two days….

“I don’t know if this will work, but it’s worth a try,” he said. “Listen.”

He told them his plan.

They set out almost immediately: thirty monks, ten novices, Otto Blackface and his team of quarrymen, Tom Builder and Alfred, two horses and a cart. When darkness fell they lit lanterns to show them the road. At midnight they stopped to rest and eat the picnic the kitchen had hastily prepared: chicken, white bread and red wine. Philip had always believed that hard work should be rewarded by good food. When they marched on, they sang the service they should have been performing back at the priory.

At some point during the darkest hour, Tom Builder, who was leading the way, held up a hand to stop them. He said to Philip: “Only a mile more to the

quarry.”

“Good,” said Philip. He turned to the monks. “Take off your clogs and sandals, and put on the felt boots.” He took off his own sandals and pulled on a pair of the soft felt boots that peasants wore in winter.

He singled out two novices. “Edward and Philemon, stay here with the horses and the cart. Keep quiet, and wait until full daylight; then join us. Is that clear?”

“Yes, Father,” they said together.

“All right, the rest of you,” Philip said. “Follow Tom Builder, now, in *complete silence*, please.”

They all walked on.

There was a light west wind blowing, and the rustling of the trees covered the sound of fifty men breathing and fifty pairs of felt boots shuffling. Philip began to feel tense. His plan seemed a little crazy now that he was about to put it into operation. He said a silent prayer for success.

The road curved to the left, and then the flickering lanterns dimly showed a wooden lodge, a stack of part-finished stone blocks, some ladders and scaffolding, and in the background a dark hillside disfigured by the white scars of quarrying. Philip suddenly wondered whether the men asleep in the lodge had dogs. If they did, Philip would lose the element of surprise, and the whole scheme would be jeopardized. But it was too late to back out now.

The whole crowd shuffled past the lodge. Philip held his breath, expecting at any moment to hear a cacophony of barking. But there were no dogs.

He brought his people to a halt around the base of the scaffolding. He was proud of them for being so quiet. It was difficult for people to stay silent even in church. Perhaps they were too frightened to make a noise.

Tom Builder and Otto Blackface began silently to place the quarrymen around the site. They divided them into two groups. One group gathered near the rock face at ground level. The others mounted the scaffolding. When they were all in position, Philip directed the monks, with gestures, to stand or sit around the workmen. He himself stayed apart from the rest, at a point halfway between the lodge and the rock face.

Their timing was perfect. Dawn came a few moments after Philip made his final dispositions. He took a candle from inside his cloak and lit it from a lantern, then he faced the monks and lifted the candle. It was a prearranged signal. Each of the forty monks and novices took out a candle and lit it from one of the three lanterns. The effect was dramatic. Day broke over a quarry occupied by silent, ghostly figures each holding a small, flickering light.

Philip turned again to face the lodge. As yet there was no sign of life. He settled down to wait. Monks were good at that. Standing still for hours was part of their everyday life. The workmen were not so used to it, however, and they began to get impatient after a while, shuffling their feet and murmuring

to one another in low voices; but it did not matter now.

Either the muttering or the strengthening daylight woke the inhabitants of the lodge. Philip heard someone cough and spit, then there was a scraping noise as of a bar being lifted from behind a door. He held up his hand for dead silence.

The door of the lodge swung open. Philip kept his hand in the air. A man came out rubbing his eyes. Philip knew him, from Tom's description, to be Harold of Shiring, the master quarryman. Harold did not see anything unusual at first. He leaned against the doorpost and coughed again, the deep, bubbling cough of a man who has too much stone dust in his lungs. Philip dropped his hand. Somewhere behind him, the cantor hit a note, and immediately all the monks began to sing. The quarry was flooded with eerie harmonies.

The effect on Harold was devastating. His head jerked up as if it had been pulled by a string. His eyes widened and his jaw dropped as he saw the spectral choir that had appeared, as if by magic, in his quarry. A cry of fear escaped from his open mouth. He staggered back through the door of the lodge.

Philip permitted himself a satisfied smile. It was a good start.

However, the supernatural dread would not last very long. He lifted his hand again and waved it without turning around. In response to his signal the quarrymen started to work and the clang of iron on rock punctuated the music of the choir.

Two or three faces peeped fearfully from the doorway. The men soon realized they were looking at ordinary, corporeal monks and workmen, not visions or spirits, and they stepped out of the lodge for a better view. Two men-at-arms came out, buckling their sword belts, and stood staring. This was the crucial moment for Philip: what would the men-at-arms do?

The sight of them, big and bearded and dirty, with their chainlink belts, their swords and daggers, and their heavy leather jerkins, brought back to Philip a vivid, crystal-clear memory of the two soldiers who had burst into his home when he was six years old and killed his mother and father. He was stabbed, suddenly and unexpectedly, by grief for the parents he hardly remembered. He stared with loathing at Earl Percy's men, not seeing them but seeing instead an ugly man with a bent nose and a dark man with blood in his beard; and he was filled with rage and disgust and a fierce determination that such mindless, godless ruffians should be defeated.

For a while they did nothing. Gradually all the earl's quarrymen came out of the lodge. Philip counted them: there were twelve workmen plus the men-at-arms.

The sun peeped over the horizon.

The Kingsbridge quarrymen were already digging out stones. If the men-at-arms wanted to stop them, they would have to lay hands on the monks who

surrounded and protected the workers. Philip had gambled that the men-at-arms would hesitate to do violence to praying monks.

So far he was right: they were hesitating.

The two novices who had been left behind now arrived, leading the horses and the cart. They looked around fearfully. Philip indicated with a gesture where they should pull up. Then he turned, met Tom Builder's eye, and nodded.

Several stones had been cut by this time, and now Tom directed some of the younger monks to pick up the stones and carry them to the cart. The earl's men watched this new development with interest. The stones were too heavy to be lifted by one man, so they had to be lowered from the scaffolding by ropes, then carried across the ground on stretchers. As the first stone was manhandled into the cart, the men-at-arms went into a huddle with Harold. Another stone was put into the cart. The two men-at-arms separated from the crowd around the lodge and walked over to the cart. One of the novices, Philemon, climbed into the cart and sat on the stones, looking defiant. Brave lad! thought Philip, but he was afraid.

The men approached the cart. The four monks who had carried the two stones stood in front of it, forming a barrier. Philip tensed. The men stopped and stood face to face with the monks. They both put their hands to the hilts of their swords. The singing stopped as everyone watched with bated breath.

Surely, Philip thought, they won't be able to bring themselves to put defenseless monks to the sword. Then he thought how easy it would be for them, big strong men who were accustomed to the slaughter of the battlefield, to run their sharp swords through these people from whom they had nothing to fear, not even retaliation. Then again, they must consider the divine punishment they would risk by murdering men of God. Even thugs such as these must know that eventually they would stand at the Day of Judgment. Were they afraid of the eternal fire? Perhaps; but they were also afraid of their employer, Earl Percy. Philip guessed that the thought uppermost in their minds must be whether he would consider they had an adequate excuse for their failure to keep the Kingsbridge men out of the quarry. He watched them, hesitating in front of a handful of young monks, hands on their swords, and imagined them weighing the danger of failing Percy against the wrath of God.

The two men looked at one another. One shook his head. The other shrugged. Together, they walked out of the quarry.

The cantor hit a new note and the monks burst into a triumphant hymn. A shout of victory went up from the quarrymen. Philip sagged with relief. For a moment it had looked dreadfully dangerous. He could not help beaming with pleasure. The quarry was his.

He blew out his candle and went over to the cart. He embraced each of the four monks who had faced the men-at-arms, and the two novices who had

brought the cart. “I’m proud of you,” he said warmly. “And I believe God is too.”

The monks and the quarrymen were all shaking hands and congratulating one another. Otto Blackface came over to Philip and said: “That was well done, Father Philip. You’re a brave man, if I may say so.”

“God protected us,” Philip said. His eye fell on the earl’s quarrymen, standing in a disconsolate group around the door of their lodge. He did not want to make enemies of them, for while they were at a loose end there would always be a danger that Percy would use them to make further trouble. Philip decided to speak to them.

He took Otto’s arm and led him over to the lodge. “God’s will has been done here today,” he said to Harold. “I hope there are no hard feelings.”

“We’re out of work,” Harold said. “That’s a hard feeling.”

Philip suddenly saw a way to get Harold’s men on his side. Impulsively he said: “You can be back in work today, if you want. Work for me. I’ll hire your whole team. You won’t even have to move out of your lodge.”

Harold was surprised at this turn of events. He looked startled, then recovered his composure and said: “At what wages?”

“Standard rates,” Philip replied promptly. “Twopence a day for craftsmen, a penny a day for laborers, fourpence for yourself, and you pay your own apprentices.”

Harold turned away and looked at his colleagues. Philip drew Otto away to let them discuss the proposal in private. Philip could not really afford twelve more men, and if they accepted his offer he would have to postpone further the day when he could hire masons. That meant he would be cutting stone faster than he could use it. He would build up a stockpile, but it would be bad for his flow of cash. However, having all Percy’s quarrymen on the priory payroll would be a good defensive move. If Percy wanted to try again to work the quarry himself, he would first have to hire a team of quarrymen; which might be difficult, once the news of today’s events got around. And if at some future date Percy should try another stratagem to close the quarry, Philip would have a stockpile of stone.

Harold appeared to be arguing with his men. After a few moments he left them and approached Philip again. “Who’s to be in charge, if we work for you?” he said. “Me, or your own master quarryman?”

“Otto here is in charge,” Philip said without hesitation. Harold certainly could not be in charge, in case his loyalty should be won back by Percy. And there could not be two masters, for that would lead to disputes. “You can still run your own team,” Philip said to Harold. “But Otto will be over you.”

Harold looked disappointed and returned to his men. The discussion continued. Tom Builder joined Philip and Otto. “Your plan worked, Father,” he said with a broad grin. “We repossessed the quarry without shedding a

drop of blood. You're amazing."

Philip was inclined to agree, and realized he was guilty of the sin of pride. "It was God who worked the miracle," he said, reminding himself as well as Tom.

Otto said: "Father Philip has offered to hire Harold and his men to work with me."

"Really!" Tom looked displeased. It was the master builder who was supposed to recruit craftsmen, not the prior. "I shouldn't have thought he could afford it."

"I can't," Philip admitted. "But I don't want these men hanging around with nothing to do, waiting for Percy to think of another way to get the quarry back."

Tom looked thoughtful, then he nodded. "And it will do no harm to have a reserve of stone in case Percy succeeds."

Philip was glad Tom saw the sense of what he had done.

Harold seemed to be reaching agreement with his men. He came back to Philip and said: "Will you pay the wages to me, and leave me to distribute the money as I think fit?"

Philip was dubious. That meant the master could take more than his share. But he said: "It's up to the master builder."

"It's common enough," Tom said. "If that's what your team wants, I'm willing."

"In that case, we accept," Harold said.

Harold and Tom shook hands. Philip said: "So everyone gets what they want. Good!"

"There's one who hasn't got what they want," Harold said.

"Who's that?" said Philip.

"Earl Percy's wife, Regan," Harold said lugubriously. "When she finds out what's happened here there's going to be blood all over the floor."

II

There was no hunting today, so the young men at Earlscastle played one of William Hamleigh's favorite games, stoning the cat.

There were always plenty of cats in the castle, and one more or less made no difference. The men closed the doors and shuttered the windows of the hall of the keep, and pushed the furniture up against the wall so that the cat could not hide behind anything; then they made a pile of stones in the middle of the room. The cat, an aging mouser with gray in its fur, sensed the bloodlust in the air and sat near the door, hoping to get out.

Each man had to put a penny into the pot for each stone he threw, and the man who threw the fatal stone took the pot.

As they drew lots to determine the order of throwing, the cat became agitated, pacing up and down in front of the door.

Walter threw first. This was lucky, for although the cat was wary it did not know the nature of the game, and might be taken by surprise. With his back to the animal, Walter picked a stone from the pile and concealed it in his hand; then he turned around slowly and threw suddenly.

He missed. The stone thudded into the door and the cat jumped and ran. The others jeered.

It was unlucky to throw second, for the cat was fresh and light on its feet, whereas later it would be tired and possibly injured. A young squire was next. He watched the cat run around the room, looking for a way out, and waited until it slowed down; then he threw. It was a good shot but the cat saw it coming and dodged it. The men groaned.

It ran around the room again, faster now, getting panicky, jumping up onto the trestles and boards that were stacked against the wall, jumping back down to the floor. An older knight threw next. He feinted a throw, to see which way the cat would jump, then threw for real when it was running, aiming a little ahead of it. The others applauded his cunning, but the cat saw the stone coming and stopped suddenly, avoiding it.

In desperation the cat tried to squeeze behind an oak chest in a corner. The next thrower saw an opportunity and seized it: he threw quickly, while the cat was stationary, and struck its rump. A great cheer went up. The cat gave up trying to squeeze behind the chest and ran on around the room, but now it was limping and it moved more slowly.

It was William's turn next.

He thought he could probably kill the cat if he was careful. In order to tire

it a little more he yelled at it, making it run faster for a moment; then he feinted a throw, with the same effect. If one of the others had delayed like this he would have been booed, but William was the earl's son, so they waited patiently. The cat slowed down, obviously in pain. It approached the door hopefully. William drew back his arm. Unexpectedly the cat stopped against the wall beside the door. William began to throw. Before the stone left his hand the door was flung open, and a priest in black stood there. William threw, but the cat sprang like an arrow from a bow, howling triumphantly. The priest in the doorway gave a frightened, high-pitched shriek, and clutched at the skirts of his robes. The young men burst out laughing. The cat cannoned into the priest's legs, then landed on its feet and shot out through the door. The priest stood frozen in an attitude of fright, like an old woman scared by a mouse, and the young men roared with laughter.

William recognized the priest. It was Bishop Waleran.

He laughed all the more. The fact that the womanish priest who had been frightened by a cat was also a rival of the family made it even better.

The bishop recovered his composure very quickly. He flushed red, pointed an accusing finger at William, and said in a grating voice: "You'll suffer eternal torment in the lowest depths of hell."

William's laughter turned to terror in a flash. His mother had given him nightmares, when he was small, by telling him what the devils did to people in hell, burning them in the flames and poking their eyes out and cutting off their private parts with sharp knives, and ever since then he hated to hear talk of it. "Shut up!" he screamed at the bishop. The room fell silent. William drew his knife and walked toward Waleran. "Don't you come here preaching, you snake!" Waleran did not look frightened at all, just intrigued, as if he was interested to have discovered William's weakness; and that made William angrier still. "I'll swing for you, so help me—"

He was mad enough to knife the bishop, but he was stopped by a voice from the staircase behind him. "William! Enough!"

It was his father.

William stopped and, after a moment, sheathed his knife.

Waleran came into the hall. Another priest followed him and shut the door behind him: Dean Baldwin.

Father said: "I'm surprised to see you, Bishop."

"Because last time we met, you induced the prior of Kingsbridge to double-cross me? Yes, I suppose you would be surprised. I'm not normally a forgiving man." He turned his icy gaze on William again for a moment, then looked back at Father. "But I don't bear a grudge when it's against my interest. We need to talk."

Father nodded thoughtfully. "You'd better come upstairs. You too, William."

Bishop Waleran and Dean Baldwin climbed the stairs to the earl's quarters, and William followed. He felt let down because the cat had escaped. On the other hand, he realized that he too had had a lucky escape: if he had touched the bishop he probably would have been hanged for it. But there was something about Waleran's delicacy, his preciousness, that William hated.

They went into Father's chamber, the room where William had raped Aliena. He remembered that scene every time he was here: her lush white body, the fear on her face, the way she had screamed, the twisted expression on her little brother's face as he had been forced to look on, and then—William's masterstroke—the way he had let Walter enjoy her afterward. He wished he had kept her here, a prisoner, so that he could have her anytime he wanted.

He had thought about her obsessively ever since. He had even tried to track her down. A verderer had been caught trying to sell William's war-horse in Shiring, and had confessed, under torture, that he had stolen it from a girl answering to the description of Aliena. William had learned from the Winchester jailer that she had visited her father before he died. And his friend Mistress Kate, the owner of a brothel he frequented, had told him she had offered Aliena a place in her house. But the trail had petered out. "Don't let her prey on your mind, Willy-boy," Kate had said sympathetically. "You want big tits and long hair? We've got it. Take Betty and Millie together, tonight, four big breasts all to yourself, why don't you?" But Betty and Millie had not been innocent, and white-skinned, and frightened half to death; and they had not pleased him. In fact, he had not achieved real satisfaction with a woman since that night with Aliena here in the earl's chamber.

He put the thought of her out of his mind. Bishop Waleran was speaking to Mother. "I suppose you know that the prior of Kingsbridge has taken possession of your quarry?"

They did not know. William was astonished, and Mother was furious. "What?" she said. "How?"

"Apparently your men-at-arms succeeded in turning away the quarrymen, but the next day when they woke up they found the quarry overrun with monks singing hymns, and they were afraid to lay hands on men of God. Prior Philip then hired your quarrymen, and now they're all working together in perfect harmony. I'm surprised the men-at-arms didn't come back to you to report."

"Where are they, the cowards?" Mother screeched. She was red in the face. "I'll see to them—I'll make them cut off their own balls—"

"I see why they didn't come back," Waleran said.

"Never mind the men-at-arms," Father said. "They're just soldiers. That sly prior is the one responsible. I never imagined he could pull a trick like this. He's outwitted us, that's all."

“Exactly,” said Waleran. “For all his air of saintly innocence, he’s got the cunning of a house rat.”

William thought that Waleran, too, was like a rat, a black one with a pointed snout and sleek black hair, sitting in a corner with a crust in its paws, darting wary glances around the room as it nibbled its dinner. Why was he interested in who occupied the quarry? He was as cunning as Prior Philip: he, too, was plotting something.

Mother said: “We can’t let him get away with this. The Hamleighs must not be seen to be defeated. That prior must be humiliated.”

Father was not so sure. “It’s only a quarry,” he said. “And the king did—”

“It’s not just the quarry, it’s the family’s honor,” Mother interrupted. “Never mind what the king said.”

William agreed with Mother. Philip of Kingsbridge had defied the Hamleighs, and he had to be crushed. If people were not afraid of you, you had nothing. But he did not see what the problem was. “Why don’t we go in with some men and just throw the prior’s quarrymen out?”

Father shook his head. “It’s one thing to obstruct the king’s wishes passively, as we did by working the quarry ourselves; but quite another to send armed men to expel workmen who are there by express permission of the king. I could lose the earldom for that.”

William reluctantly saw his point of view. Father was always cautious, but he was usually justified.

Bishop Waleran said: “I have a suggestion.” William had felt sure he had something up his embroidered black sleeve. “I believe this cathedral should not be built at Kingsbridge.”

William was mystified by this remark. He did not see its relevance. Nor did Father. But Mother’s eyes widened, she stopped scratching her face for a moment, and she said thoughtfully: “That’s an interesting idea.”

“In the old days most cathedrals were in villages such as Kingsbridge,” Waleran went on. “Many of them were moved to towns sixty or seventy years ago, during the time of the first King William. Kingsbridge is a small village in the middle of nowhere. There’s nothing there but a run-down monastery that isn’t rich enough to maintain a cathedral, let alone build one.”

Mother said: “And where would *you* wish it built?”

“Shiring,” said Waleran. “It’s a big town—the population must be a thousand or more—and it has a market and an annual fleece fair. And it’s on a main road. Shiring makes sense. And if we both campaign for it—the bishop and the earl united—we could push it through.”

Father said: “But if the cathedral were at Shiring, the Kingsbridge monks would not be able to look after it.”

“That’s the *point*,” Mother said impatiently. “Without the cathedral, Kingsbridge would be nothing, the priory would sink back into obscurity, and

Philip would once again be a nonentity, which is what he deserves."

"So who would look after the new cathedral?" Father persisted.

"A new chapter of canons," Waleran said. "Appointed by me."

William had been as puzzled as his father, but now he began to see Waleran's thinking: in moving the cathedral to Shiring, Waleran would also take personal control of it.

"What about the money?" said Father. "Who would pay for the new cathedral, if not Kingsbridge Priory?"

"I think we'd find that most of the priory's property is dedicated to the cathedral," Waleran said. "If the cathedral moves, the property goes with it. For example, when King Stephen divided up the old earldom of Shiring, he gave the hill farms to Kingsbridge Priory, as we know only too well; but he did that in order to help finance the new cathedral. If we told him that someone else was building the new cathedral, he would expect the priory to release those lands to the new builders. The monks would put up a fight, of course; but examination of their charters would settle the matter."

The picture was becoming clearer to William. Not only would Waleran get control of the cathedral by this stratagem; he would also get his hands on most of the priory's wealth.

Father was thinking the same thing. "It's a grand scheme for you, Bishop, but what's in it for me?"

It was Mother who answered him. "Can't you see?" she said tetchily. "You own Shiring. Think how much prosperity would come to the town along with the cathedral. There would be hundreds of craftsmen and laborers building the church for years: they all have to live somewhere and pay you rent, and buy food and clothing at your market. Then there will be the canons who run the cathedral; and the worshipers who will come to Shiring instead of Kingsbridge at Easter and Whitsun for the big services; and the pilgrims who come to visit the shrines…. They all spend money." Her eyes were bright with greed. William could not remember seeing her so enthusiastic for a long time. "If we handle this right, we could turn Shiring into one of the most important cities in the kingdom!"

And it will be mine, William thought. When Father dies I will be the earl.

"All right," said Father. "It will ruin Philip, it will bring power to you, Bishop, and it will make me rich. How could it be done?"

"The decision to move the location of the cathedral must be made by the archbishop of Canterbury, theoretically."

Mother looked at him sharply. "Why 'theoretically'?"

"Because there is no archbishop just now. William of Corbeil died at Christmas and King Stephen has not yet nominated his successor. However, we know who is likely to get the job: our old friend Henry of Winchester. He wants the job; the pope has already given him interim control; and his brother

is the king.”

“How much of a friend is he?” said Father. “He didn’t do much for you when you were trying to get this earldom.”

Waleran shrugged. “He’ll help me if he can. We’ll have to make a convincing case.”

Mother said: “He won’t want to make powerful enemies, just now, if he’s hoping to be made archbishop.”

“Correct. But Philip isn’t powerful enough to matter. He’s not likely to be consulted about the choice of archbishop.”

“So why shouldn’t Henry just give us what we want?” William asked.

“Because he’s *not* the archbishop, not yet; and he knows that people are watching him to see how he behaves during his caretakership. He wants to be seen making judicious decisions, not just handing out favors to his friends. Plenty of time for that *after* the election.”

Mother said reflectively: “So the best that can be said is that he will listen sympathetically to our case. What is our case?”

“That Philip can’t build a cathedral, and we can.”

“And how shall we persuade him of that?”

“Have you been to Kingsbridge lately?”

“No.”

“I was there at Easter.” Waleran smiled. “They haven’t started building yet. All they’ve got is a flat piece of ground with a few stakes banged into the soil and some ropes marking where they hope to build. They’ve started digging foundations, but they’ve only gone down a few feet. There’s a mason working there with his apprentice, and the priory carpenter, and occasionally a monk or two doing some laboring. It’s a very unimpressive sight, especially in the rain. I’d like Bishop Henry to see it.”

Mother nodded sagely. William could see that the plan was good, even though he hated the thought of collaborating with the loathsome Waleran Bigod.

Waleran went on: “We’ll brief Henry beforehand on what a small and insignificant place Kingsbridge is, and how poor the monastery is; then we’ll show him the site where it has taken them more than a year to dig a few shallow holes; then we’ll take him to Shiring and impress him with how fast we could build a cathedral there, with the bishop and the earl and the townspeople all putting their maximum energies into the project.”

“Will Henry come?” Mother said anxiously.

“All we can do is ask,” Waleran replied. “I’ll invite him to visit on Whitsunday in his archiepiscopal role. That will flatter him by implying that we already consider him to be the archbishop.”

Father said: “We must keep this secret from Prior Philip.”

“I don’t think that will be possible,” Waleran said. “The bishop can’t

make a surprise visit to Kingsbridge—it would look very odd.”

“But if Philip knows in advance that Bishop Henry is coming, he might make a big effort to advance the building program.”

“What with? He hasn’t any money, especially now that he’s hired all your quarrymen. Quarrymen can’t build walls.” Waleran shook his head from side to side with a satisfied smile. “In fact, there isn’t a thing he can do except hope the sun shines on Whit-sunday.”

At first Philip was pleased that the bishop of Winchester was to come to Kingsbridge. It would mean an open-air service, of course, but that was all right. They would hold it where the old cathedral used to be. In case of rain, the priory carpenter would build a temporary shelter over the altar and the area immediately around it, to keep the bishop dry; and the congregation could just get wet. The visit seemed like an act of faith on Bishop Henry’s part, as if he were saying that he still considered Kingsbridge to be a cathedral, and the lack of a real church was just a temporary problem.

However, it occurred to him to wonder what Henry’s motive was. The usual reason for a bishop to visit a monastery was to get free food, drink and lodging for himself and his entourage; but Kingsbridge was famous—not to say notorious—for the plainness of its food and the austerity of its accommodation, and Philip’s reforms had merely raised its standard from dreadful to barely adequate. Henry was also the richest clergyman in the kingdom, so he certainly was not coming to Kingsbridge for its food and drink. But he had struck Philip as a man who did nothing without a reason.

The more Philip thought about it, the more he suspected that Bishop Waleran had something to do with it. He had expected Waleran to arrive at Kingsbridge within a day or two of the letter, to discuss arrangements for the service and hospitality for Henry, and to make sure Henry would be pleased and impressed with Kingsbridge; and as the days went by and Waleran did not show up, Philip’s misgivings deepened.

However, even in his most mistrustful moments he had not dreamed of the treachery that was revealed, ten days before Whitsun, by a letter from the prior of Canterbury Cathedral. Like Kingsbridge, Canterbury was a cathedral run by Benedictine monks, and monks always helped one another if they could. The prior of Canterbury, who naturally worked closely with the acting archbishop, had learned that Waleran had invited Henry to Kingsbridge for the express purpose of persuading him to move the diocese, and the new cathedral, to Shiring.

Philip was shocked. His heart beat faster and the hand holding the letter trembled. It was a fiendishly clever move by Waleran, and Philip had not anticipated it, had not imagined anything like it.

It was his own lack of foresight that shook him. He knew how treacherous Waleran was. The bishop had tried to double-cross him, a year ago, over the Shiring earldom. And he would never forget how angry Waleran had been when Philip had outwitted him. He could picture Waleran's face, suffused with rage, as he said *I swear by all that's holy, you'll never build your church*. But as time went by the menace of that oath had faded, and Philip's guard had slipped. Now here was a brutal reminder that Waleran had a long memory.

"Bishop Waleran says you have no money, and in fifteen months you have built nothing," the prior of Canterbury wrote. "He says that Bishop Henry will see for himself that the cathedral will never get built if it is left to Kingsbridge Priory to build it. He argues that the time to make the move is now, before any real progress is made."

Waleran was too cunning to get caught in an outright lie, so he was purveying a gross exaggeration. Philip had in fact achieved a great deal. He had cleared the ruins, approved the plans, laid out the new east end, made a start on the foundations, and begun felling trees and quarrying stone. But he did not have much to show a visitor. And he had overcome terrific obstacles to achieve this much—reforming the priory's finances, winning a major grant of lands from the king, and defeating Earl Percy over the quarry. It was not fair!

With the letter from Canterbury in his hand, he went to his window and looked out over the building site. Spring rains had turned it into a sea of mud. Two young monks with their hoods pulled over their heads were carrying timber up from the riverside. Tom Builder had made a contraption with a rope and a pulley for lifting barrels of earth out of the foundation hole, and he was operating the winding wheel while his son Alfred, down in the hole, filled the barrels with wet mud. They looked as though they could work at that pace forever and never make any difference. Anyone but a professional would see this scene and conclude that no cathedral would be built here this side of the Day of Judgment.

Philip left the window and returned to his writing desk. What could be done? For a moment he was tempted to do nothing. Let Bishop Henry come and look, and make his own decision, he thought. If the cathedral is to be built at Shiring, so be it. Let Bishop Waleran take control of it and use it for his own ends; let it bring prosperity to the town of Shiring and the evil Hamleigh dynasty. God's will be done.

He knew that would not do, of course. Having faith in God did not mean sitting back and doing nothing. It meant believing that you would find success if you did your best honestly and energetically. Philip's holy duty was to do all he could to prevent the cathedral from falling into the hands of cynical and immoral people who would exploit it for their own aggrandizement. That meant showing Bishop Henry that his building program was well under way

and Kingsbridge had the energy and determination to finish it.

Was it true? The fact was that Philip was going to find it mortally difficult to build a cathedral here. Already he had almost been forced to abandon the project just because the earl refused him access to the quarry. But he knew he would succeed, in the end, because God would help him. However, his own conviction would not be enough to persuade Bishop Henry.

He decided he would do his best to make the site look more impressive, for what it was worth. He would set all the monks to work for the ten days remaining before Whitsun. Perhaps they could get part of the foundation hole dug to its full depth, so that Tom and Alfred could begin laying the foundation stones. Perhaps a part of the foundation could be completed up to ground level, so that Tom could start building a wall. That would be a little better than the present scene, but not much. What Philip really needed was a hundred laborers, but he did not have the money even for ten.

Bishop Henry would arrive on a Sunday, of course, so nobody would be working, unless Philip were to co-opt the congregation. That would provide a hundred laborers. He imagined himself standing up in front of them and announcing a new kind of Whitsun service: instead of singing hymns and saying prayers, we're going to dig holes and carry stones. They would be astonished. They would…

What would they do, actually?

They would probably cooperate wholeheartedly.

He frowned. Either I'm crazy, he thought, or this idea could actually work.

He thought about it some more. I get up at the end of the service, and I say that today's penance for forgiveness of all sins is half a day's labor on the cathedral building site. Bread and ale will be provided at dinnertime.

They would do it. Of course they would.

He felt the need to try the idea out on someone else. He considered Milius, but rejected him: Milius's thought processes were too similar to his own. He needed someone with a slightly different outlook. He decided to talk to Cuthbert Whitehead, the cellarer. He pulled on his cloak, drew the hood forward to keep the rain off his face, and went out.

He hurried across the muddy building site, passing Tom with a perfunctory wave, and made for the kitchen courtyard. This range of buildings now included a hen house, a cow shed and a dairy, for Philip did not like to spend scarce cash on simple commodities that the monks could provide for themselves, such as eggs and butter.

He entered the cellarer's storeroom in the undercroft below the kitchen. He inhaled the dry, fragrant air, full of the herbs and spices Cuthbert had stored. Cuthbert was counting garlic, peering at the strings of bulbs and muttering numbers in an undertone. Philip saw with a small shock that

Cuthbert was getting old: his flesh seemed to be wasting away beneath his skin.

“Thirty-seven,” Cuthbert said aloud. “Would you like a cup of wine?”

“No, thank you.” Philip found that wine in the daytime made him lazy and short-tempered. No doubt that was why Saint Benedict counseled monks to drink in moderation. “I want your advice, not your victuals. Come and sit down.”

Negotiating a path through the boxes and barrels, Cuthbert stumbled over a sack and almost fell before sitting on a three-legged stool in front of Philip. The storeroom was not as tidy as it had once been, Philip noted. He was struck by a thought. “Are you having trouble with your eyesight, Cuthbert?”

“It’s not what it was, but it will do,” Cuthbert said shortly.

His eyes had probably been poor for years—that might even be why he had never learned to read very well. However, he was obviously touchy about it, so Philip said no more, but made a mental note to begin grooming a replacement cellarer. “I’ve had a very disturbing letter from the prior of Canterbury,” he said, and he told Cuthbert about Bishop Waleran’s scheming. He concluded by saying: “The only way to make the site look like a hive of activity is to get the congregation to work on it. Can you think of any reason why I shouldn’t do that?”

Cuthbert did not even think about it. “On the contrary, it’s a good idea,” he said immediately.

“It’s a little unorthodox, isn’t it?” Philip said.

“It’s been done before.”

“Really?” Philip was surprised and pleased. “Where?”

“I’ve heard of it in several places.”

Philip was excited. “Does it work?”

“Sometimes. It probably depends on the weather.”

“How is it managed? Does the priest make an announcement at the end of the service, or what?”

“It’s more organized than that. The bishop, or prior, sends out messengers to the parish churches, announcing that forgiveness for sins may be had in return for work on the building site.”

“That’s a grand idea,” Philip said enthusiastically. “We might get a bigger congregation than usual, attracted by the novelty.”

“Or a smaller one,” Cuthbert said. “Some people would rather give money to the priest, or light a candle to a saint, than spend all day wading in mud and carrying heavy stones.”

“I never thought of that,” Philip said, suddenly deflated. “Perhaps this isn’t such a good idea after all.”

“What other ideas have you got?”

“Not one.”

“Then you’ll have to try this, and hope for the best, won’t you?”
“Yes,” said Philip. “Hope for the best.”

III

Philip did not sleep at all during the night before Whitsunday.

There had been a week of sunshine, perfect for his plan—more people would volunteer in fine weather—but as darkness fell on the Saturday, it began to rain. He lay awake listening disconsolately to the raindrops on the roof and the wind in the trees. He felt he had prayed enough. God must be fully aware of the circumstances now.

On the previous Sunday, every monk in the priory had visited one or more churches to speak to the congregations and tell them they could obtain forgiveness for their sins by working on the cathedral building site on Sundays. On Whitsunday they would get forgiveness for the past year, and thereafter a day of labor was worth a week of routine sins, excluding murder and sacrilege. Philip himself had gone to the town of Shiring, and had spoken at each of its four parish churches. He had sent two monks to Winchester to visit as many as possible of the multitude of small churches in that city. Winchester was two days' journey away, but Whitsun was a six-day holiday, and people would make such a trip for a big fair or a spectacular service. In total, many thousands of people had heard the message. There was no knowing how many might respond.

For the rest of the time they had all been working on the site. The good weather and the long days of early summer had helped, and they had achieved most of what Philip had hoped for. The foundation had been laid for the wall at the easternmost end of the chancel. Some of the foundation for the north wall had been dug to its full depth, ready for foundation stones to be laid; and Tom had built enough lifting mechanisms to keep scores of people busy digging the rest of the vast hole, if scores of people should turn up. In addition, the riverbank was crowded with timber sent downstream by the foresters and with stones from the quarry, all of which had to be carried up the slope to the cathedral site. There was work here for hundreds.

But would anyone come?

At midnight Philip got up and walked through the rain to the crypt for matins. When he returned after the service, the rain had stopped. He did not go back to bed, but sat up reading. Nowadays this period between midnight and dawn was the only time he had for study and meditation, for the whole of the day was always taken up with the administration of the monastery.

Tonight, however, he had trouble concentrating, and his mind kept returning to the prospect of the day ahead, and the chances of success or

failure. Tomorrow he could lose everything he had worked for over the past year and more. It occurred to him, perhaps because he was feeling fatalistic, that he ought not to want success for its own sake. Was it his pride that was at stake here? Pride was the sin he was most vulnerable to. Then he thought of all the people who depended on him for support, protection and employment: the monks, the priory servants, the quarrymen, Tom and Alfred, the villagers of Kingsbridge and the worshipers of the whole county. Bishop Waleran would not care for them the way Philip did. Waleran seemed to think he was entitled to use people any way he chose in the service of God. Philip believed that caring for people *was* the service of God. That was what salvation was about. No, it could not be God's will that Bishop Waleran should win this contest. Perhaps my pride is at stake, a little bit, Philip admitted to himself; but there are men's souls in the balance too.

At last dawn cracked the night, and once again he walked to the crypt, this time for the service of prime. The monks were restless and excited: they knew that today was crucial to their future. The sacrist hurried through the service, and for once Philip forgave him.

When they left the crypt and headed toward the refectory for breakfast it was fully light, and there was a clear blue sky. God had sent the weather they had prayed for, at least. It was a good start.

Tom Builder knew that his future was at stake today.

Philip had shown him the letter from the prior of Canterbury. Tom was sure that if the cathedral was built at Shiring, Waleran would hire his own master builder. He would not want to use a design Philip had approved, nor would he risk employing someone who might be loyal to Philip. For Tom, it was Kingsbridge or nothing. This was the only opportunity he would ever get to build a cathedral, and it was in jeopardy today.

He was invited to attend chapter with the monks in the morning. This happened occasionally. Usually it was because they were going to discuss the building program and might need his expert opinion on questions of design, cost or timetabling. Today he was going to make arrangements for employing the volunteer workers, if any came. He wanted the site to be a hive of busy, efficient activity when Bishop Henry arrived.

He sat patiently through the readings and the prayers, not understanding the Latin words, thinking about his plans for the day; then Philip switched to English and called on him to outline the organization of the work.

"I shall be building the east wall of the cathedral and Alfred will be laying stone in the foundations," Tom began. "The aim, in both cases, is to show Bishop Henry how far advanced the building is."

"How many men will the two of you need to help you?" Philip asked.

“Alfred will need two laborers to bring the stones to him. He’ll be using material from the ruins of the old church. He’ll also need someone to make mortar. I’ll also need a mortar maker and two laborers. Alfred can use misshapen stones in the foundations, as long as they’re flat top and bottom; but my stones will have to be properly dressed, since they will be visible aboveground, so I’ve brought two stonecutters back from the quarry to help me.”

Philip said: “All that is very important for impressing Bishop Henry, but most of the volunteers will be digging the foundations.”

“That’s right. The foundations are marked out for the whole of the chancel of the cathedral, and most of them are still only a few feet deep. Monks must man the winding gear—I’ve instructed several of you how to do it—and the volunteers can fill the barrels.”

Remigius said: “What if we get more volunteers than we can use?”

“We can employ just about any number,” Tom said. “If we haven’t enough lifting devices, people can carry earth out of the holes in buckets and baskets. The carpenter will have to stand by to make extra ladders—we’ve got the timber.”

“But there’s a limit to the number of people who can get down in that foundation hole,” Remigius persisted.

Tom had the feeling that Remigius was just argumentative. “It will take several hundred,” he said testily. “It’s a big hole.”

Philip said: “And there’s other work to be done, besides digging.”

“Indeed,” Tom said. “The other main area of work is carrying timber and stone up to the site from the riverside. You monks must make sure the materials are stacked in the right places on the site. The stones should go beside the foundation holes, but on the *outside* of the church, where they won’t get in the way. The carpenter will tell you where to put the timber.”

Philip said: “Will all the volunteers be unskilled?”

“Not necessarily. If we get people from the towns, there may be some craftsmen among them—I hope so. We must find out who they are and use them. Carpenters can build lodges for winter work. Any masons can cut stones and lay foundations. If there’s a blacksmith, we’ll put him to work in the village forge, making tools. All that sort of thing will be tremendously useful.”

Milius the bursar said: “That’s all quite clear. I’d like to get started. Some of the villagers are here already, waiting to be told what to do.”

There was something else Tom needed to tell them, something important but subtle, and he was searching for the right words. Monks could be arrogant, and might alienate the volunteers. Tom wanted today’s operation to be easygoing and cheerful. “I’ve worked with volunteers before,” he began. “It’s important not to…not to treat them like servants. We may feel that they

are laboring to obtain a heavenly reward, and should therefore work harder than they would for money; but they don't necessarily take that attitude. They feel they're working for nothing, and doing a great kindness to us thereby; and if we seem ungrateful they will work slowly and make mistakes. It will be best to rule them with a light touch."

He caught Philip's eye and saw that the prior was suppressing a smile, as if he knew what misgivings underlay Tom's honeyed words. "A good point," Philip said. "If we handle them right, these people will feel happy and uplifted, and that will create a good atmosphere, which will make a positive impression on Bishop Henry." He looked around at the assembled monks. "If there are no more questions, let's begin."

Aliena had enjoyed a year of security and prosperity under the wing of Prior Philip.

All her plans had worked. She and Richard had toured the countryside buying fleeces from peasants all last spring and summer, selling to Philip every time they had a standard woolsack. They had ended the season with five pounds of silver.

Father had died just a few days after they saw him, although Aliena did not find out until Christmas. She had located his grave, after spending much hard-earned silver on bribes, in a pauper's cemetery in Winchester. She cried hard, not just for him but for the life they had lived together, secure and carefree, the life that would never come back. In a way she had said goodbye to him before he died: when she left the jail she knew she would never see him again. In another way he was still with her, for she was bound by the oath he had made her swear, and she was resigned to spending her life doing his will.

During the winter she and Richard lived in a small house up against the wall of Kingsbridge Priory. They had built a cart, buying the wheels from the Kingsbridge cartwright, and in the spring they had bought a young ox to pull it. The shearing season was now in full swing and already they had made more than the cost of the ox and the new cart. Next year, perhaps she would employ a man to help her, and find Richard a place as a page in the household of a minor noble, so that he could begin his knightly training.

But it was all dependent on Prior Philip.

As an eighteen-year-old girl on her own, she was still considered fair game by every thief and many legitimate traders. She had tried to sell a sack of wool to merchants in Shiring and Gloucester, just to see what would happen, and both times she had been offered half price. There was never more than one merchant in a town so they knew she had no alternative. Eventually she would have her own storehouse, and sell her entire stock to the Flemish

buyers; but that time was a long way off. Meanwhile she was dependent on Philip.

And Philip's position had suddenly become precarious.

She was constantly alert to danger from outlaws and thieves, but it had come as a great shock to her, when everything was going smoothly, to have her whole livelihood threatened in such an unexpected way.

Richard had not wanted to work on the cathedral building site on Whitsunday—he was nothing if not ungrateful—but Aliena had bullied him into agreeing, and the two of them walked the few yards to the priory close soon after sunrise. Almost the whole village had turned out: thirty or forty men, some of them with their wives and children. Aliena was surprised, until she reflected that Prior Philip was their lord, and when your lord asked for volunteers it was probably unwise to refuse. In the past year she had gained a startling new perspective on the lives of ordinary people.

Tom Builder was giving the villagers their assignments. Richard immediately went to speak to Tom's son Alfred. They were almost the same age—Richard was fifteen and Alfred about a year older—and they played football with the other boys in the village every Sunday. The little girl, Martha, was here too, but the woman, Ellen, and the funny-looking boy with red hair had disappeared, no one knew where. Aliena remembered when Tom's family had come to Earlscastle. They had been destitute then. Like Aliena, they had been saved by Prior Philip.

Aliena and Richard were given a shovel each and told to dig foundations. The ground was damp but the sun was out and it would soon dry the surface. Aliena began to dig energetically. Even with fifty people working, it took a long time to make the holes noticeably deeper. Richard rested on his shovel rather frequently. One time Aliena said: "If you ever want to be a knight, dig!" But it made no difference.

She was thinner and stronger than she had been a year ago, thanks to tramping the roads and lifting heavy loads of raw wool, but now she found that digging could still make her back ache. She was grateful when Prior Philip rang a bell and declared a break. Monks brought hot bread from the kitchen and served weak beer. The sun was growing stronger, and some of the men stripped to the waist.

While they were resting, a group of strangers came through the gate. Aliena looked at them hopefully. There were just a handful of them, but perhaps they were the forerunners of a large crowd. They came over to the table where the bread and beer was being handed out, and Prior Philip welcomed them.

"Where are you from?" he asked as they gulped gratefully at their pots of beer.

"From Horsted," one of them replied, wiping his mouth on his sleeve.

That was promising: Horsted was a village of two or three hundred people a few miles west of Kingsbridge. They might hope for another hundred volunteers from there, with luck.

“And how many of you are coming, in all?” Philip asked.

The man looked surprised at the question. “Just us four,” he replied.

During the next hour people trickled through the priory gate until, by midmorning, there were seventy or eighty volunteers at work, including the villagers. Then the flow stopped altogether.

It was not enough.

Philip stood at the east end, watching Tom build a wall. He had already constructed the bases of two buttresses up to the level of the third course of stones, and now he was building the wall between. It would probably never be finished, Philip thought despondently.

The first thing Tom did, when the laborers brought him a stone, was to take out an iron instrument shaped like the letter L and use it to check that the edges of the stone were square. Then he would shovel a layer of mortar on to the wall, furrow the mortar with the point of his trowel, put the new stone on, and scrape off the surplus mortar. In placing the stone he was guided by a taut string which was stretched between the two buttresses.

Philip noticed that the stone was almost as smooth on the top and bottom, where the mortar was, as on the side that would show. This surprised him, and he asked Tom the reason. “A stone must never touch the ones above or below,” Tom replied. “That’s what the mortar’s for.”

“Why must they not touch?”

“It causes cracks.” Tom stood upright to explain. “If you tread on a slate roof, your foot will go through it; but if you put a plank across the roof, you can walk on it without damaging the slates. The plank spreads the weight, and that’s what mortar does.”

Philip had never thought of that. Building was an intriguing business, especially with someone like Tom, who was able to explain what he was doing.

The roughest face of the stone was the back. Surely, Philip thought, that face would be visible from inside the church? Then he recalled that Tom was in fact building a double-skinned wall with a cavity between, so that the back of each stone would be hidden.

When Tom had laid the stone on the bed of mortar, he picked up his level. This was an iron triangle with a leather thong attached to its apex and some markings on its base. The thong had a lead weight attached to it so that it always hung straight down. He put the base of the instrument on the stone and watched how the leather thong fell. If it hung to one side or the other of the

center line, he would tap the stone with his hammer until it was exactly level. Then he would move the instrument until it straddled the join between the two adjacent stones, to check that the tops of the stones were exactly in line. Finally he turned the instrument sideways on the stone to make sure it was not leaning one way or the other. Before picking up a new stone he would snap the taut string to satisfy himself that the faces of the stones were in a straight line. Philip had not realized it was so important that stone walls should be precisely straight and true.

He lifted his gaze to the rest of the building site. It was so big that eighty men and women and a few children were lost in it. They were working away cheerfully in the sunshine, but they were so few that it seemed to him there was an air of futility about their efforts. He had originally hoped for a hundred people, but now he saw that even that would not have been enough.

Another little group came through the gateway, and Philip forced himself to go to greet them with a smile. There was no need for them to know that their efforts would be wasted. They would gain forgiveness for their sins, anyway.

It was a large group, he saw as he approached them. He counted twelve, and then two more came in. Perhaps after all he would have a hundred people by midday, when the bishop was expected. “God bless you all,” he said to them. He was about to tell them where to start digging when he was interrupted by a loud shout. “Philip!”

He frowned disapprovingly. The voice belonged to Brother Milius. Even Milius was supposed to call Philip “Father” in public. Philip looked in the direction from which the voice came. Milius was balancing on the priory wall in a somewhat undignified stance. In a calm but carrying voice, Philip said: “Brother Milius, get off the wall.”

To his astonishment Milius stayed there and shouted: “Come and look at this!”

The new arrivals were getting a poor impression of monastic obedience, Philip thought, but he could not help wondering what it was that had got Milius so excited that he had forgotten all his manners. “Come here and tell me about it, Milius,” he said in a voice he normally reserved for noisy novices.

“You must look!” Milius yelled.

He’d better have a very good reason for this, Philip thought crossly; but since he did not want to give his closest colleague a telling-off in front of all these strangers, he was obliged to smile and do as Milius asked. Feeling irritated to the point of anger, he walked across the muddy ground in front of the stable and jumped up onto the low wall. “What is the *meaning* of this behavior?” he hissed.

“Just look!” Milius said, pointing.

Following his gesture, Philip looked out, over the roofs of the village, past the river, to the road that followed the rise and fall of the land to the west. At first he could not believe his eyes. Between the fields of green crops, the undulating road was a solid mass of people, hundreds of them, all walking toward Kingsbridge. “What is it?” he said uncomprehendingly. “An army?” And then he realized that, of course, they were his volunteers. His heart leaped for joy. “Look at them!” he shouted. “There must be five hundred—a thousand—more!”

“That’s right!” Milius said happily. “They came, after all!”

“We’re saved.” Philip was too thrilled to remember why he was supposed to be angry with Milius. The mass of people filled the road all the way to the bridge, and the line wound through the village all the way to the priory gate. The people he had greeted were the head of a phalanx. They were pouring through the gate now, and milling about at the western end of the building site, waiting for someone to tell them what to do. “Hallelujah!” he yelled recklessly.

It was not enough to rejoice—he had to use these people. He jumped down off the wall. “Come on!” he shouted to Milius. “Call all the monks off laboring—we’re going to need them as marshals. Tell the kitchener to bake all the bread he can and roll out some more barrels of beer. We’ll need more buckets and shovels. We must get all these people working before Bishop Henry arrives!”

For the next hour Philip was frantically busy. At first, just to get people out of the way, he assigned a hundred or more to the task of bringing materials up from the riverbank. As soon as Milius had assembled a supervisory group of monks, he began sending the volunteers down into the foundations. They soon ran out of shovels, barrels and buckets. Philip ordered all the cooking pots brought from the kitchen, and set some of the volunteers to making rough timber boxes and basketwork platters for carrying earth. There were not enough ladders or lifting devices, so they made a long slope at one end of the largest foundation hole so that people could walk into and out of it. He realized he had not given sufficient thought to the question of where he was going to put the vast quantity of earth that was coming out of the foundations. Now it was too late to mull it over: he made a snap decision, and ordered the earth dumped on a patch of rocky ground near the river. Perhaps it might become cultivable. While he was giving that order, Bernard Kitchener came to him in a panic, saying he had only catered for two hundred people at most, and there seemed to be at least a thousand here. “Build a fire in the kitchen courtyard and make soup in an iron bath,” Philip said. “Water the beer. Use all the stores. Get some of the villagers to prepare food on their own hearths.

Improvise!” He turned away from the kitchener and resumed organizing laborers.

He was still giving orders when someone tapped him on the shoulder and said in French: “Prior Philip, may I have your attention for a moment?” It was Dean Baldwin, Waleran Bigod’s associate.

Philip turned around and saw the entire visiting party, all on horseback and gorgeously dressed, gazing in astonishment at the scene around them. There was Bishop Henry, a short, thickset man with a pugnacious look about him, his monkish haircut contrasting strangely with his embroidered scarlet coat. Beside him was Bishop Waleran, dressed in black as always, his dismay not quite concealed by his habitual look of frozen disdain. There was fat Percy Hamleigh, his strapping son, William, and his hideous wife, Regan: Percy and William were looking bemused, but Regan understood exactly what Philip had done and she was furious.

Philip returned his attention to Bishop Henry, and found to his surprise that the bishop was favoring him with a look of intense interest. Philip returned his gaze frankly. Bishop Henry’s expression showed surprise, curiosity and a kind of amused respect. After a moment Philip approached the bishop, held his horse’s head, and kissed the beringed hand that Henry proffered.

Henry dismounted with a smooth, agile movement, and the rest of his party followed suit. Philip called a couple of monks to stable the horses. Henry was the same age as Philip, approximately, but his florid complexion and well-covered frame made him look older. “Well, Father Philip,” he said. “I came to verify reports that you were not capable of getting a new cathedral built here at Kingsbridge.” He paused, looked around at the hundreds of workers, then returned his gaze to Philip. “It seems I was misinformed.”

Philip’s heart missed a beat. Henry could hardly make it plainer: Philip had won.

Philip turned to Bishop Waleran. Waleran’s face was a mask of suppressed fury. He knew he had been defeated again. Philip knelt, bowing his head to hide the look of triumphant delight on his face, and kissed Waleran’s hand.

Tom was enjoying building the wall. It was so long since he had done this that he had forgotten the deep tranquillity that came from laying one stone upon another in perfect straight lines and watching the structure grow.

When the volunteers started to arrive by the hundred, and he realized that Philip’s scheme was going to work, he enjoyed it all the more. These stones would be part of Tom’s cathedral; and this wall that was now only a foot high would eventually reach for the sky. Tom felt he was at the beginning of the

rest of his life.

He knew when Bishop Henry arrived. Like a stone dropped into a pond, the bishop sent a ripple through the mass of laborers, as people stopped work for a moment to look up at the richly dressed figures picking their dainty way through the mud. Tom continued to lay stones. The bishop must be bowled over by the sight of a thousand volunteers cheerfully and enthusiastically laboring to build their new cathedral. Now Tom needed to make an equally good impression. He was never at ease with well-dressed people, but he needed to appear competent and wise, calm and self-assured, the kind of man to whom you would gratefully entrust the worrisome complexities of a vast and costly building project.

He kept a lookout for the visitors and put down his trowel as the party approached him. Prior Philip led Bishop Henry up to Tom, and Tom knelt and kissed the bishop's hand. Philip said: "Tom is our builder, sent to us by God on the day the old church burned down."

Tom knelt again to Bishop Waleran, then looked at the rest of the party. He reminded himself that he was the master builder, and should not be overly subservient. He recognized Percy Hamleigh, for whom he had once built half a house. "My Lord Percy," he said with a small bow. He spotted Percy's hideous wife. "My Lady Regan." Then his eye fell on the son. He remembered how William had almost run Martha down on his great war-horse; and how William had tried to buy Ellen in the forest. That young man was a nasty piece of work. But Tom made his face a polite mask. "And young Lord William. Greetings."

Bishop Henry was looking keenly at Tom. "Have you drawn your plans, Tom Builder?"

"Yes, my lord bishop. Would you like to see them?"

"Most certainly."

"Perhaps you will step this way."

Henry nodded, and Tom led the way to his shed, a few yards away. He stepped inside the little wooden building and brought out the ground plan, drawn in plaster on a large wooden frame four feet long. He leaned it against the wall of the shed and stepped back.

This was a delicate moment. Most people could not read a plan, but bishops and lords hated to admit it, so it was necessary to explain the concept to them in a way that did not reveal their ignorance to the rest of the world. Some bishops did understand it, of course, and then they were insulted when a mere builder presumed to instruct them.

Nervously, Tom pointed at the plan and said: "This is the wall I'm building."

"Yes, the eastern facade, obviously," said Henry. That answered the question: he could read a plan perfectly well. "Why aren't the transepts

aisled?”

“For economy,” Tom answered promptly. “However, we won’t start building them for another five years, and if the monastery continues to prosper as it has done in the first year under Prior Philip, it may well be that by then we will be able to afford aisled transepts.” He had praised Philip and answered the question at the same time, and he felt rather clever.

Henry nodded approval. “Sensible to plan modestly and leave room for expansion. Show me the elevation.”

Tom got out the elevation. He made no comment on it, now that he knew Henry was able to understand what he was looking at. This was confirmed when Henry said: “The proportions are pleasing.”

“Thank you,” Tom said. The bishop seemed pleased with everything. Tom added: “It’s a modest cathedral, but it will be lighter and more beautiful than the old one.”

“And how long will it take to complete?”

“Fifteen years, if the work is uninterrupted.”

“Which it never is. However. Can you show us what it will *look* like—I mean, to someone standing outside?”

Tom understood him. “You want to see a sketch.”

“Yes.”

“Certainly.” Tom returned to his wall, with the bishop’s party in tow. He knelt over his mortarboard and spread the mortar in a uniform layer, smoothing the surface. Then, with the point of his trowel, he drew a sketch of the west end of the church in the mortar. He knew he was good at this. The bishop, his party, and all the monks and volunteer workers nearby watched in fascination. Drawing always seemed a miracle to people who could not do it. In a few moments Tom had created a line drawing of the west facade, with its three arched doorways, its big window, and its flanking turrets. It was a simple trick, but it never failed to impress.

“Remarkable,” said Bishop Henry when the drawing was done. “May God’s blessing be added to your skill.”

Tom smiled. That amounted to a powerful endorsement of his appointment.

Prior Philip said: “My lord bishop, will you take some refreshment before you conduct the service?”

“Gladly.”

Tom was relieved. His test was over and he had passed it.

“Perhaps you would step into the prior’s house, just across here,” Philip said to the bishop. The party began to move off. Philip squeezed Tom’s arm and said in a murmur of restrained jubilation: “We’ve done it!”

Tom breathed a sigh of relief as the dignitaries left him. He felt pleased and proud. Yes, he thought, we’ve done it. Bishop Henry was more than

impressed: he was flabbergasted, despite his composure. Obviously Waleran had primed him to expect a scene of lethargy and inactivity, so the reality had been even more striking. In the end Waleran's malice had worked against him and heightened the triumph of Philip and Tom.

Just as he was basking in the glow of an honest victory, he heard a familiar voice. "Hello, Tom Builder."

He turned around and saw Ellen.

It was Tom's turn to be flabbergasted. The cathedral crisis had so filled his mind that he had not thought about her all day. He gazed at her happily. She looked just the same as the day she had walked away: slender, brown-skinned, with dark hair that moved like waves on a beach, and those deep-set luminous golden eyes. She smiled at him with that full-lipped mouth that always made him think of kissing.

He was seized by an urge to take her in his arms but he fought it down. With some difficulty he managed to say: "Hello, Ellen."

A young man beside her said: "Hello, Tom."

Tom looked at him curiously.

Ellen said: "Don't you remember Jack?"

"Jack!" he said, startled. The lad had changed. He was a little taller than his mother now, and he had the bony physique that made grandmothers say that a boy had outgrown his strength. He still had bright red hair, white skin and blue eyes, but his features had resolved into more attractive proportions, and one day he might even be handsome.

Tom looked back at Ellen. For a moment he just enjoyed staring at her. He wanted to say *I've missed you, I can't tell you how much I've missed you*, and he almost did, but then he lost his nerve, and instead he said: "Well, where have you been?"

"We've been living where we always lived, in the forest," she said.

"And what made you come back today, of all days?"

"We heard about the appeal for volunteers, and we were curious to know how you were getting along. And I haven't forgotten that I promised to come back one day."

"I'm so glad you did," Tom said. "I've been longing to see you."

She looked guarded. "Oh?"

This was the moment for which he had been waiting and planning for a year, and now that it had come he was scared. Until now he had been able to live in hope, but if she turned him down today he would know he had lost her forever. He was frightened to begin. The silence dragged out. He took a deep breath. "Listen," he said. "I want you to come back to me. Now, please don't say anything until you've heard what I have to say—please?"

"All right," she said neutrally.

"Philip is a very good prior. The monastery is getting wealthier all the

time, thanks to his good management. My job here is secure. We won't have to tramp the roads again, ever, I promise."

"It wasn't that—"

"I know, but I want to tell you everything."

"All right."

"I've built a house in the village, with two rooms and a chimney, and I can make it bigger. We wouldn't have to live in the priory."

"But Philip owns the village."

"Philip is indebted to me right now." Tom waved an arm to indicate the scene all around. "He knows he couldn't have done this without me. If I ask him to forgive you for what you did, and to regard your year of exile as penance enough, he'll agree. He couldn't deny me that, today of all days."

"What about the boys?" she said. "Am I supposed to watch Alfred spill Jack's blood every time he feels irritable?"

"I think I've got the answer to that, really," Tom said. "Alfred is a mason now. I'll take Jack as my apprentice. That way, Alfred won't be resentful of Jack's idleness. And you can teach Alfred to read and write, so that the two boys will be equal—both workingmen, both literate."

"You've thought about this a lot, haven't you?" she said.

"Yes."

He waited for her reaction. He was no good at being persuasive. All he could do was set out the situation. If only he could have drawn her a sketch! He felt he had dealt with every possible objection. She must agree now! But still she hesitated. "I'm not sure," she said.

His self-control broke. "Oh, Ellen, don't say that." He was afraid of crying in front of all these people, and he was so choked up that he could hardly speak. "I love you so much, please don't go away again," he begged. "The only thing that's kept me going is the hope that you'd come back. I just can't bear to live without you. Don't close the gates of paradise. Can't you see that I love you with all my heart?"

Her manner changed instantly. "Why didn't you say so, then?" she whispered, and she came to him. He wrapped his arms around her. "I love you, too, you silly fool," she said.

He felt weak with joy. She *does* love me, she *does*, he thought. He hugged her hard, then he looked at her face. "Will you marry me, Ellen?"

There were tears in her eyes, but she was smiling too. "Yes, Tom, I'll marry you," she said. She lifted her face.

He pulled her to him and kissed her mouth. He had dreamed of this for a year. He closed his eyes and concentrated on the delightful touch of her full lips on his. Her mouth was slightly open and her lips were moist. The kiss was so delicious that for a moment he forgot himself. Then someone nearby said: "Don't swallow her, man!"

He pulled away from her and said: “We’re in a church!”

“I don’t care,” she said merrily, and she kissed him again.

Prior Philip had outwitted them again, William thought bitterly as he sat in the prior’s house, drinking Philip’s watery wine and eating sweetmeats from the priory kitchen. It had taken William a while to appreciate the brilliance and completeness of Philip’s victory. There had been nothing wrong with Bishop Waleran’s original assessment of the situation: it was true that Philip was short of money and would have great difficulty building a cathedral at Kingsbridge. But despite that, the wily monk had made dogged progress, hired a master builder, started the building and then, out of nothing, conjured a vast work force to bamboozle Bishop Henry. And Henry had been duly impressed, all the more so because Waleran had painted such a bleak picture in advance.

That damned monk knew he had won, too. He could not keep the triumphant smile off his face. Now he was deep in conversation with Bishop Henry, talking animatedly about breeds of sheep and the price of wool, and Henry was listening carefully, almost respectfully, meanwhile rudely ignoring William’s mother and father, who were far more important than a mere prior.

Philip was going to regret this day. Nobody was allowed to best the Hamleighs and get away with it. They had not reached the position they enjoyed today by allowing monks to get the better of them. Bartholomew of Shiring had insulted them and had died in a traitor’s jail. Philip would fare no better.

Tom Builder was another man who was going to regret crossing the Hamleighs. William had not forgotten how Tom had defied him at Durstead, holding his horse’s head and forcing him to pay the workmen. Today Tom had disrespectfully called him “young Lord William.” He was obviously hand in glove with Philip now, building cathedrals, not manor houses. He would learn that it was better to take your chances with the Hamleighs than to join forces with their enemies.

William sat quietly fuming until Bishop Henry got to his feet and said he was ready to hold the service. Prior Philip gestured to a novice, who went running from the room, and a few moments later a bell began to ring.

They all left the house, Bishop Henry first, Bishop Waleran second, then Prior Philip, then the lay people. All the monks were waiting outside, and they fell into line behind Philip, forming a procession. The Hamleighs had to bring up the rear.

The volunteers filled the entire western half of the priory close, sitting on walls and roofs. Henry mounted a platform in the middle of the building site. The monks formed up in rows behind him, where the quire of the new

cathedral would be. The Hamleighs and the other lay members of the bishop's entourage made their way to what would become the nave.

As they took their places, William saw Aliena.

She looked very different. She wore rough, cheap clothing and wooden clogs, and the mass of curls that framed her head was damp with sweat. But it was definitely Aliena, and she was still so beautiful that his throat went dry and he stared at her, unable to tear his gaze away, while the service began and the priory close filled with the sound of a thousand voices saying the Our Father.

She seemed to feel his intense look, for she appeared troubled, shifting from foot to foot and then glancing around as if searching. Finally she met his eyes. An expression of horror and fear came over her face, and she shrank back, although she was already ten yards or more away and separated from him by dozens of people. Her fear made her all the more desirable to him, and he felt his body respond in a way it had not done for a year. His lust for her was mingled with resentment because of the spell she had cast over him. She flushed and dropped her gaze, as if she were ashamed. She spoke briefly to a boy next to her—that was the brother, of course, William thought, recalling the face in a flash of erotic memory—and then she turned away and disappeared into the crowd.

William felt let down. He was tempted to follow her, but of course he could not, not in the middle of a service, in front of his parents, two bishops, forty monks and a thousand worshipers. So he turned back to face the front, disappointed. He had lost his chance to find out where she lived.

Although she had gone, she still filled his mind. He wondered if it was a sin to have an erection in church.

He noticed that Father was looking agitated. "Look!" he was saying to Mother. "Look at that woman!"

At first William thought Father must be talking about Aliena. But she was nowhere in sight, and when he followed his father's stare, he saw a woman nearer to thirty years of age, not as voluptuous as Aliena but with an agile, untamed look that made her interesting. She was standing some distance away with Tom, the master builder, and William thought it was probably the builder's wife, the woman he had tried to buy in the forest one day a year or so ago. But why would his father know her?

"Is it her?" Father said.

The woman turned her head, almost as if she had heard them, and looked straight at them, and William saw again her pale, penetrating golden eyes.

"It *is* her, by God," Mother hissed.

The woman's stare shook Father. His red face paled and his hands trembled. "Jesus Christ preserve us," he said. "I thought she was dead."

And William thought: Now what the devil is that all about?

Jack had been dreading this.

For a whole year he had known that his mother missed Tom Builder. She was less even-tempered than she used to be; she often had a dreamy, faraway look; and in the night she sometimes made the panting noises, as if she were dreaming or imagining that she was making love to Tom. Jack had known, all along, that she would come back. And now she had agreed to stay.

He hated the idea.

The two of them had always been happy together. He loved his mother and his mother loved him, and there was no one else to interfere.

Life in the forest was somewhat uninteresting, it was true. He had missed the fascination of the crowds and the cities he had seen in his brief sojourn with Tom's family. He missed Martha. Oddly enough, he had relieved the boredom of the forest by daydreaming about the girl he thought of as the Princess, although he knew her name was Aliena. And he would be interested to work with Tom, and find out how buildings were constructed. But he would no longer be free. People would tell him what to do. He would have to work whether he wanted to or not. And he would have to share his mother with the rest of the world.

As he sat on the wall near the priory gate, ruminating disconsolately, he was astonished to see the Princess.

He blinked. She was pushing her way through the crowd, heading for the gate, looking distressed. She was even more beautiful than he remembered. In those days she had had a rounded, voluptuous, girlish body dressed in costly clothes. Now she looked thinner and more like a woman than a girl. The sweat-soaked linen shift she wore clung to her body, showing her full breasts and the ribs beneath, a flat belly, narrow hips and long legs. Her face was smeared with mud and her massed curls were untidy. She was upset about something, frightened and distressed, but the emotion only made her face more radiant. Jack was captivated by the sight of her. He felt a peculiar stirring in his loins that he had never experienced before.

He followed her. There was no conscious decision. One moment he was sitting on the wall gaping at her and the next he was hurrying through the gate behind her. He caught up with her on the street outside. She had a musky scent, as though she had been working hard. He remembered that she used to smell of flowers. "Is anything wrong?" he said.

"No, nothing's wrong," she said curtly, and she quickened her step.

Jack kept pace with her. "You don't remember me. Last time we met, you explained to me how babies were conceived."

"Oh, shut up and go away!" she shouted.

He stopped and let her walk on. He felt disappointed. Obviously he had

said the wrong thing.

She had treated him like an irritating child. He was thirteen years old, but that probably seemed like childhood to her, from the lofty height of eighteen or so years.

He saw her go up to a house, take out a key that hung from a thong around her neck, and unlock the door.

She lived right here!

That made everything different.

Suddenly the prospect of leaving the forest and living in Kingsbridge did not seem so bad. He would see the Princess every day. That would compensate for a lot.

He stayed where he was, watching the door, but she did not reemerge. It was an odd thing to do, to stand in a street in the hope of seeing someone who hardly knew him; but he did not want to move. He was seething inside with a new emotion. Nothing seemed very important anymore except the Princess. He was single-minded about her. He was enchanted. He was possessed.

He was in love.

PART THREE

1140-1142

Chapter 8

THE WHORE WILLIAM PICKED was not very pretty but she had big breasts and her mass of curly hair appealed to him. She sauntered over to him, swaying her hips, and he saw that she was a little older than he had thought, maybe twenty-five or thirty, and while her mouth smiled innocently her eyes were hard and calculating. Walter chose next. He selected a small, vulnerable-looking girl with a boyish, flat-chested figure. When William and Walter had made their selection the other four knights moved in.

William had brought them to the whorehouse because they needed some kind of release. They had not had a battle for months and they were becoming discontented and quarrelsome.

The civil war that had broken out a year ago, between King Stephen and his rival, Maud, the so-called Empress, was now in a lull. William and his men had followed Stephen all over southwest England. His strategy was energetic but erratic. He would attack one of Maud's strongholds with tremendous enthusiasm; but if he did not win an early victory, he swiftly tired of the siege, and would move on. The military leader of the rebels was not Maud herself, but her half brother Robert, earl of Gloucester; and so far Stephen had failed to force him into a confrontation. It was an indecisive war, with much movement and little actual fighting; and so the men were restless.

The whorehouse was divided by screens into small rooms, each with a straw mattress. William and his knights took their chosen women behind the screens. William's whore adjusted the screen for privacy, then pulled down the top of her shift, exposing her breasts. They were big, as William had seen, but they had the large nipples and visible veins of a woman who has suckled children, and William was a little disappointed. Nevertheless, he pulled her to him and took her breasts in his hands, squeezing them and pinching the nipples. "Gently," she said in a tone of mild protest. She put her arms around him and pulled his hips forward, rubbing herself against him. After a few moments she pushed her hand between their bodies and felt for his groin.

He muttered a curse. His body was not responding.

“Don’t worry,” she murmured. Her condescending tone angered him, but he said nothing as she disengaged herself from his embrace, knelt down, lifted the front of his tunic and went to work with her mouth.

At first the sensation pleased him, and he thought everything was going to be all right, but after the initial surge he lost interest again. He watched her face, as that sometimes inflamed him, but now he was only reminded of how unimpressive he appeared. He began to feel angry, and that made him shrivel even more.

She stopped and said: “Try to relax.” When she started again she sucked so hard that she hurt him. He pulled away, and her teeth scraped his sensitive skin, making him cry out. He struck her backhanded across the face. She gasped and fell sideways.

“Clumsy bitch,” he snarled. She lay on the mattress at his feet, looking up at him fearfully. He threw a random kick at her, more in irritation than malice. It caught her in the belly. It was harder than he had really intended, and she doubled up in pain.

He realized that his body was responding at last.

He knelt down, rolled her on to her back, and straddled her. She stared up at him with pain and fear in her eyes. He pulled up the skirt of her dress until it was around her waist. The hair between her legs was thick and curly. He liked that. He fondled himself as he looked at her body. He was not quite stiff enough. The fear was going from her eyes. It occurred to him that she could be deliberately putting him off, trying to deflate his desire so that she would not have to service him. The thought infuriated him. He made a fist and punched her face hard.

She screamed and tried to get out from under him. He rested his weight on her, pinning her down, but she continued to struggle and yell. Now he was fully erect. He tried to force her thighs apart, but she resisted him.

The screen was jerked aside and Walter came in, wearing only his boots and undershirt, with his prick sticking out in front of him like a flagpole. Two more knights came in behind him: Ugly Gervase and Hugh Axe.

“Hold her down for me, lads,” William said to them.

The three knights knelt down around the whore and held her still.

William positioned himself to enter her, then paused, enjoying the anticipation.

Walter said: “What happened, lord?”

“Changed her mind when she saw the size of it,” William said with a grin.

They all roared with laughter. William penetrated her. He liked it when there were people watching. He started to move in and out.

Walter said: “You interrupted me just as I was getting mine in.”

William could see that Walter had not yet been satisfied. “Stick it in this

one's mouth," he said. "She likes that."

"I'll give it a try." Walter changed his position and grabbed the woman by the hair, lifting her head. By now she was frightened enough to do anything, and she cooperated readily. Gervase and Hugh were no longer needed to hold her down, but they stayed and watched. They looked fascinated: they had probably never seen a woman done by two men at the same time. William had never seen it either. There was something curiously exciting about it. Walter seemed to feel the same, for after just a few moments he began to breathe heavily and move convulsively, and then he came. Watching him, William did the same a second or two later.

After a moment, they got to their feet. William still felt excited. "Why don't you two do her?" he said to Gervase and Hugh. He liked the idea of watching a repeat performance.

However, they were not keen. "I've got a little darling waiting," said Hugh, and Gervase said: "Me, too."

The whore stood up and rearranged her dress. Her face was unreadable. William said to her: "That wasn't so bad, was it?"

She stood in front of him and stared at him for a moment, then she pursed her lips and spat. He felt his face covered with a warm, sticky fluid: she had retained Walter's semen in her mouth. The stuff blurred his vision. Angry, he raised a hand to strike her, but she ducked out between the screens. Walter and the other knights burst out laughing. William did not think it was funny, but he could not chase after the girl with semen all over his face, and he realized that the only way to retain his dignity was to pretend not to care, so he laughed too.

Ugly Gervase said: "Well, lord, I hope you don't have Walter's baby, now!" and they roared. Even William thought that was funny. They all walked out of the little booth together, leaning on one another and wiping their eyes. The other girls were staring at them, looking anxious: they had heard William's whore scream and were afraid of trouble. One or two customers peeped out curiously from the other booths. Walter said: "First time I ever saw that stuff spurt out of a girl!" and they started laughing again.

One of William's squires was standing by the door, looking anxious. He was only a lad and he had probably never been inside a brothel before. He smiled nervously, not sure whether he was entitled to join in the hilarity. William said to him: "What are you doing here, you po-faced idiot?"

"There's a message come for you, lord," the squire said.

"Well, don't waste time, tell me what it is!"

"I'm very sorry, lord," said the boy. He looked so frightened that William thought he was going to turn around and run out of the house.

"What are you sorry for, you turd?" William roared. "Give me the message!"

“Your father’s dead, lord,” the boy blurted out, and he burst into tears.

William stared, dumbstruck. Dead? he thought. Dead? “But he’s in perfectly good health!” he shouted stupidly. It was true that Father was not able to fight on the battlefield anymore, but that was not surprising in a man almost fifty years old. The squire continued to cry. William recalled the way Father had looked last time he saw him: stout, red-faced, hearty and choleric, as full of life as a man could be, and that was only…He realized, with a small shock, that it was nearly a year since he had seen his father. “What happened?” he said to the squire. “What happened to him?”

“He had a seizure, lord,” the squire sobbed.

A seizure. The news began to sink in. Father was dead. That big, strong, blustering, irascible man was lying helpless and cold on a stone slab somewhere—

“I’ll have to go home,” William said suddenly.

Walter said gently: “You must first ask the king to release you.”

“Yes, that’s right,” William said vaguely. “I must ask permission.” His mind was in a turmoil.

“Shall I tip the brothel keeper?” said Walter.

“Yes.” William handed Walter his purse. Someone put William’s cloak over his shoulders. Walter murmured something to the woman who ran the whorehouse and gave her some money. Hugh Axe opened the door for William. They all went out.

They walked through the streets of the small town in silence. William felt peculiarly detached, as if he were watching everything from above. He could not take in the fact that his father no longer existed. As they approached headquarters he tried to pull himself together.

King Stephen was holding court in the church, for there was no castle or guildhall here. It was a small, simple stone church with its inside walls painted bright red, blue and orange. A fire had been lit in the middle of the floor, and the handsome, tawny-haired king sat near it on a wooden throne, with his legs stretched out before him in his usual relaxed position. He wore soldier’s clothes, high boots and a leather tunic, but he had a crown instead of a helmet. William and Walter pushed through the crowd of petitioners near the church door, nodded at the guards who were keeping the general public back, and strode into the inner circle. Stephen was talking to a newly arrived earl, but he noticed William and broke off immediately. “William, my friend. You’ve heard.”

William bowed. “My lord king.”

Stephen stood up. “I mourn with you,” he said. He put his arms around William and held him for a moment before releasing him.

His sympathy brought the first tears to William’s eyes. “I must ask you for leave to go home,” he said.

“Granted willingly, though not gladly,” said the king. “We’ll miss your strong right arm.”

“Thank you, lord.”

“I also grant you custody of the earldom of Shiring, and all the revenues from it, until the question of the succession is decided. Go home, and bury your father, and come back to us as soon as you can.”

William bowed again and withdrew. The king resumed his conversation. Courtiers gathered around William to commiserate. As he accepted their condolences, the significance of what the king had said hit him. He had given William custody of the earldom *until the question of the succession is decided*. What question? William was the only child of his father. How could there be a question? He looked at the faces around him and his eye lit upon a young priest who was one of the more knowledgeable of the king’s clerics. He drew the priest to him and said quietly: “What the devil did he mean about the ‘question’ of the succession, Joseph?”

“There’s another claimant to the earldom,” Joseph replied.

“Another claimant?” William repeated in astonishment. He had no half brothers, illegitimate brothers, cousins…. “Who is it?”

Joseph pointed to a figure standing with his back to them. He was with the new arrivals. He was wearing the clothing of a squire.

“But he’s not even a knight!” William said loudly. “My father was the earl of Shiring!”

The squire heard him, and turned around. “My father was also the earl of Shiring.”

At first William did not recognize him. He saw a handsome, broad-shouldered young man of about eighteen years, well-dressed for a squire, and carrying a fine sword. There was confidence and even arrogance in the way he stood. Most striking of all, he gazed at William with a look of such pure hatred that William shrank back.

The face was very familiar, but changed. Still William could not place it. Then his saw that there was an angry scar on the squire’s right ear, where the earlobe had been cut off. In a vivid flash of memory he saw a small piece of white flesh fall onto the heaving chest of a terrified virgin, and heard a boy scream in pain. This was Richard, the son of the traitor Bartholomew, the brother of Aliena. The little boy who had been forced to watch while two men raped his sister had grown into a formidable man with the light of vengeance in his light blue eyes. William was suddenly terribly afraid.

“You remember, don’t you?” Richard said, in a light drawl that did not quite mask the cold fury underneath.

William nodded. “I remember.”

“So do I, William Hamleigh,” said Richard. “So do I.”

William sat in the big chair at the head of the table, where his father used to sit. He had always known he would occupy this seat one day. He had imagined he would feel immensely powerful when he did so, but in reality he was a little frightened. He was afraid that people would say he was not the man his father had been, and that they would disrespect him.

His mother sat on his right. He had often watched her, when his father was in this chair, and observed the way she played on Father's fears and weaknesses to get her own way. He was determined not to let her do the same to him.

On his left sat Arthur, a mild-mannered, gray-headed man who had been Earl Bartholomew's reeve. After becoming earl, Father had hired Arthur, because Arthur had a good knowledge of the estate. William had always been dubious about that reasoning. Other people's servants sometimes clung to the ways of their former employer.

"King Stephen can't *possibly* make Richard the earl," Mother was saying angrily. "He's just a squire!"

"I don't understand how he even managed that," William said irritably. "I thought they had been left penniless. But he had fine clothes and a good sword. Where did he get the money?"

"He set himself up as a wool merchant," Mother said. "He's got all the money he needs. Or rather, his sister has—I hear Aliena runs the business."

Aliena. So she was behind this. William had never quite forgotten her, but she had not preyed on his mind so much, after the war broke out, until he had met Richard. Since then she had been in his thoughts continually, as fresh and beautiful, as vulnerable and desirable as ever. He hated her for the hold she had over him.

"So Aliena is rich now?" he said with an affectation of detachment.

"Yes. But you've been fighting for the king for a year. He cannot refuse you your inheritance."

"Richard has fought bravely too, apparently," William said. "I made some inquiries. Worse still, his courage has come to the notice of the king."

Mother's expression changed from angry scorn to thoughtfulness. "So he really has a chance."

"I fear so."

"Right. We must fight him off."

Automatically, William said: "How?" He had resolved not to let his mother take charge but now he had done it.

"You must go back to the king with a bigger force of knights, new weapons and better horses, and plenty of squires and men-at-arms."

William would have liked to disagree with her but he knew she was right.

In the end the king would probably give the earldom to the man who promised to be the most effective supporter, regardless of the rights and wrongs of the case.

“That’s not all,” Mother went on. “You must take care to look and act like an earl. That way the king will start to think of the appointment as a foregone conclusion.”

Despite himself William was intrigued. “How should an earl look and act?”

“Speak your mind more. Have an opinion about everything: how the king should prosecute the war, the best tactics for each battle, the political situation in the north, and—especially this—the abilities and loyalty of other earls. Talk to one man about another. Tell the earl of Huntingdon that the count of Warenne is a great fighter; tell the bishop of Ely that you don’t trust the sheriff of Lincoln. People will say to the king: ‘William of Shiring is in the count of Warenne’s faction,’ or ‘William of Shiring and his followers are against the sheriff of Lincoln.’ If you appear powerful, the king will feel comfortable about giving you more power.”

William had little faith in such subtlety. “I think the size of my army will count for more,” he said. He turned to the reeve. “How much is there in my treasury, Arthur?”

“Nothing, lord,” said Arthur.

“What the devil are you talking about?” said William harshly. “There must be something. How much is it?”

Arthur had a slightly superior air, as if he had nothing to fear from William. “Lord, there’s no money at all in the treasury.”

William wanted to strangle him. “This is the earldom of Shiring!” he said, loud enough to make the knights and castle officials farther down the table look up. “There must be money!”

“Money comes in all the time, lord, of course,” Arthur said smoothly. “But it goes out again, especially in wartime.”

William studied the pale, clean-shaven face. Arthur was far too complacent. Was he honest? There was no way of telling. William wished for eyes that could see into a man’s heart.

Mother knew what William was thinking. “Arthur is honest,” she said, not caring that the man was right there. “He’s old, and lazy and set in his ways, but he’s honest.”

William was stricken. He had only just sat in the chair and already his power was shriveling, as if by magic. He felt cursed. There seemed to be a law that William would always be a boy among men, no matter how old he grew. Weakly, he said: “How has this happened?”

Mother said: “Your father was ill for the best part of a year before he died. I could see he was letting things slip, but I couldn’t get him to do anything

about it.”

It was news to William that his mother was not omnipotent. He had never before known her unable to get her way. He turned to Arthur. “We have some of the best farmland in the kingdom here. How can we be penniless?”

“Some of the farms are in trouble, and several tenants are in arrears with their rents.”

“But why?”

“One reason I hear frequently is that the young men won’t work on the land, but leave for the towns.”

“Then we must stop them!”

Arthur shrugged. “Once a serf has lived in a town for a year, he becomes a freeman. It’s the law.”

“And what about the tenants who haven’t paid? What have you done to them?”

“What can one do?” said Arthur. “If we take away their livelihood, they’ll never be able to pay. So we must be patient, and hope for a good harvest which will enable them to catch up.”

Arthur was altogether too cheerful about his inability to solve any of these problems, William thought angrily; but he reined in his temper for the moment. “Well, if all the young men are going to the towns, what about our rents from house property in Shiring? That should have brought in some cash.”

“Oddly enough, it hasn’t,” said Arthur. “There are a lot of empty houses in Shiring. The young men must be going elsewhere.”

“Or people are lying to you,” William said. “I suppose you’re going to say that the income from the Shiring market and the fleece fair is down too?”

“Yes—”

“Then why don’t you increase the rents and taxes?”

“We have, lord, on the orders of your late father, but the income has gone down nonetheless.”

“With such an unproductive estate, how did Bartholomew keep body and soul together?” William said in exasperation.

Arthur even had an answer for that. “He had the quarry, also. That brought in a great deal of money, in the old days.”

“And now it’s in the hands of that damned monk.” William was shaken. Just when he needed to make an ostentatious display he was being told that he was penniless. The situation was very dangerous for him. The king had just granted him custody of an earldom. It was a kind of probation. If he returned to court with a diminutive army it would seem ungrateful, even disloyal.

Besides, the picture Arthur had painted could not be entirely true. William felt sure people were cheating him—and they were probably laughing about it behind his back, too. The thought made him angry. He was not going to

tolerate it. He would show them. There would be bloodshed before he accepted defeat.

"You've got an excuse for everything," he said to Arthur. "The fact is, you've let this estate run to seed during my father's illness, which is when you ought to have been most vigilant."

"But, lord—"

William raised his voice. "Shut your mouth or I'll have you flogged."

Arthur paled and went silent.

William said: "Starting tomorrow, we're going on a tour of the earldom. We're going to visit every village I own, and shake them all up. You may not know how to deal with whining, lying peasants, but I do. We'll soon find out how impoverished my earldom is. And if you've lied to me, I swear to God you'll be the first of many hangings."

As well as Arthur, he took his groom, Walter, and the other four knights who had fought beside him for the past year: Ugly Gervase, Hugh Axe, Gilbert de Rennes and Miles Dice. They were all big, violent men, quick to anger and always ready to fight. They rode their best horses and went armed to the teeth, to scare the peasantry. William believed that a man was helpless unless people were afraid of him.

It was a hot day in late summer, and the wheat stood in fat sheaves in the fields. The abundance of visible wealth made William all the more angry that he had no money. Someone *must* be robbing him. They ought to be too frightened to dare. His family had won the earldom when Bartholomew was disgraced, and yet he was penniless while Bartholomew's son had plenty! The idea that people were stealing from him, and laughing at his unsuspecting ignorance, gnawed at him like a stomachache, and he got angrier as he rode along.

He had decided to begin at Northbrook, a small village somewhat remote from the castle. The villagers were a mixture of serfs and freemen. The serfs were William's property, and could not do anything without his permission. They owed him so many days' work at certain times of year, plus a share of their own crops. The freemen just paid him rent, in cash or in kind. Five of them were in arrears. William had a notion they thought they could get away with it because they were far from the castle. It might be a good place to begin the shake-up.

It was a long ride, and the sun was high when they approached the village. There were twenty or thirty houses surrounded by three big fields, all of them now stubble. Near the houses, at the edge of one of the fields, were three large oak trees in a group. As William and his men drew near, he saw that most of the villagers appeared to be sitting in the shade of the oaks, eating their

dinner. He spurred his horse into a canter for the last few hundred yards, and the others followed suit. They halted in front of the villagers in a cloud of dust.

As the villagers were scrambling to their feet, swallowing their horsebread and trying to keep the dust out of their eyes, William's mistrustful gaze observed a curious little drama. A middle-aged man with a black beard spoke quietly but urgently to a plump red-cheeked girl with a plump, red-cheeked baby. A young man joined them and was hastily shooed away by the older man. Then the girl walked off toward the houses, apparently under protest, and disappeared in the dust. William was intrigued. There was something furtive about the whole scene, and he wished Mother were here to interpret it.

He decided to do nothing about it for the moment. He addressed Arthur in a voice loud enough for them all to hear. "Five of my free tenants here are in arrears, is that right?"

"Yes, lord."

"Who is the worst?"

"Athelstan hasn't paid for two years, but he was very unlucky with his pigs—"

William spoke over Arthur, cutting him off. "Which one of you is Athelstan?"

A tall, stoop-shouldered man of about forty-five years stepped forward. He had thinning hair and watery eyes.

William said: "Why don't you pay me rent?"

"Lord, it's a small holding, and I've no one to help me, now that my boys have gone to work in the town, and then there was the swine fever—"

"Just a moment," William said. "Where did your sons go?"

"To Kingsbridge, lord, to work on the new cathedral there, for they want to marry, as young men must, and my land won't support three families."

William tucked away in his memory, for future reflection, the information that the young men had gone to work on Kingsbridge Cathedral. "Your holding is big enough to support one family, at any rate, but still you don't pay your rent."

Athelstan began to talk about his pigs again. William stared malevolently at him without listening. I know why you haven't paid, he thought; you knew your lord was ill and you decided to cheat him while he was incapable of enforcing his rights. The other four delinquents thought the same. You rob us when we're weak!

For a moment he was full of self-pity. The five of them had been chuckling over their cleverness, he felt sure. Well, now they would learn their lesson. "Gilbert and Hugh, take this peasant and hold him still," he said quietly.

Athelstan was still talking. The two knights dismounted and approached him. His tale of swine fever tailed off into nothing. The knights took him by the arms. He turned pale with fear.

William spoke to Walter in the same quiet voice. “Have you got your chain-mail gloves?”

“Yes, lord.”

“Put them on. Teach Athelstan a lesson. But make sure he lives to spread the word.”

“Yes, lord.” Walter took from his saddlebag a pair of leather gauntlets with fine chain mail sewn to the knuckles and the backs of the fingers. He pulled them on slowly. All the villagers watched in dread, and Athelstan began to moan with terror.

Walter got off his horse, walked over to Athelstan and punched him in the stomach with one mailed fist. The thud as the blow landed was sickeningly loud. Athelstan doubled over, too winded to cry out. Gilbert and Hugh pulled him upright, and Walter punched his face. Blood spurted from his mouth and nose. One of the onlookers, a woman who was presumably his wife, screamed out and jumped on Walter, yelling: “Stop! Leave him! Don’t kill him!”

Walter brushed her off, and two other women grabbed her and pulled her back. She continued to scream and struggle. The other peasants watched in mutinous silence as Walter beat Athelstan systematically until his body was limp, his face covered with blood and his eyes closed in unconsciousness.

“Let him go,” William said at last.

Gilbert and Hugh released Athelstan. He slumped to the ground and lay still. The women released the wife and she ran to him, sobbing, and knelt beside him. Walter took off the gauntlets and wiped the blood and pieces of flesh off the chain mail.

William had already lost interest in Athelstan. Looking around the village, he saw a new-looking two-story wooden structure built on the edge of the brook. He pointed to it and said to Arthur: “What’s that?”

“I haven’t seen it before, lord,” Arthur said nervously.

William thought he was lying. “It’s a water mill, isn’t it?”

Arthur shrugged, but his indifference was unconvincing. “I can’t imagine what else it would be, right there by the stream.”

How could he be so insolent, when he had just seen a peasant beaten half to death on William’s orders? Almost desperately, William said: “Are my serfs allowed to build mills without my permission?”

“No, lord.”

“Do you know *why* this is prohibited?”

“So that they will bring their grain to the lord’s mills and pay him to grind it for them.”

“And the lord will profit.”

“Yes, lord.” Arthur spoke in the condescending tone of one who explains something elementary to a child. “But if they pay a fine for building a mill, the lord will profit just the same.”

William found his tone maddening. “No, he won’t profit just the same. The fine is never as much as the peasants would otherwise have to pay. That’s why they love to build mills. And that’s why my father would never let them.” Without giving Arthur the chance to reply, he kicked his horse and rode over to the mill. His knights followed, and the villagers tailed along behind them in a ragged crowd.

William dismounted. There was no doubt about what the building was. A large waterwheel was turning under the pressure of the fast-flowing stream. The wheel turned a shaft which went through the side wall of the mill. It was a solid wooden construction, made to last. Whoever built it had clearly expected to be free to use it for years.

The miller stood outside the open door, wearing a prepared expression of injured innocence. In the room behind him were sacks of grain in neat stacks. William dismounted. The miller bowed to him politely, but was there not a hint of scorn in his look? Once again William had the painful sense that these people thought he was a nobody, and his inability to impose his will on them made him feel impotent. Indignation and frustration welled up in him, and he yelled at the miller furiously. “Whatever made you think you could get away with this? Do you imagine that I’m stupid? Is that it? Is that what you think?” Then he punched the man in the face.

The miller gave an exaggerated cry of pain and fell to the ground quite unnecessarily.

William stepped over him and went inside. The shaft of the waterwheel was connected, by a set of wooden gears, to the shaft of the grindstone on the upper floor. The milled grain fell through a chute to the threshing floor at ground level. The second floor, which had to bear the weight of the grindstone, was supported by four stout timbers (taken from William’s forest without permission, undoubtedly). If the timbers were cut the whole building would fall.

William went outside. Hugh Axe carried the weapon from which he got his name strapped to his saddle. William said: “Give me your battle-ax.” Hugh obliged. William went back inside and began to attack the timber supports of the upper floor.

It gave him great satisfaction to feel the blade of the ax thud into the building that the peasants had so carefully constructed in their attempt to cheat him of his milling fees. They aren’t laughing at me now, he thought savagely.

Walter came in and stood watching. William hacked a deep notch in one of the supports and then cut halfway through a second. The platform above,

which carried the enormous weight of the millstone, began to tremble. William said: “Get a rope.” Walter went out.

William cut into the other two timbers as deeply as he dared. The building was ready to collapse. Walter came back with some rope. William tied the rope to one of the timbers, then carried the other end outside and tied it around the neck of his war-horse.

The peasants watched in sullen silence.

When the rope was fixed, William said: “Where’s the miller?”

The miller approached, still trying to look like one who is being unjustly dealt with.

William said: “Gervase, tie him up and put him inside.”

The miller made a break for it, but Gilbert tripped him and sat on him, and Gervase tied his hands and feet with leather thongs. The two knights picked him up. He began to struggle and plead for mercy.

One of the villagers stepped out of the crowd and said: “You can’t do this. It’s murder. Even a lord can’t murder people.”

William pointed a trembling finger at him. “If you open your mouth again I’ll put you inside with him.”

For a moment the man looked defiant; then he thought better of it and turned away.

The knights came out of the mill. William walked his horse forward until it had taken up the slack in the rope. He slapped its rump, and it took the strain.

Inside the building, the miller began to scream. The noise was bloodcurdling. It was the sound of a man in mortal terror, a man who knew that within the next few moments he was going to be crushed to death.

The horse tossed its head, trying to slacken the rope around its neck. William yelled at it and kicked its rump to make it pull, then shouted at his knights: “Heave on the rope, you men!” The four knights grabbed the taut rope and pulled with the horse. The villagers’ voices were raised in protest, but they were all too frightened to interfere. Arthur was standing to one side, looking sick.

The miller’s screams became more shrill. William imagined the blind terror that must be possessing the man as he waited for his dreadful death. None of these peasants will ever forget the revenge of the Hamleighs, he thought.

The timber creaked loudly; then there was a loud crack as it broke. The horse bounded forward and the knights let go of the rope. A corner of the roof sagged. The women began to wail. The wooden walls of the mill seemed to shudder; the miller’s screams rose higher; there was a mighty crash as the upper floor gave way; the screaming was cut off abruptly; and the ground shook as the grindstone landed on the threshing floor. The walls splintered,

the roof caved in, and in a moment the mill was nothing but a pile of firewood with a dead man inside it.

William began to feel better.

Some of the villagers ran forward and began to dig into the debris frantically. If they were hoping to find the miller alive they would be disappointed. His body would be a grisly sight. That was all to the good.

Looking around, William spotted the red-cheeked girl with the red-cheeked baby, standing at the back of the crowd, as if she were trying to be inconspicuous. He remembered how the man with the black beard—presumably her father—had been keen to keep her out of sight. He decided to solve that mystery before leaving the village. He caught her eye and beckoned her. She looked behind her, hoping he was pointing at someone else. “You,” William said. “Come here.”

The man with the black beard saw her and gave a grunt of exasperation.

William said: “Who’s your husband, wench?”

The father said: “She has no—”

He was too late, however, for the girl said: “Edmund.”

“So you *are* married. But who’s your father?”

“I am,” said the man with the black beard. “Theobald.”

William turned to Arthur. “Is Theobald a freeman?”

“He’s a serf, lord.”

“And when a serf’s daughter marries, is it not the lord’s right, as her owner, to enjoy her on the wedding night?”

Arthur was shocked. “Lord! That primitive custom has not been enforced in this part of the world in living memory!”

“True,” said William. “The father pays a fine, instead. How much did Theobald pay?”

“He hasn’t paid yet, lord, but—”

“Not paid! And she with a fat red-cheeked child!”

Theobald said: “We never had the money, lord, and she was with child by Edmund, and wanted to be wed, but we can pay now, for we’ve got the crop in.”

William smiled at the girl. “Let me see the baby.”

She stared at him fearfully.

“Come. Give it to me.”

She was afraid but she could not bring herself to hand over her baby. William stepped closer and gently took the child from her. Her eyes filled with terror but she did not resist him.

The baby began to squall. William held it for a moment, then grasped both its ankles in one hand and with a swift motion threw it into the air as high as he could.

The girl screamed like a banshee and gazed into the air as the baby flew

upward.

The father ran forward with his arms outstretched to catch it as it fell.

While the girl was looking up and screaming, William took a handful of her dress and ripped it. She had a pink, rounded young body.

The father caught the baby safely.

The girl turned to run, but William caught her and threw her to the ground.

The father handed the baby to a woman and turned to look at William.

William said: “As I wasn’t given my due on the wedding night, and the fine hasn’t been paid, I’ll take what’s owed me now.”

The father rushed at him.

William drew his sword.

The father stopped.

William looked at the girl, lying on the ground, trying to cover her nakedness with her hands. Her fear aroused him. “And when I’ve done, my knights will have her too,” he said with a contented smile.

II

In three years Kingsbridge had changed beyond recognition.

William had not been here since the Whitsunday when Philip and his army of volunteers had frustrated Waleran Bigod's scheme. Then it had been forty or fifty wooden houses clustered around the priory gate and scattered along the muddy footpath that led to the bridge. Now, he saw as he approached the village across the undulating fields, there were three times as many houses, at least. They formed a brown fringe all around the gray stone wall of the priory and completely filled the space between the priory and the river. Several of the houses looked large. Within the priory close there were new stone buildings, and the walls of the church seemed to be going up fast. There were two new quays beside the river. Kingsbridge had become a town.

The appearance of the place confirmed a suspicion that had been growing in his mind since he had come home from the war. As he had toured around, collecting arrears of rent and terrorizing disobedient serfs, he had continually heard talk of Kingsbridge. Landless young men were going there to work; prosperous families were sending their sons to school at the priory; smallholders would sell their eggs and cheese to the men working on the building site; and everyone who could went there on holy days, even though there was no cathedral. Today was a holy day—Michaelmas Day, which fell on a Sunday this year. It was a mild early-autumn morning, nice weather for traveling, so there should be a good crowd. William expected to find out what drew them to Kingsbridge.

His five henchmen rode with him. They had done sterling work in the villages. The news of William's tour had spread with uncanny speed, and after the first few days people knew what to expect. At William's approach they would send the children and young women to hide in the woods. It pleased William to strike fear into people's hearts: it kept them in their place. They certainly knew he was in command now!

As his group came closer to Kingsbridge, he kicked his horse into a trot, and the others followed suit. Arriving at speed was always more impressive. Other people shrank back to the sides of the road, or jumped into the fields, to get out of the way of the big horses.

They clattered over the wooden bridge, making a loud noise and ignoring the tollhouse keeper, but the narrow street ahead of them was blocked by a cart loaded with barrels of lime and pulled by two huge, slow-moving oxen; and the knights' horses were forced to slow abruptly.

William looked around as they followed the cart up the hill. New houses, hastily built, filled the spaces between the old ones. He noticed a cookshop, an alehouse, a smithy and a shoemaker's. The air of prosperity was unmistakable. William was envious.

There were not many people in the streets, however. Perhaps they were all up at the priory.

With his knights behind him he followed the ox cart through the priory gates. It was not the kind of entrance he liked to make, and he had a pang of anxiety that people would notice and laugh at him, but happily nobody even looked.

By contrast with the deserted town outside the walls, the priory close was humming with activity.

William reined in and looked around, trying to take it all in. There were so many people, and there was so much going on, that at first he found it somewhat bewildering. Then the scene resolved into three sections.

Nearest him, at the western end of the priory close, there was a market. The stalls were set up in neat north-south rows, and several hundred people were milling about in the aisles, buying food and drink, hats and shoes, knives, belts, ducklings, puppies, pots, earrings, wool, thread, rope, and dozens of other necessities and luxuries. The market was clearly thriving, and all the pennies, halfpennies and farthings that were changing hands must add up to a great deal of money.

It was no wonder, William thought bitterly, that the market at Shiring was in decline, when there was a flourishing alternative here at Kingsbridge. The rents from stall holders, tolls on suppliers, and taxes on sales that should have been going into the earl of Shiring's treasury were instead filling the coffers of Kingsbridge Priory.

But a market needed a license from the king, and William was sure Prior Philip did not have one. He was probably planning to apply as soon as he was caught, like the Northbrook miller. Unfortunately it would not be so easy for William to teach Philip a lesson.

Beyond the market was a zone of tranquillity. Adjacent to the cloisters, where the crossing of the old church used to be, there was an altar under a canopy, with a white-haired monk standing in front of it reading from a book. On the far side of the altar, monks in neat rows were singing hymns, although at this distance their music was drowned by the noise of the marketplace. There was a small congregation. This was probably nones, a service conducted for the benefit of the monks, William thought: all work and marketing would stop for the main Michaelmas service, of course.

At the far side of the priory close, the east end of the cathedral was being built. This was where Prior Philip was spending his rake-off from the market, William thought sourly. The walls were thirty or forty feet high, and it was

already possible to see the outlines of the windows and the arches of the arcade. Workers swarmed all over the site. William thought there was something odd about the way they looked, and realized after a moment that it was their colorful dress. They were not regular laborers, of course—the paid work force would be on holiday today. These people were volunteers.

He had not expected that there would be so *many* of them. Hundreds of men and women were carrying stones and splitting timber and rolling barrels and heaving cartloads of sand up from the river, all working for nothing but forgiveness of their sins.

The sly prior had a crafty setup, William observed enviously. The people who came to work on the cathedral would spend money at the market. People who came to the market would give a few hours to the cathedral, for their sins. Each hand washed the other.

He kicked his horse forward and rode across the graveyard to the building site, curious to see it more closely.

The eight massive piers of the arcade marched down either side of the site in four opposed pairs. From a distance, William had thought he could see the round arches joining one pier with the next, but now he realized the arches were not built yet—what he had seen was the wooden falsework, made in the same shape, upon which the stones would rest while the arches were being constructed and the mortar was drying. The falsework did not rest on the ground, but was supported on the out-jutting moldings of the capitals on top of the piers.

Parallel with the arcade, the outer walls of the aisles were going up, with regular spaces for the windows. Midway between each window opening, a buttress jutted out from the line of the wall. Looking at the open ends of the unfinished walls, William could see that they were not solid stone: they were in fact double walls with a space in between. The cavity appeared to be filled with rubble and mortar.

The scaffolding was made of stout poles roped together, with trestles of flexible saplings and woven reeds laid across the poles.

A lot of money had been spent here, William noted.

He rode on around the outside of the chancel, followed by his knights. Against the walls were wooden lean-to huts, workshops and lodges for the craftsmen. Most of them were locked shut now, for there were no masons laying stones or carpenters making falsework today. However, the supervising craftsmen—the master masons and the master carpenter—were directing the volunteer laborers, telling them where to stack the stones, timber, sand and lime they were carrying up from the riverside.

William rode around the east end of the church to the south side, where his way was blocked by the monastic buildings. Then he turned back, marveling at the cunning of Prior Philip, who had his master craftsmen busy

on a Sunday and his laborers working for no pay.

As he reflected on what he was seeing, it seemed devastatingly clear that Prior Philip was largely responsible for the decline in the fortunes of the Shiring earldom. The farms were losing their young men to the building site, and Shiring—jewel of the earldom—was being eclipsed by the growing new town of Kingsbridge. Residents here paid rent to Philip, not William, and people who bought and sold goods at this market generated income for the priory, not the earldom. And Philip had the timber, the sheep farms and the quarry that had once enriched the earl.

William and his men rode back across the close to the market. He decided to take a closer look. He urged his horse into the crowd. It inched forward. The people did not scatter fearfully out of his path. When the horse nudged them, they looked up at William with irritation or annoyance rather than dread, and moved out of the way in their own good time, with a somewhat condescending air. Nobody here was frightened of him. It made him nervous. If people were not scared there was no telling what they might do.

He went down one row and back up the next, with his knights trailing behind him. He became frustrated with the slow movement of the crowd. It would have been quicker to walk; but then, he felt sure, these insubordinate Kingsbridge people would probably have been cocky enough to jostle him.

He was halfway along the return aisle when he saw Aliena.

He reined in abruptly and stared at her, transfixed.

She was no longer the thin, strained, frightened girl in clogs that he had seen here on Whitsunday three years ago. Her face, then drawn with tension, had filled out again, and she had a happy, healthy look. Her dark eyes flashed with humor and her curls tumbled about her face when she shook her head.

She was so beautiful that she made William's head swim with desire.

She was wearing a scarlet robe, richly embroidered, and her expressive hands glinted with rings. There was an older woman with her, standing a little to one side, like a servant. Plenty of money, Mother had said; that was how Richard had been able to become a squire and join King Stephen's army equipped with fine weapons. Damn her. She had been destitute, a penniless, powerless girl—how had she done it?

She was at a stall that carried bone needles, silk thread, wooden thimbles and other sewing necessities, discussing the goods animatedly with the short, dark-haired Jew who was selling them. Her stance was assertive, and she was relaxed and self-confident. She had recovered the poise she had possessed as daughter of the earl.

She looked much older. She *was* older, of course: William was twenty-four, so she must be twenty-one now. But she looked more than that. There was nothing of the child in her now. She was mature.

She looked up and met his eye.

Last time he had locked glances with her, she had blushed for shame, and run away. This time she stood her ground and stared back at him.

He tried a knowing smile.

An expression of scathing contempt came over her face.

William felt himself flush red. She was as haughty as ever, and she scorned him now as she had five years ago. He had humiliated and ravished her, but she was no longer terrified of him. He wanted to speak to her, and tell her that he could do again what he had done to her before; but he was not willing to shout it over the heads of the crowd. Her unflinching gaze made him feel small. He tried to sneer at her, but he could not, and he knew he was making a foolish grimace. In an agony of embarrassment he turned away and kicked his horse on; but even then the crowd slowed him down, and her withering look burned into the back of his neck as he moved away from her by painful inches.

When at last he emerged from the marketplace he was confronted by Prior Philip.

The short Welshman stood with his hands on his hips and his chin thrust aggressively forward. He was not quite as thin as he used to be, and what little hair he had was turning prematurely from black to gray, William saw. He no longer looked too young for his job. Now his blue eyes were bright with anger. “Lord William!” he called in a challenging tone.

William tore his mind away from the thought of Aliena and remembered that he had a charge to make against Philip. “I’m glad to come across you, Prior.”

“And I you,” Philip said angrily, but the shadow of a doubtful frown crossed his brow.

“You’re holding a market here,” William said accusingly.

“So what?”

“I don’t believe King Stephen ever licensed a market in Kingsbridge. Nor did any other king, to my knowledge.”

“How dare you?” said Philip.

“I or anybody—”

“You!” Philip shouted, overriding him. “How dare you come in here and talk about a license—you, who in the past month have gone through this county committing arson, theft, rape, and at least one murder!”

“That’s nothing to do—”

“How dare you come into a monastery and talk about a license!” Philip yelled. He stepped forward, wagging his finger at William, and William’s horse sidestepped nervously. Somehow Philip’s voice was more penetrating than William’s and William could not get a word in. A crowd of monks, volunteer workers and market customers was gathering around, watching the row. Philip was unstoppable. “After what you’ve done, there is only *one* thing

you should say: ‘Father, I have sinned!’ You should get down on your *knees* in this priory! You should beg for forgiveness, if you want to escape the fires of hell.”

William blanched. Talk of hell filled him with uncontrollable terror. He tried desperately to interrupt Philip’s flow, saying: “What about your market? What about your market?”

Philip hardly heard. He was in a fury of indignation. “Beg forgiveness for the awful things you have done!” he shouted. “On your knees! On your knees, or you’ll burn in hell!”

William was almost frightened enough to believe that he would suffer hellfire unless he knelt and prayed in front of Philip right now. He knew he was overdue for confession, for he had killed many men in the war, on top of the sins he had committed during his tour of the earldom. What if he were to die before he confessed? He began to feel shaky at the thought of the eternal flames and the devils with their sharp knives.

Philip advanced on him, pointing his finger and shouting: “On your knees!”

William backed his horse. He looked around desperately. The crowd hemmed him in. His knights were behind him, looking bemused: they could not decide how to cope with a spiritual threat from an unarmed monk. William could not take any more humiliation. After Aliena, this was too much. He pulled on the reins, making his massive war-horse rear dangerously. The crowd parted in front of its mighty hooves. When its forefeet hit the ground again he kicked it hard, and it lunged forward. The onlookers scattered. He kicked it again, and it broke into a canter. Burning with shame, he fled out through the priory gate, with his knights following, like a pack of snarling dogs chased off by an old woman with a broom.

William confessed his sins, in fear and trembling, on the cold stone floor of the little chapel at the bishop’s palace. Bishop Waleran listened in silence, his face a mask of distaste, as William catalogued the killings, the beatings and the rapes he was guilty of. Even while he confessed, William was filled with loathing for the supercilious bishop, with his clean white hands folded over his heart, and his translucent white nostrils slightly flared, as if there were a bad smell in the dusty air. It tormented William to beg Waleran for absolution, but his sins were so heavy that no ordinary priest could forgive them. So he knelt, possessed by fear, while Waleran commanded him to light a candle in perpetuity in the chapel at Earlscastle, and then told him his sins were absolved.

The fear lifted slowly, like a fog.

They came out of the chapel into the smoky atmosphere of the great hall

and sat by the fire. Autumn was turning to winter and it was cold in the big stone house. A kitchen hand brought hot spiced bread made with honey and ginger. William began to feel all right at last.

Then he remembered his other problems. Bartholomew's son Richard was making a bid for the earldom, and William was too poor to raise an army big enough to impress the king. He had raked in considerable cash in the past month, but it was still not sufficient. He sighed, and said: "That damned monk is drinking the blood of the Shiring earldom."

Waleran took some bread with a pale, long-fingered hand like a claw. "I've been wondering how long it would take you to reach that conclusion."

Of course, Waleran would have worked it all out long before William. He was so superior. William would rather not talk to him. But he wanted the bishop's opinion on a legal point. "The king has never licensed a market in Kingsbridge, has he?"

"To my certain knowledge, no."

"Then Philip is breaking the law."

Waleran shrugged his bony, black-draped shoulders. "For what it's worth, yes."

Waleran seemed uninterested but William plowed on. "He ought to be stopped."

Waleran gave a fastidious smile. "You can't deal with him the way you deal with a serf who's married off his daughter without permission."

William reddened: Waleran was referring to one of the sins he had just confessed. "How can you deal with him, then?"

Waleran considered. "Markets are the king's prerogative. In more peaceful times he would probably handle this himself."

William gave a scornful laugh. For all his cleverness, Waleran did not know the king as well as William did. "Even in peacetime he wouldn't thank me for complaining to him about an unlicensed market."

"Well, then, his deputy, to deal with local matters, is the sheriff of Shiring."

"What can he do?"

"He could bring a writ against the priory in the county court."

William shook his head. "That's the last thing I want. The court would impose a fine, the priory would pay it, and the market would continue. It's almost like giving a license."

"The trouble is, there are really no grounds for refusing to let Kingsbridge have a market."

"Yes, there are!" said William indignantly. "It takes trade away from the market at Shiring."

"Shiring is a full day's journey from Kingsbridge."

"People will walk a long way."

Waleran shrugged again. William realized he shrugged when he disagreed. Waleran said: “Tradition says a man will spend a third of a day walking to the market, a third of a day at the market, and a third of a day walking home. Therefore, a market serves the people within a third of a day’s journey, which is reckoned to be seven miles. If two markets are more than fourteen miles apart, their catchment areas do not overlap. Shiring is twenty miles from Kingsbridge. According to the rule, Kingsbridge is entitled to a market, and the king should grant it.”

“The king does what he likes,” William blustered, but he was bothered. He had not known about this rule. It put Prior Philip in a stronger position.

Waleran said: “Anyway, we won’t be dealing with the king, we’ll be dealing with the sheriff.” He frowned. “The sheriff could just order the priory to desist from holding an unlicensed market.”

“That’s a waste of time,” William said contemptuously. “Who takes any notice of an order that isn’t backed up by a threat?”

“Philip might.”

William did not believe that. “Why would he?”

A mocking smile played around Waleran’s bloodless lips. “I’m not sure I can explain it to you,” he said. “Philip believes that the law should be king.”

“Stupid idea,” said William impatiently. “The king is king.”

“I said you wouldn’t understand.”

Waleran’s knowing air infuriated William. He got up and went to the window. Looking out, he could see, at the top of the nearby hill, the earthworks where Waleran had started to build a castle four years ago. Waleran had hoped to pay for it out of the income from the Shiring earldom. Philip had frustrated his plans, and now the grass had grown back over the mounds of earth, and brambles filled the dry ditch. William recalled that Waleran had hoped to build with stone from the earl of Shiring’s quarry. Now Philip had the quarry. William mused: “If I had my quarry back, I could use it as a surety, and borrow money to raise an army.”

“Then why don’t you take it back?” said Waleran.

William shook his head. “I tried, once.”

“And Philip outmaneuvered you. But there are no monks there now. You could send a squad of men to evict the stonecutters.”

“And how would I stop Philip from moving back in, the way he did last time?”

“Build a high fence around the quarry and leave a permanent guard.”

It was possible, William thought eagerly. And it would solve his problem at a stroke. But what was Waleran’s motive in suggesting it? Mother had warned him to beware of the unscrupulous bishop. “The only thing you need to know about Waleran Bigod,” she had said, “is that everything he does is carefully calculated. Nothing spontaneous, nothing careless, nothing casual,

nothing superfluous. Above all, nothing generous.” But Waleran hated Philip, and had sworn to prevent him from building his cathedral. That was motive enough.

William looked thoughtfully at Waleran. His career was in a stall. He had become bishop very young, but Kingsbridge was an insignificant and impoverished diocese and Waleran had surely intended it to be a stepping-stone to higher things. However, it was the prior, not the bishop, who was winning wealth and fame. Waleran was withering in Philip’s shadow much as William was. They both had reason to want to destroy him.

William decided, yet again, to overcome his loathing of Waleran for the sake of his own long-term interests.

“All right,” he said. “This could work. But suppose Philip then complains to the king?”

Waleran said: “You’ll say you did it as a reprisal for Philip’s unlicensed market.”

William nodded. “Any excuse will do, so long as I go back to the war with a big enough army.”

Waleran’s eyes glinted with malice. “I have a feeling Philip can’t build that cathedral if he has to buy stone at a market price. And if he stops building, Kingsbridge could go into decline. This could solve all your problems, William.”

William was not going to show gratitude. “You really hate Philip, don’t you?”

“He’s in my way,” Waleran said, but for a moment William had glimpsed the naked savagery beneath the bishop’s cool, calculating manner.

William returned to practical matters. “There must be thirty quarrymen there, some with their wives and children,” he said.

“So what?”

“There may be bloodshed.”

Waleran raised his black eyebrows. “Indeed?” he said. “Then I shall give you absolution.”

III

They set out while it was still dark, in order to arrive at dawn. They carried flaming torches, which made the horses jumpy. As well as Walter and the other four knights, William took six men-at-arms. Trailing behind them were a dozen peasants who would dig the ditch and put up the fence.

William believed firmly in careful military planning—which was why he and his men were so useful to King Stephen—but on this occasion he had no battle plan. It was such an easy operation that it would have been demeaning to make preparations as if it were a real fight. A few stonecutters and their families could not put up much opposition; and anyway, William remembered being told how the stonecutters' leader—was his name Otto? Yes, Otto Blackface—had refused to fight, on the first day Tom Builder had taken his men to the quarry.

A chill December morning dawned, with rags and tatters of mist hanging on the trees like poor people's washing. William disliked this time of year. It was cold in the morning and dark in the evening, and the castle was always damp. Too much salt meat and salt fish was served. His mother was bad-tempered and the servants were surly. His knights became quarrelsome. This little fight would be good for them. It would also be good for him: he had already arranged to borrow two hundred pounds from the Jews of London against the surety of the quarry. By the end of today his future would be secure.

When they were about a mile from the quarry William stopped, picked out two men, and sent them ahead, on foot. "There may be a sentry, or some dogs," he warned. "Have a bow out ready with an arrow at the string."

A little later the road curved to the left, then ended suddenly at the sheer side of a mutilated hill. This was the quarry. All was quiet. Beside the road, William's men were holding a scared boy—presumably an apprentice who had been on sentry duty—and at his feet was a dog bleeding to death with an arrow through its neck.

The raiding party drew up, making no particular effort to be silent. William reined in and studied the scene. Much of the hill had disappeared since last he saw it. The scaffolding ran up the hillside to inaccessible areas and down into a deep pit which had been opened up at the foot of the hill. Stone blocks of different shapes and sizes were stacked near the road, and two massive wooden carts with huge wheels were loaded with stone ready to go. Everything was covered with gray dust, even the bushes and trees. A large

area of woodland had been cleared—*my* woodland, William thought angrily—and there were ten or twelve wooden buildings, some with small vegetable gardens, one with a pigsty. It was a little village.

The sentry had probably been asleep—and his dog, too. William spoke to him. “How many men are here, lad?”

The boy looked scared but brave. “You’re Lord William, aren’t you?”

“Answer the question, boy, or I’ll take off your head with this sword.”

He went white with fear, but replied in a voice of quavering defiance. “Are you trying to steal this quarry away from Prior Philip?”

What’s the matter with me, William thought? I can’t even frighten a skinny child with no beard! Why do people think they can defy me? “This quarry is mine!” he hissed. “Forget about Prior Philip—he can’t do anything for you now. How many men?”

Instead of replying the boy threw back his head and began to yell. “Help! Look out! Attack! Attack!”

William’s hand went to his sword. He hesitated, looking across at the houses. A scared face peered out from a doorway. He decided to forget about the apprentice. He snatched a blazing torch from one of his men and kicked his horse.

He rode at the houses, carrying the torch high, and heard his men behind him. The door of the nearest hut opened and a bleary-eyed man in an undershirt looked out. William threw the burning torch over the man’s head. It landed on the floor behind him in the straw, which caught fire immediately. William gave a whoop of triumph and rode past.

He went on through the little cluster of houses. Behind him, his men charged, yelling and throwing their torches at the thatched roofs. All the doors opened, and terrified men, women and children began to pour out, screaming and trying to dodge the hammering hooves. They milled about in a panic while the flames took hold. William reined in at the edge of the melee and watched for a moment. The domestic animals got loose, and a frantic pig charged around blindly while a cow stood still in the middle of it all, its stupid head weaving from side to side in bewilderment. Even the young men, normally the most belligerent group, were confused and scared. Dawn was definitely the best time for this sort of thing: there was something about being half naked that took away people’s aggression.

A dark-skinned man with a thatch of black hair came out of one of the huts with his boots on and started giving orders. This must be Otto Blackface. William could not hear what he was saying. He could guess from the gestures that Otto was telling the women to pick up the children and hide in the woods, but what was he saying to the men? A moment later William found out. Two young men ran to a hut set apart from the others and opened its door, which was locked from the outside. They stepped in and re-emerged with heavy

stonecutters' hammers. Otto directed other men to the same hut, which was obviously a tool shed. They were going to make a fight of it.

Three years ago Otto had refused to fight for Philip. What had changed his mind?

Whatever it was, it was going to kill him. William smiled grimly and drew his sword.

There were now six or eight men armed with sledgehammers and long-handled axes. William spurred his horse and charged at the group around the door of the tool shed. They scattered out of his way, but he swung his sword and managed to catch one of them with a deep cut to the upper arm. The man dropped his ax.

William galloped away, then turned his horse. He was breathing hard and feeling good: in the heat of a battle there was no fear, only excitement. Some of his men had seen what was happening and looked to William for guidance. He beckoned them to follow him, then charged the stonecutters again. They could not dodge six knights as easily as they could dodge one. William struck down two of them, and several more fell to the swords of his men, although he was moving too fast to count how many or see whether they were dead or just wounded.

When he turned again, Otto was rallying his forces. As the knights charged, the stonecutters dispersed into the cluster of burning houses. It was a clever tactic, William realized regretfully. The knights followed, but it was easier for the stonecutters to dodge when they were split up, and the horses shied away from the blazing buildings. William chased a gray-haired man with a hammer, and just missed him several times before the man evaded him by running through a house with a burning roof.

William realized that Otto was the problem. He was giving the stonecutters courage as well as organizing them. As soon as he fell, the others would give up. William reined in his horse and looked for the dark-skinned man. Most of the women and children had disappeared, except for two five-year-olds standing in the middle of the battlefield, holding hands and crying. William's knights were charging between the houses, chasing the stonecutters. To his surprise, William saw that one of his men-at-arms had fallen to a hammer, and lay on the ground, groaning and bleeding. William was dismayed: he had not anticipated any casualties on his own side.

A distraught woman was running in and out of burning houses, calling out something William could not hear. She was searching for someone. Finally she saw the two five-year-olds, and picked them up one in each arm. As she ran away she almost collided with one of William's knights, Gilbert de Rennes. Gilbert raised his sword to strike her. Suddenly Otto sprang out from behind a hut and swung a long-handled ax. His handling of the weapon was skillful and its blade sliced right through Gilbert's thigh and bit into the wood

of the saddle. The severed leg dropped to the ground, and Gilbert screamed and fell off his horse.

He would never fight again.

Gilbert was a valuable knight. Angry, William spurred his horse forward. The woman with the children vanished. Otto was struggling to pull the blade of his ax from Gilbert's saddle. He looked up and saw William coming. If he had run at that moment he might have escaped, but he stayed and tugged at his ax. It came free when William was almost on him. William raised his sword. Otto stood his ground and lifted the ax. At the last moment William realized the ax was going to be used on the horse, and the stonecutter could cripple the animal before William was close enough to strike him down. William hauled on the reins desperately, and the horse skidded to a halt and reared up, turning its head away from Otto. The blow fell on the horse's neck, and the edge of the ax bit deeply into the powerful muscles. Blood spurted like a fountain, and the horse fell. William was off its back before the huge body hit the ground.

He was enraged. The war-horse had cost a fortune and had survived with him through a year of civil war, and it was maddening to lose it to a quarryman's ax. He jumped over its body and lunged furiously at Otto with the sword.

Otto was no easy victim. He held his ax in both hands and used its heart-of-oak handle to parry William's sword. William struck harder and harder, driving him back. Despite his age Otto was powerfully muscled, and William's blows hardly jarred him. William took his sword in both hands and struck harder. Once again the handle of the ax intervened, but this time William's blade stuck in the wood. Then Otto was advancing and William was retreating. William tugged hard at his sword and his blade came unstuck, but now Otto was almost on him.

Suddenly William was afraid for his life.

Otto raised the ax. William dodged back. His heel connected with something and he stumbled and fell backward over the body of his horse. He landed in a puddle of warm blood but managed to keep hold of his sword. Otto stood over him with his ax raised. As the weapon came down, William rolled frantically sideways. He felt the wind as the blade sliced the air next to his face; then he sprang to his feet and thrust at the stonecutter with his sword.

A soldier would have moved sideways before pulling his weapon out of the ground, knowing that a man is at his most vulnerable when he has just struck a blow and missed; but Otto was no soldier, just a brave fool, and he was standing with one hand on the haft of the ax and the other arm stretched out for balance, leaving the whole of his body an easy target. William's hasty thrust was almost blind, but nevertheless it connected. The point of the sword pierced Otto's chest. William pushed harder and the blade slid between the

man’s ribs. Otto released his hold on the ax, and over his face came an expression William knew well. His eyes showed surprise, his mouth opened as if to scream, although no sound came, and his skin suddenly looked gray. It was the look of a man who has received a mortal wound. William thrust the blade home harder, just to make sure, then pulled it out. Otto’s eyes rolled up in his head, a bright red stain appeared on his shirt front and instantly grew large, and he fell.

William spun round, scanning the whole scene. He saw two stonecutters running away, presumably having seen their leader killed. As they ran they shouted to the others. The fight turned into a retreat. The knights chased the runaways.

William stood still, breathing hard. The damned quarrymen had fought back! He looked at Gilbert. He lay still, in a pool of blood, with his eyes closed. William put a hand on his chest: there was no heartbeat. Gilbert was dead.

William walked around the still-burning houses, counting bodies. Three stonecutters lay dead, plus a woman and a child who both looked as if they had been trampled by horses. Three of William’s men-at-arms were wounded, and four horses were dead or crippled.

When he had completed his count he stood by the corpse of his war-horse. He had liked that horse better than he liked most people. After a battle he usually felt exhilarated, but now he was depressed. It was a shambles. This should have been a simple operation to chase off a group of helpless workmen, and it had turned into a pitched battle with high casualties.

The knights chased the stonecutters as far as the woods, but there the horses could not catch the men, so they turned back. Walter rode up to where William stood and saw Gilbert dead on the ground. He crossed himself and said: “Gilbert has killed more men than I have.”

“There aren’t so many like him, that I can afford to lose one in a squabble with a damned monk,” William said bitterly. “To say nothing of the horses.”

“What a turnup,” Walter said. “These people put up more of a fight than Robert of Gloucester’s rebels!”

William shook his head in disgust. “I don’t know,” he said, looking around at the bodies. “What the devil did they think they were fighting for?”

Chapter 9

JUST AFTER DAWN, when most of the brothers were in the crypt for the service of prime, there were only two people in the dormitory: Johnny Eightpence, sweeping the floor at one end of the long room, and Jonathan, playing school at the other.

Prior Philip paused in the doorway and watched Jonathan. He was almost five years old, an alert, confident boy with a childish gravity that charmed everyone. Johnny still dressed him in a miniature monk's habit. Today Jonathan was pretending to be the novice-master, giving lessons to an imaginary row of pupils. "That's wrong, Godfrey!" he said sternly to the empty bench. "No dinner for you if you don't learn your berves!" He meant *verbs*. Philip smiled fondly. He could not have loved a son more deeply. Jonathan was the one thing in life that gave him sheer unadulterated joy.

The child ran around the priory like a puppy, petted and spoiled by all the monks. To most of them he was just like a pet, an amusing plaything; but to Philip and Johnny he was something more. Johnny loved him like a mother; and Philip, though he tried to conceal it, felt like the boy's father. Philip himself had been raised, from a young age, by a kindly abbot, and it seemed the most natural thing in the world for him to play the same role with Jonathan. He did not tickle or chase him the way the monks did, but he told him Bible stories, and played counting games with him, and kept an eye on Johnny.

He went into the room, smiled at Johnny, and sat on the bench with the imaginary schoolboys.

"Good morning, Father," Jonathan said solemnly. Johnny had taught him to be scrupulously polite.

Philip said: "How would you like to go to school?"

"I know Latin already," Jonathan boasted.

"Really?"

"Yes. Listen. Omnius pluvius buvius tuvius nomine patri amen."

Philip tried not to laugh. “That *sounds* like Latin, but it’s not *quite* right. Brother Osmund, the novice-master, will teach you to speak it properly.”

Jonathan was a little cast down to discover that he did not know Latin after all. He said: “Anyway, I can run fast and fast, look!” He ran at top speed from one side of the room to the other.

“Wonderful!” said Philip. “That really is fast.”

“Yes—and I can go even faster—”

“Not just now,” Philip said. “Listen to me for a moment. I’m going away for a while.”

“Will you be back tomorrow?”

“No, not that soon.”

“Next week?”

“Not even then.”

Jonathan looked blank. He could not conceive of a time farther ahead than next week. Another mystery occurred to him. “But why?”

“I have to see the king.”

“Oh.” That did not mean much to Jonathan either.

“And I’d like you to go to school while I’m away. Would you like that?”

“Yes!”

“You’re almost five years old. Your birthday is next week. You came to us on the first day of the year.”

“Where did I come from?”

“From God. All things come from God.”

Jonathan knew that was no answer. “But where was I *before*?” he persisted.

“I don’t know.”

Jonathan frowned. A frown looked funny on such a carefree young face. “I must have been *somewhere*.”

One day, Philip realized, someone would have to tell Jonathan how babies were born. He grimaced at the thought. Well, this was not the time, happily. He changed the subject. “While I’m away, I want you to learn to count up to a hundred.”

“I can count,” Jonathan said. “One two three four five six seven eight nine ten eleven twelve thirteen fourteen porteen scorteen horteen—”

“Not bad,” said Philip, “but Brother Osmund will teach you more. You must sit still in the schoolroom and do everything he tells you to.”

“I’m going to be the best in the school!” said Jonathan.

“We’ll see.” Philip studied him for a moment longer. Philip was fascinated by the child’s development, the way he learned things and the phases through which he passed. This current insistence on being able to speak Latin, or count, or run fast, was curious: was it a necessary prelude to real learning? It must serve some purpose in God’s plan. And one day

Jonathan would be a man. What would he be like then? The thought made Philip impatient for Jonathan to grow up. But that would take as long as the building of the cathedral.

"Give me a kiss, then, and say goodbye," Philip said.

Jonathan lifted his face and Philip kissed the soft cheek. "Goodbye, Father," said Jonathan.

"Goodbye, my son," Philip said.

He gave Johnny Eightpence's arm an affectionate squeeze and went out.

The monks were coming out of the crypt and heading for the refectory. Philip went the opposite way, and entered the crypt to pray for success on his mission.

He had been heartbroken when they told him what had happened at the quarry. Five people killed, one of them a little girl! He had hidden himself in his house and cried like a child. Five of his flock, struck down by William Hamleigh and his pack of brutes. Philip had known them all: Harry of Shiring, who had once been Lord Percy's quarryman; Otto Blackface, the dark-skinned man who had been in charge of the quarry since the very beginning; Otto's handsome son Mark; Mark's wife, Alwen, who played tunes on sheep bells in the evenings; and little Norma, Otto's seven-year-old granddaughter, his favorite. Good-hearted, God-fearing, hardworking people, who had a right to expect peace and justice from their lords. William had slaughtered them like a fox killing chickens. It was enough to make the angels weep.

Philip had grieved for them, and then he had gone to Shiring to demand justice. The sheriff had refused point-blank to take any action. "Lord William has a small army—how should I arrest him?" Sheriff Eustace had said. "The king needs knights to fight against Maud—what will he say if I incarcerate one of his best men? If I brought a charge of murder against William, I'd either be killed immediately by his knights or hanged for a traitor later by King Stephen."

The first casualty of a civil war was justice, Philip had realized.

Then the sheriff had told him that William had made a formal complaint about the Kingsbridge market.

It was ludicrous, of course, that William could get away with murder and at the same time charge Philip on a technicality; but Philip felt helpless. It was true that he did not have permission to hold a market, and he was in the wrong, strictly speaking. But he could not remain in the wrong. He was the prior of Kingsbridge. All he had was his moral authority. William could call up an army of knights; Bishop Waleran could use his contacts in high places; the sheriff could claim royal authority; but all Philip could do was to say *this* is right and *that* is wrong; and if he were to forfeit that position he really would be helpless. So he had ordered the market to cease.

That left him in a truly desperate position.

The priory's finances had improved dramatically, thanks to stricter controls on the one hand, and on the other, ever-rising earnings from the market and from sheep farming; but Philip always spent every penny on the building, and he had borrowed heavily from the Jews of Winchester, a loan he had yet to repay. Now, at a stroke, he had lost his supply of cost-free stone, his income from the market had dried up, and his volunteer laborers—many of whom came mainly for the market—were likely to dwindle. He would have to lay off half the builders, and abandon hope of finishing the cathedral in his own lifetime. He was not prepared to do that.

He wondered if the crisis was his own fault. Had he been too confident, too ambitious? Sheriff Eustace had said as much. "You're too big for your boots, Philip," he had said angrily. "You run a little monastery, and you're a little prior, but you want to rule the bishop and the earl and the sheriff. Well, you can't. We're too powerful for you. All you do is cause trouble." Eustace was an ugly man with uneven teeth and a cast in one eye, and he was wearing a dirty yellow robe; but unimpressive though he was, his words had stabbed Philip's heart. He was painfully aware that the quarrymen would not have died if he had not made an enemy of William Hamleigh. But he could not do other than be William's enemy. If he gave up, even more people would suffer, people such as the miller William had killed and the serf's daughter he and his knights had raped. Philip had to fight on.

And that meant he had to go to see the king.

He hated the idea. He had approached the king once before, at Winchester four years ago, and although he had got what he wanted, he had been dreadfully ill-at-ease at the royal court. The king was surrounded by wily and unscrupulous people jostling for his attention and squabbling over his favors, and Philip found such people contemptible. They were trying to acquire wealth and position they did not merit. He did not really understand the game they were playing: in his world, the best way to get something was to deserve it, not to toady to the giver. But now he had no alternative but to enter their world and play their game. Only the king could grant Philip permission to hold a market. Only the king could now save the cathedral.

He finished his prayers and left the crypt. The sun was coming up, and there was a pink flush on the gray stone walls of the rising cathedral. The builders, who worked from sunrise to sunset, were just beginning, opening their lodges and sharpening their tools and mixing up the first batch of mortar. The loss of the quarry had not yet affected the building: they had always quarried stone faster than they could use it, from the beginning, and now they had a stockpile that would last many months.

It was time for Philip to leave. All the arrangements were made. The king was at Lincoln. Philip would have a traveling companion: Richard, the

brother of Aliena. After fighting for a year as a squire, Richard had been knighted by the king. He had come home to re-equip himself and was now going to rejoin the royal army.

Aliena had done astonishingly well as a wool merchant. She no longer sold her wool to Philip, but dealt directly with the Flemish buyers herself. Indeed, this year she had wanted to buy the entire fleece production of the priory. She would have paid less than the Flemish, but Philip would have got the money earlier. He had turned her down. However, it was a measure of her success that she could even make the offer.

She was at the stable with her brother now, Philip saw as he walked across. A crowd had gathered to say goodbye to the travelers. Richard was sitting on a chestnut war-horse that must have cost Aliena twenty pounds. He had grown into a handsome, broad-shouldered young man, his regular features marred only by an angry scar on his right ear: the earlobe had been cut off, no doubt in some fencing accident. He was splendidly dressed in red and green and outfitted with a new sword, lance, battle-ax and dagger. His baggage was carried by a second horse which he had on a leading-rein. With him were two men-at-arms on coursers and a squire on a cob.

Aliena was in tears, although Philip could not tell whether she was sorry to see her brother go, proud that he looked so fine, or frightened that he might never come back. All three, perhaps. Some of the villagers had come to say goodbye, including most of the young men and boys. No doubt Richard was their hero. All the monks were here, too, to wish their prior a safe journey.

The stable hands brought out two horses, a palfrey saddled ready for Philip and a cob loaded with his modest baggage—mainly food for the journey. The builders put down their tools and came over, led by bearded Tom and his redheaded stepson, Jack.

Philip formally embraced Remigius, his sub-prior, and took a warmer farewell of Milius and Cuthbert, then mounted the palfrey. He would be sitting in this hard saddle a long time, he realized grimly. From his raised position he blessed them all. The monks, builders and villagers waved and called out their goodbyes as he and Richard rode side by side through the priory gates.

They went down the narrow street through the village, waving to people who looked out of their doorways, then clattered across the wooden bridge and onto the road through the fields. A little later, Philip glanced back over his shoulder, and saw the rising sun shining through the window space in the half-built east end of the new cathedral. If he failed in his mission, it might never be finished. After all he had been through to get this far, he could not bear to contemplate the idea of defeat now. He turned back and concentrated on the road ahead.

Lincoln was a city on a hill. Philip and Richard approached it from the south, on an ancient and busy road called Ermine Street. Even from a distance they could see, at the top of the hill, the towers of the cathedral and the battlements of the castle. But they were still three or four miles away when, to Philip's astonishment, they came to a city gate. The suburbs must be *vast*, he thought; the population must run to *thousands*.

At Christmas the city had been seized by Ranulf of Chester, the most powerful man in the north of England and a relative of the Empress Maud. King Stephen had since retaken the city, but Ranulf's forces still held the castle. Now, Philip and Richard had learned as they drew nearer, Lincoln was in the peculiar position of having two rival armies camped within its walls.

Philip had not warmed to Richard in their four weeks together. Aliena's brother was an angry youth, who hated the Hamleighs and was set on revenge; and he talked as if Philip felt the same. But there was a difference. Philip hated the Hamleighs for what they did to their subjects: getting rid of them would make the world a better place. Richard could not feel good about himself until he had defeated the Hamleighs: his motive was entirely selfish.

Richard was physically brave, always ready for a fight; but in other ways he was weak. He confused his men-at-arms by sometimes treating them as equals and sometimes ordering them around like servants. In taverns he would try to make an impression by buying beer for strangers. He pretended to know the way when he was not really sure, and sometimes led the party far astray because he could not admit that he had made a mistake. By the time they reached Lincoln, Philip knew that Aliena was worth ten of Richard.

They passed a large lake teeming with ships; then at the foot of the hill they crossed the river that formed the southern boundary of the city proper. Lincoln obviously lived by shipping. Beside the bridge there was a fish market. They went through another guarded gate. Now they left behind the sprawl of the suburbs and entered the teeming city. A narrow, impossibly crowded street ran steeply up the hill directly in front of them. The houses that jostled shoulder to shoulder on either side were made partly or wholly of stone, a sign of considerable wealth. The hill was so steep that most houses had their main floor several feet above ground level at one end and below the surface at the other. The area underneath the downhill end was invariably a craftsman's workplace or a shop. The only open spaces were the graveyards next to the churches, and on each of these there was a market: grain, poultry, wool, leather and others. Philip and Richard, with Richard's small entourage, fought their way through the dense crowd of townspeople, men-at-arms, animals and carts. Philip realized with astonishment that there were stones beneath his feet. The whole street was paved! What wealth there must be

here, he thought, for stones to be laid in the street as if it were a palace or a cathedral. The way was still slippery with refuse and animal dung, but it was much better than the river of mud that constituted most city streets in winter.

They reached the crest of the hill and passed through yet another gate. Now they entered the inner city, and the atmosphere was suddenly different: quieter, but very tense. Immediately to their left was the entrance to the castle. The great ironbound door in the archway was shut tight. Dim figures moved behind the arrow-slit windows in the gatehouse, and sentries in armor patrolled the castellated ramparts, the feeble sunshine glinting off their burnished helmets. Philip watched them pacing to and fro. There was no conversation between them, no joshing and laughter, no leaning on the balustrade to whistle at passing girls: they were upright, eagle-eyed, and fearful.

To Philip's right, no more than a quarter of a mile from the castle gate, was the west front of the cathedral, and Philip saw instantly that despite its proximity to the castle it had been taken over as the king's military headquarters. A line of sentries barred the narrow road that led between the canons' houses to the church. Beyond the sentries, knights and men-at-arms were passing in and out through the three doorways to the cathedral. The graveyard was an army camp, with tents and cooking fires and horses grazing the turf. There were no monastic buildings: Lincoln Cathedral was not run by monks, but by priests called canons, who lived in ordinary town houses near the church.

The space between the cathedral and the castle was empty except for Philip and his companions. Philip suddenly realized that they had the full attention of the guards on the king's side and the sentries on the opposing ramparts. He was in the no-man's-land between the two armed camps, probably the most dangerous spot in Lincoln. Looking around, he saw that Richard and the others had already moved on, and he followed them hastily.

The king's sentries let them through immediately: Richard was well known. Philip admired the west facade of the cathedral. It had an enormously tall entrance arch, and subsidiary arches on either side, half the size of the central one but still awesome. It looked like the gateway to heaven—which it was, of course, in a way. Philip immediately decided he wanted tall arches in the west front of Kingsbridge Cathedral.

Leaving the horses with the squire, Philip and Richard made their way through the encampment and entered the cathedral. It was even more crowded inside than out. The aisles had been turned into stables, and hundreds of horses were tied to the columns of the arcade. Armed men thronged the nave, and here too there were cooking fires and bedding. Some spoke English, some French, and a few spoke Flemish, the guttural tongue of the wool merchants of Flanders. By and large the knights were in here and the men-at-arms were

outside. Philip was sorry to see several men playing at nine-men's morris for money, and he was even more disturbed by the appearance of some of the women, who were dressed very skimpily for winter and appeared to be flirting with the men—almost, he thought, as if they were sinful women, or even, God forbid, whores.

To avoid looking at them he raised his eyes to the ceiling. It was of wood, and beautifully painted in glowing colors, but it was a terrible fire risk with all those people cooking in the nave. He followed Richard through the crowd. Richard seemed at ease here, assured and confident, calling out greetings to barons and lords, and slapping knights on the back.

The crossing and the east end of the cathedral had been roped off. The east end appeared to have been reserved for the priests—I should think so, too, Philip thought—and the crossing had become the king's quarters.

There was another line of guards behind the rope, then a crowd of courtiers, then an inner circle of earls, with King Stephen at the center on a wooden throne. The king had aged since the last time Philip saw him, five years ago in Winchester. There were lines of anxiety on his handsome face and a little gray in his tawny hair, and a year of fighting had made him thinner. He seemed to be having an amiable argument with his earls, disagreeing without anger. Richard went to the edge of the inner circle and made a deep ceremonial bow. The king glanced over, recognized him, and said in a booming voice: "Richard of Kingsbridge! Glad to have you back!"

"Thank you, my lord king," said Richard.

Philip stepped up beside him and bowed in the same way.

Stephen said: "Have you brought a monk as your squire?" All the courtiers laughed.

"This is the prior of Kingsbridge, lord," said Richard.

Stephen looked again, and Philip saw the light of recognition in his eye. "Of course, I know Prior…Philip," he said, but his tone was not as warm as when he greeted Richard. "Have you come to fight for me?" The courtiers laughed again.

Philip was pleased the king had remembered his name. "I'm here because God's work of rebuilding Kingsbridge Cathedral needs urgent help from my lord king."

"I must hear all about it," Stephen interrupted hastily. "Come and see me tomorrow, when I'll have more time." He turned back to the earls, and resumed his conversation in a lower voice.

Richard bowed and withdrew, and Philip did the same.

Philip did not speak to King Stephen on the following day, nor the day after, nor the day after that.

On the first night he stayed at an alehouse, but he felt oppressed by the constant smell of roasting meat and the laughter of loose women. Unfortunately, there was no monastery in the town. Normally the bishop would have offered him accommodation, but the king was living in the bishop's palace and all the houses around the cathedral were crammed full with members of Stephen's entourage. On the second night Philip went right outside the town, beyond the suburb of Wigford, where there was a monastery that ran a home for lepers. There he got horsebread and weak beer for supper, a hard mattress on the floor, silence from sundown to midnight, services in the small hours of the morning, and a breakfast of thin porridge without salt; and he was happy.

He went to the cathedral early every morning, carrying the precious charter that gave the priory the right to take stone from the quarry. Day after day the king failed to notice him. When the other petitioners talked among themselves, discussing who was in favor and who was out, Philip remained aloof.

He knew why he was being kept waiting. The entire Church was at odds with the king. Stephen had not kept the generous promises that had been extracted from him at the start of his reign. He had made an enemy of his brother, the wily Bishop Henry of Winchester, by supporting someone else for the job of archbishop of Canterbury; a move which had also disappointed Waleran Bigod, who wanted to rise on Henry's coattails. But Stephen's greatest sin, in the eyes of the Church, had been to arrest Bishop Roger of Salisbury and Roger's two nephews, who were bishops of Lincoln and Ely, all on one day, on charges of unlicensed castle building. A chorus of outrage had gone up from cathedrals and monasteries all over the country at this act of sacrilege. Stephen was hurt. As men of God the bishops had no need of castles, he said; and if they built castles they could not expect to be treated purely as men of God. He was sincere, but naive.

The split had been patched up, but King Stephen was no longer eager to hear the petitions of holy men, so Philip had to wait. He used the opportunity to meditate. It was something he had little time for as prior, and he missed it. Now, suddenly, he had nothing to do for hours on end, and he spent the time lost in thought.

Eventually the other courtiers left a space around him, making him quite conspicuous, and it must have been increasingly difficult for Stephen to ignore him. He was deep in contemplation of the sublime mystery of the Trinity on the morning of his seventh day in Lincoln when he realized that someone was standing right in front of him, looking at him and speaking to him, and that person was the king.

"Are you asleep with your eyes open, man?" Stephen was saying in a tone halfway between amusement and irritation.

“I’m sorry, lord, I was thinking,” Philip said, and bowed belatedly.

“Never mind. I want to borrow your clothes.”

“What?” Philip was too surprised to mind his manners.

“I want to take a look around the castle, and if I’m dressed as a monk they won’t shoot arrows at me. Come on—go into one of the chapels and take off your robe.”

Philip had only an undershirt on beneath his robe. “But, lord, what shall I wear?”

“I forget how modest you monks are.” Stephen clicked his fingers at a young knight. “Robert—lend me your tunic, quick.”

The knight, who was talking to a girl, took off his tunic with a swift motion, gave it to the king with a bow, then made a vulgar gesture to the girl. His friends laughed and cheered.

King Stephen gave the tunic to Philip.

Philip slipped into the tiny chapel of St. Dunstan, asked the saint’s pardon with a hasty prayer, then took off his habit and put on the knight’s short-skirted scarlet tunic. It seemed very strange indeed: he had been wearing monastic clothing since the age of six, and he could not have felt more odd if he had been dressed as a woman. He emerged and handed his monkish robe to Stephen, who pulled it over his head swiftly.

Then the king astonished him by saying: “Come with me, if you like. You can tell me about Kingsbridge Cathedral.”

Philip was taken aback. His first instinct was to refuse. A sentry on the castle ramparts might be tempted to take a shot at him, and he would not be protected by religious garments. But he was being offered an opportunity to be totally alone with the king, with plenty of time to explain about the quarry and the market. He might never get another chance like this.

Stephen picked up his own cloak, which was purple with white fur at the collar and hem. “Wear this,” he said to Philip. “You’ll draw their fire away from me.”

The other courtiers had gone quiet, watching, wondering what would happen.

The king was making a point, Philip realized. He was saying that Philip had no business here in an armed camp, and could not expect to be granted privileges at the expense of men who risked their lives for the king. This was not unfair. But Philip knew that if he accepted this point of view he might as well go home and give up all hope of repossessing the quarry or reopening the market. He had to accept the challenge. He drew a deep breath and said: “Perhaps it is God’s will that I should die to save the king.” Then he took the purple cloak and put it on.

There was a murmur of surprise from the crowd; and King Stephen himself looked quite startled. Everyone had expected Philip to back down.

Almost immediately he wished he had. But he had committed himself now.

Stephen turned and walked toward the north door. Philip followed him. Several courtiers made to go with them, but Stephen waved them back, saying: “Even a monk might attract suspicion if he is attended by the entire royal court.” He pulled the cowl of Philip’s robe over his head and they passed out into the graveyard.

Philip’s costly cloak drew curious glances as they picked their way across the campsite: men assumed he was a baron and were puzzled not to recognize him. The glances made him feel guilty, as if he were some kind of impostor. Nobody looked at Stephen.

They did not go directly to the main gate of the castle, but made their way through a maze of narrow lanes and came out by the church of St.-Paul-in-the-Bail, across from the northeast corner of the castle. The castle walls were built on top of massive earth ramparts and surrounded by a dry moat. There was a swath of open space fifty yards wide between the edge of the moat and the nearest buildings. Stephen stepped onto the grass and began to walk west, studying the north wall of the castle, staying close to the backs of the houses on the outer rim of the cleared area. Philip went with him. Stephen made Philip walk on his left, between him and the castle. The open space was there to give bowmen a clear shot at anyone who approached the walls, of course. Philip was not afraid to die but he was afraid of pain, and the thought uppermost in his mind was how much an arrow would *hurt*.

“Scared, Philip?” said Stephen.

“Terrified,” Philip replied candidly; and then, made reckless by fear, he added cheekily: “How about you?”

The king laughed at his nerve. “A little,” he admitted.

Philip remembered that this was his chance to talk about the cathedral. But he could not concentrate while his life was in such peril. His eyes went constantly to the castle, and he raked the ramparts, watching for a man drawing a bow.

The castle occupied the entire southwest corner of the inner city, its west wall being part of the city wall, so to walk all the way around it one had to go out of the city. Stephen led Philip through the west gate, and they passed out into the suburb called Newland. Here the houses were like peasant hovels, made of wattle-and-daub, with large gardens such as village houses had. A bitter cold wind whipped across the open fields beyond the houses. Stephen turned south, still skirting the castle. He pointed to a little door in the castle wall. “That’s where Ranulf of Chester sneaked out to make his escape when I took the city, I suspect,” he said.

Philip was less frightened here. There were other people on the pathway, and the ramparts on this side were less heavily guarded, for the occupants of the castle were afraid of an attack from the city, not from the countryside.

Philip took a deep breath and then blurted out: “If I am killed, will you give Kingsbridge a market and make William Hamleigh give back the quarry?”

Stephen did not answer immediately. They walked downhill to the southwest corner of the castle and looked up at the keep. From their position it appeared loftily impregnable. Just below that corner they turned into another gateway and entered the lower city to walk along the castle’s south side. Philip felt in danger again. It would not be too difficult for someone inside the castle to deduce that the two men who were making a circuit of the walls must be on a scouting expedition, and therefore they were fair game, especially the one in the purple cloak. To distract himself from his fear he studied the keep. There were small holes in the wall which served as outlets for the latrines, and the refuse and filth which was washed out simply fell on the walls and the mound below and stayed there until it rotted away. No wonder there was a stink. Philip tried not to breathe too deeply, and they hurried past.

There was another, smaller tower at the southeast corner. Now Philip and Stephen had walked around three sides of the square. Philip wondered if Stephen had forgotten his question. He was apprehensive about asking it again. The king might feel he was being pushed, and take offense.

They reached the main street that went through the middle of the town and turned again, but before Philip had time to feel relieved they passed through another gate into the inner city, and a few moments later they were in the no-man’s-land between cathedral and castle. To Philip’s horror the king stopped there.

He turned to talk to Philip, positioning himself in such a way that he could scrutinize the castle over Philip’s shoulder. Philip’s vulnerable back, clad in ermine and purple, was exposed to the gatehouse which was bristling with sentries and archers. He went as stiff as a statue, expecting an arrow or a spear in his back at any moment. He began to perspire despite the freezing cold wind.

“I gave you that quarry years ago, didn’t I?” said King Stephen.

“Not exactly,” Philip replied through gritted teeth. “You gave us the right to take stone for the cathedral. But you gave the quarry to Percy Hamleigh. Now Percy’s son, William, has thrown out my stonecutters, killing five people—including a woman and a child—and he refuses us access.”

“He shouldn’t do things like that, especially if he wants me to make him earl of Shiring,” Stephen said thoughtfully. Philip was encouraged. But a moment later the king said: “I’m damned if I can see a way to get into this castle.”

“Please make William reopen the quarry,” Philip said. “He is defying you and stealing from God.”

Stephen seemed not to hear. “I don’t think they’ve got many men in

there," he said in the same musing tone. "I suspect nearly all of them are on the ramparts, to make a show of strength. What was that about a market?"

This was all part of the test, Philip decided; making him stand out in the open with his back to a host of archers. He wiped his brow with the fur cuff of the king's cloak. "My lord king, every Sunday people come from all over the county to worship at Kingsbridge and labor, for no wages, on the cathedral building site. When we first began, a few enterprising men and women would come to the site and sell meat pies, and wine, and hats, and knives, to the volunteer workers. So, gradually, a market grew up. And now I am asking you to license it."

"Will you pay for your license?"

A payment was normal, Philip knew, but he also knew that it might be waived for a religious body. "Yes, lord, I will pay—unless you would wish to give us the license without payment, for the greater glory of God."

Stephen looked directly into Philip's eyes for the first time. "You're a brave man, to stand there, with the enemy behind you, and bargain with me."

Philip gave back an equally frank stare. "If God decides my life is over, nothing can save me," he said, sounding braver than he felt. "But if God wants me to live on and build Kingsbridge Cathedral, ten thousand archers cannot strike me down."

"Well said!" Stephen remarked, and, clapping a hand on Philip's shoulder, he turned toward the cathedral. Weak with relief, Philip walked beside him, feeling better for every step away from the castle. He seemed to have passed the test. But it was important to get an unambiguous commitment from the king. Any moment now he would be engulfed by courtiers again. As they passed through the line of sentries, Philip took his courage in both hands and said: "My lord king, if you would write a letter to the sheriff of Shiring—"

He was interrupted. One of the earls rushed up, looking flustered, and said: "Robert of Gloucester is on his way here, my lord king."

"What? How far away?"

"Close. A day at most—"

"Why haven't I been warned? I posted men all around!"

"They came by the Fosse Way, then turned off the road to approach across open country."

"Who is with him?"

"All the earls and knights on his side who have lost their lands in the last two years. Ranulf of Chester is also with him—"

"Of course. Treacherous dog."

"He has brought all his knights from Chester, plus a horde of wild rapacious Welshmen."

"How many men altogether?"

"About a thousand."

“Damn—that’s a hundred more than we have.”

By this time several barons had gathered around, and now another one spoke. “Lord, if he’s coming across open country, he’ll have to cross the river at the ford—”

“Good thinking, Edward!” Stephen said. “Take your men down to that ford and see if you can hold it. You’ll need archers, too.”

“How far are they now, does anybody know?” asked Edward.

The first earl said: “Very close, the scout said. They could reach the ford before you.”

“I’ll go right away,” Edward said.

“Good man!” said King Stephen. He made a fist with his right hand and punched his left palm. “I shall meet Robert of Gloucester on the battlefield at last. I wish I had more men. Still—an advantage of a hundred men isn’t much.”

Philip listened to it all in grim silence. He was sure he had been on the point of getting Stephen’s agreement. Now the king’s mind was elsewhere. But Philip was not ready to give up. He was still wearing the king’s purple robe. He slipped it off his shoulders and held it out, saying: “Perhaps we should both revert to type, my lord king.”

Stephen nodded absently. A courtier stepped behind the king and helped him take off the monkish habit. Philip handed over the royal robe and said: “Lord, you seemed well disposed to my request.”

Stephen looked irritated to be reminded. He shrugged on his robe and was about to speak when a new voice was heard.

“My lord king!”

Philip recognized the voice. His heart sank. He turned and saw William Hamleigh.

“William, my boy!” said the king, in the hearty voice he used with fighting men. “You’ve arrived just in time!”

William bowed and said: “My lord, I’ve brought fifty knights and two hundred men from my earldom.”

Philip’s hopes turned to dust.

Stephen was visibly delighted. “What a good man you are!” he said warmly. “That gives us the advantage over the enemy!” He put his arm around William’s shoulders and walked with him into the cathedral.

Philip stood where he was and watched them go. He had been agonizingly close to success, but in the end William’s army had counted for more than justice, he thought bitterly. The courtier who had helped the king take off the monk’s habit now held the robe out to Philip. Philip took it. The courtier followed the king and his entourage into the cathedral. Philip put on his monastic robe. He was deeply disappointed. He looked at the three huge arched doorways of the cathedral. He had hoped to build archways like that at

Kingsbridge. But King Stephen had taken the side of William Hamleigh. The king had been faced with a straight choice: the justice of Philip's case against the advantage of William's army. He had failed his test.

Philip was left with only one hope: that King Stephen would be defeated in the forthcoming battle.

II

The bishop said mass in the cathedral when the sky was beginning to change from black to gray. By then the horses were saddled, the knights were wearing their chain mail, the men-at-arms had been fed, and a measure of strong wine had been served to give them all heart.

William Hamleigh knelt in the nave with the other knights and earls, while the war-horses stamped and snorted in the aisles, and was forgiven in advance for the killing he would do that day.

Fear and excitement made William light-headed. If the king won a victory today, William's name would forever be associated with it, for men would say that he had brought the reinforcements that tipped the balance. If the king should lose…anything could happen. He shivered on the cold stone floor.

The king was at the front, in a fresh white robe, with a candle in his hand. As the Host was elevated, the candle broke, and the flame went out. William trembled with dread: it was a bad omen. A priest brought a new candle and took away the broken one, and Stephen smiled nonchalantly, but the feeling of supernatural horror stayed with William, and when he looked around he could tell that others felt the same.

After the service the king put on his armor, helped by a valet. He had a knee-length mail coat made of leather with iron rings sewn to it. The coat was slit up to the waist in front and behind so that he could ride in it. The valet laced it tightly at the throat. He then put on a close-fitting cap with a long mail hood attached, covering his tawny hair and protecting his neck. Over the cap he wore an iron helmet with a nosepiece. His leather boots had mail trimmings and pointed spurs.

As he put on his armor, the earls gathered around him. William followed his mother's advice and acted as if he were already one of them, pushing through the crowd to join the group around the king. After listening for a moment he realized they were trying to persuade Stephen to withdraw and leave Lincoln to the rebels.

"You hold more territory than Maud—you can raise a larger army," said an older man whom William recognized as Lord Hugh. "Go south, get reinforcements, come back and outnumber them."

After the portent of the broken candle, William almost wished for withdrawal himself; but the king had no time for such talk. "We're strong enough to defeat them now," he said cheerfully. "Where's your spirit?" He strapped on a belt with a sword on one side and a dagger on the other, both of

them in wood-and-leather scabbards.

“The armies are too evenly matched,” said a tall man with short, grizzled hair and a close-trimmed beard: the earl of Surrey. “It’s too risky.”

This was a poor argument to use with Stephen, William knew: the king was nothing if not chivalrous. “Too evenly matched?” he repeated scornfully. “I prefer a fair fight.” He pulled on the leather gauntlets with mail on the backs of the fingers. The valet handed him a long wooden shield covered with leather. He hooked its strap around his neck and held it in his left hand.

“We’ve little to lose by withdrawing at this point,” Hugh persisted. “We aren’t even in possession of the castle.”

“I would lose my chance of meeting Robert of Gloucester on the battlefield,” Stephen said. “For two years he’s been avoiding me. Now that I have an opportunity to deal with the traitor once and for all, I’m not going to pull out just because we’re evenly matched!”

A groom brought his horse, saddled ready. As Stephen was about to mount, there was a flurry of activity around the door at the west end of the cathedral, and a knight came running up the nave, muddy and bleeding. William had a doomy premonition that this would be bad news. As the man bowed to the king, William recognized him as one of Edward’s men who had been sent to guard the ford. “We were too late, lord,” the man said hoarsely, breathing hard. “The enemy has crossed the river.”

It was another bad sign. William suddenly felt colder. Now there was nothing but open fields between the enemy and Lincoln.

Stephen too looked struck down for an instant, but he recovered his composure swiftly. “No matter!” he said. “We will meet them all the sooner!” He mounted his war-horse.

He had a battle-ax strapped to his saddle. The valet handed him a wooden lance with a bright iron point, completing his weaponry. Stephen clicked his tongue, and the horse obediently moved forward.

As he rode down the nave of the cathedral, the earls, barons and knights mounted and fell in behind him, and they left the cathedral in procession. In the grounds the men-at-arms joined them. This was when men began to feel scared and look for a chance to slip away; but their dignified pace, and the almost ceremonial atmosphere, with the townspeople looking on, meant it would be very difficult for the fainthearted to escape.

Their numbers were augmented by a hundred or more townsmen, fat bakers and shortsighted weavers and red-faced brewers, poorly armored and riding their cobs and palfreys. Their presence was a sign of the unpopularity of Ranulf.

The army could not pass the castle, for they would have been exposed to archery fire from its battlements, so they left the town by the north gate, which was called Newport Arch, and turned west. This was where the battle

would be fought.

William studied the terrain with a keen eye. Although the hill on the south side of the town sloped steeply to the river, here on the west there was a long ridge which fell gently to the plain. William saw immediately that Stephen had chosen the right spot from which to defend the town, for no matter how the enemy approached they would always be downhill from the king's army.

When Stephen was a quarter of a mile or so out of the city two scouts came up the slope, riding fast. They spotted the king and went straight to him. William crowded closer to hear their report.

"The enemy is approaching fast, lord," said one of the scouts.

William looked across the plain. Sure enough, he could see a black mass in the distance, moving slowly toward him: the enemy. He felt a shiver of fear. He shook himself, but the fear persisted. It would go when the fighting started.

King Stephen said: "What are their dispositions?"

"Ranulf and the knights of Chester form the middle, lord," the scout began. "They are on foot."

William wondered how the scout knew this. He must have gone right into the enemy camp and listened while marching orders were given. That took a cool nerve.

"Ranulf in the center?" said Stephen. "As if he were the leader, rather than Robert!"

"Robert of Gloucester is on his left flank, with an army of men who call themselves The Disinherited," the scout went on. William knew why they used that name—they had all lost lands since the civil war began.

"Robert has given Ranulf command of the operation, then," Stephen said thoughtfully. "A pity. I know Robert well—I practically grew up with him—and I could guess his tactics. But Ranulf is a stranger to me. No matter. Who's on their right?"

"The Welsh, lord."

"Archers, I suppose." The men of South Wales had a reputation for bowmanship.

"Not these," the scout said. "They are a raving mob, with their faces painted, singing barbaric songs, and armed with hammers and clubs. Very few have horses."

"They must be from North Wales," Stephen mused. "Ranulf has promised them pillage, I expect. God help Lincoln if they get inside the walls. But they won't! What's your name, scout?"

"Roger, called Lackland," the man said.

"Lackland? You shall have ten acres for this work."

The man was thrilled. "Thank you, lord!"

"Now." Stephen turned and looked at his earls. He was about to make his

dispositions. William tensed, wondering what role the king would assign to him. “Where is my lord Alan of Brittany?”

Alan edged his horse forward. He was the leader of a force of Breton mercenaries, rootless men who fought for pay and whose only loyalty was to themselves.

Stephen said to Alan: “I’ll have you and your brave Bretons in the front line on my left.”

William saw the wisdom of that: Breton mercenaries against Welsh adventurers, the untrustworthy versus the undisciplined.

“William of Ypres!” Stephen called.

“My lord king.” A dark man on a black war-horse raised his lance. This William was the leader of another force of mercenaries, Flemish men, a shade more reliable than the Bretons, it was said.

Stephen said: “You on my left also, but behind Alan’s Bretons.”

The two mercenary leaders wheeled about and rode back into the army to organize their men. William wondered where he would be placed. He had no wish to be in the front line. He had already done enough to distinguish himself, by bringing his army. A safe, uneventful rearguard position would suit him today.

King Stephen said: “My lords of Worcester, Surrey, Northampton, York and Hertford, with your knights, form my right flank.”

Once again William saw the sense of Stephen’s dispositions. The earls and their knights, mostly mounted, would face Robert of Gloucester and the “disinherited” nobles who supported him, most of whom would also be on horseback. But William was disappointed not to have been included with the earls. Surely the king could not have forgotten about him?

“I will hold the middle ground, dismounted, with foot soldiers,” Stephen said.

For the first time William disapproved of a decision. It was always better to stay on horseback as long as you could. But Ranulf, at the head of the opposing army, was said to be on foot, and Stephen’s overwrought sense of fair play compelled him to meet his enemy on equal terms.

“With me in the center I will have William of Shiring and his men,” the king said.

William did not know whether to be thrilled or terrified. It was a great honor to be chosen to stand with the king—Mother would be gratified—but it put him in the most dangerous position. Worse still, he would be on foot. It also meant the king would be able to see him and judge his performance. He would have to appear fearless and take the fight to the enemy, as opposed to keeping out of trouble and fighting only when forced to, which was the tactic he preferred.

“The loyal citizens of Lincoln will bring up the rear,” Stephen said. This

was a mixture of compassion and military good sense. The citizens would not be much use anywhere, but in the rear they could do little damage and would suffer fewer casualties.

William raised the banner of the earl of Shiring. This was another idea of Mother's. He was not entitled to the banner, strictly speaking, because he was not the earl; but the men with him were used to following the Shiring banner—or so he would argue if challenged. And by the end of the day, if the battle went well, he might be earl.

His men gathered around him. Walter was by his side, as always, a solid, reassuring presence. So were Ugly Gervase, Hugh Axe and Miles Dice. Gilbert, who had died at the quarry, had been replaced by Guillaume de St. Clair, a fresh-faced young man with a vicious streak.

Looking around, William was infuriated to see Richard of Kingsbridge, wearing bright new armor and riding a splendid war-horse. He was with the earl of Surrey. He had not brought an army for the king, as William had, but he looked impressive—fresh-faced, vigorous, and brave—and if he did great things today he might win royal favor. Battles were unpredictable, and so were kings.

On the other hand, perhaps Richard would be killed today. What a stroke of luck *that* would be. William lusted for it more than he had ever lusted for a woman.

He looked to the west. The enemy was closer.

Philip was on the roof of the cathedral, and he could see Lincoln laid out like a map. The old city surrounded the cathedral on the hilltop. It had straight streets and neat gardens and the castle in the southwest corner. The newer part, noisy and overcrowded, occupied the steep hillside to the south, between the old city and the River Witham. This district was normally bustling with commercial activity, but today it was covered with a fearful silence like a pall, and the people were standing on their rooftops to watch the battle. The river came in from the east, ran along the foot of the hill, then widened into a big natural harbor called Brayfield Pool, which was surrounded by quays and full of ships and boats. A canal called the Fosdyke ran west from Brayfield Pool—all the way to the River Trent, Philip had been told. Seeing it from a height, Philip marveled at how it ran straight for miles. People said it had been built in ancient times.

The canal formed the edge of the battlefield. Philip watched King Stephen's army march out of the city in a ragged crowd and slowly form up in three orderly columns on the ridge. Philip knew that Stephen had placed the earls on his right for they were the most colorful, with their tunics of red and yellow and their bright banners. They were also the most active, riding up and

down, giving orders and holding consultations and making plans. The group to the king's left, on the slope of the ridge that went down to the canal, were dressed in dull gray and brown, had fewer horses, and were less busy, conserving their energies: they would be the mercenaries.

Beyond Stephen's army, where the line of the canal became indistinct and merged with the hedgerows, the rebel army covered the fields like a swarm of bees. At first they had appeared to be stationary; then, when he looked again after a while, they were closer; and now, if he concentrated, he could just discern their motion. He wondered how strong they were. All indications were that the two sides were evenly matched.

There was nothing Philip could do to influence the outcome—a situation he hated. He tried to quiet his spirit and be fatalistic. If God wanted a new cathedral at Kingsbridge, he would cause Robert of Gloucester to defeat King Stephen today, so that Philip could ask the victorious Empress Maud to let him repossess the quarry and reopen the market. And if Stephen should defeat Robert, Philip would have to accept God's will, give up his ambitious plans, and let Kingsbridge once more decline into sleepy obscurity.

Try as he might, Philip could not think that way. He wanted Robert to *win*.

A strong wind buffeted the towers of the cathedral and threatened to blow the more frail spectators off the leads and hurl them to the graveyard below. The wind was bitterly cold. Philip shivered and pulled his cloak tighter around him.

The two armies were now about a mile apart.

The rebel army halted when it was about a mile from the king's front line. It was tantalizing to be able to see their mass but not make out any details. William wanted to know how well armed they were, whether they were cheerful and aggressive or tired and reluctant, even how tall they were. They continued to advance at a slow creep, as those in the rear, motivated by the same anxiety that William was suffering, pressed forward to get a look at the enemy.

In Stephen's army the earls and their knights lined up on their horses, with their lances at the ready, as if they were at a tournament and about to begin the jousting. William reluctantly sent all the horses in his contingent to the rear. He told the squires not to go back to the city but to hold the horses there in case they were needed—for flight, he meant, although he did not say so. If a battle was lost it was better to run than die.

There was a lull, when it seemed as if the fighting would never begin. The wind dropped and the horses calmed down, although the men did not. King Stephen took off his helmet and scratched his head. William became fretful.

Fighting was all right but thinking about it made him feel nauseated.

Then, for no apparent reason, the atmosphere became tense again. A battle cry went up from somewhere. All the horses suddenly turned skittish. A cheer began, and was drowned, almost instantly, by the thunder of hooves. The battle was on. William smelled the sour, sweaty odor of fear.

He looked around, trying desperately to figure out what was happening, but all was confusion, and being on foot he could see only his immediate surroundings. The earls on the right seemed to have started the battle by charging the enemy. Presumably the forces opposite them, Earl Robert's army of disinherited nobles, were responding in like manner, charging in formation. Almost immediately, a cry went up from the left, and William turned to see that the mounted men among the Breton mercenaries were spurring their horses forward. At that, a bloodcurdling cacophony arose from the corresponding section of the enemy army—the Welsh mob, presumably. He could not see who had the advantage.

He had lost sight of Richard.

Dozens of arrows rose like a flock of birds from behind the enemy lines and began to fall all around. William held his shield over his head. He loathed arrows—they killed at random.

King Stephen roared a war cry and charged. William drew his sword and ran forward, calling his men to follow. But the horsemen on his left and right had fanned out as they charged forward, and they came between him and the enemy.

On his right, there was a deafening clash of iron on iron, and the air filled with a metallic smell he knew well. The earls and the disinherited had joined battle. All he could see was men and horses colliding, wheeling, charging and falling. The neighing of the beasts was indistinguishable from the men's battle cries, and somewhere in that noise William could already hear the bone-chilling, dreadful screams of wounded men in agony. He hoped Richard was one of those screaming.

William looked left and was horrified to see that the Bretons were falling back before the clubs and axes of the wild Welsh tribesmen. The Welsh were bersesrk, yelling and screaming and trampling one another in their eagerness to get at the enemy. Perhaps they were greedy to loot the rich city. The Bretons, with nothing more than the prospect of another week's pay to spur them on, were fighting defensively and giving ground. William was disgusted.

He was frustrated that he had not yet struck a single blow. He was surrounded by his knights, and ahead of him were the horses of the earls and the Bretons. He pushed forward, slightly ahead and to one side of the king. There was combat all around: fallen horses, men fighting hand to hand with the ferocity of cats, the deafening ring of swords, and the sickly smell of

blood; but William and King Stephen were, for the moment, stuck in a dead zone.

Philip could see everything, but he understood nothing. He had no idea what was going on. All was confusion: flashing blades, charging horses, banners flying and falling, and the sounds of battle, carried on the wind, muted by distance. It was maddeningly frustrating. Some men fell and died, others overcame and fought on, but he could not tell who was winning and who losing.

A cathedral priest standing nearby in a fur coat looked at Philip and said: “What’s going on?”

Philip shook his head and said: “I can’t tell.”

But even as he spoke he discerned a movement. To the left of the battlefield, some men were running away down the hill toward the canal. They were drab-dressed mercenaries, and as far as Philip could tell, it was the king’s men who were fleeing and the painted tribesmen of the attacking army who were in pursuit. The victorious whooping of the Welsh could be heard from here. Philip’s hopes lifted: the rebels were winning already!

Then there was a sea change on the other side. To the right, where the mounted men were engaged, the king’s army seemed to be falling back. The movement was at first slight, then steady, then rapid; and even as Philip watched, the retreat turned into a rout, and scores of the king’s men turned their horses and began to flee from the battlefield.

Philip was elated: this must be God’s will!

Could it really be over so quickly? The rebels were advancing on both flanks, but the center was still holding steady. The men around King Stephen were fighting more fiercely than those to either side. Would they be able to stem the flow? Perhaps Stephen and Robert of Gloucester would fight it out personally: single combat between two leaders could sometimes settle the issue regardless of what was happening elsewhere on the field. It was not yet over.

The tide turned with horrifying speed. At one moment the two armies were even, both sides fighting fiercely; and at the next, the king’s men were falling back fast. William was deeply disheartened. On his left, the Breton mercenaries were running away down the hill and being chased into the canal by the Welsh; and on his right, the earls with their war-horses and banners were turning from the fight and trying to escape back toward Lincoln. Only the middle was holding: King Stephen was in the thick of it, laying about him with his massive sword, and the Shiring men were fighting like pack-wolves

all around him. But the situation was unstable. If the flanks continued to retreat the king would end up surrounded. William wanted Stephen to fall back. But the king was more brave than wise, and he fought on.

William felt the entire battle take a lurch to the left. Looking around, he saw the Flemish mercenaries coming from behind and falling on the Welsh, who were forced to stop chasing the Bretons down the hill and turn to defend themselves. For a moment there was a melee. Then Ranulf of Chester's men, in the middle of the enemy front line, attacked the Flemish, who now found themselves squeezed between the men from Chester and the Welsh.

Seeing the rally, King Stephen urged his men to press forward. William thought Ranulf might have made a mistake. If the king's forces could close with Ranulf's men now, Ranulf would be the one who was squeezed on two sides.

One of William's knights fell in front of him and suddenly he was in the midst of the fighting.

A beefy northerner with blood on his sword lunged at him. William parried the thrust easily: he was fresh and his antagonist was already tired. William thrust at the man's face, missed, and parried another jab. He raised his sword high, deliberately opening himself to a stab; then, when the other man predictably stepped forward with another thrust, William dodged it and brought his sword down, two-handed, on the other man's shoulder. The blow split the man's armor and broke his collarbone, and he fell.

William enjoyed a moment of elation. His fear had gone. He roared: "Come on, you dogs!"

Two more men took the place of the fallen knight and attacked William simultaneously. He held them off but he was forced to give ground.

There was a surge on his right, and one of his opponents had to turn aside to defend himself against a red-faced man armed with a cleaver, who looked like a crazed butcher. That left only one for William to deal with. He grinned savagely and pressed forward. His opponent panicked and slashed wildly at William's head. William ducked and stabbed the man in the thigh, just below the fringe of his short mail jacket. The leg buckled and the man fell.

Once again William had no one to fight. He stood still, breathing hard. For a moment he had thought the king's army was going to be routed, but they had rallied, and now neither side appeared to have the advantage. He looked to his right, wondering what had caused the surge that had distracted one of his antagonists. To his astonishment he saw that the citizens of Lincoln were giving the enemy a hard fight. Perhaps it was because they were defending their own homes. But who had rallied them, after the earls on that flank had fled? His question was answered: to his dismay he saw Richard of Kingsbridge on his war-horse, urging the townsmen on. William's heart sank. If the king saw Richard being brave it could undo all William's work. William

looked over at Stephen. At that moment the king caught Richard's eye and waved encouragement. William let out a resentful curse.

The townsmen's rally relieved the pressure on the king, but only for a moment. To the left, Ranulf's men had routed the Flemish mercenaries, and now Ranulf turned toward the center of the defending forces. At the same time the so-called Disinherited rallied against Richard and the townsmen, and the fighting became furious.

William was attacked by a huge man with a battle-ax. He dodged desperately, suddenly afraid for his life. With each swing of the ax he leaped back, and he realized fearfully that the whole of the king's army was falling back at much the same pace. To his left, the Welsh came back up the hill and, incredibly, started throwing stones. It was ridiculous but effective, for now William had to keep an eye out for flying rocks as well as defend himself against the giant with the battle-ax. There seemed to be a lot more of the enemy than before, and William felt, with a sense of despair, that the king's men were outnumbered. Hysterical fear rose in his throat as he realized that the battle was very nearly lost and he was in mortal danger. The king should flee now. Why was he fighting on? It was insane—he would be killed—they would all be killed! William's antagonist raised his ax high. William's fighting instincts took over for an instant, and instead of falling back as he had before, he leaped forward and lunged at the big man's face. His sword point went into the man's neck just under the chin. William thrust it home hard. The man's eyes closed. William felt a moment of grateful relief. He pulled the sword out and darted back to dodge the ax that now fell from the man's dead hands.

He snatched a look at the king, just a few yards to his left. As he looked, the king brought his sword down hard on a man's helmet, and the sword snapped in two like a twig. That was it, William thought with relief; the battle was over. The king would flee and save himself to fight another day. But the hope was premature. William had half turned, ready to run, when a townsman offered the king a long-handled woodsman's ax. To William's dismay, Stephen grabbed the weapon and fought on.

William was tempted to run anyway. Looking to his right, he saw Richard on foot, fighting like a madman, pressing forward, laying about him with his sword, striking men down left, right and center. William could not flee when his rival was still fighting.

William was attacked again, this time by a short man with light armor who moved very quickly, his sword flashing in the sunlight. As their weapons clashed William realized he was up against a formidable fighter. Once again he found himself on the defensive and afraid for his life, and his knowledge that the battle was lost sapped his will to fight. He parried the rapid thrusts and slashes that were aimed at him, wishing he could get in the one strong

blow that would smash through the man's armor. He saw a chance and swung his sword. The other man dodged and thrust, and William felt his left arm go numb. He was wounded. He felt sick with fear. He continued to fall back under the assault, feeling oddly unbalanced, as if the ground was shifting beneath him. His shield hung loose from his neck: he was unable to hold it steady with his useless left arm. The small man sensed victory and pressed his attack. William saw death and was filled with mortal dread.

Suddenly Walter appeared at his side.

William stepped back. Walter swung his sword two-handed. Catching the small man by surprise, he cut him down like a sapling. William suddenly felt dizzy with relief. He put a hand on Walter's shoulder.

"We've lost it!" Walter shouted at him. "Let's get out!"

William pulled himself together. The king was still fighting, even though the battle was lost. If only he would give up now, and try to get away, he could return to the south and muster another army. But the longer he fought on, the greater the probability that he could be captured or killed, and that could mean only one thing: Maud would be queen.

William and Walter edged back together. Why was the king so foolish? He had to prove his courage. Gallantry would be the death of him. Once again William was tempted to abandon the king. But Richard of Kingsbridge was still there, holding the right flank like a rock, swinging his sword and mowing men down like a reaper. "Not yet!" William said to Walter. "Watch the king!"

They retreated step by step. The fighting became less fierce as men realized that the issue had been decided and there was no point in taking risks. William and Walter crossed swords with two knights, but the knights were content to drive them back, and William and Walter fought defensively. Hard blows were struck but no one exposed himself to danger.

William stepped back two paces and chanced a look at the king. At that moment a huge rock came flying across the field and struck Stephen's helmet. The king staggered and fell to his knees. William's antagonist paused and turned his head to see what William was looking at. The battle-ax dropped from King Stephen's hands. An enemy knight ran to him and pulled off the helmet. "The king!" he shouted triumphantly. "I have the king!"

William, Walter and the entire royal army turned and ran.

Philip was jubilant. The retreat started in the middle of the king's army and spread like a ripple to the flanks. Within a few heartbeats the entire royal army was on the run. This was King Stephen's reward for injustice.

The attackers gave chase. There were forty or fifty riderless horses in the rear of the king's army, being held by squires, and some of the fleeing men leaped on them and made their escape, heading not for the city of Lincoln but

for the open country.

Philip wondered what had happened to the king.

The citizens of Lincoln were hurriedly leaving their rooftops. Children and animals were rounded up. Some families disappeared into their houses, closing the shutters and barring the doors. There was a flurry of movement among the boats on the lake: some citizens were trying to get away by river. People began to arrive at the cathedral, to take refuge there.

At each entrance to the city, people rushed to close the huge ironbound doors. Suddenly Ranulf of Chester's men burst out of the castle. They divided into groups, evidently following a prearranged plan, and one group went to each city gate. They waded in among the citizens, striking them down to left and right, and reopened the doors to admit the conquering rebels.

Philip decided to get off the cathedral roof. The others with him, mostly cathedral canons, had the same thought. They all ducked through the low doorway that led into the turret. There they met the bishop and the archdeacons, who had been higher up in the tower. Philip thought Bishop Alexander looked frightened. That was a pity: the bishop would need courage to share today.

They all went carefully down the long, narrow spiral staircase and emerged in the nave of the church at the west end. There were already a hundred or so citizens in the church, and more pouring through the three great doorways. As Philip looked out, two knights came into the cathedral courtyard, bloodstained and muddy, riding hard, obviously having come from the battle. They rode straight into the church without dismounting. When they saw the bishop one of them shouted: "The king is captured!"

Philip's heart leaped. King Stephen was not just beaten, he was taken prisoner! The royalist forces throughout the kingdom would surely collapse now. The implications tumbled over one another in Philip's imagination, but before he could sort them out he heard Bishop Alexander shout: "Close the doors!"

Philip could hardly believe his ears. "No!" he shouted. "You can't do that!"

The bishop stared at him, white with fear and panic. He was not sure who Philip was. Philip had made a formal call on him, out of courtesy, but they had not spoken since. Now, with a visible effort, Alexander remembered him. "This is not your cathedral, Prior Philip, it's mine. Close the doors!" Several priests went to do his bidding.

Philip was horrified at this display of naked self-interest by a clergyman. "You can't lock people out," he shouted angrily. "They might be killed!"

"If we don't lock the doors we'll all be killed!" Alexander screeched hysterically.

Philip grabbed him by the front of the robe. "Remember who you are," he

hissed. “We’re not supposed to be afraid—especially of death. Pull yourself together.”

“Get him off me!” Alexander screamed.

Several canons pulled Philip away.

Philip shouted at them: “Don’t you see what he’s doing?”

A canon said: “If you’re so brave, why don’t you go out there and protect them yourself?”

Philip tore himself free. “That’s exactly what I’m going to do,” he said.

He turned around. The big central door was just closing. He dashed across the nave. Three priests were pushing it shut as more people fought to get through the narrowing gap. Philip squeezed out just before the door closed.

In the next few moments a small crowd gathered in the porch. Men and women banged on the door and screamed to be let in, but there was no response from inside the church.

Suddenly Philip was afraid. The panic on the faces of the people locked out scared him. He felt himself trembling. He had encountered a victorious army once before, at the age of six, and the horror he had felt then returned to him now. The moment when the men-at-arms had burst into his parents’ house came back as vividly as if it had happened yesterday. He stood rooted to the spot, and tried to stop shaking, while the crowd boiled around him. It was a long time since he had been tormented by this nightmare. He saw the bloodlust on the men’s faces, and the way the sword had transfixed his mother, and the awful sight of his father’s guts spilling out of his belly; and he felt again that uncomprehending, overwhelming, insane hysterical terror. Then he saw a monk come through the door with a cross in his hand, and the screaming stopped. The monk showed him and his brother how to close the eyes of his mother and father, so that they could sleep the long sleep. He remembered, as if he had just awakened from a dream, that he was not a frightened child anymore, he was a grown man and a monk; and just as Abbot Peter had rescued him and his brother on that dreadful day twenty-seven years ago, so today the grown-up Philip, strengthened by faith and protected by God, would come to the help of those in fear of their lives.

He forced himself to take a single step forward; and once he had done that the second was a little less difficult, and the third was almost easy.

When he reached the street that led to the west gate he was almost knocked over by a mob of fleeing townspeople: men and boys running with bundles of precious possessions, old people gasping for breath, screaming girls, women carrying squalling children in their arms. The rush carried him back several yards, then he fought against the flow. They were heading for the cathedral. He wanted to tell them it was closed, and they should stay quietly in their own homes and bar the doors; but everyone was shouting and no one was listening.

He progressed slowly along the street, moving against the flood of people. He had gained only a few yards when a group of four horsemen came charging along the street. They were the cause of the stampede. Some people flattened themselves against house walls, but others could not get out of the way in time, and many fell beneath the flailing hooves. Philip was horrified but there was nothing he could do, and he dodged into an alleyway to avoid becoming a victim himself. A moment later the horsemen had passed by and the street was deserted.

Several bodies were left lying on the ground. As Philip stepped out of his alley he saw one of them move: a middle-aged man in a scarlet cloak was trying to crawl along the ground despite an injured leg. Philip crossed the street, intending to try to carry the man; but before he got there, two men with iron helmets and wooden shields appeared. One of them said: “This one’s alive, Jake.”

Philip shuddered. It seemed to him that their demeanor, their voices, their clothes and even their faces were the same as those of the two men who had killed his parents.

The one called Jake said: “He’ll fetch a ransom—look at that red cloak.” He turned, put his fingers in his mouth, and whistled. A third man came running up. “Take Redcoat here into the castle and tie him up.”

The third man put his arms around the wounded citizen’s chest and dragged him off. The injured man screamed in pain as his legs bumped over the stones. Philip shouted: “Stop!” They all stopped for a moment, looked at him, and laughed; then they carried on with what they were doing.

Philip shouted again but they ignored him. He watched helplessly as the wounded man was dragged off. Another man-at-arms came out of a house, wearing a long fur coat and carrying six silver plates under his arm. Jake saw him and took note of the booty. “These are rich houses,” he said to his comrade. “We ought to get into one of them. See what we can find.” They went up to the locked door of a stone house and attacked it with a battle-ax.

Philip felt useless but he was not willing to give up. However, God had not put him in this position to defend rich men’s property, so he left Jake and his companions and hurried toward the west gate. More men-at-arms came running along the street. Mingled with them were several short, dark men with painted faces, dressed in sheepskin coats and armed with clubs. They were the Welsh tribesmen, Philip realized, and he felt ashamed that he came from the same country as these savages. He clung to the wall of a house and tried to look inconspicuous.

Two men emerged from a stone house dragging by the legs a white-bearded man in a skullcap. One of them held a knife to the man’s throat and said: “Where’s your money, Jew?”

“I have no money,” the man said plaintively.

Nobody would believe that, Philip thought. The wealth of the Jews of Lincoln was famous; and anyway, the man had been living in a stone house.

Another man-at-arms came out dragging a woman by the hair. The woman was middle-aged and presumably the Jew's wife. The first man shouted: "Tell us where the money is, or she'll have my sword up her cunt." He lifted the woman's skirt, exposing her graying pubic hair, and held a long dagger pointing at her groin.

Philip was about to intervene, but the old man gave in immediately. "Don't hurt her, the money's in the back," he said urgently. "It's buried in the garden, by the woodpile—please, let her go."

The three men ran back into the house. The woman helped the man to his feet. Another group of horsemen thundered down the narrow street, and Philip flung himself out of the way. When he got up again, the two Jews had disappeared.

A young man in armor came down the street, running for his life, with three or four Welshmen in pursuit. They caught him just as he drew level with Philip. The foremost pursuer swung with his sword and touched the fugitive's calf. It did not seem to Philip like a deep wound but it was enough to make the young man stumble and fall to the ground. Another pursuer reached the fallen man and hefted a battle-ax.

With his heart in his mouth, Philip stepped forward and shouted: "Stop!"

The man raised his ax.

Philip rushed at him.

The man swung the ax, but Philip pushed him at the last minute. The blade of the ax clanged on the stone pavement a foot from the victim's head. The attacker recovered his balance and stared at Philip in amazement. Philip stared back at him, trying not to tremble, wishing he could remember a word or two of Welsh. Before either of them moved, the other two pursuers caught up, and one of them cannoned into Philip, sending him sprawling. That probably saved his life, he realized a moment later. When he recovered, everyone had forgotten him. They were butchering the poor young man on the ground with unbelievable savagery. Philip scrambled to his feet, but he was already too late: their hammers and axes were thudding into a corpse. He looked up at the sky and shouted angrily: "If I can't save anyone, why did you send me here?"

As if in reply, he heard a scream from a nearby house. It was a one-story building of stone and wood, not as costly as those around it. The door stood open. Philip ran inside. There were two rooms with an arch between, and straw on the floor. A woman with two small children huddled in a corner, terrified. Three men-at-arms were in the middle of the house, confronting one small, bald man. A young woman of about eighteen years was on the floor. Her dress was ripped and one of the three men-at-arms was kneeling on her

chest, holding her thighs apart. The bald man was clearly trying to stop them from raping his daughter. As Philip came in, the father flung himself at one of the men-at-arms. The soldier threw him off. The father staggered back. The soldier plunged his sword into the father's abdomen. The woman in the corner screamed like a lost soul.

Philip yelled: "Stop!"

They all looked at him as if he were mad.

In his most authoritative voice he said: "You'll all go to hell if you do this!"

The one who had killed the father raised his sword to strike Philip.

"Just a minute," said the man on the ground, still holding the girl's legs. "Who are you, monk?"

"I am Philip of Gwynedd, prior of Kingsbridge, and I command you in God's name to leave that girl alone, if you care for your immortal souls."

"A prior—I thought so," said the man on the ground. "He's worth a ransom."

The first man sheathed his sword and said: "Get over in the corner with the woman, where you belong."

Philip said: "Don't lay hands on a monk's robes." He was trying to sound dangerous but he could hear the note of desperation in his voice.

"Take him to the castle, John," said the man on the ground, who was still sitting on the girl. He seemed to be the leader.

"Go to hell," said John. "I want to fuck her first." He grabbed Philip's arms and, before Philip could resist, flung him into the corner. Philip tumbled onto the floor beside the mother.

The man called John lifted the front of his tunic and fell on the girl.

The mother turned her head aside and began to sob.

Philip said: "I will not watch this!" He stood up and grabbed the rapist by the hair, pulling him off the girl. The rapist roared with pain.

The third man raised a club. Philip saw the blow coming, but he was too late. The club landed on his head. He felt a moment of agonizing pain, then everything went black and he lost consciousness before he hit the ground.

The prisoners were taken to the castle and locked in cages. These were stout wooden structures like miniature houses, six feet long and three feet wide, and only a little higher than a man's head. Instead of solid walls they had close-spaced vertical posts, which enabled the jailer to see inside. In normal times, when they were used to confine thieves and murderers and heretics, there would be only one or two people to a cage. Today the rebels put eight or ten in each, and still there were more prisoners. The surplus captives were tied together with ropes and herded into a corner of the compound. They could

have escaped fairly easily, but they did not, probably because they were safer here than outside in the town.

Philip sat in one corner of a cage, nursing a splitting headache, feeling a fool and a failure. In the end he had been as useless as the cowardly Bishop Alexander. He had not saved a single life; he had not even prevented one blow. The citizens of Lincoln would have been no worse off without him. Unlike Abbot Peter, he had been powerless to stop the violence. I'm just not the man Father Peter was, he thought.

Worse still, in his vain attempt to help the townspeople he had probably thrown away his chance of winning concessions from the Empress Maud when she became queen. He was now a prisoner of her army. It would be assumed, therefore, that he had been with King Stephen's forces. Kingsbridge Priory would have to pay a ransom for Philip's release. It was quite likely that the whole thing would come to Maud's notice; and then she would be prejudiced against Philip. He felt sick, disappointed, and full of remorse.

More prisoners were brought in through the day. The influx ended around nightfall, but the sacking of the city went on outside the castle walls: Philip could hear the shouts and screams and sounds of destruction. Toward midnight the noise died down, presumably as the soldiers became so drunk on stolen wine and sated with rape and violence that they could do no more damage. A few of them staggered into the castle, boasting of their triumphs, quarreling among themselves and vomiting on the grass; and eventually fell down insensible and slept.

Philip slept, too, although he did not have enough room to lie down, and had to slump in the corner with his back against the wooden bars of his cage. He woke at dawn, shivering with cold, but the pain in his head had softened, mercifully, to a dull ache. He stood up to stretch his legs, and slapped his arms against his sides to warm himself. All the castle buildings were overflowing with people. The open-fronted stables revealed men sleeping in the stalls, while the horses were tied up outside. Pairs of legs stuck out of the bakehouse door and the kitchen undercroft. The small minority of sober soldiers had pitched tents. There were horses everywhere. In the southeast corner of the castle compound was the keep, a castle within a castle, built on a high mound, its mighty stone walls encircling half a dozen or more wooden buildings. The earls and knights of the winning side would be in there, sleeping off their own celebration.

Philip's mind turned to the implications of yesterday's battle. Did it mean the war was over? Probably. Stephen had a wife, Queen Matilda, who might fight on: she was countess of Boulogne, and with her French knights she had taken Dover Castle early in the war and now controlled much of Kent on her husband's behalf. However, she would find it difficult to gather support from the barons while Stephen was in prison. She might hold on to Kent for a while

but she was unlikely to make any gains.

Nevertheless, Maud's problems were not yet over. She had to consolidate her military victory, gain the approval of the Church and be crowned at Westminster. However, given determination and a little wisdom she would probably succeed.

And that was good news for Kingsbridge; or it would be, if Philip could get out of here without being branded a supporter of Stephen.

There was no sun, but the air warmed a little as the day got brighter. Philip's fellow-prisoners awoke gradually, groaning with aches and pains: most of them had been at least bruised, and they felt worse after a cold night, with only the minimal shelter of the roof and bars of the cage. Some were wealthy citizens and others were knights who had been captured in battle. When most of them were awake Philip asked: "Did anyone see what happened to Richard of Kingsbridge?" He was hoping Richard had survived, for Aliena's sake.

A man with a bloodstained bandage around his head said: "He fought like a lion—he rallied the townsmen when things got bad."

"Did he live or die?"

The man shook his wounded head slowly. "I didn't see him at the end."

"What about William Hamleigh?" It would be a blessed relief if William had fallen.

"He was with the king for most of the battle. But he got away at the end—I saw him on a horse, flying across the field, well ahead of the pack."

"Ah." The faint hope faded. Philip's problems were not to be solved that easily.

The conversation lapsed and the cage fell silent. Outside, the soldiers were on the move, nursing their hangovers, checking their booty, making sure their hostages were still in captivity, and getting breakfast from the kitchen. Philip wondered whether prisoners got fed. They must, he thought, for otherwise they would die and there would be no ransoms; but who would take the responsibility for feeding all these people? That started him wondering how long he would be here. His captors would have to send a message to Kingsbridge, demanding a ransom. The brothers would send one of their number to negotiate his release. Who would it be? Milius would be the best, but Remigius, who as sub-prior was in charge in Philip's absence, might send one of his cronies, or even come himself. Remigius would do everything slowly: he was incapable of prompt and decisive action even in his own interest. It could take months. Philip became gloomier.

Other prisoners were luckier. Soon after sunrise, wives and children and relatives of the captives began to trickle into the castle, fearfully and hesitantly at first, then with more confidence, to negotiate the ransom of their loved ones. They would bargain with the captors for a while, protesting their

lack of money, offering cheap jewelry or other valuables; then they would reach an agreement, depart, and return a little later with whatever ransom had been agreed, usually cash. The piles of booty grew higher and the cages emptied out.

By midday half the prisoners had gone. They were the local people, Philip assumed. Those remaining must be from distant towns, and were probably all knights who had been taken during the battle. This impression was confirmed when the constable of the castle came around the cages and asked the names of everyone remaining: most of them were knights from the south. Philip noticed that in one of the cages there was only one man, and he was confined in stocks, as if someone wanted to be doubly sure he could not escape. After staring at the special prisoner for a few minutes Philip realized who it was.

"Look!" he said to the three men in his own cage. "That man on his own. Is it who I think it is?"

The others looked. "By Christ, it's the king," said one, and the others agreed.

Philip stared at the muddy, tawny-haired man with his hands and feet confined uncomfortably in the wooden vise of the stocks. He looked just like all the rest of them. Yesterday he had been king of England. Yesterday he had refused Kingsbridge a market license. Today he could not stand up without someone else's leave. The king had got his just deserts, but all the same Philip felt sorry for him.

Early in the afternoon the prisoners were given food. It was lukewarm leftovers from the dinner provided for the fighting men, but they fell on it ravenously. Philip hung back and let the others have most of it, for he regarded hunger as a base weakness that ought to be resisted from time to time, and considered any enforced fast to be an opportunity to mortify the flesh.

While they were scraping the bowl there was a flurry of activity over at the keep, and a group of earls came out. As they walked down the steps of the keep and across the castle compound, Philip observed that two of them went a little in front of the others, and were treated with deference. They had to be Ranulf of Chester and Robert of Gloucester, but Philip did not know which was which. They approached Stephen's cage.

"Good day, Cousin Robert," Stephen said, heavily emphasizing the word *cousin*.

The taller of the two men replied. "I didn't intend for you to spend the night in the stocks. I ordered that you be moved, but the order wasn't obeyed. However, you seem to have survived."

A man in priest's clothing detached himself from the group and came toward Philip's cage. At first Philip paid him no attention, for Stephen was asking what was to be done with him, and Philip wanted to hear the answer;

but the priest said: “Which one of you is the prior of Kingsbridge?”

“I am,” Philip said.

The priest spoke to one of the men-at-arms who had brought Philip here. “Release that man.”

Philip was mystified. He had never seen the priest in his life. Clearly his name had been picked out of the list compiled earlier by the castle constable. But why? He would be glad to get out of the cage, but he was not ready to rejoice—he did not know what was in store for him.

The man-at-arms protested: “He’s my prisoner!”

“Not anymore,” said the priest. “Let him go.”

“Why should I release him without a ransom?” the man said belligerently.

The priest replied equally forcefully. “First, because he’s neither a fighting man in the king’s army nor a citizen of this town, so you have committed a crime by imprisoning him. Second, because he’s a monk, and you are guilty of sacrilege by laying hands on a man of God. Third, because Queen Maud’s secretary says you have to release him, and if you refuse you’ll end up inside that cage yourself, faster than you can blink, so *jump to it*.”

“All right,” the man grumbled.

Philip was dismayed. He had been nursing a faint hope that Maud would never get to know of his imprisonment here. If Maud’s secretary had asked to see him, that hope was now dashed. Feeling as if he had hit rock bottom, he stepped out of the cage.

“Come with me,” said the priest.

Philip followed him. “Am I to be set free?” he said.

“I imagine so.” The priest looked surprised by the question. “Don’t you know whom you’re going to see?”

“I haven’t an inkling.”

The priest smiled. “I’ll let him surprise you.”

They crossed the compound to the keep and climbed the long flight of steps that led up the mound to the gate. Philip racked his brains but could not guess why a secretary of Maud’s should have an interest in him.

He followed the priest through the gate. The circular stone keep was lined with two-story houses built against the wall. In the middle was a tiny courtyard with a well. The priest led Philip into one of the houses.

Inside the house was another priest, standing in front of the fire with his back to the door. He had the same build as Philip, short and slight, and the same black hair, but his head was not shaved and his hair was not graying. It was a very familiar back. Philip could hardly believe his luck. A broad grin spread across his face.

The priest turned. He had bright blue eyes just like Philip’s and he, too, was grinning. He held out his arms. “Philip,” he said.

“Well, God be praised!” Philip said in astonishment. “Francis!”

The two brothers embraced, and Philip’s eyes filled with tears.

III

The royal reception hall at Winchester Castle looked very different. The dogs had gone, and so had King Stephen's plain wooden throne, the benches, and the animal skins from the walls. Instead there were embroidered hangings, richly colored carpets, bowls of sweetmeats, and painted chairs. The room smelled of flowers.

Philip was never at ease at the royal court, and a *feminine* royal court was enough to put him in a state of quivering anxiety. The Empress Maud was his only hope of getting the quarry back and reopening the market, but he had no confidence that this haughty, willful woman would make a just decision.

The Empress sat on a delicately carved gilded throne, wearing a dress the color of bluebells. She was tall and thin, with proud dark eyes and straight, glossy black hair. Over her gown she wore a pelisse, a knee-length silk coat with a tight waist and flared skirt; a style that had not been seen in England until she arrived, but was now much imitated. She had been married to her first husband for eleven years and her second for fourteen, but she still looked less than forty years old. People raved about her beauty. To Philip she looked rather angular and unfriendly; but he was a poor judge of feminine attraction, being more or less immune to it.

Philip, Francis, William Hamleigh and Bishop Waleran bowed to her and stood waiting. She ignored them for a while and continued talking to a lady-in-waiting. The conversation seemed to be rather trifling, for they both laughed prettily; but Maud did not interrupt it to greet her visitors.

Francis worked closely with her, and saw her almost every day, but they were not great friends. Her brother Robert, Francis's former employer, had given him to her when she arrived in England, because she needed a first-class secretary. However, this was not the only motive. Francis acted as link man between brother and sister, and kept an eye on the impetuous Maud. It was nothing for brothers and sisters to betray one another, in the treacherous life of the royal court, and Francis's real role was to make it difficult for Maud to do anything underhand. Maud knew this and accepted it, but her relationship with Francis was nevertheless an uneasy one.

It was two months since the battle of Lincoln, and in that time all had gone well for Maud. Bishop Henry had welcomed her to Winchester (thereby betraying *his* brother King Stephen) and had convened a great council of bishops and abbots which had elected her queen; and she was now negotiating with the commune of London to arrange her coronation at Westminster. King

David of Scotland, who happened to be her uncle, was on his way to pay her a formal royal visit, one sovereign to another.

Bishop Henry was strongly supported by Bishop Waleran of Kingsbridge; and, according to Francis, Waleran had persuaded William Hamleigh to switch sides, and pledge allegiance to Maud. Now William had come for his reward.

The four men stood waiting: William with his backer, Bishop Waleran, and Prior Philip with his sponsor, Francis. This was the first time Philip had set eyes on Maud. Her appearance did not reassure him: despite her regal air he thought she looked flighty.

When Maud finished chatting she turned to them with a triumphant look, as if to say: See how unimportant you are, even my lady-in-waiting has priority over you. She looked at Philip steadily for a few moments, until he became embarrassed, then she said: “Well, Francis. Have you brought me your twin?”

Francis said: “My brother, Philip, lady, the prior of Kingsbridge.”

Philip bowed again and said: “Somewhat too old and gray to be a twin, lady.” It was the kind of trivial, self-deprecating remark that courtiers seemed to find amusing, but she gave him a frozen look and ignored it. He decided to abandon any attempt to be charming.

She turned to William. “And Sir William Hamleigh, who fought bravely against my army at the battle of Lincoln, but has now seen the error of his ways.”

William bowed and wisely kept his mouth shut.

She turned back to Philip. “You ask me to grant you a license to hold a market.”

“Yes, my lady.”

Francis said: “The income from the market will all be spent on building the cathedral, lady.”

“On what day of the week do you want to hold your market?” she asked.

“Sunday.”

She raised her plucked eyebrows. “You holy men are generally opposed to Sunday markets. Don’t they keep people from church?”

“Not in our case,” Philip said. “People come to labor on the building and attend a service, and they do their buying and selling as well.”

“So you’re already holding this market?” she said sharply.

Philip realized he had blundered. He felt like kicking himself.

Francis rescued him. “No, lady, they are not holding the market at present,” he said. “It began informally, but Prior Philip ordered it to cease until he was granted a license.”

That was the truth, but not the whole truth. However, Maud seemed to accept it. Philip silently prayed for forgiveness for Francis.

Maud said: “Is there no other market in the area?”

William spoke up. “Yes, there is, at Shiring; and the Kingsbridge market has been taking business away.”

Philip said: “But Shiring is twenty miles from Kingsbridge!”

Francis said: “My lady, the rule is that markets must be at least fourteen miles apart. By that criterion Kingsbridge and Shiring do not compete.”

She nodded, apparently willing to accept Francis’s ruling on a point of law. So far, thought Philip, it’s going our way.

Maud said: “You also ask for the right to take stone from the earl of Shiring’s quarry.”

“We have had that right for many years, but William lately threw out our quarrymen, killing five—”

“Who gave you the right to take stone?” she interrupted.

“King Stephen—”

“The usurper!”

Francis hastily said: “My lady, Prior Philip naturally accepts that all edicts of the pretender Stephen are invalid unless ratified by you.”

Philip accepted no such thing but he saw that it would be unwise to say so.

William blurted out: “I closed the quarry in retaliation for his illegal market!”

It was amazing, Philip thought, how a clear case of injustice could come to seem evenly balanced when argued at the court.

Maud said: “This entire squabble came about because Stephen’s original ruling was foolish.”

Bishop Waleran spoke for the first time. “There, lady, I heartily agree with you,” he said oilily.

“It was asking for trouble, to give the quarry to one person but let another mine it,” she said. “The quarry must belong to one or the other.”

That was true, Philip thought. And if she were to follow the spirit of Stephen’s original ruling, it would belong to Kingsbridge.

She went on: “My decision is that it shall belong to my noble ally, Sir William.”

Philip’s heart sank. The cathedral building could not have come on so well without free access to that quarry. It would have to slow right down while Philip tried to find the money to buy stone. And all because of the whim of this capricious woman! It made him fume.

William said: “Thank you, lady.”

Maud said: “However, Kingsbridge shall have market rights as at Shiring.”

Philip’s spirits rose again. The market would not quite pay for the stone but it was a big help. It meant he would be scraping around for money again,

just as he had at the beginning, but he could carry on.

Maud had given each one a part of what he wanted. Perhaps she was not so empty-headed after all.

Francis said: “Market rights as at Shiring, lady?”

“That’s what I said.”

Philip was not sure why Francis had repeated it. It was common for licenses to refer to the rights enjoyed by another town: it was evenhanded and saved writing. Philip would have to check exactly what Shiring’s charter said. There might be restrictions, or extra privileges.

Maud said: “So you have both got something. William gets the quarry and Prior Philip gets the market. And in return, each of you will pay me one hundred pounds. That is all.” She turned away.

Philip was flabbergasted. A hundred pounds! The priory did not have a hundred pennies at the moment. How was he to raise this money? The market would take years to earn a hundred pounds. It was a devastating blow that would set the building program back permanently. He stood staring at Maud, but she was apparently deep in conversation with her lady-in-waiting again. Francis nudged him. Philip opened his mouth to speak. Francis held a finger to his lips. Philip said: “But…” Francis shook his head urgently.

Philip knew Francis was right. He let his shoulders slump in defeat. Helplessly, he turned away and walked out of the royal presence.

Francis was impressed when Philip showed him around Kingsbridge Priory. “I was here ten years ago, and it was a dump,” he said irreverently. “You’ve really brought it to life.”

He was very taken with the writing room, which Tom had finished while Philip was in Lincoln. A small building next to the chapter house, it had large windows, a fireplace with a chimney, a row of writing desks, and a big oak cupboard for the books. Four of the brothers were at work there already, standing at the high desks, writing on parchment sheets with quill pens. Three were copying: one the Psalms of David, one Saint Matthew’s Gospel, and one the Rule of Saint Benedict. In addition, Brother Timothy was writing a history of England, although as he had begun with the creation of the world Philip was afraid the old boy might never finish it. The writing room was small—Philip had not wanted to divert much stone from the cathedral—but it was a warm, dry, well-lit place, just what was needed. “The priory has disgracefully few books, and as they’re iniquitously expensive to buy, this is the only way to build our collection,” Philip explained.

In the undercroft was a workshop where an old monk was teaching two youngsters how to stretch the skin of a sheep for parchment, how to make ink, and how to bind the sheets into a book. Francis said: “You’ll be able to sell

books, too.”

“Oh, yes—the writing room will pay for itself many times over.”

They left the building and walked through the cloisters. It was the study hour. Most of the monks were reading. A few were meditating, an activity that was suspiciously similar to dozing, as Francis remarked skeptically. In the northwest corner were twenty schoolboys reciting Latin verbs. Philip stopped and pointed. “See the little boy at the end of the bench?”

Francis said: “Writing on a slate, with his tongue sticking out?”

“That’s the baby you found in the forest.”

“But he’s so big!”

“Five and a half years old, and precocious.”

Francis shook his head in wonderment. “Time goes by so fast. How is he?”

“He’s spoiled by the monks, but he’ll survive. You and I did.”

“Who are the other pupils?”

“Either novice monks, or the sons of merchants and local gentry learning to write and figure.”

They left the cloisters and passed on to the building site. The eastern limb of the new cathedral was now more than half built. The great double row of mighty columns was forty feet high, and all the arches in between had been completed. Above the arcade, the tribune gallery was taking shape. Either side of the arcade, the lower walls of the aisle had been built, with their out-jutting buttresses. As they walked around, Philip saw that the masons were constructing the half-arches that would connect the tops of those buttresses with the top of the tribune gallery, allowing the buttresses to take the weight of the roof.

Francis was almost awestruck. “You’ve done all this, Philip,” he said. “The writing room, the school, the new church, even all these new houses in the town—it’s all come about because you made it happen.”

Philip was touched. No one had ever said that to him. If asked, he would say that God had blessed his efforts. But in his heart of hearts he knew that what Francis said was true: this thriving, busy town was his creation. Recognition gave him a warm glow, especially coming as it did from his sophisticated, cynical younger brother.

Tom Builder saw them and came over. “You’ve made marvelous progress,” Philip said to him.

“Yes, but look at that.” Tom pointed to the northeast corner of the priory close, where stone from the quarry was stockpiled. There were normally hundreds of stones stacked in rows, but now there were only about twenty-five scattered on the ground. “Unfortunately, our marvelous progress means we’ve used up our stock of stone.”

Philip’s elation evaporated. Everything he had achieved here was at risk,

because of Maud's harsh ruling.

They walked along the north side of the site, where the most skilled masons were working at their benches, carving the stones into shape with hammers and chisels. Philip stopped behind one craftsman and studied his work. It was a capital, the large, jutting-out stone that always stood on top of a column. Using a light hammer and a small chisel, the mason was carving a pattern of leaves on the capital. The leaves were deeply undercut and the work was delicate. To Philip's surprise, he saw that the craftsman was young Jack, Tom's stepson. "I thought Jack was still a learner," he said.

"He is." Tom moved on, and when they were out of earshot he said: "The boy is remarkable. There are men here who have been carving stone since before he was born, and none of them can match his work." He gave a slightly embarrassed laugh. "And he isn't even my own son!"

Tom's real son, Alfred, was a master mason and had his own gang of apprentices and laborers, but Philip knew that Alfred and his gang did not do the delicate work. Philip wondered how Tom felt about that in his heart.

Tom's mind had returned to the problem of paying for the market license. "Surely the market will bring in a lot of money," he said.

"Yes, but not enough. It should raise about fifty pounds a year at the start."

Tom nodded gloomily. "That will just about pay for the stone."

"We could manage if I didn't have to pay Maud a hundred pounds."

"What about the wool?"

The wool that was piling up in Philip's barns would be sold at the Shiring Fleece Fair in a few weeks' time, and would fetch about a hundred pounds. "That's what I'm going to use to pay Maud. But then I'll have nothing left for the craftsmen's wages for the next twelve months."

"Can't you borrow?"

"I already have. The Jews won't lend me any more. I asked, while I was in Winchester. They won't lend you money if they don't think you can pay it back."

"What about Aliena?"

Philip was startled. He had never thought of borrowing from her. She had even more wool in her barns. After the fleece fair she might have two hundred pounds. "But she needs the money to make her living. And Christians can't charge interest. If she lent her money to me she would have nothing to trade with. Although…" Even as he spoke, he was turning over a new idea. He remembered that Aliena had wanted to buy his entire wool production for the year. Perhaps they could work something out…. "I think I'll talk to her anyway," he said. "Is she at home at the moment?"

"I think so—I saw her this morning."

"Come, Francis—you're about to meet a remarkable young woman."

They left Tom and hurried out of the close into the town. Aliena had two houses side by side up against the west wall of the priory. She lived in one and used the other as a barn. She was very wealthy. There had to be a way she could help the priory pay Maud's extortionate fee for the market license. A vague idea was taking shape in Philip's mind.

Aliena was in the barn, supervising the unloading of an ox cart stacked high with sacks of wool. She wore a brocade pelisse, like the one the Empress Maud had worn, and her hair was done up in a white linen coif. She looked authoritative, as always, and the two men unloading the cart obeyed her instructions without question. Everyone respected her, although—strangely—she had no close friends. She greeted Philip warmly. "When we heard about the battle of Lincoln we were afraid you might have been killed!" she said. There was real concern in her eyes, and Philip was moved to think that people had been worried about him. He introduced her to Francis.

"Did you get justice at Winchester?" Aliena asked.

"Not exactly," Philip replied. "The Empress Maud granted us a market but denied us the quarry. The one more or less compensates for the other. But she charged me a hundred pounds for the market license."

Aliena was shocked. "That's terrible! Did you tell her the income from the market goes to the cathedral building?"

"Oh, yes."

"But where will you find a hundred pounds?"

"I thought you might be able to help."

"Me?" Aliena was taken aback.

"In a few weeks' time, after you've sold your wool to the Flemish, you'll have two hundred pounds or more."

Aliena looked troubled. "And I'd give it to you, gladly, but I need it to buy more wool next year."

"Remember you wanted to buy my wool?"

"Yes, but it's too late now. I wanted to buy it early in the season. Besides, you can sell it yourself soon."

"I was thinking," Philip said. "Could I sell you *next* year's wool?"

She frowned. "But you haven't got it."

"Could I sell it to you before I've got it?"

"I don't see how."

"Simple. You give me the money now. I give you the wool next year."

Aliena clearly did not know how to take this proposal: it was unlike any known way of doing business. It was new to Philip, too: he had just made it up.

Aliena spoke slowly and thoughtfully. "I would have to offer you a slightly lower price than you could get by waiting. Moreover, the price of wool might go up between now and next summer—it has every year I've been

in the business.”

“So I lose a little and you gain a little,” Philip said. “But I’ll be able to carry on building for another year.”

“And what will you do next year?”

“I don’t know. Perhaps I’ll sell you the following year’s wool.”

Aliena nodded. “It makes sense.”

Philip took her hands and looked into her eyes. “If you do this, Aliena, you’ll save the cathedral,” he said fervently.

Aliena looked very solemn. “You saved me, once, didn’t you?”

“I did.”

“Then I’ll do the same for you.”

“God bless you!” In an excess of gratitude he hugged her; then he remembered she was a woman and detached himself hastily. “I don’t know how to thank you,” he said. “I was at my wits’ end.”

Aliena laughed. “I’m not sure I deserve this much gratitude. I’ll probably do very well out of the arrangement.”

“I hope so.”

“Let’s drink a cup of wine together to seal the bargain,” she said. “I’ll just pay the carter.”

The ox cart was empty and the wool stacked neatly. Philip and Francis stepped outside while Aliena settled up with the carter. The sun was going down and the building workers were walking back to their homes. Philip’s elation returned. He had found a way to carry on, despite all the setbacks. “Thank God for Aliena!” he said.

“You didn’t tell me she was so beautiful,” Francis said.

“Beautiful? I suppose she is.”

Francis laughed. “Philip, you’re blind! She’s one of the most beautiful women I’ve ever seen. She’s enough to make a man give up the priesthood.”

Philip looked sharply at Francis. “You ought not to talk like that.”

“Sorry.”

Aliena came out and locked the barn; then they went into her home. It was a large house with a main room and a separate bedroom. There was a beer barrel in the corner, a whole ham hanging from the ceiling, and a white linen cloth on the table. A middle-aged woman servant poured wine from a flask into silver goblets for the guests. Aliena lived comfortably. If she’s so beautiful, Philip wondered, why hasn’t she got a husband? There was no shortage of aspirants: she had been courted by every eligible young man in the county, but she had turned them all down. He felt so grateful to her that he wanted her to be happy.

Her mind was still on practicalities. “I won’t have the money until after the Shiring Fleece Fair,” she said when they had toasted their agreement.

Philip turned to Francis. “Will Maud wait?”

“How long?”

“The fair is three weeks from Thursday.”

Francis nodded. “I’ll tell her. She’ll wait.”

Aliena untied her headdress and shook out her curly dark hair. She gave a tired sigh. “The days are too short,” she said. “I can’t get everything done. I want to buy more wool but I’ve got to find enough carters to take it all to Shiring.”

Philip said: “And next year you’ll have even more.”

“I wish we could make the Flemish come here to buy. It would be so much easier for us than taking all our wool to Shiring.”

Francis interjected: “But you can.”

They both looked at him. Philip said: “How?”

“Hold your own fleece fair.”

Philip began to see what he was driving at. “Can we?”

“Maud gave you exactly the same rights as Shiring. I wrote your charter myself. If Shiring can hold a fleece fair, so can you.”

Aliena said: “Why, that would be wonderful—we wouldn’t have to cart all these sacks to Shiring. We could do the business here, and ship the wool directly to Flanders.”

“That’s the least of it,” Philip said excitedly. “A fleece fair makes as much in a week as a Sunday market makes in a whole year. We can’t do it this year, of course—nobody will know about it. But we can spread the news, at this year’s Shiring Fleece Fair, that we’re going to hold our own next year, and make sure all the buyers know the date….”

Aliena said: “It will make a big difference to Shiring. You and I are the biggest sellers of wool in the county, and if we both withdraw, the Shiring fair will be less than half its usual size.”

Francis said: “William Hamleigh will lose money. He’ll be as mad as a bull.”

Philip could not help a shudder of revulsion. A mad bull was just what William was like.

“So what?” said Aliena. “If Maud has given us permission, we can go ahead. There’s nothing William can do about it, is there?”

“I hope not,” Philip said fervently. “I certainly hope not.”

Chapter 10

WORK STOPPED AT NOON on Saint Augustine's Day. Most of the builders greeted the midday bell with a sigh of relief. They normally worked from sunrise to sunset, six days a week, so they needed the rest they got on holy days. However, Jack was too absorbed in his work to hear the bell.

He was mesmerized by the challenge of making soft, round shapes out of hard rock. The stone had a will of its own, and if he tried to make it do something it did not want to do, it would fight him, and his chisel would slip, or dig in too deeply, spoiling the shapes. But once he had got to know the lump of rock in front of him he could transform it. The more difficult the task, the more fascinated he was. He was beginning to feel that the decorative carving demanded by Tom was too easy. Zigzags, lozenges, dogtooth, spirals and plain roll moldings bored him, and even these leaves were rather stiff and repetitive. He wanted to carve natural-looking foliage, pliable and irregular, and copy the different shapes of real leaves, oak and ash and birch, but Tom would not let him. Most of all he wanted to carve scenes from stories, Adam and Eve, David and Goliath, and the Day of Judgment, with monsters and devils and naked people, but he did not dare to ask.

Eventually Tom made him stop work. "It's a holiday, lad," he said. "Besides, you're still my apprentice, and I want you to help me clear up. All tools must be locked away before dinner."

Jack put away his hammer and chisels, and carefully deposited the stone on which he had been working in Tom's shed; then he went around the site with Tom. The other apprentices were tidying up and sweeping away the stone chips, sand, lumps of dried mortar and wood shavings that littered the site. Tom picked up his compasses and level while Jack collected his yardsticks and plumb lines, and they took everything to the shed.

In the shed Tom kept his poles. These were long iron rods, square in cross-section and dead straight, all exactly the same length. They were kept in a special wooden rack which was locked. They were measuring sticks.

As they continued around the site, picking up mortarboards and shovels, Jack was thinking about the poles. “How long is a pole?” he asked.

Some of the masons heard him and laughed. They often found his questions amusing. Edward Short, a diminutive old mason with leathery skin and a twisted nose, said: “A pole is a pole,” and they laughed again.

They enjoyed teasing the apprentices, especially if it gave them a chance to show off their superior knowledge. Jack hated to be laughed at for his ignorance but he put up with it because he was so curious. “I don’t understand,” he said patiently.

“An inch is an inch, a foot is a foot, and a pole is a pole,” said Edward.

A pole was a unit of measurement, then. “So how many feet are there in a pole?”

“Aha! That depends. Eighteen, in Lincoln. Sixteen in East Anglia.”

Tom interrupted to give a sensible answer. “On this site there are fifteen feet to a pole.”

A middle-aged woman mason said: “In Paris they don’t use the pole at all—just the yardstick.”

Tom said to Jack: “The whole plan of the church is based on poles. Fetch me one and I’ll show you. It’s time you understood these things.” He gave Jack a key.

Jack went to the shed and took a pole from the rack. It was quite heavy. Tom liked to explain things, and Jack loved to listen. The organization of the building site made an intriguing pattern, like the weaving on a brocade coat, and the more he understood, the more fascinated he became.

Tom was standing in the aisle at the open end of the half-built chancel, where the crossing would be. He took the pole and laid it on the ground so that it spanned the aisle. “From the outside wall to the middle of the pier of the arcade is a pole.” He turned the pole end over end. “From there to the middle of the nave is a pole.” He turned it over again, and it reached the middle of the opposite pier. “The nave is two poles wide.” He turned it over again, and it reached to the wall of the far aisle. “The whole church is four poles wide.”

“Yes,” said Jack. “And each bay must be a pole long.”

Tom looked faintly annoyed. “Who told you that?”

“Nobody. The bays of the aisles are square, so if they’re a pole wide they must be a pole long. And the bays of the nave are the same length as the bays of the aisles, obviously.”

“Obviously,” said Tom. “You should be a philosopher.” In his voice was a mixture of pride and irritation. He was pleased that Jack was quick to understand, irritated that the mysteries of masonry should be so easily grasped by a mere boy.

Jack was too caught up in the splendid logic of it all to pay attention to

Tom's sensitivities. "The chancel is four poles long, then," he said. "And the whole church will be twelve poles when it's finished." He was struck by another thought. "How high will it be?"

"Six poles high. Three for the arcade, one for the gallery, and two for the clerestory."

"But what's the point of having everything measured by poles? Why not build it all higgledy-piggledy, like a house?"

"First, because it's cheaper this way. All the arches of the arcade are identical, so we can reuse the falsework arches. The fewer different sizes and shapes of stone we need, the fewer templates I have to make. And so on. Second, it simplifies every aspect of what we're doing, from the original laying-out—everything is based on a pole square—to painting the walls—it's easier to estimate how much whitewash we'll need. And when things are simple, fewer mistakes are made. The most expensive part of a building is the mistakes. Third, when everything is based on a pole measure, the church just looks right. Proportion is the heart of beauty."

Jack nodded, enchanted. The struggle to control an operation as ambitious and intricate as building a cathedral was endlessly fascinating. The notion that the principles of regularity and repetition could both simplify the construction and result in a harmonious building was a seductive idea. But he was not sure whether proportion was the heart of beauty. He had a taste for wild, spreading, disorderly things: high mountains, aged oaks, and Aliena's hair.

He ate his dinner ravenously but quickly, then he left the village, heading north. It was a warm early-summer day, and he was barefoot. Ever since he and his mother had come to live in Kingsbridge for good, and he had become a worker, he had enjoyed returning to the forest periodically. At first he had spent the time getting rid of surplus energy, running and jumping, climbing trees and shooting ducks with his sling. That was when he was getting used to the new, taller, stronger body he now had. The novelty of that had worn off. Now when he walked in the forest he thought about things: why proportion should be beautiful, how buildings stayed standing, and what it would be like to stroke Aliena's breasts.

He had worshiped her from a distance for years. His abiding picture of her was from the first time he had seen her, as she came down the stairs to the hall at Earlscastle, and he had thought she must a princess in a story. She had continued to be a remote figure. She talked to Prior Philip, and Tom Builder, and Malachi the Jew, and the other wealthy and powerful people of Kingsbridge; and Jack never had a reason to address her. He just looked at her, praying in church or riding her palfrey across the bridge, or sitting in the sun outside her house; wearing costly furs in winter and the finest linen in

summer, her wild hair framing her beautiful face. Before he went to sleep he would think about what it would be like to take those clothes off her, and see her naked, and kiss her soft mouth gently.

In the last few weeks he had become dissatisfied and depressed with this hopeless daydreaming. Seeing her from a distance and overhearing her conversations with other people and imagining making love to her were no longer enough. He needed the real thing.

There were several girls his own age who might have given him the real thing. Among the apprentices there was much talk about which of the young women in Kingsbridge were randy and exactly what each of them would let a young man do. Most of them were determined to remain virgins until they were married, according to the teachings of the Church, but there were certain things you could do and still remain a virgin, or so the apprentices said. The girls all thought Jack was a little strange—they were probably right, he felt—but one or two of them found his strangeness appealing. One Sunday after church he had struck up a conversation with Edith, the sister of a fellow apprentice; but when he had talked about how he loved to carve stone, she had started to giggle. The following Sunday he had gone walking in the fields with Ann, the blond daughter of the tailor. He had not said much to her, but he had kissed her, and then suggested they lie down in a field of green barley. He had kissed her again and touched her breasts, and she had kissed him back, enthusiastically; but after a while she had pulled away from him and said: “Who is she?” Jack had been thinking about Aliena at that very moment and he was thunderstruck. He had tried to brush it aside, and kiss her again, but she turned her face away, and said: “Whoever she is, she’s a lucky girl.” They had walked back to Kingsbridge together, and when they separated Ann had said: “Don’t waste time trying to forget her. It’s a lost cause. She’s the one you want, so you’d better try and get her.” She had smiled at him fondly and added: “You’ve got a nice face. It might not be as difficult as you think.”

Her kindness made him feel bad, the more so because she was one of the girls the apprentices said were randy, and he had told everyone that he was going to try to feel her up. Now such talk seemed so juvenile that it made him squirm. But if he had told her the name of the woman who was on his mind, Ann might not have been so encouraging. Jack and Aliena were about the most unlikely match conceivable. Aliena was twenty-two years old and he was seventeen; she was the daughter of an earl and he was a bastard; she was a wealthy wool merchant and he was a penniless apprentice. Worse still, she was famous for the number of suitors she had rejected. Every presentable young lord in the county, and every prosperous merchant’s eldest son, had come to Kingsbridge to pay court to her, and all had gone away disappointed. What chance was there for Jack, who had nothing to offer, unless it was “a nice face”?

He and Aliena had one thing in common: they liked the forest. They were peculiar in this: most people preferred the safety of the fields and villages, and stayed away from the forest. But Aliena often walked in the woodlands near Kingsbridge, and there was a particular secluded spot where she liked to stop and sit down. He had seen her there once or twice. She had not seen him: he walked silently, as he had learned to in childhood, when he had had to find his dinner in the forest.

He was heading for her clearing without any idea of what he would do if he found her there. He knew what he would like to do: lie down beside her and stroke her body. He could talk to her, but what would he say? It was easy to talk to girls of his own age. He had teased Edith, saying: “I don’t believe *any* of the terrible things your brother says about you,” and of course she had wanted to know what the terrible things were. With Ann he had been direct: “Would you like to walk in the fields with me this afternoon?” But when he tried to come up with an opening line for Aliena his mind went blank. He could not help thinking of her as belonging to the older generation. She was so grave and responsible. She had not always been like that, he knew: at seventeen she had been quite playful. She had suffered terrible troubles since then, but the playful girl must still be there somewhere inside the solemn woman. For Jack that made her even more fascinating.

He was getting near her spot. The forest was quiet in the heat of the day. He moved silently through the undergrowth. He wanted to see her before she saw him. He was still not sure he had the nerve to approach her. Most of all he was afraid of putting her off. He had spoken to her on the very first day he returned to Kingsbridge, the Whitsunday that all the volunteers had come to work on the cathedral, and he had said the wrong thing then, with the result that he had hardly talked to her for four years. He did not want to make a similar blunder now.

A few moments later he peeped around the trunk of a beech tree and saw her.

She had picked an extraordinarily pretty place. There was a little waterfall trickling into a deep pool surrounded by mossy stones. The sun shone on the banks of the pool, but a yard or two back there was shade beneath the beech trees. Aliena sat in the dappled sunlight reading a book.

Jack was astonished. A woman? Reading a book? In the open air? The only people who read books were monks, and not many of them read anything except the services. It was an unusual book, too—much smaller than the tomes in the priory library, as if it had been made especially for a woman, or for someone who wanted to carry it around. He was so surprised that he forgot to be shy. He pushed his way through the bushes and came out into her clearing, saying: “What are you reading?”

She jumped, and looked up at him with terror in her eyes. He realized he

had frightened her. He felt very clumsy, and was afraid he had once again started off on the wrong foot. Her right hand flew to her left sleeve. He recalled that she had once carried a knife in her sleeve—perhaps she did still. A moment later she recognized him, and her fear went as quickly as it had come. She looked relieved, and then—to his chagrin—faintly irritated. He felt unwelcome, and he would have liked to turn right around and disappear back into the forest. But that would have made it difficult to speak to her another time, so he stayed, and faced her rather unfriendly look, and said: "Sorry I frightened you."

"You didn't *frighten* me," she said quickly.

He knew that was not true, but he was not going to argue with her. He repeated his initial question. "What are you reading?"

She glanced down at the bound volume on her knee, and her expression changed again: now she looked wistful. "My father got this book on his last trip to Normandy. He brought it home for me. A few days later he was put in jail."

Jack edged closer and looked at the open page. "It's in French!" he said.

"How do you know?" she said in astonishment. "Can you read?"

"Yes—but I thought all books were in Latin."

"Nearly all. But this is different. It's a poem called 'The Romance of Alexander.'"

Jack was thinking: I'm really doing it—I'm talking to her! This is wonderful! But what am I going to say next? How can I keep this going? He said: "Um…well, what's it about?"

"It's the story of a king called Alexander the Great, and how he conquered wonderful lands in the east where precious stones grow on grapevines and plants can talk."

Jack was sufficiently intrigued to forget his anxiety. "How do the plants talk? Do they have mouths?"

"It doesn't say."

"Do you think the story is true?"

She looked at him with interest, and he stared into her beautiful dark eyes. "I don't know," she said. "I always wonder whether stories are true. Most people don't care—they just like the stories."

"Except for the priests. They always think the sacred stories are true."

"Well of course *they* are true."

Jack was as skeptical of the sacred stories as he was of all the others; but his mother, who had taught him skepticism, had also taught him to be discreet, so he did not argue. He was trying not to look at Aliena's bosom, which was just at the edge of his vision: he knew that if he dropped his eyes she would know what he was looking at. He tried to think of something else to say. "I know a lot of stories," he said. "I know 'The Song of Roland,' and

‘The Pilgrimage of William of Orange’—”

“What do you mean, you *know* them?”

“I can recite them.”

“Like a jongleur?”

“What’s a jongleur?”

“A man who goes around telling stories.”

That was a new concept to Jack. “I never heard of such a man.”

“There are lots in France. I used to go overseas with my father when I was a child. I loved the jongleurs.”

“But what do they do? Just stand on the street and speak?”

“It depends. They come into the lord’s hall on feast days. They perform at markets and fairs. They entertain pilgrims outside churches. Great barons sometimes have their own jongleur.”

It occurred to Jack that not only was he talking to her, but he was having a conversation he could not have had with any other girl in Kingsbridge. He and Aliena were the only people in the town, apart from his mother, who knew about French romance poems, he was sure. They had an interest in common, and they were discussing it. The thought was so exciting that he lost track of what they were saying and he felt confused and stupid.

Fortunately she carried on. “Usually the jongleur plays the fiddle while he recites the story. He plays fast and high when there’s a battle, slow and sweet when two people are in love, jerky for a funny part.”

Jack liked that idea: background music to enhance the high points of the story. “I wish I could play the fiddle,” he said.

“Can you really recite stories?” she said.

He could hardly believe she was really interested in him, asking him questions about himself! And her face was even lovelier when it was animated by curiosity. “My mother taught me,” he said. “We used to live in the forest, just the two of us. She told me the stories again and again.”

“But how can you remember them? Some of them take *days* to tell.”

“I don’t know. It’s like knowing your way through the forest. You don’t keep the whole forest in your mind, but wherever you are, you know where to go next.” Glancing at the text of her book again, he was struck by something. He sat on the grass next to her to look more closely. “The rhymes are different,” he said.

She was not sure what he meant. “In what way?”

“They’re better. In ‘The Song of Roland,’ the word *sword* rhymes with *horse*, or *lost*, or with *ball*. In your book, *sword* rhymes with *horde* but not with *horse; lord* but not *loss; board* but not *ball*. It’s a completely different way of rhyming. But it’s better, much better. I like these rhymes.”

“Would you…” She looked diffident. “Would you tell me some of ‘The Song of Roland’?”

Jack shifted his position a little so that he could look at her. The intensity of her look, the sparkle of eagerness in her bewitching eyes, gave him a choking feeling. He swallowed hard, then began.

The lord and king of all France, Charles the Great

Has spent seven long years fighting in Spain.

He has conquered the highlands and the plain.

Before him not a single fort remains,

No town or city wall for him to break,

But Saragossa, on a high mountain

Ruled by King Marsilly the Saracen.

He serves Mahomed, to Apollo prays,

But even there he never will be safe.

Jack paused, and Aliena said: “You know it! You really do! Just like a jongleur!”

“You see what I mean about the rhymes, though.”

“Yes, but it’s the stories I like, anyway,” she said. Her eyes twinkled with delight. “Tell me some more.”

Jack felt as if he would faint with happiness. “If you like,” he said weakly. He looked into her eyes and began the second verse.

II

The first game of Midsummer Eve was eating the how-many bread. Like many of the games, it had a hint of superstition about it that made Philip uneasy. However, if he tried to ban every rite that smacked of the old religions, half the people's traditions would be prohibited, and they would probably defy him anyway; so he exercised a discreet tolerance of most things, and took a firm line on one or two excesses.

The monks had set up tables on the grass at the western end of the priory close. Kitchen hands were already carrying steaming cauldrons across the courtyard. The prior was lord of the manor, so it was his responsibility to provide a feast for his tenants on important holidays. Philip's policy was to be generous with food and mean with drink, so he served weak beer and no wine. Nevertheless there were five or six incorrigibles who managed to drink themselves insensible every feast day.

The leading citizens of Kingsbridge sat at Philip's table: Tom Builder and his family; the senior master craftsmen, including Tom's elder son, Alfred; and the merchants, including Aliena but not Malachi the Jew, who would join in the festivities later, after the service.

Philip called for silence and said grace; then he handed the how-many loaf to Tom. As the years went by, Philip valued Tom more and more. There were not many people who said what they meant and did what they said. Tom reacted to surprises, crises and disasters by calmly weighing up the consequences, assessing the damage and planning the best response. Philip looked at him fondly. Tom was very different today from the man who had walked into the priory five years ago begging for work. Then he had been exhausted, haggard, and so thin that his bones seemed to be on the point of poking through his weatherbeaten skin. In the intervening years he had filled out, especially since his woman came back. He was not fat, but there was flesh on his big frame, and the desperate look had long gone from his eyes. He was expensively dressed, in a tunic of Lincoln green, and soft leather shoes, and a belt with a silver buckle.

Philip had to ask the question that would be answered by the how-many bread. He said: "How many years will it take to finish the cathedral?"

Tom took a bite of the bread. It was baked with small, hard seeds, and as Tom spat the seeds into his hand, everyone counted aloud. Sometimes when this game was played, and someone got a big mouthful of seeds, it was found that nobody around the table could count high enough; but there was no

danger of that today, with all the merchants and craftsmen present. The answer came to thirty. Philip pretended to be dismayed. Tom said: “I should live so long!” and everyone laughed.

Tom passed the bread to his wife, Ellen. Philip was very wary of this woman. Like the Empress Maud, she had power over men, a kind of power Philip could not compete with. The day Ellen was thrown out of the priory, she had done an appalling thing, a thing Philip could still hardly bring himself to think about. He had assumed she would never be seen again, but to his horror she had returned, and Tom had begged Philip to forgive her. Cleverly, Tom had argued that if God could forgive her sin, then Philip had no right to refuse. Philip suspected the woman was not very repentant. But Tom had asked on the day the volunteers had come and saved the cathedral, and Philip had found himself granting Tom’s wish against all his instincts. They had been married in the parish church, a small wooden building in the village that had been there longer than the priory. Since then Ellen had behaved herself, and had not given Philip reason to regret his decision. Nevertheless she made him uneasy.

Tom asked her: “How many men love you?”

She took a tiny bite of the bread, which made everyone laugh again. In this game the questions tended to be mildly suggestive. Philip knew that if he had not been present they would have been downright ribald.

Ellen counted three seeds. Tom pretended to be outraged. “I shall tell you who my three lovers are,” said Ellen. Philip hoped she was not going to say anything offensive. “The first is Tom. The second is Jack. And the third is Alfred.”

There was a round of applause for her wit, and the bread went on around the table. Next it was the turn of Tom’s daughter, Martha. She was about twelve years old, and shy. The bread predicted that she would have three husbands, which seemed most unlikely.

Martha passed the bread to Jack, and as she did so Philip saw a light of adoration in her eyes, and realized that she hero-worshiped her stepbrother.

Jack intrigued Philip. He had been an ugly child, with his carrot-colored hair and pale skin and bulging blue eyes, but now that he was a young man his features had composed themselves, as it were, and his face was so strikingly attractive that strangers would turn and stare. But in temperament he was as wild as his mother. He had very little discipline and he had no concept of obedience. As a stonemason’s laborer he had been almost useless, for instead of providing a steady stream of mortar and stones he would try to pile up a whole day’s supply, then go off and do something else. He was always disappearing. One day he had decided that none of the stones on the site suited the particular carving he had to do, so without telling anyone he had gone all the way to the quarry and picked out a stone he liked. He had

brought it back on a borrowed pony two days later. But people forgave him his transgressions, partly because he was a truly exceptional stone carver, and partly because he was so likable—a trait he definitely had not inherited from his mother, in Philip's opinion. Philip had given some thought to what Jack would do with his life. If he went into the Church he could easily end up a bishop.

Martha asked Jack: "How many years before you marry?"

Jack took a small bite: apparently he was keen to wed. Philip wondered if he had anyone in mind. To Jack's evident dismay he got a mouthful of seeds, and as they were counted his face was a picture of indignation. The total came to thirty-one. "I'll be forty-eight years old!" he protested. They all thought that was hilarious, except for Philip, who worked out the calculation, found it correct, and marveled that Jack had been able to figure it out so fast. Even Milius the bursar could not do that.

Jack was sitting next to Aliena. Philip realized he had seen those two together several times this summer. It was probably because they were both so bright. There were not many people in Kingsbridge who could talk to Aliena on her own level; and Jack, for all his ungovernable ways, was more mature than the other apprentices. Still Philip was intrigued by their friendship, for at their age five years was a big difference.

Jack passed the bread to Aliena and asked her the question he had been asked: "How many years until you marry?"

Everyone groaned, for it was too easy to ask the same question again. The game was supposed to be an exercise in wit and raillery. But Aliena, who was famous for the number of suitors she had turned down, made them laugh by taking a huge bite of bread, indicating that she did not want to marry. But her ploy was unsuccessful: she spat out only one seed.

If she was going to marry next year, Philip thought, the groom had not appeared on the scene yet. Of course he did not believe in the predictive power of the bread. The probability was that she would die an old maid—except that she was not a maiden, according to rumor, for she had been seduced, or raped, by William Hamleigh, people said.

Aliena passed the bread to her brother, Richard, but Philip did not hear what she asked him. He was still thinking about Aliena. Unexpectedly, both Aliena and Philip had failed to sell all their wool this year. The surplus was not great—less than a tenth of Philip's stock, and an even smaller proportion for Aliena—but it was somewhat discouraging. After that, Philip had worried that Aliena would back out of the deal for next year's wool, but she had stuck by her bargain, and paid him a hundred and seven pounds.

The big news of the Shiring Fleece Fair had been Philip's announcement that next year Kingsbridge would be holding its own fair. Most people had welcomed the idea, for the rents and tolls charged by William Hamleigh at the

Shiring fair were extortionate, and Philip was planning to set much lower rates. So far, Earl William had not made his reaction known.

By and large, Philip felt that the priory's prospects were much brighter than they had seemed six months ago. He had overcome the problem caused by the closing of the quarry and defeated William's attempt to shut down his market. Now his Sunday market was thriving again and paying for expensive stone from a quarry near Marlborough. Throughout the crisis, cathedral building had continued uninterrupted, although it had been a close thing. Philip's only remaining anxiety was that Maud had not yet been crowned. Although she was indisputably in command, and she had been approved by the bishops, her authority rested only on her military might until there was a proper coronation. Stephen's wife still held Kent, and the commune of London was ambivalent. A single stroke of misfortune, or one bad decision, could topple her, as the battle of Lincoln had destroyed Stephen, and then there would be anarchy again.

Philip told himself not to be pessimistic. He looked at the people around the table. The game had ended and they were tucking in to their dinner. They were honest, good-hearted men and women who worked hard and went to church. God would take care of them.

They ate vegetable pottage, baked fish flavored with pepper and ginger, a variety of ducks, and a custard cleverly colored with red and green stripes. After dinner they all carried their benches into the unfinished church for the play.

The carpenters had made two screens, which were placed in the side aisles, at the east end, closing the space between the aisle wall and the first pier of the arcade, so that they effectively hid the last bay of each aisle. The monks who would play the parts were already behind those screens, waiting to walk into the middle of the nave to act out the story. The one who would be Saint Adolphus, a beardless novice with an angelic face, was lying on a table at the far end of the nave, draped in a shroud, pretending to be dead and trying not to giggle.

Philip had mixed feelings about the play, as he did about the how-many bread. It could so easily slip into irreverence and vulgarity. But people loved it so much that if he had not permitted it they would have made their own play, outside the church, and free from his supervision it would have become thoroughly bawdy. Besides, the ones who loved it most were the monks who performed it. Dressing up and pretending to be someone else, and acting outrageously—even sacrilegiously—seemed to give them some kind of release, probably because they spent the rest of their lives being so solemn.

Before the play there was a regular service, which the sacrist kept brief. Philip then gave a short account of the spotless life and miraculous works of Saint Adolphus. Then he took his seat in the audience and settled down to

watch the performance.

From behind the left-hand screen came a large figure dressed in what at first looked like shapeless, colorful garments, and on closer examination turned out to be pieces of brightly colored cloth wrapped around him and pinned. His face was painted and he carried a bulging moneybag. This was the rich barbarian. There was a murmur of admiration for his getup, followed by a ripple of laughter as people recognized the actor beneath the costume: it was fat Brother Bernard, the kitchener, whom they all knew and liked.

He paraded up and down several times, to let everyone admire him, and rushed at the little children in the front row, causing squeals of fright; then he crept up to the altar, looking around as if to make sure he was alone, and placed the moneybag behind it. He turned to the audience, leered, and said in a loud voice: “These foolish Christians will fear to steal my silver, for they imagine it is protected by Saint Adolphus. Ha!” He then retired behind the screen.

From the opposite side entered a group of outlaws, dressed in rags, carrying wooden swords and hatchets, their faces smeared with soot and chalk. They stalked around the nave, looking fearsome, until one of them saw the moneybag behind the altar. There followed an argument: should they steal it or not? The Good Outlaw argued that it would surely bring them bad luck; the Bad Outlaw said that a dead saint could do them no harm. In the end they took the money and retired into the corner to count it.

The barbarian reentered, looked everywhere for his money, and flew into a rage. He approached the tomb of Saint Adolphus and cursed the saint for failing to protect his treasure.

At that, the saint rose up from his grave.

The barbarian shuddered violently with terror. The saint ignored him and approached the outlaws. Dramatically, he struck them down one by one just by pointing at them. They simulated agonized death throes, rolling around on the ground, twisting their bodies into grotesque shapes and making hideous faces.

The saint spared only the Good Outlaw, who now put the money back behind the altar. With that the saint turned to the audience and said: “Beware, all you who may doubt the power of Saint Adolphus!”

The audience cheered and clapped. The actors stood in the nave grinning sheepishly for a while. The purpose of the drama was its moral, of course, but Philip knew that the parts people enjoyed most were the grotesqueries, the rage of the barbarian and the death throes of the outlaws.

When the applause died down Philip stood up, thanked the actors, and announced that the races would begin shortly in the pasture by the riverside.

This was the day that five-year-old Jonathan discovered he was not, after all, the faster runner in Kingsbridge. He entered the children's race, wearing his specially made monkish robe, and caused howls of laughter when he hitched it up around his waist and ran with his tiny bottom exposed to the world. However, he was competing with older children, and he finished among the last. His expression when he realized he had lost was so shocked and disappointed that Tom felt heartbroken for him, and picked him up to console him.

The special relationship between Tom and the priory orphan had grown gradually, and no one in the village had thought to wonder if there was a secret reason for it. Tom spent all day within the priory close, where Jonathan ran free, so it was inevitable that they saw a lot of one another; and Tom was at the age when a man's children are too old to be cute but have not yet given him grandchildren, and he sometimes takes a fond interest in other people's babies. As far as Tom knew, it had never crossed anyone's mind to suspect that he was Jonathan's father. If anything, people suspected that Philip was the boy's real father. That was a much more natural supposition—though Philip would not doubt be horrified to hear it.

Jonathan spotted Aaron, the eldest son of Malachi, and wriggled out of Tom's arms to go and play with his friend, the disappointment forgotten.

While the apprentices' races were on, Philip came and sat on the grass beside Tom. It was a hot, sunny day, and there was perspiration on Philip's shaved head. Tom's admiration for Philip grew year by year. Looking all around, at the young men running their race, the old people dozing in the shade, and the children splashing in the river, he reflected that it was Philip who kept all this together. He ruled the village, administering justice, deciding where new houses should be built, and settling quarrels; he employed most of the men and many of the women too, either as building workers or priory servants; and he managed the priory, which was the beating heart of the organism. He fought off predatory barons, negotiated with the monarch, and kept the bishop at bay. All these well-fed people sporting in the sunshine owed their prosperity in some measure to Philip. Tom himself was the prime example.

Tom was very conscious of the depth of Philip's clemency in pardoning Ellen. It was quite something for a monk to forgive what she had done. And it meant so much to Tom. When she went away, his joy at building the cathedral had been shadowed by loneliness. Now that she was back, he felt complete. She was still willful, maddening, quarrelsome and intolerant, but somehow these things were trifling: there was a passion inside her that burned like a candle in a lantern, and it lit up his life.

Tom and Philip watched a race in which the boys had to walk on their hands. Jack won it. "That boy is exceptional," Philip said.

“Not many people can walk that fast on their hands,” Tom said.

Philip laughed. “Indeed—but I wasn’t thinking about his acrobatic skill.”

“I know.” Jack’s cleverness had long been a source of both pleasure and pain to Tom. Jack had a lively curiosity about building—something Alfred had always lacked—and Tom enjoyed teaching Jack the tricks of the trade. But Jack had no sense of tact, and would argue with his elders. It was often better to conceal one’s superiority, but Jack had not learned that yet, not even after years of persecution by Alfred.

“The boy should be educated,” Philip went on.

Tom frowned. Jack was being educated. He was an apprentice. “What do you mean?”

“He should learn to write a good hand, and study Latin grammar, and read the ancient philosophers.”

Tom was even more puzzled. “To what end? He’s going to be a mason.”

Philip looked him in the eye. “Are you sure?” he said. “He’s a boy who doesn’t do what he’s expected to.”

Tom had never considered this. There were youngsters who defied expectations: earls’ sons who refused to fight, royal children who entered monasteries, peasants’ bastards who became bishops. It was true, Jack was the type. “Well, what do you think he will do?” he said.

“It depends on what he learns,” Philip said. “But I want him for the Church.”

Tom was surprised: Jack seemed such an unlikely clergyman. Tom was also a little wounded, in a strange way. He was looking forward to Jack’s becoming a master mason, and he would be terribly disappointed if the boy chose another course in life.

Philip did not notice Tom’s unhappiness. He went on: “God needs the best and the brightest young men to work for him. Look at those apprentices, competing to see who can jump the highest. All of them are capable of being carpenters, or masons, or stone cutters. But how many of them could be a bishop? Only one—Jack.”

That was true, Tom thought. If Jack had the chance of a career in the Church, with a powerful patron in Philip, he should probably take it, for it would lead to much greater wealth and power than he could hope for as a mason. Reluctantly Tom said: “What have you got in mind, exactly?”

“I want Jack to become a novice monk.”

“A monk!” It seemed an even more unlikely calling than the priesthood for Jack. The boy chafed at the discipline of a building site—how would he cope with the monastic rule?

“He would spend most of his time studying,” Philip said. “He would learn everything our novice-master can teach him, and I would give him lessons myself as well.”

When a boy became a monk, it was normal for the parents to make a generous donation to the monastery. Tom wondered what this proposal would cost.

Philip guessed his thoughts. “I wouldn’t expect you to present a gift to the priory,” he said. “It will be enough that you give a son to God.”

What Philip did not know was that Tom had already given one son to the priory: little Jonathan, who was now paddling at the edge of the river with his robe once again hoisted up around his waist. However, Tom knew he should suppress his own feelings in this. Philip’s proposal was generous: he obviously wanted Jack badly. The offer was a tremendous opportunity for Jack. A father would give his right arm to be able to set a son on such a career. Tom suffered a twinge of resentment that it was his stepson, rather than Alfred, who was being given this marvelous chance. The feeling was unworthy and he suppressed it. He should be glad, and encourage Jack, and hope the lad would learn to reconcile himself to the monastic regime.

“It should be done soon,” Philip added. “Before he falls in love with some girl.”

Tom nodded. Across the meadow, the women’s race was reaching its climax. Tom watched, thinking. After a moment he realized that Ellen was in the lead. Aliena was hard on her heels, but when they got to the finish line Ellen was still a little ahead. She raised her hands in a victory gesture.

Tom pointed at her. “It’s not me who needs to be persuaded,” he said to Philip. “It’s her.”

Aliena was surprised to have been beaten by Ellen. Ellen was very young to be the mother of a seventeen-year-old, but still she had to be at least ten years older than Aliena. They smiled at one another now, as they stood panting and sweating at the finish line. Aliena observed that Ellen had lean, muscular brown legs and a compact figure. All those years of living in the forest had made her tough.

Jack came up to congratulate his mother on winning. They were very fond of one another, Aliena could tell. They looked completely different: Ellen was a tanned brunette, with deep-set golden-brown eyes, and Jack was a redhead with blue eyes. He must be like his father, Aliena thought. Nothing was ever said about Jack’s father, Ellen’s first husband. Perhaps they were ashamed of him.

As she looked at the two of them together, it occurred to Aliena that Jack must remind Ellen of the husband she had lost. That might be why she was so fond of him. Perhaps the son was, as it were, all she had left of a man she had adored. A physical resemblance could be inordinately powerful in that way. Aliena’s brother, Richard, sometimes reminded her of their father, with a look

or a gesture, and that was when she felt a surge of affection; although it did not prevent her from wishing that Richard was more like his father in character.

She knew she ought not to be dissatisfied with Richard. He went to war and fought bravely, and that was all that was required of him. But she was dissatisfied a lot these days. She had wealth and security, a home and servants, fine clothes, pretty jewels, and a position of respect in the town. If anyone had asked her she would have said she was happy. But beneath the surface there was an undercurrent of restlessness. She never lost her enthusiasm for her work, but some mornings she wondered if it mattered what gown she put on and whether she wore jewelry. Nobody cared how she looked, so why should she? Paradoxically, she had become more conscious of her body. As she walked around, she could feel her breasts move. When she went down to the women's beach at the riverside to bathe, she felt embarrassed about how hairy she was. Sitting on her horse she was aware of the parts of her body that were touching the saddle. It was quite peculiar. It was as if there were a snooper peeking at her all the time, trying to look through her clothes and see her naked, and the snooper was herself. She was invading her own privacy.

She lay down on the grass, puffed out. Perspiration ran between her breasts and down the insides of her thighs. Impatiently she turned her mind to a more immediate problem. She had not sold all her wool this year. It was not her fault: most of the merchants had been left with unsold fleece, and so had Prior Philip. Philip was very calm about the whole thing but Aliena was anxious. What was she to do with all this wool? She could keep it until next year, of course. But what if she failed to sell it again? She did not know how long it took raw wool to deteriorate. She had a feeling it might dry out, becoming brittle and difficult to work.

If things went badly wrong she would be unable to support Richard. Being a knight was a very expensive business. The war-horse, which had cost twenty pounds, had lost its nerve after the battle of Lincoln and was now next to useless; soon he would want another one. Aliena could afford it, but it made a big dent in her resources. He was embarrassed about being dependent upon her—it was not the usual situation for a knight—and he had hoped to make enough in plunder to support himself, but lately he had been on the losing side. If he was to regain the earldom, Aliena had to continue to prosper.

In her worst nightmare she lost all her money, and the two of them were destitute again, prey to dishonest priests, lecherous noblemen and bloodthirsty outlaws; and they ended up in the stinking dungeon where she had last seen her father, chained to the wall and dying.

To contrast with her nightmare, she had a dream of happiness. In it, she and Richard lived together in the castle, their old home. Richard ruled as

wisely as their father had, and Aliena helped him as she had helped Father, welcoming important guests and dispensing hospitality and sitting on his left at the high table for dinner. But lately even that dream had left her discontented.

She shook her head, to dispel this melancholy mood, and thought about wool again. The simplest way to handle the problem was to do nothing. She could store the surplus wool until next year, and then, if she was unable to sell it, she would take the loss. She could bear it. However, that left the remote danger that the same thing would happen again next year, and this might be the beginning of a downward trend; so she cast about for some other solution. She had already tried to sell the wool to a weaver in Kingsbridge, but he had all he needed.

It occurred to her now, looking at the women of Kingsbridge as they recovered from their race, that most of them knew how to make cloth from raw wool. It was a tedious business, but simple: peasants had been doing it since Adam and Eve. The fleece had to be washed, then combed to take out the tangles, then spun into yarn. The yarn was woven into cloth; then the loosely woven fabric was felted, or fulled, to shrink and thicken it into something that could be used to make clothes. The townswomen would probably be willing to do that for a penny a day. But how long would it take? And what price would the finished cloth fetch?

She would have to try the scheme out with a small quantity. Then, if it worked, she could get several people doing the job during the long winter evenings.

She sat up, quite excited by her new idea. Ellen was lying right next to her. Jack was sitting on the other side of Ellen. He caught Aliena's eye, smiled faintly, and looked away, as if he was a little embarrassed at having been caught looking at her. He was a funny boy, with a head full of ideas. Aliena could remember him as a small, peculiar-looking child who did not know how babies were conceived. But she had hardly noticed him when he came to live in Kingsbridge. And now he seemed so different, so completely a new person, that it was as if he had sprung up from nowhere, a flower that appears one morning where the previous day there was nothing but bare earth. For a start he was no longer peculiar-looking. In fact, she thought, regarding him with a faint smile of amusement, the girls probably thought he was terribly handsome. He certainly had a nice smile. She herself paid no attention to his looks, but she was a little intrigued by his astonishing imagination. She had discovered that not only did he know several verse narratives in full—some of them thousands and thousands of lines long—but he could also make them up as he went along, so that she was never sure whether he was remembering or extemporizing. And the stories were not the only surprising thing about him. He was curious about everything and puzzled by things that everyone else

took for granted. One day he had asked where all the water in the river came from. “Every hour, thousands and thousands of gallons of water flow past Kingsbridge, night and day, all the year round. It’s been going on since before we were born, since before our parents were born, since before *their* parents were born. Where does it all come from? Is there a huge lake somewhere that feeds it? That lake must be as big as all England! What if one day it dries up?” He was always saying things like that, some of them less fanciful, and it made Aliena realize that she was starved of intelligent conversation. Most people in Kingsbridge could talk only about agriculture and adultery, neither of which interested her. Prior Philip was different, of course, but he did not often allow himself to indulge in idle talk: he was always busy, dealing with the building site, the monks, or the town. Aliena suspected that Tom Builder was also highly intelligent, but he was a thinker rather than a talker. Jack was the first real friend she had made. He was a marvelous discovery, despite his youth. Indeed, when she was away from Kingsbridge she had found herself looking forward to returning so that she could talk to him.

She wondered where he got his ideas from. That thought had made her notice Ellen. What a strange woman *she* must be, to raise a child in the forest! Aliena had talked to Ellen and found in her a kindred spirit, an independent and self-sufficient woman somewhat angry at the way life had treated her. Now, on impulse, Aliena said: “Ellen, where did *you* learn the stories?”

“From Jack’s father,” Ellen said without thinking, and then a guarded look came over her face, and Aliena knew she should not ask any more questions.

Another thought occurred to her. “Do you know how to weave?”

“Of course,” Ellen said. “Doesn’t everyone?”

“Would you like to do some weaving for money?”

“Perhaps. What have you got in mind?”

Aliena explained. Ellen was not short of money, of course, but it was Tom who earned it, and Aliena had a suspicion that Ellen might like to make some for herself.

The suspicion turned out to be right. “Yes, I’ll give that a try,” Ellen said.

At that moment Ellen’s stepson, Alfred, came along. Like his father, Alfred was something of a giant. Most of his face was concealed behind a bushy beard, but the eyes above it were narrow-set, giving him a cunning look. He could read and write and add up, but despite that he was rather stupid. Nevertheless he had prospered, and he had his own gang of masons, apprentices and laborers. Aliena had observed that big men often gained positions of power regardless of their intelligence. As a ganger Alfred had another advantage, of course: he could always be sure of getting work for his men because his father was the master builder of Kingsbridge Cathedral.

He sat on the grass beside her. He had enormous feet shod in heavy leather boots that were gray with stone dust. She rarely spoke to him. They

should have had a lot in common, for they were the only young people among the wealthier class of Kingsbridge, the class that lived in the houses nearest to the priory wall; but Alfred always seemed so dull. After a moment he spoke. “There ought to be a stone church,” he said abruptly.

Clearly the rest of them were supposed to figure out the context of this remark for themselves. Aliena thought for a moment then said: “Are you talking about the parish church?”

“Yes,” he said as if it was obvious.

The parish church was now used a good deal, for the cathedral crypt, which the monks were using, was cramped and airless, and the population of Kingsbridge had grown. Yet the parish church was an old wooden building with a thatched roof and a dirt floor.

“You’re right,” Aliena said. “We should have a stone church.”

Alfred was looking at her expectantly. She wondered what he wanted her to say.

Ellen, who was probably used to coaxing sense out of him, said: “What’s on your mind, Alfred?”

“How do churches get started, anyway?” he asked. “I mean, if we want a stone church, what do we do?”

Ellen shrugged. “No idea.”

Aliena frowned. “You could form a parish guild,” she suggested. A parish guild was an association of people who held a banquet every now and again and collected money among themselves, usually to buy candles for their local church, or to help widows and orphans in the neighborhood. Small villages never had guilds, but Kingsbridge was no longer a village.

“How would that do it?” Alfred said.

“The members of the guild would pay for the new church,” Aliena said.

“Then we should start a guild,” Alfred said.

Aliena wondered if she had misjudged him. He had never struck her as the pious type, but here he was trying to raise money to build a new church. Perhaps he had hidden depths. Then she realized that Alfred was the only building contractor in Kingsbridge, so he was sure to get the job of building the church. He might not be intelligent, but he was shrewd enough.

Nevertheless she still liked his idea. Kingsbridge was becoming a town, and towns always had more than one church. With an alternative to the cathedral, the town would not be so completely dominated by the monastery. At the moment Philip was the undisputed lord and master here. He was a benevolent tyrant, but she could foresee a time when it might suit the merchants of the town to have an alternative church.

Alfred said: “Would you explain about the guild to some of the others?”

Aliena had recovered her breath after the race. She was reluctant to exchange the company of Ellen and Jack for that of Alfred, but she was quite

enthusiastic about his idea, and anyway it would have been a little churlish to refuse. “I’d be glad to,” she said, and she got up and went with him.

The sun was going down. The monks had lit the bonfire and were serving the traditional ale spiced with ginger. Jack wanted to ask his mother a question, now that they were alone, but he was nervous. Then someone started to sing, and he knew she would join in at any moment, so he blurted it out. “Was my father a jongleur?”

She looked at him. She was surprised but not cross. “Who taught you that word?” she said. “You’ve never seen a jongleur.”

“Aliena. She used to go to France with her father.”

Mother gazed across the darkling meadow toward the bonfire. “Yes, he was a jongleur. He told me all those poems, just the way I told them to you. And are you now telling them to Aliena?”

“Yes.” Jack felt a little bashful.

“You really love her, don’t you?”

“Is it so obvious?”

She smiled fondly. “Only to me, I think. She’s a lot older than you.”

“Five years.”

“You’ll get her, though. You’re like your father. He could have any woman he wanted.”

Jack was embarrassed to talk about Aliena but thrilled to hear about his father, and he was eager for more; but to his intense annoyance Tom came up at that moment and sat down with them. He began to speak immediately. “I’ve been talking to Prior Philip about Jack,” he said. His tone was light, but Jack sensed tension underneath, and saw trouble coming. “Philip says the boy should be educated.”

Mother’s response was predictably indignant. “He is educated,” she said. “He can read and write English and French, he knows his numbers, he can recite whole bookfuls of poetry—”

“Now, don’t misunderstand me willfully,” Tom said firmly. “Philip didn’t say that Jack is ignorant. Quite the opposite. He’s saying that Jack is so clever he should have *more* education.”

Jack was not pleased by these compliments. He shared his mother’s suspicion of churchmen. There was sure to be a catch in this somewhere.

“More?” Ellen said scornfully. “What more does that monk want him to learn? I’ll tell you. Theology. Latin. Rhetoric. Metaphysics. Cow shit.”

“Don’t dismiss it so quickly,” Tom said mildly. “If Jack takes up Philip’s offer, and goes to school, and learns to write at speed in a good secretary’s hand, and studies Latin and theology and all the other subjects you call cow shit, he could become a clerk to an earl or a bishop, and eventually he could

be a wealthy and powerful man. Not all barons are the sons of barons, as the saying goes."

Ellen's eyes narrowed dangerously. "If he takes up Philip's offer, you said. What is Philip's offer, exactly?"

"That Jack becomes a novice monk—"

"Over my dead body!" Ellen shouted, leaping to her feet. "The damned Church is not having my son! Those treacherous lying priests took his father but they're not taking him, I'll put a knife in Philip's belly first, so help me, I swear by all the gods."

Tom had seen Mother in a tantrum before and he was not as impressed as he might have been. He said calmly: "What the devil is the matter with you, woman? The boy has been offered a magnificent opportunity."

Jack was intrigued most of all by the words *Those treacherous lying priests took his father*. What did she mean by that? He wanted to ask her but he did not get the chance.

"He's not going to be a monk!" she yelled.

"If he doesn't want to be a monk, he doesn't have to."

Mother looked sulky. "That sly prior has a knack of getting his own way in the end," she said.

Tom turned to Jack. "It's about time you said something, lad. What do *you* want to do with your life?"

Jack had never thought about that particular question, but the answer came out with no hesitation, as if he had made up his mind long ago. "I'm going to be a master builder, like you," he said. "I'm going to build the most beautiful cathedral the world has ever seen."

The red edge of the sun dropped below the horizon and night fell. It was time for the last ritual of Midsummer Eve: floating wishes. Jack had a candle end and a piece of wood ready. He looked at Ellen and Tom. They were both gazing at him, somewhat nonplussed: his certainty about his future had surprised them. Well, no wonder: it had surprised him too.

Seeing that they had no more to say, he jumped to his feet and ran across the meadow to the bonfire. He lit a dry twig at the fire, melted the base of his candle a little, and stuck it to the piece of wood; then he lit the wick. Most of the villagers were doing the same. Those who could not afford a candle made a sort of boat with dried grass and rushes, and twisted the grasses together in the middle to make a wick.

Jack saw Aliena standing quite near him. Her face was outlined by the red glow of the bonfire, and she looked deep in thought. On impulse he said: "What will you wish for, Aliena?"

She answered him without pausing for thought. "Peace," she said. Then,

looking somewhat startled, she turned away.

Jack wondered if he were crazy to love her. She liked him well enough—they had become friends—but the idea of lying naked together and kissing one another's hot skin was as far from her heart as it was close to his own.

When everyone was ready, they knelt down beside the river, or waded into the shallows. Holding their flickering lights, they all made a wish. Jack closed his eyes tight and visualized Aliena, lying in a bed with her breasts peeping over the coverlet, holding her arms out to him and saying: "Make love to me, husband." Then they all carefully floated their lights on the water. If the float sank or the flame blew out, it meant you would never get your wish. As soon as Jack let go, and the little craft moved away, the wooden base became invisible, and only the flame could be seen. He watched it intently for a while, then he lost track of it among the hundreds of dancing lights, bobbing on the surface of the water, flickering wishes floating downstream until they disappeared around the bend of the river and were lost from view.

III

All that summer, Jack told Aliena stories.

They met on Sundays, occasionally at first and then regularly, in the glade by the little waterfall. He told her about Charlemagne and his knights, and William of Orange and the Saracens. He became completely absorbed in the stories while he was telling them. Aliena liked to watch the expressions change on his young face. He was indignant about injustice, appalled by treachery, thrilled by the bravery of a knight and moved to tears by a heroic death; and his emotions were catching, so that she too was moved. Some of the poems were too long to recite in one afternoon, and when he had to tell a story in installments he always broke off at a moment of tension, so that Aliena spent all week wondering what would happen next.

She never told anyone about these meetings. She was not sure why. Perhaps it was that they would not understand the fascination of stories. Whatever the reason, she just let people believe that she was going on her usual Sunday afternoon ramble; and without consulting her Jack did the same; then it got to the point where they could not tell anyone without appearing to confess to something they felt guilty about; and so, rather by accident, the meetings became secret.

One Sunday Aliena read “The Romance of Alexander” to him, just for a change. Unlike Jack’s poems of courtly intrigue, international politics and sudden death in battle, Aliena’s romance featured love affairs and magic. Jack was very taken with these new storytelling elements, and the following Sunday he embarked upon a new romance of his own invention.

It was a hot day in late August. Aliena was wearing sandals and a light linen dress. The forest was still and silent but for the tinkling of the waterfall and the rise and fall of Jack’s voice. The story began in a conventional way, with a description of a brave knight, big and strong, mighty in battle, and armed with a magic sword, who was assigned a difficult task: to travel to a far eastern land and bring back a grapevine that grew rubies. But it rapidly deviated from the usual pattern. The knight was killed and the story focused on his squire, a brave but penniless young man of seventeen who was hopelessly in love with the king’s daughter, a beautiful princess. The squire vowed to fulfil the task given to his master, even though he was young and inexperienced and had only a piebald pony and a bow.

Instead of vanquishing an enemy with one tremendous blow of a magic sword, as the hero generally did in these stories, the squire fought desperate

losing battles and won only by luck or ingenuity, generally escaping death by a hair. He was often scared by the enemies that he faced—unlike Charlemagne's fearless knights—but he never turned back from his mission. All the same, his task, like his love, seemed hopeless.

Aliena found herself more captivated by the pluck of the squire than she had been by the might of his master. She chewed her knuckles in anxiety when he rode into enemy territory, gasped when a giant's sword barely missed him, and sighed when he lay down his lonely head to sleep and dream of the faraway princess. His love for her seemed of a piece with his general indomitability.

In the end, he brought home the grapevine that grew rubies, astonishing the entire court. "But the squire did not care *that* much," Jack said with a contemptuous snap of his fingers, "for all those barons and earls. He was interested in one person only. That night, he stole into her room, evading the guards with a cunning ruse he had learned on his journey east. At last he stood beside her bed and gazed upon her face." Jack looked into Aliena's eyes as he said this. "She woke at once, but she was not afraid. The squire reached out and gently took her hand." Jack mimed the story, reaching for Aliena's hand and holding it in both of his. She was mesmerized by the intensity of his gaze and the power of the young squire's love, and she hardly noticed that Jack was holding her hand. "He said to her, 'I love you dearly,' and kissed her on the lips." Jack leaned over and kissed Aliena. His lips touched hers so gently that she hardly felt it. It happened very quickly, and he resumed the story instantly. "The princess fell asleep," he continued. Aliena thought: Did that really happen? Did Jack kiss me? She could hardly believe it, but she could still feel the touch of his mouth on hers. "The next day, the squire asked the king if he could marry the princess, as his reward for bringing home the jeweled vine." Jack kissed me without thinking, Aliena decided. It was just part of the story. He doesn't even realize what he did. I'll just forget about it. "The king refused him. The squire was heartbroken. All the courtiers laughed. That very day the squire left that land, riding on his piebald pony; but he vowed that one day he would return, and on that day he would marry the beautiful princess." Jack stopped, and let go of Aliena's hand.

"And then what happened?" she said.

"I don't know," Jack replied. "I haven't thought of it yet."

All the important people in Kingsbridge joined the parish guild. It was a new idea to most of them, but they liked the thought that Kingsbridge was now a town, not a village, and their vanity was touched by the appeal to them, as leading citizens, to provide a stone church.

Aliena and Alfred recruited the members and organized the first guild

dinner, in mid-September. The major absentees were Prior Philip, who was somewhat hostile to the enterprise, although not enough to prohibit it; Tom Builder, who declined because of Philip's feeling; and Malachi, who was excluded by his religion.

Meanwhile, Ellen had woven a bale of cloth from Aliena's surplus wool. It was coarse and colorless, but it was good enough for monks' robes, and the priory cellarer, Cuthbert Whitehead, had bought it. The price was cheap, but it was still double the cost of the original wool, and even after paying Ellen a penny a day Aliena was better off by half a pound. Cuthbert was keen to buy more cloth at that price, so Aliena bought Philip's surplus wool to add to her own stock, and found a dozen more people, mostly women, to weave it. Ellen agreed to make another bale, but she would not felt it, for she said the work was too hard; and most of the others said the same.

Aliena sympathized. Felting, or fulling, was heavy work. She remembered how she and Richard had gone to a master fuller in Winchester and asked him to employ them. The fuller had had two men pounding cloth with bats in a trough while a woman poured water in. The woman had shown Aliena her raw, red hands, and when the men had put a bale of wet cloth on Richard's shoulder it had brought him to his knees. Most people could manage to felt a small amount, enough to make clothes for themselves and their families, but only strong men could do it all day. Aliena told her weavers to go ahead and make loose-woven cloth, and she would hire men to felt it, or sell it to a master fuller in Winchester.

The guild dinner was held in the wooden church. Aliena organized the food. She parceled out the cooking among the members, most of whom had at least one domestic servant. Alfred and his men constructed a long table made of trestles and boards. They bought strong ale and a barrel of wine.

They sat at either side of the table, with nobody at the head or foot, for all were to be equal within the guild. Aliena wore a deepred silk dress ornamented by a gold brooch with rubies in it, and a dark gray pelisse with fashionably wide sleeves. The parish priest said grace: he of course was delighted by the idea of the guild, for a new church would increase his prestige and multiply his income.

Alfred presented a budget and timetable for the building of the new church. He spoke as if this were all his own work, but Aliena knew that Tom had done most of it. The building would take two years and cost ninety pounds, and Alfred proposed that the guild's forty members should each pay sixpence a week. It was a little more than some of them had reckoned on, Aliena could tell by their faces. They all agreed to pay it, but Aliena thought the guild could expect one or two to default.

She herself could pay it easily. Looking around the table, she realized she was probably the richest person there. She was in a small minority of women:

the only others were a brewster with a reputation for good strong ale, a tailor who employed two seam-stresses and some apprentices, and the widow of a shoemaker, who managed the business her husband had left. Aliena was the youngest woman there, and younger than any of the men except Alfred, who was a year or two younger than she.

Aliena missed Jack. She had not yet heard the second installment of the story of the young squire. Today was a holiday, and she would have liked to meet him in the glade. Perhaps she still could, later on.

The talk around the table was of the civil war. Stephen's wife, Queen Matilda, had put up more of a fight than anyone expected: she had recently taken the city of Winchester and captured Robert of Gloucester. Robert was the brother of the Empress Maud and the commander in chief of her military forces. Some people said Maud was only a figurehead, and Robert was the true leader of the rebellion. In any event, the capture of Robert was almost as bad for Maud as the capture of Stephen had been for the loyalists, and everyone had an opinion on what direction the war would take next.

The drink at this feast was stronger than that provided by Prior Philip, and as the meal progressed, the revelers became quite raucous. The parish priest failed to act as a restraining influence, probably because he was drinking as much as anyone else. Alfred, who was sitting next to Aliena, seemed preoccupied, but even he became flushed. Aliena herself was not fond of strong drink, and she took a cup of apple cider with her dinner.

When most of the food was finished, someone proposed a toast to Alfred and Aliena. Alfred beamed with pleasure as he acknowledged it. After that the singing began, and Aliena started to wonder how soon she could slip away.

Alfred said to her: "We did well, together."

Aliena smiled. "Let's see how many of them are still paying sixpence a week this time next year."

Alfred did not want to hear about misgivings or qualifications today. "We did well," he repeated. "We're a good team." He raised his cup to her and drank. "Don't you think we're a good team?"

"We certainly are," she said, to humor him.

"I've enjoyed it," he went on. "Doing this with you—the guild, I mean."

"I've enjoyed it, too," she said politely.

"Have you? That makes me very happy."

She looked at him more carefully. Why was he laboring the point? His speech was clear and precise, and he showed no signs of real drunkenness. "It's been fine," she said neutrally.

He put a hand on her shoulder. She hated to be touched, but she had trained herself not to flinch, because men became so offended. "Tell me something," he said, lowering his voice to an intimate level. "What are you

looking for in a husband?”

Surely he’s not going to ask me to marry him, she thought dismally. She gave her standard answer. “I don’t need a husband—my brother is trouble enough.”

“But you need love,” he said.

She groaned inwardly.

She was about to reply when he held up a hand to stop her—a masculine habit she found particularly maddening. “Don’t tell me you don’t need love,” he said. “Everybody needs love.”

She gazed at him steadily. She knew there was something peculiar about her: most women were keen to get married; and if they were still single, as she was, at the age of twenty-two, they were more than keen, they were desperate. What’s wrong with me? she thought. Alfred was young, fit and prosperous: half the girls in Kingsbridge would like to marry him. For a moment she toyed with the idea of saying yes. But the thought of actually living with Alfred, eating supper with him every night and going to church with him and giving birth to his children, was appalling. She would rather be lonely. She shook her head. “Forget it, Alfred,” she said firmly. “I don’t need a husband, for love or anything else.”

He was not to be discouraged. “I love you, Aliena,” he said. “Working with you, I’ve been truly happy. I need you. Will you be my wife?”

He had said it now. She was sorry, for it meant she had to reject him formally. She had learned that there was no point in trying to do this gently, either: they took a kindly refusal as a sign of indecision, and pressed her all the more. “No, I won’t,” she said. “I don’t love you and I haven’t much enjoyed working with you, and I wouldn’t marry you if you were the only man on earth.”

He was hurt. He must have thought his chances were strong. Aliena was sure she had done nothing to encourage him. She had treated him as an equal partner, listened to him when he spoke, talked to him frankly and directly, fulfilled her responsibilities and expected him to fulfill his. But some men took that for encouragement. “How can you say that?” he spluttered.

She sighed. He was wounded, and she felt sorry for him; but in a moment he would be indignant, and act as if she had made an unfair accusation against him; then finally he would convince himself that she had gratuitously insulted him, and he would become offensive. Not all rejected suitors behaved like that, but a certain type did, and Alfred was that type. She was going to have to leave.

She stood up. “I respect your proposal, and I thank you for the honor you do me,” she said. “Please respect my refusal, and don’t ask me again.”

“I suppose you’re running off to see my snotnosed little stepbrother,” he said nastily. “I can’t imagine he gives you much of a ride.”

Aliena flushed with embarrassment. So people were beginning to notice her friendship with Jack. Trust Alfred to put a smutty interpretion on it. Well she *was* running off to see Jack, and she was not going to let Alfred stop her. She bent down and thrust her face into his. He was startled. Quietly and deliberately she said: “Go. To. Hell.” Then she turned and went out.

Prior Philip held court in the crypt once a month. In the old days it had been once a year, and even then the business rarely took all day. But when the population trebled, lawbreaking had increased tenfold.

The nature of crime had changed, too. Formerly, most offenses had to do with land, crops or livestock. A greedy peasant would try surreptitiously to move the boundary of a field so as to extend his land at the expense of a neighbor; a laborer would steal a sack of corn from the widow he worked for; a poor woman with too many children would milk a cow that was not hers. Nowadays most of the cases involved money, Philip thought, as he sat through his court on the first day of December. Apprentices stole money from their masters, a husband took his wife’s mother’s savings, merchants passed dud coinage, and wealthy women underpaid simpleminded servants who could hardly count their weekly wages. There had been no such crimes in Kingsbridge five years ago, because then nobody had much cash.

Philip dealt with nearly all offenses by a fine. He could also have people flogged, or put in the stocks, or imprisoned in the cell beneath the monks’ dormitory, but these punishments were rarer, and reserved mainly for crimes of violence. He had the right to hang thieves, and the priory owned a stout wooden gallows; but he had never used it, not yet, and he cherished a secret hope that he never would. The most serious crimes—murder, killing the king’s deer, and highway robbery—were dealt with by the king’s court at Shiring, presided over by the sheriff, and Sheriff Eustace did more than enough hanging.

Today Philip had seven cases of unauthorized grain grinding. He left them until the end and dealt with them all together. The priory had just built a new water mill to run alongside the old one—Kingsbridge needed two mills now. But the new building had to be paid for, which meant that everyone had to bring their grain to be ground at the priory. Strictly speaking, that had always been the law, as it was in every manor in the country: peasants were not allowed to grind grain at home; they had to pay the lord to do it for them. In recent years, as the town grew and the old mill began to break down frequently, Philip had overlooked a growing amount of illicit grinding; but now he had to clamp down.

He had the names of the offenders scratched on a slate, and he read them out, one by one, beginning with the wealthiest. “Richard Longacre, you had a

large grindstone turned by two men, Brother Franciscus says.” Franciscus was the priory’s miller.

A prosperous-looking yeoman stepped forward. “Yes, my lord prior, but I’ve broken it now.”

“Pay sixty pence. Enid Brewster, you had a handmill in your brewery. Eric Enidson was seen using it, and he is charged too.”

“Yes, lord,” said Enid, a red-faced woman with powerful shoulders.

“And where is the handmill now?” Philip asked her.

“I threw it in the river, lord.”

Philip did not believe her, but there was not much he could do about it. “Fined twenty-four pence, and twelve for your son. Walter Tanner?”

Philip went on down the list, fining people according to the scale of their illegitimate operations, until he came to the last and poorest. “Widow Goda?”

A pinch-faced old woman in faded black clothes stepped forward.

“Brother Franciscus saw you grinding grain with a stone.”

“I didn’t have a penny for the mill, lord,” she said resentfully.

“You had a penny to buy grain, though,” Philip said. “You shall be punished like everyone else.”

“Would you have me starve?” she said defiantly.

Philip sighed. He wished Brother Franciscus had pretended not to notice Goda breaking the law. “When was the last time someone starved to death in Kingsbridge?” he said. He looked around at the assembled citizens. “Anybody remember the last time someone starved to death in our town?” He paused for a moment, as if waiting for a reply, then said: “I think you’ll find it was before my time.”

Goda said: “Dick Shorthouse died last winter.”

Philip remembered the man, a beggar who slept in pigsties and stables. “Dick fell down drunk in the street at midnight and froze to death when it snowed,” he said. “He didn’t starve, and if he’d been sober enough to walk to the priory, he wouldn’t have been cold either. If you’re hungry, don’t try to cheat me—come to me for charity. And if you’re too proud to do that, and you would rather break the law instead, you must take your punishment like everyone else. Do you hear me?”

“Yes, lord,” the old woman said sulkily.

“Fined a farthing,” Philip said. “Court is over.”

He stood up and went out, climbing the stairs that led up to ground level from the crypt.

Work on the new cathedral had slowed dramatically, as it always did a month or so before Christmas. The exposed edges and tops of the unfinished stonework were covered with straw and dung—the litter from the priory stables—to keep the frost off the new masonry. The masons could not build in the winter, because of the frost, they said. Philip had asked why they could

not uncover the walls every morning and cover them again at night: it was not often frosty in the daytime. Tom said that walls built in winter fell down. Philip believed that, but he did not think it was because of the frost. He thought the real reason might be that the mortar took several months to set properly. The winter break allowed it to get really hard before the new year's masonry was built on top. That would also explain the masons' superstition that it was bad luck to build more than twenty feet high in a single year: more than that, and the lower courses might become deformed by the weight on them before the mortar could harden.

Philip was surprised to see all the masons out in the open, in what would be the chancel of the church. He went to see what they were doing.

They had made a semicircular wooden arch and stood it upright, propped up with poles on both sides. Philip knew that the wooden arch was a piece of what they called falsework: its purpose was to support the stone arch while it was being built. Now, however, the masons were assembling the stone arch at ground level, without mortar, to make sure the stones fit together perfectly. Apprentices and laborers were lifting the stones onto the falsework while the masons looked on critically.

Philip caught Tom's eye and said: "What's this for?"

"It's an arch for the tribune gallery."

Philip looked up reflexively. The arcade had been finished last year and the gallery above it would be completed next year. Then only the top level, the clerestory, would remain to be built before the roof went on. Now that the walls had been covered up for the winter, the masons were cutting the stones ready for next year's work. If this arch was right, the stones for all the others would be cut to the same patterns.

The apprentices, among whom was Tom's stepson, Jack, built the arch up from either side, with the wedge-shaped stones called voussoirs. Although the arch would eventually be built high up in the church, it would have elaborate decorative moldings; so each stone bore, on the surface that would be visible, a line of large dog-tooth carving, another line of small medallions, and a bottom line of simple roll molding. When the stones were put together, the carvings lined up exactly, forming three continuous arcs, one of dog-tooth, one of medallions and one of roll molding. This gave the impression that the arch was constructed of several semicircular hoops of stone one on top of another, whereas, in fact, it was made of wedges placed side by side. However, the stones had to fit together precisely, otherwise the carvings would not line up and the illusion would be spoiled.

Philip watched while Jack lowered the central keystone into place. Now the arch was complete. Four masons picked up sledge-hammers and knocked out the wedges that supported the wooden falsework a few inches above the ground. Dramatically, the wooden support fell. Although there was no mortar

between the stones, the arch remained standing. Tom Builder gave a grunt of satisfaction.

Someone pulled at Philip's sleeve. He turned to see a young monk. "You've got a visitor, father. He's waiting in your house."

"Thank you, my son." Philip left the builders. If the monks had put the visitor in the prior's house to wait, that meant it was someone important. He crossed the close and went into his house.

The visitor was his brother, Francis. Philip embraced him warmly. Francis looked careworn. "Have you been offered something to eat?" Philip said. "You seem weary."

"They gave me some bread and meat, thanks. I've spent the autumn riding between Bristol, where King Stephen was imprisoned, and Rochester, where Earl Robert was held."

"You said *was*."

Francis nodded. "I've been negotiating a swap: Stephen for Robert. It was done on All Saints' Day. King Stephen is now back in Winchester."

Philip was surprised. "It seems to me that the Empress Maud got the worst of the bargain—she gave a king to get an earl."

Francis shook his head. "She was helpless without Robert. Nobody likes her, nobody trusts her. Her support was collapsing. She had to have him back. Queen Matilda was clever. She wouldn't take anything less than King Stephen in exchange. She held out for that and in the end she got it."

Philip went to the window and looked out. It had started to rain, a cold slantwise rain blowing across the building site, darkening the high walls of the cathedral and dripping off the low thatched roofs of the craftsmen's lodges. "What does it mean?" he said.

"It means that Maud is once again just an aspirant to the throne. After all, Stephen has actually been crowned, whereas Maud never was, not quite."

"But it was Maud who licensed my market."

"Yes. That could be a problem."

"Is my license invalid?"

"No. It was properly granted by a legitimate ruler who had been approved by the Church. The fact that she wasn't crowned doesn't make any difference. But Stephen could withdraw it."

"The market is paying for the stone," Philip said anxiously. "I can't build without it. This is bad news indeed."

"I'm sorry."

"What about my hundred pounds?"

Francis shrugged. "Stephen will tell you to get it back from Maud."

Philip felt sick. "All that money," he said. "It was God's money, and I lost it."

"You haven't lost it yet," Francis said. "Stephen may not revoke your

license. He’s never shown much interest in markets one way or the other.”

“Earl William may pressure him.”

“William changed allegiance, remember? He threw his lot in with Maud. He won’t have much influence with Stephen anymore.”

“I hope you’re right,” Philip said fervently. “I hope to God you’re right.”

When it got too cold to sit in the glade, Aliena took to visiting Tom Builder’s house in the evenings. Alfred was normally at the alehouse, so the family group consisted of Tom, Ellen, Jack and Martha. Now that Tom was doing so well, they had comfortable seats, and a roaring fire, and plenty of candles. Ellen and Aliena would work at the weaving. Tom would draw plans and diagrams, scratching his drawings with a sharp stone onto polished pieces of slate. Jack would pretend to be making a belt, or sharpening knives, or weaving a basket, although he would spend most of the time furtively staring at Aliena’s face in the candlelight, watching her lips move as she talked or studying her white throat as she drank a glass of ale. They laughed a lot that winter. Jack loved to make Aliena laugh. She was so controlled and reserved, in general, that it was a joy to see her let herself go, almost like catching a glimpse of her naked. He was constantly thinking of things to say to amuse her. He would do impressions of the craftsmen on the building site, imitating the accent of a Parisian mason or the bowlegged walk of a blacksmith. Once he invented a comical account of life with the monks, giving each of them plausible sins—pride for Remigius, gluttony for Bernard Kitchener, drunkenness for the guest-master, and lust for Pierre Circuitor. Martha was often helpless with laughter and even the taciturn Tom cracked a smile.

It was on one such evening that Aliena said: “I don’t know if I’m going to be able to sell all this cloth.”

They were somewhat taken aback. Ellen said: “Then why are we weaving it?”

“I haven’t given up hope,” Aliena said. “I’ve just got a problem.”

Tom looked up from his slate. “I thought the priory was eager to buy it all.”

“That’s not the problem. I can’t find people to do the felting, and the priory doesn’t want loose-woven cloth—nor does anyone else.”

Ellen said: “Felting is backbreaking work. I’m not surprised no one will do it.”

“Can’t you get men to do it?” Tom suggested.

“Not in prosperous Kingsbridge. All the men have work enough. In the big towns there are professional fullers, but most of them work for weavers, and they’re prohibited from felting for their employer’s rivals. Anyway, it would cost too much to cart the cloth to Winchester and back.”

“It’s a real problem,” Tom acknowledged, and went back to his drawing.

Jack was struck by a thought. “It’s a pity we can’t get oxen to do it.”

The others laughed. Tom said: “You might as well try to teach an ox to build churches.”

“Or a mill,” Jack persisted. “There are usually easy ways to do the hardest work.”

“She wants to felt the cloth, not grind it,” Tom said.

Jack was not listening. “We use lifting gear, and winding wheels, to raise stones up to the high scaffolding.”

Aliena said: “Oh, if there was some ingenious mechanism to get this cloth felted, it would be wonderful.”

Jack thought how pleased she would be if he could solve this problem for her. He determined to find a way.

Tom said thoughtfully: “I’ve heard of a water mill being used to work the bellows in a forge—but I’ve never seen it.”

“Really!” Jack said. “That proves it!”

Tom said: “A mill wheel goes round and round, and a grindstone goes round and round, so the one can drive the other; but a fuller’s bat goes up and down. You can’t make a round waterwheel drive an up-and-down bat.”

“But a bellows goes up and down.”

“True, true; but I never saw that forge, I only heard tell of it.”

Jack tried to picture the machinery of a mill. The force of the water drove the mill wheel around. The shaft of the mill wheel was connected to another wheel inside the mill. The inside wheel, which was upright, had teeth that interlocked with the teeth of another wheel which lay flat. The flat wheel turned the millstone. “An upright wheel can drive a flat wheel,” Jack muttered, thinking aloud.

Martha laughed. “Jack, stop! If mills could felt cloth, clever people would have thought of it already.”

Jack ignored her. “The fuller’s bats could be fixed to the shaft of the mill wheel,” he said. “The cloth could be laid flat where the bats fall.”

Tom said: “But the bats would strike once, then get stuck; and the wheel would stop. I told you—wheels go round and round, but bats have to go up and down.”

“There must be a way,” Jack said stubbornly.

“There’s no way,” Tom said decisively, in the tone of voice he used to close a conversational subject.

“I bet there is, though,” Jack muttered rebelliously; and Tom pretended not to hear.

On the following Sunday, Jack disappeared.

He went to church in the morning, and ate his dinner at home, as usual; but he did not appear at suppertime. Aliena was in her own kitchen, making a thick broth of ham and cabbage with pepper in it, when Ellen came looking for Jack.

“I haven’t seen him since mass,” Aliena said.

“He vanished after dinner,” Ellen said. “I assumed he was with you.”

Aliena felt a little embarrassed that Ellen should have made that assumption so readily. “Are you worried?”

Ellen shrugged. “A mother is always worried.”

“Has he quarreled with Alfred?” Aliena said nervously.

“I asked the same question. Alfred says not.” Ellen sighed. “I don’t suppose he’s come to any harm. He’s done this before and I daresay he’ll do it again. I never taught him to keep regular hours.”

Later in the evening, just before bedtime, Aliena called at Tom’s house to see whether Jack had reappeared. He had not. She went to bed worried. Richard was away in Winchester, so she was alone. She kept thinking Jack might have fallen into the river and drowned, or something. How terrible that would be for Ellen: Jack was her only son. Tears came to Aliena’s eyes when she imagined Ellen’s grief at losing Jack. This is stupid, she thought: I’m crying over someone else’s sorrow about something that hasn’t happened. She pulled herself together and tried to think of another subject. The surplus cloth was her big problem. Normally she could worry about business half the night, but tonight her mind kept returning to Jack. Suppose he had broken his leg, and was lying in the forest, unable to move?

Eventually she drifted into a restless sleep. She woke at first light, still feeling tired. She threw on her heavy cloak over her nightshirt, and pulled on her fur-lined boots, then went outside to look for him.

He was not in the garden behind the alehouse, where men commonly fell asleep, and were saved from freezing by the heat of the fetid dunghill. She went down to the bridge and walked fearfully along the bank to a bend in the river where debris was washed up. A family of ducks was scavenging among the bits of wood, wornout shoes, rusty discarded knives and rotting meat bones on the beach. Jack was not there, thank God.

She went back up the hill and into the priory close, where the cathedral builders were beginning their day’s work. She found Tom in his shed. “Has Jack come back?” she said hopefully.

Tom shook his head. “Not yet.”

As she was going out, the master carpenter came up, looking worried. “All our hammers have gone,” he said to Tom.

“That’s funny,” Tom said. “I’ve been looking for a hammer and can’t find one.”

Then Alfred put his head around the door and said: “Where are all the

masons' bolsters?"

Tom scratched his head. "It seems as if every hammer on the site has disappeared," he said in a baffled voice. Then his expression changed, and he said: "That boy Jack is behind this, I'll bet."

Of course, Aliena thought. Hammers. Felting. The mill.

Without saying what she was thinking, she left Tom's shed and hurried across the priory close, going past the kitchen, to the south-west corner, where a channel diverted from the river drove two mills, one old and the other brand-new. As she had suspected, the wheel of the old mill was turning. She went inside.

What she saw confused and frightened her at first. There was a row of hammers fixed to a horizontal pole. Apparently of their own volition the hammers lifted their heads, like horses looking up from the manger. Then they went down again, all together, and struck simultaneously with a mighty bang that made her heart stop. She gave a cry of shock. The hammers lifted their heads, as if they had heard her cry, then they struck again. They were pounding a length of her loose-woven cloth that lay in an inch or two of water in a shallow wooden trough of the type used by mortar makers on the building site. The hammers were felting the cloth, she realized, and she stopped being frightened, although they still looked disturbingly alive. But how was it done? She saw that the pole on which the hammers were fixed ran parallel with the shaft of the mill wheel. A plank fixed to the shaft went round and round as the shaft turned. When the plank came around, it connected with the handles of the hammers, pushing the handles down so that the heads came up. As the plank continued to turn the handles were released. Then the hammers fell and pounded the cloth in the trough. It was exactly what Jack had talked about that evening: a mill that could felt cloth.

She heard his voice. "The hammers should be weighted so that they fall harder." She turned around and saw him, looking tired but triumphant. "I think I've solved your problem," he said, and grinned sheepishly.

"I'm so glad you're all right—we were worried about you!" she said. Without thinking, she threw her arms around him and kissed him. It was a very brief kiss, not much more than a peck; but then, when their lips separated, his arms went around her waist, holding her body gently but firmly against his own, and she found herself looking into his eyes. All she could think of was how happy she was that he was alive and unhurt. She gave him an affectionate squeeze. She was suddenly aware of her own skin: she could feel the roughness of her linen undershirt and the soft fur of her boots, and her nipples tingled as they pressed against his chest.

"You were worried about me?" he said wonderingly.

"Of course! I hardly slept!"

She was smiling happily, but he looked terribly solemn, and after a

moment his mood overcame hers, and she felt strangely moved. She could hear her heart beating, and her breath came faster. Behind her, the hammers thudded in unison, shaking the wooden structure of the mill with each concerted blow, and she seemed to feel the vibration deep inside her.

"I'm all right," he said. "Everything's all right."

"I'm so glad," she repeated, and it came out in a whisper.

She saw him close his eyes and bend his face to hers, and then she felt his mouth on her own. His kiss was gentle. He had full lips and a soft adolescent beard. She closed her eyes to concentrate on the sensation. His mouth moved against hers, and it seemed natural to part her lips. Her mouth had suddenly become ultra-sensitive, so that she could feel the lightest touch, the tiniest movement. The tip of his tongue caressed the inside of her upper lip. She felt so overwhelmed with happiness that she wanted to cry. She pressed her body against his, crushing her soft breasts against his hard chest, feeling the bones of his hips dig into her belly. She was no longer merely relieved that he was safe, and glad to have him here. Now there was a new emotion. His physical presence filled her with an ecstatic sensation that made her slightly dizzy. Holding his body in her arms, she wanted to touch him more, to feel more of him, to get even closer. She rubbed his back with her hands. She wanted to feel his skin, but his clothes frustrated her. Without thinking, she opened her mouth and pushed her tongue between his lips. He made a small animal sound in the back of his throat, like a muffled moan of delight.

The door of the mill banged open. Aliena pulled away from Jack. Suddenly she felt shocked, as if she had been fast asleep and someone had slapped her to wake her up. She was horrified by what they had been doing—kissing and rubbing one another like a whore and a drunk in an alehouse! She stepped back and turned around, mortified with embarrassment. The intruder was Alfred, of all people. That made her feel worse. Alfred had proposed marriage to her, three months ago, and she had refused him haughtily. Now he had seen her acting like a bitch in heat. It seemed somehow hypocritical. She flushed with shame. Alfred was staring at her, his expression a mixture of lust and contempt that reminded her vividly of William Hamleigh. She was disgusted with herself for giving Alfred a reason to look down on her, and furious at Jack for his part in it.

She turned away from Alfred and looked at Jack. When his eyes met hers he registered shock. She realized that her anger was showing in her face but she could not help it. Jack's expression of dazed happiness turned into confusion and hurt. Normally that would have melted her, but now she was too upset. She hated him for what he had made her do. Quick as a flash, she slapped his face. He did not move, but there was agony in his look. His cheek reddened where she had hit him. She could not bear to see the pain in his eyes. She tore her gaze away.

She could not stay there. She ran to the door with the incessant thud of the hammers pounding in her ears. Alfred stepped aside quickly, looking almost frightened. She dashed past him and went through the door. Tom Builder was just outside, with a small crowd of building workers. Everyone was heading for the mill to find out what was going on. Aliena hurried past them without speaking. One or two of them glanced curiously at her, making her burn with shame; but they were more interested in the hammering sound coming from the mill. The coldly logical part of Aliena's mind recalled that Jack had solved the problem of felting her cloth; but the thought that he had been up all night doing something for her only made her feel worse. She ran past the stable, through the priory gate, and along the street, her boots slipping and sliding in the mud, until she reached her house.

When she got inside she found Richard there. He was sitting at the kitchen table with a loaf of bread and a bowl of ale. "King Stephen is on the march," he said. "The war has started again. I need a new horse."

IV

For the next three months Aliena hardly spoke two words in a row to Jack.

He was heartbroken. She had kissed him as if she loved him, there was no mistaking that. When she left the mill he felt sure they would kiss like that again, soon. He walked around in an erotic haze, thinking: Aliena loves me! Aliena loves me! She had stroked his back and put her tongue into his mouth and pressed her breasts against him. When she avoided him he thought at first that she was just embarrassed. She could not possibly pretend not to love him, after that kiss. He waited for her to get over her shyness. With the help of the priory carpenter he made a stronger, more permanent fulling mechanism for the old mill, and Aliena got her cloth felted. She thanked him sincerely, but her voice was cold and her eyes evaded his.

When it had gone on not just for a few days, but for several weeks, he was forced to admit that there was something seriously wrong. A tidal wave of disillusionment engulfed him, and he felt as if he would drown in regret. He was baffled. He wished miserably that he was older, and had more experience with women, so that he could tell whether she was normal or peculiar, whether this was temporary or permanent, and whether he should ignore it or confront her. Being uncertain, and also being terrified of saying the wrong thing and making matters worse, he did nothing; and then the constant feeling of rejection began to get to him, and he felt worthless, stupid, and impotent. He thought how foolish he was, to have imagined that the most desirable and unattainable woman in the county might fall for him, a mere boy. He had amused her for a while, with his stories and his jokes, but as soon as he had kissed her like a man, she had run away. What a fool he was to have hoped for anything else!

After a week or two of telling himself how stupid he was he began to get angry. He was irritable at work, and people started to treat him warily. He was mean to his stepsister, Martha, who was almost as hurt by him as he was by Aliena. On Sunday afternoons he wasted his wages gambling on cockfights. All his passion came out in his work. He was carving corbels, the jutting-out stones that appeared to support arches or shafts that did not reach all the way to the ground. Corbels were often decorated with leaves, but a traditional alternative was to carve a man who appeared to be holding up the arch with his hands or supporting it on his back. Jack altered the customary pattern just a little, but the effect was to show a disturbingly twisted human figure with an expression of pain, condemned, as it were, to an eternity of agony as he held

up the vast weight of stone. Jack knew it was brilliant: nobody else could carve a figure that looked as if it were in pain. When Tom saw it he shook his head, unsure whether to marvel at its expressiveness or disapprove of its unorthodoxy. Philip was very taken with it. Jack did not care what they thought: he felt that anyone who disliked it was blind.

One Monday in Lent, when everyone was short-tempered because they had not eaten meat for three weeks, Alfred came to work with a triumphant look on his face. He had been to Shiring the day before. Jack did not know what he had done there but he was clearly pleased about it.

During the midmorning break, when Enid Brewster tapped a barrel of ale in the middle of the chancel and sold it to the builders, Alfred held out a penny and called: “Hey, Jack Tomson, fetch me some ale.”

This is going to be about my father, Jack thought. He ignored Alfred.

One of the carpenters, an older man called Peter, said: “You’d better do what you’re told, prentice boy.” An apprentice was always supposed to obey a master craftsman.

“I’m not Tom’s son,” Jack said. “Tom is my stepfather, and Alfred knows it.”

“Do what he says, all the same,” Peter said in a reasonable tone.

Reluctantly, Jack took Alfred’s money and joined the line. “My father’s name was Jack Shareburg,” he said in a loud voice. “You can all call me Jack Jackson, if you want to make a difference between me and Jack Blacksmith.”

Alfred said: “Jack Bastard is more like it.”

Jack said to the world at large: “Have you ever wondered why Alfred never laces up his boots?” They all looked at Alfred’s feet. Sure enough, his heavy, muddy boots, which were designed to be tied at the top with cords, were loosely open. “It’s so that he can get at his toes quickly—in case he needs to count above ten.” The craftsmen smiled and the apprentices chortled. Jack handed Alfred’s penny to Enid and got a jug of ale. He took it to Alfred and handed it to him with a small satirical bow. Alfred was annoyed, but not very; he still had something up his sleeve. Jack moved away and drank his ale with the apprentices, hoping Alfred would lay off.

It was not to be. A few moments later Alfred followed him, and said: “If Jack Shareburg was my father I wouldn’t be so quick to claim him. Don’t you realize what he was?”

“He was a jongleur,” Jack said. He made himself sound confident, but he was afraid of what Alfred was going to say. “I don’t suppose you know what a jongleur is.”

“He was a thief,” said Alfred.

“Oh, shut up, shithead.” Jack turned away and sipped his beer, but he could hardly swallow. Alfred had a reason for saying this.

“Don’t you know how he died?” Alfred persisted.

This is it, Jack thought; this is what he learned yesterday in Shiring; this is why he's wearing that stupid grin. He turned around reluctantly and faced Alfred. "No, I don't know how my father died, Alfred, but I think you're going to tell me."

"He was hanged by the neck, like the lousy thief he was."

Jack gave an involuntary cry of anguish. He knew intuitively that this was true. Alfred was so completely sure of himself that he could not be making it up. And Jack saw in a flash that this explained his mother's reticence. For years he had secretly dreaded something like this. All the time he had pretended there was nothing wrong, he was not a bastard, he had a real father with a real name. In fact he had always feared that there was a disgrace about his father, that the taunts were valid, that he really did have something to be ashamed of. He was already low: Aliena's rejection had left him feeling worthless and small. Now the truth about his father hit him like a blow.

Alfred stood there smiling, inordinately pleased with himself: the effect of his revelation had delighted him. His expression maddened Jack. It was bad enough, for Jack, that his father had been hanged. That Alfred was happy about it was too much to bear. Without thinking, Jack threw his beer in Alfred's grinning face.

The other apprentices, who had been watching the two stepbrothers and enjoying the altercation, hastily moved a step or two back. Alfred dashed the beer from his eyes, roared with anger, and lashed out with one huge fist, a surprisingly quick movement for such a big man. The blow connected with Jack's cheek, so hard that instead of hurting, it just went numb. Before he had time to react, Alfred's other fist sank into his middle. This punch hurt terribly. Jack felt as if he would never breathe again. He crumpled and fell to the ground. As he landed, Alfred kicked him in the head with one heavy boot, and for a moment he saw nothing but white light.

He rolled over blindly and struggled to his feet. But Alfred was not yet satisfied. As Jack came upright he felt himself grabbed. He began to wriggle. He was frightened now. Alfred would have no mercy. Jack would be beaten to a pulp if he could not escape. For a moment Alfred's grip was too strong and Jack could not get free, but then Alfred drew back one massive fist for a blow, and in that instant Jack slipped out of his grasp.

He darted away and Alfred lunged after him. Jack dodged around a lime barrel, pulling it over so that it fell in Alfred's path, spilling lime on the ground. Alfred jumped over the barrel but cannoned into a water butt and that, too, was upset. When the water came into contact with the lime it boiled and hissed fiercely. Some of the builders, seeing the waste of costly material, shouted protests, but Alfred was deaf to them, and Jack could think of nothing but trying to get away from Alfred. He ran, still doubled up with pain and half blind from the kick in the head.

Hard on his heels, Alfred stuck out a foot and tripped him. Jack fell headlong. I'm going to die, he thought as he rolled over; Alfred will kill me now. He fetched up under a ladder that was leaning against the scaffolding high up on the building. Alfred bore down on him. Jack felt like a cornered rabbit. The ladder saved him. As Alfred ducked behind it, Jack dodged around to the front and catapulted himself up the rungs. He went up the ladder like a rat up a gutter.

He felt the ladder shake as Alfred came up behind him. Normally he could outrun Alfred, but he was still dazed and winded. He reached the top and lurched onto the scaffolding. He stumbled and fell against the wall. The stonework had been laid that morning and the mortar was still wet. As Jack careered into it, a whole section of the wall shifted, and three or four stones slipped sideways and fell over the side. Jack thought he was going with them. He teetered at the edge, and as he looked down he saw the big stones tumbling over and over as they fell eighty feet and landed on the roofs of the lean-to lodges at the foot of the wall. He righted himself and hoped no one was in the lodges. Alfred came up over the top of the ladder and advanced toward him on the flimsy scaffolding.

Alfred was red and panting, and his eyes were full of hate. Jack had no doubt that in this state Alfred could kill. If he gets hold of me, Jack thought, he'll throw me over the side. As Alfred advanced, Jack retreated. He trod in something soft and realized it was a pile of mortar. Inspired, he stooped quickly, picked up a handful, and threw it accurately into Alfred's eyes.

Blinded, Alfred stopped advancing and shook his head, trying to get rid of the mortar. At last Jack had a chance to escape. He ran to the far end of the scaffolding platform, intending to descend, run out of the priory close, and spend the rest of the day hiding in the forest. But to his horror there was no ladder at the other end of the platform. He could not climb down the scaffolding, for it did not reach to the ground—it was built on joists stuck into putlog holes in the wall. He was trapped.

He looked back. Alfred had got his eyesight back and was coming toward him.

There was one other way down.

At the unfinished end of the wall, where the chancel would join on to the transept, each course of masonry was half a stone's length shorter than the one below, creating a steep flight of narrow steps, which was sometimes used by the more daring laborers as an alternative way up to the platform. With his heart in his mouth Jack got on top of the wall and walked along, carefully but quickly, trying not to see how far he would fall if he slipped. He reached the top of the stepped section, paused at the edge, and looked down. He felt faintly sick. He glanced back over his shoulder: Alfred was on the wall behind him. He went down.

Jack could not understand why Alfred was so unafraid: he had never been brave. It was as if hatred had dulled his sense of danger. As they ran down the dizzily steep steps, Alfred was gaining on Jack. They were still more than twelve feet off the ground when Jack realized Alfred was very nearly on him. In desperation he jumped off the side of the wall onto the thatched roof of the carpenters' lodge. He bounced off the roof onto the ground, but he landed badly, twisting his ankle, and he fell to the ground.

He staggered upright. The seconds he lost by falling had enabled Alfred to reach the ground and run to the lodge. For a split second Jack stood with his back to the wall, and Alfred paused, waiting to see which way he would jump. Jack suffered a moment of terrified indecision; then, inspired, he stepped to one side and backed into the lodge.

It was empty of craftsmen, for they were all standing around Enid's barrel. On the benches were the hammers and saws and chisels of the carpenters, and the pieces of wood they had been working on. In the middle of the floor was a large piece of new falsework, to be used in building an arch; and at the back, up against the church wall, was a blazing fire, fed by shavings and off-cuts from the carpenters' raw material.

There was no way out.

Jack turned to face Alfred. He was cornered. For a moment he was paralyzed with fright. Then his fear gave way to anger. I don't care if I get killed, he thought, so long as I make Alfred bleed before I die. He did not wait for Alfred to hit him. He lowered his head and charged. He was too maddened even to use his fists. He simply ran into Alfred full tilt.

It was the last thing Alfred expected. Jack's forehead smashed into his mouth. Jack was two or three inches shorter and a lot lighter, but all the same his charge threw Alfred back. As Jack recovered his balance he saw blood on Alfred's lips, and he was satisfied.

For a moment Alfred was too surprised to react. In that instant, Jack's eye lit on a big wooden sledgehammer leaning against a bench. As Alfred recovered his wits and came at Jack, Jack lifted the hammer and swung it wildly. Alfred dodged back and the hammer missed him. Suddenly Jack had the upper hand. Encouraged, he went after Alfred, already relishing the sensation of solid wood crunching Alfred's bones. This time he put all his strength into the blow. Once again it missed Alfred; but it connected with the pole supporting the roof of the lodge.

The lodge was not solidly constructed. Nobody lived in it. Its only function was to enable the carpenters to work in the rain. When Jack hit the pole with the hammer, the pole moved. The walls were flimsy hurdles of interwoven twigs, and gave no support at all. The thatched roof sagged. Alfred looked up fearfully. Jack hefted the hammer. Alfred backed through the door. Jack swung at him again. Alfred dodged back, tripped over a low

stack of timber, and sat down heavily. Jack raised the hammer high for the coup de grâce. His arms were seized in a strong grasp. He looked around and saw Prior Philip, with a face like thunder. Philip wrenched the hammer from Jack's grip.

Behind the prior, the roof of the lodge fell in. Jack and Philip looked. As it fell into the fire, the dry thatch caught alight instantly, and a moment later there was a fierce blaze.

Tom appeared and pointed at the three workmen nearest to him. "You, you and you—bring that water butt from outside the smithy." He turned to three others. "Peter, Rolf, Daniel, fetch buckets. You apprentices, shovel earth over the flames—all of you, and quick about it!"

For the next few minutes everyone concentrated on the fire, and Alfred and Jack were forgotten. Jack got out of the way and stood watching, feeling stunned and helpless. Alfred stood some distance away. Was I really about to smash Alfred's head with a hammer? Jack though incredulously. The whole thing seemed unreal. He was still in a state of dazed shock when the combination of water and earth put out the flames.

Prior Philip stood looking at the mess, breathing hard after his exertions. "Look at that," he said to Tom. He was furious. "A lodge wrecked. Carpenters' work ruined. A barrel of lime wasted and a whole section of new masonry destroyed."

Jack realized that Tom was in trouble: it was his job to keep order on the site and Philip blamed him for the damage. The fact that the culprits were Tom's sons made it even worse.

Tom put his hand on Philip's arm and spoke softly. "The lodge will deal with it," he said.

Philip was not to be mollified. "I will deal with it," he snapped. "I'm the prior and you all work for me."

"Then allow the masons to deliberate before you make any decisions," Tom said in a quiet and reasonable voice. "We may come up with a proposal that will recommend itself to you. If not, you're still free to do what you will."

Philip was visibly reluctant to let the initiative pass from his hands, but tradition was on Tom's side: the masons disciplined themselves. After a pause Philip said: "Very well. But whatever you decide, I will not have both your sons working on this site. One of them must go." Still fuming, he strode away.

With a black look at Jack and Alfred, Tom turned away and went into the largest of the masons' lodges.

Jack realized he was in serious trouble as he followed Tom into the lodge. When the masons disciplined one of their number it was usually for offenses such as drunkenness at work and theft of building materials, and the commonest punishment was a fine. Fighting between apprentices generally

resulted in both combatants being put in the stocks for a day, but of course Alfred was not an apprentice, and anyway, fights did not normally do so much damage. The lodge could expel a member who worked for less than the agreed minimum wage. It could also punish a member who committed adultery with another mason's wife, although Jack had never known this. Theoretically, apprentices could be flogged, but although this punishment was sometimes threatened he had never seen it carried out.

The master masons crowded into the wooden lodge, sitting on the benches and leaning against the back wall, which was in fact the side of the cathedral. When they were all inside, Tom said: "Our employer is angry, and with justification. This incident has done a lot of costly damage. Worse, it has brought disgrace on us masons. We must deal firmly with those who are to blame. This is the only way to regain our good reputation as proud and disciplined builders, men who are masters of ourselves as well as masters of our craft."

"Well said," Jack Blacksmith called out, and there was a murmur of agreement.

"I only saw the end of this fight," Tom went on. "Did anyone see it start?"

"Alfred went for the lad," said Peter Carpenter, the one who had advised Jack to be obedient and fetch Alfred's ale.

A young mason called Dan, who worked for Alfred, said: "Jack threw beer in Alfred's face."

"The lad was provoked, though," said Peter. "Alfred insulted Jack's natural father."

Tom looked at Alfred. "Did you?"

"I said his father was a thief," Alfred replied. "It's true. He was hanged for it at Shiring. Sheriff Eustace told me yesterday."

Jack Blacksmith said: "It's a poor thing if a master craftsman has to hold his tongue in case an apprentice doesn't like what he says."

There was a murmur of approval. Jack realized despondently that, whatever happened, he was not going to get off lightly. Perhaps I'm doomed to be a criminal, like my father, he thought; perhaps I'll end up on the gallows too.

Peter Carpenter, who was emerging as Jack's defender, said: "I still say it makes a difference if the craftsman went out of his way to anger the apprentice."

"The apprentice still has to be punished," said Jack Blacksmith.

"I don't deny that," said Peter. "I just think the craftsman ought to be disciplined too. Master craftsmen should use the wisdom of their years to bring about peace and harmony on a building site. If they provoke fights they fail in their duty."

There appeared to be some agreement with that, but Dan, Alfred's

supporter, said: “It’s a dangerous principle, to forgive the apprentice because the craftsman was unkind. Apprentices always think masters are unkind. If you start arguing that way you’ll end up with masters never speaking to their apprentices for fear the apprentices will strike them for discourtesy.”

That speech drew warm support, to Jack’s disgust. It just showed that the masters’ authority had to be bolstered, regardless of the rights and wrongs of the case. He wondered what his punishment would be. He had no money to pay a fine. He hated the thought of being put in the stocks: what would Aliena think of him? But it would be worse to be flogged. He thought he would knife anyone who tried to flog him.

Tom said: “We mustn’t forget that our employer also has a strong view about this. He says he will not have both Alfred and Jack working on the site. One of them must go.”

“Might he be talked out of that?” said Peter.

Tom looked thoughtful, but after a pause he said: “No.”

Jack was shocked. He had not taken Prior Philip’s ultimatum seriously. But Tom had.

Dan said: “If one of them has to go, I trust there’s no argument about which it will be.” Dan was one of the masons working for Alfred, rather than directly for the priory, and if Alfred went Dan would probably have to go too.

Once again Tom looked thoughtful, and once again he said: “No, no argument.” He looked at Jack. “Jack must be the one to go.”

Jack realized he had fatally underestimated the consequences of the fight. But he could hardly believe they were going to throw him out. What would life be like if he did not work on Kingsbridge Cathedral? Since Aliena had withdrawn into her shell, the cathedral was all he cared about. How could he leave?

Peter Carpenter said: “The priory might accept a compromise. Jack could be suspended for a month.”

Yes, please, thought Jack.

“Too weak,” said Tom. “We must be seen to act decisively. Prior Philip will not accept anything less.”

“So be it,” Peter said, giving in. “This cathedral loses the most talented young stone carver most of us have ever seen, all because Alfred can’t keep his damn mouth shut.” Several masons voiced their approval of that sentiment. Encouraged, Peter went on: “I respect you, Tom Builder, more than I’ve ever respected any master builder I’ve worked for, but it must be said that you’ve got a blind spot about your pigheaded son Alfred.”

“No abuse, please,” Tom said. “Let’s stick to the facts of the case.”

“All right,” Peter said. “I say Alfred must be punished.”

“I agree,” Tom said, to everyone’s surprise. Jack thought the remark about his blind spot had got to him. “Alfred should be disciplined.”

“Why?” Alfred said indignantly. “For beating an apprentice?”

“He’s not your apprentice, he’s mine,” Tom said. “And you did more than beat him. You chased him all over the site. If you had let him run away the lime wouldn’t have spilled, the masonry wouldn’t have been damaged and the carpenters’ lodge wouldn’t have burned down; and you could have dealt with him as soon as he came back. There was no need for what you did.”

The masons agreed.

Dan, who seemed to have become the spokesman for Alfred’s masons, said: “I hope you’re not proposing we expel Alfred from the lodge. I for one will fight against that.”

“No,” Tom said. “It’s bad enough to lose a talented apprentice. I don’t also want to lose a sound mason who runs a reliable gang. Alfred must stay—but I think he should be fined.”

Alfred’s men looked relieved.

“A heavy fine,” said Peter.

“A week’s wages,” Dan proposed.

“A month’s,” said Tom. “I doubt whether Prior Philip will be satisfied with less.”

Several men said: “Aye.”

“Are we of one mind on this, brother masons?” Tom said, using a customary form of words.

“Aye,” they all said.

“Then I will tell the prior our decision. The rest of you had better go back to work.”

Jack watched miserably as they all filed out. Alfred shot him a look of smug triumph. Tom waited until they had all gone, then said to Jack: “I did my best for you—I hope your mother will see that.”

“You’ve never done anything for me!” Jack burst out. “You couldn’t feed me or clothe me or house me. We were happy until you came along, and then we starved!”

“But in the end—”

“You won’t even protect me from that mindless brute you call your son!”

“I tried—”

“You wouldn’t even have this job if I hadn’t burned the old cathedral down!”

“What did you say?”

“Yes, I burned the old cathedral.”

Tom went pale. “That was lightning—”

“There was no lightning. It was a fine night. And no one had made a fire in the church, either. I set light to the roof.”

“But why?”

“So that you would have work. Otherwise my mother would have died in

the forest.”

“She wouldn’t—”

“Your first wife did, though, didn’t she?”

Tom turned white. Suddenly he looked older. Jack realized that he had wounded Tom profoundly. He had won the argument, but he had probably lost a friend. He felt sour and sad.

Tom whispered: “Get out of here.”

Jack left.

He walked away from the towering walls of the cathedral, close to tears. His life had been devastated in a few moments. It was incredible that he was going away from this church forever. He turned at the priory gate and looked back. There were so many things he had been planning. He wanted to carve a whole doorway all by himself; he wanted to persuade Tom to have stone angels in the clerestory; he had an innovative design for blind arcading in the transepts which he had not even shown to anyone yet. Now he would never do any of these things. It was so unfair. His eyes filled with tears.

He made his way home, seeing through a blur. Mother and Martha were sitting at the kitchen table. Mother was teaching Martha to write with a sharp stone and a slate. They were surprised to see him. Martha said: “It can’t be dinnertime already.”

Mother read Jack’s face. “What is it?” she said anxiously.

“I had a fight with Alfred and got expelled from the site,” he said grimly.

“Wasn’t Alfred expelled?” said Martha.

Jack shook his head.

“That’s not fair!” Martha said.

Mother said wearily: “What did you fight about this time?”

Jack said: “Was my father hanged at Shiring for thieving?”

Martha gasped.

Mother looked sad. “He wasn’t a thief,” she said. “But yes, he was hanged at Shiring.”

Jack was fed up with enigmatic statements about his father. He said brutally: “Why will you never tell me the truth?”

“Because it makes me so sad!” Mother burst out, and to Jack’s horror she began to cry.

He had never seen her cry. She was always so strong. He was close to breaking down himself. He swallowed hard and persisted. “If he wasn’t a thief, why was he hanged?”

“I don’t know!” Mother cried. “I never knew. He never knew either. They said he stole a jeweled cup.”

“From whom?”

“From here—from Kingsbridge Priory.”

“Kingsbridge! Did Prior Philip accuse him?”

“No, no, it was long before the time of Philip.” She looked at Jack through her tears. “Don’t start asking me who accused him and why. Don’t get caught in that trap. You could spend the rest of your life trying to put right a wrong done before you were born. I didn’t raise you so that you could take revenge. Don’t make that your life.”

Jack vowed he would learn more sometime, despite what she said; but right now he wanted her to stop crying. He sat beside her on the bench and put his arm around her. “Well, it looks as if the cathedral won’t be my life, now.”

Martha said: “What will you do, Jack?”

“I don’t know. I can’t live in Kingsbridge, can I?”

Martha was distraught. “But why not?”

“Alfred tried to kill me and Tom expelled me from the site. I’m not going to live with them. Anyway, I’m a man. I should leave my mother.”

“But what will you do?”

Jack shrugged. “The only thing I know about is building.”

“You could work on another church.”

“I might come to love another cathedral as much as I love this one, I suppose,” he said despondently. He was thinking: But I’ll never love another woman the way I love Aliena.

Mother said: “How could Tom do this to you?”

Jack sighed. “I don’t think he really wanted to. Prior Philip said he wouldn’t have me and Alfred both working on the site.”

“So that damned monk is at the bottom of this!” Mother said angrily. “I swear—”

“He was very upset about the damage we did.”

“I wonder if he could be made to see reason.”

“What do you mean?”

“God is supposed to be merciful—perhaps monks should be too.”

“You think I should plead with Philip?” Jack asked, somewhat surprised at the direction of Mother’s thinking.

“I was thinking I might talk to him,” she said.

“You!” That was even more uncharacteristic. Jack was quite shocked. For Mother to be willing to ask Philip for mercy, she must be badly upset.

“What do you think?” she asked him.

Tom had seemed to think Philip would not be merciful, Jack recalled. But then, Tom’s overriding concern had been that the lodge should take decisive action. Having promised Philip that they would be firm, Tom could not then plead for mercy. Mother was not in the same position. Jack began to feel a little more hopeful. Perhaps he would not have to leave after all. Perhaps he could stay in Kingsbridge, close to the cathedral and to Aliena. He no longer hoped that she would love him, but nevertheless he hated the thought of going

away and never seeing her again.

“All right,” he said. “Let’s go and plead with Prior Philip. We’ve got nothing to lose but our pride.”

Mother put on her cloak and they went out together, leaving Martha sitting alone at the table, looking anxious.

Jack and his mother did not often walk side by side, and now he was struck by how short she was: he towered over her. He felt suddenly fond of her. She was always ready to fight like a cat for his sake. He put his arm around her and hugged her. She smiled at him as if she knew what he was thinking.

They entered the priory close and went to the prior’s house. Mother banged on the door and walked in. Tom was there with Prior Philip. Jack knew immediately, by their faces, that Tom had *not* told Philip about Jack setting fire to the old cathedral. That was a relief. Now he probably never would. That secret was safe.

Tom looked anxious, if not a little scared, when he saw Mother. Jack recalled that he had said *I did my best for you, I hope your mother will see that*. Tom was remembering the last time Jack and Alfred had a fight: Mother had left Tom in consequence. Tom was afraid she would leave now.

Philip was no longer looking angry, Jack thought. Perhaps the lodge’s decision had mollified him. He might even be feeling a trifle guilty about his harshness.

Mother said: “I’ve come here to ask you to be merciful, Prior Philip.”

Tom immediately looked relieved.

Philip said: “I’m listening.”

Mother said: “You’re proposing to send my son away from everything he loves—his home, his family and his work.”

And the woman he adores, Jack thought.

Philip said: “Am I? I thought he had simply been dismissed from his work.”

“He’s never learned any kind of work but building, and there’s no other building work in Kingsbridge for him. And the challenge of that vast church has got into his blood. He’ll go wherever someone is building a cathedral. He’ll go to Jerusalem if there’s stone there to be carved into angels and devils.” How does she know all this? Jack wondered. He had hardly thought it himself—but it was true. She added: “I might never see him again.” Her voice shook a little at the end, and he thought wonderingly how much she must love him. She would never plead like this for herself, he knew.

Philip looked sympathetic, but it was Tom who replied. “We can’t have Jack and Alfred working on the same site,” he said doggedly. “They’ll fight again. You know that.”

“Alfred could go,” Mother said.

Tom looked sad. “Alfred is *my* son.”

“But he’s twenty years old, and he’s as mean as a bear!” Although Mother’s voice was assertive, her cheeks were wet with tears. “He doesn’t care for this cathedral any more than I do—he’d be perfectly happy building houses for butchers and bakers in Winchester or Shiring.”

“The lodge can’t expel Alfred and keep Jack,” Tom said. “Besides, the decision is already made.”

“But it’s the wrong decision!”

Philip spoke. “There might be another answer.”

Everyone looked at him.

“There might be a way for Jack to stay in Kingsbridge, and even devote himself to the cathedral, without falling foul of Alfred.”

Jack wondered what was coming. This sounded too good to be true.

“I need someone to work with me,” Philip went on. “I spend too much time making detail decisions on the building. I need a kind of assistant, who would fulfill the role of clerk of works. He would deal with most of the queries himself, referring only the most important questions to me. He would also keep track of the money and the raw materials, handling payments to suppliers and carters, and wages too. Jack can read and write, and he can add numbers faster than anyone I’ve ever met—”

“And he understands every aspect of building,” Tom put in. “I’ve seen to that.”

Jack’s mind was spinning. He could stay after all! He would be clerk of works. He would not be carving stone, but he would be supervising the entire design on Philip’s behalf. It was an astonishing proposal. He would have to deal with Tom as an equal. But he knew he was capable of it. And Tom did too.

There was one snag. Jack voiced it. “I can’t live with Alfred any longer.”

Ellen said: “It’s time Alfred had a home of his own, anyway. Perhaps if he left us he’d be more serious about finding a wife.”

Tom said angrily: “You keep thinking of reasons for getting rid of Alfred. I’m not going to throw my own son out of my house!”

“You don’t understand me, either of you,” Philip said. “You haven’t completely comprehended my proposal. Jack would not be living with you.”

He paused. Jack guessed what was coming next, and it was the last, and biggest, shock of the day.

Philip said: “Jack would have to live here, in the priory.” He looked at them with a little frown, as if he could not see why they still had not grasped his meaning.

Jack had understood him. He recalled Mother saying, on Midsummer Eve last year, *That sly prior has a knack of getting his own way in the end*. She had been right. Philip was renewing the offer he had made then. But this time

it was different. The choice Jack now faced was stark. He could leave Kingsbridge, and abandon everything he loved. Or he could stay, and lose his freedom.

“My clerk of works can’t be a layman, of course,” Philip finished, in the tone of one who states the obvious. “Jack will have to become a monk.”

V

On the night before the Kingsbridge Fleece Fair, Prior Philip stayed up after the midnight services, as usual; but instead of reading and meditating in his house, he made a tour of the priory close. It was a warm summer night, with a clear sky and a moon, and he could see without the aid of a lantern.

The entire close had been taken over by the fair, with the exception of the monastic buildings and the cloisters, which were sacred. In each of the four corners a huge latrine pit had been dug, so that the rest of the close would not become completely foul, and the latrines had been screened off to safeguard the sensibilities of the monks. Literally hundreds of market stalls had been erected. The simplest were nothing more than crude wooden counters on trestles. Most were a little more elaborate: they had a signboard with the name of the stall holder and a picture of his wares, a separate table for weighing, and a locked cupboard or shed to keep the goods in. Some stalls incorporated tents, either to keep the rain off or so that business could be done in private. The most elaborate stalls were small houses, with large storage areas, several counters, and tables and chairs where the merchant could offer hospitality to his important customers. Philip had been surprised when the first of the merchants' carpenters had arrived a full week before the fair and demanded to be shown where to erect his stall, but the structure that went up had taken four days to build and two to stock.

Philip had originally planned the layout of the stalls in two wide avenues on the west side of the close, in much the same configuration as the stalls of the weekly market; but he had soon realized that that would not be enough. The two avenues of stalls now ran all along the north side of the church as well, and then turned down the east end of the close as far as Philip's house; and there were more stalls actually inside the unfinished church, in the aisles between the piers. The stall holders were not all wool merchants by any means: everything was sold at a fair, from horsebread to rubies.

Philip walked along the moonlit rows. They were all ready now, of course: no stall building would be allowed today. Most of them were also stocked with goods. The priory had already collected more than ten pounds in fees and duties. The only goods that could be brought in on the day of the fair were freshly cooked foods, bread and hot pies and baked apples. Even the barrels of beer had been brought in yesterday.

As Philip walked around, he was watched by dozens of half-open eyes, and greeted by several sleepy grunts. The stall holders would not leave their

precious goods unguarded: most of them were sleeping at their stalls, and the wealthier merchants had left servants on guard.

He was not yet certain exactly how much money he would make from the fair, but it was virtually guaranteed to be a success, and he was confident of reaching his original estimate of fifty pounds. There had been moments, in the past few months, when he had feared that the fair would not take place at all. The civil war dragged on, with neither Stephen nor Maud gaining the upper hand, but his license had not been revoked. William Hamleigh had tried to sabotage the fair in various ways. He had told the sheriff to ban it, but the sheriff had asked for authority from one of the two rival monarchs, and it had not been forthcoming. William had forbidden his tenants to sell wool at Kingsbridge; but most of them were anyway in the habit of selling to merchants such as Aliena, rather than marketing the fleeces themselves, so the main effect of the ban was to create more business for her. Finally, he had announced that he was reducing the rents and duties at the Shiring Fleece Fair to the levels Philip was charging; but his announcement came too late to make much difference, for the big buyers and sellers had already made their plans.

Now, with the sky growing perceptibly lighter in the east on the morning of the big day, William could do no more. The sellers were here with their wares, and in a little while the buyers would begin to arrive. Philip thought William would find that in the end the Kingsbridge Fleece Fair damaged the Shiring fair less than he feared. Sales of wool seemed to go up every year without fail: there was enough business for two fairs anyway.

He had walked all the way around the close to the southwest corner, where the mills and the fishpond were. He stood there for a while, watching the water flow past the two silent mills. One was now used exclusively for felting cloth, and it made a lot of money. Young Jack was responsible for that. He had an ingenious mind. He was going to be a tremendous asset to the priory. He seemed to have settled quite well as a novice, although he tended to regard the services as a distraction from cathedral building, rather than the other way around. However, he would learn. The monastic life was a sanctifying influence. Philip thought God had a purpose for Jack. In the very back of Philip’s mind was a secret long-term hope: that one day Jack would take his place as prior of Kingsbridge.

Jack got up at dawn and slipped out of the dormitory before the service of prime to make one last inspection tour of the building site. The morning air was cool and clear, like pure water from a spring. It would be a warm, sunny day, good for business, good for the priory.

He walked around the cathedral walls, making sure that all the tools and work-in-progress were safely locked inside the lodges. Tom had built light

wooden fences around the stockpiles of timber and stone, to guard the raw materials against accidental damage by careless or drunken visitors. They did not want any daredevils climbing the structure, so all the ladders were safely hidden away, the spiral staircases in the thickness of the walls were closed off with temporary doors, and the stepped ends of the part-built walls were obstructed by wooden blocks. Some of the master craftsmen would be patrolling the site throughout the day to make sure there was no damage.

Jack managed to skip quite a lot of the services, one way or another. There was always something to be done on site. He did not have his mother's hatred of the Christian religion, but he was more or less indifferent to it. He had no enthusiasm for it, but he was willing to go through the motions if it suited his purpose. He made sure to go to one service every day, usually one that was attended either by Prior Philip or the novice-master, who were the two senior monks most likely to notice his presence or absence. He could not have borne it if he had to attend them all. Being a monk was the strangest and most perverted way of life imaginable. Monks spent half their lives putting themselves through pain and discomfort that they could easily avoid, and the other half muttering meaningless mumbo jumbo in empty churches at all hours of the day and night. They deliberately shunned anything good—girls, sports, feasting and family life. However, Jack had noted, the happiest among them had usually found some pursuit that gave deep satisfaction: illustrating manuscripts, writing history, cooking, studying philosophy, or—like Philip—changing Kingsbridge from a sleepy village into a thriving cathedral city.

Jack did not like Philip but he liked working with him. Jack did not warm to professional men of God any more than his mother did. He was embarrassed by Philip's piety; he disliked his singleminded sinlessness; and he mistrusted his tendency to believe that God would take care of anything that he, Philip, could not cope with. Nevertheless, Philip was good to work for. His orders were clear, he left Jack room to make decisions for himself, and he never blamed his servants for his own mistakes.

Jack had been a novice only three months, so he would not be asked to take vows for another nine months. The three vows were poverty, celibacy and obedience. The vow of poverty was not all it seemed. Monks had no personal possessions and no money of their own, but they lived more like lords than like peasants—they had good food, warm clothes and fine stone buildings to live in. Celibacy was no problem, Jack thought bitterly. He had gained a certain cold satisfaction from telling Aliena personally that he was entering the monastery. She had looked shocked and guilty. Now, whenever he felt the restless irritability that came from the lack of female companionship, he would think of how Aliena had treated him—their secret assignations in the forest, their winter evenings, the two times he had kissed her—and then he would recall how she had suddenly turned as cold and hard

as a rock; and thinking of that made him feel that he never wanted to have anything more to do with women. However, the vow of obedience would be difficult to keep, he could tell already. He was happy to take orders from Philip, who was intelligent and organized; but it was hard to obey the foolish sub-prior, Remigius, or the drunken guest-master, or the pompous sacrist.

Nevertheless, he was contemplating taking the vows. He did not have to keep them. All he cared about was building the cathedral. The problems of supply, construction and management were endlessly absorbing. One day he might have to help Tom devise a method of checking that the number of stones arriving at the site was the same as the number leaving the quarry—a complex problem, for the journey time varied between two days and four, so it was not possible to have a simple daily tally. Another day the masons might complain that the carpenters were not making the falsework properly. Most challenging of all were the engineering problems, such as how to lift tons of stone to the top of the walls using makeshift machinery fixed to flimsy scaffolding. Tom Builder discussed these problems with Jack as with an equal. He seemed to have forgiven Jack for that angry speech, in which Jack said that Tom had never done anything for him. And Tom acted as if he had forgotten the revelation that Jack had set fire to the old cathedral. They worked together cheerfully, and the days flew by. Even during the tedious services Jack's mind was occupied by some knotty question of construction or planning. His knowledge was increasing fast. Instead of spending years carving stones, he was learning cathedral design. There could hardly have been a better training for someone who wanted to be a master builder. For that, Jack was prepared to yawn through any number of midnight matins.

The sun was edging over the east wall of the priory close. Everything was in order on the site. The stall holders who had spent the night with their goods were beginning to fold away their bedding and put out their wares. The first customers would be here soon. A baker walked past Jack carrying a tray of new loaves on her head. The smell of hot fresh bread made Jack's mouth water. He turned and went back to the monastery, heading for the refectory, where they would soon be serving breakfast.

The first customers were the families of the stall holders and the townspeople, all curious to look at the first Kingsbridge Fleece Fair, none very interested in buying. Thrifty people had filled their bellies with horsebread and porridge before leaving home, so that they would not be tempted by the highly spiced and garishly colored confections on the food stalls. The children wandered around wide-eyed, dazzled by the display of desirable things. An optimistic early-rising whore with red lips and red boots sauntered along, smiling hopefully at middle-aged men, but there were no takers at this hour.

Aliena watched it all from her stall, which was one of the biggest. In the last few weeks she had taken delivery of Kingsbridge Priory's entire output of fleece for the year; the wool for which she had paid a hundred and seven pounds last summer. She had also been buying from farmers, as she always did; and this year there had been more sellers than usual, because William Hamleigh had forbidden his tenants to sell at the Kingsbridge fair, so they had all sold to merchants. And of all the merchants, Aliena had got the most business, because she was based at Kingsbridge where the fair was to be held. She had done so well that she had run out of money for buying, and had borrowed forty pounds from Malachi to keep her going. Now, in the warehouse that formed the rear half of her stall, she had a hundred and sixty sacks of raw wool, the product of forty thousand sheep, and it had cost her more than two hundred pounds, but she would sell it for three hundred, which was enough money to pay the wages of a skilled mason for over a century. The sheer scale of her own business amazed her whenever she thought of the numbers.

She did not expect to see her buyers until midday. There would be only five or six of them. They would all know each other, and she would know most of them from previous years. She would give each one a cup of wine, and sit and talk for a while. Then she would show him her wool. He would ask her to open a sack or two—never the top one on the pile, of course. He would plunge his hand deep into the sack and bring out a handful of wool. He would tease out the strands to determine their length, rub them between finger and thumb to test their softness, and sniff them. Finally he would offer to buy her entire stock at a ridiculously low price, and Aliena would refuse him. She would tell him her asking price, and he would shake his head. They would take another glass of wine.

Aliena would go through the same ritual with another buyer. She would give dinner to as many of them as were there at midday. Someone would offer to take a large quantity of wool at a price not much above what Aliena had paid for it. She would counter by dropping her asking price a shade. In the early afternoon she would begin closing deals. Her first deal would be at a lowish price. The other merchants would demand that she deal with them at the same price, but she would refuse. Her price would go up during the course of the afternoon. If it went up too fast, business would be slow, while the merchants calculated how soon they could fill their quotas elsewhere. If she was asking less than they were willing to pay, she would know by the relative haste with which they reached agreement. She would close deals one by one, and their servants would begin loading the huge sacks of wool onto the ox wagons with their enormous wooden wheels, while Aliena weighed the pound bags of silver pennies and guilders.

There was no doubt that today she would rake in more money than ever

before. She had twice as much to sell, and wool prices were up. She planned to buy Philip's output a year in advance again, and she had a secret scheme to build herself a stone house, with spacious cellars for storage of wool, an elegant and comfortable hall, and a pretty upstairs bedroom just for herself. Her future was secure, and she was confident of being able to support Richard as long as he needed her. Everything was perfect.

That was why it was so strange that she was completely and utterly miserable.

It was four years, almost to the day, since Ellen had returned to Kingsbridge, and they had been the best four years of Tom's life.

The pain of Agnes's death had dulled to an ache. It was still with him, but he no longer got that embarrassing feeling that he was about to burst into tears every now and again for no apparent reason. He still held imaginary conversations with her, in which he told her about the children, and Prior Philip, and the cathedral; but the conversations were less frequent. The bittersweet memory of her had not blighted his love for Ellen. He was able to live in the present. Seeing Ellen and touching her, talking to her and sleeping with her were daily joys.

He had been deeply wounded, on the day of the fight between Jack and Alfred, by Jack's saying that Tom had never looked after him; and that accusation had overshadowed even the appalling revelation that Jack had set fire to the old cathedral. He had agonized over it for several weeks, but in the end he had decided that Jack was wrong. Tom had done his best, and no man could do any more. Having reached that conclusion he had stopped worrying.

Building Kingsbridge Cathedral was the most profoundly satisfying work he had ever done. He was responsible for the design and the execution. No one interfered with him, and there was no one else to blame if things went wrong. As the mighty walls rose, with their rhythmic arches, their graceful moldings, and their individual carvings, he could look around and think: I did all this, and I did it well.

His nightmare, that one day he would again find himself on the road with no work, no money and no way of feeding his children, seemed very far away, now that there was a stout money chest full to bursting with silver pennies buried under the straw in his kitchen. He still shuddered when he remembered that cold, cold night when Agnes had given birth to Jonathan and died; but he felt sure nothing that bad would ever happen again.

He sometimes wondered why Ellen and he had not had children. They had both been proved fertile in the past, and there was no shortage of opportunities for her to get pregnant—they still made love almost every night, even after four years. However, it was not a cause of deep regret to him. Little

Jonathan was the apple of his eye.

He knew, from past experience, that the best way to enjoy a fair was with a small child, so he sought Jonathan out around midmorning, when the crowds began to arrive. Jonathan was almost an attraction in his own right, dressed as he was in his miniature habit. He had lately conceived a desire to have his head shaved, and Philip had indulged him—Philip was as fond of the child as Tom was—with the result that he looked more than ever like a tiny little monk. There were several real midgets in the crowd, performing tricks and begging, and they fascinated Jonathan. Tom had to hurry him away from one who drew a crowd by exposing his full-size penis. There were jugglers, acrobats and musicians performing and passing a hat round; soothsayers and surgeons and whores touting for business; trials of strength, wrestling contests and games of chance. People were wearing their most colorful clothes, and those who could afford it had doused themselves with scent and oiled their hair. Everyone seemed to have money to spend, and the air was full of the jingle of silver.

The bearbaiting was about to begin. Jonathan had never seen a bear, and he was fascinated. The animal's grayish-brown coat was scarred in several places, indicating that it had survived at least one previous contest. A heavy chain around its waist was fixed to a stake driven deep into the ground, and it was padding around on all fours at the limit of the chain, glaring angrily at the waiting crowd. Tom fancied he saw a cunning light in the beast's eye. Had he been a gambling man, he might have bet on the bear.

The sound of frantic barking came from a locked chest to one side. The dogs were in there, and they could smell their enemy. Every now and again the bear would stop his pacing, look at the box, and growl; and the barking would rise to hysteria pitch.

The owner of the animals, the bearward, was taking bets. Jonathan became impatient, and Tom was about to move on when at last the bearward unlocked the box. The bear stood upright at the limit of its chain and snarled. The bearward shouted something and threw the chest open.

Five greyhounds sprang out. They were light and fast-moving, and their gaping mouths showed sharp little teeth. They all went straight for the bear. The bear lashed out at them with its massive paws. It struck one dog and sent it flying; then the others backed off.

The crowd pushed closer. Tom checked on Jonathan: he was at the front, but still well out of the bear's reach. The bear was clever enough to draw back to the stake, letting its chain go loose, so that when it lunged it would not be brought up short. But the dogs were smart, too. After their initial scattered attack they regrouped and then spread out in a circle. The bear swung around in an agitated fashion, trying to see all ways at once.

One of the dogs rushed at it, yapping fiercely. The bear came to meet it

and lashed out. The dog quickly retreated, staying out of reach; and the other four rushed in from all sides. The bear swung around, swiping at them. The crowd cheered as three of them sank their teeth into the flesh of its haunches. It rose on its hind legs with a roar of pain, shaking them off, and they scrambled out of reach.

The dogs tried the same tactic once more. Tom thought the bear was going to fall for it again. The first dog darted within its reach, the bear went for it, and the dog backed off; but when the other dogs rushed the bear it was ready for them, and it turned quickly, lunged at the nearest, and swiped the dog's side with its paw. The crowd cheered as much for the bear as they had for the dogs. The bear's sharp claws ripped the dog's silky skin and left three deep bloody tracks. The dog yelped pitifully and retired from the fight to lick its wounds. The crowd jeered and booed.

The remaining four dogs circled the bear warily, making the occasional rush but turning back well before the danger point. Someone started a slow handclap. Then a dog made a frontal attack. It rushed in like a streak of lightning, slipped under the bear's swipe, and leaped for its throat. The crowd went wild. The dog sank its pointed white teeth into the bear's massive neck. The other dogs attacked. The bear reared up, pawing at the dog at its throat, then went down and rolled. For a moment Tom could not tell what was happening: there was just a flurry of fur. Then three dogs jumped clear, and the bear righted itself and stood on all fours, leaving one dog on the ground, crushed to death.

The crowd became tense. The bear had eliminated two dogs, leaving three; but it was bleeding from its back, neck and hind legs, and it looked frightened. The air was full of the smell of blood and the sweat of the crowd. The dogs had stopped yapping, and were circling the bear silently. They too looked scared, but they had the taste of blood in their mouths and they wanted a kill.

Their attack began the same way: one of them rushed in and rushed out again. The bear swiped at it halfheartedly and swung around to meet the second dog. But now this one, too, cut short its rush and retreated out of reach; and then the third dog did the same. The dogs darted in and out, one at a time, keeping the bear constantly shifting and turning. With each rush they got a little closer, and the bear's claws came a little nearer to catching them. The spectators could see what was happening, and the excitement in the crowd grew. Jonathan was still at the front, just a few steps from Tom, looking awestruck and a little frightened. Tom looked back at the fight just in time to see the bear's claws brush one dog while another dashed between the great beast's hind legs and savaged its soft belly. The bear made a sound like a scream. The dog dashed out from under it and escaped. Another dog rushed the bear. The bear slashed at it, missing by inches; and then the same dog

went for its underbelly again. This time when the dog escaped it left the bear with a huge bleeding gash in its abdomen. The bear reared up and went down on all fours again. For a moment Tom thought it was finished, but he was wrong: the bear still had some fight left in it. When the next dog rushed in, the bear made a token swipe at it, turned its head, saw the second dog coming, turned surprisingly fast and hit it with a mighty blow that sent it flying through the air. The crowd roared with delight. The dog landed like a bag of meat. Tom watched it for a moment. It was alive, but it seemed unable to move. Perhaps its back was broken. The bear ignored it, for it was out of reach and out of action.

Now there were only two dogs left. They both darted in and out of the bear's reach several times, until its lunges at them became perfunctory; then they began to circle it, moving faster and faster. The bear turned this way and that, trying to keep them both in sight. Exhausted and bleeding copiously, it could hardly stay upright. The dogs went around in ever-decreasing circles. The earth beneath the bear's mighty paws had been turned to mud by all the blood. One way or another, the end was in sight. Finally the two dogs attacked at once. One went for the throat and the other for the belly. With a last desperate swipe, the bear slashed the dog at its throat. There was a grisly fountain of blood. The crowd yelled their approval. At first Tom thought the dog had killed the bear, but it was the other way around: the blood came from the dog, which now fell to the ground with its throat slashed open. Its blood pumped out for a moment longer, then stopped. It was dead. But in the meantime the last dog had ripped open the bear's belly, and now its guts were falling out. The bear swiped feebly at the dog. The dog easily evaded the blow and struck again, savaging the bear's intestines. The bear swayed and seemed about to fall. The roar of the crowd grew to a crescendo. The bear's ripped guts gave out a revolting stench. It gathered its strength and struck at the dog again. The blow connected, and the dog jumped sideways, with blood oozing from a slash along its back; but the wound was superficial and the dog knew the bear was finished, so it went right back on the attack, biting at the bear's guts until, at last, the great animal closed its eyes and slumped to the ground, dead.

The bearward came forward and took the victorious dog by the collar. The Kingsbridge butcher and his apprentice stepped out of the crowd and began to cut the bear up for its meat: Tom supposed they had agreed on a price with the bearward in advance. Those who had won their bets demanded to be paid. Everyone wanted to pat the surviving dog. Tom looked for Jonathan. He could not see him.

The child had been just a couple of yards away throughout the bearbaiting. How had he managed to disappear? It must have happened while the sport was at its height, and Tom was concentrating on the spectacle. Now

he was cross with himself. He searched the crowd. Tom was a head taller than everyone else, and Jonathan was easy to spot with his monk's habit and shaved head; but he was nowhere to be seen.

The child could not come to much harm in the priory close, but he might come across things that Prior Philip would prefer him not to see: whores servicing their clients up against the priory wall, for example. Looking around, Tom glanced up at the scaffolding high on the cathedral building, and there, to his horror, he saw a small figure in a monastic robe.

He felt a moment of panic. He wanted to yell *Don't move, you'll fall!* but his words would have been lost in the noise of the fair. He pushed through the crowd toward the cathedral. Jonathan was running along the scaffolding, absorbed in some imaginary game, heedless of the danger that he might slip and fall over the edge and tumble eighty feet to his death—

Tom quenched the terror rising like bile in his throat.

The scaffolding did not rest on the ground, but on heavy timbers inserted into purpose-built holes high up in the walls. These timbers jutted out six feet or so. Stout poles were laid across them and roped to them, and then trestles made of flexible saplings and woven reeds were laid on the poles. The scaffolding was normally reached via the spiral stone staircases built into the thickness of the walls. But those staircases had been closed off today. So how had Jonathan climbed up? There were no ladders—Tom had seen to that, and Jack had double-checked. The child must have climbed up the stepped end of the unfinished wall. The ends had been built up with wood, so that they no longer provided easy access; but Jonathan could have clambered over the blocks. The child was full of self-confidence—but all the same he fell over at least once a day.

Tom reached the foot of the wall and looked up fearfully. Jonathan was playing happily eighty feet above. Fear gripped Tom's heart with a cold hand. He shouted at the top of his voice: "Jonathan!"

The people around him were startled, and looked up to see what he was shouting at. As they spotted the child on the scaffolding they pointed him out to their friends. A small crowd gathered.

Jonathan had not heard. Tom cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted again. "Jonathan! Jonathan!"

This time the boy heard. He looked down, saw Tom, and waved.

Tom shouted: "Come down!"

Jonathan seemed about to obey, then he looked at the wall along which he would have to walk, and the steep flight of steps he would have to descend, and he changed his mind. "I can't!" he called back, and his high voice floated down to the people on the ground.

Tom realized he was going to have to go up and get him. "Just stay where you are until I reach you!" he shouted. He pushed the blocks of wood off the

lower steps and mounted the wall.

It was four feet wide at the foot, but it narrowed as it went up. Tom climbed steadily. He was tempted to rush, but he forced himself to be calm. When he glanced up he saw Jonathan sitting on the edge of the scaffolding, dangling his short legs over the sheer drop.

At the very top the wall was only two feet thick. Even so, it was plenty wide enough to walk on, provided you had strong nerves, and Tom did. He made his way along the wall, jumped down onto the scaffolding, and took Jonathan in his arms. He was swamped with relief. “You foolish boy,” he said, but his voice was full of love, and Jonathan hugged him.

After a moment Tom looked down again. He saw a sea of upturned faces: a hundred or more people were watching. They probably thought it was another show, like the bearbaiting. Tom said to Jonathan: “All right, let’s go down now.” He set the boy on the wall, and said: “I’ll be right behind you, so don’t worry.”

Jonathan was not convinced. “I’m scared,” he said. He held out his arms to be picked up, and when Tom hesitated he burst into tears.

“Never mind, I’ll carry you,” Tom said. He was not very happy about it, but Jonathan was now too upset to be trusted at this height. Tom clambered onto the wall, knelt beside Jonathan, picked him up, and stood upright.

Jonathan held on tight.

Tom stepped forward. Because he had the child in his arms he could not see the stones immediately beneath his feet. That could not be helped. With his heart in his mouth, he walked gingerly along the wall, placing his feet cautiously. He had no fear for himself, but with the child in his arms he was terrified. At last he came to the beginning of the steps. It was no wider here at first, but somehow it seemed less precipitous, with the steps in front of him. He started down gratefully. With each step he felt calmer. When he reached the level of the gallery, and the wall widened to three feet, he paused to let his heartbeat slow down.

He looked out, past the priory close, over Kingsbridge, to the fields beyond, and there he saw something that puzzled him. There was a cloud of dust on the road leading to Kingsbridge, about half a mile away. After a moment he realized that he was looking at a large troop of men on horseback, approaching the town at a smart trot. He peered into the distance, trying to figure out who they were. At first he thought it must be a very wealthy merchant, or a group of merchants, with a large entourage, but there were too many of them, and somehow they did not look like commercial people. He tried to put his finger on what it was about them that made him think they were something other than merchants. As they came closer he saw that some of them were riding war-horses, most had helmets, and they were armed to the teeth.

Suddenly he felt scared.

“Jesus Christ, who are those people?” he said aloud.

“Don’t say ‘Christ,’” Jonathan reprimanded him.

Whoever they were, they meant trouble.

Tom hurried down the steps. The crowd cheered as he jumped down to the ground. He ignored them. Where were Ellen and the children? He looked all around, but he could not see them.

Jonathan tried to wriggle out of his arms. Tom held him tight. As he had his youngest child right here, the first thing to do was to put him somewhere safe. Then he could find the others. He pushed through the crowd to the door that led into the cloisters. It was locked from the inside, to preserve the privacy of the monastery during the fair. Tom banged on it and yelled: “Open up! Open up!”

Nothing happened.

Tom was not even sure there was anyone in the cloisters. There was no time to speculate. He stepped back, put Jonathan down, lifted his large booted right foot and kicked at the door. The wood around the lock splintered. He kicked it again, harder. The door flew open. Just the other side of it was an elderly monk, looking astonished. Tom lifted Jonathan and put him inside. “Keep him in there,” he said to the old monk. “There’s going to be trouble.”

The monk nodded dumbly and took Jonathan’s hand.

Tom closed the door.

Now he had to find the rest of his family in a crowd of a thousand or more.

The near impossibility of the task scared him. He could not see a single familiar face. He climbed onto an empty beer barrel to get a better view. It was midday, and the fair was at its height. The crowd moved like a slow river along the aisles between the stalls, and there were eddies around the vendors of food and drink as people queued to buy dinner. Tom raked the crowds but he could not see any of his family. He despaired. He looked over the roofs of the houses. The riders were almost at the bridge, and had increased their pace to a gallop. They were men-at-arms, all of them, and they carried firebrands. Tom was horrified. There would be mayhem.

Suddenly he saw Jack right beside him, looking up at him with an expression of amusement. “Why are you standing on a barrel?” he said.

“There’s going to be trouble!” Tom said urgently. “Where’s your mother?”

“At Aliena’s stall. What sort of trouble?”

“Bad. Where are Alfred and Martha?”

“Martha’s with Mother. Alfred’s watching the cockfighting. What is it?”

“See for yourself.” Tom gave Jack a hand up. Jack stood precariously on the rim of the barrel in front of Tom. The riders were pounding across the

bridge into the village. Jack said: “Christ Jesus, who are they?”

Tom peered at the leader, a big man on a war-horse. He recognized the yellow hair and heavy build. “It’s William Hamleigh,” he said.

As the riders reached the houses they touched their torches to the roofs, setting fire to the thatch. “They’re burning the town!” Jack exploded.

“It’s going to be even worse than I thought,” Tom said. “Get down.”

They both jumped to the ground.

“I’ll get Mother and Martha,” Jack said.

“Take them to the cloisters,” Tom said urgently. “It will be the only safe place. If the monks object, tell them to go shit.”

“What if they lock the door?”

“I just broke the lock. Go quickly! I’ll fetch Alfred. Go!”

Jack hurried away. Tom headed for the cockpit, roughly pushing people aside. Several men objected to his shoving but he ignored them and they shut up when they saw his size and the look of stony determination on his face. It was not long before the smoke of the burning houses blew into the priory close. Tom smelled it, and he noticed one or two other people sniffing the air curiously. He had only a few moments left before panic broke out.

The cockpit was near the priory gate. There was a large, noisy crowd around it. Tom shoved through, looking for Alfred. In the middle of the crowd was a shallow hole in the ground a few feet across. In the center of the hole, two cocks were tearing each other to pieces with beaks and spurred claws. There were feathers and blood everywhere. Alfred was near the front, watching intently, yelling at the top of his voice, encouraging one or other of the wretched birds. Tom forced his way between the packed people and grabbed Alfred’s shoulder. “Come!” he shouted.

“I’ve got sixpence on the black one!” Alfred shouted back.

“We’ve got to get out of here!” Tom yelled. At that moment a drift of smoke blew over the cockpit. “Can’t you smell the fire?”

One or two of the spectators heard the word *fire* and looked at Tom curiously. The smell came again, and they picked it up. Alfred smelled it too. “What is it?” he said.

“The town is on fire!” Tom said.

Suddenly everyone wanted to leave. The men dispersed in all directions, pushing and shoving. In the pit, the black cock killed the brown, but nobody cared anymore. Alfred started to go the wrong way. Tom grabbed him. “We’ll go to the cloisters,” he said. “It’s the only safe place.”

The smoke began to come over in billows, and fear spread through the crowd. Everyone was agitated but no one knew what to do. Looking over the heads, Tom could see that people were pouring out through the priory gate; but the gate was narrow, and anyway they were no safer out there than in here. Nevertheless, more people got the idea, and he and Alfred found

themselves struggling against a tide of people frantically going in the opposite direction. Then, quite suddenly, the tide turned, and everyone was going their way. Tom looked around to discover the reason for the change, and saw the first of the horsemen ride into the close.

At that point the crowd became a mob.

The riders were a terrifying sight. Their huge horses, just as frightened as the crowd, plunged and reared and charged, trampling people left, right and center. The armed and helmeted riders laid about them with clubs and torches, felling men, women and children, and setting fire to stalls, clothes, and people's hair. Everyone was screaming. More riders came through the gate, and more people disappeared beneath the massive hooves. Tom shouted in Alfred's ear: "You go on to the cloisters—I want to make sure the others have got clear. Run!" He gave him a shove. Alfred took off.

Tom headed for Aliena's stall. Almost immediately he tripped over someone and fell to the ground. Cursing, he got to his knees; but before he could stand upright he saw a war-horse bearing down on him. The beast's ears were back and its nostrils were flared, and Tom could see the whites of its terrified eyes. Above the horse's head, Tom saw the beefy face of William Hamleigh, distorted into a grimace of hatred and triumph. The thought flashed through his mind that it would be nice to hold Ellen in his arms once again. Then a massive hoof kicked him in the exact center of his forehead, he felt a dreadful, frightening pain as his skull seemed to burst open, and the whole world went black.

The first time Aliena smelled smoke, she thought it was coming from the dinner she was serving.

Three Flemish buyers were sitting at the table in the open air in front of her storehouse. They were corpulent, black-bearded men who spoke English with a heavy Germanic accent and wore clothes of exquisitely fine cloth. Everything was going well. She was close to starting the selling, and had decided to serve lunch first in order to give the buyers time to get anxious. Nevertheless, she would be glad when this vast fortune in wool became someone else's. She put the platter of honey-roast pork chops in front of them and looked critically at it. The meat was done to a turn, with the border of fat just crisp and brown. She poured more wine. One of the buyers sniffed the air, then they all looked around anxiously. Aliena was suddenly fearful. Fire was the wool merchant's nightmare. She looked at Ellen and Martha, who were helping her serve dinner. "Can you smell smoke?" she said.

Before they could reply Jack appeared. Aliena had not got used to seeing him in a monk's habit, with his carrot-colored hair shaved from the top of his head. There was an agitated look on his sweet face. She felt a sudden urge to

take him in her arms and kiss away the frown on his forehead. But she turned away quickly, remembering how she had let herself down with him in the old mill six months ago. She still flushed for shame every time she recalled that incident.

“There’s trouble,” he shouted urgently. “We must all take refuge in the cloisters.”

She looked at him. “What’s happening—is there a fire?”

“It’s Earl William and his men-at-arms,” he said.

Aliena suddenly felt as cold as the grave. William. Again.

Jack said: “They’ve set fire to the town. Tom and Alfred are going to the cloisters. Come with me, please.”

Ellen unceremoniously dropped the bowl of greens she was carrying onto the table in front of a startled Flemish buyer. “Right,” she said. She grabbed Martha by the arm. “Let’s go.”

Aliena shot a panicky look at her storehouse. She had hundreds of pounds’ worth of raw wool in there that she had to protect from fire—but how? She caught Jack’s eye. He was looking at her expectantly. The buyers left the table hurriedly. Aliena said to Jack: “Go. I have to look after my stall.”

Ellen said: “Jack—come on!”

“In a moment,” he said, and turned back to Aliena.

Aliena saw Ellen hesitate. She was clearly torn between saving Martha and waiting for Jack. Again she said: “Jack! Jack!”

He turned to her. “Mother! Take Martha!”

“All right!” she said. “But *please* hurry!” She and Martha left.

Jack said: “The town is on fire. The cloisters will be the safest place—they’re made of stone. Come with me, quickly.”

Aliena could hear screams from the direction of the priory gate. The smoke was suddenly everywhere. She looked all around, trying to make out what was happening. Her insides were knotted with fear. Everything she had worked for for over six years was stacked up in the storehouse.

Jack said: “Aliena! Come to the cloisters—we’ll be safe there!”

“I can’t!” she shouted. “My wool!”

“To hell with your wool!”

“It’s all I’ve got!”

“It’s no good to you if you’re dead!”

“It’s easy for you to say that—but I’ve spent all these years getting to this position—”

“Aliena! *Please!*”

Suddenly the people right outside the stall were screaming in mortal terror. The riders had entered the priory close and were charging through the crowds, regardless of whom they trampled, setting fire to the stalls. Terror-

stricken people were crushing one another in their desperate attempts to get out of the way of the flying hooves and the firebrands. The crowd pressed against the flimsy wooden hurdle that formed the front of Aliena's stall, and it immediately collapsed. People spilled onto the open space in front of the storehouse and upset the table with its plates of food and cups of wine. Jack and Aliena were forced back. Two riders charged into the stall, one swinging a club at random, the other brandishing a flaming torch. Jack pushed himself in front of Aliena, shielding her. The club came down at Aliena's head, but Jack threw a protective arm over her, and the club smashed down on his wrist. She felt the blow but he took the impact. When she looked up she saw the face of the second rider.

It was William Hamleigh.

Aliena screamed.

He looked at her for a moment, with the torch blazing in his hand and the light of triumph glittering in his eyes. Then he kicked his horse and forced it into her storehouse.

"No!" Aliena screamed.

She struggled to escape from the crush, shoving and punching those around her, including Jack. At last she got free and dashed into the storehouse. William was leaning out from the saddle, putting his torch to the piled sacks of wool. "No!" she screamed again. She threw herself at him and tried to pull him off the horse. He brushed her aside and she fell to the ground. He held his torch to the woolsacks again. The wool caught fire with a mighty roar. The horse reared and screamed in terror at the flames. Suddenly Jack was there, pulling Aliena out of the way. William wheeled the horse and went out of the storehouse fast. Aliena got to her feet. She picked up an empty sack and tried to beat the flames out. Jack said: "Aliena, you'll be killed!" The heat became agonizing. She grabbed at a woolsack that was not yet on fire, and tried to pull it free. Suddenly she heard a roaring in her ears and felt intense heat on her face, and she realized in terror that her hair was on fire. An instant later Jack threw himself at her, wrapping his arms around her head and pulling her tightly against his body. They both fell to the ground. He held her hard for a moment, then loosed his hold. She smelled singed hair but it was no longer burning. She could see that Jack's face was burned and his eyebrows had gone. He grabbed her by one ankle and dragged her out through the door. He kept on pulling her, despite her struggles, until they were well clear.

The area of her stall had emptied. Jack released his hold on her. She tried to get up, but he grabbed her and held her down. She continued to struggle, staring madly at the fire that was consuming all her years of work and worry, all her wealth and security, until she had no energy left to fight him. Then she just lay there and screamed.

Philip was in the undercroft beneath the priory kitchen, counting money with Cuthbert Whitehead, when he heard the noise. He and Cuthbert looked at one another, frowning, then got up to see what was going on.

They stepped through the door into a riot.

Philip was horrified. People were running in every direction, pushing and shoving, falling over and treading on one another. Men and women were shouting and children were crying. The air was full of smoke. Everyone seemed to be trying to get out of the priory close. Apart from the main gate, the only exit was through the gap between the kitchen buildings and the mill. There was no wall there, but there was a deep ditch that carried water from the millpond to the brewery. Philip wanted to warn people to be careful of the ditch, but nobody was listening to anyone.

The cause of the rush was obviously a fire, and a very big one. The air was thick with the smoke of it. Philip was full of fear. With this many people all crowded together, the slaughter could be appalling. What could be done?

First he had to find out exactly what was going on. He ran up the steps to the kitchen door, to get a better view. What he saw filled him with dread.

The entire town of Kingsbridge was alight.

A cry of horror and despair escaped his throat.

How could this be happening?

Then he saw the horsemen, charging through the crowd with their burning firebrands, and he realized that it was not an accident. His first thought was that there was a battle going on between the two sides in the civil war, and somehow it had engulfed Kingsbridge. But the men-at-arms were attacking the citizens, not one another. This was no battle: it was a massacre.

He saw a large blond man on a massive war-horse crashing through the crowds of people. It was William Hamleigh.

Hatred rose in Philip’s gorge. To think that the slaughter and destruction going on all around had been caused deliberately, for reasons of greed and pride, drove him half mad. He shouted at the top of his voice: “I see you, William Hamleigh!”

William heard his name called over the screams of the crowd. He reined in his horse and met Philip’s eye.

Philip yelled: “You’ll go to hell for this!”

William’s face was suffused with bloodlust. Even the threat of what he feared most had no effect on him today. He was like a madman. He waved his firebrand in the air like a banner. “This is hell, monk!” he shouted back; and he wheeled his horse and rode on.

Suddenly everyone had disappeared, the riders and the crowds. Jack released his hold on Aliena and stood up. His right hand felt numb. He remembered that he had taken the blow aimed at Aliena's head. He was glad his hand hurt. He hoped it would hurt for a long time, to remind him.

The storehouse was an inferno, and smaller fires burned all around. The ground was littered with bodies, some moving, some bleeding, some limp and still. Apart from the crackle of the flames it was quiet. The mob had got out, one way or another, leaving their dead and wounded behind. Jack felt dazed. He had never seen a battlefield but he imagined it must look like this.

Aliena started to cry. Jack put a comforting hand on her shoulder. She pushed it off. He had saved her life, but she did not care for that: she cared only for her damned wool, which was now irretrievably lost in smoke. He looked at her for a moment, feeling sad. Most of her hair had burned away, and she no longer looked beautiful, but he loved her all the same. It hurt him to see her so distraught, and not to be able to comfort her.

He felt sure she would not try to go into the storehouse now. He was worried about the rest of his family, so he left Aliena and went looking for them.

His face hurt. He put a hand to his cheek, and his own touch stung him. He must have got burned too. He looked at the bodies on the ground. He wanted to do something for the wounded, but he did not know where to begin. He searched for familiar faces among the strangers, hoping not to see any. Mother and Martha had gone to the cloisters—they had been well ahead of the mob, he thought. Had Tom found Alfred? He turned toward the cloisters. Then he saw Tom.

His stepfather's tall body was stretched out full length on the muddy ground. It was perfectly still. His face was recognizable, even peaceful-looking, up to the eyebrows; but his forehead was open and his skull was completely smashed. Jack was appalled. He could not take it in. Tom could not be dead. But this thing could not be alive. He looked away, then looked back. It was Tom, and he was dead.

Jack knelt beside the body. He felt the urge to do something, or say something, and for the first time he understood why people liked to pray for the dead. "Mother is going to miss you terribly," he said. He remembered the angry speech he had made to Tom on the day of his fight with Alfred. "Most of that wasn't true," he said, and the tears started to flow. "You didn't fail me. You fed me and took care of me, and you made my mother happy, truly happy." But there was something more important than all that, he thought. What Tom had given him was nothing so commonplace as food and shelter. Tom had given him something unique, something no other man had to give, something even his own father could not have given him; something that was a passion, a skill, an art, and a way of life. "You gave me the cathedral," Jack

whispered to the dead man. “Thank you.”

PART FOUR

1142-1145

Chapter 11

WILLIAM'S TRIUMPH WAS RUINED by Philip's prophecy: instead of feeling satisfied and jubilant, he was terrified that he would go to hell for what he had done.

He had answered Philip bravely enough, jeering "This is hell, monk!" but that had been in the excitement of the attack. When it was over, and he had led his men away from the blazing town; when their horses and their heartbeats had slowed down; when he had time to look back over the raid, and think of how many people he had wounded and burned and killed; then he recalled Philip's angry face, and his finger pointing straight down into the bowels of the earth, and the doom-laden words: "You'll go to hell for this!"

By the time darkness fell he was completely depressed. His men-at-arms wanted to talk over the operation, reliving the high spots and relishing the slaughter, but they soon caught his mood and relapsed into gloomy silence. They spent that night at the manor house of one of William's larger tenants. At supper the men grimly drank themselves senseless. The tenant, knowing how men normally felt after a battle, had brought in some whores from Shiring; but they did poor business. William lay awake all night, terrified that he might die in his sleep and go straight to hell.

The following morning, instead of returning to Earlscastle, he went to see Bishop Waleran. He was not at his palace when they arrived, but Dean Baldwin told William that he was expected that afternoon. William waited in the chapel, staring at the cross on the altar and shivering despite the summer heat.

When Waleran arrived at last, William felt like kissing his feet.

The bishop swept into the chapel in his black robes and said coldly: "What are you doing here?"

William got to his feet, trying to hide his abject terror behind a facade of self-possession. "I've just burned the town of Kingsbridge—"

"I know," Waleran interrupted. "I've been hearing about nothing else all day. What possessed you? Are you mad?"

This reaction took William completely by surprise. He had not discussed the raid with Waleran in advance because he had been so sure Waleran would approve: Waleran hated everything to do with Kingsbridge, especially Prior Philip. William had expected him to be pleased, if not gleeful. William said: “I’ve just ruined your greatest enemy. Now I need to confess my sins.”

“I’m not surprised,” Waleran said. “They say more than a hundred people burned to death.” He shuddered. “A horrible way to die.”

“I’m ready to confess,” William said.

Waleran shook his head. “I don’t know that I can give you absolution.”

A cry of fear escaped William’s lips. “Why not?”

“You know that Bishop Henry of Winchester and I have taken the side of King Stephen again. I don’t think the king would approve of my giving absolution to a supporter of Queen Maud.”

“Damn you, Waleran, it was you who persuaded me to change sides!”

Waleran shrugged. “Change back.”

William realized that this was Waleran’s objective. He wanted William to switch his allegiance to Stephen. Waleran’s horror at the burning of Kingsbridge had been faked: he had simply been establishing a bargaining position. This realization brought enormous relief to William, for it meant that Waleran was not implacably opposed to giving him absolution. But did he want to switch again? For a moment he said nothing as he tried to think about it calmly.

“Stephen has been winning victories all summer,” Waleran went on. “Maud is begging her husband to come over from Normandy to help her, but he won’t. The tide is flowing our way.”

An awful prospect opened up before William: the Church refused to absolve him from his crimes; the sheriff accused him of murder; a victorious King Stephen backed the sheriff and the Church; and William himself was tried and hanged….

“Be like me, and follow Bishop Henry—he knows which way the wind blows,” Waleran urged. “If everything works out right, Winchester will be made an archdiocese, and Henry will be the archbishop of Winchester—on a par with the archbishop of Canterbury. And when Henry dies, who knows? I could be the next archbishop. After that…well, there are English cardinals already—one day there may be an English pope….”

William stared at Waleran, mesmerized, despite his own fear, by the naked ambition revealed on the bishop’s normally stony face. Waleran as pope? Anything was possible. But the immediate consequences of Waleran’s aspirations were more important. William could see that he was a pawn in Waleran’s game. Waleran had gained in prestige, with Bishop Henry, by his ability to deliver William and the knights of Shiring to one side or the other in the civil war. That was the price William had to pay for having the Church

turn a blind eye to his crimes. “Do you mean…” His voice was hoarse. He coughed and tried again. “Do you mean that you will hear my confession if I swear allegiance to Stephen and come over to his side again?”

The glitter went from Waleran’s eyes and his face became expressionless again. “That’s exactly what I mean,” he said.

William had no choice, but in any event he could see no reason to refuse. He had switched to Maud when she appeared to be winning, and he was quite ready to switch back now that Stephen seemed to be gaining the upper hand. Anyway, he would have consented to anything to be free of that awful terror of hell. “Agreed, then,” he said without further hesitation. “Only hear my confession, quickly.”

“Very well,” said Waleran. “Let us pray.”

As they went briskly through the service, William felt the load of guilt fall from his back, and he gradually began to be pleased about his triumph. When he emerged from the chapel his men could see that his spirits had lifted, and they cheered up immediately. William told them that they would once again be fighting for King Stephen, in accordance with the will of God as expressed by Bishop Waleran, and they made that the excuse for a celebration. Waleran called for wine.

While they were waiting for dinner, William said: “Stephen ought to confirm me in my earldom now.”

“He ought to,” Waleran agreed. “But that doesn’t mean he will.”

“But I’ve come over to his side!”

“Richard of Kingsbridge never left it.”

William permitted himself a smug smile. “I think I’ve disposed of the threat from Richard.”

“Oh? How?”

“Richard has never had any land. The only way he’s been able to keep up a knightly entourage is by using his sister’s money.”

“It’s unorthodox, but it’s worked so far.”

“But now his sister no longer has any money. I set fire to her barn yesterday. She’s destitute. And so is Richard.”

Waleran nodded acknowledgment. “In that case it’s only a matter of time before he disappears from sight. And then, I should think, the earldom is yours.”

Dinner was ready. William’s men-at-arms sat below the salt and flirted with the palace laundresses. William was at the head of the table with Waleran and his archdeacons. Now that he had relaxed, William rather envied the men with the laundresses: archdeacons made dull company.

Dean Baldwin offered William a dish of peas and said: “Lord William, how will you prevent someone else from doing what Prior Philip tried to do, and starting his own fleece fair?”

William was surprised by this question. “They wouldn’t dare!”

“Another monk wouldn’t dare, perhaps; but an earl might.”

“He’d need a license.”

“He might get one, if he fought for Stephen.”

“Not in this county.”

“Baldwin is right, William,” said Bishop Waleran. “All around the borders of your earldom there are towns that could hold a fleece fair: Wilton, Devizes, Wells, Marlborough, Wallingford….”

“I burned Kingsbridge, I can burn any place,” William said irritably. He took a swallow of wine. It angered him to have his victory deprecated.

Waleran took a roll of new bread and broke it without eating any. “Kingsbridge is an easy target,” he argued. “It has no town wall, no castle, not even a big church for people to take refuge in. And it’s run by a monk who has no knights or men-at-arms. Kingsbridge is defenseless. Most towns aren’t.”

Dean Baldwin added: “And when the civil war is over, whoever wins, you won’t even be able to burn a town like Kingsbridge and get away with it. That’s breaking the king’s peace. No king could overlook it in normal times.”

William saw their point and it made him angry. “Then the whole thing might have been for nothing,” he said. He put down his knife. His stomach was cramped with tension and he could no longer eat.

Waleran said: “Of course, if Aliena is ruined, that leaves a kind of vacancy.”

William did not follow him. “What do you mean?”

“Most of the wool in the county was sold to her this year. What will happen next year?”

“I don’t know.”

Waleran continued in the same thoughtful manner. “Apart from Prior Philip, all the wool producers for miles around are either tenants of the earl or tenants of the bishop. You’re the earl, in everything but name, and I’m the bishop. If we forced all our tenants to sell their fleeces to us, we would control two thirds of the wool trade in the county. We would sell at the Shiring Fleece Fair. There wouldn’t be enough business left to justify another fair, even if someone got a license.”

It was a brilliant idea, William saw immediately. “And we’d make as much money as Aliena did,” he pointed out.

“Indeed.” Waleran took a delicate bite of the meat in front of him and chewed reflectively. “So you’ve burned Kingsbridge, ruined your worst enemy, and established a new source of income for yourself. Not a bad day’s work.”

William took a deep draft of wine, and felt a glow in his belly. He looked down the table, and his eye lit on a plump dark-haired girl who was smiling

coquettishly at two of his men. Perhaps he would have her tonight. He knew how it would be. When he got her in a corner, and threw her on the floor, and lifted her skirt, he would remember Aliena's face, and the expression of terror and despair as she saw her wool going up in flames; and then he would be able to do it. He smiled at the prospect, and took another slice off the haunch of venison.

Prior Philip was shaken to the core by the burning of Kingsbridge. The unexpectedness of William's move, the brutality of the attack, the dreadful scenes as the crowd panicked, the awful slaughter, and his own utter impotence, all combined to leave him stunned.

Worst of all was the death of Tom Builder. A man at the height of his skill, and a master of every aspect of his craft, Tom had been expected to continue to manage the building of the cathedral until it was finished. He was also Philip's closest friend outside the cloisters. They had talked at least once a day, and struggled together to find solutions to the endless variety of problems that confronted them in their vast project. Tom had had a rare combination of wisdom and humility that made him a joy to work with. It seemed impossible that he was gone.

Philip felt that he did not understand anything anymore, he had no real power, and he was not competent to be in charge of a cow shed, much less a town the size of Kingsbridge. He had always believed that if he did his honest best and trusted in God, everything would turn out well in the end. The burning of Kingsbridge seemed to have proved him wrong. He lost all motivation, and sat in his house at the priory all day long, watching the candle burn down on the little altar, thinking disconnected, desolate thoughts, doing nothing.

It was young Jack who saw what had to be done. He got the dead bodies taken to the crypt, put the wounded in the monks' dormitory, and organized emergency feeding for the living in the meadow on the other side of the river. The weather was warm, and everyone slept in the open air. The day after the massacre, Jack organized the dazed townspeople into teams of laborers and got them to clear the ashes and debris from the priory close, while Cuthbert Whitehead and Milius Bursar ordered supplies of food from surrounding farms. On the second day they buried their dead in one hundred and ninety-three new graves on the north side of the priory close.

Philip simply issued the orders that Jack proposed. Jack pointed out that most of the citizens who had survived the fire had lost very little of material value—just a hovel and a few sticks of furniture, in most cases. The crops were still in the fields, the livestock were in the pastures, and people's savings were still where they had been buried, usually beneath the hearth of their

homes, untouched by the aboveground blaze that had swept the town. The merchants whose stocks had burned were the greatest sufferers: some were ruined, as Aliena was; others had some of their wealth in buried silver, and would be able to start again. Jack proposed rebuilding the town immediately.

At Jack's suggestion, Philip gave extraordinary permission for timber to be cut freely in the priory's forests for the purpose of rebuilding houses, but only for one week. In consequence Kingsbridge was deserted for seven days while every family selected and felled the trees they would use for their new homes. During that week, Jack asked Philip to draw a plan of the new town. The idea caught Philip's imagination and he came out of his depression.

He worked on his plan nonstop for four days. There would be large houses all around the priory walls, for the wealthy craftsmen and shopkeepers. He recalled the grid pattern of Winchester's streets, and planned the new Kingsbridge on the same convenient basis. Straight streets, broad enough for two carts to pass, would run down to the river, with narrower cross streets. He made the standard building plot twenty-four feet wide, which was an ample frontage for a town house. Each plot would be a hundred and twenty feet deep, to make room for a decent backyard with a privy, a vegetable garden, and a stable, cow shed or pigsty. The bridge had burned down and the new one would be built in a more convenient position, at the bottom end of the new main street. The main road through the town would now go from the bridge straight up the hill, past the cathedral and out the far side, as in Lincoln. Another wide street would run from the priory gate to a new quay at the riverside, downstream from the bridge and around the bend in the river. That way, bulk supplies could reach the priory without using the main shopping street. There would be a completely new district of small houses around the new quay: the poor would be downstream of the priory, and their dirty habits would not foul the supply of fresh water to the monastery.

Planning the rebuilding brought Philip out of his helpless trance, but every time he looked up from his drawings he was swept by rage and grief for the people who had been lost. He wondered whether William Hamleigh was in fact the devil incarnate: he caused more misery than seemed humanly possible. Philip saw the same alternation of hope and bereavement on the faces of the townspeople as they arrived back from the forest with their loads of timber. Jack and the other monks had laid out the plan of the new town on the ground with stakes and string, and as the people chose their plots, every now and again someone would say gloomily: "But what's the point? It might be burned again next year." If there had been some hope of justice, some expectation that the evildoers might be punished, perhaps the people would not have been so inconsolable; but although Philip had written to Stephen, Maud, Bishop Henry, the archbishop of Canterbury, and the pope, he knew that in wartime there was little chance that a man as powerful and important

as William would be brought to trial.

The larger building plots in Philip's scheme were much in demand, despite higher rents, so he altered his plan to allow for more of them. Almost nobody wanted to build in the poorer quarter, but Philip decided to leave the layout as it was, for future use. Ten days after the fire, new wooden houses were going up on most plots, and another week later most of them were finished. Once the people had built their houses, work started again on the cathedral. The builders got paid and wanted to spend their money; so the shops reopened, and the smallholders brought their eggs and onions into town; and the scullery maids and laundresses recommenced work for the shopkeepers and craftsmen; and so, day by day, material life in Kingsbridge returned to normal.

But there were so many dead that it seemed like a town of ghosts. Every family had lost at least one member: a child, a mother, a husband, a sister. The people wore no badges of mourning but the lines of their faces showed grief as starkly as bare trees show winter. One of the worst hit was six-year-old Jonathan. He moped about the priory close like a lost soul, and eventually Philip realized he was missing Tom, who had, it seemed, spent more time with the boy than anyone had noticed. Once Philip understood this, he took care to set aside an hour each day for Jonathan, to tell him stories, play counting games, and listen to his voluble chatter.

Philip wrote to the abbots of all the major Benedictine monasteries in England and France, asking them if they could recommend a master builder to replace Tom. A prior in Philip's position would normally consult his bishop about this, for bishops traveled widely and were likely to hear of good builders, but Bishop Waleran would not help Philip. The fact that the two of them were permanently at odds made Philip's job lonelier than it should have been.

While Philip waited for replies from the abbots, the craftsmen looked instinctively to Alfred for leadership. Alfred was Tom's son, he was a master mason, and he had for some time been operating his own semi-autonomous team on the site. He did not have Tom's brain, unfortunately, but he was literate and authoritative, and he slipped gradually into the gap left by the death of his father.

There seemed to be a lot more problems and queries about the building than there had been in Tom's time, and Alfred always seemed to come up with a question when Jack was nowhere to be found. No doubt that was natural: everyone in Kingsbridge knew the stepbrothers hated one another. However, the upshot was that Philip found himself once again bothered by endless questions of detail.

But as the weeks went by Alfred gained in confidence, until one day he came to Philip and said: "Wouldn't you rather have the cathedral vaulted?"

Tom’s design called for a wooden ceiling over the center of the church, and vaulted stone ceilings over the narrower side aisles. “Yes, I would,” Philip said. “But we decided on a wooden ceiling to save money.”

Alfred nodded. “The trouble is, a wooden ceiling can burn. A stone vault is fireproof.”

Philip studied him for a moment, wondering whether he had underestimated Alfred. Philip would not have expected Alfred to propose a variation on his father’s design: that was more the kind of thing Jack would do. But the idea of a fireproof church was very striking, especially since the whole town had burned down.

Thinking along the same lines, Alfred said: “The only building left standing in the town after the fire was the new parish church.”

And the new parish church—built by Alfred—had a stone vault, Philip thought. But a snag occurred to him. “Would the existing walls take the extra weight of a stone roof?”

“We’d have to reinforce the buttresses They’d stick out a bit more, that’s all.”

He had really thought this out, Philip realized. “What about the cost?”

“It will cost more in the long run, of course, and the whole church will take three or four extra years to complete. But it won’t make any difference to your annual outlay.”

Philip liked the idea more and more. “But will it mean we have to wait another year before we can use the chancel for services?”

“No. Stone or wood, we can’t start on the ceiling until next spring, because the clerestory must harden before we put any weight on it. The wood ceiling is quicker to build, by a few months; but either way, the chancel will be roofed by the end of next year.”

Philip considered. It was a matter of balancing the advantage of a fireproof roof against the disadvantage of another four years of building—and another four years of cost. The extra cost seemed a long way in the future, and the gain in safety was immediate. “I think I’ll discuss it with the brothers in chapter,” he said. “But it sounds like a good idea to me.”

Alfred thanked him and went out, and after he had gone Philip sat staring at the door, wondering whether he really needed to search for a new master builder after all.

Kingsbridge made a brave show on Lammas Day. In the morning, every household in the town made a loaf—the harvest was just in, so flour was cheap and plentiful. Those who did not have an oven of their own baked their loaf at a neighbor’s house, or in the vast ovens belonging to the priory and the town’s two bakers, Peggy Baxter and Jack-atte-Noven. By midday the air was

full of the smell of new bread, making everyone hungry. The loaves were displayed on tables set up in the meadow across the river, and everyone walked around admiring them. No two were alike. Many had fruit or spices inside: there was plum bread, raisin bread, ginger bread, sugar bread, onion bread, garlic bread, and many more. Others were colored green with parsley, yellow with egg yolk, red with sandalwood or purple with turnsole. There were lots of odd shapes: triangles, cones, balls, stars, ovals, pyramids, flutes, rolls, and even figures of eight. Others were even more ambitious: there were loaves in the shapes of rabbits, bears, monkeys and dragons. There were houses and castles of bread. But the most magnificent, by general agreement, was the loaf made by Ellen and Martha, which was a representation of the cathedral as it would look when finished, based on the design by her late husband, Tom.

Ellen's grief had been terrible to see. She had wailed like a soul in torment, night after night, and no one had been able to comfort her. Even now, two months later, she was haggard and hollow-eyed; but she and Martha seemed able to help one another, and making the bread cathedral had given them some kind of consolation.

Aliena spent a long time staring at Ellen's construction. She wished there was something she could do to find comfort. She had no enthusiasm for anything. When the tasting began, she went from table to table listlessly, not eating. She had not even wanted to build a house for herself, until Prior Philip told her to snap out of it, and Alfred brought her the wood and assigned some of his men to help her. She was still eating at the monastery every day, when she remembered to eat at all. She had no energy. If it occurred to her to do something for herself—make a kitchen bench from leftover timber, or finish the walls of her house by filling in the chinks with mud from the river, or make a snare to catch birds so that she could feed herself—she would remember how hard she had worked to build up her trade as a wool merchant, and how quickly it had all gone to ruin, and she would lose her enthusiasm. So she went on from day to day, getting up late, going to the monastery for dinner if she felt hungry, spending the day watching the river flow by, and going to sleep in the straw on the floor of her new house when darkness fell.

Despite her lassitude, she knew that this Lammas Day festival was no more than a pretense. The town had been rebuilt, and people were going about their business as before, but the massacre threw a long shadow, and she could sense, beneath the facade of well-being, a deep undercurrent of fear. Most people were better than Aliena at acting as if all was well, but in truth they all felt as she did, that this could not last, and whatever they built now would be destroyed again.

While she stood looking vacantly at the piles of bread, her brother, Richard, arrived. He came across the bridge from the deserted town, leading

his horse. He had been away, fighting for Stephen, since before the massacre, and he was astonished by what he found. “What the devil happened here?” he said to her. “I can’t find our house—the whole town has changed!”

“William Hamleigh came on the day of the fleece fair, with a troop of men-at-arms, and burned the town,” Aliena said.

Richard paled with shock, and the scar on his right ear showed livid. “William!” he breathed. “That devil.”

“We’ve got a new house, though,” Aliena said expressionlessly. “Alfred’s men built it for me. But it’s much smaller, and it’s down by the new quay.”

“What happened to you?” he said, staring at her. “You’re practically bald, and you’ve got no eyebrows.”

“My hair caught fire.”

“He didn’t…”

Aliena shook her head. “Not this time.”

One of the girls brought Richard some salt bread to taste. He took some but did not eat it. He looked stunned.

“I’m glad you’re safe, anyway,” Aliena said.

He nodded. “Stephen is marching on Oxford, where Maud is holed up. The war could be over soon. But I need a new sword—I came to get some money.” He ate some bread. The color came back to his face. “By God, this tastes good. You can cook me some meat later.”

Suddenly she was afraid of him. She knew he was going to be furious with her and she had no strength to stand up to him. “I haven’t any meat,” she said.

“Well, get some from the butcher, then!”

“Don’t be angry, Richard,” she said. She began to tremble.

“I’m not angry,” he said irritably. “What’s the matter with you?”

“All my wool was burned in the fire,” she said, and stared at him in fear, waiting for him to explode.

He frowned, looked at her, swallowed, and threw away the crust of his bread. “All of it?”

“All of it.”

“But you must have some money still.”

“None.”

“Why not? You always had a great chest full of pennies buried under the floor—”

“Not in May. I had spent it all on wool—every penny. And I borrowed forty pounds from poor Malachi, which I can’t repay. I certainly can’t buy you a new sword. I can’t even buy a piece of meat for your supper. We’re completely penniless.”

“Then how am I supposed to carry on?” he shouted angrily. His horse pricked up its ears and fidgeted uneasily.

“I don’t know!” Aliena said tearfully. “Don’t shout, you’re frightening the horse.” She began to cry.

“William Hamleigh did this,” Richard said through his teeth. “One of these days I’m going to butcher him like a fat pig, I swear by all the saints.”

Alfred came up to them, his bushy beard full of crumbs of bread, with a corner of a plum loaf in his hand. “Try this,” he said to Richard.

“I’m not hungry,” Richard said ungraciously.

Alfred looked at Aliena and said: “What’s the matter?”

Richard answered the question. “She’s just told me we’re penniless.”

Alfred nodded. “Everyone lost something, but Aliena lost everything.”

“You realize what this means to me,” Richard said, speaking to Alfred but looking accusingly at Aliena. “I’m finished. If I can’t replace weapons, and can’t pay my men, and can’t buy horses, then I can’t fight for King Stephen. My career as a knight is over—and I’ll never be the earl of Shiring.”

Alfred said: “Aliena might marry a wealthy man.”

Richard laughed scornfully. “She’s turned them all down.”

“One of them might ask her again.”

“Yes.” Richard’s face twisted in a cruel smile. “We could send letters to all her rejected suitors, telling them she has lost all her money and is now willing to reconsider—”

“Enough,” Alfred said, putting a hand on Richard’s arm. Richard shut up. Alfred turned to Aliena. “Do you remember what I said to you, a year ago, at the first dinner of the parish guild?”

Aliena’s heart sank. She could hardly believe that Alfred was going to start that again. She had no strength to deal with this. “I remember,” she said. “And I hope you remember my reply.”

“I still love you,” Alfred said.

Richard looked startled.

Alfred went on: “I still want to marry you. Aliena, will you be my wife?”

“No!” Aliena said. She wanted to say more, to add something that would make it final and irreversible, but she felt too tired. She looked from Alfred to Richard and back again, and suddenly she could not take any more. She turned away from them and walked quickly out of the meadow and crossed the bridge to the town.

She was wearily angry with Alfred for repeating his proposal in front of Richard. She would have preferred her brother not to know about it. It was three months since the fire—why had Alfred left it until now? It was as if he had been waiting for Richard, and had made his move the moment Richard arrived.

She walked through the deserted new streets. Everyone was at the priory tasting the bread. Aliena’s house was in the new poor quarter, down by the quay. The rents were low there but even so she had no idea how she would

pay.

Richard caught her up on horseback, then dismounted and walked beside her. “The whole town smells of new wood,” he said conversationally. “And everything is so clean!”

Aliena had got used to the new appearance of the town but he was seeing it for the first time. It *was* unnaturally clean. The fire had swept away the damp, rotten wood of the older buildings, the thatched roofs thick with grime from years of cooking fires, the foul ancient stables and the fetid old dunghills. There was a smell of newness: new wood, new thatch, new rushes on the floors, even new whitewash on the walls of the wealthier dwellings. The fire seemed to have enriched the soil, so that wild flowers grew in odd corners. Someone had remarked how few people had fallen ill since the fire, and this was thought to confirm a theory, held by many philosophers, that disease was spread by evil-smelling vapors.

Her mind was wandering. Richard had said something. “What?” she said.

“I said, I didn’t know Alfred proposed marriage to you last year.”

“You had more important things on your mind. That was about the time Robert of Gloucester was taken captive.”

“Alfred was kind, to build you a house.”

“Yes, he was. And here it is.” She looked at him while he looked at the house. He was crestfallen. She felt sorry for him: he had come from an earl’s castle, and even the large town house they had had before the fire had been a comedown for him. Now he had to get used to the kind of dwelling occupied by laborers and widows.

She took his horse’s bridle. “Come. There’s room for the horse at the back.” She led the huge beast through the one-room house and out through the back door. There were rough low fences separating the yards. She tied the horse to a fence post and began to take off the heavy wooden saddle. From nowhere, grass and weeds had seeded the burned earth. Most people had dug a privy, planted vegetables and built a pigsty or a hen house in their yard, but Aliena’s was still untouched.

Richard lingered in the house, but there was not much to look at, and after a moment he followed Aliena into the yard. “The house is a bit bare—no furniture, no pots, no bowls…”

“I haven’t any money,” Aliena said apathetically.

“You haven’t done anything to the garden, either,” he said, looking around distastefully.

“I haven’t got the energy,” she said crossly, and she handed him the big saddle and went into the house.

She sat on the floor with her back to the wall. It was cool in here. She could hear Richard dealing with his horse in the yard. After she had been sitting still for a few moments she saw a rat poke its snout up out of the straw.

Thousands of rats and mice must have perished in the fire, but now they were beginning to be seen again. She looked around for something to kill it with, but there was nothing to hand, and anyway the creature disappeared again.

What am I going to do? she thought. I can't live like this for the rest of my life. But the mere idea of beginning a new enterprise exhausted her. She had rescued herself and her brother from penury once, but the effort had used up all her reserves, and she could not do it again. She would have to find some passive way of life, controlled by someone else, so that she could live without making decisions or taking initiatives. She thought of Mistress Kate, in Winchester, who had kissed her lips, and squeezed her breast, and said: "My dear girl, you need never want for money, or anything else. If you work for me we'll both be rich." No, she thought, not that; not ever.

Richard came in carrying his saddlebags. "If you can't look after yourself, you'd better find someone else to look after you," he said.

"I've always got you."

"I can't take care of you!" he protested.

"Why not?" A small spark of anger flared in her. "I've looked after you for six long years!"

"I've been fighting a war—all you've done is sell wool."

And knife an outlaw, she thought; and throw a dishonest priest to the floor, and feed and clothe and protect you when you could do nothing but bite your knuckles and look terrified. But the spark had died and the anger had gone, and she merely said: "I was joking, of course."

He grunted, not sure whether to be offended by that remark; then he shook his head irritably and said: "Anyway, you shouldn't be so quick to reject Alfred."

"Oh, for God's sake, shut up," she said.

"What's wrong with him?"

"Nothing's wrong with Alfred. Don't you understand? Something's wrong with *me*."

He put down the saddle and pointed his finger at her. "That's right, and I know what it is. You're completely selfish. You think only of yourself."

It was so monstrously unjust that she was unable to feel angry. Tears came to her eyes. "How can you say that?" she protested miserably.

"Because everything would be all right if only you would marry Alfred, but still you refuse."

"For me to marry Alfred wouldn't help you."

"Yes, it would."

"How?"

"Alfred said he would help me fight on, if I was his brother-in-law. I'd have to cut down a bit—he can't afford all my men-at-arms—but he promised me enough for a war-horse and new weapons, and my own squire."

“When?” Aliena said in astonishment. “When did he say this?”

“Just now. At the priory.”

Aliena felt humiliated, and Richard had the grace to look a little shamefaced. The two men had been negotiating over her like horse dealers. She got to her feet, and without another word she left the house.

She walked back up to the priory and entered the close from the south side, jumping across the ditch by the old water mill. The mill was quiet today since it was a holiday. She would not have walked that way if the mill had been working, for the pounding of the hammers as they felted the cloth always gave her a headache.

The priory close was deserted, as she had expected. The building site was quiet. This was the hour when the monks studied or rested; and everyone else was in the meadow today. She wandered across to the cemetery on the north side of the building site. The carefully tended graves, with their neat wooden crosses and bunches of fresh flowers, told the truth: the town had not yet got over the massacre. She stopped beside Tom’s stone tomb, adorned with a simple marble angel carved by Jack. Seven years ago, she thought, my father arranged a perfectly reasonable marriage for me. William Hamleigh wasn’t old, he wasn’t ugly, and he wasn’t poor. He would have been accepted with a sigh of relief by any other girl in my position. But I refused him, and look at the trouble that has followed: our castle attacked, my father jailed, my brother and me destitute—even the burning of Kingsbridge and the killing of Tom are consequences of my obstinacy.

Somehow the death of Tom seemed worse than all the other sorrows, perhaps because he had been loved by so many people, perhaps because he was the second father Jack had lost.

And now I’m refusing another perfectly reasonable proposal, she thought. What gives me the right to be so particular? My fastidiousness has caused enough trouble. I should accept Alfred, and be thankful that I don’t have to work for Mistress Kate.

She turned away from the grave and walked over to the building site. She stood in what would be the crossing and looked at the chancel. It was finished but for the roof, and the builders were getting ready for the next phase, the transepts: already the plan had been laid out on the ground on either side of her with stakes and string, and the men had started digging the foundations. The towering walls in front of her cast long shadows in the late-afternoon sun. It was a mild day, but the cathedral felt cold. Aliena looked for a long time at the rows of round arches, large at ground level, small above, and mid-sized on top. There was something deeply satisfying about the regular rhythm of arch, pier, arch, pier.

If Alfred really was willing to finance Richard, Aliena still had a chance to fulfill her vow to her father, that she would take care of Richard until he

won back the earldom. In her heart she knew she had to marry Alfred. She just could not face it.

She walked along the southern side aisle, dragging her hand along the wall, feeling the rough texture of the stones, running her fingernails over the shallow grooves made by the stonemason's toothed chisel. Here in the aisles, under the windows, the wall was decorated with blind arcading, like a row of filled-in arches. The arcading served no purpose but it added to the sense of harmony Aliena felt when she looked at the building. Everything in Tom's cathedral looked as if it was meant to be. Perhaps her life was like that, everything foreordained in a grand design, and she was like a foolish builder who wanted a waterfall in the chancel.

In the southeast corner of the church, a low doorway led to a narrow spiral staircase. On impulse Aliena went through the doorway and climbed the stairs. When she lost sight of the doorway, and could not yet see the top of the stairs, she began to feel peculiar, for the passage looked as if it might wind upward forever. Then she saw daylight: there was a small slit window in the turret wall, put there to light the steps. Eventually she emerged onto the wide gallery over the aisle. It had no windows to the outside, but on the inside it looked into the roofless church. She sat on the sill of one of the inner arches, leaning against the pillar. The cold stone caressed her cheek. She wondered whether Jack had carved this one. It occurred to her that if she fell from here she might die. But it was not really high enough: she might just break her legs, and lie in agony until the monks came and found her.

She decided to climb to the clerestory. She returned to the turret staircase and went on up. The next stage was shorter, but still she found it frightening, and her heart was beating loudly by the time she reached the top. She stepped into the clerestory passage, a narrow tunnel in the wall. She edged along the passage until it came out onto the inner sill of a clerestory window. She held on to the pillar that divided the window. When she looked down at the seventy-five-foot drop, she started to shake.

She heard footsteps on the turret stairs. She found herself breathing hard, as if she had been running. There had been no one else in sight. Had someone crept up behind her, trying to sneak up on her? The steps came along the clerestory passage. She let go of the pillar and stood teetering on the edge. A figure appeared on the sill. It was Jack. Her heart beat so loudly she could hear it.

"What are you doing?" he said warily.

"I…I was seeing how your cathedral is coming along."

He pointed to the capital above her head. "I did that."

She looked up. The stone was carved with the figure of a man who appeared to be holding the weight of the arch on his back. His body was twisted as if in pain. Aliena stared at it. She had never seen anything quite like

it. Without thinking, she said: “That’s how I feel.”

When she looked back at him he was beside her, holding her arm gently but firmly. “I know,” he said.

She looked at the drop. The thought of falling all that way made her sick with fear. He tugged at her arm. She allowed herself to be led into the clerestory passage.

They went all the way down the turret stairs and came out on the ground. Aliena felt weak. Jack turned to her and said in a conversational tone: “I was reading in the cloisters, and looked up and saw you in the clerestory.”

She looked at his young face, so full of concern and tenderness; and she remembered why she had run away from everyone else and sought solitude here. She yearned to kiss him, and she saw the answering longing in his eyes. Every fiber of her body told her to throw herself into his arms, but she knew what she had to do. She wanted to say *I love you like a thunderstorm, like a lion, like a helpless rage*; but instead she said: “I think I’m going to marry Alfred.”

He stared at her. He looked stunned. Then his face became sad, with an old, wise sadness that was beyond his years. She thought he was going to cry, but he did not. Instead there was anger in his eyes. He opened his mouth to speak, changed his mind, hesitated, then spoke at last.

In a voice like the cold north wind he said: “You would have done better to jump off the clerestory.”

He turned from her and walked back into the monastery.

I’ve lost him forever, Aliena thought; and she felt as if her heart would break.

II

Jack was seen sneaking out of the monastery on Lammas Day. It was not a serious offense in itself, but he had been caught several times before, and the fact that this time he had gone out to speak to an unmarried woman made the whole thing more grave. His transgression was discussed in chapter the following day, and he was ordered to be kept in close confinement. That meant he was restricted to the monastic buildings, the cloisters and the crypt, and any time he went from one building to another he had to be accompanied.

He hardly noticed. He was so devastated by Aliena's announcement that nothing else made much difference. If he had been flogged instead of just confined, he felt, he would have been equally oblivious.

There was now no question of his working on the cathedral, of course; but much of the pleasure had gone out of that since Alfred had taken charge. Now he spent the free afternoons reading. His Latin had improved by leaps and bounds and he could read anything, albeit slowly; and as he was supposed to be reading to improve his Latin, rather than for any other purpose, he was allowed to use any book that took his fancy. Small though the library was, it had several works of philosophy and mathematics, and Jack had plunged into them with enthusiasm.

Much of what he read was disappointing. There were pages of genealogies, repetitive accounts of miracles performed by long-dead saints, and endless theological speculation. The first book that really appealed to Jack told the whole history of the world from the Creation to the founding of Kingsbridge Priory, and when he finished it he felt he knew everything that had ever happened. He realized after a while that the book's claim to tell *all* events was implausible, for after all, things were going on everywhere all the time, not just in Kingsbridge and England, but in Normandy, Anjou, Paris, Rome, Ethiopia, and Jerusalem, so the author must have left a lot out. Nevertheless, the book gave Jack a feeling he had never had before, that the past was like a story, in which one thing led to another, and the world was not a boundless mystery, but a finite thing that could be comprehended.

Even more intriguing were the puzzles. One philosopher asked why a weak man can move a heavy stone with a lever. This had never seemed strange to Jack before, but now the question tormented him. He had spent several weeks at the quarry at one time, and he recalled that when a stone could not be moved with a crowbar a foot long, the solution was generally to use a crowbar two feet long. Why should the same man be unable to move the

stone with a short lever yet able to move it with a long one? That question led to others. The cathedral builders used a huge winding wheel to lift large stones and timbers up to the roof. The load at the end of the rope was much too heavy for a man to lift with his hands, but the same man could turn the wheel that wound the rope, and the load would rise. How was that possible?

Such speculations distracted him for a while, but his thoughts returned again and again to Aliena. He would stand in the cloisters, with a heavy book on a lectern in front of him, and recall that morning in the old mill when he had kissed her. He could remember every instant of that kiss, from the first soft touch of lips to the thrilling sensation of her tongue in his mouth. His body had pressed hers from thighs to shoulders, so that he could feel the contours of her breasts and her hips. The memory was so intense that it was like experiencing it all over again.

Why had she changed? He still believed that the kiss was real and her subsequent coldness was false. He felt he knew her. She was loving, sensual, romantic, imaginative, and warm. She was also thoughtless and imperious, and she had learned to be tough; but she was not cold, not cruel, not heartless. It was *not* in character for her to marry for money a man she did not love. She would be unhappy, she would regret it, she would be sick with misery; he knew it and in her heart she must know it too.

One day when he was in the writing room, a priory servant who was sweeping the floor stopped for a rest, leaned on his broom, and said: “Big celebration coming up in your family, then.”

Jack was studying a map of the world drawn on a big sheet of vellum. He looked up. The speaker was a gnarled old man too feeble now for heavy work. He probably had Jack confused with someone else. “Why’s that, Joseph?”

“Didn’t you know? Your brother’s getting married.”

“I have no brothers,” Jack said automatically, but his heart had gone cold.

“Stepbrother, then,” said Joseph.

“No, I didn’t know.” Jack had to ask the question. He gritted his teeth. “Who is he marrying?”

“That Aliena.”

So she was determined to go through with it. Jack had been harboring a secret hope that she would change her mind. He looked away so that Joseph should not see the despair on his face. “Well, well,” he said, trying to make his voice sound unemotional.

“Yes—her that used to be so high-and-mighty, until she lost everything in the fire.”

“Did—did you say when?”

“Tomorrow. They’re going to get wed in the new parish church Alfred built.”

Tomorrow!

Aliena was going to marry Alfred tomorrow. Until now Jack had never really believed it would happen. Now the reality burst on him like a thunderclap. Aliena was going to get married tomorrow. Jack's life would end tomorrow.

He looked down at the map on the lectern in front of him. What did it matter whether the center of the world was Jerusalem or Wallingford? Would he be happier if he knew how levers worked? He had told Aliena that she should jump from the clerestory rather than marry Alfred. What he should have said was that he, Jack, might as well jump from the clerestory.

He despised the priory. Being a monk was a stupid way of life. If he could not work on the cathedral and Aliena married someone else, he had nothing to live for.

What made it worse was that he knew how thoroughly miserable she would be living with Alfred. This was not just because he hated Alfred. There were some girls who might be more or less contented married to Alfred: for example, Edith, the one who had giggled when Jack talked to her about how he loved to carve stone. Edith would not expect much of Alfred, and she would be glad to flatter him and obey him as long as he continued prosperous and loved their children. But Aliena would hate every minute. She would loathe Alfred's physical coarseness, she would despise him for his bullying ways, she would be disgusted by his meanness, and she would find his slow-wittedness maddening. Marriage to Alfred would be hell for her.

Why could she not see that? Jack was mystified. What was going on in her mind? Surely *anything* would be better than marriage to a man she did not love. She had caused a sensation by refusing to marry William Hamleigh seven years ago, yet now she had passively accepted a proposal from someone equally unsuitable. What was she thinking of?

Jack had to know.

He had to talk to her, and to hell with the monastery.

He rolled up the map, replaced it in the cupboard, and went to the door. Joseph was still leaning on his broomstick. "Are you leaving?" he said to Jack. "I thought you were supposed to stay here until the circuitor comes for you."

"The circuitor can go shit," said Jack, and he stepped out.

As he emerged into the east walk of the cloisters, he caught the eye of Prior Philip, who was coming in from the building site to the north. Jack turned away quickly, but Philip called out: "Jack! What are you doing? You're supposed to be confined."

Jack had no patience for monastic discipline now. He ignored Philip and walked the other way, heading for the passage that led from the south walk down to the small houses around the new quay. But his luck was out. At that

moment Brother Pierre, the circuitor, came out of the passage, followed by his two deputies. They saw Jack and stopped dead. A look of astonished indignation spread over Pierre's moon-shaped face.

Philip called out: "Stop that novice, Brother Circuitor!"

Pierre held out a hand to stop Jack. Jack pushed him aside. Pierre reddened and grabbed at Jack's arm. Jack wrenched his arm free and punched Pierre on the nose. Pierre gave a shout, more of outrage than pain. Then his two deputies jumped on Jack.

Jack struggled like a maniac, and almost got free, but when Pierre recovered from the blow to his nose and joined in, the three of them were able to wrestle Jack to the ground and hold him there. He continued to wriggle, furious that this monastic horseshit was now keeping him from something really important, speaking to Aliena. He kept saying: "Let me go, you stupid fools!" The two deputies sat on him. Pierre stood upright, wiping his bleeding nose on the sleeve of his habit. Philip appeared beside him.

Despite his own rage, Jack could see that Philip too was angry, angrier than Jack had ever seen him. "I will not tolerate this behavior from anyone," he said in a voice like iron. "You're a novice monk, and you *will* obey me." He turned to Pierre. "Put him in the obedience room."

"No!" Jack shouted. "You can't!"

"I most certainly can," Philip said wrathfully.

The obedience room was a small, windowless cell in the undercroft beneath the dormitory, at the south end, next to the latrines. It was mainly used to imprison lawbreakers who were waiting to be dealt with at the prior's court, or to be transferred to the sheriff's jail at Shiring; but it did occasional service as a punishment cell for monks who committed serious disciplinary offenses, such as acts of impurity with priory servants.

It was not the solitary confinement that scared Jack—it was the fact that he would not be able to get out to see Aliena. "You don't understand!" he yelled at Philip. "I have to speak to Aliena!"

It was the worst thing he could have said. Philip got angrier. "It was for speaking to her that you were originally punished," he said furiously.

"But I must!"

"The only thing you *must* do is learn to fear God and obey your superiors."

"You're not my superior, you silly ass! You're nothing to me. Let me go, damn you all!"

"Take him away," Philip said grimly.

A little crowd had gathered by now, and several monks lifted Jack by his arms and legs. He wriggled like a fish on a hook but there were too many of them. He could not believe that this was happening. They carried him, kicking and struggling, along the passage to the door of the obedience room. Someone

opened it. Brother Pierre's voice said vengefully: "Throw him in!" They swung him back, then he was hurled through the air. He landed in a heap on the stone floor. He scrambled to his feet, numb to his bruises, and rushed at the door, but it slammed shut just as he crashed into it, and a moment later the heavy iron bar thudded down outside and the key turned in the lock.

Jack hammered on the door with all his might. "Let me out!" he yelled hysterically. "I have to stop her from marrying him! Let me out!" There was no sound from outside. He kept on calling, but his demands turned into pleas, and his voice dropped to a whine, then eventually to a whisper, and he wept tears of frustrated rage.

At last his eyes dried up and he could cry no more.

He turned from the door. The cell was not quite pitch-black: a little light came under the door and he could make out his surroundings vaguely. He went around the walls, feeling with his hands. He could tell by the pattern of chisel marks on the stones that the cell had been built a long time ago. The room was almost featureless. It was about six feet square, with a column in one corner and an upward-arching ceiling: clearly it had once been part of a larger room and had been walled off for use as a prison. In one wall there was a space like an opening for a slit window, but it was tightly shuttered, and would have been too small for anyone to crawl through even if it had been open. The stone floor felt damp. Jack became aware of a constant rushing noise, and realized that the water channel, which ran through the priory from the millpond to the latrines, must pass beneath the cell. That would explain why the floor was of stone instead of beaten earth.

He felt drained. He sat on the floor with his back to the wall and stared at the crack of light under the door, the tantalizing reminder of where he wanted to be. How had he got into this fix? He had never believed in the monastery, never intended to dedicate his life to God—he did not really believe in God. He had become a novice as a solution to an immediate problem, a way of staying in Kingsbridge, close to what he loved. He had thought: I can always leave if I want to. But now he did want to leave, wanted to more than he had ever imagined, and he could not: he was a prisoner. I'll strangle Prior Philip as soon as I get out of here, he thought, even if I have to hang for it afterward.

That started him wondering when he *would* be released. He heard the bell ring for supper. They certainly intended to leave him here all night. They were probably discussing him right now. The worst of the monks would argue that he should be shut up for a week—he could just see Pierre and Remigius calling for firm discipline. Others, who liked him, might say one night was sufficient punishment. What would Philip say? He liked Jack, but he would be terribly angry now, especially after Jack had said *You're not my superior, you silly ass, you're nothing to me*. Philip would be tempted to let the hard-liners have their own way. The only hope was that they might want Jack

thrown out of the monastery immediately, which in their view would be a harsher sentence. That way he might be able to speak to her before the wedding. But Philip would be against that, Jack was sure. Philip would see expelling Jack as an admission of defeat.

The light under the door was growing fainter. It was getting dark outside. Jack wondered how prisoners were supposed to relieve themselves. There was no pot in the cell. It would not be characteristic of the monks to overlook that particular detail: they believed in cleanliness, even for sinners. He inspected the floor again, inch by inch, and found a small hole close to one corner. The noise of water was louder there, and he guessed it led to the underground channel. This was presumably his latrine.

Shortly after he made this discovery the small shutter opened. Jack sprang to his feet. A bowl and a crust of bread were placed on the sill. Jack could not see the face of the man who put them there. “Who’s that?” he said.

“I am not permitted to converse with you,” the man said in a monotone. However, Jack recognized the voice: it was an old monk called Luke.

“Luke, have they said how long I have to stay in here?” Jack cried.

He repeated the formula: “I am not permitted to converse with you.”

“Please, Luke, tell me if you know!” Jack pleaded, not caring how pathetic he might sound.

Luke replied in a whisper. “Pierre said a week, but Philip made it two days.” The shutter slammed.

“Two days!” Jack said desperately. “But she’ll be married by then!”

There was no reply.

Jack stood still, staring at nothing. The light coming through the slit had been strong by comparison with the near-dark inside, and he could not see for a few moments, until his sight readjusted to the gloom; then his eyes filled with new tears, and he was blind again.

He lay down on the floor. There was nothing more to be done. He was locked in here until Monday, and by Monday Aliena would be Alfred’s wife, waking up in Alfred’s bed, with Alfred’s seed inside her. The thought nauseated him.

Soon it was pitch-black. He fumbled his way to the sill and drank from the bowl. It contained plain water. He took a small piece of bread and put it in his mouth, but he was not hungry and he could hardly swallow it. He drank the rest of the water and lay down again.

He did not sleep, but he went into a kind of doze, almost like a trance, in which he relived, as in a dream or a vision, the Sunday afternoons he had spent with Aliena last summer, when he had told her the story of the squire who loved the princess, and went in search of the vine that bore jewels.

The midnight bell brought him out of the doze. He was used to the monastic timetable now, and he felt wide awake at midnight, though he often

needed to sleep in the afternoons, especially if there had been meat for dinner. The monks would be getting out of their beds and forming up in lines for the procession from dormitory to church. They were immediately above Jack, but he could hear nothing: the cell was soundproof. It seemed very soon afterward that the bell rang again for lauds, which took place an hour after midnight. Time was passing quickly, too quickly, for tomorrow Aliena would be married.

In the small hours, despite his misery, he fell asleep.

He came awake with a start. There was someone in the cell with him.

He was terrified.

The cell was pitch-black. The sound of water seemed louder. “Who is it?” he said in a trembling voice.

“It’s me—don’t be afraid.”

“Mother!” He almost fainted with relief. “How did you know I was in here?”

“Old Joseph came to tell me what had happened,” she replied in a normal voice.

“Quiet! The monks will hear you.”

“No, they won’t. You can sing and shout in here without being heard above. I know—I’ve done it.”

His head was so full of questions that he did not know which to ask first. “How did you get in here? Is the door open?” He moved toward her, holding his hands out in front of him. “Oh—you’re wet!”

“The water channel runs right under here. There’s a loose stone in the floor.”

“How did you know that?”

“Your father spent ten months in this cell,” she said, and in her voice there was the bitterness of years.

“My father? *This* cell? Ten months?”

“That’s when he taught me all those stories.”

“But why was he in here?”

“We never found out,” she said resentfully. “He was kidnapped, or arrested—he never knew which—in Normandy, and he was brought here. He didn’t speak English or Latin and he had no idea where he was. He worked in the stables for a year or so—that’s how I met him.” Her voice softened with nostalgia. “I loved him from the moment I set eyes on him. He was so gentle, and he looked so frightened and unhappy, yet he sang like a bird. Nobody had spoken to him for months. He was so pleased when I said a few words in French, I think he fell in love with me just for that.” Anger made her voice hard again. “After a while they put him in this cell. That’s when I discovered how to get in here.”

It occurred to Jack that he must have been conceived right here on the

cold stone floor. The thought embarrassed him and he was glad it was too dark for him and his mother to see each other. He said: “But my father must have done something to be arrested like that.”

“He couldn’t think of anything. And in the end they invented a crime. Someone gave him a jeweled cup and told him he could go. A mile or two away he was arrested, and accused of stealing the cup. They hanged him for it.” She was crying.

“Who did all this?”

“The sheriff of Shiring, the prior of Kingsbridge…it doesn’t matter *who*.”

“What about my father’s family? He must have had parents, brothers and sisters….”

“Yes, he had a big family, back in France.”

“Why didn’t he escape, and go back there?”

“He tried, once; and they caught him and brought him back. That was when they put him in the cell. He could have tried again, of course, once we had found out how to get out of here. But he didn’t know the way home, he couldn’t speak a word of English, and he was penniless. His chances were slim. He should have done it anyway, we know now; but at the time we never thought they’d hang him.”

Jack put his arms around her, to comfort her. She was soaking wet and shivering. She needed to get out of here and get dry. He realized, with a shock, that if she could get out, so could he. For a few moments he had almost forgotten about Aliena, as his mother talked about his father; but now he realized that his wish had been granted—he could speak to Aliena before her wedding. “Show me the way out,” he said abruptly.

She sniffed and swallowed her tears. “Hold my arm and I’ll lead you.”

They moved across the cell and then he felt her go down. “Just lower yourself into the channel,” she said. “Take a deep breath and put your head under. Then crawl against the flow. Don’t go with the flow, or you’ll end up in the monks’ latrine. You’ll get short of breath when you’re almost there, but just keep calm and crawl on, and you’ll make it.” She went lower still, and he lost contact.

He found the hole and eased himself down. His feet touched the water almost immediately. When he stood on the bottom of the channel his shoulders were still in the cell. Before lowering himself farther, he found the stone and replaced it in position, thinking mischievously that the monks would be mystified when they found the cell empty.

The water was cold. He took a deep breath, went down on his hands and knees, and crawled against the flow. He went as fast as he could. As he crawled, he pictured the buildings above him. He was going beneath the passageway, then the refectory, the kitchen and the bakehouse. It was not far, but it seemed to take forever. He tried to surface but banged his head on the

roof of the tunnel. He felt panicky, and remembered what his mother had said. He was almost there. A few moments later he saw light ahead of him. Dawn must have broken while they were talking in the cell. He crawled until the light was above him, then he stood upright and gasped the fresh air gratefully. When he had got his breath back he climbed out of the ditch.

His mother had changed her clothes. She was wearing a clean, dry dress, and wringing out the wet one. She had brought dry clothes for him too. There in a neat pile on the bank were the garments he had not worn for half a year: a linen shirt, a green wool tunic, gray hose and leather boots. Mother turned her back and Jack threw off the heavy monastic robe, stepped out of the sandals, and quickly dressed in his own clothes.

He threw the monk's habit into the ditch. He was never going to wear it again.

"What will you do now?" Mother asked.

"Go to Aliena."

"Right away? It's early."

"I can't wait."

She nodded. "Be gentle. She's bruised."

Jack stooped to kiss her, then impulsively threw his arms around her and hugged her. "You got me out of a prison," he said, and he laughed. "What a mother!"

She smiled, but her eyes were moist.

He gave her a farewell squeeze and walked away.

Even though it was now full light, there was nobody about because it was Sunday, and people did not have to work, so they took the opportunity to sleep past sunrise. Jack was not sure whether he should be afraid of being seen. Did Prior Philip have the right to come after a runaway novice and force him to return? Even if he had that right, would he want to? Jack did not know. However, Philip was the law in Kingsbridge, and Jack had defied him, so there was bound to be trouble of some kind. However, Jack was looking no farther ahead than the next few moments.

He reached Aliena's little house. It occurred to him that Richard might be there. He hoped not. However, there was nothing he could do about it. He went up to the door and tapped on it gently.

He cocked his head and listened. Nothing moved inside. He tapped again, harder, and this time he was rewarded by the sound of rustling straw as someone moved. "Aliena!" he said in a loud whisper.

He heard her come to the door. A frightened voice said: "Yes?"

"Open the door!"

"Who is it?"

"It's Jack."

"Jack!"

There was a pause. Jack waited.

Aliena closed her eyes in despair and slumped forward, leaning against the door with her cheek on the rough woodwork. Not Jack, she thought; not today, not now.

His voice came again, a low, urgent whisper. “Aliena, please, open the door, quickly! If they catch me they’ll put me back in the cell!”

She had heard that he had been locked up—it was all over town. Obviously he had escaped. And he had come straight to her. Her heart quickened. She could not turn him away.

She lifted the bar and opened the door.

His red hair was plastered wetly to his head, as if he had bathed. He was wearing ordinary clothes, not his monk’s habit. He smiled at her, as if seeing her was the best thing that had ever happened to him. Then he frowned, and said: “You’ve been crying.”

“Why have you come here?” she said.

“I had to see you.”

“I’m getting married today.”

“I know. Can I come in?”

It would be wrong to let him in, she knew; but then it occurred to her that tomorrow she would be Alfred’s wife, so this might be the last time she would ever talk to Jack alone. She thought: I don’t care if it is wrong. She opened the door wider. Jack stepped in, and she closed it again and replaced the bar.

They stood facing one another. Now she felt embarrassed. He stared at her with desperate longing, as a man dying of thirst might gaze at a waterfall. “Don’t look at me like that,” she said, and she turned away.

“Don’t marry him,” Jack said.

“I must.”

“You’ll be miserable.”

“I’m miserable now.”

“Look at me, please?”

She turned to face him and raised her eyes.

“Please tell me why you’re doing this,” he said.

“Why should I?”

“Because of the way you kissed me in the old mill.”

She dropped her gaze and felt herself blush hotly. She had let herself down that day and had been ashamed of herself ever since. Now he was using it against her. She said nothing. She had no defense.

He said: “After that, you turned cold.”

She kept her gaze lowered.

“We were such friends,” he went on remorselessly. “All that summer, in

your glade, by the waterfall…my stories…we were so happy. I kissed you there, once. Do you remember?”

She did remember, of course, although she had been pretending to herself that it never happened. Now the memory melted her heart, and she looked at him with tearful eyes.

“Then I made the mill do your felting,” he said. “I was so pleased that I could help you in your business. You were thrilled when you saw it. Then we kissed again, but that wasn’t a little kiss, like the first one. This time it was…passionate.” Oh, God, yes, it was, she thought, and she blushed again, and began to breathe fast; and wished he would stop, but he would not. “We held each other very tight. We kissed for a long time. You opened your mouth—”

“Stop!” she cried.

“Why?” he said brutally. “What’s wrong with it? Why did you turn cold?”

“Because I’m frightened!” she said without thinking, and she burst into tears. She buried her face in her hands and sobbed. A moment later she felt his hands on her heaving shoulders. She did nothing, and after a while he gently enfolded her in his arms. She took her hands from her face and cried on his green tunic.

After a while she put her arms around his waist.

He laid his cheek on her hair—her ugly, short, shapeless hair, not yet grown back after the fire—and stroked her back as if she were a baby. She wanted to stay like that forever. But he pulled away from her so that he could look at her, and he said: “Why does it make you frightened?”

She knew, but she could not tell him. She shook her head and took a step back; but he held her wrists, keeping her near.

“Listen, Aliena,” he said. “I want you to know how terrible this has been for me. You seemed to love me, then you seemed to hate me, and now you’re going to marry my stepbrother. I don’t understand. I don’t know anything about these things, I’ve never been in love before. It’s all so *hurtful*. I can’t find words for how bad it is. Don’t you think you should at least try to explain to me why I have to go through this?”

She felt full of remorse. To think that she had hurt him so badly when she loved him so much. She was ashamed of the way she had treated him. He had done nothing but kind things to her and she had ruined his life. He was entitled to an explanation. She steeled herself. “Jack, something happened to me a long time ago, something truly awful, something I’ve made myself forget for years. I wanted never to think of it again, but when you kissed me like that it all came back to me, and I couldn’t stand it.”

“What was it? What was the thing that happened?”

“After my father was imprisoned, we lived in the castle, Richard and I and a servant called Matthew; and one night William Hamleigh came and threw us out.”

He narrowed his eyes. “And?”

“They killed poor Matthew.”

He knew she was not telling him the whole truth. “Why?”

“What do you mean?”

“Why did they kill your servant?”

“Because he was trying to stop them.” Tears were streaming down her face now, and her throat felt constricted every time she tried to speak, as if the words were choking her. She shook her head helplessly, and tried to turn away, but Jack would not let her go.

In a voice as gentle as a kiss he said: “Stop them from doing what?”

Suddenly she knew she could tell him, and it all came out in a rush. “They forced me,” she said. “The groom held me down, and William got on top of me, but still I wouldn’t let him, and then they cut off a piece of Richard’s ear, and they said they would cut him more.” She was sobbing with relief now, grateful beyond expression that at last she could say it. She looked into Jack’s eyes and said: “So I opened my legs, and William did it to me, while the groom forced Richard to watch.”

“I’m so sorry,” Jack whispered. “I heard rumors, but I never thought… Dear Aliena, how could they?”

She had to tell him everything. “Then, when William had done it to me, the groom did it too.”

Jack closed his eyes. His face was white and taut.

Aliena said: “And then, you see, when you and I kissed, I wanted you to do it, and that made me think of William and his groom; and I felt so horrible, and frightened, and I ran away. That’s why I was so mean to you, and made you miserable. I’m sorry.”

“I forgive you,” he whispered. He drew her to him, and she let him put his arms around her again. It was so comforting.

She felt him shudder. Anxiously she said: “Do I disgust you?”

He looked at her. “I adore you,” he said. He bent his head and kissed her mouth.

She froze. This was not what she wanted. He pulled away a little, then kissed her again. The touch of his lips on hers was very soft. Feeling grateful, and friendly toward him, she pursed her lips, just a little, then relaxed them again, in a faint echo of his kiss. Encouraged, he moved his lips against hers again. She could feel his breath warm on her face. He opened his mouth a fraction. She pulled away quickly.

He looked hurt. “Is it that bad?”

In truth, she was no longer as frightened as she had been. She had told him the horrible truth about herself and he had not recoiled in disgust; in fact, he was as tender and kind as ever. She tilted her head and he kissed her again. This was not scary. There was nothing threatening, nothing violently

uncontrollable, no force or hatred or dominance; just the reverse. This kiss was a shared pleasure.

His lips parted and she felt the tip of his tongue. She went taut. He teased her lips apart. She relaxed again. He sucked gently at her lower lip. She felt a little dizzy.

He said: “Would you do what you did last time?”

“What did I do?”

“I’ll show you. Open your mouth, just a little.”

She did as he said, and she felt his tongue again, touching her lips, passing between her parted teeth, and probing into her mouth until he found her own tongue. She pulled away.

“There,” he said. “That’s what you did.”

“Did I?” She was shocked.

“Yes.” He smiled, then suddenly he looked solemn. “If you would only do it again, that would make up for all the sorrow of the last nine months.”

She tilted her face again and closed her eyes. After a moment she felt his mouth on hers. She opened her lips, hesitated, then nervously pushed her tongue into his mouth. As she did so she remembered how she had felt the last time she did it, in the old mill, and that ecstatic sensation came back. She was filled with the need to hold him, to touch his skin and his hair, to feel his muscles and his bones, to be inside him and have him inside her. Her tongue met his, and instead of feeling embarrassed and faintly repelled, she was thrilled to be doing something so intimate as touching his tongue with her own.

They were both breathing hard now. Jack held her head in his hands. She stroked his arms, his back, and then his hips, feeling the taut, bunched muscles. Her heart pounded in her chest. At last she broke the kiss, breathless.

She looked at him. He was flushed and panting, and his face shone with desire. After a moment he bent forward again, but instead of kissing her mouth, he lifted her chin and kissed the delicate skin of her throat. She heard herself moan with pleasure. He moved his head lower, and brushed his lips over the swell of her breast. Her nipples were swollen under the coarse fabric of the linen nightshirt, and they felt unbearably tender. His lips closed over one nipple. She felt the heat of his breath on her skin. “Gently,” she whispered fearfully. He kissed her nipple through the linen, and although he was as gentle as could be, she felt a sensation of pleasure as sharp as if he had bitten her, and she gasped.

Then he went down on his knees in front of her.

He pressed his face into her lap. Until this moment all the sensation had been in her breasts, but now, suddenly, she felt the tingling move to her groin. He found the hem of her nightshirt and lifted it to her waist. She watched him, afraid of his reaction: she had always felt ashamed of being so hairy down

there. But he was not repelled; in fact he leaned forward and kissed her gently, right there, as if it was the nicest thing in the world.

She sank down on her knees in front of him. Her breath came in gasps now, as if she had run a mile. She wanted him badly. Her throat was dry with desire. She put her hands on his knees, then slid one hand under his tunic. She had never touched a man's cock. It was hot and dry and hard as a board. Jack closed his eyes and groaned deep in his throat as she explored its length with her fingertips. She lifted his tunic, bent down, and kissed it, just as he had kissed her, a gentle brush of the lips. Its end was swollen tight as a drum and wet with some kind of moisture.

She was suddenly possessed by a desire to show him her breasts. She came upright again. He opened his eyes. Watching him, she quickly pulled her nightshirt over her head and discarded it. Now she was completely naked. She felt sharply self-conscious, but it was a good feeling, delightfully indecent. Jack stared, mesmerized, at her breasts. "They're so beautiful," he said.

"Do you really think so?" she said. "I always thought they were too big."

"Too big!" he said as if the suggestion were outrageous. He reached out and touched her left breast with his right hand. He stroked her skin gently with his fingertips. She looked down, watching what he was doing. After a while she wanted him to be firmer. She took both his hands in hers and pressed them to her breasts. "Do it harder," she said hoarsely. "I want to feel you more."

Her words inflamed him. He squeezed her breasts, then took her nipples in his fingers and pinched them, just hard enough to hurt a little. The sensation drove her wild. All thought went out of her mind and she was completely possessed by the feel of his body and her own. "Take off your clothes," she said. "I want to look at you."

He pulled off his tunic and his undershirt, his boots and his hose, and knelt in front of her again. His red hair was drying into undisciplined curls. His body was thin and white, with bony shoulders and hips. He looked wiry and agile, young and fresh. His cock stuck up like a tree out of the auburn hair of his groin. Suddenly she wanted to kiss his chest. She leaned forward and brushed her lips across his flat male nipples. They puckered, just as hers had. She sucked at them gently, wanting him to have the same pleasure he had given her. He stroked her hair.

She wanted him inside her, quickly.

She could see that he was not sure what to do next. "Jack," she said. "Are you a virgin?"

He nodded, looking a little foolish.

"I'm glad," she said fervently. "I'm so glad."

She took his hand and put it between her legs. She was swollen and

sensitive there, and his touch was like a shock. “Feel me,” she said. He moved his fingers, exploring. “Feel inside,” she said. Hesitantly, he pushed a finger inside her. She was slippery with desire. “There,” she said with a sigh of satisfaction. “That’s where it has to go.” She detached his hand and lay back in the straw.

He lay over her, supporting himself on one elbow, and kissed her mouth. She felt him enter her a little way, then stop. “What is it?” she said.

“It feels too small,” he said. “I’m afraid of hurting you.”

“Push harder,” she said. “I want you so much I don’t care if it hurts.”

She felt him push. It did hurt, more than she had expected, but only for a moment, and then she felt wonderfully filled. She looked at him. He withdrew a little and pushed again, and she pushed back. She smiled at him. “I never knew it was so nice,” she said wonderingly. He closed his eyes, as if the happiness was too much to bear.

He began to move rhythmically. The constant strokes set up a pulse of pleasure somewhere in her groin. She heard herself give little gasps of excitement every time their bodies came together. He lowered himself so that his chest was touching her nipples and she could feel his hot breath. She dug her fingers into his hard back. Her regular gasps turned into cries. Suddenly she needed to kiss him. She buried her hands in his curls and pulled his head to hers. She kissed his lips hard, then thrust her tongue into his mouth and moved faster and faster. Having his cock in her cunt and her tongue in his mouth drove her out of her mind with pleasure. She felt a great spasm of joy shake her, so violent that it was like falling off a horse and hitting the ground. It made her cry out loud. She opened her eyes and looked into his eyes and said his name, and then another wave took her, and another; and then she felt his body convulse, and he cried out too, and she felt a hot jet spurt inside her, and that inflamed her even more, so that she shook with pleasure again and again, so many times that she lost count, until at last the feeling began to fade, and gradually she went limp and still.

She was too exhausted to speak or move, but she could feel Jack’s weight slumped on top of her, his bony hips on hers, his flat chest squashing her soft breasts, his mouth close to her ear, his fingers entwined in her hair. A part of her mind thought vaguely: That’s what it’s supposed to be like, between men and women; that’s why everyone makes so much fuss about it; that’s why husbands and wives love one another so much.

Jack’s breathing became light and regular, and his body relaxed until it was completely limp. He was asleep.

She turned her head and kissed his face. He was not too heavy. She wanted him to stay there, asleep on top of her, forever.

That thought made her remember.

Today was her wedding day.

Dear God, she thought, what have I done?

She began to cry.

After a moment, Jack woke up.

He kissed the tears on her cheeks with unbearable tenderness.

She said: “Oh, Jack, I want to marry you.”

“Then that’s what we’ll do,” he said in a voice of profound satisfaction.

He had misunderstood her, and that made it even worse. “But we can’t,” she said, and her tears flowed faster.

“But after this—”

“I know—”

“After this, you must marry me!”

“We can’t marry,” she said. “I’ve lost all my money, and you’ve got nothing.”

He raised himself on his elbows. “I’ve got my hands,” he said fiercely. “I’m the best stone carver for miles around.”

“You were dismissed—”

“It makes no difference. I could get work on any building site in the world.”

She shook her head miserably. “It’s not enough. I have to think about Richard.”

“Why?” he said indignantly. “What has all this got to do with Richard? He can take care of himself.”

Suddenly Jack looked boyish, and Aliena felt the difference in their ages: he was five years younger than she, and he still thought he had a right to be happy. She said: “I swore an oath to my father, when he was dying, that I would look after Richard until he becomes earl of Shiring.”

“But that could be never!”

“But an oath is an oath.”

Jack looked nonplussed. He rolled off her. His soft penis slipped out of her and she experienced a sense of loss like a pain. I will never feel him inside me again, she thought sorrowfully.

He said: “You can’t mean this. An oath is just words! It’s nothing by comparison with *this*. This is real, this is you and me.” He looked at her breasts, then he reached out and stroked the curly hair between her legs. It was so poignant that she felt his touch like a whiplash. He saw her wince, and stopped.

For a moment she was on the edge of saying *Yes, all right, let’s run away together now*, and perhaps if he had carried on stroking her like that she would have; but reason returned, and she said: “I’m going to marry Alfred.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“It’s the only way.”

He stared at her. “I just don’t believe you,” he said.

“It’s true.”

“I can’t give you up. I can’t, I can’t.” His voice cracked, and he stifled a sob.

She tried reason, arguing with herself as much as with him. “What’s the point of breaking my vow to my father, in order to make a marriage vow to you? If I break the first vow, the second is worthless.”

“I don’t care. I don’t want your vows. I just want us to be together all the time and make love whenever we feel like it.”

It was an eighteen-year-old view of marriage, she thought, but she did not say so. She would have accepted it gladly if she had been free. “I can’t do what I want,” she said sadly. “It’s not my destiny.”

“What you’re doing is wrong,” he said. “I mean *evil*. To give up happiness like this is like throwing jewels into the ocean. It’s far worse than any sin.”

She was unexpectedly struck by the thought that her mother would have agreed with that. She was not sure how she knew. She dismissed the idea. “I could never be happy, even with you, if I had to live with the knowledge that I had broken my promise to my father.”

“You care more for your father and your brother than you do for me,” he said, sounding faintly petulant for the first time.

“No…”

“What, then?”

He was just being argumentative, but she considered the question seriously. “I suppose it means that my oath to my father is more important to me than my love for you.”

“Is it?” he said incredulously. “Is it really?”

“Yes, it is,” she said with a heavy heart, and her words sounded to her like a funeral bell.

“Then there’s nothing more to be said.”

“Only…that I’m sorry.”

He got to his feet. He turned his back to her and picked up his undershirt. She looked at his long, slender body. There was a lot of curly red-gold hair on his legs. He put on his shirt and tunic quickly, then pulled up his socks and stepped into his boots. It all happened much too quickly.

“You’re going to be fearfully unhappy,” he said.

He was trying to be nasty to her, but the attempt was a failure, for she could hear compassion in his voice.

“Yes, I am,” she said. “Would you at least…at least say you respect me for my decision?”

“No,” he said without hesitation. “I don’t. I despise you for it.”

She sat there naked, looking at him, and she began to weep.

“I might as well go,” he said, and his voice cracked on the last word.

“Yes, go,” she sobbed.

He went to the door.

“Jack!”

He turned at the door.

She said: “Wish me luck, Jack?”

He lifted the bar. “Good—” He stopped, unable to speak. He looked down at the floor, then up at her again. This time his voice came out in a whisper. “Good luck,” he said.

Then he went out.

The house that had been Tom’s house was now Ellen’s, but it was also Alfred’s home, so this morning it was full of people preparing a wedding feast, organized by Martha, Alfred’s thirteen-year-old sister, with Jack’s mother looking on disconsolately. Alfred was there with a towel in his hand, about to go down to the river—women bathed once a month, and men at Easter and Michaelmas, but it was traditional to bathe on your wedding morning. The place went quiet when Jack walked in.

Alfred said: “What do you want?”

“I want you to call off the wedding,” Jack replied.

“Piss off,” Alfred said.

Jack realized he had started badly. He should try not to make a confrontation out of this. What he was proposing was in Alfred’s interest, too, if only he could be made to see it. “Alfred, she doesn’t love you,” he said as gently as he could.

“You don’t know anything about it, laddie.”

“I do,” Jack persisted. “She doesn’t love you. She’s marrying you for Richard’s sake. He’s the only one who will be made happy by this marriage.”

“Go back to the monastery,” Alfred said contemptuously. “Where’s your habit, anyway?”

Jack took a deep breath. There was nothing else for it but to tell him the real truth. “Alfred. She loves *me*.”

He expected Alfred to be enraged, but instead the shadow of a sly grin appeared on Alfred’s face. Jack was nonplussed. What did it mean? Gradually the explanation dawned on him. “You know that already,” he said unbelievingly. “You know she loves me, and you don’t care! You want her anyway, whether she loves you or not. You just want to have her.”

Alfred’s furtive smile became more visible and more malicious, and Jack knew that everything he was saying was true; but there was something else, something more to be read in Alfred’s face. An incredible suspicion arose in Jack’s mind. “Why do you want her?” he said. “Is it…Could it be that you only want to marry her to take her away from me?” His voice rose in anger.

“That you’re marrying her out of *spite*?” A look of cunning triumph spread across Alfred’s stupid face, and Jack knew that he was right again. He was devastated. The idea that Alfred was doing all this not out of an understandable lust for Aliena but out of pure malice was too much to bear. “Damn you, you’d better treat her right!” he yelled.

Alfred laughed.

The ultimate malignity of Alfred’s purpose struck Jack like a blow. Alfred was not going to treat her well. That would be his final revenge on Jack. Alfred was going to marry Aliena and make her miserable. “You filth,” Jack said bitterly. “You slime. You shit. You ugly, stupid, evil, *loathsome* slug.”

His contempt finally got to Alfred, who dropped his towel and came at Jack with his hand balled into a fist. Jack was ready for him, and stepped forward to hit him first. Then Jack’s mother was between them, and despite being smaller than either of them she stopped them with a word.

“Alfred. Go and bathe.”

Alfred calmed down quickly. He realized he had won the day without needing to fight Jack, and his thoughts revealed themselves in a smug look. He left the house.

Mother said: “What are you going to do, Jack?”

Jack found that he was shaking with rage. He breathed in and out several times before he could speak. He could not stop the wedding, he realized. But he could not watch it either. “I have to leave Kingsbridge.”

He saw sorrow cross her face, but she nodded. “I was afraid you’d say that. But I think you’re right.”

A bell began to ring in the priory. Jack said: “Any moment now they’ll discover that I’ve escaped.”

She lowered her voice. “Go quickly, but hide down by the river, within sight of the bridge. I’ll bring you some things.”

“All right.” He turned away.

Martha stood between him and the door with tears pouring down her face. He hugged her. She squeezed him hard. Her girlish body was flat and bony, like a boy’s. “Come back one day,” she said fiercely.

He kissed her once, quickly, and went out.

There were plenty of people about now, fetching water and enjoying the mild autumn morning. Most people knew he had become a novice monk—the town was still small enough for everyone to know everyone else’s business—and his layman’s clothing drew surprised looks, although nobody actually questioned him. He went quickly down the hill, crossed the bridge, and walked along the bank of the river until he came to a clump of reeds. He crouched down beside the reeds and watched the bridge, waiting for his mother.

He had no idea where he was going to go. Perhaps he would walk in a

straight line until he came to a town where they were building a cathedral, and stop there. He had meant what he said to Aliena about finding work: he knew he was good enough to be employed anywhere. Even if the site had a full complement, he would only have to show the master builder how he could carve, and he would get taken on. But there seemed no point to it anymore. He would never love another woman after Aliena, and he felt much the same about Kingsbridge Cathedral. He wanted to build *here*, not just anywhere.

Perhaps he would just walk into the forest and lie down and die. That seemed to him a nice idea. It was mild weather, the trees were green-and-gold; he could make a peaceful end. His only regret would be that he had not found out more about his father before he died.

He was picturing himself lying on a bed of autumn leaves and passing gently into death, when he saw Mother cross the bridge. She was leading a horse.

He got to his feet and ran to her. The horse was the chestnut mare she always rode. “I want you to take my mare,” she said.

He took her hand and squeezed it by way of thanks.

Tears came to her eyes. “I never did look after you very well,” she said. “First I brought you up wild, in the forest. Then I let you nearly starve with Tom. Then I made you live with Alfred.”

“You looked after me fine, Mother,” he said. “I made love to Aliena this morning. Now I can die happy.”

“You foolish boy,” she said. “You’re just like me. If you can’t have the lover you want, you won’t have anyone else.”

“Is that how you are?” he said.

She nodded. “After your father died, I lived alone rather than take second best. I never wanted another man until I saw Tom. That was eleven years later.” She detached her hand from his. “I’m telling you this for a reason. It may take eleven years, but you *will* love someone else one day; I promise you.”

He shook his head. “It doesn’t seem possible.”

“I know.” She looked nervously back over her shoulder at the town. “You’d better go.”

He walked over to the horse. It was loaded with two bulging saddlebags. “What’s in the bags?” he asked.

“Some food and money, and a full wineskin, in this one,” she replied. “The other contains Tom’s tools.”

Jack was moved. Mother had insisted on keeping Tom’s tools after he died, as a memento. Now she was passing them on to him. He hugged her. “Thank you,” he said.

“Where will you go?” she asked him.

He thought again of his father. “Where do jongleurs tell their tales?” he

asked.

“On the pilgrim road to Santiago de Compostela.”

“Do you think the jongleurs might remember Jack Shareburg?”

“They might. Tell them he looked like you.”

“Where’s Compostela?”

“In Spain.”

“Then I’m going to Spain.”

“It’s a long way, Jack.”

“I’ve got time.”

She put her arms around him and hugged him tight. He wondered how many times she had done that in the last eighteen years, comforting him over a grazed knee, a lost toy, a boyish disappointment—and now a grief that was all too grown-up. He thought of the things she had done, from raising him in the forest to getting him out of the punishment cell. She had always been willing to fight like a cat for her son. It hurt to leave her.

She let him go, and he swung up onto the horse.

He looked back at Kingsbridge. It had been a sleepy village with an old, tumbledown cathedral when he first came here. He had set fire to that old cathedral, although not a soul knew it but him. Now Kingsbridge was a busy, self-important little town. Well, there were other towns. It was a wrench to go, but he was on the edge of the unknown, about to embark on an adventure, and that eased the pain of leaving everything he loved.

Mother said: “Come back, one day, please, Jack.”

“I’ll come back.”

“Promise?”

“I promise.”

“If you run out of money before you find work, sell the horse, not the tools,” she said.

“I love you, Mother,” he said.

Her eyes overflowed. “Take care of yourself, my son.”

He kicked the horse, and it walked away. He turned and waved. She waved back. Then he kicked it into a trot, and after that he did not look back.

Richard came home just in time for the wedding.

King Stephen had generously given him two days’ leave, he explained. The king’s army was at Oxford, laying siege to the castle, where they had Maud trapped, so there was nothing much for the knights to do. “I couldn’t miss my sister’s wedding day,” Richard said, and Aliena sourly thought: You just want to make dead sure the deed is done, so that you get what Alfred has promised you.

Still, she was glad he was there to walk her to the church and give her

away. Otherwise she would have had nobody.

She put on a new linen undershirt and a white dress in the latest style. There was not much she could do with her mutilated hair, but she twisted the longest parts into plaits and bound them in fashionable white silk sheaths. A neighbor loaned her a looking-glass. She was pale, and her eyes showed that she had spent a sleepless night. Well, there was nothing she could do about that. Richard watched her. He wore a faintly sheepish look, as if he felt guilty, and he fidgeted restlessly. Perhaps he was afraid she would call the whole thing off at the last minute.

There were moments when she was sorely tempted to do just that. She imagined herself and Jack walking away from Kingsbridge hand in hand, to start a new life somewhere else, a simple life of straightforward honest work, free from the chains of old vows and dead parents. But it was a foolish dream. She could never be happy if she abandoned her brother.

When she reached that conclusion, she imagined going down to the river and throwing herself in, and she saw her limp body, in a waterlogged wedding dress, drifting downstream, face up, with her hair floating around her head; and then she realized that marriage to Alfred was better than that, and she came back to where she started, regarding the marriage as the best available solution to most of her troubles.

How Jack would pour scorn on that kind of thinking.

The church bell tolled.

Aliena stood up.

She had never visualized her wedding day this way. When she had thought about it, as a girl, she had imagined herself on her father's arm, walking from the castle keep across the drawbridge to the chapel in the lower courtyard, with Papa's knights and men-at-arms, servants and tenants packed into the castle precincts to cheer and wish her well. The young man waiting in the chapel had always been rather indistinct in this daydream, but she knew that he adored her and made her laugh and she thought he was wonderful. Well. Nothing in her life had turned out the way she expected. Richard held the door of the little one-room house and she went out into the street.

To her surprise, some of the neighbors were waiting outside their doors to see her go by. Several people called out "God bless you" and "Good luck!" as she emerged. She felt terribly grateful to them. She was showered with corn as she walked up the street. Corn was for fertility. She would have babies, and they would love her.

The parish church was on the far side of town, in the wealthy quarter, where she would be living from tonight. They walked past the monastery. The monks would be holding their service in the crypt right now, but Prior Philip had promised to put in an appearance at the wedding feast and bless the happy couple. Aliena hoped he would make it. He had been an important force in

her life, ever since the day, six years ago, when he had bought her wool at Winchester.

They arrived at the new church, built by Alfred with help from Tom. There was a crowd outside. The wedding would take place in the porch, in English; then there would be a Latin mass afterward inside the church. Everyone who worked for Alfred was there, and so were most of the people who had done weaving for Aliena in the old days. They all cheered when Aliena arrived.

Alfred was waiting with his sister, Martha, and one of his masons, Dan. Alfred was wearing a new scarlet tunic and clean boots. He had long, gleaming dark hair like Ellen's. Aliena realized that Ellen was not here. She was disappointed. She was about to ask Martha where her stepmother was, when the priest came out and the service began.

Aliena reflected that her life had been set on a new course six years ago when she had made a vow to her father, and now a fresh era was beginning with another vow to a man. She rarely did anything for herself. She had made a shocking exception this morning, with Jack. When she recalled what she had done she could hardly believe it. It seemed like a dream, or one of Jack's fanciful tales, something that had no connection with real life. She would never tell a soul. It would be a lovely secret she would hug to herself, and remember once in a while, like a miser counting a hidden hoard in the dead of night.

They were coming to the vows. On the priest's cue, Aliena said: "Alfred the son of Tom Builder, I take you as my husband, and swear to be faithful always." When she had said that she wanted to cry.

Alfred made his vow next. There was a ripple of noise on the outskirts of the crowd as he spoke, and one or two people looked behind. Aliena caught Martha's eye, and Martha whispered: "It's Ellen."

The priest frowned crossly and said: "Alfred and Aliena are now married in the eyes of God, and may the blessing—"

He never finished the sentence. A loud voice rang out from behind Aliena: "I curse this wedding!"

It was Ellen.

A gasp of horror went up from the congregation.

The priest tried to continue. "And may the blessing—" Then he stopped, paled, and made the sign of the cross.

Aliena turned around. Ellen was standing behind her. The crowd had shrunk back from her. She was holding a live cockerel in one hand and a long knife in the other. There was blood on the knife, and blood spurting from the severed neck of the bird. "I curse this marriage with sorrow," she said, and her words chilled Aliena's heart. "I curse this marriage with barrenness," she said. "I curse it with bitterness, and hatred, and bereavement, and regret. I curse it

with impotence." As she said the word *impotence* she threw the bloody cockerel up into the air. Several people screamed and cowered back. Aliena stood rooted to the spot. The cock flew through the air, spraying blood, and landed on Alfred. He jumped back, terrified. The grisly object flopped on the ground, still bleeding.

When everyone looked up, Ellen was gone.

Martha had put clean linen sheets and a new wool blanket on the bed, the great feather bed that had belonged to Ellen and Tom and was now to be Alfred's and Aliena's. Ellen had not been seen since the wedding. The feast had been a subdued affair, like a picnic on a cold day, with everyone grimly going through the motions of eating and drinking because there was nothing else to do. The guests had all left at sundown, without any of the usual coarse jokes about the newlyweds' first night. Martha was now in her own little bed in the other room. Richard had returned to Aliena's little house, which would now be his.

Alfred was talking of building a stone house for them next summer. He had been boasting about it to Richard during the feast. "It will have a bedchamber, and a hall, and an undercroft," he had said. "When John Silversmith's wife sees it she'll want one just like it. Pretty soon all the prosperous men in town will want a stone house."

"Have you done a design?" Richard had asked, and Aliena had heard a hint of skepticism, although nobody else seemed to notice.

"I've got some old drawings of my father's, done in ink on vellum. One of them is the house we were building for Aliena and William Hamleigh, all those years ago. I'll base it on that."

Aliena had turned away from them in disgust. How could anyone be so crass as to mention that on her wedding day? Alfred had been full of bluster all afternoon, pouring wine and telling jokes and exchanging sly winks with his workmates. He seemed happy.

Now he was sitting on the edge of the bed taking off his boots. Aliena took the ribbons out of her hair. She did not know what to think about Ellen's curse. It had shocked her, and she had no idea what was going on in Ellen's mind, but somehow she was not frightened by it the way most people were.

This could not be said of Alfred. When the slaughtered cock landed on him he had practically gibbered. Richard had shaken him out of it, literally, holding him by the front of his tunic and jerking him back and forth. He had recovered his wits quickly enough, however, and since then the only sign of his fright had been the relentlessness of his backslapping, beer-swilling good cheer.

Aliena felt oddly calm. She did not relish what she was about to do, but at

least she was not being forced to it, and while it might be a little distasteful, it would not be humiliating. There was only one man, and no one else would be watching.

She took off her dress.

Alfred said: “By Christ, that’s a long knife.”

She undid the strap that held the knife to her left forearm, then got into bed in her undershirt.

Alfred finally got his boots off. He pulled off his hose and stood up. He threw a lewd look at her. “Take off your underclothes,” he said. “I’m entitled to see my wife’s tits.”

Aliena hesitated. She was reluctant to be naked, somehow, but it would be foolish to deny him the first thing he asked. Obediently, she sat up and pulled her undershirt off over her head, fiercely suppressing the memory of how differently she had felt when she did the same thing, this morning, for Jack.

“What a pair of beauties,” Alfred said. He came and stood beside the bed and took hold of her right breast. His huge hands were rough-skinned, with dirt under the fingernails. He squeezed too hard, and she winced. He laughed and released her. Stepping back, he took off his tunic and hung it on a hook. Then he returned to the bed and pulled the sheet off her.

Aliena swallowed hard. She felt vulnerable like this, naked under his gaze. He said: “By God, that’s a hairy one.” He reached down and felt between her legs. She stiffened, and then made herself relax and part her thighs. “Good girl,” he said, and thrust a finger inside her. It hurt: she was dry. She could not understand it—this morning, with Jack, she had been wet and slippery. Alfred grunted and forced his finger in farther.

She felt like crying. She had known she would not much enjoy it, but she had not expected him to be so unfeeling. He had not even kissed her yet. He doesn’t love me, she thought; he doesn’t even like me. I’m a fine young horse that he’s about to ride. In fact he would treat a horse better than this—he would pat it and stroke it so that it could get used to him, and he’d talk softly to calm it down. She fought back the tears. I chose this, she thought; nobody made me marry him, so I’ll just put up with it now.

“Dry as a sawpit,” Alfred muttered.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

He removed his hand, spat on it twice, and rubbed the spittle between her legs. It seemed a dreadfully contemptuous act. She bit her lip and looked away.

He spread her thighs. She closed her eyes, then opened them and forced herself to look at him, thinking: Get used to this, you’re going to be doing it for the rest of your life. He got on the bed and knelt between her legs. The shadow of a frown crossed his face. He put one hand between her thighs, opening her up, and the other hand went beneath his undershirt. She could see

the hand moving under the linen. His frown deepened. “Christ Jesus,” he muttered. “You’re so lifeless, it puts me off, it’s like feeling up a corpse.”

It seemed so unfair of him to blame her. “I don’t know what I’m supposed to do!” she said tearfully.

“Some girls enjoy it,” he said.

Enjoy it! she thought. Impossible! Then she remembered how, that very morning, she had groaned and cried with delight. But it was as if there was no connection between what she had done then and what she was doing now.

That was foolish. She sat upright. Alfred was rubbing himself beneath his shirt. “Let me,” she said, and she slipped her hand between his legs. It felt limp and lifeless. She was not sure what to do with it. She squeezed it gently, then stroked it with her fingertips. She searched his face for a reaction. He just seemed angry. She carried on, but it made no difference.

“Do it harder,” he said.

She began to rub it vigorously. It stayed soft, but he moved his hips, as if he was enjoying it. Encouraged, she rubbed harder. Suddenly he gave a cry of pain and pulled away. She had rubbed too hard. “Stupid cow!” he said, and he slapped her face, backhanded, with a swipe that knocked her sideways.

She lay on the bed, whimpering in pain and fear.

“You’re no good, you’re cursed!” he said furiously.

“I did my best!”

“You’re a dead cunt,” he spat. He took her by the arms, lifted her upright, and pushed her off the bed. She fell into the straw on the floor. “That witch Ellen meant this to happen,” he said. “She’s always hated me.”

Aliena rolled over and knelt upright on the floor, staring at him. He did not look as if he would hit her again. He was no longer enraged, just bitter. “You can stay there,” he said. “You’re no good to me as a wife, so you can keep out of my bed. You can be a dog, and sleep on the floor.” He paused. “I can’t stand you looking at me!” he said with a note of panic in his voice. He looked around for the candle, spotted it, and put it out with a blow, knocking it to the ground.

Aliena stayed motionless in the darkness. She heard Alfred moving on the feather bed, lying down and pulling up the blanket and shifting the pillows. She was almost afraid to breathe. He was restless for a long time, tossing and turning in the bed, but he did not get up again, nor did he speak to her. Eventually he was still, and his breathing became even. When she was sure he was asleep, she crawled across the room, trying not to make the straw rustle, and found her way into the corner. She curled up and lay there, wide awake. Eventually she began to cry. She tried not to, for fear of waking him, but she could not hold the tears in, so she sobbed quietly. If the noise woke him, he gave no sign of it. She stayed like that, lying on the straw in the corner, crying softly, until eventually she cried herself to sleep.

Chapter 12

ALIENA WAS SICK all that winter.

She slept badly every night, wrapped in her cloak on the floor at the foot of Alfred's bed, and during the day she was possessed by a hopeless lassitude. She often felt nauseated, so she ate very little, but despite that she seemed to put on weight: she was sure her breasts and hips were larger, and her waist thickened.

She was supposed to be running Alfred's house, although Martha actually did most of the work. The three of them lived together in a sorry ménage. Martha had never liked her brother, and Aliena now loathed him with a passion, so it was not surprising that he spent as much time as possible away from the house, at work during the day and in the alehouse every evening. Martha and Aliena bought food and cooked it unenthusiastically, and made clothes in the evenings. Aliena looked forward to the spring, when it would once again be warm enough for her to visit her secret glade on Sunday afternoons. There she could lie in peace and daydream of Jack.

Meanwhile, her consolation was Richard. He had a spirited black courser, a new sword, and a squire with a pony, and he was once again fighting for King Stephen, albeit with a reduced entourage. The war dragged on into the new year: Maud had escaped from Oxford Castle and slipped through Stephen's hands once again, and her brother Robert of Gloucester had retaken Wareham, so the old seesaw continued, with each side gaining a little and then losing it. But Aliena was fulfilling her vow, and she could take satisfaction in that, if in nothing else.

In the first week of the year Martha began to bleed for the first time. Aliena made her a hot drink with herbs and honey to ease the cramps, and answered her questions about the woman's curse, and went to find the box of rags that she kept for her own periods. However, the box was not in the house, and she eventually realized she had not brought it here from her old house when she got married.

But that had been three months ago.

Which meant she had not bled for three months.

Not since her wedding day.

Not since she had made love with Jack.

She left Martha sitting by the kitchen fire, sipping her honey drink and toasting her toes, and went across town to her old house. Richard was not there but she had a key. She found the box without any trouble, but she did not go back right away. Instead she sat by the cold fireplace, wrapped in her cloak, deep in thought.

She had married Alfred at Michaelmas. It was now past Christmas. That was a quarter of a year. There had been three new moons. She should have bled three times. Yet her box of rags had been on the high shelf, alongside the small grindstone Richard used for sharpening kitchen knives. Now she held it in her lap. She ran a finger over the rough wood. Her finger came up dirty. The box was covered with dust.

The worst of it was, she had *never* made love with Alfred.

After that awful first night, he had tried again three times: once the following night, then a week later, and again a month after that when he had come home particularly drunk. But he was always completely incapable. At first Aliena had encouraged him, out of a sense of duty; but each failure made him angrier than the last, and she became frightened. It seemed safer to stay out of his way, and wear unappealing clothes, and make sure he never saw her undressing, and let him forget about it. Now she wondered if she should have tried more. But in truth she knew it would have made no difference. It was hopeless. She was not sure why—perhaps it was Ellen's curse, perhaps Alfred was just impotent, or perhaps it was because of the memory of Jack—but she felt certain Alfred never would make love to her now.

So he was bound to know that the baby was not his.

She stared miserably at the old, cold ashes in Richard's fireplace, wondering why she always had such bad luck. Here she was trying to make the best of a bad marriage and she had the misfortune to be pregnant by another man, after one single act of intercourse.

There was no point in self-pity. She had to decide what to do.

She rested her hand on her stomach. Now she knew why she had been putting on weight, why she kept feeling nauseated, why she was always so tired. There was a little person in there. She smiled to herself. How nice it would be to have a baby.

She shook her head. It would not be nice at all. Alfred would be as mad as a bull. There was no knowing what he would do—kill her, throw her out, kill the baby…. She had a sudden, terrible foreboding that he would try to do harm to the unborn baby by kicking her in the stomach. She wiped her brow: she had broken out in a cold sweat.

I won’t tell him, she thought.

Could she keep her pregnancy secret? Perhaps. She had already taken to wearing shapeless, baggy clothes. She might not get very big—some women didn’t. Alfred was the least observant of men. No doubt the wiser women in the town would guess, but she could probably rely on them to keep it to themselves, or at any rate not to talk to the menfolk about it. Yes, she decided, it might just be possible to keep it from him until after the baby was born.

Then what? Well, at least the little mite would have been brought safely into the world. Alfred would not be able to kill it by kicking Aliena. But he would still know that it was not his. He was sure to hate the poor thing: it would be a permanent slur on his manhood. There would be hell to pay.

Aliena could not think that far ahead. She had decided on the safest course for the next six months. She would try in the meantime to figure out what to do after the baby was born.

I wonder whether it’s a boy or a girl, she thought.

She stood up with her box of clean rags for Martha’s first monthly period. I pity you, Martha, she thought wearily; you’ve got all this in front of you.

Philip spent that winter brooding over his troubles.

He had been horrified by Ellen’s heathen curse, uttered in the porch of a church during a service. There was no doubt in his mind now that she was a witch. He only regretted his foolishness in ever forgiving her for her insult to the Rule of Saint Benedict, all those years ago. He should have known that a woman who could do that would never really repent. However, one happy consequence of the whole horrifying business was that Ellen had once again left Kingsbridge and had not been seen since. Philip hoped fervently that she would never return.

Aliena was visibly unhappy as Alfred’s wife, although Philip did not believe that the curse was the cause of that. Philip knew almost nothing about married life but he could guess that a bright, knowledgeable, lively person such as Aliena would be unhappy living with someone as slow-thinking and narrow-minded as Alfred, whether they were man and wife or anything else.

Aliena should have married Jack, of course. Philip could see that now, and he felt guilty that he had been so committed to his own plans for Jack that he had failed to realize what the boy really needed. Jack was never meant for the cloistered life and Philip had done wrong in pressuring him into it. Now Jack’s brilliance and energy had been lost to Kingsbridge.

It seemed that everything had gone wrong since the disaster of the fleece fair. The priory was more in debt than ever. Philip had dismissed half the building work force because he no longer had the money to pay them. In consequence, the population of the town had shrunk, which meant that the

Sunday market became smaller and Philip's income from rents fell. Kingsbridge was in a downward spiral.

The heart of the problem was the townspeople's morale. Although they had rebuilt their houses and restarted their small businesses, they had no confidence in the future. Whatever they planned, whatever they might build, could be wiped out in a day by William Hamleigh, if he should choose to attack again. This undercurrent of insecurity ran in everyone's thinking and paralyzed all enterprise.

Eventually Philip realized he had to do something to stop the slide. He needed to make a dramatic gesture to tell the world in general, and the townspeople in particular, that Kingsbridge was fighting back. He spent many hours of prayer and meditation trying to decide just what that gesture should be.

What he really needed was a miracle. If the bones of Saint Adolphus would cure a princess of the plague, or cause a brackish well to give sweet water, people would flood into Kingsbridge on pilgrimage. But the saint had performed no miracles for years. Philip sometimes wondered whether his steady, practical methods of ruling the priory displeased the saint, for miracles seemed to happen more frequently in places where the rule was less sensible and the atmosphere was charged with religious fervor, if not out-and-out hysteria. But Philip had been taught in a more down-to-earth school. Father Peter, the abbot of his first monastery, used to say: "Pray for miracles, but plant cabbages."

The symbol of Kingsbridge's life and vigor was the cathedral. If only it could be finished by a miracle! One time he prayed for such a miracle all night, but in the morning the chancel was still unroofed and open to the weather, and its high walls were ragged-ended where they would meet the transept walls.

Philip had not yet hired a new master builder. He had been shocked to learn how much they demanded in wages: he had never realized how cheap Tom was. Anyway, Alfred was running the reduced work force without much difficulty. Alfred had become rather morose since his marriage, like a man who defeats many rivals to become king and then finds that kingship is a wearisome burden. However, he was authoritative and decisive, and the other men respected him.

But Tom had left a gap that could not be filled. Philip missed him personally, not just as master builder. Tom had been interested in *why* churches had to be built one way rather than another, and Philip had enjoyed sharing speculations with him about what made some buildings stand up while others fell down. Tom had not been an exceptionally devout man, but he had occasionally asked Philip questions about theology which showed that he applied as much intelligence to his religion as he did to his building. Tom's

brain had more or less matched Philip's own. Philip had been able to converse with him without talking down. There were too few such people in Philip's life. Jack had been one, despite his youth; Aliena another, but she had disappeared into her sorry marriage. Cuthbert White-head was getting old, now, and Milius Bursar was almost always away from the priory, touring the sheep farms, counting acres and ewes and woolsacks. In time, a lively and busy priory in a prosperous cathedral city would draw scholars the way a conquering army attracted fighting men. Philip looked forward to that time. But it would never come unless he could find a way to re-energize Kingsbridge.

"It's been a mild winter," Alfred said one morning soon after Christmas. "We can begin earlier than usual."

That started Philip thinking. The vault would be built that summer. When it was finished, the chancel would be usable, and Kingsbridge would no longer be a cathedral town without a cathedral. The chancel was the most important part of a church: the high altar and the holy relics were kept at the far east end, called the presbytery, and most of the services took place in the quire, where the monks sat. Only on Sundays and holy days was the rest of a church used. Once the chancel had been dedicated, what had been a building site would become a church, albeit an incomplete one.

It was a pity they would have to wait almost a year before that happened. Alfred had promised to finish the vault by the end of this year's building season, and the season generally finished in November, depending on the weather. But when Alfred said he would be able to start early, Philip began to wonder whether he might finish early too. Everyone would be stunned if the church could be opened this summer. It was the kind of gesture he had been searching for: something that would surprise the whole county, and give out the message that Kingsbridge could not be put down for long.

"Can you finish by Whitsun?" Philip said impulsively.

Alfred sucked his breath in through his teeth and looked doubtful. "Vaulting is the most skilled work of all," he said. "It mustn't be hurried, and you can't let apprentices do it."

His father would have answered yes or no, Philip thought irritably. He said: "Suppose I could give you extra laborers—monks. How much would that help?"

"A little. It's more masons we need, really."

"I might be able to give you one or two more," Philip said rashly. A mild winter meant early shearing, so he could hope to begin selling wool sooner than usual.

"I don't know." Alfred was still looking pessimistic.

"Suppose I offered the masons a bonus?" Philip said. "An extra week's wages if the vault is ready for Whitsunday."

“I’ve never heard of that before,” Alfred said. He looked as if an improper suggestion had been made.

“Well, there’s a first time for everything,” Philip said testily, Alfred’s caution was getting on his nerves. “What do you say?”

“I can’t say yes or no to that,” Alfred said stolidly. “I’ll put it to the men.”

“Today?” Philip said impatiently.

“Today.”

Philip had to be satisfied with that.

William Hamleigh and his knights arrived at Bishop Waleran’s palace just behind an ox cart loaded high with sacks of wool. The new season’s shearing had begun. Like William, Waleran was buying wool from farmers at last year’s prices and expecting to sell it again for considerably more. Neither of them had had much trouble forcing their tenants to sell to them: a few peasants who defied the rule were evicted and their farmhouses were burned, and after that there were no more rebels.

As William went through the gate he glanced up the hill. The stunted ramparts of the castle the bishop had never built had stood on that hill for seven years, a permanent reminder of how Waleran had been outwitted by Prior Philip. As soon as Waleran began to reap the rewards of the wool business, he would probably recommence building. In the days of old King Henry, a bishop had not needed any more defenses than the flimsy fence of wooden stakes behind a little ditch that surrounded this palace. Now, after five years of civil war, men who were not even earls or bishops were building formidable castles.

Things were going well for Waleran, William thought sourly as he dismounted at the stable. Waleran had remained loyal to Bishop Henry of Winchester through all Henry’s switches of allegiance, and as a result had become one of Henry’s closest allies. Over the years Waleran had been enriched by a steady stream of properties and privileges, and had visited Rome twice.

William had not been so lucky—hence his sourness. Despite having gone along with each of Waleran’s changes of allegiance, and despite having supplied large armies to both sides in the civil war, he still had not been confirmed as earl of Shiring. He had been brooding on this during a lull in the fighting, and had become so angry about it that he had made up his mind to have a confrontation with Waleran.

He went up the steps to the hall entrance, with Walter and the other knights following. The steward on guard inside the door was armed, another sign of the times. Bishop Waleran sat in a big chair in the middle of the room, as always, with his bony arms and legs at all angles as if he had been untidily

dropped there. Baldwin, now an archdeacon, was standing beside him, his stance suggesting he might be waiting for instructions. Waleran was staring into the fire, deep in thought, but he looked up sharply when William approached.

William felt the familiar loathing as he greeted Waleran and sat down. Waleran's soft thin hands, his lank black hair, his dead-white skin and his pale malignant eyes made William's skin crawl. He was everything William hated: devious, physically weak, arrogant and clever.

William could tell that Waleran felt much the same about him. Waleran could never quite conceal the distaste he felt when William walked in. He sat upright and folded his arms, his lip curled a little, and he frowned faintly, altogether as if he was suffering from a twinge of indigestion.

They talked of the war for a while. It was a stiff, awkward conversation, and William was relieved when it was broken by a messenger with a letter written on a roll of parchment and sealed with wax. Waleran sent the messenger off to the kitchen to get something to eat. He did not open the letter.

William took the opportunity to change the subject. "I didn't come here to exchange news of battles. I came to tell you that I've run out of patience."

Waleran raised his eyebrows and said nothing. Silence was his response to unpleasant topics.

William plowed on: "It's almost three years since my father died, but King Stephen still hasn't confirmed me as earl. This is outrageous."

"I couldn't agree more," Waleran said languidly. He toyed with his letter, examining the seal and playing with the ribbon.

"That's good," William said, "because you're going to have to do something about it."

"My dear William, I can't make you earl."

William had known that Waleran would take this attitude, and he was determined not to accept it. "You have the ear of the king's brother."

"But what am I to say to him? That William Hamleigh has served the king well? If it is true, the king knows it, and if not, he knows that also."

William was no match for Waleran in logic so he simply ignored the arguments. "You owe it to me, Waleran Bigod."

Waleran looked faintly angered. He pointed at William with the letter. "I owe you nothing. You have always served your own ends even when you did what I wanted. There are no debts of gratitude between us."

"I tell you, I won't wait any longer."

"What will you do?" Waleran said with the hint of a sneer.

"Well, first I'll see Bishop Henry myself."

"And?"

"I'll tell him that you have been deaf to my pleas, and in consequence I'm

changing my allegiance to the Empress Maud.” William was gratified to see Waleran’s expression change: he went a shade paler and looked just a little bit surprised.

“Change again?” Waleran said skeptically.

“Just one more time than you,” William responded stoutly.

Waleran’s supercilious indifference was shaken, but not much. Waleran’s career had benefited greatly from his ability to deliver William and his knights to whichever side Bishop Henry favored at the moment: it would be a blow to him if William suddenly turned independent—but not a fatal blow. William studied Waleran’s face as he mulled over this threat. William could read the other man’s mind: he was thinking that he wanted to keep William loyal, but wondering how much he should put into the effort.

To gain time Waleran broke the seal on his letter and unrolled it. As he read, a faint flush of anger appeared on his fish-white cheeks. “Damn the man,” he hissed.

“What is it?” William asked.

Waleran held it out.

William took it from him and peered at the letters. “To—the—most—holy—gracious—bishop—”

Waleran snatched it back, impatient of William’s slow reading. “It’s from Prior Philip,” he said. “He informs me that the chancel of the new cathedral will be finished by Whitsunday, and he has the nerve to beg me to officiate at the service.”

William was surprised. “How has he managed it? I thought he had sacked half his builders!”

Waleran shook his head. “No matter what happens he seems to bounce back.” He gave William a speculative look. “He hates you, of course. Thinks you’re the devil incarnate.”

William wondered what was going on now in Waleran’s devious mind. “So what?” he said.

“It would be quite a blow to Philip if you were confirmed as earl on Whitsunday.”

“You wouldn’t do it for me, but you’d do it to spite Philip,” William said grouchily, but in reality he was feeling hopeful.

“I can’t do it at all,” Waleran said. “But I will speak to Bishop Henry.” He looked up at William expectantly.

William hesitated. At last, reluctantly, he muttered: “Thank you.”

Spring was cold and dismal that year, and on the morning of Whitsunday it was raining. Aliena had woken up in the night with a backache, and it was still troubling her with a stabbing pain every now and again. She sat in the

cold kitchen, plaiting Martha's hair before going to church, while Alfred ate a large breakfast of white bread, soft cheese and strong beer. A particularly sharp twinge in her back made her stop and stand upright for a moment, wincing. Martha noticed and said: "What's the matter?"

"Backache," Aliena said shortly. She did not want to discuss it, for the cause was surely sleeping on the floor in the drafty back room, and nobody knew about that, not even Martha.

Martha stood up and took a hot stone from the fire. Aliena sat down. Martha wrapped the stone in an old scorched piece of leather, and held it against Aliena's back. It gave her immediate relief. Martha started to plait Aliena's hair, which had grown again after being burned away and was once again an undisciplined mass of dark curls. Aliena felt soothed.

She and Martha had become quite close since Ellen left. Poor Martha: she had lost her mother and then her stepmother. Aliena felt herself to be a poor substitute for a mother. Besides, she was only ten years older than Martha. She played the role of older sister, really. Oddly enough, the person Martha missed most was her step-brother, Jack.

But then, everyone missed Jack.

Aliena wondered where he was. He might be quite close, working on a cathedral in Gloucester or Salisbury. More likely he had gone to Normandy. But he could be much farther afield: Paris, Rome, Jerusalem, or Egypt. Recalling the stories that pilgrims told about such faraway places, she visualized Jack in a sandy desert, carving stones for a Saracen fortress in the blinding sunlight. Was he thinking of her now?

Her thoughts were interrupted by a noise of hooves outside, and a moment later her brother, Richard, walked in, leading his horse. He and the horse were soaking wet and covered with mud. Aliena took some hot water from the fire for him to wash his hands and face, and Martha led the horse out to the backyard. Aliena put bread and cold beef on the kitchen table and poured him a cup of beer.

Alfred said: "What's the news of the war?"

Richard dried his face on a rag and sat down to his breakfast. "We were defeated at Wilton," he said.

"Was Stephen taken?"

"No, he escaped, just as Maud escaped from Oxford. Now Stephen is at Winchester and Maud is at Bristol, and they're both licking their wounds and consolidating their hold on the areas they control."

The news always seemed to be the same, Aliena thought. One side or both had won some small victory or suffered some small loss, but there was never any prospect of the end of the war.

Richard looked at her and said: "You're getting fat."

She nodded and said nothing. She was eight months pregnant, but nobody

knew. It was lucky that the weather had been cold, so that she had been able to continue to wear layers of loose winter clothing which concealed her shape. In a few weeks' time the baby would be born, and the truth would come out. She still had no idea what she was going to do then.

The bell rang to summon the townspeople to mass. Alfred pulled on his boots and looked expectantly at Aliena.

"I don't think I can go," she said. "I feel terrible."

He shrugged indifferently and turned to her brother. "You should come, Richard. Everyone will be there today—it's the first service in the new church."

Richard was surprised. "You've got the ceiling up already? I thought that was going to take the rest of the year."

"We rushed it. Prior Philip offered the men an extra week's wages if they could finish by today. It's amazing how much faster they worked. Even so, we only just made it—we took the falsework down this morning."

"I must see this," Richard said. He stuffed the last of the bread and beef into his mouth and stood up.

Martha said to Aliena: "Do you want me to stay with you?"

"No, thanks. I'm fine. You go. I'll just lie down."

The three of them put on their cloaks and went out. Aliena went into the back room, taking with her the hot stone in its leather wrapping. She lay down on Alfred's bed with the stone under her back. She had become terribly lethargic since her marriage. Previously, she had run a household *and* been the busiest wool merchant in the county; now, she had trouble keeping house for Alfred even though she had nothing else to do.

She lay there feeling sorry for herself for a while, wishing she could fall asleep. Suddenly she felt a trickle of warm water on her inner thigh. She was shocked. It was almost as if she was urinating, but she wasn't, and a moment later the trickle turned into a flood. She sat bolt upright. She knew what it meant. Her waters had broken. The baby was coming.

She felt scared. She needed help. She called to her neighbor at the top of her voice: "Mildred! Mildred, come here!" Then she remembered that nobody was at home—they had all gone to church.

The flow of water slowed, but Alfred's bed was soaked. He was going to be furious, she thought fearfully; and then she remembered that he was going to be furious anyway, for he would know that the baby was not his child, and she thought: Oh, God, what am I going to do?

The back pain came again, and she realized that this must be what they called labor pains. She forgot about Alfred. She was about to give birth. She was too frightened to go through with it alone. She wanted someone to help her. She decided to go to the church.

She swung her legs off the bed. Another spasm took her, and she paused,

her face screwed up in pain, until it went away. Then she got off the bed and left the house.

Her mind was in a whirl as she staggered along the muddy street. When she was at the priory gate the pain came again, and she had to lean against the wall and grit her teeth until it passed. Then she went into the priory close.

Most of the population of the town was crowded into the high tunnel of the chancel and the lower tunnels of the two side aisles. The altar was at the far end. The new church was peculiar in appearance: the rounded stone ceiling would eventually have a triangular wooden roof over it, but now it looked unprotected, like a bald man without a hat. The congregation stood with their backs to Aliena.

As she lurched toward the cathedral, the bishop, Waleran Bigod, got up to speak. She saw, as if in a nightmare, that William Hamleigh was standing beside him. Bishop Waleran's words penetrated her distress. "…with great pride and pleasure that I have to tell you that the Lord King, Stephen, has confirmed Lord William as the earl of Shiring."

Despite her pain and fear Aliena was horrified to hear this. For six years, ever since the awful day when they had seen their father in the Winchester jailhouse, she had dedicated her life to winning back the family property. She and Richard had survived robbers and rapists, conflagration and civil war. Several times the prize had seemed to be within their grasp. But now they had lost it.

The congregation murmured angrily. They had all suffered at William's hands and they still lived in fear of him. They were not happy to see him honored by the king who was supposed to protect them. Aliena looked around for Richard, to see how he was taking this terminal blow; but she could not locate him.

Prior Philip stood up with a face like thunder and started the hymn. The congregation began halfheartedly to sing. Aliena leaned against a column as another contraction seized her. She was at the back of the crowd and nobody noticed her. Somehow the bad news had calmed her. I'm only having a baby, she thought; it happens every day. I just need to find Martha or Richard, and they will take care of everything.

When the pain passed she pushed her way into the congregation, looking for Martha. There was a group of women in the low tunnel of the north aisle, and she made for them. People looked curiously at her, but their attention was distracted by something else: a strange noise like rumbling. At first it was hardly distinguishable from the singing, but the singing quickly died away as the rumbling got louder.

Aliena reached the group of women. They were looking around anxiously for the source of the noise. Aliena touched one of them on the shoulder and said: "Have you seen Martha, my sister-in-law?"

The woman looked at her, and Aliena recognized the tanner's wife, Hilda. "Martha's on the other side, I think," Hilda said; then the rumbling became deafening and she looked away.

Aliena followed her gaze. In the middle of the church everyone was looking up, toward the top of the walls. The people in the side aisles craned their necks to peer through the arches of the arcade. Someone screamed. Aliena saw a crack appear in the far wall, running between two neighboring windows in the clerestory. As she looked, several huge pieces of masonry dropped from above into the crowd in the middle of the church. There was a cacophony of screaming and shouting, and everyone turned to flee.

The ground beneath her feet shook. Even as she tried to push her way out of the church she was aware that the high walls were spreading apart at the top, and the round barrel of the vault was cracking up. Hilda the tanner's wife fell in front of her, and Aliena tripped over the prone figure and went down herself. A shower of small stones spattered her as she tried to get up. Then the low roof of the aisle cracked and fell in, something hit her head, and everything went black.

Philip had begun the service feeling proud and grateful. It had been a close thing, but the vault was finished in time. In fact, only three of the four bays of the chancel had been vaulted, for the fourth could not be done until the crossing was built and the ragged-ended chancel walls were joined to the transepts. However, three bays were enough. All the builders' equipment had been ruthlessly cleared out: the tools, the piles of stone and timber, the scaffolding poles and hurdles, the heaps of rubble and the rubbish. The chancel had been swept clean. The monks had whitewashed the stonework and painted straight red lines on the mortar, making the pointing look neater than it really was, in accordance with custom. The altar and the bishop's throne had been moved up from the crypt. However, the bones of the saint, in their stone casket, were still down there: moving them was a solemn ceremony, called translation, which was to be the climax of today's service. As the service had begun, with the bishop on his throne, the monks in new robes lined up behind the altar, and the people of the town massed in the body of the church and crowded into the aisles, Philip had felt fulfilled, and he had thanked God for bringing him successfully to the end of the first, crucial stage in the rebuilding of the cathedral.

When Waleran had made his announcement about William, Philip had been furious. It was so obviously timed to mar the triumph of the occasion and remind the townspeople that they were still at the mercy of their savage overlord. Philip had been casting about wildly for some adequate response when the rumbling started.

It was like a nightmare that Philip sometimes had, in which he was walking on the scaffolding, very high up, perfectly confident of his safety, when he noticed a loose knot in the ropes binding the scaffolding poles together—nothing very serious—but when he bent to tighten the knot, the hurdle beneath him tilted a little, not much at first but enough to make him stumble, and then, in a flash, he was falling through the vast space of the chancel of the cathedral, falling sickeningly fast, and he knew he was about to die.

The rumbling was at first mystifying. For a moment or two he thought it was thunder; then it grew too loud, and the people stopped singing. Still Philip thought it was only some strange phenomenon, shortly to be explained, whose worst effect would be to interrupt the service. Then he looked up.

In the third bay, where the falsework had come down only this morning, cracks were appearing in the masonry, high on the walls, at the clerestory level. They appeared suddenly and flashed across the wall from one clerestory window to the next like striking snakes. Philip's first reaction was disappointment: he had been happy that the chancel was finished, but now he would have to undertake repairs, and all the people who had been so impressed with the builders' work would say: "More haste, less speed." Then the tops of the walls seemed to lean outward, and he realized with an awful sense of horror that this was not merely going to interrupt the service, this was going to be a catastrophe.

Cracks appeared in the curved vault. A big stone became detached from the web of masonry and tumbled slowly through the air. People started screaming and trying to get out of its way. Before Philip could see whether anyone was badly hurt, more stones began to fall. The congregation panicked, pushing and shoving and trampling on one another as they tried to dodge the falling stones. Philip had the wild thought that this was another attack of some kind by William Hamleigh; then he saw William, at the front of the congregation, battering people around him in a terrified bid to escape, and realized that William would not have done this to himself.

Most people were trying to move away from the altar, to get out of the cathedral through the open west end. But it was the westernmost part of the building, the open end, that was collapsing. The problem was in the third bay. In the second bay, where Philip was, the vault seemed to be holding; and behind him, in the first bay where the monks were lined up, it looked solid. At that end the opposite walls were held together by the east facade.

He saw little Jonathan, with Johnny Eightpence, both huddled at the far end of the north aisle. They were safer there than anywhere, Philip decided; and then he realized that he should try to get the rest of his flock to safety. "Come this way!" he shouted. "Everybody! Move this way!" Whether they heard him or not, they took no notice.

In the third bay, the tops of the walls crumbled, falling outward, and the entire vault collapsed, large and small stones falling through the air like a lethal hailstorm to land on the hysterical congregation. Philip darted forward and grabbed a citizen. “Go back!” he yelled, and shoved the man toward the east end. The startled man saw the monks huddled against the far wall and dashed to join them. Philip did the same to two women. The people with them realized what he was doing and moved east without being pushed. Other people began to get the idea, and a general move east began among those who had been at the front of the congregation. Looking up for an instant, Philip was appalled to see that the second bay was going to go: the same cracks were snaking across the clerestory and frosting the vault directly over his head. He continued to herd people to the safety of the east end, knowing that every person he moved might be a life saved. A rain of crumbled mortar fell on his shaved head, and then the stones started to come down. The people were scattering. Some had taken refuge in the shelter of the side aisles; some were crowded up against the east wall, among them Bishop Waleran; others were still trying to crowd out of the west end, crawling over the fallen rubble and bodies in the third bay. A stone hit Philip’s shoulder. It was a glancing blow but it hurt. He put his hands over his head and looked around wildly. He was alone in the middle of the second bay: everyone else was around the edges of the danger zone. He had done all he could. He ran to the east end.

There he turned again and looked up. The clerestory of the second bay was collapsing now, and the vault was falling into the chancel, in exact replication of what had happened in the third bay; but there were fewer victims, because the people had had a chance to get out of the way, and because the roofs of the side aisles appeared to be holding there, whereas in the third bay they had given way. Everyone in the crowd at the east end moved back, pressing up against the wall, and all faces were turned up, watching the vault, to see whether the collapse would spread to the first bay. The crash of falling masonry seemed to become less loud, but a fog of dust and small stones filled the air and for a few moments no one could see anything. Philip held his breath. The dust cleared and he could see the vault again. It had collapsed right up to the edge of the first bay; but now it seemed to be holding.

The dust settled. Everything went quiet. Philip stared aghast at the ruins of his church. Only the first bay remained intact. The walls of the second bay were standing up to the level of the gallery, but in the third and fourth bays only the side aisles were left, and they were badly damaged. The floor of the church was a pile of rubble littered with the still or feebly moving bodies of the dead and injured. Seven years of work and hundreds of pounds in money had been destroyed, and dozens of people had been killed, maybe hundreds, all in a few terrible moments. Philip’s heart ached for the wasted work and the

lost people, and for the widows and orphans left behind; and his eyes filled with bitter tears.

A harsh voice spoke in his ear. “This is what comes of your damned arrogance, Philip!”

He turned around to see Bishop Waleran, his black clothes coated with dust, glaring at him triumphantly. Philip felt as if he had been stabbed. To see a tragedy such as this was heartbreaking, but to be *blamed* for it was unbearable. He wanted to say *I only tried to do my best!* but the words would not come: his throat seemed constricted and he could not speak.

His eye lit on Johnny Eightpence and little Jonathan, emerging from the shelter of the aisle, and he suddenly remembered his responsibilities. There would be plenty of time later to agonize over who was to blame. Right now there were scores of people injured and many more trapped in the rubble. He had to organize the rescue operation. He glared at Bishop Waleran and said fiercely: “Get out of my way.” The startled bishop stepped aside, and Philip leaped up on the altar.

“Listen to me!” he called out at the top of his voice. “We have to take care of the wounded, rescue people who are trapped, and then bury the dead and pray for their souls. I’m going to appoint three leaders to organize this.” He looked at the faces all around him, checking to see who was still alive and well. He spotted Alfred. “Alfred Builder is in charge of moving rubble and rescuing trapped people, and I want all the masons and wrights to work with him.” Looking at the monks, he was relieved to see his trusted confidant, Milius, unhurt. “Milius Bursar is responsible for moving the dead and injured out of the church, and he will need strong young helpers. Randolph Infirmarer will take care of the wounded once they’re out of this mess, and the older ones can help him, especially the older women. Right—let’s begin.” He jumped down from the altar. There was a hubbub of speech as people started to give orders and ask questions.

Philip went over to Alfred, who was looking shaken and scared. If anyone was to blame for this it was he, as master builder, but this was no time for recriminations. Philip said: “Divide your people into teams and give them separate areas to work.”

Alfred looked blank for a moment; then his face cleared. “Yes. Right. We’ll start at the west end and clear rubble out into the open space.”

“Good.” Philip left him and pushed through the crowd to Milius. He heard Milius say: “Carry the wounded well clear of the church and put them on the grass. Take the dead bodies out to the north side.” He moved away, content as always to trust Milius to do the right thing. He saw Randolph Infirmarer clambering over the rubble and hurried after him. They both picked their way across the piles of ruined stonework. Outside the church at the west end was a crowd of people who had managed to get out before the worst of the collapse

and so escaped injury. “Use those people,” Philip said to Randolph. “Send someone to the infirmary to fetch your equipment and supplies. Have a few of them go to the kitchen for hot water. Ask the cellarer for strong wine for those who need reviving. Make sure you lay the dead and injured out in neat lines with spaces between them, so that your helpers don’t fall over the bodies.”

He looked around. The survivors were going to work. Many of those who had been sheltered by the intact east end had followed Philip across the rubble and had already started to remove the bodies. One or two of the injured who had only been dazed or stunned were getting to their feet unaided. Philip saw an old woman sitting on the floor looking bewildered. He recognized her as Maud Silver, the widow of a silversmith. He helped her up and led her away from the wreckage. “What happened?” she said, not looking at him. “I don’t know what happened.”

“Nor do I, Maud,” he said.

As he returned to help someone else, Bishop Waleran’s words sounded again in his mind: *This is what comes of your damned arrogance, Philip*. The accusation cut him to the quick because he thought it might be true. He was always pushing for more, better, faster. He had pushed Alfred to finish the vault just as he had pushed for a fleece fair and pushed to get the earl of Shiring’s quarry. In each case the result had been tragedy: the slaughter of the quarrymen, the burning of Kingsbridge, and now this. Clearly ambition was to blame. Monks did better to live a life of resignation, accepting the tribulations and setbacks of this world as lessons in patience, taught by the Almighty.

As Philip helped to carry the groaning wounded and the unresisting dead out of the ruins of his cathedral, he resolved that in the future he would leave it to God to be ambitious and pushing: he, Philip, would passively accept whatever happened. If God wanted a cathedral, God would provide a quarry; if the town was burned, it should be taken as a sign that God did not want a fleece fair; and now that the church had fallen down, Philip would not rebuild it.

As he reached that decision, he saw William Hamleigh.

The new earl of Shiring was sitting on the floor in the third bay, near the north aisle, ashen-faced and trembling with pain, with his foot trapped under a big stone. Philip wondered, as he helped roll the stone away, why God had chosen to let so many good people die but had spared an animal such as William.

William was making a great fuss about the pain in his foot but was otherwise all right. They helped him to his feet. He leaned on the shoulder of a big man about his own size and began to hop away. Then a baby cried.

Everyone heard it. There were no babies in sight. They all looked around, mystified. The crying came again, and Philip realized it was coming from

beneath a massive pile of stones in the aisle. “Over here!” he called. He caught Alfred’s eye and beckoned him. “There’s a baby alive under all that,” he said.

They all listened to the crying. It sounded like a very small baby, not yet a month old. “You’re right,” Alfred said. “Let’s shift some of those big stones.” He and his helpers began to move rubble from a pile that completely blocked the arch of the third bay. Philip joined in. He could not think which of the townswomen had given birth in the last few weeks. Of course, a birth might not have come to his attention: although the town had got smaller in the past year, it was still big enough for him to miss such a commonplace event.

The crying stopped suddenly. Everyone stood still and listened, but it did not begin again. Grimly, they recommenced moving the stones. It was a perilous business, for removing one stone might cause others to fall. This was why Philip had put Alfred in charge. However, Alfred was not as cautious as Philip would have wished, and he seemed to be letting everyone do as they pleased, pulling stones away without any overall plan. At one point the whole pile shifted dangerously, and Philip called out: “Wait!”

They all stopped. Alfred was too shocked to organize people properly, Philip realized. He would have to do it himself. He said: “If there is someone alive under there, something must have protected them; and if we let the pile shift, they could lose their protection, and be killed by our efforts. Let’s do this carefully.” He pointed to a group of stonemasons standing together. “You three, climb the heap and take stones from the top. Instead of carrying them away yourselves, just pass each stone to one of us and we’ll take them away.”

They restarted work according to Philip’s plan. It seemed quicker as well as safer.

Now that the baby had stopped crying they were not sure exactly where they were heading, so they cleared across a broad area, most of the width of the bay. Some of the rubble was what had fallen from the vault, but the roof of the aisle had partly collapsed, so there were timber and roof slates as well as stones and mortar.

Philip worked tirelessly. He wanted that baby to survive. Even though he knew there were dozens of people dead, somehow the baby seemed more important. If it could be rescued, he felt, there was still hope for the future. As he hefted the stones, coughing and half blind from the dust, he prayed fervently that the baby would be found alive.

Eventually he could see, above the heaped rubble, the outer wall of the aisle and part of one deep-set window. There seemed to be a space behind the pile. Perhaps someone was alive in there. A mason climbed gingerly up the pile and looked down into the space. “Jesus!” he exclaimed.

For once Philip ignored the blasphemy. “Is the babe all right?” he said.

“I can’t tell,” said the mason.

Philip wanted to ask what the mason had seen, or, better still, take a look for himself, but the man recommenced clearing stones with renewed vigor, and there was nothing for it but to continue to help, in a fever of curiosity.

The level of the pile came down rapidly. There was a large stone near ground level that required three men to move it. As it was rolled aside, Philip saw the baby.

It was naked, and newborn. Its white skin was smeared with blood and building dust, but he could see that it had a head of startling carrot-colored hair. Looking more closely, Philip saw that it was a boy. It was lying on a woman's bosom and sucking at her breast. The child was alive, he saw, and his heart leaped for joy. He looked at the woman. She was alive, too. She caught his eye and gave him a weary, happy smile.

It was Aliena.

Aliena never went back to Alfred's house.

He told everyone that the baby was not his, and as proof pointed to the child's red hair, exactly the same color as Jack's; but he did not try to do any harm either to the baby or Aliena, apart from saying he would not have them in his house.

Aliena moved back into the one-room house in the poor quarter with her brother, Richard. She was relieved that Alfred's revenge was so mild. She was glad that she would no longer have to sleep on the floor at the foot of his bed like a dog. But mainly she was thrilled and proud about her lovely baby. He had red hair and blue eyes and perfect white skin, and he reminded her vividly of Jack.

No one knew why the church had fallen down. There were plenty of theories, however. Some said Alfred was not capable of being master builder. Others blamed Philip, for rushing to get the vault finished by Whitsun. Some of the masons said the falsework had been taken down before the mortar was properly dry. One old mason said the walls had never been intended to bear the weight of a stone vault.

Seventy-nine people had been killed, including those who died of their injuries later. Everyone said it would have been more if Prior Philip had not herded so many people to the east end. The priory graveyard was already full because of the fire at the fleece fair the previous year, and most of the dead were buried at the parish church. A lot of people said the cathedral was under a curse.

Alfred took all his masons off to Shiring, where he was building stone houses for the wealthy townspeople. The other craftsmen drifted away from Kingsbridge. No one was actually dismissed, and Philip continued to pay wages, but there was nothing for the men to do but tidy up the rubble, and

after a few weeks they had all gone. No volunteers came to work on Sundays, the market was reduced to a few dispirited stalls, and Malachi packed his family and his possessions onto a huge cart pulled by four oxen and left town, searching for greener pastures.

Richard rented his fine black stallion to a farmer and he and Aliena lived on the proceeds. Without Alfred's support he could not go on as a knight, and in any case there was no point now that William had been made earl. Aliena still felt bound by her vow to her father, but just now there seemed nothing she could do to fulfill it. Richard sank into lethargy. He got up late, sat in the sun most of the day, and spent his evenings in the alehouse.

Martha still lived in the big house, alone except for an elderly woman servant. However, she spent most of her time with Aliena: she loved to help with the baby, especially as he looked so much like her adored Jack. She wanted Aliena to call him Jack, but Aliena was reluctant to name him, for reasons she herself did not quite understand.

For Aliena the summer went by in a maternal glow. But when the harvest was in, and the weather cooled a little, and the evenings became shorter, she grew discontented.

Whenever she thought about her future, Jack came into her mind. He had gone, she had no idea where, and he would probably never come back, but he was still with her, dominating her thoughts, full of life and energy, as clear and vivid to her as if she had seen him only yesterday. She considered moving to another town and pretending she was a widow; she thought of trying to persuade Richard to earn a living somehow; she contemplated doing some weaving, or taking in washing, or becoming a servant to one of the few townspeople who were still wealthy enough to hire help; and each new scheme was greeted with scornful laughter by the imaginary Jack in her head, who said: "Nothing will be any good without me." Making love to Jack on the morning of her marriage to Alfred had been the greatest sin she had ever committed, and she had no doubt that now she was being punished for it; but still there were times when she felt it was the only good thing she had done in her entire life; and when she looked at her baby, she could not bring herself to regret it. Nevertheless she was restless. A baby was not enough. She felt incomplete, unfulfilled. Her house seemed too small, Kingsbridge seemed half dead, life was too uneventful. She became impatient with the baby and snappish with Martha.

At the end of the summer, the farmer brought the horse back: it was no longer needed, and suddenly Richard and Aliena had no income. One day in early autumn Richard went to Shiring to sell his armor. While he was away, and Aliena was eating apples for dinner to save money, Jack's mother walked into the house.

"Ellen!" Aliena said. She was more than startled. There was consternation

in her voice, for Ellen had cursed a church wedding, and Prior Philip might yet have her punished for it.

“I came to see my grandson,” Ellen said calmly.

“But how did you know…?”

“You hear things, even in the forest.” She went over to the cradle in the corner and looked at the sleeping child. Her face softened. “Well, well. There’s no doubt about whose son he is. Does he keep well?”

“Never had anything wrong with him—he’s small but tough,” Aliena said proudly. She added: “Like his grandmother.” She studied Ellen. She was leaner than when she had left, and brown-skinned, and she wore a short leather tunic that revealed her tanned calves. Her feet were bare. She looked young and fit: forest life seemed to suit her. Aliena calculated that she must be thirty-five years old. “You seem very well,” she said.

“I miss you all,” Ellen said. “I miss you, and Martha, and even your brother Richard. I miss my Jack. And I miss Tom.” She looked sad.

Aliena was still worried for her safety. “Did anyone see you coming here? The monks might still want to punish you.”

“There isn’t a monk in Kingsbridge who’s got the guts to arrest me,” she said with a grin. “But I was careful anyway—no one saw me.” There was a pause. Ellen looked hard at Aliena. Aliena became slightly uncomfortable under the penetrating stare of Ellen’s curious honey-colored eyes. At last Ellen said: “You’re wasting your life.”

“What do you mean?” Aliena said, though Ellen’s words had struck a chord instantly.

“You should go and find Jack.”

Aliena felt a pang of delicious hope. “But I can’t,” she said.

“Why not?”

“I don’t know where he is, for one thing.”

“I do.”

Aliena’s heart beat faster. She had thought nobody knew where Jack had gone. It was as if he had vanished off the face of the earth. But now she would be able to imagine him in a specific, real place. It changed everything. He might be somewhere nearby. She could show him his baby.

Ellen said: “At least, I know where he was headed.”

“Where?” Aliena said urgently.

“Santiago de Compostela.”

“Oh, God.” Her heart sank. She was desperately disappointed. Compostela was the town in Spain where the Apostle James was buried. It was a journey of several months. Jack might as well have been on the far side of the world.

Ellen said: “He was hoping to speak to the jongleurs on the road and find out something about his father.”

Aliena nodded disconsolately. That made sense. Jack had always resented knowing so little about his father. But he might well never return. On such a long journey he was almost certain to find a cathedral he wanted to work on, and then he might settle down. In going to seek his father he had probably lost his son.

“It’s so far away,” Aliena said. “I wish I could go after him.”

“Why not?” Ellen said. “Thousands of people go there on pilgrimage. Why shouldn’t you?”

“I made a vow to my father to take care of Richard until he becomes the earl,” she told Ellen. “I couldn’t leave him.”

Ellen looked skeptical. “Just how do you imagine you’re helping him at the moment?” she said. “You’re penniless and William is the new earl. Richard has lost any chance he might have had of regaining the earldom. You’re no more use to him here in Kingsbridge than you would be in Compostela. You dedicated your life to that wretched vow. But now there’s nothing more you can do. I don’t see how your father could reproach you. If you ask me, the greatest favor you could do Richard would be to abandon him for a while, and give him a chance to learn independence.”

It was true, Aliena thought, that she was no use to Richard at the moment, whether she stayed in Kingsbridge or not. Could it be possible that she was now free—free to go and find Jack? The mere idea made her heart race. “But I haven’t any money to go on pilgrimage,” she said.

“What happened to that great big horse?”

“We still have it—”

“Sell it.”

“How can I? It’s Richard’s.”

“For God’s sake, who the hell bought it?” Ellen said angrily. “Did Richard work hard for years building up a wool business? Did Richard negotiate with greedy peasants and hard-nosed Flemish buyers? Did Richard collect the wool and store it and set up a market stall and sell it? Don’t tell me it’s Richard’s horse!”

“He would be so angry—”

“Good. Let’s hope he gets angry enough to do some work for the first time in his life.”

Aliena opened her mouth to argue, then closed it again. Ellen was right. Richard had always relied on her for everything. While he had been fighting for his patrimony she had been obliged to support him. But now he was not fighting for anything. He had no further claim on her.

She imagined meeting Jack again. She visualized his face, smiling at her. They would kiss. She felt a stir of pleasure in her loins. She realized she was getting damp down there at the mere thought of him. She felt embarrassed.

Ellen said: “Traveling is hazardous, of course.”

Aliena smiled. “That’s one thing I’m not worried about. I’ve been traveling since I was seventeen years old. I can take care of myself.”

“Anyway, there will be hundreds of people on the road to Compostela. You can join with a large pilgrim band. You won’t have to travel alone.”

Aliena sighed. “You know, if I didn’t have Baby I think I’d do it.”

“It’s because of Baby that you must,” Ellen said. “He needs a father.”

Aliena had not looked at it that way: she had been thinking of the journey as purely selfish. Now she saw that the baby needed Jack as much as she did. In her obsession with the day-to-day care of the baby she had not thought about his future. Suddenly it seemed terribly unfair that he should grow up not knowing the brilliant, unique, adorable genius who was his father.

She realized she was talking herself into going, and she felt a thrill of apprehension.

A snag occurred to her. “I couldn’t take the baby to Compostela.”

Ellen shrugged. “He won’t know the difference between Spain and England. But you don’t have to take him.”

“What else could I do?”

“Leave him with me. I’ll feed him on goat’s milk and wild honey.”

Aliena shook her head. “I couldn’t bear to be parted from him. I love him too much.”

“If you love him,” Ellen said, “go and find his father.”

II

Aliena found a ship at Wareham. When she had crossed to France as a girl, with her father, they had gone in one of the Norman warships. These were long, narrow vessels whose sides curved up to a high, sharp point at front and back. They had rows of oars along each side and a square leather sail. The ship that was to take her to Normandy now was similar to those warships, but wider at the waist, and deeper, to take cargo. It had come from Bordeaux, and she had watched the barefoot sailors unload great casks of wine destined for the cellars of the wealthy.

Aliena knew she should leave her baby but she was heartbroken about it. Every time she looked at him she rehearsed all the arguments and decided again that she ought to go; and it made no difference: she did not want to part from him.

Ellen had come to Wareham with her. Here Aliena had joined up with two monks from Glastonbury Abbey who were going to visit their property in Normandy. Three other people would be passengers on the ship: a young squire who had spent four years with an English relative and was returning to his parents in Toulouse, and two young masons who had heard that wages were higher and girls were prettier on the other side of the water. On the morning they were to sail, they all waited in the alehouse while the crew loaded the ship with heavy ingots of Cornish tin. The masons drank several pots of ale but did not appear to get drunk. Aliena hugged the baby and cried silently.

At last the ship was ready to leave. The sturdy gray mare Aliena had bought in Shiring had never seen the sea, and refused to go up the gangplank. However, the squire and the masons collaborated enthusiastically and eventually got the horse on board.

Aliena was blinded by tears as she gave her baby to Ellen. Ellen took the baby, but she said: “You can’t do this. I was wrong to suggest it.”

Aliena cried even more. “But there’s Jack,” she sobbed. “I can’t live without Jack, I know I can’t. I must look for him.”

“Oh, yes,” Ellen said. “I’m not suggesting you abandon the trip. But you can’t leave your baby behind. Take him with you.”

Aliena was flooded with gratitude and cried all the more. “Do you really think it will be all right?”

“He’s been as happy as could be, all the way here, riding with you. The rest of the trip will only be more of the same. And he doesn’t much like goat’s

milk.”

The captain of the vessel said: “Come on, ladies, the tide’s on the turn.”

Aliena took the baby back and kissed Ellen. “Thank you. I’m so happy.”

“Good luck,” Ellen said.

Aliena turned and ran up the gangplank onto the ship.

They left immediately. Aliena waved until Ellen was a dot on the quay. As they rowed out of Poole Harbour it began to rain. There was no shelter up above, so Aliena sat in the bottom, with the horses and the cargo. The partial decking on which the oarsmen sat above her head did not completely protect her from the weather, but she was able to keep the baby dry inside her cloak. The motion of the ship seemed to agree with him, and he went to sleep. When darkness fell, and the ship anchored, Aliena joined the monks in their prayers. Afterward she dozed fitfully, sitting upright with the baby in her arms.

They landed at Barfleur the next day and Aliena found lodgings in the nearest town, Cherbourg. She spent another day going around the town, speaking to innkeepers and builders, asking if they recalled a young English mason with flaming red hair. Nobody did. There were lots of redheaded Normans, so they might not have noticed him. Or he might have crossed to a different port.

Aliena had not realistically expected to find traces of Jack so soon, but nevertheless she was disheartened. On the following day she set off, heading south. She traveled with a seller of knives and his cheerful fat wife and four children. They moved quite slowly, and Aliena was happy to keep to their pace and conserve her horse’s strength, for it had to carry her a long way. Despite the protection of traveling with a family she kept her sharp, long-bladed knife strapped up her left sleeve. She did not look rich: her clothes were warm but not fancy, and her horse was sturdy rather than spirited. She was careful to keep a few coins handy in a purse, and never show anyone the heavy money belt strapped around her waist underneath her tunic. She fed the baby discreetly, not letting strange men see her breasts.

That night she was immensely cheered by a splendid stroke of luck. They stopped at a tiny village called Lessay, and there Aliena met a monk who vividly remembered a young English mason who had been fascinated by the revolutionary new rib-vaulting in the abbey church. Aliena was exultant. The monk even remembered Jack saying he had landed at Honfleur, which explained why there was no trace of him at Cherbourg. Although it was a year ago, the man talked volubly about Jack, and had obviously been charmed by him. Aliena was thrilled to be talking to someone who had seen him. It was confirmation that she was on the right trail.

Eventually she left the monk and lay down to sleep on the floor of the abbey guesthouse. As she drifted off she hugged the baby tight and whispered into his tiny pink ear: “We’re going to find your Daddy.”

The baby fell ill at Tours.

The city was wealthy and dirty and crowded. Rats ran in packs around the huge grain stores beside the river Loire. It was full of pilgrims. Tours was a traditional starting point for the pilgrimage to Compostela. In addition, the feast day of Saint Martin, the first bishop of Tours, was imminent, and many had come to the abbey church to visit his tomb. Martin was famous for having cut his cloak in two and given half to a naked beggar. Because of the feast, the inns and lodging houses of Tours were packed. Aliena was obliged to take what she could, and she stayed in a ramshackle dockside tavern run by two elderly sisters who were too old and frail to keep the place clean.

At first she did not spend much time at her lodgings. With her baby in her arms she explored the streets, asking after Jack. She soon realized the city was so constantly full of visitors that the innkeepers could not even remember their guests of the week before last, so there was no point in asking them about someone who might have been here a year ago. However, she stopped at every building site to ask if they had employed a young English mason with red hair called Jack. Nobody had.

She was disappointed. She had not heard anything of him since Lessay. If he had stuck to his plan of going to Compostela he would almost certainly have come to Tours. She began to fear that he might have changed his mind.

She went to the church of Saint Martin, as everyone did; and there she saw a team of builders engaged on extensive repair work. She sought out the master builder, a small, bad-tempered man with thinning hair, and asked if he had employed an English mason.

“I never employ the English,” he said abruptly, before she had finished her sentence. “English masons are no good.”

“This one is *very* good,” she said. “And he speaks good French, so you might not have known he’s English. He has red hair—”

“No, never seen him,” the master said rudely, and turned away.

Aliena went back to her lodgings somewhat depressed. To be treated nastily for no reason at all was very dispiriting.

That night she suffered a stomach upset and got no sleep at all. The next day she felt too ill to go out, and spent all day lying in bed in the tavern, with the stink of the river coming in at the window and the smells of spilled wine and cooking oil seeping up the stairs. On the following morning the baby was ill.

He woke her with his crying. It was not his usual lusty, demanding squall, but a thin, weak, sorry complaint. He had the same upset stomach Aliena had, but he was also feverish. His normally alert blue eyes were shut tight in distress, and his tiny hands were clenched into fists. His skin was flushed and

blotchy.

He had never been ill before, and Aliena did not know what to do.

She gave him her breast. He sucked thirstily for a while, then cried again, then sucked again. The milk went straight through him, and seemed to give him no comfort.

There was a pleasant young chambermaid working at the tavern, and Aliena asked her to go to the abbey and buy holy water. She considered sending for a doctor, but they always wanted to bleed people, and she could not believe that it would help Baby to be bled.

The maid returned with her mother, who burned a bunch of dried herbs in an iron bowl. They gave off an acrid smoke that seemed to absorb the bad smells of the place. “The baby will be thirsty—give him the breast as often as he wants it,” she said. “Have plenty to drink yourself, so that you have enough milk. That’s all you can do.”

“Will he be all right?” Aliena said anxiously.

The woman looked sympathetic. “I don’t know, dear. When they’re so small you can’t tell. Usually they survive things like this. Sometimes they don’t. Is he your first?”

“Yes.”

“Just remember that you can always have more.”

Aliena thought: But this is Jack’s baby, and I’ve lost Jack. She kept her thoughts to herself, thanked the woman, and paid her for the herbs.

When they had gone she diluted the holy water with ordinary water, dipped a rag in it, and cooled the baby’s head.

He seemed to get worse as the day wore on. Aliena gave him her breast when he cried, sang to him when he lay awake, and cooled him with holy water when he slept. He suckled continually but fitfully. Fortunately she had plenty of milk—she always had. She herself was still ill and kept going with dry bread and watered wine. As the hours went by she came to hate the room she was in, with its bare flyblown walls, rough plank floor, ill-fitting door and mean little window. It had precisely four items of furniture: the rickety bed, a three-legged stool, a clothes pole, and a floor-standing candlestick with three prongs but only one candle.

When darkness fell the maid came and lit the candle. She looked at the baby, who was lying on the bed, waving his arms and legs and grizzling plaintively. “Poor little thing,” she said. “He doesn’t understand why he feels so bad.”

Aliena moved from the stool to the bed, but she kept the candle burning, so that she could see the baby. Through the night they both dozed fitfully. Toward dawn the baby’s breathing became shallow, and he stopped crying and moving.

Aliena began to cry silently. She had lost Jack’s trail, and her baby was

going to die here, at a house full of strangers in a city far from home. There would never be another Jack and she would never have another baby. Perhaps she would die too. That might be for the best.

At daybreak she blew out the candle and fell into an exhausted sleep.

A loud noise from downstairs woke her abruptly. The sun was up and the riverside below the window was loudly busy. The baby was dead still, his face peaceful at last. Cold fear gripped her heart. She touched his chest: he was neither hot nor cold. She gasped with fright. Then he gave a deep, shuddering sigh and opened his eyes. Aliena almost fainted with relief.

She snatched him up and hugged him, and he began to cry lustily. He was well again, she realized: his temperature was normal and he was in no distress. She put him to her breast and he sucked hungrily. Instead of turning away after a few mouthfuls he carried on, and when one breast was dry he drained the other. Then he fell into a deep, contented sleep.

Aliena realized that her symptoms had gone, too, although she felt wrung out. She slept beside the baby until midday, then fed him again; then she went down to the public room of the tavern and ate a dinner of goat's cheese and fresh bread with a little bacon.

Perhaps it was the holy water of Saint Martin that had made the baby well. That afternoon she went back to Saint Martin's tomb to give thanks to the saint.

While she was in the great abbey church, she watched the builders at work, thinking about Jack, who might yet see his baby after all. She wondered whether he had got diverted from his intended route. Perhaps he was working in Paris, carving stones for a new cathedral there. While she was thinking about him, her eye lit on a new corbel being installed by the builders. It was carved with a figure of a man who appeared to be holding the weight of the pillar above on his back. She gasped aloud. She knew instantly, without a shadow of doubt, that the twisted, agonized figure had been carved by Jack. So he had been here!

With her heart beating excitedly, she approached the men who were doing the work. "That corbel," she said breathlessly. "The man who carved it was English, wasn't he?"

An old laborer with a broken nose answered her. "That's right—Jack Fitzjack did it. Never seen anything like it in my life."

"When was he here?" Aliena said. She held her breath while the old man scratched his graying head through a greasy cap.

"Must be nearly a year ago, now. He didn't stay long, mind. Master didn't like him." He lowered his voice. "Jack was too good, if you want to know the truth. He showed the master up. So he had to go." He laid a finger alongside his nose in a gesture of confidentiality.

Aliena said excitedly: "Did he say where he was going?"

The old man looked at the baby. “That child is his, if the hair is anything to go by.”

“Yes, he is.”

“Will Jack be pleased to see you, do you think?”

Aliena realized the laborer thought Jack might have been running away from her. She laughed. “Oh, yes!” she said. “He’ll be pleased to see me.”

He shrugged. “He said he was going to Compostela, for what it’s worth.”

“Thank you!” Aliena said happily, and to the old man’s astonishment and delight she kissed him.

The pilgrim trails across France converged at Ostabat, in the foothills of the Pyrenees. There the group of twenty or so pilgrims with whom Aliena was traveling swelled to about seventy. They were a footsore but merry bunch: some prosperous citizens, some probably on the run from justice, a few drunks, and several monks and clergymen. The men of God were there for reasons of piety but most of the others seemed bent on having a good time. Several languages were spoken, including Flemish, a German tongue, and a southern French language called Oc. Nevertheless there was no lack of communication among them, and as they crossed the Pyrenees together they sang, played games, told stories, and—in several cases—had love affairs.

After Tours, unfortunately, Aliena did not find any more people who remembered Jack. However, there were not as many jongleurs along her route through France as she had imagined. One of the Flemish pilgrims, a man who had made the journey before, said there would be more of them on the Spanish side of the mountains.

He was right. At Pamplona, Aliena was thrilled to find a jongleur who recalled speaking to a young Englishman with red hair who had been asking about his father.

As the weary pilgrims moved slowly through northern Spain toward the coast, she met several more jongleurs, and most of them remembered Jack. She realized, with mounting excitement, that all of them said he had been going *to* Compostela: no one had encountered him coming back.

Which meant he was still there.

As her body became more sore her spirits lifted higher. She could hardly contain her optimism during the last few days of the journey. It was midwinter, but the weather was mild and sunny. The baby, now six months old, was fit and happy. She felt sure of finding Jack at Compostela.

They arrived there on Christmas Day.

They went straight to the cathedral and attended mass. The church was packed, naturally. Aliena walked round and round the congregation, staring at faces, but Jack was not there. Of course, he was not very devout; in fact he

never went to churches except to work. By the time she had found accommodation it was dark. She went to bed, but she could hardly sleep for excitement, knowing that Jack was probably within a few steps of where she lay, and tomorrow she would see him, and kiss him, and show him his baby.

She was up at first light. The baby sensed her impatience and nursed irritably, biting her nipples with his gums. She washed him hastily, then went out, carrying him in her arms.

As she walked the dusty streets she expected to see Jack around every corner. How astonished he would be when he caught sight of her! And how pleased! However, she did not see him on the streets, so she began calling at lodging houses. As soon as people started work she went to building sites and spoke to masons. She knew the words for *mason* and *redhead* in the Castilian dialect, and the inhabitants of Compostela were used to foreigners, so she succeeded in communicating; but she found no trace of Jack. She began to be worried. Surely people should know him. He was not the kind of person you could easily overlook, and he must have been living here for several months. She also kept an eye open for his characteristic carvings, but she saw none.

Around midmorning she met a blowsy, middle-aged woman tavern-keeper who spoke French and remembered Jack.

"A handsome lad—is he yours? None of the local girls made any progress with him, anyway. He was here at midsummer, but he didn't stay long, more's the pity. He wouldn't say where he was going, either. I liked him. If you find him, give him a big kiss from me."

Aliena went back to her lodgings and lay on the bed, staring at the ceiling. The baby grizzled but for once she ignored him. She was exhausted, disappointed, and homesick. It was not fair: she had trailed him all the way to Compostela, but he had gone somewhere else!

Since he had not gone back to the Pyrenees, and as there was nothing to the west of Compostela but a strip of coastline and an ocean that reached to the end of the world, Jack must have gone farther south. She would have to set off again, on her gray mare, with her baby in her arms, into the heart of Spain.

She wondered how far from home she would have to go before her pilgrimage came to an end.

Jack spent Christmas Day with his friend Raschid Alharoun in Toledo. Raschid was a baptized Saracen who had made a fortune importing spices from the East, especially pepper. They met at midday mass in the great cathedral and then strolled back, in the warm winter sunshine, through the narrow streets and the fragrant bazaar to the wealthy quarter.

Raschid's house was made of dazzling white stone and built around a

courtyard with a fountain. The shady arcades of the courtyard reminded Jack of the cloisters at Kingsbridge Priory. In England they gave protection from wind and rain, but here their purpose was to deflect the heat of the sun.

Raschid and his guests sat on floor cushions and dined off a low table. The men were waited on by the wives and daughters, and various servant girls whose place in the household was somewhat dubious: as a Christian, Raschid could have only one wife, but Jack suspected that he had quietly overlooked the Church's disapproval of concubines.

The women were the greatest attraction of Raschid's hospitable house. They were all beautiful. His wife was a statuesque, graceful woman with smooth dark-brown skin, lustrous black hair, and liquid brown eyes, and his daughters were slimmer versions of the same type. There were three of them. The eldest was engaged to be married to another dinner guest, the son of a silk merchant in the city. "My Raya is the perfect daughter," Raschid said as she went around the table with a bowl of scented water for the guests to dip their hands in. "She is attentive, obedient and beautiful. Josef is a lucky man." The fiancé bowed his head in acknowledgment of his good fortune.

The second daughter was proud, even haughty. She appeared to resent the praise lavished on her sister. She looked down at Jack while she poured some kind of drink into his goblet from a copper jug. "What is it?" he said.

"Peppermint cordial," she said disdainfully. She disliked waiting on him, for she was the daughter of a great man, and he was a penniless vagabond.

It was the third daughter, Aysha, whom Jack liked most. In the three months he had been here he had got to know her quite well. She was fifteen or sixteen years old, small and lively, always grinning. Although she was three or four years younger than he, she did not seem juvenile. She had a lively, questioning intelligence. She asked him endless questions about England and the different way of life there. She often made fun of Toledo society manners—the snobbery of the Arabs, the fastidiousness of the Jews, and the bad taste of the newly rich Christians—and she sometimes had Jack in fits of laughter. Although she was the youngest, she seemed the least innocent of the three: something about the way she looked at Jack, as she leaned over him to place a dish of spicy prawns on the table, unmistakably revealed a licentious streak. She caught his eye and said "Peppermint cordial" in a perfect imitation of her sister's snooty manner, and Jack giggled. When he was with Aysha he could often forget Aliena for hours at a time.

But when he was away from this house, Aliena was on his mind as much as if he had left her only yesterday. His memories of her were painfully vivid, although he had not seen her for more than a year. He could recall any of her expressions at will: laughing, thoughtful, suspicious, anxious, pleased, astonished, and—clearest of all—passionate. He had forgotten nothing about her body, and he could still see the curve of her breast, feel the soft skin on

the inside of her thigh, taste her kiss, and smell the scent of her arousal. He often longed for her.

To cure himself of his fruitless desire he sometimes imagined what Aliena must be doing. In his mind's eye he would see her pulling Alfred's boots off at the end of the day, sitting down to eat with him, kissing him, making love to him, and giving her breast to a baby boy who looked just like Alfred. These visions tortured him but did not stop him from longing for her.

Today, Christmas Day, Aliena would roast a swan and re-dress it with its feathers for the table, and there would be posset to drink, made of ale, eggs, milk, and nutmeg. The food in front of Jack could not have been more different. There were mouth-watering dishes of strangely spiced lamb, rice mixed with nuts, and salads dressed with lemon juice and olive oil. It had taken Jack awhile to get used to Spanish cooking. They never served the great joints of beef, legs of pork and haunches of venison without which no feast was complete in England; nor did they consume thick slabs of bread. They did not have the lush pastures for grazing vast herds of cattle or the rich soil on which to grow fields of waving wheat. They made up for the relatively small quantities of meat by imaginative ways of cooking it with all kinds of spices, and in place of the ubiquitous bread of the English they had a wide variety of vegetables and fruits.

Jack was living with a small group of English clerics in Toledo. They were part of an international community of scholars that included Jews, Muslims and Arab Christians. The Englishmen were occupied translating works of mathematics from Arabic into Latin, so they could be read by Christians. There was an atmosphere of feverish excitement among them as they discovered and explored the treasure-house of Arab learning, and they had casually welcomed Jack as a student: they admitted into their circle anyone who understood what they were doing and shared their enthusiasm for it. They were like peasants who have labored for years to scratch a crop out of poor soil and then suddenly move to a rich alluvial valley. Jack had abandoned building to study mathematics. He had not yet needed to work for money: the clerics casually gave him a bed and any meals he wanted, and they would have provided him with a new robe and sandals if he had needed them.

Raschid was one of their sponsors. As an international trader he was multilingual and cosmopolitan in his attitudes. At home he spoke Castilian, the language of Christian Spain, rather than Mozarabic. His family also all spoke French, the language of the Normans, who were important traders. Although he was a man of commerce, he had a powerful intellect and a wide-ranging curiosity. He loved to talk to scholars about their theories. He had taken a liking to Jack immediately, and Jack dined at his house several times a week.

Now, as they began to eat, Raschid asked Jack: “What have the philosophers taught us this week?”

“I’ve been reading Euclid.” Euclid’s *Elements of Geometry* had been one of the first books translated.

“Euclid is a funny name for an Arab,” said Ismail, Raschid’s brother.

“He was Greek,” Jack explained. “He lived before the birth of Christ. His work was lost by the Romans but preserved by the Egyptians—so it comes to us in Arabic.”

“And now Englishmen are translating it into Latin!” Raschid said. “This amuses me.”

“But what have you learned?” said Josef, the fiancé of Raya.

Jack hesitated. It was hard to explain. He tried to make it practical. “My stepfather, the builder, taught me how to perform certain operations in geometry: how to divide a line exactly in half, how to draw a right angle, and how to draw one square inside another so that the smaller is half the area of the larger.”

“What is the purpose of such skills?” Josef interrupted. There was a note of scorn in his voice. He saw Jack as something of an upstart, and was jealous of the attention Raschid paid to Jack’s conversation.

“Those operations are essential in planning buildings,” Jack replied pleasantly, pretending not to notice Josef’s tone. “Take a look at this courtyard. The area of the covered arcades around the edges is exactly the same as the open area in the middle. Most small courtyards are built like that, including the cloisters of monasteries. It’s because these proportions are most pleasing. If the middle is bigger, it looks like a marketplace, and if it’s smaller, it just looks as if there’s a hole in the roof. But to get it exactly right, the builder has to be able to draw the open part in the middle so that it’s precisely half the area of the whole thing.”

“I never knew that!” Raschid said triumphantly. He liked nothing better than to learn something new.

“Euclid explains why these techniques work,” Jack went on. “For example, the two parts of the divided line are equal because they form corresponding sides of congruent triangles.”

“Congruent?” Raschid queried.

“It means exactly alike.”

“Ah—now I see.”

However, no one else did, Jack could tell.

Josef said: “But you could perform all these geometric operations before you read Euclid—so I don’t see that you’re any better off now.”

Raschid protested: “A man is always better off for understanding something!”

Jack said: “Besides, now that I understand the principles of geometry I

may be able to devise solutions to new problems that baffled my stepfather.” He felt rather frustrated by the conversation: Euclid had come to him like the blinding flash of a revelation, but he was failing to communicate the thrilling importance of these new discoveries. He changed tack somewhat. “It’s Euclid’s method that is the most interesting,” he said. “He takes five axioms —self-evident truths—and deduces everything else logically from them.”

“Give me an example of an axiom,” Raschid said.

“A line can be prolonged indefinitely.”

“No it can’t,” said Aysha, who was handing round a bowl of figs.

The guests were somewhat startled to hear a girl joining in the argument, but Raschid laughed indulgently: Aysha was his favorite. “And why not?” he said.

“It has to come to an end sometime,” she said.

Jack said: “But in your imagination, it could go on indefinitely.”

“In my imagination, water could flow uphill and dogs speak Latin,” she retorted.

Her mother came into the room and heard that rejoinder. “Aysha!” she said in a steely voice. “Out!”

All the men laughed. Aysha made a face and went out. Josef’s father said: “Whoever marries her will have his hands full!” They laughed again. Jack laughed too; then he noticed they were all looking at him, as if the joke was on him.

After dinner, Raschid showed off his collection of mechanical toys. He had a tank in which you could mix water and wine and they would come out separately; a marvelous water-driven clock, which kept track of the hours in the day with phenomenal accuracy; a jug that would refill itself but never overflow; and a small wooden statue of a woman with eyes made of some kind of crystal that absorbed water in the warmth of the day and then shed it in the cool of the evening, so that she appeared to be weeping. Jack shared Raschid’s fascination with these toys, but he was most intrigued by the weeping statue, for whereas the mechanisms of the others were simple once they had been explained, no one really understood how the statue worked.

They sat in the arcades around the courtyard in the afternoon, playing games, dozing, or talking idly. Jack wished he belonged to a big family like this one, with sisters and uncles and in-laws, and a family home they could all visit, and a position of respect in a small town. Suddenly he recalled the conversation he had had with his mother the night she rescued him from the priory punishment cell. He had asked her about his father’s relations, and she had said *Yes, he had a big family, back in France*. I have got a family like this one, somewhere, Jack realized. My father’s brothers and sisters are my uncles and aunts. I might have cousins of my own age. I wonder if I will ever find them?

He felt adrift. He could survive anywhere but he belonged nowhere. He had been a carver, a builder, a monk and a mathematician, and he did not know which was the real Jack, if any. He sometimes wondered if he should be a jongleur like his father, or an outlaw like his mother. He was nineteen years old, homeless and rootless, with no family and no purpose in life.

He played chess with Josef and won; then Raschid came up and said: “Give me your chair, Josef—I want to hear more about Euclid.”

Josef obediently gave up his chair to his prospective father-in-law, then moved away—he had already heard everything he ever wanted to know about Euclid. Raschid sat down and said to Jack: “You’re enjoying yourself?”

“Your hospitality is matchless,” Jack said smoothly. He had learned courtly manners in Toledo.

“Thank you; but I meant with Euclid.”

“Yes. I don’t think I succeeded in explaining the importance of this book. You see—”

“I think I understand,” Raschid said. “Like you, I love knowledge for its own sake.”

“Yes.”

“Even so, every man has to make a living.”

Jack did not see the relevance of that remark, so he waited for Raschid to say more. However, Raschid sat back with his eyes half closed, apparently content to enjoy a companionable silence. Jack began to wonder whether Raschid was reproaching him for not working at a trade. Eventually Jack said: “I expect I shall go back to building, one day.”

“Good.”

Jack smiled. “When I left Kingsbridge, riding my mother’s horse, with my stepfather’s tools in a satchel slung across my shoulder, I thought there was only one way to build a church: thick walls with round arches and small windows topped by a wooden ceiling or a barrel-shaped stone vault. The cathedrals I saw on my way from Kingsbridge to Southampton taught me no different. But Normandy changed my life.”

“I can imagine,” Raschid said sleepily. He was not very interested, so Jack recalled those days in silence. Within hours of landing at Honfleur he was looking at the abbey church of Jumièges. It was the highest church he had ever seen, but otherwise it had the usual round arches and wooden ceiling—except in the chapter house, where Abbot Urso had built a revolutionary stone ceiling. Instead of a smooth, continuous barrel, or a creased groin vault, this ceiling had ribs which sprang up from the tops of the columns and met at the apex of the roof. The ribs were thick and strong, and the triangular sections of ceiling between the ribs were thin and light. The monk who was keeper of the fabric explained to Jack that it was easier to build that way: the ribs were put up first, and the sections between were then simpler to make. This type of

vault was also lighter. The monk was hoping to hear news from Jack of technical innovations in England, and Jack had to disappoint him. However, Jack's evident appreciation of rib-vaulting pleased the monk, and he told Jack that there was a church at Lessay, not far away, that had rib-vaulting throughout.

Jack went to Lessay the next day, and spent all afternoon in the church, staring in wonder at the vault. What was so striking about it, he finally decided, was the way the ribs, coming down from the apex of the vault to the capitals on top of the columns, seemed to *dramatize* the way the weight of the roof was being carried by the strongest members. The ribs made the logic of the building visible.

Jack traveled south, to the county of Anjou, and got a job doing repair work at the abbey church in Tours. He had no trouble persuading the master builder to give him a trial. The tools he had in his possession showed that he was a mason, and after a day at work the master knew he was a good one. His boast to Aliena, that he could get work anywhere in the world, was not entirely vain.

Among the tools he had inherited was Tom's foot rule. Only master builders owned these, and when the others discovered Jack had one, they asked him how he had become a master at such a young age. His first inclination was to explain that he was not really a master builder; but then he decided to say he was. After all, he had effectively run the Kingsbridge site while he was a monk, and he could draw plans just as well as Tom. But the master he was working for was annoyed to discover that he had hired a possible rival. One day Jack suggested a modification to the monk in charge of the building, and drew what he meant on the tracing floor. That was the beginning of his troubles. The master builder became convinced that Jack was after his job. He began to find fault with Jack's work, and put him on the monotonous task of cutting plain blocks.

Soon Jack set off again. He went to the abbey of Cluny, the headquarters of a monastic empire that spread all across Christendom. It was the Cluniac order that had initiated and fostered the now-famous pilgrimage to the tomb of Saint James at Compostela. All along the Compostela road there were churches dedicated to Saint James and Cluniac monasteries to take care of pilgrims. As Jack's father had been a jongleur on the pilgrim road, it seemed likely he had visited Cluny.

However, he had not. There were no jongleurs at Cluny. Jack learned nothing about his father there.

Nevertheless, the journey was by no means wasted. Every arch Jack had ever seen, until the moment he entered the abbey church of Cluny, had been semicircular; and every vault had been either tunnel-shaped, like a long line of round arches all stuck together, or groined, like the crossing where two

tunnels met. The arches at Cluny were not semicircular.

They rose to a point.

There were pointed arches in the main arcades; the groined vaults of the side aisles had pointed arches; and—most startling of all—above the nave there was a stone ceiling that could only be described as a pointed barrel vault. Jack had always been taught that a circle was strong because it was perfect, and a round arch was strong because it was part of a circle. He would have thought that pointed arches were weak. In fact, the monks told him, the pointed arches were considerably stronger than the old round ones. The church at Cluny seemed to prove it, for despite the great weight of stonework in its peaked vault, it was very high.

Jack did not stay long at Cluny. He continued south, following the pilgrim road, diverging whenever the whim took him. In the early summer there were jongleurs all along the route, in the larger towns or near the Cluniac monasteries. They recited their verse narratives to crowds of pilgrims in front of churches and shrines, sometimes accompanying themselves on the viol, just the way Aliena had told him. Jack approached every one and asked if he had known Jack Shareburg. They all said no.

The churches he saw on his way through southwest France and northern Spain continued to astonish him. They were all much higher than the English cathedrals. Some of them had banded barrel vaults. The bands, reaching from pier to pier across the vault of the church, made it possible to build in stages, bay by bay, instead of all at once. They also changed the look of a church. By emphasizing the divisions between bays, they revealed that the building was a series of identical units, like a sliced loaf; and this imposed order and logic on the huge interior space.

He was in Compostela at midsummer. He had not known there were places in the world that were so hot. Santiago was another breathtakingly tall church, and the nave, still under construction, also had a banded barrel vault. From there he went farther south.

The kingdoms of Spain had been under Saracen rule until recently; indeed, most of the country south of Toledo was still Muslim-dominated. The appearance of Saracen buildings fascinated Jack: their high, cool interiors, their arcades of arches, their stonework blinding white in the sun. But most interesting of all was the discovery that both rib-vaulting and pointed arches featured in Muslim architecture. Perhaps this was where the French had got their new ideas.

He could never work on another church like Kingsbridge Cathedral, he thought as he sat in the warm Spanish afternoon, listening vaguely to the laughter of the women somewhere deep in the big cool house. He still wanted to build the most beautiful cathedral in the world, but it would not be a massive, solid, fortress-like structure. He wanted to use the new techniques,

the rib-vaults and the pointed arches. However, he thought he would not use them in quite the way they had been used so far. None of the churches he had seen had made the most of the possibilities. A picture of a church was forming in his mind. The details were hazy but the overall feeling was very strong: it was a spacious, airy building, with sunlight pouring through its huge windows, and an arched vault so high it seemed to reach heaven.

"Josef and Raya will need a house," Raschid said suddenly. "If you were to build it, other work would follow."

Jack was startled. One thing he had not thought of building was houses. "Do you think they want me to build their house?" he said.

"They might."

There was another long silence, during which Jack contemplated life as a housebuilder for wealthy merchants in Toledo.

Eventually Raschid seemed to come awake. He sat upright and opened his eyes wide. "I like you, Jack," he said. "You're an honest man, and you're worth talking to, which is more than can be said for most people I've met. I hope we will always be friends."

"So do I," said Jack, somewhat surprised by this unprompted tribute.

"I'm a Christian, so I don't keep my women locked away, as some of my Muslim brothers do. On the other hand, I'm Arab; which means I don't give them quite the…forgive me, the license, that other women are used to. I allow them to meet and talk with male guests at the house. I even allow friendships to develop. But at the point where friendship begins to ripen into something more—as happens so naturally among young people—then I expect the man to make a formal move. Anything else would be an insult."

"Of course," Jack said.

"I knew you'd understand." Raschid stood up and put an affectionate hand on Jack's shoulder. "I've never been blessed with a son; but if I had, I think he would have been like you."

On impulse, Jack said: "But darker, I hope."

Raschid looked blank for a moment, then he roared with laughter, startling the other guests around the courtyard. "Yes!" he said merrily. "Darker!" And he went into the house, still guffawing.

The older guests began to take their leave. Jack sat by himself, thinking over what had been said to him, as the afternoon cooled. He was being offered a deal, there was no question of that. If he married Aysha, Raschid would launch him as housebuilder to the wealthy of Toledo. There was also a warning: if he did not intend to marry her, he should stay away. The people of Spain had more elaborate manners than the English, but they could make their meaning plain when necessary.

When Jack reflected on his situation he sometimes found it incredible. Is this me? he thought. Is this Jack Jackson, bastard son of a man who was

hanged, brought up in the forest, apprentice mason, escaped monk? Am I really being offered the beautiful daughter of a wealthy Arab merchant, plus a guaranteed living as a builder, in this balmy city? It sounds too good to be true. I even like the girl!

The sun was going down, and the courtyard was in shadow. There were only two people left in the arcade—himself and Josef. He was just wondering whether this situation could have been contrived when Raya and Aysha appeared, proving that it had. Despite the theoretical strictness about physical contact between girls and young men, their mother knew exactly what was happening, and Raschid probably did too. They would give the sweethearts a few moments of solitude; then, before they had time to do anything serious, the mother would come out into the courtyard, pretending to be outraged, and order the girls back inside.

On the other side of the courtyard Raya and Josef immediately started kissing. Jack stood up as Aysha approached him. She was wearing a floor-length white dress of Egyptian cotton, a fabric Jack had never seen before he came to Spain. Softer than wool and finer than linen, it clung to Aysha's limbs as she moved, and its white color seemed to glow in the twilight. It made her brown eyes look almost black. She stood close to him, grinning impishly. "What did he say to you?" she said.

Jack guessed she meant her father. "He offered to set me up as a housebuilder."

"What a dowry!" she said scornfully. "I can't believe it! At least he might have offered you money."

She had no patience with traditional Saracen indirection, Jack observed wryly. He found her frankness refreshing. "I don't think I want to build houses," he said.

She suddenly became solemn. "Do you like me?"

"You know I do."

She took a step forward, lifted her face, closed her eyes, stood on tiptoe and kissed him. She smelled of musk and ambergris. She opened her mouth, and her tongue darted between his lips playfully. His arms went around her almost involuntarily. He rested his hands on her waist. The cotton was very light: it was almost like touching her bare skin. She took his hand and raised it to her breast. Her body was lean and taut, and her breast was shallow, like a small, firm mound, with a tiny hard nipple at its tip. Her chest moved up and down as she became aroused. Jack was shocked to feel her hand moving between his legs. He squeezed her nipple between his fingertips. She gasped, and broke away from him, panting. He dropped his hands.

"Did I hurt you?" he whispered.

"No!" she said.

He thought of Aliena, and felt guilty; then he realized how foolish that

was. Why should he feel that he was betraying a woman who had *married* another man?

Aysha looked at him for a moment. It was almost dark, but he could see that her face was suffused with desire. She lifted his hand and put it back on her breast. “Do it again, but harder,” she said urgently.

He found her nipple and leaned forward to kiss her, but she pulled her head back and watched his face while he caressed her. He squeezed her nipple gently, then, obediently, pinched it hard. She arched her back so that her flat breasts protruded and her nipples made small hard puckers in the fabric of her dress. Jack bent his head to her breast. His lips closed around her nipple through the cotton. Then, on impulse, he took it between his teeth and bit down. He heard her sharp intake of breath.

He felt a shudder pass through her. She lifted his head from her breast and pressed herself against him. He bent his face to hers. She kissed him frantically, as if she wanted to cover his face with her mouth, and pulled his body to hers, making small panicky sounds in the back of her throat. Jack was aroused, bewildered and even a little scared: he had never known anything like this. He thought she was about to reach a climax. Then they were interrupted.

Her mother’s voice came from the doorway. “Raya! Aysha! Come inside at once!”

Aysha looked up at him, panting. After a moment she kissed him again, hard, pressing her lips against his until she bruised him. She broke away. “I love you,” she hissed. Then she ran into the house.

Jack watched her go. Raya followed her at a more sedate pace. Their mother flashed a disapproving look at him and Josef and then went in after the girls, shutting the door decisively behind her. Jack stood staring at the closed door, wondering what to make of it all.

Josef crossed the courtyard and interrupted his reverie. “Such beautiful girls—both of them!” he said with a conspiratorial wink.

Jack nodded absently and moved toward the gate. Josef went with him. As they passed under the arch, a servant materialized out of the shadows and closed the gate behind them.

Josef said: “The trouble with being engaged is that it leaves you with an ache between the legs.” Jack made no reply. Josef said: “I might go down to Fatima’s to get it eased.” Fatima’s was the whorehouse. Despite its Saracen name, nearly all the girls were light-skinned, and the few Arab whores were very high-priced. “Do you want to come?” Josef said.

“No,” Jack replied. “I’ve got a different kind of ache. Good night.” He walked quickly away. Josef was not his favorite companion at the best of times and tonight Jack found himself in an unforgiving mood.

The night air cooled as he headed back toward the college where he had a

hard bed in the dormitory. He felt he was at a turning point. He was being offered a life of ease and prosperity, and all he had to do was forget Aliena and abandon his aspiration to build the most beautiful cathedral in the world.

That night he dreamed that Aysha came to him, her naked body slippery with scented oil, and she rubbed herself against him but would not let him make love to her.

When he woke up in the morning he had made his decision.

The servants would not let Aliena into the house of Raschid Alharoun. She probably looked like a beggar, she thought as she stood outside the gate, in her dusty tunic and worn boots, with her baby in her arms. “Tell Raschid Alharoun that I am seeking his friend Jack Fitzjack from England,” she said in French, wondering if the dark-skinned servants could understand a single word. After a muttered consultation in some Saracen tongue, one of the servants, a tall man with coaly skin and hair like the fleece of a black sheep, went into the house.

Aliena fidgeted restlessly while the other servants stared at her openly. She had not learned patience, even on this interminable pilgrimage. After her disappointment at Compostela she had followed the road into the interior of Spain, to Salamanca. No one there remembered a redhaired young man interested in cathedrals and jongleurs, but a kindly monk told her that there was a community of English scholars at Toledo. It seemed a faint hope, but Toledo was not much farther down the dusty road, so she pressed on.

Another tantalizing disappointment had been waiting for her here. Yes, Jack had been here—what a stroke of luck!—but alas, he had already left. She was catching up with him: she was now only a month behind him. But, once again, nobody knew where he had gone.

In Compostela she had been able to guess that he must have gone south, because she had come from the east, and there was sea to the north and west. Here, unfortunately, there were more possibilities. He might have gone northeast, back toward France; west to Portugal; or south to Granada; and from the Spanish coast he might have taken ship for Rome, Tunis, Alexandria or Beirut.

Aliena had decided to give up the search if she did not get a strong indication of which way he had gone when he left here. She was bone-weary and a long way from home. She had very little energy or determination left, and she could not face going farther with no more than a faint hope of success. She was ready to turn around and go back to England, and try to forget about Jack forever.

Another servant came out of the white house. This one was dressed in more costly clothes and spoke French. He looked at Aliena warily but

addressed her politely. “You are a friend of Mr. Jack?”

“Yes, an old friend from England. I would like to speak with Raschid Alharoun.”

The servant glanced at the baby.

Aliena said: “I’m a relative of Jack’s.” It was not untrue: she was the estranged wife of Jack’s stepbrother, and that was a relationship.

The servant opened the gate wider and said: “Please come with me.”

Aliena stepped inside gratefully. If she had been turned away here it would have been the end of the road.

She followed the servant across a pleasant courtyard, past a splashing fountain. She wondered what had drawn Jack to the home of this wealthy merchant. It seemed an unlikely friendship. Had Jack recited verse narratives in these shady arcades?

They went into the house. It was a palatial home, with high, cool rooms, floors of stone and marble, and elaborately carved furniture with rich upholstery. They went through two archways and a wooden door, and then Aliena had the feeling they might have entered the women’s quarters. The servant held up his hand for her to wait, then coughed gently.

A moment later a tall Saracen woman in a black robe glided into the room, holding a corner of her garment up in front of her mouth in a pose that was insulting in any language. She looked at Aliena and said in French: “Who are you?”

Aliena drew herself up to her full height. “I am the Lady Aliena, daughter of the late earl of Shiring,” she said as haughtily as she could. “I take it I have the pleasure of addressing the wife of Raschid the pepper seller.” She could play this game as well as anyone.

“What do you want here?”

“I came to see Raschid.”

“He doesn’t receive women.”

Aliena realized she had no hope of gaining this woman’s cooperation. However, she had nowhere else to go, so she kept trying. “He may receive a friend of Jack’s,” she persisted.

“Is Jack your husband?”

“No.” Aliena hesitated. “He’s my brother-in-law.”

The woman looked skeptical. Like most people, she probably assumed that Jack had impregnated Aliena, then abandoned her, and Aliena was pursuing him with the object of forcing him to marry her and support the child.

The woman half turned and called out something in a language Aliena did not understand. A moment later three young women came into the room. It was obvious from their looks that they were her daughters. She spoke to them in the same language, and they all stared at Aliena. There followed a rapid

conversation in which the syllable *Jack* recurred often.

Aliena felt humiliated. She was tempted to turn on her heel and walk out; but that would mean giving up her search altogether. These awful people were her last hope. She raised her voice, interrupting their conversation, and said: “Where is Jack?” She intended to be forceful but to her dismay her voice just sounded plaintive.

The daughters fell silent.

The mother said: “We don’t know where he is.”

“When did you see him last?”

She hesitated. She did not want to answer, but she could hardly pretend not to know when she had seen him last. “He left Toledo the day after Christmas,” she said reluctantly.

Aliena forced a friendly smile. “Do you recall his saying anything about where he might be going?”

“I told you, we don’t know where he is.”

“Perhaps he said something to your husband.”

“No, he did not.”

Aliena despaired. She had an intuitive feeling that the woman *did* know something. However, it was clear that she was not going to reveal it. Aliena felt suddenly weak and weary. With tears in her eyes she said: “Jack is the father of my child. Don’t you think he would like to see his son?”

The youngest of the three daughters started to say something, but the mother interrupted her. There was a short, fierce exchange: mother and daughter had the same fiery temperament. But in the end the daughter shut up.

Aliena waited, but no more was said. The four of them just stared at her. They were unquestionably hostile, but they were so curious that they were in no hurry to see her go. However, there was no point in staying. She might as well get out, go back to her lodgings, and make preparations for the long journey back to Kingsbridge. She took a deep breath and made her voice cool and steady. “I thank you for your hospitality,” she said.

The mother had the grace to look slightly ashamed.

Aliena left the room.

The servant was hovering outside. He fell into step beside her and escorted her through the house. She blinked back tears. It was unbearably frustrating to know that her whole journey had failed because of the malice of one woman.

The servant led her across the courtyard. As they reached the gate, Aliena heard running footsteps. She looked back to see the youngest daughter coming after her. She stopped and waited. The servant looked uneasy.

The girl was short and slender, and very pretty, with golden skin and eyes so dark they were nearly black. She wore a white dress and made Aliena feel dusty and unwashed. She spoke broken French. “Do you love him?” she

blurted.

Aliena hesitated. She realized she had no more dignity left to lose. “Yes, I love him,” she confessed.

“Does he love you?”

Aliena was about to say yes; then she realized she had not seen him for more than a year. “He used to,” she said.

“I think he loves you,” the girl said.

“What makes you say that?”

The girl’s eyes filled with tears. “I wanted him for myself. And I nearly got him.” She looked at the baby. “Red hair and blue eyes.” The tears ran down her smooth brown cheeks.

Aliena stared at her. This explained her hostile reception. The mother had wanted Jack to marry this girl. She could not have been more than sixteen, but she had a sensual look that made her seem older. Aliena wondered exactly what had happened between them. She said: “You ‘nearly’ got him?”

“Yes,” the girl said defiantly. “I knew he liked me. It broke my heart when he went away. But now I understand.” She lost her composure, and her face crumpled in grief.

Aliena could feel for a woman who had loved Jack and lost him. She touched the girl’s shoulder in a comforting gesture. But there was something more important than compassion. “Listen,” she said urgently. “Do you know where he went?”

The girl looked up and nodded, sobbing.

“Tell me!”

“Paris,” she said.

Paris!

Aliena was jubilant. She was back on the trail. Paris was a long way, but the journey would be mostly over familiar ground. And Jack was only a month ahead of her. She felt rejuvenated. I’ll find him, in the end, she thought; I know I will!

“Are you going to Paris now?” the girl said.

“Oh, yes,” Aliena said. “I’ve come this far—I won’t stop now. Thank you for telling me—thank you.”

“I want him to be happy,” she said simply.

The servant fidgeted discontentedly. He looked as if he thought he might get into trouble over this. Aliena said to the girl: “Did he say anything else? Which road he would take, or anything that might help me?”

“He wants to go to Paris because someone told him they are building beautiful churches there.”

Aliena nodded. She could have guessed that.

“And he took the weeping lady.”

Aliena did not know what she meant. “The weeping lady?”

“My father gave him the weeping lady.”

“A lady?”

The girl shook her head. “I don’t know the right words. A lady. She weeps. From the eyes.”

“You mean a picture? A painted lady?”

“I don’t understand,” the girl said. She looked over her shoulder anxiously. “I have to go.”

Whatever the weeping lady was, it did not sound very important. “Thank you for helping me,” Aliena said.

The girl bent down and kissed the baby’s forehead. Her tears fell on his plump cheeks. She looked up at Aliena. “I wish I were you,” she said. Then she turned away and ran back into the house.

Jack’s lodgings were in the rue de la Boucherie, in a suburb of Paris on the left bank of the Seine. He saddled his horse at daybreak. At the end of the street he turned right and passed through the tower gate that guarded the Petit Pont, the bridge that led to the island city in the middle of the river.

The wooden houses on either side projected over the edges of the bridge. In the gaps between the houses were stone benches where, later in the morning, famous teachers would hold open-air classes. The bridge took Jack into the Juiverie, the island’s main street. The bakeries along the street were packed with students buying their breakfast. Jack got a pastry filled with cooked eel.

He turned left opposite the synagogue, then right at the king’s palace, and crossed the Grand Pont, the bridge that led to the right bank. The small, well-built shops of the moneychangers and goldsmiths on either side were beginning to open for business. At the end of the bridge he passed through another gatehouse and entered the fish market, where business was already brisk. He pushed through the crowds and started along the muddy road that led to the town of Saint-Denis.

When he was still in Spain he had heard, from a traveling mason, about Abbot Suger and the new church he was building at Saint-Denis. As he made his way northward through France that spring, working for a few days whenever he needed money, he heard Saint-Denis mentioned often. It seemed the builders were using both of the new techniques, rib-vaulting and pointed arches, and the combination was rather striking.

He rode for more than an hour through fields and vineyards. The road was not paved but it had milestones. It passed the hill of Montmartre, with a ruined Roman temple at its summit, and went through the village of Clignancourt. Three miles after Clignancourt he reached the small walled town of Saint-Denis.

Denis had been the first bishop of Paris. He had been decapitated at Montmartre and then had walked, carrying his severed head in his hands, out into the countryside to this spot, where at last he fell. A pious woman had buried him and a monastery had been erected over his grave. The church had become the burying place for the kings of France. The current abbot, Suger, was a powerful and ambitious man who had reformed the monastery and was now modernizing the church.

Jack entered the town and reined in his horse in the middle of the marketplace to look up at the west front of the church. There was nothing revolutionary here. It was a straightforward old-fashioned facade with twin towers and three round-arched doorways. He rather liked the aggressive way the piers thrust out from the wall, but he would not have ridden five miles to see that.

He tied his horse to a rail in front of the church and went closer. The sculpture around the three portals was quite good: lively subjects, precisely chiseled. Jack went in.

Inside there was an immediate change. Before the nave proper, there was a low entryway, or narthex. As Jack looked up at the ceiling he experienced a surge of excitement. The builders had used rib-vaulting and pointed arches in combination here, and Jack saw in a flash that the two techniques went together perfectly: the grace of the pointed arch was accentuated by the ribs that followed its line.

There was more to it. In between the ribs, instead of the usual web of mortar-and-rubble, this builder had put cut stones, as in a wall. Being stronger, the layer of stones could probably be thinner, and therefore lighter, Jack realized.

As he stared up, craning his neck until it ached, he understood a further remarkable feature of this combination. Two pointed arches of different widths could be made to reach the same height, merely by adjusting the curve of the arch. This gave the bay a more regular look. It could not be done with round arches, of course: the height of a semicircular arch was always half its width, so a wide one had to be higher than a narrow one. That meant that in a rectangular bay, the narrow arches had to spring from a point higher up the wall than the springing of the wide ones, so that their tops would be at the same level and the ceiling would be even. The result was always lopsided. This problem had now vanished.

Jack lowered his head and gave his neck a rest. He felt as jubilant as if he had just been crowned king. This, he thought, was how he would build his cathedral.

He looked into the main body of the church. The nave itself was clearly quite old, although relatively long and wide: it had been built many years ago, by someone other than the current master, and it was quite conventional. But

then, at the crossing, there seemed to be steps down—no doubt leading to the crypt and the royal tombs—and steps up to the chancel. It looked as if the chancel were floating a little way above the ground. The structure was obscured, from this angle, by dazzling sunlight coming through the east windows, so much that Jack supposed the walls must be unfinished, and the sun shining through the gaps.

He walked along the south aisle to the crossing. As he got nearer to the chancel he sensed that something quite remarkable was ahead of him. There was, indeed, sunlight pouring in, but the vault appeared to be complete and there were no gaps in the walls. When Jack stepped out of the aisle into the crossing he saw that the sun was streaming in through rows of tall windows, some of them made of colored glass, and all this sunshine seemed to fill the vast empty vessel of the church with warmth and light. Jack could not understand how they had got so much window area: there seemed to be more window than wall. He was awestruck. How had this been done, if not by magic?

He felt a frisson of superstitious dread as he mounted the steps that led up to the chancel. He stopped at the top of the stair and peered into the confusion of shafts of colored light and stone that was ahead of him. Slowly the realization came over him that he had seen something like this before, but in his imagination. This was the church he had dreamed of building, with its vast windows and surging vaults, a structure of light and air that seemed held up by enchantment.

A moment later he saw it differently. Everything fell into place quite suddenly, and in a lightning flash of revelation, Jack saw what Abbot Suger and his builder had done.

The principle of rib-vaulting was that a ceiling was made of a few strong ribs, with the gaps between the ribs filled in with light material. *They had applied that principle to the whole building*. The wall of the chancel consisted of a few strong piers joined by windows. The arcade separating the chancel from its side aisles was not a wall but a row of piers joined by pointed arches, leaving wide spaces through which the light from the windows could fall into the middle of the church. The aisle itself was divided in two by a row of thin columns.

Pointed arches and rib-vaulting had been combined here, as they had in the narthex, but it was now clear that the narthex had been a cautious trial for the new technology. By comparison with this, the narthex was musclebound, its ribs and moldings too heavy, its arches too small. Here everything was thin, light, delicate and airy. The simple roll moldings were all narrow and the colonettes were long and thin.

It would have looked too fragile to stay upright, except that the ribs showed so clearly how the weight of the building was being carried by the

piers and columns. Here was a visible demonstration that a big building did not need thick walls with tiny windows and massive piers. Provided the weight was distributed precisely on a load-bearing skeleton, the rest of the building could be light stonework, glass, or empty space. Jack was spellbound. It was almost like falling in love. Euclid had been a revelation, but this was more than a revelation, for it was beautiful too. He had had visions of a church like this, and now he was actually looking at it, touching it, standing under its sky-high vault.

He walked around the curved east end in a daze, staring at the vaulting of the double aisle. The ribs arched over his head like branches in a forest of perfect stone trees. Here, as in the narthex, the filling between the ceiling ribs was cut stone jointed with mortar, instead of the easier, but heavier, rubble-and-mortar. The outer wall of the aisle had pairs of big windows with pointed tops to match the pointed arches. The revolutionary architecture was perfectly complemented by the colored windows. Jack had never seen colored glass in England, but he had come across several examples in France: however, in the small windows of an old-style church it could not achieve its full potential. Here, the effect of the morning sun pouring through the rich many-colored windows was more than beautiful, it was spellbinding.

Because the church was round-ended, the side aisles curved around to meet at the east end, forming a semicircular ambulatory or walkway. Jack walked all the way around the half circle, then turned and came back, still marveling. He returned to his starting point.

There he saw a woman.

He recognized her.

She smiled.

His heart stood still.

Aliena shaded her eyes. The sunlight coming through the windows at the east end of the church dazzled her. Like a vision, a figure walked toward her out of the blaze of colored sunshine. He looked as if his hair was on fire. He came closer. It was Jack.

Aliena felt faint.

He came to her and stood in front of her. He was thin, terribly thin, but his eyes shone with an intensity of emotion. They stared at one another in silence for a moment.

When he spoke, his voice was hoarse. “Is it really you?”

“Yes,” she said. Her voice came out in a whisper. “Yes, Jack. It’s really me.”

The tension was too much, and she began to cry. He put his arms around her and hugged her, with the baby in her arms between them, and patted her

back, saying “There, there,” as if she were a child. She leaned against him, breathing his familiar dusty smell, hearing his dear voice as he soothed her, letting her tears fall on his bony shoulder.

Eventually he looked at her face and said: “What are you doing here?”

“Looking for you,” she said.

“Looking for me?” he said incredulously. “Then…how did you find me?”

She wiped her eyes and sniffed. “I followed you.”

“How?”

“I asked people if they had seen you. Masons, mostly, but some monks and lodging-house keepers.”

His eyes widened. “You mean—you’ve been to Spain?”

She nodded. “Compostela, then Salamanca, then Toledo.”

“How long have you been traveling?”

“Three fourths of a year.”

“But why?”

“Because I love you.”

He seemed overwhelmed. His eyes filled with tears. He whispered: “I love you, too.”

“Do you? Do you, still?”

“Oh, yes.”

She could tell he meant it. She tilted her face up. He leaned forward, over the baby, and kissed her softly. The touch of his mouth on hers made her feel dizzy.

The baby cried.

She broke the kiss and rocked him a little, and he quieted.

Jack said: “What’s the baby called?”

“I haven’t named him yet.”

“Why not? He must be a year old!”

“I wanted to consult you.”

“Me?” Jack frowned. “What about Alfred? It’s up to the father….” He tailed off. “Why…Is he…is he mine?”

“Look at him,” she said.

Jack looked. “Red hair…It must be a year and three quarters since…”

Aliena nodded.

“Good God,” Jack said. He seemed awestruck. “My son.” He swallowed hard.

She watched his face anxiously as he tried to take in the news. Would he see this as the termination of his youth and freedom? His expression became solemn. Normally a man had nine months to get used to the idea of being a father. Jack had to do it all at once. He looked again at the baby, and at last he smiled. “Our son,” he said. “I’m so glad.”

Aliena sighed happily. Everything was all right at last.

Another thought struck Jack. “What about Alfred? Does he know…?”

“Of course. He only had to look at the child. Besides…” She felt embarrassed. “Besides, your mother cursed the marriage, and Alfred was never able to, you know, do anything.”

Jack laughed harshly. “There’s true justice,” he said.

Aliena did not like the relish with which he said it. “It was very hard for me,” she said, in a tone of mild reproof.

His face changed quickly. “I’m sorry,” he said. “What did Alfred do?”

“When he saw the baby, he threw me out.”

Jack looked angry. “Did he hurt you?”

“No.”

“He’s a pig, all the same.”

“I’m glad he threw us out. It was because of that that I came looking for you. And now I’ve found you. I’m so happy I don’t know what to do.”

“You were very brave,” Jack said. “I still can’t take it in. You followed me all that way!”

“I’d do it all again,” she said fervently.

He kissed her again. A voice said in French: “If you insist on behaving lewdly in church, please remain in the nave.”

It was a young monk. Jack said: “I’m sorry, Father.” He took Aliena’s arm. They went down the steps and across the south transept. Jack said: “I was a monk for a while—I know how hard it is for them to look at happy lovers kissing.”

Happy lovers, Aliena thought. That’s what we are.

They walked the length of the church and stepped out into the busy market square. Aliena could hardly believe that she was standing in the sunshine with Jack by her side. It was almost too much happiness to bear.

“Well,” he said, “what shall we do?”

“I don’t know,” she said, smiling.

“Let’s get a loaf of bread and a flask of wine, and ride out into the fields to eat our dinner.”

“It sounds like paradise.”

They went to the baker and the vintner, and then they got a wedge of cheese from a dairywoman in the marketplace. In no time at all they were riding out of the village into the fields. Aliena had to keep looking at Jack to make sure he really was there, riding along beside her, breathing and smiling.

He said: “How is Alfred managing the building site?”

“Oh! I haven’t told you!” Aliena had forgotten how long he had been away. “There was a terrible disaster. The roof fell in.”

“What!” Jack’s loud exclamation startled his horse, and it did a skittish little dance. He calmed it. “How did that happen?”

“Nobody knows. They had three bays vaulted in time for Whitsunday, and

then it all fell down during the service. It was dreadful—seventy-nine people were killed.”

“That’s terrible.” Jack was shaken. “How did Prior Philip take it?”

“Badly. He’s given up building altogether. He seems to have lost all his energy. He does nothing nowadays.”

Philip found it hard to imagine Philip in that state—he had always seemed so full of enthusiasm and determination. “So what happened to the craftsmen?”

“They all drifted away. Alfred lives in Shiring now, and builds houses.”

“Kingsbridge must be half empty.”

“It’s turning back into a village, like it used to be.”

“I wonder what Alfred did wrong?” Jack said half to himself. “That stone vault was never in Tom’s original plans; but Alfred made the buttresses bigger to take the weight, so it should have been all right.”

He was sobered by the news, and they rode on in silence. A mile or so out of Saint-Denis they tied up the horses in the shade of an elm tree and sat down in a corner of a field of green wheat, beside a little brook, to eat their dinner. Jack took a draft of the wine and smacked his lips. “England has nothing to compare with French wine,” he said. He broke the loaf and gave Aliena some.

Aliena shyly undid the laced front of her dress and gave her nipple to the baby. She caught Jack looking at her and flushed. She cleared her throat and spoke to cover her embarrassment. “Do you know what you’d like to call him?” she said awkwardly. “Jack, perhaps?”

“I don’t know.” He looked thoughtful. “Jack was the father I never knew. It might be bad luck to give our son the same name. The nearest I ever had to a real father was Tom Builder.”

“Would you like to call him Tom?”

“I think I would.”

“Tom was such a big man. How about Tommy?”

Jack nodded. “Tommy it is.”

Oblivious of the significance of the moment, Tommy had fallen asleep, having sucked his fill. Aliena put him down on the ground with a kerchief folded under his head for a pillow. Then she looked at Jack. She felt awkward. She wanted him to make love to her, right here on the grass, but she felt sure he would be shocked if she asked him, so she just looked at him and hoped.

He said: “If I tell you something, will you promise not to think badly of me?”

“All right.”

He looked embarrassed, and said: “Ever since I saw you, I can hardly think of anything but the naked body under your dress.”

She smiled. “I don’t think badly of you,” she said. “I’m glad.”

He stared at her hungrily.

She said: “I love it when you look at me like that.”

He swallowed drily.

She held out her arms, and he came to her and embraced her.

It was almost two years since the one and only time they had made love. That morning they had both been swept away by desire and regret. Now they were just two lovers in a field. Aliena suddenly felt anxious. Would it be all right? How terrible if something went wrong, after all this time.

They lay down on the grass side by side and kissed. She closed her eyes and opened her mouth. She felt his eager hand on her body, exploring urgently. There was a quickening in her loins. He kissed her eyelids and the end of her nose, and said: “All this time, I ached for you, every day.”

She hugged him hard. “I’m so glad I found you,” she said.

They made gentle, happy love in the open air, with the sun beating down on them and the stream burbling beside them; and Tommy slept through it all, and woke up when it was over.

The wooden statue of the lady had not wept since it left Spain. Jack did not understand how it worked, so he could not be sure why it would not weep outside its own country. However, he had an idea that the tears that came at nightfall were caused by the sudden cooling of the air, and he had noticed that sunsets were more gradual in northern territories, so he suspected that the problem had to do with the slower nightfall. He still kept the statue, however. It was rather bulky to carry around, but it was a souvenir of Toledo, and it reminded him of Raschid, and (although he did not tell Aliena this) of Aysha as well. But when a stonemason at Saint-Denis wanted a model for a statue of the Virgin, Jack brought the wooden lady to the masons’ lodge, and left it there.

He had been hired by the abbey to work on the rebuilding of the church. The new chancel, which had so devastated him, was not quite complete, and had to be finished in time for the dedication ceremony at midsummer; but the energetic abbot was already preparing to rebuild the nave in the same revolutionary style, and Jack was hired to carve stones in advance for that.

The abbey rented him a house in the village, and he moved in, along with Aliena and Tommy. During the first night they spent in the house they made love five times. Living together as man and wife seemed the most natural thing in the world. After a few days Jack felt as if they had always lived together. Nobody asked whether their union had been blessed by the church.

The master builder at Saint-Denis was the greatest mason Jack had ever met, easily. As they finished the new chancel and prepared to rebuild the nave, Jack watched the master and absorbed everything he did. The technical

advances here were his, not the abbot's. Suger was in favor of new ideas, in a general way, but he was more interested in ornament than structure. His pet project was the new tomb for the remains of Saint Denis and his two companions, Rusticus and Eleutherius. The relics were kept in the crypt, but Suger planned to bring them up into the new chancel, so the whole world could see them. The three caskets would rest in a stone tomb veneered with black marble. The top of the tomb was a miniature church made of gilded wood; and in the nave and side aisles of the miniature were three empty coffins, one for each of the martyrs. The tomb would stand in the middle of the new chancel, attached to the back of the new high altar. Both the altar and the base of the tomb were already in place, and the miniature church was in the carpenters' lodge, where a painstaking craftsman was carefully gilding the wood with priceless gold paint. Suger was not a man to do things by halves.

The abbot was a formidable organizer, Jack observed as preparations for the dedication ceremony accelerated. Suger invited everybody who was anybody, and most of them accepted, notably the king and queen of France, and nineteen archbishops and bishops including the archbishop of Canterbury. Such morsels of news were picked up by the craftsmen as they worked in and on the church. Jack often saw Suger himself, in his homespun habit, striding around the monastery giving instructions to a flock of monks who followed him like ducklings. He reminded Jack of Philip of Kingsbridge. Like Philip, Suger came from a poor background and had been brought up in the monastery. Like Philip, he had reorganized the finances and tightened up the management of the monastery's property so that it produced much more income; and like Philip he was spending the extra money on building. Like Philip, he was busy, energetic and decisive.

Except that Philip was none of these things anymore, according to Aliena.

Jack found that hard to imagine. A quiescent Philip seemed as unlikely as a kindly Waleran Bigod. However, Philip had suffered a series of terrible disappointments. First there had been the burning of the town. Jack shuddered when he recalled that awful day: the smoke, the fear, the dreadful horsemen with their flaming torches, and the blind panic of the hysterical mob. Perhaps the heart had gone out of Philip then. Certainly the town had lost its nerve afterward. Jack remembered it well: the atmosphere of fear and uncertainty had pervaded the place like a faint but unmistakable odor of decay. No doubt Philip had wanted the opening ceremony for the new chancel to be a symbol of new hope. Then, when it turned into another disaster, he must have given up.

Now the builders had gone away, the market had declined, and the population was shrinking. Young people were beginning to move to Shiring, Aliena said. It was only a problem of morale, of course: the priory still had all its property, including the vast flocks of sheep which brought in hundreds of

pounds every year. If it were only a question of money, Philip could surely afford to recommence building, on some scale. It would not be easy, certainly: masons would be superstitious about working on a church that had already fallen down once; and it would be difficult to whip up the enthusiasm of the local people yet again. But the main problem, judging by what Aliena said, was that Philip had lost the will. Jack wished he could do something to help bring it back.

Meanwhile, the bishops, archbishops, dukes and counts began arriving at Saint-Denis two or three days before the ceremony. All the notables were taken on a conducted tour of the building. Suger himself escorted the most distinguished visitors, and lesser dignitaries were taken around by monks or craftsmen. They were all awestruck by the lightness of the new construction and the sunny effect of the huge windows of colored glass. As just about every important church leader in France was seeing this, it struck Jack that the new style was likely to be widely imitated; indeed, masons who could say they had actually worked on Saint-Denis would be in great demand. Coming here had been a clever move, cleverer than he had imagined: it had greatly improved his chances of designing and building a cathedral himself.

King Louis arrived on the Saturday, with his wife and his mother, and they moved into the abbot's house. That night matins were sung from dusk to dawn. By sunrise there was a crowd of peasants and Parisian citizens outside the church, waiting for what promised to be the greatest assemblage of holy and powerful men that most of them would ever see. Jack and Aliena joined the crowd as soon as Tommy had been fed. One day, Jack thought, I'll say to Tommy: "You don't remember it, but when you were just a year old you saw the king of France."

They bought bread and cider for their breakfast and ate while they were waiting for the show to begin. The public was not allowed into the church, of course, and the king's men-at-arms kept them at a distance; but all the doors were open, and people clustered in knots where they could see in. The nave was packed with the lords and ladies of the nobility. Fortunately the chancel was raised several feet, because of the large crypt under it, so Jack could still see the ceremony.

There was a flurry of activity at the far end of the nave, and suddenly all the nobles bowed. Over their lowered heads, Jack saw the king enter the church from the south. He could not see the king's face to make out his features, but his purple tunic made a vivid splash of color as he moved into the center of the crossing and knelt before the main altar.

The bishops and archbishops came in immediately afterward. They were all dressed in dazzling white robes with gold embroidery, and each bishop carried his ceremonial crozier. The crozier was supposed to be a simple shepherd's crook, but so many of them were ornamented with fabulous jewels

that the whole procession glittered like a mountain stream in the sunlight.

They all walked slowly across the church and up the steps into the chancel, then took prearranged places around the font in which—Jack knew because he had observed the preparations—there were several gallons of holy water. There followed a lull during which prayers were said and hymns were sung. The crowd became restless, and Tommy got bored. Then the bishops moved off in procession again.

They left the church by the south door and disappeared into the cloisters, much to the disappointment of the spectators; but then they emerged from the monastic buildings and filed across the front of the church. Each bishop carried a small brush called an aspergillum and a vessel of holy water, and as they marched, singing, they dipped the brushes in the water and sprinkled the walls of the church. The crowd surged forward, people begging for a blessing and trying to touch the snow-white robes of the holy men. The king's men-at-arms beat the people back with sticks. Jack stayed well back in the crowd. He did not want a blessing and he preferred to stay away from those sticks.

The procession made its stately way along the north side of the church, and the crowd followed, trampling over the graves in the cemetery. Some spectators had taken up positions here in anticipation, and they resisted the pressure from the newcomers. One or two fights broke out.

The bishops passed the north porch and continued around the half circle of the east end, the new part. This was where the craftsmen's workshops had been built, and now the crowd surged around the huts, threatening to flatten the light wooden buildings. As the leaders of the procession began to disappear back into the abbey, the more hysterical members of the crowd became desperate, and pushed forward more determinedly. The king's men responded with increased violence.

Jack began to feel anxious. "I don't like the look of this," he said to Aliena.

"I was about to say the same," she replied. "Let's get out of this crowd."

Before they could move, a scuffle broke out between the king's men and a group of youths at the front. The men-at-arms laid about them fiercely with their clubs, but the youths, instead of cowering away, fought back. The last of the bishops hurried into the cloisters with a distinctly perfunctory sprinkling of the last part of the chancel. When the holy men were out of sight, the crowd turned its attention on the men-at-arms. Someone threw a stone and hit one of the men square on the forehead. A cheer went up as he fell. The hand-to-hand fighting spread quickly. Men-at-arms came running from the west front of the church to defend their comrades.

It was turning into a riot.

There was no hope of the ceremony providing a distraction in the next few moments. Jack knew that the bishops and the king were now descending

into the crypt to fetch the remains of Saint Denis. They would carry them all around the cloisters but would not bring them out of doors. The dignitaries were not due to show themselves again until the service was over. Abbot Suger had not anticipated the size of the crowd of spectators, nor had he made arrangements to keep them happy. Now they were dissatisfied, they were hot—the sun was high by this time—and they wanted to vent their emotions.

The king's men were armed but the spectators were not, and at first the armed men got the better of it; then someone had the bright idea of breaking into the craftsmen's huts for weapons. A pair of youths kicked down the door of the masons' lodge and came out a moment later with bolster hammers in their hands. There were masons in the crowd, and some of them pushed through the throng to the lodge and tried to stop people from going in; but they were unable to stand their ground, and got shoved aside.

Jack and Aliena were trying to retreat out of the crowd, but the people behind them were pressing forward urgently, and they found themselves trapped. Jack kept Tommy hard up against his chest, protecting the baby's back with his arms and covering the little head with his hands, at the same time struggling to stay close to Aliena. He saw a small, furtive-looking man with a black beard emerge from the masons' lodge carrying the wooden statue of the weeping lady. I'll never see that again, he thought with a pang of regret; but he was too busy trying to escape from the crush to worry about being robbed.

The carpenters' lodge was broken open next. The craftsmen had given up hope of protecting their lodges, and they made no attempt to restrain the crowd. The smithy proved too strong, but the crowd burst through the flimsy wall of the roofers' lodge and took the heavy, wickedly sharp tools used for trimming and nailing lead sheets, and Jack thought: Someone is going to be killed before this is over.

Despite all his efforts he was pushed forward, toward the north porch where the fighting was fiercest. The same thing was happening to the black-bearded thief, he noticed: the man was trying to get away with his loot, hugging the wooden statue to his chest the way Jack was hugging Tommy, but he, too, was being forced farther into the melee by the press of the crowd.

Suddenly Jack had a brainwave. He gave Tommy to Aliena, saying: "Stay close to me." Then he grabbed the little thief and wrested the statue away from him. The man resisted for a moment, but Jack was bigger, and anyway the thief was now more worried about saving his skin than stealing the statue, and after a moment he relinquished his hold.

Jack lifted the statue above his head and started to shout: "Revere the Madonna!" At first nobody took any notice. Then one or two people looked at him. "Touch not the Holy Mother!" he shouted at the top of his voice. The people near him backed off superstitiously, making a space around him. He

began to warm to his theme. “It is a sin to desecrate the image of the Virgin!” He held the statue high above his head and walked forward, toward the church. This just might work, he thought with a surge of hope. More people stopped fighting to see what was going on.

He glanced behind him. Aliena was following, unable to do anything else because of the press of the crowd. However, the riot was rapidly simmering down. The crowd moved forward with Jack, and people began to repeat his words in an awestruck murmur: “It is the Mother of God…. Hail, Mary…. Make way for the effigy of the Blessed Maiden….” All they wanted was a show, and now that Jack was giving them one the fighting stopped almost completely, with only two or three continuing scuffles on the fringes. Jack marched forward solemnly. He was rather startled at the ease with which he had stopped a riot. The crowd fell away before him, and he reached the north porch of the church. There he set the statue down, with great reverence, in the cool shade of the doorway. It was a little over two feet high, and seemed less impressive standing on the ground.

The mob gathered around the doorway expectantly. Jack was at a loss to know what to do. They probably wanted a sermon. He had acted like a clergyman, bearing the statue on high and calling out sonorous warnings, but that was the limit of his priestly skills. He felt fearful: what might the crowd do to him if he disappointed them now?

Suddenly they gave a collective gasp.

Jack looked behind him. Some of the nobles from the congregation had gathered in the north transept, looking out, but he could see nothing to justify the crowd’s apparent amazement.

“A miracle!” someone said, and others took up the cry: “A miracle! A miracle!”

Jack looked at the statue, and then he understood. Water was dripping from its eyes. At first he was as awestruck as the crowd, but a moment later he recalled his theory that the lady wept when there was a sudden change from warm to cold, as happened at nightfall in southern regions. The statue had just been moved from the heat of the day into the cool of the north porch. That would explain the tears. But the crowd did not know that, of course. All they saw was a statue weeping, and they marveled.

A woman at the front tossed a denier, the French silver penny, at the feet of the statue. Jack felt like laughing aloud. What was the point of giving money to a piece of wood? But the people had been so indoctrinated by the Church that their automatic response to something holy was to give money, and several others in the crowd followed the woman’s example.

Jack had never thought that Raschid’s toy might make money. Indeed, it could not make money for Jack—the people would not give if they thought the money was going into Jack’s pocket. But it would be worth a fortune to

any church.

And when Jack realized that, he suddenly saw what he had to do.

It came to him in a flash, and he began speaking even before he had seen all the implications himself: the words came at the same time as the thoughts. “The Weeping Madonna belongs not to me, but to God,” he began. The crowd fell silent. This was the sermon they had been waiting for. Behind Jack, the bishops were singing in the church, but no one was interested in them now. “For hundreds of years, she languished in the land of the Saracens,” Jack went on. He had no idea what the history of the statue was, but it did not seem to matter: the priests themselves never inquired too closely into the truth of stories of miracles and holy relics. “She has traveled many miles, but her journey is not yet ended. Her destination is the cathedral church of Kingsbridge, in England.”

He caught Aliena’s eye. She was staring at him in amazement. He had to resist the temptation to wink at her to let her know he was making it up as he went along.

“It is my holy mission to take her to Kingsbridge. There, she will find her resting place. There, she will be at peace.” As he looked at Aliena the final, most brilliant inspiration came to him and he said: “I have been appointed master builder of the new church at Kingsbridge.”

Aliena’s mouth fell open. Jack looked away from her. “The Weeping Madonna has commanded that a new, more glorious church be built for her at Kingsbridge, and with her help I shall create a shrine for her as beautiful as the new chancel which has been erected here for the sacred remains of Saint Denis.”

He glanced down, and the money on the ground gave him the idea for his finishing touch. “Your pennies will be used for the new church,” he said. “The Madonna confers a blessing on every man, woman and child who offers a gift to help her build her new home.”

There was a moment of silence; then his listeners started to throw pennies on the ground around the base of the statue. Each person called out something as he or she made the offering. Some said “Alleluia” or “Praise God” and others asked for a blessing, or some more specific favor: “Make Robert well,” or “Let Anne conceive,” or “Give us a good harvest.” Jack studied their faces: they were excited, elevated, happy. They pushed forward, jostling one another in their eagerness to give their pennies to the Weeping Madonna. Jack looked down and watched, marveling, as the money piled up like a snowdrift around his feet.

The Weeping Madonna had the same effect in every town and village on the road to Cherbourg. As they walked in procession along the main street a

crowd would gather; and then, after they had paused in front of the church to give time for the entire population to assemble, they would take the statue into the cool of the building, and it would weep, whereupon the people would fall over one another in their eagerness to give money for the building of Kingsbridge Cathedral.

They had almost lost it, right at the start. The bishops and archbishops examined the statue and pronounced it genuinely miraculous, and Abbot Suger wanted to keep it for Saint-Denis. He had offered Jack a pound, then ten pounds, and finally fifty pounds. When he realized Jack was not interested in money he threatened to take the statue away forcibly; but Archbishop Theobald of Canterbury prevented him. Theobald also saw the moneymaking potential of the statue and he wanted it to go to Kingsbridge, which was in his archdiocese. Suger had given in with bad grace, churlishly expressing reservations about the genuineness of the miracle.

Jack had told the craftsmen at Saint-Denis that he would hire any of them who cared to follow him to Kingsbridge. Suger was not pleased about that, either. Most of them would stay where they were, in fact, on the principle that a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush; but there were a few who were from England originally and might be tempted to move back; and the others would spread the word, for it was every mason's duty to tell his brothers about new building sites. Within a few weeks, craftsmen from all over Christendom would begin drifting into Kingsbridge, the way Jack had drifted into six or seven different sites over the past two years. Aliena asked Jack what he would do if Kingsbridge Priory did not make him master builder. Jack had no idea. He had made his announcement on the spur of the moment and he had no contingency plans in case things went wrong.

Archbishop Theobald, having claimed the Weeping Madonna for England, was not willing to let Jack simply walk away with it. He had sent two priests from his entourage, Reynold and Edward, to accompany Jack and Aliena on their journey. Jack had been displeased about this at first, but he quickly got to like them. Reynold was a fresh-faced, argumentative young man with an incisive mind, and he was very interested in the mathematics Jack had learned in Toledo. Edward was a mild-mannered older man who was something of a glutton. Their principal function was to make sure none of the donations went into Jack's purse, of course. In fact, the priests spent freely out of the donations to pay their traveling expenses, whereas Jack and Aliena paid their own, so the archbishop would have done better to trust Jack.

They went to Cherbourg on their way to Barfleur, where they would take ship for Wareham. Jack knew something was wrong long before they reached the heart of the little seaside town. People were not staring at the Madonna.

They were staring at Jack.

The priests noticed it after a while. They were carrying the statue on a

wooden trestle, as they always did when entering a town. As the crowd began to follow them, Reynold hissed at Jack: “What’s going on?”

“I don’t know.”

“They’re more interested in you than the statue! Have you been here before?”

“Never.”

Aliena said: “It’s the older ones who look at Jack. The youngsters look at the statue.”

She was right. The children and young people were reacting to the statue with normal curiosity. It was the middle-aged who stared at him. He tried staring back, and found that they got scared. One made the Sign of the Cross at him. “What have they got against me?” he wondered aloud.

Their procession attracted followers just as rapidly as always, however, and they reached the marketplace with a large crowd in tow. They put the Madonna down in front of the church. The air smelled of salt water and fresh fish. Several townspeople went into the church. What normally happened next was that the local clergy would come out and talk to Reynold and Edward. There would be a discussion and explanations, and then the statue would be carried inside, where it would weep. The Madonna had only failed once: on a cold day, when Reynold insisted on going through with the procedure despite Jack’s warning that it might not work. Now they respected his advice.

The weather was right today, but something else was wrong. There was superstitious fear on the wind-whipped faces of the sailors and fishermen all around. The young sensed the disquiet of their elders, and the whole crowd was suspicious and vaguely hostile. No one approached the little group to ask questions about the statue. They stood at a distance, talking in low voices, waiting for something to happen.

At last the priest emerged. In other towns the priest had approached in a mood of wary curiosity, but this one came out like an exorcist, holding a cross in front of him like a shield and carrying a chalice of holy water in his other hand. Reynold said: “What does he think he’s going to do—cast out demons?” The priest walked over, chanting something in Latin, and approached Jack. He said in French: “I command, thee, evil spirit, to return to the Place of Ghosts! In the name—”

“I’m not a ghost, you damn fool!” Jack burst out. He felt unnerved.

The priest went on: “Father, Son and Holy Spirit—”

“We’re on a mission for the archbishop of Canterbury,” Reynold protested. “We’ve been blessed by him.”

Aliena said: “He’s not a ghost; I’ve known him since he was twelve years old!”

The priest began to look uncertain. “You are the ghost of a man of this town who died twenty-four years ago,” he said. Several people in the crowd

voiced their agreement, and the priest recommenced his incantation.

“I’m only twenty years old,” Jack said. “Perhaps I just resemble the man who died.”

Someone stepped out from the crowd. “You don’t just resemble him,” he said. “You are him—no different from the day you died.”

The crowd murmured with superstitious dread. Jack, feeling unnerved, looked at the speaker. He was a gray-bearded man of forty or so years, wearing the clothes of a successful craftsman or small merchant. He was not the hysterical type. Jack addressed him with a voice that faltered somewhat. “My companions know me,” he said. “Two of them are priests. The woman is my wife. The baby is my son. Are they ghosts, too?”

The man looked uncertain.

A white-haired woman standing beside him spoke up. “Don’t you know me, Jack?”

Jack jumped as if he had been stung. Now he was scared. “How did you know my name?” he said.

“Because I’m your mother,” she said.

“You’re not!” Aliena said, and Jack heard a note of panic in her voice. “I know his mother, and she’s not you! What’s happening here?”

“Evil magic!” said the priest.

“Wait a minute,” said Reynold. “Jack may be related to the man who died. Did he have any children?”

“No,” said the gray-bearded man.

“Are you sure?”

“He never married.”

“That’s not the same thing.”

One or two people snickered. The priest glared at them.

The gray-bearded man said: “But he died twenty-four years ago, and *this* Jack says he’s only twenty.”

“How did he die?” Reynold asked.

“Drowned.”

“Did you see the body?”

There was a silence. Finally the gray-bearded man said: “No, I never saw his body.”

“Did *anyone* see it?” Reynold said, his voice rising as he scented victory.

Nobody spoke.

Reynold turned to Jack. “Is your father alive?”

“He died before I was born.”

“What was he?”

“A jongleur.”

A gasp went up from the crowd, and the white-haired woman said: “My Jack was a jongleur.”

“But *this* Jack is a stonemason,” Reynold said. “I’ve seen his work. However, he could be the *son* of Jack the jongleur.” He turned to Jack. “What was your father called? Jack Jongleur, I suppose?”

“No. They called him Jack Shareburg.”

The priest repeated the name, pronouncing it slightly differently. “Jacques Cherbourg?”

Jack was stunned. He had never understood his father’s name, but now it was clear. Like many traveling men, he was called by the name of the town he came from. “Yes,” Jack said wonderingly. “Of course. Jacques Cherbourg.” He had found traces of his father at last, long after he had given up looking. He had gone all the way to Spain, but what he wanted had been here, on the coast of Normandy. He had fulfilled his quest. He felt wearily satisfied, as if he had put down a heavy burden after carrying it a long way.

“Then everything is clear,” Reynold said, looking around triumphantly at the crowd. “Jacques Cherbourg did not drown, he survived. He went to England, lived there a while, made a girl pregnant, and died. The girl gave birth to a boy and named him after the father. Jack here is now twenty, and looks exactly like his father did twenty-four years ago.” Reynold looked at the priest. “No need for exorcism here, father. It’s just a family reunion.”

Aliena put her arm through Jack’s and squeezed his hand. He felt stupefied. There were a hundred questions he wanted to ask and he did not know where to start. He blurted one out at random. “Why were you so sure he died?”

“Everyone on the White Ship died,” said the gray-bearded man.

“The White Ship?”

“I remember the White Ship,” said Edward. “That was a famous disaster. The heir to the throne was drowned. Then Maud became the heir, and that’s why we’ve got Stephen.”

Jack said: “But why was he on such a ship?”

The old woman who had spoken earlier answered. “He was to entertain the nobles on the voyage.” She looked at Jack. “You must be his boy, then. My grandson. I’m sorry I thought you were a ghost. You look so like him.”

“Your father was my brother,” said the gray-bearded man. “I’m your Uncle Guillaume.”

Jack realized with a glow of pleasure that this was the family he had longed for, his father’s relations. He was no longer alone in the world. He had found his roots at last.

“Well, this is my son, Tommy,” he said. “Look at his red hair.”

The white-haired woman looked fondly at the baby, then said in a shocked voice: “Oh, my soul, I’m a great-grandmother!”

Everyone laughed.

Jack said: “I wonder how my father got to England?”

Chapter 13

"SO GOD SAID TO SATAN, 'Look at my man Job. Look at him. There's a good man, if ever I saw one.'" Philip paused for effect. This was not a translation, of course: this was a freestyle retelling of the story. "'Tell me if that isn't a perfect and upright man, who fears God and does no evil.' So Satan said: 'Of course he worships you. You've given him everything. Just look at him. Seven sons and three daughters. Seven thousand sheep, and three thousand camels, and five hundred pairs of oxen, and five hundred asses. That's why he's a good man.' So God said: 'All right. Take it all away from him, and see what happens.' And that's what Satan did."

While Philip was preaching, his mind kept wandering to a mystifying letter he had received that morning from the archbishop of Canterbury. It began by congratulating him on obtaining the miraculous Weeping Madonna. Philip did not know what a weeping madonna was but he was quite sure he did not have one. The archbishop was glad to hear that Philip was recommencing the building of the new cathedral. Philip was doing no such thing. He was waiting for a sign from God before doing anything, and while he waited he was holding Sunday services in the small new parish church. Finally Archbishop Theobald commended his shrewdness in appointing a master builder who had worked on the new chancel at Saint-Denis. Philip had heard of the abbey of Saint-Denis, of course, and the famous Abbot Suger, the most powerful churchman in the kingdom of France; but he knew nothing of the new chancel there and he had not appointed a master builder from anywhere. Philip thought the letter had probably been intended for someone else and sent to him in error.

"Now, what did Job say, when he lost all his wealth, and his children died? Did he curse God? Did he worship Satan? No! He said: 'I was born naked, and I'll die naked. The Lord gives and the Lord takes away—blessed be the name of the Lord.' That's what Job said. And then God said to Satan: 'What did I tell you?' And Satan said: 'All right, but he's still got his health,

hasn't he? A man can put up with anything while he's in good health.' And God saw that he had to let Job suffer some more in order to prove his point, so he said: 'Take away his health, then, and see what happens.' So Satan made Job ill, and he had boils from the top of his head to the soles of his feet."

Sermons were becoming more common in churches. They had been rare when Philip was a boy. Abbot Peter had been against them, saying they tempted the priest to indulge himself. The old-fashioned view was that the congregation should be mere spectators, silently witnessing the mysterious holy rites, hearing the Latin words without understanding them, blindly trusting in the efficacy of the priest's intercession. But ideas had changed. Progressive thinkers nowadays no longer saw the congregation as mute observers of a mystical ceremony. The Church was supposed to be an integral part of their everyday existence. It marked the milestones in their lives, from christening, through marriage and the birth of children, to extreme unction and burial in consecrated ground. It might be their landlord, judge, employer or customer. Increasingly, people were expected to be Christians every day, not just on Sundays. They needed more than just rituals, according to the modern view: they wanted explanations, rulings, encouragement, exhortation.

"Now, I believe that Satan had a conversation with God about Kingsbridge," Philip said. "I believe that God said to Satan: 'Look at my people in Kingsbridge. Aren't they good Christians? See how they work hard all week in their fields and workshops, and then spend all day Sunday building me a new cathedral. Tell me they're not good people, if you can!' And Satan said: 'They're good because they're doing well. You've given them good harvests, and fine weather, and customers for their shops, and protection from evil earls. But take all that away from them, and they'll come over to my side.' So God said: 'What do you want to do?' And Satan said: 'Burn the town.' So God said: 'All right, burn it, and see what happens.' So Satan sent William Hamleigh to set fire to our fleece fair."

Philip took great consolation from the story of Job. Like Job, Philip had worked hard all his life to do God's will to the best of his ability; and, like Job, he had been rewarded with bad luck, failure and ignominy. But the purpose of the sermon was to lift the spirits of the townspeople, and Philip could see that it was not working. However, the story was not yet over.

"And then God said to Satan: 'Look now! You've burned that whole town to the ground, and they're *still* building me a new cathedral. *Now* tell me they're not good people!' But Satan said: 'I was too easy on them. Most of them escaped that fire. And they soon rebuilt their little wooden houses. Let me send a real disaster, then see what happens.' And God sighed, and said: 'What do you want to do now, then?' And Satan said: 'I'm going to bring the roof of that new church down on their heads.' And he did—as we all know."

Looking around the congregation, Philip saw very few people who had

not lost a relative in that awful collapse. There was Widow Meg, who had had a good husband and three strapping sons, all of whom had died; she had not spoken a word since, and her hair was white. Others had been mutilated. Peter Pony's right leg had been crushed, and he walked with a limp: he had been a horse catcher before, but now he worked for his brother, making saddles. There was hardly a family in town that had escaped. Sitting on the floor down at the front was a man who had lost the use of his legs. Philip frowned: who was he? He had not been injured in the roof collapse—Philip had never seen him before. Then he recalled being told that there was a cripple begging in the town and sleeping in the ruins of the cathedral. Philip had ordered that he be given a bed in the guesthouse.

His mind was wandering again. He returned to his sermon. "Now, what did Job do? His wife said to him: 'Curse God, and die.' But did he? He did not. Did he lose his faith? He did not. Satan was disappointed in Job. And I tell you"—Philip raised his hand dramatically, to emphasize the point—" I tell you, Satan is going to be disappointed in the people of Kingsbridge! For we continue to worship the true God, just as Job did in all his tribulations."

He paused again, to let them digest that, but he could tell he had failed to move them. The faces that looked up at him were interested, but not inspired. In truth he was not an inspirational preacher. He was a down-to-earth man. He could not captivate a congregation by the force of his personality. People did become intensely loyal to him, it was true, but not instantly: it happened slowly, over time, as they came to understand how he lived and what he achieved. His work sometimes inspired people—or it had, in the old days—but never his words.

However, the best part of the story was to come. "What happened to Job, after Satan had done his worst? Well, God gave him more than he had in the first place—twice as much! Where he had grazed seven thousand sheep, he now had fourteen thousand. The three thousand camels he had lost were replaced by six thousand. And he fathered seven more sons and three more daughters."

They looked indifferent. Philip plowed on. "And Kingsbridge will prosper again, one day. The widows shall marry again, and the widowers find wives; and those whose children died shall conceive again; and our streets will be full of people, and our shops stocked with bread and wine, leather and brass, buckles and shoes; and one day we will rebuild our cathedral."

The trouble was, he was not sure he believed it himself; and so he could not say it with conviction. No wonder the congregation was unmoved.

He looked down at the heavy book in front of him, and translated the Latin into English. "And Job lived a hundred and forty years more, and saw his sons, and his grandsons, and his great-grandsons. And then he died, being old and full of days." He closed the book.

There was a disturbance at the back of the little church. Philip looked up irritably. He was aware that his sermon had not had the effect he hoped for, but nevertheless he wanted a few moments of silence at the end of it. The church door was open, and all those at the back were looking out. Philip could see quite a crowd outside—it must contain everyone in Kingsbridge who was not in the church, he thought. What was going on?

Several possibilities went through his mind—there had been a fight, a fire, someone was dying, a large troop of horsemen was approaching—but he was completely unprepared for what actually happened. First, two priests came in carrying a statue of a woman on a board draped with an embroidered altar cloth. The solemnity of their demeanor suggested that the statue represented a saint, presumably the Virgin. Behind the priests walked two more people, and they provided the bigger surprise: one was Aliena, and the other was Jack.

Philip regarded Jack with affection mingled with exasperation. That boy, he thought: on the day he first came here the old cathedral burned down, and since then nothing connected with him has been normal. But Philip was more pleased than annoyed by Jack's entrance. Despite all the trouble the boy caused, he made life interesting. Boy? Philip looked at him again. Jack was no longer a boy. He had been away two years but he had aged ten, and his eyes were weary and knowing. Where had he been? And how had Aliena found him?

The procession moved up the middle of the church. Philip decided to do nothing and see what happened. A buzz of excitement went around as people recognized Jack and Aliena. Then there was a new sound, rather like a murmur of awe, and someone said: "She weeps!"

Others repeated it like a litany: "She weeps! She weeps!" Philip peered at the statue. Sure enough, there was water coming from the eyes. He suddenly remembered the archbishop's mysterious letter about the miraculous Weeping Madonna. So this was it. As to whether the weeping was a miracle, Philip would suspend judgment. He could see that the eyes appeared to be made of stone, or perhaps some kind of crystal, whereas the rest of the statue was wooden: that might have something to do with it.

The priests turned around and put the board down on the floor so that the Madonna was facing the congregation. Then Jack began to speak.

"The Weeping Madonna came to me in a far, far country," he began. Philip resented his taking over the service but he decided not to act precipitately: he would let Jack have his say. Anyway, he was intrigued. "A baptized Saracen gave her to me," Jack went on. The congregation murmured in surprise: Saracens were usually the barbaric black-faced enemy in such stories, and few people knew that some of them were actually Christians. "At first I wondered why she had been given to me. Nevertheless, I carried her for

many miles.” Jack had the congregation spellbound. He’s a better preacher of sermons than I am, Philip thought ruefully; I can feel the tension building already. “At last I began to realize that she wanted to go home. But where was her home? Finally it came to me: she wanted to go to Kingsbridge.”

The congregation broke into a hubbub of amazement. Philip was skeptical. There was a difference between the way God worked and the way Jack worked, and this had the hallmark of Jack. But Philip remained silent.

“But then I thought: What am I taking her to? What shrine will she have at Kingsbridge? In what church will she find her rest?” He looked around at the plain whitewashed interior of the parish church, as if to say: This obviously will not do. “And it was as if she spoke aloud, and said to me: ‘You, Jack Jackson, shall make me a shrine, and build me a church.’”

Philip began to see what Jack was up to. The Madonna was to be the spark that reignited the people’s enthusiasm for building a new cathedral. It would do what Philip’s sermon about Job had failed to do. But still Philip had to ask himself: Is this God’s will, or just Jack’s?

“So I asked her: ‘With what? I have no money.’ And she said: ‘I will provide the money.’ Well, we set off, with the blessing of Archbishop Theobald of Canterbury.” Jack glanced up at Philip as he named the archbishop. He’s telling me something, Philip thought: he’s saying that he’s got powerful backing for this.

Jack swung his gaze back to the congregation. “And along the road, from Paris, across Normandy, over the sea, and all the way to Kingsbridge, devout Christians have given money for the building of the shrine of the Weeping Madonna.” With that, Jack beckoned to someone outside.

A moment later two beturbaned Saracens marched solemnly into the church, carrying on their shoulders an ironbound chest.

The villagers cowered back from them in fear. Even Philip was astonished. He knew, in theory, that Saracens had brown skin, but he had never seen one, and the reality was amazing. Their swirling, brightly colored robes were equally striking. They strode through the awestruck congregation and knelt before the Madonna, placing the chest reverently on the floor.

There was a breathless silence as Jack unlocked the chest with a huge key and lifted the lid. People craned their necks to look. Suddenly Jack tipped the chest over.

There was a noise like a waterfall, and a stream of silver pennies poured out of the chest, hundreds of them, thousands. People crowded around to stare: none of them had ever seen so much money.

Jack raised his voice to be heard over their exclamations. “I have brought her home, and now I give her to the building of the new cathedral.” Then he turned, looked Philip in the eye, and inclined his head in a little bow, as if to say: Over to you.

Philip hated to be manipulated like this but at the same time he was bound to acknowledge that the way it had been done was masterly. However, that did not mean he was going to give in to it. The people might acclaim the Weeping Madonna but only Philip could decide whether she would be allowed to rest in Kingsbridge Cathedral alongside the bones of Saint Adolphus. And he was not yet convinced.

Some of the villagers began questioning the Saracens. Philip stepped down from his pulpit and went closer to listen. “I come from a far, far country,” one of them was saying. Philip was surprised to hear that he spoke English just like a Dorset fisherman, but most of the villagers did not even know that Saracens had a language of their own.

“What is your country called?” someone asked.

“My country is called Africa,” the Saracen replied. There was more than one country in Africa, of course, as Philip knew—although most of the villagers did not—and Philip wondered which one this Saracen came from. How exciting it would be if it were a place mentioned in the Bible, such as Egypt or Ethiopia.

A little girl reached out a tentative finger and touched his dark-brown hand. The Saracen smiled at her. Apart from his color, Philip thought, he looked no different from anyone else. Encouraged, the girl said: “What’s it like in Africa?”

“There are great deserts, and fig trees.”

“What’s a fig?”

“It’s…it’s a fruit, that looks like a strawberry and tastes like a pear.”

Philip was suddenly struck by a horrible suspicion. He said: “Tell me, Saracen, what city were you born in?”

“Damascus,” the man said.

Philip’s suspicion was confirmed. He was angered. He touched Jack’s arm and drew him aside. In a quietly furious voice he said: “What are you playing at?”

“What do you mean?” Jack said, trying to play innocent.

“Those two aren’t Saracens. They’re fishermen from Wareham with brown dye on their faces and hands.”

Jack did not seem bothered about having his deception discovered. He grinned and said: “How did you guess?”

“I don’t think that man has ever seen a fig, and Damascus is not in Africa. What is the meaning of this dishonesty?”

“It’s a harmless deception,” Jack said, and flashed his engaging smile.

“There is no such thing as a harmless deception,” Philip said coldly.

“All right.” Jack saw that Philip was angry. He became serious. “It serves the same purpose as an illuminated drawing on a page of the Bible. It’s not the truth, it’s an illustration. My brown-dyed Dorsetshire men dramatize the

true fact that the Weeping Madonna comes from a Saracen land.”

The two priests and Aliena had detached themselves from the crowd around the Madonna and joined Philip and Jack. Philip ignored them and said to Jack: “You aren’t frightened of a drawing of a snake. An illustration isn’t a lie. Your Saracens aren’t illustrations, they’re impostors.”

“We collected much more money after we got the Saracens,” Jack said.

Philip looked at the pennies heaped on the floor. “The townspeople probably think that’s enough to build a whole cathedral,” he said. “It looks to me like about a hundred pounds. You know that won’t even pay for a year’s work.”

“The money is like the Saracens,” Jack said. “It’s symbolic. You know you’ve got the money to start building.”

That was true. There was nothing stopping Philip from building. The Madonna was just the sort of thing needed to bring Kingsbridge back to life. It would attract people to the town—pilgrims and scholars as well as the idly curious. It would put new heart into the townspeople. It would be seen as a good omen. Philip had been waiting for a sign from God, and he wanted very badly to believe that this was it. But this did not have the feel of a sign from God. It had the feel of a stunt by Jack.

The younger of the two priests said: “I’m Reynold and this is Edward—we work for the archbishop of Canterbury. He sent us to accompany the Weeping Madonna.”

Philip said: “If you have the archbishop’s blessing, why did you need a couple of fairground Saracens to legitimize the Madonna?”

Edward looked a little shamefaced. Reynold said: “It was Jack’s idea, but I confess I saw no harm in it. Surely you’re not dubious about the Madonna, Philip?”

“You can call me Father,” Philip snapped. “Working for the archbishop doesn’t give you the right to condescend to your superiors. The answer to your question is yes. I am dubious about the Madonna. I am not going to install this statue in the precincts of Kingsbridge Cathedral until I’m convinced that it is a holy artifact.”

“A wooden statue weeps,” Reynold said. “How much of a miracle do you want?”

“The weeping is unexplained. That doesn’t make it a miracle. The changing of liquid water into solid ice is also inexplicable, but it isn’t miraculous.”

“The archbishop would be most disappointed if you refused the Madonna. He had a battle to prevent Abbot Suger from commandeering her for Saint-Denis.”

Philip knew he was being threatened. Young Reynold will have to work a lot harder than this to intimidate me, he thought. He said smoothly: “I’m quite

sure the archbishop would not want me to accept the Madonna without making some routine inquiries about her legitimacy.”

There was a movement at their feet. Philip looked down and saw the cripple he had noticed earlier. The unfortunate man was dragging himself across the floor, his paralyzed legs trailing behind him, trying to get close to the statue. Whichever way he turned he was blocked by the crowd. Automatically, Philip stood aside to let him through. The Saracens were preventing people from actually touching the statue, but the cripple escaped their notice. Philip saw the man’s hand reach out. Philip would normally have prevented someone from touching a holy relic, but he had not yet accepted that this statue was holy, so he did nothing. The cripple touched the hem of the wooden dress. Suddenly he let out a shout of triumph. “I feel it!” he yelled. “I feel it!”

Everyone looked at him.

“I feel the strength coming back!” he shouted.

Philip stared at the man incredulously, knowing what would happen next. The man bent one leg, then the other. There was a collective gasp from the onlookers. He reached out a hand and someone took it. With an effort, the man pulled himself upright.

The crowd made a noise like a groan of passion.

Someone called out: “Try to walk!”

Still holding the hand of his helper, the man took one tentative step, then another. The people watched in dead silence. On his third step he stumbled, and they sighed. But the man regained his balance and walked on.

They cheered.

He went down the nave with the people following him. After a few more steps he broke into a run. The cheering rose to a crescendo as he went out through the church door into the sunshine, followed by most of the congregation.

Philip looked at the two priests. Reynold was awestruck, and Edward had tears pouring down his face. Obviously they were not in on it. Philip turned to Jack and said furiously: “How dare you pull a trick like that?”

“Trick?” said Jack. “What trick?”

“That man had never been seen in this district until a few days ago. In another day or two he’ll disappear, never to be seen again, with his pockets full of your money. I know how these things are done, Jack. You’re not the first person to fake a miracle, regrettably. There was never anything wrong with his legs, was there? He’s another Wareham fisherman.”

The accusation was confirmed by Jack’s guilty look.

Aliena said: “Jack, I told you you shouldn’t try that.”

The two priests were thunderstruck. They had been completely taken in. Reynold was furious. He rounded on Jack. “You had no right!” he spluttered.

Philip felt sad as well as angry. In his heart he had hoped the Madonna would prove legitimate, for he could see just how he would use her to revitalize the priory and the town. But it was not to be. He looked around the little parish church. Only a handful of worshipers remained, still staring at the statue. He said to Jack: “You’ve gone too far this time.”

“The tears are real—there’s no trick involved there,” Jack said. “But the cripple was a mistake, I admit.”

“It was worse than a mistake,” Philip said angrily. “When people learn the truth it will shake their faith in *all* miracles.”

“Why do they need to learn the truth?”

“Because I’ll have to explain to them why the Madonna is not going to be installed in the cathedral. There’s no question of my accepting the statue now, of course.”

Reynold said: “I think that’s a little hasty—”

“When I want your opinion, young man, I’ll ask for it,” Philip snapped.

Reynold shut up but Jack persisted. “Are you sure you’ve got the right to deprive your people of the Madonna? Look at them.” He indicated the handful of worshipers who had remained behind. Among them was Meg Widow. She was kneeling in front of the statue with tears streaming down her face. Jack did not know, Philip realized, that Meg had lost her entire family in the collapse of Alfred’s roof. Her emotion touched Philip’s heart, and he wondered if Jack might be right after all. Why take this away from people? Because it’s dishonest, he reminded himself sternly. They believed in the statue because they saw a faked miracle. He hardened his heart.

Jack knelt down beside Meg and spoke to her. “Why are you weeping?”

“She’s dumb,” Philip told him.

Then Meg said: “The Madonna has suffered as I have. She understands.”

Philip was thunderstruck.

Jack said: “You see? The statue eases her suffering—What are you staring at?”

“She’s dumb,” Philip said again. “She hasn’t uttered a word for more than a year.”

“That’s right!” Aliena said. “Meg was struck dumb after her husband and boys died when the roof fell.”

“This woman?” Jack said. “But she just…”

Reynold looked bewildered. “You mean this is a miracle?” he said. “A *real* one?”

Philip looked at Jack’s face. Jack was more shocked than anyone. There was no trickery here.

Philip was profoundly moved. He had seen the hand of God move and work a miracle. He was shaking a little. “Well, Jack,” he said in an unsteady voice. “Despite all you have done to discredit the Weeping Madonna, it seems

that God intends to work wonders with it anyway."

For once Jack was lost for words.

Philip turned away from him and went to Meg. He took her hands and gently pulled her upright. "God has made you well again, Meg," he said, his voice trembling with emotion. "Now you can start a new life." He recalled that he had preached a sermon on the story of Job. The words came back to him: "So the Lord blessed the latter end of Job more than his beginning…." He had told the people of Kingsbridge that the same would be true of them. I wonder, he thought, looking at the rapture on Meg's tear-stained face, I wonder whether this could be the start of it.

There was an uproar in chapter when Jack presented his design for the new cathedral.

Philip had warned Jack to expect trouble. Philip had seen the drawings previously, of course. Jack had carried them to the prior's house early one morning, a plan and an elevation, drawn on plaster in wooden frames. They had looked at them together in the clear early light, and Philip had said: "Jack, this will be the most beautiful church in England—but we're going to have trouble with the monks."

Jack knew from his time as a novice that Remigius and his cronies still routinely opposed any plan that was dear to Philip's heart, even though it was eight years since Philip had defeated Remigius in the election. They rarely got much support from the broad mass of the brothers, but in this case Philip was uncertain: they were such a conservative lot that they could be scared by the revolutionary design. However, there was nothing for it but to show them the drawings and try to convince them. Philip certainly could not go ahead and build the cathedral without the wholehearted support of the majority of his monks.

On the following day Jack attended chapter and presented his plans. The drawings were propped up on a bench against the wall, and the monks crowded around to look at them. As they took in the details, there was a murmur of discussion which rose rapidly to a hubbub. Jack was discouraged: the tone was disapproving, bordering on outrage. The noise grew louder as they began to argue among themselves, some attacking the design and others defending it.

After a while Philip called for order and they calmed down. Milius Bursar asked a prearranged question. "Why are the arches pointed?"

"It's a new technique they're using in France," Jack replied. "I've seen it in several churches. The pointed arch is stronger. That is what will enable me to build the church so high. It will probably be the tallest nave in England."

They liked that idea, Jack could tell.

Someone else said: “The windows are so *big*.”

“Thick walls are unnecessary,” Jack said. “They’ve proved that in France. It’s the piers that hold the building up, especially with rib-vaulting. And the effect of the big windows is breathtaking. At Saint-Denis the abbot has put in colored glass with pictures on it. The church becomes a place of sunshine and air, instead of gloom and darkness.”

Several of the monks were nodding approval. Perhaps they were not as conservative as he had thought.

But Andrew Sacrist spoke next. “Two years ago you were a novice among us. You were disciplined for striking the prior, and you evaded that discipline and ran away. Now you come back wanting to tell us how to build our church.”

Before Jack could speak, one of the younger monks protested: “That’s nothing to do with it! We’re discussing the design, not Jack’s past!”

Several monks tried to speak at the same time, some of them shouting. Philip made them all shut up and asked Jack to answer the question.

Jack had been expecting something like this and he was ready. “I made a pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela as penance for that sin, Father Andrew, and I hope my bringing the Weeping Madonna to you may count as recompense for my wrongdoing,” he said meekly. “I’m not destined to be a monk, but I hope I can serve God in a different way—as his builder.”

They seemed to accept that.

However, Andrew had not finished. “How old are you?” he said, although he surely knew the answer.

“Twenty years.”

“That’s very young to be a master builder.”

“Everyone here knows me. I’ve lived here since I was a boy.” Since I burned down your old church, he thought guiltily. “I served my apprenticeship under the original master builder. You’ve seen my stonework. When I was a novice I worked with Prior Philip and Tom Builder as clerk of the works. I humbly ask the brothers to judge me by my work, not by my age.”

It was another prepared speech. He saw one of the monks grin at the word *humbly*, and realized it might have been a small error: they all knew that whatever other qualities he had he was not humble.

Andrew was quick to take advantage of his slip. “Humbly?” he said, and his face began to turn red as he feigned outrage. “It wasn’t very *humble* of you to announce to the masons of Paris three months ago that you had *already* been appointed master builder here.”

Once again there was a hubbub of indignant reactions from the monks. Jack groaned inwardly. How the devil had Andrew got hold of that little tidbit? Reynold or Edward must have been indiscreet. He tried to shrug it off.

“I was hoping to attract some of those craftsmen to Kingsbridge,” he said as the noise died down. “They will be useful, no matter who is appointed master here. I don’t think my presumption did any harm.” He tried an engaging grin. “But I’m sorry I’m not humbler.” This did not go down very well.

Milius Bursar got him out of trouble by asking another prearranged question. “What do you propose to do about the existing chancel, which has partly collapsed?”

“I’ve examined it very carefully,” Jack said. “It can be repaired. If you appoint me master builder today I will have it usable again within a year. Furthermore, you can continue to use it while I’m building the transepts and the nave to the new design. Finally, when the nave is finished, I propose demolishing the chancel and building a new one to match the rest of the new church.”

Andrew said: “But how do we know the old chancel won’t fall down again?”

“The collapse was caused by Alfred’s stone vault, which was not in the original plans. The walls weren’t strong enough to hold it up. I propose to revert to Tom’s design and build a timber ceiling.”

There was a murmur of surprise. The question of why the roof had fallen in had been a matter of controversy. Andrew said: “But Alfred increased the size of the buttresses to support the extra weight.”

This had puzzled Jack, too, but he thought he had found the answer. “They still weren’t strong enough, particularly at the top. If you study the ruins you can see that the part of the structure that gave way was the clerestory. There was very little reinforcement at that level.”

They seemed satisfied with that. Jack felt that his ability to give a confident answer had enhanced his status as a master builder.

Remigius stood up. Jack had been wondering when he would make his contribution. “I should like to read a verse of the Holy Scriptures to the brethren in chapter,” he said, rather theatrically. He looked at Philip, who nodded consent.

Remigius walked to the lectern and opened the huge Bible. Jack studied the man. His thin mouth was nervously mobile, and his watery blue eyes bulged a little, giving him a permanent expression of indignation. He was a picture of resentment. Years ago he had come to believe that he was destined to be a leader of men, but in truth he was too weak a character, and now he was doomed to live out his life in disappointment, making trouble for better men. “The Book of Exodus,” he intoned as he turned the parchment pages. “Chapter Twenty. Verse Fourteen.” Jack wondered what on earth was coming. Remigius read: “Thou shalt not commit adultery.” He closed the book with a bang and returned to his seat.

In a tone of mild exasperation, Philip said: “Perhaps you would tell us,

Brother Remigius, why you chose to read that short verse in the middle of our discussion of building plans?”

Remigius pointed an accusing finger at Jack. “Because the man who wants to be our master builder is living in a state of sin!” he thundered.

Jack could hardly believe he was serious. He said indignantly: “It’s true that our union has not been blessed by the Church, because of special circumstances, but we’ll get married as soon as you like.”

“You can’t,” Remigius said triumphantly. “Aliena is already married.”

“But that union was never consummated.”

“Nevertheless, the couple were wed in church.”

“But if you won’t let me marry her, how can I avoid committing adultery?” Jack said angrily.

“That’s enough!” The voice was Philip’s. Jack looked at him. He seemed furious. He said: “Jack, are you living in sin with your brother’s wife?”

Jack was flabbergasted. “Didn’t you know?”

“Of course I didn’t!” Philip roared. “Do you think I could have remained silent about it if I had?”

There was a silence. It was unusual for Philip to shout. Jack saw that he was in real trouble. His offense was a technicality, of course, but monks were supposed to be strict about such things. Unfortunately, the fact that Philip had not known that he was living with Aliena made matters much worse. It had enabled Remigius to take Philip by surprise and make a fool of him. Now Philip would have to be firm, to prove that he was strict.

Jack said miserably: “But you can’t build the wrong sort of church just to punish me.”

Remigius said with relish: “You’ll have to leave the woman.”

“Piss off, Remigius,” Jack said. “She has my child—he’s a year old!”

Remigius sat back with a look of satisfaction.

Philip said: “Jack, if you speak like that in chapter you’ll have to leave.”

Jack knew he should calm down but he could not. “But it’s ludicrous!” he said. “You’re telling me to abandon my woman and our child! This isn’t morality, it’s hairsplitting.”

Philip’s anger abated somewhat, and Jack saw the more familiar light of sympathy in his clear blue eyes. He said: “Jack, you may take a pragmatic approach to God’s laws but we prefer to be rigid—that’s why we’re monks. And we cannot have you as builder while you’re living in a state of adultery.”

Jack remembered a line of Scripture. “Jesus said: ‘He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone.’”

Philip said: “Yes, but Jesus said to the adulteress: ‘Go, and sin no more.’” He turned to Remigius. “I take it you would withdraw your opposition if the adultery ceased.”

“Of course!” said Remigius.

Despite his anger and misery, Jack noticed that Philip had outmaneuvered Remigius neatly. He had made the adultery the decisive question, thereby sidestepping the whole issue of the new design. But Jack was not ready to go along with that. He said: “I’m not going to leave her!”

Philip said: “It might not be for long.”

Jack paused. That had taken him by surprise. “What do you mean?”

“You could marry Aliena if her first marriage was annulled.”

“Can that be done?”

“It should be automatic, if, as you say, the marriage was never consummated.”

“What do I have to do?”

“Apply to an ecclesiastical court. Normally it would be Bishop Waleran’s court, but in this case you probably should go straight to the archbishop of Canterbury.”

“And is the archbishop bound to agree?”

“In justice, yes.”

That was not a totally unequivocal answer, Jack noted. “But we would have to live apart meanwhile?”

“If you want to be appointed master builder of Kingsbridge Cathedral—yes.”

Jack said: “You’re asking me to choose between the two things I love most in all the world.”

Philip said: “Not for long.”

His voice made Jack look up sharply: there was real compassion in it. Jack realized Philip was genuinely sorry to have to do this. That made him less angry and more sad. He said: “How long?”

“It could be as much as a year.”

“A year!”

“You don’t have to live in different towns,” Philip said. “You can still see Aliena and the child.”

“Do you know she went to Spain to look for me?” Jack said. “Can you imagine that?” But the monks had no conception of what love was about. He said bitterly: “Now I must tell her we’ve got to live apart.”

Philip stood up and put a hand on Jack’s shoulder. “The time will go by faster than you think, I promise you,” he said. “And you’ll be busy—building the new cathedral.”

II

The forest had grown and changed in eight years. Jack had thought he could never get lost in territory he had once known like the back of his hand, but he had been wrong. Old trails were overgrown, new ones had been trodden in the undergrowth by the deer and the boar and the wild ponies, streamlets had altered course, old trees had fallen and young ones were taller. Everything was diminished: distances seemed less and hills not so steep. Most striking of all, he felt a stranger here. When a young deer gazed at him, startled, across a glade, Jack could not guess which family the deer belonged to or where its dam was. When a flight of ducks took off, he did not instantly know what stretch of water they had risen from and why. And he was nervous, for he had no idea where the outlaws were.

He had ridden most of the way here from Kingsbridge, but he had to dismount as soon as he left the main road, for the trees grew too low over the trail to permit him to ride. Returning to the haunts of his boyhood made him feel irrationally sad. He had never appreciated, because he had never realized, how simple life had been then. His greatest passion had been for strawberries, and he had known that every summer, for a few days, there would be as many as he could eat, growing on the forest floor. Nowadays everything was problematical: his combative friendship with Prior Philip; his frustrated love for Aliena; his towering ambition to build the most beautiful cathedral in the world; his burning need to find out the truth about his father.

He wondered how much his mother had changed in the two years he had been away. He was looking forward eagerly to seeing her again. He had coped perfectly well on his own, of course, but it was very reassuring to have someone in your life who was always ready to fight for you, and he had missed that comforting feeling.

It had taken him all day to reach the part of the forest where he and she had used to live. Now the short winter afternoon was darkening rapidly. Soon he would have to give up the search for their old cave, and concentrate on finding a sheltered place in which to spend the night. It would be cold. Why am I worried? he thought. I used to spend every night in the forest.

In the end she found him.

He was on the point of giving up. A narrow, almost invisible track through the vegetation, probably used only by badgers and foxes, petered out in a thicket. There was nothing to do but retrace his steps. He turned his horse around and almost walked into her.

“You’ve forgotten how to move quietly in the forest,” she said. “I could hear you crashing around a mile away.”

Jack smiled. She had not changed. “Hello, Mother,” he said. He kissed her cheek, then, in a rush of affection, he hugged her.

She touched his face. “You’re thinner than ever.”

He looked at her. She was brown and healthy, her hair still thick and dark, without any gray. Her eyes were the same golden color, and they still seemed to see right through Jack. He said: “You’re just the same.”

“Where did you go?” she said.

“All the way to Compostela, and even farther, to Toledo.”

“Aliena went after you—”

“She found me. Thanks to you.”

“I’m glad.” She closed her eyes as if sending up a prayer of thanks. “I’m so glad.”

She led him through the forest to the cave, which was less than a mile away: his memory had not been so bad after all. She had a blazing log fire and three sputtering rushlights. She gave him a mug of the cider she made with crab apples and wild honey, and they roasted some chestnuts. Jack could remember the items that a forest dweller could not make for herself, and he had brought his mother knives, cord, soap and salt. She began to skin a coney for the cooking pot. He said: “How are you, Mother?”

“Fine,” she said; then she looked at him and realized the question was serious. “I grieve for Tom Builder,” she said. “But he’s dead and I don’t care to take another husband.”

“And are you happy here, otherwise?”

“Yes and no. I’m used to living in the forest. I like being alone. I never did get used to busybody priests telling me how to behave. But I miss you, and Martha, and Aliena; and I wish I could see more of my grandson.” She smiled. “But I can never go back to live in Kingsbridge, not after cursing a Christian wedding. Prior Philip will never forgive me for that. However, it’s all worth it if I’ve brought you and Aliena together at last.” She looked up from her work with a pleased smile. “So how do you like married life?”

“Well,” he said hesitantly, “we’re not married. In the eyes of the Church, Aliena is still married to Alfred.”

“Don’t be stupid. What does the Church know about it?”

“Well, they know who they’ve married, and they wouldn’t let me build the new cathedral while I was living with another man’s wife.”

Her eyes flashed anger. “So you’ve left her?”

“Yes. Until she can get an annulment.”

Mother put the rabbit’s skin to one side. With a sharp knife in her bloody hands she began to joint the carcass, dropping the pieces into the cooking pot bubbling on the fire. “Prior Philip did that to me, once, when I was with

Tom," she said, slicing the raw meat with swift strokes. "I know why he gets so frantic about people making love. It's because he's not allowed to do it himself, and he resents other people's freedom to enjoy what is forbidden to him. Of course, there's nothing he can do about it when they're married by the Church. But if they're not, he gets the chance to spoil things for them, and that makes him feel better." She cut off the rabbit's feet and threw them into a wooden bucket full of rubbish.

Jack nodded. He had accepted the inevitable, but every time he said good night to Aliena and walked away from her door he felt angry with Philip, and he understood his mother's persistent resentment. "It's not forever, though," he said.

"How does Aliena feel about it?"

Jack grimaced. "Not good. But she thinks it's her fault, for marrying Alfred in the first place."

"So it is. And it's your fault for being determined to build churches."

He was sorry that she could not share his vision. "Mother, it's not worth building anything else. Churches are bigger and higher and more beautiful and more difficult to build, and they have more decoration and sculpture than any other kind of building."

"And you won't be satisfied with anything less."

"Right."

She shook her head in perplexity. "I'll never know where you got the idea that you were destined for greatness." She dropped the rest of the rabbit in the pot and began to clean the underside of its skin. She would use the fur. "You certainly didn't inherit it from your forebears."

That was the cue he had been waiting for. "Mother, when I was overseas I learned some more about my forebears."

She stopped scraping and looked at him. "What on earth do you mean?"

"I found my father's family."

"Good God!" She dropped the rabbit skin. "How did you do that? Where are they? What are they like?"

"There's a town in Normandy called Cherbourg. That's where he came from."

"How can you be sure?"

"I look so much like him, they thought I was a ghost."

Mother sat down heavily on a stool. Jack felt guilty about having shocked her so badly, but he had not expected her to be so shaken by the news. She said: "What…what are his people like?"

"His father's dead, but his mother's still alive. She was kind, once she was convinced I wasn't the ghost of my father. His older brother is a carpenter with a wife and three children. My cousins." He smiled. "Isn't that nice? We've got relations."

The thought seemed to upset her, and she looked distressed. “Oh, Jack, I’m so sorry I didn’t give you a normal upbringing.”

“I’m not,” he said lightly. He was embarrassed when his mother showed remorse: it was so out of character for her. “But I’m glad I met my cousins. Even if I never see them again, it’s good to know they’re there.”

She nodded sadly. “I understand.”

Jack took a deep breath. “They thought my father had drowned in a shipwreck twenty-four years ago. He was aboard a vessel called the White Ship which went down just out of Barfleur. Everyone was thought to have drowned. Obviously my father survived. But somehow they never knew that, because he never went back to Cherbourg.”

“He went to Kingsbridge,” she said.

“But *why*?”

She sighed. “He clung to a barrel and was washed ashore near a castle,” she said. “He went to the castle to report the shipwreck. There were several powerful barons at the castle, and they showed great consternation when he turned up. They took him prisoner and brought him to England. After some weeks or months—he got rather confused—he ended up in Kingsbridge.”

“Did he say anything else about the wreck?”

“Only that the ship went down very fast, as if it had been holed.”

“It sounds as if they needed to keep him out of the way.”

She nodded. “And then, when they realized they couldn’t hold him prisoner forever, they killed him.”

Jack knelt in front of her and forced her to look at him. In a voice shaking with emotion he said: “But who were *they*, Mother?”

“You’ve asked me that before.”

“And you’ve never told me.”

“Because I don’t want you to spend your life trying to avenge the death of your father!”

She was still treating him like a child, withholding information that might not be good for him, he felt. He tried to be calm and adult. “I’m going to spend my life building Kingsbridge Cathedral and making babies with Aliena. But I want to know why they hanged my father. And the only people who have the answer are the men who gave false testimony against him. So I have to know who they were.”

“At the time I didn’t know their names.”

He knew she was being evasive and it made him angry. “*But you know now!*”

“Yes, I do,” she said tearfully, and he realized that this was as painful for her as it was for him. “And I’ll tell you, because I can see you’ll never stop asking.” She sniffed and wiped her eyes.

He waited in suspense.

“There were three of them: a monk, a priest and a knight.”

Jack looked at her hard. “Their names.”

“You’re going to ask them why they lied under oath?”

“Yes.”

“And you expect them to tell you?”

“Perhaps not. I’ll look into their eyes when I ask them, and that may tell me all I need to know.”

“Even that may not be possible.”

“I want to try, Mother!”

She sighed. “The monk was the prior of Kingsbridge.”

“Philip!”

“No, not Philip. This was before Philip’s time. It was his predecessor, James.”

“But he’s dead.”

“I told you it might not be possible to question them.”

Jack narrowed his eyes. “Who were the others?”

“The knight was Percy Hamleigh, the earl of Shiring.”

“William’s father!”

“Yes.”

“He’s dead, too!”

“Yes.”

Jack had a terrible feeling that all three would turn out to be dead men, and the secret buried with their bones. “Who was the priest?” he said urgently.

“His name was Waleran Bigod. He’s now the bishop of Kingsbridge.”

Jack gave a sigh of profound satisfaction. “And he’s still alive,” he said.

Bishop Waleran’s castle was finished at Christmas. William Hamleigh and his mother rode to it on a fine morning early in the new year. They saw it from a distance, across the valley. It was at the highest point of the opposite ridge, overlooking the surrounding countryside with a forbidding regard.

As they crossed the valley they passed the old palace. It was now used as a storehouse for fleeces. Income from wool was paying for much of the new castle.

They trotted up the gentle slope on the far side of the valley and followed the road through a gap in the earth ramparts and across a deep dry moat to a gateway in a stone wall. With ramparts, a moat *and* a stone wall, this was a highly secure castle, superior to William’s own and to many of the king’s.

The inner courtyard was dominated by a massive square keep three stories high which dwarfed the stone church that stood alongside it. William helped his mother dismount. They left their knights to stable the horses and mounted the steps that led to the hall.

It was midday, and in the hall Waleran's servants were preparing the table. Some of his archdeacons, deans, employees and hangers-on were standing around waiting for dinner. William and Regan waited while a steward went up to the bishop's private quarters to announce their arrival.

William was burning inside with a fierce, agonizing jealousy. Aliena was in love, and the whole county knew it. She had given birth to a love child, and her husband had thrown her out of his house. With her baby in her arms, she had gone off to look for the man she loved, and had found him after searching half of Christendom. The story was being told and retold all over southern England. It made William sick with hatred every time he heard it. But he had thought of a way to get revenge.

They were taken up the stairs and shown into Waleran's chamber. They found him sitting at a table with Baldwin, who was now an archdeacon. The two clerics were counting money on a checkered cloth, building the silver pennies into piles of twelve and moving them from black squares to white. Baldwin stood up and bowed to Lady Regan, then quickly put away the cloth and the coins.

Waleran got up from the table and went to the chair by the fire. He moved quickly, like a spider, and William felt the old familiar loathing. Nevertheless he resolved to be unctuous. He had heard recently of the dreadful death of the earl of Hereford, who had quarreled with the bishop of Hereford and died in a state of excommunication. His body had been buried in unconsecrated ground. When William imagined his own body lying in undefended earth, vulnerable to all the imps and monsters that inhabited the underworld, he shook with fright. He would never quarrel with *his* bishop.

Waleran was as pale and thin as ever, and his black robes hung on him like laundry drying on a tree. He never seemed to change. William knew that he himself had changed. Food and wine were his principal pleasures, and each year he grew a little stouter, despite the active life he led, so that the expensive chain mail that had been made for him when he turned twenty-one had been replaced twice over in the succeeding seven years.

Waleran was just back from York. He had been away for almost half a year, and William politely asked him: "Did you have a successful trip?"

"No," he replied. "Bishop Henry sent me there to attempt to resolve a four-year-old dispute over who is to be archbishop of York. I failed. The row goes on."

The less said about that the better, William thought. He said: "While you've been away, there have been a lot of changes here. Especially at Kingsbridge."

"At Kingsbridge?" Waleran was surprised. "I thought that problem had been solved once and for all."

William shook his head. "They've got the Weeping Madonna."

Waleran looked irritated. “What the devil are you talking about?”

William’s mother answered. “It’s a wooden statue of the Virgin that they use in processions. At certain times, water comes from its eyes. The people think it’s miraculous.”

“It *is* miraculous!” William said. “A statue that weeps!”

Waleran gave him a scornful look.

Regan said: “Miraculous or not, thousands of people have been to see it in the last few months. Meanwhile, Prior Philip has recommenced building. They’re repairing the chancel and putting a new timber ceiling on it, and they’ve started on the rest of the church. The foundations for the crossing have been dug, and some new stonemasons have arrived from Paris.”

“Paris?” Waleran said.

Regan said: “The church is now going to be built in the style of Saint-Denis, whatever that is.”

Waleran nodded. “Pointed arches. I heard talk of it at York.”

William did not care what style Kingsbridge Cathedral would be. He said: “The point is, young men off my farms are moving to Kingsbridge to work as laborers, the Kingsbridge market is open again every Sunday, taking business away from Shiring…. It’s the same old story!” He glanced uneasily at the other two, wondering whether either of them suspected that he had an ulterior motive; but neither looked suspicious.

Waleran said: “The worst mistake I ever made was to help Philip become prior.”

“They’re going to have to learn that they just can’t do this,” William said.

Waleran looked at him thoughtfully. “What do you want to do?”

“I’m going to sack the town again.” And when I do, I’ll kill Aliena and her lover, he thought; and he looked into the fire, so that his mother should not meet his eyes and read his thoughts.

“I’m not sure you can,” Waleran said.

“I’ve done it before—why shouldn’t I do it again?”

“Last time you had a good reason: the fleece fair.”

“This time it’s the market. They’ve never had King Stephen’s permission for that either.”

“It’s not quite the same. Philip was pushing his luck by holding a fleece fair, and you attacked it immediately. The Sunday market has been going on at Kingsbridge for six years now, and anyway, it’s twenty miles from Shiring so it ought to be licensed.”

William suppressed his anger. He wanted to tell Waleran to stop being such a feeble old woman; but that would never do.

While he was swallowing his protest a steward came into the room and stood silently by the door. Waleran said: “What is it?”

“There’s a man here who insists on seeing you, my lord bishop. Name of

Jack Jackson. A builder, from Kingsbridge. Shall I send him away?”

William’s heart raced. It was Aliena’s lover. How had the man happened to come here just when William was plotting his death? Perhaps he had supernatural powers. William was possessed by dread.

“From Kingsbridge?” Waleran said with interest.

Regan said: “He’s the new master builder there, the one who brought the Weeping Madonna from Spain.”

“Interesting,” said Waleran. “Let’s have a look at him.” He said to the steward: “Send him in.”

William stared at the door with superstitious terror. He expected a tall, fearsome man in a black cloak to stride in and point directly at him with an accusing finger. But when Jack came through the door, William was shocked by his youth. Jack could not have been much past twenty. He had red hair and alert blue eyes which flickered over William, paused on Regan—whose frightful facial sores arrested the glance of anyone who was not used to them—and came to rest on Waleran. The builder was not much intimidated by finding himself in the presence of the two most powerful men in the county, but apart from that surprising nonchalance he did not seem very fearsome.

Like William, Waleran sensed the young builder’s insubordinate attitude, and reacted with a coldly haughty voice. “Well, lad, what’s your business with me?”

“The truth,” Jack said. “How many men have you seen hang?”

William caught his breath. It was a shocking and insolent question. He looked at the others. His mother was leaning forward, frowning intently at Jack, as if she might have seen him before and was trying to place him. Waleran was looking coldly amused.

Waleran said: “Is this a riddle? I’ve seen more men hang than I care to count, and there will be another if you don’t speak respectfully.”

“I beg your pardon, my lord bishop,” Jack said, but he still did not sound frightened. “Do you remember all of them?”

“I think so,” Waleran said, and he sounded intrigued despite himself. “I suppose there is a particular one that you’re interested in.”

“Twenty-two years ago, at Shiring, you watched the hanging of a man called Jack Shareburg.”

William heard his mother give a muffled gasp.

“He was a jongleur,” Jack continued. “Do you recall him?”

William felt the atmosphere in the room become tense all of a sudden. There *was* something unnaturally frightful about Jack Jackson; there had to be, for him to have this effect on Waleran and Mother. “I think perhaps I do remember,” Waleran said, and William heard in his voice the strain of self-control. What was going on here?

“I imagine you do,” Jack said, and now he was sounding insolent again.

“The man was convicted on the testimony of three people. Two of them are now dead. You were the third.”

Waleran nodded. “He had stolen something from Kingsbridge Priory—a jeweled chalice.”

A flinty look came into Jack’s blue eyes. “He had done nothing of the kind.”

“I caught him myself, with the chalice on him.”

“You lied.”

There was a pause. When Waleran spoke again his tone was mild but his face was as hard as iron. “I may have your tongue ripped out for that,” he said.

“I just want to know why you did it,” Jack said as if he had not heard the grisly threat. “You can be candid here. William is no threat to you, and his mother seems to know all about it already.”

William looked at his mother. It was true, she did have a knowing air. William himself was now completely mystified. It seemed—he hardly dared to hope—that Jack’s visit actually had nothing to do with William and his secret plans to kill Aliena’s lover.

Regan said to Jack: “You’re accusing the bishop of perjury!”

“I shan’t repeat the charge in public,” Jack said coolly. “I’ve got no proof, and anyway I’m not interested in revenge. I would just like to understand why you hanged an innocent man.”

“Get out of here,” Waleran said icily.

Jack nodded as if he had expected no more. Although he had not got answers to his questions, there was a look of satisfaction on his face, as if his suspicions had somehow been confirmed.

William was still baffled by the whole exchange. On impulse, he said: “Wait a moment.”

Jack turned at the door and looked at him with those mocking blue eyes.

“What…” William swallowed and got his voice under control. “What’s your interest in this? Why did you come here and ask these questions?”

“Because the man they hanged was my father,” Jack said, and he went out.

There was a silence in the room. So Aliena’s lover, the master builder at Kingsbridge, was the son of a thief who had been hanged at Shiring, William thought: so what? But Mother seemed anxious, and Waleran actually looked shaken.

Eventually Waleran said bitterly: “That woman has dogged me for twenty years.” He was normally so guarded that William was shocked to see him letting his feelings show.

“She disappeared after the cathedral fell down,” Regan said. “I thought we’d seen the last of her.”

“Now her son has come to haunt us.” There was something like real fear in Waleran’s voice.

William said: “Why don’t you slap him in irons for accusing you of perjury?”

Waleran threw him a look of scorn, then said: “Your boy’s a damn fool, Regan.”

William realized the charge of perjury must be true. And if he was able to figure that out, so could Jack. “Does anyone else know?”

Regan said: “Prior James confessed his perjury, before he died, to the sub-prior, Remigius. But Remigius has always been on our side against Philip, so he’s no danger. Jack’s mother knows some of it, but not all; otherwise she would have used the information by now. But Jack has traveled around—he may have picked up something his mother didn’t know.”

William saw that this strange story from the past could be used to his advantage. As if it had just occurred to him, he said: “Then let’s kill Jack Jackson.”

Waleran just shook his head contemptuously.

Regan said: “That would serve to draw attention to him and his charges.”

William was disappointed. It had seemed almost providential. He thought about it, while the silence in the room dragged out. Then a new thought came to him, and he said: “Not necessarily.”

They both looked at him skeptically.

“Jack might be killed without drawing attention to him,” William said doggedly.

“All right, tell us how,” Waleran said.

“He could be killed in an attack on Kingsbridge,” William said, and he had the satisfaction of seeing the same look of startled respect on both their faces.

Jack walked around the building site with Prior Philip late in the afternoon. The ruins of the chancel had been cleared, and the rubble formed two huge heaps on the north side of the priory close. New scaffolding was up, and the masons were rebuilding the fallen walls. Alongside the infirmary was a large stockpile of timber.

“You’re moving along quickly,” Philip said.

“Not as fast as I’d like,” Jack replied.

They inspected the foundations of the transepts. Forty or fifty laborers were down in the deep holes, shoveling mud into buckets, while others at ground level operated the winches that lifted the buckets out of the holes. Huge rough-cut stone blocks for the foundations were stacked nearby.

Jack took Philip into his own workshop. It was much bigger than Tom’s

shed had been. One side was completely open, for better light. Half the ground area was occupied by his tracing floor. He had laid planks over the earth, put a wooden border a couple of inches high around the planks, then poured plaster onto the wood until it filled the frame and threatened to overflow the border. When the plaster set, it was hard enough to walk on, but drawings could be scratched on it with a short length of iron wire sharpened to a point. This was where Jack designed the details. He used compasses, a straightedge and a set square. The scratch marks were white and clear when first made, but they faded to gray quite quickly, which meant that new drawings could be made on top of old ones without confusion. It was an idea he had picked up in France.

Most of the rest of the hut was taken up by the bench on which Jack was working in wood, making the templates that would show the masons how to carve the stones. The light was fading: he would do no more woodwork today. He began to put his tools away.

Philip picked up a template. “What’s this for?”

“The plinth at the base of a pier.”

“You prepare things well in advance.”

“I just can’t wait to start building properly.”

These days all their conversations were terse and factual.

Philip put down the template. “I must go in to compline.” He turned away.

“And I shall go and *visit* my family,” Jack said acidly.

Philip paused, turned as if he was going to speak, looked sad, and left.

Jack locked his toolbox. That had been a foolish remark. He had accepted the job on Philip’s terms and it was pointless to complain about it now. But he felt constantly angry with Philip, and he could not always keep it in.

He left the priory close in twilight and went to the little house in the poor quarter where Aliena lived with her brother, Richard. She smiled happily when Jack walked in, but they did not kiss: they never touched one another nowadays, for fear they would become aroused, and then they would either have to part frustrated or give in to their lust and risk being caught breaking their promise to Prior Philip.

Tommy was playing on the floor. He was now a year and half old, and his current obsession was putting things into other things. He had four or five kitchen bowls in front of him, and he tirelessly put the smaller ones inside the larger and tried to put the larger inside the smaller. Jack was very struck by the idea that Tommy did not know instinctively that a large bowl would not fit inside a small one; that this was something human beings had to learn. Tommy was struggling with spatial relationships just as Jack did when he tried to visualize something like the shape of a stone in a curved vault.

Tommy fascinated Jack and made him feel anxious too. Until now Jack had never worried about his ability to find work, hold down a job, and support

himself. He had set out to cross France without giving a moment's thought to the possibility that he might become destitute and starve. But now he wanted security. The need to take care of Tommy was much more compelling than the need to take care of himself. For the first time in his life he had responsibilities.

Aliena put a jug of wine and a spiced cake on the table and sat down opposite Jack. He poured a cup of wine and sipped it gratefully. Aliena put some cake in front of Tommy, but he was not hungry, and he scattered it in the rushes on the floor.

Aliena said: "Jack, I need more money."

Jack was surprised. "I give you twelve pennies a week. I only make twenty-four."

"I'm sorry," she said. "You live alone—you don't need as much."

Jack thought this was rather unreasonable. "But a laborer only gets sixpence a week—and some of them have five or six children!"

Aliena looked cross. "Jack, I don't know how laborers' wives keep house—I never learned. And I don't spend anything on myself. But you have dinner here every day. And there's Richard—"

"Well, what about Richard?" Jack said angrily. "Why doesn't he support himself?"

"He never has done."

Jack felt that Aliena and Tommy were enough of a burden for him. "I don't know that Richard is my responsibility!"

"Well, he's mine," she said quietly. "When you took me on you took him too."

"I don't remember agreeing to that!" he said angrily.

"Don't be cross."

It was too late: Jack was already cross. "Richard is twenty-three years old—two years older than I am. How come I'm keeping him? Why should I eat dry bread for breakfast and pay for Richard's bacon?"

"Anyway, I'm pregnant again."

"What?"

"I'm having another baby."

Jack's anger evaporated. He seized her hand. "That's wonderful!"

"Are you glad?" she said. "I was afraid you'd be angry."

"Angry! I'm thrilled! I never knew Tommy when he was tiny—now I'll find out what I missed."

"But what about the extra responsibility, and the money?"

"Oh, to hell with the money. I'm just bad-tempered because we have to live apart. We've got plenty of money. But another baby! I hope it's a girl." He thought of something, and frowned. "But when…?"

"It must have been just before Prior Philip made us live apart."

“Maybe on Halloween.” He grinned. “Do you remember that night? You rode me like a horse—”

“I remember,” she said with a blush.

He gazed at her fondly. “I’d like to do you now.”

She smiled. “Me too.”

They held hands across the table.

Richard came in.

He threw the door open and walked inside, hot and dusty, leading a sweating horse. “I’ve got bad news,” he said, panting.

Aliena picked Tommy up off the floor to get him out of the way of the hooves. Jack said: “What’s happened?”

“We must all get out of Kingsbridge tomorrow,” he said.

“But why?”

“William Hamleigh is going to burn the town again on Sunday.”

“No!” Aliena cried.

Jack went cold. He saw again the scene three years ago, when William’s horsemen had invaded the fleece fair, with their blazing torches and brutal clubs. He recalled the panic, the screaming, and the smell of burning flesh. He saw again the corpse of his step-father, with his forehead smashed. He felt sick at heart.

“How do you know?” he asked Richard.

“I was in Shiring, and I saw some of William’s men buying weapons at the armorer’s shop.”

“That doesn’t mean—”

“There’s more. I followed them into an alehouse and listened to their talk. One of them asked what defenses Kingsbridge had, and another said none.”

Aliena said: “Oh, God, it’s true.” She looked at Tommy, and her hand went to her stomach, where the new baby was growing. She looked up, and Jack met her eye. They were both thinking the same.

Richard went on: “Later I got talking to some of the younger ones, who don’t know me. I told them about the battle of Lincoln, and so on, and said I was looking for a fight. They told me to go to Earlscastle, but it would have to be today, for they were to leave tomorrow, and the fight would be on Sunday.”

“Sunday,” Jack whispered fearfully.

“I rode out to Earlscastle, to double-check.”

Aliena said: “Richard, that was dangerous.”

“All the signs are there: messengers coming and going, weapons being sharpened, horses exercised, tack cleaned…. There’s no doubt of it.” In a voice full of hatred, Richard finished: “No amount of evildoing will satisfy that devil William—he always wants more.” His hand went to his right ear, and he touched the angry scar there with an unconscious nervous gesture.

Jack studied Richard for a moment. He was an idler and a wastrel, but in

one area his judgment was trustworthy: the military. If he said William was planning a raid he was probably right. “This is a catastrophe,” Jack said, half to himself. Kingsbridge was just beginning to recover from the slump. Three years ago the fleece fair had burned, two years ago the cathedral had fallen on the congregation, and now this. People would say the bad luck of Kingsbridge had come back. Even if they managed to avoid bloodshed by fleeing, Kingsbridge would be ruined. No one would want to live here, come to the market or work here. It could even stop the building of the cathedral.

Aliena said: “We must tell Prior Philip—right away.”

Jack nodded. “The monks will be at supper. Let’s go.”

Aliena picked up Tommy and they all hurried up the hill toward the monastery in the dusk.

Richard said: “When the cathedral is finished, they can hold the market inside it. That will protect it from raids.”

Jack said: “But meanwhile we need the income from the market to pay for the cathedral.”

Richard, Aliena and Tommy waited outside while Jack went into the monks’ refectory. A young monk was reading aloud in Latin while the others ate in silence. Jack recognized an apocalyptic passage from the Book of Revelation. He stood in the doorway and caught Philip’s eye. Philip was surprised to see him, but got up from the table and came out straightaway.

“Bad news,” Jack said grimly. “I’ll let Richard tell you.”

They talked in the cavernous gloom of the repaired chancel. Richard gave Philip the details in a few sentences. When he had finished, Philip said: “But we aren’t holding a fleece fair—just a little market!”

Aliena said: “At least we’ve got the chance to evacuate the town tomorrow. Nobody need get hurt. And we can rebuild our houses, as we did last time.”

“Unless William decides to hunt down the evacuees,” Richard said grimly. “I wouldn’t put it past him.”

“Even if we all escape, I think it means the end of the market,” Philip said gloomily. “People will be afraid to set up stalls in Kingsbridge after this.”

Jack said: “It may mean the end of the cathedral. In the last ten years the church has burned down once and fallen down once, and a lot of masons were killed when the town burned. Another disaster would be the last, I think. People would say it’s bad luck.”

Philip looked stricken. He was not yet forty years old, Jack reckoned, but his face was becoming lined, and his fringe of hair was now more gray than black. Nevertheless, there was a dangerous light in his clear blue eyes as he said: “I’m not going to accept this. I don’t think it’s the will of God.”

Jack wondered what on earth he was talking about. How could he “not accept” it? The chickens might as well say they refused to accept the fox, for

all the difference it would make to their fate. “So what are you going to do?” Jack said skeptically. “Pray that William will fall out of bed tonight and break his neck?”

Richard was excited by the idea of resistance. “Let’s fight,” he said. “Why not? There are hundreds of us. William will bring fifty men, a hundred at most—we could win by sheer weight of numbers.”

Aliena protested: “And how many of our people will be killed?”

Philip was shaking his head. “Monks don’t fight,” he said regretfully. “And I can’t ask townspeople to give their lives when I’m not prepared to risk my own.”

Jack said: “Don’t count on my masons fighting, either. It’s not part of their job.”

Philip looked at Richard, who was the nearest they had to a military expert. “Is there any way we can defend the town without a pitched battle?”

“Not without town walls,” Richard said. “We’ve got nothing to put in front of the enemy but bodies.”

“Town walls,” Jack said thoughtfully.

Richard said: “We could challenge William to settle the issue by single combat—a fight between champions. But I don’t suppose he would agree to it.”

“Town walls would do it?” Jack said.

Richard said impatiently: “They might save us another time, but not now. We can’t build town walls overnight.”

“Can’t we?”

“Of course not, don’t be—”

“Shut up, Richard,” Philip said forcefully. He looked expectantly at Jack. “What’s on your mind?”

“A wall is not that hard to build,” Jack said.

“Go on.”

Jack’s mind was spinning. The others were listening with bated breath. He said: “There are no arches, no vaults, no windows, no roof…. A wall *can* be built overnight, if you’ve got the men and materials.”

“What would we build it of?” Philip said.

“Look around you,” Jack said. “Here are ready-cut stone blocks intended for the foundations. There is a stack of timber bigger than a house. In the graveyard is a heap of rubble from the collapse. Down at the riverside there’s another huge stack of stone from the quarry. There’s no shortage of materials.”

“And the town is full of builders,” Philip said.

Jack nodded. “The monks can do the organizing. The builders can do the skilled work. And for laborers we’ll have the entire population of the town.” He was thinking rapidly. “The wall would have to run all along the nearside

bank of the river. We'd dismantle the bridge. Then we'd have to take the wall up the hill alongside the poor quarter to join up with the east wall of the priory…out to the north…and down the hill to the riverbank again. I don't know whether there's enough stone for that…."

Richard said: "It doesn't have to be stone to be effective. A simple ditch, with an earth rampart made of the mud dug out of the ditch, will serve the purpose, especially in a place where the enemy is attacking uphill."

"Surely stone is better," Jack said.

"Better, but not essential. The purpose of a wall is to force a delay on the enemy while he's in an exposed position, and enable the defender to bombard him from a sheltered position."

"Bombard him?" Aliena said. "With what?"

"Stones, boiling oil, arrows—there's a bow in most households in the town—"

Aliena shuddered and said: "So we still end up fighting, after all."

"But not hand to hand, not quite."

Jack felt torn. The safest course, in all probability, was for everyone to take refuge in the forest, in the hope that William would be satisfied with burning the houses. But even then there was a risk that he and his men would hunt the townspeople down. Would the danger be greater if they all stayed here, behind a town wall? If something went wrong, and William and his men found a way to breach the wall, the carnage would be appalling. Jack looked at Aliena and Tommy, and thought of the new child growing inside Aliena. "Is there a middle course?" he said. "We could evacuate the women and children, and the men could stay and defend the walls."

"No, thank you," Aliena said firmly. "That's the worst of both worlds. We would have no town walls and no menfolk to fight for us either."

She was right, Jack realized. Town walls were no good without people to defend them, and the women and children could not be left unguarded in the forest: William might leave the town alone and kill the women.

Philip said: "Jack, you're the builder. Can we put up a town wall in one day?"

"I've never built a town wall," Jack said. "There's no question of drawing plans, of course. We'd have to assign a craftsman to each section and let him use his judgment. The mortar will hardly be set by Sunday morning. It will be the worst-built wall in England. But yes, we can do it."

Philip turned to Richard. "You've seen battles. If we build a wall, can we hold William off?"

"Certainly," Richard said. "He will come prepared for a lightning raid, not a siege. If he finds a fortified town here there will be nothing he can do."

Finally Philip looked at Aliena. "You're one of the vulnerable people, with a child to protect. What do you think? Should we run to the forest, and

hope William doesn't come after us, or stay here and build a wall to keep him out?"

Jack held his breath.

"It's not just a question of safety," Aliena said after a pause. "Philip, you've dedicated your life to this priory. Jack, the cathedral is your dream. If we run away, you'll lose everything you've lived for. And as for me…Well, I have a special reason for wanting to see William Hamleigh's power curbed. I say we stay."

"All right," Philip said. "We build a wall."

As night fell, Jack, Richard and Philip walked the boundaries of the town with lanterns, deciding where the wall should go. The town was built on a low hill, and the river wound around two sides of it. The riverbanks were too soft to hold a stone wall without good foundations, so Jack proposed a wooden fence there. Richard was quite satisfied with that. The enemy could not attack the fence except from the river, which was almost impossible.

On the other two sides, some stretches of wall would be simple earth ramparts with a ditch. Richard declared that this would be effective where the ground was sloping and the enemy was forced to attack uphill. However, where the ground was level a stone wall would be needed.

Jack then went around the village gathering his builders together, getting them out of their homes—out of their beds, in some cases—and out of the alehouse. He explained the emergency and how the town was going to deal with it; then he walked around the boundaries with them and assigned a section of wall to each man: wooden fencing to carpenters, stone wall to masons, and ramparts to apprentices and laborers. He asked each man to mark out his own section with stakes and string before going to bed, and to give some thought, as he went to sleep, to how he would build it. Soon the perimeter of the town was marked by a dotted line of twinkling lights as the craftsmen did their laying out by lanternshine. The blacksmith lit his fire and settled down to spend the rest of the night making spades. The unusual after-dark activity disturbed the bedtime rituals of most of the townspeople, and the craftsmen spent a good deal of time explaining what they were doing to drowsy inquirers. Only the monks, who had gone to bed at nightfall, slept on in blissful ignorance.

But at midnight, when the craftsmen were finishing their preparations and most of the townspeople had retired—if only to discuss the news in hushed excitement under the blankets—the monks were awakened. Their services were cut short, and they were given bread and ale in the refectory while Philip briefed them. They were to be tomorrow's organizers. They were divided into teams, each team working for one builder. They would take orders from him

and supervise the digging, lifting, fetching and carrying. Their first priority, Philip emphasized in his talk, was to make sure that the builder had a never-failing supply of the raw materials he needed: stones and mortar, timber and tools.

As Philip talked, Jack wondered what William Hamleigh was doing. Earlscastle was a day's hard ride from Kingsbridge, but William would not try to do it in a day, for then his army would arrive exhausted. They would set out this morning at sunrise. They would not ride all together, but would separate, and cover their weapons and armor as they traveled, to avoid raising the alarm. They would rendezvous discreetly in the afternoon, somewhere just an hour or two from Kingsbridge, probably at the manor house of one of William's larger tenants. In the evening they would drink beer and sharpen their blades and tell one another grisly stories about previous triumphs, young men mutilated, old men trampled beneath the hooves of war-horses, girls raped and women sodomized, children beheaded and babies spitted on the points of swords while their mothers screamed in anguish. Then they would attack tomorrow morning. Jack shuddered with fear. But this time we're going to stop them, he thought. All the same he was scared.

Each team of monks located its own stretch of wall and its source of raw materials. Then, as the first hint of dawn paled the eastern horizon, they went around their assigned neighborhood, knocking on doors, waking the inhabitants while the monastery bell rang urgently.

By sunrise the operation was in full swing. The younger men and women did the laboring while the older ones supplied food and drink and the children ran errands and carried messages. Jack toured the site constantly, monitoring progress anxiously. He told a mortar maker to use less lime, so that the mortar would set faster. He saw a carpenter making a fence with scaffolding poles, and told his laborers to use cut timber from a different stockpile. He made sure that the different sections of the wall would meet in a clean join. And he joked, smiled, and encouraged people constantly.

The sun came up into a clear blue sky. It was going to be a hot day. The priory kitchen supplied barrels of beer, but Philip ordered it to be watered, and Jack approved, for people who were working hard would drink a lot in this weather, and he did not want them falling asleep.

Despite the awful danger there was an incongruous air of jollity. It was like a holiday, when the whole town did something together, like making bread on Lammas Day or floating candles downstream on Midsummer Eve. People seemed to forget the peril which was the reason for their activity. However, Philip did see a few people discreetly leaving town. Either they were going to take their chances in the forest, or more likely they had relations in outlying villages who would take them in. Nevertheless, nearly everyone stayed.

At noon Philip rang the bell again, and work stopped for dinner. Philip made a tour of the wall with Jack while the workers were eating. Despite all the activity they did not seem to have achieved much. The stone walls had only reached ground level, the earth ramparts were still low mounds, and there were vast gaps in the wooden fence.

At the end of their tour Philip said: “Are we going to finish in time?”

Jack had been purposely cheerful and optimistic all morning, but now he forced himself to make a realistic assessment. “At this rate, no,” he said despondently.

“What can we do to speed things up?”

“The only way to build faster is to build worse, normally.”

“Then let’s build worse—but how?”

Jack considered. “At the moment we’ve got masons building walls, carpenters building fences, laborers making earthworks, and townspeople fetching and carrying. But most carpenters can build a straightforward wall, and most laborers can put up a wooden fence. So let’s get the carpenters to help the masons with the stonework, have the laborers build the fences, and let the townspeople dig the ditch and throw up the ramparts. And as soon as the operation is running smoothly, the younger monks can forget about organization and help with the laboring.”

“All right.”

They gave the new orders as people were finishing dinner. Not only would this be the worst-built wall in England, Jack thought; it would probably be the shortest-lived. If all of it was still standing in a week’s time, it would be a miracle.

During the afternoon, people began to get tired, especially those who had been up in the night. The holiday atmosphere evaporated and the workers became grimly determined. The stone walls rose, the ditch got deeper, and the gaps in the fence began to close. They stopped work for supper, as the sun dipped toward the western skyline, then began again.

At nightfall the wall was not complete.

Philip set a watch, ordered everyone except the guards to get a few hours of sleep, and said he would ring the bell at midnight. The exhausted townspeople went to their beds.

Jack went to Aliena’s house. She and Richard were still awake.

Jack said to Aliena: “I want you to take Tommy and go and hide in the woods.”

The thought had been in the back of his mind all day. At first he had rejected the idea; but as time went on he kept returning to the dreadful memory of the day William burned the fleece fair; and in the end he decided to send her away.

“I’d rather stay,” she said firmly.

Jack said: “Aliena, I don’t know if this is going to work, and I don’t want you to be here if William Hamleigh gets past this wall.”

“But I can’t leave while you’re organizing everyone else to stay and fight,” she said reasonably.

He was long past worrying about what was reasonable. “If you go now they won’t know.”

“They’ll realize eventually.”

“By then it will be over.”

“But think about the disgrace.”

“To hell with the disgrace!” he shouted. He was mad with frustration at not being able to find the words to persuade her. “I want you to be safe!”

His angry voice woke Tommy, who started to cry. Aliena picked him up and rocked him. She said: “I’m not even sure I’d be safer in the forest.”

“William won’t be searching the forest. It’s the town he’s interested in.”

“He might be interested in me.”

“You could hide in your glade. Nobody ever goes there.”

“William might find it by accident.”

“Listen to me. You’ll be safer there than here. I know it.”

“All the same I want to stay here.”

“I don’t want you here,” he said harshly.

“Well, I’m staying anyway,” she replied with a smile, ignoring his deliberate rudeness.

Jack suppressed a curse. There was no arguing with her once she had made up her mind: she was as stubborn as a mule. He pleaded with her instead. “Aliena, I’m scared of what’s going to happen tomorrow.”

“I’m scared, too,” she said. “And I think we should be scared together.”

He knew he should give in gracefully, but he was too worried. “Damn you, then,” he said angrily, and he stormed out.

He stood outside, breathing the night air. After a few moments he cooled down. He was still terribly worried, but it was foolish to be angry with her: they might both die in the morning.

He went back inside. She was standing where he had left her, looking sad. “I love you,” he said. They embraced, and stood like that for a long while.

When he went out again the moon was up. He calmed himself with the thought that Aliena might even be right: she could be safer here than in the woods. At least this way he would know if she was in trouble, and could do his best to protect her.

He knew he would not sleep, even if he went to bed. He had a foolish fear that everyone might sleep past midnight, and nobody would wake until dawn when William’s men rode in slashing and burning. He walked restlessly around the edge of the town. It was odd: Kingsbridge had never had a perimeter until today. The stone walls were waist-high, which was not

enough. The fences were high but there were still enough gaps for a hundred men to ride through in a few moments. The earth ramparts were not too high for a good horse to surmount. There was a lot to do.

He stopped at the place where the bridge used to be. It had been taken to pieces, and the parts had been stored in the priory. He looked over the moonlit water. He saw a shadowy figure approach along the line of the wooden fence, and felt a shiver of superstitious apprehension, but it was only Prior Philip, as sleepless as Jack.

For the moment Jack's grudge against Philip had been overshadowed by the threat from William, and Jack did not feel unfriendly toward Philip. He said: "If we survive this, we should rebuild the wall, bit by bit."

"I agree," Philip said fervently. "We should aim to have a stone wall right around the town within a year."

"Just here, where the bridge crosses the river, I would put a gate and a barbican, so that we could keep people out without dismantling the bridge."

"It's not the kind of thing we monks are good at—organizing town defenses."

Jack nodded. They were not supposed to be involved in any kind of violence. "But if you don't organize it, who will?"

"How about Aliena's brother, Richard?"

Jack was startled by that idea, but a moment's reflection led him to realize that it was brilliant. "He'd do it well, it would keep him from idleness, and I wouldn't have to support him any longer," he said enthusiastically. He looked at Philip with reluctant admiration. "You never stop, do you?"

Philip shrugged. "I wish all our problems could be solved so simply."

Jack's mind returned to the wall. "I suppose Kingsbridge will now be a fortified town forevermore."

"Not forever, but certainly until Jesus comes again."

"You never know," Jack said speculatively. "There may come a time when savages like William Hamleigh aren't in power; when the laws protect the ordinary people instead of enslaving them; when the king makes peace instead of war. Think of that—a time when towns in England don't need walls!"

Philip shook his head. "What an imagination," he said. "It won't happen before Judgment Day."

"I suppose not."

"It must be almost midnight. Time to start again."

"Philip. Before you go."

"What?"

Jack took a deep breath. "There's still time to change our plan. We could evacuate the town now."

"Are you afraid, Jack?" Philip said, not unkindly.

“Yes. But not for myself. For my family.”

Philip nodded. “Look at it this way. If you leave now, you will probably be safe—tomorrow. But William may come another day. If we let him have his way tomorrow, we will *always* live in fear. You, me, Aliena, and little Tommy, too: he’ll grow up in fear of William, or someone like William.”

He was right, Jack thought. If children such as Tommy were to grow up free, their parents had to stop running away from William.

Jack sighed. “All right.”

Philip went off to ring the bell. He was a ruler who kept the peace, dispensed justice, and did not oppress the poor people under him, Jack thought. But did you really have to be celibate to do that?

The bell began to toll. Lamps were lit in the shuttered houses, and the craftsmen stumbled out, rubbing their eyes and yawning. They started work slowly, and there were some bad-tempered exchanges with laborers; but Philip had the priory bakehouse going, and soon there was hot bread and fresh butter, and everyone cheered up.

At dawn Jack made another tour with Philip, both of them anxiously scanning the dark horizon for signs of horsemen. The riverside fence was almost complete, with all the carpenters working together to fill in the last few yards. On the other two sides, the earth ramparts were now as high as a man, and the depth of the ditch on the outside gave it an extra three or four feet: a man might scramble up, with difficulty, but he would have to get off his horse. The wall was also man-height, but the last three or four courses of stone were completely weak, because the mortar had not set. However, the enemy would not learn that until they tried to scale the wall, and at that point it might even serve to distract them.

Apart from those gaps in the wooden fence, the work was done, and Philip issued fresh orders. The older citizens and the children were to go to the monastery and take refuge in the dormitory. Jack was pleased: Aliena would have to stay with Tommy, and the two of them would be well behind the front line. The craftsmen were to continue building, but some of their laborers now became military squadrons, under Richard’s leadership. Each group was responsible for defending the section of wall it had built. Those of the townsmen and women who had bows would be ready at the walls to shoot arrows down on the enemy. Those who had no weapons would throw stones, and they were to make stockpiles ready. Boiling water was another useful weapon, and cauldrons were heated ready to be poured down on attackers at strategic points. Several of the townsmen had swords, but they were the least useful of weapons: if it came to hand-to-hand combat, the enemy would have got in, and the building of the wall would have been in vain.

Jack had been awake for forty-eight hours straight. He had a headache and his eyes felt gritty. He sat on the thatched roof of a house near the river

and looked out across the fields, while the carpenters rushed to finish the fence. Suddenly he realized that William's men might shoot burning arrows over the wall in an attempt to set fire to the town without having to breach the wall. Wearily he got off the roof and trotted up the hill to the priory close. There he found that Richard had had the same thought, and had already got some of the monks to organize barrels of water and buckets at strategic locations around the outer edges of the town.

He was just leaving the priory when he heard what sounded like warning shouts.

His heart racing, he scrambled up onto the roof of the stable and looked out over the fields to the west. On the road that led to the bridge, a mile or so away, a cloud of dust betrayed the approach of a large group of horsemen.

Until this moment there had been an element of unreality about the whole thing; but now the men who wanted to burn Kingsbridge were right there, riding along the road, and suddenly the danger was hideously real.

Jack felt a sudden urge to find Aliena, but there was no time. He jumped off the roof and ran down the hill to the riverbank. A crowd of men was gathered around the last gap. As he watched, they drove stakes into the ground, filling the space, and hastily nailed the last two bracing members to the back, finishing the job. Most of the townspeople were here, apart from those who had taken refuge in the refectory. A few moments after Jack arrived, Richard came running down, shouting: "There's nobody on the other side of town! There could be another group sneaking up behind us! Go back to your posts, quickly!" As they started to move off, he muttered to Jack: "There's no discipline—no discipline at all!"

Jack stared out across the fields as the dust cloud got closer and the figures of the individual horsemen became visible. They were like fiends from hell, he thought, insanely intent on death and destruction. They existed because earls and kings felt the need of them. Philip may be a damned fool on matters of love and marriage, Jack thought, but at least he's found a way to rule a community without the help of savages like these.

It was an odd moment for such reflections. Was this the kind of thing men thought about when they were about to die?

The horsemen came closer. There were more than the fifty Richard had forecast. Jack reckoned the number was nearer to a hundred. They headed for the place where the bridge had been; then they began to slow down. Jack's spirits rose as they came to a ragged halt and reined in their horses in the meadow on the other side of the river. As they stared across the water at the brand-new town wall, somebody near Jack started to laugh. Someone else joined in, and then the laughter spread like wildfire, so that soon there were fifty, a hundred, two hundred men and women roaring with laughter at the embarrassed men-at-arms stuck on the wrong side of the river with no one to

fight.

Several of the horsemen dismounted and went into a huddle. Peering through the faint morning haze, Jack thought he could see the yellow hair and red face of William Hamleigh at the center of the group, but he could not be sure.

After a while they got back on their horses, regrouped, and rode off. The people of Kingsbridge raised a mighty cheer. But Jack did not think William had given up yet. They were not going back the way they had come. Instead they were heading upstream alongside the river. Richard came to Jack's side and said: "They're looking for a ford. They'll cross the river and sweep through the woods to come at us from the other side. Spread the word."

Jack went swiftly around the wall, relaying Richard's forecast. To the north and east, the wall was of earth or stone, but there was no river in the way. On that side the wall incorporated the east wall of the priory close, only a few steps from the refectory where Aliena and Tommy had taken refuge. Richard had stationed Oswald, the horse dealer, and Dick Richards, the son of the tanner, on the roof of the infirmary with their bows and arrows: they were the best shots in town. Jack went to the northeast corner and stood on the earth rampart, looking across the field to the woods from which William's men would emerge.

The sun climbed in the sky. It was another hot, cloudless day. The monks came around the walls with bread and beer. Jack wondered how far upstream William would go. There was a place a mile away where a good horse could swim across, but it would look risky to a stranger, and William would probably go a couple of miles farther, when he would come to a shallow ford.

Jack wondered how Aliena was feeling. He wanted to go to the refectory and see her, but he was reluctant to leave the wall; for if he did it, others would want to, and the wall would be left undefended.

While he was resisting the temptation there was a shout, and the horsemen reappeared.

They came out of the woods to the east, so that Jack had the sun in his eyes when he looked at them: no doubt that was intentional. After a moment he realized they were not just approaching, they were charging. They must have reined in in the woods, out of sight, and spied out the ground, then planned this charge. Jack went taut with fear. They were not going to look at the wall and go away: they were going to try to breach it.

The horses galloped across the field. One or two townspeople shot arrows. Richard, standing near Jack, yelled angrily: "Too early! Too early! Wait until they're in the ditch—then you can't miss!" Few people heard him, and a light shower of wasted arrows fell on the green barley shoots in the field. As a military force we're hopeless, Jack thought; only the wall can save us.

He had a stone in one hand and in the other he held a sling just like the one he had used as a boy to shoot ducks for his dinner. He wondered whether his aim was still good. He realized he was gripping his weapons as hard as he could, and he forced himself to relax his hold. Stones were effective against ducks, but they seemed appallingly feeble against the armored men on big horses who were thundering closer every second. He swallowed drily. Some of the enemy had bows and burning arrows, he saw; and a moment later he realized that the men with bows were heading for the stone walls, and the others for the earth ramparts. That meant William had decided he could not storm the stone wall: he did not realize the mortar was so new that the wall could be pulled down by hand. He had been fooled. Jack enjoyed a small moment of triumph.

Then the attackers were at the walls.

The townspeople shot wildly, and a hail of hasty arrows raked the horsemen. Despite their poor aim they could not fail to claim some victims. The horses reached the ditch. Some balked, and some charged down into the dip and up the other side. Immediately opposite Jack's position, a huge man in battered chain mail jumped his horse across the ditch so that it landed on the lower slope of the rampart and kept coming up. Jack loaded his sling and let fly. His aim was as good as ever: the stone hit the horse full on the end of its nose. Already floundering in the loose earth, it whinnied in pain, reared up, and turned around. It cantered away, but its rider slid off and drew his sword.

Most of the horses had turned back, either of their own volition or because their riders had turned them; but several men were attacking on foot, and the others were turning again ready to make another charge. Glancing back over his shoulder, Jack saw that several thatched roofs were burning, despite the efforts of the firefighters—the younger women of the town—to put out the flames. The dreadful thought flashed through Jack's mind that this was not going to work. Despite the heroic effort of the last thirty-six hours, these savage men would cross the wall, burn the town, and ravage the people.

The prospect of hand-to-hand fighting terrified him. He had never been taught to fight, never used a sword—not that he had one—and his only experience of fighting was when Alfred had beaten him up. He felt helpless.

The horsemen charged again and those of the attackers who had lost their mounts came up the ramparts on foot. Rocks and arrows rained on them. Jack worked his sling systematically, loading and firing, loading and firing like a machine. Several of the attackers fell under the rain of missiles. Right in front of Jack a rider took a fall and lost his helmet, revealing a head of yellow hair: it was William himself.

None of the horses made it to the top of the earth rampart, but some of the men on foot did, and, to Jack's horror, the townsmen were forced to join combat with them, fighting off the swords and lances of the attackers with

poles and axes. Some of the enemy made it over the top, and Jack saw three or four townsmen near him fall. His heart was full of horror: the townspeople were losing.

But eight or ten townsmen surrounded every attacker who got across the wall, pounding them with sticks and hacking mercilessly with axes, and although several townsmen were wounded all the attackers were killed rapidly. Then the townsmen began to drive the others back down the slope of the ramparts. The charge petered out. Those attackers still on horseback milled around uncertainly while a few loose skirmishes continued on the ramparts. Jack rested for a moment, breathing hard, grateful for the reprieve, waiting with dread for the enemy's next move.

William raised his sword in the air and yelled to attract the attention of his men. He waved his sword in a circle, to rally them, then pointed it at the walls. They regrouped and prepared to charge the walls once again.

Jack saw an opportunity.

He picked up a stone, loaded his sling, and took careful aim at William.

The stone flew through the air as straight as a mason's line and hit William in the middle of the forehead, so hard that Jack heard the thud of rock on bone.

William fell to the ground.

His men hesitated uncertainly and the charge faltered.

A big dark man jumped from his horse and ran to William's side. Jack thought he recognized William's groom, Walter, who always rode with him. Still holding on to his reins, Walter knelt down by William's prone body. For a moment Jack hoped William might be dead. Then William moved, and Walter helped him to his feet. William was looking dazed. Everyone on both sides of the battle was watching the two of them. For a moment the hail of stones and arrows stopped.

Still looking unsteady, William mounted Walter's horse, assisted by Walter, who then climbed on behind him. There was a moment of hesitation as everyone wondered whether William would be able to carry on. Walter waved his sword in a circle in the rallying gesture; then, to Jack's unspeakable relief, he pointed to the woods.

Walter kicked the horse and they charged off.

The other horsemen followed. Those who were still fighting on the ramparts gave up, backed off, and ran across the field after their leader. A few stones and arrows chased them over the barley.

The townspeople cheered.

Jack looked around him, feeling dazed. Was it all over? He could hardly believe it. The fires were going out—the women had succeeded in keeping them under control. Men were dancing on the ramparts, hugging one another. Richard came up to him and clapped him on the back. "It was the wall that

did it, Jack," he said. "Your wall."

Townspeople and monks crowded around the two of them, all wanting to congratulate Jack and each other.

"Have they gone for good?" Jack said.

"Oh, yes," Richard replied. "They won't come back, now that they've discovered we're determined to defend the walls. William knows that you can't take a walled town if the people are resolved to resist you; not without a vast army and a six-month siege."

"So it's over," Jack said stupidly.

Aliena came pushing through the crowd with Tommy in her arms. Jack embraced her gratefully. They were alive and they were together, and he was thankful.

He suddenly felt the effect of his two days without sleep, and he wanted to lie down. But it was not to be. Two young masons grabbed him and lifted him on to their shoulders. A cheer went up. They moved off, taking the crowd with them. Jack wanted to tell them that it was not *he* who had saved them, they had done it themselves; but he knew they would not listen, for they wanted a hero. As the news spread, and the whole town realized they had won, the cheering became thunderous. They've been living in fear of William for years, Jack thought, but today they've won their freedom. He was carried around the town in a triumphal procession, waving and smiling, and longing for the moment when he could lay his head down and close his eyes in blissful sleep.

III

The Shiring Fleece Fair was bigger and better than ever. The square in front of the parish church, where they held markets and executions as well as the annual fair, was crammed with stalls and people. Wool was the main commodity, but there were also displays of everything else that could be bought and sold in England: gleaming new swords, decoratively carved saddles, fat piglets, red boots, ginger cakes and straw hats. As William strolled around the square with Bishop Waleran, he calculated that the market was going to make more money for him than ever before. Yet it gave him no pleasure.

He was still sick with humiliation after his defeat at Kingsbridge. He had expected to charge in unopposed and burn the town, but in the event he had lost men and horses and had been turned back without achieving anything. Worst of all, he knew that the building of the wall had been organized by Jack Jackson, the lover of Aliena, the very man he had wanted to kill.

He had failed to kill Jack, but was still determined to take his revenge.

Waleran was also thinking about Kingsbridge, and he said: “I still don’t know how they built the wall so quickly.”

“It probably wasn’t much of a wall,” William said.

Waleran nodded. “But I’m sure Prior Philip is already busy improving it. If I were he, I’d make the wall stronger and higher, build a barbican, and appoint a night watchman. Your days of raiding Kingsbridge are over.”

William agreed, but he pretended not to. “I can still besiege the town.”

“That’s a different affair. A quick raid may be overlooked by the king. A prolonged siege, during which the townspeople can send a message to the king begging him to protect them…It can be awkward.”

“Stephen won’t move against me,” William said. “He needs me.” He was not arguing out of conviction, however. In the end he planned to concede the bishop’s point. But he wanted to make Waleran work hard for it, so that he would feel under a small obligation to William. Then William would make the request that was so heavily on his mind.

A thin, ugly woman stepped out, pushing in front of her a pretty girl of about thirteen years, presumably her daughter. The mother pulled aside the top of the girl’s flimsy dress to show her small, immature breasts. “Sixty pence,” the mother hissed. William felt a stirring in his loins, but he shook his head in refusal and brushed past.

The child-whore made him think of Aliena. She had been little more than

a child when he had ravished her. That was almost a decade ago, but he could not forget her. Perhaps he would never have her for himself now; but he could still stop anyone else from having her.

Waleran was thoughtful. He hardly seemed to look where he was going, but people shrank back out of his way, as if they were afraid even to be touched by the skirts of his black robe. After a moment he said: “Did you hear that the king took Faringdon?”

“I was there.” It had been the most decisive victory of the entire long civil war. Stephen had captured hundreds of knights and a great armory, and driven Robert of Gloucester all the way back to the west country. So crucial was the victory that Ranulf of Chester, Stephen’s old enemy in the north, had laid down his arms and sworn allegiance to the king.

Waleran said: “Now that Stephen is more secure, he won’t be so tolerant of his barons waging their own private wars.”

“Perhaps,” William said. He wondered if this was the moment to agree with Waleran and make his request. He hesitated: he was embarrassed. In making the request he was going to reveal something of his soul, and he hated to do that to a man as ruthless as Bishop Waleran.

“You should leave Kingsbridge alone, at least for a while,” Waleran went on. “You’ve got the fleece fair. You still have a weekly market, albeit smaller than it once was. You have the wool business. And you’ve got all the most fertile land in the county, either directly under your control or farmed by your tenants. My situation is also better than it used to be. I’ve improved my property and rationalized my holdings. I’ve built my castle. It’s becoming less necessary to fight with Prior Philip—at the very moment when it’s becoming politically dangerous.”

All over the market square people were making and selling food, and the air was full of smells: spicy soup, new bread, sugar confections, boiled ham, frying bacon, apple pie. William felt nauseated. “Let’s go to the castle,” he said.

The two men left the market square and walked up the hill. The sheriff was going to give them dinner. At the castle gate William stopped.

“Perhaps you’re right about Kingsbridge,” he said.

“I’m glad you see it.”

“But I still want my revenge on Jack Jackson, and you can give it to me, if you will.”

Waleran raised an eloquent eyebrow. His expression said he was fascinated to listen but did not consider himself under any obligation.

William plowed on: “Aliena has applied to have her marriage annulled.”

“Yes, I know.”

“What do you think will be the outcome?”

“Apparently the marriage was never consummated.”

“Is that all there is to it?”

“Probably. According to Gratian—a learned man whom I have met myself, actually—what constitutes a marriage is the mutual consent of the two parties; but he also maintains that the act of physical union ‘completes’ or ‘perfects’ the marriage. He specifically says that if a man marries a woman but does not copulate with her, then marries a second woman with whom he does copulate, then it is the second of the two marriages that is valid, that is to say, the consummated one. The fascinating Aliena will no doubt have mentioned this in her application, if she had sound advice, which I imagine she got from Prior Philip.”

William was impatient of all this theory. “So they will get the annulment.”

“Unless someone brings up the argument against Gratian. In fact there are two: one theological and one practical. The theological argument is that Gratian’s definition denigrates the marriage of Joseph and Mary, since it was unconsummated. The practical argument is that for political reasons, or to amalgamate two properties, marriages are quite commonly arranged between two children who are physically incapable of consummation. If either bride or groom should die before puberty, the marriage would be invalidated, under Gratian’s definition, and that could have very awkward consequences.”

William could never follow these convoluted clerical wrangles, but he had a pretty good idea of how they were settled. “What you mean is, it could go either way.”

“Yes.”

“And which way it goes depends upon who is putting pressure on.”

“Yes. In this case, there’s nothing hanging on the outcome—no property, no question of allegiance, no military alliance. But if there were more at stake, and someone—an archdeacon, for example—were to put the argument against Gratian forcefully, they would probably refuse the annulment.” Waleran gave William a knowing look that made William want to squirm. “I think I can guess what you’re going to ask me next.”

“I want you to oppose the annulment.”

Waleran narrowed his eyes. “I can’t make out whether you love that wretched woman or hate her.”

“No,” William said. “Nor can I.”

Aliena sat on the grass, in the green gloom beneath the mighty beech tree. The waterfall cast droplets like tears onto the rocks at her feet. This was the glade where Jack had told her all those stories. This was where he had given her that first kiss, so casually and quickly that she had pretended that it had never happened. This was where she had fallen in love with him, and refused to admit it, even to herself. Now she wished with all her heart that she had

given herself to him then, and married him and had his babies, so that now, whatever else intervened, she would be his wife.

She lay down to rest her aching back. It was the height of summer, and the air was hot and still. This pregnancy was so heavy, and she still had at least six weeks to go. She thought she might be carrying twins, except that she felt kicking in only one place, and when Martha, Jack's stepsister, had listened with her ear right up against Aliena's belly she had heard only one heartbeat.

Martha was looking after Tommy this Sunday afternoon, so that Aliena and Jack could meet in the woods and be alone for a while to talk about their future. The archbishop had refused the annulment, apparently because Bishop Waleran had objected. Philip said they could apply again, but they must live apart meanwhile. Philip agreed that it was unjust, but he said it must be God's will. It seemed more like ill will to Aliena.

The bitterness of regret was a weight she carried around with her, like the pregnancy. Sometimes she was more aware of it, sometimes she almost forgot about it, but it was always there. Often it hurt, but it was a familiar pain. She regretted hurting Jack, she regretted what she had done to herself, she even regretted the sufferings of the contemptible Alfred, who now lived in Shiring and never showed his face in Kingsbridge. She had married Alfred for one reason only, to support Richard in his attempt to win the earldom. She had failed to achieve her purpose and her true love for Jack had been blighted. She was twenty-six years old, her life was ruined, and it was her own fault.

She thought nostalgically of those early days with Jack. When she first met him he had been just a little boy, albeit an unusual one. After he grew up she had continued to think of him as a boy. That was why he had got under her guard. She had turned away every suitor, but she had not thought of Jack as a suitor, and so she had let him get to know her. She wondered why she had been so resistant to love. She adored Jack and there was no pleasure in life like the joy of lying with him; yet once upon a time she had deliberately closed her eyes to such happiness.

When she looked back, her life before Jack seemed empty. She had been frantically busy, building up her wool business, but now those busy days appeared joyless, like an empty palace, or a table laden with silver plates and gold cups but no food.

She heard footsteps and sat up quickly. It was Jack. He was thin and graceful, like a scrawny cat. He sat beside her and kissed her mouth softly. He smelled of perspiration and stone dust. "It's so hot," he said. "Let's bathe in the stream."

The temptation was irresistible.

Jack pulled off his clothes. She watched, staring at him hungrily. She had not seen his naked body for months. He had a lot of red hair on his legs but

none on his chest. He looked at her, waiting for her to strip. She felt shy: he had never seen her body when she was pregnant. She unlaced the neck of her linen dress slowly, then pulled it off over her head. She watched his expression anxiously, afraid he would hate her swollen body, but he showed no revulsion: on the contrary, the look that came over his face was one of fondness. I should have known better, she thought; I should have known he would love me just as much.

With a swift movement he knelt on the ground in front of her and kissed the taut skin of her distended belly. She gave an embarrassed laugh. He touched her navel. “Your belly button sticks out,” he said.

“I knew you were going to say that!”

“It used to be like a dimple—now it’s like a nipple.”

She felt shy. “Let’s bathe,” she said. She would feel less self-conscious in the water.

The pool by the waterfall was about three feet deep. Aliena slid into the water. It was deliciously cool on her hot skin, and she shivered with delight. Jack got in beside her. There was no room to swim—the pool was only a few feet across. He put his head under the waterfall and washed the stone dust out of his hair. Aliena felt good in the water: it relieved the weight of her pregnancy. She ducked her head under the surface to wash her hair.

When she came up for air, Jack kissed her.

She spluttered and laughed, breathless, rubbing the water out of her eyes. He kissed her again. She put out her arms to hold herself steady, and her hand closed on the hard rod standing upright between Jack’s loins like a flagpole. She gasped with pleasure.

“I’ve missed this,” Jack said in her ear, and his voice was hoarse with lust and some other emotion, sadness perhaps.

Aliena’s throat was dry with desire. She said: “Are we going to break our promise?”

“Now, and forevermore.”

“What do you mean?”

“We’re not going to live apart. We’re leaving Kingsbridge.”

“But what will you do?”

“Go to a different town and build another cathedral.”

“But you won’t be master. It won’t be your design.”

“One day I may get another chance. I’m young.”

It was possible, but the odds were against it, Aliena knew; and Jack knew it too. The sacrifice he was making for her moved her to tears. Nobody had ever loved her like this; nobody else ever would. But she was not willing to let him give up everything. “I won’t do it,” she said.

“What do you mean?”

“I’m not going to leave Kingsbridge.”

He was angry. “Why not? Anywhere else, we can live as man and wife, and nobody will care. We could even get married in a church.”

She touched his face. “I love you too much to take you away from Kingsbridge Cathedral.”

“That’s for me to decide.”

“Jack, I love you for offering. The fact that you’re ready to give up your life’s work to live with me is…it almost breaks my heart that you should love me so much. But I don’t want to be the woman who took you away from the work you loved. I’m not willing to go with you that way. It will cast a shadow over our entire lives. You may forgive me for it, but I never will.”

Jack looked sad. “I know better than to fight you once you’ve decided. But what will we do?”

“We’ll try again for the annulment. We’ll live apart.”

He looked miserable.

She finished: “And we’ll come here every Sunday and break our promise.”

He pressed up against her, and she could feel him becoming aroused again. “Every Sunday?”

“Yes.”

“You might get pregnant again.”

“We’ll take that chance. And I’m going to start manufacturing cloth, as I used to. I’ve bought Philip’s unsold wool again, and I’m going to organize the townspeople to spin and weave it. Then I’ll felt it in the fulling mill.”

“How did you pay Philip?” Jack said in surprise.

“I haven’t, yet. I’m going to pay him in bales of cloth, when it’s made.”

Jack nodded. He said bitterly: “He agreed to that because he wants you to stay here so that I’ll stay.”

Aliena nodded. “But he’ll still get cheap cloth out of it.”

“Damn Philip. He always gets what he wants.”

Aliena saw that she had won. She kissed him and said: “I love you.”

He kissed her back, running his hands all over her body, greedily feeling her secret places. Then he stopped and said: “But I want to be with you every night, not just on Sundays.”

She kissed his ear. “One day we will,” she breathed. “I promise you.”

He moved behind her, drifting in the water, and pulled her to him, so that his legs were underneath her. She parted her thighs and floated down gently into his lap. He stroked her full breasts with his hands and played with her swollen nipples. Finally he penetrated her, and she shuddered with pleasure.

They made love slowly and gently in the cool pond, with the rush of the waterfall in their ears. Jack put his arms around her bump, and his knowing hands touched her between her legs, pressing and stroking as he went in and out. They had never done this before, made love this way, so that he could

caress her most sensitive places at the same time, and it was sharply different, a more intense pleasure, different the way a stabbing pain is different from a dull ache; but perhaps that was because she felt so sad. After a while she abandoned herself to the sensation. Its intensity built up so quickly that the climax took her by surprise, almost frightening her, and she was racked by spasms of pleasure so convulsive that she screamed.

He stayed inside her, hard, unsatisfied, while she caught her breath. He was still, no longer thrusting, but she realized he had not reached a climax. After a while she began to move again, encouragingly, but he did not respond. She turned her head and kissed him over her shoulder. The water on his face was warm. He was weeping.

PART FIVE

1152-1155

Chapter 14

AFTER SEVEN YEARS Jack had finished the transepts—the two arms of the cross-shaped church—and they were everything he had hoped for. He had improved on the ideas of Saint-Denis, making everything taller and narrower—windows, arches, and the vault itself. The clustered shafts of the piers rose gracefully through the gallery and became the ribs of the vault, curving over to meet in the middle of the ceiling, and the tall pointed windows flooded the interior with light. The moldings were fine and delicate, and the carved decoration was a riot of stone foliage.

And there were cracks in the clerestory.

He stood in the high clerestory passage, staring out across the chasm of the north transept, brooding on a bright spring morning. He was shocked and baffled. By all the wisdom of the masons the structure was strong; but a crack showed a weakness. His vault was higher than any other he had ever seen, but not by that much. He had not made the mistake of Alfred, and put a stone vault on a structure that was not built to take the weight: his walls had been designed for a stone vault. Yet cracks had appeared in his clerestory in roughly the same place where Alfred's had failed. Alfred had miscalculated but Jack was sure he had not done the same thing. Some new factor was operating in Jack's building and he did not know what it was.

It was not dangerous, not in the short term. The cracks had been filled with mortar and they had not yet reappeared. The building was safe. But it was weak; and for Jack the weakness spoiled it. He wanted his church to last until the Day of Judgment.

He left the clerestory and went down the turret staircase to the gallery, where he had made his tracing floor, in the corner where there was a good light from one of the windows in the north porch. He began to draw the plinth of a nave pier. He drew a diamond, then a square inside the diamond, then a circle inside the square. The main shafts of the pier would spring from the four points of the diamond and rise up the column, eventually branching off

north, south, east and west to become arches or ribs. Subsidiary shafts, springing from the corners of the square, would rise to become vaulting ribs, going diagonally across the nave vault on one side and the aisle vault on the other. The circle in the middle represented the core of the pier.

All Jack's designs were based on simple geometrical shapes and some not-so-simple proportions, such as the ratio of the square root of two to the square root of three. Jack had learned how to figure square roots in Toledo, but most masons could not calculate them, and instead used simple geometric constructions. They knew that if a circle was drawn around the four corners of a square, the diameter of the circle was bigger than the side of the square in the ratio of the square root of two to one. That ratio, root-two to one, was the most ancient of the masons' formulas, for in a simple building it was the ratio of the outside width to the inside width, and therefore gave the thickness of the wall.

Jack's task was much complicated by the religious significance of various numbers. Prior Philip was planning to rededicate the church to the Virgin Mary, because the Weeping Madonna worked more miracles than the tomb of Saint Adophus; and in consequence they wanted Jack to use the numbers nine and seven, which were Mary's numbers. He had designed the nave with nine bays and the new chancel, to be built when all else was finished, with seven. The interlocked blind arcading in the side aisles would have seven arches per bay, and the west facade would have nine lancet windows. Jack had no opinion about the theological significance of numbers but he felt instinctively that if the same numbers were used fairly consistently it was bound to add to the harmony of the finished building.

Before he could finish his drawing of the plinth he was interrupted by the master roofer, who had hit a problem and wanted Jack to solve it.

Jack followed the man up the turret staircase, past the clerestory, and into the roof space. They walked across the rounded domes that were the top side of the ribbed vault. Above them, the roofers were unrolling great sheets of lead and nailing them to the rafters, starting at the bottom and working up so that the upper sheets would overlap the lower and keep the rain out.

Jack saw the problem immediately. He had put a decorative pinnacle at the end of a valley between two sloping roofs, but he had left the design to a master mason, and the mason had not made provision for rainwater from the roof to pass through or under the pinnacle. The mason would have to alter it. He told the master roofer to pass this instruction on to the mason, then he returned to his tracing floor.

He was astonished to find Alfred waiting for him there.

He had not spoken to Alfred for ten years. He had seen him at a distance, now and again, in Shiring or Winchester. Aliena had not so much as caught sight of him for nine years, even though they were still married, according to

the Church. Martha went to visit him at his house in Shiring about once a year. She always brought back the same report: he was prospering, building houses for the burgers of Shiring; he lived alone; he was the same as ever.

But Alfred did not appear prosperous now. Jack thought he looked tired and defeated. Alfred had always been big and strong, but now he had a lean look: his face was thinner, and the hand with which he pushed the hair out of his eyes was bony where it had once been beefy.

He said: “Hello, Jack.”

His expression was aggressive but his tone of voice was ingratiating—an unattractive mixture.

“Hello, Alfred,” Jack said warily. “Last time I saw you, you were wearing a silk tunic and running to fat.”

“That was three years ago—before the first of the bad harvests.”

“So it was.” Three bad harvests in a row had caused a famine. Serfs had starved, many tenant farmers were destitute, and presumably the burgers of Shiring could no longer afford splendid new stone houses. Alfred was feeling the pinch. Jack said: “What brings you to Kingsbridge after all this time?”

“I heard about your transepts and came to look.” His tone was one of grudging admiration. “Where did you learn to build like this?”

“Paris,” Jack said shortly. He did not want to discuss that period of his life with Alfred, who had been the cause of his exile.

“Well.” Alfred looked awkward, then said with elaborate indifference: “I’d be willing to work here, just to pick up some of these new tricks.”

Jack was flabbergasted. Did Alfred really have the nerve to ask him for a job? Playing for time, he said: “What about your gang?”

“I’m on my own now,” Alfred said, still trying to be casual. “There wasn’t enough work for a gang.”

“We’re not hiring, anyway,” Jack said, equally casually. “We’ve got a full complement.”

“But you can always use a good mason, can’t you?”

Jack heard a faint pleading note and realized that Alfred was desperate. He decided to be honest. “After the life we’ve had, Alfred, I’m the last person you should come to for help.”

“You are the last,” Alfred said candidly. “I’ve tried everywhere. Nobody’s hiring. It’s the famine.”

Jack thought of all the times Alfred had mistreated him, tormented him, and beaten him. Alfred had driven him into the monastery and then had driven him away from his home and family. He had no reason to help Alfred: indeed, he had cause to gloat over Alfred’s misfortune. He said: “I wouldn’t take you on even if I was needing men.”

“I thought you might,” Alfred said with bullheaded persistence. “After all, my father taught you everything you know. It’s because of him that you’re a

master builder. Won’t you help me for his sake?”

For Tom. Suddenly Jack felt a twinge of conscience. In his own way, Tom had tried to be a good stepfather. He had not been gentle or understanding, but he had treated his own children much the same as Jack, and he had been patient and generous in passing on his knowledge and skills. He had also made Jack’s mother happy, most of the time. And after all, Jack thought, here I am, a successful and prosperous master builder, well on the way to achieving my ambition of building the most beautiful cathedral in the world, and there’s Alfred, poor and hungry and out of work. Isn’t that revenge enough?

No, it’s not, he thought.

Then he relented.

“All right,” he said. “For Tom’s sake, you’re hired.”

“Thank you,” Alfred said. His expression was unreadable. “Shall I start right away?”

Jack nodded. “We’re laying foundations in the nave. Just join in.”

Alfred held out his hand. Jack hesitated momentarily, then shook it. Alfred’s grip was as strong as ever.

Alfred disappeared. Jack stood staring down at his drawing of a nave plinth. It was life-size, so that when it was finished a master carpenter could make a wooden template directly from the drawing. The template would then be used by the masons to mark the stones for carving.

Had he made the right decision? He recalled that Alfred’s vault had collapsed. However, he would not use Alfred on difficult work such as vaulting or arches: straightforward walls and floors were his metier.

While Jack was still pondering, the noon bell rang for dinner. He put down his sharpened-wire drawing instrument and went down the turret staircase to ground level.

The married masons went home to dinner and the single ones ate in the lodge. On some building sites dinner was provided, as a way of preventing afternoon lateness, absenteeism and drunkenness; but monks’ fare was often Spartan and most building workers preferred to provide their own. Jack was living in Tom Builder’s old house with Martha, his stepsister, who acted as his housekeeper. Martha also minded Tommy and Jack’s second child, a girl whom they had named Sally, while Aliena was busy. Martha usually made dinner for Jack and the children, and Aliena sometimes joined them.

He left the priory close and walked briskly home. On the way a thought struck him. Would Alfred expect to move back into the house with Martha? She was his natural sister, after all. Jack had not thought of that when he gave Alfred the job.

It was a foolish fear, he decided a moment later. The days when Alfred could bully him were long past. He was the master builder of Kingsbridge,

and if he said Alfred could not move into the house, then Alfred would not move into the house.

He half expected to find Alfred at the kitchen table, and was relieved to find he was not. Aliena was watching the children eat, while Martha stirred a pot on the fire. The smell of lamb stew was mouth-watering.

He kissed Aliena's forehead briefly. She was thirty-three years old now, but she looked as she had ten years ago: her hair was still a rich dark-brown mass of curls, and she had the same generous mouth and fine, dark eyes. Only when she was naked did she show the physical effects of time and childbirth: her marvelous deep breasts were lower, her hips were broader, and her belly had never reverted to its original taut flatness.

Jack looked affectionately at the two offspring of Aliena's body: nine-year-old Tommy, a healthy red-haired boy, big for his age, shoveling lamb stew into his mouth as if he had not eaten for a week; and Sally, age seven, with dark curls like her mother's, smiling happily and showing a gap between her front teeth just like the one Martha had had when Jack first saw her seventeen years ago. Tommy went to the school in the priory every morning to learn to read and write, but the monks would not take girls, so Aliena was teaching Sally.

Jack sat down, and Martha took the pot off the fire and set it on the table. Martha was a strange girl. She was past twenty years old, but she showed no interest in getting married. She had always been attached to Jack, and now she seemed perfectly content to be his housekeeper.

Jack presided over the oddest household in the county, without a doubt. He and Aliena were two of the leading citizens of the town: he the master builder at the cathedral and she the largest manufacturer of cloth outside Winchester. Everyone treated them as man and wife, yet they were forbidden to spend nights together, and they lived in separate houses, Aliena with her brother and Jack with his stepsister. Every Sunday afternoon, and on every holiday, they would disappear, and everyone knew what they were doing except, of course, Prior Philip. Meanwhile, Jack's mother lived in a cave in the forest because she was supposed to be a witch.

Every now and again Jack got angry about not being allowed to marry Aliena. He would lie awake, listening to Martha snoring in the next room, and think: I'm twenty-eight years old—why am I sleeping alone? The next day he would be bad-tempered with Prior Philip, rejecting all the chapter's suggestions and requests as impracticable or overexpensive, refusing to discuss alternatives or compromises, as if there were only one way to build a cathedral and that was Jack's way. Then Philip would steer clear of him for a few days and let the storm blow over.

Aliena, too, was unhappy, and she took it out on Jack. She would become impatient and intolerant, criticizing everything he did, putting the children to

bed as soon as he came in, saying she was not hungry when he ate. After a day or two of this mood she would burst into tears and say she was sorry, and they would be happy again, until the next time the strain became too much for her.

Jack ladled some stew into a bowl and began to eat. “Guess who came to the site this morning,” he said. “Alfred.”

Martha dropped an iron pot lid on the hearthstone with a loud clang. Jack looked at her and saw fear on her face. He turned to Aliena and saw that she had turned white.

Aliena said: “What’s he doing in Kingsbridge?”

“Looking for work. The famine has impoverished the merchants of Shiring, I guess, and they aren’t building stone houses like they used to. He’s dismissed his gang and he can’t find work.”

“I hope you threw him out on his tail,” Aliena said.

“He said I should give him a job for Tom’s sake,” Jack said nervously. He had not anticipated such a strong reaction from the two women. “After all, I owe everything to Tom.”

“Cow shit,” Aliena said, and Jack thought: she got that expression from my mother.

“Well, I hired him anyway,” he said.

“Jack!” Aliena screamed. “How could you? You can’t let him come back to Kingsbridge—that devil!”

Sally began to cry. Tommy stared wide-eyed at his mother. Jack said: “Alfred isn’t a devil. He’s hungry and penniless. I saved him, for the sake of his father’s memory.”

“You wouldn’t feel sorry for him if he’d forced you to sleep on the floor at the foot of his bed like a dog for nine months.”

“He’s done worse things to me—ask Martha.”

Martha said: “And to me.”

Jack said: “I just decided that seeing him like that was enough revenge for me.”

“Well it’s not enough for me!” Aliena stormed. “By Christ, you’re a damned fool, Jack Jackson. Sometimes I thank God I’m not married to you.”

That hurt. Jack looked away. He knew she did not mean it, but it was bad enough that she should say it, even in anger. He picked up his spoon and started to eat. It was hard to swallow.

Aliena patted Sally’s head and put a piece of carrot into her mouth. Sally stopped crying.

Jack looked at Tommy, who was still staring at Aliena with a frightened face. “Eat, Tommy,” said Jack. “It’s good.”

They finished their dinner in silence.

In the spring of the year that the transepts were finished, Prior Philip made a tour of the monastery's property in the south. After three bad years he needed a good harvest, and he wanted to check what state the farms were in.

He took Jonathan with him. The priory orphan was now a tall, awkward, intelligent sixteen-year-old. Like Philip at that age, he did not seem to suffer a moment's doubt about what he wanted to do with his life: he had completed his novitiate and taken his vows, and he was now Brother Jonathan. Also like Philip, he was interested in the material side of God's service, and he worked as deputy to Cuthbert Whitehead, the aging cellarer. Philip was proud of the boy: he was devout, hardworking, and well liked.

Their escort was Richard, the brother of Aliena. Richard had at last found his niche in Kingsbridge. After they built the town wall, Philip had suggested to the parish guild that they appoint Richard as Head of the Watch, responsible for the town's security. He organized the night watchmen and arranged for the maintenance and improvement of the town walls, and on market days and holy days he was empowered to arrest troublemakers and drunks. These tasks, which had become essential as the village had grown into a town, were all things a monk was not supposed to do; so the parish guild, which Philip had at first seen as a threat to his authority, had turned out to be useful after all. And Richard was happy. He was about thirty years old now, but the active life he led kept him looking young.

Philip wished Richard's sister could be as settled. If ever a person had been failed by the Church it was Aliena. Jack was the man she loved and the father of her children, but the Church insisted that she was married to Alfred, even though she had never had carnal knowledge of him; and she was unable to get an annulment because of the ill will of the bishop. It was shameful, and Philip felt guilty, even though he was not responsible.

Toward the end of the trip, when they were riding home through the forest on a bright spring morning, young Jonathan said: "I wonder why God makes people starve."

It was a question every young monk asked sooner or later, and there were lots of answers to it. Philip said: "Don't blame this famine on God."

"But God made the weather that caused the bad harvests."

"The famine is not just due to bad harvests," Philip said. "There are always bad harvests, every few years, but people don't starve. What's special about this crisis is that it comes after so many years of civil war."

"Why does that make a difference?" Jonathan asked.

Richard, the soldier, answered him. "War is bad for farming," he said. "Livestock get slaughtered to feed the armies, crops are burned to deny them to the enemy, and farms are neglected while knights go to war."

Philip added: “And when the future is uncertain, people are not willing to invest time and energy clearing new ground, increasing herds, digging ditches and building barns.”

“We haven’t stopped doing that sort of work,” Jonathan said.

“Monasteries are different. But most ordinary farmers let their farms run down during the fighting, so that when the bad weather came they were not in good shape to ride it out. Monks take a longer view. But we have another problem. The price of wool has slumped because of the famine.”

“I don’t see the connection,” Jonathan said.

“I suppose it’s because starving people don’t buy clothes.” It was the first time in Philip’s memory that the price of wool had failed to go up annually. He had been forced to slow the pace of cathedral building, stop taking new novices, and eliminate wine and meat from the monks’ diet. “Unfortunately, it means that we’re economizing just when more and more destitute people are coming to Kingsbridge looking for work.”

Jonathan said: “And so they end up queueing at the priory gate for free horsebread and pottage.”

Philip nodded grimly. It broke his heart to see strong men reduced to begging for bread because they could find no work. “But remember, it’s caused by war, not bad weather,” he said.

With youthful passion Jonathan said: “I hope there’s a special place in hell for the earls and kings who cause such misery.”

“I hope so—Saints preserve us, what’s that?”

A strange figure had burst from the undergrowth and was running full-tilt at Philip. His clothes were ragged, his hair was wild, and his face was black with dirt. Philip thought the poor man must be running away from an enraged boar, or even an escaped bear.

Then the man ran up and threw himself on Philip.

Philip was so surprised that he fell off his horse.

His attacker fell on top of him. The man smelled like an animal, and sounded like one too: he made a constant inarticulate grunting noise. Philip wriggled and kicked. The man seemed to be trying to get hold of the leather satchel that Philip had slung over his shoulder. Philip realized the man was trying to rob him. There was nothing in the satchel but a book, *The Song of Solomon*. Philip struggled desperately to get free, not because he was specially attached to the book, but because the robber was so disgustingly dirty.

But Philip was tangled up in the strap of the satchel and the robber would not let go. They rolled over on the hard ground, Philip trying to get away and the robber trying to keep hold of the satchel. Philip was vaguely aware that his horse had bolted.

Suddenly the robber was jerked away by Richard. Philip rolled over and

sat upright, but he did not get to his feet for a moment. He was dazed and winded. He breathed the clean air, relieved to be free of the robber's noxious embrace. He felt his bruises. Nothing was broken. He turned his attention to the others.

Richard had the robber flat on the ground and was standing over him, with one foot between the man's shoulder blades and the point of his sword touching the back of the man's neck. Jonathan was holding the two remaining horses and looking bewildered.

Philip got gingerly to his feet, feeling weak. When I was Jonathan's age, he thought, I could fall off a horse and jump right back on again.

Richard said: "If you keep an eye on this cockroach, I'll catch your horse." He offered Philip his sword.

"All right," Philip said. He waved the sword away. "I shan't need that."

Richard hesitated, then sheathed his sword. The robber lay still. The legs sticking out from under his tunic were as thin as twigs, and the same color; and he was barefoot. Philip had never been in any serious danger: this poor man was too weak to strangle a chicken. Richard walked off after Philip's horse.

The robber saw Richard go, and tensed. Philip knew the man was about to make a break for it. He stopped him by saying: "Would you like something to eat?"

The robber raised his head and looked at Philip as if he thought Philip was mad.

Philip went to Jonathan's horse and opened a saddlebag. He took out a loaf, broke it, and offered half to the robber. The man grabbed it unbelievingly and immediately stuffed most of it into his mouth.

Philip sat on the ground and watched him. The man ate like an animal, trying to swallow as much as possible before the meal could be snatched from him. At first Philip had thought he was an old man, but now that he could see him better he realized that the thief was quite young, perhaps twenty-five.

Richard came back, leading Philip's horse. He was indignant when he saw the robber sitting eating. "Why have you given him our food?" he said to Philip.

"Because he's starving," Philip said.

Richard did not reply, but his expression said that monks were mad.

When the robber had eaten the bread, Philip said: "What's your name?"

The man looked wary. He hesitated. Philip somehow got the idea that the man had not spoken to another human being for a while. At last he said: "David."

He still had his sanity, anyway, Philip thought. He said: "What happened to you, David?"

"I lost my farm after the last harvest."

“Who was your landlord?”

“The earl of Shiring.”

William Hamleigh. Philip was not surprised.

Thousands of tenant farmers had been unable to pay their rents after three bad harvests. When Philip’s tenants defaulted he simply forgave the rent, since if he made people destitute they would just come to the priory for charity anyway. Other landlords, notably Earl William, took advantage of the crisis to evict tenants and repossess their farms. The result was a huge increase in the number of outlaws living in the forest and preying on travelers. That was why Philip had to take Richard everywhere with him as bodyguard.

“What about your family?” Philip asked the robber.

“My wife took the baby and went back to her mother. But there was no room for me.”

It was a familiar story. Philip said: “It’s a sin to lay hands on a monk, David, and it’s wrong to live by theft.”

“But how shall I live?” the man cried.

“If you’re going to stay in the forest you’d better catch birds and fish.”

“I don’t know how!”

“You’re a failure as a robber,” Philip said. “What chance of success did you have, with no weapon, up against three of us, and Richard here armed to the teeth?”

“I was desperate.”

“Well, next time you’re desperate, go to a monastery. There’s always something for a poor man to eat.” Philip got to his feet. The sour taste of hypocrisy was in his mouth. He knew the monasteries could not possibly feed all the outlaws. For most of them there really was no alternative but theft. But his role in life was to counsel virtuous living, not to make excuses for sin.

There was no more he could do for this wretched man. He took the reins of his horse from Richard and climbed into the saddle. He could tell that the bruises from his fall were going to hurt him for days. “Go thy way, and sin no more,” he said, quoting Jesus; then he kicked his horse forward.

“You’re too good, you are,” said Richard as they rode off.

Philip shook his head sadly. “The real trouble is, I’m not good enough.”

On the Sunday before Whitsun, William Hamleigh got married.

It was his mother’s idea.

Mother had been nagging him for years to find a wife and father an heir, but he had always put it off. Women bored him and, in a way that he did not understand and really did not want to think about, they made him anxious. He kept telling Mother he would marry soon but he never did anything about it.

In the end she found him a bride.

Her name was Elizabeth. She was the daughter of Harold of Weymouth, a wealthy knight and a strong supporter of Stephen. As Mother explained to William, with a little effort he could have made a better match—could have married the daughter of an earl—but as he was not willing to put his mind to it, Elizabeth would do.

William had seen her at the king's court in Winchester, and Mother had noticed him staring at her. She had a pretty face, a mass of light brown curls, a big bust and narrow hips—just William's type.

She was fourteen years old.

When William stared at her, he had been imagining meeting her on a dark night and taking her by force in the back alleys of Winchester: marriage had not crossed his mind. However, Mother swiftly established that the father was agreeable, and the girl herself was an obedient child who would do what she was told. Having reassured William that there would be no repetition of the humiliation Aliena had inflicted on the family, Mother arranged a meeting.

William had been nervous. Last time he had done this, he had been an inexperienced youth of twenty, the son of a knight, meeting an arrogant young lady of the nobility. But now he was a battle-hardened man, thirty-seven years old, and he had been the earl of Shiring for ten years. He was foolish to be nervous about a meeting with a fourteen-year-old girl.

However, she was even more nervous. She was also desperate to please him. She talked excitably about her home and family, her horses and dogs, and her relations and friends. He sat silently, watching her face, imagining what she would look like naked.

Bishop Waleran married them in the chapel at Earlscastle, and there was a big feast that went on for the rest of the day. By custom, everyone of importance in the county had to be invited, and William would have lost face badly if he had not provided a lavish banquet. They roasted three whole oxen and dozens of sheep and pigs in the castle compound, and the guests drank the castle cellars dry of beer, cider and wine. William's mother presided over the festivities with a look of triumph on her disfigured face. Bishop Waleran found vulgar celebrations somewhat distasteful, and he left when the bride's uncle began to tell funny stories about newlyweds.

The bride and groom retired to their chamber at nightfall, leaving the guests to continue reveling. William had been at enough weddings to know the ideas that were passing through the minds of the younger guests, so he stationed Walter outside the room and barred the door to prevent interruption.

Elizabeth took off her tunic and her shoes and stood there in her linen shirt. "I don't know what to do," she said simply. "You'll have to show me."

This was not quite how William had imagined it. He went over to her. She lifted her face, and he kissed her soft lips. Somehow the kiss failed to generate any heat. He said: "Take off your shirt and lie on the bed."

She pulled the undershirt over her head. She was quite plump. Her large breasts had tiny indented nipples. A light brown fuzz of hair covered the triangle between her legs. Obediently she walked to the bed and lay down on her back.

William kicked off his boots. He sat on the bed beside her and squeezed her breasts. Her skin was soft. This sweet, obliging, smiling girl was nothing like the image that had made his throat go dry, of a woman in the grip of passion, moaning and sweating beneath him, and he felt cheated.

He put his hand between her thighs and she parted her legs immediately. He pushed his finger inside her. She gasped, hurt; then quickly said: “It’s all right, I don’t mind.”

He wondered briefly whether he was going about this in completely the wrong way. He had a momentary vision of a different scene in which the two of them lay side by side, touching and talking and getting to know one another gradually. However, desire had at last stirred inside him when she gasped in pain, and he brushed his doubts aside and fingered her more roughly. He watched her face as she struggled to bear the pain silently.

He got on the bed and knelt between her legs. He was not fully aroused. He rubbed himself to make his organ stiffer, but it had little effect. It was her damned smile that was making him impotent, he was sure. He pushed two fingers inside her, and she gave a little cry of pain. That was better. Then the silly bitch started smiling again. He realized he would have to wipe the smile off her face. He slapped her hard. She cried out, and her lip bled. This was more like it.

He hit her again.

She started to cry.

After that it was all right.

The following Sunday happened to be Whitsunday, when a huge crowd would attend the cathedral. Bishop Waleran would take the service. There would be even more people than usual, because everyone was keen to look at the new transepts, which had recently been finished. Rumor said they were amazing. William would show his bride to the ordinary folk of the county at that service. He had not been to Kingsbridge since they built the wall, but Philip could not stop him from going to church.

Two days before Whitsunday, his mother died.

She was about sixty years old. It was quite sudden. She felt breathless after dinner on Friday and went to bed early. Her maid woke William a little before dawn to tell him that his mother was in distress. He got up from his bed and went stumbling into her room, rubbing his face. He found her gasping horribly for breath, unable to speak, a look of terror in her eyes.

William was frightened by her great shuddering gasps and her staring eyes. She kept looking at him, as if she expected him to do something. He was so scared he decided to leave the room, and he turned away; then he saw the maid standing at the door, and he felt ashamed of his fear. He forced himself to look at Mother again. Her face seemed to change shape continually in the inconstant light of the one candle. Her hoarse, ragged breathing got louder and louder until it seemed to fill his head. He could not understand why it had not woken the whole castle. He put his hands over his ears to shut out the noise but he could still hear it. It was as if she was shouting at him, the way she had when he was a boy, a mad furious scolding tirade, and her face looked angry too, the mouth wide, the eyes staring, the hair disarrayed. The conviction that she was demanding something grew, and he felt himself becoming younger and smaller, until he was possessed by a blind terror he had not felt since childhood, a terror that came from knowing that the only person he loved was a raging monster. It had always been like this: she would tell him to come to her, or go away, or get on his pony, or get off; and he would be slow to respond, so she would yell; and then he would be so frightened that he could not understand what she was asking him to do; and there would be a hysterical deadlock, with her screaming louder and louder and him becoming blind, deaf and dumb with terror.

But this time it was different.

This time, she died.

First her eyes closed. William began to feel calmer then. Gradually her breathing became shallower. Her face went grayish despite the boils. Even the candle seemed to burn more weakly, and the moving shadows no longer frightened William. At last her breathing just stopped.

“There,” William said, “she’s all right, now, isn’t she?”

The maid burst into tears.

He sat beside the bed looking at her still face. The maid fetched the priest, who said angrily: “Why didn’t you call me earlier?” William hardly heard him. He stayed with her until sunrise; then the women servants asked him to leave so they could “lay her out.” William went down to the hall where the inhabitants of the castle—knights, men-at-arms, clergymen and servants—were eating a subdued breakfast. He sat at the table beside his young wife and drank some wine. One or two of the knights and the household steward spoke to him, but he did not reply. Eventually Walter came in and sat beside him. Walter had been with him for many years and he knew when to be silent.

After a while William said: “Are the horses ready?”

Walter looked surprised. “For what?”

“For the journey to Kingsbridge. It takes two days—we have to leave this morning.”

“I didn’t think we would go—under the circumstances….”

For some reason this made William angry. “Did I say we wouldn’t go?”

“No, lord.”

“Then we’re going!”

“Yes, lord.” Walter stood up. “I’ll see to it at once.”

They set off at midmorning, William and Elizabeth and the usual entourage of knights and grooms. William felt as if he was in a dream. The landscape seemed to move past him, instead of the other way around. Elizabeth rode beside him, bruised and silent. When they stopped Walter took care of everything. At each meal William ate a little bread and drank several cups of wine. In the night he dozed fitfully.

They could see the cathedral from a distance, across the green fields, as they approached Kingsbridge. The old cathedral had been a squat, broad-shouldered building with small windows like beady eyes under round-arched eyebrows. The new church looked radically different, even though it was not finished yet. It was tall and slender, and the windows seemed impossibly big. As they came closer, William saw that it dwarfed the priory buildings around it in a way that the old cathedral never had.

The road was busy with riders and pedestrians all heading for Kingsbridge: the Whitsunday service was popular, for it took place in early summer when the weather was good and the roads were dry. This year more people than usual had come, attracted by the novelty of the new building.

William and his party cantered the last mile, scattering unwary pedestrians, and clattered onto the wooden drawbridge that crossed the river. Kingsbridge was now one of the most heavily fortified towns in England. It had a stout stone wall with a castellated parapet, and here, where previously the bridge had led straight into the main street, the way was barred by a stone-built barbican with enormously heavy ironbound doors that now stood open but were undoubtedly shut tight at night. I don’t suppose I’ll ever be able to burn this town again, William thought vaguely.

People stared as he rode up the main street toward the priory. People always stared at William, of course: he was the earl. Today they were also interested in the young bride who rode at his left. On his right was Walter, as always.

They rode into the priory close and dismounted at the stables. William left his horse to Walter and turned to look at the church. The eastern end, the top of the cross, was at the far side of the close and hidden from view. The western end, the tail of the cross, was not yet built, but its shape was marked out on the ground with stakes and string, and some of the foundations had already been laid. Between the two was the new part, the arms of the cross, consisting of the north and south transepts, with the space between them which was called the crossing. The windows *were* as big as they had seemed. William had never seen a building like this in his life.

“It’s fantastic,” Elizabeth said, breaking her submissive silence.

William wished he had left her behind.

Somewhat awestruck, he walked slowly up the nave, between the lines of stakes and string, with Elizabeth following. The first bay of the nave had been partly built, and looked as if it was supporting the huge pointed arch which formed the western entrance to the crossing. William passed under that incredible arch and found himself in the crowded crossing.

The new building looked unreal: it was too tall, too slender, too graceful and fragile to stand up. It seemed to have no walls, nothing to hold up the roof but a row of willowy piers reaching eloquently upward. Like everyone around him, William craned his neck to look up, and saw that the piers continued into the curved ceiling to meet at the crown of the vault, like the overarching branches of a stand of mature elms in the forest.

The service began. The altar had been set up at the near end of the chancel, with the monks behind it, so that the crossing and both transepts were free for the congregation, but even so the crowd overflowed into the unbuilt nave. William pushed his way to the front, as was his prerogative, and stood near the altar, with the other nobles of the county, who nodded to him and whispered among themselves.

The painted timber ceiling of the old chancel was awkwardly juxtaposed with the tall eastern arch of the crossing, and it was clear that the builder intended eventually to demolish the chancel and rebuild it to match the new work.

A moment after that thought had crossed William’s mind his eye fell on the builder in question, Jack Jackson. He was a handsome devil, with his mane of red hair, and he wore a dark red tunic, embroidered at the hem and neckline, just like a nobleman. He looked rather pleased with himself, no doubt because he had built the transepts so fast and everyone was so astonished by his design. He was holding the hand of a boy of about nine years who looked just like him. William realized with a shock that that must be Aliena’s child, and he felt a sharp pang of envy. A moment later he caught sight of Aliena herself. She was standing a little behind Jack and to one side, with a faint smile of pride on her face. William’s heart leaped: she was as lovely as ever. Elizabeth was a poor substitute, a pallid imitation of the real, red-blooded Aliena. In her arms Aliena held a little girl about seven years old, and William recalled that she had had a second child by Jack even though they were not married.

William looked more closely at Aliena. She was not quite as lovely as ever, after all: there were lines of strain around her eyes, and behind the proud smile was a hint of sadness. After all these years she still could not marry Jack, of course, William thought with satisfaction: Bishop Waleran had kept his promise and had repeatedly blocked the annulment. That thought often

gave William consolation.

It was Waleran, William now realized, who was standing at the altar, lifting the Host above his head so that the entire congregation could see it. Hundreds of people went down on their knees. The bread became Christ at that moment, a transformation that struck awe into William even though he had no idea what was involved.

He concentrated on the service for a while, watching the mystical actions of the priests, listening to the meaningless Latin phrases and muttering familiar fragments of the responses. The dazed feeling that had been with him for the last day or so persisted, and the magical new church, with sunlight playing on its impossible columns, served to intensify the sense that he was in a dream.

The service was coming to an end. Bishop Waleran turned to address the congregation. “We will now pray for the soul of Countess Regan Hamleigh, the mother of Earl William of Shiring, who died on Friday night.”

There was a buzz of comment as people heard the news, but William was staring at the bishop in horror. He had realized at last what she had been trying to say while she died. She had been asking for the priest—*but William had not sent for him*. He had watched her weaken, he had seen her eyes close, he had heard her breathing stop, and he had let her die unshriven. How could he have done something like that? Ever since Friday night her soul had been in Hell, suffering the torments that she had described to him so graphically many times, with no prayers to relieve her! His heart was so laden with guilt that he seemed to feel it slow its pace and for a moment he felt that he, too, would die. How could he have let her languish in that dread place, her soul disfigured by sins as her face was with boils, while she longed for the peace of Heaven? “What am I going to do?” he said aloud, and the people around him looked at him in surprise.

When the prayer ended and the monks filed out in procession, William remained on his knees in front of the altar. The rest of the congregation drifted out into the sunshine, ignoring him; all except Walter, who stayed nearby, watching and waiting. William was praying with all his might, keeping a picture of his mother in his head while he repeated the Paternoster and all the other bits of prayers and services he could remember. After a while he realized there were other things he could do. He could light candles; he could pay priests and monks to say masses for her regularly; he could even have a special chapel built for the benefit of her soul. But everything he thought of seemed insufficient. It was as if he could see her, shaking her head, looking hurt and disappointed in him, saying: “How long will you let your mother suffer?”

He felt a hand on his shoulder and looked up. Bishop Waleran stood in front of him, still wearing the gorgeous red robe he used for Whitsun. His

black eyes looked deep into William's, and William felt as if he had no secrets from that penetrating gaze. Waleran said: "Why do you weep?"

William realized his face was wet with tears. He said: "Where is she?"

"She has gone to be purified by fire."

"Is she in pain?"

"Terrible pain. But we can speed the souls of our loved ones as they pass through that dread place."

"I'll do anything!" William sobbed. "Just tell me what!"

Waleran's eyes glittered with greed. "Build a church," he said. "Just like this one. But in Shiring."

A cold fury possessed Aliena whenever she traveled around the estates that had been part of her father's earldom. All the blocked ditches and broken fences and empty, tumbledown cow sheds angered her; the meadows running to seed made her sad; and the deserted villages broke her heart. It was not just the bad harvests. The earldom could have fed its people, even this year, if it had been properly run. But William Hamleigh had no notion of husbanding his land. For him, the earldom was a private treasure chest, not an estate that fed thousands of people. When his serfs had no food, they starved. When his tenants could not pay their rents, he threw them out. Since William became earl the acreage under cultivation had shrunk, because the lands of some dispossessed tenants had returned to their natural state. And he did not have the brains to see that this was not even in his own interest in the long term.

The worst of it was, Aliena felt partly responsible. It was her father's estate, and she and Richard had failed to win it back for the family. They had given up, when William became earl and Aliena lost all her money; but the failure still rankled, and she had not forgotten her vow to her father.

On the road from Winchester to Shiring, with a wagonload of yarn and a brawny carter with a sword at his belt, she remembered riding along the very same road with her father. He had constantly brought new land into cultivation, by clearing areas of forest, draining marshland, or plowing hillsides. In bad years he always put aside enough seed to supply the needs of those who were too improvident, or just too hungry, to save their own. He never forced tenants to sell their beasts or their plows to pay rent, for he knew that if they did that, they would be unable to farm the following year. He had treated the land well, maintaining its capacity to produce, the way a good farmer would take care of a dairy cow.

Whenever she thought of those old days, with her clever, proud, rigid father beside her, she felt the pain of loss like a wound. Life had started to go wrong when he had been taken away. Everything she had done since then seemed, in retrospect, to have been hollow: living at the castle with Matthew,

in a dreamworld; going to Winchester in the vain hope of seeing the king; even struggling to support Richard while he fought in the civil war. She had achieved what other people saw as success: she had become a prosperous wool merchant. But that had brought her only a semblance of happiness. She had found a way of life and a place in society that gave her security and stability, but in her heart she had still been hurt and lost—until Jack came into her life.

Her inability to marry Jack had blighted everything since. She had come to hate Prior Philip, whom she had once looked up to as her savior and mentor. She had not had a happy, amiable conversation with Philip for years. Of course, it was not his fault that they could not get an annulment; but it was he who had insisted they live apart, and Aliena could not help resenting him for that.

She loved her children, but she worried about them, being brought up in such an unnatural household, with a father who went away at bedtime. So far, happily, they showed no ill effects: Tommy was a strapping, good-looking boy who liked football, races and playing soldiers; and Sally was a sweet, thoughtful girl who told stories to her dolls and loved to watch Jack at his tracing floor. Their constant needs and their simple love were the one solidly normal element in Aliena's eccentric life.

She still had her work, of course. She had been a merchant of some kind for most of her adult life. At present she had dozens of men and women in scattered villages spinning and weaving for her in their homes. A few years ago there had been hundreds, but she was feeling the effects of the famine like everyone else, and there was no point in making more cloth than she could sell. Even if she were married to Jack she would still want to have her own independent work.

Prior Philip kept saying the annulment could be granted any day, but Aliena and Jack had now been living this infuriating life for seven long years, eating together and bringing up their children and sleeping apart.

She felt Jack's unhappiness more painfully than her own. She adored him. Nobody knew how much she loved him, except perhaps his mother, Ellen, who saw everything. She loved him because he had brought her back to life. She had been like a caterpillar in a cocoon, and he had drawn her out and shown her that she was a butterfly. She would have spent her entire life numb to the joys and pains of love, if he had not walked into her secret glade, and shared his story-poems with her, and kissed her so lightly, and then slowly, gently, awakened the love that lay dormant in her heart. He had been so patient, so tolerant, despite his youth. For that she would always love him.

As she passed through the forest she wondered whether she would run into Jack's mother, Ellen. They saw her occasionally, at a fair in one of the towns; and about once a year she would sneak into Kingsbridge at dusk and

spend the night with her grandchildren. Aliena felt an affinity for Ellen: they were both oddities, women who did not fit into the mold. However, she emerged from the forest without seeing Ellen.

As she traveled through farmland she checked the crops ripening in the fields. It would be a fair harvest, she estimated. They had not had a good summer, for there had been some rain and it had been cold. But they had not had the floods and crop diseases which had blighted the last three harvests. Aliena was thankful. There were thousands of people living right on the edge of starvation, and another bad winter would kill most of them.

She stopped to water her oxen at the pond in the middle of a village called Monksfield, which was part of the earl's estate. It was a fairly large place, surrounded by some of the best land in the county, and it had its own priest and a stone church. However, only about half the fields round about had been sown this year. Those that had been were now covered with yellow wheat, and the rest were sprouting weeds.

Two other travelers had stopped at the pond in the middle of the village to water their horses. Aliena looked at them warily. Sometimes it was good to team up with other people, for mutual protection; but it could be risky, too, for a woman. Aliena found that a man such as her carter was perfectly willing to do what she told him when they were alone, but if other men were present he was liable to become insubordinate.

However, one of the two travelers at Monksfield pond was a woman. Aliena looked more closely and revised *woman* to *girl*. Aliena recognized her. She had last seen this girl in Kingsbridge Cathedral on Whitsunday. It was Countess Elizabeth, the wife of William Hamleigh.

She looked miserable and cowed. With her was a surly man-at-arms, obviously her bodyguard. That could have been my fate, Aliena thought, if I had married William. Thank God I rebelled.

The man-at-arms nodded curtly to the carter and ignored Aliena. She decided not to suggest teaming up.

While they were resting, the skies turned black and a sharp wind whipped up. "Summer storm," said Aliena's carter succinctly.

Aliena looked anxiously at the sky. She did not mind getting wet, but the storm would slow their progress, and they might find themselves out in the open at nightfall. A few drops of rain fell. They would have to take shelter, she decided reluctantly.

The young countess said to her guard: "We'd better stay here for a bit."

"Can't do that," the guard said brusquely. "Master's orders."

Aliena was outraged to hear the man speak to the girl that way. "Don't be such a fool!" she said. "You're supposed to look after your mistress!"

The guard looked at her in surprise. "What's it to you?" he said rudely.

"There's going to be a cloudburst, idiot," Aliena said in her most

aristocratic voice. “You can’t ask a lady to travel in such weather. Your master will flog you for your stupidity.” Aliena turned to Countess Elizabeth. The girl was looking eagerly at Aliena, visibly pleased to see someone standing up to the bullying bodyguard. It started to rain in earnest. Aliena made a snap decision. “Come with me,” she said to Elizabeth.

Before the guard could do anything she had taken the girl by the hand and walked away. Countess Elizabeth went willingly, grinning like a child let out of school. Aliena had an inkling that the guard might come after them and snatch her away, but at that moment there was a lightning flash and the shower became a storm. Aliena broke into a run, pulling Elizabeth with her, and they raced through the graveyard to a wooden house that stood beside the church.

The door stood open. They ran inside. Aliena had assumed this was the priest’s house, and she was right. A grumpy-looking man in a black tunic, wearing a small cross on a chain around his neck, stood up as they entered. Aliena knew that the duty of hospitality was a burden to many parish priests, especially at present. Anticipating resistance, she said firmly: “My companions and I need shelter.”

“You’re welcome,” the priest said through gritted teeth.

It was a two-room house with a lean-to shed at the side for animals. It was not very clean, even though the animals were kept outside. There was a wine barrel on the table. A small dog yapped at them aggressively as they sat down.

Elizabeth pressed Aliena’s arm. “Thank you very much,” she said. There were tears of gratitude in her eyes. “Ranulf would have made me go on—he never listens to me.”

“It was nothing,” Aliena said. “These big strong men are all cowards at heart.” She studied Elizabeth, and realized with a sense of horror that the poor girl looked rather like her. It would be bad enough to be William’s wife; but to be his second choice must be hell on earth.

Elizabeth said: “I’m Elizabeth of Shiring. Who are you?”

“My name is Aliena. I’m from Kingsbridge.” Aliena held her breath, wondering whether Elizabeth would recognize the name and realize that Aliena was the woman who had rejected William Hamleigh.

But Elizabeth was too young to remember that scandal, and all she said was: “What an unusual name.”

A slovenly woman with a plain face and meaty bare arms came in from the back room, looking defiant, and offered them a cup of wine. Aliena guessed she was the priest’s wife. He would probably call her his housekeeper, since clerical marriage was banned, in theory. Priests’ wives caused no end of trouble. To force the man to put her away was cruel, and generally brought shame on the Church. And although most people would say in general that priests ought to be chaste, they usually took a permissive line

in particular cases, because they knew the woman. So the Church still turned a blind eye to liaisons such as this. Aliena thought: Be grateful, woman—at least you're living with your man.

The man-at-arms and the carter came in with their hair wet. The guard, Ranulf, stood in front of Elizabeth and said: "We can't stop here."

To Aliena's surprise, Elizabeth crumbled immediately. "All right," she said, and stood up.

"Sit down," Aliena said, pulling her back. She stood in front of the guard and wagged her finger in his face. "If I hear another word from you I'll call the villagers to come to the rescue of the countess of Shiring. They know how to treat their mistress even if you don't."

She saw Ranulf weighing the odds. If it came to the crunch, he could deal with Elizabeth and Aliena, and the carter and the priest too; but he would be in trouble if any of the villagers joined in.

Eventually he said: "Perhaps the countess would *prefer* to move on." He looked at Elizabeth aggressively.

The girl looked terrified.

Aliena said: "Well, your ladyship—Ranulf humbly begs to know your will."

Elizabeth looked at her.

"Just tell him what you want," Aliena said encouragingly. "His duty is to do your bidding."

Aliena's attitude gave Elizabeth courage. She took a deep breath and said: "We'll rest here. Go and see to the horses, Ranulf."

He grunted acquiescence and went out.

Elizabeth watched him go with an expression of amazement.

The carter said: "It's going to piss down."

The priest frowned at his vulgarity. "I'm sure it will just be the usual rain," he said in a prissy voice. Aliena could not help laughing, and Elizabeth joined in. Aliena had the feeling the girl did not laugh often.

The sound of the rain became a loud drumming. Aliena looked through the open door. The church was only a few yards away but already the rain had obscured it. This was going to be a real squall.

Aliena said to her carter: "Did you put the cart under cover?"

The man nodded. "With the beasts."

"Good. I don't want my yarn felted."

Ranulf came back in, soaking wet.

There was a flash of lightning followed by a long rumble of thunder. "This will do the crops no good," the priest said lugubriously.

He was right, Aliena thought. What they needed was three weeks of hot sunshine.

There was another flash and a longer crash of thunder, and a gust of wind

shook the wooden house. Cold water dropped on Aliena's head, and she looked up to see a drip coming from the thatched roof. She shifted her seat to get out of its way. The rain was blowing in at the door, too, but nobody seemed to want to close it: Aliena preferred to look at the storm, and it seemed the others felt the same.

She looked at Elizabeth. The girl was white-faced. Aliena put an arm around her. She was shivering, although it was not cold. Aliena hugged her.

"I'm frightened," Elizabeth whispered.

"It's only a storm," Aliena said.

It became very dark outside. Aliena thought it must be getting near suppertime; then she realized she had not had dinner yet: it was only noon. She got up and went to the door. The sky was iron gray. She had never known such peculiar weather in summer. The wind was gusting strongly. A lightning flash illuminated numerous loose objects blowing past the doorway: a blanket, a small bush, a wooden bowl, an empty barrel.

She turned back inside, frowning, and sat down. She was getting mildly worried. The house shook again. The central pole that held up the ridge of the roof was vibrating. This was one of the better-built houses in the village, she reflected: if this was unsteady, some of the poorer places must be in danger of collapse. She looked at the priest. "If it gets any worse we may have to round up the villagers and all take shelter in the church," she said.

"I'm not going out in that," the priest said with a short laugh.

Aliena stared at him incredulously. "They're your flock," she said. "You're their shepherd."

The priest looked back at her insolently. "I answer to the bishop of Kingsbridge, not you, and I'm not going to play the fool just because you tell me to."

Aliena said: "At least bring the plow team into shelter." The most precious possession of a village such as this was the team of eight oxen that pulled the plow. Without those beasts the peasants could not cultivate their land. No individual peasant could afford to own a plow team—it was communal property. The priest would surely value the team, for his prosperity depended on it too.

The priest said: "We've no plow team."

Aliena was mystified. "Why?"

"We had to sell four of them to pay rent; then we killed the others for meat in the winter."

That explained the half-sown fields, Aliena thought. They had only been able to cultivate the lighter soils, using horses or manpower to pull the plow. The story angered her. It was foolish as well as hardhearted of William to make these people sell their plow team, for that meant they would have trouble paying their rent this year too, even though the weather had been fair.

It made her want to take William by the neck and strangle him.

Another powerful gust shook the wood-framed house. Suddenly one side of the roof seemed to shift; then it lifted several inches, becoming detached from the wall, and through the gap Aliena saw black sky and forked lightning. She leaped to her feet as the gust subsided and the thatched roof crashed back down on its supports. This was now becoming dangerous. She stood up and yelled at the priest over the noise of the weather: “At least go and open the church door!”

He looked resentful but he complied. He took a key from a chest, put on a cloak, and went outside and disappeared into the rain. Aliena began to organize the others. “Carter, take my wagon and oxen into the church. Ranulf, you get the horses. Elizabeth, come with me.”

They put on their cloaks and went out. It was hard to walk in a straight line because of the wind, and they held hands for stability. They fought their way across the graveyard. The rain had turned to hail, and big pebbles of ice bounced off the tombstones. In a corner of the cemetery Aliena saw an apple tree as bare as in wintertime: its leaves and fruit had been ripped off the branches by the gale. There won’t be many apples in the county this autumn, she thought.

A moment later they reached the church and went inside. The sudden hush was like going deaf. The wind still howled and the rain drummed on the roof, and thunder crashed every few moments, but it was all at one remove. Some of the villagers were here already, their cloaks sodden. They had brought their valuables with them, their chickens in sacks, their pigs trussed, their cows on leads. It was dark in the church, but the scene was illuminated fitfully by lightning. After a few moments the carter drove Aliena’s wagon inside, and Ranulf followed with the horses.

Aliena said to the priest: “Let’s get the beasts to the west end and the people to the east, before the church starts to look like a stable.” Everyone now seemed to have accepted that Aliena was in charge, and he concurred with a nod. The two of them moved off, the priest talking to the men and Aliena to the women. Gradually the people separated from the animals. The women took the children to the little chancel and the men tied the animals to the columns of the nave. The horses were frightened, rolling their eyes and prancing. The cows all lay down. The villagers got into family groups and began to pass food and drink around. They had come prepared for a long stay.

The storm was so violent that Aliena thought it must pass soon, but instead it got worse. She went to a window. The windows were not made of glass, of course, but of fine translucent linen, which now hung in shreds from the window frames. Aliena pulled herself up to the windowsill to look out, but all she could see was rain.

The wind grew stronger, shrieking around the walls of the church, and she

began to wonder whether even this was safe. She made a discreet tour of the building. She had spent enough time with Jack to know the difference between good masonry and bad, and she was relieved to see that the stonework here was neat and careful. There were no cracks. The building was made of cut stone blocks, not rubble, and it seemed as solid as a mountain.

The priest's housekeeper lit a candle, and that was when Aliena realized night was falling outside. The day had been so dark that the difference was small. The children tired of running up and down the aisles, and curled up in their cloaks to go to sleep. The chickens put their heads under their wings. Elizabeth and Aliena sat side by side on the floor with their backs to the wall.

Aliena was consumed with curiosity about this poor girl who had taken on the role of William's wife, the role Aliena herself had refused seventeen years ago. Unable to restrain herself, she said: "I used to know William when I was a girl. What's he like now?"

"I loathe him," Elizabeth said with passion.

Aliena felt deeply sorry for her.

Elizabeth said: "How did you know him?"

Aliena realized she had let herself in for this. "To tell you the truth, when I was more or less your age, I was supposed to marry him."

"No! And how come you didn't?"

"I refused, and my father backed me. But there was a dreadful fuss…. I caused a lot of bloodshed. However, it's all in the past."

"You refused him!" Elizabeth was thrilled. "You're so courageous. I wish I was like you." Suddenly she looked downcast again. "But I can't even stand up to the servants."

"You could, you know," Aliena said.

"But how? They just don't take any notice of me, because I'm only fourteen."

Aliena considered the question carefully, then answered comprehensively. "To begin with, you must become the carrier of your husband's wishes. In the morning, ask him what he would like to eat today, whom he wants to see, which horse he would like to ride, anything you can think of. Then go to the kitchener, the steward of the hall, and the stableman, and give them the earl's orders. Your husband will be grateful to you, and angry with anyone who ignores you. So people will get used to doing what you say. Then take note of who helps you eagerly and who reluctantly. Make sure that helpful people are favored—give them the jobs they like to do, and make sure the unhelpful ones get all the dirty work. Then people will start to realize that it pays to oblige the countess. They will also love you much more than William, who isn't very lovable anyway. Eventually you will become a power in your own right. Most countesses are."

"You make it sound easy," Elizabeth said wistfully.

“No, it’s not easy, but if you’re patient, and don’t get discouraged too easily, you can do it.”

“I think I can,” she said determinedly. “I really think I can.”

Eventually they began to doze. Every now and again the wind would howl and wake Aliena. Looking around in the fitful candlelight she saw that most of the adults were doing the same, sitting upright, nodding off for a while, then waking up suddenly.

It must have been around midnight that she woke with a start and realized that she had slept for an hour or more this time. Almost everyone around her was fast asleep. She shifted her position, lying flat on the floor, and wrapped her cloak tightly around her. The storm was not letting up, but people’s need for sleep had overcome their anxiety. The sound of the rain blowing against the walls of the church was like waves crashing on a beach, and instead of keeping her awake it now lulled her to sleep.

Once again she woke with a start. She wondered what had disturbed her. She listened: silence. The storm had ended. A faint gray light seeped in through the windows. All the villagers were fast asleep.

Aliena got up. Her movement disturbed Elizabeth, who came awake instantly.

They both had the same thought. They went to the church door, opened it, and stepped outside.

The rain had stopped and the wind was no more than a breeze. The sun had not yet risen, but the dawn sky was pearl-gray. Aliena and Elizabeth looked around them in the clear, watery light.

The village was gone.

Other than the church there was not a single building left standing. The entire area had been flattened. A few heavy timbers had come to rest up against the side of the church, but otherwise only the hearthstones dotted around in the sea of mud showed where there had been houses. At the edges of what had been the village, there were five or six mature trees, oaks and chestnuts, still standing, although each of them appeared to have lost several boughs. There were no young trees left at all.

Stunned by the completeness of the devastation, Aliena and Elizabeth walked along what had been the street. The ground was littered with splintered wood and dead birds. They came to the first of the wheat fields. It looked as if a large herd of cattle had been penned there for the night. The ripening stalks of wheat had been flattened, broken, uprooted and washed away. The earth was churned up and waterlogged.

Aliena was horrified. “Oh, God,” she muttered. “What will the people eat?”

They struck out across the field. The damage was the same everywhere. They climbed a low hill and surveyed the surrounding countryside from the

top. Every way they looked, they saw ruined crops, dead sheep, blasted trees, flooded meadows and flattened houses. The destruction was appalling, and it filled Aliena with a dreadful sense of tragedy. It looked, she thought, as if the hand of God had come down over England and struck the earth, destroying everything men had made except churches.

The devastation had shocked Elizabeth too. “It’s terrible,” she said. “I can’t believe it. There’s nothing left.”

Aliena nodded grimly. “Nothing,” she echoed. “There’ll be no harvest this year.”

“What will the people do?”

“I don’t know.” Feeling a mixture of compassion and fear, Aliena said: “It’s going to be a bloody winter.”

II

One morning four weeks after the great storm, Martha asked Jack for more money. Jack was surprised. He already gave her sixpence a week for housekeeping, and he knew that Aliena gave her the same. On that she had to feed four adults and two children, and supply two houses with firewood and rushes; but there were plenty of big families in Kingsbridge who only had sixpence a week for everything, food and clothing and rent too. He asked her why she needed more.

She looked embarrassed. “All the prices have gone up. The baker wants a penny for a four-pound loaf, and—”

“A penny! For a four-pounder?” Jack was outraged. “We should make an oven and bake our own.”

“Well, sometimes I do pan bread.”

“That’s right.” Jack realized they had had pan-baked bread two or three times during the last week or so.

Martha said: “But the price of flour has gone up too, so we don’t save much.”

“We should buy wheat and grind it ourselves.”

“It’s not allowed. We’re supposed to use the priory mill. Anyway, wheat is expensive also.”

“Of course.” Jack realized he was being silly. Bread was dear because flour was dear, and flour was dear because wheat was dear, and wheat was dear because the storm had wiped out the harvest, and there was no getting away from it. He saw that Martha looked troubled. She always got very upset if she thought he was displeased. He smiled to show her it was all right, and patted her shoulder. “It’s not your fault,” he said.

“You sound so cross.”

“Not with you.” He felt guilty. Martha would rather cut off her hand than cheat him, he knew. He did not really understand why she was so devoted to him. If it was love, he thought, surely she would have got fed up by now, for she and the whole world knew that Aliena was the love of his life. He had once contemplated sending her away, to force her out of her rut: that way perhaps she would fall for a suitable man. But he knew in his heart that it would not work and would only make her desperately unhappy. So he let it be.

He reached inside his tunic for his purse, and took out three silver pennies. “You’d better have twelvepence a week, and see if you can manage

on that," he said. It seemed a lot. His pay was only twenty-four pennies a week, although he got perquisites as well, candles and robes and boots.

He swallowed the rest of a mug of beer and went out. It was unusually cold for early autumn. The weather was still strange. He walked briskly along the street and entered the priory close. It was still a little before sunrise and only a handful of craftsmen were here. He walked up the nave, looking at the foundations. They were almost complete, which was fortunate, as the mortar work would probably have to stop early this year because of the cold weather.

He looked up at the new transepts. His pleasure in his own creation was blighted by the cracks. They had reappeared on the day after the great storm. He was terribly disappointed. It had been a phenomenal tempest, of course, but his church was designed to survive a hundred such storms. He shook his head in perplexity, and climbed the turret stairs to the gallery. He wished he could talk to someone who had built a similar church, but nobody in England had, and even in France they had not yet gone this high.

On impulse, he did not go to his tracing floor, but continued up the staircase to the roof. The lead had all been laid, and he saw that the pinnacle that had been blocking the flow of rainwater now had a generous gutter running through its base. It was windy up on the roof, and he tried to keep hold of something whenever he was near the edge: he would not be the first builder to be blown off a roof to his death by a gust of wind. The wind always seemed stronger up here than it did on the ground. In fact, the wind seemed to increase disproportionately as you climbed….

He stood still, staring into space. The wind increased disproportionately as you climbed. That was the answer to his puzzle. It was not the *weight* of his vault that was causing the cracks—it was the *height*. He had built the church strong enough to bear the weight, he was sure; but he had not thought about the wind. These towering walls were constantly buffeted, and because they were so high, the wind was enough to crack them. Standing on the roof, feeling its force, he could just imagine the effect it was having on the tautly balanced structure below him. He knew the building so well that he could almost feel the strain, as if the walls were part of his body. The wind pushed sideways against the church, just as it was pushing against him; and because the church could not bend, it cracked.

He was quite sure he had found the explanation; but what was he going to do about it? He needed to strengthen the clerestory so that it could withstand the wind. But how? To build massive buttresses up against the walls would destroy the stunning effect of lightness and grace that he had achieved so successfully.

But if that was what it took to make the building stand up, he would have to do it.

He went down the stairs again. He felt no more cheerful, even though he

had finally understood the problem; for it looked as if the solution would destroy his dream. Perhaps I was arrogant, he thought. I was so sure I could build the most beautiful cathedral in the world. Why did I imagine I could do better than anyone else? What made me think I was special? I should have copied another master's design exactly, and been content.

Philip was waiting for him at the tracing floor. There was a worried frown on the prior's brow, and the fringe of graying hair around his shaved head was untidy. He looked as if he had been up all night.

"We've got to reduce our expenditure," he said without preamble. "We just haven't got the money to carry on building at our present rate."

Jack had been afraid of this. The hurricane had destroyed the harvest throughout most of southern England: it was sure to have an effect on the priory's finances. Talk of cutbacks always made him anxious. In his heart he was afraid that if building slowed down too much he might not live to see his cathedral completed. But he did not let his fear show. "Winter's coming," he said casually. "Work always slows down then anyway. And winter will be early this year."

"Not early enough," Philip said grimly. "I want to cut our outgoings in half, immediately."

"In half!" It sounded impossible.

"The winter layoff begins today."

This was worse than Jack had anticipated. The summer workers normally left around the beginning of December. They spent the winter months building wooden houses or making plows and carts, either for their families or to earn money. This year their families would not be pleased to see them. Jack said: "Do you know you're sending them to homes where people are already starving?"

Philip just stared back at him angrily.

"Of course you know it," Jack said. "Sorry I asked."

Philip said forcefully: "If I don't do this now, then one Saturday in midwinter the entire work force will stand in line for their pay and I will show them an empty chest."

Jack shrugged helplessly. "There's no arguing with that."

"It's not all," Philip warned. "From now on there's to be no hiring, even to replace people who leave."

"We haven't been hiring for months."

"You hired Alfred."

"That was different." Jack was embarrassed. "Anyway, no hiring."

"And no upgrading."

Jack nodded. Every now and again an apprentice or a laborer asked to be upgraded to mason or stonecutter. If the other craftsmen judged that his skills were adequate, the request would be granted, and the priory would have to

pay him higher wages. Jack said: “Upgrading is the prerogative of the masons’ lodge.”

“I’m not trying to alter that,” Philip said. “I’m asking the masons to postpone all promotions until the famine is over.”

“I’ll put it to them,” Jack said noncommittally. He had a feeling there could be trouble over that.

Philip pressed on. “From now on there’ll be no work on saint’s days.”

There were too many saint’s days. In principle, they were holidays, but whether workers were paid for the holiday was a matter for negotiation. At Kingsbridge the rule was that when two or more saint’s days fell in the same week, the first was a paid holiday and the second was an unpaid optional day off. Most people chose to work the second. Now, however, they would not have that option. The second saint’s day would be an obligatory unpaid holiday.

Jack was feeling uncomfortable about the prospect of explaining these changes to the lodge. He said: “All this would go down a lot better if I could present it to them as a matter for discussion, rather than as something already settled.”

Philip shook his head. “Then they’d think it was open to negotiation, and some of the proposals might be softened. They’d suggest working half the saint’s days, and allowing a limited number of upgrades.”

He was right, of course. “But isn’t that reasonable?” Jack said.

“Of course it’s *reasonable*,” Philip said irritably. “It’s just that there’s no room for adjustment. I’m already worried that these measures won’t be sufficient—I can’t make any concessions.”

“All right,” Jack said. Philip was clearly in no mood to compromise right now. “Is there anything else?” he said warily.

“Yes. Stop buying supplies. Run down your stocks of stone, iron and timber.”

“We get the timber free!” Jack protested.

“But we have to pay for it to be carted here.”

“True. All right.” Jack went to the window and looked down at the stones and tree trunks stacked in the priory close. It was a reflex action: he already knew how much he had in stock. “That’s not a problem,” he said after a moment. “With the reduced work force, we’ve got enough materials to last us until next summer.”

Philip sighed wearily. “There’s no guarantee we’ll be taking on summer workers next year,” he said. “It depends on the price of wool. You’d better warn them.”

Jack nodded. “It’s as bad as that, is it?”

“It’s worse than I’ve ever known it,” Philip said. “What this country needs is three years of good weather. And a new king.”

“Amen to that,” said Jack.

Philip returned to his house. Jack spent the morning wondering how to handle the changes. There were two ways to build a nave: bay by bay, beginning at the crossing and working west; or course by course, laying the base of the entire nave first and then working up. The second way was faster but required more masons. It was the method Jack had intended to use. Now he reconsidered. Building bay by bay was more suited to a reduced work force. It had another advantage, too: any modifications he introduced into his design to take account of wind resistance could be tested in one or two bays before being used throughout the building.

He also brooded over the long-term effect of the financial crisis. Work might slow down more and more, over the years. Gloomily he saw himself growing old and gray and feeble without achieving his life’s ambition, and eventually being buried in the priory graveyard in the shadow of a still unfinished cathedral.

When the noon bell rang he went to the masons’ lodge. The men were sitting down to their ale and cheese, and he noticed for the first time that many of them had no bread. He asked the masons who normally went home to dinner if they would stay for a moment. “The priory is running short of money,” he said.

“I’ve never known a monastery that didn’t, sooner or later,” said one of the older men.

Jack looked at him. He was called Edward Twonose because he had a wart on his face almost as big as his nose. He was a good stone carver, with a sharp eye for exact curves, and Jack always used him for shafts and drums. Jack said: “You’d have to admit that this place manages its money better than most. But Prior Philip can’t avert storms and bad harvests, and now he needs to reduce his expenditure. I’ll tell you about it before you have your dinners. First of all, we’re not taking in any more supplies of stone or timber.”

The craftsmen from the other lodges were drifting in to listen. One of the old carpenters, Peter, said: “The wood we’ve got won’t last the winter.”

“Yes, it will,” Jack said. “We’ll be building more slowly, because we’ll have fewer craftsmen. The winter layoff starts today.”

He knew immediately that he had handled the announcement wrongly. There were protests from all sides, several men speaking at once. I should have broken it to them gently, he thought. But he had no experience of this kind of thing. He had been master for seven years, but in that time there had been no financial crises.

The voice that emerged from the hubbub was that of Pierre Paris, one of the masons who had come from Saint-Denis. After six years in Kingsbridge his English was still imperfect, and his anger made his accent thicker, but he was not discouraged. “You cannot dismiss men on a Tuesday,” he said.

“That’s right,” said Jack Blacksmith. “You have to give them until the end of the week, at least.”

Jack’s stepbrother Alfred chimed in. “I remember when my father was building a house for the earl of Shiring, and Will Hamleigh came and dismissed the whole crew. My father told him he had to give everyone a week’s wages, and held his horse’s head until he handed over the money.”

Thank you for nothing, Alfred, thought Jack. He said doggedly: “You might as well hear the rest. From now on, there’s no work on saint’s days, and no promotions.”

That made them angrier. “Unacceptable,” someone said, and several of the others repeated it: “Unacceptable, unacceptable.”

Jack found that infuriating. “What are you talking about? If the priory hasn’t got the money, you’re not going to get paid. What’s the point of chanting ‘Unacceptable, unacceptable,’ like a class of schoolboys learning Latin?”

Edward Twonose spoke up again. “We’re not a class of schoolboys, we’re a lodge of masons,” he said. “The lodge has the right of promotion, and nobody can take it away.”

“And if there’s no money for the extra pay?” Jack said hotly.

One of the younger masons said: “I don’t believe that.”

It was Dan Bristol, one of the summer workers. He was not a skillful cutter but he could lay stones very accurately and fast. Jack said to him: “How can you say you don’t believe it? What do you know about the priory’s finances?”

“I know what I see,” Dan said. “Are the monks starving? No. Are there candles in the church? Yes. Is there wine in the stores? Yes. Does the prior go barefoot? No. There’s money. He just doesn’t want to give it to us.”

Several people agreed loudly. In fact, he was wrong about at least one item, and that was the wine; but no one would believe Jack now—he had become the representative of the priory. That was not fair: he was not responsible for Philip’s decisions. He said: “Look, I’m only telling you what the prior said to me. I don’t guarantee that it’s true. But if he tells us there’s not enough money, and we don’t believe him, what can we do?”

“We can *all* stop work,” said Dan. “Immediately.”

“That’s right,” said another voice.

This was getting out of control, Jack realized with a sense of panic. “Wait a moment,” he said. Desperately he searched for something to say that would bring down the temperature. “Let’s go back to work now, and this afternoon I’ll try to persuade Prior Philip to moderate his plans.”

“I don’t think we should work,” Dan said.

Jack could not believe this was happening. He had anticipated many threats to the building of his dream church, but he had not foreseen that the

craftsmen would sabotage it. “Why shouldn’t we work?” he said incredulously. “What’s the point?”

Dan said: “As things stand, half of us aren’t even sure we’re going to get paid for the rest of the week.”

“Which is against all custom and practice,” said Pierre Paris. The phrase *custom and practice* was much used in court.

Jack said desperately: “At least work while I’m trying to talk Philip around.”

Edward Twonose said: “If we work, can you guarantee that everyone will be paid for the whole week?”

Jack knew he could offer no such guarantee, with Philip in his present mood. It crossed his mind to say yes anyway, and pay the money himself, if necessary; but he realized immediately that his entire savings would not be enough to cover a week’s wages here. So he said: “I’ll do my level best to persuade him, and I think he’ll agree.”

“Not good enough for me,” said Dan.

“Nor me,” said Pierre.

Dan said: “No guarantee, no work.”

To Jack’s dismay, there was general agreement.

He saw that if he continued to oppose them he would lose what little authority he had left. “The lodge must act as one man,” he said, quoting a much-used form of words. “Are we all in favor of a stoppage?”

There was a chorus of assent.

“So be it,” said Jack dismally. “I’ll tell the prior.”

Bishop Waleran rode into Shiring followed by a small army of attendants. Earl William was waiting for him in the porch of the church on the market square. William frowned in puzzlement: he had been expecting a site meeting, not a state visit. What was the devious bishop up to now?

With Waleran was a stranger on a chestnut gelding. The man was tall and rangy, with heavy black eyebrows and a large curved nose. He wore a scornful expression that seemed permanent. He rode beside Waleran, as if they were equals, but he was not wearing the clothes of a bishop.

When they dismounted, Waleran introduced the stranger. “Earl William, this is Peter of Wareham, who is an archdeacon in the service of the archbishop of Canterbury.”

No explanation of what Peter is doing here, William thought. Waleran is definitely up to something.

The archdeacon bowed and said: “Your bishop has told me of your generosity to Holy Mother Church, Lord William.”

Before William could reply, Waleran pointed to the parish church. “This

building will be pulled down to make room for the new church, Archdeacon," he said.

"Have you appointed a master mason yet?" Peter asked.

William wondered why an archdeacon from Canterbury was so interested in the parish church of Shiring. But perhaps he was just being polite.

"No, I haven't found a master yet," Waleran said. "There are plenty of builders looking for work, but I can't get anyone from Paris. It seems the whole world wants to build churches like Saint-Denis, and the masons who know the style are in heavy demand."

"It could be important," said Peter.

"There's a builder who may be able to help waiting to see us later."

Once again William was a little puzzled. Why did Peter think it was important to build in the style of Saint-Denis?

Waleran said: "The new church will be much bigger, of course. It will protrude a good deal farther into the square here."

William did not like the proprietorial air Waleran was assuming. Now he interjected: "I can't have the church encroaching on the market square."

Waleran looked irritated, as if William had spoken out of turn. "Whyever not?" he said.

"Every inch of the square makes money on market days."

Waleran looked as if he was disposed to argue, but Peter said with a smile: "We mustn't block the silver fountain!"

"That's right," William said. He was paying for this church. Happily, the fourth bad harvest had made little difference to his income. Smaller peasants paid rent in kind, and many of them had given William his sack of grain and brace of geese even though they were living on acorn soup. Furthermore, that sack of grain was worth ten times what it had fetched five years ago, and the increase in the price more than compensated for the tenants who had defaulted and the serfs who had starved to death. He still had the resources to finance the new building.

They walked around to the back of the church. Here was an area of housing that generated minimal income. William said: "We can build out at this end, and knock down all these houses."

"But most of them are clerical residences," Waleran objected.

"We'll find other houses for the clergymen."

Waleran looked dissatisfied, but said no more on that subject.

On the north side of the church a broad-shouldered man of about thirty years bowed to them. By his dress William judged him to be a craftsman. Archdeacon Baldwin, the bishop's close colleague, said: "This is the man I told you about, my lord bishop. His name is Alfred of Kingsbridge."

At first glance the man was not very prepossessing: he was rather ox-like, big and strong and dumb. But on closer examination there was a cunning look

about his face, rather like a fox or a sly dog.

Archdeacon Baldwin said: “Alfred is the son of Tom Builder, the first master at Kingsbridge; and was himself master for a while, until he was usurped by his stepbrother.”

The son of Tom Builder. This was the man who had married Aliena, William realized. But he had never consummated the marriage. William looked at him with keen interest. He would never have guessed this man to be impotent. He appeared healthy and normal. But Aliena could have a strange effect on a man.

Archdeacon Peter was saying: “Have you worked in Paris, and learned the style of Saint-Denis?”

“No—”

“But we must have a church built in the new style.”

“At present I’m working at Kingsbridge, where my brother is master. He brought the new style back from Paris and I’ve learned it from him.”

William wondered how Bishop Waleran had managed to suborn Alfred without arousing suspicion; then he remembered that the Kingsbridge sub-prior, Remigius, was a tool of Waleran. Remigius must have made the initial approach.

He remembered something else about Kingsbridge. He said to Alfred: “But your roof fell down.”

“That wasn’t my fault,” Alfred said. “Prior Philip insisted on a change of design.”

“I know Philip,” said Peter, and there was venom in his voice. “A stubborn, arrogant man.”

“How do you know him?” William asked.

“Many years ago I was a monk at the cell of St-John-in-the-Forest when Philip was in charge there,” Peter said bitterly. “I criticized his slack regime, and he made me almoner to get me out of the way.” Peter’s resentment still burned hot, it was clear. No doubt that was a factor in whatever Waleran was scheming.

William said: “Be that as it may, I don’t think I want to hire a builder whose roofs fall down, no matter what excuses there might be.”

Alfred said: “I’m the only master builder in England who has worked on a new-style church, apart from Jack Jackson.”

William said: “I don’t care about Saint-Denis. I believe my poor mother’s soul will be served just as well by a traditional design.”

Bishop Waleran and Archdeacon Peter exchanged a look. After a moment, Waleran spoke to William in a lowered voice. “One day this church could be Shiring Cathedral,” he said.

Everything became clear to William. Many years ago Waleran had schemed to have the seat of the diocese moved from Kingsbridge to Shiring,

but Prior Philip had outmaneuvered him. Now Waleran had revived the plan. This time, it seemed, he would go about it more deviously. Last time he had simply asked the archbishop of Canterbury to grant his request. This time he was going to start building a new church, one large and prestigious enough to be a cathedral, and at the same time develop allies such as Peter within the archbishop's circle, before making his application. That was all very well, but William just wanted to build a church in memory of his mother, to ease her soul's passage through the eternal fires; and he resented Waleran's attempt to take over the scheme for his own purposes. On the other hand, it would be a tremendous boost to Shiring to have the cathedral here, and William would profit from that.

Alfred was saying: "There's something else."

Waleran said: "Yes?"

William looked at the two men. Alfred was bigger, stronger and younger than Waleran, and he could have knocked Waleran to the ground with one of his big hands tied behind his back; yet he was acting like the weak man in a confrontation. Years ago it would have made William angry to see a prissy white-skinned priest dominate a strong man, but he no longer got upset about such things: that was the way of the world.

Alfred lowered his voice and said: "I can bring the entire Kingsbridge work force with me."

Suddenly his three listeners were riveted.

"Say that again," said Waleran.

"If you hire me as master builder, I'll bring all the craftsmen from Kingsbridge with me."

Waleran said warily: "How do we know you're telling the truth?"

"I don't ask you to trust me," Alfred said. "Give me the job conditionally. If I don't do what I promise, I'll leave without pay."

For different reasons all three of his listeners hated Prior Philip, and they were immediately gripped by the prospect of striking such a blow at him.

Alfred added: "Several of the masons worked on Saint-Denis."

Waleran said: "But how can you bring them with you?"

"Does it matter? Let's just say they prefer me to Jack."

William thought Alfred was lying about this, and Waleran appeared to think the same, for he tilted back his head and gave Alfred a long look down his pointed nose. However, Alfred had seemed to be telling the truth earlier. Whatever the true reason might be, he seemed convinced that he could bring the Kingsbridge craftsmen with him.

William said: "If they all follow you here, work will come to a complete standstill at Kingsbridge."

"Yes," Alfred said. "It will."

William looked at Waleran and Peter. "We need to talk further about this.

He'd better dine with us."

Waleran nodded agreement and said to Alfred: "Follow us to my house. It's at the other end of the market square."

"I know," said Alfred. "I built it."

For two days Prior Philip refused to discuss the strike. He was speechless with rage, and whenever he saw Jack he just turned around and walked the other way.

On the second day three cartloads of flour arrived from one of the priory's outlying mills. The carts were escorted by men-at-arms: flour was as precious as gold nowadays. It was checked in by Brother Jonathan, who was deputy cellarer under old Cuthbert Whitehead. Jack watched Jonathan count the sacks. To Jack there was something oddly familiar about Jonathan's face, as if he resembled someone Jack knew well. Jonathan was tall and gangling, with light brown hair—nothing like Philip, who was short and slight and black-haired; but in every way other than physically Jonathan took after the man who was his surrogate father: the boy was intense, high-principled, determined and ambitious. People liked him despite his rather rigid attitude to morality—which was very much how they felt about Philip.

While Philip was refusing to talk, a word with Jonathan would be the next best thing.

Jack watched while Jonathan paid the men-at-arms and the carters. He was quietly efficient, and when the carters asked for more than they were entitled to, as they always did, he refused them calmly but firmly. It occurred to Jack that a monastic education was a good preparation for leadership.

Leadership. Jack's shortcomings in that area had been revealed rather starkly. He had let a problem become a crisis by maladroit handling of his men. Every time he thought of that meeting he cursed his ineptitude. He was determined to find a way to put matters right.

As the carters left, grumbling, Jack walked casually by and said to Jonathan: "Philip is terribly angry about the strike."

For a moment Jonathan looked as if he was about to say something unpleasant—he was clearly fairly angry himself—but finally his face relaxed and he said: "He seems angry, but underneath he's wounded."

Jack nodded. "He takes it personally."

"Yes. He feels the craftsmen have turned on him in his hour of need."

"I suppose they have, in a way," Jack said. "But Philip made a major error of judgment in trying to alter working practices by fiat."

"What else could he do?" Jonathan retorted.

"He could have discussed the crisis with them first. They might even have been able to suggest some economies themselves. But I'm in no position to

blame Philip, because I made the same mistake myself.”

That pricked Jonathan’s curiosity. “How?”

“I reported the schedule of cuts to the men as bluntly and tactlessly as Philip announced it to me.”

Jonathan wanted to be outraged, like Philip, and blame the strike on the perfidy of the men; but he was reluctantly seeing the other side of the coin. Jack decided to say no more. He had planted a seed.

He left Jonathan and returned to his tracing floor. The trouble, he reflected as he picked up his drawing implements, was that the town’s peacemaker was Philip. Normally, he was the judge of wrongdoers and the arbiter in disputes. It was disconcerting to find Philip a party in a quarrel, angry and bitter and unrelenting. Someone else was going to have to make peace this time. And the only person Jack could think of to do it was himself. As master builder he was the go-between who could talk to both parties, and his motivation was indisputable—he wanted to continue building.

He spent the rest of the day thinking about how to handle this task, and the question he asked himself again and again was: What would Philip do?

On the following day he felt ready to confront Philip.

It was a cold, wet day. Jack lurked around the deserted building site in the early afternoon, with the hood of his cloak pulled over his head to keep him dry, pretending to study the cracks in the clerestory (a problem that was still unsolved), and waited until he saw Philip hurry across to his own house from the cloisters. When Philip was inside, Jack followed.

Philip’s door was always open. Jack tapped on it and went in. Philip was on his knees in front of the small altar in the corner. You’d think he’d get enough praying done, in church most of the day and half the night, without doing it at home too, Jack thought. There was no fire: Philip was economizing. Jack waited silently until Philip rose and turned around. Then Jack said: “This has got to come to an end.”

Philip’s normally amiable face was set in hard lines. “I see no difficulty about that,” he said coldly. “They can come back to work as soon as they like.”

“On your terms.”

Philip just looked at him.

Jack said: “They won’t come back on your terms, and they won’t wait forever for you to see reason.” He added hastily: “Or what they think is reason.”

“Won’t wait forever?” Philip said. “Where will they go when they get tired of waiting? They won’t find work elsewhere. Do they think this is the only place that is suffering from the famine? It’s all over England. Every building site is having to cut back.”

“So you’re going to wait for them to come crawling back to you, begging

forgiveness," Jack said.

Philip looked away. "I won't make anyone crawl," he said. "I don't believe I've ever given you reason to expect such behavior from me."

"No, and that's why I've come to see you," Jack said. "I know you don't really want to humiliate these men—it's not in your nature. And besides, if they returned feeling beaten and resentful, they'd work badly for years to come. So from my point of view as well as yours, we must let them save face. And that means making concessions."

Jack held his breath. That had been his big speech, and this was his make-or-break moment. If Philip remained unmoved now, the future looked bleak.

Philip looked hard at Jack for a long moment. Jack could see reason struggling with emotion in the prior's face. Then at last his expression softened and he said: "We'd better sit down."

Jack suppressed a sigh of relief as he took a seat. He had planned what he was going to say next: he was not going to repeat the spontaneous tactlessness he had shown with the builders. "There's no need to modify your freeze on purchase of supplies," he began. "Similarly, the moratorium on new hiring can stand—no one objects to that. I also think they can be persuaded to accept that there will be no work on saint's days, if they gain concessions in other areas." He paused to let that sink in. So far he was giving everything and asking for nothing.

Philip nodded. "All right. What concessions?"

Jack took a deep breath. "They were highly offended by the proposal to ban promotions. They think you're trying to usurp the ancient prerogative of the lodge."

"I explained to you that that was not my intention," Philip said in an exasperated tone.

"I know, I know," Jack said hastily. "Of course you did. And I believed you, but they didn't." An injured look came over Philip's face. How could anyone disbelieve him? Hastily, Jack said: "But that's in the past. I'm going to propose a compromise that won't cost you anything."

Philip looked interested.

Jack went on: "Let them continue to approve applications for promotion, but postpone the associated pay raise for a year." And he thought: Find something to object to in that, if you can.

"Will they accept that?" Philip said skeptically.

"It's worth a try."

"What if I still can't afford the pay raises a year from now?"

"Cross that bridge when you get to it."

"You mean, renegotiate in a year's time."

Jack shrugged. "If necessary."

"I see," Philip said noncommittally. "Anything else?"

“The biggest stumbling block is the instant dismissal of the summer workers.” Jack was being completely candid now. This issue could not be honeyed. “Instant dismissal has never been allowed on any building site in Christendom. The end of the week is the earliest.” To help Philip feel less foolish, Jack added: “I ought to have warned you of that.”

“So all I have to do is employ them for two more days?”

“I don’t think that will be enough, now,” Jack said. “If we’d handled it differently from the start we might have got away with that, but now they’ll want more of a compromise.”

“No doubt you’ve got something specific in mind.”

Jack had, and it was the only real concession he had to ask for. “It’s now the beginning of October. We normally dismiss the summer workers at the beginning of December. Let’s meet the men halfway, and do it at the beginning of November.”

“That only gives me half of what I need.”

“It gives you more than half. You still benefit from the rundown of stocks, the postponement of pay raises for promotion, and the saint’s days.”

“Those things are trimmings.”

Jack sat back, feeling gloomy. He had done his best. He had no more arguments to put to Philip, no more resources of persuasion to deploy, nothing left to say. He had shot his arrow. And Philip was still resistant. Jack was ready to concede defeat. He looked at Philip’s stony face and waited.

Philip looked over at the altar in the corner for a long, silent moment. Finally he looked back to Jack and said: “I’ll have to put this to the chapter.”

Jack went limp with relief. It was not a victory, but it was close. Philip would not ask the monks to consider anything he did not himself approve, and more often than not they did what Philip wanted. “I hope they accept,” Jack said weakly.

Philip stood up and put a hand on Jack’s shoulder. He smiled for the first time. “If I put the case as persuasively as you, they will,” he said.

Jack was surprised by this sudden change of mood. He said: “The sooner this is over, the less long-term effect it will have.”

“I know. It’s made me very angry, but I don’t want to quarrel with you.” Unexpectedly, he put out his hand.

Jack shook it, and felt good.

Jack said: “Shall I tell the builders to come to the lodge in the morning to hear the chapter’s verdict?”

“Yes, please.”

“I’ll do that now.” He turned to go.

Philip said: “Jack.”

“Yes?”

“Thank you.”

Jack nodded acknowledgment and went out. He walked through the rain without raising his hood. He felt happy.

That afternoon he went to the homes of all the craftsmen and told them there would be a meeting in the morning. Those who were not at home—the unmarried men and the summer workers, mostly—he found in the alehouse. However, they were sober, for the price of ale had gone up along with everything else, and no one could afford to get drunk. The only craftsman he could not find was Alfred, who had not been seen for a couple of days. Eventually he turned up at dusk. He came to the alehouse with an oddly triumphant look on his bovine face. He did not say where he had been, and Jack did not ask him. Jack left him drinking with the other men, and went to have supper with Aliena and the children.

Next morning he started the meeting before Prior Philip came to the lodge. He wanted to lay the groundwork. Once again he had prepared what he had to say very carefully, to be sure he did not damage his case by tactlessness. Once again he tried to handle things as Philip might have.

All the craftsmen were there early. Their livelihoods were at stake. One or two of the younger ones looked red-eyed: Jack guessed the alehouse had stayed open late last night, and some of them had forgotten their poverty for a while. The youngsters and the summer workers were most likely to prove difficult. The older craftsmen took a more long-term view. The small minority of women craftsmen were always cautious and conservative, and would back any kind of settlement.

“Prior Philip is going to ask us to go back to work, and offer us some kind of compromise,” Jack began. “Before he comes, we ought to discuss what we might be prepared to accept, what we will definitely reject, and where we might be willing to negotiate. We must show Philip a united front. I hope you all agree.”

There were a few nods.

He made himself sound slightly angry, and said: “In my view we should absolutely refuse to accept instant dismissal.” He banged his fist on the workbench to emphasize his inflexibility on this point. Several people voiced their agreement loudly. Jack knew this was one demand Philip was certainly not going to make. He wanted the hotheads to get themselves worked up to defend ancient custom and practice on this point, so that when Philip conceded it, the wind would be taken out of their sails.

“Also, we must guard the lodge’s right to make promotions, for only craftsmen can judge whether a man is skilled or not.” Once again he was being disingenuous. He was focusing their attention on the nonfinancial aspect of promotions, in the hope that when they won that point they would be ready to compromise on payments.

“As for working on saint’s days, I’m in two minds. Holidays are normally

a matter for negotiation—there's no standard custom and practice, as far as I know." He turned to Edward Twonose and said: "What's your view on that, Edward?"

"Practice varies from site to site," Edward said. He was pleased to be consulted. Jack nodded, encouraging him to go on. Edward began to recall variant methods of dealing with saint's days. The meeting was going just the way Jack wanted. An extended discussion of a point that was not very controversial would bore the men and sap their energy for confrontation.

However, Edward's monologue was interrupted by a voice from the back which said: "This is all irrelevant."

Jack looked over and saw that the speaker was Dan Bristol, a summer worker. Jack said: "One at a time, please. Let Edward have his say."

Dan was not so easily deflected. "Never mind about all that," he said. "What we want is a raise."

"A raise?" Jack was irritated by this ludicrous remark.

To his surprise, however, Dan was supported. Pierre said: "That's right, a raise. Look—a four-pound loaf costs a penny. A hen, which used to be eightpence, is now twenty-four! None of us here has had strong beer for weeks, I bet. Everything is going up, but most of us are still getting the wage we were hired at, which is a twelvepence a week. We've got families to feed on that."

Jack's heart was sinking. He had had everything moving along nicely, but this interruption had ruined his strategy. He restrained himself from opposing Dan and Pierre, however, for he knew he would have more influence if he appeared open-minded. "I agree with you both," he said, to their evident surprise. "The question is, what chance have we got of persuading Philip to give us a raise at a time when the priory is running out of money?"

Nobody responded to that. Instead, Dan said: "We need twenty-four pence a week to stay alive, and even then we'll be worse off than we used to be."

Jack felt dismayed and bewildered: why was the meeting slipping out of his hands? Pierre said: "Twenty-four pence a week," and several others nodded their heads.

It occurred to Jack that he might not be the only person who had come to the meeting with a prepared strategy. Giving Dan a hard look, he said: "Have you discussed this previously?"

"Yes, last night, in the alehouse," Dan said defiantly. "Is there anything wrong with that?"

"Certainly not. But for the benefit of those of us who were not privileged to attend that meeting, would you like to summarize its conclusions?"

"All right." The men who had not been at the alehouse were looking resentful, but Dan was unrepentant. Just as he opened his mouth, Prior Philip walked in. Jack threw a quick, searching look at Philip. The prior looked

happy. He caught Jack's eye and gave an almost imperceptible nod. Jack felt jubilant: the monks had accepted the compromise. He opened his mouth to prevent Dan from speaking, but he was an instant too late. "We want twenty-four pence a week for craftsmen," Dan said loudly. "Twelvepence for laborers and forty-eight pence for master craftsmen."

Jack looked again at Philip. The pleased look had gone, and his face had once again set in the hard, angry lines of confrontation. "Just a moment," Jack said. "This is not the view of the lodge. It's a foolish demand cooked up by a drunken faction in the alehouse."

"No, it's not," said a new voice. It was Alfred. "I think you'll find most of the craftsmen support the demand for double pay."

Jack stared at him in fury. "A few months ago you begged me to give you a job," he said. "Now you're demanding double pay. I should have let you starve!"

Prior Philip said: "And that's what will happen to all of you if you don't see sense!"

Jack had wanted desperately to avoid such challenging remarks, but now he saw no alternative: his own strategy had collapsed.

Dan said: "We won't go back to work for less than twenty-four pence, and that's that."

Prior Philip said angrily: "It's out of the question. It's a foolish dream. I'm not even going to discuss it."

"We aren't going to discuss anything else," said Dan. "We won't work for less, under any circumstances."

Jack said: "This is stupid! How can you sit there and say you won't work for less? You won't work at all, you fool. You've got nowhere else to go!"

"Haven't we?" said Dan.

The lodge went quiet.

Oh, God, Jack thought in despair; this is it—they've got an alternative.

"We have got somewhere else to go," Dan said. He stood up. "And as for me, I'm going there now."

"What are you talking about?" Jack said.

Dan looked triumphant. "I've been offered work on a new site, in Shiring. Building the new church. At twenty-four pence a week for craftsmen."

Jack looked around. "Has anyone else been offered the same?"

The whole lodge looked shamefaced.

Dan said: "We all have."

Jack was devastated. This whole thing had been organized. He had been betrayed. He felt foolish as well as wronged. He had completely misread the situation. Hurt turned to anger, and he cast about for someone to blame. "Which of you?" he yelled. "Which of you is the traitor?" He looked around at all of them. Few were able to meet his eye. Their shame gave him no

consolation. He felt like a spurned lover. “Who brought you this offer from Shiring?” he shouted. “Who is to be the master builder at Shiring?” His eye raked the assembled company and came to rest on Alfred. Of course. He felt sick with disgust. “Alfred?” he said scornfully. “You’re leaving me to work for *Alfred*?”

There was silence. Finally Dan said: “Yes, we are.”

Jack saw that he had been defeated. “So be it,” he said bitterly. “You know me, and you know my brother; and you’ve chosen Alfred. You know Prior Philip, and you know Earl William; and you’ve chosen William. All I have left to say to you is that you deserve everything you’re going to get.”

Chapter 15

"TELL ME A STORY," Aliena said. "You never tell me stories anymore. Remember how you used to?"

"I remember," Jack said.

They were in their secret glade in the forest. It was late autumn, so instead of sitting in the shade by the stream they had built a fire in the shelter of a rocky outcrop. It was a gray, cold, dark afternoon, but lovemaking had warmed them and the fire crackled cheerfully. They were both naked under their cloaks.

Jack opened Aliena's cloak and touched her breast. She thought her breasts were too big, and she was sad that they were not as high and firm as they had been before she had the children, but he seemed to love them just as much, which was a great relief. He said: "A story about a princess who lived at the top of a high castle." He touched her nipple gently. "And a prince, who lived at the top of another high castle." He touched her other breast. "Every day they gazed at one another from the windows of their prisons, and yearned to cross the valley between." His hand rested in the cleft between her breasts, then suddenly moved down. "But every Sunday afternoon they met in the forest!" She squealed, startled, then laughed at herself.

These Sunday afternoons were the golden moments in a life that was rapidly falling apart.

The bad harvest and the slump in the wool price had brought economic devastation. Merchants were ruined, townspeople were unemployed and peasants were starving. Jack was still earning a wage, fortunately: with a handful of craftsmen he was slowly erecting the first bay of the nave. But Aliena had almost completely closed down her cloth manufacturing enterprise. And things were worse here than in the rest of southern England because of the way William was responding to the famine.

For Aliena this was the most painful aspect of the situation. William was greedy for cash to build his new church in Shiring, the church dedicated to the

memory of his vicious, half-mad mother. He had evicted so many of his tenants for rent arrears that some of the best land in the county was now uncultivated, which made the shortage of grain worse. However, he had been stockpiling grain to drive the price up even farther. He had few employees and nobody to feed, so he actually profited from the famine in the short term. But in the long run he was doing irreparable damage to the estate and its ability to feed its people. Aliena remembered the earldom under her father's rule, a rich county of fertile fields and prosperous towns, and it broke her heart.

For a few years she had almost forgotten about the vows she and her brother had made to their dying father. Since William Hamleigh had been made earl, and she had started a family, the idea of Richard winning back the earldom had come to seem a remote fantasy. Richard himself had settled down as Head of the Watch. He had even married a local girl, the daughter of a carpenter; although sadly the poor girl had turned out to have bad health, and had died last year without giving him any children.

Since the famine had started, Aliena had begun to think again about the earldom. She knew that if Richard was earl, with her help he could do a lot to alleviate the suffering caused by the famine. But it was all a dream: William was well favored by King Stephen, who had gained the upper hand in the civil war, and there was no prospect of a change.

However, all these sorry wishes faded away in the secret glade, when Aliena and Jack lay down on the turf to make love. Right from the start they had been greedy for one another's bodies—Aliena would never forget how shocked she had been at her own lust, in the beginning—and even now, when she was thirty-three years old, and childbirth had broadened her rear and made her formerly flat belly sag, still Jack was so consumed with desire for her that they would make love three or four times over every Sunday.

Now his joke about the forest began to turn into a delicious caress, and Aliena pulled his face to hers to kiss him; then she heard a voice.

They both froze. Their glade was some distance from the road, and concealed in a thicket: they were never interrupted except by the occasional unwary deer or bold fox. They held their breaths and listened. The voice came again, and was followed by a different one. As they strained their hearing they picked up an undertone of rustling, as if a large group of men was moving through the forest.

Jack found his boots, which were lying on the ground. Moving silently, he stepped smartly to the stream a few paces away, filled a boot with water, and emptied it on the fire. The flames went out with a hiss and a wisp of smoke. Jack moved noiselessly into the undergrowth, crouching low, and disappeared.

Aliena put on her undershirt, tunic and boots, then wrapped her cloak

around her again.

Jack returned as silently as he had left. “Outlaws,” he said.

“How many?” she whispered.

“A lot. I couldn’t see them all.”

“Where are they going?”

“Kingsbridge.” He held up a hand. “Listen.”

Aliena cocked her head. In the far distance she could hear the bell of Kingsbridge Priory tolling fast and incessantly, warning of danger. Her heart missed a beat. “Oh, Jack—the children!”

“We can get back ahead of the outlaws if we cross Muddy Bottom and wade the river by the chestnut wood.”

“Let’s go quickly, then!”

Jack put a restraining hand on her arm and listened for a moment. He could always hear things she could not, in the forest. It came of having been brought up in the wild. She waited. At last he said: “I think they’ve all gone by.”

They left the glade. After a few moments they came to the road. There was no one in sight. They crossed the road and cut through the woods, following a barely perceptible track. Aliena had left Tommy and Sally with Martha, playing nine-men’s morris in front of a cheerful fire. She was not quite sure what the danger was but she was terrified that something might happen before she reached her children. They ran when they could, but to Aliena’s frustration the ground was too rough for most of the way, and the best she could do was jog-trot, while Jack walked with a long-legged stride. This route was harder going than the road, which was why they did not normally use it, but it was much quicker.

They slithered down the steep slope that led to Muddy Bottom. Unwary strangers were occasionally killed in this bog, but there was no danger to those who knew their way across. Nevertheless the waterlogged mud seemed to grasp Aliena’s feet, slowing her down, keeping her from Tommy and Sally. At the far side of Muddy Bottom was a ford across the river. The cold water came up to Aliena’s knees and washed the mud from her feet.

From there the route was straightforward. The alarm bell sounded louder as they approached the town. Whatever danger the town faced from the outlaws, at least they had somehow been forewarned, Aliena thought, trying to keep her spirits up. As she and Jack emerged from the forest into the meadow across the river from Kingsbridge, twenty or thirty youngsters who had been playing football in a nearby village arrived at the same time, shouting raucously and perspiring despite the cold.

They hurried across the bridge. The gate was already closed, but the people on the battlements had seen and recognized them, and as they approached, a small sally port was opened. Jack pulled rank and made the

boys let him and Aliena in first. They ducked their heads and went through the small doorway. Aliena was deeply relieved to have got back to the town before the outlaws.

Panting with their exertions, they hurried up the main street. The townspeople were taking to the walls with spears, bows, and piles of stones to throw. The children were being rounded up and taken to the priory. Martha would have gone there already with Tommy and Sally, Aliena decided. She and Jack went straight to the priory close.

In the kitchen courtyard Aliena saw—to her astonishment—Jack's mother, Ellen, as lean and brown as ever, but with gray in her long hair and wrinkles around her forty-four-year-old eyes. She was talking animatedly to Richard. Prior Philip was some distance away, directing children into the chapter house. He did not seem to have seen Ellen.

Standing nearby was Martha with Tommy and Sally. Aliena gasped with relief and hugged the two children.

Jack said: "Mother! Why are you here?"

"I came to warn you that a gang of outlaws is on the way. They're going to raid the town."

"We saw them in the forest," Jack said.

Richard's ears pricked up. "You saw them? How many men?"

"I can't be sure, but it sounded like a lot, at least a hundred, maybe more."

"What sort of weapons?"

"Clubs. Knives. A hatchet or two. Mostly clubs."

"What direction?"

"North of here."

"Thanks! I'm going to take a look from the walls."

Aliena said: "Martha, take the children into the chapter house." She followed Richard, as did Jack and Ellen.

As they hurried through the streets, people kept saying to Richard: "What is it?"

"Outlaws," he would say succinctly, without breaking his stride.

Richard was at his best like this, Aliena thought. Ask him to go out and earn his daily bread and he was helpless; but in a military emergency he was cool, level-headed and competent.

They reached the north wall of the city and climbed the ladder to the parapet. There were heaps of stones, for throwing down on attackers, placed at regular intervals. Townsmen with bows and arrows were already taking up positions on the battlements. Some time ago, Richard had persuaded the town guild to hold emergency drills once a year. There had been a lot of resistance to the idea at first, but it had become a ritual, like the midsummer play, and everyone enjoyed it. Now its real benefits were showing as the townspeople reacted quickly and confidently to the sound of the alarm.

Aliena looked fearfully across the fields to the forest. She could see nothing.

Richard said: “You must have got here well ahead of them.”

Aliena said: “Why are they coming *here*?”

Ellen said: “The priory storehouses. This is the only place for miles around where there’s any food.”

“Of course.” The outlaws were hungry people, dispossessed of their land by William, with no way to live but theft. In the undefended villages there was little or nothing to steal: the peasants were not much better off than the outlaws. Only in the barns of landowners was there food in quantity.

As she was thinking this, she saw them.

They emerged from the edge of the forest like rats from a burning hayrick. They swarmed across the field toward the town, twenty, thirty, fifty, a hundred of them, a small army. They had probably hoped to catch the town unawares and get in through the gates, but when they heard the bell ringing the alarm they realized they had been forestalled. Nevertheless they came on, with the desperation of the starving. One or two bowmen loosed off premature arrows, and Richard yelled: “Wait! Don’t waste your shafts!”

Last time Kingsbridge was attacked, Tommy had been eighteen months old and Aliena was pregnant with Sally. She had taken refuge in the priory then, with the elderly and the children. This time she would stay on the battlements and help to fight off the danger. Most of the other women felt the same way: there were almost as many women as men on the walls.

All the same, Aliena felt torn as the outlaws came closer. She was near the priory, but it was possible that the attackers could break through at some other point and reach the priory before she could get there. Or she might be injured in the fighting and unable to help the children. Jack was here, and so was Ellen: if they should be killed, only Martha would be left to take care of Tommy and Sally. Aliena hesitated, undecided.

The outlaws were almost at the walls. A shower of arrows fell on them, and this time Richard did not tell the archers to wait. The outlaws were decimated. They had no armor to protect them. There was also no organization. No one had planned the attack. They were like stampeding animals, rushing headlong at a blank wall. When they got there they did not know what to do. The townspeople bombarded them with stones from the battlements. Several outlaws attacked the north gate with clubs. Aliena knew the thickness of that ironbound oak door: it would take all night to break through. Meanwhile, Alf Butcher and Arthur Saddler were maneuvering a cauldron of boiling water from someone’s kitchen up onto the wall over the gate.

Directly below Aliena, a group of outlaws started to form a human pyramid. Jack and Richard immediately started to throw stones at them.

Thinking of her children, Aliena did the same, and Ellen joined in too. The desperate outlaws withstood the hail of rocks for a while, then someone was hit on the head, the pyramid collapsed, and they gave up.

There were screams of pain from the north gate a moment later, as the boiling water poured on the heads of the men attacking the door.

Then some of the outlaws realized that their dead and wounded comrades were easy prey, and they started to strip the bodies. Fights broke out with those who were not so badly wounded, and rival looters quarreled over the possessions of the dead. It was a shambles, Aliena thought; a disgusting, degrading shambles. The townspeople stopped throwing stones as the attack petered out and the attackers fought among themselves like dogs over a bone.

Aliena turned to Richard. “They’re too disorganized to be a real threat,” she said.

He nodded. “With a little help they could be quite dangerous, because they’re desperate. But as it is they’ve no leadership.”

Aliena was struck by a thought. “An army waiting for a leader,” she said. Richard did not react, but she was excited by the idea. Richard was a good leader who had no army. The outlaws were an army without a leader. And the earldom was falling apart….

Some of the townspeople continued to throw stones and shoot arrows at the outlaws, and more of the scavengers fell. This was the final discouragement, and they began to retreat, like a pack of dogs with their tails between their legs, looking back over their shoulders regretfully. Then someone opened the north gate, and a crowd of young men charged out, brandishing swords and axes, and went after the stragglers. The outlaws fled, but some were caught and butchered.

Ellen turned away in disgust and said to Richard: “You should have stopped those boys from giving chase.”

“Young men need to see some blood, after a set-to such as this,” he said. “Besides, the more we kill this time, the fewer we’ll have to fight next time.”

It was a soldier’s philosophy, Aliena thought. In the time when she had felt her life threatened every day she would probably have been like the young men, and chased after outlaws to slaughter them. Now she wanted to wipe out the causes of outlawry, not the outlaws themselves. Besides, she had thought of a way to use those outlaws.

Richard told someone to sound the all-clear on the priory bell and gave instructions for a double watch for the night, with patrolling guards as well as sentries. Aliena went to the priory and collected Martha and the children. They all met again at Jack’s house.

It pleased Aliena that they were all together: she and Jack and their children, and Jack’s mother, and Aliena’s brother, and Martha. It was quite like an ordinary family, and Aliena could almost forget that her father had

died in a dungeon, and she was legally married to Jack's stepbrother, and Ellen was an outlaw, and—

She shook her head. It was no use pretending this was a normal family.

Jack drew a jug of ale from the barrel and poured it into large cups. Everyone felt tense and excited after the danger. Ellen built up the fire and Martha sliced turnips into a pot, beginning to make a broth for supper. Once upon a time they would have put half a pig on the fire on a day such as this.

Richard drank his ale in one long swallow, wiped his mouth, and said: "We're going to see more of this kind of thing before the winter's out."

Jack said: "They should attack Earl William's storehouses, not Prior Philip's. It's William who has made most of these people destitute."

"They won't have any more success against William than they did against us, unless they improve their tactics. They're like a pack of dogs."

Aliena said: "They need a leader."

Jack said: "Pray they never get one! They would really be dangerous then."

Aliena said: "A leader might direct them to attack William's property instead of ours."

"I don't follow you," Jack said. "Would a leader do that?"

"He would if he was Richard."

They all went quiet.

The idea had grown in Aliena's mind, and she was now convinced it could work. They could fulfill their vows, Richard could destroy William and become the earl, and the county could be restored to peace and prosperity…. The more she thought about it, the more excited she became. She said: "There were more than a hundred men in that rabble today." She turned to Ellen. "How many more are there in the forest?"

"Countless," Ellen said. "Hundreds. Thousands."

Aliena leaned across the kitchen table and locked eyes with Richard. "Be their leader," she said forcefully. "Organize them. Teach them how to fight. Devise plans of attack. Then send them into action—against William."

As she spoke, she realized that she was telling him to put his life in danger, and she was filled with trepidation. Instead of winning back the earldom he could be killed.

But he had no such qualms. "By God, Allie, you could be right," he said. "I could have an army of my own, and lead it against William."

Aliena saw in his face the flush of a hatred long nurtured, and she noticed again the scar on his left ear, where the lobe had been sliced off. She pushed down the vile memory that threatened to surface.

Richard was warming to his theme. "I could raid William's herds," he said with relish. "Steal his sheep, poach his deer, break open his barns, rob his mills. My God, I could make that vermin suffer, if I had an army."

He had always been a soldier, Aliena thought; it was his fate. Despite her fear for his safety, she was thrilled by the prospect that he might have another chance to fulfill his destiny.

He thought of a snag. “But how can I find the outlaws?” he said. “They always hide.”

“I can answer that,” said Ellen. “Branching off the Winchester road is an overgrown track that leads to a disused quarry. That’s their hideout. It used to be known as Sally’s Quarry.”

Seven-year-old Sally said: “But I haven’t got a quarry!”

Everyone laughed.

Then they went quiet again.

Richard looked exuberant and determined. “Very well,” he said tightly. “Sally’s Quarry.”

“We’d been working hard all morning, uprooting a massive tree stump up the hill,” said Philip. “When we came back, my brother, Francis, was standing right there, in the goat pen, holding you in his arms. You were a day old.”

Jonathan looked grave. This was a solemn moment for him.

Philip surveyed the cell of St-John-in-the-Forest. There was not much forest in sight now: over the years the monks had cleared many acres, and the monastery was surrounded by fields. There were more stone buildings—a chapter house, a refectory and a dormitory—plus a host of smaller wooden barns and dairies. It hardly looked like the place he had left seventeen years ago. The people were different, too. Several of those young monks now occupied positions of responsibility at Kingsbridge. William Beauvis, who had caused trouble by flicking hot candle wax at the novice-master’s bald head all those years ago, was now prior here. Some had gone: that troublemaker Peter of Wareham was in Canterbury, working for an ambitious young archdeacon called Thomas Becket.

“I wonder what they were like,” said Jonathan. “I mean my parents.”

Philip felt a twinge of pain for him. Philip himself had lost his parents, but not until he was six years old, and he could remember them both quite well: his mother calm and loving, his father tall and black-bearded and—to Philip, anyway—brave and strong. Jonathan did not even have that. All he knew about his parents was that they had not wanted him.

“We can guess a lot about them,” Philip said.

“Really?” Jonathan said eagerly. “What?”

“They were poor,” Philip said. “Wealthy people have no reason to abandon their children. They were friendless: friends know when you’re expecting a baby, and ask questions if a child disappears. They were desperate. Only desperate people can bear to lose a child.”

Jonathan's face was taut with unshed tears. Philip wanted to weep for him, this boy who—everyone said—was so much like Philip himself. Philip wished he could give him some consolation, tell him something warm and heartening about his parents; but how could he pretend that they had loved the boy, when they had left him to die?

Jonathan said: "But why does God do such things?"

Philip saw his opportunity. "Once you start asking that question, you can end up in confusion. But in this case I think the answer is clear. God wanted you for himself."

"Do you really think so?"

"Have I never told you that before? I've always believed it. I said so to the monks here, on the day you were found. I told them that God had sent you here for a purpose of his own, and it was our duty to raise you in God's service so that you would be fit to perform the task he has assigned you."

"I wonder if my mother knows that."

"If she's with the angels, she does."

"What do you think my task might be?"

"God needs monks to be writers, illuminators, musicians, and farmers. He needs men to take on the demanding jobs, such as cellarer, prior and bishop. He needs men who can trade in wool, heal the sick, educate the schoolboys and build churches."

"It's hard to imagine that he has a role cut out for me."

"I can't think he would have gone to this much trouble with you if he didn't," Philip said with a smile. "However, it might not be a grand or prominent role in worldly terms. He might want you to become one of the quiet monks, a humble man who devotes his life to prayer and contemplation."

Jonathan's face fell. "I suppose he might."

Philip laughed. "But I don't think so. God wouldn't make a knife out of wood, or a lady's chemise of shoe leather. You aren't the right material for a life of quietude, and God knows it. My guess is that he wants you to fight for him, not sing to him."

"I certainly hope so."

"But right now I think he wants you to go and see Brother Leo and find out how many cheeses he has for the cellar at Kingsbridge."

"Right."

"I'm going to talk to my brother in the chapter house. And-remember—if any of the monks speak to you about Francis, say as little as you can."

"I shall say nothing."

"Off you go."

Jonathan walked quickly across the yard. His solemn mood had left him already, and his natural exuberance had returned before he reached the dairy.

Philip watched him until he disappeared into the building. I was just like that, except perhaps not so clever, he thought.

He went the opposite way, to the chapter house. Francis had sent a message asking Philip to meet him here discreetly. As far as the Kingsbridge monks were concerned, Philip was making a routine visit to a cell. The meeting could not be kept from the monks here, of course, but they were so isolated they had nobody to tell. Only the prior of the cell ever came to Kingsbridge, and Philip had sworn him to secrecy.

He and Francis had arrived this morning, and although they could not plausibly claim that the meeting was an accident, they were maintaining a pretense that they had organized it only for the pleasure of seeing one another. They had both attended high mass, then taken dinner with the monks. Now was their first chance to talk alone.

Francis was waiting in the chapter house, sitting on a stone bench against the wall. Philip almost never saw his own reflection—there were no looking-glasses in a monastery—so he measured his own aging by the changes in his brother, who was only two years younger. Francis at forty-two had a few threads of silver in his black hair, and a crop of stress lines around his bright blue eyes. He was much heavier around the neck and waist than last time Philip had seen him. I've probably got more gray hair and less surplus fat, Philip thought; but I wonder which of us has more worry lines?

He sat down beside Francis and looked across the empty octagonal room. Francis said: "How are things?"

"The savages are in control again," Philip said. "The priory is running out of money, we've almost stopped building the cathedral, Kingsbridge is on the decline, half the county is starving and it's not safe to travel."

Francis nodded. "It's the same story all over England."

"Perhaps the savages will always be in control," Philip said gloomily. "Perhaps greed will always outweigh wisdom in the councils of the mighty; perhaps fear will always overcome compassion in the mind of a man with a sword in his hand."

"You're not usually so pessimistic."

"We were attacked by outlaws a few weeks ago. It was a pitiable effort: no sooner had the townsmen killed a few than the outlaws started fighting among themselves. But when they retreated, the young men of our town chased after the poor wretches and slaughtered all they could catch. It was sickening."

Francis shook his head. "It's hard to understand."

"I think I do understand it. They'd been frightened, and could only exorcise their fear by shedding the blood of the people who had scared them. I saw that in the eyes of the men who killed our mother and father. They killed because they were scared. But what can take away their fear?"

Francis sighed. “Peace, justice, prosperity…Hard things to achieve.”

Philip nodded. “Well. What are you up to?”

“I’m working for the son of the Empress Maud. His name is Henry.”

Philip had heard talk of this Henry. “What’s he like?”

“He’s a very clever and determined young man. His father is dead, so he’s count of Anjou. He’s also duke of Normandy, because he’s the eldest grandson of old Henry, who used to be king of England and duke of Normandy. And he’s married Eleanor of Aquitaine, so now he’s duke of Aquitaine as well.”

“He rules over more territory than the king of France.”

“Exactly.”

“But what’s he *like*?”

“Educated, hardworking, fast-moving, restless, strong-willed. He has a fearsome temper.”

“I sometimes wish I had a fearsome temper,” Philip said. “It keeps people on their toes. But everyone knows I’m always reasonable, so I’m never obeyed with quite the same alacrity as a prior who might explode at any minute.”

Francis laughed. “Stay just the way you are,” he said. He became serious again. “Henry has made me realize the importance of the king’s personality. Look at Stephen: his judgment is poor; he’s determined in short bursts, then he gives up; he’s courageous to the point of foolishness and he pardons his enemies all the time. People who betray him risk very little: they know they can count on his mercy. Consequently, he’s struggled unsuccessfully for eighteen years to rule a land that was a united kingdom when he took it over. Henry already has more control over his collection of previously independent duchies and counties than Stephen has ever had here.”

Philip was struck by an idea. “Why did Henry send you to England?” he said.

“To survey the kingdom.”

“What have you found?”

“That it is lawless and starving, battered by storms and ravaged by war.”

Philip nodded thoughtfully. Young Henry was duke of Normandy because he was the eldest son of Maud, who was the only legitimate child of old King Henry, who had been duke of Normandy and king of England.

By that line of descent young Henry could also claim to be king of England.

His mother had made the same claim, and had been opposed because she was a woman and because her husband was an Angevin. But young Henry was not only male but had the additional merit of being both Norman (on his mother’s side) and Angevin (on his father’s).

Philip said: “Is Henry going to try for the crown of England?”

“It depends on my report,” said Francis.
“And what will you tell him?”
“That there will never be a better time than now.”
“Praise God,” said Philip.

II

On his way to Bishop Waleran's castle, Earl William stopped at Cowford Mill, which he owned. The miller, a dour middle-aged man called Wulfric, had the right to grind all the grain grown in eleven nearby villages. As his fee he kept two sacks in every twenty: one for himself and one for William.

William went there to collect his dues. He did not normally do this personally, but these were not normal times. Nowadays he had to provide an armed escort for every cart carrying flour or anything else edible. In order to use his people in the most economical way he was in the habit of taking a wagon or two with him, whenever he moved around with his entourage of knights, and collecting whatever he could.

The surge in outlaw crime was an unfortunate side effect of his firm policy on bad tenants. Landless people often turned to theft. Generally, they were no more efficient as thieves than they had been as farmers, and William had expected most of them to die off during the winter. At first his expectations had been borne out: the outlaws either went for lone travelers who had little to be stolen, or they carried out ill-organized raids on well-defended targets. Lately, however, the outlaws' tactics had improved. Now they always attacked with at least double the numbers of the defending force. They came when barns were full, a sign that they were reconnoitering carefully. Their attacks were sudden and swift, and they had the courage of desperation. However, they did not stay to fight, but each man fled as soon as he had got his hands on a sheep, a ham, a cheese, a sack of flour or a bag of silver. There was no point in pursuing them, for they melted into the forest, dividing up and running all ways. Someone was commanding them, and he was doing it just the way William would have.

The outlaws' success humiliated William. It made him look like a buffoon who could not police his own earldom. To make matters worse, the outlaws rarely stole from anyone else. It looked as if they were deliberately defying him. William hated nothing more than the feeling that people were laughing at him behind their hands. He had spent his life forcing people to respect him and his family, and this band of outlaws was undoing all his work.

Especially galling for William was what people were saying behind his back: that it served him right, he had treated his tenants harshly and now they were taking their revenge, he had brought this on himself. Such talk made him apoplectic with rage.

The villagers of Cowford looked startled and fearful as William and his

knights rode in. William scowled at the thin, apprehensive faces that looked out from the doorways and quickly disappeared again. These people had sent their priest to plead for them to be allowed to grind their own grain this year, saying that they could not afford to give the miller a tenth. William had been tempted to pull out the priest's tongue for insolence.

The weather was cold, and there was ice around the rim of the millpond. The waterwheel was still and the grindstone silent. A woman came out of the house beside the mill. William felt a spasm of desire when he looked at her. She was about twenty years old, with a pretty face and a cloud of dark curls. Despite the famine she had big breasts and strong thighs. She had a saucy look when she first appeared, but the sight of William's knights wiped it off her face, and she ducked back inside.

"She didn't fancy us," Walter said. "She must have seen Gervase." It was an old joke, but they laughed anyway.

They tied up their horses. It was not exactly the same group that William had gathered around him when the civil war began. Walter was still with him, of course, and Ugly Gervase, and Hugh Axe; but Gilbert had died in the unexpectedly bloody battle with the quarrymen, and had been replaced by Guillaume; and Miles had lost an arm in a sword fight over dice at an alehouse in Norwich, and Louis had joined the group. They were not boys anymore, but they talked and acted just the same, laughing and drinking, gambling and whoring. William had lost count of the alehouses they had wrecked, the Jews they had tormented and the virgins they had deflowered.

The miller came out. No doubt his sour expression was due to the perennial unpopularity of millers. His grouchy look was overlaid by anxiety. That was all right: William liked people to be anxious when he turned up.

"I didn't know you had a daughter, Wulfric," William said, leering. "You've been hiding her from me."

"That's Maggie, my wife," he said.

"Cow shit. Your wife's a raddled old crone, I remember her."

"My May died last year, lord. I've married again."

"You dirty old dog!" William said, grinning. "This one must be thirty years younger than you!"

"Twenty-five—"

"Enough of that. Where's my flour? One sack in twenty!"

"All here, lord. If you please to come in."

The way into the mill was through the house. William and the knights followed Wulfric into the single room. The miller's new young wife was kneeling in front of the fire, putting logs on. As she bent down, her tunic stretched tight across her rear. She had meaty haunches, William observed. A miller's wife was one of the last to go hungry in a famine, of course.

William stopped, looking at her bottom. The knights grinned and the

miller fidgeted. The girl looked around, realized they were staring at her, and stood up, covered in confusion.

William winked at her and said: “Bring us some ale, Maggie—we’re thirsty men.”

They went through a doorway to the mill. The flour was in sacks piled around the outside of the circular threshing floor. There was not much of it. Normally the stacks were higher than a man. “Is this all?” William said.

“It was such a poor harvest, lord,” Wulfric said nervously.

“Where’s mine?”

“Here, lord.” He pointed to a pile of eight or nine sacks.

“What?” William felt his face flush. “That’s mine? I’ve got two wagons outside, and you offer me that?”

Wulfric’s face became even more doleful. “I’m sorry, lord.”

William counted them. “It’s only nine sacks!”

“That’s all there is,” Wulfric said. He was almost in tears. “You see mine next to yours, and it’s the same—”

“You lying dog,” William said angrily. “You’ve sold it—”

“No, lord,” Wulfric insisted. “That’s all there ever was.”

Maggie came to the doorway with six pottery tumblers of ale on a tray. She offered the tray to each of the knights. They took a mug each and drank thirstily. William ignored her. He was too wound up to drink. She stood waiting with the one remaining tumbler on the tray.

“What’s all this?” William said to Wulfric, pointing to the rest of the sacks, another twenty-five or thirty piled around the walls.

“Awaiting collection, lord—you see the owner’s mark on the sacks….”

It was true: each sack was marked with a letter or symbol. That might be a trick, of course, but there was no way William could establish the truth. He found it maddening. But it was not his way to accept this kind of situation. “I don’t believe you,” he said. “You’ve been robbing me.”

Wulfric was respectfully insistent, even though his voice was shaking. “I’m honest, lord.”

“There’s never been an honest miller yet.”

“Lord—” Wulfric swallowed hard. “Lord, I’ve never cheated you by so much as a grain of wheat—”

“I’ll bet you’ve been robbing me blind.”

Sweat ran down Wulfric’s face despite the cold weather. He wiped his forehead with his sleeve. “I’m ready to swear by Jesus and the saints—”

“Shut your mouth.”

Wulfric was silent.

William was letting himself get madder and madder but he still had not decided what to do. He wanted to give Wulfric a bad scare, perhaps let Walter beat him up with the chain-mail gloves, possibly take some or all of Wulfric’s

own flour…. Then his eye fell on Maggie, holding the tray with one cup of ale on it, her pretty face rigid with fear, her big young breasts swelling under the floury tunic; and he thought of the perfect punishment for Wulfric. “Grab the wife,” he said to Walter out of the corner of his mouth. To Wulfric he said: “I’m going to teach you a lesson.”

Maggie saw Walter moving toward her but she was too late to escape. As she turned away, Walter grabbed her arm and pulled. The tray fell with a crash and beer spilled on the floor as Maggie was jerked back. Walter twisted her arm behind her back and held her. She was shaking with fear.

Wulfric said: “No, leave her, please!” in a panicky voice.

William gave a satisfied nod. Wulfric was going to see his young wife raped by several men and he would be powerless to save her. Another time he would make sure to have enough grain to satisfy his lord.

William said: “Your wife’s getting plump on bread made from stolen flour, Wulfric, while the rest of us are tightening our belts. Let’s see just how fat she is, shall we?” He nodded to Walter.

Walter grasped the neck of Maggie’s tunic and pulled sharply down. The garment ripped and fell away. Underneath she wore a linen shirt that reached her knees. Her ample breasts rose and fell as she panted with fear. William stood in front of her. Walter twisted her arm harder, so that she arched her back in pain, and her breasts stuck out even more. William looked at Wulfric, then put his hands on her breasts and kneaded them. They were soft and heavy in his hands.

Wulfric took a step forward and said: “You devil—”

“Hold him,” William snapped, and Louis grabbed the miller by both arms and held him still.

William ripped off the girl’s undershirt.

His throat went dry as he stared at her voluptuous white body.

Wulfric said: “No, please—”

William felt his desire rising. “Hold her down,” he said.

Maggie began to scream.

William unbuckled his sword belt and dropped it on the floor as the knights took Maggie by the arms and legs. She had no hope of resisting four strong men, but all the same she kept writhing and screaming. William liked that. Her breasts jiggled as she moved, and her thighs opened and closed, alternately hiding and revealing her sex. The four knights pinned her down on the threshing floor.

William knelt between her legs and lifted the skirt of his tunic. He looked up at her husband. Wulfric was distraught. He was staring in horror and mumbling pleas for mercy which could not be heard over the screaming. William savored the moment: the terrified woman, the knights holding her down, the husband looking on.

Then Wulfric's eyes flickered away.

William sensed danger. Everyone in the room was staring at him and the girl. The only thing that could conceivably divert Wulfric's attention was the possibility of rescue. William turned his head and looked toward the doorway.

At that moment something heavy and hard hit him on the head.

He roared with pain and collapsed on top of the girl. His face banged against hers. Suddenly he could hear men shouting, lots of them. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Walter fall as if he, too, had been clubbed. The knights released their hold on Maggie. William looked at her face and read shock and relief there. She started to wriggle out from under him. He let her go and rolled away fast.

The first thing he saw above him was a wild-looking man with a woodsman's ax, and he thought: For God's sake, who is it? The father of the girl? He saw Guillaume rise and turn, and in the next instant the ax came down hard on Guillaume's unprotected neck, its sharp blade cutting deep into his flesh. Guillaume fell on William, dead. His blood spurted all over William's tunic.

William pushed the corpse off him. When he was able to look up again he saw that the mill had been invaded by a crowd of ragged, wild-haired, unwashed men armed with clubs and axes. There were a lot of them. He realized he was in trouble. Had the villagers come to the rescue of Maggie? How dare they! There would be some hangings in this village before the end of the day. Enraged, he scrambled to his feet and reached for his sword.

He did not have it. He had dropped his belt in order to rape the girl.

Hugh Axe, Ugly Gervase and Louis were fighting fiercely against what looked like a huge mob of beggars. There were several dead peasants on the ground, but nevertheless the three knights were slowly being driven back across the threshing floor. William saw the naked Maggie, still screaming, forcing her way frantically through the melee toward the door, and even in his confusion and fear he felt a spasm of regretful desire for that round white backside. Then he saw that Wulfric was fighting hand to hand with some of the attackers. Why was the miller fighting the men who had rescued his wife? What the devil was going on?

Bewildered, William looked around for his sword belt. It was lying on the floor almost at his feet. He picked it up and drew the sword, then took three steps back to stay clear of the fighting a moment longer. Looking past the fracas, he saw that most of the attackers were not fighting at all—they were picking up sacks of flour and running out with them. William began to understand. This was *not* a rescue operation by outraged villagers. This was a raiding party from outside. They were not interested in Maggie, and they had not known that William and his knights were inside the mill. All they wanted to do was rob the mill and steal William's flour.

It was obvious who the raiders must be: outlaws.

He felt a surge of heat. This was his chance to strike back at the rabid pack who had been terrorizing the county and emptying his barns.

His knights were overwhelmingly outnumbered. There were at least twenty attackers. William was astonished at the courage of the outlaws. Peasants would normally scatter like chickens before a band of knights, whether they outnumbered the knights by two to one or ten to one. But these people fought hard, and were not discouraged when one of their number fell. They seemed ready to die if necessary. Perhaps that was because they were going to die anyway, of starvation, unless they could steal this flour.

Louis was fighting two men at the same time when a third came up behind him and clubbed him with an ironheaded carpenter's hammer. Louis fell down and stayed down. The man dropped the hammer and picked up Louis's sword. Now there were two knights against twenty outlaws. But Walter was recovering from the blow to his head, and he now drew his sword and entered the melee. William raised his weapon and joined in.

The four of them made a formidable fighting team. The outlaws were driven back, desperately parrying the flashing swords with their clubs and axes. William began to think their morale might crack and they might flee in disorder. Then one of them shouted: "The rightful earl!"

It was some kind of rallying cry. Others took it up, and the outlaws fought more fiercely. The repeated cry, "The rightful earl—the rightful earl!," struck a chill into William's heart even as he was fighting for his life. It meant that whoever was commanding this army of outlaws had set his sights on William's title. William fought harder, as if this skirmish might determine the future of the earldom.

Only half the outlaws were actually fighting the knights, William realized. The rest were moving the flour. The combat settled into a steady exchange of thrust and parry, swipe and dodge. Like soldiers who know that the retreat must be sounded soon, the outlaws had begun to fight in a cautious, defensive style.

Behind the fighting outlaws, the others were carrying the last of the flour sacks out of the mill. The outlaws began to retreat, backing through the doorway that led from the threshing floor into the house. William realized that whatever happened now, the outlaws had got away with most of the flour. In no time at all the whole county would know that they had stolen it from under his nose. He was going to be a laughingstock. The thought enraged him so much that he pressed a fierce attack on his opponent and stabbed the man through the heart with a classic thrust.

Then an outlaw caught Hugh with a lucky jab and stabbed his right shoulder, putting him out of action. Now there were two outlaws in the doorway holding off the three surviving knights. That in itself was

humiliating enough; but then, with monumental arrogance, one of the outlaws waved the other away. The man disappeared, and the last outlaw stepped back a pace, into the single room of the miller's house.

Only one of the knights could stand in the doorway and fight the outlaw. William pushed forward, shouldering Walter and Gervase aside: he wanted this man for himself. As then swords clashed, William realized immediately that this man was no dispossessed peasant: he was a hardened fighting man like William himself. For the first time he looked into the outlaw's face; and the shock was so great he almost dropped his sword.

His opponent was Richard of Kingsbridge.

Richard's face blazed with hatred. William could see the scar on his mutilated ear. The force of Richard's rancor frightened William more than his flashing sword. William had thought he had crushed Richard finally, but now Richard was back, at the head of a ragamuffin army that had made a fool of William.

Richard came at William hard, taking advantage of his momentary shock. William sidestepped a thrust, raised his sword, parried a slash and stepped back. Richard pressed forward, but now William was partly shielded by the doorway, which restricted Richard's attack to stabbing strokes. Nevertheless Richard drove William farther back, until William was on the threshing floor of the mill and Richard was in the doorway. Now, however, Walter and Gervase went at Richard. Under pressure from the three of them he retreated again. As soon as he backed through the doorway, Walter and Gervase were squeezed out, and it was William against Richard.

William realized that Richard was in a nasty position. As soon as he gained ground he found himself fighting three men. When William tired he could give place to Walter. It was almost impossible for Richard to hold all three of them off indefinitely. He was fighting a losing battle. Perhaps today would not end in humiliation for William after all. Perhaps he would kill his oldest enemy.

Richard must have been thinking along the same lines and presumably he had come to the same conclusion. However, there was no apparent loss of energy or determination. He looked at William with a savage grin that William found unnerving, and leaped forward with a long thrust. William dodged it and stumbled. Walter lunged forward to defend William from the coup de grâce—but instead of coming on, Richard turned on his heel and fled.

William stood up and Walter bumped into him, while Gervase tried to squeeze past them. It took a moment for the three to disentangle themselves, but in that moment Richard crossed the little room, slipped out and banged the door shut. William went after him and threw the door open. The outlaws were making their escape—and, in a final humiliating stroke, they were riding off on the horses of William's knights. As William burst out of the house he

saw his own mount, a superb war-horse that had cost him a king's ransom, with Richard in the saddle. The horse had obviously been untied and held ready. William was struck by the mortifying thought that this was the second time Richard had stolen his war-horse. Richard kicked its sides, and it reared up—it was not kind to strangers—but Richard was a good horseman and he stayed on. He sawed on the reins and got the horse's head down. In that moment William darted forward and lunged at Richard with his sword; but the horse was bucking, and William missed, sticking the point of his blade into the wood of the saddle. Then the horse took off, bolting down the village street after the other fleeing outlaws.

William watched them go with murder in his heart.

The rightful earl, he thought. The rightful earl.

He turned around. Walter and Gervase stood behind him. Hugh and Louis were wounded, he did not know how badly, and Guillaume was dead, his blood all over the front of William's tunic. William was completely humiliated. He could hardly hold up his head.

Fortunately the village was deserted: the peasants had fled, not waiting to see William's wrath. The miller and his wife had also vanished, of course. The outlaws had taken all the knights' horses, leaving only the two carts and their oxen.

William looked at Walter. "Did you see who that was, that last one?"

"Yes."

Walter was in the habit of using as few words as possible when his master was in a rage.

William said: "It was Richard of Kingsbridge."

Walter nodded.

"And they called him the rightful earl," William finished.

Walter said nothing.

William went back through the house and into the mill.

Hugh was sitting up, his left hand pressed to his right shoulder. He looked pale.

William said: "How does it feel?"

"This is nothing," Hugh said. "Who *were* those people?"

"Outlaws," William said shortly. He looked around. There were seven or eight outlaws lying dead or wounded on the floor. He spotted Louis flat on his back with his eyes open. At first he thought the man was dead; then Louis blinked.

William said: "Louis."

Louis raised his head, but he looked confused. He had not yet recovered.

William said: "Hugh, help Louis into one of the carts. Walter, put Guillaume's body into the other." He left them to it and went outside.

None of the villagers would have horses, but the miller did, a dappled cob

grazing the sparse grass on the riverbank. William found the miller's saddle and put it on the cob.

A little while later he rode away from Cowford with Walter and Gervase driving the ox carts.

His fury did not abate on the journey to Bishop Waleran's castle. In fact, as he brooded over what he had learned he got angrier. It was bad enough that the outlaws had been able to defy him; it was worse that they were led by his old enemy Richard; and it was intolerable that they should call Richard the rightful earl. If they were not put down decisively, very soon Richard would use them to launch a direct attack on William. It would be totally illegal for Richard to take over the earldom that way, of course; but William had a feeling that complaints of illegal attack, coming from him, might not get a sympathetic hearing. The fact that William had been ambushed, overcome by outlaws, and robbed, and that the whole county would shortly be laughing at his humiliation, was not the worst of his problems. Suddenly his hold over his earldom was seriously threatened.

He had to kill Richard, of course. The question was how to find him. He brooded over the problem all the way to the castle; and by the time he arrived he had figured out that Bishop Waleran probably held the key.

They rode into Waleran's castle like a comic procession at a fair, the earl on a dappled cob and his knights driving ox carts. William roared peremptory orders at the bishop's men, sending one to fetch an infirmarer for Hugh and Louis and another to get a priest to pray for the soul of Guillaume. Gervase and Walter went to the kitchen for beer, and William entered the keep and was admitted to Waleran's private quarters. William hated to have to ask Waleran for anything, but he needed Waleran's help in locating Richard.

The bishop was reading an accounts roll, an endless list of numbers. He looked up and saw the rage on William's face. "What happened?" he said, in a tone of mild amusement that always infuriated William.

William gritted his teeth. "I've discovered who is organizing and leading these damned outlaws."

Waleran raised an eyebrow.

"It's Richard of Kingsbridge."

"Ah." Waleran nodded understanding. "Of course. It makes sense."

"It makes danger," William said angrily. He hated it when Waleran was cool and reflective about things. "They call him 'the rightful earl.'" He pointed a finger at Waleran. "You certainly don't want that family back in charge of this earldom—they hate you, and they're friends with Prior Philip, your old enemy."

"All right, calm down," Waleran said condescendingly. "You're quite right, I can't have Richard of Kingsbridge taking over the earldom."

William sat down. His body was beginning to ache. These days he felt the

aftereffects of a fight in a way he never used to. He had strained muscles, sore hands, and bruises where he had been struck or had fallen. I'm only thirty-seven, he thought; is this when old age begins? He said: "I have to kill Richard. Once he's gone, the outlaws will degenerate into a helpless rabble."

"I agree."

"Killing him will be easy. The problem is finding him. But you can help me with that."

Waleran rubbed his sharp nose with his thumb. "I don't see how."

"Listen. If they're organized, they must *be* somewhere."

"I don't know what you mean. They're in the forest."

"You can't find outlaws in the forest, normally, because they're scattered all over the place. Most of them don't spend two nights running in the same spot. They make a fire anywhere, and sleep in trees. But if you want to organize such people, you have to gather them all together in one place. You have to have a permanent hideout."

"So we have to discover the location of Richard's hideout."

"Exactly."

"How do you propose to do that?"

"That's where you come in."

Waleran looked skeptical.

William said: "I bet half the people in Kingsbridge know where it is."

"But they won't tell us. Everyone in Kingsbridge hates you and me."

"Not everyone," said William. "Not quite."

Sally thought Christmas was wonderful.

The special Christmas food was mostly sweet: gingerbread dolls; frumenty, made with wheat and eggs and honey; perry, the sweet pear wine that made her giggly; and Christmas umbles, tripes boiled for hours, then baked in a sweet pie. There was less of it this year, because of the famine, but Sally enjoyed it just as much.

She liked decorating the house with holly and hanging up the kissing-bush, although the kissing made her giggle even more than the pear wine. The first man across the threshold brought luck, as long as he was black-haired: Sally's father had to stay indoors all Christmas morning, for his red hair would bring people bad luck. She loved the Nativity play in the church. She liked to see the monks dressed up as Eastern kings and angels and shepherds, and she laughed fit to bust when all the false idols fell down as the Holy Family arrived in Egypt.

But best of all was the boy bishop. On the third day of Christmas, the monks dressed the youngest novice in bishop's robes, and everyone had to obey him.

Most of the townspeople waited in the priory close for the boy bishop to come out. Inevitably he would order the older and more dignified citizens to do menial tasks such as fetching firewood and mucking out pigsties. He also put on exaggerated airs and graces and insulted those in authority. Last year he had made the sacrist pluck a chicken: the result was hilarious, for the sacrist had no idea what to do and there were feathers everywhere.

He emerged in great solemnity, a boy of about twelve years with a mischievous grin, dressed in a purple silk robe and carrying a wooden crozier, and riding on the shoulders of two monks, with the rest of the monastery following. Everyone clapped and cheered. The first thing he did was to point to Prior Philip and say: “You, lad! Get over to the stable and groom the donkey!”

Everyone roared with laughter. The old donkey was notoriously bad-tempered and was never brushed. Prior Philip said: “Yes, my lord bishop,” with a good-natured grin, and went off to do his task.

“Forward!” the boy bishop commanded. The procession moved out of the priory close, with the townspeople following. Some people hid away and locked their doors, for fear that they would be picked on to perform some unpleasant task; but then they missed the fun. All Sally’s family had come: her mother and father, her brother, Tommy, Aunt Martha, and even Uncle Richard, who had returned home unexpectedly last night.

The boy bishop led them first to the alehouse, as was traditional. There he demanded free beer for himself and all the novices. The brewer handed it over with good grace.

Sally found herself sitting on a bench next to Brother Remigius, one of the older monks. He was a tall, unfriendly man and she had never spoken to him before, but now he smiled at her and said: “It’s nice that your Uncle Richard came home at Christmas.”

Sally said: “He gave me a wooden pussycat that he carved himself with his knife.”

“That’s nice. Will he stay long, do you think?”

Sally frowned. “I don’t know.”

“I expect he has to go back soon.”

“Yes. He lives in the forest now.”

“Do you know where?”

“Yes. It’s called Sally’s Quarry. That’s my name!” She laughed.

“So it is,” said Brother Remigius. “How interesting.”

When they had drunk, the boy bishop said: “And now—Andrew Sacrist and Brother Remigius will do the Widow Poll’s washing.”

Sally squealed with laughter and clapped her hands. Widow Poll was a rotund, red-faced woman who took in laundry. The fastidious monks would hate the job of washing the smelly undershirts and stockings that people

changed every six months.

The crowd left the alehouse and carried the boy bishop in procession to Poll's one-room house down by the quay. Poll had a laughing fit and turned even redder when they told her who was going to do her laundry.

Andrew and Remigius carried a heavy basket of dirty clothing from the house to the riverbank. Andrew opened the basket and Remigius, with an expression of utter distaste on his face, pulled out the first garment. A young woman called out saucily: "Careful with that one, Brother Remigius, it's my chemise!" Remigius flushed and everyone laughed. The two middle-aged monks put a brave face on it and began to wash the clothes in the river water, with the townspeople calling advice and encouragement. Andrew was thoroughly fed up, Sally could see, but Remigius had a strangely contented look on his face.

A huge iron ball hung by a chain from a wooden scaffold, like a hangman's noose dangling from a gallows. There was also a rope tied to the ball. This rope ran over a pulley on the upright post of the scaffold and hung down to the ground, where two laborers held it. When the laborers hauled on the rope, the ball was pulled up and back until it touched the pulley, and the chain lay horizontally along the arm of the scaffold.

Most of the population of Shiring was watching.

The men let go of the rope. The iron ball dropped and swung, smashing into the wall of the church. There was a terrific thud, the wall shuddered, and William felt the impact in the ground beneath his feet. He thought how he would like to have Richard clamped to the wall in just the place where the ball would hit. He would be squashed like a fly.

The laborers hauled on the rope again. William realized he was holding his breath as the iron ball stopped at the top of its travel. The men let go; the ball swung; and this time it tore a hole in the stone wall. The crowd applauded.

It was an ingenious mechanism.

William was happy to see work progressing on the site where he would build the new church, but he had more urgent matters on his mind today. He looked around for Bishop Waleran, and spotted him standing with Alfred Builder. William approached them and drew the bishop aside. "Is the man here yet?"

"He may be," said Waleran. "Come to my house."

They crossed the market square. Waleran said: "Have you brought your troops?"

"Of course. Two hundred of them. They're waiting in the woods just outside town."

They went into the house. William smelled boiled ham and his mouth watered, despite his urgent haste. Most people were being sparing with food at the moment, but with Waleran it seemed to be a matter of principle not to let the famine change his way of life. The bishop never ate much, but he liked everyone to know that he was far too rich and powerful to be affected by mere harvests.

Waleran's place was a typical narrow-fronted town house, with a hall at the front and a kitchen behind, and a yard at the back with a cesspit, a beehive and a pigsty. William was relieved to see a monk waiting in the hall.

Waleran said: "Good day, Brother Remigius."

Remigius said: "Good day, my lord bishop. Good day, Lord William."

William looked eagerly at the monk. He was a nervous man with an arrogant face and prominent blue eyes. His face was vaguely familiar, as one among many tonsured heads at services in Kingsbridge. William had been hearing about him for years, as Waleran's spy in Prior Philip's camp, but this was the first time he had spoken to the man. "Have you got some information for me?" he said.

"Possibly," Remigius replied.

Waleran threw off his fur-trimmed cloak and went to the fire to warm his hands. A servant brought hot elderberry wine in silver goblets. William took some and drank it, waiting impatiently for the servant to leave.

Waleran sipped his wine and gave Remigius a hard look. As the servant went out Waleran said to the monk: "What excuse did you give for leaving the priory?"

"None," Remigius replied.

Waleran raised an eyebrow.

"I'm not going back," Remigius said defiantly.

"How so?"

Remigius took a deep breath. "You're building a cathedral here."

"It's just a church."

"It's going to be very big. You're planning to make this the cathedral church, eventually."

Waleran hesitated, then said: "Suppose, for the sake of argument, that you're right."

"The cathedral will have to be run by a chapter, either of monks or of canons."

"So?"

"I want to be prior."

That made sense, William thought.

Waleran said tartly: "And you're so confident of getting the job that you've left Kingsbridge without Philip's permission and with no excuse."

Remigius looked uncomfortable. William sympathized with him: Waleran

in a scornful mood was enough to make anyone fidget. “I hope I’m not overconfident,” Remigius said.

“Presumably you can lead us to Richard.”

“Yes.”

William interrupted excitedly: “Good man! Where is he?”

Remigius remained silent and looked at Waleran.

William said: “Come on, Waleran, give him the job, for God’s sake!”

Still Waleran hesitated. William knew he hated to feel coerced. At last Waleran said: “All right. You shall be prior.”

William said: “Now, where’s Richard?”

Remigius continued to look at Waleran. “From today?”

“From today.”

Remigius now turned to William. “A monastery isn’t just a church and a dormitory. It needs lands, farms, churches paying tithes.”

“Tell me where Richard is, and I’ll give you five villages with their parish churches, just to start you off,” William said.

“The foundation will need a proper charter.”

Waleran said: “You shall have it, never fear.”

William said: “Come on, man, I’ve got an army waiting outside town. Where’s Richard’s hideout?”

“It’s a place called Sally’s Quarry, just off the Winchester road.”

“I know it!” William had to restrain himself from giving a whoop of triumph. “It’s a disused quarry. Nobody goes there anymore.”

“I remember,” said Waleran. “It hasn’t been worked for years. It’s a good hideout—you wouldn’t know it was there unless you actually walked into it.”

“But it’s also a trap,” William said with savage glee. “The worked-out walls are sheer on three sides. Nobody will escape. I won’t be taking any prisoners, either.” His excitement rose as he pictured the scene. “I’ll slaughter them all. It will be like killing chickens in a hen house.”

The two men of God were looking at him oddly. “Feeling a little squeamish, Brother Remigius?” William said scornfully. “Does the thought of a massacre turn the stomach of my lord bishop?” He was right both times, he could tell by their faces. They were great schemers, these religious men, but when it came to bloodshed they still had to rely on men of action. “I know you’ll be praying for me,” he said sarcastically; and he left.

His horse was tied up outside, a black stallion that had replaced—but did not equal—the war-horse Richard had stolen. He mounted and rode out of town. He suppressed his excitement and tried to think coolly about tactics.

He wondered how many outlaws would be at Sally’s Quarry. They had mounted raids with more than a hundred men at a time. There would be at least two hundred of them, perhaps as many as five hundred. William’s force could be outnumbered, so he would need to make the most of his advantages.

One was surprise. Another was weaponry: most of the outlaws had clubs, hammers or at best axes, and none had armor. But the most important advantage was that William's men were on horseback. The outlaws had few horses and it was not likely that many of them would be saddled ready just at the moment William attacked. To give himself a further edge he decided to send a few bowmen up the sides of the hill to shoot down into the quarry for a few moments before the main assault.

The most important thing was to prevent any of the outlaws from escaping, at least until he was sure that Richard was captured or dead. He decided to assign a handful of trustworthy men to hang back behind the main assault and sweep up any wily ones who tried to slip out.

Walter was waiting with the knights and men-at-arms where William had left them a couple of hours earlier. They were eager and morale was high: they anticipated an easy victory. A short while later they were trotting along the Winchester road.

Walter rode alongside William, not speaking. One of Walter's greatest assets was his ability to remain silent. William found that most people talked to him constantly, even when there was nothing to say, probably out of nervousness. Walter respected William, but was not nervous of him: they had been together too long.

William felt a familiar mixture of eager anticipation and mortal fear. This was the one thing in the world he did well, and every time he did it he risked his life. But this raid was special. Today he had a chance to destroy the man who had been a thorn in his flesh for fifteen years.

Toward noon they stopped in a village large enough to have an alehouse. William bought the men bread and beer and they watered the horses. Before moving on he briefed the men.

A few miles farther on they turned off the Winchester road. The path they took was barely visible, and William would not have noticed it had he not been looking for it. Once on it, he could follow it by observing the vegetation: there was a strip four or five yards wide with no mature trees.

He sent the archers on ahead and, to give them a start, he slowed the rest of the men for a few moments. It was a clear January day, and the leafless trees hardly dimmed the cold sunlight. William had not been to the quarry for many years and he was now not sure how far away it might be. However, once they were a mile or so from the road he began to see signs that the track was in use: trampled vegetation, broken saplings and churned mud. He was glad to have confirmation of Remigius's report.

He felt as taut as a bowstring. The signs became much more obvious: heavily trampled grass, horse droppings, human refuse. This far into the forest the outlaws had made no attempt to conceal their presence. There was no longer any doubt. The outlaws were here. The battle was about to begin.

The hideout must be very close. William strained his hearing. At any moment his bowmen would begin the attack, and there would be shouts and curses, screams of agony, and the neighing of terrified horses.

The track led into a wide clearing, and William saw, a couple of hundred yards ahead, the entrance to Sally's Quarry. There was no noise. Something was wrong. His bowmen were not shooting. William felt a shiver of apprehension. What had happened? Could his bowmen have been ambushed and silently dispatched by sentries? Not all of them, surely.

But there was no time to ponder: he was almost on top of the outlaws. He spurred his horse into a gallop. His men followed suit, and they thundered toward the hideout. William's fear evaporated in the exhilaration of the charge.

The way into the quarry was like a small twisted ravine, and William could not see inside as he approached. Glancing up, he saw some of his archers standing on top of the bluff, looking in. Why were they not shooting? He had a premonition of disaster, and he would have stopped and turned around, except that the charging horses could not now be stopped. With his sword in his right hand, holding the reins with his left, his shield hanging from his neck, he galloped into the disused quarry.

There was nobody there.

The anticlimax hit him like a blow. He was almost ready to burst into tears. All the signs had been there: he had felt so sure. Now frustration gripped his guts like a pain.

As the horses slowed, he saw that this had been the outlaws hideout not long ago. There were makeshift shelters of branches and reeds, the remains of cooking fires, and a dunghill. A corner of the area had been fenced with a few sticks and used to corral the horses. Here and there William saw the litter of human occupation: chicken bones, empty sacks, a worn-out shoe, a broken pot. One of the fires appeared to be smoking. He had a sudden surge of hope: perhaps they had only just left, and could still be caught! Then he saw a single figure squatting on the ground by the fire. He approached it. The figure stood up. It was a woman.

"Well, well, William Hamleigh," she said. "Too late, as usual."

"Insolent cow, I'll tear out your tongue for that," he said.

"You won't touch me," she replied calmly. "I've cursed better men than you." She put her hand to her face in a three-fingered gesture, like a witch. The knights shrank back, and William crossed himself protectively. The woman looked at him fearlessly with a pair of startling golden eyes. "Don't you know me, William?" she said. "You once tried to buy me for a pound." She laughed. "Lucky for you that you didn't succeed."

William remembered those eyes. This was the widow of Tom Builder, the mother of Jack Jackson, the witch who lived in the forest. He was indeed glad

he had not succeeded in buying her. He wanted to get away from her as fast as he could, but he had to question her first. “All right, witch,” he said. “Was Richard of Kingsbridge here?”

“Until two days ago.”

“And where did he go, can you tell me that?”

“Oh, yes, I can,” she said. “He and his outlaws have gone to fight for Henry.”

“Henry?” William said. He had a dreadful feeling that he knew which Henry she meant. “The son of Maud?”

“That’s right,” she said.

William went cold. The energetic young duke of Normandy might succeed where his mother had failed—and if Stephen was defeated now, William might fall with him. “What’s happened?” he said urgently. “What has Henry done?”

“He’s crossed the water with thirty-six ships and landed at Wareham,” the witch replied. “He’s brought an army of three thousand men, they say. We’ve been invaded.”

III

Winchester was crowded, tense and dangerous. Both armies were here: King Stephen's royal forces were garrisoned in the castle, and Duke Henry's rebels—including Richard and his outlaws—were camped outside the city walls, on Saint Giles's Hill where the annual fair was held. The soldiers of both sides were banned from the town itself, but many of them defied the ban, and spent their evenings in the alehouses, cockpits and brothels, where they got drunk and abused women and fought and killed one another over games of dice and nine-men's morris.

All the fight had gone out of Stephen in the summer when his elder son died. Now Stephen was in the royal castle and Duke Henry was staying at the bishop's palace, and peace talks were being conducted by their representatives, Archbishop Theobald of Canterbury speaking for the king, and the old power-broker Bishop Henry of Winchester for Duke Henry. Every morning, Archbishop Theobald and Bishop Henry would confer at the bishop's palace. At noon Duke Henry would walk through the streets of Winchester, with his lieutenants—including Richard—in train, and go to the castle for dinner.

The first time Aliena saw Duke Henry she could not believe that this was the man who ruled an empire the size of England. He was only about twenty years old, with the tanned, freckled complexion of a peasant. He was dressed in a plain dark tunic with no embroidery, and his reddish hair was cut short. He looked like the hardworking son of a prosperous yeoman. However, after a while she realized that he had some kind of aura of power. He was stocky and muscular, with broad shoulders and a large head; but the impression of crude physical strength was modified by keen, watchful gray eyes; and the people around him never got too close to him, but treated him with wary familiarity, as if they were afraid he might lash out at any moment.

Aliena thought the dinners at the castle must have been unpleasantly tense, with the leaders of opposing armies around the same table. She wondered how Richard could bear to sit down with Earl William. She would have taken the carving knife to William instead of to the venison. She herself saw William only from a distance, and briefly. He looked anxious and bad-tempered, which was a good sign.

While the earls and bishops and abbots met in the keep, the lesser nobility gathered in the castle courtyard: the knights and sheriffs, minor barons, justiciars and castellans; people who could not stay away from the capital city

while their future and the future of the kingdom were being decided. Aliena met Prior Philip there most mornings. Every day there were a dozen different rumors. One day all the earls who supported Stephen were to be degraded (which would mean the end of William); next day, all of them were to retain their positions, which would dash Richard's hopes. All Stephen's castles were to be pulled down, then all the rebels' castles, then everyone's castles, then none. One rumor said that every one of Henry's supporters would get a knighthood and a hundred acres. Richard did not want that, he wanted the earldom.

Richard had no idea which rumors were true, if any. Although he was one of Henry's trusted battlefield lieutenants, he was not consulted about the details of political negotiations. Philip, however, seemed to know what was going on. He would not say where he was getting his information, but Aliena recalled that he had a brother, who had visited Kingsbridge now and again, and who had worked for Robert of Gloucester and the Empress Maud: now perhaps he worked for Duke Henry.

Philip reported that the negotiators were close to agreement. The deal was that Stephen would continue as king until he died, but Henry would be his successor. This made Aliena anxious. Stephen could live for another ten years. What would happen in the interim? Stephen's earls would surely not be deposed while he continued to rule. So how would Henry's supporters—such as Richard—gain their rewards? Would they be expected to wait?

Philip learned the answer late one afternoon, when they had all been in Winchester a week. He sent a novice messenger to bring Aliena and Richard to him. As they walked through the busy streets to the cathedral close, Richard was full of savage eagerness, but Aliena was possessed by trepidation.

Philip was waiting for them in the graveyard, and they talked among the tombstones as the sun went down. "They've reached agreement," Philip said without preamble. "But it's a bit of a muddle."

Aliena could not bear the tension. "Will Richard be earl?" she said urgently.

Philip rocked his hand from side to side in the gesture that meant maybe yes, maybe no. "It's complicated. They've made a compromise. Lands that have been taken away by usurpers shall be restored to the people who owned them in the time of old King Henry."

"That's all I need!" Richard said immediately. "My father was earl in King Henry's time."

"Shut up, Richard," Aliena snapped. She turned to Philip. "So what's the complication?"

Philip said: "There's nothing in the agreement that says Stephen has to enforce it. There probably won't be any changes until he dies and Henry

becomes king.”

Richard was crestfallen. “But that cancels it out!”

“Not quite,” Philip said. “It means that you are the rightful earl.”

“But I have to live as an outlaw until Stephen dies—while that animal William occupies my castle,” Richard said angrily.

“Not so loud,” Philip protested as a priest walked by. “All this is still secret.”

Aliena was seething. “I don’t accept this,” she said. “I’m not prepared to wait for Stephen to die. I’ve been waiting seventeen years and I’ve had enough.”

Philip said: “But what can you do?”

Aliena addressed Richard. “Most of the country acclaims you as the rightful earl. Stephen and Henry have now acknowledged that you are the rightful earl. You should seize the castle and *rule* as the rightful earl.”

“I can’t seize the castle. William is sure to have left it guarded.”

“You’ve got an army, haven’t you?” she said, becoming carried away by the force of her own anger and frustration. “You’ve got the right to the castle and you’ve got the power to take it.”

Richard shook his head. “In fifteen years of civil war, do you know how many times I’ve seen a castle taken by frontal attack? None.” As always, he seemed to gain authority and maturity as soon as he began to talk about military matters. “It almost never happens. A town, sometimes, but not a castle. They may surrender after a siege, or be relieved by reinforcements; and I’ve seen them taken through cowardice or trickery or treachery; but not by main force.”

Aliena was still not ready to accept this. It seemed to her a counsel of despair. She could not resign herself to more years of waiting and hoping. She said: “So what would happen if you took your army to William’s castle?”

“They would raise the drawbridge and close the gates before we could get inside. We would camp outside. Then William would come to the rescue with his army and attack our camp. But even if we beat him off, we still wouldn’t have the castle. Castles are hard to attack and easy to defend—that’s the point of them.”

As he spoke, the seed of an idea was germinating in Aliena’s agitated mind. “Cowardice, trickery or treachery,” she said.

“What?”

“You’ve seen castles taken by cowardice, trickery or treachery.”

“Oh. Yes.”

“Which did William use, when he took the castle from us, all those years ago?”

Philip interrupted: “Times were different. The country had had peace, under the old King Henry, for thirty-five years. William took your father by

surprise.”

Richard said: “He used trickery. He got inside the castle surreptitiously, with a few men, before the alarm was raised. But Prior Philip is right: you couldn’t get away with that nowadays. People are much more wary.”

“I could get in,” Aliena said confidently, although as she spoke the words her heart raced with fear.

“Of course you could—you’re a woman,” Richard said. “But you couldn’t do anything once you were inside. That’s how come they’d let you in. You’re harmless.”

“Don’t be so damned arrogant,” she flared. “I’ve killed to protect you, and that’s more than you’ve ever done for me, you ungrateful pig, so don’t you dare call me harmless.”

“All right, you’re not harmless,” he said angrily. “What would you do, once inside the castle?”

Aliena’s anger evaporated. What would I do? she thought fearfully. To hell with it, I’ve got at least as much courage and resourcefulness as that pig William. “What did William do?”

“Kept the drawbridge down and the gate open long enough for the main attacking force to get inside.”

“Then that’s what I’ll do,” Aliena said with her heart in her mouth.

“But how?” Richard said skeptically.

Aliena remembered giving comfort to a fourteen-year-old girl who was frightened of a storm. “The countess owes me a favor,” she said. “And she hates her husband.”

They rode through the night, Aliena and Richard and fifty of his best men, and reached the vicinity of Earlscastle at dawn. They halted in the forest across the fields from the castle. Aliena dismounted, took off her cloak of Flanders wool and her soft leather boots, and put on a coarse peasant blanket and a pair of clogs. One of the men handed her a basket of fresh eggs packed in straw, which she slung over her arm.

Richard looked her up and down and said: “Perfect. A peasant girl bringing produce for the castle kitchen.”

Aliena swallowed hard. Yesterday she had been full of fire and boldness, but now that she was about to carry out her plan she was scared.

Richard kissed her cheek. He said: “When I hear the bell, I’ll say the Paternoster slowly once, then the advance party will start out. All you have to do is lull the guards into a false sense of security, so that ten of my men can get across the fields and into the castle without causing alarm.”

Aliena nodded. “Just make sure the main group doesn’t break cover until the advance party is across the drawbridge.”

He smiled. “I’ll be leading the main group. Don’t worry. Good luck.”

“You too.”

She walked away.

She emerged from the woodland and set out across the open fields toward the castle she had left on that awful day sixteen years ago. Seeing the place again, she had a vivid, terrifying memory of that other morning, the air damp after the storm, and the two horses charging out of the gate across the rain-sodden fields; Richard on the war-horse and she on the smaller mount, both mortally afraid. She had been denying what had happened, deliberately forgetting, chanting to herself in time with the horse’s hoofbeats: “I can’t *remember* I can’t *remember* I *can’t* I *can’t* I *can’t*.” It had worked: for a long time afterward she had been unable to recall the rape, remembering that something terrible had happened but never recollecting the details. Not until she fell in love with Jack had it come back to her; and then the memory had so terrified her that she had been unable to respond to his love. Thank God he had been so patient. That was how she knew his love was strong; because he had put up with so much and still loved her.

As she came closer to the castle she conjured up some good memories, to calm her nerves. She had lived here as a child, with her father and Richard. They had been wealthy and secure. She had played on the castle ramparts with Richard, hung around in the kitchen and scrounged bits of sweet pastry, and sat beside her father at dinner in the great hall. I didn’t know I was happy, she thought. I had no idea how fortunate I was to have nothing to be afraid of.

Those good times will begin again today, she said to herself, if only I can do this right.

She had confidently said *The countess owes me a favor, and she hates her husband*, but as they rode through the night she had thought of all the things that could go wrong. First, she might not get into the castle at all: something might have happened to put the garrison on the alert, the guards might be suspicious, or she might just be unlucky enough to come across an obstructive sentry. Second, when she was inside she might not be able to persuade Elizabeth to betray her husband. It was a year and a half since Aliena had met Elizabeth in the storm: women could get used to the most vicious men, in time, and Elizabeth might be reconciled to her fate by now. Third, even if Elizabeth was willing, she might not have the authority or the nerve to do what Aliena wanted. She had been a frightened little girl last time they met, and it could be that the castle guard would refuse to obey her.

Aliena felt unnaturally alert as she crossed the drawbridge: she could see and hear everything with abnormal clarity. The garrison was just waking up. A few bleary-eyed guards were lounging on the ramparts, yawning and coughing, and an old dog sat in the gateway scratching itself. She pulled her hood forward to hide her face, in case anyone should recognize her, and

passed under the arch.

There was a slovenly sentry on duty at the gatehouse, sitting on a bench eating a huge hunk of bread. His clothing was disarrayed and his sword belt was hanging from a hook at the back of the room. With her heart in her mouth, and a smile that belied her fear, Aliena showed him her basket of eggs.

He waved her in with an impatient gesture.

She had passed the first obstacle.

Discipline was slack. It was understandable: this was a token force, left behind while the best men went to war. All the excitement was elsewhere.

Until today.

So far, so good. Aliena crossed the lower courtyard with her nerves on edge. It was very odd to be a stranger walking into the place that had been her home, to be an infiltrator where once she had had the right to go anywhere she pleased. She looked around, careful not to be too blatantly curious. Most of the wooden buildings had changed: the stables were bigger, the kitchen had been moved and there was a new stone-built armory. The place seemed dirtier than it used to be. But the chapel was still there, the chapel where she and Richard had sat out that awful storm, shocked and numb and freezing cold. A handful of castle servants were beginning their morning chores. One or two men-at-arms moved about the compound. They looked menacing, but perhaps that was because she was aware that they would have killed her if they had known what she was going to do.

If her plan worked, by tonight she would once again be mistress of this castle. The thought was thrilling but unreal, like a marvelous, impossible dream.

She went into the kitchen. A boy was stoking the fire and a young girl was slicing carrots. Aliena smiled brightly at them and said: “Twenty-four fresh eggs.” She put her basket on the table.

The boy said: “Cook’s not up yet. You’ll have to wait for your money.”

“Can I get a bite of bread for my breakfast?”

“In the great hall.”

“Thank you.” She left her basket and went out again.

She crossed the second drawbridge to the upper compound. She smiled at the guard in the second gateway. He had uncombed hair and bloodshot eyes. He looked her up and down and said: “And where are you going?” His voice was playfully challenging.

“To get some breakfast,” she said without stopping.

He leered. “I’ve got something for you to eat,” he called after her.

“I might bite it off, though,” she said over her shoulder.

They did not suspect her for a moment. It did not occur to them that a woman could be dangerous. How foolish they were. Women could do most of

the things men did. Who was left in charge when the men were fighting wars, or going on crusades? There were women carpenters, dyers, tanners, bakers and brewers. Aliena herself was one of the most important merchants in the county. The duties of an abbess, running a nunnery, were exactly the same as those of an abbot. Why, it had been a woman, the Empress Maud, who caused the civil war that had gone on for fifteen years! Yet these wooden-headed men-at-arms did not expect a woman to be an enemy agent because it was not the normal thing.

She ran up the steps of the keep and entered the hall. There was no steward at the door. That was presumably because the master was away. In future I will make sure there is always a steward at the door, Aliena thought, whether the master is at home or not.

Fifteen or twenty people were eating breakfast around a small table. One or two of them glanced up at her, but nobody took any notice. The hall was quite clean, she observed, and there were one or two feminine touches: freshly whitewashed walls, and sweet-smelling herbs mixed with the rushes on the floor. Elizabeth had made her mark in a small way. That was a hopeful sign.

Without speaking to the people around the table, Aliena walked across the hall to the staircase in the corner, trying to look as if she had every right to be there, but expecting at any moment to be stopped. She got to the foot of the stairs without attracting attention. Then, as she ran up toward the private apartments on the top floor, she heard someone say: “You can’t go up there—hey, you!” She ignored the voice. She heard someone come after her.

She reached the top, panting. Would Elizabeth sleep in the main bedroom, the one Aliena’s father had occupied? Or would she have a bed of her own in the room that had been Aliena’s? She hesitated for an instant, her heart pounding. She guessed that by now William had tired of having Elizabeth sleep with him every night, and probably allowed her a room of her own. Aliena knocked at the smaller room and opened the door.

She had been right. Elizabeth was sitting by the fire, wearing a nightshirt, brushing her hair. She looked up, frowned, and then recognized Aliena. “It’s you!” she said. “What a surprise!” She seemed pleased.

Aliena heard heavy footsteps on the stairs behind her. “May I come in?” she said.

“Of course—and welcome!”

Aliena stepped inside and closed the door quickly. She crossed the room to where Elizabeth sat. A man burst in, saying, “Hey, you, who do you think you are?” and came after Aliena as if to seize her.

“Stay where you are!” she said in her most commanding voice. He hesitated. She said: “I come to see the countess, with a message from Earl William, and you would have learned that earlier if you had been guarding the

door instead of stuffing your face with horsebread.”

He looked guilty.

Elizabeth said: “It’s all right, Edgar, I know this lady.”

“Very well, countess,” he said. He went out and closed the door.

I made it, Aliena thought. I got in.

She looked around while her heartbeat returned to normal. The room was not very different from when it had been hers. There were dried petals in a bowl, a pretty tapestry on the wall, some books, and a trunk for clothes. The bed was in the same place—in fact it was the same bed—and on the pillow was a rag doll just like the one Aliena had had. It made her feel old.

“This used to be my room,” she said.

“I know,” said Elizabeth.

Aliena was surprised. She had not told Elizabeth about her past.

“I’ve found out all about you since that terrible storm,” Elizabeth explained. She added: “I admire you so much.” She had the gleam of hero-worship in her eyes.

That was a good sign.

“And William?” Aliena said. “Are you any happier, living with him?”

Elizabeth looked away. “Well,” she said, “I have my own room now, and he’s been away a lot. In fact everything’s much better.” Then she began to cry.

Aliena sat on the bed and put her arms around the girl. Elizabeth cried with deep, wrenching sobs, and tears flooded down her cheeks. In between sobs she gasped: “I—hate—him! I—wish—I—could—die!”

Her anguish was so pitiful, and she was so young, that Aliena was close to tears herself. She was painfully aware that Elizabeth’s fate could easily have been her own. She patted Elizabeth’s back as she would have done with Sally.

Eventually Elizabeth became calmer. She wiped her wet face with the sleeve of her nightshirt. “I’m so afraid of having a baby,” she said miserably. “I’m terrified because I know how he would mistreat the child.”

“I understand,” Aliena said. She had once been terrified by the thought that she might be pregnant with William’s child.

Elizabeth looked at her wide-eyed. “Is it true what they say, about…what he did to you?”

“Yes, it’s true. I was your age when it happened.”

For a moment they looked into one another’s eyes, brought close by a shared loathing. Suddenly Elizabeth did not look like a child anymore.

Aliena said: “You could get free of him, if you want. Today.”

Elizabeth stared at her. “Is it true?” she said with pitiable eagerness. “Is it true?”

Aliena nodded. “That’s why I’m here.”

“I could go home?” Elizabeth said, her eyes filling with fresh tears. “I could go home to Weymouth, to my mother? *Today?*”

“Yes. But you’ll have to be brave.”

“I’ll do anything,” she said. “Anything! Just tell me.”

Aliena remembered explaining how she could acquire authority with her husband’s employees, and she wondered whether Elizabeth had been able to put the principles into practice. “Do the servants still push you around?” she asked candidly.

“They try.”

“But you don’t let them.”

She looked embarrassed. “Well, sometimes I do. But I’m sixteen now, and I’ve been countess for nearly two years…and I’ve been trying to follow your advice, and it really works!”

“Let me explain,” Aliena began. “King Stephen has made a pact with Duke Henry. All lands are to be returned to the people who held them in the time of the old King Henry. That means my brother Richard will become earl of Shiring—sometime. But he wants it now.”

Elizabeth was wide-eyed. “Is Richard going to make war on William?”

“Richard is very close right now, with a small company of men. If he can take over the castle today, he will be recognized as earl, and William will be finished.”

“I can’t believe it,” Elizabeth said. “I can’t believe it’s really true.” Her sudden optimism was even more heartrending than her abject misery had been.

“All you have to do is let Richard in peacefully,” Aliena said. “Then, when it’s all over, we’ll take you home.”

Elizabeth looked fearful again. “I’m not sure the men will do what I say.”

That was Aliena’s worry. “Who is the captain of the guard?”

“Michael Armstrong. I don’t like him.”

“Send for him.”

“Right.” Elizabeth wiped her nose, stood up, and went to the door. “Madge!” she called out in a piercing voice. Aliena heard a distant reply. “Go and fetch Michael. Tell him to come here right away—I want to see him urgently. Hurry, please.”

She came back in and began to dress quickly, throwing a tunic over her nightdress and lacing up her boots. Aliena briefed her rapidly. “Tell Michael to ring the big bell to summon everyone to the courtyard. Say you’ve received a message from Earl William and you want to speak to the entire garrison, men-at-arms and servants and everyone. You want three or four men to stand guard while everyone else gathers in the lower courtyard. Also tell him you’re expecting a group of ten or twelve horsemen to arrive at any moment with a further message, and they must be brought to you as soon as they arrive.”

“I hope I can remember it all,” Elizabeth said nervously.

“Don’t worry—if you forget, I’ll prompt you.”

“That makes me feel better.”

“What’s Michael Armstrong like?”

“Smelly and surly and built like an ox.”

“Intelligent?”

“No.”

“So much the better.”

A moment later the man came in. He had a grumpy expression, a short neck and massive shoulders, and he brought with him the odor of the pigsty. He looked inquiringly at Elizabeth, giving the impression that he resented being disturbed.

“I’ve received a message from the earl,” Elizabeth began.

Michael held out his hand.

Aliena was horrified to realize that she had not taken the precaution of providing Elizabeth with a letter. The whole deception could collapse right at the outset because of a silly mistake. Elizabeth threw her a despairing look. Aliena cast about frantically for something to say. Finally she was inspired. “Can you read, Michael?”

He looked resentful. “The priest will read it to me.”

“Your lady can read.”

Elizabeth looked scared, but she said: “I shall give the message to the whole garrison myself, Michael. Ring the bell and get everyone assembled in the courtyard. But make sure to leave three or four men on guard on the ramparts.”

As Aliena had feared, Michael did not like Elizabeth taking command like this. He looked rebellious. “Why not let me address them?”

Aliena realized anxiously that she might not be able to persuade this man: he could be too stupid to listen to reason. She said: “I have brought the countess momentous news from Winchester. She wants to tell her people herself.”

“Well, what *is* the news?” he said.

Aliena said nothing and looked at Elizabeth. Once again Elizabeth looked scared. However, Aliena had not told her what was supposed to be in the fictitious message, so Elizabeth could not possibly accede to Michael’s request. In the end she simply went on as if Michael had not spoken. “Tell the guards to look out for a group of ten or twelve horsemen. Their leader will have fresh news from Earl William, and he must be brought to me immediately. Now ring the bell.”

Michael was clearly disposed to argue. He stood still, frowning, while Aliena held her breath. “More messengers,” he said, as if it were something very difficult to understand. “This lady with one message, and twelve horsemen with another.”

“Yes—now would you please go and ring the bell?” Elizabeth said.

Aliena could hear the quaver in her voice.

Michael looked defeated. He could not understand what was happening, but he saw nothing to object to either. Finally he said a grudging “Very well, lady,” and went out.

Aliena breathed again.

Elizabeth said: “What’s going to happen?”

“When they’re gathered in the courtyard, you’ll tell them about the peace between King Stephen and Duke Henry,” Aliena said. “That will distract everyone. While you’re speaking, Richard will send out an advance party of ten men. However, the guards will think they are the messengers we are expecting from Earl William, so they won’t immediately panic and raise the drawbridge. You have to try to keep everyone interested in what you’re saying while the advance party approaches the castle. All right?”

Elizabeth looked nervous. She said: “And then what?”

“When I give you the word, say you have surrendered the castle to the rightful earl, Richard. Then Richard’s army will break cover and charge the castle. At that point Michael will realize what’s happening. But his men will be in doubt about their loyalty—because you have told them to surrender, and called Richard the rightful earl—and the advance party will be inside to prevent anyone from closing the gates.” The bell began to ring. Aliena’s stomach knotted in fear. “We’ve run out of time. How do you feel?”

“Scared.”

“Me too. Let’s go.”

They went down the stairs. The bell on the gatehouse tower was ringing as it had when Aliena was a carefree girl. Same bell, same sound, different Aliena, she thought. She knew it could be heard all across the fields, as far away as the edge of the forest. Richard would by now be saying the Paternoster slowly under his breath, to measure the time he had to wait before sending his advance party.

Aliena and Elizabeth walked from the keep across the internal drawbridge to the lower courtyard. Elizabeth was pale with fear, but her mouth was set in a determined line. Aliena smiled at her to give her courage, then pulled up her hood again. So far she had not seen anyone familiar, but she was a well-known face all over the county, and someone was sure to recognize her sooner or later. If Michael Armstrong were to find out who she was he might smell a rat, dimwitted though he undoubtedly was. Several people gave her curious glances, but no one spoke to her.

She and Elizabeth went to the middle of the lower courtyard. Because the ground sloped somewhat, Aliena could see over the heads of the crowd and through the main gate to the fields outside. The advance party should be breaking cover about now, but she could see no sign of them. Oh, God, I hope there’s no snag, she thought fearfully.

Elizabeth would need something to stand on while she addressed the people. Aliena told a manservant to fetch a mounting block from the stable. While they were waiting, an elderly woman looked at Aliena and said: “Why, it’s the Lady Aliena! How nice to see you!”

Aliena’s heart sank. She recognized the woman as a cook who had worked at the castle before the coming of the Hamleighs. She forced a smile and said: “Hello, Tilly, how are you?”

Tilly nudged her neighbor. “Hey, it’s the Lady Aliena come back after all these years. Are you going to be mistress again, lady?”

Aliena did not want that thought to occur to Michael Armstrong. She looked around anxiously. Happily, Michael was not within earshot. However, one of his men-at-arms had heard the exchange and was staring at Aliena with a furrowed brow. Aliena looked back at him with a simulated expression of unconcern. The man only had one eye—which no doubt was why he had been left behind here instead of going off to war with William—and it suddenly seemed funny to Aliena to be stared at by a man with one eye, and she had to choke back a laugh. She realized she was slightly hysterical.

The manservant came back with the mounting block. The bell ceased to toll. Aliena made herself calm as Elizabeth stood on the block and the crowd went quiet.

Elizabeth said: “King Stephen and Duke Henry have made peace.”

She paused, and a cheer went up. Aliena was looking through the gateway. Now, Richard, she thought; now is the time, don’t leave it too late!

Elizabeth smiled and let the people cheer for a while, then she went on: “Stephen is to remain king until he dies, then Henry will succeed him.”

Aliena scrutinized the guards on the towers and over the gatehouse. They looked relaxed. Where was Richard?

Elizabeth said: “The peace treaty will bring many changes in our lives.”

Aliena saw the guards stiffen. One of them raised his hand to shade his eyes and peered out over the fields, while another turned and looked down into the courtyard as if hoping to catch the eye of the captain. But Michael Armstrong was listening intently to Elizabeth.

“The present and future kings have agreed that all lands shall be returned to those who possessed them in the time of the old King Henry.”

That caused a buzz of comment in the crowd, as people speculated whether this change would affect the earldom of Shiring. Aliena noticed Michael Armstrong looking thoughtful. Through the gateway she at last saw the horses of Richard’s advance party. Hurry, she thought, hurry! But they were coming at a steady trot, so as not to alarm the guards.

Elizabeth was saying: “We must all give thanks to God for this peace treaty. We should pray that King Stephen will rule wisely in his declining years, and that the young duke will keep his peace until God takes Stephen

away….” She was doing magnificently, but she was beginning to look troubled, as if she might be about to run out of things to say.

All the guards were looking outward, examining the approaching party. They had been told to expect such a group, and instructed to bring the leader to the countess immediately, so no action was required of them, but they were curious.

The one-eyed man turned around and looked through the gate, then turned back and stared at Aliena again, and she guessed he was frowning over the significance of her presence here and the approach of a troop of horsemen.

One of the guards on the battlements appeared to make a decision, and disappeared down a staircase.

The crowd was getting a little restless. Elizabeth was meandering magnificently, but they were impatient for hard news. She said: “This war started within a year of my birth, and like many young people up and down the kingdom I am looking forward to finding out what peace is like.”

The guard from the battlements emerged from the base of a tower, walked briskly across the compound, and spoke to Michael Armstrong.

Through the gateway, Aliena could see that the horsemen were still a couple of hundred yards away. It was not close enough. She could have screamed in frustration. She would not be able to contain this situation much longer.

Michael Armstrong turned and looked through the gate, frowning. Then the one-eyed man pulled Michael’s sleeve and said something, pointing at Aliena.

Aliena was afraid Michael would close the gates and raise the drawbridge before Richard could get in, but she did not know what she could do to prevent him. She wondered whether she had the nerve to throw herself at him before he could give the order. She still wore her dagger strapped to her left arm: she could even kill him. He turned away decisively. Aliena reached up and touched Elizabeth’s elbow. “Stop Michael!” she hissed.

Elizabeth opened her mouth to speak, but no sound came out. She looked petrified by fear. Then her expression changed. She took a deep breath, tilted her head up, and spoke in a voice ringing with authority. “Michael Armstrong!”

Michael turned back.

This was the point of no return, Aliena realized. Richard was not quite close enough but she had run out of time. She said to Elizabeth: “Now! Tell them now!”

Elizabeth said: “I have surrendered this castle to the rightful earl of Shiring, Richard of Kingsbridge.”

Michael stared unbelievingly at Elizabeth. “You can’t do that!” he shouted.

Elizabeth said: “I command you all to lay down your weapons. There is to be no bloodshed.”

Michael turned around and yelled: “Raise the drawbridge! Shut the gates!”

The men-at-arms rushed to do his bidding, but he had hesitated a moment too long. As the men reached the massive ironbound doors that would close the entrance arch, Richard’s advance party clattered over the drawbridge and entered the compound. Most of Michael’s men were not wearing armor and some of them did not even have their swords, and they scattered in front of the horsemen.

Elizabeth shouted: “Everyone keep calm. These messengers will confirm my orders.”

There was a shout from the battlements: one of the guards cupped his hands around his mouth and yelled down: “Michael! Attack! We’re being attacked! Scores of them!”

“Treachery!” Michael roared, and drew his sword. But two of Richard’s men were on him instantly, their blades flashing. Blood gushed and he went down. Aliena looked away.

Some of Richard’s men had taken possession of the gatehouse and the winding room. Two of them made it to the battlements, and Michael’s guards surrendered to them.

Through the gateway Aliena saw the main force galloping across the fields toward the castle, and her spirits rose like the sun.

Elizabeth shouted at the top of her voice: “This is a peaceful surrender. No one is going to be hurt, I promise you. Just stay where you are.”

Everyone stood stock-still, listening to the thunder as Richard’s army pounded closer. Michael’s men-at-arms looked confused and uncertain, but none of them did anything: their leader had fallen, and their countess had told them to surrender. The castle servants were paralyzed by the rapidity of events.

Then Richard came through the gateway on his war-horse.

It was a great moment, and Aliena’s heart swelled with pride. Richard was handsome, smiling, and triumphant. Aliena shouted: “The rightful earl!” The men entering the castle behind Richard took up the cry, and it was repeated by some of the crowd in the courtyard—most of them had no love for William. Richard rode around the compound at a slow walk, waving and acknowledging the cheers.

Aliena thought about all she had gone through for the sake of this moment. She was thirty-four years old and she had spent half of those years fighting for this. The whole of my adult life, she thought; that’s what I gave. She remembered stuffing wool into sacks until her hands were red and swollen and bleeding. She recalled the faces she had seen on the road, greedy

and cruel and lascivious faces of men who would have killed her if she had given the least sign of weakness. She thought of how she had hardened her heart against dear Jack, and married Alfred instead; and she thought of the months during which she had slept on the floor at the foot of his bed like a dog; and all because he had promised to pay for weapons and armor so that Richard could fight to win back this castle. “There it is, Father,” she said aloud. Nobody heard her: they were cheering too loud. “This is what you wanted,” she said to her dead father, and there was bitterness as well as triumph in her heart. “I promised you this, and I kept my promise. I took care of Richard, and he fought all these years, and now we’re home again at last, and Richard is the earl. Now…” Her voice rose to a shout, but everyone was shouting, and no one noticed the tears rolling down her cheeks. “Now, Father, I’ve done with you, so go to your grave, and let me live in peace!”

Chapter 16

REMIGIUS WAS ARROGANT, even in penury. He entered the wooden manor house at Hamleigh village with his head held high, and looked down his long nose at the huge, roughhewn wooden crucks supporting the roof, the wattle-and-daub walls, and the chimneyless open fire in the middle of the beaten-earth floor.

William watched him walk in. I may be down on my luck, but I'm not as far down as you, he thought, noting the monk's much-repaired sandals, the grubby robe, the unshaven chin and the unkempt hair. Remigius had never been a fat man but now he was thinner than ever. The haughty expression fixed on his face failed to conceal the lines of exhaustion or the purplish folds of defeat under his eyes. Remigius was not yet bowed, but he was very badly beaten.

"Bless you, my son," he said to William.

William was not having any of that. "What do you want, Remigius?" he said, deliberately insulting the monk by not calling him "Father" or "Brother."

Remigius flinched as if he had been struck. William guessed he had received a few taunts of that kind since he came down in the world. Remigius said: "The lands you gave to me as dean of the chapter at Shiring have been repossessed by Earl Richard."

"I'm not surprised," William replied. "Everything is to be returned to those who possessed it in the time of the old King Henry."

"But that leaves me with no means of support."

"You and a lot of other people," William said carelessly. "You'll have to go back to Kingsbridge."

Remigius's face paled with anger. "I can't do that," he said in a low voice.

"Why not?" said William, tormenting him.

"You know why not."

"Would Philip say you shouldn't prise secrets out of little girls? Does he think you betrayed him, by telling me where the outlaws' hideout was? Would he be angry with you for becoming the dean of a church that was to take the

place of his own cathedral? Well, then I suppose you can't go back."

"Give me *something*," Remigius pleaded. "One village. A farm. A little church!"

"There are no rewards for losing, monk," William said harshly. He was enjoying this. "In the world outside the monastery, nobody looks after you. The ducks swallow the worms, and the foxes kill the ducks, and the men shoot the foxes, and the devil hunts the men."

Remigius's voice sank to a whisper. "What am I to do?"

William smiled and said: "Beg."

Remigius turned on his heel and left the house.

Still proud, William thought, but not for long. You'll beg.

It pleased him to see someone who had fallen harder than he himself. He would never forget the excruciating agony of standing outside the gate of his own castle and being refused admittance. He had been suspicious when he heard that Richard and some of his men had left Winchester; then when the peace pact was announced his unease had turned to alarm, and he had taken his knights and men and ridden hard to Earlscastle. There was a skeleton force guarding the castle, so he expected to find Richard camped in the fields, laying siege. When all appeared peaceful he had been relieved, and berated himself for overreacting to Richard's sudden disappearance.

When he got closer he saw that the drawbridge was up. He had reined in at the edge of the moat and shouted: "Open up for the earl!"

That was when Richard had appeared on the battlements and said: "The earl is inside."

It was like the ground falling away from under William's feet. He had always been afraid of Richard, always aware of him as a dangerous rival, but he had not felt himself especially vulnerable at this moment in time. He had thought the real danger would come when Stephen died and Henry came to the throne, which might be ten years away. Now, as he sat in a mean manor house brooding over his mistakes, he realized bitterly that Richard had in fact been very clever. He had slipped through a narrow gap. He could not be accused of breaching the king's peace, as the war was still on. His claim to the earldom had been legitimized by the terms of the peace treaty. And Stephen, aging and tired and defeated, had no energy left for further battles.

Richard had magnanimously released those of William's men-at-arms who wanted to continue in William's service. Waldo One-eye had told William how the castle had been taken. The treachery of Elizabeth was maddening, but for William it was the part played by Aliena that was most humiliating. The helpless little girl he had raped and tormented and thrown out of her home all those years ago had come back and taken her revenge. Every time he thought of that his stomach burned with bitterness as if he had drunk vinegar.

His first inclination had been to fight Richard. William could have kept his army, lived off the countryside, and extorted taxes and supplies from the peasants, fighting a running battle with his rival. But Richard held the castle, and he had time on his side, for William's supporter Stephen was old and beaten, and Richard was backed by the young Duke Henry, who would eventually become the second King Henry.

So William had decided to cut his losses. He had retired to the village of Hamleigh and moved back into the manor house where he had been brought up. Hamleigh, and the villages surrounding it, had been granted to his father thirty years ago. It was a holding that had never been part of the earldom, so Richard had no claim to it.

William hoped that if he kept his head down Richard would be satisfied with the revenge he had already taken, and would leave him alone. So far it had worked. However, William hated the village of Hamleigh. He hated the small neat houses, the excitable ducks on the pond, the pale gray stone church, the apple-cheeked children, the broad-hipped women and the strong, resentful men. He hated it for being humble, plain and poor, and he hated it because it symbolized his family's fall from power. He watched the plodding peasants begin the spring plowing, and estimated what his share of their crop would be that summer, and he found it meager. He went hunting in his few acres of forest and failed to start a single deer, and the forester said to him: "The boar is all you can hunt now, lord—the outlaws had the deer in the famine." He held court in the great hall of the manor house, with the wind whistling through the holes in its wattle-and-daub walls; and he gave harsh judgments and imposed large fines and ruled according to his whim; but it brought him little satisfaction.

He had abandoned the building of the grand new church at Shiring, of course. He could not afford to build a stone house for himself, let alone a church. The builders had stopped work when he had stopped paying them, and what had happened to them he did not know: perhaps they had all gone back to Kingsbridge to work for Prior Philip.

But now he was having nightmares.

They were all the same. He saw his mother in the place of the dead. She was bleeding from her ears and eyes, and when she opened her mouth to speak, more blood came out. The sight filled him with mortal terror. In broad daylight he could not say what it was about the dream that he feared, for she did not threaten him in any way. But at night, when she came to him, the fear possessed him totally, an irrational, hysterical, blind panic. Once as a boy he had waded into a pond that suddenly got deeper, and he had found himself below the surface and unable to breathe; and the overpowering need for air that had possessed him then was one of the indelible memories of his childhood; but this was ten times as bad. Trying to get away from his

mother's bloody face was like trying to sprint in quicksand. He would come awake as if he had been thrown across the room, violently shocked, sweating and moaning, his body taut with agony from the racked-up tension. Walter would be at his bedside with a candle—William slept in the hall, separated from the men by a screen, for there was no bedroom here. "You cried out, lord," Walter would murmur. William would breathe hard, staring at the real bed and the real wall and the real Walter, while the power of the nightmare slowly faded to the point where he was no longer afraid; and then he would say: "It was nothing, a dream, go away." But he would be frightened to go back to sleep. And the next day the men would look at him as if he were bewitched.

A few days after his conversation with Remigius, he was sitting in the same hard chair, by the same smoky fire, when Bishop Waleran walked in.

William was startled. He had heard horses, but he had assumed it was Walter, coming back from the mill. He did not know what to do when he saw the bishop. Waleran had always been arrogant and superior, and time and time again he had made William feel foolish, clumsy and coarse. It was humiliating that Waleran should see the humble surroundings in which he now lived.

William did not get up to greet his visitor. "What do you want?" he said curtly. He had no reason to be polite: he wanted Waleran to get out as soon as possible.

The bishop ignored his rudeness. "The sheriff is dead," he said.

At first William did not see what he was getting at. "What's that to me?"

"There will be a new sheriff."

William was about to say *So what?* but he stopped himself. Waleran was concerned about who would be the new sheriff. And he had come to talk to William about it. That could only mean one thing, couldn't it? Hope rose in his breast, but he suppressed it fiercely: where Waleran was involved, high hopes often ended in frustration and disappointment. He said: "Who have you got in mind?"

"You."

It was the answer William had not dared to hope for. He wished he could believe in it. A clever and ruthless sheriff could be almost as important and influential as an earl or a bishop. This could be his way back to wealth and power. He forced himself to consider the snags. "Why would King Stephen appoint me?"

"You supported him against Duke Henry, and as a result you lost your earldom. I imagine he would like to recompense you."

"Nobody ever does anything out of gratitude," William said, repeating a saying of his mother's.

Waleran said: "Stephen can't be happy that the earl of Shiring is a man

who fought against him. He might want his sheriff to be a countervailing force against Richard."

Now that made more sense. William felt excited against his will. He began to believe that he might actually get out of this hole in the ground called Hamleigh village. He would have a respectable force of knights and men-at-arms again, instead of the pitiful handful he now supported. He would preside over the county court at Shiring, and frustrate Richard's will. "The sheriff lives at Shiring Castle," he said longingly.

"You'd be rich again," Waleran added.

"Yes." Properly exploited, the sheriff's post could be hugely profitable. William would make almost as much money as he had when he was earl. But he wondered why Waleran had mentioned it.

A moment later Waleran answered the question. "You would be able to finance the new church, after all."

So that was it. Waleran never did anything without an ulterior motive. He wanted William to be sheriff so that William could build him a church. But William was willing to go along with the plan. If he could finish the church in memory of his mother, perhaps the nightmares would stop. "Do you really think it can be done?" he said eagerly.

Waleran nodded. "It will cost money, of course, but I think it can be done."

"Money?" William said with sudden anxiety. "How much?"

"It's hard to say. In somewhere like Lincoln or Bristol, the shrievalty would cost you five or six hundred pounds; but the sheriffs of those towns are richer than cardinals. For a little place such as Shiring, if you're the candidate the king wants—which I can take care of—you can probably get it for a hundred pounds."

"A hundred pounds!" William's hopes collapsed. He had been afraid of disappointment, right from the start. "If I had a hundred pounds I wouldn't be living like this!" he said bitterly.

"You can get it," Waleran said lightly.

"Who from?" William was struck by a thought. "Will you give it to me?"

"Don't be stupid," Waleran said with infuriating condescension. "That's what Jews are for."

William realized, with a familiar mixture of hope and resentment, that once again the bishop was right.

It was two years since the first cracks had appeared, and Jack had not found a solution to the problem. Worse still, identical cracks had appeared in the first bay of the nave. There was something crucially wrong with his design. The structure was strong enough to support the weight of the vault, but not to

resist the winds that blew so hard against the high walls.

He stood on the scaffolding far above the ground, staring close-range at the new cracks, brooding. He needed to think of a way of bracing the upper part of the wall so that it would not move with the wind.

He reflected on the way the lower part of the wall was strengthened. In the outer wall of the aisle were strong, thick piers which were connected to the nave wall by half-arches hidden in the aisle roof. The half-arches and the piers propped up the wall at a distance, like remote buttresses. Because the props were hidden, the nave looked light and graceful.

He needed to devise a similar system for the upper part of the wall. He could make a two-story side aisle, and simply repeat the remote buttressing; but that would block the light coming in through the clerestory—and the whole idea of the new style of building was to bring more light into the church.

Of course, it was not the aisle as such that did the work: the support came from the heavy piers in the side wall and the connecting half-arches. The aisle concealed these structural elements. If only he could build piers and half-arches to support the clerestory *without* incorporating them into an aisle, he could solve the problem at a stroke.

A voice called him from the ground.

He frowned. He had been on to something before he was interrupted, he felt, but now it had gone. He looked down. Prior Philip was calling him.

He went into the turret and descended the spiral staircase. Philip was waiting for him at the bottom. The prior was so angry he was steaming. “Richard has betrayed me!” he said without preamble.

Jack was surprised. “How?”

Philip did not answer the question at first. “After all I’ve done for him,” he raged. “I bought Aliena’s wool when everyone else was bent on cheating her—if it hadn’t been for me she might never have got started. Then when that fell apart I got him a job as Head of the Watch. And last November I tipped him off about the peace treaty, and that enabled him to seize Earlscastle. And now that he’s won back the earldom, and he’s ruling in splendor, he has turned his back on me.”

Jack had never seen Philip quite so livid. The prior’s shaved head was red with indignation and he was spluttering as he spoke. “In what way has Richard betrayed you?” Jack said.

Once again Philip ignored the question. “I always knew Richard was a weak character. He gave Aliena very little support, over the years—just took from her what he wanted and never considered her needs. But I didn’t think he was an out-and-out villain.”

“What exactly has he done?”

At last Philip told him. “He has refused to give us access to the quarry.”

Jack was shocked. That was an act of astonishing ingratitude. “But how does he justify himself?”

“Everything is supposed to revert to those who possessed it in the time of the first King Henry. And the quarry was granted to us by King Stephen.”

Richard’s greed was remarkable, but Jack could not get as angry as Philip. They had built half the cathedral now, mostly with stone they had had to pay for, and they would continue to get by somehow. “Well, I suppose Richard is in the right, strictly speaking,” he said argumentatively.

Philip was outraged. “How can you say such a thing?”

“It’s a bit like what you did to me,” Jack said. “After I brought you the Weeping Madonna, and produced a wonderful design for your new cathedral, and built a town wall to protect you from William, you announced that I couldn’t live with the woman who is the mother of my children. There’s ingratitude.”

Philip was shocked by this parallel. “That’s completely different!” he protested. “I don’t want you to live apart. It’s Waleran who has blocked the annulment. But God’s law says you must not commit adultery.”

“I’m sure Richard would say something similar,” Jack persisted. “It’s not Richard who has ordered the reversion of property. He is just enforcing the law.”

The noon bell rang.

“There’s a difference between God’s laws and men’s laws,” Philip said.

“But we must live by both,” Jack countered. “And now I’m going to have dinner with the mother of my children.”

He walked away and left Philip standing there looking upset. He did not really think Philip was as ungrateful as Richard, but it had relieved his feelings to pretend that he did. He decided he would ask Aliena about the quarry. It might be that Richard could be persuaded to hand it over after all. She would know.

He left the priory close and walked through the streets to the house where he lived with Martha. Aliena and the children were in the kitchen, as usual. The famine had ended with a good harvest last year, and food was no longer desperately scarce: there was wheat bread and roast mutton on the table.

Jack kissed the children. Sally gave him a soft childish kiss, but Tommy, now eleven years old and impatient to grow up, offered his cheek and looked embarrassed. Jack smiled but said nothing: he remembered when he had thought kissing was silly.

Aliena looked troubled. Jack sat on the bench beside her and said: “Philip’s in a rage because Richard won’t give him the quarry.”

“That’s terrible,” Aliena said mildly. “How ungrateful of Richard.”

“Do you think he might be persuaded to change his mind?”

“I really don’t know,” she said. She had a distracted air.

Jack said: “You don’t seem very interested in the problem.”

She looked at him challengingly. “No, I’m not.”

He knew this mood. “You’d better tell me what’s on your mind.”

She stood up. “Let’s go into the back room.”

With a regretful look at the leg of mutton, Jack left the table and followed her into the bedroom. They left the door open, as usual, to avoid suspicion if someone should come into the house. Aliena sat on the bed and folded her arms across her chest. “I’ve made an important decision,” she began.

She looked so grave that Jack wondered what on earth it could be.

“I’ve lived most of my adult life under two shadows,” she began. “One was the vow I made to my father when he was dying. The other is my relationship with you.”

Jack said: “But now you’ve fulfilled your vow to your father.”

“Yes. And I want to be free of the other burden, too. I’ve decided to leave you.”

Jack’s heart seemed to stop. He knew she did not say such things lightly: she was serious. He stared at her, speechless. He was disoriented by the announcement: he had never dreamed she could leave him. How had this dreadful thing crept up on him? He said the first thing that came into his head: “Is there someone else?”

“Don’t be daft.”

“Then why?”

“Because I can’t take it anymore,” she said, and her eyes brimmed with tears. “We’ve been waiting ten years for this annulment. It’s never going to come, Jack. We’re doomed to live this way forever—unless we part.”

“But…” He cast around for something to say. Her announcement was so devastating that arguing with it seemed hopeless, like trying to walk away from a hurricane. Nevertheless he tried. “Isn’t this better than nothing, better than separation?”

“In the end, no.”

“But how will it change anything if you move away?”

“I might meet someone else, and fall in love again, and live a normal life,” she said, but she was crying.

“You’ll still be married to Alfred.”

“But nobody will know or care. I could be married by a parish priest who has never heard of Alfred Builder and who wouldn’t consider the marriage valid if he knew of it.”

“I don’t believe you’re saying this. I can’t take it in.”

“Ten years, Jack. I’ve been waiting ten years to have a normal life with you. I won’t wait any longer.”

The words fell on him like blows. She carried on talking, but he no longer understood her. All he could think about was life without her. He interrupted

her: “I’ve never loved anyone else, you see.”

She winced, as if she was in pain, but she went on with what she was saying. “I need a few weeks to arrange everything. I’ll get a house in Winchester. I want the children to get used to the idea before their new life begins—”

“You’re going to take my children,” he said stupidly.

She nodded. “I’m sorry,” she said. For the first time her resolve seemed to waver. “I know they’ll miss you. But they need a normal life too.”

Jack could not take any more. He turned away.

Aliena said: “Don’t walk out on me. We ought to talk some more. Jack—”

He went out without replying.

He heard her cry out after him: “Jack!”

He walked through the living room, not looking at the children, and left the house. In a daze he walked back to the cathedral, not knowing where else to go. The builders were still at lunch. He was unable to weep: this was too bad for mere tears. Without thinking, he climbed the staircase in the north transept, all the way up to the top, and stepped out onto the roof.

There was a stiff breeze up here, although at ground level it had hardly been noticeable. Jack looked down. If he fell from here he would land on the lean-to roof of the aisle alongside the transept. He would probably die, but it was not certain. He walked to the crossing and stood where the roof suddenly ended in a sheer drop. If the new-style cathedral was not structurally sound, and Aliena was leaving him, he had nothing left to live for.

Her decision was not as sudden as it seemed, of course. She had been discontented for years—they both had. But they had got accustomed to unhappiness. Winning back Earlscastle had shaken Aliena’s torpor, and reminded her that she was in charge of her own life. It had destabilized a situation that was already unsteady; rather in the way that the storm had caused cracks in the cathedral walls.

He looked at the wall of the transept and the roof of the side aisle. He could see the heavy buttresses jutting out from the wall of the side aisle, and he could visualize the half-arch, under the roof of the aisle, connecting the buttress to the foot of the clerestory. What would solve the problem, he had thought just before Philip had distracted him this morning, was a taller buttress, perhaps another twenty feet high, with a second half-arch leaping across the gap to the point on the wall where the cracks were appearing. The arch and the tall buttress would brace the top half of the church and keep the wall rigid when the wind blew.

That would probably solve the problem. The trouble was, if he built a two-story aisle to hide the extended buttress and the secondary half-arch, he would lose light; and if he did not…

If I don’t, he thought, so what?

He was possessed by a feeling that nothing mattered very much, since his life was falling apart; and in that mood he could not see anything wrong with the idea of naked buttressing. Standing up here on the roof, he could easily picture what it would look like. A line of sturdy stone columns would rise up from the side wall of the aisle. From the top of each column, a half-arch would spring across empty space to the clerestory. Perhaps he would put a decorative pinnacle on top of each column, above the springing of the arch. Yes, that would look better.

It was a revolutionary idea, to build big strengthening members in a position where they would be starkly visible. But it was part of the new style to show how the building was being held up.

Anyway, his instinct said this was right.

The more he thought about it, the better he liked it. He visualized the church from the west. The half-arches would look like the wings of a flight of birds, all in a line, just about to take off. They need not be massive. As long as they were well made they could be slender and elegant, light yet strong, just like a bird's wing. Winged buttresses, he thought, for a church so light it could fly.

I wonder, he thought. I wonder if it would work.

A gust of wind suddenly unbalanced him. He teetered on the edge of the roof. For a moment he thought he was going to fall to his death. Then he regained his balance and stepped back from the edge, his heart pounding.

Slowly and carefully, he made his way back along the roof to the turret door, and went down.

II

Work had stopped completely on the church at Shiring. Prior Philip caught himself gloating a little over that. After all the times he had looked out disconsolately onto a deserted building site, he could not help feeling pleased that the same thing had now happened to his enemies. Alfred Builder had only had time to demolish the old church and lay the foundations for the new chancel before William had been deposed and the money had dried up. Philip told himself that it was sinful to be glad about the ruin of a church. However, it was obviously God's will that the cathedral should be built in Kingsbridge, not Shiring—the bad fortune that had dogged Waleran's project seemed a very clear sign of divine intentions.

Now that the town's biggest church had been knocked down, the county court was held in the great hall at the castle. Philip rode up the hill with Jonathan by his side. He had made Jonathan his personal assistant, in the shake-up that had followed the defection of Remigius. Philip had been shocked by Remigius's perfidy, but he had been glad to see the back of him. Ever since Philip had beaten Remigius in the election, Remigius had been a thorn in his flesh. The priory was a nicer place to live now that he had gone.

Milius was the new sub-prior. However, he continued to fulfill the role of treasurer, and had a staff of three under him in the treasury. Since Remigius had gone, nobody could figure out what he used to do all day.

Philip got deep satisfaction out of working with Jonathan. He enjoyed explaining to him how the monastery was run, educating him in the ways of the world, and showing him how best to deal with people. The lad was generally well liked, but he could sometimes be abrasive, and he could easily raise the hackles of unselfconfident people. He had to learn that those who treated him in a hostile way did so out of weakness. He saw the hostility and reacted angrily, instead of seeing the weakness and giving reassurance.

Jonathan had a quick brain, and often surprised Philip by the rapidity with which he picked things up. Philip sometimes caught himself in the sin of pride, thinking how like himself Jonathan was.

He had brought Jonathan with him today to learn how the county court operated. Philip was going to ask the sheriff to order Richard to open the quarry to the priory. He was quite sure Richard was in the wrong legally. The new law about the restoration of property to those who had possessed it in the time of the old King Henry did not affect the priory's rights. Its object was to allow Duke Henry to replace Stephen's earls with his own, and thus reward

people who had supported him. It was obviously not meant to apply to monasteries. Philip was confident of winning the case, but there was an unknown factor: the old sheriff had died and his replacement would be announced today. No one knew who it would be, but everyone assumed the job would go to one of the three or four leading citizens of Shiring: David Merchant the silk seller; Rees Welsh, a priest who had worked at the king's court; Giles Lionheart, a knight with landholdings just outside the town; or Hugh the Bastard, the illegitimate son of the bishop of Salisbury. Philip hoped it would be Rees, not because the man was a countryman of his, but because he was likely to favor the church. But Philip was not overly worried: any of the four would rule in his favor, he thought.

They rode into the castle. It was not very heavily fortified. Because the earl of Shiring had a separate castle outside town, Shiring had escaped battle for several generations. The castle was more of an administrative center, with offices and quarters for the sheriff and his men, and dungeons for offenders. Philip and Jonathan stabled their horses and went into the largest building, the great hall.

The trestle tables that normally formed a T-shape had been rearranged. The top of the T remained, raised above the level of the rest of the hall by a dais; and the other tables were ranged down the sides of the hall, so that opposing plaintiffs could sit well apart and avoid the temptation to physical violence.

The hall was already full. Bishop Waleran was there, up on the dais, looking malevolent. To Philip's surprise, William Hamleigh was sitting with him, talking to the bishop out of the corner of his mouth as they watched people coming in. What was William doing here? For nine months he had been lying low, hardly moving from his village, and Philip—together with many other people in the county—had entertained the hope that he might stay there forever. But here he was, sitting on the bench as if he were still the earl. Philip wondered what mean-minded, ruthless, greedy little scheme had brought him to the county court today.

Philip and Jonathan sat down at the side of the room and waited for the proceedings to begin. There was a busy, optimistic air to the court. Now that the war had come to an end, the elite of the country had turned their attention back to the business of creating wealth. It was a fertile land and it quickly repaid their efforts: a bumper harvest was expected this year. The price of wool was up. Philip had reemployed almost all the builders who had left at the height of the famine. Everywhere the people who had survived were the younger, stronger, healthier individuals, and now they were full of hope, and here in the great hall of Shiring Castle it showed in the tilt of their heads, the pitch of their voices, the men's new boots and the women's fancy headgear, and the fact that they were prosperous enough to own something worth

arguing in court about.

They stood up as the sheriff's deputy walked in with Earl Richard. The two men mounted the dais and then, still standing, the deputy began to read the royal writ appointing the new sheriff. As he went through the initial verbiage, Philip looked around at the four presumed candidates. He hoped the winner had courage: he would need it, to stand up for the law in the presence of such powerful local barons as Bishop Waleran, Earl Richard and Lord William. The successful candidate presumably knew he had been appointed—there was no reason to keep it secret—but none of the four looked very animated. Normally the appointee would stand beside the deputy as the proclamation was read, but the only people up there with him were Richard, Waleran and William. The appalling thought crossed Philip's mind that Waleran might have been made sheriff. Then he was even more horrified as he heard: "…appoint as sheriff of Shiring my servant William of Hamleigh, and I order all men to assist him…"

Philip looked at Jonathan and said: "William!"

There were sounds of surprise and disapproval from the townspeople.

Jonathan said: "How did he do it?"

"He must have paid for it."

"Where did he get the money?"

"Borrowed it, I suppose."

William moved to the wooden throne in the middle of the top table, smiling. He had once been a handsome young man, Philip remembered. He was still under forty, just, but he looked older. His body was too heavy, and his complexion was flushed with wine; and the lively strength and optimism that makes young faces attractive had gone, to be replaced by a look of dissipation.

As William sat down, Philip stood up.

Jonathan got up too and whispered: "Are we leaving?"

"Follow me," Philip hissed.

The room fell silent. All eyes were on them as they walked across the courtroom. The public crowd parted for them to pass through. They reached the door and went out. A buzz of comment broke out as the door closed behind them.

Jonathan said: "We had no chance of success with William in the chair."

"Worse than that," Philip said. "If we had pressed our case we might have lost other rights."

"My soul, I never thought of that."

Philip nodded grimly. "With William as sheriff, Waleran as bishop, and the faithless Richard as earl, it is now completely impossible for Kingsbridge Priory to get justice in this county. They can do anything they like to us."

While a stableboy saddled their mounts, Philip said: "I'm going to

petition the king to make Kingsbridge a borough. That way we'd have our own court, and we'd pay our taxes directly to the king. In effect, we would be out of the jurisdiction of the sheriff."

"You've always been against that, in the past," Jonathan said.

"I've been against it because it makes the town as powerful as the priory. But now I think we may have to accept that as the price of independence. The alternative is William."

"Will King Stephen give us borough status?"

"He might, at a price. But if he doesn't, perhaps Henry will when he becomes king."

They mounted their horses and rode dejectedly through the town.

They went out through the gate and passed the rubbish dump on the waste ground just outside. A few decrepit people were picking over the refuse, looking for anything they could eat, wear or burn for fuel. Philip glanced at them without interest, but one of them caught his eye. A familiar tall figure was stooping over a heap of rags, sorting through them. Philip reined in his horse. Jonathan pulled up beside him.

"Look," Philip said.

Jonathan followed his gaze. After a moment he said quietly: "Remigius."

Philip watched. Waleran and William had obviously thrown Remigius out some time ago, when funds for the new church dried up. They had no further need of him. Remigius had betrayed Philip, betrayed the priory, and betrayed Kingsbridge, all in the hope of becoming dean of Shiring; but his prize had turned to ashes.

Philip turned his horse off the road and crossed the waste ground to where Remigius stood. Jonathan followed. There was a bad smell that seemed to rise from the ground like fog. As he approached, he saw that Remigius was skeletally thin. His habit was filthy and he was barefoot. He was sixty years old, and he had been at Kingsbridge Priory all his adult life: no one had ever taught him how to live rough. Philip saw him pull a pair of leather shoes out of the trash. There were huge holes in the soles, but Remigius looked at them with the expression of a man who has found buried treasure. As he was about to try them on, he saw Philip.

He straightened up. His face evidenced the struggle between shame and defiance in his heart. After a moment he said: "Well, have you come to gloat?"

"No," Philip said softly. His old enemy was such a pitiful sight that Philip felt nothing but compassion for him. He got off his horse and took a flask out of his saddlebag. "I've come to offer you a drink of wine."

Remigius did not want to accept it but he was too starved to resist. He hesitated only for a moment, then snatched the flask. He sniffed the wine suspiciously, then put the flask to his mouth. Once he had begun drinking, he

could not stop. There was only half a pint left and he drained it in a few moments. He lowered the flask and staggered a little.

Philip took it from him and put it back into his saddlebag. “You’d better have something to eat, as well,” he said. He brought out a small loaf.

Remigius took the proffered bread and began to stuff it into his mouth. He obviously had not eaten for days, and he probably had not had a decent meal for weeks. He could die soon, Philip thought sadly; if not of starvation, then of shame.

The bread went down fast. Philip said: “Do you want to come back?”

He heard a sharp intake of breath from Jonathan. Like a good many of the monks, Jonathan had hoped never to see Remigius again. He probably thought Philip was mad to offer to take him back.

A hint of the old Remigius showed for a moment, and he said: “Come back? In what position?”

Philip shook his head sorrowfully. “You’ll never hold a position of any kind in my priory, Remigius. Come back as a plain, humble monk. Ask God to forgive your sins, and live the rest of your days in prayer and contemplation, preparing your soul for heaven.”

Remigius tilted his head back, and Philip expected a scornful refusal; but it never came. Remigius opened his mouth to speak and then closed it again and looked down. Philip stood still and quiet, watching, wondering what would happen. There was a long moment of silence. Philip was holding his breath. When Remigius looked up again, his face was wet with tears. “Yes, please, father,” he said. “I want to come home.”

Philip felt a glow of joy. “Come on, then,” he said. “Get on my horse.”

Remigius looked flabbergasted.

Jonathan said: “Father! What are you doing?”

Philip said to Remigius: “Go on, do as I say.”

Jonathan was horrified. “But, father, how will you travel?”

“I’ll walk,” Philip said happily. “One of us must.”

“Let Remigius walk!” Jonathan said in a tone of outrage.

“Let him ride,” Philip said. “He’s pleased God today.”

“What about you? Haven’t you pleased God more than Remigius?”

“Jesus said there’s more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people,” Philip countered. “Don’t you remember the parable of the prodigal son? When he came home, his father killed the fatted calf. The angels are rejoicing over Remigius’s tears. The least I can do is give him my horse.”

He took the bridle and led the way over the waste ground to the road. Jonathan followed. When they reached the road, Jonathan dismounted and said: “Please, father, take my horse, then, and let me walk!”

Philip turned to him and spoke a little sternly. “Now get back on your

horse, stop arguing with me, and just *think* about what is being done and why.”

Jonathan looked puzzled, but he mounted again, and said no more.

They turned toward Kingsbridge. It was twenty miles away. Philip began to walk. He felt wonderful. The return of Remigius more than compensated for the quarry. I lost in court, he thought, but that was only about stones. What I gained was something infinitely more valuable.

Today I won a man’s soul.

III

New ripe apples floated in the barrel, shining red and yellow while the sun glinted off the water. Sally, nine years old and excitable, leaned over the rim of the barrel with her hands clasped behind her back and tried to pick up an apple in her teeth. The apple bobbed away, her face plunged into the water, and she came away spluttering and squealing with laughter. Aliena smiled thinly and wiped her little girl's face.

It was a warm afternoon in late summer, a saint's day and a holiday, and most of the town had gathered in the meadow across the river for the apple bobbing. This was the kind of occasion that Aliena had always enjoyed, but the fact that it would be her last saint's day in Kingsbridge was constantly on her mind, weighing down her spirits. She was still determined to leave Jack, but since she had made the decision she had begun to feel, in advance, the pain of loss.

Tommy was hovering near the barrel, and Jack called out: "Go on, Tommy—have a go!"

"Not just yet," he replied.

At the age of eleven Tommy knew he was smarter than his sister and he thought he was ahead of most other people too. He watched for a while, studying the technique of those who were successful at apple bobbing. Aliena watched him watching. She loved him specially. Jack had been about this age when she had first met him, and Tommy was so like Jack as a boy. Looking at him made her nostalgic for childhood. Jack wanted Tommy to be a builder, but Tommy had not yet shown any interest in construction. However, there was plenty of time.

Eventually he stepped up to the barrel. He bent over it and put his head down slowly, mouth wide open. He pushed his chosen apple under the surface, submerging his whole face, and then came up triumphantly with the apple between his teeth.

Tommy would be successful at whatever he put his mind to. There was a little of his grandfather, Earl Bartholomew, in his makeup. He had a very strong will and a somewhat inflexible sense of right and wrong.

It was Sally who had inherited Jack's easygoing nature and contempt for man-made rules. When Jack told the children stories, Sally always sympathized with the underdog, whereas Tommy was more likely to pronounce judgment on him. Each child had the personality of one parent and the appearance of the other: happy-go-lucky Sally had Aliena's regular

features and dark tangled curls, and determined Tommy had Jack's carrot-colored hair, white skin and blue eyes.

Now Tommy cried: "Here comes Uncle Richard!"

Aliena spun around and followed his gaze. Sure enough, her brother the earl was riding into the meadow with a handful of knights and squires. Aliena was horrified. How did he have the nerve to show his face here after what he had done to Philip over the quarry?

He came over to the barrel, smiling at everyone and shaking hands. "Try to bob an apple, Uncle Richard," said Tommy. "You could do it!"

Richard dipped his head into the barrel and came up with an apple in his strong white teeth and his blond beard soaking wet. He had always been better at games than at real life, Aliena thought.

She was not going to let him carry on as if he had done nothing wrong. Others might be afraid to say anything because he was the earl, but to her he was just her foolish little brother. He came over to kiss her, but she pushed him away and said: "How could you steal the quarry from the priory?"

Jack, seeing a quarrel coming, took the children's hands and moved away.

Richard looked stung. "All property has reverted to those who possessed it—"

"Don't give me that, Aliena interrupted. "After all Philip has done for you!"

"The quarry is part of my birthright," he said. He took her aside and began to speak in low tones so that no one else could hear. "Besides, I need the money I get by selling the stones, Allie."

"That's because you go hunting and hawking all the time!"

"But what should I do?"

"You should make the land produce wealth! There's so much to be done—repairing the damage caused by the war and the famine, bringing in new farming methods, clearing woodland and draining swamps—that's how to increase your wealth! Not by stealing the quarry that King Stephen gave to Kingsbridge Priory."

"I've never taken anything that wasn't mine."

"You've never done anything else!" Aliena flared. She was angry enough now to say things that were better left unsaid. "You've never worked for anything. You took my money for your stupid weapons, you took the job Philip gave you, you took the earldom when it was handed to you on a plate by me. Now you can't even run it without *taking* things that don't belong to you!" She turned away and stormed off.

Richard came after her, but someone waylaid him, bowing and asking him how he was. Aliena heard him make a polite reply, then get embroiled in a conversation. So much the better: she had said her piece and did not want to argue with him any further. She reached the bridge and looked back. Someone

else was talking to him now. He waved at her, indicating that he still wanted to speak to her, but he was stuck. She saw Jack, Tommy and Sally beginning a game with a stick and a ball. She stared at them, playing together in the sunshine, and she felt she could not bear to separate them. But how else, she thought, can I lead a normal life?

She crossed the bridge and entered the town. She wanted to be alone for a while.

She had taken a house in Winchester, a big place with a shop on the ground floor, a living room upstairs, a separate bedchamber, and a large storeroom at the end of the yard for her cloth. But the closer she got to moving, the less she wanted to do it.

The streets of Kingsbridge were hot and dusty, and the air was full of the flies that bred on the innumerable dunghills. All the shops were closed and the houses were locked up. The town was deserted. Everyone was in the meadow.

She went to Jack's house. That was where the others would come when the apple bobbing was over. The door of the house stood open. She frowned in annoyance. Who had left it like that? Too many people had keys: herself, Jack, Richard and Martha. There was nothing much to steal. Aliena certainly did not have her money there: for years now Philip had let her keep it in the priory treasury. But the place would be full of flies.

She stepped inside. It was dark and cool. Flies danced in the air in the middle of the room, bluebottles crawled over the linen and a pair of wasps disputed angrily around the stopper of the honeypot.

And Alfred was sitting at the table.

Aliena gave a small scream of fright, then recovered herself and said: "How did you get in?"

"I've got a key."

He had kept it a long time, Aliena thought. She looked at him. His broad shoulders were bony and his face had a shrunken look. She said: "What are you doing here?"

"I came to see you."

She found she was trembling, not from fear but from anger. "I don't want to see you, now or ever again," she spat. "You treated me like a dog, and then when Jack took pity on you and hired you, you betrayed his trust and took all his craftsmen to Shiring."

"I need money," he said, with a mixture of pleading and defiance in his voice.

"Then work."

"Building has stopped at Shiring. I can't get a job here at Kingsbridge."

"Then go to London—go to Paris!"

He persisted with ox-like stubbornness. "I thought you would help me

out.”

“There’s nothing for you here. You’d better go away.”

“Have you no pity?” he said, and now the defiance was gone and the tone was all pleading.

She leaned on the table to steady herself. “Alfred, don’t you understand that I *hate* you?”

“Why?” he said. He looked injured, as if it came as a surprise to him.

Dear God, he’s stupid, she thought; it’s the nearest he’s got to an excuse. “Go to the monastery if you want charity,” she said wearily. “Prior Philip’s capacity for forgiveness is superhuman. Mine isn’t.”

“But you’re my *wife*,” Alfred said.

That was rich. “I’m not your wife,” she hissed. “You’re not my husband. You never were. Now get out of this house.”

To her surprise he grabbed her by the hair. “You are my wife,” he said. He pulled her to him over the table, and with his free hand he grasped her breast and squeezed hard.

Aliena was taken completely by surprise. This was the last thing she had expected from a man who had slept in the same room as her for nine months without ever managing to perform the sexual act. Automatically she screamed and pulled away from him, but he had a firm grip on her hair and he jerked her back. “There’s nobody to hear you scream,” he said. “They’re all across the river.”

She was suddenly terribly afraid. They were alone, and he was very strong. After all the miles she had covered on the roads, all the years she had risked her neck traveling, she was being attacked at home by the man she had married!

He saw the fear in her eyes and said: “Scared, are you? Perhaps you’d better be nice.” Then he kissed her mouth. She bit his lip as hard as she could. He gave a roar of pain.

She did not see the punch coming. It exploded on her cheek with such force that she had the terrified thought that he must have smashed her bones. For a moment she lost her vision and her balance. She reeled away from the table and felt herself falling. The rushes on the floor softened the impact as she hit the ground. She shook her head to clear it and reached for the knife strapped to her left arm. Before she could draw it, both her wrists were seized, and she heard Alfred say: “I know about that little dagger. I’ve seen you undress, remember?” He released her hands, punched her face again, and grabbed the dagger himself.

Aliena tried to wriggle away. He sat on her legs and put his left hand to her throat. She thrashed her arms. Suddenly the point of the dagger was an inch from her eyeball. “Be still, or I’ll put out your eyes,” he said.

She froze. The idea of being blind terrified her. She had seen men who

had been blinded as a punishment. They walked the streets begging, their empty sockets staring horribly at passersby. Small boys tormented them, pinching them and tripping them until they gave in to rage and tried in vain to catch hold of their tormentors, which made the game even better. They generally died within a year or two.

“I thought that would calm you down,” Alfred said.

Why was he doing this? He had never had any lust for her. Was it just that he was defeated and angry, and she was vulnerable? Did she stand for the world that had rejected him?

He leaned forward, straddling her, with his knees either side of her hips, keeping the knife at her eye. Once again he put his face close to hers. “Now,” he said. “Be nice.” He kissed her again.

His unshaven face scratched her skin. His breath smelled of beer and onions. She kept her mouth closed tight.

“That’s not nice,” he said. “Kiss me back.”

He kissed her again, and brought the knife point even closer. When it touched her eyelid she moved her lips. The taste of his mouth sickened her. He thrust his rough tongue between her lips. She felt as if she might throw up, and tried desperately to suppress the feeling, for fear he would kill her.

He pulled away from her again, but kept the knife at her face. “Now,” he said. “Feel this.” He took her hand and pulled it under the skirt of his tunic. She touched his organ. “Hold it,” he said. She grasped it. “Now rub it gently.”

She obeyed him. It occurred to her that if she could pleasure him this way she might avoid being penetrated. She looked fearfully at his face. He was flushed and his eyes were hooded. She stroked him all the way down to the root, remembering that Jack was driven wild by that.

She was afraid she would never be able to enjoy this again, and tears came to her eyes.

He jerked the knife dangerously. “Not so hard!” he said.

She concentrated.

Then the door opened.

Her heart leaped with hope. A wedge of bright sunlight fell across the room and shone dazzingly through her tears. Alfred froze. She pulled her hand away.

They both looked toward the door. Who was it? Aliena could not see. Not one of the children, please, God, she prayed; I would feel so ashamed. She heard a roar of rage. It was a man’s voice. She blinked away her tears and recognized her brother Richard.

Poor Richard: it was almost worse than if it had been Tommy. Richard, who had a scar instead of a lobe on his left ear to remind him of the terrible scene he had witnessed when he was fourteen years old. Now he was witnessing another. How would he ever bear it?

Alfred started to get to his feet, but Richard was too quick for him. Aliena saw Richard cross the little room in a blur and lash out with his booted foot, catching Alfred full on the jaw. Alfred crashed back against the table. Richard went after him, trampling on Aliena without noticing, lashing out at Alfred with his feet and fists. Aliena scrambled out of the way. Richard's face was a mask of ungovernable fury. He did not look at Aliena. He did not care about her, she understood. He was enraged, not about what Alfred had done to Aliena today, but because of what William and Walter had done to him, Richard, eighteen years ago. He had been young and weak and helpless then, but now he was a big strong man and a seasoned fighter, and he had at last found a target for the mad rage he had nursed inside for all those years. He hit Alfred again and again, with both fists. Alfred staggered back around the table, trying feebly to defend himself with his raised arms. Richard caught him on the chin with a powerful swing, and Alfred fell backward.

He lay on the rushes, looking up, terrified. Aliena was frightened by her brother's violence, and said: "That's enough, Richard!" Richard ignored her and stepped forward to kick Alfred. Then Alfred suddenly realized that he still had Aliena's knife in his hand. He dodged, came swiftly to his feet and lashed out with the knife. Taken by surprise, Richard jumped back. Alfred lunged at him again, driving him back across the room. The two men were the same height and build, Aliena saw. Richard was a fighting man but Alfred was armed: they were now unnervingly well matched. Aliena was suddenly afraid for her brother. What would happen if Alfred overcame him? She would have to fight Alfred herself, then.

She looked around for a weapon. Her eyes lit on the pile of firewood beside the hearth. She snatched up a heavy log.

Alfred lunged at Richard again. Richard dodged; then, when Alfred's arm was at full stretch, Richard grabbed his wrist and pulled. Alfred staggered forward, off balance. Richard hit him several times, very fast, with both fists, punching his face and body. There was a savage grin on Richard's face, the smile of a man who is taking revenge. Alfred began to whimper, and raised his arms to protect himself again.

Richard hesitated, breathing hard. Aliena thought it would end then. But suddenly Alfred struck again, with surprising speed, and this time the point of the knife grazed Richard's cheek. Richard jumped back, stung. Alfred moved in with the knife raised high. Aliena saw that Alfred would kill Richard. She ran at Alfred, swinging the log with all her might. She missed his head but struck his right elbow. She heard the crack as wood connected with bone. The blow numbed Alfred's hand and the knife fell from his fingers.

The way it ended was dreadfully quick.

Richard bent, swept up Aliena's knife, and with the same motion brought it up under Alfred's guard and stabbed him in the chest with terrific force.

The dagger sank in up to the hilt.

Aliena stared, horrified. It was a terrible blow. Alfred screamed like a stuck pig. Richard pulled the knife out, and Alfred's blood squirted out of the hole in his chest. Alfred opened his mouth to scream again, but no sound came. His face turned white and then gray, his eyes closed, and he fell to the ground. Blood soaked into the rushes.

Aliena knelt beside him. His eyelids fluttered. He was still breathing, but his life was draining from him. She looked up at Richard, standing over them both, breathing hard. "He's dying," she said.

Richard nodded. He was not much moved. "I've seen better men die," he said. "I've killed men who deserved it less."

Aliena was shocked at his harshness, but she did not say anything. She had just remembered the first time Richard killed a man. It was after William had taken over the castle, and she and Richard had been on the road to Winchester, and two thieves had attacked them. Aliena had stabbed one of the thieves, but she had forced Richard, who was only fifteen, to deliver the coup de grâce. If he's heartless, she thought guiltily, who made him so?

She looked at Alfred again. He opened his eyes and looked back at her. She almost felt ashamed of how little compassion she had for this dying man. She thought, as she looked into his eyes, that he had never been compassionate himself, nor forgiving, nor generous. He had nursed his resentments and hatreds all his life, and had taken his pleasure from acts of malice and revenge. Your life *could* have been different, Alfred, she thought. You could have been kind to your sister, and forgiven your stepbrother for being cleverer than you. You could have married for love instead of for revenge. You could have been loyal to Prior Philip. You could have been happy.

His eyes widened suddenly and he said: "God, it *hurts*."

She wished he would just hurry up and *die*.

His eyes closed.

"That's it," Richard said.

Alfred stopped breathing.

Aliena stood up. "I'm a widow," she said.

Alfred was buried in the graveyard at Kingsbridge Priory. It was his sister Martha's wish, and she was the only surviving blood relative. She was also the only person who was sad. Alfred had never been good to her, and she had always turned to Jack, her stepbrother, for love and protection; but nevertheless she wanted him buried somewhere close so that she could visit the grave. When they lowered the coffin into the ground, only Martha cried.

Jack looked grimly relieved that Alfred was no more. Tommy, standing

with Aliena, was keenly interested in everything—this was his first family funeral and the rituals of death were all new to him. Sally was white-faced and frightened, holding Martha's hand.

Richard was there. He told Aliena, during the service, that he had come to ask God's forgiveness for killing his brother-in-law. Not that he felt he had done wrong, he hastened to add: he just wanted to be safe.

Aliena, whose face was still bruised and swollen from Alfred's last punch, recalled the dead man as he had been when she first met him. He had come to Earlscastle with his father, Tom Builder, and Martha and Ellen and Jack. Already Alfred had been the bully of the family, big and strong and bovine, with a sly cunning and a streak of nastiness. If Aliena had thought then that she would end up married to him she would have been tempted to throw herself off the battlements. She had not imagined she would ever see the family again after they left the castle; but both she and they had ended up living in Kingsbridge. She and Alfred had started the parish guild which was now such an important institution in the life of the town. That was when Alfred had proposed to her. She had not dreamed that he might be motivated more by rivalry with his stepbrother than by desire for her. She had refused him then, but later he had discovered how to manipulate her, and had persuaded her to marry him by promising support for her brother. Looking back on that, she felt that Alfred had deserved the frustration and humiliation of their marriage. His motives had been heartless and his reward had been lovelessness.

Aliena could not help feeling happy. There was no question of her leaving and going to live in Winchester now, of course: she and Jack would be married immediately. She was putting on a solemn face for the funeral, and even thinking some solemn thoughts, but her heart was bursting for joy.

Philip, with his apparently limitless capacity for pardoning people who had betrayed him, consented to bury Alfred.

As the five adults and two children were standing around the open grave, Ellen arrived.

Philip was cross. Ellen had cursed a Christian wedding, and she was not welcome in the priory close; but he could hardly turn her away from her stepson's funeral. The rites were over, anyway, so Philip just walked away.

Aliena was sorry. Philip and Ellen were both good people, and it was a shame they were enemies. But they were good in different ways, and they were both intolerant of rival ethics.

Ellen was looking older, with extra lines on her face and more gray in her hair, but her golden eyes were still beautiful. She was wearing a rough-sewn leather tunic and nothing else, not even shoes. Her arms and legs were tanned and muscular. Tommy and Sally ran to kiss her. Jack followed and embraced her, hugging her hard.

Ellen lifted her cheek for Richard to kiss her, and said: “You did the right thing. Don’t feel guilty.”

She stood at the edge of the grave, looking in, and said: “I was his stepmother. I wish I had known how to make him happy.”

When she turned from the grave, Aliena hugged her.

They all walked slowly away. Aliena said to Ellen: “Will you stay a while, and have dinner?”

“Gladly.” She ruffled Tommy’s red hair. “I’d like to talk to my grandchildren. They grow so fast. When I first met Tom Builder, Jack was the age Tommy is now.” They were approaching the priory gate. “As you get older, the years seem to go faster. I believe—” She broke off in midsentence, and stopped walking.

“What is it?” said Aliena.

Ellen was staring at the priory gateway. The wooden gates were open. The street outside was empty but for a handful of small children on the far side, standing in a knot, staring at something out of sight.

“Richard!” Ellen said sharply. “Don’t go out!”

Everyone stopped. Aliena could see what had alarmed Ellen. The children looked as if they might be watching something or someone who was waiting just outside the gate, concealed by the wall.

Richard reacted fast. “It’s a trap!” he said, and without further ado he turned around and ran.

A moment later a helmeted head looked around the gatepost. It belonged to a large man-at-arms. The man saw Richard running toward the church, shouted in alarm, and dashed into the close. He was followed by three, four, five more men.

The funeral party scattered. The men-at-arms ignored them and went after Richard. Aliena was scared and mystified: who would dare to attack the earl of Shiring openly and in a priory? She held her breath as she watched them chase Richard across the close. He leaped over the low wall that the masons were building. His pursuers jumped over it behind him, unmindful that they were entering a church. The craftsmen froze in position, trowels and hammers raised, as first Richard, then his pursuers, charged by. One of the younger and more quick-thinking apprentices stuck out a shovel and tripped a man-at-arms, who went flying; but no one else intervened. Richard reached the door that led to the cloisters. The man closest behind him raised his sword above his head. For a terrible moment Aliena thought the door was locked and Richard could not get in. The man-at-arms struck at Richard with his sword. Richard got the door open and slipped inside, and the sword bit into the wood as the door slammed.

Aliena breathed again.

The men-at-arms gathered around the cloister door, then began to look

about uncertainly. They seemed to realize, all of a sudden, where they were. The craftsmen gave them hostile stares and hefted their hammers and axes. There were close to a hundred builders and only five men-at-arms.

Jack said angrily: “Who the hell are those people?”

He was answered by a voice from behind. “They are the sheriff’s men.”

Aliena turned around, aghast. She knew that voice horribly well. There at the gate, on a nervous black stallion, armed and wearing chain mail, was William Hamleigh. The sight of him sent a chill through her.

Jack said: “Get out of here, you loathsome insect.”

William flushed at the insult, but he did not move. “I’ve come to make an arrest.”

“Go ahead. Richard’s men will tear you apart.”

“He won’t have any men when he’s in jail.”

“Who do you think you are? A sheriff can’t put an earl in jail!”

“He can for murder.”

Aliena gasped. She saw immediately how William’s devious mind was working. “There was no murder!” she burst out.

“There was,” William said. “Earl Richard murdered Alfred Builder. And now I must explain to Prior Philip that he is harboring a killer.”

William kicked his horse and rode past them, across the west end of the unbuilt nave, to the kitchen courtyard which was where laymen were received. Aliena watched him with incredulity. He was so evil it was hard to believe. Poor Alfred, whom they had just buried, had done much wrong through small-mindedness and weakness of character: his badness was more tragic than anything else. But William was a real servant of the devil. Aliena thought: When will we be rid of this monster?

The men-at-arms joined William in the kitchen courtyard and one of them hammered on the kitchen door with the hilt of his sword. The builders left the site and stood in a crowd, glaring at the intruders, looking dangerous with their heavy hammers and sharp chisels. Aliena told Martha to take the children home; then she and Jack stood with the builders.

Prior Philip came to the kitchen door. He was shorter than William, and in his light summer habit he appeared very small by comparison with the beefy man on horseback in chain mail; but there was a look of righteous anger on Philip’s face that made him seem more formidable than William.

William said: “You are harboring a fugitive—”

Philip interrupted him with a roar. “Leave this place!”

William tried again. “There has been a murder—”

“Get out of my priory!” Philip yelled.

“I am the sheriff—”

“Not even the king may bring men of violence into the precincts of a monastery! Get out! Get out!”

The builders began to murmur angrily among themselves. The men-at-arms looked at them nervously. William said: “Even the prior of Kingsbridge must answer to the sheriff.”

“Not on these terms! Get your men off the premises. Leave your weapons in the stable. When you’re ready to act like a humble sinner in the house of God, you may enter the priory; and *then* the prior will answer your questions.”

Philip stepped back inside and slammed the door.

The builders cheered.

Aliena found herself cheering too. William had been a figure of power and dread all her life, and it lifted her heart to see him defied by Prior Philip.

But William was not yet ready to concede defeat. He got off his horse. Slowly he unbuckled his sword belt and handed it to one of his men. He said a few quiet words to the men, and they retreated across the priory close, taking his sword. William watched them until they reached the gate; then he turned back and faced the kitchen door once again.

He shouted: “Open up to the sheriff!”

After a pause the kitchen door opened, and Philip came out again. He looked down at William, now standing unarmed in the courtyard; then he looked at the men-at-arms clustered around the gateway on the far side of the close; and finally he looked back at William and said: “Well?”

“You are harboring a murderer in the priory. Release him to me.”

Philip said: “There has been no murder in Kingsbridge.”

“The earl of Shiring murdered Alfred Builder four days ago.”

“Wrong,” Philip said. “Richard killed Alfred, but it wasn’t murder. Alfred was caught in the act of attempted rape.”

Aliena shuddered.

“Rape?” William said. “Who was he attempting to rape?”

“Aliena.”

“But she is his wife!” William said triumphantly. “How can a man *rape* his wife?”

Aliena saw the direction of William’s argument, and fury bubbled up inside her.

Philip said: “That marriage has never been consummated, and she has applied for an annulment.”

“Which has never been granted. They were married in church. They are still married, according to the law. There was no rape. On the contrary.” William turned suddenly and pointed a finger at Aliena. “She has been wanting to get rid of her husband for years, and she finally persuaded her brother to help her get him out of the way—by stabbing him to death with *her* dagger!”

The cold hand of fear gripped Aliena’s heart. The tale he told was an

outrageous lie, but for someone who had not actually seen what happened it fitted the facts as plausibly as the real story. Richard was in trouble.

Philip said: “The sheriff cannot arrest the earl.”

That was true, Aliena realized. She had been forgetting.

William pulled out a scroll. “I have a royal writ. I am arresting him on behalf of the king.”

Aliena was devastated. William had thought of everything. “How did William manage that?” she muttered.

“He was very quick,” Jack replied. “He must have ridden to Winchester and seen the king as soon as he heard the news.”

Philip held out his hand. “Show me the writ.”

William held it out. They were several yards apart. There was a momentary standoff, when neither of them would move; then William gave in and walked up the steps to hand the writ to Philip.

Philip read it and gave it back. “This doesn’t give you the right to attack a monastery.”

“It gives me the right to arrest Richard.”

“He has asked for sanctuary.”

“Ah.” William did not look surprised. He nodded as if he had heard confirmation of something inevitable, and took two or three steps back. When he spoke again his voice was raised so that everyone could hear clearly. “Let him know that he will be arrested the moment he leaves the priory. My deputies will be stationed in the town and outside his castle. Remember—” He looked around at the assembled crowd. “Remember that anyone who harms a sheriff’s deputy harms a servant of the king.” He turned back to Philip. “Tell him that he may stay within the sanctuary as long as he likes, but if he wants to leave, he will have to face justice.”

There was silence. William walked slowly down the steps and across the kitchen courtyard. His words had sounded to Aliena like a sentence of imprisonment. The crowd parted for him. He threw a smug look at Aliena as he passed her. They all watched him walk to the gate and mount his horse. He gave an order and trotted away, leaving two of his men standing at the gate, looking in.

When Aliena turned around, Philip was standing beside her and Jack. “Go to my house,” he said quietly. “We must discuss this.” He went back into the kitchen.

Aliena had the impression that he was secretly pleased about something.

The excitement was over. The builders returned to work, talking animatedly. Ellen went to the house to be with the grandchildren. Aliena and Jack walked through the graveyard, skirting the building site, and went into Philip’s house. He was not yet there. They sat on a bench to wait. Jack sensed Aliena’s anxiety for her brother, and gave her a comforting hug.

Looking around, Aliena realized that year by year Philip's house was slowly becoming more comfortable. It was still bare by the standards of an earl's private quarters in a castle, say, but it was not as austere as it had once been. In front of the little altar in the corner there was now a small rug, to save the prior's knees during the long nights of prayer; and on the wall behind the altar hung a jeweled silver crucifix that must have been a costly gift. It would do Philip no harm to be easier on himself as he got older, Aliena thought. Perhaps he would be a little easier on others too.

A few moments later Philip came in, with a flustered-looking Richard in tow. Richard began speaking immediately. "William can't do this, it's mad! I found Alfred trying to rape my sister—he had a knife in his hand—he almost killed me!"

"Calm down," Philip said. "Let's talk about this quietly, and try calmly to determine what the dangers are, if any. Why don't we all take a seat?"

Richard sat down, but he went on talking. "Dangers? There are no dangers. A sheriff can't imprison an earl for anything, even murder."

"He's going to try," Philip said. "He'll have men waiting outside the priory."

Richard made a dismissive gesture. "I can get past William's men blindfold. They're no problem. Jack can be waiting for me outside the town wall with a horse."

"And when you reach Earlscastle?" said Philip.

"Same thing. I can sneak past William's men. Or have my own men come out to meet me."

"That sounds satisfactory," said Philip. "And what then?"

"Then nothing," said Richard. "What can William do?"

"Well, he still has a royal writ that summons you to answer a charge of murder. He'll try to arrest you anytime you leave the castle."

"I'll go everywhere escorted."

"And when you hold court, in Shiring and other places?"

"Same thing."

"But will anyone abide by your decisions, knowing that you yourself are a fugitive from the law?"

"They'd better," Richard said darkly. "They should remember how William enforced his decisions when he was the earl."

"They may not be as frightened of you as they were of William. They may think you're not as bloodthirsty and evil. I hope they would be right."

"Don't count on it."

Aliena frowned. It was not like Philip to be so pessimistic—unless he had an ulterior motive. She suspected that he was laying the groundwork for some scheme he had up his sleeve. I'd bet money, she thought, that the quarry will come into this somehow.

“My main worry is the king,” Philip was saying. “In refusing to answer the charge, you’re defying the crown. A year ago I would have said go ahead and defy it. But now that the war is over, it won’t be so easy for earls to do as they please.”

Jack said: “It looks as if you’ll have to answer the charge, Richard.”

“He can’t do that,” Aliena said. “He’s got no hope of justice.”

“She’s right,” Philip said. “The case would be heard in the royal court. The facts are already known: Alfred tried to force himself upon Aliena, Richard came in, they fought, and Richard killed Alfred. Everything depends on the interpretation. And with William, a loyal supporter of King Stephen, making the complaint, and Richard being one of Duke Henry’s greatest allies, the verdict will probably be guilty. Why did King Stephen sign the writ? Presumably because he’s decided to take revenge on Richard for fighting against him. The death of Alfred provides him with a perfect excuse.”

Aliena said: “We must appeal to Duke Henry to intervene.”

It was Richard who looked dubious now. “I wouldn’t like to rely on him. He’s in Normandy. He might write a letter of protest, but what else could he do? Conceivably he could cross the channel with an army, but then he would be in breach of the peace pact, and I don’t think he’d risk that for me.”

Aliena felt miserable and frightened. “Oh, Richard, you’re caught in a terrible web, and it’s all because you saved me.”

He gave her his most charming grin. “I’d do it again, too, Allie.”

“I know.” He meant it. For all his faults, he was brave. It seemed unfair that he should be confronted with such an intractable problem so soon after he succeeded to the earldom. As earl he was a disappointment to Aliena—a terrible disappointment—but he did not deserve this.

“Well, what a choice,” he said. “I can stay here in the priory until Duke Henry becomes king, or hang for murder. I’d become a monk if you monks didn’t eat so much fish.”

“There might be another way out,” said Philip.

Aliena looked at him eagerly. She had suspected that he was hatching a plot, and she would be grateful to him if he could resolve Richard’s dilemma.

“You could do penance for the killing,” Philip went on.

“Would it involve eating fish?” Richard said flippantly.

“I’m thinking about the Holy Land,” Philip said.

They all went quiet. Palestine was ruled by the king of Jerusalem, Baldwin III, a Christian of French origin. It was constantly under attack by neighboring Muslim countries, especially Egypt to the south and Damascus to the east. To go there, a journey of six months or a year, and join the armies fighting to defend the Christian kingdom, was indeed the kind of penance a man might do to purge his soul of a killing. Aliena felt a qualm of anxiety: not everybody came back from the Holy Land. But she had been worrying about

Richard in wars for years, and the Holy Land was probably no more dangerous than England. She would just have to fret. She was used to it.

"The king of Jerusalem always needs men," Richard said. Every few years emissaries from the pope would tour the country, telling tales of battle and glory in the defense of Christendom, trying to inspire young men to go and fight in the Holy Land. "But I've only just come into my earldom," he said. "And who would be in charge of my lands while I was away?"

"Aliena," said Philip.

Aliena suddenly felt breathless. Philip was proposing that she should take the place of the earl, and rule as her father had done…. The proposal stunned her for a moment, but as soon as she recovered her senses she knew it was right. When a man went to the Holy Land his domains were normally looked after by his wife. There was no reason why a sister should not fulfill the same role for an unmarried earl. And she would run the earldom the way she had always known it ought to be run, with justice and vision and imagination. She would do all the things Richard had so dismally failed to do. Her heart raced as she thought the idea through. She would try out new ideas, plowing with horses instead of oxen, and planting spring crops of oats and peas on fallow land. She would clear new lands for planting, establish new markets, and open the quarry to Philip after all this time—

He had thought of that, of course. Of all the clever schemes Philip had dreamed up over the years, this was probably the most ingenious. At one stroke he solved three problems: he got Richard off the hook, he put a competent ruler in charge of the earldom, and he got his quarry at last.

Philip said: "I've no doubt that King Baldwin would welcome you—especially if you went with such of your knights and men who feel inspired to join you. It would be your own small crusade." He paused a moment to let that thought sink in. "William couldn't touch you over there, of course," he went on. "And you would return a hero. Nobody would dare try to hang you then."

"The Holy Land," Richard said, and there was a death-or-glory light in his eyes. It was the right thing for him, Aliena thought. He was no good at governing the earldom. He was a soldier, and he wanted to fight. She saw the faraway look on his face. In his mind he was there already, defending a sandy redoubt, sword in hand, a red cross on his shield, fighting off a heathen horde under the baking sun.

He was happy.

IV

The whole town came to the wedding.

Aliena was surprised. Most people treated her and Jack as more or less married already, and she had thought they would consider the wedding a mere formality. She had expected a small group of friends, mostly people of her own age and Jack's fellow master craftsmen. But every man, woman and child in Kingsbridge turned out. She was touched by their presence. And they all looked so *happy* for her. She realized that they had sympathized with her predicament all these years, even though they had tactfully refrained from mentioning it to her; and now they shared her joy in finally marrying the man she had loved for so long. She walked through the streets on her brother Richard's arm, dazzled by the smiles that followed her, drunk with happiness.

Richard was leaving for the Holy Land tomorrow. King Stephen had accepted this solution—indeed, he seemed relieved to be rid of Richard so easily. Sheriff William was furious, of course, for his aim had been to dispossess Richard of the earldom, and now he had lost all chance of doing that. Richard himself still had that faraway look in his eyes: he could hardly wait to be gone.

This was not the way her father had intended things to turn out, she thought as she entered the priory close: Richard fighting in a distant land and Aliena herself playing the role of earl. However, she no longer felt obliged to run her life according to her father's wishes. He had been dead for seventeen years, and anyway, she knew something that he had not understood: that she would be a far better earl than Richard.

She had already taken the reins of power. The castle servants were lazy after years of slack management and she had smartened them up. She had reorganized the stores, had the great hall painted, and cleaned out the bakehouse and the brewery. The kitchen had been so filthy that she had burned it down and built a new one. She had started to pay out the weekly wages herself, as a sign that she was in charge; and she had dismissed three men-at-arms for persistent drunkenness.

She had also ordered a new castle to be built an hour's ride from Kingsbridge. Earlscastle was too far from the cathedral. Jack had drawn a design for the new place. They would move in as soon as the keep was built. Meanwhile, they would split their time between Earlscastle and Kingsbridge.

They had already spent several nights together in Aliena's old room at Earlscastle, far from Philip's disapproving gaze. They had been like

honeymooners, swamped by insatiable physical passion. Perhaps it was because for the first time ever they had a bedroom with a door they could lock. Privacy was an extravagance of lords: everyone else slept and made love downstairs in the communal hall. Even couples who lived in a house were always liable to be seen by their children, or relatives, or neighbors dropping by: people locked their doors when they were out, not when they were in. Aliena had never been dissatisfied with that, but now she had discovered the special thrill of knowing you could do anything you liked without the risk of being seen. She thought of some of the things she and Jack had done in the past two weeks, and she blushed.

Jack was waiting for her in the partly built nave of the cathedral, with Martha and Tommy and Sally. At weddings, the couple normally exchanged vows in the church porch, then went inside for the mass. Today the first bay of the nave would serve as porch. Aliena was glad they were getting married in the church Jack was building. It was as much a part of Jack as the clothes he wore or the way he made love. His cathedral was going to be like him: graceful, inventive, cheerful, and totally unlike anything that had gone before.

She looked lovingly at him. He was thirty years old. He was such a handsome man, with his mane of red hair and his sparkling blue eyes. He had been a very ugly boy, she remembered: she had thought him somewhat beneath her notice. But he had fallen in love with her at the very start, he said; and he still winced when he remembered how they had all laughed at him because he said he had never had a father. It was nearly twenty years ago. Twenty years…

She might never have seen Jack again had it not been for Prior Philip, who now entered the church from the cloisters and came smiling into the nave. He looked genuinely thrilled to be marrying them at last. She thought of her first meeting with him. She recalled vividly the despair she had felt when the wool merchant tried to cheat her, after all the effort and heartbreak that had gone into amassing that sack of fleeces; and her overwhelming gratitude to the young black-haired monk who had saved her and said: “I’ll buy your wool any time….” His hair was gray now.

He had saved her, then he had almost destroyed her, by forcing Jack to choose between her and the cathedral. He was a hard man on questions of right and wrong; a bit like her father. However, he had wanted to perform the marriage service.

Ellen had cursed Aliena’s first wedding, and the curse had worked. Aliena was glad. If her marriage to Alfred had not been completely insupportable she might be living with him still. It was odd to reflect on what might have been: it gave her chills, like bad dreams and dreadful imaginings. She recalled the pretty, sexy Arab girl in Toledo who had fallen in love with Jack: what if he had married her? Aliena would have arrived in Toledo, with her baby in her

arms, to find Jack in the lap of domesticity, sharing his body and his mind with someone else. The thought was horrifying.

She listened to him mumbling the Paternoster. It seemed amazing, now, to think that when she came to live in Kingsbridge she had paid no more attention to him than to the grain merchant's cat. But he had noticed her: he had loved her secretly all those years. How patient he had been! He had watched as the younger sons of the county gentry came to court her, one by one, and went away again disappointed or offended or defiant. He had seen—clever, clever boy that he was—that she could not be won by wooing; and he had approached her sidelong, as a friend rather than a lover, meeting her in the woods and telling her stories and making her love him without her noticing. She remembered that first kiss, so light and casual, except that it had burned her lips for weeks afterward. She remembered the second kiss even more vividly. Every time she heard the rumble of the fulling mill she remembered the dark, unfamiliar, unwelcome surge of lust that she had felt.

One of the abiding regrets of her life was the way she had turned cold after that. Jack had loved her totally and honestly, and she had been so frightened that she had turned away, pretending she did not care for him. It had hurt him deeply; and although he had continued to love her, and the wound had healed, it left a scar, as deep wounds do; and sometimes she saw that scar, in the way he looked at her when they quarreled and she spoke coldly to him, and his eyes seemed to say: Yes, I know you, you can be cold, you can hurt me, I must be on my guard.

Was there a wary look in his eyes now, as he vowed to be loving and faithful to her all the rest of his life? He's got reason enough to doubt me, she thought. I married Alfred, and what greater betrayal could there be than that? But then I made up for it, by searching half of Christendom to find Jack.

Such disappointments, betrayals and reconciliations were the stuff of married life, but she and Jack had gone through them before the wedding. Now, at least, she felt confident that she knew him. Nothing was likely to surprise her. It was a funny way to do things, but it might be better than making your vows first and getting to know your spouse afterward. The priests would not agree, of course; indeed, Philip would be apoplectic if he knew what was going through her mind; but then again, priests knew less about love than anyone.

She made her vows, repeating the words after Philip, thinking to herself how beautiful was the promise *With my body I worship you*. Philip would never understand that.

Jack put a ring on her finger. I've been waiting for this all my life, she thought. They looked into one another's eyes. Something had changed in him, she could tell. She realized that until this moment he had never really been sure of her. Now he looked deeply content.

“I love you,” he said. “I always will.”

That was his vow. The rest was religion, but now he had made his own promise; and Aliena realized that she, too, had been unsure of him until now. In a moment they would walk forward into the crossing for the mass; and after that they would accept the congratulations and good wishes of the townspeople, and take them home and give them food and ale and make merry; but this small instant was just for them. Jack’s look said *You and me, together, always;* and Aliena thought *At last*.

It felt very peaceful.

PART SIX

1170-1174

Chapter 17

KINGSBRIDGE WAS STILL GROWING. It had long ago overflowed its original walls, which now enclosed fewer than half the houses. About five years ago the guild had built a new wall, taking in the suburbs that had grown up outside the old town; and now there were more suburbs outside the new wall. The meadow on the other side of the river, where the townspeople had traditionally held Lammas Day and Midsummer Eve festivities, was now a small village, called Newport.

On a cold Easter Sunday, Sheriff William Hamleigh rode through Newport and crossed the stone bridge that led into what was now called the old town of Kingsbridge. Today the newly completed Kingsbridge Cathedral would be consecrated. He passed through the formidable city gate and went up the main street, which had recently been paved. The dwellings on either side were all stone houses with shops in the undercrofts and living quarters above. Kingsbridge was bigger, busier and wealthier than Shiring had ever been, William thought bitterly.

He reached the top of the street and turned into the priory close; and there, before his eyes, was the reason for the rise of Kingsbridge and the decline of Shiring: the cathedral.

It was breathtaking.

The immensely tall nave was supported by a row of graceful flying buttresses. The west end had three huge porticos, like giants' doorways, and rows of tall, slender, pointed windows above, flanked by slim towers. The concept had been heralded in the transepts, finished eighteen years ago, but this was the astonishing consummation of the idea. There had never been a building like this anywhere in England.

The market still took place here every Sunday, and the green in front of the church door was packed with stalls. William dismounted and left Walter to take care of the horses. He limped across the green to the church: he was fifty-four years old, and heavy, and he suffered constant pain from gout in his

legs and feet. Because of the pain he was more or less permanently angry.

The church was even more impressive inside. The nave followed the style of the transepts, but the master builder had refined his design, making the columns even more slender and the windows larger. But there was yet another innovation. William had heard people talk of the colored glass made by craftsmen Jack Jackson had brought over from Paris. He had wondered why there was such a fuss about it, for he imagined that a colored window would be just like a tapestry or a painting. Now he saw what they meant. The light from outside shone through the colored glass, making it glow, and the effect was quite magical. The church was full of people craning their necks to stare up at the windows. The pictures showed Bible stories, Heaven and Hell, saints and prophets, disciples, and some of the Kingsbridge citizens who had presumably paid for the windows in which they appeared—a baker carrying his tray of loaves, a tanner and his hides, a mason with his compasses and level. I bet Philip made a fat profit out of those windows, William thought sourly.

The church was packed for the Easter service. The market was spreading into the interior of the building, as always happened, and walking up the nave William was offered cold beer, hot gingerbread and a quick fuck up against the wall for threepence. The clergy were forever trying to ban peddlers from churches but it was an impossible task. William exchanged greetings with the more important citizens of the county. But despite the social and commercial distractions William found his eye and his thoughts constantly drawn upward by the sweeping lines of the arcade. The arches and the windows, the piers with their clustered shafts, and the ribs and segments of the vaulted ceiling all seemed to point toward heaven in an inescapable reminder of what the building was for.

The floor was paved, the pillars were painted, and every window was glazed: Kingsbridge and its priory were rich, and the cathedral proclaimed their prosperity. In the small chapels of the transepts were gold candlesticks and jeweled crosses. The citizens also displayed their wealth, with richly colored tunics, silver brooches and buckles, and gold rings.

His eye fell on Aliena.

As always, his heart missed a beat. She was as beautiful as ever, although she had to be over fifty years old now. She still had a mass of curly hair, but it was cut shorter, and seemed to be a lighter shade of brown, as if it had faded a little. She had attractive crinkles at the corners of her eyes. She was a little wider than she used to be, but she was no less desirable. She wore a blue cloak with a red silk lining, and red leather shoes. There was a deferential crowd around her. Although she was not even a countess, merely the sister of an earl, her brother had settled in the Holy Land, and everyone treated her as the earl. She carried herself like a queen.

The sight of her brewed hatred like bile in William's belly. He had ruined her father, raped her, taken her castle, burned her wool and exiled her brother, but every time he thought he had crushed her she came back again, rising from defeat to new heights of power and wealth. Now William was aging and gouty and fat and he realized that he had spent his life in the power of a terrible enchantment.

Beside her was a tall red-haired man whom William at first took for Jack. However, on closer examination the man was obviously too young, and William realized it must be the son of Jack. The boy was dressed as a knight, and carried a sword. Jack himself stood next to his son, an inch or two shorter, his red hair receding at the temples. He was younger than Aliena, of course, by about five years, if William's memory was right, but he, too, had lines around his eyes. He was talking animatedly to a young woman who was surely his daughter. She resembled Aliena, and was just as pretty, but her abundant hair was pulled severely back and plaited, and she was quite plainly dressed. If there was a voluptuous body under that earth-brown tunic she did not want anyone to know it.

Resentment burned in his stomach as he regarded Aliena's prosperous, dignified, happy family. Everything they had should have been his. But he had not given up the hope of revenge.

The voices of several hundred monks were raised in song, drowning the conversations and the cries of the hawkers, and Prior Philip entered the church at the head of a procession. There never used to be this many monks, William thought. The priory had grown along with the town. Philip, now over sixty years old, was almost completely bald, and rather stout, so that his formerly thin face had become quite round. Not surprisingly, he looked pleased with himself: the dedication of this cathedral was the aim he had conceived when he first came to Kingsbridge, thirty-four years ago.

There was a murmur of comment when Bishop Waleran came in, clad in his most gorgeous robes. His pale, angular face was frozen in a stiffly neutral expression, but William knew he was seething inside. This cathedral was the triumphant symbol of Philip's victory over Waleran. William hated Philip too, but all the same he secretly enjoyed seeing the supercilious Bishop Waleran humbled for a change.

Waleran was rarely seen here. A new church had finally been built in Shiring—with a special chapel dedicated to the memory of William's mother—and although it was nowhere near as large or impressive as this cathedral, nevertheless Waleran had made the Shiring church his headquarters.

However, Kingsbridge was still the cathedral church, despite all Waleran's efforts. In a war that had raged over three decades, Waleran had done everything he could to destroy Philip, but in the end Philip had triumphed. They were a bit like William and Aliena. In both cases, weakness and

scruples had defeated strength and ruthlessness. William felt he would never understand it.

The bishop had been obliged to come here today, for the dedication ceremony: it would have looked very peculiar if he had not been here to welcome all the celebrity guests. Several bishops from neighboring dioceses were here, as well as a number of distinguished abbots and priors.

The archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Becket, would not be here. He was in the throes of a quarrel with his old friend, King Henry; a quarrel so bitter and fierce that the archbishop had been forced to flee the country, and had taken refuge in France. They were in conflict over a whole list of legal issues, but the heart of the dispute was simple: Could the king do as he pleased, or was he constrained? It was the dispute William himself had had with Prior Philip. William took the view that the earl could do anything—that was what it meant to be earl. Henry felt the same about kingship. Prior Philip and Thomas Becket were both bent on restricting the power of rulers.

Bishop Waleran was a clergyman who sided with the rulers. For him, power was meant to be used. The defeats of three decades had not shaken his belief that he was the instrument of God's will, nor his ruthless determination to do his holy duty. William felt sure that even while he conducted the consecration service for Kingsbridge Cathedral, he was casting about for some way to spoil Philip's moment of glory.

William moved about throughout the service. Standing was worse for his legs than walking. When he went to Shiring church, Walter carried a chair for him. Then he could doze off for a while. Here, though, there were people to talk to, and much of the congregation used the time to conduct business. William went around ingratiating himself with the powerful, intimidating the weak, and gathering information on all and sundry. He no longer struck terror into the hearts of the population, as he had in the good old days, but as sheriff he was still feared and deferred to.

The service went on interminably. There was a long interval during which the monks went around the outside of the church sprinkling the walls with holy water. Near the end, Prior Philip announced the appointment of a new sub-prior: it was to be Brother Jonathan, the priory orphan. Jonathan, now in his middle thirties and unusually tall, reminded William of old Tom Builder: he too had been something of a giant.

When the service finally ended, the distinguished guests lingered in the south transept, and the minor gentry of the county crowded around to meet them. William limped over to join them. Once upon a time he had treated bishops as his equals, but now he had to bow and scrape with the knights and small landowners. Bishop Waleran drew William aside and said: "Who is that new sub-prior?"

"The priory orphan," William replied. "He's always been a favorite of

Philip's."

"He seems young to be made sub-prior."

"He's older than Philip was when Philip became prior."

Waleran looked thoughtful. "The priory orphan. Remind me of the details."

"When Philip came here he brought a baby with him."

Waleran's face cleared as he remembered. "By the cross, yes! I'd forgotten Philip's baby. How could I have let something like that slip my mind?"

"It is thirty years. And who cares?"

Waleran gave William the scornful look that William hated so much, the look that said *You dumb ox, can't you figure out something that simple?* Pain stabbed his foot, and he shifted his weight in a vain attempt to ease it. Waleran said: "Well, where did the baby come from?"

William swallowed his resentment. "It was found abandoned near his old cell in the forest, if I remember rightly."

"Better and better," Waleran said eagerly.

William still did not see what he was getting at. "So what?" he said sullenly.

"Would you say that Philip has brought the child up as if it was his own son?"

"Yes."

"And now he's made him sub-prior."

"He was elected by the monks, presumably. I believe he's very popular."

"Anyone who is sub-prior at thirty-five must be in line for the post of prior eventually."

William was not going to say *So what?* again so he just waited, feeling like a stupid schoolboy, for Waleran to explain.

At last Waleran said: "Jonathan is obviously Philip's own child."

William burst out laughing. He had been expecting a profound thought, and Waleran had come up with a notion that was totally ludicrous. To William's satisfaction, his scorn brought a slight flush to Waleran's waxy complexion. William said: "No one who knows Philip would believe such a thing. He was born a dried-up old stick. The idea!" He laughed again. Waleran might think he was ever so clever, but this time he had lost his sense of reality.

Waleran's hauteur was icy. "I say Philip used to have a mistress, when he ran that little priory out in the forest. Then he became prior of Kingsbridge and had to leave the woman behind. She didn't want the baby if she couldn't have the father, so she dumped the child on him. Philip, being a sentimental soul, felt obliged to take care of it, so he passed it off as a foundling."

William shook his head. "Unbelievable. Anyone else, yes. Philip, no."

Waleran persisted: “If the baby was abandoned, how can he prove where it came from?”

“He can’t,” William acknowledged. He looked across the south transept to where Philip and Jonathan stood together, talking to the bishop of Hereford. “But they don’t even look alike.”

“You don’t look like your mother,” Waleran said. “Thank God.”

“What good is all this?” William said. “What are you going to do about it?”

“Accuse him before an ecclesiastical court,” Waleran replied.

That made a difference. No one who knew Philip would credit Waleran’s accusation for a moment, but a judge who was a stranger to Kingsbridge might find it more plausible. William saw reluctantly that Waleran’s idea was not so stupid after all. As usual, Waleran was shrewder than William. Waleran was looking irritatingly smug, of course. But William was enthused by the prospect of bringing Philip down. “By God,” he said eagerly. “Do you think it could be done?”

“It depends who the judge is. But I may be able to arrange something there. I wonder…”

William looked across the transept at Philip, triumphant and smiling, with his tall protégé beside him. The vast stained-glass windows threw an enchanted light over them, and they were like figures in a dream. “Fornication and nepotism,” William said gleefully. “My God.”

“If we can make it stick,” Waleran said with relish, “it will be the finish of that damned prior.”

No reasonable judge could possibly find Philip guilty.

The truth was that he had never had to try very hard to resist the temptation of fornication. He knew, from hearing confession, that some monks struggled desperately with fleshly lust, but he was not like that. There had been a time, at the age of about eighteen, when he had suffered impure dreams, but that phase had not lasted long. For most of his life chastity had come easily to him. He had never performed the sexual act and he was now probably too old for it.

However, the Church was taking the accusation very seriously. Philip was to be tried by an ecclesiastical court. An archdeacon from Canterbury would be present. Waleran had wanted the trial to be held at Shiring, but Philip had fought against that, successfully, and it would now be held at Kingsbridge, which was, after all, the cathedral city. Now Philip was clearing his personal possessions out of the prior’s house to make way for the archdeacon, who would be staying here.

Philip knew he was innocent of fornication, and it followed logically that

he could not be guilty of nepotism, for a man cannot favor his sons if he has none. Nevertheless he searched his heart to see whether he had done wrong in promoting Jonathan. Just as impure thoughts were a kind of shadow of a graver sin, perhaps favoritism toward a loved orphan was the shadow of nepotism. Monks were supposed to forgo the consolations of family life, yet Jonathan had been like a son to Philip. Philip had made Jonathan cellarer at a young age, and had now promoted him to sub-prior. Did I do that for my own pride and pleasure? he asked himself.

Well, yes, he thought.

He had taken enormous satisfaction from teaching Jonathan, watching him grow, and seeing him learn how to manage priory affairs. But even if these things had not given Philip such intense pleasure, Jonathan would still have been the ablest young administrator in the priory. He was intelligent, devout, imaginative and conscientious. Brought up in the monastery, he knew no other life, and he never hankered after freedom. Philip himself had been raised in an abbey. We monastery orphans make the best monks, he thought.

He put a book into a satchel: Luke's Gospel, so wise. He had treated Jonathan like a son, but he had not committed any sins worth taking before an ecclesiastical court. The charge was absurd.

Unfortunately, the mere accusation would be damaging. It diminished his moral authority. There would be people who would remember the charge and forget the verdict. Next time Philip stood up and said: "The commandment forbids a man to covet his neighbor's wife," some of the congregation would be thinking *But you had your fun when you were young*.

Jonathan burst in, breathing hard. Philip frowned. The sub-prior ought not to burst into rooms panting. Philip was about to launch into a homily on the dignity of monastic officers, when Jonathan said: "Archdeacon Peter is here already!"

"All right, all right," Philip soothed. "I've just about finished, anyway." He handed Jonathan the satchel. "Take this to the dormitory, and don't rush everywhere: a monastery is a place of peace and quiet."

Jonathan accepted the satchel and the rebuke, but he said: "I don't like the look of the archdeacon."

"I'm sure he'll be a just judge, and that's all we want," Philip said.

The door opened again, and the archdeacon came in. He was a tall, rangy man of about Philip's age, with thinning gray hair and a rather superior look on his face. He seemed vaguely familiar.

Philip offered a handshake, saying: "I'm Prior Philip."

"I know you," the archdeacon said sourly. "Don't you remember me?"

The gravelly voice did it. Philip's heart sank. This was his oldest enemy. "Archdeacon Peter," he said grimly. "Peter of Wareham."

“He was a troublemaker,” Philip explained to Jonathan a few minutes later, when they had left the archdeacon to make himself comfortable in the prior’s house. “He would complain that we didn’t work hard enough, or we ate too well, or the services were too short. He said I was indulgent. He wanted to be prior himself, I’m sure. He would have been a disaster, of course. I made him almoner, so that he had to spend half his time away. I did it just to get rid of him. It was best for the priory and best for him, but I’m sure he still hates me for it, even after thirty-five years.” He sighed. “I heard, when you and I visited St.-John-in-the-Forest after the great famine, that Peter had gone to Canterbury. And now he’s going to sit in judgment on me.”

They were in the cloisters. The weather was mild and the sun was warm. Fifty boys in three different classes were learning to read and write in the north walk, and the subdued murmur of their lessons floated across the quadrangle. Philip remembered when the school had consisted of five boys and a senile novice-master. He thought of all he had done here: the building of the cathedral; the transformation of the impoverished, run-down priory into a wealthy, busy, influential institution; the enlargement of the town of Kingsbridge. In the church, more than a hundred monks were singing mass. From where he sat he could see the astonishingly beautiful stained-glass windows in the clerestory. At his back, off the east walk, was a stone-built library containing hundreds of books on theology, astronomy, ethics, mathematics, indeed, every branch of knowledge. In the outside world the priory’s lands, managed with enlightened self-interest by monastic officers, fed not just the monks but hundreds of farm workers. Was all that to be taken from him by a lie? Would the prosperous and God-fearing priory be handed over to someone else, a pawn of Bishop Waleran’s such as the slimy Archdeacon Baldwin, or a self-righteous fool such as Peter of Wareham, to be run down to penury and depravity as quickly as Philip had built it up? Would the vast flocks of sheep shrink to a handful of scrawny ewes, the farms return to weed-grown inefficiency, the library become dusty with disuse, the beautiful cathedral sink into damp and disrepair? God helped me to achieve so much, he thought; I can’t believe he intended it to come to nothing.

Jonathan said: “All the same, Archdeacon Peter can’t possibly find you guilty.”

“I think he will,” Philip said heavily.

“In all conscience, how can he?”

“I think he’s been nursing a grievance against me all his life, and this is his chance to prove that I was the sinner and he was the righteous man all along. Somehow Waleran found out about that and made sure Peter was appointed to judge this case.”

“But there’s no proof!”

“He doesn’t need proof. He’ll hear the accusation, and the defense; then he’ll pray for guidance, and he’ll announce his verdict.”

“God may guide him aright.”

“Peter won’t listen to God. He’s never been a listener.”

“What will happen?”

“I’ll be deposed,” Philip said grimly. “They may let me continue here as an ordinary monk, to do penance for my sin, but it’s not likely. More probably they will expel me from the order, to prevent my having any further influence here.”

“What would happen then?”

“There would have to be an election, of course. Unfortunately, royal politics enter into the picture now. King Henry is in dispute with the archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Becket, and Archbishop Thomas is in exile in France. Half his archdeacons are with him. The other half, the ones who stayed behind, have sided with the king against their archbishop. Peter obviously belongs to that crowd. Bishop Waleran has also taken the king’s side. Waleran will recommend his choice of prior, backed by the Canterbury archdeacons and the king. It will be hard for the monks here to oppose him.”

“Who do you think it might be?”

“Waleran has someone in mind, rest assured. It could be Archdeacon Baldwin. It might even be Peter of Wareham.”

“We *must* do something to prevent this!” Jonathan said.

Philip nodded. “But everything is against us. There’s nothing we can do to alter the political situation. The only possibility…”

“What?” Jonathan said impatiently.

The case seemed so hopeless that Philip felt there was no point in toying with desperate ideas: it would excite Jonathan’s optimism only to disappoint him. “Nothing,” Philip said.

“What were you going to say?”

Philip was still working it out. “If there was a way to prove my innocence beyond doubt, it would be impossible for Peter to find me guilty.”

“But what would count as proof?”

“Exactly. You can’t prove a negative. We would have to find your real father.”

Jonathan was instantly enthusiastic. “Yes! That’s it! That’s what we’ll do!”

“Slow down,” Philip said. “I tried at the time. It’s not likely to be any easier so many years later.”

Jonathan was not to be discouraged. “Were there no clues at all to where I might have come from?”

“Nothing, I’m afraid.” Philip was now worried that he had raised hopes in

Jonathan which could not be fulfilled. Although the boy had no memories of his parents, the fact that they had abandoned him had always troubled him. Now he thought he might solve the mystery and find some explanation which proved they had loved him really. Philip felt sure this could only lead to frustration.

“Did you question people living nearby?” Jonathan said.

“There was nobody living nearby. That cell is deep in the forest. Your parents probably came from miles away, Winchester perhaps. I’ve been over all this ground already.”

Jonathan persisted. “You didn’t see any travelers in the forest around that time?”

“No.” Philip frowned. Was that true? A stray thought tugged at his memory. The day the baby was found, Philip had left the priory to go to the bishop’s palace, and on his way he had spoken to some people. Suddenly it came back to him. “Well, yes, as a matter of fact, Tom Builder and his family were passing through.”

Jonathan was astonished. “You never told me that!”

“It never seemed important. It still doesn’t. I met them a day or two later. I questioned them, and they said they hadn’t seen anyone who might have been the mother or father of an abandoned baby.”

Jonathan was crestfallen. Philip was afraid this whole line of inquiry was going to prove doubly disappointing to him: he would not find out about his parents and he would fail to prove Philip’s innocence. But there was no stopping him now. “What were they doing in the forest, anyway?” he persisted.

“Tom was on his way to the bishop’s palace. He was looking for work. That’s how they ended up here.”

“I want to question them again.”

“Well, Tom and Alfred are dead. Ellen is living in the forest, and only God knows when she will reappear. But you could talk to Jack or Martha.”

“It’s worth a try.”

Perhaps Jonathan was right. He had the energy of youth. Philip had been pessimistic and discouraging. “Go ahead,” he said to Jonathan. “I’m getting old and tired; otherwise I would have thought of it myself. Talk to Jack. It’s a slender thread to hang on to. But it’s our only hope.”

The design of the window had been drawn, full size, and painted, on a huge wooden table which had been washed with ale to prevent the colors from running. The drawing showed the Tree of Jesse, a genealogy of Christ in picture form. Sally picked up a small piece of thick ruby-colored glass and placed it on the design over the body of one of the kings of Israel—Jack was

not sure which king: he had never been able to remember the convoluted symbolism of theological pictures. Sally dipped a fine brush in a bowl of chalk ground up in water, and painted the shape of the body onto the glass: shoulders, arms, and the skirt of the robe.

In the fire on the ground beside her table was an iron rod with a wooden handle. She took the rod out of the fire and then, quickly but carefully, she ran the red-hot end of the rod around the outline she had painted. The grass cracked neatly along the line. Her apprentice picked up the piece of glass and began to smooth its edges with a grozing iron.

Jack loved to watch his daughter work. She was quick and precise, her movements economical. As a little girl she had been fascinated by the work of the glaziers Jack had brought over from Paris, and she always said that was what she wanted to do when she grew up. She had stuck by that choice. When people came to Kingsbridge Cathedral for the first time, they were more struck by Sally's glass than her father's architecture, Jack thought ruefully.

The apprentice handed the smoothed glass to her, and she began to paint the folds of the robe onto the surface, using a paint made of iron ore, urine, and gum arabic for adhesion. The flat glass suddenly began to look like soft, carelessly draped cloth. She was very skillful. She finished it quickly, then put the painted glass alongside several others in an iron pan, the bottom of which was covered with lime. When the pan was full it would go into an oven. The heat would fuse the paint to the glass.

She looked up at Jack, gave him a brief, dazzling smile, then picked up another piece of glass.

He moved away. He could watch her all day, but he had work to do. He was, as Aliena would say, daft about his daughter. When he looked at her it was often with a kind of amazement that he was responsible for the existence of this clever, independent, mature young woman. He was thrilled that she was such a good crafts-woman.

Ironically, he had always pressured Tommy to be a builder. He had actually forced the boy to work on the site for a couple of years. But Tommy was interested in farming, horsemanship, hunting and swordplay, all the things that left Jack cold. In the end Jack had conceded defeat. Tommy had served as a squire to one of the local lords and had eventually been knighted. Aliena had granted him a small estate of five villages. And Sally had turned out to be the talented one. Tommy was married now, to a younger daughter of the earl of Bedford, and they had three children. Jack was a grandfather. But Sally was still single at the age of twenty-five. There was a lot of her grandmother Ellen in her. She was aggressively self-reliant.

Jack walked around to the west end of the cathedral and looked up at the twin towers. They were almost complete, and a huge bronze bell was on its way here from the foundry in London. There was not much for Jack to do

nowadays. Where he had once controlled an army of muscular stonecutters and carpenters, laying rows of square stones and building scaffolding, he now had a handful of carvers and painters doing precise and painstaking work on a small scale, making statues for niches, building ornamental pinnacles, and gilding the wings of stone angels. There was not much to design, apart from the occasional new building for the priory—a library, a chapter house, more accommodation for pilgrims, new laundry and dairy buildings. In between petty jobs Jack was doing some stone carving himself, for the first time in many years. He was impatient to pull down Tom Builder's old chancel and put up a new east end to his own design, but Prior Philip wanted to enjoy the finished church for a year before beginning another building campaign. Philip was feeling his age. Jack was afraid the old boy might not live to see the chancel rebuilt.

However, the work would be continued after Philip's death, Jack thought as he saw the enormously tall figure of Brother Jonathan striding toward him from the direction of the kitchen courtyard. Jonathan would make a good prior, perhaps even as good as Philip himself. Jack was glad the succession was assured: it enabled him to plan for the future.

"I'm worried about this ecclesiastical court, Jack," said Jonathan without preamble.

Jack said: "I thought that was all a big fuss about nothing."

"So did I—but the archdeacon turns out to be an old enemy of Prior Philip's."

"Hell. But even so, surely he can't find him guilty."

"He can do anything he wants."

Jack shook his head in disgust. He sometimes wondered how men such as Jonathan could continue to believe in the Church when it was so shamelessly corrupt. "What are you going to do?"

"The only way we can prove his innocence is to find out who my parents were."

"It's a bit late for that!"

"It's our only hope."

Jack was somewhat shaken. They were quite desperate. "Where are you going to start?"

"With you. You were in the area of St-John-in-the-Forest at the time I was born."

"Was I?" Jack did not see what Jonathan was getting at. "I lived there until I was eleven, and I must be about eleven years older than you…."

"Father Philip says he met you, with your mother and Tom Builder and Tom's children, the day after I was found."

"I remember that. We ate all Philip's food. We were starving."

"Think hard. Did you see anyone with a baby, or a young woman who

might have been pregnant, anywhere near that area?”

“Wait a minute.” Jack was puzzled. “Are you telling me that you were found near St-John-in-the-Forest?”

“Yes—didn’t you know that?”

Jack could hardly believe his ears. “No, I didn’t know that,” he said slowly. His mind was reeling with the implications of the revelation. “When we arrived in Kingsbridge, you were already here, and I naturally assumed you had been found in the forest near here.” He suddenly felt the need to sit down. There was a pile of building rubble nearby, and he lowered himself onto it.

Jonathan said impatiently: “Well, anyway, did you see anyone in the forest?”

“Oh, yes,” Jack said. “I don’t know how to tell you this, Jonathan.”

Jonathan paled. “You know something about this, don’t you? What did you see?”

“I saw you, Jonathan; that’s what I saw.”

Jonathan’s mouth dropped open. “What…How?”

“It was dawn. I was on a duck-hunting expedition. I heard a cry. I found a newborn baby, wrapped in a cut-up old cloak, lying beside the embers of a dying fire.”

Jonathan stared at him. “Anything else?”

Jack nodded slowly. “The baby was lying on a new grave.”

Jonathan swallowed. “My mother?”

Jack nodded.

Jonathan began to weep, but he kept asking questions. “What did you do?”

“I fetched my mother. But while we were returning to the spot, we saw a priest, riding a palfrey, carrying the baby.”

“Francis,” Jonathan said in a choked voice.

“What?”

He swallowed hard. “I was found by Father Philip’s brother, Francis, the priest.”

“What was he doing there?”

“He was on his way to see Philip at St-John-in-the-Forest. That’s where he took me.”

“My God.” Jack stared at the tall monk with tears streaming down his cheeks. You haven’t heard it all yet, Jonathan, he thought.

Jonathan said: “Did you see anyone who might have been my father?”

“Yes,” Jack said solemnly. “I know who he was.”

“Tell me!” Jonathan whispered.

“Tom Builder.”

“Tom Builder?” Jonathan sat down heavily on the ground. “*Tom Builder*

was my father?”

“Yes.” Jack shook his head in wonderment. “Now I know who you remind me of. You and he are the tallest people I ever met.”

“He was always good to me when I was a child,” Jonathan said in a dazed tone. “He used to play with me. He was fond of me. I saw as much of him as I did of Prior Philip.” His tears flowed freely. “That was my father. My father.” He looked up at Jack. “Why did he abandon me?”

“They thought you were going to die anyway. They had no milk to give you. They were starving themselves, I know. They were miles from anywhere. They didn’t know the priory was nearby. They had no food except turnips, and turnips would have killed you.”

“They did love me, after all.”

Jack saw the scene as if it were yesterday: the dying fire, the freshly turned earth of the new grave, and the tiny pink baby kicking its arms and legs inside the old gray cloak. That little scrap of humanity had grown into the tall man who sat weeping on the ground in front of him. “Oh, yes, they loved you.”

“How come nobody ever spoke of it?”

“Tom was ashamed, of course,” Jack said. “My mother must have known that, and we children sensed it, I suppose. Anyway, it was an unmentionable topic. And we never connected *that* baby with *you*, of course.”

“Tom must have made the connection,” Jonathan said.

“Yes.”

“I wonder why he never took me back?”

“My mother left him quite soon after we came here,” Jack said. He smiled ruefully. “She was hard to please, like Sally. Anyway, that meant Tom would have had to hire a nursemaid to look after you. So I suppose he thought: Why not leave the baby at the monastery? You were well cared for there.”

Jonathan nodded. “By dear old Johnny Eightpence, God rest his soul.”

“Tom probably spent more time with you that way. You were running around the priory close all day and every day, and he was working there. If he’d taken you away from the priory and left you at home with a nursemaid, he’d actually have seen less of you. And I imagine as the years went by, and you grew up as the priory orphan, and seemed happy that way, it felt more and more natural to leave you there. People often give a child to God, anyway.”

“All these years I’ve wondered about my parents,” Jonathan said. Jack’s heart ached for him. “I’ve tried to imagine what they were like, asked God to let me meet them, wondered whether they loved me, questioned why they left me. Now I know that my mother died giving birth to me and my father was close to me all the rest of his life.” He smiled through his tears. “I can’t tell you how happy I am.”

Jack felt close to tears himself. To cover his embarrassment he said: “You look like Tom.”

“Do I?” Jonathan was pleased.

“Don’t you remember how tall he was?”

“All adults were tall then.”

“He had good features, like you. Well-carved. If ever you’d grown a beard, people would have guessed.”

“I remember the day he died,” Jonathan said. “He took me around the fair. We watched the bearbaiting. Then I climbed the wall of the chancel. I was too frightened to come down, so he had to come up and carry me down. Then he saw William’s men coming. He put me in the cloisters. That was the last time I saw him alive.”

“I remember that,” Jack said. “I watched him climb down with you in his arms.”

“He made sure I was safe,” Jonathan said wonderingly.

“Then he took care of the others,” Jack said.

“He really loved me.”

Jack was struck by a thought. “This will make a difference to Philip’s trial, won’t it?”

“I’d forgotten that,” Jonathan said. “Yes, it will. My goodness.”

“Have we got irrefutable proof?” Jack wondered. “I saw the baby, and the priest, but I never actually saw the baby delivered to the little priory.”

“Francis did. But Francis is Philip’s brother, so his evidence is tainted.”

“My mother and Tom went off together that morning,” Jack said, straining his memory. “They said they were going to look for the priest. I bet they went to the priory to make sure the baby was all right.”

“If she would say so in court, that would really sew it up,” Jonathan said eagerly.

“Philip thinks she’s a witch,” Jack pointed out. “Would he let her testify?”

“We could spring it on him. But she hates him, too. Will she testify?”

“I don’t know,” said Jack. “Let’s ask her.”

“Fornication and nepotism?” Jack’s mother cried. “Philip?” She started to laugh. “It’s too absurd!”

“Mother, this is serious,” Jack said.

“Philip couldn’t fornicate if you put him in a barrel with three whores,” she said. “He wouldn’t know what to do!”

Jonathan was looking embarrassed. “Prior Philip is in real trouble, even if the charge is absurd,” he said.

“And why would I help Philip?” she said. “He’s caused me nothing but heartache.”

Jack had been afraid of this. His mother had never forgiven Philip for splitting her and Tom. “Philip did the same to me as he did to you—if I can forgive him, you can.”

“I’m not the forgiving type,” she said.

“Don’t do it for Philip, then—do it for me. I want to continue building at Kingsbridge.”

“Why? The church is finished.”

“I’d like to pull down Tom’s chancel and rebuild it in the new style.”

“Oh, for God’s sake—”

“Mother. Philip is a good prior, and when he goes Jonathan will take over—if you come to Kingsbridge and tell the truth at the trial.”

“I hate courts,” she said. “No good ever comes out of them.”

It was maddening. She held the key to Philip’s trial: she could ensure that he was cleared. But she was a stubborn old woman. Jack was seriously afraid he would not be able to talk her into it.

He decided to try stinging her into consenting. “I suppose it’s a long way to travel, for someone of your age,” he said slyly. “How old are you now—sixty-eight?”

“Sixty-two, and don’t try to provoke me,” she snapped. “I’m fitter than you, my boy.”

It could be true, Jack thought. Her hair was white as snow, and her face was deeply lined, but her startling golden eyes saw just as much as ever they had: as soon as she looked at Jonathan she had known who he was, and she had said: “Well, I’ve no need to ask why you’re here. You’ve found out where you come from, have you? By God, you’re as tall as your father and nearly as broad.” She was also as independent and self-willed as ever.

“Sally is like you,” Jack said.

She was pleased. “Is she?” She smiled. “In what way?”

“In her mulish obstinacy.”

“Huh.” Mother looked cross. “She’ll be all right then.”

Jack decided he might as well beg. “Mother, please—come to Kingsbridge with us and tell the truth.”

“I don’t know,” she said.

Jonathan said: “I have something else to ask you.”

Jack wondered what was coming. He was afraid Jonathan might say something to antagonize his mother: it was easily done, especially by clergymen. He held his breath.

Jonathan said: “Could you show me where my mother is buried?”

Jack let his breath out silently. There was nothing wrong with *that*. Indeed, Jonathan could hardly have thought of anything more likely to soften her.

She dropped her scornful manner immediately. “Of course I’ll show you,”

she said. “I’m pretty sure I could find it.”

Jack was reluctant to spend the time. The trial would start in the morning and they had a long way to go. But he sensed that he should let fate take its course.

Mother said to Jonathan: “Do you want to go there now?”

“Yes, please, if it’s possible.”

“All right.” She stood up. She picked up a short cape of rabbit fur and slung it across her shoulders. Jack was about to tell her she would be too warm in that, but he held back: old people always felt colder.

They left the cave, with its smell of stored apples and wood smoke, and pushed through the concealing vegetation around its mouth to emerge into the spring sunshine. Mother set off without hesitation. Jack and Jonathan untied their horses and followed. They had to lead their mounts, for the terrain was too overgrown for riding. Jack noticed that his mother walked more slowly than she used to. She was not as fit as she pretended.

Jack could not have found the site on his own. There had been a time when he could find his way around this forest as easily as he could now move around Kingsbridge. But one clearing looked very much like another to him these days, just as the houses of Kingsbridge would all look the same to a stranger. Mother followed a chain of animal trails through the dense woodland. Now and again Jack would recognize a landmark associated with some childhood memory: an enormous old oak where he had once taken refuge from a wild boar; a rabbit warren that had provided many a dinner; a trout stream where, it seemed in retrospect, he had been able to catch fat fish in no time. For a while he would know where he was, then he would be lost again. It was amazing to think he had once felt totally at home in what was now an alien place, its brooks and thickets as meaningless to him as his voussoirs and templates were to peasants. If he had ever wondered, in those days, how his life would turn out, his best guess would have been nowhere near the truth.

They walked several miles. It was a warm spring day, and Jack found himself sweating, but Mother kept the rabbit fur on. Toward midafternoon she came to a halt in a shady clearing. Jack noticed she was breathing hard and looking a little gray. It was definitely time she left the forest, and came to live with him and Aliena. He resolved that he would make a big effort to persuade her.

“Are you all right?” he said.

“Of course I’m all right,” she snapped. “We’re there.”

Jack looked around. He did not recognize it.

Jonathan said: “Is this it?”

“Yes,” Mother said.

Jack said: “Where’s the road?”

“Over there.”

When Jack had oriented himself with the road, the clearing began to look familiar, and he was flooded with a powerful sense of the past. There was the big horse-chestnut tree: it had been bare of leaves, then, and there had been conkers all over the forest floor, but now the tree was in blossom, with big white flowers like candles all over it. The blossom had started to fall already, and every few moments a cloud of petals drifted down.

“Martha told me what had happened,” Jack said. “They stopped here because your mother could go no farther. Tom made a fire and boiled some turnips for supper: there was no meat. Your mother gave birth to you right here, on the ground. You were perfectly healthy, but something went wrong, and she died.” There was a slight rise in the ground a few feet from the base of the tree. “Look,” Jack said. “See the mound?”

Jonathan nodded, his face taut with suppressed emotion.

“That’s the grave.” As Jack spoke, a drift of blossom fell from the tree and settled over the mound like a carpet of petals.

Jonathan knelt beside the grave and began to pray.

Jack stood silent. He remembered when he had discovered his relatives in Cherbourg: it had been a devastating experience. What Jonathan was going through must be even more intense.

Eventually Jonathan stood up. “When I’m prior,” he said solemnly, “I’m going to build a little monastery just here, with a chapel and a hostel, so that in future no traveler on this stretch of road will ever have to spend a cold winter’s night sleeping in the open air. I’ll dedicate the hostel to the memory of my mother.” He looked at Jack. “I don’t suppose you ever knew her name, did you?”

“It was Agnes,” Ellen said softly. “Your mother’s name was Agnes.”

Bishop Waleran made a persuasive case.

He began by telling the court about Philip’s precocious development: cellarer of his monastery when he was only twenty-one, prior of the cell of St-John-in-the-Forest at twenty-three; prior of Kingsbridge at the remarkably young age of twenty-eight. He constantly emphasized Philip’s youth and managed to suggest there was something arrogant about anyone who accepted responsibility early. Then he described St.-John-in-the-Forest, its remoteness and isolation, and spoke of the freedom and independence of whoever was its prior. “Who can be surprised,” he said, “that after five years as virtually his own master, with only the lightest and most distant kind of supervision, this inexperienced, warm-blooded young man had a child?” It sounded almost inevitable. Waleran was infuriatingly credible. Philip wanted to strangle him.

Waleran went on to say how Philip had brought Jonathan and Johnny

Eightpence with him when he came to Kingsbridge. The monks had been startled, Waleran said, when their new prior arrived with a baby and a nurse. That was true. For a moment Philip forgot his tension, and had to suppress a nostalgic smile.

Philip had played with Jonathan as a youngster, taught him lessons, and later made the lad his personal assistant, Waleran went on, just as any man would do with his own son, except that monks were not supposed to have sons. “Jonathan was precocious, just like Philip,” Waleran said. “When Cuthbert Whitehead died, Philip made Jonathan cellarer, even though Jonathan was only twenty-one. Was there really no one else who could be cellarer, in this monastery of more than a hundred monks; no one but a boy of twenty-one? Or was Philip giving preference to his own flesh and blood? When Milius went off to be prior at Glastonbury, Philip made Jonathan treasurer. He is thirty-four years old. Is he the wisest and most devout of all the monks here? Or is he simply Philip’s favorite?”

Philip looked around at the court. It was being held in the south transept of Kingsbridge Cathedral. Archdeacon Peter sat on a large, ornately carved chair like a throne. All of Waleran’s staff were present, as were most of the monks of Kingsbridge. There would be little work done in the monastery while the prior was on trial. Every important churchman in the county was here, even some of the humble parish priests. There were also representatives from neighboring dioceses. The entire ecclesiastical community of southern England was waiting for the verdict of this court. They were not very interested in Philip’s virtue, or lack of it, of course: they were following the final trial of strength between Prior Philip and Bishop Waleran.

When Waleran sat down Philip took the oath, then began to tell the story of that winter morning so long ago. He started with the upset caused by Peter of Wareham: he wanted everyone to know that Peter was prejudiced against him. Then he called Francis to tell how the baby was found.

Jonathan had gone off, leaving a message to say that he was on the track of new information about his parentage. Jack had disappeared too, from which Philip had concluded that the trip had something to do with Jack’s mother, the witch Ellen, and that Jonathan had been afraid that if he stayed to explain, Philip would have forbidden the journey. They had been due back this morning, but had not yet arrived. Philip did not think Ellen would have anything to add to the story Francis was telling.

When Francis had done, Philip began to speak. “That baby was not mine,” he said simply. “I swear it was not mine, in peril of my immortal soul I swear it. I have never had carnal knowledge of a woman, and I remain to this day in that state of chastity commended to us by the Apostle Paul. So why, the lord bishop asks, did I treat the babe as if it were my own?”

He looked around at the listeners. He had decided that his only chance

was to tell the truth and hope that God would speak loud enough to overcome Peter's spiritual deafness. "When I was six years old, my father and mother died. They were killed by soldiers of the old King Henry, in Wales. My brother and I were saved by the abbot of a nearby monastery, and from that day onward we were cared for by monks. I was a monastery orphan. I know what it's like. I understand how the orphan yearns for a mother's touch, even though he loves the brothers who care for him. I knew that Jonathan would feel abnormal, peculiar, illegitimate. I have felt that feeling of isolation, the sense that I am different from everyone else because they all have a father and a mother and I do not. Like him, I have felt ashamed of myself for being a burden on the charity of others; have wondered what was wrong with me, that I should have been deprived of what others took for granted. I knew that he would dream, in the night, of the warm, fragrant bosom and soft voice of a mother he never knew, someone who loved him utterly and completely."

Archdeacon Peter's face was like stone. He was the worst kind of Christian, Philip realized: he embraced all of the negatives, enforced every proscription, insisted on all forms of denial, and demanded strict punishment for every offense; yet he ignored all the compassion of Christianity, denied its mercy, flagrantly disobeyed its ethic of love, and openly flouted the gentle laws of Jesus. That's what the Pharisees were like, Philip thought; no wonder the Lord preferred to eat with publicans and sinners.

He went on, although he understood, with a sinking heart, that nothing he could say would penetrate the armor of Peter's righteousness. "Nobody could care for that boy as I could, unless it were his own parents; and those we never could find. What clearer indication of God's will…." He tailed off. Jonathan had just come into the church, with Jack; and between them was the witch, Jack's mother.

She had aged: her hair was snow-white, and her face was deeply lined. But she walked in like a queen, her head held high, her strange golden eyes blazing with defiance. Philip was too surprised to protest.

The court was silent as she entered the transept and stood facing Archdeacon Peter. She spoke in a voice that rang like a trumpet, and echoed from the clerestory of her son's church. "I swear by all that is holy that Jonathan is the son of Tom Builder, my dead husband, and his first wife."

There was an astonished clamor from the crowd of clergy. For a while nobody could be heard. Philip was completely bowled over. He stared openmouthed at Ellen. Tom Builder? Jonathan was the son of Tom Builder? When he looked at Jonathan he knew immediately that it was true: they were alike, not just in their height, but facially. If Jonathan had had a beard it would have been obvious.

His first reaction was a sense of loss. Until now, he had been the nearest Jonathan had to a father. But Tom was Jonathan's real father, and although

Tom was dead, the discovery changed everything. Philip could no longer secretly think of himself as a father; Jonathan would no longer feel like his son. Jonathan was Tom's son now. Philip had lost him.

Philip sat down heavily. When the crowd began to quiet down, Ellen told the story of Jack hearing a cry and finding a newborn baby. Philip listened, dazed, as she told how she and Tom had hidden in the bushes, watching, as Philip and the monks came back from their morning's work to find Francis waiting for them with a newborn baby, and Johnny Eightpence trying to feed it with a rag dipped into a bucket of goat's milk.

Philip remembered very clearly how interested the young Tom had been, a day or so later, when they had met by accident and Philip had told him about the abandoned baby. Philip had assumed his interest was that of any compassionate man in a touching story, but in fact Tom had been learning the fate of his own child.

Then Philip recalled how fond Tom had been of Jonathan in later years, as the baby turned into a toddler and then a mischievous boy. Nobody had remarked on it: the whole monastery had treated Jonathan as a pet in those days and Tom spent all his time in the priory close, so his behavior was completely unremarkable; but now, in retrospect, Philip could see that the attention Tom paid to Jonathan was special.

As Ellen sat down, Philip realized that he had been proved innocent. Ellen's revelations had been so devastating that he had almost forgotten he was on trial. Her story of childbirth and death, desperation and hope, ancient secrets and enduring love, made the question of Philip's chastity seem trivial. It was not trivial, of course; the future of the priory hung on it; and Ellen had now answered the question so dramatically that it seemed impossible the trial should continue. Even Peter of Wareham can't find me guilty after evidence like this, Philip thought. Waleran had lost again.

Waleran was not quite ready to concede defeat, however. He pointed an accusing finger at Ellen. "You say Tom Builder told you that the baby brought to the cell was his."

"Yes," Ellen said warily.

"But the other two people who might have been able to confirm this—the children Alfred and Martha—did not accompany you to the monastery."

"No."

"And Tom is dead. So we only have your word for it that Tom said this to you. Your story cannot be verified."

"How much verification do you want?" she said spiritedly. "Jack saw the abandoned baby. Francis picked it up. Jack and I met Tom and Alfred and Martha. Francis took the baby to the priory. Tom and I spied on the priory. How many witnesses would satisfy you?"

"I don't believe you," Waleran said.

“You don’t believe me?” Ellen said, and suddenly Philip could see she was angry, deeply and passionately angry. “*You* don’t believe me? You, Waleran Bigod, whom I know to be a perjurer?”

What on earth was coming now? Philip had a premonition of cataclysm. Waleran had blanched. There’s something more here, Philip thought; something Waleran is afraid of. He felt an excited fluttering in his belly. Waleran had a vulnerable look all of a sudden.

Philip said to Ellen: “How do you know the bishop to be a perjurer?”

“Forty-seven years ago, in this very priory, there was a prisoner called Jack Shareburg,” Ellen said.

Waleran interrupted her. “This court isn’t interested in events that took place so long ago.”

Philip said: “Yes it is. The accusation against me refers to an alleged act of fornication thirty-five years ago, my lord bishop. You have demanded that I prove my innocence. The court will now expect no less of you.” He turned to Ellen. “Continue.”

“No one knew why he was a prisoner, least of all himself; but the time came when he was set free, and given a jeweled cup, perhaps as recompense for the years he had been unjustly confined. He didn’t want a jeweled cup, of course: he had no use for it, and it was too precious to be sold at a market. He left it behind, in the old cathedral here at Kingsbridge. Soon afterward he was arrested—by Waleran Bigod, who was then a plain country priest, humble but ambitious—and the cup mysteriously reappeared in Jack’s bag. Jack Shareburg was falsely accused of stealing the cup. He was convicted on the oaths of three people: Waleran Bigod, Percy Hamleigh, and Prior James of Kingsbridge. And he was hanged.”

There was a moment’s stunned silence, then Philip said: “How do you know all this?”

“I was Jack Shareburg’s only friend, and he was the father of my son, Jack Jackson, the master builder of this cathedral.”

There was uproar. Waleran and Peter were both trying to speak at the same time but neither could be heard over the astonished hubbub of the assembled clergymen. They came to see a showdown, Philip thought, but they never expected this.

Eventually Peter made himself heard. “Why would three law-abiding citizens conspire to falsely accuse an innocent stranger?” he said skeptically.

“For gain,” Ellen said. “Waleran Bigod was made an archdeacon. Percy was given the manor of Hamleigh and several other villages, and became a man of property. I don’t know what reward was received by Prior James.”

“I can answer that,” said a new voice.

Philip looked around, startled: the speaker was Remigius. He was well past his seventieth year, white-haired and inclined to ramble when he talked;

but now, as he stood up with the help of a walking stick, his eyes were bright and his expression alert. It was rare to hear him speak publicly: since his downfall and return to the monastery he had lived a quiet and humble life. Philip wondered what was coming. Whose side was Remigius going to take? Would he seize a last opportunity to stab his old enemy Philip in the back?

"I can tell you what reward Prior James received," Remigius said. "The priory was given the villages of Northwold, Southwold and Hundredacre, plus the forest of Oldean."

Philip was aghast. Could it be true that the old prior had given false testimony, under oath, for the sake of a few villages?

"Prior James was never a good manager," Remigius went on. "The priory was in difficulty, and he thought the extra income would help us out." Remigius paused, then said incisively: "It did little good and much harm. The income was useful for a while, but Prior James never recovered his self-respect."

Listening to Remigius, Philip recalled the stooped, defeated air of the old prior, and at last understood it.

Remigius said: "James had not actually perjured himself, for he swore only that the cup belonged to the priory; but he knew Jack Shareburg was innocent, yet he remained silent. He regretted that silence for the rest of his life."

He would, Philip thought; it was such a venal sin for a monk. Remigius's testimony confirmed Ellen's story—and condemned Waleran.

Remigius was still speaking. "A few of the older ones here today will remember what the priory was like forty years ago: rundown, penniless, decrepit, demoralized. That was because of the weight of guilt hanging over the prior. When he was dying, he finally confessed his sin to me. I wanted—" Remigius broke off. The church was silent, waiting. The old man sighed and resumed. "I wanted to take over his position and repair the damage. But God chose another man for that task." He paused again, and his old face worked painfully as he struggled to finish. "I should say: God chose a better man." He sat down abruptly.

Philip was shocked, bemused and grateful. Two old enemies, Ellen and Remigius, had rescued him. The revelation of these ancient secrets made him feel as if he had been living with one eye closed. Bishop Waleran was livid with rage. He must have felt sure he was safe after all these years. He was leaning over Peter, speaking into the archdeacon's ear, while a buzz of comment rose from the audience.

Peter stood up and shouted: "Silence!" The church went quiet. "This court is closed!" he said.

"Wait a minute!" It was Jack Jackson. "That's not good enough!" he said passionately. "I want to know *why*."

Ignoring Jack, Peter walked toward the door that led into the cloisters, and Waleran followed him.

Jack went after them. “Why did you do it?” he shouted at Waleran. “You lied on oath, and a man died—are you going to walk out of here without another word?”

Waleran looked straight ahead, white-faced, tight-lipped, his expression a mask of suppressed rage. As he went through the door Jack yelled: “Answer me, you lying corrupt worthless coward! Why did you kill my father?”

Waleran walked out of the church and the door slammed behind him.

Chapter 18

THE LETTER FROM KING HENRY arrived while the monks were in chapter.

Jack had built a big new chapter house to accommodate the one hundred and fifty monks—the largest number in a single monastery in all England. The round building had a stone vaulted ceiling and tiers of steps for the monks to sit on. Monastic officers sat on stone benches around the walls, a little above the level of the rest; and Philip and Jonathan had carved stone thrones against the wall opposite the door.

A young monk was reading the seventh chapter of the Rule of Saint Benedict. “The sixth step of humility is reached when a monk is content with all that is mean and vile….” Philip realized he did not know the name of the monk who was reading. Was that because he was getting old, or because the monastery was so big? “The seventh step of humility is reached when a man not only confesses with his tongue that he is most lowly and inferior to others, but in his inmost heart believes so.” Philip knew he had not yet reached that stage of humility. He had achieved a great deal in his sixty-two years, and he had achieved it through courage and determination and the use of his brain; and he needed to remind himself constantly that the real reason for his success was that he had enjoyed the help of God, without which all his efforts would have come to nothing.

Beside him, Jonathan shifted restlessly. Jonathan had even more trouble with the virtue of humility than Philip did. Arrogance was the vice of good leaders. Jonathan was ready to take over the priory now, and he was impatient. He had been talking to Aliena, and he was eager to try out her farming techniques, such as plowing with horses, and planting spring crops of peas and oats on part of the fallow land. I was just the same about raising sheep for wool, thirty-five years ago, Philip thought.

He knew he should step down and let Jonathan take over as prior. He himself should spend his declining years in prayer and meditation. It was a course he had often prescribed for others. But now that he was old enough to

retire, the prospect appalled him. His constitution was as sound as a bell and his mind was as lively as ever. A life of prayer and meditation would drive him mad.

However, Jonathan would not wait forever. God had given him the skills to run a major monastery, and he was not planning to waste his talents. He had visited numerous abbeys over the years, and made a good impression wherever he went. One of these days, when an abbot died, the monks would ask Jonathan to stand for election, and it would be hard for Philip to refuse permission.

The young monk whose name Philip could not remember was just finishing the chapter when there was a knock on the door and the gatekeeper came in. Brother Steven, the circuitor, frowned at him: he was not supposed to disturb the monks in chapter. The circuitor was responsible for discipline, and like all such men Steven was a stickler for the rules.

The gatekeeper said in a loud whisper: “There’s a messenger from the king!”

Philip said to Jonathan: “See to it, would you?” The messenger would insist on handing his letter to a senior monastic officer. Jonathan went out. The monks were all whispering to one another. Philip said firmly: “We will continue with the necrology.”

As the prayers for the dead began, he wondered what the second King Henry had to say to Kingsbridge Priory. It was not likely to be good news. Henry had been at loggerheads with the Church for six long years. The quarrel had started over the jurisdiction of ecclesiastical courts, but the willfulness of the king and the zeal of the archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Becket, had prevented compromise, and a dispute had grown into a crisis. Becket had been forced into exile.

Sadly, the English Church was not unanimous in supporting him. Bishops such as Waleran Bigod took the king’s side in order to gain royal favor. However, the pope was putting pressure on Henry to make peace with Becket. Perhaps the worst consequence of the whole dispute was that Henry’s need for support within the English Church gave power-hungry bishops such as Waleran greater influence at court. That was why a letter from the king was even more ominous than usual to Philip.

Jonathan returned and handed Philip a roll of vellum fastened with wax, the wax impressed with the mark of an enormous royal seal. All the monks were looking. Philip decided it was too much to ask them to concentrate on praying for dead people when he had such a letter in his hand. “All right,” he said. “We’ll continue the prayers later.” He broke the seal and opened the letter. He glanced at the salutation, then handed the letter to Jonathan, whose young eyes were better. “Read it to us, please.”

After the usual greetings, the king wrote: “As the new Bishop of Lincoln,

I have nominated Waleran Bigod, currently Bishop of Kingsbridge…” Jonathan’s voice was drowned by the buzz of comment. Philip shook his head disgustedly. Waleran had lost all credibility locally since the revelations at the trial of Philip: there was no way he could continue as bishop. So he had persuaded the king to nominate him bishop of Lincoln—one of the richest bishoprics in the world. Lincoln was the third most important diocese in the kingdom, after Canterbury and York. From there it was only a short step to an archbishopric. Henry might even be grooming Waleran to take over from Thomas Becket. The thought of Waleran as archbishop of Canterbury, leader of the English Church, was so appalling that Philip felt sick with fear.

When the monks calmed down Jonathan resumed: “…and I have recommended the Dean and Chapter of Lincoln to elect him.” Well, that was easier said than done, Philip thought. A royal recommendation was almost an order, but not quite: if the chapter at Lincoln took against Waleran, or if they had a candidate of their own, they would give the king trouble. The king would probably get his way in the end but it was not a foregone conclusion.

Jonathan went on: “I order you, the Chapter of the Priory of Kingsbridge, to hold an election for the new Bishop of Kingsbridge; and I recommend you to elect as Bishop my servant Peter of Wareham, Archdeacon of Canterbury.”

A collective shout of protest went up from the assembled monks. Philip went cold with horror. The arrogant, resentful, self-righteous Archdeacon Peter was the king’s choice as the new bishop of Kingsbridge! Peter was exactly the same type as Waleran. Both men were genuinely pious and God-fearing, but had no sense of their own fallibility, so they saw their own wishes as God’s will, and pursued their aims with utter ruthlessness in consequence. With Peter as bishop, Jonathan would spend his life as prior battling for justice and decency in a county ruled with an iron fist by a man with no heart. And if Waleran became archbishop there would be no prospect of relief.

Philip saw a long dark age ahead, like the worst period of the civil war, when earls of William’s type did as they pleased while arrogant priests neglected their people and the priory shrank once again to an impoverished and enfeebled shadow of its former self. The thought angered him.

He was not the only angry one. Steven Circuitor stood up, redfaced, and shouted, “It shall not be!,” at the top of his voice, despite Philip’s rule that in chapter everyone must speak calmly and quietly.

The monks cheered, but Jonathan proved his wisdom by asking the crucial question: “What can we do?”

Bernard Kitchener, fat as ever, said: “We must refuse the king’s request!”

Several monks voiced their agreement.

Steven said: “We should write to the king saying we will elect whom we please!” After a moment he added sheepishly: “With God’s guidance, of course.”

Jonathan said: “I don’t agree that we should refuse point-blank. The quicker we are to defy the king, the sooner we will bring his wrath down on our heads.”

Philip said: “Jonathan is right. A man who loses a battle with his king may be forgiven, but a man who wins such a battle is doomed.”

Steven burst out: “But you’re just giving in!”

Philip was as worried and fearful as all the others, but he had to appear calm. “Steven, be temperate, please,” he said. “We must fight against this awful appointment, of course. But we will do it carefully and cleverly, always avoiding open confrontation.”

Steven said: “But what are you going to *do*?”

“I’m not sure,” Philip said. He had been despondent at first, but now he was beginning to feel aggressive. He had fought this battle over and over again, all his life. He had fought it here in the priory, when he defeated Remigius and became prior; he had fought it in the county, against William Hamleigh and Waleran Bigod; and now he was going to fight it nationally. He was going to take on the king.

“I think I’ll have to go to France,” he said. “To see Archbishop Thomas Becket.”

In every other crisis, throughout his life, Philip had been able to come up with a plan. Whenever he or his priory or his town had been threatened by the forces of lawlessness and savagery, he had thought of some form of defense or counterattack. He had not always been sure of success but he had never been at a loss to know what to do—until now.

He was still baffled when he arrived at the city of Sens, southeast of Paris in the Kingdom of France.

The cathedral at Sens was the widest building he had ever seen. The nave had to be fifty feet across. By comparison with Kingsbridge Cathedral, Sens gave an impression of space rather than light.

Traveling through France, for the first time in his life he had realized there were more varieties of church in the world than he had previously imagined, and he understood the revolutionary effect travel had had on Jack Jackson’s thinking. Philip made sure to visit the abbey church of Saint-Denis when he passed through Paris, and he had seen where Jack got some of his ideas. He had also seen two churches with flying buttresses like those at Kingsbridge: obviously other master masons had been confronted with the problem Jack had faced, and had come up with the same solution.

Philip went to pay his respects to the archbishop of Sens, William Whitehands, a brilliant young clergyman who was the nephew of the late King Stephen. Archbishop William invited Philip to dinner. Philip was

flattered, but he declined the invitation: he had come a long way to see Thomas Becket and now that he was so close he was impatient. After attending mass in the cathedral he followed the River Yonne northward out of the town.

He was traveling light, for the prior of one of the wealthiest monasteries in England: he had with him only two men-at-arms for protection, a young monk called Michael of Bristol as his aide, and a packhorse loaded with holy books, copied and beautifully illustrated in the scriptorium at Kingsbridge, to use as gifts for the abbots and bishops he called on during the journey. The costly books made impressive presents and contrasted sharply with the modesty of Philip's entourage. This was deliberate: he wanted people to respect the priory, not the prior.

Just outside the north gate of Sens, in a sunny meadow by the river, he found the venerable abbey of Sainte-Colombe, where Archbishop Thomas had been living for the past three years. One of Thomas's priests greeted him warmly, called servants to take care of his horses and baggage, and ushered him into the guesthouse where the archbishop was staying. It occurred to Philip that the exiles must be glad to receive visitors from home, not just for sentimental reasons, but because it was a sign of support.

Philip and his aide were given food and wine and introduced to Thomas's household. His men were all priests, mostly young and—Philip thought—rather clever. Within a short while Michael was arguing with one of them about transubstantiation. Philip sipped a cup of wine and listened without taking part. Eventually one of the priests said to him: "What's your view, Father Philip? You haven't said anything yet."

Philip smiled. "Knotty theological questions are the least worrying of problems, to me."

"Why?"

"Because they will all be resolved in the hereafter, and meanwhile they can safely be shelved."

"Well spoken!" said a new voice, and Philip looked up to see Archbishop Thomas of Canterbury.

He was immediately aware of being in the presence of a remarkable man. Thomas was tall, slender and exceptionally handsome, with a wide forehead, bright eyes, fair skin and dark hair. He was about ten years younger than Philip, around fifty or fifty-one. Despite his misfortunes he had a lively, cheerful expression. He was, Philip saw instantly, a very *attractive* man; and this partly explained his remarkable rise from humble beginnings.

Philip knelt and kissed his hand.

Thomas said: "I'm so glad to make your acquaintance! I've always wanted to visit Kingsbridge—I've heard so much about your priory and the marvelous new cathedral."

Philip was charmed and flattered. He said: “I’ve come to see you because everything we’ve achieved has been put in peril by the king.”

“I want to hear all about it, right away,” Thomas said. “Come into my chamber.” He turned around and swept out.

Philip followed, feeling at once pleased and apprehensive.

Thomas led him into a smaller room. There was a costly leather-and-wood bed covered with fine linen sheets and an embroidered quilt, but Philip also saw a thin mattress rolled up in a corner, and he recalled stories that Thomas never used the luxurious furniture provided by his hosts. Remembering his own comfortable bed in Kingsbridge, Philip suffered a pang of guilt to think that he snored in comfort while the primate of all England slept on the floor.

“Speaking of cathedrals,” said Thomas, “what did you think of Sens?”

“Amazing,” Philip said. “Who’s the master builder?”

“William of Sens. I’m hoping to lure him to Canterbury one day. Sit down. Tell me what’s happening in Kingsbridge.”

Philip told Thomas about Bishop Waleran and Archdeacon Peter. Thomas appeared deeply interested in everything Philip said, and asked several perceptive questions. As well as charm, he had brains. He had needed both, to rise to a position from which he could frustrate the will of one of the strongest kings England had ever had. Underneath his archbishop’s robes, it was rumored, Thomas wore a hair shirt; and beneath that charming exterior, Philip reminded himself, there was a will of iron.

When Philip had finished his story, Thomas looked grave. “This must not be allowed to happen,” he said.

“Indeed,” Philip said. Thomas’s firm tone was encouraging. “Can you stop it?”

“Only if I’m restored to Canterbury.”

That was not the answer Philip had been hoping for. “But can’t you write to the pope, even now?”

“I will,” Thomas said. “Today. The pope will not recognize Peter as bishop of Kingsbridge, I promise you. But we can’t stop him from sitting in the bishop’s palace. And we can’t appoint another man.”

Philip was shocked and demoralized by the decisiveness of Thomas’s negative. All the way here he had nursed the hope that Thomas would do what he had failed to do, and come up with a way to frustrate Waleran’s scheme. But the brilliant Thomas was also stumped. All he could offer was the hope that he would be reinstated at Canterbury. Then, of course, he would have the power to veto episcopal appointments. Philip said dejectedly: “Is there any hope you’ll come back soon?”

“Some hope, if you’re an optimist,” Thomas replied. “The pope has devised a peace treaty which he urges me and Henry to agree to. The terms

are acceptable to me: the treaty gives me what I've been campaigning for. Henry says it is acceptable to him. I have insisted that he demonstrate his sincerity by giving me the kiss of peace. He refuses." As he spoke, Thomas's voice changed. The natural rise and fall of conversation flattened out and became an insistent monotone. All the vivacity went out of his face, and he took on the look of a priest delivering a sermon on self-denial to a heedless congregation. Philip saw in his expression the stubbornness and pride that had kept him fighting all these years. "The refusal of the kiss is a sign that he plans to lure me back to England and then renege on the terms of the agreement."

Philip nodded. The kiss of peace, which was part of the ritual of the mass, was the symbol of trust, and no contract, from a wedding to a truce, was complete without it. "What can I do?" he said, as much to himself as to Thomas.

"Go back to England and campaign for me," Thomas said. "Write letters to your fellow priors and abbots. Send a delegation from Kingsbridge to the pope. Petition the king. Preach sermons in your famous cathedral, telling the people of the county that their most senior priest has been spurned by their king."

Philip nodded. He was going to do nothing of the kind. Thomas was telling him to line up with the opposition to the king. That might do Thomas's morale some good but it would achieve nothing for Kingsbridge.

Philip had a better idea. If Henry and Thomas were this close it might not take much to push them together. Perhaps, Philip thought hopefully, there was something he could do. The idea excited his optimism. It was a long shot, but he had nothing to lose.

After all, they were only arguing about a kiss.

Philip was shocked to see how his brother had aged.

Francis's hair was gray, there were leathery bags under his eyes, and the skin of his face looked desiccated. However, he was sixty years old, so perhaps it was not surprising. And he was bright-eyed and sprightly.

Philip realized that what was bothering him was his own age. As always, seeing his brother made him aware of how he himself must have aged. He had not looked in a mirror for years. He wondered if he had bags under his eyes. He touched his face. It was hard to tell.

"What's Henry like to work for?" Philip asked, curious, as everyone was, to know what kings were like in private.

"Better than Maud," Francis said. "She was cleverer, but too devious. Henry is very open. You always know what he's thinking."

They were sitting in the cloisters of a monastery at Bayeux, where Philip

was staying. King Henry's court was billeted nearby. Francis was still working for Henry, as he had for the last twenty years. He was now head of the chancery, the office that wrote out all the royal letters and charters. It was an important and powerful post.

Philip said: "Open? Henry? Archbishop Thomas doesn't think so."

"Yet another major error of judgment on Thomas's part," Francis said scornfully.

Philip thought Francis ought not to be so contemptuous of the archbishop. "Thomas is a great man," he said.

"Thomas wants to be king," Francis snapped.

"And Henry seems to want to be archbishop," Philip rejoined.

They glared at one another for a moment. If we're having a row already, Philip thought, it's no surprise that Henry and Thomas are fighting so fiercely. He smiled and said: "Well, you and I shouldn't quarrel about it, anyway."

Francis's face softened. "No, of course not. Remember, this dispute has been the plague of my life for six years now. I can't be as detached about it as you."

Philip nodded. "But why won't Henry accept the pope's peace plan?"

"He will," Francis said. "We're a whisker away from reconciliation. But Thomas wants more. He's insisting on the kiss of peace."

"But if the king is sincere, surely he should give the kiss of peace as a surety?"

Francis raised his voice. "It's not in the plan!" he said in an exasperated tone.

"But why not give it anyway?" Philip argued.

Francis sighed. "He would gladly. But he once swore an oath, in public, never to give Thomas the kiss of peace."

"Plenty of kings have broken oaths," Philip argued.

"Weak kings. Henry won't go back on a public oath. That's the kind of thing that makes him different from the wretched King Stephen."

"Then the Church probably shouldn't try to persuade him otherwise," Philip conceded reluctantly.

"So why is Thomas so insistent on the kiss?" Francis said in an exasperated tone.

"Because he doesn't trust Henry. What is to stop Henry from reneging on the deal? What could Thomas do about it? Go into exile again? His supporters have been staunch, but they're weary. Thomas can't go through all this again. So, before he yields, he must have iron guarantees."

Francis shook his head sadly. "It's become a question of pride, now, though," he said. "I know Henry has no intention of double-crossing Thomas. But he won't be compelled. He hates to feel coerced."

"It's the same with Thomas, I think," Philip said. "He's asked for this

token, and he can't back down." He shook his head wearily. He had thought that Francis might be able to suggest a way to bring the two men together, but the task looked impossible.

"The irony of the whole thing is that Henry would gladly kiss Thomas *after* they're reconciled," Francis said. "He just won't accept it as a precondition."

"Did he say that?" said Philip.

"Yes."

"But that changes everything!" Philip said excitedly. "What did he say, exactly?"

"He said: 'I'll kiss his mouth, I'll kiss his feet, and I'll hear him say mass—after he comes back.' I heard him myself."

"I'm going to tell Thomas this."

"Do you think he might accept that?" Francis said eagerly.

"I don't know." Philip hardly dared to hope. "It seems such a small climb-down. He gets the kiss—it's just a little later than he wanted it."

"And for Henry, a similar small climb-down," Francis said with rising excitement. "He gives the kiss, but voluntarily, rather than under compulsion. By God, it might work."

"They could have a reconciliation at Canterbury. The whole agreement could be announced in advance, so that neither of them could change things at the last minute. Thomas could say mass and Henry could give him the kiss, there in the cathedral." And then, he thought, Thomas could block Waleran's evil plans.

"I'm going to propose this to the king," Francis said.

"And I to Thomas."

The monastery bell rang. The two brothers stood up.

"Be persuasive," Philip said. "If this works, Thomas can return to Canterbury—and if Thomas comes back, Waleran Bigod is finished."

They met in a pretty meadow on the bank of a river at the frontier between Normandy and the Kingdom of France, near the towns of Fréteval and Vievy-le-Raye. King Henry was already there, with his entourage, when Thomas arrived with Archbishop William of Sens. Philip, in Thomas's party, spotted his brother, Francis, with the king, on the far side of the field.

Henry and Thomas had reached agreement—in theory.

Both had accepted the compromise, whereby the kiss of peace would be given at a reconciliation mass after Becket returned to England. However, the deal was not done until the two of them had met.

Thomas rode out to the middle of the field, leaving his people behind, and Henry did the same, while everyone looked on with bated breath.

They talked for hours.

Nobody else could hear what was being said, but everyone could guess. They were talking about Henry's offenses against the Church, the way the English bishops had disobeyed Thomas, the controversial Constitutions of Clarendon, Thomas's exile, the role of the pope…. Initially Philip was afraid they would quarrel bitterly and part worse enemies. They had been close to agreement before, and had met like this, and then something had come up, some point that touched the pride of one or both, so that they had exchanged harsh words and then stormed off, each blaming the intransigence of the other. But the longer they talked, the more optimistic Philip became. If one of them had been ready to storm off, it would surely have happened early on, he felt.

The hot summer afternoon began to cool, and the shadows of the elms lengthened across the river. The tension was unbearable.

Then at last something happened. Thomas moved.

Was he going to ride away? No. He was dismounting. What did it mean? Philip watched breathlessly. Thomas got off his horse, approached Henry, and knelt at the king's feet.

The king dismounted and embraced Thomas.

The courtiers on both sides cheered and threw their hats into the air.

Philip felt tears come to his eyes. The conflict had been resolved—by reason and goodwill. This was how things ought to be.

Perhaps it was an omen for the future.

II

It was Christmas Day, and the king was in a rage.

William Hamleigh was frightened. He had known only one person with a temper like King Henry's, and that was his mother. Henry was almost as terrifying as she. He was an intimidating man anyway, with his broad shoulders and deep chest and huge head; but when he was angry his blue-gray eyes became bloodshot, his freckled face went red, and his customary restlessness turned into the furious pacing of a captive bear.

They were at Bur-le-Roi, a hunting lodge of Henry's, in a park near the Normandy coast. Henry should have been happy. He liked to hunt better than anything else in the world, and this was one of his favorite places. But he was furious. And the reason was Archbishop Thomas of Canterbury.

"Thomas, Thomas, Thomas! That's all I hear from you pestilential prelates! Thomas is doing this—Thomas is doing that—Thomas insulted you—Thomas was unjust to you. I'm sick of Thomas!"

William furtively scrutinized the faces of the earls, bishops and other dignitaries around the Christmas dinner table in the great hall. Most of them looked nervous. Only one had a look of contentment: Waleran Bigod.

Waleran had predicted that Henry would soon quarrel with Thomas again. Thomas had won too decisively, he said; the pope's peace plan forced the king to yield too much, and there would be further rows as Thomas tried to collect on the royal promises. But Waleran had not simply sat back to wait and see what would happen: he had worked hard to make his prediction come true. With William's help, Waleran constantly brought Henry complaints about what Thomas had been doing since he returned to England: riding around the countryside with an army of knights, visiting his cronies and cooking up any number of treacherous schemes, and punishing clergymen who had supported the king during the exile. Waleran embroidered these reports before passing them on to the king, but there was some truth in everything he said. However, he was fanning the flames of a fire that was already burning well. All those who had deserted Thomas during the six years of the quarrel, and were now living in fear of retribution, were keen to vilify him to the king.

So Waleran looked happy while Henry raged. And well he might. He stood to suffer more than most from the return of Thomas. The archbishop had refused to endorse the nomination of Waleran as bishop of Lincoln. Nevertheless, Thomas had come up with his own nominee as bishop of

Kingsbridge: Prior Philip. If Thomas had his way, Waleran would lose Kingsbridge but would not gain Lincoln. He would be ruined.

William's own position would suffer too. With Aliena acting as earl, Waleran gone, Philip as bishop, and no doubt Jonathan as prior of Kingsbridge, William would be isolated, without a single ally in the county. That was why he had joined Waleran at the royal court, to collaborate in the undermining of the shaky concord between King Henry and Archbishop Thomas.

Nobody had eaten much of the swans, geese, peacocks and ducks on the table. William, who normally ate and drank heartily, was nibbling bread and sipping posset, a drink made with milk, beer, eggs and nutmeg, to calm his bilious stomach.

Henry had been driven into his current fury by the news that Thomas had sent a delegation to Tours—where Pope Alexander was—to complain that Henry had not kept his part of the peace treaty. One of the king's older counselers, Enjuger de Bohun, said: "There will be no peace until you have Thomas executed."

William was shocked.

Henry roared: "That's right!"

It was clear to William that Henry had taken the remark as an expression of pessimism, rather than as a serious proposal. However, William had a feeling that Enjuger had not said it lightly.

William Malvoisin said idly: "When I was in Rome, on my way back from Jerusalem, I heard tell of a pope that had been executed, for insupportable insolence. Damned if I can think of his name, now."

The archbishop of York said: "It looks as if there's nothing *else* to be done with Thomas. While he's alive he will foment sedition, at home and abroad."

To William those three statements sounded orchestrated. He looked at Waleran. At that moment Waleran spoke. "There is certainly no point in appealing to Thomas's sense of decency—"

"Be quiet, the lot of you!" the king roared. "I've heard enough! All you do is complain—when will you get off your backsides and do something about it?" He took a gulp of ale from his goblet. "This beer tastes like piss!" he shouted furiously. He pushed back his chair and, as everyone hastened to stand, he got up and stormed out of the room.

In the anxious silence that followed, Waleran said: "The message could hardly be clearer, my lords. We are to get up off our seats and do something about Thomas."

William Mandeville, the earl of Essex, said: "I think a delegation of us should go to see Thomas and set him straight."

"And what will you do if he refuses to listen to reason?" said Waleran.

"I think we should then arrest him in the name of the king."

Several people started to speak at once. The assembly broke up into smaller groups. Those around the earl of Essex began to plan their deputation to Canterbury. William saw Waleran talking to two or three younger knights. Waleran caught his eye and beckoned him over.

Waleran said: “William Mandeville’s delegation will do no good. Thomas can handle them with one hand tied behind his back.”

Reginald Fitzurse gave William a hard look and said: “Some of us think the time has come for sterner measures.”

“What do you mean?” William said.

“You heard what Enjuger said.”

Richard le Bret, a boy of about eighteen, blurted out: “Execution.”

The word chilled William’s heart. It was serious, then. He stared at Waleran. “Will you ask for the king’s blessing?”

Reginald answered. “Impossible. He can’t sanction something like this in advance.” He grinned evilly. “But he can reward his faithful servants afterward.”

Young Richard said: “Well, William—are you with us?”

“I’m not sure,” William said. He felt both excited and scared. “I’ll have to think about it.”

Reginald said: “There’s no time to think. We’ll have to go now. We must get to Canterbury before William Mandeville, otherwise his lot will get in the way.”

Waleran addressed William. “They need an older man with them, to guide them and plan the operation.”

William was desperately keen to agree. Not only would this solve all his problems: the king would probably give him an earldom for it. “But to kill an archbishop must be a terrible sin!” he said.

“Don’t worry about that,” Waleran said. “I’ll give you absolution.”

The enormity of what they were going to do hung over William like a thundercloud as the group of assassins traveled to England. He could think of nothing else; he could neither eat nor sleep; he acted confused and spoke distractedly. By the time the ship reached Dover he was ready to abandon the project.

They reached Saltwood Castle, in Kent, three days after Christmas, on a Monday evening. The castle belonged to the archbishop of Canterbury, but during the exile it had been occupied by Ranulf de Broc, who had refused to give it back. Indeed, one of Thomas’s complaints to the pope was that King Henry had failed to restore the castle to him.

Ranulf put new heart into William.

Ranulf had ravaged Kent in the absence of the archbishop, relishing the

lack of authority rather in the way William had in years gone by, and he was willing to do anything to retain the freedom to do as he pleased. He was enthusiastic about the assassination plan and welcomed the chance of taking part, and he immediately began to discuss the details with gusto. His matter-of-fact approach dispelled the fog of superstitious dread that had clouded William's vision. William began once again to imagine how it would be if he were an earl again, with no one to tell him what to do.

They stayed up most of the night planning the operation. Ranulf drew a plan of the cathedral close and the archbishop's palace, scratching it on the table with a knife. The monastic buildings were on the north side of the church, which was unusual—they were normally to the south, as at Kingsbridge. The archbishop's palace was attached to the northwest corner of the church. It was entered from the kitchen courtyard. While they worked on the plan, Ranulf sent riders to his garrisons at Dover, Rochester and Bletchingley, ordering his knights to meet him on the road to Canterbury in the morning. Toward dawn the conspirators went to bed to catch an hour or two of sleep.

William's legs hurt like fire after the long journey. He hoped this was the last military operation he would ever do. He would be fifty-five soon, if his calculations were right, and he was getting too old for it.

Despite his weariness, and the heartening influence of Ranulf, he still could not sleep. The idea of killing an archbishop was too terrifying, even though he had already been absolved of his sin. He was afraid that if he went to sleep he would have nightmares.

They had figured out a good plan of attack. It would go wrong, of course: there was always *something* that went wrong. The important thing was to be flexible enough to cope with the unexpected. But whatever happened, it would not be very difficult for a group of professional fighting men to overpower a handful of effeminate monks.

The dim light of a gray winter morning leaked into the room through the arrow-slit windows. After a while William got up. He tried to say his prayers, but he could not.

The others were up early too. They had breakfast together in the hall. As well as William and Ranulf, there were Reginald Fitzurse, whom William had made leader of the attack group; Richard le Bret, the youngster of the group; William Tracy, the oldest; and Hugh Morville, the highest-ranking.

They put on their armor and set out on Ranulf's horses. It was a bitterly cold day, and the sky was dark with low gray clouds, as if it might snow. They followed the old road called Stone Street. On the two-and-a-half-hour journey they picked up several more knights.

Their main rendezvous was at Saint Augustine's Abbey, outside the city. The abbot was an old enemy of Thomas's, Ranulf had assured William, but

nevertheless William decided to tell him that they had come to arrest Thomas, not to kill him. That was a pretense they would keep up until the last moment: no one was to know the true aim of the operation except for William himself, Ranulf, and the four knights who had crossed from France.

They reached the abbey at noon. The men Ranulf had summoned were waiting. The abbot gave them dinner. His wine was very good and they all drank plenty. Ranulf briefed the men-at-arms who would surround the cathedral close and prevent anyone from escaping.

William kept shivering, even when he stood beside the fire in the guesthouse. It should be a simple operation, but the penalty for failure would probably be death. The king would find a way to justify the murder of Thomas, but he could never support the *attempted* murder: he would have to deny all knowledge of it and hang the perpetrators. William had hanged many people, as sheriff of Shiring, but the thought of his own body dangling at the end of a rope still made him shake.

He turned his mind to the thought of the earldom he could expect as a reward for success. It would be nice to be an earl again in his old age, respected and deferred to and obeyed without question. Perhaps Aliena's brother, Richard, would die in the Holy Land and King Henry would give William his old estates again. The thought warmed him more than the fire.

When they left the abbey they were a small army. Nevertheless they had no trouble getting into Canterbury. Ranulf had controlled this part of the country for six years and he had not yet relinquished his authority. He held more sway than Thomas, which was no doubt why Thomas had complained so bitterly to the pope. As soon as they were inside, the men-at-arms spread out around the cathedral close and blocked all the exits.

The operation had begun. Until this moment it had been theoretically possible to call the whole thing off, with no harm done; but now, William thought with a shiver of dread, the die was cast.

He left Ranulf in charge of the blockade, keeping a small group of knights and men for himself. He installed most of the knights in a house opposite the main gateway to the cathedral close. Then he went through the gate with the remainder. Reginald Fitzurse and the other three conspirators rode into the kitchen courtyard as if they were official visitors, rather than armed intruders. But William ran into the gatehouse and held the terrified porter at sword point.

The attack was under way.

With his heart in his mouth, William ordered a man-at-arms to tie up the porter, then summoned the rest of his men into the gatehouse and closed the gate. Now no one could enter or leave. He had taken armed control of a monastery.

He followed the four conspirators into the kitchen courtyard. There were

stables to the north of the yard, but the four had tied their horses to a mulberry tree in the middle. They took off their sword belts and helmets: they would keep up the facade of a peaceful visit a little longer.

William caught up with them and dropped his weapons under the tree. Reginald looked inquiringly at him. “All’s well,” William said. “The place is isolated.”

They crossed the courtyard to the palace and went into the porch. William assigned a local knight called Richard to stay in the porch on guard. The others entered the great hall.

The palace servants were sitting down to dinner. That meant they had already served Thomas and the priests and monks who were with him. One of the servants stood up. Reginald said: “We are the king’s men.”

The room went quiet, but the servant who had stood up said: “Welcome, my lords. I’m the steward of the hall, William Fitzneal. Please come in. Would you like some dinner?”

He was remarkably friendly, William thought, considering that his master was at loggerheads with the king. He could probably be suborned.

“No dinner, thank you,” said Reginald.

“A cup of wine, after your journey?”

“We have a message for your master from the king,” Reginald said impatiently. “Please announce us right away.”

“Very good.” The steward bowed. They were unarmed, so he had no reason to refuse them. He left the table and walked to the far end of the hall.

William and the four knights followed. The eyes of the silent servants went with them. William was trembling the way he used to before a battle, and he wished the fighting would start, for he knew he would be all right then.

They all went up a staircase to the upper floor.

They emerged in a roomy attendance chamber with benches around the sides. There was a large throne in the middle of one wall. Several black-robed priests and monks were sitting on the benches, but the throne was empty.

The steward crossed the room to an open door. “Messengers from the king, my lord archbishop,” he said in a loud voice.

There was no audible reply, but the archbishop must have nodded, for the steward waved them in.

The monks and priests stared wide-eyed as the knights marched across the room and went into the inner chamber.

Thomas Becket was sitting on the edge of the bed, dressed in his archbishop’s robes. There was only one other person in the room: a monk, sitting at Thomas’s feet, listening. William caught the monk’s eye, and was jolted to recognize Prior Philip of Kingsbridge. What was he doing here? Currying favor, no doubt. Philip had been elected bishop of Kingsbridge, but had not yet been confirmed. Now, William thought with savage glee, he never

would be.

Philip was equally startled to see William. However, Thomas carried on speaking, pretending not to notice the knights. This was a piece of calculated discourtesy, William thought. The knights sat down on the low stools and benches around the bed. William wished they had not: it made the visit seem social, and he felt they had lost impetus somehow. Perhaps that was what Thomas had intended.

Finally Thomas looked at them. He did not rise to greet them. He knew them all, except William, and his eye came to rest on Hugh Morville, the highest-ranking. “Ah, Hugh,” he said.

William had put Reginald in charge of this part of the operation, and so it was Reginald, not Hugh, who spoke to the archbishop. “We come from the king in Normandy. Do you want to hear his message in public or in private?”

Thomas looked irritably from Reginald to Hugh and back again, as if he resented dealing with a junior member of the delegation. He sighed, then said: “Leave me, Philip.”

Philip stood up and walked past the knights, looking worried.

“But don’t close the door,” Thomas called after him.

When Philip had gone out, Reginald said: “I require you in the name of the king to go to Winchester to answer charges against you.”

William had the satisfaction of seeing Thomas go pale. “So that’s how it is,” the archbishop said quietly. He looked up. The steward was hovering at the door. “Send everyone in,” Thomas said to him. “I want them all to hear this.”

The monks and priests filed in, Prior Philip among them. Some sat down and others stood around the walls. William had no objection: on the contrary, the more people who were present, the better; for the object of this unarmed encounter was to establish before witnesses that Thomas refused to comply with a royal command.

When they were all settled, Thomas looked at Reginald. “Again?” he said.

“I require you in the name of the king to go to Winchester to answer charges against you,” Reginald repeated.

“What charges?” Thomas said quietly.

“Treason!”

Thomas shook his head. “I will not be put on trial by Henry,” he said calmly. “I’ve committed no crime, God knows.”

“You’ve excommunicated royal servants.”

“It was not I, but the pope, who did that.”

“You’ve suspended other bishops.”

“I’ve offered to reinstate them on merciful terms. They have refused. My offer remains open.”

“You’ve threatened the succession to the throne by disparaging the

coronation of the king's son."

"I did no such thing. The archbishop of York has no right to crown anyone, and the pope has reprimanded him for his effrontery. But no one has suggested that the coronation is invalid."

Reginald said exasperatedly: "The one thing follows from the other, you damn fool."

"I've had enough!" Thomas said.

"And we've had enough of you, Thomas Becket," Reginald shouted. "By God's wounds, we've had enough of you, and your arrogance and troublemaking and treason!"

Thomas stood up. "The archbishop's castles are occupied by the king's men," he shouted. "The archbishop's rents have been collected by the king. The archbishop has been ordered not to leave the city of Canterbury. And you tell me that *you* have had enough?"

One of the priests tried to intervene, saying to Thomas: "My lord, let's discuss the matter in private—"

"To what end?" Thomas snapped. "They demand something I must not do and will not do."

The shouting had attracted everyone in the palace, and the doorway to the chamber was crowded with wide-eyed listeners, William saw. The argument had gone on long enough: nobody could now deny that Thomas had refused a royal command. William made a signal to Reginald. It was a discreet gesture, but Prior Philip noticed it and raised his eyebrows in surprise, realizing that the leader of the group was not Reginald but William.

Reginald said formally: "Archbishop Thomas, you are no longer under the king's peace and protection." He turned around and addressed the onlookers. "Clear this room," he ordered.

Nobody moved.

Reginald said: "You monks, I order you in the name of the king to guard the archbishop and prevent his escape."

They would do no such thing, of course. Nor did William want them to: on the contrary, he wanted Thomas to attempt an escape, for that would make it easier to kill him.

Reginald turned to the steward, William Fitzneal, who was technically the archbishop's bodyguard. "I arrest you," he said. He grabbed the steward's arm and marched him out of the room. The man did not resist. William and the other knights followed them out.

They ran down the stairs and through the hall. The local knight, Richard, was still on guard in the porch. William wondered what to do with the steward. He asked him: "Are you with us?"

The man was terrified. He said: "Yes, if you're with the king!"

He was too frightened to be any danger, whatever side he was on, William

decided. He said to Richard: “Keep an eye on him. Let no one leave the building. Keep the porch door closed.”

With the others he ran across the courtyard to the mulberry tree. Hastily they began to put on their helmets and swords. We’re going to do it now, William thought fearfully; we’re going to go back in there and kill the archbishop of Canterbury, oh my God. It was a long time since William had worn a helmet, and the fringe of chain mail that protected the neck and shoulders kept getting in the way. He cursed his clumsy fingers. He did not have time to fumble anything just now. He spotted a boy watching him openmouthed and shouted to him: “Hey! You! What’s your name?”

The boy looked back toward the kitchen, unsure whether to answer William or flee. “Robert, lord,” he said after a moment. “They call me Robert Pipe.”

“Come here, Robert Pipe, and help me with this.”

The boy hesitated again.

William’s patience ran out. “Come here, or I swear by the blood of Jesus I’ll chop off your hand with this sword!”

Reluctantly the boy came forward. William showed him how to hold up the chain mail while he put on the helmet. He got it on at last, and Robert Pipe fled. He’ll tell his grandchildren about this, William thought fleetingly.

The helmet had a ventail, a mouth flap that could be pulled across and fastened with a strap. The others had closed theirs, so that their faces were hidden and they could no longer be recognized. William left his open a moment longer. Each of them had a sword in one hand and an ax in the other.

“Ready?” William said.

They all nodded.

There would be little talk from now on. No more orders were necessary, no further decisions had to be made. They were simply going to go back in there and kill Thomas.

William put two fingers in his mouth and gave a shrill whistle.

Then he fastened his ventail.

A man-at-arms came running out of the gatehouse and threw open the main gate.

The knights William had stationed in the house across the road came out and poured into the courtyard, shouting, as they had been instructed, “King’s men! King’s men!”

William ran back to the palace.

The knight Richard and the steward William Fitzneal threw open the porch door for him.

As he entered, two of the archbishop’s servants took advantage of the fact that Richard and William Fitzneal were distracted, and slammed the door between the porch and the hall.

William threw his weight against the door but he was too late: they had secured it with a bar. He cursed. A setback, and so soon! The knights began to hack at the door with their axes, but they made little headway: it had been made to withstand attack. William felt control slipping away from him. Fighting back the beginnings of a panic, he ran out of the porch and looked around for another door. Reginald went with him.

There was nothing on this side of the building. They ran around the west end of the palace, past the detached kitchen, into the orchard on the south side. William grunted with satisfaction: there on the south wall of the palace was a staircase leading to the upper floor. It looked like a private entrance to the archbishop's chambers. The feeling of panic went away.

William and Reginald ran to the foot of the staircase. It was damaged halfway up, and there were a few workmen's tools and a ladder nearby, as if the stairs were being repaired. Reginald leaned the ladder against the side of the staircase and climbed up, bypassing the broken steps. He reached the top. There was a door leading to an oriel, a little enclosed balcony. William watched him try the door. It was locked. Beside it was a shuttered window. Reginald smashed the shutter with one blow of his ax. He reached inside, fumbled, then opened the door and went in.

William started to climb the ladder.

Philip was scared from the moment he saw William Hamleigh, but the priests and monks in Thomas's entourage were at first complacent. Then, when they heard the hammering on the hall door, they became frightened, and several of them proposed taking refuge in the cathedral.

Thomas was scornful. "Take refuge?" he said. "From what? Those knights? An archbishop can't run from a few hotheads."

Philip thought he was right, up to a point: the title of archbishop was meaningless if you could be frightened by knights. The man of God, secure in the knowledge that his sins are forgiven, regards death as a happy transfer to a better place, and has no fear of swords. However, even an archbishop ought not to be so careless of his safety as to invite attack. Furthermore, Philip had firsthand knowledge of the viciousness and brutality of William Hamleigh. So when they heard the smashing of the oriel shutter, Philip decided to take a lead.

He could see, through the windows, that the palace was surrounded by knights. The sight of them scared him more. This was clearly a carefully planned attack, and the perpetrators were prepared to commit violence. He hastily closed the bedroom door and pulled the bar across. The others watched him, content to let someone decisive take charge. Archbishop Thomas continued to look scornful but he did not try to stop Philip.

Philip stood by the door and listened. He heard a man come through the oriel and enter the audience chamber. He wondered how strong the bedroom door was. However, the man did not attack the door, but crossed the audience chamber and started down the stairs. Philip guessed he was going to open the hall door from the inside and let the rest of the knights in that way.

That gave Thomas a few moments' reprieve.

There was another door in the opposite corner of the bedroom, partly concealed by the bed. Philip pointed at it and said urgently: "Where does that lead?"

"To the cloisters," someone said. "But it's locked shut."

Philip crossed the room and tried the door. It was locked. "Have you got a key?" he said to Thomas, adding as an afterthought, "My lord archbishop."

Thomas shook his head. "That passage has never been used in my memory," he said with infuriating calm.

The door did not look very stout, but Philip was sixty-three years old and brute force had never been his metier. He stood back and gave the door a kick. It hurt his foot. The door rattled flimsily. Philip gritted his teeth and kicked it harder. It flew open.

Philip looked at Thomas. Thomas still seemed reluctant to flee. Perhaps it had not dawned on him, as it had on Philip, that the number of knights and the well-organized nature of their operation indicated a deadly serious intention to do him harm. But Philip knew instinctively that it would be fruitless to try to scare Thomas into fleeing. Instead he said: "It's time for vespers. We ought not to let a few hotheads disrupt the routine of worship."

Thomas smiled, seeing that his own argument had been used against him. "Very well," he said, and he got to his feet.

Philip led the way, feeling relief that he had got Thomas moving and fear that the archbishop still might not move fast enough. The passage led down a long flight of steps. There was no light except what came through the archbishop's bedroom. At the end of the passage was another door. Philip gave it the same treatment as he had given the first door, but this one was stronger and it did not open. He began to hammer on it, shouting: "Help! Open the door! Hurry, hurry!" He heard the note of panic in his own voice, and made an effort to stay calm, but his heart was racing and he knew that William's knights must be close behind.

The others caught up with him. He continued to bang the door and shout. He heard Thomas say: "Dignity, Philip, please," but he took no notice. He wanted to preserve the archbishop's dignity—his own was of no account.

Before Thomas could protest again, there was the sound of a bar being drawn and a key turning in the lock, and the door was opened. Philip grunted with relief. Two startled cellarers stood there. One said: "I didn't know this door led anywhere."

Philip pushed past them impatiently. He found himself in the cellarer's stores. He negotiated the barrels and sacks to reach another door, and passed through that into the open air.

It was getting dark. He was in the south walk of the cloisters. At the far end of the walk he saw, to his immense relief, the door that led into the north transept of Canterbury Cathedral.

They were almost safe.

He had to get Thomas into the cathedral before William and his knights could catch up. The rest of the party emerged from the stores. Philip said: "Into the church, quickly!"

Thomas said: "No, Philip; not quickly. We will enter my cathedral with dignity."

Philip wanted to scream, but he said: "Of course, my lord." He could hear the ominous sound of heavy feet in the disused passage: the knights had broken into the bedroom and had found the bolt-hole. He knew the archbishop's best protection was his dignity, but there was no harm in getting out of the way of trouble.

"Where is the archbishop's cross?" Thomas said. "I can't enter the church without my cross."

Philip groaned in despair.

Then one of the priests said: "I brought the cross. Here it is."

Thomas said: "Carry it before me in the usual way, please."

The priest held it up and walked with restrained haste toward the church door.

Thomas followed him.

The archbishop's entourage preceded him into the cathedral, as etiquette demanded. Philip went last and held the door for him. Just as Thomas entered, two knights burst out of the cellarer's stores and sprinted down the south walk.

Philip closed the transept door. There was a bar located in a hole in the wall beside the doorpost. Philip grabbed the bar and pulled it across the door.

He turned around, sagging with relief, and leaned back against the door.

Thomas was crossing the narrow transept toward the steps that led up to the north aisle of the chancel, but when he heard the bar slam into place he stopped suddenly and turned around.

"No, Philip," he said.

Philip's heart sank. "My lord archbishop—"

"This is a church, not a castle. Unbar the door."

The door shook violently as the knights tried to open it. Philip said: "I'm afraid they want to kill you!"

"Then they will probably succeed, whether you bar the door or not. Do you know how many other doors there are to this church? Open it."

There was a series of loud bangs, as if the knights were attacking the door with axes. “You could hide,” Philip said desperately. “There are dozens of places—the entrance to the crypt is just there—it’s getting dark—”

“Hide, Philip? In my own church? Would you?”

Philip stared at Thomas for a long moment. At last he said: “No, I wouldn’t.”

“Open the door.”

With a heavy heart, Philip slid back the bar.

The knights burst in. There were five of them. Their faces were hidden behind helmets. They carried swords and axes. They looked like emissaries from hell.

Philip knew he should not be afraid, but the sharp edges of their weapons made him shiver with fear.

One of them shouted: “Where is Thomas Becket, a traitor to the king and to the kingdom?”

The others shouted: “Where is the traitor? Where is the archbishop?”

It was quite dark now, and the big church was only dimly lit by candles. All the monks were in black, and the knights’ vision was somewhat limited by their faceplates. Philip had a sudden surge of hope: perhaps they would miss Thomas in the darkness. But Thomas immediately dashed that hope by walking down the steps toward the knights, saying: “Here I am—no traitor to the king, but a priest of God. What do you want?”

As the archbishop stood confronting the five men with their drawn swords, Philip suddenly knew with certainty that Thomas was going to die here today.

The people in the archbishop’s entourage must have had the same feeling, for suddenly most of them fled. Some disappeared into the gloom of the chancel, a few scattered into the nave among the townspeople waiting for the service, and one opened a small door and ran up a spiral staircase. Philip was disgusted. “You should pray, not run!” he shouted after them.

It occurred to Philip that he, too, might be killed if he did not run. But he could not tear himself away from the side of the archbishop.

One of the knights said to Thomas: “Renounce your treachery!” Philip recognized the voice of Reginald Fitzurse, who had done the talking earlier.

“I have nothing to renounce,” Thomas replied. “I have committed no treachery.” He was deadly calm, but his face was white, and Philip realized that Thomas, like everyone else, had realized that he was going to die.

Reginald shouted at Thomas: “Run away, you’re a dead man!”

Thomas stood still.

They *want* him to run, Philip thought; they can’t bring themselves to kill him in cold blood.

Perhaps Thomas had understood that too, for he stood unflinching in front

of them, defying them to touch him. For a long moment they were all frozen in a murderous tableau, the knights unwilling to make the first move, the priest too proud to run.

It was Thomas who fatally broke the spell. He said: “I am ready to die, but you are not to touch any of my men, priests or monks or laymen.”

Reginald moved first. He waved his sword at Thomas, pushing its point closer and closer to his face, as if daring himself to let the blade touch the priest. Thomas stood like stone, his eyes focused on the knight, not the sword. Suddenly, with a quick twist of the wrist, Reginald knocked Thomas’s cap off.

Philip was suddenly filled with hope again. They can’t bring themselves to do it, he thought; they’re afraid to touch him.

But he was wrong. The knights’ resolution seemed to be strengthened by the silly gesture of knocking off the archbishop’s cap; as if, perhaps, they had half expected to be struck down by the hand of God, and the fact that they had got away with it gave them courage to do worse. Reginald said: “Carry him out of here.”

The other knights sheathed their swords and approached the archbishop.

One of them grasped Thomas about the waist and tried to lift him.

Philip despaired. They had touched him at last. They were, after all, willing to lay hands on a man of God. Philip had a stomach-lurching sense of the depths of their evil, like looking over the edge of a bottomless pit. They must know, in their hearts, that they would go to hell for this; yet still they did it.

Thomas lost his balance, flailed his arms, and began to struggle. The other knights joined in trying to lift him up and carry him. The only people left from Thomas’s entourage were Philip and a priest called Edward Grim. They both rushed forward to help Thomas. Edward grabbed Thomas’s mantle and clung on tight. One of the knights turned and lashed out at Philip with a mailed fist. The blow struck the side of Philip’s head, and he went down, dazed.

When he recovered, the knights had released Thomas, who was standing with his head bowed and his hands together in an attitude of prayer. One of the knights raised his sword.

Philip, still on the floor, gave a long, helpless yell of protest: “Noooo!”

Edward Grim held out his arm to ward off the blow.

Thomas said: “I commend myself to Go—”

The sword fell.

It struck both Thomas and Edward. Philip heard himself scream. The sword cut into the archbishop’s skull and sliced the priest’s arm. As blood spurted from Edward’s arm, Thomas fell to his knees.

Philip stared aghast at the appalling wound to Thomas’s head.

The archbishop fell slowly forward onto his hands, supported himself

only for an instant, then crashed onto his face on the stone floor.

Another knight lifted his sword and struck. Philip gave an involuntary howl of grief. The second blow landed in the same place as the first, and sliced off the top of Thomas's skull. It was such a forceful swing that the sword struck the pavement and snapped in two. The knight dropped the stump.

A third knight committed an act which would burn in Philip's memory for the rest of his life: he stuck the point of his sword into the opened head of the archbishop and spilled the brains out onto the floor.

Philip's legs felt weak and he sank to his knees, overcome with horror.

The knight said: "He won't get up again—let's be off!"

They all turned and ran.

Philip watched them go down the nave, laying about them with their swords to scatter the townspeople.

When the killers had gone there was a moment of frozen silence. The corpse of the archbishop lay facedown on the floor, and the severed skull, with its hair, lay beside the head like the lid of a pot. Philip buried his face in his hands. This was the end of all hope. The savages have won, he kept thinking; the savages have won. He had a giddy, weightless sensation, as if he were sinking slowly in a deep lake, drowning in despair. There was nothing to hold on to anymore; everything that had seemed fixed was suddenly unstable.

He had spent his life fighting the arbitrary power of wicked men, and now, in the ultimate contest, he had been defeated. He remembered when William Hamleigh had come to set fire to Kingsbridge the second time, and the townspeople had built a wall in a day. What a victory that had been! The peaceful strength of hundreds of ordinary people had defeated the naked cruelty of Earl William. He recalled the time Waleran Bigod had tried to have the cathedral built at Shiring so that he could control it for his own ends. Philip had mobilized the people of the whole county. Hundreds of them, more than a thousand, had flocked to Kingsbridge on that marvelous Whitsunday thirty-three years ago, and the sheer force of their zeal had defeated Waleran. But there was no hope now. All the ordinary folk in Canterbury, even the entire population of Christendom, would not be enough to bring Thomas back to life.

Kneeling on the flagstones in the north transept of Canterbury Cathedral, he saw again the men who had burst into his home and slaughtered his mother and father before his eyes, fifty-six years ago. The emotion that came to him now, from that six-year-old child, was not fear, not even grief. It was *rage*. Powerless to stop those huge, red-faced, bloodthirsty men, he had conceived a blazing ambition to shackle all such swordsmen, to blunt their swords and hobble their war-horses and force them to submit to another authority, one higher than the monarchy of violence. And moments later, as his parents lay

dead on the floor, Abbot Peter had come in to show him the way. Unarmed and defenseless, the abbot had instantly stopped the bloodshed, with nothing but the authority of his Church and the force of his goodness. That scene had inspired Philip all his life.

Until this moment he had believed that he and people like him were winning. They had achieved some notable victories in the past half century. But now, at the end of his life, his enemies had proved that nothing had changed. His triumphs had been temporary, his progress illusory. He had won some battles, but the cause was ultimately hopeless. Men just like the ones who killed his mother and father had now murdered an archbishop in a cathedral, as if to prove, beyond all possibility of doubt, that there was no authority that could prevail against the tyranny of a man with a sword.

He had never thought they would dare to kill Archbishop Thomas, especially in a church. But he had never thought anyone could kill his father, and the same bloodthirsty men with swords and helmets had shown him the grisly truth in both cases. And now, at the age of sixty-two, as he looked at the grisly corpse of Thomas Becket, he was possessed by the childish, unreasoning, all-encompassing fury of a six-year-old boy whose father is dead.

He stood up. The atmosphere in the church was thick with emotion as the people gathered around the corpse of the archbishop. Priests, monks and townspeople came slowly nearer, stunned and full of dread. Philip sensed that behind their shocked expressions there was a rage like his own. One or two of them were muttering prayers, or just moaning half audibly. A woman bent down swiftly and touched the dead body, as if for luck. Several other people followed suit. Then Philip saw the first woman furtively collecting some of the blood in a tiny flask, as if Thomas were a martyr.

The clergy began to come to their senses. The archbishop’s chamberlain, Osbert, with tears streaming down his face, took out a knife and cut a strip from his own shirt, then bent down by the body and clumsily, gruesomely tied Thomas’s skull back on to his head, in a pathetic attempt to restore a modicum of dignity to the horribly violated person of the archbishop. As he did so, a low collective groan went up from the crowd all around.

Some monks brought a stretcher. They lifted Thomas onto it gently. Many hands reached out to help them. Philip saw that the archbishop’s handsome face was peaceful, the only sign of violence being a thin line of blood running from the right temple, across the nose, to the left cheek.

As they lifted the stretcher, Philip picked up the broken stump of the sword that had killed Thomas. He kept thinking of the woman who had collected the archbishop’s blood in a bottle, as if he were a saint. There was a massive significance to that small act of hers, but Philip was not yet sure exactly what it was.

The people followed the stretcher, drawn by an invisible force. Philip went with the crowd, feeling the weird compulsion that gripped them all. The monks carried the body through the chancel and lowered it gently to the ground in front of the high altar. The crowd, many of them praying aloud, watched as a priest brought a clean cloth and bandaged the head neatly, then covered most of the bandage with a new cap.

A monk cut through the black archbishop's mantle, which was soiled with blood, and removed it. The man seemed unsure what to do with the bloody garment, and turned as if to throw it to one side. A citizen stepped forward quickly and took it from him as if it were a precious object.

The thought that had been hovering uncertainly in the back of Philip's mind now came to the foreground in an inspirational flash. The citizens were treating Thomas like a martyr, eagerly collecting his blood and his clothes as if they had the supernatural powers of saints' relics. Philip had been regarding the murder as a political defeat for the Church, but the people here did not see it that way: they saw a martyrdom. And the death of a martyr, while it might look like a defeat, never failed to provide inspiration and strength to the Church in the end.

Philip thought again of the hundreds of people who had flocked to Kingsbridge to build the cathedral, and of the men, women and children who had worked together half the night to put up the town wall. If such people could be mobilized now, he thought with a mounting sense of excitement, they might raise a cry of outrage so loud it would be heard all over the world.

Looking at the men and women gathered around the body, their faces suffused with grief and horror, Philip realized that they only wanted a leader.

Was it possible?

There was something familiar about this situation, he realized. A mutilated corpse, a crowd of onlookers, and some soldiers in the distance: where had he seen this before? What should happen next, he felt, was that a small group of followers of the dead man would range themselves against all the power and authority of a mighty empire.

Of course. That was how Christianity started.

And when he understood that, he knew what he had to do next.

He moved in front of the altar and turned to face the crowd. He still had the broken sword in his hand. Everyone stared at him. He suffered a moment of self-doubt. Can I do it? he thought. Can I start a movement, here and now, that will shake the throne of England? He looked at their faces. As well as grief and rage, he saw, in one or two expressions, a hint of hope.

He lifted the sword on high.

"This sword killed a saint," he began.

There was a murmur of agreement.

Encouraged, Philip said: "Here tonight we have witnessed a martyrdom."

The priests and monks looked surprised. Like Philip, they had not immediately seen the real significance of the murder they had witnessed. But the townspeople had, and they voiced their approval.

"Each one of us must go from this place and tell what he has seen." Several people nodded vigorously. They were listening—but Philip wanted more. He wanted to inspire them. Preaching had never been his forte. He was not one of those men who could hold a crowd rapt, make them laugh and cry, and persuade them to follow him anywhere. He did not know how to put a tremor in his voice and make the light of glory shine from his eyes. He was a practical, earthbound man; and right now he needed to speak like an angel.

"Soon every man, woman and child in Canterbury will know that the king's men murdered Archbishop Thomas in the cathedral. But that's just the start. The news will spread all over England, and then all over Christendom."

He was losing them, he could tell. There was dissatisfaction and disappointment on some of the faces. A man called out: "But what shall we *do*?"

Philip realized they needed to take some kind of concrete action immediately. It was not possible to call for a crusade and then send people to bed.

A crusade, he thought. That was an idea.

He said: "Tomorrow, I will take this sword to Rochester. The day after tomorrow, London. Will you come with me?"

Most of them looked blank, but someone at the back called out: "Yes!" Then one or two others voiced their agreement.

Philip raised his voice a little. "We'll tell our story in every town and village in England. We'll show people the sword that killed Saint Thomas. We'll let them see the bloodstains on his priestly garments." He warmed to his theme, and let his anger show a little. "We'll raise an outcry that will spread throughout Christendom, yes, even as far as Rome. We'll turn the whole of the civilized world against the savages who perpetrated this horrible, blasphemous crime!"

This time most of them called out their assent. They had been waiting for some way of expressing their emotions, and now he was giving it to them.

"This crime," he said slowly, his voice rising to a shout, "will never—never—be—forgotten!"

They roared their approval.

Suddenly he knew where to go from here. "Let us begin our crusade now!" he said.

"Yes!"

"We'll carry this sword along every street in Canterbury!"

"Yes!"

"And we'll tell every citizen within the walls what we have witnessed

here tonight!”

“Yes!”

“Bring candles, and follow me!”

Holding the sword high, he marched straight down the middle of the cathedral.

They followed him.

Feeling exultant, he went through the chancel, over the crossing, and down the nave. Some of the monks and priests walked beside him. He did not need to look back: he could hear the footsteps of a hundred people marching behind him. He went out of the main door.

There he had a moment of anxiety. Across the dark orchard he could see men-at-arms ransacking the archbishop’s palace. If his followers confronted them, the crusade might turn into a brawl when it had hardly got started. Suddenly afraid, he turned sharply away and led the crowd through the nearest gate into the street.

One of the monks started a hymn. There were lamps and firelight behind the shutters of the houses, but as the procession passed by, people opened their doors to see what was going on. Some of them questioned the marchers. Some joined in.

Philip turned a corner and saw William Hamleigh.

William was standing outside a stable, and looked as if he had just taken off his chain mail prior to mounting a horse and leaving the city. He had a handful of men with him. They were all looking up expectantly, presumably having heard the singing and wondered what was going on.

As the candlelit procession approached, William at first looked mystified. Then he saw the broken sword in Philip’s hand, and comprehension dawned. He stared in awestruck silence for a moment more, then he spoke. “Stop this!” he shouted. “I command you to disperse!”

Nobody took any notice. The men with William looked anxious: even with their swords they were vulnerable to a mob of more than a hundred fervent mourners.

William addressed Philip directly. “In the name of the king, I order you to stop this!”

Philip swept past him, borne forward by the press of the crowd. “Too late, William!” he cried over his shoulder. “Too late!”

III

The small boys came early to the hanging.

They were already there, in the market square at Shiring, throwing stones at cats and abusing beggars and fighting one another, when Aliena arrived, alone and on foot, wearing a cheap cloak with a hood to hide her identity.

She stood at a distance, looking at the scaffold. She had not intended to come. She had witnessed too many hangings during the years when she had played the role of earl. Now that she no longer had that responsibility, she had thought she would be happy if she never saw another man hanged for the rest of her life. But this one was different.

She was no longer acting as earl because her brother, Richard, had been killed in Syria—not in battle, ironically, but in an earthquake. The news had taken six months to reach her. She had not seen him for fifteen years, and now she would never see him again.

Up the hill, the castle gates opened, and the prisoner came out with his escort, followed by the new earl of Shiring, Aliena's son, Tommy.

Richard had never had children, so his heir was his nephew. The king, stunned and enfeebled by the Becket scandal, had taken the line of least resistance and rapidly confirmed Tommy as earl. Aliena had handed over to the younger generation readily. She had achieved what she wanted to with the earldom. It was once again a rich, thriving county, a land of fat sheep and green fields and sturdy mills. Some of the larger and more progressive landowners had followed her lead in switching to horse plowing, feeding the horses on oats grown under the three-field system of crop rotation. In consequence the land could feed even more people than it had under her father's enlightened rule.

Tommy would be a good earl. It was what he was born to do. Jack had refused to see it for a long time, wanting his son to be a builder; but eventually he had been forced to admit the truth. Tommy had never been able to cut a stone in a straight line, but he was a natural leader, and at twenty-eight years of age he was decisive, determined, intelligent and fair-minded. He was usually called Thomas now.

When he took over, people expected Aliena to stay at the castle, nag her daughter-in-law and play with her grandchildren. She had laughed at them. She liked Tommy's wife—a pretty girl, one of the younger daughters of the earl of Bedford—and she adored her three grandchildren, but at the age of fifty-two she was not ready to retire. She and Jack had taken a big stone house

near the Kingsbridge Priory—in what had once been the poor quarter, although it was no longer—and she had gone back into the wool business, buying and selling, negotiating with all her old energy, and making money hand over fist.

The hanging party came into the square, and Aliena emerged from her reverie. She looked closely at the prisoner, stumbling along at the end of a rope, his hands tied behind his back. It was William Hamleigh.

Someone in the front spat at him. The crowd in the square was large, for a lot of people were happy to see the last of William, and even for those who had no grudge against him it was quite something to see a former sheriff hanged. But William had been involved in the most notorious murder anybody could remember.

Aliena had never known or imagined anything like the reaction to the killing of Archbishop Thomas. The news had spread like wildfire through the whole of Christendom, from Dublin to Jerusalem and from Toledo to Oslo. The pope had gone into mourning. The continental half of King Henry's empire had been placed under interdict, which meant the churches were closed and there were no services except baptism. In England, people had started making a pilgrimage to Canterbury, just as if it were a shrine like Santiago de Compostela. And there had been miracles. Water tinctured with the martyr's blood, and shreds of the mantle he had been wearing when he was killed, cured sick people not just in Canterbury but all over England.

William's men had tried to steal the corpse from the cathedral, but the monks had been forewarned and had hidden it; and now it was secure within a stone vault, and pilgrims had to put their heads through a hole in the wall to kiss the marble coffin.

It was William's last crime. He had come scurrying back to Shiring, but Tommy had arrested him, and accused him of sacrilege, and he had been found guilty by Bishop Philip's court. Normally no one would dare to sentence a sheriff, for he was an officer of the Crown, but in this case the reverse was true: no one, not even the king, would dare to defend one of Becket's killers.

William was going to make a bad end.

His eyes were wild and staring, his mouth was open and drooling, he was moaning incoherently, and there was a stain on the front of his tunic where he had wet himself.

Aliena watched her old enemy stagger blindly toward the gallows. She remembered the young, arrogant, heartless lad who had raped her thirty-five years ago. It was hard to believe he had become the moaning, terrified subhuman she saw now. Even the fat, gouty, disappointed old knight he had been in later life was nothing like this. He began to struggle and scream as he got closer to the scaffold. The men-at-arms pulled him along like a pig going

to the slaughterhouse. Aliena found no pity in her heart: all she could feel was relief. William would never terrorize anyone again.

He kicked and screamed as he was lifted up onto the ox cart. He looked like an animal, red-faced, wild and filthy; but he sounded like a child as he gibbered and moaned and cried. It took four men to hold him while a fifth put the noose around his neck. He struggled so much that the knot tightened before he dropped, and he began to strangle by his own efforts. The men-at-arms stepped back. William writhed, choking, his fat face turning purple.

Aliena stared aghast. Even at the height of her rage and hatred she had not wished a death like this on him.

There was no noise, now that he was choking; and the crowd stood still. Even the small boys were silenced by the horrible sight.

Someone struck the ox's flank with a switch and the beast moved forward. At last William fell, but the fall did not break his neck, and he dangled at the end of the rope, slowly suffocating. His eyes remained open. Aliena felt he was looking at her. The grimace on his face as he hung there writhing in agony was familiar to Aliena, and she realized that he had looked like that when he was raping her, just before he reached his climax. The memory stabbed her like a knife, but she would not let herself look away.

It took a long time but the crowd remained quiet throughout. His face turned darker and darker. His agonized writhing became a mere twitching. At last his eyes rolled up into his head, his eyelids closed, he became still, and then, gruesomely, his tongue stuck out, black and swollen, between his teeth.

He was dead.

Aliena felt drained. William had changed her life—at one time she would have said he had ruined her life—and now he was dead, powerless to hurt her or anyone else ever again.

The crowd began to move away. The small boys mimicked the death throes to one another, rolling up their eyes and poking out their tongues. A man-at-arms climbed up on the scaffold and cut William down.

Aliena caught her son's eye. He looked surprised to see her. He came over immediately, and bent down to kiss her. My son, she thought; my big son. Jack's son. She remembered how terrified she had been that she might have William's child. Well, some things had turned out right.

"I thought you didn't want to come here today," Tommy said.

"I had to," she said. "I had to see him dead."

He looked startled. He did not understand, not really. She was glad. She hoped he would never have to understand such things.

He put his arm around her and they walked out of the square together.

Aliena did not look back.

On a hot day in high summer, Jack ate dinner with Aliena and Sally in the cool of the north transept, up in the gallery, sitting on the scratched plaster of his tracing floor. The sound of the monks chanting the service of sext in the chancel was a low murmur like the rushing of a distant waterfall. They had cold lamb chops with fresh wheat bread and a stone jug of golden beer. Jack had spent the morning sketching the layout of the new chancel which he would begin building next year. Sally was looking at his drawing while she tore into a chop with her pretty white teeth. In a moment she would say something critical about it, he knew. He glanced at Aliena. She too had read Sally's face and knew what was coming. They exchanged a knowing parental look, and smiled.

"Why do you want the east end to be rounded?" Sally said.

"I based it on the design of Saint-Denis," Jack said.

"But is there any advantage?"

"Yes. You can keep the pilgrims moving."

"So you just have this row of little windows."

Jack had thought windows would come up soon, for Sally was a glazier. "*Little* windows?" he said, pretending to be indignant. "Those windows are huge! When I first put windows that size into this church the people thought the whole building would fall down for lack of structural support."

"If the chancel were square-ended, you would have an enormous flat wall," Sally persisted. "You could put in *really* big windows."

She had a point, Jack thought. With the round-ended layout the entire chancel had to have the same continuous elevation, divided into the traditional three layers of arcade, gallery and clerestory, all the way around. A square end offered the chance to change the design. "There might be another way to keep the pilgrims moving," he said thoughtfully.

"And the rising sun would shine through the big windows," Sally said.

Jack could imagine it. "There could be a row of tall lancets, like spears in a rack."

Sally said: "Or one big round window like a rose."

That was a stunning idea. To someone standing in the nave, looking down the length of the church toward the east, the round window would seem like a huge sun exploding into innumerable shards of gorgeous color. Jack could just see it. "I wonder what theme the monks would want."

"The Law and the Prophets," Sally said.

He raised his eyebrows at her. "You sly vixen, you've already discussed this idea with Prior Jonathan, haven't you?"

She looked guilty, but she was saved from answering by the arrival of Peter Chisel, a young stone carver. He was a shy, awkward man with fair hair that fell over his eyes, but his carvings were beautiful, and Jack was glad to have him. "What can I do for you, Peter?" he said.

“Actually, I was looking for Sally,” Peter said.

“Well, you’ve found her.”

Sally was getting to her feet, brushing bread crumbs off the front of her tunic. “I’ll see you later,” she said, and then she and Peter went through the low doorway and down the spiral staircase.

Jack and Aliena looked at one another.

“Was she blushing?” Jack said.

“I hope so,” said Aliena. “My goodness, it’s about time she fell for someone. She’s twenty-six years old!”

“Well, well. I’d given up hope. I thought she was planning to be an old maid.”

Aliena shook her head. “Not Sally. She’s as lusty as anyone. She’s just choosy.”

“Is she?” Jack said. “The girls of the county aren’t queueing up to marry Peter Chisel.”

“The girls of the county fall for big handsome men like Tommy, who can cut a dash on horseback and have their cloaks lined with red silk. Sally’s different. She wants someone clever and sensitive. Peter is just right for her.”

Jack nodded. He had never thought of it that way but he felt intuitively that Aliena was right. “She’s like her grandmother,” he said. “My mother fell in love with an oddity.”

“Sally’s like your mother, and Tommy is like my father,” Aliena said.

Jack smiled at her. She was more beautiful than ever. Her hair was streaked with gray, and the skin of her throat was not as marble-smooth as it used to be, but as she got older, and lost the roundness of motherhood, the fine bones of her lovely face became more prominent, and she took on a spare, almost structural beauty. Jack reached out and traced the line of her jaw. “Like my flying buttresses,” he said.

She smiled.

He ran his hand down her neck and across her bosom. Her breasts had changed, too. He remembered when they had stuck out from her chest as if they were weightless, the nipples pointing up. Then, when she was pregnant, they had become even bigger, and the nipples had grown larger. Now they were lower and softer, and they swung delightfully from side to side when she walked. He had loved them through all their changes. He wondered what they would be like when she was old. Would they become shriveled and wrinkled? I’ll probably love them even then, he thought. He felt her nipple harden under his touch. He leaned forward to kiss her lips.

“Jack, you’re in church,” she murmured.

“Never mind,” he said, and he ran his hand over her belly to her groin.

There was a footstep on the stair.

He pulled away guiltily.

She grinned at his discomfiture. “That’s God’s judgment on you,” she said irreverently.

“I’ll see to you later,” he whispered in a mock-threatening tone.

The footsteps reached the top of the stair and Prior Jonathan emerged. He greeted them both solemnly. He looked grave. “There’s something I want you to hear, Jack,” he said. “Will you come to the cloisters?”

“Of course.” Jack got to his feet.

Jonathan went back down the spiral staircase.

Jack paused at the doorway and pointed a threatening finger at Aliena. “Later,” he said.

“Promise?” she said with a grin.

Jack followed Jonathan down the stairs and through the church to the door in the south transept that led into the cloisters. They went along the north walk, past the schoolboys with their wax tablets, and stopped at the corner. With an inclination of his head Jonathan directed Jack’s attention to a monk sitting alone on a stone ledge halfway down the west walk. The monk’s hood was up, covering his face, but as they paused, the man turned, looked up, and then quickly averted his gaze.

Jack took an involuntary step back.

The monk was Waleran Bigod.

Jack said angrily: “What’s that devil doing here?”

“Preparing to meet his Maker,” Jonathan said.

Jack frowned. “I don’t understand.”

“He’s a broken man,” Jonathan said. “He’s got no position, no power and no friends. He’s realized that God doesn’t want him to be a great and powerful bishop. He’s seen the error of his ways. He came here, on foot, and begged to be admitted as a humble monk, to spend the rest of his days asking God’s forgiveness for his sins.”

“I find that hard to believe,” said Jack.

“So did I, at first,” said Jonathan. “But in the end I realized that he has always been a genuinely God-fearing man.”

Jack looked skeptical.

“I really think he was devout. He just made one crucial mistake: he believed that the end justifies the means in the service of God. That permitted him to do anything.”

“Including conspiring to murder an archbishop!”

Jonathan held up his hands in a defensive gesture. “God must punish him for that—not I.”

Jack shrugged. It was the kind of thing Philip would have said. Jack saw no reason to let Waleran live in the priory. However, that was the way of monks. “Why did you want me to see him?”

“He wants to tell you why they hanged your father.”

Jack suddenly felt cold.

Waleran was sitting as still as a stone, gazing into space. He was barefoot. The fragile white ankles of an old man were visible below the hem of his homespun habit. Jack realized that Waleran was no longer frightening. He was feeble, defeated and sad.

Jack walked slowly forward and sat down on the bench a yard away from Waleran.

“The old King Henry was too strong,” Waleran said without preamble. “Some of the barons didn’t like it—they were too restricted. They wanted a weaker king next time. But Henry had a son, William.”

All this was ancient history. “That was before I was born,” Jack said.

“Your father died before you were born,” Waleran said, with just a hint of his old superciliousness.

Jack nodded. “Go on, then.”

“A group of barons decided to kill Henry’s son, William. Their thinking was that if the succession was in doubt, they would have more influence over the choice of the new king.”

Jack studied Waleran’s pale, thin face, searching for evidence of guile. The old man just looked weary, beaten and remorseful. If he was up to something, Jack could see no sign of it. “But William died in the wreck of the White Ship,” Jack said.

“That shipwreck was no accident,” Waleran said.

Jack was jolted. Could this be true? The heir to the throne, murdered just because a group of barons wanted a weak monarchy? But it was no more shocking than the murder of an archbishop. “Go on,” he said.

“The barons’ men scuttled the ship and escaped in a boat. Everybody else drowned, except for one man who clung to a spar and floated ashore.”

“That was my father,” Jack said. He was beginning to see where this was leading.

Waleran’s face was white and his lips were bloodless. He spoke without emotion, and did not meet Jack’s eyes. “He was beached near a castle that belonged to one of the conspirators, and they caught him. The man had no interest in exposing them. Indeed, he never realized that the ship had been scuttled. But he had seen things which would have revealed the truth to others, if he had been allowed to go free and talk about his experience. So they kidnapped him, brought him to England, and put him in the care of some people they could trust.”

Jack felt profoundly sad. All his father had ever wanted to do was entertain people, Mother said. But there was something strange about Waleran’s story. “Why didn’t they kill him right away?” Jack said.

“They should have,” Waleran said unemotionally. “But he was an innocent man, a jongleur, someone who gave everyone pleasure. They

couldn’t bring themselves to do it.” He gave a mirthless smile. “Even the most ruthless people have some scruples, ultimately.”

“Then why did they change their minds?”

“Because eventually he became dangerous, even here. At first he threatened no one—he couldn’t even speak English. But he learned, of course, and he began to make friends. So they locked him in the prison cell below the dormitory. Then people began to ask why he was locked away. He became an embarrassment. They realized they would never rest easy while he was alive. So in the end they told us to kill him.”

So easy, thought Jack. “But why did you obey them?”

“We were ambitious, all three of us,” Waleran said, and for the first time his face showed emotion, as his mouth twisted in a grimace of remorse. “Percy Hamleigh, Prior James, and me. Your mother told the truth—we all were rewarded. I became an archdeacon, and my career in the church was off to a splendid start. Percy Hamleigh became a substantial landowner. Prior James got a useful addition to the priory property.”

“And the barons?”

“After the shipwreck, Henry was attacked, in the following three years, by Fulk of Anjou, William Clito in Normandy, and the king of France. For a while he looked very vulnerable. But he defeated his enemies and ruled for another ten years. However, the anarchy the barons wanted did come in the end, when Henry died without a male heir, and Stephen came to the throne. While the civil war raged for the next two decades, the barons ruled like kings in their own territories, with no central authority to curb them.”

“And my father died for that.”

“Even that turned sour. Most of those barons died in the fighting, and some of their sons did too. And the little lies we had told in this part of the country, to get your father killed, eventually came back to haunt us. Your mother cursed us, after the hanging, and she cursed us well. Prior James was destroyed by the knowledge of what he had done, as Remigius said at the nepotism trial. Percy Hamleigh died before the truth came out, but his son was hanged. And look at me: my act of perjury was thrown back at me almost fifty years later, and it ended my career.” Waleran was looking gray-faced and exhausted, as if his rigid self-control was a terrible strain. “We were all afraid of your mother, because we weren’t sure what she knew. In the end it wasn’t much at all, but it was enough.”

Jack felt as drained as Waleran appeared. At last he had learned the truth about his father, something he had wanted all his life. Now he could not feel angry or vengeful. He had never known his real father, but he had had Tom, who had given him the love of buildings which had been the second greatest passion of his life.

Jack stood up. The events were all too far in the past to make him weep.

So much had happened since then, and most of it had been good.

He looked down at the old, sorry man sitting on the bench. Ironically, it was Waleran who was now suffering the bitterness of regret. Jack pitied him. How terrible, Jack thought, to be old and know that your life has been wasted. Waleran looked up, and their eyes met for the first time. Waleran flinched and turned away, as if his face had been slapped. For a moment Jack could read the other man's mind, and he realized that Waleran had seen the pity in his eyes.

And for Waleran, the pity of his enemies was the worst humiliation of all.

IV

Philip stood at the West Gate of the ancient Christian city of Canterbury, wearing the full, gorgeously-colored regalia of an English bishop, and carrying a jeweled crozier worth a king's ransom. It was pouring with rain.

He was sixty-six years of age, and the rain chilled his old bones. This was the last time he would venture so far from home. But he would not have missed this day for all the world. In a way, today's ceremony would crown his life's work.

It was three and a half years after the historic murder of Archbishop Thomas. In that short span of time the mystical cult of Thomas Becket had swept the world. Philip had had no idea of what he was starting when he led that small candlelit procession through the streets of Canterbury. The pope had made Thomas a saint with almost indecent speed. There was even a new order of monk-knights in the Holy Land called the Knights of Saint Thomas of Acre. King Henry had not been able to fight such a powerful popular movement. It was far too strong for any one individual to withstand.

For Philip, the importance of the whole phenomenon lay in what it demonstrated about the power of the State. The death of Thomas had shown that, in a conflict between the Church and the Crown, the monarch could always prevail by the use of brute force. But the cult of Saint Thomas proved that such a victory would always be a hollow one. The power of a king was not absolute, after all: it could be restrained by the will of the people. This change had taken place within Philip's lifetime. He had not merely witnessed it, he had helped to bring it about. And today's ceremony would commemorate that.

A stocky man with a large head was walking toward the city out of the mist of rain. He wore no boots or hat. At some distance behind him followed a large group of people on horseback.

The man was King Henry.

The crowd was as quiet as a funeral while the rain-drenched king walked through the mud to the city gate.

Philip stepped into the road, according to the prearranged plan, and walked in front of the barefoot king, leading the way to the cathedral. Henry followed with head bowed, his normally jaunty gait rigidly controlled, his posture a picture of penitence. Awestruck townspeople gazed on in silence as the king of England humbled himself before their eyes. The king's entourage followed at a distance.

Philip led him slowly through the cathedral gate. The mighty doors of the splendid church were open wide. They went in, a solemn procession of two people that was the culmination of the political crisis of the century. The nave was packed. The crowd parted to let them through. People spoke in whispers, stunned by the sight of the proudest king in Christendom, soaking wet, walking into church like a beggar.

They went slowly along the nave and down the steps into the crypt. There, beside the new tomb of the martyr, the monks of Canterbury were waiting, along with the greatest and most powerful bishops and abbots of the realm.

The king knelt on the floor.

His courtiers came into the crypt behind him. In front of everyone, Henry of England, second of that name, confessed his sins, and said he had been the unwitting cause of the murder of Saint Thomas.

When he had confessed he took off his cloak. Beneath it he wore a green tunic and a hair shirt. He knelt down again, bending his back.

The bishop of London flexed a cane.

The king was to be whipped.

He would get five strokes from each priest and three from each monk present. The strokes would be symbolic, of course: since there were eighty monks present a real beating from each of them would have killed him.

The bishop of London touched the king’s back five times lightly with the cane. Then he turned and handed the cane to Philip, bishop of Kingsbridge.

Philip stepped forward to whip the king. He was glad he had lived to see this. After today, he thought, the world will never be quite the same.

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For Barbara

CONTENTS

PART I November 1, 1327

PART II June 8 to 14, 1337

PART III June to December 1337

PART IV June 1338 to May 1339

PART V March 1346 to December 1348

PART VI January 1349 to January 1351

PART VII March to November 1361

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

PART I

November 1, 1327

1

Gwenda was eight years old, but she was not afraid of the dark.

When she opened her eyes she could see nothing, but that was not what scared her. She knew where she was.

She was at Kingsbridge Priory, in the long stone building they called the hospital, lying on the floor in a bed of straw. Her mother lay next to her, and Gwenda could tell, by the warm milky smell, that Ma was feeding the new baby, who did not yet have a name. Beside Ma was Pa, and next to him Gwenda's older brother, Philemon, who was twelve.

The hospital was crowded, and though she could not see the other families lying along the floor, squashed together like sheep in a pen, she could smell the rank odor of their warm bodies. When dawn broke it would be All Hallows, a Sunday this year and therefore an especially holy day. By the same token the night before was All Hallows Eve, a dangerous time when evil spirits roamed freely. Hundreds of people had come to Kingsbridge from the surrounding villages, as Gwenda's family had, to spend Halloween in the sanctified precincts of the priory, and to attend the All Hallows service at daybreak.

Gwenda was wary of evil spirits, like every sensible person; but she was more scared of what she had to do during the service.

She stared into the gloom, trying not to think about what frightened her. She knew that the wall opposite her had an arched window. There was no glass—only the most important buildings had glass windows—but a linen blind kept out the cold autumn air. However, she could not even see a faint patch of gray where the window should be. She was glad. She did not want the morning to come.

She could see nothing, but there was plenty to listen to. The straw that covered the floor whispered constantly as people stirred and shifted in their sleep. A child cried out, as if woken by a dream, and was quickly silenced by a murmured endearment. Now and again someone spoke, uttering the half-

formed words of sleep talk. Somewhere there was the sound of two people doing the thing parents did but never spoke of, the thing Gwenda called grunting because she had no other word for it.

Too soon, there was a light. At the eastern end of the long room, behind the altar, a monk came through the door carrying a single candle. He put the candle down on the altar, lit a taper from it, and went around touching the flame to the wall lamps, his long shadow reaching up the wall each time like a reflection, his taper meeting the shadow taper at the wick of the lamp.

The strengthening light illuminated rows of humped figures on the floor, wrapped in their drab cloaks or huddled up to their neighbors for warmth. Sick people occupied the cots near the altar, where they could get the maximum benefit from the holiness of the place. At the opposite end, a staircase led to the upper floor, where there were rooms for aristocratic visitors: the earl of Shiring was there now with some of his family.

The monk leaned over Gwenda to light the lamp above her head. He caught her eye and smiled. She studied his face in the shifting light of the flame and recognized him as Brother Godwyn. He was young and handsome, and last night he had spoken kindly to Philemon.

Beside Gwenda was another family from her village: Samuel, a prosperous peasant with a large landholding, and his wife and two sons, the youngest of whom, Wulfric, was an annoying six-year-old who thought that throwing acorns at girls then running away was the funniest thing in the world.

Gwenda's family was not prosperous. Her father had no land at all, and hired himself out as a laborer to anyone who would pay him. There was always work in the summer, but after the harvest was gathered in and the weather began to turn cold, the family often went hungry.

That was why Gwenda had to steal.

She imagined being caught: a strong hand grabbing her arm, holding her in an unbreakable grip while she wriggled helplessly; a deep, cruel voice saying, "Well, well, a little thief"; the pain and humiliation of a whipping; and then, worst of all, the agony and loss as her hand was chopped off.

Her father had suffered this punishment. At the end of his left arm was a hideous wrinkled stump. He managed well with one hand—he could use a shovel, saddle a horse, and even make a net to catch birds—but all the same he was always the last laborer to be hired in the spring, and the first to be laid off in the autumn. He could never leave the village and seek work elsewhere, because the amputation marked him as a thief, so that people would refuse to hire him. When traveling, he tied a stuffed glove to the stump, to avoid being shunned by every stranger he met; but that did not fool people for long.

Gwenda had not witnessed Pa's punishment—it had happened before she was born—but she had often imagined it, and now she could not help thinking

about the same thing happening to her. In her mind she saw the blade of the axe coming down on her wrist, slicing through her skin and her bones, and severing her hand from her arm, so that it could never be reattached; and she had to clamp her teeth together to keep from screaming out loud.

People were standing up, stretching and yawning and rubbing their faces. Gwenda got up and shook out her clothes. All her garments had previously belonged to her older brother. She wore a woolen shift that came down to her knees and a tunic over it, gathered at the waist with a belt made of hemp cord. Her shoes had once been laced, but the eyelets were torn and the laces gone, and she tied them to her feet with plaited straw. When she had tucked her hair into a cap made of squirrel tails, she had finished dressing.

She caught her father's eye, and he pointed surreptitiously to a family across the way, a couple in middle age with two sons a little older than Gwenda. The man was short and slight, with a curly red beard. He was buckling on a sword, which meant he was a man-at-arms or a knight: ordinary people were not allowed to wear swords. His wife was a thin woman with a brisk manner and a grumpy face. As Gwenda scrutinized them, Brother Godwyn nodded respectfully and said: "Good morning, Sir Gerald, Lady Maud."

Gwenda saw what had attracted her father's notice. Sir Gerald had a purse attached to his belt by a leather thong. The purse bulged. It looked as if it contained several hundred of the small, thin silver pennies, halfpennies, and farthings that were the English currency—as much money as Pa could earn in a year if he had been able to find employment. It would be more than enough to feed the family until the spring plowing. The purse might even contain a few foreign gold coins, florins from Florence or ducats from Venice.

Gwenda had a small knife in a wooden sheath hanging from a cord around her neck. The sharp blade would quickly cut the thong and cause the fat purse to fall into her small hand—unless Sir Gerald felt something strange and grabbed her before she could do the deed…

Godwyn raised his voice over the rumble of talk. "For the love of Christ, who teaches us charity, breakfast will be provided after the All Hallows service," he said. "Meanwhile, there is pure drinking water in the courtyard fountain. Please remember to use the latrines outside—no pissing indoors!"

The monks and nuns were strict about cleanliness. Last night, Godwyn had caught a six-year-old boy peeing in a corner, and had expelled the whole family. Unless they had a penny for a tavern, they would have had to spend the cold October night shivering on the stone floor of the cathedral's north porch. There was also a ban on animals. Gwenda's three-legged dog, Hop, had been banished. She wondered where he had spent the night.

When all the lamps were lit, Godwyn opened the big wooden door to the outside. The night air bit sharply at Gwenda's ears and the tip of her nose. The

overnight guests pulled their coats around them and began to shuffle out. When Sir Gerald and his family moved off, Pa and Ma fell into line behind them, and Gwenda and Philemon followed suit.

Philemon had done the stealing until now, but yesterday he had almost been caught, at Kingsbridge Market. He had palmed a small jar of expensive oil from the booth of an Italian merchant, then he had dropped the jar, so that everyone saw it. Mercifully, it had not broken when it hit the ground. He had been forced to pretend that he had accidentally knocked it off the stall.

Until recently Philemon had been small and unobtrusive, like Gwenda, but in the last year he had grown several inches, developed a deep voice, and become awkward and clumsy, as if he could not get used to his new, larger body. Last night, after the incident with the jar of oil, Pa had announced that Philemon was now too big for serious thieving, and henceforth it was Gwenda's job.

That was why she had lain awake for so much of the night.

Philemon's name was really Holger. When he was ten years old, he had decided he was going to be a monk, so he told everyone he had changed his name to Philemon, which sounded more religious. Surprisingly, most people had gone along with his wish, though Ma and Pa still called him Holger.

They passed through the door and saw two lines of shivering nuns holding burning torches to light the pathway from the hospital to the great west door of Kingsbridge Cathedral. Shadows flickered at the edges of the torchlight, as if the imps and hobgoblins of the night were cavorting just out of sight, kept at a distance only by the sanctity of the nuns.

Gwenda half expected to see Hop waiting outside, but he was not there. Perhaps he had found somewhere warm to sleep. As they walked to the church, Pa made sure they stayed close to Sir Gerald. From behind, someone tugged painfully at Gwenda's hair. She squealed, thinking it was a goblin; but when she turned she saw Wulfric, her six-year-old neighbor. He darted out of her reach, laughing. Then his father growled: "Behave!" and smacked his head, and the little boy began to cry.

The vast church was a shapeless mass towering above the huddled crowd. Only the lowest parts were distinct, arches and mullions picked out in orange and red by the uncertain torchlight. The procession slowed as it approached the cathedral entrance, and Gwenda could see a group of townspeople coming from the opposite direction. There were hundreds of them, Gwenda thought, maybe thousands, although she was not sure how many people made a thousand, for she could not count that high.

The crowd inched through the vestibule. The restless light of the torches fell on the sculpted figures around the walls, making them dance madly. At the lowest level were demons and monsters. Gwenda stared uneasily at dragons and griffins, a bear with a man's head, a dog with two bodies and one

muzzle. Some of the demons struggled with humans: a devil put a noose around a man's neck, a foxlike monster dragged a woman by her hair, an eagle with hands speared a naked man. Above these scenes the saints stood in a row under sheltering canopies; over them the apostles sat on thrones; then, in the arch over the main door, St. Peter with his key and St. Paul with a scroll looked adoringly upward at Jesus Christ.

Gwenda knew that Jesus was telling her not to sin, or she would be tortured by demons; but humans frightened her more than demons. If she failed to steal Sir Gerald's purse, she would be whipped by her father. Worse, there would be nothing for the family to eat but soup made with acorns. She and Philemon would be hungry for weeks on end. Ma's breasts would dry up, and the new baby would die, as the last two had. Pa would disappear for days, and come back with nothing for the pot but a scrawny heron or a couple of squirrels. Being hungry was worse than being whipped—it hurt longer.

She had been taught to pilfer at a young age: an apple from a stall, a new-laid egg from under a neighbor's hen, a knife dropped carelessly on a tavern table by a drunk. But stealing money was different. If she were caught robbing Sir Gerald, it would be no use bursting into tears and hoping to be treated as a naughty child, as she had once after thieving a pair of dainty leather shoes from a softhearted nun. Cutting the strings of a knight's purse was no childish peccadillo, it was a real grown-up crime, and she would be treated accordingly.

She tried not to think about it. She was small and nimble and quick, and she would take the purse stealthily, like a ghost—provided she could keep from trembling.

The wide church was already thronged with people. In the side aisles, hooded monks held torches that cast a restless red glow. The marching pillars of the nave reached up into darkness. Gwenda stayed close to Sir Gerald as the crowd pushed forward toward the altar. The red-bearded knight and his thin wife did not notice her. Their two boys paid no more attention to her than to the stone walls of the cathedral. Gwenda's family fell back and she lost sight of them.

The nave filled up quickly. Gwenda had never seen so many people in one place: it was busier than the cathedral green on market day. People greeted one another cheerfully, feeling safe from evil spirits in this holy place, and the sound of all their conversations mounted to a roar.

Then the bell tolled, and they fell silent.

Sir Gerald was standing by a family from the town. They all wore cloaks of fine cloth, so they were probably rich wool dealers. Next to the knight stood a girl about ten years old. Gwenda stood behind Sir Gerald and the girl. She tried to make herself inconspicuous but, to her dismay, the girl looked at her and smiled reassuringly, as if to tell her not to be frightened.

Around the edges of the crowd the monks extinguished their torches, one by one, until the great church was in utter darkness.

Gwenda wondered if the rich girl would remember her later. She had not merely glanced at Gwenda then ignored her, as most people did. She had noticed her, had thought about her, had anticipated that she might be scared, and had given her a friendly smile. But there were hundreds of children in the cathedral. She could not have got a very clear impression of Gwenda's features in the dim light…could she? Gwenda tried to put the worry out of her mind.

Invisible in the darkness, she stepped forward and slipped noiselessly between the two figures, feeling the soft wool of the girl's cloak on one side and the stiffer fabric of the knight's old surcoat on the other. Now she was in a position to get at the purse.

She reached into her neckline and took the little knife from its sheath.

The silence was broken by a terrible scream. Gwenda had been expecting it—Ma had explained what was going to happen during the service—but, all the same, she was shocked. It sounded like someone being tortured.

Then there was a harsh drumming sound, as of someone beating on a metal plate. More noises followed: wailing, mad laughter, a hunting horn, a rattle, animal noises, a cracked bell. In the congregation, a child started to cry, and others joined in. Some of the adults laughed nervously. They knew the noises were made by the monks, but all the same it was a hellish cacophony.

This was not the moment to take the purse, Gwenda thought fearfully. Everyone was tense, alert. The knight would be sensitive to any touch.

The devilish noise grew louder, then a new sound intervened: music. At first it was so soft that Gwenda was not sure she had really heard it, then gradually it grew louder. The nuns were singing. Gwenda felt her body flood with tension. The moment was approaching. Moving like a spirit, imperceptible as the air, she turned so that she was facing Sir Gerald.

She knew exactly what he was wearing. He had on a heavy wool robe gathered at the waist by a broad studded belt. His purse was tied to the belt with a leather thong. Over the robe he wore an embroidered surcoat, costly but worn, with yellowing bone buttons down the front. He had done up some of the buttons, but not all, probably out of sleepy laziness, or because the walk from the hospital to the church was so short.

With a touch as light as possible, Gwenda put one small hand on his coat. She imagined her hand was a spider, so weightless that he could not possibly feel it. She ran her spider hand across the front of his coat and found the opening. She slipped her hand under the edge of the coat and along his heavy belt until she came to the purse.

The pandemonium faded as the music grew louder. From the front of the congregation came a murmur of awe. Gwenda could see nothing, but she

knew that a lamp had been lit on the altar, illuminating a reliquary, an elaborately carved ivory-and-gold box holding the bones of St. Adolphus, that had not been there when the lights went out. The crowd surged forward, everyone trying to get closer to the holy remains. As Gwenda felt herself squashed between Sir Gerald and the man in front of him, she brought up her right hand and put the edge of the knife to the thong of his purse.

The leather was tough, and her first stroke did not cut it. She sawed frantically with the knife, hoping desperately that Sir Gerald was too interested in the scene at the altar to notice what was happening under his nose. She glanced upward and realized she could just about see the outlines of people around her: the monks and nuns were lighting candles. The light would get brighter every moment. She had no time left.

She gave a fierce yank on the knife, and felt the thong give. Sir Gerald grunted quietly: had he felt something, or was he reacting to the spectacle at the altar? The purse dropped, and landed in her hand; but it was too big for her to grasp easily, and it slipped. For a terrifying moment she thought she was going to drop it and lose it on the floor among the heedless feet of the crowd; then she got a grip on it and held it.

She felt a moment of joyous relief: she had the purse.

But she was still in terrible danger. Her heart was beating so loudly she felt as if everyone must be able to hear it. She turned quickly so that her back was to the knight. In the same movement, she stuffed the heavy purse down the front of her tunic. She could feel that it made a bulge that would be conspicuous, hanging over her belt like an old man's belly. She shifted it around to her side, where it was partly covered by her arm. It would still be visible when the lights brightened, but she had nowhere else to put it.

She sheathed the knife. Now she had to get away quickly, before Sir Gerald noticed his loss—but the crush of worshippers, which had helped her take the purse unnoticed, now hindered her escape. She tried to step backward, hoping to force a gap in the bodies behind her, but everyone was still pressing forward to look at the bones of the saint. She was trapped, unable to move, right in front of the man she had robbed.

A voice in her ear said: "Are you all right?"

It was the rich girl. Gwenda fought down panic. She needed to be invisible. A helpful older child was the last thing she wanted. She said nothing.

"Be careful," the girl said to the people around. "You're squashing this little girl."

Gwenda could have screamed. The rich girl's thoughtfulness would get Gwenda's hand chopped off.

Desperate to get away, she put her hands on the man in front and shoved, pushing herself backward. She succeeded only in getting the attention of Sir

Gerald. “You can’t see anything down there, can you?” said her victim in a kindly voice; and, to her horror, he grasped her under the arms and lifted her up.

She was helpless. His big hand in her armpit was only an inch from the purse. She faced forward, so that he could see only the back of her head, and looked over the crowd to the altar, where the monks and nuns were lighting more candles and singing to the long-dead saint. Beyond them, a faint light showed through the big rose window at the east end of the building: dawn was breaking, chasing the evil spirits away. The clangor had stopped now, and the singing swelled. A tall, good-looking monk stepped up to the altar, and Gwenda recognized him as Anthony, the prior of Kingsbridge. Raising his hands in a blessing, he said loudly: “And so, once again, by the grace of Christ Jesus, the evil and darkness of this world are banished by the harmony and light of God’s holy church.”

The congregation gave a triumphant roar, then began to relax. The climax of the ceremony had passed. Gwenda wriggled, and Sir Gerald got the message and put her down. Keeping her face turned away from him, she pushed past him, heading toward the back of the crowd. People were no longer so eager to see the altar, and she was now able to force her way between the bodies. The farther back she went, the easier it became, until at last she found herself by the great west door, and saw her family.

Pa looked expectantly at her, ready to be angry if she had failed. She pulled the purse out of her shirt and thrust it at him, glad to get rid of it. He grabbed it, turned slightly, and furtively looked inside. She saw him grin with delight. Then he passed the purse to Ma, who quickly shoved it into the folds of the blanket that wrapped the baby.

The ordeal was over, but the risk had not yet passed. “A rich girl noticed me,” Gwenda said, and she could hear the shrill fear in her own voice.

Pa’s small, dark eyes flashed anger. “Did she see what you did?”

“No, but she told the others not to squash me, then the knight picked me up so I could see better.”

Ma gave a low groan.

Pa said: “He saw your face, then.”

“I tried to keep it turned away.”

“Still, better if he doesn’t come across you again,” Pa said. “We won’t return to the monks’ hospital. We’ll go to a tavern for our breakfast.”

Ma said: “We can’t hide away all day.”

“No, but we can melt into the crowd.”

Gwenda started to feel better. Pa seemed to think there was no real danger. Anyway, she was reassured just by his being in charge again, and taking the responsibility from her.

“Besides,” he went on, “I fancy bread and meat, instead of the monks’

watery porridge. I can afford it now!”

They went out of the church. The sky was pearly gray with dawn light. Gwenda wanted to hold Ma’s hand, but the baby started to cry, and Ma was distracted. Then she saw a small three-legged dog, white with a black face, come running into the cathedral close with a familiar lopsided stride. “Hop!” she cried, and picked him up and hugged him.

2

Merthin was eleven, a year older than his brother Ralph; but, to his intense annoyance, Ralph was taller and stronger.

This caused trouble with their parents. Their father, Sir Gerald, was a soldier, and could not conceal his disappointment when Merthin proved unable to lift the heavy lance, or became exhausted before the tree was chopped down, or came home crying after losing a fight. Their mother, Lady Maud, made matters worse, embarrassing Merthin by being overprotective, when what he needed her to do was pretend not to notice. When Father showed his pride in Ralph’s strength, Mother tried to compensate by criticizing Ralph’s stupidity. Ralph was a bit slow on the uptake, but he could not help it, and being nagged about it only made him angry, so that he got into fights with other boys.

Both parents were tetchy on the morning of All Hallows Day. Father had not wanted to come to Kingsbridge at all. But he had been compelled. He owed money to the priory, and he could not pay. Mother said they would take away his lands: he was lord of three villages near Kingsbridge. Father reminded her that he was directly descended from the Thomas who became earl of Shiring in the year that Archbishop Becket was murdered by King Henry II. That Earl Thomas had been the son of Jack Builder, the architect of Kingsbridge Cathedral, and Lady Aliena of Shiring—a near-legendary couple whose story was told, on long winter evenings, along with the heroic tales of Charlemagne and Roland. With such ancestry, Sir Gerald could not have his land confiscated by any monk, he bellowed, least of all that old woman Prior Anthony. When he started shouting, a look of tired resignation came over Maud’s face, and she turned away—though Merthin had heard her mutter: “The Lady Aliena had a brother, Richard, who was no good for anything but fighting.”

Prior Anthony might be an old woman, but he had at least been man enough to complain about Sir Gerald’s unpaid debts. He had gone to Gerald’s overlord, the present earl of Shiring, who happened also to be Gerald’s second cousin. Earl Roland had summoned Gerald to Kingsbridge today to meet with

the prior and work out some resolution. Hence Father's bad temper.

Then Father was robbed.

He discovered the loss after the All Hallows service. Merthin had enjoyed the drama: the darkness, the weird noises, the music beginning so quietly and then swelling until it seemed to fill the huge church, and finally the slow illumination of candles. He had also noticed, as the lights began to come on, that some people had been taking advantage of the darkness to commit minor sins for which they could now be forgiven: he had seen two monks hastily stop kissing, and a sly merchant remove his hand from the plump breast of a smiling woman who appeared to be someone else's wife. Merthin was still in an excited mood when they returned to the hospital.

As they were waiting for the nuns to serve breakfast, a kitchen boy passed through the room and went up the stairs carrying a tray with a big jug of ale and a platter of hot salt beef. Mother said grumpily: "I would think your relative, the earl, might invite us to breakfast with him in his private room. After all, your grandmother was sister to his grandfather."

Father replied: "If you don't want porridge, we can go to the tavern."

Merthin's ears pricked up. He liked tavern breakfasts of new bread and salt butter. But Mother said: "We can't afford it."

"We can," Father said, feeling for his purse; and that was when he realized it was gone.

At first he looked around the floor, as if it might have fallen; then he noticed the cut ends of the leather thong, and he roared with indignation. Everyone looked at him except Mother, who turned away, and Merthin heard her mutter: "That was all the money we had."

Father glared accusingly at the other guests in the hospital. The long scar that ran from his right temple to his left eye seemed to darken with rage. The room went quiet with tension: an angry knight was dangerous, even one who was evidently down on his luck.

Then Mother said: "You were robbed in the church, no doubt."

Merthin guessed that must be right. In the darkness, people had been stealing more than kisses.

"Sacrilege, too!" said Father.

"I expect it happened when you picked up that little girl," Mother went on. Her face was twisted, as if she had swallowed something bitter. "The thief probably reached around your waist from behind."

"He must be found!" Father roared.

The young monk called Godwyn spoke up. "I'm very sorry this has happened, Sir Gerald," he said. "I will go and tell John Constable right away. He can look out for a poor townsman who has suddenly become rich."

That seemed to Merthin a very unpromising plan. There were thousands of townspeople and hundreds more visitors. The constable could not observe

them all.

But Father was slightly mollified. “The rogue shall hang!” he said in a voice a little less loud.

“And, meanwhile, perhaps you and Lady Maud, and your sons, would do us the honor of sitting at the table that is being set up in front of the altar,” Godwyn said smoothly.

Father grunted. He was pleased, Merthin knew, to be accorded higher status than the mass of guests, who would eat sitting on the floor where they had slept.

The moment of potential violence passed, and Merthin relaxed a little; but, as the four of them took their seats, he wondered anxiously what would happen to the family now. His father was a brave soldier—everyone said that. Sir Gerald had fought for the old king at Boroughbridge, where a Lancashire rebel’s sword had given him the scar on his forehead. But he was unlucky. Some knights came home from battle with booty: plundered jewels, a cartload of costly Flemish cloth and Italian silk, or the beloved father of a noble family who could be ransomed for a thousand pounds. Sir Gerald never seemed to get much loot. But he still had to buy weapons, armor, and an expensive warhorse to enable him to do his duty and serve the king; and somehow the rents from his lands were never enough. So, against Mother’s will, he had started to borrow.

The kitchen hands brought in a steaming cauldron. Sir Gerald’s family was served first. The porridge was made with barley and flavored with rosemary and salt. Ralph, who did not understand the family crisis, started to talk excitedly about the All Hallows service, but the glum silence in which his comments were received shut him up.

When the porridge was eaten, Merthin went to the altar. Behind it he had stashed his bow and arrows. People would hesitate to steal something from an altar. They might overcome their fears, if the reward were tempting enough; but a homemade bow was not much of a prize; and, sure enough, it was still there.

He was proud of it. It was small, of course: to bend a full-size, six-foot bow took all the strength of a grown man. Merthin’s was four feet long, and slender, but in other respects it was just like the standard English longbow that had killed so many Scots mountain men, Welsh rebels, and French knights in armor.

Father had not previously commented on the bow, and now he looked at it as if seeing it for the first time. “Where did you get the stave?” he said. “They’re costly.”

“Not this one—it’s too short. A bowyer gave it me.”

Father nodded. “Apart from that it’s a perfect stave,” he said. “It’s taken from the inside of the yew, where the sapwood meets the heartwood.” He

pointed to the two different colors.

“I know,” Merthin said eagerly. He did not often get the chance to impress his father. “The stretchy sapwood is best for the front of the bow, because it pulls back to its original shape; and the hard heartwood is best for the inside of the curve, because it pushes back when the bow is bent inwards.”

“Exactly,” Father said. He handed the bow back. “But remember, this is not a nobleman’s weapon. Knights’ sons do not become archers. Give it to some peasant boy.”

Merthin was crestfallen. “I haven’t even tried it yet!”

Mother intervened. “Let them play,” she said. “They’re only boys.”

“True,” Father said, losing interest. “I wonder if those monks would bring us a jug of ale?”

“Off you go,” Mother said. “Merthin, take care of your brother.”

Father grunted. “More likely to be the other way around.”

Merthin was stung. Father had no idea what went on. Merthin could look after himself, but Ralph on his own would get into fights. However, Merthin knew better than to take issue with his father in this mood, and he left the hospital without saying anything. Ralph trailed behind him.

It was a clear, cold November day, and the sky was roofed with high pale-gray cloud. They left the cathedral close and walked down the main street, passing Fish Lane, Leather Yard, and Cookshop Street. At the bottom of the hill they crossed the wooden bridge over the river, leaving the old city for the suburb called Newtown. Here the streets of timber houses ran between pastures and gardens. Merthin led the way to a meadow called Lovers’ Field. There, the town constable and his deputies had set up butts—targets for archery. Shooting practice after church was compulsory for all men, by order of the king.

Enforcement was not much needed: it was no hardship to loose off a few arrows on a Sunday morning, and a hundred or so of the young men of the town were lining up for their turn, watched by women, children, and men who considered themselves too old, or too dignified, to be archers. Some had their own weapons. For those too poor to afford a bow, John Constable had inexpensive practice bows made of ash or hazel.

It was like a feast day. Dick Brewer was selling tankards of ale from a barrel on a cart, and Betty Baxter’s four adolescent daughters were walking around with trays of spiced buns for sale. The wealthier townspeople were done up in fur caps and new shoes, and even the poorer women had dressed their hair and trimmed their cloaks with new braid.

Merthin was the only child carrying a bow, and he immediately attracted the attention of other children. They crowded around him and Ralph, the boys asking envious questions, the girls looking admiring or disdainful according to temperament. One of the girls said: “How did you know how to make it?”

Merthin recognized her: she had stood near him in the cathedral. She was about a year younger than himself, he thought, and she wore a dress and cloak of expensive, close-woven wool. Merthin usually found girls of his own age tiresome: they giggled a lot and refused to take anything seriously. But this one looked at him and his bow with a frank curiosity that he liked. “I just guessed,” he said.

“That’s clever. Does it work?”

“I haven’t tried it. What’s your name?”

“Caris, from the Wooler family. Who are you?”

“Merthin. My father is Sir Gerald.” Merthin pushed back the hood of his cape, reached inside it, and took out a coiled bowstring.

“Why do you keep the string in your hat?”

“So it won’t get wet if there’s rain. It’s what the real archers do.” He attached the twine to the notches at either end of the stave, bending the bow slightly so that the tension would hold the string in place.

“Are you going to shoot at the targets?”

“Yes.”

Another boy said: “They won’t let you.”

Merthin looked at him. He was about twelve, tall and thin with big hands and feet. Merthin had seen him last night in the priory hospital with his family: his name was Philemon. He had been hanging around the monks, asking questions and helping to serve supper. “Of course they’ll let me,” Merthin told him. “Why shouldn’t they?”

“Because you’re too young.”

“That’s stupid.” Even as he spoke, Merthin knew he should not be so sure: adults often were stupid. But Philemon’s assumption of superior knowledge irritated him, especially after he had shown confidence in front of Caris.

He left the children and walked over to a group of men waiting to use a target. He recognized one of them: an exceptionally tall, broad-shouldered man called Mark Webber. Mark noticed the bow and spoke to Merthin in a slow, amiable voice. “Where did you get that?”

“I made it,” Merthin said proudly.

“Look at this, Elfric,” Mark said to his neighbor. “He’s made a nice job of it.”

Elfric was a brawny man with a sly look. He gave the bow a cursory glance. “It’s too small,” he said dismissively. “That’ll never fire an arrow to penetrate a French knight’s armor.”

“Perhaps not,” Mark said mildly. “But I expect the lad’s got a year or two to go before he has to fight the French.”

John Constable called out: “We’re ready, let’s get started. Mark Webber, you’re first.” The giant stepped up to the line. He picked up a stout bow and

tested it, bending the thick wood effortlessly.

The constable noticed Merthin for the first time. “No boys,” he said.

“Why not?” Merthin protested.

“Never mind why not, just get out of the way.”

Merthin heard some of the other children snigger. “There’s no reason for it!” he said indignantly.

“I don’t have to give reasons to children,” John said. “All right, Mark, take your shot.”

Merthin was mortified. The oily Philemon had proved him wrong in front of everyone. He turned away from the targets.

“I told you so,” said Philemon.

“Oh, shut up and go away.”

“You can’t make me go away,” said Philemon, who was six inches taller than Merthin.

Ralph put in: “I could, though.”

Merthin sighed. Ralph was unfailingly loyal, but he did not see that for him to fight Philemon would only make Merthin look like a weakling as well as a fool.

“I’m leaving anyway,” said Philemon. “I’m going to help Brother Godwyn.” He walked off.

The rest of the children began to drift away, seeking other curiosities. Caris said to Merthin: “You could go somewhere else to try the bow.” She was obviously keen to see what would happen.

Merthin looked around. “But where?” If he was seen shooting unsupervised, the bow might be taken from him.

“We could go into the forest.”

Merthin was surprised. Children were forbidden to go into the forest. Outlaws hid there, men and women who lived by stealing. Children might be stripped of their clothes, or made into slaves, and there were worse dangers that parents only hinted at. Even if they escaped such perils, the children were liable to be flogged by their fathers for breaking the rule.

But Caris did not seem to be afraid, and Merthin was reluctant to appear less bold than she. Besides, the constable’s curt dismissal had made him feel defiant. “All right,” he said. “But we’ll have to make sure no one sees us.”

She had the answer to that. “I know a way.”

She walked toward the river. Merthin and Ralph followed. A small three-legged dog tagged along. “What’s your dog’s name?” Merthin asked Caris.

“He’s not mine,” she said. “But I gave him a piece of moldy bacon, and now I can’t shake him off.”

They walked along the muddy bank of the river, past warehouses and wharves and barges. Merthin covertly studied this girl who had so effortlessly become the leader. She had a square, determined face, neither pretty nor ugly,

and there was mischief in her eyes, which were a greenish color with brown flecks. Her light brown hair was done in two plaits, as was the fashion among affluent women. Her clothes were costly, but she wore practical leather boots rather than the embroidered fabric shoes preferred by noble ladies.

She turned away from the river and led them through a timber yard, and suddenly they were in scrubby woodland. Merthin felt a pang of unease. Now that he was in the forest, where there might be an outlaw lurking behind any oak tree, he regretted his bravado; but he would be ashamed to back out.

They walked on, looking for a clearing big enough for archery. Suddenly Caris spoke in a conspiratorial voice. “You see that big holly bush?”

“Yes.”

“As soon as we’re past it, crouch down with me and keep silent.”

“Why?”

“You’ll see.”

A moment later Merthin, Ralph, and Caris squatted behind the bush. The three-legged dog sat with them and looked hopefully at Caris. Ralph began to ask a question, but Caris hushed him.

A minute later a little girl came by. Caris jumped out and grabbed her. The girl screamed.

“Be quiet!” Caris said. “We’re not far from the road, and we don’t want to be heard. Why are you following us?”

“You’ve got my dog, and he won’t come back!” the child sobbed.

“I know you, I met you in church this morning,” Caris said to her in a softer voice. “All right, there’s nothing to cry about, we aren’t going to do you any harm. What’s your name?”

“Gwenda.”

“And the dog?”

“Hop.” Gwenda picked up the dog, and he licked her tears.

“Well, you’ve got him now. You’d better come with us, in case he runs off again. Besides, you might not be able to find your way back to town on your own.”

They went on. Merthin said: “What has eight arms and eleven legs?”

“I give up,” Ralph said immediately. He always did.

“I know,” said Caris with a grin. “It’s us. Four children and the dog.” She laughed. “That’s good.”

Merthin was pleased. People did not always get his jokes; girls almost never did. A moment later he heard Gwenda explaining it to Ralph: “Two arms, and two arms, and two arms, and two arms makes eight,” she said. “Two legs…”

They saw no one, which was good. The small number of people who had legitimate business in the forest—woodcutters, charcoal burners, iron smelters—would not be working today, and it would be unusual to see an

aristocratic hunting party on a Sunday. Anyone they met was likely to be an outlaw. But the chances were slim. It was a big forest, stretching for many miles. Merthin had never traveled far enough to see the end of it.

They came to a wide clearing and Merthin said: “This will do.”

There was an oak tree with a broad trunk on the far edge, about fifty feet away. Merthin stood side-on to the target, as he had seen the men do. He took out one of his three arrows and fitted the notched end to the bowstring. The arrows had been as difficult to make as the bow. The wood was ash, and they had goose-feather flights. He had not been able to get iron for the points, so he had simply sharpened the ends then scorched the wood to harden it. He sighted on the tree, then pulled back on the bowstring. It took a great effort. He released the arrow.

It fell to the ground well short of the target. Hop the dog scampered across the clearing to fetch it.

Merthin was taken aback. He had expected the arrow to go winging through the air and embed its point in the tree. He realized that he had not bent the bow sufficiently.

He tried the bow in his right hand and the arrow in his left. He was unusual in this respect, that he was neither right-handed nor left-handed, but a mixture. With the second arrow, he pulled on the bowstring and pushed the bow with all his might, and succeeded in bending them farther than before. This time, the arrow almost reached the tree.

For his third shot he aimed the bow upward, hoping the arrow would fly through the air in an arc and come down into the trunk. But he overcompensated, and the arrow went into the branches, and fell to the ground amid a flurry of dry brown leaves.

Merthin was embarrassed. Archery was more difficult than he had imagined. The bow was probably all right, he guessed: the problem was his own proficiency, or lack of it.

Once again, Caris seemed not to notice his discomfiture. “Let me have a go,” she said.

“Girls can’t shoot,” Ralph said, and he snatched the bow from Merthin. Standing sideways-on to the target, as Merthin had, he did not shoot straightaway, but flexed the bow several times, getting the feel of it. Like Merthin, he found it harder than he had at first expected, but after a few moments he seemed to get the hang of it.

Hop had dropped all three arrows at Gwenda’s feet, and now the little girl picked them up and handed them to Ralph.

He took aim without drawing the bow, sighting the arrow at the tree trunk, while there was no pressure on his arms. Merthin realized he should have done the same. Why did these things come so naturally to Ralph, who could never answer a riddle? Ralph drew the bow, not effortlessly but with a fluid

motion, seeming to take the strain with his thighs. He released the arrow and it hit the trunk of the oak tree, sinking an inch or more into the soft outer wood. Ralph laughed triumphantly.

Hop scampered after the arrow. When he reached the tree, he stopped, baffled.

Ralph was drawing the bow again. Merthin realized what he was intending to do. “Don’t—” he said, but he was a moment too late. Ralph shot at the dog. The arrow hit the back of its neck and sunk in. Hop fell forward and lay twitching.

Gwenda screamed. Caris said: “Oh, no!” The two girls ran to the dog.

Ralph was grinning. “What about that?” he said proudly.

“You shot her dog!” Merthin said angrily.

“Doesn’t matter—it only had three legs.”

“The little girl was fond of it, you idiot. Look at her crying.”

“You’re just jealous because you can’t shoot.” Something caught Ralph’s eye. With a smooth movement he notched another arrow, swept the bow around in an arc, and fired while it was still moving. Merthin did not see what he was shooting at until the arrow met its target, and a fat hare jumped into the air with the shaft sticking deep into its hindquarters.

Merthin could not hide his admiration. Even with practice, not everyone could hit a running hare. Ralph had a natural gift. Merthin *was* jealous, although he would never admit it. He longed to be a knight, bold and strong, and fight for the king as his father did; and it dismayed him when he turned out to be hopeless at things such as archery.

Ralph found a stone and crushed the hare’s skull, putting it out of its misery.

Merthin knelt beside the two girls and Hop. The dog was not breathing. Caris gently drew the arrow out of its neck and handed it to Merthin. There was no gush of blood: Hop was dead.

For a moment no one spoke. In the silence, they heard a man shout.

Merthin sprang to his feet, heart thudding. He heard another shout, a different voice: there was more than one person. Both sounded aggressive and angry. Some kind of fight was going on. He was terrified, and so were the others. As they stood frozen, listening, they heard another sound, the noise made by a man running headlong through woodland, snapping fallen branches, flattening saplings, trampling dead leaves.

He was coming their way.

Caris spoke first. “The bush,” she said, pointing to a big cluster of evergreen shrubs—probably the home of the hare Ralph had shot, Merthin thought. A moment later she was flat on her belly, crawling into the thicket. Gwenda followed, cradling the body of Hop. Ralph picked up the dead hare and joined them. Merthin was on his knees when he realized that they had left

a telltale arrow sticking out of the tree trunk. He dashed across the clearing, pulled it out, ran back, and dived under the bush.

They heard the man breathing before they saw him. He was panting hard as he ran, drawing in ragged lungfuls of air in a way that suggested he was almost done in. The shouts were coming from his pursuers, calling to each other: “This way—over here!” Merthin recalled that Caris had said they were not far from the road. Was the fleeing man a traveler who had been set upon by thieves?

A moment later he burst into the clearing.

He was a knight in his early twenties, with both a sword and a long dagger attached to his belt. He was well dressed, in a leather traveling tunic and high boots with turned-over tops. He stumbled and fell, rolled over, got up, then stood with his back to the oak tree, gasping for breath, and drew his weapons.

Merthin glanced at his playmates. Caris was white with fear, biting her lip. Gwenda was hugging the corpse of her dog as if that made her feel safer. Ralph looked scared, too, but he was not too frightened to pull the arrow out of the hare’s rump and stuff the dead animal down the front of his tunic.

For a moment the knight seemed to stare at the bush, and Merthin felt, with terror, that he must have seen the hiding children. Or perhaps he had noticed broken branches and crushed leaves where they had pushed through the foliage. Out of the corner of his eye, Merthin saw Ralph notch an arrow to the bow.

Then the pursuers arrived. They were two men-at-arms, strongly built and thuggish-looking, carrying drawn swords. They wore distinctive two-colored tunics, the left side yellow and the right green. One had a surcoat of cheap brown wool, the other a grubby black cloak. All three men paused, catching their breath. Merthin was sure he was about to see the knight hacked to death, and he suffered a shameful impulse to burst into tears. Then, suddenly, the knight reversed his sword and offered it, hilt first, in a gesture of surrender.

The older man-at-arms, in the black cloak, stepped forward and reached out with his left hand. Warily, he took the proffered sword, handed it to his partner, then accepted the knight’s dagger. Then he said: “It’s not your weapons I want, Thomas Langley.”

“You know me, but I don’t know you,” said Thomas. If he was feeling any fear, he had it well under control. “By your coats, you must be the queen’s men.”

The older man put the point of his sword to Thomas’s throat and pushed him up against the tree. “You’ve got a letter.”

“Instructions from the earl to the sheriff on the subject of taxes. You’re welcome to read it.” This was a joke. The men-at-arms were almost certainly unable to read. Thomas had a cool nerve, Merthin thought, to mock men who

seemed ready to kill him.

The second man-at-arms reached under the sword of the first and grasped the wallet attached to Thomas's belt. Impatiently, he cut the belt with his sword. He threw the belt aside and opened the wallet. He took out a smaller bag made of what appeared to be oiled wool, and drew from that a sheet of parchment, rolled into a scroll and sealed with wax.

Could this fight be about nothing more than a letter? Merthin wondered. If so, what was written on the scroll? It was not likely to be routine instructions about taxes. Some terrible secret must be inscribed there.

"If you kill me," the knight said, "the murder will be witnessed by whoever is hiding in that bush."

The tableau froze for a split second. The man in the black cloak kept his sword point pressed to Thomas's throat and resisted the temptation to look over his shoulder. The one in green hesitated, then looked at the bush.

At that point, Gwenda screamed.

The man in the green surcoat raised his sword and took two long strides across the clearing to the bush. Gwenda stood up and ran, bursting out of the foliage. The man-at-arms leaped after her, reaching out to grab her.

Ralph stood up suddenly, raised the bow and drew it in one fluid motion, and shot an arrow at the man. It went through his eye and sank several inches into his head. His left hand came up, as if to grasp the arrow and pull it out; then he went limp and fell like a dropped sack of grain, hitting the ground with a thump Merthin could feel.

Ralph ran out of the bush and followed Gwenda. At the edge of his vision Merthin perceived Caris going after them. Merthin wanted to flee too, but his feet seemed stuck to the ground.

There was a shout from the other side of the clearing, and Merthin saw that Thomas had knocked aside the sword that threatened him and had drawn, from somewhere about his person, a small knife with a blade as long as a man's hand. But the man-at-arms in the black cloak was alert, and jumped back out of reach. Then he raised his sword and swung at the knight's head.

Thomas dodged aside, but not fast enough. The edge of the blade came down on his left forearm, slicing through the leather jerkin and sinking into his flesh. He roared with pain, but did not fall. With a quick motion that seemed extraordinarily graceful, he swung his right hand up and thrust the knife into his opponent's throat; then, his hand continuing in an arc, he pulled the knife sideways, severing most of the neck.

Blood came like a fountain from the man's throat. Thomas staggered back, dodging the splash. The man in black fell to the ground, his head hanging from his body by a strip.

Thomas dropped the knife from his right hand and clutched his wounded left arm. He sat on the ground, suddenly looking weak.

Merthin was alone with the wounded knight, two dead men-at-arms, and the corpse of a three-legged dog. He knew he should run after the other children, but his curiosity kept him there. Thomas now seemed harmless, he told himself.

The knight had sharp eyes. “You can come out,” he called. “I’m no danger to you in this state.”

Hesitantly, Merthin got to his feet and pushed his way out of the bush. He crossed the clearing and stopped several feet away from the sitting knight.

Thomas said: “If they find out you’ve been playing in the forest, you’ll be flogged.”

Merthin nodded.

“I’ll keep your secret, if you’ll keep mine.”

Merthin nodded again. In agreeing to the bargain, he was making no concessions. None of the children would tell what they had seen. There would be untold trouble if they did. What would happen to Ralph, who had killed one of the queen’s men?

“Would you be kind enough to help me bind up this wound?” said Thomas. Despite all that had happened, he spoke courteously, Merthin observed. The knight’s poise was remarkable. Merthin felt he wanted to be like that when he was grown up.

At last Merthin’s constricted throat managed to produce a word. “Yes.”

“Pick up that broken belt, then, and wrap it around my arm, if you would.”

Merthin did as he was told. Thomas’s undershirt was soaked with blood, and the flesh of his arm was sliced open like something on a butcher’s slab. Merthin felt a little nauseated, but he forced himself to twist the belt around Thomas’s arm so that it pulled the wound closed and slowed the bleeding. He made a knot, and Thomas used his right hand to pull it tight.

Then Thomas struggled to his feet.

He looked at the dead men. “We can’t bury them,” he said. “I’d bleed to death before the graves were dug.” Glancing at Merthin, he added: “Even with you helping me.” He thought for a moment. “On the other hand, I don’t want them to be discovered by some courting couple looking for a place to… be alone. Let’s lug the guts into that bush where you were hiding. Green coat first.”

They approached the body.

“One leg each,” said Thomas. With his right hand he grasped the dead man’s left ankle. Merthin took the other limp foot in both hands and heaved. Together they hauled the corpse into the shrubbery, next to Hop.

“That will do,” said Thomas. His face was white with pain. After a moment, he bent down and pulled the arrow out of the corpse’s eye. “Yours?” he said with a raised eyebrow.

Merthin took the arrow and wiped it on the ground to get rid of some of the blood and brains adhering to the shaft.

In the same way they dragged the second body across the clearing, its loosely attached head trailing behind, and left it beside the first.

Thomas picked up the two men's dropped swords and threw them into the bush with the bodies. Then he found his own weapons.

"Now," said Thomas, "I have a great favor to ask." He proffered his dagger. "Would you dig me a small hole?"

"All right." Merthin took the dagger.

"Just here, right in front of the oak tree."

"How big?"

Thomas picked up the leather wallet that had been attached to his belt. "Big enough to hide this for fifty years."

Screwing up his courage, Merthin said: "Why?"

"Dig, and I'll tell you as much of it as I can."

Merthin scratched a square on the ground and began to loosen the cold earth with the dagger, then scoop it up with his hands.

Thomas picked up the scroll and put it into the wool bag, then fastened the bag inside the wallet. "I was given this letter to deliver to the earl of Shiring," he said. "But it contains a secret so dangerous that I realized the bearer was sure to be killed, to make certain he could never speak of it. So I needed to disappear. I decided I would take sanctuary in a monastery, become a monk. I've had enough of fighting, and I've a lot of sins to repent. As soon as I went missing, the people who gave me the letter started to search for me—and I was unlucky. I was spotted in a tavern in Bristol."

"Why did the queen's men come after you?"

"She, too, would like to prevent the spread of this secret."

When Merthin's hole was eighteen inches deep, Thomas said: "That will do." He dropped the wallet inside.

Merthin shoveled the earth back into the hole on top of the wallet, and Thomas covered the freshly turned earth with leaves and twigs until it was indistinguishable from the ground around it.

"If you hear that I've died," said Thomas, "I'd like you to dig up this letter and give it to a priest. Would you do that for me?"

"All right."

"Until that happens, you must tell no one. While they know I've got the letter, but they don't know where it is, they'll be afraid to do anything. But if you tell the secret, two things will happen. First, they will kill me. Then they will kill you."

Merthin was aghast. It seemed unfair that he should be in so much danger just because he helped a man by digging a hole.

"I'm sorry to scare you," said Thomas. "But, then, it's not entirely my

fault. After all, I didn't ask you to come here."

"No." Merthin wished with all his heart that he had obeyed his mother's orders and stayed out of the forest.

"I'm going to return to the road. Why don't you go back the way you came? I bet you'll find your friends waiting somewhere not far from here."

Merthin turned to go.

"What's your name?" the knight called after him.

"Merthin, son of Sir Gerald."

"Really?" Thomas said, as if he knew Father. "Well, not a word, even to him."

Merthin nodded and left.

When he had gone fifty yards he vomited. After that he felt slightly better.

As Thomas had predicted, the others were waiting for him, right at the edge of the wood, near the timber yard. They crowded around him, touching him as if to make sure he was all right, looking relieved yet ashamed, as if they were guilty about having left him. They were all shaken, even Ralph. "That man," he said. "The one I shot. Was he badly hurt?"

"He's dead," Merthin said. He showed Ralph the arrow, still stained with blood.

"Did you pull it out of his eye?"

Merthin would have liked to say he had, but he decided to tell the truth. "The knight pulled it out."

"What happened to the other man-at-arms?"

"The knight cut his throat. Then we hid the bodies in the bush."

"And he just let you go?"

"Yes." Merthin said nothing about the buried letter.

"We have to keep this secret," Caris urged. "There will be terrible trouble if anyone finds out."

Ralph said: "I'll never tell."

"We should swear an oath," Caris said.

They stood in a little ring. Caris stuck out her arm so that her hand was in the center of the circle. Merthin placed his hand over hers. Her skin was soft and warm. Ralph added his hand, then Gwenda did the same, and they swore by the blood of Jesus.

Then they walked back into the town.

Archery practice was over, and it was time for the midday meal. As they crossed the bridge, Merthin said to Ralph: "When I grow up, I want to be like that knight—always courteous, never frightened, deadly in a fight."

"Me, too," said Ralph. "Deadly."

In the old city, Merthin felt an irrational sense of surprise that normal life was going on all around: the sound of babies crying, the smell of roasting meat, the sight of men drinking ale outside taverns.

Caris stopped outside a big house on the main street, just opposite the entrance to the priory precincts. She put an arm around Gwenda's shoulders and said: "My dog at home has had puppies. Do you want to see them?"

Gwenda still looked frightened and close to tears, but she nodded emphatically. "Yes, please."

That was clever as well as kind, Merthin thought. The puppies would be a comfort to the little girl—and a distraction, too. When she returned to her family, she would talk about the puppies and be less likely to speak of going into the forest.

They said good-bye, and the girls went into the house. Merthin found himself wondering when he would see Caris again.

Then his other troubles came back to him. What was his father going to do about his debts? Merthin and Ralph turned into the cathedral close, Ralph still carrying the bow and the dead hare. The place was quiet.

The guesthouse was empty but for a few sick people. A nun said to them: "Your father is in the church, with the earl of Shiring."

They went into the great cathedral. Their parents were in the vestibule. Mother was sitting at the foot of a pillar, on the outjutting corner where the round column met the square base. In the cold light that came through the tall windows, her face was still and serene, almost as if she were carved of the same gray stone as the pillar against which she leaned her head. Father stood beside her, his broad shoulders slumped in an attitude of resignation. Earl Roland faced them. He was older than Father, but with his black hair and vigorous manner he seemed more youthful. Prior Anthony stood beside the earl.

The two boys hung back at the door, but Mother beckoned them. "Come here," she said. "Earl Roland has helped us come to an arrangement with Prior Anthony that solves all our problems."

Father grunted, as if he was not as grateful as she for what the earl had done. "And the priory gets my lands," he said. "There'll be nothing for you two to inherit."

"We're going to live here, in Kingsbridge," Mother went on brightly. "We'll be corrodiaries of the priory."

Merthin said: "What's a corrodiary?"

"It means the monks will provide us with a house to live in and two meals a day, for the rest of our lives. Isn't that wonderful?"

Merthin could tell that she did not really think it was wonderful. She was pretending to be pleased. Father was clearly ashamed to have lost his lands. There was more than a hint of disgrace in this, Merthin realized.

Father addressed the earl. "What about my boys?"

Earl Roland turned and looked at them. "The big one looks promising," he said. "Did you kill that hare, lad?"

“Yes, Lord,” Ralph said proudly. “Shot it with an arrow.”

“He can come to me as a squire in a few years’ time,” the earl said briskly. “We’ll teach him to be a knight.”

Father looked pleased.

Merthin felt bewildered. Big decisions were being made too quickly. He was outraged that his younger brother should be so favored while no mention was made of himself. “That’s not fair!” he burst out. “I want to be a knight, too!”

His mother said: “No!”

“But I made the bow!”

Father gave a sigh of exasperation and looked disgusted.

“You made the bow, did you, little one?” the earl said, and his face showed disdain. “In that case, you shall be apprenticed to a carpenter.”

3

Caris’s home was a luxurious wood-frame building with stone floors and a stone chimney. There were three separate rooms on the ground floor: the hall with the big dining table, the small parlor where Papa could discuss business privately, and the kitchen at the back. When Caris and Gwenda walked in, the house was full of the mouthwatering smell of a ham boiling.

Caris led Gwenda through the hall and up the internal staircase.

“Where are the puppies?” said Gwenda.

“I want to see my mother first,” Caris replied. “She’s ill.”

They went into the front bedroom, where Mama lay on the carved wooden bedstead. She was small and frail: Caris was already the same height. Mama looked paler than usual, and her hair was not yet dressed, so it stuck to her damp cheeks. “How are you feeling?” Caris said.

“A little weak, today.” The effort of speaking made Mama breathless.

Caris felt a familiar, painful jumble of anxiety and helplessness. Her mother had been ill for a year. It had started with pains in her joints. Soon she had ulcers inside her mouth and unaccountable bruises on her body. She had felt too weak to do anything. Last week she had caught a cold. Now she was running a fever and had trouble in catching her breath.

“Is there anything you need?” Caris asked.

“No, thank you.”

It was the usual answer, but Caris felt maddened by powerlessness each time she heard it. “Should I fetch Mother Cecilia?” The prioress of Kingsbridge was the only person able to bring Mama some comfort. She had an extract of poppies that she mixed with honey and warm wine that eased the

pain for a while. Caris regarded Cecilia as better than an angel.

“No need, dear,” Mama said. “How was the All Hallows service?”

Caris noticed how pale her mother’s lips were. “Scary,” she said.

Mama paused, resting, then said: “What have you been doing this morning?”

“Watching the archery.” Caris held her breath, frightened that Mama might guess her guilty secret, as she often did.

But Mama looked at Gwenda. “Who is your little friend?”

“Gwenda. I’ve brought her to see the puppies.”

“That’s lovely.” Mama suddenly looked tired. She closed her eyes and turned her head aside.

The girls crept out quietly.

Gwenda was looking shocked. “What’s wrong with her?”

“A wasting disease.” Caris hated to talk about it. Her mother’s illness gave her the unnerving feeling that nothing was certain, anything could happen, there was no safety in the world. It was even more frightening than the fight they had witnessed in the forest. If she thought about what might happen, and the possibility that her mother might die, she suffered a panicky fluttering sensation in her chest that made her want to scream.

The middle bedroom was used in summer by the Italians, wool buyers from Florence and Prato who came to do business with Papa. Now it was empty. The puppies were in the back bedroom, which belonged to Caris and her sister, Alice. They were seven weeks old, ready to leave their mother, who was growing impatient with them. Gwenda gave a sigh of joy and immediately got down on the floor with them.

Caris picked up the smallest of the litter, a lively female, always going off on her own to explore the world. “This is the one I’m going to keep,” she said. “She’s called Scrap.” Holding the little dog soothed her, and helped her forget about the things that troubled her.

The other four clambered all over Gwenda, sniffing her and chewing her dress. She picked up an ugly brown dog with a long muzzle and eyes set too close together. “I like this one,” she said. The puppy curled up in her lap.

Caris said: “Would you like to keep him?”

Tears came to Gwenda’s eyes. “Could I?”

“We’re allowed to give them away.”

“Really?”

“Papa doesn’t want any more dogs. If you like him, you can have him.”

“Oh, yes,” Gwenda said in a whisper. “Yes, please.”

“What will you name him?”

“Something that reminds me of Hop. Perhaps I’ll call him Skip.”

“That’s a good name.” Skip had already gone to sleep in Gwenda’s lap, Caris saw.

The two girls sat quietly with the dogs. Caris thought about the boys they had met, the little red-haired one with the golden brown eyes and his tall, handsome younger brother. What had made her take them into the forest? It was not the first time she had yielded to a stupid impulse. It tended to happen when someone in authority ordered her not to do something. Her aunt Petranilla was a great rule-maker. “Don’t feed that cat, we’ll never get rid of it. No ball games in the house. Stay away from that boy, his family are peasants.” Rules that constrained her behavior seemed to drive Caris crazy.

But she had never done something this foolish. She felt shaky when she thought of it. Two men had died. But what might have happened was worse. The four children might have been killed, too.

She wondered what the fight had been about, and why the men-at-arms had been chasing the knight. Obviously it was not a simple robbery. They had spoken about a letter. But Merthin had said no more about that. Probably he had learned nothing further. It was just another of the mysteries of adult life.

Caris had liked Merthin. His boring brother, Ralph, was just like every other boy in Kingsbridge, boastful and aggressive and stupid, but Merthin seemed different. He had intrigued her right from the start.

Two new friends in one day, she thought, looking at Gwenda. The little girl was not pretty. She had dark brown eyes set close together above a beaky nose. She had picked a dog that looked a bit like her, Caris realized with amusement. Gwenda’s clothes were old, and must have been worn by many children before her. Gwenda was calmer now. She no longer looked as if she might burst into tears at any moment. She, too, had been soothed by the puppies.

There was a familiar lopsided tread in the hall below, and a moment later a voice bellowed: “Bring me a flagon of ale, for the love of the saints, I’ve got a thirst like a cart horse.”

“It’s my father,” Caris said. “Come and meet him.” Seeing that Gwenda looked anxious, she added: “Don’t worry, he always shouts like that, but he’s really nice.”

The girls went downstairs with their puppies. “What’s happened to all my servants?” Papa roared. “Have they run away to join the fairy folk?” He came stomping out of the kitchen, trailing his twisted right leg as always, carrying a big wooden cup slopping over with ale. “Hello, my little buttercup,” he said to Caris in a softer voice. He sat on the big chair at the head of the table and took a long draft from the cup. “That’s better,” he said, wiping his straggly beard with his sleeve. He noticed Gwenda. “A little daisy to go with my buttercup?” he said. “What’s your name?”

“Gwenda, from Wigleigh, my lord,” she said, awestruck.

“I gave her a puppy,” Caris explained.

“That’s a good idea!” Papa said. “Puppies need affection, and no one can

love a puppy the way a little girl does.”

On the stool beside the table Caris saw a cloak of scarlet cloth. It had to be imported, for English dyers did not know how to achieve such a bright red. Following her eye, Papa said: “It’s for your mother. She’s always wanted a coat of Italian red. I’m hoping it will encourage her to get well enough to wear it.”

Caris touched it. The wool was soft and close-woven, as only the Italians could make it. “It’s beautiful,” she said.

Aunt Petranilla entered from the street. She bore some resemblance to Papa, but was purse-mouthed where he was hearty. She was more like her other brother, Anthony, the prior of Kingsbridge: they were both tall, imposing figures, whereas Papa was short, barrel-chested, and lame.

Caris disliked Petranilla. She was clever as well as mean, a deadly combination in an adult: Caris was never able to outwit her. Gwenda sensed Caris’s dislike, and looked apprehensively at the newcomer. Only Papa was pleased to see her. “Come in, sister,” he said. “Where are all my servants?”

“I can’t think why you imagine I should know that, having just come from my own house at the other end of the street, but if I had to guess, Edmund, I should say that your cook is in the henhouse, hoping to find an egg to make you a pudding, and your maid is upstairs, helping your wife to a close stool, which she generally requires about midday. As for your apprentices, I hope they are both on guard duty at the warehouse by the riverside, making sure that no holiday revelers take it into their drunken heads to light a bonfire within a spark’s fly of your wool store.”

She often spoke like this, giving a little sermon in answer to a simple question. Her manner was supercilious, as always, but Papa did not mind, or pretended not to. “My remarkable sister,” he said. “You’re the one who inherited our father’s wisdom.”

Petranilla turned to the girls. “Our father was descended from Tom Builder, the stepfather and mentor of Jack Builder, architect of Kingsbridge Cathedral,” she said. “Father vowed to give his firstborn to God but, unfortunately, his firstborn was a girl—me. He named me after Saint Petranilla—who was the daughter of Saint Peter, as I’m sure you know—and he prayed for a boy next time. But his first son was born deformed, and he did not want to give God a flawed gift, so he brought Edmund up to take over the wool business. Happily, his third child was our brother Anthony, a well behaved and God-fearing child, who entered the monastery as a boy and is now, we are all proud to say, the prior.”

She would have become a priest, had she been a man, but as it was she had done the next best thing and brought up her son, Godwyn, to be a monk at the priory. Like Grandfather Wooler, she had given a child to God. Caris had always felt sorry for Godwyn, her older cousin, for having Petranilla as a

mother.

Petranilla noticed the red coat. “Whose is this?” she said. “It’s the most expensive Italian cloth!”

“I bought it for Rose,” said Papa.

Petranilla stared at him for a moment. Caris could tell she thought he was a fool to buy such a coat for a woman who had not left the house for a year. But all she said was: “You’re very good to her,” which might have been a compliment or not.

Father did not care. “Go up and see her,” he urged. “You’ll cheer her up.”

Caris doubted that, but Petranilla suffered no such misgivings, and she went up the stairs.

Caris’s sister, Alice, came in from the street. She was eleven, a year older than Caris. She stared at Gwenda and said: “Who’s she?”

“My new friend Gwenda,” said Caris. “She’s going to take a puppy.”

“But she’s got the one I wanted!” Alice protested.

She had not said that before. “Ooh—you never picked one!” Caris said, outraged. “You’re just saying that to be mean.”

“Why should she have one of our puppies?”

Papa intervened. “Now, now,” he said. “We’ve got more puppies than we need.”

“Caris should have asked me which one I wanted first!”

“Yes, she should,” Papa said, even though he knew perfectly well that Alice was only making trouble. “Don’t do it again, Caris.”

“Yes, Papa.”

The cook came in from the kitchen with jugs and cups. When Caris was learning to talk she had called the cook Tutty, no one knew why, but the name had stuck. Papa said: “Thank you, Tutty. Sit at the table, girls.” Gwenda hesitated, not sure if she was invited, but Caris nodded at her, knowing that Papa intended her to be included—he generally asked everyone within his range of vision to come to dinner.

Tutty refilled Papa’s cup with ale, then gave Alice, Caris, and Gwenda ale mixed with water. Gwenda drank all of hers immediately, with relish, and Caris guessed she did not often get ale: poor people drank cider made from crab apples.

Next, the cook put in front of each of them a thick slice of rye bread a foot square. Gwenda picked hers up to eat it, and Caris realized she had never dined at a table before. “Wait,” she said quietly, and Gwenda put the bread down again. Tutty brought in the ham on a board and a dish of cabbage. Papa took a big knife and cut slices off the ham, piling it on their bread trenchers. Gwenda stared big-eyed at the quantity of meat she was given. Caris spooned cabbage leaves on top of the ham.

The chambermaid, Elaine, came hurrying down the stairs. “The mistress

seems worse," she said. "Mistress Petranilla says we should send for Mother Cecilia."

"Then run to the priory and beg her to come," Papa said.

The maid hurried off.

"Eat up, children," said Papa, and he speared a slice of hot ham with his knife; but Caris could see that the dinner now had no relish for him, and he seemed to be looking at something far away.

Gwenda ate some cabbage and whispered: "This is food from Heaven." Caris tried it. The cabbage was cooked with ginger. Gwenda had probably never tasted ginger: only rich people could afford it.

Petranilla came down, put some ham on a wooden platter, and took it up for Mama; but she came back a few moments later with the food untouched. She sat at the table to eat it herself, and the cook brought her a bread trencher. "When I was a girl, we were the only family in Kingsbridge who had meat for dinner every day," she said. "Except on fast days—my father was very devout. He was the first wool merchant in town to deal directly with the Italians. Everyone does now—although my brother Edmund is still the most important."

Caris had lost her appetite, and she had to chew for a long time before she could swallow. At last Mother Cecilia arrived, a small, vital woman with a reassuringly bossy manner. With her was Sister Juliana, a simple person with a warm heart. Caris felt better as she watched them climb the stairs, a chirpy sparrow with a hen waddling behind. They would wash Mama in rose water to cool her fever, and the fragrance would lift her spirits.

Tutty brought in apples and cheese. Papa peeled an apple absentmindedly with his knife. Caris remembered how, when she was younger, he used to feed her peeled slices then eat the skin himself.

Sister Juliana came downstairs, a worried look on her pudgy face. "The prioress wants Brother Joseph to come and see Mistress Rose," she said. Joseph was the senior physician at the monastery: he had trained with the masters at Oxford. "I'll just go and fetch him," Juliana said, and she ran out through the door to the street.

Papa put his peeled apple down uneaten.

Caris said: "What is going to happen?"

"I don't know, buttercup. Will it rain? How many sacks of wool do the Florentines need? Will the sheep catch a murrain? Is the baby a girl, or a boy with a twisted leg? We never know, do we? That's…" He looked away. "That's what makes it so hard."

He gave her the apple. Caris gave it to Gwenda, who ate it entire, core and pips, too.

Brother Joseph arrived a few minutes later with a young assistant whom Caris recognized as Saul Whitehead, so called because his hair—what little he

had left after his monkish haircut—was ash blond.

Cecilia and Juliana came downstairs, no doubt to make room for the two men in the small bedroom. Cecilia sat at the table, but did not eat. She had a small face with sharp features: a little pointed nose, bright eyes, a chin like the prow of a boat. She looked with curiosity at Gwenda. “Well, now,” she said brightly, “who is this little girl, and does she love Jesus and His Holy Mother?”

Gwenda said: “I’m Gwenda, I’m Caris’s friend.” She looked anxiously at Caris, as if she feared it might have been presumptuous of her to claim friendship.

Caris said: “Will the Virgin Mary make my mama better?”

Cecilia raised her eyebrows. “Such a direct question. I could have guessed you’re Edmund’s daughter.”

“Everyone prays to her, but not everyone gets well,” Caris said.

“And do you know why that is?”

“Perhaps she never helps anyone, and it’s just that the strong people get well and the weak don’t.”

“Now, now, don’t be silly,” said Papa. “Everyone knows the Holy Mother helps us.”

“That’s all right,” Cecilia told him. “It’s normal for children to ask questions—especially the bright ones. Caris, the saints are always powerful, but some prayers are more effective than others. Do you understand that?”

Caris nodded reluctantly, feeling not convinced so much as outwitted.

“She must come to our school,” Cecilia said. The nuns had a school for the daughters of the nobility and of the more prosperous townspeople. The monks ran a separate school for boys.

Papa looked stubborn. “Rose has taught both girls their letters,” he said. “And Caris knows her numbers as well as I do—she helps me in the business.”

“She should learn more than that. Surely you don’t want her to spend her life as your servant?”

Petranilla put in: “She has no need of book learning. She will marry extremely well. There will be crowds of suitors for both sisters. Sons of merchants, even sons of knights will be eager to marry into this family. But Caris is a willful child: we must take care she doesn’t throw herself away on some penniless minstrel boy.”

Caris noticed that Petranilla did not anticipate trouble with obedient Alice, who would probably marry whomever they picked for her.

Cecilia said: “God might call Caris to his service.”

Papa said grumpily: “God has already called two from this family—my brother and my nephew. I’d have thought He would be satisfied by now.”

Cecilia looked at Caris. “What do you think?” she said. “Will you be a

wool merchant, a knight's wife, or a nun?"

The idea of being a nun horrified Caris. She would have to obey someone else's orders every hour of the day. It would be like remaining a child all your life, and having Petranilla for a mother. Being the wife of a knight, or of anyone else, seemed almost as bad, for women had to obey their husbands. Helping Papa, then perhaps taking over the business when he was too old, was the least unattractive option, but on the other hand it was not exactly her dream. "I don't want to be any of those," she said.

"Is there something you would like?" Cecilia asked.

There was, although Caris had not told anyone before, in fact had not fully realized it until now; but the ambition seemed fully formed, and suddenly she knew without doubt that it was her destiny. "I'm going to be a doctor," she said.

There was a moment of silence, then they all laughed.

Caris flushed, not knowing what was so funny.

Papa took pity and said: "Only men can be doctors. Didn't you know that, buttercup?"

Caris was bewildered. She turned to Cecilia. "But what about you?"

"I'm not a physician," Cecilia said. "We nuns care for the sick, of course, but we follow the instructions of trained men. The monks who have studied under the masters understand the humors of the body, the way they go out of balance in sickness, and how to bring them back to their correct proportions for good health. They know which vein to bleed for migraine, leprosy, or breathlessness; where to cup and cauterize; whether to poultice or bathe."

"Couldn't a woman learn those things?"

"Perhaps, but God has ordained it otherwise."

Caris felt frustrated with the way adults trotted out this truism every time they were stuck for an answer. Before she could say anything, Brother Saul came downstairs with a bowl of blood and went through the kitchen to the backyard to get rid of it. The sight made Caris feel weepy. All doctors used bloodletting as a cure, so it must be effective, she supposed; but all the same she hated to see her mother's life force in a bowl to be thrown away.

Saul returned to the sick room, and a few moments later he and Joseph came down. "I've done what I can for her," Joseph said solemnly to Papa. "And she has confessed her sins."

Confessed her sins! Caris knew what that meant. She began to cry.

Papa took six silver pennies from his purse and gave them to the monk. "Thank you, Brother," he said. His voice was hoarse.

As the monks left, the two nuns went back upstairs.

Alice sat on Papa's lap and buried her face in his neck. Caris cried and hugged Scrap. Petranilla ordered Tutty to clear the table. Gwenda watched everything with wide eyes. They sat around the table in silence, waiting.

4

Brother Godwyn was hungry. He had eaten his dinner, a stew of sliced turnips with salt fish, and it had not satisfied him. The monks nearly always had fish and weak ale for dinner, even when it was not a fast day.

Not all the monks, of course: Prior Anthony had a privileged diet. He would dine especially well today, for the prioress, Mother Cecilia, was to be his guest. She was accustomed to rich food. The nuns, who always seemed to have more money than the monks, killed a pig or a sheep every few days and washed it down with Gascony wine.

It was Godwyn's job to supervise the dinner, a hard task when his own stomach was rumbling. He spoke to the monastery cook, and checked on the fat goose in the oven and the pot of apple sauce bubbling on the fire. He asked the cellarer for a jug of cider from the barrel, and got a loaf of rye bread from the bakery—stale, for there was no baking on Sunday. He took the silver platters and goblets from the locked chest and set them on the table of the hall in the prior's house.

The prior and prioress dined together once a month. The monastery and the nunnery were separate institutions, with their own premises, and different sources of income. Prior and prioress were independently responsible to the bishop of Kingsbridge. Nevertheless they shared the great cathedral and several other buildings, including the hospital, where monks worked as doctors and nuns as nurses. So there were always details to discuss: cathedral services, hospital guests and patients, town politics. Anthony often tried to get Cecilia to pay costs that should, strictly speaking, have been divided equally—glass windows for the chapter house, bedsteads for the hospital, the repainting of the cathedral's interior—and she usually agreed.

Today, however, the talk was likely to center on politics. Anthony had returned yesterday from two weeks in Gloucester, where he had assisted at the interment of King Edward II, who had lost his throne in January and his life in September. Mother Cecilia would want to hear the gossip while pretending to be above it all.

Godwyn had something else on his mind. He wanted to talk to Anthony about his future. He had been anxiously awaiting the right moment ever since the prior returned home. He had rehearsed his speech, but had not yet found the opportunity to deliver it. He hoped to get a chance this afternoon.

Anthony entered the hall as Godwyn was putting a cheese and a bowl of pears on the sideboard. The prior looked like an older version of Godwyn. Both were tall, with regular features and light brown hair, and like all the family they had greenish eyes with flecks of gold. Anthony stood by the fire—the room was cold and the old building let in freezing drafts. Godwyn

poured him a cup of cider. “Father Prior, today is my birthday,” he said as Anthony drank. “I’m twenty-one.”

“So it is,” said Anthony. “I remember your birth very well. I was fourteen years old. My sister, Petranilla, screamed like a boar with an arrow in its guts as she brought you into the world.” He raised his goblet in a toast, looking fondly at Godwyn. “And now you’re a man.”

Godwyn decided that this was his moment. “I’ve been at the priory ten years,” he said.

“Is it that long?”

“Yes—as schoolboy, novice, and monk.”

“My goodness.”

“I hope I’ve been a credit to my mother and to you.”

“We’re both very proud of you.”

“Thank you.” Godwyn swallowed. “And now I want to go to Oxford.”

The city of Oxford had long been a center for masters of theology, medicine, and law. Priests and monks went there to study and debate with teachers and other students. In the last century the masters had been incorporated into a company, or university, that had royal permission to set examinations and award degrees. Kingsbridge Priory maintained a branch or cell in the city, known as Kingsbridge College, where eight monks could carry on their lives of worship and self-denial while they studied.

“Oxford!” said Anthony, and an expression of anxiety and distaste came over his face. “Why?”

“To study. It’s what monks are supposed to do.”

“I never went to Oxford—and I’m prior.”

It was true, but Anthony was sometimes at a disadvantage with his senior colleagues in consequence. The sacrist, the treasurer, and several other monastic officials, or obedientiaries, were graduates of the university, as were all the physicians. They were quick-thinking and skilled in argument, and Anthony sometimes appeared bumbling by comparison, especially in chapter, the daily meeting of all the monks. Godwyn longed to acquire the sharp logic and confident superiority he observed in the Oxford men. He did not want to be like his uncle.

But he could not say that. “I want to learn,” he said.

“Why learn heresy?” Anthony said scornfully. “Oxford students question the teachings of the church!”

“In order to understand them better.”

“Pointless and dangerous.”

Godwyn asked himself why Anthony was making this fuss. The prior had never appeared concerned about heresy before, and Godwyn was not in the least interested in challenging accepted doctrines. He frowned. “I thought you and my mother had ambitions for me,” he said. “Don’t you want me to

advance, and become an obedientiary, and perhaps one day prior?”

“Eventually, yes. But you don’t have to leave Kingsbridge to achieve that.”

You don’t want me to advance too fast, in case I outstrip you; and you don’t want me to leave town, in case you lose control of me, Godwyn thought in a flash of insight. He wished he had anticipated this resistance to his plans. “I don’t want to study theology,” he said.

“What, then?”

“Medicine. It’s such an important part of our work here.”

Anthony pursed his lips. Godwyn had seen the same disapproving expression on his mother’s face. “The monastery can’t afford to pay for you,” Anthony said. “Do you realize that just one book costs at least fourteen shillings?”

Godwyn was taken by surprise. Students could hire books by the page, he knew; but that was not the main point. “What about the students already there?” he said. “Who pays for them?”

“Two are supported by their families, and one by the nuns. The priory pays for the other three, but we can’t afford any more. In fact there are two places vacant in the college for lack of funds.”

Godwyn knew the priory was in financial difficulties. On the other hand, it had vast resources: thousands of acres of land; mills and fishponds and woodland; and the enormous income from Kingsbridge market. He could not believe his uncle was refusing him the money to go to Oxford. He felt betrayed. Anthony was his mentor as well as a relative. He had always favored Godwyn over other young monks. But now he was trying to hold Godwyn back.

“Physicians bring money into the priory,” he argued. “If you don’t train young men, eventually the old ones will die and the priory will be poorer.”

“God will provide.”

This infuriating platitude was always Anthony’s answer. For some years the priory’s income from the annual Fleece Fair had been declining. The townspeople had urged Anthony to invest in better facilities for the wool traders—tents, booths, latrines, even a wool exchange building—but he always refused, pleading poverty. And when his brother, Edmund, told him the fair would eventually decline to nothing, he said: “God will provide.”

Godwyn said: “Well, then, perhaps he will provide the money for me to go to Oxford.”

“Perhaps he will.”

Godwyn felt painfully disappointed. He had an urge to get away from his hometown and breathe a different air. At Kingsbridge College he would be subject to the same monastic discipline, of course—but nevertheless he would be far from his uncle and his mother, and that prospect was alluring.

He was not yet ready to give up the argument. “My mother will be very disappointed if I don’t go.”

Anthony looked uneasy. He did not want to incur the wrath of his formidable sister. “Then let her pray for the money to be found.”

“I may be able to get it elsewhere,” Godwyn said, extemporizing.

“How would you do that?”

He cast about for an answer, and found inspiration. “I could do what you do, and ask Mother Cecilia.” It was possible. Cecilia made him nervous—she could be as intimidating as Petranilla—but she was more susceptible to his boyish charm. She might be persuaded to pay for a bright young monk’s education.

The suggestion took Anthony by surprise. Godwyn could see him trying to think of an objection. But he had been arguing as if money were the main consideration, and it was difficult now for him to shift his ground.

While Anthony hesitated, Cecilia came in.

She wore a heavy cloak of fine wool, her only indulgence—she hated to be cold. After greeting the prior, she turned to Godwyn. “Your aunt Rose is gravely ill,” she said. Her voice was musically precise. “She may not last the night.”

“May God be with her.” Godwyn felt a pang of pity. In a family where everyone was a leader, Rose was the only follower. Her petals seemed the more fragile for being surrounded by brambles. “It’s not a shock,” he added. “But my cousins, Alice and Caris, will be sad.”

“Fortunately, they have your mother to console them.”

“Yes.” Consolation was not Petranilla’s strong point, Godwyn thought—she was better at stiffening your spine and preventing you from backsliding—but he did not correct the prioress. Instead he poured her a goblet of cider. “Is it a little chilly in here, Reverend Mother?”

“Freezing,” she said bluntly.

“I’ll build up the fire.”

Anthony said slyly: “My nephew Godwyn is being attentive because he wants you to pay for him to go to Oxford.”

Godwyn glared furiously at him. Godwyn would have planned a careful speech and chosen the best time to deliver it. Now Anthony had blurted out the request in the most charmless fashion.

Cecilia said: “I don’t think we can afford to finance *two* more.”

It was Anthony’s turn to be surprised. “Someone else has asked you for money to go to Oxford?”

“Perhaps I shouldn’t say,” Cecilia replied. “I don’t want to get anyone into trouble.”

“It’s of no consequence,” Anthony said huffily; then he recollected himself and added: “We are always grateful for your generosity.”

Godwyn put more wood on the fire then went out. The prior's house was on the north side of the cathedral. The cloisters, and all the other priory buildings, were to the south of the church. Godwyn walked shivering across the cathedral green to the monastery kitchen.

He had thought Anthony might quibble about Oxford, saying he should wait until he was older, or until one of the existing students graduated—for Anthony was a quibbler by nature. But he was Anthony's protégé, and he had been confident that in the end his uncle would support him. Anthony's flat opposition had left him feeling shocked.

He asked himself who else had petitioned the prioress for support. Of the twenty-six monks, six were around Godwyn's age: it could be any one of them. In the kitchen the sub-cellarer, Theodoric, was helping the cook. Could he be the rival for Cecilia's money? Godwyn watched him put the goose on a platter with a bowl of apple sauce. Theodoric had brains enough to study. He could be a contender.

Godwyn carried the dinner back to the prior's house, feeling worried. If Cecilia decided to help Theodoric, he did not know what he would do. He had no fallback plan.

He wanted to be prior of Kingsbridge one day. He felt sure he could do the job better than Anthony. And if he was a successful prior, he might rise higher: bishop, archbishop, or perhaps a royal official or counselor. He had only a vague idea of what he would do with such power, but he felt strongly that he belonged in some elevated position in life. However, there were only two routes to such heights. One was aristocratic birth; the other, education. Godwyn came from a family of wool merchants: his only hope was the university. And for that, he was going to need Cecilia's money.

He put the dinner on the table. Cecilia was saying: "But how did the king die?"

"He suffered a fall," Anthony said.

Godwyn carved the goose. "May I give you some of the breast, Reverend Mother?"

"Yes, please. A fall?" she said skeptically. "You make the king sound like a doddering old man. He was forty-three!"

"It's what his jailers say." Having been deposed, the ex-king had been a prisoner at Berkeley Castle, a couple of days' ride from Kingsbridge.

"Ah, yes, his jailers," Cecilia said. "Mortimer's men." She disapproved of Roger Mortimer, the earl of March. Not only had he led the rebellion against Edward II, he had also seduced the king's wife, Queen Isabella.

They began to eat. Godwyn wondered whether there would be any left over.

Anthony said to Cecilia: "You sound as if you suspect something sinister."

"Of course not—but others do. There has been talk…"

“That he was murdered? I know. But I saw the corpse, naked. There were no marks of violence on the body.”

Godwyn knew he should not interrupt, but he could not resist. “Rumor says that when the king died his screams of agony were heard by everyone in the village of Berkeley.”

Anthony looked censorious. “When a king dies, there are always rumors.”

“This king did not merely die,” Cecilia said. “He was first deposed by Parliament—something that has never happened before.”

Anthony lowered his voice. “The reasons were powerful. There were sins of impurity.”

He was being enigmatic, but Godwyn knew what he meant. Edward had had “favorites”—young men he seemed unnaturally fond of. The first, Peter Gaveston, had been given so much power and privilege that he aroused jealousy and resentment among the barons, and in the end he had been executed for treason. But then there had been others. It was no wonder, people said, that the queen took a lover.

“I cannot believe such a thing,” said Cecilia, who was a passionate royalist. “It may be true that outlaws in the forest give themselves up to such foul practices, but a man of royal blood could never sink so low. Is there any more of that goose?”

“Yes,” Godwyn said, concealing his disappointment. He cut the last of the meat from the bird and gave it to the prioress.

Anthony said: “At least there is now no challenge to the new king.” The son of Edward II and Queen Isabella had been crowned as King Edward III.

“He is fourteen years old, and he has been put on the throne by Mortimer,” said Cecilia. “Who will be the real ruler?”

“The nobles are glad to have stability.”

“Especially those of them who are Mortimer’s cronies.”

“Such as Earl Roland of Shiring, you mean?”

“He seemed ebullient today.”

“You’re not suggesting…”

“That he had something to do with the king’s ‘fall’? Certainly not.” The prioress ate the last of the meat. “Such an idea would be dangerous to speak of, even among friends.”

“Indeed.”

There was a tap at the door, and Saul Whitehead came in. He was the same age as Godwyn. Could he be the rival? He was intelligent and capable, and he had the great advantage of being a distant relation of the earl of Shiring; but Godwyn doubted whether he had the ambition to go to Oxford. He was devout and shy, the kind of man for whom humility was no virtue because it came naturally. But anything was possible.

“A knight has come into the hospital with a sword wound,” Saul said.

“Interesting,” said Anthony, “but hardly shocking enough to justify interrupting the prior and the prioress at dinner.”

Saul looked scared. “I beg your pardon, Father Prior,” he stammered. “But there is a disagreement about the treatment.”

Anthony sighed. “Well, the goose is all gone,” he said, and he got to his feet.

Cecilia went with him, and Godwyn and Saul followed. They entered the cathedral by the north transept and walked through the crossing, out by the south transept, across the cloisters and into the hospital. The wounded knight lay on the bed nearest the altar, as befitted his rank.

Prior Anthony uttered an involuntary grunt of surprise. For a moment he showed shock and fear. But he recovered his composure quickly, and made his face expressionless.

However, Cecilia missed nothing. “Do you know this man?” she asked Anthony.

“I believe I do. He is Sir Thomas Langley, one of the earl of Monmouth’s men.”

He was a handsome man in his twenties, broad-shouldered and long-legged. He was naked to the waist, showing a muscular torso crisscrossed with the scars of earlier fights. He looked pale and exhausted.

“He was attacked on the road,” Saul explained. “He managed to fight off his assailants, but then he had to drag himself a mile or more to the town. He’s lost a lot of blood.”

The knight’s left forearm was split from elbow to wrist, a clean cut obviously made by a sharp sword.

The monastery’s senior physician, Brother Joseph, stood beside the patient. Joseph was in his thirties, a small man with a big nose and bad teeth. He said: “The wound should be kept open and treated with an ointment to bring on a pus. That way, evil humors will be expelled and the wound will heal from the inside out.”

Anthony nodded. “So where is the disagreement?”

“Matthew Barber has another idea.”

Matthew was a barber-surgeon from the town. He had been standing back deferentially, but now he stepped forward, holding the leather case that contained his expensive, sharp knives. He was a small, thin man with bright blue eyes and a solemn expression.

Anthony did not acknowledge Matthew, but said to Joseph: “What’s he doing here?”

“The knight knows him and sent for him.”

Anthony spoke to Thomas. “If you want to be butchered, why did you come to the priory hospital?”

The ghost of a smile flickered across the knight’s white face, but he

seemed too tired to reply.

Matthew spoke up with surprising confidence, apparently undeterred by Anthony's scorn. "I've seen many wounds like this on the battlefield, Father Prior," he said. "The best treatment is the simplest: wash the wound with warm wine, then stitch it closed and bandage it." He was not as deferential as he looked.

Mother Cecilia interrupted. "I wonder if our two young monks have opinions on the question?" she asked.

Anthony looked impatient, but Godwyn realized what she was up to. This was a test. Perhaps Saul was the rival for her money.

The answer was easy, so Godwyn got in first. "Brother Joseph has studied the ancient masters," he said. "He must know best. I don't suppose Matthew can even read."

"I can, Brother Godwyn," Matthew protested. "And I have a book."

Anthony laughed. The idea of a barber with a book was silly, like a horse with a hat. "What book?"

"The *Canon* of Avicenna, the great Islamic physician. Translated from Arabic into Latin. I have read it all, slowly."

"And is your remedy proposed by Avicenna?"

"No, but—"

"Well, then."

Matthew persisted. "But I learned more about healing by traveling with armies and treating the wounded than I ever did from the book."

Mother Cecilia said: "Saul, what's your view?"

Godwyn expected Saul to give the same answer, so that the contest would be indecisive. But, although he looked nervous and shy, Saul contradicted Godwyn. "The barber may be right," he said. Godwyn was delighted. Saul went on arguing for the wrong side. "The treatment proposed by Brother Joseph might be more suitable for crushing or hammering injuries, such as we get on building sites, where the skin and flesh all around the cut is damaged, and to close the wound prematurely might seal evil humors inside the body. This is a clean cut, and the sooner it is closed the faster it will heal."

"Nonsense," said Prior Anthony. "How could a town barber be right and an educated monk be wrong?"

Godwyn smothered a triumphant grin.

The door flew open, and a young man in the robes of a priest strode in. Godwyn recognized Richard of Shiring, the younger of the two sons of Earl Roland. His nod to the prior and prioress was so perfunctory as to be impolite. He went straight to the bedside and spoke to the knight. "What the devil has happened?" he said.

Thomas lifted a weak hand and beckoned Richard closer. The young priest leaned over the patient. Thomas whispered in his ear.

Father Richard drew away as if shocked. “Absolutely not!” he said.

Thomas beckoned again, and the process was repeated: another whisper, another outraged reaction. This time, Richard said: “But why?”

Thomas did not reply.

Richard said: “You are asking for something that is not in our power to give.”

Thomas nodded firmly, as if to say: *Yes, it is.*

“You’re giving us no choice.”

Thomas shook his head weakly from side to side.

Richard turned to Prior Anthony. “Sir Thomas wishes to become a monk here at the priory.”

There was a moment of surprised silence. Cecilia was the first to react. “But he’s a man of violence!”

“Come on, it’s not unknown,” Richard said impatiently. “A fighting man sometimes decides to abandon his life of warfare and seek forgiveness for his sins.”

“In old age, perhaps,” Cecilia said. “This man is not yet twenty-five. He’s fleeing some danger.” She looked hard at Richard. “Who threatens his life?”

“Curb your curiosity,” Richard said rudely. “He wants to be a monk, not a nun, so you need not inquire further.” It was a shocking way to talk to a prioress, but the sons of earls could get away with such rudeness. He turned to Anthony. “You must admit him.”

Anthony said: “The priory is too poor to take on any more monks—unless there were to be a gift that would pay the costs…”

“It will be arranged.”

“It would have to be adequate to the need—”

“It will be arranged!”

“Very well.”

Cecilia was suspicious. She said to Anthony: “Do you know more about this man than you’re telling me?”

“I see no reason to turn him away.”

“What makes you think he’s a genuine penitent?”

Everyone looked at Thomas. His eyes had closed.

Anthony said: “He will have to prove his sincerity during his novitiate, like anyone else.”

She was clearly dissatisfied, but for once Anthony was not asking her for the money, so there was nothing she could do. “We’d better get on with treating this wound,” she said.

Saul said: “He refused Brother Joseph’s treatment. That’s why we had to fetch the Father Prior.”

Anthony leaned over the patient. In a loud voice, as if speaking to someone deaf, he said: “You must have the treatment prescribed by Brother

Joseph. He knows best.”

Thomas appeared unconscious.

Anthony turned to Joseph. “He is no longer objecting.”

Matthew Barber said: “He could lose his arm!”

“You’d better leave,” Anthony told him.

Looking angry, Matthew went out.

Anthony said to Richard: “Perhaps you would come to the prior’s house for a cup of cider.”

“Thank you.”

As they left, Anthony said to Godwyn: “Stay here and help the Mother Prioress. Come to me before Vespers and tell me how the knight is recovering.”

Prior Anthony did not normally worry about the progress of individual patients. Clearly he had a special interest in this one.

Godwyn watched as Brother Joseph applied ointment to the arm of the now-unconscious knight. He thought he had probably ensured Cecilia’s financial support by giving the correct answer to the question, but he was keen to get her explicit agreement. When Brother Joseph had done, and Cecilia was bathing Thomas’s forehead with rose water, he said: “I hope you will consider my request favorably.”

She gave him a sharp look. “I might as well tell you now that I have decided to give the money to Saul.”

Godwyn was shocked. “But I gave the right answer!”

“Did you?”

“Surely you didn’t agree with the barber?”

She raised her eyebrows. “I won’t be interrogated by you, Brother Godwyn.”

“I’m sorry,” he said immediately. “I just don’t understand it.”

“I know.”

If she was going to be enigmatic, there was no point in talking to her. Godwyn turned away, shaking with frustration and disappointment. She was giving the money to Saul! Was it because he was related to the earl? Godwyn thought not: she was too independent-minded. It was Saul’s showy piety that had tipped the balance, he decided. But Saul would never be leader of anything. What a waste. Godwyn wondered how he was going to break this news to his mother. She would be furious—but who would she blame? Anthony? Godwyn himself? A familiar feeling of dread came over him as he pictured his mother’s wrath.

As he thought of her, he saw her enter the hospital by the door at the far end, a tall woman with a prominent bust. She caught his eye and stood by the door, waiting for him to come to her. He walked slowly, trying to figure out what to say.

“Your aunt Rose is dying,” Petranilla said as soon as he was close.

“May God bless her soul. Mother Cecilia told me.”

“You look shocked—but you know how ill she is.”

“It’s not Aunt Rose. I’ve had other bad news.” He swallowed. “I can’t go to Oxford. Uncle Anthony won’t pay for it, and Mother Cecilia turned me down, too.”

She did not explode immediately, to his great relief. However, her mouth tightened into a grim line. “But why?” she said.

“He hasn’t got the money, and she is sending Saul.”

“Saul Whitehead? He’ll never amount to anything.”

“Well, at least he’s going to be a physician.”

She looked him in the eye, and he shriveled. “I think you handled this badly,” she said. “You should have discussed it with me beforehand.”

He had feared she would take this line. “How can you say I mishandled it?” he protested.

“You should have let me speak to Anthony first. I would have softened him.”

“He still might have said no.”

“And before you approached Cecilia, you should have found out whether anyone else had asked her. Then you could have undermined Saul before speaking to her.”

“How?”

“He must have a weakness. You could have found out what it is, and made sure it was brought to her attention. Then, when she was feeling disillusioned, you could have approached her yourself.”

He saw the sense of what she was saying. “I never thought of that,” he said. He bowed his head.

With controlled anger she said: “You have to plan these things, the way earls plan battles.”

“I see that now,” he said, not meeting her eye. “I’ll never make the same mistake again.”

“I hope not.”

He looked at her again. “What am I going to do?”

“I’m not giving up.” A familiar expression of determination came over her face. “I shall provide the money,” she said.

Godwyn felt a surge of hope, but he could not imagine how his mother would fulfill such a promise. “Where will you get it?” he asked.

“I’ll give up my house, and move in with my brother Edmund.”

“Will he have you?” Edmund was a generous man, but he sometimes clashed with his sister.

“I think he will. He’s going to be a widower soon, and he’ll need a housekeeper. Not that Rose was ever very effective in that role.”

Godwyn shook his head. “You’ll still need money.”

“For what? Edmund will give me bed and board, and pay for the few small necessities I may require. In return, I’ll manage his servants and raise his daughters. And you shall have the money I inherited from your father.”

She spoke firmly, but Godwyn could see the bitterness of regret expressed in the twist of her mouth. He knew what a sacrifice this would be for her. She was proud of her independence. She was one of the town’s prominent women, the daughter of a wealthy man and the sister of the leading wool merchant, and she prized that status. She loved to invite the powerful men and women of Kingsbridge to dine with her and drink the best wine. Now she was proposing to move into her brother’s house and live as a poor relation, working as a kind of servant and dependent on him for everything. It would be a terrible comedown. “It’s too much to sacrifice,” Godwyn said. “You can’t do it.”

Her face hardened, and she gave a little shake of the shoulders, as if preparing to take the weight of a heavy burden. “Oh, yes, I can,” she said.

5

Gwenda told her father everything.

She had sworn on the blood of Jesus that she would keep the secret, so now she was going to Hell, but she was more frightened of her father than of Hell.

He began by asking her where she got Skip, the new puppy, and she was forced to explain how Hop had died; and in the end the whole story came out.

To her surprise, she was not whipped. In fact Pa seemed pleased. He made her take him to the clearing in the forest where the killings had happened. It was not easy to find the place again, but she got there, and they found the bodies of the two men-at-arms dressed in green-and-yellow livery.

First Pa opened their purses. Both contained twenty or thirty pennies. He was even more pleased with their swords, which were worth more than a few pennies. He began to strip the dead men, which was difficult for him with one hand, so he made Gwenda help him. The lifeless bodies were awkwardly heavy, so strange to touch. Pa made her take off everything they wore, even their muddy hose and their soiled underdrawers.

He wrapped their weapons in the clothing, making what looked like a bundle of rags. Then he and Gwenda dragged the naked corpses back into the evergreen bush.

He was in high spirits as they walked back into Kingsbridge. He took her to Slaughterhouse Ditch, a street near the river, and they went into a large but dirty tavern called the White Horse. He bought Gwenda a cup of ale to drink

while he disappeared into the back of the house with the innkeeper, whom he addressed as “Davey boy.” It was the second time Gwenda had drunk ale in one day. Pa reappeared a few minutes later without the bundle.

They returned to the main street and found Ma, Philemon, and the baby at the Bell Inn, next to the priory gates. Pa winked broadly at Ma and gave her a big handful of money to hide in the baby’s blankets.

It was mid-afternoon, and most visitors had left to return to their villages; but it was too late to set out for Wigleigh, so the family would spend the night at the inn. As Pa kept saying, they could afford it now; although Ma said nervously: “Don’t let people know you’ve got money!”

Gwenda felt weary. She had got up early and walked a long way. She lay down on a bench and quickly fell asleep.

She was awakened by the inn door banging open violently. She looked up, startled, to see two men-at-arms walk in. At first she thought they were the ghosts of the men who had been killed in the forest, and she suffered a moment of sheer terror. Then she realized they were different men wearing the same uniform, yellow on one side and green on the other. The younger of the two carried a familiar-looking bundle of rags.

The older spoke directly to Pa. “You’re Joby from Wigleigh, aren’t you?”

Gwenda instantly felt frightened again. There was a tone of serious menace in the man’s voice. He was not posturing, just determined, but he gave her the impression he would do anything to get his way.

“No,” Pa replied, lying automatically. “You’ve got the wrong man.”

They ignored that. The second man put the bundle on the table and spread it out. It consisted of two yellow-and-green tunics wrapped around two swords and two daggers. He looked at Pa and said: “Where did these come from?”

“I’ve never seen them before, I swear by the Cross.”

He was stupid to deny it, Gwenda thought fearfully: they would get the truth out of him, just as he had got the truth out of her.

The older man-at-arms said: “Davey, the landlord of the White Horse, says he bought these from Joby Wigleigh.” His voice hardened with threat, and the handful of other customers in the room all got up from their seats and quickly slipped out of the inn, leaving only Gwenda’s family.

“Joby left here a while ago,” Pa said desperately.

The man nodded. “With his wife, two children, and a baby.”

“Yes.”

The man moved with sudden speed. He grabbed Pa’s tunic in a strong hand and pushed him up against the wall. Ma screamed, and the baby began to cry. Gwenda saw that the man’s right hand bore a padded glove covered with chain mail. He drew back his arm and punched Pa in the stomach.

Ma shouted: “Help! Murder!” Philemon began to cry.

Pa's face turned white with pain, and he went limp, but the man held him up against the wall, preventing him from falling, and punched him again, this time in the face. Blood spurted from Pa's nose and mouth.

Gwenda wanted to scream, and her mouth was open wide, but no noise would come from her throat. She thought her father was all-powerful—even though he often slyly pretended to be weak, or craven, in order to get sympathy, or turn aside anger—and it terrified her to see him so helpless.

The innkeeper appeared in the doorway that led to the back of the house. He was a big man in his thirties. A plump little girl peeped from behind him. "What's this?" he said in a voice of authority.

The man-at-arms did not look at him. "You keep out of it," he said, and he punched Pa in the stomach again.

Pa vomited blood.

"Stop that," said the innkeeper.

The man-at-arms said: "Who do you think you are?"

"I'm Paul Bell, and this is my house."

"Well, then, Paul Bell, you mind your own business, if you know what's good for you."

"I suppose you think you can do what you like, wearing that uniform." There was contempt in Paul's voice.

"That's about right."

"Whose livery is it, anyway?"

"The queen's."

Paul spoke over his shoulder. "Bessie, run and fetch John Constable. If a man is going to be murdered in my tavern, I want the constable to witness it." The little girl disappeared.

"There'll be no killing here," the man-at-arms said. "Joby has changed his mind. He's decided to lead me to the place where he robbed two dead men—haven't you, Joby?"

Pa could not speak, but he nodded. The man let him go, and he fell to his knees, coughing and retching.

The man looked at the rest of the family. "And the child that witnessed the fight…?"

Gwenda screamed: "No!"

He nodded in satisfaction. "The rat-faced girl, obviously."

Gwenda ran to her mother. Ma said: "Mary, Mother of God, save my child."

The man grabbed Gwenda's arm and roughly pulled her away from her mother. She cried out. He said harshly: "Shut your noise, or you'll get the same as your miserable father."

Gwenda clamped her jaws together to stop herself screaming.

"Get up, Joby." The man dragged Pa to his feet. "Pull yourself together,

you're going for a ride."

The second man picked up the clothes and the weapons.

As they left the inn, Ma called out frantically: "Just do everything they ask!"

The men had horses. Gwenda rode in front of the older man, and Pa was mounted in the same position on the other horse. Pa was helpless, groaning, so Gwenda directed them, remembering the way clearly now that she had followed it twice. They made rapid progress on horseback, but all the same the afternoon was darkening when they reached the clearing.

The younger man held on to Gwenda and Pa while the leader pulled the bodies of their comrades out from under the bush.

"That Thomas must be a rare fighter, to kill Harry and Alfred together," the older man mused, looking at the corpses. Gwenda realized that these men did not know about the other children. She would have confessed that she had not been alone, and that Ralph had killed one of the men; but she was too terrified to speak. "He's nearly cut Alfred's head off," the man went on. He turned and looked at Gwenda. "Was anything said about a letter?"

"I don't know!" she said, finding her voice. "I had my eyes shut because I was frightened, and I couldn't hear what they were saying! It's true, I'd tell you if I knew!"

"If they got the letter from him in the first place, he would have taken it back after he killed them anyway," the man said to his comrade. He looked at the trees around the clearing, as if the letter might have been hanging among the dying leaves. "He probably has it now, at the priory, where we can't get at him without violating the sanctity of the monastery."

The second man said: "At least we can report exactly what happened, and take the bodies home for a Christian burial."

There was a sudden commotion. Pa wrenched himself out of the grasp of the second man and dashed across the clearing. His captor moved to go after him, but was stopped by the older man-at-arms. "Let him go—what's the point in killing him now?"

Gwenda began to cry quietly.

"What about this child?" said the younger man.

They were going to murder her, Gwenda felt sure. She could see nothing through her tears, and she was sobbing too hard to plead for her life. She would die and go to Hell. She waited for the end.

"Let her go," said the older man. "I wasn't born to kill little girls."

The younger man released her and gave her a shove. She stumbled and fell to the ground. She got up, wiped her eyes so that she could see, and stumbled off.

"Go on, run away," the man called after her. "It's your lucky day!"

Caris could not sleep. She got up from her bed and went into Mama's room. Papa was sitting on a stool, staring at the still figure in the bed.

Mama's eyes were closed and her face glistened, in the candlelight, with a film of perspiration. She seemed to be hardly breathing. Caris took her pale hand: it was terribly cold. She held it between her own, trying to warm it.

She said: "Why did they take her blood?"

"They think illness sometimes comes from an excess of one of the humors. They hope to take it away with the blood."

"But it didn't make her better."

"No. In fact, she seems worse."

Tears came to Caris's eyes. "Why did you let them do it, then?"

"Priests and monks study the works of the ancient philosophers. They know more than we do."

"I don't believe that."

"It's hard to know what to believe, little buttercup."

"If I was a doctor, I'd only do things that made people better."

Papa was not listening. He was looking more intently at Mama. He leaned forward and slipped his hand under the blanket to touch her chest just below her left breast. Caris could see the shape of his big hand under the fine wool. He made a small choking sound in his throat, then moved his hand and pressed down more firmly. He held it there for a few moments.

He closed his eyes.

He seemed to fall slowly forward, until he was on his knees beside the bed, as if praying, with his big forehead resting on Mama's thigh, and his hand still on her chest.

She realized he was crying. It was the most frightening thing that had ever happened to her, much more frightening than seeing a man killed in the forest. Children cried, women cried, weak and helpless people cried, but Papa never cried. She felt as if the world was ending.

She had to get help. She let Mama's cold hand slip out of her own onto the blanket, where it lay motionless. She went back to her bedroom and shook the shoulder of the sleeping Alice. "You've got to wake up!" she said.

At first Alice would not open her eyes.

"Papa is crying!" Caris said.

Alice sat upright. "He can't be," she said.

"Get up!"

Alice got out of bed. Caris took her older sister's hand and they went together into Mama's room. Papa was standing up now, looking down at the still face on the pillow, his face wet with tears. Alice stared at him in shock. Caris whispered: "I told you so."

On the other side of the bed stood Aunt Petranilla.

Papa saw the girls standing in the doorway. He left his station by the bed and came to them. He put one arm around each of them, drew them both to him, and hugged them. “Your mama has gone to be with the angels,” he said quietly. “Pray for her soul.”

“Be brave, girls,” said Petranilla. “From now on, I will be your mama.”

Caris wiped the tears from her eyes and looked up at her aunt. “Oh, no, you won’t,” she said.

PART II

June 8 to 14, 1337

6

On Whitsunday in the year that Merthin was twenty-one, a river of rain fell on Kingsbridge Cathedral.

Great globules of water bounced off the slate roof; streams flooded the gutters; fountains gushed from the mouths of gargoyles; sheets of water unfolded down the buttresses; and torrents ran over the arches and down the columns, soaking the statues of the saints. The sky, the great church, and the town round about were all shades of wet gray paint.

Whitsunday commemorated the moment when the Holy Spirit descended on the disciples of Jesus. The seventh Sunday after Easter, it fell in May or June, soon after most of England's sheep had been sheared; and so it was always the first day of the Kingsbridge Fleece Fair.

As Merthin splashed through the downpour to the cathedral for the morning service, pulling his hood forward over his brow in a vain attempt to keep his face dry, he had to pass through the fair. On the broad green to the west of the church, hundreds of traders had set out their stalls—then hastily covered them with sheets of oiled sacking or felted cloth to keep the rain off. Wool traders were the key figures in the fair, from the small operators who collected the produce of a few scattered villagers, to the big dealers such as Edmund who had a warehouse full of woolsacks to sell. Around them clustered subsidiary stalls selling just about everything else money could buy: sweet wine from the Rhineland, silk brocade threaded with gold from Lucca, glass bowls from Venice, ginger and pepper from places in the East that few people could even name. And finally there were the workaday tradespeople who supplied visitors and stallholders with their commonplace needs: bakers, brewers, confectioners, fortune-tellers, and prostitutes.

The stallholders responded bravely to the rain, joking with one another, trying to create the carnival atmosphere; but the weather would be bad for their profits. Some people had to do business, rain or shine: Italian and Flemish buyers needed soft English wool for thousands of busy looms in

Florence and Bruges. But more casual customers would stay at home: a knight's wife would decide she could manage without nutmeg and cinnamon; a prosperous peasant would make his old coat last another winter; a lawyer would judge that his mistress did not really need a gold bangle.

Merthin was not going to buy anything. He had no money. He was an unpaid apprentice, living with his master, Elfric Builder. He was fed at the family table, he slept on the kitchen floor, and he wore Elfric's cast-off clothes, but he got no wages. In the long winter evenings he carved ingenious toys that he sold for a few pennies—a jewel box with secret compartments, a cockerel whose tongue poked out when its tail was pressed—but in summer there was no spare time, for craftsmen worked until dark.

However, his apprenticeship was almost over. In less than six months, on the first day of December, he would become a full member of the carpenters' guild of Kingsbridge at the age of twenty-one. He could hardly wait.

The great west doors of the cathedral were open to admit the thousands of townspeople and visitors who would attend today's service. Merthin stepped inside, shaking the rain off his clothes. The stone floor was slippery with water and mud. On a fine day, the interior of the church would be bright with shafts of sunlight, but today it was murky, the stained-glass windows dim, the congregation shrouded in dark, wet clothes.

Where did all the rain go? There were no drainage ditches around the church. The water—thousands and thousands of gallons of it—just soaked into the ground. Did it go on down, farther and farther, until it fell as rain again in Hell? No. The cathedral was built on a slope. The water traveled underground, seeping down the hill from north to south. The foundations of large stone buildings were designed to let water flow through, for a buildup was dangerous. All this rain eventually passed into the river on the southern boundary of the priory grounds.

Merthin imagined he could feel the underground rush of the water, its drumming vibration transmitted through the foundations and the tiled floor and sensed by the soles of his feet.

A small black dog scampered up to him, wagging its tail, and greeted him joyfully. "Hello, Scrap," he said, and patted her. He looked up to see the dog's mistress, Caris; and his heart skipped a beat.

She wore a cloak of bright scarlet that she had inherited from her mother. It was the only splash of color in the gloom. Merthin smiled broadly, happy to see her. It was hard to say what made her so beautiful. She had a small, round face with neat, regular features; mid-brown hair; and green eyes flecked with gold. She was not so different from a hundred other Kingsbridge girls. But she wore her hat at a jaunty angle, there was a mocking intelligence in her eyes, and she looked at him with a mischievous grin that promised vague but tantalizing delights. He had known her for ten years, but it was only in the last

few months that he had realized he loved her.

She drew him behind a pillar and kissed him on the mouth, the tip of her tongue running lightly across his lips.

They kissed every chance they got: in church, in the marketplace, when they met on the street, and—best of all—when he was at her house and they found themselves alone. He lived for those moments. He thought about kissing her before he went to sleep and again as soon as he woke up.

He visited her house two or three times a week. Her father, Edmund, liked him, though her aunt Petranilla did not. A convivial man, Edmund often invited Merthin to stay for supper, and Merthin accepted gratefully, knowing it would be a better meal than he would get at Elfric's house. He and Caris would play chess or checkers, or just sit talking. He liked to watch her while she told a story or explained something, her hands drawing pictures in the air, her face expressing amusement or astonishment, acting every part in a pageant. But, most of the time, he was waiting for those moments when he could steal a kiss.

He glanced around the church: no one was looking their way. He slipped his hand inside her coat and touched her through the soft linen of her dress. Her body was warm. He held her breast in his palm, small and round. He loved the way her flesh yielded to the press of his fingertips. He had never seen her naked, but he knew her breasts intimately.

In his dreams they went farther. Then, they were alone somewhere, a clearing in the woods or the big bedchamber of a castle; and they were both naked. But, strangely, his dreams always ended a moment too soon, just before he entered her; and he would wake up frustrated.

One day, he would think; one day.

They had not yet spoken about marriage. Apprentices could not marry, so he had to wait. Caris must, surely, have asked herself what they were going to do when he finished his term; but she had not voiced those thoughts. She seemed content to take life one day at a time. And he had a superstitious fear of talking about their future together. It was said that pilgrims should not spend too much time planning their journey, for they might learn of so many hazards that they would decide not to go.

A nun walked past, and Merthin withdrew his hand guiltily from Caris's bosom; but the nun did not notice them. People did all sorts of things in the vast space of the cathedral. Last year Merthin had seen a couple having sexual congress up against the wall of the south aisle, in the darkness of the Christmas Eve service—although they had been thrown out for it. He wondered if he and Caris could stay here throughout the service, dallying discreetly.

But she had other ideas. "Let's go to the front," she said. She took his hand and led him through the crowd. He knew many of the people there,

though not all: Kingsbridge was one of the larger cities in England, with about seven thousand inhabitants, and no one knew everybody. He followed Caris to the crossing, where the nave met the transepts. There they came up against a wooden barrier blocking entrance to the eastern end, or chancel, which was reserved for clergy.

Merthin found himself standing next to Buonaventura Caroli, the most important of the Italian merchants, a heavyset man in a richly embroidered coat of thick wool cloth. He came originally from Florence—which he said was the greatest city in the Christian world, more than ten times the size of Kingsbridge—but he now lived in London, managing the large business his family had with English wool producers. The Carolis were so rich they loaned money to kings, but Buonaventura was amiable and unpretentious—though people said that in business he could be implacably hard.

Caris greeted the man in a casually familiar way: he was staying at her house. He gave Merthin a friendly nod, even though he must have guessed, from Merthin's age and hand-me-down clothing, that he was a mere apprentice.

Buonaventura was looking at the architecture. "I have been coming to Kingsbridge for five years," he said, making idle conversation, "but until today I have never noticed that the windows of the transepts are much bigger than those in the rest of the church." He spoke French with an admixture of words from the dialect of the Italian region of Tuscany.

Merthin had no trouble understanding. He had grown up, like most sons of English knights, speaking Norman French to his parents and English to his playmates; and he could guess the meanings of many Italian words because he had learned Latin in the monks' school. "I can tell you why the windows are like that," he said.

Buonaventura raised his eyebrows, surprised that an apprentice should claim such knowledge.

"The church was built two hundred years ago, when these narrow lancet windows in the nave and chancel were a revolutionary new design," Merthin went on. "Then, a hundred years later, the bishop wanted a taller tower, and he rebuilt the transepts at the same time, putting in the bigger windows that had by then come into fashion."

Buonaventura was impressed. "And how do you happen to know this?"

"In the monastery library there is a history of the priory, called *Timothy's Book*, that tells all about the building of the cathedral. Most of it was written in the time of the great Prior Philip, but later writers have added to it. I read it as a boy at the monks' school."

Buonaventura looked hard at Merthin for a moment, as if memorizing his face, then he said casually: "It's a fine building."

"Are the buildings very different in Italy?" Merthin was fascinated by talk

of foreign countries, their life in general and their architecture in particular.

Buonaventura looked thoughtful. “I believe the principles of building are the same everywhere. But in England I have never seen domes.”

“What’s a dome?”

“A round roof, like half a ball.”

Merthin was astonished. “I never heard of such a thing! How is it built?”

Buonaventura laughed. “Young man, I am a wool merchant. I can tell whether a fleece comes from a Cotswold sheep or a Lincoln sheep, just by rubbing the wool between my finger and thumb, but I don’t know how a henhouse is built, let alone a dome.”

Merthin’s master, Elfric, arrived. He was a prosperous man, and he wore expensive clothes, but they always looked as if they belonged to someone else. A habitual sycophant, he ignored Caris and Merthin, but made a deep bow to Buonaventura and said: “Honored to have you in our city once again, sir.”

Merthin turned away.

“How many languages do you think there are?” Caris said to him.

She was always saying crazy things. “Five,” Merthin replied without thinking.

“No, be serious,” she said. “There’s English, and French, and Latin, that’s three. Then the Florentines and the Venetians speak differently, though they have words in common.”

“You’re right,” he said, entering into the game. “That’s five already. Then there’s Flemish.” Few people could make out the tongue of the traders who came to Kingsbridge from the weaving towns of Flanders: Ypres, Bruges, Ghent.

“And Danish.”

“The Arabs have their own language, and when they write, they don’t even use the same letters as we do.”

“And Mother Cecilia told me that all the barbarians have their own tongues that no one even knows how to write down—Scots, Welsh, Irish, and probably others. That makes eleven, and there might be people we haven’t even heard of!”

Merthin grinned. Caris was the only person he could do this with. Among their friends of the same age, no one understood the thrill of imagining strange people and different ways of life. She would ask a random question: What is it like to live at the edge of the world? Are the priests wrong about God? How do you know you’re not dreaming, right now? And they would be off on a speculative voyage, competing to come up with the most outlandish notions.

The roar of conversation in the church suddenly quieted, and Merthin saw that the monks and nuns were seating themselves. The choirmaster, Blind

Carlus, came in last. Although he could not see, he walked without assistance in the church and the monastic buildings, moving slowly, but as confident as a sighted man, familiar with every pillar and flagstone. Now he sang a note in his rich baritone, and the choir began a hymn.

Merthin was quietly skeptical about the clergy. Priests had power that was not always matched by their knowledge—rather like his employer, Elfric. However, he liked going to church. The services induced a kind of trance in him. The music, the architecture, and the Latin incantations enchanted him, and he felt as if he were asleep with his eyes open. Once again he had the fanciful sensation that he could feel the rainwater flowing in torrents far beneath his feet.

His gaze roamed over the three levels of the nave—arcade, gallery, and clerestory. He knew that the columns were made by placing one stone on top of another, but they gave a different impression, at least at first glance. The stone blocks were carved so that each column looked like a bundle of shafts. He traced the rise of one of the four giant piers of the crossing, from the huge square foot on which it stood, up to where one shaft branched north to form an arch across the side aisle, on up to the tribune level, where another shaft branched west to form the arcade of the gallery, on up to the westward springing of a clerestory arch, until the last remaining shafts separated, like a spray of flowers, and became the curving ribs of the ceiling vault far above. From the central boss at the highest point of the vault, he followed a rib all the way down again to the matching pier on the opposite corner of the crossing.

As he did so, something odd happened. His vision seemed momentarily to blur, and it looked as if the east side of the transept moved.

There was a low rumbling sound, so deep it was almost inaudible, and a tremor underfoot, as if a tree had fallen nearby.

The singing faltered.

In the chancel, a crack appeared in the south wall, right next to the pier Merthin had been looking at.

He found himself turning toward Caris. Out of the corner of his eye he saw masonry falling in the choir and the crossing. Then there was nothing but noise: women screaming, men shouting, and the deafening crash of huge stones hitting the floor. It lasted a long moment. When silence descended, Merthin found he was holding Caris, his left arm around her shoulders pressing her to him, his right arm protectively covering her head, his body interposed between her and the place where a part of the great church lay in ruins.

It was obviously a miracle that no one died.

The worst of the damage was in the south aisle of the chancel, which had

been empty of people during the service. The congregation was not admitted to the chancel, and the clergy had all been in the central part, called the choir. Several monks had had narrow escapes, which only heightened the talk of miracles, and others had bad cuts and bruises from flying chips of stone. The congregation suffered no more than a few scratches. Evidently, they had all been supernaturally protected by St. Adolphus, whose bones were preserved under the high altar, and whose deeds included many instances of curing the sick and saving people from death. However, it was generally agreed that God had sent the people of Kingsbridge a warning. What he was warning them about was not yet clear.

An hour later, four men were inspecting the damage. Brother Godwyn, the cousin of Caris, was the sacrist, responsible for the church and all its treasures. Under him as matricularius, in charge of building operations and repairs, was Brother Thomas, who had been Sir Thomas Langley ten years ago. The contract for cathedral maintenance was held by Elfric, a carpenter by training and a general builder by trade. And Merthin tagged along as Elfric's apprentice.

The east end of the church was divided by pillars into four sections, called bays. The collapse had affected the two bays nearest the crossing. The stone vaulting over the south aisle was destroyed completely in the first bay and partially in the second. There were cracks in the tribune gallery, and stone mullions had fallen from the windows of the clerestory.

Elfric said: "Some weakness in the mortar allowed the vault to crumble, and that in turn caused the cracks at higher levels."

That did not sound right to Merthin, but he lacked an alternative explanation.

Merthin hated his master. He had first been apprenticed to Elfric's father, Joachim, a builder of wide experience who had worked on churches and bridges in London and Paris. The old man had delighted in explaining to Merthin the lore of the masons—what they called their "mysteries," which were mostly arithmetical formulas for building, such as the ratio between the height of a building and the depth of its foundations. Merthin liked numbers and lapped up everything Joachim could teach him.

Then Joachim died, and Elfric took over. Elfric believed the main thing an apprentice had to learn was obedience. Merthin found this difficult to accept, and Elfric punished him with short rations, thin clothing, and outdoor work in frosty weather. To make matters worse, Elfric's chubby daughter Griselda, the same age as Merthin, was always well fed and warmly dressed.

Three years ago Elfric's wife had died, and he had married Alice, the older sister of Caris. People thought Alice was the prettier sister, and it was true that she had more regular features, but she lacked Caris's captivating ways, and Merthin found her dull. Alice had always seemed to like Merthin

almost as much as her sister did, and so he had hoped she would make Elfric treat him better. But the reverse happened. Alice seemed to think it was her wifely duty to join with Elfric in tormenting him.

Merthin knew that many other apprentices suffered in the same way, and they all put up with it because apprenticeship was the only way into a well-paid trade. The craft guilds efficiently kept out upstarts. No one could do business in a town without belonging to a guild. Even a priest, a monk, or a woman who wanted to deal in wool or brew ale for sale would have to get into a guild. And outside the towns there was little business to be done: peasants built their own houses and sewed their own shirts.

At the end of the apprenticeship, most boys would remain with the master, working as journeymen for a wage. A few would end up partners, taking over the enterprise when the old man died. That would not be Merthin's destiny. He hated Elfric too much. He would leave the moment he could.

"Let's look at it from above," said Godwyn.

They walked toward the east end. Elfric said: "It's good to see you back from Oxford, Brother Godwyn. But you must miss the company of all those learned people."

Godwyn nodded. "The masters are truly astonishing."

"And the other students—they must be remarkable young men, I imagine. Though we hear tales of bad behavior, too."

Godwyn looked rueful. "I'm afraid some of those stories are true. When a young priest or monk is away from home for the first time, he may suffer temptation."

"Still—we're fortunate to have the benefit of university-trained men here in Kingsbridge."

"Very kind of you to say so."

"Oh, but it's true."

Merthin wanted to say: Shut up, for pity's sake. But this was Elfric's way. He was a poor craftsman, his work inaccurate and his judgment shaky, but he knew how to ingratiate himself. Merthin had watched him do it, time and again—for Elfric could be as charming to people from whom he wanted something as he could be rude to those who had nothing he needed.

Merthin was more surprised at Godwyn. How could an intelligent and educated man fail to see through Elfric? Perhaps it was less obvious to the person who was the object of the compliments.

Godwyn opened a small door and led the way up a narrow spiral staircase concealed in the wall. Merthin felt excited. He loved to enter the hidden passageways of the cathedral. He was also curious about the dramatic collapse, and eager to figure out its cause.

The aisles were single-story structures that stuck out either side of the main body of the church. They had rib-vaulted stone ceilings. Above the

vault, a lean-to roof rose from the outer edge of the aisle up to the base of the clerestory. Under that sloping roof was a triangular void, its floor the hidden side, or extrados, of the aisle's vaulted ceiling. The four men climbed into this void to look at the damage from above.

It was lit by window openings into the interior of the church, and Thomas had had the foresight to bring an oil lamp. The first thing Merthin noticed was that the vaults, viewed from above, were not exactly the same in each bay. The easternmost formed a slightly flatter curve than its neighbor, and the next one—partly destroyed—looked as though it was different again.

They walked along the extrados, staying close to the edge where the vault was strongest, until they were as near as they dared go to the collapsed portion. The vault was constructed in the same way as the rest of the church, of stones mortared together, except that ceiling stones were very thin and light. The vault was almost vertical at its springing, but as it rose it leaned inward, until it met the stonework coming up from the opposite edge.

Elfric said: "Well, the first thing to do is obviously to rebuild the vaulting over the first two bays of the aisle."

Thomas said: "It's a long time since anyone in Kingsbridge built rib-vaulting." He turned to Merthin. "Could you make the formwork?"

Merthin knew what he meant. At the edge of the vault, where the masonry was almost upright, the stones would stay in place by their own weight; but, higher up, as the curve turned toward the horizontal, some support was needed to keep everything in place while the mortar dried. The obvious method was to make a wooden frame, called formwork or centering, and lay the stones on top of that.

It was a challenging job for a carpenter, for the curves had to be just right. Thomas knew the quality of Merthin's craftsmanship, having closely supervised the work Merthin and Elfric carried out at the cathedral over several years. However, it was tactless of Thomas to address the apprentice rather than the boss, and Elfric reacted quickly. "Under my supervision he can do it, yes," he said.

"I can make the formwork," Merthin said, already thinking about how the frame would be supported by the scaffolding, and the platform on which the masons would have to stand. "But these vaults were not built with formwork."

"Don't talk nonsense, boy," Elfric said. "Of course they were. You know nothing about it."

Merthin knew it was unwise to argue with his employer. On the other hand, in six months he would be competing with Elfric for work, and he needed people such as Brother Godwyn to believe in his competence. Also, he was stung by the scorn in Elfric's voice, and he felt an irresistible desire to prove his master wrong. "Look at the extrados," he said indignantly. "Having

finished one bay, surely the masons would have re-used the same formwork for the next. In which case, all the vaults would have the same curve. But, in fact, they're all different."

"Obviously they didn't re-use their formwork," Elfric said irritably.

"Why wouldn't they?" Merthin persisted. "They must have wanted to save on timber, not to mention the wages of skilled carpenters."

"Anyway, it's not possible to build vaulting without formwork."

"Yes, it is," Merthin said. "There's a method—"

"That's enough," Elfric said. "You're here to learn, not teach."

Godwyn put in: "Just a minute, Elfric. If the boy is right, it could save the priory a lot of money." He looked at Merthin. "What were you going to say?"

Merthin was half wishing he had not raised this subject. There would be hell to pay later. But he was committed now. If he backed off, they would think he did not know what he was talking about. "It's described in a book in the monastery library, and it's very simple," he said. "As each stone is laid, a rope is draped over it. One end of the rope is tied to the wall, the other weighted with a lump of wood. The rope forms a right angle over the edge of the stone, and keeps it from slipping off its bed of mortar and falling to the ground."

There was a moment of silence as they all concentrated, trying to visualize the arrangements. Then Thomas nodded. "It could work," he said.

Elfric looked furious.

Godwyn was intrigued. "What book is this?"

"It's called *Timothy's Book*," Merthin told him.

"I know of it, but I've never studied it. Obviously I should." Godwyn addressed the others. "Have we seen enough?"

Elfric and Thomas nodded. As the four men left the roof space, Elfric muttered to Merthin: "Do you realize you've just talked yourself out of several weeks' work? You won't do that when you're your own master, I'll bet."

Merthin had not thought of that. Elfric was right: by proving that formwork was unnecessary, he had also done himself out of a job. But there was something badly wrong with Elfric's way of thinking. It was unfair to allow someone to spend money unnecessarily, just to keep yourself in work. Merthin did not want to live by cheating people.

They went down the spiral staircase into the chancel. Elfric said to Godwyn: "I'll come to you tomorrow with a price for the work."

"Good."

Elfric turned to Merthin. "You stay here and count the stones in an aisle vault. Bring me the answer at home."

"Yes."

Elfric and Godwyn left, but Thomas lingered. "I got you into trouble," he

said.

“You were trying to boost me.”

The monk shrugged and made a what-can-you-do gesture with his right arm. His left arm had been amputated at the elbow ten years ago, after infection set in to the wound he received in the fight Merthin had witnessed.

Merthin hardly ever thought about that strange scene in the forest—he had become used to Thomas in a monk’s robe—but he recalled it now: the men-at-arms, the children hiding in the bush, the bow and arrow, the buried letter. Thomas was always kind to him, and he guessed it was because of what happened that day. “I’ve never told anyone about that letter,” he said quietly.

“I know,” Thomas replied. “If you had, you’d be dead.”

Most large towns were run by a guild merchant, an organization of the leading citizens. Under the guild merchant were numerous craft guilds, each dedicated to a particular trade: masons, carpenters, leather tanners, weavers, tailors. Then there were the parish guilds, small groups centered on local churches, formed to raise money for priestly robes and sacred ornaments, and for the support of widows and orphans.

Cathedral towns were different. Kingsbridge, like St. Albans and Bury St. Edmunds, was ruled by the monastery, which owned almost all the land in and around the town. The priors had always refused permission for a guild merchant. However, the most important craftsmen and traders belonged to the parish guild of St. Adolphus. No doubt this had started out, in the distant past, as a pious group that raised money for the cathedral, but it was now the most important organization in town. It made rules for the conduct of business, and elected an alderman and six wardens to enforce them. In the guildhall were kept the measures that standardized the weight of a woolsack, the width of a bolt of cloth, and the volume of a bushel for all Kingsbridge trade. Nevertheless, the merchants could not hold courts and dispense justice the way they did in borough towns—the Kingsbridge prior retained those powers for himself.

On the afternoon of Whitsunday, the parish guild gave a banquet at the guildhall for the most important visiting buyers. Edmund Wooler was the alderman, and Caris went with him to be hostess, so Merthin had to amuse himself without her.

Fortunately, Elfric and Alice were also at the banquet, so he could sit in the kitchen, listening to the rain and thinking. The weather was not cold, but there was a small fire for cooking, and its red glow was cheerful.

He could hear Elfric’s daughter, Griselda, moving about upstairs. It was a fine house, although smaller than Edmund’s. There was just a hall and a kitchen downstairs. The staircase led to an open landing, where Griselda

slept, and a closed bedroom for the master and his wife. Merthin slept in the kitchen.

There had been a time, three or four years ago, when Merthin had been tormented at night by fantasies of climbing the stairs and slipping under the blankets next to Griselda's warm, plump body. But she considered herself superior to him, treating him like a servant, and she had never given him the least encouragement.

Sitting on a bench, Merthin looked into the fire and visualized the wooden scaffolding he would build for the masons who would reconstruct the collapsed vaulting in the cathedral. Wood was expensive, and long tree trunks were rare—the owners of woodland usually yielded to the temptation of selling the timber before it was fully mature. So builders tried to minimize the amount of scaffolding. Rather than build it up from floor level, they saved timber by suspending it from the existing walls.

While he was thinking, Griselda came into the kitchen and took a cup of ale from the barrel. "Would you like some?" she said. Merthin accepted, amazed by her courtesy. She surprised him again by sitting on a stool opposite him to drink.

Griselda's paramour, Thurstan, had disappeared three weeks ago. No doubt she now felt lonely, which would be why she wanted Merthin's company. The drink warmed his stomach and relaxed him. Searching for something to say, he asked: "What happened to Thurstan?"

She tossed her head like a frisky mare. "I told him I didn't want to marry him."

"Why not?"

"He's too young for me."

That did not sound right to Merthin. Thurstan was seventeen, Griselda twenty, but Griselda was not notably mature. More likely, he thought, Thurstan was too low-class. He had arrived in Kingsbridge from nowhere a couple of years ago and had worked as an unskilled laborer for several of the town's craftsmen. He had probably got bored, with Griselda or with Kingsbridge, and simply moved on.

"Where did he go?"

"I don't know, and I don't care. I should marry someone my own age, someone with a sense of responsibility—perhaps a man who could take over my father's enterprise one day."

It occurred to Merthin that she might mean him. Surely not, he thought; she's always looked down on me. Then she got up from her stool and came and sat on the bench beside him.

"My father is spiteful to you," she said. "I've always thought that."

Merthin was astonished. "Well, it's taken you long enough to say so—I've been living here six and a half years."

“It’s hard for me to go against my family.”

“Why is he so vile to me, anyway?”

“Because you think you know better than him, and you can’t hide it.”

“Maybe I do know better.”

“See what I mean?”

He laughed. It was the first time she had ever made him laugh.

She shifted closer on the bench, so that her thigh in the woolen dress was pressed against his. He was in his worn linen shirt, which came to mid-thigh, with the undershorts that all men wore, but he could feel the warmth of her body through their clothes. What had brought this on? He looked incredulously at her. She had glossy dark hair and brown eyes. Her face was attractive in a fleshy way. She had a nice mouth for kissing.

She said: “I like being indoors in a rainstorm. It feels cozy.”

He felt himself becoming aroused, and looked away from her. What would Caris think, he asked himself, if she walked in here now? He tried to quell his desire, but that only made it worse.

He looked back at Griselda. Her lips were moist and slightly parted. She leaned toward him. He kissed her. Immediately, she thrust her tongue into his mouth. It was a sudden, shocking intimacy that he found thrilling, and he responded in the same way. This was not like kissing Caris—

That thought arrested him. He tore himself away from Griselda and stood up.

She said: “What’s the matter?”

He did not want to tell her the truth, so he said: “You never seemed to like me.”

She looked annoyed. “I’ve told you, I had to side with my father.”

“You’ve changed very suddenly.”

She stood up and moved toward him. He stepped away until his back was to the wall. She took his hand and pressed it to her bosom. Her breasts were round and heavy, and he could not resist the temptation to feel them. She said: “Have you ever done it—the real thing—with a girl?”

He found he could not speak, but he nodded.

“Have you thought about doing it with me?”

“Yes,” he managed.

“You can do it to me now, if you like, while they’re out. We can go upstairs and lie on my bed.”

“No.”

She pressed her body to his. “Kissing you has made me go all hot and slippery inside.”

He pushed her away. The shove was rougher than he intended, and she fell backward, landing on her well-cushioned bottom. “Leave me alone,” he said.

He was not sure he meant it, but she took him at his word. “Go to hell, then,” she swore. She got to her feet and stomped upstairs.

He stayed where he was, panting. Now that he had rejected her, he regretted it.

Apprentices were not very attractive to young women, who did not want to be forced to wait years before marrying. All the same, Merthin had courted several Kingsbridge girls. One, Kate Brown, had been sufficiently fond of him to let him go all the way, one warm summer afternoon a year ago, in her father’s orchard. Then her father had died suddenly, and her mother had taken the family to live in Portsmouth. It was the only time Merthin had lain with a woman. Was he mad to turn down Griselda’s offer?

He told himself he had had a lucky escape. Griselda was a mean-spirited girl who did not really like him. He should be proud of having resisted temptation. He had not followed his instinct like a dumb beast; he had made a decision, like a man.

Then Griselda started to cry.

Her weeping was not loud, but all the same he could hear everything. He went to the back door. Like every house in town, Elfric’s had a long, narrow strip of land at the back with a privy and a rubbish dump. Most householders kept chickens and a pig, and grew vegetables and fruits, but Elfric’s yard was used to store stacks of lumber and stones, coils of rope, buckets and barrows and ladders. Merthin stared at the rain falling on the yard, but Griselda’s sobbing still reached his ears.

He decided to leave the house, and got as far as the front door, but then he could not think where to go. At Caris’s house there was only Petranilla, who would not welcome him. He thought of going to his parents, but they were the last people he wanted to see when he was in this state. He could have talked to his brother, but Ralph was not due to arrive in Kingsbridge until later in the week. Besides, he realized, he could not leave the house without a coat—not because of the rain, he did not mind getting wet, but because of the bulge in front of his clothing that would not subside.

He tried to think of Caris. She would be sipping wine, he thought, and eating roast beef and wheat bread. He asked himself what she was wearing. Her best dress was a soft pinkish red with a square-cut neckline that showed off the pale skin of her slender neck. But Griselda’s crying kept intruding on his thoughts. He wanted to comfort her, to tell her he was sorry to make her feel spurned, and explain to her that she was an attractive person but they were not right for one another.

He sat down, then stood up again. It was hard to listen to a woman in distress. He could not think about scaffolding while that sound filled the house. Can’t stay, can’t leave, can’t sit still.

He went upstairs.

She was lying facedown on the straw-filled palliasse that was her bed. Her dress was rucked up around her chubby thighs. The skin on the back of her legs was very white and looked soft.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Go away."

"Don't cry."

"I hate you."

He knelt down and patted her back. "I can't sit in the kitchen and listen to you crying."

She rolled over and looked at him, her face wet with tears. "I'm ugly and fat, and you hate me."

"I don't hate you." He wiped her wet cheeks with the back of his hand.

She took his wrist and drew him to her. "Don't you? Truly?"

"No. But…"

She put her hand behind his head, pulled him down, and kissed him. He groaned, more aroused than ever. He lay beside her on the mattress. I will leave her in a moment, he told himself. I'll just comfort her a little more, then I'll get up and go down the stairs.

She took his hand and pushed it up her skirt, placing it between her legs. He felt the wiry hair, the soft skin beneath, and the moist divide, and he knew he was lost. He stroked her roughly, his finger slipping inside. He felt as if he would burst. "I can't stop," he said.

"Quickly," she said, panting. She pulled up his shirt and pushed down his drawers, and he rolled onto her.

He felt himself losing control as she guided him inside her. The remorse hit him before it was over. "Oh, no," he said. The explosion began with his first thrust, and in an instant it was finished. He slumped on top of her, his eyes closed. "Oh, God," he said. "I wish I was dead."

7

Buonaventura Caroli made his shocking announcement at breakfast on Monday, the day after the big banquet at the guildhall.

Caris felt a little unwell as she took her seat at the oak table in the dining hall of her father's house. She had a headache and a touch of nausea. She ate a small dish of warm bread-and-milk to settle her stomach. Recalling that she had enjoyed the wine at the banquet, she wondered whether she had drunk too much of it. Was this the morning-after feeling that men and boys joked about when they boasted how much strong drink they could take?

Father and Buonaventura were eating cold mutton, and Aunt Petranilla

was telling a story. “When I was fifteen, I was betrothed to a nephew of the earl of Shiring,” she said. “It was considered a good match: his father was a knight of the middling sort, and mine a wealthy wool merchant. Then the earl and his only son both died in Scotland, at the battle of Loudon Hill. My fiancé, Roland, became the earl—and broke off the engagement. He is still the earl today. If I had married Roland before the battle, I would now be the countess of Shiring.” She dipped toast in her ale.

“Perhaps it was not the will of God,” said Buonaventura. He threw a bone to Scrap, who pounced on it as if she had not seen food for a week. Then he said to Papa: “My friend, there is something I should tell you before we begin the day’s business.”

Caris felt, from his tone of voice, that he had bad news; and her father must have had the same intuition, for he said: “This sounds ominous.”

“Our trade has been shrinking for the last few years,” Buonaventura went on. “Each year my family sells a little less cloth, each year we buy a little less wool from England.”

“Business is always like that,” said Edmund. “It goes up, it goes down, no one knows why.”

“But now your king has interfered.”

It was true. Edward III had seen the money being made in wool and had decided that more of it must go to the crown. He had introduced a new tax of one pound per woolsack. A sack was standardized at 364 pounds weight and sold for about four pounds in money; so the extra tax was a quarter of the value of the wool, a huge slice.

Buonaventura went on: “What is worse, he has made it difficult to export wool from England. I have had to pay large bribes.”

“The ban on exports will be lifted shortly,” Edmund said. “The merchants of the Wool Company in London are negotiating with royal officials—”

“I hope you are right,” Buonaventura said. “But, with things as they are, my family feels I no longer need to visit two separate wool fairs in this part of the country.”

“Quite right!” said Edmund. “Come here, and forget about the Shiring fair.”

The town of Shiring was two days’ travel from Kingsbridge. It was about the same size, and while it did not have a cathedral or a priory, it boasted the sheriff’s castle and the county court. It held a rival wool fair once a year.

“I’m afraid I can’t find the range of wool here. You see, the Kingsbridge Fleece Fair seems to be declining. More and more sellers go to Shiring. Their fair offers a greater variety of types and qualities.”

Caris was dismayed. This could be disastrous for her father. She put in: “Why would sellers prefer Shiring?”

Buonaventura shrugged. “The guild merchant there has made the fair

attractive. There's no long queue to enter the city gate; the dealers can hire tents and booths; there's a wool exchange building where everyone can do business when it rains like this…"

"We could do all that," she said.

Her father snorted. "If only."

"Why not, Papa?"

"Shiring is an independent borough, with a royal charter. The merchant guild there has the power to organize things for the benefit of the wool merchants. Kingsbridge belongs to the priory—"

Petranilla put in: "For the glory of God."

"No doubt," Edmund said. "But our parish guild can't do anything without the priory's approval—and priors are cautious and conservative people, my brother being no exception. The upshot is that most improvement plans get rejected."

Buonaventura went on: "Because of my family's long association with you, Edmund, and your father before you, we have continued to come to Kingsbridge; but in hard times we can't afford to be sentimental."

"Then let me ask you a small favor, for the sake of that long association," Edmund said. "Don't make a final decision yet. Keep an open mind."

That was clever, Caris thought. She was struck—as she often was—by how shrewd her father could be in a negotiation. He did not argue that Buonaventura should reverse his decision, for that would just make him dig his heels in. The Italian was much more likely to agree not to make the decision final. That committed him to nothing, but left the door open.

Buonaventura found it hard to refuse. "All right, but to what end?"

"I want the chance to improve the fair, and especially that bridge," Edmund replied. "If we could offer better facilities here at Kingsbridge than they have at Shiring, and attract more sellers, you would continue to visit us, wouldn't you?"

"Of course."

"Then that's what we'll have to do." He stood up. "I'll go and see my brother now. Caris, come with me. We'll show him the queue at the bridge. No, wait, Caris, go and fetch your clever young builder, Merthin. We might need his expertise."

"He'll be working."

Petranilla said: "Just tell his master that the alderman of the parish guild wants the boy." Petranilla was proud that her brother was alderman, and mentioned it at every opportunity.

But she was right. Elfric would have to release Merthin. "I'll go and find him," Caris said.

She put on a cape with a hood and went out. It was still raining, though not as heavily as yesterday. Elfric, like most of the leading citizens, lived on

the main street that ran from the bridge up to the priory gates. The broad street was crowded with carts and people heading for the fair, splashing through puddles and streamlets of rain.

She was eager to see Merthin, as always. She had liked him ever since All Hallows Day ten years ago, when he had appeared at archery practice with his homemade bow. He was clever and funny. Like her, he knew that the world was a bigger and more fascinating place than most Kingsbridge citizens could conceive. But six months ago they had discovered something that was even more fun than being friends.

Caris had kissed boys before Merthin, though not often: she had never really seen the point. With him it was different, exciting and sexy. He had an impish streak that made everything he did seem mildly wicked. She liked it when he touched her body, too. She wanted to do more—but she tried not to think about that. “More” meant marriage, and a wife had to be subordinate to her husband, who was her master—and Caris hated that idea. Fortunately she was not forced to think about it yet, for Merthin could not marry until his apprenticeship was over, and that was half a year away.

She reached Elfric’s house and stepped inside. Her sister, Alice, was in the front room, at the table, with her stepdaughter, Griselda. They were eating bread with honey. Alice had changed in the three years since she had married Elfric. Her nature had always been harsh, like Petranilla’s, and under the influence of her husband she had become more suspicious, resentful, and ungenerous.

But she was pleasant enough today. “Sit down, sister,” she said. “The bread is fresh this morning.”

“I can’t, I’m looking for Merthin.”

Alice looked disapproving. “So early?”

“Father wants him.” Caris went through the kitchen to the back door and looked into the yard. Rain fell on a dismal landscape of builder’s junk. One of Elfric’s laborers was putting wet stones into a barrow. There was no sign of Merthin. She went back inside.

Alice said: “He’s probably at the cathedral. He’s been making a door.”

Caris recalled that Merthin had mentioned this. The door in the north porch had rotted, and Merthin was working on a replacement.

Griselda added: “He’s been carving virgins.” She grinned, then put more bread-and-honey into her mouth.

Caris knew this, too. The old door was decorated with carvings illustrating the story Jesus told on the Mount of Olives, about the wise and foolish virgins, and Merthin had to copy it. But there was something unpleasant about Griselda’s grin, Caris thought; almost as if she were laughing at Caris for being a virgin herself.

“I’ll try the cathedral,” Caris said, and with a perfunctory wave she left.

She climbed the main street and entered the cathedral close. As she threaded her way through the market stalls, it seemed to her that a dismal air hung over the fair. Was she imagining it, because of what Buonaventura had said? She thought not. When she recalled the fleece fairs of her childhood, it seemed to her that they had been busier and more crowded. In those days, the priory precincts had not been large enough to contain the fair, and the streets all around had been obstructed by unlicensed stalls—often just a small table covered with trinkets—plus hawkers with trays, jugglers, fortune-tellers, musicians, and itinerant friars calling sinners to redemption. Now it seemed to her there might have been room for a few more stalls within the precincts. “Buonaventura must be right,” she said to herself. “The fair is shrinking.” A trader gave her a strange look, and she realized she had spoken her thoughts out loud. It was a bad habit: people thought she was talking to spirits. She had taught herself not to do it, but she sometimes forgot, especially when she was anxious.

She walked around the great church to the north side.

Merthin was working in the porch, a roomy space where people often held meetings. He had the door standing upright in a stout wooden frame that held it still while he carved. Behind the new work, the old door was still in place in the archway, cracked and crumbling. Merthin stood with his back to her, so that the light fell over his shoulders onto the wood in front of him. He did not see her, and the sound of the rain drowned her footsteps, so she was able to study him for a few moments unnoticed.

He was a small man, not much taller than she. He had a large, intelligent head on a wiry body. His small hands moved deftly across the carving, shaving fine curls of wood with a sharp knife as he shaped the images. He had white skin and a lot of bushy red hair. “He’s not very handsome,” Alice had said, with a twist of her lip, when Caris admitted she had fallen in love with him. It was true that Merthin did not have the dashing good looks of his brother, Ralph, but Caris thought his face was quite marvelous: irregular and quirky and wise and full of laughter, just as he was.

“Hello,” she said, and he jumped. She laughed. “It’s not like you to be so easily spooked.”

“You startled me.” He hesitated, then kissed her. He seemed a little awkward, but that sometimes happened when he was concentrating on his work.

She looked at the carving. They were five virgins on each side of the door, the wise ones feasting at the wedding, and the foolish ones outside, holding their lamps upside down to show that they were empty of oil. Merthin had copied the design of the old door, but with subtle changes. The virgins stood in rows, five on one side and five on the other, like the arches in the cathedral; but, in the new door, they were not exactly alike. Merthin had given each girl

a sign of individuality. One was pretty, another had curly hair, one wept, another closed one eye in a mischievous wink. He had made them real, and the scene on the old door now looked stiff and lifeless by comparison. “It’s wonderful,” Caris said. “But I wonder what the monks will think.”

“Brother Thomas likes it,” Merthin replied.

“What about Prior Anthony?”

“He hasn’t seen it. But he’ll accept it. He won’t want to pay twice.”

That was true, Caris thought. Her uncle Anthony was unadventurous, but parsimonious, too. The mention of the prior reminded her of her errand. “My father wants you to meet him and the prior at the bridge.”

“Did he say why?”

“I think he’s going to ask Anthony to build a new bridge.”

Merthin put his tools into a leather satchel and quickly swept the floor, brushing sawdust and wood shavings out of the porch. Then he and Caris walked in the rain through the fair and down the main street to the wooden bridge. Caris told him what Buonaventura had said at the breakfast table. Merthin felt, as she did, that recent fairs had not been as bustling as those he remembered from childhood.

Despite that, there was a long queue of people and carts waiting to get into Kingsbridge. At the near end of the bridge was a small gatehouse where a monk sat taking a fee of one penny from every trader who entered the city with goods for sale. The bridge was narrow, so it was not possible for anyone to jump the queue, and in consequence people who did not need to pay—residents of the town, mainly—also had to stand in line. In addition, some of the boards that formed the surface were twisted and broken, so carts had to move slowly as they crossed. The result was that the queue stretched away along the road between the suburban hovels and disappeared into the rain.

The bridge was also too short. Once, no doubt, both its ends had given on to dry land. But either the river had widened or, more likely, the passage of carts and people over decades and centuries had flattened the banks, so that now people had to wade across muddy beaches on both sides.

Caris saw that Merthin was studying its structure. She knew that look in his eyes: he was thinking about how it stayed upright. She often caught him staring at something in that way, usually in the cathedral, but sometimes in front of a house or even something natural, a thorn tree in blossom or a sparrow hawk hovering. He became very still, his gaze bright and sharp, as if he were shining a light into a murky place, trying to make out what was there. If she asked him, he told her he was trying to see the insides of things.

She followed his gaze and strained to imagine what he perceived in the old bridge. It was sixty yards from end to end, the longest bridge she had ever seen. The roadbed was supported by massive oak piers in two rows, like the pillars that marched either side of the nave of the cathedral. There were five

pairs of piers. The end ones, where the water was shallow, were quite short, but the three central pairs stood fifteen feet above the waterline.

Each pier consisted of four oak beams in a cluster, held together by plank braces. Legend said that the king had given Kingsbridge Priory the twenty-four best oak trees in England to build the three central pairs of piers. The tops were linked by beams in two parallel lines. Shorter beams crossed from one line to the other, forming the roadbed; and longitudinal planks had been laid on top to form the road surface. On each side was a wooden railing that served as a flimsy parapet. Every couple of years a drunk peasant would drive a cart through the rail and kill himself and his horse in the river.

"What are you looking at?" Caris asked Merthin.

"The cracks."

"I don't see any."

"The timbers on either side of the central pier are splitting. You can see where Elfric has reinforced them with iron braces."

Now that he pointed them out, Caris could see the flat metal strips nailed across the cracks. "You look worried," she said to him.

"I don't know why the timbers cracked in the first place."

"Does it matter?"

"Of course it does."

He was not very talkative this morning. She was about to ask him why, when he said: "Here comes your father."

She looked along the street. The two brothers made an odd pair. Tall Anthony fastidiously held up the skirts of his monkish robe and stepped gingerly around the puddles, wearing an expression of distaste on his pale indoor face. Edmund, more vigorous despite being the elder, had a red face and a long, untidy gray beard, and he walked carelessly, dragging his withered leg through the mud, speaking argumentatively and gesturing extravagantly with both arms. When Caris saw her father at a distance, the way a stranger might see him, she always felt a surge of love.

The dispute was in full swing when they got to the bridge, and they continued without pause. "Look at that queue!" Edmund shouted. "Hundreds of people *not* trading at the fair because they haven't got there yet! And you can be sure half of them will meet a buyer or seller while waiting, and conduct their business right then and there, then go home without even entering the city!"

"That's forestalling, and it's against the law," said Anthony.

"You could go and tell them that, if you could get across the bridge, but you can't, because it's too narrow! Listen, Anthony. If the Italians pull out, the Fleece Fair will never be the same again. Your prosperity and mine are based on the fair—we must not just let it go!"

"We can't force Buonaventura to do business here."

“But we can make our fair more attractive than Shiring’s. We need to announce a big, symbolic project, right now, this week, something to convince them all that the Fleece Fair isn’t finished. We have to tell them we’re going to tear down this old bridge and build a new one, twice as wide.” Without warning, he turned to Merthin. “How long would it take, young lad?”

Merthin looked startled, but he answered. “Finding the trees would be the hard part. You need very long timbers, well seasoned. Then the piers have to be driven into the river bed—that’s tricky, because you’re working in running water. After that it’s just carpentry. You could finish it by Christmas.”

Anthony said: “There’s no certainty the Caroli family will change its plans if we build a new bridge.”

“They will,” Edmund said forcefully. “I guarantee it.”

“Anyway, I can’t afford to build a bridge. I don’t have the money.”

“You can’t afford *not* to build a bridge,” Edmund shouted. “You’ll ruin yourself as well as the town.”

“It’s out of the question. I don’t even know where I’m going to get the money for the repairs in the south aisle.”

“So what will you do?”

“Trust in God.”

“Those who trust in God and sow a seed may reap a harvest. But you’re not sowing the seed.”

Anthony got irritated. “I know this is difficult for you to understand, Edmund, but Kingsbridge Priory is not a commercial enterprise. We’re here to worship God, not to make money.”

“You won’t worship God for long if you’ve nothing to eat.”

“God will provide.”

Edmund’s red face flushed with anger, turning an purplish color. “When you were a boy, our father’s business fed you and clothed you and paid for your education. Since you’ve been a monk, the citizens of this town and the peasants of the surrounding countryside have kept you alive by paying you rents, tithes, charges for market stalls, bridge tolls, and a dozen other different fees. All your life you’ve lived like a flea on the backs of hardworking people. And now you have the nerve to tell us that God provides.”

“That’s perilously close to blasphemy.”

“Don’t forget that I’ve known you since you were born, Anthony. You always had a talent for avoiding work.” Edmund’s voice, so often raised in a shout, now dropped—a sign, Caris knew, that he was really furious. “When it was time to empty out the privy, you went off to bed, so that you would be rested for school the next day. Father’s gift to God, you always had the best of everything, and never lifted your hand to earn it. Strengthening food, the warmest bedroom, the best clothes—I was the only boy who wore his younger brother’s cast-off outfits!”

“And you never let me forget it.”

Caris had been waiting for the opportunity to halt the flow, and now she took it. “There ought to be a way around this.”

They both looked at her, surprised to be interrupted.

She went on: “For example, couldn’t the townspeople build a bridge?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” said Anthony. “The town belongs to the priory. A servant doesn’t furnish his master’s house.”

“But if your permission was sought, you would have no reason to refuse it.”

Anthony did not immediately contradict that, which was encouraging; but Edmund was shaking his head. “I don’t think I could persuade them to put up the money,” he said. “It would be in their interests, long term, of course; but people are very reluctant to think in the long term when being asked to part with their money.”

“Ha!” said Anthony. “Yet you expect me to think long term.”

“You deal with eternal life, don’t you?” Edmund shot back. “You of all people ought to be able to see beyond the end of next week. Besides, you get a penny toll from everyone who crosses the bridge. You’d get your money back *and* you’d benefit from the improvement in business.”

Caris said: “But Uncle Anthony is a spiritual leader, and he feels it’s not his role.”

“But he owns the town!” Papa protested. “He’s the only one who can do it!” Then he gave her an inquiring look, realizing that she would not have contradicted him without a reason. “What are you thinking?”

“Suppose the townspeople built a bridge, and were repaid out of the penny tolls?”

Edmund opened his mouth to express an objection, but could not think of one.

Caris looked at Anthony.

Anthony said: “When the priory was new, its only income came from that bridge. I can’t give it away.”

“But think what you would gain, if the Fleece Fair and the weekly market began to return to their former size: not just the bridge tolls, but stallholders’ fees, the percentage you take of all transactions at the fair, and gifts to the cathedral, too!”

Edmund added: “And the profits on your own sales: wool, grain, hides, books, statues of the saints—”

Anthony said: “You planned this, didn’t you?” He pointed an accusing finger at his older brother. “You told your daughter what to say, and the lad. He would never think up a scheme like this, and she’s just a woman. It has your mark on it. This is all a plot to cheat me of my bridge tolls. Well, it’s failed. Praise God, I’m not that stupid!” He turned away and splashed off

through the mud.

Edmund said: “I don’t know how my father ever sired someone with so little sense.” And he, too, stomped off.

Caris turned to Merthin. “Well,” she said, “what did you think of all that?”

“I don’t know.” He looked away, avoiding her eye. “I’d better get back to work.” He went without kissing her.

“Well!” she said when he was out of earshot. “What on earth has got into him?”

8

The earl of Shiring came to Kingsbridge on the Tuesday of Fleece Fair week. He brought with him both his sons, various other family members, and an entourage of knights and squires. The bridge was cleared by his advance men, and no one was permitted to cross for an hour before his arrival, lest he should suffer the indignity of being made to wait alongside the common people. His followers wore his red-and-black livery, and they all splashed into town with banners flying, their horses’ hooves spattering the citizens with rainwater and mud. Earl Roland had prospered in the last ten years—under Queen Isabella and, later, her son Edward III—and he wanted the world to know it, as rich and powerful men generally did.

In his company was Ralph, son of Sir Gerald and brother of Merthin. At the same time as Merthin had been apprenticed to Elfric’s father, Ralph had become a squire in the household of Earl Roland, and he had been happy ever since. He had been well fed and clothed, he had learned to ride and fight, and he had spent most of his time hunting and playing sports and games. In six and a half years no one had asked him to read or write a word. As he rode behind the earl through the huddled stalls of the Fleece Fair, watched by faces both envious and fearful, he pitied the merchants and tradesmen grubbing for pennies in the mud.

The earl dismounted at the prior’s house, on the north side of the cathedral. His younger son, Richard, did the same. Richard was bishop of Kingsbridge and the cathedral was, theoretically, his church. However, the bishop’s palace was in the county town of Shiring, two days’ journey away. This suited the bishop, whose duties were political as much as religious; and it suited the monks, who preferred not to be too closely supervised.

Richard was only twenty-eight, but his father was a close ally of the king, and that counted for more than seniority.

The rest of the entourage rode to the south end of the cathedral close. The

earl's elder son, William, lord of Caster, told the squires to stable the horses while half a dozen knights settled in to the hospital. Ralph moved quickly to help William's wife, Lady Philippa, get down from her horse. She was a tall, attractive woman with long legs and deep breasts, and Ralph nurtured a hopeless love for her.

When the horses were settled, Ralph went to visit his mother and father. They lived rent-free in a small house in the southwest quarter of the town, by the river, in a neighborhood made malodorous by the work of leather tanners. As he approached the house, Ralph felt himself shriveling with shame inside his red-and-black uniform. He was grateful that Lady Philippa could not see the indignity of his parents' situation.

He had not seen them for a year, and they seemed older. There was a lot of gray in his mother's hair, and his father was losing his eyesight. They gave him cider made by the monks and wild strawberries Mother had gathered in the woods. Father admired his livery. "Has the earl made you a knight yet?" he asked eagerly.

It was the ambition of every squire to become a knight, but Ralph felt it more keenly than most. His father had never got over the humiliation, ten years ago, of being degraded to the position of pensioner of the priory. An arrow had pierced Ralph's heart that day. The pain would not be eased until he had restored the family honor. But not all squires became knights. Nevertheless, Father always talked as if it were only a matter of time for Ralph.

"Not yet," Ralph said. "But we're likely to go to war with France before long, and that will be my chance." He spoke lightly, not wishing to show how badly he yearned for the chance to distinguish himself in battle.

Mother was disgusted. "Why do kings always want war?"

Father laughed. "It's what men were made for."

"No, it's not," she said sharply. "When I gave birth to Ralph in pain and suffering, I didn't intend that he should live to have his head cut off by a Frenchman's sword or his heart pierced by a bolt from a crossbow."

Father flapped a hand at her in a dismissive gesture and said to Ralph: "What makes you say there will be war?"

"King Philip of France has confiscated Gascony."

"Ah. We can't have that."

English kings had ruled the western French province of Gascony for generations. They had given trade privileges to the merchants of Bordeaux and Bayonne, who did more business with London than with Paris. Still, there was always trouble.

Ralph said: "King Edward has sent ambassadors to Flanders to form alliances."

"Allies may want money."

“That’s why Earl Roland has come to Kingsbridge. The king wants a loan from the wool merchants.”

“How much?”

“The talk is of two hundred thousands pounds, nationwide, as an advance against the wool tax.”

Mother said bleakly: “The king should take care not to tax the wool merchants to death.”

Father said: “The merchants have plenty of money—just look at their fine clothes.” There was bitterness in his tone, and Ralph observed that he had on a worn linen undershirt and old shoes. “Anyway, they want us to stop the French navy interfering with their trade.” Over the last year, French ships had raided towns on the south coast of England, sacking the ports and setting fire to ships in the harbors.

“The French attack us, so we attack the French,” said Mother. “What is the sense of it?”

“Women will never understand,” Father replied.

“That’s the truth,” she said crisply.

Ralph changed the subject. “How is my brother?”

“He’s a fine craftsman,” said his father, and he sounded, Ralph thought, like a horse salesman saying that an undersize pony was a good mount for a woman.

Mother said: “He’s smitten with Edmund Wooler’s daughter.”

“Caris?” Ralph smiled. “He always liked her. We played together as children. She was a bossy little minx, but Merthin never seemed to mind. Will he marry her?”

“I expect so,” Mother said. “When he finishes his apprenticeship.”

“He’ll have his hands full.” Ralph got up. “Where do you think he is now?”

“He’s working in the north porch of the cathedral,” Father said. “But he might be having his dinner.”

“I’ll find him.” Ralph kissed them both and went out.

He returned to the priory and wandered through the fair. The rain had stopped and the sun was shining fitfully, glinting in the puddles and raising steam off the stallholders’ wet covers. He saw a familiar profile, and the regular footsteps of his heart faltered. It was the straight nose and strong jaw of Lady Philippa. She was older than Ralph, about twenty-five, he guessed. She was standing at a stall, looking at bolts of silk from Italy, and he drank in the way her light summer dress draped itself lasciviously over the curves of her hips. He made her an unnecessarily elaborate bow.

She glanced up and gave a perfunctory nod.

“Beautiful materials,” he said, trying to open a conversation.

“Yes.”

At that moment, a diminutive figure with untidy carrot-colored hair approached: Merthin. Ralph was delighted to see him. “This is my clever older brother,” he said to Philippa.

Merthin said to Philippa: “Buy the pale green—it matches your eyes.”

Ralph winced. Merthin should not have addressed her in such a familiar way.

However, she did not seem to mind too much. She spoke in a tone of mild reproof, saying: “When I want a boy’s opinion, I’ll ask my son,” but as she said it she gave him a smile that was almost flirtatious.

Ralph said: “This is the Lady Philippa, you fool! I apologize for my brother’s cheek, my lady.”

“What’s his name, anyway?”

“I’m Merthin Fitzgerald, at your service anytime you find yourself hesitating over silks.”

Ralph took his arm and led him away before he could say anything else indiscreet. “I don’t know how you do it!” he said, with exasperation and admiration equally mixed. “It matches her eyes, does it? If I said something like that, she’d have me flogged.” He was exaggerating, but it was true that Philippa usually responded sharply to insolence. He did not know whether to be amused or angry that she had been indulgent to Merthin.

“That’s me,” Merthin said. “Every woman’s dream.”

Ralph detected bitterness in his tone. “Is anything wrong?” he said. “How’s Caris?”

“I’ve done something stupid,” Merthin replied. “I’ll tell you later. Let’s look around while the sun’s out.”

Ralph noticed a stall where a monk with ash blond hair was selling cheese. “Watch this,” he said to Merthin. He approached the stall and said: “This looks tasty, brother—where does it come from?”

“We make it at St.-John-in-the-Forest. It’s a small cell, or branch, of Kingsbridge Priory. I’m the prior there—my name is Saul Whitehead.”

“It makes me hungry to look at it. I wish I could buy some—but the earl keeps us squires penniless.”

The monk cut a slice off the wheel of cheese and gave it to Ralph. “Then you shall have some for nothing, in the name of Jesus,” he said.

“Thank you, Brother Saul.”

As they walked away, Ralph grinned at Merthin and said: “See? As easy as taking an apple from a child.”

“And about as admirable,” Merthin said.

“But what a fool, to give his cheese away to anyone with a sob story!”

“He probably thinks it’s better to risk being made a fool of than to deny food to a starving man.”

“You’re a bit sour today. How come you’re allowed to cheek a

noblewoman, but I can't talk a stupid monk into giving me free cheese?"

Merthin surprised him with a grin. "Just like when we were boys, eh?"

"Exactly!" Now Ralph did not know whether to be angry or amused. Before he could make up his mind, a pretty girl approached him with eggs on a tray. She was slim, with a small bust under a homespun dress, and he imagined her breasts to be pale and round like the eggs. He smiled at her: "How much?" he said, though he had no need of eggs.

"A penny for twelve."

"Are they good?"

She pointed at a nearby stall. "They're from these hens."

"And have the hens been well serviced by a healthy rooster?" Ralph saw Merthin roll up his eyes in mock despair at this sally.

However, the girl played along. "Yes, sir," she said with a smile.

"Lucky hens, eh?"

"I don't know."

"Of course not. A maid understands little of these things." Ralph scrutinized her. She had fair hair and a turned-up nose. She was about eighteen, he guessed.

She batted her eyelids and said: "Don't stare at me, please."

From behind the stall a peasant—no doubt the girl's father—called: "Annet! Come here."

"So your name is Annet," Ralph said.

She ignored the summons.

Ralph said: "Who is your father?"

"Perkin from Wigleigh."

"Really? My friend Stephen is lord of Wigleigh. Is Stephen good to you?"

"Lord Stephen is just and merciful," she said dutifully.

Her father called again. "Annet! You're wanted here."

Ralph knew why Perkin was trying to get her away. He would not mind if a squire wanted to marry his daughter: that would be a step up the social ladder for her. But he feared that Ralph wanted to dally with her then discard her. And he was right.

"Don't go, Annet Wigleigh," Ralph said.

"Not until you've bought what I'm offering."

Beside them, Merthin groaned: "One is as bad as the other."

Ralph said: "Why don't you put down the eggs and come with me. We could stroll along the riverbank." Between the river and the wall of the priory grounds there was a wide bank, covered at this time of year with wildflowers and bushes, where courting couples traditionally went.

But Annet was not that easy. "My father would be displeased," she said.

"Let's not worry about him." There was not much a peasant could do to oppose the will of a squire, especially when the squire was wearing the livery

of a great earl. It was an insult to the earl to lay hands on one of his servants. The peasant might try to dissuade his daughter, but it would be risky for him to restrain her forcibly.

However, someone else came to Perkin's aid. A youthful voice said: "Hello, Annet, is all well?"

Ralph turned to the newcomer. He looked about sixteen, but he was almost as tall as Ralph, with broad shoulders and big hands. He was strikingly handsome, with regular features that might have been carved by a cathedral sculptor. He had thick, tawny hair and the beginnings of a beard the same color.

Ralph said: "Who the hell are you?"

"I'm Wulfric from Wigleigh, sir." Wulfric was deferential, but not afraid. He turned back to Annet and said: "I've come to help you sell some eggs."

The boy's muscular shoulder came between Ralph and Annet, his stance protecting the girl and at the same time excluding Ralph. It was mildly insolent, and Ralph felt a stirring of anger. "Get out of the way, Wulfric Wigleigh," he said. "You're not wanted here."

Wulfric turned again and gave him a level look. "I'm betrothed to this woman, sir," he said. Once again, the tone was respectful but the attitude fearless.

Perkin spoke up. "That's true, sir—they are to be married."

"Don't talk to me about your peasant customs," Ralph said contemptuously. "I don't care if she's married to the oaf." It angered him to be spoken to this way by his inferiors. It was not their place to tell him what to do.

Merthin butted in. "Let's go, Ralph," he said. "I'm hungry, and Betty Baxter is selling hot pies."

"Pies?" Ralph said. "I'm more interested in eggs." He picked up one of the eggs on her tray and fondled it suggestively, then he put it down and touched her left breast. It was firm to his fingertips, and egg-shaped.

"What do you think you're doing?" She sounded indignant, but she did not move away.

He squeezed gently, enjoying the sensation. "Examining the goods on offer."

"Take your hands off me."

"In a minute."

Then Wulfric shoved him violently.

Ralph was taken by surprise. He had not expected to be attacked by a peasant. He staggered back, stumbled, and fell to the ground with a thump. He heard someone laugh, and amazement gave way to humiliation. He sprang to his feet, enraged.

He was not wearing his sword, but he had a long dagger at his belt.

However, it would be undignified to use weapons on an unarmed peasant: he could lose the respect of the earl's knights and the other squires. He would have to punish Wulfric with his fists.

Perkin stepped from behind his stall, speaking rapidly. "A clumsy mistake, sir, not intended, the lad is deeply sorry, I assure you—"

However, his daughter seemed unafraid. "Boys, boys!" she said in a tone of mock reprimand, but she seemed more pleased than anything else.

Ralph ignored them both. He took one step toward Wulfric and raised his right fist. Then, when Wulfric lifted both arms to defend his face from the blow, Ralph drove his left fist into the boy's belly.

It was not as soft as he had expected. All the same, Wulfric bent forward, his face twisted in agony, both hands going to his midriff; whereupon Ralph hit him full in the face with his right fist, catching him high on the cheekbone. The punch hurt his hand but brought joy to his soul.

To his astonishment, Wulfric hit him back.

Instead of crumpling to the floor and lying there waiting to be kicked, the peasant boy came back with a right-handed punch that had all the strength of his shoulders behind it. Ralph's nose seemed to explode in blood and pain. He roared with anger.

Wulfric stepped back, seeming to realize what a terrible thing he had done, and he dropped both arms, holding his palms upward.

But it was too late to be sorry. Ralph hit him with both fists on the face and body, a storm of blows that Wulfric feebly tried to ward off by holding up his arms and ducking his head. As he punched him, Ralph wondered vaguely why the boy did not run away, and guessed he was hoping to take his punishment now rather than face worse later. He had guts, Ralph realized; but that made him even angrier. He hit him harder, again and again, and he was filled with an emotion that was both rage and ecstasy. Merthin tried to intervene. "For the love of Christ, enough," he said, putting a hand on Ralph's shoulder; but Ralph shook him off.

At last Wulfric's hands fell to his sides and he staggered, dazed, his handsome face covered in blood, his eyes closing; then he fell down. Ralph started to kick him. Then a burly man in leather trousers appeared and spoke with a voice of authority: "Now, then, young Ralph, don't murder the boy."

Ralph recognized John, the town constable, and said indignantly: "He attacked me!"

"Well, he's not attacking you anymore, is he, sir? Lying on the ground like that with his eyes shut." John put himself in front of Ralph. "I'd rather do without the trouble of a coroner's inquiry."

People crowded around Wulfric: Perkin; Annet, who was flushed with excitement; the Lady Philippa; and several bystanders.

The ecstatic feeling left Ralph, and his nose hurt like hell. He could

breathe only through his mouth. He tasted blood. “That animal punched my nose,” he said, and he sounded like a man with a heavy cold.

“Then he shall be punished,” said John.

Two men who looked like Wulfric appeared: his father and his elder brother, Ralph guessed. They helped Wulfric to his feet, shooting angry glances at Ralph.

Perkin spoke up. He was a fat man with a sly face. “The squire threw the first punch,” he said.

Ralph said: “The peasant deliberately shoved me!”

“The squire insulted Wulfric’s wife-to-be.”

The constable said: “No matter what the squire may have said, Wulfric should know better than to lay hands on a servant of Earl Roland’s. I should think the earl will expect him to be severely dealt with.”

Wulfric’s father spoke up. “Is there a new law, John Constable, that says a man in livery may do what he likes?”

There was a mutter of agreement from the small crowd now gathered. Young squires caused a lot of trouble, and often escaped punishment because they were wearing the colors of some baron; and this was deeply resented by law-abiding tradesmen and peasants.

Lady Philippa intervened. “I’m the earl’s daughter-in-law, and I saw the whole thing,” she said. Her voice was low and melodious, but she spoke with the authority of high rank. Ralph expected her to take his side, but to his dismay she went on: “I’m sorry to say that this was entirely Ralph’s fault. He fondled the girl’s body in a most outrageous way.”

“Thank you, my lady,” John Constable said deferentially. He lowered his voice to confer with her. “But I think the earl might not want the peasant lad to go unpunished.”

She nodded thoughtfully. “We don’t want this to be the start of a lengthy dispute. Put the boy in the stocks for twenty-four hours. It won’t do him much harm, at his age, but everyone will know that justice has been done. That will satisfy the earl—I’ll answer for him.”

John hesitated. Ralph could see that the constable did not like taking orders from anyone but his master, the prior of Kingsbridge. However, Philippa’s decision would surely satisfy all parties. Ralph himself would have liked to see Wulfric flogged, but he was beginning to suspect that he did not come out of this as a hero, and he would look worse if he demanded a harsh punishment. After a moment John said: “Very well, Lady Philippa, if you’re willing to take responsibility.”

“I am.”

“Right.” John took Wulfric by the arm and led him away. The lad had recovered fast, and was able to walk normally. His family followed. Perhaps they would bring him food and drink while he was in the stocks, and make

sure he was not pelted.

Merthin said to Ralph: “How are you?”

Ralph felt as if the middle of his face were swelling like an inflated bladder. His vision was blurred, his speech was a nasal honk, and he was in pain. “I’m fine,” he said. “Never better.”

“Let’s get a monk to look at your nose.”

“No.” Ralph was not afraid of fights, but he hated the things physicians did: bleeding and cupping and lancing boils. “All I need is a bottle of strong wine. Take me to the nearest tavern.”

“All right,” Merthin said, but he did not move. He was giving Ralph a queer look.

Ralph said: “What’s the matter with you?” “You don’t change, do you?”

Ralph shrugged. “Does anyone?”

9

Godwyn was completely fascinated by *Timothy’s Book*. It was a history of Kingsbridge Priory and, like most such histories, it began with the creation by God of Heaven and Earth. But mostly it recounted the era of Prior Philip, two centuries ago, when the cathedral was built—a time now regarded by the monks as a golden age. The author, Brother Timothy, claimed that the legendary Philip had been a stern disciplinarian as well as a man of compassion. Godwyn was not sure how you could be both.

On the Wednesday of Fleece Fair week, in the study hour before the service of Sext, Godwyn sat on a high stool in the monastery library, the book open on a lectern before him. This was his favorite place in the priory: a spacious room, well lit by high windows, with almost a hundred books in a locked cupboard. It was normally hushed, but today he could hear, from the far side of the cathedral, the muffled roar of the fair—a thousand people buying and selling, haggling and quarreling, calling their wares and shouting encouragement at cockfighting and bear-baiting.

At the back of the book, later authors had tracked the descendants of the cathedral builders down to the present day. Godwyn was pleased—and frankly surprised—to find confirmation of his mother’s theory that she was descended from Tom Builder through Tom’s daughter Martha. He wondered what family traits might have come down from Tom. A mason needed to be a shrewd businessman, he supposed, and Godwyn’s grandfather and his uncle Edmund had that quality. His cousin Caris also showed signs of the same flair. Perhaps Tom had also had the green eyes flecked with yellow that they all shared.

Godwyn also read about Tom Builder's stepson, Jack, the architect of Kingsbridge Cathedral, who had married the Lady Aliena and fathered a dynasty of earls of Shiring. He was the ancestor of Caris's sweetheart, Merthin Fitzgerald. That made sense: young Merthin was already showing unparalleled ability as a carpenter. *Timothy's Book* even mentioned Jack's red hair, which had been inherited by Sir Gerald and Merthin, though not Ralph.

What interested him most was the book's chapter on women. It seemed there had been no nuns at Kingsbridge in Prior Philip's day. Women had been strictly forbidden to enter the monastery buildings. The author, quoting Philip, said that if possible a monk should never look at a female, for his own peace of mind. Philip disapproved of combined monastery-nunneries, saying the advantages of shared facilities were outweighed by the opportunities for the devil to introduce temptation. Where there was a double house, the separation of monks and nuns should be as rigid as possible, he added.

Godwyn felt the thrill of finding authoritative support for a preexisting conviction. At Oxford he had enjoyed the all-male environment of Kingsbridge College. The university teachers were men, as were the students, without exception. He had hardly spoken to a female for seven years and, if he kept his eyes on the ground as he walked through the city, he could even avoid looking at them. On his return to the priory, he had found it disturbing to see nuns so frequently. Although they had their own cloisters, refectory, kitchen, and other buildings, he met them constantly in the church, the hospital, and other communal areas. At this moment there was a pretty young nun called Mair just a few feet away, consulting an illustrated book on medicinal herbs. It was even worse to encounter girls from the town, with their close-fitting clothes and alluring hairstyles, casually walking through the priory grounds on everyday errands, bringing supplies to the kitchen or visiting the hospital.

Clearly, he thought, the priory had fallen from Philip's high standards—another example of the slackness that had crept in under the rule of Anthony, Godwyn's uncle. But perhaps there was something he could do about this.

The bell rang for Sext, and he closed the book. Sister Mair did the same, and smiled at him, her red lips forming a sweet curve as she did so. He looked away and hurried out of the room.

The weather was improving, the sun shining fitfully between showers of rain. In the church, the stained-glass windows brightened and faded as patchy clouds blew across the sky. Godwyn's mind was equally restless, distracted from his prayers by thoughts of how he could best use *Timothy's Book* to inspire a revival in the priory. He decided he would raise the subject at chapter, the daily meeting of all the monks.

The builders were getting on quickly with the repairs to the chancel after last Sunday's collapse, he noted. The rubble had been cleared away and the

area had been roped off. There was a growing stack of thin, lightweight stones in the transept. The men did not stop work when the monks began to sing—there were so many services during the course of a normal day that the repairs would have been severely delayed. Merthin Fitzgerald, who had temporarily abandoned his work on the new door, was in the south aisle, constructing an elaborate spiderweb of ropes, branches, and hurdles on which the masons would stand as they rebuilt the vaulted ceiling. Thomas Langley, whose job it was to supervise the builders, was standing in the south transept with Elfric, pointing with his one arm at the collapsed vault, obviously discussing Merthin's work.

Thomas was effective as matricularius: he was decisive, and he never let things slip. Any morning the builders failed to show up—a frequent irritation—Thomas would go and find them and demand to know why. If he had a fault, it was that he was too independent: he rarely reported progress or asked Godwyn's opinion, but got on with the work as if he were his own master rather than Godwyn's subordinate. Godwyn had an annoying suspicion that Thomas doubted his ability. Godwyn was younger, but only slightly: he was thirty-one, Thomas thirty-four. Perhaps Thomas thought that Godwyn had been promoted by Anthony under pressure from Petranilla. However, he showed no other sign of resentment. He just did things his own way.

As Godwyn watched, murmuring the responses of the service automatically, Thomas's conversation with Elfric was interrupted. Lord William of Caster came striding into the church. He was a tall, black-bearded figure very like his father, and equally harsh, though people said he was sometimes softened by his wife, Philippa. He approached Thomas and waved Elfric away. Thomas turned to William, and something in his stance reminded Godwyn that Thomas had once been a knight, and had first arrived at the priory bleeding from the sword wound that had eventually necessitated the amputation of his left arm at the elbow.

Godwyn wished he could hear what Lord William was saying. William was leaning forward, speaking aggressively, pointing a finger. Thomas, unafraid, answered with equal vigor. Godwyn suddenly remembered Thomas having just such an intense, combative conversation ten years ago, on the day he arrived here. On that occasion, he had been arguing with William's younger brother, Richard—then a priest, now the bishop of Kingsbridge. Perhaps it was fanciful, but Godwyn imagined they were quarreling about the same thing today. What could it be? Could there really be an issue between a monk and a noble family that was still a cause of anger after ten years?

Lord William stamped off, evidently unsatisfied, and Thomas turned back to Elfric.

The argument ten years ago had resulted in Thomas's joining the priory. Godwyn recalled that Richard had promised a donation to secure Thomas's admittance. Godwyn had never heard any more about that donation. He wondered if it had ever been paid.

In all that time, no one at the priory seemed to have learned much about Thomas's former life. That was curious: monks gossiped constantly. Living closely together in a small group—there were twenty-six at present—they tended to know almost everything about one another. What lord had Thomas served? Where had he lived? Most knights ruled over a few villages, receiving rents that enabled them to pay for horses, armor, and weapons. Had Thomas had a wife and children? If so, what had become of them? No one knew.

Apart from the mystery of his background, Thomas was a good monk, devout and hardworking. It seemed as if this existence suited him better than his life as a knight. Despite his former career of violence, there was something of the woman about him, as there was about many monks. He was very close to Brother Matthias, a sweet-natured man a few years younger than he. But, if they were committing sins of impurity, they were very discreet about it, for no accusation had ever been made.

Toward the end of the service Godwyn glanced into the deep gloom of the nave and saw his mother, Petranilla, standing as still as one of the pillars, a shaft of sunlight illuminating her proud gray head. She was alone. He wondered how long she had been there, watching. Laypeople were not encouraged to attend the weekday services, and Godwyn guessed she was here to see him. He felt the familiar mixture of pleasure and apprehension. She would do anything for him, he knew. She had sold her house and become her brother Edmund's housekeeper just so that he could study at Oxford; and when he thought of the sacrifice that entailed for his proud mother, he wanted to weep with gratitude. Yet her presence always made him anxious, as if he were going to be reprimanded for some transgression.

As the monks and nuns filed out, Godwyn peeled off from the procession and approached her. "Good morning, Mama."

She kissed his forehead. "You look thin," she said with maternal anxiety. "Aren't you getting enough to eat?"

"Salt fish and porridge, but there's plenty of it," he said.

"What are you so excited about?" She could always read his mood.

He told her about *Timothy's Book*. "I could read the passage during chapter," he said.

"Would others support you?"

"Theodoric and the younger monks would. A lot of them find it disturbing

to see women all the time. After all, they have all chosen to live in an all-male community.”

She nodded approvingly. “This casts you in the role of leader. Excellent.”

“Besides, they like me because of the hot stones.”

“Hot stones?”

“I introduced a new rule in the winter. On frosty nights, when we go into church for Matins, each monk is given a hot stone wrapped in a rag. It prevents them getting chilblains in their feet.”

“Very clever. All the same, check your support before you make your move.”

“Of course. But it fits in with what the masters teach at Oxford.”

“Which is?”

“Mankind is fallible, so we should not rely on our own reasoning. We cannot hope to understand the world—all we can do is stand amazed at God’s creation. True knowledge comes only from revelation. We should not question received wisdom.”

Mother looked skeptical, as laypeople often did when educated men tried to explain high philosophy. “And this is what bishops and cardinals believe?”

“Yes. The University of Paris has actually banned the works of Aristotle and Aquinas because they are based on rationality rather than faith.”

“Will this way of thinking help you find favor with your superiors?”

That was all she really cared about. She wanted her son to be prior, bishop, archbishop, even cardinal. He wanted the same, but he hoped he was not as cynical as she. “I’m sure of it,” he replied.

“Good. But that’s not why I came to see you. Your uncle Edmund has suffered a blow. The Italians are threatening to take their custom to Shiring.”

Godwyn was shocked. “That will ruin his business.” But he was not sure why she had made a special visit to tell him.

“Edmund thinks he can win them back if we improve the Fleece Fair, and in particular if we tear down the old bridge and build a new, wider one.”

“Let me guess: Uncle Anthony refused.”

“But Edmund has not given up.”

“You want me to talk to Anthony?”

She shook her head. “You can’t persuade him. But, if the subject comes up in chapter, you should support the proposal.”

“And go against Uncle Anthony?”

“Whenever a sensible proposal is opposed by the old guard, you must be identified as leader of the reformers.”

Godwyn smiled admiringly. “Mama, how do you know so much about politics?”

“I’ll tell you.” She looked away, her eyes focusing on the great rose window at the east end, her mind in the past. “When my father started to trade

with the Italians, he was treated as an upstart by the leading citizens of Kingsbridge. They turned up their noses at him and his family, and did everything they could to prevent him implementing his new ideas. My mother was dead by then, and I was an adolescent, so I became his confidante, and he told me everything." Her face, normally fixed in an expression of frozen calm, twisted now into a mask of bitterness and resentment: her eyes narrowed, her lip curled, and her cheek flushed with remembered shame. "He decided he would never be free of them until he took control of the parish guild. So that's what he set out to do, and I helped him." She drew a deep breath, as if once again gathering her strength for a long war. "We divided the ruling group, set one faction against the other, made alliances then shifted them, ruthlessly undermined our opponents, and used our supporters until it suited us to discard them. It took us ten years, and at the end of it, he was alderman of the guild and the richest man in town."

She had told him the story of his grandfather before, but never in quite such bluntly honest terms. "So you were his aide, as Caris is to Edmund?"

She gave a short, harsh laugh. "Yes. Except that, by the time Edmund took over, we were the leading citizens. My father and I climbed the mountain, and Edmund just had to walk down the other side."

They were interrupted by Philemon. He came into the church from the cloisters, a tall, scrawny-necked man of twenty-two, walking like a bird, with short, pigeon-toed steps. He carried a broom: he was employed by the priory as a cleaner. He seemed excited. "I've been looking for you, Brother Godwyn."

Petranilla ignored his obvious hurry. "Hello, Philemon, haven't they made you a monk yet?"

"I can't raise the necessary donation, Mistress Petranilla. I come from a humble family."

"But it's not unknown for the priory to waive the donation in the case of an applicant who shows devotion. And you've been a servant of the priory, paid and unpaid, for years."

"Brother Godwyn has proposed me, but some of the older monks argued against me."

Godwyn put in: "Blind Carlus hates Philemon—I don't know why."

Petranilla said: "I'll speak to my brother Anthony. He should overrule Carlus. You're a good friend to my son—I'd like to see you get on."

"Thank you, Mistress."

"Well, you're obviously bursting to tell Godwyn something that can't be said in front of me, so I'll take my leave." She kissed Godwyn. "Remember what I said."

"I will, Mama."

Godwyn felt relieved, as if a storm cloud had passed overhead and gone

on to drench some other town.

As soon as Petranilla was out of earshot, Philemon said: “It’s Bishop Richard!”

Godwyn raised his eyebrows. Philemon had a way of learning people’s secrets. “What have you found out?”

“He’s in the hospital, right now, in one of the private rooms upstairs—with his cousin Margery!”

Margery was a pretty girl of sixteen. Her parents—a younger brother of Earl Roland and a sister of the countess of Marr—were both dead, and she was Roland’s ward. He had arranged for her to marry a son of the earl of Monmouth, in a political alliance that would greatly strengthen Roland’s position as the leading nobleman of southwest England. “What are they doing?” Godwyn said, though he could guess.

Philemon lowered his voice. “Kissing!”

“How do you know?”

“I’ll show you.”

Philemon led the way out of the church via the south transept, through the monks’ cloisters, and up a flight of steps to the dormitory. It was a plain room with two rows of simple wooden bedsteads, each having a straw mattress. It shared a party wall with the hospital. Philemon went to a large cupboard that contained blankets. With an effort, he pulled it forward. In the wall behind it there was a loose stone. Momentarily Godwyn wondered how Philemon had come across this peephole, and guessed he might have hidden something in the gap. Philemon lifted the stone out, careful to make no noise, and whispered: “Look, quick!”

Godwyn hesitated. In a low voice he said: “How many other guests have you observed from here?”

“All of them,” Philemon replied, as if that should have been obvious.

Godwyn thought he knew what he was going to see, and he did not relish it. Peeping at a misbehaving bishop might be all right for Philemon, but it seemed shamefully underhand. However, his curiosity urged him on. In the end he asked himself what his mother would advise, and knew immediately that she would tell him to look.

The hole in the wall was a little below eye level. He stooped and peeked through.

He was looking into one of the two private guest rooms upstairs at the hospital. In one corner stood a prie-dieu facing a wall painting of the crucifixion. There were two comfortable chairs and a couple of stools. When there was a crowd of important guests, the men took one room and the women the other; and this was clearly the women’s room, for on a small table were several distinctly feminine articles: combs, ribbons, and mysterious small jars and vials.

On the floor were two straw mattresses. Richard and Margery lay on one of them. They were doing more than kissing.

Bishop Richard was an attractive man with wavy mid-brown hair and regular features. Margery was not much more than half his age, a slender girl with white skin and dark eyebrows. They lay side by side. Richard was kissing her face and speaking into her ear. A smile of pleasure played upon his fleshy lips. Margery's dress was pushed up around her waist. She had beautiful long white legs. His hand was between her thighs, moving with a practised, regular motion: although Godwyn had no experience of women, somehow he knew what Richard was doing. Margery looked at Richard adoringly, her mouth half-open, panting with excitement, her face flushed with passion. Perhaps it was mere prejudice, but Godwyn sensed intuitively that Richard saw Margery as a plaything of the moment, whereas Margery believed Richard was the love of her life.

Godwyn stared at them for a horrified moment. Richard moved his hand, and suddenly Godwyn was looking at the triangle of coarse hair between Margery's thighs, dark against her white skin, like her eyebrows. Quickly, he looked away.

"Let me see," said Philemon.

Godwyn moved away from the wall. This was shocking, but what should he do about it—if anything?

Philemon looked through the hole and gave a gasp of excitement. "I can see her cunt!" he whispered. "He's rubbing it!"

"Come away from there," Godwyn said. "We've seen enough—too much."

Philemon hesitated, fascinated; then, reluctantly, he moved away and replaced the loose stone. "We must expose the bishop's fornication at once!" he said.

"Shut your mouth and let me think," Godwyn said. If he did as Philemon suggested, he would make enemies of Richard and his powerful family—and to no purpose. But surely there was a way something like this could be turned to advantage? Godwyn tried to think about it as his mother would. If there was nothing to be gained by revealing Richard's sin, was it possible to make a virtue of concealing it? Perhaps Richard would be grateful to Godwyn for keeping it secret.

That was more promising. But for it to work, Richard had to know that Godwyn was protecting him.

"Come with me," Godwyn said to Philemon.

Philemon moved the cupboard back into place. Godwyn wondered whether the sound of the wood scraping on the floor was audible in the next room. He doubted it—and, anyway, Richard and Margery were surely too absorbed in what they were doing to notice noises from beyond the wall.

Godwyn led the way down the stairs and through the cloisters. There were two staircases to the private rooms: one led up from the hospital's ground floor, and the other was outside the building, permitting important guests to come and go without passing through the common people's quarters. Godwyn hurried up the outside stairs.

He paused outside the room where Richard and Margery were and spoke to Philemon quietly. "Follow me in," he said. "Do nothing. Say nothing. Leave when I leave."

Philemon put down his broom.

"No," Godwyn said. "Carry it."

"All right."

Godwyn threw open the door and strode in. "I want this chamber immaculately clean," he said loudly. "Sweep every corner—oh! I beg your pardon! I thought the room was empty!"

In the time it had taken Godwyn and Philemon to rush from the dormitory to the hospital, the lovers had progressed. Richard now lay on top of Margery, his long clerical robe lifted in front. Her shapely white legs stuck straight up in the air either side of the bishop's hips. There was no mistaking what they were doing.

Richard ceased his thrusting motion and looked at Godwyn, his expression a mixture of angry frustration and frightened guilt. Margery gave a cry of shock and she, too, stared at Godwyn with fear in her eyes.

Godwyn drew the moment out. "Bishop Richard!" he said, feigning bewilderment. He wanted Richard to be in no doubt that he had been recognized. "But how…and Margery?" He pretended to understand suddenly. "Forgive me!" He spun on his heel. He shouted at Philemon: "Get out! Now!" Philemon scuttled back through the door, still clutching his broom.

Godwyn followed, but he turned at the door, to make sure Richard got a good look at him. The two lovers remained frozen in position, locked in sexual congress, but their faces had changed. Margery's hand had flown to her mouth in the eternal gesture of surprised guilt. Richard's expression had become frantically calculating. He wanted to speak but he could not think what to say. Godwyn decided to put them out of their misery. He had done everything he needed to do.

He stepped out—then, before he could close the door, a shock made him stop. A woman was coming up the stairs. He suffered a moment of panic. It was Philippa, the wife of the earl's other son.

He realized instantly that Richard's guilty secret would lose its value if someone else knew it. He had to warn Richard. "Lady Philippa!" he said in a loud voice. "Welcome to Kingsbridge Priory!"

Urgent scuffling noises came from behind him. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Richard leap to his feet.

Luckily, Philippa did not march straight past, but stopped and spoke to Godwyn. “Perhaps you can help me.” From where she stood, she could not quite see into the room, he thought. “I’ve lost a bracelet. It’s not precious, just carved wood, but I’m fond of it.”

“What a shame,” Godwyn said sympathetically. “I’ll ask all the monks and nuns to look out for it.”

Philemon said: “I haven’t seen it.”

Godwyn said to Philippa: “Perhaps it slipped from your wrist.”

She frowned. “The odd thing is, I haven’t actually worn it since I got here. I took it off when I arrived, and put it on the table, and now I can’t find it.”

“Perhaps it rolled into a dark corner. Philemon here will look for it. He cleans the guest rooms.”

Philippa looked at Philemon. “Yes, I saw you as I was leaving, an hour or so ago. You didn’t spot it when you swept the room?”

“I didn’t sweep. Miss Margery came in just as I was getting started.”

Godwyn said: “Philemon has just come back to clean your room, but Miss Margery is…,” he looked into the room, “…at prayer,” he finished. Margery was kneeling on the prie-dieu, eyes closed—begging forgiveness for her sin, Godwyn hoped. Richard stood behind her, head bowed, hands clasped, lips moving in a murmur.

Godwyn stepped aside to let Philippa enter the room. She gave her brother-in-law a suspicious look. “Hello, Richard,” she said. “It’s not like you to pray on a weekday.”

He put his finger to his lips in a shushing gesture, and pointed to Margery on the prayer stool.

Philippa said briskly: “Margery can pray as much as she likes, but this is the women’s room, and I want you out.”

Richard concealed his relief and left, closing the door on the two women.

He and Godwyn stood face to face in the hallway. Godwyn could tell that Richard did not know what line to take. He might be inclined to say *How dare you burst into a room without knocking?* However, he was so badly in the wrong that he probably could not summon up the nerve to bluster. On the other hand, he could hardly beg Godwyn to keep quiet about what he had seen, for that would be to acknowledge himself in Godwyn’s power. It was a moment of painful awkwardness.

While Richard hesitated, Godwyn spoke. “No one shall hear of this from me.”

Richard looked relieved, then glanced at Philemon. “What about him?”

“Philemon wants to be a monk. He is learning the virtue of obedience.”

“I’m in your debt.”

“A man should confess his own sins, not those of others.”

“All the same, I’m grateful, Brother…”

“Godwyn, the sacrist. I’m the nephew of Prior Anthony.” He wanted Richard to know that he was sufficiently well connected to make serious trouble. But, to take the edge off the threat, he added: “My mother was betrothed to your father, many years ago, before your father became the earl.”

“I’ve heard that story.”

Godwyn wanted to add: And your father spurned my mother, just as you’re planning to spurn the wretched Margery. But instead he said pleasantly: “We might have been brothers.”

“Yes.”

The bell rang for dinner. Relieved of their embarrassment, the three men parted company: Richard to Prior Anthony’s house, Godwyn to the monks’ refectory, and Philemon to the kitchen to help serve.

Godwyn was thoughtful as he walked through the cloisters. He was upset by the animal scene he had witnessed, but he felt he had handled it well. At the end, Richard had seemed to trust him.

In the refectory Godwyn sat next to Theodoric, a bright monk a couple of years younger than he. Theodoric had not studied at Oxford, and in consequence he looked up to Godwyn. Godwyn treated him as an equal, which flattered Theodoric. “I’ve just read something that will interest you,” Godwyn said. He summarized what he had read about the revered Prior Philip’s attitude to women in general and nuns in particular. “It’s what you’ve always said,” he finished. In fact, Theodoric had never expressed an opinion on the subject, but he always agreed when Godwyn complained about Prior Anthony’s slackness.

“Of course,” Theodoric said. He had blue eyes and fair skin, and now he flushed with excitement. “How can we have pure thoughts when we are constantly distracted by females?”

“But what can we do about it?”

“We must confront the prior.”

“In chapter, you mean,” Godwyn said, as if it were Theodoric’s idea rather than his own. “Yes, excellent plan. But would others support us?”

“The younger monks would.”

Young men probably agreed with more or less any criticism of their elders, Godwyn thought. But he also knew that many monks shared his own preference for a life in which women were absent or, at least, invisible. “If you talk to anyone between now and chapter, let me know what they say,” he said. That would encourage Theodoric to go around whipping up support.

The dinner arrived, a stew of salt fish and beans. Before Godwyn could begin to eat, he was prevented by Friar Murdo.

Friars were monks who lived among the people instead of secluding themselves in monasteries. They felt that their self-denial was more rigorous than that of institutional monks, whose vow of poverty was compromised by

their splendid buildings and extensive landholdings. Traditionally friars had no property, not even churches—although many had slipped from this ideal after pious admirers gave them land and money. Those who still lived by the original principles scrounged their food and slept on kitchen floors. They preached in marketplaces and outside taverns, and were rewarded with pennies. They did not hesitate to sponge off ordinary monks for food and lodging anytime it suited their convenience. Not surprisingly, their assumption of superiority was resented.

Friar Murdo was a particularly unpleasant example: fat, dirty, greedy, often drunk, and sometimes seen in the company of prostitutes. But he was also a charismatic preacher who could hold a crowd of hundreds with his colorful, theologically dubious sermons.

Now he stood up, uninvited, and began to pray in a loud voice. “Our Father, bless this food to our foul, corrupt bodies, as full of sin as a dead dog is full of maggots…”

Murdo’s prayers were never short. Godwyn put down his spoon with a sigh.

There was always a reading in chapter—usually from the Rule of St. Benedict, but often from the Bible, and occasionally other religious books. As the monks were taking their places on the raked stone benches around the octagonal chapter house, Godwyn sought out the young monk who was due to read today and told him, quietly but firmly, that he, Godwyn, would be reading instead. Then, when the moment came, he read the crucial page from *Timothy’s Book*.

He felt nervous. He had returned from Oxford a year ago, and he had been quietly talking to people about reforming the priory ever since; but, until this moment, he had not openly confronted Anthony. The prior was weak and lazy, and needed to be shocked out of his lethargy. Furthermore, St. Benedict had written: “All must be called to chapter, for the Lord often reveals to a younger member what is best.” Godwyn was perfectly entitled to speak out in chapter and call for stricter compliance with monastic rules. All the same, he suddenly felt he was running a risk, and wished he had taken longer to think about his tactics in using *Timothy’s Book*.

But it was too late for regrets. He closed the book and said: “My question, to myself and my brethren, is this: Have we slipped below the standards of Prior Philip in the matter of separation between monks and females?” He had learned, in student debates, to put his argument in the form of a question whenever he could, giving his opponent as little as possible to argue against.

The first to reply was Blind Carlus, the subprior, Anthony’s deputy. “Some monasteries are located far from any center of population, on an

uninhabited island, or deep in the forest, or perched on a lonely mountaintop," he said. His slow, deliberate speech made Godwyn fidget with impatience. "In such houses, the brothers seclude themselves from all contact with the secular world," he went on unhurriedly. "Kingsbridge has never been like that. We're in the heart of a great city, the home of seven thousand souls. We care for one of the most magnificent cathedrals in Christendom. Many of us are physicians, because St. Benedict said: 'Special care must be taken of the sick, so that in very deed they be looked after as if it were Christ himself.' The luxury of total isolation has not been granted to us. God has given us a different mission."

Godwyn had expected something like this. Carlus hated furniture to be moved, for then he would stumble over it; and he opposed any other kind of change, out of a parallel anxiety about coping with the unfamiliar.

Theodoric had a quick answer to Carlus. "All the more reason for us to be strict about the rules," he said. "A man who lives next door to a tavern must be extra careful to avoid drunkenness."

There was a murmur of pleased agreement: the monks enjoyed a smart riposte. Godwyn gave a nod of approval. The fair-skinned Theodoric blushed with gratification.

Emboldened, a novice called Juley said in a loud whisper: "Women don't bother Carlus, he can't see them." Several monks laughed, though others shook their heads in disapproval.

Godwyn felt it was going well. He seemed to be winning the argument, so far. Then Prior Anthony said: "Exactly what are you proposing, Brother Godwyn?" He had not been to Oxford, but he knew enough to press for his opponent's real agenda.

Reluctantly, Godwyn put his cards on the table. "We might consider reverting to the position as it was in the time of Prior Philip."

Anthony persisted: "What do you mean by that, exactly? No nuns?"

"Yes."

"But where would they go?"

"The nunnery could be removed to another location, and become a remote cell of the priory, like Kingsbridge College, or St.-John-in-the-Forest."

That shocked them. There was a clamor of comment, which the prior suppressed with difficulty. The voice that emerged from the hubbub was that of Joseph, the senior physician. He was a clever man, but proud, and Godwyn was wary of him. "How would we run a hospital without nuns?" he said. His bad teeth caused him to slur his sibilants, making him sound drunk, but he spoke with no less authority. "They administer medicines, change dressings, feed the incapable, comb the hair of senile old men—"

Theodoric said: "Monks could do all that."

"Then what about childbirth?" Joseph said. "We often deal with women

who are having difficulty bringing a baby into the world. How could monks help them without nuns to do the actual…handling?”

Several men voiced their agreement, but Godwyn had anticipated this question, and now he said: “Suppose the nuns removed to the old lazar house?” The leper colony—or lazar house—was on a small island in the river on the south side of the town. In the old days it had been full of sufferers, but leprosy seemed to be dying out, and now there were only two occupants, both elderly.

Brother Cuthbert, who was a wit, muttered: “I wouldn’t want to be the one to tell Mother Cecilia she’s being moved to a leper colony.” There was a ripple of laughter.

“Women should be ruled by men,” said Theodoric.

Prior Anthony said: “And Mother Cecilia is ruled by Bishop Richard. He would have to make a decision such as this.”

“Heaven forbid that he should,” said a new voice. It was Simeon, the treasurer. A thin man with a long face, he spoke against every proposal that involved spending money. “We could not survive without the nuns,” he said.

Godwyn was taken by surprise. “Why not?” he said.

“We don’t have enough money,” Simeon said promptly. “When the cathedral needs repair, who do you think pays the builders? Not us—we can’t afford it. Mother Cecilia pays. She buys supplies for the hospital, parchment for the scriptorium, and fodder for the stables. Anything used communally by both monks and nuns is paid for by her.”

Godwyn was dismayed. “How can this be? Why are we dependent on them?”

Simeon shrugged. “Over the years, many devout women have given the nunnery land and other assets.”

That was not the whole story, Godwyn felt sure. The monks also had extensive resources. They collected rent and other charges from just about every citizen of Kingsbridge, and they held thousands of acres of farmland, too. The way the wealth was husbanded must be a factor. But there was no point going into that now. He had lost the argument. Even Theodoric was silent.

Anthony said complacently: “Well, that was a most interesting discussion. Thank you, Godwyn, for asking the question. And now let us pray.”

Godwyn was too angry for prayer. He had gained nothing of what he wanted, and he was unsure where he had gone wrong.

As the monks filed out, Theodoric gave him a frightened look and said: “I didn’t know the nuns paid for so much.”

“None of us knew,” Godwyn said. He realized he was glaring at Theodoric, and made amends hastily, adding: “But you were splendid—you debated better than many an Oxford man.”

It was just the right thing to say, and Theodoric looked happy.

This was the hour for monks to read in the library or walk in the cloisters, meditating, but Godwyn had other plans. Something had been nagging him all through dinner and chapter. He had thrust it to the back of his mind, because more important things had intervened, but now it came back. He thought he knew where Lady Philippa's bracelet might be.

There were few hiding places in a monastery. The monks lived communally: no one but the prior had a room to himself. Even in the latrine they sat side by side over a trough that was continuously flushed by a stream of piped water. They were not permitted to have personal possessions, so no one had his own cupboard or even box.

But today Godwyn had seen a hiding place.

He went upstairs to the dormitory. It was empty. He pulled the blanket cupboard away from the wall and removed the loose stone, but he did not look through the hole. Instead, he put his hand into the gap, exploring. He felt the top, bottom, and sides of the hole. To the right there was a small fissure. Godwyn eased his fingers inside and touched something that was neither stone nor mortar. Scrabbling with his fingertips, he drew the object out.

It was a carved wooden bracelet.

Godwyn held it to the light. It was made of some hard wood, probably oak. The inner surface was smoothly polished, but the outside was carved with an interlocking design of bold squares and diagonals, executed with pleasing precision: Godwyn could see why Lady Philippa was fond of it.

He put it back, restored the loose stone, and returned the cupboard to its usual position.

What did Philemon want with such a thing? He might be able to sell it for a penny or two, though that would be dangerous because it was so recognizable. But he certainly could not wear it.

Godwyn left the dormitory and went down the stairs to the cloisters. He was in no mood for study or meditation. He needed to talk over the day's events. He felt the need to see his mother.

The thought made him apprehensive. She might berate him for his failure in chapter. But she would praise him for his handling of Bishop Richard, he felt sure, and he was eager to tell her the story. He decided to go in search of her.

Strictly speaking, this was not allowed. Monks were not supposed to roam about the streets of the town at will. They needed a reason, and in theory they were supposed to ask the prior's permission before leaving the precincts. But in practice, the obedientiaries—monastic officials—had dozens of excuses. The priory did business constantly with merchants, buying food, cloth, shoes, parchment, candles, garden tools, tack for horses—all the necessities of everyday life. The monks were landlords, owning almost the entire city. And

any one of the physicians might be called to see a patient who was unable to walk to the hospital. So it was common to see monks in the streets, and Godwyn, the sacrist, was not likely to be asked to explain what he was doing out of the monastery.

Nevertheless it was wise to be discreet, and he made sure he was not observed as he left the priory. He passed through the busy fair and went quickly along the main street to his uncle Edmund's house.

As he hoped, Edmund and Caris were out doing business, and he found his mother alone but for the servants. "This is a treat for a mother," she said. "To see you twice in one day! And it gives me a chance to feed you up." She poured him a big tankard of strong ale and told the cook to bring a plate of cold beef. "What happened in chapter?" she said.

He told her the story. "I was in too much of a hurry," he said at the end.

She nodded. "My father used to say: never call a meeting until the outcome is a foregone conclusion."

Godwyn smiled. "I must remember that."

"All the same, I don't think you've done any harm."

That was a relief. She was not going to be angry. "But I lost the argument," he said.

"You also established your position as leader of the reformist younger group."

"Even though I made a fool of myself?"

"Better than being a nonentity."

He was not sure she was right about that but, as usual when he doubted the wisdom of his mother's advice, he did not challenge her, but resolved to think about it later. "Something very odd happened," he said, and he told her about Richard and Margery, leaving out the gross physical details.

She was surprised. "Richard must be mad!" she said. "The wedding will be called off if the earl of Monmouth finds out that Margery isn't a virgin. Earl Roland will be furious. Richard could be unfrocked."

"But a lot of bishops have mistresses, don't they?"

"That's different. A priest may have a 'housekeeper' who is his wife in all but name. A bishop may have several. But to take the virginity of a noblewoman shortly before her wedding—even the son of an earl might find it difficult to survive as a clergyman after that."

"What do you think I should do?"

"Nothing. You've handled it perfectly so far." He glowed with pride. She added: "One day this information will be a powerful weapon. Just remember it."

"There's one more thing. I wondered how Philemon had come across the loose stone, and it occurred to me that he might have used it initially as a hiding place. I was right—and I found a bracelet that Lady Philippa had lost."

“Interesting,” she said. “I have a strong feeling that Philemon will be useful to you. He’ll do anything, you see. He has no scruples, no morals. My father had an associate who was always willing to do his dirty work—start rumors, spread poisonous gossip, foment strife. Such men can be invaluable.”

“So you don’t think I should report the theft.”

“Certainly not. Make him give the bracelet back, if you think it’s important—he can just say he found it while sweeping. But don’t expose him. You’ll reap the benefit, I guarantee.”

“So I should protect him?”

“As you would a mad dog that mauls intruders. He’s dangerous, but he’s worth it.”

10

On Thursday, Merthin completed the door he was carving.

He had finished work in the south aisle, for the present. The scaffolding was in place. There was no need for him to make formwork for the masons, as Godwyn and Thomas were determined to save money by trying Merthin’s method of building without it. So he returned to his carving and realized there was little left to do. He spent an hour improving a wise virgin’s hair, and another on a foolish virgin’s silly smile, but he was not sure he was making them any better. He found it difficult to make decisions, because his mind kept wandering to Caris and Griselda.

He had hardly been able to bring himself to speak to Caris all week. He felt so ashamed of himself. Every time he saw Caris, he thought of how he had embraced Griselda, and kissed her, and done with her the most loving act of human life—a girl he did not like, let alone love. Although he had formerly spent many happy hours imagining the moment when he would do that with Caris, now the prospect was filled with dread. There was nothing wrong with Griselda—well, there was, but that was not what disturbed him. He would have felt the same if it had been any woman other than Caris. He had taken away the meaning of the act by doing it with Griselda. And now he could not face the woman he loved.

While he was staring at his work, trying to stop thinking about Caris and decide whether the door was finished or not, Elizabeth Clerk walked into the north porch. She was a pale, thin beauty of twenty-five with a cloud of fair curls. Her father had been the bishop of Kingsbridge before Richard. He had lived, like Richard, in the bishop’s palace at Shiring, but on his frequent visits to Kingsbridge he had fallen for a serving wench at the Bell—Elizabeth’s mother. Because of her illegitimacy, Elizabeth was sensitive about her social

position, alert to the least slight and quick to take offense. But Merthin liked her because she was clever, and because when he was eighteen she had kissed him and let him feel her breasts, which were high on her chest and flat, as if molded from shallow cups, with nipples that hardened at the gentlest touch. Their romance had ended over something that seemed trivial to him and unforgivable to her—a joke he had made about randy priests—but he still liked her.

She touched his shoulder and looked at the door. Her hand went to her mouth, and she drew in her breath. “They seem alive!” she said.

He was thrilled. Her praise was not lightly given. All the same, he felt an impulse to be modest. “It’s only that I’ve made each one individual. On the old door, the virgins were identical.”

“It’s more than that. They look as if they might step forward and talk to us.”

“Thank you.”

“But it’s so different from everything else in the cathedral. What will the monks say?”

“Brother Thomas likes it.”

“What about the sacrist?”

“Godwyn? I don’t know what he’ll think. But if there’s a fuss I’ll appeal to Prior Anthony—who won’t want to commission another door and pay twice.”

“Well,” she said thoughtfully, “the Bible doesn’t say that they were all alike, of course—just that five had the sense to get ready well in advance, and the other five left arrangements until the last minute and ended up missing the party. But what about Elfric?”

“It’s not for him.”

“He’s your master.”

“He only cares about getting the money.”

She was not convinced. “The problem is that you’re a better craftsman than he. That’s been obvious for a couple of years, and everyone knows it. Elfric would never admit it, but that’s why he hates you. He may make you regret this.”

“You always see the black side.”

“Do I?” She was offended. “Well, we’ll see if I’m right. I hope I’m wrong.” She turned to go.

“Elizabeth?”

“Yes.”

“I’m really pleased you think it’s good.”

She did not reply, but she seemed a bit mollified. She waved good-bye and left.

Merthin decided the door was finished. He wrapped it in coarse sacking.

He would have to show it to Elfric, and now was as good a time as any: the rain had stopped, for a while at least.

He got one of the laborers to help him carry the door. The builders had a technique for carrying heavy, awkward objects. They laid two stout poles on the ground, parallel, then placed boards crosswise on the poles in the center to provide a firm base. They manhandled the object onto the boards. Then they stood between the poles, one man at each end, and lifted. The arrangement was called a stretcher, and it was also used for carrying sick people to the hospital.

Even so, the door was very heavy. However, Merthin was used to difficult lifting. Elfric had never allowed him to make an excuse of his slight stature, and the result was that he had become surprisingly strong.

The two men reached Elfric's house and carried the door inside. Griselda was sitting in the kitchen. She seemed to be getting more voluptuous by the day—her large breasts appeared to be growing even bigger. Merthin hated to be at odds with people, so he tried to be friendly. "Do you want to see my door?" he said as they passed her.

"Why would I want to look at a door?"

"It's carved. The story of the wise and foolish virgins."

She gave a humorless laugh. "Don't tell me about virgins."

They carried it through to the yard. Merthin did not understand women. Griselda had been cold to him ever since they had made love. If that was how she felt, why had she done it? She was making it clear she did not want to do it again. He could have reassured her that he felt the same way—in fact he loathed the prospect—but that would be insulting, so he said nothing.

They put down the stretcher and Merthin's helper left. Elfric was in the yard, his brawny body bent over a stack of timber, counting planks, tapping each beam with a piece of square-cut wood a couple of feet long, sticking his tongue into his cheek as he did whenever he faced a mental challenge. He glared at Merthin and carried on, so Merthin said nothing, but unwrapped the door and stood it up against a pile of stone blocks. He was extraordinarily proud of what he had done. He had followed the traditional pattern, but at the same time he had done something original that made people gasp. He could hardly wait to see the door installed in the church.

"Forty-seven," Elfric said, then he turned to Merthin.

"I finished the door," Merthin said proudly. "What do you think?"

Elfric looked at the door for a moment. He had a big nose, and his nostrils twitched in surprise. Then, without warning, he hit Merthin across the face with the stick he had been using to count. It was a solid piece of wood and the blow was hard. Merthin cried out in sudden agony, staggered back, and fell to the ground.

"You piece of filth!" Elfric yelled. "You defiled my daughter!"

Merthin tried to sputter a protest, but his mouth was full of blood.

“How dare you!” Elfric bellowed.

As if at a signal, Alice appeared from inside the house. “Snake!” she screamed. “You slithered into our home and deflowered our little girl!”

They were pretending to be spontaneous, but they must have planned this, Merthin thought. He spat blood and said: “Deflowered? She was no virgin!”

Elfric lashed out again with his improvised club. Merthin rolled out of the way, but the blow landed painfully on his shoulder.

Alice said: “How could you do this to Caris? My poor sister—when she finds out, it will break her heart.”

Merthin was stung into a response. “And you’ll be sure to tell her, won’t you, you bitch.”

“Well, you’re not going to marry Griselda in secret,” Alice said.

Merthin was astonished. “Marry? I’m not marrying her. She hates me!”

With that, Griselda appeared. “I certainly don’t want to marry you,” she said. “But I’ll have to. I’m pregnant.”

Merthin stared at her. “That’s not possible—we only did it once.”

Elfric laughed harshly. “It only takes once, you young fool.”

“I’m still not marrying her.”

“If you don’t, you’ll be sacked,” Elfric said.

“You can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t care, I’m not going to marry her.”

Elfric dropped the club and picked up an axe.

Merthin said: “Jesus Christ!”

Alice took a step forward. “Elfric, don’t commit murder.”

“Get out of the way, woman.” Elfric lifted the axe.

Merthin, still on the ground, scooted away, in fear of his life.

Elfric brought the axe down, not on Merthin, but on his door.

Merthin shouted: “No!”

The sharp blade sank into the face of the long-haired virgin and split the wood along the grain.

Merthin yelled: “Stop it!”

Elfric lifted the axe again and brought it down even harder. It split the door in two.

Merthin got to his feet. To his horror, he felt his eyes fill with tears. “You have no right!” He was trying to shout, but his voice came out in a whisper.

Elfric lifted the axe and turned toward him. “Stay back, boy—don’t tempt me.”

Merthin saw a mad light in Elfric’s eye, and backed away.

Elfric brought the axe down on the door again.

Merthin stood and watched with tears pouring down his face.

11

The two dogs, Skip and Scrap, greeted one another with joyful enthusiasm. They were from the same litter, though they did not look similar: Skip was a brown boy dog and Scrap a small black female. Skip was a typical village dog, lean and suspicious, whereas the city-dwelling Scrap was plump and contented.

It was ten years since Gwenda had picked Skip out of a litter of mongrel puppies, on the floor of Caris's bedroom in the wool merchant's big house, the day Caris's mother died. Since then, Gwenda and Caris had become close friends. They met only two or three times a year, but they shared their secrets. Gwenda felt she could tell Caris everything, and the information would never get back to her parents or anyone else in Wigleigh. She assumed Caris felt the same: because Gwenda did not talk to any other Kingsbridge girls, there could be no risk of her letting something slip in a careless moment.

Gwenda arrived in Kingsbridge on the Friday of Fleece Fair week. Her father, Joby, went to the fairground in front of the cathedral to sell the furs of squirrels he had trapped in the forest near Wigleigh. Gwenda went straight to Caris's house, and the two dogs were reunited.

As always, Gwenda and Caris talked about boys. "Merthin is in a strange mood," Caris said. "On Sunday he was his normal self, kissing me in church—then, on Monday, he could hardly look me in the eye."

"He's feeling guilty about something," Gwenda said immediately.

"It's probably connected with Elizabeth Clerk. She's always had her eye on him, though she's a cold bitch and much too old for him."

"Have you and Merthin done it yet?"

"Done what?"

"You know…When I was little, I used to call it grunting, because that was the noise grown-ups made while they were doing it."

"Oh, that? No, not yet."

"Why not?"

"I don't know…"

"Don't you want to?"

"Yes, but…don't you worry about spending your life doing some man's bidding?"

Gwenda shrugged. "I don't like the idea but, on the other hand, I don't worry about it."

"What about you? Have you done it yet?"

"Not properly. I said yes to a boy from the next village, years ago, just to see what it was like. It's a nice warm glow, like drinking wine. That was the only time. But I'd let Wulfric do it any time he liked."

“Wulfric? This is new!”

“I know. I mean, I’ve known him since we were small, when he used to pull my hair and run away. Then one day, soon after Christmas, I looked at him as he came into church, and I realized he’d become a man. Well, not just a man, but a really gorgeous man. He had snow in his hair and a sort of mustard-colored scarf around his neck, and he just looked glowing.”

“Do you love him?”

Gwenda sighed. She did not know how to say what she felt. It was not just love. She thought about him all the time, and she did not know how she could live without him. She daydreamed about kidnapping him and locking him up in a hut deep in the forest so that he could never escape from her.

“Well, the look on your face answers my question,” Caris said. “Does he love you?”

Gwenda shook her head. “He never even speaks to me. I wish he’d do something to show that he knows who I am, even if it was only pulling my hair. But he’s in love with Annet, the daughter of Perkin. She’s a selfish cow, but he adores her. Her father and his are the two wealthiest men in the village. Her father raises laying hens and sells them, and his father has fifty acres.”

“You make it sound hopeless.”

“I don’t know. What’s hopeless? Annet might die. Wulfric might suddenly realize he’s always loved me. My father might be made earl and order him to marry me.”

Caris smiled. “You’re right. Love is never hopeless. I’d like to see this boy.”

Gwenda stood up. “I was hoping you’d say that. Let’s go and find him.”

They left the house, the dogs following at their heels. The rainstorms that had lashed the town earlier in the week had given way to occasional showers, but the main street was still a stream of mud. Because of the fair, the mud was mixed with animal droppings, rotten vegetables, and all the litter and filth of a thousand visitors.

As they splashed through the disgusting puddles, Caris asked about Gwenda’s family.

“The cow died,” Gwenda said. “Pa needs to buy another, but I don’t know how he’s going to do it. He only has a few squirrel furs to sell.”

“A cow costs twelve shillings this year,” Caris said with concern. “That’s a hundred and forty-four silver pennies.” Caris always did arithmetic in her head: she had learned Arabic numbers from Buonaventura Caroli, and she said that made it easy.

“For the last few winters that cow has kept us alive—especially the little ones.” The pain of extreme hunger was familiar to Gwenda. Even with the cow to give milk, four of Ma’s babies had died. No wonder Philemon had longed to be a monk, she thought: it was worth almost any sacrifice to have

hearty meals provided every day without fail.

Caris said: “What will your father do?”

“Something underhand. It’s difficult to steal a cow—you can’t slip it into your satchel—but he’ll have a crafty scheme.” Gwenda was sounding more confident than she felt. Pa was dishonest, but not clever. He would do anything he could, legal or not, to get another cow, but he might just fail.

They passed through the priory gates into the wide fairground. The traders were wet and miserable on the sixth day of bad weather. They had exposed their stock to the rain and got little in return.

Gwenda felt awkward. She and Caris almost never talked about the disparity in wealth between the two families. Every time Gwenda visited, Caris would quietly give her a present to take home: a cheese, a smoked fish, a bolt of cloth, a jar of honey. Gwenda would thank her—and she was always profoundly grateful—but no more would be said. When Pa tried to make her take advantage of Caris’s trust by stealing from the house, Gwenda would argue that she would then be unable to visit again, whereas this way she came home with something two or three times a year. Even Pa could see the sense of that.

Gwenda looked for the stall where Perkin would be selling his hens. Annet would probably be there and, wherever Annet was, Wulfric would not be far away. Gwenda was right. There was Perkin, fat and sly, greasily polite to his customers, curt to everyone else. Annet was carrying a tray of eggs, smiling coquettishly, the tray pulling her dress tight against her breasts, her fair hair straying from her hat in wisps that played around her pink cheeks and her long neck. And there was Wulfric, looking like an archangel who had lost his way and wandered among humankind by mistake.

“There he is,” Gwenda murmured. “The tall one with—”

“I can tell which one he is,” Caris said. “He looks good enough to eat.”

“You see what I mean.”

“He’s a bit young, isn’t he?”

“Sixteen. I’m eighteen. Annet is eighteen too.”

“All right.”

“I know what you’re thinking,” Gwenda said. “He’s too handsome for me.”

“No—”

“Handsome men never fall for ugly women, do they?”

“You’re not ugly—”

“I’ve seen myself in a glass.” The memory was painful, and Gwenda grimaced. “I cried when I realized what I looked like. I have a big nose and my eyes are too close together. I resemble my father.”

Caris protested: “You have beautiful soft brown eyes, and wonderful thick hair.”

“But I’m not in Wulfric’s class.”

Wulfric was standing side-on to Gwenda and Caris, giving them a good view of his carved profile. They both admired him for a moment—then he turned, and Gwenda gasped. The other side of his face was completely different: bruised and swollen, with one eye closed.

She ran up to him. “What happened to you?” she cried.

He was startled. “Oh, hello, Gwenda. I had a fight.” He half-turned away, obviously embarrassed.

“Who with?”

“Some squire of the earl’s.”

“You’re hurt!”

He looked impatient. “Don’t worry, I’m fine.”

He did not understand why she was concerned, of course. Perhaps he even thought she was reveling in his misfortune. Then Caris spoke. “Which squire?” she said.

Wulfric looked at her with interest, realizing from her dress that she was a wealthy woman. “His name is Ralph Fitzgerald.”

“Oh—Merthin’s brother!” Caris said. “Was he hurt?”

“I broke his nose.” Wulfric looked proud.

“Weren’t you punished?”

“A night in the stocks.”

Gwenda gave a little cry of anguish. “Poor you!”

“It wasn’t so bad. My brother made sure no one pelted me.”

“Even so…” Gwenda was horrified. The idea of being imprisoned in any way seemed to her the worst kind of torture.

Annet finished with a customer and joined in the conversation. “Oh, it’s you, Gwenda,” she said coldly. Wulfric might be oblivious to Gwenda’s feelings, but Annet was not, and she treated Gwenda with a mixture of hostility and scorn. “Wulfric fought a squire who insulted me,” she said, unable to conceal her satisfaction. “He was just like a knight in a ballad.”

Gwenda said sharply: “I wouldn’t want him to get his face hurt for my sake.”

“Fortunately, that’s not very likely, is it?” Annet smiled triumphantly.

Caris said: “One never knows what the future may hold.”

Annet looked at her, startled by the interruption, and showed surprise that Gwenda’s companion was so expensively dressed.

Caris took Gwenda’s arm. “Such a pleasure to meet you Wigleigh folk,” she said graciously. “Good-bye.”

They walked on. Gwenda giggled. “You were terribly condescending to Annet.”

“She annoyed me. Her kind give women a bad name.”

“She was so pleased that Wulfric got beaten up for her sake! I’d like to

poke out her eyes.”

Caris said thoughtfully: “Apart from his good looks, what is he actually like?”

“Strong, proud, loyal—just the type to get into a fight on someone else’s behalf. But he’s the kind of man who will provide tirelessly for his family, year in and year out, until the day he drops dead.”

Caris said nothing.

Gwenda said: “He doesn’t appeal to you, does he?”

“You make him sound a bit dull.”

“If you’d grown up with my father, you wouldn’t think a good provider was dull.”

“I know.” Caris squeezed Gwenda’s arm. “I think he’s wonderful for you—and, to prove it, I’m going to help you get him.”

Gwenda was not expecting that. “How?”

“Come with me.”

They left the fairground and walked to the north end of the town. Caris led Gwenda to a small house in a side street near St. Mark’s parish church. “A wise woman lives here,” she said. Leaving the dogs outside, they ducked through a low doorway.

The single, narrow downstairs room was divided by a curtain. In the front half were a chair and a bench. The fireplace had to be at the back, Gwenda thought, and she wondered why someone would want to hide whatever went on in the kitchen. The room was clean, and there was a strong smell, herby and slightly acid, hardly a perfume but not unpleasant. Caris called out: “Mattie, it’s me.”

After a moment, a woman of about forty pulled aside the curtain and came through. She had gray hair and pale indoor skin. She smiled when she saw Caris. Then she gave Gwenda a hard look and said: “I see your friend is in love—but the boy hardly speaks to her.”

Gwenda gasped: “How did you know?”

Mattie sat on the chair heavily: she was stout, and short of breath. “People come here for three reasons: sickness, revenge, and love. You look healthy, and you’re too young for revenge, so you must be in love. And the boy must be indifferent to you, otherwise you wouldn’t need my help.”

Gwenda glanced at Caris, who looked pleased and said: “I told you she was wise.” The two girls sat on the bench and looked expectantly at the woman.

Mattie went on: “He lives close to you, probably in the same village; but his family are wealthier than yours.”

“All true.” Gwenda was amazed. No doubt Mattie was guessing, but she was so accurate it seemed as if she must have second sight.

“Is he handsome?”

“Very.”

“But he’s in love with the prettiest girl in the village.”

“If you like that type.”

“And her family, too, is wealthier than yours.”

“Yes.”

Mattie nodded. “A familiar story. I can help you. But you must understand something. I have nothing to do with the spirit world. Only God can work miracles.”

Gwenda was puzzled. Everyone knew that the spirits of the dead controlled all of life’s hazards. If they were pleased with you, they would guide rabbits to your traps, give you healthy babies, and make the sun shine on your ripening corn. But if you did something to anger them, they could put worms in your apples, cause your cow to give birth to a deformed calf, and make your husband impotent. Even the physicians at the priory admitted that prayers to the saints were more efficacious than their medicines.

Mattie went on: “Don’t despair. I can sell you a love potion.”

“I’m sorry, I have no money.”

“I know. But your friend Caris is extraordinarily fond of you, and she wants you to be happy. She came here prepared to pay for the potion. However, you must administer it correctly. Can you get the boy alone for an hour?”

“I’ll find a way.”

“Put the potion in his drink. Within a short time he will become amorous. That’s when you must be alone with him—if there is another girl in sight he may fall for her instead. So keep him away from other women, and be very sweet to him. He will think you the most desirable woman in the world. Kiss him, tell him he’s wonderful, and—if you want—make love to him. After a while, he will sleep. When he wakes up, he will remember that he spent the happiest hour of his life in your arms, and he’ll want to do it again as soon as he can.”

“But won’t I need another dose?”

“No. The second time, your love and desire and femininity will be enough. A woman can make any man blissfully happy if he gives her the chance.”

The very thought made Gwenda feel lustful. “I can’t wait.”

“Then let’s make up the mixture.” Mattie heaved herself out of the chair. “You can come behind the curtain,” she said. Gwenda and Caris followed her. “It’s only there for the ignorant.”

The kitchen had a clean stone floor and a big fireplace equipped with stands and hooks for cooking and boiling, far more than one woman would need for her own food. There was a heavy old table, stained and scorched but scrubbed clean; a shelf with a row of pottery jars; and a locked cupboard,

presumably containing the more precious ingredients used in Mattie's potions. Hanging on the wall was a large slate with numbers and letters scratched on it, presumably recipes. "Why do you need to hide all this behind a curtain?" Gwenda said.

"A man who makes ointments and medicines is called an apothecary, but a woman who does the same runs the risk of being called a witch. There's a woman in town called Crazy Nell who goes around shouting about the devil. Friar Murdo has accused her of heresy. Nell is mad, it's true, but there's no harm in her. All the same, Murdo is insisting on a trial. Men like to kill a woman, every now and again, and Murdo will give them an excuse, and collect their pennies afterwards as alms. That's why I always tell people that only God works miracles. I don't conjure spirits. I just use the herbs of the forest and my powers of observation."

While Mattie talked, Caris was moving about the kitchen as freely as if she were at home. She put a mixing bowl and a vial on the table. Mattie handed her a key, and she opened the cupboard. "Put three drops of essence of poppies into a spoonful of distilled wine," Mattie said. "We must be careful not to make the mixture over-strong, or he will go to sleep too soon."

Gwenda was astonished. "Are *you* going to make the potion, Caris?"

"I sometimes help Mattie. Don't say anything to Petranilla; she would disapprove."

"I wouldn't tell her if her hair was on fire." Caris's aunt disliked Gwenda, probably for the same reason she would disapprove of Mattie: they were both low-class, and such things mattered to Petranilla.

But why was Caris, the daughter of a wealthy man, working like an apprentice in the kitchen of a side-street medicine woman? While Caris made up the mixture, Gwenda recalled that her friend had always been intrigued by illness and cures. As a little girl, Caris had wanted to be a physician, not understanding that only priests were allowed to study medicine. Gwenda remembered her saying, after her mother had died: "But *why* do people have to fall sick?" Mother Cecilia had told her it was because of sin; Edmund had said that no one really knew. Neither response had satisfied Caris. Perhaps she was still seeking the answer here in Mattie's kitchen.

Caris poured the liquid into a tiny jar, stoppered it, and bound the stopper tightly with cord, tying the ends in a knot. Then she handed the jar to Gwenda.

Gwenda tucked it into the leather purse attached to her belt. She wondered how on earth she was going to get Wulfric on his own for an hour. She had glibly said that she would find a way but, now that she had the love potion in her possession, the task seemed nearly impossible. He showed signs of restlessness if she merely spoke to him. He wanted to be with Annet any free time he had. What reason would Gwenda give for needing to be alone

with him? *I want to show you a place where we can get wild duck eggs.* But why would she show him and not her father? Wulfric was a little naïve, but not stupid: he would know she was up to something.

Caris gave Mattie twelve silver pennies—two weeks' wages for Pa. Gwenda said: "Thank you, Caris. I hope you'll come to my wedding."

Caris laughed. "That's what I like to see—confidence!"

They left Mattie and headed back to the fair. Gwenda decided to begin by finding out where Wulfric was staying. His family was too well off to claim poverty, so they could not stay free at the priory. They would probably be lodging in a tavern. She could just casually ask him, or his brother, and follow up with a question about the standard of accommodation, as if she were interested to know which of the town's many inns was the best.

A monk passed by, and Gwenda realized with a guilty start that she had not even thought about trying to see her brother, Philemon. Pa would not visit him, for they had hated one another for years; but Gwenda was fond of him. She knew that he was sly, untruthful, and malicious, but all the same he loved her. They had been through many hungry winters together. She would seek him out later, she resolved, after she had seen Wulfric again.

But before she and Caris reached the fairground, they met Gwenda's father.

Joby was near the priory gates, outside the Bell. With him was a rough-looking man in a yellow tunic, with a pack on his back—and a brown cow.

He waved Gwenda over. "I've found a cow," he said.

Gwenda looked more closely. It was two years old, and thin, with a bad-tempered look, but it appeared healthy. "It seems fine," she said.

"This is Sim Chapman," he said, jerking a thumb at the yellow tunic. A chapman traveled from village to village selling small necessities—needles, buckles, hand mirrors, combs. He might have stolen the cow, but that would not bother Pa, if the price was right.

Gwenda said to her father: "Where did you get the money?"

"I'm not paying, exactly," he replied, looking shifty.

Gwenda had expected him to have some scheme. "What, then?"

"It's more of a swap."

"What are you giving him in exchange for the cow?"

"You," said Pa.

"Don't be silly," she said, and then she felt a loop of rope dropped over her head and tightened around her body, pinning her arms to her sides.

She felt bewildered. This could not be happening. She struggled to free herself, but Sim just pulled the rope tighter.

"Now, don't make a fuss," Pa said.

She could not believe they were serious. "What do you think you're doing?" she said incredulously. "You can't sell me, you fool!"

“Sim needs a woman, and I need a cow,” Pa said. “It’s very simple.”

Sim spoke for the first time. “She’s ugly enough, your daughter.”

“This is ridiculous!” Gwenda said.

Sim smiled at her. “Don’t worry, Gwenda,” he said. “I’ll be good to you, as long as you behave yourself, and do as you’re told.”

They meant it, Gwenda saw. They actually thought they could make this exchange. A cold needle of fear entered her heart as she realized it might even happen.

Caris spoke up. “This joke has gone on long enough,” she said in a loud, clear voice. “Release Gwenda immediately.”

Sim was not intimidated by her air of command. “And who are you, to give orders?”

“My father is alderman of the parish guild.”

“But you’re not,” Sim said. “And even if you were, you’d have no authority over me or my friend Joby.”

“You can’t trade a girl for a cow!”

“Why not?” said Sim. “It’s my cow, and the girl is his daughter.”

Their raised voices attracted the attention of passers-by, who stopped to stare at the girl tied up with a rope. Someone said: “What’s happening?” Another replied: “He’s sold his daughter for a cow.” Gwenda saw a look of panic cross her father’s face. He was wishing he had done this up a quiet alley—but he was not smart enough to have foreseen the public reaction. Gwenda realized the bystanders might be her only hope.

Caris waved to a monk who came out of the priory gates. “Brother Godwyn!” she called. “Come and settle an argument, please.” She looked triumphantly at Sim. “The priory has jurisdiction over all bargains agreed at the Fleece Fair,” she said. “Brother Godwyn is the sacrist. I think you’ll have to accept his authority.”

Godwyn said: “Hello, cousin Caris. What’s the matter?”

Sim grunted with disgust. “Your cousin, is he?”

Godwyn gave him a frosty look. “Whatever the dispute is here, I shall try to give a fair judgment, as a man of God—you can depend on me for that, I hope.”

“And very glad to hear it, sir,” Sim said, becoming obsequious.

Joby was equally oily. “I know you, Brother—my son Philemon is devoted to you. You’ve been the soul of kindness to him.”

“All right, enough of that,” Godwyn said. “What’s going on?”

Caris said: “Joby here wants to sell Gwenda for a cow. Tell him he can’t.”

Joby said: “She’s my daughter, sir, and she’s eighteen years old and a maid, so she’s mine to do with what I will.”

Godwyn said: “All the same, it seems a shameful business, selling your children.”

Joby became pathetic. “I wouldn’t do it, sir, only I’ve three more at home, and I’m a landless laborer, with no means to feed the children through the winter, unless I have a cow, and our old one has died.”

There was a sympathetic murmur from the growing crowd. They knew about winter hardship, and the extremes to which a man might have to go to feed his family. Gwenda began to despair.

Sim said: “Shameful you may think it, Brother Godwyn, but is it a sin?” He spoke as if he already knew the answer, and Gwenda guessed he might have had this argument before, in a different place.

With obvious reluctance, Godwyn said: “The Bible does appear to sanction selling your daughter into slavery. The book of Exodus, chapter twenty-one.”

“Well, there you are, then!” said Joby. “It’s a Christian act!”

Caris was outraged. “The book of Exodus!” she said scornfully.

One of the bystanders joined in. “We are not the children of Israel,” she said. She was a small, chunky woman with an underbite that gave her jaw a determined look. Although dressed poorly, she was assertive. Gwenda recognized her as Madge, the wife of Mark Webber. “There is no slavery today,” Madge said.

Sim said: “Then what of apprentices, who get no pay, and may be beaten by their master? Or novice monks and nuns? Or those who skivvy for bed and board in the palaces of the nobility?”

Madge said: “Their life may be hard, but they can’t be bought and sold—can they, Brother Godwyn?”

“I don’t say that the trade is lawful,” Godwyn responded. “I studied medicine at Oxford, not law. But I can find no reason, in Holy Scripture or the teachings of the Church, to say that what these men are doing is a sin.” He looked at Caris and shrugged. “I’m sorry, cousin.”

Madge Webber folded her arms across her chest. “Well, chapman, how are you going to take the girl out of town?”

“At the end of a rope,” he said. “Same way I brought the cow in.”

“Ah, but you didn’t have to get the cow past me and these people.”

Gwenda’s heart leaped with hope. She was not sure how many of the bystanders supported her, but if it came to a fight they were more likely to side with Madge, who was a townswoman, than with Sim, an outsider.

“I’ve dealt with obstinate women before,” Sim said, and his mouth twisted as he spoke. “They’ve never given me much trouble.”

Madge put her hand on the rope. “Perhaps you’ve been lucky.”

He snatched the rope away. “Keep your hands off my property and you won’t get hurt.”

Deliberately, Madge put a hand on Gwenda’s shoulder.

Sim shoved Madge roughly, and she staggered back; but there was a

murmur of protest from the crowd.

A bystander said: “You wouldn’t do that if you’d seen her husband.”

There was a ripple of laughter. Gwenda recalled Madge’s husband Mark, a gentle giant. If only he would show up!

But it was John Constable who arrived, his well-developed nose for trouble bringing him to any crowd almost as soon as it gathered. “We’ll have no shoving,” he said. “Are you causing trouble, chapman?”

Gwenda became hopeful again. Chapmen had a bad reputation, and the constable was assuming Sim was the cause of the trouble.

Sim turned obsequious, something he could obviously do quicker than changing his hat. “Beg pardon, Master Constable,” he said. “But when a man has paid an agreed price for his purchase, he must be allowed to leave Kingsbridge with his goods intact.”

“Of course.” John had to agree. A market town depended on its reputation for fair dealing. “But what have you bought?”

“This girl.”

“Oh.” John looked thoughtful. “Who sold her?”

“I did,” said Joby. “I’m her father.”

Sim went on: “And this woman with the big chin threatened to stop me taking the girl away.”

“So I did,” said Madge. “For I’ve never heard of a woman being bought and sold in Kingsbridge Market, and nor has anyone else around here.”

Joby said: “A man may do as he will with a child of his own.” He looked around the crowd appealingly. “Is there anyone here who will disagree with that?”

Gwenda knew that no one would. Some people treated their children kindly, and some harshly, but all were agreed that the father must have absolute power over the child. She burst out angrily: “You wouldn’t stand there, deaf and dumb, if you had a father like him. How many of you were sold by your parents? How many of you were made to steal, when you were children and had hands small enough to slide into folks’ wallets?”

Joby started to look worried. “She’s raving, now, Master Constable,” he said. “No child of mine ever stole.”

“Never mind that,” said John. “Everyone listen to me. I shall make a ruling on this. Those who disagree with my decision can complain to the prior. If there’s any shoving, by anyone, or any other kind of rough stuff, I shall arrest everyone involved in it. I hope that’s clear.” He looked around belligerently. No one spoke: they were eager to hear his decision. He went on: “I know of no reason why this trade is unlawful, therefore Sim Chapman is allowed to go his way, with the girl.”

Joby said: “I told you so, didn’t—”

“Shut your damn mouth, Joby, you fool,” said the constable. “Sim, get

going, and make it quick. Madge Webber, if you raise a hand I'll put you in the stocks, and your husband won't stop me either. And not a word from you, Caris Wooler, please—you may complain to your father about me if you wish."

Before John had finished speaking, Sim jerked hard on the rope. Gwenda was tipped forward, and stuck a foot out in front of her to keep from falling to the ground; then, somehow, she was moving along, stumbling and half-running down the street. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Caris alongside her. Then John Constable seized Caris by the arm, she turned to protest to him, and a moment later she disappeared from Gwenda's sight.

Sim walked quickly down the muddy main street, hauling on the rope, keeping Gwenda just off balance. As they approached the bridge, she began to feel desperate. She tried jerking back on the rope, but he responded with an extra strong heave that threw her down in the mud. Her arms were still pinioned, so she could not use her hands to protect herself, and she fell flat, bruising her chest, her face squelching into the ooze. She struggled to her feet, giving up all resistance. Roped like an animal, hurt, frightened, and covered in filthy mud, she staggered after her new owner, across the bridge and along the road that led into the forest.

Sim Chapman led Gwenda through the suburb of Newtown to the crossroads known as Gallows Cross, where criminals were hanged. There he took the road south, toward Wigleigh. He tied her rope to his wrist so that she could not break away, even when his attention wandered. Her dog, Skip, followed them, but Sim threw stones at him and, after one hit him full on the nose, he retreated with his tail between his legs.

After several miles, as the sun began to set, Sim turned into the forest. Gwenda had seen no feature beside the road to mark the spot, but Sim seemed to have chosen carefully for, a few hundred paces into the trees, they came upon a pathway. Looking down, Gwenda could see the neat impressions of dozens of small hooves in the earth, and she realized it was a deer path. It would lead to water, she guessed. Sure enough, they came to a little brook, the vegetation on either side trodden into mud.

Sim knelt beside the stream, filled his cupped hands with clear water, and drank. Then he moved the rope so that it was around her neck, freeing her hands, and motioned her to the water.

She washed her hands in the stream then drank thirstily.

"Wash your face," he ordered. "You're ugly enough by nature."

She did as she was told, wondering wearily why he cared how she looked.

The path continued on the farther side of the drinking hole. They walked on. Gwenda was a strong girl, capable of walking all day, but she was

defeated and miserable and scared, and that made her feel exhausted. Whatever fate awaited her at their destination, it was probably worse than this, but all the same she yearned to get there so that she could sit down.

Darkness was falling. The deer path wound through trees for a mile then petered out at the foot of a hill. Sim stopped beside a particularly massive oak tree and gave a low whistle.

A few moments later, a figure materialized out of the half-lit woodland and said: “All right, Sim.”

“All right, Jed.”

“What you got there, a fruit tart?”

“You shall have a slice, Jed, same as the others, so long as you’ve got sixpence.”

Gwenda realized what Sim had planned. He was going to prostitute her. The realization hit her like a blow, and she staggered and fell to her knees.

“Sixpence, eh?” Jed’s voice seemed to come from far away, but all the same she could hear the excitement in his voice. “How old is she?”

“Her father claimed she was eighteen.” Sim jerked on the rope. “Stand up, you lazy cow, we’re not there yet.”

Gwenda got to her feet. That’s why he wanted me to wash my face, she thought, and for some reason the realization made her cry.

She wept hopelessly as she stumbled along in Sim’s footsteps until they came to a clearing with a fire in the middle. Through her tears, she perceived fifteen or twenty people lying around the edge of the clearing, most of them wrapped in blankets or cloaks. Almost all those watching her in the firelight were male, but she caught sight of a white female face, hard in expression but smooth-chinned, that stared at her briefly then disappeared back into a bundle of ragged bedding. An upturned wine barrel and a scattering of wooden cups testified to a drunken party.

Gwenda realized that Sim had brought her to a den of outlaws.

She groaned. How many of them would she be forced to submit to?

As soon as she asked herself the question, she knew the answer: all of them.

Sim dragged her across the clearing to a man who was sitting upright, his back against a tree. “All right, Tam,” said Sim.

Gwenda knew instantly who the man must be: the most famous outlaw in the county, he was called Tam Hiding. He had a handsome face, though it was reddened by drink. People said he was noble-born, but they always said that about famous outlaws. Looking at him, Gwenda was surprised by his youth: he was in his mid-twenties. But then, to kill an outlaw was no crime so, in all probability, few lived to be old.

Tam said: “All right, Sim.”

“I traded Alwyn’s cow for a girl.”

“Well done.” Tam’s speech was only slightly slurred.

“We’re going to charge the boys sixpence, but of course you can have a free go. I expect you’d like to be first.”

Tam peered at her with bloodshot eyes. Perhaps it was wishful thinking, but she imagined she saw a hint of pity in his look. He said: “No, thanks, Sim. You go ahead and let the boys have a good time. Though you might want to leave it until tomorrow. We got a barrel of good wine from a pair of monks who were taking it to Kingsbridge, and most of the lads are dead drunk now.”

Gwenda’s heart leaped with hope. Perhaps her torture would be postponed.

“I’ll have to consult Alwyn,” Sim said doubtfully. “Thanks, Tam.” He turned away, pulling Gwenda behind him.

A few yards away, a broad-shouldered man was struggling to his feet. Sim said: “All right, Alwyn.” The phrase seemed to serve the outlaws as a greeting and a recognition code.

Alwyn was at the bad-tempered phase of drunkenness. “What have you got?”

“A fresh young girl.”

Alwyn took Gwenda’s chin in his hand, gripping unnecessarily hard, and turned her face to the firelight. She was forced to look into his eyes. He was young, like Tam Hiding, but with the same unhealthy air of dissipation. His breath smelled of drink. “By Christ, you picked an ugly one,” he said.

For once Gwenda was happy to be thought ugly: perhaps Alwyn would not want to do anything to her.

“I took what I could get,” Sim said testily. “If the man had a beautiful daughter he wouldn’t sell her for a cow, would he? He’d marry her to the son of a rich wool merchant instead.”

The thought of her father made Gwenda angry. He must have known, or suspected, that this would happen. How could he do it to her?

“All right, all right, it doesn’t matter,” Alwyn said to Sim. “With only two women in the group, most of the lads are desperate.”

“Tam said we should wait until tomorrow, because they’re all too drunk tonight—but it’s up to you.”

“Tam’s right. Half of them are asleep already.”

Gwenda’s fear retreated a little. Anything could happen overnight.

“Good,” Sim said. “I’m dog tired anyway.” He looked at Gwenda. “Lie down, you.” He never called her by her name.

She lay down, and he used the rope to tie her feet together and her hands behind her back. Then he and Alwyn lay down either side of her. In a few moments, both men were asleep.

Gwenda was exhausted, but she had no thought of sleep. With her arms behind her back, every position was painful. She tried to move her wrists

within the rope, but Sim had pulled it tight and knotted it well. All she achieved was broken skin, so that the rope burned her flesh.

Despair turned to helpless rage, and she pictured herself taking revenge on her captors, lashing them all with a whip as they cowered in front of her. It was a pointless fantasy. She turned her mind to practical means of escape.

First she would have to make them untie her. That done, she would have to get away. Ideally, she would somehow ensure they could not follow her and recapture her.

It seemed impossible.

12

Gwenda was cold when she woke up. It was midsummer, but the weather was cool, and she had no covering but her light dress. The sky was turning from black to gray. She looked around the clearing in the faint light: no one was moving.

She needed to pee. She thought of doing it there, and soaking her dress. If she made herself disgusting, so much the better. Almost as soon as the thought occurred to her she dismissed it. That would be giving up. She was not giving up.

But what was she going to do?

Alwyn was sleeping beside her, with his long dagger in its sheath still attached to his belt, and that gave her the glimmer of an idea. She was not sure she had the nerve to carry out the plan that was forming in her mind. But she refused to think about how scared she was. She just had to do it.

Although her ankles were tied together, she could move her legs. She kicked Alwyn. At first he did not seem to feel it. She kicked him again, and he moved. The third time, he sat upright. “Was that you?” he said blearily.

“I have to pee,” she said.

“Not in the clearing. It’s one of Tam’s rules. Go twenty paces for a piss, fifty for a shit.”

“So, even outlaws live by rules.”

He stared uncomprehendingly at her. The irony escaped him. He was not a clever man, she realized. That was helpful. But he was strong, and mean. She would have to be very cautious.

She said: “I can’t go anywhere tied up.”

Grumbling, he undid the rope around her ankles.

The first part of her plan had worked. Now she was even more frightened.

She struggled to her feet. All the muscles of her legs ached from a night of constriction. She took a step, stumbled, and fell down again. “It’s so hard

with my hands tied," she said.

He ignored that.

The second part of her plan had not worked.

She would have to keep trying.

She got up again and walked into the trees, with Alwyn following her. He was counting paces on his fingers. The first time he got to ten, he started again. The second time, he said: "Far enough."

She looked at him helplessly. "I can't lift my dress," she said.

Would he fall for this?

He stared dumbly at her. She could almost hear his brain working, rumbling like the gears of a water mill. He could lift her dress while she peed, but that was the kind of thing a mother did for a toddler, and he would find it humiliating. Alternatively, he could untie her hands. With hands and feet free, she might make a run for it. But she was small, weary and cramped: there was no way she could outrun a man with long, muscular legs. He must be thinking that the risk was not serious.

He untied the rope around her wrists.

She looked away from him, so that he would not see her look of triumph.

She rubbed her forearms to restore the circulation. She wanted to poke his eyeballs out with her thumbs, but instead she smiled as sweetly as she could and said: "Thank you," as if he had performed an act of kindness.

He said nothing, but stood watching her, waiting.

She expected him to look away when she hitched up the skirt of her dress and squatted, but he only stared more intensely. She held his gaze, unwilling to act ashamed while she did what was natural. His mouth opened slightly and she could tell he was breathing harder.

Now came the hardest part.

She stood up slowly, letting him get a good look before she dropped her dress. He licked his lips, and she knew she had him.

She went closer and stood in front of him. "Will you be my protector?" she said, using a little-girl voice that did not come naturally to her.

He showed no sign of suspicion. He did not speak, but grasped her breast in his rough hand and squeezed.

She gasped with pain. "Not so hard!" She took his hand in hers. "Be more gentle." She moved his hand against her breast, rubbing the nipple so that it stood up. "It's nicer if you're gentle."

He grunted, but continued to rub softly. Then he took the neckline of her dress in his left hand and drew his dagger. The knife was a foot long, with a point, and the blade gleamed with recent sharpening. He obviously intended to cut her dress off. That would not do—it would leave her naked.

She took his wrist in a light grip, restraining him momentarily. "You don't need the knife," she said. "Look." She stepped back, undid her belt and, with

a quick movement, pulled the dress off over her head. It was her only garment.

She stretched it out on the ground then lay on it. She tried to smile at him. She felt sure the result was a horrible grimace. Then she parted her legs.

He hesitated only for a moment.

Keeping the knife in his right hand, he pushed down his underdrawers and knelt between her thighs. He pointed the dagger at her face and said: “Any trouble, and I’ll slice your cheek open.”

“You won’t need to do that,” she said. She was trying desperately to think what words such a man would like to hear from a woman. “My big, strong protector,” she said.

He showed no reaction to that.

He lay over her, thrusting blindly. “Not so fast,” she said, gritting her teeth against the pain of his clumsy stabs. She reached between her legs and guided him inside, throwing her legs up to make the entrance easier.

He reared over her, taking his weight on his arms. He put the dagger on the grass beside her head, covering the hilt with his right hand. He groaned as he moved inside her. She moved with him, keeping up the pretense of willingness, watching his face, forcing herself not to glance sideways at the dagger, waiting for her moment. She was both scared and disgusted, but a small part of her mind remained calm and calculating.

He closed his eyes and lifted his head like an animal scenting the breeze. His arms were straight, holding him up. She risked a look at the knife. He had moved his hand slightly, so that it only partly covered the hilt. She could grab it now, but how fast would he react?

She looked at his face again. His mouth was twisted in a rictus of concentration. He thrust faster, and she matched his motion.

To her dismay, she felt a glow spread through her loins. She was appalled at herself. The man was a murdering outlaw, little better than a beast, and he was planning to prostitute her for sixpence a time. She was doing this to save her life, not for enjoyment! Yet there was a gush of moisture inside her, and he thrust faster.

She sensed that his moment of climax was near. It was now or never. He gave a groan that sounded like surrender, and she moved.

She snatched the knife from under his hand. There was no change in the expression of ecstasy on his face: he had not noticed her movement. Terrified that he would see what she was doing and stop her at the last moment, she did not hesitate but jabbed upward, jerking her shoulders up from the lying position as she did so. He sensed her movement and opened his eyes. Shock and fear showed on his face. Stabbing wildly, she stuck the knife into his throat just below the jaw. She cursed, knowing she had missed the most vulnerable parts of the neck—the breathing pipe and the jugular vein. He

roared with pain and rage, but he was not incapacitated, and she knew she was as close to death as she had ever been.

She moved instinctively, without forethought. Using her left arm, she struck at the inside of his elbow. He could not prevent the bending of his arm, and involuntarily he slumped. She pushed harder at the foot-long dagger, and his weight dragged him down on to the blade. As the knife entered his head from below, blood gushed from his open mouth, falling on her face, and she jerked her head aside reflexively; but she kept pushing on the knife. The blade met resistance for a moment, then slipped through, until his eyeball seemed to explode, and she saw the point emerge from the eye socket in a spray of blood and brains. He slumped on top of her, dead or nearly so. His weight knocked the breath out of her. It was like being stuck under a fallen tree. For a moment she was helpless to move.

To her horror, she felt him ejaculate inside her.

She was filled with superstitious terror. He was more frightening like this than when he had threatened her with a knife. Panicking, she wriggled out from under him.

She scrambled to her feet shakily, breathing hard. She had his blood on her breasts and his seed on her thighs. She glanced fearfully toward the outlaws' camp. Had anyone been awake to hear Alwyn's shout? If they had all been asleep, had the sound wakened any of them?

Trembling, she pulled her dress over her head and buckled her belt. She had her wallet and her own small knife, mainly used for eating. She hardly dared take her eyes off Alwyn: she had a dreadful feeling he might still be alive. She knew she should finish him off, but she could not bring herself to do it. A sound from the direction of the clearing startled her. She needed to get away fast. She looked around, getting her bearings, then headed in the direction of the road.

There was a sentry near the big oak tree, she recalled with a sudden start of fear. She walked softly through the woods, careful to make no sound, as she approached the tree. Then she saw the sentry—Jed, his name was—fast asleep on the ground. She tiptoed past him. It took all her willpower not to break into a mad run. But he did not stir.

She found the deer path and followed it to the brook. It seemed there was no one on her tail. She washed the blood off her face and chest, then splashed cold water on her private parts. She drank deeply, knowing she had a long walk ahead.

Feeling slightly less frantic, she continued along the deer path. As she walked, she listened. How soon would the outlaws find Alwyn? She had not even tried to conceal the body. When they figured out what had happened they would surely come after her, for they had given a cow for her, and that was worth twelve shillings, half a year's pay for a laborer such as her father.

She reached the road. For a woman traveling alone, the open road was almost as hazardous as a forest track. Tam Hiding's group were not the only outlaws, and there were plenty of other men—squires, peasant boys, bands of men-at-arms—who might take advantage of a defenseless woman. But her first priority was to get away from Sim Chapman and his cronies, so speed was paramount.

Which direction should she take? If she went home to Wigleigh, Sim might follow her there and claim her back—and there was no telling how her father would deal with that. She needed friends she could trust. Caris would help her.

She set off for Kingsbridge.

It was a clear day, but the road was muddy from many days of rain, and walking was that much more difficult. After a while she reached the top of a hill. Looking back, she could see along the road for about a mile. At the far limit of her vision, she saw a lone figure striding along. He wore a yellow tunic.

Sim Chapman.

She broke into a run.

The case against Crazy Nell was heard in the north transept of the cathedral on Saturday at noon. Bishop Richard presided over the ecclesiastical court, with Prior Anthony on his right, and on his left his personal assistant, Archdeacon Lloyd, a dour black-haired priest who was said to do all the actual work of the bishopric.

There was a big crowd of townspeople. A heresy trial was good entertainment, and Kingsbridge had not seen one for years. Many craftsmen and laborers finished work at midday on Saturdays. Outside, the Fleece Fair was coming to an end, tradespeople dismantling their stalls and packing up their unsold goods, buyers preparing for the journey home or arranging to consign their purchases by raft downriver to the seaport of Melcombe.

Waiting for the trial to begin, Caris thought gloomily of Gwenda. What was she doing now? Sim Chapman would force her to have sex with him, for sure—but that might not be the worst thing to happen to her. What else would she have to do as his slave? Caris had no doubt Gwenda would try to escape—but would she succeed? And, if she failed, how would Sim punish her? Caris realized she might never find out.

It had been a strange week. Buonaventura Caroli had not changed his mind: the Florentine buyers would not return to Kingsbridge, at least until the priory improved facilities for the Fleece Fair. Caris's father and the other leading wool merchants had spent half the week shut up with Earl Roland. Merthin continued in a strange mood, withdrawn and gloomy. And it was

raining again.

Nell was dragged into church by John Constable and Friar Murdo. Her only garment was a sleeveless surcoat, fastened at the front but revealing her bony shoulders. She had no hat or shoes. She struggled feebly in the men's grasp, shouting imprecations.

When they got her quieted down, a series of townspeople came forward to attest that they had heard her call upon the devil. They were telling the truth. Nell threatened people with the devil all the time—for refusing to give her a handout, for standing in her way on the street, for wearing a good coat, or for no reason at all.

Each witness related some misfortune that had followed the curse. A goldsmith's wife had lost a valuable brooch; an innkeeper's chickens had all died; a widow developed a painful boil on her bottom—a complaint that caused laughter, but also carried conviction, for witches were known to have a malicious sense of humor.

While this was going on, Merthin appeared beside Caris. "This is so stupid," Caris said to him indignantly. "Ten times the number of witnesses could come forward to say that Nell cursed them and nothing bad ensued."

Merthin shrugged. "People just believe what they want to believe."

"Ordinary people, perhaps. But the bishop and the prior should know better—they are educated."

"I've got something to tell you," Merthin said.

Caris perked up. Perhaps she was about to learn the reason for his bad mood. She had been looking at him sidelong, but now she turned and saw that he had a huge bruise on the left side of his face. "What happened to you?"

The crowd roared with laughter at some interjection of Nell's, and Archdeacon Lloyd had to call repeatedly for quiet. When Merthin could be heard again he said: "Not here. Can we go somewhere quiet?"

She almost turned to leave with him, but something stopped her. All week long he had bewildered and wounded her by his coldness. Now, at last, he had decided he was ready to say what was on his mind—and she was expected to jump at his command. Why should he set the timetable? He had made her wait five days—why should she not make him wait an hour or so? "No," she said. "Not now."

He looked surprised. "Why not?"

"Because it doesn't suit my convenience," she said. "Now let me listen." As she turned from him, she saw a hurt look cross his face, and straightaway she wished she had not been so cold; but it was too late, and she was not going to apologize.

The witnesses had finished. Bishop Richard said: "Woman, do you say that the devil rules the earth?"

Caris was outraged. Heretics worshipped Satan because they believed he

had jurisdiction over the earth, and God only ruled Heaven. Crazy Nell could not even understand such a sophisticated credo. It was disgraceful that Richard was going along with Friar Murdo's ridiculous accusation.

Nell shouted back: "You can shove your prick up your arse."

The crowd laughed, delighted by this coarse insult to the bishop.

Richard said: "If that's her defense…"

Archdeacon Lloyd intervened. "Someone should speak on her behalf," he said. He spoke respectfully, but he seemed comfortable correcting his superior. No doubt the lazy Richard relied on Lloyd to remind him of the rules.

Richard looked around the transept. "Who will speak for Nell?" he called out.

Caris waited, but no one volunteered. She could not allow this to happen. Someone must point out how irrational this whole procedure was. When no one else spoke, Caris stood up. "Nell is mad," she said.

Everyone looked around, wondering who was foolish enough to side with Nell. There was a murmur of recognition—most people knew Caris—but no great sense of surprise, for she had a reputation for doing the unexpected.

Prior Anthony leaned over and said something in the bishop's ear. Richard said: "Caris, the daughter of Edmund Wooler, tells us that the accused woman is mad. We had reached that conclusion without her assistance."

Caris was goaded by his cool sarcasm. "Nell has no idea what she is saying! She calls upon the devil, the saints, the moon and the stars. It has no more meaning than the barking of a dog. You might as well hang a horse for neighing at the king." She could not keep the note of scorn from her voice, though she knew it was unwise to let your contempt show when addressing the nobility.

Some of the crowd murmured agreement. They liked a spirited argument.

Richard said: "But you have heard people testify to the damage done by her curses."

"I lost a penny yesterday," Caris rejoined. "I boiled an egg, and it was bad. My father lay awake all night coughing. But no one cursed us. Bad things just happen."

There was much head-shaking at this. Most people believed there was some malign influence behind every misfortune, great or small. Caris had lost the support of the crowd.

Prior Anthony, her uncle, knew her views, and had argued with her before. Now he leaned forward and said: "Surely you don't believe that *God* is responsible for illness and misfortune and loss?"

"No—"

"Who, then?"

Caris imitated Anthony's prissy tone. "Surely you don't believe that every

misfortune in life is the responsibility of either God or Crazy Nell?”

Archdeacon Lloyd said sharply: “Speak respectfully to the prior.” He did not realize Anthony was Caris’s uncle. The townspeople laughed: they knew the prim prior and his independent-minded niece.

Caris finished: “I believe Nell is harmless. Mad, yes, but harmless.”

Suddenly Friar Murdo was on his feet. “My lord bishop, men of Kingsbridge, friends,” he said in his sonorous voice. “The evil one is everywhere among us, tempting us to sin—to lying, greed of food, drunkenness with wine, puffed-up pride, and fleshly lust.” The crowd liked this: Murdo’s descriptions of sin called to the imagination delightful scenes of indulgence that were sanctified by his brimstone disapproval. “But he cannot go unobserved,” Murdo went on, his voice rising with excitement. “As the horse presses his hoofprints into the mud, as the kitchen mouse makes dainty tracks across the butter, as the lecher deposits his vile seed to grow in the womb of the deceived maid, so the devil must leave—his mark!”

They shouted their approval. They knew what he meant, and so did Caris.

“The servants of the evil one may be known by the mark he leaves upon them. For he sucks their hot blood as a child sucks the sweet milk from its mother’s swollen breasts. And, like the child, he needs a teat from which to suck—a third nipple!”

He had the audience rapt, Caris observed. He began each sentence in a low, quiet voice, then built it up, piling one emotive phrase on another to his climax; and the crowd responded eagerly, listening in silence while he spoke, then shouting their approval at the end.

“This mark is dark in color, ridged like a nipple, and rises from the clear skin around it. It may be on any part of the body. Sometimes it lies in the soft valley between a woman’s breasts, the unnatural manifestation cruelly mimicking the natural. But the devil best likes it to be in the secret places of the body: in the groin, on the private parts, especially—”

Bishop Richard said loudly: “Thank you, Friar Murdo, you need go no further. You are demanding that the woman’s body be examined for the devil’s mark.”

“Yes, my lord bishop, for—”

“All right, no need for further argument, your point is well made.” He looked around. “Is Mother Cecilia close by?”

The prioress was sitting on a bench on one side of the court, with Sister Juliana and some of the senior nuns. Crazy Nell’s naked body could not be examined by men, so women would have to do it in private and report back. The nuns were the obvious choice.

Caris did not envy them their task. Most townspeople washed their hands and faces every day, and the smellier parts of their bodies once a week. All-over bathing was at best a twice-a-year ritual, necessary though dangerous to

the health. However, Crazy Nell never seemed to wash at all. Her face was grimy, her hands were filthy, and she smelled like a dunghill.

Cecilia stood up. Richard said: “Please take this woman to a private room, remove her clothing, examine her body carefully, and come back to report faithfully what you find.”

The nuns got up immediately and approached Nell. Cecilia spoke soothingly to the madwoman and took her gently by the arm. But Nell was not fooled. She twisted away, throwing her arms into the air.

At that point, Friar Murdo shouted: “I see it! I see it!”

Four of the nuns managed to hold Nell still.

The friar said: “No need to take off her clothes. Just look under her right arm.” As Nell started to wriggle again, he strode over to her and lifted her arm himself, holding it high above her head. “There!” he said, pointing into her armpit.

The crowd surged forward. “I see it!” someone shouted, and others repeated the cry. Caris could see nothing other than normal armpit hair, and she was unwilling to commit the indignity of peering. She had no doubt that Nell had some kind of blemish or growth there. Lots of people had marks on their skin, especially the elderly.

Archdeacon Lloyd called for order, and John Constable beat the crowd back with a stick. When at last the church was quiet, Richard stood up. “Crazy Nell of Kingsbridge, I find you guilty of heresy,” he said. “You shall now be tied to the back of a cart and whipped through the town, then taken to the place known as Gallows Cross, where you shall be hanged by the neck until you die.”

The crowd cheered. Caris turned away in disgust. With justice like this, no woman was safe. Her eye lit on Merthin, waiting patiently for her. “All right,” she said bad-temperedly. “What is it?”

“It’s stopped raining,” he said. “Come down to the river.”

The priory had a string of ponies for the senior monks and nuns to use when traveling, plus some carthorses for transporting goods. These were kept, along with the mounts of prosperous visitors, in a run of stone stables at the south end of the cathedral close. The nearby kitchen garden was manured with the straw from the stalls.

Ralph was in the stable yard, with the rest of Earl Roland’s entourage. Their horses were saddled, ready to begin the two-day journey back to Roland’s residence at Earlscastle, near Shiring. They were waiting only for the earl.

Ralph was holding his horse, a bay called Griff, and talking to his parents. “I don’t know why Stephen was made lord of Wigleigh while I got nothing,”

he said. “We’re the same age, and he’s no better than I am at riding or jousting or fencing.”

Every time they met, Sir Gerald asked the same hopeful questions, and Ralph had to give him the same inadequate answers. Ralph could have borne his disappointment more easily had it not been for his father’s pathetic eagerness to see him elevated.

Griff was a young horse. He was a hunter: a mere squire did not merit a costly warhorse. But Ralph liked him. He responded gratifyingly well when Ralph urged him on in the hunt. Griff was excited by all the activity in the yard, and impatient to get going. Ralph murmured in his ear: “Quiet, my lovely lad, you shall stretch your legs later.” The horse calmed down at the sound of his voice.

“Be constantly on the alert for ways to please the earl,” Sir Gerald said. “Then he will remember you when there is a post to be filled.”

That was all very well, Ralph thought, but the real opportunities came only in battle. However, war might be a little nearer today than it had been a week ago. Ralph had not been in on the meetings between the earl and the wool merchants, but he gathered that the merchants were willing to lend money to King Edward. They wanted the king to take some decisive action against France, in retaliation for French attacks on the south coast ports.

Meanwhile, Ralph longed for some way to distinguish himself and begin to win back the honor the family had lost ten years ago—not just for his father, but for his own pride.

Griff stamped and tossed his head. To calm him, Ralph began to walk him up and down, and his father walked with him. His mother stood apart. She was upset about his broken nose.

With Father he walked past Lady Philippa, who was holding the bridle of a spirited courser with a firm hand while she talked to her husband, Lord William. She wore close-fitting clothes, which were suitable for a long ride but also emphasized her full bosom and long legs. Ralph was always on the lookout for excuses to talk to her, but it did him no good: he was just one of her father-in-law’s followers, and she never spoke to him unless she had to.

As Ralph watched, she smiled at her husband and tapped him on the chest with the back of her hand in a gesture of mock reprimand. Ralph was filled with resentment. Why should it not be him with whom she was sharing such a moment of private amusement? No doubt she would if he were lord of forty villages, as William was.

Ralph felt that his life was all aspiration. When would he actually achieve something? He and his father walked the length of the yard then turned and came back.

He saw a one-armed monk come out of the kitchen and cross the yard, and was struck by how familiar the man looked. A moment later, he

remembered how he knew the face. This was Thomas Langley, the knight who had killed two men-at-arms in the forest ten years ago. Ralph had not seen the man since that day, but his brother Merthin had, for the knight-become-monk was now responsible for supervising repairs to the priory buildings. Thomas wore a drab robe instead of the fine clothes of a knight, and had his head shaved in the monkish tonsure. He was heavier around the waist, but still carried himself like a fighting man.

As Thomas walked past, Ralph said casually to Lord William: “There he goes—the mystery monk.”

William said sharply: “What do you mean?”

“Brother Thomas. He used to be a knight, and no one knows why he joined the monastery.”

“What the devil do you know of him?” William’s tone showed anger, although Ralph had said nothing offensive. Perhaps he was in a bad mood, despite the affectionate smiles of his beautiful wife.

Ralph wished he had not begun the conversation. “I was here the day he came to Kingsbridge,” he said. He hesitated, recalling the oath the children had sworn that afternoon. Because of that, and because of William’s inexplicable annoyance, Ralph did not tell the whole story. “He staggered into town bleeding from a sword wound,” he went on. “A boy remembers such things.”

Philippa said: “How curious.” She looked at her husband. “Do you know what Brother Thomas’s story is?”

“Certainly not,” William snapped. “How would I know a thing like that?”

She shrugged and turned away.

Ralph walked on, glad to get away. “Lord William was lying,” he said to his father in a low voice. “I wonder why.”

“Don’t ask any more questions about that monk,” Father said anxiously. “It’s obviously a touchy subject.”

At last Earl Roland appeared. Prior Anthony was with him. The knights and squires mounted up. Ralph kissed his parents and swung himself into the saddle. Griff danced sideways, eager to be off. The motion made Ralph’s broken nose hurt like fire. He gritted his teeth: there was nothing he could do but endure it.

Roland went up to his horse, Victory, a black stallion with a white patch over one eye. He did not mount, but took the bridle and began to walk, still in conversation with the prior. William called out: “Sir Stephen Wigleigh and Ralph Fitzgerald, ride ahead and clear the bridge.”

Ralph and Stephen rode across the cathedral green. The grass was trampled and the ground muddy from the Fleece Fair. A few stalls were still doing business, but most were closing, and many had already gone. They passed out through the priory gates.

On the main street, Ralph saw the boy who had given him a broken nose. Wulfric, his name was, and he came from Stephen's village of Wigleigh. The left side of his face was bruised and swollen where Ralph had repeatedly punched him. Wulfric was outside the Bell Inn with his father, mother, and brother. They appeared to be about to leave.

You'd better hope you never meet me again, Ralph thought.

He tried to think of some insult to shout, but he was distracted by the sound of a crowd.

As he and Stephen rode down the main street, their horses stepping adroitly through the mud, they saw ahead of them a mob of people. Halfway down the hill, they were forced to stop.

The street was jammed by hundreds of men, women, and children shouting, laughing, and jostling for space. They all had their backs to Ralph. He looked over their heads.

At the front of this unruly procession was a cart drawn by an ox. Tied to the back of the cart was a half-naked woman. Ralph had seen this kind of thing before: to be whipped through the town was a common punishment. The woman wore only a skirt of rough wool secured at the waist by a cord. Her face, when he could see it, was begrimed, and her hair was filthy, so that at first he thought she was old. Then he saw her breasts and realized she was only in her twenties.

Her hands were bound together and attached by the same rope to the back end of the cart. She stumbled along behind it, sometimes falling and being dragged writhing through the mud until she managed to get back on her feet. The town constable followed, vigorously lashing her bare back with a bullwhip, a strip of leather at the end of a stick.

The crowd, led by a knot of young men, were taunting the woman, shouting insults, laughing, and throwing mud and rubbish. She delighted them by responding, screaming imprecations and spitting at anyone who got near her.

Ralph and Stephen urged their horses into the crowd. Ralph raised his voice. "Clear the way!" he shouted at the top of his voice. "Make way for the earl!"

Stephen did the same.

No one took any notice.

To the south of the priory, the ground sloped steeply down to the river. The bank on that side was rocky, unsuitable for loading barges and rafts, so all the wharves were on the more accessible south side, in the suburb of Newtown. The quiet north side bloomed at this time of year with shrubbery and wildflowers. Merthin and Caris sat on a low bluff overlooking the water.

The river was swollen with rain. It moved faster than it used to, Merthin noticed, and he could see why: the channel was narrower than formerly. That was because of the development of the riverside. When he was a child, most of the south bank had been a wide, muddy beach with a swampy field beyond. The river then had flowed at a stately pace, and as a boy he had floated on his back from one side to the other. But the new wharves, protected from flooding by stone walls, squeezed the same quantity of water into a smaller funnel, through which it hurried as if eager to get past the bridge. Beyond the bridge, the river widened and slowed around Leper Island.

"I've done something terrible," Merthin said to Caris.

Unfortunately, she looked particularly lovely today. She wore a dark red linen dress, and her skin seemed to glow with vitality. She had been angry at the trial of Crazy Nell, but now she just seemed worried, and that gave her a vulnerable look that tugged at Merthin's heart. She must have noticed how he had been unable to meet her eye all week. But what he had to tell her was probably worse than anything she had imagined.

He had spoken to no one about this since the row with Griselda, Elfric, and Alice. No one even knew that his door had been destroyed. He was longing to unburden himself, but he had held back. He did not want to talk to his parents: his mother would be judgmental and his father would just tell him to be a man. He might have talked to Ralph, but there had been a coolness between them since the fight with Wulfric: Merthin thought Ralph had behaved like a bully, and Ralph knew it.

He dreaded telling Caris the truth. For a moment he asked himself why. It was not that he was afraid of what she would do. She might be scornful—she was good at that—but she could not say anything worse than the things he said to himself constantly.

What he truly feared, he realized, was hurting her. He could bear her anger: it was her pain he could not face.

She said: "Do you still love me?"

He was not expecting the question, but he answered without hesitation. "Yes."

"And I love you. Anything else is just a problem we can solve together."

He wished she were right. He wished it so badly that tears came to his eyes. He looked away so that she would not see. A mob of people was moving onto the bridge, following a slow-moving cart, and he realized this must be Crazy Nell being whipped through the town on her way to Gallows Cross in Newtown. The bridge was already crowded with departing stallholders and their carts, and the traffic was almost at a standstill.

"What's the matter?" Caris said. "Are you crying?"

"I lay with Griselda," Merthin said abruptly.

Caris's mouth dropped open. *"Griselda?"* she said unbelievingly.

“I’m so ashamed.”

“I thought it must be Elizabeth Clerk.”

“She’s too proud to offer herself.”

Caris’s reaction to that surprised him. “Oh, so you would have done it with her, too, if she’d suggested it?”

“That’s not what I meant!”

“Griselda! Dear Saint Mary, I thought I was worth more than that.”

“You are.”

“Lupa,” she said, using the Latin word for a whore.

“I don’t even like her. I hated it.”

“Is that supposed to make me feel better? Are you saying you wouldn’t be so sorry if you’d enjoyed it?”

“No!” Merthin was dismayed. Caris seemed determined to misinterpret everything he said.

“Whatever got into you?”

“She was crying.”

“Oh, for God’s sake! Do you do that to every girl you see crying?”

“Of course not! I was just trying to explain to you how it happened even though I really didn’t want it to.”

Her scorn got worse with everything he said. “Don’t talk rubbish,” she said. “If you hadn’t wanted it to happen, it wouldn’t have.”

“Listen to me, please,” he said frustratedly. “She asked me, and I said no. Then she cried, and I put my arm around her to comfort her, then—”

“Oh, spare me the sickening details—I don’t want to know.”

He began to feel resentful. He knew he had done wrong, and he expected her to be angry, but her contempt stung. “All right,” he said, and he shut up.

But silence was not what she wanted. She stared at him in dissatisfaction, then said: “What else?”

He shrugged. “What’s the point in my speaking? You just pour scorn on everything I say.”

“I don’t want to listen to pathetic excuses. But there’s something you haven’t told me—I can feel it.”

He sighed. “She’s pregnant.”

Caris’s reaction surprised him again. All the anger left her. Her face, until now taut with indignation, seemed to collapse. Only sadness remained. “A baby,” she said. “Griselda is going to have your baby.”

“It may not happen,” he said. “Sometimes…”

Caris shook her head. “Griselda is a healthy girl, well fed. There’s no reason she should miscarry.”

“Not that I’d wish it,” he said, though he was not quite sure that was true.

“But what will you do?” she said. “It will be your child. You will love it, even if you hate its mother.”

“I’ve got to marry her.”

Caris gasped. “Marry! But that would be forever.”

“I’ve fathered a child, so I should take care of it.”

“But to spend your whole life with Griselda!”

“I know.”

“You don’t have to,” she said decisively. “Think. Elizabeth Clerk’s father didn’t marry her mother.”

“He was a bishop.”

“There’s Maud Roberts, in Slaughterhouse Ditch—she has three children, and everyone knows the father is Edward Butcher.”

“He’s already married, and has four other children with his wife.”

“I’m saying they don’t always force people to marry. You could just carry on as you are.”

“No, I couldn’t. Elfric would throw me out.”

She looked thoughtful. “So, you’ve already talked to Elfric?”

“Talked?” Merthin touched his bruised cheek. “I thought he was going to kill me.”

“And his wife—my sister?”

“She screamed at me.”

“So she knows.”

“Yes. She said I have to marry Griselda. She never wanted me to be with you, anyway. I don’t know why.”

Caris muttered: “She wanted you for herself.”

That was news to Merthin. It seemed unlikely that the haughty Alice would be attracted to a lowly apprentice. “I never saw any sign of that.”

“Only because you never looked at her. That’s what made her so cross. She married Elfric in frustration. You broke my sister’s heart—and now you’re breaking mine.”

Merthin looked away. He barely recognized this picture of himself as a heartbreaker. How had things gone so wrong? Caris went quiet. Merthin stared moodily along the river to the bridge.

The crowd had come to a standstill, he saw. A heavy cart loaded with woolsacks was stuck at the southern end, probably with a broken wheel. The cart pulling Nell had stopped, unable to pass. The crowd was swarming around both carts, and some people had climbed onto the woolsacks for a better view. Earl Roland was also trying to leave. He was at the town end of the bridge, on horseback, with his entourage; but even they were having trouble getting the citizens to give way. Merthin spotted his brother, Ralph, on his horse, chestnut colored with a black mane and tail. Prior Anthony, who had evidently come to see the earl off, stood wringing his hands with anxiety while Roland’s men forced their horses into the mob, trying in vain to clear a passage.

Merthin's intuition rang an alarm. Something was badly wrong, he felt sure, though at first he did not know what. He looked more closely at the bridge. He had noticed, on Monday, that the massive oak beams stretching from one piling to another across the length of the bridge were showing cracks on the upstream side; and that the beams had been strengthened with iron braces nailed across the cracks. Merthin had not been involved in this job, which was why he had not previously looked hard at the work. On Monday he had wondered why the beams were cracking. The weakness was not halfway between the uprights, as he would have expected if the timbers had simply deteriorated over time. Rather, the cracks were near the central pier, where the strain should have been less.

He had not thought about it since Monday—there was too much else on his mind—but now an explanation occurred to him. It was almost as if that central pier was not supporting the beams, but dragging them down. That would mean that something had undermined the foundation beneath the pier—and, as soon as that thought occurred to him, he realized how it could have happened. It must be the faster flow of the river, scouring the river bed from under the pier.

He remembered walking barefoot on a sandy beach, as a child, and noticing that when he stood at the sea's edge, letting the water wash over his feet, the outgoing waves would suck the sand from under his toes. That kind of phenomenon had always fascinated him.

If he was right, the central pier, with nothing underneath to support it, was now hanging from the bridge—hence the cracks. Elfric's iron braces had not helped; in fact, they might have worsened the problem, by making it impossible for the bridge to settle slowly into a new, stable position.

Merthin guessed that the other pier of the pair—on the farther, downstream side of the bridge—was still grounded. The current surely spent most of its force on the upstream pier, and attacked the second of the pair with reduced violence. Only one pier was affected; and it seemed that the rest of the structure was knitted together strongly enough for the entire bridge to stay upright—as long as it was not subjected to extraordinary strain.

But the cracks seemed wider today than on Monday. And it was not difficult to guess why. Hundreds of people were on the bridge, a much greater load than it normally took; and there was a heavily laden wool cart, with twenty or thirty people sitting on the sacks of wool to add to the burden.

Fear gripped Merthin's heart. He did not think the bridge could withstand that level of strain for long.

He was vaguely aware that Caris was speaking, but her meaning did not penetrate his thoughts until she raised her voice and said: "You're not even listening!"

"There's going to be a terrible accident," he said.

“What do you mean?”

“We have to get everyone off the bridge.”

“Are you mad? They’re all tormenting Crazy Nell. Even Earl Roland can’t get them to move. They’re not going to listen to you.”

“I think it could collapse.”

“Oh, look!” said Caris, pointing. “Can you see someone running along the road from the forest, approaching the south end of the bridge?”

Merthin wondered what that had to do with anything, but he followed her pointing finger. Sure enough, he saw the figure of a young woman running, her hair flying.

Caris said: “It looks like Gwenda.”

Behind her, in hot pursuit, was a man in a yellow tunic.

Gwenda was more tired than she had ever been in her life.

She knew that the fastest way to cover a long distance was to run twenty paces then walk twenty paces. She had started to do that half a day ago, when she spotted Sim Chapman a mile behind her. For a while she lost sight of him but, when once again the road provided her with a long rearward view, she saw that he, too, was walking and running alternately. As mile succeeded mile and hour followed hour he gained on her. By mid-morning she had known that at this rate he would catch her before she reached Kingsbridge.

In desperation, she had taken to the forest. But she could not stray far from the road for fear of losing her way. Eventually she heard running steps and heavy breathing, and peered through the undergrowth to see Sim go by on the road. She realized that as soon as he came to a long clear stretch he would guess what she had done. Sure enough, some time later she saw him come back.

She had pressed on through the forest, stopping every few minutes to stand in silence and listen. For a long time she had evaded him, and she knew he would have to search the woods on both sides of the road to make sure she was not in hiding. But her progress was also slow, for she had to fight her way through the summer undergrowth, and keep checking that she had not strayed too far from the road.

When she heard the sound of a distant crowd, she knew she could not be far from the city, and she thought she was going to escape after all. She made her way to the road and cautiously looked out from a bush. The way was clear in both directions—and, a quarter of a mile to the north, she could see the tower of the cathedral.

She was almost there.

She heard a familiar bark, and her dog, Skip, emerged from the bushes at the side of the road. She bent to pat him, and he wagged joyfully, licking her

hands. Tears came to her eyes.

Sim was not in sight, so she risked the open road. She wearily resumed her twenty paces of running and twenty of walking, now with Skip trotting happily beside her, thinking this was a new game. Each time she switched, she looked back over her shoulder. The third time she did so, she saw Sim.

He was only a couple of hundred yards behind.

Despair washed over her like a tidal wave. She wanted to lie down and die. But she was in the suburbs now, and the bridge was only a quarter of a mile away. She forced herself to keep going.

She tried to sprint, but her legs refused to obey orders. A staggering jog was the best she could manage. Her feet hurt. Looking down, she saw blood seeping through the holes in her tattered shoes. As she turned the corner at Gallows Cross, she saw a huge crowd on the bridge ahead of her. They were all looking at something, and no one noticed her running for her life, with Sim Chapman close behind.

She had no weapons other than her eating knife, which would just about cut through a baked hare, but would hardly disable a man. She wished with all her heart that she had had the nerve to pull Alwyn's long dagger out of his head and bring it away with her. Now she was virtually defenseless.

She had a row of small houses on one side of her—the suburban homes of people too poor to live in the city—and, on the other side, the pasture called Lovers' Field, owned by the priory. Sim was so close behind her that she could hear his breathing, harsh and ragged like her own. Terror gave her a last burst of energy. Skip barked, but there was more fear than defiance in his note—he had not forgotten the stone that hit him on the nose.

The approach to the bridge was a swamp of sticky mud, churned up by boots, hooves, and cartwheels. Gwenda waded through it, desperately hoping that the heavier Sim would be hampered even more than she.

At last she reached the bridge. She pushed into the crowd, which was less dense at this end. They were all looking the other way, where a heavy cart loaded with wool was blocking the passage of an ox cart. She had to get to Caris's house, almost in sight now on the main street. "Let me through!" she screamed, fighting her way forward. Only one person seemed to hear her. A head turned to look, and she saw the face of her brother Philemon. His mouth dropped open in alarm, and he tried to move toward her, but the crowd resisted him as it resisted her.

Gwenda tried to push past the team of oxen drawing the wool cart, but an ox tossed its massive head and knocked her sideways. She lost her footing—and, at that moment, a big hand grasped her arm in a powerful grip, and she knew she was recaptured.

"I've got you, you bitch," Sim gasped. He pulled her to him and slapped her across the face as hard as he could. She had no strength left to resist him.

Skip snapped ineffectually at his heels. “You won’t get away from me again,” he said.

Despair engulfed her. It had all been for nothing: seducing Alwyn, murdering him, running for miles. She was back where she had started, the captive of Sim.

Then the bridge seemed to move.

13

Merthin saw the bridge bend.

Over the central pier on the near side, the entire roadbed sagged like a horse with a broken back. The people tormenting Nell suddenly found the surface beneath their feet unsteady. They staggered, grabbing their neighbors for support. One fell backward over the parapet into the river; then another, then another. The shouts and catcalls directed at Nell were quickly drowned out by yells of warning and screams of fright.

Merthin said: “Oh, no!”

Caris screamed: “What’s happening?”

All those people, he wanted to say—*people we grew up with, women who have been kind to us, men we hate, children who admire us; mothers and sons, uncles and nieces; cruel masters and sworn enemies and panting lovers—they’re going to die.* But he could not get any words out.

For a moment—less than a breath—Merthin hoped the structure might stabilize in the new position; but he was disappointed. The bridge sagged again. This time, the interlocked timbers began to tear free of their joints. The longitudinal planks on which the people were standing sprang from their wooden pegs; the transverse joints that supported the roadbed twisted out of their sockets; and the iron braces that Elfric had hammered across the cracks were ripped out of the wood.

The central part of the bridge seemed to lurch downward on the side nearest Merthin, the upstream side. The wool cart tilted, and the spectators standing and sitting on the piled woolsacks were hurled into the river. Great timbers snapped and flew through the air, killing everyone they struck. The insubstantial parapet gave way, and the cart slid slowly off the edge, its helpless oxen lowing in terror. It fell with nightmare slowness through the air and hit the water with a thunderclap. Suddenly there were dozens of people jumping or falling into the river, then scores of them. Those already in the water were struck by the falling bodies of those who came after, and by the disintegrating timbers, some small, some huge. Horses fell, with and without riders, and carts fell on top of them.

Merthin's first thought was of his parents. Neither of them had gone to the trial of Crazy Nell, and they would not have wanted to watch her punishment: his mother thought such public spectacles beneath her dignity, and his father was not interested when there was no more at stake than the life of a madwoman. Instead, they had gone to the priory to say good-bye to Ralph.

But Ralph was now on the bridge.

Merthin could see his brother fighting to control his horse, Griff, which was rearing and kicking out with its front hooves. "Ralph!" he yelled uselessly. Then the timbers under Griff fell into the water. "No!" Merthin shouted as horse and rider disappeared from view.

Merthin's gaze flashed to the other end, where Caris had spotted Gwenda, and he saw her struggling with a man in a yellow tunic. Then that part gave way, and both ends of the bridge were dragged into the water by the collapsing middle.

The river was now a mass of writhing people, panicking horses, splintered timbers, smashed carts, and bleeding bodies. Merthin realized that Caris was no longer by his side when he saw her hurrying along the bank toward the bridge, clambering over rocks and running along the muddy strand. She looked back at him and yelled: "Hurry up! What are you waiting for? Come and help!"

This must be what a battlefield is like, Ralph thought: the screaming, the random violence, the people falling, the horses mad with fear. It was the last thought he had before the ground dropped away beneath him.

He suffered a moment of sheer terror. He did not understand what had happened. The bridge had been there, under his horse's hooves, but now it was not, and he and his mount were tumbling through the air. Then he could no longer feel the familiar bulk of Griff between his thighs, and he realized they had separated. An instant later he hit the cold water.

He went under and held his breath. The panic left him. Now he felt scared, but calm. He had played in the sea as a child—a seaside village had been among his father's domains—and he knew he would rise to the surface, though it might seem to take a long time. He was weighed down by his thick traveling clothes, now saturated, and by his sword. If he had been wearing armor, he would have sunk to the bottom and stayed there forever. But at last his head broke the surface and he gasped for breath.

He had swum a good deal as a boy, but that was many years ago. All the same, the technique came back to him, more or less, and he was able to keep his head above water. He began to thrash his way toward the north bank. Beside him, he recognized the chestnut coat and black mane of Griff, doing the same as he was, swimming for the nearest shore.

The horse's gait changed, and he realized it had found its footing. Ralph let his feet drift down to the riverbed and found that he, too, could stand. He waded through the shallows. The sticky mud of the bottom seemed to be trying to suck him back into midstream. Griff hauled himself onto a narrow strip of beach below the priory wall. Ralph did the same.

He turned and looked back. There were several hundred people in the water, many bleeding, many screaming, many dead. Near the edge he saw a figure wearing the red-and-black livery of the earl of Shiring, floating facedown. He stepped back into the water, grabbed the man by the belt, and hauled him ashore.

He turned the heavy body over, and his heart lurched with recognition. It was his friend Stephen. The face was unmarked, but Stephen's chest appeared to have caved in. His eyes were wide open, showing no sign of life. There was no breath. The body was too damaged even for Ralph to feel for a heartbeat. A few minutes ago I was envying him, Ralph thought. Now I'm the lucky one.

Feeling irrationally guilty, he closed Stephen's eyes.

He thought of his parents. Only a few minutes ago he had left them in the stable yard. Even if they had followed him, they could not have reached the bridge yet. They must be safe.

Where was Lady Philippa? Ralph cast his mind back to the scene on the bridge just before the collapse. Lord William and Philippa had been at the rear of the earl's procession and had not yet ridden onto the bridge.

But the earl had.

Ralph could picture the scene quite clearly. Earl Roland had been close behind him, impatiently urging his horse, Victory, forward through the gap in the crowd made by Ralph on Griff. Roland must have fallen close to Ralph.

Ralph heard again his father's words: *Be constantly on the alert for ways to please the earl.* Perhaps this was the big chance he had been looking for, he thought excitedly. He might not have to wait for a war. He could distinguish himself today. He would save Earl Roland—or even just Victory.

The thought energized him. He scanned the river. The earl had been wearing a distinctive purple robe and a black velvet surcoat. It was hard to pick out an individual in the seething mass of bodies, alive and dead. Then he saw a black stallion with a distinctive white patch over one eye, and his heart leaped: it was Roland's mount. Victory was thrashing around in the water, apparently unable to swim in a straight line, probably having broken one or more legs.

Floating next to the horse was a tall figure in a purple robe.

This was Ralph's moment.

He threw off his outer clothing: it would hamper his swimming. Wearing only his underdrawers, he plunged back into the river and swam toward the

earl. He had to force his way through a mass of men, women, and children. Many of the living grabbed desperately at him, delaying his progress. He fought them off ruthlessly with merciless blows of his fists.

At last he reached Victory. The beast's struggles were weakening. It was still for a moment and started to sink; then, when its head dipped into the water, it began to struggle again. "Easy, boy, easy," Ralph said into its ear; but he felt sure it was going to drown.

Roland was floating on his back, eyes closed, unconscious or dead. One foot was caught in a stirrup, and that seemed to be what was keeping his body from going down. He had lost his hat, and the top of his head was a bloody mess. Ralph could not see how a man could live after such an injury. All the same, he would rescue him. There would surely be some reward just for the corpse, when it was that of an earl.

He tried to pull Roland's foot from the stirrup, but he found the strap was twisted tight around the ankle. He felt for his knife and realized it was attached to his belt, which he had left on the shore with the rest of his outer clothing. But the earl had weapons. Ralph fumbled Roland's dagger from its sheath.

Victory's convulsions made it difficult for Ralph to cut the strap. Each time he caught hold of the stirrup, the dying horse jerked it from his grasp before he could bring the knife to bear on the leather. He cut the back of his own hand in the struggle. Finally he braced himself against the horse's side with both feet, for stability, and in that position he was able to slice through the stirrup strap.

Now he had to drag the unconscious earl to the bank. Ralph was not a strong swimmer, and he was already panting with exhaustion. To make matters worse, he could not breathe through his broken nose, so his mouth kept filling with river water. He paused for a moment, leaning his weight on the doomed Victory, trying to catch his breath; but the earl's body, now unsupported, began to sink, and Ralph realized he could not rest.

He grabbed Roland's ankle in his right hand and started to swim for the shore. He found it harder to keep his head above the surface when he had only one hand free for swimming. He did not look back at Roland: if the earl's head went under water there was nothing Ralph could do about it. After a few seconds he was gasping for air and his limbs were aching.

He was not used to this. He was young and strong, and his whole life was spent hunting, jousting, and fencing. He could ride all day then win a wrestling match the same evening. But now he seemed to be relying on disused muscles. His neck hurt from the effort of keeping his head up. He could not help breathing water in, and that made him cough and choke. He flapped his left arm madly and just managed to keep himself afloat. He heaved at the bulky body of the earl, made heavier by its water-soaked

clothing. He approached the shore with agonizing slowness.

At last he was close enough to put his feet on the riverbed. Gulping air, he began to wade, still dragging Roland. When the water was thigh-high he turned, picked up the earl in his arms, and carried him the last few steps to the shore.

He put the body on the ground and collapsed beside it, exhausted. With the last of his energy, he felt the chest. There was a strong heartbeat.

Earl Roland was alive.

The collapse of the bridge paralyzed Gwenda with fear. Then, an instant later, the sudden immersion in cold water shocked her back to normal.

When her head came above the surface, she found herself surrounded by brawling, yelling people. Some had found a piece of wood to keep them afloat, but every other man tried to keep himself above water by leaning on someone else. Those leaned upon felt themselves being pushed under, and lashed out with their fists to get free. Many of the blows missed. Those that connected were returned. It was like being outside a Kingsbridge tavern at midnight. It would have been comical, except that people were dying.

Gwenda gasped air and went under. She could not swim.

She came up again. To her horror, Sim Chapman was immediately in front of her, blowing water out of his mouth like a fountain. He began to go under, obviously as unable to swim as she was. In desperation, he grabbed her shoulder and tried to use her for support. She immediately sank. Finding her inadequate to keep him on the surface, he let her go.

Under the water, holding her breath, fighting off panic, she thought: I can’t drown now, after all I’ve been through.

Next time she surfaced, she felt herself shoved aside by a heavy body, and she saw, out of the corner of her eye, the ox that had knocked her over a moment before the bridge fell apart. It was apparently unharmed and swimming strongly. She reached out, kicking her feet, and managed to get hold of one of its horns. She pulled its head sideways for a moment, then the powerful neck pulled back and its head came upright again.

Gwenda managed to hang on.

Her dog, Skip, appeared beside her, swimming effortlessly, and yelped for joy to see her face.

The ox was heading for the suburban shore. Gwenda clung to its horn, even though her arm felt as if it was about to drop off.

Someone grabbed her, and she looked over her shoulder to see Sim again. Trying to use her to keep himself afloat, he pulled her under. Without letting go of the ox, she pushed Sim off with her free hand. He dropped back, his head close to her feet. Taking careful aim, she kicked him as hard as she could

in the face. He gave a cry of pain that was quickly silenced as his head went under.

The ox found its footing and lumbered out of the water, splashing and snorting. Gwenda let go as soon as she could stand on the bottom.

Skip gave a frightened bark, and Gwenda looked around warily. Sim was not on the bank. She scanned the river, looking for the flash of a yellow tunic among the bodies and the floating timbers.

She saw him, keeping himself afloat by holding on to a plank, kicking with his legs and coming straight toward her.

She could not run. She had no strength left, and her dress was waterlogged. On this side of the river, there was no place to hide. And, now that the bridge was down, there was no way to cross to the Kingsbridge side.

But she was not going to let him take her.

She saw that he was struggling, and that gave her hope. The plank would have kept him afloat if he had remained still, but he was kicking for the shore, and his thrashing destabilized him. He would push down on the plank to lift himself up, then kick to swim for shore, and his head would go under again. He might not make it to the bank.

She realized she could make certain of that.

She looked around quickly. The water was full of bits of wood, from huge load-bearing timbers to splinters. Her eye lit on a stout timber about a yard long. She stepped into the water and grabbed it. Then she waded out into the river to meet her owner.

She had the satisfaction of seeing the light of fear in his eyes.

He paused in his paddling. Ahead of him was the woman he had tried to enslave—angry, determined, and wielding a formidable club. Behind him, death by drowning.

He came forward.

Gwenda stood up to her waist in water and waited for her moment.

She saw Sim pause again, and guessed from his movements that he was trying to find the bottom with his feet.

Now or never.

Gwenda raised the wood over her head and stepped forward. Sim saw what she was about to do, and scrabbled desperately to get out of the way; but he was off balance, neither swimming nor wading, and he could not dodge. Gwenda brought the timber down on top of his head with all her might.

Sim’s eyes rolled up and he slumped unconscious.

She reached forward and grabbed him by the yellow tunic. She was not going to let him float away—he might survive. She pulled him to her, then took his head in both hands and pushed it under the water.

It was more difficult than she had imagined to keep a body under, even though he was out cold. His greasy hair was slippery. She had to grasp his

head under her arm then lift her feet off the bottom, so that her weight carried them both down.

She began to feel she might have overcome him. How long did it take to drown a man? She had no idea. Sim's lungs must be filling with water already. How would she know when she could let go?

Suddenly he twisted. She tightened her grip on his head. For a moment she struggled to hold him. She was not sure whether he had come round, or was undergoing an unconscious convulsion. His spasms were strong, but seemed random. Her feet found the bottom again and she braced herself and held on.

She looked around. No one was watching: they were all too busy saving themselves.

After a few moments, Sim's movements became weaker. Soon he was still. Gradually she relaxed her grip. Sim sank slowly to the bottom.

He did not come up again.

Panting for breath, Gwenda waded to the shore. She sat down heavily on the muddy ground. She felt for the leather purse on her belt: it was still there. The outlaws had not got around to stealing it from her, and she had kept it through all her trials. It contained the precious love potion made by Mattie Wise. She opened the purse to check—and found nothing but shards of pottery. The little vial had been smashed.

She started to cry.

The first person Caris saw doing anything sensible was Merthin's brother, Ralph. He was wearing nothing but a soaking wet pair of underdrawers. He was uninjured, apart from his red and swollen nose, which he had had before. Ralph pulled the earl of Shiring out of the water and laid him on the shore next to a body in the earl's livery. The earl had a grisly head injury that might be fatal. Ralph appeared exhausted by his efforts and unsure what to do next. Caris considered what she should tell him.

She looked around. On this side, the riverbank consisted of small, muddy beaches separated by rocky outcrops. There was not much room to lay out the dead and injured here: they would have to be taken elsewhere.

A few yards away, a flight of stone steps led up from the river to a gate in the priory wall. Caris made a decision. Pointing, she said to Ralph: "Take the earl that way into the priory. Lay him down carefully in the cathedral, then run to the hospital. Tell the first nun you see to fetch Mother Cecilia immediately."

Ralph seemed glad to have someone decisive to obey, and did as he was told right away.

Merthin started to wade into the water, but Caris stopped him. "Look at

that crowd of idiots," she said, pointing to the city end of the ruined bridge. Dozens of people were standing gawping at the scene of carnage in front of them. "Get all the strong men down here," she went on. "They can start pulling people out of the water and carrying them to the cathedral."

He hesitated. "They can't get down here from there."

Caris saw his point. They would have to clamber over the wreckage, and that would probably lead to more injuries. But the houses on this side of the main street had gardens that backed up against the priory walls; and the house on the corner, belonging to Ben Wheeler, had a small door in the wall so that he could come to the river directly from his garden.

Merthin was thinking the same. He said: "I'll bring them through Ben's house and across his yard."

"Good."

He clambered over the rocks, pushed open the door, and disappeared.

Caris looked across the water. A tall figure was wading onto the bank nearby, and she recognized Philemon. Gasping, he said: "Have you seen Gwenda?"

"Yes—just before the bridge collapsed," Caris replied. "She was running from Sim Chapman."

"I know—but where is she now?"

"I don't see her. The best thing you can do is start pulling people out of the water."

"I want to find my sister."

"If she's alive, she'll be among those who need to get out of the river."

"All right." Philemon splashed back into the water.

Caris was desperate to find out where her own family was—but there was too much to do here. She promised herself she would look for her father as soon as possible.

Ben Wheeler emerged from his gate. A squat man with big shoulders and a thick neck, he was a carter, and got through life more by the use of his muscles than his brain. He scrambled down to the beach, then looked around, not knowing what to do.

On the ground at Caris's feet was one of Earl Roland's men, wearing the red-and-black livery, apparently dead. She said: "Ben, carry this man into the cathedral."

Ben's wife, Lib, appeared, carrying a toddler. She was a little brighter than her husband, and she asked: "Shouldn't we deal with the living first?"

"We have to get them out of the water before we can tell whether they're dead or alive—and we can't leave bodies here on the bank because they will get in the way of rescuers. Take him to the church."

Lib saw the sense of that. "You'd better do as Caris says, Ben," she said.

Ben picked up the body effortlessly and moved off.

Caris realized they could move the bodies more quickly if they carried them on the kind of stretchers the builders used. The monks could organize those. Where were the monks? She had told Ralph to alert Mother Cecilia, but so far no one had appeared. The injured would need wound dressings, ointments, and cleansing fluids: every nun and monk would be needed. Matthew Barber must be summoned: there would be many broken bones to set. And Mattie Wise, to give potions to the injured to ease their pain. Caris needed to raise the alarm, but she was reluctant to leave the riverside before the rescue operation was properly organized. Where was Merthin?

A woman was crawling to the shore. Caris stepped into the water and pulled her to her feet. It was Griselda. Her wet dress clung to her, and Caris could see her full breasts and the swell of her thighs. Knowing that she was pregnant, Caris said anxiously: “Are you all right?”

“I think so.”

“You’re not bleeding?”

“No.”

“Thank God.” Caris looked around and was grateful to see Merthin coming from Ben Wheeler’s garden at the head of a line of men, some of them wearing the earl’s livery. She called to him: “Take Griselda’s arm. Help her up the steps to the priory. She should sit down and rest for a while.” She added reassuringly: “She’s all right, though.”

Both Merthin and Griselda looked at her strangely, and she realized in a flash how peculiar this situation was. The three of them stood for a moment in a frozen triangle: the mother-to-be, the father of her child, and the woman who loved him.

Then Caris turned away, breaking the spell, and began to give orders to the men.

Gwenda cried for a few moments, then stopped. It was not really the broken vial that made her so sad: Mattie could make up another love potion, and Caris would pay for it, if either of them was still alive. Her tears were for everything she had been through in the last twenty-four hours, from her father’s treachery to her bleeding feet.

She had no regrets about the two men she had killed. Sim and Alwyn had tried to enslave her then prostitute her. They deserved to die. Killing them was not even murder, for it was no crime to do away with an outlaw. All the same, she could not stop her hands shaking. She was exultant that she had beaten her enemies and won her freedom, and at the same time she felt sickened by what she had done. She would never forget the way the dying body of Sim had twitched at the end. And she feared that the vision of Alwyn with the point of his own knife sticking out of his eye socket might appear in her

dreams. She could not help trembling in the grip of such strong contradictory feelings.

She tried to put the killings out of her mind. Who else was dead? Her parents had been planning to leave Kingsbridge yesterday. But what about her brother, Philemon? Caris, her greatest friend? Wulfric, the man she loved?

She looked across the river and was immediately reassured about Caris. She was on the far side with Merthin, and they appeared to be organizing a gang of men to pull people out of the water. Gwenda felt a surge of gratitude: at least she had not been left completely alone in the world.

But what about Philemon? He was the last person she had seen before the collapse. He should have fallen near her, all other things being equal; but she could not see him now.

And where was Wulfric? She doubted whether he would have cared to watch the spectacle of a witch being flogged through the town. However, he had been planning to return home to Wigleigh with his family today, and it was possible—God forbid, she thought—that they had been crossing the bridge on their way home when the collapse happened. She scanned the surface frantically, looking for his distinctive tawny hair, praying that she would see him swimming vigorously for the shore, rather than floating facedown. But she could not see him at all.

She decided to cross over. She could not swim, but she thought that if she had a sizeable piece of wood to keep her afloat she might be able to kick herself across. She found a plank, pulled it from the water, and walked fifty yards upstream, to get well clear of the mass of bodies. Then she reentered the water. Skip followed fearlessly. It was more taxing than she had expected, and her wet dress was a drag on progress, but she reached the far shore.

She ran to Caris, and they embraced. Caris said: “What happened?”

“I escaped.”

“And Sim?”

“He was an outlaw.”

“Was?”

“He’s dead.”

Caris looked startled.

Gwenda added hastily: “Killed when the bridge collapsed.” She did not want even her best friend to know the exact circumstances. She went on: “Have you seen any of my family?”

“Your parents left town yesterday. I saw Philemon a few moments ago—he’s looking for you.”

“Thank God! What about Wulfric?”

“I don’t know. He hasn’t been brought out of the river. His fiancée left yesterday, but his parents and his brother were in the cathedral this morning, at the trial of Crazy Nell.”

“I have to look for him.”

“Good luck.”

Gwenda ran up the steps to the priory and across the green. A few of the stallholders were still packing up their effects, and it seemed incredible to her that they could go about their normal business when hundreds of people had just been killed in an accident—until she realized that they probably did not yet know: it had happened only minutes ago, though it felt like hours.

She passed through the priory gates into the main street. Wulfric and his family had been staying at the Bell. She ran inside.

An adolescent boy stood beside the ale barrel, looking frightened.

Gwenda said: “I’m looking for Wulfric Wigleigh.”

“There’s no one here,” the boy said. “I’m the apprentice, they left me to guard the beer.”

Someone had summoned everyone to the riverside, Gwenda guessed.

She ran out again. As she passed through the doorway, Wulfric appeared.

She was so relieved that she threw her arms around him. “You’re alive—thank God!” she cried.

“Someone said the bridge collapsed,” he said. “Is it true, then?”

“Yes—it’s dreadful. Where are the rest of your family?”

“They left a while ago. I stayed behind to collect a debt.” He held up a small leather money bag. “I hope they weren’t on the bridge when it fell.”

“I know how we can find out,” Gwenda said. “Come with me.”

She took his hand. He let her lead him into the priory precincts without withdrawing his hand. She had never touched him for so long. His hand was large, the fingers rough with work, the palm soft. It sent thrills through her, despite all that had happened.

She took him across the green and inside the cathedral. “They’re pulling people out of the river and bringing them here,” she explained.

There were already twenty or thirty bodies on the stone floor of the nave, with more arriving continually. A handful of nuns attended to the injured, dwarfed by the mighty pillars around them. The blind monk who normally led the choir seemed to be in charge. “Put the dead on the north side,” he called out as Gwenda and Wulfric entered the nave. “Wounded to the south.”

Suddenly Wulfric let out a cry of shock and dismay. Gwenda followed his gaze, and saw David, his brother, lying among the wounded. They both knelt beside him on the floor. David was a couple of years older than Wulfric, and the same large build. He was breathing, and his eyes were open, but he seemed not to see them. Wulfric spoke to him. “Dave!” he said in a low, urgent voice. “Dave, it’s me, Wulfric.”

Gwenda felt something sticky, and realized David was lying in a pool of blood.

Wulfric said: “Dave—where are Ma and Pa?”

There was no response.

Gwenda looked around and saw Wulfric's mother. She was on the far side of the nave, in the north aisle, where Blind Carlus was telling people to put the dead. "Wulfric," Gwenda said quietly.

"What?"

"Your ma."

He stood up and looked. "Oh, no," he said.

They crossed the wide church. Wulfric's mother was lying next to Sir Stephen, the lord of Wigleigh—his equal now. She was a petite woman—it was amazing that she had given birth to two such big sons. In life she had been wiry and full of energy, but now she looked like a fragile doll, white and thin. Wulfric put his hand on her chest, feeling for a heartbeat. When he pressed down, a trickle of water came from her mouth.

"She drowned," he whispered.

Gwenda put her arm around his wide shoulders, trying to console him with her touch. She could not tell whether he noticed.

A man-at-arms wearing Earl Roland's red-and-black livery came up carrying the lifeless body of a big man. Wulfric gasped again: it was his father.

Gwenda said: "Lay him here, next to his wife."

Wulfric was stunned. He said nothing, seeming unable to take it in. Gwenda herself was bewildered. What could she say to the man she loved in these circumstances? Every phrase that came to mind seemed stupid. She was desperate to give him some kind of comfort, but she did not know how.

As Wulfric stared at the bodies of his mother and father, Gwenda looked across the church at his brother. David seemed very still. She walked quickly to his side. His eyes were staring up blindly, and he was no longer breathing. She felt his chest: no heartbeat.

How could Wulfric bear it?

She wiped tears from her own eyes and returned to him. There was no point in hiding the truth. "David is dead, too," she said.

Wulfric looked blank, as if he did not understand. The dreadful thought occurred to Gwenda that the shock might have caused him to lose his mind.

But he spoke at last. "All of them," he said in a whisper. "All three. All dead." He looked at Gwenda, and she saw tears come to his eyes.

She put her arms around him, and felt his big body shake with helpless sobs. She squeezed him tightly. "Poor Wulfric," she said. "Poor, beloved Wulfric."

"Thank God I've still got Annet," he said.

An hour later, the bodies of the dead and wounded covered most of the floor

of the nave. Blind Carlus, the subprior, stood in the middle of it all, with thin-faced Simeon, the treasurer, beside him to be his eyes. Carlus was in charge because Prior Anthony was missing. “Brother Theodoric, is that you?” he said, apparently recognizing the tread of the fair-skinned, blue-eyed monk who had just walked in. “Find the gravedigger. Tell him to get six strong men to help him. We’re going to need at least a hundred new graves, and in this season we don’t want to delay burial.”

“Right away, Brother,” said Theodoric.

Caris was impressed by how effectively Carlus could organize things despite his blindness.

Caris had left Merthin efficiently managing the rescue of bodies from the water. She had made sure the nuns and monks were alerted to the disaster, then she had found Matthew Barber and Mattie Wise. Finally she had checked on her own family.

Only Uncle Anthony and Griselda had been on the bridge at the time of the collapse. She had found her father at the guildhall with Buonaventura Caroli. Edmund had said: “They’ll have to build a new bridge now!” Then he had gone limping down to the riverbank to help pull people out of the water. The others were safe: Aunt Petranilla had been at home, cooking; Caris’s sister, Alice, had been with Elfric at the Bell Inn; her cousin Godwyn had been in the cathedral, checking on the repairs to the south side of the chancel.

Griselda had now gone home to rest. Anthony was still unaccounted for. Caris was not fond of her uncle, but she would not wish him dead, and she looked anxiously for him every time a new body was brought into the nave from the river.

Mother Cecilia and the nuns were washing wounds, applying honey as an antiseptic, affixing bandages, and giving out restorative cups of hot spiced ale. Matthew Barber, the briskly efficient battlefield surgeon, was working with a panting, overweight Mattie Wise, Mattie administering a calming medicine a few minutes before Matthew set the broken arms and legs.

Caris walked to the south transept. There, away from the noise, the bustle, and the blood in the nave, the senior physician-monks were clustered around the still-unconscious figure of the earl of Shiring. His wet clothes had been removed, and he had been covered with a heavy blanket. “He’s alive,” said Brother Godwyn. “But his injury is very serious.” He pointed to the back of the head. “Part of his skull has shattered.”

Caris peered over Godwyn’s shoulder. She could see the skull, like a broken pie crust, stained with blood. Through the gaps she could see gray matter underneath. Surely nothing could be done for such a dreadful injury?

Brother Joseph, the oldest of the physicians, felt the same. He rubbed his large nose and spoke through a mouth full of bad teeth. “We must bring the relics of the saint,” he said, slurring his sibilants like a drunk, as always.

“They are his best hope for recovery.”

Caris had little faith in the power of the bones of a long-dead saint to heal a living man’s broken head. She said nothing, of course: she knew she was peculiar in this respect, and she kept her views to herself most of the time.

The earl’s sons, Lord William and Bishop Richard, stood looking on. William, with his tall, soldierly figure and black hair, was a younger version of the unconscious man on the table. Richard was fairer and rounder. Merthin’s brother, Ralph, was with them. “I pulled the earl out of the water,” he said. It was the second time Caris had heard him say it.

“Yes, well done,” said William.

William’s wife, Philippa, was as dissatisfied as Caris with Brother Joseph’s pronouncement. “Isn’t there something *you* can do to help the earl?” she said.

Godwyn replied: “Prayer is the most effective cure.”

The relics were kept in a locked compartment under the high altar. As soon as Godwyn and Joseph left to fetch them, Matthew Barber bent over the earl, peering at the head wound. “It will never heal like that,” he said. “Not even with the help of the saint.”

William said sharply: “What do you mean?” Caris thought he sounded just like his father.

“The skull is a bone like any other,” Matthew answered. “It can mend itself, but the pieces need to be in the right place. Otherwise it will grow back crooked.”

“Do you think you know better than the monks?”

“My lord, the monks know how to call upon the help of the spirit world. I only set broken bones.”

“And where did you get this knowledge?”

“I was surgeon with the king’s armies for many years. I marched alongside your father, the earl, in the Scottish wars. I have seen broken heads before.”

“What would you do for my father now?”

Matthew was nervous under William’s aggressive questioning, Caris felt; but he seemed sure of what he was saying. “I would take the pieces of broken bone out of the brain, clean them, and try to fit them together again.”

Caris gasped. She could hardly imagine such a bold operation. How did Matthew have the nerve to propose it? And what if it went wrong?

William said: “And he would recover?”

“I don’t know,” Matthew replied. “Sometimes a head wound has strange effects, impairing a man’s ability to walk, or speak. All I can do is mend his skull. If you want miracles, ask the saint.”

“So you can’t promise success.”

“Only God is all-powerful. Men must do what they can and hope for the

best. But I believe your father will die of this injury if it remains untreated."

"But Joseph and Godwyn have read the books written by the ancient medical philosophers."

"And I have seen wounded men die or recover on the battlefield. It's for you to decide whom to trust."

William looked at his wife. Philippa said: "Let the barber do what he can, and ask Saint Adolphus to help him."

William nodded. "All right," he said to Matthew. "Go ahead."

"I want the earl lying on a table," Matthew said decisively. "Near the window, where a strong light will fall on his injury."

William snapped his fingers at two novice monks. "Do whatever this man asks," he ordered.

Matthew said: "All I need is a bowl of warm wine."

The monks brought a trestle table from the hospital and set it up below the big window in the south transept. Two squires lifted Earl Roland on to the table.

"Facedown, please," said Matthew.

They turned him over.

Matthew had a leather satchel containing the sharp tools from which barbers got their name. He first took out a small pair of scissors. He bent over the earl's head and began to cut away the hair around the wound. The earl had thick black hair that was naturally oily. Matthew snipped the locks and tossed them aside so that they landed on the floor. When he had clipped a circle around the wound, the damage was more clearly visible.

Brother Godwyn reappeared, carrying the reliquary, the carved ivory-and-gold box containing the skull of St. Adolphus and the bones of one arm and a hand. When he saw Matthew operating on Earl Roland, he said indignantly: "What is going on here?"

Matthew looked up. "If you would place the holy relics on the earl's back, as close as possible to his head, I believe the saint will steady my hands."

Godwyn hesitated, clearly angry that a mere barber had taken charge.

Lord William said: "Do as he says, Brother, or the death of my father may be laid at your door."

Still Godwyn did not obey. Instead he spoke to Blind Carlus, standing a few yards away. "Brother Carlus, I am ordered by Lord William to—"

"I heard what Lord William said," Carlus interrupted. "You'd better do as he wishes."

It was not the answer Godwyn had been hoping for. His face showed angry frustration. With evident distaste, he placed the sacred container on Earl Roland's broad back.

Matthew picked up a fine pair of forceps. With a delicate touch, he grasped the visible edge of a piece of bone and lifted it, without touching the

gray matter beneath. Caris watched, entranced. The bone came right away from the head, with skin and hair attached. Matthew put it gently into the bowl of warm wine.

He did the same with two more small pieces of bone. The noise from the nave—the groans of the wounded and the sobs of the bereaved—seemed to recede into the background. The people watching Matthew stood silent and still in a circle around him and the unconscious earl.

Next, he worked on the shards that remained attached to the rest of the skull. In each case he snipped away the hair, washed the area carefully with a piece of linen dipped in wine, then used the forceps to press the bone gently into what he thought was its original position.

Caris could hardly breathe, the tension was so great. She had never admired anyone as much as she admired Matthew Barber at this moment. He had such courage, such skill, such confidence. And he was performing this inconceivably delicate operation on an earl! If it went wrong, they would probably hang him. Yet his hands were as steady as the hands of the angels carved in stone over the cathedral doorway.

Finally he replaced the three detached shards that he had put in the bowl of wine, fitting them together as if he were mending a broken jar.

He pulled the skin of the scalp across the wound and sewed it together with swift, precise stitches.

Now Roland's skull was complete.

"The earl must sleep for a day and a night," he said. "If he wakes, give him a strong dose of Mattie Wise's sleeping draft. Then he must lie still for forty days and forty nights. If necessary, strap him down."

Then he asked Mother Cecilia to bandage the head.

Godwyn left the cathedral and ran down to the riverbank, feeling frustrated and annoyed. There was no firm authority: Carlus was letting everyone do as they wished. Prior Anthony was weak, but he was better than Carlus. He had to be found.

Most of the bodies were out of the water now. Those who were merely bruised and shocked had walked away. Most of the dead and wounded had been carried to the cathedral. Those left were somehow entangled with the wreckage.

Godwyn was both excited and frightened by the thought that Anthony might be dead. He longed for a new regime at the priory: a stricter interpretation of Benedict's rule, along with meticulous management of the finances. But, at the same time, he knew that Anthony was his patron, and that under another prior he might not continue to be promoted.

Merthin had commandeered a boat. He and two other young men were

out in midstream, where most of what had been the bridge was now floating in the water. Wearing only their underdrawers, the three were trying to lift a heavy beam in order to free someone. Merthin was small in stature, but the other two looked strong and well fed, and Godwyn guessed they were squires from the earl's entourage. Despite their evident fitness, they were finding it difficult to get leverage on the heavy timbers, standing as they were in the well of a small rowing boat.

Godwyn stood with a crowd of townspeople, watching, torn by fear and hope, as the two squires raised a heavy beam and Merthin pulled a body from beneath it. After a short examination, he called out: "Marguerite Jones—dead."

Marguerite was an elderly woman of no account. Impatiently, Godwyn shouted out: "Can't you see Prior Anthony?"

A look passed between the men on the boat, and Godwyn realized he had been too peremptory. But Merthin called back: "I can see a monk's robe."

"Then it's the prior!" Godwyn shouted. Anthony was the only monk still unaccounted for. "Can you tell how he is?"

Merthin leaned over the side of the boat. Apparently unable to get close enough from there, he eased himself into the water. Eventually he called out: "Still breathing."

Godwyn felt both elated and disappointed. "Then get him out, quickly!" he shouted. "Please," he added.

There was no acknowledgment of what he said, but he saw Merthin duck under a partly submerged plank, then relay instructions to the other two. They eased the beam they were holding to one side, letting it slip gently into the water, then they leaned over the prow of the little boat to get hold of the plank Merthin was under. Merthin seemed to be struggling to detach Anthony's clothing from a tangle of boards and splinters.

Godwyn watched, frustrated that he could do nothing to speed the process. He spoke to two of the bystanders. "Go to the priory and get two monks to bring a stretcher. Tell them Godwyn sent you." The two men went up the steps and into the priory grounds.

At last Merthin managed to pull the unconscious figure from the wreckage. He drew him close, then the other two heaved the prior into the boat. Merthin scrambled in after, and they poled to the bank.

Eager volunteers took Anthony from the boat and put him on the stretcher brought by the monks. Godwyn examined the prior quickly. He was breathing, but his pulse was weak. His eyes were closed and his face was ominously white. His head and chest were only bruised, but his pelvis seemed smashed, and he was bleeding.

The monks picked him up. Godwyn led the way across the priory grounds into the cathedral. "Make way!" he shouted. He took the prior along the nave

and into the chancel, the holiest part of the church. He told the monks to lay the body in front of the high altar. The sodden robe clearly outlined Anthony's hips and legs, which were twisted so far out of shape that only his top half looked human.

Within a few moments, all the monks had gathered around the unconscious body of their prior. Godwyn retrieved the reliquary from Earl Roland and placed it at Anthony's feet. Joseph placed a jeweled crucifix on his chest and wrapped Anthony's hands around it.

Mother Cecilia knelt beside Anthony. She wiped his face with a cloth soaked in some soothing liquid. She said to Joseph: "He seems to have broken many bones. Do you want Matthew Barber to look at him?"

Joseph shook his head silently.

Godwyn was glad. The barber would have defiled the holy sanctuary. Better to leave the outcome to God.

Brother Carlus performed the last rites, then led the monks in a hymn.

Godwyn did not know what to hope for. For some years he had been looking forward to the end of Prior Anthony's rule. But in the last hour he had got a glimpse of what might replace Anthony: joint rule by Carlus and Simeon. They were Anthony's cronies, and would be no better.

Suddenly he saw Matthew Barber at the edge of the crowd, looking over the monks' shoulders, studying Anthony's lower half. Godwyn was about to order him indignantly to leave the chancel, when he gave an almost imperceptible shake of the head and walked away.

Anthony opened his eyes.

Brother Joseph cried: "Praise God!"

The prior seemed to want to speak. Mother Cecilia, who was still kneeling beside him, leaned over his face to catch his words. Godwyn saw Anthony's mouth move, and wished he could hear. After a moment, the prior fell silent.

Cecilia looked shocked. "Is that true?" she said.

They all stared. Godwyn said: "What did he say, Mother Cecilia?"

She did not answer.

Anthony's eyes closed. A subtle change came over him. He went very still.

Godwyn bent over his body. There was no breath. He placed a hand over Anthony's heart, and felt no beat. He grasped the wrist, feeling for a pulse: nothing.

He stood up. "Prior Anthony has left this world," he said. "May God bless his soul and welcome him into His holy presence."

All the monks said: "Amen."

Godwyn thought: Now there will have to be an election.

PART III

June to December 1337

14

Kingsbridge Cathedral was a place of horror. Wounded people groaned in pain and cried out for help to God, or the saints, or their mothers. Every few minutes, someone searching for a loved one would find him or her dead and would scream with the shock of sudden grief. The living and the dead were grotesquely twisted with broken bones, covered in blood, their clothing ripped and sodden. The stone floor of the church was slippery with water, blood, and riverside mud.

In the middle of the horror, a small zone of calm and efficiency was centered on the figure of Mother Cecilia. Like a small, quick bird, she went from one horizontal figure to the next. She was followed by a little flock of hooded nuns, among them her long-time assistant, Sister Juliana, now respectfully known as Old Julie. As she examined each patient, she gave orders: for washing, for ointments, for bandages, for herbal medicines. In the more serious cases she would summon Mattie Wise, Matthew Barber, or Brother Joseph. She always spoke quietly but clearly, her instructions simple and decisive. She left most patients soothed, and their relatives reassured and hopeful.

It reminded Caris, with dreadful vividness, of the day her mother died. There had been terror and confusion then, though only in her heart. In the same way, Mother Cecilia had seemed to know what to do. Mama had died despite Cecilia's help, just as many of today's wounded would die; but there had been an orderliness about the death, a sense that everything possible had been done.

Some people appealed to the Virgin and the saints when someone was sick, but that only made Caris more uncertain and frightened, for there was no way to know if the spirits would help, or even whether they had heard. Mother Cecilia was not as powerful as the saints, the ten-year-old Caris had known; but all the same her assured, practical presence had given Caris both hope and resignation in a combination that brought peace to her soul.

Now Caris became part of Cecilia's entourage, without really making a decision or even thinking about it. She followed the commands of the most assertive person in the vicinity, just as people had obeyed her directions at the riverside immediately after the collapse, when no one else seemed to know what to do. Cecilia's brisk practicality was infectious, and those around her acquired some of the same cool competence. Caris found herself holding a small bowl of vinegar, while a beautiful novice nun called Mair dipped a rag in it and washed the blood from the face of Susanna Chepstow, the timber merchant's wife.

After that it was nonstop until well after dark. Thanks to the long summer evening, all the floating bodies were retrieved from the river before nightfall—though perhaps no one would ever know how many drowned people had sunk to the bottom or drifted downstream. There was no trace of Crazy Nell, who must have been pulled under by the cart to which she was tied. Unjustly, Friar Murdo had survived, having suffered nothing worse than a twisted ankle, and had limped off to the Bell to recuperate with hot ham and strong ale.

However, the treatment of the injured continued, after nightfall, by candlelight. Some of the nuns became exhausted and had to stop; others were overwhelmed by the scale of the tragedy and fell apart, misunderstanding what they were told and becoming clumsy, so that they had to be dismissed; but Caris and a small core group carried on until there was no more to do. It must have been midnight when the last knot was tied in the last bandage, and Caris staggered across the green to her father's house.

Papa and Petranilla sat together in the dining hall, holding hands, grieving for the death of their brother, Anthony. Edmund's eyes were wet with tears, and Petranilla was crying inconsolably. Caris kissed them both, but she could think of nothing to say. If she had sat down, she would have gone to sleep in the chair; so she climbed the stairs. She got into bed next to Gwenda, who was staying with her, as always. Gwenda was deep in an exhausted sleep, and did not stir.

Caris closed her eyes, her body weary and her heart aching with sorrow.

Her father was mourning one person among the many, but she felt the weight of them all. She thought of her friends, neighbors, and acquaintances lying dead on the cold stone floor of the cathedral; and she imagined the sadness of their parents, their children, their brothers and sisters; and the sheer volume of grief overwhelmed her. She sobbed into her pillow. Without speaking, Gwenda put an arm around her and hugged her. After a few moments exhaustion overtook her, and she fell asleep.

She got up again at dawn. Leaving Gwenda still fast asleep, she returned to the cathedral and continued the work. Most of the injured were sent home. Those who still needed to be watched over—such as the still-unconscious

Earl Roland—were moved into the hospital. The dead bodies were laid out in neat rows in the chancel, the eastern end of the church, to await burial.

The time flew by, with hardly a moment to rest. Then, late on Sunday afternoon, Mother Cecilia told Caris to take a break. She looked around and realized that most of the work was done. That was when she started to think of the future.

Until that moment she had felt, unconsciously, that ordinary life was over, and she was living in a new world of horror and tragedy. Now she realized that this, like everything else, would pass. The dead would be buried, the injured would heal, and somehow the town would struggle back to normal. And she remembered that, just before the bridge collapsed, there had been another tragedy, violent and devastating in its own way.

She found Merthin down by the river, with Elfric and Thomas Langley, organizing the cleanup with the help of fifty or more volunteers. Merthin's quarrel with Elfric had clearly been set aside in the emergency. Most of the loose timber had been retrieved from the water and stacked on the bank. But much of the woodwork was still joined together, and a mass of interlocked timber floated on the surface, moving slightly on the rise and fall of the water, with the innocent tranquillity of a great beast after it has killed and eaten.

The men were trying to break up the wreckage into manageable proportions. It was a dangerous job, with a constant risk that the bridge would collapse further and injure the volunteers. They had tied a rope around the central part of the bridge, now partly submerged, and a team of men stood on the bank hauling on the rope. In a boat in midstream were Merthin and giant Mark Webber with an oarsman. When the men on the bank rested, the boat was rowed in close to the wreckage, and Mark, directed by Merthin, attacked the beams with a huge forester's axe. Then the boat moved to a safe distance, Elfric gave a command, and the rope team pulled again.

As Caris watched, a big section of the bridge came free. Everyone cheered, and the men dragged the tangled woodwork to the shore.

The wives of some of the volunteers arrived with loaves of bread and jugs of ale. Thomas Langley ordered a break. While the men were resting, Caris got Merthin on his own. "You can't marry Griselda," she said without preamble.

The sudden assertion did not surprise him. "I don't know what to do," he said. "I keep thinking about it."

"Will you walk with me?"

"All right."

They left the crowd at the riverside and went up the main street. After the bustle of the Fleece Fair, the town was graveyard quiet. Everyone was staying indoors, tending the sick or mourning the dead. "There can't be many families in town that don't have someone dead or injured," she said. "There must have

been a thousand people on the bridge, either trying to leave town or tormenting Crazy Nell. There are more than a hundred bodies in the church, and we've treated about four hundred wounded."

"And five hundred lucky ones," Merthin said.

"We could have been on the bridge, or near it. You and I might be lying on the floor of the chancel, now, cold and still. But we've been given a gift—the rest of our lives. And we mustn't waste that gift because of one mistake."

"It's not a mistake," he said sharply. "It's a baby—a person, with a soul."

"You're a person with a soul, too—an exceptional one. Look at what you've been doing just now. Three people are in charge down there at the river. One is the town's most prosperous builder. Another is the matricularius at the priory. And the third is…a mere apprentice, not yet twenty-one. Yet the townsmen obey you as readily as they obey Elfric and Thomas."

"That doesn't mean I can shirk my responsibilities."

They turned into the priory close. The green in front of the cathedral was rutted and trampled from the fair, and there were boggy patches and wide puddles. In the three great west windows of the church Caris could see the reflection of a watery sun and ripped clouds, a picture divided, like a three-sided altarpiece. A bell began to ring for Evensong.

Caris said: "Think how often you've talked of going to see the buildings of Paris and Florence. Will you give all that up?"

"I suppose so. A man can't abandon his wife and child."

"So you're already thinking of her as your wife."

He rounded on her. "I'll never think of her as my wife," he said bitterly. "You know who I love."

For once she could not think of a clever answer. She opened her mouth to speak, but no words came to her. Instead, she felt a constriction in her throat. She blinked away tears, and looked down to hide her emotions.

He grasped her arms and pulled her close to him. "You know, don't you?"

She forced herself to meet his eye. "Do I?" Her vision blurred.

He kissed her mouth. It was a new kind of kiss, different from anything she had experienced before. His lips moved gently but insistently against hers, as if he was determined to remember the moment; and she realized, with dread, that he was thinking this would be their last kiss.

She clung to him, wanting it to go on forever, but all too soon he drew away.

"I love you," he said. "But I'm going to marry Griselda."

Life and death went on. Children were born and old people died. On Sunday Emma Butchers attacked her adulterous husband, Edward, with his largest cleaver in a fit of jealous rage. On Monday one of Bess Hampton's chickens

went missing, and was found boiling in a pot over Glynnie Thompson's kitchen fire, whereupon Glynnie was stripped and flogged by John Constable. On Tuesday Howell Tyler was working on the roof of St. Mark's church when a rotten beam gave way beneath him and he fell, crashing through the ceiling, to the floor below, and died immediately.

By Wednesday the wreckage of the bridge had been cleared, all but the stumps of two of the main piers, and the timber was stacked on the bank. The waterway was open, and barges and rafts were able to leave Kingsbridge for Melcombe with wool and other goods from the Fleece Fair consigned to Flanders and Italy.

When Caris and Edmund went to the riverside to check on progress, Merthin was using the salvaged timbers to build a raft to ferry people across the river. "It's better than a boat," he explained. "Livestock can walk on and off, and carts can be driven on, too."

Edmund nodded gloomily. "It will have to do, for the weekly market. Fortunately, we should have a new bridge by the time of the next Fleece Fair."

"I don't think so," Merthin said.

"But you told me it would take a year to build a new bridge!"

"A wooden bridge, yes. But if we build another wooden one it, too, will fall down."

"Why?"

"Let me show you." Merthin took them to a pile of timber. He pointed to a group of mighty posts. "These formed the piers—they're probably the famous twenty-four best oak trees in the land, given to the priory by the king. Notice the ends."

Caris could see that the huge posts had originally been sharpened into points, though their outlines had been softened by years under water.

Merthin said: "A timber bridge has no foundations. The posts are simply driven into the riverbed. That's not good enough."

"But this bridge has stood for hundreds of years!" Edmund said indignantly. He always sounded quarrelsome when he argued.

Merthin was used to him, and paid no attention to his tone of voice. "And now it has fallen down," he said patiently. "Something has changed. Wooden piers were once firm enough, but no longer."

"What can have changed? The river is the river."

"Well, for one thing you built a barn and a jetty on the bank, and protected the property with a wall. Several other merchants did the same. The old mud beach where I used to play on the south shore has mostly gone. So the river can no longer spread itself into the fields. As a result, the water flows faster than it used to—especially after the kind of heavy rain we've had this year."

"So it will have to be a stone bridge?"

"Yes."

Edmund looked up and saw Elfric standing by, listening. “Merthin says a stone bridge will take three years.”

Elfric nodded. “Three building seasons.”

Most building was done in the warmer months, Caris knew. Merthin had explained to her that stone walls could not be constructed when there was a risk that the mortar might freeze before it had begun to set.

Elfric went on: “One season for the foundations, one for the arches, and one for the roadbed. After each stage, the mortar must be left for three or four months to set hard before the next stage can be laid on top of it.”

“Three years with no bridge,” Edmund said gloomily.

“Four years, unless you get started right away.”

“You’d better prepare an estimate of the cost for the priory.”

“I’ve already started, but it’s a long job. It will take me another two or three days.”

“Quick as you can.”

Edmund and Caris left the riverside and walked up the main street, Edmund with his energetically lopsided stride. He would never lean on anyone’s arm, despite his withered leg. To keep his balance, he swung his arms as if he were sprinting. The townspeople knew to give him plenty of room, especially when he was in a hurry. “Three years!” he said as they walked. “It will do terrible damage to the Fleece Fair. I don’t know how long it will take us to get back to normal. Three years!”

When they got home, they found Caris’s sister, Alice, there. Her hair was tied up in her hat in an elaborate new style copied from Lady Philippa. She was sitting at the table with Aunt Petranilla. Caris knew immediately, from the looks on their faces, that they had been talking about her.

Petranilla went to the kitchen and came back with ale, bread, and fresh butter. She filled a cup for Edmund.

Petranilla had cried on Sunday, but since then she had shown little sign of bereavement for her dead brother, Anthony. Surprisingly Edmund, who had never liked Anthony, seemed to grieve more: tears would come to his eyes at unexpected moments during the day, though they would disappear just as quickly.

Now he was full of news of the bridge. Alice was inclined to question Merthin’s judgment, but Edmund dismissed that notion impatiently. “The boy’s a genius,” he said. “He knows more than many master builders, yet he isn’t out of his apprenticeship.”

Caris said bitterly: “All the more shame that he’s going to spend his life with Griselda.”

Alice leaped to the defense of her stepdaughter. “There’s nothing wrong with Griselda.”

“Yes, there is,” Caris said. “She doesn’t love him. She seduced him

because her boyfriend left town, that's all."

"Is that the story Merthin's telling you?" Alice laughed sarcastically. "If a man doesn't want to do it, he doesn't do it—take my word."

Edmund grunted. "Men can be tempted," he said.

"Oh, so you're siding with Caris, are you, Papa?" Alice said. "I shouldn't be surprised, you usually do."

"It's not a question of taking sides," Edmund replied. "A man may not want to do a thing beforehand, and he may regret it afterward, yet for a brief moment his wishes may change—especially when a woman uses her wiles."

"Wiles? Why do you assume that she threw herself at him?"

"I didn't say that. But I understand it began when she cried, and he comforted her."

Caris herself had told him this.

Alice made a disgusted sound. "You've always had a soft spot for that insubordinate apprentice."

Caris ate some bread with butter, but she had no appetite. She said: "I suppose they'll have half a dozen fat children, and Merthin will inherit Elfric's business, and become just another town tradesman, building houses for merchants and fawning on clergymen for contracts, just like his father-in-law."

Petranilla said: "And very lucky so to do! He'll be one of the leading men of the town."

"He's worthy of a better destiny."

"Is he, really?" Petranilla said in mock amazement. "And him the son of a knight who fell from grace and hasn't a shilling to buy shoes for his wife! What exactly do you believe him to be destined for?"

Caris was stung by this mockery. It was true that Merthin's parents were poor corrodiaries, dependent on the priory for their food and drink. For him to inherit a successful building business would indeed mean a jump up the social ladder. Yet she still felt he deserved better. She could not say exactly what future she had in mind for him. She just knew that he was different from everyone else in town, and she could not bear the thought of his becoming like the rest.

On Friday, Caris took Gwenda to see Mattie Wise.

Gwenda was still in town because Wulfric was there, attending to the burial of his family. Elaine, Edmund's housemaid, had dried Gwenda's dress in front of the fire, and Caris had bandaged her feet and given her an old pair of shoes.

Caris felt that Gwenda was not telling the full truth about her adventure in the forest. She said that Sim had taken her to the outlaws, and she had

escaped; he had chased after her, and he had died in the bridge collapse. John Constable was satisfied with that story: outlaws were outside the law, as their name indicated, so there was no question of Sim bequeathing his property. Gwenda was free. But something else had happened in the forest, Caris felt sure; something Gwenda did not want to talk about. Caris did not press her friend. Some things were best buried.

Funerals were the business of the town this week. The extraordinary manner of the deaths made little difference to the rituals of interment. The bodies had to be washed, the shrouds sewn for the poor, the coffins nailed for the rich, the graves dug, and the priests paid. Not all the monks were qualified as priests, but several were, and they worked in shifts, all day, every day, conducting obsequies in the cemetery on the north side of the cathedral. There were half a dozen small parish churches in Kingsbridge, and their priests were also busy.

Gwenda was helping Wulfric with the arrangements, performing the traditional woman's tasks, washing the bodies and making the shrouds, doing what she could to comfort him. He was in a kind of daze. He managed the details of the burial well enough, but spent hours gazing into space, with a slightly puzzled frown, as if trying to make sense of a massive conundrum.

By Friday the funerals were over, but the acting prior, Carlus, had announced a special service on Sunday for the souls of all those killed, so Wulfric was staying until Monday. Gwenda reported to Caris that he seemed grateful for the company of someone from his own village, but showed animation only when talking about Annet. Caris offered to buy her another love potion.

They found Mattie Wise in her kitchen, brewing medicines. The little house smelled of herbs, oil, and wine. "I used just about everything I had on Saturday and Sunday," she said. "I need to restock."

"You must have made some money, anyway," Gwenda said.

"Yes—if I can collect it."

Caris was shocked. "Do people welsh on you?"

"Some do. I always try to collect the fee in advance, while they're still in pain. But if they haven't got the money there and then, it's hard to refuse them treatment. Most pay up afterwards, but not all."

Caris felt indignant on behalf of her friend. "What do they say?"

"All sorts of things. They can't afford it, the potion did them no good, they were given it against their will, anything. But don't worry. There are enough honest people for me to continue. What's on your mind?"

"Gwenda lost her love potion in the accident."

"That's easily remedied. Why don't you prepare it for her?"

While Caris was making up the mixture, she asked Mattie: "How many pregnancies end in a miscarriage?"

Gwenda knew why she was asking. Caris had told her all about Merthin's dilemma. The two girls had spent most of their time together discussing either Wulfric's indifference or Merthin's high principles. Caris had even been tempted to buy a love potion herself, and use it on Merthin; though something held her back.

Mattie gave her a sharp look, but answered noncommittally. "No one knows. Many times, a woman misses one month but comes on again the next. Did she get pregnant and lose the baby, or was there some other reason? It's impossible to tell."

"Oh."

"Neither of you is pregnant, though, if that's what you're worried about."

Gwenda said quickly: "How do you know?"

"By looking at you. A woman changes almost immediately. Not just her belly and her breasts, but her complexion, her way of moving, her mood. I see these things better than most people—that's why they call me wise. So who is pregnant?"

"Griselda, Elfric's daughter."

"Oh, yes, I've seen her. She's three months gone."

Caris was astonished. "How long?"

"Three months, or very nearly. Take a look at her. She was never a thin girl, but she's even more voluptuous now. So why are you so shocked? I suppose it's Merthin's baby, is it?"

Mattie always guessed these things.

Gwenda said to Caris: "I thought you told me it happened recently."

"Merthin didn't say exactly when, but he gave me the impression it was not long ago, and it only happened once. Now it seems he's been doing it to her for months!"

Mattie frowned. "Why would he lie?"

"To make himself look not so bad?" Gwenda suggested.

"How could it be worse?"

"Men are peculiar, the way they think."

"I'm going to ask him," Caris said. "Right now." She put down the jar and the measuring spoon.

Gwenda said: "What about my love potion?"

"I'll finish making it," Mattie said. "Caris is in too much of a hurry."

"Thank you," Caris said, and she went out.

She marched down to the riverside, but for once Merthin was not there. She failed to find him at Elfric's house either. She decided he must be in the mason's loft.

In the west front of the cathedral, neatly fitted into one of the towers, was a workroom for the master mason. Caris reached it by climbing a narrow spiral staircase in a buttress of the tower. It was a wide room, well lit by tall

lancet windows. All along one wall were stacked the beautifully shaped wooden templates used by the original cathedral stone carvers, carefully preserved and used now for repairs.

Underfoot was the tracing floor. The floorboards were covered with a layer of plaster, and the original master mason, Jack Builder, had scratched his plans in the mortar with iron drawing instruments. The marks thus made were white at first, but they faded over time, and new drawings could be scratched on top of the old. When there were so many designs that it became hard to tell the new from the old, a fresh layer of plaster was laid on top, and the process began again.

Parchment, the thin leather on which monks copied out the books of the Bible, was much too expensive to be used for drawings. In Caris's lifetime a new writing material had appeared, paper, but it came from the Arabs, so monks rejected it as a heathen Muslim invention. Anyway, it had to be imported from Italy and was no cheaper than parchment. And the tracing floor had another advantage: a carpenter could lay a piece of wood on the floor, on top of the drawing, and carve his template exactly to the lines drawn by the master mason.

Merthin was kneeling on the floor, carving a piece of oak in accordance with a drawing, but he was not making a template. He was carving a cogwheel with sixteen teeth. On the floor close by was another, smaller wheel, and Merthin stopped carving for a moment to put the two together and see how well they fitted. Caris had seen such cogs, or gears, in water mills, connecting the mill paddle to the grindstone.

He must have heard her footsteps on the stone staircase, but he was too absorbed in his work to glance up. She regarded him for a second, anger competing with love in her heart. He had the look of total concentration that she knew so well: his slight body bent over his work, his strong hands and dextrous fingers making fine adjustments, his face immobile, his gaze unwavering. He had the perfect grace of a young deer bending its head to drink from a stream. This was what a man looked like, she thought, when he was doing what he was born to do. He was in a state like happiness, but more profound. He was fulfilling his destiny.

She burst out: "Why did you lie to me?"

His chisel slipped. He cried out in pain and looked at his finger. "Christ," he said, and put his finger in his mouth.

"I'm sorry," Caris said. "Are you hurt?"

"Nothing much. When did I lie to you?"

"You gave me the impression that Griselda seduced you one time. The truth is that the two of you have been at it for months."

"No, we haven't." He sucked his bleeding finger.

"She's three months pregnant."

“She can’t be, it happened two weeks ago.”

“She is, you can tell by her figure.”

“Can you?”

“Mattie Wise told me. Why did you lie?”

He looked her in the eye. “But I didn’t lie,” he said. “It happened on the Sunday of Fleece Fair week. That was the first and only time.”

“Then how could she be sure she’s pregnant, after only two weeks?”

“I don’t know. How soon can women tell, anyway?”

“Don’t you know?”

“I’ve never asked. Anyway, three months ago Griselda was still with…”

“Oh, God!” Caris said. A spark of hope flared in her breast. “She was still with her old boyfriend—Thurstan.” The spark blazed into a flame. “It must be his baby, Thurstan’s—not yours. You’re not the father!”

“Is it possible?” Merthin seemed hardly to dare to hope.

“Of course—it explains everything. If she had suddenly fallen in love with you, she’d be after you every chance she gets. But you said she hardly speaks to you.”

“I thought that was because I was reluctant to marry her.”

“She’s never liked you. She just needed a father for her baby. Thurstan ran away—probably when she told him she was pregnant—and you were right there in the house, and stupid enough to fall for her trick. Oh, thank God!”

“Thank Mattie Wise,” said Merthin.

She caught sight of his left hand. Blood was welling from a finger. “Oh, I made you hurt yourself!” she cried. She took his hand and examined the cut. It was small, but deep. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s not that bad.”

“But it is,” she said, not knowing whether she was talking about the cut or something else. She kissed his hand, feeling his hot blood on her lips. She put his finger in her mouth, sucking the wound clean. It was so intimate that it felt like a sexual act, and she closed her eyes, feeling ecstatic. She swallowed, tasting his blood, and shuddered with pleasure.

A week after the bridge collapsed, Merthin had built a ferry.

It was ready at dawn on Saturday morning, in time for the weekly Kingsbridge market. He had worked on it by lamplight all Friday night, and Caris guessed he had not had time to speak to Griselda and tell her he knew the baby was Thurstan’s. Caris and her father came down to the riverside to see the new sensation as the first traders arrived—women from the surrounding villages with baskets of eggs, peasants with cartloads of butter and cheese, and shepherds with flocks of lambs.

Caris admired Merthin’s work. The raft was large enough to carry a horse

and cart without taking the beast out of the shafts, and it had a firm wooden railing to keep sheep from falling overboard. New wooden platforms at water level on both banks made it easy for carts to roll on and off. Passengers paid a penny, collected by a monk—the ferry, like the bridge, belonged to the priory.

Most ingenious was the system Merthin had devised for moving the raft from one bank to the other. A long rope ran from the south end of the raft across the river, around a post, back across the river, around a drum, and back to the raft, where it was attached again at the north end. The drum was connected by wooden gears to a wheel turned by a pacing ox: Caris had seen Merthin carving the gears yesterday. A lever altered the gears so that the drum turned in either direction, depending on whether the raft was going or coming back—and there was no need to take the ox out of its traces and turn it around.

"It's quite simple," Merthin said when she marveled at it—and it was, when she looked closely. The lever simply lifted one large cogwheel up out of the chain and moved into its place two smaller wheels, the effect being to reverse the direction in which the drum turned. All the same, no one in Kingsbridge had seen anything like it.

During the course of the morning, half the town came to look at Merthin's amazing new machine. Caris was bursting with pride in him. Elfric stood by, explaining the mechanism to anyone who asked, taking the credit for Merthin's work.

Caris wondered where Elfric got the nerve. He had destroyed Merthin's door—an act of violence that would have scandalized the town, had it not been overtaken by the greater tragedy of the bridge collapse. He had beaten Merthin with a stick, and Merthin still had the bruise on his face. And he had colluded in a deception intended to make Merthin marry Griselda and raise another man's child. Merthin had continued to work with him, feeling that the emergency outweighed their quarrel. But Caris did not know how Elfric could continue to hold his head up.

The ferry was brilliant—but inadequate.

Edmund pointed this out. On the far side of the river, carts and traders were queuing all along the road through the suburbs as far as the eye could see.

"It would go faster with two oxen," Merthin said.

"Twice as fast?"

"Not quite, no. I could build another ferry."

"There's already a second one," Edmund said, pointing. He was right: Ian Boatman was rowing foot passengers across. Ian could not take carts, he refused livestock, and he charged twopence. Normally he had trouble scraping a living: he took a monk across to Leper Island twice a day and found little other business. But today he, too, had a queue.

Merthin said: “Well, you’re right. In the end, a ferry is not a bridge.”

“This is a catastrophe,” Edmund said. “Buonaventura’s news was bad enough. But this—this could kill the town.”

“Then you must have a new bridge.”

“It’s not me, it’s the priory. The prior is dead, and there’s no telling how long they will take to elect a new one. We’ll just have to pressure the acting prior to make a decision. I’ll go and see Carlus now. Come with me, Caris.”

They walked up the street and entered the priory. Most visitors had to go to the hospital, and tell one of the servants that they wanted to speak to a monk; but Edmund was too important a personage, and too proud, to beg the favor of an audience in that way. The prior was lord of Kingsbridge, but Edmund was alderman of the guild, leader of the merchants who made the town what it was, and he treated the prior as a partner in the governance of the town. Besides, for the last thirteen years the prior had been his younger brother. So he went straight to the prior’s house on the north side of the cathedral.

It was a timber-framed house like Edmund’s, with a hall and a parlor on the ground floor and two bedrooms upstairs. There was no kitchen, for the prior’s meals were prepared in the monastery kitchen. Many bishops and priors lived in palaces—and the bishop of Kingsbridge had a fine place in Shiring—but the prior of Kingsbridge lived modestly. However, the chairs were comfortable, the wall was hung with tapestries of Bible scenes, and there was a big fireplace to keep the house cozy in winter.

Caris and Edmund arrived mid-morning, the time when younger monks were supposed to labor, and their elders to read. Edmund and Caris found Blind Carlus in the hall of the prior’s house, deep in conversation with Simeon, the treasurer. “We must talk about the new bridge,” Edmund said immediately.

“Very well, Edmund,” Carlus said, recognizing him by his voice. The welcome was not warm, Caris noted, and she wondered if they had come at a bad time.

Edmund was just as sensitive as she to atmosphere, but he always blustered through. Now he took a chair and said: “When do you think you’ll hold the election for the new prior?”

“You can sit down, too, Caris,” said Carlus. She had no idea how he knew she was there. “No date has been set for the election,” he went on. “Earl Roland has the right to nominate a candidate, but he has not yet recovered consciousness.”

“We can’t wait,” Edmund said. Caris thought he was being too abrupt, but this was his way, so she said nothing. “We have to start work on the new bridge right away,” her father continued. “Timber’s no good, we have to build in stone. It’s going to take three years—four, if we delay.”

“A stone bridge?”

“It’s essential. I’ve been talking to Elfric and Merthin. Another wooden bridge would fall down like the old.”

“But the cost!”

“About two hundred and fifty pounds, depending on the design. That’s Elfric’s calculation.”

Brother Simeon said: “A new wooden bridge would cost fifty pounds, and Prior Anthony rejected that last week because of the price.”

“And look at the result! A hundred people dead, many more injured, livestock and carts lost, the prior dead, and the earl at death’s door.”

Carlus said stiffly: “I hope you don’t mean to blame all that on the late Prior Anthony.”

“We can’t pretend his decision worked out well.”

“God has punished us for sin.”

Edmund sighed. Caris felt frustrated. Whenever they were in the wrong, monks would bring God into the argument. Edmund said: “It is hard for us mere men to know God’s intentions. But one thing we do know is that, without a bridge, this town will die. We’re already losing out to Shiring. Unless we build a new stone bridge as fast as we possibly can, Kingsbridge will soon become a small village.”

“That may be God’s plan for us.”

Edmund began to show his exasperation. “Is it possible that God is so displeased with you monks? For, believe me, if the Fleece Fair and the Kingsbridge market die, there will not be a priory here with twenty-five monks and forty nuns and fifty employees, and a hospital and a choir and a school. There may not be a cathedral, either. The bishop of Kingsbridge has always lived in Shiring—what if the prosperous merchants there offer to build him a splendid new cathedral in their own town, out of the profits from their ever-growing market? No Kingsbridge market, no town, no cathedral, no priory—is that what you want?”

Carlus looked dismayed. Clearly it had not occurred to him that the long-term consequences of the bridge collapse could actually affect the status of the priory.

But Simeon said: “If the priory can’t afford to build a wooden bridge, there’s certainly no prospect of a stone one.”

“But you must!”

“Will the masons work free?”

“Certainly not. They have to feed their families. But we’ve already explained how the townspeople could raise the money and lend it to the priory against the security of the bridge tolls.”

“And take away our income from the bridge!” Simeon said indignantly. “You’re back to that swindle, are you?”

Caris put in: “You’ve got no bridge tolls at all now.”

“On the contrary, we’re collecting fares on the ferry.”

“You found the money to pay Elfric for that.”

“A lot less than a bridge—and even so it emptied our coffers.”

“The fares will never amount to much—the ferry is too slow.”

“The time may come, in the future, when the priory is able to build a new bridge. God will send the means, if he wishes it. And then we will still have the tolls.”

Edmund said: “God has already sent the means. He inspired my daughter to dream up a way of raising the money that has never been thought of before.”

Carlus said primly: “Please leave it to us to decide what God has done.”

“Very well.” Edmund stood up, and Caris did the same. “I’m very sorry you’re taking this attitude. It’s a catastrophe for Kingsbridge and everyone who lives here, including the monks.”

“I must be guided by God, not you.”

Edmund and Caris turned to leave.

“One more thing, if I may,” said Carlus.

Edmund turned at the door. “Of course.”

“It’s not acceptable for laypeople to enter priory buildings at will. Next time you wish to see me, please come to the hospital, and send a novice or a priory servant to seek me out, in the usual way.”

“I’m alderman of the parish guild!” Edmund protested. “I’ve always had direct access to the prior.”

“No doubt the fact that Prior Anthony was your brother made him reluctant to impose the usual rules. But those days are over.”

Caris looked at her father’s face. He was repressing fury. “Very well,” he said tightly.

“God bless you.”

Edmund went out, and Caris followed.

They walked across the muddy green together, passing a pitifully small cluster of market stalls. Caris felt the weight of her father’s obligations. Most people just worried about feeding their families. Edmund worried about the entire town. She glanced at him and saw that his expression was twisted into an anxious frown. Unlike Carlus, Edmund would not throw his hands in the air and say that God’s will would be done. He was racking his brains for a solution to the problem. She felt a surge of compassion for him, straining to do the right thing with no help from the powerful priory. He never complained of the responsibility, he just took it on. It made her want to weep.

They left the precincts and crossed the main street. As they came to their front door, Caris said: “What are we going to do?”

“It’s obvious, isn’t it?” said her father. “We’ve got to make sure Carlus

doesn’t get elected prior.”

15

Godwyn wanted to be prior of Kingsbridge. He longed for it with all his heart. He itched to reform the priory’s finances, tightening up the management of its lands and other assets, so that the monks no longer had to go to Mother Cecilia for money. He yearned for the stricter separation of monks from nuns, and both from townspeople, so that they might all breathe the pure air of sanctity. But as well as these irreproachable motives, there was something else. He lusted for the authority and distinction of the title. At night, in his imagination, he was already prior.

“Clean up that mess in the cloister!” he would say to a monk.

“Yes, Father Prior, right away.”

Godwyn loved the sound of *Father Prior.*

“Good day, Bishop Richard,” he would say, not obsequiously, but with friendly courtesy.

And Bishop Richard would reply, as one distinguished clergyman to another: “And a good day to you, too, Prior Godwyn.”

“I trust everything is to your satisfaction, Archbishop?” he might say, more deferentially this time, but still as a junior colleague of the great man, rather than as an underling.

“Oh, yes, Godwyn, you’ve done extraordinarily well here.”

“Your Reverence is very kind.”

And perhaps, one day, strolling in the cloister side by side with a richly dressed potentate: “Your Majesty does us great honor to visit our humble priory.”

“Thank you, Father Godwyn, but I come to ask your advice.”

He wanted this position—but he was not sure how to get it. He pondered the question all week, as he supervised a hundred burials and planned the big Sunday service that would be both Anthony’s funeral and a remembrance for the souls of all the Kingsbridge dead.

Meanwhile, he spoke to no one of his hopes. It was only ten days ago that he had learned the price of being guileless. He had gone to the chapter with *Timothy’s Book* and a strong argument for reform—and the old guard had turned on him with perfect coordination, as if they had rehearsed it, and squashed him like a frog under a cartwheel.

He would not let that happen again.

On Sunday morning, as the monks were filing into the refectory for breakfast, a novice whispered to Godwyn that his mother would like to see

him in the north porch of the cathedral. He slipped away discreetly.

He felt apprehensive as he passed quietly through the cloisters and the church. He could guess what had happened. Something had occurred yesterday to trouble Petranilla. She had lain awake half the night worrying about it. This morning she had woken up at dawn with a plan of action—and he was part of it. She would be at her most impatient and domineering. Her plan would probably be good—but even if it was not, she would insist he carry it out.

She stood in the gloom of the porch in a wet cloak—it was raining again. “My brother Edmund came to see Blind Carlus yesterday,” she said. “He tells me Carlus is acting as if he is already prior, and the election is a mere formality.”

There was an accusing note in her voice, as if this was Godwyn’s fault, and he answered defensively. “The old guard swung behind Carlus before Uncle Anthony’s body was cold. They won’t hear talk of rival candidates.”

“Hm. And the youngsters?”

“They want me to run, of course. They liked the way I stood up to Prior Anthony over *Timothy’s Book*—even though I was overruled. But I’ve said nothing.”

“Any other candidates?”

“Thomas Langley is the outsider. Some disapprove of him because he used to be a knight, and has killed people, by his own admission. But he’s capable, does his job with quiet efficiency, never bullies the novices…”

His mother looked thoughtful. “What’s his story? Why did he become a monk?”

Godwyn’s apprehension began to ease. It seemed she was not going to berate him for inaction. “Thomas just says he always hankered for the sanctified life and, when he came here to get a sword wound attended to, he resolved never to leave.”

“I remember that. It was ten years ago. But I never did hear how he got the wound.”

“Nor I. He doesn’t like to talk about his violent past.”

“Who paid for his admission to the priory?”

“Oddly enough, I don’t know.” Godwyn often marveled at his mother’s ability to ask the revealing question. She might be tyrannical, but he had to admire her. “It might have been Bishop Richard—I recall him promising the usual gift. But he wouldn’t have had the resources personally—he wasn’t a bishop, then, just a priest. Perhaps he was speaking for Earl Roland.”

“Find out.”

Godwyn hesitated. He would have to look through all the charters in the priory’s library. The librarian, Brother Augustine, would not presume to question the sacrist, but someone else might. Then Godwyn would have the

awkwardness of inventing a plausible story to explain what he was doing. If the gift had been cash, rather than land or other property—unusual, but possible—he would have to go through the account rolls…

"What's the matter?" his mother said sharply.

"Nothing. You're right." He reminded himself that her domineering attitude was a sign of her love for him, perhaps the only way she knew how to express it. "There must be a record. Come to think of it…"

"What?"

"A gift like that is usually trumpeted. The prior announces it in church, and calls down blessings on the head of the donor, then preaches a sermon on how people who give lands to the priory are rewarded in Heaven. But I don't remember anything like that happening at the time Thomas came to us."

"All the more reason to seek out the charter. I think Thomas is a man with a secret. And a secret is always a weakness."

"I'll look into it. What do you think I should say to people who want me to stand for election?"

Petranilla smiled slyly. "I think you should tell them you're not going to be a candidate."

Breakfast was over by the time Godwyn left his mother. Latecomers were not allowed to eat, by a longstanding rule. But the kitchener, Brother Reynard, could always find a morsel for someone he liked. Godwyn went to the kitchen and got a slice of cheese and a heel of bread. He ate it standing up, while around him the priory servants brought the breakfast bowls back from the refectory and scrubbed out the iron pot in which the porridge had been cooked.

As he ate, he mulled over his mother's advice. The more he thought about it, the cleverer it seemed. Once he had announced he would not stand for election, everything else he said would carry the authority of a disinterested commentator. He could manipulate the election without being suspected of selfish motives. Then he could make his move at the last moment. He felt a warm glow of loving gratitude for the shrewdness of his mother's restless brain, and the loyalty of her indomitable heart.

Brother Theodoric found him there. Theodoric's fair complexion was flushed with indignation. "Brother Simeon spoke to us at breakfast about Carlus becoming prior," he said. "It was all about continuing the wise traditions of Anthony. He's not going to change anything!"

That was sly, Godwyn thought. Simeon had taken advantage of Godwyn's absence to say, with authority, things that Godwyn would have challenged if he had been present. He said sympathetically: "That's disgraceful."

"I asked whether the other candidates would be permitted to address the

monks at breakfast in the same way.”

Godwyn grinned. “Good for you!”

“Simeon said there was no need for other candidates. ‘We’re not holding an archery contest,’ he said. In his view, the decision has already been made: Prior Anthony chose Carlus as his successor by making him subprior.”

“That’s complete rubbish.”

“Exactly. The monks are furious.”

This was very good, Godwyn thought. Carlus had offended even his supporters by trying to take away their right to vote. He was undermining his own candidacy.

Theodoric went on: “I think we should press Carlus to withdraw himself from the contest.”

Godwyn wanted to say: *Are you mad?* He bit his tongue and tried to look as if he were mulling over what Theodoric had said. “Is that the best way to deal with it?” he asked, as if genuinely unsure.

Theodoric was surprised by the question. “What do you mean?”

“You say the brothers are all furious with Carlus and Simeon. If this goes on, they won’t vote for Carlus. But if Carlus withdraws, the old guard will come up with another candidate. They could make a better choice the second time. It might be someone popular—Brother Joseph, for example.”

Theodoric was thunderstruck. “I never thought of it that way.”

“Perhaps we should hope that Carlus remains the choice of the old guard. Everyone knows he’s against any kind of change. The reason he’s a monk is that he likes to know that every day will be the same: he’ll walk the same paths, sit in the same seats, eat and pray and sleep in the same places. Perhaps it’s because of his blindness, though I suspect he might have been like that anyway. The cause doesn’t matter. He believes that nothing here needs changing. Now, there aren’t many monks who are *that* contented—which makes Carlus relatively easy to beat. A candidate who represented the old guard but advocated a few minor reforms would be much more likely to win.” Godwyn realized he had forgotten to seem tentative and had started laying down the law. Backtracking quickly, he added: “I don’t know—what do you think?”

“I think you’re a genius,” said Theodoric.

I’m not a genius, Godwyn thought, but I learn fast.

He went to the hospital, where he found Philemon sweeping out the private guest rooms upstairs. Lord William was still here, watching over his father, waiting for him to wake up or die. Lady Philippa was with him. Bishop Richard had returned to his palace in Shiring, but was expected back today for the big funeral service.

Godwyn took Philemon to the library. Philemon could barely read, but he would be useful for getting out the charters.

The priory had more than a hundred charters. Most were deeds to landholdings, the majority near Kingsbridge, some scattered around far parts of England and Wales. Other charters entitled the monks to establish their priory, to build a church, to take stone from a quarry on the earl of Shiring's land without payment, to parcel the land around the priory into house plots and rent them out, to hold courts, to have a weekly market, to charge a toll for crossing the bridge, to have an annual Fleece Fair, and to ship goods by river to Melcombe without paying taxes to the lords of any of the lands through which the river passed.

The documents were written with pen and ink on parchment, thin leather painstakingly cleaned and scraped and bleached and stretched to form a writing surface. Longer ones were rolled up and tied with a fine leather thong. They were kept in an ironbound chest. The chest was locked, but the key was in the library, in a small carved box.

Godwyn frowned with disapproval when he opened the chest. The charters were not lined up in neat stacks, but tumbled in the box in no apparent order. Some had small rips and frayed edges, and all were covered with dust. They should be kept in date sequence, he thought, each one numbered, and the numbered list fixed to the inside of the lid, so that any particular charter could be quickly located. If I become prior…

Philemon took the charters out one by one, blew off the dust, and laid them on a table for Godwyn. Most people disliked Philemon. One or two of the older monks mistrusted him, but Godwyn did not: it was hard to mistrust someone who treated you like a god. Most of the monks were just used to him—he had been around for so long. Godwyn remembered him as a boy, tall and awkward, always hanging around the priory, asking the monks which saint was best to pray to, and had they ever witnessed a miracle.

Most of the charters had originally been written out twice on a single sheet. The word "chirograph" had been written in large letters between the two copies, then the sheet had been cut in half with a zigzag line through the word. Each of the parties kept half the sheet, and the match between the zigzags was taken as proof that both documents were genuine.

Some of the sheets had holes, probably where the living sheep had been bitten by an insect. Others appeared to have been nibbled, at some point in their history, presumably by mice.

They were written in Latin, of course. The more recent ones were easier to read, but the older style of handwriting was sometimes hard for Godwyn to decipher. He scanned each until he came to a date. He was looking for something written soon after All Hallows Day ten years ago.

He examined every sheet and found nothing.

The nearest was a deed dated some weeks later in which Earl Roland gave permission to Sir Gerald to transfer his lands to the ownership of the priory, in

exchange for which the priory would forgive Gerald's debts and support him and his wife for the rest of their lives.

Godwyn was not really disappointed. Rather the contrary. Either Thomas had been admitted without the usual gift—which would in itself be curious—or the charter was kept somewhere else, away from prying eyes. Either way, it seemed increasingly likely that Petranilla's instinct was right, and Thomas had a secret.

There were not many private places in a monastery. Monks were supposed to have no personal property and no secrets. Although some wealthy monasteries had built private cells for the senior monks, at Kingsbridge they slept in one big room—all except the prior himself. Almost certainly, the charter that had secured Thomas's admission was in the prior's house.

Which was now occupied by Carlus.

That made things difficult. Carlus would not let Godwyn search the place. Searching might hardly be necessary; there was probably a box or satchel somewhere in plain sight containing the late Prior Anthony's personal documents: a notebook from his novice days, a friendly letter from the archbishop, some sermons. Carlus had probably examined the contents after Anthony died. But he had no reason to permit Godwyn to do the same.

Godwyn frowned, thinking. Could someone else search? Edmund or Petranilla might ask to see their late brother's possessions, and it would be hard for Carlus to deny such a request. But he might remove any priory documents beforehand. No, the search had to be clandestine.

The bell rang for Terce, the morning office. Godwyn realized that the only time he could be certain Carlus would not be in the prior's house was during a service in the cathedral.

He would have to skip Terce. He could think up a plausible excuse. It would not be easy—he was the sacrist, the one person who should never skip services. But there was no alternative.

"I want you to come to me in the church," he said to Philemon.

"All right," said Philemon, though he looked worried: priory employees were not supposed to enter the chancel during worship.

"Come right after the verse. Whisper in my ear. It doesn't matter what you say. Take no notice of my reaction, just continue."

Philemon frowned anxiously, but he nodded assent. He would do anything for Godwyn.

Godwyn left the library and joined the procession into the church. There was only a handful of people standing in the nave: most of the town would come later in the day to attend the mass for the victims of the bridge collapse. The monks took their places in the chancel, and the ritual began. "Oh, God, incline unto mine aid," Godwyn said along with the rest.

They finished the verse and began the first hymn, and Philemon appeared. All the monks stared at him, as people always did stare at anything out of the ordinary that occurred during a familiar rite. Brother Simeon frowned disapprovingly. Carlus, conducting the singing, sensed a disturbance and looked puzzled. Philemon came to Godwyn's seat and bent over. "Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly," he whispered.

Godwyn pretended to be surprised, and continued to listen while Philemon recited Psalm number one. After a few moments he shook his head vigorously, as if denying a request. Then he listened some more. He was going to have to think up an elaborate story to account for this pantomime. Perhaps he would say that his mother had insisted on speaking to him immediately about the funeral of her brother, Prior Anthony, and that she was threatening to come into the chancel herself unless Philemon took a message to Godwyn. Petranilla's overbearing personality, combined with family grief, made the story just about credible. As Philemon finished the psalm, Godwyn made a resigned face and got up and followed Philemon out of the chancel.

They hurried around the cathedral to the prior's house. A young employee was sweeping the floor. He would not dare to question a monk. He might tell Carlus that Godwyn and Philemon had been here—but it would be too late then.

Godwyn thought the prior's house was a disgrace. It was smaller than Uncle Edmund's home in the main street. A prior should have a palace befitting his station, as the bishop did. There was nothing glorious about this building. A few tapestries covered the walls, depicting biblical scenes and keeping out the drafts, but overall the decor was dull and unimaginative—rather like the late Anthony.

They searched the place quickly and soon found what they were looking for. Upstairs in the bedroom, in a chest beside the prie-dieu, was a large wallet. It was made of soft ginger-brown goatskin and beautifully sewn with scarlet thread: Godwyn felt sure it had been a pious gift from one of the town's leatherworkers.

Watched intently by Philemon, he opened it.

Inside were about thirty sheets of parchment, laid flat and interleaved with protective linen cloths. Godwyn examined them quickly.

Several bore study notes on the Psalms: Anthony must at some time have contemplated writing a book of commentaries, but the work appeared to have been abandoned. The most surprising was a love poem, in Latin. Headed *Virent Oculi*, it was addressed to a man with green eyes. Uncle Anthony had green eyes flecked with gold, like all his family.

Godwyn wondered who had written it. Not many women could write Latin well enough to compose a poem. Had a nun loved Anthony? Or was the poem from a man? The parchment was old and yellowing: the love affair, if

such it was, had happened in Anthony's youth. But he had kept the poem. Perhaps he had not been quite as dull as Godwyn had imagined.

Philemon said: "What is it?"

Godwyn felt guilty. He had peeped into a deeply private corner of his uncle's life, and he wished he had not. "Nothing," he said. "Just a poem." He picked up the next sheet—and struck gold.

It was a charter dated Christmas ten years ago. It concerned a landholding of five hundred acres near Lynn, in Norfolk. The lord had recently died. The deed assigned the vacant lordship to Kingsbridge Priory, and specified the annual dues—grain, fleeces, calves, and chickens—payable to the priory by the serfs and tenants who farmed the land. It nominated one of the peasants to be a bailiff with the responsibility of delivering the produce to the priory annually. It also assigned money payments that could be offered instead of the actual produce—a practice that was now predominant, especially where the land was many miles from the residence of the lord.

It was a typical charter. Every year, after the harvest, representatives of dozens of similar communities made the pilgrimage to the priory to deliver what they owed. Those from nearby showed up early in the autumn; others came at intervals through the winter, with a few from long distances not arriving until after Christmas.

The deed also specified that the gift was given in consideration of the priory's accepting Sir Thomas Langley as a monk. That, too, was routine.

But one feature of this document was not commonplace. It was signed by Queen Isabella.

That was interesting. Isabella was the unfaithful wife of King Edward II. She had rebelled against her royal husband and installed, in his place, their fourteen-year-old son. Shortly afterward the deposed king had died, and Prior Anthony had been present at his burial in Gloucester. Thomas had come to Kingsbridge at around the same time.

For a few years the queen and her lover, Roger Mortimer, had ruled England; but, before long, Edward III had asserted his authority, despite his youth. The new king was now twenty-four and firmly in control. Mortimer was dead, and Isabella, now forty-two, lived in opulent retirement at Castle Rising in Norfolk, not far from Lynn.

"This is it!" Godwyn said to Philemon. "It was Queen Isabella who arranged for Thomas to become a monk."

Philemon frowned. "But why?"

Though uneducated, Philemon was shrewd. "Why indeed?" Godwyn answered. "Presumably she wanted to reward him, or silence him, or perhaps both. And this happened in the year of her coup."

"He must have performed some service for her."

Godwyn nodded. "He carried a message, or opened the gates of a castle,

or betrayed the king's plans to her, or secured for her the support of some important baron. But why is it a secret?"

"It's not," said Philemon. "The treasurer must know about it. And everyone in Lynn. The bailiff must talk to a few people when he comes here."

"But no one knows that the whole arrangement was made for the benefit of Thomas—unless they have seen this charter."

"So that's the secret—that Queen Isabella made this gift for Thomas's sake."

"Exactly." Godwyn packed up the documents, carefully interleaving the sheets of parchment with linen cloths, and replaced the wallet in the chest.

Philemon asked: "But why is it a secret? There's nothing dishonest or shameful about such an arrangement—it happens all the time."

"I don't know why it's a secret, and perhaps we don't need to know. The fact that people want to keep it hidden may be sufficient for our purpose. Let's get out of this house."

Godwyn felt satisfied. Thomas had a secret and Godwyn knew about it. That gave Godwyn power. Now he felt confident enough to risk putting Thomas forward as a candidate for prior. He also felt apprehensive: Thomas was no fool.

They returned to the cathedral. The office of Terce ended a few moments later, and Godwyn began to prepare the church for the big funeral service. On his instructions, six monks lifted Anthony's coffin and placed it on a stand in front of the altar, then surrounded it with candles. Townspeople began to gather in the nave. Godwyn nodded to his cousin Caris, who had covered her everyday headgear in black silk. Then he spotted Thomas, carrying in a large, ornate chair, with the help of a novice. This was the bishop's throne, or cathedra, that gave the church its special cathedral status.

Godwyn touched Thomas's arm. "Let Philemon do that."

Thomas bristled, thinking that Godwyn was offering help because of his missing arm. "I can manage."

"I know you can. I want a word."

Thomas was older—he was thirty-four, Godwyn thirty-one—but Godwyn was his superior in the monastic hierarchy. All the same, Godwyn was always a little afraid of Thomas. The matricularius usually showed the appropriate deference to the sacrist, but all the same Godwyn felt he was getting just as much respect as Thomas thought he merited, and no more. Though Thomas conformed in every way to the discipline of St. Benedict's Rule, nevertheless he seemed to have brought into the priory with him a quality of independence and self-sufficiency that he never lost.

It would not be easy to deceive Thomas—but that was exactly what Godwyn planned to do.

Thomas allowed Philemon to take his side of the throne, and Godwyn

drew him into the aisle. “They’re talking about you as possibly the next prior,” Godwyn said.

“They’re saying the same about you,” Thomas rejoined.

“I shall refuse to stand.”

Thomas raised his eyebrows. “You surprise me, Brother.”

“Two reasons,” Godwyn said. “One, I think you would do a better job.”

Thomas looked more surprised. He probably had not suspected Godwyn of such modesty. He was right: Godwyn was lying.

“Two,” Godwyn continued, “you’re more likely to win.” Now Godwyn was telling the truth. “The youngsters like me, but you’re popular across the range of all ages.”

Thomas’s handsome face looked quizzical. He was waiting for the catch.

“I want to help you,” Godwyn said. “I believe the only important thing is to have a prior who will reform the monastery and improve its finances.”

“I think I could do that. But what do you want in return for your support?”

Godwyn knew better than to ask for nothing. Thomas would not believe that. He invented a plausible lie. “I’d like to be your subprior.”

Thomas nodded, but did not immediately consent. “How would you help me?”

“First, by gaining you the support of the townspeople.”

“Just because Edmund Wooler is your uncle?”

“It’s not that simple. The townspeople are worried about the bridge. Carlus won’t say when he’ll begin building, if ever. They’re desperate to stop him becoming prior. If I tell Edmund that you’ll start work on the bridge as soon as you’re elected, you’ll have the whole town behind you.”

“That won’t win me the votes of many monks.”

“Don’t be so sure. Remember, the monks’ choice has to be ratified by the bishop. Most bishops are prudent enough to consult local opinion—and Richard is as keen as anyone to avoid trouble. If the townspeople come out for you, it will make a difference.”

Godwyn could see that Thomas did not trust him. The matricularius studied him, and Godwyn felt a bead of sweat trickle down his spine as he fought to remain expressionless under that keen gaze. But Thomas was listening to his arguments. “There’s no doubt we need a new bridge,” he said. “Carlus is foolish to prevaricate.”

“So you would be promising something you intend to do anyway.”

“You’re very persuasive.”

Godwyn held up his hands in a defensive gesture. “I don’t mean to be. You must do what you feel is God’s will.”

Thomas looked skeptical. He did not believe that Godwyn was so dispassionate. But he said: “All right.” Then he added: “I’ll pray about it.”

Godwyn sensed he would get no stronger commitment out of Thomas

today, and it might be counterproductive to push any harder. “So will I,” he said, and he turned away.

Thomas would do exactly what he had promised, and pray about it. He had little in the way of personal desires. If he thought it was God’s will he would stand as prior, and if not, not. Godwyn could do no more with him, for the moment.

There was now a blaze of candles around Anthony’s coffin. The nave was filling with townspeople and peasants from the surrounding villages. Godwyn raked the crowd for the face of Caris, which he had spotted a few minutes earlier. He located her in the south transept, looking at Merthin’s scaffolding in the aisle. He had affectionate memories of Caris as a child, when he had been her all-knowing grown-up cousin.

She had been looking glum since the bridge collapse, he had noticed, but today she seemed cheerful. He was glad: he had a soft spot for her. He touched her elbow. “You look happy.”

“I am.” She smiled. “A romantic knot just came untangled. But you wouldn’t understand.”

“Of course not.” You have no idea, he thought, how many romantic tangles there are among monks. But he said nothing: laypeople were best left in ignorance of sins that took place in the priory. He said: “Your father should speak to Bishop Richard about rebuilding the bridge.”

“Really?” she said skeptically. As a child she had hero-worshipped him, but nowadays she was less in awe. “What’s the point? It’s not his bridge.”

“The monks’ choice for prior has to be approved by the bishop. Richard could let it be known that he won’t approve anyone who refuses to rebuild the bridge. Some monks might be defiant, but others will say there’s no point in voting for someone who isn’t going to be ratified.”

“I see. You really think my father could help?”

“Absolutely.”

“Then I’ll suggest it.”

“Thank you.”

The bell rang. Godwyn slipped out of the church and again joined the procession forming up in the cloisters. It was midday.

He had done a good morning’s work.

16

Wulfric and Gwenda left Kingsbridge early on Monday morning to walk the long road back to their village of Wigleigh.

Caris and Merthin watched them cross the river on Merthin’s new ferry.

Merthin was pleased by how well it was working. The wooden gears would wear out quite quickly, he knew. Iron gears would be better, but…

Caris had other thoughts. “Gwenda is so much in love,” she sighed.

“She has no chance with Wulfric,” Merthin said.

“You never know. She’s a determined girl. Look how she escaped from Sim Chapman.”

“But Wulfric’s engaged to that Annet—who is much prettier.”

“Good looks aren’t everything in a romance.”

“For which I thank God every day.”

She laughed. “I love your funny face.”

“But Wulfric fought my brother over Annet. He must love her.”

“Gwenda’s got a love potion.”

Merthin gave her a disapproving look. “So you think it’s all right for a girl to maneuver a man into marrying her when he loves someone else?”

She was struck silent for a moment. The soft skin of her throat turned pink. “I never thought of it that way,” she said. “Is it really the same thing?”

“It’s similar.”

“But she’s not coercing him—she just wants to make him love her.”

“She should try to do that without a potion.”

“Now I feel ashamed of helping her.”

“Too late.” Wulfric and Gwenda were getting off the ferry on the far side. They turned to wave, then headed along the road through the suburbs with Skip, the dog, at their heels.

Merthin and Caris walked back up the main street. Caris said: “You haven’t spoken to Griselda yet.”

“I’m going to do it now. I don’t know whether I’m looking forward to it or dreading it.”

“You’ve got nothing to fear. She’s the one who lied.”

“That’s true.” He touched his face. The bruise had almost healed. “I just hope her father doesn’t get violent again.”

“Do you want me to come with you?”

He would have been glad of her support, but he shook his head. “I made this mess, and I have to straighten it out.”

They stopped outside Elfric’s house. Caris said: “Good luck.”

“Thanks.” Merthin kissed her lips briefly, resisted the temptation to kiss her again, and walked in.

Elfric was sitting at the table eating bread and cheese. A cup of ale stood in front of him. Beyond him, Merthin could see Alice and the maid in the kitchen. There was no sign of Griselda.

Elfric said: “Where have you been?”

Merthin decided that if he had nothing to fear he had better act fearlessly. He ignored Elfric’s question. “Where’s Griselda?”

“Still in bed.”

Merthin shouted up the stairs: “Griselda! I want to talk to you.”

Elfric said: “No time for that. We’ve got work to do.”

Again Merthin ignored him. “Griselda! You’d better get up now.”

“Hey!” Elfric said. “Who do you think you are, to give orders?”

“You want me to marry her, don’t you?”

“So what?”

“So she’d better get used to doing what her husband tells her.” He raised his voice again. “Get down here now, or you’ll just have to hear what I’ve got to say from someone else.”

She appeared at the top of the stairs. “I’m coming!” she said irritably. “What’s all the fuss about?”

Merthin waited for her to come down, then said: “I’ve found out who the father of the baby is.”

Fear flashed in her eyes. “Don’t be stupid, it’s you.”

“No, it’s Thurstan.”

“I never lay with Thurstan!” She looked at her father. “Honestly I didn’t.”

Elfric said: “She doesn’t lie.”

Alice came out of the kitchen. “That’s right,” she said.

Merthin said: “I lay with Griselda on the Sunday of Fleece Fair week—fifteen days ago. Griselda is three months pregnant.”

“I’m not!”

Merthin looked hard at Alice. “You knew, didn’t you?” Alice looked away. Merthin went on: “And yet you lied—even to Caris, your own sister.”

Elfric said: “You don’t know how long pregnant she is.”

“Look at her,” Merthin replied. “You can see the bulge in her belly. Not much, but it’s there.”

“What do you know of such things? You’re just a boy.”

“Yes—you were all relying on my ignorance, weren’t you? And it almost worked.”

Elfric wagged his finger. “You lay with Griselda, and now you’ll marry Griselda.”

“Oh, no I won’t. She doesn’t love me. She lay with me to get a father for her baby, after Thurstan ran away. I know I did wrong, but I’m not going to punish myself for the rest of my life by marrying her.”

Elfric stood up. “You are, you know.”

“No.”

“You’ve got to.”

“No.”

Elfric’s face turned red, and he shouted: “You will marry her!”

Merthin said: “How long do you want me to keep on saying no?”

Elfric realized he was serious. “In that case, you’re dismissed,” he said.

“Get out of my house and never come back.”

Merthin had been expecting this, and it came as a relief. It meant the argument was over. “All right.” He tried to step past Elfric.

Elfric blocked his way. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“To the kitchen, to get my things.”

“Your tools, you mean.”

“Yes.”

“They’re not yours. I paid for them.”

“An apprentice is always given his tools at the end of his…” Merthin tailed off.

“You haven’t finished your apprenticeship, so you don’t get your tools.”

Merthin had not expected this. “I’ve done six and a half years!”

“You’re supposed to do seven.”

Without tools Merthin could not earn his living. “That’s unfair. I’ll appeal to the carpenters’ guild.”

“I look forward to it,” Elfric said smugly. “It will be interesting to hear you argue that an apprentice who is sacked for lying with his master’s daughter should be rewarded with a free set of tools. The carpenters in the guild have all got apprentices, and most of them have daughters. They’ll throw you out on your arse.”

Merthin realized he was right.

Alice said: “There you are, you’re in real trouble now, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” Merthin said. “But whatever happens, it won’t be as bad as life with Griselda and her family.”

Later that morning, Merthin went to St. Mark’s Church for the funeral of Howell Tyler. He attended because he hoped someone there would give him a job.

Looking up at the timber ceiling—the church did not have a stone vault—Merthin could see a man-shaped hole in the painted wood, grim testament to the manner of Howell’s death. Everything up there was rotten, the builders at the funeral said knowingly; but they said it after the accident, their sagacity coming too late to save Howell. It was now clear that the roof was too weak to be repaired, but must be demolished completely and rebuilt from scratch. That meant closing the church.

St. Mark’s was a poor church. It had a pitiful endowment, a single farm ten miles away that was kept by the priest’s brother and just about managed to feed the family. The priest, Father Joffroi, had to get his income from the eight or nine hundred citizens of his parish in the poorer north end of town. Those who were not actually destitute generally pretended to be, so their tithes brought in only a modest sum. He made his living by christening,

marrying, and burying them, charging a lot less than the monks at the cathedral. His parishioners married early, had many children, and died young, so there was plenty of work for him, and in the end he did well enough. But if he closed the church, his income would dry up—and he would not be able to pay the builders.

Consequently the work on the roof had stopped.

All the town's builders came to the funeral, including Elfric. Merthin tried to look unashamed as he stood in the church, but it was difficult: most of them knew he had been dismissed. He had been unjustly treated but, unfortunately, he was not completely innocent.

Howell had had a young wife who was friendly with Caris, and now Caris walked in with the widow and the bereaved family. Merthin moved next to Caris and told her what had happened with Elfric.

Father Joffroi conducted the service dressed in an old robe. Merthin thought about the roof. It seemed to him there must be a way to dismantle it without closing the church. The standard approach, when repairs had been postponed too long and the timbers were too badly rotted to bear the weight of workmen, was to build scaffolding around the church and knock the timbers down into the nave. The building was then open to the elements until the new roof was finished and tiled. But it should be possible to build a swiveling hoist, supported by the thick side wall of the church, which would lift the roof timbers up one by one, instead of pushing them down, and swing them across the wall and down into the graveyard. That way, the wooden ceiling could be left intact, and replaced only after the roof had been rebuilt.

At the graveside, he looked at the men one by one, wondering which of them was most likely to employ him. He decided to approach Bill Watkin, the town's second largest builder and no admirer of Elfric's. Bill had a bald dome with a fringe of black hair, a natural version of the monkish tonsure. He did most of the house building in Kingsbridge. Like Elfric, he employed a stonemason and a carpenter, a handful of laborers and one or two apprentices.

Howell had not been prosperous, and his body was lowered into the grave in a shroud, without a coffin.

When Father Joffroi had departed, Merthin approached Bill Watkin. "Good day, Master Watkin," he said formally.

Bill's response was not warm. "Well, young Merthin?"

"I've parted company with Elfric."

"I know that," said Bill. "And I know why."

"You've heard Elfric's side of the story."

"I've heard all I need to hear."

Elfric had been talking to people before and during the service, Merthin realized. He was sure Elfric had left out of his account the fact that Griselda had tried to make Merthin the substitute father for Thurstan's baby. But he felt he would do himself no good by making excuses. Better to admit his fault. "I realize I did wrong, and I'm sorry, but I'm still a good carpenter."

Bill nodded agreement. "The new ferry testifies to that."

Merthin was encouraged. "Will you hire me?"

"As what?"

“As a carpenter. You said I was a good one.”

“But where are your tools?”

“Elfric wouldn’t give them to me.”

“And he was right—because you haven’t finished your apprenticeship.”

“Then take me on as an apprentice for six months.”

“And give you a new set of tools for nothing at the end of it? I can’t afford that kind of generosity.” Tools were expensive because iron and steel were costly.

“I’ll work as a laborer, and save up to buy my own tools.” It would take a long time, but he was desperate.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’ve got a daughter, too.”

This was outrageous. “I’m not a menace to maidens, you know.”

“You’re an example to apprentices. If you get away with this, what’s to stop the others trying their luck?”

“That is so unjust!”

Bill shrugged. “You might think so. But ask any other master carpenter in town. I think you’ll find they feel as I do.”

“But what am I to do?”

“I don’t know. You should have thought of that before you shagged her.”

“You don’t care about losing a good carpenter?”

Bill shrugged again. “All the more work for the rest of us.”

Merthin turned away. That was the trouble with guilds, he thought bitterly: it was in their interest to exclude people, for good or bad reasons. A shortage of carpenters would just drive up their wages. They had no incentive to be fair.

Howell’s widow left, accompanied by her mother. Caris, liberated from her duty of commiseration, came over to Merthin. “Why do you look unhappy?” she said. “You hardly knew Howell.”

“I may have to leave Kingsbridge,” he said.

She went pale. “Why on earth would you do that?”

He told her what Bill Watkin had said. “So, you see, no one in Kingsbridge will hire me, and I can’t work on my own account for I’ve no tools. I could live with my parents, but I can’t take the food from their mouths. So I’ll have to seek work someplace where no one knows about Griselda. In time, perhaps I can save up enough money to buy a hammer and chisel and then move to another town and try to gain admittance to the carpenters’ guild.”

As he explained this to Caris, he began to appreciate the full misery of the situation. He saw her familiar features as if for the first time, and he was enchanted again by her sparkling green eyes, her small, neat nose, and the

determined set of her jaw. Her mouth, he realized, did not quite fit the rest of her face: it was too wide, and the lips were too full. It unbalanced the regularity of her physiognomy the way her sensual nature subverted her tidy mind. It was a mouth made for sex, and the thought that he might have to go away and never kiss it again filled him with despair.

Caris was furious. “This is iniquitous! They have no right.”

“That’s what I think. But there seems to be nothing I can do about it. I just have to accept it.”

“Wait a minute. Let’s think about this. You can live with your parents, and have your dinner at my house.”

“I don’t want to become a dependent, like my father.”

“Nor should you. You can buy Howell Tyler’s tools—his widow was just telling me she’s asking a pound for them.”

“I haven’t any money.”

“Ask my father for a loan. He’s always liked you, I’m sure he’ll do it.”

“But it’s against the rules for anyone to employ a carpenter who isn’t in the guild.”

“Rules can be broken. There must be someone in town desperate enough to defy the guild.”

Merthin realized he had allowed the old men to quench his spirit, and he was grateful to Caris for refusing to accept defeat. She was right, of course: he should stay in Kingsbridge and fight this unjust ruling. And he knew someone who was in desperate need of his talents. “Father Joffroi,” he said.

“Is he desperate? Why?”

Merthin explained about the roof.

“Let’s go and see him,” Caris said.

The priest lived in a small house next to the church. They found him preparing a dinner of salt fish in a stew with spring greens. Joffroi was in his thirties, built like a soldier, tall with broad shoulders. His manner was brusque, but he had a reputation for sticking up for the poor.

Merthin said: “I can repair your roof without closing your church.”

Joffroi looked wary. “You’re an answer to prayer if you can.”

“I’ll build a hoist that will lift the roof timbers and deposit them in the graveyard.”

“Elfric sacked you.” The priest shot an embarrassed look in Caris’s direction.

She said: “I know what happened, Father.”

Merthin said: “He dismissed me because I would not marry his daughter. But the child she is bearing is not mine.”

Joffroi nodded. “Some say you were treated unjustly. I can believe it. I have no great love for the guilds—their decisions are rarely unselfish. All the same, you haven’t completed your apprenticeship.”

“Can any member of the carpenters’ guild repair your roof without closing your church?”

“I heard you haven’t even got any tools.”

“Leave that problem to me to solve.”

Joffroi looked thoughtful. “How much do you want to be paid?”

Merthin stuck his neck out. “Four pence a day, plus the cost of materials.”

“That’s a journeyman carpenter’s wage.”

“If I don’t have the skill of a qualified carpenter, you shouldn’t hire me.”

“You’re cocky.”

“I’m just saying what I can do.”

“Arrogance is not the worst sin in the world. And I can afford four pence a day if I can keep my church open. How long will it take you to build your hoist?”

“Two weeks at the most.”

“I’m not going to pay you until I can be sure it will work.”

Merthin breathed in. He would be penniless, but he could cope with that. He could live with his parents and eat at Edmund Wooler’s table. He would get by. “Pay for the materials, and save my wages up until the first roof timber is removed and safely brought to ground.”

Joffroi hesitated. “I’ll be unpopular…but I have no choice.” He held out his hand.

Merthin shook it.

17

All the way from Kingsbridge to Wigleigh—a distance of twenty miles, a full day’s walk—Gwenda was hoping for a chance to use the love potion; but she was disappointed.

It was not that Wulfric was wary. On the contrary, he was open and friendly. He talked about his family, and told her how he wept every morning when he woke up and realized their deaths were not a dream. He was considerate, asking whether she was tired and needed to rest. He told her that he felt land was a trust, something a man held for a lifetime then passed to his heirs, and that when he improved his land—by weeding fields, fencing sheepfolds, or clearing stones from pasture—he was fulfilling his destiny.

He even patted Skip.

By the end of the day she was more in love with him than ever. Unfortunately, he showed no sign of feeling anything for her more than a kind of camaraderie, caring but not passionate. In the forest with Sim Chapman, she had wished with all her heart that men were not so much like wild beasts;

but now she wanted Wulfric to have a bit more of the beast in him. All day she did little things to arouse his interest. As if by accident, she let him see her legs, which were firm and shapely. When the terrain was hilly, she made it an excuse to take deep breaths and stick out her chest. At every opportunity she brushed against him, touched his arm, or put a hand on his shoulder. None of it had the least effect. She was not pretty, she knew, but there was something about her that often made men look hard at her and breathe through their mouths—but it was not working on Wulfric.

They stopped for a rest at noon, and ate the bread and cheese they carried with them; but they drank water from a clear stream, using their hands as cups, and she had no opportunity to give him the potion.

All the same, she was happy. She had him all to herself for a whole day. She could look at him, talk to him, make him laugh, sympathize with him, and occasionally touch him. She pretended to herself that she could kiss him anytime she liked, but that at the moment she was not so disposed. It was almost like being married. And it was over too soon.

They arrived in Wigleigh early in the evening. The village stood on a rise, its fields sloping away to all sides, and it was always windy. After two weeks in the bustle of Kingsbridge, the familiar place seemed small and quiet, just a scatter of rough dwellings along the road that led to the manor house and the church. The manor was as large as a Kingsbridge merchant's home, with bedrooms on an upper floor. The priest's house was also a fine dwelling, and a few of the peasant houses were substantial. But most of the homes were two-room hovels, one room normally being occupied by livestock and the other serving as kitchen and bedroom for all the family. Only the church was built of stone.

The first of the more substantial houses belonged to Wulfric's family. Its doors and shutters were closed, giving it a desolate look. He walked past it to the second big house, which was where Annet lived with her parents. He gave Gwenda a casual wave of farewell and went inside, smiling in anticipation.

She felt the sharp tug of loss, as if she had just woken out of a delightful dream. She swallowed her discontent and set out across the fields. The early June rain had been good for the crops, and the wheat and barley were green, but now they needed sunshine to ripen them. Village women were moving along the rows of grain, bent double, pulling up weeds. Some waved to her.

As she approached her home, Gwenda felt a mixture of apprehension and anger. She had not seen her parents since the day her father had sold her to Sim Chapman for a cow. Almost certainly, Pa thought she was still with Sim. Her appearance would come as a shock. What would he say when he saw her? And what was she going to say to the father who had betrayed her trust?

She felt sure her mother knew nothing of the sale. Pa had probably told Ma some story about Gwenda running off with a boy. Ma was going to fly

into a fearsome rage.

She felt happy at the prospect of seeing the little ones—Cath, Joanie, and Eric. She realized now how much she had missed them.

On the far side of the hundred-acre field, half-hidden in the trees at the edge of the forest, was her home. It was even smaller than the peasants' hovels, having only one room, which was shared with the cow at night. It was made of wattle and daub: tree branches stuck upright in the ground, with twigs interwoven basket-fashion, the gaps plugged with a sticky mixture of mud, straw, and cow dung. There was a hole in the thatched roof to let out the smoke of the fire in the middle of the earth floor. Such houses lasted only a few years then had to be rebuilt. It now seemed meaner than ever to Gwenda. She was determined not to spend her life in such a place, having babies every year or two, most of whom died for lack of food. She would not live like her mother. She would rather die.

When she was still a hundred yards from the house, she saw her father coming toward her. He was carrying a jug, probably going to buy ale from Peggy Perkins, Annet's mother, who was the village brewster. Pa always had money at this time of year, for there was plenty of work to be had in the fields.

At first he did not see her.

She studied his thin figure as he walked along the narrow gap between two field strips. He wore a long smock that came to his knees, a battered cap, and homemade sandals tied to his feet with straw. His gait managed to be both furtive and jaunty: he always looked like a nervous foreigner defiantly pretending to be at home. His eyes were set closely either side of a big nose, and he had a wide jaw with a knob of a chin, so that his face looked like a lumpy triangle: Gwenda knew that she resembled him in that. He glanced sidelong at the women he passed in the field, as if he did not want them to know he was observing them.

As he came close, he threw her one of his sneaky looks, up from under his lowered eyelids. He looked down instantly, then looked up again. She lifted her chin and stared back at him haughtily.

Astonishment spread across his face. "You!" he said. "What happened?"

"Sim Chapman wasn't a tinker, he was an outlaw."

"And where is he now?"

"He's in hell, Pa. You'll meet him there."

"Did you kill him?"

"No." She had long ago decided to lie about this. "God killed him. The bridge at Kingsbridge collapsed while Sim was crossing it. God punished him for his sin. Has he punished you yet?"

"God forgives good Christians."

"Is that all you have to say to me? That God forgives good Christians?"

“How did you escape?”

“I used my wits.”

A crafty look came over his face. “You’re a good girl,” he said.

She stared at him suspiciously. “What mischief are you planning now?”

“You’re a good girl,” he repeated. “Go in to your mother now. You shall have a cup of ale with your supper.” He walked on.

Gwenda frowned. Pa did not seem afraid of what Ma would say when she learned the truth. Perhaps he thought Gwenda would not tell her, out of shame. Well, he was wrong.

Cath and Joanie were outside the house, playing in the dirt. When they saw Gwenda, they jumped up and ran to her. Skip barked hysterically. Gwenda hugged her sisters, remembering how she had thought she would never see them again; and at that moment she was fiercely glad she had stuck a long knife into Alwyn’s head.

She went inside. Ma was sitting on a stool, giving little Eric some milk, helping him hold the cup steady so that he did not spill any. She gave a cry of joy when she saw Gwenda. She put down the cup, stood up, and embraced her. Gwenda began to weep.

Once she had started crying, it was hard to stop. She cried because Sim had led her out of town on a rope, and because she had let Alwyn fuck her, and for all the people who had died when the bridge collapsed, and because Wulfric loved Annet.

When her sobs subsided enough for her to speak again, she said: “Pa sold me, Ma. He sold me for a cow, and I had to go with outlaws.”

“That was wrong,” her mother said.

“It was worse than wrong! He’s wicked, evil—he’s a devil.”

Ma withdrew from the embrace. “Don’t say such things.”

“They’re true!”

“He’s your father.”

“A father doesn’t sell his children like livestock. I have no father.”

“He’s fed you for eighteen years.”

Gwenda stared uncomprehendingly. “How can you be so hard? He sold me to outlaws!”

“And he got us a cow. So there’s milk for Eric, even though my breasts have dried up. And you’re here, aren’t you?”

Gwenda was shocked. “You’re defending him!”

“He’s all I’ve got, Gwenda. He’s not a prince. He’s not even a peasant. He’s a landless laborer. But he’s done everything he can for this family for almost twenty-five years. He worked when he could and thieved when he had to. He kept you alive, and your brother, and with a fair wind he’ll do the same for Cath and Joanie and Eric. Whatever his faults, we’d be worse off without him. So don’t you call him a devil.”

Gwenda was struck dumb. She had hardly got used to the idea that her father had betrayed her. Now she had to face the fact that her mother was as bad. She felt disoriented. It was like when the bridge had moved under her feet: she could hardly understand what was happening to her.

Her father came into the house carrying the jug of ale. He seemed not to notice the atmosphere. He took three wooden cups from the shelf over the fireplace. “Now, then,” he said cheerfully. “Let’s drink to the return of our big girl.”

Gwenda was hungry and thirsty after walking all day. She took the cup and drank deeply. But she knew her father in this mood. “What are you planning?” she said.

“Well, now,” he said. “It’s the Shiring Fair next week, isn’t it?”

“So what?”

“Well…we could do it again.”

She could hardly believe what she was hearing. “Do what again?”

“I sell you, you go with the buyer, then you escape and come home. You’re none the worse.”

“None the worse?”

“And we’ve got a cow worth twelve shillings! Why, it takes me near half a year of laboring to earn twelve shillings.”

“And after that? What then?”

“Well, there’s other fairs—Winchester, Gloucester, I don’t know how many.” He refilled her cup from the ale jug. “Why—this could be better than the year you stole Sir Gerald’s purse!”

She did not drink. There was a bitter taste in her mouth, as if she had eaten something corrupt. She thought of arguing with him. Harsh words came to her lips, angry accusations, curses—but she did not speak them. The way she felt was beyond rage. What was the point of having a row? She could never trust her father again. And because Ma refused to be disloyal to him, Gwenda could not trust her either.

“What am I to do?” she said aloud, but she did not want an answer from anyone in the room: the question was to herself. In this family she had become a commodity, to be sold at city fairs. If she was not prepared to accept that, what could she do?

She could leave.

She realized with a shock that this house was no longer a home to her. The blow shook the foundations of her existence. She had lived here since before she could remember. Now she did not feel safe here. She had to get out.

Not next week, she realized; not even tomorrow morning—she had to go now.

She had nowhere to go, but that made no difference. To stay here, and eat

the bread her father put on the table, would be to yield to his authority. She would be accepting his evaluation of her, as a commodity to be sold. She was sorry she had drunk the first cup of ale. Her only chance was to reject him immediately and get out from under his roof.

Gwenda looked at her mother. “You’re wrong,” she said. “He is a devil. And the old stories are right: when you make a bargain with the devil, you end up paying more than you thought.”

Ma looked away.

Gwenda stood up. The refilled cup was still in her hand. She tipped it, pouring the ale on the floor. Skip immediately started to lick it up.

Her father said angrily: “I paid a farthing for this jug of ale!”

“Good-bye,” said Gwenda, and she walked out.

18

On the following Sunday, Gwenda attended the court hearing that would decide the fate of the man she loved.

The manorial court was held in the church after the service. It was the forum in which the village took collective action. Some of the questions it addressed were disputes—arguments over field boundaries, accusations of theft or rape, quarrels about debts—but more often it made pragmatic decisions, such as when to begin plowing with the communal eight-ox team.

In theory, the lord of the manor sat in judgment over his serfs. But Norman law—brought to England by invaders from France almost three centuries earlier—compelled lords to follow the customs of their predecessors; and in order to find out what those customs were, they had to formally consult twelve men of good standing in the village—a jury. So, in practice, the proceedings often became a negotiation between lord and villagers.

On this particular Sunday, Wigleigh had no lord. Sir Stephen had been killed in the collapse of the bridge. Gwenda had brought this news to the village. She also reported that Earl Roland, who had the task of appointing Stephen’s replacement, had been gravely injured. On the day before she left Kingsbridge, the earl had recovered consciousness for the first time—but he had woken into a fever so violent that he was unable to speak a coherent sentence. So there was no prospect of a new lord of Wigleigh yet.

This was not an unusual circumstance. Lords were frequently away: at war, in Parliament, fighting lawsuits, or just attending on their earl or the king. Earl Roland always appointed a deputy, usually one of his sons—but, in this case, he had not been able to do so. In the absence of an overlord, the

bailiff had to manage the landholding as best he could.

The job of a bailiff or reeve was, in theory, to carry out the lord's decisions, but this inevitably gave him a degree of power over his fellows. Exactly how much power depended on the lord's personal preference: some held tight control, others were lax. Sir Stephen had kept a loose rein, but Earl Roland was notoriously strict.

Nate Reeve had been bailiff to Sir Stephen and to Sir Henry before him, and would presumably be bailiff to whoever came next. He was a hunchback, a small, bent figure, thin and energetic. He was shrewd and greedy, careful to make the most of his limited power by demanding bribes from the villagers at every opportunity.

Gwenda disliked Nate. It was not his greed she objected to: all bailiffs had that vice. But Nate was a man twisted by resentment as much as by his physical defect. His father had been bailiff to the earl of Shiring, but Nate had not inherited that grand position, and he blamed his hump for the fact that he had ended up in the small village of Wigleigh. He seemed to hate all young, strong, handsome people. In his leisure hours he liked to drink wine with Perkin, Annet's father—who always paid for the liquor.

The question before the court today was what to do about Wulfric's family's land.

It was a large holding. Peasants were not all equal, and they did not have equal lands. The standard was a virgate, which was thirty acres in this part of England. In theory a virgate was the area of land one man could farm, and normally yielded enough to feed one family. However, most Wigleigh peasants had a half virgate, fifteen acres, or thereabouts. They were obliged to find additional means of support for their families: netting birds in the woods, trapping fish in the stream that ran through Brookfield, making belts or sandals from cheap leather offcuts, weaving cloth from yarn for Kingsbridge merchants, or poaching the king's deer in the forest. A few had more than a virgate. Perkin had a hundred acres, and Wulfric's father, Samuel, had had ninety. Such wealthy peasants needed help to farm their land, either from their sons and other relatives, or from hired laborers such as Gwenda's father.

When a serf died, his land might be inherited by his widow, his sons, or a married daughter. In any event, the handover had to be licensed by the lord, and a stiff tax, called a heriot, was due. In normal circumstances Samuel's land would automatically have been inherited by his two sons, and there would have been no need for a court hearing. They would have clubbed together to pay the heriot, then either divided up the land or farmed it together, and made some arrangement for their mother. But one of Samuel's sons had died with him, which complicated matters.

Every adult in the village attended the court, in general. Gwenda had a particular interest today. Wulfric's future would be decided, and the fact that

he planned to spend that future with another woman did not dampen Gwenda's concern. Perhaps she should have wished him a miserable life with Annet, she sometimes thought; but she could not. She wanted him to be happy.

When the service was over, a large wooden chair and two benches were brought in from the manor house. Nate took the chair and the jurymen sat on the benches. Everyone else stood.

Wulfric spoke simply. "My father held ninety acres of the lord of Wigleigh," he said. "Fifty acres were held by his father before him, and forty by his uncle who died ten years ago. As my mother is dead, and so is my brother, and I have no sisters, I am the sole heir."

"How old are you?" said Nate.

"Sixteen years."

"You can't even call yourself a man yet."

It seemed Nate was going to make things difficult. Gwenda knew why. He wanted a bribe. But Wulfric had no money.

"Years aren't everything," Wulfric said. "I'm taller and stronger than most grown men."

Aaron Appletree, one of the jurors, said: "David Johns inherited from his father when he was eighteen."

Nate said: "Eighteen isn't sixteen. I don't recall an instance where a sixteen-year-old was allowed to inherit."

David Johns was not a juror, and he was standing next to Gwenda. "I didn't have no ninety acres, neither," he said, and there was a ripple of laughter. David had a half virgate, like most of them.

Another juror spoke. "Ninety acres is too much for one man, let alone a boy. Why, it was farmed by three until now." The speaker was Billy Howard, a man in his middle twenties who had wooed Annet unsuccessfully—which might be why he wanted to side with Nate in putting obstacles in Wulfric's way. "I've got forty acres, and I have to hire laborers at harvest time."

Several of the men nodded agreement. Gwenda began to feel pessimistic. It was not going Wulfric's way.

"I can get help," Wulfric said.

Nate said: "Have you got money to pay laborers?"

Wulfric looked a bit desperate, and Gwenda's heart went out to him. "My father's purse was lost when the bridge collapsed, and I spent what money I had on the funeral," he said. "But I can offer my laborers a share of the harvest."

Nate shook his head. "Everyone in the village is already working full-time on their own lands, and those who have no land are already employed. And no one is likely to give up a job that pays cash for one that offers a share of an uncertain crop."

“I will get the harvest in,” Wulfric said with passionate determination. “I can work day and night, if I have to. I’ll prove to you all that I can handle it.”

There was so much yearning on his handsome face that Gwenda wanted to jump up and shout her support for him. But the men were shaking their heads. Everyone knew that one man could not harvest ninety acres on his own.

Nate turned to Perkin. “He’s engaged to your daughter. Can’t you do something for him?”

Perkin looked thoughtful. “Perhaps you should transfer the land to me, for the time being. I could pay the heriot. Then, when he marries Annet, he could take over his land.”

“No!” Wulfric said immediately.

Gwenda knew why he was so against the idea. Perkin was nothing if not sly. He would spend every waking minute between now and the wedding trying to figure out a way of keeping Wulfric’s land for himself.

Nate said to Wulfric: “If you have no money, how will you pay the heriot?”

“I’ll have money when I get the harvest in.”

“If you get the harvest in. And then it may not be enough. Your father paid three pounds for his father’s lands and two pounds for his uncle’s.”

Gwenda gasped. Five pounds was a fortune. It seemed impossible that Wulfric could raise so much money. It would probably have taken all his family’s savings.

Nate went on: “Besides, the heriot is normally paid before the inheritor takes possession—not after the harvest.”

Aaron Appletree said: “In the circumstances, Nate, you might show leniency on that point.”

“Might I? A lord may show leniency, for he holds sway over his own possessions. But if a bailiff shows leniency, he’s giving away someone else’s gold.”

“But we will only be making a recommendation, in any case. Nothing will be final until approved by the new lord of Wigleigh, whoever he may be.”

That was true, strictly speaking, Gwenda thought; but in practice it was unlikely a new lord would overturn an inheritance from father to son.

Wulfric said: “Sir, my father’s heriot was not so much as five pounds.”

“We must check the rolls.” Nate’s response was so quick that Gwenda guessed he had been waiting for Wulfric to challenge the amount. Nate often engineered a pause of some kind in the middle of a hearing, she reflected. She presumed it was to give the parties an opportunity to offer him a bribe. Perhaps he thought Wulfric was concealing some money.

Two jurors brought from the vestry the chest containing the manorial rolls, the record of the manor court’s decisions, written on long strips of

parchment rolled into cylinders. Nate could read and write—a bailiff had to be literate, in order to compile accounts for the lord. He searched through the box for the right one.

Gwenda felt that Wulfric was doing badly. His plain speaking and evident honesty were not enough. Nate wanted above all else to make sure he collected the lord's heriot. Perkin was maneuvering to get the land for himself. Billy Howard wanted to do Wulfric down out of sheer malice. And Wulfric had no money for a bribe.

He was also guileless. He believed that if he stated his case he would get justice. He had no sense of managing the situation.

Perhaps she could help him. A child of Joby's could not grow up without learning something about guile.

Wulfric had not appealed to the villagers' self-interest in his arguments. She would do so for him. She turned to David Johns, standing beside her. "I'm surprised you men aren't more worried about this," she said.

He gave her a shrewd look. "What are you getting at, lass?"

"Despite the sudden deaths, this is an inheritance from father to son. If you let Nate quibble about this one, he'll question them all. He can always dream up some reason for arguing about a legacy. Aren't you afraid he'll interfere with your own sons' rights?"

David looked worried. "You might have a point, there, girl," he said, and he turned to talk to his neighbor on the other side.

Gwenda also felt it was a mistake for Wulfric to demand a final ruling today. Better to ask for a temporary judgment, which the jurymen would grant more readily. She went to speak to Wulfric. He was arguing with Perkin and Annet. When Gwenda appeared, Perkin looked suspicious, and Annet put her nose in the air, but Wulfric was as courteous as ever. "Hello, my traveling companion," he said. "I heard you left your father's house."

"He threatened to sell me."

"A second time?"

"As many times as I could escape. He thinks he's found a bottomless purse."

"Where are you living?"

"Widow Huberts took me in. And I've been working for the bailiff, on the lord's lands. A penny a day, sunrise to sunset—Nate likes his laborers to go home tired. Do you think he'll give you what you want?"

Wulfric made a face. "He seems reluctant."

"A woman would handle it so differently."

He looked surprised. "How so?"

Annet glared at her, but Gwenda ignored the look. "A woman would not demand a ruling, especially when everyone knows that today's decision isn't final. She would not risk a no for the chance of a maybe."

Wulfric looked thoughtful. “What would she do?”

“She would just ask to be allowed to continue working the land, for now. She would let the binding decision wait until the new lord is appointed. She would know that in the interim everyone would get used to her being in possession, so that when the new lord showed up his approval would seem like a formality. She would gain her objective without giving people much chance to argue about it.”

Wulfric was not sure. “Well…”

“It’s not what you want, but it’s the most you can get today. And how can Nate refuse you, when he has no one else to bring in the harvest?”

Wulfric nodded. He was working out the possibilities. “People would see me reaping the crop, and become accustomed to the idea. After that, it would seem unjust to deny me the inheritance. And I’d be able to pay the heriot, or some of it.”

“You’d be a lot closer to your goal than you are now.”

“Thank you. You’re very wise.” He touched her arm, then turned back to Annet. She said something sharp to him in an undertone. Her father looked annoyed.

Gwenda turned away. Don’t tell me I’m wise, she thought. Tell me I’m… what? Beautiful? Never. The love of your life? That’s Annet. A true friend? To hell with that. So what do I want? Why am I desperate to help you?

She had no answer.

She noticed David Johns speaking emphatically to one of the jurors, Aaron Appletree.

Nate flourished the manor roll. “Wulfric’s father, Samuel, paid thirty shillings to inherit from his father, and a pound to inherit from his uncle.” A shilling was twelve pennies. There was no shilling coin, but everyone talked about shillings just the same. Twenty shillings made a pound. The sum Nate had announced was exactly half what he had originally said.

David Johns spoke up. “A man’s lands should go to his son,” he said. “We don’t want to give our new lord, whoever he may be, the impression that he can pick and choose who shall inherit.”

There was a murmur of agreement.

Wulfric stepped forward. “Bailiff, I know you can’t make a final decision today, and I’m content to wait until the new lord is appointed. All I ask is that I should be allowed to continue to work the land. I will bring in the harvest, I swear it. But nothing is lost to you if I fail. And nothing is promised to me if I succeed. When the new lord comes, I will throw myself on his mercy.”

Nate looked cornered. Gwenda felt sure he had been hoping for some way of making money out of this. Perhaps he had expected a bribe from Perkin, Wulfric’s prospective father-in-law. She watched Nate’s face as he tried to think of a way to refuse Wulfric’s more modest request. As he hesitated, one

or two villagers began to mutter, and he realized he was doing himself no good by revealing his reluctance. “Very well,” he said with a show of grace that was not very convincing. “What does the jury say?”

Aaron Appletree conferred briefly with his fellow jurors, then said: “Wulfric’s request is modest and reasonable. He should occupy the lands of his father until the new lord of Wigleigh is appointed.”

Gwenda sighed with relief.

Nate said: “Thank you, jurymen.”

The court broke up and people began to head home for dinner. Most of the villagers could afford to eat meat once a week, and Sunday was the usual day they chose. Even Joby and Ethna could generally manage a stew of squirrel or hedgehog, and at this time of year there were plenty of young rabbits to be caught. Widow Huberts had a neck of mutton in a pot on the fire.

Gwenda caught Wulfric’s eye as they were leaving the church. “Well done,” she said as they strolled out together. “He couldn’t refuse you, though he seemed to want to.”

“It was your idea,” he said admiringly. “You knew exactly what I needed to say. I don’t know how to thank you.”

She resisted the temptation to tell him. They walked through the graveyard. She said: “How will you manage the harvest?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why don’t you let me come and labor for you?”

“I’ve no money.”

“I don’t care, I’ll work for food.”

He stopped at the gate, turned, and gave her a candid look. “No, Gwenda. I don’t think that would be a good plan. Annet wouldn’t like it and, to be frank, she’d be right.”

Gwenda found herself blushing. There was no doubt what he meant. If he had wanted to reject her because she might be too weak, or something, there would have been no need for the direct look, or for the mention of his fiancée’s name. He knew, she realized with mortification, that she was in love with him, and he was refusing her offer of help because he did not want to encourage her hopeless passion. “All right,” she whispered, looking down. “Whatever you say.”

He smiled warmly. “But thank you for the offer.”

She made no reply and, after a moment, he turned and walked away.

19

Gwenda got up while it was still dark.

She slept in the straw on the floor of Widow Huberts's house. Somehow her sleeping mind knew the time, and woke her just before dawn. The widow, lying next to her, did not stir when Gwenda unwrapped her blanket and stood up. Finding her way by touch, she opened the back door and stepped into the yard. Skip followed her, shaking himself.

She stood still for a moment. There was a fresh breeze, as always in Wigleigh. The night was not totally black, and she could make out vague shapes: the duck house, the privy, the pear tree. She could not see the neighboring house, which was Wulfric's; but she heard a low growl from his dog, tethered outside the small sheepfold, and she murmured a quiet phrase so that it would recognize her voice and be reassured.

It was a peaceful time—but nowadays there were too many such moments in her day. All her life she had lived in a tiny house full of babies and children, and at any instant at least one of them was clamoring for food, crying because of a minor hurt, shouting a protest, or screaming with helpless infantile rage. She would never have guessed she might miss that. But she did, living with the quiet widow, who chatted amiably enough but was equally comfortable with silence. Sometimes Gwenda longed to hear a child cry, just so that she could pick it up and comfort it.

She found the old wooden bucket and washed her hands and face, then went back inside. She located the table in the dark, opened the bread box, and cut a thick slice from the week-old loaf. Then she set out, eating the bread as she walked.

The village was silent: she was the first up. Peasants worked from sunup to sundown, and at this time of year it was a long, weary day. They treasured every moment of rest. Only Gwenda also used the hour between dawn and sunrise, and the hour of twilight at the end of the day.

Dawn broke as she left the houses behind and set out across the fields. Wigleigh had three great fields: Hundredacre, Brookfield, and Longfield. Different crops were grown on each in a three-year cycle. Wheat and rye, the most valuable grains, were sown in the first year; then lesser crops such as oats, barley, peas, and beans in the second year; and in the third year the field was left fallow. This year, Hundredacre was in wheat and rye, Brookfield in various secondary crops, and Longfield was fallow. Each field was divided into strips of about one acre; and each serf's land consisted of a number of strips scattered across all three fields.

Gwenda went to Hundredacre and began weeding one of Wulfric's strips, pulling up the persistent new growth of dockweed, marigolds, and dog fennel from between his stalks of wheat. She was happy working on his land, helping him, whether he knew about it or not. Every time she bent down, she was saving his back the same effort; every time she pulled a weed, she made his crop greater. It was like giving him presents. As she worked she thought

of him, picturing his face when he laughed, hearing his voice, the deep voice of a man yet with the eagerness of a boy. She touched the green shoots of his wheat and imagined she was stroking his hair.

She weeded until sunrise then moved to the demesne lands—those strips farmed by the lord, or his laborers—and worked for pay. Although Sir Stephen was dead, his crops still had to be reaped, and his successor would demand a strict account of what had been done with the proceeds. At sundown, having earned her daily bread, Gwenda would move to another part of Wulfric's holding and work there until dark—longer, if there was a moon.

She had said nothing to Wulfric. But, in a village of only two hundred people, few things remained secret for long. Widow Huberts had asked her, with gentle curiosity, what she hoped to achieve. "He's going to marry Perkin's girl, you know—you can't prevent that."

"I just want him to succeed," Gwenda had replied. "He deserves it. He's an honest man with a good heart, and he's willing to work until he drops. I want him to be happy, even if he does marry that bitch."

Today the demesne workers were in Brookfield, harvesting the lord's early peas and beans, and Wulfric was nearby, digging a drainage ditch: the land was swampy after the heavy rain of early June. Gwenda watched him working, wearing only his drawers and boots, his broad back bending over the spade. He moved as tirelessly as a millwheel. Only the sweat glistening on his skin betrayed the effort he was making. At midday Annet came to him, looking pretty with a green ribbon in her hair, carrying a jug of ale and some bread and cheese wrapped in a piece of sacking.

Nate Reeve rang a bell, and everyone stopped work and retreated to the fringe of trees at the north end of the field. Nate gave out cider, bread, and onions to the demesne workers: dinner was included in their remuneration. Gwenda sat with her back against a hornbeam tree and studied Wulfric and Annet with the fascination of a condemned man watching the carpenter build the gallows.

At first, Annet was her usual flirtatious self, tilting her head, batting her eyelids, playfully striking Wulfric in mock punishment for something he said. Then she became serious, speaking to him insistently while he seemed to protest innocence. They both looked at Gwenda, and she guessed they were talking about her. She presumed Annet had found out about her working on Wulfric's strips in the mornings and evenings. Eventually Annet left, looking petulant, and Wulfric finished his dinner in thoughtful solitude.

After eating, everyone rested for the remainder of the dinner hour. The older people lay full length on the ground and dozed while the youngsters chatted. Wulfric came to where Gwenda sat and crouched beside her. "You've been weeding my strips," he said.

Gwenda was not going to apologize. "I suppose Annet scolded you."

“She doesn’t want you working for me.”

“What would she like me to do, put the weeds back in the earth?”

He glanced around and lowered his voice, not wanting others to hear—although everyone could surely guess what he and Gwenda were saying to one another. “I know you mean well, and I’m grateful, but it’s causing trouble.”

She enjoyed being this close to him. He smelled of earth and sweat. “You need help,” she said. “And Annet isn’t much use.”

“Please don’t criticize her. In fact, don’t speak of her at all.”

“All right, but you can’t get the harvest in alone.”

He sighed. “If only the sun would shine.” Automatically, he looked up at the sky, a peasant reflex. There was thick cloud from horizon to horizon. All the grain crops were struggling in the cool, damp weather.

“Let me work for you,” Gwenda begged. “Tell Annet you need me. A man is supposed to be master of his wife, not the other way around.”

“I’ll think about it,” he said.

But the next day he hired a laborer.

He was a traveling man who showed up at the end of the afternoon. The villagers gathered around him in the twilight to hear his story. His name was Gram and he came from Salisbury. He said his wife and children had been killed when his house burned down. He was on his way to Kingsbridge, where he hoped to get employment, perhaps at the priory. His brother was a monk there.

Gwenda said: “I probably know him. My brother, Philemon, has worked at the priory for years. What’s your brother’s name?”

“John.” There were two monks called John but, before Gwenda could ask which was Gram’s brother, he went on: “When I started out, I had a little money to buy food along the way. Then I was robbed by outlaws, and now I’m penniless.”

There was a lot of sympathy for the man. Wulfric invited him to sleep at his house. The next day, Saturday, he started to work for Wulfric, accepting board and lodging and a share of the harvest as his remuneration.

Gram worked hard all day Saturday. Wulfric was shallow-plowing his fallow land in Longfield to destroy thistles. It was a two-man job: Gram led the horse, whipping it on when it flagged, while Wulfric guided the plow. On Sunday they rested.

In church on Sunday, Gwenda burst into tears when she saw Cath, Joanie, and Eric. She had not realized how badly she missed them. She held Eric through the service. Afterward, her mother spoke harshly to her. “You’re breaking your heart for that Wulfric. Weeding his strips won’t make him love you. He’s cross-eyed for that worthless Annet.”

“I know,” Gwenda said. “But I want to help him anyway.”

“You should leave the village. There’s nothing for you here.”

She knew her mother was right. “I will,” she said. “I’ll leave the day after their wedding.”

Ma lowered her voice. “If you must stay, watch out for your father. He hasn’t given up hope of another twelve shillings.”

“What do you mean?” Gwenda asked.

Ma just shook her head.

“He can’t sell me now,” Gwenda said. “I’ve left his house. He doesn’t feed or shelter me. I work for the lord of Wigleigh. I’m not Pa’s to dispose of any longer.”

“Just watch out,” said Ma, and she would say no more.

Outside the church the traveling man, Gram, talked to Gwenda, asking her questions about herself, and suggested they take a stroll together after dinner. She guessed what he meant by a “stroll” and turned him down flat, but later she saw him with yellow-haired Joanna, the daughter of David Johns, who was only fifteen and stupid enough to fall for the blandishments of a traveling man.

On Monday, Gwenda was weeding Wulfric’s wheat on Hundredacre in the half light before sunrise when Wulfric came across the field toward her at a run. His face was grim with fury.

She had continued to defy his wishes, working on his lands every morning and evening, and it looked as if she had driven him too far. What would he do—beat her up? After the way she had provoked him, he could probably do violence to her with impunity—people would say she had asked for it, and she had no one to stick up for her now that she had left her parents’ home. She felt scared. She had seen Wulfric break Ralph Fitzgerald’s nose.

Then she told herself not to be foolish. Although he had been in many fights, she had never known him to strike a woman or a child. All the same, his anger made her tremble.

But it was nothing like that. As soon as he got within hailing distance, he shouted: “Have you seen Gram?”

“No, why?”

He came closer and stopped, breathing hard. “How long have you been here?”

“I got up before dawn.”

Wulfric’s shoulders slumped. “Then, if he came this way, he’s out of reach by now.”

“What’s happened?”

“He’s disappeared—and so has my horse.”

That explained Wulfric’s rage. A horse was a valuable asset—only wealthy peasants such as his father could afford one. Gwenda recalled how quickly Gram had changed the subject when she said she might know his

brother. He did not have a brother at the priory, of course, nor had he lost his wife and child in a fire. He was a liar who had wormed his way into the confidence of the villagers with the intention of stealing. “What fools we were to listen to his story,” she said.

“And I the biggest fool of all, to take him into my house,” Wulfric said bitterly. “He stayed just long enough for the animals to get to know him, so that the horse was willing to go with him, and the dog didn’t bark when he left.”

Gwenda’s heart ached for Wulfric, losing the horse at a time when he needed it most. “I don’t think he came this way,” she said thoughtfully. “He can’t have left before me—the night was too dark. And if he had followed me, I would have seen him.” There was only one road into and out of the village, and it dead-ended at the manor house. But there were numerous pathways across the fields. “He probably took the lane between Brookfield and Longfield—it’s the quickest way into the forest.”

“The horse can’t move very fast in the woods. I might catch him yet.” Wulfric turned and ran back the way he had come.

“Good luck,” Gwenda called after him, and he waved acknowledgment without turning his head.

However, he did not have good luck.

Late that afternoon, as Gwenda was carrying a sack of peas from Brookfield to the lord’s barn, she walked past Longfield and saw Wulfric again. He was digging over his fallow land with a spade. Obviously he had not caught up with Gram, or retrieved his horse.

She put down the sack and crossed the field to speak to him. “You can’t do this,” she said. “You’ve got thirty acres here, and you’ve plowed, what, ten? No man can dig over twenty acres.”

He did not meet her eye. He carried on digging, his face set. “I can’t plow,” he said. “I’ve no horse.”

“Put yourself in harness,” she said. “You’re strong, and it’s a light plow—you’re only killing thistles.”

“I’ve no one to guide the plow.”

“Yes, you have.”

He stared at her.

“I’ll do it,” she said.

He shook his head.

She said: “You’ve lost your family, and now you’ve lost your horse. You can’t manage on your own. You have no choice. You have to let me help you.”

He looked away, across the fields, toward the village, and she knew he was thinking about Annet.

“I’ll be ready first thing tomorrow morning,” Gwenda said.

His gaze returned to her. His face worked with emotion. He was torn between love of the land and a desire to please Annet.

"I'll knock on your door," Gwenda said. "We'll plow the rest together." She turned and walked away, then stopped and looked back.

He did not say yes.

But he did not say no.

They plowed for two days, then made hay, then picked spring vegetables.

Now that Gwenda was no longer earning money to pay Widow Huberts for bed and board, she needed somewhere else to sleep, so she moved into Wulfric's cowshed. She explained the reason, and he made no objection.

After the first day, Annet ceased to bring Wulfric's dinner at midday, so Gwenda would prepare food for them both from his cupboard: bread, ale in a jug, boiled eggs or cold bacon, and spring onions or beets. Once again, Wulfric accepted the change without comment.

She still had the love potion. The little pottery vial was in a tiny leather bag attached to a thong around her neck. It hung between her breasts, hidden from view. She could have dosed his ale at any dinnertime, but she would not be able to take advantage of its effects out in the fields in the middle of the day.

Every evening he went to Perkin's house and had supper with Annet and her family, so Gwenda sat alone in his kitchen. When he returned he often looked grim, but he said nothing to Gwenda, so she assumed he must have overruled Annet's objections. He went to bed without taking anything more to eat or drink, so she was not able to use the potion.

On the Saturday after Gram ran off, Gwenda made herself a supper of greens boiled with salt pork. Wulfric's house was stocked with food for four adults, so there was plenty to eat. The evenings were cool, even though it was now July, and after she had eaten she put another log on the kitchen fire and sat watching it catch alight, thinking of the simple, predictable life she had led until a few short weeks ago, marveling at how that life had collapsed as completely as the bridge at Kingsbridge.

When the door opened, she thought it was Wulfric coming home. She always retired to the cowshed when he came back, but she enjoyed the few friendly words they exchanged before going to bed. She looked up eagerly, expecting to see his handsome face; but she suffered an unpleasant shock.

It was not Wulfric, but her father.

With him was a rough-looking stranger.

She leaped to her feet, full of fear. "What do you want?"

Skip gave a hostile bark, but retreated from Joby in fear.

Joby said: "Now, then, my little girl, no need to be afraid, I'm your pa."

She recalled, with dismay, her mother's vague warning in church. "Who is he?" she said, pointing at the stranger.

"This here is Jonah from Abingdon, a dealer in hides."

Jonah might once have been a merchant, Gwenda thought grimly, and he might even come from Abingdon, but his boots were worn, his clothes were filthy, and his matted hair and straggly beard showed that he had not visited a city barber for some years.

Showing more courage than she felt, Gwenda said: "Get away from me."

"I told you she was feisty," Joby said to Jonah. "But she's a good girl, and strong."

Jonah spoke for the first time. "Not to worry," he said. He licked his lips as he studied Gwenda, and she wished she were wearing more than her light wool dress. "I've broken in a few fillies in my time," he added.

Gwenda had no doubt that her father had carried out his threat and sold her again. She had thought that leaving his house would make her safe. Surely the villagers would not permit the abduction of a laborer employed by one of their number? But it was dark now, and she might be far away before anyone realized what had happened.

There was no one to help her.

All the same, she was not going without a fight.

She looked around desperately, searching for a weapon. The log she had put on a few minutes ago was blazing at one end, but it was about eighteen inches long, and the other end stuck out invitingly. She bent quickly and snatched it up.

"Now, then, no need for that sort of thing," said Joby. "You don't want to hurt your old pa, do you?" He stepped closer.

A rush of rage overwhelmed her. How dare he speak of himself as her old pa when he was trying to sell her? Suddenly she did want to hurt him. She leaped at him, screaming with rage, thrusting the burning log at his face.

He jumped back, but she kept coming, mad with fury. Skip yapped frantically. Joby lifted his arms to protect himself, trying to knock the brand away, but she was strong, too. His flailing arms failed to stop her rush, and she pushed the red-hot end of the log into his face. He screamed in pain as it scorched his cheek. His dirty beard caught fire, and there was a sickening smell of roasting flesh.

Then Gwenda was grabbed from behind. Jonah's arms encircled her, pinning her own arms to her side. She dropped the burning log. Flames leaped up immediately from the straw on the floor. Skip, terrified of fire, ran out of the house. Gwenda struggled, wriggling in Jonah's grasp, throwing herself from side to side, but he was surprisingly strong. He lifted her off her feet.

A tall figure appeared in the doorway. Gwenda saw only the shape, then it disappeared again. Gwenda felt herself thrown to the ground. For a moment

she was stunned. When she came to her senses, Jonah was kneeling on her, tying her hands with a rope.

The tall figure reappeared, and Gwenda recognized Wulfric. This time he was carrying a big oak bucket. Swiftly, he emptied the bucket onto the burning straw, putting out the flames. Then he changed his grip, swung the bucket, and hit the kneeling Jonah a mighty blow on top of the head.

Jonah's grip on Gwenda relaxed. She pulled her wrists apart and felt the rope loosen. Wulfric swung the bucket and hit Jonah a second time, even harder. Jonah's eyes closed and he slumped to the floor.

Joby put out the flames of his burning beard by pressing his sleeve against it, then sank to his knees, moaning in agony.

Wulfric picked up the unconscious Jonah by his tunic front. "Who on earth is this?"

"His name is Jonah. My father wanted to sell me to him."

Wulfric lifted the man by the belt, carried him to the front door, and threw him out into the road.

Joby groaned. "Help me, my face is burned."

"Help you?" said Wulfric. "You've set fire to my house and attacked my laborer, and you want me to help you? Get out!"

Joby got to his feet, moaning piteously, and staggered to the front door. Gwenda searched her heart and found no compassion. What little love she might have had left for him had been destroyed tonight. As he went out through the door, she hoped he would never speak to her again.

Perkin came to the back door, carrying a rush light. "What happened?" he said. "I thought I heard a scream." Gwenda saw Annet hovering behind him.

Wulfric answered the question. "Joby came here with another ruffian. They tried to take Gwenda away."

Perkin grunted. "You seem to have dealt with the problem."

"Without difficulty." Wulfric realized he still had the bucket in his hand, and he put it down.

Annet said: "Are you hurt?"

"Not in the least."

"Do you need anything?"

"I just want to go to sleep."

Perkin and Annet took the hint and went away. No one else seemed to have heard the commotion. Wulfric closed the doors.

He looked at Gwenda in the firelight. "How do you feel?"

"Shaky." She sat on the bench and leaned her elbows on the kitchen table.

He went to the cupboard. "Drink a little wine to steady yourself." He took out a small barrel, put it on the table, and got two cups off the shelf.

Gwenda was suddenly alert. Could this be her chance? She tried to pull herself together. She would have to act quickly.

Wulfric poured wine into the cups, then returned the barrel to the cupboard.

Gwenda had only a second or two. While his back was turned, she reached into her bosom and pulled out the bag that hung around her neck on its leather thong. She fumbled the vial from the bag. With a trembling hand she unstoppered it and emptied it into his cup.

He turned around as she was pushing the bag back into her neckline. She patted herself as if she had merely been straightening her clothing. Typical man, he noticed nothing amiss, and sat opposite her at the table.

She picked up her cup and raised it in a toast. “You saved me,” she said. “Thank you.”

“Your hand is shaking,” he said. “You’ve had a nasty shock.”

They both drank.

Gwenda wondered how long the potion would take to have its effect.

Wulfric said: “You saved me, by helping me in the fields. Thank you.”

They drank again.

“I don’t know what’s worse,” Gwenda said. “To have a father like mine, or to be like you and have no father at all.”

“I feel sorry for you,” Wulfric said thoughtfully. “At least I have good memories of my parents.” He emptied his cup. “I don’t usually drink wine—I don’t like that woozy feeling—but this is great.”

She watched him carefully. Mattie Wise had said that he would become amorous. Gwenda looked for the signs. Sure enough, he soon began to stare as if seeing her for the first time. After a while he said: “You know, you’ve got such a nice face. There’s a lot of kindness in it.”

Now she was supposed to use her feminine wiles to seduce him. But, she realized with a panicky feeling, she had had no practice at this. Women such as Annet did it all the time. However, when she thought of the things Annet did—smilingly coyly, touching her hair, fluttering her eyelashes—she could not bring herself even to try. She would just feel stupid.

“You’re kind,” she said, talking to gain time. “But your face shows something else.”

“What?”

“Strength. The kind that comes, not from big muscles, but from determination.”

“I feel strong tonight.” He grinned. “You said no man could dig over twenty acres—but I feel as if I could, right now.”

She put her hand over his on the table. “Enjoy your rest,” she said. “There’s plenty of time for digging.”

He looked at her small hand on his large one. “We’ve got different color skin,” he said, as if discovering an amazing fact. “Look: yours is brown, mine’s pink.”

“Different skin, different hair, different eyes. I wonder what our babies would be like?”

He smiled at the thought. Then his expression changed as he realized something was wrong with what she had said. Abruptly, his face became grave. The change might have been comical if she had not cared so much about his feelings for her. He said solemnly: “We’re not going to have babies.” He took his hand away.

“Let’s not think about that,” she said desperately.

“Don’t you sometimes wish…” He tailed off.

“What?”

“Don’t you sometimes wish the world could be different from the way it is?”

She got up, walked around the table, and sat close to him. “Don’t wish,” she said. “We’re alone, and it’s night. You can do anything you want.” She looked directly into his eyes. “Anything.”

He stared back at her. She saw the yearning in his face, and realized with a thrill of triumph that he desired her. It had required a potion to bring it out, but it was unmistakably genuine. Right now he wanted nothing in the world other than to make love to her.

Still he made no move.

She took his hand. He did not resist as she drew it to her lips. She held the big, rough fingers, then pressed the palm to her mouth. She kissed it, then licked it with the tip of her tongue. Then she pressed his hand to one breast.

His hand closed over it, making it seem very small. His mouth opened a fraction, and she could see that he was breathing hard. She tilted her head back, ready to be kissed, but he did nothing.

She stood up and quickly pulled her dress up over her head and threw it to the floor. She stood naked in front of him in the firelight. He gazed at her, eyes wide, mouth open, as if he were witnessing a miracle.

She took his hand again. This time, she touched it to the soft place between her thighs. It covered the triangle of hair there. She was so wet that his finger slipped inside her, and she gave an involuntary groan of pleasure.

But he did nothing of his own volition, and she understood that he was paralyzed by indecision. He wanted her, but he had not forgotten Annet. Gwenda could move him like a puppet all night, perhaps even have sex with his inert body, but that would change nothing. She needed him to take the initiative.

She leaned forward, still holding his hand against her groin. “Kiss me,” she said. She moved her face closer to his. “Please,” she said. She was an inch away from his mouth. She would not get nearer: he had to close the gap.

Suddenly, he moved.

He withdrew his hand, turned away from her, and stood up. “This is

wrong," he said.

And she knew that she had lost.

Tears came to her eyes. She picked up her dress from the floor and held it in front of her, covering her nakedness.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I shouldn't have done any of those things. I misled you. I've been cruel."

No, you haven't, she thought. I've been cruel. I've misled you. But you were too strong. You're too loyal, too faithful. You're too good for me.

But she said nothing.

He kept his gaze steadfastly away from her. "You must go to the cowshed," he said. "Go to sleep. We'll feel differently in the morning. It might be all right then."

She ran out through the back door, not bothering to get dressed. It was moonlight, but there was no one to see her, and she would not have cared anyway. She was inside the cowshed in seconds.

At one end of the wooden building was a raised loft where clean straw was kept. That was where she made her bed each night. She climbed the ladder and threw herself down, too miserable to care about the sharp prickle of straw on her bare skin. She wept with disappointment and shame.

When eventually she calmed down, she stood up and put her dress on, then wrapped a blanket around her. As she did so, she thought she heard a step outside. She looked through a gap in the rough wattle-and-daub of the wall.

The moon was almost full, and she could see clearly. Wulfric was outside. He walked toward the door of the cowshed. Gwenda's heart leaped. Perhaps it was not all over yet. But he hesitated at the door, then walked away. He returned to the house, turned at the kitchen door, came back to the cowshed, and turned again.

She watched him pace up and down, her heart thudding, but she did not move. She had done all she could to encourage him. He had to take the last step himself.

He stopped at the kitchen door. His body was profiled by the moonlight, a silver line running from his forelock to his boots. She saw clearly as he reached into his drawers. She knew what he was going to do: she had seen her older brother do the same thing. She heard Wulfric groan as he began to rub himself with the motion that caricatured lovemaking. She stared at him, beautiful in the moonlight, wasting his desire, and she felt as if her heart would break.

20

Godwyn moved against Blind Carlus on the Sunday before the birthday of St. Adolphus.

On that Sunday every year, a special service was held in Kingsbridge Cathedral. The bones of the saint were carried around the church by the prior, followed by the monks in procession; and they prayed for good harvest weather.

As always, it was Godwyn's job to prepare the church for the service—placing candles, getting incense ready, and moving furniture—helped by novices and employees such as Philemon. The Feast of St. Adolphus required a secondary altar, an elaborately carved wooden table set on a platform that could be moved about the church as required. Godwyn placed this altar on the eastern edge of the crossing and put on it a pair of silver-gilt candlesticks. As he did so, he anxiously mulled over his position.

Now that he had persuaded Thomas to stand for election as prior, his next step was to eliminate the opposition. Carlus ought to be an easy target—but in a way, that was a disadvantage, for Godwyn did not want to appear callous.

He placed in the center of the altar a reliquary cross, a bejeweled gold crucifix with a core of wood from the True Cross. This, the actual timber upon which Christ was killed, had been miraculously found a thousand years ago by Helena, the mother of Constantine the Great, and pieces of it had found their way to churches all over Europe.

As Godwyn was arranging the ornaments on the altar, he saw Mother Cecilia nearby and broke off from his work to speak to her. "I understand that Earl Roland has recovered his mind," he said. "Praise God."

"Amen," she said. "The fever was on him so long that we feared for his life. Some evil humor must have entered his brain after his skull was fractured. Nothing he said made sense. Then, this morning, he woke up and spoke normally."

"You cured him."

"God cured him."

"Still, he should be grateful to you."

She smiled. "You're young, Brother Godwyn. You'll learn that men of power never show gratitude. Whatever we give them, they accept as their right."

Her condescension annoyed Godwyn, but he concealed his irritation. "At any rate, we can now hold the election for prior, at last."

"Who will win?"

"Ten monks have promised firmly to vote for Carlus, and only seven for Thomas. With the candidates' own votes, that makes the score eleven to eight, with six uncommitted."

"So it could go either way."

“But Carlus is in the lead. Thomas could do with your support, Mother Cecilia.”

“I don’t have a vote.”

“But you have influence. If you were to say that the monastery needs stricter control and a measure of reform, and you felt Thomas was more likely to deliver such a program, it would sway some of the waverers.”

“I ought not to take sides.”

“Perhaps not, but you could say that you will not continue to subsidize the monks unless they manage their money better. What could be wrong with that?”

Her bright eyes glittered with amusement: she was not so easily persuaded. “That would be a coded message of support for Thomas.”

“Yes.”

“I am strictly neutral. I will happily work with whomever the monks choose. And that’s my last word, Brother.”

He bowed his head deferentially. “I respect your decision, of course.”

She nodded and moved away.

Godwyn was pleased. He had never expected her to endorse Thomas. She was conservative. Everyone assumed she favored Carlus. But Godwyn could now spread the word that she would be content with either candidate. In effect, he had undermined her implicit support for Carlus. She might even be cross when she heard what use he was making of her words, but she would not withdraw her statement of neutrality.

I am so clever, he thought; I really deserve to be prior.

Neutralizing Cecilia was helpful, but it would not be enough to crush Carlus. Godwyn needed to give the monks a vivid demonstration of how incompetent Carlus was to lead them. He was hoping anxiously for such an opportunity today.

Carlus and Simeon were in the church now, rehearsing the service. Carlus was the acting prior, so he had to lead the procession, carrying the ivory-and-gold reliquary that contained the bones of the saint. Simeon, the treasurer and Carlus’s crony, was walking him through it, and Godwyn could see Carlus counting his paces, so that he would be able to do it on his own. The congregation was impressed when Carlus moved around confidently despite his blindness: it seemed like a minor miracle.

The procession always began at the east end of the church, where the relics were stored under the high altar. The prior would unlock the cupboard and remove the reliquary. He would carry it along the north aisle of the chancel, around the north transept, down the north aisle of the nave, across the west end, and back up the center of the nave and into the crossing. There he would climb two steps to place it on the second altar that Godwyn had put in position ready. The holy relics would remain there, for the congregation to

stare at, throughout the service.

Looking around the church, Godwyn's eye fell on the repairs in the south aisle of the chancel, and he stepped closer to see how they were coming along. Merthin was no longer involved, having been sacked by Elfric, but his startlingly simple method was still being operated. Instead of expensive wooden formwork supporting the new masonry while the mortar set, each stone was held in place by a simple rope, draped over the long edge of the stone and weighted with a rock. The system could not be used to build the ribs of the vault, which were composed of long, slender stones laid end to end, so formwork had to be made for those elements; but, all the same, Merthin had saved the priory a small fortune in carpentry.

Godwyn recognized Merthin's genius, but still felt uneasy with him, and preferred to work with Elfric. Elfric could be trusted always to be a willing tool, never to make trouble; whereas Merthin was all too likely to walk his own road.

Carlus and Simeon left. The church was ready for the service. Godwyn sent away the men who had been helping him, all but Philemon, who was sweeping the floor of the crossing.

For a moment, the great cathedral was empty but for the two of them.

This was Godwyn's chance. The plan he had half-formulated now appeared complete in his mind. He hesitated, for it was dreadfully risky. But he decided to gamble.

He beckoned to Philemon. "Now," he said. "Quickly—move the platform forward a yard."

Much of the time, the cathedral was no more than a place of work to Godwyn. It was a space to be used, a building to be repaired, a source of income and at the same time a financial burden. But, on an occasion such as this, its majesty was renewed. The candle flames flickered, their reflections glinting on the gold of the candlesticks; the robed monks and nuns glided between the ancient stone pillars; and the voices of the choir soared to the high vault. No wonder the crowd of hundreds of townspeople was hushed as they stood watching.

Carlus led the procession. As the monks and nuns sang, he opened the compartment under the high altar—working by touch—and took out the ivory-and-gold reliquary. Holding it high, he began to process around the church. He was the picture of a holy innocent, with his white beard and unseeing eyes.

Would he fall into Godwyn's trap? It was so simple—it seemed too easy. Godwyn, following a few paces behind Carlus, bit his lip and tried to remain calm.

The congregation was awestruck. Godwyn never failed to marvel at how willing they were to be manipulated. They could not see the bones and, if they had, they could not have distinguished them from any other human remains. But, because of the costly extravagance of the box, the eerie beauty of the singing, the uniform robes of the monks and nuns, and the towering architecture that dwarfed them all, they felt the presence of something holy.

Godwyn watched Carlus carefully. As he reached the precise midpoint of the westernmost bay of the north aisle, he turned sharply left. Simeon stood ready to correct him if he misjudged, but it was not necessary. Good: the more confident Carlus was, the more likely he was to stumble at the crucial moment.

Counting his paces, Carlus marched to the exact center of the nave then turned again, heading straight for the altar. On cue, the singing stopped, and the procession carried on in a reverent hush.

It must be a bit like finding your way to the latrine in the middle of the night, Godwyn thought. Carlus had followed this route several times a year for most of his life. He was now doing it as leader of the procession, which must make him tense; but he appeared calm, only the slight movement of his lips betraying the fact that he was counting. But Godwyn had ensured that his count would be wrong. Would he make a fool of himself? Or would he somehow recover?

The congregation fell back fearfully as the sacred bones went by. Touching the casket could work miracles, they knew, but they also believed that any disrespect shown to the relics would have disastrous consequences. The spirits of the dead were ever present, watching over their remains while they waited for the day of judgment; and those who had led holy lives enjoyed almost unlimited powers to reward or punish the living.

The thought crossed Godwyn’s mind that St. Adolphus might be displeased with him for what was about to happen in Kingsbridge Cathedral. He shivered with momentary terror. Then he reassured himself that he was acting for the good of the priory that housed the sacred bones, and that the all-wise saint, who could see into men’s hearts, would understand that this was for the best.

Carlus slowed as he approached the altar, but his paces were the same measured length. Godwyn stopped breathing. Carlus seemed to hesitate as he took the step that should, by his own calculations, bring him just short of the platform on which the altar stood. Godwyn watched helplessly, dreading some last-moment change of routine.

Then, confidently, Carlus walked on.

His foot struck the edge of the platform a yard sooner than expected. In the silence, the sound of his sandal on the hollow wood resounded loudly. He let out a cry of shock and fear. His momentum carried him forward.

Godwyn's heart was lifted by a surge of triumph—but it lasted only an instant, then disaster struck.

Simeon reached out to grab Carlus's arm, but he was too late. The casket flew from Carlus's hands. The congregation gave a collective gasp of horror. The precious box hit the stone floor and burst open, scattering the bones of the saint. Carlus crashed into the heavy carved-wood altar, pushing it back off the platform, sending its ornaments and candles tumbling to the floor.

Godwyn was horrified. This was much worse than he had intended.

The skull of the saint rolled across the floor and came to rest at Godwyn's feet.

His plan had worked—but too well. He had wanted Carlus to fall, and appear helpless, but he had not intended the holy remains to be desecrated. He stared, horrified, at the skull on the ground, and its empty eyes seemed to look back at him accusingly. What dreadful punishment would befall him?

Could he ever make restitution for such a crime?

Because he had been expecting an incident, he was slightly less shocked than everyone else, and he regained his composure first. Standing over the bones, he raised both arms in the air and shouted over the hubbub: "Everyone—on your knees! We must pray!"

Those at the front knelt down, and the rest quickly followed suit. Godwyn began a familiar prayer, and the monks and nuns joined in. As the chanting filled the church, he righted the reliquary, which seemed undamaged. Then, moving with theatrical slowness, he picked up the skull in both hands. He was shaking with superstitious dread, but he managed to hold it. Speaking the Latin words of the prayer, he carried the skull to the casket and placed it inside.

He saw that Carlus was struggling to his feet. He pointed at two nuns. "Help the subprior to the hospital," he said. "Brother Simeon, Mother Cecilia, will you go with him?"

He picked up another bone. He was frightened, knowing that he more than Carlus was to blame for what had happened; but his intentions had been pure, and he still hoped to mollify the saint. At the same time, he was aware that his actions must look good in the eyes of everyone present: he was taking charge in a crisis, like a true leader.

However, this moment of awe and horror could not be allowed to last too long. He needed to gather up the bones more quickly. "Brother Thomas," he said. "Brother Theodoric. Come and help me." Philemon stepped forward, but Godwyn waved him back: he was not a monk, and only men of God should touch the bones.

Carlus limped out of the church, helped by Simeon and Cecilia, leaving Godwyn the undisputed master of the occasion.

Godwyn beckoned Philemon and another employee, Otho, and told them

to right the altar. They set it straight on the platform. Otho picked up the candlesticks and Philemon the jeweled crucifix. They placed them reverently on the altar then retrieved the scattered candles.

All the bones were picked up. Godwyn tried to close the lid of the reliquary, but it had buckled and did not quite fit. Making the best of it, he ceremoniously placed the casket on the altar.

Godwyn remembered, just in time, that he was seeking to show Thomas, not himself, in the light of leader of the priory—for the present. He picked up the book Simeon had been carrying and handed it to Thomas. Thomas did not need to be told what to do. He opened the book, found the correct page, and read the verse. The monks and nuns formed lines either side of the altar, then Thomas led them in singing the psalm.

Somehow, they got through the service.

Godwyn began to tremble again as soon as he got out of the church. It had been a near-disaster, but he seemed to have got away with it.

The monks burst into excited chatter as the procession reached the cloisters and broke up. Godwyn leaned against a pillar, struggling to regain his composure. He listened to the comments of the monks. Some felt the desecration of the relics was a sign that God did not want Carlus to be prior—the reaction Godwyn had intended. But, to his dismay, most expressed compassion for Carlus. That was not what Godwyn wanted. He realized he might have given Carlus the benefit of a sympathetic backlash.

He pulled himself together and hurried to the hospital. He needed to get to Carlus while the man was still demoralized, and before he got wind of the monks' understanding.

The subprior was sitting up in bed with one arm in a sling and a bandage around his head. He was pale and looked shaken, and every few moments his face would twitch nervously. Simeon was sitting beside him.

Simeon gave Godwyn a filthy look. "I suppose you're pleased," he said.

Godwyn ignored him. "Brother Carlus, you'll be glad to know that the relics of the saint have been restored to their usual place with hymns and prayers. The saint will surely forgive us all for this tragic accident."

Carlus shook his head. "There are no accidents," he said. "Everything is ordained by God."

Godwyn's hopes lifted. This was promising.

Simeon's thoughts followed the same lines, and he tried to restrain Carlus. "Don't say anything hasty, Brother."

"It's a sign," Carlus said. "God is telling us he does not want me to be prior."

This was what Godwyn had been hoping for.

Simeon said: “Nonsense.” He picked up a cup from a table beside the bed. Godwyn guessed it contained warm wine and honey, Mother Cecilia’s prescription for most ills. Simeon put the cup into Carlus’s hand. “Drink.”

Carlus drank, but he was not to be diverted from his theme. “It would be a sin to ignore such a portent.”

“Portents are not so easily interpreted,” Simeon protested.

“Perhaps not. But even if you’re right, will the brothers vote for a prior who can’t carry the relics of the saint without falling over?”

Godwyn said: “Some of them might, in fact, be drawn to you in commiseration, rather than repelled.”

Simeon shot him a puzzled look, wondering what he was up to.

Simeon was right to be suspicious. Godwyn was playing devil’s advocate because he wanted more than vague expressions of doubt from Carlus. Could he possibly extract a definitive withdrawal?

As he hoped, Carlus argued with him. “A man should be made prior because the brothers respect him and believe he can lead them wisely—not out of pity.” He spoke with the bitter conviction of a lifetime of disability.

“I suppose that’s true,” Godwyn said with feigned reluctance, as if the admission had been wrung from him against his will. Taking a risk, he added: “But perhaps Simeon is right, and you should postpone any final decision until you feel more yourself.”

“I’m as well as I’m ever going to be,” Carlus retorted, refusing to admit to weakness in front of young Godwyn. “Nothing is going to change. I’ll feel tomorrow the way I feel today. I will not stand for election as prior.”

Those were the words Godwyn had been waiting for. He stood up abruptly and bowed his head as if in acknowledgment, hiding his face for fear he might reveal his sense of triumph. “You are as clear as always, Brother Carlus,” he said. “I will convey your wishes to the rest of the monks.”

Simeon opened his mouth to protest, but he was forestalled by Mother Cecilia, coming into the room from the stairwell. She looked flustered. “Earl Roland is demanding to see the subprior,” she said. “He’s threatening to get out of bed, but he must not move, for his skull may not yet be fully healed. But Brother Carlus should not move either.”

Godwyn looked at Simeon. “We’ll go,” he said.

They went together up the stairs.

Godwyn was feeling good. Carlus did not even know that he had been routed. Of his own accord, he had withdrawn himself from the contest, leaving only Thomas. And Godwyn could eliminate Thomas anytime he liked.

The plan had been astonishingly successful—so far.

Earl Roland was lying on his back, and his head was thickly bandaged, but all the same he managed to look like a man in power. The barber must

have visited him, for his face was shaved and his black hair—as much of it as was not covered by the bandage—had been neatly trimmed. He wore a short purple tunic and new hose, the two legs fashionably dyed different colors, one red and one yellow. Despite lying in bed, he wore a belt with a dagger and short leather boots. His elder son, William, and William's wife, Philippa, stood by the bed. His young secretary, Father Jerome, in priestly robes, sat at a nearby writing desk with pens and sealing wax ready.

The message was clear: the earl was back in charge.

"Is the subprior there?" he said in a clear, strong voice.

Godwyn was quicker-thinking than Simeon, and he replied first. "Subprior Carlus has suffered a fall and is himself lying here in this hospital, Lord," he said. "I am the sacrist, Godwyn, and with me is the treasurer, Simeon. We thank God for your miraculous recovery, for He guided the hands of the physician-monks who have been attending you."

"It was the barber who mended my broken head," said Roland. "Thank him."

Because the earl was lying on his back, looking up at the ceiling, Godwyn could not see his face well; but he had the impression that the earl's expression was curiously blank, and he wondered whether the injury had done some permanent damage. He said: "Do you have everything you need to make you comfortable?"

"If I don't, you'll soon know. Now, listen. My niece, Margery, is to marry Monmouth's younger son, Roger. I presume you know this."

"Yes." Godwyn had a sudden flash of memory: Margery lying on her back in this very room, her white legs in the air, fornicating with her cousin Richard, the bishop of Kingsbridge.

"The wedding has been unduly delayed by my injuries."

That was not true, Godwyn reflected. The collapse of the bridge had taken place only a month ago. The truth was probably that the earl needed to prove that the injury had not diminished him, and he was still a power worthy of an alliance with the earl of Monmouth.

Roland went on: "The wedding will take place in Kingsbridge Cathedral three weeks from today."

Strictly speaking the earl should have made a request, not issued a command, and an elected prior might have bristled at his high-handedness; but, of course, there was no prior. Anyway, Godwyn could think of no reason why Roland should not have his wish. "Very well, my lord," he said. "I will make the necessary preparations."

"I want the new prior installed in time for the service," Roland went on.

Simeon grunted in surprise.

Godwyn quickly calculated that haste would suit his plans remarkably well. "Very good," he replied. "There were two candidates, but today

Subprior Carlus withdrew his name, leaving only Brother Thomas, the matricularius. We can hold the election as soon as you like." He could hardly believe his luck.

Simeon knew he was looking defeat in the face. "Wait a minute," he said.

But Roland was not listening. "I don't want Thomas," he said.

Godwyn had not been expecting that.

Simeon grinned, pleased at this last-minute reprieve.

Shocked, Godwyn said: "But, my lord—"

Roland did not permit him to interrupt. "Summon my nephew, Saul Whitehead, from St.-John-in-the-Forest," he said.

Godwyn's heart filled with foreboding. Saul was his contemporary. As novices, they had been friends. They had gone to Oxford together—but there they had grown apart, Saul becoming more devout and Godwyn more worldly. Saul was now the competent prior of the remote cell of St. John. He took very seriously the monastic virtue of humility, and he would never have put forward his own name. But he was bright, devout, and liked by everyone.

"Get him here as soon as possible," said Roland. "I shall nominate him as the next prior of Kingsbridge."

21

Merthin sat on the roof of St. Mark's Church, at the north end of Kingsbridge. From here he could see the whole town. To the southeast, a bend in the river cradled the priory in the crook of its elbow. A quarter of the town was taken up by the priory buildings and the grounds around them—cemetery, marketplace, orchard, and vegetable garden—with the cathedral rising from its surroundings like an oak in a field of nettles. He could see priory employees picking vegetables in the garden, mucking out a stable, and unloading barrels from a cart.

The center of town was the wealthy neighborhood, especially the main street, climbing the slope from the river as the first monks must have climbed it hundreds of years ago. Several wealthy merchants, identifiable by the glowing colors of their fine wool coats, walked purposefully along the street: merchants were always busy. Another wide thoroughfare, the high street, ran west to east through the middle of the town, bisecting the main street at right angles near the northwest corner of the priory. On the same corner he could see the broad roof of the guildhall, the largest building in town outside the priory.

On the main street next to the Bell were the priory gates, with Caris's house opposite, taller than most of the other buildings. Outside the Bell,

Merthin could see a crowd gathered around Friar Murdo. The friar, who did not seem to be attached to any particular fraternal order, had stayed in Kingsbridge after the bridge collapse. Shocked and bereaved people were particularly susceptible to his emotional roadside sermons, and he was raking in the silver halfpennies and farthings. Merthin thought he was a fraud, his holy anger faked and his tears a cover for cynicism and greed—but Merthin was in a minority.

At the bottom of the main street, the stumps of the bridge still stuck up out of the water, and next to them Merthin's ferry was crossing the water bearing a cart loaded with tree trunks. To the southwest was the industrial sector, where large houses on broad plots encompassed abattoirs, tanneries, breweries, bakeries, and workshops of all kinds—too smelly and dirty for the town's leading citizens, but nevertheless a district where plenty of money was made. The river widened there, dividing into two channels either side of Leper Island. Merthin could see Ian Boatman rowing his small craft to the island, his passenger a monk, probably carrying food to the one remaining leper. The south bank of the river was lined with wharves and warehouses, and rafts and barges were being unloaded at several of them. Beyond was the suburb of Newtown, where rows of poor houses ran between orchards, pastures, and gardens in which priory employees produced food for the monks and nuns.

The north end of town, where St. Mark's stood, was the poor quarter, and the church was surrounded by the huddled homes of laborers, widows, the unsuccessful, and the old. It was a poor church—luckily for Merthin.

Four weeks ago, a desperate Father Joffroi had hired Merthin to build a hoist and repair his roof. Caris had persuaded Edmund to lend Merthin the money to buy tools. Merthin had hired a fourteen-year-old boy, Jimmie, to labor for a halfpenny a day. And today the hoist was finished.

Somehow, word had got around that Merthin was about to try out a new machine. Everyone had been impressed by his ferry, and people were fascinated to see what he had come up with now. Down in the graveyard a small crowd had gathered, mostly idlers but including Father Joffroi, Edmund and Caris, and some of the town's builders, notably Elfric. If Merthin failed today, he would fail in front of his friends and enemies.

That was not the worst of it. This job had saved him from the need to leave town in search of work. But such a fate still hung over him. If the hoist went wrong, people would conclude that hiring Merthin brought bad luck. They would say that the spirits did not want him in town. He would be under greater pressure to leave. He would have to say good-bye to Kingsbridge—and to Caris.

Over the last four weeks, as he had shaped the wood and joined the pieces of his hoist, he had for the first time seriously thought about losing her; and it

dismayed him. He had realized that she was all the joy in his world. If the weather was fine, he wanted to walk in the sunshine with her; if he saw something beautiful, he wanted to show it to her; if he heard something funny, his first thought was to tell her, and see her smile. His work gave him pleasure, especially when he came up with clever solutions to intractable problems; but it was a cold, cerebral satisfaction, and he knew that his life would be a long winter without Caris.

He stood up. It was time to put his skill to the test.

He had built a normal hoist with one innovative feature. Like all hoists, it had a rope that ran through a series of pulleys. On top of the church wall, at the edge of the roof, Merthin had built a timber structure like a gallows, with an arm that reached across the roof. The rope ran out to the end of the arm. At the other end of the rope, on the ground in the graveyard, was a treadwheel, which wound up the rope when operated by the boy Jimmie. All this was standard. The innovation was that the gallows incorporated a swivel, so that the arm could swing.

To save himself from the fate of Howell Tyler, Merthin had a belt under his arms that was tied to a sturdy stone pinnacle: if he fell, he would not fall far. So protected, he had removed the slates from a section of the roof then tied the rope of the hoist to a timber. Now he called down to Jimmie: “Turn the wheel!”

Then he held his breath. He was sure it would work—it had to—but, all the same, this was a moment of high anxiety.

Jimmie, inside the great treadmill on the ground, began to walk. The wheel could move only one way. It had a brake pressing on its asymmetric teeth: one side of each tooth was gently angled, so that the brake moved gradually along the slope; but the other side was vertical, so that any reverse movement was immediately arrested.

As the wheel turned, the roof timber rose.

When the timber was clear of the roof structure, Merthin shouted: “Whoa!”

Jimmie stopped, the brake engaged, and the timber hung in the air, swinging gently. So far, so good. The next part was where things might go wrong.

Merthin turned the hoist, so that its arm began to swing. He watched it, holding his breath. New strains were brought to bear on the structure as the weight of the load moved its position. The wood of the hoist creaked. The arm swung through half a circle, bringing the timber from its original location over the roof to a new point over the graveyard. There was a collective murmur of wonder from the crowd: they had never seen a hoist that could swivel.

“Let it down!” Merthin called.

Jimmie operated the brake, allowing the load to fall jerkily, a foot at a time, as the wheel turned and the rope unwound.

Everyone watched in silence. When the timber touched the ground there was a round of applause.

Jimmie detached the timber from the rope.

Merthin permitted himself a moment of triumph. It had worked.

He climbed down the ladder. The crowd cheered. Caris kissed him. Father Joffroi shook his hand. “It’s a marvel,” the priest said. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“No one has,” Merthin said proudly. “I invented it.”

Several more men congratulated him. Everyone was pleased to have been among the first to witness the phenomenon—all but Elfric, looking cross at the back of the crowd.

Merthin ignored him. He said to Father Joffroi: “Our agreement was that you would pay me if it worked.”

“Gladly,” said Joffroi. “I owe you eight shillings so far, and the sooner I have to pay you for removing the rest of the timbers and rebuilding the roof, the happier I’ll be.” He opened the wallet at his waist and took out some coins tied up in a rag.

Elfric said loudly: “Wait a moment!”

Everyone looked at him.

“You can’t pay this boy, Father Joffroi,” he said. “He’s not a qualified carpenter.”

Surely this could not happen, Merthin thought. He had done the work—it was too late now to deny him the wages. But Elfric cared nothing for fairness.

“Nonsense!” said Joffroi. “He’s done what no other carpenter in town could do.”

“All the same, he’s not in the guild.”

“I wanted to join,” Merthin put in. “You would not admit me.”

“That’s the prerogative of the guild.”

Joffroi said: “I say that’s unjust—and many people in town would agree. He’s done six and a half years of his apprenticeship, with no wages but his food and a bed on the kitchen floor, and everyone knows he’s been doing the work of a qualified carpenter for years. You should not have turned him out without his tools.”

There was a murmur of assent from the men gathered around. Elfric was generally thought to have gone a bit too far.

Elfric said: “With due respect to your reverence, that is for the guild to decide, not you.”

“All right.” Joffroi folded his arms. “You tell me not to pay Merthin—even though he is the only man in town who can repair my church without closing it. I defy you.” He handed the coins to Merthin. “Now you can take

the case to court.”

“The prior’s court.” Elfric’s face twisted in spite. “When a man has a grievance against a priest, is he likely to get a fair hearing in a court run by monks?”

There was some sympathy in the crowd for this. They knew of too many instances where the prior’s court had unjustly favored the clergy.

But Joffroi shot back: “Can an apprentice get a fair hearing in a guild run by masters?”

The crowd laughed at that: they appreciated clever arguments.

Elfric looked crushed. Whatever the court, he could win a dispute between himself and Merthin, but he could not so easily prevail against a priest. Resentfully, he said: “It’s a bad day for the town when apprentices defy their masters and priests support the boys.” But he sensed he had lost, and he turned away.

Merthin felt the weight of the coins in his hand: eight shillings, ninety-six silver pennies, two-fifths of a pound. He knew he should count them, but he was too happy to bother. He had earned his first wages.

He turned to Edmund. “This is your money,” he said.

“Pay me five shillings now, the rest later,” Edmund said generously. “Keep some money for yourself—you deserve it.”

Merthin smiled. That would leave him three shillings to spend—more money than he had ever had in his life. He did not know what to do with it. Perhaps he would buy his mother a chicken.

It was midday, and the crowd began to disperse, heading home for dinner. Merthin went with Caris and Edmund. He felt his future was secure. He had proved himself as a carpenter, and few people would hesitate to employ him now that Father Joffroi had set the precedent. He could earn a living. He could have a house of his own.

He could get married.

Petranilla was waiting for them. As Merthin counted out five shillings for Edmund, she put on the table a fragrant dish of fish baked with herbs. In celebration of Merthin’s triumph, Edmund poured sweet Rhenish wine into cups for all of them.

But Edmund was not a man to linger over the past. “We must get on with the new bridge,” he said impatiently. “Five weeks have gone by and nothing has been done!”

Petranilla said: “I hear the earl’s health is rapidly returning to normal, so perhaps the monks will hold the election soon. I must ask Godwyn—but I haven’t seen him since yesterday, when Blind Carlus fell over during the service.”

“I’d like to have a bridge design ready,” Edmund said. “Then work could begin as soon as the new prior is elected.”

Merthin's ears pricked up. "What have you got in mind?"

"We know it has to be a stone bridge. I want it wide enough for two carts to pass."

Merthin nodded. "And it should be ramped at both ends, so that people will step off the bridge onto dry ground, not a muddy beach."

"Yes—excellent."

Caris said: "But how do you build stone walls in the middle of a river?"

Edmund said: "I've no idea, but it must be possible. There are lots of stone bridges."

Merthin said: "I've heard men talk about this. You have to build a special structure called a cofferdam to keep the water out of the area where you're building. It's quite simple, but they say you have to be very careful to make sure it's watertight."

Godwyn came in, looking anxious. He was not supposed to make social calls in the town—in theory, he could leave the priory only on a specific errand. Merthin wondered what had happened.

"Carlus withdrew his name from the election," he said.

"Good news!" Edmund said. "Have a cup of this wine."

"Don't celebrate yet," Godwyn said.

"Why not? That leaves Thomas as the only candidate—and Thomas wants to build the new bridge. Our problem is solved."

"Thomas is no longer the only candidate. The earl is nominating Saul Whitehead."

"Oh." Edmund was thoughtful. "Is that necessarily bad?"

"Yes. Saul is well liked and has shown himself a competent prior of St.-John-in-the-Forest. If he accepts the nomination, he's likely to get the votes of former supporters of Carlus—which means he could win. Then, as the earl's nominee, and his cousin, too, Saul is likely to do his sponsor's bidding—and the earl may oppose the building of the new bridge, on the grounds that it might take business away from Shiring market."

Edmund looked worried. "Is there anything we can do?"

"I hope so. Someone has to go to St. John to tell Saul the news and bring him to Kingsbridge. I've volunteered for that job, and I'm hoping there's some way I can persuade him to refuse."

Petranilla spoke. "That may not solve the problem," she said. Merthin listened carefully to her: he did not like her, but she was clever. She went on: "The earl might nominate another candidate. Any nominee of his could oppose the bridge."

Godwyn nodded agreement. "So, assuming I can keep Saul out of the contest, we must make sure the earl's second choice is someone who can't possibly get elected."

"Who do you have in mind?" his mother asked.

“Friar Murdo.”

“Excellent.”

Caris said: “But he’s awful!”

“Exactly,” Godwyn said. “Greedy, drunken, a sponger, a self-righteous rabble-rouser. The monks will never vote for him. That’s why we want him to be the earl’s candidate.”

Godwyn was like his mother, Merthin realized, in having a talent for this kind of plotting.

Petranilla said: “How shall we proceed?”

“First, we need to persuade Murdo to put his name forward.”

“That won’t be hard. Just tell him he’s in with a chance. He’d love to be prior.”

“Agreed. But I can’t do it. Murdo would immediately suspect my motives. Everyone knows I’m backing Thomas.”

“I’ll speak to him,” said Petranilla. “I’ll tell him you and I are at odds, and I don’t want Thomas. I’ll say the earl is looking for someone to nominate, and Murdo could be the right man. He’s popular in the town, especially among the poor and ignorant, who labor under the delusion that he’s one of them. All he needs to do, to get the nomination, is make it clear that he’s willing to be the earl’s pawn.”

“Good.” Godwyn stood up. “I’ll try to be present when Murdo speaks to Earl Roland.” He kissed his mother’s cheek and went out.

The fish was all gone. Merthin ate his bread trencher, rich with juices. Edmund offered him more wine, but he declined: he was afraid he might fall off the roof of St. Mark’s this afternoon if he drank too much. Petranilla went into the kitchen and Edmund retired to the parlor to sleep. Merthin and Caris were left alone.

He moved to sit on the bench next to her, and kissed her.

She said: “I’m so proud of you.”

He glowed. He was proud of himself. He kissed her again, this time with a long, moist kiss that gave him an erection. He touched her breast through the linen of her robe, squeezing her nipple gently with his fingertips.

She touched his erection and giggled. “Do you want me to bring you off?” she whispered.

She did that sometimes late in the evening, when her father and Petranilla were asleep, and Merthin and she were alone on the ground floor of the house. But this was broad daylight, and someone could walk in at any moment. “No!” he said.

“I could do it quickly.” She tightened her grasp.

“I’m too embarrassed.” He stood up and moved to the other side of the table.

“I’m sorry.”

“Well, maybe we won’t have to do this much longer.”

“Do what?”

“Hide, and worry about people walking in.”

She looked hurt. “Don’t you like it?”

“Of course I do! But it would be nicer for us to be alone. I could take a house, now that I’m getting paid.”

“You’ve only been paid once.”

“That’s true…but you seem very pessimistic all of a sudden. Have I said something wrong?”

“No, but…why do you want to change the way things are?”

He was baffled by this question. “I just want more of the same, in private.”

She looked defiant. “I’m happy now.”

“Well, so am I…but nothing goes on forever.”

“Why not?”

He felt as if he were explaining something to a child. “Because we can’t spend the rest of our lives living with our parents and stealing kisses when no one’s looking. We have to get a home of our own, and live as man and wife, and sleep together every night, and have real sex instead of bringing each other off, and raise a family.”

“Why?” she said.

“I don’t know why,” he said in exasperation. “That’s the way it is, and I’m not going to try to explain anymore, because I think you’re determined not to understand; or, at least, to pretend you don’t understand.”

“All right.”

“And besides, I have to go back to work.”

“Go on, then.”

This was incomprehensible. He had been frustrated, during the last half year, by not being able to marry Caris, and he had assumed she felt the same. Now it seemed she did not. Indeed, she resented his assumption. But did she really believe that they could continue this adolescent relationship indefinitely?

He looked at her, trying to read her face, and saw only a sulky obstinacy there. He turned away and went out through the door.

He hesitated on the street outside. Perhaps he should go back in and make her say what was on her mind. But, remembering the look on her face, he knew this was not the moment to try to make her do anything. So he walked on, heading for St. Mark’s, thinking: How did such a wonderful day turn so bad?

22

Godwyn was preparing Kingsbridge Cathedral for the big wedding. The church had to look its best. In addition to the earl of Monmouth and the earl of Shiring, there would be several barons and hundreds of knights in attendance. Broken flagstones had to be replaced, chipped masonry repaired, crumbling moldings carved anew, walls whitewashed, pillars painted, and everything scrubbed clean.

"And I want the repairs to the south aisle of the chancel finished," Godwyn said to Elfric as they walked through the church.

"I'm not sure that's possible—"

"It must be done. We can't have scaffolding in the chancel during a wedding of this importance." He saw Philemon waving urgently at him from the south transept door. "Excuse me."

"I haven't got the men!" Elfric called after him.

"You shouldn't be so quick to sack them," Godwyn said over his shoulder.

Philemon was looking excited. "Friar Murdo is asking to see the earl," he said.

"Good!" Petranilla had spoken to the friar last night, and this morning Godwyn had instructed Philemon to lurk near the hospital and watch out for Murdo. He had been expecting an early visit.

He hurried to the hospital, with Philemon in tow. He was relieved to see that Murdo was still waiting in the big room on the ground floor. The fat friar had smartened up his appearance: his face and hands were clean, the fringe of hair around his tonsure was combed, and he had sponged the worst of the stains off his robe. He did not look like a prior, but he almost looked like a monk.

Godwyn ignored him and went up the stairs. Standing guard outside the earl's room he saw Merthin's brother, Ralph, who was one of the earl's squires. Ralph was handsome, except for a broken nose, a recent injury. Squires were always breaking bones. "Hello, Ralph," Godwyn said amiably. "What happened to your nose?"

"I had a fight with a peasant bastard."

"You should have got it set properly. Did that friar come up here?"

"Yes. They asked him to wait."

"Who's with the earl?"

"Lady Philippa and the clerk, Father Jerome."

"Ask if they'll see me."

"Lady Philippa says the earl must not see anyone."

Godwyn gave Ralph a man-to-man grin. "But she's only a woman."

Ralph grinned back, then opened the door and put his head inside.

“Brother Godwyn, the sacrist?” he said.

There was a pause, and then Lady Philippa stepped out and closed the door behind her. “I told you no visitors,” she said angrily. “Earl Roland is not getting the rest he needs.”

Ralph said: “I know, my lady, but Brother Godwyn wouldn’t bother the earl unnecessarily.”

Something in Ralph’s tone made Godwyn look at him. Although Ralph’s words were mundane, the expression on his face was adoring. Godwyn noticed, then, how voluptuous Philippa was. She wore a dark red dress belted at the waist, and the fine wool clung to her breasts and hips. She looked like a statue representing Temptation, Godwyn thought, and he wished, yet again, that he could find a way to ban women from the priory. It was bad enough if a squire fell in love with a married woman, but for a monk to do the same would be a catastrophe.

“I regret the need to trouble the earl,” Godwyn said. “But there’s a friar waiting downstairs to see him.”

“I know—Murdo. Is his business so urgent?”

“On the contrary. But I need to forewarn the earl what to expect.”

“So you know what the friar is going to say?”

“I believe I do.”

“Well, I think it’s best if the two of you see the earl together.”

Godwyn said: “But—” then pretended to stifle a protest.

Philippa looked at Ralph. “Get the friar up here, please.”

Ralph summoned Murdo, and Philippa ushered him and Godwyn into the room. Earl Roland was on the bed, fully dressed as before, but this time he was sitting up, his bandaged head cushioned with feather pillows. “What’s this?” he said with his usual bad temper. “A meeting of the chapter? What do you monks want?”

Looking at his visage directly for the first time since the bridge collapse, Godwyn was shocked to see that the entire right side of his face was paralyzed: the eyelid drooped, the cheek hardly moved, and the mouth was slack. What made it so startling was that the left side was animated. When Roland spoke, the left side of his forehead frowned, his left eye opened wide and seemed to blaze with authority, and he spoke vehemently out of the left side of his mouth. The doctor in Godwyn was fascinated. He knew that head injuries could have unpredictable effects, but he had never heard of this particular manifestation.

“Don’t gawk at me,” the earl said impatiently. “You look like a pair of cows staring over a hedge. State your business.”

Godwyn pulled himself together. He had to tread carefully over the next few minutes. He knew that Roland would reject Murdo’s application to be nominated as prior. All the same, he wanted to plant in Roland’s mind the

idea of Murdo as a possible alternative to Saul Whitehead. Therefore Godwyn's job was to strengthen Murdo's application. He would do this, paradoxically, by objecting to Murdo, thereby showing Roland that Murdo would owe no allegiance to the monks—for Roland wanted a prior who served him alone. But, on the other hand, Godwyn must not protest too strongly, for he did not want the earl to realize what a truly hopeless candidate Murdo actually was. It was a tortuous path to walk.

Murdo spoke first, in his sonorous pulpit voice. "My lord, I come to ask you to consider me for the position of prior of Kingsbridge. I believe—"

"Not so loud, for the love of the saints," Roland protested.

Murdo lowered his voice. "My lord, I believe that I—"

"Why do you want to be prior?" Roland said, interrupting him again. "I thought a friar was a monk without a church—by definition." This point of view was old-fashioned. Friars originally were travelers who held no property, but nowadays some of the fraternal orders were as wealthy as traditional monks. Roland knew this, and was just being provocative.

Murdo gave the standard answer. "I believe that God accepts both forms of sacrifice."

"So you're willing to turn your coat."

"I have come to think that the talents he gave me could be put to better use in a priory, so yes, I would be happy to embrace the rule of St. Benedict."

"But why should I consider you?"

"I am also an ordained priest."

"No shortage of those."

"And I have a following in Kingsbridge and the surrounding countryside such that, if I may be allowed to boast, I must be the most influential man of God in the area."

Father Jerome spoke for the first time. He was a confident young man with an intelligent face, and Godwyn sensed that he was ambitious. "It's true," he said. "The friar is extraordinarily popular."

He was not popular with the monks, of course—but neither Roland nor Jerome knew that, and Godwyn was not about to enlighten them.

Nor was Murdo. He bowed his head and said unctuously: "I thank you from my heart, Father Jerome."

Godwyn said: "He is popular with the ignorant multitude."

"As was our Savior," Murdo shot back.

"Monks should lead lives of poverty and self-denial," Godwyn said.

Roland put in: "The friar's clothes look poor enough. And as for self-denial, it seems to me that Kingsbridge monks eat better than many peasants."

"Friar Murdo has been seen drunk in taverns!" Godwyn protested.

Murdo said: "St. Benedict's Rule permits monks to drink wine."

"Only if they are sick, or laboring in the fields."

“I preach in the fields.”

Murdo was a formidable opponent in an argument, Godwyn noted. He was glad that he did not actually want to win this one. He turned to Roland. “All I can say is that as the sacrist here I strongly counsel your lordship against nominating Murdo as prior of Kingsbridge.”

“Noted,” Roland said coldly.

Philippa gave Godwyn a look of mild surprise, and he realized he had yielded a little too easily. But Roland had not noticed: he did not deal in nuances.

Murdo had not finished. “The prior of Kingsbridge must serve God, of course; but, in all things temporal, he should be guided by the king, and the king’s earls and barons.”

That was about as plain as could be, Godwyn thought. Murdo might as well have said: “I will be your man.” It was an outrageous declaration. The monks would be horrified. It would wipe out any support there might have been among them for Murdo’s candidacy.

Godwyn made no comment, but Roland looked inquiringly at him. “Anything to say to that, sacrist?”

“I’m sure the friar did not mean to say that the priory of Kingsbridge should be in subjection to the earl of Shiring in any matter, temporal or otherwise—did you, Murdo?”

“I have said what I have said,” Murdo replied in his pulpit voice.

“Enough,” said Roland, bored now with the game. “You’re wasting your time, both of you. I shall nominate Saul Whitehead. Off you go.”

St.-John-in-the-Forest was a miniature version of Kingsbridge Priory. The church was small, as were the stone-built cloisters and dormitory; and the rest of the buildings were simple wood-frame structures. There were eight monks and no nuns. In addition to their lives of prayer and meditation, they grew most of their own food and made a goats’ cheese that was famous throughout southwest England.

Godwyn and Philemon had been riding for two days, and it was early evening when the road emerged from the forest and they saw a wide acreage of cleared land with the church in the middle. Godwyn knew at once that his fears were true, and reports that Saul Whitehead was doing a good job as prior of this cell were, if anything, understated. There was a look of order and neatness about everything: the hedges trimmed, the ditches straight, the trees planted at measured intervals in the orchard, the fields of ripening grain free of weeds. He felt sure he would find that the services were held at the correct times and conducted reverently. He had to hope that Saul’s evident fitness for leadership had not made him ambitious.

As they rode along the path through the fields, Philemon said: “Why is the earl so keen to make his cousin prior of Kingsbridge?”

“For the same reason that he had his younger son made bishop of Kingsbridge,” Godwyn replied. “Bishops and priors are powerful. The earl wants to make sure that any influential man in his neighborhood is an ally, not an enemy.”

“What might they quarrel about?”

Godwyn was interested to see that young Philemon was beginning to be intrigued by the chess game of power politics. “Land, taxes, rights, privileges…for example, the prior might want to build a new bridge at Kingsbridge, to bring more business to the Fleece Fair; and the earl might oppose such a scheme, on the grounds that it would take business away from his own fair at Shiring.”

“But I don’t really see how the prior could fight against the earl. A prior has no soldiers…”

“A clergyman can influence the mass of the people. If he preaches a sermon against the earl, or calls upon the saints to bring misfortune to the earl, people will begin to believe that the earl is cursed. Then they will discount his power, mistrust him, and expect all his projects to be doomed. It can be very hard for a nobleman to oppose a truly determined cleric. Look what happened to King Henry II after the murder of Thomas Becket.”

They rode into the farmyard and dismounted. The horses immediately drank from the trough. There was no one about but a monk with his robe hitched up, mucking out a pigsty behind the stables. He was sure to be a youngster, doing a job like that. Godwyn called to him. “Hey, you, lad! Come and help us with our horses.”

“Righto!” the monk called back. He finished cleaning out the sty with a few more passes of his rake, then leaned the tool up against the stable wall and walked toward the newcomers. Godwyn was about to tell him to get a move on when he recognized the blond fringe of Saul.

Godwyn disapproved. A prior should not muck out a pigsty. Ostentatious humility was, after all, ostentation. However, in this case Saul’s meekness might suit Godwyn’s purpose.

He gave Saul a friendly smile. “Hello, Brother. I didn’t mean to order the prior to unsaddle my horse.”

“Why not?” said Saul. “Someone must do it, and you’ve been traveling all day.” Saul led the horses into the stable. “The brothers are in the fields,” he called out. “But they’ll be back soon for Evensong.” He reemerged. “Come into the kitchen.”

They had never been close. Godwyn could not helping feeling criticized by Saul’s piety. Saul was never unfriendly, but with quiet determination he simply did things differently. Godwyn had to take care not to become

irritated. He felt stressed enough already.

Godwyn and Philemon followed Saul across the farmyard and into a one-story building with a high roof. Although made of wood, it had a stone fireplace and chimney. They sat gratefully on a rough bench at a scrubbed table. Saul drew two generous cups of ale from a large barrel.

He sat opposite them. Philemon drank thirstily, but Godwyn just sipped. Saul offered no food, and Godwyn guessed they would get nothing more until after Evensong. He felt too tense to eat, anyway.

This was another delicate moment, he reflected anxiously. He had had to protest against Murdo's nomination in such a way as not to dissuade Roland. Now he had to invite Saul to stand in a way that he could not possibly accept. He knew what he was going to say, but he had to say it right. If he made a false step, Saul would become suspicious, and then anything could happen.

Saul gave him no time for further worry. "What brings you here, Brother?" he said.

"Earl Roland has recovered his wits."

"I thank God."

"This means we can hold the election for prior."

"Good. We should not go too long without one."

"But who should it be?"

Saul sidestepped the question. "Have any names been put forward?"

"Brother Thomas, the matricularius."

"He'd be a good manager. No one else?"

Godwyn told a half truth. "Not formally."

"What about Carlus? When I came to Kingsbridge for Prior Anthony's funeral, the subprior was the leading candidate."

"He feels he is not capable of the job."

"Because of his blindness?"

"Perhaps." Saul did not know about Carlus falling over during the service for St. Adolphus's birthday. Godwyn decided not to tell him. "At any rate, he has thought and prayed about it, and made his decision."

"Has the earl not made a nomination?"

"He's thinking about it." Godwyn hesitated. "That's why we're here. The earl is…considering nominating you." This was not really a lie, Godwyn told himself; just a misleading emphasis.

"I'm honored."

Godwyn studied him. "But not completely surprised, perhaps?"

Saul flushed. "Forgive me. The great Philip was in charge here at St. John and then became prior of Kingsbridge, and others have followed the same route. That is not to say that I'm worthy as they were, of course. But the thought had crossed my mind, I confess."

"Nothing to be ashamed of. How would you feel about being nominated?"

“How would I feel?” Saul seemed mystified. “Why ask that? If the earl wishes, he will nominate me; and if my brethren want me, they’ll vote for me; and I will consider myself called by God. It makes no difference how I feel about it.”

This was not the answer Godwyn wanted. He needed Saul to make up his own mind. Talk of God’s will was counterproductive. “It’s not quite so simple,” he said. “You don’t have to accept the nomination. That’s why the earl sent me here.”

“It’s not like Roland to ask where he might command.”

Godwyn almost winced. Never forget how shrewd Saul is, he told himself. He backpedaled hastily. “No, indeed. However, if you think you might refuse, he needs to know as soon as possible, so that he can nominate someone else.” That was probably true, though Roland had not said it.

“I didn’t realize it was done this way.”

It is not done this way, Godwyn thought. But he said: “Last time it happened, when Prior Anthony was elected, you and I were both novices, so we didn’t know what went on.”

“True.”

“Do you feel you have the ability to fill the role of prior of Kingsbridge?”

“Certainly not.”

“Ah.” Godwyn pretended disappointment, though he had been relying on Saul’s humility to produce that answer.

“However…”

“What?”

“With God’s help, who knows what might be accomplished?”

“How true.” Godwyn concealed his annoyance. The humble answer had just been a formality. The truth was that Saul thought he could do the job. “Of course, you should reflect and pray about it tonight.”

“I’m sure I’ll think of little else.” They heard distant voices. “The brothers are returning from their work.”

“We can talk again in the morning,” Godwyn said. “If you decide to be a candidate, you must come back to Kingsbridge with us.”

“Very well.”

There was a serious danger of Saul’s accepting, Godwyn feared. But he had one more arrow to shoot. “Something else you might bear in mind in your prayers,” he said. “A nobleman never offers a free gift.”

Saul looked worried. “What do you mean?”

“Earls and barons dispense titles, land, positions, monopolies—but these things always have a price.”

“And in this case?”

“If you are elected, Roland will expect you to make recompense. You are his cousin, anyway; and you’ll owe your position to him. You will be his voice in chapter, making sure the priory’s actions don’t interfere with his interests.”

“Will he make that an explicit condition of the nomination?”

“Explicit? No. But, when you return with me to Kingsbridge, he will question you, and the questions will be designed to reveal your intentions. If you insist that you will be an independent prior, showing no special favor to your cousin and sponsor, he will nominate someone else.”

“I had not thought of that.”

“Of course, you may simply give him the answers he wants to hear and then change your mind after the election.”

“But that would be dishonest.”

“Some would think so.”

“God would think so.”

“That’s something for you to pray about tonight.”

A group of young monks came into the kitchen, muddy from the fields, talking loudly; and Saul got up to serve them ale, but the worried look remained on his face. It stayed there when they went into the little church, with its wall painting of the Day of Judgment over the altar, for Evensong. It was still there when at last the evening meal was served and Godwyn’s hunger was assuaged by the delicious cheese the monks made.

Godwyn lay awake that night, although he ached from two days on horseback. He had confronted Saul with an ethical dilemma. Most monks would have been willing to shade their position while talking to Roland, and speak words which promised a degree of subservience to the earl much greater than they really intended. But not Saul. He was driven by moral imperatives. Would he find a way through the dilemma, and accept the nomination? Godwyn did not see how he could.

Saul still wore the worried look when the monks got up, at first light, for the service of Lauds.

After breakfast, he told Godwyn he could not accept the nomination.

Godwyn could not get used to Earl Roland's face. It was the strangest thing to look at. The earl was now wearing a hat to cover the bandages on his head; but, by making his appearance more normal, the hat emphasized the paralysis of the right side of his face. Roland also seemed even more bad-tempered than usual, and Godwyn guessed he was still suffering severe headaches.

"Where is my cousin Saul?" he said as soon as Godwyn walked into the room.

"Still at St. John, my lord. I gave him your message—"

"Message? It was a command!"

Lady Philippa, standing beside the bed, said softly: "Don't excite yourself, lord—you know it makes you feel ill."

Godwyn said: "Brother Saul simply said that he cannot accept the nomination."

"Why the devil not?"

"He thought and prayed—"

"Of course he prayed, that's what monks do. What reason did he give for defying me?"

"He does not feel himself capable of such a challenging role."

"Nonsense. What challenge? He's not being asked to lead a thousand knights into battle—just make sure a handful of monks sing their hymns at the right times of day."

That was rubbish, so Godwyn bowed his head and said nothing.

The earl's tone changed suddenly. "I've just realized who you are. You're the son of Petranilla, aren't you?"

"Yes, Lord." That Petranilla whom you jilted, Godwyn thought.

"She was sly, and I'll bet you are too. How do I know you didn't talk Saul out of accepting? You want Thomas Langley to be prior, don't you?"

My plan is a lot more devious than that, you fool, Godwyn thought. He said: "Saul did ask me what you might want in return for nominating him."

"Ah, now we come to it. What did you tell him?"

"That you would expect him to listen to one who was his cousin, his sponsor, and his earl."

"And he was too pigheaded to accept that, I suppose. Right. That settles it. I shall nominate that fat friar. Now, get out of my sight."

Godwyn had to hide his elation as he bowed out of the room. The penultimate stage of his plan had worked perfectly. Earl Roland had not the least suspicion of how he had been nudged into nominating the most hopeless candidate Godwyn could think of.

Now for the final step.

He left the hospital and entered the cloisters. It was the hour of study before the midday service of Sext, and most of the monks were standing or sitting around reading, being read to, or meditating. Godwyn spotted

Theodoric, his young ally, and summoned him with a jerk of the head.

In a low voice, he said: “Earl Roland has nominated Friar Murdo as prior.”

Theodoric said loudly: “What?”

“Hush.”

“It’s impossible!”

“Of course it is.”

“No one will vote for him.”

“That’s why I’m pleased.”

Understanding dawned on Theodoric’s face. “Oh…I see. So it’s good for us, really.”

Godwyn wondered why he always had to explain these things, even to intelligent men. No one saw below the surface, except him and his mother. “Go around telling everyone—quietly. No need to show your outrage. They’ll get angry enough without encouragement.”

“Should I say that this is good for Thomas?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Right,” said Theodoric. “I understand.”

He evidently did not, but Godwyn felt he could be trusted to follow instructions.

Godwyn left him and went in search of Philemon. He found him sweeping out the refectory. “Do you know where Murdo is?” he asked.

“Probably in the kitchen.”

“Find him and ask him to meet you in the prior’s house when all the monks are in church for Sext. I don’t want anyone to see you there with him.”

“All right. What do I tell him?”

“First of all, you say: ‘Brother Murdo, no one must ever know that I told you this.’ Is that clear?”

“No one must ever know that I told you this. All right.”

“Then show him the charter we found. You remember where it is—in the bedroom beside the prie-dieu, there’s a chest with a ginger-colored leather wallet inside.”

“Is that all?”

“Point out that the land Thomas brought to the priory belonged originally to Queen Isabella, and that this fact has been kept secret for ten years.”

Philemon looked puzzled. “But we don’t know what Thomas is trying to hide.”

“No. But there’s always a reason for a secret.”

“Don’t you think Murdo will try to use this information against Thomas?”

“Of course.”

“What will Murdo do?”

“I don’t know but, whatever it is, it’s sure to be bad for Thomas.”

Philemon frowned. “I thought we were supposed to be helping Thomas.”

Godwyn smiled. “That’s what everyone thinks.”

The bell rang for Sext.

Philemon went off in search of Murdo, and Godwyn joined the rest of the monks in church. In unison with the others he said: “Oh, God, incline unto mine aid.” On this occasion he prayed with unusual earnestness. Despite the confidence he had shown Philemon, he knew he was gambling. He had staked everything on Thomas’s secret, but he did not know what the face of the card would show when he turned it up.

However, it was clear he had succeeded in stirring up the monks. They were restless and talkative, and Carlus had to call for quiet twice during the psalms. They disliked friars in general, for taking an attitude of moral superiority on the question of earthly possessions while, at the same time, sponging off those they condemned. And they disliked Murdo in particular for being pompous, greedy, and drunk. They would have anyone rather than him.

As they left the church after the service, Simeon spoke to Godwyn. “We cannot have the friar,” he said.

“I agree.”

“Carlus and I will not be putting forward another name. If the monks appear divided, the earl will be able to present his candidate as a necessary compromise. We must sink our differences and rally round Thomas. If we show the world a united front, it will be difficult for the earl to oppose us.”

Godwyn stopped and faced Simeon. “Thank you, Brother,” he said, forcing himself to look humble and hide the exultation he felt.

“We’re doing it for the good of the priory.”

“I know. But I appreciate your generosity of spirit.”

Simeon nodded and walked away.

Godwyn smelled victory.

The monks went into the refectory for dinner. Murdo joined them. He missed services, but not meals. All monasteries had a general rule that any monk or friar was welcomed at the table—though few people exploited the practice as thoroughly as Murdo. Godwyn studied his face. The friar looked excited, as if he had news he was bursting to share. However, he contained himself while dinner was served, and remained silent throughout the meal, listening to a novice read.

The passage chosen was the story of Susanna and the Elders. Godwyn disapproved: the story was too sexy to be read aloud in a celibate community. But today even the attempts of two lascivious old men to blackmail a woman into having sex with them failed to capture the monks’ attention. They kept whispering among themselves, looking sidelong at Murdo.

When the food was finished, and the prophet Daniel had saved Susanna

from execution by interrogating the elders separately and showing that they told inconsistent stories, the monks got ready to leave. At that moment, Murdo spoke to Thomas.

“When you came here, Brother Thomas, you had a sword wound, I believe.”

He spoke loudly enough for everyone to hear, and the other monks stopped to listen.

Thomas looked at him stonily. “Yes.”

“The wound that eventually caused you to lose your left arm. I wonder, did you receive that wound in the service of Queen Isabella?”

Thomas turned pale. “I’ve been a monk of Kingsbridge for ten years. My previous life is forgotten.”

Murdo carried on unperturbed. “I ask because of the parcel of land that you brought with you when you joined the priory. A very productive little village in Norfolk. Five hundred acres. Near Lynn—where the queen lives.”

Godwyn interrupted, pretending to be indignant. “What does an outsider know of our property?”

“Oh, I’ve read the charter,” Murdo said. “These things aren’t secret.”

Godwyn looked at Carlus and Simeon, sitting side by side. Both men looked startled. As subprior and treasurer, they knew already. They must be wondering how Murdo had got sight of the deed. Simeon opened his mouth to speak.

Murdo said: “Or, at least, they’re not supposed to be secret.”

Simeon closed his mouth again. If he demanded to know how Murdo had found out, he would himself face questions about why he had kept the secret.

Murdo went on: “And the farm at Lynn was donated to the priory by…” He paused for dramatic effect. “Queen Isabella,” he finished.

Godwyn looked around. There was consternation among the monks, all but Carlus and Simeon, who both looked stone-faced.

Friar Murdo leaned across the table. Green herbs from the dinnertime stew adhered to his teeth. “I ask you again,” he said aggressively. “Did you receive your wound in the service of Queen Isabella?”

Thomas said: “Everyone knows what I did before I was a monk. I was a knight, I fought battles, I killed men. I have confessed and received absolution.”

“A monk may put his past behind him—but the prior of Kingsbridge carries a heavier burden. He may be asked whom he killed, and why, and—most importantly—what reward he received.”

Thomas stared back at Murdo without speaking. Godwyn tried to read Thomas’s face. It was rigidly set in an expression of some strong emotion—but what? There was no sign of guilt, or even embarrassment: whatever the secret was, Thomas did not feel he had done something shameful. The look

was not rage, either. Murdo's sneering tone might have provoked many men to violence, but Thomas did not look as if he were about to lash out. No, what Thomas seemed to be feeling was something different, colder than embarrassment, quieter than rage. It was, Godwyn realized at last, fear. Thomas was afraid. Of Murdo? Hardly. No, he feared something that might happen because of Murdo, some consequence of Murdo's having discovered the secret.

Murdo continued like a dog with a bone. "If you don't answer the question here in this room, it will be asked elsewhere."

Godwyn's calculations called for Thomas to give up at this point. But it was not a certainty. Thomas was tough. For ten years he had shown himself to be quiet, patient, and resilient. When approached by Godwyn to stand as prior, he must have decided that the past could be buried. He must now realize he had been wrong. But how would he react to that realization? Would he see his mistake and back away? Or would he grit his teeth and see it through? Godwyn bit his lip and waited.

Thomas spoke at last. "I think you may be right about the question being asked elsewhere," he said. "Or, at least, I think you will do everything in your power, no matter how unbrotherly or dangerous, to make your forecast come true."

"I don't know if you're implying—"

"You need say no more!" Thomas said, rising abruptly to his feet. Murdo recoiled. Thomas's height and soldierly physique, combined with a sharp rise in his voice, achieved the rare result of silencing the friar.

"I have never answered questions about my past," Thomas said. His voice was quiet again, and every monk in the room was still and silent, straining to hear. "I never will." He pointed at Murdo. "But this…slug…makes me realize that if I became your prior, such questions would never cease. A monk may keep his past to himself, but a prior is different, I now see. A prior may have enemies, and any mystery is a weakness. And then, of course, by the leader's vulnerability the institution itself is threatened. My brain should have led me where Friar Murdo's malice led him—to the conclusion that a man who does not want to answer questions about his past cannot be a prior. Therefore—"

Young Theodoric said: "No!"

"Therefore I now withdraw my candidacy in the coming election."

Godwyn breathed a long sigh of satisfaction. He had achieved his object.

Thomas sat down; Murdo looked smug; and everyone else tried to speak at the same time.

Carlus banged the table, and slowly they quieted down. He said: "Friar Murdo, as you don't have a vote in this election, I must ask you to leave us now."

Murdo slowly walked out, looking triumphant.

When he had gone, Carlus said: “This is a catastrophe—Murdo the only candidate!”

Theodoric said: “Thomas cannot be allowed to withdraw.”

“But he has!”

Simeon said: “There must be another candidate.”

“Yes,” said Carlus. “And I propose Simeon.”

“No!” said Theodoric.

“Let me speak,” said Simeon. “We must choose the one among us who is most certain to unite the brethren against Murdo. That is not myself. I know I don’t have enough backing among the youngsters. I think we all know who would gather most support from all sections.”

He turned and looked at Godwyn.

“Yes!” Theodoric said. “Godwyn!”

The younger monks cheered, and the older ones looked resigned. Godwyn shook his head, as if reluctant even to respond to them. They began to bang the tables and chant his name: “God-wyn! God-wyn!”

At last he stood up. His heart was full of elation, but he kept his face straight. He held up his hands for quiet. Then, when the room was silent, he said in a low, modest voice: “I shall obey the will of my brethren.”

The room erupted in cheering.

23

Godwyn delayed the election. Earl Roland was going to be angry at the result, and Godwyn wanted to give him as little time as possible to fight the decision before the wedding.

The truth was that Godwyn was frightened. He was going up against one of the most powerful men in the kingdom. There were only thirteen earls. Together with about forty lesser barons, twenty-one bishops, and a handful of others, they governed England. When the king summoned Parliament, they were the Lords, the aristocratic group, by contrast with the Commons, who were knights, gentry, and merchants. The earl of Shiring was one of the more powerful and prominent men of his class. And yet Brother Godwyn, age thirty-one, son of the widow Petranilla, who had risen no higher than sacrist of Kingsbridge Priory, was in conflict with the earl—and, what was even more dangerous, he was winning.

So he dithered—but, six days before the wedding, Roland put his foot down and said: “Tomorrow!”

Guests were already arriving for the nuptials. The earl of Monmouth had moved into the hospital, using the private room next to Roland’s. Lord

William and Lady Philippa had had to remove to the Bell Inn. Bishop Richard was sharing the prior's house with Carlus. Lesser barons and knights filled the taverns, along with their wives and children, squires and servants and horses. The town enjoyed a surge of spending, much needed after the disappointing profits from the rain-drenched Fleece Fair.

On the morning of the election Godwyn and Simeon went to the treasury, a small windowless room behind a heavy oak door off the library. The precious ornaments used for special services were there, locked in an ironbound chest. Simeon as treasurer held the keys.

The election was a foregone conclusion, or so thought everyone except Earl Roland. No one suspected Godwyn's hidden hand. He had suffered one tense moment, when Thomas had wondered aloud how Friar Murdo got to know about the Isabella charter. "He can't have discovered it accidentally—he's never been seen reading in the library, and anyway that deed isn't kept with the others," Thomas had said to Godwyn. "Someone must have told him about it. But who? Only Carlus and Simeon knew of it. Why would they have let the secret out? They didn't want to help Murdo." Godwyn had said nothing, and Thomas had remained baffled.

Godwyn and Simeon dragged the treasure chest into the light of the library. The cathedral jewels were wrapped in blue cloth and cushioned in protective sheets of leather. As they sorted through the box, Simeon unwrapped some of the items, admiring them and checking that they were undamaged. There was a plaque a few inches wide made of ivory, delicately carved, showing the crucifixion of St. Adolphus, at which the saint had asked God to grant good health and long life to all those who venerated his memory. There were numerous candlesticks and crucifixes, all of gold or silver, most decorated with precious stones. In the strong light from the tall library windows the gems glittered and the gold glowed. These things had been given to the priory, over the centuries, by devout worshippers. Their combined value was awesome: there was more wealth here than most people ever saw in one place.

Godwyn had come for a ceremonial crosier, or shepherd's crook, made of wood encased in gold, with an elaborately jeweled handle. This was ritually handed to the new prior at the end of the election process. The crook was at the bottom of the chest, not having been used for thirteen years. As Godwyn drew it out, Simeon let out an exclamation.

Godwyn looked up sharply. Simeon was holding a large crucifix on a stand, intended to be placed on an altar. "What's the matter?" Godwyn said.

Simeon showed him the back of the cross and pointed to a shallow cup-shaped indentation just below the crosspiece. Godwyn immediately saw that a ruby was missing. "It must have fallen out," he said. He glanced around the library: they were alone.

They were both worried. As treasurer and sacrist they shared responsibility. They would be blamed for any loss.

Together they examined every item in the chest. They unwrapped each one and shook out every blue cloth. They looked at all the leather sheets. Frantically, they scrutinized the empty box and the floor all around. The ruby was nowhere to be seen.

Simeon said: “When was the crucifix last used?”

“At the feast of St. Adolphus, when Carlus fell. He knocked it off the table.”

“Perhaps the ruby fell out then. But how is it possible that no one noticed?”

“The stone was on the back of the cross. But surely someone would have seen it on the floor?”

“Who picked up the crucifix?”

“I don’t remember,” Godwyn said quickly. “The situation was confused.” In fact he remembered perfectly well.

It was Philemon.

Godwyn could picture the scene. Philemon and Otho together had righted the altar, setting it squarely on its platform. Then Otho had picked up the candlesticks and Philemon the cross.

With a growing feeling of dismay, Godwyn recalled the disappearance of Lady Philippa’s bracelet. Had Philemon stolen again? He trembled to think how it might affect him. Everyone knew that Philemon was Godwyn’s unofficial acolyte. Such a dreadful sin—stealing a jewel from a sacred ornament—would bring shame on everyone associated with the perpetrator. It could easily upset the election.

Simeon obviously did not recollect the scene exactly, and he accepted without question Godwyn’s feigned inability to remember who had picked up the cross. But others among the monks would surely recall seeing it in Philemon’s hands. Godwyn had to put this right quickly, before suspicion could fall on Philemon. But first he had to get Simeon out of the way.

“We must search for the ruby in the church,” Simeon said.

“But the service was two weeks ago,” Godwyn protested. “A ruby can’t have lain on the floor unnoticed for that length of time.”

“It’s unlikely, but we must check.”

Godwyn saw that he had to go with Simeon, and wait for an opportunity to get away from him and seek out Philemon. “Of course,” he said.

They put the ornaments away and locked the treasury door. As they left the library, Godwyn said: “I suggest we say nothing about this until we’re sure the jewel has been lost. No point in bringing blame on our heads prematurely.”

“Agreed.”

They hurried around the cloisters and entered the church. They stood in the center of the crossing and scanned the ground all around them. A month ago, the idea that a ruby could lie hidden somewhere on the church floor would have been more plausible; but recently the flagstones had been repaired, and the cracks and chips had disappeared. A ruby would have stood out.

Simeon said: “Now that I come to think of it, wasn’t it Philemon who picked up the crucifix?”

Godwyn looked at Simeon’s face. Was there accusation in the expression? He could not tell. “It may have been Philemon,” Godwyn said. Then he saw a chance to get away. “I’ll go and fetch him,” he suggested. “Perhaps he will be able to recall exactly where he was standing at the time.”

“Good idea. I’ll wait here.” Simeon got down on his knees and began to pat the floor with his hands, as if the ruby might be found by touch more easily than by sight.

Godwyn hurried out. He went first to the dormitory. The blanket cupboard was in the same place. He pulled it away from the wall, found the loose stone, and removed it. He put his hand into the hidey-hole where Philemon had stashed Lady Philippa’s bracelet.

He found nothing there.

He cursed. It was not going to be that easy.

I’ll have to dismiss Philemon from the monastery, he thought as he strode through the priory buildings looking for him. If he has stolen this ruby, I can’t cover up for him again. He’s out.

Then he realized, with a shock of dismay, that he could not dismiss Philemon—not now, perhaps not ever. It was Philemon who had told Friar Murdo about the Isabella charter. If dismissed, Philemon could confess what he had done, and reveal that he had done it at Godwyn’s instigation. And he would be believed. Godwyn recalled Thomas’s puzzling over who had told Murdo the secret, and why. Philemon’s revelation would gain conviction by answering that question.

There would be an outcry at such underhand work. Even if the disclosure were made after the election, it would undermine Godwyn’s authority and cripple his ability to lead the monks. The ominous truth dawned on him that he now had to protect Philemon in order to protect himself.

He found Philemon sweeping the hospital floor. He beckoned him outside and led him around to the back of the kitchen, where it was unlikely that anyone would see them.

He looked Philemon in the eye and said: “There’s a ruby missing.”

Philemon looked away. “How terrible.”

“It’s from the altar crucifix that was knocked to the floor when Carlus fell over.”

Philemon pretended innocence. “How could it have gone missing?”

“The ruby may have become dislodged when the crucifix hit the floor. But it’s not on the floor now—I’ve just looked. Someone found it—and kept it.”

“Surely not.”

Godwyn felt angered by Philemon’s false air of innocence. “You fool, everyone saw you pick up that crucifix!”

Philemon’s voice rose to a higher pitch. “I know nothing about it!”

“Don’t waste time lying to me! We have to put this right. I could lose the election on your account.” Godwyn pushed Philemon up against the wall of the bakehouse. “Where is it?”

To his astonishment, Philemon began to cry.

“For the love of the saints,” Godwyn said disgustedly. “Stop this nonsense—you’re a grown man!”

Philemon continued to sob. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m sorry.”

“If you don’t stop that—” Godwyn checked himself. Nothing was to be gained by berating Philemon. The man was truly pathetic. Speaking more gently, he said: “Try to pull yourself together. Where is the ruby?”

“I hid it.”

“Yes…”

“In the refectory chimney.”

Godwyn immediately turned away, heading for the refectory. “Mary save us, it could fall into the fire!”

Philemon followed, his tears drying. “There’s no fire in August. I would have moved it before the cold weather.”

They entered the refectory. At one end of the long room was a wide fireplace. Philemon put his arm up the chimney and fumbled for a moment. Then he produced a ruby the size of a sparrow’s egg, covered with soot. He wiped it clean on his sleeve.

Godwyn took it. “Now come with me,” he said.

“What are we going to do?”

“Simeon is going to find this.”

They went to the church. Simeon was still searching on hands and knees. “Now,” Godwyn said to Philemon. “Try to remember exactly where you were when you picked up the crucifix.”

Simeon looked at Philemon and, seeing signs of emotion on his face, spoke kindly to him. “Don’t be afraid, lad, you’ve done nothing wrong.”

Philemon positioned himself on the east side of the crossing, close to the steps leading up to the chancel. “I think it was here,” he said.

Godwyn climbed the two steps and looked under the choir stalls, pretending to search. Surreptitiously, he placed the ruby under one of the rows of seats, close to the near end, where it was not visible to a casual glance.

Then, as if changing his mind about the likeliest place to look, he moved to the south side of the chancel. “Come and search under here, Philemon,” he said.

As he had hoped, Simeon then moved to the north side and got down on his knees to look under the stalls, murmuring a prayer as he did so.

Godwyn expected Simeon to see the ruby immediately. He pretended to search the south aisle, waiting for Simeon to find it. He began to think there must be something wrong with Simeon’s eyesight. He might have to go over there and “find” it himself. Then at last Simeon called out: “Oh! Here!”

Godwyn pretended to be excited. “Have you found it?”

“Yes! Hallelujah!”

“Where was it?”

“Here—under the choir stalls!”

“Praise be to God,” said Godwyn.

Godwyn told himself not to be frightened of Earl Roland. As he climbed the stone stairs of the hospital to the guest rooms, he asked himself what the earl could do to him. Even if Roland had been capable of getting out of his bed and drawing a sword, he would not be foolish enough to attack a monk within the precincts of a monastery—even a king would hardly get away with that.

Ralph Fitzgerald announced him, and he went into the room.

The earl’s sons stood either side of the bed: tall William, in soldierly brown hose and muddy boots, his hair already receding from his forehead; and Richard, in bishop’s purple, his growing roundness of figure evidence of a sybaritic nature and the means to indulge it. William was thirty, a year younger than Godwyn; he had his father’s strength of will, but it was sometimes softened by the influence of his wife, Philippa. Richard was twenty-eight, and presumably took after his late mother, for he had little of the earl’s imposing bearing and forcefulness.

“Well, monk?” said the earl, speaking out of the left side of his mouth. “Have you held your little election?”

Godwyn suffered a moment of resentment for this discourteous form of address. One day, he vowed silently, Roland would call him Father Prior. Indignation gave him the courage he needed to tell the earl the news. “We have, Lord,” he said. “I have the honor to tell you that the monks of Kingsbridge have chosen me as their prior.”

“What?” the earl bellowed. “You?”

Godwyn bowed his head in an affectation of humility. “No one could be more surprised than I.”

“You’re nothing but a boy!”

The insult stung Godwyn into a rejoinder. “I’m older than your son, the

bishop of Kingsbridge.”

“How many votes did you get?”

“Twenty-five.”

“And how many for Friar Murdo?”

“None. The monks were unanimous—”

“None?” Roland roared. “There must have been a conspiracy—this is treason!”

“The election was held in strict accordance with the rules.”

“I don’t care a pig’s prick for your rules. I won’t be ignored by a bunch of effeminate monks.”

“I am the choice of my brothers, my lord. The inauguration ceremony will be held this coming Sunday, before the wedding.”

“The monks’ choice must be ratified by the bishop of Kingsbridge. And I can tell you he will not ratify you. Rerun the election, and this time bring me the result I want.”

“Very good, Earl Roland.” Godwyn went to the door. He had several more cards in his hand, but he was not going to lay them on the table all at once. He turned and addressed Richard. “My lord bishop, when you wish to speak to me about this, you will find me in the prior’s house.”

He stepped outside. “You’re not the prior!” Roland shouted as he shut the door.

Godwyn was trembling. Roland was formidable, especially when angry, and he was often angry. But Godwyn had stood his ground. Petranilla would be proud of him.

He went down the stairs on shaky legs and made his way to the prior’s house. Carlus had already moved out. For the first time in fifteen years, Godwyn would have a bedroom to himself. His pleasure was only slightly damped by having to share the place with the bishop, who traditionally stayed there while visiting. The bishop was, technically, the abbot of Kingsbridge ex officio and, though his power was limited, his status was above that of the prior. Richard was rarely in the house during the day, but returned every night to sleep in the best bedroom.

Godwyn entered the ground-floor hall and sat in the big chair, waiting. It would not be long before Bishop Richard appeared, his ears burning with his father’s scorching instructions. Richard was a rich and powerful man, but not frightening in the way the earl was. All the same, it was a bold monk who defied his bishop. However, Godwyn had an advantage in this confrontation, for he knew something shameful about Richard, and that was as good as a knife up his sleeve.

Richard bustled in a few minutes later, showing a confidence that Godwyn knew to be faked. “I’ve struck a bargain for you,” he said without preamble. “You can be subprior under Murdo. You’ll be in charge of day-to-

day management of the priory. Murdo doesn't want to be an administrator, anyway—he just wants the prestige. You'll have all the power, but my father will be satisfied."

"Let me get this straight," said Godwyn. "Murdo agrees to make me his subprior. Then we tell the rest of the monks that he is the only one you'll ratify. And you think they will accept that."

"They have no choice!"

"I have an alternative suggestion. Tell the earl that the monks will not have anyone but me—and that I must be ratified before the wedding, otherwise the monks will not take part in the nuptials. The nuns, too, will refuse." Godwyn did not know whether the monks would go along with this—let alone Mother Cecilia and the nuns—but he was too far gone for caution.

"They wouldn't dare!"

"I'm afraid they would."

Richard looked panicky. "My father won't be bullied!"

Godwyn laughed. "Small chance of that. But I hope he may be made to see reason."

"He'll say the wedding must go ahead anyway. I'm the bishop, I can marry the couple, I don't need monks to help me."

"Of course. But there will be no singing, no candles, no psalms, no incense—just you and Archdeacon Lloyd."

"They will still be married."

"How will the earl of Monmouth feel about such a mean wedding for his son?"

"He'll be furious, but he'll accept it. The alliance is the important thing."

That was probably right, Godwyn thought, and he felt the cold draft of imminent failure.

It was time to draw his concealed knife.

"You owe me a kindness," he said.

At first, Richard pretended not to know what he was talking about. "Do I?"

"I concealed a sin you committed. Don't pretend to have forgotten, it was only a couple of months ago."

"Ah, yes, that was generous of you."

"I saw, with my own eyes, you and Margery on the bed in the guest room."

"Hush, for pity's sake!"

"Now is your chance to repay me that kindness. Intercede with your father. Tell him to give in. Argue that the wedding is more important. Insist on ratifying me."

Richard's face showed desperation. He looked crushed by opposing forces. "I can't!" he said, and there was panic in his voice. "My father won't

be defied. You know what he's like."

"Try."

"I've already tried! I forced him to concede that you could be subprior."

Godwyn doubted that Roland had conceded any such thing. Richard had almost certainly made it up, knowing that such a promise could easily be broken. All the same, Godwyn said: "I thank you for that." Then he added: "But it's not enough."

"Just think about it," Richard pleaded. "That's all I ask."

"I will. And I suggest you ask your father to do the same."

"Oh, God," Richard groaned. "This is going to be a catastrophe."

The wedding was scheduled for Sunday. On the Saturday, in place of the service of Sext, Godwyn ordered a rehearsal, beginning with the ceremony of inauguration of the new prior and continuing with the marriage service. Outside it was another sunless day, the sky full of low, gray cloud heavy with rain, and the inside of the cathedral was gloomy. After the rehearsal, as the monks and nuns headed off for dinner and the novices began to tidy up the church, Godwyn was approached by Carlus and Simeon, both looking solemn.

"I think that went very smoothly, don't you?" Godwyn said brightly.

Simeon said: "Is there actually going to be an inauguration for you?"

"Absolutely."

"We hear the earl has ordered the election to be rerun."

"Do you think he has the right to do that?"

"Indeed not," said Simeon. "He has the power of nomination, that's all. But he says Bishop Richard will not ratify you as prior."

"Has Richard told you that?"

"Not himself, no."

"I thought not. Trust me, the bishop will ratify me." Godwyn heard his own voice sounding sincere and confident, and wished his feelings matched it.

Carlus said anxiously. "Did you tell Richard the monks would refuse to take part in the wedding?"

"I did."

"That's very hazardous. We're not here to oppose the will of noblemen."

Godwyn could have predicted that Carlus would weaken at the first sign of serious opposition. Fortunately, he was not planning to test the monks' resolve. "We won't have to do it, don't worry. It's just an empty threat. But don't tell the bishop I said so."

"So you're not planning to ask the monks to boycott the wedding?"

"No."

Simeon said: “You’re playing a dangerous game.”

“Perhaps—but I trust no one is in danger except me.”

“You did not even want to be prior. You would not allow your name to be put forward. You only accepted when all else failed.”

“I don’t want to be prior,” Godwyn lied. “But the earl of Shiring must not be allowed to choose for us, and that’s more important than my personal feelings.”

Simeon looked at him with respect. “You’re being very honorable.”

“Like you, Brother, I’m just trying to do the will of God.”

“May He bless your efforts.”

The two old monks left him. He felt a twinge of conscience for allowing them to believe that he was acting unselfishly. They saw him as some kind of martyr. But it was true, he told himself, that he was only trying to do the will of God.

He looked around: the church was back to normal. He was about to go to the prior’s house for dinner when his cousin Caris appeared, her blue dress a startling splash of color in the dim, gray church. “Are you going to be inaugurated tomorrow?” she said.

He smiled. “Everyone’s asking the same question. The answer is yes.”

“We hear the earl is putting up a fight.”

“He’s going to lose it.”

Her shrewd green eyes gave him a penetrating stare. “I’ve known you since you were a child, and I can tell when you’re lying.”

“I’m not lying.”

“You’re pretending to be more certain than you actually feel.”

“That’s not a sin.”

“My father is worried about the bridge. Friar Murdo is even more likely to obey the earl’s will than Saul Whitehead was.”

“Murdo is not going to be prior of Kingsbridge.”

“There you go again.”

Godwyn was annoyed by her perspicacity. “I don’t know what to say to you,” he snapped. “I’ve been elected, and I mean to take the post. Earl Roland would like to stop me, but he doesn’t have the right, and I’m fighting him with all the means at my disposal. Am I scared? Yes. But I still intend to beat him.”

She grinned. “That’s what I wanted to hear.” She punched his shoulder. “Go and see your mother. She’s in your house, waiting for you. That’s what I came to tell you.” With that she turned and left.

Godwyn went out through the north transept. Caris was clever, he thought with a mixture of admiration and irritation. She had cajoled him into giving her an assessment of the situation more candid than anything he had said to anyone else.

But he was glad of the chance to talk to his mother. Everyone else doubted his power to win this fight. She would have confidence—and perhaps some strategic ideas.

He found Petranilla in the hall, sitting at the table, which was laid for two with bread, ale, and a platter of salted fish. He kissed her forehead, said grace, and sat down to eat. He allowed himself a moment of triumphant pleasure. “Well,” he said. “I’m the prior-elect, at least, and here we are having dinner in the prior’s house.”

“But Roland is still fighting you,” she said.

“Harder than I expected. After all, he has the right of nomination, not selection. It’s inherent in his position that his choice will not always be elected.”

“Most earls would accept that, but not him,” Petranilla said. “He’s felt superior to everyone he’s ever met.” There was a bitterness in her tone which, Godwyn guessed, sprang from memories of their aborted engagement more than thirty years ago. She smiled vengefully. “Soon he will realize how badly he’s underestimated us.”

“He knows I’m your son.”

“Then that will be a factor. You probably remind him of the dishonorable way he behaved to me. That’s enough to make him hate you.”

“It’s a shame.” Godwyn lowered his voice in case a servant might be listening outside the door. “Until this point, your plan has worked perfectly. Withdrawing myself from the contest, then discrediting everyone else, was brilliant.”

“Perhaps. But we may be about to lose everything. Have you said any more to the bishop?”

“No. I’ve reminded him that we know about Margery. He was scared, but not scared enough to defy his father, it seems.”

“He should be. If this comes out, he won’t be forgiven. He could end up a lowly knight on the level of Sir Gerald, wasting his days as a pensioner. Doesn’t he realize that?”

“Perhaps he thinks I don’t have the courage to reveal what I know.”

“Then you’ll have to go to the earl with the information.”

“Heavens! He’ll explode!”

“Steel your nerve.”

She always said this kind of thing. It was why he looked forward with such apprehension to meetings with her. She always wanted him to be a little more daring, and take greater risks, than was his inclination. But he could never refuse her.

She went on: “If it came out that Margery’s not a virgin, the marriage would be called off. Roland doesn’t want that. He’ll accept the lesser evil of you as prior.”

“But he’ll be my enemy for the rest of his life.”

“He’ll be that whatever happens.”

Small consolation, Godwyn thought; but he did not argue, for he could see that his mother was right.

There was a tap at the door, and Lady Philippa walked in.

Godwyn and Petranilla stood up.

“I need to talk to you,” Philippa said to Godwyn.

He said: “May I present my mother, Petranilla?”

Petranilla curtsied, then said: “I’d better leave. You’re obviously here to broker a deal, my lady.”

Philippa gave her an amused look. “If you know that much, you know everything of importance. Perhaps you should stay.”

As the two women stood facing one another, Godwyn noticed that they were similar: same height, same statuesque build, and the same imperious air. Philippa was younger, of course, by something like twenty years; and she had a relaxed authority, and a touch of humor, that contrasted with Petranilla’s tight-wound determination—perhaps because Philippa had a husband and Petranilla had lost hers. But Philippa was a strong-willed woman who exercised power through a man—Lord William—and, Godwyn now realized, Petranilla also wielded influence through a man—himself.

“Let’s sit down,” Philippa said.

Petranilla said: “Has the earl approved whatever you’re about to propose?”

“No.” Philippa made a helpless gesture with her hands. “Roland is too proud to agree in advance to something that might then be rejected by the other side. If I can get Godwyn’s agreement to what I’m about to suggest, then I’ve got a chance of persuading Roland to compromise.”

“I thought as much.”

Godwyn said: “Would you like something to eat, my lady?”

Philippa dismissed the offer with an impatient wave. “As things stand, everyone is going to lose,” she began. “The wedding will take place, but without the proper pomp and ceremony; so that Roland’s alliance with the earl of Monmouth will be blighted from the start. The bishop will refuse to ratify you as prior, Godwyn, so the archbishop will be called in to resolve the dispute; and he will dismiss both you and Murdo, and nominate someone new, probably a member of his staff whom he wants to be rid of. No one will get what they want. Am I right?”

She directed the question at Petranilla, who made a noncommittal sound.

“So why not anticipate the archbishop’s compromise?” Philippa went on. “Bring forward the third candidate now. Only”—she pointed a finger at Godwyn—“the candidate is chosen by you—and he promises to make you subprior.”

Godwyn considered. This would relieve him of the need to confront the earl eyeball-to-eyeball and threaten him with the revelation of his son's behavior. But the compromise would doom him to be subprior for an indefinite period—and then, when the new prior died, he would have to fight the battle all over again. He was inclined to refuse, despite his apprehension.

He glanced at his mother. She gave an almost imperceptible shake of the head. She did not like it either.

"I'm sorry," Godwyn said to Philippa. "The monks have held an election, and the result must stand."

Philippa stood up. "In that case, I must give you the message that is my official reason for coming here. Tomorrow morning the earl will rise from his sickbed. He wishes to inspect the cathedral and make sure all is ready in plenty of time for the wedding. You are to meet him in the church at eight o'clock. All the monks and nuns must be robed and ready, and the church dressed with the usual ornaments."

Godwyn bowed his head in acknowledgment, and she went out.

At the appointed hour Godwyn stood in a bare, silent church.

He was alone: there were no monks or nuns with him. No furniture was to be seen, except for the fixed choir stalls. There were no candles, no crucifixes, no chalices, no flowers. The watery sun that had shone fitfully through rain clouds much of this summer now cast a weak, cold light into the nave. Godwyn held his hands tightly together behind his back to keep them from shaking.

On time, the earl walked in.

With him were Lord William, Lady Philippa, Bishop Richard, Richard's assistant Archdeacon Lloyd, and the earl's clerk Father Jerome. Godwyn would have liked to surround himself with an entourage, but none of the monks knew quite how risky his scheme was, and if they had known, they might not have had the nerve to back him up; so he had decided to face the earl alone.

The bandages had been removed from Roland's head. He walked slowly but steadily. He must surely feel shaky after so many weeks in bed, Godwyn thought, but he seemed determined not to show it. He looked normal apart from the paralysis of half his face. His message to the world today would be that he was fully recovered and back in charge. And Godwyn was threatening to spoil that design.

The others looked with incredulity at the empty church, but the earl showed no surprise. "You're an arrogant monk," he said to Godwyn, speaking as always out of the left side of his mouth.

Godwyn was risking everything, and had nothing further to lose by being

defiant, so he said: “You’re an obstinate earl.”

Roland put his hand on the hilt of his sword. “I ought to run you through for that.”

“Go ahead.” Godwyn held his arms out sideways, ready to be crucified. “Murder the prior of Kingsbridge, here in the cathedral, just as King Henry’s knights murdered Archbishop Thomas Becket in Canterbury. Send me to Heaven and yourself to eternal damnation.”

Philippa gasped with shock at Godwyn’s disrespect. William moved as if to silence Godwyn. Roland restrained him with a gesture, and said to Godwyn: “Your bishop orders you to ready the church for the wedding. Don’t monks take a vow of obedience?”

“The lady Margery cannot be married here.”

“Why not—because you want to be prior?”

“Because she is not a virgin.”

Philippa’s hand flew to her mouth. Richard groaned. William drew his sword. Roland said: “This is treason!”

Godwyn said: “Put away your sword, Lord William—you can’t restore her maidenhead with that.”

Roland said: “What do you know of such things, monk?”

“Two men of this priory witnessed the act, which took place in a private room of the hospital, the very room where you, my lord, are staying.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“The earl of Monmouth will.”

“You would not dare to tell him.”

“I must explain to him why his son cannot marry Margery in Kingsbridge Cathedral—at least until she has confessed her sin and received absolution.”

“You have no proof of this slander.”

“I have two witnesses. But ask the girl. I believe she will confess. I imagine she favors the lover who took her virginity over the political match chosen by her uncle.” Once again Godwyn was going out on a limb. But he had seen Margery’s face when Richard was kissing her, and at that moment he had felt sure she was in love. Having to marry the earl’s son must be breaking her heart. It would be very difficult for such a young woman to lie convincingly if her emotions were as turbulent as Godwyn guessed.

The animated half of Roland’s face was working with fury. “And who is this man who you claim committed this crime? For, if you can prove what you allege, the villain will hang, I swear. And, if not, you will. So let him be sent for, and we’ll see what he has to say.”

“He’s already here.”

Roland looked with incredulity at the four men with him—his two sons, William and Richard, plus two priests, Lloyd and Jerome.

Godwyn stared at Richard.

Roland followed the direction of Godwyn's stare. In a moment, they were all looking at Richard.

Godwyn held his breath. What would Richard say? Would he bluster? Would he accuse Godwyn of lying? Would he fly into a rage and attack his accuser?

But his face showed defeat, not anger, and after a moment he bowed his head and said: "It's no good. The damned monk is right—she will not withstand interrogation."

Earl Roland went white. "You did this?" he said. For once he was not shouting, but that seemed to make him more terrifying. "The girl I betrothed to an earl's son—you fucked her?"

Richard made no reply, but looked down at the ground.

"You fool," the earl said. "You traitor. You—"

Philippa interrupted him. "Who else knows?"

That stopped the tirade. They all looked at her.

"Perhaps the wedding may still take place," she said. "Thank God, the earl of Monmouth isn't here." She looked at Godwyn. "Who knows about this, other than the people here now, and the two men of the priory who witnessed the act?"

Godwyn tried to calm his thudding heart. He was so close to success that he seemed to taste it. "No one else knows, my lady," he said.

"All of us on the earl's side can keep the secret," she said. "What about your men?"

"They will obey their elected prior," he said, with the slightest emphasis on the word "elected."

Philippa turned to Roland. "Then the wedding can take place."

Godwyn added: "Provided the inauguration ceremony is held first."

Everyone looked at the earl.

He took a step forward and suddenly hit Richard in the face. It was a powerful blow struck by a soldier who knew how to put all his weight into it. Although he used his open hand, Richard was knocked to the ground.

Richard lay still, looking terrified, blood trickling from his mouth.

Earl Roland's face was white and sweating: the blow had used up all his reserves, and he now looked shaky. Several silent seconds passed. At last he seemed to recover his strength. With a contemptuous glance at the purple-robed figure cowering on the floor, he turned on his heel and walked, slowly but steadily, out of the church.

24

Caris stood on the green in front of Kingsbridge Cathedral, along with at least half the population of the town, waiting for the bride and groom to emerge from the great west door of the church.

Caris was not sure why she was here. She had been feeling negative about marriage ever since the day Merthin had finished his hoist, and they had had an abrasive conversation about their future. She felt angry with him, even though everything he had said made perfect sense. Of course he wanted to have his own house and live with her in it; of course he wanted to sleep with her every night and have children. That was what everyone wanted—everyone, it seemed, except Caris.

And in fact she wanted all those things, too, in a way. She would have liked to lie down beside him every evening, and put her arms around his slim body anytime she wanted, and feel his clever hands on her skin when she woke up in the morning, and give birth to a miniature version of him that they could both love and care for. But she did not want the things that went with marriage. She wanted a lover, not a master; she wanted to live with him, not dedicate her life to him. And she was angry with Merthin for forcing her to face up to the dilemma. Why could they not go on just as they were?

For three weeks she had hardly spoken to him. She pretended to have a summer cold, and in fact she developed a painful sore on her lip that gave her an excuse not to kiss him. He still took his meals at her house, and talked amiably with her father; but he did not linger after Edmund and Petranilla went to bed.

Now Caris's sore had healed and her anger had cooled. She still did not want to become Merthin's property, but she wished he would start kissing her again. However, he was not with her now. He was in the crowd, some distance away, talking to Bessie Bell, daughter of the landlord of the Bell Inn. She was a small girl with a curvy body and the kind of grin that men called saucy and women called tarty. Merthin was making her laugh. Caris looked away.

The big wooden church door opened. A cheer went up from the crowd, and the bride emerged. Margery was a pretty girl of sixteen, dressed in white, with flowers in her hair. The groom followed her out, a tall, serious-looking man about ten years older than she.

They both looked completely miserable.

They hardly knew each other. Until this week, they had met only once, six months ago, when the two earls had arranged the marriage. There was a rumor that Margery loved someone else, but of course there was no question of her disobeying Earl Roland. And her new husband had a studious air, as if he would prefer to be in a library somewhere, reading a book about geometry. What would their life together be like? It was hard to imagine their

developing the kind of passion for one another that Caris and Merthin enjoyed.

She saw Merthin coming toward her through the crowd, and suddenly she was struck by the thought that she was ungrateful. How lucky she was not to be the niece of an earl! No one was going to force her into an arranged marriage. She was free to marry the man she loved—and all she could do was find reasons not to.

She greeted him with a hug and a kiss on the lips. He looked surprised, but made no comment. Some men would have been unnerved by her change of mood, but Merthin had a bedrock equanimity that was hard to shake.

They stood together and watched as Earl Roland came out of the church, followed by the earl and countess of Monmouth, then Bishop Richard and Prior Godwyn. Caris noticed that her cousin Godwyn looked both pleased and apprehensive—almost as if he were the groom. The reason, no doubt, was that he had just been inaugurated as prior.

An escort of knights formed up, the Shiring men in Roland's red-and-black livery, the Monmouth men in yellow and green. The procession moved off, heading for the guildhall. There Earl Roland was giving a banquet for the wedding guests. Edmund was going, but Caris had managed to get out of it, and Petranilla was to accompany him.

As the bridal party left the precincts, a light shower of rain began to fall. Caris and Merthin took shelter in the cathedral porch. "Come with me to the chancel," Merthin said. "I want to look at Elfric's repairs."

The wedding guests were still leaving the church. Moving against the flow, Merthin and Caris pushed through the crowd in the nave and went to the south aisle of the chancel. This part of the church was reserved for the clergy, and they would have disapproved of Caris's being there, but the monks and nuns had already left. Caris glanced around, but there was no one to see her except one unfamiliar woman, a well-dressed redhead of about thirty, presumably a wedding guest, apparently waiting for someone.

Merthin craned his neck to look up at the vaulted ceiling over the aisle. The repairs were not quite finished: a small section of the vault was still open, and a sheet of canvas, painted white, was stretched across the gap, so that the ceiling looked complete to a casual glance.

"He's doing a decent job," Merthin said. "I wonder how long it will last."

"Why wouldn't it last indefinitely?" Caris asked.

"Because we don't know why the vault crumbled. These things don't happen for no reason—they're not acts of God, regardless of what the priests may say. Whatever caused the stonework to collapse once will, presumably, do so again."

"Is it possible to discover the cause?"

"It's not easy. Elfric certainly can't do it. I might."

“But you’ve been sacked.”

“Exactly.” He stood there for a few moments, head tilted back, then said: “I want to see this from above. I’m going into the loft.”

“I’ll come with you.”

They both looked around, but there was no one nearby except for the red-haired wedding guest, who was still loitering in the south transept. Merthin led Caris to a small door that opened on a narrow spiral staircase. She followed him up, wondering what the monks would think if they knew a woman was exploring their secret passageways. The staircase emerged into an attic over the south aisle.

Caris was intrigued to see the vault from the other side. “What you’re looking at is called the extrados,” Merthin said. She liked the casual way he gave her architectural information, assuming she would be interested and knowing she would understand. He never made stupid jokes about women not grasping technicalities.

He moved along the narrow walkway then lay down to examine the new stonework closely. Mischievously, she lay beside him and put her arm around him, as if they were in bed. Merthin touched the mortar between the new stones then put his finger on his tongue. “It’s drying out quite quickly,” he said.

“I’m sure it’s very dangerous if there’s moisture in the cleft.”

He looked at her. “I’ll give you moisture in the cleft.”

“You already have.”

He kissed her. She closed her eyes to enjoy it more.

After a minute she said: “Let’s go to my house. We’ll have it to ourselves—my father and my aunt are both at the wedding banquet.”

They were about to get up when they heard voices. A man and a woman had come into the south aisle, immediately below the repair work. What they said was only a little muffled by the canvas sheet covering the hole in the ceiling. “Your son is thirteen now,” the woman said. “He wants to be a knight.”

“All boys do,” came the reply.

Merthin whispered: “Don’t move—they’ll hear us.”

Caris presumed the female voice to be that of the wedding guest. The male voice was familiar, and she had the feeling the speaker was a monk—but a monk could not have a son.

“And your daughter is twelve. She’s going to be beautiful.”

“Like her mother.”

“A little.” There was a pause, then the woman went on: “I can’t stay long—the countess may look for me.”

So she was in the entourage of the countess of Monmouth. She might be a lady-in-waiting, Caris guessed. She seemed to be giving news of children to a

father who had not seen them for years. Who could it be?

He said: “Why did you want to meet me, Loreen?”

“Just to look at you. I’m sorry you lost your arm.”

Caris gasped, then covered her mouth, hoping she had not been heard. There was only one monk who had lost an arm: Thomas. Now that the name had come into her mind, she knew that the voice was his. Could it be that he had a wife? And two children? Caris looked at Merthin and saw that his face was a mask of incredulity.

“What do you tell the children of me?” Thomas asked.

“That their father is dead,” Loreen replied harshly. Then she began to cry. “Why did you do it?”

“I had no choice. If I had not come here, I would have been killed. Even now, I almost never leave the precincts.”

“Why would anyone want to kill you?”

“To protect a secret.”

“I’d be better off if you’d died. As a widow, I could find a husband, someone to be a father to my children. But this way I have all the burdens of a wife and mother but no one to help me…no one to put his arms around me in the night.”

“I’m sorry I’m still alive.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean that. I don’t wish you dead. I loved you once.”

“And I loved you as much as a man of my kind can love a woman.”

Caris frowned. What did he mean by “a man of my kind”? Was he one of those men who loved other men? Monks often were.

Whatever he meant, Loreen seemed to understand, for she said gently: “I know you did.”

There was a long silence. Caris knew she and Merthin should not be eavesdropping on such an intimate conversation—but it was now too late to reveal themselves.

Loreen said: “Are you happy?”

“Yes. I was not made to be a husband, or a knight. I pray for my children every day—and for you. I ask God to wash from my hands the blood of all the men I killed. This is the life I always wanted.”

“In that case, I wish you well.”

“You’re very generous.”

“You’ll probably never see me again.”

“I know.”

“Kiss me, and say good-bye.”

There was a long silence, then light footsteps receded. Caris lay still, hardly daring to breathe. After another pause, she heard Thomas crying. His sobs were muffled, but seemed to come from deep inside. Tears came to her own eyes as she listened.

Eventually Thomas got himself under control. He sniffed, coughed, and muttered something that might have been a prayer; then she heard his steps as he walked away.

At last she and Merthin could move. They stood up and walked back along the loft and down the spiral stairs. Neither spoke as they went down the nave of the great church. Caris felt as if she had been staring at a painting of high tragedy, the figures frozen in their dramatic attitudes of the moment, their past and future only to be guessed at.

Like a painting, the scene aroused different emotions in different people, and Merthin's reaction was not the same as hers. As they emerged into a damp summer afternoon, he said: "What a sad story."

"It makes me angry," Caris said. "That woman has been ruined by Thomas."

"You can hardly blame him. He had to save his life."

"And now her life is over. She has no husband, but she can't marry again. She's forced to raise two children alone. At least Thomas has the monastery."

"She has the court of the countess."

"How can you compare the two?" Caris said irritably. "She's probably a distant relation, kept on as an act of charity, asked to perform menial tasks, helping the countess dress her hair and choose her clothes. She's got no choice—she's trapped."

"So is he. You heard him say he can't leave the precincts."

"But Thomas has a role, he's the matricularius, he makes decisions, he does something."

"Loreen has her children."

"Exactly! The man takes care of the most important building for miles around, and the woman is stuck with her children."

"Queen Isabella had four children, and for a while she was one of the most powerful people in Europe."

"But she had to get rid of her husband first."

They went on in silence, walking out of the priory grounds into the main street, and stopped in front of Caris's house. She realized that this was another quarrel, and it was on the same subject as last time: marriage.

Merthin said: "I'm going to the Bell for dinner."

That was Bessie's father's inn. "All right," Caris said despondently.

As Merthin walked away, she called after him: "Loreen would be better off if she'd never married."

He spoke over his shoulder. "What else would she do?"

That was the problem, Caris thought resentfully as she entered her house. What else was a woman to do?

The place was empty. Edmund and Petranilla were at the banquet, and the servants had the afternoon off. Only Scrap the dog was there to welcome

Caris with a lazy wag of her tail. Caris patted her black head absentmindedly, then sat at the table in the hall, brooding.

Every other young woman in Christendom wanted nothing more than to marry the man she loved—why was Caris so horrified by the prospect? From where had she got such unconventional feelings? Certainly not from her own mother. Rose had wanted only to be a good wife to Edmund. She had believed what men said about the inferiority of women. Her subordination had embarrassed Caris and, though Edmund never complained, Caris suspected that he had been bored by it. Caris had more respect for her forceful, unlovable aunt Petranilla than for her compliant mother.

Even Petranilla had allowed her life to be shaped by men. For years she had worked to maneuver her father up the social ladder until he became alderman of Kingsbridge. Her strongest emotion was resentment: toward Earl Roland because he had jilted her, and toward her husband because he had died. As a widow she had dedicated herself to Godwyn's career.

Queen Isabella had been similar. She had deposed her husband, King Edward II; but the result had been that her lover, Roger Mortimer, had effectively ruled England until her son grew old enough and confident enough to oust him.

Was that what Caris should do—live her life through men? Her father wanted her to work with him in the wool business. Or she could manage Merthin's career, helping him secure contracts to construct churches and bridges, expanding his business until he was the richest and most important builder in England.

She was roused from her thoughts by a tap at the door, and the birdlike figure of Mother Cecilia walked briskly in.

"Good afternoon!" Caris said in surprise. "I was just asking myself whether all women are doomed to live their lives through men—and here you are, an obvious counterexample."

"You're not quite right," Cecilia said with a friendly smile. "I live through Jesus Christ, who was a man, though he is God, too."

Caris was not sure whether that counted. She opened the cupboard and took out a small barrel of the best wine. "Would you like a cup of my father's Rhenish?"

"Just a little, mixed with water."

Caris half-filled two cups with wine then topped up the drinks with water from a jug. "You know that my father and aunt are at the banquet."

"Yes. I came to see you."

Caris had guessed as much. The prioress did not wander around the town making social calls without a purpose.

Cecilia sipped, then went on: "I've been thinking about you, and the way you acted on the day the bridge collapsed."

“Did I do something wrong?”

“On the contrary. You did everything perfectly. You were gentle but firm with the injured, and you obeyed my orders but at the same time used your initiative. I was impressed.”

“Thank you.”

“And you seemed…not to enjoy it, exactly, but at least to find satisfaction in the work.”

“People were in distress, and we brought them relief—what could be more satisfying?”

“That’s how I feel, and it’s why I’m a nun.”

Caris saw where this was going. “I couldn’t spend my life in the priory.”

“The natural aptitude you showed for looking after the sick is only part of what I noticed. When people first started to walk into the cathedral carrying the injured and dead, I asked who had told them what to do. The answer was Caris Wooler.”

“It was obvious what should be done.”

“Yes—to you.” Cecilia leaned forward earnestly. “The talent for organization is given to few people. I know—I have it, and I recognize it in others. When everyone around us is baffled, or panicked, or terrified, you and I take charge.”

Caris felt this was true. “I suppose so,” she said reluctantly.

“I’ve watched you for ten years—since the day your mother died.”

“You brought her relief in her distress.”

“I knew then, just by talking to you, that you were going to grow up into an exceptional woman. My feeling was confirmed when you attended the nuns’ school. You’re twenty now. You must be thinking about what to do with your life. I believe that God has work for you.”

“How do you know what God thinks?”

Cecilia bristled. “If anyone else in town asked me that question, I’d order them down on their knees to pray for forgiveness. But you’re sincere, so I’ll answer. I know what God thinks because I accept the teachings of His church. And I’m convinced he wants you to be a nun.”

“I like men too much.”

“Always a problem for me, as a youngster—but, I can assure you, a problem that diminishes with every passing year.”

“I can’t be told how to live.”

“Don’t be a Beguine.”

“What’s that?”

“Beguines are nuns who accept no rules and consider their vows to be temporary. They live together, cultivate their lands and graze their cattle, and refuse to be governed by men.”

Caris was always intrigued to hear of women who defied the rules.

“Where are they to be found?”

“Mostly in the Netherlands. They had a leader, Marguerite Porete, who wrote a book called *The Mirror of Simple Souls*.”

“I’d like to read it.”

“Out of the question. The Beguines have been condemned by the church for the heresy of the Free Spirit—the belief that we can attain spiritual perfection here on earth.”

“Spiritual perfection? What does that mean? It’s just a phrase.”

“If you’re determined to close your mind to God, you’ll never understand it.”

“I’m sorry, Mother Cecilia, but every time I’m told something about God by a mere human, I think: But humans are fallible, so the truth might be different.”

“How could the church be wrong?”

“Well, the Muslims have different beliefs.”

“They’re heathens!”

“They call us infidels—it’s the same thing. And Buonaventura Caroli says there are more Muslims than Christians in the world. So somebody’s church is wrong.”

“Be careful,” Cecilia said severely. “Don’t allow your passion for argument to lead you into blasphemy.”

“Sorry, Mother.” Caris knew that Cecilia enjoyed sparring with her, but there always came a moment when the prioress stopped arguing and started preaching, and Caris had to back down. It left her feeling slightly cheated.

Cecilia stood up. “I know I can’t persuade you against your will, but I wanted you to know the tendency of my thoughts. You could do nothing better than to join our nunnery, and dedicate your life to the sacrament of healing. Thank you for the wine.”

As Cecilia was leaving, Caris said: “What happened to Marguerite Porete? Is she still alive?”

“No,” said the prioress. “She was burned at the stake.” She went out into the street, shutting the door behind her.

Caris stared at the closed door. A woman’s life was a house of closed doors: she could not be an apprentice, she could not study at the university, she could not be a priest or a physician, or shoot a bow or fight with a sword, and she could not marry without submitting herself to the tyranny of her husband.

She wondered what Merthin was doing now. Was Bessie sitting at his table at the Bell Inn, watching him drink her father’s best ale, giving him that inviting smile, pulling the front of her dress tight to make sure he could see what nice breasts she had? Was he being charming and amusing to her, making her laugh? Was she parting her lips to show him her even teeth, and

throwing back her head so that he could appreciate the soft skin of her white throat? Was he talking to her father, Paul Bell, asking respectful and interested questions about his business, so that later Paul would tell his daughter that Merthin was a good sort, a fine young man? Would Merthin get drunk and put his arm around Bessie's waist, resting his hand on her hip then slyly inching his fingertips toward that sensitive place between her thighs that was already itching for his touch—just as he once had with Caris?

Tears came to her eyes. She felt she was a fool. She had the best man in town and here she was handing him over to a barmaid. Why did she do these things to herself?

At that moment he walked in.

She looked at him through a mist of tears. Her vision was so blurred that she could not read his expression. Had he come to make friends again—or to berate her, venting his anger with the courage of several tankards of ale?

She stood up. For a moment she was held in suspense, as he closed the door behind him and came slowly to stand in front of her. Then he said: "No matter what you do or say, I still love you."

She threw her arms around him and burst out crying.

He stroked her hair and said nothing, which was just right.

After a while they started to kiss. She felt the familiar hunger, but stronger than ever: she wanted his hands all over her, his tongue in her mouth, his fingers inside her. She felt differently and she wanted their love to find a new expression. "Let's take off all our clothes," she said. They had never done that before.

He smiled with pleasure. "All right, but what if someone comes in?"

"They'll be at the banquet for hours. And anyway we can go upstairs."

They went to her bedroom. She kicked off her shoes. Suddenly she felt shy. What would he think when he saw her naked? She knew he loved her body bit by bit: her breasts, her legs, her throat, her cunt—he always told her how beautiful they were as he kissed and caressed them. But would he now notice that her hips were too wide, her legs a little short, her breasts quite small?

He seemed to have no such inhibitions. He threw off his shirt, pulled down his underdrawers, and stood unself-consciously before her. His body was slight but strong, and he seemed full of pent-up energy, like a young deer. She noticed for the first time that the hair at his groin was the color of autumn leaves. His cock stood up eagerly. Desire overcame her shyness, and she pulled her dress quickly over her head.

He stared at her bare body, but she no longer felt embarrassed—his look inflamed her like an intimate caress. "You're beautiful," he said.

"So are you."

They lay side by side on the straw-filled palliasse that was her bed. As

they kissed and touched one another, she realized that today she was not going to be satisfied with the games they usually played. “I want to do it properly,” she said.

“You mean go the whole way?”

The thought of pregnancy surfaced in her mind, but she pushed it back down. She was too heated to think of consequences. “Yes,” she whispered.

“So do I.”

He lay on top of her. Half her life she had wondered what this moment would be like. She looked up at his face. It wore the concentrated expression that she loved so much, the look he had when he was working, his small hands shaping wood with tenderness and skill. His fingertips softly spread the petals of her sex. She was slippery and yearning for him.

He said: “Are you sure?”

Once again she suppressed the thought of pregnancy. “I’m sure.”

She felt a moment of fear when he entered her. She tightened involuntarily, and he hesitated, feeling her body resisting him. “It’s all right,” she said. “You can push harder. You won’t hurt me.” She was wrong about that, and there was a sudden sharp pain as he thrust. She could not help crying out.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered.

“Just wait a minute,” she said.

They lay still. He kissed her eyelids and her forehead and the tip of her nose. She stroked his face and looked into his golden brown eyes. Then the pain was gone and the desire came back, and she began to move, rejoicing in the feeling of having the man she loved deep inside her body for the first time. She thrilled to see the intensity of his pleasure. He stared at her, a faint smile on his lips, a deep hunger in his eyes, as they moved faster.

“I can’t stop,” he said breathlessly.

“Don’t stop, don’t stop.”

She watched him intently. In a few moments he was overwhelmed by pleasure, his eyes shut tight and his mouth open and his whole body as taut as a bowstring. She felt his spasms inside her, and the jet of his ejaculation, and she thought that nothing in life had prepared her for such happiness. A moment later she herself was convulsed with ecstasy. She had had this sensation before, but not so powerfully, and she closed her eyes and gave herself up to it, pulling his body hard against her own as she shook like a tree in the wind.

When it was over, they lay still for a long while. He buried his face in her neck, and she felt his panting breath on her skin. She stroked his back. His skin was damp with perspiration. Gradually her heartbeat slowed, and a deep contentment stole over her like twilight on a summer evening.

“So,” she said after a while, “that’s what all the fuss is about.”

25

The day after Godwyn was confirmed as prior of Kingsbridge, Edmund Wooler came to Merthin's parents' house early in the morning.

Merthin tended to forget what an important personage Edmund was, for Edmund treated him as a member of the family; but Gerald and Maud acted as if receiving an unexpected royal visitation. They were embarrassed that Edmund should see how poor their house was. There was only one room. Merthin and his parents slept on straw mattresses on the floor. There was a fireplace and a table and a small yard at the back.

Fortunately, the family had been up since sunrise, and had washed and dressed and tidied the place. All the same, when Edmund came stomping into the house with his uneven gait, Merthin's mother dusted a stool, patted her hair, closed the back door then opened it again, and put a log on the fire. His father bowed several times, put on a surcoat, and offered Edmund a cup of ale.

"No, thank you, Sir Gerald," said Edmund, no doubt knowing that the family had none to spare. "However, I'll take a small bowl of your pottage, Lady Maud, if I may." Every family kept a pot of oats on the fire to which they added bones, apple cores, pea pods, and other scraps, to be slow-cooked for days. Flavored with salt and herbs, the result was a soup that never tasted the same twice. It was the cheapest food.

Pleased, Maud ladled some pottage into a bowl and put it on the table with a spoon and a plate of bread.

Merthin was still feeling the euphoria of the previous afternoon. It was like being slightly drunk. He had gone to sleep thinking of Caris's naked body and woken up smiling. But he was suddenly reminded of his confrontation with Elfric over Griselda. A false instinct told him that Edmund was going to scream, "You defiled my daughter!" and hit him across the face with a length of timber.

It was only a momentary vision, and it vanished as Edmund sat at the table. He picked up the spoon but, before he began to eat, he said to Merthin: "Now that we've got a prior, I want to start work on the new bridge as soon as possible."

"Good," said Merthin.

Edmund swallowed a spoonful and smacked his lips. "This is the best pottage I've ever tasted, Lady Maud." Merthin's mother looked pleased.

Merthin was grateful to Edmund for being charming to his parents. They felt the humiliation of their reduced status, and it was balm to the wound to have the town's alderman eating at their table and calling them Sir Gerald and Lady Maud.

Now his father said: “I almost didn’t marry her, Edmund—did you know that?”

Merthin was sure Edmund had heard the story before, but he replied: “Good lord, no—how did that happen?”

“I saw her in church on Easter Sunday, and fell in love with her instantly. There must have been a thousand people in Kingsbridge Cathedral, and she was the most beautiful woman there.”

“Now, Gerald, no need to exaggerate,” Maud said crisply.

“Then she disappeared into the crowd, and I couldn’t find her! I didn’t know her name. I asked people who was the pretty girl with the fair hair, and they said all the girls were pretty and fair.”

Maud said: “I hurried away after the service. We were staying at the Holly Bush Inn, and my mother was unwell, so I went back to take care of her.”

Gerald said: “I looked all over town, but I couldn’t find her. After Easter, everyone went home. I was living in Shiring, and she in Casterham, though I didn’t know that. I thought I’d never see her again. I imagined she might have been an angel, come to earth to make sure everyone was attending the service.”

She said: “Gerald, please.”

“But my heart was lost. I took no interest in other women. I expected to spend my life longing for the Angel of Kingsbridge. This went on for two years. Then I saw her at a tournament in Winchester.”

She said: “This complete stranger came up to me and said: ‘It’s you—after all this time! You must marry me before you disappear again.’ I thought he was mad.”

“Amazing,” said Edmund.

Merthin thought Edmund’s goodwill had been stretched far enough. “Anyway,” he said, “I’ve drawn some designs on the tracing floor in the mason’s loft at the cathedral.”

Edmund nodded. “A stone bridge wide enough for two carts?”

“As you specified—and ramped at both ends. And I’ve found a way to reduce the price by about a third.”

“That’s astonishing! How?”

“I’ll show you, as soon as you’ve finished eating.”

Edmund spooned up the last of the pottage and stood. “I’m done. Let’s go.” He turned to Gerald and inclined his head in a slight bow. “Thank you for your hospitality.”

“It’s a pleasure to have you here, alderman.”

Merthin and Edmund stepped out into a light drizzle. Instead of heading for the cathedral, Merthin led Edmund toward the river. Edmund’s lopsided stride was instantly recognizable, and every second person on the street greeted him with a friendly word or a respectful bow.

Merthin suddenly felt nervous. He had been thinking about the bridge design for months. While he worked at St Mark's, supervising the carpenters who were constructing the new roof as the old was demolished, he mulled over the greater challenge of the bridge. Now for the first time his ideas would come under scrutiny by someone else.

As yet, Edmund had no idea how radical Merthin's plan was.

The muddy street wound downhill through houses and workshops. The city ramparts had fallen into disrepair during two centuries of civil peace, and in some places all that remained were humps of earth that now formed parts of garden walls. At the river's edge were industries that used large quantities of water, especially wool dyers and leather tanners.

Merthin and Edmund emerged onto the muddy foreshore between a slaughterhouse that gave off a strong smell of blood and a smithy where hammers clanged on iron. Directly in front of them, across a narrow stretch of water, was Leper Island. Edmund said: "Why are we here? The bridge is a quarter of a mile upstream."

"It was," said Merthin. He took a breath and said: "I think we should build the new one here."

"A bridge to the island?"

"And another from the island to the far shore. Two small bridges instead of one big one. Much cheaper."

"But people will have to walk across the island from one bridge to the other."

"Why not?"

"Because it's a leper colony!"

"There's only one leper left. He can be moved elsewhere. The disease seems to be dying out."

Edmund looked thoughtful. "So everyone who comes to Kingsbridge will arrive at this spot, where we're standing."

"We'll have to build a new street, and knock down some of these buildings—but the cost will be small by comparison with the money saved on the bridge."

"And on the other side…"

"A pasture that belongs to the priory. I can see the whole layout when I'm on the roof of St. Mark's. That's how come I thought of it."

Edmund was impressed. "That's very clever. I wonder why the bridge wasn't put here originally."

"The first bridge was erected hundreds of years ago. The river probably had a different shape then. Riverbanks must move their position as the centuries go by. The channel between the island and the pasture could have been wider at one time. Then there would have been no advantage in building here."

Edmund peered across the water, and Merthin followed his gaze. The leper colony was a scatter of tumbledown wooden buildings spread over three or four acres. The island was too rocky for cultivation, but there were some trees and scrubby grass. The place was infested with rabbits, which the townspeople would not eat because of a superstition that they were the souls of dead lepers. At one time the ostracized inhabitants had kept their own chickens and pigs. Now, however, it was simpler for the priory to supply food to the last remaining inhabitant. “You’re right,” Edmund said. “There hasn’t been a new case of leprosy in the town for at least ten years.”

“I’ve never seen a leper,” Merthin said. “As a child, I thought people were saying ‘leopard.’ I imagined that island to be occupied by spotted lions.”

Edmund laughed. Turning his back on the river, he looked at the buildings around. “There will be some political work to do,” he mused. “The people whose homes must be demolished will have to be convinced that they’re the lucky ones, being moved to new and better houses while their neighbors missed out. And the island may have to be cleansed with holy water to convince people that it’s safe. But we can handle all that.”

“I’ve drawn both bridges with pointed arches, like the cathedral,” Merthin said. “They will be beautiful.”

“Show me.”

They left the riverside and walked uphill through the town to the priory. The cathedral dripped with rain under a layer of low cloud like smoke from a damp fire. Merthin was looking forward to seeing his drawings again—he had not been to the loft for a week or so—and to explaining them to Edmund. He had thought a great deal about the way the current had undermined the old bridge, and how he could protect the new one from the same fate.

He led Edmund through the north porch and up the spiral staircase. His wet shoes slipped on the worn stone steps. Edmund energetically hauled his withered leg up behind him.

Several lamps were burning in the mason's loft. At first Merthin was pleased, for that meant they would be able to see his drawings more clearly. Then he saw Elfric working on the tracing floor.

He felt momentarily frustrated. The enmity between himself and his former master was as great as ever. Elfric had failed to prevent townspeople from employing Merthin, but he continued to block Merthin's application to join the carpenters' guild—leaving Merthin in an anomalous position, illegitimate but accepted. Elfric's attitude was pointless, but spiteful.

Elfric's presence here would put a damper on Merthin's conversation with Edmund. He told himself not to be so sensitive. Why should it not be Elfric who was made uncomfortable?

He held the door for Edmund, and together they crossed the room to the tracing floor. Then he suffered a shock.

Elfric was bent over the tracing floor, drawing with a pair of compasses—on a fresh layer of plaster. He had re-covered the floor, totally obliterating Merthin's drawings.

Merthin said incredulously: "What have you done?"

Elfric looked contemptuously at him and went on with his drawing, saying nothing.

"He's wiped out my work," Merthin said to Edmund.

"What's your explanation, man?" Edmund demanded.

Elfric could not ignore his father-in-law. "There's nothing to explain," he said. "A tracing floor has to be renewed at intervals."

"But you've covered over important designs!"

"Have I? The prior has not commissioned this boy to make any drawings, and the boy has not asked permission to use the tracing floor."

Edmund was never slow to anger, and Elfric's cool insolence was getting under his skin. "Don't act stupid," he said. "I asked Merthin to prepare drawings for the new bridge."

"I'm sorry, but only the prior has authority to do that."

"Damn it, the guild is providing the money."

"A loan, to be repaid."

"It still gives us the right to a say on the design."

"Does it? You'll have to speak to the prior about that. I don't think he'll be impressed by your choice of an inexperienced apprentice as your designer, though."

Merthin was looking at the drawings Elfric had scratched in the new plaster. "I suppose this is your bridge design," he said.

"Prior Godwyn has commissioned me to build it," Elfric said.

Edmund was shocked. “Without asking us?”

Elfric said resentfully: “What’s the matter—don’t you want the work to go to your own daughter’s husband?”

“Round arches,” Merthin said, still studying Elfric’s drawing. “And narrow openings. How many piers will you have?”

Elfric was reluctant to answer, but Edmund was staring expectantly at him. “Seven,” he said.

“The wooden bridge only had five!” Merthin said. “Why are they so thick, and the openings so narrow?”

“To bear the weight of a stone-paved roadway.”

“You don’t need thick piers for that. Look at this cathedral—its columns bear the entire weight of the roof, but they’re slim and widely spaced.”

Elfric sneered. “No one’s going to drive a cart across the roof of a church.”

“That’s true, but—” Merthin stopped. The rain on the cathedral’s vast expanse of roof probably weighed more than an oxcart loaded with stone, but why should he explain this to Elfric? It was not his role to educate an incompetent builder. Elfric’s design was poor, but Merthin did not want to improve it, he wanted to replace it with his own, so he shut up.

Edmund also realized he was wasting his breath. “This decision is not going to be made by you two,” he said, and he stomped off.

John Constable’s baby daughter was christened in the cathedral by Prior Godwyn. This honor was granted because he was an important employee of the priory. All the leading townspeople attended. Although John was neither wealthy nor well connected—his father had worked in the priory stables—Petranilla said that respectable people should take care to show friendship toward him and support for him. Caris thought they condescended to John because they needed him to protect their property.

It was raining again, and the people grouped around the font were wetter than the infant who was sprinkled with holy water. Strange feelings stirred in Caris as she looked at the tiny, helpless child. Since lying with Merthin she had simply refused to let herself think about pregnancy but, all the same, she felt a warm surge of protective emotion when she saw the baby.

She was named Jesca, after Abraham’s niece.

Caris’s cousin Godwyn had never been comfortable with babies and, as soon as the brief rite was over, he turned to leave. But Petranilla grabbed the sleeve of his Benedictine robe. “What about this bridge?” she said.

She spoke in a low voice, but Caris heard, and made up her mind to listen to the rest.

Godwyn said: “I’ve asked Elfric to prepare drawings and estimates.”

“Good. We should keep it in the family.”

“Elfric is the priory’s builder.”

“Other people may want to horn in.”

“I shall decide who builds the bridge.”

Caris was annoyed enough to intervene. “How dare you,” she said to Petranilla.

“I was not speaking to you,” her aunt said.

Caris ignored that. “Why should Merthin’s design not be considered?”

“Because he isn’t family.”

“He practically lives with us!”

“But you’re not married to him. If you were, it might be different.”

Caris knew she was at a disadvantage there, so she shifted her ground. “You’ve always been prejudiced against Merthin,” she said. “But everyone knows he’s a better builder than Elfric.”

Her sister, Alice, heard that and joined in the argument. “Elfric taught Merthin everything, and now Merthin pretends he knows better!”

That was dishonest, Caris knew, and she felt angry. “Who built the ferry?” she said, raising her voice. “Who repaired the roof of St. Mark’s?”

“Merthin was working with Elfric when he built the ferry. And no one asked Elfric about St. Mark’s.”

“Because they knew he wouldn’t be able to solve the problem!”

Godwyn interrupted. “Please!” he said, with his hands raised in front of himself protectively. “I know you’re my family, but I’m the prior and this is the cathedral. I can’t be harangued by womenfolk in public.”

Edmund joined the circle. “Just what I was going to say. Keep your voices down.”

Alice said accusingly: “You should be supporting your son-in-law.”

It occurred to Caris that Alice was getting more like Petranilla. Although she was only twenty-one, and Petranilla was more than twice that age, Alice had the same purse-mouthed look of disapproval. She was also becoming more stout, her bosom filling out the front of her dress like wind in a sail.

Edmund looked sternly at Alice. “This decision will not be made on the basis of family relationships,” he said. “The fact that Elfric is married to my daughter won’t help his bridge stay upright.”

He had strong views on this subject, Caris knew. He believed you should always do business with the most reliable supplier, always hire the best man for the job, regardless of friendship or family ties. “Any man who needs to surround himself with loyal acolytes doesn’t really believe in himself,” he would say. “And if he doesn’t believe in himself, why should I?”

Petranilla said: “So how will the choice be made?” She gave him a shrewd look. “You’ve obviously got a plan.”

“The priory and the guild will consider Elfric’s design and Merthin’s—

and any others that may be put forward," Edmund said decisively. "All designs must be drawn and costed. The costing must be independently checked by other builders."

Alice muttered: "I've never heard of such goings-on. It's like an archery contest. Elfric is the priory's builder; he should do the job."

Her father ignored her. "Finally, the designers will be questioned by the leading citizens of the town at a meeting of the parish guild. And then"—he looked at Godwyn, who was pretending not to be bewildered by the way the decision process had been taken out of his hands—"and then Prior Godwyn will make his choice."

The meeting took place in the guildhall on the main street. It had a stone undercroft below and a timber superstructure, topped by a tiled roof and two stone chimneys. In the basement were the large kitchen that prepared food for the banquets, a jail, and an office for the constable. The main floor was as spacious as a church, a hundred feet long and thirty feet wide. At one end was a chapel. Because it was so wide, and because timbers long enough to span a thirty-foot roof were rare and expensive, the main room was divided by a row of wooden pillars supporting the joists.

It appeared an unpretentious building, made of the materials used in the humblest dwellings, glorifying nobody. But, as Edmund often said, the money made by the people here paid for the limestone-and-stained-glass majesty of the cathedral. And the guildhall was comfortable in its unostentatious way. There were tapestries on the walls and glass in the windows, and two huge fireplaces kept it warm in winter. When business was booming, the food served here was fit for royalty.

The parish guild had been formed hundreds of years ago, when Kingsbridge was a small town. A few merchants had got together to raise money to buy ornaments for the cathedral. But when wealthy men eat and drink in a group they inevitably discuss their common concerns, and fund-raising soon became secondary to politics. From the start the guild was dominated by wool merchants, which was why a huge pair of scales and a standard weight for a woolsack—364 pounds—stood at one end of the hall. As Kingsbridge grew, other guilds had been formed, representing crafts—carpenters, masons, brewers, goldsmiths—but their leading members also belonged to the parish guild, which retained its primacy. It was a less powerful version of the guild merchant that ruled most English towns, but was prohibited here by the town's landlord, Kingsbridge Priory.

Merthin had never attended a meeting or banquet here, but he had been inside several times on more mundane business. He liked to crane back his neck and study the complex geometry of the roof timbers, a lesson in how the

weight of a broad expanse of roof could be funneled down to a few slender wooden pillars. Most of the elements made sense, but one or two pieces of wood seemed to him to be superfluous, or even detrimental, transferring weight to weaker zones. That was because no one really knew what made buildings stand up. Builders went by instinct and experience, and sometimes got it wrong.

This evening Merthin was in a state of high anxiety, too nervous to really appreciate the woodwork. The guild was about to pass judgment on his bridge design. It was far superior to Elfric's—but would they see that?

Elfric had had the benefit of the tracing floor. Merthin might have asked Godwyn for permission to use it, but he had been afraid of further sabotage by Elfric, so he had devised an alternative. He had stretched a large piece of parchment across a wooden frame, and had drawn his design on the skin with a pen and ink. Tonight this might work to his advantage, for he had brought his design with him to the guildhall, so that members would have it in front of them, whereas Elfric's would only be in their memories.

He placed his framed drawing at the front of the hall, on a three-legged stand he had devised for the purpose. Everyone came and looked at it as they arrived, although they had all seen it at least once over the last few days. They had also climbed the spiral staircase to the loft and looked at Elfric's drawings. Merthin thought most people preferred his design, but some were wary of backing a youngster against an experienced man. Many had kept their opinions to themselves.

The noise level rose as the hall filled up with men and a few women. They dressed up for the guild, as they did for church, the men in expensive wool coats despite the mild summer weather, the women in elaborate headdresses. Although everyone paid lip service to the untrustworthiness and general inferiority of women, in practice several of the town's wealthiest and most important citizens were female. There was Mother Cecilia, sitting now at the front with her personal assistant, a nun known as Old Julie. Caris was here—everyone acknowledged that she was Edmund's right hand. Merthin experienced a jolt of desire as she sat on the bench next to him, her thigh warm against his own. Anyone carrying on a trade in the town had to belong to a guild—outsiders could do business only on market days. Even monks and priests were compelled to join if they wanted to trade, which they often did. When a man died, it was common for his widow to continue his enterprise. Betty Baxter was the town's most prosperous baker; Sarah Taverner kept the Holly Bush Inn. It would have been difficult and cruel to prevent such women earning a living. Much easier to include them in the guild.

Edmund normally chaired these meetings, sitting on a big wooden throne on a raised platform at the front. Today, however, there were two chairs on the platform. Edmund sat in one and, when Prior Godwyn arrived, Edmund

invited him to take the other. Godwyn was accompanied by all the senior monks, and Merthin was pleased to see Thomas among them. Philemon was also in the entourage, lanky and awkward, and Merthin wondered briefly what on earth Godwyn had brought him for.

Godwyn was looking pained. Opening the proceedings, Edmund was careful to acknowledge that the prior was in charge of the bridge, and the choice of design was ultimately his. But everyone knew that, in fact, Edmund had taken the decision out of Godwyn's hands by calling this meeting. Provided there was a clear consensus tonight, Godwyn would have great difficulty in going against the expressed will of the merchants in a matter of commerce rather than religion. Edmund asked Godwyn to begin with a prayer, and Godwyn obliged, but he knew he had been outmaneuvered, and that was why he looked as if there was a bad smell.

Edmund stood up and said: "These two designs have been costed by Elfric and Merthin, who have used the same methods of calculation."

Elfric interjected: "Of course we have—he learned them from me." There was a ripple of laughter from the older men.

It was true. There were formulae for calculating costs per square foot of wall, per cubic yard of infill, per foot of a roof span, and for more intricate work such as arches and vaulting. All builders used the same methods, though with their individual variations. The bridge calculations had been complex, but easier than for a building such as a church.

Edmund went on: "Each man has checked the other's calculations, so there is no room for dispute."

Edward Butcher called out: "Yes—all builders overcharge by the same amount!" That got a big laugh. Edward was popular with the men for his quick wit, and with the women for his good looks and brown bedroom eyes. He was not so popular with his wife, who knew about his infidelities and had recently attacked him with one of his own heavy knives; he still had a bandage on his left arm.

"Elfric's bridge will cost two hundred and eighty-five pounds," Edmund said as the laughter died away. "Merthin's comes out at three hundred and seven. The difference is twenty-two pounds, as most of you will have worked out faster than me." There was a quiet chuckle at that: Edmund was often teased for having his daughter do his arithmetic for him. He still used the old Latin numerals, because he could not get used to the new Arabic digits that made calculation so much easier.

A new voice said: "Twenty-two pounds is a lot of money." It was Bill Watkin, the builder who had refused to hire Merthin, looking like one of the monks with his bald dome.

Dick Brewer said: "Yes, but Merthin's bridge is twice as wide. It ought to cost twice as much—but it doesn't, because it's a cleverer design." Dick was

fond of his own product, ale, and in consequence had a protruding round belly like a pregnant woman.

Bill rejoined: “How many days a year do we need a bridge wide enough for two carts?”

“Every market day and all of Fleece Fair week.”

“Not so,” said Bill. “It’s only for an hour in the morning and another in the afternoon.”

“I’ve waited two hours with a cartload of barley before now.”

“You should have the sense to bring your barley in on quiet days.”

“I bring barley in every day.” Dick was the largest brewer in the county. He owned a huge copper kettle that held five hundred gallons, in consequence of which his tavern was called the Copper.

Edmund interrupted this spat. “There are other problems caused by delays on the bridge,” he said. “Some traders go to Shiring, where there’s no bridge and no queue. Others do their business while waiting in line, then go home without ever entering the town, and save themselves the bridge toll and the market taxes. It’s forestalling, and it’s illegal, but we’ve never succeeded in stopping it. And then there’s the question of how people think of Kingsbridge. Right now we’re the town whose bridge collapsed. If we’re going to attract back all the business we’re losing, we need to change that. I’d like us to become known as the town with the best bridge in England.”

Edmund was hugely influential, and Merthin began to scent victory.

Betty Baxter, an enormously fat woman in her forties, stood up and pointed to something on Merthin’s drawing. “What’s this, here in the middle of the bridge parapet, over the pier?” she said. “There’s a little pointed bit that sticks out over the water, like a viewing platform. What is it for, fishing?” The others laughed.

“It’s a pedestrian refuge,” Merthin answered. “If you’re walking over the bridge, and suddenly the earl of Shiring rides across with twenty mounted knights, you can step out of their way.”

Edward Butcher said: “I hope it’s big enough to fit Betty in.”

Everyone laughed, but Betty persisted with her questioning. “Why is the pier underneath it pointed like that all the way down to the water? Elfric’s piers aren’t pointed.”

“To deflect debris. Look at any river bridge—you’ll see the piers are chipped and cracked. What do you think causes that damage? It must be the large pieces of wood—tree trunks, or timbers from demolished buildings—that you see floating downstream and crashing into piers.”

“Or Ian Boatman when he’s drunk,” said Edward.

“Boats or debris, they will cause less damage to my pointed piers. Elfric’s will suffer the full impact.”

Elfric said: “My walls are too strong to be knocked down by bits of

wood.”

“On the contrary,” said Merthin. “Your arches are narrower than mine, therefore the water will be drawn through them faster, and the debris will strike the piers with greater force, causing more damage.”

He could see from Elfric’s face that the older man had not even thought of that. But the audience were not builders—how could they judge what was right?

Around the base of each pier, Merthin had drawn a pile of rough stones, known to builders as riprap. This would prevent the current undermining his piers the way it had those of the old wooden bridge. But no one asked him about the riprap, so he did not explain it.

Betty had more questions. “Why is your bridge so long? Elfric’s begins at the water’s edge. Yours starts several yards inland. Isn’t that unnecessary expense?”

“My bridge is ramped at both ends,” Merthin explained. “That’s so that you step off the bridge onto dry land, instead of a swamp. No more oxcarts getting bogged down on the beach and blocking the bridge for an hour.”

“Cheaper to put down a paved road,” said Elfric.

Elfric was beginning to sound desperate. Then Bill Watkin stood up. “I’m having trouble deciding who’s right and who’s wrong,” he said. “When these two argue, it’s difficult to make up your mind. And I’m a builder—it must be worse for those who aren’t.” There was a murmur of agreement. Bill went on: “So I think we should look at the men, not the designs.”

Merthin had been afraid of this. He listened with increasing despair.

“Which of the two do you know best?” said Bill. “Which can you rely on? Elfric has been a builder in this town, man and boy, for twenty years. We can look at houses he’s put up and see they’re still standing. We can see the repairs he’s done on the cathedral. On the other hand, here’s Merthin—a clever lad, we know, but a bit of a tearaway, and never finished his apprenticeship. There’s not a lot to indicate that he’s capable of taking charge of the largest building project Kingsbridge has seen since the construction of the cathedral. I know which one I trust.” He sat down.

Several men voiced their approval. They would not judge the designs—they would decide on personalities. It was maddeningly unfair.

Then Brother Thomas spoke up. “Has anyone in Kingsbridge ever been involved in a project that involved building below water level?”

Merthin knew the answer was no. He felt a surge of hope. This could rescue it for him.

Thomas went on: “I would like to know how both men would handle that problem.”

Merthin was ready with his solution—but he was afraid that if he spoke first Elfric would simply echo him. He compressed his lips, hoping that

Thomas—who usually helped him—would get the message.

Thomas caught Merthin's eye, and said: "Elfric, what would you do?"

"The answer is simpler than you think," Elfric said. "You just have to drop loose rubble into the river at the point where your pier will stand. The rubble rests on the river bottom. You put more and more in until the pile is visible above water level. Then you build your pier on that foundation."

As Merthin had expected, Elfric had come up with the crudest solution to the problem. Now Merthin said: "There are two snags with Elfric's method. One is that a pile of rubble is no more stable under water than on land. Over time, it will shift and drop, and when that happens the bridge will subside. If you want a bridge to last only a few years, fine. But I think we should build for the long term."

He heard a quiet rumble of concurrence.

"The second problem is the shape of the pile. It will naturally slope outwards below the waterline, restricting the passage of boats, especially when the river is low. And Elfric's arches are already narrow."

Elfric said irritably: "What would you do instead?"

Merthin suppressed a smile. That was what he had wanted to hear—Elfric admitting that he did not know a better answer. "I'll tell you," he said. And I'll show everyone that I know better than the idiot who chopped my door to pieces, he thought. He looked around. They were all listening. Their decision hung on what he would say next.

He took a deep breath. "First, I would take a pointed wooden stake and pile-drive it into the riverbed. Then I would bang in another next to it, touching; then another. In that way I would build a ring of stakes around the place in the river where I want to put my pier."

"A ring of stakes?" Elfric jeered. "That will never keep the water out."

Brother Thomas, who had asked the question, said: "Listen to him, please. He listened to you."

Merthin said: "Next, I would build a second ring inside the first, with a gap between them of half a foot." He sensed that he had his audience's attention now.

"It still won't be waterproof," said Elfric.

Edmund said: "Shut up, Elfric, this is interesting."

Merthin went on: "Then I would pour a clay mortar into the gap between the two rings. The mixture would displace the water, being heavier. And it would plug any chinks between the wood stakes, making the ring watertight. This is called a cofferdam."

The room was quiet.

"Finally, I would remove the water from inside by bucket, exposing the riverbed, and build a mortared stone foundation."

Elfric was dumbstruck. Both Edmund and Godwyn were staring at

Merthin.

Thomas said: “Thank you both. Speaking for myself, that makes the decision an easy one.”

“Yes, said Edmund. “I rather think it does.”

Caris was surprised that Godwyn had wanted Elfric to design the bridge. She understood that Elfric would seem a safer choice—but Godwyn was a reformer, not a conservative, and she had expected him to be enthusiastic about Merthin’s clever, radical design. Instead he had timidly favored the cautious option.

Fortunately, Edmund had been able to outmaneuver Godwyn, and now Kingsbridge would have a well-built, beautiful bridge that would allow two carts to cross at the same time. But Godwyn’s eagerness to appoint the unimaginative sycophant rather than the bold man of talent was an ominous sign for the future.

And Godwyn had never been a good loser. When he was a boy Petranilla had taught him to play chess, letting him win to encourage him, and he had challenged his uncle Edmund; but after being beaten twice he had sulked and refused to play again. He was in the same mood after the meeting in the guildhall, she could tell. It was probably not that he was particularly attracted to Elfric’s design. But he undoubtedly resented having the decision taken out of his hands. Next day, when she and her father went to the prior’s house, she anticipated trouble.

Godwyn greeted them coolly and did not offer any refreshment. As always, Edmund pretended not to notice slights. “I want Merthin to start work on the bridge immediately,” he said as he sat down at the table in the hall. “I have pledges of money for the full amount of Merthin’s budget—”

“From whom?” Godwyn interrupted.

“The town’s wealthiest traders.”

Godwyn continued to look inquiringly at Edmund.

Edmund shrugged and said: “Fifty pounds from Betty Baxter, eighty from Dick Brewer, seventy from myself, and ten pounds each from eleven others.”

“I didn’t know our citizens possessed such riches,” Godwyn said. He seemed both awestruck and envious. “God has been kind.”

Edmund added: “Kind enough to reward people for a lifetime’s hard work and worry.”

“No doubt.”

“Which is why I need to give them reassurances about the return of their money. When the bridge is built, the tolls will come to the parish guild, which will use them to repay loans—but who will collect the pennies as the passengers cross the bridge? I think it has to be a servant of the guild.”

“I never agreed to this,” Godwyn said.

“I know, that’s why I’m raising it now.”

“I mean, I never agreed to pay the tolls to the parish guild.”

“What?”

Caris stared at Godwyn, flabbergasted. Of course he had agreed to it—what was he talking about? He had spoken to her as well as to Edmund and assured them that Brother Thomas—

“Oh,” she said. “You promised that Thomas would build the bridge, if he was elected prior. Then, when Thomas withdrew and you became the candidate, we assumed…”

“You assumed,” Godwyn said. A smirk of triumph played about his lips.

Edmund could barely contain himself. “This is not square dealing, Godwyn!” he said in a choked voice. “You knew what the understanding was!”

“I knew no such thing, and you should call me Father Prior.”

Edmund’s voice got louder. “Then we’re back where we were with Prior Anthony three months ago! Except that now, instead of an inadequate bridge, we have no bridge at all. Don’t imagine it will be built at no cost to you. Citizens may lend their life savings to the priory, on the security of income from the bridge tolls, but they will not give their money away…Father Prior.”

“Then they must manage without a bridge. I have only just become prior—how can I start by alienating a right that has belonged to my priory for hundreds of years?”

“But it’s only temporary!” Edmund exploded. “And if you don’t do this no one will gain any money from bridge tolls because there will be no cursed bridge!”

Caris was furious, but she bit her tongue and tried to figure out what Godwyn was up to. He was getting his revenge for last night, but did he really mean it? “What do you want?” she said to him.

Edmund looked surprised by the question, but he said nothing: the reason he brought Caris with him to meetings was that she often saw things he missed, and asked questions he had not thought of.

“I don’t know what you mean,” Godwyn replied.

“You’ve pulled a surprise,” she said. “You’ve caught us wrong-footed. Very well. We admit we made an assumption that may have been unwarranted. But what’s your purpose? Just to make us feel stupid?”

“You asked for this meeting, not I.”

Edmund burst out: “What kind of way is that to talk to your uncle and your cousin?”

“Just a minute, Papa,” Caris said. Godwyn did have a secret agenda, she felt sure, but he did not want to admit it. All right, she thought, I’ll have to guess it. “Give me a minute to think,” she said. Godwyn still wanted the

bridge—he had to, nothing else made sense. The business about alienating the priory's ancient rights was rhetoric, the kind of pompous prating that all students were taught at Oxford. Did he want Edmund to break down and agree to Elfric's design? She did not think so. Godwyn clearly resented the way Edmund had appealed over his head to the citizenry, but he must see that Merthin was offering twice as much bridge for almost the same money. So what else could it be?

Perhaps he just wanted a better deal.

He had looked hard at the priory's finances, she guessed. Having railed comfortably against Anthony's inefficiency for many years, he was now confronted with the reality of having to do the job better himself. Perhaps it was not going to be as easy as he had imagined. Perhaps he was not as clever about money and management as he had thought. In desperation, he wanted the bridge *and* the money from tolls. But how did he think that could happen?

She said: "What could we offer you that would make you change your mind?"

"Build the bridge without taking the tolls," he said instantly.

So that was his agenda. You always were a bit sneaky, Godwyn, she thought.

A flash of inspiration struck her, and she said: "How much money are we talking about?"

Godwyn looked suspicious. "Why do you want to know that?"

Edmund said: "We can work it out. Not counting citizens, who don't pay the toll, about a hundred people cross the bridge every market day, and carts pay twopence. It's much less now, with the ferry, of course."

Caris said: "Say a hundred and twenty pennies a week, or ten shillings, which comes to twenty-six pounds a year."

Edmund said: "Then, during Fleece Fair week, about a thousand on the first day, and another two hundred each subsequent day."

"That's two thousand two hundred, plus carts, call it two thousand four hundred pennies, which is ten pounds. Total, thirty-six pounds a year." Caris looked at Godwyn. "Is that about right?"

"Yes," he acknowledged grudgingly.

"So, what you want from us is thirty-six pounds a year."

"Yes."

"Impossible!" said Edmund.

"Not necessarily," Caris said. "Suppose the priory were to grant the parish guild a lease on the bridge—" Thinking on her feet, she added: "Plus an acre of ground at either end, and the island in the middle—for thirty-six pounds a year, in perpetuity." Once the bridge was built, that land would be priceless, she knew. "Would that give you what you want, Father Prior?"

"Yes."

Godwyn clearly thought he was getting thirty-six pounds a year for something worthless. He had no idea how much rent could be charged for a plot of land at the end of a bridge. The worst negotiator in the world is a man who believes he's clever, Caris thought.

Edmund said: "But how would the guild recoup the cost of construction?"

"With Merthin's design, the number of people and carts crossing should rise. Theoretically it could double. Everything over thirty-six pounds is the guild's. Then we could put up buildings either side to service travelers—taverns, stables, cook shops. They should be profitable—we could charge a good rent."

"I don't know," said Edmund. "It seems very risky to me."

For a moment, Caris felt furious with her father. She had come up with a brilliant solution, and he seemed to be finding unnecessary fault with it. Then she realized he was faking. She could see the light of enthusiasm in his eyes, not quite concealed. He loved the idea, but he did not want Godwyn to know how keen he was. He was hiding his feelings, for fear the prior would try to negotiate a better bargain. It was a ploy father and daughter had used before, when bargaining over wool.

Having figured out what he was up to, Caris played along, pretending to share his misgivings. "I know it's hazardous," she said gloomily. "We could lose everything. But what alternative do we have? We've got our backs to the wall. If we don't build the bridge, we'll go out of business."

Edmund shook his head dubiously. "All the same, I can't agree to this on behalf of the guild. I'll have to talk to the people who are putting up the money. I can't say what their reply will be." He looked Godwyn in the eye. "But I'll do my best to persuade them, if this is your best offer."

Godwyn had not actually made an offer, Caris reflected; but he had forgotten that. "It is," he said firmly.

Got you, Caris thought triumphantly.

"You're really very shrewd," Merthin said.

He was lying between Caris's legs, his head on her thigh, toying with her pubic hair. They had just made love for the second time ever, and he had found it even more joyous than the first. As they dozed in the pleasant daydream of satisfied lovers, she had told him about her negotiation with Godwyn. He was impressed.

Caris said: "The best of it is, he thinks he's driven a hard bargain. In fact, a perpetual lease on the bridge and the land around it is priceless."

"All the same, it's a bit dismaying if he's going to be no better at managing the priory's money than your uncle Anthony was."

They were in the forest, in a clearing hidden by brambles and shaded by a

stand of tall beech trees, where a stream ran over rocks to form a pool. It had probably been used by lovers for hundreds of years. They had stripped naked and bathed in the pool before making love on the grassy bank. Anyone traveling clandestinely through the woods would skirt the thicket, so they were not likely to be discovered, unless by children picking blackberries—which was how Caris had originally discovered the glade, she told Merthin.

Now he said idly: “Why did you ask for that island?”

“I’m not sure. It’s obviously not as valuable as the land at either end of the bridge, and it’s no good for cultivation, but it could still be developed. The truth is, I guessed he wouldn’t object, so I just threw it in.”

“Will you take over your father’s wool business one day?”

“No.”

“So definite? Why?”

“It’s too easy for the king to tax the wool trade. He has just imposed an extra duty of a pound per sack of wool—that’s on top of the existing tax of two-thirds of a pound. The price of wool is now so high that the Italians are looking for wool from other countries, such as Spain. The business is too much at the mercy of the monarch.”

“Still, it’s a living. What else would you do?” Merthin was edging the conversation toward marriage, a subject she never raised.

“I don’t know.” She smiled. “When I was ten, I wanted to be a doctor. I thought that if I had known about medicine I could have saved my mother’s life. They all laughed at me. I didn’t realize only men could be physicians.”

“You could be a wise woman, like Mattie.”

“That would shock the family. Imagine what Petranilla would say! Mother Cecilia thinks it’s my destiny to be a nun.”

He laughed. “If she could see you now!” He kissed the soft inside of her thigh.

“She’d probably want to do what you’re doing,” Caris said. “You know what people say about nuns.”

“Why would she think you wanted to join the convent?”

“It’s because of what we did after the bridge collapsed. I helped her take care of the injured. She said I had a natural gift for it.”

“You have. Even I could see it.”

“I just did what Cecilia said.”

“But people seemed to feel better as soon as you spoke to them. And then you always listened to what they had to say before telling them what they should do.”

She stroked his cheek. “I couldn’t be a nun. I’m too fond of you.”

Her triangle of hair was reddish-brown with golden lights. “You’ve got a little mole,” he said. “Right here, on the left, beside the cleft.”

“I know. It’s been there since I was a little girl. I used to think it was ugly.

I was so pleased when my hair grew, because I thought that meant my husband wouldn't see it. I never imagined anyone would look as closely as you."

"Friar Murdo would call you a witch—you'd better not let him see it."

"Not if he were the last man on earth."

"This is the blemish that saves you from blasphemy."

"What are you talking about?"

"In the Arab world, every work of art has a tiny flaw, so that it doesn't sacrilegiously compete with the perfection of God."

"How do you know that?"

"One of the Florentines told me. Listen, do you think the parish guild will want the island?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Because I'd like to own it."

"Four acres of rock and rabbits. Why?"

"I'd build a dock and a builder's yard. Stone and timber coming by river could be delivered directly to my dock. When the bridge is finished, I'd build a house on the island."

"Nice idea. But they wouldn't give it to you free."

"How about as part payment for building the bridge? I could take, say, half wages for two years."

"You charge four pence a day…so the price of the island would be just over five pounds. I should think the guild would be pleased to get that much for barren land."

"Do you think it's a good idea?"

"I think you could build houses there and rent them, as soon as the bridge is finished and people can travel to and from the island easily."

"Yes," said Merthin thoughtfully. "I'd better talk to your father about it."

26

Returning to Earlscastle at the end of a day's hunting, when all the men in Earl Roland's entourage were in a good mood, Ralph Fitzgerald was happy.

They crossed the drawbridge like an invading army, knights and squires and dogs. Rain was falling in a light drizzle, coolly welcome to the men and animals, who were hot and tired and content. They had taken several summer-fat hinds that would make good eating, plus a big old stag, too tough for anything but dog meat, killed for its magnificent antlers.

They dismounted in the outer compound, within the lower circle of the figure-eight moat. Ralph unsaddled Griff, murmured a few words of thanks in

his ear, fed him a carrot, and handed him to a groom to be rubbed down. Kitchen boys dragged away the bloody carcasses of the deer. The men were noisily recalling the day's incidents, boasting and jeering and laughing, remembering remarkable jumps and dangerous falls and hairsbreadth escapes. Ralph's nostrils filled with a smell he loved, a mixture of sweating horses, wet dogs, leather, and blood.

Ralph found himself next to Lord William of Caster, the earl's elder son. "A great day's sport," he said.

"Tremendous," William agreed. He pulled off his cap and scratched his balding head. "I'm sorry to lose old Bruno, though."

Bruno, the leader of the dog pack, had gone in for the kill a few moments too early. When the stag was too exhausted to run any farther, and turned to face the hounds, its heaving shoulders covered with blood, Bruno had leaped for its throat—but, with a last burst of defiance, the deer had dipped its head and swung its muscular neck and impaled the soft belly of the dog on the points of its antlers. The effort finished the beast off, and a moment later the other dogs were tearing it apart; but, as it thrashed its life away, Bruno's guts unraveled across the antlers like a tangled rope, and William had had to put him out of his misery, slashing his throat with a long dagger. "He was a brave dog," Ralph said, and put a hand on William's shoulder in commiseration.

"Like a lion," William agreed.

On the spur of the moment, Ralph decided to speak about his prospects. There would never be a better moment. He had been Roland's man for seven years; he was brave and strong; and he had saved his lord's life after the bridge collapsed—yet he had been given no promotion, and was still a squire. What more could be asked of him?

Yesterday he had met his brother, by chance, at a tavern on the road from Kingsbridge to Shiring. Merthin, on his way to the priory's quarry, had been full of news. He was going to build the most beautiful bridge in England. He would be rich and famous. Their parents were thrilled. It had made Ralph feel even more frustrated.

Now, speaking to Lord William, he could not think of a neat way to introduce the subject that was on his mind, so he just plunged in. "It's three months since I saved your father's life at Kingsbridge."

"Several people claim that honor," William said. The harsh look that came over his face reminded Ralph strongly of Roland.

"I pulled him out of the water."

"And Matthew Barber mended his head, and the nuns changed his bandages, and the monks prayed for him. God saved his life, though."

"Amen," Ralph said. "All the same, I was hoping for some sign of favor."

"My father's a hard man to please."

William's brother, Richard, was standing nearby, red-faced and sweating,

and he overheard the remark. “That’s as true as the Bible,” he said.

“Don’t complain,” William said. “Our father’s hardness made us strong.”

“As I recall, it made us miserable.”

William turned away, probably not wanting to argue the point in front of an underling.

When the horses were stabled, the men drifted across the compound, past the kitchens and barracks and chapel, to a second drawbridge that led to a small inner compound, the top loop of the figure eight. Here the earl lived in a traditional keep, with ground-floor storerooms, a great hall above, and a small upper story for the earl’s private bedchamber. A colony of rooks inhabited the high trees around the keep, and strutted on the battlements like sergeants, cawing their dissatisfaction. Roland was in the great hall, having changed out of his dirty hunting clothes into a purple robe. Ralph stood near the earl, determined to raise the question of his promotion at the first opportunity.

Roland was arguing good-naturedly with William’s wife, Lady Philippa—one of the few people who could contradict him and get away with it. They were talking about the castle. “I don’t think it’s changed for a hundred years,” Philippa said.

“That’s because it’s such a good design,” Roland said, speaking out of the left side of his mouth. “The enemy expends most of his strength getting into the lower compound, then he faces a whole new battle to reach the keep.”

“Exactly!” said Philippa. “It was built for defense, not comfort. But when was the last time a castle in this part of England came under attack? Not in my lifetime.”

“Nor in mine.” He grinned with the mobile half of his face. “Probably because our defenses are so strong.”

“There was a bishop who scattered acorns on the road wherever he traveled, to protect him from lions,” Philippa said. “When they told him there were no lions in all England, he said: ‘It’s more effective than I thought.’”

Roland laughed.

Philippa added: “Most noble families nowadays live in more comfortable homes.”

Ralph did not care for luxury, but he cared for Philippa. He gazed at her voluptuous figure as she talked, unaware of him. He imagined her lying beneath him, twisting her naked body, crying out in pleasure, or pain, or both. If he were a knight, he could have a woman like that.

“You should knock down this old keep and build a modern house,” she was saying to her father-in-law. “One with big windows and lots of fireplaces. You could have the hall at ground level, with the family apartments at one end, so that we could all have somewhere private to sleep when we come to visit you; and the kitchens at the other end, so that the food is still hot when it reaches the table.”

Suddenly Ralph realized he could make a contribution to this conversation. “I know who could design such a house for you,” he said.

They turned to him in surprise. What would a squire know of house design? “Who?” said Philippa.

“My brother, Merthin.”

She looked thoughtful. “The funny-faced boy who tells me to buy green silk to match my eyes?”

“He meant no disrespect.”

“I’m not sure what he meant. Is he a builder?”

“He’s the best,” Ralph said proudly. “He devised the new ferry at Kingsbridge, then he figured out how to repair the roof of St. Mark’s when no one else could, and now he’s been commissioned to build the most beautiful bridge in England.”

“Somehow I’m not surprised,” she said.

“What bridge?” said Roland.

“The new one at Kingsbridge. It will have pointed arches, like a church, and be wide enough for two carts!”

“I’ve heard nothing of this,” Roland said.

Ralph realized the earl was displeased. What had annoyed him? “The bridge must be rebuilt, mustn’t it?” Ralph said.

“I’m not so sure,” Roland replied. “Nowadays there’s hardly enough business for two markets as close together as Kingsbridge and Shiring. But, if we must accept the Kingsbridge market, that doesn’t mean we have to countenance a blatant attempt by the priory to steal customers from Shiring.” Bishop Richard had come in, and now Roland rounded on him. “You didn’t tell me about the new bridge at Kingsbridge.”

“Because I don’t know about it,” Richard answered.

“You ought to, you’re the bishop.”

Richard flushed at the reproof. “The bishop of Kingsbridge has lived in or near Shiring ever since the civil war between King Stephen and the Empress Maud, two centuries ago. The monks prefer it that way, and so do most bishops.”

“That doesn’t prevent you keeping your ear to the ground. You should have some idea of what’s happening there.”

“Since I don’t, perhaps you’d be kind enough to tell me what you’ve learned.”

That kind of cool insolence passed over Roland’s head. “It’s going to be wide enough for two carts. It will take business away from my market at Shiring.”

“There’s nothing I can do about it.”

“Why not? You’re the abbot, ex officio. The monks are supposed to do what you say.”

“They don’t, though.”

“Perhaps they will if we take away their builder. Ralph, can you persuade your brother to give up the project?”

“I can try.”

“Offer him a better prospect. Tell him I want him to build a new palace for me here at Earlscastle.”

Ralph was excited to get a special commission from the earl, but he was daunted, too. He had never been able to talk Merthin into anything—it was always the other way around. “All right,” he said.

“Will they be able to go ahead without him?”

“He got the job because no one else in Kingsbridge knew how to build under water.”

Richard said: “He’s not the only man in England who can design a bridge, obviously.”

William said: “Still, taking away their builder would surely delay them. They probably couldn’t start for another year.”

“Then it’s worth doing,” Roland said decisively. A look of hatred came over the animated half of his face, and he added: “That arrogant prior has to be put in his place.”

Things had changed in the life of Gerald and Maud, Ralph discovered. His mother wore a new green dress to church, and his father had leather shoes. Back at home there was a goose stuffed with apples roasting over the fire, filling the little house with a mouthwatering smell, and a loaf of wheat bread, the most expensive kind, standing on the table.

The money came from Merthin, Ralph soon learned. “He gets paid four pence a day every day he works on St. Mark’s,” Maud said proudly. “And he’s building a new house for Dick Brewer. That’s as well as getting ready to build the new bridge.”

Merthin received a lower wage for working on the bridge, he explained while his father carved the goose, because he had been given Leper Island in part payment. The last remaining leper, old and bedridden, had been moved to a small house in the monks’ orchard on the far side of the river.

Ralph found that his mother’s evident happiness left a sour taste in his mouth. He had believed, since he was a boy, that the destiny of the family lay in his hands. He had been sent away, at the age of fourteen, to join the household of the earl of Shiring, and he had known even then that it was up to him to wipe out his father’s humiliation by becoming a knight, perhaps a baron, even an earl. Merthin, by contrast, had been apprenticed to a carpenter, and set on a road that could only lead farther down the social hill. Builders were never made knights.

It was some consolation that their father was unimpressed by Merthin's success. He showed signs of impatience when Maud talked about building projects. "My elder son seems to have inherited the blood of Jack Builder, my only low-born ancestor," he said, and his tone was amazed rather than proud. "But, Ralph, tell us how you're getting on at the court of Earl Roland."

Unfortunately, Ralph had so far mysteriously failed to rise in the nobility, whereas Merthin was buying his parents new clothes and expensive dinners. Ralph knew he should just be grateful that one of them had won success, and that even if his parents remained humble they could at least be comfortable. But, though his mind told him to rejoice, his heart seethed with resentment.

And now he had to persuade his brother to give up the bridge. The trouble with Merthin was that he would never see anything simply. He was not like the knights and squires with whom Ralph had spent the last seven years. They were fighting men. In their world loyalties were clear, bravery was the virtue, and the issue was life or death. There was never much need for deep thought. But Merthin thought about everything. He could not play a game of checkers without suggesting a change in the rules.

He was explaining to their parents why he had accepted four acres of barren rock in part payment for his work on the bridge. "Everyone thinks the land is worthless because it's an island," he said. "What they don't realize is that when the bridge is built the island will become part of the city. Townspeople will walk across the bridge just as they walk along the main street. And four acres of city land is very valuable. If I build houses on it, the rents will be worth a fortune."

Gerald said: "You've a few years to wait before then."

"I'm getting some income from it already. Jake Chepstow is renting half an acre to use as a timber yard. He's bringing logs from Wales."

"Why from Wales?" Gerald asked. "The New Forest is nearer—their wood should be cheaper."

"It should be, but the earl of Shaftesbury charges a toll or a tax at every river ford and bridge in his territory."

It was a familiar gripe. Many lords found ways to tax goods that passed through their territories.

As they started to eat, Ralph said to Merthin: "I bring you news of another opportunity. The earl wants to build a new palace at Earlscastle."

Merthin looked suspicious. "He sent you to ask me to design it?"

"I suggested you. Lady Philippa was berating him about how old-fashioned the keep is, and I said I knew the right person to talk to."

Maud was thrilled. "Isn't that wonderful?"

Merthin remained skeptical. "And the earl said he wanted me?"

"Yes."

"Amazing. A few months ago I couldn't get a job. Now I've got too much

to do. And Earlscastle is two days away. I don't see how I could build a palace there and a bridge here at the same time."

"Oh, you'll have to give up the bridge," Ralph said.

"What?"

"Work for the earl has to take precedence over everything else, naturally."

"I'm not sure that's right."

"Take it from me."

"Did he say that?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact, he did."

Their father joined in. "This is a marvelous opportunity, Merthin," he said. "To build a palace for an earl!"

"Of course it is," Merthin replied. "But a bridge for this town is at least as important."

"Don't be stupid," his father said.

"I do my best not to be," Merthin said sarcastically.

"The earl of Shiring is one of the great men of the land. The prior of Kingsbridge is a nobody, by comparison."

Ralph cut a slice of goose thigh and put it in his mouth, but he could hardly swallow. He had been afraid of this. Merthin was going to be difficult. He would not take orders from their father, either. He had never been obedient, even as a child.

Ralph felt desperate. "Listen," he said. "The earl doesn't want the new bridge to be built. He thinks it will take business away from Shiring."

"Aha," said Gerald. "You don't want to go up against the earl, Merthin."

"Is that what's behind this, Ralph?" Merthin asked. "Is Roland offering me this job just to prevent the building of the bridge?"

"Not just for that reason."

"But it's a condition. If I want to build his palace, I must abandon the bridge."

Gerald said with exasperation: "You don't have a choice, Merthin! The earl doesn't request, he commands."

Ralph could have told him that an argument based on authority was not the way to persuade Merthin.

Merthin said: "I don't think he can command the prior of Kingsbridge, who has commissioned me to build this bridge."

"But he can command you."

"Can he? He's not my lord."

"Don't be foolish, son. You can't win a fight with an earl."

"I don't think Roland's quarrel is with me, Father. This is between the earl and the prior. Roland wants to use me, as a hunter uses a dog, but I think I'd do better to stay out of the fight."

"I think you should do what the earl says. Don't forget, he's your

kinsman, too.”

Merthin tried a different argument. “Has it occurred to you what a betrayal this would be of Prior Godwyn?”

Gerald made a disgusted noise. “What loyalty do we owe the priory? It was the monks who forced us into penury.”

“And your neighbors? The people of Kingsbridge, among whom you’ve lived for ten years? They need the bridge—it’s their lifeline.”

“We are of the nobility,” his father said. “We’re not required to take into account the needs of mere merchants.”

Merthin nodded. “You may feel that way, but as a mere carpenter I can’t share your view.”

“This isn’t just about you!” Ralph burst out. He had to come clean, he realized. “The earl has given me a mission. If I succeed, he may make me a knight, or at least a minor lord. If I fail, I could remain a squire.”

Maud said: “It’s very important that we all try to please the earl.”

Merthin looked troubled. He was always willing to go head-to-head with their father, but he did not like to argue with Mother. “I’ve agreed to build the bridge,” he said. “The town is counting on me. I can’t give it up.”

“Of course you can,” Maud said.

“I don’t want to get a reputation for unreliability.”

“Everyone would understand if you gave the earl precedence.”

“They might understand, but they wouldn’t respect me for it.”

“You should put your family first.”

“I fought for this bridge, Mother,” Merthin said stubbornly. “I made a beautiful design, and I persuaded the whole town to have faith in me. No one else can build it—not the way it should be done.”

“If you defy the earl, it will affect Ralph’s whole life!” she said. “Don’t you see that?”

“His whole life shouldn’t depend on something like this.”

“But it does. Are you willing to sacrifice your brother, just for the sake of a bridge?”

Merthin said: “I suppose it’s a bit like my asking him to save men’s lives by not going to war.”

Gerald said: “Come, now, you can’t compare a carpenter to a soldier.”

That was tactless, Ralph thought. It showed Gerald’s preference for the younger son. Merthin felt the sting, Ralph could tell. His brother’s face reddened and he bit his lip as if to restrain himself from a combative reply.

After a pause, Merthin spoke in a quiet voice that Ralph knew to be a sign that he had made up his mind irrevocably. “I didn’t ask to be a carpenter,” he said. “Like Ralph, I wanted to be a knight. A foolish aspiration for me, I know that now. All the same, it was your decision that I should be what I am. As things have turned out, I’m good at it. I’m going to make a success of what

you forced me into. One day I'd like to build the tallest building in England. This is what you made me—so you'd better learn to live with it."

Before Ralph went back to Earlscastle with the bad news, he racked his brains for a way to turn defeat into victory. If he could not talk his brother into abandoning the bridge, was there some other way he could get the project canceled or delayed?

There was no point talking to Prior Godwyn or Edmund Wooler, he was sure. They would be more committed to the bridge even than Merthin, and anyway they would not be persuaded by a mere squire. What could the earl do? He might send a troop of knights to kill the construction workers, but that could cause more problems than it solved.

It was Merthin who gave him the idea. He had said that Jake Chepstow, the timber merchant who was using Leper Island as a store yard, was buying trees from Wales to avoid the taxes charged by the earl of Shaftesbury.

"My brother feels he must accept the authority of the prior of Kingsbridge," Ralph said to Earl Roland on his return. Before the earl had time to get angry, he added: "But there may be a better way to delay the building of the bridge. The priory's quarry is in the heart of your earldom, between Shiring and Earlscastle."

"But it belongs to the monks," Roland growled. "The king gave it to them centuries ago. We can't stop them taking stone."

"You could tax them, though," Ralph said. He felt guilty: he was sabotaging a project dear to his brother's heart. But it had to be done, and he quelled his conscience. "They will be transporting their stone through your earldom. Their heavy carts will wear away your roads and churn up your river fords. They ought to pay."

"They'll squeal like pigs. They'll go to the king."

"Let them," Ralph said, sounding more confident than he felt. "It will take time. There are only two months left of this year's building season—they have to stop work before the first frost. With luck, you could delay the start of the bridge until next year."

Roland gave Ralph a hard look. "I may have underestimated you," he said. "Perhaps you're good for more than pulling drowning earls out of rivers."

Ralph concealed a triumphant smile. "Thank you, my lord."

"But how shall we enforce this tax? Usually there's a crossroads, a ford in a river, some place every cart has to pass through."

"Since we're only interested in blocks of stone, we could simply camp a troop of men outside the quarry."

"Excellent," said the earl. "And you can lead them."

Two days later Ralph was approaching the quarry with four men-at-arms on horseback and two boys leading a string of packhorses carrying tents and food for a week. He was pleased with himself, so far. He had been given an impossible task and turned it around. The earl thought he was good for more than river rescue work. Things were looking up.

He was deeply uncomfortable about what he was doing to Merthin. He had lain awake much of the night recalling their childhood together. He had always revered his clever older brother. They had often fought, and Ralph had felt worse when he won than when he lost. They had always made friends afterward, in those days. But grown-up fights were harder to forget.

He was not very anxious about the coming confrontation with the monks' quarrymen. It should not prove too challenging for a group of military men. He had no knights with him—such work was beneath their dignity—but he had Joseph Woodstock, whom he knew to be a hard man, and three others. All the same, he would be glad when it was over and he had achieved his aim.

It was just after dawn. They had camped the night before in the forest a few miles from the quarry. Ralph planned to get there in time to challenge the first cart that attempted to leave this morning.

The horses stepped daintily along a road muddied by the hooves of oxen and deeply rutted by the wheels of heavy carts. The sun rose into a sky of rain clouds broken by scraps of blue. Ralph's group were in a good mood, looking forward to exercising their power over unarmed men, with no serious risk to themselves.

Ralph smelled wood burning, then saw the smoke of several fires rising over the trees. A few moments later, the road widened into a muddy clearing in front of the largest hole in the ground he had ever seen. It was a hundred yards wide and stretched for at least a quarter of a mile. A mud ramp led down to the tents and wooden huts of the quarrymen, who were clustered around their fires cooking breakfast. A few were already at work, farther along the site, and Ralph could hear the dull thud of hammers driving wedges into cracks in the rock, splitting great slabs from the mass of stone.

The quarry was a day's journey from Kingsbridge, so most carters arrived in the evening and left the following morning. Ralph could see several carts dotted about the quarry, some being loaded with stone, and one already making its slow way along the track through the diggings toward the exit ramp.

The men in the quarry looked up, alerted by the sound of horses, but no one approached. Workers were never in a hurry to converse with men-at-arms. Ralph waited patiently. There appeared to be only one way out of the quarry, the long slope of mud that led to where he was.

The first cart lumbered slowly up the ramp, the carter urging the ox on with a long-tailed whip, the ox putting one foot in front of the other with mute

resentment. Four huge stones were piled on its flatbed, rough-hewn and incised with the mark of the man who had quarried them. Each man's output was counted once at the quarry and again at the building site, and he was paid per stone.

As the cart came closer, Ralph saw that the carter was a Kingsbridge man, Ben Wheeler. He looked a bit like his ox, with a thick neck and massive shoulders. His face wore a similar expression of dull hostility. He might try to make trouble, Ralph guessed. However, he could be subdued.

Ben drove his ox toward the line of horses blocking the road. Instead of halting at a distance, he let the beast come closer and closer. The horses were not combat-trained destriers but everyday hacks, and they snorted nervously and backed. The ox stopped of its own accord.

Ben's attitude angered Ralph, who called out: "You're a cocksure oaf."

Ben said: "Why do you stand in my way?"

"To collect the tax."

"There's no tax."

"To carry stone across the territory of the earl of Shiring, you must pay a penny per cartload."

"I have no money."

"Then you must get some."

"Do you bar my passage?"

The fool was not as scared as he should have been, which infuriated Ralph. "Don't presume to question me," Ralph said. "The stone stays here until someone has paid tax for it."

Ben glared back at him for a long moment, and Ralph had the strongest feeling that the man was wondering whether to knock him off his horse. "But I have no money," he said eventually.

Ralph wanted to run him through with his sword, but he reined in his temper. "Don't pretend to be even more stupid than you are," he said contemptuously. "Just go to the master quarryman and tell him the earl's men will not let you leave."

Ben stared at him a little longer, mulling this over; then, without speaking, he turned and walked back down the ramp, leaving his cart.

Ralph waited, fuming, staring at the ox.

Ben entered a wooden hut halfway along the quarry. He emerged a few minutes later accompanied by a slight man in a brown tunic. At first, Ralph presumed the second man was the quarrymaster. However, the figure looked familiar and, as the two came closer, Ralph recognized his brother, Merthin.

"Oh, no," he said aloud.

He was not prepared for this. He felt tortured by shame as he watched Merthin walk up the long ramp. He knew he was here to betray his brother, but he had not expected Merthin to be here to see it.

“Hello, Ralph,” said Merthin as he came closer. “Ben says you won’t let him pass.”

Merthin had always been able to overcome him in an argument, Ralph recalled dismally. He decided to be formal. It would hide his emotions, and he could hardly get into trouble if he simply repeated his instructions. He said stiffly: “The earl has decided to exercise his right to collect taxes from consignments of stone using his roads.”

Merthin ignored that. “Aren’t you going to get down off your horse to talk to your brother?”

Ralph would have preferred to stay mounted, but he did not want to refuse what seemed like some kind of challenge, so he got down. Then he felt as if he had already been bested.

“There’s no tax on stone from here,” Merthin said.

“There is now.”

“The monks have been working this quarry for hundreds of years. Kingsbridge Cathedral is built of this stone. It has never been taxed.”

“Perhaps the earl forgave the tax for the sake of the church,” Ralph said, improvising. “But he won’t do it for a bridge.”

“He just doesn’t want the town to have a new bridge. That’s the reason for this. First he sends you to bribe me, then when that fails he invents a new tax.” Merthin looked thoughtfully at Ralph. “This was your idea, wasn’t it?”

Ralph was mortified. How had he guessed? “No!” he said, but he felt himself redden.

“I can see from your face that it was. I gave you the notion, I’m sure, when I spoke of Jake Chepstow importing logs from Wales to avoid the earl of Shaftesbury’s tax.”

Ralph was feeling more foolish and angry with every moment. “There’s no connection,” he said stubbornly.

“You berated me for putting my bridge before my brother, but you’re happy to wreck my hopes for the sake of your earl.”

“It doesn’t matter whose idea it was, the earl has decided to tax the stone.”

“But he doesn’t have the right.”

Ben Wheeler was following the conversation intently, standing beside Merthin with his legs apart and his hands on his hips. Now he said to Merthin: “Are you saying these men don’t have the right to stop me?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying,” said Merthin.

Ralph could have told Merthin it was a mistake to treat such a man as if he was intelligent. Ben now took Merthin’s words for permission to leave. He flicked his whip over his ox’s shoulders. The beast leaned into its wooden collar and took the strain.

Ralph shouted angrily: “Halt!”

Ben whipped the ox again and called: “Hup!”

The ox pulled harder and the cart started forward with a jerk that startled the horses. Joseph Woodstock’s mount whinnied and reared up, eyes rolling.

Joseph sawed at the reins and got the horse under control. Then he pulled from his saddlebag a long wooden club. “You keep still when you’re told,” he said to Ben. He urged his horse forward and lashed out with the club.

Ben dodged the blow, grabbed the club, and pulled.

Joseph was already leaning out from his saddle. The sudden jerk unbalanced him, and he fell off his horse.

Merthin cried: “Oh, no!”

Ralph knew why Merthin was dismayed. A man-at-arms could not overlook such humiliation. There was no avoiding violence now. But Ralph himself was not sorry. His brother had failed to treat the earl’s men with the deference they merited, and now he would see the consequences.

Ben was holding Joseph’s club in a two-handed grip. Joseph leaped to his feet. Seeing Ben brandishing the club, he reached for his dagger. But Ben was quicker—the carter must have fought in battle at some time, Ralph realized. Ben swung the club and landed a mighty blow on the top of Joseph’s head. Joseph fell to the ground and lay motionless.

Ralph roared with rage. He drew his sword and ran at the carter.

Merthin shouted: “No!”

Ralph stabbed Ben in the chest, thrusting the sword between his ribs as forcefully as he could. It passed through Ben’s thick body and came out the other side. Ben fell back and Ralph pulled the sword out. Blood spurted from the carter in a fountain. Ralph felt a jolt of triumphant satisfaction. There would be no more insolence from Ben Wheeler.

He knelt beside Joseph. The man’s eyes stared sightlessly. There was no heartbeat. He was dead.

In a way that was good. It simplified the explanations. Ben Wheeler had murdered one of the earl’s men, and had died for it. No one would see any injustice in that—least of all Earl Roland, who had no mercy for those who defied his authority.

Merthin did not see it the same way. His face was twisted as if in pain. “What have you done?” he said incredulously. “Ben Wheeler has a two-year-old son! They call him Bennie!”

“The widow had better look for another husband, then,” said Ralph. “This time, she should choose a man who knows his place.”

It was a poor harvest. There was so little sunshine in August that the grain had barely ripened by September. In the village of Wigleigh, spirits were low. There was none of the usual euphoria of harvest time: the dances, the drinking, the sudden romances. Wet crops were liable to rot. Many villagers would go hungry before spring.

Wulfric reaped his barley in the driving rain, scything the wet stalks while Gwenda followed behind binding the sheaves. On the first sunny day of September they started to harvest the wheat, the most valuable crop, in the hope that the fine weather would last long enough to dry it.

At some point Gwenda realized that Wulfric was powered by fury. The sudden loss of his entire family had enraged him. He would have blamed someone for his bereavement, if he could; but the collapse of the bridge seemed a random event, an act of evil spirits, or a punishment by God; so he had no outlet for his passion except work. She herself was driven by love, which was just as potent.

They were in the fields before the crack of dawn, and they did not stop until it was too dark to see. Gwenda went to sleep with an aching back every night and woke when she heard Wulfric bang the kitchen door before dawn. Still they lagged behind everyone else.

Gradually, she sensed a change in the attitude of the village toward her and Wulfric. All her life, she had been looked down upon as the daughter of the disreputable Joby; and the women had disapproved of her even more when they realized she wanted to snatch Wulfric away from Annet. Wulfric was hard to dislike, but some felt that his desire to inherit such a big landholding was greedy and impractical. However, people could hardly fail to be impressed by their efforts to get the harvest in. A boy and a girl were trying to do the work of three men, and they were getting on better than anyone had expected. Men began to look at Wulfric with admiration, and women at Gwenda with sympathy.

In the end the villagers rallied around to help them. The priest, Father Gaspard, turned a blind eye to their working on Sundays. When Annet's family had got their harvest in, her father, Perkin, and her brother, Rob, joined Gwenda on Wulfric's land. Even Gwenda's mother, Ethna, showed up. As they carted the last of the sheaves to Wulfric's barn, there was a hint of the traditional harvest spirit, with everyone singing the old songs as they walked home behind the cart.

Annet was there, in violation of the saying that you should first follow the plow if you want to dance the harvest jig. She walked by Wulfric's side, as was her right, being his acknowledged fiancée. Gwenda watched her from behind, noting sourly how she swayed her hips, tossed her head, and laughed prettily at everything he said. How could he be so stupid as to fall for that?

Had he not noticed that Annet had done no work on his land?

No day had yet been fixed for the wedding. Perkin was nothing if not shrewd, and he would not let his daughter commit herself until the question of the inheritance was settled.

Wulfric had proved his ability to farm the land. No one would question that now. His age had come to seem irrelevant. The only remaining obstacle was the heriot. Would he be able to raise the money to pay the inheritance tax? It would depend how much he got for his cash crops. The harvest was poor but, if the bad weather had been widespread, the price of wheat would probably be high. In normal circumstances, a prosperous peasant family would have money saved up for the heriot; but Wulfric's family's savings were at the bottom of the river in Kingsbridge. So nothing was settled. And Gwenda could continue to dream that Wulfric would inherit the land and, somehow, transfer his affections to her. Anything was possible.

As they were unloading the cart into the barn, Nathan Reeve arrived. The hunchbacked bailiff was in a state of high excitement. "Come to the church, quickly," he said. "Everybody! Stop what you're doing."

Wulfric said: "I'm not leaving my crops out in the open—it might rain."

Gwenda said: "We'll just drag the cart inside. What's the emergency, Nate?"

The bailiff was already hurrying to the next house. "The new lord is arriving!" he said.

"Wait!" Wulfric ran after him. "Will you recommend that I inherit?"

Everyone stood still, watching, waiting for the answer.

Nathan turned reluctantly and faced Wulfric. He had to look up, for Wulfric was taller by a foot. "I don't know," he said slowly.

"I've proved I can farm the land—you can see that. Just look in the barn!"

"You've done well, no question. But can you pay the heriot?"

"It depends on the price of wheat."

Annet spoke. "Father?" she said.

Gwenda wondered what was coming.

Perkin looked hesitant.

Annet prompted him again. "You remember what you promised me."

"Yes, I remember," Perkin said at last.

"Tell Nate, then."

Perkin turned to the bailiff. "I'll guarantee the heriot, if the lord will let Wulfric inherit."

Gwenda's hand flew to her mouth.

Nathan said: "You'll pay it for him? It's two pounds and ten shillings."

"If he's short, I'll lend him what he needs. Of course, they'll have to be married first."

Nathan lowered his voice. "And, in addition…?"

Perkin said something so quietly that Gwenda could not hear it, but she could guess what it was. Perkin was offering Nathan a bribe, probably a tenth of the tax, which would be five shillings.

"Very well," Nathan said. "I'll make the recommendation. Now get yourselves to the church, quickly!" He ran off.

Wulfric smiled broadly and kissed Annet. Everyone shook his hand.

Gwenda was heartsick. Her hopes were dashed. Annet had been too clever. She had persuaded her father to lend Wulfric the money he needed. He would inherit his land—and he would marry Annet.

Gwenda forced herself to help push the cart into the barn. Then she followed the happy couple as they walked through the village to the church. It was all over. A new lord, not knowing the village or the people, was unlikely to go against his bailiff's advice on a question such as this. The fact that Nathan had gone to the trouble of negotiating a bribe indicated his confidence.

It was partly her fault, of course. She had broken her back to make sure Wulfric got his harvest in, in the vain hope that somehow he would realize how much better a wife she would make than Annet. All summer long she had been digging her own grave, she thought as she walked through the cemetery to the church door. But she would do the same again. She could not have borne to see him struggle alone. Whatever happens, she thought, he'll always know I was the one who stuck it out with him. It was small consolation.

Most of the villagers were already in the church. They had not needed much urging from Nathan. They were eager to be among the first to pay their respects to their new lord, and curious to see what he was like: young or old, ugly or handsome, cheerful or dyspeptic, clever or stupid, and—most important of all—cruel or kind. Everything about him would affect their lives for as long as he remained lord, which might be years or decades. If he were reasonable, he could do a lot to make Wigleigh a happy and prosperous village. If he were a fool, they would have unwise decisions and unjust rulings, oppressive taxes and harsh punishments. And one of his first decisions would be whether to let Wulfric inherit.

The rumble of conversation died away, and a jingle of harness was heard. Gwenda heard Nathan's voice, low and obsequious, then the authoritative tone of a lord—a big man, she thought, confident, but young. Everyone looked at the church door. It flew open.

Gwenda gasped with shock.

The man who strode in was no more than twenty. He was well dressed in an expensive wool surcoat, and armed with sword and dagger. He was tall, and his expression was proud. He seemed pleased to be lord of Wigleigh, though there was a hint of insecurity in the haughty look. He had wavy dark

hair and a handsome face disfigured by a broken nose.

He was Ralph Fitzgerald.

Ralph's first manorial court was held the following Sunday.

In the interim, Wulfric was depressed. Gwenda wanted to weep every time she looked at him. He walked around with his eyes cast down, his broad shoulders slumped. All summer he had seemed tireless, working in the fields with the uncomplaining dependability of a plowhorse; but now he looked weary. He had done all a man could do, but his fate had been given into the hands of one who hated him.

She would have liked to say something hopeful, in an attempt to cheer him up, but the truth was that she shared his pessimism. Lords were often petty and vindictive, and nothing about Ralph encouraged her to believe that he would be magnanimous. As a child, he had been stupid and brutal. She would never forget the day he had killed her dog with Merthin's bow and arrow.

There was no sign that he had improved since then. He had moved into the manor house with his sidekick, a beefy young squire called Alan Fernhill, and the two of them were drinking the best wine, eating the chickens, and squeezing the breasts of the female servants with the carelessness typical of their class.

Nathan Reeve's attitude confirmed her fears. The bailiff was not bothering to negotiate an increased bribe—a sure sign that he expected failure.

Annet, too, seemed to have a poor view of Wulfric's prospects. Gwenda saw an unmistakable change in her. She did not toss her hair so gaily, or walk with that swish of her hips, and the waterfall tinkle of her laughter was not heard so often. Gwenda hoped Wulfric would not see the difference in Annet: he had enough to be gloomy about. But it seemed to her that he did not stay so late at Perkin's house in the evenings, and when he returned home he was taciturn.

She was surprised to learn, on Sunday morning, that Wulfric still harbored the ghost of a hope. When the service ended, and Father Gaspard gave place to Lord Ralph, she saw that Wulfric's eyes were closed and his lips were moving, presumably in a prayer to his favorite saint, the Virgin Mary.

All the villagers were in church, of course, including Joby and Ethna. Gwenda did not stand with her parents. She talked to her mother sometimes, but only when her father was not around. Joby had an angry red patch on his cheek where she had burned him with the blazing log. He never met her eye. She was still afraid of him, but she sensed that he was now also afraid of her.

Ralph sat on the big wooden chair, staring at his serfs with the appraising look of a buyer at a cattle market. The court proceedings on this day consisted

of a series of announcements. Nathan proclaimed the arrangements for getting the harvest in from the lord's fields, stating on which days of the coming week different villagers would be required to perform their customary duty on the lord's lands. No discussion was invited. Clearly Ralph did not intend to govern by consensus.

There were other details of the kind Nathan dealt with every week: gleaning should be completed in Hundredacre by Monday night so that livestock could graze the stubble from Tuesday morning, and autumn plowing of Longfield would begin on Wednesday. Normally there would have been minor disputes about these plans, with the more argumentative villagers finding reasons to propose different arrangements, but today they were all quiet, waiting to get the measure of the new lord.

When the decision came, it seemed curiously low-key. As if he were simply stating another schedule of work, Nathan said: "Wulfric will not be permitted to inherit his father's landholding, because he is only sixteen."

Gwenda looked at Ralph. He was trying to smother a triumphant grin. His hand went to his face—unconsciously, she thought—and he touched his broken nose.

Nathan went on: "Lord Ralph will consider what to do with the lands and give his judgment later."

Wulfric groaned loud enough for everyone to hear. It was the decision he had been expecting, but its confirmation was bitter. She watched as he turned his back on the crowd in the church, hiding his face, and leaned against the wall as if to stop himself falling.

"That's all for today," said Nathan.

Ralph stood up. He walked down the aisle slowly, his eyes continually turning to the distraught Wulfric. What kind of lord would he be, Gwenda thought, if his first instinct was to use his power for revenge? Nathan followed Ralph, looking at the floor: he knew that an injustice had been done. As they left the church, a buzz of comment arose. Gwenda spoke to no one, but watched Wulfric.

He turned from the wall, his face a picture of misery. His eyes raked the crowd and found Annet. She looked furious. Gwenda waited for her to meet Wulfric's eye, but she seemed determined not to look at him. Gwenda wondered what was going through her mind.

Annet walked toward the door, head held high. Her father, Perkin, and the family followed. Would she not even speak to Wulfric?

The same thought must have occurred to him, for he went after her. "Annet!" he said. "Wait."

The place went quiet.

Annet turned. Wulfric stood before her. "We'll still get married, won't we?" he said. Gwenda winced to hear the undignified note of pleading in his

voice. Annet stared at him, apparently about to speak, but she said nothing for a long moment, and Wulfric spoke again. “Lords need good serfs to farm the land. Perhaps Ralph will give me a smaller holding—”

“You broke his nose,” she said harshly. “He will never give you anything.”

Gwenda recalled how pleased Annet had been, at the time, to have two men fighting over her.

Wulfric said: “Then I’ll be a laborer. I’m strong, I’ll never lack for work.”

“But you’ll be poor all your life. Is that what you’re offering me?”

“We’ll be together—just as we dreamed, that day in the forest, when you told me you loved me, don’t you remember?”

“And what would life be like for me, married to a landless laborer?” Annet demanded angrily. “I’ll tell you.” She lifted her arm and pointed at Gwenda’s mother, Ethna, standing with Joby and the three little ones. “I would be like her—grim-faced with worry and as thin as a broom handle.”

Joby was stung by this. He waved the stump of his severed arm at Annet. “You watch your mouth, you haughty minx.”

Perkin stepped in front of his daughter and made a patting gesture with both hands. “Forgive her, Joby, she’s overwrought, she means no harm.”

Wulfric said: “No disrespect to Joby, but I’m not like him, Annet.”

“But you are!” she said. “You’ve got no land. It’s why he’s poor, and it’s why you’ll be poor, and your children will be hungry and your wife will be drab.”

It was true. In hard times the landless were the first to suffer. Dismissing your employees was the quickest way to save money. All the same, Gwenda found it hard to believe that a woman would turn down the chance of spending her life with Wulfric.

Yet that seemed to be what Annet was doing.

Wulfric thought so, too. Plaintively, he said: “Don’t you love me anymore?”

He had lost all his dignity and he looked pathetic; yet, at that moment, Gwenda felt more passion for him than ever before.

“I can’t eat love,” Annet said, and she walked out of the church.

Two weeks later, she married Billy Howard.

Gwenda went to the wedding, as did everyone in the village except Wulfric. Despite the poor harvest, there was a good feast. By this marriage two large landholdings were united: Perkin’s hundred acres with Billy’s forty. Furthermore, Perkin had asked Ralph to give him Wulfric’s family’s lands. If Ralph agreed, Annet’s children could be heirs to almost half the village. But Ralph had gone to Kingsbridge, promising a decision as soon as he returned.

Perkin broached a barrel of his wife's strongest ale and slaughtered a cow. Gwenda ate and drank heartily. Her future was too uncertain for her to turn down good food.

She played with her little sisters, Cathie and Joanie, throwing and catching a wooden ball; then she took baby Eric on her knee and sang to him. After a while her mother sat beside her and said: "What will you do now?"

In her heart Gwenda was not completely reconciled with Ethna. They talked, and Ma asked concerned questions. Gwenda still resented her mother for forgiving Joby, but she answered the questions. "I'll live in Wulfric's barn as long as I can," she said. "Perhaps I can stay there indefinitely."

"And if Wulfric moves out—leaves the village, say?"

"I don't know."

For now, Wulfric was still working in the fields, plowing-in the stubble and harrowing the fallow on the land that had been his family's, and Gwenda was helping him. They were paid the daily laborer's rate by Nathan, as they would have no part of the next harvest. Nathan was keen for them to stay, otherwise the land would deteriorate rapidly. They would continue until Ralph announced who the new tenant would be. At that point, they would have to offer themselves for hire.

"Where is Wulfric now?" Ethna asked.

"I assume he's not disposed to celebrate this wedding."

"How does he feel about you?"

Gwenda gave her mother a candid look. "He tells me I'm the best friend he's ever had."

"What does that mean?"

"I don't know. But it doesn't mean 'I love you,' does it?"

"No," said her mother. "No, it doesn't mean that."

Gwenda heard music. Aaron Appletree was playing a bagpipe, running up and down the scale in preparation for a tune. She saw Perkin coming out of his house with a pair of small drums attached to his belt. The dancing was about to begin.

She was in no mood to dance. She could have talked to the old women, but they would only ask the same questions as her mother, and she did not want to spend the rest of the day explaining her predicament. She recalled the last village wedding, and Wulfric slightly drunk, dancing around with great leaps, embracing all the women, though still favoring Annet. Without him there was no festival for Gwenda. She gave Eric back to her mother and drifted away. Her dog, Skip, stayed behind, knowing that such parties provided a banquet of dropped food and discarded scraps.

She went into Wulfric's house, half-hoping he might be there, but the place was empty. It was a sturdy timber house, of post-and-beam construction, but with no chimney—such luxuries were for the rich. She

looked in both ground-floor rooms and the upstairs bedroom. The place was as tidy and clean as it had been when his mother was alive, but that was because he used only one room. He ate and slept in the kitchen. The place was cold and unhomely. It was a family house with no family.

She went to the barn. It was full of bundled hay, for winter fodder, and sheaves of barley and wheat waiting to be threshed. She climbed the ladder to the loft and lay down in the hay. After a while she fell asleep.

When she woke up, it was dark. She had no idea what time it was. She stepped outside to look at the sky. There was a low moon behind streaks of cloud, and she calculated that it was only an hour or two after nightfall. As she stood by the barn door, still half-asleep, she heard weeping.

She knew instantly that it was Wulfric. She had heard him cry once before, when he saw the bodies of his parents and his brother lying on the floor of Kingsbridge Cathedral. He cried with great sobs that seemed torn from the depths of his chest. Tears came to her own eyes as she listened to his grief.

After a while, she went into the house.

She could see him by the light of the moon. He lay facedown in the straw, his back heaving as he sobbed. He must have heard her lift the latch, but he was too distraught to care, and he did not look up.

Gwenda knelt beside him and tentatively touched his mane of hair. He made no response. She rarely touched him, and to stroke his hair was an unknown delight. Her caress seemed to soothe him, for his weeping subsided.

After a while, she dared to lie down beside him. She expected him to push her away, but he did not. He turned his face to her, eyes closed. She dabbed at his cheeks with her sleeve, wiping away the tears. She was thrilled to be this close to him, and to be permitted these small intimacies. She longed to kiss his closed eyelids, but she was afraid that would be a step too far, and she restrained herself.

A few moments later, she realized he was asleep.

She was pleased. It was a sign of how comfortable he felt with her, and it meant she could stay with him, at least until he woke up.

It was autumn, and the night was cold. As Wulfric’s breathing became slower and steadier, she got up stealthily and took his blanket from its hook on the wall. She draped it over him. He slept on undisturbed.

Despite the chill in the air, she slipped her dress over her head and lay beside him naked, arranging the blanket so that it covered them both.

She moved close to him and laid her cheek against his chest. She could hear his heartbeat and feel the breeze of his breath on the top of her head. The heat of his big body warmed her. In time, the moon went down, and the room became pitch dark. She felt she could have stayed like this forever.

She did not sleep. She had no intention of wasting any of this precious

time. She savored every moment, knowing it might never happen again. She touched him cautiously, careful not to wake him. Through his light wool shift, her fingertips explored the muscles of his chest and back, the bones of his ribs and hips, the turn of his shoulder and the knob of his elbow.

He moved in his sleep several times. He turned and lay flat on his back, whereupon she put her head on his shoulder and her arm across his flat belly. Later he turned away, and then she moved really close, fitting herself into the S-shape of his body, pressing her breasts against his broad back, her hips into his, her knees into the backs of his knees. Then he turned back to her, flinging one arm across her shoulders and one leg over her thighs. His leg was painfully heavy, but she relished the ache as proof that she was not dreaming.

He dreamed, though. In the middle of the night he suddenly kissed her, thrusting his tongue roughly into her mouth, grasping her breast with one big hand. She felt his erection as he rubbed up against her clumsily. For a moment she was bewildered. He could have her whatever way he wanted, but it was unlike him to be anything but gentle. She put her hand to his groin and grasped his penis, which was sticking out through the slit in his underdrawers. Then, just as suddenly, he turned away and lay on his back, breathing rhythmically, and she realized that he had never woken up, but had touched her in a dream. He was undoubtedly dreaming of Annet, she realized ruefully.

She did not sleep, but she daydreamed. She imagined him introducing her to a stranger, saying: “This is my wife, Gwenda.” She saw herself pregnant, but still working in the fields, and fainting in the middle of the day; and in her fantasy he picked her up and carried her home, and bathed her face with cold water. She saw him as an old man, playing with their grandchildren, indulging them, giving them apples and honeycombs.

Grandchildren? she thought wryly. It was a big edifice to build on the strength of his allowing her to put her arm around him while he cried himself to sleep.

When she was thinking that it must be almost dawn, and her stay in paradise might soon be over, he begin to stir. His breathing changed. He rolled onto his back. Her arm fell across his chest and she left it there, tucking her hand under his arm. After a few moments she sensed that he was awake, thinking. She lay still, afraid that if she spoke or moved she would break the spell.

Eventually he rolled back toward her. He put his arm around her, and she felt his hand on the bare skin of her back. He stroked her there, but she did not know what the caress meant: he seemed to be exploring, surprised to find that she was naked. His hand went up to her neck and all the way down to the curve of her hip.

At last he spoke. As if afraid of being overheard, he whispered: “She married him.”

Gwenda whispered back: “Yes.”

“Her love is weak.”

“True love is never weak.”

His hand remained on her hip, maddeningly close to the places where she wanted him to touch her.

He said: “Will I ever stop loving her?”

Gwenda took his hand and moved it. “She has two breasts, like these,” she said, still whispering. She did not know why she did it: intuition was guiding her, and she followed it for good or ill.

He groaned, and she felt his hand close gently over one, then the other.

“And she has hair down here, like this,” she said, moving his hand again. His breathing became faster. Leaving his hand there, she explored his body beneath his wool shift, and found that he had an erection. She grasped it and said: “Her hand feels just like this.” He began to move his hips rhythmically.

She suddenly felt afraid that the act would be over before it was fully consummated. She did not want that. It was all or nothing now. She pushed him gently on to his back, then quickly raised herself and straddled him. “Inside, she’s hot and wet,” she said, and she lowered herself onto him. Although she had done it before, it had not been anything like this; she felt filled up and yet she wanted more. She moved down against the thrust of his hips, then up as he withdrew. She lowered her face to his and kissed his bearded mouth.

He held her head in his hands and kissed her back.

“She loves you,” Gwenda whispered to him. “She loves you so much.”

He cried out with passion, and she was rocked up and down, riding his hips like a wild pony, until at last she felt him come inside her, and he gave one last cry, then said: “Oh, I love you too! I love you, Annet!”

28

Wulfric went back to sleep, but Gwenda lay awake. She was too excited to sleep. She had won his love—she knew it. It hardly mattered that she had had to half-pretend to be Annet. He had made love to her with such hunger, and had kissed her afterward with such tenderness and gratitude, that she felt he was hers forever.

When her heart stopped racing and her mind calmed down, she thought about his inheritance. She was not willing to give up on it, especially now. As dawn broke outside, she racked her brains for some way to save it. When Wulfric woke up, she said: “I’m going to Kingsbridge.”

He was startled. “Why?”

“To find out whether there’s some way you can still inherit.”

“How?”

“I don’t know. But Ralph hasn’t given the land to anyone else yet, so there’s still a chance. And you deserve it—you’ve worked so hard and suffered so much.”

“What will you do?”

“I’ll see my brother Philemon. He understands these things better than we do. He’ll know what we need to do.”

Wulfric looked at her strangely.

She said: “What is it?”

He said: “You really love me, don’t you?”

She smiled, full of happiness, and said: “Let’s do it again, shall we?”

On the following morning she was at Kingsbridge Priory, sitting on the stone bench by the vegetable garden, waiting for Philemon. During the long walk from Wigleigh she had gone over every second of Sunday night in her mind, relishing the physical pleasures, puzzling over the words spoken. Wulfric still had not said that he loved her, but he had said: “You really love me.” And he had seemed pleased that she loved him, albeit a bit bewildered by the strength of her passion.

She longed to win back his birthright. She yearned for it almost as much as she had yearned for him. She wanted it for both of them. Even if he were a landless laborer like her father, she would marry him, given the chance; but she wanted better for them both, and she was determined to get it.

When Philemon came out of the priory into the garden to greet her, she saw immediately that he was wearing the robes of a novice monk. “Holger!” she said, using his real name in her shock. “You’re a novice—

He smiled proudly, and benignly overlooked the use of his old name. “It was one of Godwyn’s first acts as prior,” he said. “He is a wonderful man. It’s such an honor to serve him.” He sat beside her on the bench. It was a mild autumn day, cloudy but dry.

“And how are you getting on with your lessons?”

“Slowly. It’s hard to learn to read and write when you’re grown-up.” He grimaced. “The small boys progress faster than I do. But I can copy out the Lord’s Prayer in Latin.”

She envied him. She could not even write her name. “That’s wonderful!” she said. Her brother was on his way to achieving his life’s dream, and becoming a monk. Perhaps the status of novice might ameliorate the feelings of worthlessness that, she felt sure, accounted for his sometimes being sly and deceitful.

“But what about you?” he said. “Why have you come to Kingsbridge?”

“Did you know that Ralph Fitzgerald has become lord of Wigleigh?”

“Yes. He’s here in town, staying at the Bell, living it up.”

“He has refused to let Wulfric inherit his father’s land.” She told Philemon the story. “I want to know whether the decision can be contested.”

Philemon shook his head. “The short answer is no. Wulfric could appeal to the earl of Shiring, of course, asking him to overturn Ralph’s decision, but the earl won’t intervene unless he has a personal stake. Even if he thinks the decision unjust—which it obviously is—he won’t undermine the authority of a new appointee. But what’s your interest? I thought Wulfric was going to marry Annet.”

“When Ralph announced his decision, Annet jilted Wulfric and married Billy Howard.”

“And now you have a chance with Wulfric.”

“I think so.” She felt herself blush.

“How do you know?” he asked shrewdly.

“I took advantage of him,” she confessed. “When he was distraught over the wedding, I went to his bed.”

“Don’t worry. We who are born poor have to use cunning to get what we want. Scruples are for the privileged.”

She did not really like to hear him talk that way. Sometimes he seemed to think that any behavior could be excused by their difficult childhood. But she was too disappointed to worry about that. “Is there really nothing I can do?”

“Oh, I didn’t say that. It can’t be contested, I said. But Ralph might be talked around.”

“Not by me, I’m sure.”

“I don’t know. Why don’t you go and see Godwyn’s cousin Caris? You’ve been friends with her since you were girls. She’ll help you if she can. And she’s close to Ralph’s brother, Merthin. Perhaps he can think of something.”

Any hope was better than none. Gwenda stood up to go. “I’ll see her right away.” She leaned forward to kiss her brother good-bye, then realized that he was forbidden such contact now. Instead, she clasped his hand, which seemed peculiar.

“I’ll pray for you,” he said.

Caris’s house was opposite the priory gates. When Gwenda went in, there was no one in the dining hall, but she heard voices in the parlor, where Edmund usually did business. The cook, Tutty, told her Caris was with her father. Gwenda sat down to wait, tapping her foot impatiently, but after a few minutes the door opened.

Edmund came out accompanied by a man she did not recognize. He was tall, and had flared nostrils that gave his face a supercilious look. He wore the black robe of a priest, but no cross or other sacred symbol. Edmund nodded amiably to Gwenda and said to the stranger: “I’ll walk you back to the priory.”

Caris followed the two men out of the parlor and embraced Gwenda.

“Who was that man?” Gwenda asked as soon as he had left.

“His name is Gregory Longfellow. He’s the lawyer hired by Prior Godwyn.”

“Hired for what?”

“Earl Roland has stopped the priory taking stone from its quarry. He’s trying to charge a penny a cartload. Godwyn is going to appeal to the king.”

“Are you involved?”

“Gregory thinks we must argue that the town will be unable to pay its taxes without a bridge. That’s the best way to persuade the king, he says. So my father will go with Godwyn to testify at the royal court.”

“Will you go, too?”

“Yes. But tell me why you’re here?”

“I lay with Wulfric.”

Caris smiled. “Really? At last! How was it?”

“It was wonderful. I lay beside him all night while he slept, then when he woke up I…persuaded him.”

“Tell me more, I want all the details.”

Gwenda told Caris the story. At the end, even though she was impatient to get on to the real purpose of her visit, she said: “But something tells me you have news of the same kind.”

Caris nodded. “I lay with Merthin. I told him I didn’t want to get married, and he went off to see that fat sow Bessie Bell, and I got upset at the thought of her sticking out her big tits at him—then he came back, and I was so pleased I just had to do it with him.”

“Did you like it?”

“I loved it. It’s the best thing ever. And it gets better. We do it whenever we get the chance.”

“What if you get pregnant?”

“I’m not even thinking about that. I don’t care if I die. One time—” She lowered her voice. “One time, we bathed in a pool in the forest, and afterwards he licked me…down there.”

“Oh, disgusting! What was it like?”

“Nice. He liked it, too.”

“You didn’t do the same to him.”

“Yes.”

“But did he…?”

Caris nodded. “In my mouth.”

“Wasn’t it foul?”

Caris shrugged. “It tastes funny…but it’s so exciting to feel that happen. And he enjoyed it so much.”

Gwenda was shocked but intrigued. Perhaps she should do that to Wulfric. She knew a place where they could bathe, a stream in the forest far

from any roads…

Caris said: “But you didn’t come all this way just to tell me about Wulfric.”

“No. It’s about his inheritance.” Gwenda explained Ralph’s decision. “Philemon thought perhaps Merthin could persuade Ralph to change his mind.”

Caris shook her head pessimistically. “I doubt it. They’ve quarreled.”

“Oh, no!”

“It was Ralph who stopped the carts leaving the quarry. Unfortunately, Merthin was there at the time. There was a fight. Ben Wheeler killed one of the earl’s ruffians, and Ralph killed Ben.”

Gwenda gasped. “But Lib Wheeler has a two-year-old!”

“And now little Bennie has no father.”

Gwenda was dismayed for herself as well as for Lib. “So a brother’s influence won’t help.”

“Let’s go and see Merthin anyway. He’s working on Leper Island today.”

They left the house and walked down the main street to the riverside. Gwenda was discouraged. Everyone believed her chances were slender. It was so unfair.

They got Ian Boatman to row them across to the island. Caris explained that the old bridge was to be replaced by two new ones which would use the island as a stepping stone.

They found Merthin with his boy assistant, fourteen-year-old Jimmie, laying out the abutments of the new bridge. His measuring stick was an iron pole more than twice the height of a man, and he was hammering pointed stakes into the rocky ground to mark where the foundations must be dug.

Gwenda watched the way Caris and Merthin kissed. It was different. There was a cozy relish in one another’s bodies that seemed new. It matched how Gwenda herself felt about Wulfric. His body was not just desirable, it was hers to enjoy. It seemed to belong to her the way her own body did.

She and Caris watched while Merthin finished what he was doing, tying a length of twine between two stakes. Then he told Jimmie to pack up the tools.

Gwenda said: “I suppose there’s not much you can do without stone.”

“There are some preparations we can make. But I’ve sent all the masons to the quarry. They’re dressing the stones there, instead of here on-site. We’re building a stockpile.”

“So, if you win your case in the royal court, you can start building right away.”

“I hope so. It depends on how long the case takes—and the weather. We can’t build in deepest winter, in case the frost freezes the mortar. It’s October already. We normally stop around the middle of November.” He looked up at the sky. “We might have a bit longer this year—rain clouds keep the earth

warm.”

Gwenda told him what she wanted.

“I wish I could help you,” Merthin said. “Wulfric is a decent man, and that fight was entirely Ralph’s fault. But I’ve quarreled with my brother. Before asking him a favor, I’d have to make friends. And I can’t forgive him for killing Ben Wheeler.”

It was the third negative response in a row, Gwenda thought glumly. Perhaps this was a foolish errand.

Caris said: “You may have to do this on your own.”

“Yes, I will,” Gwenda said decisively. It was time to stop asking for other people’s help and start relying on herself—the way she had all her life. “Ralph is here in town, isn’t he?”

“Yes,” Merthin said. “He came to tell our parents the good news about his promotion. They’re the only people in the county who are celebrating.”

“But he’s not staying with them.”

“He’s too grand for that now. He’s at the Bell.”

“What would be the best way to persuade him?”

Merthin thought for a few moments. “Ralph feels our father’s humiliation—a knight reduced to the status of a pensioner of the priory. He’ll do anything that seems to enhance his social position.”

Gwenda thought about that as Ian Boatman rowed them all back to the city. How could she present her request as a way for Ralph to raise his standing? It was midday as she walked up the main street with the others. Merthin was going to Caris’s house for dinner, and Caris invited Gwenda to join them, but she was impatient to see Ralph, and she went on to the Bell.

A potboy told her Ralph was upstairs in the best room. Most lodgers slept in a communal dormitory: Ralph was emphasizing his new position by taking an entire room—paid for, Gwenda thought sourly, out of the meager harvests of Wigleigh peasants.

She knocked at the door and went in.

Ralph was there with his squire, Alan Fernhill, a boy of about eighteen with big shoulders and a small head. On the table between them stood a jug of ale, a loaf, and a joint of hot beef with a wisp of steam coming from it. They were finishing their dinner and looked thoroughly contented with their lot in life, Gwenda thought. She hoped they were not too drunk: men in that state could not talk to women; all they could do was make ribald remarks and laugh helplessly at each other’s wit.

Ralph peered at her: the room was not well lit. “You’re one of my serfs, aren’t you?”

“No, my lord, but I’d like to be. I’m Gwenda, and my father is Joby, a landless laborer.”

“And what are you doing so far from the village? It’s not market day.”

She moved a step farther into the room so that she could see his face more clearly. “Sir, I come to plead for Wulfric, son of the late Samuel. I know that he behaved disrespectfully to you once but, since then, he has suffered the torments of Job. His parents and brother were killed when the bridge collapsed, all the family’s money was lost, and now his fiancée has married someone else. I hope you might feel that God has punished him harshly for the wrong he did you, and it is time for you to show mercy.” Remembering what Merthin had advised, she added: “The mercy characteristic of the true nobleman.”

He belched fruitily and sighed. “What do you care whether Wulfric inherits?”

“I love him, my lord. Now that he has been rejected by Annet, I hope he may marry me—with your gracious permission, of course.”

“Come closer,” he said.

She moved into the center of the room and stood in front of him.

His eyes roamed all over her body. “You’re not a pretty girl,” he said. “But there’s something about you. Are you a virgin?”

“Lord—I…I…”

“Obviously not,” he laughed. “Have you lain with Wulfric yet?”

“No!”

“Liar.” He grinned, enjoying himself. “Well, now, what if I let Wulfric have his father’s lands after all? Perhaps I should. What then?”

“You would be called a true nobleman by Wigleigh and all the world.”

“The world won’t care. But will you be grateful to me?”

Gwenda had a horrible feeling that she knew where this was leading. “Of course, deeply grateful.”

“And how would you show it?”

She backed toward the door. “Any way I could without shame.”

“Would you take off your dress?”

Her heart sank. “No, lord.”

“Ah. Not so grateful, then.”

She reached the door and touched the handle, but she did not go out. “What…what are you asking me, lord?”

“I want to see you naked. Then I’ll decide.”

“Here?”

“Yes.”

She looked at Alan. “In front of him?”

“Yes.”

It did not seem much, to show herself to these two men—not by comparison with the prize, winning Wulfric’s inheritance back.

Swiftly, she undid her belt and pulled her dress over her head. She held the dress in her hand, keeping the other hand on the doorknob, and stared

defiantly at Ralph. He looked greedily at her body, then glanced over at his companion with a grin of triumph; and Gwenda saw that this was about showing his power as much as anything else.

Ralph said: “An ugly cow, but nice udders—eh, Alan?”

Alan replied: “I wouldn’t climb over her to get at you.”

Ralph laughed.

Gwenda said: “Now will you grant my petition?”

Ralph put his hand to his crotch and began to stroke himself. “Lie with me,” he said. “On that bed.”

“No.”

“Come on—you’ve already done it with Wulfric, you’re no virgin.”

“No.”

“Think of the lands—ninety acres, all that his father had.”

She thought. If she agreed, Wulfric would have his heart’s desire—and the two of them could look forward to a life of plenty. If she continued to refuse, Wulfric would be a landless laborer, like Joby, struggling all his life to make enough to feed his children, and often failing.

Still the thought revolted her. Ralph was an unpleasant man, petty and vengeful, a bully—so different from his brother. His being tall and handsome made little difference. It would be disgusting to lie with someone she disliked so much.

The fact that she had done it with Wulfric only yesterday made the prospect of sex with Ralph even more repellent. After her night of happy intimacy with Wulfric, it would be a terrible betrayal to do the same with another man.

Don’t be a fool, she told herself. For the sake of five minutes of unpleasantness, will you condemn yourself to a life of hardship? She thought of her mother, and the babies that had died. She remembered the stealing she and Philemon had been forced to do. Was it not better to prostitute herself to Ralph one time, for just a few moments, than to condemn her unborn children to a life of poverty?

Ralph remained quiet while she vacillated. He was wise: any words from him would only have strengthened her revulsion. Silence served him better.

“Please,” Gwenda said at last. “Don’t make me do this.”

“Ah,” he said. “That tells me you’re willing.”

“It’s a sin,” she said desperately. She did not often talk about sin, but she thought there was a chance it might move him. “A sin for you to ask, and a sin for me to agree.”

“Sins can be forgiven.”

“What would your brother think of you?”

That gave him pause. For a moment he seemed to hesitate.

“Please,” she said. “Just let Wulfric inherit.”

His face hardened again. “I’ve made my decision. I’m not going to reverse it—unless you can persuade me. And just saying please won’t work.” His eyes glistened with desire, and he was breathing a little faster, his mouth open, his lips moist behind his beard.

She dropped her dress to the floor and walked to the bed.

“Kneel on the mattress,” Ralph said. “No, facing away from me.”

She did as he said.

“Better view from this side,” he said, and Alan laughed loudly. Gwenda wondered if Alan was going to stay to watch, but then Ralph said: “Leave us alone.” A moment later the door slammed.

Ralph knelt on the bed behind Gwenda. She closed her eyes and prayed for forgiveness. She felt his thick fingers exploring her. She heard him spit, then he rubbed a wet hand on her. A moment later he entered her. She groaned with shame.

Ralph misinterpreted the sound and said: “You like that, eh?”

She wondered how long this would take. He began to move rhythmically. To ease the discomfort she moved with him, and he laughed triumphantly, thinking he had excited her lust. Her greatest fear was that this would sour her entire experience of lovemaking. In future, when she lay with Wulfric, would she think of this moment?

And then, to her horror, a warm flush of pleasure began to spread through her loins. She felt her face redden in shame. Despite her profound repugnance, her body betrayed her, and moisture flooded inside her, easing the friction of his thrusts. He sensed the change and moved faster. Disgusted with herself, she ceased to match his rhythm; but he grabbed her hips, pushing and pulling alternately, and she was helpless to resist. She remembered with dismay that her body had undermined her in the same way with Alwyn in the forest. Then as now, she had wanted her body to be a wooden statue, numb and impassive; both times, it had responded against her will.

She had killed Alwyn with his own knife.

She could not do the same to Ralph, even if she had wanted to, because he was behind her. She could not see him, and she had little control over her body. She was in his hands. She was glad when she sensed that he was approaching the climax. Soon it would be over. She felt an answering pressure in her own loins. She tried to make her body limp and her mind blank: it would be too humiliating if she, too, reached a climax. She felt Ralph ejaculate inside her, and she shuddered, not with pleasure but with loathing.

He sighed with satisfaction, withdrew from her, and lay flat on the bed.

She got up and quickly pulled on her dress.

“That was better than I expected,” Ralph said, as if he were paying her some kind of polite compliment.

She went out and slammed the door behind her.

On the following Sunday, before church, Nathan Reeve came to Wulfric's house.

Gwenda and Wulfric were sitting in the kitchen. They had had breakfast and swept the room, and now Wulfric was sewing a pair of leather trousers while Gwenda wove a belt from cords. They sat close to the window, for better light—it was raining again.

Gwenda was pretending to live in the barn, so that Father Gaspard would not be offended, but she spent every night with Wulfric. He had not mentioned marriage, which disappointed her. However, they were living more or less as man and wife, in the way that people often did when they intended to marry as soon as they got around to the formalities. The nobility and the gentry were permitted no such laxity, but it was routinely overlooked among the peasantry.

As she had feared, she felt strange making love to him. The more she tried to put Ralph out of her mind, the more he intruded. Fortunately, Wulfric never noticed her mood. He made love to her with such enthusiasm and joy that it almost swamped her guilty conscience—but not quite.

And she had the consolation of knowing that he would inherit his family's lands after all. That made up for everything. She could not tell him this, of course, for then she would have needed to explain what had changed Ralph's mind. She had told him about her conversations with Philemon, Caris, and Merthin, and had given him a partial version of her encounter with Ralph, saying only that he had promised to reconsider. So Wulfric was hopeful, rather than triumphant.

"Come to the manor house, right away, both of you," Nathan said, putting his wet head around the door.

Gwenda said: "What does the Lord Ralph want?"

"Will you refuse to go if the proposed topic of discussion fails to interest you?" Nathan said sarcastically. "Don't ask stupid questions, just come."

She put a blanket over her head to walk to the big house. She still did not have a cloak. Wulfric had money, from the sale of his crops, and could have bought her a cloak, but he was saving for the heriot.

They hurried through the rain to the manor house. It was a small version of a nobleman's castle, having a great hall with a long dining table, plus a small upper story, called the solar, for the lord's private chamber. Now it bore the signs of a house occupied by men without wives: the walls were bare of tapestries, the straw on the floor gave up a pungent smell, the dogs snarled at the newcomers, and a mouse nibbled a crust on the sideboard.

Ralph sat at the head of the table. On his right was Alan, who gave Gwenda a smirk she did her best to ignore. A minute later, Nathan came in.

Behind him followed fat, sly Perkin, rubbing his hands and bowing obsequiously, his hair so oily it looked like a leather skullcap. With Perkin was his new son-in-law, Billy Howard. Billy shot a triumphant glance at Wulfric: I've got your girl, he was thinking, and now I'm going to get your land. He had a shock coming.

Nathan sat on Ralph's left. The rest of them remained standing.

Gwenda had been looking forward to this moment. It was the reward for her sacrifice. She eagerly anticipated the expression on Wulfric's face when he learned that he had inherited after all. He would be overjoyed—and she would, too. Their future would be secure, or at least as secure as was possible in a world of unpredictable weather and oscillating grain prices.

Ralph said: "Three weeks ago, I said that Wulfric, son of Samuel, could not inherit his father's land because he's too young." He spoke slowly and ponderously. He loves this, Gwenda thought: sitting at the head of the table, pronouncing judgment, everyone hanging on his words. "Wulfric has been working the land since then, while I have considered who should succeed old Samuel." He paused, then said: "But I've come to doubt my rejection of Wulfric."

Perkin started. He had been confident of success, and this shocked him.

Billy Howard said: "What's this? I thought Nate—" Then Perkin nudged him, and he shut up.

Gwenda could not restrain a smile of triumph.

Ralph said: "Despite his youth, Wulfric has shown himself capable."

Perkin glared at Nathan. Gwenda guessed that Nathan had promised the land to Perkin. Perhaps the bribe had already been paid.

Nathan was just as shocked as Perkin. He stared openmouthed at Ralph for a moment, turned to Perkin with a baffled expression, then looked suspiciously at Gwenda.

Ralph added: "In this he has been well supported by Gwenda, whose strength and loyalty have impressed me."

Nathan stared at her speculatively. She could tell what he was thinking. He realized she had intervened, and he was wondering how she had managed to change Ralph's mind. He might even be guessing the truth. She did not care if he did, so long as Wulfric remained ignorant.

Suddenly Nathan seemed to make a decision. He stood up and leaned his twisted torso across the table. He spoke to Ralph quietly. Gwenda could not hear what he said.

"Really?" Ralph said in a normal voice. "How much?"

Nathan turned to Perkin and murmured something to him.

Gwenda said: "Wait a minute! What's all this whispering?"

Perkin looked angry, but said reluctantly: "Yes, all right."

"All right to what?" Gwenda said fearfully.

“Double?” said Nathan.

Perkin nodded.

Gwenda had a feeling of dread.

Nathan said aloud: “Perkin offers to pay double the normal heriot, which would be five pounds.”

Ralph said: “That makes a difference.”

Gwenda cried: “No!”

Wulfric spoke for the first time. “The heriot is laid down by custom, recorded in the manor rolls,” he said in his slow, boy-man voice. “It’s not for negotiation.”

Nathan said quickly: “Heriots can change, though. They’re not in the Domesday Book.”

Ralph said: “Are you two lawyers? If not, shut up. The heriot is two pounds and ten shillings. Any other money that changes hands is none of your business.”

Gwenda realized with horror that Ralph was on the point of reneging on their deal. She spoke in a low, accusing voice, slow but clear. “You made me a promise.”

“Why would I do something like that?” Ralph said.

It was the one question she could not answer. “Because I pleaded with you,” she replied feebly.

“And I said I would think again. But I made no promise.”

She was powerless to make him keep his word. She wanted to kill him. “Yes, you did!” she said.

“Lords don’t bargain with peasants.”

She stared at him, lost for words. It had all been for nothing: the long walk to Kingsbridge, the humiliation of appearing naked in front of him and Alan, the shameful act she had performed on Ralph’s bed. She had betrayed Wulfric, and he still would not inherit. She pointed a finger at Ralph and said bitterly: “God damn you to hell, Ralph Fitzgerald.”

He went pale. The curse of a genuinely wronged woman was known to be powerful. “Watch what you say,” he replied. “We have a punishment for a witch who casts spells.”

Gwenda drew back. No woman could take such a threat lightly. The accusation of witchcraft was easy to make and hard to refute. Still she could not resist saying: “Those who escape justice in this life will find it in the next.”

Ralph ignored that and turned to Perkin. “Where is the money?”

Perkin had not got rich by telling people where he kept his cash. “I’ll fetch it right away, lord,” he said.

Wulfric said: “Come on, Gwenda. There’s no mercy for us here.”

Gwenda fought back tears. Anger had been replaced by grief. They had

lost the battle, after all they had done. She turned away, head lowered to hide her emotions.

Perkin said: “Wait, Wulfric. You need employment—and I need help. Work for me. I’ll pay you a penny a day.”

Wulfric flushed with the shame of being offered a job as a laborer on lands his family had owned.

Perkin added: “Gwenda, too. You’re both young and willing.”

He did not intend to be malicious, Gwenda saw. He was single-minded in the pursuit of his own interests, and he was eager to hire two strong young laborers to help him farm his amalgamated holding. He did not care, or perhaps did not even know, that for Wulfric this was the final humiliation.

Perkin said: “That’s a shilling a week between you. You’ll have plenty.”

Wulfric looked bitter. “Work for a wage, on lands that my family has owned for decades?” he said. “Never.” He turned away and left the house.

Gwenda followed, thinking: What are we going to do now?

29

Westminster Hall was huge, bigger than the inside of some cathedrals.

It was dauntingly long and wide, and its distant ceiling was supported by a double row of tall pillars. It was the most important room in the Palace of Westminster.

Earl Roland was perfectly at home here, Godwyn thought resentfully. The earl and his son William swaggered about in their fashionable clothes, with one leg of their hose red and the other black. Every earl knew all the others, and most of the barons too, and they clapped their friends on the shoulders, mocked each other facetiously, and hooted with laughter at their own humor. Godwyn wanted to remind them that the courts held in this room had the power to sentence any one of them to death, even if they were the nobility.

He and his entourage were quiet, speaking only to one another, and then in hushed tones. This was not out of reverence, he had to admit, but nervousness. Godwyn, Edmund, and Caris were ill at ease here. None of them had been to London before. The only person they knew was Buonaventura Caroli, and he was out of town. They did not know their way around, their clothes looked old-fashioned, and the money they had brought—which they had thought would be plenty—was running out.

Edmund was not cowed by anything, and Caris seemed distracted—as if she had something more important on her mind, though it hardly seemed possible—but Godwyn was tormented by anxiety. He was a newly elected prior, challenging one of the greatest noblemen in the land. The issue was the

future of the town. Without the bridge, Kingsbridge would die. The priory, currently the beating heart of one of England's great cities, would dwindle to a lonely outpost in a small village, where a few monks did their devotions in the echoing emptiness of a crumbling cathedral. Godwyn had not fought to be prior only to see his prize turn to dust.

With so much at stake, he wanted to be in control of events, confident that he was cleverer than almost everyone else, as he was in Kingsbridge. But here he felt the opposite, and the insecurity drove him to distraction.

His consolation was Gregory Longfellow. A friend of Godwyn's from university days, Gregory had a devious mind well suited to the law. The royal court was familiar to him. Aggressive and cocksure, he had guided Godwyn through the legal maze. He had presented the priory's petition to Parliament, as he had presented many petitions before. It was not debated by Parliament, of course, but passed to the king's council, which was overseen by the chancellor. The chancellor's team of lawyers—all of them friends or acquaintances of Gregory's—might have referred the matter to the king's bench, the court that dealt with disputes in which the king had an interest; but, again as Gregory had foreseen, they had decided this was too petty to bother the king with, and had instead sent the case to the common bench, or court of common pleas.

All this had taken a full six weeks. It was late November, and the weather was getting colder. The building season was nearly over.

Today at last they stood before Sir Wilbert Wheatfield, an experienced judge who was said to be liked by the king. Sir Wilbert was the younger son of a northern baron. His elder brother had inherited the title and the estate, and Wilbert had trained as a priest, studied law, come to London, and found favor at the royal court. His inclination would be to side with an earl against a monk, Gregory warned; but he would put the king's interests ahead of all else.

The judge sat on a raised bench against the east wall of the palace, between windows that looked out onto the Green Yard and the River Thames. In front of him were two clerks at a long table. There were no seats for the litigants.

"Sir, the earl of Shiring has sent armed men to blockade the quarry owned by Kingsbridge Priory," Gregory said as soon as Sir Wilbert looked at him. His voice quivered with simulated indignation. "The quarry, which is within the earldom, was granted to the priory by King Henry I some two hundred years ago. A copy of the charter has been lodged with the court."

Sir Wilbert had a pink face and white hair, and looked handsome until he spoke, when he showed rotten teeth. "I have the charter before me," he said.

Earl Roland spoke without waiting to be invited. "The monks were given the quarry so that they could build their cathedral," he said, speaking in a bored-sounding drawl.

Gregory said quickly: “But the charter does not restrict their use of it to any one purpose.”

“Now they want to build a bridge,” Roland said.

“To replace the bridge that collapsed at Whitsun—a bridge that itself was built, many hundreds of years ago, with timber that was a gift of the king!” Gregory spoke as if he was outraged by the earl’s every word.

“They don’t need permission to rebuild a preexisting bridge,” Sir Wilbert said briskly. “And the charter does say that the king wishes to encourage the building of the cathedral, but it does not say they have to relinquish their rights when the church is finished, nor that they are forbidden to use the stone for any other purpose.”

Godwyn was heartened. The judge seemed to have seen the priory’s side of the argument immediately.

Gregory made a spreading gesture with his hands, palms up, as if the judge had said something blindingly obvious. “And, indeed, sir, that has been the understanding of priors of Kingsbridge and earls of Shiring for three centuries.”

That was not quite right, Godwyn knew. There had been disputes about the charter in the time of Prior Philip. But Sir Wilbert did not know that, nor did Earl Roland.

Roland’s attitude was haughty, as if it was beneath his dignity to squabble with lawyers, but this was deceptive: he had a firm grip on the argument. “The charter does not say the priory may escape tax.”

Gregory said: “Why, then, has the earl never imposed such a tax until now?”

Roland had his answer ready. “Former earls forgave the tax, as their contribution to the cathedral. It was a pious act. But no piety compels me to subsidize a bridge. Yet the monks refuse to pay.”

Suddenly the argument had swung the other way. How fast it moved, Godwyn thought; not like arguments in the monks’ chapter house, which could go on for hours.

Gregory said: “And the earl’s men prevent movement of stones from the quarry, and have killed a poor carter.”

Sir Wilbert said: “Then the dispute had better be resolved as soon as possible. What does the priory say to the argument that the earl has the right to tax consignments passing through his earldom, using roads and bridges and fords that belong to him, regardless of whether he has actually enforced this right in the past or not?”

“That since the stones are not passing through his lands, but originate there, the tax is tantamount to charging the monks for the stones, contrary to the charter of Henry I.”

Godwyn saw with dismay that the judge seemed unimpressed by this.

However, Gregory had not finished. “And that the kings who gave Kingsbridge a bridge and a quarry did so for a good reason: they wanted the priory and the town to prosper. And the town’s alderman is here to testify that Kingsbridge cannot prosper without a bridge.”

Edmund stepped forward. With his unkempt hair and provincial clothes he looked like a country bumpkin, by contrast with the gorgeously robed noblemen around; but, unlike Godwyn, he did not appear intimidated. “I’m a wool merchant, sir,” he said. “Without the bridge, there’s no trade. And without trade, Kingsbridge will pay no taxes to the king.”

Sir Wilbert leaned forward. “How much did the town yield in the last tenth?”

He was speaking of the tax, imposed by Parliament from time to time, of one-tenth or one-fifteenth of each individual’s movable property. No one ever paid a tenth, of course—everyone understated their wealth—so the amount payable by each town or county had become fixed, and the burden was shared out more or less fairly, with poor men and lowly peasants paying nothing at all.

Edmund had been expecting this question, and he replied promptly: “One thousand and eleven pounds, sir.”

“And the effect of the loss of the bridge?”

“Today, I estimate that a tenth would raise less than three hundred pounds. But our citizens are continuing to trade in the hope that the bridge will be rebuilt. If that hope were to be dashed in this court today, the annual Fleece Fair and the weekly market would almost disappear, and the yield from a tenth would fall below fifty pounds.”

“Next to nothing, in the scale of the king’s needs,” the judge said. He did not say what they all knew: that the king was in dire need of money because in the last few weeks he had declared war on France.

Roland was needled. “Is this hearing about the king’s finances?” he said scornfully.

Sir Wilbert was not to be browbeaten, even by an earl. “This is the king’s court,” he said mildly. “What would you expect?”

“Justice,” Roland replied.

“And you shall have it.” The judge implied, but did not say, *Whether you like it or not.* “Edmund Wooler, where is the nearest alternative market?”

“Shiring.”

“Ah. So the business you lose will move to the earl’s town.”

“No, sir. Some will move, but much will vanish. Many Kingsbridge traders will be unable to get to Shiring.”

The judge turned to Roland. “How much does a tenth yield from Shiring?”

Roland conferred briefly with his secretary, Father Jerome, then said: “Six

hundred and twenty pounds.”

“And with the increased trade at Shiring market, could you pay one thousand six hundred and twenty pounds?”

“Of course not,” the earl said angrily.

The judge continued in his mild tone. “Then your opposition to this bridge would cost the king dear.”

“I have my rights,” Roland said sulkily.

“And the king has his. Is there any way you could compensate the royal treasury for the loss of a thousand pounds every year or so?”

“By fighting alongside him in France—which wool merchants and monks will never do!”

“Indeed,” said Sir Wilbert. “But your knights will require payment.”

“This is outrageous,” said Roland. He knew he was losing the argument. Godwyn tried not to look triumphant.

The judge did not like his proceedings being called outrageous. He fixed Roland with a look. “When you sent your men-at-arms to blockade the priory’s quarry, I feel sure you did not intend to damage the king’s interests.” He paused expectantly.

Roland sensed a trap, but there was only one answer he could give. “Certainly not.”

“Now that it has been made clear to the court, and to you, how the building of the new bridge serves the king’s purposes, as well as those of Kingsbridge Priory and the town, I imagine you will agree to the reopening of the quarry.”

Godwyn realized Sir Wilbert was being clever. He was forcing Roland to consent to his ruling, making it difficult for him to appeal personally to the king later.

After a long pause, Roland said: “Yes.”

“And to the transport of stones through your territory without tax.”

Roland knew he had lost. There was fury in his voice as he said again: “Yes.”

“So ordered,” the judge said. “Next case.”

It was a great victory, but it had probably come too late.

November had turned into December. Building normally stopped about now. Because of the rainy weather, the frosts would come late this year but, even so, there were at most a couple of weeks left. Merthin had hundreds of stones stockpiled at the quarry, cut and shaped and ready to be laid. However, it would take months to cart them all to Kingsbridge. Although Earl Roland had lost the court case, he had almost certainly succeeded in delaying the building of the bridge by a year.

Caris returned to Kingsbridge, with Edmund and Godwyn, in a somber mood. Reining in on the suburban side of the river, she saw that Merthin had already constructed his cofferdams. In each of the channels that ran either side of Leper Island, the ends of wooden boards stuck a couple of feet above the surface in a big circle. She recalled Merthin explaining, in the guildhall, how he planned to drive stakes into the riverbed in a double ring then fill the gap between the rings with clay mortar to make a watertight seal. The water inside the coffer could then be taken out so that the builders could lay a foundation on the riverbed.

One of Merthin's workmen, Harold Mason, was on the ferry as they crossed the river, and Caris asked him if the cofferdams had been drained. "Not yet," he said. "The master wants to leave it until we're ready to start building."

Caris noticed with pleasure that Merthin was now called the master, despite his youth. "But why?" she said. "I thought we wanted everything ready for a quick start."

"He says the force of the river puts more strain on the dam when there's no water inside."

Caris wondered how Merthin knew such things. He had learned the basics from his first master, Joachim, Elfric's father. He always talked a lot to strangers who came to town, especially men who had seen tall buildings in Florence and Rome. And he had read all about the construction of the cathedral in *Timothy's Book*. But he seemed also to have remarkable intuition about these matters. She would never have guessed that an empty dam would be weaker than a full one.

Although they were subdued as they entered the town, they wanted to tell Merthin the good news right away and find out what, if anything, he could get done before the end of the season. Pausing only to entrust their horses to stableboys, they went in search of him. They found him in the mason's loft, high in the northwest tower of the cathedral, working by the light of several oil lamps, scratching a design for a parapet on the tracing floor.

He looked up from his drawing, saw their faces, and grinned widely. "We won?" he said.

"We won," said Edmund.

"Thanks to Gregory Longfellow," Godwyn added. "He cost a lot of money, but he was worth it."

Merthin embraced both men—his quarrel with Godwyn forgotten, at least for now. He kissed Caris tenderly. "I missed you," he murmured. "It's been eight weeks! I felt as if you were never coming back."

She made no reply. She had something momentous to say to him, but she wanted privacy.

Her father did not notice her reticence. "Well, Merthin, you can start

building right away.”

“Good.”

Godwyn said: “You can begin carting stones from the quarry tomorrow—but I suppose it’s too late to get much building done before the winter frosts.”

“I’ve been thinking about that,” Merthin said. He glanced at the windows. It was mid-afternoon, the December day already darkening to evening. “There might be a way to do it.”

Edmund was immediately enthusiastic. “Well, out with it, lad! What’s your idea?”

Merthin turned to the prior. “Would you grant an indulgence to volunteers who bring stones from the quarry?” An indulgence was a special act of forgiveness of sins. Like a gift of money, it could either pay for past debts or stand in credit for future liabilities.

“I could,” Godwyn said. “What have you got in mind?”

Merthin turned to Edmund. “How many people in Kingsbridge own a cart?”

“Let me think,” Edmund said, frowning. “Every substantial trader has one…so it must come to a couple of hundred, at least.”

“Suppose we were to go around the town tonight and ask every one of them to drive to the quarry tomorrow and pick up stones.”

Edmund stared at Merthin, and a grin slowly spread across his face. “Now,” he said delightedly, “that’s an idea!”

“We’ll tell each one that everybody else is going,” Merthin went on. “It will be like a holiday. Their families can go along, and they can take food and beer. If each one brings back a cartload of stone or rubble, in two days’ time we’ll have enough to build the piers of the bridge.”

That was brilliant, Caris thought wonderingly. It was typical of him, to think of something no one else could have imagined. But would it work?

“What about the weather?” said Godwyn.

“The rain has been a curse for the peasants, but it’s held off the deep cold. We’ve a week or two yet, I think.”

Edmund was excited, stomping up and down the loft with his lopsided gait. “But if you can build the piers in the next few days…”

“By the end of next year we can finish the bulk of the work.”

“Could we use the bridge the following year?”

“No…but wait. We could put a temporary wooden roadbed on top in time for the Fleece Fair.”

“So we would have a usable bridge by the year after next—and miss only one Fleece Fair!”

“We’d have to finish the stone roadbed after the Fleece Fair, then it would harden in time to be used normally in the third year.”

“Damn it, we’ve got to do it!” Edmund said excitedly.

Godwyn said cautiously: “You have yet to empty the water out of the cofferdams.”

Merthin nodded. “That’s hard work. In my original plan I allowed two weeks for it. But I’ve got an idea about that, too. However, let’s get the carts organized first.”

They all moved to the door, animated with enthusiasm. As Godwyn and Edmund started down the narrow spiral staircase, Caris caught Merthin by the sleeve and held him back. He thought she wanted to kiss, and he put his arms around her, but she pushed him away. “I’ve got some news,” she said.

“More?”

“I’m pregnant.”

She watched his face. He was startled at first, and his red brown eyebrows rose. Then he blinked, tilted his head to one side, and shrugged, as if to say: *Nothing surprising about that.* He grinned, at first ruefully, then with unmixed happiness. At the end he was beaming. “That’s wonderful!” he said.

She hated him momentarily for his stupidity. “No, it’s not!”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t want to spend my life as a slave to anyone, even if it is my own child.”

“A slave? Is every mother a slave?”

“Yes! How could you possibly not know that I feel that way?”

He looked baffled and hurt, and a part of her wanted to back off, but she had been nursing her anger too long. “I did know, I suppose,” he said. “But then you lay with me, so I thought…” He hesitated. “You must have known it might happen—*would* happen, sooner or later.”

“Of course I knew, but I acted as if I didn’t.”

“Yes, I can understand that.”

“Oh, stop being so understanding. You’re such a weakling.”

His face froze. After a long pause he said: “All right, then, I’ll stop being so understanding. Just give me the information. What’s your plan?”

“I don’t have a plan, you fool. I just know I don’t want to have a baby.”

“So you don’t have a plan, and I’m a fool and a weakling. Do you want anything from me?”

“No!”

“Then what are you doing here?”

“Don’t be so logical!”

He sighed. “I’m going to stop trying to be what you tell me to be, because you make no sense.” He went around the room putting out the lamps. “I’m glad we’re having a baby, and I’d like us to be married and look after the child together—assuming this mood you’re in is only temporary.” He put his drawing implements in a leather bag and slung it over his shoulder. “But for now, you’re so cantankerous that I’d rather not speak to you at all. And

besides, I have work to do.” He went to the door, then paused. “On the other hand, we could kiss and make up.”

“Go away!” she yelled.

He ducked through the low door and disappeared into the stairwell.

Caris began to cry.

Merthin had no idea whether the people of Kingsbridge would rally to the cause. They all had work and worries of their own: would they see the communal effort to build the bridge as being more important? He was not sure. He knew, from his reading of *Timothy’s Book*, that at moments of crisis Prior Philip had often prevailed by calling on the ordinary people to make a massive effort. But Merthin was not Philip. He had no right to lead people. He was just a carpenter.

They made a list of cart owners and divided it up by streets. Edmund rounded up ten leading citizens, and Godwyn picked ten senior monks, and they went around in pairs. Merthin was teamed with Brother Thomas.

The first door they knocked on was Lib Wheeler’s. She was continuing Ben’s business with hired labor. “You can have both my carts,” she said. “And the men to drive them. Anything to give that damned earl a poke in the eye.”

But their second call brought a refusal. “I’m not well,” said Peter Dyer, who had a cart for delivering the bales of woolen cloth he dyed yellow and green and pink. “I can’t travel.”

He looked perfectly all right, Merthin thought; he was probably scared of a confrontation with the earl’s men. There would be no fight, Merthin felt sure; but he could understand the fear. What if all the citizens felt that way?

Their third call was on Harold Mason, a young builder who was hoping for several years of work building the bridge. He agreed immediately. “Jake Chepstow will come, too,” he said. “I’ll make sure of that.” Harold and Jake were pals.

After that, almost everybody said yes.

They did not need to be told how important the bridge was—everyone who had a cart was a trader, obviously—and they had the additional incentive of a pardon for their sins. But the most important factor seemed to be the promise of an unexpected holiday. Most people said: “Is so-and-so going?” When they heard that their friends and neighbors had volunteered, they did not want to be left out.

When they had made all their calls, Merthin left Thomas and went down to the ferry. They had to take the carts across overnight, to be ready to leave at sunrise. The ferry carried only one cart at a time—two hundred carts would take several hours. That was why they needed a bridge, of course.

An ox was revolving the great wheel, and carts were already crossing the

river. On the other side, the owners turned their beasts out to graze in the pasture, then came back on the ferry and went to bed. Edmund had got John Constable and half a dozen of his deputies to spend the night in Newtown, guarding carts and beasts.

The ferry was still working when Merthin went to bed an hour or so after midnight. He lay thinking about Caris for a while. Her quirkiness and unpredictability were part of what he loved, but sometimes she was impossible. She was the cleverest individual in Kingsbridge, but also hopelessly irrational at times.

Most of all, though, he hated to be called weak. He was not sure he would ever forgive Caris for that jibe. Earl Roland had humiliated him, ten years ago, by saying he could not be a squire, and was fit only to be apprenticed to a carpenter. But he was not weak. He had defied Elfric's tyranny, he had routed Prior Godwyn over the bridge design, and he was about to save the entire town. I might be small, he thought, but by God I'm strong.

Still he did not know what to do about Caris, and he fell asleep worrying.

Edmund woke him at first light. By then almost every cart in Kingsbridge was on the far side of the river, in a straggly line that led through the suburb of Newtown and half a mile into the forest. It took a couple more hours to ferry the people over. The excitement of organizing what was effectively a pilgrimage diverted Merthin's mind from the problem of Caris and her pregnancy. Soon the pasture on the far side was a scene of good-natured chaos, as dozens of people caught their horses and oxen, led them to their carts, and backed them into the traces. Dick Brewer brought over a huge barrel of ale and gave it away—"to encourage the expedition," he said—with mixed results: some people were so encouraged they had to lie down.

A crowd of spectators gathered on the city side of the river, watching. As the line of carts at last began to move off, a great cheer went up.

But stones were only half the problem.

Merthin turned his attention to the next challenge. If he were to begin laying stones as soon as they arrived from the quarry, he had to empty the cofferdams in two days instead of two weeks. As the cheering died down, he raised his voice and addressed the crowd. This was the moment to catch their interest, when the excitement was fading and they were beginning to wonder what to do next.

"I need the strongest men left in town!" he shouted. They went quiet, intrigued. "Are there any strong men in Kingsbridge?" This was partly a come-on: the work would be heavy, but asking only for strong people also threw down a challenge that the young men would find hard to resist. "Before the carts get back from the quarry tomorrow night, we have to empty the water out of the cofferdams. It will be the hardest work you've ever done—so no weaklings, please." As he said this, he looked at Caris in the crowd and

caught her eye, and he saw her flinch: she remembered using that word, and she knew she had insulted him. “Any woman who thinks she is the equal of the men can join in,” he went on. “I need you to find a bucket and meet me on the shore opposite Leper Island as soon as possible. Remember—only the strongest!”

He was not sure whether he had won them over. As he finished, he spotted the tall figure of Mark Webber, and pushed through the throng to him. “Mark, will you encourage them?” he said anxiously.

Mark was a gentle giant, much liked in the town. Even though he was poor, he had influence, especially among adolescents. “I’ll make sure the lads join in,” he said.

“Thank you.”

Next, Merthin found Ian Boatman. “I’m going to need you all day, I hope,” he said. “Ferrying people out to the cofferdams and back. You can work for pay or an indulgence—your choice.” Ian was excessively fond of his wife’s younger sister, and would probably prefer the indulgence, either for a past sin or for one he was hoping to commit soon.

Merthin made his way through the streets to the shore where he was preparing to build the bridge. Could the cofferdams be emptied in two days? He really had no idea. He wondered how many gallons of water were in each. Thousands? Hundreds of thousands? There must be a way of calculating. The Greek philosophers had probably worked out a method but, if they had, it had not been taught at the priory school. To find out, he would probably have to go to Oxford, where there were mathematicians famous all over the world, according to Godwyn.

He waited at the river’s edge, wondering if anyone would come.

The first to arrive was Megg Robbins, the strapping daughter of a corn dealer, with muscles enlarged by years of lifting sacks of grain. “I can outdo most of the men in this town,” she said, and Merthin did not doubt it.

A group of young men came next, then three novice monks.

As soon as Merthin had ten people with buckets, he got Ian to row them and him to the nearer of the two dams.

Inside the rim of the dam, he had built a ledge just above water level, strong enough for men to stand on. From the ledge four ladders reached all the way down to the riverbed. In the center of the dam, floating on the surface, was a large raft. Between the raft and the ledge there was a gap of about two feet, and the raft was held in a central position by protruding wooden spokes that reached almost to the wall and prevented movement of more than a few inches in any direction.

“You work in pairs,” he told them. “One on the raft, one on the ledge. The one on the raft fills his bucket and passes it to the one on the ledge, who tosses the water over the edge into the river. As the empty bucket is passed

back, another full one is passed forward.”

Megg Robbins said: “What happens when the water level inside falls, and we can’t reach one another?”

“Good thinking, Megg. You’d better be my forewoman in charge here. When you can no longer reach, you work in threes, with one on a ladder.”

She caught on fast. “And then fours, with two on a ladder…”

“Yes. Though by then we’ll need to rest the men and bring in fresh ones.”

“Right.”

“Get started. I’ll bring over another ten—you’ve got plenty of room still.”

Megg turned away. “Pick your partners, everyone!” she called.

The volunteers started to dip their buckets. He heard Megg say: “Let’s keep a rhythm going. Dip, lift, pass, chuck! One, two, three, four. How about a song to give us the swing of it?” She raised her voice in a lusty contralto. “Oh, *there* was *once* a *come*ly *knight…*”

They knew the song, and all joined in the next line: “His *blade* was *straight* and *true, oh!*”

Merthin watched. Everyone was soaking wet in a few minutes. He could see no apparent fall in the level of the water. It was going to be a long job.

He climbed over the side and into Ian’s boat.

By the time he reached the bank there were thirty more volunteers with buckets.

He got the second cofferdam started, with Mark Webber as foreman, then doubled the numbers in both locations, then started replacing tired workers with fresh ones. Ian Boatman became exhausted and handed the oars over to his son. The water inside the dams fell inch by wearisome inch. As the level fell, the work went ever more slowly, for the buckets had to be lifted greater and greater distances to the rim.

Megg was the first to discover that a person could not hold a full bucket in one hand and an empty one in the other and still keep balance on a ladder. She devised a one-way bucket chain, with full buckets going up one ladder and empty ones down another. Mark instituted the same system in his dam.

The volunteers worked an hour and rested an hour, but Merthin did not stop. He was organizing the teams, supervising the transport of volunteers to and from the dams, replacing buckets that broke. Most of the men drank ale during their rest periods, and in consequence there were several accidents during the afternoon, with people dropping buckets and falling off ladders. Mother Cecilia came to take care of the injured, with the help of Mattie Wise and Caris.

Too soon, the light began to fail, and they had to stop. But both coffers were more than half-empty. Merthin asked everyone to come back in the morning, then went home. After a few spoonfuls of his mother’s soup he fell asleep at the table, waking only long enough to wrap a blanket around himself

and lie down in the straw. When he woke the next morning, his first thought was to wonder whether any of the volunteers would show up for the second day.

He hurried down to the river at first light with an anxious heart. Both Mark Webber and Megg Robbins were there already, Mark eating his way through a doorstep of bread and Megg lacing a pair of high boots in the hope of keeping her feet dry. No one else showed up for the next half hour, and Merthin began to wonder what he would do with no volunteers. Then some of the young men arrived, carrying their breakfast with them, followed by the novice monks, then a whole crowd.

Ian Boatman turned up, and Merthin got him to row Megg out with some volunteers, and they began again.

The work was harder today. Everyone was aching from yesterday's efforts. Every bucket had to be lifted ten feet or more. But the end was in sight. The levels continued to drop, and the volunteers began to glimpse the riverbed.

In the middle of the afternoon, the first of the carts arrived back from the quarry. Merthin directed the owner to unload his stone in the pasture and ferry his cart back across the river to the town. A short while later, in Megg's coffer, the raft bumped the riverbed.

There was more to be done. When the last of the water was lifted out, the raft itself had to be dismantled and raised, plank by plank, up the ladders and out. Then dozens of fish were revealed, flapping in muddy pools on the bottom, and they had to be netted and shared out among the volunteers. But, when that was finished, Merthin stood on the ledge, weary but jubilant, and looked down a twenty-foot hole at the flat mud of the riverbed.

Tomorrow he would drop several tons of rubble into each hole, and drench the rubble with mortar, forming a massive, immovable foundation.

Then he would start building the bridge.

Wulfric was in a depression.

He ate almost nothing and forgot to wash himself. He got up automatically at daybreak and lay down again when it got dark, but he did not work, and he did not make love to Gwenda in the night. When she asked him what was the matter, he would say: "I don't know, really." He answered all questions with such uninformative replies, or just with grunts.

There was little to do in the fields anyway. This was the season when villagers sat by their fires, sewing leather shoes and carving oak shovels, eating salt pork and soft apples and cabbage preserved in vinegar. Gwenda was not worried about how they were going to feed themselves: Wulfric still had money from the sale of his crops. But she was desperately anxious about

him.

Wulfric had always lived for his work. Some villagers grumbled constantly and were happy only on rest days, but he was not like that. The fields, the crops, the beasts, and the weather were what he cared about. On Sundays he had always been restless until he found some occupation that was not forbidden, and on holidays he had done all he could to circumvent the rules.

She knew she had to get him to return to his normal state of mind. Otherwise he might fall sick with some physical illness. And his money would not last forever. Sooner or later they must both work.

However, she did not give him her news until two full moons had passed, and she was sure.

Then, one morning in December, she said: “I have something to tell you.”

He grunted. He was sitting at the kitchen table, whittling a stick, and he did not look up from this idle occupation.

She reached across the table and held his wrists, stopping the whittling. “Wulfric, would you please look at me?”

He did so with a surly expression on his face, resentful at being ordered but too lethargic to defy her.

“It’s important,” she said.

He looked at her in silence.

“I’m going to have a baby,” she said.

His expression did not change, but he dropped the knife and stick.

She looked back at him for a long moment. “Do you understand me?” she said.

He nodded. “A baby,” he said.

“Yes. We will have a child.”

“When?”

She smiled. It was the first question he had asked for two months. “Next summer, before the harvest.”

“The child must be cared for,” he said. “You, too.”

“Yes.”

“I must work.” He looked depressed again.

She held her breath. What was coming?

He sighed, then set his jaw. “I’ll go and see Perkin,” he said. “He’ll need help with his winter plowing.”

“And manuring,” she said happily. “I’ll come with you. He offered to hire us both.”

“All right.” He was still staring at her. “A child,” he said, as if it were a marvel. “Boy or girl, I wonder.”

She got up and walked around the table to sit on the bench next to him. “Which would you prefer?”

“A little girl. It was all boys in my family.”

“I want a boy, a miniature version of you.”

“We might have twins.”

“One of each.”

He put his arm around her. “We should get Father Gaspard to marry us properly.”

Gwenda sighed contentedly and leaned her head on his shoulder. “Yes,” she said. “Perhaps we should.”

Merthin moved out of his parents’ house just before Christmas. He had built a one-room house for himself on Leper Island, which was now his land. He said he needed to guard the growing stockpile of valuable building materials he was keeping on the island—timber, stones, lime, ropes, and iron tools.

At the same time, he stopped coming to Caris’s house for meals.

On the last but one day of December, she went to see Mattie Wise.

“No need to tell me why you’re here,” said Mattie. “Three months gone?”

Caris nodded and avoided her eye. She looked around the little kitchen, with its bottles and jars. Mattie was heating something in a small iron pot, and it gave off an acrid smell that made Caris want to sneeze.

“I don’t want to have a baby,” Caris said.

“I wish I had a chicken for every time I’ve heard that said.”

“Am I wicked?”

Mattie shrugged. “I make potions, not judgments. People know the difference between right and wrong—and if they don’t, that’s what priests are for.”

Caris was disappointed. She had been hoping for sympathy. More coolly, she said: “Do you have a potion to get rid of this pregnancy?”

“I do…” Mattie looked uneasy.

“Is there a snag?”

“The way to get rid of a pregnancy is to poison yourself. Some girls drink a gallon of strong wine. I make up a dose with several toxic herbs. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn’t. But it always makes you feel dreadful.”

“Is it dangerous? Could I die?”

“Yes, though it’s not as risky as childbirth.”

“I’ll take it.”

Mattie took her pot off the fire and put it on a stone slab to cool. Turning to her scarred old workbench, she took a small pottery bowl from a cupboard and poured into it small quantities of different powders.

Caris said: “What’s the matter? You say you don’t make judgments, but you look disapproving.”

Mattie nodded. “You’re right. I do make judgments, of course; everyone

does.”

“And you’re judging me.”

“I’m thinking that Merthin is a good man and you love him, but you don’t seem able to find happiness with him. That makes me sad.”

“You think I should be like other women, and throw myself at the feet of some man.”

“It seems to make them happy. But I chose a different way of life. And so will you, I suppose.”

“Are you happy?”

“I wasn’t born to be happy. But I help people, I make a living, and I’m free.” She poured her mixture into a cup, added some wine, and stirred, dissolving the powders. “Have you had breakfast?”

“Just some milk.”

She dripped a little honey into the cup. “Drink this, and don’t bother to eat dinner—you’ll only throw it up.”

Caris took the cup, hesitated, then swallowed the draft. “Thank you.” It had a vilely bitter taste that was only partly masked by the sweetness of the honey.

“It should be all over by tomorrow morning—one way or the other.”

Caris paid her and left. Walking home, she felt an odd mixture of elation and sadness. Her spirits were lifted by having made a decision, after all the weeks of worry; but she also felt a tug of loss, as if she were saying good-bye to someone—Merthin, perhaps. She wondered if their separation would be permanent. She could contemplate the prospect calmly, because she still felt angry with him, but she knew she would miss him terribly. He would find another lover eventually—Bessie Bell, perhaps—but Caris felt sure she would not do the same. She would never love anyone as she had loved Merthin.

When she got home, the smell of roasting pork in the house nauseated her, and she went out again. She did not want to gossip with other women in the main street or talk business with the men at the guildhall, so she drifted into the priory grounds, her heavy wool cloak wrapped around her for warmth, and sat on a tombstone in the graveyard, looking at the north wall of the cathedral, marveling at the perfection of its carved moldings and the grace of its flying buttresses.

It was not long before she felt ill.

She puked on a grave, but her stomach was empty, and nothing came up except a sour fluid. Her head began to ache. She wanted to lie down, but she was reluctant to go home because of the kitchen smell. She decided to go to the priory hospital. The nuns would let her lie down for a minute. She left the graveyard, crossed the green in front of the cathedral, and entered the hospital. Suddenly she was terribly thirsty.

She was greeted by the kindly, podgy face of Old Julie. “Oh, Sister

Juliana," Caris said gratefully. "Would you bring me a cup of water?" The priory had water piped from upstream, cool and clear and safe to drink.

"Are you ill, child?" said Old Julie anxiously.

"A little nauseated. If I may, I'll just lie down for a moment."

"Of course. I'll fetch Mother Cecilia."

Caris lay down on one of the straw mattresses lined up neatly on the floor. For a few moments she felt better, then the headache became worse. Julie returned with a jug and a cup, and Mother Cecilia. Caris drank some water, threw up, and drank some more.

Cecilia asked her some questions then said: "You've eaten something corrupt. You need to be purged."

Caris hurt so much she could make no response. Cecilia left and returned moments later with a bottle and a spoon. She gave Caris a spoonful of treacly medicine that tasted of cloves.

Caris lay back with her eyes closed and longed for the pain to go away. After a while, she was afflicted with stomach cramps, followed by uncontrollable diarrhea. She assumed vaguely that it had been brought on by the treacle. After an hour it went away. Julie undressed her, washed her, gave her a nun's robe instead of her own soiled dress, and put her on a clean mattress. She lay down and closed her eyes, exhausted.

Prior Godwyn came to see her and said she must be bled. Another monk came to do the job. He made her sit up and stretch out her arm with her elbow over a large bowl. Then he took a sharp knife and opened the vein in the crook of her arm. She hardly noticed the pain of the cut or the slow throb of the bleeding. After a while the monk put a dressing on the cut and told her to hold it there firmly. He took away the bowl of blood.

She was vaguely conscious of people coming to see her: her father, Petranilla, Merthin. Old Julie put a cup to her lips from time to time, and she always drank, for she was insatiably thirsty. At some point she noticed candles, and realized it must be night. Eventually she fell into a troubled sleep, and had terrifying dreams about blood. Every time she woke, Julie gave her water.

At last she woke to daylight. The pain had receded, leaving only a dull headache. The next thing she realized was that someone was washing her thighs. She raised herself on her elbow.

A novice nun with the face of an angel crouched beside the mattress. Caris's dress was up around her waist, and the nun was bathing her with a cloth dipped in warm water. After a moment, she remembered the girl's name. "Mair," she said.

"Yes," the novice answered with a smile.

As she squeezed out the cloth into a bowl, Caris was frightened to see that it was red. "Blood!" she said fearfully.

“Don’t worry,” said Mair. “It’s just your monthly cycle. Heavy, but normal.”

Caris saw that her dress and the mattress were soaked with blood.

She lay back, looking up at the ceiling. Tears came to her eyes, but she did not know whether she was crying out of relief or sadness.

She was no longer pregnant.

PART IV

June 1338 to May 1339

30

The June of 1338 was dry and sunny, but the Fleece Fair was a catastrophe—for Kingsbridge in general, and for Edmund Wooler in particular. By the middle of the week, Caris knew that her father was bankrupt.

The townspeople had expected that it would be difficult, and had done all they could to prepare. They commissioned Merthin to build three large rafts that could be poled across the river, to supplement the ferry and Ian's boat. He could have built more, but there was no room to land them on the banks. The priory's grounds were opened a day early, and the ferry operated all night, by torchlight. They persuaded Godwyn to give permission for Kingsbridge shopkeepers to cross to the suburban side and sell to the queue, in the hope that Dick Brewer's ale and Betty Baxter's buns would mollify the people waiting.

It was not enough.

Fewer people than usual came to the fair, but the queues were worse than ever. The extra rafts were insufficient but, even so, the shore on both sides became so swampy that carts were constantly getting stuck in the mud and having to be towed out by teams of oxen. Worse, the rafts were difficult to steer, and on two occasions there were collisions that threw passengers into the water, though fortunately no one drowned.

Some traders anticipated these problems and stayed away. Others turned back when they saw the length of the queue. Of those willing to wait half a day to get into the city, some then did such paltry business that they left after a day or two. By Wednesday the ferry was taking more people away than it was bringing in.

That morning, Caris and Edmund made a tour of the bridge works with Guillaume of London. Guillaume was not as big a customer as Buonaventura Caroli, but he was the best they had this year, and they were making a fuss over him. He was a tall, beefy man in a cloak of expensive Italian cloth, bright red.

They borrowed Merthin's raft, which had a raised deck and a builtin hoist for transporting building materials. His young assistant, Jimmie, poled them out into the river.

The midstream piers that Merthin had constructed in such a rush last December were still surrounded by their cofferdams. He had explained to Edmund and Caris that he would leave the dams in place until the bridge was almost finished, to protect the stonework from accidental damage by his own workmen. When he demolished them, he would put in their place a pile of loose large stones, called riprap, which he said would prevent the current undermining the piers.

The massive stone columns had now grown, like trees, spreading their arches sideways toward smaller piers built in the shallower water near the banks. These in turn were growing arches, on one side toward the central piers and on the other toward abutments on the bank. A dozen or more masons were busy on the elaborate scaffolding that clung to the stonework like gulls' nests on a cliff.

They landed on Leper Island and found Merthin with Brother Thomas, supervising the masons building the abutment from which the bridge would spring across the northern branch of the river. The priory still owned and controlled the bridge, even though the land was leased to the parish guild and the construction was financed by loans from individual townspeople. Thomas was often on-site. Prior Godwyn took a proprietorial interest in the work, and especially in how the bridge would look, evidently feeling it was going to be some kind of monument to him.

Merthin looked up at the visitors with his golden brown eyes, and Caris's heart seemed to beat faster. She hardly saw him, these days, and when they spoke it was always about business; but she still felt strange in his presence. She had to make an effort to breathe normally, to meet his eye with feigned indifference, and to slow her speech to a moderate speed.

They had never patched up their quarrel. She had not told him about her abortion, so he did not know whether her pregnancy had terminated spontaneously or otherwise. Neither of them had ever referred to it. On two occasions since then he had come to talk to her, solemnly, and had begged her to make a fresh start with him. Both times, she had told him that she would never love another man, but she was not going to spend her life as someone's wife and someone else's mother. "How *will* you spend your life, then?" he had asked, and she had replied simply that she did not know.

Merthin was not as impish as he used to be. His hair and beard were neatly trimmed—he was now a regular customer of Matthew Barber. He was dressed in a russet tunic, like the masons, but he wore a yellow cape trimmed with fur, a sign of his status as a master, and a cap with a feather in it, which made him look a bit taller.

Elfric, whose enmity continued, had objected to Merthin dressing like a master, on the grounds that he was not a member of any guild. Merthin's reply was that he was a master, and the solution to the problem was for him to be admitted to a guild. And there the matter remained, unresolved.

Merthin was still only twenty-one, and Guillaume looked at him and said: "He's young!"

Caris said defensively: "He's been the best builder in town since he was about seventeen."

Merthin said a few more words to Thomas then came over. "The abutments of a bridge need to be heavy, with deep foundations," he said, explaining the massive bulwark of stone he was constructing.

Guillaume said: "Why is that, young man?"

Merthin was used to being condescended to, and he took it lightly. With a small smile, he said: "Let me show you. Stand with your feet as far apart as you can, like this." Merthin demonstrated, and Guillaume—after a moment's hesitation—imitated him. "Your feet feel as if they might slide farther apart, don't they?"

"Yes."

"And the ends of a bridge tend to spread, like your feet. This puts a strain on the bridge, just as you're now feeling the tension in your groin." Merthin stood upright and placed his own booted foot firmly up against Guillaume's soft leather shoe. "Now your foot can't move, and the strain on your groin has eased, hasn't it?"

"Yes."

"The abutment has the same effect as my foot, in bracing your foot and relieving the strain."

"Very interesting," Guillaume said thoughtfully as he straightened up, and Caris knew he was telling himself not to underestimate Merthin.

"Let me show you around," Merthin said.

The island had changed completely in the last six months. All signs of the old leper colony had gone. Much of the rocky land was now taken up with stores: neat piles of stone, barrels of lime, stacks of timber, and coils of rope. The place was still infested with rabbits—but they were now competing for space with the builders. There was a smithy, where a blacksmith was repairing old tools and forging new ones; several masons' lodges; and Merthin's new house, small but carefully built and beautifully proportioned. Carpenters, stone carvers, and mortar makers were laboring to keep the men on the scaffolding supplied with materials.

"There seem to be more people at work than usual," Caris murmured in Merthin's ear.

He grinned. "I've put as many as possible in highly visible positions," he replied quietly. "I want every visitor to notice how fast we're working to build

the new bridge. I want them to believe the fair will be back to normal next year.”

At the west end of the island, away from the twin bridges, were storage yards and warehouses on plots of land Merthin had rented to Kingsbridge merchants. Although his rents were lower than what tenants would have to pay within the city walls, Merthin was already earning a good deal more than the token sum he paid every year for the lease.

He was also seeing a lot of Elizabeth Clerk. Caris thought she was a cold bitch, but she was the only other woman in town with the brains to challenge Merthin. She had a small box of books she had inherited from her father, the bishop, and Merthin spent evenings at her house, reading. Whether anything else went on, Caris did not know.

When the tour was over, Edmund took Guillaume back across the water, but Caris stayed behind to talk to Merthin. “Good customer?” he asked as they watched the raft being poled away.

“We’ve just sold him two sacks of cheap wool for less than we paid.” A sack was 364 pounds weight of wool, washed clean and dried. This year, the cheap wool was selling for thirty-six shillings a sack, the good quality for about double that.

“Why?”

“When prices are falling, it’s better to have cash than wool.”

“But surely you anticipated a poor fair.”

“We didn’t expect it to be this bad.”

“I’m surprised. In the past, your father has always had a supernatural ability to foresee trends.”

Caris hesitated. “It’s the combination of slack demand and the lack of a bridge.” In truth, she was surprised, too. She had watched her father buy fleeces in the same quantity as usual, despite the poor prospects, and had wondered why he did not play safe by reducing his purchases.

“I suppose you’ll try to sell your surplus at the Shiring Fair,” Merthin said.

“It’s what Earl Roland wants everyone to do. The trouble is, we’re not regulars there. The locals will cream off the best of the business. It’s what happens in Kingsbridge: my father and two or three others strike large deals with the biggest buyers, leaving smaller operators and outsiders to scrabble for the leftovers. I’m sure the Shiring merchants do the same. We might sell a few sacks there, but there’s no real chance we can get rid of it all.”

“What will you do?”

“That’s why I’ve come to talk to you. We may have to stop work on the bridge.”

He stared at her. “No,” he said quietly.

“I’m very sorry, but my father doesn’t have the money. He’s put it all into

fleeces that he can't sell."

Merthin looked as if he had been slapped. After a moment he said: "We have to find another way!"

Her heart went out to him, but she could think of nothing hopeful to say. "My father pledged seventy pounds to the bridge. He's paid out half already. The rest, I'm afraid, is in woolsacks at his warehouse."

"He can't be completely penniless."

"Very nearly. And the same applies to several other citizens who promised money for the bridge."

"I could slow down," Merthin said desperately. "Lay off some craftsmen, and run down the stocks of materials."

"Then you wouldn't have a bridge ready by next year's fair, and we'd be in worse trouble."

"Better than giving up altogether."

"Yes, it would be," she said. "But don't do anything yet. When the Fleece Fair is over, we'll think again. I just wanted you to know the situation."

Merthin still looked pale. "I appreciate it."

The raft came back, and Jimmie waited to take her to the shore. As she walked on board, Caris said casually: "And how is Elizabeth Clerk?"

Merthin pretended to be a little surprised by the question. "She's fine, I think," he said.

"You seem to be seeing a lot of her."

"Not especially. We've always been friends."

"Yes, of course," Caris said, though it was not really true. Merthin had completely ignored Elizabeth for most of last year, when he and Caris were spending so much time together. But it would have been undignified to contradict him, so she said no more.

She waved good-bye and Jimmie pushed the raft off. Merthin was trying to give the impression that his relationship with Elizabeth was not a romance. Perhaps that was true. Or perhaps he was embarrassed to admit to Caris that he was in love with someone else. She could not tell. One thing she felt sure of: it was a romance on Elizabeth's side. Caris could tell, just by the way Elizabeth looked at him. Elizabeth might be an ice maiden, but she was hot for Merthin.

The raft bumped against the opposite bank. Caris stepped off and walked up the hill into the center of the city.

Merthin had been deeply shaken by her news. Caris felt like crying when she recalled the shock and dismay on his face. That was how he had looked when she had refused to rekindle their love affair.

She still did not know how she was going to spend her life. She had always assumed that, whatever she did, she would live in a comfortable house paid for by a profitable business. Now even that ground was moving under

her feet. She racked her brains for some way out of the mess. Her father was oddly serene, as if he had not yet grasped the scale of his losses; but she knew that something had to be done.

Walking up the main street, she passed Elfric's daughter, Griselda, carrying her six-month-old baby. It was a boy, and she had named him Merthin, a permanent reproach to the original Merthin for not marrying her. Griselda was still maintaining a pretense of injured innocence. Everyone else now accepted that Merthin was not the father, though some townspeople still thought he should have married her anyway, as he had lain with her.

As Caris came to her own house, her father came out. She stared at him in astonishment. He was dressed only in his underwear: a long undershirt, drawers, and hose. "Where are your clothes?" she said.

He looked down at himself and made a disgusted sound. "I'm getting absentminded," he said, and he went back indoors.

He must have taken his coat off to go to the privy, she thought, then forgotten to put it on again. Was that just his age? He was only forty-eight, and besides, it seemed worse than mere forgetfulness. She felt unnerved.

He returned normally dressed, and they crossed the main street together and entered the priory grounds. Edmund said: "Did you tell Merthin about the money?"

"Yes. He was terribly shocked."

"What did he say?"

"That he could spend less by slowing the pace."

"But then we wouldn't have a bridge in time for next year."

"But, as he said, that would be better than abandoning the bridge half-built."

They came to the stall of Perkin Wigleigh, selling laying hens. His flirtatious daughter, Annet, had a tray of eggs held up by a strap around her neck. Behind the counter Caris saw her friend Gwenda, who was now working for Perkin. Eight months pregnant, with heavy breasts and a swollen belly, Gwenda stood with one hand on her hip, stretching in the classic pose of the expectant mother with an aching back.

Caris calculated that she would now be eight months pregnant, if she had not taken Mattie's potion. After the abortion her breasts had leaked milk, and she could not help feeling that this was her body's reproach for what she had done. She suffered pangs of regret but, whenever she thought about it logically, she knew that if she had her time over again she would do the same.

Gwenda caught Caris's eye and smiled. Against all the odds, Gwenda had got what she wanted: Wulfric for her husband. He was there now, strong as a horse and twice as handsome, lifting a stack of wooden crates onto the flatbed of a cart. Caris was thrilled for Gwenda. "How do you feel today?" she said.

"My back's been hurting all morning."

“Not long, now.”

“A couple of weeks, I think.”

Edmund said: “Who’s this, my dear?”

“Don’t you remember Gwenda?” said Caris. “She’s been a guest at your house at least once a year for the past ten years!”

Edmund smiled. “I didn’t recognize you, Gwenda—it must be the pregnancy. You look well, though.”

They moved on. Wulfric had not been given his inheritance, Caris knew: Gwenda had failed in that task. Caris was not sure exactly what had gone on last September, when Gwenda had gone to plead with Ralph, but it seemed Ralph had made some kind of promise then reneged. Anyway, Gwenda now hated Ralph with a passion that was almost frightening.

Nearby was a line of stalls at which local cloth merchants were selling brown burel, the loosely woven fabric that was bought by all but the rich for their homemade clothing. They seemed to be doing good business, unlike the wool merchants. Raw wool was a wholesale business—the absence of a few big buyers could ruin the market. But cloth was retail. Everyone needed it, everyone bought it. A bit less, perhaps, when times were hard, but they still needed clothes.

A vague thought formed in the back of Caris’s mind. When merchants could not sell their wool, they sometimes had it woven and tried to sell it as cloth. But it was a lot of work, and there was not much profit in brown burel. Everyone bought the cheapest, and sellers had to keep the price down.

She looked at the cloth stalls with new eyes. “I wonder what fetches the most money,” she said. The burel was twelve pence per yard. You had to pay half as much again for cloth that had been fulled—thickened by pounding in water—and still more for colors other than the natural dull brown. Peter Dyer’s stall featured green, yellow, and pink cloth at two shillings—twenty-four pence—per yard, even though the colors were not very bright.

She turned to her father, to tell him the notion that was forming in her mind; but, before she could speak, something happened to distract her.

Being at the Fleece Fair reminded Ralph unpleasantly of the same event a year ago, and he touched his misshapen nose. How had that occurred? It had started with him harmlessly teasing the peasant girl, Annet, then teaching her oafish paramour a lesson in respect; but somehow it had ended up in humiliation for Ralph.

As he approached Perkin’s stall, he consoled himself by reflecting on what had happened since. He had saved Earl Roland’s life after the collapse of the bridge; he had pleased the earl by his decisive behavior at the quarry; and he had at last been made a lord, albeit over nothing more than the little

village of Wigleigh. He had killed a man, Ben Wheeler—a carter, so there was no honor in it, but all the same he had proved to himself that he could do it.

He had even made up his quarrel with his brother. Their mother had forced the issue, inviting them both to dinner on Christmas day, insisting that they shake hands. It was a misfortune, their father had said, that they served masters who were rivals, but each had a duty to do his best, like soldiers who found themselves on opposing sides in a civil war. Ralph was pleased, and he thought Merthin felt the same.

He had been able to take a satisfying revenge on Wulfric, by denying him his inheritance and, at the same time, his girl. The eye-catching Annet was now married to Billy Howard, and Wulfric had to content himself with the ugly, though passionate, Gwenda.

It was a pity Wulfric did not look more crushed. He seemed to walk tall and proud around the village, as if he, not Ralph, owned the place. All his neighbors liked him, and his pregnant wife worshipped him. Despite the defeats Ralph had inflicted, Wulfric somehow emerged as the hero. Perhaps it was because his wife was so lusty.

Ralph would have liked to tell Wulfric about Gwenda's visit to him at the Bell. "I lay with your wife," he wanted to say. "And she liked it." That would wipe the proud look off Wulfric's face. But then Wulfric would also know that Ralph had made a promise and, shamefully, broken it—which would just make Wulfric feel superior all over again. Ralph shuddered when he thought of the contempt Wulfric and others would feel for him if they ever found out about that betrayal. His brother, Merthin, in particular, would despise him for it. No, his tumble with Gwenda would have to remain a secret.

They were all at the stall. Perkin was the first to see Ralph approaching, and greeted his lord as obsequiously as ever. "Good day, Lord Ralph," he said, bowing; and his wife, Peggy, curtseyed behind him. Gwenda was there, rubbing her back as if it hurt. Then Ralph saw Annet with her tray of eggs, and he remembered touching her small breast, round and firm like the eggs on the tray. She saw him looking, and dropped her eyes demurely. He wanted to touch her breast again. Why not? he thought—I'm her lord. Then he saw Wulfric, at the back of the stall. The boy had been loading crates onto a cart, but now he stood still, looking at Ralph. His face was carefully expressionless, but his gaze was level and steady. His look could not be called insolent, but for Ralph there was no mistaking the threat. It could not have been clearer if Ralph had said, *Touch her and I'll kill you.*

Perhaps I should do it, Ralph thought. Let him attack me. I'll run him through with my sword. I will be completely in the right, a lord defending himself against a peasant maddened with hatred. Holding Wulfric's gaze, he lifted his hand to fondle Annet's breast—and then Gwenda let out a sharp cry

of pain and distress, and all eyes turned to her.

31

Caris heard a cry of pain, and recognized the voice of Gwenda. She felt a throb of fear. Something was wrong. In a few hurried steps she was at Perkin's stall.

Gwenda was sitting on a stool, looking pale, her face twisted in a grimace of pain, her hand on her hip again. Her dress was wet.

Perkin's wife, Peg, said briskly: "Her waters have broken. Her labor is beginning."

"It's early," Caris said anxiously.

"The baby is coming anyway."

"This is dangerous." Caris made a decision. "Let's take her to the hospital." Women did not normally go to the hospital to give birth, but they would admit Gwenda if Caris insisted. An early baby could be vulnerable; everyone knew that.

Wulfric appeared. Caris was struck by how young he looked. He was seventeen and about to become a father.

Gwenda said: "I feel a bit wobbly. I'll be all right in a minute."

"I'll carry you," Wulfric said, and he picked her up effortlessly.

"Follow me," said Caris. She walked ahead of him through the stalls, calling: "Stand aside, please—stand aside!" In a minute they were at the hospital.

The door was wide open. Overnight visitors had been tipped out hours ago, and their straw mattresses were now piled high against one wall. Several employees and novices were energetically washing the floor with mops and buckets. Caris addressed the nearest cleaner, a middle-aged woman with bare feet. "Fetch Old Julie, quickly—tell her Caris sent you."

Caris found a reasonably clean mattress and spread it on the floor near the altar. She was not sure how effective altars were at helping sick people, but she followed the convention. Wulfric put Gwenda down on the bed as carefully as if she had been made of glass. She lay with her knees up and her legs parted.

A few moments later Old Julie arrived, and Caris thought how often in her life she had been comforted by this nun, who was probably not much past forty but seemed ancient. "This is Gwenda Wigleigh," said Caris. "She may be fine, but the baby is coming several weeks early, and I thought it a sensible precaution to bring her here. We were just outside, anyway."

"Very wise," said Julie, gently pushing Caris aside to kneel by the bed.

“How do you feel, my dear?” she said to Gwenda.

While Julie talked to Gwenda in a low voice, Caris looked at Wulfric. His handsome young face was contorted with anxiety. Caris knew that he had never intended to marry Gwenda—he had always wanted Annet. However, he now seemed as concerned for her as if he had loved her for years.

Gwenda cried out in pain. “There, there,” said Julie. She knelt between Gwenda’s feet and looked up her dress. “Baby’s coming quite soon,” she said.

Another nun appeared, and Caris recognized Mair, the novice with the angel face. She said: “Shall I get Mother Cecilia?”

“No need to bother her,” said Julie. “Just go to the storeroom and fetch me the wooden box with ‘Birth’ written on the top.”

Mair hurried away.

Gwenda said: “Oh, God, it hurts.”

“Keep pushing,” said Julie.

Wulfric said: “What’s wrong, for God’s sake?”

“Nothing’s wrong,” said Julie. “This is normal. This is how women give birth. You must be the youngest of your family, otherwise you would have seen your mother like this.”

Caris, too, was the young sibling in her family. She knew that childbirth was painful, but she had never actually watched it, and she was shocked by how bad it was.

Mair returned and placed a wooden box on the floor next to Julie.

Gwenda stopped groaning. Her eyes closed, and she looked almost as if she might have been asleep. Then, a few minutes later, she cried out again.

Julie said to Wulfric: “Sit beside her and hold her hand.” He obeyed immediately.

Julie was still looking up Gwenda’s dress. “Stop pushing now,” she said after a while. “Take lots of short breaths.” She panted to show Gwenda what she meant. Gwenda complied, and it seemed to ease her distress for a few minutes. Then she cried out again.

Caris could hardly stand it. If this was normal, what was childbirth like when there were difficulties? She lost her sense of time: everything was happening very quickly, but Gwenda’s torment seemed endless. Caris had the powerless feeling that she hated so much, the feeling that had overwhelmed her when her mother died. She wanted to help, but she did not know what to do, and it made her so anxious that she bit her lip until she tasted blood.

Julie said: “Here comes baby.” She reached between Gwenda’s legs. The dress fell away, and suddenly Caris could clearly see the baby’s head, facedown, covered in wet hair, emerging from an opening that seemed impossibly stretched. “God help us, no wonder it hurts!” she said in horror.

Julie supported the head with her left hand. The baby slowly turned sideways, then its tiny shoulders came out. Its skin was slippery with blood

and some other fluid. “Just relax now,” Julie said. “It’s nearly over. Baby looks beautiful.”

Beautiful? Caris thought. To her it looked horrible.

The baby’s torso came out with a fat, pulsing blue cord attached to its navel. Then its legs and feet came all in a rush. Julie picked up the baby in both hands. It was tiny, its head not much bigger than the palm of Julie’s hand.

Something seemed wrong. Caris realized the baby was not breathing.

Julie brought the baby’s face close to her own and blew into its miniature nostrils.

The baby suddenly opened its mouth, gasped air, and cried.

“Praise God,” said Julie.

She wiped the baby’s face with the sleeve of her robe, tenderly cleaning around the ears, eyes, nose, and mouth. Then she pressed the newborn to her bosom, closing her eyes; and in that instant Caris saw a lifetime of self-denial. The moment passed, and Julie laid the baby on Gwenda’s chest.

Gwenda looked down. “Is it a boy or a girl?”

Caris realized that none of them had looked. Julie leaned over and parted the baby’s knees. “A boy,” she said.

The blue cord stopped pulsing and shriveled, turning white. Julie took from the box two short lengths of string and tied off the umbilical cord. Then she took out a small, sharp knife and cut the cord between the two knots.

Mair took the knife from her and handed her a tiny blanket from the box. Julie took the baby from Gwenda, wrapped him in the blanket, and gave him back. Mair found some pillows and propped Gwenda up. Gwenda pushed down the neck of her shift and took out a swollen breast. She gave the baby the nipple, and he began to suck. After a minute, he seemed to sleep.

The other end of the cord was still hanging out of Gwenda. A few minutes later it moved, and a shapeless red mass slipped out: the afterbirth. Blood soaked the mattress. Julie lifted the mass, handed it to Mair and said: “Burn this.”

Julie scrutinized Gwenda’s pelvic area and frowned. Caris followed her gaze, and saw that the blood was still flowing. Julie wiped the stains away from Gwenda’s body, but the red streaks reappeared immediately.

When Mair came back, Julie said: “Fetch Mother Cecilia, please, right away.”

Wulfric said: “Is something wrong?”

“The bleeding should have stopped by now,” Julie answered.

Suddenly there was tension in the air. Wulfric looked frightened. The baby cried, and Gwenda gave him the nipple again. He suckled briefly and slept again. Julie kept looking at the doorway.

At last Cecilia appeared. She looked at Gwenda and said: “Has the

afterbirth come out?”

“A few minutes ago.”

“Did you put the baby to the breast?”

“As soon as we had cut the cord.”

“I’ll get a physician.” Cecilia walked quickly away.

She was gone some minutes. When she returned, she was carrying a small glass vessel containing a yellowish fluid. “Prior Godwyn has prescribed this,” she said.

Caris was indignant. “Doesn’t he want to examine Gwenda?”

“Certainly not,” Cecilia said crisply. “He’s a priest as well as a monk. Such men don’t look upon women’s private parts.”

“Podex,” Caris said contemptuously. It was the Latin for asshole.

Cecilia pretended not to hear. She knelt beside Gwenda. “Drink this, my dear.”

Gwenda drank the potion, but she continued to bleed. She was pale, and looked weaker than she had immediately after the birth. The baby slept contentedly on her breast, but everyone else was scared. Wulfric kept standing up and sitting down again. Julie wiped the blood off Gwenda’s thighs and looked as if she might cry. Gwenda asked for something to drink, and Mair brought a cup of ale.

Caris took Julie aside and said in a whisper: “She’s bleeding to death!”

“We’ve done what we can,” Julie said.

“Have you seen cases like this before?”

“Yes, three.”

“How did they end?”

“The women died.”

Caris gave a low groan of despair. “There must be something we can do!”

“She’s in God’s hands now. You could pray.”

“That’s not what I meant by doing something.”

“You be careful what you say.”

Caris immediately felt guilty. She did not want to quarrel with someone as kindly as Julie. “I’m sorry, sister. I didn’t mean to deny the power of prayer.”

“I should hope not.”

“But I’m not yet ready to leave Gwenda in the hands of God.”

“What else is there to do?”

“You’ll see.” Caris hurried out of the hospital.

She pushed impatiently through the customers strolling around the fair. It seemed amazing to her that people could still be buying and selling when a drama of life and death was going on a few yards away. But there had been many occasions when she had heard that a mother-to-be had gone into labor, and she had never stopped what she was doing, just wished the woman well and carried on.

She emerged from the priory grounds and ran through the streets of the town to Mattie Wise's house. She knocked on the door and opened it. To her relief, Mattie was at home.

"Gwenda's just had her baby," she said.

"What's gone wrong?" Mattie said immediately.

"The baby's all right, but Gwenda's still bleeding."

"Has the afterbirth come out?"

"Yes."

"The bleeding should have stopped."

"Can you help her?"

"Perhaps. I'll try."

"Hurry, please!"

Mattie took a pot off the fire and put on her shoes, then the two of them left, Mattie locking her door behind her.

Caris said vehemently: "I'm never going to have a baby, I swear."

They rushed to the priory and went into the hospital. Caris noticed the strong smell of blood.

Mattie was careful to acknowledge Old Julie. "Good afternoon, Sister Juliana."

"Hello, Mattie." Julie looked disapproving. "Do you believe you can help this woman, when the holy prior's remedies have not been blessed with success?"

"If you pray for me and for the patient, Sister, who knows what may happen?"

It was a diplomatic answer, and Julie was mollified.

Mattie knelt beside mother and child. Gwenda was becoming paler. Her eyes were closed. The baby sought blindly for the nipple, but Gwenda seemed too tired to help him.

Mattie said: "She must keep drinking—but not strong liquor. Please bring her a jug of warm water with a small glass of wine mixed into it. Then ask the kitchener if he has a clear soup, warm but not hot."

Mair looked questioningly at Julie, who hesitated, then said: "Go—but don't tell anyone that you're doing Mattie's bidding." The novice hurried off.

Mattie pushed Gwenda's dress up as high as it would go, exposing all of her abdomen. The skin that had been stretched so taut a few hours ago was now flabby and folded. Mattie grasped the loose flesh, digging her fingers gently but firmly into Gwenda's belly. Gwenda grunted, but it was a sound of discomfort rather than pain.

Mattie said: "The womb is soft. It has failed to contract. That's why she's bleeding."

Wulfric, who seemed close to tears, said: "Can you do anything for her?"

"I don't know." Mattie began to massage, her fingers apparently pressing

Gwenda's womb through the skin and flesh of her belly. "Sometimes this provokes the womb to shrink," she said.

Everyone watched in silence. Caris was almost afraid to breathe.

Mair came back with the water-and-wine mixture. "Give her some, please," Mattie said without pausing in her massage. Mair held a cup to Gwenda's lips and she drank thirstily. "Not too much," Mattie warned. Mair took the cup away.

Mattie continued to massage, glancing from time to time at Gwenda's pelvis. Julie's lips moved in silent prayer. The blood flowed without letup.

Looking worried, Mattie changed her position. She put her left hand on Gwenda's belly just below the navel, then her right hand over the left. She pressed down, slowly putting on more pressure. Caris was afraid it must hurt the patient, but Gwenda seemed only half-conscious. Mattie leaned farther over Gwenda until she seemed to be putting all her weight onto her hands.

Julie said: "She's stopped bleeding!"

Mattie did not change her position. "Can anyone here count to five hundred?"

"Yes," Caris said.

"Slowly, please."

Caris began to count aloud. Julie wiped the blood off Gwenda again, and this time the streaks did not reappear. She began to pray aloud. "Holy Mary, Mother of the Lord Jesus Christ…"

Everyone was still, like a group of statuary: the mother and baby on the bed, the wise woman pressing down on the mother's belly; the husband, the praying nun, and Caris counting: "A hundred and eleven, a hundred and twelve…"

As well as her own voice and Julie's, Caris could hear the sound of the fair outside, the roar of hundreds of people all speaking at once. The strain of pressing down began to show on Mattie's face, but she did not move. Wulfric was crying silently, tears streaming down his sunburned cheeks.

When Caris reached five hundred, Mattie slowly eased her weight off Gwenda's abdomen. Everyone looked at her vagina, dreading the gush of blood.

It did not come.

Mattie breathed a long sigh of relief. Wulfric smiled. Julie said: "Praise God!"

Mattie said: "Give her another drink, please."

Once again, Mair put a full cup to Gwenda's lips. Gwenda opened her eyes and drank it all.

"You're going to be all right now," Mattie said.

Gwenda whispered: "Thank you." Then she closed her eyes.

Mattie looked at Mair. "Perhaps you should go and see about that soup,"

she said. “The woman must rebuild her strength, otherwise her milk will dry up.”

Mair nodded and left.

The baby cried. Gwenda seemed to revive. She moved the baby to her other breast and helped him find the nipple. Then she looked up at Wulfric and smiled.

Julie said: “What a beautiful little boy.”

Caris looked at the baby again. For the first time, she saw him as an individual. What would he be like—strong and true like Wulfric, or weak and dishonest like his grandfather Joby? He did not resemble either, she thought. “Who does he look like?” she said.

Julie said: “He has his mother’s coloring.”

That was right, Caris thought. The baby had dark hair and beige skin, where Wulfric had fair skin and a mane of dark blond hair. The baby’s face reminded her of someone, and after a moment she realized it was Merthin. A foolish thought crossed her mind, and she dismissed it immediately. All the same, the resemblance was there. “You know who he reminds me of?” she said.

Suddenly she caught a look from Gwenda. Her eyes widened, an expression of panic crossed her face, and she gave a barely perceptible shake of her head. It was gone in an instant, but the message was unmistakable: *Shut up!* Caris clamped her teeth together.

“Who?” said Julie innocently.

Caris hesitated, desperately thinking of something to say. At last she was inspired. “Philemon, Gwenda’s brother,” she said.

“Of course,” said Julie. “Someone should tell him to come and see his new nephew.”

Caris was bewildered. So the baby was not Wulfric’s? Then whose? It could not be Merthin’s. He might have lain with Gwenda—he was certainly vulnerable to temptation—but he could never have kept it secret from Caris afterward. If not Merthin…

Caris was struck by a dreadful thought. What *had* gone on that day when Gwenda went to plead with Ralph for Wulfric’s inheritance? Could the baby be *Ralph*’s? It was too grim to contemplate.

She looked at Gwenda, then at the baby, then at Wulfric. Wulfric was smiling with joy, though his face was still wet with tears. He had no suspicions.

Julie said: “Have you thought about the baby’s name?”

“Oh, yes,” said Wulfric. “I want to name him Samuel.”

Gwenda nodded, looking down at the baby’s face. “Samuel,” she said. “Sammy. Sam.”

“After my father,” Wulfric said happily.

32

One year after the death of Anthony, Kingsbridge Priory was a different place, Godwyn thought, with satisfaction, as he stood in the cathedral on the Sunday after the Fleece Fair.

The main difference was the separation of monks and nuns. They no longer mingled in the cloisters, the library, or the scriptorium. Even here in the church, a new carved oak screen running down the center of the choir prevented them from looking at one another during the services. Only in the hospital were they sometimes forced to mix.

In his sermon, Prior Godwyn said the collapse of the bridge a year ago had been God's punishment for laxity in the monks and nuns, and for sin among the townspeople. The new spirit of rigor and purity at the priory, and piety and submission in the town, would lead to a better life for all, in this world and the hereafter. He felt it went down quite well.

Afterward he had dinner with Brother Simeon, the treasurer, in the prior's house. Philemon served them stewed eel and cider. "I want to build a new prior's house," Godwyn said.

Simeon's long, thin face seemed to get longer. "Any particular reason?"

"I'm sure I am the only prior in Christendom who lives in a house like a leather tanner's. Think of the people who have been guests here in the last twelve months—the earl of Shiring, the bishop of Kingsbridge, the earl of Monmouth—this building isn't appropriate for such folk. It gives a poor impression of us and of our order. We need a magnificent building to reflect the prestige of Kingsbridge Priory."

"You want a palace," said Simeon.

Godwyn detected a disapproving note in Simeon's tone of voice, as if Godwyn's aim were to glorify himself rather than the priory. "Call it a palace, if you wish," he said stiffly. "Why not? Bishops and priors live in palaces. It's not for their own comfort, but for that of their guests, and for the reputation of the institution they represent."

"Of course," said Simeon, giving up that line of argument. "But you can't afford it."

Godwyn frowned. In theory, his senior monks were encouraged to debate with him, but the truth was that he hated to be opposed. "That's ridiculous," he said. "Kingsbridge is one of the richest monasteries in the land."

"So it is always said. And we do own vast resources. But the price of wool has fallen this year, for the fifth year in succession. Our income is shrinking."

Philemon suddenly interjected: "They say the Italian merchants are buying fleeces in Spain."

Philemon was changing. Since achieving his ambition and becoming a novice monk, he had lost the awkward-boy look and had grown in confidence to the point where he could join in a conversation between prior and treasurer—and make an interesting contribution.

"Could be," said Simeon. "Also, the Fleece Fair was smaller, because there's no bridge, so we earned a lot less in duty and tolls than we usually do."

Godwyn said: "But we hold thousands of acres of farmland."

"In this part of the country, where most of our lands are, there was a poor harvest last year, after all that rain. Many of our serfs struggled to stay alive. It's hard to force them to pay their rents when they're hungry—"

"They must pay, all the same," Godwyn said. "Monks get hungry, too."

Philemon spoke again. "If the bailiff of a village says that a serf has defaulted on his rent, or that part of the land is untenanted therefore no rent is due, you haven't really got any way of checking that he's telling the truth. Bailiffs can be bribed by serfs."

Godwyn felt frustrated. He had had numerous conversations like this in the past year. He had been determined to tighten up control of the priory's finances, but every time he tried to change things he ran into barriers. "Have you got a suggestion?" he said irritably to Philemon.

"Send an inspector on a tour of the villages. Let him speak to bailiffs, look at the land, go into the cottages of serfs who are said to be starving."

"If the bailiff can be bribed, so can the inspector."

"Not if he's a monk. What use have we for money?"

Godwyn recalled Philemon's old inclination to stealing. It was true that monks had no use for personal money, at least in theory, but that did not mean they were incorruptible. However, a visit from the prior's inspector would certainly put bailiffs on their toes. "It's a good idea," Godwyn said. "Would you like to be the inspector?"

"I'd be honored."

"Then it's settled." Godwyn turned back to Simeon. "All the same, we still have a huge income."

"And huge costs," Simeon replied. "We pay a subvention to our bishop. We feed, clothe, and house twenty-five monks, seven novices, and nineteen pensioners of the priory. We employ thirty people as cleaners, cooks, stable boys, and so on. We spend a *fortune* on candles. Monks' robes—"

"All right, I've grasped your point," Godwyn said impatiently. "But I still want to build a palace."

"Where will you go for the money, then?"

Godwyn sighed. "Where we always go, in the end. I'll ask Mother Cecilia."

He saw her a few minutes later. Normally he would have asked her to

come to him, as a sign of the superiority of the male within the church; but on this occasion he thought it best to flatter her.

The prioress's house was an exact copy of the prior's, but it had a different feel. There were cushions and rugs, flowers in a bowl on the table, embroidered samplers on the wall illustrating Bible stories and texts, and a cat asleep in front of the fireplace. Cecilia was finishing a dinner of roast lamb and dark red wine. She put on a veil when Godwyn arrived, in accordance with a rule Godwyn had introduced, for occasions when monks had to talk to nuns.

He found Cecilia difficult to read, veiled or not. She had formally welcomed his election as prior, and had gone along unprotestingly with his stricter rules about separation of monks and nuns, making only the occasional practical point about the efficient running of the hospital. She had never opposed him, and yet he felt she was not really on his side. It seemed he was no longer able to charm her. When he was younger, he had been able to make her laugh like a girl. Now she was no longer susceptible—or perhaps he had lost the knack.

Small talk was difficult with a woman in a veil, so he plunged straight into his topic. "I think we should build two new houses for entertaining noble and high-ranking guests," he said. "One for men, one for women. They would be called the prior's house and the prioress's house, but their main purpose would be to accommodate visitors in the style to which they're accustomed."

"That's an interesting idea," Cecilia said. As ever, she was compliant without being enthusiastic.

"We should have impressive stone buildings," Godwyn went on. "After all, you have been prioress here for more than a decade—you are one of the most senior nuns in the kingdom."

"We want the guests to be impressed, not by our wealth, but by the holiness of the priory and the piety of the monks and nuns, of course," she said.

"Indeed—but the buildings should symbolize that, as the cathedral symbolizes the majesty of God."

"Where do you think the new buildings should be sited?"

This was good, Godwyn thought—she was already getting down to details. "Close to where the old houses are now."

"So, yours near the east end of the church, next to the chapter house, and mine down here by the fishpond."

It crossed Godwyn's mind that she might be mocking him. He could not see her expression. Imposing a veil on women had its disadvantages, he reflected. "You might prefer a new location," he said.

"Yes, I might."

There was a short silence. Godwyn was finding it hard to broach the

subject of money. He was going to have to change the rule about veils—make an exception for the prioress, perhaps. It was just too difficult to negotiate like this.

He was forced to plunge again. “Unfortunately, I would not be able to make any contribution to the building costs. The monastery is very poor.”

“To the cost of the prioress’s house, you mean?” she said. “I wouldn’t expect it.”

“No, actually, I meant the cost of the prior’s house.”

“Oh. So you want the nunnery to pay for your new house as well as mine.”

“I’m afraid I would have to ask you that, yes. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Well, if it’s for the prestige of Kingsbridge Priory…”

“I knew you would see it that way.”

“Let me see…Right now I’m building new cloisters for the nuns, as we no longer share with the monks.”

Godwyn made no comment. He was irritated that Cecilia had employed Merthin to design the cloisters, rather than the cheaper Elfric, which was a wasteful extravagance; but this was not the moment to say so.

Cecilia went on: “And when that’s done, I need to build a nuns’ library and buy some books for it, as we can’t use your library anymore.”

Godwyn tapped his foot impatiently. This seemed irrelevant.

“And then we need a covered walkway to the church, as we now take a different route to that used by the monks, and we have no protection in bad weather.”

“Very reasonable,” Godwyn commented, though he wanted to say: *Stop dithering!*

“So,” she said with an air of finality, “I think we could consider this proposal in three years’ time.”

“Three years? I want to start now!”

“Oh, I don’t think we can contemplate that.”

“Why not?”

“We have a budget for building, you see.”

“But isn’t this more important?”

“We must stick to our budget.”

“Why?”

“So that we remain financially strong and independent,” she said; then she added pointedly: “I wouldn’t like to go begging.”

Godwyn did not know what to say. Worse, he had a ghastly feeling that she was laughing at him behind the veil. He could not stand to be laughed at. He stood up abruptly. “Thank you, Mother Cecilia,” he said coldly. “We’ll talk about this again.”

“Yes,” she said, “in three years’ time. I look forward to it.”

Now he was sure she was laughing. He turned away and left as quickly as he could.

Back in his own house, he threw himself in a chair, fuming. “I hate that woman,” he said to Philemon, who was still there.

“She said no?”

“She said she would consider it in three years’ time.”

“That’s worse than a no,” said Philemon. “It’s a three-year no.”

“We’re always in her power, because she has money.”

“I listen to the talk of the older men,” Philemon said, apparently irrelevantly. “It’s surprising how much you learn.”

“What are you getting at?”

“When the priory first built mills, and dug fishponds, and fenced off rabbit warrens, the priors made a law that townspeople had to use the monks’ facilities, and pay for them. They weren’t allowed to grind their corn at home, or full cloth by treading it, nor could they have their own ponds and warrens—they had to buy from us. The law ensured that the priory got back its costs.”

“But the law fell out of use?”

“It changed. Instead of a prohibition, people were allowed their own facilities if they paid a fine. Then *that* fell out of use, in Prior Anthony’s time.”

“And now there’s a hand mill in every house.”

“And all the fishmongers have ponds, there are half a dozen warrens, and dyers full their own cloth by making their wives and children tread it, instead of bringing it to the priory’s fulling mill.”

Godwyn was excited. “If all those people paid a fine for the privilege of having their own facilities…”

“It could be quite a lot of money.”

“They would squeal like pigs.” Godwyn frowned. “Can we prove what we say?”

“There are plenty of people who remember the fines. But it’s bound to be written in the priory records somewhere—probably in *Timothy’s Book*.”

“You’d better find out exactly how much the fines were. If we’re resting on the ground of precedent, we’d better get it right.”

“If I may make a suggestion…”

“Of course.”

“You could announce the new regime from the pulpit of the cathedral on Sunday morning. That would serve to emphasize that it’s the will of God.”

“Good idea,” said Godwyn. “That’s exactly what I’ll do.”

“I’ve got the solution,” Caris said to her father.

He sat back in the big wooden seat at the head of the table, a slight smile on his face. She knew that look. It was skeptical, but willing to listen. “Go on,” he said.

She was a little nervous. She felt sure her idea would work—saving her father’s fortune and Merthin’s bridge—but could she convince Edmund? “We take our surplus wool and have it woven into cloth and dyed,” she said simply. She held her breath, waiting for his reaction.

“Wool merchants often try that in hard times,” he said. “But tell me why you think it would work. What would it cost?”

“For cleaning, spinning, and weaving, four shillings per sack.”

“And how much cloth would that make?”

“A sack of poor-quality wool, that you bought for thirty-six shillings, and wove for four more shillings, would make forty-eight yards of cloth.”

“Which you would sell for…?”

“Undyed, brown burel sells for a shilling a yard, so forty-eight shillings—eight more than we would have paid out.”

“It’s not much, considering the work we would have put in.”

“But that’s not the best of it.”

“Keep going.”

“Weavers sell their brown burel because they’re in a hurry to get the money. But if you spend another twenty shillings fulling the cloth, to thicken it, then dyeing and finishing it, you can get double the price—two shillings a yard, ninety-six shillings for the whole lot—thirty-six shillings more than you paid!”

Edmund looked dubious. “If it’s so easy, why don’t more people do it?”

“Because they don’t have the money to lay out.”

“Nor do I!”

“You’ve got three pounds from Guillaume of London.”

“Am I to have nothing with which to buy wool next year?”

“At these prices, you’re better off out of the business.”

He laughed. “By the saints, you’re right. Very well, try it out with some cheap stuff. I’ve got five sacks of coarse Devon wool that the Italians never want. I’ll give you a sack of that, and see if you can do what you say.”

Two weeks later, Caris found Mark Webber smashing up his hand mill.

She was shocked to see a poor man destroying a valuable piece of equipment—so much so that, for a moment, she forgot her own troubles.

The hand mill consisted of two stone disks, each slightly roughened on one face. The smaller sat on the larger, fitting perfectly into a shallow

indentation, rough side to rough. A protruding wooden handle enabled the upper stone to be turned while the lower remained still. Ears of grain placed between the two stones would be rapidly ground to flour.

Most Kingsbridge people of the lower class had a hand mill. The very poor could not afford one, and the affluent did not need one—they could buy flour already ground by a miller. But for families such as the Webbers, who needed every penny they earned to feed their children, a hand mill was a money-saving godsend.

Mark had laid his on the ground in front of his small house. He had borrowed from somewhere a long-handled sledgehammer with an iron head. Two of his children were watching, a thin girl in a ragged dress and a naked toddler. He lifted the hammer over his head and swung it in a long arc. It was a sight to see: he was the biggest man in Kingsbridge, with shoulders like a carthorse. The stone crazed like an eggshell and fell into pieces.

Caris said: “What on earth are you doing?”

“We must grind corn at the prior’s watermills, and forfeit one sack in twenty-four as a fee,” Mark replied.

He seemed phlegmatic about it, but she was horrified. “I thought the new rules applied only to unlicensed windmills and watermills.”

“Tomorrow I have to go around with John Constable, searching people’s homes, breaking up illicit hand mills. I can’t have them saying I’ve got one of my own. That’s why I’m doing this in the street, where everyone can see.”

“I didn’t realize Godwyn intended to take the bread out of the mouths of the poor,” Caris said grimly.

“Luckily for us, we’ve got some weaving to do—thanks to you.”

Caris turned her mind to her own business. “How are you getting on?”

“Finished.”

“That was quick!”

“It takes longer in winter. But in summer, with sixteen hours of daylight, I can weave six yards in a day, with Madge helping.”

“Wonderful!”

“Come inside and I’ll show you.”

His wife, Madge, was standing over the cooking fire at the back of the one-room house, with a baby on one arm and a shy boy at her side. Madge was shorter than her husband by more than a foot, but her build was chunky. She had a large bust and a jutting behind, and she made Caris think of a plump pigeon. Her protruding jaw gave her an aggressive air that was not entirely misleading. Although combative, she was good-hearted, and Caris liked her. She offered her visitor a cup of cider, which Caris refused, knowing the family could not afford it.

Mark’s loom was a wooden frame, more than a yard square, on a stand. It took up most of the living space. Behind it, close to the back door, was a table

with two benches. Obviously they all slept on the floor around the loom.

“I make narrow dozens,” Mark explained. “A narrow dozen is a cloth a yard wide and twelve yards long. I can’t make broadcloth, because I haven’t room for such a wide loom.” Four rolls of brown burel were stacked against the wall. “One sack of wool makes four narrow dozens,” he said.

Caris had brought him the raw fleeces in a standard woolsack. Madge had arranged for the wool to be cleaned, sorted, and spun into yarn. The spinning was done by the poor women of the town, and the cleaning and sorting by their children.

Caris felt the cloth. She was excited: she had completed the first stage of her plan. “Why is it so loosely woven?” she asked.

Mark bristled. “Loose? My burel is the tightest weave in Kingsbridge!”

“I know—I didn’t mean to sound critical. But Italian cloth feels so different—yet they make it from our wool.”

“Partly it depends on the weaver’s strength, and how hard he can press down the batten to pack the wool.”

“I don’t think the Italian weavers are all stronger than you.”

“Then it’s their machines. The better the loom, the closer the weave.”

“I was afraid of that.” The implication was that Caris could not compete with high-quality Italian wool unless she bought Italian looms, which seemed impossible.

One problem at a time, she told herself. She paid Mark, counting out four shillings, of which he would have to give about half to the women who had done the spinning. Caris had made eight shillings profit, theoretically. Eight shillings would not pay for much work on the bridge. And at this rate it would take years to weave all her father’s surplus wool. “Is there any way we can produce cloth faster?” she said to Mark.

Madge answered. “There are other weavers in Kingsbridge, but most of them are committed to work for existing cloth merchants. I can find you more outside the town, though. The larger villages often have a weaver with a loom. He usually makes cloth for the villagers from their own yarn. Such men can easily switch to another job, if the money’s good.”

Caris concealed her anxiety. “All right,” she said. “I’ll let you know. Meanwhile, will you deliver these cloths to Peter Dyer for me?”

“Of course. I’ll take them now.”

Caris went home for dinner, deep in thought. To make any real difference, she would have to spend most of what money her father had left. If things went wrong, they would be even worse off. But what was the alternative? Her plan was risky, but no one else had any kind of plan at all.

When she arrived home, Petranilla was serving a mutton stew. Edmund sat at the head of the table. The financial setback of the Fleece Fair seemed to have affected him more severely than Caris would have expected. His normal

exuberance was subdued, and he often appeared thoughtful, not to say distracted. Caris was worried about him.

“I saw Mark Webber smashing up his hand mill,” she said as she sat down. “Where’s the sense in that?”

Petranilla put her nose in the air. “Godwyn is entirely within his rights,” she said.

“Those rights are out of date—they haven’t been enforced for years. Where else does a priory do such things?”

“In St. Albans,” Petranilla said triumphantly.

Edmund said: “I’ve heard of St. Albans. The townspeople periodically riot against the monastery.”

“Kingsbridge Priory is entitled to recoup the money it spent building mills,” Petranilla argued. “Just as you, Edmund, want to get back the money you’re putting into the bridge. How would you feel if someone built a second bridge?”

Edmund did not answer her, so Caris did. “It would depend entirely on how soon it happened,” she said. “The priory’s mills were built hundreds of years ago, as were the warrens and fishponds. No one has the right to hold back the development of the town forever.”

“The prior has a right to collect his dues,” she said stubbornly.

“Well, if he carries on like this, there will be no one to collect dues from. People will go and live in Shiring. They’re allowed hand mills there.”

“Don’t you understand that the needs of the priory are sacred?” Petranilla said angrily. “The monks serve God! By comparison with that, the lives of the townspeople are insignificant.”

“Is that what your son Godwyn believes?”

“Of course.”

“I was afraid of that.”

“Don’t you believe the prior’s work is sacred?”

Caris had no answer to that, so she just shrugged, and Petranilla looked triumphant.

The dinner was good, but Caris was too tense to eat much. As soon as the others had finished, she said: “I have to go and see Peter Dyer.”

Petranilla protested: “Are you going to spend more? You’ve already given Mark Webber four shillings of your father’s money.”

“Yes—and the cloth is worth twelve shillings more than the wool was, so I’ve made eight shillings.”

“No, you haven’t,” Petranilla said. “You haven’t sold the cloth yet.”

Petranilla was expressing doubts that Caris shared, in her more pessimistic moments, but she was stung into denial. “I will sell it, though—especially if it’s dyed red.”

“And what will Peter charge for dyeing and fulling four narrow dozens?”

“Twenty shillings—but the red cloth will be worth double the brown burel, so we’ll make another twenty-eight shillings.”

“If you sell it. And if you don’t?”

“I’ll sell it.”

Her father intervened. “Let her be,” he said to Petranilla. “I’ve told her she can give this a try.”

Shiring Castle stood on top of a hill. It was the home of the county sheriff. At the foot of the hill stood the gallows. Whenever there was a hanging, the prisoner was brought down from the castle on a cart, to be hanged in front of the church.

The square in which the gallows stood was also the marketplace. The Shiring Fair was held here, between the guildhall and a large timber building called the Wool Exchange. The bishop’s palace and numerous taverns also stood around the square.

This year, because of the troubles at Kingsbridge, there were more stalls than ever, and the fair spilled into the streets off the marketplace. Edmund had brought forty sacks of wool on ten carts, and could get more brought from Kingsbridge before the end of the week, if necessary.

To Caris’s dismay, it was not necessary. He sold ten sacks on the first day, then nothing until the end of the fair, when he sold another ten by reducing the price below what he had paid. She could not remember seeing him so down.

She put her four lengths of dull brownish red cloth on his stall, and over the week, yard by yard, she sold three of the four. “Look at it this way,” she said to her father on the last day of the fair. “Before, you had a sack of unsaleable wool and four shillings. Now you’ve got thirty-six shillings and a length of cloth.”

But her cheerfulness was only for his benefit. She was deeply depressed. She had boasted bravely that she could sell cloth. The result was not a complete failure, but it was no triumph. If she could not sell the cloth for more than it cost, then she did not have the solution to the problem. What was she going to do? She left the stall and went to survey other cloth sellers.

The best cloth came from Italy, as always. Caris stopped at the stall of Loro Fiorentino. Cloth merchants such as Loro were not wool buyers, though they often worked closely with buyers. Caris knew that Loro gave his English takings to Buonaventura, who used it to pay English merchants for their raw wool. Then, when the wool reached Florence, Buonaventura’s family would sell it, and with the proceeds pay back Loro’s family. That way, they all avoided the hazards of transporting barrels of gold and silver coins across Europe.

Loro had on his stall only two rolls of cloth, but the colors were much brighter than anything the local people could produce. “Is this all you brought?” Caris asked him.

“Of course not. I’ve sold the rest.”

She was surprised. “Everyone else is having a bad fair.”

He shrugged. “The finest cloth always sells.”

An idea was taking shape in Caris’s head. “How much is the scarlet?”

“Only seven shillings per yard, mistress.”

That was seven times the price of burel. “But who can afford it?”

“The bishop took a lot of my red, Lady Philippa some blue and green, a few daughters of the brewers and bakers in town, some lords and ladies from the villages round about…Even when times are hard, someone is prospering. This vermilion will be so beautiful on you.” With a swift motion, he unrolled the bale and draped a length over Caris’s shoulder. “Marvelous. See how everyone is looking at you already.”

She smiled. “I can see why you sell so much.” She handled the cloth. It was closely woven. She already had a cloak of Italian scarlet that she had inherited from her mother. It was her favorite garment. “What dye do they use to get this red?”

“Madder, the same as everyone.”

“But how do they make it so bright?”

“It’s no secret. They use alum. It brightens the color and also fixes it, so it won’t fade. A cloak in this color, for you, would be wonderful, a joy forever.”

“Alum,” she repeated. “Why don’t English dyers use it?”

“It’s very expensive. It comes from Turkey. Such luxury is only for special women.”

“And the blue?”

“Like your eyes.”

Her eyes were green, but she did not correct him. “It’s such a deep color.”

“English dyers use woad, but we get indigo from Bengal. Moorish traders bring it from India to Egypt, and then our Italian merchants buy it in Alexandria.” He smiled. “Think how far it has traveled—to complement your outstanding beauty.”

“Yes,” said Caris. “Just think of that.”

The riverside workshop of Peter Dyer was a house as big as Edmund’s, but built of stone, and with no interior walls or floors—just a shell. Two iron cauldrons stood over great fires. Beside each was a hoist, like the ones Merthin made for building work. These were used to lift huge sacks of wool or cloth and lower them into the vats. The floors were permanently wet and the air was thick with steam. The apprentices worked barefoot, in their

underdrawers because of the heat, their faces running with sweat, their hair gleaming with damp. There was an acrid smell that bit at the back of Caris's throat.

She showed Peter her unsold length of cloth. "I want the bright scarlet that the Italian cloths have," she said. "That's what sells best."

Peter was a lugubrious man who always looked injured, no matter what you said to him. Now he nodded glumly, as if acknowledging a justified criticism. "We'll dye it again with madder."

"And with alum, to fix the color and make it brighter."

"We don't use alum. Never have. I don't know anyone who does."

Caris cursed inwardly. She had not thought to check this. She had assumed a dyer would know everything about dyes. "Can't you try it?"

"I haven't got any."

Caris sighed. Peter seemed to be one of those craftsmen for whom everything is impossible unless they have done it before. "Suppose I could get you some?"

"Where from?"

"Winchester, I suppose, or London. Or perhaps from Melcombe." That was the nearest big port. Ships came from all over Europe to Melcombe.

"If I had some, I wouldn't know how to use it."

"Can't you find out?"

"Who from?"

"I'll try to find out, then."

He shook his head pessimistically. "I don't know…"

She did not want to quarrel with him: he was the only large-scale dyer in town. "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it," she said in a conciliatory tone. "I won't take up any more of your time discussing it now. First I'll see if I can get some alum."

She left him. Who in town might know about alum? She wished now that she had asked Loro Fiorentino more questions. The monks ought to know about things like this, but they were no longer allowed to talk to women. She decided to see Mattie Wise. Mattie was forever mixing strange ingredients—maybe alum was one of them. More importantly, if she did not know she would admit her ignorance, unlike a monk or an apothecary who might make something up for fear of being thought foolish.

Mattie's first words were: "How is your father?"

"He seems a bit shaken by the failure of the Fleece Fair," Caris said. It was typical of Mattie to know what she was worried about. "He's becoming forgetful. He seems older."

"Take care of him," said Mattie. "He's a good man."

"I know." Caris was not sure what Mattie was getting at.

"Petranilla is a self-centered cow."

“I know that, too.”

Mattie was grinding something with a mortar and pestle. She pushed the bowl toward Caris. “If you do this for me, I’ll pour you a cup of wine.”

“Thank you.” Caris began to grind.

Mattie poured yellow wine from a stone jug into two wooden cups. “Why are you here? You’re not ill.”

“Do you know what alum is?”

“Yes. In small quantities, we use it as an astringent, to close wounds. It can also stop diarrhea. But in large quantities it’s poisonous. Like most poisons, it makes you vomit. There was alum in the potion I gave you last year.”

“What is it, a herb?”

“No, it’s an earth. The Moors mine it in Turkey and Africa. Tanners employ it in the preparation of leather, sometimes. I suppose you want to use it to dye cloth.”

“Yes.” As always, Mattie’s guesswork seemed supernaturally accurate.

“It acts as a mordant—it helps the dye to bite the wool.”

“And where do you get it?”

“I buy it in Melcombe,” said Mattie.

Caris made the two-day journey to Melcombe, where she had been several times before, accompanied by one of her father’s employees as a bodyguard. At the quayside she found a merchant who dealt in spices, cage birds, musical instruments, and all kinds of curiosities from remote parts of the world. He sold her both the red dye made from the root of the madder plant, cultivated in France, and a type of alum known as Spiralum that he said came from Ethiopia. He charged her seven shillings for a small barrel of madder and a pound for a sack of alum, and she had no idea whether she was paying fair prices or not. He sold her his entire stock, and promised to get more from the next Italian ship to come into port. She asked him what quantities of dye and alum she should use, but he did not know.

When she got home, she began to dye pieces of her unsold cloth in a cooking pot. Petranilla objected to the smell, so Caris built a fire in the backyard. She knew that she had to put the cloth in a solution of dye and boil it, and Peter Dyer told her the correct strength of the dye solution. However, no one knew how much alum she needed or how she should use it.

She began a frustrating process of trial and error. She tried soaking the cloth in alum before dyeing it; putting the alum in at the same time as the dye; and boiling the dyed cloth in a solution of alum afterward. She tried using the same quantity of alum as dye, then more, then less. At Mattie’s suggestion she experimented with other ingredients: oak galls, chalk, lime water, vinegar,

urine.

She was short of time. In all towns, no one could sell cloth but members of the guild—except during a fair, when the normal rules were relaxed. And all fairs were held in summer. The last was St. Giles's Fair, which took place on the downs to the east of Winchester on St. Giles's Day, September 12. It was now mid-July, so she had eight weeks.

She started early in the morning and worked until long after dark. Agitating the cloth continuously and lifting it in and out of the pot made her back ache. Her hands became red and sore from constant dipping in the harsh chemicals, and her hair began to smell. But, despite the frustration, she occasionally felt happy, and sometimes she hummed or even sang as she worked, old tunes whose words she could barely remember from childhood. Neighbors in their own backyards watched her curiously across the fences.

Now and again there came into her mind the thought: Is this my fate? More than once she had said that she did not know what to do with her life. But she might not have a free choice. She was not to be allowed to be a physician; becoming a wool merchant looked like a bad idea; she did not want to enslave herself to a husband and children—but she had never dreamed that she might end up as a dyer. When she thought about it, she knew that this was not what she wanted to do. Having started it, she was determined to succeed—but it was not going to be her destiny.

At first she could only get the cloth to turn brownish red or pale pink. When she began to approach the right shade of scarlet she found, maddeningly, that it faded when she dried it in the sun, or it came out when washed. She tried double-dyeing, but the effect proved temporary. Peter told her, rather late, that the material would soak up dye more completely if she worked with the yarn before it was woven, or even with raw fleeces; and that improved the shade, but not the fastness.

"There's only one way to learn dyeing, and that's from a master," Peter said several times. They all thought that way, Caris realized. Prior Godwyn learned medicine by reading books that were hundreds of years old, and prescribed medicines without even looking at his patient. Elfric had punished Merthin for carving the parable of the virgins in a new way. Peter had never even tried to dye cloth scarlet. Only Mattie based her decisions on what she could see for herself, rather than on some venerated authority.

Caris's sister Alice stood watching her late one evening, with folded arms and pursed lips. As darkness gathered in the corners of the yard, the light of Caris's fire reddened Alice's disapproving face. "How much of our father's money have you spent on this foolishness?" she said.

Caris added it up. "Seven shillings for the madder, a pound for the alum, twelve shillings for the cloth—thirty-nine shillings."

"God save us!" Alice was horrified.

Caris herself was daunted. It was more than a year's wages for most people in Kingsbridge. "It is a lot, but I'll make more," she said.

Alice was angry. "You have no right to spend his money like this."

"No right?" Caris said. "I have his permission—what more do I need?"

"He's showing signs of age. His judgment is not what it was."

Caris pretended not to know this. "His judgment is fine, and a lot better than yours."

"You're spending our inheritance!"

"Is *that* what's bothering you? Don't worry, I'm making you money."

"I don't want to take the risk."

"You're not taking the risk, he is."

"He shouldn't throw away money that should come to us!"

"Tell him that."

Alice went away defeated, but Caris was not as confident as she pretended. She might never get it just right. And then what would she and her father do?

When finally she found the right formula, it was remarkably simple: an ounce of madder and two ounces of alum for every three ounces of wool. She boiled the wool in the alum first, then added the madder to the pot without reboiling the liquid. The extra ingredient was lime water. She could hardly believe the result. It was more successful than she could have hoped. The red was bright, almost like the Italian red. She felt sure it would fade, and give her another disappointment; but the color remained the same through drying, rewashing, and fulling.

She gave Peter the formula, and under her close supervision, he used all her remaining alum to dye twelve yards of best-quality wool cloth in one of his giant vats. When it had been fulled, Caris paid a finisher to draw off the loose threads with a teazle, the prickly head of a wildflower, and to repair small blemishes.

She went to St Giles's Fair with a bale of perfect bright red cloth.

As she was unrolling it, she was addressed by a man with a London accent. "How much is that?" he said.

She looked at him. His clothes were expensive without being ostentatious, and she guessed he was wealthy but not noble. Trying to mask the trembling in her voice, she said: "Seven shillings a yard. It's the best—"

"No, I meant how much for the whole cloth."

"It's twelve yards, so that would be eighty-four shillings."

He rubbed the cloth between finger and thumb. "It's not as close-woven as Italian cloth, but it's not bad. I'll give you twenty-seven gold florins."

The gold coin of Florence was in common use, because England had no gold currency of its own. It was worth about three shillings, thirty-six English silver pennies. The Londoner was offering to buy her entire cloth for only

three shillings less than she would get selling it yard by yard. But she sensed that he was not very serious about haggling—otherwise he would have started lower. “No,” she said, marveling at her own temerity. “I want the full price.”

“All right,” he said immediately, confirming her instinct. She watched, thrilled, as he took out his purse. A moment later she held in her hand twenty-eight gold florins.

She examined one carefully. It was a bit larger than a silver penny. On one side was St. John the Baptist, the patron saint of Florence, and on the other the flower of Florence. She placed it on a balance to compare its weight with that of a new-minted florin her father kept for the purpose. The coin was good.

“Thank you,” she said, hardly believing her success.

“I’m Harry Mercer of Cheapside, London,” he said. “My father is the largest cloth merchant in England. When you’ve got more of this scarlet, come to London. We’ll buy as much as you can bring us.”

“Let’s weave it all!” she said to her father when she returned home. “You’ve got forty sacks of wool left. We’ll turn it all into red cloth.”

“It’s a big enterprise,” he said thoughtfully.

Caris was sure her scheme would work. “There are plenty of weavers, and they’re all poor. Peter isn’t the only dyer in Kingsbridge, we can teach the others to use the alum.”

“Others will copy you, once the secret gets out.”

She knew he was right to think of snags, but all the same she felt impatient. “Let them copy,” she said. “They can make money, too.”

He was not going to be pushed into anything. “The price will come down if there’s a lot of cloth for sale.”

“It will have to fall a long way before the business becomes unprofitable.”

He nodded. “That’s true. But can you sell that much in Kingsbridge and Shiring? There aren’t that many rich people.”

“Then I’ll take it to London.”

“All right.” He smiled. “You’re so determined. It’s a good plan—but even if it were a bad one, you’d probably make it work.”

She went immediately to Mark Webber’s house and arranged for him to begin work on another sack of wool. She also arranged for Madge to take one of Edmund’s oxcarts and four sacks of wool, and go around neighboring villages looking for weavers.

But the rest of Caris’s family were not happy. Next day, Alice came to dinner. As they sat down, Petranilla said to Edmund: “Alice and I think you should reconsider your cloth-making project.”

Caris wanted him to tell her that the decision was made and it was too late

to go back. But instead he said mildly: “Really? Tell me why.”

“You’ll be risking just about every penny you’ve got, that’s why!”

“Most of it’s at risk now,” he said. “I’ve got a warehouse full of wool that I can’t sell.”

“But you could make a bad situation worse.”

“I’ve decided to take that chance.”

Alice broke in: “It’s not fair on me!”

“Why not?”

“Caris is spending my inheritance!”

His face darkened. “I’m not dead yet,” he said.

Petranilla clamped her mouth shut, recognizing the undertone in his low voice; but Alice did not notice how angry he was, and plowed on. “We have to think about the future,” she said. “Why should Caris be allowed to spend my birthright?”

“Because it’s not yours yet, and perhaps it never will be.”

“You can’t just throw away money that should come to me.”

“I won’t be told what to do with my money—especially by my children,” he said, and his voice was so taut with anger that even Alice noticed.

More quietly, she said: “I didn’t intend to annoy you.”

He grunted. It was not much of an apology, but he could never remain grumpy for long. “Let’s have dinner and say no more about it,” he said; and Caris knew that her project had survived another day.

After dinner she went to see Peter Dyer, to warn him of the large quantity of work coming his way. “It can’t be done,” he said.

That took her by surprise. He always looked gloomy, but he normally did what she wanted. “Don’t worry, you won’t have to dye it all,” she said. “I’ll give some of the work to others.”

“It’s not the dyeing,” he said. “It’s the fulling.”

“Why?”

“We’re not allowed to full the cloth ourselves. Prior Godwyn has issued a new edict. We have to use the priory’s fulling mill.”

“Well, then, we’ll use it.”

“It’s too slow. The machinery is old, and keeps breaking down. It’s been repaired again and again, so the wood is a mixture of new and old, which never sorts well. It’s no faster than a man treading in a bath of water. And there’s only one mill. It will barely cope with the normal work of Kingsbridge weavers and dyers.”

This was maddening. Surely her whole scheme could not fail because of a stupid ruling by her cousin Godwyn? She said indignantly: “But if the mill can’t do the work, the prior must permit us to tread the cloth by foot!”

Peter shrugged. “Tell him that.”

“I will!”

She marched off toward the priory, but before she got there, she thought again. The hall of the prior's house was used for his meetings with townspeople, but all the same it would be unusual for a woman to go in alone without an appointment, and Godwyn was increasingly touchy about such things. Moreover, a straight confrontation might not be the best way to change his mind. She realized she would do better to think this through. She returned to her house and sat down with her father in the parlor.

"Young Godwyn is on weak ground here," Edmund said immediately. "There never was a charge for using the fulling mill. According to legend, it was built by a townsman, Jack Builder, for the great Prior Philip; and, when Jack died, Philip gave the town the right to use the mill in perpetuity."

"Why did people stop using it?"

"It fell into disrepair, and I think there was an argument about who should pay for its upkeep. The argument was never resolved, and people went back to treading cloth themselves."

"Why, then, he has no right to charge a fee, nor to force people to use it!"

"No, indeed."

Edmund sent a message to the priory asking when it might be convenient for Godwyn to see him, and the reply came back saying he was free right away, so Edmund and Caris crossed the street and went to the prior's house.

Godwyn had changed a lot in a year, Caris thought. There was no boyish eagerness left. He seemed wary, as if he expected them to be aggressive. She was beginning to wonder whether he had the strength of character to be prior.

Philemon was with him, pathetically eager as ever to fetch chairs and pour drinks, but with a new touch of assurance in his manner, the look of someone who knew he belonged here.

"So, Philemon, you're an uncle now," Caris said. "What do you think of your new nephew, Sam?"

"I'm a novice monk," he said prissily. "We give up all worldly relations."

Caris shrugged. She knew he was fond of his sister Gwenda, but if he wanted to pretend otherwise, she was not going to argue.

Edmund laid out the problem starkly for Godwyn. "Work on the bridge will have to stop if the wool merchants of Kingsbridge can't improve their fortunes. Happily, we have come up with a new source of income. Caris has discovered how to produce high-quality scarlet cloth. Only one thing stands in the way of the success of this new enterprise: the fulling mill."

"Why?" said Godwyn. "The scarlet cloth can be fulled at the mill."

"Apparently not. It's old and inefficient. It can barely handle the existing production of cloth. It has no capacity for extra. Either you build a new fulling mill—"

"Out of the question," Godwyn interrupted. "I have no spare cash for that sort of thing."

“Very well, then,” said Edmund. “You’ll have to permit people to full cloth in the old way, by putting it in a bath of water and stamping on it with their bare feet.”

The look that came over Godwyn’s face was familiar to Caris. It was compounded of resentment, injured pride, and mulish obstinacy. In childhood he had looked like that whenever he was opposed. It meant he would try to bully the other children into submission or, failing that, stamp his foot and go home. Wanting his own way was only part of it. He seemed, Caris thought, to feel humiliated by disagreement, as if the idea that someone might think him wrong was too wounding to be borne. Whatever the explanation, she knew as soon as she saw the look that he was not going to be reasonable.

“I knew you would oppose me,” he said petulantly to Edmund. “You seem to think the priory exists for the benefit of Kingsbridge. You’ll just have to realize that it’s the other way around.”

Edmund rapidly became exasperated. “Don’t you see that we depend on one another? We thought you understood that interrelationship—that’s why we helped you get elected.”

“I was elected by the monks, not the merchants. The town may depend on the priory, but there was a priory here before there was a town, and we can exist without you.”

“You can exist, perhaps, but as an isolated outpost, rather than as the throbbing heart of a bustling city.”

Caris put in: “You must want Kingsbridge to prosper, Godwyn—why else would you have gone to London to oppose Earl Roland?”

“I went to the royal court to defend the ancient rights of the priory—as I am trying to do here and now.”

Edmund said indignantly: “This is treachery! We supported you as prior because you led us to believe you would build a bridge!”

“I owe you nothing,” Godwyn replied. “My mother sold her house to send me to the university—where was my rich uncle then?”

Caris was amazed that Godwyn was still resentful over what had happened ten years ago.

Edmund’s expression became coldly hostile. “I don’t think you have the right to force people to use the fulling mill,” he said.

A glance passed between Godwyn and Philemon, and Caris realized they knew this. Godwyn said: “There may have been times when the prior generously allowed the townspeople to use the mill without charge.”

“It was the gift of Prior Philip to the town.”

“I know nothing of that.”

“There must be a document in your records.”

Godwyn became angry. “The townspeople have allowed the mill to fall into disrepair, so that the priory has to pay to put it right. That is enough to

annul any gift.”

Edmund was right, Caris realized: Godwyn was on weak ground. He knew about Prior Philip’s gift, but he intended to ignore it.

Edmund tried again. “Surely we can settle this between us?”

“I will not back down from my edict,” Godwyn said. “It would make me appear weak.”

That was what really bothered him, Caris realized. He was frightened that the townspeople would disrespect him if he changed his mind. His obstinacy came, paradoxically, from a kind of timidity.

Edmund said: “Neither of us wants the trouble and expense of another visit to the royal court.”

Godwyn bristled. “Are you threatening me with the royal court?”

“I’m trying to avoid it. But…”

Caris closed her eyes, praying that the two men would not push their argument to the brink. Her prayer was not answered.

“But what?” said Godwyn challengingly.

Edmund sighed. “But yes, if you force the townspeople to use the fulling mill, and prohibit home fulling, I will appeal to the king.”

“So be it,” said Godwyn.

34

The deer was a young female, a year or two old, sleek across the haunches, well muscled under a soft leather skin. She was on the far side of a clearing, pushing her long neck through the branches of a bush to reach a patch of scrubby grass. Ralph Fitzgerald and Alan Fernhill were on horseback, the hooves of their mounts muffled by the carpet of wet autumn leaves, and their dogs were trained to silence. Because of this, and perhaps because she was concentrating on straining to reach her fodder, the deer did not hear their approach until it was too late.

Ralph saw her first, and pointed across the clearing. Alan was carrying his longbow, grasping it and the reins in his left hand. With the speed of long practice, he fitted an arrow to the string in a heartbeat, and shot.

The dogs were slower. Only when they heard the thrum of the bowstring and the whistle of the arrow as it flew through the air did they react. Barley, the bitch, froze in place, head up, ears erect; and Blade, her puppy, now grown larger than his mother, uttered a low, startled woof.

The arrow was a yard long, flighted with swan feathers. Its tip was two inches of solid iron with a socket into which the shaft fitted tightly. It was a hunting arrow, with a sharp point: a battle arrow would have had a square

head, so that it would punch through armor without being deflected.

Alan's shot was good, but not perfect. It struck the deer low in the neck. She jumped with all four feet—shocked, presumably, by the sudden, agonizing stab. Her head came up out of the bush. For an instant, Ralph thought she was going to fall down dead, but a moment later she bounded away. The arrow was still buried in her neck, but the blood was oozing rather than spurting from the wound, so it must have lodged in her muscles, missing the major blood vessels.

The dogs leaped forward as if they, too, had been shot from bows; and the two horses followed without urging. Ralph was on Griff, his favorite hunter. He felt the rush of excitement that was what he mainly lived for. It was a tingling in the nerves, a constriction in the neck, an irresistible impulse to yell at the top of his voice; a thrill so like sexual excitement that he could hardly have said what the difference was.

Men such as Ralph existed to fight. The king and his barons made them lords and knights, and gave them villages and lands to rule over, for a reason: so that they would be able to provide themselves with horses, squires, weapons, and armor whenever the king needed an army. But there was not a war every year. Sometimes two or three years would go by without so much as a minor police action on the borders of rebellious Wales or barbarian Scotland. Knights needed something to do in the interim. They had to keep fit and maintain their horsemanship and—perhaps most important of all—their bloodlust. Soldiers had to kill, and they did it better when they longed for it.

Hunting was the answer. All noblemen, from the king down to minor lords such as Ralph, hunted whenever they got the chance, often several times a week. They enjoyed it, and it ensured they were fit for battle whenever called upon. Ralph hunted with Earl Roland on his frequent visits to Earlscastle, and often joined Lord William's hunt at Casterham. When he was at his own village of Wigleigh, he went out with his squire, Alan, in the forests round about. They usually killed boar—there was not much meat on the wild pigs, but they were exciting to hunt because they put up a good fight. Ralph also went after foxes and the occasional, rare, wolf. But a deer was best: agile, fast, and a hundred pounds of good meat to take home.

Now Ralph thrilled to the feel of Griff beneath him, the horse's weight and strength, the powerful action of its muscles and the drumbeat of its tread. The deer disappeared into the vegetation, but Barley knew where it had gone, and the horses followed the dogs. Ralph carried a spear ready in his right hand, a long shaft of ash with a fire-hardened point. As Griff swerved and jumped, Ralph ducked under overhanging branches and swayed with the horse, his boots firmly in the stirrups, keeping his seat effortlessly by the pressure of his knees.

In the undergrowth the horses were not as nimble as the deer, and they fell

behind; but the dogs had the advantage, and Ralph heard frantic barking as they closed in. Then there was a lull, and in a few moments Ralph found out why: the deer had broken out of the vegetation onto a pathway and was leaving the dogs behind. Here, however, the horses had the advantage, and they quickly passed the dogs and began to gain on the deer.

Ralph could see that the beast was weakening. He saw blood on its rump, and deduced that one of the dogs had got a bite. Its gait became irregular as it struggled to get away. It was a sprinter, made for the sudden quick dash, and it could not keep up its initial pace for long.

His blood raced as he closed on his prey. He tightened his grip on the lance. It took a great deal of strength to force a wooden point into the tough body of a big animal: the skin was leathery, the muscles dense, the bones hard. The neck was the softest target, if you could contrive to miss the vertebrae and hit the jugular vein. You had to choose the exact moment, then thrust quickly with all your might.

Seeing the horses almost upon it, the deer made a desperate turn into the bushes. This gave it a few seconds' respite. The horses slowed as they crashed through undergrowth over which the deer had bounded without pause. But the dogs caught up again, and Ralph saw that the deer could not go much farther.

The usual pattern was that the dogs would inflict more and more wounds, slowing the deer until the horses could catch it and the hunter could deliver the death blow. But, on this occasion, there was an accident.

When the dogs and the horses were almost upon the deer, she dodged sideways. Blade, the younger dog, went after her with more enthusiasm than sense, and swerved in front of Griff. The horse was going too fast to stop or even avoid the dog, and kicked him with a mighty foreleg. The dog was a mastiff, weighing seventy or eighty pounds, and the impact caused the horse to stumble.

Ralph was thrown. He let go of his spear as he flew through the air. His greatest fear, in that instant, was that his horse would fall on him. But he saw, in the moment before he landed, that Griff had somehow regained his balance.

Ralph fell into a thorn bush. His hands and face were scratched painfully, but the branches broke his fall. All the same, he was enraged.

Alan reined in. Barley went after the deer but returned in a few moments: the beast had obviously got away. Ralph struggled to his feet, cursing. Alan caught Griff then dismounted, holding both horses.

Blade lay motionless on the dead leaves, blood dripping from his mouth. He had been struck on the head by Griff's iron horseshoe. Barley went up to him, sniffed, nudged him with her nose, and licked the blood on his face, then turned away, looking bewildered. Alan prodded the dog with the toe of his boot. There was no response. Blade was not breathing. "Dead," Alan said.

"Damn fool dog deserved to die," Ralph said.

They walked the horses through the woods, looking for a place to rest. After a while Ralph heard running water. Following the sound, he came to a fast-flowing stream. He recognized the stretch of water: they were only a little way beyond the fields of Wigleigh. “Let’s have some refreshment,” he said. Alan tied up the horses then took from his saddlebag a stoppered jug, two wooden cups, and a canvas sack of food.

Barley went to the stream and lapped the cold water thirstily. Ralph sat on the bank, resting his back against a tree. Alan sat beside him and handed him a cup of ale and a wedge of cheese. Ralph took the drink and refused the food.

Alan knew his boss in a bad mood, and said nothing while Ralph drank, wordlessly refilling Ralph’s cup from the jug. In the silence they both heard female voices. Alan looked at Ralph with a raised eyebrow. Barley growled. Ralph stood up, shushing the dog, and walked softly in the direction of the sound. Alan followed.

A few yards downstream Ralph stopped, looking through the vegetation. A small group of village women were doing laundry on the near bank of the stream, where the water flowed fast over an outcrop of rocks. It was a damp October day, cool but not cold, and they wore their sleeves rolled up and the skirts of their shifts raised to thigh level to keep them dry.

Ralph studied them one by one. There was Gwenda, all muscular forearms and calves, with her baby—now four months old—strapped to her back. He identified Peg, the wife of Perkin, scrubbing her husband’s underdrawers with a stone. His own housemaid, Vira, was there, a hard-faced woman of about thirty who had looked so stonily at him when he patted her arse that he never touched her again. The voice that he had heard belonged to the Widow Huberts, a great talker, no doubt because she lived alone. The widow was standing in midstream, calling out to the others, carrying on a gossipy conversation at a distance.

And there was Annet.

She stood on a rock, washing some small garment, bending to dip it in the stream then standing upright to scrub it. She had long, white legs that disappeared enchantingly into her rucked-up dress. Every time she bent over, her neckline fell open to reveal the pale fruit of her small breasts hanging like temptation on a tree. Her fair hair was wet at the ends, and there was a petulant look on her pretty face, as if she felt she had not been born for this kind of work.

They had been there for some time, Ralph guessed, and their presence might have remained unknown to him, had not Widow Huberts raised her voice to call out. He lowered himself to the ground and knelt behind a bush, peering through the leafless twigs. Alan squatted beside him.

Ralph liked spying on women. He had often done it as an adolescent. They scratched themselves, sprawled on the ground with their legs apart, and

talked about things they would never speak of if they knew a man was listening. In fact they acted like men.

He feasted his eyes on the unsuspecting women of his village, and strained to hear what they were saying. He watched Gwenda, looking at her small, strong body, remembering her naked, kneeling on the bed, and reliving how it had felt to hold her hips and pull her to him. He recalled how her attitude had changed. At first she had been coldly passive, struggling to conceal her resentment and distaste for the act she was performing; then he had seen a slow alteration. The skin on her neck had flushed, her chest had betrayed her excited breathing, and she had bent her head and closed her eyes in what seemed to him to be a mixture of shame and pleasure. The memory made him breathe faster and brought out a film of perspiration on his brow, despite the chill October air. He wondered if he would get another chance to lie with Gwenda.

Too soon, the women prepared to depart. They folded the damp washing and packed it into baskets, or wrapped it in bundles to be balanced on their heads, and then began to move away along the pathway beside the stream. Then an argument began between Annet and her mother. Annet had done only half the laundry she had brought. She was proposing to take the dirty half home, and it seemed Peg thought she should stay and finish it. In the end Peg stomped off and Annet stayed, looking sulky.

Ralph could hardly believe his luck.

In a low voice he said to Alan: “We’ll have some fun with her. Sneak around and cut off her retreat.”

Alan disappeared.

Ralph watched as Annet dipped the remaining laundry perfunctorily in the stream, then sat on the bank staring at the water grumpily. When he judged that the other women were out of earshot and Alan must be in place, he stood up and walked forward.

She heard him pushing through the undergrowth and looked up, startled. He enjoyed seeing the expression on her face change from surprise and curiosity to fear as she realized she was alone with him in the forest. She leaped to her feet, but by that time he was next to her, holding her arm in a light but firm grip. “Hello, Annet,” he said. “What are you doing here…all alone?”

She looked over his shoulder—hoping, he guessed, that he might be accompanied by others who would restrain him, and her face registered dismay when she saw only Barley. “I’m going home,” she said. “My mother’s just left.”

“Don’t rush,” he said. “You look so attractive like this, with your hair damp and your knees bare.”

She tried hastily to push the skirt of her dress down. With his free hand,

he held the point of her chin and made her look at him. “How about a smile?” he said. “Don’t look so worried. I wouldn’t harm you—I’m your lord.”

She attempted a smile. “I’m just a bit flustered,” she said. “You startled me.” She mustered a trace of her habitual coquetry. “Perhaps you would escort me home,” she said with a simper. “A girl needs protection in the forest.”

“Oh, I’ll protect you. I’ll look after you much better than that fool Wulfric, or your husband.” He took his hand from her chin and grasped her breast. It was as he remembered, small and firm. He released her arm so that he could use both hands, one on each breast.

But as soon as he let go of her, she fled. He laughed as she ran along the path and into the trees. A moment later he heard her give a cry of shock. He stayed where he was, and Alan brought her to him, her arm twisted behind her back so that her chest stuck out invitingly.

Ralph drew his knife, a sharp dagger with a blade a foot long. “Take off your dress,” he said.

Alan let her go, but she did not immediately comply. “Please, lord,” she said. “I’ve always shown you respect—”

“Take off your dress, or I’ll cut your cheeks and scar you for ever.”

It was a well-chosen threat for a vain woman, and she gave in immediately. She began to cry as she lifted the plain brown wool shift over her head. At first she held the crumpled garment in front of her, covering her nakedness, but Alan snatched it from her and threw it aside.

Ralph stared at her naked body. She stood with her eyes down, tears on her face. She had slim hips with a prominent bush of dark blond hair. “Wulfric never saw you like this, did he?” Ralph said.

She shook her head in negation without raising her eyes.

He thrust his hand between her legs. “Did he ever touch you here?”

She said: “Please, lord, I’m a married woman—”

“All the better—you’ve no virginity to lose, nothing to worry about. Lie down.”

She tried to back away from him, and bumped into Alan, who expertly tripped her, so that she fell on her back. Ralph grabbed her ankles, so that she could not get up, but she wriggled desperately. “Hold her down,” Ralph said to Alan.

Alan forced her head down then put his knees on her upper arms and his hands on her shoulders.

Ralph got his cock out and rubbed it to make it harder. Then he knelt between Annet’s thighs.

She began to scream, but no one heard her.

35

Fortunately, Gwenda was one of the first people to see Annet after the incident.

Gwenda and Peg brought home the laundry and hung it to dry around the fire in the kitchen of Perkin's house. Gwenda was still working as a laborer for Perkin but now, in autumn, when there was less to do in the fields, she helped Peg with her domestic chores. When they had dealt with the laundry they began to prepare the midday meal for Perkin, Rob, Billy Howard, and Wulfric. After an hour Peg said: "What can have happened to Annet?"

"I'll go and see." Gwenda first checked on her baby. Sammy was lying in a basketwork crib, wrapped in an old bit of brown blanket, his alert dark eyes watching the smoke from the fire gathering in curls under the ceiling. Gwenda kissed his forehead then went to look for Annet.

She retraced her steps across the windy fields. Lord Ralph and Alan Fernhill galloped past her, heading up to the village, their day's hunting apparently cut short. Gwenda entered the forest and followed the short path that led to the spot where the women did laundry. Before she got there she met Annet coming the other way.

"Are you all right?" Gwenda said. "Your mother is worried."

"I'm fine," Annet replied.

Gwenda could tell something was wrong. "What has happened?"

"Nothing." Annet would not meet her eye. "Nothing happened, leave me alone."

Gwenda stood squarely in front of Annet and looked her up and down. Her face told Gwenda unmistakably that there had been some calamity. At first glance she did not appear to be physically hurt—though most of her body was covered by the long wool shift—but then Gwenda saw dark smears on her dress that looked like bloodstains.

Gwenda recalled Ralph and Alan galloping past. "Did Lord Ralph do something to you?"

"I'm going home." Annet tried to push past Gwenda. Gwenda grabbed her arm to stop her. She did not squeeze hard, but nevertheless Annet cried out in pain, her hand flying to her upper arm.

"You're hurt!" Gwenda exclaimed.

Annet burst into tears.

Gwenda put her arm around Annet's shoulders. "Come home," she said. "Tell your mother about it."

Annet shook her head. "I'm not telling anyone," she said.

Too late for that, Gwenda thought.

Walking Annet back to Perkin's house, Gwenda ran over the possibilities

in her mind. Clearly Annet had suffered some kind of assault. She might have been attacked by one or more travelers, though there was no road nearby. Outlaws were always a possibility, but it was a long time since any had been seen near Wigleigh. No, the likeliest suspects were Ralph and Alan.

Peg was brisk. She sat Annet down on a stool and pulled her dress down over her shoulders. Both upper arms showed swollen red bruises. “Someone held you down,” Peg said angrily.

Annet made no reply.

Peg persisted. “Am I right? Answer me, child, or you’ll be in worse trouble. Did someone hold you down?”

Annet nodded.

“How many men? Come on, out with it.”

Annet did not speak, but held up two fingers.

Peg reddened with fury. “Did they fuck you?”

Annet nodded.

“Who were they?”

Annet shook her head.

Gwenda knew why she did not want to say. It was dangerous for a serf to accuse a lord of a crime. She said to Peg: “I saw Ralph and Alan riding away.”

Peg said to Annet: “Was it them—Ralph and Alan?”

Annet nodded.

Peg’s voice fell almost to a whisper. “I suppose Alan held you down while Ralph did it.”

Annet nodded again.

Peg softened, now that she had got the truth. She put her arms around her daughter and hugged her. “You poor child,” she said. “My poor baby.”

Annet began to sob.

Gwenda left the house.

The men would be home soon for their midday dinner, and they would quickly find out that Ralph had raped Annet. Annet’s father, her brother, her husband, and her former lover would be mad with rage. Perkin was too old to do anything foolish, Rob would do what Perkin told him, and Billy Howard probably was not brave enough to make trouble—but Wulfric would be incandescent. He would kill Ralph.

And then he would be hanged.

Gwenda had to turn the course of events; otherwise she would lose her husband. She hurried through the village, speaking to no one, and went to the manor house. There, she hoped to be told that Ralph and Alan had finished their dinner and gone out again; but it was a little too early and, to her dismay, they were still at home.

She found them in the stable behind the house, looking at a horse with an

infected hoof. Normally she was uncomfortable in the presence of Ralph or Alan, for she felt sure that whenever they looked at her they remembered the sight of her kneeling naked on the bed at the Bell in Kingsbridge. But today the thought hardly entered her head. Somehow she had to make them leave the village—now, before Wulfric found out what they had done. What was she going to say?

For a moment she was struck dumb. Then in desperation she said: “Lord, there was a messenger here from Earl Roland.”

Ralph was surprised. “When was this?”

“An hour ago.”

Ralph looked at the groom who was holding the horse’s foot up for inspection. The man said: “No one came here.”

Naturally, a messenger would have come to the manor house and spoken to the lord’s servants. Ralph said to Gwenda: “Why did he give this message to *you*?”

She improvised desperately. “I met him on the road just outside the village. He asked for Lord Ralph, and I told him you were out hunting and you would be back for dinner—but he wouldn’t stay.”

This was unusual behavior for a messenger, who would normally stop to eat and drink and rest his horse. Ralph said: “Why was he in such a hurry?”

Inventing excuses extempore, Gwenda said: “He had to get to Cowford by sundown…I didn’t make so bold as to question him.”

Ralph grunted. The last part was plausible: a messenger from Earl Roland was not likely to subject himself to cross-examination by a peasant woman. “Why didn’t you tell me this earlier?”

“I came across the fields to meet you, but you didn’t see me and galloped past.”

“Oh. I think I did see you. No matter—what’s the message?”

“Earl Roland summons you to Earlscastle as soon as possible.” She took a breath and added another layer of implausibility. “The messenger said to tell you not to wait to eat your dinner, but take fresh horses and leave at once.” It was barely credible, but she had to get Ralph away before Wulfric showed up.

“Really? Did he say why he needs me in such a terrible hurry?”

“No.”

“Hm.” Ralph looked thoughtful and said nothing for a few moments.

Gwenda said anxiously: “So, will you go now?”

He glared at her. “That’s no concern of yours.”

“It’s just that I wouldn’t want it to be said that I hadn’t made the urgency clear enough.”

“Oh, wouldn’t you? Well, I don’t care what you would or wouldn’t want. Be off.”

Gwenda had to go.

She returned to Perkin's house. She arrived just as the men were coming in from the fields. Sam was quiet and happy in his crib. Annet was sitting in the same place, with her dress pulled down to show the bruises on her arms. Peg said accusingly: "Where have you been?"

Gwenda did not answer, and Peg was distracted by Perkin coming in and saying: "What's this? What's the matter with Annet?"

Peg said: "She had the misfortune to meet Ralph and Alan when she was alone in the forest."

Perkin's face darkened with anger. "Why was she alone?"

"It's my fault," Peg said, and she began to cry. "Only she was so lazy about the laundry, as she always is, and I made her stay back and finish it, after the other women went home, and that's when those two animals must have come along."

"We saw them a while ago, riding across Brookfield," Perkin said. "They must have just come from the place." He looked frightened. "This is very dangerous," he said. "It's the kind of thing that can ruin a family."

"But *we've* done nothing wrong!" Peg protested.

"Ralph's guilt will make him hate us for our innocence."

That was probably true, Gwenda realized. Perkin was shrewd, beneath his obsequious manner.

Annet's husband, Billy Howard, came in, wiping his muddy hands on his shirt. Her brother, Rob, was close behind. Billy looked at his wife's bruises and said: "What happened to you?"

Peg answered for her. "It was Ralph and Alan."

Billy stared at his wife. "What did they do to you?"

Annet lowered her eyes and said nothing.

"I'll kill them both," Billy said furiously, but it was obviously an idle threat: Billy was a mild-mannered man, slim built, and had never been known to fight, even when drunk.

Wulfric was the last to come through the door. Too late, Gwenda realized how attractive Annet was looking. She had a long neck and pretty shoulders, and the tops of her breasts were showing. The ugly bruises only emphasized her other charms. Wulfric stared at her with undisguised admiration—he never could hide his feelings. Then, after a moment, he registered the angry bruises, and he frowned.

Billy said: "Did they rape you?"

Gwenda was watching Wulfric. As he grasped the significance of the scene, his expression registered shock and dismay, and his fair skin flushed with emotion.

Billy said: "Did they, woman?"

Gwenda felt a surge of compassion for the unlovable Annet. Why did everyone feel they had the right to ask her bullying questions?

At last, Annet answered Billy's question with a silent nod.

Wulfric's face was suffused with black rage. "Who?" he growled.

Billy said: "This is none of your business, Wulfric. Go home."

Perkin said tremulously: "I don't want trouble. We mustn't let this destroy us."

Billy looked angrily at his father-in-law. "What are you saying? That we should do nothing?"

"If we make an enemy of Lord Ralph, we could suffer for the rest of our lives."

"But he's raped Annet!"

Wulfric said incredulously: "Ralph did this?"

Perkin said: "God will punish him."

"So will I, by Christ," said Wulfric.

Gwenda said: "Please, Wulfric, no!"

Wulfric made for the door.

Gwenda went to him, frantic with fright, and grabbed his arm. Only a few minutes had gone by since she had given Ralph the fake message. Even if he believed it, she did not know how seriously he would take the urgency. There was a good chance he had not left the village yet. "Don't go to the manor house," she pleaded with Wulfric. "Please."

He shook her off roughly. "Get away from me," he said.

"Look at your baby!" she cried, pointing at Sammy in the crib. "Are you going to leave him without a father?"

Wulfric went out.

Gwenda followed, and the other men came after. Wulfric marched through the village like the angel of death, fists clenched at his sides, staring straight ahead, his face twisted into a rictus of fury. Other villagers, on their way home for the midday meal, spoke to him but got no reply. Some followed him. In the few minutes it took to walk to the manor house he gathered a small crowd. Nathan Reeve came out of his house and asked Gwenda what was happening, but all she could say was: "Stop him, someone, please!" It was useless: none of them could have restrained Wulfric even if they had dared to try.

He threw open the front door of the manor house and marched in. Gwenda was right behind him, and the crowd pushed through after them. The housekeeper, Vira, said indignantly: "You're supposed to knock!"

"Where is your master?" said Wulfric.

Vira saw the expression on Wulfric's face and looked scared. "He went to the stable," she said. "He's about to leave for Earlscastle."

Wulfric pushed past her and went through the kitchen. As he and Gwenda stepped out of the back door, they saw Ralph and Alan mounting up. Gwenda could have screamed—they were just seconds too early!

Wulfric jumped forward. With desperate inspiration, Gwenda stuck out her foot and hooked it around Wulfric's ankle.

Wulfric fell flat on his face in the mud.

Ralph did not see either of them. He kicked his horse and it trotted out of the yard. Alan saw them, read the situation, decided to avoid trouble, and followed Ralph. As they left the yard Alan urged his horse into a canter, passing Ralph, whereupon Ralph's horse eagerly increased its pace.

Wulfric leaped to his feet, cursing, and chased them. Gwenda ran after him. Wulfric could not catch the horses, but Gwenda was terrified that Ralph would look behind, and rein in to see what the fuss was about.

But the two men were enjoying the lively energy of fresh horses, and without a backward glance they raced away along the track that led out of the village. In seconds they disappeared.

Wulfric slumped on his knees in the mud.

Gwenda caught up with him and took his arm to help him to his feet. He pushed her aside so forcefully that she staggered and almost fell. She was shocked: it was completely out of character for him to be rough with her.

"You tripped me up," he said as he got to his feet unaided.

"I saved your life," she said.

He stared at her with hatred in his eyes and said: "I will never forgive you."

When Ralph reached Earlscastle he was told that Roland had not sent for him at all, never mind urgently. The rooks on the battlements laughed mockingly at him.

Alan conjectured an explanation. "It's to do with Annet," he said. "Just as we left, I saw Wulfric coming out of the back door of the manor house. I thought nothing of it at the time, but maybe he was intending to confront you."

"I'll bet he was," Ralph said. He touched the long dagger at his belt. "You should have told me—I'd welcome an excuse to stick my knife in his belly."

"And no doubt Gwenda knows that, so perhaps she invented the message to get you away from her murderous husband."

"Of course," said Ralph. "That would explain why no one else saw this messenger—he never existed. Crafty bitch."

She should be punished, but it might be difficult. She would probably say she did it for the best, and Ralph could hardly argue that she had been wrong to prevent her husband attacking the lord of the manor. Worse, if he made a fuss about her deception he would call attention to the fact that she had outwitted him. No, there would be no formal penalty—though he might find unofficial ways to chastise her.

As he was at Earlscastle, he took the opportunity to go hunting with the earl and his entourage, and he forgot about Annet—until the end of the second day, when Roland called him into his private chamber. Only the earl's clerk, Father Jerome, was with him. Roland did not ask Ralph to sit down. "The priest of Wigleigh is here," he said.

Ralph was surprised. "Father Gaspard? At Earlscastle?"

Roland did not bother to answer these rhetorical questions. "He complains that you raped a woman called Annet, the wife of Billy Howard, one of your serfs."

Ralph's heart missed a beat. He had not imagined the peasants would have the nerve to complain to the earl. It was very difficult for a serf to accuse a lord in a court of law. But they could be sly, and someone in Wigleigh had cleverly persuaded the priest to make the complaint.

Ralph put on an expression of carelessness. "Rubbish," he said. "All right, I lay with her, but she was willing." He gave Roland a man-to-man grin. "More than willing."

An expression of distaste came over Roland's face, and he turned to Father Jerome with an inquiring look.

Jerome was an educated, ambitious young man, a type Ralph particularly disliked. He had a snooty look as he said: "The girl is here. Woman, I should say, though she is only nineteen. She has massive bruises on her arms and a bloodstained dress. She says you encountered her in the forest, and your squire knelt on her to hold her down. And a man called Wulfric is here to say that you were seen riding away from the scene."

Ralph guessed it was Wulfric who had persuaded Father Gaspard to come here to Earlscastle. "It's not true," he said, trying to put a note of indignation into his voice.

Jerome looked skeptical. "Why would she lie?"

"Maybe someone saw us and told her husband. He gave her the bruises, I expect. She cried rape to stop him beating her. Then she stained her dress with chicken blood."

Roland sighed. "It's a bit oafish, isn't it, Ralph?"

Ralph was not sure what he meant. Did he expect his men to behave like damned monks?

Roland went on: "I was warned you'd be like this. My daughter-in-law always said you'd give me problems."

"Philippa?"

"Lady Philippa, to you."

Enlightenment dawned on Ralph, and he said incredulously: "Is that why you didn't promote me after I saved your life—because a *woman* was against me? What sort of an army will you have if you let girls pick your men?"

"You're right, of course, and that's why I went against her judgment in the

end. What women never realize is that a man without some bile in him is good for nothing but tilling the land. We can't take milksops into battle. But she was right when she warned me that you would cause trouble. I don't want to be bothered, in peacetime, with damned priests whining about serfs' wives being raped. Don't do it again. I don't care if you lie with the peasant women. If it comes to that, I don't care if you lie with the men. But if you take a man's wife, willing or otherwise, be prepared to compensate the husband in some way. Most peasants can be bought. Just don't let it become my problem."

"Yes, lord."

Jerome said: "What am I to do with this Gaspard?"

"Let me see," Roland said thoughtfully. "Wigleigh is on the edge of my territory, not far from my son William's landholding, is it not?"

"Yes," Ralph said.

"How far were you from the border when you met this girl?"

"A mile. We were only just outside Wigleigh."

"No matter." He turned to Jerome. "Everyone will know this is just an excuse, but tell Father Gaspard that the incident took place in Lord William's territory, so I can't adjudicate."

"Very good, my lord."

Ralph said: "What if they go to William?"

"I doubt that they will. But if they persist, you'll have to come to some arrangement with William. The peasants will tire of complaining eventually."

Ralph nodded, relieved. For a moment, he had suffered the dread thought that he had made a terrible error of judgment, and that after all he might be made to pay the price for raping Annet. But, in the end, he had got away with it, as he had expected to.

"Thank you, my lord," he said.

He wondered what his brother would say about this. The thought filled him with shame. But perhaps Merthin would never find out.

"We must complain to Lord William," said Wulfric when they got back to Wigleigh.

The entire village gathered in the church to discuss the matter. Father Gaspard and Nathan Reeve were there, but somehow Wulfric seemed to be the leader, despite his youth. He had gone to the front, leaving Gwenda and baby Sammy in the crowd.

Gwenda was praying that they would decide to drop the matter. It was not that she wanted Ralph to go unpunished—on the contrary, she would have liked to see him boiled alive. She herself had killed two men for merely threatening her with rape, something she remembered, every now and again during the discussion, with a shudder. But she did not like Wulfric taking the

leading role. It was partly because he was driven by the unquenched flame of his feeling for Annet, which hurt and saddened Gwenda. But, more importantly, she feared for him. The enmity between him and Ralph had already cost Wulfric his inheritance. What other vengeance would Ralph take?

Perkin said: “I’m the father of the victim, and I don’t want any more trouble over this. It’s very dangerous to complain of the actions of a lord. He always finds a way to punish the complainers, right or wrong. Let’s drop it.”

“Too late for that,” said Wulfric. “We’ve already complained, or at least our priest has. There’s nothing to be gained by backing down now.”

“We’ve gone far enough,” Perkin argued. “Ralph has been embarrassed in front of his earl. He knows now that he can’t do just whatever he pleases.”

“On the contrary,” said Wulfric. “He thinks he’s got away with it. I’m afraid he’ll do it again. No woman in the village will be safe.”

Gwenda herself had said to Wulfric all the things Perkin was saying. Wulfric had not answered her. He had hardly spoken to her since she tripped him up at the back door of the manor house. At first, she had told herself that he was merely sulking because he had felt foolish. She had expected him to have forgotten about it by the time he returned from Earlscastle. But she had been wrong. He had not touched her, in bed or out of it, for a week; he rarely met her eye; and he talked to her in monosyllables and grunts. It was beginning to depress her.

Nathan Reeve said: “You’ll never win against Ralph. Serfs never overcome lords.”

“I’m not so sure,” Wulfric said. “Everyone has enemies. We might not be the only people who would like to see Ralph reined in. Perhaps we will never see him convicted in court—but we must inflict the maximum of trouble and embarrassment on him if we want him to hesitate before doing this sort of thing again.”

Several villagers nodded agreement, but no one spoke in support of Wulfric, and Gwenda began to hope that he would lose the argument. However, her husband was nothing if not determined, and he now turned to the priest. “What do you think, Father Gaspard?”

Gaspard was young, poor, and earnest. He had no fear of the nobility. He was not ambitious—he did not want to become a bishop and join the ruling class—so he felt no need to please aristocrats. He said: “Annet has been cruelly violated, the peace of our village has been criminally broken, and Lord Ralph has committed a wicked, vile sin which he must confess and repent. For the sake of the victim, for our own self-respect, and to save Lord Ralph from the flames of Hell, we must go to Lord William.”

There was a rumble of assent.

Wulfric looked at Billy Howard and Annet, sitting side by side. In the

end, Gwenda thought, people would probably do what Annet and Billy wanted. “I don’t want trouble,” Billy said. “But we should finish what we’ve started, for the sake of all the women in the village.”

Annet did not raise her eyes from the floor, but she nodded assent, and Gwenda realized with dismay that Wulfric had won.

“Well, you got what you wanted,” she said to him as they left the church.

He grunted.

She persisted: “So, I suppose you will continue to risk your life for the honor of Billy Howard’s wife, while refusing to speak to your own wife.”

He said nothing. Sammy sensed the hostility and began to cry.

Gwenda felt desperate. She had moved heaven and earth to get the man she loved, she had married him and had his baby, and now he was treating her like an enemy. Her father had never behaved this way to her mother—not that Joby’s behavior was a model for anyone. But she had no idea how to deal with him. She had tried using Sammy, holding him in one arm while touching Wulfric with the other hand, in an attempt to win back his affection by associating herself with the baby boy he loved; but he just moved away, rejecting them both. She had even tried sex, pressing her breasts against his back at night, brushing her hand across his belly, touching his penis, but it did not work—as she might have known, remembering how resistant he had been last summer, before Annet married Billy.

Now, in frustration, she cried out: “What is wrong with you? I only tried to save your life!”

“You should not have done it,” he said.

“If I’d let you kill Ralph, you’d have been hanged!”

“You had no right.”

“What does it matter if I had the right or not?”

“That’s your father’s philosophy, isn’t it?”

She was startled. “What do you mean?”

“Your father believes it doesn’t matter whether or not he has the right to do something. If it’s for the best, he does it. Like selling you to feed his family.”

“They sold me to be raped! I tripped you up to save you from the gallows. That’s completely different.”

“As long as you go on telling yourself that, you’ll never understand him or me.”

She realized she was not going to win back his affection by trying to prove him wrong. “Well…I don’t understand, then.”

“You took away my power to make my own decisions. You treated me the way your father treated you, as a thing to be controlled, not as a person. It doesn’t matter whether I was right or wrong. What matters is that it was up to me to decide, not you. But you can’t see that, just as your father can’t see

what he took away from you when he sold you.”

She still thought the two things were completely different, but she did not argue the point, because she was beginning to see what had made him angry. He was passionate about his independence—something she could empathize with, for she felt the same way. And she had robbed him of that. She said falteringly: “I…I think I understand.”

“Do you?”

“At any rate, I’ll try not to do anything of that kind again.”

“Good.”

She only half believed she had been wrong, but she was desperate to end the war between them, so she said: “I’m very sorry.”

“All right.”

He wasn’t saying much, but she sensed he might be softening. “You know that I don’t want you to complain to Lord William about Ralph—but, if you’re determined to, I won’t try to stop you.”

“I’m glad.”

“In fact,” she said, “I might be able to help you.”

“Oh?” he said. “How?”

36

The home of Lord William and Lady Philippa, at Casterham, had once been a castle. There was still a round stone keep with battlements, though it was in ruins and used as a cowshed. The wall around the courtyard was intact, but the moat had dried up, and the ground in the slight remaining dip was used to grow vegetables and fruit trees. Where once there had been a drawbridge, a simple ramp now led up to the gatehouse.

Gwenda, carrying Sammy, passed under the arch of the gatehouse with Father Gaspard, Billy Howard, Annet, and Wulfric. A young man-at-arms was lolling on a bench, presumably on guard, but he saw the priest’s robe and did not challenge them. The relaxed atmosphere encouraged Gwenda. She was hoping to get a private audience with Lady Philippa.

They entered the house by the main door and found themselves in a traditional great hall, with high windows like those of a church. It seemed to take up about half the total space of the house. The rest, presumably, would be personal chambers, in the modern fashion, which emphasized the privacy of the noble family and played down military defenses.

A middle-aged man in a leather tunic was sitting at a table counting notches on a tally stick. He glanced up at them, finished his count, made a note on a slate, then said: “Good day to you, strangers.”

“Good day, Master Bailiff,” said Gaspard, deducing the man’s occupation. “We’ve come to see Lord William.”

“He’s expected back by suppertime, Father,” the bailiff said politely. “What’s your business with him, may I ask?”

Gaspard began to explain, and Gwenda slipped back outside.

She went around the house to the domestic end. There was a wooden extension that she guessed was the kitchen. A maid sat on a stool by the kitchen door with a sack of cabbages, washing the mud off in a big bowl of water. The maid was young, and looked fondly at the baby. “How old is he?” she said.

“Four months, nearly five. His name is Samuel. We call him Sammy, or Sam.”

The baby smiled at the girl, and she said: “Ah.”

Gwenda said: “I’m just an ordinary woman, like you, but I need to speak to the Lady Philippa.”

The girl frowned and looked troubled. “I’m only the kitchen maid,” she said.

“But you must see her sometimes. You could speak to her for me.”

She glanced behind her, as if worried about being overheard. “I don’t like to.”

Gwenda realized this might be more difficult than she had anticipated. “Couldn’t you just give her a message for me?” she said.

The maid shook her head.

Then a voice came from inside: “Who wants to send me a message?”

Gwenda tensed, wondering if she was in trouble. She looked toward the kitchen door.

A moment later, Lady Philippa stepped out.

She was not quite beautiful, and certainly not pretty, but she was good-looking. She had a straight nose and a strong jaw, and her green eyes were large and clear. She was not smiling, in fact she wore a slight frown, but nevertheless there was something friendly and understanding about her face.

Gwenda answered her question. “I’m Gwenda from Wigleigh, my lady.”

“Wigleigh.” Philippa’s frown deepened. “And what do you have to say to me?”

“It’s about Lord Ralph.”

“I was afraid it might be. Well, come inside and let’s warm that baby by the kitchen fire.”

Many noble ladies would have refused to speak to someone as lowly as Gwenda, but she had guessed that Philippa had a big heart underneath that rather formidable exterior. She followed Philippa inside. Sammy began to grizzle, and Gwenda gave him the breast.

“You can sit down,” Philippa said.

That was even more unusual. A serf would normally remain standing when talking to a lady. Philippa was being kind because of the baby, Gwenda guessed.

“All right, out with it,” Philippa said. “What has Ralph done?”

“You may remember, lady, a fight at the Fleece Fair in Kingsbridge last year.”

“I certainly do. Ralph groped a peasant girl, and her handsome young fiancé broke his nose. The boy shouldn’t have done it, of course, but Ralph is a brute.”

“Indeed he is. Last week he came across the same girl, Annet, in the woods. His squire held her down while Ralph raped her.”

“Oh, God save us.” Philippa looked distressed. “Ralph is an animal, a pig, a wild boar. I knew he should never have been made a lord. I told my father-in-law not to promote him.”

“A pity the earl didn’t follow your advice.”

“And I suppose the fiancé wants justice.”

Gwenda hesitated. She was not sure how much of the complicated story to tell. But she sensed it would be a mistake to hold anything back. “Annet is married, lady, but to a different man.”

“So what lucky girl got Mr. Handsome?”

“As it happens, Wulfric married me.”

“Congratulations.”

“Though Wulfric is here, with Annet’s husband, to bear witness.”

Philippa gave Gwenda a sharp look, and seemed about to comment, then changed her mind. “So why have you come here? Wigleigh is not in my husband’s territory.”

“The incident happened in the forest, and the earl says it was on Lord William’s land, so he can’t adjudicate.”

“That’s an excuse. Roland adjudicates anything he likes. He just doesn’t want to punish a man he’s recently elevated.”

“Anyway, our village priest is here to tell Lord William what happened.”

“And what do you want me to do?”

“You’re a woman, you understand. You know how men make excuses for rape. They say the girl must have been flirting, or doing something provocative.”

“Yes.”

“If Ralph gets away with this, he might do it again—perhaps to me.”

“Or me,” said Philippa. “You should see the way he stares at me—like a dog looking at a goose on the pond.”

That was encouraging. “Perhaps you can make Lord William understand how important it is that Ralph should not get away with this.”

Philippa nodded. “I think I can.”

Sammy had stopped sucking and gone to sleep. Gwenda stood up. “Thank you, lady.”

“I’m glad you came to me,” said Philippa.

Lord William summoned them the next morning. They met with him in the great hall. Gwenda was glad to see Lady Philippa sitting beside him. She gave Gwenda a friendly look, and Gwenda hoped that meant she had spoken to her husband.

William was tall and black-haired, like his father the earl, but he was going bald, and the dome above the dark beard and eyebrows suggested a more thoughtful kind of authority, matching his reputation. He examined the bloodstained dress and looked at Annet’s bruises, which were blue now, rather than the original angry red. All the same, they brought a look of fury to Lady Philippa’s face. Gwenda guessed it was not so much the severity of the injuries as the grim picture they conjured up of a brawny squire kneeling on a girl’s arms to hold her down while another man raped her.

“Well, you’ve done everything correctly so far,” William said to Annet. “You went immediately to the nearest village, you showed your injuries to men of good reputation there, and you named your attacker. Now you have to offer a bill to a justice of the peace in the Shiring County Court.”

She looked anxious. “What does that mean?”

“A bill is an accusation, written in Latin.”

“I can’t write English, lord, let alone Latin.”

“Father Gaspard can do it for you. The justice will put the bill before an indicting jury, and you will tell them what happened. Can you do that? They may ask for embarrassing details.”

Annet nodded determinedly.

“If they believe you, they will order the sheriff to summon Lord Ralph to the court a month later to be tried. Then you will need two sureties, people who will pledge a sum of money to guarantee that you will appear at the trial.”

“But who will be my sureties?”

“Father Gaspard can be one, and I will be the other. I’ll put up the money.”

“Thank you, lord!”

“Thank my wife, who has persuaded me that I can’t allow the king’s peace to be breached on my territory by an act of rape.”

Annet shot a grateful look at Philippa.

Gwenda looked at Wulfric. She had told her husband about her conversation with the lord’s wife. Now he met her eye and gave an almost imperceptible nod of acknowledgment. He knew she had made this happen.

William went on: “At the trial, you will tell your story again. Your friends will all have to be witnesses: Gwenda will say she saw you coming from the forest in your bloodstained dress, Father Gaspard will say you told him what happened, Wulfric will say he saw Ralph and Alan riding away from the scene.”

They all nodded solemnly.

“One more thing. Having started something like this, you can’t stop it. Withdrawing an appeal is an offense, and you would be severely punished—to say nothing of what revenge Ralph might take on you.”

Annet said: “I won’t change my mind. But what will happen to Ralph? How will he be punished?”

“Oh, there’s only one penalty for rape,” said Lord William. “He’ll be hanged.”

They all slept in the great hall of the castle, with William’s servants and squires and dogs, wrapping their cloaks around them and nestling into the carpet of rushes on the floor. As the light from the embers in the huge fireplace dimmed to a glow, Gwenda hesitantly reached for her husband, putting a tentative hand on his arm, stroking the wool of his cloak. They had not made love since the rape, and she was unsure whether he wanted her or

not. She had angered him grievously by tripping him up: would he feel that her intervention with Lady Philippa made up for that?

He responded immediately, drawing her to him and kissing her lips. She relaxed gratefully into his arms. They toyed with each other for a while. Gwenda was so happy she wanted to weep.

She waited for him to roll on top of her, but he did not do so. She could tell he wanted to, for he was being very affectionate, and his penis was hard in her hand; but perhaps he hesitated to do it in the company of so many others. People did have sex in halls like this, of course; it was normal, and no one took any notice. But perhaps Wulfric felt shy.

However, Gwenda was determined to seal the repair of their love, and after a while she climbed onto him, drawing her cloak over them both. As they began to move together, she saw an adolescent boy watching them, wide-eyed, a few yards away. Adults would politely look the other way, of course, but he was at the age where sex was a captivating mystery, and he obviously could not tear his gaze away. Gwenda was feeling so happy that she hardly cared. She met his eye, then smiled at him, without ceasing to move. His mouth fell open in shock, and he was struck by agonizing embarrassment. Looking mortified, he rolled over and covered his eyes with his arm.

Gwenda pulled her cloak up over her head and Wulfric's, buried her face in his neck, and gave herself up to pleasure.

37

Caris felt confident the second time she went to the royal court. The vast interior of Westminster Hall no longer intimidated her, nor did the mass of wealthy and powerful people crowding around the judges' benches. She had been here before, she knew the ropes, everything that had seemed so strange a year ago was now familiar. She even wore a dress in the London fashion, green on the right side and blue on the left. She enjoyed studying those around her, and reading their lives in their faces: cocksure or desperate, bewildered or sly. She could spot people who were new to the capital by their wide-eyed gaze and their air of uncertainty, and she felt pleasantly knowledgeable and superior.

If she had any misgivings, they centred on her lawyer, Francis Bookman. He was young and well informed, and—like most lawyers, she thought—he seemed very sure of himself. A small man with sandy hair, quick in his movements and always ready for an argument, he made her think of a cheeky bird on a window ledge, pecking crumbs and aggressively chasing away rivals. He had told them that their case was incontrovertible.

Godwyn had Gregory Longfellow, of course. Gregory had won the case against Earl Roland, and Godwyn had naturally asked him to represent the priory again. He had proved his ability, whereas Bookman was an unknown. However, Caris had a weapon up her sleeve, something that would come as a shock to Godwyn.

Godwyn showed no awareness that he had betrayed Caris, her father, and the entire city of Kingsbridge. He had always presented himself as a reformer, impatient of stick-in-the-mud Prior Anthony, sympathetic with the needs of the town, eager for the prosperity of monks and merchants alike. Then, within a year of becoming prior, he had turned to face the opposite way and become even more of a traditionalist than Anthony. Yet he appeared to feel no shame. Caris flushed with anger every time she thought of it.

He had no right to force the townspeople to use the fulling mill. His other impositions—the ban on hand mills, the fines for private fishponds and warrens—were technically correct, albeit outrageously harsh. But the fulling mill should be free, and Godwyn knew it. Caris wondered whether he believed that any deceit was pardonable provided it was done for the sake of God's work. Surely men of God should be *more* scrupulous about honesty than laymen, not less?

She put the point to her father, as they hung around the court, waiting for their case to come up. He said: "I never trust anyone who proclaims his morality from the pulpit. That high-minded type can always find an excuse for breaking his own rules. I'd rather do business with an everyday sinner who thinks it's probably to his advantage, in the long run, to tell the truth and keep his promises. He's not likely to change his mind about that."

In moments such as that, when Papa was his old self, Caris realized how much he had changed. Nowadays he was not often shrewd and quick-witted. More usually, he was forgetful and distracted. Caris suspected the decline had begun some months before she had noticed, and it probably accounted for his disastrous failure to anticipate the collapse of the wool market.

After several days' wait, they were called before Sir Wilbert Wheatfield, the pink-faced judge with rotten teeth who had ruled for the priory against Earl Roland a year ago. Caris's confidence began to ebb away as the judge took his seat on the bench against the east wall. It was frightening that a mere mortal should have such power. If he made the wrong decision, Caris's new cloth manufacturing enterprise would be blighted, her father would be ruined, and no one would be able to pay for the new bridge.

Then, as her lawyer began to speak, she started to feel better. Francis commenced with the history of the fulling mill, saying how it had been invented by the legendary Jack Builder, who built the first one, and how Prior Philip had given the townspeople the right to use it free.

He then dealt with Godwyn's counterarguments, disarming the prior in

advance. “It is true that the mill is in bad repair, slow, and prone to frequent breakdowns,” he said. “But how can the prior argue that the people have lost the right to it? The mill is the priory’s property, and it is for the priory to keep it in good repair. The fact that he has failed in this duty makes no difference. The people have no right to repair the mill, and they certainly have no obligation so to do. Prior Philip’s grant was not conditional.”

At this point, Francis produced his secret weapon. “In case the prior should attempt to claim that the grant *was* conditional, I invite the court to read this copy of Prior Philip’s will.”

Godwyn was astonished. He had tried to pretend that the will had been lost. But Thomas Langley had agreed to look for it, as a favor to Merthin; and he had sneaked it out of the library, for a day, time enough for Edmund to have it copied.

Caris could not help enjoying the look of shock and outrage on Godwyn’s face when he found that his deception had been foiled. He stepped forward and said indignantly: “How was this obtained?”

The question was revealing. He did not ask: “Where was it found?”—which would have been the logical inquiry if it had really been lost.

Gregory Longfellow looked annoyed, and waved at him with a hushing gesture; and Godwyn closed his mouth and stepped back, realizing he had given himself away—but it was surely too late, Caris thought. The judge must see that the only reason for Godwyn to be angry was that he knew the document favored the townspeople, and had attempted to suppress it.

Francis wound up quickly after that—a good decision, Caris thought, for Godwyn’s duplicity would be fresh in the judge’s mind while Gregory made the case for the defense.

But Gregory’s approach took them all completely by surprise.

He stepped forward and said to the judge: “Sir, Kingsbridge is not a chartered borough.” He stopped there, as if that was all he had to say.

It was true, technically. Most towns had a royal charter giving them the freedom to trade and hold markets without obligations to the local earl or baron. Their citizens were free men, owing allegiance to no one but the king. However, a few towns such as Kingsbridge remained the property of an overlord, usually a bishop or a prior: St. Albans and Bury St. Edmunds were examples. Their status was less clear.

The judge said: “That makes a difference. Only free men can appeal to the royal court. What do you have to say to that, Francis Bookman? Are your clients serfs?”

Francis turned to Edmund. In a low, urgent voice he said: “Have the townspeople appealed to the royal court before?”

“No. The prior has—”

“But not the parish guild? Even before your time?”

“There’s no record of it—”

“So we can’t argue from precedent. Damn.” Francis turned back to the judge. His face changed from worried to confident in a flash, and he spoke as if condescending to deal with something trivial. “Sir, the townspeople are free. They enjoy burgess tenure.”

Gregory said quickly: “There is no universal pattern of burgess tenure. It means different things in different places.”

The judge said. “Is there a written statement of customs?”

Francis looked at Edmund, who shook his head. “No prior would ever agree to such things being written down,” he muttered.

Francis turned back to the judge. “There is no written statement, sir, but clearly—”

“Then this court must decide whether or not you are free men,” the judge said.

Edmund spoke directly to the judge. “Sir, the citizens have the freedom to buy and sell their homes.” This was an important right not granted to serfs, who needed their lord’s permission.

Gregory said: “But you have feudal obligations. You must use the prior’s mills and fishponds.”

Sir Wilbert said: “Forget fishponds. The key factor is the citizens’ relationship to the system of royal justice. Does the town freely admit the king’s sheriff?”

Gregory answered that. “No, he must ask permission to enter the town.”

Edmund said indignantly: “That is the prior’s decision, not ours!”

Sir Wilbert said: “Very well. Do the citizens serve on royal juries, or claim exemption?”

Edmund hesitated. Godwyn looked exultant. Serving on juries was a time-consuming chore that everyone avoided if they could. After a pause, Edmund said: “We claim exemption.”

“Then that settles the matter,” the judge said. “If you refuse that duty on the grounds that you are serfs, you cannot appeal over the head of your landlord to the king’s justice.”

Gregory said triumphantly: “In the light of that, I beg you to dismiss the townspeople’s application.”

“So ruled,” said the judge.

Francis appeared outraged. “Sir, may I speak?”

“Certainly not,” said the judge.

“But, sir—”

“Another word and I’ll hold you in contempt.”

Francis closed his mouth and bowed his head.

Sir Wilbert said: “Next case.”

Another lawyer began to speak.

Caris was dazed.

Francis addressed her and her father in tones of protest. “You should have told me you were serfs!”

“We’re not.”

“The judge has just ruled that you are. I can’t win cases on partial information.”

She decided not to squabble with him. He was the type of young man who could not admit a mistake.

Godwyn was so pleased with himself that he looked as if he might burst. As he left, he could not resist a parting shot. He wagged a finger at Edmund and Caris. “I hope that, in future, you’ll see the wisdom of submitting to the will of God,” he said solemnly.

Caris said: “Oh, piss off,” and turned her back.

She spoke to her father. “This makes us completely powerless! We proved we had the right to use the fulling mill free, but Godwyn can still withhold that right!”

“So it seems,” he said.

She turned to Francis. “There must be *something* we can do,” she said angrily.

“Well,” he said, “you could get Kingsbridge made into a proper borough, with a royal charter setting out your rights and freedoms. Then you would have access to the royal court.”

Caris saw a glimmer of hope. “How do we go about that?”

“You apply to the king.”

“Would he grant it?”

“If you argued that you need this to be able to pay your taxes, he would certainly listen.”

“Then we must try.”

Edmund warned: “Godwyn will be furious.”

“Let him,” Caris said grimly.

“Don’t underestimate the challenge,” her father persisted. “You know how ruthless he is, even over small disputes. Something like this will lead to total war.”

“So be it,” said Caris bleakly. “Total war.”

“Oh, Ralph, how could you do it?” said his mother.

Merthin studied his brother’s face in the dim light of their parents’ home. Ralph appeared torn between outright denial and self-justification.

In the end, Ralph said: “She led me on.”

Maud was distressed more than angry. “But, Ralph, she is another man’s wife!”

“A peasant’s wife.”

“Even so.”

“Don’t worry, Mother, they’ll never convict a lord on the word of a serf.”

Merthin was not so sure. Ralph was a minor lord, and it seemed he had incurred the enmity of William of Caster. There was no telling how the trial would come out.

Their father said sternly: “Even if they don’t convict you—which I pray for—just think of the shame of it! You’re the son of a knight—how could you forget that?”

Merthin was horrified and upset, but not surprised. That streak of violence had always been in Ralph’s nature. In their boyhood he had ever been ready for a fight, and Merthin had often steered him away from fisticuffs, deflating a confrontation with a conciliatory word or a joke. Had anyone other than his brother committed this horrible rape, Merthin would have been hoping to see the man hang.

Ralph kept glancing at Merthin. He was worried about Merthin’s disapproval—perhaps more so than his mother’s. He had always looked up to his older brother. Merthin just wished there was some way Ralph could be shackled to prevent his attacking people, now that he no longer had Merthin nearby to keep him out of trouble.

The discussion with their distraught parents was set to go on for some time, but there was a knock at the door of the modest house, and Caris came in. She smiled at Gerald and Maud, though her face changed when she saw Ralph.

Merthin guessed she wanted him. He stood up. “I didn’t know you were back from London,” he said.

“Just arrived,” she replied. “Can we have a few words?”

He pulled a cloak around his shoulders and stepped outside with her into the dim gray light of a cold December day. It was a year since she had terminated their love affair. He knew that her pregnancy had ended in the hospital, and he guessed she had somehow brought on the abortion deliberately. Twice in the following few weeks he had asked her to come back to him, but she had refused. It was bewildering: he sensed that she still loved him, but she was adamant. He had given up hope, and assumed that in time he would cease to grieve. So far, that had not happened. His heart still beat faster when he saw her, and he was happier talking to her than doing anything else in the world.

They walked to the main street and turned into the Bell. In the late afternoon the tavern was quiet. They ordered hot spiced wine.

“We lost the case,” Caris said.

Merthin was shocked. “How is that possible? You had Prior Philip’s will __”

“It made no difference.” She was bitterly disappointed, Merthin could see. She explained: “Godwyn’s smart lawyer argued that Kingsbridge people are serfs of the prior, and serfs have no right to appeal to the royal court. The judge dismissed the case.”

Merthin felt angry. “But that’s stupid. It means the prior can do anything he likes, regardless of laws and charters—”

“I know.”

Merthin realized she was impatient because he was saying things she had said to herself many times. He suppressed his indignation and tried to be practical. “What are you going to do?”

“Apply for a borough charter. That would free the town from the control of the prior. Our lawyer thinks we have a strong case. Mind you, he thought we would win against the fulling mill. However, the king is desperate for money for this war against France. He needs prosperous towns to pay his taxes.”

“How long would it take to get a charter?”

“That’s the bad news—at least a year, perhaps more.”

“And in that time, you can’t manufacture scarlet cloth.”

“Not with the old fulling mill.”

“So we’ll have to stop work on the bridge.”

“I can’t see any way out of it.”

“Damn.” It seemed so unreasonable. Here they had at their fingertips the means to restore the town’s prosperity, and one man’s stubbornness was preventing them. “How we all misjudged Godwyn,” Merthin said.

“Don’t remind me.”

“We’ve got to escape from his control.”

“I know.”

“But sooner than a year from now.”

“I wish there was a way.”

Merthin racked his brains. At the same time, he was studying Caris. She was a wearing a new dress from London, particolored in the current fashion, which gave her a playful look, even though she was solemn and anxious. The colors, deep green and mid-blue, seemed to make her eyes sparkle and her skin glow. This happened every so often. He would be deep in conversation with her over some problem to do with the bridge—they rarely talked of anything else—then suddenly he would realize how lovely she was.

Even while he was thinking about that, the problem-solving part of his mind came up with a proposal. “We should build our own fulling mill.”

Caris shook her head. “It would be illegal. Godwyn would order John Constable to pull it down.”

“What if it were outside the town?”

“In the forest, you mean? That’s illegal, too. You’d have the king’s

verderers on your back.” Verderers enforced the laws of the forest.

“Not in the forest, then. Somewhere else.”

“Wherever you went, you’d need the permission of some lord.”

“My brother’s a lord.”

A look of distaste crossed Caris’s face at the mention of Ralph, then her expression changed as she thought through what Merthin was saying. “Build a fulling mill at Wigleigh?”

“Why not?”

“Is there a fast-flowing stream to turn the mill wheel?”

“I believe so—but if not, it can be driven by an ox like the ferry.”

“Would Ralph let you?”

“Of course. He’s my brother. If I ask him, he’ll say yes.”

“Godwyn will go mad with rage.”

“Ralph doesn’t care about Godwyn.”

Caris was pleased and excited, Merthin could see; but what were her feelings toward him? She was glad they had a solution to their problem, and eager to outwit Godwyn, but beyond that he could not read her mind.

“Let’s think this through before we rejoice,” she said. “Godwyn will make a rule saying cloth can’t be taken out of Kingsbridge to be fulled. Lots of towns have laws like that.”

“Very hard for him to enforce such a rule without the cooperation of a guild. And, if he does, you can get around it. Most of the cloth is being woven in the villages anyway, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“Then don’t bring it into the city. Send it from the weavers to Wigleigh. Dye it there, full it in the new mill, then take it to London. Godwyn will have no jurisdiction.”

“How long would it take to build a mill?”

Merthin considered. “The timber building can be put up in a couple of days. The machinery will be wooden, too, but it will take longer, as it has to be precisely measured. Getting the men and materials there will take the most time. I could have it finished a week after Christmas.”

“That’s wonderful,” she said. “We’ll do it.”

Elizabeth rolled the dice and moved her last counter into the home position on the board. “I win!” she said. “That’s three out of three. Pay up.”

Merthin handed her a silver penny. Only two people ever beat him at tabula: Elizabeth and Caris. He did not mind losing. He was grateful for a worthy opponent.

He sat back and sipped his pear wine. It was a cold Saturday afternoon in January, and already dark. Elizabeth’s mother was asleep in a chair near the

fire, snoring gently with her mouth open. She worked at the Bell, but she was always at home when Merthin visited her daughter. He preferred it that way. It meant he never had to decide whether to kiss Elizabeth or not. It was a question he did not want to confront. He would have liked to kiss her, of course. He remembered the touch of her cool lips and the firmness of her flat breasts. But it would mean admitting that his love affair with Caris was over forever, and he was not yet ready for that.

"How is the new mill at Wigleigh?" Elizabeth asked.

"Finished, and rolling," Merthin said proudly. "Caris has been fulling cloth there for a week."

Elizabeth raised her eyebrows. "Herself?"

"No, that was a figure of speech. As a matter of fact, Mark Webber is running the mill, though he is training some of the village men to take over."

"It will be good for Mark if he becomes Caris's second-in-command. He's been poor all his life—this is a big opportunity."

"Caris's new enterprise will be good for us all. It will mean I can finish the bridge."

"She's a clever girl," Elizabeth said in a level voice. "But what does Godwyn have to say?"

"Nothing. I'm not sure he knows about it yet."

"He will, though."

"I don't believe there's anything he can do."

"He's a prideful man. If you've outwitted him, he'll never forgive you."

"I can live with that."

"And what about the bridge?"

"Despite all the problems, the work is only a couple of weeks behind schedule. I've had to spend money to catch up, but we will be able to use the bridge—with a temporary wooden roadbed—for the next Fleece Fair."

"You and Caris between you have saved the town."

"Not yet—but we will."

There was a knock at the door, and Elizabeth's mother woke up with a start. "Now who could that be?" she said. "It's dark out."

It was one of Edmund's apprentice boys. "Master Merthin is wanted at the parish guild meeting," he said.

"What for?" Merthin asked him.

"Master Edmund said to tell you, you're wanted at the parish guild meeting," the boy said. He had obviously learned the message off by heart and knew nothing more.

"Something about the bridge, I expect," Merthin said to Elizabeth. "They're worried about the cost." He picked up his cloak. "Thank you for the wine—and the game."

"I'll play you anytime you like," she said.

He walked beside the apprentice to the guildhall on the main street. The guild was holding a business meeting, not a banquet. The twenty or so most important people in Kingsbridge were sitting at a long trestle table, some drinking ale or wine, talking in low voices. Merthin sensed tension and anger, and he became apprehensive.

Edmund was at the head of the table. Prior Godwyn sat next to him. The prior was not a member of the guild: his presence suggested that Merthin's surmise had been right, and the meeting was about the bridge. However, Thomas the matricularius was not present, although Philemon was. That was odd.

Merthin had recently had a small dispute with Godwyn. His contract had been for a year at two pence a day plus the lease on Leper Island. It was due for renewal, and Godwyn had proposed to continue paying him two pence a day. Merthin had insisted on four pence, and in the end Godwyn had conceded the point. Had he complained about this to the guild?

Edmund spoke with characteristic abruptness. "We've called you here because Prior Godwyn wishes to dismiss you as master builder in charge of the bridge."

Merthin felt as if he had been punched in the face. He was not expecting anything like this. "What?" he said. "But Godwyn appointed me!"

Godwyn said: "And therefore I have the right to dismiss you."

"But why?

"The work is behind schedule and over budget."

"It's behind schedule because the earl closed the quarry—and it's over budget because I had to spend money to catch up."

"Excuses."

"Am I inventing the death of a carter?"

Godwyn shot back: "Killed by your own brother!"

"What has that to do with anything?"

Godwyn ignored the question. "A man who is accused of rape!" he added.

"You can't dismiss a master builder because of his brother's behavior."

"Who are you to say what I can do?"

"I'm the builder of your bridge!" Then it occurred to Merthin that much of his work as master builder was complete. He had designed all the most complicated parts and made wooden templates to guide the stonemasons. He had built the cofferdams, which no one else knew how to do. And he had constructed the floating cranes and hoists needed to move the heavy stones into position in midstream. Any builder could now finish the job, he realized with dismay.

"There is no guarantee of renewal of your contract," Godwyn said.

It was true. Merthin looked around the room for support. No one would meet his eye. They had already argued this out with Godwyn, he deduced.

Despair overwhelmed him. Why had this happened? It was not because the bridge was behind schedule and over budget—the delay was not Merthin's fault, and anyway he was catching up. What was the real reason? As soon as he had asked the question, the answer came into his mind. "This is because of the fulling mill at Wigleigh!" he said.

Godwyn said primly: "The two things are not necessarily connected."

Edmund said quietly but distinctly: "Lying monk."

Philemon spoke for the first time. "Take care, Alderman!" he said.

Edmund was undeterred. "Merthin and Caris outwitted you, didn't they, Godwyn? Their mill at Wigleigh is entirely legitimate. You brought defeat on yourself by your greed and obstinacy. And this is your revenge."

Edmund was right. No one was as capable a builder as Merthin. Godwyn must know that, but clearly he did not care. "Who will you hire instead of me?" Merthin asked. Then he answered the question himself. "Elfric, I suppose."

"That has to be decided."

Edmund said: "Another lie."

Philemon spoke again, his voice more shrill. "You can be brought before the ecclesiastical court for talk like that!"

Merthin wondered if this might be no more than a move in the game, a way for Godwyn to renegotiate his contract. He said to Edmund: "Is the parish guild in agreement with the prior on this?"

Godwyn said: "It is not for them to agree or disagree!"

Merthin ignored him and looked expectantly at Edmund.

Edmund was shamefaced. "It cannot be denied that the prior has the right. The guildsmen are financing the bridge by loans, but the prior is overlord of the town. This was agreed from the start."

Merthin turned to Godwyn. "Do you have anything else to say to me, Lord Prior?" He waited, hoping in his heart that Godwyn would come out with his real demands.

But Godwyn said stonily: "No."

"Good night, then."

He waited a second longer. No one spoke. The silence told him it was all over.

He left the room.

Outside the building, he took a deep breath of the cold night air. He could hardly believe what had happened. He was no longer master of the bridge.

He walked through the dark streets. It was a clear night, and he could find his way by starlight. He walked past Elizabeth's house: he did not want to talk to her. He hesitated outside Caris's, but passed that, too, and went down to the waterside. His small rowboat was tied up opposite Leper Island. He got in and rowed himself across.

When he reached his house, he paused outside and looked up at the stars, fighting back tears. The truth was that in the end he had *not* outwitted Godwyn—rather the reverse. He had underestimated the lengths to which the prior would go to punish those who opposed him. Merthin had thought himself clever, but Godwyn had been cleverer, or at least more ruthless. He was prepared to damage the town and the priory, if necessary, to avenge a wound to his pride. And that had given him victory.

Merthin went inside and lay down, alone and beaten.

38

Ralph lay awake all through the night before his trial.

He had seen many people die by hanging. Every year, twenty or thirty men and a few women rode the sheriff's cart from the prison in Shiring Castle down the hill to the market square where the gallows stood waiting. It was a common occurrence, but those men had remained in Ralph's memory, and on this night they returned to torment him.

Some died fast, their necks snapped by the drop; but not many. Most strangled slowly. They kicked and struggled and opened their mouths wide in silent, breathless screaming. They pissed and shat themselves. He recalled an old woman convicted of witchcraft: when she dropped, she bit right through her tongue and spat it out, and the crowd around the gallows had backed away in fright from the bloody lump of flesh as it flew through the air and fell on the dusty ground.

Everyone told Ralph he was not going to be hanged, but he could not get the thought out of his mind. People said that Earl Roland could not allow one of his lords to be executed on the word of a serf. However, so far the earl had done nothing to intervene.

The preliminary jury had returned an indictment against Ralph to the justice of the peace in Shiring. Like all such juries, it had consisted mainly of knights of the county owing allegiance to Earl Roland—but, despite this, they had acted on the evidence of the Wigleigh peasants. The men—jurors were never women, of course—had not flinched from indicting one of their own. In fact the jurors had shown, by their questions, some distaste for what Ralph had done, and several had refused to shake his hand afterward.

Ralph had planned to prevent Annet testifying again, at the trial proper, by imprisoning her in Wigleigh before she could leave for Shiring. However, when he went to her house to seize her, he found she had already departed. She must have anticipated his move and left earlier to foil him.

Today another jury would hear the case but, to Ralph's dismay, at least

four of the men had been on the preliminary jury, too. Since the evidence on both sides was likely to be exactly the same, he could not see how this group could return a different verdict, unless some kind of pressure was put on the jurors—and it was getting very late for that.

He got up at first light and went downstairs to the ground floor of the Courthouse Inn on the market square of Shiring. He found a shivering boy breaking the ice on the well in the backyard and told him to fetch bread and ale. Then he went to the communal dormitory and woke his brother, Merthin.

They sat together in the cold parlor, with the stale smell of last night's ale and wine, and Ralph said: "I'm afraid they'll hang me."

"So am I," said Merthin.

"I don't know what to do." The boy brought two tankards and half a loaf. Ralph picked up his ale in a shaking hand and took a long draft.

Merthin ate some bread automatically, frowning and looking upward out of the corners of his eyes in the way he always did when he was racking his brains. "The only thing I can think of is to try to persuade Annet to drop the charge and come to a settlement. You'll have to offer her compensation."

Ralph shook his head. "She can't back out—it's not allowed. They'll punish her if she does."

"I know. But she could deliberately give weak evidence, making room for doubt. That's how it's usually done, I believe."

Hope sparked in Ralph's heart. "I wonder if she would consent."

The potboy brought in an armful of logs and knelt before the fireplace to start a fire.

Merthin said thoughtfully: "How much money could you offer Annet?"

"I've got twenty florins." That was worth three pounds of English silver pennies.

Merthin ran a hand through his untidy red hair. "It's not much."

"It's a lot to a peasant girl. On the other hand, her family is rich, for peasants."

"Doesn't Wigleigh yield you much money?"

"I've had to buy armor. When you're a lord you need to be ready to go to war."

"I could lend you money."

"How much have you got?"

"Thirteen pounds."

Ralph was so astonished that for a moment he forgot his troubles. "Where did you get all that?"

Merthin looked faintly resentful. "I work hard and I'm paid well."

"But you were sacked as master builder of the bridge."

"There's plenty more work. And I rent out land on Leper Island."

Ralph was indignant. "So a carpenter is richer than a lord!"

“Luckily for you, as it happens. How much do you think Annet will want?”

Ralph thought of a snag, and his spirits fell again. “It’s not her, it’s Wulfric. He’s the ringleader in this.”

“Of course.” Merthin had spent a lot of time in Wigleigh while building the fulling mill, and he knew that Wulfric had married Gwenda only after being jilted by Annet. “Then let’s talk to him.”

Ralph did not think it would do any good, but he had nothing to lose.

They went out into the bleak gray daylight, pulling their cloaks around their shoulders against a cold February wind. They crossed the marketplace and entered the Bell, where the Wigleigh folk were staying—paid for, Ralph presumed, by Lord William, without whose help they would not have begun this process. But Ralph had no doubt that his real enemy was William’s voluptuous, malevolent wife, Philippa, who seemed to hate Ralph, even though—or perhaps because—he found her fascinating and alluring.

Wulfric was up, and they found him eating porridge with bacon. When he saw Ralph, his face turned thunderous and he rose from his seat.

Ralph put his hand on his sword, ready to fight there and then, but Merthin hastily stepped forward, holding his hands open in front of him in a conciliatory gesture. “I come as a friend, Wulfric,” he said. “Don’t get angry, or you’ll end up on trial instead of my brother.”

Wulfric remained standing with his hands at his sides. Ralph was disappointed: the agony of his suspense would have been eased by a fight.

Wulfric spat a piece of bacon rind on the floor and swallowed, then said: “What do you want, if not trouble?”

“To make a settlement. Ralph is willing to pay Annet ten pounds by way of recompense for what he did.”

Ralph was startled by the amount. Merthin would have to pay most of it—but he showed no hesitation.

Wulfric said: “Annet can’t withdraw the charge—it’s not allowed.”

“But she can alter her evidence. If she says that at first she consented, then changed her mind when it was too late, the jury wouldn’t convict Ralph.”

Ralph watched Wulfric’s face eagerly for a sign of willingness, but his expression remained stony, and he said: “So you’re offering her a bribe to commit perjury?”

Ralph began to despair. He could see that Wulfric did not want Annet to be paid money. Revenge was his aim, not compensation. He wanted a hanging.

Merthin said reasonably: “I’m offering her a different kind of justice.”

“You’re trying to get your brother off the hook.”

“Wouldn’t you do the same? You had a brother once.” Ralph recalled that Wulfric’s brother had been killed, along with his parents, when the bridge

collapsed. Merthin went on: “Wouldn’t you try to save his life—even if he had done wrong?”

Wulfric appeared startled by this appeal to family feeling. Clearly it had never occurred to him to think of Ralph as someone with kinfolk who loved him. But he recovered after a moment and said: “My brother David would never have done what Ralph did.”

“Of course,” Merthin said soothingly. “All the same, you can’t blame me for wanting to find a way to save Ralph, especially if it can be managed without doing an injustice to Annet.”

Ralph admired his brother’s smooth way of talking. He could charm a bird out of a tree, he thought.

But Wulfric was not easily persuaded. “The villagers want to see the back of Ralph. They’re afraid he might do the same thing again.”

Merthin sidestepped that. “Perhaps you should put our offer to Annet. It should be her decision, surely.”

Wulfric looked thoughtful. “How could we be certain you would pay the money?”

Ralph’s heart leaped. Wulfric was softening.

Merthin replied: “We’ll give the cash to Caris Wooler before the trial. She will pay Annet after Ralph is declared innocent. You trust Caris, and we do, too.”

Wulfric nodded. “As you say, it’s not my decision. I’ll put it to her.” He went upstairs.

Merthin let out his breath in a long sigh. “By heaven, there’s an angry man.”

“You talked him round, though,” Ralph said admiringly.

“He’s only agreed to pass on a message.”

They sat at the table Wulfric had vacated. A potboy asked them if they wanted breakfast, but they both refused. The parlor was full of guests calling for ham and cheese and ale. The inns were crowded with people attending the court. Unless they had a good excuse, all the knights of the shire were obliged to come, as were most other prominent men of the county: senior clergymen, wealthy merchants, and anyone with an income over forty pounds a year. Lord William, Prior Godwyn, and Edmund Wooler were all included. Ralph and Merthin’s father, Sir Gerald, had been a regular attender before his fall from grace. They had to offer themselves as jurors and transact other business, such as paying their taxes or electing their Members of Parliament. In addition there was a host of accused men, victims, witnesses, and sureties. A court brought a lot of business to the inns of a town.

Wulfric kept them waiting. Ralph said: “What do you think they’re talking about, up there?”

Merthin said: “Annet may be inclined to take the money. Her father would

support her in that, and perhaps her husband, Billy Howard, too. But Wulfric is the type who thinks telling the truth is more important than money. His wife, Gwenda, will support him out of loyalty, and Father Gaspard will do the same on principle. Most importantly, they'll have to consult Lord William; and he'll do what Lady Philippa wants. She hates you, for some reason. On the other hand, a woman is more likely to choose reconciliation over confrontation."

"So it could go either way."

"Exactly."

The patrons of the inn finished their breakfasts and began to drift out, heading across the square to the Courthouse Inn, where the session would be held. Soon it would be too late.

At last Wulfric reappeared. "She says no," he said abruptly, and he turned away.

"Just a minute!" Merthin said.

Wulfric took no notice, and disappeared again up the stairs.

Ralph cursed. For a while he had hoped for a reprieve. Now he was in the hands of the jury.

He heard the sound of a handbell being rung vigorously outside. A sheriff's deputy was summoning all concerned to the court. Merthin stood up. Reluctantly, Ralph followed suit.

They walked back to the courthouse and went into the large back room. At the far end, the justice's "bench" stood on a raised dais. Although always called a bench, it was in fact a carved wooden chair like a throne. The justice was not seated, but his clerk was at a table in front of the dais, reading a scroll. Two long benches for the jurymen stood to one side. There were no other seats in the room: everyone else would stand wherever he wished. Order was maintained by the power of the justice to sentence instantly anyone who misbehaved: no trial was necessary for a crime that the judge had himself witnessed. Ralph spotted Alan Fernhill, looking terrified, and stood beside him without speaking.

Ralph began to think he should never have come here. He could have made an excuse: sickness, a misunderstanding about dates, a horse lamed on the road. But that would only have brought him a postponement. Eventually the sheriff would have come, with armed deputies, to arrest him; and if he evaded them, he would have been declared an outlaw.

However, that was better than hanging. He wondered if he should flee now. He could probably fight his way out of the tavern. But he would not get far on foot. He would be chased by half the town, and if they did not catch him, the sheriff's deputies would follow on horseback. And his flight would be seen as an admission of guilt. As things stood, he still had a chance of acquittal. Annet might be too intimidated to give her evidence clearly.

Perhaps key witnesses would fail to show up. There could be some last-minute intervention by Earl Roland.

The courtroom filled up: Annet, the villagers, Lord William and Lady Philippa, Edmund Wooler and Caris, Prior Godwyn and his slimy assistant Philemon. The clerk banged on his table for quiet, and the justice came through a side door. It was Sir Guy de Bois, a large landholder. He had a bald head and a fat belly. He was an old comrade-in-arms of the earl's, which might stand in Ralph's favor; but, on the other side of the balance, he was Lady Philippa's uncle, and she might have whispered malice in his ear. He had the flushed look of a man who has breakfasted on salt beef and strong ale. He sat down, farted loudly, sighed with satisfaction, and said: "All right, let's get on with it."

Earl Roland was not present.

Ralph's case came first: it was the one that most interested everybody, including the justice. The indictment was read, and Annet was called to give her evidence.

Ralph found it strangely difficult to concentrate. He had heard it all before, of course, but he should have been listening hard for any discrepancy in the story Annet told today, any sign of uncertainty, any hesitation or faltering. But he felt fatalistic. His enemies were out in full force. His one powerful friend, Earl Roland, was absent. Only his brother stood beside him, and Merthin had already tried his best to help, and failed. Ralph was doomed.

The witnesses followed: Gwenda, Wulfric, Peg, Gaspard. Ralph had thought he had absolute power over these people, but somehow they had conquered him. The foreman of the jury, Sir Herbert Montain, was one of those who had refused to shake Ralph's hand, and he asked questions that seemed designed to emphasize the horror of the crime: How bad was the pain? How much blood? Was she weeping?

When it was Ralph's turn to speak, he told the story that had been disbelieved by the jury of indictment, and he told it in a low voice, stumbling over his words. Alan Fernhill did better, saying firmly that Annet had been eager to lie with Ralph, and that the two lovers had asked him to make himself scarce while they enjoyed one another's favors beside the stream. But the jury did not believe him: Ralph could tell by their faces. He began to feel almost bored by the proceedings, wishing they would be over, and his fate sealed.

As Alan stepped back, Ralph was conscious of a new figure at his shoulder, and a low voice said: "Listen to me."

Ralph glanced behind and saw Father Jerome, the earl's clerk, and the thought crossed his mind that a court such as this had no power over priests, even if they committed crimes.

The justice turned to the jury and asked for their verdict.

Father Jerome murmured: “Your horses stand outside, saddled and ready to go.”

Ralph froze. Was he hearing correctly? He turned and said: “What?”

“Run for it.”

Ralph looked behind him. A hundred men barred his way to the door, many of them armed. “It’s not possible.”

“Use the side door,” Jerome said, indicating with a slight inclination of his head the entrance through which the justice had come. Ralph saw immediately that only the Wigleigh people stood between him and the side door.

The foreman of the jury, Sir Herbert, stood up, looking self-important.

Ralph caught the eye of Alan Fernhill, standing beside him. Alan had heard everything and looked expectant.

“Go now!” whispered Jerome.

Ralph put his hand on his sword.

“We find Lord Ralph of Wigleigh guilty of rape,” said the foreman.

Ralph drew his sword. Waving it in the air, he dashed for the door.

There was a second of stunned silence, then everyone shouted at once. But Ralph was the one man in the room with a weapon in his hand, and he knew it would take the others a moment to draw.

Only Wulfric tried to stop him, stepping into his path heedlessly, not even looking scared, just determined. Ralph raised his sword and brought it down, as hard as he could, aiming at the middle of Wulfric’s skull, intending to cleave it in two. But Wulfric stepped nimbly back and to the side. Nevertheless, the point of the sword sliced through the left side of his face, cutting it open from the temple to the jaw. Wulfric cried out in sudden agony, and his hands flew to his cheek; and then Ralph was past him.

He flung open the door, stepped through, and turned. Alan Fernhill dashed past him. The foreman of the jury was close behind Alan, sword drawn and raised. Ralph experienced a moment of pure elation. This was how things should be settled—by a fight, not a discussion. Win or lose, he preferred it this way.

With a yell of exhilaration he thrust at Sir Herbert. The point of his sword touched the foreman’s chest, ripping through his leather tunic; but the man was too distant for the blow to penetrate the ribs, and it merely cut his skin then glanced off the bones. All the same, Herbert cried out—more in fear than pain—and stumbled back, colliding with those behind him. Ralph slammed the door on them.

He found himself in a passage that ran the length of the house, with a door to the market square at one end and another to the stable yard at the other. Where were the horses? Jerome had said only that they were outside. Alan was already running for the back door, so Ralph followed. As they burst into

the yard, a hubbub behind them told him that the courtroom door had been opened and the crowd was after him.

There was no sign of their horses in the yard.

Ralph ran under the arch that led to the front.

There stood the most welcome sight in the world: his hunter, Griff, saddled and pawing the ground, with Alan's two-year-old Fletch beside him, both held by a barefoot stable boy with his mouth full of bread.

Ralph seized the reins and jumped on his horse. Alan did the same. They kicked their beasts just as the mob from the courtroom came through the arch. The stable boy threw himself out of the way, terrified. The horses surged forward and away.

Someone in the crowd threw a knife. It stuck a quarter of an inch into Griff's flank, then fell away, serving only to spur the horse on.

They galloped flat out through the streets, scattering townspeople before them, careless of men, women, children, and livestock. They charged through a gate in the old wall and passed into a suburb of houses interspersed with gardens and orchards. Ralph looked behind. No pursuers were in sight.

The sheriff's men would come after them, of course, but they had first to fetch horses and saddle them. Ralph and Alan were already a mile from the market square, and their mounts showed no signs of tiring. Ralph was filled with glee. Five minutes ago he had reconciled himself to being hanged. Now he was free!

The road forked. Choosing at random, Ralph turned left. A mile away across the fields he could see woodland. Once there, he would turn off the track, and disappear.

But what would he do then?

39

"Earl Roland was clever," Merthin said to Elizabeth Clerk. "He allowed justice to take its course almost to the end. He didn't bribe the judge or influence the jury or intimidate the witnesses, and he avoided a quarrel with his son, Lord William. But he escaped the humiliation of seeing one of his men hanged."

"Where is your brother now?" she said.

"No idea. I haven't spoken to him or even seen him since that day."

They were sitting in Elizabeth's kitchen on Sunday afternoon. She had made dinner for him: boiled ham with stewed apples and winter greens, and a small jug of wine that her mother had bought, or perhaps stolen, from the inn where she worked.

Elizabeth said: “What will happen now?”

“The sentence of death still hangs over him. He can’t return to Wigleigh, or come here to Kingsbridge, without getting arrested. In effect, he’s declared himself an outlaw.”

“Is there nothing he can do?”

“He could get a pardon from the king—but that costs a fortune, far more money than he or I could raise.”

“And how do you feel about him?”

Merthin winced. “Well, he deserves punishment for what he did, of course. All the same, I can’t wish it on him. I just hope he’s all right, wherever he is.”

He had told the story of Ralph’s trial many times in the last few days, but Elizabeth had asked the most astute questions. She was intelligent and sympathetic. The thought crossed his mind that it would be no hardship to spend every Sunday afternoon this way.

Her mother, Sairy, was dozing by the fire, as usual, but now she opened her eyes and said: “My soul! I’ve forgotten the pie.” She stood up, patting her mussed gray hair. “I promised to ask Betty Baxter to make a pie with ham and eggs for the leather-tanners guild. They’re holding their last-before-Lent dinner at the Bell tomorrow.” She draped a blanket around her shoulders and went out.

It was unusual for them to be left alone together, and Merthin felt slightly awkward, but Elizabeth seemed relaxed enough. She said: “What are you doing with yourself, now that you no longer work on the bridge?”

“I’m building a house for Dick Brewer, among other things. Dick’s ready to retire and hand over to his son, but he says he’ll never stop work while he’s living at the Copper, so he wants a house with a garden outside the old city walls.”

“Oh—is that the building site beyond Lovers’ Field?”

“Yes. It will be the biggest house in Kingsbridge.”

“A brewer is never short of money.”

“Would you like to see it?”

“The site?”

“The house. It’s not finished, but it’s got four walls and a roof.”

“Now?”

“There’s still an hour of daylight.”

She hesitated, as if she might have had another plan; but then she said: “I’d love to.”

They put on heavy cloaks with hoods and went out. It was the first day of March. Flurries of snow chased them down the main street. They took the ferry to the suburban side.

Despite the ups and downs of the wool trade, the town seemed to grow a

little every year, and the priory turned more and more of its pasture and orchards into house plots for rent. Merthin guessed there must be fifty dwellings that had not been here when he first came to Kingsbridge, as a boy, twelve years ago.

Dick Brewer's new home was a two-story structure set back from the road. As yet it had no window shutters or doors, so the gaps in the walls had been temporarily covered with hurdles, wood frames filled in with woven reeds. The front entrance was thus blocked, but Merthin took Elizabeth to the back, where there was a temporary wooden door with a lock.

Merthin's sixteen-year-old assistant, Jimmie, was in the kitchen, guarding the place from thieves. He was a superstitious boy, always crossing himself and throwing salt over his shoulder. He was sitting on a bench in front of a big fire, but he looked anxious. "Hello, master," he said. "Now that you're here, may I go and get my dinner? Lol Turner was supposed to bring it, but he hasn't come."

"Make sure you're back before it gets dark."

"Thank you." He hurried off.

Merthin stepped through the doorway to the interior of the house. "Four rooms downstairs," he said, showing her.

She was incredulous. "What will they use them all for?"

"Kitchen, parlor, dining room, and hall." There was no staircase yet, but Merthin climbed a ladder to the upper floor, and Elizabeth followed. "Four bedrooms," he said as she reached the top.

"Who will live here?"

"Dick and his wife, his son Danny and *his* wife, and his daughter, who probably won't remain single for ever."

Most Kingsbridge families lived in one room, and all slept side by side on the floor: parents, children, grandparents, and in-laws. Elizabeth said: "This place has more rooms than a palace!"

It was true. A nobleman with a big entourage might still live in two rooms: a bedchamber for himself and his wife, and a great hall for everyone else. But Merthin had now designed several houses for wealthy Kingsbridge merchants, and the luxury they all craved was privacy. It was a new trend, he thought.

"I suppose there will be glass in the windows," Elizabeth said.

"Yes." That was another trend. Merthin could remember the time when there was no glazier in Kingsbridge, just an itinerant who called every year or two. Now the city had a resident glazier.

They returned to the ground floor. Elizabeth sat on Jimmie's bench in front of the fire and warmed her hands. Merthin sat beside her. "I'll build a house like this for myself, one day," he said. "In a big garden with fruit trees."

To his surprise, she leaned her head on his shoulder. "What a nice dream,"

she said.

They both stared into the fire. Her hair tickled Merthin's cheek. After a moment, she laid a hand on his knee. In the silence, he could hear her breathing, and his own, and the crackle of burning logs.

"In your dream, who's in the house?" she said.

"I don't know."

"Just like a man. I can't see my house, but I know who's in it: a husband, some babies, my mother, an elderly parent-in-law, and three servants."

"Men and women have different dreams."

She lifted her head, looked at him, and touched his face. "And when you put them together, you have a life." She kissed his mouth.

He closed his eyes. He remembered the soft touch of her lips from years ago. Her mouth lingered on his for just a moment, then she drew back.

He felt oddly detached, as if he were watching himself from a corner of the room. He did not know how he felt. He looked at her and saw again how lovely she was. He asked himself what was so striking about her, and realized immediately that everything was in harmony, like the parts of a beautiful church. Her mouth, her chin, her cheekbones, and her forehead were just as he would have drawn them if he had been God creating a woman.

She looked back at him with calm blue eyes. "Touch me," she said. She opened her cloak.

He took her breast gently in his hand. He remembered doing this, too. Her breasts were firm and flat against her chest. Her nipple hardened immediately to his touch, betraying her calm demeanor.

"I want to be in your dream house," she said, and she kissed him again.

She was not acting on the spur of the moment; Elizabeth never did. She had been thinking about this. While he had been casually visiting her, enjoying her company without thinking any farther, she had been imagining their life together. Perhaps she had even planned this scene. That would explain why her mother had left them with an excuse about a pie. He had almost spoiled her plan by proposing to show her Dick Brewer's house, but she had improvised.

There was nothing wrong with such an unemotional approach. She was a reasoning person. It was one of the things he liked about her. He knew that passions burned nonetheless beneath the surface.

What seemed wrong was his own lack of feeling. It was not his way to be coolly rational about women—quite the reverse. When he had felt love, it had taken him over, making him feel rage and resentment as well as lust and tenderness. Now he felt interested, flattered, and titillated, but he was not out of control.

She sensed that his kiss was lukewarm, and drew back. He saw the ghost of an emotion on her face, fiercely suppressed, but he knew there was fear

behind the mask. She was so poised, by nature, that it must have cost her a lot to be so forward, and she dreaded rejection.

She drew away from him, stood up, and lifted the skirt of her dress. She had long, shapely legs covered with nearly invisible fine blond hair. Although she was tall and slim, her body widened just below the hips in a delightfully womanly way. His gaze homed in helplessly on the delta of her sex. Her hair was so fair that he could see through it, to the pale swelling of the lips and the delicate line between them.

He looked up to her face and read desperation there. She had tried everything, and she saw that it had not worked.

Merthin said: “I’m sorry.”

She dropped her skirts.

“Listen,” he said. “I think—”

She interrupted him. “Don’t speak.” Her desire was turning to anger. “Whatever you say now will be a lie.”

She was right. He had been trying to formulate some soothing half-truth: he was not feeling well, or Jimmie might be back at any moment. But she did not want to be mollified. She had been rebuffed, and feeble excuses would only make her feel patronized as well.

She stared at him, grief struggling with rage on the battleground of her beautiful face. Tears of frustration came to her eyes. “Why not?” she cried; but when he opened his mouth to reply she said: “Don’t answer! It won’t be the truth”; and again she was right.

She turned to go, then came back. “It’s Caris,” she said, her face working with emotion. “That witch has cast a spell on you. She won’t marry you, but no one else can have you. She’s evil!”

At last she walked away. She flung open the door and stepped out. He heard her sob once, then she was gone.

Merthin stared into the fire. “Oh, hell,” he said.

“There’s something I need to explain to you,” Merthin said to Edmund a week later, as they were leaving the cathedral.

Edmund’s face took on a look of mild amusement that was familiar to Merthin. *I’m thirty years older than you,* the look said, *and you should be listening to me, not giving me lessons; but I enjoy youthful enthusiasm. Besides, I’m not yet too old to learn something.* “All right,” he said. “But explain it in the Bell. I want a cup of wine.”

They went into the tavern and sat close to the fire. Elizabeth’s mother brought their wine, but she stuck her nose in the air and did not talk to them. Edmund said: “Is Sairy angry with you or me?”

“Never mind that,” said Merthin. “Have you ever stood at the edge of the

ocean, with your bare feet on the sand, and felt the sea wash over your toes?”

“Of course. All children play in water. Even I was a boy once.”

“Do you remember how the action of the waves, flowing in and out, seems to scour the sand from under the edges of your feet, making a little channel?”

“Yes. It’s a long time ago, but I think I know what you mean.”

“That’s what happened to the old wooden bridge. The flowing river scoured the earth from under the central pier.”

“How do you know?”

“By the pattern of cracks in the woodwork just before the collapse.”

“What’s your point?”

“The river hasn’t changed. It will undermine the new bridge just as surely as it did the old—unless we prevent it.”

“How?”

“In my drawing, I showed a pile of large, loose stones surrounding each of the piers of the new bridge. They will break up the current and enfeeble its effect. It’s the difference between being tickled by loose thread and being flogged with a tightly woven rope.”

“How do you know?”

“I asked Buonaventura about it, immediately after the bridge collapsed, before he went back to London. He said he had seen such piles of stones around the piers of bridges in Italy, and he had often wondered what they were for.”

“Fascinating. Are you telling me this for general enlightenment, or is there some more specific purpose?”

“People like Godwyn and Elfric don’t understand this, and wouldn’t listen if I told them. Just in case Elfric takes it into his fool head not to follow my design exactly, I want to be sure that at least one person in town knows the reason for the pile of stones.”

“But one person does—you.”

“I’m leaving Kingsbridge.”

That shocked him. “Leaving?” he said. “You?”

At that moment, Caris appeared. “Don’t stay here too long,” she said to her father. “Aunt Petranilla is preparing dinner. Do you want to join us, Merthin?”

Edmund said: “Merthin’s leaving Kingsbridge.”

Caris paled.

Seeing her reaction, Merthin felt a jolt of satisfaction. She had rejected him, but she was dismayed to hear that he was leaving town. He immediately felt ashamed of such an unworthy emotion. He was too fond of her to want her to suffer. All the same, he would have felt worse if she had received the news with equanimity.

“Why?” she said.

“There’s nothing for me here. What am I going to build? I can’t work on the bridge. The town already has a cathedral. I don’t want to do nothing but merchants’ houses for the rest of my life.”

In a quiet voice, she said: “Where will you go?”

“Florence. I’ve always wanted to see the buildings of Italy. I’ll ask Buonaventura Caroli for letters of introduction. I might even be able to travel with one of his consignments.”

“But you own property here in Kingsbridge.”

“I wanted to speak to you about that. Would you manage it for me? You could collect my rents, take a commission, and give the balance to Buonaventura. He can transfer money to Florence by letter.”

“I don’t want a damn commission,” she said huffily.

Merthin shrugged. “It’s work, you should be paid.”

“How can you be so cold about it?” she said. Her voice was shrill, and around the parlor of the Bell several people looked up. She took no notice. “You’ll be leaving all your friends!”

“I’m not cold about it. Friends are great. But I’d like to get married.”

Edmund put in: “Plenty of girls in Kingsbridge would marry you. You’re not handsome, but you’re prosperous, and that’s worth more than good looks.”

Merthin smiled wryly. Edmund could be disarmingly blunt. Caris had inherited the trait. “For a while I thought I might marry Elizabeth Clerk,” he said.

Edmund said: “So did I.”

Caris said: “She’s a cold fish.”

“No, she’s not. But when she asked me, I backed off.”

Caris said: “Oh—so that’s why she’s so bad-tempered lately.”

Edmund said: “And why her mother won’t look at Merthin.”

“Why did you refuse her?” Caris asked.

“There’s only one woman in Kingsbridge I could marry—and she doesn’t want to be anyone’s wife.”

“But she doesn’t want to lose you.”

Merthin became angry. “What should I do?” he said. His voice was loud, and people around them stopped their conversations to listen. “Godwyn has fired me, you’ve rejected me, and my brother is an outlaw. In God’s name, why should I stay here?”

“I don’t want you to go,” she said.

“That’s not enough!” he shouted.

The room was silent now. Everyone there knew them: the landlord, Paul Bell, and his curvy daughter Bessie; the gray-haired barmaid Sairy, Elizabeth’s mother; Bill Watkin, who had refused to employ Merthin; Edward

Butcher, the notorious adulterer; Jake Chepstow, Merthin's tenant; Friar Murdo, Matthew Barber, and Mark Webber. They all knew the history of Merthin and Caris, and they were fascinated by the quarrel.

Merthin did not care. Let them listen. He said furiously: "I'm not going to spend my life hanging around you, like your dog Scrap, waiting for your attention. I'll be your husband, but I won't be your pet."

"All right, then," she said in a small voice.

Her sudden change of tone surprised him, and he was not sure what she meant. "All right, what?"

"All right, I'll marry you."

For a moment, he was too shocked to speak. Then he said suspiciously: "Do you mean it?"

She looked up at him at last and smiled shyly. "Yes, I mean it," she said. "Just ask me."

"All right." He took a deep breath. "Will you marry me?"

"Yes, I will," she said.

Edmund shouted: "Hoorah!"

Everyone in the tavern cheered and clapped.

Merthin and Caris started laughing. "Will you, really?" he said.

"Yes."

They kissed, then he put his arms around her and squeezed as hard as he could. When he let her go, he saw that she was crying.

"Some wine for my betrothed," he called out. "A barrel, in fact—give everyone a cup, so they can all drink our health!"

"Coming right up," said the landlord, and they all cheered again.

A week later, Elizabeth Clerk became a novice nun.

40

Ralph and Alan were miserable. They were living on venison and cold water, and Ralph found himself dreaming about food he would normally scorn: onions, apples, eggs, milk. They slept in a different place every night, always lighting a fire. They each had a good cloak, but it was not enough out in the open, and they woke shivering every dawn. They robbed any vulnerable people they met on the road, but most of the loot was either paltry or useless: ragged clothes, animal fodder, and money, which would buy nothing in the forest.

Once they stole a big barrel of wine. They rolled it a hundred yards into

the woods, drank as much as they could, and fell asleep. When they woke up, hungover and ill-tempered, they realized they could not take the three-quarters-full barrel with them, so they just left it there.

Ralph thought nostalgically of his former life: the manor house, the roaring fires, the servants, the dinners. But, in his realistic moments, he knew he did not want that life either. It was too dull. That was probably why he had raped the girl. He needed excitement.

After a month in the forest, Ralph decided they had to get organized. They needed a base where they could build some kind of shelter and store food. And they had to plan their robberies so that they stole items that would be really valuable to them, such as warm clothing and fresh food.

Around the time he was coming to this realization, their wanderings brought them to a range of hills a few miles from Kingsbridge. Ralph recalled that the hillsides, bleak and bare in winter, were used for summer grazing by shepherds, who had built rough stone shelters in the folds of the landscape. As adolescents he and Merthin had discovered these crude buildings while out hunting, and had lit fires and cooked the rabbits and partridges they shot with their bows. Even in those days, he recalled, he had craved the thrill of the hunt: chasing and shooting a terrified creature, finishing it off with a knife or club—the ecstatic sense of power that came from taking a life.

No one would come here until the new season's grass was thick. The traditional day was Whitsunday, also the opening day of the Fleece Fair, still two months away. Ralph selected a hut that looked sturdy, and they made it their home. There were no doors or windows, just a low entrance, but there was a hole in the roof to let smoke out, and they lit a fire and slept warm for the first time in a month.

Proximity to Kingsbridge gave Ralph another bright idea. The time to rob people, he realized, was when they were on their way to market. They were carrying cheeses, flagons of cider, honey, oatcakes: all the things that were produced by villagers and needed by townspeople—and by outlaws.

Kingsbridge market was on a Sunday. Ralph had lost track of the days of the week, but he found out by asking a traveling friar, before robbing him of three shillings and a goose. On the following Saturday, he and Alan made camp not far from the road to Kingsbridge, and stayed awake all night by their fire. At dawn they made their way to the road and lay in wait.

The first group to come along were carting fodder. Kingsbridge had hundreds of horses and very little grass, so the town constantly needed supplies of hay. However, it was no use to Ralph: Griff and Fletch had no end of grazing in the forest.

Ralph was not bored waiting. Preparing an ambush was like watching a woman get undressed. The longer the anticipation, the more intense the thrill.

Soon afterward they heard singing. The hairs on the back of Ralph's neck

stood up: it sounded like angels. The morning was hazy, and when he first saw the singers, they seemed to have halos. Alan, obviously thinking the same as Ralph, even gave a sob of fear. But it was only the weak winter sun lighting the mist behind the travelers. They were peasant women, each carrying a basket of eggs—hardly worth robbing. Ralph let them go by without revealing himself.

The sun rose a little higher. Ralph began to worry that soon the road would become sufficiently crowded with marketgoers to make robbery difficult. Then along came a family: a man and woman in their thirties with two adolescent children, a boy and a girl. They were vaguely familiar: no doubt he had seen them at Kingsbridge market during the years he lived there. They carried an assortment of goods. The husband had a heavy basket of vegetables on his back; the wife balanced on her shoulder a long pole bearing several live chickens, trussed; the boy had a heavy ham on his shoulder and the girl a crock that probably contained salted butter. Ralph's mouth watered at the thought of ham.

The excitement rose in his guts, and he gave Alan a nod.

As the family drew level, Ralph and Alan came out of the bushes at a run.

The woman screamed and the boy gave a shout of fear.

The man tried to shrug off his basket but, before it fell from his shoulders, Ralph ran him through, his sword piercing the man's abdomen under the ribs and then rising up. The man's scream of agony was cut off abruptly as the point of the sword penetrated his heart.

Alan swung at the woman and cut through most of her neck, so that blood spurted from her severed throat in a sudden red jet.

Exhilarated, Ralph turned to the son. The lad was quick to react: he had already dropped his ham and drawn a knife. While Ralph's weapon was still on the upswing, the boy darted close and stabbed him. It was an unprofessional blow, too wild to do much damage. The knife completely missed Ralph's chest, but the point caught in the flesh of his upper right arm, and the sudden agonizing pain made him drop his sword. The boy turned and ran away, going in the direction of Kingsbridge.

Ralph looked at Alan. Before turning to the girl, Alan finished off the mother, and the delay almost cost him his life. Ralph saw the girl throw her crock of butter at Alan. Either accurate or lucky, she hit him square on the back of the head, and Alan fell to the ground as if poleaxed.

Then she ran after her brother.

Ralph stooped, picked up his sword in his left hand, and gave chase.

They were young and fleet, but he had long legs, and he soon gained on them. The boy looked over his shoulder and saw Ralph coming close. To Ralph's astonishment the lad stopped, turned, and came running back at him, screaming, knife raised in his fist.

Ralph stopped running and lifted his sword. The boy ran at him—then stopped outside his reach. Ralph stepped forward and lunged, but it was a feint. The boy dodged the blow; then, thinking to catch Ralph off balance, tried to step inside his guard and stab him at close quarters. But that was exactly what Ralph was expecting. He stepped nimbly back, stood on the balls of his feet, and thrust his sword precisely into the boy's throat, pushing it through until the point came out of the back of his neck.

The boy fell dead, and Ralph withdrew his sword, pleased with the accuracy and efficiency of the death blow.

He looked up to see the girl disappearing into the distance. He saw immediately that he could not catch her on foot; and by the time he fetched his horse, she would be in Kingsbridge.

He turned and looked back. To his surprise, Alan was struggling to his feet. "I thought she'd killed you," Ralph said. He wiped his sword on the dead boy's tunic, sheathed his blade, and clamped his left hand over the wound in his right arm, trying to stop the bleeding.

"My head hurts like Satan," Alan replied. "Did you kill them all?"

"The girl got away."

"Do you think she knew us?"

"She might know me. I've seen this family before."

"In that case, we're now branded as murderers."

Ralph shrugged. "Better to hang than starve." He looked at the three bodies. "All the same, let's get these peasants off the road before someone comes along."

With his left hand he dragged the man to the edge of the road. Alan picked up the body and threw it into the bushes. They did the same with the woman and the boy. Ralph made sure the corpses were not visible to passersby. The blood on the road was already darkening to the color of the mud into which it was soaking.

Ralph cut a strip off the woman's dress and tied it around the cut in his arm. It still hurt, but the flow of blood was less. He felt the slight depression that always followed a fight, like the sadness after sex.

Alan began to collect up the loot. "A nice haul," he said. "Ham, chickens, butter…," he looked into the basket the man had been carrying, "…and onions! Last year's, of course, but still good."

"Old onions taste better than no onions. My mother says that."

As Ralph bent to pick up the butter crock that had felled Alan, he felt a sharp iron point stick into his ass. Alan was in front of him, dealing with the trussed chickens. Ralph said: "Who…?"

A harsh voice said: "Don't move."

Ralph never obeyed such instructions. He sprang forward, away from the voice, and spun around. Six or seven men had materialized from nowhere. He

was bewildered, but he managed, left-handed, to draw his sword. The man nearest him—who presumably had prodded him—raised his sword to fight, but the others were grabbing the loot, snatching chickens and fighting over the ham. Alan's sword flashed in defense of his chickens as Ralph engaged with his antagonist. He realized that another group of outlaws was trying to rob him. He was filled with indignation: he had killed people for this stuff, and now they wanted to take it from him! He felt no fear, only anger. He attacked his opponent with the energy of outrage, despite being forced to fight left-handed. Then an authoritative voice said loudly: "Put away your blades, you fools."

All the newcomers stood still. Ralph held his sword at the ready, suspicious of a trick, and looked toward the voice. He saw a handsome man in his twenties with something of the nobility about him. He wore clothes that looked expensive but were filthy dirty: a cloak of Italian scarlet covered with leaves and twigs, a rich brocade coat marked with what appeared to be food stains, and hose of a rich chestnut leather, scratched and muddy.

"It amuses me to steal from thieves," the newcomer said. "It's not a crime, you see."

Ralph knew he was in a tight spot but, all the same, he was intrigued. "Are you the one they call Tam Hiding?" he said.

"There were stories of Tam Hiding when I was a child," the man replied. "But every now and again someone comes along to act the part, like a monk impersonating Lucifer in a mystery play."

"You're not a common type of outlaw."

"Nor are you. I'm guessing that you're Ralph Fitzgerald."

Ralph nodded.

"I heard about your escape, and I've been wondering when I'd run into you." Tam looked up and down the road. "We happened upon you by accident. What made you choose this spot?"

"I picked the day and time, first. It's Sunday, and at this hour the peasants are taking their produce to market in Kingsbridge, which is on this road."

"Well, well. Ten years I've been living outside the law, and I never thought of doing that. Perhaps we should team up. Are you going to put your weapon away?"

Ralph hesitated, but Tam was unarmed, so he could not see the disadvantage. Anyway, he and Alan were so heavily outnumbered that it would be best to avoid a fight. Slowly, he sheathed his sword.

"That's better." Tam put an arm around Ralph's shoulders, and Ralph realized they were the same height. Not many people were as tall as Ralph. Tam walked him into the woods, saying: "The others will bring the loot. Come this way. We've got a lot to talk about, you and I."

Edmund rapped on the table. “I’ve called this emergency meeting of the parish guild to discuss the outlaw problem,” he said. “But, as I’m getting old and lazy, I’ve asked my daughter to summarize the situation.”

Caris was a member of the parish guild now, by virtue of her success as a manufacturer of scarlet cloth. The new business had rescued her father’s fortunes. Numerous other Kingsbridge people were prospering because of it, notably the Webber family. Her father had been able to fulfill his pledge to lend money for the building of the bridge, and in the general upturn several other merchants had done the same. Bridge building continued apace—supervised now by Elfric, not Merthin, unfortunately.

Her father took little initiative these days. The moments when he was his sharp-witted former self were becoming rarer. She was worried about him, but there was nothing she could do. She felt the rage that had possessed her during her mother’s illness. Why was there no help for him? Nobody understood what was wrong; no one could even put a name to his malady. They said it was old age, but he was not yet fifty!

She prayed he would live to see her wedding. She was going to marry Merthin in Kingsbridge Cathedral on the Sunday after the Fleece Fair, now just a month away. The wedding of the daughter of the town’s alderman would be a big event. There would be a banquet in the guildhall for the leading citizens, and a picnic in Lovers’ Field for several hundred more guests. Some days her father would spend hours planning the menus and the entertainment, only to forget everything he had said and start again from scratch the next day.

She put that out of her mind, and turned her attention to a problem she hoped would be more tractable. “In the last month there has been a big increase in attacks by outlaws,” she said. “They take place mainly on Sundays, and the victims are invariably people bringing produce to Kingsbridge.”

She was interrupted by Elfric. “It’s your fiancé’s brother that’s doing it!” he said. “Talk to Merthin, not us.”

Caris suppressed a flash of exasperation. Her sister’s husband never missed a chance to snipe at her. She was painfully aware of Ralph’s likely involvement. It was a cause of agony to Merthin. Elfric relished that.

Dick Brewer said: “I think it’s Tam Hiding.”

“Perhaps it’s both,” Caris said. “I believe that Ralph Fitzgerald, who has some military training, may have joined forces with an existing band of outlaws and simply made them more organized and effective.”

Fat Betty Baxter, the town’s most successful baker, said: “Whoever it is, they’ll be the ruination of this town. No one comes to market anymore!”

That was an exaggeration, but attendance at the weekly market was down drastically, and the effects were felt by just about every enterprise in town, from bakeries to brothels. “That’s not the worst of it, though,” Caris said. “In four weeks’ time we’ve got the Fleece Fair. Several people here have invested enormous sums of money in the new bridge, which should be ready for use, with a temporary timber roadbed, in time for the opening. Most of us depend on the annual fair for our prosperity. I personally have a warehouse full of costly scarlet cloth to sell. If it gets around that people coming to Kingsbridge are likely to be robbed by outlaws, we may have no customers.”

She was even more worried than she let herself appear. Neither she nor her father had any cash left. Everything they had was either invested in the bridge or tied up in raw wool and scarlet cloth. The Fleece Fair was their chance to get their money back. If attendance was poor, they would be in deep trouble. Among other things, who would pay for the wedding?

She was not the only worried citizen. Rick Silvers, the head of the jewelers’ guild, said: “That would be the third bad year in succession.” He was a prim, fussy man, always immaculately dressed. “It would finish some of my people,” he went on. “We do half our year’s business at the Fleece Fair.”

Edmund said: “It would finish this town. We can’t let it happen.”

Several others joined in. Caris, who was unofficially presiding, let them grumble. A heightened sense of urgency would predispose them to accept the radical solution she was going to propose.

Elfric said: “The sheriff of Shiring ought to do something about it. What’s he paid for, if not to keep the peace?”

Caris said: “He can’t search the entire forest. He doesn’t have enough men.”

“Earl Roland has.”

This was wishful thinking, but again Caris let the discussion run, so that when she proposed her solution they would be aware that there were no real alternatives.

Edmund said to Elfric: “The earl won’t help us—I’ve already asked him.”

Caris, who had in fact written Edmund’s letter to Roland, said: “Ralph was the earl’s man, and still is. You notice the outlaws don’t attack people going to Shiring market.”

Elfric said indignantly: “Those Wigleigh peasants should never have made a complaint against a squire of the earl’s—who do they think they are?”

Caris was about to respond indignantly, but Betty Baxter beat her to it. “Oh, so you think lords should be allowed to rape anyone they like?”

Edmund intervened. “That’s a different question,” he said briskly, showing some of his old authority. “It’s happened, and Ralph is preying on us, so what are we going to do? The sheriff can’t help us and the earl won’t.”

Rick Silvers said: “What about Lord William? He took the side of the Wigleigh people—it’s his fault that Ralph’s an outlaw.”

“I asked him, too,” Edmund said. “He said we’re not in his territory.”

Rick said: “That’s the trouble with having the priory as your landlord—what use is a prior when you need protection?”

Caris said: “Another reason why we are applying to the king for a borough charter. We’d be under royal protection then.”

Elfric said: “We’ve got our own constable, what’s he doing?”

Mark Webber spoke. He was one of the constable’s deputies. “We’re ready to do whatever’s necessary,” he said. “Just give us the word.”

Caris said: “No one doubts your bravery. But your role is to deal with troublemakers within the town. John Constable doesn’t have the expertise to hunt down outlaws.”

Mark, who was close to Caris because he ran her fulling mill at Wigleigh, was mildly indignant. “Well, who does, then?”

Caris had been leading the discussion toward this question. “As a matter of fact, there is an experienced soldier who is willing to help us,” she said. “I took the liberty of asking him to come here tonight, and he’s waiting in the chapel.” She raised her voice. “Thomas, will you join us?”

Thomas Langley came out of the little chapel at the end of the hall.

Rick Silvers said skeptically: “A monk?”

“Before he was a monk, he was a soldier,” Caris explained. “That’s how he lost his arm.”

Elfric said grumpily: “Guild members’ permission should have been sought before he was invited.” No one took any notice, Caris was pleased to see: they were too interested to hear what Thomas would have to say.

“You need to form a militia,” Thomas began. “By all accounts there are twenty or thirty outlaws in the troop. That’s not many. Most townsmen can use a longbow effectively, thanks to the Sunday morning practice sessions. A hundred of you, well prepared and intelligently led, could overcome the outlaws easily.”

“That’s all very well,” said Rick Silvers. “But we have to find them.”

“Of course,” said Thomas. “But I feel sure there is someone in Kingsbridge who knows where they are.”

Merthin had asked the timber merchant, Jake Chepstow, to bring him a piece of slate from Wales—the largest piece he could find. Jake had come back from his next logging expedition with a thin sheet of gray Welsh slate about four feet square. Merthin had encased it in a wooden frame, and he used it for sketching plans.

This evening, while Caris was at the parish guild, Merthin was at his own

house on Leper Island, working on a map of the island. Renting parts of it for wharves and warehouses was the least of his ambitions. He foresaw an entire street of inns and shops crossing the island from one bridge to the other. He would construct the buildings himself and rent them to enterprising Kingsbridge traders. It excited him to look into the future of the town and imagine the buildings and streets it was going to need. This was the kind of thing the priory would have done, if it had had better leadership.

Included in the plan was a new house for him and Caris. This little place would be cozy when they were first married, but they would need more room eventually, especially if they had children. He had marked out a site on the southern shore, where they would get fresh air off the river. Most of the island was rocky, but the patch he had in mind featured a small area of cultivable soil where he might be able to grow some fruit trees. As he planned the house, he relished the vision of the two of them living side by side, day by day, always.

His dream was interrupted by a knock at the door. He was startled. Normally no one came to the island at night—except Caris, and she would not knock. “Who is it?” he called nervously.

Thomas Langley came in.

“Monks are supposed to be asleep at this time,” Merthin said.

“Godwyn doesn’t know I’m here.” Thomas looked at the slate. “You draw left-handed?”

“Left or right, it makes no difference. Would you like a cup of wine?”

“No, thanks. I’ll have to be up for Matins in a few hours, so I don’t want to get sleepy.”

Merthin liked Thomas. There had been a bond between them ever since that day, twelve years ago, when he had promised that if Thomas should die he would take a priest to the place where the letter was buried. Later, when they had worked together on cathedral repairs, Thomas had always been clear in his instructions and gracious to apprentices. He managed to be sincere about his religious calling without becoming prideful: all men of God should be like that, Merthin thought.

He waved Thomas to a chair by the fire. “What can I do for you?”

“It’s about your brother. He has to be stopped.”

Merthin winced, as if at a sudden stab of pain. “If I could do anything, I would. But I haven’t seen him, and when I do, I’m not sure he will listen to me. There was a time when he looked to me for guidance, but I think those days are over.”

“I’ve just come from a meeting of the parish guild. They asked me to organize a militia.”

“Don’t expect me to be part of it.”

“No, I didn’t come for that purpose.” Thomas gave a wry smile. “Your

many amazing talents don’t actually include military skills.”

Merthin nodded ruefully. “Thanks.”

“But there is something you could do to help me, if you would.”

Merthin felt uneasy. “Well, ask me.”

“The outlaws must have a hideout somewhere not far from Kingsbridge. I want you to think about where your brother might be. It’s probably a place you both know—a cave, perhaps, or an abandoned verderer’s hut in the forest.”

Merthin hesitated.

Thomas said: “I know you’d hate to betray him. But think of that first family he attacked: a decent, hardworking peasant, his pretty wife, a lad of fourteen, and a little girl. Now three of them are dead and the little girl has no parents. Even though you love your brother, you have to help us catch him.”

“I know.”

“Can you think where he might be?”

Merthin was not yet ready to answer the question. “Will you take him alive?”

“If I can.”

Merthin shook his head. “Not good enough. I need a guarantee.”

Thomas was silent for a few moments. At last he said: “All right. I’ll take him alive. I don’t know how, but I’ll find a way. I promise.”

“Thank you.” Merthin paused. He knew he had to do this, but his heart rebelled. After a moment, he forced himself to speak. “When I was about thirteen we used to go hunting, often with older boys. We would stay out all day and cook whatever we shot. Sometimes we used to go as far as the Chalk Hills and meet the families who spend the summer up there grazing sheep. Shepherdesses tend to be quite free and easy—some would let you kiss them.” He smiled briefly. “In winter, when they weren’t there, we used their huts for shelter. That might be where Ralph is hiding out.”

“Thank you,” said Thomas. He stood up.

“Remember your promise.”

“I will.”

“You trusted me with a secret twelve years ago.”

“I know.”

“I never betrayed you.”

“I realize that.”

“Now I’m trusting you.” Merthin knew that his words could be interpreted two ways: either as a plea for reciprocity, or as a veiled threat. That was all right. Let Thomas take it how he wished.

Thomas put out his one hand, and Merthin clasped it. “I’ll keep my word,” Thomas said. Then he went out.

Ralph and Tam rode side by side up the hill, followed by Alan Fernhill on his horse and the rest of the outlaws on foot. Ralph was feeling good: it had been another successful Sunday morning's work. Spring had arrived, and the peasants were beginning to bring the new season's produce to market. The members of the gang were carrying half a dozen lambs, a jar of honey, a stoppered jug of cream, and several leather bottles of wine. As usual, the outlaws had suffered only minor injuries, a few cuts and bruises inflicted by the more foolhardy of their victims.

Ralph's partnership with Tam had been extraordinarily successful. A couple of hours' easy fighting brought them all they needed for a week of living in luxury. They spent the rest of their time hunting in the day and drinking in the evenings. There were no clodhopping serfs to badger them about boundary disputes or cheat them of rent. All they lacked were women, and today they had remedied that, by kidnapping two plump girls, sisters of about thirteen and fourteen years.

His only regret was that he had never fought for the king. It had been his ambition since boyhood, and he still felt the tug. Being an outlaw was too easy. He could not feel very proud of killing unarmed serfs. The boy in him longed yet for glory. He had never proved, to himself and others, that he had in him the soul of a true knight.

However, he would not allow that thought to lower his spirits. As he breasted the rise that hid the upland pasture where their hideout was, he looked forward to a feast tonight. They would roast a lamb on a spit and drink cream with honey. And the girls…Ralph decided he would make them lie side by side, so that each would see her sister being violated by one man after another. The thought made his heart beat faster.

They came within sight of the stone shelters. They would not be able to use these much longer, Ralph reflected. The grass was growing and the shepherds would be here soon. Easter had been early this year, so Whitsun would come soon after May Day. The outlaws would have to find another base.

When he was fifty yards from the nearest hut, he was shocked to see someone walk out of it.

He and Tam both reined in, and the outlaws gathered around them, hands on their weapons.

The man approached them, and Ralph saw that it was a monk. Tam, beside Ralph, said: "What in the name of heaven…?"

One sleeve of the monk's robe flapped empty, and Ralph recognized him as Brother Thomas from Kingsbridge. Thomas walked up to them as if meeting them by chance on the main street. "Hello, Ralph," he said.

“Remember me?”

Tam said to Ralph: “Do you know this man?”

Thomas came up on the right side of Ralph’s horse and extended his good right arm to shake hands. What the hell was he doing here? On the other hand, what harm could there be in a one-armed monk? Baffled, Ralph reached down and took the proffered hand. Thomas slipped his hand up Ralph’s arm and grasped his elbow.

Out of the corner of his eye, Ralph saw movement near the stone huts. Glancing up, he saw a man step out through the doorway of the nearest building, closely followed by a second man, then three more; then he saw that they were pouring out of all the huts—and fitting arrows to the tall longbows they carried. He realized that he and his band had been ambushed—but, in that moment, the grip on his elbow tightened and, with a sudden strong heave, he was pulled off his horse.

A shout went up from the outlaws. Ralph crashed to the ground, landing on his back. His horse, Griff, skittered sideways, frightened. As Ralph tried to get up, Thomas fell on him like a tree, flattening him to the ground, and lay on top of him like a lover. “Lie still and you won’t get killed,” he said in Ralph’s ear.

Then Ralph heard the sound of dozens of arrows being shot simultaneously from longbows, a deadly swish that was unmistakable, like the sudden wind of a flash thunderstorm. The noise was tremendous—there must have been a hundred archers, he thought. They had obviously crammed themselves into the shelters. Thomas’s grasping Ralph’s arm must have been the signal for them to come out and shoot.

He considered fighting Thomas off, and thought better of it. He could hear the cries of the outlaws as the arrows struck home. From ground level he could not see much, but some of his men were drawing their swords. However, they were too far from the archers: if they ran at their enemy, they would be shot down before they could engage. It was a massacre, not a battle. Hooves drummed the earth, and Ralph wondered whether Tam was charging the archers or riding away.

Confusion reigned, but not for long. Within moments he could tell that the outlaws were in full retreat.

Thomas got off him, pulled a long dagger from under his Benedictine robe, and said: “Don’t even think about drawing your sword.”

Ralph stood up. He looked at the archers, and recognized many of them: fat Dick Brewer, randy Edward Butcher, convivial Paul Bell, grumpy Bill Watkin—timid, law-abiding citizens of Kingsbridge, every one. He had been captured by tradesmen. But that was not the most surprising thing.

He looked curiously at Thomas. “You saved my life, monk,” he said.

“Only because your brother asked me to,” Thomas replied crisply. “If it

had been up to me, you would have been dead before you hit the ground.”

The Kingsbridge jail was in the basement of the guildhall. The pen had stone walls, a dirt floor, and no windows. There was no fire either, and prisoners occasionally died of cold in the winter; but this was May, and Ralph had a wool cloak to keep him warm at night. He also had a few items of furniture—a chair, a bench, and a small table—rented from John Constable and paid for by Merthin. On the other side of the barred oak door was John Constable’s office. On market days and during the fair he and his deputies sat there waiting to be summoned to deal with trouble.

Alan Fernhill was in the cell with Ralph. A Kingsbridge archer had brought him down with an arrow in the thigh, and although the wound was not serious he had been unable to run. However, Tam Hiding had got away.

Today was their last here. The sheriff was due at midday to take them to Shiring. They had already been sentenced to death, in their absence, for the rape of Annet, and for the crimes they had committed in that court under the judge’s eye: wounding the foreman of the jury, wounding Wulfric, and escaping. When they got to Shiring they would be hanged.

An hour before noon, Ralph’s parents brought them dinner: hot ham, new bread, and a jug of strong ale. Merthin came with them, and Ralph surmised that this was good-bye.

His father confirmed it. “We’ll not follow you to Shiring,” he said.

His mother added: “We don’t want to see you—” She broke down, but he knew what she was going to say. They would not journey to Shiring to see him hang.

Ralph drank the ale but found it difficult to eat. He was going to the gallows, and food seemed pointless. Anyway, he had no appetite. Alan tucked in: he seemed to have no sense of the doom that awaited him.

The family sat in an awkward silence. Although these were their last minutes together, no one knew what to say. Maud wept quietly, Gerald looked thunderous, and Merthin sat with his head in his hands. Alan Fernhill just looked bored.

Ralph had a question for his brother. Part of him did not want to ask it, but now he realized that this was his last chance. “When Brother Thomas pulled me off my horse, protecting me from the arrows, I thanked him for saving my life,” he said. Looking at his brother, he went on: “Thomas said he did it for you, Merthin.”

Merthin just nodded.

“Did you ask him to?”

“Yes.”

“So you knew what was going to happen.”

“Yes.”

“So…how did Thomas know where to find me?”

Merthin did not answer.

Ralph said: “You told him, didn’t you?”

Their father was shocked. “Merthin!” he said. “How could you?”

Alan Fernhill said: “You treacherous swine.”

Merthin said to Ralph: “You were murdering people! Innocent peasants and their wives and children! You had to be stopped!”

Ralph did not feel angry, somewhat to his surprise. He felt a choking sensation. He swallowed, then said: “But why did you ask Thomas to spare my life? Was it because you preferred that I should hang?”

Maud said: “Ralph, don’t,” and sobbed.

“I don’t know,” Merthin said. “Perhaps I just wanted you to live a little longer.”

“But you did betray me.” Ralph found that he was on the verge of breaking down. Tears seemed to gather behind his eyes, and he felt the pressure in his head. “You betrayed me,” he repeated.

Merthin stood up and said angrily: “By God, you deserved it!”

Maud said: “Don’t fight.”

Ralph shook his head sadly. “We’re not going to fight,” he said. “Those days are over.”

The door opened and John Constable stepped in. “The sheriff is outside,” he announced.

Maud put her arms around Ralph and clung to him, weeping. After a few moments, Gerald gently pulled her away.

John walked out and Ralph followed him. He was surprised not to be tied up or chained. He had escaped once before—were they not afraid he would do the same again? He walked through the constable’s office and out into the open air. His family came behind.

It must have been raining earlier, for now bright sunshine reflected off the wet street, and Ralph had to screw up his eyes against the glare. As he adjusted to the light, he recognized his own horse, Griff, saddled ready. The sight gladdened his heart. He took the reins and spoke into the horse’s ear. “You never betrayed me, boy, did you, eh?” The horse blew through its nostrils and stamped, pleased to have its master back.

The sheriff and several deputies were waiting, mounted and armed to the teeth: they were going to let Ralph ride to Shiring, but they were not taking any risks with him. There would be no escape this time, he realized.

Then he looked again. The sheriff was here, but the other armed riders were not his deputies. They were Earl Roland’s men. And there was the earl himself, black-haired and black-bearded, mounted on a gray charger. What was he doing here?

Without dismounting, the earl leaned down and handed a rolled sheet of parchment to John Constable. “Read that, if you can,” Roland said, speaking as always out of one side of his mouth. “It is a writ from the king. All the prisoners in the county are pardoned and freed—on condition they come with me to join the king’s army.”

Gerald shouted: “Hoorah!!” Maud burst into tears. Merthin looked over the constable’s shoulder and read the writ.

Ralph looked at Alan, who said: “What does it mean?”

“It means we’re free!” Ralph said.

John Constable said: “It does, if I read it aright.” He looked at the sheriff. “Do you confirm this?”

“I do,” said the sheriff.

“Then there is no more to be said. These men are free to go with the earl.” The constable rolled up the parchment.

Ralph looked at his brother. Merthin was weeping. Were they tears of joy, or frustration?

He was given no more time to wonder. “Come on,” said Roland impatiently. “We’ve completed the formalities, let’s get on the road. The king is in France—we’ve a long way to go!” He wheeled his horse and rode down the main street.

Ralph kicked Griff’s sides, and the horse eagerly broke into a trot and followed the earl.

41

“Y**ou** can’t win,” Gregory Longfellow said to Prior Godwyn, sitting in the large chair in the hall of the prior’s house. “The king is going to grant a borough charter to Kingsbridge.”

Godwyn stared at him. This was the lawyer who had won two cases for him at the royal court, one against the earl and the other against the alderman. If such a champion declared himself beaten then, surely, defeat must be inevitable.

It was not to be borne. If Kingsbridge became a royal borough, the priory would be sidelined. For hundreds of years, the prior had ruled the town. In Godwyn’s eyes, the town existed only to serve the priory, which served God. Now the priory would become just part of a town ruled by merchants, serving the god of Money. And the Book of Life would show that the prior who let this happen was Godwyn.

Dismayed, he said: “Are you quite certain?”

“I’m always quite certain,” said Gregory.

Godwyn was aggravated. Gregory's cocksure attitude was all very well when he was sneering at your opponents, but when he turned it on you it became infuriating. Angrily, Godwyn said: "You came all the way to Kingsbridge to tell me you can't do what I asked for?"

"And to collect my fee," Gregory said blithely.

Godwyn wished he could have him thrown into the fishpond in his London clothes.

It was the Saturday of Whitsun weekend, the day before the opening of the Fleece Fair. Outside, on the green to the west of the cathedral, hundreds of traders were setting up their stalls, and their conversations and cries to one another combined to make a roar that could be heard here in the hall of the prior's house, where Godwyn and Gregory sat at either end of the dining table.

Philemon, sitting on the bench at the side, said to Gregory: "Perhaps you could explain to the lord prior how you have reached this pessimistic conclusion?" He was developing a tone of voice that sounded half obsequious and half contemptuous. Godwyn was not sure he liked it.

Gregory did not react to the tone. "Of course," he said. "The king is in France."

Godwyn said: "He has been there for almost a year, but nothing much has happened."

"You will hear of action this winter."

"Why?"

"You must have heard of the French raids on our southern ports."

"I have," Philemon said. "They say the French sailors raped nuns at Canterbury."

"We always claim the enemy has raped nuns," Gregory said with condescension. "It encourages the common people to support the war. But they did burn Portsmouth. And there has been serious disruption to shipping. You may have noticed a fall in the price you get for your wool."

"We certainly have."

"That's partly due to the difficulty of shipping it to Flanders. And the price you're paying for wine from Bordeaux is up for the same reason."

We couldn't afford wine at the old prices, Godwyn thought; but he did not say so.

Gregory went on: "These raids appear to be no more than preliminaries. The French are assembling an invasion fleet. Our spies say they already have more than two hundred vessels anchored in the mouth of the Zwyn River."

Godwyn noted that Gregory talked of "our spies" as if he were part of the government. In reality he was only retailing gossip. All the same, it sounded convincing. "But what does the French war have to do with whether or not Kingsbridge becomes a borough?"

“Taxes. The king needs money. The parish guild has argued that the town will be more prosperous, and therefore will pay more tax, if the merchants are freed from the control of the priory.”

“And the king believes this?”

“It has proved true before. That’s why kings create boroughs. Boroughs generate trade, and trade produces tax revenue.”

Money again, Godwyn thought with disgust. “Is there nothing we can do?”

“Not in London. I advise you to concentrate on the Kingsbridge end. Can you persuade the parish guild to withdraw the application? What’s the old alderman like? Can he be bribed?”

“My uncle Edmund? He’s in poor health, and fading fast. But his daughter, my cousin Caris, is the real driving force behind this.”

“Ah, yes, I remember her at the trial. Rather arrogant, I felt.”

There was a case of the pot calling the kettle black, Godwyn thought sourly. “She’s a witch,” he said.

“Is she, now? That might help.”

“I didn’t mean literally.”

Philemon said: “As a matter of fact, Lord Prior, there have been rumors.”

Gregory raised his eyebrows. “Interesting!”

Philemon went on: “She is a great friend of a wise woman called Mattie, who mixes potions for gullible townspeople.”

Godwyn was about to pour scorn on the witchcraft idea, then he decided to shut up. Any weapon that might shoot down the notion of a borough charter must surely have been sent by God. Perhaps Caris does use witchcraft, he thought; who knows?

Gregory said: “I see you hesitate. Of course, if you are fond of your cousin…”

“I was when we were younger,” Godwyn said, and he felt a pang of regret for the old simplicities. “But I regret to say she has not grown into a God-fearing woman.”

“In that case…”

“I must investigate this,” Godwyn said.

Gregory said: “If I might make a suggestion?”

Godwyn had had enough of Gregory’s suggestions, but he did not quite have the nerve to say so. “Of course,” he said with slightly exaggerated politeness.

“Heresy investigations can be…mucky. You shouldn’t get your own hands soiled. And people may be nervous about talking to a prior. Delegate the task to someone less intimidating. This young novice, for example.” He indicated Philemon, who glowed with pleasure. “His attitude strikes me as…sensible.”

Godwyn recalled that it was Philemon who had discovered Bishop Richard's weakness—his affair with Margery. He was certainly the man for any dirty work. "All right," he said. "See what you can find out, Philemon."

"Thank you, Lord Prior," said Philemon. "Nothing would give me more pleasure."

On Sunday morning, people were still pouring into Kingsbridge. Caris stood and watched them streaming over Merthin's two wide bridges on foot, on horseback, or driving two-wheeled and four-wheeled horse carts and oxcarts laden with goods for the fair. The sight gladdened her heart. There had been no grand opening ceremony—the bridge was not really finished, but was usable thanks to a temporary timber roadbed—but, all the same, word had got around that it was open, and that the roads were safe from outlaws. Even Buonaventura Caroli was here.

Merthin had suggested a different way of collecting the tolls, which the parish guild had adopted eagerly. Instead of a single booth at the end of the bridge, creating a bottleneck, they had stationed ten men on Leper Island in temporary booths spread across the road between the two bridges. Most people handed over their penny without breaking stride. "There isn't even a queue," Caris said aloud, talking to herself.

And the weather was sunny and mild with no sign of rain. The fair was going to be a triumph.

Then, a week from today, she would marry Merthin.

She still had misgivings. The idea of losing her independence, and becoming someone's property, had not ceased to terrify her, even though she knew Merthin was not the kind of man to take advantage by bullying his wife. On the rare occasions when she had confessed this feeling—to Gwenda, for example, or to Mattie Wise—she had been told that she thought like a man. Well, so be it, that was how she felt.

But the prospect of losing him had seemed even more bleak. What would she have left, except for a cloth manufacturing business that did not inspire her? When he finally announced his intention of leaving town, the future had suddenly seemed empty. And she had realized that the only thing worse than being married to him might be not being married to him.

At least, that was what she told herself in her more positive moments. Then, sometimes, when she lay awake in the middle of the night, she saw herself backing out at the last minute, often in the middle of the wedding, refusing to take the vows and rushing out of the church, to the consternation of the entire congregation.

That was nonsense, she felt now in the light of day, with everything going so well. She would marry Merthin and be happy.

She left the riverbank and walked through the town to the cathedral, already crowded with worshippers waiting for the morning service. She remembered Merthin feeling her up behind a pillar. She felt nostalgic for the thoughtless passion of their early relationship; the long, intense conversations and the stolen kisses.

She found him near the front of the congregation, studying the south aisle of the choir, the part of the church that had collapsed in front of their eyes two years ago. She recalled going up into the space over the vaulting with Merthin, and overhearing that dreadful interaction between Brother Thomas and his estranged wife, the conversation that had crystallized all her fears and made her turn Merthin down. She put the thought out of her mind. “The repairs seem to be holding,” she said, guessing what he was thinking about.

He looked dubious. “Two years is a short time in the life of a cathedral.”

“There’s no sign of deterioration.”

“That’s what makes it difficult. An invisible weakness can work away for years, unsuspected, until something comes tumbling down.”

“Perhaps there is no weakness.”

“There must be,” he said with a touch of impatience. “There was a reason why that collapse took place two years ago. We never found out what it was, so we haven’t put it right. If it hasn’t been put right, it’s still a weakness.”

“It might have corrected itself spontaneously.”

She was just being argumentative, but he took her seriously. “Buildings don’t usually repair themselves—but you’re right, it’s possible. There might have been some seepage of water, for example from a blocked gargoyle, which somehow became diverted to a less harmful route.”

The monks began to enter in procession, singing, and the congregation went quiet. The nuns appeared from their separate entrance. One of the novice nuns looked up, a beautiful pale face in the line of hooded heads. It was Elizabeth Clerk. She saw Merthin and Caris together, and the sudden malice in her eyes made Caris shudder. Then Elizabeth bowed her head and disappeared back into her anonymous uniform.

“She hates you,” Merthin said.

“She thinks I stopped you marrying her.”

“She’s right.”

“No, she’s not—you could have married anyone you wanted!”

“But I only wanted you.”

“You toyed with Elizabeth.”

“It must have seemed that way to her,” Merthin said regretfully. “But I just liked talking to her. Especially after you turned to ice.”

She felt uncomfortable. “I know. But Elizabeth feels cheated. The way she looks at me makes me nervous.”

“Don’t be afraid. She’s a nun, now. She can’t do you any harm.”

They were quiet for a while, standing side by side, their shoulders touching intimately, watching the ritual. Bishop Richard sat on the throne at the east end, presiding over the service. Merthin liked this sort of thing, Caris knew. He always felt better afterward, and he said that was what going to church was supposed to do for you. Caris went because people noticed if she stayed away, but she had doubts about the whole business. She believed in God, but she was not sure He revealed His wishes exclusively to men such as her cousin Godwyn. Why would a god want praise, for example? Kings and earls required worship, and the more petty their rank the more deference they demanded. It seemed to her that an almighty God would not care one way or another whether the people of Kingsbridge sang His praises, any more than she cared whether the deer in the forest feared her. She occasionally gave voice to these ideas, but no one took her seriously.

Her thoughts drifted to the future. The signs were good that the king would grant Kingsbridge a borough charter. Her father would probably be the first mayor, if his health recovered. Her cloth business would continue to grow. Mark Webber would be rich. With increased prosperity, the parish guild could build a Wool Exchange, so that everyone could do business comfortably even in bad weather. Merthin could design the building. Even the priory was going to be better off, though Godwyn would not thank her.

The service came to an end, and the monks and nuns began to process out. A novice monk broke out of line and entered the congregation. It was Philemon. To Caris's surprise, he approached her. "May I have a word?" he said.

She repressed a shudder. There was something loathsome about Gwenda's brother. "What about?" she replied, barely politely.

"I want to ask your advice, really," he said, with an attempt at a charming smile. "You know Mattie Wise."

"Yes."

"What do you think of her methods?"

She gave him a hard look. Where was this going? She decided she had better defend Mattie anyway. "She has never studied the texts of the ancients, of course. Despite that, her remedies work—sometimes better than those of the monks. I think it's because she bases her treatments on what has worked previously, rather than on a theory about the humors."

People standing nearby were listening with curiosity, and some of them now joined in uninvited.

"She gave our Nora a potion that brought her fever down," said Madge Webber.

John Constable said: "When I broke my arm, her medicine took the pain away while Matthew Barber set the bone."

Philemon said: "And what kind of spells does she pronounce when she's

making her mixtures?”

“No spells!” Caris said indignantly. “She tells people to pray when they take their medicines, because only God can heal—she says.”

“Could she be a witch?”

“No! It’s a ridiculous idea.”

“Only there has been a complaint to the ecclesiastical court.”

A chill gripped Caris. “From whom?”

“I can’t say. But I’ve been asked to investigate.”

Caris was mystified. Who could Mattie’s enemy be? She said to Philemon: “Well, you of all people know Mattie’s worth—she saved the life of your sister when she gave birth to Sam. Gwenda would have bled to death if not for Mattie.”

“So it seems.”

“Seems? Gwenda’s alive, isn’t she?”

“Yes, of course. So you feel sure Mattie does not call on the devil?”

Caris noticed that he asked the question in a slightly raised voice, as if he wanted to make sure the listeners around heard it. She was puzzled, but she had no doubt of her answer. “Of course I’m sure! I’ll swear an oath if you want.”

“Not necessary,” Philemon said smoothly. “Thank you for your advice.” He inclined his head in a sort of bow and slithered away.

Caris and Merthin walked toward the exit. “What rubbish!” Caris said. “Mattie a witch!”

Merthin looked troubled. “You would expect Philemon to want evidence against her, wouldn’t you?”

“Yes.”

“So why did he come to you? He could have guessed that you, of all people, would deny the charge. Why would he be keen to clear her name?”

“I don’t know.”

They passed through the great west doorway and out on to the green. The sun was shining on hundreds of stalls loaded with colorful goods. “It doesn’t make sense,” Merthin said. “And that troubles me.”

“Why?”

“It’s like the cause of weakness in the south aisle. If you can’t see it, it may be working away invisibly to undermine you—and you won’t know it until everything comes crashing down all around.”

The scarlet cloth on Caris’s market stall was not as good as that sold by Loro Fiorentino, although you had to have a sharp eye for wool to see the difference. The weave was not so close, because the Italian looms were somehow superior. The color was just as bright, but it was not perfectly even

over the length of the bale, no doubt because Italian dyers were more skilled. In consequence, she charged one-tenth less than Loro.

All the same, it was easily the best English scarlet that had ever been seen at Kingsbridge, and business was brisk. Mark and Madge sold it retail by the yard, measuring and cutting for individual customers, and Caris dealt with wholesale buyers, negotiating reductions for one bale or six with drapers from Winchester, Gloucester, and even London. By midday on Monday she knew she would sell out before the end of the week.

When business slowed down for the dinner break, she strolled around the fair. She felt a profound sense of satisfaction. She had triumphed over adversity, and so had Merthin. She stopped at Perkin's stall to talk to the Wigleigh folk. Even Gwenda had triumphed. Here she was, married to Wulfric—something that had seemed impossible—and there was her baby, Sammy, a year old, sitting on the ground, fat and happy. Annet was selling eggs from a tray, as always. And Ralph had gone to France to fight for the king, and might never come back.

Farther on she saw Joby, Gwenda's father, selling his squirrel furs. There was a wicked man. But he seemed to have lost his power to hurt Gwenda.

Caris stopped at her own father's stall. She had persuaded him to buy fleece in smaller quantities this year. The international wool market could not possibly thrive when the French and English were raiding one another's ports and burning ships. "How is business?" she asked him.

"Steady," he said. "I think I've judged it about right." He forgot that it had been her judgment, not his, that had counseled caution. But that was all right.

Their cook, Tutty, appeared with Edmund's dinner: mutton stew in a pot, a loaf of bread, and a jug of ale. It was important to look prosperous but not overly so. Edmund had explained to Caris, many years ago, that although customers needed to believe they were buying from a successful business, they would resent contributing to the wealth of someone who appeared to be rolling in money.

"Are you hungry?" he asked her.

"Starving."

He stood up to reach for the stew pot. Then he staggered, made an odd sound halfway between a grunt and a cry, and fell to the ground.

The cook screamed.

Caris cried: "Father!" But she knew he would not respond. She could tell he was unconscious by the way he hit had the earth, inertly heavy, like a sack of onions. She fought down the urge to scream. She knelt beside him. He was alive, and breathing hoarsely. She grasped his wrist and felt his pulse: it was strong, but slow. His face seemed flushed. It was always reddish, but now it seemed more so than usual.

Tutty said: "What is it? What is it?"

Caris forced herself to speak calmly. “He’s had a fit,” she said. “Fetch Mark Webber. He can carry Father into the hospital.”

The cook ran off. People from the neighboring stalls gathered around. Dick Brewer appeared and said: “Poor Edmund—what can I do?”

Dick was too old and fat to lift Edmund. Caris said: “Mark’s coming to take him to the hospital.” She began to cry. “I hope he’ll be all right,” she said.

Mark appeared. He lifted Edmund easily, cradling him gently in his strong arms, and walked toward the hospital, negotiating his way through the crowds, calling: “Mind out, there! Out of the way, please! Injured man, injured man.”

Caris followed, distraught. She could hardly see through her tears, so she stayed close to Mark’s broad back. They reached the hospital building and went inside. Caris was grateful to see the familiar knobbly face of Old Julie. “Fetch Mother Cecilia, as quick as you can!” Caris said to her. The old nun hurried away, and Mark laid Edmund on a pallet near the altar.

Edmund was still unconscious, eyes closed, breathing hoarsely. Caris felt his forehead: he was neither hot nor cold. What had caused this? It had been so sudden. One moment he had been talking normally, the next he fell down unconscious. How could such a thing happen?

Mother Cecilia came. Her bustling efficiency was reassuring. She knelt beside the pallet and felt Edmund’s heart, then his pulse. She listened to his breathing and touched his face. “Get him a pillow and a blanket,” she said to Julie. “Then fetch one of the monk physicians.”

She stood up and looked at Caris. “He’s had a fit,” she said. “He may recover. All we can do is make him comfortable. The physician may recommend bleeding, but apart from that the only treatment is prayer.”

That was not good enough for Caris. “I’m going for Mattie,” she said.

She ran out of the building and dodged through the fair, remembering that she had done exactly the same thing a year ago, rushing to fetch Mattie when Gwenda was bleeding to death. This time it was her father, and she felt a different kind of panic. She had been desperately worried about Gwenda, but now it was as if the world was falling apart. The fear that her father might die gave her the dreadful feeling she sometimes got in dreams, when she found herself on the roof of Kingsbridge Cathedral with no way down but to jump.

The physical effort of running through the streets calmed her a little, and she was in control of her emotions by the time she came to Mattie’s house. Mattie would know what to do. She would say: “I’ve seen this before, I know what will happen next, here’s the treatment that helps.”

Caris banged on the door. Hearing no immediate answer, she impatiently tried the latch and found it open. She dashed inside, saying: “Mattie, you have to come to the hospital right away, it’s my father!”

The front room was empty. Caris pulled aside the curtain that screened off the kitchen. Mattie was not there, either. Caris said aloud: “Oh, why would you be out of the house at this very moment?” She looked around for some clue as to where Mattie might have gone. Then she noticed how stripped the room appeared. All the little jars and bottles had gone, leaving the shelves bare. There were none of the mortars and pestles Mattie used for grinding ingredients, none of her small pots for melting and boiling, no knives for chopping herbs. Caris returned to the front half of the house and saw that Mattie’s personal possessions had also disappeared: her sewing box, her polished wood cups for wine, the embroidered shawl she had hung on the wall for decoration, the carved bone comb she treasured.

Mattie had packed up and gone.

And Caris could guess why. Mattie must have heard about Philemon’s questions in church yesterday. Traditionally, the ecclesiastical court held a session on the Saturday of Fleece Fair week. Only two years ago the monks had used the occasion for the trial of Crazy Nell on the absurd charge of heresy.

Mattie was no heretic, of course, but it was difficult to prove that, as many old women had learned. She had calculated her chances of surviving a trial and found the answer frightening. Without telling anyone, she had packed up her possessions and left town. Probably she had found a peasant returning home after selling his produce and persuaded him to take her on his oxcart. Caris imagined her leaving at first light, her box beside her on the cart, the hood of her cloak pulled forward to hide her face. No one could even guess where she had gone.

“What am I going to do?” Caris said to the empty room. Mattie knew better than anyone else in Kingsbridge how to help sick people. This was the worst possible moment for her to disappear, just when Edmund lay unconscious in the hospital. Caris felt despair.

She sat down on Mattie’s chair, still panting from the effort of running. She wanted to run back to the hospital, but there was no point. She would not be able to help her father. Nobody could.

The town must have a healer, she thought; one who does not rely on prayers and holy water, or bleeding, but uses simple treatments that have been shown to work. And, as she sat in Mattie’s empty house, she realized that there was one person who could fill the role, someone who knew Mattie’s methods and believed in her practical philosophy. That person was Caris herself.

The thought burst on her with the blinding light of a revelation, and she sat dead still, bewildered by the implications. She knew the recipes for Mattie’s main potions: one for easing pain, one to cause vomiting, one for washing wounds, one to bring down a fever. She knew the uses of all the

common herbs: dill for indigestion, fennel for fever, rue for flatulence, watercress for infertility. She knew the treatments Mattie *never* prescribed: poultices made with dung, medicines containing gold and silver, verses written on vellum and bound to the ailing part of the body.

And she had an instinct for it. Mother Cecilia had said so, had practically pleaded with Caris to become a nun. Well, she was not going to enter the priory, but she might perhaps take Mattie's place. Why not? The cloth business could be run by Mark Webber—he was doing most of the work anyway.

She would seek out other wise women—in Shiring, in Winchester, perhaps in London—and question them about their methods, what succeeded and what failed. Men were secretive about their craft skills—their "mysteries" as they called them, as if there were something supernatural about tanning leather or making horseshoes—but women were usually willing to share knowledge with other women.

She would even read some of the monks' ancient texts. There might be some truth in them. Perhaps the instinct that Cecilia attributed to her would help her winnow the seeds of practical treatment from the chaff of priestly mumbo-jumbo.

She stood up and left the house. She walked slowly back, dreading what she would find at the hospital. She felt fatalistic now. Her father would either be all right, or he would not. All she could do was carry out her resolution so that in future, when the people she loved were sick, she would know she was doing everything possible to help them.

She fought back tears as she made her way through the fair to the priory buildings. When she entered the hospital, she hardly dared look at her father. She approached the bed, which was surrounded by people: Mother Cecilia, Old Julie, Brother Joseph, Mark Webber, Petranilla, Alice, Elfric.

What must be, must be, she thought. She touched the shoulder of her sister, Alice, who moved aside, making room. At last Caris looked at her father.

He was alive and conscious, though he looked pale and tired. His eyes were open, and he looked straight at her and tried a weak smile. "I'm afraid I gave you a scare," he said. "I'm sorry, my dear."

"Oh, thank God," said Caris, and she began to cry.

On Wednesday morning Merthin came to Caris's stall in consternation. "Betty Baxter just asked me a strange question," he said. "She wanted to know who was going to stand against Elfric in the election for alderman."

"What election?" Caris said. "My father is alderman…oh." She realized what must be going on. Elfric was telling people that Edmund was too old and

sick to fulfill the role, and the town needed someone new. And he was presenting himself as a candidate. “We must tell my father right away.”

Caris and Merthin left the fairground and crossed the main street to the house. Edmund had left the priory hospital yesterday, saying—correctly—that there was nothing the monks could do for him but bleed him, which made him feel worse. He had been carried home, and a bed had been made up for him in the parlor on the ground floor.

This morning he was reclining on a stack of pillows in his improvised bed. He looked so weak that Caris hesitated to bother him with the news, but Merthin sat down beside him and laid out the facts starkly.

“Elfric is right,” Edmund said when Merthin had finished. “Look at me. I can hardly sit upright. The parish guild needs strong leadership. It’s no job for a sick man.”

“But you’ll be better soon!” Caris exclaimed.

“Perhaps. But I’m getting old. You must have noticed how absentminded I’ve become. I forget things. And I was fatally slow to react to the downturn in the market for raw wool—I lost a lot of money last year. Thank God, we’ve rebuilt our fortune with the scarlet cloth—but you did that, Caris, not me.”

She knew all that, of course, but still she felt indignant. “Are you just going to let Elfric take over?”

“Certainly not. He would be a disaster. He’s too much in thrall to Godwyn. Even after we become a borough, we’ll need an alderman who can stand up to the priory.”

“Who else could do the job?”

“Talk to Dick Brewer. He’s one of the richest men in town, and the alderman must be rich, to have the respect of the other merchants. Dick’s not afraid of Godwyn or any of the monks. He’d be a good leader.”

Caris found herself reluctant to do as he said. It seemed like accepting that he was going to die. She could not remember a time when her father had not been alderman. She did not want her world to change.

Merthin understood her reluctance, but urged her on. “We have to accept this,” he said. “If we ignore what’s happening, we could end up with Elfric in charge. He would be a disaster—he might even withdraw the application for the borough charter.”

That decided her. “You’re right,” she said. “Let’s find Dick.”

Dick Brewer had several carts in different locations in the fairground. Each bore a huge barrel. His children, grandchildren, and in-laws were selling ale from the barrels as fast as they could pour it. Caris and Merthin found him setting an example by drinking a large pot of his own brew while he watched his family making money for him. They took him aside and explained what was going on.

Dick said to Caris: “When your father dies, I suppose his fortune will be

divided equally between you and your sister?”

“Yes.” Edmund had already told Caris that this was in his will.

“When Alice’s inheritance is added to Elfric’s existing wealth, he will be very rich.”

Caris realized that half the money she was making from her scarlet cloth might go to her sister. She had not thought of this before, because she had not thought about her father dying. It came as a shock. Money itself was not important to her, but she did not want to help Elfric become alderman. “It’s not just a question of who is the richest man,” she said. “We need someone who will stand up for the merchants.”

“Then you must put up a rival candidate,” Dick said.

“Will you stand?” she asked him directly.

He shook his head. “Don’t bother trying to persuade me. At the end of this week I’m handing over to my eldest son. I’m planning to spend the rest of my days drinking beer instead of brewing it.” He took a long draft from his tankard and belched contentedly.

Caris felt she had to accept that: he seemed quite sure. She said: “Who do you think we might approach?”

“There’s only one real possibility,” he said. “You.”

Caris was astonished. “Me! Why?”

“You’re the driving force behind the campaign for a borough charter. Your fiancé’s bridge has saved the Fleece Fair, and your cloth business has pretty much rescued the town’s prosperity after the wool slump. You’re the child of the existing alderman and, although it’s not an inherited office, people think leaders breed leaders. And they’re right. You’ve actually been acting as alderman for almost a year, ever since your father’s powers started to fail.”

“Has the town ever had a woman alderman?”

“Not as far as I know. Nor one as young as you. Both these things will count heavily against you. I’m not saying you’re going to win. I’m telling you no one else has a better chance of beating Elfric.”

Caris had a faintly dizzy feeling. Was it possible? Could she do the job? What about her vow to become a healer? Were there not many other people in town who would be better than she as alderman? “What about Mark Webber?” she said.

“He’d be good, especially with that shrewd wife of his at his side. But people in this town still think of Mark as a poor weaver.”

“He’s prosperous now.”

“Thanks to your scarlet cloth. But people are suspicious of new money. They would just say Mark is a jumped-up weaver. They want an alderman from a well-established family—someone whose father was rich, and preferably grandfather too.”

Caris wanted to beat Elfric, but she did not feel sure of her ability. She

thought of her father's patience and shrewdness, his hearty conviviality, his inexhaustible energy. Did she have any such qualities? She looked at Merthin.

He said: "You would be the best alderman the town has ever had."

His unhesitating confidence decided her. "All right," she said. "I'll do it."

Godwyn invited Elfric to dine with him on the Friday of the fair. He ordered an expensive dinner: swan cooked with ginger and honey. Philemon served them, and sat down to eat with them. The citizens had decided to elect a new alderman and, in a remarkably short time, two candidates had emerged as the principal contestants: Elfric and Caris.

Godwyn did not like Elfric, but he was useful. He was not a particularly good builder, but he had successfully ingratiated himself with Prior Anthony, and thereby gained the contract for cathedral repairs. When Godwyn took office, he had seen in Elfric a servile toady and had kept him on. Elfric was not well liked, but he either employed or subcontracted most of the building craftsmen and suppliers in town, and they in their turn courted him in the hope of work. Having won his confidence, they all wanted him to continue in a position where he could grant them favors. And that gave him a power base.

"I don't like uncertainty," Godwyn said.

Elfric tasted the swan and grunted appreciatively. "In what context?"

"The election of a new alderman."

"By its nature, an election is uncertain—unless there is only one candidate."

"Which would be my preference."

"Mine, too, provided that candidate was me."

"That's what I'm suggesting."

Elfric looked up from his dinner. "Really?"

"Tell me, Elfric—how badly do you want to be alderman?"

Elfric swallowed his mouthful. "I want it," he said. His voice sounded a little hoarse, and he slurped some wine. "I deserve it," he went on, a note of indignation creeping into his tone. "I'm as good as any of them, am I not? Why should I not be alderman?"

"Would you proceed with the application for a borough charter?"

Elfric stared at him. Thoughtfully, he said: "Are you asking me to withdraw it?"

"If you're elected alderman, yes."

"Are you offering to help me get elected?"

"Yes."

"But how?"

"By eliminating the rival candidate."

Elfric looked skeptical. "I don't see how you could achieve that."

Godwyn nodded to Philemon, who said: “I believe Caris is a heretic.”

Elfric dropped his knife. “You’re going to try Caris as a witch?”

“You must not tell anyone about this,” Philemon said. “If she hears about it beforehand, she may flee.”

“As Mattie Wise did.”

“I have let some townspeople believe that Mattie has been captured, and it is she who will be tried on Saturday at the ecclesiastical court. But, at the last minute, a different person will be accused.”

Elfric nodded. “And, as it’s an ecclesiastical court, there is conveniently no need for indictments or juries.” He turned to Godwyn. “And you will be judge.”

“Unfortunately, no,” Godwyn said. “Bishop Richard will preside. So we must prove our point.”

“Have you any evidence?” Elfric said skeptically.

Godwyn replied: “Some, but we’d like more. What we already have would be plenty if the accused were some old woman with no family or friends, like Crazy Nell. But Caris is well known and comes from a wealthy and influential family, as I need hardly tell you.”

Philemon put in: “It’s extremely fortunate for us that her father is too ill to leave his bed—God has ordained it so that he will not be able to defend her.”

Godwyn nodded. “Nevertheless, she has many friends. So our evidence must be strong.”

“What have you got in mind?” said Elfric.

Philemon answered. “It would be helpful if a member of her family were to come forward and say that she had called upon the devil, or turned a crucifix upside down, or spoken to some presence in an empty room.”

For a moment, Elfric looked as if he did not understand; then enlightenment dawned. “Oh!” he said. “You mean me?”

“Think very carefully before you answer.”

“You’re asking me to help send my sister-in-law to Gallows Cross.”

Godwyn said: “Your sister-in-law; my cousin. Yes.”

“All right, I’m thinking.”

Godwyn saw on Elfric’s face ambition, greed, and vainglory, and he marveled at the way God used even men’s weaknesses to His holy purpose. He could guess what Elfric was thinking. The position of alderman was a burdensome task for an unselfish man such as Edmund, who exercised his power for the benefit of the town’s merchants; but for someone with his eye on the main chance it offered endless opportunities for profit and self-aggrandizement.

Philemon continued in a smooth, assured voice. “If you have never witnessed anything suspicious, then of course that is the end of the matter. But I beg you to search your memory carefully.”

Godwyn noticed again how much Philemon had learned in the last two years. The awkward priory servant had vanished. He talked like an archdeacon.

"There may have been incidents that seemed at the time perfectly harmless, but which take on a sinister cast in the light of what you have been told today. On mature reflection, you may feel that these events were not as innocent as they at first appeared."

"I get your meaning, Brother," Elfric said.

There was a long silence. None of them ate. Godwyn waited patiently for Elfric's decision.

Philemon said: "And, of course, if Caris were dead, then Edmund's entire fortune would come to the other sister, Alice…your wife."

"Yes," Elfric said. "I'd thought of that."

"Well?" said Philemon. "Is there anything you can think of that might help us?"

"Oh, yes," Elfric said at last. "I can think of quite a lot."

42

Caris was unable to find out the truth about Mattie Wise. Some people said she had been captured and was locked in a cell in the priory. Others thought she would be tried in her absence. A third strand of opinion claimed that someone else entirely would stand trial for heresy. Godwyn refused to answer Caris's questions, and the rest of the monks said they knew nothing.

Caris went to the cathedral on Saturday morning determined to defend Mattie whether she was present or not, and to stand up for any other poor old woman who suffered this absurd accusation. Why did monks and priests hate women so? They worshipped their Blessed Virgin, but treated every other female as an incarnation of the devil. What was the matter with them?

In a secular court there would have been a jury of indictment and a preliminary hearing, and Caris would have been able to find out in advance what the evidence against Mattie might be. But the church made its own rules.

Whatever they alleged, Caris would say loud and clear that Mattie was a genuine healer who used herbs and drugs and told people to pray to God to make them well. Some of the many townspeople who had been helped by Mattie would surely speak up for her.

Caris stood with Merthin in the north transept and remembered the Saturday two years ago when Crazy Nell had been tried. Caris had told the court Nell was mad but harmless. It had done no good.

Today, as then, there was a big crowd of townspeople and visitors in the

cathedral, hoping for drama: accusations, counteraccusations, quarrels, hysterics, curses, and the spectacle of a woman being flogged through the streets and then hanged at Gallows Cross. Friar Murdo was present. He always showed up for sensational trials. They provided an opportunity for him to do what he did best: whip up hysteria in a congregation.

While they were waiting for the clergy, Caris's mind wandered. Tomorrow, in this church, she would marry Merthin. Betty Baxter and her four daughters were already busy making the bread and pastry for the feast. Tomorrow night, Caris and Merthin would sleep together in his house on Leper Island.

She had stopped worrying about the marriage. She had made her decision and she would take the consequences. In truth she felt very happy. Sometimes she wondered how she could have been so scared. Merthin could not make anyone his slave—it was not in his nature. He was even kind to his boy laborer Jimmie.

Most of all she loved their sexual intimacy. It was the best thing that had ever happened to her. What she looked forward to most was having a home and a bed of their own, and being able to make love whenever they wanted to, on going to bed or on waking up, in the middle of the night or even the middle of the day.

At last the monks and nuns came in, led by Bishop Richard with his assistant, Archdeacon Lloyd. When they had taken their seats, Prior Godwyn stood up and said: "We are here today to try the charge of heresy against Caris, daughter of Edmund Wooler."

The crowd gasped.

Merthin shouted: "No!"

Everyone turned to look at Caris. She felt sick with fear. She had had no suspicion of this. It hit her like a punch in the dark. Bewildered, she said: "Why?" No one answered her.

She remembered her father warning her that Godwyn would have an extreme reaction to the threat of a borough charter. "You know how ruthless he is, even over small disputes," Edmund had said. "Something like this will lead to total war." Caris shuddered now to remember her reply: "So be it—total war."

Even so, Godwyn's chance of success would have been slender indeed if her father had been in good health. Edmund would have fought Godwyn to a standstill, and probably destroyed him. But Caris alone was a different matter. She did not have her father's power, authority, or popular support—not yet. Without him, she had become vulnerable.

She noticed her aunt Petranilla in the crowd. She was one of the few people *not* looking at Caris. How could she stand there in silence? Of course she supported her son, Godwyn, in general—but surely she would try to stop

him condemning Caris to death? She had once said she wanted to be like a mother to Caris. Would she remember that? Somehow, Caris felt she would not. Her devotion to her son was too great. That was why she could not meet Caris's eye. She had already made up her mind not to stand in Godwyn's way.

Philemon stood up. "My lord bishop," he said, formally addressing the judge. But he immediately turned to the crowd. "As everyone knows, the woman Mattie Wise has fled, too frightened and guilty to be tried. Caris has been a regular visitor to Mattie's house for some years. Only days ago she defended the woman, in front of witnesses, here in the cathedral."

So that was why Philemon had questioned her about Mattie, Caris realized. She caught Merthin's eye. He had been worried because he could not figure out what Philemon was up to. He had been right to worry. Now they knew.

At the same time, part of her mind marveled at the transformation of Philemon. That awkward, unhappy boy was now a confident, arrogant man, standing in front of the bishop, the prior, and the townspeople, as full of spite as a snake about to strike.

Philemon said: "She offered to swear on oath that Mattie is no witch. Why would she do that—unless to cover her own guilt?"

Merthin shouted out: "Because she's innocent, and so is Mattie, you mendacious hypocrite!"

He might have been put in the stocks for that, but others were shouting at the same time, and his insult passed without comment.

Philemon went on: "Recently, Caris has miraculously dyed wool the exact shade of Italian scarlet, something Kingsbridge dyers have never been able to do. How has this been achieved? By a magic spell!"

Caris heard the rumble of Mark Webber's bass voice: "This is a lie!"

"She could not do this by daylight, of course. She lit a fire in her backyard at night, as was seen by people living nearby."

Philemon had been assiduous, Caris noted with foreboding. He had interviewed her neighbors.

"And she chanted strange rhymes. Why?" Caris had sung to herself out of boredom, as she boiled up dyes and dipped the cloth, but Philemon had the ability to turn innocent trivia into evidence of evil. He dropped his voice to a thrilling stage whisper and said: "Because she was calling for the secret aid of the Prince of Darkness…," he raised his voice to a shout, "…Lucifer!"

The crowd groaned with dread.

"That cloth is Satan's scarlet!"

Caris looked at Merthin. He was aghast. "The fools are starting to believe him!" he said.

Caris's courage began to return. "Don't despair," she said. "I haven't had my say yet."

He took her hand.

“This is not the only spell she has used,” Philemon continued in a more normal voice. “Mattie Wise also made love potions.” He looked accusingly around the crowd. “There may even be wicked girls in this church now who have made use of Mattie’s powers to bewitch a man.”

Including your own sister, Caris thought. Did Philemon know about that?

He said: “This novice nun will testify.”

Elizabeth Clerk stood up. She spoke in a quiet voice, eyes lowered, the picture of nunlike modesty. “I say this on my oath as I hope to be saved,” she began. “I was betrothed to Merthin Builder.”

Merthin called out: “Liar!”

“We were in love and very happy,” Elizabeth went on. “Suddenly he changed. He seemed like a stranger to me. He became cold.”

Philemon asked her: “Did you notice anything else unusual, Sister?”

“Yes, Brother. I saw him hold his knife in his left hand.”

The crowd gasped. This was an acknowledged sign of bewitchment—although, as Caris knew, Merthin was ambidextrous.

Elizabeth said: “Then he announced he was going to marry Caris.”

It was amazing, Caris thought, how the truth could be just a little skewed so that it sounded sinister. She knew what had really happened. Merthin and Elizabeth had been friends until Elizabeth made it clear she wanted to be more than a friend, at which point he had told her that he did not share her feelings, and they had parted. But a satanic spell made a much better story.

Elizabeth might have convinced herself that she was telling the truth. But Philemon knew this was a lie. And Philemon was Godwyn’s tool. How could Godwyn reconcile his conscience with this level of wickedness? Was he telling himself that anything was justified in the service of the priory?

Elizabeth finished: “I can never love another man. That is why I have decided to give my life to God.” She sat down.

It was powerful evidence, Caris realized, and her dismay darkened like a winter sky. The fact that Elizabeth had become a nun lent conviction to her testimony. She was operating a kind of sentimental blackmail: How can you disbelieve me when I have made such a sacrifice?

The townspeople were quieter now. This was not the hilarious spectacle of a mad old woman being condemned. They were watching a battle for the life of a fellow citizen.

Philemon said: “Most damning of all, my lord bishop, is the final witness, a close member of the accused woman’s own family: her brother-in-law, Elfric Builder.”

Caris gasped. She had been accused by her cousin, Godwyn; by her best friend’s brother, Philemon; and by Elizabeth—but this was worse. For her sister’s husband to speak against her was astonishing treachery. Surely no one

would ever respect Elfric again.

Elfric stood up. The expression of defiance on his face told Caris he was ashamed of himself. “I say this on my oath as I hope to be saved,” he began.

Caris looked around for her sister, Alice, but did not see her. If she had been here, she would surely have stopped Elfric. No doubt Elfric had ordered her to stay at home on some pretext. She probably knew nothing of this.

Elfric said: “Caris speaks to unseen presences in empty rooms.”

“Spirits?” Philemon prompted.

“I fear so.”

A murmur of horror came from the crowd.

Caris was aware that she often talked aloud to herself. She had always thought of it as a harmless, if mildly embarrassing, habit. Her father said all imaginative people did it. Now it was being used to condemn her. She bit back a protest. It was better to let the prosecution run its course, then refute the accusations one by one.

“When does she do this?” Philemon asked Elfric.

“When she thinks she is alone.”

“And what does she say?”

“The words are difficult to make out. She might be speaking a foreign tongue.”

The crowded reacted to that, too: witches and their familiars were said to have their own language that no one else could understand.

“What does she seem to be saying?”

“To judge by her tone of voice, she is asking for help, pleading for good luck, cursing those who cause her misfortune, that sort of thing.”

Merthin shouted: “This is not evidence!” Everyone looked at him, and he added: “He has admitted he did not understand the words—he’s just making this up!”

There was a rumble of support from the more levelheaded citizens, but it was not as loud or as indignant as Caris would have liked.

Bishop Richard spoke for the first time. “Be quiet,” he said. “Men who disrupt the proceedings will be put outside by the constable. Carry on, please, Brother Philemon, but do not invite witnesses to fabricate evidence when they have admitted they do not know the truth.”

That was at least evenhanded, Caris thought. Richard and his family had no love for Godwyn after the quarrel over Margery’s wedding. On the other hand, as a cleric Richard might not want the town to pass out of the priory’s control. Perhaps he would at least be neutral in this. Her hopes rose a little.

Philemon said to Elfric: “Do you think the familiars she speaks to help her in any way?”

“Most certainly,” Elfric replied. “Caris’s friends, those she favors, are lucky. Merthin has become a successful builder although he never even

completed his apprenticeship as a carpenter. Mark Webber was a poor man, but now he is rich. Caris's friend Gwenda is married to Wulfric, even though Wulfric was betrothed to someone else. How are these things achieved, if not with unnatural help?"

"Thank you."

Elfric sat down.

As Philemon summarized his evidence, Caris fought down a rising feeling of terror. She tried to put out of her mind the vision of Crazy Nell being flogged behind a cart. She struggled to concentrate on what she should say to defend herself. She could ridicule every statement made about her, but that might not be enough. She needed to explain why people had lied about her, and show what their motives were.

When Philemon was finished, Godwyn asked her if she had anything to say. In a loud voice that sounded more confident than she felt, she replied: "Of course I do." She made her way to the front of the crowd: she would not let her accusers monopolize the position of authority. She took her time, making them all wait for her. She walked up to the throne and looked Richard in the eye. "My lord bishop, I say this on my oath as I hope to be saved…," she turned to the crowd and added, "…which I notice Philemon did not say."

Godwyn interrupted: "As a monk, he does not need to swear."

Caris raised her voice. "And a good thing for him, otherwise he would burn in Hell for the lies he has told today!"

Score a point to me, she thought, and her hopes rose another notch.

She spoke to the crowd. Although the decision would be made by the bishop, he would be heavily influenced by the reaction of the townspeople. He was not a man of high principle.

"Mattie Wise healed many people in this town," she began. "On this day two years ago, when the old bridge collapsed, she was one of the foremost in tending to the injured, working alongside Mother Cecilia and the nuns. Looking around the church today I see many people who benefited from her care at that terrible time. Did anyone hear her invoke the devil on that day? If so, let him speak now."

She paused to let the silence impress itself on her audience.

She pointed at Madge Webber. "Mattie gave you a potion that brought down your child's fever. What did she say to you?"

Madge looked scared. No one was comfortable being called as a witness in the defense of a witch. But Madge owed a lot to Caris. She straightened her shoulders, looked defiant, and said: "Mattie said to me: 'Pray to God, for only He can heal.'"

Caris pointed at the constable. "John, she eased your pain while Mathew Barber set your broken bones. What did she say to you?"

John was used to being on the prosecuting side, and he, too, looked

uneasy, but he told the truth in a strong voice. “She said: ‘Pray to God, for only He can heal.’”

Caris turned to the crowd. “Everyone knows that Mattie was no witch. In that case, says Brother Philemon, why did she flee? Easy question. She was afraid that lies would be told about her—as they have been told about me. Which of you women, if falsely accused of heresy, would feel confident about proving your innocence to a court of priests and monks?” She looked around, letting her eyes rest on the prominent women of the town: Lib Wheeler, Sarah Taverner, Susanna Chepstow.

“Why did I mix dyes at night?” she resumed. “Because the days were short! Like many of you, my father failed to sell all his fleeces last year, and I wanted to turn the raw wool into something I could market. It was very difficult to discover the formula, but I did it, by hard work, over many hours, day and night—but without the help of Satan.” She paused for breath.

When she began again, she used a different tone of voice, more playful. “I am accused of bewitching Merthin. I have to admit that the case against me is strong. Look at Sister Elizabeth. Stand up, please, Sister.”

Reluctantly, Elizabeth stood.

“She is beautiful, isn’t she?” Caris said. “She is also clever. And she is the daughter of a bishop. Oh, forgive me, my lord bishop, I meant no disrespect.”

The crowd chuckled at that cheeky stab. Godwyn looked outraged, but Bishop Richard smothered a smile.

“Sister Elizabeth cannot see why any man would prefer me to her. Nor can I. Unaccountably, Merthin loves me, plain as I am. I cannot explain it.” There was more giggling. “I’m sorry Elizabeth is so angry. If we lived in Old Testament times, Merthin could have two wives and everyone would be happy.” They laughed loudly at that. She waited for the sound to subside, then said gravely: “What I am most sorry about is that the commonplace jealousy of a disappointed woman should become the pretext, in the untrustworthy mouth of a novice monk, for a charge as serious as that of heresy.”

Philemon stood up to protest the charge of untrustworthiness, but Bishop Richard flapped a hand at him, saying: “Let her speak, let her speak.”

Caris decided she had made her point about Elizabeth, and moved on. “I confess that I sometimes use vulgar words when I am alone—especially if I stub my toe. But you may ask why my own brother-in-law would testify against me, and tell you that my mutterings were invocations to evil spirits. I’m afraid I can answer that.” She paused, then spoke solemnly. “My father is ill. If he dies, his fortune will be divided between me and my sister. But, if I die first, my sister will get it all. And my sister is Elfric’s wife.”

She paused, looking quizzically at the crowd. “Are you shocked?” she said. “So am I. But men kill for less money than that.”

She moved away, as if she had finished, and Philemon got up from his

bench. Caris turned around and addressed him in Latin. *“Caput tuum in ano est.”*

The monks laughed loudly, and Philemon flushed.

Caris turned to Elfric. “You didn’t understand that, did you, Elfric?”

“No,” he said sulkily.

“Which is why you might have thought I was using some sinister witchcraft tongue.” She turned back to Philemon. “Brother, you know what language I was using, don’t you?”

“Latin,” Philemon replied.

“Perhaps you would tell us what I just said to you.”

Philemon looked an appeal at the bishop. But Richard was amused, and just said: “Answer the question.”

Looking furious, Philemon obeyed. “She said: ‘You’ve got your head up your ass.’”

The townspeople roared with laughter, and Caris walked back to her place.

When the noise died down, Philemon began to speak, but Richard interrupted him. “I don’t need to hear any further from you,” he said. “You’ve made a strong case against her, and she has mounted a vigorous defense. Does anyone else have anything to say about this accusation?”

“I do, my lord bishop.” Friar Murdo came forward. Some of the townspeople cheered, others groaned: Murdo aroused contrary reactions. “Heresy is an evil,” he began, his voice modulating into fruity preaching mode. “It corrupts the souls of women and men—”

“Thank you, Brother, but I know what heresy does,” said Richard. “Do you have anything else to say? If not—”

“Just this,” Murdo replied. “I agree with, and reiterate—”

“If it has been said before—”

“—your own comment that the case is strong, and the defense similar.”

“In which case—”

“I have a solution to propose.”

“All right, Brother Murdo, what is it? In the minimum number of words.”

“She must be examined for the Devil’s Mark.”

Caris’s heart seemed to stop.

“Of course,” said the bishop. “I seem to remember you making the same suggestion at an earlier trial.”

“Indeed, lord, for the devil greedily sucks the hot blood of his acolytes through his own special nipple, as the newborn babe sucks the swollen breasts—”

“Yes, thank you, friar, no need for further details. Mother Cecilia, will you and two other nuns please take the accused woman to a place of examination?”

Caris looked at Merthin. He was pale with horror. They were both thinking the same.

Caris had a mole.

It was tiny, but the nuns would find it—in just the kind of place they thought the devil was most interested in: on the left side of her vulva, just beside the cleft. It was dark brown, and the red gold hair around did not hide it. The first time Merthin had noticed it, he had joked: “Friar Murdo would call you a witch—you’d better not let him see it.” And Caris had laughed and said: “Not if he were the last man on earth.”

How could they have spoken of it in such a carefree way? Now she would be condemned to death for it.

She looked around desperately. She would have run, but she was surrounded by hundreds of people, some of whom would stop her. She saw Merthin’s hand on the knife at his belt; but even if the knife had been a sword and he had been a great fighter—which he was not—he could not have cut his way through such a crowd.

Mother Cecilia came to her and took her hand.

Caris decided she would escape as soon as she got outside the church. Crossing the cloisters she could easily break free.

Then Godwyn said: “Constable, take one of your deputies and escort the woman to the place of examination, and stand outside the door until it is done.”

Cecilia could not have held Caris, but two men could.

John looked at Mark Webber, normally his first choice among the deputies. Caris felt a faint hope: Mark was a loyal friend to her. But the constable apparently had the same thought, for he turned from Mark and pointed to Christopher Blacksmith.

Cecilia tugged gently on Caris’s hand.

As if sleepwalking, Caris allowed herself to be led out of the church. They left by the north door, Cecilia and Caris followed by Sister Mair and Old Julie, with John Constable and Christopher Blacksmith close behind. They crossed the cloisters, entered the nuns’ quarters, and made their way to the dormitory. The two men stayed outside.

Cecilia closed the door.

“No need to examine me,” Caris said dully. “I’ve got a mark.”

“We know,” said Cecilia.

Caris frowned. “How?”

“We have washed you.” She indicated Mair and Julie. “All three of us. When you were in the hospital, two Christmases ago. You had eaten something that poisoned you.”

Cecilia did not know, or was pretending not to have guessed, that Caris had taken a potion to end her pregnancy.

She went on: “You were puking and shitting all over the place, and bleeding down there. You had to be washed several times. We all saw the mole.”

Hopeless despair washed over Caris in an irresistible tide. She closed her eyes. “So now you will condemn me to death,” she said in a voice so low it was almost a whisper.

“Not necessarily,” said Cecilia. “There could be another way.”

Merthin was distraught. Caris was trapped. She would be condemned to death, and there was nothing he could do. He could not have rescued her even if he had been Ralph, with big shoulders and a sword and a relish for violence. He stared, horrified, at the door through which she had disappeared. He knew where Caris’s mole was, and he felt sure the nuns would find it—that was just the kind of place where they would look most carefully.

All around him the noise of excited chatter rose from the crowd. People were arguing for or against Caris, rerunning the trial, but he seemed to be inside a bubble, and he could hardly follow what anyone said. In his ears, their talk sounded like the random beating of a hundred drums.

He found himself staring at Godwyn, wondering what he was thinking. Merthin could understand the others—Elizabeth was eaten up with jealousy, Elfric was possessed by greed, and Philemon was pure malevolence—but the prior mystified him. Godwyn had grown up with his cousin Caris, and he knew she was not a witch. Yet he was prepared to see her die. How could he do something so wicked? What excuse did he make to himself? Did he tell himself that this was all for the glory of God? Godwyn had once seemed to be a man of enlightenment and decency, the antidote to Prior Anthony’s narrow conservatism. But he had turned out to be worse than Anthony: more ruthless in the pursuit of the same obsolete aims.

If Caris dies, Merthin thought, I’m going to kill Godwyn.

His parents came up to him. They had been in the cathedral throughout the trial. His father said something, but Merthin could not understand him. “What?” he said.

Then the north door opened, and the crowd became silent. Mother Cecilia walked in alone and closed the door behind her. There was a murmur of curiosity. What now?

Cecilia walked up to the bishop’s throne.

Richard said: “Well, Mother Prioress? What do you have to report to the court?”

Cecilia said slowly: “Caris has confessed—”

There was a roar of shock from the crowd.

Cecilia raised her voice. “…confessed her sins.”

They went quiet again. What did this mean?

“She has received absolution—”

“From whom?” Godwyn interrupted. “A nun cannot give absolution!”

“From Father Joffroi.”

Merthin knew Joffroi. He was the priest at St. Mark’s, the church where Merthin had repaired the roof. Joffroi had no love for Godwyn.

But what was going on? Everyone waited for Cecilia to explain.

She said: “Caris has applied to become a novice nun here at the priory—”

Once again she was interrupted by a shout of shock from the assembled townspeople.

She yelled over their voices: “—and I have accepted her!”

There was uproar. Merthin could see Godwyn yelling at the top of his voice, but his words were lost. Elizabeth was enraged; Philemon stared at Cecilia with poisonous hatred; Elfric looked bewildered; Richard was amused. Merthin’s own mind reeled with the implications. Would the bishop accept this? Did it mean the trial was over? Had Caris been saved from execution?

Eventually the tumult died down. As soon as he could be heard, Godwyn spoke, his face white with fury. “Did she, or did she not, confess to heresy?”

“The confessional is a sacred trust,” Cecilia replied imperturbably. “I don’t know what she said to the priest, and if I did I could not tell you or anyone else.”

“Does she bear the mark of Satan?”

“We did not examine her.” This answer was evasive, Merthin realized, but Cecilia quickly added: “It was not necessary once she had received absolution.”

“This is unacceptable!” Godwyn bellowed. He had dropped the pretense that Philemon was the prosecutor. “The prioress cannot frustrate the proceedings of the court in this way!”

Bishop Richard said: “Thank you, Father Prior—”

“The order of the court must be carried out!”

Richard raised his voice. “That will do!”

Godwyn opened his mouth to protest further, then thought better of it.

Richard said: “I don’t need to hear any more argument. I have made my decision, and I will now announce my judgment.”

Silence fell.

“The proposal that Caris be permitted to enter the nunnery is an interesting one. If she is a witch, she will be unable to do any harm in the holiness of her surroundings. The devil cannot enter here. On the other hand, if she is not a witch, we will have been saved from the error of condemning an innocent woman. Perhaps the nunnery would not have been Caris’s choice as a way of life, but her consolation will be an existence dedicated to serving

God. On balance, then, I find this a satisfactory solution."

Godwyn said: "What if she should leave the nunnery?"

"Good point," said the bishop. "That is why I am formally sentencing her to death, but suspending the sentence for as long as she remains a nun. If she should renounce her vows, the sentence would be carried out."

That's it, thought Merthin in despair; a life sentence; and he felt tears of rage and grief come to his eyes.

Richard stood up. Godwyn said: "The court is adjourned!" The bishop left, followed by the monks and nuns in procession.

Merthin moved in a daze. His mother spoke to him in a consoling voice, but he ignored her. He let the crowd carry him to the great west door of the cathedral and out on to the green. The traders were packing up their leftover goods and dismantling their stalls: the Fleece Fair was over for another year. Godwyn had got what he wanted, he realized. With Edmund dying and Caris out of the way, Elfric would become alderman and the application for a borough charter would be withdrawn.

He looked at the gray stone walls of the priory buildings: Caris was in there somewhere. He turned that way, moving across the tide of the crowd, and headed for the hospital.

The place was empty. It had been swept clean, and the straw-filled palliasses used by the overnight visitors were stacked neatly against the walls. A candle burned on the altar at the eastern end. Merthin walked slowly the length of the room, not sure what to do next.

He recalled, from *Timothy's Book*, that his ancestor Jack Builder had briefly become a novice monk. The author had hinted that Jack had been a reluctant recruit, and had not taken easily to monastic discipline; at any rate, his novitiate had ended abruptly in circumstances over which Timothy drew a tactful veil.

But Bishop Richard had stated that if Caris ever left the nunnery she would be under sentence of death.

A young nun came in. When she recognized Merthin she looked scared. "What do you want?" she said.

"I must speak to Caris."

"I'll go and ask," she said, and hurried out.

Merthin looked at the altar, and the crucifix, and the triptych on the wall showing Elizabeth of Hungary, the patron saint of hospitals. One panel showed the saint, who had been a princess, wearing a crown and feeding the poor; the second showed her building her hospital; and the third illustrated the miracle in which the food she carried beneath her cloak was turned into roses. What would Caris do in this place? She was a skeptic, doubtful of just about everything the church taught. She did not believe that a princess could turn bread into roses. "How do they know that?" she would say to stories that

everyone else accepted without question—Adam and Eve, Noah's ark, David and Goliath, even the Nativity. She would be a caged wildcat in here.

He had to talk to her, to find out what was in her mind. She must have some plan that he was not able to guess at. He waited impatiently for the nun to return. She did not come back, but Old Julie appeared. "Thank heaven!" he said. "Julie, I have to see Caris, quickly!"

"I'm sorry, young Merthin," she said. "Caris doesn't want to see you."

"Don't be ridiculous," he said. "We're betrothed—we're supposed to get married tomorrow. She has to see me!"

"She's a novice nun now. She won't be getting married."

Merthin raised his voice. "If that's true, don't you think she should tell me herself?"

"It's not for me to say. She knows you're here, and she won't see you."

"I don't believe you." Merthin pushed past the old nun and went through the door by which she had entered. He found himself in a small lobby. He had never been here before: few men had ever entered the nuns' area of the priory. He passed through another door and found himself in the nuns' cloisters. Several of them stood there, some reading, some walking around the square meditatively, some talking in quiet voices.

He ran along the arcade. A nun caught sight of him and screamed. He ignored her. Seeing a staircase, he ran up it and entered the first room. He found himself in a dormitory. There were two lines of mattresses, with neatly folded blankets on top. No one was there. He went a few steps along the corridor and tried another door. It was locked. "Caris!" he shouted. "Are you in there? Speak to me!" He banged on the door with his fist. He scraped the skin of his knuckles, which started to bleed, but he hardly felt the pain. "Let me in!" he yelled. "Let me in!"

A voice behind him said: "I'll let you in."

He spun around to see Mother Cecilia.

She took a key from her belt and calmly unlocked the door. Merthin threw it open. Beyond it was a small room with a single window. All around the walls were shelves packed with folded clothes.

"This is where we keep our winter robes," Cecilia said. "It's a storeroom."

"Where is she?" Merthin shouted.

"She's in a room that is locked by her own request. You won't find the room and, if you did, you couldn't get in. She will not see you."

"How do I know she's not dead?" Merthin heard his voice crack with emotion, but he did not care.

"You know me," Cecilia said. "She's not dead." She looked at his hand. "You've hurt yourself," she said sympathetically. "Come with me and let me put some ointment on your cuts."

He looked at his hand, and then at her. "You're a devil," he said.

He ran from her, back the way he had come, into the hospital, past a scared-looking Julie, out into the open. He made his way through the end-of-fair chaos in front of the cathedral and emerged onto the main street. He thought of speaking to Edmund, but decided against it: someone else could tell Caris's ailing father the terrible truth. Whom could he trust? He thought of Mark Webber.

Mark and his family had moved to a big house on the main street, with a large stone-built ground-floor storeroom for bales of cloth. There was no loom in their kitchen now: all the weaving was done by others whom they organized. Mark and Madge were sitting on a bench, looking solemn. When Merthin walked in, Mark jumped up. "Have you seen her?" he cried.

"They won't let me."

"That's outrageous!" Mark said. "They don't have the right to stop her seeing the man she's supposed to marry!"

"The nuns say she doesn't want to see me."

"I don't believe them."

"Nor do I. I went in and looked for her, but I couldn't find her. There are a lot of locked doors."

"She must be there somewhere."

"I know. Will you come back with me, and bring a hammer, and help me break down every door until we find her?"

Mark looked uncomfortable. Strong as he was, he hated violence.

Merthin said: "I have to find her—she might be dead!"

Before he could reply, Madge said: "I've got a better idea."

The two men looked at her.

"I'll go to the nunnery," Madge said. "The nuns won't be so nervous of a woman. Perhaps they will persuade Caris to see me."

Mark nodded. "At least then we'll know that she's alive."

Merthin said: "But…I need more than that. What is she thinking? Is she going to wait until the fuss dies down, then escape? Should I try to break her out of there? Or should I just wait—and, if so, how long? A month? A year? Seven years?"

"I'll ask her, if they'll let me in." Madge stood up. "You wait here."

"No, I'm coming with you," Merthin said. "I'll wait outside."

"In that case, Mark, why don't you come, too, to keep Merthin company?"

To keep Merthin out of trouble, she meant, but he made no objection. He had asked for their help. And he was grateful to have two people he trusted on his side.

They hurried back to the priory close. Mark and Merthin waited outside the hospital while Madge went in. Merthin saw that Caris's old dog, Scrap, was sitting at the door, waiting for her to reappear.

After Madge had been gone for half an hour, Merthin said: “I think they must have let her in, otherwise she’d be back by now.”

“We’ll see,” said Mark.

They watched the last of the traders pack up and depart, leaving the cathedral green a sea of churned mud. Merthin paced up and down while Mark sat like a statue of Samson. One hour followed another. Despite his impatience, Merthin was glad of the delay, for almost certainly Madge was talking to Caris.

The sun was sinking over the west side of town when at last Madge emerged. Her expression was solemn and her face was wet with tears. “Caris is alive,” she said. “And there’s nothing wrong with her, physically or mentally. She’s in her right mind.”

“What did she say?” Merthin asked urgently.

“I’ll tell you every word. Come, let’s sit in the garden.”

They went to the vegetable patch and sat on the stone bench, looking at the sunset. Madge’s equanimity gave Merthin a bad feeling. He would have preferred her to be spitting with rage. Her manner told him the news was bad. He felt hopeless. He said: “Is it true that she doesn’t want to see me?”

Madge sighed. “Yes.”

“But why?”

“I asked her that. She said it would break her heart.”

Merthin began to cry.

Madge went on in a low, clear voice. “Mother Cecilia left us alone, so that we could speak frankly, without being overheard. Caris believes that Godwyn and Philemon are determined to get rid of her, because of the application for a borough charter. She’s safe in the nunnery, but if she ever leaves they will find her and kill her.”

“She could escape and I could take her to London!” Merthin said. “Godwyn would never find us there!”

Madge nodded. “I said that to her. We discussed it for a long time. She feels the two of you would be fugitives for the rest of your lives. She’s not willing to condemn you to that. It’s your destiny to be the greatest builder of your generation. You will be famous. But, if she is with you, you will always have to lie about your identity and hide from the light of day.”

“I don’t care about that!”

“She told me you would say that. But she believes you do care about it, and what is more she thinks you should. Anyway, she cares about it. She will not take away your destiny, even if you ask her to.”

“She could say this to me herself!”

“She’s afraid you would talk her around.”

Merthin knew Madge was telling the truth. Cecilia had been telling the truth, too. Caris did not want to see him. He felt choked with grief. He

swallowed, wiped the tears from his face with his sleeve, and struggled to speak. “But what will she do?” he said.

“Make the best of it. Try to be a good nun.”

“She hates the church!”

“I know she has never been very respectful of the clergy. In this town, it’s not surprising. But she believes she can find some kind of consolation in a life dedicated to healing her fellow women and men.”

Merthin thought about that. Mark and Madge watched him in silence. He could imagine Caris working in the hospital, taking care of sick people. But how would she feel about spending half the night singing and praying? “She might kill herself,” he said after a long pause.

“I don’t think so,” Madge said with conviction. “She’s terribly sad, but I don’t see her taking that way out.”

“She might kill someone else.”

“That’s more likely.”

“Then again,” Merthin said slowly and reluctantly, “she might find a kind of happiness.”

Madge said nothing. Merthin looked hard at her. She nodded.

That was the terrible truth, he realized. Caris might be happy. She was losing her home, her freedom, and her husband-to-be; but she might still be happy, in the end.

There was nothing more to say.

Merthin stood up. “Thank you for being my friends,” he said. He began to walk away.

Mark said: “Where are you going?”

Merthin stopped and turned back. There was a thought spinning in his head, and he waited for it to become clear. When it did, he was astonished. But he saw immediately that the idea was right. It was not merely right, it was perfect.

He wiped the tears from his face and looked at Mark and Madge in the red light of the dying sun.

“I’m going to Florence,” he said. “Good-bye.”

PART V

March 1346 to December 1348

43

Sister Caris left the nuns' cloisters and walked briskly into the hospital. There were three patients lying in beds. Old Julie was now too infirm to attend services or climb the stairs to the nuns' dormitory. Bella Brewer, the wife of Dick Brewer's son Danny, was recovering from a complicated birth. And Rickie Silvers, aged thirteen, had a broken arm which Matthew Barber had set. Two other people sat on a bench to one side, talking: a novice nun called Nellie, and a priory servant, Bob.

Caris's experienced gaze swept the room. Beside each bed was a dirty dinner plate. The dinner hour was long over. "Bob!" she said. He leaped to his feet. "Take away these plates. This is a monastery, and cleanliness is a virtue. Jump to it!"

"Sorry, Sister," he said.

"Nellie, have you taken Old Julie to the latrine?"

"Not yet, Sister."

"She always needs to go after dinner. My mother was the same. Take her quick, before she has an accident."

Nellie began to get the old nun up.

Caris was trying to develop the quality of patience, but after seven years as a nun she still had not succeeded, and she became frustrated by having to repeat instructions again and again. Bob knew he should clear away as soon as dinner was over—Caris had told him often. Nellie knew Julie's needs. Yet they sat on a bench gossiping until Caris surprised them with a lightning inspection.

She picked up the bowl of water that had been used for hand washing and walked the length of the room to throw it outside. A man she did not know was relieving himself against the outside wall. She guessed he was a traveler hoping for a bed. "Next time, use the latrine behind the stable," she snapped.

He leered at her, holding his penis in his hand. "And who are you?" he said insolently.

“I’m in charge of this hospital, and if you want to stay here tonight you’ll have to improve your manners.”

“Oh!” he said. “The bossy type, eh?” He took his time shaking the drops off.

“Put away your pathetic prick, or you won’t be allowed to spend a night in this town, let alone at the priory.” Caris threw the bowl of water at his middle. He jumped back, shocked, his hose soaked.

She went back inside and refilled the bowl at the fountain. There was an underground pipe running through the priory that brought clean water from upstream of the town and fed fountains in the cloisters, the kitchens, and the hospital. A separate branch of the subterranean stream flushed the latrines. One day, Caris wanted to build a new latrine adjacent to the hospital, so that senile patients such as Julie would not have to go so far.

The stranger followed her in. “Wash your hands,” she said, handing him the bowl.

He hesitated, then took the bowl from her.

She looked at him. He was about her own age, twenty-nine. “Who are you?” she said.

“Gilbert of Hereford, a pilgrim,” he said. “I’ve come to reverence the relics of St. Adolphus.”

“In that case, you’ll be welcome to stay a night here at the hospital, provided you speak respectfully to me—and to anyone else here, for that matter.”

“Yes, Sister.”

Caris returned to the cloisters. It was a mild spring day, and the sun shone on the smooth old stones of the courtyard. Along the west walk, Sister Mair was teaching the girls’ school a new hymn, and Caris paused to observe. People said that Mair looked like an angel: she had clear skin, bright eyes, and a mouth shaped like a bow. The school was technically one of Caris’s responsibilities—she was guest master, in charge of everyone who came into the nunnery from the outside world. She had attended this school herself, almost twenty years ago.

There were ten pupils, aged from nine to fifteen. Some were the daughters of Kingsbridge merchants; others were noblemen’s children. The hymn, on the theme that God is good, came to an end, and one of the girls asked: “Sister Mair, if God is good, why did he let my parents die?”

It was the child’s personal version of a classic question, one asked by all intelligent youngsters sooner or later: How can bad things happen? Caris had asked it herself. She looked with interest at the questioner. She was Tilly Shiring, twelve-year-old niece of Earl Roland, a girl with an impish look that Caris liked. Tilly’s mother had bled to death after giving birth to her, and her father had broken his neck in a hunting accident not long afterward, so she

had been brought up in the earl's household.

Mair gave a bland answer about God's mysterious ways. Tilly clearly was not satisfied, but was unable to articulate her misgivings, and fell silent. The question would come up again, Caris felt sure.

Mair started them singing the hymn again, then stepped over to speak to Caris.

"A bright girl," Caris said.

"The best in the class. In a year or two she'll be arguing with me fiercely."

"She reminds me of someone," Caris said, frowning. "I'm trying to remember her mother…"

Mair touched Caris's arm lightly. Gestures of affection were prohibited between nuns, but Caris was not strict about such things. "She reminds you of yourself," Mair said.

Caris laughed. "I was never that pretty."

But Mair was right: even as a child, Caris had asked skeptical questions. Later, when she became a novice nun, she had started an argument at every theology class. Within a week, Mother Cecilia had been obliged to order her to be silent during lessons. Then Caris had begun breaking the nunnery rules, and responding to correction by questioning the rationale behind convent discipline. Once again she had been enjoined to silence.

Before long, Mother Cecilia had offered her a deal. Caris could spend most of her time in the hospital—a part of the nuns' work she did believe in—and skip services whenever necessary. In exchange, Caris had to stop flouting discipline and keep her theological ideas to herself. Caris had agreed, reluctantly and sulkily, but Cecilia was wise, and the arrangement had worked. It was still working, for Caris now spent most of her time supervising the hospital. She missed more than half the services, and rarely said or did anything openly subversive.

Mair smiled. "You're pretty now," she said. "Especially when you laugh."

Caris found herself momentarily spellbound by Mair's blue eyes. Then she heard a child scream.

She turned away. The scream had come not from the group in the cloisters, but from the hospital. She hurried through the little lobby. Christopher Blacksmith was carrying a girl of about eight into the hospital. The child, whom Caris recognized as his daughter Minnie, was screaming in pain.

"Lay her on a mattress," Caris said.

Christopher put the child down.

"What happened?"

Christopher was a strong man in a panic, and he spoke in a strangely high-pitched voice. "She stumbled in my workshop and fell with her arm against a bar of red-hot iron. Do something for her, quickly, Sister, she's in

such agony!”

Caris touched the child’s cheek. “There, there, Minnie, we’ll ease the pain very soon.” Poppy-seed extract was too strong, she thought: it might kill such a small child. She needed a milder potion. “Nellie, go to my pharmacy and fetch the jar marked ‘Hemp essence.’ Walk quickly, but don’t run—if you should stumble and break the vial, it will take hours to make up a new batch.” Nellie hurried away.

Caris studied Minnie’s arm. She had a nasty burn but, fortunately, it was restricted to the arm, nothing like as dangerous as the all-over burns people got in house fires. There were large angry blisters over most of the girl’s forearm, and in the middle the skin was burned away to reveal charred flesh underneath.

Caris looked up for help and saw Mair. “Go to the kitchen and get me half a pint of wine and the same quantity of olive oil, in two separate jugs, please. Both need to be warm but not hot.” Mair left.

Caris spoke to the child. “Minnie, you must try to stop screaming. I know it hurts, but you need to listen to me. I’m getting you some medicine. It will ease the pain.” The screaming abated somewhat, and began to turn into sobbing.

Nellie arrived with the hemp essence. Caris poured some onto a spoon, then thrust the spoon into Minnie’s open mouth and held her nose. The child swallowed. She screamed again, but after a minute she began to calm down.

“Give me a clean towel,” Caris said to Nellie. They used a lot of towels in the hospital, and the cupboard behind the altar was always full of clean ones, by Caris’s edict.

Mair came back from the kitchen with the oil and wine. Caris put a towel on the floor beside Minnie’s mattress and moved the burned arm over the towel. “How do you feel?” she asked.

“It hurts,” Minnie wailed.

Caris nodded in satisfaction. Those were the first coherent words the patient had uttered. The worst was over.

Minnie began to look sleepy as the hemp took effect. Caris said: “I’m going to put something on your arm to make it better. Try to keep still, will you?”

Minnie nodded.

Caris poured a little of the warm wine onto Minnie’s wrist, where the burn was least bad. The child flinched, but did not try to snatch her arm away. Encouraged, Caris slowly moved the jug up the arm, pouring the wine over the worst of the burn to cleanse it. Then she did the same with the olive oil, which would soothe the place and protect the flesh from bad influences in the air. Finally she took a fresh towel and wrapped it lightly around the arm to keep the flies off.

Minnie was moaning, but half-asleep. Caris looked anxiously at her complexion. Her face was flushed pink with strain. That was good—if she had been turning pale, it would have been a sign that the dose had been too strong.

Caris was always nervous about drugs. The strength varied from batch to batch, and she had no precise way of measuring it. When weak, the medicine was ineffectual; when strong, dangerous. She was especially frightened of overdosing children, though the parents always pressured her for powerful medicine because they were so distressed by their children's pain.

At that point Brother Joseph came in. He was old now—somewhere in his late fifties—and all his teeth had fallen out, but he was still the priory's best monk-physician. Christopher Blacksmith immediately leaped to his feet. "Oh, Brother Joseph, thank God you're here," he said. "My little girl has a terrible burn."

"Let's have a look," said Joseph.

Caris stood back, hiding her irritation. Everyone believed the monks were powerful doctors, able to work near-miracles, whereas the nuns just fed the patients and cleared up. Caris had long ago stopped fighting that attitude, but it still annoyed her.

Joseph took off the towel and looked at the patient's arm. He prodded the burned flesh with his fingers. Minnie whimpered in her drugged sleep. "A bad burn, but not fatal," he said. He turned to Caris. "Make up a poultice of three parts chicken fat, three parts goat's dung, and one part white lead, and cover the burn with it. That will bring forth the pus."

"Yes, Brother." Caris was doubtful of the value of poultices. She had noticed that many injuries healed well without bringing forth the pus that monks thought such a healthy sign. In her experience, wounds sometimes became corrupt beneath such ointments. But the monks disagreed—except for Brother Thomas, who was convinced he had lost his arm because of the poultice prescribed by Prior Anthony almost twenty years ago. However, this was another battle Caris had given up. The monks' techniques had the authority of Hippocrates and Galen, the ancient writers on medicine, and everyone agreed they must be right.

Joseph left. Caris made sure that Minnie was comfortable and her father was reassured. "When she wakes up, she will be thirsty. Make sure she gets plenty to drink—weak ale or watered wine."

She was in no hurry to make the poultice. She would give God a few hours to work unaided before she began Joseph's treatment. The likelihood that the monk-physician would come back later to check on his patient was small. She sent Nellie out to collect goat dung from the green to the west of the cathedral; then she went to her pharmacy.

It was next to the monks' library. Unfortunately, she did not have large

windows matching those in the library. The room was small and dark. However, it had a workbench, some shelves for her jars and vials, and a small fireplace for heating ingredients.

In a cupboard she kept a small notebook. Parchment was expensive, and a text block of identical sheets would be used only for holy scriptures. However, she had gathered a stack of odd-shaped offcuts and sewn them together. She kept a record of every patient with a serious complaint. She wrote down the date, the patient's name, the symptoms, and the treatment given; then later she added the results, always noting exactly how many hours or days had passed before the patient got better or worse. She often looked back over past cases to refresh her memory on how effective different treatments had been.

When she wrote down Minnie's age, it occurred to her that her own child would have been eight this year, if she had not taken Mattie Wise's potion. For no good reason, she thought her baby would have been a girl. She wondered how she would have reacted if her own daughter had suffered an accident. Would she have been able to deal so coolly with the emergency? Or would she have been almost hysterical with fear, like Christopher Blacksmith?

She had just finished logging the case when the bell rang for Evensong, and she went to the service. Afterward it was time for the nuns' supper. Then they went to bed, to get some sleep before they had to rise for Matins at three o'clock in the morning.

Instead of going to bed, Caris went back to her pharmacy to make the poultice. She did not mind the goat's dung—anyone who worked in a hospital saw worse things. But she wondered how Joseph could imagine it was a good thing to put on burned flesh.

She would not be able to apply it until morning, now. Minnie was a healthy child: her recovery would be well advanced by then.

While she was working, Mair came in.

Caris looked at her curiously. "What are you doing out of bed?"

Mair stood beside her at the workbench. "I came to help you."

"It doesn't take two people to make a poultice. What did Sister Natalie say?" Natalie was the subprioress, in charge of discipline, and no one could leave the dormitory at night without her permission.

"She's fast asleep. Do you really think you're not pretty?"

"Did you get out of bed to ask me that?"

"Merthin must have thought you were."

Caris smiled. "Yes, he did."

"Do you miss him?"

Caris finished mixing the poultice and turned away to wash her hands in a bowl. "I think about him every day," she said. "He is now the richest architect

in Florence.”

“How do you know?”

“I get news of him every Fleece Fair from Buonaventura Caroli.”

“Does Merthin get news of you?”

“What news? There’s nothing to tell. I’m a nun.”

“Do you long for him?”

Caris turned back and gave Mair a direct look. “Nuns are forbidden to long for men.”

“But not for women,” Mair said, and she leaned forward and kissed Caris on the mouth.

Caris was so surprised that for a second she froze. Mair held the kiss. The touch of a woman’s lips was soft, not like Merthin’s. Caris was shocked, though not horrified. It was seven years since anyone had kissed her, and she realized suddenly how much she missed it.

In the silence, there was a loud noise from the library next door.

Mair jerked away guiltily. “What was that?”

“It sounded like a box being dropped on the floor.”

“Who could it be?”

Caris frowned. “There shouldn’t be anyone in the library at this time of night. Monks and nuns are in bed.”

Mair looked scared. “What should we do?”

“We’d better go and look.”

They left the pharmacy. Although the library was adjacent, they had to walk through the nuns’ cloisters and into the monks’ cloisters to reach the library door. It was a dark night, but they had both lived here for years, and they could find their way blindfolded. When they reached their destination, they saw a flickering light in the high windows. The door, normally locked at night, was ajar.

Caris pushed it open.

For a moment, she could not make out what she was looking at. She saw a closet door standing open, a box on a table, a candle next to it, and a shadowy figure. After a moment, she realized that the closet was the treasury, where charters and other valuables were kept, and the box was the chest containing the jeweled gold and silver ornaments used in the cathedral for special services. The shadowy man was taking objects out of the box and putting them in some kind of bag.

The figure looked up, and Caris recognized the face. It was Gilbert of Hereford, the pilgrim who had arrived earlier today. Except that he was no pilgrim, and he probably was not even from Hereford. He was a thief.

They stared at each other for a moment, no one moving.

Then Mair screamed.

Gilbert put out the candle.

Caris pulled the door shut, to delay him a second longer. Then she dashed along the cloisters and darted into a recess, pulling Mair with her.

They were at the foot of the stairs that led to the monks' dorm. Mair's scream would have awakened the men, but they might be slow to react. "Tell the monks what's happening!" Caris yelled at Mair. "Go on, run!" Mair dashed up the stairs.

Caris heard a creak, and guessed that the library door was opening. She listened for the sound of footsteps on the flagstones of the cloisters, but Gilbert must have been a practised burglar, for he walked silently. She held her breath and listened for his. Then a commotion broke out upstairs.

The thief must have realized then that he had only a few seconds to escape, for he broke into a run, and Caris heard his tread.

She did not care greatly for the precious cathedral ornaments, believing that gold and jewels probably pleased the bishop and the prior more than they pleased God; but she had taken a dislike to Gilbert, and she hated the idea that he might get rich by robbing the priory. So she stepped out of her recess.

She could hardly see, but there was no mistaking the running steps hurtling toward her. She held her arms out to protect herself, and he cannoned into her. She was knocked off balance, but grasped his clothing, and they both fell to the ground. There was a clatter as his sack of crucifixes and chalices hit the paving stones.

The pain of the fall enraged Caris, and she let go of his clothes and reached for where she thought his face might be. She encountered skin and dragged her fingernails across it, digging deep. He roared with pain and she felt blood flow under her fingertips.

But he was stronger. He grappled with her and swung himself on top. A light appeared from the head of the monks' stairs, and suddenly she could see Gilbert—and he could see her. Kneeling astride her, he punched her face, first with his right fist, then with his left, then with the right again. She cried out in agony.

There was more light. The monks were stumbling down the stairs. Caris heard Mair scream: "Leave her alone, you devil!" Gilbert leaped to his feet and scrabbled for his sack, but he was too late: suddenly Mair was flying at him with some kind of blunt instrument. He took a blow to the head, turned to retaliate, and fell beneath a tidal wave of monks.

Caris got to her feet. Mair came to her and they hugged.

Mair said: "What did you do?"

"Tripped him up then scratched his face. What did you hit him with?"

"The wooden cross off the dormitory wall."

"Well," said Caris, "so much for turning the other cheek."

44

Gilbert Hereford was tried before the ecclesiastical court, found guilty, and sentenced, by Prior Godwyn, to an appropriate punishment for those who robbed churches: he would be flayed alive. His skin would be cut off him, while he was fully conscious, and he would bleed to death.

On the day of the flaying, Godwyn had his weekly meeting with Mother Cecilia. Their deputies would also attend: Subprior Philemon and Subprioress Natalie. Waiting in the hall of the prior's house for the nuns to arrive, Godwyn said to Philemon: "We must try to persuade them to build a new treasury. We can no longer keep our valuables in a box in the library."

Philemon said thoughtfully: "Would it be a shared building?"

"It would have to be. We can't afford to pay for it."

Godwyn thought regretfully of the ambitions he had once had, as a young man, to reform the monastery's finances and make it rich again. This had not happened, and he still did not understand why. He had been tough, forcing the townspeople to use and pay for the priory's mills, fishponds, and warrens, but they seemed to find ways around his rules—like building mills in neighboring villages. He had imposed harsh sentences on men and women caught poaching or illegally cutting down trees in the priory's forests. And he had resisted the blandishments of those who would tempt him to spend the priory's money by building mills, or waste the priory's timber by licensing charcoal burners and iron smelters. He felt sure his approach was right, but it had not yet yielded the increased income he felt he deserved.

"So you will ask Cecilia for the money," Philemon said thoughtfully. "There might be advantages in keeping our wealth in the same place as the nuns'."

Godwyn saw which way Philemon's devious mind was leading him. "But we wouldn't say that to Cecilia."

"Of course not."

"All right, I'll propose it."

"While we're waiting…"

"Yes?"

"There's a problem you need to know about in the village of Long Ham."

Godwyn nodded. Long Ham was one of dozens of villages that paid homage—and feudal dues—to the priory.

Philemon explained: "It has to do with the landholding of a widow, Mary-Lynn. When her husband died, she agreed to let a neighbor farm her land, a man called John Nott. Now the widow has remarried, and she wants the land back so that her new husband can farm it."

Godwyn was puzzled. This was a typical peasant squabble, too trivial to

require his intervention. “What does the bailiff say?”

“That the land should revert to the widow, since the arrangement was always intended to be temporary.”

“Then that is what must happen.”

“There is a complication. Sister Elizabeth has a half brother and two half sisters in Long Ham.”

“Ah.” Godwyn might have guessed there would be a reason for Philemon’s interest. Sister Elizabeth, formerly Elizabeth Clerk, was the nuns’ matricularius, in charge of their buildings. She was young and bright, and would rise farther up the hierarchy. She could be a valuable ally.

“They are the only family she’s got, apart from her mother, who works at the Bell,” Philemon went on. “Elizabeth is fond of her peasant relatives, and they in turn revere her as the holy one of the family. When they come to Kingsbridge they bring gifts to the nunnery—fruit, honey, eggs, that sort of thing.”

“And…?”

“John Nott is the half brother of Sister Elizabeth.”

“Has Elizabeth asked you to intervene?”

“Yes. And she also asked that I should not tell Mother Cecilia of the request.”

Godwyn knew that this was just the kind of thing Philemon liked. He loved to be regarded as a powerful person who could use his influence to favor one side or the other in a dispute. Such things fed his ego, which was never satisfied. And he was drawn to anything clandestine. The fact that Elizabeth did not want her superior to know about this request delighted Philemon. It meant he knew her shameful secret. He would store the information away like miser’s gold.

“What do you want to do?” Godwyn asked.

“It’s for you to say, of course, but I suggest we let John Nott keep the land. Elizabeth would be in our debt, and that cannot fail to be useful at some point in the future.”

“That’s hard on the widow,” Godwyn said uneasily.

“I agree. But that must be balanced against the interests of the priory.”

“And God’s work is more important. Very well. Tell the bailiff.”

“The widow will receive her reward in the hereafter.”

“Indeed.” There had been a time when Godwyn had hesitated to authorize Philemon’s underhand schemes, but that was long ago. Philemon had proved too useful—as Godwyn’s mother, Petranilla, had forecast all those years ago.

There was a tap at the door, and Petranilla herself came in.

She now lived in a comfortable small house in Candle Court, just off the main street. Her brother Edmund had left her a generous bequest, enough to last her the rest of her life. She was fifty-eight years old, her tall figure was

now stooped and frail, and she walked with a stick, but she still had a mind like a bear trap. As always, Godwyn was glad to see her but also apprehensive that he might have done something to displease her.

Petranilla was the head of the family now. Anthony had been killed in the bridge collapse and Edmund had died seven years ago, so she was the last survivor of her generation. She never hesitated to tell Godwyn what to do. She was the same with her niece Alice. Alice's husband, Elfric, was the alderman, but she gave him orders, too. Her authority even extended to her stepgranddaughter Griselda, and she terrorized Griselda's eight-year-old son, Little Merthin. Her judgment was as sound as ever, so they all obeyed her most of the time. If for some reason she did not take command, they would usually ask her opinion anyway. Godwyn was not sure how they would manage without her. And on the rare occasions when they did not do her bidding, they worked very hard to hide the fact. Only Caris stood up to her. "Don't you dare tell me what to do," she had said to Petranilla more than once. "You would have let them kill me."

Petranilla sat down and looked around the room. "This is not good enough," she said.

She was often abrupt, but all the same Godwyn became edgy when she spoke like this. "What do you mean?"

"You should have a better house."

"I know." Eight years ago, Godwyn had tried to persuade Mother Cecilia to pay for a new palace. She had promised to give him the money three years later but, when the time came, she said she had changed her mind. He felt sure it was because of what he had done to Caris. After that heresy trial, his charm had ceased to work on Cecilia, and it had become difficult to get money out of her.

Petranilla said: "You need a palace for entertaining bishops and archbishops, barons and earls."

"We don't get many of those, nowadays. Earl Roland and Bishop Richard have been in France for much of the last few years." King Edward had invaded northeast France in 1339 and spent all of 1340 there; then in 1342 he had taken his army to northwest France and fought in Brittany. In 1345 English troops had done battle in the southwestern wine district of Gascony. Now Edward was back in England, but assembling another army of invasion.

"Roland and Richard aren't the only noblemen," Petranilla said testily.

"The others never come here."

Her voice hardened. "Perhaps that's because you can't accommodate them in the style they expect. You need a banqueting hall, and a private chapel, and spacious bedchambers."

She had been awake all night thinking about this, he guessed. That was her way: she brooded over things then shot off her ideas like arrows. He

wondered what had brought on this particular complaint. “It sounds very extravagant,” he said, playing for time.

“Don’t you understand?” she snapped. “The priory is not as influential as it might be, simply because you don’t ever see the powerful men of the land. When you’ve got a palace with beautiful rooms for them, they will come.”

She was probably right. Wealthy monasteries such as Durham and St. Albans even complained about the number of noble and royal visitors they were obliged to entertain.

She went on: “Yesterday was the anniversary of my father’s death.” So that’s what brought this on, Godwyn thought: she’s been remembering Grandfather’s glorious career. “You’ve been prior here for almost nine years,” she said. “I don’t want you to get stuck. The archbishops and the king should be considering you for a bishopric, a major abbey such as Durham, or a mission to the pope.”

Godwyn had always assumed that Kingsbridge would be his springboard to higher things but, he realized now, he had let his ambition wane. It seemed only a little while ago that he had won the election for prior. He felt he had only just got on top of the job. But she was right, it was more than eight years.

“Why aren’t they thinking of you for more important posts?” she asked rhetorically. “Because they don’t know you exist! You are prior of a great monastery, but you haven’t told anyone about it. Display your magnificence! Build a palace. Invite the archbishop of Canterbury to be your first guest. Dedicate the chapel to his favorite saint. Tell the king you have built a royal bedchamber in the hope that he will visit.”

“Wait a moment, one thing at a time,” Godwyn protested. “I’d love to build a palace, but I haven’t got the money.”

“Then get it,” she said.

He wanted to ask her how, but at that moment the two leaders of the nunnery came into the room. Petranilla and Cecilia greeted one another with wary courtesy, then Petranilla took her leave.

Mother Cecilia and Sister Natalie sat down. Cecilia was fifty-one now, with gray in her hair and poor eyesight. She still darted about the place like a busy bird, poking her beak into every room, chirping her instructions to nuns, novices, and servants; but she had mellowed with the years, and would go a long way to avoid a conflict.

Cecilia was carrying a scroll. “The nunnery has received a legacy,” she said as she made herself comfortable. “From a pious woman of Thornbury.”

Godwyn said: “How much?”

“One hundred and fifty pounds in gold coins.”

Godwyn was startled. It was a huge sum. It was enough to build a modest palace. “The nunnery has received it—or the priory?”

“The nunnery,” she said firmly. “This scroll is our copy of her will.”

“Why did she leave you so much money?”

“Apparently we nursed her when she fell ill on her way home from London.”

Natalie spoke. She was a few years older than Cecilia, a round-faced woman with a mild disposition. “Our problem is, where are we going to keep the money?”

Godwyn looked at Philemon. Natalie had given them an opening for the topic they had planned to raise. “What do you do with your money at present?” he asked her.

“It’s in the prioress’s bedroom, which can be reached only by going through the dormitory.”

As though thinking of it for the first time, Godwyn said: “Perhaps we should spend a little of the bequest on a new treasury.”

“I think that’s necessary,” said Cecilia. “A simple stone building with no windows and a stout oak door.”

“It won’t take long to construct,” Godwyn said. “And shouldn’t cost more than five or ten pounds.”

“For safety, we think it should be part of the cathedral.”

“Ah.” That was why the nuns had to discuss the plan with Godwyn. They would not have needed to consult him about building within their own area of the priory, but the church was common to monks and nuns. He said: “It could go up against the cathedral wall, in the corner formed by the north transept and the choir, but be entered from inside the church.”

“Yes—that’s just the kind of thing I had in mind.”

“I’ll speak to Elfric today, if you like, and ask him to give us an estimate.”

“Please do.”

Godwyn was happy to have extracted from Cecilia a fraction of her windfall, but he was not satisfied. After the conversation with his mother, he yearned to get his hands on more of it. He would have liked to grab it all. But how?

The cathedral bell tolled, and the four of them stood up and went out.

The condemned man was outside the west end of the church. He was naked, and tied tightly by his hands and feet to an upright wooden rectangle like a door frame. A hundred or so townspeople stood waiting to watch the execution. The ordinary monks and nuns had not been invited: it was considered improper for them to see bloodshed.

The executioner was Will Tanner, a man of about fifty whose skin was brown from his trade. He wore a clean canvas apron. He stood by a small table on which he had laid out his knives. He was sharpening one of them on a stone, and the scrape of steel on granite made Godwyn shudder.

Godwyn said several prayers, ending with an extempore plea in English that the death of the thief would serve God by deterring others from the same

sin. Then he nodded to Will Tanner.

Will stood behind the tethered thief. He took a small knife with a sharp point and inserted it into the middle of Gilbert's neck, then drew it downward in a long straight line to the base of the spine. Gilbert roared with pain, and blood welled out of the cut. Will made another slash across the man's shoulders, forming the shape of the letter T.

Will then changed his knife, selecting one with a long, thin blade. He inserted it carefully at the point where the two cuts met, and pulled away a corner of skin. Gilbert cried out again. Then, holding the corner in the fingers of his left hand, Will began carefully to cut the skin of Gilbert's back away from his body.

Gilbert began to scream.

Sister Natalie made a noise in her throat, turned away, and ran back into the priory. Cecilia closed her eyes and began to pray. Godwyn felt nauseated. Someone in the crowd fell to the ground in a dead faint. Only Philemon seemed unmoved.

Will worked quickly, his sharp knife slicing through the subcutaneous fat to reveal the woven muscles below. Blood flowed copiously, and he stopped every few seconds to wipe his hands on his apron. Gilbert screamed in undiminished agony at every cut. Soon the skin of his back hung in two broad flaps.

Will knelt on the ground, his knees an inch deep in blood, and began to work on the legs.

The screaming stopped suddenly: Gilbert appeared to have passed out. Godwyn was relieved. He had intended the man to suffer agony for trying to rob a church—and he had wanted others to witness the thief's torment—but, all the same, he had found it hard to listen to that screaming.

Will continued his work phlegmatically, apparently unconcerned whether his victim was conscious or not, until all the back skin—body, arms, and legs—was detached. Then he went around to the front. He cut around the ankles and wrists, then detached the skin so that it hung from the victim's shoulders and hips. He worked upward from the pelvis, and Godwyn realized he was going to try to take the entire skin off in one piece. Soon there was no skin left attached except for the head.

Gilbert was still breathing.

Will made a careful series of cuts around the skull. Then he put down his knives and wiped his hands one more time. Finally he grasped Gilbert's skin at the shoulders and gave a sudden jerk upward. The face and scalp were ripped off the head, yet remained attached to the rest of the skin.

Will held Gilbert's bloody hide up in the air like a hunting trophy, and the crowd cheered.

Caris was uneasy about sharing the new treasury with the monks. She pestered Beth with so many questions about the safety of their money that in the end Beth took her to inspect the place.

Godwyn and Philemon were in the cathedral at the time, as if by chance, and they saw the nuns and followed them.

They passed through a new arch in the south wall of the choir into a little lobby and halted in front of a formidable studded door. Sister Beth took out a big iron key. She was a humble, unassuming woman, like most nuns. “This is ours,” she said to Caris. “We can enter the treasury anytime we like.”

“I should think so, since we paid for it,” said Caris crisply.

They entered a small, square room. It contained a counting table with a stack of parchment rolls, a couple of stools, and a big ironbound chest.

“The chest is too big to be taken out through the door,” Beth pointed out.

Caris said: “So how did you it get in here?”

Godwyn answered: “In pieces. It was put together by the carpenter here in the room.”

Caris gave Godwyn a cold look. This man had tried to kill her. Ever since the witchcraft trial she had looked at him with loathing and avoided speaking to him if at all possible. Now she said flatly: “The nuns will need a key to the chest.”

“Not necessary,” Godwyn said quickly. “It contains the jeweled cathedral ornaments, which are in the care of the sacrist, who is always a monk.”

Caris said: “Show me.”

She could see that he was offended by her tone, and had half a mind to refuse her, but he wanted to appear open and guileless, so he conceded. He took a key from the wallet at his belt and opened the chest. As well as the cathedral ornaments, it contained dozens of scrolls, the priory’s charters.

“Not just the ornaments, then,” Caris said, her suspicions vindicated.

“The records, too.”

“Including the nuns’ charters,” she persisted

“Yes.”

“In which case we will have a key.”

“My idea is that we copy all our charters, and keep the copies in the library. Whenever we need to read a charter, we consult the library copy, so that the precious originals can remain under lock and key.”

Beth hated conflict, and intervened nervously. “That sounds like quite a sensible idea, Sister Caris.”

Caris said grudgingly: “So long as the nuns always have access to their documents in some form.” The charters were a secondary issue. Addressing Beth, rather than Godwyn, she said: “More importantly, where do we keep the

money?”

Beth said: “In hidden vaults in the floor. There are four of them—two for the monks and two for the nuns. If you look carefully you can see the loose stones.”

Caris studied the floor, and after a moment said: “I wouldn’t have noticed if you hadn’t told me, but I can see them now. Can they be locked?”

“I suppose they could,” said Godwyn. “But then it would be obvious where they were, which would defeat the purpose of hiding them under flagstones.”

“But this way the monks and nuns have access to one another’s money.”

Philemon spoke up. He looked accusingly at Caris and said: “Why are you here? You’re the guest master—nothing to do with the treasury.”

Caris’s attitude to Philemon was simple loathing. She felt he was not fully human. He seemed to have no sense of right and wrong, no principles or scruples. Whereas she despised Godwyn as a wicked man who knew when he was doing evil, she felt that Philemon was more like a vicious animal, a mad dog or a wild boar. “I have an eye for detail,” she told him.

“You’re very mistrustful,” he said resentfully.

Caris gave a humorless laugh. “Coming from you, Philemon, that’s ironic.”

He pretended to be hurt. “I don’t know what you can mean.”

Beth spoke again, trying to keep the peace. “I just wanted Caris to come and look because she asks questions I don’t think of.”

Caris said: “For example, how can we be sure that the monks don’t take the nuns’ money?”

“I’ll show you,” said Beth. Hanging on a hook on the wall was a stout length of oak. Using it as a lever, she prized up a flagstone. Underneath was a hollow space containing an ironbound chest. “We’ve had a locked casket made to fit each of these vaults,” she said. She reached inside and lifted out the chest.

Caris examined it. It seemed strongly made. The lid was hinged, and the clasp was secured by a barrel padlock made of iron. “Where did we get the lock?” she asked.

“Christopher Blacksmith made it.”

That was good. Christopher was a well-establish Kingsbridge citizen who would not risk his reputation by selling duplicate keys to thieves.

Caris was not able to fault the arrangements. Perhaps she had worried unnecessarily. She turned to go.

Elfric appeared, accompanied by an apprentice with a sack. “Is it all right to put up the warning?” Elfric said.

Philemon replied: “Yes, please, go ahead.”

Elfric’s assistant took from his sack something that looked like a big piece

of leather.

Beth said: “What’s that?”

“Wait,” said Philemon. “You’ll see.”

The apprentice held the object up against the door.

“I’ve been waiting for it to dry out,” Philemon said. “It’s Gilbert Hereford’s skin.”

Beth gave a cry of horror.

Caris said: “That’s disgusting.”

The skin was turning yellow, and the hair was falling out of the scalp, but you could still make out the face: the ears, two holes for the eyes, and a gash of a mouth that seemed to grin.

“That should scare thieves away,” Philemon said with satisfaction.

Elfric took out a hammer and began to nail the hide to the treasury door.

The two nuns left. Godwyn and Philemon waited for Elfric to finish his gruesome task, then they went back inside the treasury.

Godwyn said: “I think we’re safe.”

Philemon nodded: “Caris is a suspicious woman, but all her questions were answered satisfactorily.”

“In which case…”

Philemon closed the door and locked it. Then he lifted the stone slab over one of the nuns’ two vaults and took out the chest.

“Sister Beth keeps a small amount of cash for everyday needs somewhere in the nuns’ quarters,” he explained to Godwyn. “She comes in here only to deposit or withdraw larger sums. She always goes to the other vault, which contains mostly silver pennies. She almost never opens this chest, which contains the bequest.”

He turned the box around and looked at the hinge at the back. It was fixed to the wood by four nails. He took from his pocket a thin steel chisel and a pair of pliers for gripping. Godwyn wondered where he had got the tools, but did not ask. Sometimes it was best not to know too many details.

Philemon slipped the sharp blade of the chisel under the edge of the iron hinge and pushed. The hinge came away from the wood slightly, and he pushed the blade in a little farther. He worked delicately and patiently, careful to make sure that the damage would not be visible to a casual glance. Gradually the flat plate of the hinge became detached, the nails coming out with it. When he had made enough room for the pliers to grip the nailheads, he pulled them out. Then he was able to detach the hinge and lift the lid.

“Here’s the money from the pious woman of Thornbury,” he said.

Godwyn looked into the chest. The money was in Venetian ducats. These gold coins showed the doge of Venice kneeling before St. Mark on one side

and, on the other, the Virgin Mary, surrounded by stars to indicate that she was in Heaven. Ducats were intended to be interchangeable with florins from Florence, and were the same size, weight, and purity of metal. They were worth three shillings, or thirty-six English silver pennies. England had its own gold coins now, an innovation of King Edward's—nobles, half nobles, and quarter nobles—but these had been in circulation less than two years and had not yet displaced foreign gold coins.

Godwyn took fifty ducats, worth seven pounds and ten shillings. Philemon closed the lid of the chest. He wrapped each of the nails in a thin strip of leather, to make them a tight fit, and reattached the hinge. He put the chest back in the vault and lowered the slab over the hole.

"Of course they will notice the loss, sooner or later," he said.

"It may not be for years," Godwyn said. "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it."

They went out, and Godwyn locked the door.

Godwyn said: "Find Elfric, and meet me in the cemetery."

Philemon left. Godwyn went to the eastern end of the graveyard, just beyond the existing prior's house. It was a blowy May day, and the fresh wind made his robe flap around his legs. A loose goat was grazing among the tombstones. Godwyn watched it meditatively.

He was risking a terrible row with the nuns, he knew. He did not think they would discover their loss for a year or more, but he could not be sure. When they did find out, there would be hell to pay. But what, exactly, could they do? He was not like Gilbert Hereford, stealing money for himself. He had taken the bequest of a pious woman to use for holy purposes.

He thrust his worries aside. His mother was right: he needed to glorify his role as prior of Kingsbridge if he was going to make further progress.

When Philemon returned with Elfric, Godwyn said: "I want to build the prior's palace here, well to the east of the present building."

Elfric nodded. "A very good location, if I may say so, Lord Prior—close to the chapter house and the east end of the cathedral, but separated from the marketplace by the graveyard, so you'll have privacy and quiet."

"I want a big dining hall downstairs for banquets," Godwyn went on. "About a hundred feet long. It must be a really prestigious, impressive room, for entertaining the nobility, perhaps even royalty."

"Very good."

"And a chapel at the east end of the ground floor."

"But you'll be just a few steps from the cathedral."

"Noble guests don't always want to expose themselves to the people. They must be able to worship in private if they wish."

"And upstairs?"

"The prior's own chamber, of course, with room for an altar and a writing

desk. And three large chambers for guests.”

“Splendid.”

“How much will it cost?”

“More than a hundred pounds—perhaps two hundred. I’ll make a drawing then give you a more accurate estimate.”

“Don’t let it go above a hundred and fifty pounds. That’s all I can afford.”

If Elfric wondered where Godwyn had suddenly acquired a hundred and fifty pounds, he did not ask. “I’d better start stockpiling the stone as soon as possible,” he said. “Can you give me some money to begin with?”

“How much would you like—five pounds?”

“Ten would be better.”

“I’ll give you seven pounds ten shillings, in ducats,” Godwyn said, and handed over the fifty gold coins he had taken from the nuns’ reserves.

Three days later, as the monks and nuns were filing out of the cathedral after the dinnertime service of Nones, Sister Elizabeth spoke to Godwyn.

Nuns and monks were not supposed to talk to one another casually, so she had to contrive a pretext. As it happened, there was a dog in the nave, and it had barked during the service. Dogs were always getting into the church and making a minor nuisance of themselves, but they were generally ignored. However, on this occasion Elizabeth left the procession to shoo the dog out. She was obliged to cross the line of monks, and timed her move so that she walked in front of Godwyn. She smiled apologetically at him and said: “I beg your pardon, Father Prior.” Then she lowered her voice and said: “Meet me in the library, as if by accident.” She chased the dog out of the west door.

Intrigued, Godwyn made his way to the library and sat down to read the Rule of St. Benedict. Shortly afterward, Elizabeth appeared and took out the Gospel of St. Matthew. The nuns had built their own library, after Godwyn took over as prior, in order to improve the separation between males and females; but when they removed all their books from the monks’ library, the place had been denuded, and Godwyn had reversed his decision. The nuns’ library building was now used as a schoolroom in cold weather.

Elizabeth sat with her back to Godwyn, so that anyone coming in would not get the impression that they were conspiring, but she was close enough for him to hear her clearly. “Something I felt I should tell you,” she said. “Sister Caris doesn’t like the nuns’ money being kept in the new treasury.”

“I knew that already,” Godwyn said.

“She has persuaded Sister Beth to count the money, to make sure it’s all still there. I thought you might like to know that, just in case you have… borrowed from them.”

Godwyn’s heart missed a beat. An audit would find the reserves short by fifty ducats. And he was going to need the rest to build his palace. He had not been expecting this so soon. He cursed Caris. How had she guessed what he

had done so secretly?

“When?” he said, and there was a catch in his voice.

“Today. I don’t know at what hour—it could be anytime. But Caris was most emphatic that you should have no advance warning.”

He was going to have to put the ducats back, and fast. “Thank you very much,” he said. “I appreciate your telling me this.”

“It’s because you showed favor to my family in Long Ham,” she said; and she got up and went out.

Godwyn hurried after her. What luck that Elizabeth felt indebted to him! Philemon’s instinct for intrigue was invaluable. As that thought crossed his mind, he saw Philemon in the cloisters. “Get those tools and meet me in the treasury!” he whispered. Then he left the priory.

He hurried across the green and into the main street. Elfric’s wife, Alice, had inherited the house of Edmund Wooler, one of the largest homes in town, along with all the money Caris had made dyeing cloth. Elfric now lived in great luxury.

Godwyn knocked on the door and entered the hall. Alice was sitting at the table amid the remains of dinner. With her was her stepdaughter Griselda, and Griselda’s son, Little Merthin. No one now believed that Merthin Fitzgerald was the little boy’s father—he looked just like Griselda’s runaway boyfriend Thurstan. Griselda had married one of her father’s employees, Harold Mason. Polite people called the eight-year-old Merthin Haroldson, and the others called him Merthin Bastard.

Alice leaped up from her seat when she saw Godwyn. “Well, Cousin Prior, what a pleasure to have you in our house! Will you take a little wine?”

Godwyn ignored her polite hospitality. “Where’s Elfric?”

“He’s upstairs, taking a short nap before he goes back to work. Sit in the parlor, and I’ll fetch him.”

“Right away, if you please.” Godwyn stepped into the next room. There were two comfortable-looking chairs, but he paced up and down.

Elfric came in rubbing his eyes. “Sorry about this,” he said. “I was just—”

“Those fifty ducats I gave you three days ago,” Godwyn said. “I need them back.”

Elfric was startled. “But the money was for stone.”

“I know what it was for! I have to have it right now.”

“I’ve spent some of it, paying carters to bring the stones from the quarry.”

“How much?”

“About half.”

“Well, you can make that up out of your own funds, can’t you?”

“Don’t you want a palace anymore?”

“Of course I do, but I must have that money. Don’t ask why, just give it to me.”

“What am I to do with the stones I’ve bought?”

“Just keep them. You’ll get the money again, I just need it for a few days. Hurry!”

“All right. Wait here. If you will.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

Elfric went out. Godwyn wondered where he kept his money. In the hearth, under the firestone was the usual place. Being a builder, Elfric might have a more cunning hidey-hole. Wherever it was, he was back in a few moments.

He counted fifty gold coins into Godwyn’s hand.

Godwyn said: “I gave you ducats—some of these are florins.” The florin was the same size, but stamped with different images: John the Baptist on one side and a flower on the other.

“I don’t have the same coins! I told you I’ve spent some of them. They’re all worth the same, aren’t they?”

They were. Would the nuns notice the difference?

Godwyn thrust the money into the wallet at his belt and left without another word.

He hurried back to the cathedral and found Philemon in the treasury. “The nuns are going to carry out an audit,” he explained breathlessly. “I’ve got the money back from Elfric. Open that chest, quickly.”

Philemon opened the vault in the floor, took out the chest, and removed the nails. He lifted the lid.

Godwyn sifted through the coins. They were all ducats.

It could not be helped. He dug down into the money and pushed his florins to the bottom. “Close it up and put it back,” he said.

Philemon did so.

Godwyn felt a moment of relief. His crime was partly concealed. At least now it would not be glaringly obvious.

“I want to be here when she counts it,” he said to Philemon. “I’m worried about whether she’ll notice that she’s now got some florins mixed in with her ducats.”

“Do you know when they intend to come?”

“No.”

“I’ll put a novice to sweeping the choir. When Beth shows up, he can come and fetch us.” Philemon had a little coterie of admiring novice monks eager to do his bidding.

However, the novice was not needed. As they were about to leave the treasury, Sister Beth and Sister Caris arrived.

Godwyn pretended to be in the middle of a conversation about accounts. “We’ll have to look in an earlier account roll, Brother,” he said to Philemon. “Oh, good day, sisters.”

Caris opened both nuns' vaults and took out the two chests.

"Something I can help you with?" Godwyn said.

Caris ignored him.

Beth said: "We're just checking something, thank you, Father Prior. We won't be long."

"Go ahead, go ahead," he said benevolently, though his heart was hammering in his chest.

Caris said irritably: "There's no need to apologize for our being here, Sister Beth. It's our treasury and our money."

Godwyn opened an account roll at random, and he and Philemon pretended to study it. Beth and Caris counted the silver in the first chest: farthings, halfpennies, pennies, and a few Luxembourgs, forged pennies crudely made of adulterated silver and used as small change. There were a few assorted gold coins, too: florins, ducats, and similar coins—the genovino from Genoa and the reale from Naples—plus some larger French moutons and new English nobles. Beth checked the totals against a small notebook. When they had finished she said: "Exactly right."

They replaced all the coins in the chest, locked it, and put it back in its underfloor vault.

They began counting the gold coins in the other chest, putting them in piles of ten. When they got toward the bottom of the chest, Beth frowned and made a puzzled sound.

"What is it?" Caris said.

Godwyn felt a guilty dread.

Beth said: "This chest contains only the bequest from the pious woman of Thornbury. I kept it separate."

"And…?"

"Her husband traded with Venice. I was sure the entire amount was in ducats. But there are some florins here, too."

Godwyn and Philemon froze, listening.

"That's odd," Caris said.

"Perhaps I made a mistake."

"It's a bit suspicious."

"Not really," Beth said. "Thieves don't put money into your treasury, do they?"

"You're right, they don't," Caris said reluctantly.

They finished counting. They had one hundred stacks of ten coins, worth a hundred and fifty pounds. "That's the exact figure in my book," Beth said.

"So every pound and penny is correct," Caris said.

Beth said: "I told you so."

45

Caris spent many hours thinking about Sister Mair.

She had been startled by the kiss, but more surprised at her own reaction to it. She had found it exciting. Until now, she had not felt attracted to Mair or any other woman. In fact there was only one person who had ever made her yearn to be touched and kissed and penetrated, and that was Merthin. In the nunnery she had learned to live without physical contact. The only hand that touched her sexually was her own, in the darkness of the dormitory, when she remembered the days of her courtship, and buried her face in the pillow so that the other nuns would not hear her panting.

She did not feel for Mair the same happy lust that Merthin inspired in her. But Merthin was a thousand miles away and seven years in the past. And she was fond of Mair. It was something to do with her angelic face, something about her blue eyes, some response to her gentleness in the hospital and the school.

Mair always spoke sweetly to Caris and, when no one was looking, touched her arm, or her shoulder, and once her cheek. Caris did not rebuff her, but she held back from responding. It was not that she thought it would be a sin. She felt sure God was much too wise to make a rule against women harmlessly pleasuring themselves or each other. But she was afraid of disappointing Mair. Instinct told her that Mair's feelings were strong and definite, whereas her own were uncertain. She's in love with me, Caris thought, but I'm not in love with her. If I kiss her again, she may hope that the two of us will be soul mates for life, and I can't promise her that.

So she did nothing, until Fleece Fair week.

The Kingsbridge fair had recovered from the slump of 1338. The trade in raw wool was still suffering from interference by the king, and the Italians came only every second year, but the new business of weaving and dyeing compensated. The town was still not as prosperous as it might have been, for Prior Godwyn's prohibition of private mills had driven the industry out of the city and into the surrounding villages; but most of the cloth was sold in the market, indeed it had become known as Kingsbridge Scarlet. Merthin's bridge had been finished by Elfric, and people poured across the wide double span with their packhorses and wagons.

So, on the Saturday night before the official opening of the fair, the hospital was full to bursting with visitors.

And one of them was ill.

His name was Maldwyn Cook, and his trade was to make salty little savories with flour and scraps of meat or fish, cook them quickly in butter over a fire, and sell them six for a farthing. Soon after he arrived, he was

afflicted with a sudden, savage bellyache, followed by vomiting and diarrhea. There was nothing Caris could do for him other than give him a bed near the door.

She had long wanted to give the hospital its own latrine, so that she could supervise its cleanliness. But that was only one of the improvements she hoped for. She needed a new pharmacy, adjacent to the hospital, a spacious, well-lit room where she could prepare medicines and make her notes. And she was trying to figure out a way to give patients more privacy. At present everyone in the room could see a woman giving birth, a man having a fit, a child vomiting. People in distress should have small rooms of their own, she felt, like the side chapels in a large church. But she was not sure how to achieve this: the hospital was not big enough. She had had several discussions with Jeremiah Builder—who had been Merthin's apprentice Jimmie, many years ago—but he had not come up with a satisfactory solution.

Next morning, three more people had the same symptoms as Maldwyn Cook.

Caris fed the visitors breakfast and tipped them out into the market. Only the sick were allowed to stay behind. The floor of the hospital was filthier than usual, and she had it swept and swabbed. Then she went to the service in the cathedral.

Bishop Richard was not present. He was with the king, preparing to invade France again—he had always regarded his bishopric mainly as a means of supporting his aristocratic lifestyle. In his absence the diocese was run by Archdeacon Lloyd, who collected the bishop's tithes and rents, baptized children, and conducted services with dogged but unimaginative efficiency—a trait he illustrated by giving a tedious sermon on why God was more important than money, an odd note on which to open one of England's great commercial fairs.

Nevertheless, everyone was in high spirits, as was usual on the first day. The Fleece Fair was the high point of the year for the townspeople and the peasants of the surrounding villages. People made money at the fair and lost it gambling in the inns. Strapping village girls allowed themselves to be seduced by slick city boys. Prosperous peasants paid the town's prostitutes for services they dared not ask their wives to perform. There was usually a murder, often several.

Caris spotted the heavyset, richly dressed figure of Buonaventura Caroli in the congregation, and her heart faltered. He might have news of Merthin. She went through the service distractedly, mumbling the psalms. On the way out she managed to catch Buonaventura's eye. He smiled at her. She tried to indicate, with an inclination of her head, that she wanted him to meet her afterward. She was not sure whether he got the message.

However, she went to the hospital—the only place in the priory where a

nun could meet a man from outside—and Buonaventura came in not long afterward. He wore a costly blue coat and pointed shoes. He said: “Last time I saw you, you had just been consecrated a nun by Bishop Richard.”

“I’m guest master now,” she said.

“Congratulations! I never expected you to take so well to convent life.” Buonaventura had known her since she was a little girl.

“Nor did I,” she laughed.

“The priory seems to be doing well.”

“What makes you say that?”

“I see that Godwyn is building a new palace.”

“Yes.”

“He must be prospering.”

“I suppose he is. How about you? Is trade good?”

“We have some problems. The war between England and France has disrupted transport, and your King Edward’s taxes make English wool more expensive than the Spanish. But it’s also better quality.”

They always complained about taxes. Caris came to the subject that really interested her. “Any news of Merthin?”

“As a matter of fact, there is,” Buonaventura said; and although his manner was as urbane as ever, she detected a hesitation. “Merthin is married.”

Caris felt as if she had been punched. She had never expected this, never even thought of it. How could Merthin do this? He was…They were…

There was no reason at all why he should not get married, of course. She had rejected him more than once, and on the last occasion she had made her rejection final by entering the nunnery. It was only remarkable that he had waited so long. She had no right to feel hurt.

She forced a smile. “How splendid!” she said. “Please send him my congratulations. Who is the girl?”

Buonaventura pretended not to notice her distress. “Her name is Silvia,” he said, as casually as if he were passing on harmless gossip. “She’s the younger daughter of one of the city’s most prominent citizens, Alessandro Christi, a trader in oriental spices who owns several ships.”

“How old?”

He grinned. “Alessandro? He must be about my age…”

“Don’t tease me!” She was grateful to Buonaventura for lightening the tone. “How old is Silvia?”

“Twenty-three.”

“Six years younger than me.”

“A beautiful girl…”

She sensed the unspoken qualification. “But…?”

He tilted his head to one side apologetically. “She has the reputation of being sharp-tongued. Of course, people say all sorts of things…but perhaps

that is why she remained single so long—girls in Florence generally marry before the age of eighteen.”

“I’m sure it’s true,” Caris said. “The only girls Merthin liked in Kingsbridge were me and Elizabeth Clerk, and we’re both shrews.”

Buonaventura laughed. “Not so, not so.”

“When was the wedding?”

“Two years ago. Not long after I last saw you.”

Caris realized that Merthin had remained single until she had been consecrated as a nun. He would have heard, via Buonaventura, that she had taken the final step. She thought of him waiting and hoping, for more than four years, in a foreign country; and her brittle facade of good cheer began to crack.

Buonaventura said: “And they have a child, a little baby girl called Lolla.”

That was too much. All the grief Caris had felt seven years ago—the pain she thought had gone forever—came back in a rush. She had not truly lost him back then in 1339, she realized. He had remained loyal to her memory for years. But she had lost him now, finally, eternally.

She was shaken as if by a fit, and she knew she could not hold out much longer. Trembling, she said: “It’s such a pleasure to see you, and catch up with the news, but I must get back to my work.”

His face showed concern. “I hope I haven’t upset you too much. I thought you would prefer to know.”

“Don’t be kind to me—I can’t stand it.” She turned from him and hurried away.

She bent her head to hide her face as she walked from the hospital into the cloisters. Searching for somewhere to be alone, she ran up the stairs to the dormitory. There was no one there in the daytime. She began to sob as she walked the length of the bare room. At the far end was Mother Cecilia’s bedroom. No one was allowed in there without an invitation, but Caris went in anyway, slamming the door behind her. She fell on Cecilia’s bed, not caring that her nun’s cap had fallen off. She buried her face in the straw mattress and wept.

After a while she felt a hand on her head, stroking her short-cropped hair. She had not heard the person enter the room. She did not care who it was. All the same she was slowly, gradually soothed. Her sobs became less wrenching, her tears dried, and the storm of her emotions began to die down. She rolled over and looked up at her comforter. It was Mair.

Caris said: “Merthin is married—he has a baby girl.” She began to cry again.

Mair lay down on the bed and cradled Caris’s head in her arms. Caris pressed her face into Mair’s soft breasts, letting the woolen robe soak up the tears. “There, there,” said Mair.

After a while, Caris calmed down. She was too drained to feel any more sorrow. She thought of Merthin holding a dark-haired little Italian baby, and saw how happy he would be. She was glad that he was happy, and she drifted into an exhausted sleep.

The illness that had started with Maldwyn Cook spread like a summer fire through the crowds at the Fleece Fair. On Monday it leaped from the hospital to the taverns, then on Tuesday from the visitors to the townspeople. Caris noted its characteristics in her book: it began with stomach pains, led quickly to vomiting and diarrhea, and lasted between twenty-four and forty-eight hours. It left adults not much the worse, but killed old people and small babies.

On Wednesday, it struck the nuns and the children in the girls' school. Both Mair and Tilly were affected. Caris sought out Buonaventura, at the Bell, and worriedly asked him whether Italian doctors had any treatment for such diseases. "There's no cure," he said. "None that works, anyway, though doctors nearly always prescribe something just to get more money out of people. But some Arab physicians believe you can retard the spread of such illnesses."

"Oh, really?" Caris was interested. Traders said that Muslim doctors were superior to their Christian counterparts, although the priest-physicians denied this hotly. "How?"

"They believe the disease is acquired when a sick person looks at you. Sight functions by beams that issue from the eyes and touch the things we see—rather like extending a finger to feel whether something is warm, or dry, or hard. But the beams may also project sickness. Therefore you can avoid the disease by never being in the same room as a sufferer."

Caris did not think illness could be transmitted by looks. If that were true then, after an important service in the cathedral, everyone in the congregation would acquire any illness the bishop had. Whenever the king was ill, he would infect all the hundreds of people who saw him. And surely someone would have noticed that.

However, the notion that you should not share a room with someone who was ill did seem convincing. Here in the hospital, Maldwyn's illness seemed to spread from a sufferer to those nearby: the sick man's wife and family were the first to catch it, followed by people in neighboring beds.

She had also observed that certain kinds of illness—stomach upsets, coughs and colds, and poxes of all sorts—seemed to flare up during fairs and markets; so it seemed obvious that they were passed from one person to another by some means.

On Wednesday night at supper, half the guests in the hospital were

suffering from the illness; then by Thursday morning every one of them had it. Several priory servants also succumbed, so Caris was short of people to clean up.

Surveying the chaos at breakfasttime, Mother Cecilia suggested closing the hospital.

Caris was ready to consider anything. She felt dismayed at her own powerlessness to combat the disease, and devastated by the filth of her hospital. “But where would the people sleep?” she said.

“Send them to the taverns.”

“The taverns have the same problem. We could put them in the cathedral.”

Cecilia shook her head. “Godwyn won’t have peasants puking in the nave while services go on in the choir.”

“Wherever they sleep, we ought to separate the sick from the well. That’s the way to retard the spread of the illness, according to Buonaventura.”

“It makes sense.”

Caris was struck by a new idea, something that suddenly seemed very obvious, though she had not thought of it before. “Perhaps we shouldn’t just improve the hospital,” she said. “Maybe we should build a new one, just for sick people, and keep the old one for pilgrims and other healthy visitors.”

Cecilia looked thoughtful. “It would be costly.”

“We’ve got a hundred and fifty pounds.” Caris’s imagination began to work. “It could incorporate a new pharmacy. We could have private rooms for people who are chronically ill.”

“Find out what it would cost. You could ask Elfric.”

Caris hated Elfric. She had disliked him even before he had given evidence against her. She did not want him to build her new hospital. “Elfric is busy building Godwyn’s new palace,” she said. “I’d rather consult Jeremiah.”

“By all means.”

Caris felt a rush of affection for Cecilia. Although she was a martinet, tough on discipline, she gave her deputies room to make their own decisions. She had always understood the conflicting passions that drove Caris. Instead of trying to suppress those passions, Cecilia had found ways to make use of them. She had given Caris work that engaged her and provided outlets for her rebellious energy. Here I am, Caris thought, plainly incapable of dealing with the crisis in front of me, and my superior is calmly telling me to forge ahead with a new long-term project. “Thank you, Mother Cecilia,” she said.

Later that day she walked around the priory grounds with Jeremiah and explained her aspirations. He was as superstitious as ever, seeing the work of saints and devils in the most trivial of everyday incidents. Nevertheless, he was an imaginative builder, open to new ideas: he had learned from Merthin.

They quickly settled on the best location for the new hospital, immediately to the south of the existing kitchen block. It would be apart from the rest of the buildings, so that sick people would have less contact with the healthy, but food would not have to be carried far, and the new building could still be accessed conveniently from the nuns' cloisters. With the pharmacy, the new latrines, and an upper floor with private rooms, Jeremiah thought it would cost about a hundred pounds—most of the legacy.

Caris discussed the site with Mother Cecilia. It was land that belonged neither to the monks nor the nuns, so they went to see Godwyn about it.

They found him on the site of his own building project, the new palace. The shell was up and the roof was on. Caris had not visited the site for some weeks, and she was surprised at its size—it was going to be as big as her new hospital. She saw why Buonaventura had called it impressive: the dining hall was larger than the nuns' refectory. The site was swarming with workmen, as if Godwyn was in a hurry to get it finished. Masons were laying a floor of colored tiles in a geometric pattern, several carpenters were making doors, and a master glazier had set up a furnace to make the windows. Godwyn was spending a lot of money.

He and Philemon were showing the new building to Archdeacon Lloyd, the bishop's deputy. Godwyn broke off as the nuns approached. Cecilia said: "Don't let us interrupt you—but, when you're finished, will you meet me outside the hospital? There's something I need to show you."

"By all means," said Godwyn.

Caris and Cecilia walked back through the marketplace in front of the cathedral. Friday was bargain day at the Fleece Fair, when traders sold their remaining stocks at reduced prices so that they would not have to carry the goods home. Caris saw Mark Webber, round-faced and round-bellied now, wearing a coat of his own bright scarlet. His four children were helping at his stall. Caris was especially fond of Dora, now fifteen, who had her mother's bustling confidence in a slimmer body.

"You're looking prosperous," Caris said to Mark with a smile.

"The wealth should have come to you," he replied. "You invented the dye. I just did what you said. I almost feel as if I cheated you."

"You've been rewarded for hard work," she said. She did not mind that Mark and Madge had done so well out of her invention. Although she had always enjoyed the challenge of doing business, she had never lusted for money—perhaps because she had always taken it for granted, growing up in her father's wealthy household. Whatever the reason, she felt no pang of regret that the Webbers were making a fortune that might have been hers. The cashless life of the priory seemed to suit her well. And she was thrilled to see the Webber children healthy and well dressed. She remembered when all six of them had to find sleeping space on the floor of a single room, most of

which was taken up by a loom.

She and Cecilia went to the south end of the priory grounds. The land around the stables looked like a farmyard. There were a few small buildings: a dovecote, a henhouse, and a tool shed. Chickens scratched in the dirt, and pigs rooted in the kitchen garbage. Caris itched to tidy it up.

Godwyn and Philemon joined them soon, with Lloyd tagging along. Cecilia indicated the patch of land next to the kitchens, and said: “I’m going to build a new hospital, and I want to put it there. What do you think?”

“A new hospital?” Godwyn said. “Why?”

Caris thought he looked anxious, which puzzled her.

Cecilia said: “We want a hospital for the sick and a separate guest house for healthy visitors.”

“What an extraordinary idea.”

“It’s because of the stomach illness that started with Maldwyn Cook. This is a particularly virulent example, but diseases often flare up at markets, and part of the reason they spread so fast may be that we have the sick and the well eating and sleeping and going to the latrine together.”

Godwyn took umbrage. “Oho!” he said. “So the nuns are the physicians now, are they?”

Caris frowned. This kind of sneering was not Godwyn’s style. He used charm to get his way, especially with powerful people such as Cecilia. This fit of pique was covering something else.

“Of course not,” Cecilia said. “But we all know that some illnesses spread from one sufferer to the next—that’s obvious.”

Caris put in: “The Muslim physicians believe illness is transmitted by looking at the sick person.”

“Oh, do they? How interesting!” Godwyn spoke with ponderous sarcasm. “Those of us who have spent seven years studying medicine at the university are always glad to be lectured on illness by young nuns barely out of their novitiate.”

Caris was not intimidated. She felt no inclination to show respect to a lying hypocrite who had tried to murder her. She said: “If you don’t believe in the transmission of illness, why don’t you prove your sincerity by coming to the hospital tonight and sleeping alongside a hundred people suffering from nausea and diarrhea?”

Cecilia said: “Sister Caris! That will be enough.” She turned to Godwyn. “Forgive her, Father Prior. It wasn’t my intention to engage you in a discussion about disease with a mere nun. I just want to make sure you don’t object to my choice of site.”

“You can’t build it now, anyway,” Godwyn said. “Elfric is too busy with the palace.”

Caris said: “We don’t want Elfric—we’re using Jeremiah.”

Cecilia turned on her. “Caris, be quiet! Remember your place. Don’t interrupt my conversation with the lord prior again.”

Caris realized she was not helping Cecilia, and—against her inclination—she lowered her head and said: “I’m sorry, Mother Prioress.”

Cecilia said to Godwyn: “The question is not *when* we build, it’s *where*.”

“I’m afraid I don’t approve of this,” he said stiffly.

“Where would you prefer the new building to be sited?”

“I don’t think you need a new hospital at all.”

“Forgive me, but I am in charge of the nunnery,” Cecilia said with asperity. “You can’t tell me how I should spend our money. However, we normally consult one another before putting up new buildings—although it has to be said that you forgot this little courtesy when planning your palace. Nevertheless, I am consulting you—merely on the question of the location of the building.” She looked at Lloyd. “I’m sure the archdeacon will agree with me on this.”

“There must be agreement,” Lloyd said noncommittally.

Caris frowned, baffled. Why did Godwyn care? He was building his palace on the north side of the cathedral. It made no difference to him if the nuns put up a new building down here in the south, where most monks hardly ever came. What was he worried about?

Godwyn said: “I’m telling you that I do not approve of the location nor of the building, so that is the end of the matter!”

Caris suddenly saw, in a flash of inspiration, the reason for Godwyn’s behavior. She was so shocked that she blurted it out. “You stole our money!”

Cecilia said: “Caris! I told you—”

“He’s stolen the legacy of the woman of Thornbury!” Caris said, overriding Cecilia in her outrage. “That’s where he got the money for his palace, of course. And now he’s trying to stop us building because he knows we’ll go to the treasury and find that our money has vanished!” She felt so indignant she might burst.

Godwyn said: “Don’t be preposterous.”

As a response, it was so muted that Caris knew she must have touched a nerve. Confirmation made her even angrier. “Prove it!” she yelled. She forced herself to speak more calmly. “We’ll go to the treasury now and check the vaults. You wouldn’t object to that, would you, Father Prior?”

Philemon chipped in: “It would be a completely undignified proceeding, and there is no question of the prior submitting himself to it.”

Caris ignored him. “There should be one hundred and fifty pounds in gold in the nuns’ reserves.”

“Out of the question,” said Godwyn.

Caris said: “Well, clearly the nuns will have to check the vaults anyway, now that the accusation has been made.” She looked at Cecilia, who nodded

in agreement. “So, if the prior prefers not to be present, no doubt the archdeacon will be happy to attend as a witness.”

Lloyd looked as if he would have preferred not to get involved in this dispute, but it was hard for him to refuse to play the role of umpire, so he muttered: “If I can help both sides, of course…”

Caris’s mind was racing on. “How did you open the chest?” she said. “Christopher Blacksmith made the lock, and he’s too honest to give you a duplicate key and help you steal from us. You must have broken the box open, then repaired it somehow. What did you do, take off the hinge?” She saw Godwyn glance involuntarily at his subprior. “Ah,” Caris said triumphantly, “so *Philemon* took the hinge off. But the prior took the money, and gave it to Elfric.”

Cecilia said: “Enough speculation. Let’s settle the matter. We’ll all go to the treasury and open the box, and that will be an end to it.”

Godwyn said: “It wasn’t stealing.”

Everyone stared at him. There was a shocked silence.

Cecilia said: “You’re admitting it!”

“It wasn’t stealing,” Godwyn repeated. “The money is being used for the benefit of the priory and the glory of God.”

Caris said: “It makes no difference. It wasn’t your money!”

“It’s God’s money,” Godwyn said stubbornly.

Cecilia said: “It was left to the nunnery. You know that. You saw the will.”

“I know nothing of any will.”

“Of course you do. I gave it to you, to make a copy…” Cecilia tailed off.

Godwyn said again: “I know nothing of any will.”

Caris said: “He’s destroyed it. He said he would make a copy, and put the original in the chest, in the treasury…but he destroyed it.”

Cecilia was staring openmouthed at Godwyn. “I should have known,” she said. “After what you tried to do to Caris—I should never have trusted you again. But I thought your soul might yet have been saved. I was so wrong.”

Caris said: “It’s a good thing we made our own copy of the will, before handing it over.” She was inventing this in desperation.

Godwyn said: “A forgery, obviously.”

Caris said: “If the money was yours in the first place, you will have had no need to break open the casket to get it. So let’s go and look. That will settle it one way or another.”

Philemon said: “The fact that the hinge has been tampered with proves nothing.”

“So I was right!” said Caris. “But how do you know about the hinge? Sister Beth has not opened the vault since the audit, and the box was fine then. You must have removed it from the vault yourself, if you know that it

has been interfered with."

Philemon looked bewildered, and had no answer.

Cecilia turned to Lloyd. "Archdeacon, you are the bishop's representative. I think it's your duty to order the prior to return this money to the nuns."

Lloyd looked worried. He said to Godwyn: "Have you got any of the money left?"

Caris said furiously: "When you've caught a thief, you don't ask him whether he can afford to relinquish his ill-gotten gains!"

Godwyn said: "More than half has already been spent on the palace."

"Building must stop immediately," Caris said. "The men must be dismissed today, the building torn down and the materials sold. You have to return every penny. What you can't pay in cash, after the palace has been demolished, you must make up in land or other assets."

"I refuse," Godwyn said.

Cecilia addressed Lloyd again. "Archdeacon, please do your duty. You cannot allow one of the bishop's subordinates to steal from another, no matter that they both do God's work."

Lloyd said: "I can't adjudicate a dispute such as this myself. It's too serious."

Caris was speechless with fury and dismay at Lloyd's weakness.

Cecilia protested: "But you must!"

He looked trapped, but he shook his head stubbornly. "Accusations of theft, destruction of a will, a charge of forgery…This must go to the bishop himself!"

Cecilia said: "But Bishop Richard is on his way to France—and no one knows when he will be back. Meanwhile, Godwyn is spending the stolen money!"

"I can't help that, I'm afraid," Lloyd said. "You must appeal to Richard."

"Very well, then," said Caris. Something in her tone made them all look at her. "In that case there's only one thing to do. We'll go and find our bishop."

46

In July of 1346, King Edward III assembled the largest invasion fleet England had ever seen, almost a thousand ships, at Portsmouth. Contrary winds delayed the armada, but they finally set sail on July 11, their destination a secret.

Caris and Mair arrived in Portsmouth two days later, just missing Bishop Richard, who had sailed with the king.

They decided to follow the army to France.

It had not been easy to get approval even for the trip to Portsmouth. Mother Cecilia had invited the nuns in chapter to discuss the proposal, and some had felt that Caris would be in moral and physical danger. But nuns did leave their convents, not just on pilgrimages, but on business errands to London, Canterbury, and Rome. And the Kingsbridge sisters wanted their stolen money back.

However, Caris was not sure that she would have got permission to cross the Channel. Fortunately she was not able to ask.

She and Mair could not have followed the army immediately, even if they had known the king's destination, because every seaworthy vessel on the south coast of England had been commandeered for the invasion. So they fretted with impatience at a nunnery just outside Portsmouth and waited for news.

Caris learned later that King Edward and his army disembarked on a broad beach at St.-Vaast-la-Hogue, on the north coast of France near Barfleur. However, the fleet did not return immediately. Instead, the ships followed the coast eastward for two weeks, tracking the invading army as far as Caen. There they loaded their holds with booty: jewelry, expensive cloth, and gold and silver plate looted by Edward's army from the prosperous burgesses of Normandy. Then they returned.

One of the first back was the *Grace*, which was a cog—a broad-built cargo ship with rounded prow and stern. Her captain, a leather-faced salt called Rollo, was full of praise for the king. He had been paid at scarcity rates for his ship and his men, and he had gained a good share of the plunder himself. "Biggest army I've ever seen," Rollo said with relish. He thought there were at least fifteen thousand men, about half of them archers, and probably five thousand horses. "You'll have your work cut out to catch up with them," he said. "I'll take you to Caen, the last place I know them to have been, and you can pick up their trail there. Whatever direction they've taken, they'll be about a week ahead of you."

Caris and Mair negotiated a price with Rollo then went aboard the *Grace* with two sturdy ponies, Blackie and Stamp. They could not travel any faster than the army's horses, but the army had to stop and fight every so often, Caris reasoned, and that should enable her to catch up.

When they reached the French side and sailed into the estuary of the Orne, early on a sunny August morning, Caris sniffed the breeze and noticed the unpleasant smell of old ashes. Studying the landscape on either side of the river, she saw that the farmland was black. It looked as if the crops had been burned in the fields. "Standard practice," Rollo said. "What the army can't take must be destroyed, otherwise it could benefit the enemy." As they neared the port of Caen, they passed the hulks of several burned-out ships, presumably fired for the same reason.

“No one knows the king’s plan,” Rollo told them. “He may go south and advance on Paris, or swing northeast to Calais and hope to meet up there with his Flemish allies. But you’ll be able to follow his trail. Just keep the blackened fields on either side of you.”

Before they disembarked, Rollo gave them a ham. “Thank you, but we’ve got some smoked fish and hard cheese in our saddlebags,” Caris said to him. “And we have money—we can buy anything else we need.”

“Money may not be much use to you,” the captain replied. “There may be nothing to buy. An army is like a plague of locusts, it strips the country bare. Take the ham.”

“You’re very kind. Good-bye.”

“Pray for me, if you would, Sister. I’ve committed some heavy sins in my time.”

Caen was a city of several thousand houses. Like Kingsbridge, its two halves, Old Town and New Town, were divided by a river, the Odon, which was spanned by St. Peter’s Bridge. On the riverbank near the bridge, a few fishermen were selling their catch. Caris asked the price of an eel. She found the answer difficult to understand: the fisherman spoke a dialect of French she had never heard. When at last she was able to make out what he was saying, the price took her breath away. Food was so scarce, she realized, that it was more precious than jewels. She was grateful for Rollo’s generosity.

They had decided that if they were questioned they would say they were Irish nuns traveling to Rome. Now, however, as she and Mair rode away from the river, Caris wondered nervously whether local people would know from her accent that she was English.

There were not many local people to be seen. Broken-down doors and smashed shutters revealed empty houses. There was a ghostly hush—no vendors crying their wares, no children quarreling, no church bells. The only work being done was burial. The battle had taken place more than a week ago, but small groups of grim-faced men were still bringing corpses out of buildings and loading them onto carts. It looked as if the English army had simply massacred men, women and children. They passed a church where a huge pit had been dug in the churchyard, and saw the bodies being tipped into a mass grave, without coffins or even shrouds, while a priest intoned a continuous burial service. The stench was unspeakable.

A well-dressed man bowed to them and asked if they needed assistance. His proprietorial manner suggested that he was a leading citizen concerned to make sure no harm came to religious visitors. Caris declined his offer of help, noting that his Norman French was no different from that of a nobleman in England. Perhaps, she thought, the lower orders all had their different local dialects, while the ruling class spoke with an international accent.

The two nuns took the road east out of town, glad to leave the haunted

streets behind. The countryside was deserted, too. The bitter taste of ash was always on Caris's tongue. Many of the fields and orchards on either side of the road had been fired. Every few miles they rode through a heap of charred ruins that had been a village. The peasants had either fled before the army or died in the conflagration, for there was little life: just the birds, the occasional pig or chicken overlooked by the army's foragers, and sometimes a dog, nosing through the debris in a bewildered way, trying to pick up the scent of its master in a pile of cold embers.

Their immediate destination was a nunnery half a day's ride from Caen. Whenever possible, they would spend the night at a religious house—nunnery, monastery, or hospital—as they had on the way from Kingsbridge to Portsmouth. They knew the names and locations of fifty-one such institutions between Caen and Paris. If they could find them, as they hurried in the scorched footprints of King Edward, their accommodation and food would be free and they would be safe from thieves—and, Mother Cecilia would add, from fleshly temptations such as strong drink and male company.

Cecilia's instincts were sharp, but she had not sensed that a different kind of temptation was in the air between Caris and Mair. Because of that, Caris had at first refused Mair's request to come with her. She was focused on moving fast, and she did not want to complicate her mission by entering into a passionate entanglement—or by refusing so to do. On the other hand, she needed someone courageous and resourceful as her companion. Now she was glad of her choice: of all the nuns, Mair was the only one with the guts to go chasing the English army through France.

She had planned to have a frank talk before they left, saying that there should be no physical affection between them while they were away. Apart from anything else, they could get into terrible trouble if they were seen. But somehow she had never got around to the frank talk. So here they were in France with the issue still hanging unmentioned, like an invisible third traveler riding between them on a silent horse.

They stopped at midday by a stream on the edge of a wood, where there was an unburned meadow for the ponies to graze. Caris cut slices from Rollo's ham, and Mair took from their baggage a loaf of stale bread from Portsmouth. They drank the water from the stream, though it had the taste of cinders.

Caris suppressed her eagerness to get going, and forced herself to let the horses rest for the hottest hour of the day. Then, as they were getting ready to leave, she was startled to see someone watching her. She froze, with the ham in one hand and her knife in the other.

Mair said: "What is it?" Then she followed Caris's gaze, and understood.

Two men stood a few yards away, in the shade of the trees, staring at them. They looked quite young, but it was hard to be sure, for their faces were

sooty and their clothing was filthy.

After a moment, Caris spoke to them in Norman French. “God bless you, my children.”

They made no reply. Caris guessed they were unsure what to do. But what possibilities were they considering? Robbery? Rape? They had a predatory look.

She was scared, but she made herself think calmly. Whatever else they might want, they must be starving, she calculated. She said to Mair: “Quickly, give me two trenchers of that bread.”

Mair cut two thick slices off the big loaf. Caris cut corresponding slabs from the ham. She put the ham on the bread, then said to Mair: “Give them one each.”

Mair looked terrified, but she walked across the grass with an unhesitating step and offered the food to the men.

They both snatched it and began to wolf it down. Caris thanked her stars that she had guessed right.

She quickly put the ham in her saddlebag and the knife in her belt, then climbed onto Blackie. Mair followed suit, stowing the bread and mounting Stamp. Caris felt safer on horseback.

The taller of the two men came toward them, moving quickly. Caris was tempted to kick her pony and take off, but she did not quite have time; and then the man’s hand was holding her bridle. He spoke through a mouthful of food. “Thank you,” he said with the heavy local accent.

Caris said: “Thank God, not me. He sent me to help you. He is watching over you. He sees everything.”

“You have more meat in your bag.”

“God will tell me who to give it to.”

There was a pause, while the man thought that over, then he said: “Give me your blessing.”

Caris was reluctant to extend her right arm in the traditional gesture of blessing—it would take her hand too far away from the knife at her belt. It was only a short-bladed food knife of the kind carried by every man and woman, but it was enough to slash the back of the hand that held her bridle and cause the man to let go.

Then she was inspired. “Very well,” she said. “Kneel down.”

The man hesitated.

“You must kneel to receive my blessing,” she said in a slightly raised voice.

Slowly, the man knelt, still holding his food in his hand.

Caris turned her gaze on his companion. After a moment, the second man did the same.

Caris blessed them both, then kicked Blackie and quickly trotted away.

After a moment she looked back. Mair was close behind her. The two starving men stood staring at them.

Caris mulled over the incident anxiously as they rode through the afternoon. The sun shone cheerfully, as on a fine day in Hell. In some places, smoke was rising fitfully from a patch of woodland or a smoldering barn. But the countryside was not totally deserted, she realized gradually. She saw a pregnant woman harvesting beans in a field that had escaped the English torches; the scared faces of two children looking out from the blackened stones of a manor house; and several small groups of men, usually flitting through the fringes of woodland, moving with the alert purposefulness of scavengers. The men worried her. They looked hungry, and hungry men were dangerous. She wondered whether she should stop fretting about speed and worry instead about safety.

Finding their way to the religious houses where they planned to stop was also going to be more difficult than Caris had thought. She had not anticipated that the English army would leave such devastation in its wake. She had assumed there would be peasants around to direct her. It could be hard enough in normal times to get such information from people who had never traveled farther than the nearest market town. Now her interlocutors would also be elusive, terrified, or predatory.

She knew by the sun that she was heading east, and she thought, judging by the deep cartwheel ruts in the baked mud, that she was on the main road. Tonight's destination was a village named, after the nunnery at its center, Hôpital-des-Soeurs. As the shadow in front of her grew longer, she looked about with increasing urgency for someone whom she could ask for directions.

Children fled from their approach in fear. Caris was not yet desperate enough to risk getting close to the hungry-looking men. She hoped to come across a woman. There were no young women anywhere, and Caris had a bleak suspicion about the fate they might have met at the hands of the marauding English. Occasionally she saw, in the far distance, a few lonely figures harvesting a field that had escaped burning; but she was reluctant to go too far from the road.

At last they found a wrinkled old woman sitting under an apple tree next to a substantial stone house. She was eating small apples wrenched from the tree long before they were ripe. She looked terrified. Caris dismounted, to seem less intimidating. The old woman tried to hide her poor meal in the folds of her dress, but she seemed not to have the strength to run away.

Caris addressed her politely. "Good evening, mother. Will this road take us to Hôpital-des-Soeurs, may I ask?"

The woman seemed to pull herself together, and answered intelligently. Pointing in the direction in which they were heading, she said: "Through the

woods and over the hill.”

Caris saw that she had no teeth. It must have been almost impossible to eat unripe apples with your gums, she thought with pity. “How far?” she asked.

“A long way.”

All distances were long at her age. “Can we get there by nightfall?”

“On a horse, yes.”

“Thank you, mother.”

“I had a daughter,” said the old woman. “And two grandsons. Fourteen years and sixteen. Fine boys.”

“I’m very sorry to hear that.”

“The English,” said the old woman. “May they all burn in Hell.”

Evidently it did not occur to her that Caris and Mair might be English. That answered Caris’s question: local people could not tell the nationality of strangers. “What were the boys’ names, mother?”

“Giles and Jean.”

“I will pray for the souls of Giles and Jean.”

“Have you any bread?”

Caris looked around, to make sure there was no one else lurking nearby, ready to pounce, but they were alone. She nodded to Mair, who took from her saddlebag the remains of the loaf and offered it to the old woman.

The woman snatched it from her and began to gnaw it with her gums.

Caris and Mair rode away.

Mair said: “If we keep giving our food away, we’re going to starve.”

“I know,” said Caris. “But how can you refuse?”

“We can’t fulfill our mission if we’re dead.”

“But we are nuns, after all,” Caris said with asperity. “We must help the needy, and leave it to God to decide when it’s time for us to die.”

Mair was startled. “I’ve never heard you talk like that before.”

“My father hated people who preached about morality. We’re all good when it suits us, he used to say: that doesn’t count. It’s when you want so badly to do something wrong—when you’re about to make a fortune from a dishonest deal, or kiss the lovely lips of your neighbor’s wife, or tell a lie to get yourself out of terrible trouble—that’s when you need the rules. Your integrity is like a sword, he would say: you shouldn’t wave it until you’re about to put it to the test. Not that he knew anything about swords.”

Mair was silent for a while. She might have been mulling over what Caris had said, or she might simply have given up the argument: Caris was not sure.

Talk of Edmund always made Caris realize how much she missed him. After her mother died he had become the cornerstone of her life. He had always been there, standing at her shoulder, as it were, ready when she needed sympathy and understanding, or shrewd advice, or just information: he had

known so much about the world. Now, when she turned in that direction, there was just an empty space.

They passed through a patch of woodland then breasted a rise, as the old woman had forecast. Looking down on a shallow valley, they saw another burned village, the same as all the rest but for a cluster of stone buildings that looked like a small convent. “This must be Hôpital-des-Soeurs,” said Caris. “Thank God.”

She realized, as she approached, how used to nunnery life she had become. As they rode down the hill, she found herself looking forward to the ritual washing of hands, a meal taken in silence, bedtime at nightfall, even the sleepy peacefulness of Matins at three o’clock in the morning. After what she had seen today, the security of those gray stone walls was alluring, and she kicked the tired Blackie into a trot.

There was no one moving about the place, but that was not really surprising: it was a small house in a village, and you would not expect the kind of hustle and bustle seen at a major priory such as Kingsbridge. Still, at this time of day there should have been a column of smoke from a kitchen fire as the evening meal was prepared. However, as she came closer she saw further ominous signs, and a sense of dismay slowly engulfed her. The nearest building, which looked like a church, appeared to have no roof. The windows were empty sockets, lacking shutters or glass. Some of the stone walls were blackened, as if by smoke.

The place was silent: no bells, no cries of hostlers or kitchen hands. It was deserted, Caris realized despondently as she reined in. And it had been fired, like every other building in the village. Most of the stone walls were still standing, but the timber roofs had fallen in, doors and other woodwork had burned, and glass windows had shattered in the heat.

Mair said unbelievingly: “They set fire to a nunnery?”

Caris was equally shocked. She had believed that invading armies invariably left ecclesiastical buildings intact. It was an iron rule, people said. A commander would not hesitate to put to death a soldier who violated a holy place. She had accepted that without question. “So much for chivalry,” she said.

They dismounted and walked, stepping cautiously around charred beams and scorched rubble, to the domestic quarters. As they approached the kitchen door, Mair gave a shriek and said: “Oh, God, what’s that?”

Caris knew the answer. “It’s a dead nun.” The corpse on the ground was naked, but had the cropped hair of a nun. The body had somehow survived the fire. The woman was about a week dead. The birds had already eaten her eyes, and parts of her face had been nibbled by some scavenging animal.

Also, her breasts had been cut off with a knife.

Mair said in amazement: “Did the *English* do this?”

“Well, it wasn’t the French.”

“Our soldiers have foreigners fighting alongside them, don’t they? Welshmen and Germans and so on. Perhaps it was them.”

“They’re all under the orders of our king,” Caris said with grim disapprobation. “He brought them here. What they do is his responsibility.”

They stared at the hideous sight. As they looked, a mouse came out of the corpse’s mouth. Mair screamed and turned away.

Caris hugged her. “Calm down,” she said firmly, but she stroked Mair’s back to comfort her. “Come on,” she said after a moment. “Let’s get away from here.”

They returned to their horses. Caris resisted an impulse to bury the dead nun: if they delayed, they would still be here at nightfall. But where were they to go? They had planned to spend the night here. “We’ll go back to the old woman with the apple tree,” she said. “Her house is the only intact building we’ve seen since we left Caen.” She glanced anxiously at the setting sun. “If we push the horses, we can be there before it’s full dark.”

They urged their tired ponies forward, and headed back along the road. Directly ahead of them the sun sank all too quickly below the horizon. The last of the light was fading when they arrived back at the house by the apple tree.

The old woman was happy to see them, expecting them to share their food, which they did, eating in the dark. Her name was Jeanne. There was no fire, but the weather was mild, and the three women rolled up side by side in their blankets. Not fully trusting their hostess, Caris and Mair lay down clutching the saddlebags that contained their food.

Caris lay awake for a while. She was pleased to be on the move after such a long delay in Portsmouth, and they had made good progress in the last two days. If she could find Bishop Richard, she felt sure he would force Godwyn to repay the nuns’ money. He was no paragon of integrity, but he was open-minded, and in his lackadaisical way he dispensed justice evenhandedly. Godwyn had not had things all his own way even in the witchcraft trial. She felt sure she could persuade Richard to give her a letter ordering Godwyn to sell priory assets in order to give back the stolen cash.

But she was worried about her safety and Mair’s. Her assumption that soldiers would leave nuns alone had been quite wrong: what they had seen at Hôpital-des-Soeurs had made that clear. She and Mair needed a disguise.

When she woke up at first light, she said to Jeanne: “Your grandsons—do you still have their clothes?”

The old woman opened a wooden chest. “Take what you want,” she said. “I have no one to give them to.” She picked up a bucket and went off to fetch water.

Caris began to sort through the garments in the chest. Jeanne had not

asked for payment. Clothes had little monetary value after so many people had died, she guessed.

Mair said: “What are you up to?”

“Nuns aren’t safe,” Caris said. “We’re going to become pages in the service of a minor lord—Pierre, *sieur* of Longchamp in Brittany. Pierre is a common name and there must be lots of places called Longchamp. Our master has been captured by the English, and our mistress has sent us to find him and negotiate his ransom.”

“All right,” Mair said eagerly.

“Giles and Jean were fourteen and sixteen, so with luck their clothes will fit us.”

Caris picked out a tunic, leggings, and a cape with a hood, all in the dull brown of undyed wool. Mair found a similar outfit in green, with short sleeves and an undershirt. Women did not usually wear underdrawers, but men did, and fortunately Jeanne had lovingly washed the linen garments of her dead family. Caris and Mair could keep their own shoes: the practical footwear of nuns was no different from what men wore.

“Shall we put them on?” said Mair.

They pulled off their nuns’ robes. Caris had never seen Mair undressed, and she could not resist a peek. Her companion’s naked body took her breath away. Mair’s skin seemed to glow like a pink pearl. Her breasts were generous, with pale girlish nipples, and she had a luxuriant bush of fair pubic hair. Caris was suddenly conscious that her own body was not as beautiful. She looked away, and quickly began to put on the clothes she had chosen.

She pulled the tunic over her head. It was just like a woman’s dress except that it stopped at the knee instead of the ankles. She pulled up the linen underdrawers and the leggings, then put her shoes and belt back on.

Mair said: “How do I look?”

Caris studied her. Mair had put a boy’s cap over her short blond hair, and tilted it at an angle. She was grinning. “You look so happy!” Caris said in surprise.

“I’ve always liked boys’ clothes.” Mair swaggered up and down the small room. “This is how they walk,” she said. “Always taking more space than they need.” It was such an accurate imitation that Caris burst out laughing.

Caris was struck by a thought. “Are we going to have to pee standing up?”

“I can do it, but not in undershorts—too inaccurate.”

Caris giggled. “We can’t leave off the drawers—a sudden flurry of wind could expose our…pretenses.”

Mair laughed. Then she began to stare at Caris in a way that was strange but not entirely unfamiliar, looking her up and down, meeting her eyes and holding her gaze.

“What are you doing?” said Caris.

“This is how men look at women, as if they own us. But be careful—if you do it to a man, he becomes aggressive.”

“This could be more difficult than I thought.”

“You’re too beautiful,” Mair said. “You need a dirty face.” She went to the fireplace and blackened her hand with soot. Then she smeared it on Caris’s face. Her touch was like a caress. My face isn’t beautiful, Caris thought; no one ever judged it so—except Merthin, of course…

“Too much,” Mair said after a minute, and wiped some off with her other hand. “That’s better.” She smeared Caris’s hand and said: “Now do me.”

Caris spread a faint smudge on Mair’s jawline and throat, making it look as if she might have a light beard. It felt very intimate, to be looking so hard at her face, and touching her skin so softly. She dirtied Mair’s forehead and cheeks. Mair looked like a pretty boy—but she did not look like a woman.

They studied one another. A smile played on the red bow of Mair’s lips. Caris felt a sense of anticipation, as if something momentous was about to happen. Then a voice said: “Where are the nuns?”

They both turned around guiltily. Jeanne stood in the doorway, holding a heavy bucket of fresh water, looking frightened. “What have you done to the nuns?” she said.

Caris and Mair burst out laughing, and then Jeanne recognized them. “How you have changed yourselves!” she exclaimed.

They drank some of the water, and Caris shared out the rest of the smoked fish for breakfast. It was a good sign, she thought as they ate, that Jeanne had not recognized them. If they were careful, perhaps they could get away with this.

They took their leave of Jeanne and rode off. As they breasted the rise before Hôpital-des-Soeurs, the sun came up directly ahead of them, casting a red light on the nunnery, making the ruins look as if they were still burning. Caris and Mair trotted quickly through the village, trying not to think about the mutilated corpse of the nun lying there in the debris, and rode on into the sunrise.

47

By Tuesday, August 22, the English army was on the run.

Ralph Fitzgerald was not sure how it had happened. They had stormed across Normandy from west to east, looting and burning, and no one had been able to withstand them. Ralph had been in his element. On the march, a soldier could take anything he saw—food, jewelry, women—and kill any man

who stood in his way. It was how life ought to be lived.

The king was a man after Ralph's own heart. Edward III loved to fight. When he was not at war he spent most of his time organizing elaborate tournaments, costly mock battles with armies of knights in specially designed uniforms. On the campaign, he was always ready to lead a sortie or raiding party, hazarding his life, never pausing to balance risks against benefits like a Kingsbridge merchant. The older knights and earls commented on his brutality, and had protested about incidents such as the systematic rape of the women of Caen, but Edward did not care. When he had heard that some of the Caen citizens had thrown stones at soldiers who were ransacking their homes, he had ordered that everyone in the town should be killed, and only relented after vigorous protests by Sir Godfrey de Harcourt and others.

Things had started to go wrong when they came to the River Seine. At Rouen they had found the bridge destroyed, and the town—on the far side of the water—heavily fortified. King Philippe VI of France was there in person, with a mighty army.

The English marched upstream, looking for a place to cross, but they found that Philippe had been there before them, and one bridge after another was either strongly defended or in ruins. They went as far as Poissy, only twenty miles from Paris, and Ralph thought they would surely attack the capital—but older men shook their heads sagely and said it was impossible. Paris was a city of fifty thousand men, and they must by now have heard the news from Caen, so they would be prepared to fight to the death, knowing they could expect no mercy.

If the king did not intend to attack Paris, Ralph asked, what was his plan? No one knew, and Ralph suspected that Edward had no plan other than to wreak havoc.

The town of Poissy had been evacuated, and the English engineers were able to rebuild its bridge—fighting off a French attack at the same time—so at last the army crossed the river.

By then it was clear that Philippe had assembled an army larger by far than the English, and Edward decided on a dash to the north, with the aim of joining up with an Anglo-Flemish force invading from the northeast.

Philippe gave chase.

Today the English were encamped south of another great river, the Somme, and the French were playing the same trick as they had at the Seine. Sorties and reconnaissance parties reported that every bridge had been destroyed, every riverside town heavily fortified. Even more ominously, an English detachment had seen, on the far bank, the flag of Philippe's most famous and frightening ally, John, the blind king of Bohemia.

Edward had started out with fifteen thousand men in total. In six weeks of campaigning many of those had fallen, and others had deserted, to find their

way home with their saddlebags full of gold. He had about ten thousand left, Ralph calculated. Reports of spies suggested that in Amiens, a few miles upstream, Philippe now had sixty thousand foot soldiers and twelve thousand mounted knights, an overwhelming advantage in numbers. Ralph was more worried than he had been since he first set foot in Normandy. The English were in trouble.

Next day they marched downstream to Abbeville, location of the last bridge before the Somme widened into an estuary; but the burgesses of the town had spent money, over the years, strengthening the walls, and the English could see it was impregnable. So cocksure were the citizens that they sent out a large force of knights to attack the vanguard of the English army, and there was a fierce skirmish before the locals withdrew back inside their walled town.

When Philippe's army left Amiens, and started advancing from the south, Edward found himself trapped in the point of a triangle: on his right the estuary, on his left the sea, and behind him the French army, baying for the blood of the barbaric invaders.

That afternoon, Earl Roland came to see Ralph.

Ralph had been fighting in Roland's retinue for seven years. The earl no longer regarded him as an untried boy. Roland still gave the impression that he did not much like Ralph, but he certainly respected him, and would always use him to shore up a weak point in the line, lead a sally, or organize a raid. Ralph had lost three fingers from his left hand, and had walked with a limp when tired ever since a Frenchman's pikestaff had cracked his shinbone outside Nantes in 1342. Nevertheless, the king had not yet knighted Ralph, an omission which caused Ralph bitter resentment. For all the loot he had garnered—most of it held for safekeeping by a London goldsmith—Ralph was unfulfilled. He knew that his father would be equally dissatisfied. Like Gerald, Ralph fought for honor, not money; but in all this time he had not climbed a single step up the staircase of nobility.

When Roland appeared, Ralph was sitting in a field of ripening wheat that had been trampled to shreds by the army. He was with Alan Fernhill and half a dozen comrades, eating a gloomy dinner, pea soup with onions: food was running out, and there was no meat left. Ralph felt as they did, tired from constant marching, dispirited by repeated encounters with broken bridges and well-defended towns, and scared of what would happen when the French army caught up with them.

Roland was now an old man, his hair and beard gray, but he still walked erect and spoke with authority. He had learned to keep his expression stonily impassive, so that people hardly noticed that the right side of his face was paralyzed. He said: "The estuary of the Somme is tidal. At low tide, the water may be shallow in places. But the bottom is thick mud, making it

impassable.”

“So we can’t cross,” said Ralph. But he knew Roland had not come just to give him bad news, and his spirits lifted optimistically.

“There may be a ford—a point where the bottom is firmer,” Roland went on. “If there is, the French will know.”

“You want me to find out.”

“As quick as you like. There are some prisoners in the next field.”

Ralph shook his head. “Soldiers might have come from anywhere in France, or even other countries. It’s the local people who will have the information.”

“I don’t care who you interrogate. Just come to the king’s tent with the answer by nightfall.” Roland walked away.

Ralph drained his bowl and leaped to his feet, glad to have something aggressive to do. “Saddle up, lads,” he said.

He still had Griff. Miraculously, his favorite horse had survived seven years of war. Griff was somewhat smaller than a warhorse, but had more spirit than the oversize destriers most knights preferred. He was now experienced in battle, and his iron-shod hooves gave Ralph an extra weapon in the melee. Ralph was more fond of him than of most of his human comrades. In fact the only living creature to whom he felt closer was his brother, Merthin, whom he had not seen for seven years—and might never see again, for Merthin had gone to Florence.

They headed northeast, toward the estuary. Every peasant living within half a day’s walk would know of the ford if there was one, Ralph calculated. They would use it constantly, crossing the river to buy and sell livestock, to attend the weddings and funerals of relatives, to go to markets and fairs and religious festivals. They would be reluctant to give information to the invading English, of course—but he knew how to solve that problem.

They rode away from the army, into territory that had not yet suffered from the arrival of thousands of men, where there were sheep in the pastures and crops ripening in the fields. They came to a village from which the estuary could be seen in the far distance. They kicked their horses into a canter along the grassy track that led into the village. The one-room and two-room hovels of the serfs reminded Ralph of Wigleigh. As he expected, the peasants fled in all directions, the women carrying babies and children, most of the men holding an axe or a sickle.

Ralph and his companions had played out this drama twenty or thirty times in the past few weeks. They were specialists in gathering intelligence. Usually, the army’s leaders wanted to know where local people had hidden their stocks. When they heard the English were coming, the sly peasants drove their cattle and sheep into woods, stashed sacks of flour in holes in the ground, and hid bales of hay in the bell tower of the church. They knew they

would probably starve to death if they revealed where their food was, but they always told sooner or later. On other occasions the army needed directions, perhaps to an important town, a strategic bridge, a fortified abbey. The peasants would usually answer such inquiries unhesitatingly, but it was necessary to make sure they were not lying, for the shrewder among them might try to deceive the invading army, knowing the soldiers were not able to return to punish them.

As Ralph and his men chased the fleeing peasants across gardens and fields, they ignored the men and concentrated on the women and children. Ralph knew that if he captured them, their husbands and fathers would come back.

He caught up with a girl of about thirteen. He rode alongside her for a few seconds, watching her terrified expression. She was dark-haired and dark-skinned, with plain, homely features, young but with a rounded woman's body—the type he liked. She reminded him of Gwenda. In slightly different circumstances he would have enjoyed her sexually, as he had several similar girls in the last few weeks.

But today he had other priorities. He turned Griff to cut her off. She tried to dodge him, tripped over her own feet, and fell flat in a vegetable patch. Ralph leaped off his horse and grabbed her as she got up. She screamed and scratched his face, so he punched her in the stomach to quiet her. Then he grabbed her long hair. Walking his horse, he began to drag her back to the village. She stumbled and fell, but he just kept going, dragging her along by the hair; and she struggled to her feet, crying in pain. After that, she did not fall again.

They gathered in the little wooden church. The eight English soldiers had captured four women, four children, and two babies in arms. They made them sit on the floor in front of the altar. A few moments later a man ran in, babbling in the local French, begging and pleading. Four others followed.

Ralph was pleased.

He stood at the altar, which was only a wooden table painted white. "Quiet!" he shouted. He waved his sword. They fell silent. He pointed at a young man. "You," he said. "What are you?"

"A leather worker, lord. Please don't harm my wife and child, they've done you no wrong."

He pointed to another man. "You?"

The girl he had captured gasped, and Ralph concluded that they were related; father and daughter, he guessed.

"Just a poor cowherd, lord."

"A cowherd?" That was good. "And how often do you take cattle across the river?"

"Once or twice a year, lord, when I go to market."

“And where is the ford?”

He hesitated. “Ford? There is no ford. We have to cross the bridge at Abbeville.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, lord.”

He looked around. “All of you—is this the truth?”

They nodded.

Ralph considered. They were scared—terrified—but they could still be lying. “If I fetch the priest, and he brings a Bible, will you all swear on your immortal souls that there is no ford across the estuary?”

“Yes, lord.”

But that would take too long. Ralph looked at the girl he had captured. “Come here.”

She took a step back.

The cowherd fell to his knees. “Please, lord, don’t harm an innocent child, she is only thirteen—”

Alan Fernhill picked up the girl as if she were a sack of onions and threw her to Ralph, who caught her and held her. “You’re lying to me, all of you. There is a ford, I’m sure there is. I just need to know exactly where it is.”

“All right,” said the cowherd. “I’ll tell you, but leave the child alone.”

“Where is the ford?”

“It’s a mile downstream from Abbeville.”

“What’s the name of the village?”

The cowherd was thrown by the question for a moment, then he said: “There is no village, but you can see an inn on the far side.”

He was lying. He had never traveled, so he did not realize that there was always a village by a ford.

Ralph took the girl’s hand and placed it on the altar. He drew his knife. With a swift movement, he cut off one of her fingers. His heavy blade easily split her small bones. The girl screamed in agony, and her blood spurted red over the white paint of the altar. All the peasants cried out with horror. The cowherd took an angry step forward, but was stopped by the point of Alan Fernhill’s sword.

Ralph kept hold of the girl with one hand, and held up the severed finger on the point of his knife.

“You are the devil himself,” the cowherd said, shaking with shock.

“No, I’m not.” Ralph had heard that accusation before, but it still stung him. “I’m saving the lives of thousands of men,” he said. “And if I have to, I’ll cut off the rest of her fingers, one by one.”

“No, no!”

“Then tell me where the ford really is.” He brandished the knife.

The cowherd shouted: “The Blanchetaque, it’s called the Blanchetaque,

please leave her alone!”

“The Blanchetaque?” said Ralph. He was pretending skepticism, but in fact this was promising. It was an unfamiliar word, but it sounded as if it might mean a white platform, and it was not the kind of thing that a terrified man would invent on the spur of the moment.

“Yes, lord, they call it that because of the white stones on the river bottom that enable you to cross the mud.” He was panic-stricken, tears streaming down his face, so he was almost certainly telling the truth, Ralph thought with satisfaction. The cowherd babbled on: “People say the stones were put there in olden times, by the Romans, please leave my little girl alone.”

“Where is it?”

“Ten miles downstream from Abbeville.”

“Not a mile?”

“I’m telling the truth this time, lord, as I hope to be saved!”

“And the name of the village?”

“Saigneville.”

“Is the ford always passable, or only at low tide?”

“Only at low tide, lord, especially with livestock or a cart.”

“But you know the tides.”

“Yes.”

“Now, I have only one more question for you, but it is a very important one. If I even suspect you may be lying to me, I will cut off her whole hand.” The girl screamed. Ralph said: “You know I mean it, don’t you?”

“Yes, lord, I’ll tell you anything!”

“When is low tide tomorrow?”

A look of panic came over the cowherd. “Ah—ah—let me work it out!” The man was so wrought up he could barely think.

The leather worker said: “I’ll tell you. My brother crossed yesterday, so I know. Low tide tomorrow will be in the middle of the morning, two hours before noon.”

“Yes!” said the cowherd. “That’s right! I was just trying to calculate. Mid-morning, or a little after. Then again in the evening.”

Ralph kept hold of the girl’s bleeding hand. “How sure are you?”

“Oh, lord, as sure as I am of my own name, I swear!”

The man probably did not know his own name right now, he was so distracted with terror. Ralph looked at the leather worker. There was no sign of deceit on his face, no defiance or eagerness to please in his expression: he just looked a bit ashamed of himself, as if he had been forced, against his will, to do something wrong. This is the truth, Ralph thought exultantly; I’ve done it.

He said: “The Blanchetaque. Ten miles downstream from Abbeville, at the village of Saigneville. White stones on the river bottom. Low tide at mid-

morning tomorrow.”

“Yes, lord.”

Ralph let go of the girl’s wrist, and she ran sobbing to her father, who put his arms around her. Ralph looked down at the pool of blood on the white altar table. There was a lot of it, for a slip of a girl. “All right, men,” he said. “We’re finished here.”

The trumpets woke Ralph at first light. There was no time to light a fire or eat breakfast: the army struck camp immediately. Ten thousand men had to travel six miles by mid-morning, most of them on foot.

The prince of Wales’s division led the march off, followed by the king’s division, then the baggage train, then the rear guard. Scouts were sent out to check how far away the French army was. Ralph was in the vanguard, with the sixteen-year-old prince, who had the same name as his father, Edward.

They hoped to surprise the French by crossing the Somme at the ford. Last night the king had said: “Well done, Ralph Fitzgerald.” Ralph had long ago learned that such words meant nothing. He had performed numerous useful or brave tasks for King Edward, Earl Roland, and other nobles, but he still had not been knighted. On this occasion he felt little resentment. His life was in as much danger today as it had ever been, and he was so glad to have found an escape route for himself that he hardly cared whether anyone gave him credit for saving the entire army.

As they marched, dozens of marshals and undermarshals patrolled constantly, heading the army in the right direction, keeping the formation together, maintaining the separation of divisions, and rounding up stragglers. The marshals were all noblemen, for they had to have the authority to give orders. King Edward was fanatical about orderly marching.

They headed north. The land rose in a gentle slope to a ridge from which they could see the distant glint of the estuary. From there they descended through cornfields. As they passed through villages the marshals ensured there was no looting, because they did not want to carry extra baggage across the river. They also refrained from setting fire to the crops, for fear the smoke might betray their exact position to the enemy.

The sun was about to rise when the leaders reached Saigneville. The village stood on a bluff thirty feet above the river. From the lip of the bank, Ralph looked over a formidable obstacle: a mile and a half of water and marshland. He could see the whitish stones on the bottom marking the ford. On the other side of the estuary was a green hill. As the sun appeared on his right, he saw on the far slope a glint of metal and a flash of color, and his heart filled with dismay.

The strengthening light confirmed his suspicion: the enemy was waiting

for them. The French knew where the ford was, of course, and a wise commander had provided for the possibility that the English might discover its location. So much for surprise.

Ralph looked at the water. It was flowing west, showing that the tide was going out; but it was still too deep for a man to wade. They would have to wait.

The English army continued to build up at the shore, hundreds more men arriving every minute. If the king had tried now to turn the army around and go back, the confusion would have been nightmarish.

A scout returned, and Ralph listened as the news was related to the prince of Wales. King Philippe's army had left Abbeville and was approaching on this bank of the river.

The scout was sent to determine how fast the French army was moving.

There was no turning back, Ralph realized with fear in his heart; the English had to cross the water.

He studied the far side, trying to figure out how many French were on the north bank. More than a thousand, he thought. But the greater danger was the army of tens of thousands coming up from Abbeville. Ralph had learned, in many encounters with the French, that they were extraordinarily brave—foolhardy, sometimes—but they were also undisciplined. They marched in disarray, they disobeyed orders, and they sometimes attacked, to prove their valor, when they would have been wiser to wait. But if they could overcome their disorderly habits, and get here in the next few hours, they would catch King Edward's army in midstream. With the enemy on both banks, the English could be wiped out.

After the devastation they had wrought in the last six weeks, they could expect no mercy.

Ralph thought about armor. He had a fine suit of plate armor that he had taken from a French corpse at Cambrai seven years ago, but it was on a wagon in the baggage train. Furthermore, he was not sure he could wade through a mile and a half of water and mud so encumbered. He was wearing a steel cap and a short cape of chain mail, which was all he could manage on the march. It would have to do. The others had similar light protection. Most of the infantry carried their helmets hanging from their belts, and they would put them on before coming within range of the enemy; but no one marched in full armor.

The sun rose high in the east. The water level fell until it was just knee-deep. The noblemen came from the king's entourage with orders to begin the crossing. Earl Roland's son, William of Caster, brought the instructions to Ralph's group. "The archers go first, and begin firing as soon as they are near enough to the other side," William told them. Ralph looked at him stonily. He had not forgotten that William had tried to have him hanged for doing what

half the English army had done in the last six weeks. “Then, when you get to the beach, the archers scatter left and right to let the knights and men-at-arms through.” It sounded simple, Ralph thought; orders always did. But it was going to be bloody. The enemy would be perfectly positioned, on the slope above the river, to pick off the English soldiers struggling unprotected through the water.

The men of Hugh Despenser led the advance, carrying his distinctive black-on-white banner. His archers waded in, holding their bows above the water line, and the knights and men-at-arms splashed along behind. Roland’s men followed, and soon Ralph and Alan were riding through the water.

A mile and a half was not far to walk but, Ralph now realized, it was a long way to wade, even for a horse. The depth varied: in some places they walked on swampy ground above the surface, in others the water came up to the waists of the infantry. Men and animals tired quickly. The August sun beat down on their heads while their wet feet grew numb with cold. And all the time, as they looked ahead, they could see, more and more clearly, the enemy waiting for them on the north bank.

Ralph studied the opposing force with growing trepidation. The front line, along the shore, consisted of crossbowmen. He knew that these were not Frenchmen but Italian mercenaries, always called Genoese but in fact coming from various parts of Italy. The crossbow had a slower rate of fire than the longbow, but the Genoese were going to have plenty of time to reload while their targets lumbered through the shallows. Behind the archers, on the green rise, stood foot soldiers and mounted knights ready to charge.

Looking back, Ralph saw thousands of English crossing the river behind him. Once again, turning back was not an option; in fact, those behind were pressing forward, crowding the leaders.

Now he could see the enemy ranks clearly. Ranged along the shore were the heavy wooden shields, called pavises, used by the crossbowmen. As soon as the English came within range, the Genoese began to shoot.

At a distance of three hundred yards, their aim was inaccurate, and the bolts fell with diminished force. All the same, a handful of horses and men were hit. The injured fell and drifted downstream to drown. Wounded horses thrashed in the water, turning it bloody. Ralph’s heart beat faster.

As the English came closer to the shore, the accuracy of the Genoese improved, and the bolts landed with greater power. The crossbow was slow, but it fired a steel-tipped iron bolt with terrible force. All around Ralph, men and horses fell. Some of those hit died instantly. There was nothing he could do to protect himself, he realized with an apprehension of doom: either he would be lucky, or he would die. The air filled with the awful noise of battle: the swish of deadly arrows, the curses of wounded men, the screams of horses in agony.

The archers at the front of the English column shot back. Their six-foot longbows dragged their ends in the water, so they had to hold them at an unfamiliar angle, and the river bottom beneath their feet was slippery, but they did their best.

Crossbow bolts could penetrate armor plate at close range, but none of the English were wearing any serious armor anyway. Apart from their helmets, they had little protection from the deadly hail.

Ralph would have turned and run if he could. However, behind him ten thousand men and half as many horses were pressing forward, and would have trampled him and drowned him if he had tried to go back. He had no alternative but to lower his head to Griff's neck and urge him on.

The survivors among the leading English archers at last reached shallow water and began to deploy their longbows more effectively. They shot in a trajectory, over the top of the pavises. Once they got started, English bowmen could shoot twelve arrows a minute. The shafts were made of wood—usually ash—but they had steel tips, and when they fell like rain they were terrifying. Suddenly the shooting from the enemy side lessened. Some of the shields fell. The Genoese were driven back, and the English began to reach the foreshore.

As soon as the archers got their feet on solid ground they dispersed left and right, leaving the shore clear for the knights, who charged out of the shallows at the enemy lines. Ralph, still wading across the river, had seen enough battles to know what the French tactics should be at this point: they needed to hold their line and let the crossbowmen continue to slaughter the English on the beach and in the water. But the chivalric code would not permit the French nobility to hide behind low-born archers, and they broke the line to ride forth and engage with the English knights—thereby throwing away much of the benefit of their position. Ralph felt a glimmer of hope.

The Genoese fell back, and the beach was a melee. Ralph's heart pounded with fear and excitement. The French still had the advantage of charging downhill, and they were fully armored: they slaughtered Hugh Despenser's men wholesale. The vanguard of the charge splashed into the shallows, cutting down the men still in the water.

Earl Roland's archers reached the edge just ahead of Ralph and Alan. Those who survived gained the shore and divided. Ralph felt that the English were doomed, and he was sure to die, but there was nowhere to go except forward, and suddenly he was charging, head down by Griff's neck, sword in the air, straight at the French line. He ducked a scything sword and reached dry ground. He struck uselessly at a steel helmet, then Griff cannoned into another horse. The French horse was larger but younger, and it stumbled, throwing its rider to the mud. Ralph whirled Griff around, went back, and prepared to charge again.

His sword was of limited use against plate armor, but he was a big man on

a spirited horse, and his best hope was to knock enemy soldiers off their mounts. He charged again. At this point in a battle he felt no fear. Instead, he was possessed by an exhilarating rage that drove him to kill as many of the enemy as he could. When battle was joined, time stood still, and he fought from moment to moment. Later, when the action came to an end, if he was still alive, he would be astonished to see that the sun was setting and a whole day had gone by. Now he rode at the enemy again and again, dodging their swords, thrusting where he saw an opportunity; never slowing his pace, for that was fatal.

At some point—it might have been after a few minutes or a few hours—he realized, with incredulity, that the English were no longer being slaughtered. In fact, they seemed to be winning ground and gaining hope. He detached himself from the melee and paused, panting, to take stock.

The beach was carpeted with corpses, but there were as many French as English, and Ralph realized the folly of the French charge. As soon as the knights on both sides engaged, the Genoese crossbowmen had stopped firing, for fear of hitting their own side, so the enemy had no longer been able to pick off the English in the water like ducks on a pond. Ever since then the English had streamed out of the estuary in their hordes, all following the same orders, archers spreading left and right, knights and infantrymen pushing relentlessly forward, so that the French were inundated by sheer weight of numbers. Glancing back at the water, Ralph saw that the tide was now rising again, so those English still in the river were desperate to get out, regardless of the fate that might await them on the beach.

As he was catching his breath, the French lost their nerve. Forced off the beach, chased up the hill, overwhelmed by the army stampeding out of the rising water, they began to retreat. The English pressed forward, hardly able to believe their luck; and, as so often happened, it took remarkably little time for retreat to turn into flight, with every man for himself.

Ralph looked back over the estuary. The baggage train was in midstream, horses and oxen pulling the heavy carts across the ford, lashed by drivers frantic to beat the tide. There was scrappy fighting on the far bank now. The vanguard of King Philippe’s army must have arrived and engaged a few stragglers, and Ralph thought he recognized, in the sunlight, the colors of the Bohemian light cavalry. But they were too late.

He slumped in his saddle, suddenly weak with relief. The battle was over. Incredibly, against all expectations, the English had slipped out of the French trap.

For today, they were safe.

48

Caris and Mair arrived in the vicinity of Abbeville on August 25, and were dismayed to find the French army already there. Tens of thousands of foot soldiers and archers were camped in the fields around the town. On the road they heard, not just regional French accents, but the tongues of places farther afield: Flanders, Bohemia, Italy, Savoy, Majorca.

The French and their allies were chasing King Edward of England and his army—as were Caris and Mair. Caris wondered how she and Mair could ever get ahead in the race.

When they passed through the gates and entered the town, late in the afternoon, the streets were crowded with French noblemen. Caris had never seen such a display of costly clothing, fine weapons, magnificent horses, and new shoes, not even in London. It seemed as if the entire aristocracy of France was here. The innkeepers, bakers, street entertainers, and prostitutes of the town were working nonstop to fulfill the needs of their guests. Every tavern was full of counts and every house had knights sleeping on the floor.

The abbey of St. Peter was on the list of religious houses where Caris and Mair had planned to take shelter. But even if they had still been dressed as nuns they would have had trouble getting into the guest quarters: the king of France was staying there, and his entourage took up all the available space. The two Kingsbridge nuns, disguised now as Christophe de Longchamp and Michel de Longchamp, were directed to the grand abbey church, where several hundred of the king's squires, grooms, and other attendants were bedding down at night on the cold stone floor of the nave. However, the marshal in charge told them there was no room, and they would have to sleep in the fields like everyone else of low station.

The north transept was a hospital for the wounded. On the way out, Caris paused to watch a surgeon sewing up a deep cut on the cheek of a groaning man-at-arms. The surgeon was quick and skillful, and when he had finished Caris said admiringly: "You did that very well."

"Thank you," he said. Glancing at her he added: "But how would you know, laddie?"

She knew because she had watched Matthew Barber at work many times, but she had to make up a story quickly, so she said: "Back in Longchamp, my father is surgeon to the *sieur.*"

"And are you with your *sieur* now?"

"He has been captured by the English, and my lady has sent me and my brother to negotiate his ransom."

"Hmm. You might have done better to go straight to London. If he isn't there now, he soon will be. However, now that you're here, you can earn a

bed for the night by helping me.”

“Gladly.”

“Have you seen your father wash wounds with warm wine?”

Caris could wash wounds in her sleep. In a few moments she and Mair were doing what they knew best, taking care of sick people. Most of the men had been hurt the previous day, in a battle at a ford over the River Somme. Injured noblemen had been attended to first, and now the surgeon was getting around to the common soldiers. They worked nonstop for several hours. The long summer evening turned to twilight, and candles were brought. At last all the bones had been set, the crushed extremities amputated, and the wounds sewn up; and the surgeon, Martin Chirurgien, took them to the refectory for supper.

They were treated as part of the king’s entourage and fed stewed mutton with onions. They had not tasted meat for a week. They even had good red wine. Mair drank with relish. Caris was glad they had the opportunity to build up their strength, but she was still anxious about catching up with the English.

A knight at their table said: “Do you realize that in the abbot’s dining room, next door, four kings and two archbishops are eating supper?” He counted on his fingers as he named them: “The kings of France, Bohemia, Rome, and Majorca, and the archbishops of Rouen and Sens.”

Caris decided she had to see. She went out of the room by the door that seemed to lead to the kitchen. She saw servants carrying laden platters into another room, and peeped through the door.

The men around the table were undoubtedly high-ranking—the board was loaded with roasted fowls, huge joints of beef and mutton, rich puddings, and pyramids of sugared fruits. The man at the head was presumably King Philippe, fifty-three years old, with a scatter of gray hairs in his blond beard. Beside him, a younger man who resembled him was holding forth. “The English are not noblemen,” he said, red-faced with fury. “They are like thieves, who steal in the night and then run away.”

Martin appeared at Caris’s shoulder and murmured in her ear: “That’s my master—Charles, count of Alençon, the king’s brother.”

A new voice said: “I disagree.” Caris saw immediately that the speaker was blind, and concluded that he must be King Jean of Bohemia. “The English cannot run much longer. They are low on food, and they’re tired.”

Charles said: “Edward wants to join forces with the Anglo-Flemish army that has invaded northeast France from Flanders.”

Jean shook his head. “We learned today that that army has gone into retreat. I think Edward has to stand and fight. And, from his point of view, the sooner the better, for his men are only going to become more dispirited as the days go by.”

Charles said excitedly: “Then we may catch them tomorrow. After what

they have done to Normandy, every one of them should die—knights, noblemen, even Edward himself!”

King Philippe put a hand on Charles’s arm, silencing him. “Our brother’s anger is understandable,” he said. “The crimes of the English are disgusting. But remember: when we encounter the enemy, the most important thing is to put aside any differences there may be between us—forget our quarrels and grudges—and trust one another, at least for the course of the battle. We outnumber the English, and we should vanquish them easily—but we must fight together, as one army. Let us drink to unity.”

That was an interesting toast, Caris decided as she discreetly withdrew. Clearly the king could not take it for granted that his allies would act as a team. But what worried her about the conversation was the likelihood that there would be a battle soon, perhaps tomorrow. She and Mair would have to take care not to get mixed up in it.

As they returned to the refectory, Martin said quietly: “Like the king, you have an unruly brother.”

Caris saw that Mair was getting drunk. She was overplaying her boyish role, sitting with her legs splayed and her elbows on the table. “By the saints, that was a good stew, but it’s making me fart like the devil,” said the sweet-faced nun in men’s clothing. “Sorry about the stink, lads.” She refilled her wine cup and drank deeply.

The men laughed at her indulgently, amused by the sight of a boy getting drunk for the first time, doubtless remembering embarrassing incidents in their own pasts.

Caris took her arm. “Time you were in bed, baby brother,” she said. “Off we go.”

Mair went willingly enough. “My big brother acts like an old woman,” she said to the company. “But he loves me—don’t you, Christophe?”

“Yes, Michel, I love you,” Caris said, and the men laughed again.

Mair held on tightly to her. Caris walked her back to the church and found the spot in the nave where they had left their blankets. She made Mair lie down, and covered her with her blanket.

“Kiss me good night, Christophe,” said Mair.

Caris kissed her lips, then said: “You’re drunk. Go to sleep. We have to start early in the morning.”

Caris lay awake for some time, worrying. She felt she had had terribly bad luck. She and Mair had almost caught up with the English army and Bishop Richard—but at exactly the same moment the French had also caught up with them. She should keep well away from the battlefield. On the other hand, if she and Mair got stuck in the rear of the French army they might never catch the English.

On balance she thought she had better set off first thing in the morning,

and try to get ahead of the French. An army this big could not move fast—it would take hours just to form up into marching order. If she and Mair were nimble, they should be able to stay ahead. It was risky—but they had done nothing but take risks since leaving Portsmouth.

She drifted off to sleep, and woke when the bell rang for Matins soon after three o'clock in the morning. She roused Mair, and was unsympathetic when she complained of a headache. While the monks sang psalms in the church, Caris and Mair went to the stables and found their horses. The sky was clear, and they could see by starlight.

The town's bakers had been working all night, so they were able to buy loaves for their journey. But the city gates were still closed: they had to wait impatiently until dawn, shivering in the cool air, eating the new bread.

At about half past four they at last left Abbeville and headed northwest along the right bank of the Somme, the direction the English army was said to be taking.

They were only a quarter of a mile away when the trumpets sounded a reveille on the walls of the town. Like Caris, King Philippe had decided on an early start. In the fields, the soldiers and men-at-arms began to stir. The marshals must have got their orders last night, for they seemed to know what to do, and before long some of the army joined Caris and Mair on the road.

Caris still hoped to reach the English ahead of these troops. The French would obviously have to stop and regroup before joining battle. That ought to give Caris and Mair time to reach their countrymen and find some safe place beyond the battlefield. She did not want to get caught between the two sides. She was beginning to think she had been foolhardy to set out on this mission. Knowing nothing of war, she had not been able to imagine the difficulties and dangers. But it was too late now for regrets. And they had got this far without coming to harm.

The soldiers on the road were not French but Italian. They carried steel crossbows and sheaves of iron arrows. They were friendly, and Caris chatted to them in a mixture of Norman French, Latin, and the Italian she had picked up from Buonaventura Caroli. They told her that in battle they always formed the front line, and fired from behind their heavy wooden pavises, which at the moment were in wagons somewhere behind them. They grumbled about their hasty breakfast, disparaged French knights as impulsive and quarrelsome, and spoke with admiration of their leader, Ottone Doria, who could be seen a few yards ahead.

The sun climbed in the sky and everyone got hot. Because the crossbowmen knew they might do battle today, they were wearing heavy quilted coats and carrying iron helmets and knee guards as well as their bows and arrows. Toward noon, Mair declared that she would faint unless they stopped for a break. Caris, too, felt exhausted—they had been riding since

dawn—and she knew their horses also needed rest. So, against her inclination, she was forced to stop while thousands of crossbowmen overtook them.

Caris and Mair watered their ponies in the Somme and ate some more bread. When they set off again, they found themselves marching with French knights and men-at-arms. Caris recognized Philippe's choleric brother Charles at the head of the group. She was in the thick of the French army, but there was nothing to do but keep moving and hope for a chance to get ahead.

Soon after midday an order came down the line. The English were not west of here, as previously believed, but north; and the French king had ordered that his army should swing in that direction—not in a column, but all at the same time. The men around Caris and Mair, led by Count Charles, turned off the riverside road down a narrow path through the fields. Caris followed with a sinking heart.

A familiar voice hailed her, and Martin Chirurgien came alongside. "This is chaos," he said grimly. "The marching order has completely broken down."

A small group of men on fast horses appeared across the fields and hailed Count Charles. "Scouts," said Martin, and he went forward to hear what they had to say. Caris and Mair's ponies went too, with the natural instinct of horses to stick together.

"The English have halted," they heard. "They've taken up a defensive position on a ridge near the town of Crécy."

Martin said: "That's Henri le Moine, an old comrade of the king of Bohemia."

Charles was pleased by the news. "Then we shall have battle today!" he said, and the knights around him gave a ragged cheer.

Henri raised a hand in caution. "We're suggesting that all units stop and regroup," he said.

"Stop now?" Charles roared. "When the English are at last willing to stand and fight? Let's get at them!"

"Our men and horses need rest," Henri said quietly. "The king is far in the rear. Give him a chance to catch up and look at the battlefield. He can make his dispositions today for an attack tomorrow, when the men will be fresh."

"To hell with dispositions. There are only a few thousand English. We'll just overrun them."

Henri made a helpless gesture. "It is not for me to command you, my lord. But I will ask your brother the king for his orders."

"Ask him! Ask him!" said Charles, and he rode on.

Martin said to Caris: "I don't know why my master is so intemperate."

Caris said thoughtfully: "I suppose he has to prove that he's brave enough to rule, even though by an accident of birth he's not the king."

Martin shot her a sharp look. "You're very wise, for a mere boy."

Caris avoided his eye, and vowed to remember her false identity. There

was no hostility in Martin's voice, but he was suspicious. As a surgeon, he would be familiar with the subtle differences in bone structure between men and women, and he might have noticed that Christophe and Michel de Longchamp were abnormal. Fortunately, he did not press the matter.

The sky began to cloud over, but the air was still warm and humid. Woodland appeared on the left, and Martin told Caris this was the Forest of Crécy. They could not be far from the English—but now Caris wondered how she was going to detach herself from the French and join the English without being killed by one side or the other.

The effect of the forest was to crowd the left flank of the marching army, so that the road on which Caris was riding became jam-packed with troops, the different divisions getting hopelessly mixed up.

Couriers came down the line with new orders from the king: the army was instructed to halt and make camp. Caris's hopes rose: now she would have a chance to get ahead of the French army. There was an altercation between Charles and a courier, and Martin went to Charles's side to listen. He came back looking incredulous. "Count Charles is refusing to obey the orders!" he said.

"Why?" Caris asked in dismay.

"He thinks his brother is overcautious. He, Charles, will not be so lily-livered as to halt before such a weak enemy."

"I thought everyone had to obey the king in battle."

"They should. But nothing is more important to French noblemen than their code of chivalry. They would die rather than do something cowardly."

The army marched on in defiance of its orders. "I'm glad you two are here," Martin said. "I'm going to need your help again. Win or lose, there will be a lot of wounded men by sundown."

Caris realized she could not escape. But somehow she no longer wanted to get away. In fact she felt a strange eagerness. If these men were mad enough to maim one another with swords and arrows, she could at least come to the aid of the wounded.

Soon the crossbowmen's leader, Ottone Doria, came riding back through the crowd—not without difficulty, given the crush—to speak to Charles of Alençon. "Halt your men!" he shouted at the count.

Charles took offense. "How dare you give orders to me!"

"The orders come from the king! We are to halt—but my men can't stop, because of yours pushing from behind!"

"Then let them march on."

"We are within sight of the enemy. If we go any farther we'll have to do battle."

"So be it."

"But the men have been marching all day. They're hungry and thirsty and

tired. And my crossbowmen don't have their pavises."

"Are they too cowardly to fight without shields?"

"Are you calling my men cowards?"

"If they won't fight, yes."

Ottone was quiet for a moment. Then he spoke in a low voice, and Caris could only just hear his words. "You're a fool, Alençon. And you'll be in Hell by nightfall." Then he turned his horse and rode away.

Caris felt water on her face, and looked up at the sky. It was beginning to rain.

49

The shower was heavy but brief and, when it cleared, Ralph looked down over the valley and saw, with a thrill of fear, that the enemy had arrived.

The English occupied a ridge that ran from southwest to northeast. At their backs, to the northwest, was a wood. In front and on both sides the hill sloped down. Their right flank looked over the town of Crécy-en-Ponthieu, which nestled in the valley of the River Maye.

The French were approaching from the south.

Ralph was on the right flank, with Earl Roland's men, commanded by the young prince of Wales. They were drawn up in the harrow formation that had proved so effective against the Scots. To the left and right, triangular formations of archers stood, like the two teeth of a harrow. Between the teeth, set well back, were dismounted knights and men-at-arms. This was a radical innovation, and one which many knights still resisted: they liked their horses and felt vulnerable on foot. But the king was implacable: everyone on foot. In the ground in front of the knights, the men had dug pitfalls—holes in the ground a foot deep and a foot square—to trip the French horses.

On Ralph's right, at the end of the ridge, was a novelty: three new machines called bombards, or cannons, that used explosive powder to shoot round stones. They had been dragged all the way across Normandy but so far had never been fired, and no one was sure whether they would work. Today King Edward needed to use every means at his disposal, for the enemy's superiority was somewhere between four-to-one and seven-to-one.

On the English left flank, the earl of Northampton's men were drawn up in the same harrow formation. Behind the front lines, a third battalion led by the king stood in reserve. Behind the king were two fallback positions. The baggage wagons formed the first, drawn up in a circle, with noncombatants—cooks, engineers, and hostlers—inside the circle with the horses. The second was the wood itself where, in the event of a rout, the remnants of the English

army could flee, and the mounted French knights would find it difficult to follow.

They had been here since early morning, with nothing to eat but pea soup with onions. Ralph was wearing his armor, and had been sweltering in the heat, so the rainstorm had been welcome. It had also muddied the slope up which the French would have to charge, making their approach treacherously slippery.

Ralph could guess what the French tactics would be. The Genoese crossbowmen would shoot from behind their shields, to soften up the English line. Then, when they had done enough damage, they would step aside, and the French knights would charge on their warhorses.

There was nothing so terrifying as that charge. Called the *furor fransiscus*, it was the ultimate weapon of the French nobility. Their code made them disregard their own safety. Those huge horses, with riders so completely armored that they looked like iron men, simply rolled over archers, shields, swords, and men-at-arms.

Of course, it did not always work. The charge could be repulsed, especially where the terrain favored the defenders, as it did here. However, the French were not easily discouraged: they would charge again. And they had such enormous superiority in numbers that Ralph could not see how the English could hold them off indefinitely.

He was scared, but all the same he did not regret being with the army. For seven years he had lived the life of action he had always wanted, in which strong men were kings and the weak counted for nothing. He was twenty-nine, and men of action rarely lived to be old. He had committed foul sins, but had been absolved of them all, most recently this morning, by the bishop of Shiring, who was now standing next to his father, the earl, armed with a vicious-looking mace—priests were not supposed to shed blood, a rule they acknowledged cursorily by using blunt weapons on the battlefield.

The crossbowmen in their white coats reached the foot of the slope. The English archers, who had been sitting down, their arrows stuck point-first into the ground in front of them, now began to stand up and string their bows. Ralph guessed that most of them felt what he did, a mixture of relief that the long wait was over and fear at the thought of the odds against them.

Ralph thought there was plenty of time. He could see that the Genoese did not have the heavy wooden pavises that were an essential element of their tactics. The battle would not start until the shields were brought, he felt sure.

Behind the crossbowmen, thousands of knights were pouring into the valley from the south, spreading left and right behind the crossbowmen. The sun came out again, lighting up the bright colors of their banners and the horses’ coats. Ralph recognized the coat of arms of Charles, count of Alençon, King Philippe’s brother.

The crossbowmen stopped at the foot of the slope. There were thousands of them. As if at a signal, they all gave a terrific shout. Some jumped up in the air. Trumpets sounded.

It was their war cry, meant to terrify the enemy, and it might have worked on some foes, but the English army consisted of experienced fighting men who were at the end of a six-week campaign, and it took more than shouting to scare them. They looked on impassively.

Then, to Ralph's utter astonishment, the Genoese lifted their crossbows and shot.

What were they doing? They had no shields!

The sound was sudden and terrifying, five thousand iron bolts flying through the air. But the crossbowmen were out of range. Perhaps they had failed to take account of the fact that they were shooting uphill; and the afternoon sun behind the English lines must have been shining in their eyes. Whatever the reason, their bolts fell uselessly short.

There was a flash of flame and a crash like thunder from the middle of the English front line. Amazed, Ralph saw smoke rising from where the new bombards were. Their sound was impressive, but when he returned his gaze to the enemy ranks he saw little actual damage. However, many of the crossbowmen were shocked enough to pause in their reloading.

At that moment, the prince of Wales shouted the order for his archers to shoot.

Two thousand longbows were raised. Knowing they were too distant to shoot in a straight line parallel with the ground, the archers aimed into the sky, intuitively plotting a shallow trajectory for their arrows. All the bows bent simultaneously, like blades of wheat in a field blown by a sudden summer breeze; then the arrows were released with a collective sound like a church bell tolling. The shafts, flying faster than the swiftest bird, rose into the air then turned downward and fell on the crossbowmen like a hailstorm.

The enemy ranks were densely packed, and the padded Genoese coats gave little protection. Without their shields, the crossbowmen were horribly vulnerable. Hundreds of them fell dead or wounded.

But that was only the beginning.

While the surviving crossbowmen were rewinding their weapons, the English fired again and again. It took an archer only four or five seconds to pull an arrow from the ground, nock it, draw the bow, take aim, shoot, and reach for another. Experienced, practised men could do it faster. In the space of a minute, twenty thousand arrows fell on the unprotected crossbowmen.

It was a massacre, and the consequence was inevitable: they turned and ran.

In moments the Genoese were out of range, and the English held their fire, laughing at their unexpected triumph and jeering at the enemy. But then

the crossbowmen encountered another hazard. The French knights were moving forward. A dense herd of fleeing crossbowmen came head to head with massed horsemen itching to charge. For a moment there was chaos.

Ralph was amazed to see the enemy begin to fight among themselves. The knights drew their swords and started to hack the bowmen, who discharged their bolts at the knights, then fought on with knives. The French noblemen should have been trying to stop the carnage but, as far as Ralph could see, those in the most expensive armor and riding the largest horses were at the forefront of the fight, attacking their own side with ever-greater fury.

The knights drove the crossbowmen back up the slope until they were again within longbow range. Once again the prince of Wales gave the order for the English archers to shoot. Now the hail of arrows fell among knights as well as bowmen. In seven years of warfare Ralph had seen nothing like this. Hundreds of the enemy lay dead and wounded, and not a single English soldier had been so much as scratched.

At last the French knights retreated, and the remaining crossbowmen scattered. They left the slope below the English position littered with bodies. Welsh and Cornish knifemen ran forward from the English ranks onto the battlefield and began finishing off the French wounded, retrieving undamaged arrows for the longbowmen to reuse, and no doubt robbing the corpses while they were at it. At the same time, boy runners got fresh stocks of arrows from the supply train and brought them to the English front line.

There was a pause, but it did not last long.

The French knights regrouped, reinforced by new arrivals who were appearing in their hundreds and thousands. Peering into their ranks, Ralph could see that the colors of Alençon had been joined by those of Flanders and Normandy. The standard of the count of Alençon moved to the front, then the trumpets sounded, and the horsemen began to move.

Ralph put his faceplate down and drew his sword. He thought of his mother. He knew she prayed for him every time she went to church, and he felt a moment of warm gratitude to her. Then he watched the enemy.

The huge horses were slow to start, encumbered as they were by riders in full plate armor. The setting sun glinted off the French visors, and the flags snapped in the evening breeze. Gradually the pounding of the hooves grew louder and the pace of the charge picked up. The knights yelled encouragement to their mounts and to one another, waving their swords and spears. They came like a wave onto a beach, seeming to get bigger and faster as they got nearer. Ralph’s mouth was dry and his heart beat like a big drum.

They came within bowshot, and again the prince gave the order to shoot. Once more, the arrows rose into the air and fell like deadly rain.

The charging knights were fully armored, and it was a lucky shot indeed

that found the weak spot in the joints between plates. But their mounts had only faceplates and chain-mail neck cowls. So it was the horses that were vulnerable. When the arrows pierced their shoulders and their haunches, some stopped dead, some fell, and some turned and tried to flee. The screams of beasts in pain filled the air. Collisions between horses caused more knights to fall to the ground, joining the bodies of Genoese crossbowmen. Those behind were going too fast to take evasive action, so they just rode over the fallen.

But there were thousands of knights, and they kept coming.

The range shortened for the archers, and their trajectory flattened. When the charge was a hundred yards away, they switched to a different type of arrow, with a flattened steel tip for punching through armor, instead of a point. Now they could kill the riders, although a shot that hit a horse was almost as good.

The ground was already wet with rain, and now the charge encountered the pitfalls dug earlier by the English. The horses' momentum was such that few of them could step into a hole a foot deep without stumbling, and many fell, pitching their riders onto the ground in the path of other horses.

The oncoming knights shied away from the archers so, as the English had planned, the charge was funneled into a narrow killing field, fired upon from left and right.

This was the key to the English tactics. At this point, the wisdom of forcing the English knights to dismount became clear. If they had been on horseback, they could not have resisted the urge to charge—and then the archers would have had to cease shooting, for fear of killing their own side. But, because the knights and men-at-arms remained in their lines, the enemy could be slaughtered wholesale, with no casualties on the English side.

But it was not enough. The French were too numerous and too brave. Still they came on, and at last they reached the line of dismounted knights and men-at-arms in the fork between the two masses of archers, and the real fighting began.

The horses trampled over the front ranks of English, but their charge had been slowed by the muddy uphill slope, and they were brought up short by the densely packed English line. Ralph was suddenly in the thick of it, avoiding deadly downward blows from mounted knights, swinging his sword at the legs of their horses, aiming to cripple the beasts by the easiest and most reliable method, cutting their hamstrings. The fighting was fierce: the English had nowhere to go, and the French knew that if they retreated they would have to ride back through the same lethal hail of arrows.

Men fell all around Ralph, hacked down by swords and battleaxes, then tramped by the mighty iron-shod hooves of the warhorses. He saw Earl Roland go down to a French sword. Roland's son, Bishop Richard, swung his mace to protect his fallen father, but a warhorse shouldered Richard aside, and

the earl was trampled.

The English were forced back, and Ralph realized that the French had a target: the prince of Wales.

Ralph had no affection for the privileged sixteen-year-old heir to the throne, but he knew it would be a crushing blow to English morale if the prince were captured or killed. Ralph moved back and to his left, joining several others who thickened the shield of fighting men around the prince. But the French intensified their efforts, and they were on horseback.

Then Ralph found himself fighting shoulder-to-shoulder with the prince, recognizing him by his quartered surcoat, with fleurs-de-lis on a blue background and heraldic lions on red. A moment later, a French horseman swung at the prince with an axe, and the prince fell to the ground.

It was a bad moment.

Ralph sprang forward and lunged at the attacker, sliding his long sword into the man's armpit, where the armor was jointed. He had the satisfaction of feeling the point penetrate flesh, and saw blood spurt from the wound.

Someone else straddled the fallen prince and swung a big sword two-handed at men and horses alike. Ralph saw that it was the prince's standard-bearer, Richard FitzSimon, who had dropped the flag over his supine master. For a few moments Richard and Ralph fought savagely to defend the king's son, not knowing if he was alive or dead.

Then reinforcements arrived. The earl of Arundel appeared with a large force of men-at-arms, all fresh to the fight. The newcomers joined the battle with vigor, and they turned the tables. The French began to fall back.

The prince of Wales got to his knees. Ralph put up his visor and helped the prince to his feet. The boy seemed to be hurt, but not seriously, and Ralph turned away and fought on.

A moment later the French broke. Despite the lunacy of their tactics, their courage had almost enabled them to sever the English line—but not quite. Now they fled, many more falling as they ran the gauntlet of archers, stumbling down the bloody slope back to their own lines; and a cheer went up from the English, weary but jubilant.

Once again the Welsh invaded the battlefield, cutting the throats of the wounded and collecting thousands of arrows. The archers, too, picked up spent shafts to replenish their stocks. From the rear, cooks appeared with jugs of beer and wine, and surgeons rushed to attend injured noblemen.

Ralph saw William of Caster bend over Earl Roland. Roland was breathing, but his eyes were closed and he looked near to death.

Ralph wiped his bloody sword on the ground and put his visor up to drink a tankard of ale. The prince of Wales approached him and said: "What's your name?"

"Ralph Fitzgerald of Wigleigh, my lord."

“You fought bravely. You shall be Sir Ralph tomorrow, if the king listens to me.”

Ralph glowed with pleasure. “Thank you, lord.”

The prince nodded graciously and moved away.

50

Caris watched the early stages of the battle from the far side of the valley. She saw the Genoese crossbowmen try to flee, only to be cut down by knights of their own side. Then she saw the first great charge, with the colors of Charles of Alençon leading thousands of knights and men-at-arms.

She had never seen battle, and she was utterly sickened. Hundreds of knights fell to the English arrows, to be trampled by the hooves of the great warhorses. She was too far away to be able to follow the hand-to-hand fighting, but she saw the swords flash and the men fall, and she wanted to weep. As a nun, she had seen severe injuries—men who had fallen from high scaffolding, hurt themselves with sharp tools, suffered hunting accidents—and she always felt the pain and the waste of a lost hand, a crushed leg, a damaged brain. To see men inflicting such wounds on one another intentionally revolted her.

For a long time it seemed the fight could go either way. If she had been at home, hearing news of the war from afar, she might have hoped for an English victory; but after what she had seen in the last two weeks she felt a sort of disgusted neutrality. She could not identify with the English who had murdered peasants and burned their crops, and it made no difference to her that they had committed these atrocities in Normandy. Of course, they would say the French deserved what they got because they had burned Portsmouth, but that was a stupid way to think—so stupid that it led to scenes of horror such as this.

The French retreated, and she assumed they would regroup and reorganize, and wait for the king to arrive to develop a new battle plan. They still had overwhelming superiority in numbers, she could see: there were tens of thousands of troops in the valley, with more still arriving.

But the French did not regroup. Instead, every new battalion that arrived went straight into the attack, throwing themselves suicidally up the hill at the English position. The second and subsequent charges fared worse than the first. Some were cut down by archers even before they reached the English lines; the rest were beaten off by foot soldiers. The slope below the ridge became shiny with the gushing blood of hundreds of men and horses.

After the first charge, Caris looked only occasionally at the battle. She

was too busy tending those French wounded who were lucky enough to be able to leave the field. Martin Chirurgien had realized that she was as good a surgeon as he. Giving her free access to his instruments, he left her and Mair to work independently. They washed, sewed, and bandaged hour after hour.

News of prominent casualties came back to them from the front line. Charles of Alençon was the first high-ranking fatality. Caris could not help feeling that he deserved his fate. She had witnessed his foolish enthusiasm and careless indiscipline. Hours later, King Jean of Bohemia was reported dead, and she wondered what madness drove a blind man to battle.

“In God’s name, why don’t they stop?” she said to Martin when he brought her a cup of ale to refresh her.

“Fear,” he replied. “They’re scared of disgrace. To leave the field without striking a blow would be shameful. They would prefer to die.”

“A lot of them have had that wish granted,” said Caris grimly, and she emptied her tankard and went back to work. Her knowledge and understanding of the human body was growing by leaps and bounds, she reflected. She saw inside every part of a living man: the brains beneath shattered skulls, the pipework of the throat, the muscles of the arms sliced open, the heart and lungs within smashed rib cages, the slimy tangle of the intestines, the articulation of the bones at hip and knee and ankle. She discovered more in an hour on the battlefield than in a year at the priory hospital. This was how Matthew Barber had learned so much, she realized. No wonder he was confident.

The carnage continued until night fell. The English lit torches, afraid of a sneak attack under cover of darkness. But Caris could have told them they were safe. The French were routed. She could hear the calls of French soldiers searching the battlefield for fallen kinsmen and comrades. The king, who had arrived in time to join one of the last hopeless charges, left the field. After that the exit became general.

A fog came up from the river, filling the valley and obscuring the distant flares. Once again, Caris and Mair worked by firelight long into the night, patching up the wounded. All those who could walk or hobble left as soon as they could, putting as much distance as possible between themselves and the English, hoping to avoid tomorrow’s inevitable bloodthirsty mopping-up operation. When Caris and Mair had done all they could for the victims, they slipped away.

This was their chance.

They located their ponies and led them forward by the light of a burning torch. They reached the bottom of the valley and found themselves in noman's-land. Hidden by fog and darkness, they slipped out of their boys' clothing. For a moment they were terribly vulnerable, two naked women in the middle of a battlefield. But no one could see them, and a second later they were pulling their nuns' robes over their heads. They packed up their male garments in case they should need them again: it was a long way home.

Caris decided to abandon the torch, in case an English archer should take it into his head to shoot at the light and ask questions afterward. Holding hands so that they would not get separated they went forward, still leading the horses. They could see nothing: the fog obscured whatever light might have come from moon or stars. They headed uphill toward the English lines. There was a smell like a butcher's shop. So many bodies of horses and men covered the ground that they could not walk around them. They had to grit their teeth and step on the corpses. Soon their shoes were covered with a mixture of mud and blood.

The bodies on the ground thinned out, and soon there were none. Caris began to feel a deep sense of relief as she approached the English army. She and Mair had traveled hundreds of miles, lived rough for two weeks, and risked their lives, for this moment. She had almost forgotten the outrageous theft by Prior Godwyn of one hundred and fifty pounds from the nuns' treasury—the reason for her journey. Somehow it seemed less important after all this bloodshed. Still, she would appeal to Bishop Richard and win justice for the nunnery.

The walk seemed farther than Caris had imagined when she looked across the valley in daylight. She wondered nervously if she had become disoriented. She might have turned in the wrong direction and just walked straight past the English. Perhaps the army was now behind her. She strained to hear some noise—ten thousand men could not be silent, even if most of them had fallen into exhausted sleep—but the fog muffled sound.

She clung to the conviction that, as King Edward had positioned his forces on the highest land, she must be approaching him as long as she was walking uphill. But the blindness was unnerving. If there had been a precipice, she would have stepped right over it.

The light of dawn was turning the fog to the color of pearl when at last she heard a voice. She stopped. It was a man speaking in a low murmur. Mair squeezed her hand nervously. Another man spoke. She could not make out the language. She feared that she might have walked in a full circle and arrived back on the French side.

She turned toward the voice, still holding Mair's hand. The red glow of flames became visible through the gray mist, and she headed for it gratefully. As she came nearer, she heard the talk more clearly, and realized with

immense relief that the men were speaking English. A moment later she made out a group of men around a fire. Several lay asleep, rolled in blankets, but three sat upright, legs crossed, looking into the flames, talking. A moment later Caris saw a man standing, peering into the fog, presumably on sentry duty, though the fact that he had not noticed her approach proved his job was impossible.

To get their attention, Caris said in a low voice: “God bless you, men of England.”

She startled them. One gave a shout of fear. The sentry said belatedly: “Who goes there?”

“Two nuns from Kingsbridge Priory,” Caris said. The men stared at her in superstitious dread, and she realized they thought she might be an apparition. “Don’t worry, we’re flesh and blood, and so are these ponies.”

“Did you say Kingsbridge?” said one of them in surprise. “I know you,” he said, standing up. “I’ve seen you before.”

Caris recognized him. “Lord William of Caster,” she said.

“I am the earl of Shiring, now,” he said. “My father died of his wounds an hour ago.”

“May his soul rest in peace. We have come here to see your brother, Bishop Richard, who is our abbot.”

“You’re too late,” William said. “My brother, too, is dead.”

Later in the morning, when the fog had lifted and the battlefield looked like a sunlit slaughterhouse, Earl William took Caris and Mair to see King Edward.

Everyone was astonished at the tale of the two nuns who had followed the English army all through Normandy, and soldiers who had faced death only yesterday were fascinated by their adventures. William told Caris that the king would want to hear the story from her own lips.

Edward III had been king for nineteen years, but he was still only thirty-three years old. Tall and broad-shouldered, he was imposing rather than handsome, with a face that might have been molded for power: a big nose, high cheekbones, and luxuriant long hair just beginning to recede from his high forehead. Caris saw why people called him a lion.

He sat on a stool in front of his tent, fashionably dressed in two-colored hose and a cape with a scalloped border. He wore no armor or weapons: the French had vanished, and in fact a force of vengeful troops had been sent out to hunt down and kill any stragglers. A handful of barons stood around.

As Caris told how she and Mair had sought food and shelter in the devastated landscape of Normandy, she wondered if the king felt criticized by her tale of hardship. However, he seemed not to think the sufferings of the people reflected on him. He was as delighted with her exploits as if he were

hearing of someone who had been brave during a shipwreck.

She ended by telling him of her disappointment on finding, after all her travails, that Bishop Richard, from whom she had hoped for justice, was dead. “I beg Your Majesty to order the prior of Kingsbridge to restore to the nuns the money he stole.”

Edward smiled ruefully. “You’re a brave woman, but you know nothing of politics,” he said with condescension. “The king can’t get involved in an ecclesiastical quarrel such as this. We would have all our bishops banging on our door in protest.”

That might be so, Caris reflected, but it did not prevent the king interfering with the church when it suited his own purposes. However, she said nothing.

Edward went on: “And it would do your cause harm. The church would be so outraged that every cleric in the land would oppose our ruling, regardless of its merits.”

There might be something in that, she judged. But he was not as powerless as he pretended. “I know you will remember the wronged nuns of Kingsbridge,” she said. “When you appoint the new bishop of Kingsbridge, please tell him our story.”

“Of course,” said the king, but Caris had the feeling he would forget.

The interview seemed to be over, but then William said: “Your Majesty, now that you have graciously confirmed my elevation to my father’s earldom, there is the question of who is to be lord of Caster.”

“Ah, yes. Our son the prince of Wales suggests Sir Ralph Fitzgerald, who was knighted yesterday for saving his life.”

Caris murmured: “Oh, no!”

The king did not hear her, but William did, and he obviously felt the same way. He was not quite able to hide his indignation as he said: “Ralph was an outlaw, guilty of numerous thefts, murders, and rapes, until he obtained a royal pardon by joining your majesty’s army.”

The king was not as moved by this as Caris expected. He said: “All the same, Ralph has fought with us for seven years now. He has earned a second chance.”

“Indeed he has,” William said diplomatically. “But, given the trouble we’ve had with him in the past, I’d like to see him settle down peacefully for a year of two before he’s ennobled.”

“Well, you will be his overlord, so you’ll have to deal with him,” Edward granted. “We won’t impose him on you against your will. However, the prince is keen that he should have some further reward.” The king thought for a few moments, then said: “Don’t you have a cousin who is eligible for marriage?”

“Yes, Matilda,” said William. “We call her Tilly.”

Caris knew Tilly. She was at the nunnery school.

“That’s right,” said Edward. “She was your father Roland’s ward. Her father had three villages near Shiring.”

“Your Majesty has a good memory for detail.”

“Marry Lady Matilda to Ralph and give him her father’s villages,” said the king.

Caris was appalled. “But she’s only twelve!” she burst out.

William said to her: “Hush!”

King Edward turned a cold gaze on her. “The children of the nobility must grow up fast, Sister. Queen Philippa was fourteen when I married her.”

Caris knew she should shut up, but she could not. Tilly was only four years older than the daughter she might have had, if she had given birth to Merthin’s baby. “There’s a big difference between twelve and fourteen,” she said desperately.

The young king became even more frosty. “In the royal presence, people give their opinions only when asked. And the king almost never asks for the opinions of women.”

Caris realized she had taken the wrong tack. Her objection to the marriage was not based on Tilly’s age so much as Ralph’s character. “I know Tilly,” she said. “You can’t marry her to that brute Ralph.”

Mair said in a scared whisper: “Caris! Remember who you’re speaking to!”

Edward looked at William. “Take her away, Shiring, before she says something that cannot be overlooked.”

William took Caris’s arm and firmly marched her out of the royal presence. Mair followed. Behind them, Caris heard the king say: “I can see how she survived in Normandy—the locals must have been terrified of her.” The noblemen around him laughed.

“You must be mad!” William hissed.

“Must I?” Caris said. They were out of earshot of the king now, and she raised her voice. “In the last six weeks the king has caused the deaths of thousands of men, women, and children, and burned their crops and their homes. And I have tried to save a twelve-year-old girl from being married to a murderer. Tell me again, Lord William, which of us is mad?”

51

In the year 1347 the peasants of Wigleigh suffered a poor harvest. The villagers did what they always did in such times: they ate less food, postponed the purchase of hats and belts, and slept closer together for warmth. Old Widow Huberts died earlier than expected; Janey Jones succumbed to a cough

that she might have survived in a good year; and Joanna David's new baby, who might otherwise have had a chance, failed to make it to his first birthday.

Gwenda kept an anxious eye on her two little boys. Sam, the eight-year-old, was big for his age, and strong: he had Wulfric's physique, people said, though Gwenda knew that in truth he was like his real father, Ralph Fitzgerald. Even so, Sam was visibly thinner by December. David, named after Wulfric's brother who had died when the bridge collapsed, was six. He resembled Gwenda, being small and dark. The poor diet had weakened him, and all through the autumn he suffered minor ailments: a cold, then a skin rash, then a cough.

All the same, she took the boys with her when she went with Wulfric to finish sowing the winter wheat on Perkin's land. A bitterly cold wind swept across the open fields. She dropped seeds into the furrows, and Sam and David chased off the daring birds who tried to snatch the corn before Wulfric turned the earth over. As they ran, and jumped, and shouted, Gwenda marveled that these two fully functioning miniature human beings had come from inside her body. They turned the chasing of the birds into some kind of competitive game, and she delighted in the miracle of their imagination. Once part of her, they were now able to have thoughts she did not know about.

Mud clung to their feet as they tramped up and down. A fast-running stream bordered the big field, and on the far bank stood the fulling mill Merthin had built nine years ago. The distant rumble of its pounding wooden hammers accompanied their work. The mill was run by two eccentric brothers, Jack and Eli—both unmarried men with no land—and an apprentice boy who was their nephew. They were the only villagers who had not suffered on account of the bad harvest: Mark Webber paid them the same wages all winter long.

It was a short midwinter day. Gwenda and her family finished sowing just as the gray sky began to darken, and the twilight gathered mistily in the distant woods. They were all tired.

There was half a sack of seed leftover, so they took it to Perkin's house. As they approached the place, they saw Perkin himself coming from the opposite direction. He was walking beside a cart on which his daughter, Annet, was riding. They had been to Kingsbridge to sell the last of the year's apples and pears from Perkin's trees.

Annet still retained her girlish figure, although she was now twenty-eight, and had had a child. She called attention to her youthfulness with a dress that was a little too short and a hairstyle that was charmingly disarrayed. She looked silly, Gwenda thought. Her opinion was shared by every woman in the village and none of the men.

Gwenda was shocked to see that Perkin's cart was full of fruit. "What happened?" she said.

Perkin's face was grim. "Kingsbridge folk are having a hard winter just like us," he said. "They've no money to buy apples. We shall have to make cider with this lot."

That was bad news. Gwenda had never known Perkin to come home from the market with so much unsold produce.

Annet seemed unworried. She held out a hand to Wulfric, who helped her down from the cart. As she stepped to the ground, she stumbled, and fell against him with her hand on his chest. "Oops!" she said, and smiled at him as she recovered her balance. Wulfric flushed with pleasure.

You blind idiot, Gwenda thought.

They went inside. Perkin sat at the table, and his wife, Peggy, brought him a bowl of pottage. He cut a thick slice from the loaf on the board. Peggy served her own family next. Annet, her husband Billy Howard, Annet's brother Rob, and Rob's wife. She gave a little to Annet's four-year-old daughter, Amabel, and to Rob's two small boys. Then she invited Wulfric and his family to sit down.

Gwenda spooned up the broth hungrily. It was thicker than the pottage she made: Peggy was putting stale bread in, whereas in Gwenda's house the bread never lasted long enough to go stale. Perkin's family got cups of ale, but Gwenda and Wulfric were not offered any: hospitality went only so far in hard times.

Perkin was jocular with his customers, but otherwise a sourpuss, and the atmosphere in his house was always more or less dismal. He talked in a disheartened way about the Kingsbridge market. Most of the traders had had a bad day. The only ones doing any business were those who sold essentials such as corn, meat, and salt. No one was buying the now-famous Kingsbridge Scarlet cloth.

Peggy lit a lamp. Gwenda wanted to go home, but she and Wulfric were waiting for their wages. The boys began to misbehave, running around the room and bumping into adults. "It's getting near their bedtime," said Gwenda, though it was not really.

At last Wulfric said: "If you'll give us our wages, Perkin, we'll leave."

"I haven't got any money," Perkin said.

Gwenda stared at him. He had never said anything like this in the nine years she and Wulfric had been working for him.

Wulfric said: "We must have our wages. We've got to eat."

"You've had some pottage, haven't you?" Perkin said.

Gwenda was outraged. "We work for money, not pottage!"

"Well, I haven't got any money," Perkin repeated. "I went to market to sell my apples, but no one bought them, so I've got more apples than we can eat, and no money."

Gwenda was so shocked that she did not know what to say. It had never

occurred to her that Perkin might not pay them. She felt a stab of fear as she realized there was nothing she could do about it.

Wulfric said slowly: “Well, what’s to be done about it? Shall we go to the Long Field and take the seeds back out of the ground?”

“I’ll have to owe you this week’s wages,” Perkin said. “I’ll pay you when things get better.”

“And next week?”

“I won’t have any money next week, either—where do you think it’s to come from?”

Gwenda said: “We’ll go to Mark Webber. Perhaps he can employ us at the fulling mill.”

Perkin shook his head. “I spoke to him yesterday, in Kingsbridge, and asked if he could hire you. He said no. He’s not selling enough cloth. He’ll continue to employ Jack and Eli and the boy, and stockpile the cloth until trade picks up, but he can’t take on any extra hands.”

Wulfric was bewildered. “How are we to live? How will you get your spring plowing done?”

“You can work for food,” Perkin offered.

Wulfric looked at Gwenda. She choked back a scornful retort. She and her family were in deep trouble, and this was not the moment to antagonize anyone. She thought fast. They did not have much choice: eat or starve. “We’ll work for food, and you’ll owe us the money,” she said.

Perkin shook his head. “What you’re suggesting may be fair—”

“It is fair!”

“All right, it is fair, but just the same I can’t do it. I don’t know when I’ll have the money. Why, I could owe you a pound come Whitsun! You can work for food, or not at all.”

“You’ll have to feed all four of us.”

“Yes.”

“But only Wulfric will work.”

“I don’t know—”

“A family wants more than food. Children need clothes. A man must have boots. If you can’t pay me, I will have to find some other way of providing such things.”

“How?”

“I don’t know.” She paused. The truth was, she had no idea. She fought down panic. “I may have to ask my father how he manages.”

Peggy put in: “I wouldn’t do that, if I were you—Joby will tell you to steal.”

Gwenda was stung. What right did Peggy have to take a supercilious attitude? Joby had never employed people then told them at the end of the week that he could not pay them. But she bit her tongue and said mildly: “He

fed me through eighteen winters, even if he did sell me to outlaws at the end."

Peggy tossed her head and abruptly began to pick up the bowls from the table.

Wulfric said: "We should go."

Gwenda did not move. Whatever advantages she could gain had to be won now. When she left this house, Perkin would consider that a bargain had been struck, and could not be renegotiated. She thought hard. Remembering how Peggy had given ale only to her own family, she said: "You won't fob us off with stale fish and watery beer. You'll feed us exactly the same as yourself and your family—meat, bread, ale, whatever it may be."

Peggy made a deprecating noise. She had been planning to do just what Gwenda feared, it seemed.

Gwenda added: "That is, if you want Wulfric to do the same work as you and Rob." They all knew perfectly well that Wulfric did more work than Rob and twice as much as Perkin.

"All right," Perkin said.

"And this is strictly an emergency arrangement. As soon as you get money, you have to start paying us again at the old rate—a penny a day each."

"Yes."

There was a short silence. Wulfric said: "Is that it?"

"I think so," Gwenda said. "You and Perkin should shake hands on the bargain."

They shook hands.

Taking their children, Gwenda and Wulfric left. It was now full dark. Clouds hid the stars, and they had to make their way by the glimmer of light shining through cracks in shutters and around doors. Fortunately they had walked from Perkin's house to their own a thousand times before.

Wulfric lit a lamp and built up the fire while Gwenda put the boys to bed. Although there were bedrooms upstairs—they were still living in the large house that had been occupied by Wulfric's parents—nevertheless they all slept in the kitchen, for warmth.

Gwenda felt depressed as she wrapped the boys in blankets and settled them near the fire. She had grown up determined not to live the way her mother did, in constant worry and want. She had aspired to independence: a patch of land, a hardworking husband, a reasonable lord. Wulfric yearned to get back the land his father had farmed. In all those aspirations they had failed. She was a pauper, and her husband a landless laborer whose employer could not even pay him a penny a day. She had ended up exactly like her mother, she thought; and she felt too bitter for tears.

Wulfric took a pottery bottle from a shelf and poured ale into a wooden cup. "Enjoy it," Gwenda said sourly. "You won't be able to buy your own ale for a while."

Wulfric said conversationally: “It’s amazing that Perkin has no money. He’s the richest man in the village, apart from Nathan Reeve.”

“Perkin has money,” Gwenda said. “There’s a jar of silver pennies under his fireplace. I’ve seen it.”

“Then why won’t he pay us?”

“He doesn’t want to dip into his savings.”

Wulfric was taken aback. “But he could pay us, if he wanted to?”

“Of course.”

“Then why am I going to work for food?”

Gwenda let out an impatient grunt. Wulfric was so slow on the uptake. “Because the alternative was no work at all.”

Wulfric was feeling that they had been hoodwinked. “We should have insisted on payment.”

“Then why didn’t you?”

“I didn’t know about the jar of pennies under the fireplace.”

“For God’s sake, do you think a man as rich as Perkin can be impoverished by failing to sell one cartload of apples? He’s been the largest landholder in Wigleigh ever since he got hold of your father’s acres ten years ago. Of course he has savings!”

“Yes, I see that.”

She stared into the fire while he finished the ale, then they went to bed. He put his arms around her, and she rested her head on his chest, but she did not want to make love. She was too angry. She told herself she should not take it out on her husband: Perkin had let them down, not Wulfric. But she *was* angry with Wulfric—furious. As she sensed him drifting off to sleep, she realized that her anger was not about their wages. That was the kind of misfortune that afflicted everyone from time to time, like bad weather and barley mold.

What, then?

She recalled the way Annet had fallen against Wulfric as she stepped down from the cart. When she remembered Annet’s coquettish smile, and Wulfric’s flush of pleasure, she wanted to slap his face. I’m angry with you, she thought, because that worthless, empty-headed flirt can still make you look such a damn fool.

On the Sunday before Christmas, a manor court was held in the church after the service. It was cold, and the villagers huddled together, wrapped in cloaks and blankets. Nathan Reeve was in charge. The lord of the manor, Ralph Fitzgerald, had not been seen in Wigleigh for years. So much the better, Gwenda thought. Besides, he was Sir Ralph now, with three other villages in his fiefdom, so he would not take much interest in ox teams and cow pasture.

Alfred Shorthouse had died during the week. He was a childless widower with ten acres. “He has no natural heirs,” said Nate Reeve. “Perkin is willing to take over his land.”

Gwenda was surprised. How could Perkin think of taking on more land? She was too startled to respond immediately, and Aaron Appletree, the bagpipe player, spoke first. “Alfred has been in poor health since the summer,” he said. “He’s done no autumn plowing and sown no winter wheat. All the work is to be done. Perkin will have his hands full.”

Nate said aggressively: “Are you asking for the land yourself?”

Aaron shook his head. “In a few more years, when my boys are big enough to help, I’ll jump at such a chance,” he said. “I couldn’t handle it now.”

“I can manage it,” Perkin said.

Gwenda frowned. Nate obviously wanted Perkin to have the land. No doubt a bribe had been promised. She had known all along that Perkin had money. But she had little interest in exposing Perkin’s duplicity. She was thinking of how she could exploit this situation to her advantage, and get her family out of poverty.

Nate said: “You could take on another laborer, Perkin.”

“Wait a minute,” Gwenda said. “Perkin can’t pay the laborers he’s got now. How can he take on more land?”

Perkin was taken aback, but he could hardly deny what Gwenda was saying, so he remained silent.

Nate said: “Well, who else can cope with it?”

Gwenda said quickly: “We’ll take it.”

Nate looked surprised.

She added quickly: “Wulfric is working for food. I have no work. We need land.”

She noticed several nodding heads. No one in the village liked what Perkin had done. They all feared that one day they might end up in the same situation.

Nate saw the danger of his plan going awry. “You can’t afford the entry fee,” he said.

“We’ll pay it a little at a time.”

Nate shook his head. “I want a tenant who can pay right away.” He looked around the assembled villagers. However, no one volunteered. “David Johns?”

David was a middle-aged man whose sons had land of their own. “I would have said yes a year ago,” he said. “But the rain at harvest time knocked me back.”

The offer of an extra ten acres would normally have had the more ambitious villagers fighting among themselves, but it was a bad year. Gwenda

and Wulfric were different. For one thing, Wulfric had never ceased to long for land of his own. Alfred's acres were not Wulfric's birthright, but they were better than nothing. Anyway, Gwenda and Wulfric were desperate.

Aaron Appletree said: "Give it to Wulfric, Nate. He's a hard worker, he'll get the plowing done in time. And he and his wife deserve some good luck—they've had more than their fair share of bad."

Nate looked bad-tempered, but there was a loud rumble of assent from the peasants. Wulfric and Gwenda were well respected despite their poverty.

This was a rare combination of circumstances that could get Gwenda and her family started on the road to a better life, and she felt growing excitement as it began to seem possible.

But Nate was still looking dubious. "Sir Ralph hates Wulfric," he said.

Wulfric's hand went to his cheek, and he touched the scar made by Ralph's sword.

"I know," said Gwenda. "But Ralph's not here."

52

When Earl Roland died the day after the battle of Crécy, several people moved a step up the ladder. His elder son, William, became the earl, overlord of the county of Shiring, answerable to the king. A cousin of William's, Sir Edward Courthose, became lord of Caster, took over the rule of the forty villages of that fiefdom as a subtenant of the earl, and moved into William and Philippa's old house in Casterham. And Sir Ralph Fitzgerald became lord of Tench.

For the next eighteen months, none of them went home. They were all too busy traveling with the king and killing French people. Then, in 1347, the war reached a stalemate. The English captured and held the valuable port city of Calais, but otherwise there was little to show for a decade of war—except, of course, a great deal of booty.

In January 1348 Ralph took possession of his new property. Tench was a large village with a hundred peasant families, and the manor included two smaller villages nearby. He also retained Wigleigh, which was half a day's ride away.

Ralph felt a thrill of pride as he rode through Tench. He had looked forward to this moment. The serfs bowed and their children stared. He was lord of every person and owner of every object in the place.

The house was set in a compound. Riding in, followed by a cart loaded with French loot, Ralph saw immediately that the defensive walls had long ago fallen into disrepair. He wondered whether he should restore them. The

burghers of Normandy had neglected their defenses, by and large, and that had made it relatively easy for Edward III to overrun them. On the other hand, the likelihood of an invasion of southern England was now very small. Early in the war, most of the French fleet had been wiped out at the port of Sluys, and thereafter the English had controlled the sea channel that separated the two countries. Apart from minor raids by freelance pirates, every battle since Sluys had been fought on French soil. On balance it hardly seemed worthwhile to rebuild the compound walls.

Several grooms appeared and took the horses. Ralph left Alan Fernhill to supervise the unloading, and walked toward his new house. He was limping: his injured leg always hurt after a long ride. Tench Hall was a stone-built manor house. It was impressive, he noted with satisfaction, though it needed repairs—not surprisingly, for it had remained unoccupied since Lady Matilda's father died. However, it was modern in design. In old-fashioned houses, the lord's private chamber was an afterthought stuck on to the end of the all-important great hall, but Ralph could see, from the outside, that here the domestic apartments took up half the building.

He entered the hall, and was annoyed to find Earl William there.

At the far end of the room was a large chair made of dark wood, elaborately carved with powerful symbols: angels and lions on the back and arms, snakes and monsters on the legs. It was obviously the chair of the lord of the manor. But William was sitting in it.

Much of Ralph's pleasure evaporated. He could not enjoy his mastery of the new manor under the scrutiny of his own overlord. It would be like going to bed with a woman while her husband listened outside the door.

He masked his displeasure and formally greeted Earl William. The earl introduced the man standing next to him. "This is Daniel, who has been bailiff here for twenty years, and has taken good care of the place, on my father's behalf, during Tilly's minority."

Ralph acknowledged the bailiff stiffly. William's message was clear: he wanted Ralph to let Daniel continue in the job. But Daniel had been Earl Roland's man and now he would be Earl William's. Ralph had no intention of letting his domain be managed by the earl's man. His bailiff would be loyal to him alone.

William waited expectantly for Ralph to say something about Daniel. However, Ralph was not going to have that discussion. Ten years ago he would have jumped feet first into an argument, but he had learned a lot in the time he had spent with the king. He was not obliged to get his earl's approval for his choice of bailiff, so he would not seek it. He would say nothing until William had gone, then he would tell Daniel he was being assigned to other duties.

Both William and Ralph remained stubbornly silent for a few moments,

then the deadlock was broken. A large door opened at the domestic end of the hall and the tall, elegant figure of Lady Philippa came in. It was many years since Ralph had seen her, but his youthful passion returned with a shock that felt like a punch, leaving him breathless. She was older—she had to be forty, he guessed—but she was in her prime. Perhaps she was a little heavier than he remembered, her hips more rounded, her breasts fuller, but that only added to her allure. She still walked like a queen. As always, the sight of her made him ask resentfully why he could not have a wife like that.

In the past she had barely deigned to notice his presence, but today she smiled and shook his hand and said: “Are you getting to know Daniel?”

She, too, wanted him to continue to employ the earl’s retainer—that was why she was being courteous. All the more reason to get rid of the man, he thought with secret relish. “I’ve just arrived,” he said noncommittally.

Philippa explained their presence. “We wanted to be here when you met young Tilly—she’s part of our family.”

Ralph had commanded the nuns of Kingsbridge Priory to bring his fiancée here to meet him today. Interfering busybodies, the nuns had obviously told Earl William what was happening. “Lady Matilda was the ward of Earl Roland, rest his soul,” Ralph said, emphasizing that the wardship had ended with Roland’s death.

“Yes—and I would have expected the king to transfer her wardship to my husband, as Roland’s heir.” Clearly Philippa would have preferred that.

“But he did not,” Ralph said. “He gave her to me to wed.” Although no ceremony had yet taken place, the girl had immediately become Ralph’s responsibility. Strictly speaking, William and Philippa had no business to invite themselves here today, as if playing the role of Tilly’s parents. But William was Ralph’s overlord, so he could visit whenever he pleased.

Ralph did not want to quarrel with William. It was too easy for William to make Ralph’s life difficult. On the other hand, the new earl was overreaching his authority here—probably under pressure from his wife. But Ralph was not going to be bullied. The last seven years had given him the confidence to defend such independence as he was entitled to.

Anyway, he was enjoying crossing swords with Philippa. It gave him an excuse to stare at her. He rested his gaze on the assertive line of her jaw and the fullness of her lips. Despite her hauteur, she was forced to engage with him. This was the longest conversation he had ever had with her.

“Tilly is very young,” said Philippa.

“She will be fourteen this year,” Ralph said. “That’s the age our queen was when she married our king—as the king himself pointed out, to me and to Earl William, after the battle of Crécy.”

“The aftermath of a battle is not necessarily the best moment to decide the fate of a young girl,” Philippa said in a lowered voice.

Ralph was not going to let that pass. “Speaking for myself, I feel obliged to comply with the decisions of His Majesty.”

“As do we all,” she muttered.

Ralph felt he had vanquished her. It was a sexual feeling, almost as if he had lain with her. Satisfied, he turned to Daniel. “My wife-to-be should arrive in time for dinner,” he said. “Make sure we have a feast.”

Philippa said: “I have already seen to that.”

Ralph slowly turned his head until his eyes were on her again. She had overstepped the bounds of courtesy by going into his kitchen and giving orders.

She knew it, and reddened. “I didn’t know what time you would get here,” she said.

Ralph said nothing. She would not apologize, but he was content in having forced her to explain herself—a climb-down for a woman as proud as she.

For a short while there had been the noise of horses outside, and now Ralph’s parents came in. He had not seen them for some years, and he hurried to embrace them.

They were both in their fifties, but his mother had aged faster, it seemed to him. Her hair was white and her face was lined. She had the slight stoop of elderly women. His father seemed more vigorous. It was partly the excitement of the moment: he was flushed with pride, and shook Ralph’s hand as if pumping water from a well. But there was no gray in his red beard, and his slim figure still appeared spry. They were both wearing new clothes—Ralph had sent the money. Sir Gerald had a heavy wool surcoat and Lady Maud a fur cloak.

Ralph snapped his fingers at Daniel. “Bring wine,” he said. For an instant, the bailiff looked as though he might protest at being treated like a maidservant; then he swallowed his pride and hurried off to the kitchen.

Ralph said: “Earl William, Lady Philippa, may I present my father, Sir Gerald, and my mother, Lady Maud.”

He was afraid that William and Philippa would look down their noses at his parents, but they acknowledged them courteously enough.

Gerald said to William: “I was a comrade-in-arms of your father, may he rest in peace. In fact, Earl William, I knew you as a boy, though you won’t remember me.”

Ralph wished his father would not call attention to his glorious past. It only emphasized how far he had fallen.

But William seemed not to notice. “Well, d’you know, I think I do remember,” he said. He was probably just being kind, but Gerald was pleased. “Of course,” William added, “I recall you as a giant at least seven feet tall.”

Gerald, who was short in stature, laughed delightedly.

Maud looked around and said: “My, this is a fine house, Ralph.”

“I wanted to decorate it with all the treasures I’ve brought back from France,” he said. “But I’ve only just got here.”

A kitchen girl brought a jug of wine and goblets on a tray, and they all took some refreshment. The wine was good Bordeaux, Ralph noticed, clear and sweet. Due credit to Daniel for keeping the house well supplied, he thought at first; then he reflected that for many years no one had been here to drink it—except, of course, Daniel.

He said to his mother: “Any news of my brother, Merthin?”

“He’s doing very well,” she said proudly. “Married with a daughter, and rich. He’s building a palace for the family of Buonaventura Caroli.”

“But they haven’t made him a *conte* yet, I suppose?” Ralph pretended to be joking, but he was pointing out that Merthin, for all his success, had not gained a noble title; and that it was he, Ralph, who had fulfilled their father’s hopes by taking the family back into the nobility.

“Not yet,” said his father gaily, as if it were a real possibility that Merthin might become an Italian count; which annoyed Ralph, but only momentarily.

His mother said: “Could we see our rooms?”

Ralph hesitated. What did she mean by “our rooms”? The dreadful thought crossed his mind that his parents might think they were going to live here. He could not have that: they would be a constant reminder of the family’s years of shame. Besides, they would cramp his style. On the other hand, he now realized, it was also shameful for a nobleman to let his parents live in a one-room house as pensioners of a priory.

He would have to think more about that. For now he said: “I haven’t had a chance to look at the private quarters myself yet. I hope I can make you comfortable for a few nights.”

“A few nights?” his mother said quickly. “Are you going to send us back to our hovel in Kingsbridge?”

Ralph was mortified that she should mention that in front of William and Philippa. “I don’t think there’s room for you to live here.”

“How do you know, if you haven’t yet looked at the chambers?”

Daniel interrupted. “There’s a villager here from Wigleigh, Sir Ralph—name of Perkin. Wants to pay his respects and discuss an urgent matter.”

Ralph would normally have told the man off for butting into a conversation, but on this occasion he was grateful for the diversion. “Have a look at the rooms, Mother,” he said. “I’ll deal with this peasant.”

William and Philippa went off with his parents to inspect the domestic quarters, and Daniel brought Perkin to the table. Perkin was as obsequious as ever. “So happy to see your lordship safe and whole after the French wars,” he said.

Ralph looked at his left hand, with three fingers missing. “Well, almost

whole," he said.

"All the people of Wigleigh are sorry for your wounds, lord, but the rewards! A knighthood, and three more villages, and Lady Matilda to wed!"

"Thank you for your felicitations, but what was the urgent matter you needed to discuss?"

"Lord, it doesn't take long to tell. Alfred Shorthouse died without a natural heir to his ten acres, and I offered to take on the land, even though times have been very hard, after this year's thunderstorms in August—"

"Never mind the weather."

"Of course. In brief, Nathan Reeve made a decision that I feel you would not approve."

Ralph felt impatient. He really did not care which peasant farmed Alfred's ten acres. "Whatever Nathan decided—"

"He gave the land to Wulfric."

"Ah."

"Some of the villagers said Wulfric deserved it, as he had no land; but he can't pay the entry fee, and anyway—"

"You don't need to convince me," Ralph said. "I will not allow that troublemaker to hold land in my territory."

"Thank you, lord. Shall I tell Nathan Reeve that you wish me to have the ten acres?"

"Yes," Ralph said. He saw the earl and countess emerge from the private quarters, with his parents in tow. "I'll be there to confirm it in person within the next two weeks." He dismissed Perkin with a wave.

At that moment, Lady Matilda arrived.

She entered the hall with a nun on either side of her. One was Merthin's old girlfriend, Caris, who had tried to tell the king that Tilly was too young to marry. On the other side was the nun who had traveled to Crécy with Caris, an angel-faced woman whose name Ralph did not know. Behind them, presumably acting as their bodyguard, was the one-armed monk who had captured Ralph so cleverly nine years ago, Brother Thomas.

And in the center was Tilly. Ralph saw immediately why the nuns wanted to protect her from marriage. Her face had a look of childish innocence. She had freckles on her nose and a gap between her two front teeth. She stared about her with frightened eyes. Caris had heightened the childish look by dressing her in a plain white nun's robe and a simple cap, but the clothing failed to hide the womanly curves of the body underneath. Caris had obviously wanted to make Tilly seem too young for wedlock. The effect on Ralph was the opposite of what was intended.

One of the things Ralph had learned in the king's service was that, in many situations, a man could take charge simply by speaking first. He said loudly: "Come here, Tilly."

The girl stepped forward and came to him. Her escort hesitated, then stayed where they were.

“I am your husband,” Ralph said to her. “My name is Sir Ralph Fitzgerald, Lord of Tench.”

She looked terrified. “I’m happy to meet you, sir.”

“This is your home now, as it was when you were a child and your father was lord here. You are now the Lady of Tench, as your mother once was. Are you happy to be back in your family home?”

“Yes, lord.” She looked anything but happy.

“I’m sure the nuns have told you that you must be an obedient wife, and do all you can to please your husband, who is your lord and master.”

“Yes, lord.”

“And here are my mother and father, who are your parents, too, now.”

She made a little curtsey to Gerald and Maud.

Ralph said: “Come here.” He held out his hands.

Automatically, Tilly reached out, then she saw his maimed left hand. She made a disgusted sound and flinched back.

An angry curse came to Ralph’s lips, but he suppressed it. With some difficulty he forced himself to speak in a light tone of voice. “Don’t be afraid of my wounded hand,” he said. “You should be proud of it. I lost those fingers in the service of the king.” He kept both arms stretched out expectantly.

With an effort, she took his hands.

“Now you can kiss me, Tilly.”

He was seated, and she was standing in front of him. She leaned forward and offered her cheek. He put his wounded hand at the back of her head and turned her face, then he kissed her lips. He sensed her uncertainty and guessed that she had not been kissed by a man before. He let his mouth linger on hers, partly because it was so sweet, and partly to enrage those watching. Then, with slow deliberation, he pressed his good hand against her chest, and felt her breasts. They were full and round. She was no child.

He released her and sighed with satisfaction. “We must get married soon,” he said. He turned to Caris, who was visibly suppressing anger. “In Kingsbridge Cathedral, four weeks from Sunday,” he said. He looked at Philippa but addressed William. “As we’re getting married by the express wish of His Majesty King Edward, I would be honored if you would attend, Earl William.”

William nodded curtly.

Caris spoke for the first time. “Sir Ralph, the prior of Kingsbridge sends you greetings, and says he will be honored to perform the ceremony, unless of course the new bishop wishes to do so.”

Ralph nodded graciously.

She then added: “But those of us who have had charge of this child

believe she is still too young to live with her husband conjugally."

Philippa said: "I concur."

Ralph's father spoke. "You know, son, I waited years to marry your mother."

Ralph did not want to hear that story all over again. "Unlike you, Father, I have been ordered by the king to marry Lady Matilda."

His mother said: "Perhaps you should wait, son."

"I have waited more than a year! She was twelve when the king gave her to me."

Caris said: "Marry the child, yes, with all due ceremony—but then let her return to the nunnery for a year. Let her grow fully into her womanhood. Then bring her to your home."

Ralph snorted scornfully. "I could be dead in a year, especially if the king decides to go back to France. Meanwhile, the Fitzgeralds need an heir."

"She is a child—"

Ralph interrupted, raising his voice. "She is no child—look at her! That stupid nun's habit can't disguise her breasts."

"Puppy fat—"

"Does she have a woman's hair?" Ralph demanded.

Tilly gasped at his crude frankness, and her cheeks reddened with shame.

Caris hesitated.

Ralph said: "Perhaps my mother should examine her on my behalf and tell me."

Caris shook her head. "That won't be necessary. Tilly has hair where a woman has it and a child does not."

"I knew as much. I have seen—" Ralph stopped, realizing that he did not want everyone here to know in what circumstances he had seen the naked bodies of girls of Tilly's age. "I guessed, from her figure," he amended, avoiding his mother's eye.

A rarely heard pleading tone entered Caris's voice. "But, Ralph, in her mind she is still a child."

I don't care about her mind, Ralph thought, but he did not say so. "She has four weeks to learn what she does not know," he said. He gave Caris a knowing look. "I'm sure you can teach her everything."

Caris flushed. Nuns were not supposed to know about marital intimacy, of course, but she had been his brother's girlfriend.

His mother said: "Perhaps a compromise—"

"You just don't understand, Mother, do you?" he said, rudely interrupting her. "No one is really concerned about her age. If I were going to marry the daughter of a Kingsbridge butcher, they wouldn't care if she was nine. It's because Tilly is noble-born, don't you see that? They think they're superior to us!" He knew he was shouting, and he could see the amazed expressions of

everyone around him, but he did not care. “They don’t want a cousin of the earl of Shiring to marry the son of an impoverished knight. They want to put off the marriage in the hope that I’ll be killed in battle before it’s consummated.” He wiped his mouth. “But this son of an impoverished knight fought at the battle of Crécy, and saved the life of the prince of Wales. That’s what matters to the king.” He looked at each of them in turn: haughty William, scornful Philippa, furious Caris, and his astonished parents. “So you might as well accept the facts. Ralph Fitzgerald is a knight and a lord, and a comrade-in-arms of the king. And he’s going to marry Lady Matilda, the cousin of the earl—whether you like it or not!”

There was a shocked silence for several moments.

At last Ralph turned to Daniel. “You can serve dinner now,” he said.

53

In the spring of 1348, Merthin woke up as if from a nightmare he could not quite remember. He felt frightened and weak. He opened his eyes to a room lit by bars of bright sunshine coming through half-open shutters. He saw a high ceiling, white walls, red tiles. The air was mild. Reality returned slowly. He was in his bedroom, in his house, in Florence. He had been ill.

The illness came back to him first. It had begun with a skin rash, purplish-black blotches on his chest, then his arms, then everywhere. Soon afterward he developed a painful lump or bubo in his armpit. He had a fever, sweating in his bed, tangling the sheets as he writhed. He had vomited and coughed blood. He had thought he would die. Worst of all was a terrible, unquenchable thirst that had made him want to throw himself into the River Arno with his mouth open.

He was not the only sufferer. Thousands of Italians had fallen ill with this plague, tens of thousands. Half the workmen on his building sites had disappeared, as had most of his household servants. Almost everyone who caught it died within five days. They called it *la moria grande,* the big death.

But he was alive.

He had a nagging feeling that while ill he had reached a momentous decision, but he could not remember it. He concentrated for a moment. The harder he thought, the more elusive the memory became, until it vanished.

He sat up in bed. His limbs felt feeble and his head spun for a moment. He was wearing a clean linen nightshirt, and he wondered who had put it on him. After a pause, he stood.

He had a four-story house with a courtyard. He had designed and built it himself, with a flat facade instead of the traditional overhanging floors, and

architectural features such as round window arches and classical columns. The neighbors had called it a *palagetto,* a mini-palace. That was seven years ago. Several prosperous Florentine merchants had asked him to build *palagetti* for them, and that had got his career here started.

Florence was a republic, with no ruling prince or duke, dominated by an elite of squabbling merchant families. The city was populated by thousands of weavers, but it was the merchants who made fortunes. They spent their money building grand houses, which made the city a perfect place for a talented young architect to prosper.

He went to the bedroom door and called his wife. “Silvia! Where are you?” It came naturally to him to speak the Tuscan dialect now, after nine years.

Then he remembered. Silvia had been ill, too. So had their daughter, who was three years old. Her name was Laura, but they had adopted her childish pronunciation, Lolla. His heart was gripped by a terrible fear. Was Silvia alive? Was Lolla?

The house was quiet. So was the city, he realized suddenly. The angle of the sunlight slanting into the rooms told him it was mid-morning. He should have been hearing the cries of street hawkers, the clop of horses and the rumble of wooden cartwheels, the background murmur of a thousand conversations—but there was nothing.

He went up the stairs. In his weakness, the effort made him breathless. He pushed open the door to the nursery. The room looked empty. He broke out in a sweat of fear. There was Lolla’s cot, a small chest for her clothes, a box of toys, a miniature table with two tiny chairs. Then he heard a noise. There in the corner was Lolla, sitting on the floor in a clean dress, playing with a small wooden horse with articulated legs. Merthin gave a strangled cry of relief. She heard him and looked up. “Papa,” she observed in a matter-of-fact tone.

Merthin picked her up and hugged her. “You’re alive,” he said in English.

There was a sound from the next room, and Maria walked in. A gray-haired woman in her fifties, she was Lolla’s nurse. “Master!” she said. “You got up—are you better?”

“Where is your mistress?” he said.

Maria’s face fell. “I’m so sorry, master,” she said. “The mistress died.”

Lolla said: “Mama’s gone.”

Merthin felt the shock like a blow. Stunned, he handed Lolla to Maria. Moving slowly and carefully, he turned away and walked out of the room, then down the stairs to the *piano nobile,* the principal floor. He stared at the long table, the empty chairs, the rugs on the floor, and the pictures on the walls. It looked like someone else’s home.

He stood in front of a painting of the Virgin Mary with her mother. Italian painters were superior to the English or any others, and this artist had given

Saint Anne the face of Silvia. She was a proud beauty, with flawless olive skin and noble features, but the painter had seen the sexual passion smoldering in those aloof brown eyes.

It was hard to comprehend that Silvia no longer existed. He thought of her slim body, and remembered how he had marveled, again and again, at her perfect breasts. That body, with which he had been so completely intimate, now lay in the ground somewhere. When he imagined that, tears came to his eyes at last, and he sobbed with grief.

Where was her grave? he wondered in his misery. He remembered that funerals had ceased in Florence: people were terrified to leave their houses. They simply dragged the bodies outside and laid them on the street. The city's thieves, beggars, and drunks had acquired a new profession: they were called corpse carriers or *becchini*, and they charged exorbitant fees to take the bodies away and put them in mass graves. Merthin might never know where Silvia lay.

They had been married four years. Looking at her picture, garbed in St. Anne's conventional red dress, Merthin suffered an access of painful honesty, and asked himself whether he had really loved her. He was very fond of her, but it was not an all-consuming passion. She had an independent spirit and a sharp tongue, and he was the only man in Florence with the nerve to woo her, despite her father's wealth. In return, she had given him complete devotion. But she had accurately gauged the quality of his love. "What are you thinking about?" she used to say sometimes, and he would give a guilty start, because he had been remembering Kingsbridge. Soon she changed it to: "Who are you thinking about?" He never spoke Caris's name, but Silvia said: "It must be a woman, I can tell by the look on your face." Eventually she began to talk about "your English girl." She would say: "You're remembering your English girl," and she was always right. But she seemed to accept it. Merthin was faithful to her. And he adored Lolla.

After a while, Maria brought him soup and bread. "What day is it?" he asked her.

"Tuesday."

"How long was I in bed?"

"Two weeks. You were so ill."

He wondered why he had survived. Some people never succumbed to the disease, as if they had natural protection; but those who caught it nearly always died. However, the tiny minority who recovered were doubly fortunate, for no one had ever caught the illness a second time.

When he had eaten, he felt stronger. He had to rebuild his life, he realized. He suspected that he had already made this decision once, when he was ill, but again he was tantalized by the thread of a memory slipping from his grasp.

His first task was to find out how much of his family was left.

He took his dishes to the kitchen, where Maria was feeding Lolla bread dipped in goat's milk. He asked her: "What about Silvia's parents? Are they alive?"

"I don't know," she said. "I haven't heard. I go out only to buy food."

"I'd better find out."

He got dressed and went downstairs. The ground floor of the house was a workshop, with the yard at the rear used for storing wood and stone. No one was at work, either inside or out.

He left the house. The buildings around him were mostly stone-built, some of them very grand: Kingsbridge had no houses to compare with these. The richest man in Kingsbridge, Edmund Wooler, had lived in a timber house. Here in Florence, only the poor lived in such places.

The street was deserted. He had never seen it this way, not even in the middle of the night. The effect was eerie. He wondered how many people had died: a third of the population? Half? Were their ghosts still lingering in alleyways and shadowed corners, enviously watching the lucky survivors?

The Christi house was on the next street. Merthin's father-in-law, Alessandro Christi, had been his first and best friend in Florence. A schoolmate of Buonaventura Caroli, Alessandro had given Merthin his first commission, a simple warehouse building. He was, of course, Lolla's grandpa.

The door of Alessandro's *palagetto* was locked. That was unusual in itself. Merthin banged on the woodwork and waited. Eventually it was opened by Elizabetta, a small, plump woman who was Alessandro's laundress. She stared at him in shock. "You're alive!" she said.

"Hello, Betta," he said. "I'm glad to see that you're alive, too."

She turned and called back into the house: "It's the English lord!"

He had told them he was not a lord, but the servants did not believe him. He stepped inside. "Alessandro?" he said.

She shook her head and began to cry.

"And your mistress?"

"Both dead."

The stairs led from the entrance hall to the main floor. Merthin walked up slowly, surprised by how weak he still felt. In the main room he sat down to catch his breath. Alessandro had been wealthy, and the room was a showplace of rugs and hangings, paintings and jeweled ornaments and books.

"Who else is here?" he asked Elizabetta.

"Just Lena and her children." Lena was an Asiatic slave, unusual but by no means unique in prosperous Florentine households. She had two small children by Alessandro, a boy and a girl, and he had treated them just like his legitimate offspring; in fact Silvia had said acidly that he doted on them more

than he ever had on her and her brother. The arrangement was considered eccentric rather than scandalous by the sophisticated Florentines.

Merthin said: “What about Signor Gianni?” Gianni was Silvia’s brother.

“Dead. And his wife. The baby is here with me.”

“Dear God.”

Betta said tentatively: “And your family, lord?”

“My wife is dead.”

“I am so sorry.”

“But Lolla is alive.”

“Thank God!”

“Maria is taking care of her.”

“Maria is a good woman. Would you like some refreshment?”

Merthin nodded, and she went away.

Lena’s children came to stare at him: a dark-eyed boy of seven who looked like Alessandro, and a pretty four-year-old with her mother’s Asiatic eyes. Then Lena herself came in, a beautiful woman in her twenties with golden skin and high cheekbones. She brought him a silver goblet of dark red Tuscan wine and a tray of almonds and olives.

She said: “Will you come to live here, lord?”

Merthin was surprised. “I don’t think so—why?”

“The house is yours now.” She waved a hand to indicate the Christi family’s wealth. “Everything is yours.”

Merthin realized she was right. He was Alessandro Christi’s only surviving adult relative. That made him the heir—and the guardian of three children in addition to Lolla.

“Everything,” Lena repeated, giving him a direct look.

Merthin met her candid gaze, and realized that she was offering herself.

He considered the prospect. The house was beautiful. It was home to Lena’s children, and a familiar place to Lolla, and even to Gianni’s baby: all the children would be happy here. He had inherited enough money to live on for the rest of his life. Lena was a woman of intelligence and experience, and he could readily imagine the pleasures of becoming intimate with her.

She read his mind. She took his hand and pressed it to her bosom. Her breasts felt soft and warm through the light wool dress.

But this was not what he wanted. He drew Lena’s hand to him and kissed it. “I will provide for you and your children,” he said. “Don’t worry.”

“Thank you, lord,” she said, but she looked disappointed, and something in her eyes told Merthin that her offer had not been merely practical. She had genuinely hoped he might be more to her than just her new owner. But that was part of the problem. He could not imagine sex with someone he owned. The idea was distasteful to the point of revulsion.

He sipped his wine and felt stronger. If he was not drawn to an easy life of

luxury and sensual gratification, what *did* he want? His family was almost gone: only Lolla was left. But he still had his work. Around the city were three sites where designs of his were under construction. He was not going to give up the job he loved. He had not survived the great death to become an idler. He recalled his youthful ambition to build the tallest building in England. He would pick up where he had left off. He would recover from the loss of Silvia by throwing himself into his building projects.

He got up to leave. Lena flung her arms around him. “Thank you,” she said. “Thank you for saying you will take care of my children.”

He patted her back. “They are Alessandro’s grandchildren,” he said. In Florence, the children of slaves were not themselves enslaved. “When they grow up they will be rich.” He detached her arms gently and went down the stairs.

All the houses were locked and shuttered. On some doorsteps he saw a shrouded form that he presumed was a dead body. There were a few people on the streets, but mostly the poorer sort. The desolation was unnerving. Florence was the greatest city in the Christian world, a noisy commercial metropolis producing thousands of yards of fine woolen cloth every day, a market where vast sums of money were paid over on no more security than a letter from Antwerp or the verbal promise of a prince. Walking through these silent, empty streets was like seeing an injured horse that has fallen and cannot get up: immense strength was suddenly brought to nothing. He saw no one from his circle of acquaintance. His friends were keeping indoors, he presumed—those that were still alive.

He went first to a square nearby, in the old Roman city, where he was building a fountain for the municipality. He had devised an elaborate system to recycle almost all the water during Florence’s long, dry summers.

But, when he reached the square, he could see immediately that no one was working on the site. The underground pipes had been put in and covered over before he fell ill, and the first course of masonry for the stepped plinth around the pool had been laid. However, the dusty, neglected look of the stones told him that no work had been done for days. Worse, a small pyramid of mortar on a wooden board had hardened into a solid mass that gave off a puff of dust when he kicked it. There were even some tools lying on the ground. It was a miracle they had not been stolen.

The fountain was going to be stunning. In Merthin’s workshop, the best stone carver in the city was sculpting the centerpiece—or had been. Merthin was disappointed that work had stopped. Surely not all the builders had died? Perhaps they were waiting to see whether Merthin would recover.

This was the smallest of his three projects, albeit a prestigious one. He left the square and headed north to inspect another one. But as he walked he worried. He had not yet met anyone knowledgeable enough to give him a

wider perspective. What was left of the city government? Was the plague easing off or getting worse? What about the rest of Italy?

One thing at a time, he told himself.

He was building a home for Giulielmo Caroli, the older brother of Buonaventura. It was to be a real palazzo, a high double-fronted house designed around a grand staircase wider than some of the city's streets. The ground-floor wall was already up. The facade was battered, or inclined, at ground level, the slight protrusion giving an impression of fortification; but above were elegant pointed-arch two-light windows with a trefoil. The design said that the people inside were both powerful and refined, which was what the Caroli family wanted.

The scaffolding had been erected for the second floor, but no one was working. There should have been five masons laying stones. The only person on-site was a elderly man who acted as caretaker and lived in a wooden hut at the back. Merthin found him cooking a chicken over a fire. The fool had used costly marble slabs for his hearth. "Where is everyone?" Merthin said abruptly.

The caretaker leaped to his feet. "Signor Caroli died, and his son Agostino wouldn't pay the men, so they left, those that weren't already dead themselves."

That was a blow. The Caroli family was one of the richest in Florence. If they felt they could no longer afford to build, the crisis was severe indeed.

"So Agostino is alive?"

"Yes, master, I saw him this morning."

Merthin knew young Agostino. He was not as clever as his father or his uncle Buonaventura, so he compensated by being extremely cautious and conservative. He would not recommence building until he was sure the family finances had recovered from the effects of the plague.

However, Merthin felt confident his third and largest project would continue. He was building a church for an order of friars much favored by the city's merchants. The site was south of the river, so he crossed the new bridge.

This bridge had been finished only two years ago. In fact Merthin had done some work on it, under the leading designer, the painter Taddeo Gaddi. The bridge had to withstand fast-flowing water when the winter snows melted, and Merthin had helped with the design of the piers. Now, as he crossed, he was dismayed to see that all the little goldsmiths' shops on the bridge were closed—another bad sign.

The Church of Sant' Anna dei Frari was his most ambitious project to date. It was a big church, more like a cathedral—the friars were rich—though nothing like the cathedral at Kingsbridge. Italy had Gothic cathedrals, Milan being one of the greatest, but modern-minded Italians did not like the

architecture of France and England: they regarded huge windows and flying buttresses as a foreign fetish. The obsession with light, which made sense in the gloomy northwest of Europe, seemed perverse in sunny Italy, where people sought shade and coolness. Italians identified with the classical architecture of ancient Rome, the ruins of which were all around them. They liked gable ends and round arches, and they rejected ornate exterior sculpture in favor of decorative patterns of different-colored stone and marble.

But Merthin was going to surprise even the Florentines with this church. The plan was a series of squares, each topped by a dome—five in a row, and two either side of the crossing. He had heard about domes back in England, but had never seen one until he visited Siena Cathedral. There were none in Florence. The clerestory would be a row of round windows, or oculi. Instead of narrow pillars that reached yearningly for Heaven, this church would have circles, complete in themselves, with the air of earthbound self-sufficiency that characterized the commercial people of Florence.

He was disappointed, but not surprised, to see that there were no masons on the scaffolding, no laborers moving the great stones, no mortar-making women stirring with their giant paddles. This site was as quiet as the other two. However, in this case he felt confident he could get the project restarted. A religious order had a life of its own, independent of individuals. He walked around the site and entered the friary.

The place was silent. Monasteries were supposed to be so, of course, but there was a quality to this silence that unnerved him. He passed from the vestibule into the waiting room. There was usually a brother on duty here, studying the scriptures in between attending to visitors, but today the room was empty. With grim apprehension, Merthin went through another door and found himself in the cloisters. The quadrangle was deserted. “Hello!” he called out. “Is anyone there?” His voice echoed around the stone arcades.

He searched the place. All the friars were gone. In the kitchen he found three men sitting at the table, eating ham and drinking wine. They wore the costly clothes of merchants, but they had matted hair, untrimmed beards, and dirty hands: they were paupers wearing dead men’s garments. When he walked in, they looked guilty but defiant. He said: “Where are the holy brothers?”

“All dead,” said one of the men.

“All?”

“Every one. They took care of the sick, you see, and so they caught the disease.”

The man was drunk, Merthin could see. However, he seemed to be telling the truth. These three were too comfortable, sitting in the monastery, eating the friars’ food and drinking their wine. They clearly knew there was no one left to object.

Merthin returned to the site of the new church. The walls of the choir and transepts were up, and the oculi in the clerestory were visible. He sat in the middle of the crossing, amid stacks of stones, looking at his work. For how long would the project be stalled? If all the friars were dead, who would get their money? As far as he knew, they were not part of a larger order. The bishop might claim the inheritance, and so might the pope. There was a legal tangle here that could take years to resolve.

This morning he had resolved to throw himself into his work as a way of healing the wound of Silvia's death. Now it was clear that, at least for the present, he had no work. Ever since he began to repair the roof of St. Mark's church in Kingsbridge, ten years ago, he had had at least one building project on the go. Without one, he was lost. It made him feel panicky.

He had woken up to find his whole life in ruins. The fact that he was suddenly very rich only heightened the sense of nightmare. Lolla was the only part of his life he had left.

He did not even know where to go next. He would go home, eventually, but he could not spend all day playing with his three-year-old and talking to Maria. So he stayed where he was, sitting on a carved stone disc intended for a column, looking along what would be the nave.

As the sun rolled down the curve of the afternoon, he began to remember his illness. He had felt sure he would die. So few survived that he did not expect to be among the lucky ones. In his more lucid moments, he had reviewed his life as if it were over. He had come to some grand realization, he knew, but since recovering he had been unable to recall what it was. Now, in the tranquility of the unfinished church, he recalled concluding that he had made one huge mistake in his life. What was it? He had quarreled with Elfric, he had had sex with Griselda, he had rejected Elizabeth Clerk…All these decisions had caused trouble, but none counted as the mistake of a lifetime.

Lying on the bed, sweating, coughing, tormented by thirst, he had almost wanted to die; but not quite. Something had kept him alive—and now it came back to him.

He had wanted to see Caris again.

That was his reason for living. In his delirium he had seen her face, and had wept with grief that he might die here, thousands of miles away from her. The mistake of his life had been to leave her.

As he at last retrieved that elusive memory, and realized the blinding truth of the revelation, he was filled with an odd kind of happiness.

It did not make sense, he reflected. She had joined the nunnery. She had refused to see him and explain herself. But his soul was not rational, and it was telling him that he should be where she was.

He wondered what she was doing now, while he sat in a half-built church in a city nearly destroyed by a plague. The last he had heard was that she had

been consecrated by the bishop. That decision was irrevocable—or so they said: Caris had never accepted what other people told her were the rules. On the other hand, once she had made her own decision, it was generally impossible to change her mind. There was no doubt she was strongly committed to her new life.

It made no difference. He wanted to see her again. Not to do so would be the second biggest mistake of his life.

And now he was free. His ties with Florence were all broken. His wife was dead, and so were all his relations by marriage except for three children. The only family he had here was his daughter, Lolla, and he would take her with him. She was so young he felt she would hardly notice that they had left.

It was a momentous move, he told himself. He would first have to prove Alessandro's will, and make arrangements for the children—Agostino Caroli would help him with that. Then he would have to turn his wealth into gold and arrange for it to be transferred to England. The Caroli family could do that, too, if their international network was still intact. Most daunting, he would have to undertake the thousand-mile journey from Florence across Europe to Kingsbridge. And all that without having any idea how Caris would receive him when at last he arrived.

It was a decision that required long and careful thought, obviously.

He made up his mind in a few moments.

He was going home.

54

Merthin left Italy in company with a dozen merchants from Florence and Lucca. They took a ship from Genoa to the ancient French port of Marseilles. From there they traveled overland to Avignon, home of the pope for the last forty years or more, and the most lavish court in Europe—as well as the smelliest city Merthin had ever known. There they joined a large group of clergymen and returning pilgrims heading north.

Everyone traveled in groups, the larger the better. The merchants were carrying money and expensive trading goods, and they had men-at-arms to protect them from outlaws. They were happy to have company: priestly robes and pilgrim badges might deter robbers, and even ordinary travelers such as Merthin helped just by swelling the numbers.

Merthin had entrusted most of his fortune to the Caroli family in Florence. Their relatives in England would give him cash. The Carolis carried on this kind of international transaction all the time, and indeed Merthin had used their services nine years ago to transfer a smaller fortune from

Kingsbridge to Florence. All the same, he knew that the system was not completely infallible—such families sometimes went bankrupt, especially if they got involved in lending money to untrustworthy types such as kings and princes. That was why he had a large sum in gold florins sewn into his undershirt.

Lolla enjoyed the journey. As the only child in the caravan, she was much fussed over. During the long days on horseback, she sat on the saddle in front of Merthin, his arms holding her safe while his hands held the reins. He sang songs, repeated rhymes, told stories, and talked to her about the things they saw—trees, mills, bridges, churches. She probably did not understand half of what he said, but the sound of his voice kept her happy.

He had never before spent this much time with his daughter. They were together all day, every day, week after week. He hoped the intimacy would make up, in part, for the loss of her mother. It certainly worked the other way around: he would have been terribly lonely without her. She no longer spoke about Mama, but every now and then she would put her arms around his neck and cling to him with desperation, as if frightened to let him go.

He felt regret only when he stood in front of the great cathedral at Chartres, sixty miles outside Paris. There were two towers at its west end. The north tower was unfinished, but the south tower was three hundred and fifty feet high. It reminded him that he had once yearned to design such buildings. He was unlikely to achieve that ambition in Kingsbridge.

He lingered in Paris for two weeks. The plague had not reached here, and it was an immense relief to see the normal life of a great city, with people buying and selling and walking around, instead of empty streets with corpses on the doorsteps. His spirits lifted, and it was only then that he realized how stricken he had been by the horror he had left behind in Florence. He looked at Paris's cathedrals and palaces, making sketches of details that interested him. He had a small notebook made of paper, a new writing material popular in Italy.

Leaving Paris, he teamed up with a noble family returning to Cherbourg. Hearing Lolla talk, the people assumed Merthin was Italian, and he did not disabuse them, for the English were hated passionately in northern France. With the family and their entourage, Merthin crossed Normandy at a leisurely pace, with Lolla on the saddle in front of him and their packhorse following on a leading rein, looking at those churches and abbeys that had survived the devastation of King Edward's invasion almost two years ago.

He could have moved faster, but he told himself he was making the most of an opportunity that might not come again, the chance to see a rich variety of architecture. However, when he was honest with himself he had to admit that he was afraid of what he might find when he reached Kingsbridge.

He was going home to Caris, but she would not be the same Caris he had

left behind nine years ago. She might have changed, physically and mentally. Some nuns became grossly fat, their only pleasure in life being food. More likely, Caris might have become ethereally thin, starving herself in an ecstasy of self-denial. By now she could be obsessed with religion, praying all day and flagellating herself for imaginary sins. Or she might be dead.

Those were his wildest nightmares. In his heart he knew she would not be enormously fat or a religious fanatic. And if she were dead he would have heard, as he had heard of the death of her father, Edmund. She was going to be the same Caris, small and neat, quick-witted, organized, and determined. But he was seriously concerned about how she would receive him. How did she feel about him after nine years? Did she think of him with indifference, as a part of her past too remote to care about, the way he thought of, say, Griselda? Or did she still long for him, somewhere deep in her soul? He had no idea, and that was the true cause of his anxiety.

They sailed to Portsmouth and traveled with a party of traders. They left the group at Mudeford Crossing, the traders going on to Shiring while Merthin and Lolla forded the shallow river on horseback and took the Kingsbridge road. It was a pity, Merthin thought, that there was no visible sign of the way to Kingsbridge. He wondered how many traders continued on to Shiring simply because they did not realize that Kingsbridge was nearer.

It was a warm summer day, and the sun was shining when they came within sight of their destination. The first thing he saw was the top of the cathedral tower, visible over the trees. At least it had not fallen down, Merthin thought: Elfric's repairs had held for eleven years. It was a pity the tower could not be seen from Mudeford Crossing—what a difference that would make to the numbers visiting the town.

As they came closer, he began to suffer a strange mixture of excitement and fear that made him feel nauseous. For a few moments he was afraid he would have to dismount and throw up. He tried to make himself calm. What could happen? Even if Caris proved to have become indifferent to him, he would not die.

He saw several new buildings on the outskirts of the suburb of Newtown. The splendid new home he had built for Dick Brewer was no longer on the edge of Kingsbridge, for the town had grown past it.

He momentarily forgot his apprehension when he saw his bridge. It rose in an elegant curve from the riverbank and landed gracefully on the midstream island. On the far side of the island, the bridge sprang again to span the second channel. Its white stone gleamed in the sun. People and carts were crossing in both directions. The sight made his heart swell with pride. It was everything he had hoped it would be: beautiful, useful, and strong. I did that, he thought, and it's good.

But he suffered a shock when he got closer. The masonry of the nearer

span was damaged around the central pier. He could see cracks in the stonework, repaired with iron braces in a clumsy fashion that bore the hallmark of Elfric. He was appalled. Brown dribbles of rust dripped from the nails that fixed the ugly braces in the stonework. The sight took him back eleven years, to Elfric's repairs to the old wooden bridge. Everyone can make mistakes, he thought, but people who don't learn from their mistakes just make the same ones again. "Bloody fools," he said aloud.

"Bloody fools," Lolla repeated. She was learning English.

He rode on to the bridge. The roadbed had been finished properly, he was happy to see, and he was pleased with the design of the parapet, a sturdy barrier with a carved capstone that recalled the moldings in the cathedral.

Leper Island was still overrun with rabbits. Merthin continued to hold a lease on the island. In his absence, Mark Webber had been collecting rents from tenants, paying the nominal rent due to the priory every year, subtracting an agreed collection fee, and sending the balance annually to Merthin in Florence via the Caroli family. After all the deductions it was a small sum, but it grew a little every year.

Merthin's house on the island had an occupied look, the shutters open, the doorstep swept. He had arranged for Jimmie to live there. The boy must now be a man, he thought.

At the near end of the second span, an old man Merthin did not recognize sat in the sun collecting the tolls. Merthin paid him a penny. The man gave him a hard stare, as if trying to recall where he had seen him before, but he said nothing.

The town was both familiar and strange. Because it was almost the same, the changes struck Merthin as miraculous, as if they had happened overnight: a row of hovels knocked down and replaced by fine houses; a busy inn where once there had been a big gloomy house occupied by a wealthy widow; a well dried up and paved over; a gray house painted white.

He went to the Bell Inn on the main street, next to the priory gates. It was unchanged: a tavern in such a good location would probably last hundreds of years. He left his horses and baggage with a hostler and went inside, holding hands with Lolla.

The Bell was like taverns everywhere: a big front room furnished with rough tables and benches, and a back area where the barrels of beer and wine were racked and food was cooked. Because it was popular and profitable, the straw on the floor was changed frequently and the walls were freshly whitewashed, and in winter a huge fire blazed. Now, in the heat of summer, all the windows were open, and a mild breeze blew through the front room.

After a moment, Bessie Bell came out from the back. Nine years ago she had been a curvy girl; now she was a voluptuous woman. She looked at him without recognition, but he saw her appraise his clothes and judge him an

affluent customer. “Good day to you, traveler,” she said. “What can we do to make you and your child comfortable?”

Merthin grinned. “I’d like to take your private room, please, Bessie.”

She knew him as soon as he spoke. “My soul!” she cried. “It’s Merthin Bridger!” He put out his hand to shake, but she threw her arms around him and hugged him. She had always had a soft spot for him. She released him and studied his face. “Such a beard you’ve grown! I would have recognized you sooner otherwise. Is this your little girl?”

“Her name is Lolla.”

“Well, aren’t you a pretty thing! Your mother must be beautiful.”

Merthin said: “My wife died.”

“How sad. But Lolla is young enough to forget. My husband died, too.”

“I didn’t know you were married.”

“I met him after you left. Richard Brown, from Gloucester. I lost him a year ago.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“My father’s gone to Canterbury, on a pilgrimage, so I’m running this tavern all on my own at the moment.”

“I always liked your father.”

“He was fond of you, too. He always takes to men with a bit of spirit. He was never very keen on my Richard.”

“Ah.” Merthin felt the conversation had become too intimate, too fast. “What news of my parents?”

“They’re not here in Kingsbridge. They’re staying at your brother’s new home in Tench.”

Merthin had heard, through Buonaventura, that Ralph had become lord of Tench. “My father must be very pleased.”

“Proud as a peacock.” She smiled, then looked concerned. “You must be hungry and tired. I’ll tell the boys to take your bags upstairs, then I’ll bring you a tankard of ale and some pottage.” She turned to go into the back room.

“That’s kind, but…”

Bessie paused at the door.

“If you would give Lolla some soup, I’d be grateful. There’s something I have to do.”

Bessie nodded. “Of course.” She bent down to Lolla. “Do you want to come with Auntie Bessie? I expect you could eat a piece of bread. Do you like new bread?”

Merthin translated the question into Italian, and Lolla nodded happily.

Bessie looked at Merthin. “Going to see Sister Caris, are you?”

Absurdly, he felt guilty. “Yes,” he said. “She’s still here, then?”

“Oh, yes. She’s guest master at the nunnery now. I’ll be surprised if she isn’t prioress one day.” She took Lolla’s hand and led her into the back room.

“Good luck,” she called over her shoulder.

Merthin went out. Bessie could be a little suffocating, but her affection was sincere, and it warmed his heart to be welcomed back with such enthusiasm. He entered the priory grounds. He paused to look at the soaring west front of the cathedral, almost two hundred years old now and as awe-inspiring as ever.

He noticed a new stone building to the north of the church, beyond the graveyard. It was a medium-size palace, with an imposing entrance and an upper story. It had been built close to where the old timber prior’s house used to be, so presumably it had replaced that modest building as the residence of Godwyn. He wondered where Godwyn had found the money.

He went closer. The palace was very grand, but Merthin did not like the design. None of the levels related in any way to the cathedral that loomed over it. The details were careless. The top of the ostentatious doorcase blocked part of an upper-story window. Worst of all, the palace was built on a different axis from that of the church, so that it stood at an awkward angle.

It was Elfric’s work, no doubt of that.

A plump cat sat on the doorstep in the sun. It was black with a white tip to its tail. It glared malevolently at Merthin.

He turned away and walked slowly to the hospital. The cathedral green was quiet and deserted: there was no market today. The excitement and apprehension rose again in his stomach. He might see Caris at any moment. He reached the entrance and went in. The long room looked brighter and smelled fresher than he remembered: everything had a scrubbed look. There were a few people lying on mattresses on the floor, most of them elderly. At the altar a young novice was saying prayers aloud. He waited for her to finish. He was so anxious that he was sure he felt more ill than the patients on the beds. He had come a thousand miles for this moment. Was it a wasted journey?

At last the nun said “Amen” for the last time and turned around. He did not know her. She approached him and said politely: “May God bless you, stranger.”

Merthin took a deep breath. “I’ve come to see Sister Caris,” he said.

The nuns’ chapter meetings now took place in the refectory. In the past they had shared with the monks the elegant octagonal chapter house at the northeast corner of the cathedral. Sadly, mistrust between monks and nuns was now so great that the nuns did not want to risk the monks’ eavesdropping on their deliberations. So they met in the long bare room where they took their meals.

The nunnery officials sat behind a table, Mother Cecilia in the middle.

There was no subprioress: Natalie had died a few weeks ago, at the age of fifty-seven, and Cecilia had not yet replaced her. On Cecilia's right was the treasurer, Beth, and her matricularius, Elizabeth, formerly Elizabeth Clerk. On Cecilia's left were the cellarer, Margaret, in charge of all supplies, and her subordinate Caris, the guest master. Thirty nuns sat on rows of benches facing the senior officials.

After the prayer and the reading, Mother Cecilia made her announcements. "We have received a letter from our lord bishop in response to our complaint about Prior Godwyn stealing our money," she said. There was a murmur of anticipation from the nuns.

The reply had been a long time coming. King Edward had taken almost a year to replace Bishop Richard. Earl William had lobbied hard for Jerome, his father's able administrator, but in the end Edward had chosen Henri of Mons, a relative of his wife's from Hainault in northern France. Bishop Henri had come to England for the ceremony, then traveled to Rome to be confirmed by the pope, then returned and settled into his palace at Shiring, before replying to Cecilia's formal letter of complaint.

Cecilia went on: "The bishop declines to take any action over the theft, saying that the events took place during the time of Bishop Richard, and the past is past."

The nuns gasped. They had accepted the delay patiently, feeling confident they would get justice in the end. This was a shocking rejection.

Caris had seen the letter earlier. She was not as astonished as the rest of the nuns. It was not so remarkable that the new bishop did not wish to begin his period of office by quarreling with the prior of Kingsbridge. The letter told her that Henri would be a pragmatic ruler, not a man of principle. He was no different, in that respect, from the majority of men who were successful in church politics.

However, she was no less disappointed for being unsurprised. The decision meant that she had to abandon, for the foreseeable future, her dream of building a new hospital where sick people could be isolated from healthy guests. She told herself she should not grieve: the priory had existed for hundreds of years without such a luxury, so it could wait another decade or more. On the other hand, it angered her to see the rapid spread of diseases like the vomiting sickness that Maldwyn Cook had brought to the Fleece Fair the year before last. No one understood exactly how these things were transmitted—by looking at a sick person, by touching him, or just by being in the same room—but there could be no doubt that many illnesses did hop from one victim to the next, and proximity was a factor. However, she had to forget all that for now.

A rumble of resentful muttering came from the nuns on the benches. Mair's voice rose above the others, saying: "The monks will be cock-a-hoop."

She was right, Caris thought. Godwyn and Philemon had got away with daylight robbery. They had always argued that it was not theft for the monks to use the nuns' money, since it was all for the glory of God in the end; and they would now consider that the bishop had vindicated them. It was a bitter defeat, especially for Caris and Mair.

But Mother Cecilia was not going to waste time on regrets. "This is not the fault of any of us, except perhaps me," she said. "We have simply been too trusting."

You trusted Godwyn, but I did not, Caris thought, but she kept her mouth clamped shut. She waited to hear what Cecilia would say next. She knew that the prioress was going to make changes among the nunnery officials, but no one knew what had been decided.

"However, we must be more careful in the future. We will build a treasury of our own, to which the monks will not have access; indeed, I hope they will not even know where it is. Sister Beth will retire as treasurer, with our thanks for long and faithful service, and Sister Elizabeth will take her place. I have complete faith in Elizabeth."

Caris tried to control her face so that her disgust would not be seen. Elizabeth had testified that Caris was a witch. It was nine years ago, and Cecilia had forgiven Elizabeth, but Caris never would. However, that was not the only reason for Caris's antipathy. Elizabeth was sour and twisted, and her resentments interfered with her judgment. Such people could never be trusted, in Caris's opinion: they were always liable to make decisions based on their prejudices.

Cecilia went on: "Sister Margaret has asked permission to step down from her duties, and Sister Caris will take her place as cellarer."

Caris was disappointed. She had hoped to be made subprioress, Cecilia's deputy. She tried to smile as if pleased, but she found it difficult. Cecilia was obviously not going to appoint a subprioress. She would have two rival subordinates, Caris and Elizabeth, and let them fight it out. Caris caught Elizabeth's eye, and saw barely suppressed hatred in her look.

Cecilia went on: "Under Caris's supervision, Sister Mair will become guest master."

Mair beamed with pleasure. She was glad to be promoted and even happier that she would be working under Caris. Caris, too, liked the decision. Mair shared her obsession with cleanliness and her mistrust of priests' remedies such as bleeding.

Caris had not got what she wanted, but she tried to look happy as Cecilia announced a handful of lesser appointments. When the meeting closed, she went to Cecilia and thanked her.

"Don't imagine it was an easy decision," the prioress said. "Elizabeth has brains and determination, and she's steady where you're volatile. But you're

imaginative, and you get the best out of people. I need you both."

Caris could not argue with Cecilia's analysis of her. She really knows me, Caris thought ruefully; better than anyone else in the world, now that my father is dead and Merthin has gone. She felt a surge of affection. Cecilia was like a mother bird, always moving, always busy, taking care of her fledglings. "I'll do everything I can to live up to your expectations," Caris vowed.

She left the room. She needed to check on Old Julie. No matter what she said to the younger nuns, no one looked after Julie the way she did. It was as if they believed that a helpless old person did not need to be kept comfortable. Only Caris made sure Julie was given a blanket in cool weather, and got something to drink when she was thirsty, and was helped to the latrine at those times of day when habitually she needed to go. Caris decided to take her a hot drink, an infusion of herbs that seemed to cheer the old nun up. She went to her pharmacy and put a small pan of water on the fire to boil.

Mair came in and closed the door. "Isn't this wonderful?" she said. "We'll still be working together!" She threw her arms around Caris and kissed her lips.

Caris hugged her, then detached herself from the embrace. "Don't kiss me like that," she said.

"It's because I love you."

"And I love you, too, but not in the same way."

It was true. Caris was very fond of Mair. They had become highly intimate in France, when they had risked their lives together. Caris had even found herself attracted by Mair's beauty. One night in a tavern in Calais, when the two of them had had a room with a door that could be locked, Caris had at last succumbed to Mair's advances. Mair had fondled and kissed Caris in all her most private places, and Caris had done the same to Mair. Mair had said it was the happiest day of her life. Unfortunately, Caris had not felt the same. For her the experience was pleasant but not thrilling, and she had not wanted to repeat it.

"That's all right," Mair said. "As long as you love me, even just a little bit, I'm happy. You won't ever stop, will you?"

Caris poured boiling water on the herbs. "When you're as old as Julie, I promise I'll bring you an infusion to keep you healthy."

Tears came to Mair's eyes. "That's the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me."

Caris had not meant it to be a vow of eternal love. "Don't be sentimental," she said gently. She strained the infusion into a wooden cup. "Let's go and check on Julie."

They crossed the cloisters and entered the hospital. A man with a bushy red beard was standing near the altar. "God bless you, stranger," Caris said. The man seemed familiar. He did not reply to her greeting, but looked hard at

her with intense golden brown eyes. Then she recognized him. She dropped the cup. “Oh, God!” she said. “You!”

The few moments before she saw him were exquisite, and Merthin knew he would treasure them all his life, whatever else happened. He stared hungrily at the face he had not seen for nine years, and remembered, with a shock that was like plunging into a cold river on a hot day, how dear that face had been to him. She had hardly changed at all: his fears had been groundless. She did not even look older. She would be thirty now, he calculated, but she was as slim and perky as she had been at twenty. She walked quickly into the hospital with an air of brisk authority, carrying a wooden cup full of some medicine; then she looked at him, paused, and dropped the cup.

He grinned at her, feeling happy.

“You’re here!” she said. “I thought you were in Florence!”

“I’m very pleased to be back,” he replied.

She looked at the liquid on the floor. The nun with her said: “Don’t worry about this, I’ll clear up. Go and talk to him.” The second nun was pretty, and had tears in her eyes, Merthin noticed, but he was too excited to pay much attention.

Caris said: “When did you come back?”

“I arrived an hour ago. You look well.”

“And you look…such a man.”

Merthin laughed.

She said: “What made you decide to return?”

“It’s a long story,” he replied. “But I’d love to tell it to you.”

“We’ll step outside.” She touched his arm lightly and led him out of the building. Nuns were not supposed to touch people, or to have private conversations with men, but for her such rules had always been optional. He was glad she had not acquired a respect for authority in the last nine years.

Merthin pointed to the bench by the vegetable garden. “I sat on that seat with Mark and Madge Webber, the day you entered the convent, nine years ago. Madge told me you had refused to see me.”

She nodded. “It was the most unhappy day of my life—but I knew that seeing you would make it even worse.”

“I felt the same way, except that I wanted to see you, no matter how miserable it made me.”

She gave him a direct look, her gold-flecked green eyes as candid as ever. “That sounds a bit like a reproach.”

“Perhaps it is. I was very angry with you. Whatever you decided to do, I felt you owed me an explanation.” He had not intended the conversation to go this way, but he found he could not help himself.

She was unapologetic. “It’s really quite simple. I could hardly bear to leave you. If I had been forced to speak to you, I think I would have killed myself.”

He was taken aback. For nine years he had thought she had been selfish on that day of parting. Now it looked as if he had been the selfish one, in making such demands on her. She had always had this ability to make him revise his attitudes, he recalled. It was an uncomfortable process, but she was often right.

They did not sit on the bench, but turned away and walked across the cathedral green. The sky had clouded over, and the sun had gone. “There is a terrible plague in Italy,” he said. “They call it *la moria grande*.”

“I’ve heard about it,” she said. “Isn’t it in southern France, too? It sounds dreadful.”

“I caught the disease. I recovered, which is unusual. My wife, Silvia, died.”

She looked shocked. “I’m so sorry,” she said. “You must feel terribly sad.”

“All her family died, and so did all my clients. It seemed like a good moment to come home. And you?”

“I’ve just been made cellarer,” she said with evident pride.

To Merthin that seemed somewhat trivial, especially after the slaughter he had seen. However, such things were important in the life of the nunnery. He looked up at the great church. “Florence has a magnificent cathedral,” he said. “Lots of patterns in colored stone. But I prefer this: carved shapes, all the same shade.” As he studied the tower, gray stone against gray sky, it started to rain.

They went inside the church for shelter. A dozen or so people were scattered around the nave: visitors to the town looking at the architecture, devout locals praying, a couple of novice monks sweeping. “I remember feeling you up behind that pillar,” Merthin said with a grin.

“I remember it, too,” she said, but she did not meet his eye.

“I still feel the same about you as I did on that day. That’s the real reason I came home.”

She turned and looked at him with anger in her eyes. “But you got married.”

“And you became a nun.”

“But how could you marry her—Silvia—if you loved me?”

“I thought I could forget you. But I never did. Then, when I thought I was dying, I realized I would never get over you.”

Her anger vanished as quickly as it had appeared, and tears came to her eyes. “I know,” she said, looking away.

“You feel the same.”

“I never changed.”

“Did you try?”

She met his eye. “There’s a nun…”

“The pretty one who was with you in the hospital?”

“How did you guess?”

“She cried when she saw me. I wondered why.”

Caris looked guilty, and Merthin guessed she was feeling the way he had felt when Silvia used to say: “You’re thinking about your English girl.”

“Mair is dear to me,” Caris said. “And she loves me. But…”

“But you didn’t forget me.”

“No.”

Merthin felt triumphant, but he tried not to let it show. “In that case,” he said, “you should renounce your vows, leave the nunnery, and marry me.”

“Leave the nunnery?”

“You’ll need first to get a pardon for the witchcraft conviction, I realize that, but I’m sure it can be done—we’ll bribe the bishop and the archbishop and even the pope if necessary. I can afford it—”

She was not sure it would be as easy as he thought. But that was not her main problem. “It’s not that I’m not tempted,” she said. “But I promised Cecilia I would vindicate her faith in me…I have to help Mair take over as guest master…we need to build a new treasury…and I’m the only one who takes care of Old Julie properly…”

He was bewildered. “Is all that so important?”

“Of course it is!” she said angrily.

“I thought the nunnery was just old women saying prayers.”

“And healing the sick, and feeding the poor, and managing thousands of acres of land. It’s at least as important as building bridges and churches.”

He had not anticipated this. She had always been skeptical of religious observance. She had gone into the nunnery under duress, when it was the only way to save her own life. But now she seemed to have grown to love her punishment. “You’re like a prisoner who is reluctant to leave the dungeon, even when the door is opened wide,” he said.

“The door isn’t open wide. I would have to renounce my vows. Mother Cecilia—”

“We’ll have to work on all these problems. Let’s begin right away.”

She looked miserable. “I’m not sure.”

She was torn, he could see. It amazed him. “Is this you?” he said incredulously. “You used to hate the hypocrisy and falsehood that you saw in the priory. Lazy, greedy, dishonest, tyrannical—”

“That’s still true of Godwyn and Philemon.”

“Then leave.”

“And do what?”

“Marry me, of course.”

“Is that all?”

Once again he was bewildered. “It’s all I want.”

“No, it’s not. You want to design palaces and castles. You want to build the tallest building in England.”

“If you need someone to take care of…”

“What?”

“I’ve got a little girl. Her name is Lolla. She’s three.”

That seemed to settle Caris’s mind. She sighed. “I’m a senior official in a convent of thirty-five nuns, ten novices, and twenty-five employees, with a school and a hospital and a pharmacy—and you’re asking me to throw all that up to nursemaid one little girl I’ve never met.”

He gave up arguing. “All I know is that I love you and I want to be with you.”

She laughed humorlessly. “If you had said that and nothing else, you might have talked me into it.”

“I’m confused,” he said. “Are you refusing me, or not?”

“I don’t know,” she said.

55

Merthin lay awake much of the night. He was accustomed to bedding down in taverns, and the sounds Lolla made in her sleep only soothed him; but tonight he could not stop thinking about Caris. He was shocked by her reaction to his return. He realized, now, that he had never thought logically about how she would feel when he reappeared. He had indulged in unrealistic nightmares about how she might have changed, and in his heart he had hoped for a joyous reconciliation. Of course she had not forgotten him; but he could have figured out that she would not have spent nine years moping for him: she was not the type.

All the same, he would never have guessed that she would be so committed to her work as a nun. She had always been more or less hostile to the church. Given how dangerous it was to criticize religion in any way, she might well have concealed the true depth of her skepticism even from him. So it was a terrible shock to find her reluctant to leave the nunnery. He had anticipated fear of Bishop Richard’s death sentence, or anxiety about being permitted to renounce her vows, but he had not suspected she might have found life in the priory so fulfilling that she hesitated to leave it to become his wife.

He felt angry with her. He wished he had said: “I’ve traveled a thousand

miles to ask you to marry me—how can you say you're not sure?" He thought of a lot of biting remarks he might have made. Perhaps it was a good thing they had not occurred to him then. Their conversation had ended with her asking him to give her time to get over the shock of his sudden return and think about what she wanted to do. He had consented—he had no alternative—but it had left him hanging in agony like a man crucified.

Eventually he drifted into a troubled sleep.

Lolla woke him early, as usual, and they went down to the parlor for porridge. He repressed the impulse to go straight to the hospital and speak to Caris again. She had asked for time, and it would do his cause no good to pester her. It occurred to him that there might be more shocks in store for him, and that he had better try to catch up with what had been happening in Kingsbridge. So after breakfast he went to see Mark Webber.

The Webber family lived on the main street in a large house they had bought soon after Caris got them started in the cloth business. Merthin remembered the days when they and their four children had lived in one room that was not much bigger than the loom on which Mark worked. Their new house had a large stone-built ground floor used as a storeroom and shop. The living quarters were in the timber-built upper story. Merthin found Madge in the shop, checking a cartload of scarlet cloth that had just arrived from one of their out-of-town mills. She was almost forty now, with strands of gray in her dark hair. A short woman, she had become quite plump, with a prominent bosom and a vast behind. She made Merthin think of a pigeon, but an aggressive one, because of her jutting chin and assertive manner.

With her were two youngsters, a beautiful girl of about seventeen and a strapping boy a couple of years older. Merthin recalled her two older children—Dora, a thin girl in a ragged dress, and John, a shy boy—and realized that these were the same, grown up. Now John was effortlessly lifting the heavy bales of cloth while Dora counted them by notching a stick. It made Merthin feel old. I'm only thirty-two, he thought; but that seemed old when he looked at John.

Madge gave a cry of surprise and pleasure when she saw him. She hugged him and kissed his bearded cheeks, then made a fuss over Lolla. "I thought she could come and play with your children," Merthin said ruefully. "Of course they're much too old."

"Dennis and Noah are at the priory school," she said. "They're thirteen and eleven. But Dora will entertain Lolla—she loves children."

The young woman picked Lolla up. "The cat next door has kittens," she said. "Do you want to see them?"

Lolla replied with a stream of Italian, which Dora took for assent, and they went off.

Madge left John to finish unloading the cart and took Merthin upstairs.

“Mark has gone to Melcombe,” she said. “We export some of our cloth to Brittany and Gascony. He should be back today or tomorrow.”

Merthin sat in her parlor and accepted a cup of ale. “Kingsbridge seems to be prospering,” he said.

“The trade in fleeces has declined,” she said. “It’s because of war taxes. Everything has to be sold through a handful of large traders so that the king can collect his share. There are still a few dealers here in Kingsbridge—Petranilla carries on the business Edmund left—but it’s nothing like it used to be. Luckily, the trade in finished cloth has grown to replace it, in this town at least.”

“Is Godwyn still prior?”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

“Is he still making difficulties?”

“He’s so conservative. He objects to any change and vetoes all progress. For example, Mark proposed opening the market on Saturday as well as Sunday, as an experiment.”

“What possible objection could Godwyn have to that?”

“He said it would enable people to come to market without going to church, which would be a bad thing.”

“Some of them might have gone to church on Saturday, too.”

“Godwyn’s cup is always half-empty, never half-full.”

“Surely the parish guild opposes him?”

“Not very often. Elfric is alderman now. He and Alice got almost everything Edmund left.”

“The alderman doesn’t have to be the richest man in town.”

“But he usually is. Remember, Elfric employs lots of craftsmen—carpenters, stonemasons, mortar makers, scaffolders—and buys from everyone who trades in building materials. The town is full of people who are more or less bound to support him.”

“And Elfric has always been close to Godwyn.”

“Exactly. He gets all the priory’s building work—which means every public project.”

“And he’s such a shoddy builder!”

“Strange, isn’t it?” Madge said in a musing tone. “You’d think Godwyn would want the best man for the job. But he doesn’t. For him, it’s all about who will be compliant, who will obey his wishes unquestioningly.”

Merthin felt a bit depressed. Nothing had changed: his enemies were still in power. It might prove difficult for him to resume his old life. “No good news for me there, then.” He stood up. “I’d better take a look at my island.”

“I’m sure Mark will seek you out as soon as he returns from Melcombe.”

Merthin went next door for Lolla, but she was having such a good time that he left her with Dora, and strolled through the town to the riverside. He

took another look at the cracks in his bridge, but he did not need to study them long: the cause was obvious. He made a tour of Leper Island. Little had changed: there were a few wharves and storehouses at the west end and just one house, the one he had lent to Jimmie, at the east end, beside the road that led from one span of the bridge to the other.

When he first took possession of the island, he had had ambitious plans for developing it. Nothing had happened, of course, during his exile. Now he thought he could do something. He paced the ground, making rough measurements and visualizing buildings and even streets, until it was time for the midday meal.

He picked Lolla up and returned to the Bell. Bessie served a tasty pork stew thickened with barley. The tavern was quiet, and Bessie joined them for dinner, bringing a jug of her best red wine. When they had eaten, she poured him another cup, and he told her about his ideas. “The road across the island, from one bridge to the other, is an ideal place to put shops,” he said.

“And taverns,” she pointed out. “This place and the Holly Bush are the busiest inns in town simply because they are close to the cathedral. Any place where people are continually passing by is a good location for a tavern.”

“If I built a tavern on Leper Island, you could run it.”

She gave him a direct look. “We could run it together.”

He smiled at her. He was full of her good food and wine, and any man would have loved to tumble into bed with her and enjoy her soft, round body; but it was not to be. “I was very fond of my wife, Silvia,” he said. “But, all the time we were married, I kept thinking about Caris. And Silvia knew it.”

Betty looked away. “That’s sad.”

“I know. And I’ll never do it to another woman. I won’t get married again, unless it’s to Caris. I’m not a good man, but I’m not that bad.”

“Caris may never marry you.”

“I know.”

She stood up, picking up their bowls. “You are a good man,” she said. “Too good.” She returned to the kitchen.

Merthin put Lolla to bed for a nap, then sat on a bench in front of the tavern, looking down the hillside at Leper Island, sketching on a big slate, enjoying the September sunshine. He did not get much work done because every other person who walked past wanted to welcome him home and ask what he had been doing for the last nine years.

Late in the afternoon he saw the massive figure of Mark Webber coming up the hill driving a cart bearing a barrel. Mark had always been a giant but now, Merthin observed, he was a plump giant.

Merthin shook his enormous hand. “I’ve been to Melcombe,” Mark said. “I go every few weeks.”

“What’s in the barrel?”

“Wine from Bordeaux, straight off the ship—which also brought news. You know that Princess Joan was on her way to Spain?”

“Yes.” Every well-informed person in Europe knew that the fifteen-year-old daughter of King Edward was to marry Prince Pedro, heir to the throne of Castile. The marriage would forge an alliance between England and the largest of the Iberian kingdoms, ensuring that Edward could concentrate on his interminable war against France without worrying about interference from the south.

“Well,” said Mark, “Joan died of the plague in Bordeaux.”

Merthin was doubly shocked: partly because Edward’s position in France had suddenly become shaky, but mainly because the plague had spread so far. “They have the plague in Bordeaux?”

“Bodies piled in the streets, the French sailors told me.”

Merthin was unnerved. He had thought he had left *la moria grande* behind him. Surely it would not come as far as England? He did not fear it personally: no one had ever caught it twice, so he was safe, and Lolla was among those who for some reason did not succumb to it. But he was afraid for everyone else—especially Caris.

Mark had other things on his mind. “You’ve returned at just the right time. Some of the younger merchants are getting fed up with Elfric as alderman. A lot of the time he’s just a dogsbody for Godwyn. I’m planning to challenge him. You could be influential. There’s a meeting of the parish guild tonight—come along and we’ll get you admitted right away.”

“Won’t it matter that I never finished my apprenticeship?”

“After what you’ve built, here and abroad? Hardly.”

“All right.” Merthin needed to be a guild member if he was going to develop the island. People always found reasons to object to new buildings, and he might need support himself. But he was not as confident of his acceptance as Mark.

Mark took his barrel home and Merthin went inside to give Lolla her supper. At sundown Mark returned to the Bell, and Merthin walked with him up the main street as the warm afternoon turned into a chilly evening.

The guildhall had seemed like a fine building to Merthin years ago, when he had stood here and presented his bridge design to the parish guild. But it appeared awkward and shabby now that he had seen the grand public buildings of Italy. He wondered what men such as Buonaventura Caroli and Loro Fiorentino must think of its rough stone undercroft, with the prison and the kitchen, and its main hall with a row of pillars running awkwardly down the middle to support the roof.

Mark introduced him to a handful of men who had arrived in Kingsbridge, or had come to prominence, in Merthin’s absence. However, most of the faces were familiar, albeit a little older. Merthin greeted those few

he had not already encountered in the last two days. Among these was Elfric, ostentatiously dressed in a brocade surcoat made with silver thread. He showed no surprise—someone had obviously told him Merthin was back—but glared with undisguised hostility.

Also present were Prior Godwyn and his subprior, Brother Philemon. Godwyn at forty-two was looking more like his uncle Anthony, Merthin observed, with downsloping lines of querulous discontent around his mouth. He put on a pretense of affability that might have fooled someone who did not know him. Philemon, too, had changed. He was no longer lean and awkward. He had filled out like a prosperous merchant, and carried himself with an air of arrogant self-assurance—although Merthin fancied he could still see, underneath the facade, the anxiety and self-hatred of the fawning toady. Philemon shook his hand as if touching a snake. It was depressing to realize that old hatreds were so long-lived.

A handsome, dark-haired young man crossed himself when he saw Merthin, then revealed that he was Merthin's former protégé, Jimmie, now known as Jeremiah Builder. Merthin was delighted to find that he was doing well enough to belong to the parish guild. However, it seemed he was still as superstitious as ever.

Mark mentioned the news about Princess Joan to everyone he spoke to. Merthin answered one or two anxious questions about the plague, but the Kingsbridge merchants were more concerned that the collapse of the alliance with Castile would prolong the French war, which was bad for business.

Elfric sat on the big chair in front of the giant woolsack scales and opened the meeting. Mark immediately proposed that Merthin should be admitted as a member.

Not surprisingly, Elfric objected. "He was never a member of the guild because he did not finish his apprenticeship."

"Because he wouldn't marry your daughter, you mean," said one of the men, and they all laughed. Merthin took a few moments to identify the speaker: it was Bill Watkin, the house builder, the black hair around his bald dome now turning gray.

"Because he is not a craftsman of the required standard," Elfric persisted stubbornly.

"How can you say that?" Mark protested. "He has built houses, churches, palaces—"

"And our bridge, which is cracking after only eight years."

"You built that, Elfric."

"I followed Merthin's design exactly. Clearly the arches are not strong enough to bear the weight of the roadbed and the traffic upon it. The iron braces I have installed have not been sufficient to prevent the cracks widening. Therefore I propose to reinforce the arches either side of the central

pier, on both bridges, with a second course of masonry, doubling their thickness. I thought this subject might come up tonight, so I have prepared estimates of the cost.”

Elfric must have started to plan this attack the moment he heard that Merthin was back in town. He had always seen Merthin as an enemy: nothing had changed. However, he had failed to understand the problem with the bridge, and that gave Merthin his chance.

He spoke to Jeremiah in a low voice. “Would you do something for me?”

“After all you did for me? Anything!”

“Run to the priory now and ask to speak to Sister Caris urgently. Tell her to find the original drawing I made for the bridge. It should be in the priory library. Bring it here right away.”

Jeremiah slipped out of the room.

Elfric went on: “I must tell guildsmen that I have already spoken to Prior Godwyn, who says the priory cannot afford to pay for this repair. We will have to finance it, as we financed the original cost of building the bridge, and be repaid out of penny tolls.”

They all groaned. There followed a long and bad-tempered discussion about how much money each member of the guild should put up. Merthin felt animosity building up toward him in the room. This was undoubtedly what Elfric had intended. Merthin kept looking at the door, willing Jeremiah to reappear.

Bill Watkin said: “Maybe Merthin should pay for the repairs, if it’s his design that’s at fault.”

Merthin could not stay out of the discussion any longer. He threw caution to the winds. “I agree,” he said.

There was a startled silence.

“If my design has caused the cracks, I’ll repair the bridge at my own expense,” he went on recklessly. Bridges were costly: if he was wrong about the problem, it could cost half his fortune.

Bill said: “Handsomely said, I’m sure.”

Merthin said: “But I have something to say, first, if guildsmen will permit.” He looked at Elfric.

Elfric hesitated, obviously trying to think of a reason for refusing; but Bill said: “Let him speak,” and there was a chorus of assent.

Elfric nodded reluctantly.

“Thank you,” said Merthin. “When an arch is weak, it cracks in a characteristic pattern. The stones at the top of the arch are pressed downwards, so that their lower edges splay apart, and a crack appears at the crown of the arch on the intrados—the underside.”

“That’s true,” said Bill Watkin. “I’ve seen that sort of crack many a time. It’s not usually fatal.”

Merthin went on: “This is *not* the type of cracking you’re seeing on the bridge. Contrary to what Elfric said, those arches *are* strong enough: the thickness of the arch is one-twentieth of its diameter at the base, which is the standard proportion, in every country.”

The builders in the room nodded. They all knew that ratio.

“The crown is intact. However, there are horizontal cracks at the springing of the arch either side of the central pier.”

Bill spoke again. “You sometimes see that in a quadripartite vault.”

“Which this bridge is *not*,” Merthin pointed out. “The vaults are simple.”

“What’s causing it, then?”

“Elfric did not follow my original design.”

Elfric said: “I did!”

“I specified a pile of large, loose stones at both ends of the piers.”

“A pile of stones?” Elfric said mockingly. “And you say that’s what was going to keep your bridge upright?”

“Yes, I do,” Merthin said. He could tell that even the builders in the room agreed with Elfric’s skepticism. But they did not know about bridges, which were different from any other kind of building because they stood in water. “The piles of stones were an essential part of the design.”

“They were never in the drawings.”

“Would you like to show us my drawings, Elfric, to prove your point?”

“The tracing floor is long gone.”

“I did a drawing on parchment. It should be in the priory library.”

Elfric looked at Godwyn. At that moment the complicity between the two men was blatant, and Merthin hoped the rest of the guild could see it. Godwyn said: “Parchment is costly. That drawing was scraped and reused long ago.”

Merthin nodded as if he believed Godwyn. There was still no sign of Jeremiah. Merthin might have to win the argument without the help of the original plans. “The stones *would* have prevented the problem that is now causing the cracks,” he said.

Philemon put in: “You would say that, wouldn’t you? But why should we believe you? It’s just your word against Elfric’s.”

Merthin realized he would have to stick his neck out. All or nothing, he thought. “I will tell you what the problem is, and prove it to you, in daylight, if you will meet me at the riverside tomorrow at dawn.”

Elfric’s face showed that he wanted to refuse this challenge, but Bill Watkin said: “Fair enough! We’ll be there.”

“Bill, can you bring two sensible boys who are good swimmers and divers?”

“Easy.”

Elfric had lost control of the meeting, and Godwyn intervened, revealing

himself as the puppet master. “What kind of a mockery are you planning?” he said angrily.

But it was too late. The others were curious now. “Let him make his point,” said Bill. “If it’s a mockery, we’ll all know soon enough.”

Just then, Jeremiah came in. Merthin was pleased to see that he was carrying a wooden frame with a large sheet of parchment stretched across it. Elfric stared at Jeremiah, shocked.

Godwyn looked pale and said: “Who gave you that?”

“A revealing question,” Merthin commented. “The lord prior doesn’t ask what the drawing shows, nor where it came from—he seems to know all that already. He just wonders who handed it over.”

Bill said: “Never mind all that. Show us the drawing, Jeremiah.”

Jeremiah stood in front of the scales and turned the frame around so that everyone could see the drawing. There at the ends of the piers were the piles of stones Merthin had spoken of.

Merthin stood up. “In the morning, I’ll explain how they work.”

Summer was turning into autumn, and it was chilly on the riverbank at dawn. News had somehow got around that a drama would take place and, as well as the members of the parish guild, there were two or three hundred people waiting to see the clash between Merthin and Elfric. Even Caris was there. This was no longer merely an argument about an engineering problem, Merthin realized. He was the youngster challenging the authority of the old bull, and the herd understood that.

Bill Watkin produced two lads of twelve or thirteen, stripped to their undershorts and shivering. It turned out they were Mark Webber’s younger sons, Dennis and Noah. Dennis, the thirteen-year-old, was short and chunky, like his mother. He had red-brown hair the color of leaves in autumn. Noah, the younger by two years, was taller, and would probably grow up to be as big as Mark. Merthin identified with the short redhead. He wondered whether Dennis was embarrassed, as Merthin himself had been at that age, to have a younger brother who was bigger and stronger.

Merthin thought Elfric might object to Mark’s sons being the divers, on the grounds that they might have been briefed in advance by their father and told what to say. However, Elfric said nothing. Mark was too transparently honest for anyone to suspect him of such duplicity, and perhaps Elfric realized that—or, more likely, Godwyn realized it.

Merthin told the boys what to do. “Swim out to the central pier, then dive. You’ll find the pier is smooth for a long way down. Then there’s the foundation, a great lump of stones held together with mortar. When you reach the riverbed, feel underneath the foundation. You probably won’t be able to

see anything—the water will be too muddy. But hold your breath for as long as you can and investigate thoroughly all around the base. Then come up to the surface and tell us exactly what you find.”

They both jumped into the water and swam out. Merthin spoke to the assembled townspeople. “The bed of this river is not rock but mud. The current swirls around the piers of a bridge and scours the mud out from underneath the pillars, leaving a depression filled only with water. This happened to the old wooden bridge. The oak piers were not resting on the riverbed at all, but hanging from the superstructure. That’s why the bridge collapsed. To prevent the same thing happening to the new bridge, I specified piles of large rough stones around the feet of the piers. Such piles break up the current so that its action is haphazard and weak. However, the piles were not installed and so the piers have been undermined. They are no longer supporting the bridge, but hanging from it—and that’s why there are cracks where the pier joins the arch.”

Elfric snorted skeptically, but the other builders looked intrigued. The two boys reached midstream, touched the central pier, took deep breaths, and disappeared.

Merthin said: “When they come back, they will tell us that the pier is not resting on the riverbed, but hanging over a depression, filled with water, large enough for a man to climb into.”

He hoped he was right.

Both boys stayed under water for a surprisingly long time. Merthin found himself feeling breathless, as it were, in sympathy with them. At last a wet head of red hair broke the surface, then a brown one. The two boys conversed briefly, nodding, as if establishing that they had both observed the same thing. Then they struck out for the shore.

Merthin was not completely sure of his diagnosis, but he could think of no other explanation for the cracks. And he had felt the need to appear supremely confident. If he now turned out to be wrong, he would look all the more foolish.

The boys reached the bank and waded out of the water, panting. Madge gave them blankets which they pulled around their shaking shoulders. Merthin allowed them a few moments to catch their breath, then said: “Well? What did you find?”

“Nothing,” said Dennis, the elder.

“What do you mean, nothing?”

“There’s nothing there, at the bottom of the pillar.”

Elfric looked triumphant. “Just the mud of the riverbed, you mean.”

“No!” said Dennis. “No mud—just water.”

Noah put in: “There’s a hole you could climb into—easily! That big pillar is just hanging in the water, with nothing under it.”

Merthin tried not to look relieved.

Elfric blustered: “There’s still no authority for saying a pile of loose stones would have solved the problem.” But no one was listening to him. In the eyes of the crowd, Merthin had proved his point. They gathered around him, commenting and questioning. After a few moments, Elfric walked away alone.

Merthin felt a momentary pang of compassion. Then he recalled how, when he was an apprentice, Elfric had hit him across the face with a length of timber; and his pity evaporated into the cold morning air.

56

The following morning, a monk came to see Merthin at the Bell. When he pulled back his hood, Merthin did not at first recognize him. Then he saw that the monk’s left arm was cut off at the elbow, and he realized it was Brother Thomas, now in his forties, with a gray beard and deep-set lines around his eyes and mouth. Was his secret still dangerous after all these years? Merthin wondered. Would Thomas’s life be in danger, even now, if the truth came out?

But Thomas had not come to talk about that. “You were right about the bridge,” he said.

Merthin nodded. There was a sour satisfaction in it. He had been right, but Prior Godwyn had fired him, and in consequence his bridge would never be perfect. “I wanted to explain the importance of the rough stones, back then,” he said. “But I knew Elfric and Godwyn would never listen to me. So I told Edmund Wooler, then he died.”

“You should have told me.”

“I wish I had.”

“Come with me to the church,” Thomas said. “Since you can read so much from a few cracks, I’d like to show you something, if I may.”

He led Merthin to the south transept. Here and in the south aisle of the choir Elfric had rebuilt the arches, following the partial collapse eleven years ago. Merthin saw immediately what Thomas was worrying about: the cracks had reappeared.

“You said they would come back,” Thomas said.

“Unless you discovered the root cause of the problem, yes.”

“You were right. Elfric was wrong twice.”

Merthin felt a spark of excitement. If the tower needed to be rebuilt…“You understand that, but does Godwyn?”

Thomas did not answer the question. “What do you think the root cause might be?”

Merthin concentrated on the immediate problem. He had thought about this, on and off, for years. “This is not the original tower, is it?” he said. “According to *Timothy’s Book*, it has been rebuilt, and made higher.”

“About a hundred years ago, yes—when the raw wool business was booming. Do you think they made it too high?”

“It depends on the foundations.” The site of the cathedral sloped gently to the south, toward the river, and that might be a factor. He walked through the crossing, under the tower, to the north transept. He stood at the foot of the massive pillar at the northeast corner of the crossing and looked up at the arch that stretched over his head, across the north aisle of the choir, to the wall.

“It’s the south aisle I’m worried about,” Thomas said, slightly peevishly. “There are no problems here.”

Merthin pointed up. “There’s a crack on the underside of the arch—the intrados—at the crown,” he said. “You get that in a bridge, when the piers are inadequately grounded, and start to splay apart.”

“What are you saying—that the tower is moving away from the north transept?”

Merthin went back through the crossing and looked at the matching arch on the south side. “This one is cracked, too, but on the upper side, the extrados, do you see? The wall above it is cracked, too.”

“They aren’t very big cracks.”

“But they tell us what is happening. On the north side, the arch is being stretched; on the south side, it’s being pinched. That means the tower is moving south.”

Thomas looked up warily. “It seems straight.”

“You can’t see it with the eye. But if you climb up into the tower, and drop a plumb line from the top of one of the columns of the crossing, just below the springing of the arch, you will see that by the time the line touches the floor it will be adrift of the column to the south by several inches. And, as the tower leans, it’s separating from the wall of the choir, which is where the damage shows worst.”

“What can be done?”

Merthin wanted to say: *You have to commission me to build a new tower.* But that would have been premature. “A lot more investigation, before any building,” he said, suppressing his excitement. “We have established that the cracks have appeared because the tower is moving—but *why* is it moving?”

“And how will we learn that?”

“Dig a hole,” Merthin said.

In the end Jeremiah dug the hole. Thomas did not want to employ Merthin directly. It was difficult enough as it was, he said, to get the money for the investigation out of Godwyn, who seemed never to have any money to spare. But he could not give the job to Elfric, who would have said there was

nothing to investigate. So the compromise was Merthin's old apprentice.

Jeremiah had learned from his master and liked to work fast. On the first day, he lifted the paving stones in the south transept. Next day, his men started excavating the earth around the huge southeast pier of the crossing.

As the hole got deeper, Jeremiah built a timber hoist for lifting out loads of earth. By the second week he had to build wooden ladders down the sides of the hole so that the laborers could get to the bottom.

Meanwhile, the parish guild gave Merthin the contract for the repair of the bridge. Elfric was against the decision, of course, but he was in no position to claim that he was the best man for the job, and he hardly bothered to argue.

Merthin went to work with speed and energy. He built cofferdams around the two problem piers, drained the dams, and began to fill the holes under the piers with rubble and mortar. Next he would surround the piers with the piles of large rough stones he had envisaged from the start. Finally, he would remove Elfric's ugly iron braces and fill the cracks with mortar. Provided the repaired foundations were sound, the cracks would not reopen.

But the job he really wanted was the rebuilding of the tower.

It would not be easy. He would have to get his design accepted by the priory and the parish guild, currently run by his two worst enemies, Godwyn and Elfric. And Godwyn would have to find the money.

As a first step, Merthin encouraged Mark to put himself forward for election as alderman, to replace Elfric. The alderman was elected once a year, on All Hallows Day, the first of November. In practice, most aldermen were reelected unopposed until they retired or died. However, there was no doubt that a contest was permitted. Indeed, Elfric himself had put his name forward while Edmund Wooler was still in office.

Mark required little prompting. He was itching to put an end to Elfric's rule. Elfric was so close to Godwyn that there was not much point in having a parish guild at all. The town was in effect run by the priory—narrow, conservative, mistrustful of new ideas, careless of the interests of the townspeople.

So the two candidates began drumming up support. Elfric had his followers, mainly people he either employed or bought materials from. However, he had lost face badly in the argument over the bridge, and those who took his side were downcast. Mark's supporters, by contrast, were ebullient.

Merthin visited the cathedral every day and examined the foundations of the mighty column as they were exposed by Jeremiah's digging. The foundations were made of the same stone as the rest of the church, laid in mortared courses, but less carefully trimmed, as they would not be visible. Each course was a little wider than the one above, in a pyramid shape. As the

excavation went deeper, he examined every layer for weakness, and found none. But he felt confident that eventually he would.

Merthin told no one what was in his mind. If his suspicions were correct, and the thirteenth-century tower was simply too heavy for the twelfth-century foundations, the solution would be drastic: the tower would have to be demolished—and a new one built. And the new tower could be the tallest in England…

One day in the middle of October, Caris appeared at the digging. It was early in the morning, and a winter sun was shining through the great east window. She stood on the edge of the hole with her hood around her head like a halo. Merthin's heart beat faster. Perhaps she had an answer for him. He climbed up the ladder eagerly.

She was as beautiful as ever, though in the strong sunlight he could see the little differences that nine years had made to her face. Her skin was not quite as smooth, and there were now the tiniest of creases at the corners of her lips. But her green eyes still shone with that alert intelligence that he loved so much.

They walked together down the south aisle of the nave and stopped near the pillar that always reminded him of how he had once felt her up here. "I'm happy to see you," he said. "You've been hiding away."

"I'm a nun, I'm supposed to hide away."

"But you're thinking about renouncing your vows."

"I haven't made a decision."

He was crestfallen. "How much time do you need?"

"I don't know."

He looked away. He did not want to show her how badly he was hurt by her hesitation. He said nothing. He could have told her she was being unreasonable, but what was the point?

"You'll be going to visit your parents in Tench at some point, I suppose," she said.

He nodded. "Quite soon—they will want to see Lolla." He was eager to see them, too, and had delayed only because he had become so deeply involved in his work on the bridge and the tower.

"In that case, I wish you would talk to your brother about Wulfric in Wigleigh."

Merthin wanted to talk about himself and Caris, not Wulfric and Gwenda. His response was cool. "What do you want me to say to Ralph?"

"Wulfric is laboring for no money—just food—because Ralph won't give him even a small acreage to farm."

Merthin shrugged. "Wulfric broke Ralph's nose." He felt the conversation begin to descend into a quarrel, and he asked himself why he was angry. Caris had not spoken to him for weeks, but she had broken her silence for the sake

of Gwenda. He resented Gwenda's place in her heart, he realized. That was an unworthy emotion, he told himself; but he could not shake it.

Caris flushed with annoyance. "That was twelve years ago! Isn't it time Ralph stopped punishing him?"

Merthin had forgotten the abrasive disagreements he and Caris used to have, but now he recognized this friction as familiar. He spoke dismissively. "Of course he should stop—in my opinion. But Ralph's opinion is the one that counts."

"Then see if you can change his mind," she said.

He resented her imperious attitude. "I'm yours to command," he said facetiously.

"Why the irony?"

"Because I'm *not* yours to command, of course, but you seem to think I am. And I feel a bit foolish for going along with you."

"Oh, for heaven's sake," she said. "You're offended that I've asked you?"

For some reason, he felt sure she had made up her mind to reject him, and stay in the nunnery. He tried to control his emotions. "If we were a couple, you could ask me anything. But while you're keeping open the option of rejecting me, it seems a bit presumptuous of you." He knew he was sounding pompous, but he could not stop. If he revealed his true feelings he would burst into tears.

She was too wrapped up in her indignation to notice his distress. "But it's not even for myself!" she protested.

"I realize it's your generosity of spirit that makes you do it, but I still feel you're using me."

"All right, then, don't do it."

"Of course I'll *do* it." Suddenly he could no longer contain himself. He turned and walked away from her. He was shaking with some passion he could not identify. As he strode up the aisle of the great church, he struggled to get himself under control. He reached the excavation. This was stupid, he thought. He turned and looked back, but Caris had vanished.

He stood at the lip of the hole, looking down, waiting for the storm inside him to subside.

After a while he realized that the excavation had reached a crucial stage. Thirty feet below him, the men had dug down past the masonry foundations and were beginning to reveal what was beneath. There was nothing more he could do about Caris right now. It would be best to concentrate on his work. He took a deep breath, swallowed, and went down the ladder.

This was the moment of truth. His distress over Caris began to ease as he watched the men dig farther down. Shovelful after shovelful of heavy mud was dug up and taken away. Merthin studied the stratum of earth that was revealed below the foundations. It looked like a mixture of sand and small

stones. As the men removed the mud, the sandy stuff dribbled into the hole they were making.

Merthin ordered them to stop.

He knelt down and picked up a handful of the sandy material. It was nothing like the soil all around. It was not natural to the site, therefore it must be something that had been put there by builders. The excitement of discovery rose inside him, overmastering his grief about Caris. “Jeremiah!” he called. “See if you can find Brother Thomas—quick as you like.”

He told the men to carry on digging, but to make a narrower hole: at this point the excavation itself could be dangerous to the structure. After a while Jeremiah returned with Thomas, and the three of them watched as the men took the hole farther down. Eventually the sandy layer came to an end, and the next stratum was revealed to be the natural muddy earth.

“I wonder what that sandy stuff is,” Thomas said.

“I think I know,” Merthin said. He tried not to look triumphant. He had predicted, years ago, that Elfric’s repairs would not work unless the root of the problem was discovered, and he had been right—but it was never wise to say “I told you so.”

Thomas and Jeremiah looked at him in anticipation.

He explained. “When you’ve dug a foundation hole, you cover the bottom with a mixture of rubble and mortar. Then you lay the masonry on top of that. It’s a perfectly good system, as long as the foundations are proportional to the building above.”

Thomas said impatiently: “We both know this.”

“What happened here was that a much higher tower was erected on foundations that were not designed for it. The extra weight, acting over a hundred years, has crushed that layer of rubble-and-mortar to sand. The sand has no cohesion, and under pressure it has spread outward into the surrounding soil, allowing the masonry above it to sink down. The effect is worse on the south side simply because the site naturally slopes that way.” He felt a profound satisfaction at having figured this out.

The other two looked thoughtful. Thomas said: “I suppose we will have to reinforce the foundations.”

Jeremiah shook his head. “Before we can put any reinforcement under the stonework, we’d have to remove the sandy stuff, and that would leave the foundations unsupported. The tower would fall down.”

Thomas was perplexed. “So what *can* we do?”

They both looked at Merthin. He said: “Build a temporary roof over the crossing, erect scaffolding, and take down the tower, stone by stone. Then reinforce the foundations.”

“Then we’d have to build a new tower.”

That was what Merthin wanted, but he did not say so. Thomas might

suspect that his judgment had been colored by his aspiration. “I’m afraid so,” he said with feigned regret.

“Prior Godwyn won’t like that.”

“I know,” Merthin said. “But I don’t think he’s got any choice.”

Next day Merthin rode out of Kingsbridge with Lolla on the saddle in front of him. As they traveled through the forest, he obsessively ran over his fraught exchange with Caris. He knew he had been ungenerous. How foolish that was, when he was trying to win back her love. What had got into him? Caris’s request was perfectly reasonable. Why would he not wish to perform a small service for the woman he wanted to marry?

But she had not agreed to marry him. She was still reserving the right to reject him. That was the source of his anger. She was exercising the privileges of a fiancée without making the commitment.

He could see now that it was petty of him to object on these grounds. He had been stupid, and turned what could have been a delightful moment of intimacy into a squabble.

On the other hand, the underlying cause of his distress was all too real. How long did Caris expect him to wait for an answer? How long was he prepared to wait? He did not like to think about that.

Anyway, it would do him nothing but good if he could persuade Ralph to stop persecuting poor Wulfric.

Tench was on the far side of the county, and on the way Merthin spent a night at windy Wigleigh. He found Gwenda and Wulfric thin after a rainy summer and the second poor harvest in a row. Wulfric’s scar seemed to stand out more on a hollowed cheek. Their two small sons looked pale, and had runny noses and sores on their lips.

Merthin gave them a leg of mutton, a small barrel of wine, and a gold florin that he pretended were gifts from Caris. Gwenda cooked the mutton over the fire. She was possessed by rage, and she hissed and spat like the turning meat as she talked of the injustice that had been done to them. “Perkin has almost half the land in the village!” she said. “The only reason he can manage it all is that he’s got Wulfric, who does the work of three men. Yet he must demand more, and keep us in poverty.”

“I’m sorry that Ralph still bears a grudge,” Merthin said.

“Ralph himself provoked that fight!” Gwenda said. “Even Lady Philippa said so.”

“Old quarrels,” Wulfric said philosophically.

“I’ll try to get him to see reason,” Merthin said. “In the unlikely event that he listens to me, what do you really want from him?”

“Ah,” said Wulfric, and he got a faraway look in his eyes, which was

unusual for him. “What I pray for every Sunday is to get back the lands that my father farmed.”

“That will never happen,” Gwenda said quickly. “Perkin is too well entrenched. And, if he should die, he has a son and a married daughter waiting to inherit, and a couple of grandsons growing taller every day. But we’d like a piece of land of our own. For the last eleven years Wulfric has been working hard to feed other men’s children. It’s time he got some of the benefit of his strength.”

“I’ll tell my brother he has punished you long enough,” Merthin said.

Next day he and Lolla rode from Wigleigh to Tench. Merthin was even more resolved to do something for Wulfric. It was not just that he wanted to please Caris, and atone for his curmudgeonly attitude. He also felt sad and indignant that two such honest and hardworking people as Wulfric and Gwenda should be poor and thin, and their children sickly, just because of Ralph’s vindictiveness.

His parents were living in a house in the village, not in Tench Hall itself. Merthin was shocked by how much his mother had aged, though she perked up when she saw Lolla. His father looked better. “Ralph is very good to us,” Gerald said in a defensive way that made Merthin think the opposite. The house was pleasant enough, but they would have preferred to live at the hall with Ralph. Merthin guessed that Ralph did not want his mother watching everything he did.

They showed him around their home, and Gerald asked Merthin how things were in Kingsbridge. “The town is still prospering, despite the effects of the king’s French war,” Merthin replied.

“Ah—but Edward must fight for his birthright,” his father said. “He is the legitimate heir to the throne of France, after all.”

“I think that’s a dream, Father,” said Merthin. “No matter how many times the king invades, the French nobility will not accept an Englishman as their king. And a king can’t rule without the support of his earls.”

“But we had to stop the French raids on our south coast ports.”

“That hasn’t been a major problem since the battle of Sluys, when we destroyed the French fleet—which was eight years ago. Anyway, burning the crops of the peasants won’t stop pirates—it might even add to their numbers.”

“The French support the Scots, who keep invading our northern counties.”

“Don’t you think the king would be better able to deal with Scottish incursions if he were in the north of England rather than the north of France?”

Gerald looked baffled. It had probably never occurred to him to question the wisdom of the war. “Well, Ralph has been knighted,” he said. “And he brought your mother a silver candlestick from Calais.”

That was about the size of it, Merthin thought. The real reason for the war was booty and glory.

They all walked to the manor house. Ralph was out hunting with Alan Fernhill. In the great hall was a huge carved wooden chair, obviously the lord's. Merthin saw what he thought was a young servant girl, heavily pregnant, and was dismayed to be introduced to her as Ralph's wife, Tilly. She went to the kitchen to fetch wine.

"How old is she?" Merthin said to his mother while she was gone.

"Fourteen."

It was not unknown for girls to become pregnant at fourteen, but all the same Merthin felt that decent people behaved otherwise. Such early pregnancies usually happened in royal families, for whom there was intense political pressure to produce heirs, and among the lowest and most ignorant of peasants, who knew no better. The middle classes maintained higher standards. "She's a bit young, isn't she?" he said quietly.

Maud replied: "We all asked Ralph to wait, but he would not." Clearly she, too, disapproved.

Tilly returned with a servant carrying a jug of wine and a bowl of apples. She might have been pretty, Merthin thought, but she looked worn out. His father addressed her with forced jollity. "Cheer up, Tilly! Your husband will be home soon—you don't want to greet him with a long face."

"I'm fed up with being pregnant," she said. "I just wish the baby would come as soon as possible."

"It won't be long now," Maud said. "Three or four weeks, I'd say."

"It seems like forever."

They heard horses outside. Maud said: "That sounds like Ralph."

Waiting for the brother he had not seen for nine years, Merthin had mixed feelings, as ever. His affection for Ralph was always contaminated by his knowledge of the evil Ralph had done. The rape of Annet had been only the beginning. During his days as an outlaw Ralph had murdered innocent men, women, and children. Merthin had heard, traveling through Normandy, of the atrocities perpetrated by King Edward's army and, while he did not know specifically what Ralph had done, it would have been foolish to hope that Ralph had held himself aloof from that orgy of rape, burning, looting, and slaughter. But Ralph was his brother.

Ralph, too, would have mixed feelings, Merthin was sure. He might not have forgiven Merthin for giving away the location of his outlaw hideout. And, although Merthin had made Brother Thomas promise not to kill Ralph, he had known that Ralph, once captured, was likely to be hanged. The last words Ralph had spoken to Merthin, in the jail in the basement of the guildhall at Kingsbridge, were: "You betrayed me."

Ralph came in with Alan, both muddy from the hunt. Merthin was shocked to see that he walked with a limp. Ralph took a moment to recognize Merthin. Then he smiled broadly. "My big brother!" he said heartily. It was an

old joke: Merthin was the elder, but had long been smaller.

They embraced. Merthin felt a surge of warmth, despite everything. At least we're both alive, he thought, despite war and plague. When they had parted, he had wondered whether they would ever meet again.

Ralph threw himself into the big chair. "Bring some beer, we're thirsty!" he said to Tilly.

There were to be no recriminations, Merthin gathered.

He studied his brother. Ralph had changed since that day in 1339 when he had ridden off to war. He had lost some of the fingers of his left hand, presumably in battle. He had a dissipated look: his face was veined from drink and his skin seemed dry and flaky. "Did you have good hunting?" Merthin asked.

"We brought home a roe deer as fat as a cow," he replied with satisfaction. "You shall have her liver for supper."

Merthin asked him about fighting in the army of the king, and Ralph related some of the highlights of the war. Their father was enthusiastic. "An English knight is worth ten of the French!" he said. "The battle of Crécy proved that."

Ralph's response was surprisingly measured. "An English knight is not much different from a French knight, in my opinion," he said. "But the French haven't yet understood the harrow formation in which we line up, with archers either side of dismounted knights and men-at-arms. They are still charging us suicidally, and long may they continue. But they will figure it out one day, and then they will change their tactics. Meanwhile, we are almost unbeatable in defense. Unfortunately, the harrow formation is irrelevant to attack, so we have ended up winning very little."

Merthin was struck by how his brother had grown up. Warfare had given him a depth and subtlety he had never previously possessed.

In turn, Merthin talked about Florence: the incredible size of the city, the wealth of the merchants, the churches and palaces. Ralph was particularly fascinated by the notion of slave girls.

Darkness fell and the servants brought lamps and candles, then supper. Ralph drank a lot of wine. Merthin noticed that he hardly spoke to Tilly. Perhaps it was not surprising. Ralph was a thirty-one-year-old soldier who had spent half his adult life in an army, and Tilly was a girl of fourteen who had been educated in a nunnery. What would they have to talk about?

Late in the evening, when Gerald and Maud had returned to their own house and Tilly had gone to bed, Merthin broached the subject Caris had asked him to raise. He felt more optimistic than previously. Ralph was showing signs of maturity. He had forgiven Merthin for what had happened in 1339, and his cool analysis of English and French tactics had been impressively free from tribal chauvinism.

Merthin said: “On my way here, I spent a night in Wigleigh.”

“I see that fulling mill stays busy.”

“The scarlet cloth has become a good business for Kingsbridge.”

Ralph shrugged. “Mark Webber pays the rent on time.” It was beneath the dignity of noblemen to discuss business.

“I stayed with Gwenda and Wulfric,” Merthin went on. “You know that Gwenda has been Caris’s friend since childhood.”

“I remember the day we all met Sir Thomas Langley in the forest.”

Merthin shot a quick glance at Alan Fernhill. They had all kept their childish vows and had not told anyone about that incident. Merthin wanted the secrecy to continue, for he sensed it was still important to Thomas, though he had no idea why. But Alan showed no reaction: he had drunk a lot of wine, and had no ear for hints.

Merthin moved on quickly. “Caris asked me to speak to you about Wulfric. She thinks you’ve punished him enough for that fight. And I agree.”

“He broke my nose!”

“I was there, remember? You weren’t an innocent party.” Merthin tried to make light of it. “You did feel up his fiancée. What was her name?”

“Annet.”

“If her tits weren’t worth a broken nose, you’ve only got yourself to blame.”

Alan laughed, but Ralph was not amused. “Wulfric almost got me hanged, by stirring Lord William up after Annet pretended I’d raped her.”

“But you weren’t hanged. And you cut Wulfric’s cheek open with your sword when you escaped from the courthouse. It was a terrible wound—you could see his back teeth through it. He’ll never lose the scar.”

“Good.”

“You’ve punished Wulfric for eleven years. His wife is thin and his children are ill. Haven’t you done enough, Ralph?”

“No.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s not enough.”

“Why?” Merthin cried in frustration. “I don’t understand you.”

“I will continue to punish Wulfric and hold him back, and humiliate him and his women.”

Merthin was startled by Ralph’s frankness. “For heaven’s sake, to what end?”

“I wouldn’t normally answer that question. I’ve learned that it rarely does you any good to explain yourself. But you’re my big brother, and from childhood I’ve always needed your approval.”

Ralph had not really changed, Merthin realized, except insofar as he seemed to know and understand himself in a way he never had when younger.

“The reason is simple,” Ralph went on. “Wulfric is not afraid of me. He wasn’t scared that day at the Fleece Fair, and he’s still not scared of me, even after all I’ve done to him. That’s why he must continue to suffer.”

Merthin was horrified. “That’s a life sentence.”

“The day I see fear in his eyes when he looks at me, he shall have anything he likes.”

“Is that so important to you?” Merthin said incredulously. “That people fear you?”

“It’s the most important thing in the world,” said Ralph.

57

Merthin’s return affected the whole town. Caris observed the changes with amazement and admiration. It started with his victory over Elfric in the parish guild. People realized the town could have lost its bridge because of Elfric’s incompetence, and that jolted them out of their apathy. But everyone knew that Elfric was a tool of Godwyn, so the priory was the ultimate focus of their resentment.

And people’s attitude to the priory was changing. There was a mood of defiance. Caris felt optimistic. Mark Webber had a good chance of winning the election on the first day of November and becoming alderman. If that happened, Prior Godwyn would no longer have things all his own way, and perhaps the town could begin to grow: markets on Saturdays, new mills, independent courts that traders could have faith in.

But she spent most of her time thinking about her own position. Merthin’s return was an earthquake that shook the foundations of her life. Her first reaction had been horror at the prospect of abandoning all that she had worked for over the last nine years; her position in the convent hierarchy; maternal Cecilia and affectionate Mair and ailing Old Julie; and most of all her hospital, so much more clean and efficient and welcoming than it had been before.

But as the days became shorter and colder, and Merthin repaired his bridge and began laying out the foundations of the street of new buildings he wanted to create on Leper Island, Caris’s resolve to remain a nun weakened. Monastic restrictions that she had stopped noticing began to chafe again. The devotion of Mair, which had been a pleasant romantic diversion, now became irritating. She started to think about what kind of life she might lead as Merthin’s wife.

She thought a lot about Lolla, and about the child she might have had with Merthin. Lolla was dark-eyed and black-haired, presumably like her

Italian mother. Caris's daughter might have had the green eyes of the Wooler family. The idea of giving up everything to take care of another woman's daughter had appalled Caris in theory, but as soon as she met the little girl she softened.

She could not talk to anyone in the priory about this, of course. Mother Cecilia would tell her she must keep her vows; Mair would beg her to stay. So she agonized alone at night.

Her quarrel with Merthin over Wulfric made her despair. After he walked away from her, she had gone back to her pharmacy and cried. Why were things so difficult? All she wanted was to do the right thing.

While Merthin was at Tench, she confided in Madge Webber.

Two days after Merthin left, Madge came into the hospital soon after dawn, when Caris and Mair were doing their rounds. "I'm worried about my Mark," she said.

Mair said to Caris: "I went to see him yesterday. He had been to Melcombe and come back with a fever and an upset stomach. I didn't tell you because it didn't seem serious."

"Now he's coughing blood," Madge said.

"I'll go," Caris said. The Webbers were old friends: she preferred to attend Mark herself. She picked up a bag containing some basic medicines and went with Madge to her house in the main street.

The living area was upstairs, over the shop. Mark's three sons loitered anxiously in the dining hall. Madge took Caris into a bedroom that smelled bad. Caris was used to the odor of a sick room, a mixture of sweat, vomit, and human waste. Mark lay on a straw mattress, perspiring. His huge belly stuck up in the air as if he were pregnant. The daughter, Dora, stood by the bed.

Caris knelt beside Mark and said: "How do you feel?"

"Rough," Mark said in a croaky voice. "Can I have something to drink?"

Dora handed Caris a cup of wine, and Caris held it to Mark's lips. She found it strange to see a big man helpless. Mark had always seemed invulnerable. It was unnerving, like finding an oak tree that has been there all your life suddenly felled by lightning.

She touched his forehead. He was burning up: no wonder he was thirsty. "Let him have as much to drink as he wants," she said. "Weak beer is better than wine."

She did not tell Madge that she was puzzled and worried by Mark's illness. The fever and the stomach upset were routine, but his coughing blood was a dangerous sign.

She took a vial of rose water from her bag, soaked a small piece of woolen cloth, and bathed his face and neck. The action soothed him immediately. The water would cool him a little, and the perfume masked the bad smells in the room. "I'll give you some of this from my pharmacy," she

said to Madge. “The physicians prescribe it for an inflamed brain. A fever is hot and humid, and roses are cool and dry, so the monks say. Whatever the reason, it will give him some ease.”

“Thank you.”

But Caris knew of no effective treatment for bloody sputum. The monk-physicians would diagnose an excess of blood, and recommend bleeding, but they prescribed that for almost everything, and Caris did not believe in it.

As she bathed Mark’s throat, she noticed a symptom Madge had not mentioned. There was a rash of purple black spots on Mark’s neck and chest.

This was an illness she had not come across before, and she was mystified, but she did not let Madge know that. “Come back with me, and I’ll give you the rose water.”

The sun was rising as they walked from the house to the hospital. “You’ve been very good to my family,” Madge said. “We were the poorest people in town, until you started the scarlet business.”

“It was your energy and industry that made it work.”

Madge nodded. She knew what she had done. “All the same, it wouldn’t have happened without you.”

On impulse, Caris decided to take Madge through the nuns’ cloisters to her pharmacy so that they could talk privately. Laypeople were not normally allowed inside, but there were exceptions, and Caris was now senior enough to decide when the rules could be broken.

They were alone in the cramped little room. Caris filled a pottery bottle with rose water and asked Madge for sixpence. Then she said: “I’m thinking of renouncing my vows.”

Madge nodded, unsurprised. “Everybody’s wondering what you’re going to do.”

Caris was shocked that the townspeople had guessed her thoughts. “How do they know?”

“It doesn’t take a clairvoyant. You entered the nunnery only to escape a death sentence for witchcraft. After the work you’ve done here, you should be able to get a pardon. You and Merthin were in love, and always seemed so right for one another. Now he’s come back. You must at least be thinking about marrying him.”

“I just don’t know what my life would be like as someone’s wife.”

Madge shrugged. “A bit like mine, perhaps. Mark and I run the cloth business together. I have to organize the household as well—all husbands expect that—but it’s not so difficult, especially if you have the money for servants. And the children will always be your responsibility rather than his. But I manage, and so would you.”

“You don’t make it sound very exciting.”

She smiled. “I assume you already know about the good parts: feeling

loved and adored; knowing there's one person in the world who will always be on your side; getting into bed every night with someone strong and tender who wants to fuck you…that's happiness, for me."

Madge's simple words painted a vivid picture, and Caris was suddenly filled with a longing that was almost unbearable. She felt she could hardly wait to quit the cold, hard, loveless life of the priory, in which the greatest sin was to touch another human being. If Merthin had walked into the room at that moment she would have torn off his clothes and taken him there on the floor.

She saw that Madge was watching her with a little smile, reading her thoughts, and she blushed.

"It's all right," Madge said. "I understand." She put six silver pennies down on the bench and picked up the bottle. "I'd better go home and look after my man."

Caris recovered her composure. "Try to keep him comfortable, and come and fetch me immediately there's any change."

"Thank you, Sister," said Madge. "I don't know what we'll do without you."

Merthin was thoughtful on the journey back to Kingsbridge. Even Lolla's bright, meaningless chatter did not bring him out of his mood. Ralph had learned a lot, but he had not changed deep down. He was still a cruel man. He neglected his child-wife, barely tolerated his parents, and was vengeful to the point of mania. He enjoyed being a lord, but felt little obligation to care for the peasants in his power. He saw everything around him, people included, as being there for his gratification.

However, Merthin felt optimistic about Kingsbridge. All the signs were that Mark would become alderman on All Hallows Day, and that could be the start of a boom.

Merthin got back on the last day of October, All Hallows Eve. It was a Friday this year, so there was not the influx of crowds that came when the night of evil spirits fell on a Saturday, as it had in the year that Merthin was eleven, and he met the ten-year-old Caris. All the same the people were nervous, and everyone planned to be in bed by nightfall.

On the main street he saw Mark Webber's eldest son, John. "My father is in the hospital," the boy said. "He has a fever."

"This is a bad time for him to fall sick," Merthin said.

"It's an ill-starred day."

"I didn't mean because of the date. He has to be present at the parish guild meeting tomorrow. An alderman can't be elected in his absence."

"I don't think he'll be going to any meetings tomorrow."

That was worrying. Merthin took his horses to the Bell and left Lolla in the care of Betty.

Entering the priory grounds, he ran into Godwyn with his mother. He guessed they had dined together and now Godwyn was walking her to the gate. They were deep in an anxious conversation, and Merthin guessed they were worried about the prospect of their placeman Elfric losing the post of alderman. They stopped abruptly when they saw him. Petranilla said unctuously: “I’m sorry to hear that Mark is unwell.”

Forcing himself to be civil, Merthin replied: “It’s just a fever.”

“We will pray that he gets well quickly.”

“Thank you.”

Merthin entered the hospital. He found Madge distraught. “He’s been coughing blood,” she said. “And I can’t quench his thirst.” She held a cup of ale to Mark’s lips.

Mark had a rash of purple blotches on his face and arms. He was perspiring, and his nose was bleeding.

Merthin said: “Not so good today, Mark?”

Mark did not seem to see him, but he croaked: “I’m very thirsty.” Madge gave him the cup again. She said: “No matter how much he drinks, he’s always thirsty.” She spoke with a note of panic that Merthin had never heard in her voice before.

Merthin was filled with dread. Mark made frequent trips to Melcombe, where he talked to sailors from plague-ridden Bordeaux.

Tomorrow’s meeting of the parish guild was the least of Mark’s worries now. And the least of Merthin’s, too.

Merthin’s first impulse was to cry out to everyone the news that they were in mortal danger. But he clamped his mouth shut. No one listened to a man in a panic, and besides he was not yet sure. There was a small chance Mark’s illness was not what he feared. When he was certain, he would get Caris alone and speak to her calmly and logically. But it would have to be soon.

Caris was bathing Mark’s face with a sweet-smelling fluid. She wore a stony expression that Merthin recognized: she was hiding her feelings. She obviously had some idea of how serious Mark’s illness was.

Mark was clutching something that looked like a scrap of parchment. Merthin guessed it would have a prayer written on it, or a verse of the Bible, or perhaps a magic spell. That would be Madge’s idea—Caris had no faith in writing as a remedy.

Prior Godwyn came into the hospital, trailed as usual by Philemon. “Stand away from the bed!” Philemon said immediately. “How will the man get well if he cannot see the altar?”

Merthin and the two women stood back, and Godwyn bent over the patient. He touched Mark’s forehead and neck, then felt his pulse. “Show me

the urine," he said.

The monk-physicians set great store by examination of the patient's urine. The hospital had special glass bottles, called urinals, for the purpose. Caris handed one to Godwyn. It did not take an expert to see that there was blood in Mark's urine.

Godwyn handed it back. "This man is suffering from overheated blood," he said. "He must be bled, then fed sour apples and tripes."

Merthin knew, from his experience of the plague in Florence, that Godwyn was talking rubbish, but he made no comment. In his mind there was no longer much room for doubt about what was wrong with Mark. The skin rash, the bleeding, the thirst: this was the illness he himself had suffered in Florence, the one that had killed Silvia and all her family. This was *la moria grande.*

The plague had come to Kingsbridge.

As darkness fell on All Hallows Eve, Mark Webber's breathing became more difficult. Caris watched him weaken. She felt the angry impotence that possessed her when she was unable to help a patient. Mark passed into a state of troubled unconsciousness, sweating and gasping although his eyes were closed and he showed no awareness. At Merthin's quiet suggestion, Caris felt in Mark's armpits, and found large boil-like swellings there. She did not ask Merthin the significance of this: she would question him later. The nuns prayed and sang hymns while Madge and her four children stood around, helplessly distraught.

At the end Mark convulsed, and blood jetted from his mouth in a sudden flood. Then he fell back, lay still, and stopped breathing.

Dora wailed loudly. The three sons looked bewildered, and struggled to hold back unmanly tears. Madge wept bitterly. "He was the best man in the world," she said to Caris. "Why did God have to take him?"

Caris had to fight back her own grief. Her loss was nothing compared with theirs. She did not know why God so often took the best people and left the wicked alive to do more wrong. The whole idea of a benevolent deity watching over everyone seemed unbelievable at moments such as this. The priests said sickness was a punishment for sin. Mark and Madge loved one another, cared for their children, and worked hard: why should they be punished?

There were no answers to religious questions, but Caris had some urgent practical inquiries to make. She was deeply worried by Mark's illness, and she could guess that Merthin knew something about it. She swallowed her tears.

First she sent Madge and her children home to rest, and told the nuns to

prepare the body for burial. Then she said to Merthin: “I want to talk to you.”

“And I to you,” he said.

She noticed that he looked frightened. That was rare. Her fear deepened. “Come to the church,” she said. “We can talk privately there.”

A wintry wind swept across the cathedral green. It was a clear night, and they could see by starlight. In the chancel, monks were preparing for the All Hallows dawn service. Caris and Merthin stood in the northwest corner of the nave, away from the monks, so that they could not be overheard. Caris shivered and pulled her robe closer around her. She said: “Do you know what killed Mark?”

Merthin took a shaky breath. “It’s the plague,” he said. *“La moria grande.”*

She nodded. This was what she had feared. But all the same she challenged him. “How do you know?”

“Mark goes to Melcombe and talks to sailors from Bordeaux, where the bodies are piled in the streets.”

She nodded. “He’s just back.” But she did not want to believe Merthin. “All the same, can you be sure it’s the plague?”

“The symptoms are the same: fever, purple-black spots, bleeding, buboes in the armpits, and most of all the thirst. I remember it, by Christ. I was one of the few to recover. Almost everyone dies within five days, often less.”

She felt as if doomsday had come. She had heard the terrible stories from Italy and southern France: entire families wiped out, unburied bodies rotting in empty palaces, orphaned toddlers wandering the streets crying, livestock dying untended in ghost villages. Was this to happen to Kingsbridge? “What did the Italian doctors do?”

“Prayed, sang hymns, took blood, prescribed their favorite nostrums, and charged a fortune. Everything they tried was useless.”

They were standing close together and speaking in low tones. She could see his face by the faint light of the monks’ distant candles. He was staring at her with a strange intensity. He was deeply moved, she could tell, but it did not seem to be grief for Mark that possessed him. He was focused on her.

She asked: “What are the Italian doctors like, compared with our English physicians?”

“After the Muslims, the Italian doctors are supposed to be the most knowledgeable in the world. They even cut up dead bodies to learn more about sickness. But they never cured a single sufferer from this plague.”

Caris refused to accept such complete hopelessness. “We can’t be utterly helpless.”

“No. We can’t cure it, but some people think you can escape it.”

Caris said eagerly: “How?”

“It seems to spread from one person to another.”

She nodded. “Lots of diseases do that.”

“Usually, when one in a family gets it, they all do. Proximity is the key factor.”

“That makes sense. Some say you fall ill from looking at sick people.”

“In Florence, the nuns counseled us to stay at home as much as possible, and avoid social gatherings, markets, and meetings of guilds and councils.”

“And church services?”

“No, they didn’t say that, though lots of people stayed home from church too.”

This chimed with what Caris had been thinking for years. She felt renewed hope: perhaps her methods could stave off the plague. “What about the nuns themselves, and the physicians, people who have to meet the sick and touch them?”

“Priests refused to hear confessions in whispers, so that they did not have to get too near. Nuns wore linen masks over their mouths and noses so that they would not breathe the same air. Some washed their hands in vinegar every time they touched a patient. The priest-physicians said none of this would do any good, but most of them left the city anyway.”

“And did these precautions help?”

“It’s hard to say. None of this was done until the plague was rampant. And it wasn’t systematic—just everyone trying different things.”

“All the same, we must make the effort.”

He nodded. After a pause he said: “However, there is one precaution that is sure.”

“What’s that?”

“Run away.”

This was what he had been waiting to say, she realized.

He went on: “The saying goes: ‘Leave early, go far, and stay long.’ People who did that escaped the sickness.”

“We can’t go away.”

“Why not?”

“Don’t be silly. There are six or seven thousand people in Kingsbridge—they can’t all leave town. Where would they go?”

“I’m not talking about them—just you. Listen, you may not have caught the plague from Mark. Madge and the children almost certainly have, but you spent less time close to him. If you’re still all right, we could escape. We could leave today, you and me and Lolla.”

Caris was appalled by the way he assumed it had spread by now. Was she doomed already? “And…and go where?”

“To Wales, or Ireland. We need to find a remote village where they don’t see a stranger from one year to the next.”

“You’ve had the sickness. You told me people don’t get it twice.”

“Never. And some people don’t catch it at all. Lolla must be like that. If she didn’t pick it up from her mother, she’s not likely to get it from anyone else.”

“So why do you want to go to Wales?”

He just stared at her with that intense look, and she realized that the fear she had detected in him was for her. He was terrified that she would die. Tears came to her eyes. She remembered what Madge had said: “Knowing there’s one person in the world who will always be on your side.” Merthin tried to look after her, no matter what she did. She thought of poor Madge, blasted by grief at the loss of the one who was always on her side. How could she, Caris, even think of rejecting Merthin?

But she did. “I can’t leave Kingsbridge,” she said. “Of all times, not now. They rely on me if someone is sick. When the plague strikes, I’m the one they will turn to for help. If I were to flee…well, I don’t know how to explain this.”

“I think I understand,” Merthin said. “You’d be like a soldier who runs away as soon as the first arrow is shot. You’d feel a coward.”

“Yes—and a cheat, after all these years of being a nun, and saying that I live to serve others.”

“I knew you would feel this way,” Merthin said. “But I had to try.” The sadness in his voice nearly broke her heart as he added: “And I suppose this means you won’t be renouncing your vows in the foreseeable future.”

“No. The hospital is where they come for help. I have to be here at the priory, to play my role. I have to be a nun.”

“All right, then.”

“Don’t be too downhearted.”

With wry sorrow he said: “And why should I not be downhearted?”

“You said that it killed half the population of Florence?”

“Something like that.”

“So at least half the people just didn’t catch it.”

“Like Lolla. No one knows why. Perhaps they have some special strength. Or maybe the disease strikes at random, like arrows fired into the enemy ranks, killing some and missing others.”

“Either way, there’s a good chance I’ll escape the illness.”

“One chance in two.”

“Like the toss of a coin.”

“Heads or tails,” he said. “Life or death.”

Hundreds of people came to Mark Webber's funeral. He had been one of the town's leading citizens, but it was more than that. Poor weavers arrived from the surrounding villages, some of them having walked for hours. He had been unusually well loved, Merthin reflected. The combination of his giant's body and his gentle temperament cast a spell.

It was a wet day, and the bared heads of rich and poor men were soaked as they stood around the grave. Cold rain mingled with hot tears on the faces of the mourners. Madge stood with her arms around the shoulders of her two younger sons, Dennis and Noah. They were flanked by the eldest son, John, and the daughter, Dora, who were both much taller than their mother, and looked as if they might be the parents of the three short people in the middle.

Merthin wondered grimly whether Madge or one of her children would be the next to die.

Six strong men grunted with the effort of lowering the extra-large coffin into the grave. Madge sobbed helplessly as the monks sang the last hymn. Then the gravediggers started to shovel the sodden earth back into the hole, and the crowd began to disperse.

Brother Thomas approached Merthin, pulling up his hood to keep the rain off. "The priory has no money to rebuild the tower," he said. "Godwyn has commissioned Elfric to demolish the old tower and just roof the crossing."

Merthin tore his mind away from apocalyptic thoughts of the plague. "How will Godwyn pay Elfric for that?"

"The nuns are putting up the money."

"I thought they hated Godwyn."

"Sister Elizabeth is the treasurer. Godwyn is careful to be kind to her family, who are tenants of the priory. Most of the other nuns do hate him, it's true—but they need a church."

Merthin had not given up his hope of rebuilding the tower higher than before. "If I could find the money, would the priory build a new tower?"

Thomas shrugged. "Hard to say."

That afternoon, Elfric was reelected alderman of the parish guild. After the meeting Merthin sought out Bill Watkin, the largest builder in town after Elfric. "Once the foundations of the tower are repaired, it could be built even higher," he said.

"No reason why not," Bill agreed. "But what would be the point?"

"So that it could be seen from Mudeford Crossing. Many travelers—pilgrims, merchants, and so on—miss the road for Kingsbridge and go on to Shiring. The town loses a lot of custom that way."

"Godwyn will say he can't afford it."

"Consider this," Merthin said. "Suppose the new tower could be financed the same way as the bridge? The town merchants could lend the money and

be repaid out of bridge tolls.”

Bill scratched his monklike fringe of gray hair. This was an unfamiliar concept. “But the tower is nothing to do with the bridge.”

“Does that matter?”

“I suppose not.”

“The bridge tolls are just a way of guaranteeing that the loan is repaid.”

Bill considered his self-interest. “Would I be commissioned to do any of the work?”

“It would be a big project—every builder in town would get a piece of it.”

“That would be useful.”

“All right. Listen, if I design a large tower, will you back me, here at the parish guild, at the next meeting?”

Bill looked dubious. “The guild members aren’t likely to approve of extravagance.”

“I don’t think it needs to be extravagant, just high. If we put a domed ceiling over the crossing, I can build that with no centering.”

“A dome? That’s a new idea.”

“I saw domes in Italy.”

“I can see how it would save money.”

“And the tower can be topped by a slender wooden spire, which will save money and look wonderful.”

“You’ve got this all worked out, haven’t you?”

“Not really. But it’s been at the back of my mind ever since I returned from Florence.”

“Well, it sounds good to me—good for business, good for the town.”

“And good for our eternal souls.”

“I’ll do my best to help you push it through.”

“Thank you.”

Merthin mulled over the design of the tower as he went about his more mundane work, repairing the bridge and building new houses on Leper Island. It helped turn his mind away from dreadful, obsessive visions of Caris ill with the plague. He thought a lot about the south tower at Chartres. It was a masterpiece, albeit a little old-fashioned, having been built about two hundred years ago.

What Merthin had liked about it, he recalled very clearly, was the transition from the square tower to the octagonal spire above. At the top of the tower, perched on each of the four corners, were pinnacles facing diagonally outward. On the same level, at the midpoint of each side of the square, were dormer windows similar in shape to the pinnacles. These eight structures matched the eight sloping sides of the tower rising behind them, so that the eye hardly noticed the change of shape from square to octagon.

However, Chartres was unnecessarily chunky by the standards of the

fourteenth century. Merthin's tower would have slender columns and large window openings, to lighten the weight on the pillars below, and to reduce stress by allowing the wind to blow through.

He made his own tracing floor at his workshop on the island. He enjoyed himself planning the details, doubling and quadrupling the narrow lancets of the old cathedral to make the large windows of the new tower, updating the clusters of columns and the capitals.

He hesitated over the height. He had no way to calculate how high it had to be in order to be visible from Mudeford Crossing. That could be done only by trial and error. When he had finished the stone tower he would have to erect a temporary spire, then go to Mudeford on a clear day and determine whether it could be seen. The cathedral was built on elevated ground, and at Mudeford the road breasted a rise just before descending to the river crossing. His instinct told him that if he went a little higher than Chartres—say about four hundred feet—that would be sufficient.

The tower at Salisbury Cathedral was four hundred and four feet high.

Merthin planned his to be four hundred and five.

While he was bent over the tracing floor, drawing the roof pinnacles, Bill Watkin appeared. "What do you think of this?" Merthin said to him. "Does it need a cross on top, to point to heaven? Or an angel, to watch over us?"

"Neither," said Bill. "It's not going to get built."

Merthin stood up, holding a straightedge in his left hand and a sharpened iron drawing needle in his right. "What makes you say that?"

"I've had a visit from Brother Philemon. I thought I might as well let you know as soon as possible."

"What did that snake have to say?"

"He pretended to be friendly. He wanted to give me a piece of advice for my own good. He said it wouldn't be wise of me to support any plan for a tower designed by you."

"Why not?"

"Because it would annoy Prior Godwyn, who was not going to approve your plans, regardless."

Merthin could hardly be surprised. If Mark Webber had become alderman, the balance of power in the town would have changed, and Merthin might have won the commission to build the new tower. But Mark's death meant the odds were against him. He had clung to hope, however, and now he felt the deep ache of heavy disappointment. "I suppose he'll commission Elfric?"

"That was the implication."

"Will he never learn?"

"When a man is proud, that counts for more than common sense."

"Will the parish guild pay for a stumpy little tower designed by Elfric?"

“Probably. They may not get excited about it, but they’ll find the money. They are proud of their cathedral, despite everything.”

“Elfric’s incompetence almost cost them the bridge!” Merthin said indignantly.

“They know that.”

He allowed his wounded feelings to show. “If I hadn’t diagnosed the problem with the tower, it would have collapsed—and it might have brought down the entire cathedral.”

“They know that, too. But they’re not going to fight with the prior just because he’s treated you badly.”

“Of course not,” said Merthin, as if he thought that was perfectly reasonable; but he was hiding his bitterness. He had done more for Kingsbridge than Godwyn, and he was hurt that the townspeople had not put up more of a fight for him. But he also knew that most people most of the time acted in their own immediate self-interest.

“People are ungrateful,” Bill said. “I’m sorry.”

“Yes,” Merthin said. “That’s all right.” He looked at Bill, then looked away; and then he threw down his drawing implements and walked off.

During the predawn service of Lauds, Caris was surprised to look down the nave and see a woman in the north aisle, on her knees, in front of a wall painting of Christ Risen. She had a candle by her side and, in its unsteady light, Caris made out the chunky body and jutting chin of Madge Webber.

Madge stayed there throughout the service, not paying any attention to the psalms, apparently deep in prayer. Perhaps she was asking God to forgive Mark’s sins and let him rest in peace—not that Mark had committed many sins, as far as Caris knew. More likely, Madge was asking Mark to send her good fortune from the spirit world. Madge was going to carry on the cloth business with the help of her two older children. It was the usual thing, when a trader died leaving a widow and a thriving enterprise. Still, no doubt she felt the need of her dead husband’s blessing on her efforts.

But this explanation did not quite satisfy Caris. There was something intense in Madge’s posture, something about her stillness that suggested great passion, as if she were begging Heaven to grant her some terribly important boon.

When the service ended, and the monks and nuns began to file out, Caris broke away from the procession and walked through the vast gloom of the nave toward the candle’s glow.

Madge stood up at the sound of her footsteps. When she recognized Caris’s face, she spoke with a note of accusation. “Mark died of the plague, didn’t he?”

So that was it. “I think so,” said Caris.

“You didn’t tell me.”

“I’m not sure, and I didn’t want to frighten you—not to mention the whole town—on the basis of a guess.”

“I’ve heard it’s come to Bristol.”

So the townspeople had been talking about it. “And London,” Caris said. She had heard this from a pilgrim.

“What will happen to us all?”

Sorrow stabbed Caris like a pain in the heart. “I don’t know,” she lied.

“It spreads from one to another, I hear.”

“Many illnesses do.”

The aggression went out of Madge, and her face took on a pleading look that broke Caris’s heart. In a near-whisper she asked: “Will my children die?”

“Merthin’s wife got it,” Caris said. “She died, and so did all her family, but Merthin recovered, and Lolla didn’t catch it at all.”

“So my children will be all right?”

That was not what Caris had said. “They may be. Or some may catch it and others escape.”

That did not satisfy Madge. Like most patients, she wanted certainties, not possibilities. “What can I do to protect them?”

Caris looked at the painting of Christ. “You’re doing all you can,” she said. She began to lose control. As a sob rose in her throat, she turned away to hide her feelings, and walked quickly out of the cathedral.

She sat in the nuns’ cloisters for a few minutes, pulling herself together, then went to the hospital, as usual at this hour.

Mair was not there. She had probably been called to attend a sick person in the town. Caris took charge, overseeing the serving of breakfast to guests and patients, making sure the place was cleaned thoroughly, checking on those who were sick. The work eased her distress about Madge. She read a psalm to Old Julie. When all the chores were done, Mair still had not appeared, so Caris went in search of her.

She found her in the dormitory, lying facedown on her bed. Caris’s heart quickened. “Mair! Are you all right?” she said.

Mair rolled over. She was pale and sweating. She coughed, but did not speak.

Caris knelt beside her and placed a hand on her forehead. “You’ve got a fever,” she said, suppressing the dread that rose in her belly like nausea. “When did it begin?”

“I was coughing yesterday,” Mair said. “But I slept all right, and got up this morning. Then, when I went in to breakfast, I suddenly felt I was going to throw up. I went to the latrine, then came here and lay down. I think I might have been sleeping…What time is it?”

“The bell is about to ring for Terce. But you’re excused.” It could just be an ordinary illness, Caris told herself. She touched Mair’s neck, then pulled the cowl of her robe down.

Mair smiled weakly. “Are you trying to look at my chest?”

“Yes.”

“You nuns are all the same.”

There was no rash, as far as Caris could see. Perhaps it was just a cold. “Any pains?”

“There’s a dreadfully tender place in my armpit.”

That did not tell Caris much. Painful swellings in the armpits or groin were a feature of other illnesses as well as the plague. “Let’s get you down to the hospital,” she said.

As Mair lifted her head, Caris saw bloodstains on the pillow.

She felt the shock like a blow. Mark Webber had coughed blood. And Mair had been the first person to attend Mark at the start of his illness—she had gone to the house the day before Caris did.

Caris hid her fear and helped Mair up. Tears came to her eyes, but she controlled herself. Mair put her arm around Caris’s waist and her head on her shoulder, as if she needed support walking. Caris put her arm around Mair’s shoulder. Together they walked down the stairs and through the nuns’ cloisters to the hospital.

Caris took Mair to a mattress near the altar. She fetched a cup of cold water from the fountain in the cloisters. Mair drank thirstily. Caris bathed her face and neck with rose water. After a while, Mair seemed to sleep.

The bell rang for Terce. Caris was normally excused this service, but today she felt the need for a few moments of quiet. She joined the file of nuns walking into the church. The old gray stones seemed cold and hard today. She chanted automatically, while in her heart a storm raged.

Mair had the plague. There was no rash, but she had the fever, she was thirsty, and she had coughed blood. She would probably die.

Caris felt a terrible guilt. Mair loved her devotedly. Caris had never been able to return Mair’s love, not in the way Mair longed for. Now Mair was dying. Caris wished she could have been different. She ought to have been able to make Mair happy. She should be able to save her life. She cried as she sang the psalm, hoping that anyone who noticed her tears would assume she was moved by religious ecstasy.

At the end of the service, a novice nun was waiting anxiously for her outside the south transept door. “There’s someone asking for you urgently in the hospital,” the girl said.

Caris found Madge Webber there, her face white with fear.

Caris did not need to ask what Madge wanted. She picked up her medical bag and the two of them rushed out. They crossed the cathedral green in a

biting November wind and went to the Webber house in the main street. Upstairs, Madge's children were waiting in the living room. The two older children were sitting at the table, looking frightened; the young boys were both lying on the floor.

Caris examined them quickly. All four were feverish. The girl had a nosebleed. The three boys were coughing.

They all had a rash of purplish black spots on their shoulders and necks.

Madge said: "It's the same, isn't it? This is what Mark died of. They've got the plague."

Caris nodded. "I'm sorry."

"I hope I die, too," Madge said. "Then we can all be together in Heaven."

59

In the hospital, Caris instituted the precautions Merthin had told her about. She cut up strips of linen for the nuns to tie over their mouths and noses while they were dealing with people who had the plague. And she compelled everyone to wash their hands in vinegar and water every time they touched a patient. The nuns all got chapped hands.

Madge brought her four children in, then fell ill herself. Old Julie, whose bed had been next to Mark Webber's while he was dying, also succumbed. There was little Caris could do for any of them. She bathed their faces to cool them, gave them cold clear water to drink from the fountain in the cloisters, cleaned up their bloody vomit, and waited for them to die.

She was too busy to think about her own death. She observed a kind of fearful admiration in the townspeople's eyes when they saw her soothing the brows of infectious plague victims, but she did not feel like a selfless martyr. She saw herself as the kind of person who disliked brooding and preferred to act. Like everyone else, she was haunted by the question: Who's next? But she firmly put it out of her mind.

Prior Godwyn came in to see the patients. He refused to wear the face mask, saying it was women's nonsense. He made the same diagnosis as before, overheated blood, and prescribed bleeding and a diet of sour apples and ram's tripe.

It did not matter much what the patients ate, as they threw everything up toward the end; but Caris felt sure that taking blood from them made the illness worse. They were already bleeding too much: they coughed blood, vomited blood, and pissed blood. But the monks were the trained physicians, so she had to follow their instructions. She did not have time to be angry whenever she saw a monk or nun kneeling at the bedside of a patient, holding

an arm out straight, cutting into a vein with a small sharp knife, and supporting the arm while a pint or more of precious blood dripped into a bowl on the floor.

Caris sat with Mair at the end, holding her hand, not caring if anyone disapproved. To ease her torment, she gave her a tiny amount of the euphoric drug Mattie had taught her to make from poppies. Mair still coughed, but it did not hurt her so much. After a coughing fit, her breathing would be easier for a short while, and she could talk. “Thank you for that night in Calais,” she whispered. “I know you didn’t really enjoy it, but I was in heaven.”

Caris tried not to cry. “I’m sorry I couldn’t be what you wanted.”

“You loved me, though, in your own way. I know that.”

She coughed again. When the fit ended, Caris wiped the blood from her lips.

“I love you,” Mair said, and closed her eyes.

Caris let the tears come, then, not caring who saw or what they thought. She watched Mair, through a watery film, as she grew paler and breathed more shallowly, until at last her breathing stopped.

Caris remained where she was, on the floor beside the mattress, holding the hand of the corpse. Mair was still beautiful, even like this, white and forever still. It occurred to Caris that one other person loved her as Mair had, and that was Merthin. How strange that she had rejected his love, too. There was something wrong with her, she thought; some malformation of the soul that prevented her from being like other women and embracing love gladly.

Later that night, the four children of Mark Webber died; and so did Old Julie.

Caris was distraught. Was there nothing she could do? The plague was spreading fast and killing everyone. It was like living in a prison and wondering which of the inmates would be next to go to the gallows. Was Kingsbridge to be like Florence and Bordeaux, with bodies in the streets? Next Sunday there would be a market on the green outside the cathedral. Hundreds of people from every village within walking distance would come to buy and sell and mingle with the townspeople in churches and taverns. How many would go home fatally ill? When she felt like this, excruciatingly helpless up against terrible forces, she understood why people threw up their hands and said everything was controlled by the spirit world. But that had never been her way.

Whenever a member of the priory died there was always a special burial service, involving all the monks and nuns, with extra prayers for the departed soul. Both Mair and Old Julie had been well loved, Julie for her kind heart and Mair for her beauty, and many of the nuns wept. Madge’s children were included in the funeral, with the result that several hundred townspeople came. Madge herself was too ill to leave the hospital.

They all gathered in the graveyard under a slate-gray sky. Caris thought she could smell snow in the cold north wind. Brother Joseph said the graveside prayers, and six coffins were lowered into the ground.

A voice in the crowd asked the question that was on everyone's mind. "Are we all going to die, Brother Joseph?"

Joseph was the most popular of the monk-physicians. Now close to sixty years old and with no teeth, he was intellectual but had a warm bedside manner. Now he said: "We're all going to die, friend, but none of us knows when. That's why we must always be prepared to meet God."

Betty Baxter spoke up, ever the probing questioner. "What can we do about the plague?" she said. "It is the plague, isn't it?"

"The best protection is prayer," Joseph said. "And, in case God has decided to take you regardless, come to church and confess your sins."

Betty was not so easily fobbed off. "Merthin says that in Florence people stayed in their homes to avoid contact with the sick. Is that a good idea?"

"I don't think so. Did the Florentines escape the plague?"

Everyone looked at Merthin, standing with Lolla in his arms. "No, they didn't escape," he said. "But perhaps even more would have died if they had done otherwise."

Joseph shook his head. "If you stay at home, you can't go to church. Holiness is the best medicine."

Caris could not remain silent. "The plague spreads from one person to another," she said angrily. "If you stay away from other people, you've got a better chance of escaping infection."

Prior Godwyn spoke up. "So the women are the physicians now, are they?"

Caris ignored him. "We should cancel the market," she said. "It would save lives."

"Cancel the market!" he said scornfully. "And how would we do that? Send messengers to every village?"

"Shut the city gates," she replied. "Block the bridge. Keep all strangers out of the town."

"But there are already sick people in town."

"Close all taverns. Cancel meetings of all guilds. Prohibit guests at weddings."

Merthin said: "In Florence they even abandoned meetings of the city council."

Elfric spoke up. "Then how are people to do business?"

"If you do business, you'll die," Caris said. "And you'll kill your wife and children, too. So choose."

Betty Baxter said: "I don't want to close my shop—I'd lose a lot of money. But I'll do it to save my life." Caris's hopes lifted at this, but then

Betty dashed them again. “What do the doctors say? They know best.” Caris groaned aloud.

Prior Godwyn said: “The plague has been sent by God to punish us for our sins. The world has become wicked. Heresy, lasciviousness, and disrespect are rife. Men question authority, women flaunt their bodies, children disobey their parents. God is angry, and His rage is fearsome. Don’t try to run from His justice! It will find you, no matter where you hide.”

“What should we do?”

“If you want to live, you should go to church, confess your sins, pray, and lead a better life.”

Caris knew it was useless to argue, but all the same she said: “A starving man should go to church, but he should also eat.”

Mother Cecilia said: “Sister Caris, you need say no more.”

“But we could save so many—”

“That will do.”

“This is life and death!”

Cecilia lowered her voice. “But no one is listening to you. Drop it.”

Caris knew Cecilia was right. No matter how long she argued, people would believe the priests, not her. She bit her lip and said no more.

Blind Carlus started a hymn, and the monks began to process back into the church. The nuns followed, and the crowd dispersed.

As they passed from the church into the cloisters, Mother Cecilia sneezed.

Every evening Merthin put Lolla to bed in the room at the Bell. He would sing to her, or recite poems, or tell her stories. This was the time when she talked to him, asking him the strangely unexpected questions of a three-year-old, some childish, some profound, some hilarious.

Tonight, while he was singing a lullaby, she burst into tears.

He asked her what the trouble was.

“Why did Dora die?” she wailed.

So that was it. Madge’s daughter, Dora, had taken to Lolla. They had spent time together, playing counting games and plaiting one another’s hair. “She had the plague,” Merthin said.

“My mama had the plague,” Lolla said. She switched to the Italian she had not quite forgotten. *“La moria grande.”*

“I had it, too, but I got better.”

“So did Libia.” Libia was the wooden doll she had carried all the way from Florence.

“Did Libia have the plague?”

“Yes. She sneezed, felt hot, and had spots, but a nun made her better.”

“I’m very pleased. That means she’s safe. Nobody gets it twice.”

“You’re safe, aren’t you?”

“Yes.” That seemed like a good note on which to end. “Go to sleep now.”

“Good night,” she said.

He went to the door.

“Is Bessie safe?” she said.

“Go to sleep.”

“I love Bessie.”

“That’s nice. Good night.” He closed the door.

Downstairs, the parlor was empty. People were nervous about going to crowded places. Despite what Godwyn said, Caris’s message had gone home.

He could smell a savory soup. Following his nose, he went into the kitchen. Bessie was stirring a pot on the fire. “Bean soup with ham,” she said.

Merthin sat at the table with her father, Paul, a big man in his fifties. He helped himself to bread while Paul poured him a tankard of ale. Bessie served the soup.

Bessie and Lolla were becoming fond of one another, he realized. He had employed a nanny to take care of Lolla during the day, but Bessie often watched Lolla in the evening, and Lolla preferred her.

Merthin owned a house on Leper Island, but it was a small place, especially by comparison with the *palagetto* he had become used to in Florence. He was happy to let Jimmie go on living there. Merthin was comfortable here at the Bell. The place was warm and clean, and there was plenty of hearty food and good drink. He paid his bill every Saturday, but in other respects he was treated like a member of the family. He was in no hurry to move into a place of his own.

On the other hand, he could not live here forever. And when he did move out, Lolla might be upset to leave Bessie behind. Too many of the people in her life had left it. She needed stability. Perhaps he should move out now, before she became too attached to Bessie.

When they had eaten, Paul retired to bed. Bessie gave Merthin another cup of ale, and they sat by the fire. “How many people died in Florence?” she said.

“Thousands. Tens of thousands, probably. No one could keep count.”

“I wonder who’s next in Kingsbridge.”

“I think about it all the time.”

“It might be me.”

“I’m afraid so.”

“I’d like to lie with a man one more time, before I die.”

Merthin smiled, but said nothing.

“I haven’t been with a man since my Richard passed away, and that’s more than a year.”

“You miss him.”

“How about you? How long is it since you had a woman?”

Merthin had not had sex since Silvia fell ill. Remembering her, he felt a stab of grief. He had been insufficiently grateful for her love. “About the same,” he said.

“Your wife?”

“Yes, rest her soul.”

“It’s a long time to go without loving.”

“Yes.”

“But you’re not the type to go with just anybody. You want someone to love.”

“I suppose you’re right.”

“I’m the same. It’s wonderful to lie with a man, the best thing in the world, but only if you love one another truly. I’ve only ever had one man, my husband. I never went with anyone else.”

Merthin wondered if that was true. He could not be sure. Bessie seemed sincere. But it was the kind of thing a woman would say anyway.

“What about you?” she said. “How many women?”

“Three.”

“Your wife, and before that Caris, and…who else? Oh, I remember—Griselda.”

“I’m not saying who they were.”

“Don’t worry, everyone knows.”

Merthin smiled ruefully. Of course, everyone did know. Perhaps they could not be sure, but they guessed, and they usually guessed right.

“How old is Griselda’s little Merthin now—seven? Eight?”

“Ten.”

“I’ve got fat knees,” Bessie said. She pulled up the skirt of her dress to show him. “I’ve always hated my knees, but Richard used to like them.”

Merthin looked. Her knees were plump and dimpled. He could see her white thighs.

“He would kiss my knees,” she said. “He was a sweet man.” She adjusted her dress, as if straightening it, but she lifted it, and for a moment he glimpsed the dark inviting patch of hair at her groin. “He would kiss me all over, sometimes, especially after bathing. I used to like that. I liked everything. A man can do what he likes to a woman who loves him. Don’t you agree?”

This had gone far enough. Merthin stood up. “I think you’re probably right, but this kind of talk leads only one way, so I’m going to bed before I commit a sin.”

She gave him a sad smile. “Sleep well,” she said. “If you get lonely, I’ll be here by the fire.”

“I’ll remember that.”

They put Mother Cecilia on a bedstead, not a mattress, and placed it immediately in front of the altar, the holiest place in the hospital. Nuns sang and prayed around her bed all day and all night, in shifts. There was always someone to bathe her face with cool rose water, always a cup of clear fountain water at her side. None of it made any difference. She declined as fast as the others, bleeding from her nose and her vagina, her breathing becoming more and more labored, her thirst unquenchable.

On the fourth night after she sneezed, she sent for Caris.

Caris was heavily asleep. Her days were exhausting: the hospital was overflowing. She was deep in a dream in which all the children in Kingsbridge had the plague, and as she rushed around the hospital trying to care for them all she suddenly realized that she, too, had caught it. One of the children was tugging at her sleeve, but she was ignoring it and desperately trying to figure out how she would cope with all these patients while she was so ill—and then she realized someone was shaking her shoulder with increasing urgency, saying: “Wake up, Sister, please, the mother prioress needs you!”

She came awake. A novice knelt by her bed with a candle. “How is she?” Caris asked.

“She’s sinking, but she can still speak, and she wants you.”

Caris got out of bed and put on her sandals. It was a bitterly cold night. She was wearing her nun’s robe, and she took the blanket from her bed and pulled it around her shoulders. Then she ran down the stone stairs.

The hospital was full of dying people. The mattresses on the floor were lined up like fish bones, so that those patients who were able to sit upright could see the altar. Families clustered around the beds. There was a smell of blood. Caris took a clean length of linen from a basket by the door and tied it over her mouth and nose.

Four nuns knelt beside Cecilia’s bed, singing. Cecilia lay back with her eyes closed, and at first Caris was afraid she had arrived too late. Then the old prioress seemed to sense her presence. She turned her head and opened her eyes.

Caris sat on the edge of the bed. She dipped a rag in a bowl of rose water and wiped a smear of blood from Cecilia’s upper lip.

Cecilia’s breathing was tortured. In between gasps, she said: “Has anyone survived this terrible illness?”

“Only Madge Webber.”

“The one who didn’t want to live.”

“All her children died.”

“I’m going to die soon.”

“Don’t say that.”

“You forget yourself. We nuns have no fear of death. All our lives we long to be united with Jesus in Heaven. When death comes, we welcome it.” The long speech exhausted her. She coughed convulsively.

Caris wiped blood from her chin. “Yes, Mother Prioress. But those who are left behind may weep.” Tears came to her eyes. She had lost Mair and Old Julie, and now she was about to lose Cecilia.

“Don’t cry. That’s for the others. You have to be strong.”

“I don’t see why.”

“I think God has you in mind to take my place, and become prioress.”

In that case he has made a very odd choice, Caris thought. He usually picks people whose view of Him is more orthodox. But she had long ago learned that there was no point in saying these things. “If the sisters choose me, I’ll do my best.”

“I think they’ll choose you.”

“I’m sure Sister Elizabeth will want to be considered.”

“Elizabeth is clever, but you’re loving.”

Caris bowed her head. Cecilia was probably right. Elizabeth would be too harsh. Caris was the best person to run the nunnery, even though she was skeptical of lives spent in prayer and hymn singing. She did believe in the school and the hospital. Heaven forbid that Elizabeth should end up running the hospital.

“There’s something else.” Cecilia lowered her voice, and Caris had to lean closer. “Something Prior Anthony told me when he was dying. He had kept it secret until the last, and now I’ve done the same.”

Caris was not sure she wanted to be burdened with such a secret. However, the deathbed seemed to overrule such scruples.

Cecilia said: “The old king did not die of a fall.”

Caris was shocked. It had happened more than twenty years ago, but she remembered the rumors. The killing of a king was the worst offense imaginable, a double outrage, combining murder with treason, both of them capital crimes. Even knowing about such a thing was dangerous. No wonder Anthony had kept it a secret.

Cecilia went on: “The queen and her lover, Mortimer, wanted Edward II out of the way. The heir to the throne was a little boy. Mortimer became king in all but name. In the upshot, it didn’t last as long as he might have hoped, of course—young Edward III grew up too fast.” She coughed again, more weakly.

“Mortimer was executed while I was an adolescent.”

“But even Edward didn’t want anyone to know what had really happened to his father. So the secret was kept.”

Caris was awestruck. Queen Isabella was still alive, living in lavish circumstances in Norfolk, the revered mother of the king. If people found out that she had her husband’s blood on her hands, there would be a political earthquake. Caris felt guilt just knowing about it.

“So he was murdered?” she asked.

Cecilia made no reply. Caris looked harder. The prioress was still, her face immobile, her eyes staring upward. She was dead.

60

The day after Cecilia died, Godwyn asked Sister Elizabeth to have dinner with him.

This was a dangerous moment. Cecilia’s death unbalanced the power structure. Godwyn needed the nunnery, because the monastery on its own was not viable: he had never succeeded in improving its finances. Yet most of the nuns were now angry about the money he had taken from them, and bitterly hostile to him. If they fell under the control of a prioress bent on revenge—Caris, perhaps—it could mean the end of the monastery.

He was frightened of the plague, too. What if he caught it? What if Philemon died? Such flashes of nightmare unnerved him, but he succeeded in pushing them to the back of his mind. He was determined not to be distracted

from his long-term purpose by the plague.

The election of the prioress was an immediate danger. He had visions of the monastery closing down, and himself leaving Kingsbridge in disgrace, being forced to become an ordinary monk in some other place, subordinate to a prior who would discipline and humiliate him. If that happened he thought he might kill himself.

On the other hand, this was an opportunity as well as a threat. If he handled things cleverly he might get a prioress sympathetic to him who would be content to let him take the lead. And Elizabeth was his best bet.

She would make an imperious leader, one who would stand on her dignity. But he could work with her. She was pragmatic: she had proved that, the time she had warned him that Caris was planning to audit the treasury. She would be his ally.

She walked in with her head held high. She knew she had suddenly become important, and she was enjoying it, Godwyn realized. He wondered anxiously if she would go along with the plan he was about to propose. She might need careful handling.

She looked around the grand dining hall. “You built a splendid palace,” she said, reminding him that she had helped him get the money for it.

She had never been inside the place, he realized, although it had been finished a year ago. He preferred not to have females in the monks’ part of the priory. Only Petranilla and Cecilia had been admitted here, until today. He said: “Thank you. I believe it wins us respect from the noble and powerful. Already we have entertained the archbishop of Monmouth here.”

He had used the last of the nuns’ florins to buy tapestries showing scenes from the lives of the prophets. She studied a picture of Daniel in the lions’ den. “This is very good,” she said.

“From Arras.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Is that your cat under the sideboard?”

Godwyn tutted. “I can’t get rid of it,” he lied. He shooed it out of the room. Monks were not supposed to have pets, but he found the cat a soothing presence.

They sat at one end of the long banqueting table. He hated having a woman here, sitting down to dinner as if she were just as good as a man; but he hid his discomfort.

He had ordered an expensive dish, pork cooked with ginger and apples. Philemon poured wine from Gascony. Elizabeth tasted the pork and said: “Delicious.”

Godwyn was not very interested in food, except as a means of impressing people, but Philemon tucked in greedily.

Godwyn got down to business. “How do you plan to win this election?”

“I believe I’m a better candidate than Sister Caris,” she said.

Godwyn sensed the suppressed emotion with which she uttered the name. Clearly she was still angry that Merthin had rejected her in favor of Caris. Now she was about to enter another contest with her old rival. She would kill to win this time, he thought.

That was good.

Philemon said to her: “Why do you think you’re better?”

“I’m older than Caris,” Elizabeth said. “I’ve been a nun longer, and a priory officer longer. And I was born and brought up in a deeply religious household.”

Philemon shook his head dismissively. “None of that will make any difference.”

She raised her eyebrows, startled by his bluntness, and Godwyn hoped Philemon would not be too brutal. *We need her compliant,* he wanted to whisper. *Don’t get her back up.*

Philemon went on remorselessly. “You’ve only got one year of experience more than Caris has. And your father, the bishop—rest his soul—will count against you. After all, bishops aren’t supposed to have children.”

She flushed. “Priors aren’t supposed to have cats.”

“We’re not discussing the prior,” he said impatiently. His manner was insolent, and Godwyn winced. Godwyn was good at masking his hostility, and putting on a facade of friendly charm, but Philemon had never learned that art.

However, Elizabeth took it coolly. “So, did you ask me here to tell me I can’t win?” She turned to Godwyn. “It’s not like you to cook with costly ginger just for the pleasure of it.”

“You’re quite right,” said Godwyn. “We want you to become prioress, and we’re going to do everything we can to help you.”

Philemon said: “And we’re going to start by taking a realistic look at your prospects. Caris is liked by everyone—nuns, monks, merchants, and nobility. The job she does is a great advantage to her. Most of the monks and nuns, and hundreds of townspeople, have come to the hospital with ailments and been helped by her. By contrast, they rarely see you. You’re the treasurer, thought of as cold and calculating.”

“I appreciate your frankness,” Elizabeth said. “Perhaps I should give up now.”

Godwyn could not tell whether she was being ironic.

“You can’t win,” Philemon said. “But she can lose.”

“Don’t be enigmatic, it’s tiresome,” Elizabeth snapped. “Just tell me in plain words what you’re getting at.”

I can see why she’s not popular, Godwyn thought.

Philemon pretended not to notice her tone. “Your task in the next few weeks is to destroy Caris,” he said. “You have to transform her, in the nuns’

minds, from a likeable, hardworking, compassionate sister into a monster.”

A glint of eagerness came into Elizabeth’s eye. “Is that possible?”

“With our help, yes.”

“Go on.”

“Is she still ordering nuns to wear linen masks in the hospital?”

“Yes.”

“And wash their hands?”

“Yes.”

“There is no basis for these practices in Galen or any other medical authority, and certainly none in the Bible. It seems a mere superstition.”

Elizabeth shrugged. “Apparently the Italian doctors believe the plague spreads through the air. You catch it by looking at sick people, or touching them, or breathing their breath. I don’t see how—”

“And where did the Italians get this idea?”

“Perhaps just by observing patients.”

“I have heard Merthin say that the Italian doctors are the best—except for the Arabs.”

Elizabeth nodded. “I’ve heard that.”

“So this whole business of wearing masks probably comes from the Muslims.”

“Possibly.”

“In other words, it is a heathen practice.”

“I suppose so.”

Philemon sat back, as if he had proved a point.

Elizabeth did not yet get it. “So we outmaneuver Caris by saying she has introduced a heathen superstition into the nunnery?”

“Not exactly,” said Philemon with a crafty smile. “We say she is practising witchcraft.”

She saw it then. “Of course! I had almost forgotten about that.”

“You testified against her at the trial!”

“It was a long time ago.”

“I would think you’d never forget that your enemy was once accused of such a crime,” Philemon said.

Philemon himself certainly never forgot such things, Godwyn reflected. Knowing people’s weaknesses, and exploiting them shamelessly, was his specialty. Godwyn sometimes felt guilty about the sheer depth of Philemon’s malice. But that malice was so useful to Godwyn that he always suppressed his misgivings. Who else could have dreamed up this way of poisoning the nuns’ minds against the beloved Caris?

A novice brought apples and cheese, and Philemon poured more wine. Elizabeth said: “All right, this makes sense. Have you thought about how, in detail, we should bring this up?”

“It’s important to prepare the ground,” Philemon said. “You should never make an accusation such as this formally until it’s already believed by large numbers of people.”

Philemon was very good at this, Godwyn thought admiringly.

Elizabeth said: “And how do you suggest we achieve that?”

“Actions are better than words. Refuse to wear the mask yourself. When asked, shrug and say quietly that you have heard it is a Muslim practice, and you prefer Christian means of protection. Encourage your friends to refuse the mask, as a sign of support for you. Don’t wash your hands too often, either. When you notice people following Caris’s precepts, frown disapprovingly—but say nothing.”

Godwyn nodded agreement. Philemon’s slyness sometimes approached the level of genius.

“Should we not even mention heresy?”

“Talk about it as much as you like, without connecting it directly to Caris. Say that you’ve heard of a heretic being executed in another city, or a devil-worshipper who succeeded in depraving an entire nunnery, perhaps in France.”

“I wouldn’t wish to say anything that was not true,” Elizabeth said stiffly.

Philemon sometimes forgot that not everyone was as unscrupulous as he. Godwyn said hastily: “Of course not—Philemon just means that you should repeat such stories if and when you hear them, to remind the nuns of the ever-present danger.”

“Very good.” The bell rang for Nones, and Elizabeth stood up. “I mustn’t miss the service. I don’t want someone to notice my absence and guess that I’ve been here.”

“Quite right,” said Godwyn. “Anyway, we’ve agreed our plan.”

She nodded. “No masks.”

Godwyn could see that she was nursing a doubt. He said: “You don’t imagine they’re effective, do you?”

“No,” she replied. “No, of course not. How could they be?”

“Exactly.”

“Thank you for dinner.” She went out.

That had gone well, Godwyn reflected, but he was still worried. He said anxiously to Philemon: “Elizabeth on her own might not be able to convince people that Caris is still a witch.”

“I agree. We may need to help with the process.”

“Perhaps with a sermon?”

“Exactly.”

“I’ll speak about the plague from the cathedral pulpit.”

Philemon looked thoughtful. “It might be dangerous to attack Caris directly. That could backfire.”

Godwyn agreed. If there were open strife between himself and Caris, the townspeople would probably support her. “I won’t mention her name.”

“Just sow the seeds of doubt, and let people come to their own conclusions.”

“I’ll blame heresy, devil worship, and heathenish practices.”

Godwyn’s mother, Petranilla, came in. She was very stooped, and walked with two canes, but her large head still jutted forward assertively on her bony shoulders. “How did that go?” she said. She had urged Godwyn to attack Caris, and had approved Philemon’s plan.

“Elizabeth will do exactly as we wish,” Godwyn said, feeling pleased. He enjoyed giving her good news.

“Good. Now I want to talk to you about something else.” She turned to Philemon. “We won’t need you.”

For a moment, Philemon looked hurt, like a child unexpectedly smacked. Brutally abrasive himself, he was easily wounded. However, he recovered quickly, and pretended to be untroubled and even a bit amused by her high-handedness. “Of course, madam,” he said with exaggerated deference.

Godwyn said to him: “Take charge of Nones for me, will you?”

“Very good.”

When he had gone, Petranilla sat at the big table and said: “I know it was me who urged you to foster that young man’s talents, but I have to admit that nowadays he makes my flesh crawl.”

“He’s more useful than ever.”

“You can never really trust a ruthless man. If he will betray others, why should he not betray you?”

“I’ll remember that,” Godwyn said, though he felt he was now so bound up with Philemon that it was hard to imagine operating without him. However, he did not want to tell his mother that. Changing the subject, he said: “Would you like a cup of wine?”

She shook her head. “I’m already too liable to fall over. Sit down and listen to me.”

“Very well, Mother.” He sat beside her at the table.

“I want you to leave Kingsbridge before this plague gets much worse.”

“I can’t do that. But you could go—”

“I don’t matter! I’m going to die soon anyway.”

The thought filled Godwyn with panic. “Don’t say that!”

“Don’t be stupid. I’m sixty years old. Look at me—I can’t even stand upright. It’s time for me to go. But you’re only forty-two—and you’ve got so much ahead! You could be bishop, archbishop, even cardinal.”

As always, her limitless ambition for him made Godwyn feel dizzy. Was he really capable of becoming a cardinal? Or was it just a mother’s blindness? He did not really know.

“I don’t want you to die of the plague before you’ve achieved your destiny,” she finished.

“Mother, you’re not going to die.”

“Forget about me!” she said angrily.

“I can’t leave town. I have to make sure the nuns don’t make Caris prioress.”

“Get them to hold the election quickly. Failing that, get out anyway and leave the election in God’s hands.”

He was terrified of the plague, but he feared failure, too. “I could lose everything if they elect Caris!”

Her voice softened. “Godwyn, listen to me. I have only one child, and that’s you. I can’t bear to lose you.”

Her sudden change of tone shocked him into silence.

She went on: “Please, I beg you, get out of this city and go to some place where the plague can’t reach you.”

He had never known her to plead. It was unnerving. He felt scared. Just to stop her, he said: “Let me think about it.”

“This plague,” she said. “It’s like a wolf in the forest. When you see it, you don’t think—you run.”

Godwyn gave the sermon on the Sunday before Christmas.

It was a dry day with high, pale cloud roofing the cold vault of heaven. The central tower of the cathedral was covered by a bird’s nest of rope-and-branch scaffolding where Elfric was demolishing it from the top down. At the market on the green, shivering traders did desultory business with a few preoccupied customers. Beyond the market, the frozen grass of the cemetery was quilted with the brown rectangles of more than a hundred fresh graves.

But the church was full. The frost that Godwyn had noticed on the inside walls during Prime had been dispersed by the warmth of thousands of bodies by the time he entered the church to perform the Christmas service. They huddled in their heavy earth-colored coats and cloaks, looking like cattle in a pen. They had come because of the plague, he knew. The congregation of thousands of townspeople had been augmented by hundreds more from the surrounding countryside, all in search of God’s protection against an illness that had already struck at least one family in every city street and rural village. Godwyn sympathized. Even he had been praying more fervently lately.

Normally only the people at the front solemnly followed the service. Those behind chatted to their friends and neighbors, and the youngsters amused themselves at the back. But today there was little noise from the nave. All heads were turned to the monks and nuns, watching with unusual attention

as they performed the rituals. The crowd murmured the responses scrupulously, desperate to acquire what defensive holiness they could. Godwyn studied their faces, reading their expressions. What he saw there was dread. Like him, they were wondering fearfully who would be the next to sneeze, or suffer a nosebleed, or come out in a rash of purple-black spots.

Right at the front he could see Earl William with his wife, Philippa, their two grown sons, Roland and Richard, and their much younger daughter, Odila, who was fourteen. William ruled the county in the same style as his father, Roland, with order and justice and a firm hand that was occasionally cruel. He looked worried: an outbreak of plague in his earldom was something he could not control, no matter how harsh he was. Philippa had her arm around the young girl, as if to protect her.

Next to them was Sir Ralph, lord of Tench. Ralph had never been any good at hiding his feelings, and now he looked terrified. His child-wife was carrying a tiny baby boy. Godwyn had recently christened the child Gerald, after its grandfather, who stood nearby with the grandmother, Maud.

Godwyn's eye moved along the line to Ralph's brother, Merthin. When Merthin had returned from Florence, Godwyn had hoped that Caris would renounce her vows and leave the nunnery. He thought she might be less of a nuisance as the mere wife of a citizen. But it had not happened. Merthin was holding the hand of his little Italian daughter. Next to them was Bessie from the Bell Inn. Bessie's father, Paul Bell, had succumbed to the plague already.

Not far away was the family Merthin had spurned: Elfric, with his daughter, Griselda, the little boy they had named Merthin—now ten—and Harry Mason, the husband Griselda had wed after she gave up hope of the original Merthin. Next to Elfric was his second wife, Godwyn's cousin Alice. Elfric kept looking up. He had built a temporary ceiling over the crossing while he tore down the tower, and he was either admiring his work or worrying about it.

Conspicuously absent was the bishop of Shiring, Henri of Mons. The bishop normally gave the sermon on Christmas Day. However, he had not come. So many clergy had died of the plague that the bishop was frantically busy visiting parishes and searching for replacements. There was already talk of easing the requirements for priests, and ordaining under-twenty-fives and even illegitimate men.

Godwyn stepped forward to speak. He had a delicate task. He needed to whip up fear and hatred of the most popular person in Kingsbridge. And he had to do it without mentioning her name, indeed without even letting people think he was hostile to her. They must turn on her with fury but, when they did, they had to believe it was their own idea, not his.

Not every service featured a sermon. Only at major solemnities, attended by large crowds, did he address the congregation, and then he did not always

preach. Often there were announcements, messages from the archbishop or the king about national events—military victories, taxes, royal births and deaths. But today was special.

“What is sickness?” he said. The church was already quiet, but the congregation became very still. He has asked the question that was on everybody’s mind.

“Why does God send illnesses and plagues to torment and kill us?” He caught the eye of his mother, standing behind Elfric and Alice, and he was suddenly reminded of her forecast that she would die soon. For a moment he froze, paralyzed with fear, unable to speak. The congregation shifted restlessly, waiting. Knowing he was losing their attention, he felt panicky, and that made his paralysis worse. Then the moment passed.

“Sickness is a punishment for sin,” he resumed. Over the years he had developed a preaching style. He was not a ranter, like Friar Murdo. He spoke in a more conversational manner, sounding like a reasonable man rather than a demagogue. He wondered how suitable that was for whipping up the kind of hatred he wanted them to feel. But Philemon said it made him sound more convincing.

“The plague is a special sickness, so we know God is inflicting a special punishment on us.” There was a low collective sound, between a murmur and a moan, from the crowd. This was what they wanted to hear. He was encouraged.

“We must ask ourselves what sins we have committed, to merit such punishment.” As he said this, he noticed Madge Webber, standing alone. Last time she came to church she had had a husband and four children. He thought of making the point that she had enriched herself using dyes concocted by witchcraft, but he decided against that tactic. Madge was too well liked and respected.

“I say to you that God is punishing us for heresy. There are people in the world—in this town—even in this great cathedral today—who question the authority of God’s holy church and its ministers. They doubt that the sacrament turns bread into the true body of Christ; they deny the efficacy of masses for the dead; they claim that it is idolatry to pray before statues of the saints.” These were the usual heresies debated among student priests at Oxford. Few people in Kingsbridge cared about such arguments, and Godwyn saw disappointment and boredom on the faces in the crowd. He sensed he was losing them again, and he felt the panic rise. Desperately, he added: “There are people in this city who practise witchcraft.”

That got their attention. There was a collective gasp.

“We must be vigilant against false religion,” he said. “Remember that only God can cure sickness. Prayer, confession, communion, penance—these are the remedies sanctioned by Christianity.” He raised his voice a little. “All

else is blasphemy!”

This was not clear enough, he decided. He needed to be more specific.

“For if God sends us a punishment, and we try to escape it, are we not defying His will? We may pray to Him to forgive us, and perhaps in his wisdom he will heal our sickness. But heretical cures will only make matters worse.” The audience was rapt, and he warmed up. “I warn you! Magic spells, appeals to the fairy folk, unchristian incantations, and especially heathen practices—all are witchcraft, all are forbidden by God’s holy church.”

His real audience today was the thirty-two nuns standing behind him in the choir of the church. So far only a few had registered their opposition to Caris, and their support for Elizabeth, by refusing to wear the mask against the plague. As things stood, Caris would easily win next week’s election. He needed to give the nuns the clear message that Caris’s medical ideas were heretical.

“Anyone who is guilty of such practices…,” he paused for effect, leaning forward and staring at the congregation, “…anyone in town…,” he turned and looked behind him, at the monks and nuns in the choir, “…or even in the priory…” He turned back. “I say, anyone guilty of such practices should be shunned.”

He paused for effect.

“And may God have mercy on their souls.”

61

Paul Bell was buried three days before Christmas. All those who stood at his frosty graveside in the December cold were invited to the Bell to drink to his memory. His daughter, Bessie, now owned the place. She did not want to grieve alone, so she poured the tavern’s best ale generously. Lennie Fiddler played sad tunes on his five-stringed instrument, and the mourners became tearful and maudlin as they got drunker.

Merthin sat in the corner with Lolla. At yesterday’s market he had bought some sweet raisins from Corinth—an expensive luxury. He was sharing them with Lolla, teaching her numbers at the same time. He counted nine raisins for himself, but when he was counting out hers he missed every other number, saying: “One, three, five, seven, nine.”

“No!” she said. “That’s not right!” She was laughing, knowing that he was only teasing.

“But I counted nine each,” he protested.

“But you’ve got more!”

“Well, how did that happen?”

“You didn’t count them right, silly.”

“You’d better count them, then, and see if you can do better.”

Bessie sat with them. She was wearing her best dress, which was a bit tight. “Can I have some raisins?” she said.

Lolla said: “Yes, but don’t let Daddy count them.”

“Don’t worry,” Bessie said. “I know his tricks.”

“Here you are,” Merthin said to Bessie. “One, three, nine, thirteen—oh, thirteen is too many. I’d better take some away.” He took back three raisins. “Twelve, eleven, ten. There, now you’ve got ten raisins.”

Lolla thought this was hysterically funny. “But she’s only got one!” she said.

“Did I count them wrong again?”

“Yes!” She looked at Bessie. “We know his tricks.”

“You count them, then.”

The door opened, letting in a blast of icy air. Caris came in, wrapped in a heavy cloak. Merthin smiled: every time he saw her, he felt glad she was still alive.

Bessie looked at her warily, but spoke a welcome. “Hello, Sister,” she said. “It’s kind of you to remember my father.”

Caris said: “I’m very sorry you have lost him. He was a good man.” She, too, was being formally polite. Merthin realized that these two women saw themselves as rivals for his affections. He did not know what he had done to deserve such devotion.

“Thank you,” Bessie said to Caris. “Will you have a cup of ale?”

“That’s very kind, but no. I need to speak to Merthin.”

Bessie looked at Lolla. “Shall we roast some nuts on the fire?”

“Yes, please!”

Bessie took Lolla away.

“They get on well together,” Caris said.

Merthin nodded. “Bessie has a warm heart, and no children of her own.”

Caris looked sad. “I have no children…but perhaps I haven’t got the warm heart.”

Merthin touched her hand. “I know better,” he said. “You have such a warm heart you have to take care of not just one or two children but dozens of people.”

“It’s kind of you to see it that way.”

“It’s true, that’s all. How are things at the hospital?”

“Unbearable. The place is full of people dying, and I can’t do anything for them except bury them.”

Merthin felt a surge of compassion. She was always so competent, so reliable, but the strain told on her, and she was willing to show it to him, if to no one else. “You look tired,” he said.

“I am, God knows.”

“I suppose you’re worrying about the election, too.”

“I came to ask for your help with that.”

Merthin hesitated. He was torn by contradictory feelings. Part of him wanted her to achieve her ambition and become prioress. But then would she ever be his wife? He had a shamefully selfish hope that she would lose the election and renounce her vows. All the same, he wanted to give her whatever help she asked for, just because he loved her. “All right,” he said.

“Godwyn’s sermon yesterday hurt me.”

“Will you never be rid of that old accusation of witchcraft? It’s so absurd!”

“People are stupid. The sermon had a big impact on the nuns.”

“As was intended, of course.”

“No doubt of it. Few of them believed Elizabeth when she said that my linen masks were heathenish. Only her close friends discarded the mask: Cressie, Elaine, Jeannie, Rosie, and Simone. But when the others heard the message from the pulpit of the cathedral, it was different. The more impressionable sisters have all now discarded the mask. A few avoid making an obvious choice by never coming into the hospital. Only a handful still wear it: me and four nuns I’m close to.”

“I was afraid of this.”

“Now that Mother Cecilia, Mair, and Old Julie are dead, there are only thirty-two nuns eligible to vote. Seventeen votes are all you need to win. Elizabeth originally had five sworn supporters. The sermon has given her eleven more. With her own vote, that makes seventeen. I have only five, and even if all the waverers came over to me, I would lose.”

Merthin felt angry on her behalf. It must be hurtful to be rejected like this after all she had done for the nunnery. “What can you do?”

“The bishop is my last hope. If he sets his face against Elizabeth, and announces that he will not ratify her election, some of her support may fall away, and I could have a chance.”

“How can you influence him?”

“I can’t, but you could—or, at least, the parish guild could.”

“I suppose so…”

“They have a meeting this evening. You’ll be there, I imagine.”

“Yes.”

“Think about it. Godwyn already has the town in a stranglehold. He’s close to Elizabeth—her family are tenants of the priory, and Godwyn has always been careful to favor them. If she becomes prioress, she will be as compliant as Elfric. Godwyn will have no opposition in or out of the priory. It will be the death of Kingsbridge.”

“That’s true, but whether the guildsmen will agree to intercede with the

bishop…”

Suddenly she looked terribly disheartened. “Just try. If they turn you down, so be it.”

Her desperation touched him, and he wished he could be more optimistic. “I will, of course.”

“Thank you.” She stood up. “You must have conflicting feelings about this. Thank you for being a true friend.”

He smiled wryly. He wanted to be her husband, not her friend. But he would take what he could get.

She went out into the cold.

Merthin joined Bessie and Lolla at the fireside, and sampled their roasted nuts, but he was preoccupied. Godwyn’s influence was malign, but all the same his power never ceased to grow. Why was that? Perhaps because he was an ambitious man with no conscience—a potent combination.

As darkness fell, he put Lolla to bed and paid a neighbor’s daughter to watch her. Bessie left the barmaid, Sairy, in charge of the tavern. Wearing heavy cloaks, they walked up the main street to the guildhall for the midwinter meeting of the parish guild.

At the back of the long room there was a seasonal barrel of ale for the members. The merrymaking seemed to have a driven quality this Christmas, Merthin thought. They had been drinking hard at Paul Bell’s wake, and some of those people now followed Merthin in and filled their tankards again as eagerly as if they had not tasted ale for a week. Perhaps it took their minds off the plague.

Bessie was one of four people introduced as new members. The other three were eldest sons of leading merchants who had died. Godwyn, as overlord of the townspeople, must be enjoying a rise in his income from inheritance tax, Merthin realized.

When the routine business had been dealt with, Merthin raised the subject of the election of the new prioress.

“That’s none of our business,” Elfric said immediately.

“On the contrary, the result will affect commerce in this town for years to come, perhaps decades,” Merthin argued. “The prioress is one of the richest and most powerful people in Kingsbridge, and we ought to do what we can to get one who will do nothing to fetter trade.”

“But there’s nothing we can do—we have no vote.”

“We have influence. We could petition the bishop.”

“It’s never been done before.”

“That’s not much of an argument.”

Bill Watkin interrupted. “Who are the candidates?”

Merthin replied: “Sorry, I thought you’d know. Sister Caris and Sister Elizabeth. I think we should support Caris.”

“Of course you do,” said Elfric. “And we all know why!”

There was a ripple of laughter. Everyone knew about the longstanding on-off love affair between Merthin and Caris.

Merthin smiled. “Go on, laugh—I don’t mind. Just remember that Caris grew up in the wool business and helped her father, so she understands the problems and challenges that merchants face—whereas her rival is the daughter of a bishop, and more likely to sympathize with the prior.”

Elfric was looking red in the face—partly because of the ale he had drunk, Merthin thought, but mainly through anger. “Why do you hate me, Merthin?” he said.

Merthin was surprised. “I thought it was the other way around.”

“You seduced my daughter, then refused to marry her. You tried to prevent my building the bridge. I thought we’d got rid of you, then you came back and humiliated me over the cracks in the bridge. You hadn’t been back more than a few days before you tried to get me ousted as alderman and replaced by your friend Mark. You even hinted that the cracks in the cathedral were my fault, although it was built before I was born. I repeat, why do you hate me?”

Merthin did not know what to say. How could Elfric not know what he had done to Merthin? But Merthin did not want to have this argument in front of the parish guild—it seemed childish. “I don’t hate you, Elfric. You were a cruel master when I was an apprentice, and you’re a slipshod builder, and you toady to Godwyn, but all the same I don’t hate you.”

One of the new members, Joseph Blacksmith, said: “Is this what you do at the parish guild—have stupid arguments?”

Merthin felt hard done by. It was not he who had introduced the personal note. But for him to say that would be seen as continuing a stupid argument. So he said nothing, and reflected that Elfric was ever sly.

“Joe’s right,” said Bill Watkin. “We didn’t come here to listen to Elfric and Merthin squabbling.”

Merthin was troubled by Bill’s willingness to put him and Elfric on the same level. Generally, the guildsmen liked him and felt mildly hostile to Elfric, since the dispute over the bridge cracks. Indeed, they would have ousted Elfric if Mark had not died. But something had changed.

Merthin said: “Can we return to the matter in hand, which is petitioning the bishop to favor Caris as prioress?”

“I’m against it,” Elfric said. “Prior Godwyn wants Elizabeth.”

A new voice spoke up. “I’m with Elfric. We don’t want to quarrel with the father prior.” It was Marcel Chandler, who had the contract to supply wax candles to the priory. Godwyn was his biggest customer. Merthin was not surprised.

However, the next speaker shocked him. It was Jeremiah Builder, who

said: “I don’t think we should favor someone who has been accused of heresy.” He spat on the floor twice, left and right, and crossed himself.

Merthin was too surprised to reply. Jeremiah had always been fearfully superstitious, but Merthin would never have imagined it would lead him to betray his mentor.

It was left to Bessie to defend Caris. “That charge was always ludicrous,” she said.

“It was never disproved, though,” said Jeremiah.

Merthin stared at him, but Jeremiah would not meet his eye. “What’s got into you, Jimmie?” Merthin said.

“I don’t want to die of the plague,” Jeremiah said. “You heard the sermon. Anyone practising heathen remedies should be shunned. We’re talking about asking the bishop to make her prioress—that’s not shunning her!”

There was a murmur of assent, and Merthin realized that the tide of opinion had turned. The others were not as credulous as Jeremiah, but they shared his fear. The plague had spooked them all, undermining their rationality. Godwyn’s sermon had been more effective than Merthin had imagined.

He was ready to give up—then he thought of Caris, and how weary and demoralized she had looked, and he gave it one more try. “I’ve lived through this once, in Florence,” he said. “I warn you now, priests and monks won’t save anyone from the plague. You’ll have handed the town to Godwyn on a plate, and all for nothing.”

Jeremiah said: “That sounds awfully close to blasphemy.”

Merthin looked around. The others agreed with Jeremiah. They were too scared to think straight. There was nothing more he could do.

They decided to take no action on the election for prioress, and soon afterward the meeting broke up in somewhat bad humor, the members taking burning sticks from the fire to light their way home.

Merthin decided it was too late to report to Caris—the nuns, like the monks, went to bed at nightfall and got up in the early hours of the morning. However, there was a figure wrapped in a big wool cloak waiting outside the guildhall, and to his surprise his torch revealed the troubled face of Caris. “What happened?” she said anxiously.

“I failed,” he said. “I’m sorry.”

In the torchlight she looked wounded. “What did they say?”

“They won’t intervene. They believed the sermon.”

“Fools.”

Together they walked down the main street. At the priory gates, Merthin said: “Leave the nunnery, Caris. Not for my sake, but for your own. You can’t work under Elizabeth. She hates you, and she’ll block everything you want to do.”

“She hasn’t won yet.”

“She will, though—you said so yourself. Renounce your vows, and marry me.”

“Marriage is a vow. If I break my vow to God, why would you trust me to keep my promise to you?”

He smiled. “I’ll risk it.”

“Let me think about it.”

“You’ve been thinking about it for months,” Merthin said with resentment. “If you don’t leave now, you never will.”

“I can’t leave now. People need me more than ever.”

He began to feel angry. “I won’t keep asking forever.”

“I know.”

“In fact, I won’t ask you again, after tonight.”

She began to cry. “I’m sorry, but I can’t abandon the hospital in the midst of a plague.”

“The hospital.”

“And the people of the town.”

“But what about yourself?”

The flame of his torch made her tears glisten. “They need me so badly.”

“They’re ungrateful, all of them—nuns, monks, townspeople. I should know, by God.”

“It makes no difference.”

He nodded, accepting her decision, suppressing his selfish anger. “If that’s how you feel, you must do your duty.”

“Thank you for understanding.”

“I wish this had turned out differently.”

“So do I.”

“You’d better take this torch.”

“Thank you.”

She took the burning branch from his hand and turned away. He watched her, thinking: Is this how it ends? Is this all? She walked away with her characteristic stride, determined and confident, but her head was bowed. She passed through the gateway and disappeared.

The lights of the Bell shone cheerfully through the gaps around the shutters and the door. He went inside.

The last few customers were saying drunken farewells, and Sairy was collecting tankards and wiping tables. Merthin checked on Lolla, who was fast asleep, and paid the girl who had been watching her. He thought of going to bed, but he knew he would not sleep. He was too upset. Why had he run out of patience tonight, as opposed to any other time? He had got angry. But his anger came from fear, he realized as he calmed down. Underneath it all, he was terrified that Caris would catch the plague and die.

He sat on a bench in the parlor of the inn and took off his boots. He stayed there, staring into the fire, wondering why he could not have the one thing in life that he wanted most.

Bessie came in and hung up her cloak. Sairy left, and Bessie locked up. She sat opposite Merthin, taking the big chair that her father had always used. “I’m sorry about what happened at the guild,” she said. “I’m not sure who’s right, but I know you’re disappointed.”

“Thank you for supporting me, anyway.”

“I’ll always support you.”

“Perhaps it’s time for me to stop fighting Caris’s battles.”

“I agree with that. But I can see that it makes you sad.”

“Sad and angry. I seem to have wasted half my life waiting for Caris.”

“Love is never wasted.”

He looked up at her, surprised. After a pause, he said: “You’re a wise person.”

“There’s no one else in the house, except for Lolla,” she said. “All the Christmas guests have left.” She got up from her chair and knelt in front of him. “I’d like to comfort you,” she said. “Any way I can.”

He looked at her round, friendly face and felt his body stir in response. It was such a long time since he had held the soft body of a woman in his arms. But he shook his head. “I don’t want to use you.”

She smiled. “I’m not asking you to marry me. I’m not even asking you to love me. I’ve just buried my father, and you’ve been disappointed by Caris, and we’re both in need of someone warm to hold on to.”

“To dull the pain, like a jug of wine.”

She took his hand and kissed the palm. “Better than wine,” she said. She pressed his hand to her breast. It was big and soft, and he sighed as he caressed it. She turned her face up, and he leaned down and kissed her lips. She gave a little moan of pleasure. The kiss was delicious, like a cold drink on a hot day, and he did not want to stop.

Eventually she broke away from him, panting. She stood upright and pulled her woolen dress over her head. Her naked body looked rosy in the firelight. She was all curves: round hips, round belly, round breasts. Still seated, he put his hands on her waist and drew her to him. He kissed the warm skin of her belly, then the pink tips of her breasts. He looked up at her flushed face. “Do you want to go upstairs?” he murmured.

“No,” she said breathlessly. “I can’t wait that long.”

The election for prioress was held on the day after Christmas. That morning, Caris felt so depressed she could hardly get out of bed. When the bell rang for Matins in the early hours, she was strongly tempted to put her head under the blankets and say that she did not feel well. But she could not pretend when so many were dying, so in the end she forced herself.

She shuffled around the ice-cold flagstones of the cloisters side by side with Elizabeth, the two of them at the head of the procession to the church. This protocol had been agreed because neither would yield precedence to the other while they were competing in the election. But Caris no longer cared. The result was a foregone conclusion. She stood yawning and shivering in the choir through the psalms and readings. She was angry. Later today, Elizabeth would be elected prioress. Caris resented the nuns for rejecting her, she hated Godwyn for his enmity, and she despised the town's merchants for refusing to intervene.

She felt as if her life had been a failure. She had not built the new hospital she had dreamed of, and now she never would.

She also resented Merthin, for making her an offer she could not accept. He did not understand. For him, their marriage would be an adjunct to his life as an architect. For her, marriage would have to *replace* the work to which she had dedicated herself. That was why she had vacillated for so many years. It was not that she did not want him. She longed for him with a hunger that she could hardly bear.

She mumbled the last of the responses and then, mechanically, walked out of the church at the front of the line. As they walked around the cloisters again, someone behind her sneezed. She was too dispirited even to look and see who it was.

The nuns climbed the stairs to their dormitory. When Caris entered the room she heard heavy breathing, and realized that someone had stayed behind. Her candle revealed the novice mistress, Sister Simone—a dour middle-aged woman, normally a conscientious nun, not one to malinger. Caris bound a strip of linen around her own face then knelt by Simone's mattress. Simone was perspiring and looking scared.

Caris said: "How do you feel?"

"Awful," Simone said. "I've had strange dreams."

Caris touched her forehead. She was burning hot.

Simone said: "Can I have something to drink?"

"In a moment."

"It's just a cold, I expect."

"You're certainly running a fever."

"I haven't got the plague, though, have I? It's not that bad."

"We'll take you to the hospital anyway," Caris said evasively. "Can you

walk?”

Simone struggled to her feet. Caris took a blanket off the bed and wrapped it around Simone’s shoulders.

As they were heading for the door, Caris heard a sneeze. This time she could see that it came from Sister Rosie, the plump matricularius. Caris looked hard at Rosie, who appeared scared.

Caris picked another nun at random. “Sister Cressie, take Simone to the hospital while I look at Rosie.”

Cressie took Simone’s arm and led her down the stairs.

Caris held her candle up to Rosie’s face. She, too, was perspiring. Caris pulled down the neck of her robe. There was a rash of small purple spots over her shoulders and breasts.

“No,” Rosie said. “No, please.”

“It may be nothing at all,” Caris lied.

“I don’t want to die of the plague!” Rosie said, her voice cracking.

Caris said quietly: “Just keep calm and come with me.” She took Rosie’s arm firmly.

Rosie resisted. “No, I’ll be all right!”

“Try saying a prayer,” Caris said. “Ave Maria, come on.”

Rosie began to pray, and a moment later Caris was able to lead her away.

The hospital was crammed with dying people and their families, most of them awake despite the hour. There was a strong odor of sweaty bodies, vomit, and blood. The place was dimly lit by tallow lamps and the candles on the altar. A handful of nuns attended to the patients, bringing water and cleaning up. Some wore the mask, others did not.

Brother Joseph was there, the oldest of the monk-physicians and the most well liked. He was giving the last rites to Rick Silvers, the head of the jewelers’ guild, bending to hear the man’s whispered confession, surrounded by the children and grandchildren.

Caris made a space for Rosie and persuaded her to lie down. One of the nuns brought her a cup of clear fountain water. Rosie lay still, but her eyes shifted restlessly this way and that. She knew her fate, and she was frightened. “Brother Joseph will come and see you shortly,” Caris told her.

“You were right, Sister Caris,” said Rosie.

“What do you mean?”

“Simone and I were among the original friends of Sister Elizabeth who refused to wear the mask—and look what has happened to us.”

Caris had not thought of this. Would she be proved horribly right by the deaths of those who disagreed with her? She would rather be wrong.

She went to look at Simone. She was lying down and holding the hand of Cressie. Simone was older and calmer than Rosie, but there was fear in her eyes, and she was gripping Cressie’s hand hard.

Caris glanced at Cressie. There was a dark stain above her lip. Caris reached out and wiped it with her sleeve.

Cressie, too, was among the original group who had abandoned the mask.

She looked at the mark on Caris's sleeve. "What is it?" she said.

"Blood," said Caris.

The election took place in the refectory an hour before dinnertime. Caris and Elizabeth were side by side behind a table at one end of the room, and the nuns sat on benches in rows.

Everything had changed. Simone, Rosie, and Cressie lay in the hospital, stricken by the plague. Here in the refectory the other two who had originally refused the mask, Elaine and Jeannie, were both showing early symptoms, Elaine sneezing and Jeannie sweating. Brother Joseph, who had been treating plague victims without a mask since the beginning, had at last succumbed. All the remaining nuns had resumed wearing the masks in the hospital. If the mask was still a sign of support for Caris, she had won.

They were tense and restless. Sister Beth, the former treasurer and now the oldest nun, read a prayer to open the meeting. Almost before she had finished, several nuns spoke at once. The voice that prevailed was that of Sister Margaret, the former cellarer. "Caris was right, and Elizabeth was wrong!" she cried. "Those who refused the mask are now dying."

There was a collective rumble of agreement.

Caris said: "I wish it were otherwise. I'd rather have Rosie and Simone and Cressie sitting here voting against me." She meant it. She was sick of seeing people die. It made her think how trivial everything else was.

Elizabeth stood up. "I propose we postpone the election," she said. "Three nuns are dead and three more are in the hospital. We should wait until the plague is over."

That took Caris by surprise. She had thought there was nothing Elizabeth could do to avoid defeat—but she had been wrong. No one would now vote for Elizabeth, but her supporters might prefer to avoid making any choice at all.

Caris's apathy vanished. Suddenly she remembered all the reasons why she wanted to be prioress: to improve the hospital, to teach more girls to read and write, to help the town prosper. It would be a catastrophe if Elizabeth were elected instead.

Elizabeth was immediately supported by old Sister Beth. "We shouldn't hold the election in a panic, and make a choice we might regret later when things have calmed down." Her statement sounded rehearsed: Elizabeth had obviously planned this. But the argument was not unreasonable, Caris thought with some trepidation.

Margaret said indignantly: “Beth, you only say that because you know Elizabeth is going to lose.”

Caris held back from speaking, for fear of prompting the same argument against herself.

Sister Naomi, who was not committed to either side, said: “The trouble is, we have no leader. Mother Cecilia, rest her soul, never appointed a subprioress after Natalie died.”

“Is that so bad?” Elizabeth said.

“Yes!” Margaret said. “We can’t even make up our minds who is to go first in the procession!”

Caris decided to risk making a practical point. “There is a long list of decisions that need to be made, especially about inheritance of nunnery properties whose tenants have died of the plague. It would be difficult to go much longer with no prioress.”

Sister Elaine, one of the original five friends of Elizabeth, now argued against postponement. “I hate elections,” she said. She sneezed, then went on: “They set sister against sister and cause acrimony. I want to get this over with so that we can be united in the face of this dreadful plague.”

That raised a cheer of support.

Elizabeth glared angrily at Elaine. Elaine caught her eye and said: “You see, I can’t even make a pacific remark like that without Elizabeth looking at me as if I’ve betrayed her!”

Elizabeth dropped her gaze.

Margaret said: “Come on, let’s vote. Whoever is for Elizabeth, say: ‘Aye.’”

For a moment, no one spoke. Then Beth said quietly: “Aye.”

Caris waited for someone else to speak, but Beth was the only one.

Caris’s heart beat faster. Was she about to achieve her ambition?

Margaret said: “Who is for Caris?”

The response was instant. There was a shout of “Aye!” It seemed to Caris that almost all the nuns voted for her.

I’ve done it, she thought. I’m prioress. Now we can really begin.

Margaret said: “In that case—”

A male voice suddenly said: “Wait!”

Several nuns gasped, and one screamed. They all looked at the door. Philemon stood there. He must have been listening outside, Caris thought.

He said: “Before you go any farther—”

Caris was not having this. She stood up and interrupted him. “How dare you enter the nunnery!” she said. “You do not have permission and you are not welcome. Leave now!”

“I’m sent by the lord prior—”

“He has no right—”

“He is the senior religious in Kingsbridge, and in the absence of a prioress or a subprioress he has authority over the nuns.”

“We are no longer without a prioress, Brother Philemon.” Caris advanced toward him. “I have just been elected.”

The nuns hated Philemon, and they all cheered.

He said: “Father Godwyn refuses to permit this election.”

“Too late. Tell him *Mother* Caris is now in charge of the nunnery—and she threw you out.”

Philemon backed away. “You are not prioress until your election has been ratified by the bishop!”

“Out!” said Caris.

The nuns took up the chant. “Out! Out! Out!”

Philemon was intimidated. He was not used to being defied. Caris took another step toward him, and he took another back. He looked amazed by what was happening, but also scared. The chanting got louder. Suddenly he turned around and scurried out.

The nuns laughed and cheered.

But Caris realized that his parting remark had been true. Her election would have to be ratified by Bishop Henri.

And Godwyn would do everything in his power to prevent that.

A team of volunteers from the town had cleared an acre of rough woodland on the far side of the river, and Godwyn was in the process of consecrating the new land as a cemetery. Every churchyard within the town walls was full, and the available space in the cathedral graveyard was shrinking fast.

Godwyn paced the borders of the plot in a biting cold wind, sprinkling holy water that froze when it hit the ground, while monks and nuns marched behind him, singing a psalm. Although the service was not yet over, the gravediggers were already at work. Humps of raw earth stood in neat lines beside straight-sided pits, placed as close together as possible to save space. But an acre would not last long, and men were already at work clearing the next patch of woodland.

At moments such as this, Godwyn had to struggle to keep his composure. The plague was like an incoming tide, submerging everyone in its path, unstoppable. The monks had buried a hundred people during the week before Christmas and the numbers were still rising. Brother Joseph had died yesterday, and two more monks were now ill. Where would it end? Would everyone in the world die? Would Godwyn himself die?

He was so scared that he stopped, staring at the gold aspergillum with which he was sprinkling the holy water as if he had no idea how it had got into his hand. For a moment he was so panicked that he could not move. Then

Philemon, at the head of the procession, pushed him gently from behind. Godwyn stumbled forward and resumed his march. He had to thrust these frightening thoughts from his mind.

He turned his brain to the problem of the nuns' election. Reaction to his sermon had been so favorable that he had thought Elizabeth's victory secure. The tide had turned with shocking rapidity, and the infuriating revival in Caris's popularity had taken him by surprise. Philemon's last-ditch intervention had been a desperate measure taken just too late. When he thought of it, Godwyn wanted to scream.

But it was not yet over. Caris had mocked Philemon, but the truth was that she could not consider her position safe until she had Bishop Henri's approval.

Unfortunately, Godwyn had not yet had a chance to ingratiate himself with Henri. The new bishop, who spoke no English, had visited Kingsbridge only once. Because he was so new, Philemon had not yet learned whether he had any fatal weaknesses. But he was a man, and a priest, so he ought to side with Godwyn against Caris.

Godwyn had written to Henri saying that Caris had bewitched the nuns into thinking she could save them from the plague. He had detailed Caris's history: the accusation of heresy, the trial and sentence eight years ago, the rescue by Cecilia. He hoped Henri would arrive in Kingsbridge with his mind firmly prejudiced against Caris.

But when would Henri come? It was extraordinary for the bishop to miss the Christmas service in the cathedral. A letter from the efficient, unimaginative Archdeacon Lloyd had explained that Henri was busy appointing clergy to replace those who had died of the plague. Lloyd might be against Godwyn: he was Earl William's man, owing his position to William's late brother Richard; and the father of William and Richard, Earl Roland, had hated Godwyn. But Lloyd would not make the decision, Henri would. It was hard to know what might happen. Godwyn felt he had lost control. His career was threatened by Caris and his life was threatened by a remorseless plague.

A light snowfall began as the ceremony of consecration came to an end. Just beyond the cleared plot, seven funeral processions were at a standstill, waiting for the cemetery to be ready. At Godwyn's signal, they moved forward. The first body was in a coffin, but the rest were in shrouds on biers. In the best of times coffins were a luxury for the prosperous, but now that timber had become expensive and coffin-makers were overworked it was only the very rich that could afford to be buried in a wooden casket.

At the head of the first procession was Merthin, with snowflakes caught in his copper-red hair and beard. He was carrying his little girl. The wealthy deceased in the coffin must be Bessie Bell, Godwyn deduced. Bessie had died without relatives and left the tavern to Merthin. Money sticks to that man like

wet leaves, Godwyn thought sourly. Merthin already had Leper Island and the fortune he had made in Florence. Now he owned the busiest tavern in Kingsbridge.

Godwyn knew about Bessie's will because the priory was entitled to an inheritance tax and had taken a fat percentage of the value of the place. Merthin had paid the money in gold florins without hesitation.

The one good consequence of the plague was that the priory suddenly had plenty of cash.

Godwyn conducted one burial service for all seven bodies. This was now the norm: one funeral in the morning and one in the afternoon, regardless of the number of dead. There were not enough priests in Kingsbridge to bury each person individually.

That thought renewed Godwyn's feeling of dread. He stumbled over the words of the service, seeing himself in one of the graves; then he managed to take hold of himself and continue.

At last the service was over, and he led the procession of monks and nuns back to the cathedral. They entered the church and fell out of formation in the nave. The monks returned to their normal duties. A novice nun approached Godwyn nervously and said: "Father Prior, would you kindly come to the hospital?"

Godwyn did not like to receive bossy messages via novices. "What for?" he snapped.

"I'm sorry, Father, I don't know—I was just told to ask you."

"I'll come as soon as I can," he said irritably. He did not have anything urgent to do, but just to make the point he delayed in the cathedral, speaking to Brother Eli about the monks' robes.

A few minutes later he crossed the cloisters and entered the hospital.

Nuns were crowded around a bedstead that had been set up in front of the altar. They must have an important patient, he thought. He wondered who it was. One of the attendant nuns turned to him. She wore a linen mask over her nose and mouth, but he recognized the gold-flecked green eyes that he and all his family shared: it was Caris. Although he could see so little of her face, he read an odd expression in her look. He expected dislike and contempt, but instead he saw compassion.

He moved closer to the bed with a feeling of trepidation. When the other nuns saw him they moved aside deferentially. A moment later, he saw the patient.

It was his mother.

Petranilla's large head lay on a white pillow. She was sweating, and there was a steady trickle of blood from her nose. A nun was in the act of wiping it away, but it reappeared. Another nun offered the patient a cup of water. There was a rash of purple spots on the wrinkled skin of Petranilla's throat.

Godwyn cried out as if he had been struck. He stared in horror. His mother gazed at him with suffering eyes. There was no room for doubt: she had fallen victim to the plague. “No!” he shouted. “No! No!” He felt an unbearable pain in his chest, as if he had been stabbed.

He heard Philemon, beside him, say in a frightened voice: “Try to stay calm, Father Prior,” but he could not. He opened his mouth to scream, but no sound came. He suddenly felt detached from his body, with no control over his movements. Then a black mist arose from the floor and engulfed him, gradually rising up his body until it covered his nose and mouth, so that he could not breathe, and then his eyes, so that he was blind; and at last he lost consciousness.

Godwyn was in bed for five days. He ate nothing and drank only when Philemon put a cup to his lips. He could not think straight. He could not move, for it seemed he had no way of deciding what to do. He sobbed, and slept, then woke up and sobbed again. He was vaguely aware of a monk feeling his forehead, taking a urine sample, diagnosing brain fever, and bleeding him.

Then, on the last day of December, a scared-looking Philemon brought him the news that his mother was dead.

Godwyn got up. He had himself shaved, put on a new robe, and went to the hospital.

The nuns had washed and dressed the body. Petranilla’s hair was brushed and she wore a dress of costly Italian wool. Seeing her like that, with the pallor of death on her face and her eyes forever closed, Godwyn felt a resurgence of the panic that had overwhelmed him; but this time he was able to fight it down. “Take her body to the cathedral,” he ordered. Normally the honor of lying in state in the cathedral was reserved for monks, nuns, senior clergymen, and the aristocracy; but Godwyn knew that no one would dare to contradict him.

When she had been moved into the church, and placed in front of the altar, he knelt beside her and prayed. Prayer helped him calm his terror, and gradually he figured out what to do. When at last he stood up, he ordered Philemon to call a meeting in the chapter house immediately.

He felt shaky, but he knew he had to pull himself together. He had always been blessed with the power of persuasion. Now he had to use it to the utmost.

When the monks had gathered, he read to them from the Book of Genesis. “And it came to pass after these things, that God did tempt Abraham, and said unto him, Abraham: and he said, Behold, here I am. And he said, Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of

Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of. And Abraham rose up early in the morning, and saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son, and clave the wood for the burnt offering, and rose up, and went unto the place of which God had told him."

Godwyn looked up from the book. The monks were watching him intently. They all knew the story of Abraham and Isaac. They were more interested in him, Godwyn. They were alert, wary, wondering what would come next.

"What does the story of Abraham and Isaac teach us?" he asked rhetorically. "God tells Abraham to kill his son—not just his eldest son, but his only son, born when he was a hundred years old. Did Abraham protest? Did he plead for mercy? Did he argue with God? Did he point out that to kill Isaac would be murder, infanticide, a terrible sin?" Godwyn let the question hang for a moment, then looked down at the book and read: "And Abraham rose up early in the morning, and saddled his ass…"

He looked up again. "God may tempt us, too. He may order us to perform acts which seem wrong. Perhaps he will tell us to do something that appears to be a sin. When that happens, we must remember Abraham."

Godwyn was speaking in what he knew was his most persuasive preaching style, rhythmic yet conversational. He could tell that he had their rapt attention by the quiet in the octagonal chapter house: no one fidgeted, whispered, or shuffled.

"We must not question," he said. "We must not argue. When God leads us, we must follow—no matter how foolish, sinful, or cruel his wishes may seem to our feeble human minds. We are weak and humble. Our understanding is fallible. It is not given to us to make decisions or choices. Our duty is simple. It is to obey."

Then he told them what they had to do.

The bishop arrived after dark. It was almost midnight when the entourage entered the precinct: they had ridden by torchlight. Most of the priory had been in bed for hours, but there was a group of nuns at work in the hospital, and one of them came to wake Caris. "The bishop is here," she said.

"Why does he want me?" Caris asked sleepily.

"I don't know, Mother Prior."

Of course she didn't. Caris pulled herself out of bed and put on a cloak.

She paused in the cloisters. She took a long drink of water, and for a few moments she breathed deeply of the cold night air, clearing her head of sleep. She wanted to make a good impression on the bishop, so that there would be no trouble about his ratifying her election as prioress.

Archdeacon Lloyd was in the hospital, looking tired, the pointed tip of his long nose red with cold. “Come and greet your bishop,” he said crossly, as if she ought to have been up and waiting.

She followed him out. A servant stood outside the door with a burning torch. They walked across the green to where the bishop sat on his horse.

He was a small man in a big hat, and he looked thoroughly fed up.

Caris said in Norman French: “Welcome to Kingsbridge Priory, my lord bishop.”

Henri said peevishly: “Who are you?”

Caris had seen him before but had never spoken to him. “I am Sister Caris, prioress-elect.”

“The witch.”

Her heart sank. Godwyn must have already tried to poison Henri’s mind against her. She felt indignant. “No, my lord bishop, there are no witches here,” she said with more acerbity than was prudent. “Just a group of ordinary nuns doing their best for a town that has been stricken by the plague.”

He ignored that. “Where is Prior Godwyn?”

“In his palace.”

“No, he’s not!”

Archdeacon Lloyd explained: “We’ve been there. The building is empty.”

“Really?”

“Yes,” the archdeacon said irritably. “Really.”

At that moment, Caris spotted Godwyn’s cat, with the distinctive white tip to its tail. The novices called it Archbishop. It walked across the west front of the cathedral and looked into the spaces between the pillars, as if searching for its master.

Caris was taken aback. “How strange…Perhaps Godwyn decided to sleep in the dormitory with the other monks.”

“And why would he do that? I hope there’s no impropriety going on.”

Caris shook her head dismissively. The bishop suspected unchastity, but Godwyn was not prone to that particular sin. “He reacted badly when his mother caught the plague. He had some kind of fit and collapsed. She died today.”

“If he’s been unwell I should have thought he was all the more likely to sleep in his own bed.”

Anything might have happened. Godwyn was slightly unhinged by Petranilla’s illness. Caris said: “Would the lord bishop like to speak to one of his deputies?”

Henri answered crossly: “If I could find one, yes!”

“Perhaps if I take Archdeacon Lloyd to the dormitory…”

“As soon as you like!”

Lloyd got a torch from a servant, and Caris led him quickly through the

cathedral into the cloisters. The place was silent, as monasteries generally were at this time of night. They reached the foot of the staircase that led up to the dormitory, and Caris stopped. “You’d better go up alone,” she said. “A nun should not see monks in bed.”

“Of course.” Lloyd went up the stairs with his torch, leaving her in darkness. She waited, curious. She heard him shout: “Hello?” There was a strange silence. Then, after a few moments, he called down to her in an odd voice: “Sister?”

“Yes?”

“You can come up.”

Mystified, she climbed the stairs and entered the dormitory. She stood beside Lloyd and peered into the room by the unsteady light of the burning torch. The monks’ straw mattresses lay neatly in their places along either side of the room—but not one of them was occupied. “There’s no one here,” Caris said.

“Not a soul,” Lloyd agreed. “What on earth has happened?”

“I don’t know, but I can guess,” said Caris.

“Then enlighten me, please.”

“Isn’t it obvious?” she said. “They’ve run away.”

PART VI

January 1349 to January 1351

63

When Godwyn left, he took with him all the valuables from the monks' treasury and all the charters. This included the nuns' charters, which they had never succeeded in retrieving from his locked chest. He also took the sacred relics, including the bones of St. Adolphus in their priceless reliquary.

Caris discovered this on the morning afterward, the first day of January, the Feast of the Circumcision of Christ. She went with Bishop Henri and Sister Elizabeth to the treasury off the south transept. Henri's attitude to her was stiffly formal, which was worrying; but he was a peevish character, so perhaps he was like that with everyone.

The flayed skin of Gilbert Hereford was still nailed to the door, slowly turning hard and yellow, and giving off a faint but distinct whiff of rottenness.

But the door was not locked.

They went in. Caris had not been inside this room since Prior Godwyn stole the nuns' one hundred and fifty pounds to build his palace. After that they had built their own treasury.

It was immediately obvious what had happened. The flagstones that disguised the vaults in the floor had been lifted and not put back, and the lid of the ironbound chest stood open. Vaults and chest were empty.

Caris felt that her contempt for Godwyn was vindicated. A trained physician, a priest and the leader of the monks, he had fled just at the moment when the people needed him most. Now, surely, everyone would realize his true nature.

Archdeacon Lloyd was outraged. "He took everything!"

Caris said to Henri: "And this is the man who wanted you to annul my election."

Bishop Henri grunted noncommittally.

Elizabeth was desperate to find an excuse for Godwyn's behavior. "I'm sure the lord prior took the valuables with him for safekeeping."

That stung the bishop into a response. "Rubbish," he said crisply. "If your

servant empties your purse and disappears without warning, he's not keeping your money safe, he's stealing it."

Elizabeth tried a different tack. "I believe this was Philemon's idea."

"The subprior?" Henri looked scornful. "Godwyn is in charge, not Philemon. Godwyn is responsible."

Elizabeth shut up.

Godwyn must have recovered from the death of his mother, Caris thought, at least temporarily. It was quite an achievement to persuade every single one of the monks to follow him. She wondered where they had gone.

Bishop Henri was thinking the same thing. "Where did the wretched cowards go?"

Caris remembered Merthin trying to persuade her to leave. *To Wales, or Ireland,* he had said. *A remote village where they don't see a stranger from one year to the next.* She said to the bishop: "They will be hiding out in some isolated place where no one ever goes."

"Find out exactly where," he said.

Caris realized that all opposition to her election had vanished with Godwyn. She felt triumphant, and made an effort not to look too pleased. "I'll make some inquiries in the town," she said. "Somebody must have seen them leave."

"Good," said the bishop. "However, I don't think they're coming back soon, so in the meantime you're going to have to manage as best you can with no men. Continue the services as normally as possible with the nuns. Get a parish priest to come into the cathedral for mass, if you can find one still alive. You cannot perform the mass, but you can hear confessions—there has been a special dispensation from the archbishop, because so many clergymen have died."

Caris was not going to let him slide past the question of her election. "Are you confirming me as prioress?" she said.

"Of course," he said irritably.

"In that case, before I accept the honor—"

"You have no decision to make, Mother Prioress," he said indignantly. "It is your duty to obey me."

She wanted the post desperately, but she resolved to pretend otherwise. She was going to drive a hard bargain. "We live in strange times, don't we?" she said. "You've given nuns authority to hear confessions. You've shortened the training for priests, but you still can't ordain them fast enough to keep up with deaths from the plague, I hear."

"Is it your intention to exploit the difficulties the church is facing for some purpose of your own?"

"No, but there is something you need to do to make it possible for me to carry out your instructions."

Henri sighed. Clearly he did not like being spoken to in this way. But, as Caris had suspected, he needed her more than she needed him. “Very well, what is it?”

“I want you to convene an ecclesiastical court and reopen my trial for witchcraft.”

“For heaven’s sake, why?”

“To declare me innocent, of course. Until that happens, it could be difficult for me to exercise authority. Anyone who disagrees with my decisions can all too easily undermine me by pointing out that I stand condemned.”

The tidy secretarial mind of Archdeacon Lloyd liked that idea. “It would be good to have the issue disposed of once and for all, my lord bishop.”

“Very well, then,” said Henri.

“Thank you.” She felt a surge of delight and relief, and bowed her head for fear that her triumph would show in her face. “I will do my best to bring honor to the position of prioress of Kingsbridge.”

“Lose no time in inquiring after Godwyn. I’d like some kind of answer before I leave town.”

“The alderman of the parish guild is a crony of Godwyn’s. He’ll know where they’ve gone if anyone does. I’ll go and see him.”

“Right away, please.”

Caris left. Bishop Henri was charmless, but he seemed competent, and she thought she could work with him. Perhaps he would be the kind of leader who made decisions based on the merits of the case, instead of siding with whomever he perceived as an ally. That would be a pleasant change.

Passing the Bell, she was tempted to go in and tell Merthin her good news. However, she thought she had better find Elfric first.

In the street in front of the Holly Bush she saw Duncan Dyer lying on the ground. His wife, Winnie, was sitting on the bench outside the tavern, crying. Caris thought the man must have been hurt, but Winnie said: “He’s drunk.”

Caris was shocked. “It isn’t even dinnertime yet!”

“His uncle, Peter Dyer, caught the plague and passed away. His wife and children died, too, so Duncan inherited all his money, and he just spends it on wine. I don’t know what to do.”

“Let’s get him home,” Caris said. “I’ll help you lift him.” They each took an arm and got Duncan to his feet. Holding him upright, they half-dragged him down the street to his house. They put him on the floor and covered him with a blanket. Winnie said: “He’s like this every day. He’s says it’s not worth working, because we’re all going to die of the plague. What shall I do?”

Caris thought for a moment. “Bury the money in the garden, now, while he’s sleeping. When he wakes up, tell him he lost it all gambling with a chapman who left town.”

“I might do that,” Winnie said.

Caris crossed the street to Elfric’s house and went inside. Her sister, Alice, was sitting in the kitchen sewing stockings. They had not been close since Alice married Elfric, and what little was left of their relationship had been destroyed by Elfric’s testifying against Caris in the heresy trial. Forced to choose between sister and husband, Alice had been loyal to Elfric. Caris understood that, but it meant her sister had become like a stranger to her.

When Alice saw her, she stood up and dropped her sewing. “What are you doing here?” she said.

“The monks have all disappeared,” Caris told her. “They must have left in the night.”

“So that was what it was!” Alice said.

“Did you see them?”

“No, but I heard a whole crowd of men and horses. They weren’t loud—in fact, now that I think of it, they must have been making an effort to be quiet—but you can’t keep horses silent, and men make a noise just walking along the street. They woke me, but I didn’t get up to see—it was too cold. Is that why you’ve entered my house for the first time in ten years?”

“You didn’t know they were going to run off?”

“Is that what they’ve done, run off? Because of the plague?”

“I assume so.”

“Surely not. What’s the use of physicians who flee from sickness?” Alice was troubled by this behavior on the part of her husband’s patron. “I can’t understand it.”

“I was wondering if Elfric knew anything about it.”

“If he does, he hasn’t told me.”

“Where will I find him?”

“St. Peter’s. Rick Silvers left some money to the church, and the priest decided to pave the floor of the nave.”

“I’ll go and ask him.” Caris wondered if she should make an attempt to be courteous. Alice had no children of her own, but she had a stepdaughter. “How is Griselda?” Caris said.

“Very well and happy,” Alice said with a touch of defiance, as if she thought Caris might prefer to hear otherwise.

“And your grandson?” Caris could not bring herself to use the child’s name, which was Merthin.

“Lovely. And another grandchild on the way.”

“I’m pleased for her.”

“Yes. It’s just as well she didn’t marry your Merthin, the way things have turned out.”

Caris refused to be drawn. “I’ll go and find Elfric.”

St. Peter’s Church was at the western end of the town. As Caris was

threading her way through the winding streets, she came upon two men fighting. They were shouting curses at one another and punching wildly. Two women, presumably their wives, were screeching abuse, while a small crowd of neighbors looked on. The door of the nearest house had been broken down. On the ground nearby was a cage made of twigs and rushes containing three live chickens.

Caris went up to the men and stepped between them. “Stop it this instant,” she said. “I command you in the name of God.”

They did not take much persuading. They had probably expended their wrath with the first few blows, and might even be grateful for an excuse to stop. They stepped back and dropped their arms.

“What’s this about?” Caris demanded.

They both started speaking at once, and so did their wives.

“One at a time!” Caris said. She pointed at the larger of the two men, a dark-haired fellow whose good looks were spoiled by a swelling around his eye. “You’re Joe Blacksmith, aren’t you? Explain.”

“I caught Toby Peterson stealing Jack Marrow’s chickens. He broke down the door.”

Toby was a smaller man with a gamecock bravado. He spoke through bleeding lips. “Jack Marrow owed me five shillings—I’m entitled to those chickens!”

Joe said: “Jack and all his family died of the plague two weeks ago. I’ve been feeding his chickens ever since. They’d be dead but for me. If anyone should take them, it ought to be me.”

Caris said: “Well, you’re both entitled to them, aren’t you? Toby because of the debt, and Joe because he kept them alive at his own expense.”

They looked taken aback at the thought that they might both be right.

Caris said: “Joseph, take one of the chickens out of the cage.”

Toby said: “Wait a moment—”

“Trust me, Toby,” Caris said. “You know I wouldn’t treat you unjustly, don’t you?”

“Well, I can’t deny that…”

Joe opened the cage and picked up a scrawny brown-feathered chicken by its feet. The bird’s head turned jerkily from side to side, as if it was bewildered to see the world upside-down.

Caris said: “Now give it to Toby’s wife.”

“What?”

“Would I cheat you, Joseph?”

Joe reluctantly handed the chicken to Toby’s wife, a pretty, sulky type. “There you are, then, Jane.”

Jane took it with alacrity.

Caris said to her: “Now thank Joe.”

Jane looked petulant, but she said: “I thank you, Joseph Blacksmith.”

Caris said: “Now, Toby, give a chicken to Ellie Blacksmith.”

Toby obeyed, with a sheepish grin. Joe’s wife, Ellie, who was heavily pregnant, smiled and said: “Thank you, Toby Peterson.”

They were returning to normal, and beginning to realize the foolishness of what they had been doing.

Jane said: “What about the third chicken?”

“I’m coming to that,” Caris said. She looked at the watching crowd and pointed at a sensible-looking girl of eleven or twelve. “What’s your name?”

“I’m Jesca, Mother Prior—the daughter of John Constable.”

“Take the other chicken to St. Peter’s Church and give it to Father Michael. Say that Toby and Joe will be coming to ask forgiveness for the sin of covetousness.”

“Yes, Sister.” Jesca picked up the third chicken and went off.

Joe’s wife, Ellie, said: “You may remember, Mother Caris, that you helped my husband’s baby sister, Minnie, when she burned her arm in the forge.”

“Oh, yes, of course,” Caris said. It had been a nasty burn, she remembered. “She must be ten now.”

“That’s right.”

“Is she well?”

“Right as rain, thanks to you, and God’s grace.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

“Would you care to step into my house for a cup of ale, Mother Prioress?”

“I’d love to, but I’m in a hurry.” She turned to the men. “God bless you, and no more fighting.”

Joe said: “Thank you.”

Caris walked away.

Toby called after her: “Thank you, Mother.”

She waved without looking back.

She noticed several more houses that appeared to have been broken into, presumably to be looted after the occupants died. Someone ought to do something about it, she thought. But with Elfric as alderman, and a disappearing prior, there was no one to take the initiative.

She reached St. Peter’s and found Elfric with a team of paviors and their apprentices in the nave. Stone slabs were stacked all around, and the men were preparing the ground, pouring sand and smoothing it with sticks. Elfric was checking that the surface was level, using a complicated piece of apparatus with a wooden frame and a dangling cord with a lead point at its end. The apparatus looked like a miniature gallows, and it reminded Caris that Elfric had tried to get her hanged for witchcraft ten years ago. She was surprised to find that she felt no hatred for him. He was too mean-spirited and

small-minded for that. When she looked at him, she felt nothing but contempt.

She waited for him to finish, then said abruptly: “Did you know that Godwyn and all the monks have run away?”

She intended to surprise him, and she knew by his look of astonishment that he had no foreknowledge. “Why would they…? When…? Oh, last night?”

“You didn’t see them.”

“I heard something.”

“I saw them,” said a pavior. He leaned on his spade to talk. “I was coming out of the Holly Bush. It was dark, but they had torches. The prior was riding, and the rest walking, but they had a sight of baggage: wine casks and wheels of cheese and I don’t know what.”

Caris already knew that Godwyn had emptied the monks’ food stores. He had not tried to take any of the nuns’ supplies, which were kept separately. “What time was that?”

“Not late—nine or ten o’clock.”

“Did you speak to them?”

“Just to say good night.”

“Any clue as to where they might have been headed?”

The pavior shook his head. “They went over the bridge, but I didn’t see which road they took at Gallows Cross.”

Caris turned to Elfric. “Think back over the past few days. Did Godwyn say anything to you that, with hindsight, might relate to this? Mention any place names—Monmouth, York, Antwerp, Bremen?”

“No. I had no clue.” Elfric looked grumpy about not having been forewarned, which made Caris think he was telling the truth.

If Elfric was surprised, it was unlikely that anyone else had known what Godwyn planned. Godwyn was fleeing from the plague, and clearly he did not want anyone to follow him, bringing the disease with them. *Leave early, go far, and stay long,* Merthin had said. Godwyn could be anywhere.

“If you hear from him, or any of the monks, please tell me,” Caris said.

Elfric said nothing.

Caris raised her voice to make sure the workmen heard. “Godwyn has stolen all the precious ornaments,” she said. There was a rumble of indignation. The men felt proprietorial about the cathedral ornaments—indeed, the wealthier craftsmen had probably helped pay for some of them. “The bishop wants them back. Anyone who helps Godwyn, even just by concealing his whereabouts, is guilty of sacrilege.”

Elfric looked bewildered. He had based his life on ingratiating himself with Godwyn. Now his patron had gone. He said: “There may be some perfectly innocent explanation…”

“If there is, why did Godwyn tell no one? Or even leave behind a letter?”

Elfric could not think of anything to say.

Caris realized she was going to have to speak to all the leading merchants, and the sooner the better. “I’d like you to call a meeting,” she said to Elfric. Then she thought of a more persuasive way of putting it. “The bishop wants the parish guild to meet today, after dinner. Please inform the members.”

“Very well,” said Elfric.

They would all be there, Caris knew, agog with curiosity.

She left St. Peter’s and headed back toward the priory. As she passed the White Horse Tavern, she saw something that made her pause. A young girl was talking to an older man, and there was something about the interaction that raised Caris’s hackles. She always felt the vulnerability of girls very sharply—perhaps because she remembered herself as an adolescent, perhaps because of the daughter she had never had. She drew back into a doorway and studied them.

The man was poorly dressed except for a costly fur hat. Caris did not know him, but she guessed he was a laborer and had inherited the hat. So many people had died that there was a glut of finery, and you saw odd sights like this all the time. The girl was about fourteen years old, and pretty, with an adolescent figure. She was trying to be coquettish, Caris saw with disapproval; though she was not very convincing. The man took money from his purse, and they seemed to be arguing. Then the man fondled the girl’s small breast.

Caris had seen enough. She marched up to the pair. The man took one look at her nun’s habit and walked quickly away. The girl looked both guilty and resentful. Caris said: “What are you doing—trying to sell your body?”

“No, Mother.”

“Tell the truth! Why did you let him feel your breast?”

“I don’t know what to do! I haven’t got anything to eat, and now you’ve chased him away.” She burst into tears.

Caris could believe the girl was hungry. She looked thin and pale. “Come with me,” Caris said. “I’ll give you something to eat.”

She took the girl’s arm and steered her toward the priory. “What’s your name?” she asked.

“Ismay.”

“How old are you?”

“Thirteen.”

They reached the priory and Caris took Ismay to the kitchen, where the nuns’ dinner was being prepared under the supervision of a novice called Oonagh. The kitchener, Josephine, had fallen to the plague. “Give this child some bread and butter,” Caris said to Oonagh.

She sat and watched the girl eat. Ismay obviously had not had food for days. She ate half of a four-pound loaf before slowing down.

Caris poured her a cup of cider. “Why were you starving?” she asked.

“All my family died of the plague.”

“What was your father?”

“A tailor, and I can sew very neatly, but no one is buying clothes—they can get anything they want from the homes of dead people.”

“So that’s why you were trying to prostitute yourself.”

She looked down. “I’m sorry, Mother Prioress. I was so hungry.”

“Was that the first time that you tried?”

She shook her head and would not look at Caris.

Tears of rage welled up in Caris’s eyes. What kind of man would have sexual congress with a starving thirteen-year-old? What kind of God would drive a girl to such desperation? “Would you like to live here, with the nuns, and work in the kitchen?” she said. “You would have plenty to eat.”

Ismay looked up with eagerness. “Oh, yes, Mother, I’d like that.”

“Then you shall. You can begin by helping to prepare the nuns’ dinner. Oonagh, here’s a new kitchen hand.”

“Thank you, Mother Caris, I need all the help I can get.”

Caris left the kitchen and went thoughtfully into the cathedral for the service of Sext. The plague was not just a physical sickness, she was beginning to realize. Ismay had escaped the disease, but her soul had been in peril.

Bishop Henri took the service, leaving Caris free to think. At the parish guild meeting she needed to talk about more than just the flight of the monks, she decided. It was time to get the town organized to deal with the effects of the plague. But how?

She mulled over the problems through dinner. For all sorts of reasons, this was a good time to make big decisions. With the bishop here to back up her authority, she might be able to push through measures that could otherwise meet with opposition.

This was also a good moment to get what she wanted from the bishop. That was a fertile thought…

After dinner she went to see the bishop in the prior’s house, where he was staying. He was at table with Archdeacon Lloyd. They had been fed by the nuns’ kitchen and were drinking wine while a priory servant cleared the table. “I hope you enjoyed your dinner, my lord bishop,” she said formally.

He was a little less peevish than usual. “It was fine, thank you, Mother Caris—a very tasty pike. Any news of the runaway prior?”

“He seems to have been careful to leave no clue as to his destination.”

“Disappointing.”

“As I walked through the town, making inquiries, I saw several incidents that disturbed me: a thirteen-year-old girl prostituting herself; two normally law-abiding citizens fighting over a dead man’s property; a man dead drunk at

midday.”

“These are the effects of the plague. It’s the same everywhere.”

“I believe we must act to counter those effects.”

He raised his eyebrows. It seemed he had not thought of taking such action. “How?”

“The prior is overlord of Kingsbridge. He is the one to take the initiative.”

“But he has vanished.”

“As bishop, you are technically our abbot. I believe you must stay here in Kingsbridge permanently, and take charge of the town.”

This was in fact the last thing she wanted. Fortunately, there was little chance of the bishop agreeing: he had far too much to do elsewhere. She was just trying to back him into a corner.

He hesitated, and for a moment she worried that she might have misjudged him, and he might accept her suggestion. Then he said: “Out of the question. Every town in the diocese has the same problems. Shiring is worse. I have to try to hold together the fabric of Christianity here while my priests are dying. I have no time to worry about drunks and prostitutes.”

“Well, somebody must act as prior of Kingsbridge. The town needs a moral leader.”

Archdeacon Lloyd put in: “My lord bishop, there is also the question of who is to receive monies owed to the priory, maintain the cathedral and other buildings, manage the lands and the serfs…”

Henri said: “Well, you will have to do all that, Mother Caris.”

She pretended to consider the suggestion as if she had not already thought of it. “I could handle all the less important tasks—managing the monks’ money and their lands—but I could not do what you can do, my lord bishop. I could not perform the holy sacraments.”

“We’ve already discussed that,” he said impatiently. “I’m creating new priests as fast as I can. But you can do everything else.”

“It almost seems as if you’re asking me to be acting prior of Kingsbridge.”

“That’s exactly what I want.”

Caris was careful not to show her elation. It seemed too good to be true. She was prior for all purposes except those she did not care about. Were there any hidden snags she had not thought of?

Archdeacon Lloyd said: “You’d better let me write her a letter to that effect, in case she needs to enforce her authority.”

Caris said: “If you want the town to abide by your wishes, you may need to impress upon them that this is your personal decision. A meeting of the parish guild is about to begin. If you’re willing, Bishop, I’d like you to attend it and make an announcement.”

“All right, let us go.”

They left Godwyn's palace and walked up the main street to the guildhall. The members were all waiting to hear what had happened to the monks. Caris began by telling them what she knew. Several people had seen or heard the exodus yesterday after dark, although no one had realized or even suspected that every single one of the monks was leaving.

She asked them to be alert for talk among travelers about a large group of monks on the road with a lot of baggage.

"But we have to accept the likelihood that the monks will not return soon. And in connection with that, the lord bishop has an announcement." She wanted the words to come from him, not her.

Henri cleared his throat and said: "I have confirmed the election of Caris as prioress, and I have appointed her acting prior. You will all please treat her as my representative and your overlord in all matters, excepting only those reserved to ordained priests."

Caris watched the faces. Elfric was furious. Merthin smiled faintly, guessing that she had maneuvered herself into this position, pleased for her and for the town, the rueful twist to his mouth showing that he knew this would keep her out of his arms. Everyone else seemed glad. They knew and trusted her, and she had won even more loyalty by staying while Godwyn fled.

She would make the most of it. "Three matters I want to take care of urgently on my first day as acting prior," she said. "First, drunkenness. Today I saw Duncan Dyer unconscious in the street before dinnertime. I believe this contributes to an atmosphere of debauchery in the town, which is the last thing we need during this dreadful crisis."

There were loud sounds of approval. The parish guild was dominated by the older and more conservative of the town merchants. If they ever got drunk in the morning, they did it at home where no one could see.

Caris went on: "I want to give John Constable an extra deputy and instruct him to arrest anyone found drunk in daylight. He can put them in the jail until they sober up."

Even Elfric was nodding.

"Second is the question of what happens to the property of people who die without heirs. This morning I found Joseph Blacksmith and Toby Peterson fighting in the street over three chickens belonging to Jack Marrow."

There was laughter at the idea of grown men fighting over such trifles.

Caris had thought out her solution to that problem. "In principle, such property reverts to the lord of the manor, which for Kingsbridge residents means the priory. However, I don't want the monastery buildings filled up with old clothes, so I propose to waive the rule for anyone whose possessions are worth less than two pounds. Instead, the two nearest neighbors should lock up the house, to make sure nothing is taken; then the property should be

inventoried by the parish priest, who will also hear the claims of any creditors. Where there is no priest, they can come to me. When any debts have been paid, the deceased's personal possessions—clothing, furniture, food and drink—will be divided up among the neighbors, and any cash given to the parish church."

There was widespread approval for this, too, most people nodding and murmuring agreement.

"Finally, I found a thirteen-year-old orphan girl trying to sell her body outside the White Horse. Her name is Ismay, and she did it because she had nothing to eat." Caris looked around the room with a challenging stare. "Can anyone tell me how such a thing could possibly happen in a Christian town? All her family are dead—but did they have no friends or neighbors? Who allows a child to starve?"

Edward Butcher said in a low voice: "Ismay Taylor is a rather badly behaved child."

Caris was not accepting excuses. "She's thirteen!"

"I'm just saying that she might have been offered help and spurned it."

"Since when did we allow children to make such decisions for themselves? If a child is orphaned, it is the duty of every one of us to take care of her. What does your religion mean, if not that?"

They all looked shamefaced.

"In future, whenever a child is orphaned, I want the two nearest neighbors to bring the child to me. Those who cannot be placed with a friendly family will move into the priory. The girls can live with the nuns, and we will turn the monks' dormitory into a bedroom for boys. They can all have lessons in the morning and do suitable work in the afternoon."

There was general approval for that, too.

Elfric spoke up. "Have you finished, Mother Caris?"

"I think so, unless anyone wants to discuss the details of what I have suggested."

No one spoke up, and the members began to move in their seats as if the meeting was over.

Then Elfric said: "Some of the men here may remember that they elected *me* as alderman of the guild."

His voice was full of resentment. Everyone fidgeted impatiently.

"We have now seen the prior of Kingsbridge accused of theft and condemned without trial," he went on.

That went down badly. There was a rumble of dissent. No one thought Godwyn innocent.

Elfric ignored the mood of the room. "And we have sat here like slaves and let a woman dictate the laws of the city to us. By whose authority are drunks to be imprisoned? Hers. Who is the ultimate judge of inheritance? She

is. Who will dispose of the city's orphans? She will. What have you come to? Are you not men?"

Betty Baxter said: "No."

The men laughed.

Caris decided not to intervene. It was unnecessary. She glanced at the bishop, wondering if he would assert himself against Elfric, and saw that he was sitting back, mouth clamped shut: plainly he, too, had realized that Elfric was fighting a losing battle.

Elfric raised his voice. "I say we reject a female prior, even acting prior, and we deny the right of the prioress to come to the parish guild and issue commandments!"

Several muttered mutinously. Two or three stood up, as if about to walk out in disgust. Someone called out: "Forget it, Elfric."

He persisted. "And this is a woman who was convicted of witchcraft and sentenced to death!"

All the men were standing, now. One walked out of the door.

"Come back!" Elfric shouted. "I haven't closed the meeting!"

No one took any notice.

Caris joined the group at the door. She made way for the bishop and the archdeacon. She was the last to leave. She turned back at the exit and looked at Elfric. He sat alone at the head of the room.

She went out.

64

It was twelve years since Godwyn and Philemon had visited the cell of St.-John-in-the-Forest. Godwyn remembered being impressed by the neatness of the fields, the trimmed hedges, the cleared ditches, and the apple trees in straight lines in the orchard. It was the same today. Evidently Saul Whitehead had not changed, either.

Godwyn and his caravan crossed a checkerboard of frozen fields toward the clustered buildings of the monastery. As they came closer, Godwyn saw that there had been some developments. Twelve years ago the little stone church with its cloister and dormitory had been surrounded by a scatter of small wooden structures: kitchen, stables, dairy, bakery. Now the flimsy timber outbuildings had gone, and the stone-built complex attached to the church had grown correspondingly. "The compound is more secure than it used to be," Godwyn remarked.

"Because of the increase in outlawry by soldiers coming home from the French wars, I'd guess," Philemon said.

Godwyn frowned. “I don’t recall being asked for my permission for the building program.”

“You were not.”

“Hmm.” Unfortunately, he could hardly complain. Someone might ask how it was possible for Saul to have carried out such a program without Godwyn’s knowledge, unless Godwyn had neglected his duty of supervision.

Besides, it suited his purpose now for the place to be easily closed to intruders.

The two-day journey had somewhat calmed him. The death of his mother had thrown him into a frenzy of fear. Every hour he remained in Kingsbridge, he had felt he was sure to die. He had got just enough grip on his emotions to address the meeting in the chapter house and organize the exodus. Despite his eloquence, a few of the monks had had misgivings about fleeing. Fortunately, they were all sworn to obedience, and the habit of doing as they were told had prevailed. Nevertheless, he had not begun to feel safe until his group had crossed the double bridge, torches blazing, and headed off into the night.

He still felt close to the edge. Every now and again he would be mulling something over and would decide to ask Petranilla what she thought, then he would realize he could not ask her advice ever again, and panic would rise like bile in his throat.

He was fleeing from the plague—but he should have done it three months ago, when Mark Webber died. Was he too late? He fought down terror. He would not feel safe until he was locked away from the world.

He wrenched his thoughts back to the present. There was no one in the fields at this time of year, but in a yard of beaten earth in front of the monastery he saw a handful of monks working: one shoeing a horse, another mending a plow, and a small group turning the lever of a cider press.

They all stopped what they were doing and stared, astonished, at the crowd of visitors approaching them: twenty monks, half a dozen novices, four carts, and ten packhorses. Godwyn had left nobody behind but the priory servants.

One of those at the cider press detached himself from the group and came forward. Godwyn recognized him as Saul Whitehead. They had met on Saul’s annual visits to Kingsbridge, but now for the first time Godwyn noticed touches of gray in Saul’s distinctive ash blond hair.

Twenty years ago they had been students together at Oxford. Saul had been the star pupil, quick to learn and agile in argument. He had also been the most devoutly religious of them all. He might have become prior of Kingsbridge if he had been less spiritual, and had thought strategically about his career instead of leaving such matters to God. As it was, when Prior Anthony had died and the election was held, Godwyn had easily outmaneuvered Saul.

All the same, Saul was not weak. He had a streak of stubborn righteousness that Godwyn feared. Would he go along obediently with Godwyn's plan today, or would he make trouble? Once again Godwyn fought down panic and struggled to remain cool.

He studied Saul's face carefully. The prior of St. John was surprised to see him, and clearly displeased. His expression was carefully composed into a look of polite welcome, but he was not smiling.

During the election campaign, Godwyn had made everyone believe that he himself did not want the job, but he had eliminated every other reasonable candidate, including Saul. Did Saul suspect how he had been hoodwinked?

"Good day to you, Father Prior," Saul said as he approached. "This is an unexpected blessing."

So he was not going to be openly hostile. No doubt he would think that such behavior conflicted with his vow of obedience. Godwyn was relieved. He said: "God bless you, my son. It is too long since I have visited my children at St. John."

Saul looked at the monks, the horses, and the carts loaded with supplies. "This appears to be more than a simple visit." He did not offer to help Godwyn down from his horse. It was as if he wanted an explanation before he would invite them in—which was ridiculous: he had no right to turn away his superior.

All the same, Godwyn found himself explaining. "Have you heard about the plague?"

"Rumors," Saul said. "There are few visitors to bring us news."

That was good. The lack of visitors was what drew Godwyn here. "The disease has killed hundreds in Kingsbridge. I feared it might wipe out the priory. That's why I've brought the monks here. It may be the only way to ensure our survival."

"You are welcome here, of course, whatever the reason for your visit."

"It goes without saying," Godwyn said stiffly. He felt angry that he had been nudged into justifying himself.

Saul looked thoughtful. "I'm not sure where everyone's going to sleep…"

"I shall decide that," Godwyn said, reasserting his authority. "You can show me around while your kitchen is preparing our supper." He got down from his horse unaided and walked into the monastery.

Saul was obliged to follow.

The whole place had a bare, scrubbed look that expressed how serious Saul was about the monkish vow of poverty. But today Godwyn was more interested in how readily the place could be closed to outsiders. Fortunately, Saul's belief in order and control had led him to design buildings with few entrances. There were only three ways into the priory: through the kitchen, the stable, or the church. Each entrance had a stout door that could be firmly

barred.

The dormitory was small, normally accommodating nine or ten monks, and there was no separate bedroom for the prior. The only way to fit twenty extra monks in was the let them sleep in the church.

Godwyn thought of taking over the dormitory for himself, but there was nowhere in the room to hide the cathedral treasures, and he wanted to keep them close. Fortunately, the little church had a small side chapel that could be closed off, and Godwyn took that for his own room. The rest of the Kingsbridge monks spread straw on the stamped earth floor of the nave and made the best of it.

The food and wine went to the kitchen and the cellar, but Philemon brought the ornaments into Godwyn's chapel-bedroom. Philemon had been chatting to the St. John monks. "Saul has his own way of running things," he reported. "He demands rigid obedience to God and the Rule of St. Benedict, but they say he doesn't set himself up on a pedestal. He sleeps in the dorm, eats the same food as the others, and in general takes no privileges. Needless to say, they like him for that. But there's one monk who is constantly being punished—Brother Jonquil."

"I remember him." Jonquil had always been in trouble while a novice at Kingsbridge—for lateness, slovenliness, laziness, and greed. He was without self-control, and had probably been drawn to the monastic life as a way of getting someone else to enforce the restraint he could not impose on himself. "I doubt that he will be much help to us."

"He will break ranks, given half a chance," Philemon said. "But he doesn't carry any authority. No one will follow him."

"And they have no complaints about Saul? Doesn't he sleep late, or dodge unpleasant chores, or take the best wine for himself?"

"Apparently not."

"Hmm." Saul was as upright as ever. Godwyn was disappointed, but not very surprised.

During Evensong, Godwyn noted how solemn and disciplined the St. John men were. Over the years, he had always sent problem monks here: the mutinous, the mentally ill, those inclined to question the church's teachings and take an interest in heretical ideas. Saul had never complained, never sent anyone back. It seemed he was able to turn such people into model monks.

After the service, Godwyn sent most of the Kingsbridge men to the refectory for supper, keeping only Philemon and two strong young monks behind. When they had the church to themselves, he told Philemon to guard the door that gave entrance from the cloisters, then ordered the youngsters to move the carved wooden altar and dig a hole beneath where it normally stood.

When the hole was deep enough, Godwyn brought the cathedral ornaments from his chapel, ready to be buried beneath the altar. But before he

could complete the job Saul came to the door.

Godwyn heard Philemon say: “The lord prior wishes to be alone.”

Next came Saul’s voice. “Then he may tell me so himself.”

“He has asked me to say so.”

Saul’s voice rose. “I will not be shut out of my own church—least of all by you!”

“Will you offer violence to me, the subprior of Kingsbridge?”

“I will pick you up and throw you in the fountain, if you continue to stand in my way.”

Godwyn intervened. He would have preferred to keep Saul in ignorance, but it was not to be. “Let him in, Philemon,” he called.

Philemon stepped aside and Saul marched in. He saw the baggage and, without asking permission, opened the neck of a sack and looked inside. “My soul!” he exclaimed, drawing out a silver-gilt altar cruet. “What’s all this?”

Godwyn was tempted to tell him not to interrogate his superiors. Saul might have accepted such a reproof: he believed in humility, at least in principle. But Godwyn did not want to let suspicion ferment in Saul’s mind, so he said: “I’ve brought the cathedral treasures with me.”

Saul made a face of distaste. “I realize that such gewgaws are thought appropriate in a great cathedral, but they will seem out of place at a humble cell in the forest.”

“You won’t have to look at them. I’m going to hide them. There’s no harm in your knowing where, though I intended to spare you the burden of that knowledge.”

Saul looked suspicious. “Why bring them at all?”

“For safekeeping.”

Saul was not so easily reassured. “I’m surprised the bishop was willing to let them be taken away.”

The bishop had not been asked, of course, but Godwyn did not say that. “At the moment, things are so bad in Kingsbridge that we’re not sure the ornaments are safe even at the priory.”

“Safer than here, though, surely? We are surrounded by outlaws, you know. Thank God you didn’t meet them on the road.”

“God is watching over us.”

“And over his jewelry, I hope.”

Saul’s attitude amounted almost to insubordination, but Godwyn did not reprimand him, fearing that an overreaction would suggest guilt. However, he noted that Saul’s humility had its limits. Perhaps after all Saul did know that he had been hoodwinked twelve years ago.

Now Godwyn said: “Please ask all the monks to stay in the refectory after supper. I will address them as soon as I have finished here.”

Saul accepted this dismissal and went out. Godwyn buried the ornaments,

the priory charters, the relics of the saint, and almost all the money. The monks replaced the soil in the hole, tamped it down, and put the altar back in its place. There was some loose earth left over, which they took outside and scattered.

Then they went to the refectory. The little room was crowded now, with the addition of the Kingsbridge men. A monk stood at the lectern, reading a passage from Mark's gospel, but he fell silent when Godwyn walked in.

Godwyn motioned the reader to a seat and took his place. "This is a holy retreat," he began. "God has sent this terrible plague to punish us for our sins. We have come here to purge those sins far away from the corrupting influence of the city."

Godwyn had not intended to open a discussion, but Saul sang out: "What sins in particular, Father Godwyn?"

Godwyn improvised. "Men have challenged the authority of God's holy church; women have become lascivious; monks have failed to separate themselves completely from female society; nuns have turned to heresy and witchcraft."

"And how long will it take to purge these sins?"

"We will know we have triumphed when the plague dies away."

Another St. John monk spoke up, and Godwyn recognized Jonquil, a large, uncoordinated man with a wild look in his eyes. "How will you purge yourself?"

Godwyn was surprised that the monks here felt so free to question their superiors. "By prayer, meditation, and fasting."

"The fasting is a good idea," said Jonquil. "We haven't got much food to spare."

There was a little laughter at that.

Godwyn was worried that he might lose control of his audience. He banged the lectern for quiet. "From now on, anyone who comes here from the outside world is a danger to us," he said. "I want all doors to the precinct barred from the inside day and night. No monk is to go outside without my personal permission, which will be granted only in emergency. All callers are to be turned away. We are going to lock ourselves in until this terrible plague is over."

Jonquil said: "But what if—"

Godwyn interrupted him. "I haven't asked for comments, Brother." He glared around the room, staring them all into silence. "You are monks, and it is your duty to obey," he said. "And now, let us pray."

The crisis came the very next day.

Godwyn sensed that his orders had been accepted by Saul and the other

monks in a provisional way. Everyone was taken by surprise, and on the spur of the moment they could think of no great objections; and so, in default of a strong reason for rebellion, they instinctively obeyed their superior. But he knew the time would come when they would have to make a real decision. However, he did not expect it so soon.

They were singing the office of Prime. It was freezing cold in the little church. Godwyn was stiff and aching after an uncomfortable night. He missed his palace with its fireplaces and soft beds. The gray light of a winter dawn was beginning to appear in the windows when there was a banging on the heavy west door of the church.

Godwyn tensed. He wished he had been given an extra day or two to consolidate his position.

He signaled that the monks should ignore the knocking and continue with the service. The knocking was then augmented by shouting. Saul stood up to go to the door, but Godwyn made sit-down signs with his hands and, after a hesitation, Saul obeyed. Godwyn was determined to sit tight. If the monks did nothing, the intruders must go away.

However, Godwyn began to realize that persuading people to do nothing was extraordinarily difficult.

The monks were too distracted to concentrate on the psalm. They were all whispering to one another and looking back over their shoulders toward the west end. The singing became ragged and uncoordinated and eventually petered out until only Godwyn's voice was left.

He felt irate. If they had followed his lead, they could have ignored the disturbance. Angered by their weakness, he at last left his place and walked down the short nave to the door, which was barred. "What is it?" he shouted.

"Let us in!" came the muffled reply.

"You can't come in," Godwyn shouted back. "Go away."

Saul appeared at his side. "Are you turning them away from the church?" he said in a horrified tone.

"I told you," Godwyn replied. "No visitors."

The banging resumed. "Let us in!"

Saul shouted: "Who are you?"

There was a pause, then the voice said: "We are men of the forest."

Philemon spoke up. "Outlaws," he said.

Saul said indignantly: "Sinners like us, and God's children, too."

"That's no reason to let them murder us."

"Perhaps we should find out whether that's what they intend." Saul went to the window on the right of the door. The church was a low building, and the window ledges were just below eye level. None of them was glazed: they were closed against the cold by shutters of translucent linen. Saul opened the shutter and stood on tiptoe to look out. "Why have you come here?" he called.

Godwyn heard the reply. “One of our number is sick.”

Godwyn said to Saul: “I will speak to them.”

Saul stared at him.

“Come away from the window,” Godwyn said.

Reluctantly, Saul obeyed.

Godwyn shouted: “We cannot let you in. Go away.”

Saul looked at him with incredulity. “Are you going to turn away a sick man?” he said. “We are monks and physicians!”

“If the man has the plague, there is nothing we can do for him. By admitting him, we will kill ourselves.”

“That is in God’s hands, surely.”

“God does not permit us to commit suicide.”

“You don’t know what is wrong with the man. He may have a broken arm.”

Godwyn opened the corresponding window on the left of the door and looked out. He saw a group of six rough-looking characters standing around a stretcher that they had put down in front of the church door. Their clothes were costly but dirty, as if they were sleeping rough in their Sunday best. This was typical of outlaws, who stole fine clothes from travelers and made them shabby very quickly. The men were heavily armed, some with good-quality swords, daggers, and longbows, which suggested they might be demobilized soldiers.

On the stretcher lay a man who was perspiring heavily—even though it was a frosty January morning—and bleeding from his nose. Suddenly, without wishing it, Godwyn saw in his imagination that scene in the hospital when his mother lay dying, and the trickle of blood on her upper lip kept returning, no matter how often the nun wiped it away. The thought that he might die like that made him so distracted that he wanted to throw himself from the roof of Kingsbridge Cathedral. How much better it would be to die in one brief instant of overwhelming pain than over three, four, or five days of mad delirium and agonizing thirst. “That man has the plague!” Godwyn exclaimed, and he heard in his own voice a note of hysteria.

One of the outlaws stepped forward. “I know you,” he said. “You’re the prior of Kingsbridge.”

Godwyn tried to pull himself together. He looked with fear and anger at the man who was evidently the leader. He carried himself with the arrogant assurance of a nobleman, and he had once been handsome, though his looks had been marred by years of living rough. Godwyn said: “And who are you, that comes banging on a church door while the monks are singing psalms to God?”

“Some call me Tam Hiding,” the outlaw replied.

There was a gasp from the monks: Tam Hiding was a legend. Brother

Jonquil shouted: “They will kill us all!”

Saul rounded on Jonquil. “Be silent,” he said. “All of us will die when God wills it, and not before.”

“Yes, Father.”

Saul returned to the window and said: “You stole our chickens last year.”

“I’m sorry, Father,” said Tam. “We were starving.”

“Yet now you come to me for help?”

“Because you preach that God forgives.”

Godwyn said to Saul: “Let *me* deal with this!”

Saul’s internal struggle was evident on his face, which looked alternately ashamed and mutinous; but at last he bowed his head.

Godwyn said to Tam: “God forgives those who truly repent.”

“Well, this man’s name is Win Forester, and he truly repents all his many sins. He would like to come into the church to pray for healing or, failing that, to die in a holy place.”

One of the other outlaws sneezed.

Saul came away from his window and stood facing Godwyn, hands on hips. “We cannot turn him away!”

Godwyn tried to make himself calm. “You heard that sneeze—don’t you understand what it means?” He turned to the rest of the monks, to make sure they heard what he said next. “They’ve *all* got the plague!”

They gave a collective murmur of fear. Godwyn wanted them frightened. That way they would support him if Saul decided to defy him.

Saul said: “We must help them, even if they have got the plague. Our lives are not our own, to be protected like gold hidden under the earth. We have given ourselves to God, to use as he wishes, and he will end our lives when it suits his holy purpose.”

“To let those outlaws in would be suicide. They’ll kill us all!”

“We are men of God. For us, death is the happy reunion with Christ. What do we have to fear, Father Prior?”

Godwyn realized that he was sounding frightened, whereas Saul was speaking reasonably. He forced himself to appear calm and philosophical. “It is a sin to seek our own death.”

“But if death comes to us in the course of our holy duty, we embrace it gladly.”

Godwyn realized he could debate all day with Saul and get nowhere. This was not the way to impose his authority. He closed his shutter. “Shut your window, Brother Saul, and come here to me,” he said. He looked at Saul, waiting.

After a hesitation, Saul did as he was told.

Godwyn said: “What are your three vows, Brother?”

There was a pause. Saul knew what was happening here. Godwyn was

refusing to engage with him as an equal. At first, Saul looked as if he might refuse to answer, but his training took over, and he said: “Poverty, chastity, obedience.”

“And who must you obey?”

“God, and the Rule of St. Benedict, and my prior.”

“And your prior stands before you now. Do you acknowledge me?”

“Yes.”

“You may say: ‘Yes, Father Prior.’”

“Yes, Father Prior.”

“Now I will tell you what you must do, and you will obey.” Godwyn looked around. “All of you—return to your places.”

There was a moment of frozen silence. No one moved and no one spoke. It could go either way, Godwyn thought: compliance or mutiny, order or anarchy, victory or defeat. He held his breath.

At last, Saul moved. He bowed his head and turned away. He walked up the short aisle and resumed his position in front of the altar.

All the others did the same.

There were a few more shouts from outside, but they sounded like parting shots. Perhaps the outlaws had realized they could not force a physician to treat their sick comrade.

Godwyn returned to the altar and turned to face the monks. “We will finish the interrupted psalm,” he said, and he began singing.

Glory be to the Father

And to the Son

And to the Holy Ghost

The singing was still ragged. The monks were far too excited to adopt the proper attitude. All the same, they were back in their places and following their routine. Godwyn had prevailed.

As it was in the beginning

Is now

And ever shall be

World without end

Amen.

"Amen," Godwyn repeated.

One of the monks sneezed.

65

Soon after Godwyn fled, Elfric died of the plague.

Caris was sorry for Alice, his widow; but aside from that she could hardly help rejoicing that he was gone. He had bullied the weak and toadied to the strong, and the lies he had told at her trial almost got her hanged. The world was a better place without him. Even his building business would be better off run by his son-in-law, Harold Mason.

The parish guild elected Merthin as alderman in Elfric's place. Merthin said it was like being made captain of a sinking ship.

As the deaths went on and on, and people buried their relatives. neighbors, friends, customers, and employees, the constant horror seemed to brutalize many of them, until no violence or cruelty seemed shocking. People who thought they were about to die lost all restraint and followed their impulses regardless of the consequences.

Together, Merthin and Caris struggled to preserve something like normal life in Kingsbridge. The orphanage was the most successful part of Caris's program. The children were grateful for the security of the nunnery, after the ordeal of losing their parents to the plague. Taking care of them, and teaching them to read and sing hymns, brought out long-suppressed maternal instincts in some of the nuns. There was plenty of food, with fewer people competing for the winter stores. And Kingsbridge Priory was full of the sound of children.

In the town things were more difficult. There continued to be violent quarrels over the property of the dead. People just walked into empty houses and picked up whatever took their fancy. Children who had inherited money, or a warehouse full of cloth or corn, were sometimes adopted by unscrupulous neighbors greedy to get their hands on the legacy. The prospect of something for nothing brought out the worst in people, Caris thought despairingly.

Caris and Merthin were only partly successful against the decline in public behavior. Caris was disappointed with the results of John Constable's crackdown on drunkenness. The large numbers of new widows and widowers seemed frantic to find partners, and it was not unusual to see middle-aged people in a passionate embrace in a tavern or even a doorway. Caris had no great objection to this sort of thing in itself, but she found that the

combination of drunkenness and public licentiousness often led to fighting. However, Merthin and the parish guild were unable to stop it.

Just at the moment when the townspeople needed their spines stiffened, the flight of the monks had the opposite effect. It demoralized everyone. God's representatives had left: the Almighty had abandoned the town. Some said that the relics of the saint had always brought good fortune, and now that the bones had gone their luck had run out. The lack of precious crucifixes and candlesticks at the Sunday services was a weekly reminder that Kingsbridge was considered doomed. So why not get drunk and fornicate in the street?

Out of a population of about seven thousand, Kingsbridge had lost at least a thousand by mid-January. Other towns were similar. Despite the masks Caris had invented, the death toll was higher among the nuns, no doubt because they were continually in contact with plague victims. There had been thirty-five nuns, and now there were twenty. But they heard of places where almost every monk or nun had died, leaving a handful, or sometimes just one, to carry on the work; so they counted themselves fortunate. Meanwhile, Caris had shortened the period of novitiate and intensified the training so that she would have more help in the hospital.

Merthin hired the barman from the Holly Bush and put him in charge of the Bell. He also took on a sensible seventeen-year-old girl called Martina to nursemaid Lolla.

Then the plague seemed to die down. Having buried a hundred people a week in the run up to Christmas, Caris found that the number dropped to fifty in January, then twenty in February. She allowed herself to hope that the nightmare might be coming to an end.

One of the unlucky people to fall ill during this period was a dark-haired man in his thirties who might once have been good-looking. He was a visitor to the town. "I thought I had a cold yesterday," he said when he came through the door. "But now I've got this nosebleed that won't stop." He was holding a bloody rag to his nostrils.

"I'll find you somewhere to lie down," she said through her linen mask.

"It's the plague, isn't it?" he said, and she was surprised to hear calm resignation in his voice in place of the usual panic. "Can you do anything to cure it?"

"We can make you comfortable, and we can pray for you."

"That won't do any good. Even you don't believe in it, I can tell."

She was shocked by how easily he had read her heart. "You don't know what you're saying," she protested weakly. "I'm a nun, I must believe it."

"You can tell me the truth. How soon will I die?"

She looked hard at him. He was smiling at her, a charming smile that she guessed had melted a few female hearts. "Why aren't you frightened?" she said. "Everyone else is."

“I don’t believe what I’m told by priests.” He looked at her shrewdly. “And I have a suspicion that you don’t either.”

She was not about to have this discussion with a stranger, no matter how charming. “Almost everyone who falls ill with the plague dies within three to five days,” she said bluntly. “A few survive, no one knows why.”

He took it well. “As I thought.”

“You can lie down here.”

He gave her the bad-boy grin again. “Will it do me any good?”

“If you don’t lie down soon, you’ll fall down.”

“All right.” He lay on the palliasse she indicated.

She gave him a blanket. “What’s your name?”

“Tam.”

She studied his face. Despite his charm, she sensed a streak of cruelty. He might seduce women, she thought, but if that failed he would rape them. His skin was weathered by outdoor living, and he had the red nose of a drinker. His clothes were costly but dirty. “I know who you are,” she said. “Aren’t you afraid you’ll be punished for your sins?”

“If I believed that, I wouldn’t have committed them. Are *you* afraid you’ll burn in Hell?”

It was a question she normally sidestepped, but she felt that this dying outlaw deserved a true answer. “I believe that what I do becomes part of me,” she said. “When I’m brave and strong, and care for children and the sick and the poor, I become a better person. And when I’m cruel, or cowardly, or tell lies, or get drunk, I turn into someone less worthy, and I can’t respect myself. That’s the divine retribution I believe in.”

He looked at her thoughtfully. “I wish I’d met you twenty years ago.”

She made a deprecatory noise. “I would have been twelve.”

He raised an eyebrow suggestively.

That was enough, she decided. He was beginning to flirt—and she was beginning to enjoy it. She turned away.

“You’re a brave woman to do this work,” he said. “It will probably kill you.”

“I know,” she said, turning to face him again. “But this is my destiny. I can’t run away from people who need me.”

“Your prior doesn’t seem to think that way.”

“He’s vanished.”

“People can’t vanish.”

“I mean, no one knows where Prior Godwyn and the monks have gone.”

“I do,” said Tam.

The weather at the end of February was sunny and mild. Caris left

Kingsbridge on a dun pony, heading for St.-John-in-the-Forest. Merthin went with her, riding a black cob. Normally, eyebrows would have been raised by a nun going on a journey accompanied only by a man, but these were strange times.

The danger from outlaws had receded. Many had fallen victim to the plague, Tam Hiding had told her himself before he died. Also, the sudden drop in population had brought about a countrywide surplus of food, wine, and clothing—all the things outlaws normally stole. Those outlaws who survived the plague could walk into ghost towns and abandoned villages and take whatever they wanted.

Caris had at first felt frustrated to learn that Godwyn was no farther than two days' journey from Kingsbridge. She had imagined him gone to a place so distant that he would never return. However, she was glad of the chance to retrieve the priory's money and valuables and, in particular, the nunnery's charters, so vital whenever there was a dispute about property or rights.

When and if she was able to confront Godwyn, she would demand the return of the priory's property, in the name of the bishop. She had a letter from Henri to back her up. If Godwyn still refused, that would prove beyond doubt that he was stealing it rather than keeping it safe. The bishop could then take legal action to get it back—or simply arrive at the cell with a force of men-at-arms.

Although disappointed that Godwyn was not permanently out of her life, Caris relished the prospect of confronting him with his cowardice and dishonesty.

As she rode away from the town she recalled that her last long journey had been to France, with Mair—a real adventure in every way. She felt bereft when she thought of Mair. Of all those who had died of the plague, she missed Mair the most: her beautiful face, her kind heart, her love.

But it was a joy to have Merthin to herself for two whole days. Following the road through the forest, side by side on their horses, they talked continuously, about anything that sprang to mind, just as they had when they were adolescents.

Merthin was as full of bright ideas as ever. Despite the plague, he was building shops and taverns on Leper Island, and he told her he planned to demolish the tavern he had inherited from Bessie Bell and rebuild it twice as big.

Caris guessed that he and Bessie had been lovers—why else would she have left her property to him? But Caris had only herself to blame. She was the one Merthin really wanted, and Bessie had been second best. Both women had known that. All the same, Caris felt jealous and angry when she thought of Merthin in bed with that plump barmaid.

They stopped at noon and rested by a stream. They ate bread, cheese, and

apples, the food that all but the wealthiest travelers carried. They gave the horses some grain: grazing was not enough for a mount that had to carry a man or woman all day. When they had eaten, they lay in the sun for a few minutes, but the ground was too cold and damp for sleep, and they soon roused themselves and moved on.

They quickly slipped back into the affectionate intimacy of their youth. Merthin had always been able to make her laugh, and she needed cheering up, with people dying every day in the hospital. She soon forgot to be angry about Bessie.

They were taking a route that had been followed by Kingsbridge monks for hundreds of years, and they stopped for the night at the usual halfway point, the Red Cow Tavern in the small town of Lordsborough. They had roast beef and strong ale for supper.

By this time, Caris was aching for him. The last ten years seemed to have vanished from memory, and she longed to take him in her arms and make love to him the way they used to. But it was not to be. The Red Cow had two bedrooms, one for men and one for women—which was no doubt why it had always been the choice of the monks. Caris and Merthin parted company on the landing, and Caris lay awake, listening to the snores of a knight's wife and the wheezing of a spice-seller, touching herself and wishing the hand between her thighs was Merthin's.

She woke up tired and dispirited, and ate her breakfast porridge mechanically. But Merthin was so happy to be with her that her mood soon lifted. By the time they rode away from Lordsborough, they were talking and laughing as merrily as yesterday.

The second day's journey was through dense woodland, and they saw no other travelers all morning. Their conversation became more personal. She learned more about his time in Florence: how he had met Silvia, and what kind of person she was. Caris wanted to ask: What was it like to make love to her? Was she different from me? How? But she held back, feeling that such questions would trespass on Silvia's privacy, even though Silvia was dead. Anyway, she could guess a lot from Merthin's tone of voice. He had been happy in bed with Silvia, she sensed, even if the relationship had not been as intensely passionate as his with Caris.

The unaccustomed hours on horseback were making her sore, so she was relieved to stop for dinner and get off the pony. When they had eaten, they sat on the ground with their backs to a broad tree trunk, to rest and let their food go down before resuming the journey.

Caris was thinking about Godwyn, and wondering what she would find at St.-John-in-the-Forest, when suddenly she realized that she and Merthin were about to make love. She could not have explained how she knew—they were not even touching—but she had no doubt. She turned to look at him and saw

that he sensed it, too. He smiled at her ruefully, and in his eyes she saw ten years of hope and regrets, pain and tears.

He took her hand and kissed her palm, then he put his lips to the soft inside of her wrist, and closed his eyes. “I can feel your pulse,” he said quietly.

“You can’t tell much from the pulse,” she breathed. “You’ll have to give me a thorough examination.”

He kissed her forehead, and her eyelids, and her nose. “I hope you won’t be embarrassed by my seeing your naked body.”

“Don’t fret—I’m not taking my clothes off in this weather.”

They both giggled.

He said: “Perhaps you would be kind enough to lift the skirt of your robe, so that I may proceed with the checkup.”

She reached down and took hold of the hem of her dress. She was wearing hose that came up to her knees. She lifted her dress slowly, revealing her ankles, her shins, her knees, and then the white skin of her thighs. She was feeling playful, but in the back of her mind she wondered if he could detect the changes wrought in her body by the last ten years. She had got thinner, yet at the same time her bottom had spread. Her skin was a little less supple and smooth than it had been. Her breasts were not as firm and upright. What would he think? She suppressed the worry and played the game. “Is that sufficient, for medical purposes?”

“Not quite.”

“But I’m afraid I’m not wearing underdrawers—such luxuries are considered inappropriate for us nuns.”

“We physicians are obliged to be very thorough, no matter how distasteful we find it.”

“Oh, dear,” she said with a smile. “What a shame. All right, then.” Watching his face she slowly lifted her skirt until it was around her waist.

He stared at her body, and she could see that he was breathing harder. “My, my,” he said. “This is a very severe case. In fact…” He looked up at her face, swallowed, and said: “I can’t joke about this anymore.”

She put her arms around him and pulled his body to her own, squeezing as hard as she could, clinging to him as if she were saving him from drowning. “Make love to me, Merthin,” she said. “Now, quickly.”

The priory of St.-John-in-the-Forest looked tranquil in the afternoon light—a sure sign that something was wrong, Caris thought. The little cell was traditionally self-sufficient in food, and was surrounded by fields, moist with rain, that needed plowing and harrowing. But no one was at work.

When they got closer, they saw that the little cemetery next to the church

had a row of fresh graves. “It seems the plague may have reached this far,” Merthin said.

Caris nodded. “So Godwyn’s cowardly escape plan failed.” She could not help feeling a glow of vengeful satisfaction.

Merthin said: “I wonder if he himself has fallen victim.”

Caris found herself hoping he had, but was too ashamed to say so.

She and Merthin rode around the silent monastery to what was obviously the stable yard. The door was open, and the horses had been let out, and were grazing a patch of meadow around a pond. But no one appeared to help the visitors unsaddle.

They walked through the empty stables into the interior. It was eerily quiet, and Caris wondered if all the monks were dead. They looked into a kitchen, which Caris observed was not as clean as it should be, and a bakery with a cold oven. Their footsteps echoed around the cool gray arcades of the cloisters. Then, approaching the entrance to the church, they met Brother Thomas.

“You found us!” he said. “Thank God.”

Caris embraced him. She knew that women’s bodies did not present a temptation to Thomas. “I’m glad you’re alive,” she said.

“I fell ill and got better,” he explained.

“Not many survive.”

“I know.”

“Tell us what happened.”

“Godwyn and Philemon planned it well,” Thomas said. “There was almost no warning. Godwyn addressed the chapter, and told the story of Abraham and Isaac to show that God sometimes asks us to do things that appear wrong. Then he told us we were leaving that night. Most of the monks were glad to get away from the plague, and those that had misgivings were instructed to remember their vow of obedience.”

Caris nodded. “I can imagine. It’s not hard to obey orders when they are so strongly in your own self-interest.”

“I’m not proud of myself.”

Caris touched the stump of his left arm. “I meant no reproof, Thomas.”

Merthin said: “All the same, I’m surprised no one leaked the destination.”

“That’s because Godwyn didn’t tell us where we were going. Most of us didn’t know even after we arrived—we had to ask the local monks what place this was.”

“But the plague caught up with you.”

“You’ve seen the graveyard. All the St. John monks are there except Prior Saul, who is buried in the church. Almost all the Kingsbridge men are dead. A few ran away after the sickness broke out here—God knows what happened to them.”

Caris recalled that Thomas had always been close to one particular monk, a sweet-natured man a few years younger than he. Hesitantly she said: “And Brother Matthias?”

“Dead,” Thomas said brusquely; then tears came to his eyes, and he looked away, embarrassed.

Caris put a hand on his shoulder. “I’m very sorry.”

“So many people have suffered bereavement,” he said.

Caris decided it would be kinder not to dwell on Matthias. “What about Godwyn and Philemon?”

“Philemon ran away. Godwyn is alive and well—he hasn’t caught it.”

“I have a message for Godwyn from the bishop.”

“I can imagine.”

“You’d better take me to him.”

“He’s in the church. He set up a bed in a side chapel. He’s convinced that’s why he hasn’t fallen ill. Come with me.”

They crossed the cloisters and entered the little church. It smelled more like a dormitory. The wall painting of the Day of Judgment at the east end seemed grimly appropriate now. The nave was strewn with straw and littered with blankets, as if a crowd of people had been sleeping here; but the only person present was Godwyn. He was lying facedown on the dirt floor in front of the altar, his arms stretched out sideways. For a moment she thought he was dead, then she realized this was simply the attitude of extreme penitence.

Thomas said: “You have visitors, Father Prior.”

Godwyn remained in position. Caris would have assumed he was putting on a show, but something about his stillness made her think he was sincerely seeking forgiveness.

Then he got slowly to his feet and turned around.

He was pale and thin, Caris saw, and he looked tired and anxious.

“You,” he said.

“You’ve been discovered, Godwyn,” she said. She was not going to call him Father. He was a miscreant and she had caught him. She felt deep satisfaction.

He said: “I suppose Tam Hiding betrayed me.”

His mind was as sharp as ever, Caris noted. “You tried to escape justice, but you failed.”

“I have nothing to fear from justice,” he said defiantly. “I came here in the hope of saving the lives of my monks. My error was to leave it too late.”

“An innocent man doesn’t sneak away under cover of night.”

“I had to keep my destination secret. It would have defeated my purpose to allow anyone to follow us here.”

“You didn’t have to steal the cathedral ornaments.”

“I didn’t steal them. I took them for safekeeping. I shall return them to

their rightful place when it's safe to do so."

"So why did you tell no one that you were taking them?"

"But I did. I wrote to Bishop Henri. Did he not receive my letter?"

Caris felt a growing sense of dismay. Surely Godwyn could not wriggle out of this? "Certainly not," she said. "No letter was received, and I don't believe one was sent."

"Perhaps the messenger died of the plague before he could deliver it."

"And what was the name of this vanishing messenger?"

"I never knew it. Philemon hired the man."

"And Philemon is not here—how convenient," she said sarcastically. "Well, you can say what you like, but Bishop Henri accuses you of stealing the treasure, and he has sent me here to demand its return. I have a letter ordering you to hand everything to me, immediately."

"That's won't be necessary. I'll take it to him myself."

"That is not what your bishop commands you to do."

"I'll be the judge of what's best."

"Your refusal is proof of theft."

"I'm sure I can persuade Bishop Henri to see things differently."

The trouble was, Caris thought despairingly, that Godwyn might well do just that. He could be very plausible, and Henri, like most bishops, would generally avoid confrontation if he could. She felt as if the victory trophy were slipping through her hands.

Godwyn felt he had turned the tables on her, and he permitted himself a small smile of satisfaction. That infuriated her, but she had no more to say. All she could do now was return and tell Bishop Henri what had happened.

She could hardly believe it. Would Godwyn really return to Kingsbridge and resume his position as prior? How could he possibly hold his head up in Kingsbridge Cathedral? After all he had done to damage the priory, the town, and the church? Even if the bishop accepted him, surely the townspeople would riot? The prospect was dire, yet stranger things had happened. Was there no justice?

She stared at him. The look of triumph on his face must be matched, she supposed, by the defeat on her own.

Then she saw something that turned the tables yet again.

On Godwyn's upper lip, just below his left nostril, there was a trickle of blood.

Next morning, Godwyn did not get out of bed.

Caris put on her linen mask and nursed him. She bathed his face in rose water and gave him diluted wine whenever he asked for a drink. Every time she touched him, she washed her hands in vinegar.

Other than Godwyn and Thomas, there were only two monks left, both Kingsbridge novices. They, too, were dying of the plague; so she brought them down from the dormitory to lie in the church, and she took care of them as well, flitting around the dim-lit nave like a shade as she went from one dying man to the next.

She asked Godwyn where the cathedral treasures were, but he refused to say.

Merthin and Thomas searched the priory. The first place they looked was under the altar. Something had been buried there, quite recently, they could tell by the looseness of the earth. However, when they made a hole—Thomas digging surprisingly well with one hand—they found nothing. Whatever had been buried there had since been removed.

They checked every echoing room in the deserted monastery, and even looked in the cold bakery oven and the dry brewery tanks, but they found no jewels, relics, or charters.

After the first night, Thomas quietly vacated the dormitory—without being asked—and left Merthin and Caris to sleep there alone. He made no comment, not even a nudge or a wink. Grateful for his discreet connivance, they huddled under a pile of blankets and made love. Afterward, Caris lay awake. An owl lived somewhere in the roof, and she heard its nocturnal hooting, and occasionally the scream of a small animal caught in its talons. She wondered if she would become pregnant. She did not want to give up her vocation—but she could not resist the temptation of lying in Merthin's arms. So she just refused to think about the future.

On the third day, as Caris, Merthin, and Thomas ate dinner in the refectory, Thomas said: "When Godwyn asks for a drink, refuse to give it to him until he's told you where he hid the treasure."

Caris considered that. It would be perfectly just. But it would also amount to torture. "I can't do that," she said. "I know he deserves it, but all the same I can't do it. If a sick man asks for a drink I must give it to him. That's more important than all the jeweled ornaments in Christendom."

"You don't owe him compassion—he never showed any to you."

"I've turned the church into a hospital, but I won't let it become a torture chamber."

Thomas looked as if he might be inclined to argue further, but Merthin dissuaded him with a shake of the head. "Think, Thomas," he said. "When did you last see this stuff?"

"The night we arrived," Thomas said. "It was in leather bags and boxes on a couple of horses. It was unloaded at the same time as everything else, and I think it was carried into the church."

"Then what happened to it?"

"I never saw it again. But after Evensong, when we all went to supper, I

noticed that Godwyn and Philemon stayed behind in the church with two other monks, Juley and John.”

Caris said: “Let me guess: Juley and John were both young and strong.”

“Yes.”

Merthin said: “So that’s probably when they buried the treasure under the altar. But when did they dig it up?”

“It had to be when nobody was in the church, and they could be sure of that only at mealtimes.”

“Were they absent from any other meals?”

“Several, probably. Godwyn and Philemon always acted as if the rules didn’t really apply to them. Their missing meals and services wasn’t unusual enough for me to remember every instance.”

Caris said: “Do you recall Juley and John being absent a second time? Godwyn and Philemon would have needed help again.”

“Not necessarily,” Merthin said. “It’s much easier to reexcavate ground that has already been loosened. Godwyn is forty-three and Philemon is only thirty-four. They could have done it without help, if they really wanted to.”

That night, Godwyn began to rave. Some of the time he seemed to be quoting from the Bible, sometimes preaching, and sometimes making excuses. Caris listened for a while, hoping for clues. “Great Babylon is fallen, and all the nations have drunk of the wrath of her fornication; and out of the throne proceeded fire, and thunder; and all the merchants of the earth shall weep. Repent, oh, repent, all ye who have committed fornication with the mother of harlots! It was all done for a higher purpose, all done for the glory of God, because the end justifies the means. Give me something to drink, for the love of God.” The apocalyptic tone of his delirium was probably suggested by the wall painting, with its graphic depiction of the tortures of Hell.

Caris held a cup to his mouth. “Where are the cathedral ornaments, Godwyn?”

“I saw seven golden candlesticks, all covered with pearls, and precious stones, and wrapped in fine linen, and purple, and scarlet, and lying in an ark made of cedarwood, and sandalwood, and silver. I saw a woman riding upon a scarlet beast, having seven heads and ten horns, and full of the names of blasphemy.” The nave rang with the echoes of his ranting.

On the following day the two novices died. That afternoon, Thomas and Merthin buried them in the graveyard to the north of the priory. It was a cold, damp day, but they sweated with the effort of digging. Thomas performed the funeral service. Caris stood at the grave with Merthin. When everything was falling apart, the rituals helped to maintain a semblance of normality. Around them were the new graves of all the other monks except Godwyn and Saul. Saul’s body lay under the little chancel of the church, an honor reserved for

the most highly regarded priors.

Afterward Caris came back into the church and stared at Saul's grave in the chancel. That part of the church was paved with flagstones. Obviously the flags had been lifted so that the grave could be dug. When they had been put back, one of the stones had been polished and carved with an inscription.

It was hard to concentrate, with Godwyn in the corner raving about beasts with seven heads.

Merthin noticed her thoughtful look and followed her gaze. He immediately guessed what she was thinking. In a horrified voice he said: "Surely Godwyn can't have hidden the treasure in Saul Whitehead's coffin?"

"It's hard to imagine monks desecrating a tomb," she said. "On the other hand, the ornaments wouldn't have had to leave the church."

Thomas said: "Saul died a week before you arrived. Philemon disappeared two days later."

"So Philemon could have helped Godwyn dig up the grave."

"Yes."

The three of them looked at one another, trying to ignore the mad mumblings of Godwyn.

"There's only one way to find out," Merthin said.

Merthin and Thomas got their wooden shovels. They lifted the memorial slab and the paving stones around it, and started digging.

Thomas had developed a one-handed technique. He pushed the shovel into the earth with his good arm, tilted it, then ran his hand all the way down the shaft to the blade and lifted it. His right arm had become very muscular as a result of this kind of adaptation.

Nevertheless, it took a long time. Many graves were shallow nowadays, but for Prior Saul they had dug down the full six feet. Night was falling outside, and Caris fetched candles. The devils in the wall painting seemed to move in the flickering light.

Both Thomas and Merthin were standing in the hole, with only their heads visible above floor level, when Merthin said: "Wait. Something's here."

Caris saw some muddy white material that looked like the oiled linen sometimes used for shrouds. "You've found the body," she said.

Thomas said: "But where's the coffin?"

"Was he buried in a box?" Coffins were only for the elite: poor people were interred in a shroud.

Thomas said: "Saul was buried in a coffin—I saw it. There's plenty of wood here in the middle of the forest. All the monks were put in coffins, right up until Brother Silas fell ill—he was the carpenter."

"Wait," said Merthin. He pushed his shovel through the earth at the feet of the shroud and lifted a shovelful. Then he tapped with the blade, and Caris heard the dull thud of wood on wood. "Here's the coffin, underneath," he

said.

Thomas said: “How did the body get out?”

Caris felt a shiver of fear.

Over in the corner, Godwyn raised his voice. “And he shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the sight of the holy angels, and the smoke of his torment will rise up forever and ever.”

Thomas said to Caris: “Can’t you shut him up?”

“I’ve got no drugs with me.”

Merthin said: “There’s nothing supernatural here. My guess is that Godwyn and Philemon took the body out—and filled the coffin with their stolen treasures.”

Thomas pulled himself together. “We’d better look in the coffin, then.”

First they had to move the shrouded corpse. Merthin and Thomas bent down, grabbed it by the shoulders and knees, and lifted it. When they had raised it to the level of their shoulders, the only way they could get it farther was to toss it out onto the floor. It landed with a thump. They both looked fearful. Even Caris, who did not believe much of what she was told about the spirit world, felt frightened by what they were doing, and found herself glancing nervously over her shoulder into the shadowed corners of the church.

Merthin cleared the earth from the top of the coffin while Thomas went to fetch an iron bar. Then they lifted the lid of the casket.

Caris held two candles over the grave so that they could see better.

Inside the coffin was another shrouded body.

Thomas said: “This is very strange!” His voice was distinctly shaky.

“Let’s just think sensibly about this,” Merthin said. He was sounding calm and collected, but Caris—who knew him extraordinarily well—could tell that his composure was taking a big effort. “Who is in the coffin?” he said. “Let’s look.”

He bent down, grabbed the shroud in two hands, and ripped it open along the stitched seam at the head. The corpse was a week dead, and there was a bad smell, but it had not deteriorated much in the cold ground under the unheated church. Even in the unsteady light from Caris’s candles, there was no doubt about the identity of the dead man: the head was fringed with distinctively ash blond hair.

Thomas said: “That’s Saul Whitehead.”

“In his rightful coffin,” said Merthin.

Caris said: “So who is the other corpse?”

Merthin closed the shroud around Saul’s blond head and replaced the coffin lid.

Caris knelt by the other corpse. She had dealt with many dead bodies, but she had never brought one up from its grave, and her hands were shaky.

Nevertheless she opened the shroud and exposed the face. To her horror, the eyes were open and seemed to be staring. She forced herself to close the cold eyelids.

It was a big young monk she did not recognize. Thomas stood on tiptoe to look out of the grave and said: “That’s Brother Jonquil. He died the day after Prior Saul.”

Caris said: “And he was buried…?”

“In the cemetery…we all thought.”

“In a coffin?”

“Yes.”

“Except that he’s here.”

“His coffin weighed enough,” Thomas said. “I helped carry it…”

Merthin said: “I see what happened. Jonquil lay here in the church, in his coffin, prior to burial. While the other monks were at dinner, Godwyn and Philemon opened the coffin and took the body out. They dug up Saul’s tomb and tumbled Jonquil in on top of Saul’s coffin. They closed the grave. Then they put the cathedral treasures in Jonquil’s coffin and closed it again.”

Thomas said: “So we have to dig up Jonquil’s grave.”

Caris glanced up at the windows of the church. They were dark. Night had fallen while they were opening the tomb of Saul. “We could leave it until morning,” she said.

Both men were silent for a long moment, then Thomas said: “Let’s get it over with.”

Caris went to the kitchen, picked two branches from the firewood pile, lit them at the fire, then returned to the church.

As the three of them went outside, they heard Godwyn cry: “And the winepress of the wrath of God was trodden outside the city, and the grapes gave forth blood, and the land was flooded to the height of the horses’ bridles.”

Caris shuddered. It was a vile image from the Revelation of St. John the Divine, and it disgusted her. She tried to put it out of her mind.

They walked quickly to the cemetery in the red light of the torches. Caris was relieved to be away from that wall painting and out of earshot of Godwyn’s mad ravings. They found Jonquil’s headstone and began to excavate.

The two men had already dug two graves for the novices and re-dug Saul’s. This was their fourth since dinnertime. Merthin looked tired and Thomas was sweating heavily. But they worked on doggedly. Slowly the hole got deeper and the pile of earth beside it rose higher. At last a shovel struck wood.

Caris passed Merthin the crowbar, then she knelt on the edge of the pit, holding both torches. Merthin prized open the coffin lid and threw it out of

the grave.

There was no corpse in the box.

Instead it was packed tightly with bags and boxes. Merthin opened a leather bag and pulled out a jeweled crucifix. “Hallelujah,” he said wearily.

Thomas opened a box to reveal a row of parchment rolls, packed tightly together like fish in a crate: the charters.

Caris felt a weight of worry roll off her shoulders. She had got the nunnery charters back.

Thomas put his hand into another bag. When he looked at what he had got hold of, it was a skull. He gave a fearful cry and dropped it.

“Saint Adolphus,” Merthin said in a matter-of-fact voice. “Pilgrims travel hundreds of miles to touch the box that holds his bones.” He picked up the skull. “Lucky us,” he said, and put it back into the bag.

“If I may make a suggestion?” said Caris. “We have to carry this stuff all the way back to Kingsbridge in a cart. Why don’t we leave it in the coffin? It’s packed already, and the casket may serve to deter thieves.”

“Good idea,” Merthin said. “We’ll just lift the coffin out of the grave.”

Thomas returned to the priory and brought ropes, and they lifted the coffin out of the hole. They refixed the lid, then tied the ropes around the box in order to drag it across the ground and into the church.

As they were about to start, they heard a scream.

Caris let out a cry of fear.

They all looked toward the church. A figure was running toward them, eyes staring, blood coming from its mouth. Caris suffered a moment of utter terror when she suddenly believed every foolish superstition she had ever heard about spirits. Then she realized she was looking at Godwyn. Somehow he had found the strength to rise from his deathbed. He had staggered out of the church and seen their torches, and now in his madness he was running toward them.

They watched him, transfixed.

He stopped and looked at the coffin, then at the empty grave, and in the restless torchlight Caris thought she saw a glimmer of understanding on his grimacing face. Then he seemed to lose his strength, and he collapsed. He fell on the mound of earth beside Jonquil’s empty grave, then he rolled down the mound and into the pit.

They all stepped forward and looked into the grave.

Godwyn lay there on his back, looking up at them with open, sightless eyes.

66

As soon as Caris got back to Kingsbridge, she decided to leave again.

The image of St.-John-in-the-Forest that stayed with her was not the graveyard, or the corpses Merthin and Thomas had dug up, but the neat fields with no one tilling them. As she rode home, with Merthin beside her and Thomas driving the cart, she saw a lot of land in the same state, and she foresaw a crisis.

The monks and nuns got most of their income from rents. Serfs grew crops and raised livestock on land belonging to the priory and, instead of paying a knight or an earl for the privilege, they paid the prior or prioress. Traditionally they brought a portion of their harvest to the cathedral—a dozen sacks of flour, three sheep, a calf, a cartload of onions—but nowadays most people paid cash.

If no one was cultivating the land, there would be no rent paid, obviously. And then what would the nuns eat?

The cathedral ornaments, the money, and the charters she had retrieved from St.-John-in-the-Forest were stashed safely in the new, secret treasury that Mother Cecilia had commissioned Jeremiah to build in a place where no one could easily find it. All the ornaments had been found except one, a gold candlestick given by the chandlers' guild, the group that represented the wax candle makers of Kingsbridge. That had disappeared.

Caris held a triumphant Sunday service featuring the rescued bones of the saint. She put Thomas in charge of the boys in the orphanage—some of them were old enough to require a strong male presence. She herself moved into the prior's palace, thinking with pleasure how appalled the late Godwyn would be that it was occupied by a woman. Then, as soon as she had dealt with these details, she went to Outhenby.

The Vale of Outhen was a fertile valley of heavy clay soil a day's journey from Kingsbridge. It had been given to the nuns a hundred years ago by a wicked old knight making a last-gasp attempt to win forgiveness for a lifetime of sins. Five villages stood at intervals along the banks of the River Outhen. On either side the great fields covered the land and the lower slopes of the hills.

The fields were divided into strips allocated to different families. As she had feared, many strips were not being cultivated. The plague had changed everything, but no one had had the brains—or perhaps the courage—to reorganize farming in the light of the new circumstances. Caris herself would have to do that. She had a rough idea of what was required, and she would work out the details as she went along.

With her was Sister Joan, a young nun recently out of her novitiate. Joan was a bright girl who reminded Caris of herself ten years ago—not in appearance, for she was black-haired and blue-eyed, but in her questioning

mind and brisk skepticism.

They rode to the largest of the villages, Outhenby. The bailiff for the whole valley, Will, lived there in a large timber house next to the church. He was not at home, but they found him in the farthest field, sowing oats; a big, slow-moving man. The next strip had been left fallow, and wild grass and weeds were poking up, grazed by a few sheep.

Will Bailiff visited the priory several times a year, usually to bring the rents from the villages, so he knew Caris; but he was disconcerted to meet her on his home ground. “Sister Caris!” he exclaimed when he recognized her. “What brings you here?”

“I’m Mother Caris now, Will, and I’ve come to make sure the nuns’ lands are being properly husbanded.”

“Ah.” He shook his head. “We’re doing our best, as you see, but we’ve lost so many men that it’s very, very difficult.”

Bailiffs always said that times were difficult—but in this case it was true.

Caris dismounted. “Walk with me and tell me about it.” A few hundred yards away, on the gentle slope of a hillside, she saw a peasant plowing with a team of eight oxen. He halted the team and looked at her curiously, so she headed that way.

Will began to recover his composure. Walking alongside her, he said: “A woman of God, such as yourself, can’t be expected to know much about tilling the soil, of course; but I’ll do my best to explain the finer points.”

“That would be kind.” She was used to being condescended to by men of Will’s type. She had found that it was best not to challenge them, but rather to lull them into a false sense of security. That way, she learned more. “How many men have you lost to the plague?”

“Oh, many men.”

“How many?”

“Well, now, let me see, there was William Jones, and his two sons; then Richard Carpenter, and his wife—”

“I don’t need to know their names,” she said, controlling her exasperation. “How many, roughly speaking?”

“I’d have to think about that.”

They had reached the plow. Managing the eight-ox team was a skilled job, and plowmen were often among the more intelligent villagers. Caris addressed the young man. “How many people in Outhenby have died of the plague?”

“About two hundred, I’d say.”

Caris studied him. He was short but muscular, with a bushy blond beard. He had a cocksure look, as young men often did. “Who are you?” she asked.

“My name is Harry, and my father was Richard, Holy Sister.”

“I am Mother Caris. How do you work out that figure of two hundred?”

“There’s forty-two dead here in Outhenby, by my reckoning. It’s just as bad in Ham and Shortacre, making about a hundred and twenty. Longwater escaped completely, but every soul in Oldchurch is dead but old Roger Breton, which is about eighty people, making two hundred.”

She turned to Will. “Out of about how many in the whole valley?”

“Ah, now, let me see…”

Harry Plowman said: “A thousand, near enough, before the plague.”

Will said: “That’s why you see me sowing my own strip, which should be done by laborers—but I have no laborers. They’ve all died.”

Harry said: “Or they’ve gone to work elsewhere for higher wages.”

Caris perked up. “Oh? Who offers higher wages?”

“Some of the wealthier peasants in the next valley,” Will said indignantly. “The nobility pay a penny a day, which is what laborers have always got and always should; but there are some people who think they can do as they please.”

“But they get their crops sowed, I suppose,” Caris said.

“But there’s right and wrong, Mother Caris,” said Will.

Caris pointed to the fallow strip where the sheep were. “And what about that land? Why has it not been plowed?”

Will said: “That belonged to William Jones. He and his sons died, and his wife went to live with her sister in Shiring.”

“Have you looked for a new tenant?”

“Can’t get them, Mother.”

Harry interjected again. “Not on the old terms, anyhow.”

Will glared at him, but Caris said: “What do you mean?”

“Prices have fallen, you see, even though it’s spring when corn is usually dear.”

Caris nodded. That was how markets worked, everyone knew: if there were fewer buyers, the price fell. “But people must live somehow.”

“They don’t want to grow wheat and barley and oats—but they have to grow what they’re told, at least in this valley. So a man looking for a tenancy would rather go elsewhere.”

“And what will he get elsewhere?”

Will interrupted angrily: “They want to do as they please.”

Harry answered Caris’s question. “They want to be free tenants, paying cash rent, rather than serfs working one day a week on the lord’s land; and they want to be able to grow different crops.”

“What crops?”

“Hemp, or flax, or apples and pears—things they know they can sell at the market. Maybe something different every year. But that’s never been allowed in Outhenby.” Harry seemed to recollect himself, and added: “No offense to your holy order, Mother Prioress, nor to Will Bailiff, an honest man

as everyone knows.”

Caris saw how it was. Bailiffs were always conservative. In good times, it hardly mattered: the old ways sufficed. But this was a crisis.

She assumed her most authoritative manner. “All right, listen carefully, now, Will, and I’ll tell you what you’re going to do.” Will looked startled: he had thought he was being consulted, not commanded. “First, you are to stop plowing the hillsides. It’s foolish when we’ve got good land uncultivated.”

“But—”

“Be quiet and listen. Offer every tenant an exchange, acre for acre, good valley bottom instead of hillside.”

“Then what will we do with the hillside?”

“Convert it to grazing, cattle on the lower slopes and sheep on the higher. You don’t need many men for that, just a few boys to herd them.”

“Oh,” said Will. It was plain that he wanted to argue, but he could not immediately think of an objection.

Caris went on: “Next, any valley bottomland that is still untenanted should be offered as a free tenancy with cash rent to anyone who will take it on.” A free tenancy meant that the tenant was not a serf, and did not have to work on the lord’s land, or get his permission to marry or build a house. All he had to do was pay his rent.

“You’re doing away with all the old customs.”

She pointed at the fallow strip. “The old customs are letting my land go to waste. Can you think of another way to stop this happening?”

“Well,” said Will, and there was a long pause; then he shook his head silently.

“Thirdly, offer wages of twopence a day to anyone who will work the land.”

“Twopence a day!”

Caris felt she could not rely on Will to implement these changes vigorously. He would drag his feet and invent excuses. She turned to the cocksure plowman. She would make him the champion of her reforms. “Harry, I want you to go to every market in the county over the next few weeks. Spread the word that anyone who is on the move can do well in Outhenby. If there are laborers looking for wages, I want them to come here.”

Harry grinned and nodded, though Will still looked a bit dazed.

“I want to see all this good land growing crops this summer,” she said. “Is that clear?”

“Yes,” said Will. “Thank you, Mother Prioress.”

Caris went through all the charters with Sister Joan, making a note of the date and subject of each. She decided to have them copied, one by one—the idea

Godwyn had proposed, though he had only pretended to be copying them as a pretext for taking them away from the nuns. But it was a sound notion. The more copies there were, the harder it was for a valuable document to disappear.

She was intrigued by a deed dated 1327 which assigned to the monks the large farm near Lynn, in Norfolk, that they called Lynn Grange. The gift was made on condition the priory took on, as a novice monk, a knight called Sir Thomas Langley.

Caris was taken back to her childhood, and the day she had ventured into the wood with Merthin, Ralph, and Gwenda, and they had seen Thomas receive the wound that had caused him to lose his arm.

She showed the charter to Joan, who shrugged and said: “It’s usual for such a gift to be made when someone from a wealthy family becomes a monk.”

“But look who the donor is.”

Joan looked again. “Queen Isabella!” Isabella was the widow of Edward II and the mother of Edward III. “What’s her interest in Kingsbridge?”

“Or in Thomas?” said Caris.

A few days later she had a chance to find out. The bailiff of Lynn Grange, Andrew, came to Kingsbridge on his biannual visit. A Norfolk-born man of over fifty, he had been in charge of the grange ever since it was gifted to the priory. He was now white-haired and plump, which led Caris to believe that the grange continued to prosper despite the plague. Because Norfolk was several days’ journey away, the grange paid its dues to the priory in coins, rather than drive cattle or cart produce all that way, and Andrew brought the money in gold nobles, the new coin worth a third of a pound, with an image of King Edward standing on the deck of a ship. When Caris had counted the money and given it to Joan to stash in the new treasury, she said to Andrew: “Why did Queen Isabella give us this grange twenty-two years ago, do you know?”

To her surprise, Andrew’s pink face turned pale. He made several false starts at answering, then said: “It’s not for me to question Her Majesty’s decisions.”

“No, indeed,” Caris said in a reassuring tone. “I’m just curious about her motive.”

“She is a holy woman who has performed many pious acts.”

Like murdering her husband, Caris thought; but she said: “However, there must be a reason she named Thomas.”

“He petitioned the queen for a favor, like hundreds of others, and she graciously granted it, as great ladies sometimes do.”

“Usually when they have some connection with the petitioner.”

“No, no, I’m sure there’s no connection.”

His anxiety made Caris sure he was lying, and just as sure that he would not tell her the truth, so she dropped the subject, and sent Andrew off to have supper in the hospital.

Next morning she was accosted in the cloisters by Brother Thomas, the only monk left in the monastery. Looking angry, he said: “Why did you interrogate Andrew Lynn?”

“Because I was curious,” she said, taken aback.

“What are you trying to do?”

“I’m not *trying* to do anything.” She was offended by his aggressive manner, but she did not want to quarrel with him. To ease the tension, she sat on the low wall around the edge of the arcade. A spring sun was shining bravely into the quadrangle. She spoke in a conversational tone. “What’s this all about?”

Thomas said stiffly: “Why are you investigating me?”

“I’m not,” she said. “Calm down. I’m going through all the charters, listing them and having them copied. I came across one that puzzled me.”

“You’re delving into matters that are none of your business.”

She bridled. “I’m the prioress of Kingsbridge, and the acting prior—nothing here is secret from me.”

“Well, if you start digging up all that old stuff, you’ll regret it, I promise you.”

It sounded like a threat, but she decided not to challenge him. She tried a different tack. “Thomas, I thought we were friends. You have no right to forbid me to do anything, and I’m disappointed that you should even try. Don’t you trust me?”

“You don’t know what you’re asking.”

“Then enlighten me. What does Queen Isabella have to do with you, me, and Kingsbridge?”

“Nothing. She’s an old woman now, living in retirement.”

“She’s fifty-three. She’s deposed one king, and she could probably depose another if she had a mind to. And she has some long-hidden connection with my priory which you are determined to keep from me.”

“For your own good.”

She ignored that. “Twenty-two years ago someone was trying to kill you. Was it the same person who, having failed to do away with you, paid you off by getting you admitted to the monastery?”

“Andrew is going to go back to Lynn and tell Isabella that you’ve been asking these questions—do you realize that?”

“Why would she care? Why are people so afraid of you, Thomas?”

“Everything will be answered when I’m dead. None of it will matter then.” He turned around and walked away.

The bell rang for dinner. Caris went to the prior’s palace, deep in thought.

Godwyn's cat, Archbishop, was sitting on the doorstep. It glared at her and she shooed it away. She would not have it in the house.

She had got into the habit of dining every day with Merthin. Traditionally the prior regularly dined with the alderman, though to do so every day was unusual—but these were unusual times. That, at any rate, would have been her excuse, had anyone challenged her; but nobody did. Meanwhile they both looked out eagerly for another excuse to go on a trip so that they could again be alone together.

He came in muddy from his building site on Leper Island. He had stopped asking her to renounce her vows and leave the priory. He seemed content, at least for the moment, to see her every day and hope for future chances to be more intimate.

A priory employee brought them ham stewed with winter greens. When the servant had gone, Caris told Merthin about the charter and Thomas's reaction. "He knows a secret that could damage the old queen if it got out."

"I think that must be right," Merthin said thoughtfully.

"On All Hallows Day in 1327, after I ran away, he caught you, didn't he?"

"Yes. He made me help him bury a letter. I had to swear to keep it secret—until he dies, then I am to dig it up and give it to a priest."

"He told me all my questions would be answered when he died."

"I think the letter is the threat he holds over his enemies. They must know that its contents will be revealed when he dies. So they fear to kill him—in fact they have made sure he remains alive and well by helping him become a monk of Kingsbridge."

"Can it matter, still?"

"Ten years after we buried the letter, I told him I hadn't ever let the secret out, and he said: 'If you had, you'd be dead.' That scared me more than the vow."

"Mother Cecilia told me that Edward II did not die naturally."

"How would she know a thing like that?"

"My uncle Anthony told her. So I presume the secret is that Queen Isabella had her husband murdered."

"Half the country believes that anyway. But if there were proof…Did Cecilia say how he was killed?"

Caris thought hard. "No. Now that I think of it, what she said was: 'The old king did not die of a fall.' I asked her if he had been murdered—but she died without answering."

"Still, why put out a false story about his death if not to cover up foul play?"

"And Thomas's letter must somehow prove that there was foul play, and that the queen was in on it."

They finished their dinner in thoughtful silence. In the monastery day, the

hour after dinner was for rest or reading. Caris and Merthin usually lingered for a while. Today, however, Merthin was anxious about the angles of the roof timbers being erected in the new tavern, The Bridge, that he was building on Leper Island. They kissed hungrily, but he tore himself away and hurried back to the site. Disappointed, Caris opened a book called *Ars Medica*, a Latin translation of a work by the ancient Greek physician Galen. It was the cornerstone of university medicine, and she was reading it to find out what priests learned at Oxford and Paris; though she had so far found little that would help her.

The maid came back and cleared the table. “Ask Brother Thomas to come and see me, please,” Caris said. She wanted to make sure they were still friends despite their abrasive conversation.

Before Thomas arrived, there was a commotion outside. She heard several horses and the kind of shouting that indicated a nobleman wanting attention. A few moments later the door was flung open and in walked Sir Ralph Fitzgerald, lord of Tench.

He looked angry, but Caris pretended not to notice that. “Hello, Ralph,” she said as amiably as she could. “This is an unexpected pleasure. Welcome to Kingsbridge.”

“Never mind all that,” he said rudely. He walked up to where she sat and stood aggressively close. “Do you realize you’re ruining the peasantry of the entire county?”

Another figure followed him in and stood by the door, a big man with a small head, and Caris recognized his long-time sidekick, Alan Fernhill. Both were armed with swords and daggers. Caris was acutely aware that she was alone in the palace. She tried to defuse the scene. “Would you like some ham, Ralph? I’ve just finished dinner.”

Ralph was not to be diverted. “You’ve been stealing my peasants!”

“Peasants, or pheasants?”

Alan Fernhill burst out laughing.

Ralph reddened and looked more dangerous, and Caris wished she had not made that joke. “If you poke fun at me you’ll be sorry,” he said.

Caris poured ale into a cup. “I’m not laughing at you,” she said. “Tell me exactly what’s on your mind.” She offered him the ale.

Her shaking hand betrayed her fear, but he ignored the cup and wagged his finger at her. “Laborers have been disappearing from my villages—and when I inquire after them, I find they have moved to villages belonging to you, where they get higher wages.”

Caris nodded. “If you were selling a horse, and two men wanted to buy it, wouldn’t you give it to the one who offered the higher price?”

“That’s not the same.”

“I think it is. Have some ale.”

With a sudden sideswipe of his hand, he knocked the cup from her grasp. It fell to the floor, the ale spilling into the straw. “They’re *my* laborers.”

Her hand was bruised, but she tried to ignore the pain. She bent down, picked up the cup, and set it on the sideboard. “Not really,” she said. “If they’re laborers, that means you’ve never given them any land, so they have the right to go elsewhere.”

“I’m still their lord, damn it! And another thing. I offered a tenancy to a free man the other day and he refused it, saying he could get a better bargain from Kingsbridge Priory.”

“Same thing, Ralph. I need all the people I can get, so I give them what they want.”

“You’re a woman, you don’t think things through. You can’t see that it will all end with everyone paying more for the same peasants.”

“Not necessarily. Higher wages might attract some of those who at present do no work at all—outlaws, for example, or those vagabonds who go around living off what they find in plague-emptied villages. And some who are now laborers might become tenants, and work harder because they’re cultivating their own land.”

He banged the table with his fist, and she blinked at the sudden noise. “You’ve no right to change the old ways!”

“I think I have.”

He grabbed the front of her robe. “Well, I’m not putting up with it!”

“Take your hands off me, you clumsy oaf,” she said.

At that moment, Brother Thomas came in. “You sent for me—what the devil is going on here?”

He stepped smartly across the room, and Ralph let go of Caris’s robe as if it had suddenly caught fire. Thomas had no weapons and only one arm, but he had got the better of Ralph once before; and Ralph was scared of him.

Ralph took a step back, then realized he had revealed his fear, and looked ashamed. “We’re done here!” he said loudly, and turned to the door.

Caris said: “What I’m doing in Outhenby and elsewhere is perfectly legitimate, Ralph.”

“It’s interfering with the natural order!” he said.

“There’s no law against it.”

Alan opened the door for his master.

“You wait and see,” said Ralph, and he went out.

67

In March that year, 1349, Gwenda and Wulfric went with Nathan Reeve to

the midweek market at the small town of Northwood.

They were working for Sir Ralph now. Gwenda and Wulfric had escaped the plague, so far, but several of Ralph's laborers had died of it, so he needed help; and Nate, the bailiff of Wigleigh, had offered to take them on. He could afford to pay normal wages, whereas Perkin had been giving them nothing more than their food.

As soon as they announced they were going to work for Ralph, Perkin discovered that he could now afford to pay them normal wages—but he was too late.

On this day they took a cartload of logs from Ralph's forest to sell in Northwood, a town that had had a timber market since time immemorial. The boys, Sam and David, went with them: there was no one else to look after them. Gwenda did not trust her father, and her mother had died two years ago. Wulfric's parents were long dead.

Several other Wigleigh folk were at the market. Father Gaspard was buying seeds for his vegetable garden, and Gwenda's father, Joby, was selling freshly killed rabbits.

Nate, the bailiff, was a stunted man with a twisted back, and he could not lift logs. He dealt with customers while Wulfric and Gwenda did the lifting. At midday he gave them a penny to buy their dinner at the Old Oak, one of the taverns around the square. They got bacon boiled with leeks and shared it with the boys. David, at eight years of age, still had a child's appetite, but Sam was a fast-growing ten and perpetually hungry.

While they were eating, they overheard a conversation that caught Gwenda's attention.

There was a group of young men standing in a corner, drinking large tankards of ale. They were all poorly dressed, except one with a bushy blond beard who had the superior clothes of a prosperous peasant or a village craftsman: leather trousers, good boots, and a new hat. The sentence that caused Gwenda to prick up her ears was: "We pay twopence a day for laborers at Outhenby."

She listened hard, trying to learn more, but caught only scattered words. She had heard that some employers were offering more than the traditional penny a day, because of the shortage of workers caused by the plague. She had hesitated to believe such stories, which sounded too good to be true.

She said nothing for the moment to Wulfric, who had not heard the magic words, but her heart beat faster. She and her family had endured so many years of poverty. Was it possible that life might get better for them?

She had to find out more.

When they had eaten, they sat on a bench outside, watching the boys and some other children running around the broad trunk of the tree that gave the tavern its name. "Wulfric," she said quietly. "What if we could earn twopence

a day—each?”

“How?”

“By going to Outhenby.” She told him what she had overheard. “It could be the beginning of a new life for us,” she finished.

“Am I never to get back my father’s lands, then?”

She could have hit him with a stick. Did he really still think that was going to happen? How foolish could he be?

She tried to make her voice as gentle as possible. “It’s twelve years since you were disinherited,” she said. “In that time Ralph has become more and more powerful. And there’s never been the least sign that he might mellow toward you. What do *you* think the chances are?”

He did not answer that question. “Where would we live?”

“They must have houses in Outhenby.”

“But will Ralph let us go?”

“He can’t stop us. We’re laborers, not serfs. You know that.”

“But does Ralph know it?”

“Let’s not give him the chance to object.”

“How could we manage that?”

“Well…” She had not thought this through, but now she saw that it would have to be done precipitately. “We could leave today, from here.”

It was a scary thought. They had both lived their entire lives in Wigleigh. Wulfric had never even moved house. Now they were contemplating going to live in a village they had never seen without even going back to say good-bye.

But Wulfric was worrying about something else. He pointed at the hunchbacked bailiff, crossing the square to the chandler’s shop. “What would Nathan say?”

“We won’t tell him what we’re planning. We’ll give him some story—say we want to stay here overnight, for some reason, and return home tomorrow. That way, nobody will know where we are. And we’ll never go back to Wigleigh.”

“Never go back,” Wulfric said despondently.

Gwenda controlled her impatience. She knew her husband. Once Wulfric was set on a course he was unstoppable, but he took a long time to decide. He would come around to this idea eventually. He was not closed-minded, just cautious and deliberate. He hated to make decisions in a rush—whereas she thought it was the only way.

The young man with the blond beard came out of the Old Oak. Gwenda looked around: none of the Wigleigh folk was in sight. She stood up and accosted the man. “Did I hear you say something about twopence a day for laborers?” she said.

“That’s right, mistress,” he replied. “In the Vale of Outhenby, just half a day southwest of here. We need all we can get.”

“Who are you?”

“I’m the plowman of Outhenby. My name is Harry.”

Outhenby must be a large and prosperous village, to have a plowman all of its own, Gwenda reasoned. Most plowmen worked for a group of villages. “And who is lord of the manor?”

“The prioress of Kingsbridge.”

“Caris!” That was wonderful news. Caris could be trusted. Gwenda’s spirits lifted further.

“Yes, she is the current prioress,” Harry said. “A very determined woman.”

“I know.”

“She wants her fields cultivated so that she can feed the sisters, and she’s not listening to excuses.”

“Do you have houses at Outhenby for laborers to live in? With their families?”

“Plenty, unfortunately. We’ve lost many people to the plague.”

“You said it was southwest of here.”

“Take the southerly road to Badford, then follow the Outhen upstream.”

Caution returned to Gwenda. “I’m not going,” she said quickly.

“Ah. Of course.” He did not believe her.

“I was really asking on behalf of a friend.” She turned away.

“Well, tell your friend to come as soon as he can—we’ve got spring plowing and sowing to finish yet.”

“All right.”

She felt slightly dizzy, as if she had taken a draft of strong wine. Twopence a day—working for Caris—and miles away from Ralph, Perkin, and flirty Annet! It was a dream.

She sat back down beside Wulfric. “Did you hear all that?” she asked him.

“Yes,” he said. He pointed to a figure standing by the tavern door. “And so did he.”

Gwenda looked. It was her father.

“Put that horse in the traces,” Nate said to Wulfric around mid-afternoon. “It’s time to go home.”

Wulfric said: “We’ll be needing our wages for the week so far.”

“You’ll be paid on Saturday as usual,” Nate said dismissively. “Hitch that nag.”

Wulfric did not move toward the horse. “I’ll trouble you to pay me today,” he insisted. “I know you’ve got the money, you’ve sold all that timber.”

Nate turned and looked directly at him. “Why should you be paid early?” he said irritably.

“Because I shan’t be returning to Wigleigh with you tonight.”

Nate was taken aback. “Why not?”

Gwenda took over. “We’re going to Melcombe,” she said.

“What?” Nate was outraged. “People like you have no business traveling to Melcombe!”

“We met a fisherman who needs crew for twopence a day.” Gwenda had worked out this story to throw any pursuit off the scent.

Wulfric added: “Our respects to Sir Ralph, and may God be with him in the future.”

Gwenda added: “But we don’t expect to see him ever again.” She said it just to hear the sweet sound of it: never to see Ralph again.

Nathan said indignantly: “He may not wish you to leave!”

“We’re not serfs, we have no land. Ralph cannot forbid us.”

“You’re the son of a serf,” Nathan said to Wulfric.

“But Ralph denied me my inheritance,” Wulfric replied. “He cannot now demand my fealty.”

“It’s a dangerous thing for a poor man to stand on his rights.”

“That’s true,” Wulfric conceded. “But I’m doing it, all the same.”

Nate was beaten. “You shall hear more of this,” he said.

“Would you like me to put the horse to the cart?”

Nate scowled. He could not do it himself. Because of his back, he had difficulty with complicated physical tasks, and the horse was taller than he. “Yes, of course,” he said.

“I’ll be glad to. Would you kindly pay me first?”

Looking furious, Nate took out his purse and counted six silver pennies.

Gwenda took the money and Wulfric hitched up the horse.

Nate drove away without another word.

“Well!” said Gwenda. “That’s done.” She looked at Wulfric. He was smiling broadly. She asked him: “What is it?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “I feel as if I’ve been wearing a collar for years, and suddenly it’s been taken off.”

“Good.” That was how she wanted him to feel. “Now let’s find a place to stay the night.”

The Old Oak was in a prime position in the market square, and charged top prices. They walked around the little town looking for somewhere cheaper. Eventually they went into the Gate House, where Gwenda negotiated accommodation for the four of them—supper, a mattress on the floor, and breakfast—for a penny. The boys would need a decent night’s sleep and some breakfast if they were to walk all morning.

She could hardly sleep for excitement. She was also worried. What was

she taking her family to? She had only the word of one man, a stranger, for what they would find when they reached Outhenby. She really ought to have sought confirmation before committing herself.

But she and Wulfric had been stuck in a hole for ten years, and Harry Plowman of Outhenby was the first person to offer them a way out of it.

The breakfast was meager: thin porridge and watery cider. Gwenda bought a big loaf of new bread for them to eat on the road, and Wulfric filled his leather flask with cold water from a well. They passed through the city gate an hour after sunrise and set off on the road south.

As they walked, she thought about Joby, her father. As soon as he learned that she had not returned to Wigleigh, he would remember the conversation he had overheard, and he would guess she had gone to Outhenby. He would not be fooled by the story about Melcombe: he was an accomplished deceiver himself, too experienced to be taken in by a simple ruse. But would anyone think to ask him where she had gone? Everyone knew she never spoke to her father. And, if they did ask him, would he blurt out what he suspected? Or would some vestige of paternal feeling cause him to protect her?

There was nothing she could do about it, so she put him out of her mind.

It was good weather for traveling. The ground was soft with recent rain, and there was no dust; but today was a dry day with fitful sunshine, neither cold nor hot. The boys quickly grew tired, especially David, the younger, but Wulfric was good at distracting them with songs and rhymes, quizzing them about the names of trees and plants, playing number games and telling stories.

Gwenda could hardly believe what they had done. This time yesterday, it had looked as if their life would never change: hard work, poverty, and frustrated aspirations would be their lot for ever. Now they were on the road to a new life.

She thought of the house where she had lived with Wulfric for ten years. She had not left much behind: a few cooking pots, a stack of newly chopped firewood, half a ham, and four blankets. She had no clothes other than what she was wearing, and neither did Wulfric or the boys; no jewelry, ribbons, gloves, or combs. Ten years ago, Wulfric had had chickens and pigs in his yard, but they had gradually been eaten or sold during the years of penury. Their meager possessions could be replaced with a week’s wages at the promised Outhenby rates.

In accordance with Harry’s directions they took the road south to a muddy ford across the Outhen, then turned west and followed the river upstream. As they progressed, the river narrowed, until the land funneled between two ranges of hills. “Good, fertile soil,” Wulfric said. “It’ll need the heavy plow, though.”

At noon they came to a large village with a stone church. They went to the door of a timber manor house next to the church. With trepidation,

Gwenda knocked. Was she about to be told that Harry Plowman did not know what he was talking about, and there was no work here? Had she made her family walk half a day for nothing? How humiliating it would be to have to return to Wigleigh and beg to be taken on again by Nate Reeve.

A gray-haired woman came to the door. She looked at Gwenda with the suspicious glare that villagers everywhere gave to strangers. “Yes?”

“Good day, mistress,” Gwenda said. “Is this Outhenby?”

“It is.”

“We’re laborers looking for work. Harry Plowman told us to come here.”

“Did he, now?”

Was there something wrong, Gwenda wondered, or was this woman just a grumpy old cow? She almost asked the question out loud. Stopping herself, she said: “Does Harry live at this house?”

“Certainly not,” the woman replied. “He’s just a plowman. This is the bailiff’s house.”

Some conflict between bailiff and plowman, Gwenda guessed. “Perhaps we should see the bailiff, then.”

“He’s not here.”

Patiently, Gwenda said: “Would you be kind enough to tell us where we might find him?”

The woman pointed across the valley. “North Field.”

Gwenda turned to look in the direction indicated. When she turned back, the woman had disappeared into the house.

Wulfric said: “She didn’t seem pleased to see us.”

“Old women hate change,” Gwenda commented. “Let’s find this bailiff.”

“The boys are tired.”

“They can rest soon.”

They set off across the fields. There was plenty of activity on the strips. Children were picking stones off plowed land, women were sowing seeds, and men were carting manure. Gwenda could see the ox team in the distance, eight mighty beasts patiently dragging the plow through the wet, heavy soil.

They came upon a group of men and women trying to move a horse-drawn harrow that had got stuck in a ditch. Gwenda and Wulfric joined in pushing it out. Wulfric’s broad back made the difference, and the harrow was freed.

All the villagers turned and looked at Wulfric. A tall man with an old burn mark disfiguring one side of his face said amiably: “You’re a useful fellow—who are you?”

“I’m Wulfric, and my wife is Gwenda. We’re laborers looking for work.”

“You’re just what we need, Wulfric,” the man said. “I’m Carl Shaftesbury.” He stuck out his hand to shake. “Welcome to Outhenby.”

Ralph came eight days later.

Wulfric and Gwenda had moved into a small, well-built house with a stone chimney and an upstairs bedroom where they could sleep separately from the boys. They got a wary reception from the older, more conservative villagers—notably Will Bailiff and his wife, Vi, who had been so rude to them on the day they arrived. But Harry Plowman and the younger set were excited by the changes and glad to have help in the fields.

They were paid twopence a day, as promised, and Gwenda looked forward eagerly to the end of their first full week, when they each got twelve pence—a shilling!—double the highest sum they had ever earned. What would they do with all that money?

Neither Wulfric nor Gwenda had worked anywhere but Wigleigh, and they were surprised to find that not all villages were the same. The ultimate authority here was the prioress of Kingsbridge, and that made a difference. Ralph's rule was personal and arbitrary: appealing to him was hazardous. By contrast, Outhenby folk seemed to know what the prioress would want in most situations, and they could settle disputes by figuring out what she would say if asked to adjudicate.

A mild disagreement of this kind was going on when Ralph came.

They were all walking home from the fields at sundown, the adults work-weary, the children running on ahead, and Harry Plowman bringing up the rear with the unharnessed oxen. Carl Shaftesbury, the man with the burned face, who was a newcomer like Gwenda and Wulfric, had caught three eels at dawn for his family's supper, as it was Friday. The question was whether laborers had the same right as tenants to take fish from the Outhen River on fast days. Harry Plowman said the privilege extended to all Outhenby residents. Vi Bailiff said that tenants owed customary dues to the landlord, which laborers did not, and those who had extra duties should have extra privileges.

Will Bailiff was called upon for a decision, and he ruled against his wife. "I believe the mother prioress would say that if the church wishes people to eat fish, then fish must be provided for them to eat," he said; and that was accepted by everyone.

Looking toward the village, Gwenda saw two horsemen.

A cold wind gusted suddenly.

The visitors were half a mile away across the fields, and heading for the houses at an angle to the path the villagers were taking. She could tell they were men-at-arms. They had big horses, and their clothes looked bulky—men of violence generally wore heavily padded coats. She nudged Wulfric.

"I've seen them," he said grimly.

Such men had no casual reason to come to a village. They despised the people who grew the crops and cared for the livestock. They normally visited only to take from the peasants those things they were too proud to provide for themselves, bread and meat and drink. Their view of what they were entitled to, or how much they should pay, always differed from that of the peasants; so there was invariably trouble.

Within the next couple of minutes all the villagers saw them, and the group went quiet. Gwenda noticed that Harry turned the oxen slightly and headed for the far end of the village, though she could not immediately guess why.

Gwenda felt sure the two men had come to find runaway laborers. She found herself praying they would turn out to be the former employers of Carl Shaftesbury or one of the other newcomers. However, as the villagers came closer to the horsemen she recognized Ralph Fitzgerald and Alan Fernhill, and her heart sank.

This was the moment she had dreaded. She had known there was a chance Ralph would find out where they had gone: her father could make a good guess, and he could not be relied upon to keep his mouth shut. And although Ralph had no right to take them back, he was a knight and a nobleman, and such people generally did as they pleased.

It was too late to run. The group was walking along a path between broad plowed fields: if some of them broke away and fled, Ralph and Alan would immediately see them and give chase; and then Gwenda and her family would lose whatever protection they might gain from being with other villagers. They were trapped in the open.

She called to her boys: “Sam! David! Come here!”

They did not hear, or did not want to, and they ran on. Gwenda went after them, but they thought it was a game, and tried to outrun her. They were almost at the village now, and she found she was too tired to catch them. Almost in tears, she shouted: “Come back!”

Wulfric took over. He ran past her and easily caught up with David. He scooped the boy up in his arms. But he was too late to catch Sam, who ran laughing in among the scattered houses.

The horsemen were reined in by the church. As Sam ran toward them, Ralph nudged his horse forward, then leaned down from the saddle and picked the boy up by his shirt. Sam gave a shout of fright.

Gwenda screamed.

Ralph sat the boy on his horse’s wither.

Wulfric, carrying David, came to a stop in front of Ralph.

Ralph said: “Your son, I presume.”

Gwenda was appalled. She was afraid for her son. It would be beneath Ralph’s dignity to attack a child, but there might be an accident. And there

was another danger.

Seeing Ralph and Sam together, Wulfric might realize they were father and son.

Sam was still a little boy, of course, with a child's body and face, but he had Ralph's thick hair and dark eyes, and his bony shoulders were wide and square.

Gwenda looked at her husband. Wulfric's expression showed no sign that he had seen what was so obvious to her. She surveyed the faces of the other villagers. They seemed oblivious to the stark truth—except for Vi Bailiff, who was giving Gwenda a hard stare. That old battleaxe might have guessed. But no one else had—yet.

Will came forward and addressed the visitors. "Good day to you, sirs. I'm Will, the bailiff of Outhenby. May I ask—"

"Shut your mouth, bailiff," said Ralph. He pointed at Wulfric. "What is he doing here?"

Gwenda sensed a slight easing of tension as the other villagers realized they were not the target of the lord's wrath.

Will replied: "My lord, he's a laborer, hired on the authority of the prioress of Kingsbridge—"

"He's a runaway, and he's got to come home," Ralph said.

Will fell silent, frightened.

Carl Shaftesbury said: "And what authority do you claim for this demand?"

Ralph peered at Carl, as if memorizing his face. "Watch your tongue, or I'll disfigure the other side of your face."

Will said nervously: "We don't want any bloodshed."

"Very wise, bailiff," said Ralph. "Who is this insolent peasant?"

"Never you mind who I am, knight," said Carl rudely. "I know who you are. You're Ralph Fitzgerald, and I saw you convicted of rape and sentenced to death at Shiring court."

"But I'm not dead, am I?" Ralph said.

"You should be, though. And you have no feudal rights over laborers. If you try to use force, you'll be taught a sharp lesson."

Several people gasped. This was a reckless way to speak to an armed knight.

Wulfric said: "Be quiet, Carl. I don't want you killed for my sake."

"It's not for your sake," Carl said. "If this thug is allowed to drag you off, next week someone will come for me. We have to stick together. We're not helpless."

Carl was a big man, taller than Wulfric and almost as broad, and Gwenda could see that he meant what he said. She was appalled. If they started fighting, there would be terrible violence—and her Sam was still sitting on

the horse with Ralph. “We’ll just go with Ralph,” she said frantically. “It will be better.”

Carl said: “No, it won’t. I’m going to stop him taking you away, whether you want me to or not. It’s for my own good.”

There was a murmur of assent. Gwenda looked around. Most of the men were holding shovels or hoes, and they looked ready to swing them, though they also looked scared.

Wulfric turned his back on Ralph and spoke in a low, urgent voice. “You women, take the children into the church—quickly now!”

Several women snatched up toddlers and grabbed youngsters by the arms. Gwenda stayed where she was, and so did several of the younger women. The villagers instinctively moved closer together, standing shoulder to shoulder.

Ralph and Alan looked disconcerted. They had not expected to face a crowd of fifty or more belligerent peasants. But they were on horseback, so they could get away anytime they wanted.

Ralph said: “Well, perhaps I’ll just take this little boy to Wigleigh.”

Gwenda gasped with horror.

Ralph went on: “Then, if his parents want him, they can come back where they belong.”

Gwenda was beside herself. Ralph had Sam, and he could ride away at any moment. She fought down a hysterical scream. If he turned his horse, she decided, she would throw herself at him and try to drag him off the saddle. She moved a step closer.

Then, behind Ralph and Alan, she saw the oxen. Harry Plowman was driving them through the village from the other end. Eight massive beasts lumbered up to the scene in front of the church, then stopped, looking around dumbly, not knowing which way to go. Harry stood behind them. Ralph and Alan found themselves in a triangular trap, hemmed in by the villagers, the oxen, and the stone church.

Harry had planned this to stop Ralph riding away with Wulfric and herself, Gwenda guessed. But the tactic did just as well for this situation.

Carl said: “Put the child down, Sir Ralph, and go in peace.”

The trouble was, Gwenda thought, it was now difficult for Ralph to back down without losing face. He was going to have to do something to avoid looking foolish, which was the ultimate horror for proud knights. They talked all the time about their honor, but that meant nothing—they were thoroughly dishonorable when it suited them. What they really prized was their dignity. They would rather die than be humiliated.

The tableau was frozen for several moments: the knight and the child on the horse, the mutinous villagers, and the dumb oxen.

Then Ralph lowered Sam to the ground.

Tears of relief came to Gwenda’s eyes.

Sam ran to her, threw his arms around her waist, and began to cry.

The villagers relaxed, the men lowering their shovels and hoes.

Ralph pulled on his horse's reins and shouted: "Hup! Hup!" The horse reared. He dug in his spurs and rode straight at the crowd. They scattered. Alan rode behind him. The villagers desperately threw themselves out of the way, ending up in tangled heaps on the muddy ground. They were trampled by one another but not, miraculously, by the horses.

Ralph and Alan laughed loudly as they rode out of the village, as if the entire encounter had been nothing more than a huge joke.

But, in reality, Ralph had been shamed.

And that, Gwenda felt sure, meant that he would be back.

68

Earlscastle had not changed. Twelve years ago, Merthin recalled, he had been asked to demolish the old fortress and build a new, modern palace fit for an earl in a peaceful country. But he had refused, preferring to design the new bridge at Kingsbridge. Since then, it seemed, the project had languished, for here was the same figure-eight wall, with two drawbridges, and the old-fashioned keep ensconced in the upper loop, where the family lived like frightened rabbits at the end of a burrow, unaware that there was no longer any danger from the fox. The place must have been much the same in the days of Lady Aliena and Jack Builder.

Merthin was with Caris, who had been summoned here by the countess, Lady Philippa. Earl William had fallen sick, and Philippa thought her husband had the plague. Caris had been dismayed. She had thought the plague was over. No one had died of it in Kingsbridge for six weeks.

Caris and Merthin had set out immediately. However, the messenger had taken two days to travel from Earlscastle to Kingsbridge, and they had taken the same time to get here, so the likelihood was that the earl would now be dead, or nearly so. "All I will be able to do is give him some poppy essence to ease the final agony," Caris had said as they rode along.

"You do more than that," Merthin had said. "Your presence comforts people. You're calm and knowledgeable, and you talk about things they understand, swelling and confusion and pain—you don't try to impress them with jargon about humors, which just makes them feel more ignorant and powerless and frightened. When you're there, they feel that everything possible is being done; and that's what they want."

"I hope you're right."

If anything, Merthin was understating. More than once he had seen a

hysterical man or woman change, after just a few calming moments with Caris, into a sensible person capable of coping with whatever should happen.

Her inborn gift had been augmented, since the advent of the plague, by an almost supernatural reputation. Everyone for miles around knew that she and her nuns had carried on caring for the sick, despite the risk to themselves, even when the monks had fled. They thought she was a saint.

The atmosphere inside the castle compound was subdued. Those who had routine tasks were performing them: fetching firewood and water, feeding horses and sharpening weapons, baking bread and butchering meat. Many others—secretaries, men-at-arms, messengers—sat around doing nothing, waiting for news from the sick room.

The rooks cawed a sarcastic welcome as Merthin and Caris crossed the inner bridge to the keep. Merthin's father, Sir Gerald, always claimed to be directly descended from Jack and Aliena's son, Earl Thomas. As Merthin counted the steps to the great hall, placing his feet carefully in the smooth hollows worn by thousands of boots, he reflected that his ancestors had probably trodden on just these old stones. To him, such notions were intriguing but trivial. By contrast his brother, Ralph, was obsessed with restoring the family to its former glory.

Caris was ahead of him, and the sway of her hips as she climbed the steps made his lips twitch in a smile. He was frustrated by not being able to sleep with her every night, but the rare occasions when they could be alone together were all the more thrilling. Yesterday they had spent a mild spring afternoon making love in a sunlit forest glade, while the horses grazed nearby, oblivious to their passion.

It was an odd relationship, but then she was an extraordinary woman: a prioress who doubted much of what the church taught; an acclaimed healer who rejected medicine as practised by physicians; and a nun who made enthusiastic love to her man whenever she could get away with it. If I wanted a normal relationship, Merthin told himself, I should have picked a normal girl.

The hall was full of people. Some were working, laying down fresh straw, building up the fire, preparing the table for dinner; and others were simply waiting. At the far end of the long room, sitting near the foot of the staircase that led up to the earl's private quarters, Merthin saw a well-dressed girl of about fifteen. She stood up and came toward them with a rather stately walk, and Merthin realized she must be Lady Philippa's daughter. Like her mother she was tall, with an hourglass figure. "I am the Lady Odila," she said with a touch of hauteur that was pure Philippa. Despite her composure, the skin around her young eyes was red and creased with crying. "You must be Mother Caris. Thank you for coming to attend my father."

Merthin said: "I'm the alderman of Kingsbridge, Merthin Bridger. How is

Earl William?”

“He is very ill, and both my brothers have been laid low.” Merthin recalled that the earl and countess had two boys of nineteen and twenty or thereabouts. “My mother asks that the lady prioress should come to them immediately.”

Caris said: “Of course.”

Odila went up the stairs. Caris took from her purse a strip of linen cloth and fastened it over her nose and mouth, then followed.

Merthin sat on a bench to wait. Although he was reconciled to infrequent sex, that did not stop him looking out eagerly for extra opportunities, and he surveyed the building with a keen eye, figuring out the sleeping arrangements. Unfortunately the house had a traditional layout. This large room, the great hall, would be where almost everyone ate and slept. The staircase presumably led to a solar, a bedroom for the earl and countess. Modern castles had a whole suite of apartments for family and guests, but there appeared to be no such luxury here. Merthin and Caris might lie side by side tonight, on the floor here in the hall, but they could do nothing more than sleep, not without causing a scandal.

After a while, Lady Philippa emerged from the solar and came down the stairs. She entered a room like a queen, aware that all eyes were on her, Merthin always thought. The dignity of her posture only emphasized the alluring roundness of her hips and her proud bosom. However, today her normally serene face was blotchy and her eyes were red. Her fashionably piled hairstyle was slightly awry, with stray locks of hair escaping from her headdress, adding to her air of glamorous distraction.

Merthin stood up and look at her expectantly.

She said: “My husband has the plague, as I feared; and so do both my sons.”

The people around murmured in dismay.

It might turn out to be no more than the last remnants of the epidemic, of course; but it could just as easily be the start of a new outbreak—God forbid, Merthin thought.

He said: “How is the earl feeling?”

Philippa sat on the bench next to him. “Mother Caris has eased his pain. But she says he’s near the end.”

Their knees were almost touching. He felt the magnetism of her sexuality, even though she was drowning in grief and he was dizzy with love for Caris. “And your sons?” he said.

She looked down at her lap, as if studying the pattern of gold and silver threads woven into her blue gown. “The same as their father.”

Merthin said quietly: “This is very hard for you, my lady, very hard.”

She gave him a wary glance. “You’re not like your brother, are you?”

Merthin knew that Ralph had been in love with Philippa, in his own obsessive way, for many years. Did she realize that? Merthin did not know. Ralph had chosen well, he thought. If you were going to have a hopeless love, you might as well pick someone singular. “Ralph and I are very different,” he said neutrally.

“I remember you as youngsters. You were the cheeky one—you told me to buy a green silk to match my eyes. Then your brother started a fight.”

“I sometimes think the younger of two brothers deliberately tries to be the opposite of the elder, just to differentiate himself.”

“It’s certainly true of my two. Rollo is strong-willed and assertive, like his father and grandfather; and Rick has always been sweet-natured and obliging.” She began to cry. “Oh, God, I’m going to lose them all.”

Merthin took her hand. “You can’t be sure what will happen,” he said gently. “I caught the plague in Florence, and I survived. My daughter didn’t catch it at all.”

She looked up at him. “And your wife?”

Merthin looked down at their entwined hands. Philippa’s was perceptibly more wrinkled than his, he saw, even though there was only four years’ difference in their ages. He said: “Silvia died.”

“I pray to God that I will catch it. If all my men die, I want to go, too.”

“Surely not.”

“It’s the fate of noblewomen to marry men they don’t love—but I was lucky, you see, in William. He was chosen for me, but I loved him from the start.” Her voice began to fail her. “I couldn’t bear to have someone else…”

“You feel that way now, of course.” It was odd to be talking like this while her husband was still alive, Merthin thought. But she was so stricken by grief that she had little thought for niceties and said just what was in her mind.

She collected herself with an effort. “What about you?” she said. “Have you remarried?”

“No.” He could hardly explain that he was having a love affair with the prioress of Kingsbridge. “I think I could, though, if the right woman were… willing. You might come to feel the same, eventually.”

“But you don’t understand. As the widow of an earl with no heirs, I would have to marry someone King Edward chose for me. And the king would have no thought for my wishes. His only concern would be who should be the next earl of Shiring.”

“I see.” Merthin had not thought of that. He could imagine that an arranged marriage might be particularly loathsome to a widow who had truly loved her first husband.

“How dreadful of me to be speaking of another husband while my first is alive,” she said. “I don’t know what came over me.”

Merthin patted her hand sympathetically. “It’s understandable.”

The door at the top of the stairs opened and Caris came out, drying her hands on a cloth. Merthin suddenly felt uncomfortable about holding Philippa’s hand. He was tempted to thrust it away from him, but realized how guilty that would look and managed to resist the impulse. He smiled at Caris and said: “How are your patients?”

Caris’s eyes went to their linked hands, but she said nothing. She came down the stairs, untying her linen mask.

Philippa unhurriedly withdrew her hand.

Caris took off her mask and said: “I’m very sorry to have to tell you, my lady, that Earl William is dead.”

“I need a new horse,” said Ralph Fitzgerald. His favorite mount, Griff, was getting old. The spirited bay palfrey had suffered a sprain in its left hind leg that had taken months to heal, and now it was lame again in the same leg. Ralph felt sad. Griff was the horse Earl Roland had given him when he was a young squire, and it had been with him ever since, even going to the French wars. It might serve him a few years longer for unhurried trips from village to village within his domain, but its hunting days were over.

“We could go to Shiring market tomorrow and buy another,” Alan Fernhill said.

They were in the stable, looking at Griff’s fetlock. Ralph liked stables. He enjoyed the earthy smell, the strength and beauty of the horses, and the company of rough-handed men engrossed in physical tasks. It took him back to his youth, when the world had seemed a simple place.

He did not at first respond to Alan’s suggestion. What Alan did not know was that Ralph did not have the money to buy a horse.

The plague had at first enriched him, through the inheritance tax: land that normally passed from father to son once in a generation had changed hands twice or more in a few months, and he got a payment every time—traditionally the best beast, but often a fixed sum in cash. But then land had started to fall into disuse for lack of people to farm it. At the same time, agricultural prices had dropped. The upshot was that Ralph’s income, in money and produce, fell drastically.

Things were bad, he thought, when a knight could not afford a horse.

Then he remembered that Nate Reeve was due to come to Tench Hall today with the quarterly dues from Wigleigh. Every spring that village was obliged to provide its lord with twenty-four hoggets, year-old sheep. They could be driven to Shiring market and sold, and they should raise enough cash to pay for a palfrey, if not a hunter. “All right,” Ralph said to Alan. “Let’s see if the bailiff of Wigleigh is here.”

They went into the hall. This was a feminine zone, and Ralph's spirits dropped immediately. Tilly was sitting by the fire, nursing their three-month-old son, Gerry. Mother and baby were in vigorous good health, despite Tilly's youth. Her slight, girlish body had changed drastically: she now had swollen breasts with large, leathery nipples at which the baby sucked greedily. Her belly sagged loosely like that of an old woman. Ralph had not lain with her for many months and he probably never would again.

Nearby sat the grandfather after whom the baby was named, Sir Gerald, with Lady Maud. Ralph's parents were now old and frail, but every morning they walked from their house in the village to the manor house to see their grandson. Maud said the baby looked like Ralph, but he could not see the resemblance.

Ralph was pleased to see that Nate was also in the hall.

The hunchbacked bailiff sprang up from his bench. "Good day to you, Sir Ralph," he said.

He had a hangdog look about him, Ralph observed. "What's the matter with you, Nate?" he said. "Have you brought my hoggets?"

"No, sir."

"Why the devil not?"

"We've got none, sir. There are no sheep left in Wigleigh, except for a few old ewes."

Ralph was shocked. "Has someone stolen them?"

"No, but some have been given to you already, as heriot when their owners died, and then we couldn't find a tenant to take over Jack Shepherd's land, and many sheep died over the winter. Then there was no one to look to the early lambs this spring, so we lost most of those, and some of the mothers."

"But this is impossible!" Ralph said angrily. "How are noblemen to live if their serfs let the livestock perish?"

"We thought perhaps the plague was over, when it died down in January and February, but now it seems to be coming back."

Ralph repressed a shudder of terror. Like everyone else, he had been thanking God that he had escaped the plague. Surely it could not return?

Nate went on: "Perkin died this week, and his wife Peg, and his son Rob, and his son-in-law Billy Howard. That's left Annet with all those acres to manage, which she can't possibly do."

"Well, there must be a heriot due on that property, then."

"There will be, when I can find a tenant to take it over."

Parliament was in the process of passing new legislation to stop laborers flitting about the country demanding even higher wages. As soon as the ordinance became law, Ralph would enforce it and get his workers back. Even then, he now realized, he would be desperate to find tenants.

Nate said: “I expect you’ve heard of the death of the earl.”

“No!” Ralph was shocked again.

“What’s that?” Sir Gerald said. “Earl William is dead?”

“Of the plague,” Nate explained.

Tilly said: “Poor Uncle William!”

The baby sensed her mood and wailed.

Ralph spoke over the noise. “When did this happen?”

“Only three days ago,” Nate replied.

Tilly gave the baby the nipple again, and he shut up.

“So William’s elder son is the new earl,” Ralph mused. “He can’t be more than twenty.”

Nate shook his head. “Rollo also died of the plague.”

“Then the younger son—”

“Dead, too.”

“Both sons!” Ralph’s heart leaped. It had always been his dream to become the earl of Shiring. Now the plague had given him the opportunity. And the plague had also improved his chances, for many likely candidates for the title had been wiped out.

He caught his father’s eye. The same thought had occurred to Sir Gerald.

Tilly said: “Rollo and Rick dead—it’s so awful.” She began to cry.

Ralph ignored her and tried to think through the possibilities. “Let’s see, what surviving relatives are there?”

Gerald said to Nate: “I presume the countess died, too?”

“No, sir. Lady Philippa lives. So does her daughter, Odila.”

“Ah!” said Gerald. “So, whoever the king chooses will have to marry Philippa in order to become earl.”

Ralph was thunderstruck. Since he was a lad he had dreamed of marrying Lady Philippa. Now there was an opportunity to achieve both his ambitions at one stroke.

But he was already married.

Gerald said: “That’s it, then.” He sat back in his chair, his excitement gone as quickly as it had come.

Ralph looked at Tilly, suckling their child and weeping at the same time. Fifteen years old and barely five feet tall, she stood like a castle wall between him and the future he had always yearned for.

He hated her.

Earl William’s funeral took place at Kingsbridge Cathedral. There were no monks except Brother Thomas, but Bishop Henri conducted the service and the nuns sang the hymns. Lady Philippa and Lady Odila, both heavily veiled, followed the coffin. Despite their dramatic black-clad presence, Ralph found

the occasion lacked the momentous feeling that usually attended the funeral of a magnate, the sense of historical time passing by like the flow of a great river. Death was everywhere, every day, and even noble deaths were now commonplace.

He wondered whether someone in the congregation was infected, and was even now spreading the disease through his breath, or the invisible beams from his eyes. The thought made Ralph shaky. He had faced death many times, and learned to control his fear in battle; but this enemy could not be fought. The plague was an assassin who slid his long knife into people from behind then slipped away before he was spotted. Ralph shuddered and tried not to think about it.

Next to Ralph was the tall figure of Sir Gregory Longfellow, a lawyer who had been involved in suits concerning Kingsbridge in the past. Gregory was now a member of the king's council, an elite group of technical experts who advised the monarch—not on what he should do, for that was the job of Parliament, but on how he could do it.

Royal announcements were often made at church services, especially big ceremonies such as this. Today Bishop Henri took the opportunity to explain the new Ordinance of Laborers. Ralph guessed that Sir Gregory had brought the news and stayed to see how it was received.

Ralph listened attentively. He had never been summoned to Parliament, but he had talked about the labor crisis to Earl William, who had sat with the Lords, and to Sir Peter Jeffries, who represented Shiring in the Commons; so he knew what had been discussed.

"Every man must work for the lord of the village where he lives, and may not move to another village or work for another master, unless his lord should release him," the bishop said.

Ralph rejoiced. He had known this was coming, but he was delighted that at last it was official.

Before the plague there had never been a shortage of laborers. On the contrary, many villages had more than they knew what to do with. When landless men could find no paid work, they sometimes threw themselves on the charity of the lord—which was an embarrassment to him, whether he helped them or not. So, if they wanted to move to another village, the lord was if anything relieved, and certainly had no need of legislation to keep them where they were. Now the laborers had the whip hand—a situation that obviously could not be allowed to continue.

There was a rumble of approval from the congregation at the bishop's announcement. Kingsbridge folk themselves were not much affected, but those in the congregation who had come in from the countryside for the funeral were predominantly employers rather than employees. The new rules had been devised by and for them.

The bishop went on: “It is now a crime to demand, to offer, or to accept wages higher than those paid for similar work in 1347.”

Ralph nodded approval. Even laborers who stayed in the same village had been demanding more money. This would put a stop to that, he hoped.

Sir Gregory caught his eye. “I see you nodding,” he said. “Do you approve?”

“It’s what we wanted,” Ralph said. “I’ll begin to enforce it in the next few days. There are a couple of runaways from my territory that I particularly want to bring home.”

“I’ll come with you, if I may,” the lawyer said. “I should like to see how things work out.”

69

The priest at Outhenby had died of the plague, and there had been no services at the church since; so Gwenda was surprised when the bell began to toll on Sunday morning.

Wulfric went to investigate and came back to report that a visiting priest, Father Derek, had arrived; so Gwenda washed the boys’ faces quickly and they all went out.

It was a fine spring morning, and the sun bathed the old gray stones of the little church in a clear light. All the villagers turned out, curious to view the newcomer.

Father Derek turned out to be a well-spoken city clergyman, too richly dressed for a village church. Gwenda wondered whether any special significance was attached to his visit. Was there a reason why the church hierarchy had suddenly remembered the existence of this parish? She told herself that it was a bad habit always to imagine the worst, but all the same she felt something was wrong.

She stood in the nave with Wulfric and the boys, watching the priest go through the ritual, and her sense of doom grew stronger. A priest usually looked at the congregation while he was praying or singing, to emphasize that all this was for their benefit, not a private communication between himself and God; but Father Derek’s gaze went over their heads.

She soon found out why. At the end of the service, he told them of a new law passed by the king and Parliament. “Landless laborers must work for the lord in their village of origin, if required,” he said.

Gwenda was outraged. “How can that be?” she shouted out. “The lord is not obliged to help the laborer in hard times—I know, my father was a landless laborer, and when there was no work we went hungry. So how can

the laborer owe loyalty to a lord who gives him nothing?”

A rumble of agreement broke out, and the priest had to raise his voice. “This is what the king has decided, and the king is chosen by God to rule over us, so we must all do as he wishes.”

“Can the king change the custom of hundreds of years?” Gwenda persisted.

“These are difficult times. I know that many of you have come to Outhenby in the last few weeks—”

“Invited by the plowman,” the voice of Carl Shaftesbury interrupted. His scarred face was livid with rage.

“Invited by all the villagers,” the priest acknowledged. “And they were grateful to you for coming. But the king in his wisdom has ruled that this kind of thing must not go on.”

“And poor people must remain poor,” Carl said.

“God has ordained it so. Each man in his place.”

Harry Plowman said: “And has God ordained how we are to till our fields with no help? If all the newcomers leave, we will never finish the work.”

“Perhaps not all the newcomers will have to leave,” said Derek. “The new law says only that they must go home if required.”

That quieted them. The immigrants were trying to figure out whether their lords would be able to track them down; the locals were wondering how many laborers would be left here. But Gwenda knew what her own future held. Sooner or later Ralph would come back for her and her family.

By then, she decided, they would be gone.

The priest retired and the congregation began to drift to the door. “We’ve got to leave here,” Gwenda said to Wulfric in a low voice. “Before Ralph comes back for us.”

“Where will we go?”

“I don’t know—but perhaps that’s better. If we don’t know where we’re going, no one else will.”

“But how will we live?”

“We’ll find another village where they need laborers.”

“Are there many others, I wonder?”

He was always slower-thinking than she. “There must be lots,” she said patiently. “The king didn’t pass this ordinance just for Outhenby.”

“Of course.”

“We should leave today,” she said decisively. “It’s Sunday, so we’re not losing any work.” She glanced at the church windows, estimating the time of day. “It’s not yet noon—we could cover a good distance before nightfall. Who knows, we could be working in a new place tomorrow morning.”

“I agree,” Wulfric said. “There’s no telling how fast Ralph might move.”

“Say nothing to anyone. We’ll go home, pick up whatever we want to take

with us, and just slip away.”

“All right.”

They reached the door and stepped outside into the sunshine, and Gwenda saw that it was already too late.

Six men on horseback were waiting outside the church: Ralph, his sidekick Alan, a tall man in London clothes, and three dirty, scarred, evil-looking ruffians of the kind that could be hired for a few pennies in any low tavern.

Ralph caught Gwenda’s eye and smiled triumphantly.

Gwenda looked around desperately. A few days ago the men of the village had stood shoulder to shoulder against Ralph and Alan—but this was different. They were up against six men, not two. The villagers were unarmed, coming out of church, whereas previously they had been returning from the fields with tools in their hands. And, most important, on that first occasion they had believed they had right on their side, whereas today they were not so sure.

Several men met her eye and looked quickly away. That confirmed her suspicion. The villagers would not fight today.

Gwenda was so disappointed that she felt weak. Fearing that she might fall down, she leaned on the stonework of the church porch for support. Her heart had turned into something heavy and cold and damp, like a clod from a winter grave. A grim hopelessness possessed her completely.

For a few days they had been free. But it had just been a dream. And now the dream was over.

Ralph rode slowly through Wigleigh, leading Wulfric by a rope around his neck.

They arrived late in the afternoon. For speed, Ralph had let the two small boys ride, sharing the horses of the hired men. Gwenda was walking behind. Ralph had not bothered to tie her in any way. She could be relied upon to follow her children.

Because it was Sunday, most of the Wigleigh folk were outside their houses, enjoying the sun, as Ralph had anticipated. They all stared in horrified silence at the dismal procession. Ralph hoped the sight of Wulfric’s humiliation might deter others from going in search of higher wages.

They reached the small manor house that had been Ralph’s home before he moved to Tench Hall. He released Wulfric and sent him and his family off to their old home. He paid off the hired men, then took Alan and Sir Gregory into the manor house.

It was kept clean and ready for his visits. He ordered Vira to bring wine then prepare supper. It was too late now to go on to Tench: they could not get

there before nightfall.

Gregory sat down and stretched out his long legs. He seemed like a man who could make himself comfortable anywhere. His straight dark hair was now tweeded with gray, but his long nose with its flared nostrils still gave him a supercilious look. “How do you feel that went?” he said.

Ralph had been thinking about the new ordinance all the way home, and he had his answer ready. “It’s not going to work,” he said.

Gregory raised his eyebrows. “Oh?”

Alan said: “I agree with Sir Ralph.”

“Reasons?”

Ralph said: “First of all, it’s difficult to find out where the runaways have gone.”

Alan put in: “It was only by luck that we traced Wulfric. Someone had overheard him and Gwenda planning where to go.”

“Second,” Ralph went on, “recovering them is too troublesome.”

Gregory nodded. “I suppose we have been all day at it.”

“And I had to hire those ruffians and get them horses. I can’t spend my time and money chasing all over the countryside after runaway laborers.”

“I see that.”

“Third, what is to stop them running away again next week?”

Alan said: “If they keep their mouths shut about where they’re headed, we might never find them.”

“The only way it will work,” Ralph said, “is if someone can go to a village, find out who the migrants are, and punish them.”

Gregory said: “You’re talking about a sort of Commission of Laborers.”

“Exactly. Appoint a panel in each county, a dozen or so men who go from place to place ferreting out runaways.”

“You want someone else to do the work for you.”

It was a taunt, but Ralph was careful not to appear stung. “Not necessarily—I’ll be one of the commissioners, if you wish. It’s just the way the job is to be done. You can’t reap a field of grass one blade at a time.”

“Interesting,” said Gregory.

Vira brought a jug and some goblets, and poured wine for the three of them.

Gregory said: “You’re a shrewd man, Sir Ralph. You’re not a Member of Parliament, are you?”

“No.”

“Pity. I think the king would find your counsel helpful.”

Ralph tried not to beam with pleasure. “You’re very kind.” He leaned forward. “Now that Earl William is dead, there is of course a vacancy—” He saw the door open, and broke off.

Nate Reeve came in. “Well done, Sir Ralph, if I may say so!” he said.

“Wulfric and Gwenda back in the fold, the two hardest-working people we’ve got.”

Ralph was annoyed with Nate for interrupting at such a crucial moment. He said irritably: “I trust the village will now be able to pay more of its dues.”

“Yes, sir…if they stay.”

Ralph frowned. Nate had immediately fastened on the weakness in his position. How was he going to keep Wulfric in Wigleigh? He could not chain a man to a plow all day and all night.

Gregory spoke to Nate. “Tell me, bailiff, do you have a suggestion for your lord?”

“Yes, sir, I do.”

“I thought you might.”

Nate took that as an invitation. Addressing Ralph, he said: “There is one thing you could do that would guarantee that Wulfric would stay here in Wigleigh until the day he dies.”

Ralph sensed a trick, but had to say: “Go on.”

“Give him back the lands his father held.”

Ralph would have yelled at him, except that he did not want to give Gregory a bad impression. Controlling his anger, he said firmly: “I don’t think so.”

“I can’t get a tenant for the land,” Nate persisted. “Annet can’t manage it, and she has no male relations living.”

“I don’t care,” said Ralph. “He can’t have the land.”

Gregory said: “Why not?”

Ralph did not want to admit that he still held a grudge against Wulfric because of a fight twelve years ago. Gregory had formed a good impression of Ralph, and Ralph did not want to spoil it. What would the king’s counselor think of a knight who acted against his own interests in pursuit of a boyhood squabble? He cast about for a plausible excuse. “It would seem to be rewarding Wulfric for running away,” he said finally.

“Hardly,” said Gregory. “From what Nate says, you’d be giving him something that no one else wants.”

“All the same, it sends the wrong signal to the other villagers.”

“I think you’re being too scrupulous,” Gregory said. He was not the kind of man to keep his opinions tactfully to himself. “Everyone must know you’re desperate for tenants,” he went on. “Most landlords are. The villagers will see that you’re simply acting in your own interest, and consider that Wulfric is the lucky beneficiary.”

Nate added: “Wulfric and Gwenda will work twice as hard if they’ve got their own land.”

Ralph felt cornered. He was desperate to look good in Gregory’s eyes. He had started but not finished a discussion about the earldom. He could not put

that at risk just because of Wulfric.

He had to give in.

“Perhaps you’re right,” he said. He realized he was speaking through gritted teeth, and made an effort to be nonchalant. “After all, he has been brought home and humiliated. That may be enough.”

“I’m sure it is.”

“All right, Nate,” Ralph said. For a moment words stuck in his throat, he hated so much to give Wulfric his heart’s desire. But this was more important. “Tell Wulfric he can have his father’s lands back.”

“I’ll do that before nightfall,” Nate said, and he left.

Gregory said: “What were you saying about the earldom?”

Ralph picked his words carefully. “After Earl Roland died at the battle of Crécy, I thought the king might have considered making me the earl of Shiring, especially as I had saved the life of the young prince of Wales.”

“But Roland had a perfectly good heir—who himself had two sons.”

“Exactly. And now all three are dead.”

“Hmm.” Gregory took a draft from his goblet. “This is good wine.”

“Gascon,” said Ralph.

“I suppose it comes into Melcombe.”

“Yes.”

“Delicious.” Gregory drank some more. He seemed to be about to say something, so Ralph remained silent. Gregory took a long time choosing his words. At last he said: “There is, somewhere in the neighborhood of Kingsbridge, a letter that…ought not to exist.”

Ralph was mystified. What was coming now?

Gregory went on: “For many years, this document was in the hands of someone who could be relied upon, for various complicated reasons, to keep it safe. Lately, however, certain questions have been asked, suggesting to me that the secret may be in danger of getting out.”

All this was too enigmatic. Ralph said impatiently: “I don’t understand. Who has been asking embarrassing questions?”

“The prioress of Kingsbridge.”

“Oh.”

“It’s possible she may have simply picked up some hint, and her questions may be harmless. But what the king’s friends fear is that the letter may have got into her possession.”

“What is in the letter?”

Once again, Gregory chose his words warily, tiptoeing across a raging river on carefully placed stepping-stones. “Something touching the king’s beloved mother.”

“Queen Isabella.” The old witch was still alive, living in splendor in her castle at Lynn, spending her days reading romances in her native French, so people said.

“In short,” said Gregory, “I need to find out whether the prioress has this letter or not. But no one must know of my interest.”

Ralph said: “Either you have to go to the priory and search through the nuns’ documents…or the documents must come to you.”

“The second of those two.”

Ralph nodded. He was beginning to understand what Gregory wanted him to do.

Gregory said: “I have made some very discreet inquiries, and discovered that no one knows exactly where the nuns’ treasury is.”

“The nuns must know, or some of them.”

“But they won’t say. However, I understand you’re an expert in… persuading people to reveal secrets.”

So Gregory knew of the work Ralph had done in France. There was nothing spontaneous about this conversation, Ralph realized. Gregory must have planned it. In fact it was probably the real reason he had come to Kingsbridge. Ralph said: “I may be able to help the king’s friends solve this problem…”

“Good.”

“…if I were promised the earldom of Shiring as my reward.”

Gregory frowned. “The new earl will have to marry the old countess.”

Ralph decided to hide his eagerness. Instinct told him that Gregory would have less respect for a man who was driven, even just partly, by lust for a woman. “Lady Philippa is five years older than I am, but I have no objection to her.”

Gregory looked askance. “She’s a very beautiful woman,” he said. “Whoever the king gives her to should think himself a lucky man.”

Ralph realized he had gone too far. “I don’t wish to appear indifferent,” he said hastily. “She is indeed a beauty.”

“But I thought you were already married,” Gregory said. “Have I made a mistake?”

Ralph caught Alan’s eye, and saw that he was keenly curious to hear what Ralph would say next.

Ralph sighed. “My wife is very ill,” he said. “She hasn’t long to live.”

Gwenda lit the fire in the kitchen of the old house where Wulfric had lived since he was born. She found her cooking pots, filled one with water at the well, and threw in some early onions, the first step in making a stew. Wulfric brought in more firewood. The boys happily went out to play with their old friends, unaware of the depth of the tragedy that had befallen their family.

Gwenda busied herself with household chores as the evening darkened outside. She was trying not to think. Everything that came into her mind just made her feel worse: the future, the past, her husband, herself. Wulfric sat and looked into the flames. Neither of them spoke.

Their neighbor, David Johns, appeared with a big jug of ale. His wife was dead of the plague, but his grown-up daughter, Joanna, followed him in. Gwenda was not happy to see them: she wanted to be miserable in private. But their intentions were kind, and it was impossible to spurn them. Gwenda glumly wiped the dust from some wooden cups, and David poured ale for everyone.

“We’re sorry things worked out this way, but we’re glad to see you,” he said as they drank.

Wulfric emptied his cup with one huge swallow and held it out for more.

A little later Aaron Appletree and his wife Ulla came in. She carried a basket of small loaves. “I knew you wouldn’t have any bread, so I made some,” she said. She handed them around, and the house filled with the mouthwatering smell. David Johns poured them some ale, and they sat down. “Where did you get the courage to run away?” Ulla asked admiringly. “I would have died of fright!”

Gwenda began to tell the story of their adventures. Jack and Eli Fuller arrived from the mill, bringing a dish of pears baked in honey. Wulfric ate plenty and drank deep. The atmosphere lightened, and Gwenda’s mood lifted a little. More neighbors came, each bringing a gift. When Gwenda told how the villagers of Outhenby with their spades and hoes had faced down Ralph and Alan, everyone rocked with delighted laughter.

Then she came to the events of today, and she descended into despair

again. “Everything was against us,” she said bitterly. “Not just Ralph and his ruffians, but the king and the church. We had no chance.”

The neighbors nodded gloomily.

“And then, when he put a rope around my Wulfric’s neck…” She was filled with bleak despair. Her voice cracked, and she could not go on. She took a gulp of ale and tried again. “When he put a rope around Wulfric’s neck—the strongest and bravest man I’ve ever known, any of us have ever known, led through the village like a beast, and that heartless, crass, bullying Ralph holding the rope—I just wanted the heavens to fall in and kill us all.”

These were strong words, but the others agreed. Of all the things the gentry could do to peasants—starve them, cheat them, assault them, rob them—the worst was to humiliate them. They never forgot it.

Suddenly Gwenda wanted the neighbors to leave. The sun had gone down, and it was dusk outside. She needed to lie down and close her eyes and be alone with her thoughts. She did not want to talk even to Wulfric. She was about to ask everyone to go when Nate Reeve walked in.

The room went quiet.

“What do you want?” Gwenda said.

“I bring you good news,” he said brightly.

She made a sour face. “There can be no good news for us today.”

“I disagree. You haven’t heard it yet.”

“All right, what is it?”

“Sir Ralph says Wulfric is to have his father’s lands back.”

Wulfric leaped to his feet. “As a tenant?” he said. “Not just to labor on?”

“As a tenant, on the same terms as your father,” said Nate expansively, as if he were making the concession himself, rather than simply passing on a message.

Wulfric beamed with joy. “That’s wonderful!”

“Do you accept?” Nate said jovially, as if it were a mere formality.

Gwenda said: “Wulfric! Don’t accept!”

He looked at her, bewildered. As usual, he was slow to see beyond the immediate.

“Discuss the terms!” she urged him in a low voice. “Don’t be a serf like your father. Demand a free tenancy, with no feudal obligations. You’ll never be in such a strong bargaining position again. Negotiate!”

“Negotiate?” he said. He wavered briefly, then gave in to the happiness of the occasion. “This is the moment I’ve been hoping for for the last twelve years. I’m not going to negotiate.” He turned to Nate. “I accept,” he said, and held up his cup.

They all cheered.

70

The hospital was full again. The plague, which had seemed to retreat during the first three months of 1349, came back in April with redoubled virulence. On the day after Easter Sunday, Caris looked wearily at the rows of mattresses crammed together in a herringbone pattern, packed so tightly that the masked nuns had to step gingerly between them. Moving around was a little easier, however, because there were so few family members at the bedsides of the sick. Sitting with a dying relative was dangerous—you were likely to catch the plague yourself—and people had become ruthless. When the epidemic began, they had stayed with their loved ones regardless, mothers with children, husbands with wives, the middle-aged with their elderly parents, love overcoming fear. But that had changed. The most powerful of family ties had been viciously corroded by the acid of death. Nowadays the typical patient was brought in by a mother or father, a husband or wife, who then simply walked away, ignoring the piteous cries that followed them out. Only the nuns, with their face masks and their vinegar-washed hands, defied the disease.

Surprisingly, Caris was not short of help. The nunnery had enjoyed an influx of novices to replace the nuns who had died. This was partly because of Caris's saintly reputation. But the monastery was experiencing the same kind of revival, and Thomas now had a class of novice monks to train. They were all searching for order in a world gone mad.

This time the plague had struck some leading townspeople who had previously escaped. Caris was dismayed by the death of John Constable. She had never much liked his rough-and-ready approach to justice—which was to hit troublemakers over the head with a stick and ask questions afterward—but it was going to be more difficult to maintain order without him. Fat Betty Baxter, baker of special buns for every town festivity, shrewd questioner at parish guild meetings, was dead, her business awkwardly shared out between four squabbling daughters. And Dick Brewer had died, the last of Caris's father's generation, a cohort of men who knew how to make money and how to enjoy it.

Caris and Merthin had been able to slow the spread of the disease by canceling major public gatherings. There had been no big Easter procession in the cathedral, and there would be no Fleece Fair this Whitsun. The weekly market was held outside the city walls, in Lovers' Field, and most townspeople stayed away. Caris had wanted such measures when the plague first struck, but Godwyn and Elfric had opposed her. According to Merthin, some Italian cities had even closed their gates for a period of thirty or forty days, called a trentine or a quarantine. It was now too late to keep the disease

out, but Caris still thought restrictions would save lives.

One problem she did not have was money. More and more people bequeathed their wealth to the nuns, having no surviving relatives, and many of the new novices brought with them lands, flocks, orchards, and gold. The nunnery had never been so rich.

It was small consolation. For the first time in her life she felt tired—not just weary from hard work, but drained of energy, short of willpower, enfeebled by adversity. The plague was worse than ever, killing two hundred people a week, and she did not know how she was going to carry on. Her muscles ached, her head hurt, and sometimes her vision seemed to blur. Where would it end? she wondered dismally. Would everyone die?

Two men staggered in through the door, both bleeding. Caris hurried forward. Before she got within touching distance, she picked up the sweetly rotten smell of drink on them. They were both nearly helpless, although it was not yet dinnertime. She groaned in frustration: this was all too common.

She knew the men vaguely: Barney and Lou, two strong youngsters employed in the abattoir owned by Edward Slaughterhouse. Barney had one arm hanging limp, possibly broken. Lou had a dreadful injury to his face: his nose was crushed and one eye was a ghastly pulp. Both seemed too drunk to feel pain. “It was a fight,” Barney slurred, his words only just comprehensible. “I didn’t mean it. He’s my best friend. I love him.”

Caris and Sister Nellie got the two drunks lying down on adjacent mattresses. Nellie examined Barney and said his arm was not broken but dislocated, and sent a novice to fetch Matthew Barber, the surgeon, who would try to relocate it. Caris bathed Lou’s face. There was nothing she could do to save his eye: it had burst like a soft-boiled egg.

This kind of thing made her furious. The two men were not suffering from a disease or an accidental injury: they had harmed one another while drinking to excess. After the first wave of the plague, she had managed to galvanize the townspeople into restoring law and order; but the second wave had done something terrible to people’s souls. When she called again for a return to civilized behavior, the response had been apathetic. She did not know what to do next, and she felt so tired.

As she contemplated the two maimed men lying shoulder to shoulder on the floor, she heard a strange noise from outside. For an instant, she was transported back three years, to the battle of Crécy, and the terrifying booming sound made by King Edward’s new machines that shot stone balls into the enemy ranks. A moment later the noise came again and she realized it was a drum—several drums, in fact, being struck in no particular rhythm. Then she heard pipes and bells whose notes failed to form any kind of tune; then hoarse cries, wailing, and shouts that might have indicated triumph or agony, or both. It was not unlike the noise of battle, but without the swish of

deadly arrows or the screams of maimed horses. Frowning, she went outside.

A group of forty or so people had come onto the cathedral green, dancing a mad antic jig. Some played on musical instruments, or rather sounded them, for there was no melody or harmony to the noise. Their flimsy light-colored clothes were ripped and stained, and some were half-naked, carelessly exposing the intimate parts of their bodies. All those who did not have instruments were carrying whips. A crowd of townspeople followed, staring in curiosity and amazement.

The dancers were led by Friar Murdo, fatter than ever but cavorting energetically, sweat pouring down his dirty face and dripping from his straggly beard. He led them to the great west door of the cathedral, where he turned to face them. “We have all sinned!” he roared.

His followers cried out in response, inarticulate shrieks and groans.

“We are dirt!” he said thrillingly. “We wallow in lasciviousness like pigs in filth. We yield, quivering with desire, to our fleshly lusts. We deserve the plague!”

“Yes!”

“What must we do?”

“Suffer!” they called. “We must suffer!”

One of the followers dashed forward, flourishing a whip. It had three leather thongs, each of which appeared to have sharp stones attached to a knot. He threw himself at Murdo’s feet and began to lash his own back. The whip tore the thin material of his robe and drew blood from the skin of his back. He cried out in pain, and the rest of Murdo’s followers groaned in sympathy.

Then a woman came forward. She pulled her robe down to her waist and turned, exposing her bare breasts to the crowd; then lashed her bare back with a similar whip. The followers moaned again.

As they came forward in ones and twos, flogging themselves, Caris saw that many of them had bruises and half-healed cuts on their skin: they had done this before, some of them many times. Did they go from town to town repeating the performance? Given Murdo’s involvement, she felt sure that sooner or later someone would start collecting money.

A woman in the watching crowd suddenly ran forward screaming: “Me, too, I must suffer!” Caris was surprised to see that it was Mared, the browbeaten young wife of Marcel Chandler. Caris could not imagine that she had committed many sins, but perhaps she had at last seen a chance to make her life dramatic. She threw off her dress and stood stark naked before the friar. Her skin was unmarked; in fact she looked beautiful.

Murdo gazed at her for a long moment then said: “Kiss my feet.”

She knelt in front of him, exposing her rear obscenely to the crowd, and lowered her face to his filthy feet.

He took a whip from another penitent and handed it to her. She lashed herself, then shrieked in pain, and red marks appeared instantly on her white skin.

Several more ran forward eagerly from the crowd, mostly men, and Murdo went through the same ritual with each. Soon there was an orgy. When they were not whipping themselves they were banging their drums and clanging their bells and dancing their fiendish jig.

Their actions had a mad abandon, but Caris's professional eye noted that the strokes of the whips, though dramatic and undoubtedly painful, did not appear to inflict permanent damage.

Merthin appeared beside Caris and said: "What do you think of this?"

She frowned and said: "Why does it make me feel indignant?"

"I don't know."

"If people want to whip themselves, why should I object? Perhaps it makes them feel better."

"I agree with you, though," Merthin said. "There's generally something fraudulent about anything Murdo is involved with."

"That's not it."

The mood here was not one of penitence, she decided. These dancers were not looking back contemplatively over their lives, feeling sorrow and regret for sins committed. People who genuinely repented tended to be quiet, thoughtful, and undemonstrative. What Caris sensed in the air here was quite different. It was excitement.

"This is a debauch," she said.

"Only instead of drink, they're overindulging in self-loathing."

"And there's a kind of ecstasy in it."

"But no sex."

"Give them time."

Murdo led the procession off again, heading out of the priory precincts. Caris noticed that some of the flagellants had produced bowls and were begging coins from the crowd. They would go through the principal streets of the town like this, she guessed. They would probably finish up at one of the larger taverns, where people would buy them food and drink.

Merthin touched her arm. "You look pale," he said. "How do you feel?"

"Just tired," she said curtly. She had to soldier on regardless of how she felt, and it did not help her to be reminded of her tiredness. However, it was kind of him to notice, and she softened her tone to say: "Come to the prior's house. It's almost dinnertime."

They walked across the green as the procession disappeared. They stepped inside the palace. As soon as they were alone, Caris put her arms around Merthin and kissed him. She suddenly felt very physical, and she thrust her tongue into his mouth, which she knew he liked. In response, he

took both her breasts in his hands and squeezed gently. They had never kissed like this inside the palace, and Caris wondered vaguely whether something about Friar Murdo's bacchanal had weakened her normal inhibitions.

"Your skin is hot," Merthin said in her ear.

She wanted Merthin to pull down her robe and put his mouth to her nipples. She felt she was losing control, and might find herself recklessly making love right here on the floor, where they might so easily be caught.

Then a girl's voice said: "I didn't mean to spy."

Caris was shocked. She sprang guiltily away from Merthin. She turned around, looking for the speaker. At the far end of the room, sitting on a bench, was a young woman holding a baby. It was Ralph Fitzgerald's wife. "Tilly!" said Caris.

Tilly stood up. She looked exhausted and frightened. "I'm so sorry to startle you," she said.

Caris was relieved. Tilly had attended the nuns' school and lived at the nunnery for years, and she was fond of Caris. She could be trusted not to make a fuss about the kiss she had seen. But what was she doing here? "Are you all right?" Caris said.

"I'm a bit tired," Tilly said. She staggered, and Caris caught her arm.

The baby cried. Merthin took the child and rocked him expertly. "There, there, my little nephew," he said. The crying fell to a mild grizzle of discontent.

Caris said to Tilly: "How did you get here?"

"I walked."

"From Tench Hall? Carrying Gerry?" The baby was now six months old, and no easy burden.

"It took me three days."

"My goodness. Has something happened?"

"I ran away."

"Didn't Ralph come after you?"

"Yes, with Alan. I hid in the forest while they went by. Gerry was very good and didn't cry."

The picture brought a lump to Caris's throat. "But…" She swallowed. "But why did you run away?"

"Because my husband wants to kill me," Tilly said, and she burst into tears.

Caris sat her down and Merthin brought her a cup of wine. They let her sob. Caris sat on the bench beside her and put an arm around her shoulders while Merthin cradled baby Gerry. When at last Tilly had cried herself out, Caris said: "What has Ralph done?"

Tilly shook her head. "Nothing. It's just the way he looks at me. I know he wants to murder me."

Merthin muttered: “I wish I could say my brother is incapable of that.”

Caris said: “But why would he want to do such a terrible thing?”

“I don’t know,” Tilly said miserably. “Ralph went to Uncle William’s funeral. There was a lawyer from London there, Sir Gregory Longfellow.”

“I know him,” Caris said. “A clever man, but I don’t like him.”

“It started after that. I have a feeling it’s all to do with Gregory.”

Caris said: “You wouldn’t have walked all this way, carrying a baby, because of something you just imagined.”

“I know it sounds fanciful, but he just sits and glares at me hatefully. How can a man look at his wife like that?”

“Well, you’ve come to the right place,” Caris said. “You’re safe here.”

“Can I stay?” she begged. “You won’t send me back, will you?”

“Certainly not,” said Caris. She caught Merthin’s eye. She knew what he was thinking. It would be rash to give Tilly a guarantee. Fugitives might take refuge in churches, as a general principle, but it was very doubtful whether a nunnery had the right to shelter a knight’s wife and keep her from him indefinitely. Moreover Ralph would certainly be entitled to make her give up the baby, his son and heir. All the same, Caris put as much confidence into her voice as she could and said: “You can stay here just as long as you like.”

“Oh, thank you.”

Caris silently prayed that she would be able to keep her promise.

“You could live in one of the special guest rooms upstairs in the hospital,” she said.

Tilly looked troubled. “But what if Ralph should come in?”

“He wouldn’t dare. But if it makes you feel safer, you can have Mother Cecilia’s old room, at the end of the nuns’ dormitory.”

“Yes, please.”

A priory servant came in to lay the table for dinner. Caris said to Tilly: “I’ll take you to the refectory. You can have dinner with the nuns, then lie down in the dormitory and rest.” She stood up.

Suddenly she felt dizzy. She put a hand on the table to steady herself. Merthin, still holding baby Gerry, said anxiously: “What’s wrong?”

“I’ll be fine in a moment,” Caris said. “I’m just tired.”

Then she fell to the floor.

Merthin felt a tidal wave of panic. For an instant, he was stunned. Caris had never been ill, never helpless—she was the one who took care of the sick. He could not think of her as a victim.

The moment passed like a blink. Fighting down his fear, he carefully handed the baby to Tilly.

The servant girl had stopped laying the table and stood staring in shock at

the unconscious form of Caris on the floor. Merthin deliberately made his voice calm but urgent and said to her: “Run to the hospital and tell them Mother Caris is ill. Bring Sister Oonagh. Go on now, as quick as you can!” She hurried away.

Merthin knelt beside Caris. “Can you hear me, my darling?” he said. He picked up her limp hand and patted it, then touched her cheek, then lifted an eyelid. She was out cold.

Tilly said: “She’s got the plague, hasn’t she?”

“Oh, God.” Merthin took Caris in his arms. He was a slight man, but he had always been able to lift heavy objects, building stones and timber beams. He lifted her easily and stood upright, then laid her gently on the table. “Don’t die,” he whispered. “Please don’t die.”

He kissed her forehead. Her skin was hot. He had felt it when they embraced a few minutes ago, but he had been too excited to worry. Perhaps that was why she had been so passionate: fever could have that effect.

Sister Oonagh came in. Merthin was so grateful to see her that tears came to his eyes. She was a young nun, only a year or two out of her novitiate, but Caris thought highly of her nursing skill and was grooming her to take responsibility for the hospital one day.

Oonagh wrapped a linen mask over her mouth and nose and tied it in a knot behind her neck. Then she touched Caris’s forehead and cheek. “Did she sneeze?” she said.

Merthin wiped his eyes. “No,” he answered. He felt sure he would have noticed: a sneeze was an ominous sign.

Oonagh pulled down the front of Caris’s robe. To Merthin she looked agonizingly vulnerable with her small breasts exposed. But he was glad to see there was no rash of purple-black spots on her chest. Oonagh covered her up again. She looked up Caris’s nostrils. “No bleeding,” she said. She felt Caris’s pulse thoughtfully.

After a few moments she looked at Merthin. “This may not be the plague, but it seems a serious illness. She’s feverish, her pulse is rapid, and her breathing is shallow. Carry her upstairs, lay her down, and bathe her face with rose water. Anyone who attends her must wear a mask and wash their hands as if she had the plague. That includes you.” She gave him a linen strip.

Tears rolled down his face as he tied the mask. He carried Caris upstairs, put her on the mattress in her room, and straightened her clothing. The nuns brought rose water and vinegar. Merthin told them of Caris’s instructions regarding Tilly, and they took the young mother and baby to the refectory. Merthin sat beside Caris, patting her forehead and cheeks with a rag damped with the fragrant liquid, praying for her to come round.

At last she did. She opened her eyes, frowned in puzzlement, then looked anxious and said: “What happened?”

“You fainted,” he said.

She tried to sit up.

“Keep still,” he said. “You’re sick. It’s probably not the plague, but you have a serious illness.”

She must have felt weak, for she lay back on the pillow without further protest. “I’ll just rest for an hour,” she said.

She was in bed for two weeks.

After three days the whites of her eyes turned the color of mustard, and Sister Oonagh said she had the yellow jaundice. Oonagh prepared an infusion of herbs sweetened with honey, which Caris drank hot three times a day. The fever receded, but Caris remained weak. She inquired anxiously about Tilly every day, and Oonagh answered her questions, but refused to discuss any other aspect of life in the nunnery, in case it should tire Caris. Caris was too enfeebled to fight her.

Merthin did not leave the prior’s palace. In the daytime he sat downstairs, close enough to hear her call, and his employees came to him for instructions about the various buildings they were putting up or tearing down. At night he lay on a mattress beside her and slept lightly, waking every time her breathing changed or she turned over in her bed. Lolla slept in the next room.

At the end of the first week, Ralph showed up.

“My wife has disappeared,” he said as he walked into the hall of the prior’s palace.

Merthin looked up from a drawing he was making on a large slate. “Hello, brother,” he said. Ralph looked shifty, he thought. Clearly he had mixed feelings about Tilly’s disappearance. He was not fond of her, but on the other hand no man likes his wife to run away.

Perhaps I have mixed feelings, too, Merthin thought guiltily. After all, I did help his wife to leave him.

Ralph sat on a bench. “Have you got any wine? I’m parched.”

Merthin went to the sideboard and poured from a jug. It crossed his mind to say he had no idea where Tilly could be, but his instinct revolted from the idea of lying to his own brother, especially about something so important. Besides, Tilly’s presence at the priory could not be kept secret: too many nuns, novices, and employees had seen her here. It was always best to be honest, Merthin thought, except in dire emergency. Handing the cup to Ralph, he said: “Tilly is here, at the nunnery, with the baby.”

“I thought she might be.” Ralph lifted the cup in his left hand, showing the stumps of his three severed fingers. He took a long draft. “What’s the matter with her?”

“She ran away from you, Ralph.”

“You should have let me know.”

“I feel bad about that. But I couldn’t betray her. She’s frightened of you.”

“Why take sides with her against me? I’m your brother!”

“Because I know you. If she’s scared, there’s probably a reason.”

“This is outrageous.” Ralph was trying to appear indignant, but the act was unconvincing.

Merthin wondered what he really felt.

“We can’t throw her out,” Merthin said. “She’s asked for sanctuary.”

“Gerry’s my son and heir. You can’t keep him from me.”

“Not indefinitely, no. If you start a legal action, I’m sure you’ll win. But you wouldn’t try to separate him from his mother, would you?”

“If he comes home, she will.”

That was probably true. Merthin was casting around for another way of persuading Ralph when Brother Thomas came in, bringing Alan Fernhill with him. With his one hand, Thomas was holding Alan’s arm, as if to prevent him from running away. “I found him snooping,” he said.

“I was just looking around,” Alan protested. “I thought the monastery was empty.”

Merthin said: “As you see, it’s not. We’ve got one monk, six novices, and a couple of dozen orphan boys.”

Thomas said: “Anyway, he wasn’t in the monastery, he was in the nuns’ cloisters.”

Merthin frowned. He could hear a psalm being sung in the distance. Alan had timed his incursion well: all the nuns and novices were in the cathedral for the service of Sext. Most of the priory buildings were deserted at this hour. Alan had probably been walking around unhindered for some time.

This did not seem like idle curiosity.

Thomas added: “Fortunately, a kitchen hand saw him and came to fetch me out of the church.”

Merthin wondered what Alan had been looking for. Tilly? Surely he would not have dared to snatch her from a nunnery in broad daylight. He turned to Ralph. “What are you two plotting?”

Ralph batted the question off to Alan. “What did you think you were doing?” he said wrathfully, though Merthin thought the anger was faked.

Alan shrugged. “Just looking around while I waited for you.”

It was not plausible. Idle men-at-arms waited for their masters in stables and taverns, not cloisters.

Ralph said: “Well…don’t do it again.”

Merthin realized that Ralph was going to stick with this story. I was honest with him, but he’s not being honest with me, he thought sadly. He returned to the more important subject. “Why don’t you leave Tilly be for a while?” he said to Ralph. “She’ll be perfectly all right here. And perhaps,

after a while, she'll realize you mean her no harm, and come back to you."

"It's too shaming," Ralph said.

"Not really. A noblewoman sometimes spends a few weeks at a monastery, if she feels the need to retire from the world for a while."

"Usually when she's been widowed, or her husband has gone off to war."

"Not always, though."

"When there's no obvious reason, people always say she wants to get away from her husband."

"How bad is that? You might like some time away from your wife."

"Perhaps you're right," Ralph said.

Merthin was startled by this response. He had not expected Ralph to be so easily persuaded. It took him a moment to get over the surprise. Then he said: "That's it. Give her three months, then come back and talk to her." Merthin had a feeling that Tilly would never relent, but at least this proposal would postpone the crisis.

"Three months," said Ralph. "All right." He stood up to go.

Merthin shook his hand. "How are Mother and Father? I haven't seen them for months."

"Getting old. Father doesn't leave their house now."

"I'll come and visit as soon as Caris is better. She's recovering from yellow jaundice."

"Give her my best wishes."

Merthin went to the door and watched Ralph and Alan ride away. He felt deeply disturbed. Ralph was up to something, and it was not simply getting Tilly back.

He returned to his drawing and sat staring at it without seeing it for a long time.

By the end of the second week it was clear that Caris was going to get better. Merthin was exhausted but happy. Feeling like a man reprieved, he put Lolla to bed early and went out for the first time.

It was a mild spring evening, and the sun and balmy air made him light-headed. His own tavern, the Bell, was closed for rebuilding, but the Holly Bush was doing brisk business, customers sitting on benches outside with their tankards. There were so many people out enjoying the weather that Merthin stopped and asked the drinkers if it was a holiday today, thinking he might have lost track of the date. "Every day's a holiday now," one said. "What's the point in working, when we're all going to die of the plague? Have a cup of ale."

"No, thanks." Merthin walked on.

He noticed that many people wore very fancy clothes, elaborate headgear

and embroidered tunics that they would not normally have been able to afford. He presumed they had inherited these garments, or perhaps just taken them from wealthy corpses. The effect was a bit nightmarish: velvet hats on filthy hair, gold threads and food stains, ragged hose and jewel-encrusted shoes.

He saw two men dressed all in women's clothing, floor-length gowns and wimples. They were walking along the main street arm in arm, like merchants' wives showing off their wealth—but they were unmistakably male, with big hands and feet and hair on their chins. Merthin began to feel disoriented, as if nothing could be relied on anymore.

As the dusk thickened, he crossed the bridge to Leper Island. He had built a street of shops and taverns there, between the two parts of the bridge. The work was finished, but the buildings were untenanted, with boards nailed across their doors and windows to keep vagrants out. No one lived there but rabbits. The premises would remain empty until the plague died out, and Kingsbridge returned to normal, Merthin supposed. If the plague never went away, they would never be occupied; but, in that eventuality, renting his property would be the least of his worries.

He returned to the old city just as the gate was closing. There seemed to be a huge party going on at the White Horse Tavern. The house was full of lights, and the crowd filled the road in front of the building. "What's going on?" Merthin asked a drinker.

"Young Davey's got the plague, and he has no heirs to bequeath the inn to, so he's giving all the ale away," the man said, grinning with delight. "Drink as much as you can hold, it's free!"

He and many other people had clearly been working on the same principle, and dozens of them were reeling drunk. Merthin pushed his way into the crowd. Someone was banging a drum and others were dancing. He saw a circle of men and looked over their shoulders to see what they were hiding. A very drunk woman of about twenty years was bending over a table while a man entered her from behind. Several other men were clearly waiting their turn. Merthin turned away in distaste. At the side of the building, half-concealed by empty barrels, his eye lit on Ozzie Ostler, a wealthy horse dealer, kneeling in front of a younger man and sucking his penis. That was against the law, in fact the penalty was death, but clearly no one cared. Ozzie, a married man who was on the parish guild, caught Merthin's eye but did not stop, in fact he continued with more enthusiasm, as if excited by being watched. Merthin shook his head, amazed. Just outside the tavern door was a table laden with partly eaten food: joints of roasted meat, smoked fish, puddings, and cheese. A dog was standing on the table tearing at a ham. A man was throwing up into a bowl of stew. Beside the tavern door Davey Whitehorse sat in a big wooden chair with a huge cup of wine. He was

sneezing and sweating, and the characteristic trickle of blood came from his nose, but he was looking around and cheering the revelers on. He seemed to want to kill himself with drink before the plague finished him off.

Merthin felt nauseated. He left the scene and hurried back to the priory.

To his surprise, he found Caris up and dressed. “I’m better,” she said. “I’m going to return to my usual work tomorrow.” Seeing his skeptical look, she added: “Sister Oonagh said I could.”

“If you’re taking orders from someone else, you can’t be back to normal,” he said; and she laughed. The sight brought tears to his eyes. She had not laughed for two weeks, and there had been moments when he had wondered whether he would ever hear the sound again.

“Where have you been?” she asked.

He told her about his walk around the town, and the disturbing sights he had seen. “None of it was very wicked,” he said. “I just wonder what they’ll do next. When all their inhibitions have gone, will they start to kill one another?”

A kitchen hand brought a tureen of soup for their supper. Caris sipped warily. For a long time, all food had made her feel sick. However, she seemed to find the leek soup palatable, and drank a bowlful.

When the maid had cleared away, Caris said: “While I was ill, I thought a lot about dying.”

“You didn’t ask for a priest.”

“Whether I’ve been good or bad, I don’t think God will be fooled by a last-minute change of heart.”

“What, then?”

“I asked myself if there was anything I really regretted.”

“And was there?”

“Lots of things. I’m bad friends with my sister. I haven’t any children. I lost that scarlet coat my father gave my mother on the day she died.”

“How did you lose it?”

“I wasn’t allowed to bring it with me when I entered the nunnery. I don’t know what happened to it.”

“What was your biggest regret?”

“There were two. I haven’t built my hospital; and I’ve spent too little time in bed with you.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Well, the second one is easily rectified.”

“I know.”

“What about the nuns?”

“Nobody cares anymore. You saw what it was like in the town. Here in the nunnery, we’re too busy dealing with the dying to fuss about the old rules. Joan and Oonagh sleep together every night in one of the upstairs rooms of the hospital. It doesn’t matter.”

Merthin frowned. “It’s odd that they do that, and still go to church services in the middle of the night. How do they reconcile the two things?”

“Listen. St. Luke’s Gospel says: ‘He that hath two coats, let him impart to him that hath none.’ How do you think the bishop of Shiring reconciles that with his chest full of robes? Everybody takes what they like from the teachings of the church, and ignores the parts that don’t suit them.”

“And you?”

“I do the same, but I’m honest about it. So I’m going to live with you, as your wife, and if anyone questions me I shall say that these are strange times.” She got up, went to the door, and barred it. “You’ve been sleeping here for two weeks. Don’t move out.”

“You don’t have to lock me in,” he said with a laugh. “I’ll stay voluntarily.” He put his arms around her.

She said: “We started something a few minutes before I fainted. Tilly interrupted us.”

“You were feverish.”

“In that way, I still am.”

“Perhaps we should pick up where we left off.”

“We could go to bed first.”

“All right.”

Holding hands, they went up the stairs.

71

Ralph and his men hid in the forest north of Kingsbridge, waiting.

It was May, and the evenings were long. When night fell Ralph encouraged the others to take a nap while he sat up, watching.

With him were Alan Fernhill and four hired men, soldiers demobilized from the king’s army, fighters who had failed to find their niche in peacetime. Alan had hired them at the Red Lion in Gloucester. They did not know who Ralph was and had never seen him in daylight. They would do as they were told, take their money, and ask no questions.

Ralph stayed awake, noting the passing of time automatically, as he had when with the king in France. He had found that, if he tried too hard to figure out how many hours had gone by, he became doubtful; but, if he simply guessed, what came into his head was always right. Monks used a burning candle, marked with rings for the hours, or an hourglass with sand or water trickling through a narrow funnel; but Ralph had a better measure in his head.

He sat very still, with his back to a tree, staring into the low fire they had built. He could hear the rustle of small animals in the undergrowth and the

occasional hoot of a predatory owl. He never felt so calm as in the waiting hours before action. There was quiet, and darkness, and time to think. The knowledge of danger to come, which made most men jumpy, actually soothed him.

The main risk tonight did not in fact come from the hazards of fighting. There would be some hand-to-hand combat, but the enemy would consist of fat townsmen or soft-skinned monks. The real peril was that Ralph might be recognized. What he was about to do was shocking. It would be talked of with outrage in every church in the land, perhaps in Europe. Gregory Longfellow, for whom Ralph was doing this, would be the loudest in condemning it. If the fact ever got out that Ralph was the villain, he would be hanged.

But if he succeeded, he would be the earl of Shiring.

When he judged it was two hours past midnight, he roused the others.

They left their tethered horses and walked out of the woodland and along the road to the city. Alan was carrying the equipment, as he always had when they fought in France. He had a short ladder, a coil of rope, and a grappling iron they had used when attacking city walls in Normandy. In his belt were a mason's chisel and a hammer. They might not need these tools, but they had learned that it was best to be prepared.

Alan also had several large sacks, rolled up tightly and tied with string in a bundle.

When they came within sight of the city, Ralph gave out hoods with holes for the eyes and mouth, and they all put them on. Ralph also wore a mitten on his left hand, to conceal the telltale stumps of his three missing fingers. He was completely unrecognizable—unless, of course, he should be captured.

They all pulled felt bags over their boots, tying them to their knees, to muffle their footsteps.

It was hundreds of years since Kingsbridge had been attacked by an army, and security was slack, especially since the advent of the plague. Nevertheless, the southern entrance to the town was firmly closed. At the townward end of Merthin's great bridge was a stone gatehouse barred with a mighty wooden door. But the river defended the town only on the east and south sides. To the north and west no bridge was needed, and the town was protected by a wall that was in poor repair. That was why Ralph was approaching from the north.

Mean houses huddled outside the walls like dogs at the back of a butcher's shop. Alan had scouted the route several days ago, when the two of them had come to Kingsbridge and inquired about Tilly. Now Ralph and the hired men followed Alan, padding between the hovels as quietly as possible. Even paupers in the suburbs could raise the alarm if awakened. A dog barked, and Ralph tensed, but someone cursed the animal and it fell silent. In another moment they came to a place where the wall was broken down and they could

easily clamber over the fallen stones.

They found themselves in a narrow alley behind some warehouses. It came out just inside the north gate of the city. At the gate, Ralph knew, was a sentry in a booth. The six men approached silently. Although they were now within the walls, a sentry would question them if he saw them, and shout for help if he was not satisfied with their answers. But, to Ralph's relief, the man was fast asleep, sitting on a stool and leaning against the side of his box, a stub of candle guttering on a shelf beside him.

All the same, Ralph decided not to risk the man's waking up. He tiptoed close, leaned into the booth, and slit the sentry's throat with a long knife. The man woke up and tried to scream with pain, but all that came out of his mouth was blood. As he slumped, Ralph caught him and held him for the few moments it took him to lose consciousness. Then he propped the body back up against the wall of the booth.

He wiped his bloody blade on the dead man's tunic and sheathed the knife.

The large double door that stopped the gateway had within it a smaller, man-size doorway. Ralph unbarred this little door, ready for a quick getaway later.

The six men walked silently along the street that led to the priory.

There was no moon—Ralph had chosen tonight for that reason—but they were faintly lit by starlight. He looked anxiously at the upstairs windows of the houses on either side. If sleepless people happened to look out, they would see the unmistakably sinister sight of six masked men. Fortunately it was not quite warm enough to leave windows open at night, and all the shutters were closed. Just the same, Ralph pulled up the hood of his cloak and dragged it forward as far as it would go, in the hope of shadowing his face and concealing the mask; then he signed to the others to do the same.

This was the city where he had spent his adolescence, and the streets were familiar. His brother, Merthin, still lived here, although Ralph was not sure exactly where.

They went down the main street, past the Holly Bush, closed for the night and locked up hours ago. They turned into the cathedral close. The entrance had tall ironbound timber gates, but they stood open, not having been closed for years, their hinges rusted and seized up.

The priory was dark except for a dim light in the windows of the hospital. Ralph reckoned this would be the time when the monks and nuns were sleeping most deeply. In an hour or so they would be wakened for the service of Matins, which started and finished before dawn.

Alan, who had reconnoitered the priory, led the team around the north side of the church. They walked silently through the graveyard and past the prior's palace, then turned along the narrow strip of land that divided the east

end of the cathedral from the riverbank. Alan propped his short ladder up against a blank wall and whispered: “Nuns’ cloisters. Follow me.”

He went up the wall and over the roof. His feet made little noise on the slates. Happily, he did not need to use the grappling iron, which might have made an alarming clang.

The others followed, Ralph last.

On the inside, they dropped from the roof and landed with soft thumps on the turf of the quadrangle. Once there, Ralph looked warily at the regular stone columns of the cloisters around him. The arches seemed to stare at him like watchmen, but nothing stirred. It was a good thing monks and nuns were not allowed to have pet dogs.

Alan led them around the deep-shadowed walkway and through a heavy door. “Kitchen,” he whispered. The room was dimly lit by the embers of a big fire. “Move slowly so that you don’t knock over any pots.”

Ralph waited, letting his eyes adjust. Soon he could make out the outlines of a big table, several barrels, and a stack of cooking vessels. “Find somewhere to sit or lie down, and try to make yourselves comfortable,” he said to them. “We stay here until they all get up and go into the church.”

Peering out of the kitchen an hour later, Ralph counted the nuns and novices shuffling out of the dormitory and heading through the cloisters toward the cathedral, some carrying lamps that threw antic shadows on the vaulted ceiling. “Twenty-five,” he whispered to Alan. As he had expected, Tilly was not among them. Visiting noblewomen were not expected to attend services in the middle of the night.

When they had all disappeared, he moved. The others remained behind.

There were only two places where Tilly might be sleeping: the hospital and the nuns’ dormitory. Ralph had guessed she would feel safer in the dormitory, and headed there first.

He went softly up the stone steps, his boots still muffled by felt overshoes. He peeped into the dorm. It was lit by a single candle. He was hoping that all the nuns would be in the church, for he did not want miscellaneous people confusing the situation. He was afraid one or two might have stayed behind, because of illness or laziness. But the room was empty—not even Tilly was there. He was about to retreat when he saw a door at the far end.

He padded the length of the dormitory, picking up the candle, and went through the door silently. The unsteady light revealed the young head of his wife on a pillow, her hair in disarray around her face. She looked so innocent and pretty that Ralph felt a stab of remorse, and had to remind himself of how much he hated her for standing in the way of his advancement.

The baby, his son Gerry, lay in a crib next to her, eyes closed, mouth

open, sleeping peacefully.

Ralph crept closer and, with a swift movement, clamped his right hand hard over Tilly's mouth, waking her and at the same time stopping her making any noise.

Tilly opened her eyes wide and stared at him in dread.

He put the candle down. In his pocket he had an assortment of useful odds and ends, including rags and leather thongs. He stuffed a rag into Tilly's mouth to keep her quiet. Despite his mask and glove, he had a feeling she recognized him, even though he had not spoken. Perhaps she could smell him, like a dog. It did not matter. She was not going to tell anyone.

He tied her hands and feet with leather thongs. She was not struggling now, but she would later. He checked that her gag was secure. Then he settled down to wait.

He could hear the singing from the church: a strong choir of females and a ragged few male voices trying to match them. Tilly kept staring at him with big, pleading eyes. He turned her over so that he could not see her face.

She had guessed he was going to kill her. She had read his mind. She must be a witch. Perhaps all women were witches. Anyway, she had known his intention almost as soon as he had formed it. She had started to watch him, especially in the evenings, her fearful eyes following him around the room, no matter what he did. She had lain stiff and alert beside him at night while he fell asleep, and in the mornings when he awoke she was invariably up already. Then, after a few days of this, she had disappeared. Ralph and Alan had searched for her without success, then he had heard a rumor that she had taken refuge in Kingsbridge Priory.

Which happened to fit in with his plans very neatly.

The baby snuffled in his sleep, and it occurred to Ralph that he might cry. What if the nuns came back just then? He thought it through. One or two would probably come in here to see if Tilly needed help. He would just kill them, he decided. It would not be the first time. He had killed nuns in France.

At last he heard them shuffling back into the dormitory.

Alan would be watching from the kitchen, counting them as they returned. When they were all safely inside the room, Alan and the other four men would draw their swords and make their move.

Ralph lifted Tilly to her feet. Her face was streaked with tears. He turned her so that her back was to him, then put an arm around her waist and lifted her, hoisting her onto his hip. She was as light as a child.

He drew his long dagger.

From outside, he heard a man say: "Silence, or you die!" It was Alan, he knew, although the hood muffled the voice.

This was a crucial moment. There were other people on the premises—nuns and patients in the hospital, monks in their own quarters—and Ralph did

not want them to appear and complicate matters.

Despite Alan's warning, there were several shouts of shock and shrieks of fear—but, Ralph thought, not too loud. So far, so good.

He threw open the door and stepped into the dormitory carrying Tilly on his hip.

He could see by the light of the nuns' lamps. At the far end of the room, Alan had a woman in his grasp, his knife to her throat, in the same pose as Ralph with Tilly. Two more men stood behind Alan. The other two hirelings would be on guard at the foot of the stairs.

"Listen to me," Ralph said.

When he spoke, Tilly jerked convulsively. She had recognized his voice. But that did not matter so long as no one else did.

There was a terrified silence.

Ralph said: "Which of you is treasurer?"

No one spoke.

Ralph touched the edge of his blade to the skin of Tilly's throat. She began to struggle, but she was too small, and he held her easily. Now, he thought, now is the time to kill her; but he hesitated. He had killed many people, women as well as men, but suddenly it seemed terrible to stick a knife into the warm body of someone he had embraced and kissed and slept with, the woman who had borne his child.

Also, he told himself, the effect on the nuns would be more shocking if one of their own died.

He nodded to Alan.

With one strong cut, Alan slit the throat of the nun he was holding. Blood gushed out of her neck onto the floor.

Someone screamed.

It was not merely a cry or a shriek, but a fortissimo yell of pure terror that might have awakened the dead, and it went on until one of the hired men hit the screamer a mighty blow over her head with his club and she fell unconscious to the floor, blood trickling down her cheek.

Ralph said again: "Which of you is treasurer?"

Merthin had woken up briefly when the bell rang for Matins and Caris slipped out of bed. As usual, he turned over and fell into a light doze, so that when she returned it seemed as if she had been away only for a minute or two. She was cold when she got back into bed, and he drew her to him and wrapped his arms around her. They often stayed awake for a while, talking, and usually made love before going to sleep. It was Merthin's favorite time.

She pressed up against him, her breasts squashed comfortably against his chest. He kissed her forehead. When she had warmed up, he reached between

her legs and gently stroked the soft hair there.

But she was feeling talkative. “Did you hear yesterday’s rumor? Outlaws in the woods north of town.”

“It seems a bit unlikely,” he said.

“I don’t know. The walls are decrepit on that side.”

“But what are they going to steal? Anything they want is theirs for the taking. If they need meat, there are thousands of sheep and cattle unguarded in the fields, with no one to claim ownership.”

“That’s what makes it strange.”

“These days, stealing is like leaning over the fence to breathe your neighbor’s air.”

She sighed. “Three months ago I thought this terrible plague was over.”

“How many more people have we lost?”

“We’ve buried a thousand since Easter.”

That seemed about right to Merthin. “I hear that other towns are similar.”

He felt her hair move against his shoulder as she nodded in the dark. She said: “I believe something like a quarter of the population of England is gone already.”

“And more than half the priests.”

“That’s because they make contact with so many people every time they hold a service. They can hardly escape.”

“So half the churches are closed.”

“A good thing, if you ask me. I’m sure crowds spread the plague faster than anything.”

“Anyway, most people have lost respect for religion.”

To Caris, that was no great tragedy. She said: “Perhaps they’ll stop believing in mumbo-jumbo medicine, and start thinking about what treatments actually make a difference.”

“You say that, but it’s hard for ordinary people to know what is a genuine cure and what a false remedy.”

“I’ll give you four rules.”

He smiled in the dark. She always had a list. “All right.”

“One: If there are dozens of different remedies for a complaint, you can be sure none of them works.”

“Why?”

“Because if one worked, people would forget the rest.”

“Logical.”

“Two: Just because a remedy is unpleasant doesn’t mean it’s any good. Raw larks’ brains do nothing for a sore throat, even though they make you heave; whereas a nice cup of hot water and honey will soothe you.”

“That’s good to know.”

“Three: Human and animal dung never does anyone any good. It usually

makes them worse.”

“I’m relieved to hear it.”

“Four: If the remedy looks like the disease—the spotted feathers of a thrush for the pox, say, or sheep’s urine for yellow jaundice—it’s probably imaginative rubbish.”

“You should write a book about this.”

She made a scornful noise. “Universities prefer ancient Greek texts.”

“Not a book for university students. One for people like you—nuns and midwives and barbers and wise women.”

“Wise women and midwives can’t read.”

“Some can, and others have people who can read for them.”

“I suppose people might like a little book that tells them what to do about the plague.”

She was thoughtful for a few moments.

In the silence, there was a scream.

“What was that?” Merthin said.

“It sounded like a shrew being caught by an owl,” she said.

“No, it didn’t,” he said, and he got up.

One of the nuns stepped forward and addressed Ralph. She was young—they were nearly all young—with black hair and blue eyes. “Please don’t hurt Tilly,” she begged. “I’m Sister Joan, the treasurer. We’ll give you anything you want. Please don’t do any more violence.”

“I am Tam Hiding,” Ralph said. “Where are the keys to the nuns’ treasury?”

“I have them here on my belt.”

“Take me there.”

Joan hesitated. Perhaps she sensed that Ralph did not know where the treasury was. On their reconnaissance trip, Alan had been able to scout the nunnery quite thoroughly before he was caught. He had plotted their way in, identified the kitchen as a good hiding place, and located the nuns’ dormitory; but he had not been able to find the treasury. Clearly Joan did not want to reveal its location.

Ralph had no time to lose. He did not know who might have heard that scream. He pressed the point of his knife into Tilly’s throat until it drew blood. “I want to go to the treasury,” he said.

“All right, just don’t hurt Tilly! I’ll show you the way.”

“I thought you would,” Ralph said.

He left two of the hired men in the dormitory to keep the nuns quiet. He and Alan followed Joan down the steps to the cloisters, taking Tilly.

At the foot of the stairs, the other two hired men were detaining at

knifepoint three more nuns. Ralph guessed that those on duty in the hospital had come to investigate the scream. He was pleased: another threat had been neutralized. But where were the monks?

He sent the extra nuns up into the dormitory. He left one hired man on guard at the foot of the stairs and took the other with him.

Joan led them into the refectory, which was at ground level directly under the dorm. Her flickering lamp revealed trestle tables, benches, a lectern, and a wall painting of Jesus at a wedding feast.

At the far end of the room Joan moved a table to reveal a trapdoor in the floor. It had a keyhole just like a normal upright door. She turned a key in the lock and lifted the trapdoor. It gave onto a narrow spiral of stone steps. She descended the stairs. Ralph left the hired man on guard and went down, awkwardly carrying Tilly, and Alan followed him.

Ralph reached the bottom of the staircase and looked around him with a satisfied air. This was the holy of holies, the nuns' secret treasury. It was a cramped underground room like a dungeon, but better built: the walls were of ashlar, smoothly squared-off stones as used in the cathedral, and the floor was paved with closely set flagstones. The air felt cool and dry. Ralph put Tilly, trussed like a chicken, on the floor.

Most of the room was taken up by a huge lidded box, like a coffin for a giant, chained to a ring in the wall. There was not much else: two stools, a writing desk, and a shelf bearing a stack of parchment rolls, presumably the nunnery's account books. On a hook on the wall hung two heavy wool coats, and Ralph guessed they were for the treasurer and her assistant to wear when working down here in the coldest months of the winter.

The box was far too large to have come down the staircase. It must have been brought here in pieces and assembled in situ. Ralph pointed to the clasp, and Joan unlocked it with another of the keys on her belt.

Ralph looked inside. There were scores more parchment rolls, obviously all the charters and title deeds that proved the nunnery's ownership of its property and rights; a pile of leather and wool bags that undoubtedly held jeweled ornaments; and another, smaller chest that probably contained money.

At this point he had to be subtle. His object was those charters, but he did not want that to be apparent. He had to steal them, but appear not to have done so.

He ordered Joan to open the small chest. It contained a few gold coins. Ralph was puzzled by how little money there was. Perhaps more was hidden somewhere in this room, possibly behind stones in the wall. However, he did not stop to ponder: he was only pretending to be interested in the money. He poured the coins into the purse at his belt. Meanwhile, Alan unrolled a capacious sack and began filling it with cathedral ornaments.

Having let Joan see that, Ralph ordered her back up the stairs.

Tilly was still here, watching with wide, terrified eyes, but it did not matter what she saw. She would never have a chance to tell.

Ralph unrolled another sack and began loading the parchment rolls into it as fast as he could.

When they had bagged everything, Ralph told Alan to break up the wooden chests with his hammer and chisel. He took the wool coats from the hook, bundled them up, and held the tip of his candle flame to the bundle. The wool caught fire immediately. He piled wood from the chests on top of the burning wool. Soon there was a merry bonfire, and the smoke caught in his throat.

He looked at Tilly, lying helpless on the floor. He drew his knife. Then, once again, he hesitated.

From the prior's palace, a small door led directly into the chapter house, which itself communicated with the north transept of the cathedral. Merthin and Caris took this route in their search for the source of the scream. The chapter house was empty, and they went into the church. Their single candle was too dim to illuminate the vast interior, but they stood in the center of the crossing and listened hard.

They heard the click of a latch.

Merthin said: "Who's there?" and was ashamed of the fear that made his voice tremble.

"Brother Thomas," they heard.

The voice came from the south transept. A moment later Thomas moved into the light of their candle. "I thought I heard someone scream," he said.

"So did we. But there's no one here in the church."

"Let's look around."

"What about the novices, and the boys?"

"I told them to go back to sleep."

They passed through the south transept into the monks' cloisters. Once again they saw no one and heard nothing. From here, they followed a passage through the kitchen stores to the hospital. The patients lay in their beds as normal, some sleeping and some moving and groaning in pain—but, Merthin realized after a moment, there were no nuns in the room.

"This is strange," said Caris.

The scream might have come from here, but there was no sign of emergency, or of any kind of disturbance.

They went into the kitchen, which was deserted, as they would have expected.

Thomas sniffed deeply, as if trying to pick up a scent.

Merthin said: "What is it?" He found himself whispering.

“Monks are clean,” Thomas murmured in reply. “Someone dirty has been here.”

Merthin could not smell anything unusual.

Thomas picked up a cleaver, the kind a cook would use to chop through meat and bones.

They went to the kitchen door. Thomas held up the stump of his left arm in a warning gesture and they halted. There was a faint light in the nuns’ cloisters. It seemed to be coming from the recess at the near end. It was the reflected gleam of a distant candle, Merthin guessed. It might be coming from the nuns’ refectory, or from the flight of stone steps that led up to their dormitory; or both.

Thomas stepped out of his sandals and went forward, his bare feet making no sound on the flagstones. He melted into the shadows of the cloister. Merthin could just about make him out as he edged toward the recess.

A faint but pungent aroma came to Merthin’s nose. It was not the smell of dirty bodies that Thomas had detected in the kitchen, but something quite different and new. A moment later Merthin identified it as smoke.

Thomas must have picked it up, too, for he froze in place up against the wall.

Someone unseen gave a grunt of surprise, then a figure stepped out from the recess into the cloister walk, faintly but clearly visible, the weak light outlining the silhouette of a man with some kind of hood covering his entire head and face. The man turned toward the refectory door.

Thomas struck.

The cleaver glinted briefly in the dark, then there was a sickening thud as it sank into the man’s body. He gave a shout of terror and pain. As he fell Thomas swung again, and the man’s cry turned into a sickening gurgle then stopped. He hit the stone pavement with a lifeless thump.

Beside Merthin, Caris gasped with horror.

Merthin ran forward. “What’s going on?” he cried.

Thomas turned to him, making go-back motions with the cleaver. “Quiet!” he hissed.

The light changed in a heartbeat. Suddenly the cloisters were illuminated with the bright glow of a flame.

Someone came running out of the refectory with a heavy tread. It was a big man carrying a sack in one hand and a blazing torch in the other. He looked like a ghost, until Merthin realized he was wearing a crude hood with holes for the eyes and mouth.

Thomas stepped in front of the running man and raised his cleaver. But he was a moment too late. Before he could strike, the man cannoned into him, sending him flying.

Thomas crashed into a pillar, and there was a crack that sounded like his

head hitting the stone. He slumped to the ground, out cold. The running man lost his balance and fell to his knees.

Caris pushed past Merthin and knelt beside Thomas.

Several more men appeared, all hooded, some carrying torches. It seemed to Merthin that some emerged from the refectory and others came down the stairs from the dorm. At the same time he heard the sound of women screaming and wailing. For a moment the scene was chaos.

Merthin rushed to Caris's side and tried to protect her, with his body, from the stampede.

The intruders saw their fallen comrade and they all paused in their rush, suddenly shocked into stillness. By the light of their torches they could see that he was unquestionably dead, his neck sliced almost all the way through, his blood spilled copiously over the stone floor of the cloisters. They looked around, moving their heads from side to side, peering through the holes in their hoods, looking like fish in a stream.

One of them spotted Thomas's cleaver, red with blood, lying on the ground next to Thomas and Caris, and pointed at it to show the others. With a grunt of anger, he drew a sword.

Merthin was terrified for Caris. He stepped forward, attracting the swordsman's attention. The man moved toward Merthin and raised his weapon. Merthin retreated, drawing the man away from Caris. As the danger to her receded, he felt more frightened for himself. Walking backward, shaking with fear, he slipped on the dead man's blood. His feet flew from under him and he fell flat on his back.

The swordsman stood over him, weapon raised high to kill him.

Then one of the others intervened. He was the tallest of the intruders, and moved with surprising speed. With his left hand, he grabbed the upraised arm of Merthin's assailant. He must have had authority, for without speaking he simply shook his hooded head from side to side in negation, and the swordsman lowered his weapon obediently.

Merthin noticed that his savior wore a mitten on his left hand, but nothing on the right.

The interaction lasted only as long as it might take a man to count to ten, and ended as suddenly as it had begun. One of the hooded men turned toward the kitchen and broke into a run, and the others followed. They must have planned to escape that way, Merthin realized: the kitchen had a door that gave onto the cathedral green, and that was the quickest way out. They disappeared, and without the blaze of their torches the cloisters went dark.

Merthin stood still, unsure what to do. Should he run after the intruders, go up to the dormitory and find out why the nuns were screaming, or find out where the fire was?

He knelt beside Caris. “Is Thomas alive?” he said.

“I think he’s banged his head, and he’s unconscious, but he’s breathing, and there’s no blood.”

Behind him, Merthin heard the familiar voice of Sister Joan. “Help me, please!” He turned. She stood in the doorway of the refectory, her face lit up grotesquely by the candle lamp in her hand, her head wreathed in smoke like a fashionable hat. “For God’s sake, come quickly!”

He stood up. Joan disappeared back into the refectory, and Merthin ran after her.

Her lamp threw confusing shadows, but he managed to avoid falling over the furniture as he followed her to the end of the room. Smoke was pouring from a hole in the floor. Merthin saw immediately that the hole was the work of a careful builder: it was perfectly square, with neat edges and a well-made trapdoor. He guessed this was the nuns’ hidden treasury, built in secrecy by Jeremiah. But tonight’s thieves had found it.

He got a lungful of smoke, and coughed. He wondered what was burning down there, and why, but he had no intention of finding out—it looked too dangerous.

Then Joan screamed at him: “Tilly is in there!”

“Dear God,” Merthin said despairingly; and he went down the steps.

He had to hold his breath. He peered through the smoke. Despite his fear, his builder’s eye noticed that the spiral stone staircase was well made, each step exactly the same size and shape, and each set at precisely the same angle to the next; so that he was able to go down with confidence even when he could not see what was underfoot.

In a second he reached the underground chamber. He could see flames near the middle of the room. The heat was intense, and he knew he would not be able to stand it for more than a few instants. The smoke was thick. He was still holding his breath, but now his eyes began to water, and his vision blurred. He wiped his eyes with his sleeve and peered into the murk. Where was Tilly? He could not see the floor.

He dropped to his knees. Visibility improved slightly: the smoke was less dense lower down. He moved around on all fours, staring into the corners of the room, sweeping with his hands where he could not see. “Tilly!” he shouted. “Tilly, where are you?” The smoke caught in his throat, and he suffered a coughing fit that would have drowned any reply she made.

He could not last any longer. He was coughing convulsively, but every breath seemed to choke him with more smoke. His eyes watered copiously and he was nearly blind. In desperation, he went so close to the fire that the flames began to singe his sleeve. If he collapsed and lost consciousness, he would die for certain.

Then his hand touched flesh.

He grabbed. It was a human leg, a small leg, a girl’s leg. He pulled her

toward him. Her clothes were smoldering. He could hardly see her face and could not tell whether she was conscious, but she was tied hand and foot with leather thongs, so she could not move of her own accord. Striving to stop coughing, he got his arms under her and picked her up.

As soon as he stood upright the smoke became blindingly thick. Suddenly he could not remember which way the stairs were. He staggered away from the flames and crashed into the wall, almost dropping Tilly. Left or right? He went left and came to a corner. Changing his mind, he retraced his steps.

He felt as if he was drowning. His strength gone, he dropped to his knees. That saved him. Once again he found he could see better close to the floor, and a stone step appeared, like a vision from Heaven, right in front of him.

Desperately holding on to the limp form of Tilly, he moved forward on his knees and made it to the staircase. With a last effort, he got to his feet. He put one foot on the lowest step and hauled himself up; then he managed the next step. Coughing uncontrollably, he forced himself upward until there were no more steps. He staggered, fell to his knees, dropped Tilly, and collapsed on the refectory floor.

Someone bent over him. He spluttered: “Close the trapdoor—stop the fire!” A moment later he heard a bang as the wooden door slammed shut.

He was grabbed under the arms. He opened his eyes for a moment and saw Caris’s face, upside-down; then his vision blurred. She dragged him across the floor. The smoke thinned and he began to suck air into his lungs. He sensed the transition from indoors to out, and tasted clean night air. Caris put him down and he heard her footsteps run back inside.

He gasped, coughed, gasped, and coughed. Slowly he began to breathe more normally. His eyes stopped watering, and he saw that dawn was breaking. The faint light showed him a crowd of nuns standing around him.

He sat upright. Caris and another nun dragged Tilly out of the refectory and put her beside him. Caris bent over her. Merthin tried to speak, coughed, and tried again. “How is she?”

“She’s been stabbed through the heart,” Caris said. She began to cry. “She was dead before you got to her.”

72

Merthin opened his eyes to bright daylight. He had slept late: the angle of the sun’s rays shining through the bedroom window told him it was the middle of the morning. He recalled the events of the previous night like a bad dream, and for a moment he cherished the thought that they might not really have happened. But his chest hurt when he breathed, and the skin of his face

was painfully scorched. The horror of Tilly's murder came back to him. And Sister Nellie, too—both innocent young women. How could God permit such things to happen?

He realized what had awakened him when his eye lit on Caris, putting a tray down on the small table near the bed. Her back was to him but he could tell, by the hunch of her shoulders and the set of her head, that she was angry. It was not surprising. She was grieving for Tilly, and enraged that the sanctity and safety of the nunnery had been violated.

Merthin got up. Caris pulled two stools to the table and they both sat down. He studied her face fondly. There were lines of strain around her eyes. He wondered if she had slept. There was a smear of ash on her left cheek, so he licked his thumb and gently wiped it off.

She had brought new bread with fresh butter and a jug of cider. Merthin found he was hungry and thirsty, and he tucked in. Caris, bottling up fury, ate nothing.

Through a mouthful of bread Merthin said: "How is Thomas this morning?"

"He's lying down in the hospital. His head hurts, but he can talk coherently and answer questions, so there's probably no permanent damage to his brain."

"Good. There will have to be an inquest on Tilly and Nellie."

"I've sent a message to the sheriff of Shiring."

"They will probably blame it on Tam Hiding."

"Tam Hiding is dead."

He nodded. He knew what was coming. His spirits had been lifted by the breakfast, but now they sank again. He swallowed and pushed away his plate.

Caris went on: "Whoever it was that came here last night, he wanted to conceal his identity, so he told a lie—not knowing that Tam died in my hospital three months ago."

"Who do you think it could have been?"

"Someone we know—hence the masks."

"Perhaps."

"Outlaws don't wear masks."

It was true. Living outside the law, they did not care who knew about them and the crimes they committed. Last night's intruders were different. The masks strongly suggested they were respected citizens who were afraid of being recognized.

Caris went on with merciless logic. "They killed Nellie to make Joan open up the treasury—but they had no need to kill Tilly: they were already inside the treasury by then. They wanted her dead for some other reason. And they were not content to leave her to be suffocated by smoke and burned to death: they also stabbed her fatally. For some reason, they had to be sure she

was dead.”

“What does that tell you?”

Caris did not answer the question. “Tilly thought Ralph wanted to kill her.”

“I know.”

“One of the hooded men was about to do away with you, at one point.” Her voice caught in her throat, and she had to stop. She took a sip of Merthin’s cider, composing herself; then she went on. “But the leader stopped him. Why would he do that? They had already murdered a nun and a noblewoman—why scruple to kill a mere builder?”

“You think it was Ralph.”

“Don’t you?”

“Yes.” Merthin sighed heavily. “Did you see his mitten?”

“I noticed he was wearing gloves.”

Merthin shook his head. “Only one. On his left hand. Not a glove with fingers, but a mitten.”

“To hide his injury.”

“I can’t be sure, and we certainly couldn’t prove anything, but I have a dreadful conviction about it.”

Caris stood up. “Let’s inspect the damage.”

They went to the nuns’ cloisters. The novices and the orphans were cleaning the treasury, bringing sacks of charred wood and ashes up the spiral staircase, giving anything not completely destroyed to Sister Joan and carrying the detritus out to the dunghill.

Laid out on a refectory table Merthin saw the cathedral ornaments: gold and silver candlesticks, crucifixes and vessels, all finely wrought and studded with precious stones. He was surprised. “Didn’t they take these?” he said.

“Yes—but they seem to have had second thoughts, and dumped them in a ditch outside town. A peasant on his way in with eggs to sell found them this morning. Luckily he was honest.”

Merthin picked up a gold aquamanile, a jug for washing the hands, made in the shape of a cockerel, the feathers of its neck beautifully chased. “It’s hard to sell something like this. Only a few people could afford to buy it, and most of those would guess it had been stolen.”

“The thieves could have melted it down and sold the gold.”

“Obviously they decided that was too much trouble.”

“Perhaps.”

She was not convinced. Nor was Merthin: his own explanation did not quite fit. The robbery had been carefully planned, that was evident. So why would the thieves not have made up their minds in advance about the ornaments? Either to take them or leave them behind?

Caris and Merthin went down the steps and into the chamber, Merthin’s

stomach clenching in fear as he was grimly reminded of last night's ordeal. More novices were cleaning the walls and floor with mops and buckets.

Caris sent the novices away to take a break. When she and Merthin were alone, she picked up a length of wood from a shelf and used it to prize up one of the flagstones underfoot. Merthin had not previously noticed that the stone was not fitted as tightly as most, having a narrow gap all around it. Now he saw that underneath was a spacious vault containing a wooden box. Caris reached into the hole and pulled out the box. She opened it with a key from her belt. It was full of gold coins.

Merthin was surprised. "They missed that!"

"There are three more concealed vaults," Caris told him. "Another in the floor and two in the walls. They missed them all."

"They can't have looked very hard. Most treasuries have hiding places. People know that."

"Especially robbers."

"So maybe the cash wasn't their first priority."

"Exactly." Caris locked the chest and put it back in its vault.

"If they didn't want the ornaments, and they weren't sufficiently interested in cash to search the treasury thoroughly for hidden vaults, why did they come here at all?"

"To kill Tilly. The robbery was a cover."

Merthin thought about that. "They didn't need an elaborate cover story," he said after a pause. "If all they wanted was to kill Tilly, they could have done it in the dormitory and been far away from here by the time the nuns got back from Matins. If they had done it carefully—suffocated her with a feather pillow, say—we would not even have been sure she had been murdered. It would have looked as if she had died in her sleep."

"Then there's no explanation for the attack. They ended up with next to nothing—a few gold coins."

Merthin looked around the underground chamber. "Where are the charters?" he said.

"They must have burned. It doesn't much matter. I've got copies of everything."

"Parchment doesn't burn very well."

"I've never tried to light it."

"It smolders, shrinks and distorts, but it doesn't catch fire."

"Perhaps the charters have been retrieved from the debris."

"Let's check."

They climbed back up the steps and left the vault. Outside in the cloisters, Caris asked Joan: "Have you found any parchment among the ashes?"

She shook her head. "Nothing at all."

"Could you have missed it?"

“I don’t think so—not unless it has burned to cinders.”

“Merthin says it doesn’t burn.” She turned to him. “Who would want our charters? They’re no use to anyone else.”

Merthin followed the thread of his own logic, just to see where it might lead. “Suppose there’s a document that you’ve got—or you *might* have, or they *think* you might have—and they want it.”

“What could it be?”

Merthin frowned. “Documents are intended to be public. The whole point of writing something down is so that people can look at it in the future. A secret document is a strange thing…” Then he thought of something.

He drew Caris away from Joan, and walked casually around the cloisters with her until he was sure they could not be overheard. Then he said: “But, of course, we do know of one secret document.”

“The letter Thomas buried in the forest.”

“Yes.”

“But why would anyone imagine it might be in the nunnery’s treasury?”

“Well, think. Has anything happened lately that might arouse such a suspicion?”

A look of dismay came over Caris’s face. “Oh, my soul,” she exclaimed.

“There is something.”

“I told you about Lynn Grange being given to us by Queen Isabella for accepting Thomas, all those years ago.”

“Did you speak to anyone else about it?”

“Yes—the bailiff of Lynn. And Thomas was angry that I had done so, and said there would be dire consequences.”

“So someone is afraid you might have got hold of Thomas’s secret letter.”

“Ralph?”

“I don’t think Ralph is aware of the letter. I was the only one of us children who saw Thomas burying it. He’s certainly never mentioned it. Ralph must be acting on behalf of someone else.”

Caris looked scared. “Queen Isabella?”

“Or the king himself.”

“Is it possible that the king ordered Ralph to invade a nunnery?”

“Not personally, no. He would have used an intermediary, someone loyal, ambitious, and with absolutely no scruples. I came across such men in Florence, hanging around the doge’s palace. They’re the scum of the earth.”

“I wonder who it was.”

“I think I can guess,” said Merthin.

Gregory Longfellow met Ralph and Alan two days later at Wigleigh, in the small timber manor house. Wigleigh was more discreet than Tench. At Tench

Hall there were too many people watching Ralph's every move: servants, followers, his parents. Here in Wigleigh the peasants had their own backbreaking business to do, and no one would question Ralph about the contents of the sack Alan was carrying.

"I gather it went off as planned," Gregory said. News of the invasion of the nunnery had spread all over the county in no time.

"No great difficulty," Ralph said. He was a bit let down by Gregory's muted reaction. After all the trouble that had been taken to get the charters, Gregory might have shown some elation.

"The sheriff has announced an inquest, of course," Gregory said dourly.

"They'll blame it on outlaws."

"You were not recognized?"

"We wore hoods."

Gregory looked at Ralph strangely. "I did not know that your wife was at the nunnery."

"A useful coincidence," Ralph said. "It enabled me to kill two birds with one stone."

The strange look intensified. What was the lawyer thinking? Was he going to pretend to be shocked that Ralph had killed his wife? If so, Ralph was ready to point out that Gregory was complicit in everything that had happened at the nunnery—he had been the instigator. He had no right to judge. Ralph waited for Gregory to speak. But, after a long pause, all he said was: "Let's have a look at these charters."

They sent the housekeeper, Vira, on a lengthy errand, and Ralph made Alan stand at the door to keep out casual callers. Then Gregory tipped the charters out of the sack onto the table. He made himself comfortable and began to examine them. Some were rolled and tied with string, others bundled flat, a few sewn together in booklets. He opened one, read a few lines in the strong sunlight coming through the open windows, then threw the charter back into the sack and picked up another.

Ralph had no idea what Gregory was looking for. He had only said that it might embarrass the king. Ralph could not imagine what kind of document Caris might possess that would embarrass a king.

He got bored watching Gregory read, but he was not going to leave. He had delivered what Gregory wanted, and he was going to sit here until Gregory confirmed his half of the deal.

The tall lawyer worked his way patiently through the documents. One caught his attention, and he read it all the way through, but then he threw it in the sack with the others.

Ralph and Alan had spent most of the last week in Bristol. It was not likely that they would be asked to account for their movements, but they had taken precautions anyway. They had caroused at taverns every evening except

the night they went to Kingsbridge. Their companions would remember the free drinks, but probably would not recall that on one night of the week Ralph and Alan had been absent—or, if they did, they certainly would not know whether it was the fourth Wednesday after Easter or the Thursday but two before Whitsun.

At last the table was clear and the sack was full again. Ralph said: “Did you not find what you were looking for?”

Gregory did not answer the question. “You brought everything?”

“Everything.”

“Good.”

“So you haven’t found it?”

Gregory chose his words carefully, as always. “The specific item is not here. However, I did come across a deed that may explain why this…issue… has arisen in recent months.”

“So you’re satisfied,” Ralph persisted.

“Yes.”

“And the king need no longer be anxious.”

Gregory looked impatient. “You should not concern yourself with the king’s anxieties. I’ll do that.”

“Then I can expect my reward immediately.”

“Oh, yes,” said Gregory. “You shall be the earl of Shiring by harvesttime.”

Ralph felt a glow of satisfaction. The earl of Shiring—at last. He had won the prize he had always longed for, and his father was still alive to hear the news. “Thank you,” he said.

“If I were you,” said Gregory, “I should go and woo Lady Philippa.”

“Woo her?” Ralph was astonished.

Gregory shrugged. “She has no real choice in the matter, of course. But still, the formalities should be observed. Tell her that the king has given you permission to ask for her hand in marriage, and say you hope she will learn to love you as much as you love her.”

“Oh,” said Ralph. “All right.”

“Take her a present,” said Gregory.

73

On the morning of Tilly’s burial, Caris and Merthin met on the roof of the cathedral at dawn.

The roof was a world apart. Calculating the acreage of slates was a perennial geometry exercise in the advanced mathematics class at the priory

school. Workmen needed constant access for repairs and maintenance, so a network of walkways and ladders linked the slopes and ridges, corners and gulleys, turrets and pinnacles, gutters and gargoyles. The crossing tower had not yet been rebuilt, but the view from the top of the west facade was impressive.

The priory was already busy. This would be a big funeral. Tilly had been a nobody in life, but now she was the victim of a notorious murder, a noblewoman killed in a nunnery, and she would be mourned by people who had never spoken three words to her. Caris would have liked to discourage mourners, because of the risk of spreading the plague, but there was nothing she could do.

The bishop was already here, in the best room of the prior's palace—which was why Caris and Merthin had spent the night apart, she in the nuns' dormitory and he and Lolla at the Holly Bush. The grieving widower, Ralph, was in a private room upstairs at the hospital. His baby, Gerry, was being taken care of by the nuns. Lady Philippa and her daughter, Odila, the only other surviving relatives of the dead girl, were also staying at the hospital.

Neither Merthin nor Caris had spoken to Ralph when he arrived yesterday. There was nothing they could do, no way to get justice for Tilly, for they could prove nothing; but all the same they knew the truth. So far they had told no one what they believed: there was no point. During today's obsequies they would have to pretend something like normalcy with Ralph. It was going to be difficult.

While the important personages slept, the nuns and the priory employees were hard at work preparing the funeral dinner. Smoke was rising from the bakery, where dozens of long four-pound loaves of wheat bread were already in the oven. Two men were rolling a new barrel of wine across to the prior's house. Several novice nuns were setting up benches and a trestle table on the green for the common mourners.

As the sun rose beyond the river, throwing a slanting yellow light on the rooftops of Kingsbridge, Caris studied the marks made on the town by nine months of plague. From this height she could see gaps in the rows of houses, like bad teeth. Timber buildings collapsed all the time, of course—because of fire, rain damage, incompetent construction, or just old age. What was different now was that no one bothered to repair them. If your house fell down, you just moved into one of the empty homes in the same street. The only person building anything was Merthin, and he was seen as a mad optimist with too much money.

Across the river, the gravediggers were already at work in another newly consecrated cemetery. The plague showed no signs of relenting. Where would it end? Would the houses just continue to fall down, one at a time, until there was nothing left, and the town was a wasteland of broken tiles and scorched

timbers, with a deserted cathedral in the middle and a hundred-acre graveyard at its edge?

“I’m not going to let this happen,” she said.

Merthin did not at first understand. “The funeral?” he said, frowning.

Caris made a sweeping gesture to take in the city and the world beyond it. “Everything. Drunks maiming one another. Parents abandoning their sick children on the doorstep of my hospital. Men queuing to fuck a drunken woman on a table outside the White Horse. Livestock dying in the pastures. Half-naked penitents whipping themselves then collecting pennies from bystanders. And, most of all, a young mother brutally murdered here in my nunnery. I don’t care if we are all going to die of the plague. As long as we’re still alive, I’m not going to let our world fall apart.”

“What are you going to do?”

She smiled gratefully at Merthin. Most people would have told her she was powerless to fight the situation, but he was always ready to believe in her. She looked at the stone angels carved on a pinnacle, their faces blurred by two hundred years of wind and rain, and she thought of the spirit that had moved the cathedral builders. “We’re going to reestablish order and routine here. We’re going to force Kingsbridge people to return to normal, whether they like it or not. We’re going to rebuild this town and its life, despite the plague.”

“All right,” he said.

“This is the moment to do it.”

“Because everyone is so angry about Tilly?”

“And because they’re frightened at the thought that armed men can come into the town at night and murder whomever they will. They think no one’s safe.”

“What will you do?”

“I’m going to tell them it must never happen again.”

“This must never happen again!” she cried, and her voice rang out across the graveyard and echoed off the ancient gray walls of the cathedral.

A woman could never speak out as part of a service in church, but the graveside ceremony was a gray area, a solemn moment that took place outside the church, a time when laypeople such as the family of the deceased would sometimes make speeches or pray aloud.

All the same, Caris was sticking her neck out. Bishop Henri was officiating, backed up by Archdeacon Lloyd and Canon Claude. Lloyd had been diocesan clerk for decades, and Claude was a colleague of Henri’s from France. In such distinguished clerical company, it was audacious for a nun to make an unscheduled speech.

Such considerations had never meant much to Caris, of course.

She spoke just as the small coffin was being lowered into the grave. Several of the congregation had begun to cry. The crowd was at least five hundred strong, but they fell silent at the sound of her voice.

“Armed men have come into our town at night and killed a young woman in the nunnery—and I will not stand for it,” she said.

There was a rumble of assent from the crowd.

She raised her voice. “The priory will not stand for it—the bishop will not stand for it—and the men and women of Kingsbridge will not stand for it!”

The support became louder, the crowd shouting: “No!” and “Amen!”

“People say the plague is sent by God. I say that when God sends rain we take shelter. When God sends winter, we build up the fire. When God sends weeds, we pull them up by the roots. We must defend ourselves!”

She glanced at Bishop Henri. He was looking bemused. He had had no warning of this sermon, and if he had been asked for his permission he would have refused it; but he could tell that Caris had the people on her side, and he did not have the nerve to intervene.

“What can we do?”

She looked around. All faces were turned to her expectantly. They had no idea what to do, but they wanted a solution from her. They would cheer at anything she said, if only it gave them hope.

“We must rebuild the city wall!” she cried.

They roared their approval.

“A new wall that is taller, and stronger, and longer than the broken-down old one.” She caught the eye of Ralph. “A wall that will keep murderers out!”

The crowd shouted: “Yes!” Ralph looked away.

“And we must elect a new constable, and a force of deputies and sentries, to uphold the law and enforce good behavior.”

“Yes!”

“There will be a meeting of the parish guild tonight to work out the practical details, and the guild’s decisions will be announced in church next Sunday. Thank you and God bless you all.”

At the funeral banquet, in the grand dining hall of the prior’s palace, Bishop Henri sat at the head of the table. On his right was Lady Philippa, the widowed countess of Shiring. Next to her was seated the chief mourner, Tilly’s widower, Sir Ralph Fitzgerald.

Ralph was delighted to be next to Philippa. He could stare at her breasts while she concentrated on her food, and every time she leaned forward he could peek down the square neckline of her light summer dress. She did not know it yet, but the time was not far away when he would command her to take off her clothes and stand naked in front of him, and he would see those

magnificent breasts in their entirety.

The dinner provided by Caris was ample but not extravagant, he noted. There were no gilded swans or towers of sugar, but there was plenty of roasted meat, boiled fish, new bread, beans, and spring berries. He helped Philippa to some soup made of ground chicken with almond milk.

She said to him gravely: “This is a terrible tragedy. You have my most profound sympathy.”

People had been so compassionate that sometimes, for a few moments, Ralph thought of himself as the pitiable victim of a dreadful bereavement, and forgot that he was the one who had slid the knife into Tilly’s young heart. “Thank you,” he said solemnly. “Tilly was so young. But we soldiers get used to sudden death. One day a man will save your life, and swear eternal friendship and loyalty; and the next day he is struck down by a crossbow bolt through the heart, and you forget him.”

She gave him an odd look that reminded him of the way Sir Gregory had regarded him, with a mixture of curiosity and distaste, and he wondered what it was about his attitude to Tilly’s death that provoked this reaction.

Philippa said: “You have a baby boy.”

“Gerry. The nuns are looking after him today, but I’ll take him home to Tench Hall tomorrow. I’ve found a wet nurse.” He saw an opportunity to drop a hint. “Of course, he needs someone to mother him properly.”

“Yes.”

He recalled her own bereavement. “But you know what it is to lose your spouse.”

“I was fortunate to have my beloved William for twenty-one years.”

“You must be lonely.” This might not be the moment to propose, but he thought to edge the conversation toward the subject.

“Indeed. I lost my three men—William and our two sons. The castle seems so empty.”

“But not for long, perhaps.”

She stared at him as if she could not believe her ears, and he realized he had said something offensive. She turned away and spoke to Bishop Henri on her other side.

On Ralph’s right was Philippa’s daughter, Odila. “Would you like some of this pasty?” he said to her. “It’s made with peacocks and hares.” She nodded, and he cut her a slice. “How old are you?” he asked.

“I’ll be fifteen this year.”

She was tall, and had her mother’s figure already, a full bosom and wide, womanly hips. “You seem older,” he said, looking at her breasts.

He intended it as a compliment—young people generally wanted to seem older—but she blushed and looked away.

Ralph looked down at his trencher and speared a chunk of pork cooked

with ginger. He ate it moodily. He was not very good at what Gregory called wooing.

Caris was seated on the left of Bishop Henri, with Merthin, as alderman, on her other side. Next to Merthin was Sir Gregory Longfellow, who had come for the funeral of Earl William three months ago and had not yet left the neighborhood. Caris had to suppress her disgust at being at a table with the murdering Ralph and the man who had, almost certainly, put him up to it. But she had work to do at this dinner. She had a plan for the revival of the town. Rebuilding the walls was only the first part. For the second, she had to get Bishop Henri on her side.

She poured the bishop a goblet of clear red Gascon wine, and he took a long draft. He wiped his mouth and said: “You preach a good sermon.”

“Thank you,” she said, noting the ironic reproof that underlay his compliment. “Life in this town is degenerating into disorder and debauchery, and if we’re to put it right we need to inspire the townspeople. I’m sure you agree.”

“It’s a little late to ask whether I agree with you. However, I do.” Henri was a pragmatist who did not re-fight lost battles. She had been counting on that.

She served herself some heron roasted with pepper and cloves, but did not begin to eat: she had too much to say. “There’s more to my plan than the walls and the constabulary.”

“I thought there might be.”

“I believe that you, as the bishop of Kingsbridge, should have the tallest cathedral in England.”

He raised his eyebrows. “I wasn’t expecting that.”

“Two hundred years ago this was one of England’s most important priories. It should be so again. A new church tower would symbolize the revival—and your eminence among bishops.”

He smiled wryly, but he was pleased. He knew he was being flattered, and he liked it.

Caris said: “The tower would also serve the town. Being visible from a distance, it would help pilgrims and traders find their way here.”

“How would you pay for it?”

“The priory is wealthy.”

He was surprised again. “Prior Godwyn complained of money problems.”

“He was a hopeless manager.”

“He struck me as rather competent.”

“He struck a lot of people that way, but he made all the wrong decisions. Right at the start he refused to repair the fulling mill, which would have

brought him an income; but he spent money on this palace, which returned him nothing.”

“And how have things changed?”

“I’ve sacked most of the bailiffs and replaced them with younger men who are willing to make changes. I’ve converted about half the land to grazing, which is easier to manage in these times of labor shortage. The rest I’ve leased for cash rents with no customary obligations. And we’ve all benefited from inheritance taxes and from the legacies of people who died without heirs because of the plague. The monastery is now as rich as the nunnery.”

“So all the tenants are free?”

“Most. Instead of working one day a week on the demesne farm, and carting the landlord’s hay, and folding their sheep on the landlord’s field, and all those complicated services, they just pay money. They like it better and it certainly makes our life simpler.”

“A lot of landlords—abbots especially—revile that type of tenancy. They say it ruins the peasantry.”

Caris shrugged. “What have we lost? The power to impose petty variations, favoring some serfs and persecuting others, keeping them all subservient. Monks and nuns have no business tyrannizing peasants. Farmers know what crops to sow and what they can sell at market. They work better left to themselves.”

The bishop looked suspicious. “So you feel the priory can pay for a new tower?”

He had been expecting her to ask him for money, she guessed. “Yes—with some assistance from the town’s merchants. And that’s where you can help us.”

“I thought there must be something.”

“I’m not asking you for money. What I want from you is worth more than money.”

“I’m intrigued.”

“I want to apply to the king for a borough charter.” As she said the words, Caris felt her hands begin to shake. She was taken back to the battle she had fought with Godwyn, ten years ago, that had ended in her being accused of witchcraft. The issue then had been the borough charter, and she had nearly died fighting for it. Circumstances now were completely different, but the charter was no less important. She put down her eating knife and clasped her hands together in her lap to keep them still.

“I see,” said Henri noncommittally.

Caris swallowed hard and went on. “It’s essential for the regeneration of the town’s commercial life. For a long time Kingsbridge has been held back by the dead hand of priory rule. Priors are cautious and conservative, and

instinctively say no to any change or innovation. Merchants live by change—they're always looking for new ways to make money, or at least the good ones are. If we want the men of Kingsbridge to help pay for our new tower, we must give them the freedom they need to prosper."

"A borough charter."

"The town would have its own court, set its own regulations, and be ruled by a proper guild, rather than the parish guild we have now, which has no real power."

"But would the king grant it?"

"Kings like boroughs, which pay lots of taxes. But, in the past, the prior of Kingsbridge has always opposed a charter."

"You think priors are too conservative."

"Timid."

"Well," said the bishop with a laugh, "timidity is a thing you'll never be accused of."

Caris pressed her point. "I think a charter is essential if we're to build the new tower."

"Yes, I can see that."

"So, do you agree?"

"To the tower, or the charter?"

"They go together."

Henri seemed amused. "Are you making a deal with me, Mother Caris?"

"If you're willing."

"All right. Build me a tower, and I'll help you get a charter."

"No. It has to be the other way around. We need the charter first."

"So I must trust you."

"Is that difficult?"

"To be honest, no."

"Good. Then we're agreed."

"Yes."

Caris leaned forward and looked past Merthin. "Sir Gregory?"

"Yes, Mother Caris?"

She forced herself to be polite to him. "Have you tried this rabbit in sugar gravy? I recommend it."

Gregory accepted the bowl and took some. "Thank you."

Caris said to him: "You will recall that Kingsbridge is not a borough."

"I certainly do." Gregory had used that fact, more than a decade ago, to outmaneuver Caris in the royal court in the dispute over the fulling mill.

"The bishop thinks it's time for us to ask the king for a charter."

Gregory nodded. "I believe the king might look favorably on such a plea—especially if it were presented to him in the right way."

Hoping that her distaste was not showing on her face, she said: "Perhaps

you would be kind enough to advise us.”

“May we discuss this in more detail later?”

Gregory would require a bribe, of course, though he would undoubtedly call it a lawyer’s fee. “By all means,” she said, repressing a shudder.

The servants began clearing away the food. Caris looked down at her trencher. She had not eaten anything.

“Our families are related,” Ralph was saying to Lady Philippa. “Not closely, of course,” he added hastily. “But my father is descended from that earl of Shiring who was the son of Lady Aliena and Jack Builder.” He looked across the table at his brother Merthin, the alderman. “I think I inherited the blood of the earls, and my brother that of the builders.”

He looked at Philippa’s face to see how she took that. She did not seem impressed.

“I was brought up in the household of your late father-in-law, Earl Roland,” he went on.

“I remember you as a squire.”

“I served under the earl in the king’s army in France. At the battle of Crécy, I saved the life of the prince of Wales.”

“My goodness, how splendid,” she said politely.

He was trying to get her to see him as an equal, so that it would seem more natural when he told her that she was to be his wife. But he did not appear to be getting through to her. She just looked bored and a bit puzzled by the direction of his conversation.

The dessert was served: sugared strawberries, honey wafers, dates and raisins, and spiced wine. Ralph drained a cup of wine and poured more, hoping that the drink would help him relax with Philippa. He was not sure why he found it difficult to talk to her. Because this was his wife’s funeral? Because Philippa was a countess? Or because he had been hopelessly in love with her for years, and could not believe that now, at last, she really was to be his wife?

“When you leave here, will you go back to Earlscastle?” he asked her.

“Yes. We depart tomorrow.”

“Will you stay there long?”

“Where else would I go?” She frowned. “Why do you ask?”

“I will come and visit you there, if I may.”

Her response was frosty. “To what end?”

“I want to discuss with you a subject that it would not be appropriate to raise here and now.”

“What on earth do you mean?”

“I’ll come and see you in the next few days.”

She looked agitated. In a raised voice she said: “What could you possibly have to say to me?”

“As I said, it wouldn’t be appropriate to speak of it today.”

“Because this is your wife’s funeral?”

He nodded.

She went pale. “Oh, my God,” she said. “You can’t mean to suggest…”

“I told you, I don’t want to discuss it now.”

“But I must know!” she cried. “Are you planning to propose marriage to me?”

He hesitated, shrugged, and then nodded.

“But on what grounds?” she said. “Surely you need the king’s permission!”

He looked at her and raised his eyebrows briefly.

She stood up suddenly. “No!” she said. Everyone around the table looked at her. She stared at Gregory. “Is this true?” she said. “Is the king going to marry me to *him*?” She jerked a thumb contemptuously at Ralph.

Ralph felt stabbed. He had not expected her to display such revulsion. Was he so repellent?

Gregory looked reproachfully at Ralph. “This was not the moment to raise the matter.”

Philippa cried: “So it’s true! God save me!”

Ralph caught Odila’s eye. She was staring at him in horror. What had he ever done to earn her dislike?

Philippa said: “I can’t bear it.”

“Why?” Ralph said. “What is so wrong? What right have *you* to look down on me and my family?” He looked around at the company: his brother, his ally Gregory, the bishop, the prioress, minor noblemen, and leading citizens. They were all silent, shocked and intrigued by Philippa’s outburst.

Philippa ignored his question. Addressing Gregory, she said: “I will not do it! I will not, do you hear me?” She was white with rage, but tears ran down her cheeks. Ralph thought how beautiful she was, even while she was rejecting and humiliating him so painfully.

Gregory said coolly: “It is not your decision, Lady Philippa, and it certainly is not mine. The king will do as he pleases.”

“You may force me into a wedding dress, and you may march me up the aisle,” Philippa raged. She pointed at Bishop Henri. “But when the bishop asks me if I take Ralph Fitzgerald to be my husband I will not say yes! I will not! Never, never, never!”

She stormed out of the room, and Odila followed.

When the banquet was over, the townspeople returned to their homes, and the

important guests went to their rooms to sleep off the feast. Caris supervised the clearing up. She felt sorry for Philippa, profoundly sorry, knowing—as Philippa did not—that Ralph had killed his first wife. But she was concerned about the fate of an entire town, not just one person. Her mind was on her scheme for Kingsbridge. Things had gone better than she had imagined. The townspeople had cheered her, and the bishop had agreed to everything she proposed. Perhaps civilization would return to Kingsbridge, despite the plague.

Outside the back door, where there was a pile of meat bones and crusts of bread, she saw Godwyn's cat, Archbishop, delicately picking at the carcass of a duck. She shooed it away. It scampered a few yards then slowed to a stiff walk, its white-tipped tail arrogantly upstanding.

Deep in thought, she went up the stairs of the palace, thinking of how she would begin implementing the changes agreed to by Henri. Without pausing, she opened the door of the bedroom she shared with Merthin and stepped inside.

For a moment she was disoriented. Two men stood in the middle of the room, and she thought, *I must be in the wrong house,* and then *I must be in the wrong room,* before she remembered that her room, being the best bedroom, had naturally been given to the bishop.

The two men were Henri and his assistant, Canon Claude. It took Caris a moment to realize that they were both naked, with their arms around one another, kissing.

She stared at them in shock. "Oh!" she said.

They had not heard the door. Until she spoke, they did not realize they were observed. When they heard her gasp of surprise, they both turned toward her. A look of horrified guilt came over Henri's face, and his mouth fell open.

"I'm sorry!" Caris said.

The men sprang apart, as if hoping they might be able to deny what was going on; then they remembered they were naked. Henri was plump, with a round belly and fat arms and legs, and gray hair on his chest. Claude was younger and slimmer, with very little body hair except for a blaze of chestnut at his groin. Caris had never before looked at two erect penises at the same time.

"I beg your pardon!" she said, mortified with embarrassment. "My mistake. I forgot." She realized that she was babbling and they were dumbstruck. It did not matter: nothing that anyone could say would make the situation any better.

Coming to her senses, she backed out of the room and slammed the door.

Merthin walked away from the banquet with Madge Webber. He was fond of

this small, chunky woman, with her chin jutting out in front and her bottom jutting out behind. He admired the way she had carried on after her husband and children had died of the plague. She had continued the enterprise, weaving cloth and dyeing it red according to Caris's recipe. She said to him: "Good for Caris. She's right, as usual. We can't go on like this."

"You've continued normally, despite everything," he said.

"My only problem is finding the people to do the work."

"Everyone is the same. I can't get builders."

"Raw wool is cheap, but rich people will still pay high prices for good scarlet cloth," Madge said. "I could sell more if I could produce more."

Merthin said thoughtfully: "You know, I saw a faster type of loom in Florence—a treadle loom."

"Oh?" She looked at him with alert curiosity. "I never heard of that."

He wondered how to explain. "In any loom, you stretch a number of threads over the frame to form what you call the warp, then you weave another thread crossways through the warp, under one thread and over the next, under and over, from one side to the other and back again, to form the weft."

"That's how simple looms work, yes. Ours are better."

"I know. To make the process quicker, you attach every second warp thread to a movable bar, called a heddle, so that when you shift the heddle, half the threads are lifted away from the rest. Then, instead of going over and under, over and under, you can simply pass the weft thread straight through the gap in one easy movement. Then you drop the heddle below the warp for the return pass."

"Yes. By the way, the weft thread is wound on a bobbin."

"Each time you pass the bobbin through the warp from left to right, you have to put it down, then use both hands to move the heddle, then pick up the bobbin again and bring it back from right to left."

"Exactly."

"In a treadle loom, you move the heddle with your feet. So you never have to put the bobbin down."

"Really? My soul!"

"That would make a difference, wouldn't it?"

"A huge difference. You could weave twice as much—more!"

"That's what I thought. Shall I build one for you to try?"

"Yes, please!"

"I don't remember exactly how it was constructed. I think the treadle operated a system of pulleys and levers…" He frowned, thinking. "Anyway, I'm sure I can figure it out."

Late in the afternoon, as Caris was passing the library, she met Canon Claude coming out, carrying a small book. He caught her eye and stopped. They both immediately thought of the scene Caris had stumbled upon an hour ago. At first Claude looked embarrassed, but then a grin lifted the corners of his mouth. His put his hand to his face to cover it, obviously feeling it was wrong to be amused. Caris remembered how startled the two naked men had been and she, too, felt inappropriate laughter bubbling up inside her. On impulse, she said what was in her mind: “The two of you did look funny!” Claude giggled despite himself, and Caris could not help chuckling too, and they made each other worse, until they fell into one another’s arms, tears streaming down their cheeks, helpless with laughter.

That evening, Caris took Merthin to the southwest corner of the priory grounds, where the vegetable garden grew alongside the river. The air was mild, and the moist earth gave up a fragrance of new growth. Caris could see spring onions and radishes. “So, your brother is to be the earl of Shiring,” she said.

“Not if Lady Philippa has anything to do with it.”

“A countess has to do what she is told by the king, doesn’t she?”

“All women should be subservient to men, in theory,” Merthin said with a grin. “Some defy convention, though.”

“I can’t think who you mean.”

Merthin’s mood changed abruptly. “What a world,” he said. “A man murders his wife, and the king elevates him to the highest rank of the nobility.”

“We know these things happen,” she said. “But it’s shocking when it’s your own family. Poor Tilly.”

Merthin rubbed his eyes as if to erase visions. “Why have you brought me here?”

“To talk about the final element in my plan: the new hospital.”

“Ah. I was wondering…”

“Could you build it here?”

Merthin looked around. “I don’t see why not. It’s a sloping site, but the entire priory is built on a slope, and we’re not talking about putting up another cathedral. One story or two?”

“One. But I want the building divided into medium-size rooms, each containing just four or six beds, so that diseases don’t spread so quickly from one patient to everyone else in the place. It must have its own pharmacy—a large, well-lit room—for the preparation of medicines, with a herb garden outside. And a spacious, airy latrine with piped water, very easy to keep clean. In fact the whole building must have lots of light and space. But, most

importantly, it has to be at least a hundred yards from the rest of the priory. We have to separate the sick from the well. That's the key feature."

"I'll do some drawings in the morning."

She glanced around and, seeing that they were not observed, she kissed him. "This is going to be the culmination of my life's work, do you realize that?"

"You're thirty-two—isn't it a little early to be talking about the culmination of your life's work?"

"It hasn't happened yet."

"It won't take long. I'll start on it while I'm digging the foundations for the new tower. Then, as soon as the hospital is built, I can switch my masons to work on the cathedral."

They started to walk back. She could tell that his real enthusiasm was for the tower. "How tall will it be?"

"Four hundred and five feet."

"How high is Salisbury?"

"Four hundred and four."

"So it *will* be the highest building in England."

"Until someone builds a higher one, yes."

So he would achieve his ambition too, she thought. She put her arm through his as they walked to the prior's palace. She felt happy. That was strange, wasn't it? Thousands of Kingsbridge people had died of the plague, and Tilly had been murdered, but Caris felt hopeful. It was because she had a plan, of course. She always felt better when she had a plan. The new walls, the constabulary, the tower, the borough charter, and most of all the new hospital: how would she find time to organize it all?

Arm in arm with Merthin, she walked into the prior's house. Bishop Henri and Sir Gregory were there, deep in conversation with a third man who had his back to Caris. There was something unpleasantly familiar about the newcomer, even from behind, and Caris felt a tremor of unease. Then he turned around and she saw his face: sardonic, triumphant, sneering, and full of malice.

It was Philemon.

74

Bishop Henri and the other guests left Kingsbridge the next morning.

Caris, who had been sleeping in the nuns' dormitory, returned to the prior's palace after breakfast and went upstairs to her room.

She found Philemon there.

It was the second time in two days that she had been startled by men in her bedroom. However, Philemon was alone and fully dressed, standing by the window looking at a book. Seeing him in profile, she realized that the trials of the last six months had left him thinner.

She said: “What are you doing here?”

He pretended to be surprised by the question. “This is the prior’s house. Why should I not be here?”

“Because it’s not your room!”

“I am the subprior of Kingsbridge. I have never been dismissed from that post. The prior is dead. Who else should live here?”

“Me, of course.”

“You’re not even a monk.”

“Bishop Henri made me acting prior—and last night, despite your return, he did not dismiss me from this post. I am your superior, and you must obey me.”

“But you’re a nun, and you must live with the nuns, not with the monks.”

“I’ve been living here for months.”

“Alone?”

Suddenly Caris saw that she was on shaky ground. Philemon knew that she and Merthin had been living more or less as man and wife. They had been discreet, not flaunting their relationship, but people guessed these things, and Philemon had a wild beast’s instinct for weakness.

She considered. She could insist on Philemon’s leaving the building immediately. If necessary, she could have him thrown out: Thomas and the novices would obey her, not Philemon. But what then? Philemon would do all he could to call attention to what Merthin and she were up to in the palace. He would create a controversy, and leading townspeople would take sides. Most would support Caris, almost whatever she did, such was her reputation; but there would be some who would censure her behavior. The conflict would weaken her authority and undermine everything else she wanted to do. It would be better to admit defeat.

“You may have the bedroom,” she said. “But not the hall. I use that for meetings with leading townspeople and visiting dignitaries. When you’re not attending services in the church, you will be in the cloisters, not here. A subprior does not have a palace.” She left without giving him a chance to argue. She had saved face, but he had won.

She had been reminded last night of how wily Philemon was. Questioned by Bishop Henri, he seemed to have a plausible explanation for everything dishonorable that he had done. How did he justify deserting his post at the priory and running away to St.-John-in-the-Forest? The monastery had been in danger of extinction, and the only way to save it had been to flee, in accordance with the saying “Leave early, go far, and stay long.” It was still,

by general consent, the only sure way to avoid the plague. Their sole mistake had been to remain too long in Kingsbridge. Why, then, had no one informed the bishop of this plan? Philemon was sorry, but he and the other monks were only obeying the orders of Prior Godwyn. Then why had he run away from St. John when the plague caught up with them there? He had been called by God to minister to the people of Monmouth, and Godwyn had given him permission to leave. How come Brother Thomas did not know about this permission, in fact denied firmly that it had ever been given? The other monks had not been told of Godwyn's decision for fear it would cause jealousy. Why, then, had Philemon left Monmouth? He had met Friar Murdo, who had told him that Kingsbridge Priory needed him, and he regarded this as a further message from God.

Caris concluded that Philemon had run from the plague until he had realized he must be one of those fortunate people who were not prone to catch it. Then he had learned from Murdo that Caris was sleeping with Merthin in the prior's palace, and he had immediately seen how he could exploit that situation to restore his own fortunes. God had nothing to do with it.

But Bishop Henri had believed Philemon's tale. Philemon was careful to appear humble to the point of obsequiousness. Henri did not know the man, and failed to see beneath the surface.

She left Philemon in the palace and walked to the cathedral. She climbed the long, narrow spiral staircase in the northwest tower and found Merthin in the mason's loft, drawing designs on the tracing floor in the light from the tall north-facing windows.

She looked with interest at what he had done. It was always difficult to read plans, she found. The thin lines scratched in the mortar had to be transformed, in the viewer's imagination, into thick walls of stone with windows and doors.

Merthin regarded her expectantly as she studied his work. He was obviously anticipating a big reaction.

At first she was baffled by the drawing. It looked nothing like a hospital. She said: "But you've drawn…a cloister!"

"Exactly," he said. "Why should a hospital be a long narrow room like the nave of a church? You want the place to be light and airy. So, instead of cramming the rooms together, I've set them around a quadrangle."

She visualized it: the square of grass, the building around, the doors leading to rooms of four or six beds, the nuns moving from room to room in the shelter of the covered arcade. "It's inspired!" she said. "I would never have thought of it, but it will be perfect."

"You can grow herbs in the quadrangle, where the plants will have sunshine but be sheltered from the wind. There will be a fountain in the middle of the garden, for fresh water, and it can drain through the latrine wing

to the south and into the river.”

She kissed him exuberantly. “You’re so clever!” Then she recalled the news she had to tell him.

He must have seen her face fall, for he said: “What’s the matter?”

“We have to move out of the palace,” she said. She told him about her conversation with Philemon, and why she had given in. “I foresee major conflicts with Philemon—I don’t want this to be the one on which I make my stand.”

“That makes sense,” he said. His tone of voice was reasonable, but she knew by his face that he was angry. He stared at his drawing, though he was not really thinking about it.

“And there’s something else,” she said. “We’re telling everyone they have to live as normally as possible—order in the streets, a return to real family life, no more drunken orgies. We ought to set an example.”

He nodded. “A prioress living with her lover is about as abnormal as could be, I suppose,” he said. Once again his equable tone was contradicted by his furious expression.

“I’m very sorry,” she said.

“So am I.”

“But we don’t want to risk everything we both want—your tower, my hospital, the future of the town.”

“No. But we’re sacrificing our life together.”

“Not entirely. We’ll have to sleep separately, which is painful, but we’ll have plenty of opportunities to be together.”

“Where?”

She shrugged. “Here, for example.” An imp of mischief possessed her. She walked away from him across the room, slowly lifting the skirt of her robe, and went to the doorway at the top of the stairs. “I don’t see anyone coming,” she said as she raised her dress to her waist.

“You can hear them, anyway,” he said. “The door at the foot of the stairs makes a noise.”

She bent over, pretending to look down the staircase. “Can you see anything unusual, from where you are?”

He chuckled. She could usually pull him out of an angry mood by being playful. “I can see something winking at me,” he laughed.

She walked back toward him, still holding her robe up around her waist, smiling triumphantly. “You see, we don’t have to give up everything.”

He sat on a stool and pulled her toward him. She straddled his thighs and lowered herself onto his lap. “You’d better get a straw mattress up here,” she said, her voice thick with desire.

He nuzzled her breasts. “How would I explain the need for a bed in a mason’s loft?” he murmured.

“Just say that masons need somewhere soft to put their tools.”

A week later Caris and Thomas Langley went to inspect the rebuilding of the city wall. It was a big job but simple and, once the line had been agreed, the actual stonework could be done by inexperienced young masons and apprentices. Caris was glad the project had begun so promptly. It was necessary that the town be able to defend itself in troubled times—but she had a more important motive. Getting the townspeople to guard against disruption from outside would lead naturally, she hoped, to a new awareness of the need for order and good behavior among themselves.

She found it deeply ironic that fate had cast her in this role. She had never been a rule keeper. She had always despised orthodoxy and flouted convention. She felt she had the right to make her own rules. Now here she was clamping down on merrymakers. It was a miracle that no one had yet called her a hypocrite.

The truth was that some people flourished in an atmosphere of anarchy, and others did not. Merthin was one of those who were better off without constraints. She recalled the carving he had made of the wise and foolish virgins. It was different from anything anyone had seen before—so Elfric had made that his excuse for destroying it. Regulation only served to handicap Merthin. But men such as Barney and Lou, the slaughterhouse workers, had to have laws to stop them maiming one another in drunken fights.

All the same her position was shaky. When you were trying to enforce law and order, it was difficult to explain that the rules did not actually apply to you personally.

She was mulling over this as she returned with Thomas to the priory. Outside the cathedral she found Sister Joan pacing up and down in a state of agitation. “I’m so angry with Philemon,” she said. “He claims you have stolen his money, and I must give it back!”

“Just calm down,” Caris said. She led Joan into the porch of the church, and they sat on a stone bench. “Take a deep breath and tell me what happened.”

“Philemon came up to me after Terce and said he needed ten shillings to buy candles for the shrine of St. Adolphus. I said I would have to ask you.”

“Quite right.”

“He became very angry and shouted that it was the monks’ money, and I had no right to refuse him. He demanded my keys, and I think he would have tried to snatch them from me, but I pointed out that they would be no use to him, as he didn’t know where the treasury was.”

“What a good idea it was to keep that secret,” Caris said.

Thomas was standing beside them, listening. He said: “I notice he picked

a time when I was off the premises—the coward.”

Caris said: “Joan, you did absolutely right to refuse him, and I’m sorry he tried to bully you. Thomas, go and find him and bring him to me at the palace.”

She left them and walked through the graveyard, deep in thought. Clearly, Philemon was set on making trouble. But he was not the kind of blustering bully whom she could have overpowered with ease. He was a wily opponent, and she must watch her step.

When she opened the door of the prior’s house, Philemon was there in the hall, sitting at the head of the long table.

She stopped in the doorway. “You shouldn’t be here,” she said. “I specifically told you—”

“I was looking for you,” he said.

She realized she would have to lock the building. Otherwise he would always find a pretext for flouting her orders. She controlled her anger. “You looked for me in the wrong place,” she said.

“I’ve found you now, though, haven’t I?”

She studied him. He had shaved and cut his hair since his arrival, and he wore a new robe. He was every inch the priory official, calm and authoritative. She said: “I’ve been speaking to Sister Joan. She’s very upset.”

“So am I.”

She realized he was sitting in the big chair, and she was standing in front of him, as if he were in charge and she a supplicant. How clever he was at manipulating these things. She said: “If you need money, you must ask me.”

“I’m the subprior!”

“And I’m the acting prior, which makes me your superior.” She raised her voice. “So the first thing you must do is stand up when you’re speaking to me!”

He started, shocked by her tone; then he controlled himself. With insulting slowness he pulled himself out of the chair.

Caris sat down in his place and let him stand.

He seemed unabashed. “I understand you’re using monastery money to pay for the new tower.”

“By order of the bishop, yes.”

A flash of annoyance crossed his face. He had hoped to ingratiate himself and make the bishop his ally against Caris. Even as a child he had toadied unendingly to people in authority. That was how he had gained admission to the monastery.

He said: “I must have access to the monastery’s money. It’s my right. The monks’ assets should be in my charge.”

“The last time you were in charge of the monks’ assets, you stole them.”

He went pale: that arrow had struck the bull’s-eye. “Ridiculous,” he

blustered, trying to cover his embarrassment. “Prior Godwyn took them for safekeeping.”

“Well, nobody is going to take them for ‘safekeeping’ while I’m acting prior.”

“You should at least give me the ornaments. They are sacred jewels, to be handled by priests, not women.”

“Thomas has been dealing with them quite adequately, taking them out for services and restoring them to our treasury afterward.”

“It’s not satisfactory—”

Caris remembered something, and interrupted him. “Besides, you haven’t yet returned all that you took.”

“The money—”

“The ornaments. There’s a gold candlestick missing, a gift from the chandlers’ guild. What happened to that?”

His reaction surprised her. She was expecting another blustering denial. But he looked embarrassed and said: “That was always kept in the prior’s room.”

She frowned. “And…?”

“I kept it separate from the other ornaments.”

She was astonished. “Are you telling me that *you* have had the candlestick all this time?”

“Godwyn asked me to look after it.”

“And so you took it with you on your travels to Monmouth and elsewhere?”

“That was his wish.”

This was a wildly implausible tale, and Philemon knew it. The fact was that he had stolen the candlestick. “Do you still have it?”

He nodded uncomfortably.

At that moment, Thomas came in. “There you are!” he said to Philemon.

Caris said: “Thomas, go upstairs and search Philemon’s room.”

“What am I looking for?”

“The lost gold candlestick.”

Philemon said: “No need to search. You’ll see it on the prie-dieu.”

Thomas went upstairs and came down again carrying the candlestick. He handed it to Caris. It was heavy. She looked at it curiously. The base was engraved with the names of the twelve members of the chandlers’ guild in tiny letters. Why had Philemon wanted it? Not to sell or melt down, obviously: he had had plenty of time to get rid of it but he had not done so. It seemed he had just wanted to have his own gold candlestick. Did he gaze at it and touch it when he was alone in his room?

She looked at him and saw tears in his eyes.

He said: “Are you going to take it from me?”

It was a stupid question. “Of course,” she replied. “It belongs in the cathedral, not in your bedroom. The chandlers gave it for the glory of God and the beautification of church services, not the private pleasure of one monk.”

He did not argue. He looked bereft, but not penitent. He did not understand that he had done wrong. His grief was not remorse for wrongdoing, but regret for what had been taken from him. He had no sense of shame, she realized.

“I think that ends our discussion about your access to the priory’s valuables,” she said to Philemon. “Now you may go.” He went out.

She handed the candlestick back to Thomas. “Take it to Sister Joan and tell her to put it away,” she said. “We’ll inform the chandlers that it has been found, and use it next Sunday.”

Thomas went off.

Caris stayed where she was, thinking. Philemon hated her. She wasted no time wondering why: he made enemies faster than a tinker made friends. But he was an implacable foe and completely without scruples. Clearly he was determined to make trouble for her at every opportunity. Things would never get better. Each time she overcame him in one of these little skirmishes, his malice would burn hotter. But if she let him win he would only be encouraged in his insubordination.

It was going to be a bloody battle, and she could not see how it would end.

The flagellants came back on a Saturday evening in June.

Caris was in the scriptorium, writing her book. She had decided to begin with the plague and how to deal with it, then go on to lesser ailments. She was describing the linen face masks she had introduced in the Kingsbridge hospital. It was hard to explain that the masks were effective but did not offer total immunity. The only certain safeguard was to leave town before the plague arrived and stay away until it had gone, but that was never going to be an option for the majority of people. Partial protection was a difficult concept for people who believed in miracle cures. The truth was that some masked nuns still caught the plague, but not as many as would otherwise have been expected. She decided to compare the masks to shields. A shield did not guarantee that a man would survive attack, but it certainly gave him valuable protection, and no knight would go into battle without one. She was writing this down, on a pristine sheet of blank parchment, when she heard the flagellants, and groaned in dismay.

The drums sounded like drunken footsteps, the bagpipes like a wild creature in pain, and the bells like a parody of a funeral. She went outside just

as the procession entered the precincts. There were more of them this time, seventy or eighty, and they seemed wilder than before: their hair long and matted, their clothing a few shreds, their shrieks more lunatic. They had already been around the town and gathered a long tail of followers, some looking on in amusement, others joining in, tearing their clothes and lashing themselves.

She had not expected to see them again. The pope, Clement VI, had condemned flagellants. But he was a long way away, at Avignon, and it was up to others to enforce his rulings.

Friar Murdo led them, as before. When he approached the west front of the cathedral, Caris saw to her astonishment that the great doors were open wide. She had not authorized that. Thomas would not have done it without asking her. Philemon must be responsible. She recalled that Philemon on his travels had met up with Murdo. She guessed that Murdo had forewarned Philemon of this visit, and they had conspired together to get the flagellants into the church. No doubt Philemon would argue that he was the only ordained priest in the priory, therefore he had the right to decide what kind of services were conducted.

But what was Philemon's motive? Why did he care about Murdo and the flagellants?

Murdo led the procession through the tall central doorway and into the nave. The townspeople crowded in afterward. Caris hesitated to join in such a display, but she felt the need to know what was going on, so she reluctantly followed the crowd inside.

Philemon was at the altar. Friar Murdo joined him. Philemon raised his hands for quiet, then said: "We come here today to confess our wickedness, repent our sins, and do penance in propitiation."

Philemon was no preacher, and his words drew a muted reaction; but the charismatic Murdo immediately took over. "We confess that our thoughts are lascivious and our deeds are filthy!" he cried, and they shouted their approval.

The proceedings took the same form as before. Worked into a frenzy by Murdo's preaching, people came to the front, cried out that they were sinners, and flogged themselves. The townspeople looked on, mesmerized by the violence and nudity. It was a performance, but the lashes were real, and Caris shuddered to see the weals and cuts on the backs of the penitents. Some of them had done this many times before and were scarred. Others had recent wounds that were reopened by the fresh whipping.

Townspeople soon joined in. As they came forward, Philemon held out a collection bowl, and Caris realized that his motivation was money. Nobody got to confess and kiss Murdo's feet until they put a coin in Philemon's bowl. Murdo was keeping an eye on the takings, and Caris assumed the two men would share out the coins afterward.

There was a crescendo of drumming and piping as more and more townspeople came forward. Philemon's bowl filled up rapidly. Those who had been "forgiven" danced ecstatically to the mad music.

Eventually all the penitents were dancing and no more were coming forward. The music built to a climax and stopped suddenly, whereupon Caris noticed that Murdo and Philemon had disappeared. She assumed they had slipped out through the south transept to count their takings in the monks' cloisters.

The spectacle was over. The dancers lay down, exhausted. The spectators began to disperse, drifting out through the open doors into the clean air of the summer evening. Soon Murdo's followers found the strength to leave the church, and Caris did the same. She saw that most of the flagellants were heading for the Holly Bush.

She returned with relief to the cool hush of the nunnery. As dusk gathered in the cloisters, the nuns attended Evensong and ate their supper. Before going to bed, Caris went to check on the hospital. The place was still full: the plague raged unabated.

She found little to criticize. Sister Oonagh followed Caris's principles: face masks, no bloodletting, fanatical cleanliness. Caris was about to go to bed when one of the flagellants was brought in.

It was a man who had fainted in the Holly Bush and cracked his head on a bench. His back was still bleeding, and Caris guessed that loss of blood was as much responsible as the blow to his head for the loss of consciousness.

Oonagh bathed his wounds with salt water while he was unconscious. To bring him round, she set fire to the antler of a deer and wafted the pungent smoke under his nose. Then she made him drink two pints of water mixed with cinnamon and sugar, to replace the fluid his body had lost.

But he was only the first. Several more men and women were brought in suffering from some combination of loss of blood, excess of strong drink, and injuries received in accidents or fights. The orgy of flagellation increased the number of Saturday-night patients tenfold. There was also a man who had flogged himself so many times that his back was putrid. Finally, after midnight, a woman was brought in after having been tied up, flogged, and raped.

Fury stoked up in Caris as she worked with the other nuns to tend these patients. All their injuries arose from the perverted notions of religion put about by men such as Murdo. They said the plague was God's punishment for sin, but people could avoid the plague by punishing themselves another way. It was as if God were a vengeful monster playing a game with insane rules. Caris believed that God's sense of justice must be more sophisticated than that of the twelve-year-old leader of a boys' gang.

She worked until Matins on Sunday morning, then went to sleep for a

couple of hours. When she got up, she went to see Merthin.

He was now living in the grandest of the houses he had built on Leper Island. It was on the south shore, and stood in a broad garden newly planted with apple and pear trees. He had hired a middle-aged couple to take care of Lolla and maintain the place. Their names were Arnaud and Emily, but they called one another Arn and Em. Caris found Em in the kitchen, and was directed to the garden.

Merthin was showing Lolla how her name was written, using a pointed stick to form the letters in a patch of bare earth, and he made her laugh by drawing a face in the “o”. She was four years old, a pretty girl with olive skin and brown eyes.

Watching them, Caris suffered a pang of regret. She had been sleeping with Merthin for almost half a year. She did not want to have a baby, for it would mean the end of all her ambitions; yet a part of her was sorry that she had not become pregnant. She was torn, which was probably why she had taken the risk. But it had not happened. She wondered whether she had lost the ability to conceive. Perhaps the potion Mattie Wise had given her to abort her pregnancy a decade ago had harmed her womb in some way. As always, she wished she knew more about the body and its ills.

Merthin kissed her and they walked around the grounds, with Lolla running in front of them, playing in her imagination an elaborate and impenetrable game that involved talking to each tree. The garden looked raw, all the plants new, the soil carted in from elsewhere to enrich the island’s stony ground. “I’ve come to talk to you about the flagellants,” Caris said, and she told him about last night at the hospital. “I want to ban them from Kingsbridge,” she finished.

“Good idea,” Merthin said. “The whole performance is just another moneymaker for Murdo.”

“And Philemon. He was holding the bowl. Will you talk to the parish guild?”

“Of course.”

As acting prior, Caris was in the position of lord of the manor, and she could theoretically have banned the flagellants herself, without asking anyone else. However, her application for a borough charter was before the king, and she expected soon to hand over the government of the town to the guild, so she treated the current situation as a transition. Besides, it was always smarter to win support before trying to enforce a rule.

She said: “I’d like to have the constable escort Murdo and his followers out of town before the midday service.”

“Philemon will be furious.”

“He shouldn’t have opened the church to them without consulting anyone.” Caris knew there would be trouble, but she could not allow fear of

Philemon's reaction to prevent her doing the right thing for the town. "We've got the pope on our side. If we handle this discreetly and move fast, we can solve the problem before Philemon's had breakfast."

"All right," said Merthin. "I'll try to get the guildsmen together at the Holly Bush."

"I'll meet you there in an hour."

The parish guild was badly depleted, like every other organization in town, but a handful of leading merchants had survived the plague, including Madge Webber, Jake Chepstow, and Edward Slaughterhouse. The new constable, John's son Mungo, attended, and his deputies waited outside for their instructions.

The discussion did not last long. None of the leading citizens had taken part in the orgy, and they all disapproved of such public displays. The pope's ruling clinched the matter. Formally, Caris as prior promulgated a bylaw forbidding whipping in the streets and public nudity, violators to be expelled from the town by the constable on the instructions of any three guildsmen. The guild then passed a resolution supporting the new law.

Then Mungo went upstairs and roused Friar Murdo from his bed.

Murdo did not go quietly. Coming down the stairs he raved, he wept, he prayed, and he cursed. Two of Mungo's deputies took him by the arms and half-carried him out of the tavern. In the street he became louder. Mungo led the way, and the guildsmen followed. Some of Murdo's adherents came to protest and were themselves put under escort. A few townspeople tagged along as the group headed down the main street toward Merthin's bridge. None of the citizens objected to what was being done, and Philemon did not appear. Even some who had flogged themselves yesterday said nothing today, looking a bit shamefaced about it all.

The crowd fell away as the group crossed the bridge. With a reduced audience, Murdo became quieter. His righteous indignation was replaced by smoldering malevolence. Released at the far end of the double bridge, he stumped away through the suburbs without looking back. A handful of disciples trailed after him uncertainly.

Caris had a feeling she would not see him again.

She thanked Mungo and his men, then returned to the nunnery.

In the hospital, Oonagh was releasing the overnight accident cases to make room for new plague victims. Caris worked in the hospital until midday, then left gratefully and led the procession into the church for the main Sunday service. She found she was looking forward to an hour or two of psalms and prayers and a boring sermon: it would seem restful.

Philemon had a thunderous look when he led Thomas and the novice monks in. He had obviously heard about the expulsion of Murdo. No doubt he had seen the flagellants as a source of income for himself independent of

Caris. That hope had been dashed, and he was livid.

For a moment, Caris wondered what he would do in his anger. Then she thought: Let him do what he likes. If it were not this, it would be something else. Whatever she did, sooner or later Philemon would be angry with her. There was no point in worrying about it.

She nodded off during the prayers and woke up when he began to preach. The pulpit seemed to heighten his charmlessness, and his sermons were poorly received, in general. However, today he grabbed the attention of his audience at the start by announcing that his subject would be fornication.

He took as his text a verse from St. Paul's first letter to the early Christians at Corinth. He read it in Latin, then translated it in ringing tones: "Now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone who is a fornicator!"

He elaborated tediously on the meaning of keeping company. "Don't eat with them, don't drink with them, don't live with them, don't talk to them." But Caris was wondering anxiously where he was going with this. Surely he would not dare to attack her directly from the pulpit? She glanced across the choir to Thomas, on the other side with the novice monks, and caught a worried look from him.

She looked again at Philemon's face, dark with resentment, and realized he was capable of anything.

"Who does this refer to?" he asked rhetorically. "Not to outsiders, the saint specifically writes. It is for God to judge them. But, he says, you are judges within the fellowship." He pointed at the congregation. "You!" He looked down again at the book and read: "Put away from among yourselves that wicked person!"

The congregation was quiet. They sensed that this was not the usual generalized exhortation to better behavior. Philemon had a message.

"We must look around ourselves," he said. "In our town—in our church—in our priory! Are there any fornicators? If so, they must be put out!"

There was no doubt now in Caris's mind that he was referring to her. And all the more astute townspeople would have come to the same conclusion. But what could she do? She could hardly get up and contradict him. She could not even walk out of the church, for that would underline his point and make it obvious, to the stupidest member of the congregation, that she was the target of his tirade.

So she listened, mortified. Philemon was speaking well for the first time ever. He did not hesitate or stumble, he enunciated clearly and projected his voice, and he managed to vary his usual dull monotone. For him, hatred was inspirational.

No one was going to put her out of the priory, of course. Even if she had been an incompetent prioress the bishop would have kept her on, simply

because the scarcity of clergy was chronic. Churches and monasteries all over the country were closing because there was no one to hold services or sing psalms. Bishops were desperate to appoint more priests, monks, and nuns, not sack them. Anyway, the townspeople would have revolted against any bishop who tried to get rid of Caris.

All the same, Philemon's sermon was damaging. It would now be more difficult for the town's leaders to turn a blind eye to Caris's liaison with Merthin. This kind of thing undermined people's respect. They would forgive a man for a sexual peccadillo more readily than a woman. And, as she was painfully aware, her position invited the accusation of hypocrisy.

She sat grinding her teeth through the peroration, which was the same message shouted louder, and the remainder of the service. As soon as the nuns and monks had processed out of the church, she went to her pharmacy and sat down to compose a letter to Bishop Henri, asking him to move Philemon to another monastery.

Instead, Henri promoted him.

It was two weeks after the expulsion of Friar Murdo. They were in the north transept of the cathedral. The summer day was hot, but the interior of the church was always cool. The bishop sat on a carved wooden chair, and the others on benches: Philemon, Caris, Archdeacon Lloyd, and Canon Claude.

"I'm appointing you prior of Kingsbridge," Henri said to Philemon.

Philemon smirked with delight and shot a triumphant look at Caris.

She was appalled. Two weeks ago she had given Henri a long list of sound reasons why Philemon could not be permitted to continue in a responsible position here—starting with his theft of a gold candlestick. But it seemed her letter had had the opposite effect.

She opened her mouth to protest, but Henri glared at her and raised his hand, and she decided to remain silent and find out what else he had to say. He continued to address Philemon. "I'm doing this despite, not because of, your behavior since you returned here. You've been a malicious troublemaker, and if the church were not desperate for people I wouldn't promote you in a hundred years."

Then why do it now? Caris wondered.

"But we have to have a prior, and it simply is not satisfactory for the prioress to play that role, despite her undoubted ability."

Caris would have preferred him to appoint Thomas. But Thomas would have refused, she knew. He had been scarred by the bitter struggle over who was to succeed Prior Anthony, twelve years ago, and had sworn then never again to get involved in a priory election. In fact the bishop might well have spoken to Thomas, without Caris's knowledge, and learned this.

“However, your appointment is fenced about with provisos,” Henri said to Philemon. “First, you will not be confirmed in the role until Kingsbridge has obtained its borough charter. You are not capable of running the town and I won’t put you in that position. In the interim, therefore, Mother Caris will continue as acting prior, and you will live in the monks’ dormitory. The palace will be locked up. If you misbehave in the waiting period, I will rescind the appointment.”

Philemon looked angry and wounded by this, but he kept his mouth shut tight. He knew he had won and he was not going to argue about the conditions.

“Secondly, you will have your own treasury, but Brother Thomas is to be the treasurer, and no money will be spent nor precious objects removed without his knowledge and consent. Furthermore, I have ordered the building of a new tower, and I have authorized payments according to a schedule prepared by Merthin Bridger. The priory will make these payments from the monks’ funds, and neither Philemon nor anyone else shall have the power to alter this arrangement. I don’t want half a tower.”

Merthin would get his wish, at least, Caris thought gratefully.

Henri turned to Caris. “I have one more command to issue, and it is for you, Mother Prioress.”

Now what? she thought.

“There has been an accusation of fornication.”

Caris stared at the bishop, thinking about the time she had surprised him and Claude naked. How did he dare to raise this subject?

He went on: “I say nothing about the past. But for the future, it is not possible that the prioress of Kingsbridge should have a relationship with a man.”

She wanted to say: But you live with your lover! However, she suddenly noticed the expression on Henri’s face. It was a pleading look. He was begging her not to make the accusation that, he well knew, would show him up as a hypocrite. He knew that what he was doing was unjust, she realized, but he had no choice. Philemon had forced him into this position.

She was tempted, all the same, to sting him with a rebuke. But she restrained herself. It would do no good. Henri’s back was to the wall and he was doing his best. Caris clamped her mouth shut.

Henri said: “May I have your assurance, Mother Prioress, that from this moment on there will be absolutely no grounds for the accusation?”

Caris looked at the floor. She had been here before. Once again her choice was to give up everything she had worked for—the hospital, the borough charter, the tower—or to part with Merthin. And, once again, she chose her work.

She raised her head and looked him in the eye. “Yes, my lord bishop,” she

said. “You have my word.”

She spoke to Merthin in the hospital, surrounded by other people. She was trembling and close to tears, but she could not see him in private. She knew that if they were alone her resolve would weaken, and she would throw her arms around him and tell him that she loved him, and promise to leave the nunnery and marry him. So she sent a message, and greeted him at the door of the hospital, then spoke to him in a matter-of-fact voice, her arms folded tightly across her chest so that she would not be tempted to reach out with a fond gesture and touch the body she loved so much.

When she had finished telling him about the bishop’s ultimatum and her decision, he looked at her as if he could kill her. “This is the last time,” he said.

“What do you mean?”

“If you do this, it’s permanent. I’m not going to wait around anymore, hoping that one day you will be my wife.”

She felt as if he had hit her.

He went on, delivering another blow with each sentence. “If you mean what you’re saying, I’m going to try to forget you now. I’m thirty-three years old. I don’t have forever—my father is dying at the age of fifty-eight. I’ll marry someone else and have more children and be happy in my garden.”

The picture he painted tortured her. She bit her lip, trying to control her grief, but hot tears ran down her face.

He was remorseless. “I’m not going to waste my life loving you,” he said, and she felt as if he had stabbed her. “Leave the nunnery now, or stay there forever.”

She tried to look steadily at him. “I won’t forget you. I will always love you.”

“But not enough.”

She was silent for a long moment. It wasn’t like that, she knew. Her love was not weak or inadequate. It just presented her with impossible choices. But there seemed no point in arguing. “Is that what you really believe?” she said.

“It seems obvious.”

She nodded, though she did not really agree. “I’m sorry,” she said. “More sorry than I have ever been in my whole life.”

“So am I,” he said, and he turned away and walked out of the building.

Sir Gregory Longfellow at last went back to London, but he returned surprisingly quickly, as if he had bounced off the wall of that great city like a football. He showed up at Tench Hall at suppertime looking harassed, breathing hard through his flared nostrils, his long gray hair matted with perspiration. He walked in with something less than his usual air of being in command of all men and beasts that crossed his path. Ralph and Alan were standing by a window, looking at a new broad-bladed style of dagger called a basilard. Without speaking, Gregory threw his tall figure into Ralph's big carved chair: whatever might have happened, he was still too grand to wait for an invitation to sit.

Ralph and Alan stared at him expectantly. Ralph's mother sniffed censoriously: she disliked bad manners.

Finally Gregory said: "The king does not like to be disobeyed."

That scared Ralph.

He looked anxiously at Gregory, and asked himself what he had done that could possibly be interpreted as disobedient by the king. He could think of nothing. Nervously he said: "I'm sorry His Majesty is displeased—I hope it's not with me."

"You're involved," Gregory said with annoying vagueness. "And so am I. The king feels that when his wishes are frustrated it sets a bad precedent."

"I quite agree."

"That is why you and I are going to leave here tomorrow, ride to Earlscastle, see the lady Philippa, and *make* her marry you."

So that was it. Ralph was mainly relieved. He could not be held responsible for Philippa's recalcitrance, in all fairness—not that fairness made much difference to kings. But, reading between the lines, he guessed that the person taking the blame was Gregory, and so Gregory was now determined to rescue the king's plan and redeem himself.

There was fury and malice in Gregory's expression. He said: "By the time I have finished with her, I promise you, she will beg you to marry her."

Ralph could not imagine how this was to be achieved. As Philippa herself had pointed out, you could lead a woman up the aisle but you could not force her to say "I do." He said to Gregory: "Someone told me that a widow's right to refuse marriage is actually guaranteed by Magna Carta."

Gregory gave him a malevolent look. "Don't remind me. I made the mistake of mentioning that to His Majesty."

Ralph wondered, in that case, what threats or promises Gregory planned to use to bend Philippa to his will. Himself, he could think of no way to marry her short of abducting her by force, and carrying her off to some isolated church where a generously bribed priest would turn a deaf ear to her cries of "No, never!"

They set off early next morning with a small entourage. It was harvest time and, in the North Field, the men were reaping tall stalks of rye while the women followed behind, binding the sheaves.

Lately Ralph had spent more time worrying about the harvest than about Philippa. This was not because of the weather, which was fine, but the plague. He had too few tenants and almost no laborers. Many had been stolen from him by unscrupulous landlords such as Prioress Caris, who seduced other lords' men by offering high wages and attractive tenancies. In desperation, Ralph had given some of his serfs free tenancies, which meant they had no obligation to work on his land—an arrangement that left Ralph denuded of labor at harvesttime. In consequence, it was likely that some of his crops would rot in the fields.

However, he felt his troubles would be over if he could marry Philippa. He would have ten times the land he now controlled, plus income from a dozen other sources, including courts, forests, markets, and mills. And his family would be restored to its rightful place in the nobility. Sir Gerald would be the father of an earl before he died.

He wondered again what Gregory had in mind. Philippa had set herself a challenging task, in defying the formidable will and powerful connections of Gregory. Ralph would not have wished to be standing in her beaded silk shoes.

They arrived at Earlscastle shortly before noon. The sound of the rooks quarreling on the battlements always reminded Ralph of the time he had spent here as a squire in the service of Earl Roland—the happiest days of his life, he sometimes thought. But the place was very quiet now, without an earl. There were no squires playing violent games in the lower compound, no warhorses snorting and stamping as they were groomed and exercised outside the stables, no men-at-arms throwing dice on the steps of the keep.

Philippa was in the old-fashioned hall with Odila and a handful of female attendants. Mother and daughter were working on a tapestry together, sitting side by side on a bench in front of the loom. The picture looked as if it would show a forest scene when finished. Philippa was weaving brown thread for the tree trunks and Odila bright green for the leaves.

"Very nice, but it needs more life," Ralph said, making his voice cheerful and friendly. "A few birds and rabbits, and maybe some dogs chasing a deer."

Philippa was as immune to his charm as ever. She stood up and stepped back, away from him. The girl did the same. Ralph noticed that mother and daughter were equal in height. Philippa said: "Why have you come here?"

Have it your way, Ralph thought resentfully. He half-turned away from her. "Sir Gregory here has something to say to you," he said, and he went to a window and looked out, as if bored.

Gregory greeted the two women formally, and said he hoped he was not

intruding on them. It was rubbish—he did not give a hoot for their privacy—but the courtesy seemed to mollify Philippa, who invited him to sit down. Then he said: “The king is annoyed with you, Countess.”

Philippa bowed her head. “I am very sorry indeed to have displeased His Majesty.”

“He wishes to reward his loyal servant, Sir Ralph, by making him earl of Shiring. At the same time, he will be providing a young, vigorous husband for you, and a good stepfather for your daughter.” Philippa shuddered, but Gregory ignored that. “He is mystified by your stubborn defiance.”

Philippa looked scared, as well she might. Things would have been different if she had had a brother or an uncle to stick up for her, but the plague had wiped out her family. As a woman without male relations, she had no one to defend her from the king’s wrath. “What will he do?” she said apprehensively.

“He has not mentioned the word ‘treason’…yet.”

Ralph was not sure Philippa could legally be accused of treason, but all the same the threat caused her to turn pale.

Gregory went on: “He has asked me, in the first instance, to reason with you.”

Philippa said: “Of course, the king sees marriage as a political matter—”

“It *is* political,” Gregory interrupted. “If your beautiful daughter, here, were to fancy herself in love with the charming son of a scullery maid, you would say to her, as I say to you, that noblewomen may not marry whomever they fancy; and you would lock her in her room and have the boy flogged outside her window until he renounced her forever.”

Philippa looked affronted. She did not like being lectured on the duties of her station by a mere lawyer. “I understand the obligations of an aristocratic widow,” she said haughtily. “I am a countess, my grandmother was a countess, and my sister was a countess until she died of the plague. But marriage is not *just* politics. It is also a matter of the heart. We women throw ourselves on the mercy of the men who are our lords and masters, and who have the duty of wisely deciding our fate; and we beg that what we feel in our hearts be not entirely ignored. Such pleas are usually heard.”

She was upset, Ralph could see, but still in control, still full of contempt. That word “wisely” had a sarcastic sting.

“In normal times, perhaps you would be right, but these are strange days,” Gregory replied. “Usually, when the king looks around him for someone worthy of an earldom, he sees a dozen wise, strong, vigorous men, loyal to him and keen to serve him in any way they can, any of whom he could appoint to the title with confidence. But now that so many of the best men have been struck down by the plague, the king is like a housewife who goes to the fishmonger at the end of the afternoon—forced to take whatever is left

on the slab.”

Ralph saw the force of the argument, but also felt insulted. However, he pretended not to notice.

Philippa changed her tack. She waved a servant over and said: “Bring us a jug of the best Gascon wine, please. And Sir Gregory will be having dinner here, so let’s have some of this season’s lamb, cooked with garlic and rosemary.”

“Yes, my lady.”

Gregory said: “You’re most kind, Countess.”

Philippa was incapable of coquetry. To pretend that she was simply being hospitable, with no ulterior motive, was beyond her. She returned straight to the subject. “Sir Gregory, I have to tell you that my heart, my soul, and my entire being revolt against the prospect of marrying Sir Ralph Fitzgerald.”

“But why?” said Gregory. “He’s a man like any other.”

“No, he’s not,” she said.

They were speaking about Ralph as if he were not there, in a way that he found deeply offensive. But Philippa was desperate, and would say anything; and he was curious to know just what it was about him that she disliked so much.

She paused, collecting her thoughts. “If I say rapist, torturer, murderer… the words just seem too abstract.”

Ralph was taken aback. He did not think of himself that way. Of course, he had tortured people in the king’s service, and he had raped Annet, and he had murdered several men, women, and children in his days as an outlaw…At least, he consoled himself, Philippa did not appear to have guessed that he was the hooded figure who had killed Tilly, his own wife.

Philippa went on: “Human beings have within them something that prevents them from doing such things. It is the ability…no, the compulsion to feel another’s pain. We can’t help it. You, Sir Gregory, could not rape a woman, because you would feel her grief and agony, you would suffer with her, and this would compel you to relent. You could not torture or murder for the same reason. One who lacks the faculty to feel another’s pain is not a man, even though he may walk on two legs and speak English.” She leaned forward, lowering her voice, but even so Ralph heard her clearly. “And I will not lie in bed with an *animal.”*

Ralph burst out: “I am not an animal!”

He expected Gregory to back him up. Instead, Gregory seemed to give in. “Is that your final word, Lady Philippa?”

Ralph was astonished. Was Gregory going to let that pass, as if it might be even half-true?

Philippa said to Gregory: “I need you to go back to the king and tell him that I am his loyal and obedient subject, and that I long to win his favor, but

that I could not marry Ralph if the Archangel Gabriel commanded me.”

“I see.” Gregory stood up. “We will not stay to dinner.”

Was that all? Ralph had been waiting for Gregory to produce his surprise, a secret weapon, some irresistible bribe or threat. Did the clever court lawyer really have nothing up his costly brocade sleeve?

Philippa seemed equally startled to find the argument so suddenly terminated.

Gregory went to the door, and Ralph had no choice but to follow. Philippa and Odila stared at the two of them, unsure what to make of this cool walkout. The ladies-in-waiting fell silent.

Philippa said: “Please, beg the king to be merciful.”

“He will be, my lady,” said Gregory. “He has authorized me to tell you that, in the light of your obstinacy, he will not force you to marry a man you loathe.”

“Thank you!” she said. “You have saved my life.”

Ralph opened his mouth to protest. He had been promised! He had committed sacrilege and murder for this reward. Surely it could not be taken from him now?

But Gregory spoke first. “Instead,” he said, “it is the king’s command that Ralph will marry your daughter.” He paused, and pointed at the tall fifteen-year-old girl standing beside her mother. “Odila,” he said, as if there were any need to emphasize who he was talking about.

Philippa gasped and Odila screamed.

Gregory bowed. “Good day to you both.”

Philippa cried: “Wait!”

Gregory took no notice, and went out.

Stunned, Ralph followed.

Gwenda was weary when she woke up. It was harvesttime, and she was spending every hour of the long August days in the fields. Wulfric would swing the scythe tirelessly from sunrise to nightfall, mowing down the corn. Gwenda’s job was to bundle the sheaves. All day long she bent down and scooped up the mown stalks, bent and scooped, bent and scooped until her back seemed to burn with pain. When it was too dark to see, she staggered home and fell into bed, leaving the family to feed themselves with whatever they could find in the cupboard.

Wulfric woke at dawn, and his movements penetrated Gwenda’s deep slumber. She struggled to her feet. They all needed a good breakfast, and she put cold mutton, bread, butter, and strong beer on the table. Sam, the ten-year-old, got up, but Davy, who was only eight, had to be shaken awake and pulled to his feet.

“This holding was never farmed by one man and his wife,” Gwenda said grumpily as they ate.

Wulfric was irritatingly positive. “You and I got the harvest in on our own, the year the bridge collapsed,” he said cheerfully.

“I was twelve years younger then.”

“But you’re more beautiful now.”

She was in no mood for gallantry. “Even when your father and brother were alive, you took on hired labor at harvest time.”

“Never mind. It’s our land, and we planted the crops, so we’ll benefit from the harvest, instead of earning just a penny a day wages. The more we work, the more we get. That’s what you always wanted, isn’t it?”

“I always wanted to be independent and self-sufficient, if that’s what you mean.” She went to the door. “A west wind, and a few clouds in the sky.”

Wulfric looked worried. “We need the rain to hold off for another two or three days.”

“I think it will. Come on, boys, time to go to the field. You can eat walking along.” She was bundling the bread and meat into a sack for their dinner when Nate Reeve hobbled in through the door. “Oh, no!” she said. “Not today—we’ve almost got our harvest in!”

“The lord has a harvest to get in, too,” said the bailiff.

Nate was followed in by his ten-year-old son, Jonathan, known as Jonno, who immediately started making faces at Sam.

Gwenda said: “Give us three more days on our own land.”

“Don’t bother to dispute with me about this,” Nate said. “You owe the lord one day a week, and two days at harvesttime. Today and tomorrow you will reap his barley in Brookfield.”

“The second day is normally forgiven. That’s been the practise for a long time.”

“It was, in times of plentiful labor. The lord is desperate now. So many people have negotiated free tenancies that he has hardly anyone to bring in his harvest.”

“So those who negotiated with you, and demanded to be freed of their customary duties, are rewarded, while people like us, who accepted the old terms, are punished with twice as much work on the lord’s land.” She looked accusingly at Wulfric, remembering how he had ignored her when she told him to argue terms with Nate.

“Something like that,” Nate said carelessly.

“Hell,” Gwenda said.

“Don’t curse,” said Nate. “You’ll get a free dinner. There will be wheat bread, and a new barrel of ale. Isn’t that something to look forward to?”

“Sir Ralph feeds oats to the horses he means to ride hard.”

“Don’t be long, now!” Nate went out.

His son, Jonno, poked out his tongue at Sam. Sam made a grab for him, but Jonno slipped out of his grasp and ran after his father.

Wearily, Gwenda and her family trudged across the fields to where Ralph's barley stood waving in the breeze. They got down to work. Wulfric reaped and Gwenda bundled. Sam followed behind, picking up the stray stalks she missed, gathering them until he had enough for a sheaf, then passing them to her to be tied. David had small, nimble fingers, and he plaited straws into tough cords for tying the sheaves. Those other families still working under old-style tenancies labored alongside them, while the cleverer serfs reaped their own crops.

When the sun was at its highest, Nate drove up in a cart with a barrel on the back. True to his word, he provided each family with a big loaf of delicious new wheat bread. Everyone ate their fill, then the adults lay down in the shade to rest while the children played.

Gwenda was dozing off when she heard an outbreak of childish screaming. She knew immediately, from the voice, that neither of her boys was making the noise, but all the same she leaped to her feet. She saw her son Sam fighting with Jonno Reeve. Although they were roughly the same age and size, Sam had Jonno on the ground and was punching and kicking him mercilessly. Gwenda moved toward the boys, but Wulfric was quicker, and he grabbed Sam with one hand and hauled him off.

Gwenda looked at Jonno in dismay. The boy was bleeding from his nose and mouth, and his face around one eye was inflamed and already beginning to swell. He was holding his stomach, moaning and crying. Gwenda had seen plenty of scraps between boys, but this was different. Jonno had been beaten up.

Gwenda stared at her ten-year-old son. His face was unmarked: it looked as if Jonno had not landed a single blow. Sam showed no sign of remorse at what he had done. Rather, he looked smugly triumphant. It was a vaguely familiar expression, and Gwenda searched her memory for its likeness. She did not take long to recall whom she had seen looking like that after giving someone a beating.

She had seen the same expression on the face of Ralph Fitzgerald, Sam's real father.

Two days after Ralph and Gregory visited Earlscastle, Lady Philippa came to Tench Hall.

Ralph had been considering the prospect of marrying Odila. She was a beautiful young girl, but you could buy beautiful young girls for a few pennies in London. Ralph had already had the experience of being married to someone who was little more than a child. After the initial excitement wore

off, he had been bored and irritated by her.

He wondered for a while whether he might marry Odila and get Philippa too. The idea of marrying the daughter and keeping the mother as his mistress intrigued him. He might even have them together. He had once had sex with a mother-daughter pair of prostitutes in Calais, and the element of incest had created an exciting sense of depravity.

But, on reflection, he knew that was not going to happen. Philippa would never consent to such an arrangement. He might look for ways to coerce her, but she was not easily bullied. “I don’t want to marry Odila,” he had said to Gregory as they rode home from Earlscastle.

“You won’t have to,” Gregory had said, but he refused to elaborate.

Philippa arrived with a lady-in-waiting and a bodyguard but without Odila. As she entered Tench Hall, for once she did not look proud. She did not even look beautiful, Ralph thought: clearly she had not slept for two nights.

They had just sat down to dinner: Ralph, Alan, Gregory, a handful of squires, and a bailiff. Philippa was the only woman in the room.

She walked up to Gregory.

The courtesy he had shown her previously was forgotten. He did not stand, but rudely looked her up and down, as if she were a servant girl with a grievance. “Well?” he said at last.

“I will marry Ralph.”

“Oh!” he said in mock surprise. “Will you, now?”

“Yes. Rather than sacrifice my daughter to him, I will marry him myself.”

“My lady,” he said sarcastically, “you seem to think that the king has led you to a table laden with dishes and asked you to choose which you like best. You are mistaken. The king does not ask what is your pleasure. He commands. You disobeyed one command, so he issued another. He did not give you a choice.”

She looked down. “I am very sorry for my behavior. Please spare my daughter.”

“If it were up to me, I would decline your request, as punishment for your intransigence. But perhaps you should plead with Sir Ralph.”

She looked at Ralph. He saw rage and despair in her eyes. He felt excited. She was the most haughty woman he had ever met, and he had broken her pride. He wanted to lie with her now, right away.

But it was not yet over.

He said: “You have something to say to me?”

“I apologize.”

“Come here.” Ralph was sitting at the head of the table, and she approached and stood by him. He caressed the head of a lion carved into the arm of his chair. “Go on,” he said.

“I am sorry that I spurned you before. I would like to withdraw everything I said. I accept your proposal. I will marry you.”

“But I have not renewed my proposal. The king orders me to marry Odila.”

“If you ask the king to revert to his original plan, surely he will grant your plea.”

“And that is what you are asking me to do.”

“Yes.” She looked him in the eye and swallowed her final humiliation. “I am asking you…I am begging you. Please, Sir Ralph, make me your wife.”

Ralph stood up, pushing his chair back. “Kiss me, then.”

She closed her eyes.

He put his left arm around her shoulders and pulled her to him. He kissed her lips. She submitted unresponsively. With his right hand, he squeezed her breast. It was as firm and heavy as he had always imagined. He ran his hand down her body and between her legs. She flinched, but remained unresistingly in his embrace, and he pressed his palm against the fork of her thighs. He grasped her mound, cupping its triangular fatness in his hand.

Then, holding that position, he broke the kiss and looked around the room at his friends.

76

At the same time as Ralph was created earl of Shiring, a young man called David Caerleon became earl of Monmouth. He was only seventeen, and related rather distantly to the dead man, but all nearer heirs to the title had been wiped out by the plague.

A few days before Christmas that year, Bishop Henri held a service in Kingsbridge Cathedral to bless the two new earls. Afterward David and Ralph were guests of honor at a banquet given by Merthin in the guildhall. The merchants were also celebrating the granting of a borough charter to Kingsbridge.

Ralph considered David to have been extraordinarily lucky. The boy had never been outside the kingdom, nor had he ever fought in battle, yet he was an earl at seventeen. Ralph had marched all through Normandy with King Edward, risked his life in battle after battle, lost three fingers, and committed countless sins in the king’s service, yet he had had to wait until the age of thirty-two.

However, he had made it at last, and sat next to Bishop Henri at the table, wearing a costly brocade coat woven with gold and silver threads. People who knew him pointed him out to strangers, wealthy merchants made way for him

and bowed their heads respectfully as he passed, and the maidservant's hand shook with nervousness as she poured wine into his cup. His father, Sir Gerald, confined to bed now but hanging on tenaciously to life, had said: "I'm the descendant of an earl, and the father of an earl. I'm satisfied." It was all profoundly gratifying.

Ralph was keen to talk to David about the problem of laborers. It had eased temporarily now that the harvest was in and the autumn plowing was finished: at this time of year the days were short and the weather was cold, so not much work could be done in the fields. Unfortunately, as soon as the spring plowing began and the ground was soft enough for the serfs to sow seeds, the trouble would start again: laborers would recommence agitating for higher wages, and if refused would illegally run off to more extravagant employers.

The only way to stop this was for the nobility collectively to stand firm, resist demands for higher pay, and refuse to hire runaways. This was what Ralph wanted to say to David.

However, the new earl of Monmouth showed no inclination to talk to Ralph. He was more interested in Ralph's stepdaughter, Odila, who was near his own age. They had met before, Ralph gathered: Philippa and her first husband, William, had often been guests at the castle when David had been a squire in the service of the old earl. Whatever their history, they were friends now: David was talking animatedly and Odila was hanging on every word—agreeing with his opinions, gasping at his stories, and laughing at his jokes.

Ralph had always envied men who could fascinate women. His brother had the ability, and consequently was able to attract the most beautiful women, despite being a short, plain man with red hair.

All the same, Ralph felt sorry for Merthin. Ever since the day that Earl Roland had made Ralph a squire and condemned Merthin to be a carpenter's apprentice, Merthin had been doomed. Even though he was the elder, it was Ralph who was destined to become the earl. Merthin, now sitting on the other side of Earl David, had to console himself with being a mere alderman—and having charm.

Ralph could not even charm his own wife. She hardly spoke to him. She had more to say to his dog.

How was it possible, Ralph asked himself, for a man to want something as badly as he had wanted Philippa, and then to be so dissatisfied when he got it? He had yearned for her since he was a squire of nineteen. Now, after three months of marriage, he wished with all his heart that he could get rid of her.

Yet it was hard for him to complain. Philippa did everything a wife was obliged to do. She ran the castle efficiently, as she had been doing ever since her first husband had been made earl after the battle of Crécy. Supplies were ordered, bills were paid, clothes were sewn, fires were lit, and food and wine

arrived on the table unfailingly. And she submitted to Ralph's sexual attentions. He could do anything he liked: tear her clothes, thrust his fingers ungently inside her, take her standing up or from behind—she never complained.

But she did not reciprocate his caresses. Her lips never moved against his, her tongue never slipped into his mouth, she never stroked his skin. She kept a vial of almond oil handy, and lubricated her unresponsive body with it whenever he wanted sex. She lay as still as a corpse while he grunted on top of her. The moment he rolled off, she went to wash herself.

The only good thing about the marriage was that Odila was fond of little Gerry. The baby brought out her nascent maternal instinct. She loved to talk to him, sing him songs, and rock him to sleep. She gave him the kind of affectionate mothering he would never really get from a paid nurse.

All the same, Ralph was regretful. Philippa's voluptuous body, which he had stared at with longing for so many years, was now revolting to him. He had not touched her for weeks, and he probably never would again. He looked at her heavy breasts and round hips, and wished for the slender limbs and girlish skin of Tilly. Tilly, whom he had stabbed with a long, sharp knife that went up under her ribs and into her beating heart. That was a sin he did not dare to confess. How long, he wondered wretchedly, would he suffer for it in Purgatory?

The bishop and his colleagues were staying in the prior's palace, and the Monmouth entourage filled the priory's guest rooms, so Ralph and Philippa and their servants were lodging at an inn. Ralph had chosen the Bell, the rebuilt tavern owned by his brother. It was the only three-story house in Kingsbridge, with a big open room at ground level, male and female dormitories above, and a top floor with six expensive individual guest rooms. When the banquet was over, Ralph and his men removed to the tavern, where they installed themselves in front of the fire, called for more wine, and began to play at dice. Philippa remained behind, talking to Caris and chaperoning Odila with Earl David.

Ralph and his companions attracted a crowd of admiring young men and women such as always gathered around free-spending noblemen. Ralph gradually forgot his troubles in the euphoria of drink and the thrill of gambling.

He noticed a young fair-haired woman watching him with a yearning expression as he cheerfully lost stacks of silver pennies on the throw of the dice. He beckoned her to sit beside him on the bench, and she told him her name was Ella. At moments of tension she grabbed his thigh, as if captured by the suspense, though she probably knew exactly what she was doing—women usually did.

He gradually lost interest in the game and transferred his attention to her. His men carried on betting while he got to know Ella. She was everything Philippa was not: happy, sexy, and fascinated by Ralph. She touched him and herself a lot—she would push her hair off her face, then pat his arm, then hold her hand to her throat, then push his shoulder playfully. She seemed very interested in his experiences in France.

To Ralph's annoyance, Merthin came into the tavern and sat down with him. Merthin was not running the Bell himself—he had rented it to the youngest daughter of Betty Baxter—but he was keen that the tenant should make a success of it, and he asked Ralph if everything was to his satisfaction. Ralph introduced his companion, and Merthin said, "Yes, I know Ella," in a dismissive tone that was uncharacteristically discourteous.

Today was only the third or fourth time the two brothers had met since the death of Tilly. On previous occasions, such as Ralph's wedding to Philippa, there had hardly been time to talk. All the same Ralph knew, from the way his brother looked at him, that Merthin suspected him of being Tilly's killer. The unspoken thought was a looming presence, never addressed but impossible to ignore, like the cow in the cramped one-room hovel of a poor peasant. If it was mentioned, Ralph felt that would be the last time they ever spoke.

So tonight, as if by mutual consent, they once again exchanged a few meaningless platitudes, then Merthin left, saying he had work to do. Ralph wondered briefly what work he was going to do at dusk on a December

evening. He really had no idea how Merthin spent his time. He did not hunt, or hold court, or attend on the king. Was it possible to spend all day, every day, making drawings and supervising builders? Such a life would have driven Ralph mad. And he was baffled by how much money Merthin seemed to make from his enterprises. Ralph himself had been short of money even when he had been lord of Tench. Merthin never seemed to lack it.

Ralph turned his attention back to Ella. “My brother’s a bit grumpy,” he said apologetically.

“It’s because he hasn’t had a woman for half a year.” She giggled. “He used to shag the prioress, but she had to throw him out after Philemon came back.”

Ralph pretended to be shocked. “Nuns aren’t supposed to be shagged.”

“Mother Caris is a wonderful woman—but she’s got the itch, you can tell by the way she walks.”

Ralph was aroused by such frank talk from a woman. “It’s very bad for a man,” he said, playing along. “To go for so long without a woman.”

“I think so, too.”

“It leads to…swelling.”

She put her head on one side and raised her eyebrows. He glanced down at his own lap. She followed his gaze. “Oh, dear,” she said. “That looks uncomfortable.” She put her hand on his erect penis.

At that moment, Philippa appeared

Ralph froze. He felt guilty and scared, and at the same time he was furious with himself for caring whether Philippa saw what he was doing or not.

She said: “I’m going upstairs—oh.”

Ella did not release her hold. In fact she squeezed Ralph’s penis gently, while looking up at Philippa and smiling triumphantly.

Philippa flushed red, her face registering shame and distaste.

Ralph opened his mouth to speak, then did not know what to say. He was not willing to apologize to his virago of a wife, feeling that she had brought this humiliation on herself. But he also felt somewhat foolish, sitting there with a tavern tart holding his prick while his wife, the countess, stood in front of them looking embarrassed.

The tableau lasted only a moment. Ralph made a strangled sound, Ella giggled, and Philippa said, “Oh!” in a tone of exasperation and disgust. Then Philippa turned and walked away, head held unnaturally high. She approached the broad staircase and went up, as graceful as a deer on a hillside, and disappeared without looking back.

Ralph felt both angry and ashamed, though he reasoned that he had no need to feel either. However, his interest in Ella diminished visibly, and he took her hand away.

“Have some more wine,” she said, pouring from the jug on the table, but Ralph felt the onset of a headache, and pushed the wooden cup away.

Ella put a restraining hand on his arm and said in a low, warm voice: “Don’t leave me in the lurch now that you’ve got me all, you know, excited.”

He shook her off and stood up.

Her face hardened and she said: “Well, you’d better give me something by way of compensation.”

He dipped into his purse and took out a handful of silver pennies. Without looking at Ella, he dumped the money on the table, not caring whether it was too much or too little.

She began to scoop up the coins hastily.

Ralph left her and went upstairs.

Philippa was on the bed, sitting upright with her back against the headboard. She had taken off her shoes but was otherwise fully dressed. She stared accusingly at Ralph as he walked in.

He said: “You have no right to be angry with me!”

“I’m not angry,” she said. “But you are.”

She could always twist words around so that she was in the right and he in the wrong.

Before he could think of a reply, she said: “Wouldn’t you like me to leave you?”

He stared at her, astonished. This was the last thing he had expected. “Where would you go?”

“Here,” she said. “I won’t become a nun, but I could live in the convent nevertheless. I would bring just a few servants: a maid, a clerk, and my confessor. I’ve already spoken to Mother Caris, and she is willing.”

“My last wife did that. What will people think?”

“A lot of noblewomen retire to nunneries, either temporarily or permanently, at some point in their lives. People will think you’ve rejected me because I’m past the age for conceiving children—which I probably am. Anyway, do you care what people say?”

The thought briefly flashed across his mind that he would be sorry to see Gerry lose Odila. But the prospect of being free of Philippa’s proud, disapproving presence was irresistible. “All right, what’s stopping you? Tilly never asked permission.”

“I want to see Odila married first.”

“Who to?”

She looked at him as if he were stupid.

“Oh,” he said. “Young David, I suppose.”

“He is in love with her, and I think they would be well suited.”

“He’s underage—he’ll have to ask the king.”

“That’s why I’ve raised it with you. Will you go with him to see the king,

and speak in support of the marriage? If you do this for me, I swear I will never ask you for anything ever again. I will leave you in peace.”

She was not asking him to make any sacrifices. An alliance with Monmouth could do Ralph nothing but good. “And you’ll leave Earlscastle, and move into the nunnery?”

“Yes, as soon as Odila is married.”

It was the end of a dream, Ralph realized, but a dream that had turned into a sour, bleak reality. He might as well acknowledge the failure and start again.

“All right,” he said, feeling regret mingled with liberation. “It’s a bargain.”

77

Easter came early in the year 1350, and there was a big fire blazing in Merthin’s hearth on the evening of Good Friday. The table was laid with a cold supper: smoked fish, soft cheese, new bread, pears, and a flagon of Rhenish wine. Merthin was wearing clean underclothes and a new yellow robe. The house had been swept, and there were daffodils in a jug on the sideboard.

Merthin was alone. Lolla was with his servants, Arn and Em. Their cottage was at the end of the garden but Lolla, who was five, loved to stay there overnight. She called it going on pilgrimage, and took a traveling bag containing her hairbrush and a favorite doll.

Merthin opened a window and looked out. A cold breeze blew across the river from the meadow on the south side. The last of the evening was fading, the light seeming to fall out of the sky and sink into the water, where it disappeared in the blackness.

He visualized a hooded figure emerging from the nunnery. He saw it tread a worn diagonal across the cathedral green, hurry past the lights of the Bell, and descend the muddy main street, the face shadowed, speaking to no one. He imagined it reaching the foreshore. Did it glance sideways into the cold, black river, and remember a moment of despair so great as to give rise to thoughts of self-destruction? If so, the recollection was quickly dismissed, and it stepped forward onto the cobbled roadbed of his bridge. It crossed the span and made landfall again on Leper Island. There it diverted from the main road and passed through low shrubbery, across scrubby grass cropped by rabbits, and around the ruins of the old lazar house until it came to the southwest shore. Then it tapped on Merthin’s door.

He closed the window and waited. No tap came. He was wishfully a little ahead of schedule.

He was tempted to drink some wine, but he did not: a ritual had developed, and he did not want to change the order of events.

The knock came a few moments later. He opened the door. She stepped inside, threw back her hood, and dropped the heavy gray cloak from her shoulders.

She was taller than he by an inch or more, and a few years older. Her face was proud, and could be haughty, although now her smile radiated warmth like the sun. She wore a robe of bright Kingsbridge scarlet. He put his arms around her, pressing her voluptuous body to his own, and kissed her wide mouth. “My darling,” he said. “Philippa.”

They made love immediately, there on the floor, hardly undressing. He was hungry for her, and she was if anything more eager. He spread her cloak on the straw, and she lifted the skirt of her robe and lay down. She clung to him like one drowning, her legs wrapped around his, her arms crushing him to her soft body, her face buried in his neck.

She had told him that, after she left Ralph and moved into the priory, she had thought no one would ever touch her again until the nuns laid out her cold body for burial. The thought almost made Merthin cry.

For his part, he had loved Caris so much that he felt no other woman would ever arouse his affection. For him as well as Philippa, this love had come as an unexpected gift, a spring of cold water bubbling up in a baking-hot desert, and they both drank from it as if they were dying of thirst.

Afterward they lay entwined by the fire, panting, and he recalled the first time. Soon after she moved to the priory, she had taken an interest in the building of the new tower. A practical woman, she had trouble filling the long hours that were supposed to be spent in prayer and meditation. She enjoyed the library but could not read all day. She came to see him in the mason’s loft, and he showed her the plans. She quickly got into the habit of visiting every day, talking to him while he worked. He had always admired her intelligence and strength, and in the intimacy of the loft he came to know the warm, generous spirit beneath her stately manner. He discovered that she had a lively sense of humor, and he learned how to make her laugh. She responded with a rich, throaty chuckle that, somehow, led him to think of making love to her. One day she had paid him a compliment. “You’re a kind man,” she had said. “There aren’t enough of them.” Her sincerity had touched him, and he had kissed her hand. It was a gesture of affection, but one she could reject, if she wished, without drama: she simply had to withdraw her hand and take a step back, and he would have known he had gone a little too far. But she had not rejected it. On the contrary, she had held his hand and looked at him with something like love in her eyes, and he had wrapped his arms around her and kissed her lips.

They had made love on the mattress in the loft, and he had not

remembered until afterward that Caris had encouraged him to put the mattress there, with a joke about masons needing a soft place for their tools.

Caris did not know about him and Philippa. No one did except Philippa's maid and Arn and Em. She went to bed in her private room on the upper floor of the hospital soon after nightfall, at the same time as the nuns retired to their dormitory. She slipped out while they were asleep, using the outside steps that permitted important guests to come and go without passing through the common people's quarters. She returned by the same route before dawn, while the nuns were singing Matins, and appeared at breakfast as if she had been in her room all night.

He was surprised to find that he could love another woman less than a year after Caris had left him for the final time. He certainly had not forgotten Caris. On the contrary, he thought about her every day. He felt the urge to tell her about something amusing that had happened, or he wanted her opinion on a knotty problem, or he found himself performing some task the way she would want it done, such as carefully bathing Lolla's grazed knee with warm wine. And then he saw her most days. The new hospital was almost finished, but the cathedral tower was barely begun, and Caris kept a close eye on both building projects. The priory had lost its power to control the town merchants, but nevertheless Caris took an interest in the work Merthin and the guild were doing to create all the institutions of a borough—establishing new courts, planning a wool exchange, and encouraging the craft guilds to codify standards and measures. But his thoughts about her always had an unpleasant aftertaste, like the bitterness left at the back of the throat by sour beer. He had loved her totally, and she had, in the end, rejected him. It was like remembering a happy day that had ended with a fight.

"Do you think I'm peculiarly attracted to women who aren't free?" he said idly to Philippa.

"No, why?"

"It does seem odd that after twelve years of loving a nun, and nine months of celibacy, I should fall for my brother's wife."

"Don't call me that," she said quickly. "It was no marriage. I was wedded against my will, I shared his bed for no more than a few days, and he will be happy if he never sees me again."

He patted her shoulder apologetically. "But still, we have to be secretive, just as I did with Caris." What he was not saying was that a man was entitled, by law, to kill his wife if he caught her committing adultery. Merthin had never known it to happen, certainly not among the nobility, but Ralph's pride was a terrible thing. Merthin knew, and had told Philippa, that Ralph had killed his first wife, Tilly.

She said: "Your father loved your mother hopelessly for a long time, didn't he?"

“So he did!” Merthin had almost forgotten that old story.

“And you fell for a nun.”

“And my brother spent years pining for you, the happily married wife of a nobleman. As the priests say, the sins of the fathers are visited upon the sons. But enough of this. Do you want some supper?”

“In a moment.”

“There’s something you want to do first?”

“You know.”

He did know. He knelt between her legs and kissed her belly and her thighs. It was a peculiarity of hers that she always wanted to come twice. He began to tease her with his tongue. She groaned, and pressed the back of his head. “Yes,” she said. “You know how I like that, especially when I’m full of your seed.”

He lifted his head. “I do,” he said. Then he bent again to his task.

The spring brought a respite in the plague. People were still dying, but fewer were falling ill. On Easter Sunday, Bishop Henri announced that the Fleece Fair would take place as usual this year.

At the same service, six novices took their vows and so became full-fledged monks. They had all had an extraordinarily short novitiate, but Henri was keen to raise the number of monks at Kingsbridge, and he said the same thing was going on all over the country. In addition five priests were ordained—they, too, benefiting from an accelerated training program—and sent to replace plague victims in the surrounding countryside. And two Kingsbridge monks came down from university, having received their degrees as physicians in three years instead of the usual five or seven.

The new doctors were Austin and Sime. Caris remembered both of them rather vaguely: she had been guest master when they left, three years ago, to go to Kingsbridge College in Oxford. On the afternoon of Easter Monday she showed them around the almost-completed new hospital. No builders were at work as it was a holiday.

Both had the bumptious self-confidence that the university seemed to instill in its graduates along with medical theories and a taste for Gascon wine. However, years of dealing with patients had given Caris a confidence of her own, and she described the hospital’s facilities and the way she planned to run it with brisk assurance.

Austin was a slim, intense young man with thinning fair hair. He was impressed with the innovative new cloisterlike layout of the rooms. Sime, a little older and round-faced, did not seem eager to learn from Caris’s experience: she noticed that he always looked away when she was talking.

“I believe a hospital should always be clean,” she said.

“On what grounds?” Sime inquired in a condescending tone, as if asking a little girl why Dolly had to be spanked.

“Cleanliness is a virtue.”

“Ah. So it has nothing to do with the balance of humors in the body.”

“I have no idea. We don’t pay too much attention to the humors. That approach has failed spectacularly against the plague.”

“And sweeping the floor has succeeded?”

“At a minimum, a clean room lifts patients’ spirits.”

Austin put in: “You must admit, Sime, that some of the masters at Oxford share the mother prioress’s new ideas.”

“A small group of the heterodox.”

Caris said: “The main point is to take patients suffering from the type of illnesses that are transmitted from the sick to the well and isolate them from the rest.”

“To what end?” said Sime.

“To restrict the spread of such diseases.”

“And how is it that they are transmitted?”

“No one knows.”

A little smile of triumph twitched Sime’s mouth. “Then how do you know by what means to restrict their spread, may I ask?”

He thought he had trumped her in argument—it was the main thing they learned at Oxford—but she knew better. “From experience,” she said. “A shepherd doesn’t understand the miracle by which lambs grow in the womb of a ewe, but he knows it won’t happen if he keeps the ram out of the field.”

“Hm.”

Caris disliked the way he said: “Hm.” He was clever, she thought, but his cleverness never touched the world. She was struck by the contrast between this kind of intellectual and Merthin’s kind. Merthin’s learning was wide, and the power of his mind to grasp complexities was remarkable—but his wisdom never strayed far from the realities of the material world, for he knew that if he went wrong his buildings would fall down. Her father, Edmund, had been like that, clever but practical. Sime, like Godwyn and Anthony, would cling to his faith in the humors of the body regardless of whether his patients lived or died.

Austin was smiling broadly. “She’s got you there, Sime,” he said, evidently amused that his smug friend had failed to overwhelm this uneducated woman. “We may not know exactly how illnesses spread, but it can’t do any harm to separate the sick from the well.”

Sister Joan, the nuns’ treasurer, interrupted their conversation. “The bailiff of Outhenby is asking for you, Mother Caris.”

“Did he bring a herd of calves?” Outhenby was obliged to supply the nuns with twelve one-year-old calves every Easter.

“Yes.”

“Pen the beasts and ask the bailiff to come here, please.”

Sime and Austin took their leave, and Caris went to inspect the tiled floor in the latrines. The bailiff found her there. It was Harry Plowman. She had sacked the old bailiff, who was too slow to respond to change, and she had promoted the brightest young man in the village.

He shook her hand, which was overfamiliar of him, but Caris liked him and did not mind.

She said: “It must be a nuisance, your having to drive a herd all the way here, especially when the spring plowing is under way.”

“It is that,” he said. Like most plowmen, he was broad-shouldered and strong-armed. Strength as well as skill was required for driving the communal eight-ox team as they pulled the heavy plow through wet clay soil. He seemed to carry with him the air of the healthy outdoors.

“Wouldn’t you rather make a money payment?” Caris said. “Most manorial dues are paid in cash these days.”

“It would be more convenient.” His eyes narrowed with peasant shrewdness. “But how much?”

“A year-old calf normally fetches ten to twelve shillings at market, though prices are down this season.”

“They are—by half. You can buy twelve calves for three pounds.”

“Or six pounds in a good year.”

He grinned, enjoying the negotiation. “There’s your problem.”

“But you would prefer to pay cash.”

“If we can agree the amount.”

“Make it eight shillings.”

“But then, if the price of a calf is only five shillings, where do we villagers get the extra money?”

“I tell you what. In future, Outhenby can pay the nunnery either five pounds or twelve calves—the choice is yours.”

Harry considered that, looking for snags, but could find none. “All right,” he said. “Shall we seal the bargain?”

“How should we do that?”

To her surprise, he kissed her.

He held her slender shoulders in his rough hands, bent his head, and pressed his lips to hers. If Brother Sime had done this she would have recoiled. But Harry was different, and perhaps she had been titillated by his air of vigorous masculinity. Whatever the reason, she submitted to the kiss, letting him pull her unresisting body to his own, and moving her lips against his bearded mouth. He pressed up against her so that she could feel his erection. She realized that he would cheerfully take her here on the newly laid tiles of the latrine floor, and that thought brought her to her senses. She broke

the kiss and pushed him away. “Stop!” she said. “What do you think you’re doing?”

He was unabashed. “Kissing you, my dear,” he said.

She realized that she had a problem. No doubt gossip about her and Merthin was widespread: they were probably the two best-known people in Shiring. While Harry surely did not know the truth, the rumors had been enough to embolden him. This kind of thing could undermine her authority. She must squash it now. “You must never do anything like that again,” she said as severely as she could.

“You seemed to like it!”

“Then your sin is all the greater, for you have tempted a weak woman to perjure her holy vows.”

“But I love you.”

It was true, she realized, and she could guess why. She had swept into his village, reorganized everything, and bent the peasants to her will. She had recognized Harry’s potential and elevated him above his fellows. He must think of her as a goddess. It was not surprising that he had fallen in love with her. He had better fall out of love as soon as possible. “If you ever speak to me like that again, I’ll have to get another bailiff in Outhenby.”

“Oh,” he said. That stopped him short more effectively than the accusation of sin.

“Now, go home.”

“Very well, Mother Caris.”

“And find yourself another woman—preferably one who has not taken a vow of chastity.”

“Never,” he said, but she did not believe him.

He left, but she stayed where she was. She felt restless and lustful. If she could have felt sure of being alone for a while, she would have touched herself. This was the first time in nine months that she had been bothered by physical desire. After finally splitting up with Merthin she had fallen into a kind of neutered state, in which she did not think about sex. Her relationships with other nuns gave her warmth and affection: she was fond of both Joan and Oonagh, though neither loved her in the physical way Mair had. Her heart beat with other passions: the new hospital, the tower, and the rebirth of the town.

Thinking of the tower, she left the hospital and walked across the green to the cathedral. Merthin had dug four enormous holes, the deepest anyone had ever seen, outside the church around the foundations of the old tower. He had built great cranes to lift the earth out. Throughout the wet autumn months, oxcarts had lumbered all day long down the main street and across the first span of the bridge to dump the mud on rocky Leper Island. There they had picked up building stones from Merthin’s wharf, then climbed the street

again, to stack the stones around the grounds of the church in ever-growing piles.

As soon as the winter frost was over, his masons had begun laying the foundations. Caris went to the north side of the cathedral and looked into the hole in the angle formed by the outside wall of the nave and the outside wall of the north transept. It was dizzyingly deep. The bottom was already covered with neat masonry, the squared-off stones laid in straight lines and joined by thin layers of mortar. Because the old foundations were inadequate, the tower was being built on its own new, independent foundations. It would rise outside the existing walls of the church, so no demolition would be needed over and above what Elfric had already done in taking down the upper levels of the old tower. Only when it was finished would Merthin remove the temporary roof Elfric had built over the crossing. It was a typical Merthin design: simple yet radical, a brilliant solution to the unique problems of the site.

As at the hospital, no builders were at work on Easter Monday, but she saw movement in the hole and realized someone was walking around on the foundations. A moment later she recognized Merthin. She went to one of the surprisingly flimsy rope-and-branch ladders the masons used, and clambered shakily down.

She was glad to reach the bottom. Merthin helped her off the ladder, smiling. “You look a little pale,” he said.

“It’s a long way down. How are you getting on?”

“Fine. It will take many years.”

“Why? The hospital seems more complicated, and that’s finished.”

“Two reasons. The higher we go, the fewer masons will be able to work on it. Right now I’ve got twelve men laying the foundations. But as it rises it will get narrower, and there just won’t be room for them all. The other reason is that mortar takes so long to set. We have to let it harden over a winter before we put too much weight on it.”

She was hardly listening. Watching his face, she was remembering making love to him in the prior’s palace, between Matins and Lauds, with the first gleam of daylight coming in through the open window and falling over their naked bodies like a blessing.

She patted his arm. “Well, the hospital isn’t taking so long.”

“You should be able to move in by Whitsun.”

“I’m glad. Although we’re having a slight respite from the plague: fewer people are dying.”

“Thank God,” he said fervently. “Perhaps it may be coming to an end.”

She shook her head bleakly. “We thought it was over once before, remember? About this time last year. Then it came back worse.”

“Heaven forbid.”

She touched his cheek with her palm, feeling his wiry beard. “At least you’re safe.”

He looked faintly displeased. “As soon as the hospital is finished we can start on the wool exchange.”

“I hope you’re right to think that business must pick up soon.”

“If it doesn’t, we’ll all be dead anyway.”

“Don’t say that.” She kissed his cheek.

“We have to act on the assumption that we’re going to live.” He said it irritably, as if she had annoyed him. “But the truth is that we don’t know.”

“Let’s not think about the worst.” She put her arms around his waist and hugged him, pressing her breasts against his thin body, feeling his hard bones against her yielding flesh.

He pushed her away violently. She stumbled backward and almost fell. “Don’t do that!” he shouted.

She was as shocked as if he had slapped her. “What’s the matter?”

“Stop touching me!”

“I only…”

“Just don’t do it! You ended our relationship nine months ago. I said it was the last time, and I meant it.”

She could not understand his anger. “But I only hugged you.”

“Well, don’t. I’m not your lover. You have no right.”

“I have no right to touch you?”

“No!”

“I didn’t think I needed some kind of permission.”

“Of course you knew. You don’t let people touch you.”

“You’re not *people*. We’re not strangers.” But as she said these things she knew she was wrong and he was right. She had rejected him, but she had not accepted the consequences. The encounter with Harry from Outhenby had fired her lust, and she had come to Merthin looking for release. She had told herself she was touching him in affectionate friendship, but that was a lie. She had treated him as if he were still available to her, as a rich and idle lady might put down a book and pick it up again. Having denied him the right to touch her all this time, it was wrong of her to try to reinstate the privilege just because a muscular young plowman had kissed her.

All the same, she would have expected Merthin to point this out in a gentle and affectionate way. But he had been hostile and brutal. Had she thrown away his friendship as well as his love? Tears came to her eyes. She turned away from him and went back to the ladder.

She found it hard to climb up. It was tiring, and she seemed to have lost her energy. She stopped for a rest, and looked down. Merthin was standing on the bottom of the ladder, steadying it with his weight.

When she was almost at the top, she looked down again. He was still

there. It occurred to her that her unhappiness would be over if she fell. It was a long drop to those unforgiving stones. She would die instantly.

Merthin seemed to sense what she was thinking, for he gave an impatient wave, indicating that she should hurry up and get off the ladder. She thought of how devastated he would be if she killed herself, and for a moment she enjoyed imagining his misery and guilt. She felt sure God would not punish her in the afterlife, if there was an afterlife.

Then she climbed the last few rungs and stood on solid ground. How foolish she had been, just for a moment. She was not going to end her life. She had too much to do.

She returned to the nunnery. It was time for Evensong, and she led the procession into the cathedral. As a young novice she had resented the time wasted in services. In fact Mother Cecilia had taken care to give her work that permitted her to be excused for much of the time. Now she welcomed the chance to rest and reflect.

This afternoon had been a low moment, she decided, but she would recover. All the same she found herself fighting back tears as she sang the psalms.

For supper the nuns had smoked eel. Chewy and strongly flavored, it was not Caris's favorite dish. Tonight she was not hungry, anyway. She ate some bread.

After the meal she retired to her pharmacy. Two novices were there, copying out Caris's book. She had finished it soon after Christmas. Many people had asked for copies: apothecaries, prioresses, barbers, even one or two physicians. Copying the book had become part of the training of nuns who wanted to work in the hospital. The copies were cheap—the book was short, and there were no elaborate drawings or costly inks—and the demand seemed never-ending.

Three people made the room feel crowded. Caris was looking forward to the space and light of the pharmacy in the new hospital.

She wanted to be alone, so she sent the novices away. However, she was not destined to get her wish. A few moments later Lady Philippa came in.

Caris had never warmed to the reserved countess, but sympathized with her plight, and was glad to give sanctuary to any woman fleeing from a husband such as Ralph. Philippa was an easy guest, making few demands, spending a lot of time in her room. She had only a limited interest in sharing the nuns' life of prayer and self-denial—but Caris of all people could understand that.

Caris invited her to sit on a stool at the bench.

Philippa was a remarkably direct woman, despite her courtly manners. Without preamble, she said: "I want you to leave Merthin alone."

"What?" Caris was astonished and offended.

“Of course you have to talk to him, but you should not kiss or touch him.”

“How dare you.” What did Philippa know—and why did she care?

“He’s not your lover anymore. Stop bothering him.”

Merthin must have told her about their quarrel this afternoon. “But why would he tell you…?” Before the question was out of her mouth, she guessed the answer.

Philippa confirmed it with her next utterance. “He’s not yours, now—he’s mine.”

“Oh, my soul!” Caris was flabbergasted. “You and Merthin?”

“Yes.”

“Are you…Have you actually…”

“Yes.”

“I had no idea!” She felt betrayed, though she knew she had no right. When had this happened? “But how…where…?”

“You don’t need to know the details.”

“Of course not.” At his house on Leper Island, she supposed. At night, probably. “How long…?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

Caris could work it out. Philippa had been here less than a month. “You moved fast.”

It was an unworthy jibe, and Philippa had the grace to ignore it. “He would have done anything to keep you. But you threw him over. Now let him go. It’s been difficult for him to love anyone else, after you—but he has managed it. Don’t you dare interfere.”

Caris wanted to rebuff her furiously, tell her angrily that she had no right to give orders and make moral demands—but the trouble was that Philippa was in the right. Caris had to let Merthin go, forever.

She did not want to show her heartbreak in front of Philippa. “Would you leave me now, please?” she said with an attempt at Philippa’s style of dignity. “I would like to be alone.”

Philippa was not easily pushed around. “Will you do as I say?” she persisted.

Caris did not like to be cornered, but she had no spirit left. “Yes, of course,” she said.

“Thank you.” Philippa left.

When she was sure Philippa was out of earshot, Caris began to cry.

78

Philemon as prior was no better than Godwyn. He was overwhelmed by the

challenge of managing the assets of the priory. Caris had made a list, during her spell as acting prior, of the monks' main sources of income:

1. *Rents*
2. *A share of profits from commerce and industry (tithing)*
3. *Agricultural profits on land not rented out*
4. *Profits from grain mills and other, industrial mills*
5. *Waterway tolls and a share of all fish landed*
6. *Stallage in markets*
7. *Proceeds of justice—fees and fines from courts*
8. *Pious gifts from pilgrims and others*
9. *Sale of books, holy water, candles, etc.*

She had given the list to Philemon, and he had thrown it back at her as if insulted. Godwyn, better than Philemon only in that he had a certain superficial charm, would have thanked her and quietly ignored her list.

In the nunnery, she had introduced a new method of keeping accounts, one she had learned from Buonaventura Caroli when she was working for her father. The old method was simply to write in a parchment roll a short note of every transaction, so that you could always go back and check. The Italian system was to record income on the left-hand side and expenditure on the right, and add them up at the foot of the page. The difference between the two totals showed whether the institution was gaining or losing money. Sister Joan had taken this up with enthusiasm, but when she offered to explain it to Philemon he refused curtly. He regarded offers of help as insults to his competence.

He had only one talent, and it was the same as Godwyn's: a flair for manipulating people. He had shrewdly weeded the new intake of monks, sending the modern-minded physician, Brother Austin, and two other bright young men to St.-John-in-the-Forest, where they would be too far away to challenge his authority.

But Philemon was the bishop's problem now. Henri had appointed him and Henri would have to deal with him. The town was independent, and Caris had her new hospital.

The hospital was to be consecrated by the bishop on Whitsunday, which was always seven weeks after Easter. A few days beforehand, Caris moved her equipment and supplies into the new pharmacy. There was plenty of room for two people to work at the bench, preparing medicines, and a third to sit at a writing desk.

Caris was preparing an emetic, Oonagh was grinding dried herbs, and a novice, Greta, was copying out Caris's book, when a novice monk came in

with a small wooden chest. It was Josiah, a teenage boy usually called Joshie. He was embarrassed to be in the presence of three women. “Where shall I put this?” he said.

Caris looked at him. “What is it?”

“A chest.”

“I can see that,” she said patiently. The fact that someone was capable of learning to read and write did not, unfortunately, make him intelligent. “What does the chest contain?”

“Books.”

“And why have you brought me a chest of books?”

“I was told to.” Realizing, after a moment, that this answer was insufficiently informative, he added: “By Brother Sime.”

Caris raised her eyebrows. “Is Sime making me a gift of books?” She opened the chest.

Joshie made his escape without answering the question.

The books were medical texts, all in Latin. Caris looked through them. They were the classics: Avicenna’s *Poem on Medicine*, Hippocrates’ *Diet and Hygiene*, Galen’s *On the Parts of Medicine*, and *De Urinis* by Isaac Judaeus. All had been written more than three hundred years ago.

Joshie reappeared with another chest.

“What now?” said Caris.

“Medical instruments. Brother Sime says you are not to touch them. He will come and put them in their proper places.”

Caris was dismayed. “Sime wants to keep his books and instruments here? Is he planning to work here?”

Joshie did not know anything about Sime’s intentions, of course.

Before Caris could say any more, Sime appeared, accompanied by Philemon. Sime looked around the room then, without explanation, began unpacking his things. He moved some of Caris’s vessels from a shelf and replaced them with his books. He took out sharp knives for opening veins, and the teardrop-shaped glass flasks used for examining urine samples.

Caris said neutrally: “Are you planning to spend a great deal of time here in the hospital, Brother Sime?”

Philemon answered for him, clearly having anticipated the question with relish. “Where else?” he said. His tone was indignant, as if Caris had challenged him already. “This is the hospital, is it not? And Sime is the only physician in the priory. How shall people be treated, if not by him?”

Suddenly the pharmacy did not seem so spacious anymore.

Before Caris could say anything, a stranger appeared. “Brother Thomas told me to come here,” he said. “I am Jonas Powderer, from London.”

The visitor was a man of about fifty dressed in an embroidered coat and a fur hat. Caris noted his ready smile and affable manner, and guessed that he

made his living by selling things. He shook hands, then looked around the room, nodding with apparent approval at Caris's neat rows of labeled jars and vials. "Remarkable," he said. "I have never seen such a sophisticated pharmacy outside London."

"Are you a physician, sir?" Philemon asked. His tone was cautious: he was not sure of Jonas's status.

"Apothecary. I have a shop in Smithfield, next to St. Bartholomew's Hospital. I shouldn't boast, but it is the largest such business in the city."

Philemon relaxed. An apothecary was a mere merchant, well below a prior in the pecking order. With a hint of a sneer he said: "And what brings the biggest apothecary in London all the way down here?"

"I was hoping to acquire a copy of *The Kingsbridge Panacea.*"

"The what?"

Jonas smiled knowingly. "You cultivate humility, Father Prior, but I see this novice nun making a copy right here in your pharmacy."

Caris said: "The book? It's not called a panacea."

"Yet it contains cures for all ills."

There was a certain logic to that, she realized. "But how do you know of it?"

"I travel a good deal, searching for rare herbs and other ingredients, while my sons take care of the shop. I met a nun of Southampton who showed me a copy. She called it a panacea, and told me it was written in Kingsbridge."

"Was the nun Sister Claudia?"

"Yes. I begged her to lend me the book just long enough to make a copy, but she would not be parted from it."

"I remember her." Claudia had made a pilgrimage to Kingsbridge, stayed in the nunnery, and nursed plague victims with no thought for her own safety. Caris had given her the book in thanks.

"A remarkable work," Jonas said warmly. "And in English!"

"It's for healers who aren't priests, and therefore don't speak much Latin."

"There is no other book of its kind in *any* language."

"Is it so unusual?"

"The arrangement of subjects!" Jonas enthused. "Instead of the humors of the body, or the classes of illness, the chapters refer to the pains of the patient. So, whether the customer's complaint is stomachache, or bleeding, or fever, or diarrhea, or sneezing, you can just go to the relevant page!"

Philemon said impatiently: "Suitable enough for apothecaries and their *customers*, I am sure."

Jonas appeared not to hear the note of derision. "I assume, Father Prior, that you are the author of this invaluable book."

"Certainly not!" he said.

“Then who…?”

“I wrote it,” Caris said.

“A woman!” Jonas marveled. “But where did you get all the information? Virtually none of it appears in other texts.”

“The old texts have never proved very useful to me, Jonas. I was first taught how to make medicines by a wise woman of Kingsbridge, called Mattie, who sadly left town for fear of being persecuted as a witch. I learned more from Mother Cecilia, who was prioress here before me. But gathering the recipes and treatments is not difficult. Everyone knows a hundred of them. The difficulty is to identify the few effective ones in all the dross. What I did was to keep a diary, over the years, of the effects of every cure I tried. In my book, I included only those I have seen working, with my own eyes, time after time.”

“I am awestruck to be speaking to you in person.”

“Well, you shall have a copy of my book. I’m flattered that someone should come such a long way for it!” She opened a cupboard. “This was intended for our priory of St.-John-in-the-Forest, but they can wait for another copy.”

Jonas handled it as if it were a holy object. “I am most grateful.” He produced a bag of soft leather and gave it to Caris. “And, in token of my gratitude, accept a modest gift from my family to the nuns of Kingsbridge.”

Caris opened the bag and took out a small object swathed in wool. When she unwrapped the material she found a gold crucifix embedded with precious stones.

Philemon’s eyes glittered with greed.

Caris was startled. “This is a costly present!” she exclaimed. That was less than charming, she realized. She added: “Extraordinarily generous of your family, Jonas.”

He made a deprecatory gesture. “We are prosperous, thanks be to God.”

Philemon said enviously: “That—for a book of old women’s nostrums!”

Jonas said: “Ah, Father Prior, you are above such things, of course. We do not aspire to your intellectual heights. We do not try to understand the body’s humors. Just as a child sucks on a cut finger because that eases the pain, so we administer cures only because they work. As to why and how these things happen, we leave that to greater minds than ours. God’s creation is too mysterious for the likes of us to comprehend.”

Caris thought Jonas was speaking with barely concealed irony. She saw Oonagh smother a grin. Sime, too, picked up the undertone of mockery, and his eyes flashed anger. But Philemon did not notice, and he seemed mollified by the flattery. A sly look came over his face, and Caris guessed he was wondering how he could share in the credit for the book—and get some jeweled crucifixes for himself.

The Fleece Fair opened on Whitsunday, as always. It was traditionally a busy day for the hospital, and this year was no exception. Elderly folk fell ill after making a long journey to the fair; babies and children got diarrhea from strange food and foreign water; men and women drank too much in the taverns and injured themselves and each other.

For the first time, Caris was able to separate the patients into two categories. The rapidly diminishing number of plague victims, and others who had catching illnesses such as stomach upsets and poxes, went into the new building, which was officially blessed by the bishop early in the day. Victims of accidents and fights were treated in the old hospital, safe from the risk of infection. Gone were the days when someone would come into the priory with a dislocated thumb and die there of pneumonia.

The crisis came on Whitmonday.

Early in the afternoon Caris happened to be at the fair, taking a stroll after dinner, looking around. It was quiet by comparison with the old days, when hundreds of visitors and thousands of townspeople thronged not just the cathedral green but all the principal streets. Nevertheless, this year's fair was better than expected after last year's cancellation. Caris figured that people had noticed how the grip of the plague seemed to be weakening. Those who had survived so far thought they must be invulnerable—and some were, though others were not, for it continued to kill people.

Madge Webber's cloth was the talking point of the fair. The new looms designed by Merthin were not just faster—they also made it easier to produce complex patterns in the weave. She had sold half her stock already.

Caris was talking to Madge when the fight started. Madge was embarrassing her by saying, as she had often said before, that without Caris she would still be a penniless weaver. Caris was about to give her customary denial when they heard shouts.

Caris recognized immediately the deep-chested sound of aggressive young men. It came from the neighborhood of an ale barrel thirty yards away. The shouts increased rapidly, and a young woman screamed. Caris hurried over to the place, hoping to stop the fight before it got out of control.

She was a little too late.

The fracas was well under way. Four of the town's young tearaways were fighting fiercely with a group of peasants, identifiable as such by their rustic clothing, and probably all from the same village. A pretty girl, no doubt the one who had screamed, was struggling to separate two men who were punching one another mercilessly. One of the town boys had drawn a knife, and the peasants had heavy wooden shovels. As Caris arrived, more people were joining in on both sides.

She turned to Madge, who had followed her. “Send someone to fetch Mungo Constable, quick as you can. He’s probably in the basement of the guildhall.” Madge hurried off.

The fight was getting nastier. Several town boys had knives out. A peasant lad was lying on the ground bleeding copiously from his arm, and another was fighting on despite a gash in his face. As Caris watched, two more townies started kicking the peasant on the ground.

Caris hesitated another moment, then stepped forward. She grabbed the nearest fighter by the shirt. “Willie Bakerson, stop this right now!” she shouted in her most authoritative voice.

It almost worked.

Willie stepped back from his opponent, startled, and looked at Caris guiltily. She opened her mouth to speak again, but at that instant a shovel struck her a violent blow on the head that had surely been intended for Willie.

It hurt like hell. Her vision blurred, she lost her balance, and the next thing she knew she hit the ground. She lay there dazed, trying to recover her wits, while the world seemed to sway around her. Then someone grabbed her under the arms and dragged her away.

“Are you hurt, Mother Caris?” The voice was familiar, though she could not place it.

Her head cleared at last, and she struggled to her feet with the help of her rescuer, whom she now identified as the muscular corn merchant Megg Robbins. “I’m just a bit stunned,” Caris said. “We have to stop these boys killing each other.”

“Here come the constables. Let’s leave it to them.”

Sure enough, Mungo and six or seven deputies appeared, all wielding clubs. They waded into the fight, cracking heads indiscriminately. They were doing as much damage as the original fighters, but their presence confused the battleground. The boys looked bewildered, and some ran off. In a remarkably few moments the fight was over.

Caris said: “Megg, run to the nunnery and fetch Sister Oonagh, and tell her to bring bandages.”

Megg hurried away.

The walking wounded quickly disappeared. Caris began to examine those who were left. A peasant boy who had been knifed in the stomach was trying to hold his guts in: there was little hope for him. The one with the gashed arm would live if Caris could stop the bleeding. She took off his belt, wound it around his upper arm, and tightened it until the flow of blood slowed to a trickle. “Hold that there,” she told him, and moved on to a town boy who seemed to have broken some bones in his hand. Her head was still hurting but she ignored it.

Oonagh and several more nuns appeared. A moment later, Matthew

Barber arrived with his bag. Between them they patched up the wounded. Under Caris's instructions, volunteers picked up the worst victims and carried them to the nunnery. "Take them to the old hospital, not the new one," she said.

She stood up from a kneeling position and felt dizzy. She grabbed Oonagh to steady herself. "What's the matter?" said Oonagh.

"I'll be all right. We'd better get to the hospital."

They threaded their way through the market stalls to the old hospital. When they went in, they saw immediately that none of the wounded were here. Caris cursed. "The fools have taken them all to the wrong place," she said. It was going to take a while for people to learn the importance of the difference, she concluded.

She and Oonagh went to the new building. The cloister was entered through a wide archway. As they went in, they met the volunteers coming out. "You brought them to the wrong place!" Caris said crossly.

One said: "But, Mother Caris—"

"Don't argue, there's no time," she said impatiently. "Just carry them to the old hospital."

Stepping into the cloisters, she saw the boy with the gashed arm being carried into a room where, she knew, there were five plague victims. She rushed across the quadrangle. "Stop!" she yelled furiously. "What do you think you're doing?"

A man's voice said: "They are carrying out my instructions."

Caris stopped and looked around. It was Brother Sime. "Don't be a fool," she said. "He's got a knife wound—do you want him to die of the plague?"

His round face turned pink. "I don't propose to submit my decision to you for approval, Mother Caris."

That was stupid and she ignored it. "All these injured boys must be kept away from plague victims, or they'll catch it!"

"I think you're overwrought. I suggest you go and lie down."

"Lie down?" She was outraged. "I've just patched up all these men—now I've got to look at them properly. But not here!"

"Thank you for your emergency work, Mother. You can now leave me to examine the patients thoroughly."

"You idiot, you'll kill them!"

"Please leave the hospital until you have calmed down."

"You can't throw me out of here, you stupid boy! I built this hospital with the nuns' money. I'm in charge here."

"Are you?" he said coolly.

Caris realized that, although she had not anticipated this moment, he almost certainly had. He was flushed, but he had his feelings under control. He was a man with a plan. She paused, thinking fast. Looking around, she

saw that the nuns and volunteers were all watching, waiting to see how this would turn out.

“We have to attend to these boys,” she said. “While we’re standing here arguing, they’re bleeding to death. We’ll compromise, for now.” She raised her voice. “Put every one down exactly where they are, please.” The weather was warm, there was no need for the patients to be indoors. “We’ll see to their needs first, then decide later where they are to be bedded.”

The volunteers and nuns knew and respected Caris, whereas Sime was new to them; and they obeyed her with alacrity.

Sime saw that he was beaten, and a look of utter fury came over his face. “I cannot treat patients in these circumstances,” he said, and he stalked out.

Caris was shocked. She had tried to save his pride with her compromise, and she had not thought he would walk away from sick people in a fit of petulance.

She quickly put him out of her mind as she began to look again at the injured.

For the next couple of hours she was busy bathing wounds, sewing up gashes, and administering soothing herbs and comforting drinks. Matthew Barber worked alongside her, setting broken bones and fixing dislocated joints. Matthew was in his fifties now, but his son Luke assisted him with equal skill.

The afternoon was cooling into evening when they finished. They sat on the cloister wall to rest. Sister Joan brought them tankards of cool cider. Caris still had a headache. She had been able to ignore it while she was busy, but now it bothered her. She would go to bed early, she decided.

While they were drinking their cider, young Joshie appeared. “The lord bishop asks you to attend on him in the prior’s palace at your convenience, Mother Prioress.”

She grunted irritably. No doubt Sime had complained. This was the last thing she needed. “Tell him I’ll come immediately,” she said. In a lower voice she added: “Might as well get it over with.” She drained her tankard and left.

Wearily she walked across the green. The stallholders were packing up for the night, covering their goods and locking their boxes. She passed through the graveyard and entered the palace.

Bishop Henri sat at the head of the table. Canon Claude and Archdeacon Lloyd were with him. Philemon and Sime were also there. Godwyn’s cat, Archbishop, was sitting on Henri’s lap, looking smug. The bishop said: “Please sit down.”

She sat beside Claude. He said kindly: “You look tired, Mother Caris.”

“I’ve spent the afternoon patching up stupid boys who got into a big fight. Also, I got a bang on the head myself.”

“We heard about the fight.”

Henri added: “And about the argument in the new hospital.”

“I assume that’s why I’m here.”

“Yes.”

“The whole idea of the new place is to separate patients with infectious illnesses—”

“I know what the argument is about,” Henri interrupted. He addressed the group. “Caris ordered that those injured in the fight be taken to the old hospital. Sime countermanded her orders. They had an unseemly row in front of everyone.”

Sime said: “I apologize for that, my lord bishop.”

Henri ignored that. “Before we go any farther, I want to get something clear.” He looked from Sime to Caris and back again. “I am your bishop and, ex officio, the abbot of Kingsbridge Priory. I have the right and power to command you all, and it is your duty to obey me. Do you accept that, Brother Sime?”

Sime bowed his head. “I do.”

Henri turned to Caris. “Do you, Mother Prioress?”

There was no argument, of course. Henri was completely in the right. “Yes,” she said. She felt confident that Henri was not stupid enough to force injured hooligans to catch the plague.

Henri said: “Allow me to state the arguments. The new hospital was built with the nuns’ money, to the specifications of Mother Caris. She intended it to provide a place for plague victims and others whose illnesses may, according to her, be spread from the sick to the well. She believes it is essential to compartmentalize the two types of patient. She feels she is entitled, in all the circumstances, to insist that her plan be carried out. Is that fair, Mother?”

“Yes.”

“Brother Sime was not here when Caris conceived her plan, so he could not be consulted. However, he has spent three years studying medicine at the university, and has been awarded a degree. He points out that Caris has no training and, apart from what she has picked up by practical experience, little understanding of the nature of disease. He is a qualified physician, and more than that, he is the only one in the priory, or indeed in Kingsbridge.”

“Exactly,” said Sime.

“How can you say I have no training?” Caris burst out. “After all the years I’ve cared for patients—”

“Be quiet, please,” Henri said, hardly raising his voice; and something in his quiet tone caused Caris to shut up. “I was about to mention your history of service. Your work here has been invaluable. You are known far and wide for your dedication during the plague that is still with us. Your experience and practical knowledge are priceless.”

“Thank you, Bishop.”

“On the other hand, Sime is a priest, a university graduate…and a man. The learning he brings with him is essential to the proper running of a priory hospital. We do not want to lose him.”

Caris said: “Some of the masters at the university agree with my methods—ask Brother Austin.”

Philemon said: “Brother Austin has been sent to St.-John-in-the-Forest.”

“And now we know why,” Caris said.

The bishop said: “I have to make this decision, not Austin or the masters at the university.”

Caris realized that she had not prepared for this showdown. She was exhausted, she had a headache, and she could hardly think straight. She was in the middle of a power struggle, and she had no strategy. If she had been fully alert, she would not have come when the bishop called. She would have gone to bed and got over her bad head and woken up refreshed in the morning, and she would not have met with Henri until she had worked out her battle plan.

Was it yet too late for that?

She said: “Bishop, I don’t feel adequate to this discussion tonight. Perhaps we could postpone it until tomorrow, when I’m feeling better.”

“No need,” said Henri. “I’ve heard Sime’s complaint, and I know your views. Besides, I will be leaving at sunrise.”

He had made up his mind, Caris realized. Nothing she said would make any difference. But what had he decided? Which way would he jump? She really had no idea. And she was too tired to do anything but sit and listen to her fate.

“Humankind is weak,” Henri said. “We see, as the apostle Paul puts it, as through a glass, darkly. We err, we go astray, we reason poorly. We need help. That is why God gave us His church, and the pope, and the priesthood—to guide us, because our own resources are fallible and inadequate. If we follow our own way of thinking, we will fail. We must consult the authorities.”

It looked as if he was going to back Sime, Caris concluded. How could he be so stupid?

But he was. “Brother Sime has studied the ancient texts of medical literature, under the supervision of the masters at the university. His course of study is endorsed by the church. We must accept its authority, and therefore his. His judgment cannot be subordinated to that of an uneducated person, no matter how brave and admirable she may be. His decisions must prevail.”

Caris felt so weary and ill that she was almost glad the interview was over. Sime had won; she had lost; and all she wanted to do was sleep. She stood up.

Henri said: “I’m sorry to disappoint you, Mother Caris…”

His voice tailed off as she walked away.

She heard Philemon say: “Insolent behavior.”

Henri said quietly: “Let her go.”

She reached the door and went out without turning back.

The full meaning of what had happened became clear to her as she walked slowly through the graveyard. Sime was in charge of the hospital. She would have to follow his orders. There would be no separation of different categories of patient. There would be no face masks or hand washing in vinegar. Weak people would be made weaker by bleeding; starved people would be made thinner by purging; wounds would be covered with poultices made of animal dung to encourage the body to produce pus. No one would care about cleanliness or fresh air.

She spoke to nobody as she walked across the cloisters, up the stairs, and through the dormitory to her own room. She lay facedown on her bed, her head pounding.

She had lost Merthin, she had lost her hospital, she had lost everything.

Head injuries could be fatal, she knew. Perhaps she would go to sleep now and never wake up.

Perhaps that would be for the best.

79

Merthin’s orchard had been planted in the spring of 1349. A year later most of the trees were established and came out in a scatter of brave leaves. Two or three were struggling, and only one was inarguably dead. He did not expect any of them to bear fruit yet, but by July, to his surprise, one precocious sapling had a dozen or so tiny dark green pears, small as yet and as hard as stones, but promising ripeness in the autumn.

One Sunday afternoon he showed them to Lolla, who refused to believe that they would grow into the tangy, juicy fruits she loved. She thought—or pretended to think—that he was playing one of his teasing games. When he asked her where she imagined ripe pears came from, she looked at him reproachfully and said: “The market, silly!”

She, too, would ripen one day, he thought, although it was hard to imagine her bony body rounding out into the soft shape of a woman. He wondered whether she would bear him grandchildren. She was five years old, so that day might be only a decade or so away.

His thoughts were on ripeness when he saw Philippa coming toward him through the garden, and it struck him how round and full her breasts were. It was unusual for her to visit him in daylight, and he wondered what had brought her here. In case they were observed, he greeted her with only a

chaste kiss on the cheek, such as a brother-in-law might give without arousing comment.

She looked troubled, and he realized that for a few days now she had been more reserved and thoughtful than usual. As she sat beside him on the grass he said: “Something on your mind?”

“I’ve never been good at breaking news gently,” she said. “I’m pregnant.”

“Good God!” He was too shocked to hold back his reaction. “I’m surprised because you told me…”

“I know. I was sure I was too old. For a couple of years my monthly cycle was irregular, and then it stopped altogether—I thought. But I’ve been vomiting in the morning, and my nipples hurt.”

“I noticed your breasts as you came into the garden. But can you be sure?”

“I’ve been pregnant six times previously—three children and three miscarriages—and I know the feeling. There’s really no doubt.”

He smiled. “Well, we’re going to have a child.”

She did not return the smile. “Don’t look pleased. You haven’t thought through the implications. I’m the wife of the earl of Shiring. I haven’t slept with him since October, haven’t lived with him since February, yet in July I’m two or at most three months pregnant. He and the whole world will know that the baby is not his, and that the countess of Shiring has committed adultery.”

“But he wouldn’t…”

“Kill me? He killed Tilly, didn’t he?”

“Oh, my God. Yes, he did. But…”

“And if he killed me, he might kill my baby, too.”

Merthin wanted to say it was not possible, that Ralph would not do such a thing—but he knew otherwise.

“I have to decide what to do,” said Philippa.

“I don’t think you should try to end the pregnancy with potions—it’s too dangerous.”

“I won’t do that.”

“So you’ll have the baby.”

“Yes. But then what?”

“Suppose you stayed in the nunnery, and kept the baby secret? The place is full of children orphaned by the plague.”

“But what couldn’t be kept secret is a mother’s love. Everyone would know that the child was my particular care. And then Ralph would find out.”

“You’re right.”

“I could go away—vanish. London, York, Paris, Avignon. Not tell anyone where I was going, so that Ralph could never come after me.”

“And I could go with you.”

“But then you wouldn’t finish your tower.”

“And you would miss Odila.”

Philippa’s daughter had been married to Earl David for six months. Merthin could imagine how hard it would be for Philippa to leave her. And the truth was that he would find it agony to abandon his tower. All his adult life he had wanted to build the tallest building in England. Now that he had at last begun, it would break his heart to abandon the project.

Thinking of the tower brought Caris to mind. He knew, intuitively, that she would be devastated by this news. He had not seen her for weeks: she had been ill in bed after suffering a blow on the head at the Fleece Fair, and now, though she was completely recovered, she rarely emerged from the priory. He guessed that she had lost some kind of power struggle, for the hospital was being run by Brother Sime. Philippa’s pregnancy would be another shattering blow for Caris.

Philippa added: “And Odila, too, is pregnant.”

“So soon! That’s good news. But even more reason why you can’t go into exile and never see her, or your grandchild.”

“I can’t run, and I can’t hide. But, if I do nothing, Ralph will kill me.”

“There must be a way out of this,” Merthin said.

“I can think of only one answer.”

He looked at her. She had thought this out already, he realized. She had not told him about the problem until she had the solution. But she had been careful to show him that all the obvious answers were wrong. That meant he was not going to like the plan she had settled on.

“Tell me,” he said.

“We have to make Ralph think the baby is his.”

“But then you’d have to…”

“Yes.”

“I see.”

The thought of Philippa sleeping with Ralph was loathsome to Merthin. This was not so much jealousy, though that was a factor. What weighed most with him was how terrible she would feel about it. She had a physical and emotional revulsion toward Ralph. Merthin understood the revulsion, though he did not share it. He had lived with Ralph’s brutishness all his life, and the brute was his brother, and somehow that fact remained no matter what Ralph did. All the same, it made him sick to think that Philippa would have to force herself to have sex with the man she hated most in the world.

“I wish I could think of a better way,” he said.

“So do I.”

He looked hard at her. “You’ve already decided.”

“Yes.”

“I’m very sorry.”

“So am I.”

“But will it even work? Can you…seduce him?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I’ll just have to try.”

The cathedral was symmetrical. The mason’s loft was at the west end in the low north tower, overlooking the north porch. In the matching southwest tower was a room of similar size and shape that looked over the cloisters. It was used to store items of small value that were used only rarely. All the costumes and symbolic objects employed in the mystery plays were there, together with an assortment of not-quite-useless things: wooden candlesticks, rusty chains, cracked pots, and a book whose vellum pages had rotted with age so that the words penned so painstakingly were no longer legible.

Merthin went there to check how upright the wall was, by dangling a lead pointer on a long string from the window; and while there he made a discovery.

There were cracks in the wall. Cracks were not necessarily a sign of weakness: their meaning had to be interpreted by an experienced eye. All buildings moved, and cracks might simply show how a structure was adjusting to accommodate change. Merthin judged that most of the cracks in the wall of this storeroom were benign. But there was one that puzzled him by its shape. It did not look normal. A second glance told him that someone had taken advantage of a natural crack to loosen a small stone. He removed the stone.

He realized immediately that he had found someone’s secret hiding place. The space behind the stone was a thief’s stash. He took the objects out one by one. There was a woman’s brooch with a large green stone; a silver buckle; a silk shawl; and a scroll with a psalm written on it. Right at the back he found the object that gave him the clue to the identity of the thief. It was the only thing in the hole that had no monetary value. A simple piece of polished wood, it had letters carved into its surface that read: “M:Phmn:AMAT.”

M was just an initial. *Amat* was the Latin for “loves.” And Phmnn was surely Philemon.

Someone whose name began with M, boy or girl, had once loved Philemon and given him this; and he had hidden it with his stolen treasures.

Since childhood Philemon had been rumored to be light-fingered. Around him, things went missing. It seemed that this was where he hid them. Merthin imagined him coming up here alone, perhaps at night, to pull out the stone and gloat over his loot. No doubt it was a kind of sickness.

There had never been any rumors about Philemon having lovers. Like his mentor Godwyn, he seemed to be one of that small minority of men in whom the need for sexual love was weak. But someone had fallen for him, at some time, and he cherished the memory.

Merthin replaced the objects, putting them back exactly the way he had found them—he had a good memory for that sort of thing. He replaced the loose stone. Then, thoughtfully, he left the room and went back down the spiral staircase.

Ralph was surprised when Philippa came home.

It was a rare fine day in a wet summer, and he would have liked to be out hawking, but to his anger he was not able to go. The harvest was about to begin, and most of the twenty or thirty stewards, bailiffs, and reeves in the earldom needed to see him urgently. They all had the same problem: crops ripening in the fields and insufficient men and woman to harvest them.

He could do nothing to help. He had taken every opportunity to prosecute laborers who defied the ordinance by leaving their villages in search of higher wages—but those few who could be caught just paid the fine out of their earnings and ran off again. So his bailiffs had to make do. However, they all wanted to explain their difficulties to him, and he had no choice but to listen and give his approval to their makeshift plans.

The hall was full of people: bailiffs, knights and men-at-arms, a couple of priests, and a dozen or more loitering servants. When they all went quiet, Ralph suddenly heard the rooks outside, their harsh call sounding like a warning. He looked up and saw Philippa in the doorway.

She spoke first to the servants. “Martha! This table is still dirty from dinner. Fetch hot water and scrub it, now. Dickie—I’ve just seen the earl’s favorite courser covered with what looks like yesterday’s mud, and you’re here whittling a stick. Get back to the stables where you belong and clean up that horse. You, boy, put that puppy outside, it’s just pissed on the floor. The only dog allowed in the hall is the earl’s mastiff, you know that.” The servants were galvanized into action, even those to whom she had not spoken suddenly finding work to do.

Ralph did not mind Philippa issuing orders to the domestic servants. They got lazy without a mistress to harry them.

She came up to him and made a deep curtsy, as was only appropriate after a long absence. She did not offer to kiss him.

He said neutrally: “This is…unexpected.”

Philippa said irritably: “I shouldn’t have had to make the journey at all.”

Ralph groaned inwardly. “What brings you here?” he said. Whatever it was, there would be trouble, he felt sure.

“My manor of Ingsby.”

Philippa had a small number of properties of her own, a few villages in Gloucestershire that paid tribute to her rather than to the earl. Since she had gone to live at the nunnery, the bailiffs from these villages had been visiting

her at Kingsbridge Priory, Ralph knew, and accounting to her directly for their dues. But Ingsby was an awkward exception. The manor paid tribute to him and he passed it on to her—which he had forgotten to do since she left. “Damn,” he said. “It slipped my mind.”

“That’s all right,” she said. “You’ve got a lot to think about.”

That was surprisingly conciliatory.

She went upstairs to the private chamber, and he returned to his work. Half a year of separation had improved her a little, he thought as another bailiff enumerated the fields of ripening corn and bemoaned the shortage of reapers. Still, he hoped she did not plan to stay long. Lying beside her at night was like sleeping with a dead cow.

She reappeared at suppertime. She sat next to Ralph and spoke politely to several visiting knights during the meal. She was as cool and reserved as ever—there was no affection, not even any humor—but he saw no sign of the implacable, icy hatred she had shown after their wedding. It was gone, or at least deeply hidden. When the meal was over, she retired again, leaving him to drink with the knights.

He considered the possibility that she was planning to come back permanently, but in the end he dismissed the idea. She would never love him or even like him. It was just that a long absence had blunted the edge of her resentment. The underlying feeling would probably never leave her.

He assumed she would be asleep when he went upstairs but, to his surprise, she was at the writing desk, in an ivory-colored linen nightgown, a single candle throwing a soft light over her proud features and thick dark hair. In front of her was a long letter in a girlish hand, which he guessed was from Odila, now the countess of Monmouth. Philippa was penning a reply. Like most aristocrats, she dictated business letters to a clerk, but wrote personal ones herself.

He stepped into the garderobe, then came out and took off his outer clothing. It was summer, and he normally slept in his underdrawers.

Philippa finished her letter, stood up—and knocked over the jar of ink on the desk. She jumped back, too late. Somehow it fell toward her, disfiguring her white nightdress with a broad black stain. She cursed. He was mildly amused: she was so prissily particular that it was funny to see her splashed with ink.

She hesitated for a moment, then pulled the nightdress off over her head.

He was startled. She was not normally quick to take off her clothes. She had been disconcerted by the ink, he realized. He stared at her naked body. She had put on a little weight at the nunnery: her breasts seemed larger and rounder than before, her belly had a slight but discernible bulge, and her hips had an attractive swelling curve. To his surprise, he felt aroused.

She bent down to mop the ink off the tiled floor with her bundled-up

nightgown. Her breasts swayed as she rubbed the tiles. She turned, and he got a full view of her generous behind. If he had not known her better, he would have suspected her of trying to inflame him. But Philippa had never tried to inflame anyone, let alone him. She was just awkward and embarrassed. And that made it even more stimulating to stare at her exposed nakedness while she wiped the floor.

It was several weeks since he had been with a woman, and the last one had been a very unsatisfactory whore in Salisbury.

By the time Philippa stood up, he had an erection.

She saw him staring. “Don’t look at me,” she said. “Go to bed.” She threw the soiled garment into the laundry hamper.

She went to the clothespress and lifted its lid. She had left most of her clothes here when she went to Kingsbridge: it was not considered seemly to dress richly when living in a nunnery, even for noble guests. She found another nightdress. Ralph raked her with his eyes as she lifted it out. He stared at her uplifted breasts, and the mound of her sex with its dark hair, and his mouth went dry.

She caught his look. “Don’t you touch me,” she said.

If she had not said that, he would probably have lain down and gone to sleep. But her swift rejection stung him. “I’m the earl of Shiring and you’re my wife,” he said. “I’ll touch you anytime I like.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” she said, and she turned away to put on the gown.

That angered him. As she lifted the garment to put it on over her head, he slapped her bottom. It was a hard slap on bare skin, and he could tell that it hurt her. She jumped and cried out. “So much for not daring,” he said. She turned to him, a protest on her lips, and on impulse he punched her in the mouth. She was knocked back and fell to the floor. Her hands flew to her mouth, and blood seeped through her fingers. But she was on her back, naked, with her legs spread, and he could see the triangle of hair at the fork of her thighs, with its cleft slightly parted in what looked like an invitation.

He fell on her.

She wriggled furiously, but he was bigger than she, and strong. He overcame her resistance effortlessly. A moment later he was inside her. She was dry, but somehow that excited him.

It was all over quite quickly. He rolled off her, panting. After a few moments he looked at her. There was blood on her mouth. She did not look back at him: her eyes were closed. Yet it seemed to him that there was a curious expression on her face. He thought about it for a while until he worked it out; then he was even more puzzled than before.

She looked triumphant.

Merthin knew that Philippa had returned to Kingsbridge, because he saw her maid in the Bell. He expected his lover to come to his house that night, and was disappointed when she did not. No doubt she felt awkward, he thought. No lady would be comfortable with what she had done, even though the reasons were compelling, even though the man she loved knew and understood.

Another night went by without her appearing, then it was Sunday and he felt sure he would see her in church. But she did not come to the service. It was almost unheard of for the nobility to miss Sunday mass. What had kept her away?

After the service he sent Lolla home with Arn and Em, then went across the green to the old hospital. On the upper floor were three rooms for important guests. He took the outside staircase.

In the corridor he came face-to-face with Caris.

She did not bother to ask what he was doing here. “The countess doesn’t want you to see her, but you probably should,” she said.

Merthin noted the odd turn of phrase: Not “The countess doesn’t want to see you,” but “The countess doesn’t want *you* to see *her.*” He looked at the bowl Caris was carrying. It contained a bloodstained rag. Fear struck his heart. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing too serious,” Caris said. “The baby is unharmed.”

“Thank God.”

“You’re the father, of course?”

“Please don’t ever let anyone hear you say that.”

She looked sad. “All the years you and I were together, and I only conceived that one time.”

He looked away. “Which room is she in?”

“Sorry to talk about myself. I’m the last thing you’re interested in. Lady Philippa is in the middle room.”

He caught the poorly suppressed grief in her voice and paused, despite his anxiety for Philippa. He touched Caris’s arm. “Please don’t believe I’m not interested in you,” he said. “I’ll always care what happens to you, and whether you’re happy.”

She nodded, and tears came to her eyes. “I know,” she said. “I’m being selfish. Go and see Philippa.”

He left Caris and entered the middle room. Philippa was kneeling on the prie-dieu with her back to him. He interrupted her prayers. “Are you all right?”

She stood up and turned to him. Her face was a mess. Her lips were swollen to three times their normal size and badly scabbed.

He guessed that Caris had been bathing the wound—hence the bloody rag. “What happened?” he said. “Can you speak?”

She nodded. “I sound queer, but I can talk.” Her voice was a mumble, but comprehensible.

“How badly are you hurt?”

“My face looks awful, but it’s not serious. Other than that, I’m fine.”

He put his arms around her. She laid her head on his shoulder. He waited, holding her. After a while, she began to cry. He stroked her hair and her back while she shook with sobs. He said: “There, there,” and kissed her forehead, but he did not try to silence her.

Slowly, her weeping subsided.

He said: “Can I kiss your lips?”

She nodded. “Gently.”

He brushed them with his own. He tasted almonds: Caris had smeared the cuts with oil. “Tell me what happened,” he said.

“It worked. He was fooled. He will be sure it’s his baby.”

He touched her mouth with his fingertip. “And he did this?”

“Don’t be angry. I tried to provoke him, and I succeeded. Be glad he hit me.”

“Glad! Why?”

“Because he thinks he had to force me. He believes I would not have submitted without violence. He has no inkling that I intended to seduce him. He will never suspect the truth. Which means I’m safe—and so is our baby.”

He put his hand on her belly. “But why didn’t you come and see me?”

“Looking like this?”

“I want to be with you even more when you’re hurt.” He moved his hand to her breast. “Besides, I’ve missed you.”

She took his hand away. “I can’t go from one to the other like a whore.”

“Oh.” He had not thought of it that way.

“Do you understand?”

“I think so.” He could see that a woman would feel cheap—although a man might be proud of doing exactly the same thing. “But how long…?”

She sighed, and moved away. “It’s not how long.”

“What do you mean?”

“We’ve agreed to tell the world that this is Ralph’s baby, and I’ve made sure he’ll believe that. Now he’s going to want to raise it.”

Merthin was dismayed. “I hadn’t thought about the details, but I imagined you would continue to live in the priory.”

“Ralph won’t allow his child to be raised in a nunnery, especially if it’s a boy.”

“So what will you do, go back to Earlscastle?”

“Yes.”

The child was nothing yet, of course; not a person, not even a baby, just a swelling in Philippa’s belly. But all the same Merthin felt a stab of grief. Lolla

had become the great joy of his life, and he had been looking forward eagerly to another child.

But at least he had Philippa for a little while longer. “When will you go?” he asked.

“Immediately,” she said. She saw the look on his face, and tears came to her eyes. “I can’t tell you how sorry I am—but I would just feel wrong, making love to you and planning to return to Ralph. It would be the same with any two men. The fact that you’re brothers just makes it uglier.”

His eyes blurred with tears. “So it’s over with us already? Now?”

She nodded. “And there’s another thing I have to tell you, one more reason why we can never be lovers again. I’ve confessed my adultery.”

Merthin knew that Philippa had her own personal confessor, as was appropriate for a high-ranking noblewoman. Since she came to Kingsbridge, he had been living with the monks, a welcome addition to their thinned ranks. So now she had told him of her affair. Merthin hoped he could keep the secrets of the confessional.

Philippa said: “I have received absolution, but I must not continue the sin.”

Merthin nodded. She was right. They had both sinned. She had betrayed her husband, and he had betrayed his brother. She had an excuse: she had been forced into the marriage. He had none. A beautiful woman had fallen in love with him and he had loved her back, even though he had no right. The yearning ache of grief and loss he was feeling now was the natural consequence of such behavior.

He looked at her—the cool gray-green eyes, the smashed mouth, the ripe body—and realized that he had lost her. Perhaps he had never really had her. In any case it had always been wrong, and now it was over. He tried to speak, to say good-bye, but his throat seemed to seize up, and nothing came out. He could hardly see for crying. He turned away, fumbled for the door, and somehow got out of the room.

A nun was coming along the corridor carrying a jug. He could not see who it was, but he recognized Caris’s voice when she said: “Merthin? Are you all right?”

He made no reply. He went in the opposite direction and passed through the door and down the outside staircase. Weeping openly, not caring who saw, he walked across the cathedral green, down the main street, and across the bridge to his island.

80

September 1350 was cold and wet, but all the same there was a sense of euphoria. As damp sheaves of wheat were gathered in the surrounding countryside, only one person died of the plague in Kingsbridge: Marge Taylor, a dressmaker of sixty years old. No one caught the disease in October, November, or December. It seemed to have vanished, Merthin thought gratefully—at least for the time being.

The age-old migration of enterprising, restless people from countryside to town had been reversed during the plague, but now it recommenced. They came to Kingsbridge, moved into empty houses, fixed them up, and paid rent to the priory. Some started new businesses—bakeries, breweries, candle manufactories—to replace the old ones that had disappeared when the owners and all their heirs died off. Merthin, as alderman, had made it easier to open a shop or a market stall, sweeping away the lengthy process of obtaining permission that had been imposed by the priory. The weekly market grew busier.

One by one Merthin rented out the shops, houses, and taverns he had built on Leper Island, his tenants either enterprising newcomers or existing tradesmen who wanted a better location. The road across the island, between the two bridges, had become an extension of the main street, and therefore prime commercial property—as Merthin had foreseen, twelve years ago, when people had thought he was mad to take the barren rock as payment for his work on the bridge.

Winter drew in, and once again the smoke from thousands of fires hung over the town in a low, brown cloud; but the people still worked and shopped, ate and drank, played dice in taverns and went to church on Sundays. The guildhall saw the first Christmas Eve banquet since the parish guild had become a borough guild.

Merthin invited the prior and prioress. They no longer had the power to overrule the merchants, but they were still among the most important people in town. Philemon came, but Caris declined the invitation: she had become worryingly withdrawn.

Merthin sat next to Madge Webber. She was now the richest merchant and the largest employer in Kingsbridge, perhaps in the whole county. She was deputy alderman, and probably should have been alderman but for the fact that it was unusual to have a woman in that position.

Among Merthin’s many enterprises was a workshop turning out the treadle looms that had improved the quality of Kingsbridge Scarlet. Madge bought more than half his production, but enterprising merchants came from as far away as London to place orders for the rest. The looms were complex pieces of machinery that had to be made accurately and assembled with precision, so Merthin had to employ the best carpenters available; but he

priced the finished product at more than double what it cost him to make, and still people could hardly wait to give him the money.

Several people had hinted that he should marry Madge, but the idea did not tempt him or her. She had never been able to find a man to match Mark, who had had the physique of a giant and the disposition of a saint. She had always been chunky, but these days she was quite fat. Now in her forties, she was growing into one of those women who looked like barrels, almost the same width all the way from shoulders to bottom. Eating and drinking well were now her chief pleasures, Merthin thought as he watched her tuck into gingered ham with a sauce made of apples and cloves. That and making money.

At the end of the meal they had a mulled wine called hippocras. Madge took a long draft, belched, and moved closer to Merthin on the bench. “We have to do something about the hospital,” she said.

“Oh?” He was not aware of a problem. “Now that the plague has ended, I would have thought people didn’t have much need of a hospital.”

“Of course they do,” she said briskly. “They still get fevers and bellyaches and cancer. Women want to get pregnant and can’t, or they suffer complications giving birth. Children burn themselves and fall out of trees. Men are thrown by their horses or knifed by their enemies or have their heads broken by angry wives—”

“Yes, I get the picture,” Merthin said, amused by her garrulousness. “What’s the problem?”

“Nobody will go to the hospital anymore. They don’t like Brother Sime and, more importantly, they don’t trust his learning. While we were all coping with the plague, he was at Oxford reading ancient textbooks, and he still prescribes remedies such as bleeding and cupping that no one believes in anymore. They want Caris—but she never appears.”

“What do people do when they’re sick, if they don’t go to the hospital?”

“They see Matthew Barber, or Silas Pothecary, or a newcomer called Marla Wisdom who specializes in women’s problems.”

“So what’s worrying you?”

“They’re starting to mutter about the priory. If they don’t get help from the monks and nuns, they say, why should they pay toward building the tower?”

“Oh.” The tower was a huge project. No individual could possibly finance it. A combination of monastery, nunnery, and city funds was the only way to pay for it. If the town defaulted, the project could be threatened. “Yes, I see,” said Merthin worriedly. “That is a problem.”

It had been a good year for most people, Caris thought as she sat through the

Christmas Day service. People were adjusting to the devastation of the plague with astonishing speed. As well as bringing terrible suffering and a near-breakdown of civilized life, the disease had provided the opportunity for a shake-up. Almost half the population had died, by her calculations; but one effect was that her remaining peasants were farming only the most fertile soils, so each man produced more. Despite the Ordinance of Laborers, and the efforts of noblemen such as Earl Ralph to enforce it, she was gratified to see that people continued to move to where the pay was highest, which was usually where the land was most productive. Grain was plentiful and herds of cattle and sheep were growing again. The nunnery was thriving and, because Caris had reorganized the monks' affairs as well as the nuns' after the flight of Godwyn, the monastery was now more prosperous than it had been for a hundred years. Wealth created wealth, and good times in the countryside brought more business to the towns, so Kingsbridge craftsmen and shopkeepers were beginning to return to their former affluence.

As the nuns left the church at the end of the service, Prior Philemon spoke to her. "I need to talk to you, Mother Prioress. Would you come to my house?"

There had been a time when she would have politely acceded to such a request without hesitation, but those days were over. "No," she said. "I don't think so."

He reddened immediately. "You can't refuse to speak to me!"

"I didn't. I refused to go to your palace. I decline to be summoned before you like a subordinate. What do you want to talk about?"

"The hospital. There have been complaints."

"Speak to Brother Sime—he's in charge of it, as you well know."

"Is there no reasoning with you?" he said exasperatedly. "If Sime could solve the problem I would be talking to him, not you."

By now they were in the monks' cloisters. Caris sat on the low wall around the quadrangle. The stone was cold. "We can talk here. What do you have to say to me?"

Philemon was annoyed, but he gave in. He stood in front of her, and now he was the one who seemed like a subordinate. He said. "The townspeople are unhappy about the hospital."

"I'm not surprised."

"Merthin complained to me at the guild's Christmas dinner. They don't come here anymore, but see charlatans like Silas Pothecary."

"He's no more of a charlatan than Sime."

Philemon realized that several novices were standing nearby, listening to the argument. "Go away, all of you," he said. "Get to your studies."

They scurried off.

Philemon said to Caris: "The townspeople think you ought to be at the

hospital.”

“So do I. But I won’t follow Sime’s methods. At best, his cures have no effect. Much of the time they make patients worse. That’s why people no longer come here when they’re ill.”

“Your new hospital has so few patients that we’re using it as a guest house. Doesn’t that bother you?”

That jibe went home. Caris swallowed and looked away. “It breaks my heart,” she said quietly.

“Then come back. Figure out a compromise with Sime. You worked under monk-physicians in the early days, when you first came here. Brother Joseph was the senior doctor then. He had the same training as Sime.”

“You’re right. In those days, we felt that the monks sometimes did more harm than good, but we could work with them. Most of the time we didn’t call them in at all, we just did what we thought best. When they did attend, we didn’t always follow their instructions exactly.”

“You can’t believe they were always wrong.”

“No. Sometimes they cured people. I remember Joseph opening a man’s skull and draining accumulated fluid that had been causing unbearable headaches—it was very impressive.”

“So do the same now.”

“It’s no longer possible. Sime put an end to that, didn’t he? He moved his books and equipment into the pharmacy and took charge of the hospital. And I’m sure he did so with your encouragement. In fact it was probably your idea.” She could tell from Philemon’s expression that she was right. “You and he plotted to push me out. You succeeded—and now you’re suffering the consequences.”

“We could go back to the old system. I’ll make Sime move out.”

She shook her head. “There have been other changes. I’ve learned a lot from the plague. I’m surer than ever that the physicians’ methods can be fatal. I won’t kill people for the sake of a compromise with you.”

“You don’t realize how much is at stake.” He had a faintly smug look.

So, there was something else. She had been wondering why he had brought this up. It was not like him to fret about the hospital: he had never cared much for the work of healing. He was interested only in what would raise his status and defend his fragile pride. “All right,” she said. “What have you got up your sleeve?”

“The townspeople are talking about cutting off funds for the new tower. Why should they pay extra to the cathedral, they say, when they’re not getting what they want from us? And now that the town is a borough, I as prior can no longer enforce the payment.”

“And if they don’t pay…?”

“Your beloved Merthin will have to abandon his pet project,” Philemon

said triumphantly.

Caris could see that he thought this was his trump card. And, indeed, there had been a time when the revelation would have jolted her. But no longer. “Merthin isn’t my beloved anymore, is he,” she said. “You put a stop to that, too.”

A look of panic crossed his face. “But the bishop has set his heart on this tower—you can’t put that at risk!”

Caris stood up. “Can’t I?” she said. “Why not?” She turned away, heading for the nunnery.

He was flabbergasted. He called after her: “How can you be so reckless?”

She was going to ignore him, then she changed her mind and decided to explain. She turned back. “You see, all that I ever held dear has been taken from me,” she said in a matter-of-fact tone. “And when you’ve lost everything—” Her facade began to crumble, and her voice broke, but she made herself carry on. “When you’ve lost everything, you’ve got nothing to lose.”

The first snow fell in January. It formed a thick blanket on the roof of the cathedral, smoothed out the delicate carving of the spires, and masked the faces of the angels and saints sculpted over the west door. The new masonry of the tower foundations had been covered with straw to insulate the new mortar against winter frost, and now the snow overlaid the straw.

There were few fireplaces in a priory. The kitchen had fires, of course, which was why work in kitchens was always popular with novices. But there was no fire in the cathedral, where the monks and nuns spent seven or eight hours every day. When churches burned down, it was usually because some desperate monk had brought a charcoal brazier into the building, and a spark had flown from the fire to the timber ceiling. When not in church or laboring, the monks and nuns were supposed to walk and read in the cloisters, which were out of doors. The only concession to their comfort was the warming room, a small chamber off the cloisters where a fire was lit in the most severe weather. They were allowed to come into the warming room from the cloisters for short periods.

As usual, Caris ignored rules and traditions, and permitted nuns to wear woolen hose in the winter. She did not believe that God needed his servants to get chilblains.

Bishop Henri was so worried about the hospital—or rather, about the threat to his tower—that he drove from Shiring to Kingsbridge through the snow. He came in a charette, a heavy wooden cart with a waxed canvas cover and cushioned seats. Canon Claude and Archdeacon Lloyd came with him. They paused at the prior’s palace only long enough to dry their clothes and drink a warming cup of wine before summoning a crisis meeting with

Philemon, Sime, Caris, Oonagh, Merthin, and Madge.

Caris knew it would be a waste of time, but she went anyway: it was easier than refusing, which would have required her to sit in the nunnery and deal with endless messages begging, commanding, and threatening her.

She looked at the snowflakes falling past the glazed windows as the bishop drearily summarized a quarrel in which she really had no interest. “This crisis has been brought about by the disloyal and disobedient attitude of Mother Caris,” Henri said.

That stung her into a response. “I worked in the hospital here for ten years,” she said. “My work, and the work of Mother Cecilia before me, are what made it so popular with the townspeople.” She pointed a rude finger at the bishop. “You changed it. Don’t try to blame others. You sat in that chair and announced that Brother Sime would henceforth be in charge. Now you should take responsibility for the consequences of your foolish decision.”

“You must obey me!” he said, his voice rising to a screech in frustration. “You are a nun—you have taken a vow.” The grating sound disturbed the cat, Archbishop, and it stood up and walked out of the room.

“I realize that,” Caris said. “It puts me in an intolerable position.” She spoke without forethought, but as the words came out she realized they were not really ill-considered. In fact they were the fruit of months of brooding. “I can no longer serve God in this way,” she went on, her voice calm but her heart pounding. “That is why I have decided to renounce my vows and leave the nunnery.”

Henri actually stood up. “You will not!” he shouted. “I will not release you from your holy vows.”

“I expect God will, though,” she said, scarcely disguising her contempt.

That made him angrier. “This notion that individuals can deal with God is wicked heresy. There has been too much of such loose talk since the plague.”

“Do you think that might have happened because, when people approached the church for help during the plague, they so often found that its priest and monks…,” here she looked at Philemon, “…had fled like cowards?”

Henri held up a hand to stifle Philemon’s indignant response. “We may be fallible but, all the same, it is only through the church and its priests that men and women may approach God.”

“You would think that, of course,” Caris said. “But that doesn’t make it right.”

“You’re a devil!”

Canon Claude intervened. “All things considered, my lord bishop, a public quarrel between yourself and Caris would not be helpful.” He gave her a friendly smile. He had been well disposed toward her ever since the day she had caught him and the bishop kissing and had said nothing about it. “Her

present noncooperation must be set against many years of dedicated, sometimes heroic service. And the people love her.”

Henri said: “But what if we do release her from her vows? How would that solve the problem?”

At this point, Merthin spoke for the first time. “I have a suggestion,” he said.

Everyone looked at him.

He said: “Let the town build a new hospital. I will donate a large site on Leper Island. Let it be staffed by a convent of nuns quite separate from the priory, a new group. They will be under the spiritual authority of the bishop of Shiring, of course, but have no connection with the prior of Kingsbridge or any of the physicians at the monastery. Let the new hospital have a lay patron, who would be a leading citizen of the town, chosen by the guild, and would appoint the prioress.”

They were all quiet for a long moment, letting this radical proposal sink in. Caris was thunderstruck. A new hospital…on Leper Island…paid for by the townspeople…staffed by a new order of nuns…having no connection with the priory…

She looked around the group. Philemon and Sime clearly hated the idea. Henri, Claude, and Lloyd just looked bemused.

At last the bishop said: “The patron will be very powerful—representing the townspeople, paying the bills, and appointing the prioress. Whoever plays that role will control the hospital.”

“Yes,” said Merthin.

“If I authorize a new hospital, will the townspeople be willing to resume paying for the tower?”

Madge Webber spoke for the first time. “If the right patron is appointed, yes.”

“And who should it be?” said Henri.

Caris realized that everyone was looking at her.

A few hours later, Caris and Merthin wrapped themselves in heavy cloaks, put on boots, and walked through the snow to the island, where he showed her the site he had in mind. It was on the west side, not far from his house, overlooking the river.

She was still dizzy from the sudden change in her life. She was to be released from her vows as a nun. She would become a normal citizen again, after almost twelve years. She found she could contemplate leaving the priory without anguish. The people she had loved were all dead: Mother Cecilia, Old Julie, Mair, Tilly. She liked Sister Joan and Sister Oonagh well enough, but it was not the same.

And she would still be in charge of a hospital. Having the right to appoint and dismiss the prioress of the new institution, she would be able to run the place according to the new thinking that had grown out of the plague. The bishop had agreed to everything.

“I think we should use the cloister layout again,” Merthin said. “It seemed to work really well for the short time you were in charge.”

She stared at the sheet of unmarked snow and marveled at his ability to imagine walls and rooms where she could see only whiteness. “The entrance arch was used almost like a hall,” she said. “It was the place where people waited, and where the nuns first examined the patients before deciding what to do with them.”

“You would like it larger?”

“I think it should be a real reception hall.”

“All right.”

She was bemused. “This is hard to believe. Everything has turned out just as I would have wanted it.”

He nodded. “That’s how I worked it out.”

“Really?”

“I asked myself what you would wish for, then I figured out how to achieve it.”

She stared at him. He had said it lightly, as if merely explaining the reasoning process that had led him to his conclusions. He seemed to have no idea how momentous it was to her that he should be thinking about her wishes and how to achieve them.

She said: “Has Philippa had the baby yet?”

“Yes, a week ago.”

“What did she have?”

“A boy.”

“Congratulations. Have you seen him?”

“No. As far as the world is concerned, I’m only his uncle. But Ralph sent me a letter.”

“Have they named him?”

“Roland, after the old earl.”

Caris changed the subject. “The river water isn’t very pure this far downstream. A hospital really needs clean water.”

“I’ll lay a pipe to bring you water from farther upstream.”

The snowfall eased and then stopped, and they had a clear view of the island.

She smiled at him. “You have the answer to everything.”

He shook his head. “These are the easy questions: clean water, airy rooms, a reception hall.”

“And what are the difficult ones?”

He turned to face her. There were snowflakes in his red beard. He said: “Questions like: Does she still love me?”

They stared at one another for a long moment.

Caris was happy.

PART VII

March to November 1361

81

Wulfric at forty was still the handsomest man Gwenda had ever seen. There were threads of silver now in his tawny hair, but they just made him look wise as well as strong.

When he was young his broad shoulders had tapered dramatically to a narrow waist, whereas nowadays the taper was not so sharp nor the waist so slim—but he could still do the work of two men. And he would always be two years younger than she.

She thought she had changed less. She had the kind of dark hair that did not go gray until late in life. She was no heavier than she had been twenty years ago, although since having the children her breasts and belly were not quite as taut as formerly.

It was only when she looked at her son Davey, at his smooth skin and the restless spring in his step, that she felt her years. Now twenty, he looked like a male version of herself at that age. She, too, had had a face with no lines, and she had walked with a jaunty stride. A lifetime of working in the fields in all weathers had wrinkled her hands, and given her cheeks a raw redness just beneath the skin, and taught her to walk slowly and conserve her strength.

Davey was small like her, and shrewd, and secretive: since he was little, she had never been sure what he was thinking. Sam was the opposite: big and strong, not clever enough to be deceitful, but with a mean streak that Gwenda blamed on his real father, Ralph Fitzgerald.

For several years now the two boys had been working alongside Wulfric in the fields—until two weeks ago, when Sam had vanished.

They knew why he had gone. All winter long he had been talking about leaving Wigleigh and moving to a village where he could earn higher wages. He had disappeared the moment the spring plowing began.

Gwenda knew he was right about the wages. It was a crime to leave your village, or to accept pay higher than the levels of 1347, but all over the country restless young men were flouting the law, and desperate farmers were

hiring them. Landlords such as Earl Ralph could do little more than gnash their teeth.

Sam had not said where he would go, and he had given no warning of his departure. If Davey had done the same, Gwenda would have known he had thought things out carefully and decided this was the best way. But she felt sure Sam had just followed an impulse. Someone had mentioned the name of a village, and he had woken up early the next morning and decided to go there immediately.

She told herself not to worry. He was twenty-two years old, big and strong. No one was going to exploit him or ill-treat him. But she was his mother, and her heart ached.

If she could not find him, no one else could, she figured, and that was good. All the same she yearned to know where he was living, and if he was working for a decent master, and whether the people were kind to him.

That winter, Wulfric had made a new light plow for the sandier acres of his holding, and one day in spring Gwenda and he went to Northwood to buy an iron plowshare, the one part they could not make for themselves. As usual, a small group of Wigleigh folk traveled together to the market. Jack and Eli, who operated the fulling mill for Madge Webber, were stocking up on supplies: they had no land of their own, so they bought all their food. Annet and her eighteen-year-old daughter, Amabel, had a dozen hens in a crate, to sell at the market. The bailiff, Nathan, came too, with his grown son Jonno, the childhood enemy of Sam.

Annet still flirted with every good-looking man that crossed her path, and most of them grinned foolishly and flirted back. On the journey to Northwood she chatted with Davey. Although he was less than half her age, she simpered and tossed her head and smacked his arm in mock reproach, just as if she were twenty-two rather than forty-two. She was not a girl any more, but she did not seem to know it, Gwenda thought sourly. Annet’s daughter, Amabel, who was as pretty as Annet had once been, walked a little apart, and seemed embarrassed by her mother.

They reached Northwood at mid-morning. After Wulfric and Gwenda had made their purchase, they went to get their dinner at the Old Oak Tavern.

For as long as Gwenda could remember there had been a venerable oak outside the inn, a thick, squat tree with malformed branches that looked like a bent old man in winter and cast a welcome deep shade in summer. Her sons had chased one another around it as little boys. But it must have died or become unstable, for it had been chopped down, and now there was a stump, as wide across as Wulfric was tall, used by the customers as a chair, a table, and—for one exhausted carter—a bed.

Sitting on its edge, drinking ale from a huge tankard, was Harry Plowman, the bailiff of Outhenby.

Gwenda was taken back twelve years in a blink. What came to her mind, so forcefully that it brought tears to her eyes, was the hope that had lifted her heart as she and her family had set out, that morning in Northwood, to walk through the forest to Outhenby and a new life. The hope had been crushed, in less than a fortnight, and Wulfric had been taken back to Wigleigh—the memory still made her burn with rage—with a rope around his neck.

But Ralph had not had things all his own way since then. Circumstances had forced him to give Wulfric back the lands his father had held, which for Gwenda had been a savagely satisfying outcome, even though Wulfric had not been smart enough to win a free tenancy, unlike some of his neighbors. Gwenda was glad they were now tenants rather than laborers, and Wulfric had achieved his life's ambition; but she still longed for more independence—a tenancy free of feudal obligations, with a cash rent to pay, the whole agreement written down in the manorial records so that no lord could go back on it. It was what most serfs wanted, and more of them were getting it since the plague.

Harry greeted them effusively and insisted on buying them ale. Soon after Wulfric and Gwenda's brief stay at Outhenby, Harry had been made bailiff by Mother Caris, and he still held that position, though Caris had long ago renounced her vows, and Mother Joan was now prioress. Outhenby continued to be prosperous, to judge by Harry's double chin and alehouse belly.

As they were preparing to leave with the rest of the Wigleigh folk, Harry spoke to Gwenda in a low voice. "I've got a young man called Sam laboring for me."

Gwenda's heart leaped. "My Sam?"

"Can't possibly be, no."

She was bewildered. Why mention him, in that case?

But Harry tapped his wine-red nose, and Gwenda realized he was being enigmatic. "This Sam assures me that his lord is a Hampshire knight I've never heard of, who has given him permission to leave his village and work elsewhere, whereas your Sam's lord is Earl Ralph, who never lets his laborers go. Obviously I couldn't employ your Sam."

Gwenda understood. That would be Harry's story if official questions were asked. "So, he's in Outhenby."

"Oldchurch, one of the smaller villages in the valley."

"Is he well?" she asked eagerly.

"Thriving."

"Thank God."

"A strong boy and a good worker, though he can be quarrelsome."

She knew that. "Is he living in a warm house?"

"Lodging with a good-hearted older couple whose own son has gone to Kingsbridge to be apprenticed to a tanner."

Gwenda had a dozen questions, but suddenly she noticed the bent figure of Nathan Reeve leaning on the doorpost of the tavern entrance, staring at her. She suppressed a curse. There was so much she wanted to know, but she was terrified of giving Nate even a clue to Sam's whereabouts. She needed to be content with what she had. And she was thrilled that at least she knew where he could be found.

She turned away from Harry, trying to give the impression of casually ending an unimportant conversation. Out of the corner of her mouth she said: "Don't let him get into fights."

"I'll do what I can."

She waved perfunctorily and went after Wulfric.

Walking home with the others, Wulfric carried the heavy plowshare on his shoulder with no apparent effort. Gwenda was bursting to tell him the news, but she had to wait until the group straggled out along the road, and she and her husband were separated from the others by a few yards. Then she repeated the conversation, speaking quietly.

Wulfric was relieved. "At least we know where the lad has got to," he said, breathing easily despite his load.

"I want to go to Outhenby," Gwenda said.

Wulfric nodded. "I thought you might." He rarely challenged her, but now he expressed a misgiving. "Dangerous, though. You'll have to make sure no one finds out where you've gone."

"Exactly. Nate mustn't know."

"How will you manage that?"

"He's sure to notice that I'm not in the village for a couple of days. We'll have to think of a story."

"We can say you're sick."

"Too risky. He'll probably come to the house to check."

"We could say you're at your father's place."

"Nate won't believe that. He knows I never stay there longer than I have to." She gnawed at a hangnail, racking her brains. In the ghost stories and fairy tales that people told around the fire on long winter evenings, the characters generally believed one another's lies without question; but real people were less easily duped. "We could say I've gone to Kingsbridge," she said at last.

"What for?"

"To buy laying hens at the market, perhaps."

"You could buy hens from Annet."

"I wouldn't buy anything from that bitch, and people know it."

"True."

"And Nate knows I've always been a friend of Caris, so he'll believe I could be staying with her."

“All right.”

It was not much of a story, but she could not think of anything better. And she was desperate to see her son.

She left the next morning.

She slipped out of the house before dawn, wrapped in a heavy cloak against the cold March wind. She walked softly through the village in pitch darkness, finding her way by touch and memory. She did not want to be seen and questioned before she had even left the neighborhood. But no one was up yet. Nathan Reeve’s dog growled quietly then recognized her tread, and she heard a soft thump as he wagged his tail against the side of his wooden kennel.

She left the village and followed the road through the fields. When dawn broke, she was a mile away. She looked at the road behind her. It was empty. No one had followed her.

She chewed a crust of stale bread for breakfast, then stopped at mid-morning at a tavern where the Wigleigh-to-Kingsbridge road crossed the Northwood-to-Outhenby road. She recognized no one at the inn. She watched the door nervously as she ate a bowl of salt-fish stew and drank a pint of cider. Every time someone came in she got ready to hide her face, but it was always a stranger, and no one took any notice of her. She left quickly, and set off on the road to Outhenby.

She reached the valley around mid-afternoon. It was twelve years since she had been here, but the place had not changed much. It had recovered from the plague remarkably quickly. Apart from some small children playing near the houses, most of the villagers were at work, plowing and sowing, or looking after new lambs. They stared at her across the fields, knowing she was a stranger, wondering about her identity. Some of them would recognize her close up. She had been here for only ten days, but those had been dramatic times, and they would remember. Villagers did not often see such excitement.

She followed the River Outhen as it meandered along the flat plain between two ranges of hills. She went from the main village through smaller settlements that she knew, from the time she had spent here, as Ham, Shortacre, and Longwater, to the smallest and most remote, Oldchurch.

Her excitement grew as she approached, and she even forgot her sore feet. Oldchurch was a hamlet, with thirty hovels, none big enough to be a manor house or even a bailiff’s home. However, in accordance with the name, there was an old church. It was several hundred years of age, Gwenda guessed. It had a squat tower and a short nave, all built of crude masonry, with tiny square windows placed apparently at random in the thick walls.

She walked to the fields beyond. She ignored a group of shepherds in a distant pasture: shrewd Harry Plowman would not waste big Sam on such light work. He would be harrowing, or clearing a ditch, or helping to manage

the eight-ox plow team. Searching the three fields methodically, she looked for a crowd of mostly men, with warm hats and muddy boots and big voices to call to one another across the acres; and a young man a head taller than the others. When she did not at first see her son, she suffered renewed apprehension. Had he already been recaptured? Had he moved to another village?

She found him in a line of men digging manure into a newly plowed strip. He had his coat off, despite the cold, and he was hefting an oak spade, the muscles of his back and arms bunching and shifting under his old linen shirt. Her heart filled with pride to see him, and to think that such a man had come from her diminutive body.

They all looked up as she approached. The men stared at her in curiosity: Who was she and what was she doing here? She walked straight up to Sam and embraced him, even though he stank of horse dung. “Hello, Mother,” he said, and all the other men laughed.

She was puzzled by their hilarity.

A wiry man with one empty eye socket said: “There, there, Sam, you’ll be all right now,” and they laughed again.

Gwenda realized they thought it funny that a big man such as Sam should have his little mother come and check on him as if he were a wayward boy.

“How did you find me?” Sam said.

“I met Harry Plowman at Northwood market.”

“I hope no one tracked you here.”

“I left before it was light. Your father was to tell people I went to Kingsbridge. No one followed me.”

They talked for a few minutes, then he said he had to get back to work, or the other men would resent his leaving it all to them. “Go back to the village and find old Liza,” he said. “She lives opposite the church. Tell her who you are and she’ll give you some refreshment. I’ll be there at dusk.”

Gwenda glanced up at the sky. It was a dark afternoon, and the men would be forced to stop work in an hour or so. She kissed Sam’s cheek and left him.

She found Liza in a house slightly larger than most—it had two rooms rather than one. The woman introduced her husband, Rob, who was blind. As Sam had promised, Liza was hospitable: she put bread and pottage on the table and poured a cup of ale.

Gwenda asked about their son, and it was like turning on a tap. Liza talked unstoppably about him, from babyhood to apprenticeship, until the old man interrupted her harshly with one word: “Horse.”

They fell silent, and Gwenda heard the rhythmic thud of a trotting horse.

“Smallish mount,” blind Rob said. “A palfrey, or a pony. Too little for a nobleman or a knight, though it might be carrying a lady.”

Gwenda felt a shiver of fear.

“Two visitors within an hour,” Rob observed. “Must be connected.”

That was what Gwenda was afraid of.

She got up and looked out of the door. A sturdy black pony was trotting along the path between the houses. She recognized the rider immediately, and her heart sank: it was Jonno Reeve, the son of the bailiff of Wigleigh.

How had he found her?

She tried to duck quickly back into the house, but he had seen her. “Gwenda!” he shouted, and reined in his horse.

“You devil,” she said.

“I wonder what you’re doing here,” he said mockingly.

“How did you get here? No one was following me.”

“My father sent me to Kingsbridge, to see what mischief you might be making there, but on the way I stopped at the Cross Roads Tavern, and they remembered you taking the road to Outhenby.”

She wondered whether she could outwit this shrewd young man. “And why should I not visit my old friends here?”

“No reason,” he said. “Where’s your runaway son?”

“Not here, though I hoped he might be.”

He looked momentarily uncertain, as if he thought she might be telling the truth. Then he said: “Perhaps he’s hiding. I’ll look around.” He kicked his horse on.

Gwenda watched him go. She had not fooled him, but perhaps she had planted a doubt in his mind. If she could get to Sam first she might be able to conceal him.

She walked quickly through the little house, with a hasty word to Liza and Rob, and left by the back door. She headed across the field, staying close to the hedge. Looking back toward the village, she could see a man on horseback moving out at an angle to her direction. The day was dimming, and she thought her own small figure might be indistinguishable against the dark background of the hedge.

She met Sam and the others coming back, their spades over their shoulders, their boots thick with muck. From a distance, at first sight, Sam could have been Ralph: the figure was the same, and the confident stride, and the set of the handsome head on the strong neck. But as he talked she could see Wulfric in him, too: he had a way of turning his head, a shy smile, and a deprecating gesture of the hand that exactly imitated his foster father.

The men spotted her. They had been tickled by her arrival earlier, and now the one-eyed man called out: “Hello, Mother!” and they all laughed.

She took Sam aside and said: “Jonno Reeve is here.”

“Hell!”

“I’m sorry.”

“You said you weren’t followed!”

“I didn’t see him, but he picked up my trail.”

“Damn. Now what do I do? I’m not going back to Wigleigh!”

“He’s looking for you, but he left the village heading east.” She scanned the darkening landscape but could not see much. “If we hurry back to Oldchurch, we could hide you—in the church, perhaps.”

“All right.”

They picked up their pace. Gwenda said over her shoulder: “If you men come across a bailiff called Jonno…you haven’t seen Sam from Wigleigh.”

“Never heard of him, Mother,” said one, and the others concurred. Serfs were generally ready to help one another outwit the bailiff.

Gwenda and Ralph reached the settlement without seeing Jonno. They headed for the church. Gwenda thought they could probably get in: country churches were usually empty and bare inside, and generally left open. But if this one should turn out to be an exception, she was not sure what they would do.

They threaded through the houses and came within sight of the church. As they passed Liza’s front door, Gwenda saw a black pony. She groaned. Jonno must have doubled back under cover of the dusk. He had gambled that Gwenda would find Sam and bring him to the village, and he had been right. He had his father Nate’s low cunning.

She took Sam’s arm to hurry him across the road and into the church—then Jonno stepped out from Liza’s house.

“Sam,” he said. “I thought you’d be here.”

Gwenda and Sam stopped and turned.

Sam leaned on his wooden spade. “What are you going to do about it?”

Jonno was grinning triumphantly. “Take you back to Wigleigh.”

“I’d like to see you try.”

A group of peasants, mostly women, appeared from the west side of the village and stopped to watch the confrontation.

Jonno reached into his pony’s saddlebag and brought out some kind of metal device with a chain. “I’m going to put a leg iron on you,” he said. “And if you’ve got any sense you won’t resist.”

Gwenda was surprised by Jonno’s nerve. Did he really expect to arrest Sam all on his own? He was a beefy lad, but not as big as Sam. Did he hope the villagers would help him? He had the law on his side, but few peasants would think his cause just. Typical young man, he had no sense of his own limitations.

Sam said: “I used to beat the shit out of you when we were boys, and I’ll do the same today.”

Gwenda did not want them to fight. Whoever won, Sam would be wrong in the eyes of the law. He was a runaway. She said: “It’s too late to go

anywhere now. Why don't we discuss this in the morning?"

Jonno gave a disparaging laugh. "And let Sam slip away before dawn, the way you sneaked out of Wigleigh? Certainly not. He sleeps in irons tonight."

The men Sam had been working with appeared, and stopped to see what was going on. Jonno said: "All law-abiding men have a duty to help me arrest this runaway, and anyone who hinders me will be subject to the punishment of the law."

"You can rely on me," said the one-eyed man. "I'll hold your horse." The others chuckled. There was little sympathy for Jonno. On the other hand, no villager spoke in Sam's defense.

Jonno moved suddenly. With the leg iron in both hands, he stepped toward Sam and bent down, trying to snap the device onto Sam's leg in one surprise move.

It might have worked on a slow-moving older man, but Sam reacted quickly. He stepped back then kicked out, landing one muddy boot on Jonno's outstretched left arm.

Jonno gave a grunt of pain and anger. Straightening up, he drew back his right arm and swung the iron, intending to hit Sam over the head with it. Gwenda heard a frightened scream and realized it came from herself. Sam darted back another step, out of range.

Jonno saw that his blow was going to miss, and let go of the iron at the last moment.

It flew through the air. Sam flinched away, turning and ducking, but he could not dodge it. The iron hit his ear and the chain whipped across his face. Gwenda cried out as if she herself had been hurt. The onlookers gasped. Sam staggered, and the iron fell to the ground. There was a moment of suspense. Blood came from Sam's ear and nose. Gwenda took a step toward him, stretching out her arms.

Then Sam recovered from the shock.

He turned back to Jonno and swung his heavy wooden spade in one graceful movement. Jonno had not quite recovered his balance after the effort of his throw, and he was unable to dodge. The edge of the spade caught him on the side of the head. Sam was strong, and the sound of wood on bone rang out across the village street.

Jonno was still reeling when Sam hit him again. Now the spade came straight down from above. Swung by both Sam's arms, it landed on top of Jonno's head, edge first, with tremendous force. This time the impact did not ring out, but sounded more like a dull thud, and Gwenda feared Jonno's skull had cracked.

As Jonno slumped to his knees, Sam hit him a third time, another full-force blow with the oak blade, this one across his victim's forehead. An iron sword could hardly have been more damaging, Gwenda though despairingly.

She stepped forward to restrain Sam, but the village men had had the same idea a moment earlier, and got there before her. They pulled Sam away, two of them holding each arm.

Jonno lay on the ground, his head in a pool of blood. Gwenda was sickened by the sight, and could not help thinking of the boy's father, Nate, and how grieved he would be by his son's injuries. Jonno's mother had died of the plague, so at least she was in a place where grief could not afflict her.

Gwenda could see that Sam was not badly hurt. He was bleeding, but still struggling with his captors, trying to get free so that he could attack again. Gwenda bent over Jonno. His eyes were closed and he was not moving. She put a hand on his heart and felt nothing. She tried for a pulse, the way Caris had shown her, but there was none. Jonno did not seem to be breathing.

The implications of what had happened dawned on her, and she began to weep.

Jonno was dead, and Sam was a murderer.

82

On Easter Sunday that year, 1361, Caris and Merthin had been married ten years.

Standing in the cathedral, watching the Easter procession, Caris recalled their wedding. Because they had been lovers, off and on, for so long, they had seen the ceremony as no more than confirmation of a long-established fact, and they had foolishly envisaged a small, quiet event: a low-key service in St. Mark's Church and a modest dinner for a few people afterward at the Bell. But Father Joffroi had informed them, the day before, that by his calculation at least two thousand people were planning to attend the wedding, and they had been forced to move it to the cathedral. Then it turned out that, without their knowledge, Madge Webber had organized a banquet in the guildhall for leading citizens and a picnic in Lovers' Field for everyone else in Kingsbridge. So, in the end, it had been the wedding of the year.

Caris smiled at the recollection. She had worn a new robe of Kingsbridge Scarlet, a color the bishop probably thought appropriate for such a woman. Merthin had dressed in a richly patterned Italian coat, chestnut brown with gold threads, and had seemed to glow with happiness. They both had realized, belatedly, that their drawn-out love affair, which they had imagined to be a private drama, had been entertaining the citizens of Kingsbridge for years, and everyone wanted to celebrate its happy ending.

Caris's pleasant memories evaporated as her old enemy Philemon mounted the pulpit. In the decade since the wedding he had grown quite fat.

His monkish tonsure and shaved face revealed a ring of blubber around his neck, and the priestly robes billowed like a tent.

He preached a sermon against dissection.

Dead bodies belonged to God, he said. Christians were instructed to bury them in a carefully specified ritual; the saved in consecrated ground, the unforgiven elsewhere. To do anything else with corpses was against God's will. To cut them up was sacrilege, he said with uncharacteristic passion. There was even a tremor in his voice as he asked the congregation to imagine the horrible scene of a body being opened, its parts separated and sliced and pored over by so-called medical researchers. True Christians knew there was no excuse for these ghoulish men and women.

The phrase "men and women" was not often heard from Philemon's mouth, Caris thought, and could not be without significance. She glanced at her husband, standing next to her in the nave, and he raised his eyebrows in an expression of concern.

The prohibition against examining corpses was standard dogma, propounded by the church since before Caris could remember, but it had been relaxed since the plague. Progressive younger clergymen were vividly aware of how badly the church had failed its people then, and they were keen to change the way medicine was taught and practised by priests. However, conservative senior clergy clung to the old ways and blocked any change in policy. The upshot was that dissection was banned in principle and tolerated in practice.

Caris had been performing dissections at her new hospital from the start. She never talked about it outside the building: there was no point in upsetting the superstitious. But she did it every chance she got.

In recent years she had usually been joined by one or two younger monk-physicians. Many trained doctors never saw inside the body except when treating very bad wounds. Traditionally, the only carcasses they were allowed to open were those of pigs, thought to be the animals most like humans in their anatomy.

Caris was puzzled as well as worried by Philemon's attack. He had always hated her, she knew, though she had never been sure why. But since the great standoff in the snowfall of 1351 he had ignored her. As if in compensation for his loss of power over the town, he had furnished his palace with precious objects: tapestries, carpets, silver tableware, stained-glass windows, illuminated manuscripts. He had become ever more grand, demanding elaborate deference from his monks and novices, wearing gorgeous robes for services, and traveling, when he had to go to other towns, in a charette that was furnished like a duchess's boudoir.

There were several important visiting clergymen in the choir for the service—Bishop Henri of Shiring, Archbishop Piers of Monmouth, and

Archdeacon Reginald of York—and presumably Philemon was hoping to impress them with this outburst of doctrinal conservatism. But to what end? Was he looking for promotion? The archbishop was ill—he had been carried into the church—but surely Philemon could not aspire to that post? It was something of a miracle that the son of Joby from Wigleigh should have risen to be prior of Kingsbridge. Besides, elevation from prior to archbishop would be an unusually big jump, a bit like going from knight to duke without becoming a baron or an earl in between. Only a special favorite could hope for such a rapid rise.

However, there was no limit to Philemon's ambition. It was not that he felt himself to be superbly well qualified, Caris thought. That had been Godwyn's attitude, arrogant self-confidence. Godwyn had assumed that God made him prior because he was the cleverest man in town. Philemon was at the opposite extreme: in his heart he believed he was a nobody. His life was a campaign to convince himself that he was not completely worthless. He was so sensitive to rejection that he could not bear to consider himself undeserving of any post, no matter how lofty.

She thought of speaking to Bishop Henri after the service. She might remind him of the ten-year-old agreement that the prior of Kingsbridge had no jurisdiction over the Hospital of St. Elizabeth on Leper Island, which came under the bishop's direct control; so that any attack on the hospital was an attack on the rights and privileges of Henri himself. But, on further reflection, she realized that such a protest would confirm to the bishop that she was conducting dissections, and turn what might now be only a vague suspicion, easily ignored, into a known fact that must be dealt with. So she decided to remain silent.

Standing beside her were Merthin's two nephews, the sons of Earl Ralph: Gerry, age thirteen, and Roley, ten. Both boys were enrolled in the monks' school. They lived in the priory but spent much of their free time with Merthin and Caris at their house on the island. Merthin had his hand resting casually on the shoulder of Roley. Only three people in the world knew that Roley was not his nephew but his son. They were Merthin himself, Caris, and the boy's mother, Philippa. Merthin tried not to show special favor to Roley, but found it hard to disguise his true feelings, and was especially delighted when Roley learned something new or did well at school.

Caris often thought about the child she had conceived with Merthin and then aborted. She always imagined it to have been a girl. She would be a woman now, Caris mused, twenty-three years old, probably married with children of her own. The thought was like the ache of an old wound, painful but too familiar to be distressing.

When the service was over, they all left together. The boys were invited to Sunday dinner, as always. Outside the cathedral, Merthin turned to look back

at the tower that now soared high over the middle of the church.

As he examined his almost-finished work, frowning at some detail visible only to him, Caris studied him fondly. She had known him since he was eleven years old, and had loved him almost as long. He was forty-five now. His red hair was receding from his brow, and stood up around his head like a curly halo. He had carried his left arm stiffly ever since a small carved stone corbel, dropped from the scaffolding by a careless mason, had fallen on his shoulder. But he still had the expression of boyish eagerness that had drawn the ten-year-old Caris to him on All Hallows Day a third of a century ago.

She turned to share his view. The tower appeared to stand neatly on the four sides of the crossing, and to be exactly two bays square, even though in fact its weight was held up by massive buttresses built into the exterior corners of the transepts, which themselves rested on new foundations separate from the old original ones. The tower looked light and airy, with slender columns and multiple window openings through which you could see blue sky in fine weather. Above the square top of the tower, a web of scaffolding was rising for the final stage, the spire.

When Caris brought her gaze back down to ground level she saw her sister approaching. Alice was only a year older at forty-five, but Caris felt she was from another generation. Her husband, Elfric, had died in the plague, but she had not remarried, becoming frumpy, as if she thought that was how a widow should be. Caris had quarreled with Alice, many years ago, over Elfric's treatment of Merthin. The passage of time had blunted the edge of their mutual hostility, but there was still a resentful tilt to Alice's head when she said hello.

With her was Griselda, her stepdaughter, though only a year younger than Alice. Griselda's son, known as Merthin Bastard, stood beside her, towering over her, a big man with superficial charm—just like his father, the long-gone Thurstan, and about as different from Merthin Bridger as could be. Also with her was her sixteen-year-old daughter, Petranilla.

Griselda's husband, Harold Mason, had taken over the business after Elfric died. He was not much of a builder, according to Merthin, but he was doing all right, although he did not have the monopoly of priory repairs and extensions that had made Elfric rich. He stood next to Merthin now and said: "People think you're going to build the spire with no formwork."

Caris understood. Formwork, or centering, was the wooden frame that held the masonry in place until the mortar dried.

Merthin said: "Not much room for formwork inside that narrow spire. And how would it be supported?" His tone was polite, but Caris could tell from its briskness that he did not like Harold.

"I could believe it if the spire was going to be round."

Caris understood this, too. A round spire could be built by placing one

circle of stones on top of another, each a little narrower than the last. No formwork was needed because the circle was self-supporting: the stones could not fall inward because they pressed on one another. The same was not true of any shape with corners.

“You’ve seen the drawings,” Merthin said. “It’s an octagon.”

The corner turrets on the top of the square tower faced diagonally outward, easing the eye as it progressed upward to the different shape of the narrower spire. Merthin had copied this feature from Chartres. But it made sense only if the tower was octagonal.

Harold said: “But how can you build an octagonal tower without formwork?”

“Wait and see,” said Merthin, and he moved away.

As they walked down the main street Caris said: “Why won’t you tell people how you’re going to do it?”

“So that they can’t fire me,” he replied. “When I was building the bridge, as soon as I’d done the hard part they got rid of me, and hired someone cheaper.”

“I remember.”

“They can’t do that now, because no one else can build the spire.”

“You were a youngster then. Now you’re alderman. No one would dare sack you.”

“Perhaps not. But it’s nice to feel they can’t.”

At the bottom of the main street, where the old bridge had stood, there was a disreputable tavern called the White Horse. Caris saw Merthin’s sixteen-year-old daughter, Lolla, leaning on the wall outside, with a group of older friends. Lolla was an attractive girl, with olive skin and lustrous dark hair, a generous mouth and sultry brown eyes. The group was crowded around a dice game, and they were all drinking ale from large tankards. Caris was sorry, though not surprised, to see her stepdaughter carousing on the street at midday.

Merthin was angry. He went up to Lolla and took her arm. “You’d better come home for your dinner,” he said in a tight voice.

She tossed her head, shaking her thick hair in a gesture that was undoubtedly meant for the eyes of someone other than her father. “I don’t want to go home, I’m happy here,” she said.

“I didn’t ask what you wanted,” Merthin replied, and he jerked her away from the others.

A good-looking boy of about twenty detached himself from the crowd. He had curly hair and a mocking smile, and he was picking his teeth with a twig. Caris recognized Jake Riley, a lad of no particular profession who nevertheless always seemed to have money to spend. He sauntered over. “What’s going on?” he said. He spoke with the twig sticking out of his mouth

like an insult.

“None of your damn business,” Merthin said.

Jake stood in his way. “The girl doesn’t want to leave.”

“You’d better get out of my way, son, unless you want to spend the rest of the day in the town stocks.”

Caris froze with anxiety. Merthin was in the right: he was entitled to discipline Lolla, who was still five years short of adulthood. But Jake was the kind of boy who might punch him anyway, and take the consequences. However, Caris did not intervene, knowing it might make Merthin angry with her instead of with Jake.

Jake said: “I suppose you’re her father.”

“You know perfectly well who I am, and you can call me Alderman, and speak respectfully to me, or suffer the consequences.”

Jake stared insolently at Merthin a moment longer then turned aside, casually saying: “Yes, all right.”

Caris was relieved that the confrontation had not turned into fisticuffs. Merthin never got into fights, but Lolla was capable of driving him to distraction.

They walked on toward the bridge. Lolla shook herself free of her father’s grasp and walked on ahead, arms folded under her breasts, head down, frowning and muttering to herself in a full-dress sulk.

This was not the first time Lolla had been seen in bad company. Merthin was horrified and enraged that his little girl should be so determined to seek out such people. “Why does she do it?” he said to Caris as they followed Lolla across the bridge to Leper Island.

“God knows.” Caris had observed that this kind of behavior was more common in youngsters who had suffered the loss of a parent. After Silvia died, Lolla had been mothered by Bessie Bell, Lady Philippa, Merthin’s housekeeper Em, and of course Caris herself. Perhaps she was confused about whom she should obey. But Caris did not voice this thought, as it might seem to suggest that Merthin had somehow failed as a parent. “I had terrible fights with Aunt Petranilla when I was that age.”

“What about?”

“Similar things. She didn’t like me spending time with Mattie Wise.”

“That’s completely different. You didn’t go to low taverns with rogues.”

“Petranilla thought Mattie was bad company.”

“It’s not the same.”

“I suppose not.”

“You learned a lot from Mattie.”

Lolla was undoubtedly learning a lot from handsome Jake Riley, but Caris kept that inflammatory thought to herself—Merthin was furious enough already.

The island was entirely built up now, and an integral part of the city. It even had its own parish church. Where once they had wandered across waste ground, they now followed a footpath that ran straight between houses and turned sharp corners. The rabbits had long gone. The hospital occupied most of the western end. Although Caris went there every day, she still felt a glow of pride when she looked at the clean gray stonework, the large windows in regular rows, and the chimneys lined up like soldiers.

They passed through a gate into Merthin's grounds. The orchard was mature, and blossoms covered the apple trees like snow.

As always, they went in through the kitchen door. The house had a grand entrance on the river side which no one ever used. Even a brilliant architect can make a mistake, Caris thought with amusement; but, once again, she decided to give the thought no voice today.

Lolla stamped upstairs to her room.

From the front room a woman called: "Hello, everyone!" The two boys rushed into the parlor with glad cries. It was their mother, Philippa. Merthin and Caris greeted her warmly.

Caris and Philippa had become sisters-in-law when Caris married Merthin, but their past rivalry had continued to make Caris feel awkward in Philippa's presence for some years. Eventually the boys had brought them together. When first Gerry then Roley enrolled at the priory school, it was natural for Merthin to look after his nephews, and then it became normal for Philippa to call at Merthin's house whenever she was in Kingsbridge.

At first, Caris had felt jealous of Philippa for having attracted Merthin sexually. Merthin had never tried to pretend that his love for Philippa had been merely superficial. He clearly still cared about her. But Philippa nowadays cut a sad figure. She was forty-nine and looked older, her hair gray and her face lined with disappointment. She lived now for her children. She was a frequent guest of her daughter, Odila, the countess of Monmouth; and when she was not there she often visited Kingsbridge Priory to be close to her sons. She managed to spend very little time at Earlscastle with her husband Ralph.

"I've got to take the boys to Shiring," she said, explaining her presence here. "Ralph wants them to attend the county court with him. He says it's a necessary part of their education."

"He's right," Caris said. Gerry would be the earl, if he lived long enough; and if he did not Roley would inherit the title. So they both needed to be familiar with courts.

Philippa added: "I intended to be in the cathedral for the Easter service, but my charette broke a wheel and I made an overnight stop."

"Well, now that you're here, let's have dinner," Caris said.

They went into the dining hall. Caris opened the windows that looked

onto the river. Cool, fresh air came in. She wondered what Merthin would do about Lolla. He said nothing, leaving her to stew upstairs, to Caris's relief: a brooding adolescent at the dinner table could bring down everyone's spirits.

They ate mutton boiled with leeks. Merthin poured red wine, and Philippa drank thirstily. She had become fond of wine. Perhaps it was her consolation.

While they were eating, Em came in looking anxious. "There's somebody at the kitchen door to see the mistress," she said.

Merthin said impatiently: "Well, who is it?"

"He wouldn't mention his name, but he said the mistress would know him."

"What kind of person?"

"A young man. By his clothes a peasant, not a town dweller." Em had a snobbish dislike of villagers.

"Well, he sounds harmless. Let him come in."

A moment later, in walked a tall figure with a hood pulled forward to cover most of his face. When he drew it back, Caris recognized Gwenda's elder son, Sam.

Caris had known him all his life. She had seen him born, had watched his slimy head emerge from the small body of his mother. She had observed him as he grew and changed and became a man. She saw Wulfric in him now, in the way he walked and stood and raised a hand slightly as he was about to speak. She had always suspected that Wulfric was not in fact his father—but, close as she was to Gwenda, she had never mentioned her doubt. Some questions were better left unasked. However, the suspicion had inevitably returned when she heard that Sam was wanted for the murder of Jonno Reeve. For Sam when born had had a look of Ralph.

Now he came up to Caris, lifted his hand in that gesture of Wulfric's, hesitated, then went down on one knee. "Save me, please," he said.

Caris was horrified. "How can I save you?"

"Hide me. I've been on the run for days. I left Oldchurch in the dark and walked through the night and I've hardly rested since. Just now I tried to buy something to eat in a tavern and someone recognized me, and I had to run."

He looked so desperate that she felt a surge of compassion. Nevertheless, she said: "But you can't hide here, you're wanted for murder!"

"It was no murder, it was a fight. Jonno struck first. He hit me with a leg iron—look." Sam touched his face in two places, ear and nose, to indicate two scabbed gashes.

The physician in Caris could not help noting that the injuries were about five days old, and the nose was healing well enough though the ear really needed a stitch. But her main thought was that Sam should not be here. "You have to face justice," she said.

"They'll take Jonno's side, they're sure to. I ran away from Wigleigh, for

higher wages in Outhenby. Jonno was trying to take me back. They'll say he was entitled to chain a runaway."

"You should have thought of that before you hit him."

He said accusingly: "You employed runaways at Outhenby, when you were prioress."

She was stung. "Runaways, yes—killers, no."

"They will hang me."

Caris was torn. How could she turn him away?

Merthin spoke. "There are two reasons why you can't hide here, Sam. One is that it's a crime to conceal a fugitive, and I'm not willing to put myself on the wrong side of the law for your sake, fond though I am of your mother. But the second reason is that everyone knows your mother is an old friend of Caris's, and if the Kingsbridge constables are searching for you this is the first place they will look.

"Is it?" Sam said.

He was not very bright, Caris knew—his brother, Davey, had all the brains.

Merthin said: "You could hardly think of a worse place than this to hide." He softened. "Drink a cup of wine, and take a loaf of bread with you, and get out of town," he said more kindly. "I'll have to find Mungo Constable and report that you were here, but I can walk slowly." He poured wine into a wooden cup.

"Thank you."

"Your only hope is to go far away where you aren't known and start a new life. You're a strong boy, you'll always find work. Go to London and join a ship. And don't get into fights."

Philippa said suddenly: "I remember your mother…Gwenda?"

Sam nodded.

Philippa turned to Caris. "I met her at Casterham, when William was alive. She came to me about that girl in Wigleigh who had been raped by Ralph."

"Annet."

"Yes." Philippa turned back to Sam. "You must be the baby she had in her arms at the time. Your mother is a good woman. I'm sorry for her sake that you're in trouble."

There was a moment of quiet. Sam drained the cup. Caris was thinking, as no doubt Philippa and Merthin were too, about the passage of time, and how it can change an innocent, beloved baby into a man who commits murder.

In the silence, they heard voices.

It sounded like several men at the kitchen door.

Sam looked around him like a trapped bear. One door led to the kitchen, the other outside to the front of the house. He dashed to the front door, flung it

open, and ran out. Without pausing he headed down toward the river.

A moment later Em opened the door from the kitchen, and Mungo Constable came into the dining hall, with four deputies crowding behind him, all carrying wooden clubs.

Merthin pointed at the front door. “He just left.”

“After him, lads,” said Mungo, and they all ran through the room and out the door.

Caris stood up and hurried outside, and the others followed her.

The house was built on a low, rocky bluff only three or four feet high. The river flowed rapidly past the foot of the little cliff. To the left, Merthin’s graceful bridge spanned the water; to the right was a muddy beach. Across the river, trees were coming into leaf in the old plague graveyard. Pokey little suburban hovels had grown up like weeds either side of the cemetery.

Sam could have turned left or right, and Caris saw with a feeling of despair that he had made the wrong choice. He had gone right, which led nowhere. She saw him running along the foreshore, his boots leaving big impressions in the mud. The constables were chasing him like dogs after a hare. She felt sorry for Sam, as she always felt sorry for the hare. It was nothing to do with justice, merely that he was the quarry.

Seeing he had nowhere to go, he waded into the water.

Mungo had stayed on the paved footpath at the front of the house, and now he turned in the opposite direction, to the left, and ran toward the bridge.

Two of the deputies dropped their clubs, pulled off their boots, got out of their coats, and jumped into the water in their undershirts. The other two stood on the shoreline, presumably unable to swim, or perhaps unwilling to jump into the water on a cold day. The two swimmers struck out after Sam.

Sam was strong, but his heavy winter coat was now sodden and dragging him down. Caris watched with horrid fascination as the deputies gained on him.

There was a shout from the other direction. Mungo had reached the bridge and was running across, and he had stopped to beckon the two nonswimming deputies to follow him. They acknowledged his signal and ran after him. He continued across the bridge.

Sam reached the far shore just before the swimmers caught up with him. He gained his footing and staggered through the shallows, shaking his head, water running from his clothing. He turned and saw a deputy almost on him. The man stumbled, bending forward inadvertently, and Sam swiftly kicked him in the face with a heavy waterlogged boot. The deputy cried out and fell back.

The second deputy was more cautious. He approached Sam then stopped, still out of reach. Sam turned and ran forward, coming out of the water onto the turf of the plague graveyard; but the deputy followed him. Sam stopped

again, and the deputy stopped. Sam realized he was being toyed with. He gave a roar of anger and rushed at his tormentor. The deputy ran back, but he had the river behind him. He ran into the shallows, but the water slowed him, and Sam was able to catch him.

Sam grabbed the man by the shoulders, turned him, and head-butted him. On the far side of the river, Caris heard a crack as the poor man's nose broke. Sam tossed him aside and he fell, spurting blood into the river water.

Sam turned again for the shore—but Mungo was waiting for him. Now Sam was lower down the slope of the foreshore and hampered by the water. Mungo rushed at him, stopped, let him come forward, then raised his heavy wooden club. He feinted, Sam dodged, then Mungo struck, hitting Sam on the top of his head.

It looked a dreadful blow, and Caris herself gasped with shock as if she had been hit. Sam roared with pain and reflexively put his hands over his head. Mungo, experienced in fighting with strong young men, hit him again with the club, this time in his unprotected ribs. Sam fell into the water. The two deputies who had run across the bridge now arrived on the scene. Both jumped on Sam, holding him down in the shallows. The two he had wounded took their revenge, kicking and punching him savagely while their colleagues held him down. When there was no fight left in him, they at last let up and dragged him out of the water.

Mungo swiftly tied Sam's hands behind his back. Then the constables marched the fugitive back toward the town.

"How awful," said Caris. "Poor Gwenda."

83

The town of Shiring had a carnival air during sessions of the county court. All the inns around the square were busy, their parlors crowded with men and women dressed in their best clothes, all shouting for drinks and food. The town naturally took the opportunity to hold a market, and the square itself was so closely packed with stalls that it took half an hour to move a couple of hundred yards. As well as the legitimate stallholders there were dozens of strolling entrepreneurs: bakers with trays of buns, a busking fiddle player, maimed and blind beggars, prostitutes showing their breasts, a dancing bear, a preaching friar.

Earl Ralph was one of the few people who could cross the square quickly. He rode with three knights ahead of him and a handful of servants behind, and his entourage went through the melee like a plowshare, turning the crowd aside by the force of their momentum and their carelessness for the safety of

people in their way.

They rode on up the hill to the sheriff's castle. In the courtyard they wheeled with a flourish and dismounted. The servants immediately began shouting for hostlers and porters. Ralph liked people to know he had arrived.

He was tense. The son of his old enemy was about to be tried for murder. He was on the brink of the sweetest revenge imaginable, but some part of him feared it might not happen. He was so on edge that he felt slightly ashamed: he would not have wanted his knights to know how much this meant to him. He was careful to conceal, even from Alan Fernhill, how eager he was that Sam should hang. He was afraid something would go wrong at the last minute. No one knew better than he how the machinery of justice could fail: after all, he himself had escaped hanging twice.

He would sit on the judge's bench during the trial, as was his right, and do his best to make sure there was no upset.

He handed his reins to a groom and looked around. The castle was not a military fortification. It was more like a tavern with a courtyard, though strongly built and well guarded. The sheriff of Shiring could live here safe from the vengeful relatives of the people he arrested. There were basement dungeons in which to keep prisoners, and guest apartments where visiting judges could stay unmolested.

Sheriff Bernard showed Ralph to his room. The sheriff was the king's representative in the county, responsible for collecting taxes as well as administering justice. The post was lucrative, the salary usefully supplemented by gifts, bribes, and percentages skimmed off the top of fines and forfeited bail money. The relationship between earl and sheriff could be fractious: the earl ranked higher, but the sheriff's judicial power was independent. Bernard, a rich wool merchant of about Ralph's age, treated Ralph with an uneasy mixture of camaraderie and deference.

Philippa was waiting for Ralph in the apartment set aside for them. Her long gray hair was tied up in an elaborate headdress, and she wore an expensive coat in drab shades of gray and brown. Her haughty manner had once made her a proud beauty, but now she just looked like a grumpy old woman. She might have been his mother.

He greeted his sons, Gerry and Roley. He was not sure how to deal with children, and he had never seen much of his own: as babies they had been cared for by women, of course, and now they were at the monks' school. He addressed them somewhat as if they were squires in his service, giving them orders at one moment and joshing them in a friendly way the next. He would find them easier to talk to when they were older. It did not seem to matter: they regarded him as a hero whatever he did.

"Tomorrow you shall sit on the judge's bench in the courtroom," he said. "I want you to see how justice is done."

Gerry, the elder, said: “Can we look around the market this afternoon?”

“Yes—get Dickie to go with you.” Dickie was one of the Earlscastle servants. “Here, take some money to spend.” He gave them each a handful of silver pennies.

The boys went out. Ralph sat down across the room from Philippa. He never touched her, and tried always to keep his distance so that it would not happen by accident. He felt sure that she dressed and acted like an old woman to make sure he was not attracted to her. She also went to church every day.

It was a strange relationship for two people who had once conceived a child together, but they had been stuck in it for years and it would never change. At least it left him free to fondle servant girls and tumble tavern wenches.

However, they had to talk about the children. Philippa had strong views and, over the years, Ralph had realized it was easier to discuss things with her, rather than make unilateral decisions and then have a fight when she disagreed.

Now Ralph said: “Gerald is old enough to be a squire.”

Philippa said: “I agree.”

“Good!” said Ralph, surprised—he had expected an argument.

“I’ve already spoken to David Monmouth about him,” she added.

That explained her willingness. She was one jump ahead. “I see,” he said, playing for time.

“David agrees, and suggests we send him as soon as he is fourteen.”

Gerry was only just thirteen. Philippa was in fact postponing Gerry’s departure by almost a year. But this was not Ralph’s main worry. David, earl of Monmouth, was married to Philippa’s daughter, Odila. “Being a squire is supposed to turn a boy into a man,” Ralph said. “But Gerry will get too easy a ride with David. His stepsister is fond of him—she’ll probably protect him. He could have it too soft.” After a moment’s reflection, he added: “I expect that’s why you want him to go there.”

She did not deny it, but said: “I thought you would be glad to strengthen your alliance with the earl of Monmouth.”

She had a point. David was Ralph’s most important ally in the nobility. Placing Gerry in the Monmouth household would create another bond between the two earls. David might become fond of the boy. In later years, perhaps David’s sons would be squires at Earlscastle. Such family connections were priceless. “Will you undertake to make sure the boy isn’t mollycoddled there?” Ralph said.

“Of course.”

“Well, all right then.”

“Good. I’m glad that’s settled.” Philippa stood up.

But Ralph was not finished. “Now what about Roley? He could go too, so

that they would be together.”

Philippa did not like this idea at all, Ralph could tell, but she was too clever to contradict him flatly. “Roley’s a bit young,” she said, as if thinking it over. “And he hasn’t properly learned his letters yet.”

“Letters aren’t as important to a nobleman as learning to fight. After all, he is second in line to the earldom. If anything should happen to Gerry…”

“Which God forbid.”

“Amen.”

“All the same, I think he should wait until he’s fourteen.”

“I don’t know. Roley’s always been a bit womanish. Sometimes he reminds me of my brother, Merthin.” He saw a flash of fear in her eyes. She was afraid of letting her baby go, he guessed. He was tempted to insist, just to torture her. But ten was young for a squire. “We’ll see,” he said noncommittally. “He’ll have to be toughened up sooner or later.”

“All in good time,” said Philippa.

The judge, Sir Lewis Abingdon, was not a local man, but a London lawyer from the king’s court, sent on tour to try serious cases in county courts. He was a beefy type with a pink face and a fair beard. He was also ten years younger than Ralph.

Ralph told himself he should not be surprised. He was now forty-four. Half his own generation had been wiped out by the plague. Nevertheless, he continued to be startled by distinguished and powerful men who were younger than he.

They waited, with Gerry and Roley, in a side chamber at the Court House Inn, while the jury assembled and the prisoners were brought down from the castle. It turned out that Sir Lewis had been at Crécy, as a young squire, though Ralph did not recall him. He treated Ralph with wary courtesy.

Ralph tried subtly to probe the judge, and find out how tough he was. “The Statute of Laborers is difficult to enforce, we find,” he said. “When peasants see a way to make money, they lose all respect for the law.”

“For every runaway who is working for an illegal wage, there is an employer who is paying it,” the judge said.

“Exactly! The nuns of Kingsbridge Priory have never obeyed the statute.”

“Difficult to prosecute nuns.”

“I don’t see why.”

Sir Lewis changed the subject. “You have a special interest in this morning’s proceedings?” he asked. He had probably been told that it was unusual for Ralph to exercise his right to sit beside the judge.

“The murderer is a serf of mine,” Ralph admitted. “But the main reason I’m here is to give these boys a look at how justice works. One of them is

likely to be the earl when I give up the ghost. They can watch the hangings tomorrow, too. The sooner they get used to seeing men die, the better.”

Lewis nodded agreement. “The sons of the nobility cannot afford to be softhearted.”

They heard the clerk of the court bang his gavel, and the hubbub from the next room died down. Ralph’s anxiety was not allayed: Sir Lewis’s conversation had not told him much. Perhaps that in itself was revealing: it might mean he was not easily influenced.

The judge opened the door and stood aside for the earl to go first.

At the near end of the room, two large wooden chairs were set on a dais. Next to them was a low bench. A murmur of interest arose from the crowd as Gerry and Roley sat on the bench. The people were always fascinated to see the children who would grow into their overlords. But more than that, Ralph thought, there was a look of innocence about the two prepubescent boys that was strikingly out of place in a court whose business was violence, theft, and dishonesty. They looked like lambs in a pigpen.

Ralph sat in one of the two chairs and thought of the day, twenty-two years ago, when he had stood in this very courtroom as a criminal accused of rape—a ludicrous charge to bring against a lord when the so-called victim was one of his own serfs. Philippa had been behind that malicious prosecution. Well, he had made her suffer for it.

At that trial, Ralph had fought his way out of the room as soon as the jury pronounced him guilty, and then had been pardoned when he joined the king’s army and went to France. Sam was not going to escape: he had no weapon, and his ankles were chained. And the French wars seemed to have petered out, so there were no more free pardons.

Ralph studied Sam as the indictment was read. He had Wulfric’s build, not Gwenda’s: he was a tall lad, broad across the shoulders. He might have made a useful man-at-arms if he had been more nobly born. He did not really look like Wulfric, though something about the cast of his features rang a bell. Like so many accused men, he wore an expression of superficial defiance overlaying fear. That’s just how I felt, Ralph thought.

Nathan Reeve was the first witness. He was the father of the dead man but, more importantly, he testified that Sam was a serf of Earl Ralph’s and had not been given leave to go to Oldchurch. He said he had sent his son Jonno to follow Gwenda in the hope of tracking down the runaway. He was not likeable, but his grief was clearly genuine. Ralph was pleased: it was damning testimony.

Sam’s mother was standing next to him, the top of her head level with her son’s shoulder. Gwenda was not beautiful: her dark eyes were set close to a beaky nose, and her forehead and chin both receded sharply, giving her the look of a determined rodent. Yet there was something strongly sexual about

her, even in middle age. It was more than twenty years since Ralph had lain with her, but he remembered her as if it were yesterday. They had done it in a room at the Bell in Kingsbridge, and he had made her kneel up on the bed. He could picture it now, and the memory of her compact body excited him. She had a lot of dark hair, he recollected.

Suddenly she met his eye. She held his gaze and seemed to sense what he was thinking. On that bed she had been indifferent and motionless, to begin with, accepting his thrusts passively because he had coerced her; but, at the end, something strange had come over her, and almost against her own will she had moved in rhythm with him. She must have remembered the same thing, for an expression of shame came over her plain face, and she looked quickly away.

Next to her was another young man, presumably the second son. This one was more like her, small and wiry, with a crafty look about him. He met Ralph's gaze with a stare of intense concentration, as if he was curious what went on in the mind of an earl, and thought he might find the answer in Ralph's face.

But Ralph was most interested in the father. He had hated Wulfric since their fight at the Fleece Fair of 1337. He touched his broken nose reflexively. Several other men had wounded him in later years, but none had hurt his pride so badly. However, Ralph's revenge on Wulfric had been terrible. I deprived him of his birthright for a decade, Ralph thought. I lay with his wife. I gave him that scar across his cheek when he tried to stop me escaping from this very courtroom. I dragged him home when he tried to run away. And now I'm going to hang his son.

Wulfric was heavier than he used to be, but he carried it well. He had a salt-and-pepper beard that did not grow over the long scar of the sword wound Ralph had given him. His face was lined and weatherbeaten. Where Gwenda looked angry, Wulfric was grief-stricken. As the peasants of Oldchurch testified that Sam had killed Jonno with an oak spade, Gwenda's eyes flashed defiance, whereas Wulfric's broad forehead creased in anguish.

The foreman of the jury asked whether Sam had been in fear for his life.

Ralph was displeased. The question implied an excuse for the killer.

A thin peasant with one eye responded. "He wasn't in fear of the bailiff, no. I think he was ascared of his mother, though." The crowd tittered.

The foreman asked whether Jonno had provoked the attack, another question that bothered Ralph by indicating sympathy for Sam.

"Provoked?" said the one-eyed man. "Only by hitting him across the face with a leg iron, if you call that provoking." They laughed loudly.

Wulfric looked bewildered. How can people be amused, his expression said, when my son's life is at stake?

Ralph was feeling more anxious. The foreman seemed unsound.

Sam was called to testify, and Ralph noticed that the young man resembled Wulfric more when he spoke. There was a tilt of the head and a gesture of the hand that immediately brought Wulfric to mind. Sam told how he had offered to meet Jonno the following morning, and Jonno had responded by trying to put an iron on his leg.

Ralph spoke to the judge in an undertone. “None of this makes any difference,” he said with suppressed indignation. “Whether he was in fear, whether he was provoked, whether he offered to meet the following day.”

Sir Lewis said nothing.

Ralph said: “The bare fact is that he’s a runaway and he killed the man who came to fetch him.”

“He certainly did that,” said Sir Lewis guardedly, giving Ralph no satisfaction.

Ralph looked at the spectators while the jury questioned Sam. Merthin was in the crowd, with his wife. Before becoming a nun Caris had enjoyed dressing fashionably, and after renouncing her vows she had reverted to type. Today she wore a gown made of two contrasting fabrics, one blue and the other green, with a fur-trimmed cloak of Kingsbridge Scarlet and a little round hat. Ralph remembered that Caris had been a childhood friend of Gwenda’s, in fact she had been there the day they all saw Thomas Langley kill two men-at-arms in the woods. Merthin and Caris would be hoping, for Gwenda’s sake, that Sam would be treated mercifully. Not if I have anything to do with it, Ralph thought.

Caris’s successor as prioress, Mother Joan, was in court, presumably because the nunnery owned Outhenby Valley and was therefore the illegal employer of Sam. Joan ought to be in the dock with the accused, Ralph thought; but when he caught her eye she gave him an accusing glance, as if she thought the murder was his fault more than hers.

The prior of Kingsbridge had not shown up. Sam was Prior Philemon’s nephew, but Philemon would not want to draw attention to the fact that he was the uncle of a murderer. Philemon had once had a protective affection for his younger sister, Ralph recalled; but perhaps that had faded with the years.

Sam’s grandfather, the disreputable Joby, was present, a white-haired old man now, bent and toothless. Why was he here? He had been at odds with Gwenda for years, and was not likely to have much affection for his grandson. He had probably come to steal coins from people’s purses while they were absorbed in the trial.

Sam stood down and Sir Lewis spoke briefly. His summing-up pleased Ralph. “Was Sam Wigleigh a runaway?” he asked. “Did Jonno Reeve have the right to arrest him? And did Sam kill Jonno with his spade? If the answer to all three questions is yes, then Sam is guilty of murder.”

Ralph was surprised and relieved. There was no nonsense about whether

Sam was provoked. The judge was sound after all.

“What is your verdict?” the judge asked.

Ralph looked at Wulfric. The man was stricken. This is what happens to those who defy me, Ralph thought, and he wished he could say it out loud.

Wulfric caught his eye. Ralph held his gaze, trying to read Wulfric’s mind. What emotion was there? Ralph saw that it was fear. Wulfric had never shown fear to Ralph before, but now he crumbled. His son was going to die, and that had weakened him fatally. A profound satisfaction filled Ralph’s being as he stared into Wulfric’s frightened eyes. I have crushed you at last, he thought, after twenty-four years. Finally, you’re scared.

The jury conferred. The foreman seemed to be arguing with the others. Ralph watched them impatiently. Surely they could not be in doubt, after what the judge had said? But there was no certainty with juries. It can’t all go wrong at this stage, Ralph thought, can it?

They seemed to come to a resolution, though he could not guess who had prevailed. The foreman stood up.

“We find Sam Wigleigh guilty of murder,” he said.

Ralph kept his eyes fixed on his old enemy. Wulfric looked as if he had been stabbed. His face went pale and he closed his eyes as if in pain. Ralph tried not to smile in triumph.

Sir Lewis turned to Ralph, and Ralph tore his gaze away from Wulfric. “What are your thoughts about the sentence?” said the judge.

“There’s only one choice, as far as I’m concerned.”

Sir Lewis nodded. “The jury has made no recommendation for mercy.”

“They don’t want a runaway to get away with murdering his bailiff.”

“The ultimate penalty, then?”

“Of course!”

The judge turned back to the court. Ralph locked his gaze on Wulfric again. Everyone else looked at Sir Lewis. The judge said: “Sam Wigleigh, you have murdered the son of your bailiff, and you are sentenced to death. You shall be hanged in Shiring market square tomorrow at dawn, and may God have mercy on your soul.”

Wulfric staggered. The younger son grabbed his father’s arm and held him upright; otherwise he might have fallen to the floor. Let him drop, Ralph wanted to say; he’s finished.

Ralph looked at Gwenda. She was holding Sam’s hand, but she was looking at Ralph. Her expression surprised him. He expected grief, tears, screams, hysterics. But she stared back at him steadily. There was hatred in her eyes, and something else: defiance. Unlike her husband, she did not look crushed. She did not believe the case was over.

She looked, Ralph thought with dismay, as if she had something up her sleeve.

84

Caris was in tears as Sam was taken away, but Merthin could not pretend to be grief-stricken. It was a tragedy for Gwenda, and he felt desperately sorry for Wulfric. However, it was no bad thing, for the rest of the world, that Sam should be hanged. Jonno Reeve had been carrying out the law. It might well be a bad law, an unjust law, an oppressive law—but that did not give Sam the right to kill Jonno. After all, Nate Reeve was also bereaved. The fact that nobody liked Nate made no difference.

A thief was brought up before the bench, and Merthin and Caris left the courtroom and went into the parlor of the tavern. Merthin got some wine and poured a cup for Caris. A moment later, Gwenda came up to where they sat. "It's noon," she said. "We have eighteen hours to save Sam."

Merthin looked up at her in surprise. "What do you propose?" he said.

"We must get Ralph to ask the king to pardon him."

That seemed highly unlikely. "How would you persuade him to do that?"

"I can't, obviously," Gwenda said. "But you can."

Merthin felt trapped. He did not believe Sam deserved a pardon. On the other hand, it was hard to refuse a pleading mother. He said: "I intervened with my brother on your behalf once before—do you remember?"

"Of course," Gwenda said. "Over Wulfric not inheriting his father's land."

"He turned me down flat."

"I know," she said. "But you have to try."

"I'm not sure I'm the best person."

"Who else would he even listen to?"

That was right. Merthin had little chance of success, but no one else had any.

Caris could see that he was reluctant, and she threw her weight in on Gwenda's side. "Please, Merthin," she said. "Think how you would feel if it was Lolla."

He was about to say that girls don't get into fights, then he realized that in Lolla's case it was all too likely. He sighed. "I think this is a doomed enterprise," he said. He looked at Caris. "But, for your sake, I'll try."

Gwenda said: "Why don't you go now?"

"Because Ralph is still in court."

"It's almost dinnertime. They'll be finished soon. You could wait in the private chamber."

He had to admire her resolve. "All right," he said.

He left the parlor and walked around to the back of the tavern. A guard was standing outside the judge's private room. "I'm the earl's brother," Merthin said to the sentry. "Alderman Merthin of Kingsbridge."

“Yes, Alderman, I know you,” the guard said. “I’m sure it will be all right for you to wait inside.”

Merthin went into the little room and sat down. He felt uncomfortable asking his brother for a favor. The two of them had not been close for decades. Ralph had long ago turned into something Merthin did not recognize. Merthin did not know the man who could rape Annet and murder Tilly. It seemed impossible that such a one could have grown from the boy Merthin had called his brother. Since their parents had died, they had not met except on formal occasions, and even then they spoke little. It was presumptuous of him to use their relationship as justification for asking for a privilege. He would not have done it for Gwenda. But for Caris, he had to.

He did not wait long. After a few minutes the judge and the earl came in. Merthin noticed that his brother’s limp—the result of a wound suffered in the French wars—was getting worse as he aged.

Sir Lewis recognized Merthin and shook hands. Ralph did the same and said ironically: “A visit from my brother is a rare pleasure.”

It was not an unfair jibe, and Merthin acknowledged it with a nod. “On the other hand,” he said, “I suppose that if anyone is entitled to plead with you for mercy, I am.”

“What need do you have of mercy? Did you kill someone?”

“Not yet.”

Sir Lewis chuckled.

Ralph said: “What, then?”

“You and I have known Gwenda since we were all children together.”

Ralph nodded. “I shot her dog with that bow you made.”

Merthin had forgotten that incident. It was an early sign of how Ralph was going to turn out, he realized with hindsight. “Perhaps you owe her mercy on that account.”

“I think Nate Reeve’s son is worth more than a damn dog, don’t you?”

“I didn’t mean to suggest otherwise. Just that you might balance cruelty then with kindness now.”

“Balance?” Ralph said, with anger rising in his voice, and Merthin knew then that his cause was lost. “Balance?” He tapped his broken nose. “What should I balance against this?” He pointed a finger aggressively at Merthin. “I’ll tell you why I won’t give Sam a pardon. Because I looked at Wulfric’s face in the courtroom today, as his son was declared guilty of murder, and do you know what I saw there? Fear. That insolent peasant is afraid of me, at last. He has been tamed.”

“He means so much to you?”

“I’d hang six men to see that look.”

Merthin was ready to give up, then he thought of Gwenda’s grief, and he tried once more. “If you’ve conquered him, your work is done, isn’t it?” he

argued. “So let the boy go. Ask the king for a pardon.”

“No. I want to keep Wulfric the way he is.”

Merthin wished he had not come. Putting pressure on Ralph only brought out the worst in him. Merthin was appalled by his vengefulness and malice. He never wanted to speak to his brother again. The feeling was familiar: he had been through this with Ralph before. Somehow it always came as a shock to be reminded of what he was really like.

Merthin turned away. “Well, I had to try,” he said. “Good-bye.”

Ralph became cheery. “Come up to the castle for dinner,” he said. “The sheriff lays a good table. Bring Caris. We’ll have a real talk. Philippa’s with me—you like her, don’t you?”

Merthin had no intention of going. “Let me speak to Caris,” he said. Caris would rather have dinner with Lucifer, he knew.

“I may see you later, then.”

Merthin made his escape.

He returned to the parlor. Caris and Gwenda looked expectantly at him as he crossed the room. He shook his head. “I did my best,” he said. “I’m sorry.”

Gwenda had expected this. She was disappointed but not surprised. She had felt she had to try through Merthin. The other remedy she had at her disposal was so much more drastic.

She thanked Merthin perfunctorily and left the inn, heading for the castle on the hill. Wulfric and Davey had gone to a cheap tavern in the suburbs where they could get a filling dinner for a farthing. Wulfric was no good at this sort of thing anyway. His strength and honesty were useless in negotiations with Ralph and his kind.

Besides, Wulfric could not be allowed even to know about how she hoped to persuade Ralph.

As she was walking up the hill she heard horses behind her. She stopped and turned. It was Ralph and his entourage with the judge. She stood still and looked hard at Ralph, making sure he caught her eye as he passed. He would guess she was coming to see him.

A few minutes later she entered the courtyard of the castle, but access to the sheriff’s house was barred. She made her way to the porch of the main building and spoke to the marshal of the hall. “My name is Gwenda from Wigleigh,” she said. “Please tell Earl Ralph I need to see him in private.”

“Yes, yes,” said the marshal. “Look around you: all these people need to see the earl, the judge, or the sheriff.”

There were twenty or thirty people standing around the courtyard, some clutching rolls of parchment.

Gwenda was prepared to take a terrible risk to save her son from hanging

—but she would not get the opportunity unless she succeeded in speaking to Ralph before dawn.

“How much?” she said to the marshal.

He looked at her with a little less disrespect. “I can’t promise he’ll see you.”

“You can give him my name.”

“Two shillings. Twenty-four silver pennies.”

It was a lot of money, but Gwenda had all their savings in her purse. However, she was not yet ready to hand over the money. “What is my name?” she said.

“I don’t know.”

“I just told you. How can you give Earl Ralph my name if you can’t remember it?”

He shrugged. “Tell me again.”

“Gwenda from Wigleigh.”

“All right, I’ll mention it to him.”

Gwenda slipped her hand into her purse, brought out a handful of little silver coins, and counted twenty-four. It was four weeks’ wages for a laborer. She thought of the backbreaking work she had done to earn the money. Now this idle, supercilious doorkeeper was going to get it for doing next to nothing.

The marshal held out his hand.

She said: “What’s my name?”

“Gwenda.”

“Gwenda from where?”

“Wigleigh.” He added: “That’s where this morning’s murderer came from, isn’t it?”

She gave him the money. “The earl will want to see me,” she said as forcefully as she could.

The marshal pocketed the coins.

Gwenda retreated into the courtyard, not knowing whether she had wasted her money.

A moment later she saw a familiar figure with a small head on wide shoulders: Alan Fernhill. That was a piece of luck. He was crossing from the stables to the hall. The other petitioners did not recognize him. Gwenda stood in his way. “Hello, Alan,” she said.

“It’s Sir Alan now.”

“Congratulations. Will you tell Ralph that I want to see him?”

“I don’t need to ask you what it’s about.”

“Say I want to meet him in private.”

Alan raised an eyebrow. “No offense, but you were a girl last time. You’re twenty years older today.”

“Do you think perhaps we should let him decide?”

“Of course.” He grinned insultingly. “I know he remembers that afternoon at the Bell.”

Alan had been there, of course. He had watched Gwenda take off her dress, and stared at her naked body. He had seen her walk to the bed and kneel on the mattress, facing away. He had laughed coarsely when Ralph said she was better looking from behind.

She hid her revulsion and shame. “I was hoping he would remember,” she said as neutrally as she could.

The other petitioners realized Alan must be someone important. They began to crowd around, speaking to him, begging and pleading. He pushed them aside and went into the hall.

Gwenda settled down to wait.

After an hour it was clear Ralph was not going to see her before dinner. She found a patch of ground that was not too muddy and sat with her back to a stone wall, but she never took her eyes off the entrance to the hall.

A second hour passed, and a third. Noblemen’s dinners often went on all afternoon. Gwenda wondered how they could keep on eating and drinking for such a long time. Why did they not burst?

She had eaten nothing all day, but she was too tense to feel hungry.

It was gray April weather, and the sky began to darken early. Gwenda shivered on the cold ground, but she stayed where she was. This was her only chance.

Servants came out and lit torches around the courtyard. Lights appeared behind the shutters in some of the windows. Night fell, and Gwenda realized there were about twelve hours left until dawn. She thought of Sam, sitting on the floor in one of the underground chambers beneath the castle, and wondered if he was cold. She fought back tears.

It’s not over yet, she told herself; but her courage was weakening.

A tall figure blocked the light from the nearest torch. She looked up to see Alan. Her heart leaped.

“Come with me,” he said.

She jumped to her feet and moved toward the hall door.

“Not that way.”

She looked inquiringly at him.

“You said privately, didn’t you?” Alan said. “He’s not going to see you in the chamber he shares with the countess. Come this way.”

She followed him through a small door near the stables. He led her through several rooms and up a staircase. He opened a door to a narrow bedchamber. She stepped inside. Alan did not follow her in, but closed the door from the outside.

It was a low room almost completely filled by a bedstead. Ralph stood by

the window in his undershirt. His boots and outer clothing were piled on the floor. His face was flushed with drink, but his speech was clear and steady. “Take off your dress,” he said with a smile of anticipation.

Gwenda said: “No.”

He looked startled.

“I’m not taking my clothes off,” she said.

“Why did you tell Alan you wanted to see me in private?”

“So that you would think I was willing to have sex with you.”

“But if not…why are you here?”

“To beg you to ask the king for a pardon.”

“But you’re not offering yourself to me?”

“Why would I? I did that once before, and you broke your word. You reneged on the deal. I gave you my body, but you didn’t give my husband his land.” She allowed the contempt she felt to be heard in her tone of voice. “You would do the same again. Your honor is nothing. You remind me of my father.”

Ralph colored. It was an insult to tell an earl that he could not be trusted, and even more offensive to compare him with a landless laborer who trapped squirrels in the woods. Angrily he said: “Do you imagine this is the way to persuade me?”

“No. But you’re going to get that pardon.”

“Why?”

“Because Sam is your son.”

Ralph stared at her for a moment. “Hah,” he said contemptuously. “As if I would believe that.”

“He is your son,” she repeated.

“You can’t prove that.”

“No, I can’t,” she said. “But you know that I lay with you at the Bell in Kingsbridge nine months before Sam was born. True, I lay with Wulfric, too. So which of you is his father? Look at the boy! He has some of Wulfric’s mannerisms, yes—he has learned those, in twenty-two years. But look at his features.”

She saw a thoughtful expression appear on Ralph’s face, and knew that something she had said had hit the mark.

“Most of all, think about his character,” she said, pressing home. “You heard the evidence at the trial. Sam didn’t just fight Jonno off, as Wulfric would have done. He didn’t knock him down then help him up again, which would have been Wulfric’s way. Wulfric is strong, and quick to anger, but he’s tenderhearted. Sam is not. Sam hit Jonno with a spade, a blow that would have knocked any man senseless; then, before Jonno fell, Sam hit him again, even harder, although he was already helpless; and then, before Jonno’s limp form reached the ground, Sam hit him a third time. If the Oldchurch peasants

hadn't jumped on Sam and restrained him, he would have continued to lash out with that bloody spade until Jonno's head was smashed to a pulp. He wanted to kill!" She realized she was crying, and wiped the tears away with her sleeve.

Ralph was staring at her with a horrified look.

"Where does the killer instinct come from, Ralph?" she said. "Look in your own black heart. Sam is your son. And, God forgive me, he's mine."

When Gwenda had gone, Ralph sat on the bed in the little chamber, staring at the flame of the candle. Was it possible? Gwenda would lie, if it suited her, of course; there was no question of trusting her. But Sam could be Ralph's son as easily as Wulfric's. They had both lain with Gwenda at the crucial time. The truth might never be known for sure.

Even the possibility that Sam might be his child was enough to fill Ralph's heart with dread. Was he about to hang his own son? The dreadful punishment he had devised for Wulfric might be inflicted on himself.

It was already night. The hanging would take place at dawn. Ralph did not have long to decide.

He picked up the candle and left the little room. He had intended to satisfy a carnal desire there. Instead he had been given the shock of his life.

He went outside and crossed the courtyard to the cell block. On the ground floor of the building were offices for the sheriff's deputies. He went inside and spoke to the man on guard duty. "I want to see the murderer, Sam Wigleigh."

"Very good, my lord," the jailer said. "I'll show you the way." He led Ralph into the next room, carrying a lamp.

There was a grating set in the floor, and a bad smell. Ralph looked down through the grating. The cell was nine or ten feet deep with stone walls and a dirt floor. There was no furniture: Sam sat on the floor with his back against the wall. Beside him was a wooden jug, presumably containing water. A small hole in the floor appeared to be the toilet. Sam glanced up, then looked away indifferently.

"Open up," said Ralph.

The jailer unlocked the grating with a key. It swung up on a hinge.

"I want to go down."

The jailer was surprised, but did not dare argue with an earl. He picked up a ladder that was leaning against the wall and slid it into the cell. "Take care, please, my lord," he said nervously. "Remember, the villain has nothing to lose."

Ralph climbed down, carrying his candle. The smell was disgusting, but he hardly cared. He reached the foot of the ladder and turned.

Sam looked up at him resentfully and said: “What do you want?”

Ralph stared at him. He crouched down and held the candle close to Sam’s face, studying his features, trying to compare them with the face he saw when he looked into a mirror.

“What is it?” Sam said, spooked by Ralph’s intense stare.

Ralph did not answer. Was this his own child? It could be, he thought. It could easily be. Sam was a good-looking boy, and Ralph had been called handsome in his youth, before his nose got broken. In court earlier, Ralph had thought that something about Sam’s face rang a bell, and now he concentrated, searching his memory, trying to think who Sam reminded him of. That straight nose, the dark-eyed gaze, the head of thick hair that girls would envy…

Then he got it.

Sam looked like Ralph’s mother, the late Lady Maud.

“Dear God,” he said, and it came out as a whisper.

“What?” said Sam, his voice betraying fear. “What is this?”

Ralph had to say something. “Your mother…,” he began, then he trailed off. His throat was constricted with emotion, making it difficult for him to get words out. He tried again. “Your mother has pleaded for you…most eloquently.”

Sam looked wary and said nothing. He thought Ralph had come here to mock him.

“Tell me,” Ralph said. “When you hit Jonno with that spade…did you mean to kill him? You can be honest, you have nothing more to fear.”

“Of course I meant to kill him,” Sam said. “He was trying to take me in.”

Ralph nodded. “I would have felt the same,” he said. He paused, staring at Sam, then said it again. “I would have felt the same.”

He stood up, turned to the ladder, hesitated, then turned back and put the candle on the ground next to Sam. Then he climbed up.

The jailer replaced the grating and locked it.

Ralph said to him: “There will be no hanging. The prisoner will be pardoned. I will speak to the sheriff immediately.”

As he left the room, the jailer sneezed.

85

When Merthin and Caris returned from Shiring to Kingsbridge, they found that Lolla had gone missing.

Their long-standing house servants, Arn and Em, were waiting at the garden gate, and looked as if they had been stationed there all day. Em began

to speak but burst into incoherent sobs, and Arn had to break the news. “We can’t find Lolla,” he said, distraught. “We don’t know where she is.”

At first Merthin misunderstood. “She’ll be here by suppertime,” he said. “Don’t upset yourself, Em.”

“But she didn’t come home last night, nor the night before,” Arn said.

Merthin realized then what they meant. She had run away. A blast of fear like a winter wind chilled his skin and gripped his heart. She was only sixteen. For a moment he could not think rationally. He just pictured her, halfway between child and adult, with the intense dark-brown eyes and sensual mouth of her mother, and an expression of blithe false confidence.

When rationality returned to him, he asked himself what had gone wrong. He had been leaving Lolla in the care of Arn and Em for a few days at a time ever since she was five years old, and she had never come to any harm. Had something changed?

He realized that he had hardly spoken to her since Easter Sunday, two weeks ago, when he had taken her by the arm and pulled her away from her disreputable friends outside the White Horse. She had sulked upstairs while the family ate dinner, and had not emerged even when Sam was arrested. She had still been in a snit a few days later, when Merthin and Caris had kissed her good-bye and set out for Shiring.

Guilt stabbed him. He had treated her harshly, and driven her away. Was Silvia’s ghost watching, and despising him for his failure to care for their daughter?

The thought of Lolla’s disreputable friends came back to him. “That fellow Jake Riley is behind this,” he said. “Have you spoken to him, Arn?”

“No, master.”

“I’d better do that right away. Do you know where he lives?”

“He lodges next to the fishmonger’s behind St. Paul’s Church.”

Caris said to Merthin: “I’ll go with you.”

They crossed the bridge back into the city and headed west. The parish of St. Paul took in the industrial premises along the waterfront: abattoirs, leather tanners, sawmills, manufactories, and the dyers that had sprung up like September mushrooms since the invention of Kingsbridge Scarlet. Merthin headed for the squat tower of St. Paul’s Church, visible over the low roofs of the houses. He found the fish shop by smell, and knocked at a large, run-down house next door.

It was opened by Sal Sawyers, poor widow of a jobbing carpenter who had died in the plague. “Jake comes and goes, Alderman,” she said. “I haven’t seen him for a week. He can do as he pleases, so long as he pays the rent.”

Caris said: “When he left, was Lolla with him?”

Sal warily looked sideways at Merthin. “I don’t like to criticize,” she said.

Merthin said: “Please just tell me what you know. I won’t be offended.”

“She’s usually with him. She does anything Jake wants, I’ll say no more than that. If you look for him, you’ll find her.”

“Do you know where he might have gone?”

“He never says.”

“Can you think of anyone who might know?”

“He doesn’t bring his friends here, except for her. But I believe his pals are usually to be found at the White Horse.”

Merthin nodded. “We’ll try there. Thank you, Sal.”

“She’ll be all right,” Sal said. “She’s just going through a wild phase.”

“I hope you’re right.”

Merthin and Caris retraced their steps until they came to the White Horse, on the riverside near the bridge. Merthin recalled the orgy he had witnessed here at the height of the plague, when the dying Davey Whitehorse had given away all his ale. The place had stood empty for several years afterward, but now it was once again a busy tavern. Merthin often wondered why it was popular. The rooms were cramped and dirty, and there were frequent fights. About once a year someone was killed there.

They went into a smoky parlor. It was mid-afternoon, but there were a dozen or so desultory drinkers sitting on benches. A small group was clustered around a backgammon board, and several small piles of silver pennies on the table indicated that money was being wagered on the outcome. A red-cheeked prostitute called Joy looked up hopefully at the newcomers, then saw who they were and relapsed into bored indolence. In a corner, a man was showing a woman an expensive-looking coat, apparently offering it for sale; but when he saw Merthin he folded the garment quickly and put it out of sight, and Merthin guessed it was stolen property.

The landlord, Evan, was eating a late dinner of fried bacon. He stood up, wiping his hands on his tunic, and said nervously: “Good day to you, Alderman—an honor to have you in the house. May I draw you a pot of ale?”

“I’m looking for my daughter, Lolla,” Merthin said briskly.

“I haven’t seen her for a week,” said Evan.

Sal had said exactly the same about Jake, Merthin recalled. He said to Evan: “She may be with Jake Riley.”

“Yes, I’ve noticed that they’re friendly,” Evan said tactfully. “He’s been gone about the same length of time.”

“Do you know where he went?”

“He’s a close-lipped type, is Jake,” said Evan. “If you asked him how far it was to Shiring, he’d shake his head and frown and say it was none of his business to know such things.”

The whore, Joy, had been listening to the conversation, and now she chipped in. “He’s openhanded, though,” she said. “Fair’s fair.”

Merthin gave her a hard look. “And where does his money come from?”

“Horses,” she said. “He goes around the villages buying foals from peasants, and sells them in the towns.”

He probably stole horses from unwary travelers, too, Merthin thought sourly. “Is that what he’s doing now—buying horses?”

Evan said: “Very likely. The big fair season is coming up. He could be acquiring his stock-in-trade.”

“And perhaps Lolla went with him.”

“Not wishing to give offense, Alderman, but it’s quite likely.”

“It’s not you who has given offense,” Merthin said. He nodded a curt farewell and left the tavern, with Caris following.

“That’s what she’s done,” he said angrily. “She’s gone off with Jake. She probably thinks it’s a great adventure.”

“I’m afraid I think you’re right,” Caris said. “I hope she doesn’t become pregnant.”

“I wish that was the worst I feared.”

They headed automatically for home. Crossing the bridge, Merthin stopped at the highest point and looked out over the suburban rooftops to the forest beyond. His little girl was somewhere out there with a shady horse dealer. She was in danger, and there was nothing he could do to protect her.

When Merthin went to the cathedral the next morning, to check on the new tower, he found that all work had stopped. “Prior’s orders,” said Brother Thomas when Merthin questioned him. Thomas was almost sixty years old, and showing his age. His soldierly physique was bent, and he shuffled around the precincts unsteadily. “There’s been a collapse in the south aisle,” he added.

Merthin glanced at Bartelmy French, a gnarled old mason from Normandy, who was sitting outside the lodge sharpening a chisel. Bartelmy shook his head in silent negation.

“That collapse was twenty-four years ago, Brother Thomas,” Merthin said.

“Ah, yes, you’re right,” said Thomas. “My memory’s not as good as it used to be, you know.”

Merthin patted his shoulder. “We’re all getting older.”

Bartelmy said: “The prior is up the tower, if you want to see him.”

Merthin certainly did. He went into the north transept, stepped through a small archway, and climbed a narrow spiral stair within the wall. As he passed from the old crossing into the new tower, the color of the stones changed from the dark gray of storm clouds to the light pearl of the morning sky. It was a long climb: the tower was already more than three hundred feet high. However, he was used to it. Almost every day for eleven years he had

climbed a stair that was higher each time. It occurred to him that Philemon, who was quite fat nowadays, must have had a compelling reason to drag his bulk up all these steps.

Near the top, Merthin passed through a chamber that housed the great wheel, a wooden winding mechanism twice as high as a man, used for hoisting stones, mortar, and timber up to where they were needed. When the spire was finished the wheel would be left here permanently, to be used for repair work by future generations of builders, until the trumpets sounded on the Day of Judgment.

He emerged on top of the tower. A stiff, cold breeze was blowing, though none had been noticeable at ground level. A leaded walkway ran around the inside of the tower's summit. Scaffolding stood around an octagonal hole, ready for the masons who would build the spire. Dressed stones were piled nearby, and a heap of mortar was drying up wastefully on a wooden board.

There were no workmen here. Prior Philemon stood on the far side with Harold Mason. They were deep in conversation, but stopped guiltily when Merthin came into view. He had to shout into the wind to make himself heard. "Why have you stopped the building?"

Philemon had his answer ready. "There's a problem with your design."

Merthin looked at Harold. "You mean some people can't understand it."

"Experienced people say it can't be built," Philemon said defiantly.

"Experienced people?" Merthin repeated scornfully. "Who in Kingsbridge is experienced? Who has built a bridge? Who has worked with the great architects of Florence? Who has seen Rome, Avignon, Paris, Rouen? Certainly not Harold here. No offense, Harold, but you've never even been to London."

Harold said: "I'm not the only one who thinks it's impossible to build an octagonal tower with no formwork."

Merthin was about to say something sarcastic, but stopped himself. Philemon must have more than this, he realized. The prior had deliberately chosen to fight this battle. Therefore he must have weapons more formidable than the mere opinion of Harold Mason. He had presumably won some support among members of the guild—but how? Other builders who were prepared to say that Merthin's spire was impossible must have been offered some incentive. That probably meant construction work for them. "What is it?" he said to Philemon. "What are you hoping to build?"

"I don't know what you mean," Philemon blustered.

"You've got an alternative project, and you've offered Harold and his friends a piece of it. What's the building?"

"You don't know what you're talking about."

"A bigger palace for yourself? A new chapter house? It can't be a hospital, we've already got three. Come on, you might as well tell me. Unless

you’re ashamed of it.”

Philemon was stung into a response. “The monks wish to build a Lady chapel.”

“Ah.” That made sense. The cult of the Virgin was increasingly popular. The church hierarchy approved because the wave of piety associated with Mary counterbalanced the skepticism and heresy that had afflicted congregations since the plague. Numerous cathedrals and churches were adding a special small chapel at the east end—the holiest part of the building—dedicated to the Mother of God. Merthin did not like the architecture: on most churches, a Lady chapel looked like an afterthought, which of course it was.

What was Philemon’s motive? He was always trying to ingratiate himself with someone—that was his modus operandi. A Lady chapel at Kingsbridge would undoubtedly please conservative senior clergy.

This was the second move Philemon had made in that direction. On Easter Sunday, from the pulpit of the cathedral, he had condemned dissection of corpses. He was mounting a campaign, Merthin realized. But what was its purpose?

Merthin decided to do nothing more until he had figured out what Philemon was up to. Without saying anything further, he left the roof and started down the series of staircases and ladders to the ground.

Merthin arrived home at the dinner hour, and Caris came in from the hospital a few minutes later. “Brother Thomas is getting worse,” he said to Caris. “Is there anything that can be done for him?”

She shook her head. “There’s no cure for senility.”

“He told me the south aisle had collapsed as if it had happened yesterday.”

“That’s typical. He remembers the distant past but doesn’t know what’s going on today. Poor Thomas. He’ll probably deteriorate quite fast. But at least he’s in a familiar place. Monasteries don’t change much over the decades. His daily routine is probably the same as it has always been. That will help.”

As they sat down to mutton stew with leeks and mint, Merthin explained the morning’s developments. The two of them had been battling Kingsbridge priors for decades: first Anthony, then Godwyn, and now Philemon. They had thought that the granting of the borough charter would put an end to the constant jockeying. It had certainly improved matters, but it seemed Philemon had not given up yet.

“I’m not really worried about the spire,” Merthin said. “Bishop Henri will overrule Philemon, and order the building restarted, just as soon as he hears. Henri wants to be bishop of the tallest cathedral in England.”

“Philemon must know that,” Caris said thoughtfully.

“Perhaps he simply wants to make the gesture toward a Lady chapel, and get the credit for trying, while blaming his failure on someone else.”

“Perhaps,” Caris said doubtfully.

In Merthin’s mind there was a more important question. “But what is he really after?”

“Everything Philemon does is driven by the need to make himself feel important,” Caris said confidently. “My guess is he’s after a promotion.”

“What job could he have in mind? The archbishop of Monmouth seems to be dying, but surely Philemon can’t hope for that position?”

“He must know something we don’t.”

Before they could say any more, Lolla walked in.

Merthin’s first reaction was a feeling of relief so powerful that it brought tears to his eyes. She was back, and she was safe. He looked her up and down. She had no apparent injuries, she walked with a spring in her step, and her face showed only the usual expression of moody discontent.

Caris spoke first. “You’re back!” she said. “I’m so glad!”

“Are you?” Lolla said. She often pretended to believe that Caris did not like her. Merthin was not fooled, but Caris could be thrown into doubt, for she was sensitive about not being Lolla’s mother.

“We’re both glad,” Merthin said. “You gave us a scare.”

“Why?” said Lolla. She hung her cloak on a hook and sat at the table. “I was perfectly all right.”

“But we didn’t know that, so we were terribly worried.”

“You shouldn’t be,” Lolla said. “I can take care of myself.”

Merthin suppressed an angry retort. “I’m not sure you can,” he said as mildly as possible.

Caris stepped in to try to lower the temperature. “Where did you go?” she asked. “You’ve been away for two weeks.”

“Different places.”

Merthin said tightly: “Can you give us one or two examples?”

“Mudeford Crossing. Casterham. Outhenby.”

“And what have you been doing?”

“Is this the catechism?” she said petulantly. “Do I have to answer all these questions?”

Caris put a restraining hand on Merthin’s arm and said to Lolla: “We just want to know that you haven’t been in danger.”

Merthin said: “I’d also like to know who you’ve been traveling with.”

“Nobody special.”

“Does that mean Jake Riley?”

She shrugged and looked embarrassed. “Yes,” she said, as if it were a trivial detail.

Merthin had been ready to forgive and embrace her, but she was making

that difficult. Trying to keep his voice neutral, he said: “What sleeping arrangements did you and Jake have?”

“That’s my business!” she cried.

“No, it’s not!” he shouted back. “It’s mine, too, and your stepmother’s. If you’re pregnant, who will care for your baby? Are you confident that Jake is ready to settle down and be a husband and father? Have you talked to him about that?”

“Don’t speak to me!” she yelled. Then she burst into tears and stomped up the stairs.

Merthin said: “Sometimes I wish we lived in one room—then she wouldn’t be able to pull that trick.”

“You weren’t very gentle with her,” Caris said with mild disapproval.

“What am I supposed to do?” Merthin said. “She talks as if she’s done nothing wrong!”

“She knows the truth, though. That’s why she’s crying.”

“Oh, hell,” he said.

There was a knock, and a novice monk put his head around the door. “Pardon me for disturbing you, Alderman,” he said. “Sir Gregory Longfellow is at the priory, and would be grateful for a word with you, as soon as is convenient.”

“Damn,” said Merthin. “Tell him I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

“Thank you,” the novice said, and left.

Merthin said to Caris: “Perhaps it’s just as well to give her time to cool off.”

“You, too,” Caris said.

“You’re not taking her side, are you?” he said with a touch of irritation.

She smiled and touched his arm. “I’m on your side, always,” she said. “But I remember what it was like to be a sixteen-year-old girl. She’s as worried as you are about her relationship with Jake. But she’s not admitting it, even to herself, because that would wound her pride. So she resents you for speaking the truth. She has constructed a fragile defense around her self-esteem, and you just tear it down.”

“What should I do?”

“Help her build a better fence.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“You’ll figure it out.”

“I’d better go and see Sir Gregory.” Merthin stood up.

Caris put her arms around him and kissed him on the lips. “You’re a good man doing your best, and I love you with all my heart,” she said.

That took the edge off his frustration, and he felt himself calm down as he strode across the bridge and up the main street to the priory. He did not like Gregory. The man was sly and unprincipled, willing to do anything for his

master the king, just as Philemon had been when he served Godwyn as prior. Merthin wondered uneasily what Gregory wanted to discuss with him. It was probably taxes—always the king's worry.

Merthin went first to the prior's palace where Philemon, looking pleased with himself, told him that Sir Gregory was to be found in the monks' cloisters to the south of the cathedral. Merthin wondered what Gregory had done to win himself the privilege of holding audience there.

The lawyer was getting old. His hair was white, and his tall figure was stooped. Deep lines had appeared like brackets either side of that sneering nose, and one of the blue eyes was cloudy. But the other eye saw sharply enough, and he recognized Merthin instantly, though they had not met for ten years. "Alderman," he said. "The archbishop of Monmouth is dead."

"Rest his soul," Merthin said automatically.

"Amen. The king asked me, as I was passing through his borough of Kingsbridge, to give you his greetings, and tell you this important news."

"I'm grateful. The death is not unexpected. The archbishop has been ill." The king certainly had not asked Gregory to meet with Merthin purely to give him interesting information, he thought suspiciously.

"You're an intriguing man, if you don't mind my saying so," Gregory said expansively. "I first met your wife more than twenty years ago. Since then I've seen the two of you slowly but surely take control of this town. And you've got everything you set your hearts on: the bridge, the hospital, the borough charter, and each other. You're determined, and you're patient."

It was condescending, but Merthin was surprised to detect a grain of respect in Gregory's flattery. He told himself to remain mistrustful: men such as Gregory praised only for a purpose.

"I'm on my way to see the monks of Abergavenny, who must vote for a new archbishop." Gregory leaned back in his chair. "When Christianity first came to England, hundreds of years ago, monks elected their own superiors." Explaining was an old man's habit, Merthin reflected: the young Gregory would not have bothered. "Nowadays, of course, bishops and archbishops are too important and powerful to be chosen by small groups of pious idealists living detached from the world. The king makes his choice, and His Holiness the Pope ratifies the royal decision."

Even I know it's not that simple, Merthin thought. There's usually some kind of power struggle. But he said nothing.

Gregory continued: "However, the ritual of the monks' election still goes on, and it is easier to control it than to abolish it. Hence my journey."

"So you're going to tell the monks whom to elect," Merthin said.

"To put it bluntly, yes."

"And what name will you give them?"

"Didn't I say? It's your bishop, Henri of Mons. Excellent man: loyal,

trustworthy, never makes trouble.”

“Oh, dear.”

“You’re not pleased?” Gregory’s relaxed air evaporated, and he became keenly attentive.

Merthin realized that this was what Gregory had come for: to find out how the people of Kingsbridge—as represented by Merthin—would feel about what he was planning, and whether they would oppose him. He collected his thoughts. The prospect of a new bishop threatened the spire and the hospital. “Henri is the key to the balance of power in this town,” he said. “Ten years ago, a kind of armistice was agreed between the merchants, the monks, and the hospital. As a result, all three have prospered mightily.” Appealing to Gregory’s interest—and the king’s—he added: “That prosperity is of course what enables us to pay such high taxes.”

Gregory acknowledged this with a dip of his head.

“The departure of Henri obviously puts into question the stability of our relationships.”

“It depends on who replaces him, I should have thought.”

“Indeed,” said Merthin. Now we come to the crux, he thought. He said: “Have you got anyone in mind?”

“The obvious candidate is Prior Philemon.”

“No!” Merthin was aghast. “Philemon! Why?”

“He’s a sound conservative, which is important to the church hierarchy in these times of skepticism and heresy.”

“Of course. Now I understand why he preached a sermon against dissection. And why he wants to build a Lady chapel.” I should have foreseen this, Merthin thought

“And he has let it be known that he has no problem with taxation of the clergy—a constant source of friction between the king and some of his bishops.”

“Philemon has been planning this for some time.” Merthin was angry with himself for letting it sneak up on him.

“Since the archbishop fell ill, I imagine.”

“This is a catastrophe.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Philemon is quarrelsome and vengeful. If he becomes bishop he will create constant strife in Kingsbridge. We have to prevent him.” He looked Gregory in the eye. “Why did you come here to forewarn me?” As soon as he had asked the question, the answer came to him. “You don’t want Philemon either. You didn’t need me to tell you what a troublemaker he is—you knew already. But you can’t just veto him, because he has already won support among senior clergy.” Gregory just smiled enigmatically—which Merthin took to mean he was right. “So what do you want me to do?”

“If I were you,” Gregory said, “I’d start by finding another candidate to put up as the alternative to Philemon.”

So that was it. Merthin nodded pensively. “I’ll have to think about this,” he said.

“Please do.” Gregory stood up, and Merthin realized the meeting was over. “And let me know what you decide,” Gregory added.

Merthin left the priory and walked back to Leper Island, musing. Who could he propose as bishop of Kingsbridge? The townspeople had always got on well with Archdeacon Lloyd, but he was too old—they might succeed in getting him elected only to have to do the whole thing again in a year’s time.

He had not thought of anyone by the time he got home. He found Caris in the parlor and was about to ask her when she preempted him. Standing up, with a pale face and a frightened expression, she said: “Lolla’s gone again.”

86

The priests said Sunday was a day of rest, but it had never been so for Gwenda. Today, after church in the morning and then dinner, she was working with Wulfric in the garden behind their house. It was a good garden, half an acre with a hen house, a pear tree, and a barn. In the vegetable patch at the far end, Wulfric was digging furrows and Gwenda sowing peas.

The boys had gone to another village for a football game, their usual recreation on Sundays. Football was the peasant equivalent of the nobility’s tournaments: a mock battle in which the injuries were sometimes real. Gwenda just prayed her sons would come home intact.

Today Sam returned early. “The ball burst,” he said grumpily.

“Where’s Davey?” Gwenda asked.

“He wasn’t there.”

“I thought he was with you.”

“No, he quite often goes off on his own.”

“I didn’t know that.” Gwenda frowned. “Where does he go?”

Sam shrugged. “He doesn’t tell me.”

Perhaps he was seeing a girl, Gwenda thought. Davey was close about all sorts of things. If it was a girl, who was she? There were not many eligible girls in Wigleigh. The survivors of the plague had remarried quickly, as if eager to repopulate the land; and those born since were too young. Perhaps he was meeting someone from the next village, at a rendezvous in the forest. Such assignations were as common as heartache.

When Davey came home, a couple of hours later, Gwenda confronted him. He made no attempt to deny that he had been sneaking off. “I’ll show you what I’ve been doing, if you like,” he said. “I can’t keep it secret forever. Come with me.”

They all went, Gwenda, Wulfric, and Sam. The Sabbath was observed to the extent that no one worked in the fields, and the Hundredacre was deserted as the four of them walked across it in a blustery spring breeze. A few strips looked neglected: there were still villagers who had more land than they could cope with. Annet was one such—she had only her eighteen-year-old daughter Amabel to help her, unless she could hire labor, which was still difficult. Her strip of oats was getting weedy.

Davey led them half a mile into the forest and stopped at a clearing off the beaten track. “This is it,” he said.

For a moment Gwenda did not know what he was talking about. She was standing on the edge of a nondescript patch of ground with low bushes growing between the trees. Then she looked again at the bushes. They were a species she had never seen before. It had a squarish stem with pointed leaves growing in clusters of four. The way it had covered the ground made her think it was a creeping plant. A pile of uprooted vegetation at one side showed that Davey had been weeding. “What is it?” she said.

“It’s called madder. I bought the seeds from a sailor that time we went to Melcombe.”

“Melcombe?” Gwenda said. “That was three years ago.”

“That’s how long it’s taken.” Davey smiled. “At first I was afraid it wouldn’t grow at all. He told me it needed sandy soil and would tolerate light shade. I dug over the clearing and planted the seeds, but the first year I got only three or four feeble plants. I thought I’d wasted my money. Then, the second year, the roots spread underground and sent up shoots, and this year it’s all over the place.”

Gwenda was astonished that her child could have kept this from her for so long. “But what use is madder?” she said. “Does it taste good?”

Davey laughed. “No, it’s not edible. You dig up the roots, dry them, and

grind them to a powder that makes a red dye. It's very costly. Madge Webber in Kingsbridge pays seven shillings for a gallon."

That was an astonishing price, Gwenda reflected. Wheat, the most expensive grain, sold for about seven shillings a quarter, and a quarter was sixty-four gallons. "This is sixty-four times as precious as wheat!" she said.

Davey smiled. "That's why I planted it."

"Why you planted what?" said a new voice. They all turned to see Nathan Reeve, standing beside a hawthorn tree as bent and twisted as he was. He wore a triumphant grin: he had caught them red-handed.

Davey was quick with an answer. "This is a medicinal herb called… hagwort," he said. Gwenda could tell he was improvising, but Nate would not be sure. "It's good for my mother's wheezy chest."

Nate looked at Gwenda. "I didn't know she had a wheezy chest."

"In the winter," Gwenda said.

"A herb?" Nate said skeptically. "There's enough here to dose all Kingsbridge. And you've been weeding it, to get more."

"I like to do things properly," Davey said.

It was a feeble response, and Nate ignored it. "This is an unauthorized crop," he said. "First of all, serfs need permission for what they plant—they can't go raising anything they like. That would lead to total chaos. Secondly, they can't cultivate the lord's forest, even by planting herbs."

None of them had any answer to that. Those were the rules. It was frustrating: often peasants knew they could make money by growing nonstandard crops that were in demand and fetched high prices: hemp for rope, flax for expensive underclothing, or cherries to delight rich ladies. But many lords and their bailiffs refused permission, out of instinctive conservatism.

Nate's expression was venomous. "One son a runaway and a murderer," he said. "The other defies his lord. What a family."

He was entitled to feel angry, Gwenda thought. Sam had killed Jonno and got away with it. Nate would undoubtedly hate her family to his dying day.

Nate bent down and roughly pulled a plant out of the ground. "This will come before the manor court," he said with satisfaction; and he turned and limped away through the trees.

Gwenda and her family followed. Davey was undaunted. "Nate will impose a fine, and I'll pay it," he said. "I'll still make money."

"What if he orders the crop destroyed?" Gwenda said.

"How?"

"It could be burned, or trampled."

Wulfric put in: "Nate wouldn't do that. The village wouldn't stand for it. A fine is the traditional way to deal with this."

Gwenda said: "I just worry about what Earl Ralph will say."

Davey made a deprecatory gesture with his hand. “No reason why the earl should find out about a little thing like this.”

“Ralph takes a special interest in our family.”

“Yes, he does,” Davey said thoughtfully. “I still don’t understand what made him pardon Sam.”

The boy was not stupid. Gwenda said: “Perhaps Lady Philippa persuaded him.”

Sam said: “She remembers you, Mother. She told me that when I was at Merthin’s house.”

“I must have done something to endear myself to her,” Gwenda said, extemporizing. “Or it could be that she just felt compassion, one mother for another.” It was not much of a story, but Gwenda did not have a better one.

In the days since Sam had been released they had had several conversations about what might account for Ralph’s pardon. Gwenda just pretended to be as perplexed as everyone else. Fortunately Wulfric had never been the suspicious type.

They reached their house. Wulfric looked at the sky, said there was another good hour of light left, and went into the garden to finish sowing peas. Sam volunteered to help him. Gwenda sat down to mend a rip in Wulfric’s hose. Davey sat opposite Gwenda and said: “I’ve got another secret to tell you.”

She smiled. She did not mind him having a secret if he told his mother. “Go on.”

“I have fallen in love.”

“That’s wonderful!” She leaned forward and kissed his cheek. “I’m very happy for you. What’s she like?”

“She’s beautiful.”

Gwenda had been speculating, before she found out about the madder, that Davey might be meeting a girl from another village. Her intuition had been right. “I had a feeling about this,” she said.

“Did you?” He seemed anxious.

“Don’t worry, there’s nothing wrong. It just occurred to me that you might be meeting someone.”

“We go to the clearing where I’m growing the madder. That’s sort of where it started.”

“And how long has this been going on?”

“More than a year.”

“It’s serious, then.”

“I want to marry her.”

“I’m so pleased.” She looked fondly at him. “You’re still only twenty, but that’s old enough if you’ve found the right person.”

“I’m glad you think so.”

“What village is she from?”

“This one, Wigleigh.”

“Oh?” Gwenda was surprised. She had not been able to think of a likely girl here. “Who is she?”

“Mother, it’s Amabel.”

“No!”

“Don’t shout.”

“Not Annet’s daughter!”

“You’re not to be angry.”

“Not to be angry!” Gwenda struggled to calm herself. She was as shocked as if she had been slapped. She took several deep breaths. “Listen to me,” she said. “We have been at odds with that family for more than twenty years. That cow Annet broke your father’s heart and never left him alone afterwards.”

“I’m sorry, but that’s all in the past.”

“It’s not—Annet still flirts with your father every chance she gets!”

“That’s your problem, not ours.”

Gwenda stood up, her sewing falling from her lap. “How can you do this to me? That bitch would be part of our family! My grandchildren would be her grandchildren. She’d be in and out of this house all the time, making a fool of your father with her coquettish ways and then laughing at me.”

“I’m not going to marry Annet.”

“Amabel will be just as bad. Look at her—she’s just like her mother!”

“She’s not, actually—”

“You can’t do this! I absolutely forbid it!”

“You can’t forbid it, Mother.”

“Oh, yes I can—you’re too young.”

“That won’t last forever.”

Wulfric’s voice came from the doorway. “What’s all the shouting?”

“Davey says he wants to marry Annet’s daughter—but I won’t permit it.” Gwenda’s voice rose to a shriek. “Never! Never! Never!”

Earl Ralph surprised Nathan Reeve when he said he wanted to look at Davey’s strange crop. Nate mentioned the matter in passing, on a routine visit to Earlscastle. A bit of unlicensed cultivation in the forest was a trivial breach of the rules, regularly dealt with by a fine. Nate was a shallow man, interested in bribes and commissions, and he had little conception of the depth of Ralph’s obsession with Gwenda’s family: his hatred of Wulfric, his lust for Gwenda, and now the likelihood that he was Sam’s real father. So Nate was startled when Ralph said he would inspect the crop next time he was in the neighborhood.

Ralph rode with Alan Fernhill from Earlscastle to Wigleigh on a fine day

between Easter and Whitsun. When they reached the small timber manor house, there was the old housekeeper, Vira, bent and gray now but still hanging on. They ordered her to prepare their dinner, then found Nate and followed him into the forest.

Ralph recognized the plant. He was no farmer, but he knew the difference between one bush and another, and on his travels with the army he had observed many crops that did not grow naturally in England. He leaned down from his saddle and pulled up a handful. “This is called madder,” he said. “I’ve seen it in Flanders. It’s grown for the red dye that has the same name.”

Nate said: “He told me it was a herb called hagwort, used to cure a wheezy chest.”

“I believe it does have medicinal properties, but that’s not why people cultivate it. What will his fine be?”

“A shilling would be the usual amount.”

“It’s not enough.”

Nate looked nervous. “So much trouble is caused, lord, when these customs are flouted. I would rather not—”

“Never mind,” Ralph said. He kicked his horse and trotted through the middle of the clearing, trampling the bushes. “Come on, Alan,” he said. Alan imitated him, and the two of them cantered around in tight circles, flattening the growth. After a few minutes all the shrubs were destroyed.

Ralph could see that Nate was shocked by the waste, even though the planting was illegal. Peasants never liked to see crops despoiled. Ralph had learned in France that the best way of demoralizing the population was to burn the harvest in the fields.

“That will do,” he said, quickly getting bored. He was irritated by Davey’s insolence in planting this crop, but that was not the main reason he had come to Wigleigh. The truth was that he wanted to see Sam again.

As they rode back to the village, he scanned the fields, looking for a tall young man with thick dark hair. Sam would stand out, because of his height, among these stunted serfs hunched over their spades. He saw him, at a distance, in Brookfield. He reined in and peered across the windy landscape at the twenty-two-year-old son he had never known.

Sam and the man he thought was his father—Wulfric—were plowing with a horse-drawn light plow. Something was wrong for they kept stopping and adjusting the harness. When they were together, it was easy to see the differences between them. Wulfric’s hair was tawny, Sam’s dark; Wulfric was barrel-chested, oxlike, where Sam was broad-shouldered but lean, like a horse; Wulfric’s movements were slow and careful, but Sam was quick and graceful.

It was the oddest feeling to look at a stranger and think: my son. Ralph believed himself immune to womanish emotions. If he had been subject to

feelings of compassion or regret, he could not have lived as he had. But the discovery of Sam threatened to unman him.

He tore himself away and cantered back to the village; then he succumbed again to curiosity and sentiment, and sent Nate to find Sam and bring him to the manor house.

He was not sure what he intended to do with the boy: talk to him, tease him, invite him to join them for dinner, or what. He might have foreseen that Gwenda would not leave him free to choose. She showed up with Nate and Sam, and Wulfric and Davey followed them in. “What do you want with my son?” she demanded, speaking to Ralph as if he were an equal rather than her overlord.

Ralph spoke without forethought. “Sam was not born to be a serf tilling the fields,” he said. He saw Alan Fernhill look at him in surprise.

Gwenda looked puzzled. “Only God knows what we are born for,” she said, playing for time.

“When I want to know about God, I’ll ask a priest, not you,” Ralph said to her. “Your son has something of the mettle of a fighting man. I don’t need to pray to see that—it’s obvious to me, as it would be to any veteran of the wars.”

“Well, he’s not a fighting man, he’s a peasant, and the son of a peasant, and his destiny is to grow crops and raise livestock like his father.”

“Never mind his father.” Ralph remembered what Gwenda had said to him in the sheriff’s castle at Shiring, when she had persuaded him to pardon Sam. “Sam has the killer instinct,” he said. “It’s dangerous in a peasant, but priceless in a soldier.”

Gwenda looked scared as she began to divine Ralph’s purpose. “What are you getting at?”

Ralph realized where this chain of logic was leading him. “Let Sam be useful, rather than dangerous. Let him learn the arts of war.”

“Ridiculous, he’s too old.”

“He’s twenty-two. It’s late, but he’s fit and strong. He can do it.”

“I don’t see how.”

Gwenda was pretending to find practical objections, but he could see through her simulation, and knew that she hated the idea with all her heart. That made him all the more determined. With a smile of triumph he said: “Easily enough. He can be a squire. He can come and live at Earlscastle.”

Gwenda looked as if she had been stabbed. Her eyes closed for a moment, and her olive-skinned face paled. She mouthed the word “No,” but no sound came out.

“He’s been with you for twenty-two years,” Ralph said. “That’s long enough.” Now it’s my turn, he thought, but instead he said: “Now he’s a man.”

Because Gwenda was temporarily silent, Wulfric spoke up. “We won’t permit it,” he said. “We are his parents, and we do not consent to this.”

“I didn’t ask for your consent,” Ralph said contemptuously. “I’m your earl, and you are my serfs. I don’t request, I command.”

Nate Reeve put in: “Besides, Sam is over the age of twenty-one, so the decision is his, not his father’s.”

Suddenly they all turned and looked at Sam.

Ralph was not sure what to expect. Becoming a squire was something many young men of all classes dreamed about, but he did not know whether Sam was one of them. Life in the castle was luxurious and exciting, by comparison with breaking your back in the fields; but, on the other hand, men-at-arms died young, or—worse than that—came home crippled, to live the rest of their miserable days begging outside taverns.

However, as soon as Ralph saw Sam’s face he knew the truth. Sam was smiling broadly, and his eyes gleamed with eagerness. He could hardly wait to go.

Gwenda found her voice. “Don’t do it, Sam!” she said. “Don’t be tempted. Don’t let your mother see you blinded by an arrow, or mutilated by the swords of French knights, or crippled by the hooves of their warhorses!”

Wulfric said: “Don’t go, son. Stay in Wigleigh and live a long life.”

Sam began to look doubtful.

Ralph said: “All right, lad. You’ve listened to your mother, and to the peasant father who raised you. But the decision is yours. What will you do? Live out your life here in Wigleigh, tilling the fields alongside your brother? Or escape?”

Sam paused only for a moment. He looked guiltily at Wulfric and Gwenda, then turned to Ralph. “I’ll do it,” he said. “I’ll be a squire, and thank you, my lord!”

“Good lad,” Ralph said.

Gwenda began to cry. Wulfric put his arm around her. Looking up at Ralph, he said: “When shall he go?”

“Today,” Ralph said. “He can ride back to Earlscastle with me and Alan after dinner.”

“Not so soon!” Gwenda cried.

No one took any notice of her.

Ralph said to Sam: “Go home and fetch anything you want to bring with you. Have dinner with your mother. Come back and wait for me in the stables. Meanwhile, Nate can requisition a mount to carry you to Earlscastle.” He turned away, having finished with Sam and his family. “Now, where’s my dinner?”

Wulfric and Gwenda went out with Sam, but Davey stayed behind. Had he already found out that that his crop had been trampled? Or was it

something else? “What do you want?” Ralph said.

“Lord, I have a boon to ask.”

This was almost too good to be true. The insolent peasant who had planted madder in the woods without permission was now a supplicant. What a satisfying day this was turning out to be. “You can’t be a squire, you’ve got your mother’s build,” Ralph told him, and Alan laughed.

“I want to marry Amabel, the daughter of Annet,” said the young man.

“That won’t please your mother.”

“I will be of age in less than a year.”

Ralph knew all about Annet, of course. He had nearly been hanged for her sake. His history was entwined with hers almost as much as with Gwenda’s. He recalled that all her family had died in the plague. “Annet still has some of the lands her father held.”

“Yes, lord, and she is willing for them to be transferred to me when I marry her daughter.”

Such a request would not normally have been refused, although all lords would charge a tax, called an entry fee, on the transfer. However, there was no obligation on a lord to consent. The right of lords to refuse such requests on a whim, and blight the course of a serf’s life, was one of the peasants’ greatest gripes. But it provided the ruler with a means of discipline that could be extraordinarily effective.

“No,” said Ralph. “I will not transfer the land to you.” He grinned. “You and your bride can eat madder.”

87

Caris had to prevent Philemon becoming bishop. This was his boldest move yet, but he had made his preparations carefully, and he had a chance. If he succeeded, he would have control of the hospital again, giving him the power to destroy her life’s work. But he could do worse than that. He would revive the blind orthodoxy of the past. He would appoint hard-hearted priests like himself in the villages, close schools for girls, and preach sermons against dancing.

She had no say in the choice of a bishop, but there were ways to exert pressure.

She began with Bishop Henri.

She and Merthin traveled to Shiring to see the bishop in his palace. On the way, Merthin stared at every dark-haired girl that came into view, and when there was no one he scanned the woods at the side of the road. He was looking for Lolla, but they reached Shiring without seeing any sign of her.

The bishop's palace was on the main square, opposite the church and beside the Wool Exchange. It was not a market day, so the square was clear but for the scaffold that stood there permanently, a stark warning to villains of what the people of the county did to those who broke the law.

The palace was an unpretentious stone building with a hall and chapel on the ground floor and a series of offices and private apartments upstairs. Bishop Henri had imposed upon the place a style that Caris thought was probably French. Each room looked like a painting. The place was not decorated extravagantly, like Philemon's palace in Kingsbridge, where the profusion of rugs and jewels suggested a robber's cave. However, there was something pleasantly artful about everything in Henri's house: a silver candlestick placed to catch the light from a window; the polished gleam of an ancient oak table; spring flowers in the cold fireplace; a small tapestry of David and Jonathan on the wall.

Bishop Henri was not an enemy, but he was not quite an ally either, Caris thought nervously as they waited for him in the hall. He would probably say that he tried to rise above Kingsbridge quarrels. She, more cynically, thought that whatever decision he had to make, he remained unshakably focused on his own interests. He disliked Philemon, but he might not allow that to affect his judgment.

Henri came in followed, as always, by Canon Claude. The two of them did not seem to age. Henri was a little older than Caris, and Claude perhaps ten years younger, but they both looked like boys. Caris had noticed that clergy often aged well, better than aristocrats. She suspected it was because most priests—with some notorious exceptions—led lives of moderation. Their regime of fasting obliged them to eat fish and vegetables on Fridays and saints' days and all through Lent, and in theory they were never allowed to get drunk. By contrast, noblemen and their wives indulged in orgies of meat-eating and heroic wine-drinking. That might be why their faces became lined, their skin flaky, and their bodies bent, while clerics stayed fit and spry later into their quiet, austere lives.

Merthin congratulated Henri on having been nominated archbishop of Monmouth, then got straight to the point. "Prior Philemon has stopped work on the tower."

Henri said with studied neutrality: "Any reason?"

"There's a pretext, and a reason," Merthin said. "The pretext is a fault in the design."

"And what is the alleged fault?"

"He says an octagonal spire can't be built without formwork. It is generally true, but I've found a way around it."

"Which is…?"

"Rather simple. I will build a round spire, which will need no formwork,

then give its exterior a cladding of thin stones and mortar in the shape of an octagon. Visually, it will be an octagonal spire, but structurally it will be a cone.”

“Have you told Philemon this?”

“No. If I do, he’ll find another pretext.”

“What is his real reason?”

“He wants to build a Lady chapel instead.”

“Ah.”

“It’s part of a campaign to ingratiate himself with senior clergy. He preached a sermon against dissection when Archdeacon Reginald was there. And he has told the king’s advisors that he will not campaign against taxation of the clergy.”

“What is he up to?”

“He wants to be bishop of Shiring.”

Henri raised his eyebrows. “Philemon always had nerve, I’ll give him that.”

Claude spoke for the first time. “How do you know?”

“Gregory Longfellow told me.”

Claude looked at Henri and said: “Gregory would know if anyone does.”

Caris could tell that Henri and Claude had not anticipated that Philemon would be so ambitious. To make sure they did not overlook the significance of the revelation, she said: “If Philemon gets his wish, you as archbishop of Monmouth will have endless work adjudicating disputes between Bishop Philemon and the townspeople of Kingsbridge. You know how much friction there has been in the past.”

Claude said: “We certainly do.”

“I’m glad we’re in agreement,” Merthin said.

Thinking aloud, Claude said: “We must put forward an alternative candidate.”

That was what Caris had hoped he would say. “We have someone in mind,” she said.

Claude said: “Who?”

“You.”

There was a silence. Caris could tell that Claude liked the idea. She guessed he might be quietly envious of Henri’s promotion, and wondering whether it was his destiny always to be a kind of assistant to Henri. He could easily cope with the post of bishop. He knew the diocese well and handled most of the practical administration already.

However, both men were now surely thinking about their personal lives. She had no doubt they were all but husband and wife: she had seen them kissing. But they were decades past the first flush of romance, and her intuition told her they could tolerate a part-time separation.

She said: “You would still be working together a good deal.”

Claude said: “The archbishop will have many reasons to visit Kingsbridge and Shiring.”

Henri said: “And the bishop of Kingsbridge will need to come to Monmouth often.”

Claude said: “It would be a great honor to be bishop.” With a twinkle in his eye he added: “Especially under you, archbishop.”

Henri looked away, pretending not to notice the double meaning. “I think it’s a splendid idea,” he said.

Merthin said: “The Kingsbridge guild will back Claude—I can guarantee that. But you, Archbishop Henri, will have to put the suggestion to the king.”

“Of course.”

Caris said: “If I may make one suggestion?”

“Please.”

“Find another post for Philemon. Propose him as, I don’t know, archdeacon of Lincoln. Something he would like, but that would take him many miles from here.”

“That’s a sound idea,” Henri said. “If he’s up for two posts, it weakens his case for either one. I’ll keep my ear to the ground.”

Claude stood up. “This is all very exciting,” he said. “Will you have dinner with us?”

A servant came in and addressed Caris. “There’s someone asking for you, mistress,” the man said. “It’s only a boy, but he seems distressed.”

Henri said: “Let him come in.”

A boy of about thirteen appeared. He was dirty, but his clothes were not cheap, and Caris guessed he came from a family that was comfortably off but suffering some kind of crisis. “Will you come to my house, Mother Caris?”

“I’m not a nun anymore, child, but what’s the problem?”

The boy spoke fast. “My father and mother are ill and so is my brother, and my mother heard someone say you were at the bishop’s palace and said to fetch you, and she knows you help the poor but she can pay, but will you please come, please?”

This type of request was not unusual, and Caris carried a leather case of medical supplies with her wherever she went. “Of course I’ll come, lad,” she said. “What’s your name?”

“Giles Spicers, Mother, and I’m to wait and bring you.”

“All right.” Caris turned to the bishop. “Go ahead with your dinner, please. I’ll join you as soon as I can.” She picked up her case and followed the boy out.

Shiring owed its existence to the sheriff’s castle on the hill, just as Kingsbridge did to the priory. Near the market square were the grand houses of the leading citizens, the wool merchants and sheriff’s deputies and royal

officials such as the coroner. A little farther out were the homes of moderately prosperous traders and craftsmen, goldsmiths and tailors and apothecaries. Giles's father was a dealer in spices, as his name indicated, and Giles led Caris to a street in this neighborhood. Like most houses of this class, it had a stone-built ground floor that served as warehouse and shop, and flimsier timber living quarters above. Today the shop was closed and locked. Giles led Caris up the outside staircase.

She smelled the familiar odor of sickness as soon as she walked in. Then she hesitated. There was something special about the smell, something that struck a chord in her memory that for some reason made her feel very frightened.

Rather than ponder it, she walked through the living room into the bedroom, and there she found the dreadful answer.

Three people lay on mattresses around the room: a woman of her own age, a slightly older man, and an adolescent boy. The man was farthest gone in sickness. He lay moaning and sweating in a fever. The open neck of his shirt showed that he had a rash of purple-black spots on his chest and throat. There was blood on his lips and nostrils.

He had the plague.

"It's come back," said Caris. "God help me."

For a moment fear paralyzed her. She stood motionless, staring at the scene, feeling powerless. She had always known, in theory, that the plague might return—that was half the reason she had written her book—but even so she was not prepared for the shock of once again seeing that rash, that fever, that nosebleed.

The woman lifted herself on one elbow. She was not so far gone: she had the rash and the fever, but did not appear to be bleeding. "Give me something to drink, for the love of God," she said.

Giles picked up a jug of wine, and at last Caris's mind started to work and her body unfroze. "Don't give her wine—it will make her thirstier," she said. "I saw a barrel of ale in the other room—draw her a cup of that."

The woman focused on Caris. "You're the prioress, aren't you?" she said. Caris did not correct her. "People say you're a saint. Can you make my family well?"

"I'll try, but I'm not a saint, just a woman who has observed people in sickness and health." Caris took from her bag a strip of linen and tied it over her mouth and nose. She had not seen a case of the plague for ten years, but she had got into the habit of taking this precaution whenever she dealt with patients whose illness might be catching. She moistened a clean rag with rose water and bathed the woman's face. As always, the action soothed the patient.

Giles came back with a cup of ale, and the woman drank. Caris said to him: "Let them have as much to drink as they want, but give them ale or

watered wine.”

She moved to the father, who did not have long to live. He was not speaking coherently and his eyes failed to focus on Caris. She bathed his face, cleaning the dried blood from around his nose and mouth. Finally she attended to Giles’s elder brother. He had only recently succumbed, and was still sneezing, but he was old enough to realize how seriously ill he was, and he looked terrified.

When she had finished, she said to Giles: “Try to keep them comfortable and give them drinks. There’s nothing else you can do. Do you have any relations? Uncles or cousins?”

“They’re all in Wales.”

She made a mental note to warn Bishop Henri that he might need to make arrangements for an orphan boy.

“Mother said to pay you,” the boy said.

“I haven’t done much for you,” Caris said. “You can pay me sixpence.”

There was a leather purse beside his mother’s bed. He took out six silver pennies.

The woman raised herself again. Speaking more calmly now, she said: “What’s wrong with us?”

“I’m sorry,” said Caris. “It’s the plague.”

The woman nodded fatalistically. “That’s what I was afraid of.”

“Don’t you recognize the symptoms from last time?”

“We were living in a small town in Wales—we escaped it. Are we all going to die?”

Caris did not believe in deceiving people about such important questions. “A few people survive it,” she said. “Not many, though.”

“May God have mercy on us, then,” said the woman.

Caris said: “Amen.”

All the way back to Kingsbridge, Caris brooded on the plague. It would spread, of course, just as fast as last time. It would kill thousands. The prospect filled her with rage. It was like the senseless carnage of war, except that war was caused by men, and the plague was not. What was she going to do? She could not sit back and watch as the events of thirteen years ago were cruelly repeated.

There was no cure for the plague, but she had discovered ways to slow its murderous progress. As her horse jogged the well-worn road through the forest, she thought over what she knew about the illness and how to combat it. Merthin was quiet, recognizing her mood, probably guessing accurately what she was thinking about.

When they got home, she explained to him what she wanted to do. “There

will be opposition," he warned. "Your plan is drastic. Those who did not lose family and friends last time may imagine they are invulnerable, and say you're overreacting."

"That's where you can help me," she said.

"In that case, I recommend we divide up the potential objectors and deal with them separately."

"All right."

"You have three groups to win over: the guild, the monks, and the nuns. Let's start with the guild. I'll call a meeting—and I won't invite Philemon."

Nowadays the guild met in the Cloth Exchange, a large new stone building on the main street. It enabled traders to do business even in bad weather. It had been paid for by profits from Kingsbridge Scarlet.

But before the guild convened, Caris and Merthin met individually with the leading members, to win their support in advance, a technique Merthin had developed long ago. His motto was: "Never call a meeting until the result is a foregone conclusion."

Caris herself went to see Madge Webber.

Madge had married again. Much to everyone's amusement, she had enchanted a villager as handsome as her first husband and fifteen years her junior. His name was Anselm, and he seemed to adore her, though she was as plump as ever and covered her gray hair with a selection of exotic caps. Even more surprising, in her forties she had conceived again and given birth to a healthy baby girl, Selma, now eight years old and attending the nuns' school. Motherhood had never kept Madge from doing business, and she continued to dominate the market in Kingsbridge Scarlet, with Anselm as her lieutenant.

Her home was still the large house on the main street that she and Mark had moved into when she first began to profit from weaving and dyeing. Caris found her and Anselm taking delivery of a consignment of red cloth, trying to find room for it in the overcrowded storeroom on the ground floor. "I'm stocking up for the Fleece Fair," Madge explained.

Caris waited while she checked the delivery, then they went upstairs, leaving Anselm in charge of the shop. As Caris entered the living room she was vividly reminded of the day, thirteen years ago, when she had been summoned here to see Mark—the first Kingsbridge victim of the plague. She suddenly felt depressed.

Madge noticed her expression. "What is it?" she said.

You could not hide things from women the way you could from men. "I walked in here thirteen years ago because Mark was ill," Caris said.

Madge nodded. "That was the beginning of the worst time of my life," she said in her matter-of-fact voice. "That day, I had a wonderful husband and four healthy children. Three months later I was a childless widow with nothing to live for."

“Days of grief,” Caris said.

Madge went to the sideboard, where there were cups and a jug, but instead of offering Caris a drink she stood staring at the wall. “Shall I tell you something strange?” she said. “After they died, I couldn’t say Amen to the paternoster.” She swallowed, and her voice went quieter. “I know what the Latin means, you see. My father taught me. *Fiat voluntas tua:* ‘Thy will be done.’ I couldn’t say that. God had taken my family, and that was sufficient torture—I would not acquiesce in it.” Tears came to her eyes as she remembered. “I didn’t want God’s will to prevail, I wanted my children back. ‘Thy will be done.’ I knew I’d go to Hell, but still I couldn’t say Amen.”

Caris said: “The plague has come back.”

Madge staggered, and clutched the sideboard for support. Her solid figure suddenly looked frail, and as the confidence went from her face she appeared old. “No,” she said.

Caris pulled a bench forward and held Madge’s arm while she sat on it. “I’m sorry to shock you,” she said.

“No,” Madge said again. “It can’t come back. I can’t lose Anselm and Selma. I can’t bear it. I can’t bear it.” She looked so white and drawn that Caris began to fear she might suffer some kind of attack.

Caris poured wine from the jug into a cup. She gave it to Madge, who drank it automatically. A little of her color came back.

“We understand it better now,” Caris said. “Perhaps we can fight it.”

“Fight it? How can we do that?”

“That’s what I’ve come to tell you. Are you feeling a little better?”

Madge met Caris’s eye at last. “Fight it,” she said. “Of course that’s what we must do. Tell me how.”

“We have to close the city. Shut the gates, man the walls, prevent anyone coming in.”

“But the city has to eat.”

“People will bring supplies to Leper Island. Merthin will act as middleman, and pay them—he contracted the plague last time and survived, and no one has ever got it twice. Traders will leave their goods on the bridge. Then, when they have gone, people will come out from the city and get the food.”

“Could people leave the city?”

“Yes, but they couldn’t come back.”

“What about the Fleece Fair?”

“That may be the hardest part,” Caris said. “It must be canceled.”

“But Kingsbridge merchants will lose hundreds of pounds!”

“It’s better than dying.”

“If we do as you say, will we avoid the plague? Will my family survive?”

Caris hesitated, resisting the temptation to tell a reassuring lie. “I can’t

promise," she said. "The plague may already have reached us. There may be someone right now dying alone in a hovel near the waterfront, with nobody to get help. So I fear we may not escape entirely. But I believe my plan gives you the best chance of still having Anselm and Selma by your side at Christmas."

"Then we'll do it," Madge said decisively.

"Your support is crucial," Caris said. "Frankly, you will lose more money than anyone else from the cancellation of the fair. For that reason, people are more likely to believe you. I need you to say how serious it is."

"Don't worry," said Madge. "I'll tell them."

"A very sound idea," said Prior Philemon.

Merthin was surprised. He could not remember a time when Philemon had agreed readily with a proposal of the guild's. "Then you will support it," he said, to make sure he had heard aright.

"Yes, indeed," said the prior. He was eating a bowl of raisins, stuffing handfuls into his mouth as fast as he could chew them. He did not offer Merthin any. "Of course," he said, "it wouldn't apply to monks."

Merthin sighed. He might have known better. "On the contrary, it applies to everyone," he said.

"No, no," said Philemon, in the tone of one who instructs a child. "The guild has no power to restrict the movements of monks."

Merthin noticed a cat at Philemon's feet. It was fat, like him, with a mean face. It looked just like Godwyn's cat, Archbishop, though that creature must be long dead. Perhaps it was a descendant. Merthin said: "The guild has the power to close the city gates."

"But we have the right to come and go as we please. We're not subject to the authority of the guild—that would be ridiculous."

"All the same, the guild controls the city, and we have decided that no one can enter while the plague is rife."

"You cannot make rules for the priory."

"But I can for the city, and the priory happens to be in the city."

"Are you telling me that if I leave Kingsbridge today, you will refuse me admission tomorrow?"

Merthin was not sure. It would be highly embarrassing, at a minimum, to have the prior of Kingsbridge standing outside the gate demanding admission. He had been hoping to persuade Philemon to accept the restriction. He did not want to put the resolve of the guild to the test quite so dramatically. However, he tried to make his answer sound confident. "Absolutely."

"I shall complain to the bishop."

"Tell him he can't enter Kingsbridge."

The personnel of the nunnery had hardly changed in ten years, Caris realized. Nunneries were like that, of course: you were supposed to stay forever. Mother Joan was still prioress, and Sister Oonagh ran the hospital under the supervision of Brother Sime. Few people came here for medical care now: most preferred Caris's hospital on the island. Those patients Sime did have, devoutly religious for the most part, were cared for in the old hospital, next to the kitchens, while the new building was used for guests.

Caris sat down with Joan, Oonagh, and Sime in the old pharmacy, now used as the prioress's private office, and explained her plan. "People outside the walls of the old city who fall victim to the plague will be admitted to my hospital on the island," she said. "While the plague lasts, the nuns and I will stay within the building night and day. Nobody will leave, except those lucky few who recover."

Joan asked: "What about here in the old city?"

"If the plague gets into the city despite our precautions, there may be too many victims for the accommodation you have. The guild has ruled that plague victims and their families will be confined to their homes. The rule applies to anyone who lives in a house struck by plague: parents, children, grandparents, servants, apprentices. Anyone caught leaving such a house will be hanged."

"It's very harsh," Joan said. "But if it prevents the awful slaughter of the last plague, it's worthwhile."

"I knew you'd see that."

Sime was saying nothing. The news of the plague seemed to have deflated his arrogance.

Oonagh said: "How will the victims eat, if they're imprisoned in their homes?"

"Neighbors can leave food on the doorstep. No one may go in—except monk-physicians and nuns. They will visit the sick, but they must have no contact with the healthy. They will go from the priory to the home, and from the home back to the priory, without entering any other building or even speaking to anyone on the street. They should wear masks at all times, and wash their hands in vinegar each time they touch a patient."

Sime was looking terrified. "Will that protect us?" he said.

"To some degree," Caris said. "Not completely."

"But then it will be highly dangerous for us to attend the sick!"

Oonagh answered him. "We have no fear," she said. "We look forward to death. For us, it is the longed-for reunion with Christ."

"Yes, of course," said Sime.

The next day, all the monks left Kingsbridge.

88

Gwenda felt murderously angry when she saw what Ralph had done to Davey's madder plants. Wanton destruction of crops was a sin. There should be a special place in Hell for noblemen who despoiled what peasants had sweated to grow.

But Davey was not dismayed. "I don't think it matters," he said. "The value is in the roots, and he hasn't touched them."

"That would have been too much like work," Gwenda said sourly, but she cheered up.

In fact the shrubs recovered remarkably quickly. Ralph probably did not know that madder propagated underground. Throughout May and June, as reports began to reach Wigleigh of an outbreak of the plague, the roots sent up new shoots, and at the beginning of July, Davey decided it was time to harvest the crop. One Sunday Gwenda, Wulfric, and Davey spent the afternoon digging up the roots. They would first loosen the soil around the plant, then pull it out of the ground, then strip its foliage, leaving the root attached to a short stem. It was back-aching work of the kind Gwenda had done all her life.

They left half the plantation untouched, in the hope that it would regenerate itself next year.

They pulled a handcart piled with madder roots back through the woods to Wigleigh, then unloaded the roots into the barn and spread them in the hayloft to dry.

Davey did not know when he would be able to sell his crop. Kingsbridge was a closed city. The people still bought supplies, of course, but only through brokers. Davey was doing something new, and he would need to explain the situation to his buyer. It would be awkward to do that through an intermediary. But perhaps he would have to try. He had to dry the roots first, then grind them to a powder, and that would take time anyway.

Davey had said no more about Amabel, but Gwenda felt sure he was still seeing the girl. He pretended to be cheerfully resigned to his fate. If he had really given her up, he would have moped resentfully.

All Gwenda could do was hope he would get over her before he was old enough to marry without permission. She still could hardly bear even to think of her family being joined to Annet's. Annet had never ceased to humiliate her by flirting with Wulfric, who continued to grin foolishly at every stupid coquettish remark. Now that Annet was in her forties, with broken veins in her rosy cheeks and gray streaks among her fair ringlets, her behavior was not just embarrassing but grotesque; yet Wulfric reacted as if she were still a girl.

And now, Gwenda thought, my son has fallen into the same trap. It made

her want to spit. Amabel looked just like Annet twenty-five years ago, a pretty face with flyaway curls, a long neck and narrow white shoulders, and small breasts like the eggs that mother and daughter sold at markets. She had the same way of tossing her hair, the same trick of looking at a man with mock reproach and hitting his chest with the back of her hand in a gesture that pretended to be a smack but was in fact a caress.

However, Davey was at least physically safe and well. Gwenda was more worried about Sam, living now with Earl Ralph at the castle, learning to be a fighting man. In church she prayed he would not be injured hunting, or learning to use a sword, or fighting in a tournament. She had seen him every day for twenty-two years, then suddenly he had been taken from her. It's hard to be a woman, she thought. You love your baby with all your heart and soul, and then one day he just leaves.

For several weeks she looked for an excuse to travel to Earlscastle and check on Sam. Then she heard that the plague had struck there, and that decided her. She would go before the harvest got under way. Wulfric would not go with her: he had too much to do on the land. Anyway, she had no fear of traveling alone. "Too poor to be robbed, too old to be raped," she joked. The truth was that she was too tough for either. And she carried a long knife.

She walked across the drawbridge at Earlscastle on a hot July day. On the battlements of the gatehouse a rook stood like a sentry, the sun glinting off its glossy black feathers. It cawed a warning at her. It sounded like: "Go, go!" She had escaped the plague once, of course; but that might have been luck: she was risking her life by coming here.

The scene in the lower compound was normal, if a little quiet. A woodcutter was unloading a cart full of firewood outside the bakehouse, and a groom was unsaddling a dusty horse in front of the stables, but there was no great bustle of activity. She noticed a small group of men and women outside the west entrance of the little church, and crossed the baked-earth ground to investigate. "Plague victims inside," a maidservant said in answer to her inquiry.

She stepped through the door, feeling dread like a cold lump in her heart.

Ten or twelve straw mattresses were lined up on the floor so that the occupants could face the altar, just as in a hospital. About half the patients seemed to be children. There were three grown men. Gwenda scanned their faces fearfully.

None of them was Sam.

She knelt down and said a prayer of thanks.

Outside, she approached the woman she had spoken to earlier. "I'm looking for Sam from Wigleigh," she said. "He's a new squire."

The woman pointed to the bridge leading to the inner compound. "Try the keep."

Gwenda took the route indicated. A sentry at the bridge ignored her. She climbed the steps to the keep.

The great hall was dark and cool. A big dog slept on the cold stones of the fireplace. There were benches around the walls and a pair of large armchairs at the far end of the room. Gwenda noticed that there were no cushions, no upholstered seats, and no wall hangings. She deduced that Lady Philippa spent little time here and took no interest in the furnishings.

Sam was sitting near a window with three younger men. The parts of a suit of armor were laid out on the floor in front of them, arranged in order from faceplate to greaves. Each of the men was cleaning a piece. Sam was rubbing the breastplate with a smooth pebble, trying to remove rust.

She stood watching him for a moment. He wore new clothes in the red-and-black livery of the earl of Shiring. The colors suited his dark good looks. He seemed to be at ease, talking in a desultory way with the others while they all worked. He appeared healthy and well fed. It was what Gwenda had hoped for, but all the same she suffered a perverse pang of disappointment that he was doing so well without her.

He glanced up and saw her. His face registered surprise, then pleasure, then amusement. “Lads,” he said, “I am the oldest among you, and you may think I’m capable of looking after myself, but it’s not so. My mother follows me everywhere to make sure I’m all right.”

They saw her and laughed. Sam put down his work and came over. Mother and son sat on a bench in a corner near the staircase that led to the upstairs rooms. “I’m having a wonderful time,” Sam said. “Everyone plays games here most days. We go hunting and hawking, we have wrestling matches and contests of horsemanship, and we play football. I’ve learned so much! It’s a bit embarrassing to be grouped with these adolescents all the time, but I can put up with that. I just have to master the skill of using a sword and shield while riding a horse at the same time.”

He was already speaking differently, she noticed. He was losing the slow rhythms of village speech. And he used French words for “hawking” and “horsemanship.” He was becoming assimilated into the life of the nobility.

“What about the work?” she said. “It can’t be all play.”

“Yes, there’s plenty of work.” He gestured at the others cleaning the armor. “But it’s easy by comparison with plowing and harrowing.”

He asked about his brother, and she told him all the news from home: Davey’s madder had regenerated, they had dug up the roots, Davey was still involved with Amabel, no one had fallen sick of the plague yet. While they were talking, she began to feel that she was being watched, and she knew her feeling was not fanciful. After a moment, she looked over her shoulder.

Earl Ralph was standing at the top of the staircase in front of an open door, evidently having stepped out of his room. She wondered how long he

had been looking at her. She met his gaze. His stare was intense, but she could not read it, did not understand what it meant. She began to feel the look was uncomfortably intimate, and she glanced away.

When she looked back, he had gone.

The next day, when she was on the road and halfway home, a horseman came up behind her, riding fast, then slowed down and stopped.

Her hand went to the long dagger in her belt.

The rider was Sir Alan Fernhill. “The earl wants to see you,” he said.

“Then he had better come himself, instead of sending you,” she replied.

“You’ve always got a smart answer, haven’t you? Do you imagine it endears you to your superiors?”

He had a point. She was taken aback, perhaps because in all the years he had been Ralph’s sidekick she had never known Alan to say anything intelligent. If she was really smart she would suck up to people such as Alan, not poke fun at them. “All right,” she said wearily. “The earl bids me to him. Must I walk all the way back to the castle?”

“No. He has a lodge in the forest, not far from here, where he sometimes stops for refreshment during a hunt. He’s there now.” He pointed into the woods beside the road.

Gwenda did not much like this but, as a serf, she had no right to decline a summons from her earl. Anyway, if she did refuse she felt sure Alan would knock her down and tie her up and carry her there. “Very well,” she said.

“Jump up on the saddle in front of me, if you like.”

“No, thanks, I’d rather walk.”

At this time of year the undergrowth was thick. Gwenda followed the horse into the woods, taking advantage of the path it trampled through the nettles and ferns. The road behind them swiftly disappeared into the greenery. Gwenda wondered nervously what whim had caused Ralph to arrange this forest meeting. It could not be good news for her or her family, she felt.

They walked a quarter of a mile and came to a low building with a thatched roof. Gwenda would have assumed it to be a verderer’s cottage. Alan looped his reins around a sapling and led the way inside.

The place had about it the same bare, utilitarian look Gwenda had noted at Earlscastle. The floor was beaten earth, the walls unfinished wattle-and-daub, the ceiling nothing more than the underside of the thatch. The furniture was minimal: a table, some benches, and a plain wooden bedstead with a straw mattress. A door at the back stood half-open on a small kitchen where, presumably, Ralph’s servants prepared food and drink for him and his fellow huntsmen.

Ralph was sitting at the table with a cup of wine. Gwenda stood in front

of him, waiting. Alan leaned against the wall behind her. “So, Alan found you,” Ralph said.

“Is there no one else here?” Gwenda said nervously.

“Just you, me, and Alan.”

Gwenda’s anxiety went up a notch. “Why do you want to see me?”

“To talk about Sam, of course.”

“You’ve taken him from me. What else is there to say?”

“He’s a good boy, you know…our son.”

“Don’t call him that.” She looked at Alan. He showed no surprise: clearly he had been let in on the secret. She was dismayed. Wulfric must never find out. “Don’t call him our son,” she said. “You’ve never been a father to him. Wulfric raised him.”

“How could I raise him? I didn’t even know he was mine! But I’m making up for lost time. He’s doing well, did he tell you?”

“Does he get into fights?”

“Of course. Squires are supposed to fight. It’s practice for when they go to war. You should have asked whether he wins.”

“It’s not the life I wanted for him.”

“It’s the life he was made for.”

“Did you bring me here to gloat?”

“Why don’t you sit down?”

Reluctantly, she sat opposite him at the table. He poured wine into a cup and pushed it toward her. She ignored it.

He said: “Now that I know we have a son together, I think we should be more intimate.”

“No, thank you.”

“You’re such a killjoy.”

“Don’t you talk to me about joy. You’ve been a blight on my life. With all my heart I wish I had never set eyes on you. I don’t want to be intimate with you, I want to get away from you. If you went to Jerusalem it wouldn’t be far enough.”

His face darkened with anger, and she regretted the extravagance of her words. She recalled Alan’s rebuke. She wished she could say no simply and calmly, without stinging witticisms. But Ralph aroused her ire like no one else.

“Can’t you see?” she said, trying to be reasonable. “You have hated my husband for, what, a quarter of a century? He broke your nose and you slashed his cheek open. You disinherited him then you were forced to give him back his family’s lands. You raped the woman he once loved. He ran away and you dragged him back with a rope around his neck. After all that, even having a son together cannot make you and me friends.”

“I disagree,” he said. “I think we can be not just friends, but lovers.”

“No!” It was what she had feared, in the back of her mind, ever since Alan had reined in on the road in front of her.

Ralph smiled. “Why don’t you take off your dress?”

She tensed.

Alan leaned over her from behind and slipped the long dagger out of her belt with a smooth motion. He had obviously premeditated the move, and it happened too quickly for her to react.

But Ralph said: “No, Alan—that won’t be necessary. She’ll do it willingly.”

“I will not!” she said.

“Give her back the dagger, Alan.”

Reluctantly, Alan reversed the knife, holding it by the blade, and offered it to her.

She snatched it and leaped to her feet. “You may kill me but I’ll take one of you with me, by God,” she said.

She backed away, holding the knife at arm’s length, ready to fight.

Alan stepped toward the door, moving to cut her off.

“Leave her be,” Ralph said. “She’s not going anywhere.”

She had no idea why Ralph was so confident, but he was dead wrong. She was getting out of this hut and then she was going to run away as fast as she could, and she would not stop until she dropped.

Alan stayed where he was.

Gwenda got to the door, reached behind her, and lifted the simple wooden latch.

Ralph said: “Wulfric doesn’t know, does he?”

Gwenda froze. “Doesn’t know what?”

“He doesn’t know that I’m Sam’s father.”

Gwenda’s voice fell to a whisper. “No, he doesn’t.”

“I wonder how he would feel if he found out.”

“It would kill him,” she said.

“That’s what I thought.”

“Please don’t tell him,” she begged.

“I won’t…so long as you do as I say.”

What could she do? She knew Ralph was drawn to her sexually. She had used that knowledge, in desperation, to get in to see him at the sheriff’s castle. Their encounter at the Bell all those years ago, a vile memory to her, had lived in his recollection as a golden moment, probably much enhanced by the passage of time. And she had put into his head the idea of reliving that moment.

This was her own fault.

Could she somehow disabuse him? “We aren’t the same people we were all those years ago,” she said. “I will never be an innocent young girl again.

You should go back to your serving wenches.”

“I don’t want serving girls, I want you.”

“No,” she said. “Please.” She fought back tears.

He was implacable. “Take off your dress.”

She sheathed her knife and unbuckled her belt.

89

The moment Merthin woke up, he thought of Lolla.

She had been missing now for three months. He had sent messages to the city authorities in Gloucester, Monmouth, Shaftesbury, Exeter, Winchester, and Salisbury. Letters from him, as alderman of one of the great cities of the land, were treated seriously, and he had received careful replies to them all. Only the mayor of London had been unhelpful, saying in effect that half the girls in the city had run away from their fathers, and it was no business of the mayor’s to send them home.

Merthin had made personal inquiries in Shiring, Bristol, and Melcombe. He had spoken to the landlord of every tavern, giving them all a description of Lolla. They had all seen plenty of dark-haired young women, often in the company of handsome rogues called Jake, or Jack, or Jock; but none could say for sure that they had seen Merthin’s daughter, or heard the name Lolla.

Some of Jake’s friends had also vanished, along with a girlfriend or two, the other missing women all some years older than Lolla.

Lolla might be dead—Merthin knew that—but he refused to give up hope. It was unlikely she had caught the plague. The new outbreak was ravaging towns and villages, and taking away most of the children under ten. But survivors of the first wave, such as Lolla and himself, must have been people who for some reason had the strength to resist the illness, or—in a very few cases, such as his own—to recover from it; and they were not falling sick this time. However, the plague was only one of the hazards to a sixteen-year-old girl running away from home, and Merthin’s fertile imagination tortured him, in the small hours of the night, with thoughts of what might have happened to her.

One town not ravaged by the plague was Kingsbridge. The illness had affected about one house in a hundred in the old town, as far as Merthin could tell from the conversations he held, shouted across the city gate, with Madge Webber, who was acting as alderman inside the city walls while Merthin managed affairs outside. The Kingsbridge suburbs, and other towns, were seeing something like one in five afflicted. But had Caris’s methods overcome the plague, or merely delayed it? Would the illness persist, and eventually

overcome the barriers she had put up? Would the devastation be as bad as last time in the end? They would not know until the outbreak had run its course—which might be months or years.

He sighed and got up out of his lonely bed. He had not seen Caris since the city was closed. She was living at the hospital, a few yards from Merthin's house, but she could not leave the building. People could go in but not come out. Caris had decided she would have no credibility unless she worked side by side with her nuns, so she was stuck.

Merthin had spent half his life separated from her, it seemed. But it did not get any easier. In fact he ached for her more now, in middle age, than he had as a youngster.

His housekeeper, Em, was up before him, and he found her in the kitchen, skinning rabbits. He ate a piece of bread and drank some weak beer, then went outside.

The main road across the island was already crowded with peasants and their carts bringing supplies. Merthin and a team of helpers spoke to each of them. Those bringing standard products with agreed prices were the simplest: Merthin sent them across the inner bridge to deposit their goods at the locked door of the gatehouse, then paid them when they came back empty. With those bringing seasonal produce such as fruits and vegetables he negotiated a price before allowing them to deliver. For some special consignments, a deal had been made days earlier, when he placed the order: hides for the leather trade; stones for the masons, who had recommenced building the spire under Bishop Henri's orders; silver for the jewelers; iron, steel, hemp, and timber for the city's manufacturers, who had to continue working even though they were temporarily cut off from most of their customers. Finally there were the one-off cargoes, for which Merthin would need to take instructions from someone in the city. Today brought a vendor of Italian brocade who wanted to sell it to one of the city's tailors; a year-old ox for the slaughterhouse; and Davey from Wigleigh.

Merthin listened to Davey's story with amazement and pleasure. He admired the lad for his enterprise in buying madder seeds and cultivating them to produce the costly dye. He was not surprised to learn that Ralph had tried to scuttle the project: Ralph was like most noblemen in his contempt for anything connected with manufacture or trade. But Davey had nerve as well as brains, and he had persisted. He had even paid a miller to grind the dried roots into powder.

"When the miller washed the grindstone afterward, his dog drank some of the water that ran off," Davey told Merthin. "The dog pissed red for a week, so we know the dye works!"

Now he was here with a handcart loaded with old four-gallon flour sacks full of what he believed to be precious madder dye.

Merthin told him to pick up one of the sacks and bring it to the gate. When they got there, he called out to the sentry on the other side. The man climbed to the battlements and looked down. “This sack is for Madge Webber,” Merthin shouted up. “Make sure she gets it personally, would you, sentry?”

“Very good, Alderman,” said the sentry.

As always, a few plague victims from the villages were brought to the island by their relatives. Most people now knew there was no cure for the plague, and simply let their loved ones die, but a few were ignorant or optimistic enough to hope that Caris could work a miracle. The sick were left outside the hospital doors, like supplies at the city gate. The nuns came out for them at night when the relatives had gone. Now and again a lucky survivor emerged in good health, but most patients went out through the back door, and were buried in a new graveyard on the far side of the hospital building.

At midday Merthin invited Davey to dinner. Over rabbit pie and new peas, Davey confessed he was in love with the daughter of his mother’s old enemy. “I don’t know why Ma hates Annet, but it’s all so long in the past, and it’s nothing to do with me or Amabel,” he said, with the indignation of youth against the irrationality of parents. When Merthin nodded sympathetically, Davey asked: “Did your parents stand in your way like this?”

Merthin thought for a moment. “Yes,” he said. “I wanted to be a squire and spend my life as a knight fighting for the king. I was heartbroken when they apprenticed me to a carpenter. However, in my case it worked out quite well.”

Davey was not pleased by this anecdote.

In the afternoon access to the inner bridge was closed off at the island end, and the gates of the city were opened. Teams of porters came out and picked up everything that had been left, and carried the supplies to their destinations in the city.

There was no message from Madge about the dye.

Merthin had a second visitor that day. Toward the end of the afternoon, as trading petered out, Canon Claude arrived.

Claude’s friend and patron, Bishop Henri, was now installed as archbishop of Monmouth. However, his replacement as bishop of Kingsbridge had not been chosen. Claude wanted the position, and had been to London to see Sir Gregory Longfellow. He was on his way back to Monmouth, where he would continue to work as Henri’s right-hand man for the moment.

“The king likes Philemon’s line on taxation of the clergy,” he said over cold rabbit pie and a goblet of Merthin’s best Gascon wine. “And the senior clergy liked the sermon against dissection and the plan to build a Lady chapel.

On the other hand, Gregory dislikes Philemon—says he can't be trusted. The upshot is, the king has postponed a decision by ruling that the monks of Kingsbridge cannot hold an election while they are in exile at St.-John-in-the-Forest."

Merthin said: "I assume the king sees little point in selecting a bishop while the plague rages and the city is closed."

Claude nodded agreement. "I did achieve something, albeit small," he went on. "There is a vacancy for an English ambassador to the pope. The appointee has to live in Avignon. I suggested Philemon. Gregory seemed intrigued by the idea. At least, he didn't rule it out."

"Good!" The thought of Philemon being sent so far away lifted Merthin's spirits. He wished there were something he could do to weigh in on Claude's side; but he had already written to Gregory pledging the support of the guild, and that was the limit of his influence.

"One more piece of news—sad news, in fact," Claude said. "On my way to London, I went to St.-John-in-the-Forest. Henri is still abbot, technically, and he sent me to reprimand Philemon for decamping without permission. Waste of time, really. Anyway, Philemon has adopted Caris's precautions, and would not let me in, but we talked through the door. So far, the monks have escaped the plague. But your old friend Brother Thomas has died of old age. I'm sorry."

"God rest his soul," Merthin said sadly. "He was very frail toward the end. His mind was going, too."

"The move to St. John probably didn't help him."

"Thomas encouraged me when I was a young builder."

"Strange how God sometimes takes the good men from us and leaves the bad."

Claude left early the next morning.

As Merthin was going through his daily routine, one of the carters came back from the city gate with a message. Madge Webber was on the battlements and wanted to talk to Merthin and Davey.

"Do you think she'll buy my madder?" Davey said as they walked across the inner bridge.

Merthin had no idea. "I hope so," he said.

They stood side by side in front of the closed gate and looked up. Madge leaned over the wall and shouted down: "Where did this stuff come from?"

"I grew it," Davey said.

"And who are you?"

"Davey from Wigleigh, son of Wulfric."

"Oh—Gwenda's boy?"

"Yes, the younger one."

"Well, I've tested your dye."

“It works, doesn’t it?” Davey said eagerly.

“It’s very weak. Did you grind the roots whole?”

“Yes—what else would I have done?”

“You’re supposed to remove the hulls before grinding.”

“I didn’t know that.” Davey was crestfallen. “Is the powder no good?”

“As I said, it’s weak. I can’t pay the price of pure dye.”

Davey looked so dismayed that Merthin’s heart went out to him.

Madge said: “How much have you got?”

“Nine more four-gallon sacks like the one you have,” Davey said despondently.

“I’ll give you half the usual price—three shillings and sixpence a gallon. That’s fourteen shillings a sack, so exactly seven pounds for ten sacks.”

Davey’s face was a picture of delight. Merthin wished Caris were with him just to share it. “Seven pounds!” Davey repeated.

Thinking he was disappointed, Madge said: “I can’t do better than that—the dye just isn’t strong enough.”

But seven pounds was a fortune to Davey. It was several years’ wages for a laborer, even at today’s rates. He looked at Merthin. “I’m rich!” he said.

Merthin laughed and said: “Don’t spend it all at once.”

The next day was Sunday. Merthin went to the morning service at the island’s own little church of St. Elizabeth of Hungary, patron saint of healers. Then he went home and got a stout oak spade from his gardener’s hut. With the spade over his shoulder, he walked across the outer bridge, through the suburbs, and into his past.

He tried hard to remember the route he had taken through the forest thirty-four years ago with Caris, Ralph, and Gwenda. It seemed impossible. There were no pathways other than deer runs. Saplings had become mature trees, and mighty oaks had been felled by the king’s woodcutters. Nevertheless, to his surprise there were still recognizable landmarks: a spring gurgling up out of the ground where he remembered the ten-year-old Caris kneeling to drink; a huge rock that she said looked as if it must have fallen from Heaven; a steep-sided little valley with a boggy bottom where she had got mud in her boots.

As he walked, his recollection of that day of childhood became more vivid. He remembered how the dog, Hop, had followed them, and Gwenda had followed her dog. He felt again the pleasure of having Caris understand his joke. His face reddened at the recollection of how incompetent he had been, in front of Caris, with the bow he had made—and how easily his younger brother had mastered the weapon.

Most of all, he remembered Caris as a girl. They had been preadolescent, but nevertheless he had been bewitched by her quick wits, her daring, and the effortless way she had assumed command of the little group. It was not love,

but it was a kind of fascination that was not unlike love.

Remembrance distracted him from pathfinding, and he lost his bearings. He began to feel as if he was in completely unfamiliar territory—then, suddenly, he emerged into a clearing and knew he was in the right place. The bushes were more extensive; the trunk of the oak tree was even broader; and the clearing in between was gay with a scatter of summer flowers, as it had not been on that November day in 1327. But he was in no doubt: it was like a face he had not seen for years, changed but unmistakable.

A shorter and skinnier Merthin had crawled under that bush to hide from the big man crashing through the undergrowth. He remembered how the exhausted, panting Thomas had stood with his back to that oak tree and drawn his sword and dagger.

He saw in his imagination the events of that day played out again. Two men in yellow-and-green livery had caught up with Thomas and asked him for a letter. Thomas had distracted the men by telling them they were being observed by someone hiding in a bush. Merthin had felt sure he and the other children would be murdered—then Ralph, just ten years old, had killed one of the men-at-arms, showing the quick and deadly reflexes that had served him so well, years later, in the French wars. Thomas had dispatched the other man, though not before receiving the wound that had ended in his losing his left arm—despite, or perhaps because of, the treatment given him in the hospital at Kingsbridge Priory. Then Merthin had helped Thomas bury the letter.

Just here, Thomas had said. *Right in front of the oak tree.*

There was a secret in the letter, Merthin knew now; a secret so potent that high-ranking people were frightened of it. The secret had given Thomas protection, though he had nevertheless sought sanctuary in a monastery and spent his life there.

If you hear that I've died, Thomas had said to the boy Merthin, *I'd like you to dig up this letter and give it to a priest.*

Merthin the man hefted his spade and began to dig.

He was not sure whether this was what Thomas had intended. The buried letter was a precaution against Thomas's being killed by violence, not dying of natural causes at the age of fifty-eight. Would he still have wanted the letter dug up? Merthin did not know. He would decide what to do when he had read the letter. He was irresistibly curious about what was in it.

His memory of where he had buried the bag was not perfect, and with his first try he missed the spot. He got down about eighteen inches and realized his mistake: the hole had been only about a foot deep, he was sure. He tried again a few inches to the left.

This time he got it right.

A foot down, the spade struck something that was not earth. It was soft, but unyielding. He put the spade to one side and scrabbled with his fingers in

the hole. He felt a piece of ancient, rotting leather. Gently, he dislodged the earth and lifted the object. It was the wallet Thomas had worn on his belt all those years ago.

He wiped his muddy hands on his tunic and opened it.

Inside was a bag made of oiled wool, still intact. He loosened the drawstring of the bag and reached in. He pulled out a sheet of parchment, rolled into a scroll and sealed with wax.

He handled it gently, but all the same the wax crumbled as soon as he touched it. With careful fingertips he unrolled the parchment. It was intact: it had survived thirty-four years in the earth remarkably well.

He saw immediately that it was not an official document but a personal letter. He could tell by the handwriting, which was the painstaking scrawl of an educated nobleman, rather than the practised script of a clerk.

He began to read. The salutation ran:

From Edward, the second of that name, King of England, at Berkeley Castle; by the hand of his faithful servant, Sir Thomas Langley; to his beloved eldest son, Edward; royal greeting and fatherly love.

Merthin felt scared. This was a message from the old king to the new. The hand holding the document shook, and he looked up from it and scanned the greenery around him, as if there might be someone peering at him through the bushes.

My beloved son, you will soon hear that I am dead. Know that it is not true.

Merthin frowned. This was not what he had expected.

Your mother, the queen, the wife of my heart, has corrupted and subverted Roland, earl of Shiring, and his sons, who sent murderers here; but I was forewarned by Thomas, and the murderers were killed.

So Thomas had not been the assassin, after all, but the savior of the king.

Your mother, having failed to kill me once, would surely try again, for she and her adulterous consort cannot feel safe while I live. So I have changed clothes with one of the slain murderers, a man of my

height and general appearance, and I have bribed several people to swear that the dead body is mine. Your mother will know the truth when she sees the body, but she will go along with the pretense; for if I am thought to be dead, I will be no threat to her, and no rebel or rival to the throne can claim my support.

Merthin was amazed. The nation had thought Edward II to be dead. All Europe had been fooled.

But what had happened to him afterward?

I will not tell you where I plan to go, but know that I intend to leave my kingdom of England and never return. However, I pray that I will again see you, my son, before I die.

Why had Thomas buried this letter instead of delivering it? Because he had feared for his own life, and had seen the letter as a powerful weapon in his defense. Once Queen Isabella had committed herself to the pretense of her husband's death, she had needed to deal with those few people who knew the truth. Merthin now recalled that while he was still an adolescent, the earl of Kent had been convicted of treason and beheaded for maintaining that Edward II was still alive.

Queen Isabella had sent men to kill Thomas, and they had caught up with him just outside Kingsbridge. But Thomas had disposed of them, with the help of the ten-year-old Ralph. Afterward, Thomas must have threatened to expose the whole deception—and he had proof, in the form of the old king's letter. That evening, as he lay in the hospital at Kingsbridge Priory, Thomas had negotiated with the queen, or more likely with Earl Roland and his sons as her agents. He had promised to keep the secret, on condition that he was accepted as a monk. He would feel safe in the monastery—and, in case the queen should be tempted to renege, he had said that the letter was in a safe place and would be revealed on his death. The queen therefore needed to keep him alive.

Old Prior Anthony had known something of this, and as he lay dying had told Mother Cecilia, who on her own deathbed had repeated part of the story to Caris. People might keep secrets for decades, Merthin reflected, but they felt compelled to tell the truth when death was near. Caris had also seen the incriminating document that gave Lynn Grange to the priory on condition Thomas was accepted as a monk. Merthin now understood why Caris's disingenuous inquiries about this document had caused such trouble. Sir Gregory Longfellow had persuaded Ralph to break into the monastery and steal all the nuns' charters in the hope of finding the incriminating letter.

Had the destructive power of this sheet of vellum been lessened by the passage of time? Isabella had lived a long life, but she had died three years ago. Edward II himself was almost certainly dead—if alive, he would be seventy-seven now. Would Edward III fear the revelation that his father had remained alive when the world thought him dead? He was too strong a king now to be seriously threatened, but he would face great embarrassment and humiliation.

So what was Merthin to do?

He remained where he was, on the grassy floor of the forest among the wildflowers, for a long time. At last he rolled up the scroll, replaced it in the bag, and put the bag back in the old leather pouch.

He put the pouch back into the ground and filled up the hole. He also filled in his first, erroneous hole. He smoothed the earth on top of both. He stripped some leaves off the bushes and scattered them in front of the oak tree. He stood back and looked at his work. He was satisfied: the excavations were no longer visible to the casual glance.

Then he turned his back on the clearing and went home.

90

At the end of August, Earl Ralph made a tour of his landholdings around Shiring, accompanied by his long-term sidekick, Sir Alan Fernhill, and his newfound son, Sam. He enjoyed having Sam along, his child yet a grown man. His other sons, Gerry and Roley, were too young for this sort of thing. Sam did not know about his paternity, but Ralph nursed the secret with pleasure.

They were horrified by what they saw as they went around. Hundreds of Ralph's serfs were dead or dying, and the corn was standing unharvested in the fields. As they rode from one place to the next, Ralph's anger and frustration grew. His sarcastic remarks cowed his companions, and his bad temper turned his horse skittish.

In each village, as well as the serfs' landholdings, some acres were kept exclusively for the earl's personal use. They should have been cultivated by his employees and by serfs who were obliged to work for him one day a week. These lands were in the worst state of all. Many of his employees had died; so had some of the serfs who owed him labor; other serfs had negotiated more favorable tenancies after the last plague, so that they no longer had to work for the lord; and, finally, it was impossible to find laborers for hire.

When Ralph came to Wigleigh, he went around the back of the manor house and looked into the big timber barn, which at this time of year should

have been filling with grain ready for milling—but it was empty, and a cat had given birth to a litter of kittens in the hayloft.

"What will we do for bread?" he roared at Nathan Reeve. "With no barley to make ale, what will we drink? You'd better have a plan, by God."

Nate looked churlish. "All we can do is reallocate the strips," he said.

Ralph was surprised by his surliness. Nate was usually sycophantic. Then Nate glared at young Sam, and Ralph realized why the worm had turned. Nate hated Sam for killing Jonno, his son. Instead of punishing Sam, Ralph had first pardoned him, then made him a squire. No wonder Nate looked resentful.

Ralph said: "There must be one or two young men in the village who could farm some extra acres."

"Ah, yes, but they aren't willing to pay an entry fee," Nate said.

"They want land for nothing?"

"Yes. They can see that you have too much land and not enough labor, and they know when they're in a strong bargaining position." In the past Nate had been quick to abuse uppity peasants, but now he seemed to be enjoying Ralph's dilemma.

"They act as if England belongs to them, not to the nobility," Ralph said angrily.

"It is disgraceful, lord," said Nate more politely, and a sly look came over his face. "For example, Wulfric's son Davey wants to marry Amabel and take over her mother's land. It would make sense: Annet has never been able to manage her holding."

Sam spoke up. "My parents won't pay the entry fee—they're against the marriage."

Nate said: "Davey could pay it himself, though."

Ralph was surprised. "How?"

"He sold that new crop he grew in the forest."

"Madder. Obviously we didn't do a sufficiently thorough job of trampling it. How much did he get?"

"No one knows. But Gwenda has bought a young milking cow, and Wulfric has a new knife…and Amabel wore a yellow scarf to church on Sunday."

And Nate had been offered a fat bribe, Ralph guessed. "I hate to reward Davey's disobedience," he said. "But I'm desperate. Let him have the land."

"You would have to give him special permission to marry against his parents' will."

Davey had asked Ralph for this, and Ralph had turned him down, but that was before the plague decimated the peasantry. He did not like to revisit such decisions. However, it was a small price to pay. "I shall give him permission," he said.

"Very well."

“But let’s go and see him. I’d like to make the offer in person.”

Nate was startled, but of course made no objection.

The truth was that Ralph wanted to see Gwenda again. There was something about her that made his throat go dry. His last encounter with her, in the little hunting lodge, had not satisfied him for long. He had thought about her often in the weeks since then. He got little satisfaction nowadays from the kind of women he normally lay with: young prostitutes, tavern wenches, and maidservants. They all pretended to be delighted by his advances, though he knew they just wanted the present of money that came afterward. Gwenda, by contrast, made no secret of the fact that she loathed him and shuddered at his touch; and that pleased him, paradoxically, because it was honest and therefore real. After their meeting in the hunting lodge he had given her a purse of silver pennies, and she had thrown it back at him so hard that it had bruised his chest.

“They’re in Brookfield today, turning their reaped barley,” Nate said. “I’ll take you there.”

Ralph and his men followed Nate out of the village and along the bank of the stream at the edge of the great field. Wigleigh was always windy, but today the summer breeze was soft and warm, like Gwenda’s breasts.

Some of the strips of land here had been reaped, but in others Ralph despaired to see overripe oats, barley rank with weeds, and one patch of rye that had been reaped but not bundled, so that the crop lay scattered on the ground.

A year ago he had thought that all his financial troubles were over. He had come home from the most recent French war with a captive, the Marquis de Neuchatel, and had negotiated a ransom of fifty thousand pounds. But the marquis’s family had not been able to raise the money. Something similar had happened to the French king, Jean II, captured by the prince of Wales at the battle of Poitiers. King Jean had stayed in London for four years, technically a prisoner, though living in comfort at the Savoy, the new palace built by the duke of Lancaster. The king’s ransom had been reduced, but still it had not been paid in full. Ralph had sent Alan Fernhill to Neuchatel to renegotiate his prisoner’s ransom, and Alan had reduced the price to twenty thousand, but again the family had failed to pay it. Then the marquis had died of the plague, so Ralph was insolvent again, and had to worry about the harvest.

It was midday. The peasants were having their dinner at the side of the field. Gwenda, Wulfric, and Davey were sitting on the ground under a tree eating cold pork with raw onions. They all jumped to their feet when the horses came near. Ralph went over to Gwenda’s family and waved the rest away.

Gwenda wore a loose green dress that hid her shape. Her hair was tied back, making her face more ratlike. Her hands were dirty, with earth under the

nails. But, when Ralph looked at her, in his imagination he saw her naked, ready, waiting for him with an expression of resigned disgust at what he was about to do; and he felt aroused.

He looked away from her to her husband. Wulfric stared back at him with a level gaze, neither defiant nor cowed. There was a little gray now in his tawny beard, but still it would not grow over the scar of the sword cut Ralph had given him. “Wulfric, your son wants to marry Amabel and take over Annet’s land.”

Gwenda responded. She had never learned to speak only when spoken to. “You’ve stolen one son from me—will you take the other now?” she said bitterly.

Ralph ignored her. “Who will pay the heriot?”

Nate put in: “It’s thirty shillings.”

Wulfric said: “I haven’t got thirty shillings.”

Davey said calmly: “I can pay it.”

He must have done very well out of his madder crop, Ralph thought, to be so cool about such a large sum of money. “Good,” he said. “In that case—”

Davey interrupted him. “But on what terms are you offering it?”

Ralph felt his face redden. “What do you mean?”

Nate intervened again. “The same terms as those upon which Annet holds the land, of course.”

Davey said: “Then I thank the earl, but I will not accept his gracious offer.”

Ralph said: “What the devil are you talking about?”

“I would like to take over the land, my lord, but only as a free tenant, paying cash rent, without customary dues.”

Sir Alan said threateningly: “Do you dare to haggle with the earl of Shiring, you insolent young dog?”

Davey was scared but defiant. “I’ve no wish to offend, lord. But I want to be free to grow whatever crop I can sell. I don’t want to cultivate what Nate Reeve chooses, regardless of market prices.”

Davey had inherited that streak of stubborn determination from Gwenda, Ralph thought. He said angrily: “Nate expresses my wishes! Do you think you know better than your earl?”

“Forgive me, lord, but you neither till the soil nor go to market.”

Alan’s hand went to the hilt of his sword. Ralph saw Wulfric glance at his scythe, lying on the ground, its sharp blade gleaming in the sunlight. On Ralph’s other side, young Sam’s horse skittered nervously, picking up its rider’s tension. If it came to a fight, Ralph thought, would Sam fight for his lord, or for his family?

Ralph did not want a fight. He wanted to get the harvest in, and killing his peasants would make that harder. He restrained Alan with a gesture. “This is

how the plague undermines morality," he said disgustedly. "I will give you what you want, Davey, because I must."

Davey swallowed drily and said: "In writing, lord?"

"You're demanding a copyhold, too?"

Davey nodded, too frightened to speak.

"Do you doubt the word of your earl?"

"No, lord."

"Then why demand a written lease?"

"For the avoidance of doubt in future years."

They all said that when they asked for a copyhold. What they meant was that if the lease was written down the landlord could not easily alter the terms. It was yet another encroachment on time-honored traditions. Ralph did not want to make a further concession—but, once again, he had no option if he wanted to get the harvest in.

And then he thought of a way he could use this situation to gain something else he wanted, and he cheered up.

"All right," he said. "I'll give you a written lease. But I don't want men leaving the fields during the harvest. Your mother can come to Earlscastle to collect the document next week."

Gwenda walked to Earlscastle on a baking hot day. She knew what Ralph wanted her for, and the prospect made her miserable. As she crossed the drawbridge into the castle, the rooks seemed to laugh derisively at her plight.

The sun beat down mercilessly on the compound, where the walls blocked the breeze. The squires were playing a game outside the stables. Sam was among them, and too absorbed to notice Gwenda.

They had tied a cat to a post at eye level in such a way that it could move its head and legs. A squire had to kill the cat with his hands tied behind his back. Gwenda had seen the game before. The only way for the squire to achieve his object was to head-butt the wretched animal, but the cat naturally defended itself by scratching and biting the attacker's face. The challenger, a boy of about sixteen, was hovering near the post, watched by the terrified cat. Suddenly the boy jerked his head. His forehead smashed into the cat's chest, but the animal lashed out with its clawed paws. The squire yelped with pain and jumped back, his cheeks streaming blood, and all the other squires roared with laughter. Enraged, the challenger rushed at the post and butted the cat again. He was scratched worse, and he hurt his head, which they found even funnier. The third time he was more careful. Getting close, he feinted, making the cat lash out at thin air; then he delivered a carefully aimed strike right at the beast's head. Blood poured from its mouth and nostrils, and it slumped unconscious, though still breathing. He butted it a final time to kill it, and the

others cheered and clapped.

Gwenda felt sickened. She did not much like cats—she preferred dogs—but it was unpleasant to see any helpless creature tormented. She supposed that boys had to do this sort of thing to prepare them for maiming and killing human beings in war. Did it have to be that way?

She moved on without speaking to her son. Perspiring, she crossed the second bridge and climbed the steps to the keep. The great hall was mercifully cool.

She was glad Sam had not seen her. She was hoping to avoid him as long as possible. She did not want him to suspect that anything was wrong. He was not notably sensitive, but he might detect his mother's distress.

She told the marshal of the hall why she was here, and he promised to let the earl know. "Is Lady Philippa in residence?" Gwenda asked hopefully. Perhaps Ralph would be inhibited by the presence of his wife.

But the marshal shook his head. "She's at Monmouth, with her daughter."

Gwenda nodded grimly and settled down to wait. She could not help thinking about her encounter with Ralph at the hunting lodge. When she looked at the unadorned gray wall of the great hall she saw him, staring at her as she undressed, his mouth slightly open in anticipation. As much as the intimacy of sex was a joy with the man she loved, so much was it loathsome with one she hated.

The first time Ralph had coerced her, more than twenty years ago, her body had betrayed her, and she had felt a physical pleasure, even while experiencing a spiritual revulsion. The same thing had happened with Alwyn the outlaw in the forest. But it had not occurred this time with Ralph in the hunting lodge. She attributed the change to age. When she had been a young girl, full of desire, the physical act had triggered an automatic response—something she could not help, although it had made her even more ashamed. Now in her maturity her body was not so vulnerable, the reflex not so ready. She could at least be grateful for that.

The stairs at the far end of the hall led to the earl's chamber. Men were going up and down constantly: knights, servants, tenants, bailiffs. After an hour, the marshal told her to go up.

She was afraid Ralph would want sex there and then, but she was relieved to find that he was having a business day. With him were Sir Alan and two priest-clerks sitting at a table with writing materials. One of the clerks handed her a small vellum scroll.

She did not look at it. She could not read.

"There," said Ralph. "Now your son is a free tenant. Isn't that what you always wanted?"

She had wanted freedom for herself, as Ralph knew. She had never achieved it—but Ralph was right, Davey had. That meant that her life had not

been completely without purpose. Her grandchildren would be free and independent, growing what crops they chose, paying their rent and keeping for themselves everything else they earned. They would never know the miserable existence of poverty and hunger that Gwenda had been born to.

Was that worth all she had been through? She did not know.

She took the scroll and went to the door.

Alan came after her and spoke in a low voice as she was going out. “Stay here tonight, in the hall,” he said. The great hall was where most of the castle’s residents slept. “Tomorrow, be at the hunting lodge two hours after midday.”

She tried to leave without replying.

Alan barred her way with his arm. “Understand?” he said.

“Yes,” she said in a low voice. “I will be there in the afternoon.”

He let her go.

She did not speak to Sam until late in the evening. The squires spent the whole afternoon at various violent games. She was glad to have the time to herself. She sat in the cool hall alone with her thoughts. She tried to tell herself that it was nothing for her to have sexual congress with Ralph. She was no virgin, after all. She had been married for twenty years. She had had sex thousands of times. It would all be over in a few minutes, and it would leave no scars. She would do it and forget it.

Until the next time.

That was the worst of it. He could go on coercing her indefinitely. His threat to reveal the secret of Sam’s paternity would terrify her as long as Wulfric was alive.

Surely Ralph would tire of her soon, and go back to the firm young bodies of his tavern wenches?

“What’s the matter with you?” Sam said when at dusk the squires came in for supper.

“Nothing,” she said quickly. “Davey’s bought me a milking cow.”

Sam looked a bit envious. He was enjoying life, but squires were not paid. They had little need of money—they were provided with food, drink, accommodation, and clothing—but, all the same, a young man liked to have a few pennies in his wallet.

They talked about Davey’s forthcoming wedding. “You and Annet are going to be grandmothers together,” Sam said. “You’ll have to make your peace with her.”

“Don’t be stupid,” Gwenda snapped. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Ralph and Alan emerged from the chamber when supper was served. All

the residents and visitors assembled in the hall. The kitchen staff brought in three large pike baked with herbs. Gwenda sat near the foot of the table, well away from Ralph, and he took no notice of her.

After dinner she lay down to sleep in the straw on the floor beside Sam. It was a comfort to her to lie next to him, as she had when he was little. She remembered listening to his childish breathing, soft and contented, in the silence of the night. Drifting off, she thought about how children grew up to defy their parents' expectations. Her own father had wanted to treat her like a commodity to be traded, but she had angrily refused to be used that way. Now each of her sons was taking his own road through life, and in both cases it was not the one she had planned. Sam would be a knight, and Davey was going to marry Annet's daughter. If we knew how they would turn out, she thought, would we be so eager to have them?

She dreamed that she went to Ralph's hunting lodge and found that he was not there, but there was a cat on his bed. She knew she had to kill the cat, but she had her hands tied behind her back, so she butted it with her head until it died.

When she woke up she wondered if she could kill Ralph at the lodge.

She had killed Alwyn, all those years ago, sticking his own knife into his throat and pushing it up into his head until its point had come out through his eye. She had killed Sim Chapman, too, holding his head under the water while he wriggled and thrashed, keeping him there until he breathed the river into his lungs and died. If Ralph went to the hunting lodge alone, she might be able to kill him, if she chose her moment well.

But he would not be on his own. Earls never went anywhere alone. He would have Alan with him, as he had before. It was unusual for him to travel with only one companion. It was unlikely he would have none.

Could she kill them both? No one else knew she was going to meet them there. If she killed them and simply walked on home she would not even be suspected. No one knew of her motive—it was a secret, that was the whole point. Someone might realize she had been near the lodge at the time, but they would only ask her whether she had seen any suspicious-looking men in the vicinity—it would not occur to them that big strong Ralph might have been murdered by a small middle-aged woman.

But could she do it? She thought about it, but she knew in her heart it was hopeless. They were experienced men of violence. They had been at war, off and on, for twenty years, most recently in the campaign of the winter before last. They had quick reflexes and their reactions were deadly. Many French knights had wanted to kill them, and had died trying.

She might have killed one, using guile and surprise, but not two.

She was going to have to submit to Ralph.

Grimly she went outside and washed her face and hands. When she came

back into the great hall, the kitchen staff were putting out rye bread and weak ale for breakfast. Sam was dipping the stale bread into his ale to soften it. “You’ve got that look again,” he said. “What’s the matter?”

“Nothing,” she said. She drew her knife and cut a slab of the bread. “I’ve got a long walk ahead of me.”

“Is that what you’re worried about? You shouldn’t really go on your own. Most women don’t like to travel alone.”

“I’m tougher than most women.” She was pleased that he showed concern for her. It was something his real father, Ralph, would never have done. Wulfric had had some influence over the boy, after all. But she was embarrassed that he had read her expression and divined her state of mind. “You don’t need to worry about me.”

“I could come with you,” he offered. “I’m sure the earl would let me. He doesn’t need any squires today—he’s going off somewhere with Alan Fernhill.”

That was the last thing she wanted. If she failed to keep her rendezvous, Ralph would let out the secret. She could readily imagine the pleasure Ralph would take in that. He would not need much provocation. “No,” she said firmly. “Stay here. You never know when your earl will call for you.”

“He won’t call for me. I should come with you.”

“I absolutely forbid it.” Gwenda swallowed a mouthful of her bread and stuffed the rest into her wallet. “You’re a good boy to worry about me, but it’s not necessary.” She kissed his cheek. “Take care of yourself. Don’t run unnecessary risks. If you want to do something for me, stay alive.”

She walked away. At the door, she turned. He was watching her thoughtfully. She forced herself to give what she hoped was a carefree smile. Then she went out.

On the road, Gwenda began to worry that someone might find out about her liaison with Ralph. Such things had a way of getting out. She had met him once, she was about to do so a second time, and she feared there might be more such occasions. How long would it be before someone saw her leaving the road and heading into the woods at a certain point in her journey, and wondered why? What if someone should stumble by accident into the hunting lodge at the wrong moment? How many people would notice that Ralph went off with Alan whenever Gwenda was traveling from Earlscastle to Wigleigh?

She stopped at a tavern just before noon and had some ale and cheese. Travelers generally left such places in a group, for safety, but she made sure to wait behind so that she would be alone on the road. When she came to the point where she had to turn into the woods, she looked ahead and behind, to make sure there was no one watching. She thought she saw a movement in the

trees a quarter of a mile back, and she peered into the hazy distance, trying to make out more clearly what she had seen; but no one was there. She was just getting jumpy.

She thought again about killing Ralph as she waded through the summer undergrowth. If by some lucky chance Alan was not here, might she find an opportunity? But Alan was the one person in the world who knew she was meeting Ralph here. If Ralph were killed, Alan would know who had done it. She would have to kill him, too. And that seemed impossible.

There were two horses outside the lodge. Ralph and Alan were inside, sitting at the little table, with the remains of a meal in front of them: half a loaf, a ham bone, the rind of a cheese, and a wine flask. Gwenda closed the door behind her.

“Here she is, as promised,” Alan said with a satisfied air. Clearly he had been given the job of getting her to come to the rendezvous, and he was relieved she had obeyed orders. “Just perfect for your dessert,” he said. “Like a raisin, wrinkled but sweet.”

Gwenda said to Ralph: “Why don’t you get him out of here?”

Alan stood up. “Always the insolent remark,” he said. “Will you never learn?” But he left the room, going into the kitchen and slamming the door behind him.

Ralph smiled at her. “Come here,” he said. She moved obediently closer to him. “I’ll tell Alan not to be so rude, if you like.”

“Please don’t!” she said, horrified. “If he starts being nice to me, people will wonder why.”

“As you please.” He took her hand and tried to draw her closer. “Sit on my lap.”

“Couldn’t we just fuck and get it over with?”

He laughed. “That’s what I like about you—you’re honest.” He stood up, held her shoulders, and looked into her eyes; then he bent his head and kissed her.

It was the first time he had done this. They had had sex twice without ever kissing. Now Gwenda was revolted. As his lips pressed against hers she felt more violated than when he had thrust his penis into her. He opened his mouth, and she tasted his cheesy breath. She pulled away, disgusted. “No,” she said.

“Remember what you stand to lose.”

“Please don’t do this.”

He started to become angry. “I will have you!” he said loudly. “Get that dress off.”

“Please let me go,” she said. He started to say something, but she raised her voice to speak over him. The walls were thin, and she knew that Alan in the kitchen could hear her pleading, but she did not care. “Don’t force me, I

beg you!”

“I don’t care what you say!” he shouted. “Get on that bed!”

“Please don’t make me!”

The front door flew open.

Both Gwenda and Ralph turned and stared.

Sam stood there.

Gwenda said: “Oh, God, no!”

The three of them were frozen still for a split second, and in that moment Gwenda guessed, all at once, what had happened. Sam had been worried about her, and—disobeying her orders—he had followed her from Earlscastle, staying out of sight but never far behind. He had seen her leave the road and head into the woods—she had caught a flash of movement when she looked behind, but she had dismissed it. He had found the hut, arriving a minute or two after her. He must have stood outside and heard the shouting. It must have been obvious that Ralph was in the process of forcing Gwenda to submit to unwanted sex—although, recalling in a flash what they had said, Gwenda realized they had not mentioned the true reason she had to submit. The secret had not been revealed—yet.

Sam drew his sword.

Ralph leaped to his feet. As Sam rushed at him, Ralph managed to get his own sword out. Sam swung at Ralph’s head, but Ralph raised his sword just in time to parry the stroke.

Gwenda’s son was trying to kill his father.

Sam was in terrible danger. Hardly more than a boy, he was up against a battle-hardened soldier.

Ralph shouted: “Alan!”

Then Gwenda realized Sam was up against not one but two veterans.

She dashed across the room. As the kitchen door came open, she stood on the far side of the doorway and flattened herself against the wall. She drew the long dagger from her belt.

The door flew wide and Alan stepped into the room.

He looked at the two fighters and did not see Gwenda. He paused for an instant, taking in the scene in front of him. Sam’s sword swept through the air again, aimed at Ralph’s neck; and again Ralph took the blow on his own sword.

Alan could see instantly that his master was under furious attack. His hand went to the hilt of his sword, and he took a pace forward. Then Gwenda stabbed him in the back.

She thrust the long dagger in and upward as hard as she could, pushing with a field-worker’s strength, thrusting through the muscles of Alan’s back, up through kidneys and stomach and lungs, hoping to reach his heart. The knife was ten inches long, pointed and sharp, and it sliced through his organs;

but it did not kill him immediately.

He roared with pain then suddenly went silent. Staggering, he turned and grabbed her, pulling her to him in a wrestler's embrace. She stabbed him again, in the stomach this time, with the same upward stroke through the vital organs. Blood came out of his mouth. He went limp and his arms fell to his sides. He stared for a moment with a look of utter incredulity at the contemptible little woman who had ended his life. Then his eyes closed and he fell to the floor.

Gwenda looked at the other two.

Sam struck and Ralph parried; Ralph stepped back and Sam advanced; Sam struck again and Ralph parried again. Ralph was defending himself vigorously, but not attacking.

Ralph was fearful of killing his son.

Sam, not knowing that his opponent was his father, had no such scruples, and pressed forward, slashing with his sword.

Gwenda knew this could not go on for long. One of them would hurt the other, and then it would become a fight to the death. Holding her bloody knife ready, she looked desperately for a chance to intervene, and stab Ralph the way she had stabbed Alan.

"Wait," Ralph said, holding up his left hand; but Sam was angry, and thrust at him regardless. Ralph parried and spoke again. "Wait!" He was gasping from exertion, but he managed to get a few words out. "There's something you don't know."

"I know enough!" Sam yelled, and Gwenda could hear the note of boyish hysteria in his big man's voice. He swung again.

"You don't!" Ralph shouted.

Gwenda knew what Ralph wanted to tell Sam. He was going to say *I am your father.*

It must not happen.

"Listen to me!" Ralph said, and at last Sam responded. He stepped back, though he did not lower his sword.

Ralph panted, catching his breath in preparation for speaking; and, as he paused, Gwenda ran at him.

He spun around to face her, at the same time swinging his sword to the right in a flat arc. His blade hit hers, knocking the knife out of her hand. She was completely defenseless, and she knew that if he slashed at her with the return stroke she would be killed.

But, for the first time since Sam had drawn his sword, Ralph's guard was open, leaving the front of his body undefended.

Sam stepped forward and thrust his sword into Ralph's chest.

The pointed tip of the blade passed through Ralph's light summer tunic and entered his body on the left side of his breastbone. It must have slipped

between two ribs, for the blade sank farther in. Sam gave a bloodthirsty cry of triumph and pushed harder. Ralph staggered backward under the impact. His shoulders hit the wall behind him, but still Sam came forward, pushing with all his might. The sword seemed to pass all the way through Ralph's chest. There was a strange thud as the point came out of his back and stuck into the timber of the wall.

Ralph's eyes looked into Sam's face, and Gwenda knew what he was thinking. Ralph understood that he had been wounded fatally. And, in the last few seconds of his life, he knew that he had been killed by his own son.

Sam let go of the sword, but it did not fall. It was embedded in the wall, impaling Ralph gruesomely. Sam stepped back, aghast.

Ralph was not yet dead. His arms waved feebly in an effort to grab the sword and pull it out of his chest, but he was not able to coordinate his movements. Gwenda realized in a ghastly flash that he looked a bit like the cat the squires had tied to the post.

She stooped and quickly picked up her dagger from the floor.

Then, incredibly, Ralph spoke.

"Sam," he said. "I am…" Then blood spurted from his mouth in a sudden flood, cutting off his speech.

Thank God, Gwenda thought.

The torrent stopped as quickly as it had started, and he spoke again. "I am __"

This time he was stopped by Gwenda. She leaped forward and thrust her dagger into his mouth. He made a gruesome choking noise. The blade sank into his throat.

She let go of the knife and stepped back.

She stared in horror at what she had done. The man who had tormented her for so long was nailed to the wall as if crucified, with a sword through his chest and a knife in his mouth. He made no sound, but his eyes showed that he was alive, as they looked from Gwenda to Sam and back again, in agony and terror and despair.

They stood still, staring at him, silent, waiting.

At last his eyes closed.

91

The plague faded away in September. Caris's hospital gradually emptied, as patients died without being replaced by new ones. The vacant rooms were swept and scrubbed, and juniper logs were burned in the fireplaces, filling the hospital with a sharp autumn fragrance. Early in October, the last victim was

laid to rest in the hospital's graveyard. A smoky red sun rose over Kingsbridge Cathedral as four strong young nuns lowered the shrouded corpse into the hole in the ground. The body was that of a crookbacked weaver from Outhenby, but as Caris gazed into the grave she saw her old enemy, the plague, lying on the cold earth. Under her breath, she said: "Are you really dead, or will you come back again?"

When the nuns returned to the hospital after the funeral, there was nothing to do.

Caris washed her face, brushed her hair, and put on the new dress she had been saving for this day. It was the bright red of Kingsbridge Scarlet. Then she walked out of the hospital for the first time in half a year.

She went immediately into Merthin's garden.

His pear trees cast long shadows in the morning sun. The leaves were beginning to redden and crisp, while a few late fruits still hung on the boughs, round-bellied and brown. Arn, the gardener, was chopping firewood with an axe. When he saw Caris, he was at first startled and frightened; then he realized what her appearance meant, and his face split in a grin. He dropped his axe and ran into the house.

In the kitchen, Em was boiling porridge over a cheerful fire. She looked at Caris as at a heavenly apparition. She was so moved that she kissed Caris's hands.

Caris went up the stairs and into Merthin's bedroom.

He was standing at the window in his undershirt, looking out at the river that flowed past the front of the house. He turned toward her, and her heart faltered to see his familiar, irregular face, the gaze of alert intelligence and the quick humor in the twist of his lips. His golden-brown eyes looked lovingly at her, and his mouth widened in a welcoming smile. He showed no surprise: he must have noticed that there had been fewer and fewer patients arriving at the hospital, and he would have been expecting her to reappear any day. He looked like a man whose hopes have been fulfilled.

She stood beside him at the window. He put his arm around her shoulders, and she put hers around his waist. There was a little more gray in his red beard than six months ago, she thought, and his halo of hair seemed to have receded a little farther, unless it was her imagination.

For a moment, they both looked out at the river. In the gray morning light, the water was the color of iron. The surface shifted endlessly, mirror-bright or deep black in irregular patterns, always changing and always the same.

"It's over," Caris said.

Then they kissed.

Merthin announced a special Autumn Fair to celebrate the reopening of the

town. It was held during the last week of October. The wool dealing season was over, but anyway fleeces were no longer the principal commodity traded in Kingsbridge, and thousands of people came to buy the scarlet cloth for which the town was now famous.

At the Saturday night banquet that opened the fair, the guild honored Caris. Although Kingsbridge had not totally escaped the plague, it had suffered much less than other cities, and most people felt they owed their lives to her precautions. She was everyone's hero. The guildsmen insisted on marking her achievement, and Madge Webber devised a new ceremony in which Caris was presented with a gold key, symbolizing the key to the city gate. Merthin felt very proud.

Next day, Sunday, Merthin and Caris went to the cathedral. The monks were still at St.-John-in-the-Forest, so the service was taken by Father Michael from St. Peter's parish church in the town. Lady Philippa, countess of Shiring, showed up.

Merthin had not seen Philippa since Ralph's funeral. Not many tears had been shed for his brother, her husband. The earl would normally have been buried at Kingsbridge Cathedral but, because the town had been closed, Ralph had been interred in Shiring.

His death remained a mystery. His body had been found in a hunting lodge, stabbed through the chest. Alan Fernhill lay on the floor nearby, also dead of stab wounds. The two men appeared to have had dinner together, for the remains of a meal were still on the table. Obviously there had been a fight, but it was not clear whether Ralph and Alan had inflicted fatal wounds on one another, or someone else had been involved. Nothing had been stolen: money was found on both bodies, their costly weapons lay beside them, and two valuable horses were cropping the grass in the clearing outside. Because of that, the Shiring coroner inclined to the theory that the two men had killed one another.

In another sense, there was no mystery. Ralph had been a man of violence, and it was no surprise that he had died a violent death. They that live by the sword shall die by the sword, Jesus said, although that verse was not often quoted by the priests of King Edward III's reign. If anything was remarkable, it was that Ralph had survived so many military campaigns, so many bloody battles, and so many charges by the French cavalry, to die in a squabble a few miles from his home.

Merthin had surprised himself by weeping at the funeral. He wondered what he was sad about. His brother had been a wicked man who caused a great deal of misery, and his death was a blessing. Merthin had not been close to him since he murdered Tilly. What was there to mourn? In the end, Merthin decided he was grieving for a Ralph that might have been—a man whose violence was not indulged but controlled; whose aggression was directed, not

by ambition for personal glory, but by a sense of justice. Perhaps it had once been possible for Ralph to grow into such a man. When the two of them had played together, aged five and six, floating wooden boats on a muddy puddle, Ralph had not been cruel and vengeful. That was why Merthin cried.

Philippa's two boys had been at the funeral, and they were with her today. The elder, Gerry, was Ralph's son by poor Tilly. The younger, Roley, was believed by everyone to be Ralph's son by Philippa, though in fact he was Merthin's. Fortunately, Roley was not a small, lively redhead like Merthin. He was going to be tall and dignified like his mother.

Roley was clutching a small wooden carving, which he presented solemnly to Merthin. It was a horse, and he had done it rather well for a ten-year-old, Merthin realized. Most children would have sculpted the animal standing firmly on all four feet, but Roley had made it move, its legs in different positions and its mane flying in the wind. The boy had inherited his real father's ability to visualize complex objects in three dimensions. Merthin felt an unexpected lump in his throat. He bent down and kissed Roley's forehead.

He gave Philippa a grateful smile. He guessed she had encouraged Roley to give him the horse, knowing what it would mean to him. He glanced at Caris and saw that she, too, understood its significance; though nothing was said.

The atmosphere in the great church was joyful. Father Michael was not a charismatic preacher, and he went through the mass in a mumble. But the nuns sang as beautifully as ever, and an optimistic sun shone through the rich dark colors of the stained-glass windows.

Afterward they walked around the fair in the crisp autumn air. Caris held Merthin's arm and Philippa walked on his other side. The two boys ran on ahead while Philippa's bodyguard and lady-in-waiting followed behind. Business was good, Merthin saw. Kingsbridge craftsmen and traders were already beginning to rebuild their fortunes. The town would recover from this epidemic faster than from the last.

Senior members of the guild were going around checking weights and measures. There were standards for the weight of a woolsack, the width of a piece of cloth, the size of a bushel, and so on, so that people knew what they were buying. Merthin encouraged guildsmen to perform these checks ostentatiously, so that buyers could see how carefully the town monitored its tradesmen. Of course, if they really suspected someone of cheating, they would check discreetly and then, if he was guilty, get rid of him quietly.

Philippa's two sons ran excitedly from one stall to the next. Watching Roley, Merthin said quietly to Philippa: "Now that Ralph has gone, is there any reason why Roley should not know the truth?"

She looked thoughtful. "I wish I could tell him—but would it be for his

sake, or ours? For ten years he's believed Ralph to be his father. Two months ago he wept at Ralph's graveside. It would be a terrible shock to tell him now that he is another man's son."

They were speaking in low voices, but Caris could hear, and she said: "I agree with Philippa. You have to think of the child, not of yourself."

Merthin saw the sense of what they were saying. It was a small sadness on a happy day.

"There is another reason," Philippa said. "Gregory Longfellow came to see me last week. The king wants to make Gerry earl of Shiring."

"At the age of thirteen?" Merthin said.

"The title of earl is always hereditary, once it has been granted, although baronies are not. Anyway, I would administer the earldom for the next three years."

"As you did all the time Ralph was away fighting the French. You'll be relieved the king isn't asking you to marry again."

She made a face. "I'm too old."

"So Roley will be second in line for the earldom—provided we keep our secret." If something should happen to Gerry, Merthin thought, my son will become earl of Shiring. Fancy that.

"Roley would be a good ruler," Philippa said. "He's intelligent and quite strong-willed, but not cruel like Ralph."

Ralph's mean nature had been obvious at an early age: he had been ten, Roley's age now, when he shot Gwenda's dog. "But Roley might prefer to be something else." He looked again at the carved wooden horse.

Philippa smiled. She did not smile often, but when she did it was dazzling. She was still beautiful, he thought. She said: "Give in to it, and be proud of him."

Merthin recalled how proud his father had been when Ralph became the earl. But he knew he would never feel the same way. He would be proud of Roley whatever he did, as long as he did it well. Perhaps the boy would become a stonemason, and carve saints and angels. Perhaps he would be a wise and merciful nobleman. Or he might do something else, something his parents had never anticipated.

Merthin invited Philippa and the boys to dinner, and they all left the cathedral precincts. They walked over the bridge against the flow of loaded carts coming to the fair. They crossed Leper Island together and went through the orchard into the house.

In the kitchen they found Lolla.

As soon as she saw her father, she burst into tears. He put his arms around her and she sobbed on his shoulder. Wherever she had been, she must have got out of the habit of washing, for she smelled like a pigsty, but he was too happy to care.

It was a while before they could get any sense out of her. When at last she spoke, she said: “They all died!” Then she burst into fresh tears. After a while she calmed down, and spoke more coherently. “They all died,” she repeated, suppressing her sobs. “Jake, and Boyo, Netty and Hal, Joanie and Chalkie and Ferret, one by one, and nothing I did made any difference!”

They had been living in the forest, Merthin gathered, a group of youngsters pretending to be nymphs and shepherds. The details came out gradually. The boys would kill a deer every now and again, and sometimes they would go away for a day and come back with a barrel of wine and some bread. Lolla said they bought their supplies, but Merthin guessed they had robbed travelers. Lolla had somehow imagined they could live like that forever: she had not thought about how things might be different in the winter. But, in the end, it was the plague rather than the weather that brought the idyll to an end. “I was so frightened,” Lolla said. “I wanted Caris.”

Gerry and Roley listened with mouths agape. They idolized their older cousin Lolla. Although she had come home in tears, the story of her adventure only enhanced her in their eyes.

“I never want to feel like that again,” Lolla said. “So powerless, with my friends all sick and dying around me.”

“I can understand that,” Caris said. “It’s how I felt when my mother died.”

“Will you teach me to heal people?” Lolla said to her. “I want to really help them, as you do, not just sing hymns and show them a picture of an angel. I want to understand about bones and blood, and herbs and things that make people better. I want to be able to do something when a person is sick.”

“Of course I’ll teach you, if that’s what you want,” Caris said. “I would be pleased.”

Merthin was astonished. Lolla had been rebellious and bad-tempered for some years now, and part of her rejection of authority had been a pretense that Caris, her stepmother, was not really her parent, and need not be respected. He was delighted by the turnaround. It was almost worth the agony of worry he had been through.

A moment later, a nun came into the kitchen. “Little Annie Jones is having a fit, and we don’t know why,” she said to Caris. “Can you come?”

“Of course,” Caris said.

Lolla said: “Can I go with you?”

“No,” said Caris. “Here’s your first lesson: you have to be clean. Go and wash now. You can come with me tomorrow.”

As she was leaving, Madge Webber came in. “Have you heard the news?” she said, her face grim. “Philemon is back.”

On that Sunday, Davey and Amabel were married at the little church in

Wigleigh.

Lady Philippa gave permission for the manor house to be used for the party. Wulfric killed a pig and roasted it whole over a fire in the yard. Davey had bought sweet currants, and Annet baked them in buns. There was no ale—much of the barley harvest had rotted in the fields for want of reapers—but Philippa had sent Sam home with a present of a barrel of cider.

Gwenda still thought, every day, about that scene in the hunting lodge. In the middle of the night she stared into the darkness and saw Ralph with her knife in his mouth, the hilt sticking out between his brown teeth, and Sam's sword nailing him to the wall.

When she and Sam had retrieved their weapons, pulling them grimly out of Ralph, and the corpse had fallen to the floor, it had looked as if the two dead men had killed one another. Gwenda had smeared blood on their unstained weapons and left them where they lay. Outside, she had loosened the horses' tethers, so that they could survive for a few days, if necessary, until someone found them. Then she and Sam had walked away.

The Shiring coroner had speculated that outlaws might have been involved in the deaths, but in the end had come to the conclusion Gwenda expected. No suspicion had fallen on her or Sam. They had got away with murder.

She had told Sam an edited version of what had happened between her and Ralph. She pretended that this was the first time he had tried to coerce her, and she said he had simply threatened to kill her if she refused. Sam was awestruck to think that he had killed an earl, but he had no doubt that his action had been justified. He had the right temperament for a soldier, Gwenda realized: he would never suffer agonies of remorse over killing.

Nor did she, even though she often recalled the scene with revulsion. She had killed Alan Fernhill and finished Ralph off, but she had not a twinge of regret. The world was a better place without both of them. Ralph had died in the agony of knowing that his own son had stabbed him through the heart, and that was exactly what he deserved. In time, she felt sure, the vision of what she had done would cease to come to her by night.

She put the memory out of her mind and looked around the hall of the manor house at the carousing villagers.

The pig was eaten, and the men were drinking the last of the cider. Aaron Appletree produced his bagpipes. The village had had no drummer since the death of Annet's father, Perkin. Gwenda wondered whether Davey would take up drumming now.

Wulfric wanted to dance, as he always did when he had had a bellyful of drink. Gwenda partnered him for the first number, laughing as she tried to keep up with his cavorting. He lifted her, swung her through the air, crushed her to his body, and put her down again only to circle her with great leaps. He

had no sense of rhythm, but his sheer enthusiasm was infectious. Afterward she declared herself exhausted, and he danced with his new daughter-in-law, Amabel.

Then, of course, he danced with Annet.

His eye fell on her as soon as the tune ended and he let go of Amabel. Annet was sitting on a bench at one side of the hall of the manor house. She wore a green dress that was girlishly short and showed her dainty ankles. The dress was not new, but she had embroidered the bosom with yellow and pink flowers. As always, a few ringlets had escaped from her headdress, and they hung around her face. She was twenty years too old to dress that way, but she did not know it, and nor did Wulfric.

Gwenda smiled as they began to dance. She wanted to look happy and carefree, but she realized her expression might be more like a grimace, and she gave up trying. She tore her gaze away from them and watched Davey and Amabel. Perhaps Amabel would not turn out quite like her mother. She had some of Annet's coquettish ways, but Gwenda had never seen her actually flirting, and right now she seemed uninterested in anyone but her husband.

Gwenda scanned the room and located her other son, Sam. He was with the young men, telling a story, miming it, holding the reins of an imaginary horse and almost falling off. He had them spellbound. They probably envied his luck in becoming a squire.

Sam was still living at Earlscastle. Lady Philippa had kept on most of the squires and men-at-arms, for her son Gerry would need them to ride and hunt with him, and practise with the sword and the lance. Gwenda hoped that, during the period of Philippa's regency, Sam would learn a more intelligent and merciful code that he would have got from Ralph.

There was not much else to look at, and Gwenda's gaze returned to her husband and the woman he had once wanted to marry. As Gwenda had feared, Annet was making the most of Wulfric's exuberance and inebriation. She gave him sexy smiles when they danced apart, and when they came together she clung to him, Gwenda thought, like a wet shirt.

The dance seemed to go on forever, Aaron Appletree repeating the bouncy melody endlessly on his bagpipes. Gwenda knew her husband's moods, and now she saw the glint in his eye that always appeared when he was about to ask her to lie with him. Annet knew exactly what she was doing, Gwenda thought furiously. She shifted restlessly on her bench, willing the music to stop, trying not to let her anger show.

However, she was seething with indignation when the tune ended with a flourish. She made up her mind to get Wulfric to calm down and sit beside her. She would keep him close for the rest of the afternoon, and there would be no trouble.

But then Annet kissed him.

While he still had his hands on her waist she stood on tiptoe and tilted her face and kissed him full on the lips, briefly but firmly; and Gwenda boiled over.

She jumped up from her bench and strode across the hall. As she passed the bridal couple, her son Davey saw the expression on her face and tried to detain her, but she ignored him. She went up to Wulfric and Annet, who were still gazing at one another and smiling stupidly. She poked Annet's shoulder with her finger and said loudly: "Leave my husband alone!"

Wulfric said: "Gwenda, please—"

"Don't you say anything," Gwenda said. "Just stay away from this whore."

Annet's eyes flashed defiance. "It's not dancing that whores are paid for."

"I'm sure you know all about what whores do."

"How dare you!"

Davey and Amabel intervened. Amabel said to Annet: "Please don't make a scene, Ma."

Annet said: "It's not me, it's Gwenda!"

Gwenda said: "I'm not the one trying to seduce someone else's husband."

Davey said: "Mother, you're spoiling the wedding."

Gwenda was too enraged to listen. "She always does this. She jilted him twenty-three years ago, but she's never let him go!"

Annet began to cry. Gwenda was not surprised. Annet's tears were just another means of getting her way.

Wulfric reached out to pat Annet's shoulder, and Gwenda snapped: "Don't touch her!" He jerked back his hand as if burned.

"You don't understand," Annet sobbed.

"I understand you all too well," Gwenda said.

"No, you don't," Annet said. She wiped her eyes and gave Gwenda a surprisingly direct, candid look. "You don't understand that you have won. He's yours. You don't know how he adores you, respects you, admires you. You don't see the way he looks at you when you're speaking to someone else."

Gwenda was taken aback. "Well," she mumbled, but she did not know what else to say.

Annet went on: "Does he eye younger women? Does he ever sneak away from you? How many nights have you slept apart in the last twenty years—two? Three? Can't you see that he will never love another woman as long as he lives?"

Gwenda looked at Wulfric and realized that all this was true. In fact it was obvious. She knew it and so did everyone. She tried to remember why she was so angry with Annet, but somehow the logic of it had slipped her mind.

The dancing had stopped and Aaron had put down his pipes. All the villagers now gathered around the two women, mothers of the bridal couple.

Annet said: “I was a foolish and selfish girl, and I made a stupid decision, and lost the best man I’ve ever met. And you got him. Sometimes I can’t resist the temptation to pretend it happened the other way around, and he’s mine. So I smile at him, and I pat his arm; and he’s kind to me because he knows he broke my heart.”

“You broke your own heart,” Gwenda said.

“I did. And you were the lucky girl who benefited from my folly.”

Gwenda was dumbfounded. She had never looked at Annet as a sad person. To her, Annet had always been a powerful, threatening figure, ever scheming to take Wulfric back. But that was never going to come to pass.

Annet said: “I know it annoys you when Wulfric is nice to me. I’d like to say it won’t happen again, but I know my own weakness. Do you have to hate me for it? Don’t let this spoil the joy of the wedding and of the grandchildren we both want. Instead of regarding me as your lifelong enemy, couldn’t you think of me as a bad sister, who sometimes misbehaves and makes you cross, but still has to be treated as one of the family?”

She was right. Gwenda had always thought of Annet as a pretty face with an empty head, but on this occasion Annet was the wiser of the two, and Gwenda felt humbled. “I don’t know,” she said. “Perhaps I could try.”

Annet stepped forward and kissed Gwenda’s cheek. Gwenda felt Annet’s tears on her face. “Thank you,” Annet said.

Gwenda hesitated, then put her arms around Annet’s bony shoulders and hugged her.

All around them, the villagers clapped and cheered.

A moment later, the music began again.

Early in November, Philemon arranged a service of thanksgiving for the end of the plague. Archbishop Henri came with Canon Claude. So did Sir Gregory Longfellow.

Gregory must have come to Kingsbridge to announce the king’s choice of bishop, Merthin thought. Formally, he would tell the monks that the king had nominated a certain person, and it would be up to the monks to elect that person or someone else; but, in the end, the monks usually voted for whomever the king had chosen.

Merthin could read no message in Philemon’s face, and he guessed that Gregory had not yet revealed the king’s choice. The decision meant everything to Merthin and Caris. If Claude got the job, their troubles were over. He was moderate and reasonable. But if Philemon became bishop, they faced more years of squabbling and lawsuits.

Henri took the service, but Philemon preached the sermon. He thanked God for answering the prayers of Kingsbridge monks and sparing the town from the worst effects of the plague. He did not mention that the monks had fled to St.-John-in-the-Forest and left the townspeople to fend for themselves; nor that Caris and Merthin had helped God to answer the monks' prayers by closing the town gates for six months. He made it sound as if he had saved Kingsbridge.

"It makes my blood boil," Merthin said to Caris, not troubling to keep his voice down. "He's completely twisting the facts!"

"Relax," she said. "God knows the truth, and so do the people. Philemon isn't fooling anyone."

She was right, of course. After a battle, the soldiers on the winning side always thanked God, but all the same they knew the difference between good generals and bad.

After the service, Merthin as alderman was invited to dine at the prior's palace with the archbishop. He was seated next to Canon Claude. As soon as grace had been said, a general hubbub of conversation broke out, and Merthin spoke to Claude in a low, urgent voice. "Does the archbishop know yet who the king has chosen as bishop?"

Claude replied with an almost imperceptible nod.

"Is it you?"

Claude's head shake was equally minimal.

"Philemon, then?"

Again the tiny nod.

Merthin's heart sank. How could the king pick a fool and coward such as Philemon in preference to someone as competent and sensible as Claude? But he knew the answer: Philemon had played his cards well. "Has Gregory instructed the monks yet?"

"No." Claude leaned closer. "He will probably tell Philemon informally tonight after supper, then speak to the monks in chapter tomorrow morning."

"So we've got until the end of the day."

"For what?"

"To change his mind."

"You won't do that."

"I'm going to try."

"You'll never succeed."

"Bear in mind that I'm desperate."

Merthin toyed with his food, eating little and fighting to keep his patience, until the archbishop rose from the table; then he spoke to Gregory. "If you would walk with me in the cathedral, I would speak to you about something I feel sure will interest you deeply," he said, and Gregory nodded assent.

They paced side by side up the nave, where Merthin could be sure no one

was lurking close enough to hear. He took a deep breath. What he was about to do was dangerous. He was going to try to bend the king to his will. If he failed, he could be charged with treason—and executed.

He said: “There have long been rumors that a document exists, somewhere in Kingsbridge, that the king would dearly love to destroy.”

Gregory was stone-faced, but he said: “Go on.” That was as good as confirmation.

“This letter was in the possession of a knight who has recently died.”

“Has he!” said Gregory, startled.

“You obviously know exactly what I’m talking about.”

Gregory answered like a lawyer. “Let us say, for the sake of argument, that I do.”

“I would like to do the king the service of restoring that document to him—whatever it may be.” He knew perfectly well what it was, but he could adopt a cautious pretense of ignorance as well as Gregory.

“The king would be grateful,” said Gregory.

“How grateful?”

“What did you have in mind?”

“A bishop more in sympathy with the people of Kingsbridge than Philemon.”

Gregory looked hard at him. “Are you trying to blackmail the king of England?”

Merthin knew this was the point of danger. “We Kingsbridge folk are merchants and craftsmen,” he said, trying to sound reasonable. “We buy, we sell, we make deals. I’m just trying to make a bargain with you. I want to sell you something, and I’ve told you my price. There’s no blackmail, no coercion. I make no threats. If you don’t want what I’m selling, that will be the end of the matter.”

They reached the altar. Gregory stared at the crucifix that surmounted it. Merthin knew exactly what he was thinking. Should he have Merthin arrested, taken to London, and tortured until he revealed the whereabouts of the document? Or would it be simpler and more convenient to the king just to nominate a different man as bishop of Kingsbridge?

There was a long silence. The cathedral was cold, and Merthin pulled his cloak closer around him. At last Gregory said: “Where is the document?”

“Close by. I’ll take you there.”

“Very well.”

“And our bargain?”

“If the document is what you believe it to be, I will honor my side of the arrangement.”

“And make Canon Claude bishop?”

“Yes.”

“Thank you,” said Merthin. “We’ll need to walk a little way into the woods.”

They went side by side down the main street and across the bridge, their breath making clouds in the air. A wintry sun shone with little warmth as they walked into the forest. Merthin found the way easily this time, having followed the same route only a few weeks earlier. He recognized the little spring, the big rock, and the boggy valley. They came quickly to the clearing with the broad oak tree, and he went straight to the spot where he had dug up the scroll.

He was dismayed to see that someone else had got here first.

He had carefully smoothed the loose earth and covered it with leaves but, despite that, someone had found the hiding place. There was a hole a foot deep, and a pile of recently excavated earth beside it. And the hole was empty.

He stared at the hole, appalled. “Oh, hell,” he said.

Gregory said: “I hope this isn’t some kind of charade—”

“Let me think,” Merthin snapped.

Gregory shut up.

“Only two people knew about this,” Merthin said, thinking aloud. “I haven’t told anyone, so Thomas must have. He was getting senile before he died. I think he spilled the beans.”

“But to whom?”

“Thomas spent the last few months of his life at St.-John-in-the-Forest, and the monks were keeping everyone else out, so it must have been a monk.”

“How many are there?”

“Twenty or so. But not many would know enough about the background to understand the significance of an old man’s mumblings about a buried letter.”

“That’s all very well, but where is it now?”

“I think I know,” said Merthin. “Give me one more chance.”

“Very well.”

They walked back to the town. As they crossed the bridge, the sun was setting over Leper Island. They went into the darkening cathedral, walked to the southwest tower, and climbed the narrow spiral staircase to the little room where the costumes for the mystery play were kept.

Merthin had not been here for eleven years, but dusty storerooms did not change much, especially in cathedrals, and this was the same. He found the loose stone in the wall and pulled it out.

All Philemon’s treasures were behind the stone, including the love note carved in wood. And there, among them, was a bag made of oiled wool. Merthin opened the bag and drew from it a vellum scroll.

“I thought so,” he said. “Philemon got the secret out of Thomas when Thomas was losing his mind.” No doubt Philemon was keeping the letter to

be used as a bargaining counter if the decision on the bishopric went the wrong way—but now Merthin could use it instead.

He handed the scroll to Gregory.

Gregory unrolled it. A look of awe came over his face as he read. “Dear God,” he said. “Those rumors were true.” He rolled it up again. He had the look of a man who has found something he has been seeking for many years.

“Is it what you expected?” Merthin said.

“Oh, yes.”

“And the king will be grateful?”

“Profoundly.”

“So your part of the bargain…?”

“Will be kept,” said Gregory. “You shall have Claude as your bishop.”

“Thank God,” said Merthin.

Eight days later, early in the morning, Caris was at the hospital, teaching Lolla how to tie a bandage, when Merthin came in. “I want to show you something,” he said. “Come to the cathedral.”

It was a bright, cold winter’s day. Caris wrapped herself in a heavy red cloak. As they were crossing the bridge into the city, Merthin stopped and pointed. “The spire is finished,” he said.

Caris looked up. She could see its shape through the spiderweb of flimsy scaffolding that still surrounded it. The spire was immensely tall and graceful. As her eye followed its upward taper, Caris had the feeling that it might go on forever.

She said: “And is it the tallest building in England?”

He smiled. “Yes.”

They walked up the main street and into the cathedral. Merthin led the way up the staircase within the walls of the central tower. He was used to the climb, but Caris was panting by the time they emerged into the open air at the summit of the tower, on the walkway that ran around the base of the spire. Up here the breeze was stiff and cold.

They looked at the view while Caris caught her breath. All Kingsbridge was laid out to the north and west: the main street, the industrial district, the river, and the island with the hospital. Smoke rose from a thousand chimneys. Miniature people hurried through the streets, walking or riding or driving carts, carrying tool bags or baskets of produce or heavy sacks; men and women and children, fat and thin, their clothing poor and worn or rich and heavy, mostly brown and green but with flashes of peacock blue and scarlet. The sight of them all made Caris marvel: each individual had a different life, every one of them rich and complex, with dramas in the past and challenges in the future, happy memories and secret sorrows, and a crowd of friends and

enemies and loved ones.

“Ready?” Merthin said.

Caris nodded.

He led her up the scaffolding. It was an insubstantial affair of ropes and branches, and it always made her nervous, though she did not like to say so: if Merthin could climb it, so could she. The wind made the whole structure sway a little, and the skirts of Caris’s robe flapped around her legs like the sails of a ship. The spire was as tall again as the tower, and the climb up the rope ladders was strenuous.

They stopped halfway for a rest. “The spire is very plain,” Merthin said, not needing to catch his breath. “Just a roll molding at the angles.” Caris realized that other spires she had seen featured decorative crochets, bands of colored stone or tile, and windowlike recesses. The simplicity of Merthin’s design was what made it seem to go on forever.

Merthin pointed down. “Hey, look what’s happening!”

“I’d rather not look down…”

“I think Philemon is leaving for Avignon.”

She had to see that. She was standing on a broad platform of planks, but all the same she had to hold on tight with both hands to the upright pole to convince herself that she was not falling. She swallowed hard and directed her gaze down the perpendicular side of the tower to the ground below.

It was worth the effort. A charette drawn by two oxen was outside the prior’s palace. An escort consisting of a monk and a man-at-arms, both on horseback, waited patiently. Philemon stood beside the charette while the monks of Kingsbridge came forward, one by one, and kissed his hand.

When they had all done, Brother Sime handed him a black-and-white cat, and Caris recognized the descendant of Godwyn’s cat Archbishop.

Philemon climbed into the carriage and the driver whipped the oxen. The vehicle lumbered slowly out of the gate and down the main street. Caris and Merthin watched it cross the double bridge and disappear into the suburbs.

“Thank God he’s gone,” said Caris.

Merthin looked up. “Not much farther to the top,” he said. “Soon you will be higher off the ground than any woman in England has ever stood.” He began to climb again.

The wind grew stronger but, despite her anxiety, Caris felt exhilarated. This was Merthin’s dream, and he had made it come true. Every day for hundreds of years people for miles around would look at this spire and think how beautiful it was.

They reached the top of the scaffolding and stood on the stage that encircled the peak of the spire. Caris tried to forget that there was no railing around the platform to stop them falling off.

At the point of the spire was a cross. It had looked small from the ground,

but now Caris saw that it was taller than she.

“There’s always a cross at the top of a spire,” Merthin said. “That’s conventional. Aside from that, practise varies. At Chartres, the cross bears an image of the sun. I’ve done something different.”

Caris saw that, at the foot of the cross, Merthin had placed a life-size stone angel. The kneeling figure was not gazing up at the cross, but out to the west, over the town. Looking more closely, Caris saw that the angel’s features were not conventional. The small round face was clearly female, and looked vaguely familiar, with neat features and short hair.

Then she realized that the face was her own.

She was amazed. “Will they let you do that?” she said.

Merthin nodded. “Half the town thinks you’re an angel already.”

“I’m not, though,” she said.

“No,” he said with the familiar grin that she loved so much. “But you’re the closest they’ve seen.”

The wind blustered suddenly. Caris grabbed Merthin. He held her tightly, standing confidently on spread feet. The gust died away as quickly as it had come, but Merthin and Caris remained locked together, standing there at the top of the world, for a long time afterward.

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