

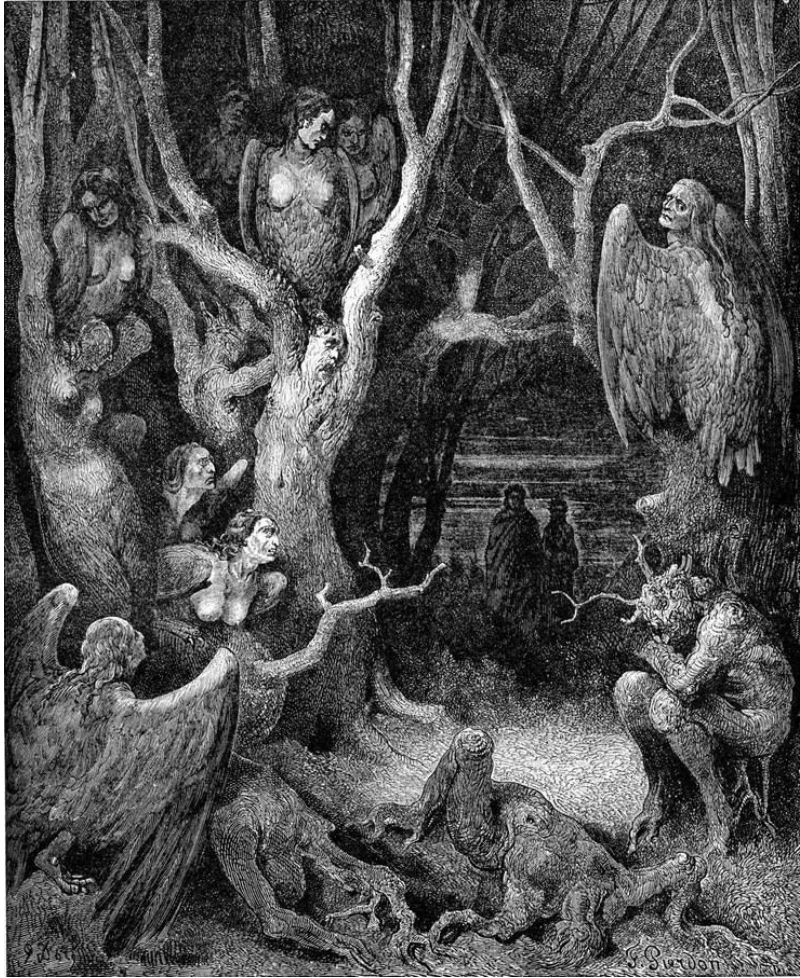


**J. M. Munro**

Mariana de la Mar 2

# **THE UNDEPARTED DEAD**

## **Part I**



**Gustave Doré - "Harpies in the Forest of Suicides"**  
**(Canto XIII, Inferno, Divine Comedy, by Dante Alighieri)**

Mariana continues her bawdy and frequently catastrophic career as a solver of mysteries, this time in England, where, having been recruited to a network of secret agents specialising in the occult, she takes on two of the Undead which infested the country, especially Essex, not only in the early Middle Ages but again in the 14th Century, in the wake of the Black Death.

*"It would not be easy to believe that the corpses of the dead should sally (I know not by what agency) from their graves, and should wander about to the terror or destruction of the living, and again return to the tomb, which of its own accord spontaneously opened to receive them, did not frequent examples, occurring in our own times, suffice to establish this fact, to the truth of which there is abundant testimony."* He wrote this *"as a warning to posterity"* and added *"were I to write down all the instances of this kind which I have ascertained to have befallen in our times, the undertaking would be beyond measure laborious and troublesome"*. (**William of Newburgh**, a 12th-century English historian and Augustinian Canon of Anglo-Saxon descent from Bridlington, Yorkshire.)

It turns out that the mission involves going undercover as a prostitute (not difficult for her, given her experiences since she was sold as a sex-slave at the age of fourteen) but will she ever again be able to convince people that Mad Mariana the Spanish whore and Lady Marian MacElpin are one and the same person?

**J. M. Munro**

# **THE UNDEPARTED DEAD**

## **Part I**

*Wherever blood is shed  
they gather round,  
the undeparted dead.*

© J.M. Munro 2019

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

This is an authorised free edition from [www.obooko.com](http://www.obooko.com)  
Although you do not have to pay for this e-book, the author's intellectual property rights remain fully protected by international Copyright law. You are licensed to use this digital copy strictly for your personal enjoyment only: it must not be redistributed commercially or offered for sale in any form. If you paid for this free edition, or to gain access to it, we suggest you demand an immediate refund and report the transaction to the author.

### **WARNING**

**These books all contain sexually explicit scenes unsuitable for very young readers. And certain readers of more mature age may find the scenes depicting medieval witchcraft, torture and prostitution, not to mention the medieval Undead, all a little too much.**

## **Contents**

- 1 [Dead Man's Hands](#)
- 2 [The Arcane Net](#)
- 3 [One of the Undying](#)
- 4 [The Saxon Sea](#)
- 5 [If Women Had Written Stories](#)
- 6 [Long Will Langland](#)
- 7 [Who the Hunter, Who the Prey?](#)

# 1

## DEAD MAN'S HANDS

*All that do these things are an abomination  
unto the LORD (Deut 18:12)*

Southwark, *March, 1379*

'Do you remember when you jumped into the river in Paris?' Ferchard asked, suddenly. 'In the middle of winter. Daft wench.'

'Daft? If I hadn't, the poor girl would have drowned.'

'I didn't mean you, not this time. The red-headed lass you jumped in after. What was her name?'

'Natalie.'

'Aye, Natalie. Good thing you're half fish.'

Ferchard and I were standing on London Bridge, gazing down at the rushing water, thinking and dreaming and reminiscing. Flowing water will always make you dream, and how could we help comparing it with the Seine?

When the tide is out in London, there is no comparison, the Thames is just a shallow stream bordered on both sides by mud-flats littered with garbage, but when the sea surges back up, the river fills and spreads and is wider and to my mind even more majestic than the Seine.

'Ah, remember that great island and the cathedral – Notre Dame – and the tavern where we took you after we fished the pair of you out? What was the name of the place? You can't get food like that here.'

'The Chaire,' I said. 'Ferchard, I think ...'

I'd been waiting ages – months! – for the right moment and that morning he did seem to be in a good mood. Had he finally forgiven me? We would see.

'Aye, lass? What is it now?'

I didn't like that "now" but I took the plunge. 'Ferchard, I'd really like to make use of that introduction the Sire de Coucy gave me to Princess Isabel. Princess Isabel of England is Coucy's ex-wife, did you know that?'

The pale blue eyes turned icy..

'It's been a year now,' I hurried on, 'and I need to make myself known to people who matter if we're going to stay here. As Lady Marian, I mean. Before the same thing happens as happened in Paris.'

'The Princess has contacts in France. She may already have heard about you.'

She may indeed, and I could hardly blame Ferchard for that.

We gazed at the river a while longer in silence, then we walked home.

As we entered the house he said 'You know all I have always wanted was for you to leave behind the past and establish yourself as your father's daughter. Go then, lass. If you can be accepted by the English royal family as who you truly are, you will be welcome everywhere.'

'Thank you, Ferchard.' I gave him a quick kiss on the cheek, and lifting my skirts ran up the stairs, shouting for Yahia, the enormous Moorish eunuch who had been with me since my time in Granada.

The princess was staying at the Savoy Palace, the London home of her brother John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, uncle of the boy-king and without question the most powerful man in the kingdom. I thought it might help my cause if I met him, too, but there was little chance of that.

My note simply said I had met de Coucy at Beauté-sur-Marne and, on learning that I was coming to London, he had recommended that I present myself to her; that she always liked to meet interesting and well-travelled people.

Next morning, a messenger arrived wearing the Lancaster livery, a shy, gangly youth whom Khadija's heart warmed to at once. She began to feed him on fresh-baked bread and new-laid eggs – we had chickens



already, thanks to Undead John. I sat opposite the lad, hungry myself at breakfast-time for once, and devoured one of those omelettes only Khadija can cook.

As we ate, we watched each other – he uncertain at first, then relaxing as he realised I was on his side.

I looked back down at the note he had brought, then back up at him. He was clearly hoping that notes between the Savoy Palace and this house at breakfast-time would become a regular occurrence.

*Her Royal Highness the Princess Isabel would be pleased to receive Lady Marian MacElpin this afternoon betwixt sext and nones.*

'Would you like me to return at midday to escort you, my lady?'

'Yes, that would perhaps be a good idea this first time. Thank you – er –'

'Humphrey, my lady.'

Why *had* the Princess agreed to see me? My first impression when I was ushered into their presence was that it was mainly her daughter Philippa's desire to talk of her father, de Coucy.

'Oh please! Tell me about him!' she cried.

'He seemed very well,' I told her. 'Happy, confident – everyone knew him and liked him.'

'But did you speak to him?'

'I met both him and Olivier de Clissons. Really, I just listened in as they discussed the peace talks at Boulogne. Your father seemed in favour of peace between England and France, Clissons less so.'

I glanced at Isabel to see whether she agreed with Clissons. She might. After all, she was by reputation very English and very much her father's daughter. Despite having been married to Coucy for years, she had apparently been quite unable to settle down and live in France. Her father, the old war-horse Edward III, must be turning in his grave at all this talk of peace, but she seemed to have no strong feelings on the subject.

Politics best left to the men, no doubt.

I would stick to personalities.

'Clissons wandered off and your father spoke to me for a moment, then the Emperor beckoned me over, and –'

'*The Emperor?*' Philippa was entranced.

'Yes, it was he who had invited me. That was his last day in Paris, and –'

'But how did you know him? How did *he* know *you*?'

Philippa reminded me of Thomas of Pizan's daughter Christine. The wide-eyed enthusiasm, the open smile – albeit behind a large pomander, held to her nose.

I wasn't fooling her any more than I had fooled Christine. How had I ever expected to?

Her mother was not wide-eyed at all. She was after something. 'A little bird told me ...' she began, from behind her pomander, and paused, waiting for our full attention. Then lowered her pomander and went on, 'A little bird told me that you met the Emperor and King Charles in private and – is that not so, Lady Marian?'

'Hardly in private, your highness. The Emperor's three children were present, and Thomas of Pizan – il Dottore Tomasso di Benvenuto da Pizzano, to give him his full title.'

'Ah yes, your friend the astrologer. Or should I say alchemist?'

'Astrologer will do, I think.' I was getting a little huffy. 'He is the French King's astrologer – and physician.'

'Hmm. And this little bird informed me that you read the Emperor's hands, told his fortune. Even predicted his date of death, Lady Marian.'

'The songs of little birds can be highly misleading, your highness.'

My mind was racing. Who could have spoken of it? Not Thomas of Pizan, surely. It must have been the king – discussing the future with his ministers or simply gossiping with his queen, his family. And from there it spread, and crossed the Channel.

It was Philippa who saved me for the moment. 'And the princess? Anna? Did you read her hands?'

'Yes. Her father wished me to, and she consented.'

'And?'

I laughed. 'These things are confidential. If I read your hands, told your fortune, would you want me gossiping about it afterwards?'

'No, of course not. But ... would you?'

'Would I gossip? No, that's what –'

'No, would you read my hand? Tell me my fortune?'

'Philippa! Are you sure you – ?'

'Mama! Marian read Princess Anna's hand!'

Princess Isabel stared at me. I'd been summoned here to have my brains picked but it wasn't turning out like that. 'Oh, very well. But don't think I'm going to leave you two alone.'

'No, Mama. Marian was never alone with Princess Anna, were you, Marian?'

'No.' Only with her father. I realised once again how much I had loved the Emperor.

But "Mama" was persistent. 'First, Marian, why don't you set my mind at rest by telling us something – just something – of what you learnt about dear Anna?'

'But I told you. I can't –'

'What I really want to know, what we all really want to know, is whether she will one day be Richard's bride and Queen of England.'

Yes, of course that's what they want to know. I kept my lips firmly sealed.

But Princess Isabel persisted. 'This little bird told me *that* was one of the questions her father the Emperor put to you after Princess Anna herself had left the room.'

I remained silent.

'He wouldn't have put it unless he himself – a notorious dabbler in the secret arts – he himself believed that eventuality to be likely. Highly likely, even. He simply wanted confirmation, didn't he.'

I nodded.

She smiled.

Philippa squealed. 'So you won't be surprised if our next queen turns out to be an old acquaintance of yours?'

'No,' I admitted. 'I shan't be surprised. Though "old acquaintance" is pushing it a bit!'

'But you will be one of the very few people in this country she already knows.'

'All right, Philippa. You and Marian go ahead. I'll watch and listen.'

'And keep your mouth closed!'

I caught Philippa's eye. She knew she'd said what I'd been longing to say.

She moved a chair so that I could sit facing her, and I did so. We were knee to knee. I took both her hands in mine and examined them, the palms, then the backs, then the palms again. They were the hands of a princess, yes, but they were large and strong for a girl her age,

with wide-set thumbs on a full, firm Mount of Venus. However, the Lunar Mount was undeveloped and her Fate Line, though it started out strongly, wavered at the Line of Head and petered out at the Line of Heart. Only the Apollo Line came to the fore in later life.

So she was strong and healthy, loving and kind, and could look forward to a long life and, in the end, a measure of happiness. She was also a physical, practical person, with little feeling for the spiritual, the mystical, side of life. This I could tell her. She was also doomed to a loveless marriage and to remain childless. That I would rather not tell her.

'Tell me!'

I told her. She was not impressed, though she agreed it was true. 'But "in the end a measure of happiness"? You mean most of my life I'll be *unhappy*?'

'Telling someone's fortune *honestly* is never all good news, my lady.'

'Philippa, I told you.'

'Well, no, of course not, but ... My marriage? Children?'

'There is no sign of children here yet. But that is often the case on very young hands like yours, the hands of those who are little more than children themselves.'

'No children?'

'But what I can tell you,' I was guessing to some extent here, but given her character and her status not wildly so, 'What I can tell you is that you will have a role to play in the great events that unfold during the years to come. An important role. And that you will be a close friend to Princess Anna – Queen Anne as she will be then. So, now I have answered your first question! And that must be enough for you.'

'But not for me, Marian,' said her mother, coldly. 'Now I want you to tell me *my* fortune. Oh, not from my hands. I've had my hands read many a time. No, I want you to use *these*.' From a small table that stood at her side she picked up two silk purses.

'No, Mama!'

Ignoring her daughter, she held out one of the bags to me.

I took it. Opened it. Peered inside.

An assortment of the dried and withered feet of various small animals. Gingerly, I pulled some of them out, one by one, examining them. There were the feet and the tails of a rat, a rabbit – they were

obvious – and what I thought might be a weasel; a mouse; a hare; and others I didn't recognise. I'd seen the same at Cuenca, in Spain. But when Doña Inés had cast them and read them there had always been two hands among the unholy relics – two *human* hands, mummified and no doubt shrunken, and almost certainly cut from the body of a hanged man.

She gazed at me and said, 'Do you know what is missing?'

'A pair of hands.'

'You see, Philippa? I told you she would – '

'But I don't!'

'Don't what? Don't know that a pair of hands – '

'I meant – '

'*Lady* Marian, you are going to read the Feet and Tails for me. Here are the Hands.'

She passed me the other silk purse.

Philippa looked as horrified as I must have done. 'No, Mama! If Marian doesn't – '

'Marian does. And Marian has no choice.'

I hesitated. I was in strange waters here in the Savoy Palace. Deep waters, with many swirling undercurrents and other hidden dangers. In unfamiliar water one must swim cautiously. Swim, not wade. To wade blindly was to court disaster. And I was wading. I was thinking: wondering whether a "real" lady would consider herself more or less the princess's equal and simply refuse with a laugh. Or was a princess, a king's daughter, so far above a mere knight's daughter that she could treat her like a servant? I didn't know. This society was utterly foreign to me. As was any such society, despite my brief acquaintance with the royals of France and Bohemia. I should have learnt that from my dealings with Queen Blanche in Avignon. Or rather her dealings with me. And looking back on it, I'd been nothing more than a moment's diversion for the royals in Paris, too. A visit from a soothsayer. And to the Emperor, a potential mistress to pass the idle moment with.

At least I hadn't started out here grovelling and afraid to look them in the eye. On the contrary, these two had treated me more or less as an equal ...

So stop wading and wondering.

I dived in.

They were not small, the hands; not, *deo gratias*, a child's hands as I had sometimes suspected the pair Doña Inés used in Cuenca might be. They were dessicated and shrunken, yes, skin, tendons and bones, but the fingers were long ... Longer than mine. I held them up, examined them. She could wait. I wondered what I could read of the man – yes, it had been a man – who once owned and used these hands, considered them part of himself, then found, as we all must, that we are not our bodies, though our bodies may fleetingly, at least when in their prime, reflect our immortal selves.

The principal lines were still clear, but there was little I could tell from them. However, the long fingers, long narrow palm, indicated a water hand: a man, then, of sensitivity, and perhaps not entirely at home in this world.

I held the hands together between my own, palm to palm, and closed my eyes. And knew at once. When those hands had been cut off, that man had been still alive.

I opened my eyes, glared at the princess. 'These are not Dead Man's Hands. These are the hands of a living man. He could even be alive still now.'

She nodded.

She knew that. She even knew whose hands they were.

'I need a dead man's hands,' I said.

'He is dead. Now. Get on with your job.'

She didn't say it – because Philippa was there? – but I heard the veiled threat. *Before I have you whipped*. Or even: *The next may be a dead woman's hands* ... She was all-powerful. Nothing she could say or do would ever be held against her.

I had no choice.

I put the hands into the first bag, the larger one, with the feet and tails, held it closed and mixed them up.

Before I cast them, I knew I had to clear my head of all thought of what the hands and the various different feet and tails might signify. Either way, what I remembered was little enough. The hands pointing out, away from each other, was good. The hands pointing in, fingers straining to touch each other, was bad. The rat's tail was lucky, the rabbit's tail unlucky. The mouse's feet, if grouped together – yes, there had been all four – were auspicious; the coming winter would be passed in (relative) comfort. What else? Nothing!

Forget all that! Focus simply on the princess ... her eyes, her face ... her aura. Her aura? I don't usually see auras! But suddenly hers was clear around her, and it was dark and murky. This was not going to be good.

I emptied the bag onto the floor from waist height, exactly as I had seen Doña Inés do.

They fell clunk: not a bounce, not a shuffle. Just a twitch of the hands as the tips of the middle fingers touched. *A twitch?* They were straining to touch! I had never seen that before. I doubted whether even Doña Inés had. But I knew what it meant. Especially as all the other objects had clustered beneath and on top of and between the fingers of the hands. Only the rat's tail had somehow slithered clear.

She was looking at me. She could tell. So could Philippa.

I should have listened to Ferchard. What was I doing here? Please God, I will always listen to Ferchard in future if –

'Well?' Princess Isabel was keeping cool and calm, as she had been groomed to since childhood. 'What do the disgusting things tell us?'

*Disgusting.* Said as though *I* had brought them into the palace and I too was disgusting.

'The reading, girl!'

'I'm not sure. I –'

'Yes, you are.'

'Very well. This foretells your death, madame.'

'We all die.'

'Indeed.'

She studied me, not the objects. 'How soon?'

'As you say, we all must die eventually. If you follow my advice, do just as I say, you too will live out your full life span –'

'How long?'

'I'm not sure.'

'Less than a year?'

I nodded.

'Less than a month?'

I nodded.

Philippa screamed.

The door flew open and two liveried guards burst in.

'Get out!' Isabel snapped. 'And you – be silent, child.'

'Madame! This – this – ' Suddenly I was pleading. 'This is not inexorable! You must break your habits, disturb and rearrange the threads of destiny – '

'I suppose now you wish to sell me – or offer me in exchange for my favour – a spell of some kind to undo this fate?'

'No! I told you! What you must do is change – '

'Would you like to hear what Coucy actually said about you in his letter to me? I assume it was you, though there is no mention of a Scottish Lady Marian. He said: "At Beauté-sur-Marne the other day, the Emperor was wearing on his sleeve a Spanish courtesan, one Doña Mariana de la Mar. It transpired, however, that there was more to it than His Majesty's famed lasciviousness. She shares his interest in the Dark Arts. He had not only invited her to read Princess Anna's hands at a soirée a couple of days earlier, but had actually allowed her to read his own and predict his future and that of the Empire. I am telling you this because she mentioned in my hearing that she was considering making a move to London in the near future – France has grown too hot for her, apparently – and I suggested she present herself to you. I know you find such creatures *amusant*.'"'

What could I say? After all, every word was true. It was simply not the whole truth. It was one side of a coin. The coin, I was coming more and more to realise, that was me.

I said nothing. Philippa clung to her mother and gazed at me reproachfully over the pomander now clutched tightly to her nose.

I wanted to say "May I leave?" but I sensed that whatever I said, the princess would snap out a command to the contrary.

I kept my mouth shut.

'How many days would you say?'

*What?* 'Oh. At least ten, your highness. But the rat's tail out there – that means this is not fixed, not inevitable. It is simply what will happen if things are allowed to go on as they are. If, however, you change everything, do nothing that you would normally have been doing during the next two or three months, then – '

'Yes, you said that. I will go to Sheen.'

'Not Sheen, my lady. That's too normal, too much a part of your life. Go to a convent you have never visited, have never even heard of, would never normally visit under any circumstances, and spend three months there.'



'Three months in some pokey, impoverished little convent? That *would* be the death of me! Though I suppose I could take my own servants, my own wine, my own sweetmeats –'

'No! You must drink the sour wine the sisters drink, live as they live –'

'That is enough, Doña Mariana. You may leave us. Guard!'

The door opened and one of the guards appeared on the threshold. His eyes were on me, not her. He knew I was trouble.

'Ah. But as it turns out that you are not a Lady but a Spanish whore, I suppose you expect payment for your time. What have I here? Some cheap trinket.'

'Here, Marian – Mariana, whatever your name is – take this.' Philippa pulled a ring off her finger and held it out to me – careful, I noticed to conceal it from her mother.

I'd been going to decline payment, but this ring intrigued me. I took it and slipped it into the purse at my waist.

'Remove her,' ordered Isabel. 'And inform the guards at the gate that she is not to be admitted to the Savoy Palace again. She is a Spanish whore named Mariana de la something or other but she poses as a Lady Marian MacElpin.'

I am quite tall, but my my feet didn't touch the ground as they escorted me bodily along gilded corridors, down a different flight of stairs – where my feet did catch and clatter – and so to the guardroom.

Where they all turned and looked at me.

Oh God, no. No!

When she had told him I was a whore, she had been authorising them – inviting them! – to rape me.

'Lady Marian?'

My head snapped round.

A small, plump man was taking in the situation. He didn't look like much of an ally – he was wearing no livery, and couldn't have taken on even one of the guards by himself – yet they all seemed wary of him. His quick, clever eyes flicked over me, then passed more slowly over them – some looked guilty, some belligerent – then back to me. 'Are you entering or leaving the palace?'

'Oh, leaving. Most definitely leaving.'

'Then allow me to accompany you.'

'But that is not Lady Marian, sir!' It was one of the guards from outside the princess's room. 'It is a Spanish whore who pretends –'

'I have it on the very best authority that this *is* the Lady Marian MacElpin. Now, if you will excuse us ...'

Once clear of the palace and down on the quay – 'Fleet Street is no place for you,' he murmured as he took my elbow and guided me down the slippery steps – he looked me in the eye and said, 'You were in trouble there.'

I nodded.

'May I ask what precipitated it?'

'Oh. Princess Isabel took a dislike to me ... You have the advantage of me, sir.'

'Chaucer. Geoffrey Chaucer.'

'Well, I must thank you, Master Chaucer. I am quite capable of looking after myself, but there were an awful lot of them.'

'There were indeed. And bloodshed is always better avoided.'

'How did you know me? Who was this "very best authority"?''

'You were pointed out to me – twice – in Paris. First at a rather barbarous celebration of the Taking of Antioch, and then, a couple of days later, at Beauté-sur-Marne.'

When I didn't answer, he went on.

'As you may have guessed, I am a diplomat. At present in the service of His Grace the Duke of Lancaster. I had waited in Paris two weeks for a word with the Emperor. That little festivity at Vincennes was my last chance.'

'And did you speak to him?'

'Oh, yes. You *saw* me. Our eyes met. Then he patted your bottom and sent you away for a few minutes so that he could speak to me in private.'

'Our eyes met?'

'Oh, yes. Such eyes. You are very memorable, my lady. I am very forgettable. An advantage in my – ah – avocation.'

'I will never forget you again, or what you did for me this morning.'

He chuckled. 'It is not often I get to play the knight in shining armour. But tell me where you are staying. I must go to the Tower, and I am a little pressed.'

'Then perhaps we can take the same boat? My home is in Southwark.'

'Southwark? I see. Yes, this ferry will take you across, then drop me at the Tower wharf. Come.'

He took me by the hand this time and helped me aboard.

Once we were settled, I seized the opportunity of having his hand in mine to open it and examine it.

'You read hands? Yes, of course you do. Was that why the princess summoned you? Yes, of course it was. That, and no doubt other talents and skills you are gifted with.'

'Can any one join in this conversation?'

'I do beg your pardon. Katherine – my sister-in-law – is always laughing at me, telling me I talk to myself because I can't find anyone else sufficiently witty and well-read and widely-travelled to have a decent conversation with. Philippa – her sister, my wife – says it is simply that no one else will listen to my nonsense.'

'I'm sure Katherine is in the right of it.'

'In this case, Katherine would be quite wrong, for I feel I may have met my match.'

'I am still a child, but one day perhaps we shall meet and converse, if not as equals, at least on equal terms.'

'Soon then. For though it is true you are still in the spring of life, my summer is all but over and these white hairs on my chin remind me of the old man's beard in autumn hedgerows.'

I laughed. 'They become you.'

His eyes twinkled.

'What are you thinking, Master Chaucer? That that was a professional response? Because of what you heard about me in the guardroom? What else have you heard about me? And who, may I ask, pointed me out to you as Lady Marian MacElpin? At Vincennes, Beauté-sur-Marne, everyone knew me as Doña Mariana de la Mar. Was it someone at the Louvre? At the Taking of Jerusalem?'

'No. There, when I asked, I was told that you were a Spanish whore by the name of Mariana de la Mar. No surprise to me to see such a one on the arm of Dottore Tomasso di Benvenuto da Pizzano, though his daughter's presence gave me pause.'

'*La douce* Christine. At least that's what the Emperor called her.'

'Hm. When I saw you next, you were on the arm of the Emperor – *his* daughter was not present – and you were looking remarkably pleased with yourself. As well you might. Then someone whispered in

my ear, "The Emperor's pick of Paris. You approve?" "No Parisienne, though," I responded. "No," he agreed, his eyes running over you like fingers, "a little bird from the north, here for the winter no doubt. In the spring she will fly north again, back to her native Scotland." He definitely approved! But *Scotland*? I am not often left speechless. Seeing my surprise, he said: "That is the Lady Marian MacElpin." I might have thought you two women who chanced to look alike, but having the same name, Marian, Mariana, seemed too great a coincidence. Was this one woman passing as two quite different people? And if so, which was the real one? *Which is the real one?*

'Who told you my name?'

'On which occasion?'

'Both.'

'In the first case, it was a lady. One of Wenceslas' entourage. In the second case, it was a young man – a mysterious young man I know professionally.'

'Mysterious? But if he'd been invited, then he – '

'You, too, are mysterious ... There were the great and the good. And then there were the diplomats and courtiers, like me, and the – ah – hangers-on, like you. And then there were the servants. He was masquerading as a servant. I recognised him. Fortunately, no one else did.'

'His name?'

'Ah, his real name. No, that is out of the question. But he travels under a variety of *noms de guerre*. One he has been using recently is Jack Cutting.'

'*Jack Cutting*?' That was my *nom de guerre*!

'We are arriving. This is where you alight, Lady Marian.'

Perfect timing. The man was indeed a diplomat.

'Master Chaucer, I hope very much to make your further acquaintance some day soon.'

'Not soon, I'm afraid. I am going abroad again. But I shall seek you out upon my return. You and Katherine have in common that a man enjoys your company.'

'No doubt it is simply that we both enjoy the company of a man like you ... Are there others – like you – in London? I am new here.'

'Well, let me see. Like me the courtier? Hundreds. Like me the diplomat and secret agent? A few. Like me the poet? There are only

two other acknowledged poets practising their art in London now. One is John Gower. A neighbour of yours, incidentally. He will amuse you, but little else. The other is Long Will Langland. He will not amuse you. Indeed, after a couple of hours with him you may wish to jump in the river – which is handy – and be done with it all.'

'If I jumped in the river, I would not be done with it all. I'm a swimmer.'

'Are you indeed. Then perhaps you might choose to take to the water and live like a fish. For he will attempt to persuade you of the vanity of life in the world performing works in the service of Lady Meed, and of the vacuity of the alternative, life as a hermit performing no works whatsoever, good or bad. But when we are all long dead, his great poem will still be read, along perhaps with some few lines of mine and poor Gower's.'

The boat bumped against the key.

'Speaking of secret agents, do you know Lady Alice? Alice Perrers? I believe she might find a use for you.'

'Alice Perrers? The old king's –'

'Poor Alice desperately needs a secret emissary, someone new and unknown, to run errands for her here and there. Highly confidential errands.'

'By "here" and "there" you mean?'

'"Here" is – *here*. "There" might well be France, to begin with. And she has no one now that she can trust.'

'Not even you?'

'Me? My master these days is John of Gaunt. But hush,' he said, looking over my shoulder to where someone was obviously taking an interest in our conversation.

I hushed. 'You said John Gower is a neighbour of mine.'

'He has rooms at the Priory of St Mary Overie – just here.'

'And Will Langland?'

'Long Will? He is a clerk in minor orders, but has no money. He lives in a cottage in Cornhill and makes a pittance singing masses for the dead. Farewell, Lady Marian.'

'Master Chaucer.'

I was handed off the boat, then turned and watched as my saviour was carried away from me across the river to the Tower.

And so it began, with the visit to the Princess and her daughter in Gaunt's great palace, and with the mention of my running a confidential errand for Alice Perrers, who had been the old king's mistress and was now *persona non grata* everywhere that mattered.

A whore, everyone called Alice. A whore and a thief.

Probably not someone I should cultivate. On the other hand, it looked as though I was now also *persona non grata* in that same great palace, not to mention being publicly labelled a whore. I would like very much to help her, to be someone she could trust – and as a source of information, of simple gossip, she'd be invaluable to a newcomer like me. However, I was in no hurry to return to Paris. I'd leave Lady Alice and her errand in the hands of the Three Weird Sisters. France had grown too hot for me. Coucy was right.

I walked back home along Clink Street, past the Bishop's prison with its never-ending screams and wailing and the filthy hands thrust out between the bars for food, and as I did so, felt the cold finger-tips of one of the Weird Sisters reach out towards me.

I bought half a dozen loaves of bread from the man with the barrow who stands there oblivious all day every day, and broke them up and distributed them among the grasping hands, and found myself thinking of the Feeding of the Five Thousand. Well, and if I could, if I did, they would burn me, that was for sure.

And then, as I walked away, I remembered the Emperor – Charles – who had said just that to me last year in Paris. Or was it Thomas of Pizan, the French King's alchemist, who had said, speaking of healing the sick: *If it worked but rarely and partially, it would be called medicine. If it was truly effective, miraculous in effect, it would be labelled magic, and condemned.* Anyway, the Emperor had agreed. Only the Pope himself could perform miracles with impunity, and so far as I knew no Pope since St Peter himself had ever been able to.

Which reminded me of a beautiful little story that was passing around among the theology students while I was in Paris. Thomas Aquinas had been with the then Pope on one of the balconies of the papal palace in Rome. Together, they were watching Swiss mercenaries unloading bags of treasure from the backs of a train of mules and carrying them into the palace.

The Pope smiled and said, 'No longer need Peter say "Silver and gold have I none".'

To which Aquinas replied, 'No longer *can* Peter say "But that which I have, I give unto you: Take up your bed and walk".'

Laughing to myself, I turned the corner by the Castle-on-the-Hoop and pushed open the door beneath the sign of the Hand of Fatima (The Eye-in-the-Hand), my house in Southwark, where I was greeted by Undead John and the mouth-watering aroma of one of Khadija's *tajines*. A perfect ending to a terrible day.

Which after all was much better than a perfect day with a terrible ending.

\* \* \* \* \*

London, like Paris, is foul when it's hot. The river steams and froths, and only adds to the horrible all-pervading stench.

All right, that day was no more than warm, but it reminded me of when we'd arrived in London the previous summer. The truth is, I was homesick. Homesick for beaches, for the sea. I needed to swim.

It was three years since we'd left *al Cazar*, Los Alcazares, my home by the Mar Menor. And even that had been only a visit. Not since I was fourteen had I *lived* by the sea, been free to spend all day every day in the sea. Cuenca, Granada, Avignon, Paris, London – not one of them by the sea, though London is the most tantalising for the river here is sea water, flowing up stream not down when the great tide sweeps in, and you can smell the sea and watch gulls soaring over the ships' masts and swooping across the water, hear them squawking as they fight over the detritus from the fish market just along the way from where I live in Southwark, on the south bank.

But not that day. The sun was shining and the gulls were miles away, bobbing up and down on the sparkling sea.

Lucky birds. Me, I was standing, undecided, at the end of the bank where the stairs went down into the swirling water. From there, if I wished, I could take a boat across to the North Bank as I had when I paid that catastrophic visit to Princess Isabel at the Savoy Palace. The late Princess Isabel, for she died, as I had most unfortunately predicted.

Time to leave London.

Ferchard was impatient to travel on to Scotland. Ferchard, Sir Ferchard de Dyngvale, my father's old friend, who believed he stood to me *in loco parentis*. We all lived together fairly happily in our three-storey house just off Clink Street. It was *my* house, actually, but despite that, I was looked upon as the young one, the foolish one, the irresponsible one, and what was worse, the immoral one, the "one with a past". Khadija, my slave/servant/nurse, simply affected shock and horror at everything I did and said. She was so convinced I would come to a bad end, she had finally managed to convince everyone else – even me. I was almost looking forward to it. Yahia never criticised, never aired his opinions. Yahia, my eunuch, adored me. He just looked very, very sad when, for instance, I went out dressed as a boy.

Ferchard, being a Scot, knew nothing of London and the English, and when we came north from Spain, via Avignon and Paris, intended it only to be a stop on the way home.

That always annoyed me. Home for me was not the north of Scotland, where my father and Ferchard had grown up together. Home for me was the Mar Menor, the Little Sea, in the south-east of Spain, near Cartagena, and the village of Los Alcazares, where my maternal grandfather had been *alcalde*, the mayor, until he died.

Finally, Ferchard decided to stay in London 'for a wee while'. He even agreed to buy a house in Southwark, rather than in the City itself. Though who he was agreeing *with*, I'm not sure. It was certainly him and Martin who found the house. And bought it. With my money.

And he began to settle down. Better than me, in some respects. But then Ferchard had English, a blond giant he had known in Outremer. English himself had only been in London a year or two, but he knew everyone that mattered – like the organisers of cock-fights and dog-fights, the proprietors of bear and bull-baiting arenas, and the players who performed wherever they could find an open space to gather an audience.

Everything was permitted where we lived, in Southwark, to the south of the Thames. Nothing was permitted in the City itself, which lay encircled by its great wall all along the north bank, facing us.

No wonder Ferchard had opted for Southwark.

And in addition to English, he had Martin of Chich.

Martin had been in France too, and when they met "by chance" at a dog-fight in Southwark, (if you believe that was a chance meeting,



you'll believe anything!) he recognised Ferchard as one who had been a companion of Pierre de Montrouge, and afterwards of Petit-Jean. He helped Ferchard with buying the house, then left, saying he had to return to Chich. However, from what I gathered as the months went by, he spent little time in his village. He drank and whored with his friends in the nearby town of Colchester, and every month came up to London for a few days. He had a friend he stayed with in Wood Street, near Cripplegate, but crossed the river most days to see Ferchard and me. Ferchard he talked to, went out drinking and gambling with. Me, he tormented whenever he had the opportunity.

For Martin was the man who had accosted and embarrassed me that time at the Lutetia in Paris with Kateline. I recognised him at once when Ferchard brought him home and introduced us but I said nothing to Ferchard either then or later when we were alone. I was afraid Ferchard would find Martin's allegations more plausible than my denials and vent his anger on me. Now, whenever Ferchard's back was turned, Martin continued where he'd left off at the Lutetia, treating me as some English whore he once knew who was now living a double life pretending to be a Lady.

As I lay in bed that night – Ferchard was out drinking with English, and Martin had "a meeting" with his friends in Fleet Street, outside Ludgate – I started thinking about the changes that had taken place in my relationship with Ferchard since we met three years earlier.

At first, Ferchard had been distant and respectful. That had altered, gradually, during the months he lived in my old home at Los Alcazares and then travelled north with us – Khadija, Yahia, Alazais and me – all the way up through Spain to France. Of course it had altered. We'd become family in a sense. And the things I said and the stories I told of the two years I spent working in a bordel in Cuenca and the eighteen months as a slave-girl in harems in Granada, which at first he'd seemed to take in his stride, began to shock and upset him as he assumed more and more completely the role of *pater familias*. Nevertheless, he must have believed that was all water under the bridge as he encouraged me to become, to be, what I was by birth, my father's daughter, the Scottish Lady Marian MacElpin.

It was my dream. I needed no encouragement.

Avignon spoilt that dream. Our meetings with La Reine Blanche – Blanche d'Evreux, once Queen of France – and her attitude to me –

once a whore always a whore – and our final argument, when Ferchard took her side against me. Then through no fault of my own I was forced to take shelter in a bordel and pretend to work there, a pretence that all too soon became reality due once again to Blanche. Ferchard went off to Paris with my money and my two slaves, Khadija and Yahia – they had accompanied us from Spain, I couldn't leave them behind – and set himself up as a householder. I carried on working at *La Negrillonne*, the Black Girl, for another couple of months, until I could escape and make my way to Paris, penniless and on foot. Which brought home to me just how right the old Gypsy woman had been when she'd dealt me the Fool, the card of the vagabond and outsider.

Not that any of this was Ferchard's fault. He had done what he had to do, same as me. However, it meant that when I finally got there I moved into *his* house and never entirely regained control over my life. The money – *my* money – became *our* money. Yes, of course, I had access to it, but still ...

I arrived in Paris in rags – boy's rags – having run away from the bordel in Avignon, and with the Church and the civil authorities of both Spain and France hot on my tail. Mariana la Loca.

And by the time I left Paris, the fact that I was to all intents and purposes a whore playing at being a lady was an open secret.

And the Church and the civil authorities were once again hot on my tail. Mariana la Puta.

I slept.

## 2

### THE ARCANE NET

Every morning, I try to do either an hour of the belly-dancing I learned from my Moorish grandmother or some of the fighting drills Ferchard taught me while we were still in Spain. Yahia plays the drums while I dance, and today we were both in the mood. It was a great session, and I finished it with a series of shoulder-shimmies that cried *I am here! I'm alive!* but then I had to send him away because, although he loves dressing me, he hates seeing me in boy's clothes. As soon as his back was turned, I slipped into one of my favourite outfits – green mid-thigh-length tunic, red hose, and pointed shoes, though not ridiculously long and pointed, the fashion among young men here now, same as in Paris. Then I went for a walk.

I was still entranced by Southwark. There were parts of Paris that were similar, but Southwark was freer – totally lawless, in fact – and utterly different from the south of Spain where I grew up.

I was wandering along Maiden Lane, away from the river and the Bishop's palace, my mind on my meeting with Mistress Hickman at Sext – midday – to discuss the possibility of my visiting her and her friends on a regular basis to read their hands and tell their fortunes. She'd also asked me about astrology and I'd said we would see. It wasn't something I wanted to practise with people I hardly knew and didn't trust.

I certainly didn't need the money.

But I was bored. I did need some kind of occupation. Sitting at home sewing was not for me. I hadn't been brought up by women,

apart from my beloved grandmother, who had taught me to dance, *hamdullah*, not sew. I'd been brought up by men. Palmistry and astrology were the only practical things I knew, apart from fighting, which was hardly an option as an occupation, and dancing, which was, of course, but not while I was still trying so hard to please Ferchard.

Oh, and skinning eels! But I didn't fancy all day everyday down by the river being a fishwife.

I turned into Dirty Lane, then Foul Lane (I'm not inventing the names, you can imagine what these alleys are like!) and so into the High Street, where things were already livening up. It must have been the good weather – real sunshine! – bringing out the pimps, the actors, the singing and dancing-girls, the pretty-boys, the quacks and extortioners, magicians and mimes, beggars and buffoons, all after your money. Even the occasional Moor, the occasional belly-dancer!

I strolled down towards the river and the bridge, stopping and watching things, but not being drawn into any transactions. The great thing about dressing as a boy was that men mostly left you in peace, as I had learnt in Paris where I'd had to wear boy's clothes in order to be accepted as a student.

Then before I reached the bridge, I turned. The gallows, I could see, were empty, but there were three – no, four – girls locked in the pillory with their poor heads shorn and scraped bloody. They were surrounded, of course, by a mob of jeering men and boys.

I headed back the way I'd come, along Dirty Lane, across Stoney Street, and was cutting through to Dead Man's Place when a young and very alive man's voice said, 'Mariana!'

It was a boy I'd known vaguely in Paris, a student. I remembered now, he was English. Peter something ...

'Mariana? *You? Here?*'

'In London?' I smiled. 'I live here now.'

'But – *here?*'

'I have a house here. Up by the Castle-on-the-Hoop.'

'Your *own* house. I see ... You remember the last time we spoke?'

I had no idea.

'At the Adriatica! Did you get the job? I asked for you – I mean for *you*, specially – next time I was there –'

'What are you talking about? What job?'

'With Mère Veronique. But the Midget told me you weren't there, and then Martin – you remember Martin? – who used to follow you around? – Martin told me he'd tipped the Midget and she'd told *him* you were working at La Fille d'Or –'

I must have been staring in amazement, because he stopped in mid-sentence and said, 'Oh, no! Did I get it wrong? You aren't a prostitute?'

He was about to apologise, but my hesitation said it all. Instead, he laughed. 'I knew it.'

Don't tell me it came as a surprise to the Three Weird Sisters that Peter met me inside a brothel in Paris, then outside one in London, and that on both occasions my being there was absolutely innocent.

'Then you must know Marell.' He turned back towards the house he'd just come out of. The Green Unicorn. A brothel, obviously. But then half the houses around here were. It was smaller than the Naked Boy next door which, by the look of it, catered for all and sundry, including the severely unwashed, whereas the Green Unicorn looked clean and welcoming – as did the girl standing in the doorway – and was no doubt correspondingly more expensive.

'But Peter, I –'

Too late. A woman had joined the girl in the door.

'And Susanna, my favourite. You know Susanna?'

Susanna was looking at me enquiringly.

I gave her a little wave. A very feminine little wave I suddenly realised, for one dressed as and trying to pass as a young man.

This was getting ridiculous.

'Listen, I'm in a hurry, Peter. I have to be somewhere.'

But Susanna was beckoning me in. Perhaps I could escape more easily that way.

'By the Castle-on-the-Hoop, you say?' Peter called after me as I went in through the door.

I glanced back and nodded. Peter Crofton his name was I remembered, and wondered who Marell was and why Peter should have imagined I might know her?

Because in Paris he, too, had gained the impression I was a prostitute. Martin had told him so.

As my eyes adjusted after the bright sunlight, I saw an old woman sitting in the shadows looking me up and down. Marell?

'Through there. First one on the right,' Susanna said. 'I'll be with you in a moment.'

To their evident surprise, I stayed where I was. 'Good morning, Susanna. And you, I think, must be Marell. Good morning to you, too.'

Susanna raised her eyes to heaven. 'Another hoddypeak – why do I get them all?' she muttered, but Marell let out a sudden cackle. She'd seen through me. 'That's a girl, Su. Can't you tell? What do you want, love? Looking for work?'

I shook my head, grinning. I couldn't help it. It all brought back so many memories.

'Why are you wearing boy's clothes. You wish you were a boy? You like *girls*, perhaps?'

'No! It's not that, not at all.'

'And your name? Your real name, not the one you use when you're posing as a boy.'

My *real* one? This was not a Lady Marian situation, so – 'Mariana.' And I found myself telling them something of my story. Not that I had twice worked in a brothel, that I would keep to myself, especially in this company, but that I was Spanish – Mariana de la Mar – and new to London and Southwark, having been living in Paris. Where I first started dressing as a boy – Jack Cutting.

'Not another Jack!' laughed Susanna.

And when we were all friends, it occurred to me to ask them about a little plan of mine: to get a room of my own, a room nobody else knew about where I could come and go as I pleased, when I pleased, wearing whatever I pleased, without being watched and tutted over. Perhaps they had one to spare, or would know of one. There was no harm in asking.

'What I really want,' I told them, 'what I would love to have, is a room of my own. Just a single room. But it must be secure. And it must have private access: I have to be able to come and go without people seeing me.'

They had one! The single room on the first floor at the back of the Green Unicorn.

'How does it come to be empty?' I asked Ma Lethbridge after Susanna had shown me the room and we had adjourned to the old woman's private apartment. This was also at the back, but on the ground floor.

'Our star chamber, that was. Nobs'll cough up any amount to visit a house's star girl in private, no one else ever laying eyes on them.'

*La estrella.* We'd had a similar system at the bordel in Cuenca, in Spain, but I just said, 'Sounds like a good idea. Why are you stopping it?'

'Truth is we haven't had a star girl in there since our Bess got married and went to live down Canterbury. Last two years, an old sea-going fellow rented it, but he's gone to live somewhere on the coast now – Harwich, I think, up past Colchester – where he has family. The sea he missed, not his family.'

'And why not another star girl?'

'I've only got five girls – apart from Susanna. Three are scared to be out there on their own. Kids still, for all they like to think they're so grown up. Anyway, they ain't star material, 'cept for Delia. Delia – nobs'll be queueing up for Delia one day, if she lasts that long, silly bitch. Then there's Vera, who's too small for that trade.'

Too *small*? Did she mean too young? 'And the fifth girl?'

She gave me a funny look. 'Petronella. She's no girl, not any more. Oh, she ain't withered like me, like an old tree, not her – never will be. She'll not live that long, and anyway, she's not the kind. She's like a plum, like a great yellow pear in autumn, over-ripe. Juicy, but who wants it? Not at the sort of price we ask for a star girl in a private chamber. And her hair never grew out again after the last time they done her head ... No, there's only Susanna here. Susanna's special – well, you ain't blind – but she's whoremistress now and has to stay out front. Anything else you'd like to know?'

I grinned.

Then Susanna called her, so I got a chance to look around and indulge my natural curiosity.

There was a small oil-burner where presumably she brewed her simples from the herbs that were hanging on a rack on the wall and stored in jars on the shelves. Being what she was, an auntie, a whoremistress, no doubt she was mostly called on for abortifacients and love philtres, and for creams and lotions to enhance the beauty – or restore it – to cleanse the skin, firm the cheeks and jowls, breasts, belly or buttocks, to brighten the eyes, engorge the lips and nipples (and the penises of old men – and not only *old* men), to whiten the teeth, purify the breath, prevent hair-loss (on the head) and depilate

and prevent hair-growth (elsewhere). All quite normal. Much of it she would at least be able to help with; the rest she could pretend – and the patient's belief in her could of itself bring about the desired effect. Doña Inés in Spain did the same, and much more. But Doña Inés was not just a simple herbalist, she was a true witch, a sorceress. Was Marell? She had no books of spells. Probably illiterate. What she did have was a large and expensive-looking crystal globe. And an utterly repellant stone carving up on the wall, leering down at her and whoever happened to be with her.

'Listen,' she said, coming back in, 'I don't mind who leases it just so long as they're clean and quiet, they don't expect to use my girls free, and they pay the rent regular a month at a time *in advance*. All right?'

'Perfect. Can I ask you about your crystal globe? Is it just a ball of glass, or is it made of something special?'

'It's a crystal globe, a real one. Like solid light. Not like. That's what it is: solidified light. Not glass at all. Glass wouldn't work. Wouldn't throw light on the situation.'

I liked that. 'Wouldn't enlighten us.'

'Exactly. And before you ask: No. You can't use it. A crystal globe's for one person only. No one else can use it while that one's still alive and kicking.'

'I wasn't going to ask.'

'Liar.'

'That sort of thing frightens me.'

Was that true? I hardly knew myself.

'That don't mean it ain't got you in thrall. You can no more turn your back on what you know and what you've seen than I can.'

She was right about that. It's what you are.

'May I ask how it came into your possession?'

'You may, but that don't mean I have to answer. Fact is, it belonged to a friend of a friend of mine. They was witches together down by the sea on Mersea Island. She came to a bad end, old Ma Hadleigh – Tabitha, my friend's friend – when they said it was through her Sir John's wife lost her babe, him being lord of the manor, and her nibs refusing Tabitha as midwife. And now I've got things to do even if you ain't.'

I took the room in the name of Jack Cutting and without telling anyone at all moved some of my stuff in – including almost all my



male stuff, and sealed it with a simple locking spell I'd learnt in Cuenca.

It was around then, soon after I'd taken that room at the Green Unicorn, that a messenger came knocking on the door of my house and informed Ferchard my presence was required at the Savoy Palace the following morning.

I was horrified. And I was so relieved when Ferchard announced he was coming with me that I didn't make even a token protest.

We put on our best clothes – well, Ferchard's best clothes. My best clothes are my caftans and my boy's outfits of shirt, doublet and hose, but he insisted on me being formally dressed with my head covered and a veil in place. Then we crossed the river by ferry to the palace pier, where we were ceremoniously escorted along miles of corridors – the same miles of corridors that I had been unceremoniously frog-marched out along at the end of my last visit. When we stopped outside a closed door, Ferchard was informed that he would have to wait there with the two guards.

I wanted to laugh, but didn't dare.

I was shown into a small room, a simple parlour.

*Queen Blanche?* Oh, no.

She didn't wait for me to curtsy to her. 'Marian, surely you realise that I should send you straight back to Mère Bertelote at La Negrillonne in Avignon? Look at me.'

I looked at her. Her eyes were soft, not hard. Why? She found me, the situation, amusing?

'If that is what you must do, that is what you will do, your highness.'

'I didn't say it was what I must do. I said it was what I should do. Sit down, Marian.' She indicated a chair exactly the same as the one she was sitting on.

Was she mocking me?

I sat down and faced her.

'We only have a moment, then Princess Philippa will be joining us. She feels she ought to have a little talk with you.'

'Oh, no.'

'Oh, yes. But don't worry, I won't leave you alone with her, and after she's gone we'll have a chance to continue our little chat. I needed to see you first, though, in order to clarify the matter of your identity.'

'My identity? But you –'

'Shh. Are you both Lady Marian MacElpin and Doña Mariana de la Manga?'

'Of course I am.'

'There's no *of course* about it. But we'll return to Marian MacElpin in a moment. Most people here and in Paris have never heard of Mariana de la Manga. And why should they have, for she still lives and works at La Negrillonne in Avignon? Mère Bertelote never reported you missing. On the other hand, many people here and in Paris *have* heard of Mariana de la Mar, and most of them believe that said Mariana de la Mar – also known as Mariana la Loca – either poses as or pretends to be Lady Marian MacElpin though she is not in fact a lady at all, in any sense of the word.'

'All right, I changed my name from "de la Manga" to "de la Mar" – and I'm very grateful that Mère Bertelote never declared me a fugitive – but that part about me, my mother's daughter, pretending to be me, my father's daughter, is nonsense.'

'What everyone believes has its own validity. So listen. Philippa wants to know whether you are a whore, whether her mother was right. She also wants to know whether you are a witch. You could admit to being a whore, it's not a crime, after all, but you must not admit to being – in any sense – a witch. What I would prefer and advise is not admitting to either. *You* have never been a whore. That was Mariana la Loca. But you, Lady Marian, are a diviner, a fortune-teller. You use the tarocchi cards, you read hands, you study the zodiac – and you have witnessed other means of fortune-telling, such as the *Feet and Tails and Dead Man's Hands*, but you had never read them before that day with Philippa's mother, nor will you ever read them again.'

'But, your highness, Princess Philippa *knows* I was introduced to the Emperor and his family as Doña Mariana.'

'I told you once before that you could address me as Blanche in private.'

'That was when I thought we were friends. I very soon learnt that we were not and never would or could be.'

'She's coming! Just make the story as plausible as possible.'

And in came the princess, through another door which presumably led to the private apartments.

I jumped to my feet, mumbled 'Princess', and bobbed.

She nodded, fractionally, and sat down, but did not speak. Perhaps she did not know whether to call me Lady Marian or Mariana the whore.

I didn't know either, Blanche had me so confused.

Pippa discretely sniffed the air.

Blanche noticed and smirked. 'Marian, would you mind sitting further away? Pippa is unaccustomed to the company of whores and princesses have delicate noses.'

The moment of truth already! Do I say *No, of course not, madame*, and get up and move the chair away from them? Or do I protest, angrily, that I am not a whore?

Yes, I preferred that.

'I am not a whore! Do I have to be insulted every time I come to this English palace?'

Philippa raised her eyebrows, shrugged and put her pomander to her delicate nose.

Blanche played the diplomat. 'English as opposed to what, Marian? And do sit down.'

'As opposed to Scottish, of course. But I have never been insulted like this anywhere – France, Spain ...' I sat down and faced them, seething ... but only outwardly. I was laughing inside. Did the laughter show in my eyes? The eyes were the hardest thing when you were spinning another chapter in the on-going tale.

Blanche sighed and smiled. 'Let me tell you a story. A true story.' She gave me a look. 'You, too, Pippa, you haven't heard all this. Before he died, the Emperor Charles IV summoned me to his bedside. Partly to say farewell. We had been friends. Partly to hand over to me, his chosen successor, his network of agents and spies.'

'But Blanche, surely Wenceslas, as his heir, took control of everything?'

'Of course, Pippa. But this was not the network pertaining to the Holy Roman Empire or the State of Bohemia. This was Charles' private network, about which Wenceslas knew nothing. Just as he knew nothing, and cared less, about his father's interest in, shall we

say, the esoteric? This network provided the Emperor with intelligence on almost all occult activities anywhere within his empire, and indeed beyond its borders, in France and Spain, and here in England.

'The third reason he had for summoning me to his side was to tell me about a certain young woman he had met during his last visit to France.'

No. No, it wasn't possible.

'Yes, Marian. You. It seems you didn't simply catch his eye – believe me, his eye was easy to catch – but his heart. And his heart was hard to touch, let alone catch, even at the best of times. That Christmas in Paris, when he was old and ill, was the worst of times.'

'He wasn't old,' I protested. 'Nor was he ill, not really.' Then remembered who I was talking to, who I had interrupted. 'Oh. I'm sorry, your highness.'

'I think a lady who was on first-name terms not only with the Emperor but with his son, Sigismund, and his daughter, Anna – who will soon be Queen of England – might deign to address me as Blanche and the princess as Pippa. In private.'

A *lady*, eh? 'If you say so, Blanche.'

'Good. Now we've got that out of the way, I want you to know that when Charles invited you to that party at Beauté-sur-Marne on his last day in France, he intended to take you back with him to Prague, in order to make sweet – his phrase – his final months.' She studied me. 'You believe that?'

'Yes.' I'd been half-expecting such a proposal.

'Do you know why he failed to go through with this?'

'No. I thought, I supposed, that I had misread his intentions. Do *you* know?'

'Let me ask you one more question first. If he had made such a proposal, would you have accepted it?'

'I would have been honoured to accept it.'

'To be his courtesan, if only for a short time, as your friend Niniane was Charles of France's courtesan throughout his life.'

'Niniane?' I feigned ignorance of the one person in the world I truly looked up to and adored – and felt like Peter denying Jesus.

'Niniane – a whore who once belonged to the late Sire de Montrouge. He sold her to the King. She now works at a bordel known as La Fille d'Or.'

'Ah, yes, I know who you mean. I believe Mariana knows her and that she was helpful in solving the tarocchi murders. I had no personal contact with her, of course.'

'The Emperor made some enquiries and discovered that you belonged to a certain Sir Ferchard, that you were his mistress, his concubine –'

'That *Sir Ferchard* ... that *I* ... But that is *ridiculous*! How *could* he have thought that?'

'Everyone in Paris thought that.'

'Don't tell me *you* do?'

'I had my suspicions in Avignon. Then decided I was mistaken. Then when he lied to me and came to Paris and took a house and you rushed north to join him, I decided that you were his concubine after all.'

'But I wasn't! I *never* – I *would* never! He was my father's friend, is like my uncle –'

What was Blanche doing? I thought we were supposed to be proving to Philippa that I *wasn't* a whore.

'I realise that now. I've been making good use of Charles's spy-ring. More like a guardian than an uncle these days, and very much in charge. For instance, the money. Deposits that were solely in *your* name originally, *Lady Marian MacElpin*, then in Paris were put in both your names, are now solely in his name. You no longer have access to any of those deposits.'

I was stunned. 'You must be mistaken.'

'I assure you I'm not.'

'Ferchard is outside now – he insisted on accompanying me here. May I call him in?'

'No, you may not. I will speak to him when we've finished with you. Now, shall we get down to why you are here?'

I could hardly think. *Ferchard had taken all my money*? But she was still speaking ...

'Pippa told me about your audience with her mother, the Princess Isabel. How you read the Feet and Tails and Dead Man's Hands.'

'I didn't want to! She made me! Pippa, tell her!'

'She has told me. And that after you made your unfortunate prediction, Princess Isabel called you a whore and sent you to the

Guard Room for them to use and then throw out onto the street. This was implicit or explicit, Pippa?"

'So far as I know, implicit only in what she told them. But there may have been a hidden message that was more explicit.'

'You wouldn't put that past her.'

'Oh, no. If she took against someone, she was ruthless.'

'You mean she might just as easily have had Marian's hands lopped off and added to her bag of tricks.'

'Ugh. Don't!' Pippa had turned green.

'Yes or no? You knew her.'

'Yes! Of course! It wouldn't have surprised me at all.'

'Good. Now we know where we are. And you were saved from a fate worse than death by Master Geoffrey Chaucer. I loved the poetry, and for that I love the man.'

'Blanche, I – I think I may have been very wrong about you. Well, right in the first place, but then wrong. And thinking back to that time, could you tell me – I've often wondered and worried – have you any news of Soeur Catherine and the child who accompanied her?'

'Soeur Catherine is dead. As for the child, I have had no news at all, which is certainly worrying. But that doesn't concern Pippa, so we'll speak of it another time. What does concern Pippa is whether or not her mother the princess was justified in describing you as a whore. Was she?'

I looked at Pippa. Glanced down at the ring I was wearing, the ring she had given me. Her eyes followed mine, but she had obviously already noticed. 'No,' I said.

'Mariana, of course you are a whore, that is obvious.' The princess was not amused. 'And we know about you becoming a whore in Spain. It was hardly your fault.'

'My name is not Mariana, your highness, and I am not a whore. You are confusing me with someone else.'

With a small sarcastic laugh, Pippa glanced at Blanche and left it to her to continue.

'Pippa, it does seem that Marian is in the right of this.'

Pippa shrugged and pressed her pomander to her nose.

'But Marian,' Blanche turned back to me, 'Who *is* this Mariana who looks so like you and sometimes even pretends to *be* you? Mariana la Loca, is that what she calls herself? Mariana la Puta?'

And so she passed the buck to me. I could see she was enjoying herself. Well, I would enjoy myself, too.

'She calls herself Mariana de la Mar, but la Loca is one of the various sobriquets she has picked up on her travels, yes. She is actually my illegitimate half-sister, got by my father on a Spanish whore. And has eyes like mine – these very distinctive eyes characteristic of MacElpin women.'

I really did have just such a half-sister though her name was Andreka.

I glimpsed Blanche raise an amused eyebrow, and nearly laughed out loud – my strumpet's laugh, as Ferchard called it the other day, which wouldn't have helped my case. But on with the story.

'For a few months we were in Paris simultaneously. Sir Ferchard invited her to stay at his house with us, and she did, though she was out much of the time, frequently all night, as you can imagine. Anyway, the late Emperor was in Paris for Christmas and I desperately wanted to meet him in order to discuss – shall we say, the esoteric? However, I could not get an invitation no matter who I spoke to. Then I heard that Thomas of Pisan, the French King's astrologer, had been invited to meet the Emperor. Now I knew a poet from Les Îles Normandes who was a friend of Maitre Thomas, so I asked him if he could persuade Thomas to take me along, and it turned out, very conveniently, that Thomas was going on his own and would be glad to have such a charming lady on his arm. Such a charming lady? He had never met me. I should have been warned. Yes, my poet friend knew Mariana as well, knew her much better than he knew me, I suspect, and – inadvertantly? – introduced me to Thomas as *her*, as Mariana. Thomas had obviously heard of her, too, and he was *absolument enchanté* to make my – I mean her – acquaintance. Long before I could get a word in, it was already too late for me to correct the mistake. In the end, I just went along with it. I was introduced to King Charles of France, and the Emperor Charles, and his two sons and his daughter – yes, Anna! – as Doña Mariana de la Mar! We became friends! I was on first name terms with them, I read Anna's hand and did her horoscope, and a couple of days later had another long chat with her in private. And I met Charles alone on three occasions. Then he left Paris and went east to Bohemia. A few months later I, too, left,

and travelled west to England, to my house in Southwark. And that was the end of that, or so I thought.'

'Mariana, that is all very interesting, but we need to get on. We have established, to my satisfaction, that you are Lady Marian MacElpin, and that your relative Mariana, by posing as you, has caused some confusion. But what Pippa really wishes to discuss is a quite different matter. Whether or not you, Lady Marian, are a witch. And this time it is certainly *you*, not Mariana, who is being judged. Mariana knows nothing of the esoteric, does she? Of astrology and palmistry? No, I thought not.' There was a pause while she seemed to collect her thoughts. Then, 'You know why I like Pippa so much? It is because she has consistently taken your side against everyone, not just her mother. But especially her mother ... Let me tell you something. You may need to know this one day, if it ever catches up with you. When she was dying, Isabel became obsessed with you. She wanted to charge you with witchcraft, but Pippa kept stopping her, telling her she had no evidence against you. Then one day, she – what was that about the ring, Pippa? *This* ring, if I'm not mistaken.' She took my hand, held it, examined the ring, then continued to hold it.

'Mother said "We can get her through the ring, Pippa. You can report it stolen. I'll say it disappeared the day *she* was here. They'll find it on her. *Voilà*. One boiled whore." I refused, of course.'

'And then, on her death-bed, she whispered something about a witch to the bishop. Who was it, Pippa? The Bishop of London?'

'William Courtenay, yes. And the exorcist, Brother Hamon. They were both there. She was afraid evil spirits might enter her body while she was dying, make her undead. Or carry her soul to Hell. These two heard the whisper, then nothing more, then later, clearly, "Burn the Witch! Burn her! Promise me!" They promised, but though they waited beside her bed she never spoke again, and died a few hours later.'

'Afterwards, they asked everyone, especially Pippa, who the witch might be, but no one knew – except Pippa, of course, and she wasn't saying. You were very lucky, because the guards had only heard her call you a whore. It never occurred to them that *you* might be the witch.'

'Lucky? Well, I suppose I was, yes. And I'm certainly very grateful to you, Princess. Pippa.'



'I was simply doing the right thing. Being just. Mother never understood that. Fortunately, Uncle John taught me about the responsibility that goes along with power and privilege.'

'John of Gaunt,' Blanche explained, unnecessarily. 'Lancaster. Yes, despite some foolish decisions – and we all make foolish decisions in the course of our lives – he has always upheld truth and justice.'

Pippa obviously agreed. 'Thank God he is still alive and well to hold the reins ... Marian, while I think dear Blanche is being a little soft on you – ' she pointedly raised the pomander again and held it close to her nose – 'the extent to which you, too, may be classed as a whore does not concern me and should not concern any member of the Royal Family. The extent to which you may be classed as a witch, however, does. And should.'

Be careful here! Do not say anything that commits you. We shall talk alone later.

What was that? Blanche communicating with me by telepathy?

I kept my eyes on Pippa. 'A whore I may be in your eyes because I have committed one or two indiscretions and because I was ready and willing, indeed eager, to be the Emperor's courtesan, but a whore by trade like my half-sister Mariana I am not. *And I am most assuredly not a witch.* Being able to read omens and the hidden meanings in things is not witchcraft. Reading hands and reading horoscopes, for instance – which is how I came to read the hands of the Emperor and Princess Anne. I can only tell people – sometimes – what may or will happen. I cannot make them happen. Witches can. It's like – let me see – the difference between looking at the sky in the evening and saying "There will be a storm tomorrow", and a witch stirring up a storm out of a clear sky, a storm that would not otherwise have happened.'

'That's a good answer, Marian, and it makes sense. But surely there are some forms of "reading" that *are* witchcraft. Like the Dead Man's Hands. Where on earth did you learn that? And *why*?'

'When I was studying in Cordoba, where my rabbi had sent me for more advanced studies, there was an old woman who used to read the Feet and Tails and Dead Man's Hands. When your mother forced me to read them I was terrified. I'd seen the old woman cast and read them many times, I'd even copied out a book on how to read them, but I'd never read them myself. Here, at the Savoy, I was given no choice, though. I had to try. So I did. And in fact the reading was an obvious

one, perfectly clear. Even then I didn't want to tell her, preferred to invent a favourable reading, but she knew. She already knew ...'

I stopped. There was a moment of silence.

'Pippa ...?' asked Blanche.

'Yes, Blanche. I agree. Marian, you have a talent there, a gift if you like, that you would do well not to cultivate. But I am satisfied that on this occasion you acted in all innocence and against your own will.'

'So there you are, Marian. Acquitted. And they would have burnt you. They don't burn witches in England, do they, Pippa? No. Still, I'm sure they'd have found a way round that. They'd probably have shipped you across to France and burnt you there. In the great square outside the Cathedral in Rouen perhaps.'

Another *could have happened* in my life. Could so easily have happened, there or in that other great square, La Place du Palais des Papes in Avignon. Did being the Fool, la Loca, lend one a certain immunity?

'Now, Pippa, would you mind giving Marian and me a few moments alone together?'

'Of course not. Farewell, Marian.'

I stood up, made a slight curtsy. 'Princess.'

\* \* \* \* \*

Blanche smiled at me. '*Quiero hablar contigo a solas*,' she said, switching from the French we'd all been speaking together into Spanish. I want to speak to you alone. Then, switching again, this time into Arabic, 'But Arabic would be more secure.'

'You know Arabic?' I was astonished.

'I had a teacher from Fes when I was a child, Sidi Abdelkrim. He achieved two things. One was making me fluent in his own tongue – we never spoke anything else. He also, quite unintentionally, made me more open-minded. He himself was a Muslim, of course, and Islam, like the Church, is incompatible with open-mindedness. Which brought out all my native contrariness.'

'I summoned you here to the Savoy today, first, to clear the air a bit with Pippa. And for one awful moment there I was sure you were going to say: "A heretic I am, a whore I may be, but a witch I'm not."'

I laughed.

'Don't laugh. Being branded a heretic these days is as bad as being branded a witch. Poor Pippa could never have overlooked it. Now listen. Joan of Kent has been wishing to meet you ever since Pippa mentioned that you had forecast Isabel's death – which was foolish of her, but there you are, she's a foolish child, if a well-intentioned one – and that you are personally acquainted with Anne of Bohemia. By the way, your story of your illegitimate half-sister was brilliant – though now you're going to have to live with it, you do realise that? And when you said "a few months later, I left Paris" it led me to wonder what actually did happen once the tarocchi murder business was all over. You stayed on in Paris for a few months, right?'

'We waited till the weather was good enough for the journey to the coast and the voyage to England. My maid Khadija is very old. We finally set out on the first of April.'

'And during that time you remained in seclusion?'

'You obviously know I did.'

'The word was already out, was it not, that Lady Marian had left Paris, that you were a whore and a liar and an imposter.'

'Yes, but she hadn't! And I'm not!'

'We're not concerned with the truth here – whatever that may be – we're working on your legend, the story you just told Princess Philippa; and that *is* the truth now, so far as London and the English court are concerned. It is also the truth so far as Paris and the French court are concerned, which should please you as much as it pleases me. And dear little Princess Anna, too. I spoke to her when I was in Prague and she told me it was obvious to both her and Thomas of Pizan's daughter that you were a prostitute. You even told them you'd been part of a tableau-vivant in Avignon, when three of the most beautiful girls from *Le Chabanès* posed as the goddesses for a tableau rendition of the Judgement of Paris. The fact that you'd worked for months if not years at *Le Chabanès* before you presented yourself to me as the Scottish aristocrat Lady Marian MacElpin, claiming to have just arrived in Avignon –'

'But I didn't! It was just –'

'Oh, come on. The child had all the details – the three of you naked in a fountain for the arrival of some important Cardinal-Archbishop, how you were wet and cold, but you couldn't move because you knew what would happen to you if you did. And she got these details from you. So how long *did* you work at *Le Chabanès*?'

'I didn't!'

'It's part of your legend. How long?'

What could I say? This was all so ridiculous.

'All right, then,' she announced. 'I'll tell you. Because fortunately I happen to know.'

'How? How can you possibly know when I never – ?'

'Because Mère Bertelote, when she learnt that you'd been one of the three girls chosen for the honour of appearing in that tableau-vivant, enquired of Mère Aliénor at *Le Chabanès* and was informed that the only girl in the tableau with dark hair had been *una mora* named Maryam. She had worked at *Le Chabanès* for six months, then been bought anonymously, through an agent, the day following the tableau-vivant.'

I laughed. What else could I do? It was all such nonsense. Then pointed out that according to the story I had told Princess Philippa, it was Lady Marian that Princess Anna had met, not Mariana la Puta at all.

'Oh, I know. And perhaps that is why Pippa doesn't believe Lady Marian is not also a prostitute. But then nor do I. And nor, of course, do you. Anyway, a little confusion adds authenticity to a legend. Just don't forget those six months at *Le Chabanès* when you are asked about your time in Avignon.'

'As Mariana, or as Lady Marian?'

'Mariana, obviously. But didn't you tell Pippa that Lady Marian had been inadvertently introduced as Mariana when she first met Princess Anna, so she was pretending to be Mariana, wasn't she? and with this story of the tableau-vivant – a story she had got first-hand from Mariana – she was simply overdoing the pretence.'

'But enough of that. I don't have all day. Now, where did you in fact learn to read the Feet and Tails. The old woman in Cordoba wasn't the true story – you never went to Cordoba, did you? – so what was?'

'I went to Cordoba as a child with my father and my grandmother, Sebah, who was a native of Cordoba.'

'I should have guessed that. Yes, when you're making up a story you should make the details as nearly true as possible. You're much less likely to be caught out. So where was it?'

'The bordel in Cuenca where I was first employed as a prostitute – *La Casa de Dos Peces* – was also a library, a house where books such as grimoires, books that most monasteries would never allow within their walls, were copied out and sold. I spent much of my time on this work rather than actual – ah – whoring, because of my literacy not only in Spanish but in Latin and Arabic and Hebrew.'

'I didn't know that!' smiled Blanche. 'Well, well.'

'Spells had to be copied out before they were cast, too, and I was often given that job, so I was frequently present when they were cast, and also when other things took place, such as the reading of the Feet and Tails and Dead Man's Hands.'

'Your fluency in all these languages brings us to the other reason you were summoned here today. *My* reason. I wish to recruit you. Yes, recruit you. To the Arcane Net, the Emperor's network of spies – with some of whom you have already worked, very successfully. You may now give me a *Yes*, a *No*, or an *I'll think about it*, before I continue.'

I thought about it without saying so. Saw her smile. 'May I have a little more to go on?'

'Twice a year, starting from today, twenty-five gold nobles will be deposited to your account with a certain merchant of your acquaintance. As you no longer have immediate access to any funds whatsoever, that should be very welcome.'

'I cannot believe Ferchard would –'

'Believe it. He takes being your guardian very seriously.' She waited, studying me. Then went on: 'Others may ask you – or order you – to act on their behalf. Do so. But you will always remember that your secret and primary loyalty is to me, and in the event of conflicting orders or interests you will always obey me.'

'It seems a lot of money to pay a secret agent, a spy.'

'You are not just any secret agent. Fifty gold nobles is half the sum the Emperor suggested.'

'This was *his* suggestion?'

'Oh, yes. He said "Keep an eye on her, Blanche. Put her under the protection of the Arcane Net. Make it their duty to ensure that she is never burnt or boiled or buried alive. I couldn't bear that"'

*He couldn't bear that?!*

She caught my eye, smirked, and went on, still quoting the Emperor: "'If it should happen that you have the opportunity to recruit her, that would please me enormously, for not only is such a life what she was born for, but in that way she would come permanently under your wing.'" And he was right, wasn't he. It is what you were born *and bred* for. You can pass as a lady, you can pass as a whore, you can pass as a nun, as a student, as a boy. You can pass as Spanish, as French, as English, as Scottish – or as a Jew or a Moor. And you have proved yourself a survivor. So you see ... '

They were right. But not only that; it was the kind of life I craved.

'Do you have a specific assignment in mind for me?'

'Several – for one of which, a particularly urgent one, you are uniquely well suited.'

'Well suited?'

'Not until you commit yourself.'

'All right, then. Yes. Consider me committed.'

'Good. Then I can tell you that your codename is still,' she smiled, "'Demoiselle d'Écosse". One assignment that will probably come your way in the not-too-distant future is a highly confidential errand for a certain Lady Alice. You will recognise it when it is given to you.'

Lady Alice? Alice Perrers? Was this the same errand Geoffrey Chaucer had mentioned? Was Chaucer himself part of what was now Blanche's network?

'That errand will entail your travelling to Normandy. Lady Alice will give you detailed instructions. And now, let us speak of the Undead.'

'The *Undead*?' I squeaked.

'The Undead and the Undying. You have some experience of them.'

'No! Well, Undead John is not really one of the Undead, it's just a name, a joke – '

'Try killing him.'

I stared at her, shocked.

'But it was not him, it was your experience with your lamia friend I had in mind. The one Sir Ferchard survived a session with?'

'Ah.' Yes, we'd told her about that back in Avignon.

'Did she ever tell you anything about herself?'

My mind was full of John, but ... 'Um. Yes. She claimed to be the original lamia – Lamia herself – the Queen of Libya whom Jove – Zeus – seduced, and –'

'You didn't believe her?'

'Her Latin was perfect, and her Hebrew –'

'You would know?'

'Yes. And she said she spoke the languages of Hind. That I believed, for she looked Hindu, and often spoke of Hind with nostalgia. I gained the impression that that was where she hailed from, was her real home, as mine is Spain.'

She waited, so I went on. 'I asked her to speak to me in Greek, a language I'm curious about, but she wouldn't. I believe she couldn't. Surely, if she'd been the original Lamia, she would know Greek?'

'Yes, it sounds as if she's of the Indian branch. A Naga. A serpent-woman. But then that is what they all are, serpent-women. I believe they all have a common origin. Each individual, no matter how recently initiated, seems to partake of a pool of memories which allows her to think, at least some of the time, that she is one of the original serpent-women.'

'One of the original –'

'Yes, that's the point. There are many legends, many myths, concerning them, most of which will have had some basis in reality, or how would they have got into the common pool of memories? The first serpent-woman was Lilith –'

'I know! Adam's first wife. Created of earth, along with him.'

'Created *before* him!'

'Really?'

'According to the secret teaching.'

'And are all *her* descendants, the female ones, lamiae? Like it says in *Le Roman de la Rose*? Something like half the women in the world? I can't believe that.'

'Of course not. Alazais has the Sight, can see them as they are. How many did she see?'

'I don't know. She never said anything, so perhaps none before the one in Avignon. You're right, yes. But is what Alazais sees the true body? Carmen seemed so real as a woman.'

'That depends what you mean by true, by real. Those with the Sight, like Alazais, see the lamia's *zelim* – shadow body, astral body, etheric

body – call it what you will – in the form of a serpent-woman. The fangs are what pierces a man's neck.'

'But the man bears no mark. Not like what is supposed to happen when a vampire bites him.'

'Or her. Vampires are different. When a vampire bites a man or woman, its physical body bites the physical body of the victim and sucks its blood. Real blood. When a lamia bites a man, her shadow body bites the man's shadow body, and the blood that is drawn off is the life force, shadow blood. Oh, she leaves a wound all right, on the man's shadow body.'

'But can they be killed?'

'Yes. Only the cleverest and luckiest last for hundreds – thousands? – of years. They can be killed, but their bodies will walk, animated by the shadow body, the serpent-form; or the shadow body will walk alone if the body is buried under stone. Even if it is headless. It must be burnt. It should have been burnt while still alive, say the priests.'

'Like witches.'

'They think witches *are* lamiae – or vampires – or that they will become some such thing after they've been killed. They are very confused.'

'The priests.'

'Yes.'

'I didn't know any of this. Carmen wouldn't tell me until I'd agreed to become one. Not even *how* you become one!'

'You become one by going through a rather nasty rite of initiation. But be careful: it is the opposite of most rites of initiation, which are intended to prepare one for the after-life and reincarnation. *Their* rite is to preserve *this* life, and even after death the *zelim* will not let go. Even after the body is burnt, the *zelim* will hang about, trying to live, become some kind of female demon, a succubus or a stifler of infants ... Have you ever visited your friend Martin's village out on the Essex coast?'

*Martin?* What was this sudden *non sequitur*? 'Martin's not my friend!'

She laughed. 'I know. But answer the question.'

'Martin's village? To be honest, I've thought about it. I miss the sea. I need to swim. For that I think I could put up even with him!.'



'Really? That's perfect. Because we may have to use you as live bait.'

She laughed at the expression on my face.

'Live bait is needed to catch the Undead. But before we send you off to the wilds of Essex we have another assignment for you much nearer home: one involving the Undying rather than the Undead.'

'The *Undying*?' I was lost here.

'Did you notice anything odd about the good princess's Dead Man's Hands?' she said, apparently changing the subject yet again.

I stared at her. Was she omniscient? 'Yes. As soon as I touched them I knew they'd been cut off a living man not a dead man.'

She was impressed. 'Did you say so – to Isabella?'

'Yes! I was horrified! Disgusted!'

'No wonder she took you for a witch. And what did she say?'

'She said he was dead – *now*.' Blanche waited, so I went on: 'She was lying?'

'Those hands came from one of the Undying. The Undying are only immortal – undying – for so long as their heads remain intact. The man whose hands you held in yours lost the rest of his body some months after he lost his hands.'

'What do you mean, lost the rest of his body?'

'He was beheaded. In the case of the Undying, it makes more sense to say beheaded. His head lives on, though we have no idea where she kept it or who has it now. Perhaps she never had it, had only the hands.'

'But that – that's horrible!' And it reminded me of Disappearing Guilly in Paris, who had indeed disappeared completely soon after Natalie took over responsibility for him. I loved Natalie, but no one could describe her as *kind*.

'Talking heads,' said Blanche, jerking me back to the present.. 'Horrible maybe, yet one of the most ancient forms of sorcery. Cut off from their bodies – all too literally – they live in their minds, have access to information *out there* that we can only access in our dreams or in a trance or under the influence of certain drugs.'

Oh, God ... 'And you want me to – don't tell me you expect me to – ?'

'No, for that you would be peculiarly *unsuitable*. I am telling you this because I think you ought to know something of those hands you

held; and as an introduction to the Undying. I am informed that you visited a bordel named the Green Unicorn on Monday.'

She was omniscient!

'Looking for work?' she grinned.

'No! Looking for a room – a room of my own, a private room, where I –'

'Their Star Chamber?'

'Yes, but –'

'Listen, *why* you were there, and what purpose a girl of your background might have in renting the Star Chamber of a small but exclusive bordel, is not the issue here. What matters is that you *were* there, that you are now part of the establishment –'

'But I'm not! I –'

'Which as I said makes this a task for which you are uniquely well suited. Yesterday, early in the morning, Ma Lethbridge was found dead. Murdered. Then yesterday evening the body disappeared ... Well?'

What did she mean, "Well"?

'How does the death of the bawd of a small Southwark brothel concern *you*, your highness?'

'Under normal circumstances it would not concern me in the slightest. However, this particular bawd is one of the Undying. And now I'm afraid our time is up. I will send young Humphrey for you again on Friday. For you as Lady Marian. At the Green Unicorn and elsewhere as you pursue your enquiries, you will of course be Mariana la Puta. When Sir Ferchard asks what I said to you, tell him I told you to be obedient.' She motioned for me to go.

'Do I have to tell him *that*?' I said, rising to my feet.

'Oh, yes. And tell them I said to send him in for a moment, poor man.'

Ferchard was only in there for a few minutes, but he emerged looking a lot happier than when he went in.

We were shown out – I recognised some of these guards, and perhaps they recognised me, my veil was still up, but they avoided my eye – then outside the gate my reverie was broken by the words 'Want a sausage, love?'

Furious, Ferchard stormed over to the stall, and picked the man up by the throat. 'This lady is with me, you cur! One more lewd suggestion and you will find your sausages stuffed up your arse!'

'Probably where they come from in the first place,' laughed a street-kid, one of a couple who were hanging about there, no doubt hoping for left-overs.

'Put him down, Ferchard. This is not Scotland ... Now,' I said to the poor man, 'What meat is it?'

'Pork. They're all pork.' He offered me a slice of bread with a sausage on it.

'I'll have one for myself, and one each for these two boys – if they apologise for that remark about the provenance of these culinary delights.'

'The what, lady?'

'Just say sorry.'

'Sorry, guv. We was only teasing.'

I paid for the three sausages while Ferchard stood there glowering, then waved goodbye and walked down to the pier. It was deserted. A ferry had just left.

I sat on the bench I had sat on with Geoffrey, and ate my sausage. Say what you like, English sausages are the best in the world.

Ferchard plonked himself down beside me.

'What did she say to you?'

'She told me to be obedient.'

'What was that, then?'

'What was what?'

'That performance up there.'

'I wasn't the one performing.'

'Buying sausages –'

'Had you told me not to?'

'Right. But buying sausages for all and sundry.'

'I can afford to buy sausages for all and sundry. At least, I used to be able to. I have just been informed that my gold deposits have been stolen. That I'm now a pauper. Next time I'm here I shall stand by that stall and wait for some kind gentleman to come along and offer me a sausage.'

He slapped me. Very hard.

It took all my strength to stop myself picking him up and throwing him in the river. *He's old! He's your father's friend! You deserved it! I didn't! Well, you certainly asked for it!* And most telling – *It was this man who trained you to fight and to kill!*

Instead, as the tears welled up in my eyes – tears I did not wish him to see! – I stood up and walked away.

'COME BACK HERE!'

I walked two more paces, then remembered Blanche's words, and my conviction that somehow, through it all, she was on my side.

I turned round and walked back. Without looking at each other we sat down once more on the bench and waited in silence for the next ferry.

I was hiding in my room, my cheek still visibly swollen and bruised – Yahia had been gently smoothing more lotion onto it – when Undead John came up and told me, 'Sir Ferchard wants you in the kitchen, my lady.'

'I'm not coming.'

'He said *now*.'

I didn't want another argument. And Blanche had said to be obedient.

'Who's with him?' I asked.

'Master Martin and Master English.'

*Merde*. Should I wear a veil? No, I'd just look ridiculous.

'All right, I'm coming.'

I thought they would all turn and look at me. That English, at least, would make a snide comment, while Martin smirked. But no, only Khadija did. And she smirked again, as she had that morning. The men didn't even seem to notice I was there.

It was true that I desperately missed the sea, and as Ferchard didn't seem to have had any very pressing reason for summoning me, I waited until there was a lull in the conversation, then said, 'Didn't you tell us your village is on the coast, Martin?'

He nodded.

'And right by the sea?'

He raised his eyebrows.

'I could swim there?'

English affected a shiver. 'The water would be too cold still here in the north.'

'Not for her,' said Martin.

How did he know? But he was right, and was supporting me, so I ploughed on. 'Ferchard, do you think I could go with Martin for a couple of weeks?'

He looked at me, looked at Martin, looked at me again. 'English is right, the sea here in the north is not like the sea you're used to. Still, a half fish like you probably won't notice the difference, so if Martin is prepared to take responsibility for you – and you do seem to have turned over a new leaf and to be behaving yourself. Martin and I will discuss it over a drink sometime. Was there anything else, lass?'

'No ... No.'

I wished I'd never asked him. I hated it when he talked like that in front of English and John, and especially in front of Martin. But it was too late to back out now without making myself look even more childish than Ferchard had already made me look.

Back upstairs it occurred to me to wonder what his purpose had been in sending for me. Just so they could all see my swollen face?

Not only had Ma Lethbridge been killed, then disappeared, but Petronella, the "over-ripe" one with the bald head, had been arrested, charged with her murder, and taken to Newgate prison, ready to be hanged at West Smithfields as soon as the Crowner had made his report and the Judge had passed sentence.

I was shocked. I liked Petronella. The three young ones were just that, young, spoilt and silly – all right, no working prostitute (as opposed to top-flight courtesan) is ever really *spoilt*, but they were young and silly, and Delia at least, the one Marell considered star material, was certainly pampered compared with others I'd known. Oh, it was true she was extremely nubile, that she had a natural fuck-me stance and attitude (that has been said of me, too, I blush to admit), but she had no brain whatsoever. Unlike poor Petronella.

Why Petronella? Because everyone had heard her yelling at Ma Lethbridge the previous evening, and because there were no other suspects. I asked them who had told the Deputy. Predictably, it had been Delia.

'You're lucky we're not living in Paris,' I told her.

'Oh! Do you know Paris?' – all thought of the murder gone instantly from her head. (Looking back on it now, I can see Delia was the inspiration for Lea, the whore I was fated to play in Paris a couple of years later.)

'I used to live there. In France they put witnesses to the question.'

'To the *question*?' Delia, wide-eyed.

'She means they torture them,' explained Susanna. 'To see if they're telling the truth.'

'Or to ensure that they tell the right story,' I said.

'The *right* story?' Delia again.

'The story the powers-that-be want told. Suppose someone high up ordered the murder, and arranged for it to be blamed on *me*. The last thing he wants is for some silly chicken like you to start clucking about Petronella threatening the victim. They'd take you to the Palais de Justice, and by the time they finished with you, you'd be prepared to swear in court you'd actually seen me do it. Of course, you'd probably be crippled for life, depending what torture they used.'

'And that's the right story?'

'Huh?'

'*You* did it?' She was backing away from me, horror on her face.

Susanna grabbed her and slapped her face hard. '*Listen*, you silly cow! Mariana's just explaining how torturers can make you say anything they bleeding want. If you was tortured you might even say Mariana did it – or *I* did it – though you know bleeding well we didn't.'

Thank Heaven for Susanna! I could have been in trouble there.

'I – I don't understand,' the poor thing sobbed, holding her cheek. 'I thought Petronella did it. But then Mariana said something about her doing it – and now my face is going to be all finger-marked like Mariana's!'

'Of course I didn't do it,' I interrupted, 'and nor did Susanna. And I don't believe Petronella did it either. But I'm going to ask my friend Lady Marian to visit her and talk to her. We'll see if *she* can shed any light on what happened.'

From my earlier brief visit to Marell's room, I knew she was something of a witch. Now I had the chance to see what she really knew and did.

They couldn't open for work that day, or any day until this whole thing was resolved, so Susanna and I left the three girls in the salon, talking and crying together, and went back to Marell's room.

'We left her lying in her room upstairs, where she was. Then in the evening, some other men came – dunno who they were, they never said, but they were rich, important. I showed them up there, and she'd gone! I couldn't believe it! But they did! I mean, they didn't seem all that surprised. And they went, without bothering us. An hour or so later, the Bailiff turned up – no body, so no Crowner – asked a lot of silly questions and took poor Petronella off to Newgate.'

Marell's prize possession seemed to be her crystal globe. Was it just for decoration, or did she actually use it as a magic mirror?

I asked Susanna.

'Oh, she used it.'

'How successful was she with it?'

'Too bleeding successful. I heard many a threat made against her, and mumblings of "witch" and that. We all did. We was all afraid the bishop's hornies'd have her burnt and take over here like they've taken over in other nunneries ... What you looking for?'

Susanna's patience was running out. She had a brothel to run. No, she didn't. Not today. Perhaps never again. Who would take over the place? That woman in Canterbury?

'I must get back out front. You coming or what?'

'Just a moment.'

She shrugged and left me to it.

I took the crystal globe down from its shelf, stood it on the table and stared at it.

I hadn't done this since I was a child at home with Rabbi Yacoub ben Amar – Uncle Yacoub.

The first thing to do was clear the mirror. All right, this wasn't a mirror, but mirrors were all I knew and it was as close to being a mirror as a dish filled with water and oil was. Like I used with Uncle Yacoub. And like Guillaume le Grec used – Guillaume le Breton, the old alchemist in Paris.

Now though, surely, I didn't want to clear it. I wanted to see anything it remembered of the last days of Ma Lethbridge – especially anything it might have recorded during her final moments.

But I didn't know how. I wasn't skilled enough.

I wasn't skilled at all.

I always took this keep-it-at-arm's-length (or better still turn-your-back-on-it-and-walk-away) approach to anything connected with the Black Arts, as would any woman with any sense in a world where mass murderers were fêted and witches were burnt alive. But then when I needed to perform some simple trick, work some basic spell, I couldn't. Apart from the Goddess Spell and the Dead Man Spell, both of which I'd learnt in Cuenca and never forgotten, and one or two other very simple ones. Reading hands, of course, wasn't witchcraft any more than astrology was, but even that could be used to incriminate a woman if they were looking for trouble with her.

I could probably clear the globe. I remembered enough to do that. And I could probably recharge it. But how could I charge it without first clearing it?

Then even as I watched, the globe slowly turned black. It was clearing itself before my eyes. Because Marell had died? Because I, a stranger, had touched it?

Now I had to remove the blackness, dilute it, dissolve it, or the globe would remain dark and dead for ever.

I did this with my hands, passing them over it as close as I possibly could without touching it, drawing light into it and darkness out of it, then casting the darkness through the window into the coming night.

When the globe was clear and light again, pure crystal, I rested and waited. Now there were no memories, no records of the past, left in it. But perhaps it could still tell me something? We would see.

Yacoub used to charge the mirror with the fire element, but I'd never done that – I'd only ever seen *him* do it once – so I would stick with what I knew, what I had practised, even if it was less effective: the water element. Sea water, of course, being me.

I cupped my hands and imagined a cloud of sea water forming between them ... condensing, becoming wet and heavy and cold, taking all the heat out of the air and out of my hands. And now the empty globe was sucking at the water in my hands, sucking it in... When it was all gone and my hands felt warmer, I started again. More of the water element – more sea water – getting colder and colder then being sucked into the crystal globe ... Then again ...

Three times should do.

It was dark now outside, and the globe was glowing ...



Leaving it standing where it was on the table, I knelt before it and placed one hand each side of it, holding it as I might hold someone's head, my hands firmly on their ears, communicating ... *I want to know about Ma Lethbridge's death ... her final moments ... what happened ...*

... ..

Nothing.

Something simpler – to practise, to experiment. *Show me a conversation between Ferchard and Martin, one where they're talking about me.* The globe remained blank and empty.

*What is happening there at home, now, in Khadija's kitchen?* And suddenly, blurred at first, then coming into focus, I saw her, sitting by her fire, looking so, so sad. So old and lost and lonely.

No! I couldn't think about that now! But it worked – it worked! For the present, if not for the past.

Right, then.

Time to go home, think about it. But I needed to take the crystal globe with me.

I carried it through to where Susanna was sitting with Delia and one of the other girls. Delia scowled at me.

'I want Lady Marian to see this.'

Susanna frowned.

'My mistress, Lady Marian MacElpin. What's wrong? She might be able to help. I'll bring it back. I promise.'

'Why can't she come here? No, I suppose she can't.'

Susanna meant because this is a whore-house and she is a lady. But it wasn't that at all. Lady Marian couldn't come here because they would see immediately that *she* was *me*.

'She has been here – to the star chamber.'

'Really?'

'Yes. She likes to keep an eye on what I'm up to.'

'Why doesn't that surprise me?'

The other girl there with us was a skinny little thing, who couldn't have been more than ten or eleven. Vera, of course. But I was surprised Marell had a child so young here at the Green Unicorn.

The girl knew what I was thinking. Everyone always knows what I'm thinking! I'm going to have to do something about that, shield myself from magic mirrors and crystal globes and – oh – people!

'I'm seventeen,' she told me. 'I just *look* eleven.'

Susanna laughed. 'Marell starves her to keep her like that.'

Poor little thing. This was worse in a way than having actual ten and eleven-year-olds around the place. At least they get fed!

'And now?' I said.

'Now?' Susanna shrugged her perfect shoulders. 'I dunno. We'll see. Probably keep her like that. Vera doesn't mind, do you, love?'

'Vera?' I asked the girl.

'No, I don't mind. It's true men like me like this. And my brother's the same, small like me. He's a chimney sweep so he's lucky really 'cos for that job he has to be. We've both always been small, him and me. It's not just Marell. When we were eight, people thought we were four or five and said how bright we were for our age.' She laughed. 'That's when the Master Sweep bought Luke, when he was eight.'

'Do you ever see him?'

'No. I saw him once when we was ten and I was still at home. He tried to talk to me but his master clipped his ear and when he still kept trying the bastard kicked his arse and sent him flying. He was all black then, and different, and I wouldn't have known him, but he knew me. Now though ...'

'Well, I expect he's still small, and still working, so ...'

'Oh, I expect, yes, he will be. He was smaller than me even that last time I saw him.'

Susanna was watching me closely. Now she said, 'You been a whore before, ain't you.'

'Course she has,' sneered Delia. 'Can't you tell a whore when you see one?'

Vera was studying me, too, I noticed.

'You agree with them?' I asked her.

'I dunno. I thought you were a lady at first – you know, a lady playing games – dressing up like a boy one day, dressing up like a common working girl another day ...'

The funny thing was they were both right. But I couldn't say so. I had to follow Blanche's instructions.

'No, Delia's right, sweet. I've been a whore, in France and in Spain. I've never been a whore here in England, though.'

'Once a whore, always a whore,' laughed Susanna, 'no matter where you are. But – oh, I was going to say, Marell wants to talk to your Lady Marian, then I remembered Marell ...'

'What about?'

'Can't you guess?'

'Who's Lady Marian?' asked Delia.

'Mariana's mistress, stupid. Marell wants Mariana to work here with us.'

*What?* 'But –'

'In the Star Chamber.'

'*Her?* A *Star*?' Delia chortled.

We both ignored Delia – though Susanna grinned when she saw I was offended. Absurd, but I couldn't help it.

'See if you can arrange for *me* to have a little chat with her. I'll tell her we charge a wee bit less for you than we actually do, that way you'll get a bit for yourself –'

'I don't think she'll want me to –'

'You'd be surprised. You wanna take the globe round to her? All right, but only if you promise to ask her yourself. Tell her how much we'll charge for you – how much she'll be raking in! You'll see. A tanner a trick, we'll charge for you.'

'*A tanner a trick?*' Delia was mortified. '*Sixpence?* I only get –'

'You don't get nothing, so shut your cakehole. Tell her she can have half, Mariana – half of everything you earn. All right?'

'All right.'

'And tell her I'll come round and talk to her about it any time she chooses. She'll be delighted, you'll see – get you off the street and into a star chamber.'

I fled. What on earth would happen to me if they ever found out there was no real Lady Marian?

What was I talking about? I was the real Lady Marian.

### 3

## ONE OF THE UNDYING

Ferchard was out. He'd gone drinking with English and Martin, John told me as I passed through the kitchen, declining dinner – I was getting fat – and hurried up to my room. I let poor Yahia accompany me, but made him sit quiet and wait while I experimented some more with the crystal globe.

He sat with my hairbrush in his hands and his great black soul-filled eyes never leaving my face. I had always found this reproachful look almost impossible to ignore, but today my mind was on Marell and the investigation; my hair and face and body would have to wait.

I charged the globe once more then held it between my two hands, one palm pressed firmly to each side of it, and focussed.

Not on Marell, but on Ferchard.

And there they were! They weren't drinking, they were in one of those brothels along Bankside known as stews because they posed as bath-houses. Each had his own tub of presumably hot water, and standing in it with him, each had his own woman. Ferchard's, I noticed, was predictably dark and Moorish-looking, but I wasn't interested in the women. I was interested in the conversation.

I couldn't hear what they were saying, of course, not with my ears, but I knew what they were saying the same as one does in a dream.

It is the first time Ferchard has been there, though Martin and English both know the place and have their favourites among the girls. Probably the first time Ferchard has been to one of the Bankside stews at all. The weather is cold here in London, and the stews hardly the

same as the *hamams* he knew and loved in Outremer, where he spent so many years.

He is by nature hard to please, and they are teasing him, which is probably a mistake. Still, the water is hot and the girl is beautiful and she does indeed speak Arabic, so he is beginning to relax. I wonder suddenly whether English and Martin are aware of his predilection for pretty boys. English probably is ... Not that that is anything to do with me. I'm not spying on them. I just want to hear what they say about *me*.

Only, they are not saying anything about me.

Can I influence them to?

Ferchard is the only one of the three that I have ever had any form of telepathic contact with. He sometimes knows what I'm thinking, what I'm about to say. Perhaps ...

But no, it is Martin who says a moment later: 'Ferchard, about Marian.'

'Marian? What about Marian? Oh, this thing she's got in her head about going off with you to your village. Wants to swim in the great North Sea like her father's sister Una and the other MacElpin girls all used to – and no doubt still do. More fish than woman, they are. Some name them mermaids, some name them selchies. With that blood, it's no wonder she took to the sea back home in Spain as soon as she was big enough to swim.'

English laughs. 'I didn't know that! You should have left her there, where she was happy. It was unkind to bring her here.'

'You know why I did,' Ferchard growls. 'She'd been fished out of the sea, sold to a slaver. When I found her, she wasn't a mermaid any more, she was a whore. I wanted to make a lady of her, groom her to be her father's daughter.'

He glares around, daring either of them to say "She's still a whore".

Neither of them does, though both of them are thinking it.

For a moment there is silence as they each succumb to their respective girl's caresses – or rather *wipes*. I see now that they are actually being washed in those tubs. Makes one appreciate being a regular whore – not that I have any intention of ever being one on a regular basis again, despite Susanna and Marell. And Blanche.

Then Ferchard says, 'So what about Marian, lad?'

'I'm not clear how I'm supposed to treat her.'

'If she behaves like a lady, treat her like a lady. That clear enough?'

'And if she doesn't?'

'Let's hope for her sake she does.'

English tried to help: 'What the poor lad needs clarifying is: if she behaves like a whore, is he allowed – '

'There's no question of "allowed". He has a free hand. All I ask is that as long as she behaves like a lady he treats her as one. But if she starts playing the whore he has a free hand. Of course.'

'And if she gets up to any of the witchy tricks she seems to have learnt in Spain?'

That was Martin, the bastard.

Ferchard stared at him. 'Then you must harden your heart and be merciless with her. For her sake. In Scotland, as in France and Spain, they burn witches at the stake. They should do the same here. A good witch-burning puts the fear of God into foolish wenches like her.'

*A good witch-burning.* Oh, Ferchard.

'Easy to say,' English pointed out. 'She has you wrapped around her little finger.'

'Aye, well she found out today she does not. Found out in more ways than one.'

He must mean that he hit me – and the money. *My* money. He's not going to tell them about that, is he?

'So there you are, Martin my lad,' roared big, blond English. 'All clear now?' He was like a lion, even naked and standing in a tub of water.

Why do I say "even naked"? *Especially* naked.

And I can't stand him.

Though he's not creepy, like the darker, but almost equally handsome, Martin.

'I think I need a drink!'

'Aye, so do I,' Ferchard agreed. 'Enough of this bath-tub nonsense!'

Seething, I removed my hands from the crystal globe.

Those bastards. Ferchard was an old man, and I respected him still, but if Martin ever hit me I would kill him.

Then immediately put my hands back on it. If it couldn't, or wouldn't, show me the past, perhaps it would show me a glimpse of the future. *My* future. With Martin.

It cleared immediately, and I saw myself sitting in a room with a woman, older than me, forty or so, but a whore still obviously judging by the bare breasts, the rouged nipples, the painted face.

'*En realidad, me llamo Catalina Martinez,*' she was saying. My real name is Catalina Martinez.

Spanish then.

'I changed my name when I left here,' she went on, in Spanish, 'so Master William couldn't find me. I told them that was because, like this Catalina woman, I was Spanish. And of course Spanish girls do it better ... They agreed!' she laughed. Then, 'No one outside this house knows. So don't you go telling Master Martin.'

'No, of course I won't tell him,' I watched myself say. What was she talking about? "Master Martin", though, must be my Martin.

'Anyway, I doubt you'll ever see him again. Henry will prefer to *buy* you from him, and –'

'No! Master Martin just left me here for a few days while he ... Listen. I feel I can speak in confidence with you because – well, because we're speaking Spanish and that makes us ... I don't know. Two strangers in a strange land whose paths have crossed. Does that make us friends?'

'We're certainly two strangers in a very strange land. About becoming friends ... we'll see. Now what is it you are bursting to tell me?'

'I – I'm not just a whore. In Spain and France I learnt about *los inmuertos, les mort-vivants* – the Undead. Vampires. Lamiae. I knew a lamia. She wanted to make me one, but I –'

She shrank away from me.

'I didn't! Of course I didn't! Look at me! Do I look like a lamia?'

'How do I know what a lamia looks like?'

'Well, I'm not. I was scared ... But I do know some of their secrets, and I'm here to look into these murders, not because Master Martin ...'

She stared at me. 'I never heard of any of that at home in Navarre. Only what you call lamiae, I think that's what we called *empusas*. Like whores – often they *were* whores – and they sucked all the life out of a man. When I was a young girl I worked in a house in Logrono and I heard them – saw them – say "*Es una empusa!*" and drag a woman away – Elvira, her name was – and hack her poor head off and bury her without her head. She had long, fair hair, like Juicy Jenny.

Beautiful. We never learnt what they did with her head ... It was after that I ran away to Barcelona.'

And it faded out. That was all! But "Master Martin"? I called him *Master* Martin!

No. It wasn't possible.

I nodded to Yahia, who leapt to his feet and said, 'Face first?' He had the cream there ready.

'No, dance first. Fetch your drum.'

Next morning, I am like a dead thing. I had two different nightmares. In one of them, Marell was coming for me like a great ugly bird. I was dressed as a boy, and fleeing, but I kept stumbling and falling, and crawling, and screaming over my shoulder that I was a woman, a woman! In the other nightmare, Khadija had died. I don't need to tell you which one was the worse. Pushing Yahia aside, I stagger down the stairs and take her in my arms and hold her there while she, bewildered by this sudden display of affection, struggles to breathe and to protect her hair from the floods of tears pouring down upon it.

Eventually, she manages to shake herself free and persuade me to go back upstairs with Yahia and allow myself to be prepared for the day.

'Lalla, what is it?' wails Yahia. 'Tell me!' He has never seen me so upset.

'It's nothing ... Oh! It ... Khadija was my nurse when I was a baby! She's been with me all my life!'

A man might have said that was equally true yesterday and all the other days, yet yesterday and all the other days there were no tears, no hysteria.

Yahia was not a man. He understood. He too burst into tears.

It took me half an hour to stop him crying. We just sat on the bed, me on his lap – he could hardly sit on mine, he is enormous – murmuring comforting platitudes to each other in Arabic, till eventually he calmed down.

Still huge tears, drops of an impossible size, rolled one by one down his podgy cheeks until I said, in a moment of inspiration, 'Today, I have to be a great lady.'



He jumped up, almost spilling me on the floor. That was what he wanted, what he needed. He hated me going out looking like a tradesman's wife or a whore – or even worse, dressed as a boy.

He sent me back down to Khadija to have breakfast while he got everything ready. She eyed me suspiciously. She is not a cold woman, but life and I have sorely tried her over the years, and she would dearly have loved to be serving my mother still in our house by the sea in the south of Spain. My mother, who was a real lady, in the sense of modestly dressed and softly spoken: something I would never be.

I asked her forgiveness with my eyes. She gave it, grudgingly, with hers. And served me toasted crusts in warm milk. Which I do not like, and never liked even as a child of one or two, when she used to *make* me eat the soggy mess. I knew I had no more chance now than I did then.

It was my penance.

I finished it all and licked the bowl. Yes, licked it, like a dog. Food for the soul.

After that, I'd be able to face even an undead Ma Lethridge. No, not undead, undying. I still wasn't clear about the difference.

When I was dressed to Yahia's satisfaction, I made him dress to mine. I was taking both him and Undead John with me. I needed to make an impression.

Two hours later, John handed me down into a wherry at St Mary Overie's stairs. Yahia, who hates all boats, stepped gingerly after us, lost his balance and almost had the lot of us in the water. Everybody shouted at him, he started crying again, then in a sudden tantrum picked one of the loud-mouths up by his hair and dangled him over the side. That effectively silenced everyone else, and I managed to get him to release the poor man – into the boat, not the water, though it was a close thing – and to settle down in the dead centre of the deck.

'Couldn't we use the bridge when we return, my lady?' asked John, who hadn't helped at all.

'You be quiet, or I'll send the two of you straight back – in the boat! – and go to Newgate by myself.'

The boat rocked, and Yahia let out what sounded like a long whimpering moan that was in fact a plea to Allah to protect him from his tormentors. Me, no doubt.

This time, no one so much as tittered.

When we landed at Blackfriars, John stepped out onto the quay first to give me a hand. Before I could move, Yahia flew past me and up onto the quay like a dancer, slipped on the wet stone, and only managed to save himself by grabbing John and almost pushing him in. John thrust him away. A fight started.

'Are they yours, my lady?' a gentleman said.

'They are. But I don't think they will be for very long.'

Chuckling, he handed me up out of the boat. 'Oh, they're all right.' He considered them. And I considered him. He was about forty, warmly and expensively dressed, sparkling eyes, neat little beard just beginning to go grey ... 'They're in fine fettle,' he observed, as if he were speaking of horses. 'They just need a taste of the whip occasionally. I'm surprised your husband –'

'I don't have a husband, sir.'

'Ah. A thousand apologies, my lady.'

We had walked on past my two stalwarts now. 'May I escort you somewhere?'

'Don't you think I should wait for them?'

'No, I do not. Besides, when they finish they will realise they have lost you, which will add to their remorse, and add also to the list of charges for which you can have them whipped.'

'I see. I think they are very fortunate they do not have you for a master, sir.'

'They are. And you are very unfortunate.'

'What can you mean?'

By this time, we were approaching Ludgate.

'Oh, simply that such men need a master. Now, where are you going, my lady?'

'To Newgate, actually. The prison.'

'You are not serious?'

'Never more so.'

'But my dear, the horror – the stench! You will never be able –'

'I have to brave it.'

'Then I shall accompany you.'

I looked at him. Was *he* serious?

'No, you will not.'

'I know the Head Keeper ...'

'Ah. In that case ...'

We were arm in arm when we approached the stout door within the great arched gate that, he told me, was where we should find his friend. He purchased me a pomander from a woman sitting outside, then an official took our names, and within seconds we were being ushered into the presence of Hugo of Amiens, the Head Keeper, a short, wide man, almost as broad as he was tall, and clearly immensely strong.

'Ah, Sir Edward. And – my lady?'

'Lady Marian MacElpin,' I introduced myself.

'I am honoured, my lady.'

He did not look honoured. But he did look impressed by something. Was it my height? I was so much taller than him. Or was it my companion?

'Sir Edward ... What can I do for you?'

'Lady Marian wishes to interview one of your prisoners. She will naturally want the prisoner in question brought out to her.'

Master Hugo looked me up and down. 'Naturally. And what would be the name of the prisoner in question?'

'Petronella – a whore of Southwark,' I said. 'Accused of the murder of her mistress.'

'Ah, yes. And what would your interest in this woman be, my lady?'

'I have reason to believe she did not commit the crime of which she stands accused. I wish to question her, to elicit certain information that may possibly enable me to help her.'

'And to ensure she has all she needs, no doubt.'

'Of course. I should be more than happy to reimburse you and your men for any expenses ...'

'I will have her fetched up. You can talk to her here.'

He ushered me into a small chamber obviously used for just such interviews. There was a table and one greasy-looking chair.

'Sit down, my lady.'

'I don't think so.'

He went, and I turned to my escort, who was hovering in the doorway. 'Thank you for your assistance, Sir Edward. Now I ...'

'You would rather see this woman alone?'

'Oh, yes.'

'Hm. I suppose she would not speak openly in front of a man.'

In my experience, the opposite was true. Whores were shy in front of ladies.

'Shall I await you? To escort you back to – ?'

'No, no. But should you chance to see my pair of *zouaves*, kindly instruct them to attend me outside the gate here.'

'Of course. Then farewell, Lady Marian. It has been a pleasure.'

'Farewell, Sir Edward.'

I had, of course, met Petronella, but she had never met Lady Marian. The way I was dressed and with the veil still down over my eyes and nose, and my pomander pressed against it, there was little chance of her recognising me.

'My lady?'

'I am here to help you, Petronella.'

'But – '

'Mariana is my – my um – let's simply say that she runs various errands, carries out certain assignments for me. She is convinced of your innocence. She asked me to come and talk to you ...'

'Mariana?'

'At the Green Unicorn?'

'Oh, my lady! That Mariana!' Tears started pouring down her cheeks. It reminded me of Yahia that morning. It's worse when someone bald cries.

'Please, Petronella. We don't have much time. Were you and Ma Lethbridge on good terms? Or had you quarrelled about something?' Calling her Ma Lethbridge seemed a good idea as when I was Jack or Mariana I always referred to her as Marell.

'Oh, we were always the best of friends, my lady! Leastways, till I started getting older and she brought in them young ones. I should have gone then when the others who were young when I was young went! Only I had nowhere else to go, not like them.'

'Did Ma Lethbridge ever threaten to get rid of you?'

'No!'

I waited.

'Well, all right. Yes. But ... '

'But what?'

'She wasn't serious. I'm good for a few more years. Anyway, Susanna was on my side so ...'

'So there was no great urgency about it.'

'No. It was just, you know – well, no, you don't know – but it's usual, you know, for a –'

'So what were you and Ma Lethbridge arguing about before she was killed?'

'You know about that? Here, whose side are you on?'

'Yours! But I have to know everything. It's still true you've nowhere else to go, I suppose?'

She nodded. 'She was in a bad mood, that's all. And so was I. It was nothing. These things happen. She'd been offered a young girl she liked the look of and – and I got upset, and –'

'And you killed her?'

'No! Oh, you don't believe me!'

'I'm trying to. I just have to be sure.'

She stared at me. 'Anyway, I been thinking about it. How would killing her help me?'

'It wouldn't. The new owner would owe you no loyalty, not like Ma Lethbridge. You'd be out on your neck.'

'So there you are.'

'I want you to tell me about anything strange – or anybody strange – at the Green Unicorn. Anyone who doesn't quite fit in, is not doing exactly what you would expect in a small but perfectly ordinary Southwark brothel.'

She had a few thoughts, nothing that struck me as at all interesting or relevant, then she said: 'There's Rees.'

'Who's Rees? What's interesting or different about him?'

'He never pays. After he sees Marell, he always has one of us before leaving. Me, it used to be, till he laid eyes on Delia. I'm still his second choice, if Delia's taken and he can't wait.'

'What does he see Ma Lethbridge about? Do you know?'

'Money. What else? She never looks very happy after his visits.' Petronella laughed. Then another sob escaped her. 'Will you be able to get me out of here? Really? God's truth?'

'I think so. I hope so. If you're innocent.'

'I am!'

'I know. So what was Rees up to? Protection?'

'Nah, that's the Bishop's game. They wouldn't let nobody else muscle in on it. Talking of which, why aren't I in the Bishop's nick? The Clink? I'd be better off there. They all say the Bishop's beaks protect us girls ...'

She was right, and I should have thought of that before. Why *had* they carted her across the river to London? Neither she nor Ma Lethbridge had been citizens of London, nor had the crime been committed in London. If I could find out who gave the order to bring her to Newgate ... 'I'll ask. Ma Lethbridge didn't have another house, did she? Over in London?'

'You *can't* have a house in London! The girls in Cock Lane –'

'I mean a home, somewhere she *lived*.'

'Oh, a *home*. Nah. She lived with us at the Green Unicorn.'

'Right. But that *is* interesting. I'll find out. Anyway, what was Ma Lethbridge giving him money for, then? If not protection.'

'I dunno.'

'Was it *him*, do you think?'

'What? What done her?'

'Well, yes, but I meant does he visit her on his own behalf, or on someone else's business?'

'Oh. Someone else's, of course. He's nothing.'

'Then we need to know whose, and what she was paying for ... Was he there then – when she died?'

'No. Any rate, I didn't see him. But then if he'd just cut her throat for her, he wouldn't hang about, would he – not even to fuck Delia. Sorry, but you know –'

'Yes. No, he wouldn't. Not unless he was very cool. Did he seem a cool type?'

'Nah! Nervous little cove – full of ticks.'

'How little?'

'Wouldn't come up to your tits, my lady.'

'Hair? Eyes? Anything?'

'His hair's a dirty brown, getting thin; an' he's got a wispy little beard.'

'How old is he?'

'Oh – thirty.'

'His eyes?'

'Red.'

'Red?'

'The rims – you know. The eyes were – you know – brown, too. I think.'

'Hm. Are you sure Marell didn't look happy after his visits? That she was paying him? Maybe he was paying her?'

'What? For me? Or Delia? That's not how it works.'

'I know how it works.'

'You may think you do, my lady, but –'

'Trust me.'

She laughed, and again it turned into a sob. 'Don't have much choice, do I.'

'No. I think just possibly Ma Lethbridge was doing a bit of blackmailing.'

'Blackmailing?' She looked incredulous. 'Rees? Nothing bad you could say about him would surprise anyone what knew him.'

I laughed. I was getting used to the stench, the cries in the distance. 'You already agreed Rees works for someone else. It may be someone rich and important. I want to know who.'

The door opened. I expected it to be the Keeper, to tell me my time was up, that if wanted more time with her I would have to give him more money. It wasn't. It was a small boy, dressed in skimpy, slimy-looking rags. He gazed at me, his eyes huge in the filthy face. They were bright blue.

I glanced at Petronella.

'He's a slug-boy. He fetched me some clean water. I couldn't pay him.'

'He's not a prisoner?'

'Nah. They run errands, and for that they get to stay in here, off the streets –'

'They *want* to stay in here?' The mind reeled.

'Anything's better than the streets at night, specially in winter. You don't know.'

Obviously. Then I remembered that night, that dawn, by the freezing river in Paris. 'So he did that as a favour? Fetching you the water.'

She nodded, and smiled at the boy.

'So if I give him some money, he'll fetch you food –'

'I can fetch her a blanket, too, lady, if – '

'Yes, everything you can think of that she might need. How much?'

His eyes opened even wider.

I held out two pennies. 'Listen,' I said. 'I want to know if anyone comes asking after Petronella. Anyone who shows any interest in her at all. I'll be here again tomorrow. If you have a name for me, I'll pay you well. If you haven't, but you know someone who might have a name for me, I'll pay you and him. Understand?'

He nodded so hard I thought his head would come off.

'Go on, then. Wait. What's your name?'

'I don't have a name, my lady, not rightly. They just call me Megson.'

'Nice. I'm Lady Marian MacElpin. Give the information only to me or to someone who says he's from me. All right, off you go. Now, Petronella. It's time for the difficult question – and your life depends upon you telling me the truth. The whole truth.'

She gazed at me, eyes wide, suddenly fearful again.

'You've been with Ma Lethbridge a long time. Has she changed in all those years? Grown *older*? Like you have?'

Her eyes grew even wider, were popping out of her head. She was terrified.

Ah ha.

'Or is she exactly the same now as she was when you first laid eyes on her?'

'She's – she's dead now.'

'You know what I mean. Were her hands always like that? Hard and scaly and clawed, like a bird's talons? Or did she use to have fingers – real fingers, like yours and mine?'

We looked at her fingers – plump, and though they were dirty now in this place she had obviously tried to care for them – then at mine as I slid off the glove I was wearing. Mine, slender and strong, the nails polished and unbroken. How long for, I wondered, a sudden premonition overwhelming me.

She sobbed.

I wanted to say "Tell me", but I held my tongue, knowing poor Petronella was at the end of her tether – who wouldn't be, locked up in this place and faced with hanging or worse? – and that if I was patient it would all come pouring out.



She went on sobbing.

'Tell me.' I couldn't help it. I'm just not a patient person. At least I said it gently.

'She knew I knew. Said if ever I mentioned it to a soul she'd slit my gizzard, feed my guts and blood to Sheela.'

'*Sheela?*' What was this? Some ancient goddess?

'Sheela-na-Gig. That statue thing she's got up on the wall there.'

The stone-carving on the wall over the door. Yes, I'd seen it. It was – well, even I could only describe that as utterly lewd.

'Marell done a rat for Her – you know, cut its throat and drained its blood out over Her that morning. I know, cos it's me what traps them. I choose a nice big one for Marell then bag the rest and sling'em in the river, every week, regular.'

The Sheela-na-Gig – Her with a capital H by the sound of it.

'If you ever mentioned *what* to a soul?'

'My grandma knew her. In Thundersley.'

'So?'

'Back when my grandma was a little girl. And Marell ... Marell ... she ...'

'She looked just the same back then as she does now?'

'Yeah. You know. Who are you?'

'I told you. I'm Mariana's mistress. And I'm *one who knows*. Do you think Mariana would have asked someone stupid, someone ignorant, to help you?'

'No! I didn't mean ... I'm sorry, my lady.'

'Tell me, do you think Ma Lethbridge might be still alive?'

'No! She can't be! Her throat was slashed open!'

'Tell me about her crystal globe.'

'That? I dunno. She can't see the past, what happened – she told me that herself one day – only what's happening right this moment and a bit of what will happen, what *may* happen – what do I know? I tried looking in it once when she wasn't around and I couldn't see nothing.'

'That was extremely stupid,' I said, in my most pompous Lady tone.

'Oh, I know! And she *knew*! She had me beat raw!'

'Quite right. But don't you see? This means she knows things about what people are doing in private. She might very well have been blackmailing someone.'

'But ... you really think she might not have been dead, my lady? For God's sake, she *can't* be alive – but if she *can't* die, either ...'

'Petronella, if she'd been still alive, if she'd somehow recovered lying there on the floor, what would she have done? Where would she have gone?'

'If she didn't want us to see her, like, recovering from being dead, then ...'

'Yes, and if she was still not fully recovered, still hardly able to move ...'

'She'd go to the Star Chamber, my lady – Jack's room – your girl Mariana.'

She was right! There was a spell locking the door, but Marell would have no trouble getting past that! Though it was a long way. She'd have to go out through the front door, then –

'There's a secret entrance to the Star Chamber. She must have told Mariana about it.'

'No.' Whoops. 'If she did, Mariana should have told me.'

'Perhaps she's ashamed, doesn't want you to know she's working as a whore.'

'She's always been a whore, that's no secret, but I didn't know she'd been taken on at the Green Unicorn.'

'That's how it works, my lady. The whore-mistress lets a girl like your Mariana rent the Star Chamber and ...'

'Yes, I see. Of course. So tell me about this secret entrance.'

'There's a panel in Marell's bedroom what's also a panel in the Star Chamber. Don't think you can open from there, though, only from Marell's side.'

'Right. I'll send Mariana round to see.'

'And *me*?'

'I'll get you out of here just as quick as I possibly can, I promise. Oh, one more thing. Is there anyone else who knows the truth about Marell? Anyone who might be helping her?'

'Only that Scotch witch. She knows.'

'What Scotch witch?'

'Muriel, she calls herself. Works as a whore in Maiden Lane, but that's just a cover. She's no whore, not deep down like me and your Mariana.'

What could I say to that?

I took my leave of Hugo of Amiens, smiled at the slug-boy, who was just returning, and went outside, wondering whether Yahia and John would be there waiting. They were.

I sent them off past St Paul's and along Watling Street to the bridge while I went straight down to Blackfriars and got a boat across the river. I needed to get home and change as fast as possible.

I put on a skirt and blouse – the simple working-girl clothes I preferred that were suitable for Mariana but not for Lady Marian – and slipped out through the kitchen, needing to avoid Ferchard and managing to avoid Khadija as well, then hurried off to the Green Unicorn.

Yahia and John still hadn't arrived.

When I got there, I headed straight for the door of my room. I'd decided to find out first whether by any chance Marell really was there and alive before I made a fool of myself by saying anything to Susanna.

The door was still locked, my spell unbroken. But then it would be, if she had come through the secret entrance.

I undid the spell, opened the door and stepped in.

Marell was lying on my bed.

I couldn't see her throat, she had what looked like one of my blouses wrapped around her neck.

'Ah, Mariana. At last.' Her voice was rasping, but not feeble or faint. There was no doubt about it: she was, to all intents and purposes, alive if not kicking. And from the look on her face she might well be kicking soon, too.

'Days now – days! – I been lying here waiting for you, you slut! Where you been?'

'I – I didn't know! I thought – they said – you were dead!' I had to pretend shock and horror. It wasn't difficult.

'Do I look dead?'

She did, actually. She just didn't behave dead. But it would be unwise to say so.

'No! No – they – I –'

'Bring me Petronella! I need someone who –'

'Petronella's not here, she's in Newgate.'

'She what?'

'She was arrested for killing you!'

'*Petronella*? Petronella's the only person I've ever met who could never kill anyone – let alone *me*! Tell them to set her free, at once.'

'*Me*? What can I ...?'

'Tell Lady Marian.'

'Oh. Yes. And can *I* do anything for you – ?'

'No, you can't, you silly bitch. Send Susanna to me. Tell her to run! Or have they arrested her as well?'

'No! I mean, yes! No, she – yes, I'll send her – '

'RUN!'

A blast of malevolent energy sent me hurtling backwards out of the room.

Marell was a lot more powerful than I had suspected – and she was seemingly unkillable. *Ungillable*? I raced down the stairs and into the brothel through the main entrance.

Vera was there – only Vera – sitting on some man's lap. The place was closed, but that clearly didn't stop favoured men from slipping in.

'Get out!' I said to him.

'Here, you can't – ' Vera protested.

'Yes, I can. You, go,' I told him, and 'You get Susanna in here – now!' I ordered her.

They both obeyed.

Susanna came down from upstairs. 'What's going on? Mariana? Vera says – '

'It's Marell. She's alive, and in my room – the Star Chamber.'

She stared at me, and shook her head. 'Vera, run next door and tell Robin I need him. Tell him to bring a rod with him.'

What was she talking about? Then suddenly I understood. 'Vera! Stop! Do *not* bring anyone! If you do, Marell will kill you – after she kills me. She's *waiting*!'

'Mariana, this is not funny. If you go on with this, I'll get her to fetch a Sergeant, not Robin.'

'Susanna, it's true! Oh, just come with me and see!'

She hesitated. Then Delia came wandering in from outside.

'What's going on?'

'Delia,' Susanna told her, 'go up to Mariana's room and see if anyone's in there.'

'What? Some nasty man scared the poor little thing and you send me to sort him out?'

'Go! Run! Or I'll get Robin to tan your arse as well as Mariana's!'

Delia rolled her eyes, but she went.

Seconds later she came crashing back in. 'It's a ghost!' she screamed. 'Marell's ghost! It spoke! – it said "Oh, not you! I told Mariana I want Susanna! And it threw something at me!'

'That's no ghost,' I said. 'Ghosts don't throw things. Now do you believe me, Susanna? It'll be *you* whose arse gets tanned when Marell –'

But she was already running out of the door.

I followed her – then changed my mind and turned right outside the door instead of left. There was nothing more I could do here, and I had to get back home and change my clothes again ready to be Lady Marian when Blanche sent Humphrey to fetch me.

\* \* \* \* \*

This time, Blanche wasted no words. She didn't even comment on my bruised face.

'So what happened? Did the old bawd die or is she truly one of the Undying as the Emperor suspected?'

'She did not die. I found her and informed Susanna, the whore-mistress.'

'I thought she might have disappeared. I don't mean vanished but deliberately disappeared from view.'

'No ... ' I was puzzled. 'Marell is back where she belongs, at the helm of the Green Unicorn.'

'Do they all now know that she is one of the Undying?'

'I don't believe so. Petronella does. She's the one who was charged with the murder. I interviewed her in Newgate – promised her I would get her out of there. Can I leave that to you?'

'Do you think we can trust her. If not, it might be better to ensure she never sees the light of day again.'

*No!*

'I'll have her quietly strangled there in her cell. You have the *entrée*, and she trusts you, so I'll let you be the one to put the finishing touch to this assignment.'

I was about to refuse, point blank; then I realised that such a refusal would only harden Blanche's resolve.

So, 'But we *can* trust her,' I said instead. 'She has known for years and never told anyone.'

'She told you.'

'No, *I* told *her*, because I suspected she might already be aware of Marell's great age.'

'And she was.'

I nodded. 'But she's never mentioned it to a soul – nor will she – because Marell told her that if she did she'd "slit her gizzard open and feed her liver and lights to Sheela-na-Gig".'

'Ugh. That would give even me pause. And she would carry out that threat. Be careful of her, Mariana.'

'Don't worry, I'm going to give up that room and stay right away from her and the Green Unicorn. And from Susanna!'

She laughed. 'Susanna got you scared too?'

'She thinks I'm going to work there. And she threatened me with a beating!'

More laughter. 'Well, don't look so indignant. I'm sure you deserved it. Was it her who slapped you?'

I put my hand to my left cheek. 'No, that was Ferchard.'

'Ah ha. Well, it's true you'll have little or no contact with the Green Unicorn for the next few months, but I shouldn't be at all surprised if you do work there one day so try to keep in their good books for your own sake. And under no circumstances give up that room. That's an order.'

'Yes, your highness.'

'Right. And if I now dispatch you to Newgate Prison to permanently eliminate a risk, however small, I assume you will also respond "Yes, your highness".'

I could say the words. That didn't mean I would have to do it. I could always "disappear from view". Go somewhere I was not already known, already infamous. Scotland perhaps, where I had never been but had roots.

Blanche would just send someone else to do her dirty work.

'Yes, your highness.'

'You do realise that the fact that you have killed, several times – that you are able to kill, that you could, if necessary, carry out an assassination – is one your main assets so far as I am concerned.'

She rang a bell, the door opened and Humphrey appeared.

'Tell Sir Lionel the whore Petronella of the Green Unicorn in Southwark, who is currently being held in custody at Newgate Prison, is to be released immediately. He is to inform Hugh d'Amiens, on the authority of the Duke of Lancaster, that no charge is being brought against her. Tell Sir Lionel he is to escort Petronella home to the Green Unicorn personally – and to make clear to her and to everyone there that he is acting on behalf of Lady Marian MacElpin. No mention is to be made of my part in this. Well, don't just stand there!'

When Humphrey had gone, I breathed a surreptitious sigh of relief. Blanche didn't miss it – she didn't miss anything! – but it was the Undying and the Undead who mattered to her, not the ageing and worthless Petronella.

'You remember last time we were talking about Lilith and the lamia, the serpent women? Lilith was the original serpent in the Garden of Eden. I'll wager your rabbi didn't tell you *that*.' She laughed, then went on: 'There is another similar myth of creatures out of the mists of time who crop up here and there in the modern world. Have you heard of Ereshkigal? She was the goddess of the underworld, and she fed on blood. She is thought of as having partly the form of a bird – an owl, or a vulture – feathered and with talons rather than feet. The original harpy. The harpies of today are to Ereshkigal what the lamiae are to Lilith.'

'And Marell is a harpy?'

'It seems very likely. Either way, at this point, as one of the Undying, harpy or not, Ma Lethbridge would normally change her identity. Become someone else. You'll be here in London for a few more days, so keep an eye open. I need to know if she disappears. And anything else you can find out about her. Now for the second question: Who did it? Do you know? No? But you must have some ideas.'

'Only that whoever did it clearly didn't know she was – *is* – one of the Undying. Or they would at least have hacked off her head – probably taken it with them. So that wasn't the motive, and the crime becomes just an ordinary one. It has occurred to me that using her

crystal globe she must learn a lot of secrets – and not only scandalous secrets – '

'State secrets.'

'Yes. Perhaps she was blackmailing someone. Someone important ... '

'I'll look into that. For the moment, you simply keep an eye on her until ... Last time we spoke, I mentioned the Undead in Essex.'

'Yes, you said you needed me as "live bait".'

'The creature in question operates in and around the villages on the edge of the marshes along the Essex coast, and he always seems to pick girls with a reputation, the local sluts. I don't think you'll need to sleep with half the men in Martin's village to establish a reputation.'

'You mean one look at me and – '

She laughed. 'No. But if you swim naked – '

'All right, I get the idea.'

'He's also killed at least two whores just outside the walls of the ancient city of Colchester. If he doesn't take the bait in Martin's village or on the marshes, it may become necessary for you to start work again. There are three good brothels outside the gates to the south of the town.'

'But – '

'You can pass as a whore, and have no objection to doing so. It is another of your main assets as an agent.'

'I have every objection!'

'But it happens anyway,' she laughed.

'All right. There's another problem, though. Ferchard won't give me leave to go unless I promise to behave myself like a lady. And he'll make Martin responsible for ensuring that I do.'

'That's perfectly normal. But out of sight, out of mind. Martin already thinks of you as a whore, and I imagine that once he has you to himself he'll start treating you as one again.'

*How did she know all this?*

But she was off on a different track.

'There are actually two different sets of murders occurring in Essex. Two quite different undead killers. The second is a disgusting revenant in a state of decomposition which is killing priests and other religious, literally tearing them apart. According to the old folk, it is like one of the hordes of decomposing dead that walked the land in the wake of



the Great Mortality, now better known as the Black Death. If you happen to bump into that –'

I wanted to giggle *Oh yes, in the middle of a cemetery in middle of the night*, but I was too horrified by the image of hordes of unburied dead shuffling around on decomposing feet.

'– you would be doing the Church a favour if you put a permanent stop to its activities. By for instance hacking off its head and making sure the head is buried separately from the rest of it. But as you may not feel you owe the Church any favours – quite the reverse – you will probably prefer to focus on the more mysterious figure who kills girls like you ... I will see you in a month or two,' she went on, without giving me the opportunity to protest further. 'Your contact for the twenty-five gold nobles is Master Richard Whytington. He will have been informed that the money is for Lady Marian MacElpin. The account will be in her name.'

'But you said Charles – the Emperor – had suggested twice that figure.' And that I was to be kept safe, I thought, but she missed that. Or ignored it.

'*Suggested* is the operative word. I will double it as soon as you prove your worth and your loyalty. Now, one last thing. There is, it seems, a young woman in Paris who is your doppelgänger. For this reason if for no other, you should have a secure codeword known only to you and Master Whytington. Similarly, there must be a secure password known only to you and me. I will say "The son of Mary". You will respond – well, how would most people respond?'

'Jesus.'

'And how will you respond?'

'Mark?' I guessed. The only Gospel in which Jesus is referred to specifically as "the son of Mary". That very point had come up in an earlier conversation with Blanche, in Avignon.

'Mark. Right. And remember, that is only between you and me personally. My representatives will say "Avignon", and you will respond "The Black Girl".'

'No.' My association with The Black Girl was known to the Church, and to Doña Leonor in Spain. 'I will respond: "Skinning live eels".'

'Perfect. That may save your life one day.'

She was ready for me to leave, but I still had a question. 'Would you please tell me the true reason why Charles, the Emperor, finally

decided against inviting me to Prague. Was it about *me*, whether I was Lady Marian or Mariana de la Mar? Or was there a man, *another* man, he had been informed that I belonged to?

'About *you*? About a man *other* than Sir Ferchard? About other *men*? Yes, Yes and Yes, in a sense. But also No. By the time he died, Charles had heard all the stories, and felt that of all your various personae, being Marian atte-Marsh was your best protection.'

*Marian atte-Marsh?* Back in Paris, Natalie had told me that according to her mother, Lule, la Dame de Montrouge, I was really an English whore known as Marian atte-Marsh. Mireille, too, had used that name once in Paris when speaking of me. And Père Pierre had said something ...

'However, none of that was the reason he didn't take you with him, which was simply that he had such a short time to live, and afterwards, what would happen to you? He didn't trust Wenceslas at all. You'd have been burnt at the stake in the market square in Belgrade.'

*'Marian atte-Marsh?'*

She gazed at me. 'You really have no idea, do you. But it's not for me to tell you. And even if it were, I have other appointments now – '

'But – '

'Mariana, by the time I see you again, you'll have winkled out the whole story, I'm sure. You'll even be able to fill me in on the details. So ... farewell, my dear.'

That afternoon, once again Ferchard sent for me. And once again I was obliged to watch and wait, while trying not to listen, until Ferchard acknowledged my presence.

There are, as I have mentioned before, men you can focus on and manipulate mentally. I learnt how to do it at the bordel in Cuenca. I worked the full spell on men *en masse* the day I first set foot in England. But normally, when dealing with one man, a little mental manipulation is sufficient.

I tried it again now.

English, I already knew, was completely impervious to it. Which of course is what you'd expect. After all, it requires a modicum of sensitivity in the man. Ferchard I could influence, sometimes quite dramatically, when we were alone and he was in an amenable mood. While we were in Spain, and during our year in Paris, I had frequently

made him change his mind about something, or at any rate change his attitude to something or somebody, without opening my mouth. But during our final months in Paris and since we arrived in London his mood had rarely been amenable, and anyway, when he was in the company of other men, brutes like Martin and English, the brute that was never far below the surface in Ferchard himself emerged, and linking one's mind with his became impossible.

It was like trying to mentally manipulate three *toros de lidia* – three fighting bulls.

I gave up and listened.

Martin was betting it would take six dogs at least to kill some poor badger – it had been brought up from Essex so it must be a good one! – while both Ferchard and English reckoned it would all be over with three dogs.

'It's not that big.'

'No, but it's vicious. You saw it.'

'You get a lot of badger-baiting out your way, do you, Martin?' Ferchard asked.

Martin nodded.

'So you're something of an expert.'

'I wouldn't say that, but yes, in Colchester it's most often the local badgers they pit against dogs these days. No bears left, though the ring was built for bears and the road there outside the wall where it all happens was named for bears. You get the occasional bull-baiting, same as here, or strolling players passing through, but most evenings now in Bere Lane, apart from sitting hour after hour in a tap-room with just the slattern waiting on tables for entertainment, the only things on offer for a man are cock-fights and rat-fights and the local brothels.'

At the mention of brothels they all turned and looked at me.

'Ah, Marian. Listen, lass, it seems you never actually asked Martin if he *would* take you to his village with him.'

*What? But ...* No, Ferchard was right. I'd been "playing the lady again" as Mère Bertelote used to say in Avignon. 'Martin? Do you think I could come with you to your village for a week or two?'

He waited, his insolent eyes holding mine.

I dropped my gaze. 'Please,' I muttered.

'Ask properly, lass. Don't mutter,' Ferchard snapped, embarrassed by what he saw as *my* insolence. It wasn't so much the muttering as the sight of me staring a man in the eye that angered him.

'Can I come with you to your village for a week or two, please, Martin?'

'A week or two – or three or four. We'll see. You'll come back when I'm ready to bring you back.'

I nodded. 'Yes, of course.'

'You never know, it could be a couple of months. Or more. Three months. Six. If I'm travelling back and forth in other company, where your presence might be an embarrassment, you'll just have to wait till the following month. When again I may have company.'

Bastard. 'Yes, of course. I understand that.'

'And you'll be polite to my parents. Obedient.'

*Obedient?*

But Ferchard's eyes were on me. 'Aye, obedient,' he said. 'And none of your insolence.' He had that icy look in his pale eyes. He was serious. He turned back to Martin. 'I'm making you responsible for her. If she's any trouble, or causes you or your family any embarrassment in the village, you will let me know.'

Martin was trying to suppress a grin – a grin I had already come to loathe. 'Of course, Sir Farquhar.'

*Sir Farquhar?* This was formal.

'Bring her straight back. Or if you prefer, send me a letter and deal with the matter yourself. Marian? You leave at dawn the day after tomorrow. You will, of course, travel as a lady.'

With that, Ferchard took himself off to prepare for their evening's entertainment, and I slipped out into the yard to avoid having to suffer the leering of English and Martin. I had to talk to John before I left for the Essex coast. I would do that now, this evening. I also had to talk to Ma Lethbridge, but that could wait till tomorrow. I still had her crystal globe and somehow I had to get that back to her without being accused of stealing it. Stealing in a brothel was normally punished by a good thrashing, something I did not want before a long journey on horseback. *Or ever!* What was I thinking?

So John first, this evening. Undead John, whom I had saved from being buried at a cross-roads in Normandy with a stake through his heart.

That had been one morning the previous spring, in 1378. We were riding through Louviers, having finally left Paris, and were on our way to take ship for England. I became aware of a disturbance up ahead, a clamouring of voices. Leaving Yahia and Khadija behind with the baggage, Ferchard and I rode forward into the crowd thronging the city square.

'What is it?' I asked.

'Just some Englishman,' answered a woman who, from the smell of her, was a *poissonière*, a fishmonger, though she was carrying no fish; she was in too much of a hurry to see the fun. 'Got into trouble instead of keeping his mouth shut.'

'Got into a fight, most like,' put in a man, a peasant with a dozen chickens hanging by their legs from his shoulders. All but one had their heads up, dazed-looking but still taking an interest; one, the only cock among them, had its head hanging down, limp. Perhaps it was the brightest; perhaps it had more notion of its future.

'No, he's one of the Undead,' said another man, a fat little clerk. 'I'd keep well back if I were you. You don't want to catch his eye. He might come back up out of the grave again.'

'Not if he's staked,' chortled the fish-wife. She shoved her way forward through the crowd.

The man with the chickens agreed with her. 'There's a witch in our village says all the English *tard-venus* are night-walkers. The only way to get rid of them is stake the lot. Mayhap she's right.' Even the poor cock, who seemed to have no doubt about what fate lay in store for him, raised his head and showed an interest. Was he dreaming of coming back and drinking the blood of humans? From the cooking-pot?

Perhaps that's why boiling alive is such a popular punishment in France.

'Come on, Marian.' Ferchard wanted to get me away from there. 'This is not for your eyes.'

But it was too late to tell me that. I'd seen him. It was taking six of them to hold him. They were carrying him from a tavern, inaptly named *le coq de combat*. The Fighting Cock.

Then the procession stopped before an important-looking man.

'A magistrate?' I asked Ferchard.

He shrugged. 'Could be, lass. Could be the Duke of Lancaster for all I know.'

It was a magistrate. As we drew nearer, still on horseback, I heard the man's accusers describing how he had risen out of a pit where they'd buried a score of English dead after a fight between two wandering bands of robbers and rapists.

I waited to hear what the man would say.

'What's your name?' the magistrate asked him, in French. Then in English.

'John, sir.'

'John of ... ?'

Nothing.

Then the magistrate said, in English: 'John, are you one of the Undead, come back to feed on our blood?'

John remained silent.

The magistrate said, 'Do you understand?'

'Well, yes, sir, sort of, sir, but ... '

There were some titters. The people were frightened, though. They knew all about the Undead.

'Undead John, you will be taken to the crossroads outside the town and there buried with a stake through your heart.'

John started struggling again.

I realised I was the poor man's only hope. Time to play the great lady. 'What's going on here?' I shouted in French. Then, in English, 'John, stop playing with those men, and stand properly when I speak to you. I send you ahead to book our passage, and now, when you should be in Honfleur, I find you here, getting into trouble. *Again*.' I left him to think about that – praying he was quicker-witted than he looked and seemed – and turned back to the magistrate. 'Who's in charge here? You?'

'I am. And who may you be, my lady?'

'I am Lady Marian MacElpin, of the Kingdom of Scotland. And my companion is Sir Farquhar de Dyngvale, also in the Kingdom of Scotland. That man – ' I nodded towards John, 'belongs to me.'

'My lady, how were we to know that? We took him for one of the *tard-venus*, the gangs of deserters from the English army who scour our countryside, robbing and raping. We kill them, they kill each other, but because they've have been excommunicated for desecrating

our churches they don't stay dead. You must know that the excommunicate *cannot* stay dead unless they are staked.'

'John, are you dead?'

'Er – no, my lady.'

'Good. You heard him. There's been some mistake. Now release him immediately.'

But the magistrate was eyeing me, sensing my youth through my veil, and doubting me because of that. Anyway, I was a woman: a man must speak. 'Is she who she says she is, Sire Farker?' he demanded of Ferchard.

'She is, maître.'

'And that man, Undead John, is hers?'

'He is.' No hesitation.

'Of course he is!' I let myself sound infuriated. 'I am *not* used to having my word doubted.'

'My lady, sentence had already been passed.'

'John, tell this person that you are my bondsman and were on your way to Honfleur to arrange passage across the Channel for your mistress – *me* – and Sir Ferchard, when you got waylaid by a tavern. Not for the first time.' I looked back at the magistrate. 'Tell him, John.'

I waited, fingers crossed.

"Tis true, sir, this lady is my good mistress. And though I don't rightly recollect all that about Honfleur, sir, that'll be because I – I can't remember much of anything at the moment. I certainly don't remember being buried, though I do remember waking up and –'

Sighing with relief, and trying not to show my pleasure, I translated this, and added 'He must have fallen into bad company on the way.'

But it was not only the magistrate, it was the crowd I had to convince. They wanted English blood, and they wanted the undead staked before their eyes.

But now, thank Heaven, Ferchard took over. 'We need a distraction,' I heard him mutter. 'An alternative form of entertainment. John! When did you last drink a pint of ale?'

'I don't remember ...'

'The Undead don't drink ale, they drink blood!' someone shouted. 'Course he don't remember!'

Everyone agreed.

'Fetch him a drink,' ordered Ferchard. 'Fetch everyone a drink! It's on me!'

We left Louviers that afternoon – I insisted, everyone wanted us to stay! – and found an inn near Rouen to pass the night. Two days later, we reached Honfleur and secured a place aboard the Agnes, which was sailing with the tide that evening.

I had not talked to John about his situation yet. But now we were crossing to England, where presumably he was a free man and could say so, I wondered what he would do.

I was leaning over the side of the ship soon after dawn, watching the water swirl by and trying to make out the coast of England through the mist, when he approached me. He looked better, though his face was still bruised. He also looked nervous – shy even, I would have said if I didn't know him. I didn't know him.

'My lady, am I disturbing you?'

'No. And if you were, so what? You're a free man.'

'A free man? But I – we –'

'That was just a ploy, as you very well know, a trick to get you out of that awful magistrate's hands.'

'A trick?'

'And now you're on a ship bound for England, and you owe me nothing except your thanks.'

'A trick? But then you didn't send me to Honfleur?'

'Of course I didn't.'

'Then where did you send me?'

I stared at him. Did he *want* to be my man? Why would he want that? Because he had no place to go? Had he run away from his lord – or lady?

We would see. Maybe he had lost his memory, and it would come back to him all in good time. For now, though ...

'I sent you to buy me an apple.'

'An apple?'

'Yes, an apple, John. And I'm still waiting.'

'My lady, I ... What can I say?'

'Don't say anything. *Do* something.'

A few minutes later, he was back with a small and rather bruised but quite edible apple. He held it out to me.

Like a stray dog in need of a mistress.



And there ahead of us, looming up out of the mist were the white cliffs of England.

Ferchard said John had obviously fought in France, become part of a company that had either deserted from or been left behind by the main army, which was led at that time by Buckingham, the old King's youngest son, and Richard FitzAlan, the Earl of Arundel. (Both of them men I was later to come to know, Buckingham disastrously and Arundel intimately, though I had no inkling of that as yet.) This band of *écorceurs* – brutal rapists and pillagers – met what Ferchard considered a well-deserved death at the hands of a bigger band or of some local militia and were buried in a shallow pit on unhallowed land. From which John subsequently emerged.

He did not remember this, except in nightmares that woke him screaming and clawing his way up through the dead weight of his erstwhile companions' rotting bodies. Or so he told me. He didn't go drinking and whoring with Ferchard and English and Martin, or betting on fighting-cocks and crazed dogs and badgers and bears. John preferred the kitchen, where he made himself indispensable to Khadija, who had no English or French, and so began to take John with her wherever she went.

Eventually, Ferchard and the other men left.

I returned to the kitchen and sat John down facing me, knee to knee on two stools. 'John ...?' I hesitated, then decided to ask him straight out, 'John, is there something special about you – some special reason why you survived being buried in that pit in France yet none of your companions did?'

He gazed at me like the village idiot. But he wasn't an idiot.

I tried another tack. 'How do you feel about being named Undead John? Is it a joke, or is it ... appropriate?'

Still nothing. Just his eyes on me like a nervous but harmless dog.

Make the question simpler. 'When were you born?' He looked no more than twenty-five. Which would mean he was born in the early 1350s.'

'1349, my lady. During the plague years.'

So. Nothing wrong with his age. 'The time of the plague, the Great Mortality. So what happened? Did you catch it? Did your mother?'

He nodded.

'Did you die?'

'No!'

'It's all right.' I patted him on the knee. 'I believe you.'

'Everyone else in the village died, but not her, not me. Not then.'

*Not then?* 'What do you mean, "not then"?"

'She died later, when I was eight. We were living in Lincoln then, with an uncle of mine. I stayed there with him. I stayed till I – I don't know. Till I entered your service, my lady. But I don't remember that. Only when you found me in that village in France and ...'

I patted his knee again. Blanche had got that one wrong. John wasn't either undead or undying. He had simply lost his memory, probably as a result of a blow to the head.

'Don't worry about it, John. You're safe here. And don't let anybody ever call you undead again. You're not, you're alive and well, the same as me, the same as Sir Ferchard ... Listen, John. I'll be going away the day after tomorrow, for maybe two weeks, maybe much longer. You stay out here with Khadija as you have been doing, and make yourself useful to her. Don't bother Sir Farquhar or his friends –'

'I don't. I don't want to go out with them – they asked me once, but I like it here in the quiet.'

'You don't like dog-fights and all that?'

'No, and I don't like, you know, whoring and drinking, and –'

He had realised too late who he was talking to!

'I don't mean I don't like whores,' he went on hurriedly. 'It's the places I don't like, the whore-houses. The women themselves are just women ... just girls, like ...'

'Like me,' I said, helping him out. 'Yes, some of them are nice, some of them are not, the same as any group of people.'

'And is it true? Are you really ... ?'

The question *he* had needed to ask. If only the answer were as simple as his answer to the question *I* had needed to ask.

'It's complicated, John. Can I answer that question after I return from my travels?'

'You don't have to answer it at all, my lady. Of course, you don't. I should never have asked it. Never even have thought it.'

'You're not to blame. You see Master English and Master Martin, and even Sir Ferchard himself sometimes, treating me as one. I think

for the moment, though, that you'd better go on referring to me as Lady Marian, at least in front of Sir Farquhar.'

'Oh, yes! He'd kill me if he thought I was being insolent to you!'

I laughed. 'You're probably right. I do believe he's as confused as I am. But there is something you can do for me tomorrow. Go back to Newgate Prison, early, and ask for a slugboy named Megson. He may have some information for Lady Marian. If so, he can tell you, he doesn't need to come here. And give him this groat. Make sure no one sees you giving it to him.'

Yahia had been sitting watching all this, understanding little or nothing but following our eyes and sensing our mood. Now I smiled at him and said in Arabic, 'Come on, Yahia! Time for you to earn your keep!' and led him upstairs. I had a feeling it might be a very long time before I got another thorough oiling and massage.

By the time I came down in the morning, John had already been to Newgate. Tom had told him the only person who'd shown an interest in Petronella had been a grand messenger from the Duke of Lancaster. Petronella had been released and she had gone back to her brothel in Southwark. He had been thrilled with his groat.

I thanked John, drank some herbal infusion of Khadija's – no breakfast! – then put on a cloak and hid the crystal globe under it, and hurried down to the Green Unicorn.

I did not want to go in there yet. I wanted to go to my room – the star chamber – and leave the crystal globe there. I also wanted to visit the handsome Master Whytington (he who later became Lord Mayor), but for that I needed to change into boy's clothes because he only knew me as Jack Cutting, Lady Marian's errand-boy.

To go to the Green Unicorn, I dressed as Mariana – which to me, then, simply meant not like a lady, with a veil hanging from a tall cap down over my face, but informally, in a front-laced gown with my hair loosely braided but not covered. As usual, no one seemed to notice me as I went up the external stairway and in through the door, which opened at my touch.

The peace. The quiet. So different from my own house. How I loved having a place where I could be alone.

I put the crystal globe on the shelf, changed into boy's clothes, and skipped back down to the lane; then turned to see if anyone was

watching. No one was. Marell's rooms were both closed and shuttered, and apart from my small window there were no others at the back.

Satisfied, I sauntered down Stoney Street and crossed Clink Street to St Mary Overie Stairs. From there, I took a wherry across to Blackfriars, the quickest way to get to Cheapside, where Master Whytington had his mercer's business. He was importing some rolls of silk for me. And more importantly, I wanted to ask him about those twenty-five gold nobles Blanche had promised me.

He was handsome all right, but reserved and serious. Quite a contrast to his beautiful wife Alice, the daughter of a wealthy alderman, whose hand in marriage the penniless Dick Whytington had obtained by what many considered to be little short of witchcraft. I didn't know the details of the story, I only knew that having met him I believed him to be utterly guileless and no more capable of any form of witchcraft than a dog. It was Alice who had eyes like a cat, and a cat's small mouth and tiny teeth and little pink tongue, and who kept cats, and who had without any doubt supplied the celebrated cat of Dick's rise to fame and fortune.

'Jack! How are you?'

'I'm in fine fettle, Master Whytington. Yourself?'

'Well, Jack, *Deo gratias*. Now, I have those rolls of silk ready for your mistress.'

He handed me two rolls, securely wrapped and sealed in a tube of wood and leather. 'Not too heavy for you, are they?'

'I'll manage.'

'Now.' He gazed at me. 'Was there anything else?'

He knew very well there was. I realised he was testing me.

'Yes. But first, I've been instructed to establish a password with you, for security reasons.'

'Really?'

'Yes. You are never to pay out any of the money to someone claiming to be Lady Marian or me –'

'But I know you both by sight.'

'Even someone who looks like Lady Marian or me, unless they know the password. Which will be ... Let me see. You will ask, "Who lives in Avignon?"'

'And the answer will be "The Pope",' he smiled.

'No, that is exactly what it will not be. The correct response will be "Barbara".' Barbara, the eel-woman I worked for in Avignon. Who knew that? No one. 'All right? Shall we do it?'

He smiled, amused by my games.

'I want ten gold nobles of the twenty-five you are holding for Lady Marian.'

'Only ten?'

'No! You must not admit to understanding the request until you have heard the password. So, again. I want ten gold nobles of the twenty-five you are holding for Lady Marian.'

'Who lives in Avignon?'

'The Pope.'

'I'm sorry, but I know nothing of any gold nobles for Lady Marian.'

'Good. Now one more time. I want ten gold nobles of the twenty-five you are holding for Lady Marian.'

'Who lives in Avignon?'

'Barbara.'

'Only ten?'

'Yes, only ten for the moment.'

He grinned. I liked Master Whytington.

When I left, his wife, Mistress Alice was waiting for me. 'Psst. Come in here.'

I looked at her in some surprise. I was accustomed to being psst'd at, but not by the wives of respectable tradesmen. Still, I followed her into the small parlour, then waited for her to speak.

'Your name, girl?'

*Girl?* I was dressed as a boy, and her husband knew me as Lady Marian's messenger.

'You're from Southwark, aren't you?'

'Excuse me?'

'Answer the question – or I'll have you exposed, and you'll be lucky if you end up with only a few hours in the pillory.'

Well, she was right about that. They were pretty free with the whip here north of the river. Especially when someone like me (*me?*) was denounced by a rich and respectable good-wife like her.

So I said 'Yes, mistress,' though "from Southwark" was stretching it a bit. 'But how did you – ?'

'Then you must know Marell. You will take her a message from me. Here.'

'Marell?' Acting innocent.

'At the sign of the Green Unicorn.'

'Ah. Yes, I know.'

'There'll be an answer. Run straight back here with it – and I mean *run*.'

So I went back to the Green Unicorn, left the gold nobles and rolls of silk in my little room, then went round to the front door.

And came face to face with Marell.

How to start? What to say?

Start with the simplest thing. I gave her the message.

'Who's it from?'

'Dame Alice. Master Whytington's wife.'

She handed it back to me. 'What does it say?'

So she couldn't read. 'She wants some more of that cream for her breasts. The one that makes them bigger.'

'You going back there now?'

I nodded. 'That's a Sheelah, isn't it?'

She didn't answer. She was at her bench now, making up the cream.

'You said Petronella was getting over-ripe, like a Sheelah. That made me curious.'

'Curiosity killed the cat. Ask Sheelah. Sheelah knows all about that.'

'What?'

'Killing cats.'

I was trying to work that out when she said, 'What do you know of Sheelah, anyway?'

'My father was from Scotland. He told me about the old *cailleach*, the hag-goddess – like an old and ugly witch, he said – who accosted MacBeth out on the moors somewhere.'

'Who was MacBeth?'

'A Scottish laird – an earl – the Earl of – I don't know, I can't remember – Cawdor? Ross? Anyway, he was one of the top men in the country, but never likely to be king. My father said the *cailleach*'s name was Sheelah, I remember that clearly. He said men refused to sleep with her, but if one did she turned into a beautiful maiden and conferred the kingship upon him.'

'Hm. The Sacred Whore. What happened?'

'He murdered the King,' I told her. 'Became King in his place.'

'And?'

'And?'

She studied me. 'There's something more you want to say. To ask me.'

'Yes. I always wondered whether her words would have come true anyway. If he'd been patient, and waited ...'

'You're wise for a young serving-maid what likes to dress up as a boy. Oh, they would have come true anyway. Your MacBeth was a fool. He turned his luck into a curse. But that's often the way of it. Magic – any magic – is a two-edged sword.'

'I know.'

'You *know*?'

'I mean I *heard* ...'

She was still studying me intently. 'Because there are things I might tell you as you seem to have a feel for the Old Ways, and because I wouldn't want you to go taking Her name, or Her image there, in vain, I'll tell you this. The Sheelah you see up on the wall before you comes from a village in Essex. As did I, once upon a time, and so do Susanna and Petronella – but not the three young'uns. Though that Delia has the looks of an Essex girl ... She was set in the wall of a little chapel by the sea – Sheelah, not Delia – don't smirk at *me* – or sneer at poor Delia. I wonder how clever you'd be if you'd been sold for a whore when you were just a nipper.'

I didn't tell her I had been. I waited, humbly.

'A tumble-down chapel out on the marshes near Maldon. As soon as I saw Her lying there on the ground where folk had been helping themselves to the stones, I knew She'd seen me, and not just that, She'd been *waiting* for me to come by.'

'So you brought her here?'

'No, this was years ago. Many, many years.'

Ah ha.

'I hid Her. I was in service then and my master'd've skinned me alive if I'd took her home. One for the priests, he was – specially fat priests with girlish voices, like they've been gelded, though any whore can tell you they haven't. Anyhow, he didn't hold with the Old Ways,

so She was best kept out of sight. Then, years later, when I was having a spot of trouble, I brought Her here. To turn away evil.'

Turn away. Avert. Yes. 'And she does?

'Oh yes. But she demands much in return.'

I could imagine. But ... 'How do you know? I mean if you found her by chance? Anyway, much *what?*'

'Such questions. And all the right questions. The questions I'd ask if I was in your shoes.' She looked down at my shoes and the long red hose I was wearing, and cackled again. 'Not that I'd mind being, but I've left *that* a little late ... We had one "boy" come looking for work, I thought he was a catamite, a bumboy. I told him we don't do that here, to try next door. "Do what?" he says. "Oh, I see." And strips off right there where you're standing, and – well, it was much like it would be if you was to strip. He was a girl. A beautiful girl. I should have known – those round cheeks and big lips, the long, slender legs, same as you. Only thing she didn't have was your eyes ... She worked for me here five, six years. In the star chamber for the last two. Then left to get married. No, I tell a lie. Some lording bought her, wanted her all to hisself ... '

Her hands were like chicken's feet, skinny and yellow and wrinkled – and cold, cold, cold, I was sure – and the nails weren't nails at all, they were long, sharp claws.

'Talking about Essex, do you know anything about night-walkers on the Essex coast?'

'No.'

'Please. Anything at all.'

'Stay away from Canvey Island. Especially the area in the south around Dead Man's Point. And that's all I'm saying. Now where were we? Ah, yes ... Much blood.'

'Uh?'

'Much what? you asks. Much blood. And how do I know? You mean how does someone like me, a poor old crone as has to make her mark on paper, come to know *things like that*. Ah, well, you see, there's always a real witch somewhere around if you know where to look. Which I did. Dame Agnes was the best. She'd been in the service of Queen Eleanor. "Sheelah needs cat's blood," says she. Well, I ask you. Where'm I going to get cat's blood? You seen any stray cats about? They all get ate any time there's a famine and – "Pity," she



says. "You give Sheelah the blood and you get to eat the flesh and keep the furs yourself. But let's see ... She don't like chickens. Too tame. A fighting cock, if one comes your way, but it must be alive still, and rearing to go." I laugh at her. "Where'm I going to get a live and kicking game-cock? How about pigeons? They're wild and free." "You feed Her dove's blood," she says, "and it'll be the last thing you ever do. Dove's blood, indeed. No, it'll have to be rats." "Rats?" "Aye, rats. Rats are wild and free, and they're vicious. You trap a rat once a week and hold it up by its tail over Her and slit its throat and let the fresh, hot blood flow over Her, and She'll protect you from all evil." So that's what I do.'

I gazed at her. This place was worse than Cuenca! And then I remembered Natalie feeding live mice to that rat snake in Paris.

'It's all right this time of year, but when the weather gets really hot She stinks. Lady of the Flies I calls Her then. And now, as I've told you all this, perhaps you wouldn't mind telling me what you've done with my crystal globe what you had your eye on last time? You know what happens to girls who steal things, I'm sure.'

'Yes! Yes, of course I do, but I didn't steal it, it's here, it's in my room, in the star chamber, where Lady Marian left it. She said I was to give it back to you personally, into your hands, and I didn't know if you'd be here, so –'

'It wasn't there when I was lying there waiting for you, you dozy cow, after that bastard killed me.'

*Merde.* 'It was – it must have been! It can't have gone anywhere by itself, can it? Can it – I mean if it's magic?' I can be *really dozy* when I try! 'And what do you mean, he killed you? You're not dead, are you?' I shrank away from her.

'Do I look dead, you stupid slut?'

'Well, no, actually. But you do look awfully old.'

She studied me. Wondering whether I was really as stupid as I seemed.

I decided to push my luck. 'How old are you?'

'Awfully, like you said. Right. Here you are. How'd you come to be running errands for that bitch Alice Whytington, anyway? Your Lady Marian buy stuff from Master Whytington, does she?'

I nodded.

'MacElpin, eh. Another Scotch. And got bags of money, like all them Scotch aristos. Still she done well by Petronella. You give her my thanks – and while you're at it, ask her if you can have a few hours off in the evenings to work here part-time.'

'I'll ask, but I don't think –'

'Tell her I'll send your cut of what you make direct to her, you won't never see a farthing of it, and she might surprise you. Wait! Before you go, fetch me down my crystal globe'

I fetched it for her, she inspected it, then said, 'Well, off you go. And run! If I know Dame Alice, you'll be in trouble if you don't arrive panting.'

'I'll pant,' I laughed.

'I bet you will. Now be off with you.'

In fact I went back up to my room, changed out of my boy's clothes and headed home with the ten gold nobles tucked in my purse. And the cream for Alice's breasts. What was I going to do with that? I certainly didn't intend to cross back over the river today and was leaving for Chich in the morning. Would she mind waiting until I returned?

Yes, she probably would.

I beckoned a boy I'd seen several times hanging around outside the Clink but never spoken to before. He came running over.

'Are you a slug-boy?'

'Nah, they don't let slug-boys into the Clink. Bishop won't have it. You got someone in there, lady?'

'No, it's nothing like that. I need someone to take this pot of ointment to Mistress Alice, Master Whytington's wife, in Cheapside. Will you do that for me? Here, this is for you.' I gave him a penny. 'She may give you something, too. Tell her it's from Lady Marian's maid, who has to work this afternoon.'

'Where, the Green Unicorn? Is that where you work? I seen you around, and I know Dame Alice gets her stuff from Marell.'

'You know altogether too much.'

He laughed. 'I've run errands for her before, ain't I. Be lucky if I get a farthing.'

'Well, you've already had a penny. What's your name?'

'Tom. But you can call me Tommy, like my mum does.'

'Right. Well, Tommy Tucker. I'll be –'

'Here, how did you know my name's Tucker?'

'I dunno. It just came to me.'

'You ain't a witch, are you?'

'*Me?* Do I look like a witch?'

'No, you look like a whore.'

'Well, thanks.'

'A high-priced one. Marell's lucky getting you.'

I laughed. "She hasn't got me yet."

'No?'

'No. And I'm going away for a few weeks tomorrow, but I'll see you when I come back, I hope. Look after yourself.'

'You didn't tell me *your* name.'

'Mariana. I'm Spanish, sort of.'

'Nice. Is Dame Alice waiting for this? Cos if she is, I better run. She's a slapper.'

'Yeah, you'll be in trouble if you don't arrive panting,' I told him, quoting Marell and glad it was him, not me.

'I'll pant,' he laughed, exactly as I had, and raced off towards the bridge.

I watched him go, pleased with him and remembering the boys like him I had known in Paris. He glanced back and I waved, then he was gone.'

When I got home, Ferchard was in the kitchen eating some soup. It smelt delicious.

John wasn't there, nor was Yahia.

Khadija put another bowl of soup on the table without a word.

Ferchard nodded, and went on slurping.

I sat down opposite him and tried to spoon the soup into my mouth without making all those slurping noises.

He finished his soup and while Khadija was refilling his bowl, said, 'Are you sure you want to go tomorrow, lass?'

'I have to.'

'What do you mean, you *have* to?'

I meant I had to; and I did, but I couldn't tell him that. Or tell him anything at all about my arrangements with Blanche. 'Oh, I just mean I need to get away, to see the sea, to swim. In some ways, I hate the city, Ferchard.'

'London? Aye, it is –'

'Any city. Paris was the same. I want to be alone. I want to run along the beach, I want to hear the gulls calling, I want to spend all day in the sea.'

'That's why they called you Crazy Mariana.'

Mariana la Loca. Yes.

'I was hoping you'd have grown out of that.'

'You want to turn me into someone I'm not.'

'I want you to be the person you were born to be.'

For a moment we both concentrated on our soup, the slurping loud in the ominous silence.

When he'd finished, he put down his spoon and said, 'We'll see what a few weeks in Master Martin's hands achieves.'

'In his *hands*?'

'You know what I mean. He'll be in charge of you.'

'If he touches me, I'll kill him.'

Suddenly Ferchard's old grin broke through. 'Aye, I told him. He didn't believe me.'

'Then he'll have to find out the hard way.'

Why the grin, which was still there? Something for me to think about.

'Ferchard, do you know anything about a queen named Eleanor?'

'Eleanor? Of where? Here?'

'I suppose so.'

'The only Eleanor I can think of is Eleanor of Aquitaine.'

'No, it can't be her.'

'Wait, lass. She ruled the Duchy of Aquitaine in her own right, independent of the King of France – until she married him. Which seemed like a good move on his part: the size of his kingdom almost doubled overnight. But she was a wild one. She even insisted on going with him when he went on Crusade to the Holy Land. And while she was in Antioch she had an affair with her uncle Raymond, who was not much older than herself and vastly more entertaining than her poor pious husband, King Louis.'

'But Ferchard, I told you, it's a Queen of *England* that I –'

'You really must learn not interrupt, lass. Whether it's me speaking, or Martin, or English – or even Undead John.'

'He's not undead.'

'Of course he's not. You were the only person who ever imagined he was.'

'All right. So I'm stupid as well as ill-mannered. Now would you please finish your story of the Queen of France?'

'To cut a long story short, her marriage to Louis was annulled and she married Henry II of England. She was the Mother of both Good King Richard and Bad King John, and the great-great-great-great-grandmother of young King Richard, God save him.'

'Ferchard, you are a Scot.'

'Aye, but when in Rome –'

'We are in London.'

'You never used to be so prosaic. And didn't I just tell you not to interrupt?'

'You did, and I'm sorry. I will try to be less prosaic.'

'No! No, please don't. I don't think the world is ready for that.' And he actually laughed.

So I laughed too. And said, 'That's a lot of "greats". She must have lived an awfully long time ago,' unconsciously echoing Marell's "awfully old".

'Two centuries, give or take a decade. Why the interest?'

What could I say? Because being endowed with a feeble female brain, I find belief in the Undead quite reasonable? And incidentally, I met an undead, a real one, the ancient bawd who owns the brothel known as the Green Unicorn – for whom, as it happens, I may very well find myself working in the not too distant future?

'Oh, nothing. I heard her name mentioned in tones of admiration – now that was a Queen! – and I was curious.'

'Well, she was never prosaic, that's for sure, but she was unfaithful to her first husband, and encouraged her sons by her second husband to rise up against him in a civil war – which he won, and she spent her last few years imprisoned in one of her castles. Oh, and she poisoned King Henry's mistress, the Fair Rosamund, known as the *rosa mundi*, the Rose of the World. So, not a queen other queens should be encouraged to emulate.'

'Oh, I don't know. I rather like the way she dealt with the fair *rosa mundi*.'

'I'd have imagined you'd identify with the infamous mistress rather than the legendary queen.'

'Well, yes, there is that.' I grinned. Which was a mistake. I should have noticed that his eyes had turned icy again.

I was saved by the arrival of English, who came in behind Ferchard, winked at me and boomed, 'Ready, Ferchard?'

Ferchard snapped his fingers at me and pointed at the door.

I glared at him – I hated being treated like that, especially in front of English – but it was time I went, he was right. And while I was likely to have an overdose of Martin during the next few weeks, at least I would be spared Ferchard's contemptuous glare and English's even more contemptuous leering.

## 4

### THE SAXON SEA

*Kent for its hops and ale,  
Sussex for its beaches,  
Somerset for Weary-all Hill,  
Essex for its witches.*

*One month later.*

Was it the Three Weird Sisters who spoilt my only full day from dawn to dusk in the sea?

Tired but happy, I swam through the waves to the beach where Martin had said he would meet me with my clothes when he dropped me off that morning.

The beach was empty, and it was growing dark.

Beyond the beach, the wild salt-marshes still reflected the red of the setting sun. It was beautiful but I didn't like it. Unlike the sea, it was strange to me, and I a stranger to it.

I stayed where I was in the shallow water, my hands down on the sand keeping me steady as the waves, hardly more than ripples now, washed over my back. They'd been bigger when I walked into the sea at dawn, though not so fierce as the previous day. I didn't mind. I loved the sea in all her moods. Her. I thought in Spanish – still do when I'm alone – and where I come from on the coast of Murcia we called the sea *la mar*; inland, like in Cuenca where I spent two years, they do not know the sea and call her *el mar*. There, though, I was known as Maryam al Qartayanni, Maryam of Cartagena, not as Mariana de la Mar. They believed I was a Moorish girl.

The sun was disappearing beyond the marshes and mudflats and sea, back the way I had come.

The beach was dark now. Martin should be here. Or had I made a mistake?

I don't like the day up here in the north. I like a real day with real sunshine like the day in Spain. But the night is the same everywhere. At night you always feel at home.

There were no stars out yet, only the planet Venus, and up there, Jupiter. The moon hadn't risen yet, either, but perhaps bright moonlight wouldn't be such a good idea with me wandering around the marshes naked as a pig. Though mud would be good camouflage. If he didn't come and I had to step up out of the water like Venus, shiny and clean and bathed in her light, then the first thing I'd do would be to roll in the nearest mud-patch. Which meant just over there. The marshes were all mud. As naked as a pig, and as filthy as one.

He would come. This was nothing but some unavoidable delay, it would have some simple explanation. I just hoped the explanation was not that I'd made some silly mistake.

How could I have made a mistake? From Point Clear, where he'd dropped me off at dawn, I simply had to follow the coast south until it turned east at Colne Point, then follow it for a mile and a half, two miles. All right, not very exact, but he'd said he would find me if I was anywhere along that stretch of beach at sunset.

*He* would find *me*. So, not my fault.

I couldn't possibly cross the marshes alone, and further west along the coast was an impossible maze of creeks and inlets, one of which – but which one? – made its muddy way up to the village. A long, long way round, and I had no intention of attempting it.

But then if he had something more important to see to – and I'd been made aware that I was considered of no importance at all in the scheme of things down here – he might well *not* come. After all, this was the first time he'd let me swim all day and go so far, and had agreed to ride out and find me in the evening. And now I came to think of it, it wouldn't cross his mind that I might be unable to find my way back across the marshes. He really believed I'd grown up here, that these salt-marshes, this grey northern sea, were home to me.

My mind went back to the long conversation we'd had at the Cross Keys in Chelsford, the inn where Martin and I spent the first night



after leaving London. He did most of the talking while I sat there, my lamb stew forgotten and my mouth hanging open. I'd never heard anything so ridiculous in my life.

First, though, he'd wanted to know about the friar who'd spoken to me outside the house that morning before we left. In fact, the friar had been from Blanche's Arcane Net and might well not have been a friar at all, but he'd come straight up to me and introduced himself with the words: 'Dem'selle d'Écosse?' I nodded, and waited. I couldn't remember which question he was supposed to ask, but I knew the answer to all of them. 'Avignon,' he said. 'Skinning live eels,' I responded. 'The White Widow asks if you have anything to report before you leave.' The White Widow! I loved that! 'Yes, the man is a normal thirty-one-year-old. The woman was around in the time of Eleanor of Aquitaine.' 'What man, what woman?' But at that point Martin came out of the house wiping crumbs from around his mouth. 'She'll know,' I muttered – then aloud, 'No, Brother, I have no coins to spare, but if you go to the kitchen door, they may give you some bread.'

Martin had ignored him – but now, suddenly he was curious. 'The fat bastard seemed to know you.'

'No, I don't think so.'

He smirked. 'Well, you can hardly be expected to remember all the many friars who –'

'Martin. That's enough. Whatever I did –'

'Oh, I know what you did.'

Now I smirked. Which of the many things I'd done, and the many more I hadn't done but had been accused of, did he have in mind?

None of them, as it turned out. This was something new. Apparently I'd been born in a hovel on the edge of these marshes, the daughter of a whore named Liza. Her man, my father, was a Spaniard called Paco. And he, Martin, had known my mother and father, known me.

'You said something like that in Paris. And it still sounds more like who you imagine I am than what you know I did.'

'That *is* who you are. What you *did* was to assume the name and status of Lady Marian MacElpin.'

I stared at him. 'I don't believe there's any point in continuing this conversation. You're obviously quite mad.'

He waited, insolently, for *me* to go on. As though what I'd just said didn't merit a response.

At length, I said, 'When we met – for the first time – in Paris – '

'In the Lutetia, yes. You were with a young French woman, one of those who seemed to be your friends but later began to wonder about you. Only it wasn't the first time. Not at all. The first time I became aware of you as yourself rather than simply as Liza's kid was one May Day on the village green in Chich – St Oswyth – my village, where we are headed now. It was as I watched you dancing round the Maypole that I first realised what a gorgeous little slut you are.'

'No!'

'No *what*? All right, you're not little any more,' he laughed, actually laughed, 'but you're still gorgeous and still a slut.'

'No, you're making all this up! I just don't know why.'

'But I'm not. You'll meet people who remember you in Chich and Clackton and on the marshes between, you and your mermaid face and whore's-daughter ways ... You're denying it because you know that for what you've done you'd have been buried alive in France – or maybe boiled alive – and here, I don't know, whipped half to death, perhaps, then hanged. Of course you will deny it.'

'Of course I *would*, if it were true, yes. But ... '

Again, he'd sat and waited for me to go on. To *think*, then go on. He'd been so arrogant, so sure he was right.

I'd have to come out soon. I was hungry, and getting cold. Could I make my way along the beach in the other direction, towards the distant cliffs? It looked safer than the marshes or the creeks. Perhaps that way I'd find shelter for the night and hope Martin would come in search of me tomorrow.

I needed to find a woman, someone understanding. As a rule, men are more understanding, but given that I had no clothes on, any male over the age of ten and under the age of eighty – make that ninety – was going to understand only one thing.

Then I remembered Le Pitre finding and helping me when I'd been left on the strand by the river in Paris, as naked as now, but unconscious. And that had been in the middle of winter. I'd nearly died. Would have died if it hadn't been for that skinny, ragged boy who tried to give me his jacket only I couldn't get into it.

I laughed aloud at the memory. Suddenly I was happy again. Compared with then, I had no complaints to make about my situation now. I hoped the Weird Sisters took note.

Still, it was true that women could be much worse, much harder than men. Look at Princess Isabel and Master Chaucer. Princess Isabel, spoilt favourite daughter of the great King Edward III, who had reigned over not only most of Britain but much of France for fifty years. She'd summoned me to Lancaster's Savoy Palace, and insisted I read the *Feet and Tails and Dead Man's Hands* for her. Ten days later, she'd died. Just as I said she would. Whose fault was that?

I stood up, stepped out of the water, pushed my long hair back off my face and began to walk along the sand towards the east, towards where the sun would rise in just a few hours. *Gracias a Dios*, it was nearly mid-summer and further north than I had ever been in my life before. This great open ocean shimmering in the light of Venus and Jupiter and the countless stars now coming out, was the Saxon Sea, also known as the North Sea, the sea not so much of the Saxons as of the North Men, the Norsemen, from whom the Normans are descended. To Martin and his family, of course, it was still the Saxon Sea. To all in London, people like Princess Isabel and Geoffrey Chaucer, it was the North Sea, the sea into which their River Thames flowed just a few miles down the coast from where I stood, or so I imagined.

The great river beside which I now lived.

A sudden bleat to my left drew my gaze away from the sea and my mind back to the present.

One lost sheep, or a whole flock? I stood still and waited. More bleats followed the first. A flock then, and I'd disturbed them. A flock of sheep would have a shepherd nearby. I couldn't see anyone. In the darkness I could hardly distinguish the sheep from the humps of grass-covered mud. The shepherd would be sleeping. But if he woke, wondering what had disturbed them, he would see me on the beach, right out in the open.

Would he just stare or would he come after me with his dogs? Dogs. There'd been no barking. If he did, I'd go straight back into the sea. Like the mermaid or nymph he no doubt took me for.

As it seemed did his dog, or one of them at least, for here it came, shyly, creeping up to me, tail between its legs, whining and wetting itself. A little tan-coloured bitch no bigger than a lamb – and no braver than one. I crouched down beside it, fondled its head and ears.

Still the man didn't come.

I stood up and walked on, hoping the dog wouldn't follow me. She didn't. She lay down, her chin on her forepaws, and was still following me with her eyes the last time I glanced back fearing pursuit by her master and some other bigger dogs. But there was nothing. Only the occasional cry of a night bird over the marshes and the never-ending sound of little waves rippling in and breaking on my right.

The breaking of the waves seemed slow. Could that be so? Slower than the Mediterranean? Slower than the waves that broke on a quiet evening on the outside of La Manga, the arm of land that encloses the Mar Menor? Perhaps it is the size of the sea? This sea goes on for ever, they say; it is not enclosed like my sea – and I don't mean the Mar Menor, I mean the great Mediterranean itself, which is just a lake, a greater Mar Menor, compared to this.

My mind flew back again to that conversation at the Cross Keys. Martin had left me to sit and think while he'd pinched the slattern's bottom as she passed and got another mug of ale.

I studied him from behind my eyelashes.

His first thirst had gone, and he sipped at this one. He was really remarkably handsome for such a bastard – so big, as tall and strong as Ferchard must have been when he was young, and with those dark eyes and that curly chestnut-coloured hair and beard.

When debating, always start by looking at it from your opponent's point of view. Uncle Yacoub, the rabbi, used to say that. Uncle Yacoub, whom I would presumably never have met, never have known, if what Martin was saying was true. But on the other hand, Yacoub had also once said, "If all this, this life we lead here by the Mar Menor, were but a dream, how would we know? How would it be any different?" We would know when we woke up, I'd laughed. I'd been just a child.

*Was this the moment I woke up?*

'Humour me, Martin. Accept for a moment that I know nothing of this. That I'm not telling lies. And I'll accept for the moment that you're not telling lies, that you truly believe what you're saying. So

let's say I lost my memory at some point – it happens – and that – I don't know – Ferchard found me when searching for Marian MacElpin and convinced both himself and me that I was her. Now, what you have to do is tell this amnesiac the story of her life up to the point where she was given her freedom. I've been a slave in a harem in Granada as well as a whore in two brothels – did you know that? – and Ferchard took on responsibility for me.'

'Two brothels? What about the ones in Paris?'

'I'm waiting for the story of my *early* years ... What was my name?' I knew, *bien sûr*, what the answer would be.

'Marian, of course. Marian atte-Marsh.'

Just as Blanche had said. And she had followed it up by saying "You really have no idea, do you?" Was I the only one who didn't know? Suddenly, I *needed* to hear this story – but he chose that moment to yawn and say 'Time for bed.'

'But, Martin!'

'Go to bed. Perhaps it will all come back to you during the night.'

Furious, I stormed off to the women's dormitory followed by a gale of masculine laughter.

The sheep and the little dog are far behind me now.

Straight ahead the moon has come up, a crescent moon floating low in the sky. I walk right down at the water's edge where I feel safe. The first mile or two is mostly flat, firm sand, damp from the receding tide. Such enormous tides they have here, surging up over the beach then sweeping back out again, out, out, out – so different from the few inches the tide rises and ebbs at home in Spain. Then I come to a long pebble beach. Walking barefoot on sand is silent, but you try traipsing over heaps of pebbles without disturbing them. The breaking waves shift the pebbles too, making the same sounds, yet a dog must have heard me – or smelt me, a breeze is blowing off the sea – for I hear barking from up on the dunes that now separate me from the marshes.

I ignore it and walk on.

After another hour or so, the land to my left begins to rise. Should I go up with it, walk along the top of the cliff – I think I can make out a path leading up from the beach – or should I stay down by the water where I feel safe?

The choice is made for me when a tall man in a cloak emerges from the darkness and strides straight down the beach to where I am standing. *Striding silently across those mounds of pebbles?* I back into the water – because I'm naked and alone, not because there is any perceptible aura of evil about him. Only that uncanny silence. And the silence persists as he stands there and gazes at me. His eyes, gleaming in the pitch blackness inside his hood are the only thing I can see.

I sink down into the water, slowly, then finally take my eyes off his, lower my head beneath the surface, and turn and swim away under water. Out, far out, then on east along the coast, till I have to come up for air.

There is no sign of him.

I swim on for a while, then, tired, approach the empty beach. I float right in till I'm touching the sand with my hands. I stand up out of the water, step out onto the damp, flat sand – and he is there, where nothing was, materialising right in front of me, face to face, one hand pulling the hood of his cloak down off his head, the other seizing me by the throat. He is immensely strong, but his hands are cold as ice and I am wet and slippery, and Ferchard has seen to it that I am skilled with my feet. Even as he lifts me up off the ground, I throw myself over backwards, slipping out of his grasp. My right foot connects with his chin in a blow that would have broken any other man's neck, but he grabs my ankle! Again, I slip out of his grasp, falling backwards into the water and kick frantically away from the shore.

Can he follow me?

No, he doesn't seem able to ... but he can wait. And wait. And wait. Well, so can I. We know what he is waiting for. But what am I waiting for? And I'm so cold, so tired ...

After a while I open my eyes. I must have been sleeping in the water. He's gone. No, he's there ... How does he do that? I recall the gesture with the hood. Is it the cloak that makes him invisible?

I must have slept again, for next time I open my eyes it is getting light and he has gone.

A woman is coming down a slope, leading a donkey. She waves. I look round. No one is there in the sea behind me. She's waving at me.

Uncertainly, I wave back. And wait for her. Then step up out of the water.

For a moment, I think she's going to embrace me, like a long-lost sister or friend. A sister or friend from a past life? Maybe. Past lives haven't crossed my mind since I was thirteen, fourteen, and last heard Rabbi Yacoub, Uncle Yacoub, talking about the immortality of the soul and reincarnation – to my mind the most interesting part of the brief and highly simplified introduction to the Kabbalah that was all he would teach me. Not only was I still a child, but I was a *girl* of all things.

But can she be? It is the first time I've ever seriously wondered that about someone.

All this passes through my mind in a second as she takes my hands in hers, holds them to her breast and searches my eyes.

'You were expecting me?' It seems incredible.

'I came to meet you, yes. My name is Balthild. And you are?'

'Marian,' I say, wondering if the truth is that she recognises me as Marian atte-Marsh.

'Here, put this on. You're freezing.' She takes off her cloak, wraps it round me. I start to protest but she overrides me. I'm cold, and she's wearing a warm linen kirtle.

'I brought the donkey, too, for you to ride on. You must be exhausted.'

'No! No, all I need is a little food and water and I'll be fine.'

She smiles. 'I know. But I had to bring him. When I saw us walking home together, you dressed in my cloak, he was with us.'

'You saw us? Saw me?'

'Why else would I be here?'

Why else indeed.

She reaches into the pannier on the near side of the donkey, lifts out a flagon of water and passes it to me, then takes a loaf of bread and holds it, watching with a smile as I drink and wipe my mouth with the back of my hand.

'I'll eat when we get to your house. If I eat now I won't be able to walk another step.'

She puts the bread back, I take another swallow of water, and we start up the slope – the donkey, who clearly doesn't enjoy being taken

on pre-dawn excursions by crazy humans, taking the lead and setting a brisk pace.

Now, though, the stars are fading, and I can see that we are following a lane lined with blackberry brambles that leads directly inland.

'Is this Clackton?' I wonder, remembering Martin's brief description of the area.

'Yes, this is all Clackton; then there's Walton up the coast. That way.' She waves an arm to her right. 'Clackton covers a large area including the parishes of Great Clackton and Little Clackton. I live in Great Clackton. Let me see your feet.'

'Huh?'

'Your feet. It's quite a long walk from here and you're obviously used to being shod.'

'Oh. Yes.' The summer sun and the sea wind have baked the mud hard just as they do in Spain, and the stones here on the lane are sharp unlike the smooth round pebbles on the beach. Though even those made my feet ache after a while. Only the smooth wet sand suited me.

She goes behind me and examines my feet one by one, picking them up backwards as she might a horse's. 'Now is when you mount Darwin. We've fulfilled the Sighting, but there must have been a reason for bringing the donkey. There's always a reason.'

And so I arrived at what turned out to be the blacksmith's house in Great Clackton riding on a donkey and feeling like a child again. It reminded me of when my Spanish grandfather used to take me around mounted on a sweet little donkey my father called Griselda. She'd been grey, whereas this one, Darwin, was a strange dark brown and not sweet at all with anyone except Balthild.

'Don't worry. My husband will still be fast asleep.'

'Your husband?'

'Ned Smith. That's his smithy there, beside the house.'

'You're his assistant?'

'His assistant? Oh!' She laughed. 'You mean the way I lifted your feet. No, not usually. I have my own work. Come on in.'

'Children?'

'Two, yes. A boy and a girl. The girl – Linette – is an early riser, so she may be up to meet you. Yes, here she is.'



Linette is ten or so, with hazel-coloured hair – lighter than her mother's wavy chestnut locks. Her eyes, too, are hazel flecked with blue. She is like a wood fairy. I want to say *Where did you find this one? In the wood?* but refrain. I don't know how they would take it.

'I know what you're thinking. You're thinking I'm a wood fairy.'

Well! 'And are you?'

'No, of course I'm not. I just look like one.'

Silly me.

'Linette may look magical and read minds,' says her mother, 'but she's totally prosaic. Her brother, Harold, is the poetic one.'

'I like that,' I smile. 'All poets need a prosaic sister to counterbalance the muse and keep their feet on the ground.'

'I'm not prosaic, whatever that means. When I grow up, I'll be a muse, you'll see.'

'I'm sure you will, my sweet. It doesn't matter if a muse is prosaic. The point is that she should be beautiful and should inspire poetry.'

'Hush, Marian. You'll give the child airs. Here, put this on.' She hands me a smock, which I take gratefully and pull on. There is something very shy-making about being naked in an ordinary house with ordinary people who are all wearing clothes. Not that they seem to mind, or even to notice.

'That's what she always says when anyone says anything nice about me. Why aren't you wearing any clothes?'

'I've been swimming.'

'So early? Or *in the night*?'

'The sea is lovely in the moonlight –'

I see Linette's eyes – and so does her mother, who quickly changes the subject: 'Where are you from? Don't say "from under the sea" because I shan't believe it. But you're not English, are you?'

'No. I'm half-Scottish, half-Spanish. I grew up in Spain. With my mother's family.'

'And your mother was a witch, or a mermaid?'

I stare at her. Then laugh. 'Neither, so far as I know. She died when I was a toddler. Her mother, though – my grandmother – was a dancer. And Moorish, not Spanish.' They are both gazing at me in awe. I can't resist going on. 'But my other grandmother – the Scottish one, whom I've never met – is said to have been a witch.'

There is a long silence. Then Balthild murmurs, '*Said to have been*, eh? So now you never will ... I wonder ... '

'Ma thinks you will meet her one day,' Linette announces.

I am taken aback. I've always believed she might still be alive despite her great age and the rigours of life in the north, but my father poo-pooed the idea.

'And why have you got all those bruises?' Linette is off again.

'I – I don't know. You bump into things when you're out in the dark with no clothes on ... '

She is not convinced. Neither is her mother.

'Hush, child. Marian, you need to sleep. I'll bring you a straw pallet and a blanket. You can make yourself comfortable on that bench. And you, young lady, go and let the hens out, at once.'

Surprisingly meekly, Linette goes; and after getting me settled her mother follows her.

In the half-darkness, I lie and count my blessings for what can't be more than a few seconds before I fall into a deep sleep.

I woke and wondered where I was, then remembered and sat up. I wrapped the blanket around me.

Balthild came in and grinned. 'Did you sleep all right?'

'Oh, yes. How long have I been asleep?'

'A few hours. It's midday now.'

She busied herself with the fire and her pots and pans, talking over her shoulder as she did so. 'I asked you last night where you were from, but I didn't ask how you come to be in these parts. I mean, you must have somewhere to go to now, today? Somewhere nearer than Spain. Not that you're not welcome, of course. Linette asked me how far away Spain is. She thinks you swam here ... ' She turned and looked at me. 'You didn't, did you?'

'No!' I laughed. 'I'm visiting Martin's family in Chich. Martin Wickman. You know him? His father, Master Edward, keeps the White Hart there.'

'I know Martin, of course, yes, and the White Hart.'

'I live in London now. Not London exactly. Southwark. It's – '

'Southwark! Oh! I've never been there – I've never been further than Colchester, I grew up in Colchester – but a friend of mine lives in Southwark!' She hesitated, then added, 'She works in a house called

the Green Unicorn.' She gazed at me, wondering whether I'd know what she meant, and if I did, how I would take it. 'It's off Dead Man's Place somewhere.'

I smiled. 'I know where you mean. I could call in there if you like, when I get back.'

'You could? You wouldn't mind?' She blushed and smiled. Her hair was so fair, her skin so white. These people were pure Saxons. A folk and a culture that had got lost, or at least submerged, with the Norman invasion.

I shook my head. 'No! And if you ever want to visit Southwark, to see your friend again, you'll come and stay with me. It might be difficult for her to put you up, and anyway, you'd be embarrassed.'

'Oh, I wouldn't. We used to work together in a house in Colchester. I grew up there. Master Henry's father, William Bawd, took me in as a babe when my folk died in the Great Mortality. Gave me a home and was always good to me. So it was natural I'd work for him when I grew up. Susanna, my friend – though she's more sister to me than friend, the only sister I ever knew – she was Master William's niece, Henry's cousin, and an orphan too, from when she was thirteen, fourteen. They took her in as well, of course, and we worked St Botolph's Yard and Bere Lane together for five, six years. Till the killings started.'

I decided not to mention that I knew Susanna. But *killings*? 'There've been other killings in Colchester? When?'

'About ten years ago. A crazy took to killing prostitutes. Brother Edmund from St John's, the abbey down the road. He used to strangle them with a cord – a garrote, it's called. It was horrible.'

'A *monk* was doing it?'

'Yes! We were terrified. Then Ned offered for me – he'd been a regular of mine for ages.' She grinned. 'And Master William accepted his offer, so we got married and I was saved. But no one offered for Susanna. Men like plain women as wives, and Susanna's gorgeous. Anyway, she went off to work in Southwark. Then they caught Brother Edmund, and Master William wished he'd never let her go. She was his star – you know?'

I nodded. What was the point of denying it? 'When did you last hear from her?'

'Jack – he's my cousin – he passes through this way occasionally and I get news of her from him – that's she's alive and well – but I don't think he ever remembers to tell her about my family. You know what men are like.'

I laughed. That was one thing I did know. But she looked so sad I jumped up and gave her a hug.

'Will you really go there?'

'Yes!'

'Tell her about my wonderful children.'

'I'll tell her everything,' I promised. 'Does this Jack live in Southwark?'

'No, in Chelmsford. But he visits London ... Do you come to Chich often?'

'It's the first time. But I love the sea, and swimming – all day if I can! There's no swimming in London.'

'And you're Martin's woman?'

'No. He's a friend of my – of Sir Ferchard, who I live with ... '

'I understand. I think. But I think, too, you might be in some sort of trouble. If you like, I can put in a good word for you with Master Henry at the Shag, and – '

'I'm not – '

'You can talk to Master Martin about it – he knows Master Henry well – or if he's the problem we can do it behind his back. Though on second thoughts, perhaps you shouldn't now the killings have started again and people are saying he's returned from the grave.'

*Returned from the grave?* 'Who? This Brother Edmund? You mean he's dead?'

'Undead, they say. But what do I know? You'd have to ask Martin.'

'He'll know?'

'He spends all his time over in Colchester from what I hear.'

'He spends a lot of his time in London.'

'In Southwark, I bet!' she grins. 'Well, there's nothing much for a man like him in a village like Chich. Even if it does try to make itself sound grander than us by calling itself St Oswyth.'

'I've heard that, yes. Some local Saxon saint.'

'Aye, she was the daughter of the King of the East Angles, who married her off to Sigbert, King of Essex. Only she was a Christian and he wasn't. So she ran away and he fetched her back, she ran away

again – and again – and eventually he let her go. She founded a community of nuns here, at Chich. Everything was fine until a shipload of Danish raiders came by and began the usual raping and plundering. Oswyth and her companions, preferring death to dishonour, fought like cats, and in the struggle she lost her head. Whereupon, she picked it up and walked with it to the church.'

'And she's still to be seen, on occasion, carrying her head along the path to the church. I heard about that.'

'There's only one day you're sure to see her walk and that's the seventh of October. On that day, she carries her head in her hands from the spring where she was martyred to the door of the church.'

'A spring?'

'Yes, it sprang up from the ground where her poor head fell.'

'And the water still flows?'

'Oh, yes, and cures all kinds of illnesses, they say.'

'They didn't tell me about that. But Mistress Enid did mention that it's considered lucky to see her.'

'Lucky or not, there are those who have the Sight and those who don't, and those who don't wouldn't see her if she came in and sat beside them and placed the head on the table.' She grinned at me. 'There are some who claim she did just that one night while they were drinking. A lass with a basket of crabs or shells more like and them so drunk ... '

We both laughed.

'It's lovely to laugh. At the inn they don't like me joining in and laughing as if – you know – as if I were one of them ... I keep out of the way, same as Hild.'

'That's why you hadn't heard about Brother Edmund coming back from the grave. Everyone's talking about him and the murders.' She studied me. 'You said Martin's your master's friend and I understood you're there as a guest. But is the truth that you're there as a servant?'

What to say? She sounded a little accusing suddenly.

'You talk like a lady, but you say *Master* Edward and *Mistress* Enid ... Have you been working? Doing chores?'

I nodded.

'And the bruises?'

'Mostly from Mistress Enid.'

'Mostly?'

'Sometimes you don't even see who kicks you or gives you a whack with a stick as he passes by when you're down on your knees scrubbing ...'

'And the men there all use you?'

'No ... 'I'd been going to scream "*No!!*", but I thought better of it. I was talking to a woman who'd grown up in a whorehouse. So, 'No,' quietly and calmly.

'Only Martin.'

'Not Martin, either.' Time for a change of subject. 'Do you have the Sight, Balthild?'

It was a long minute before she answered. Her mind was still on the mystery of my status at the White Hart – indeed, of my status in society as a whole. Then, 'I have the Sight sometimes,' she said, 'though no real control of it.'

I watched while she cast her mind back to our previous topic of conversation.

'But I only ever go across to Chich in the mornings, so I'm not likely to bump into Saint Oswyth, am I.' She gazed at me, solemn suddenly. 'Perhaps the woman at the inn that everyone saw wasn't her at all, not a ghost at all, but one of the Undead ...'

*Ah ...* 'You have them – the Undead – around here? I mean apart from this Brother Edmund?'

'There are tales of the Undead in these parts going back to the days of the first Saxon settlers.'

'They came in with the Saxon people? Your people?'

'No. The stories are of murdered Welshmen and women – Celts, the people who lived here before us – who came back from the dead to take bloody vengeance on those who had slaughtered them and stolen their land. There's a town up along the coast where no Saxon could sleep safe in his bed, night after night people had their throats torn out. Eventually, they moved away, moved inland, left Walton to the ghouls, and to the Welsh who promptly moved back in.'

'I remember my teacher back home in Spain telling me about ghosts and the Undead. He was a Jew, a rabbi. He'd travelled around, he knew things. I asked him what the difference between ghosts and the Undead was. He told me locking the door might keep vampires and strigoi out, if it's a good strong door, but it won't keep a ghost out. Ghosts can pass straight through doors and walls. And only those with

the Sight can see them. Anyone can see a vampire, if they're unlucky enough to come face to face with one. He'd been in Bohemia and Transylvania. Vampires are so common there that as well as burning witches and heretics and werewolves, great heavy gravestones are laid on top of every body that's not burnt, just in case.'

'They think witches become vampires? Oh, I don't believe that. There are lots of witches around here and they don't all ...' She decided not to complete that thought. I was a stranger, after all. 'Round here everyone says it's suicides stay undead, and that makes some kind of sense because it's not their time yet.'

'In Spain, they bury suicides at a cross-roads.'

'Here, they drive an ash stake through their hearts and bury them in unhallowed ground.'

With that, the two children came running in, followed by their father, introductions were made – by Linette, who now considered herself an old friend of mine – then Ned looked from one to the other of us enquiringly. 'And what have you two been talking about?'

'Oh, nothing serious,' laughed Balthild. 'Just ghosts and the Sight and stuff like that.'

'Oh, well that's all right then. But don't let her frighten you, Marian.'

'*Me?* Frighten *her*? Marian's worse than I am! Now let's have some of this rabbit stew I've made ...'

He grinned at me, obviously not believing a word of it.

\* \* \* \* \*

After we'd eaten and the little boy had run off to play, Balthild and Ned both looked at me. Linette was gazing at me, too.

There was long silence while I shifted uncomfortably and glanced up and met their eyes then looked down again.

Finally, Ned sighed and said, 'Well, if the lass doesn't want to talk about it, I'm certainly not going to press her.' Then with a chuckle, he added, 'I'm not sure I could anyway. She looks like a bit of a fighter to me!'

That. coming from a such a big, muscular man – he was a blacksmith! – woke me up. I laughed. 'A bit of a fighter, but I'm not fighting you, Master Ned! Can I start by asking you both a question?'

'And *me*?' protested Linette. 'I can answer questions!'

'You're not old enough to answer this one.'

'I am. I'm eight.'

'What I want to know about happened ten years ago. And more.'

Linette opened her mouth and closed it again.

Like a fish, I thought.

'I am not like a fish!'

Oh, *merde*. I forgot she's yet another who can read my mind.

'Of course you're not! You're beautiful – like a wood fairy. Isn't that what I told you last night?'

'Anyway, you're the one who looks like a fish!'

'Linette!' growled her father.

'Oh, I know. All the time I spend in the sea. But I think of myself as a mermaid, not a fish.'

'Do your legs turn into a tail when you're in the sea?' She was excited at the thought.

'No. Only in my dreams.'

'Me, I dream I can fly like a bird!' laughed Balthild. Then, 'You be quiet, child, and you, Marian, ask your question.'

'What do you know about a girl called Marian atte-Marsh?'

Balthild and Ned both stared at me, their eyes suddenly wide. Linette, realising she had no idea, pouted.

'So it is you, Marian,' Ned breathed. 'I thought – '

'No, it is *not* me. I mean I am not her. But Martin of Chich *believes* I am.'

More silence.

'Please,' I said, 'forget *me*, for the moment and just answer the question.'

'Right,' said Balthild. 'Well, I'll go first, Ned, and tell the little I know, then you tell the rest. I never met the poor girl, but Ned knew her. I came here to live just after she disappeared, and people were still guessing what might have happened to her. Of course, with her being who she was, her mother the local whore and herself already with a reputation, the first thought was Brother Edmund must have got her. But Brother Edmund never hid bodies, and people began to argue



against that and to wonder all over again. She might have run away to London – or been taken there – and be working in Southwark like Susanna. Or,' she looked at me, 'she might have drowned. After all, she spent all day in the sea, even sometimes in storms, and ... but Ned never believed that, did you, Ned. No more drown her than drown a fish – or a mermaid – that's what he said, and all the other people who knew her well.'

So. Not only was her name Marian, but she used to spend all day in the sea! Martin had hinted at that, anyway. It was his reason for letting me have the occasional swim, for even letting me spend one whole day in the sea before we left. To prove to me and to everyone else that I really was Marian atte-Marsh.

Then the truth came out. The story Martin didn't want told.

'Martin's mate Tom, a Great Clackton boy from just up the road here, fell off his horse a couple of years ago and broke his spine. Before he died a few weeks later, he made his confession to Father George of St John's. Of course, confessions are confidential. But Father George enjoys a drink – what priest doesn't? –'

'Not all priests babble in their cups,' put in Ned.

'Fortunately! Anyway, Father George does, and it soon came out that Tom and Martin had tried to rape the girl. You remember this, Marian?'

'No, of course I don't!'

'So you don't know what she did?'

'No.'

'What would *you* have done?'

'I'd have kicked the nearest one in the balls and fled – into the sea if it was nearby.'

Linette giggled. Me being a bad influence again, as Ferchard used to tell me when we had little Alazais with us in Spain and Avignon.

I glanced at Balthild. She didn't seem to mind.

'That's exactly what she did. So, with their pride and their balls hurt, what do you imagine they did next?'

'Came back with a dozen sweet kind friends of theirs and caught her when she was out on dry land again. Then raped her. All of them. Again and again. She was twelve years old, and probably still a virgin.'

Linette was frightened now.

'Once more exactly right. But how did you know she was twelve years old?'

'More to the point,' put in Ned, 'why *didn't* you know if she was a virgin?'

I smiled at Ned, then turned back to Balthild. 'Because Martin told me she was – *I* was – twelve when I disappeared, and he'd heard in a dockside bar in Wivenhoe – is that right? Wivenhoe? I have terrible trouble with these names.'

'Aye, Wivenhoe. Up the Colne towards Colchester.'

'He heard I'd been picked up by the sailors from a ship that was leaving for Spain within the hour, and as the sailors hadn't finished with me they took me with them. And no doubt sold me to some happy whorehouse owner in Cádiz, their port of destination. What did I expect? That's what happens to sluts who hang around ports hoping to make a quick silver penny ... He's a lovely man, Martin, isn't he.' I paused, and they waited. I obviously had something else to say. 'But now, having heard the story of the rape, and doubting whether a little thing like that would have been on Tom's conscience, I suspect they *sold* the poor child to the captain of that ship.'

'They did, yes. And that is what Tom wanted to confess to the priest before he died. He was a good boy. Raping a girl like her, a girl everyone said was a slut and a whore like her mother, was one thing. Selling her, and to a captain who was sailing down to the land of the Moors and the Barbary Pirates, was another thing altogether. Father George was horrified. The girl – one of his flock! – might be lost to Christendom! He told Ned and Alfred later that it had been the only time in his life he'd ever heard a death-bed confession so grave he could not grant absolution.'

Poor Linette had given up trying to make sense of what we were saying. She just sat there wide-eyed, shifting her gaze from speaker to speaker. I smiled at her and said softly, 'Let's listen to what your dad has to say, shall we?'

He cleared his throat. He was a blacksmith, not a public speaker, and when called upon to bear witness he took it very seriously. 'I think ... Before I tell you what I remember, I think I'd like to *know* if you really are her – or not. So I can talk about *her* – or talk about *you* – you when you were a youngster here on the marshes.'

'But how can you know? Is there a way you can tell? Oh, God, if there is, if you can, then *please* –'

'You don't sound any too sure now yourself. Not as sure as you did a moment ago.'

'It's Martin! He's so sure! And he's told people – out at Chich – people who knew me – I mean knew *her*! – and none of them ever seems to have the slightest doubt. "Oh, that slut. She's come back like a bad penny, has she?" That's everyone's attitude. And when I tell him about things that prove I *can't* be her, he always has an answer.'

'What sort of things?' asked Balthild.

'Well, for instance, my old servant, Khadija. She's a Moor, a slave who's been with the family since before my mother was born. She nursed my mother when she was a baby and did everything for her and for everyone else in the house until ... when the Black Death returned and my mother died, she took over looking after me.'

'Your mother was Spanish?'

'Yes. Maria de la Manga.'

'But you don't remember her.'

'No. That's bad?'

Balthild laughed. 'I don't remember mine – or my father, or my grandparents – no one! Does that mean I'm not me?'

'No, of course not. It's ridiculous, isn't it.'

'But it would mean I'd have a hard time proving I was me if someone tried to claim I was someone else.' She grew thoughtful. 'I only know I'm me because Master William at the Shag told me I was when I grew old enough to wonder ... And this Kad – what's her name? – this Moorish slave. She's still alive?'

'Oh, yes! That's the point! I couldn't abandon her so I brought her with me. She's in Southwark.'

'Well, there you are then,' said Balthild.

'No, because Martin says she's so old and half blind she would have accepted as me any girl who spoke Spanish and Arabic. After all, she hadn't seen me for four years. And in those four years I'd grown up, become a woman. And ... become a whore.'

They didn't seem surprised.

'You'd changed, that's for sure,' Balthild agreed, 'but I feel she would have known. There's all the little things like – oh, what you like to eat, and what you don't like. If someone came here pretending to be

Linette all grown up and she didn't like getting up in the mornings and she liked eating fish I'd be very suspicious. Linette can't stand fish.'

'You're right, but I don't think Martin will take such details seriously. He'll say Khadija doesn't remember. He said he doubts if she even remembers her own childhood. I'm ashamed to say I've never asked her about it. I will though, next time I'm home.'

'What about your grandmother?'

'Sebah. She was a Moor, not a Christian. She taught me to dance – and – and to be a woman. But Martin says I could have learnt to dance while I was in a harem in Granada. And learnt Arabic there, too, of course.'

'He does seem to have all the answers.'

'Did I mention my teacher at home when I was a child? The rabbi? He taught me Hebrew and theology and – and stuff.' Not all of it stuff for these ears. 'Martin simply asked me whether my master in Granada, Sidi Abdelrahman ibn Khaldoun, knew Hebrew. He did. Martin just laughed. "You're very quick at picking up languages. You speak English like a native – well, you would, you were born here – but you speak French like a native, too." "My father used to like talking to me in French. But usually we spoke Gaelic together. How do you explain my fluency in Gaelic?" Another mocking laugh. "I don't know. I can't judge your fluency in Gaelic any more than I can judge your Arabic or your Hebrew. But I do know that the old priest up at St John's used to fancy you. And of course you encouraged him. And he was a Scot." So you see? I can't help beginning to wonder. Perhaps my hold on reality isn't all it should be. You know, when I was a child, in the village they called me Mariana la Loca. Crazy Mariana.'

'If they did, if they really did, then that just proves you aren't crazy,' said Balthild kindly.

'Yes, there's that. But sometimes it does seem ... Yacoub, the rabbi who was my teacher, once challenged me to define reality. Could I prove I "really" was sitting there talking to him about reality, that it wasn't all part of a dream? That my whole childhood by the sea in Spain wasn't a dream? And certainly looking back on it now, from a great distance in both time and space, it does seem like a dream.'

'He was a wise man, no doubt,' said Ned, 'but now I'm going to give you a bit of proof, a bit of reality. Take that smock off.'

*What?* 'But it's all I'm wearing!'

'Take it off, Marian,' Balthild told me. 'Linette and I both saw you naked as a fish – sorry, a mermaid – this morning, and Ned, of course, is used to seeing girls like you stripped off and wearing next to nothing.'

'Well, all right. If you say so.' I pulled the smock off over my head, and stood there shyly facing him.

'Come here.'

I inched closer.

He put his great hands one on my tummy one on the small of my back and turned me slightly so he could see my right hip and flank. He peered at it, ran his fingers lightly over it. 'This is not the Marian I knew, the daughter of Liza atte-Marsh. She had a big burn scar here – ' he ran his fingers over the top of my hip again, 'a scar she'll still have when she's ninety. This young lady – may I call you Mariana to avoid confusion? – hasn't the slightest trace of such a scar.'

I threw myself into his lap and gave him a great kiss.

'Marian – Mariana – I think you can put my husband down and put your smock back on now.'

'Oh! Oh – ' I jumped up and pulled the smock on. 'I'm sorry, Balthild, I – I ...'

She laughed. 'Never mind. Ned, tell us about that scar. How the other Marian came by it.'

'Yes. She and Alfie, the boy who was helping me here then, were sweet on each other. No, that's not really fair. They were only children. But they were friends, they enjoyed each other's company. One day she crept into the forge – she wasn't allowed in there when the fire was lit, she knew that, they both did, but – anyway, she shouted BOO! or something, there was a scuffle and laughter, she fell against a red-hot bar and screamed – and went on screaming! That was the first I knew of it. We got what was left of her skirt off her, but some of the cloth was stuck to the wound. I poured cold water over it again and again till she calmed down, then sent Alfie to fetch Liza. Liza came running, and she and Alfie took her to Audrey, the witch – the witch of the marshes, they call her,' he told me, then went on, 'so she was in good hands, and Audrey's hovel was close to Liza's own. Still is. Liza died a few months after Marian disappeared, but the witch is still there.'

'Did you ever actually see the scar, Ned?' I asked.

'Oh, yes. A month or so later, when I saw her again and asked how she was, she told me it was better but it still had a bandage on it and herbs the witch put on every day. But the next time I saw her with Alfie and asked, she lifted her skirt and showed me. It looked clean and dry, no pus, no oozing, none of the bits of cloth that I'd seen crushed into the molten flesh. But the flesh had set as it had melted, in ripples. The poor thing was marked for life, and – and she didn't seem to mind. In fact she was rather proud of it!' He chuckled. 'I saw her once a year or so later coming up out of the sea beneath Clackton cliffs, a fish, a bass, hanging from her hand. She saw me and turned to dive back in – by this time, she'd learnt to be terrified of me – but I bellowed at her to wait and to come to me, so she came running over, and stood before me, trembling and beginning to cry. "Is that for your Mum and Dad or do you want to sell it?" "If – if you want it, sir." "Ay, I do. And you can show me the burn you got that day at the smithy." She was naked, of course, but she turned sideways on and leaned over so I could see the scar properly. "The sea helps," she sobbed. I ran my fingers over those cold, wet, hard ridges. "I'm sure it does," I said. I bought the bass from her and she went running off along the beach in the gathering dusk. I think that was the last time I saw her.'

What a sad story. And how did she catch that fish? I'd never been able to catch a big fish underwater by hand. When I go back to Spain, I resolved – and I will go, one day, I'm sure of that – I will look for Marian atte-Marsh, the other Marian, the other me. But for the moment I would have to continue being her while I was here in her home-country. Now I knew I wasn't her, the pressure was off and I could relax; and I could see how convenient this name and background could be. Much better than anything I could ever invent.

'And another thing,' Ned added. 'You're not frightened of me. If you were Liza's daughter, you would be, wouldn't she, Balthild?'

'She'd be even more terrified now than she was as a child.' Balthild laughed and turned to me. 'I don't think she even knows who you are! She can't possibly be our Marian.'

What was all this about who he was? He was the village blacksmith and seemed a kind enough man. Why should Marian have been so frightened of him?

I could think about that later. Now I needed to pay attention to Balthild. She was asking me what my plans were – if I had any! – and what exactly "this Sir Ferchard" was to me.

What should I tell them? I didn't want Lady Marian involved in the proceedings here in Essex. And if I tried to tell these people the whole story ... it was just too long and too complicated. I would stick to the tale Blanche and I had agreed on in London, the one where I, Mariana, was a poor half-sister of the Lady Marian MacElpin.

'Sir Ferchard is the guardian of Lady Marian MacElpin, a Scottish aristocrat, and my half-sister. We share the same father. The house in Southwark where I stay is hers, but she's rarely there. Sir Ferchard lets me stay because she said I might though he – let's just say he heartily disapproves of me.'

'And he knows you as?'

'I use my Spanish name and – well, people who don't like me refer to me as "that Spanish whore".'

'So he calls you Mariana –'

'Yes, Mariana de la Mar, though I'm actually a MacElpin. too. He thinks I disgrace that name.' Always stick as close to the truth as possible.

'Hm. Well, I can see why,' she laughed. 'And when this Lady Marian is there, how do you get on? Are you friends or what?'

'We're very close, at least in private. In public, less so. But I run errands for her, things like that.'

'Enough, Balthild,' Ned said. 'All we need to know now is what Mariana would like us to say regarding who she is – if we're asked.'

'Oh, nothing, Ned. Please. As far as everyone down here is concerned, I'm Marian atte-Marsh. If we try to prove them wrong it'll just cause a lot of trouble. And if there's trouble, we all know who will end up on the receiving end – don't we, Balthild?'

'Oh yes. It's always girls like Mariana who end up with some extra bruises.'

'Bruises? If everyone's convinced she's Liza's daughter come back, then claiming to be someone else'd warrant a public whipping.'

'Please, no, not that,' I murmured. 'You have no idea how grateful I am, to you Balthild for your hospitality and to you Ned for setting my mind at rest. It matters not what the world *thinks*, it's what you yourself *know* that's important.'

'Right, Marian atte-Marsh,' said Ned, getting to his feet.

'Ned, take her back over to Chich before it gets any later and she gets in even more trouble than she's in already. If I know Mistress Enid,' she laughed, 'you'll be lucky to get off with just a good beating.'

Ned agreed. 'Aye, but Mistress Enid's in the right of it. She has an inn to run. Master Edward's a soft one and it doesn't do to spoil the slatterns.'

'Hild's not spoilt,' I protested.

'That's what he means,' said Balthild. 'That Mistress Enid's a good mistress.'

'Oh. Yes, I see.'

'And I think when you tell them your tale,' Ned continued, 'you'd better refer to us as *Mistress* Balthild and *Master* Ned. And make it a lot less friendly.'

Linette was asleep, face down on her forearms, so I didn't say goodbye to the little wood fairy, but I did give a Balthild a hug when she gave me an old skirt and top for the ride back.

Ned delivered me to Chich riding up behind him on his huge old horse. It was much bigger than any knight's destrier I'd ever seen: an English drayhorse, he told me, but one accustomed to the saddle and preferring it. Not that it was far, and I could easily have walked. But when we got there and he'd had a drink with Martin's father and I'd thanked him and said goodbye to him and his beautiful horse, they told me Martin had spent hours searching for me, that I must have been on the wrong beach. That he was furious. That he knew now they were right, he should never have let me swim. And that he'd gone to see some friends he had to speak to before he left ...

We really were leaving?

I smiled at Hild, who was better now, *gracias a Dios*, or I would never have been allowed my day in the sea. The poor thing was down on her knees scrubbing the stone steps that led up from the muddy yard into the kitchen – I hated that yard, those steps! – but she looked back down quickly, frightened someone might see her slacking. She clearly didn't dare talk, so as no one was watching and no one had said anything about a beating, I wandered out and down the lane to the creek, hoping I might meet Martin on his way home.



For a while, I sat watching the boats bob up and down and listening to the water lapping against their wooden hulls. And dozed off ...

I woke with a start when a pair of enormous gulls started squawking and arguing over something on one of the boats. I looked round. Still no sign of Martin.

Clouds had blown over and there was a chill on the wind. The embankment, a grass-covered dyke with a path along the top, looked inviting, so I set out along it, the creek on my left full of muddy seawater, and on my right the grey-green marshes, the true colours of this bleak northern world.

When I came to a sheltered spot where a small tree was growing out of the side of the dyke, I sat down and gazed in the direction of the open sea, wishing I was out there among the waves again like yesterday.

Then I dreamt I was back home in Spain, sitting under an olive tree gazing out over the dazzling Mar Menor ...

A harsh voice awoke me: 'Where were you?'

Martin.

'I was where we'd arranged I should be.' Despite everything, I preferred that to "where you told me to be".

'You were not.'

I refused to do "I was", "You weren't", with him. I remained silent.

'You must have mistaken the place. Either way, you should have waited. I rode along the beach. I'd have found you.'

He would, yes. On horseback was much faster than on foot. So he was lying. *And* I'd been delayed by that wraith-like figure.

I remained silent.

'Where did you spend the night?'

He knew where I'd spent the night. His parents would have told him. Otherwise I'd have told him I spent it in the sea.

'How did you meet her? Or did you already know her? Birds of a feather.'

'Are you referring to Balthild? We met by chance. I was wandering the night, naked and cold. She took me in out of the kindness of her heart.' I remembered Ned had told me to say *Mistress* Balthild. Next time.

'Did she tell you what she was?'

'A housewife? A mother? A seer, to some extent?'

'A whore.'

'She did mention that she grew up in William Bawd's house, and later worked for him.'

'And she knew who you were? That you're a whore too?'

'Hard to tell a lady from a whore when she's naked. And I was naked as a jellyfish when Mistress Balthild found me washed up on the beach and took pity on me. Well, not exactly washed up on the beach. I was walking through the night towards Clackton. But naked, yes,' I laughed.

'Then she must have recognised you. That's exactly how you used to behave when –'

'She didn't know me. Master Ned knew me, but Mistress Balthild came here from Colchester after you'd sold me to that ship's captain.'

'That's right, she did, yes.' He gazed at me, not in the least ashamed of having sold a child to be a slave in a far-off country, and revelling in my tacit admission that I was Marian atte-Marsh.

'She told you about where she used to work in Colchester?'

'She told me about the Shag and Master William and Master Henry. The Shag's their place, right?'

'Henry's place. William Bawd's dead. What did she say?'

I wondered what I should tell him? How to lead into the conversation I needed to have with him if I was ever to get a place in one of the brothels in Colchester. 'She offered to put in a good word for me with Master Henry – I was, as I say, naked and apparently homeless.'

He grinned. 'If that's necessary, I'll be the one who puts in a good word for you with my friend Henry.'

'Well, thank you, sir.' The way I said it, he could take that as sarcasm or believe I really meant it.

'I leave in the morning.'

*I?* Not *we*? He wasn't leaving me here, was he?

'Are you – are you taking me with you?'

He nodded, amused at my relief.

'Can we stop in Colchester this time? Please?' On our way here, as the weather was good, we'd ridden straight past Colchester.

'We will be stopping in Colchester. I have people to speak to there before I return to London. And I want to ask my uncle about the murders.'

Perfect. But I needn't have added that "please".

'Mistress Balthild mentioned something about murders. A monk, Brother Edmund I think his name was, killing girls.'

'Brother Edmund was from my uncle's abbey. He's dead, and now the killings have started again people are saying he's come back. That he's undead. Really undead, a revenant, not like your John.'

The sky was a dark grey now, and all the grey-green of grass and marsh and water growing darker by the minute.

'The question is what to do with you if I don't go straight on to London.'

'You might *not* ...?' I hated how he always made me sound stupid! But it was the way he doled out information in drips and drops.

'In Colchester, I'll be informed whether I'm to proceed to London or turn north on another mission. In the latter case, I certainly won't want you tagging along.'

'You'll leave me in Colchester?'

This sounded promising, but I wouldn't suggest him leaving me with Henry Bawd. Better to make him think it was his idea.

He beckoned and I stood up.

'Walk in front of me.'

I went ahead, and he followed me back to the White Hart.

\* \* \* \* \*

Next morning, we heard that a shepherd girl had been killed on the marsh. Throat slashed open, blood drained.

'The marsh, Master William?' I asked, wondering if it had happened where I'd been.

'Somewhere out on the open marshland to the west of the Clackton cliffs,' he told me. 'Sounds like you were lucky.'

Luckier than they knew. I cleared away the bread and honey he'd finished with.

'Luckier than poor Helga.'

'You knew her, master?'

'Our Martin did. One of the many,' he laughed. 'but there, I didn't ought to speak ill of the dead.'

It wasn't the dead he was speaking ill of, it was Martin and all the other men like him, but there was no way I could say so. Then Martin walked in. 'Martin, your father – Master Edward, sorry – tells me Helga was a friend of yours. Won't you be staying for the funeral?'

They both looked at me as though I was mad. Men's friends were other men.

'Plenty more like her in the villages around here.'

'And in the towns and cities,' chortled his father. 'Now you run and get yourself dressed up ready then wait by the horses. I've a couple of things to say to Martin in private.'

They'd decided I should leave "dressed up" as a lady. It was how I'd arrived, so they assumed Sir Ferchard preferred me that way.

I dressed as slowly as I dared and by the time I came back down, Martin was ready and waiting, impatiently tapping his boot with his whip. He ignored the change in my appearance, and we rode out of the village in silence.

It was a beautiful morning. I found myself paying more attention to the countryside and the villages we passed through than I had on the way down to St Oswyth a few weeks previously. Then, I'd been tired, and with the weather suddenly worsening I'd just wanted to finish the journey. To my surprise, he stopped for us to admire a wood carpeted in primroses. Then soon afterwards, we passed another wood, another remnant of what must once have been the great forest that covered the whole land.

Martin said, 'You liked the primroses? Come and look at this.' He led me in among the trees.

'More primroses?'

'No, look.'

I looked, and everywhere I turned there were bluebells! It was a flower I'd come to love in Southwark. Even before we left they'd been on display at all the flower-stalls, their scent filling the air. He seemed to be in no hurry, so I wandered among the trees picking one sweet-smelling flower here, another there, the ones that caught my eye among the millions growing all around us unnoticed and unappreciated. Unnoticed? I would have to think about that. It was like

under the sea. Who ever saw all that, apart from me? Here at least Martin shared it. I would have liked that he knew where flowers grew, and brought me to see them, except that for him it was probably just a place to bring a slut for a fuck. *Plenty more around ...*

It was only out of respect for Ferchard that he kept his hands off me. Fucking me would be crossing a line Ferchard had never, so far as I knew, made explicit but which was clearly understood by both Martin and English.

We left the wood and passed through Thorrington, then on to Alresford where, after a quick stop for a drink and something to eat, we forded the creek and headed towards Wivenhoe.

We didn't talk. Whatever his failings, Martin was a man, a real man ... I glanced across at him, riding beside and slightly ahead of me ... Real men never talk freely except in the company of other men, while women wait on them or sit around being decorative, depending upon their rank, and keep their mouths firmly shut. Which suited me just fine, because today I was particularly quiet and pensive. I had that feeling I always seem to get when things are about to start happening. It's not so much what those who know call the Sight: I don't *foresee* what is about to unfold, I *forefeel* it.

We came to a sharp bend in the road where the trees came down close to the marshes that border the Colne, and the lane we were on turned inland following the trees. We rounded the corner and suddenly, the way was blocked by people all talking at once.

'What's happening?' I asked Martin.

'Wait ... They've found a body.'

'With its throat cut or torn open?'

He shrugged.

'Can I go and see?'

He hesitated. 'They have to wait for the Crowner.' Then, pleased that I'd asked him even though I was dressed as a lady, he nodded.

I dismounted, and Martin held the horses while I eased my way through to the front. People let me pass when they saw my rich attire. The English were not as cowed as the peasants of Spain and France, but most of them still stood in awe of the wealthy, and of the power the wealthy wielded.

I smiled at one or two of the women but my smile was not returned.

Just the usual surliness? Or a sign of the growing discontent among the peasants that everyone in Southwark was talking about? Martin would not discuss it with me. Neither would his father when I tried to broach the subject.

And there was the corpse. It had been concealed by the bracken that grew between the pathway and trees, but now the bracken had been cut away for everyone to see. The body was rotten, stinking, had been there a long time. Where the eyes had been, maggots were crawling. But what was most shocking was that he had been dismembered, his arms and legs seemingly ripped away from his torso – not cut, but wrenched and torn, you could tell by the remains of the tendons and other stuff hanging from the stumps, and from the depth of the holes in the body, over which flies were buzzing and maggots were crawling. I'd heard someone in Paris – one of the students? one of the prostitutes? I couldn't remember – describe an appalling execution she'd witnessed where a woman was torn apart by four horses. This reminded me of that. And whoever killed him had taken his cloak and cassock. His soutane. For the man had been a priest, his head was tonsured. His only clothes now were the torn rags that were all that was left of his drawers and tunic.

Half hidden beneath that truncated torso was a scrip, a small bag, that had hung by a cord from his neck.

'Why don't they open his scrip?' I asked the man standing to my left. 'It may tell us who he is.'

'No one be allowed to touch body till Crowner arrive.'

'Ah.'

'Nought Crowner can do,' muttered the woman standing next to him. His wife?

'That bain't Black Shuck's work. A man done that.'

'Black Shuck?' I asked.

They both glanced at me then looked back at the body.

'No man done that.' The woman again. 'No man'd be strong enough. Least, not a live one.'

'A night-walker, right enough.'

Disgusted by the smell and the flies, I turned and made my way back to Martin. I would ask him.

'Black Shuck?'

'Uh?'

'They're muttering that it's not – "it bain't" – the work of Black Shuck. Who is Black Shuck?'

'Black Shuck's not a man. Black Shuck's a dog. A great black dog with blood-red eyes that gleam in the dark when he's pursuing a man. We'll ask my uncle.'

We remounted and rode on for a while, thick forest now on both sides of the lane.

*A great black dog?* Could it be a shape-shifter rather than an undead monk? *The wench is dead. Who cares. Plenty more like her around ...* I cared. And I was sure I'd already survived a run-in with one of the killers. For as Blanche had pointed out, there were two quite different undead murderers here and two separate sets of murders being committed.

Colchester stands on a hill. The Wall that encloses the city rings the top of the hill like a collar. We were approaching from the east and could see the great Keep and two church spires towering over the Wall. The spire on the right was the Church of the Grey Friars, Martin told me, and the slightly smaller one to the left the Church of St James the Greater. 'All that corner of the city to the left of the gate is one enormous graveyard,' he said, 'green and pleasant enough during the day, but as grim as any place I've ever set foot in once the sun goes down.'

A chill crept up my spine and I knew I too would set foot there one night. Now, though, we were crossing a small river at the foot of the hill. The sun came back out and sparkled on the water and a little family of black birds swam by – something like small ducks with brilliant white foreheads and beaks, but the babies with reddish heads and faces, exactly as I remembered them from Avignon. *Foulques*, they were called, in French, Vieux Gaspard had told me as we sat by the great River Rhône watching all that water race by on its way to the sea, then asked what they were called in Spanish. I didn't know. I didn't know in English, either.

'What are they called? Those birds.'

'Coots.'

'Coots. I like that. Lovely word. Is Colchester a port, then?' I'd spotted the river snaking along on our left as we made our way to

Colchester. All there was at the bridge where we were standing was a water-mill.

'Yes, down at the Hythe.' He pointed off to our left. 'There's another port at Wivenhoe, a little further down river.'

Wivenhoe, yes. Where they'd found the latest body. And where Martin and his mate had sold Marian atte-Marsh.

'Where you and your mates sold poor Marian.'

Ignoring that, he turned away from the water and I followed him slowly up the hill. When we reached the gate, he didn't pass in through it but went on round the outside of the Wall, past the graveyard. All I could see of it was the tops of some trees.

Eventually, we came to another gate. South Gate. Still we didn't go in.

'The abbey's outside the wall? Ah, that must be it over there.'

'No, that's St Botolph's. An Augustinian priory, like the one in Chich. The abbey – St John's – is down this way.'

We passed the priory on our left, then a small church and there before us was the abbey gatehouse, with the great abbey church like a man-made hill behind it.

The gate-keeper went to inform Father Geoffrey that his nephew was here, but with female, and therefore inadmissible, company.

After a few minutes, he came out to us.

There was something in the eyes that recalled Martin's mother, but little else. She was plump and self-indulgent; he was gaunt and ascetic.

Martin introduced me as Lady Marian MacElpin – well, I *was* dressed as a lady – but the lack of courtesy in his manner and the way that he said it implied very strongly that I wasn't one.

'Have you any guest accommodation available, Uncle?'

'We have no facilities for "ladies" here at the abbey, but in the city ... ' He mentioned a nunnery and a couple of respectable inns to Martin.

'I hadn't meant for *her*, Uncle. *I* should like to stay the night, maybe two, here at the abbey.'

'You are always welcome here, my son.'

'And I want to ask you about these murders. Mother wondered whether it was Brother Edmund come back from the grave. Then we saw another one – '

'*Another* one?'



'They found a body, out on the Wivenhoe road. A religious, by the look of it. Dismembered.'

'Another religious? There've been quite a number of whores killed but not many religious yet, *deo gratias*. An Augustinian Canon, three, maybe four, others, priests, monks. That's not Edmund's work. Your mother's right, the murderer *is* rumoured to be a religious, but that's not why everyone talks of Edmund having come back from the grave. That's because the Franciscan Guardian's been saying so. Fool. If it *is* a religious doing it, then it'll be one of his damned friars. And it's not the same as it was when Brother Edmund was doing it. The place is the same – how could it not be? – outside the walls, near the brothels and the monasteries. But the victims chosen are not the same, and the *modus operandi* is totally different. And much more frightening. That poor Canon was dismembered, too. Torn apart. And one leg had gone. *Eaten*.'

'And the girls?' I asked. 'The woman?'

'Oh, they'd all had their throats ripped open,' he said dismissively.

Right. But *they* didn't matter. 'Another girl had her throat torn open on the marsh a couple of nights ago – a girl named Helga – but I suppose she doesn't matter either. And why do you say it must be one of those "damned friars"? Might it not just as easily be, say, one of the Austin Canons? Or a different Benedictine monk? A *live* one?'

He glared at me. 'Martin, go with her. Find her appropriate accomodation.'

I shrugged, and turned away.

A few minutes later Martin caught up with me. He had left our horses at the abbey and was carrying my bag on his shoulder. 'What did you say?'

'Me? Nothing.'

'As you turned to go, I heard you mutter something. *And so did my uncle*.'

'Oh, that. Just "Bless you, too, Father".'

'You mustn't – !'

'Mustn't what? Respond when a priest blesses me.'

'He didn't bless you.'

'A sin of omission on his part requires an act of contrition on my part?'

He looked me in the eye, but said nothing.

We walked on in silence for a while, out past St Giles' Church and along Botolph Street.

As we passed St Botolph's Priory again, on our right this time, I noticed Martin look left then glance at me.

'Is that Master Henry's house?'

'No, his place is round the corner, in Bere Lane. At the sign of the Shag.'

'Yes, I remember. But what in heaven's name *is* a shag – apart from –'

He laughed. 'Respectable people hearing that word think of a large sea bird – a cormorant. As you, of course, know perfectly well.'

'I do? But yes, cormorant is from the French and Spanish, so shag is no doubt the Saxon word for the same bird. If I spend much more time in your company picking up these rustic gems, I'll be able to pass as a respectable person.'

'It will take more than that.'

Now I laughed. 'And was that house also a brothel?'

'Yes. They have to be outside the walls.'

'So does every town and city in England have its own little Southwark?'

'Ipswich does, south of the river: Stoke, it's called. I don't know many cities in England. Paris is different. There most of the bordels are north of the river, aren't they?'

He waited for me to reply, but we had come to the Wall. I looked at him, wondering whether at last I would be permitted to enter the town. Yes! We passed in through South Gate, and suddenly we were surrounded by throngs of people. To get away from the crowds, Martin led me up a narrow lane with three-storey houses leaning out over us till they almost touched each other. They shut out all the light, and reminded me of the alleys I knew but normally avoided in the worst parts of London and Paris. Then we turned left into an even darker lane. I tipped back my head and looked straight up at the narrow strip of overcast sky.

'This is Culver Lane,' he informed me.

'Is there nowhere more open, more light, we could walk?'

'We can go on through there – that's Hell Lane – to the Swan, and on to the High Street.'

'Hell Lane, eh? I'll save that for another time.'

He took me by the elbow and led me out into the High Street.

'Ah. This is better. Oh, look! Another White Hart. It seems a very popular name.'

'There's one in Southwark – very big, very grand.'

'I know, I've seen it. I must get you or Ferchard or someone to take me in there one day.'

'As a lady?'

'If I go as a working girl, I shan't need you! What's that building there?'

'The Moot Hall. At the back is the law court, and some holding cells. And look – opposite is the pillory.'

It was empty, thank heaven. There are pillories everywhere in England, of course, and it's all quite normal, but I hate seeing people abused by their jeering neighbours and the ubiquitous street kids pelting them with filth. Though I suppose that's preferable to the amputations, the slicing off of lips and cheeks and ears and noses and hands and arms which is normal practice in Spain and France – and to the tortures that seemed to go on day and night in Southwark, in the Clink Prison, not two hundred yards from where I lived.

'What did *he* say?' I heard myself ask, and was almost as surprised by my sudden question as Martin was.

'Who?'

'The good prior. Your uncle. While I was walking away from you. You asked me what I said. Now I'm asking you what *he* said.'

'He said you weren't a lady.'

'His exact words?'

'He said: "She's no lady. Look at the way she walks."'

I laughed. I'd heard that before. 'So we know where *his* eyes were. Now, where shall I stay tonight?'

'There's a place near the Bull, outside Hed Gate. At the sign of the Winged Lion. I've stayed there once or twice when I arrived late and the gates were closed.'

'She puts people up?'

'No questions asked.'

'Is she in the same business as Master Henry?'

'Joan? No – or not officially. Though I don't think she'd turn away a woman who –'

'A woman like me, you mean.'

'You said it.'

'Let's go and see.'

We had started walking again as we talked, moving east along High Street, but now we turned in our tracks and headed back the way we'd come. We turned left into Hed Street and there before us was the double arch of Hed Gate.

'That's the gate leads out onto the London Road. The Bull's right outside, and the Winged Lion's just past it.'

Joan was certainly not as I'd imagined her. She was tall and bony and no-nonsense – her husband had run away (*fled*, Martin whispered) to London – and I decided immediately that any attempt to deceive her would be doomed to failure.

When Martin went to introduce me, I interrupted him: 'I'll be fine Martin. Pick me up here in the morning.' I waved him away.

And when he'd gone – pleased to be rid of me for the evening – I turned back to Joan. 'My name is Marian atte-Marsh, or Lady Marian.'

She raised her eyebrows, and gave me a this-had-better-be-good look.

'Sometimes one, sometimes the other. I need a room to change in – change clothes, change personalities. When I'm dressed as now, I shall be Lady Marian.'

'Yes, my lady.' The beginnings of a smile. 'And how will you be dressed when you are plain Marian atte-Marsh?'

'I'll be dressed as a whore. But not I hope working as one. Unless the agreement I come to with Master Henry Bawd makes that unavoidable.'

'Master Henry is it, eh? And where will you be sleeping? Here, or at Master Henry's?'

'I don't know yet. Does it matter?'

'No. And nor do the hours you keep. We're without the wall here, so the curfew's no concern. People come and go here when the Bull's shut for the night. Will Martin be with you?'

'He may, when I'm a lady. He won't when I'm a whore.'

'Funny kind of lady.'

'There are ladies and ladies.'

'You got that right. And you're not going to tell me what all this is about.'

'I can't.'

'Can't as in not allowed to ...? You're a girl trouble follows, anyone can see that; don't bring it in here. Come, I'll show you the room.' She picked up my bag from where Martin had placed it, and set off up the stairs. 'As you're a lady, I'll carry your bag for you. When you're a whore, you carry your own.'

I laughed and followed her.

It was on the first floor, a small room above the street. It was warm and comfortable, and the bed had a canopy over it, with autumn-coloured curtains, which I loved.

'This is a lady's room – my best one. Will you want another room for when – ?'

'No! No, I told you, I shan't be bringing anyone back here.'

She threw open the shutter and I peered out.

'This is the London Road? Yes, of course it is,' I answered myself.

'It's busy, but not noisy at night. And a great place for watching the comings and goings.'

'Just what I was thinking.' I grinned. 'Right. I'll take it.'

'You want some hot water? If you do, I'll send the girl up. But you seem clean to me. Too clean, you know what I mean. Whores tend to be pretty grubby.'

'There are whores and whores.'

She laughed. 'You got that right, too.'

'I'll have some water in the morning. What's the girl's name?'

'Marjorie. Your Martin knows her.'

He would. 'Can she keep her mouth shut?'

'Oh, yes. A trollop she is, like her mother before her, but she's not a gossip.'

How could a girl work in a place like this – or the White Hart in Chich – and not be, or not end up, a trollop? She sounded perfect to me.

Much too bright and early next morning, there was hammering on my door, then it flew open and Martin strode in.

'I knew I should have left you in Chich!'

'And good morning to you, Master Martin.'

He glared at me.

'Why didn't you?'

'Because my mother said she couldn't stand one more hour of you swanning around the place, let alone another month.'

*Another month?* What was this?

'I won't be travelling on to London. I have to go somewhere else and I can't possibly take someone like *you* with me.'

A whore, he meant.

He studied me.

I let my gaze drop and remained silent. I'd speak when he was finished and I knew what he had in mind for me.

'Why do you have to cause so much trouble wherever you go?'

*Me? Trouble?* But I kept my eyes down. I'd become surprisingly meek during my time in Chich.

But Martin and his mother didn't see it that way.

'The Prior thinks my mother would give you another chance if I insisted, but she'd want me to give you a good sound beating before I left you with her.'

I glanced up and noticed a slight grin forming. Was it the thought of giving me that beating? Hadn't Ferchard told him I could break his neck, and would, if he laid so much as a finger on me? Then suddenly I guessed. He *hadn't* told him. That's why he'd been grinning. And why not? Because Ferchard had a bet on with English, one of them betting on Martin, the other on me: Ferchard, for sure. The old bastard!

'I'm sure you have an alternative in mind. To save you and your mother all that trouble.'

'I have, yes. The Prior suggested letting you decide between a stay at a nunnery with a prioress of his choosing and a stay at the Shag with Henry Bawd. If I went along with that, which would you choose?'

'Henry Bawd and the Shag.'

'All right, forget the nunnery. But if, instead, you were offered the chance to return to Chich – ?'

'I don't enjoy being a skivvy – '

'Not as a skivvy so much – that lazy bitch Hild would do most of the cleaning. You'd be going back more as a slattern. More like Marjorie, here. That was one of their complaints about how you did the job, or rather didn't do it, while Hild was ill. Too hoity-toity to open your legs for the locals.'

'I would most definitely still choose Henry Bawd and the Shag.'

'As we expected. I have to admit I was a little worried what Ferchard might think, but the Prior pointed out that if Ferchard hadn't minded you working as a whore in Avignon and Paris, why should he start minding now?'

'How did the Prior know about Avignon and Paris?'

'I told him. Naturally, he wanted to know all about you before giving me his counsel. And he said I should cover myself by giving you the choice. So. You want to be a whore again?'

If I said Yes, that's how it would be presented to Ferchard: that that was what I *wanted*.

It wasn't what *I* wanted, it was what *Blanche* wanted.

I looked into his eyes and smiled. 'Once a whore, always a whore. Isn't that what you men say? But yes, I'd rather be a whore for Master Henry here in Colchester than for Mistress Enid back in Chich.'

'So that's what you want? To work as a whore?'

'Yes! You want it in writing?'

He laughed. 'Wear something appropriate. I'll wait downstairs and have one of Joan's pasties.'

He went, closing the door behind him.

More like Marjorie, he'd said. Hm. The clothes a slattern in a rooming-house or inn wears are little different from those worn by a whore. They're treated as part-time whores anyway, so that's hardly surprising.

I opened the door again and shouted down the stairs after him: 'Mistress Joan!'

'Aye?' she shouted back up.

'Is Marjorie there?'

'In the kitchen –'

'Send her up to me.'

'Marjorie! Marjorie!!!' I heard her shout.

A moment later, I heard her come running up the stairs.

'Yes, ma'am. I mean, my lady.'

Marjorie was not the buxom wench I'd been expecting but a slender girl with long fair hair tied back in a pony-tail. And almost as tall as me. Her clothes would fit perfectly.

'Marjorie, we're about to transform me from a lady into a working girl.'

She gaped at me.

'I want to borrow some of your clothes. A skirt – an old tatty one will do – and a bodice or – something like you're wearing now.' It was a grubby sort of off-white, but left her shoulders and arms bare, and more importantly her breasts and cleavage, with glimpses of the nipples as she moved. With a slight adjustment, the nipples would be out and the breasts fully displayed. 'Can I have this one? And an old skirt?'

'Well – I mean, yes, of course, my lady, but –'

'Not "my lady", not now. Mariana. Go and find me a skirt – the tattiest one you've got – and put on another bodice so I can have that one.'

'Are you – are you sure? You're not mocking me?'

'Mocking you? Marjorie, here's half a gold noble. No, it's yours. Keep it. Now go and do what I say.'

She clutched it. 'But you'll look silly in my old things if you're still wearing your beautiful boots and I don't have any shoes –'

'I'll go barefoot, like you.'

A few minutes later I was dressed and ready. Or rather undressed and ready. And Marjorie was giggling in delight.

Once again, Martin hardly seemed to notice the change in my appearance; but then I'd been dressed much the same at the White Hart, in ragged garments Mistress Enid had looked out for me. As we left the lodging-house, though, he asked, 'Are you sure you want to work at the Shag? That one there, the Blue Maid, is the classy place.'

It was a big building, right by Hed Gate. It looked like an inn to me.

'Just take me to the Shag and introduce me.'

So off we went, along the Wall past Shere Gate. And as we walked, he said 'There's a girl at Henry's that knows you. Lucia, Lucy,' he went on when I tried to ask him what he meant – *a girl who knows me? here?* 'For years she passed as a boy, called herself Otter, went hunting with her father. But she knew you all right – and you knew her. Here, she can't pretend to be a boy, of course. If she did, she'd have to have her little cock robin out on show for all to see, and them as likes bum-boys would choose her every time.'

I gave him a quizzical look. Was he, too, "one as likes bum-boys"?"

He grinned back, knowing what I was thinking. You couldn't shame him. 'No, I'm not one for the pretty-boys, not while there are pretty girls lined up and waiting, anyway.'



We walked in through the front door, where a couple of girls stood waiting. They both smiled at Martin, both looked me up and down speculatively, but before anyone spoke, a man strode in from the back of the house as though he owned the place. And the girls.

'Henry!'

'Martin?'

He did.

Master Henry Bawd was dark and looked Spanish. Not what I'd been expecting at all.

'Martin, it's been a long time. And who is this?'

'Mariana, she likes to call herself, but her name's Marian atte-Marsh. I brought her to meet you.'

'Marian, eh?' He'd finished examining my body, and now focused on my face.

I didn't know whether to drop my eyes and be shy, decided not to. First mistake.

'My friend Balthild told me about you,' I said.

'Balthild? You're from down Clackton way?'

'Not exactly, no, Master Henry.' Was I supposed to say I was from Chich or Clackton? 'In fact not at all.' I was beginning to sound completely stupid, but perhaps that was no bad thing. 'I'm from Spain and France. I was visiting St Oswyth with Master Martin.'

'Ale, Martin? *Jenny!*'

A young woman of about my age sauntered in. 'Master Henry? Clarice is – oh!' She stared at me.

Another of those Saxon blondes, beautiful; her blue eyes could have been a little larger, a little further apart, but her figure was perfect and *all* on show.

'Bring a pot of ale for Martin, quick now,' Henry told her.

'And for the lady?'

'Her? Does she look like a lady?'

'Well, no, but –'

'Run and get that ale before I take my belt to you!' He had a rather high-pitched voice. It made threats sound silly.

With a wink at me, she fled.

'And get a smock on!' he called after her. Then turned back to me. And waited.

What had we been saying before Jenny interrupted? Oh, yes. 'My mother was Spanish.'

'And your father French?'

'No! I mentioned France because I – I used to work there – in Paris. But now I live in Southwark.'

'And how did you two come to meet?'

Well, now we'd see just how quick-witted Martin was.

'They'd bared her back,' he said, without looking at me, 'ready for a whipping.'

'Where was that? In Southwark?'

'No, in Paris. In Southwark the whores get away with murder,' Martin replied. And waited – obviously wanting me to take up the story. How had he started it? Oh, yes. They'd tied my up for a whipping. I'd make this good! I opened my eyes wide, gazed into Henry's dark eyes. He had long thick eyelashes to match his long, thick, black hair – hair and eyelashes any girl might envy.

'They were tying me to the whipping-post,' I began, 'all ready to whip me they were – when *he* came up and said – like a real gentleman – "Take your filthy hands off her!" The one with the whip stepped back, but the other one, a big bruiser with the ugliest face you ever saw, snarled "It's the whores are filthy. *I* wear gloves." And he held up his hands, which were encased in heavy leather gauntlets. "Filthy whore she may be," Master Martin snarled back, "but she's *my* filthy whore!" A real gentleman. Then – I don't know what happened exactly – I was crying, you can imagine! – they'd have taken the skin off my back! – I found myself freed and handed over to him ... '

'I see ... My mother is Spanish, too.'

'Is she? Balthild didn't –'

'Balthild hardly knew her. It was my father she knew. Did she tell you about him? Sancha, my mother, ran away when I was a child. She's a wildcat – was, when she was young. And spoilt. Still is, but ... She came back when she heard my father was dead. I took her in. How could I not? She's my mother.'

'She'd been in Spain?'

'No, she didn't go far – wanted to be near me, I suppose. Worked Cambridge for a few years. Plenty for a whore to do there with all them students, though they've most of them not got two farthings to

rub together. Then down to London, to Southwark. Spent twelve years in a Spanish house there. La Sirena.'

'La Sirena. The mermaid. I don't know it. Master Martin will, of course'

'The way you said *la sirena* – you speak Spanish?'

I nodded. '*Sí*.'

He examined my face again, studied my lips. 'Martin: tell me why you really brought Marian here.'

'We were on our way to London, but I wanted to talk to my uncle, Prior Geoffrey of St John's, to ask him about these murders. And lucky I did, because he had an urgent message for me. I'm to head north immediately. It's something important, and I can't possibly have *this* tagging along ...'

I smiled, and said brightly, 'We heard that another girl and another religious, an Austin Canon, had been murdered here in Colchester. Was the girl one of yours?'

'No, thank God!'

He looked at me, wondering why I kept intruding in their conversation.

'And the Austin Canon? Did you know him?' I asked, foolishly undeterred.

'No. I get some local priests coming in here, and grey friars – they have a friary up by the Keep. Other friars and mendicants sometimes drop in, but the black monks and the Canons keep themselves to themselves.'

'What about Brother Edmund?' I asked.

'What about him? He's dead.'

'There are rumours that this killer is one of the Undead.'

Henry was growing upset, not only with the way I was behaving, but with the conversation. He crossed himself and peered round nervously – and was saved by Jenny, who danced in at that moment with their drinks in her hands. She was wearing a short smock now, but was wide-eyed about something.

'At last,' grunted Henry.

'We were talking in the kitchen. There's been another one!'

She should stick to the wide-eyed look. It suited her.

Be serious, Mariana.

'A girl from the Blue Maid.'

'Where was she found?'

She shrugged, nearly spilling Henry's ale. 'Shall I go and find out?'

'No!' Henry snapped. 'You stay in the house. And nobody goes out alone, you hear me? Go and tell the others.'

'Jenny?' said Martin as she turned to go.

'Mm? Oh!' She gave him his ale, laughing at herself, and hurried back to her friends.

'It's not surprising there are rumours, is it,' I said, 'the way the girls are killed, their throats slashed and bitten, like the one down on the marshes near Chich a couple of days ago. And she wasn't a whore.'

'You talk too much.'

There was a moment of silence during which I managed to keep my lips firmly closed on the flow of glib responses which always come to me so easily. Then Martin stood up and said, 'So can I leave her with you for a week or two, Henry? She'll be safe here.'

'A week or two?'

'Maybe longer.'

'Well, all right, yes.' Henry accompanied him to the door. 'But I can't have her just sitting around. The men will see her and want her. Shall I use her? Keep fifty percent, give you the other fifty.'

'Yes, of course, that'll be fine.'

'Wait here, girl!' Henry called back to me.

Then silence.

## 5

### IF WOMEN HAD WRITTEN STORIES

*By God, if women had written stories,  
As clerks had within here oratories,  
They would have written of men more wickedness  
Than all the mark of Adam may redress.*  
Geoffrey Chaucer (1340-1400)

Colchester, Essex, *May 1379*

I had a sudden nightmare feeling that Martin really believed he had saved me from a whipping in Paris. It could so easily have happened when I took on the abbé, and his thugs left me for dead by the river. Perhaps being left by the river wasn't what happened. Perhaps I just imagined that. Or perhaps this thing with Martin happened before the abbé's men grabbed me, about the time when Père Pierre and the Canon picked me up and took me to Le Mans ... No! I didn't have any whip-marks on my back! Well, I wouldn't have, would I, if Martin saved me? But that was a story I'd just made up. No, not me. It was his story, and he spoke as if it was true. I just added details ...

Then I must have fallen asleep, because I saw Martin back at the Abbey with the Prior.

*'Ah, Martin, my man found you.'*

*'Yes. I was on my way to the Swan with some friends.'*

*'Where I told him you'd go. And the whore?'*

*'I left her with Master Henry at the Shag. He seemed pleased with her. He's going to put her to work.'*

*'Best thing. But he'll be saving her for my lord of Arundel if I know him.'*

*'Richard FitzAlan?'*

*'Sir Richard's in town, yes, staying at the White Hart; and known to have a penchant for girls newly arrived in England.'*

*'Nice.'*

*'Nice indeed. You could net yourself a gold coin or two there. Much more if he wants to keep her.'*

*'Henry promised me half.'*

*'Half is for using her. He buys her, you get the lot. Not that I can imagine anyone who'd spent even five minutes with her wanting to keep her.'*

*'That bastard monk.'*

*'You mean her mouth?'*

*'Not only her mouth. She has insolent eyes. The way she walks is insolent. Everything about her is insolent. But listen, Henry uses a gag sometimes –'*

*'He does?'*

*'He has one of the ones we use on novices who have yet to learn to hold their tongues. We supplied him with it when a whore he had was spouting blasphemy. Good man, Henry. Bring her up here wearing the thing if you get the chance. I'd enjoy that.'*

*'Of course, yes. I can arrange that. But I can't sell her, Uncle. She's not really mine. She belongs to Sir Ferchard, who –'*

*'What? Like a courtesan? A private whore? Shame. Ah, so that's why she was dressed up like a lady. Still you'll get something out of it. And if he really wants her, my lord of Arundel can bring pressure to bear on anyone in the Kingdom – except the young King himself, of course, God save him.'*

*And the Duke of Lancaster, I thought. I'd like to see anyone bring pressure to bear on him.*

*'But why did you send for me, Uncle?'*

*'I had a message from Enid after you left. Your father fell down the stairs this morning.'*

*'No!'*

*'May be dying, she says, but I doubt it. She tends to panic and he's a tough old bird.'*

*'I'd better go! I'll leave at once.'*

*'And Harwich?'*

*'I'll go direct from Chich to Harwich.'*

*'Dominus tecum, then.' The Lord be with you ...*

'Marian? Marian!'

It's Jenny.

'You were sleeping. Come.'

She beckons, and I follow. What else can I do? Am I dreaming now, I wonder?

We pass through the hall, where a girl younger than me and a woman stand around ready and waiting. I smile and they look me up and down. The girl smiles back but the woman turns away.

Through to the kitchen, where another girl and three more women are sitting around a table. Jenny introduces me to them all – the girl is Bertha, the women Clarice of Cock Lane, Long Lucy – she must be the one who used to pretend to be a boy – Sancha, and Jonette Bearbait – Jonette? That reminds me of the Jonet who visited us in Spain and I had so loved, and in fact she looks a little like her with her red hair – but the only one I'm interested in now is Sancha. Her hair is short, she is half naked, and she is, I notice, simply Sancha. Not Doña Sancha, or Mistress Sancha. And not even introduced first. Is this how he treats his mother? As just another whore?

*'Doña Sancha, estoy encantada de conocerte,'* I say. I am delighted – enchanted – to know you.

*'Pero – eres española?'*

*'Sí.* Your son told me about you,' I continue in Spanish, 'that you are from Spain, and that – '

'But we must talk!'

'Oh, please, yes. Can we talk in private?' I laugh. 'Though of course no one understands us here.'

'No, but ... Come with me.'

I stand up to go with her.

'Where are you going?' demands Jenny.

'We're going to have a nice long chat,' Sancha answers.

'But you can't! Master Henry said I must get Marian ready – '

'Later.'

'No! You have to do what he says, same as the rest of us.'

'But I do. Most of what he says. Come, Mariana.'

'Listen to her! *I do most of what he says*, like she's the whoremistress or something,' Clarice puts in. She's one of the older ones, a slender dark-haired woman in her thirties.

I shrug and mouth *Sorry* to Jenny and follow Sancha out and through to a small room at the back. Her private room? It has benches along two walls and a small table with some flowers – bluebells! – in a pot of water.

Whatever happened to *my* bluebells?

'This is your room?'

'My room? No! This is where Henry brings men to talk business. I use it when I feel a need to escape the constant chatter.'

'But not when he's in.'

She gazes at me. '*Muy perspicaz*.' Very percipient. 'Henry is entitled to respect.' Then, after a pause, 'And I'm *not* entitled to any special privileges. Like Clarice says, I'm just another whore to him.' Another pause. 'What did he tell you about me?'

'In a nutshell, that you preferred being a whore – in Cambridge, Southwark, wherever – to being a mother.'

She sighs, but produces no crocodile tears. I know, I watch for them. 'And there you have it,' she says at last. 'Why should he treat me as a mother when I was never a mother to him? He did me a great favour taking me in, giving me a place here when I'd lost my place in Southwark and was working St Paul's in the City after curfew with another girl, Petronella, and risking the cage or a whipping every time we went there. Most nights the sergeants just shouted at us as they passed by and stopped to watch and laugh as we fled, tits bouncing and holding up our skirts. But then one night, I don't know why, they came chasing after us in and out the alleys off Cheap and Poultry then up Gropecunt – you know it? We thought we'd get lost among the other girls there, but they were after *us*. Maybe someone important was with them, one of the aldermen or sheriffs or whatever, I don't know. Anyway, that night they were doing their job properly for a change. From St Helen's, we doubled back down to East Cheap then on down to the river with them behind us and closing. At Billingsgate, I jumped in. Petra didn't. I was swept downriver away from the bridge and had quite made up my mind that was the end of me when I was thrown a rope by a sailor on a ship moored near Santa Catalina. She must have heard the prayers I was screeching. But they didn't set me



ashore, they enjoyed having me aboard too much – I don't know if Santa Catalina knew that would happen! They set sail next morning making for Bordeaux, down in the Bay of Biscay. That's really close to Spain, and I might have made it home if they'd taken me with them, but that wasn't to be. After being fucked by every man and boy on board, I was chucked off – into the sea! – at a place called Canvey Island. And you know why they chucked me back overboard?"

I laughed. I did. 'Because it's unlucky to have a woman on board.'

'Yes! Can you credit it? But there you are, perhaps they're right. I mean they should know, it's their job. Like us. There are things we don't do. Me, I've never had thirteen men in a day – twelve yes, fourteen yes, never thirteen. And I've never fucked a priest on a Friday, not even when I was beaten for refusing. You?'

'Me? I know about the thirteen, and that it's lucky to start the day teaching a boy how to do it. I never heard that about a priest on Friday, though.'

'No. I think that's an Italian one. I learnt my trade in Barcelona, in an Italian whorehouse owned by a man from Sardinia, a real bastard, but he taught me everything – well, almost everything – I know ... '

'What happened to your friend – Petronella?'

She shrugged. A beautiful shrug. She still had perfect shoulders and arms. 'Petra'd been whipped before, in Flanders, whipped terribly. Me, I never had, and I was terrified. That's why I jumped in the river. She said an English whipping was nothing compared to what they did to girls in Ghent. So perhaps she preferred that to drowning. Which she would have. I remember hearing her scream "I can't swim!"'

She held my eyes for a moment. She had beautiful eyes, too, dark Spanish eyes. 'Canvey's just down the coast from here, so I did the obvious thing, the easy thing, and came back home to the sign of the Shag. *Shag ... Estos ingleses*. And what about Gropecunt Lane? Would you believe that name?'

'You forget I know Southwark. The names there!' We both laughed. 'And Henry took you in. Well, of course. You're his mother.'

'*Master* Henry. Yes, he took me in. Though there was no "of course" about it. I was available, I was experienced. I live alongside the other girls – not just eating and sleeping but doing my share of the washing and cleaning and all the other chores – and I earn him money – men still fancy me and I work hard, do more than my share of tricks

– and not one of them, gent or ditch-digger, clerk or lay, would ever guess I was Henry's mother.'

'Really? Don't any of the older men recognise you?'

'No. Well, a few of the older ones gave me funny looks when I first came back, and a couple I serviced said I reminded them of Catalina –'

'Catalina?'

'My real name. Catalina Martinez. I changed my name when I left here so Master William couldn't find me. I told them that was because, like this Catalina woman, I was Spanish. And of course Spanish girls do it better ... They agreed!' she laughed. 'And another thing. When I was young here, this hair of mine was long – really long – and lustrous. But they shaved my head in Cambridge – they do all the whores' heads there, regular, shear their hair off and scrape their heads. They did me four times – or was it five? Anyway, since then it's never grown any longer than this ... Listen. No one outside this house knows about me. So don't you go telling Master Martin.'

'No, of course I won't tell him.'

'Anyway, I doubt you'll ever see him again. Henry will prefer to *buy* you from him, and –'

'No! Master Martin just left me here for a few days while he ... Sancha. Listen. I feel I can speak in confidence with you because – well, because we're speaking Spanish and that makes us ... I don't know. Two strangers in a strange land whose paths have crossed. Does that make us friends?'

'We're certainly two strangers in a very strange land. About becoming friends ... we'll see. Now what is it you are bursting to tell me?'

As she said that, I knew suddenly we'd had this conversation before. In one of my dreams? 'I'm not just a whore,' I told her. 'In Spain and France I learnt about *los inmuertos*, *les mort-vivants* – the Undead. Vampires. Lamiae. I knew a lamia. She wanted to make me one, but I –'

She shrank away from me.

'I didn't! Of course I didn't! Look at me! Do I look like a lamia?'

'How do I know what a lamia looks like?'

'How do I know? That might be just what a lamia looks like!'

'Well, it's not, it's what a mermaid looks like.'

'A mermaid? *Una sirena*?'

'So they say – but we're not talking about mermaids, we're talking about the Undead. That lamia scared me to death – no, not to death!' I laughed, I couldn't help it. 'But I did learn some of their secrets, and Master Martin was ordered to leave me here so I could look into these horrible murders. *That's* why I'm here.'

'Really?' She stared at me. 'I never heard of any of that at home in Navarre. Only what you call lamiae, I think that's what we called *empusas*. Like whores – often they *were* whores – and they sucked all the life out of a man. When I was a young girl I worked in a house in Logrono and I heard them – saw them – say "*Es una empusa!*" and drag a woman away – Elvira, her name was – and hack her poor head off and bury her without her head. She had long, fair hair, like Juicy Jenny. Beautiful. We never learnt what they did with her head ... It was after that I ran away to Barcelona.'

'Sancha!' It was Jenny. 'Master Debynhem is here. Quick! He's waiting!'

'*Mierda!*' She jumped up and ran out of the room.

Jenny didn't even bother to speak to me. She just beckoned and walked out.

Once more, I followed.

"Juicy Jenny" – I liked that.

In the hall, two of the women I'd met earlier in the kitchen were now waiting. Jonette and Lauda. They both smiled at me. I smiled back and gave them a little wave. Clarice was working, but the girl who'd been there was in the kitchen with the other woman and girl I'd met before. And a woman they introduced as Prunella Portjoie. *Portjoie?*

Jenny said, 'Sit down, Marian. Are you hungry? Thirsty? There's some soup.'

'I'd love some soup.'

They all watched like cats as Jenny sat down without giving me any.

What was going on?

All right.

'On second thoughts, I'll just have a cup of this ale for now, and then some soup later.' I filled an empty cup from the flagon on the table and drank half of it straight down. It was disgusting.

'Good,' I said. And burped.

One of the younger girls laughed.

I smiled at her. 'You're Bertha, aren't you,' I said, remembering.

'Yeah! And you're Marian! You're Spanish – I heard you talking Spanish with Sancha – was that Spanish? – but you used to work in Paris. Paris is in France!'

She was excited about me. Nice.

'Yes, that was Spanish. And my name's Mariana, really.'

'Mariana! Oh, I like that!'

'Me, too. It's nicer than Marian, isn't it. And where are you from?'

'Near here. A village called Much Bentley.'

'Yes? I think I passed near there this morning. We were coming here from St Oswyth – Chich.'

'Yeah! Much Bentley's near Alresford. You went through Alresford, I 'spect.'

'We stopped there for a drink. Do you go back sometimes to see your parents, your family?' I was pretty sure she didn't, but everyone was gazing at me, hanging on my every word, and I wanted her to tell me. I liked her. I wanted to know her.

'No, I can't never go back.' A tear formed in each eye. 'I haven't got no parents, they died, and my big brother, he said he couldn't marry me off without a dowry – a big one, seeing how I wasn't a virgin, and he had no money to spare for a dowry, but Master Henry would give him money seeing how I was a pretty girl who enjoyed a romp with a man.'

'And was that true? That you enjoyed a romp with a man? Back then before you came to work here.'

'No! They done it to me, they *all* done it to me, the men in my aunt's village – Walton – you know it? – 'cos I was a stranger, and 'cos – and 'cos –'

'And 'cos you're beautiful,' I smiled. 'A beautiful stranger's a danger, they say, the frightened ones, while the truth is: a beautiful stranger's always *in* danger ... How long have you been here, Bertha?'

'Since mid-winter.'

'And are you still scared? Of men, I mean.'

'Pouf. I know what to do now, and they come one at a time ... That night, I didn't know what to do, I'd never done it before, and they

didn't even take turns, they all tried to fuck me at once and when I couldn't they slapped me and – and –'

Prunella laughed. 'You excited them, you must've. What were you doing before it happened to get them all worked up like that?'

'That's what my brother said, and my sister, when I got home. And the priest. But –'

'That's what they *would* say,' Jenny snapped, 'but no woman should be saying it, Prunella Portjoie!' She glared at the older one. 'A woman should know better.'

Prunella wasn't giving in. 'If we want to hook a man, we go out there with our tits hanging out and our arms and shoulders bare and we wiggle our bottoms, 'cos if we don't do all that no man's gonna notice us.'

'No man'd notice *you*,' sneered Jenny, 'but a dead man'd notice Bertha no matter how well covered she was or how sedately she walked.'

'Ugh! Don't talk about a *dead* man noticing her!' wailed the other young one, Kat, and they all laughed nervously.

But I was thinking that some people just can't walk sedately no matter how hard they try. I'm one. I reckoned Bertha was another ... I was going to say that, make a joke of it, when I caught Bertha's eye and realised there was more to the story than she'd let on.

'There was something else, wasn't there, Bertha ... something to do with your aunt.'

'Yeah, but how did you know?'

'Let's just say my grandmother – the Scottish one – was a witch.'

'But that's it! Oh, I don't believe it! Yeah, you're right!'

What did I say? Wait a minute ... Oh, no. I looked round the other faces. Sighed. 'They picked on poor Bertha not because she was a beautiful stranger but because they believe her aunt's a witch.'

'She *is* a witch!' Bertha wasn't ashamed. She *announced* it, with pride.

'But *you're* not,' I said. The conversation had taken a dangerous turn, thanks to me. Now I had to retrieve the situation fast. 'You're not. If you *had* been a witch, a real one, they wouldn't have been able to do that to you, those men. You'd have ... you'd have ...' I waited for her to catch on.

'I'd have turned them all into frogs!' And she burst into tears and giggles.

'Then you'd have been covered in frogs,' laughed Jonette. 'Yack. I'd rather be covered in men.'

The others were laughing, but Bertha was looking at me, so I went on. 'And if you were a witch, you'd be with your aunt in Walton learning how to be a wise-woman and healer. But as you're not a witch, you're here with us, learning how to be a whore. Which is not so different when all is said and done – is it, Jenny?'

Now for the first time, Jenny laughed. 'It's the only therapy most men ever need.' Then, obviously wanting to change the subject, and perhaps warming a little towards me, she said, 'You were a beautiful stranger in Paris, weren't you, Marian. And when *you* were in danger, handsome Martin of Chich saved you.'

'Oh, that's so romantic!' cooed Kat.

'Oh, tell us about it, Mariana! Please!' cried Bertha. 'I wasn't here, I was working, when Master Henry told –'

'All right, all right.' I drained my cup of ale, wondering what exactly they'd already heard. Had Martin come in here too before he left, and embroidered the tale?

'Who did you hear about it from?' I asked them.

'Master Henry,' Jonette said. 'But nothing much. We want to have the whole story from *you*. And quick now, before some of us have to go. Or you do,' she added with a smirk.

'No, Marian's free this evening,' Jenny said. 'Master Henry's arranging a special for her tomorrow.'

'No! Who with?' Prunella was jealous.

'The Earl of Arundel, I imagine. He's in town, I know.'

As in my dream ... But that meant I'd have to go out and start looking round and asking questions this evening, because tomorrow the Earl of Arundel – what was his name? I'd heard it in my dream, ah yes, FitzAlan, Sir Richard FitzAlan – was going to have to take precedence over all else. Unless I fled Colchester, and I had no intention of doing that.

Meanwhile, they were all sitting there gazing at me and waiting for a story, poor things.

I'd give them a good one.

But tired of waiting, Bertha beat me to it and asked the key question, the one the very thought of which obviously troubled – and scared – her most: 'But what did you do to earn a whipping from the public hangman?'

'I didn't do anything!'

They burst out laughing.

'But you must have done something!'

'Being *me* is doing something wrong. Specially if I loosen my clothes a bit.' I loosened my bodice to fully expose my breasts – I was the only one there whose breasts weren't already on show, but still they loved it. 'If I showed my legs, they'd kill me!' I lifted my skirt, and again, though none of them were wearing skirts, there was a roar of approval. I did a little dance, then sat down. Everyone fell quiet.

'I'd been working in Avignon. A house called *La Negrillonne* – the Black Girl.'

'Avignon? Where's that?'

'In the south of France. The Pope lives there, in a huge palace, and the cardinals each have –'

'Oh, come on, Marian,' protested Prunella, a blonde about the same age as Clarice. 'We want a *true* story.'

'This *is* true.'

'The Pope lives in Rome, everyone knows that.'

'Actually, you're right. He moved back to Rome about the same time I left for Paris.'

'Any connection between those two events?' grinned Jenny.

'No. Well, a small one, yes, but that's another story. This story takes place in Paris.'

'All right, we'll save the one about you and the Pope for another day. So: Paris.'

'After a terrible journey – you can guess what happened to me all along the way – I arrived in Paris with nothing, and no contacts except a name I'd heard on my travels – Mère Véronique at the Adriatica. And when I say nothing, I mean nothing. There was nothing left of the clothes I'd had on when I fled Avignon, and all I was wearing was a torn skirt I'd picked up somewhere along the way and a filthy old piece of cloth the guards at the Porte Bordelle had thrown me to use as a shawl before they would let me in.'

'After they'd fucked you.' Laughter.

'No! I looked like a beggar – '

'Of course you didn't. You looked like a whore who was down on her luck.'

'I looked, and no doubt smelt, so disgusting they turned their noses up at me. I made my way across the city till I came to the river. Paris is on a river, same as London, a wide, fast-flowing river called the Seine. It's so wide it has islands in the middle of it that are so big one of them has the great Cathedral of Notre Dame on it. I went across a bridge onto the island and asked where the Adriatica was but nobody would even speak to me. It was getting dark now and I didn't want to be trapped on the island so I went across another, longer bridge to the north bank. But again nobody would tell me where the Adriatica was, and the people were disappearing from the streets because there's a very strict curfew in Paris. So I started avoiding the main thoroughfares and keeping to narrow alleys to avoid being seen.'

'But didn't you get stopped all the time by men wanting to fuck you?'

'No. I told you the state I was in. And anyway, at first I'd been on busy streets among crowds who just shoved me aside with a curse and a kick and a gob of spit – '

'The men too?'

'Yes, when they're out with their wives or important friends they're as bad as the women.'

'In London too? Or is that just Paris?' Kat really wanted to know.

'Everywhere. Don't tell me it doesn't happen here in Colchester.' The older ones nodded and smiled. 'The men have to be on their own,' I went on, 'and either unobserved or observed only by other men after the same thing. It's all a matter of the right time and place. Now, are you going to let me get on with my story?'

Silence. A few grins.

'I made my way through these dark narrow alleys along the north bank going parallel to the river. I don't know why. I think I just felt I would be safer away from the centre. And I was a bit light-headed. I hadn't eaten for two or three days. Then suddenly I came out in a square which was full of people and lit up by a great bonfire. Before I could decide whether I was scared enough to run or cold and starving enough to stay and beg, someone seized me from behind. I threw him



over my head – I'm a good fighter – but two more men grabbed my arms and –'

Clarice chose that moment to throw the door open and yell: 'Three of you! Now! – Jenny? Are you here? You're supposed –'

'Yes, I'm coming. Lucy, you're wanted – and you two. Quick now.'

The two were Bertha and Kat, who howled in protest. 'But the story! No! Mariana!'

'Go!' shouted Jenny. 'Or do you want me to call Dan to you?'

Crying 'Snot fair!' and 'Mariana, wait!' they fled.

Dan was the hostiler, the doorman – big, strong and stupid, but the young ones were frightened of him. Well, they needed to be frightened of someone.

I laughed and called after them, 'I'll save the story for later!'

With a glare aimed at me *and* Jenny, Clarice stormed back out after them – and bumped into Sancha in the doorway.

Sancha stood back for her, then came in with a smile and joined us at the table.

'Mariana's been telling us about her adventures in Paris,' Jonette said. 'Go on, love. You can't stop there.'

'And the others?'

'You can tell them the rest of the story some other time.'

'No, leave it,' said Jenny. 'I've got to go, too. You better come through as well, Jonette. We're going to be busy this evening, what with my lord of Arundel and his train in town – and even after they're back inside and the gates all closed there'll be a few stragglers.' She stood up. 'Save it for the morning, Marian. Most of us will be around then.'

I smiled and agreed, and they went, leaving only Sancha and me.

\* \* \* \* \*

Deciding to *agarrar el toro por los cuernos* – take the bull by the horns, as we say in Spain – I switched back into Spanish and asked, 'Is there any way we can get out of here without anyone knowing?'

'What, now?'

I nodded.

'And what do you mean "we"?'

'I, then. But it would be much better and much easier if you were with me.'

'Better and easier for *you*.'

I grinned. 'Easier for me, yes. But better for everyone, because something must be done to stop this creature from beyond the grave that preys on women and girls.'

'And priests.'

'Yeah. And them.'

She laughed. Then went serious again. 'And you seriously believe you're the person to do it.'

'I don't believe in coincidences. I'm here, now. Why?'

She gazed at me. 'You really had some experience of the Undead in Spain?'

I nodded. 'And in France. In Paris.'

'You think it's Brother Edmund?'

'I don't know. I've just arrived ... Do you? Do people? Really?'

'The Brother Edmund killings took place after I left – while I was in Cambridge, I think. But they say the way of killing is different.'

'If he was an undead now, it would be.'

She nodded. Then sat and thought for a moment. 'There is a way out,' she said eventually. 'And I will come with you, because I think it highly unlikely he would attack two of us together. He singles out girls on their own dressed as whores –'

'And black-garbed priests,' I laughed.

'Yes, and black-garbed priests passing like shadows in the night.'

'We will wear cloaks, and take knives to defend ourselves with.'

'We will do nothing of the sort. We will make it clear that we are prostitutes going about our legitimate duty in the area assigned to us; that way no one will bother us apart from drunks and would-be cullies. We shall be deceiving no one and breaking no law.'

'And if we take knives?'

'Have you any idea what happens in this country to a whore who wounds a man, even in self-defence? Even with her knees or feet or finger-nails only, let alone a weapon?'

'I just meant to take one with us? Concealed.'

'No whore is allowed to bear a weapon, here or in Spain or anywhere. Didn't you know that? And where exactly would you conceal it?'

'Yes, of course I knew. It's just that it's been a while since I worked as a whore and I've stopped thinking like one.'

'What about this story of you in Paris and Master Martin and –'

'It's just that. A story.'

'The one you're in the middle of telling the others?'

'I'm making it up as I go along.'

'*Madre Maria* ... You really are *una loca*, aren't you.'

I smirked.

'What?'

'Oh, nothing.'

'Tell me.'

'At home in my village in Spain I was known as Mariana la Loca.'

She laughed. 'That can be your *nombre de puta* here.'

'No!'

'If you hadn't rather liked it, you wouldn't have mentioned it, Mad Marian. Now, if we're going, let's go. I do feel like a walk.'

'Will I be all right like this?'

'You may be out of practice working as a whore, but you certainly manage to look like one. Come on.'

We went out through a side door into a garden where a path led to a gate with a bolt on the inside. She opened it and we walked out onto an area of wasteland where there was nothing but a few low bushes.

'Careful, they're brambles, sharp and nasty. The rabbits eat anything else that tries to grow here. Where do you want to go? That way's Schere Gate, but it'll be closed now. And down there is St Giles' Church –'

'I know. Outside the abbey. Let's start down there. Then walk up along the lane that passes the priory.'

'All right. But be careful. It's very dark and there's a narrow stream here – not much more than a ditch, really – that runs across our path.'

She led the way and I had no difficulty following her. My night vision has always been excellent.

'You've been here before,' I murmured, a laugh in my voice.

'How did you guess? Many, many times, years ago. Not so often recently. Here – there's a plank across. Can you see?'

'I've got eyes like a bat.'

'Don't say that! So have you-know-whats.'

'Can *you* see?'

'Me? I've got eyes like a Moor, everyone says so. I don't know whether Moors can see in the dark –'

'They can't,' I told her.

'You would know?'

'Oh, yes. That's while they're alive of course. When they're dead –'

'Will you stop that!'

'Sorry.'

'Perhaps my father was a Moor. Or my grandfather.'

'My grandmother was. It was her who taught me to dance. To be a woman.'

'She was a whore?'

'No!' I heard the way I said that and was instantly ashamed. Why should I be indignant? I was a whore, and so was this good woman. 'No,' I repeated, softly, with a smile. 'No, she was lucky ... But she'd have made a wonderful one. I remember her telling me once that she was looking forward to being a *houri* in Paradise.'

'*Era moro de verdad?*' She was really a Moor?

'*Sí. Era musulmán.*'

'Well, I hope she has her wish. And you?'

'Me? Oh, I don't think whores on earth become *houris* in Paradise. That wouldn't be fair. They probably become angels –'

Sancha burst out laughing, then slapped her hand to her mouth as I hissed: 'Shhh!'

We had come out on the lane facing St Giles' and two men were standing there staring at us. One was a monk, the other a layman, a burgess, well-off by the look of him.

I had been about to flounce my skirt and shimmy my breasts at them, as we used to in Cuenca and Avignon, but Sancha whispered 'Ignore them' – and I would have done, only I stepped on a sharp stone and let out a howl of pain.

'Hush! Come on!'

'I'm not used to going barefoot and it hurt!'

But by then they were approaching us.

The burgess, a tall, well-built man in his forties, was smiling. 'Sancha? What are you doing out here at this time?'

'Master Spicer. Just out for a walk. And maybe pick up a rich lover in the moonlight.'

'There is no moonlight.'

'No? Oh, well, don't let a little thing like that prevent you from –'

'Yes, there is,' I interrupted, pointing behind them. 'It's just coming up.'

They turned to look at the half moon, low in the sky as it had been the night Balthild came and found me with the malevolent Darwin.

The monk's eyes, however, were firmly fixed on me.

I recognised him now. It was the gate-keeper.

'And who is your lovely companion?' Spicer asked Sancha.

But it was the gate-keeper who spat out, 'It's Martin of Chich's whore. Came here pretending to be a lady. Prior wasn't fooled. No more was I.'

'Is that so?' asked Spicer, mock seriously, peering at me – or rather at my breasts.

'I don't know about that,' said Sancha, saving me, 'all I know is that she's one of Master Henry's girls and she's booked with my lord of Arundel tomorrow, and probably the next day.'

The next day, too?

But I showed no reaction, just a knowing look and a shy smile for Spicer while cutting the gate-keeper dead.

I like men taller than me. Few are. Very few are so tall they have to stoop to study my face, look me in the eye. Spicer had to.

'Which is why she's free this evening to go for a walk with me,' continued Sancha.

'So that she will be fresh as a daisy for the good earl. Quite right. But is it safe for you to be out? With this whore-son murderer on the loose –'

'We'll be fine so long as we stay together, won't we, Mariana. But do come and visit me at the house again soon. Make that very soon.'

'Of course. Tomorrow, if I can escape. And then one evening, Mariana, when Arundel and his rabble of hangers-on have gone their way, I shall want to get much better acquainted with you.'

I dimpled prettily, as I'd been trained to do in Cuenca, and gave a little wiggle that turned into a sort of squirm of pleasure that surprised even me. And watched his eyes grow even brighter and the gate-keeper's narrow to venomous slits. 'Nothing would afford me greater delight, sir. Shall we, Sancha?'

As soon as we were out of earshot, Sancha turned to me with a wicked grin. 'What was that? Don't tell me you're not a professional. I

thought for a moment he was going to kneel down and caress your poor injured foot!"

'Who? The monk?'

We both collapsed laughing. And continued giggling while she described Spicer's beautiful body and contrasted it with his rather pathetic performances in bed. 'Just for decoration,' she finished up.

'Aren't we all?' I responded.

'Huh? Speak for yourself! Anyway, I don't believe it. A hot-blooded, thrill-seeking Spanish girl like you?'

I gazed at her. Was that how she saw me? After only a couple of hours?

'Look!' she whispered, and pointed at a man, a beggar by the look of him. He'd been sitting with his back against the Priory wall, almost invisible, but now he was getting up and coming towards us.

'Run!' she hissed, pulling my hand.

'No! Wait ...'

'That gown he's wearing! It's a black monk's habit – !'

'It may once have been. Now it's just a rag.' He was half naked, and bone thin.

As he drew closer, Sancha backed away leaving me to face him, but she didn't turn and run.

'I want *you*,' he croaked – then peered at me in astonishment as I sniffed him. I had expected a foul stench to come wafting towards me from his body and breath but there was nothing of that. He smelt like the forest after rain, clean and wholesome.

But I wasn't buying a bunch of flowers – or even a man. Which suggested an appropriate response.

'I don't think you can afford me.'

I heard Sancha snort behind me.

'I don't want to afford you. I want to kill you.'

'Then why don't you?'

'I'm dead. I would have done, I would have killed you, were I still quick, and still God's instrument on Earth, but now I am rejected of both God and Devil. You see? You do not fear me. When I was quick, you would have feared me ...'

This had to be Brother Edmund.

'Brother Edmund, listen to me. You're not dead.'

'Of course I am.'

'No, you're not. Come with me. Let's sit down and have a little talk.'  
I put out my hand to him.

He jumped away from me and fled up the road towards the city as if all the demons in hell were after him. Perhaps they were.

Sancha took me by the elbow and I turned to her with a shrug and a smile, and by the time I turned back, Brother Edmund – for I was convinced it was he – had disappeared.

'He fled as if you were a demon from Hell.'

So. Not *all* the demons from Hell. Just one. 'Did you see where he went?'

She shook her head. 'We should go home.'

'What? I'm just getting started. You go, if – '

'I'm not leaving you alone.'

It was very quiet. Too quiet. We walked up to South Gate, then turned left along Bere Lane and passed the front of Henry's house, all the home Sancha had, without seeing anyone.

I decided to take her to my lodgings for a drink and something to eat. And so that she could see there was more to my story than she had chosen, so far, to believe.

I could hear someone working in the kitchen.

'Mistress Joan?' I peered in.

'My lady?' She looked me up and down and grinned. 'Mariana. You on your own, or you got a cully with you?'

'A friend. I told you, no cullies here. She's from Master Henry's house. Can we come in?'

'Why not? Kitchen ain't no place for gentlefolk, but tonight you're clearly not, so yes, come in and make yourselves warm, the pair of you.'

We sat on a bench at her kitchen table, and I introduced Sancha.

'You another lady playing at being a whore?'

'No, just a whore, pure and simple. I don't play.'

'Since when was a whore pure? And since when did a whore not play?'

Sancha laughed. 'You've got me there. But I'm no lady, never have been, never will be.'

'But pure in heart,' I said.

They both stared at me, then Sancha burst out laughing and Joan raised her eyes to heaven.

They seemed to have taken to each other.

'And the pure shall inherit the earth,' I continued.

'Six foot of it if they're lucky,' said Joan.

'Some ashes scattered in the river if they're not,' I said, thinking of all the burnings in Avignon and throughout Occitania and Catalonia.

Joan snorted. 'That's quite enough of that. Now, what can I offer you? Cheap wine – rot-gut – fit for whores? Or the best Gascony, fit for ladies? Ale – '

'You brew your own ale?' I wondered.

'No, too much trouble and risk. I get it from the Bull.'

'Then I think we'll have your best wine – a drink fit for ladies of the night – and anything you might be able to offer us to eat.' I could smell something fresh-baked.

'Ladies of the night, is it? Where my husband come from – he was Italian, from Venice – '

'Ah! I wondered about the Winged Lion.'

'Yes, that was his idea, and I can't change it now. In Venice, he told me, ladies of the night meant ... vampires. You know?'

I nodded. I knew. 'And here?'

'Oh, the Undead walk here – but they're not ladies. And I don't think they would fancy my mutton pasties. But you're in luck 'cos I've been baking for tomorrow.'

She set a cup of wine and a small piping-hot pastie in front of each of us. The wine was good, the pastie delicious.

I swallowed and grinned. 'I was in luck when Martin brought me here.'

'That ne'er-do-well? How on earth did you come to be in *his* company?'

Sancha looked shocked – then curious, and amused.

'To tell you the truth, I don't rightly know. But we'd like to hear more about the Undead you say walk here.'

Sancha shuddered. 'Mariana would. Me, the less I hear about vampires and the Undead, the better.'

'Who told me about *las empusas*? I'd never heard of them.'

'My one experience of it. And even then I didn't believe it. That poor woman was just a simple whore, same as you and me.'



'And as pure, no doubt,' said Joan, straight-faced. 'What can I tell you? Save that you should not wander the streets at night – especially now ... They do say that Brother Edmund has risen from his grave. Now there was one that should have had an ash stake thrust through his heart before they buried him, cast iron nails hammered through his feet into the foot of his coffin and his jaws screwed shut. And why wasn't he, I ask you? ... You know of Brother Edmund?'

I was pretty sure I'd just met him, but I wasn't about to say so. 'We know the story, yes. Though neither of us was here at the time of the first series of murders. Do you really believe he's responsible for these latest killings?'

She studied my eyes. 'No ... No, to be honest I don't. Though I know for a fact that Brother Edmund's tomb does not contain Brother Edmund. The Bishop of London had it opened a week ago, and the body was that of an elderly pilgrim who'd gone missing while putting up at the Abbey. On his way down from Walsingham to Gravesend, he was.'

'How do you know all this?' I had to ask, though I knew intuitively that she was telling the truth.

'One of the exorcist's men came from these parts. Visited his mother, my friend Agnes. Told her all about it.'

'Is this exorcist still at the Abbey?'

'Brother Hamon? He returned hot-foot to London soon as the truth was known. Left word to summon him if there's any news.'

'And these latest murders aren't news?'

'Hey! That *I'm-a-lady* tone! You just remember a lady wouldn't be sitting here with me in my kitchen while I pass on the latest gossip. So which is it to be?'

I blushed. 'Mariana the whore. Sorry, mistress.'

Sancha laughed, but Joan ignored her. "'Sorry" is good and "Sorry, mistress" is better. Now, where was I? Oh, yes. Brother Hamon already knew about the first, the Austin Canon. That's what brought him here. The second was only a whore like you – and like the poor girl what was found dead this morning – and I'm sure you know what people say about whores getting killed. That it's hardly even murder, that they ask for it, that it clears the trash off the streets, so who cares?'

She was right about that. 'There was another girl killed on the marshes down Clackton way,' I said. 'Her throat slashed and bitten

though she wasn't a whore. And another priest, out on the Wivenhoe road, but the body'd been there a long time.'

'I heard about him. Another one torn limb from limb, like by a monster. But without his black robe, so it seems the monster may not be a religious at all. He may simply be wearing the cassock he stole from a victim ...' She lowered her voice. 'Only the Undead have the strength to tear someone limb from limb.'

'Do the Undead feel the cold?'

'Mariana!'

Sancha was getting upset again, but I was thinking of the beggar I believed was Brother Edmund. He'd been shivering.

'Likely he took it to pass as a priest,' said Joan. She had a practical approach that I liked.

'But if it isn't Brother Edmund doing it, then who is it?' Sancha asked. 'Some other crazy – even crazier than Brother Edmund. Or is it really something dead that won't stay in its grave? Because that's horrible.'

'Everyone knows that around here corpses do sally from their graves in quest of blood.' Joan's face was the face of a woman who *knew*, one who'd experienced it. 'But the question is,' she went on, 'which corpses? And is their quest for blood also a quest for vengeance?'

I couldn't have put that better myself. 'You know the answer to those questions, don't you, mistress?'

'I have my ideas.'

'Well, I don't want to hear them,' announced Sancha. 'And it's time we went. Never mind Brother Edmund, if we don't get back soon, we'll be in *real* trouble.'

'And you'll finish the evening bent over Master Henry's knee getting the beating you been looking for,' Joan told me with a malicious grin.

I smiled sweetly. 'Maybe so, mistress. Worse things have happened.'

'Oh, I'm sure they have. I'm sure they have.'

'Come on, Mariana!'

'All right, I'm coming. Good night, mistress.'

'Hurry now! Don't stand around outside giving my house a bad name.'

I laughed, and ran after Sancha, and took her arm. I liked her. And I liked Joan.

\* \* \* \* \*

We walked back past the Blue Maid and along Bere Lane. It still seemed unnaturally quiet to me. I wasn't used to Colchester, but was this part of it, to the south, outside the wall, so different from Southwark, which I was getting used to? It had tap-rooms and brothels, and no doubt cock-fighting and jugglers and acrobats and ballad-singers, and it should have, if not people after the curfew (though the curfew did not apply out here) at least cats and rats and the odd stray dog. But there was nothing. Everything was hiding.

Except that one stray beggar I had decided was Brother Edmund. He was there, by the wall, the other side of South Gate – had seemed to emerge from the very wall itself.

'Look!' I pulled at Sancha – we were arm in arm, and about to turn in to the house. 'It's him again. You see him? He wasn't there, and suddenly he was. How did he do that?'

'Perhaps it's something the Undead do. And that's the cemetery! I'm going indoors!'

'No, wait!'

'No! You come!' And she ran off into the house through the front entrance.

I saw her peer out. I waved and gesticulated that I was going after the beggar. The door closed.

I had rarely felt more alone. In one sense. In another, I was conscious of hidden watchers all around me, but that only made me feel more alone and vulnerable and exposed.

It wasn't the first time.

I walked across to him. An ordinary walk. A dancer's walk, all right, I couldn't help that. But not exaggerated, not a whore's walk. I didn't want to scare him.

Even so, he turned and fled. Through what I now saw was a small postern gate that must lead directly into the cemetery.

I followed and peered in. 'Brother Edmund?'

And behind me a horn blew and all hell broke loose, dogs and men barking and shouting and baying and yelling – and they were coming after *us*! I threw myself inside, slammed the gate shut and bolted it with the heavy wooden bar lying there ready. Just in time! Outside the yells intensified and someone – something – started hammering on the gate. 'Open up! In the name of the King! Open for the *posse comitatus*! OPEN THIS GATE IN THE NAME OF THE KING!' – on and on, accompanied by louder and louder banging on the wood.

'Edmund!' I hissed. 'Edmund? Where are you?'

And there he was, cowering behind a gravestone, whimpering with terror.

'Is there another way out?' Nothing. 'What's the *posse comitatus*?'

'Like – like the h-h-hue and c-cry.'

I had no idea what that was either, but it sounded to me like a mob bent on killing some poor soul.

'There must be another way out! Show me!'

'They've got m-mastiffs! They'll run me down, tear me to pieces!'

'Then come with me, quick! This way, over towards the church, before they have the place surrounded!'

I took his hand and pulled him after me. Then, as the blood-curdling baying suddenly grew in volume and ferocity – were they through the gate? – he moved in front, and now he was pulling me.

'Here! There's a tomb and a tree right beside the wall!'

'Will we be outside the town walls, or inside, in the High Street?'

'Outside, near East Street!'

Perfect. 'Quick!'

Seconds later, we were both perched on top of the wall, peering into the darkness. We could hear the *posse*, but they were obviously still outside or grouping at the postern gate before spreading out to search the cemetery.

We jumped down. (When it comes to climbing trees and jumping over walls – not to mention simply running for one's life – there is a lot to be said for the single, simple skirt that slatterns and whores wear.)

Again he took my hand, and led me racing down East Hill, my skirt held up clear of my legs in my other hand, and still no sign of pursuit.

Until we came to the river. There, we stopped for breath – and heard the hounds in the distance behind us.

'Are you a swimmer?'

'Yes – er – when I was a boy.'

Well, that was something. 'In we go!'

And in we went, still hand in hand, turning right with the flow of the river. It wasn't wide or deep, but it was deep enough for us to float and fast-moving enough to carry us away, until after a few minutes it seemed safe to whisper, 'Swim now! Start swimming!'

So we swam for a while, but I could hear his teeth chattering and knew I had to do something.

'Where are we?' I asked, hoping he was local enough to know his way around.

'Over th-there, that's the H-Hythe.' He waved vaguely ahead and to our right, where I could just make out the outline of some buildings and moored ships against the night sky.

To our left, a little tributary led off into what seemed to be a wood, though whether it was just that, a small wood, or the beginnings of a great forest, I couldn't tell. Either way, it would do for a start. They'd imagine we'd stayed in the water and gone on down towards Wivenhoe or got out at the Hythe and disappeared among the buildings and boats.

Soon we were in the wood, and running, but he was weak from lack of food.

'What's the other side of these trees?' More trees, I suspected, but we must be somewhere near the Wivenhoe Road that Martin and I had ridden along.

'A r-road. The W-W-W- '

'That will do us. Now, you're going to have to trust me.'

When we emerged, panting, onto the road, the half moon was high and as bright as full moon in the cloudless sky. But would anyone come?

Martin, for instance?

Fat chance.

'Listen, Edmund. You are Edmund, aren't you?' He nodded. 'When someone comes along, I'll say we were set upon by thieves. You lie down, pretend to be dying.'

'Not d-d-difficult.'

I laughed. A sense of humour. I could grow fond of this poor creature.

'Don't say anything. Leave it all to me.'

But nobody came.

It occurred to me that he might have meant "not difficult" because he was already dead.

Who had told him he was dead? The same people who had told him he was a murderer?

'Edmund ... Tell me how you killed those people. Not the ones now. I know you didn't kill them. The other ones, years ago. The girls you strangled. Or garotted. Which was it? Did you strangle them or garotte them?'

'I d-don't remember.'

'I see. And the girls. Do you remember any of the girls?'

'No.'

'You can't have killed all those girls without looking at them. Think of one – any one ... A particularly tall one, for instance. One taller than you. Or one with red hair? No? A blonde?'

'No! I – I don't ... I can't ... They t-told me I k-k-killed them but I don't remember. They said I was sick.'

'Let's try a little experiment. Stand up. Close to me. Now put your hands round my throat, try to strangle me. Go on, don't worry.'

Very tentatively, he put his hands to my neck. He had small hands. Feminine hands. There was no way he could strangle with his bare hands anyone bigger and stronger than a nine or ten-year-old.

I had Marjorie's cord still holding up my skirt. I took it off and handed it to him. 'Show me how you garotte a girl.'

He had no idea.

I took the cord back, tied it round my waist again. And sat him down and sat down beside him and took his hand in mine.

'From now on, you will be known as – let's see. Tom? Will that do? You understand? You are no longer Edmund, you are Tom ... So, Tom. When I first spoke to you, you claimed you were dead. What made you say that? What made you *think* that?'

The poor thing's flesh was so cold now that even I might have believed he was dead. I didn't have a cloak, didn't have anything to wrap him in except my skirt and that was dripping wet still. I did the next best thing. I wrapped my arms around him, pressing his head to my breast. I even wrapped my bare legs around him. Not the sort of thing a lady would do with a ragged-arsed beggar. Perhaps they *were*

right about me. After all, a common whore doesn't mind who she wraps her legs around.

'No one has held me since my m-mother d-d-died,' he sobbed.

'Your mother is dead?'

'Yes. May she rest in p-peace.'

'Amen ... But you are not. Now who, or what, made you think you were?'

'Because I died. I did. They kept me locked in my cell for years – I don't know how many. Then I fell ill and died.'

'What were they feeding you on, Tom?'

'Bread and water. Penitential diet.'

Stale bread. Mouldy bread. I knew. 'I'm surprised you lasted for years. You must have been very strong when they first shut you in there.'

'I was. I was a soldier. Then I – I was upset by the things – by what I saw done in France. My father sent me to St John's on retreat, and I stayed. They wanted me to stay.'

'Your father was a rich man?'

'Not rich, but ... yes.'

His father paid them to keep him, because he was an embarrassment to the family with his nightmares and his accusations.

'Who were you fighting under? Who was your commander?'

'I was at the siege of Limoges with the Black Prince – and black was his heart as well as his name, God forgive me for saying so. We even slaughtered the children. It was ... Hell. And we were the devils.'

The Black Prince. King Richard's father. If he was going around talking like that he was lucky only to be falsely accused of murder and locked away for life.

Not lucky. His father must have paid them very handsomely.

'So you took ill and died. What happened then?'

'I woke up in my coffin. In the Abbey church. It was the middle of the night, and the church was silent.'

'Don't you see that if you're dead you don't "wake up". You must have been sleeping. Unconscious.'

'I don't mean "woke up" like that. I mean I came to myself. Realised I was dead and in my coffin. And anyone who realises *that* is undead. No?'

'No.'

'Then if I'm dead but I'm not one of the Undead, I must be one of the undeclared dead –'

'The undeclared dead?' This was new to me. Another Essex thing?

'Yes, you know:

*Wherever blood is shed  
they gather round,  
the undeclared dead.'*

'Like shades, you mean?' Uncle Yacoub had told me about, "the shades of the dead" in the Bible. And they were in Homer, too. I'd copied out parts of the Odyssey in Latin for Madre Inés when I was in Cuenca. 'But you're not a shade!'

'No, I don't seem to be, do I.'

'Listen. Forget about the undeclared dead.' Though it was a very interesting notion, and I wanted to know more about it. 'Listen, Edmund. I mean Tom. People can be deeply unconscious and seem to be dead – this is called catatonia – but then they wake up, come to, whatever you choose to call it. They're not, and never were, dead.'

'You think *that's* what happened to me?'

'I *know* that's what happened to you. Because I know you're not dead – or undead. So, you woke up in the coffin in the abbey church. The coffin was open?'

'Yes, *Deo gratias*.'

'Then, Tom, I assume you stood up and stepped out of it.'

'Yes. And there were two monks keeping vigil beside the coffin! They screamed and fled. I fled, too. But in the opposite direction – out of the church and away from the abbey that had been my prison all those years.'

'So you don't know what happened next?'

'No. How could I? But I know what has happened to me ... '

'What do you mean?'

'Someone's coming!'

He was right – and from the town. 'Quick, into the trees!'

We squatted in the undergrowth and peered out and watched two men on horseback draw near, pass – they were not in any hurry – and ride on towards Wivenhoe.

'Why?' he asked. 'I thought we were waiting for someone to come along.'



'Not from that direction. They may have heard about us, may even have been part of the *posse*. Which would mean they've given up the hunt for today. I'm waiting for someone heading into Colchester.'

'No one will come now. It's late.'

'We'll give it a few more minutes, Tom. I don't want to be caught out on the open road away from the cover of the trees if the wrong people come along.'

At least he was getting warmer, but we couldn't stay there much longer.

'So, what do you mean, you know what happened to you?'

'What happened to me was, God rejected me: I couldn't go to Heaven because I killed those girls. And the Devil rejected me: I couldn't go to Hell because I hadn't wanted to kill those girls, didn't even remember killing those girls. So I was dead, but I was wandering the night. I can't eat ordinary food because I'm dead, and I can't drink people's blood – the food of the Undead – because only the Devil's brood can do that, and I'm not one of them ...'

'That's nonsense. What happened after you fled the Abbey church was that they put someone else in your coffin – an old man, a pilgrim – and buried him, pretending it was you. So apart from the monks themselves, who believe you to be undead and wandering the night outside the abbey walls, everyone else believes you dead and buried. But you were never dead and buried. And you are not undead.'

'How do you know all this?'

'Let's just say I am one who knows, and leave it at that.'

We sat in silence for a while, me holding him tight again, then I realised he was sleeping. Sleeping like a baby in his mother's arms.

And after a while, a cart came along the road heading for Colchester. I laid Edmund – *Tom* – down, got to my feet, and waved to the driver.

He was an elderly peasant with sharp eyes. He looked me up and down. Glanced down at Tom. And I knew my story wasn't going to wash. I didn't look like a lady who had been set upon by thieves. I looked like a slattern who'd been dropped in the village pond for some misdemeanour, probably sexual. And Tom didn't look like a servant, no matter how stout his defence of his mistress had been. He looked like a vagabond – the Fool, who'd been chased out of village after village by a pack of stone-throwing boys and half-starved mongrels.

He was waiting for me to speak.

'Oh, sir, please help us! My master took me – I told him No! – every time I told him No! – but he doesn't care, and my mistress threw me out. This kind man tried to help me when I was lost and cold and hungry, but now he's injured, sir. His name's Tom something.'

I glanced at the horse. The poor old thing, all skin and bone, had closed its eyes and gone to sleep.

I looked back at the man. He was wide awake. And a devious plan was hatching behind those sharp eyes of his or I was the Cardinal Archbishop of Toledo.

Again, I had to say something. 'We just need a bit of a ride, sir. Into Colchester? I know a woman there I think will help me, take me in, at least for a while.'

'Where?'

'By the Bull, sir. Outside Hed Gate.'

'You, up here by me. Him, in the back with the fish.'

I helped Tom into the back of the cart, then squeezed in beside the man.

He shook the reins, the horse woke up, and we trundled slowly forward.

'Fish, sir?' I said, for want of anything better to say.

'Fish, girl.'

That ended that conversation.

After a moment, he stretched and groaned and, as if by accident, placed his hand on my knee.

I smiled, put my hand over his, squealed 'Ooooh, you're cold!' and lifted his hand and pulled my skirt up and set his hand down again on my bare thigh. I left my hand on top of his.

'Warmer now?' I murmured.

No answer.

My mind was racing ahead, wondering what I was going to tell Joan, what I was going to do in the morning – I would certainly revert to being a lady for a while – but I would have to report back to Henry in the afternoon – when he suddenly said, 'She was right to throw you out.'

Well, thank you.

Stay in character.

'Oh, I know, sir. Men can't keep their hands off me, and my master, her husband, well ... But still, it wasn't fair, not really. I mean, it wasn't my fault he – '

'Best thing for you is get a place in a brothel.'

Here we go.

'Henry Bawd in Bere Lane might ... Mm, I'll take you there.'

No! 'Oh no, sir! I'm a good girl, I am!'

He ran his free hand up and down my thigh speculatively. Wondering, no doubt, how much Henry would pay for me.

To be sold to the same whoremaster twice in one day?!

We had crossed the bridge and were at the bottom of East Hill now.

'Get down and walk here. And *him*. Get him out. Cart's too heavy. Give me a push up the hill.'

I removed his hand with a grin and jumped down off the slowly moving cart, then woke Tom up and helped him down. We both leant against the back of the cart, doing little but at least not adding to the poor beast's burden. The hill looked very high and very steep, seen from the bottom in the dark. And when we reached the top we would, I knew, be back where we had started .

We got to the top and East Gate eventually, puffing and gasping, and turned left by the cemetery on the road that led to St Botolph's Priory. We were nearly there. We could cut and run, now. On the other hand, if any of the men who'd been hunting us were still about, we wouldn't have a lame dog's hope of getting away a second time. We'd been safe on the cart.

I did *not* want to be delivered back to Henry.

Henry, though, was the lesser risk.

I helped Tom up onto the moving cart then ran to the front and climbed back up beside the driver. His hand pushed my skirt aside, slid up my thigh, caressed my groin. We were turning right – the horse knew the way – and would be outside Henry's house in a minute.

'I'll go to Master Henry's house tomorrow, I will! But not tonight! Please! I have to do something about poor Tom. Tell me your name and I'll tell Master Henry you sent me. That way you'll get ... well, he'll be grateful, you know that.'

'He'd be grateful tonight.'

'But I'll be unwilling. Difficult. That will reduce my value. Tomorrow I will smile and be sweet!'

'All sluts are liars. Anyway, a good beating and you'll smile and be sweet any time Master Henry wants you to smile and be sweet.'

Why is my life always so difficult? 'Oh, I know, sir. You are so right. You really understand a girl. I will give you the fuck of your dreams next time you come. When will that be? *Tomorrow?*'

'Tomorrow. Late. About this time.'

'Perfect!' I squealed. 'I'll be waiting for you. And what is your name?'

'Henry Clough of Wivenhoe.'

We had left the Shag behind now, were passing the Schere Gate. I had won! But I was going to be busy tomorrow evening ...

He dropped us off at the corner by the Bull.

'Don't forget, slut.'

'I won't!'

'You'll rue the day if you do!'

We limped and stumbled down the road towards Joan's house.

'Hey! What's your name?' he shouted after us.

'His name's Tom, sir!'

'Not *him*! *You*, you trollop!'

'Oh! Me? Marian, sir. Mad Marian.'

## 6

### LONG WILL LANGLAND

We were lucky. Again. The door opened to my touch and inside, seated at a table, were Marjorie and a man in a black gown, not a priest, but a cleric of some sort.

She jumped up. 'My lady! What – ?'

'Shh! Where's Joan?'

'Sleeping. She – '

'Good.'

The man was staring at me in astonishment, mystified and intrigued – what man would not be? – by the incompatibility of my ragtail appearance and my perceived status.

'Too late, sir,' I told him.

'Too late?'

'If you'd been going to stand up, you should already have done so. Better now to go on judging by appearances, and remain seated.'

'Yes, my lady.' The most lugubrious voice I had ever come across. And no smile at all.

But I laughed. 'Now you are simply adding to the confusion.'

Was that a hint of a smile in his eyes?

I turned back to Marjorie. 'This man – ' I pushed Tom forward – 'is in dire need of warmth, clothes and food. Probably in that order, but I'm not sure.'

'And you – '

'Me?'

'You need warmth, clothes and food, too, my lady.'

'Oh. Yes. But see to him first, Marjorie. Take him upstairs to my chamber, put a blanket or something around him, light a fire, and fetch him bread and some soup.'

'I – I can't eat,' croaked Tom.

'Of course you can, Tom. Don't start that nonsense again. And I'll be up in a minute to see that you do.'

'But it'll be cold in your room,' Marjorie protested. 'Let him stay here –'

'No. He's in trouble with his lord. I don't want him seen.'

I glanced at the cleric.

'I haven't seen him,' he said.

'Who?'

'Good question. Let me rephrase that. I haven't seen anyone apart from sweet Marjorie, and you, my lady.'

I tried to keep a straight face, but that voice!

'An unobservant man is a blessing to any lady, sir. Now, Marjorie, take him up, get those wet rags off him and a warm cloak round him – mine is in my room, use that – and light the fire.'

'Will he need hot water?'

'No. He smells surprisingly sweet. Just hot soup. Now go on. Hurry. And don't wake Mistress Joan.'

'No chance of that. She doesn't sleep often, but when she does, she sleeps sound.'

'Go!'

'Yes, ma'am.'

Marjorie bustled poor Tom up the stairs and I turned to face the unknown cleric who had witnessed – was still witnessing – all this. How should I deal with him? "Sweet Marjorie," he had said. It seemed he was not impervious to feminine charm.

I opened my mouth to speak, but he spoke first.

'Don't you think you ought to take those wet clothes off?'

Well! I was right about that.

'I have my cloak here.' He held it up. 'As you so kindly lent yours to that poor fellow, I feel I should offer you mine. Here – take it. And I will turn my back.' The voice never changed, but the hint of a smile in the eyes was growing warmer.

As I took the cloak, he turned his face to the fire. I pulled off my wet bodice and skirt and wrapped myself up in the cloak. It was old

and threadbare and far from clean, but it was warm from the heat of the fire.

I sat down beside him and we both gazed at the smouldering logs.

After a while, he said, 'Perhaps if I tell you a little about myself, you will repay me in kind.'

I turned and looked him in the eye. 'Perhaps.' I smiled. He had dark grey eyes – or were they hazel? Difficult to tell in the firelight.

He broke the eye contact and turned back to the now dancing flames. 'I live in London – a tiny house in Cornhill – and make a pittance saying prayers for the rich departed who, unable to take their riches with them, make sure it is still being used for *their* benefit after they pass on.'

*Another rebel?*

'I spent the last month in Ipswich. You know it? On the River Orwell in Suffolk.'

'I know Stoke, on the south bank of the river. Like Southwark.'

He turned and studied me again. 'Ah ha. Do you now? Yes, it is a little like Southwark in miniature ...'

I wanted to kick myself. I couldn't stay in character to save my life this evening. He was right, I was exhausted.

'I'd been commissioned to say prayers for a month in a private chapel there. That done, and having no liking for the monastic lodgings made available to me, I am on my way home with a happy heart and enjoying a fine mutton pastie, a flagon of Mistress Joan's best Gascon wine and this open fire, reluctant to go to my bed and delighted by this unexpected company.'

'And your name, sir?'

'William Langland, my lady.'

Cornhill? Langland? 'Are you by any chance the poet known – if not to the world, at least to the discerning – as Long Will?'

He stared at me. 'How do you know that?'

'Geoffrey Chaucer mentioned you.'

'You know Chaucer?'

I resisted the temptation to try to impress, and said simply, 'I have met him, yes.'

'When? Where? I thought he was abroad.'

'At the Savoy Palace, a while back. He had recently returned from France and was going abroad again.'

Now I had, quite unintentionally, given him the impression that I was an habituée of Lancaster's grand London home. Oh well, perhaps it was for the best. A plan was beginning to form in my head and Long Will was central to it.

'He is a great admirer of yours. He spoke of one – just one, yes, but one great – poem you have written. He said you and your poem would be remembered in centuries to come when we have all been forgotten, even he himself and John Gower, apart perhaps from a few lines that chance to survive.'

'You know Gower, too?'

'He's a neighbour of mine.' True. St Mary Ovarie was at the other end of Clink Street.

'You live in Southwark?'

We were eye to eye again.

I nodded.

'You become more mysterious by the minute ...' And he turned back to the fire, where the flames had died down again and the remains of the logs were going grey. As was the stubble on his chin, I noticed. Like Geoffrey's. But unlike Geoffrey, he had what had probably started as a tonsure but had now spread until he was almost completely bald.

He sighed and said, 'Geoffrey is kind. He has the entertainer's reverence for the moralist. Poetry can be a diversion simply, a song, a comedy, meant to cheer the weary heart on which the weight of the world bears down too hard. Or it can be a hymn, a sermon, intended to instruct and edify. The former, while admirable in its own way, cannot be considered *work*. The latter can.'

'Work? You mean *work*, like ploughing the fields, milking the cows, washing the clothes?'

'Ploughing the fields. Curious you should choose that particular simile. But no, I mean work as in the theological conundrum: are we saved by faith or by works? Do we want mercy or justice? Which should we expect? Which is right? If justice, then we will be judged by our works.'

'I see.' I did see. I had discussed this very issue many times with the other students at the Sorbonne in Paris, when I'd been a student there (and pretending to be a boy). But there was no reason to go into all



that with Long Will here. Instead, I said 'What is the name of this poem? This work of yours?'

'I'm not sure yet. Probably Piers the Ploughman.' Now he did really smile. 'Or Meed the Maiden.'

'Meed?'

'Payment. Reward. Right when it is earned and justified. Very wrong when it is the fruit of sin and corruption.'

'I can see why you call yourself a moralist, and I'd love to discuss all this with you at length. I have a great interest in theology. But tonight I am cold and tired and hungry and – ah! Marjorie! Right on time. Thank you. This smells delicious. How's Tom?'

'Asleep, my lady. In Master Will's room – '

'In *my* room?'

'It's a big bed – '

'In my *bed*?!'

'You want me to put him in my lady's bed?'

'Well, no, that would hardly be the thing, but – '

'Did he eat?' I interrupted. I liked the idea of Tom in Long Will's bed – for the plan I felt coming it was perfect – and I didn't want any changes made.

'At first he refused, some silly nonsense he has in his head – it's all this talk of the Undead, it has everyone upset and imagining things. *I* had a nightmare a couple of nights ago. I never had one before, didn't understand what they were. I do now ... That poor man. Anyway, when I got a sip of the broth into him and he'd swallowed it, he couldn't stop! Licked out the bowl and begged for more!'

I laughed. She was such a good girl.

'Thank you so much, Marjorie. Will you be about in the morning?'

'I'm *always* about.'

'Because I shall need you to help me dress again.'

'Oh, thank goodness! I was so worried about you. I'll bring up water for a bath, shall I?'

'In the morning, yes. Do you mind leaving us now? Master Langland and I have some matters to discuss.'

'I'll get some sleep, then, my lady. I'll be in the kitchen if you need me, sir.'

Will nodded. 'Goodnight, Marjorie.'

'Goodnight, sir.'

When she'd gone, I plunged straight in. 'How are you travelling tomorrow? You have a horse? Or a mule?'

He shook his head as though the idea of him having a horse, or even a mule, of his own was laughable. 'I know a man who will be passing through Colchester tomorrow at around midday with a waggon-load of Essex cheese bound for London.'

'Then may I make so bold as to suggest a good work you might perform?'

'Surely you have your own horse, my lady?'

'I do, of course. But Tom doesn't.'

'Ah. Tom.'

I laughed. 'You know what they say about bed-fellows.'

'One tends to get stuck with them. Yes.'

That lugubrious voice was perfect!

Another thought struck him. 'What will he accompany me *as*? He has no clothes apart from your cape.'

'I suppose I could lend him some other garments to wear under the cloak. He could accompany you disguised as a lady.'

'I hope you are not serious. Anyway, ladies do not travel in waggons along with the cheeses.' He gave me a look that matched his voice. 'Though I have no doubt there are exceptions to that rule.'

'As to all rules. Do *you* have a spare outfit?'

'I knew that was coming, and I do, yes. But only the one cloak and pair of shoes.'

'Tomorrow morning I will buy you a new cloak and him an old pair of shoes.'

'No –'

'Yes. Listen, Will. I have money. Lots of it. Too much for my own good. I will pay you well for delivering Tom to my house in Southwark.'

He studied me again, but I kept my face resolutely turned towards the dying fire.

'Think of me as Meed the Maiden, and helping Tom as a good work.'

'When you put it like that, how can I possibly say no?'

'Keep him with you in your room until you leave. Then leave quickly and discretely. I'd prefer Mistress Joan to know nothing of this.'

'And when will I see you?'

'I will come to your room an hour at least before midday. I shall have with me the cloak and shoes, and gold for you. One day, in a week or two, or a month, I will come to you in Cornhill and we will finish our discussion.'

'Continue it, my lady. Such a discussion is never finished.'

'Which bodes well for the future of our friendship.'

And with that, we went up the stairs to our separate rooms.

At his door, he turned back and murmured, 'You never told *me* anything! Not even your name!'

'Lady Marian MacElpin, daughter of Sir Andrew MacElpin of the County of Ross in Scotland. Now dwelling at the Eye-in-the-Hand, by the Castle-on-the-Hoop, in Southwark.'

'Scotland, eh? And my cloak?'

'Here.' I threw it to him and darted into my room.

In the morning I entered the town through Hed Gate and, to get the feel of the place, walked right along the High Street to East Gate, past the market stalls which lined the road. When I knew where everything was, I turned and walked back past the Friary and this time stopped in the fish section. It stank, of course, but I felt at home immediately – the fish market I lived so close to now, in Southwark, the market where I had actually worked for a while in Avignon, skinning eels. There was a stall selling eels and I stood and watched the woman pinning them down and skinning them until she caught my eye. How I would have loved to offer to help! If I'd been dressed in Marjorie's clothes I could have, but I was a lady today and all I could do was smile and walk on.

Next were the meat stalls, with what they call here the shambles down by the castle. This is the part of any market I really hate, so I hurried on through the crowd till all the dead meat and still living animals and birds, the smell of blood and shit, were behind me, then slowed down and wandered along looking at everything.

The fact that I was alone caused people to look askance at me – it didn't in Southwark, or not so much – this was provincial England and like provincial France – but my obviously very expensive clothes made them treat me with respect.

I was thinking of Long Will's Meed the Maiden, of the importance of reward – I would reward both Marjorie and Will handsomely – and of how reward merges into corruption so subtly that it is impossible to say where the one ends and the other begins.

I was sure Will would disapprove of what he'd no doubt label "harlotry". After all, he was a moralist. And yet I found it hard to believe he had never paid a visit to a "den of iniquity" such as Henry Bawd's place, or the ones I had worked at in Cuenca and Avignon. Or Marell's house in Southwark, the Green Unicorn. And what little the girl who serviced him received in cash or in kind was fairly earned regardless of whether you consider what she did for him a "good work".

I realised I was walking along smiling to myself – almost talking to myself!

Hmmm.

On the other hand, the large amounts of money brothel-owners made out of the needs of the men – needs as normal as eating and sleeping – and the vulnerability of the girls, was definitely Meed at her worst.

But I had jobs to do. And there was a shop that looked as though it stocked fine quality clothes for men.

I chose a long cloak for Long Will, who was extremely tall – until he stood up, I'd been curious about that "Long" – paid for it and arranged for it to be delivered to Mistress Joan at the Winged Lion.

Then from a cobbler, a pair of shoes for Tom. I had to guess the size, but they were strong and well made, and if they were too uncomfortable he'd be able to exchange them somewhere en route without any difficulty. Again I arranged for them to be delivered.

Then to a shop where they sold women's clothes. I wasn't going to be left out! I found a thick, warm, split skirt for riding, which would do me perfectly, paid and arranged for that to be delivered, then headed back to the first shop. It had occurred to me that things might well get worse before they got better, so I bought a complete outfit for a boy – "a young man more or less the same size as me" – including my favourite bright red hose and a beautiful green suede tunic. If it didn't get worn here, it would in London.

Finally, I wandered past the stalls selling cheap women's stuff and found some bodices such as Marian atte-Marsh might wear. And

would wear tonight, I decided – *if* I went through with tonight, which was far from certain. I might move to the White Hart without telling anyone, take a chamber there as Lady MacElpin, and let Martin and Henry go hang.

Anyway, I bought four, of various colours, two of them for Marjorie – all four for her if I moved to the White Hart.

This last purchase I carried in a little parcel as I strolled to the end of the street – and saw the White Hart in front of me. I had an hour to spare: I would go in, have a drink, see if I liked the place, and pay serious attention to the gossip going on around me. On the street I had heard odd snatches of conversation in which "the murderer", "the Undead", "the monk" and "Brother Edmund" were frequently mentioned, along with "a whore he'd been seen with and must have killed, though her body hasn't been found". Like sheep gossiping in a field.

A pot-boy led me to a table and sat me down, then a girl came and took my order.

I leant back and relaxed.

Another night was looming, and I had no idea yet what I would do – or even what I *should* do – once I'd got Tom safely away from all this.

At the nearest table, half a dozen merchants were discussing their apprentices, who were – in the masters' view – uniformly lazy and rebellious. And from what they said, rebellion was in the air, not just among the apprentices but throughout the lower echelons of society.

I'd heard in London that rebellion was brewing in Essex but had paid it little attention. I was about to start paying it more when Master Spicer came in from the street, accompanied by a petite, elegantly-dressed woman. His wife? He glanced around, spotted me, looked twice, decided he didn't know me, or if he did couldn't remember where from, and sat down with her too far away for me to hear anything they said.

The girl brought my wine. I sipped at it, and watched them over the rim of the glass. Then my attention was drawn back to the table next to mine, where a fat, official-looking man with a red face had come to join the group. Greetings were waved aside as he announced: 'There's been another one! Another girl murdered!'

*Me*, I smirked.

'That whore of Henry Bawd's?' one of the men mumbled. 'We know about her.'

'No, not her. *Her* body's still not been found. This one's that slattern from the Angel – Edith, skinny girl – you know her?'

From the nods and grunts, it seemed they all did, probably intimately.

'At least it wasn't another priest.'

'*Deo gratias*,' and more nods and grunts.

'Found in the grounds of the Keep, she was. Throat torn open and blood drained, same as the other whore.'

'Within the walls!'

'Oh, now, that's too much! We're none of us safe!'

'Oh, come on, George. You are neither a priest nor a whore.'

'Well, no, but I was thinking of my wife.'

General hilarity.

Men.

'Must have made his way back up after giving the posse the run-around –'

'Aye, fast they are, the Undead.'

'Faster than hounds. That's how he got away.'

' – then back in, presumably via the cemetery again.'

'Something must be done about those walls.'

'And that postern gate.'

'She was a good girl.'

'Who? Edith, or the other one?'

'Edith, I meant.'

'She was not a good girl. And neither was she clean.'

'She was a good fuck.'

Suddenly one, and then all, looked in my direction. Ashamed. I was a lady.

I pretended not to be listening, to have heard nothing, to be suddenly embarrassed by their stares.

More ashamed, they turned away, lowered their voices and carried on.

'And the other one? Henry's girl?'

'No one knows. She was new. A foreign girl. Spanish, if you please.'

'Really? Shame. I've never had a Spanish woman.'

'That Sancha there is Spanish.'

'She's *old*. And she's been whoring around this country so long she's probably forgotten there is a place called Spain.'

'She's probably forgotten there's a place that's not a brothel!'

Disgusted, I left them there, laughing and enjoying themselves. I knew now what I was going to do. What I had to do.

\* \* \* \* \*

From the White Hart, it's just a short walk down Hed Street to Hed Gate and so to Joan's house.

All was quiet. Two men were sitting at a table, drinking and talking. Their eyes followed me as I went through to the kitchen door, but they didn't speak.

I peeped in. Joan and Marjorie were both there, working.

'Oh, it's you, my lady,' said Joan. 'Some parcels were delivered for you. Where did you put them, girl?'

'Up in my lady's room.' Marjorie smiled at me. 'I'll go up with her and show her –'

'Do you *need* her?' Joan asked me.

'Only for a couple of minutes. Do you mind?'

'Go on, then, and come straight back down,' she told Marjorie. 'Don't stand there gossiping.' This last was addressed to me as much as Marjorie, despite the fact that I was dressed as a lady.

We hurried up the stairs and, once we were in the room with the door closed, I said, 'What happened? Have you seen them? Did Mistress Joan find out about Tom?'

That morning, when Marjorie had brought my breakfast and water for my bath, then helped me dress and seen me off at the door, there had been no sign of Will or Tom.

'After you'd gone, Master Will shouted down for me to bring his breakfast up to him. I took a lot, 'cos Mistress Joan wasn't watching and I knew it was for two.'

'And they're still in his room?'

'Far as I know. Here's all your stuff. I didn't –'

'No, that's fine. You go back down and get on with your work. I'll see about Tom and Master Will now. I've got some things here for them. Wait. Tell me what back ways there are in and out of here.'

'Back ways? Well, through the kitchen, out into the yard. And there's a door out into the garden from the back parlour.'

'Locked?'

'No. Well, bolted from inside sometimes at night. But often we forget.'

'And from the garden?'

'There's a gate in the wall, leads out onto the main road.'

'Right. Here, this is for you.' I pressed another half-noble into her hand.

'*What?* I can't take that!'

'Of course you can. Put it away somewhere. Keep it for a rainy day. And if I have to slip out fast and don't see her, make sure you tell your mistress Lady Marian still wants this room kept for her. I'll be sleeping here on and off for at least another week, maybe two. Now go, quick, or we'll both be in trouble.'

She grinned, then looked round anxiously. 'Can I hide this here somewhere and pick it up later? I've got to go straight back to the kitchen, and –'

'Yes, of course. Where –?'

'Here. Under the clothes chest ... I'll come and get it as soon as her back's turned. And thank you *so* much.'

'Run!'

She laughed and ran.

I opened all the parcels, found Tom and Will's things, then went to his room and knocked on the door.

'Who?' called Will.

'Me. Lady Marian.'

But it wasn't Will who opened the door to me. It was his fellow-cleric and travelling-companion Tom of – of where? No, Tom what? A simple name would be better.

Will had worked a miracle. Tom was shaved and shining and garbed all in black. Save that his feet were bare.

Will was lying on the bed, his hands behind his head.

'You worked a miracle.'

'Writing a poem is working a miracle.'



'He's perfect. And I have his shoes here. But what shall we call him? Tom of where? Tom what?'

'Tom Watt. Yes.'

'Yes what?'

'Yes, Watt.'

'Excuse me,' said Tom. 'He means Watt the name. You mean what the question.'

Will laughed. So I laughed too, though the joke was on me.

'It all very well for you two. It's difficult working in a foreign language.'

'What language do they speak in Scotland then?'

Of course, neither of these two knew anything of my Spanish background.

'Gaelic,' I said. 'Yes, Tom Watt will do fine. Now, Tom, you are not to appear in the hall or kitchen or at the front door. I do not want Mistress Joan – or anyone else – to see you. Here, put these shoes on. And here's your new cloak, Will.'

He took it and examined it. His eyes lit up. 'Now *that's* a cloak. But what will everyone think?'

'They'll think you prayed for the dead so effectively you got a cloak from Heaven.'

'Right. Just so long as they don't think I've got a rich mistress.'

'Why not? It would do wonders for your reputation. As a poet, if not as a moralist and cleric.'

'I have a wife.' In that voice.

I burst out laughing. Then remembered I might well not have much time, and became serious again.

'Will, take Tom downstairs, being careful no one sees him. Turn right at the bottom of the stairs into the back parlour.'

'I know it.'

'And go out through the door there into the garden. There's a gate that gives onto the street. Tom, you wait there. Inside the gate. Don't go out onto the street alone. Wait for Will. Will, you come back in, say goodbye and leave through the front door. Go round the corner, get Tom from the garden, and together wait – piously – for your cheese waggon. Oh, and here.' Another gold piece.

'My lady, that is too –'

'It is not. I'm going to my room now. I'll see you when I get home, Tom. And you sometime later, in Cornhill.'

'Will they really let me stay in your house?'

'Yes. You will ask for Sir Ferchard. Tell him Marian sent you, and that I'm following later. He'll be responsible for you until I come. There's a Moorish woman, Khadija, who will feed you and spoil you. Can you remember those names?'

He repeated them, and I left it at that, wished them God speed, and returned to my own room.

I stuffed all the new things into the chest, apart from one bodice I intended to wear, and sat down to take off my boots and undress – wishing Marjorie was there to help me. I had to get back to Henry's house fast.

There was a knock on the door. Was it her? A powerful wish!

'My lady?'

It was Will. Ah well.

'Come in. It's open.'

'My lady – '

'Tom?'

'He's all right. He's in the garden. This Sir Ferchard. Who is he, exactly? I need to know what I'm walking into.'

'He's a Scottish knight, an old friend of my father's who has spent most of his life in *outré-mer*.'

'A crusader?'

I nodded. 'In effect, yes. He once told me he would have joined the Knights Templar if ... Let's just say "if".' Will had crossed himself when I mentioned the Templars. I changed the subject. 'Now – my own father being dead – he has appointed himself in some sense my guardian.'

'I see. And the gold? The wealth? That is his?'

'No, it is not. And neither am I. His, I mean. His whore, his mistress. I know you wish to ask that.'

'But he will take Tom under his wing?'

'Absolutely.'

'He has nightmares. He was screaming during the night. I didn't want to mention it in front of him, but he believes he is dead.'

'Just get him to Southwark and Sir Ferchard will take care of him. He knows – but what is that shouting?'

'I'll go and see.'

I followed, but stayed at the top of the stairs, keeping out of sight.

Joan was saying 'We only had two people staying here last night, a cleric and a lady.'

'Together?' A man. I didn't recognise the voice.

'No, not together. Master Langland has stayed here before when he's travelling, but never stays more than one night. Lady MacElpin is staying here for a few days.'

'Who is this "Lady"?' The same man.

'Lady MacElpin. I know no more than you do.'

'Listen! I know you had a whore staying here!' That was Henry!  
'And she –'

'A whore? Here? And you stop shouting in my house, Master Henry!'

'Oh, come on! Your wench – you there – what's your name?'

'Marjorie, sir.'

'Don't tell me Marjorie isn't a whore. They all are – stealing trade from legitimate establishments like mine.'

Joan wasn't having that. 'Marjorie does whatever's required of her, naturally. But only with men who are *staying* here. She's a good girl.'

The other man answered him. 'Girls like her are an amenity, Henry, you know that. Leave her out of it. She's not the one we're interested in.' No, the one he was interested in, this other man – who was he? – was *me*. 'So, Marjorie,' he went on, 'does this Lady MacElpin have a maid with her, or have you been looking after her?'

'Oh, *me*, sir.'

'And would you say she was a real lady?'

'Oh yes, sir. Just this morning I helped her dress, and she has such beautiful clothes. Like a princess!'

'And you know a lot of princesses, slut.' Henry again.

'Is she here, this lady?'

'I don't think so, sir. She went shopping this morning. Boys were running backwards and forwards delivering parcels for her from clothes shops one after another. She did come back to see what was happening, but then she went out again as far as I know.'

'Go and check.'

Marjorie came running up the stairs past Will and saw me at the top. I put my finger to my lips. *I'm not here!* I mouthed.

She grinned and ran back down the stairs to where Long Will had now entered the fray.

'You are Master Langland?'

'I am. You have the advantage of me, sir.'

'John Furneys, one of the Colchester Bailiffs. Perhaps you can help us.'

'I don't have much time, Master Furneys, I'm leaving now, but yes, if I can.'

'Did you meet Lady MacElpin?'

'Lady Marian? Yes.'

'Marian! You see!' exclaimed Henry.

The Bailiff ignored him.

'Did you speak to her? Did you get to know her at all?'

'Why, yes. We had a quite a long chat yesterday evening.'

'Yesterday evening!' shouted Henry. 'And how was she dressed? Like a *lady*?'

'She was a perfect lady.'

'What was she wearing, sir?' Henry shouted. He could not behave like a gentleman to save his life.

'A cloak, sir.'

'And under the cloak, sir?'

'I imagine she was wearing whatever a wealthy lady wears. Running a whorehouse, you no doubt have more experience of ladies – and princesses – than Marjorie and I. But no, on second thoughts, you probably imagine that beneath her cloak she was naked.'

I nearly burst out laughing.

'I do, yes! She's a whore!'

'I think you should be very, very careful what you are saying,' said Will.

'As do I, Henry,' said the Bailiff.

'She is an habituée of the Savoy Palace,' Will continued, 'which in case you don't know, whoremaster, is the home of the Duke of Lancaster, the Regent of England.'

'She –'

'Be silent, Henry! Do you have evidence of this, Master Langland, or is it simply something she told you?'

'It is something she told me, of course. I only met her for the first time last night. But she knew me, knew who I am, what I do. Knew

that I write poetry. Very few people know that. One who does is the courtier Geoffrey Chaucer, who is also an habitué of the Savoy Palace, a confidant of the Duke's – and of the King and his mother Princess Joan's – and a good friend of mine. He is another poet. He is also a friend of Lady Marian's. Therefore I would strongly advise you to keep a civil tongue in your head, whoremaster, or your tongue may be removed from your head. Now, I must be going. I bid you all farewell.

'Farewell, Master Langland.'

That was the Bailiff. Henry was keeping his mouth firmly closed.

'I think,' said the Bailiff, 'we can exclude Lady MacElpin from our investigations. I also think, Henry, that before we go any further, you should beg these good people not to repeat a word of what you've been saying to the Lady when she returns.'

There was short silence while Henry slowly realised he had no choice whatsoever but to throw himself on the mercy of Joan and Marjorie.

'I – I was obviously mistaken about this lady. Would you be kind enough to forget I ever said the things I did?'

'I might, Master Henry, but this poor girl you publicly labelled a whore ... I think it might take a little gold to induce her to forget.'

'I think it might, too, Henry,' said the Bailiff. 'And if anything unfortunate were to happen to her, you know who would be our first suspect.'

I could imagine the look on Henry's face. I almost felt sorry for him!

'I don't have much with me, but I will send something round for her this afternoon.'

'Tell *her*. And tell her *how much* you will send round,' said Joan. 'See if she agrees.'

'I will send round a shilling – twelve pence, Marjorie.'

'You called me slut, you called me whore. I want a gold noble. At least.'

This was turning out to be Marjorie's lucky day!

'*A gold noble?* I can't –'

'What's the value of your tongue, Henry?' asked the Bailiff. 'Master Langland wasn't joking. Lady MacElpin is even less likely to find your remarks amusing ... Just tell the girl you agree, and we can get on.'

'Right. I agree, Marjorie.'

'And if she hasn't received that gold noble by None – '

'None? Give me till Vespers!'

'Marjorie?'

'All right. Vespers.'

'If she hasn't received it by Vespers, by the time the sun sets, let's say, she will take great pleasure in informing Lady Mac – '

'I agree!'

'He agrees, Mistress Joan. Now, can we please get on. Tell us again exactly what you heard, Henry – and for God's sake – and your own! – leave the lady out of it.'

'One of my girls was here last night with another whore, who also now belongs to me. That second whore, whose name is Mariana or Marian, said she was staying here.'

'Oh, them. If she belongs to you, she'd be spending the night in your house, surely,' said Joan.

'She has only just come into my hands.'

'Sancha and Mariana they said their names were, didn't they, Marjorie?'

'That's right.'

'They sat here for a while, had a drink or two, ate one of my pasties each – girls like them often come in off the street for a drink or a pastie, specially when it's cold – then they went. Needed to pick up a man each, I suppose, or they'd be in trouble with Master Henry. But he was so busy going on about Lady MacElpin, he never got round to asking us about Sancha and Mariana.'

'Then those will have been the two we saw outside the cemetery. And Mariana was the one who was carried off by the killer. We haven't found her body yet, but that is clearly who she is. Was.'

It's a strange feeling, knowing people are searching everywhere for your body.

'And now, before we leave, I think I'd like to sample one of these famous pasties of yours, Mistress Joan. And one for my poor friend Henry here.'

'He looks as if what he needs is a cup of wine. Marjorie – wine and a pastie for each of these gentlemen.'

That was my cue. I had to get back to Henry's house before he got there, and the wine and pastie gave me a chance.

I darted back into my room, threw off my clothes and put on Marjorie's old skirt, which had dried but was little more than a rag now, and a beautiful new bodice. Then I crept down the stairs making not a sound – I was barefoot, of course – slipped into the back parlour without anyone seeing me – they were all gathered round the fire – and out into the garden and the street. Where I wanted to run, but knew I mustn't draw attention to myself anywhere near Mistress Joan's. So I walked – my best whore walk – back along Bere Lane and into Henry's house – Master Henry, now – through the kitchen entrance. Where I was greeted with screams of fear, then amazement and delight.

They'd all thought I was dead!

Then they all had to touch me to make sure I was really alive, that I felt warm, not cold like a corpse. Undead. You could see the fear still in their eyes. But when they'd all touched me, then they hugged me: 'Marian! You gave us such a fright!'

Then Bertha announced that I was back just in time to finish my story before they all had to start work.

More laughter.

Then Clarice said, 'She must have another story to tell now. What the hell happened to you last night?'

'Didn't Sancha tell you?'

'Sancha's locked in her room. All she managed to tell us was that you gone to talk to the murderer – you *are* mad, ain't you! – and she'd given up on you and come home.'

'And then Master Henry told us the *posse* had gone after him,' added Jenny, 'and he'd run off faster than anyone live can run, pulling you along behind him!'

'You must have been so scared!' Bertha was wide-eyed.

'I'd have died!' gasped little Kat.

'And then we heard after he'd killed you he killed another girl.'

'Yeah, Edith, from the Angel. You know her? Right little slut. Askin' for it,' said Clarice.

'How can you talk like that?' demanded Lucy. She was tall, skinny and blonde, and I decided I liked her.

'Did you know Edith?' Bertha asked me.

'No, sweet. But nobody *asks* for that to happen to them.'

'No! I mean it nearly happened to *you*!'

'No, it didn't. He wasn't the killer. The killer was up by the Keep, inside the walls. That's where they found poor Edith. The man I was with was just some poor homeless vagabond, like I told Sancha. I was running *with* him.'

'Oh, don't talk rubbish, Marian,' snapped Jenny. 'Why on earth would you run with him?'

'Because the dogs – hounds, mastiffs, I don't know – were chasing us!'

'They were chasing *him*, not you.'

'Tell *them* that. Excuse me, Master Mastiff, you're mauling the wrong person –'

'Oh, Mariana, you're so funny!' giggled Bertha.

'Even one dog if it growls terrifies me!' said Kat.

Then Henry came in, his face like thunder. God bless Marjorie.

Don't laugh, Mariana. And don't, whatever you do, criticise his treatment of his mother.

'You? Here?' he tried to roar, but as I say, his voice is a bit high-pitched.

I feigned surprise at his surprise. 'Where else should I be, sir? Master Martin left me here with you.'

He slapped my face. No, that doesn't describe it. He clouted me on the side of my head and face with his open hand, nearly knocking me over. He did it with all his strength, bringing his hand right back before he swung it at me, so it was slow, slow, slow. I could easily have defended myself. But I didn't. I had a part to play, a part I'd chosen.

Tears, though, I would not do.

I stood there and faced him defiantly.

'Where'd you get that blouse?' he demanded. 'It looks new.'

'It fell off the back of a cart.'

There were a couple of suppressed giggles.

He glared round at everyone, picked Clarice. 'Take Mariana and get her ready. I'm expecting the Earl of Arundel in one hour. And if I'd had to cancel that, you spoilt little slut,' this was to me, 'I'd have skinned you alive and fed you to the rats in the cellar.'

'Rats?' I asked Clarice, as soon as we were alone. 'There are rats in the cellar?'



'Course there are. Should have locked *her* up down there, stuck up bitch. And you with her. Get those things off. The top's all right, you can keep that, but the skirt's a mess, a beggar would turn up her nose.'

'There's money in the pocket.'

'I'll see to it. Now wash.'

'Seven silver pennies.'

She ignored that.

The water was cold but I didn't mind. It just made me wish I was back in the sea.

'All over. Inside as well,' she ordered.

'I know. I've worked in bigger, better brothels than this.'

'Yeah? You keep coming down in the world at this rate, you'll be turning tricks in the street next.'

'Thanks.'

'Now let's get you dry.'

She dried me and perfumed me, then gave me a muslin gown to put on. 'You'll be irresistible in that, with your figure. You might even get an offer that'll take you out of Master Henry's hands altogether – and Master Martin's. What his nibs of Arundel wants, his nibs gets.'

'Like every other man who comes here with a silver penny in his hand.'

'There'll be a lot more than silver pennies changing hands this evening. Not that you'll see any of it,' she laughed.

'I might get a tip.'

'From a lord, yeah, you might. Jammy cow. And if he decides he wants you for himself, doesn't want to share you, you might do very well out of it. Not as well as Master Henry and your Master Martin, of course, but still ... '

I'd handle Lord Arundel wanting to buy me when I came to it. One of the few things my father and Uncle Yacoub the rabbi agreed about: Don't go meeting trouble half way. Let it come to you, size it up, then take whatever action is necessary. Hopefully it will peter out like a great wave when only the tiniest ripple comes all the way and kisses your toes where you are standing on the beach.

Then she did my nipples, and my lips. 'Reckon they used capsicum ointment on your lips somewhere you worked, and not just once in a while but regular.'

Oh, that. 'Of course, yes. All the time.' I'd always had big, full lips, though. Still, if it was evident to Clarice – Clarice of Cock Lane! – then it must have been obvious to Mireille and the others in Paris, and one of the reasons they all ...

Stupid, Mariana!

And everyone in London and Southwark! And Chich!

But now she was doing my eyes ...

She was good.

'You're good,' I said. 'As good as anyone in France. And I haven't seen eye-shadow as good as this since Granada.'

'Granada?'

'The Moors. In the south of Spain.'

'Moors? You mean Saracens?'

'Mm. I was a slave in a harem there.'

She laughed. 'You and your stories. You'll be telling us you're one of the Undead next.'

I ignored that.

'Anyone who survives an encounter with the Undead and lives to tell the tale ...'

Change the subject. 'That's where I was depilated. In Granada. Among the Moors.'

'Oh, yeah? I was going to ask you about that, too. I've seen it before, complete like that, in Harwich. Another foreign girl. She used capsicum on her own lips and chewed them. I worked there a couple of years with the sailors. But here, there's no one else ...'

'In France, being depilated's the mark of a whore, same as in Italy –

Little Kat peered in and announced: 'The Earl of Arundel's *waiting*!'

I ran. And arrived at the bottom of the stairs in a flurry holding the ridiculous transparent gown up clear of my legs, and saw the delight on the face of the man standing there awaiting me and the envy on the faces of his two companions.

I dropped into a deep curtsy. 'My lord ...'

There is something very effective about a curtsy with naked legs.

With a roar, he snatched me up, threw me over his shoulder, and charged up the stairs and into the first empty room.

\* \* \* \* \*

I had no problem with Richard FitzAlan. He was a nobleman, arrogant and easily flattered, and, like all men if you know your trade, easily satisfied, easily tricked. Which must be the meaning of trick in this context. We trick them into believing themselves whatever they want to believe themselves. Great lovers. Good men, misunderstood by their wives and families. Sensitive men, poets and artists deep down if not in reality. In reality, they may be tradesmen, farmers, soldiers; the good men may be bastards; the great lovers may be selfish and unimaginative boors whom no woman would ever go with by choice.

Not that we don't occasionally meet an authentic great lover or a truly good man or a genuinely sensitive man – even the odd saint among the throngs of priests and monks and friars who queue up for our services twenty-four hours a day in holy cities like Rome and Avignon.

My problem with FitzAlan came afterwards when he informed Henry that he would require my presence the following night at the White Hart. I was to present myself there shortly before the gates closed and be at his disposal until the gates opened again next morning.

Henry, of course, grovelled and simpered, then had the gall to ask whether milord would like me suitably chastised before I was sent over.

What was this? Some Essex speciality, intended to make me sweet and docile? I'd never come across it before – but it reminded me of my conversation with the driver of the fish-cart, Henry something – oh God! *He* would be here soon! What was I going to say?

And FitzAlan had the cheek to give the proposal his serious consideration while I stood there in the muslin gown which he had ripped open down the front, trying to look so utterly sweet and biddable and willing to please that any form of chastisement would have been manifestly superfluous and uncalled-for. He considered it for so long that I decided the notion must be new to him, too – not an Essex man, then. Eventually, he tweaked one of my nipples – hard – it hurt! – but I showed no reaction – no wonder they believe whores don't feel things like normal women do, let alone ladies – and drawled,

'No, no, Henry. Any chastisement Marian may need I will administer personally.'

And with that he took his leave.

My problem? You may imagine I'd be overjoyed to be away from Henry and his brothel and in the company of a gentleman. And you'd be right, because he did seem to be a gentleman, for what that was worth, but I was in Colchester to trap an undead killer of young prostitutes, and I was losing all my evenings.

Then Henry, who'd pocketed a gold noble for my services, went hurrying out. To the Winged Lion, I assumed. I smirked. That it should be me who earned on her back the money for him to pay his debt to Marjorie was one of those little ironies in which the Three Weird Sisters delight. After all, even I had to admit that the whole scene in Mistress Joan's hall had been brought about by my craziness and stupidity.

No sooner had he gone, and I was about to get changed and retreat to the kitchen, than the carter, Henry Clough, walked in. He saw me in front of him and his eyes lit up. The fuck of his dreams – my phrase, yes, I know – was about to take place.

I said, 'This one's for me.' Jenny nodded, and I took him upstairs to the room I'd used with FitzAlan.

When his dreams had come true, I had to inform him that another, lesser, dream was going to remain just that. 'I work here, I already worked here, you know that now.'

He was lying on his back, relaxed, satisfied, and I was gently stroking his chest.

'What did I say to you when you promised me Henry would show me his gratitude?' he asked.

'You told me all sluts are liars.'

'Right. My mother used to say what you don't believe can't disappoint you.'

'I'm glad you see it that way. I'm sure your mother and me would have got on.'

'My mother was a good woman. She'd have had you whipped and branded and thought you got off lightly.'

Ah.

The door opened. Jenny put her head in. 'There's a queue down there waiting for you. It's that ripped gown you came down in. Some of them saw you, some of them heard about you. Make them short and sweet. Master Henry wants to see you after you finish.'

All I needed. 'Master Clough is free,' I told her.

'Tell Master Henry that.'

I did, hours later, after Clarice brought up "one last one" and said 'You're on thirteen, love. Better do a fourteenth.'

'I have. Perhaps you forgot his nibs.'

'No.'

'Or the free one? Henry Clough?'

'*You did a free one?* Does Master Henry know?'

I nodded.

'You're in even more trouble then.'

'I'll pay. Fetch me one of those pennies I –'

'You do this last one while I'm gone.'

I nodded wearily, and got up to wash myself.

When I'd finished, I beckoned him in.

The last few had been local men, and they'd been drinking while they were waiting their turn – more money for Henry! – but this one was sober. And he was young, and smart-looking. Elegant, even.

Not one of FitzAlan's entourage though – no livery, no crest.

'You are Marian?'

'Yes ...'

'I came to speak with you.'

He looked so earnest I couldn't help smiling. '*Only* to speak with me?'

He blushed!

'Come here,' I said.

A few minutes later – that was all it took, he was a complete *débutant* – I rolled away from him and asked what he'd come to say to me.

'Sir Robert – the Earl of Arundel – wants to know whether you would like him to buy you, take you away from all this. If so, when you come tomorrow evening you should bring your things –' he looked round the little room – Henry's best! – 'because you will not be coming back. He will arrange everything with your master.'

A tempting offer for someone in my position. However, it didn't fit in with my plans at all – or with my real position.

'Tell him – tell Sir Robert – I'm flattered, but no, for the moment I have to stay here.'

'For the moment? You mean that one day – I can tell him that one day you will –'

'Yes, tell him that by all means. And that I'm looking forward to being his – just for the night – tomorrow.'

'I will.' He got to his feet, pulled up his hose and adjusted his tunic and belt. Then he opened his purse. 'Marian? Here ...' He held out a silver penny.

'You don't have to give me a tip.'

'You need a penny for your master or you'll be in trouble. I heard. Take it.'

'All right, then.' I took it. 'What's your name?'

'Walter. They call me Walt.'

'Will I see you tomorrow?'

He shrugged – such a sweet boyish shrug. 'Maybe. In the background. But please, don't tell him I – we –'

'Of course I won't. And don't you go telling your friends. I know boys – showing off.'

He laughed. 'I won't, I promise. Bye, Marian.' He bent and kissed the nipple nearest to him – then lent over and kissed the other one. And walked out, his head held high, thrilled by his little adventure and delighted with himself and with me.

But I believed him. Boys are not liars, like us sluts are.

There was no sign of Henry, so I went to the kitchen.

'Marian!' Lauda hadn't seen me since I came back. 'We were so frightened for you!' She held me, studied me. 'You're sure *you're* not *undead*?'

Some gasped, some laughed.

'Of course I'm not! He was just a vagabond being chased by men and dogs, nothing to be frightened of. Except the men and dogs.'

She laughed – they all did. 'So you ran with him.'

'I never knew I could run so fast.'

'And swim!' squealed Kat. 'We heard you both swam down to the Hythe.'

'I'm a good swimmer, yes. I grew up by the sea.'

'So did I,' said Jonette, 'but they didn't let me swim.'

'Only the boys, eh?'

'No. Nobody. In the village, anyway. They said it was against religion. But my brother used to secretly. I expect he still does.'

I held my tongue. And a good thing too, for Henry chose that moment to come in behind me.

'I left a message you were to come and see me!'

'I didn't know where you were, sir. So after I'd finished my fifteenth I came out here.'

Nobody was impressed, least of all him.

'Then we'll talk out here. Or rather I'll talk and you'll listen. Let's start with you giving free ones. *No one gets a free one at the Shag*. Got that?'

'Didn't Clarice give you the money for Master Clough?'

'Don't speak unless you're spoken to – ever!'

'I thought you were speaking to me, sir. Did someone else do a free one today?'

I thought for a moment he was going to hit me again. So did he, I'm sure. But the moment passed.

'If she didn't – here.' I held out the silver penny the boy had given me.

He stared at it incredulously, then shouted 'Out of here, all of you!'

They scampered out, leaving us alone.

He ignored the proffered penny. 'Next time I have any cheek from you, any at all, you go to Dan, master in London or no master in London.' Then turned and followed the others out, leaving me alone.

Next morning, a woman called Jocelyn, who used to work here for Henry – had she left at the same time as Balthild? – came and asked Henry to take her back because her dead husband had moved back into their cottage and they had nowhere else to go.

*Her dead husband?* I moved closer to the gossiping girls to hear better.

'He's been haunting them for weeks, according to Pippa. Sounds more like a ghost than an undead to me,' said Lauda.

Pippa?

'Jocelyn said he'd been making their lives impossible, not just haunting them. And Pippa's so sweet.'

'What if he follows them here? I'm scared.'

'Yes, that'll be what's worrying Master Henry,' said Lucy. 'Pippa's sweet, though, isn't she.'

Long Lucy – like Long Will. Well, she was tall, taller than me. I found myself studying her mouth. It was true, it was very big, even on a big girl like her. But so what? It was like having big ears or big eyes. Big eyes, good. Big ears, bad. Big mouth?

'He won't miss the chance of grabbing hold of Pippa,' said Lauda.

'No, of course not. He can always find something for Jocelyn to do,' Lucy replied. 'Like cooking. Even organising.'

'Yeah. She knows the trade, and Jenny's gorgeous still. She should be working herself, not wasting her time getting us organised like she's been doing since Rose left.'

'Mm, that'd be good.'

So Jocelyn, the ex-whore, was a mother, and Pippa the beautiful daughter. *And her husband, Pippa's father, was a revenant? An undead?* If he was, he must surely be the one I was looking for. Not to mention the Bailiff and the whole *posse comitatus*! So why had it been kept secret? Fear? Shame?

I had to talk to these two!

Then a woman I didn't know called Lauda and Lucy indoors, ordered Lucy to move himself, there was a man waiting, and told Lauda, more politely, to have something to eat and drink before starting work. I was left outside where we'd been cleaning the yard. It was all chicken shit and mud, same as it had been before we began, but one corner seemed cleaner than the rest and almost dry. I sat there on the ground, and rested my back and the back of my head against the wall.

A girl I didn't know came out and glanced around, saw me there, and came across.

'You must be Daffy Marian.'

'Daffy?'

'Sancha said you're new here, too.'

'Right, yes. You must be Pippa.'

'Pippa!' Someone called her and she turned and hurried back in.

Yes, she was a pretty little thing.



But *daffy*? If Sancha said it, it must mean "crazy". Another way of translating "loca".

I closed my eyes, and in the silence – a distant chattering from the kitchen, a bird singing behind me among the bushes the other side of the wall – I must have fallen asleep.

Next thing I knew, a fat woman was shaking me. 'Marian! Wake up! I'm Jocelyn. Master Henry's asked me to get you ready. You know you have to go to the White Hart this evening?'

I didn't get a chance to question her about her supposedly undead husband while she was preparing me, I was too busy chewing the capsicum ointment into my lips and pretending to listen politely to all her words of advice and warning. Then as she was finishing, she said, 'Sancha told me you're taking an interest in these murders.'

I nodded. Then, stupidly, losing my chance to question her, 'Of course, you must know Sancha. And do you remember Balthild?'

'Balthild? Yes, she grew up here, was like my little sister. Her and that minx Susanna. Why, do you know Balthild?'

I nodded again. 'We're friends.'

'So you're not such a stranger! To tell you the truth, I was a bit suspicious of you, we all were, you being like – a bit of an undead, even if you're not really ... but any friend of Balthild's ... So what *did* happen with that undead the other night – at least according to you.'

'He *wasn't* undead – and neither am I! Here, feel me!'

'I have been. You're warm all right, but that don't mean ... So tell me about him.'

'He was just a beggar, a vagabond. But the reason I was talking to him when the *posse* came after him was that it's true, I really am interested in these murders. I wanted to know if he'd seen anything of the killer. He hadn't. Then afterwards I simply wanted to save him – and myself!'

Then I opened my mouth to ask her what happened exactly, that she couldn't stay at home – and Henry marched in. It was time for me to go. And Dan would deliver me.

What can I say? It was a night like any other night of love that's been paid for, but when dawn came he yawned and said, 'A little bird told me you're not based here in Colchester, Marian, but in Southwark. Is that so?'

What little bird was that? And it must have been yesterday, for Walt had not known.

'It is, my lord.'

'Where exactly? I may have need of your services again. In fact, I'm quite sure I shall.'

Where? Well, I only knew one brothel in Southwark.. 'At the Green Unicorn, my lord.'

'The Green Unicorn, eh? Right, off you go then. Here, this is for Master Henry. Be sure he gets it. And these are for you. Buy yourself something pretty.'

A slap on my bottom and I was outside the door, clutching my clothes in one hand and the purse and three silver pennies in the other.

Shivering – it had been warm in his bed – I pulled on the skirt and blouse, then crept out of the inn and across to Hed Gate. It was just opening. One of the guards tried to grab me as I ran past them but I slipped through his hands and was gone.

Then I had to decide.

The Winged Lion – Joan's house – oh, how I longed for a hot bath and some privacy! Or the Shag – Henry's house. Well, we would see. I still had a few moments to make up my mind because I was worried about what would happen if Martin decided that as I'd moved into the Shag on a semi-permanent basis, I no longer needed my room at Joan's house. Or the stuff that was in it. My clothes. My money!

'Good morning, Joan.'

'*Mistress* Joan to you. And I've told you before, I do not want whores prancing in and out in broad daylight giving my house a bad name.'

'Oh, right. The clothes.'

'Doesn't matter what you wear, not any more.'

'My lady!' Marjorie came running in, having heard voices.

'She's not your lady. And keep your mouth shut. I'm talking.'

'Sorry, mistress.'

'I just came to tell you I shan't want the room any longer,' I blurted out, wanting only to finish with this and get back to the Shag, 'and – and – to ask you to keep some of my stuff aside in case someone else comes in to empty my room and take everything.'

'You mean Martin.'

I nodded again. Was Martin a friend of hers? I knew he had fucked Marjorie, but so, I suspected, had half the travellers who passed by on the road to or from London.

'I met Martin yesterday,' Joan went on. 'He cancelled your booking and arranged to come in and pick up your stuff – *all* of it – some time this morning.'

Just what I'd feared.

'He also informed me that you're now a full-time whore, and no longer even pretending to be a lady. Is that right?'

'It – well, it's half right, but –'

'So why would I help you? When you come to collect the stuff you leave here, you'll be a fugitive, and Marjorie and me will be aiding and abetting ...'

I said nothing. What could I say?

'So what was all that you had Long Will telling the Bailiff and Master Henry about the Savoy Palace and the Lord Regent and that poet fellow? All lies?'

'No!'

'Then what were you doing mixing with these people?'

'Oh, mistress, she was whoring. It's her trade – and she's good at it, the best, you can tell. Leave her alone.'

'You shut your gob. It's your trade, too, we all know that. That's why you're on her side. I ought to send *you* to Master Henry. Find myself a new skivvy, some girl who's not a whore.'

'Not a whore *yet*. If she works for you, she soon will be.'

Joan gave Marjorie's face a resounding slap.

I was shocked, but Marjorie took it without flinching.

'Takes a lot of slapping, this one,' sighed Joan, caressing her bruised hand. 'But she's a good girl. Just got a big mouth on her.'

Marjorie, who was holding her cheek and had tears in her eyes, winked at me.

'You want another slap? Or you want to run and fetch me my stick? No? Then hold your tongue. Now, *you*.' She turned her attention to me, while Marjorie sat there pouting and holding her swollen cheek. 'You spent last night at the Hart with my lord of Arundel, is that right?'

I nodded. The grapevine here was as impressive as the one in Cuenca; everyone knew what everyone else was doing before they knew it themselves.

'And what did he tell you when you parted this morning? I don't mean the money. You give that to Master Henry, it's his. Or the coins he gave you. Give them to Marjorie, now. The stupid slut seems to be your only friend.'

I gave the three silver pence to her. She smiled – all better suddenly.

'What I want to know is what he said.'

'He wanted to know where I worked in London. In Southwark. He wants to see me again. I told him the Green Unicorn.'

'The Green Unicorn. Right. Then I think I can help you. When you run away from Henry, you'll be off back to the Green Unicorn, where you in fact belong. That'll be our story, so make it your story, too. Don't let me down.'

'You mean that way I won't be classified as a fugitive. I was abducted from there –'

And she slapped *my* face! Like she'd slapped Marjorie's! 'Ow!!'

'You were *what*?'

'I was – was *took* from the Green Unicorn –'

'You're a whore. Talk like a bloody whore, so people can understand. You were took from the Green Unicorn and sold to Martin, who bought you in good faith, and then hired you out to Henry, God bless him. And if they don't believe me, I'll refer them to Lord Arundel. He *knows* you work at the Green Unicorn. So quick now, before Martin comes. Marjorie, stop sniffing and sort out Mariana's things, the stuff she wants hidden. *Now*.'

'It's just my boy clothes I want,' I told Marjorie when we were upstairs. 'And some money. Not all of it. I'll leave most of it for him or he'll be suspicious. I'll just leave these five nobles with you.'

'You don't think she'll sell me to Master Henry and get a new girl here, do you?'

'You know her better than I do. Best not provoke her like you did this morning.'

'Oh, I know! I'm a silly cow sometimes, everyone says so, but she was being so mean to you.'

'She wasn't. She was being sensible. She's a good woman – even if she has got a heavy hand.' We both touched our cheeks gingerly and grinned. 'You should listen to her, try to copy her. Learn to be sensible too.'

'Oh, I will! ... Mistress Joan says I'm stupid still believing you're a lady.'

'Who can tell a lady from a whore when they're naked?' I remembered that night Balthild found me wandering along the beach, and later asking Martin that same question.

She stared at me. 'Now it's you being stupid. Anyone can. Course they can. A lady's got soft, sweet-smelling skin and hair, and her body's smooth and her hands are silky and her nails are long and pretty and her feet – oh, there's all the difference in the world in the feet!'

'Because a lady always walks shod, yes, while a working woman – whore or not – goes barefoot and her feet are filthy and hard –'

'Like mine.'

'And a lady's bottom and legs don't bear the scars of a lifetime of kicks and blows. You're right. And next time I'm here I'll let you examine me so you can decide for yourself whether I'm a real lady.' She was going to be sorely disappointed. Though perhaps not. Perhaps she'd be happy to find I was just the same as her really, and that we could be friends. I'd like that. But now I was in a hurry.

We went downstairs, she took my stuff to give to her mistress to hide and I hurried across to the door, suddenly frightened I'd bump into Martin. Me, frightened? *Yes!* I raced out into the street – no Martin! – and along Bere Lane to the Shag.

## WHO THE HUNTER, WHO THE PREY?

No Henry, either.

I gave the purse – which contained a gold noble and a handful of silver pennies – I peeped! – to Jenny, but she passed it to Jocelyn and told me 'Jocelyn's handling that sort of thing now. Thank God.'

I smiled and asked Jocelyn whether *she* would rather be working as a whore.

'Not now. I did enough of that when I was a slip of a thing like you. Started when I was twelve. Not here; in Ipswich. Master Henry's father, Master William, God rest him, bought me from the cow what ran that place when I was fifteen. Best thing ever happened to me. Well, apart from getting married and having Pippa there. Mind you, being married's not all it's cracked up to be and Pippa's a right little whiner –'

'I'm not a whiner!'

' – but she's thirteen, almost fourteen, so what's she got to whine about? At least we can live in peace here.'

'What happened at your house?' I asked, but she ignored that, and asked me, 'How old were you when you started?'

'Fourteen.'

No further doubt here about my background.

'In Spain?' she asked.

I nodded.

'Nicer than here?'

I shrugged. 'Men are the same everywhere.'

'Have you had any breakfast?'

I shook my head. 'I'm not hungry.' I looked around. Jenny and Pippa had gone, leaving Jocelyn and me alone.

'Suit yourself ... Any problems last night?'

'No. He's a gentleman.'

'They're sometimes the worst ... '

Again we were interrupted by Master Henry.

I jumped to my feet. 'Master Henry ...'

He smirked. I was learning to treat him with respect.

If I'd listened to Sancha, who was his mother, and should know, I'd have been treating him with respect all along. Not that that would have helped on this occasion, I soon discovered, for it was my new master, Martin, not Henry, who was asserting his authority.

He put his hand under my chin, lifted my face up. 'Your master is coming.'

'M-my master, sir?'

He finished examining my face and let my head go.

I cast my eyes down again.

'I met him in the Swan. He's just passing through, but he said he'll call in later. Get her clean, inside and out, Josse. Martin may wish to fuck her himself. Afterwards, when he's gone, put her to work and keep her working. He says he wants her doing as many tricks as possible, it'll keep her out of mischief. Though of course that's not what he has in mind. He's not daft. He's taking half of everything she earns. And he asked me if she was wearing a gag – seemed to think she should be – so have a look for the thing and if you can find it put it on her. Wait. Dan has it, I remember now.'

*Put the gag on her?* As in my dream? Martin promising his uncle he'd bring me to the abbey wearing it. *That's* what this was all about. But what kind of gag? Like the contraption my father had once spoken of. A special gag, my father had said, for women who can't hold their tongues. It holds them for them. It had been invented in Scotland, he told me – told me proudly! Once, when I'd been especially cheeky, he'd said if we were at home – he meant in Scotland – he'd have had them brank me. Branking, that's what they call it up there. But he'd been joking. I think.

Jocelyn got me washed and dressed so quick this time I had no chance to dry myself. My bodice was wet and clinging, but that didn't matter, all that mattered was that Master Martin should not be inconvenienced. Then she sent me to get the gag from Dan's cubby-hole.

'Ah, you again. You come for that beating?'

'No! For – for the gag, sir.'

He was a small man, height-wise, but as wide as he was high. Not fat, just built to a square design – by some other god, no doubt. And immensely strong, as I'd discovered last night.

'Here.' He gave me the gag. 'The beating later, then.'

'I – I expect so, sir.'

He accompanied me back to Jocelyn. I felt his hand once again pressing, assessing, as he followed behind me. Hadn't having his hand on my bottom all the way from the Shag to the White Hart been enough? Stupid question.

In the kitchen, I examined the gag while I waited for Josse to turn from her cooking. It seemed to consist of just a short piece of rope with a bit of leather strapping at either end and a metal buckle. The rope obviously went into my mouth – across my mouth – and held my tongue in place so I couldn't speak. But it looked filthy! When she turned and I started to protest, she said 'Shh. Put your hands behind your back.' She tied my wrists together with another piece of cord, then, while Dan held my mouth open, dirt-engrained fingers and nails forcing my top and bottom teeth apart, she lowered the gag down over my face as if she was going to garotte me, but instead of going for my throat she pulled it across my wide-open mouth. I felt her working on the buckle at the back of my neck, pulling the rope so tight I thought my face would split!

'Stop fussing. It's good for you, it'll make your mouth bigger if you wear it a lot. There, you're ready. It won't hurt you, not much. Not if you keep your tongue still.' I could hear the laugh in her voice. 'Just don't try to talk, that's all.'

I tried again to protest and started choking.

She waited for me to get over it, then said, 'There now. You'll do. Do you need to have your wrists tied?'

I shook my head vehemently.

'All right, Dan, you can go ... ' She undid my wrists, saying as she did so, 'Your master's a good man, Daffy Marian. And handsome!' Then she started doing something with the pot on the fire. 'Is he leaving you here permanently? Renting you to Master Henry? Or selling you to him outright?' She had her back to me, and seemed to have forgotten I couldn't speak. 'You don't know? Well, you wouldn't. They'll talk together over a drink, and then perhaps tell you what's



been decided. Not that it's any of your business – oh, you stupid thing! Letting me go on talking when you can't answer! Outside in the yard with you. Shoo! You can wait there till he comes. Though why he should bother with you at all, I don't know. He'll probably just have a drink or two with the master, then be off again with his earnings.' She gave me a shove – 'Outside! Now!' – and I stumbled out through the doorway.

I sat in the corner among the chickens, holding the gag, trying to relieve the pressure and pain, but not daring to reach behind me and loosen the buckle ... She was quite right. There was no reason at all why Martin should bother to come out and see me. He was the master now.

Hours later – it was afternoon – Jenny put her head out and called, 'Marian! Your master's here! Stop that silly whimpering noise. He's having a drink with Master Henry to seal their bargain. Come in the kitchen and wait. Over there, in the corner.'

I stood in the corner as she had said – but not facing the wall! – and tried not to make "that silly whimpering noise", but my tongue was aching and swollen and I wanted to kill someone. Martin would do very well.

Through the open door I could see Kat and Lauda waiting for cullies.

A couple of boys came in. They both wanted Kat.

Jenny came down and sent Lauda to fetch Bertha.

Then they both wanted Bertha.

Boys. They're worse than men.

No, they aren't.

They heard Master Henry coming and fled upstairs with the two girls. They'd sort it out up there.

Martin came with him, and they went out through the front door without so much as a glance into the kitchen.

Then Jocelyn came with the empty cups. 'Master Martin'll come for you later. I heard he's taking you to the Abbey, don't ask me why. Then after that to the Angel, to stand you on the table and have a laugh with the lads, I expect.'

Henry hurried back in and shouted at Lucy, who was still waiting for her next cully with Lauda, 'Tell Jocelyn I want her out here *now*! And you stay in the kitchen!'

Lucy ran into the kitchen, then the slower-moving Jocelyn went bustling out.

'You're going to have to lose some weight if you want to work here again, Josse. Listen, Lady Helen'll be here any moment.'

Lucy, sitting at the kitchen table opposite me, gasped.

'What?' I tried to mouth.

She shook her head, a look of horror on her face as she listened to Henry and Josse.

'You remember Sir Arthur and George from Little Clackton?' Henry asked.

'Old Sir Arthur? Yes! But he's dead.'

'Sir George is his son. Sir Arthur was a regular here for years. George too.'

'I remember.'

'But that was before he got married,' Henry sniggered. 'Lady Helen keeps him on a short leash.'

'Lady Helen. Sir George's wife. Yes, I remember. With Otter.'

'You remember the story?'

'I don't think I ever heard the whole story.'

'No, well why should you? You were just one of the whores. What happened was that before old Sir Arthur passed away, he made George swear he wouldn't save himself the cost of a dowry by having his sister live and die an old maid there in the family home. He meant, of course, that George was either to get her married or shut her up in a respectable nunnery.' He laughed.

Out in the kitchen with me, but hearing all this, Lucy looked as if she was going to faint. I stood up, went round behind her, clasped her shoulders.

'The old man was still warm in his grave,' Henry went on, 'when they brought the big-mouthed daughter here wearing a gag. I said times were hard, I couldn't buy her outright, but I'd pay them a third of what she grossed for as long as she went on grossing a reasonable amount. They were happy with that. It got her off Sir George's hands and out of Lady Helen's hair. And instead of having to pay out money, they'd make some – a lot over the years. Lady Helen came with him to

see he went through with it and it was her who signed and sealed the ten-year contract I'd had drawn up. Lucy Longlegs, we called her, and we kept the gag on her till she settled in, though she'd always been a whore.'

Then Lucy – this poor creature sitting here in front of me sobbing her heart out – was the sister of Sir George? Was *a lady*?

'Ten years ago, that was. So last week I sent a message to Lady Helen reminding her that Lucy's contract was coming to an end, and asking what she wanted done with her.'

'You sent the message to *her*'?

'She's the one cracks the whip in that family. Look, there she is.'

'Shall I tell Lucy?'

'Yeah, get her prepared. Lady Helen drops by a couple of times a year to pick up the earnings and she always has a word with Lucy.'

Jocelyn came and saw Lucy crying. 'Ah, you already know. Well, you'd better ... '

But I wasn't paying attention to them. I was peering out, trying to see this Lady Helen. After what Henry had said about them, I was curious. Ah, there she was: elegant and – yes, I had to admit it – beautiful, although I already hated her for what they'd done to poor Lucy. Very beautiful, and a real lady. Unlike me. But a lady who knew her way around. Another man had come in and both Emma and Kat had gone upstairs, and now Clarice and Bertha took their place – equally naked. She wasn't shocked, as I might have expected a lady to be. Any lady apart from me.

I'd never seen Henry with a lady before. He was all charm. 'Lady Helen.' He kissed her hand, then raised his head and studied her face and breasts. 'The years have been more than kind to you. I thought you beautiful when I saw you first. That was but a pale foretaste of your full beauty.'

'Flatterer. It's simply that surrounded by fly-blown whores, you rarely get a chance to feast your eyes for a moment on a lady. And a moment is all you'll get. Is the slut in the kitchen?'

'Ready and waiting.'

'I'll see her when we're finished, tell her what we decide.'

And with that Henry hurried her through to his office and out of earshot.

Jocelyn got out the best wine and some water and cups, glanced at the sobbing Lucy and at me in my gag and raised her eyes to heaven. 'Have to take it myself,' she muttered.

But a moment later, she was back with the untouched wine, accompanied by Lady Helen – who started with me. 'The gag. Is it a Scotch one, with a spike on it?'

I shook my head.

'It's Lucy's one, I think,' Jocelyn told her.

Lady Helen lost interest. She turned to Lucy. 'Stand up, girl, let's have a look at you.'

Lucy stood up. She was trembling, and her face tear-stained.

'Turn round.'

Lucy turned. It reminded me of my moment on the block at the slave-market in Granada.

'Turn again ... Touch your toes ... Ah, Henry.' He was at the door. 'The slut seems fine to me.'

'Oh, she's strong still. Stand up, girl. Good for a few more years – at a lower price.'

'Oh, come on, she's gorgeous still. But all right. Draw up a contract for five years. And you can reduce our share to a quarter of what she earns from now on.'

'That should work. All right. I'll send two copies out, my lady. You sign one and send it back to me.'

'Yes, yes. And I'll drop by from time to time to see what condition she's in.'

'I'll look forward to that, my lady.' He kissed her hand.

But Lady Helen was still considering Lucy. 'Though five years is a long time at her age ... I shan't want her let loose around here when you no longer have a place for her.'

'No, of course not ... Come to think of it, her value being much less than it was ten years ago, I could buy her outright from you now, if you like.'

'No, Henry. She's mine. And I like the look of this other one.' She looked me up and down as if I was on sale. Perhaps I was! 'What do you call her? Fish-lips?'

Henry laughed politely. 'No. Daffy Marian. But Fish-lips is good.'

'She doesn't look a local girl. Where did you get her?'

'She belongs to some knight in London. He loaned her out to Martin of Chich, and he –'

'Martin? And he left her here with you to make some money for him. Nice ... And looking at her reminds me: I've heard tales of an old whore collector, Brother De'Ath. You have dealings with him?'

Looking at *me*?!

'No. My father always preferred to deal with his own. And I don't –'

'Should it become necessary to dispose of her, I think I'd like her handed over to Brother De'Ath.'

'If you say so, my lady.'

'I do say so. And now I must be off.'

She held out her hand, he kissed it again, then stood aside for her. She had a dancer's walk, I noticed. She would have made a good dancer, a good whore.

He followed her to the front door and out of sight.

And she'd make the perfect whore-mistress.

Me, I wanted to talk to Lucy, now that I knew more about her. But of course I couldn't; and she was still standing there sobbing.

What was today? I realised I didn't know. Wednesday? I'd be able to find out this afternoon, at the Angel. I was dreading my interview with the Prior, but I was secretly rather looking forward to visiting the Angel with Martin. I hadn't danced for men, not properly, since – since Cuenca? No, I'd danced in Granada. But not since then. Perhaps I *should* have been more active when I was in Paris. But I was trying so hard to be a lady, to be good, not to disappoint Ferchard – yes, and Khadija. I wondered now why I'd bothered.

Then I heard voices outside. It was Martin – and Henry.

I jumped to my feet and stood next to Lucy, eyes down. I was learning fast.

'Lady Helen? *She* was *here*? And I missed her? A pox on my uncle! But what did she want?'

'She was here about Long Lucy. It was Lady Helen who brought her to me in the first place.'

They came into the kitchen and both gazed at Lucy, completely ignoring me.

'I'd always assumed that was Sir George.'

'It's usually the women who dispose of unwanted family-members with a talent for whoring.'

'With a talent for whoring.' Martin liked that. 'Tell you what, Henry. The prior thinks I'm Brother Arselicker today. *Be patient, my son, I'll get to you in God's good time.* So, I'll have a good time of my own while I'm waiting. I'll take Lucy upstairs and let those gorgeous lips of hers do what they were designed to do. He took her hand. 'Come on, Lucy.' He led her out of the kitchen, still completely ignoring me.

*And me?* It was almost worse to be so totally ignored! It must be the gag. A woman in a gag, *anyone* in a gag, anyone who cannot speak, is isolated. She is within the home still, or the convent or brothel or wherever, but not part of it. Not only is she unable to communicate, but other people, other women, *don't even try to* communicate with her. She is a non-person. Which, it suddenly struck me, must be how the Undead feel ... In the world, yet not part of it.

But had Martin known Lucy when she was still a Lady with a capital L, and when she dressed as a boy?

I remembered Uncle Yacoub, the Rabbi, saying to me not long before he left me for good: If you think of yourself as something that belongs in a pig-sty, or on a dung heap or in a midden, something on a par with a slug or a cockroach – for God also made pigs and slugs and cockroaches – then nothing life throws at you can disappoint you.

God also made Lucy – and Clarice and Pippa and Jocelyn. What made me think I was so superior?

What made me compare myself in my mind to Lady Helen? It was Lucy I was like, not Lady Helen. We were like twins, with our big mouths and our long legs. Our fathers were both knights, and we were both sold into sexual slavery. I by my father, her by her brother and sister-in-law.

If nothing worse happened to me than happened to her, I should not be disappointed.

The evening was to show that Lucy was much more like me than I would ever have dreamed.

\* \* \* \* \*

'Come on, Marian.' Martin took hold of my arm and led me to the front door.

I had a bit of trouble walking – they'd attached a chain to the gag so I couldn't run off – but he didn't seem to notice. Or didn't care. He strode along, jerking on the chain with each step, and I stumbled after him.

All along the way, for it was mid-morning, the busiest time of day, people coming and going made way for us, and laughed and jeered and shouted ribald comments – I remember only 'That'll teach her to keep her mouth shut!' 'Yeah, but nothing'll teach her to keep her cunt shut!' – then the kids had started throwing things at me, but Martin stopped that, I think only because he was walking close to me and feared a stone might hurt him or a rotten apple spoil the short, tight cote-hardie he was sporting over his tunic. It was elegant and obviously new and I could imagine where he'd got the money to pay for it.

At the abbey, the gate-keeper greeted Martin with respect, but ignored me other than saying 'Keep the whore the far side of that line there, master. This side's holy ground.'

The Prior was called and when he came out he had a scribe with him, a young monk who stood staring at me with horrid fascination as though I was a demon out of Hell. A succubus, that was it. I would come to him in his dreams, that was for sure. I tried to smile at him, but of course couldn't. The resulting grimace made him step back in terror, the wisps of red hair around the bare white tonsure standing up on end in alarm.

'She can't harm you here on holy ground, Terence, with you wearing your cross, and me here to protect you as well as her good master.'

'She gave me such a look, Father Prior.'

'Ignore it. Think of her as an animal, for that is what she is. Many of the Church Fathers held that women have no souls. Others insist that some do. However, all agree that whores do not, which is why they are buried in unhallowed ground.'

'I didn't know that,' said Martin. 'Really? Marian has no soul?'

'None whatever. She's an animal, a rabid bitch that, fortunately for us all,' he smirked, 'is wearing a muzzle.'

I'd heard some offensive shit in my life, but this topped it all. Martin, naturally, lapped it up.

'Now, shall we begin? I will add my own note to Sir Ferchard at the end. Martin?'

What was this?

'Yes. Well. Write: *I brought her to my village without any mishap. But once there she began to misbehave. She behaved at my father's inn as if she was a great lady staying there as an honoured guest, instead of as one of the family – or one of the slatterns, helping with the chores, serving beer, and so on, which my mother certainly felt would be more appropriate. Then she swam – you had said she might – but she swam naked! And if I was not there with her clothes waiting on the beach when she chose to come out, she walked up into the nearest village – naked! – despite the fact that I'd ordered her to wait for me and not make a display of herself. And she found a friend there, a whore who used to work at a brothel called the Shag, in Colchester, but was permitted to leave and marry and have children. Once a whore, always a whore, though.*

'Amen to that,' murmured the Prior.

'Next thing I knew, she'd tired of village life and swimming, and was asking me about Henry Bawd, whoremaster at the Shag, and wondering whether I might leave her there till I was ready to return to London. So I did, thinking it would only be for a couple of days and would relieve my family of her unwelcome presence. But then my father fell down the stairs and broke his leg, which means I have to stay here and run the inn for a few months. Three, at least. So I've been to Master Henry and arranged for her to work at the Shag for the next three months. It is a one-year contract, and renews itself automatically for a further period of nine months, making one full year, unless at the end of the first three months it is terminated by either party – me, in your name, or Henry Bawd. At the end of the year, we either remove her, if you still want her, or sell her to him, if he still wants her. If neither you nor he wants her, she will be auctioned. Oh, and he will give me one third of her earnings, which I shall of course keep and hand over to you. I tried for a half, but he was adamant. She has a big mouth, she answers back, and they have had to go to the trouble of fitting her with a gag. Perhaps it would have been



*better if I hadn't stepped in and saved her in Paris. She is nothing but trouble.'*

This Martin was a complete addle-pate. Ferchard knew nothing of the fantasy of Martin saving me in Paris. He would see at once that something was drastically wrong and come to rescue me. Only I didn't want to be rescued. I had a job to do.

*'It may interest you to know that since starting work here she has spent two nights with Sir Richard FitzAlan, Earl of Arundel, the first when he was one of a series of clients at the brothel, the second a full night at his hotel. Please write back to let me know that you approve of the arrangements I have made, and if possible give me and Master Henry Bawd some indication of whether you will wish the contract to run the full year, as we fully expect, or to terminate it at the end of three months.'*

Then the Prior broke in. 'Yes, yes, that is more than enough, my boy. I will add a few comments and send it to him by Brother Clement, who is leaving for London tomorrow.'

'I don't have the address, Father Prior,' whined the scribe. Pathetic little runt. I pictured his practically non-existent genitals, burst out laughing, hurt my tongue, squawked, and nearly choked myself.

They all stared at me, the two monks crossing themselves repeatedly.

'Take the creature away, Martin!'

'Yes, Uncle. At once. It's to Sir Ferchard de Dyngvale at the sign of the Eye in the Hand, at the end of Clink Street, just round the corner into Dead Man's Place. In Southwark. Got that, brother?'

The scribe nodded his nobbly red and white head on its long, skinny white neck like some horrible flower growing on a corpse in a sunless vault.

Terence.

I gave another gurgling squawk of laughter, the monks crossed themselves again, and Martin yanked on my chain, wrenching me round by my head, and back past St Giles' – saving me from being burnt at the stake on the spot – then stopped and took my gag off.

We walked along the road side by side in silence.

When we turned the corner and were approaching the Shag, he said, 'Not so full of yourself this afternoon?'

I didn't answer.

'Tongue swollen?'

'Yesh.'

'Don't worry, one thing you *won't* be expected to do at the Angel this evening is talk.'

When we reached the Shag, he shouted in through the open door. Bertha peeped out, and shouted back, 'I'll call Jocelyn!' She obviously couldn't come onto the street herself, naked.

After a moment, Jocelyn came hurrying out. 'Yes, sir? You finished with Marian for the moment?'

'No, I'll bring her back later. Here, take this.'

He handed her the gag and the chain.

'Right, Master Martin, sir. Thank you.'

'Old slag,' he said, loud enough for her to hear, as we walked on up Bere Lane towards Schere Gate.

I glanced sideways at him. Why did I never listen when people warned me?

'Interesting, that you have no soul. You, with all your pretences. Pretending to be a theology student when you're really a whore. I knew. Everyone knew. You think you fool people? You're stupid. Walk in front of me. The only thing I like about you is watching you walk.' He gave me a shove and I stumbled forward, ahead of him. 'Walk properly, like a whore! Wiggle your bottom! Oh, come on! How you usually walk!'

I remembered my grandmother all those years ago in Spain teaching me the dancers' walk: hear the music in your head, move your whole body with the beat, your hands, your shoulders, not just your legs. And in Cuenca, Madre Inés telling me to pass my feet across each other from side to side each step, not walk like a man, each leg moving straight forward, plod, plod, like I tried to do when I was wearing boys' clothes.

The whore's walk. Here we go.

'Good,' he said.

We turned in through the Gate.

It was the first time I'd been within the wall dressed as a whore, not a lady. I suppose if I'd been walking *with* Martin, it would have been different, but he kept me walking ahead of him, wanting to watch.

'Go straight on till you get to the High Street. And don't forget people can say and do what they like to whores, but – especially here – you mustn't speak to anyone. If you do, you'll be charged with soliciting, and put in the pillory.'

'I won't.'

'I won't, *sir*.'

'I won't, sir.'

I was shouldered and shoved and kicked out of people's way, I was spat on, and of course I was threatened with whipping and branding and mutilation by the women and by the men with women, and asked where I worked by the men with other men, and the men on their own. I remembered Martin's words, and showed no reaction to anything or anyone.

At the Angel, before we went in, he showed me a courtyard at the back. 'You'll dance inside for a while, and when I get bored with you you'll come out here and wait for me in this yard. Any of my friends who come to fuck you, you'll be very, very nice to them. Got that?'

I nodded. I'd been looking forward to the dancing but I hadn't anticipated what would follow. Being a whore, I was belatedly coming to realise, is not a job, it's what you are, always and everywhere, universally available. I should have expected it.

We went inside, and I had another nasty surprise. The dancing I was expected to do was nothing like the dancing I'd been trained to do in Andalucía.

They simply lifted my skirt up so that it covered my head and enclosed my arms, and tied it shut with a string above my head. Then they lifted me up onto the table, blind and helpless, and naked from the waist down. Somebody gave me slap and shouted, 'Dance, bitch!' Another slap, and I understood: they meant like that, blind, on top of the table.

I don't remember much of the next – hour, was it? – half hour? – I swivelled my hips and did some simple belly-dancing moves, and after a while the slaps stopped, I think they got bored with me, then the hands that were preventing me from stepping off the table lost interest, too, and I suddenly stepped into nothingness and went crashing down unable to protect myself with my hands and arms trapped inside the skirt. I hurt my elbow and shoulder, and by then I'd had enough. I thrust my other hand into the tear in my skirt that had been letting air

in for me to breathe, ripped it right open and leapt to my feet, ready to fight.

Nobody seemed to notice.

Then, 'Throw her out,' drawled Martin. 'Leave the slut in the courtyard. A free fuck.'

Someone – a woman – said 'Come on, love,' and steered me out. 'Stand here, I should,' she said, 'and do it up against the wall. You want a drink?'

'Oh yes, please.'

She was back in moment with a mug of beer and a man.

'The beer first,' she told the man, handing it to me.

I drank half of it gratefully, and stopped for breath.

'Drink it all. I can't leave the mug out here.'

I emptied the mug and handed it back to her with what I hoped was a smile.

'She's only doing stand-ups,' she told the man.

'Fine by me.'

Another two men came out, and I realised I'd better get started. I lifted the tattered remains of my skirt right up, the man shoved the woman aside with a curse, and the second part of the evening's entertainment was under way.

For a time, men kept coming, some of them coming back for seconds, then, after twenty or so, it petered out.

And in the longest pause yet, so long that I thought it was over and let my skirt fall back down and cover my legs, another man suddenly appeared out of the darkness at the far end of the courtyard. With a sigh that came out as a whimper, I lifted my skirt again. He stepped right up to me.

It was the smell – the stench of death – that alerted me.

I'm not a screamer, I'm a fighter, but I'd been through too much. I neither screamed nor raised a hand to defend myself as he placed his icy hands on my bare arms. I simply watched, amazed, as Master Henry appeared out of nowhere and attacked the night-walker from behind, his arm round the creature's neck. The undead threw him off effortlessly, then turned and picked him up and proceeded to tear off one of his legs as if he were a child's doll. Blood flew everywhere, over the undead, over me, and over a black figure creeping up, knife in

each hand. It turned and saw her. She threw one knife. It flew straight and true, and buried itself in the thing's heart.

It staggered, slumped to its knees, rested like that for a second, then, when she grabbed its head – it had no hair – and wrenched it back to cut its throat – cut off its head? – it pulled itself together, threw her off, and stumbled back into the darkness whence it came.

'Master Henry?' The woman was kneeling beside him, holding up his head. But I knew that voice – and the sound woke me up. It was Lucy! *Lucy?*

'Go!' she hissed to me. 'Run for your life! I'll see you back at the Shag!'

The second knife was still in her hand, and coated with what looked like blood, but thicker than Henry's, and blacker – you could tell, even in the darkness.

I forced her hand open, took the knife by the handle. 'You see to Henry! I'm going after that *thing!*'

'You can't!' she screamed after me.

'You don't know me!' I shouted back as I raced off into the darkness, throwing off what remained of my skirt and following the noise the thing made as it staggered and stumbled away. She doesn't know me, and I certainly didn't know her!

*But what was that I had heard her say, after the "you can't"?* Something quite different. And not addressed to me at all. It sounded like "Papa". *Papa?*

There was no time for that now. The thing was clambering over a wall up ahead of me. It seemed to be getting worse, weaker and more shamolic in its movements. Was it going to die? Ridiculous. It was already dead. But how could it recover from being stabbed straight through the heart? Perhaps it didn't need its heart, or at least not from moment to moment, contrary to what was said in the stories and legends Uncle Yacoub had told me.

I vaulted lightly over that wall – and found myself out in the open, in a street, and highly conspicuous! I dashed across the street and dived into the darkness of a narrow alley between two buildings, the way it too must have gone. Now I knew why Lucy had blacked her skin with something. She was a wonder, that girl! She had said "Papa". Don't tell me Henry was her father! No, of course he wasn't, she was

Sir George's sister. But it hadn't been the undead creature, either. That had already run off.

Beyond the houses, the ground was open once more and I spotted it up on another wall fifty yards away. It was looking back. When it saw me, it dropped down the other side and was gone.

Was this Jocelyn's husband? Didn't she say they lived in East Street, down the hill, outside the Wall? It was heading in that direction but how was it going to get over the Wall? Jocelyn's husband or not, it was obviously the monster that had been dismembering priests. Henry was no priest: don't laugh, I've known priests worse, far worse, than Henry – and that's without his giving his life to save me.

We were in the grounds of the Castle now. I remembered Edith, also from the Angel, being found there, her throat torn open and her blood sucked. Did this one do that as well – perhaps he dealt with whores differently – everyone else did. No, there was another killer, another undead night-walker, the one I'd left standing on the beach. Someone – something – quite different.

We crossed behind the Castle, and came to the Friary. I could see their church with its spire outlined against the night sky. Was it going in there? *Could* it? I still entertained the notion that hallowed ground – ground where the likes of me were not permitted to set foot – might be impassable for the undead. I was wrong. He struggled painfully over their wall without any apparent misgiving and staggered on. They were wrong, too, about me. I followed him without a qualm, absurdly pleased with myself. Not only was I cocking a snoop at Martin's obnoxious uncle, but at last I was getting somewhere. Soon this would be over and I'd be able to tell Master Henry what he could do with his brothel, and Martin what he could do with himself. But Henry was dead, I remembered. He had died saving me.

I ran even faster, across the open ground beside their church, round the outside of their cloisters – I must catch up, must get this monster tonight. I might never have another chance. I looked up at the night sky, clear now, and beautiful. Were the stars in their courses all lined up in my favour? And crashed to the ground.

*What?* It must have doubled back. I was going to die, be torn limb from limb! Or have my throat ripped out – I was a whore ... Nothing happened. I looked up. Heard it in the distance. I had simply tripped and fallen over, not looking where I was going.

I got up, grinning and rubbing my grazed knees and palms, then raced off in pursuit of the thing again. And remembered something Ferchard had once told me when he was lambasting poets, and in particular Raoul, *my* poet. Something he had heard in the East, and liked and remembered. Poet say: one man look at ground, another man look at stars. Wise man say, man who look at stars fall flat on face.

Laughing, I ran on round the cloister. At least I had fallen in good company, along with the poets and star-gazers.

It had disappeared. Careful, now. This time it might have doubled back. But there was nowhere to double back. It had gone through or over the wall between the Friary and freedom, which formed part of the town wall itself. I examined the wall, acutely aware, now that I was not running – was trapped, in fact – that should a friar come out and see me – like *this* – in *here* – I was dead. And not a nice quick death like the night-walker I was chasing would give me, but a very long-drawn-out, very nasty, very messy death. Courtesy of the Church.

Then I saw it. This must be the route the friars took when they came to visit us at the Shag. A small wooden ladder leaning against the wall, half hidden by a bush of some kind. Usually completely hidden, but the thing had left it in place. Why? To encourage me? *Come into my parlour* ... Or because it was in a hurry. And wounded. I ran up the ladder and peered over. Not a long drop, but how did the friars get back in, I wondered, then jumped and rolled.

It was very quiet. Over to my right was East Street, going down East Hill. But which way had it gone? I chose the alley that led down behind the row of houses that lined East Street. Moving fast, but silently. It may have stopped anywhere. No looking at the stars now.

Again, it was the vomit-making stench that alerted me.

I peered in through the gate. A vegetable garden and a yard, and beyond, the back door of a two-storey house. It was lying on the ground in the yard.

It may be shamming, but I was faster.

I went in, crept closer, poised to fly at the slightest movement. Nothing. Just black blood – blood was the wrong word – black ichor seeping from its chest.

It knew I was there, though.

Knew I was just a girl, a whore and harmless. Prey, not a predator.

Then it spoke. 'Tell the other I've got his scent.' An unvoiced rasp, but quite comprehensible. It moved and I jumped back, but it was only shifting slightly, onto its side. Perhaps it could speak easier, breathe easier, like that. 'I'll tear him apart.'

Did they breathe? I needed to know much, much more about the Undead.

'You are dying. Again.'

'I heal. By tomorrow I will be healed.'

I had no doubt that what it claimed was true.

'Are you Harold Turner, Jocelyn's husband?' I asked, trying to occupy his mind while I searched the yard, tried the door. It was open.

It laughed. I think.

'No?' I said from the door. The way it was lying now, it could not see what I was doing.

'I'm Alfwin. Alfwin Host-thief.'

*Host-thief?* 'You stole the Host from a church?' Even I was shocked. 'When? While you were still alive?'

'For that they killed me. That and other things. But I have overcome their death.'

'*Their* death?' I went in and left him talking to himself. The kitchen was as Jocelyn must have left it. I picked up a cleaver and walked back out.

'... they had my body. I didn't need it. I knew this one awaited me.'

'Why priests?'

'They've always been my enemy.'

Well, we had something in common.

'I stole the Host for the witches.'

'The witches were your friends?'

There might be something else we shared.

'They told me how to –'

I brought the cleaver down on the side of its neck with all my strength.

It sprang to its feet.

I fled. A hundred yards up the alley, I realised it was not following me. I walked slowly back. Stopped at the gate and peeped in. It was still on its feet, but its head was hanging sideways, resting on its shoulder. Then as I watched, the head slid forward dangling over its



chest. It fell to its knees, then flat on its face with a thud that shook the ground.

Only it wasn't flat on its face exactly, it was flat on its head.

I waited a few moments. There was no sign of life – or undeath – at all.

A pitch-fork caught my eye. I went and picked it up, hefted it. Yes, that would do nicely.

I went back to the thing and thrust both prongs deep into its buttock.

No reaction. And when I pulled it out, just more black ichor following the prongs slowly up out of each hole.

I dug the prongs into its side and turned it over.

It was dead. Or at least, this body was.

I threw down the pitch-fork, retrieved the cleaver from where I had dropped it when I fled, and proceeded to hack away at what was left of its neck until the head came free.

But what to do with it? One thing I knew, I must not leave it near the rest of the body.

Time to go. Time I was back at the Shag!

But the head ...?

The Abbey. I would throw it over the gate and run! Leave it there for that gate-keeper or the prior to find. On hallowed ground!

And that's what I did. The streets were deserted, just a couple of old women at the well, but they took no notice of me. They can't have seen the head, realised what it was. I was just another whore who had lost her skirt and was making her way back to her master or her husband for a beating.

Except that I had no master now. No Master Henry, anyway. I wanted to cry ...

When I came running back from the Abbey, they'd gone.

At the Shag, I found the door in the wall at the side unbolted – Lucy's doing, I was sure – oh, I had to talk to her! and crept into the kitchen.

Jocelyn was sitting at the table, alone. She looked at me. 'Oh, are you in trouble! When I –'

'Shh.'

She jumped up. 'Don't you shh me!'

'Where's Lucy?'

'When Master Henry – '

'Henry's dead. Murdered. By your husband.'

Her eyes grew wide. Her face turned white. And she fainted, crashing down onto the floor. I made her comfortable and left her there.

I needed a skirt.

Or alternatively, I could discard what was left of my bodice and go through naked. Pretend to be working.

I took it off, washed my face and hands, decided to wash quickly all over, especially my legs and between my legs. Then peeped out into the hall.

A man I knew was there waiting, talking to Lauda but showing no sign of going upstairs with her.

It was Spicer. I remembered him and the gate-keeper, wondered whether the gate-keeper had found my little gift for the Abbey yet.

Lauda saw me, and Spicer turned round. 'Ah! Here she is! Mariana! I've been praying you would get back here safe and sound – and in time – from wherever you've been.'

'Oh, so have I!'

'And even more beautiful! But of course, on the previous occasion, your full beauty was veiled from us, like a queen in a convent.'

I'd been dressed as a whore.

Lauda made a vulgar movement with her tongue behind his back, I smiled at her, at him, 'Shall we?' he said, and I let him lead me up the stairs.

Getting back to what you know is always a comfort.

\* \* \* \* \*

Afterwards, in the kitchen, Jocelyn obviously believed that Mad Marian had been talking nonsense, so I said nothing to any of the others about Henry's death, and the main subject of discussion was the gag. None of them apart from Lucy had ever had to wear one.

'I heard they got better ones than that in Scotland,' said Jonette. 'Got a spike in them, they have, and they use them a lot.'

'Scotch women've got big mouths on them, everyone knows that,' said Clarice. 'Didn't Sancha tell us your da was Scotch, Daffy? The one what sold you to be a whore?'

'Yes. Yes, he was,' I mumbled. What else could I say?

'Explains your big mouth. Surprised your da didn't make you wear one when you was a kid. Would've done you the world of good.'

Some of them found that funny. Probably they all did. I wasn't looking round, I was too embarrassed, and too angry with my father. I'd forgiven, but I would never understand, not all of it. And I would never forget. How could I?

Lucy had still not returned when Jocelyn told those of us who slept in the house to go to sleep. Hoping she'd survived and not been arrested, I gave up. I was exhausted.

And in the morning I had no chance to talk to her before Jocelyn brought the Bailiff into the kitchen and told us he wished to speak to us. Especially me.

*Me?* I tried to put on my whatever-for face, but he wasn't falling for it.

'For those of you who do not know,' he said, 'your master, Henry Bawd, was murdered in the grounds of the Angel yesterday evening. Apparently by the same man – live or dead – who murdered the three priests and the monks.'

'But what's going to happen to us?' wailed Clarice.

'And you are?'

'Clarice, sir. Clarice of Cock Lane.'

'Well, Clarice of Cock Lane, that is hardly my concern, but I understand the Shag is the property of the good nuns of Stratford-atte-Bowe.'

'The nuns run brothels?' Bertha is shocked.

'They don't run them, they just own them, child.'

'Still, the child's right,' said Sancha.

'It gets you lot off the streets. What do you think they should do? Turn all the brothels into nunneries? You think you'd make a good nun?' He looks round and everyone laughs. 'You fancy being a nun?' he asks Bertha.

'No!'

He looks at me. 'Or you?'

'No.' I don't tell him I was a novice in a nunnery in Spain for a while, and fled at the first opportunity. They'd have to send me back!

'Who will take over from Master Henry?' Jenny asks, getting back to the matter in hand.

'How would I know. But for the moment ... to keep things going ... there's a rumour that Sancha, the best fuck in Colchester, is Henry's mother. Is that true, Sancha?'

'It's partly true.'

'How can you be partly Henry's mother?'

'I am Henry's mother, but I doubt if I'm the best fuck in Colchester.'

He grins. 'Only one way to find out.'

'Any time, Bailiff, any time.'

Clarice is not to be done out of this. 'To find out if she's the best, you'd need to sample us all.'

'That'll take longer. But, yes. Except I don't fuck children.'

'Snot fair!' wails Bertha.

He laughs. 'I didn't mean you, I meant her.' He looks at Pippa. 'You're Harold Turner's daughter, aren't you.'

She nods and blushes and looks at her mother, Jocelyn.

He too looks at Jocelyn. 'And you're his widow.'

She nods. She knows what's coming. She didn't believe me last night, but she does now.

'For the moment, Sancha, you'd better keep the place running. Until a new lease is signed and the Shag has a new proprietor.'

He turns to me. 'Now. You.'

'Me?' I glance round as someone comes in behind me. It is Lucy. White now. She avoids my eye, and is, I notice, her usual shy and submissive self.

'Are you the prostitute Marian atte-Marsh?'

'In a sense, sir.'

'In a sense?'

'Course she is,' says Clarice of Cock Lane. 'Daffy Marian.'

But he keeps his eyes on me.

'Mariana de la Mar is my name; atte-Marsh and Daffy are recent sobriquets.'

'Then it may interest you to know, Mariana, that some of my men have spent the night searching for the body of a whore known to have been present at the spot where Henry Bawd was murdered, and to have

subsequently disappeared. Presumably in the company of the murderer. When I realised the whore in question was the same one whose body these same men had spent all night searching for not one week earlier, I told them to call off the search for the moment. She had turned up safe and sound next morning on the first occasion, no one quite knows how. I thought she might have repeated the trick. It was you on the first occasion?'

'Well, yes, but – '

'And it was you last night?'

'Well, yes, but – '

'Would you kindly explain, in simple terms, so that I and the "ladies" here assembled can follow you, how that came about?'

'Yes, sir. Well, the first time, the man was a beggar, a vagabond, not the murderer at all, and we were both running from the dogs. And the men. In the same direction. Away.'

'And last night? Are you going to tell me the man was not the murderer, that poor Henry's leg just happened to fall off his body while your man just happened to be there?'

'Oh no, sir!' Best wide-eyed look. And my best wide-eyed look stops better men than this Bailiff in their tracks. Usually. I must be tired. 'No, this *was* the murderer. One of them.'

'*One* of them?'

'This was the man who dismembers priests, sir. Priests and Master Henry, sir.'

'And it is another man, in your opinion, who murders the girls.'

'Or woman.'

'Girls or women. Yes.'

'No, I meant man or woman. Who commits the murders.'

'I see. Yes.' He is obviously trying to keep a straight face, not easy with the girls all starting to titter and giggle. 'However, the one who killed Henry – that was a man.'

'Oh yes, sir.'

'And he was a murderer.'

'Oh yes, sir.'

'Good. I have a suspicion that just possibly we may be getting somewhere here. However, I do not wish to be overly optimistic. Now ... Did you accompany him when he left the scene of the crime?'

'In a sense – '

'Did you or didn't you?

'Well, yes, but –'

'Did you do so voluntarily or involuntarily?'

'Voluntarily, sir.'

'Good. Because if you had said involuntarily, it would be difficult to see how you could still be alive.'

'Oh, he doesn't kill girls, sir. Didn't, I should say.'

'Why *didn't*?'

'Because he's dead, sir.'

'Dead?'

He didn't know! Why did I assume he must know?

'I suppose you're going to tell me next that you killed him.'

No, I'm not, actually. And anyway, 'He was already dead.'

The giggles became open laughs.

The Bailiff glares round the room and Jocelyn threatens the next one who laughs with a thrashing.

'Do you mean he was already dead when he murdered your master? Or that he was already dead when you found him, caught up with him, whatever?'

'Both, sir. He was a night-walker, sir, one of the Undead. And when I caught up with him, he was even deader. His head had been chopped off.'

Gasps of horror don't count as laughs, so the girls get away with that.

'And did you recognise him?'

'It's hard to recognise a man without a head with a face on it.'

'Even for a whore?'

Naughty. 'I don't accept the Undead as clients, sir.'

This time there is no stopping the gales of laughter combined with gasps of horror. Jocelyn says she is going to tell Master Henry, and they will all be beaten.

'Master Henry's dead,' someone reminds her.

'Dan's not.' That sobers them.

'Anyway, I already knew who he was,' I say.

He had guessed that. He had guessed most of it, in my opinion, just wants to hear me say it.

He waits.

'It was Master Harold Turner, sir. Jocelyn's husband.'

Pandemonium.

When I can continue, I say, 'At least the body was Master Harold's. But it wasn't Master Harold inside. It was Master Harold's father, sir.'

'Alfwin Host-thief. But how do you know that?'

'He told me, sir.'

'How did he manage that?'

Good question.

'Or did you have a separate conversation with the – ah – separate – head?' he asks, pushing home his advantage.

Time for a bit more silliness. 'Oh, I never saw the head again. And it's difficult to have a conversation with a headless corpse as you so wisely observe. But even *I* understood that, so I didn't really try. I just gave a him a good kicking and –'

Now the girls are *all* staring at me in horror. Except Lucy, who is trying not to laugh.

'*What?*' I stare round. 'He'd just torn Master Henry's leg from his body before my very eyes, spraying me – spraying my eyes! – with blood – and you think – you think – I should have been polite and lady-like and kept my feet to myself –'

'Mariana!' the Bailiff stops me. 'Mariana. Mariana, if a lady kicks someone, (a) he deserves it, by definition, and (b) she is wearing boots. If a whore kicks someone, (a) she deserves a whipping and (b) because she is barefoot, it will hurt her more than him.'

'A wh-whipping? Even if he's dead – I mean undead – and a murderer?'

'Whoever he is. For a whore to raise a hand – or a foot – to any man is against the law. And anyway, you were barefoot. Now, why don't you tell us what really happened?'

He isn't going to let it go, but I've had time to come up with a story. 'Master Henry knew him, sir. Called him Harold. After he ran off – I think he must have heard people coming – Master Henry told me who Harold was, and Harold's father, before he died. Henry, I mean.'

'Could you possibly share with us the location of this twice-dead corpse?'

'The body's in the yard at the back of a house on East Hill. I think it may be Jocelyn's house.'

'That would make sense. But you say the body. You mean the body and the head. Or ...?'

'Just the body, sir. The head ...?'

'You mean the head got up and went off by itself – '

'Oh no, I don't expect so, sir.'

'Without any help from someone like you?'

'Someone like me? There wasn't anyone like me around, sir. I should have noticed.'

'Yes, she would rather have stood out,' he says sarcastically. 'Running around the town without a skirt on.'

More laughter. Jocelyn has given up since everyone learned that the murderer was her husband/father-in-law.

'Was she really? Without a skirt on? That's shocking!' I say.

He grins. And looks at Pippa, poor child. 'Run outside and ask Pike for the filthy rag he's holding.'

She runs out, and comes back with my skirt. 'Give it to Marian,' he tells her.

She gives it to me.

He grins. 'Well? Does that disgusting garment belong to you?'

It is time for a change of mood. 'It wasn't disgusting before I was fucked standing up outside the Angel last night by twenty or thirty of your heroic fellow-townsmen. They are the disgusting ones.'

He isn't a bad man, and that finishes the conversation.

'I apologise, Mariana. Not for the behaviour of my heroic fellow-townsmen – these things happen to a whore, as I'm sure you are all too well aware – but for implying that because your skirt had been made disgusting you are in some way disgusting. You are not. Far from it. Did you ever hear any more of Lady Marian?'

He has caught me. I can't remember off-hand whether I am supposed to know Lady Marian. What a web of lies I had spun here in Colchester!

'L-Lady Marian?'

'No? If she ever passes this way again, you might have the kindness to let me know.'

I have no idea what to say!

'Well,' he says, standing up and letting me off the hook, 'I'd better have a look at this doubly dead body, then institute a search for the head. And tell them to abandon the search for *you*.' He chucks me under the chin and grins down at me. I smile back up, shyly.

As soon as he is gone, Lauda laughs, 'He fancies you!'



'I thought he was going to throw her over his shoulder and run upstairs with her!' giggles Bertha.

'I thought he was going to arrest her and take her to the Moot Hall for a whipping,' says Clarice. 'But yeah, at the end there, you really had him getting hot for you.'

'And he's going to have to be free.' Jenny laughs. 'Good thing Henry won't be around.'

Then I see that Sancha is crying. Sancha, whose son has died – saving me! I jump up and take her in my arms and say in Spanish, 'Oh, Sancha, *lo siento, lo lamento*, I am so, so sorry. I was there, I saw it all. Can we go to your little room – Henry's little room – and I'll tell you about it.'

Before following her, I glance back at Lucy and gesture with my fingers: *Wait ...*

In that little room, Henry's room, which he had allowed her to use, and which still had the bluebells, now wilted, on the table, she cried openly for few minutes. I think she only now fully grasped the fact that Henry was dead, that she would never see him again, her only child, her only family in this unspeakable world.

Then she spoke, still sobbing at first, but slowly pulling herself together. She was a fighter, a survivor. I prided myself on what I had been through, had survived. She had been through a hundred times worse, and with no let-up, ever.

'You've only been here a few days, Mariana, but already you know me well enough to know that my son and I were – not strangers, but not family, either. *Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa*, as we were taught by the priests to say when I was a child. But still it is a shock when the baby you carried and bore – the only baby you ever carried and bore – and cared for as an infant and knew as a man, dies before you. It leaves you somehow ... *despojada*. How do you say *despojada* in English?'

'Bereft.'

'Bereft. Yes,'

She fell silent.

I waited.

She didn't go on.

I didn't feel ready yet to launch into the story.

'Can I fetch you something? Have you had any breakfast?'

'No. Yes. Some water. A little wine perhaps.'

I went back to the kitchen. They were all still sitting there.

'What's happening, Mariana? Do you know?'

I shrugged. 'Sancha would like a little wine, some water. And a little bread, too, I think.' Jocelyn seemed right out of it, so I turned to Jenny.

'I'll send Bertha with them,' she said.

'Why *you*?' complained Clarice.

I understood. 'Because she's Spanish, still Spanish, at heart. She can't think in English at the moment, can't express her grief in English. If this happened to you somewhere overseas, wouldn't you like someone who spoke English to talk to, to weep with?'

She nodded. 'Yeah. You're right. Sorry.'

The water and wine and a piece of bread were ready, so I took them through myself. And when she had drunk a little in silence, she said, 'Tell me.'

So I told her the story, up to the appearance of Lucy, then said, 'May I call Lucy?'

'Of course.'

So Lucy came in.

And Sancha said, 'I understand Henry being there. I even understand him attempting to save Mariana's life. He was not all bad, though hardly a man one would expect to find riding like a knight to rescue a damsel in distress. But then he was not a great one for spoilt and pathetic damsels. He would happily have seen them all turned into whores. A whore in danger though, especially a happy whore, a real whore, might well appeal to what little of the *caballero*, the gentleman, there was in him.'

'Someone like *you*, you mean,' I said in Spanish, smiling. 'Every man's ideal woman, every man's goddess, is a younger version of his mother, or so they say.'

She returned the smile. 'And you are the only one who ever fitted the bill, at least here in Colchester.' Then she went back into English. 'But what I cannot begin to understand, Lucy, is how you, the quiet, shy, unwell one, came to be running through the night like – like an Amazon! – naked and black and with a dagger in each hand!'

Lucy shrugged. 'That's how I grew up, running and swimming, hunting and fighting. I'll tell you the whole story sometime, but for

now you must simply believe that when I realised Mariana would probably be left unprotected by her drunken oaf of a master in the very spot where Edith was killed by a vampire just a few days ago, I knew I had to call on my old skills. When I was young and went out in the night, I covered myself with a special ointment of invisibility made for me by the local witch. I don't know what it contained else, but the great thing about it was that if I swam – and I usually did – it didn't wash off. Which was a problem when it came to getting clean afterwards!'

She laughed – and Sancha, I was delighted to see, laughed with her.

'Anyway,' Lucy went on, 'I had no such cream here, but I wasn't intending to go swimming so I simply rolled wet and naked in the sooty mud outside the back-door. Then sprinted after you to the Angel.'

Sancha was open-mouthed.

'But how did you get in – and out! – of the town?' I wanted to know.

'The postern gate in Bury Field – the graveyard you went through that other night – is still left open. I *think* they believe that will encourage undeads who come up out of their graves to walk the night outside the town rather than inside!'

She found that funny!

'Oh, I love you, Lucy. And not just because you saved my life.'

'And *you*'ve saved the lives of all the people that creature would have killed.'

'Priests.'

She laughed. 'Well, yes, it would have been more to the point if we'd caught the other one, but –'

'The story!' Sancha interrupted.

'Yes, mistress.'

Sancha smiled. 'I've never been called "mistress" before.'

'You're the mistress now, the Bailiff said so.'

'I'm not sure I'm going to want that.'

'Just for now, you have to. We need you. So. When I got to the Angel, Marian was still inside. I found myself a good place to hide, in deep shadow but close enough to the door to see everything that happened. After a while, a woman brought Marian out, gave her a drink, and left her to get on with it. I watched, and I counted. Twenty-

seven fucks, some of them the same man back for a second helping, and one – only a boy he was – came three times.'

'Yes, I remember him. I think it was his first time, and he decided he liked it.'

'Liked *you*. When he wasn't doing it himself, he stood there gazing at you while the others did it. Luckily, a man – his brother, his father? – came and dragged him away by the ear.'

'Yes,' I said, 'otherwise there'd have been a witness.'

'Witness? He'd have got himself killed trying to save you.'

'In which case Henry might still be alive.' Sancha looked thoughtful. 'Fate. Who can fight it?'

'Eventually, the party seemed over. Marian was standing there in a daze. I thought she'd died standing up!'

'So did I!'

'Then I saw another man coming out of the shadows to the north. But I was the other side of her, and I didn't realise it was him. Did you, Marian? You didn't react – didn't raise your skirt for him, but didn't scream and thrust him away, either.'

'I knew it was him! By the smell! But I was dead on my feet, like you say. I couldn't do anything.'

'You could have screamed. It would have alerted me.'

'I'm not a screamer.'

'Anyway, someone else realised first. Someone hidden in the bushes. Master Henry. He ran over and leapt on the brute's back, arms round his neck, trying to pull him off, strangle him, I don't know. He didn't have a hope, they're terribly strong. By that time I'd woken up and was racing towards them. He already had Henry down, but he sensed me and turned. It was too late to stab him. I had to throw one of my knives. It went straight into his heart.'

'Another of the skills you mastered when you were a – a girl,' smiled Sancha. 'Knife-throwing.'

'Yes, my father taught me. That and archery and stalking. We used to go hunting together.'

'And your brother?' I asked. 'Lady Helen's husband?'

'Sir George.' He looked suddenly nervous. 'Sir George wasn't interested. He likes watching fights – dog-fights or cock-fights – and fights between matched men, that's his favourite. Well, I can understand that. But he's no fighter himself, not even with the sword,

despite all those years of training. And it's the same with the hunt. The only hunting he enjoys is riding to hounds after a stag or a fox.'

'But your father liked the real thing,' said Sancha.

Lucy nodded.

'And you, blacked and running naked through the forest at night must have been the real thing,' I said.

She looked at me, wondering if I meant – I hadn't! It hadn't crossed my mind. But Sancha stepped in and saved me from having to say so.

'You thought Mariana meant was there something going on between you and your father. If that was the reason you ended up a whore. No, wait! We're on your side. But that *has* happened to hundreds, thousands, of girls, who then ended up either in a strict nunnery to atone for their sins – *their* sins! – or, more likely, in a brothel.'

'My father was a *good* man. But people did wonder when he and I shared a room at an inn in a place where he was known, here in Colchester for instance.'

'But if he was known and you weren't, of course they'd wonder – about you, I mean.'

'I just naturally assumed everyone knew I was his daughter. But one night in Ipswich I heard people talking about me and realised they took me for a prostitute. After that, I paid more attention in Colchester where we often stayed overnight, and I noticed men pointing me out to their friends.'

'So you already had a reputation in Colchester *before* you started working here at the Shag?' Sancha asked her.

She grimaced. 'Yeah, you could say that.'

'Did your father know what people were saying?'

'I told him that first time in Ipswich. He just laughed. He was not a man who cared about such things. "Fuck them!" he would say. So I thought the same. Fuck them. I admired him and copied him in everything I could – all the things a girl could possibly copy him in!'

'Well, thank heaven you did, or Mariana would not be here with us now. So what happened next? After you threw the knife and it buried itself in the thing's heart.'

'It was a big knife, and it was in up to the hilt. He should have died. Only of course he was already dead! He sank to his knees. I grabbed

his head – he had no hair – and tilted it back so I could get at his throat and cut off his head with my other knife –'

'You mean we have two girls here with the talents of a headsman? Or a pork butcher!'

'Pork butcher, in my case,' I grinned.

'And mine,' said Lucy. 'But then he seemed to pull himself together. I jumped away from him – if he got hold of me, I would lose a leg or two, and I like my legs! He was grievously wounded, though. He forgot about me and Marian, just turned and stumbled back into the shadows he'd emerged from. Then she grabbed my other knife from me and went after him. I screamed at her not to, but she wouldn't listen.'

Jenny put her head in. 'Mariana! The Crowner's here. Wants to speak to you – in private.'

'Use this room,' Sancha told me. 'I'll go and see what's happening, and send him through to you. *Buena suerte, chica.*' Good luck, lass.

And so she took charge.

\* \* \* \* \*

I sat down and waited. And waited. He was obviously talking to Sancha about the murder; and maybe about the future. All the men of the town appeared to take a personal interest in the place.

A man bustled in and sat down in Henry's chair, facing me. He was the opposite of the Bailiff, small and busy, with a paunch he seemed proud of.

'You are the whore Marian atte-Marsh?'

'I am.'

'Tell me exactly what happened outside the Angel last night.'

No playing now, not with this one. 'I'd been doing my job, servicing some men from the Angel, when this big man came at me. At first I thought he was another cully but he stank of death. I screamed. Then Master Henry appeared – perhaps he'd been inside the Angel, I don't know, I –'

'Stick to what you do know. I want everything you know, and nothing you imagine or surmise. Understand?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Well, go on.'

I told him the same story I'd told the Bailiff, without the asides and the silliness.

When I'd finished, he said, 'I don't pretend to understand this business. However, you are clearly innocent of Henry Bawd's murder – even of failing to stay with him as first-finder, for he was still alive when you left – am I right?'

This pink frog had a heart. And balls. 'Yes, sir. If you say so, sir.'

He smiled. 'And the other. It seems he was already dead, had been for some weeks. How he came to lose his head at this late stage, and how that head came to be in the possession of the gate-keeper of St John's, is a mystery that need not concern us. This is for you.'

And he gave me a purse.

'That contains twenty gold nobles. It is the reward that was offered for information leading to the termination of the ungodly creature that has been murdering by dismemberment priests and other religious in Colchester and its environs. The money is yours to do with what you will – on condition, and this is my condition for handing it over to you – that you never mention this episode again to anyone at all. And that includes Master Martin of Chich, in whose charge your master in London has apparently placed you for the time being. It also includes the said master in London. A Scottish knight, if I am not misinformed.'

'No sir, you are not misinformed. I will not mention it to either of them, or to anyone else.'

'Good. Because if you do talk out of turn, I will have your tongue cut out ... Then you won't need to worry about the gag ever again, will you.'

I gave him my best smile. 'Every cloud has a silver lining, doesn't it, sir.'

He returned the smile. 'As you say. Now, look after that money, and remember what will happen if you open that big mouth of yours.'

'Oh, I will, sir. I promise.'

He got up and left. I stood, of course, and bobbed a curtsey as he went, but he didn't seem to notice.

Why should he?

Then I sat down again.

I had accomplished half my task. The lesser half. And in so doing, I'd got myself into even more hot water than I'd been in before I left France a year ago.

Should I give up at this point?

I had to return to London anyway. I needed to find out more about the other kind of undead: the undying, or vampires, or whatever they were. Speaking of which, I needed to see what had happened about Marell. And about Brother Edmund, now Tom Watt. And I needed very badly to talk to Ferchard ... to explain ... But would he listen? Martin was obviously quite mad. All this nonsense about saving me in Paris, for instance. And just thinking he could treat me like this. But on the other hand, Ferchard *had* made Martin responsible for me, had put him in charge.

I realised I was not simply nervous about my meeting with Ferchard, I was actually frightened! But it had to be faced, I couldn't put it off any longer. The only question was, would I – should I – return to Colchester?

Yacoub ben Amar, my uncle and mentor, had said, 'Finish the task in hand. Put the terrors aside along with the daydreams, and finish the task in hand, the task you've been set.'

The task you've taken on.

The answer to the question "Should I?" was clearly "Yes".

The answer to the question "Would I?" was not so clearly "Yes" at all. For a start, there was a real likelihood that Ferchard would forbid me ever to come anywhere near Colchester again. Would I obey him? And if I did obey, would I be using it as an excuse for not completing my task? We would see.

But that was not what I said to Lucy when I told her I was leaving for London. And that I would be coming back.

'No! No, you mustn't!'

She meant I mustn't come back.

'Why? I – we – have a task to finish.'

'There's a rumour the new lease-holder may be Sir George –'

'No!' And the new *de facto* proprietress, Lady Helen.

'She won't run the place herself – that would be beneath her – but she'll interfere and make life unbearable for whoever is actually running the place from day to day – Sancha? – and of course for me. Especially for me ... And for you, too, because of who you really are



and because you'll have run away, and as a runaway you'll be at her mercy.'

Why am I so contrary? The more she begged me not to come back, the more I realised I must. Perhaps because she was so terrified of Lady Helen and was appealing to my fears, to what Yacoub called my "terrors". I have always tried to avoid being ruled by my fears. So now again it was time to set my fears aside.

'I may come back as a lady and stay at the White Hart. Or may come back here as myself. Either way, I will contact you within the week, I promise.'

She laughed.

'But – why are you laughing?'

'Listen to you! "I may come back as a lady, or I may come back as myself."

I laughed, too, realising. Then shrugged – a full Parisian shrug.

She gazed at me. 'We are very alike, I think. And we've both arrived at a point where the road forks.'

'Sometimes I believe our life paths are all laid out for us in advance.'

'Sometimes, certainly, it seems like that. But we both have choices to make. Now. In the next few days.'

She meant she wouldn't stay if Lady Helen was the new proprietress. She, too, would run away, and who could blame her? Everybody could, and would. She would be caught and branded. No, perhaps she wouldn't, not this new Lucy.

'Give me till the Harvest Moon, Lucy. But listen, if I come back and you stay, it must be worth it. We must catch and destroy this other night-walker together.'

'All right,' she said. 'But that's more than six weeks.'

She looked scared. Six weeks was a long time, and it wasn't the Undead she was scared of, it was Lady Helen.

'Lucy, can I ask you something? About your father – what you were saying this morning.'

She nodded and waited.

'Did your father go whoring?'

'Oh, yes. One thing I didn't copy!'

'No, but ... I think – if you loved him so much and thought him so perfect – it must have made you sympathetic to the notion of whores and being a whore.'

'I suppose so.'

'And you didn't seem to mind people thinking you were a whore.'

'I think that was because my father didn't seem to mind. But when I leave here, I won't go on whoring somewhere else – Southwark or wherever – like Sancha did. Like you will.'

I looked at her, surprised she should say that.

She laughed. 'Well, you've already worked in a variety of different brothels, haven't you. Why does the thought of one more surprise you?'

'You're right. It shouldn't and doesn't. This strange path of mine was laid down not by the Fates at my birth, but by my father. He set me on this road and I can't get off it.'

'Your father did?'

'He was a Scottish knight living in exile in Spain and married to the daughter of a Spanish aristocrat – my mother. He sold me to a slave-trader.'

'Your father?'

'Yes. Oh, it's not like it sounds. He was a good man.'

'He may have been a good man, but it's exactly like it sounds.'

She was right. But her next question was one I'd known someone would ask sooner or later:

'So why do you call yourself Marian atte-Marsh?'

I waited, unsure how much to tell her.

'I knew Marian. I knew her quite well, actually – her and her mother, Liza.'

I'd been waiting for this. 'And you're saying I'm not her?'

'In appearance – well, you could be her. The same dark hair and golden skin – quite different from most people around here, who are sort of white and pink, like me. And people change as the years go by, specially if they spend those years as a whore like we have, her and me, and you. Would *she* recognise *me*? Probably not, if we met as strangers. So perhaps I wouldn't recognise her. But I remember her! You? Even when you heard about my father and brother and heard my name – Lucy, Lucia – you showed no sign of realising who I was. And

the story you tell of your life – it's not like you're even pretending to be her ...'

'I'm not her. And I'm not pretending to be her. But for some reason Martin believes I'm her, and he introduced me around Chich and Clackton as her, then here in Colchester.'

'But he must know you're not! He knew her too, same as me.'

'No, not the same as you. He knew her simply as Liza the whore's daughter, an easy fuck – born to be fucked, you might say. I doubt if he ever really looked at her face. Then years later he came across me, a body that reminded him of hers – '

'You must have other things in common. Martin's not that stupid. Let's see. A whore. Coming from Spain but speaking English.'

'And the swimming. That really struck him.'

'You're a swimmer? I don't believe it.'

'I spent my childhood in the sea. And apparently so did she.'

'She did, yes. She was more at home in the sea than on land. You've got *me* wondering now!'

'Think what you like. I'm not denying it. I can't. To be honest, I wouldn't dare. He's convinced so many people I am her that – '

'If you start claiming to be the daughter of a knight – the legitimate daughter – the least they'll do is tear your tongue out.'

Of course. As I remarked earlier, Lucy and I also had a great deal in common.

But talking about our fathers, I still hadn't asked her about the "Papa" I heard that night outside the Angel.

'Lucy, what did you call your father? Was it "Papa"?'

'Yes. Why?'

'Because when that thing murdered Henry, I heard you say "Papa". I thought for a moment Henry must be your father, then I realised that was ridiculous ... Was I mistaken? Was it something else you said?'

'No. It was Papa. He came to me – a ghost, a shade – while I was kneeling there with Henry on my lap. I couldn't see him. I just felt that he was there suddenly – and lots of other ghosts with him, all around me and Henry.'

A *shade*. I remembered Edmund's little rhyme:

*'Wherever blood is shed  
they gather round,*

*the undeparted dead.'*

'That's it!' she cried. 'That's it exactly! I'd forgotten that. It was one of the rhymes my nurse used to sing me when I was a child.'

'So what happened?'

'My father dipped his fingers in Henry's blood. I didn't see him do that, but he became visible as he licked the blood from his hand.'

'Weren't you horrified?'

'No, he used to do that – we both did – when we went hunting.'

But this was a man! I was horrified just thinking about it!

'He dipped his fingers in and licked them clean again and again. And spoke! "Wait!" he said.'

'I waited. What else could I do. Then, when he'd grown as solid-seeming as you and me, he said: "Lucia, I've been a shade watching over you for so long. I need your forgiveness. I cannot quit this mortal vale until I have it." "What is there to forgive?" "Only you can know that in its fullness." "I forgive you, Papa!" "Then farewell, my daughter. It is enough for any man to have one child's love, one child of whom he can be proud, one child whose image he can carry with him into eternity. Good hunting, daughter."'

I gazed at her in awe. Was my father a shade somewhere among the undeparted dead, awaiting my forgiveness?

'But enough of that,' she said, breaking the tension. 'Let's go and see if there's any news.'

I left Lucy as she went in through the kitchen door to join the others – the ones who were there. The Shag was closed, of course, and Dan outside turning cullies away, while the girls who lived out and only came in to work had gone home to their fathers or husbands to face the consequences of returning with no money – or were trying desperately to earn some in the street.

When the Crowner gave the reward to me, I had thought of passing it on to Jocelyn for her and Pippa, but decided to hold onto it for the moment as I might need it myself. Then, as she came out of the kitchen and approached me, looking so lost, so shattered, I changed my mind again.

'Jocelyn, come here with me for a moment. In here.'

'That's Master Henry's room, you stupid girl. We can't go –'

'Sancha won't mind. Please. I want to talk to you.'

'Why? What about? Haven't I got enough trouble – ?'

'Please ... ' I ushered her into the room and sat her down.

'Well? What is it? I've got things to do.'

'Jocelyn. Your husband is gone, finally.'

She burst into tears again, and stood up. Only one thing was going to keep her listening.

'This is for you,' I said, handing her the bag of gold coins.

'What's this?'

'It's a great deal of money, and it's for you and Pippa.'

She opened it, shrieked, and dropped it as if it had burnt her hands.

'The Crowner gave it to me. I'm giving it to you.'

'Why? Where's it from? The Crowner? I don't understand.'

'There was a reward of twenty gold nobles for information leading to the arrest or death of the person or thing that was killing priests.'

'My husband.'

I nodded. 'Not your husband, but your poor dead husband's body, being used by ... you know who it was being used by?'

'I ... I think so. But this money? This gold? How did *you* get it? Why are you giving it to me?'

'I was there. I was ... Let's just say the Ceowner decided I was the one who deserved the reward. So ... '

'He gave it to you. Why? He fancy you? He can have you any time for a silver penny.'

'Please. Listen. I'm giving you this, for you and Pippa. Don't argue with me. Just take it and use it wisely. You have no husband now, Pippa has no father. Nothing can replace him. But this will help you survive.'

'I don't understand.'

'How did your husband – Harold? – how did he die? I don't mean now, I mean the first time.'

'He hanged himself.'

'Was he definitely dead?'

'Oh, yes. Cold and stiff when we found him and cut him down.'

'Was there anything strange about him in the days before he hanged himself?'

'Yes. He stopped going to church, he couldn't cross himself, he spat when he saw a priest.'

'This was not normal for him?'

'Oh, no! He was good man. A respectable man.'

'Was it more like the way his father used to behave?'

'It was, yes. Exactly like.'

'Perhaps he was copying his father? Men do.'

'He hated his father.'

'Tell me about his father.'

'Alfwin was a rebel. He was excommunicated for stealing the Host from a church – St James's, it was, in Little Clackton – for them witches in Wivenhoe. They put him in the Keep, to hold him there till his trial, but he escaped. Fled to London, by all accounts.'

'You know what happened to him there?'

'We heard he was executed. Serve the bastard right.'

'Yes, but I believe he came back as an undead, and took over your husband's body.'

'You mean it was *really* him did all this, not Harold?'

'That's exactly what I mean. Your Harold's soul went back to God as soon as he died, released from that body which his father, Alfwin, had already forced his way into and taken control of.'

'But they buried poor Harold in the Judas Field.'

'Unhallowed ground. Perhaps that's what made it so easy for Alfwin to come up out of the grave.'

'Who are you?'

'Me? You know me. Marian-atte-Marsh. So, you keep this. You deserve it more than I do. Take it and go home with it now. Bury it, or something. It represents your future, you and Pippa. Come on. I'll walk with you, make sure you don't get robbed.'

'I can't just –'

'Of course you can. I doubt they'll even notice you're not here. Come on. Don't worry about Dan. He's at the front door.'

We left by the back door and out through the garden and the little door in the wall. I couldn't lock it again from outside, but that didn't matter. I was going. And I knew that despite everything I'd said, I might never come back. Ferchard was quite capable of ensuring that I remained where he could keep a watchful, paternalistic, eye on me.

I took Jocelyn, now clutching the purse to her chest, as far as her front door on East Hill, then had to go all the way round, back past the Shag – there was no sign of Dan – to the Bull and then, at last, the

Winged Lion. Where, at the front door, I heard pompous voices, so – dressed the way I was – I went round and came in through the kitchen door.

Marjorie opened her mouth to squeal, but I raised my finger to my lips. 'Shh! Who's that? Where's Joan?' I whispered.

'She's out there with them, getting all the gossip.'

'I have to go to London. I need my boy's clothes and my –'

'Sh! Keep your voice down.'

'Who is it?'

'Master Crackbone and his wife –'

'Master *what*?'

She giggled. 'He's the Assistant Chief Executioner in the City of London.'

'Seriously?'

'I know, 'cos they often stay here. He's from Harwich, has family there.'

I went over to the door and peeped out.

'Don't let them see you!'

'I want to listen.'

A man with a soft, gentle voice – Master Crackbone? – was speaking. '... might be right. Might well be right.'

What might?

'He was hanged, wasn't he?' This was Joan. 'Were you there? Was there anything strange about the way he died?'

'I was there, right enough. I'd been there all along. He was arrested with a gang of Essex ne'er-do-wells plotting rebellion in a tavern at Mile End, and brought to me for questioning.'

Brought to *him* for questioning? Master Crackbone? I began to feel sorry for poor Alfwin.

'Naturally, they all confessed and were duly sentenced to hang. Then – yes – there was something ... Brother Hamon – ah, you know him – Brother Hamon, the Exorcist, pointed out that the man was an unrepentant host-thief and had been excommunicated. It is customary in such cases for the corpse after hanging to be burnt to prevent any sallying forth from the grave.'

'And so he was burnt.'

'I imagine so. The dead – and undead – are not my business. My business is to ensure that criminals survive their questioning and come alive to their place of execution.'

Oh, Master Crackbone.

'Once there, it becomes my business to ensure that they die in the prescribed manner.'

'Which he does,' another woman breathed. 'A stickler for prescribed manner is Master Crackbone.'

'That's his wife,' whispered Marjorie, her head pressed against mine. 'Mistress Crackbone.'

I snorted and nearly burst out laughing. I jumped back from the door. 'Don't!' I hissed.

'Don't what?' All innocence. 'Quick, they're going up to their chamber!'

'But –'

'Go back out and come in the other way when Mistress Joan's out here.'

So I slipped back out and waited a while, then when all was quiet crept back in through the front door and up the stairs and hid in the shadows beyond what had been *my* chamber when Joan had taken me for a lady.

A few minutes later, Marjorie came up the stairs then up the other narrow flight of stairs to her little attic room. I crept after her.

She handed me the other gold coins, the ones I'd left in her keeping, and my boy's outfit, and gave me a kiss and hurried back downstairs.

A few minutes later I followed her and slipped back out into the street.

No problem.

Nor did I have any difficulty getting to London. I hired a horse at a stables a hundred yards down the London Road, stopped at Kelvedon the first night, Brentwood the second night, and made it home by nightfall the third day, leaving the horse with Dick Ostler at the Stable at the Bridge.

The first person I saw when I entered the house was Ferchard. He was approaching the door in his cloak and boots, ready to go out.

He stopped dead when he saw me.



I threw myself into his arms, but there was no answering hug. Instead, he held me at arm's length and looked me up and down. 'Why are you dressed like that?'

'I had to escape! I mean literally!'

'You know I don't like you dressing as a boy.'

'I had to! And now I need a bath and some good food. Khadija!'

Khadija didn't like me dressing as a boy, either, but at least she responded to my hug. She utterly disapproved of me. But deep down she loved me. Ferchard only disapproved of me. Why did I put up with him? Did I still have a choice?

We were obviously going to be having a serious talk together when he came back. I had no idea how serious it would turn out to be. All I knew was that I was not looking forward to it.

And what about Tom – Brother Edmund? There'd been no mention of him, so I decided not to mention him either. Long Will might have taken Tom home with him rather than face the Scottish knight. He probably believed Ferchard was my master – after all, everyone else did – and that he'd be expected to report on my doings in Colchester.

Khadija wouldn't let me eat till I'd had my bath, but I grabbed some bits and pieces and stuffed them into my mouth while Yahia, my enormous eunuch, carried the buckets of hot water upstairs. Yahia, the one person who loved me unconditionally, and whose hug I always got lost in and had to struggle out of. But even he didn't like me in boy's clothes.

Ferchard was late coming home and I was tired after my long ride, so I went to bed without seeing him. I lay there thinking I needed information and advice. I remembered Petronella telling me about a powerful Scottish witch named Muriel who lived in Maiden Lane. That would be my first port of call in the morning. And the beginning of the next round of this adventure.

The story continues in

**THE UNDEPARTED DEAD**  
**Part II**