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**Opening Extract from...**

# Friend & Foe

Written by Shirley McKay

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# Friend & Foe

*A Hew Cullan Mystery*

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Polygon

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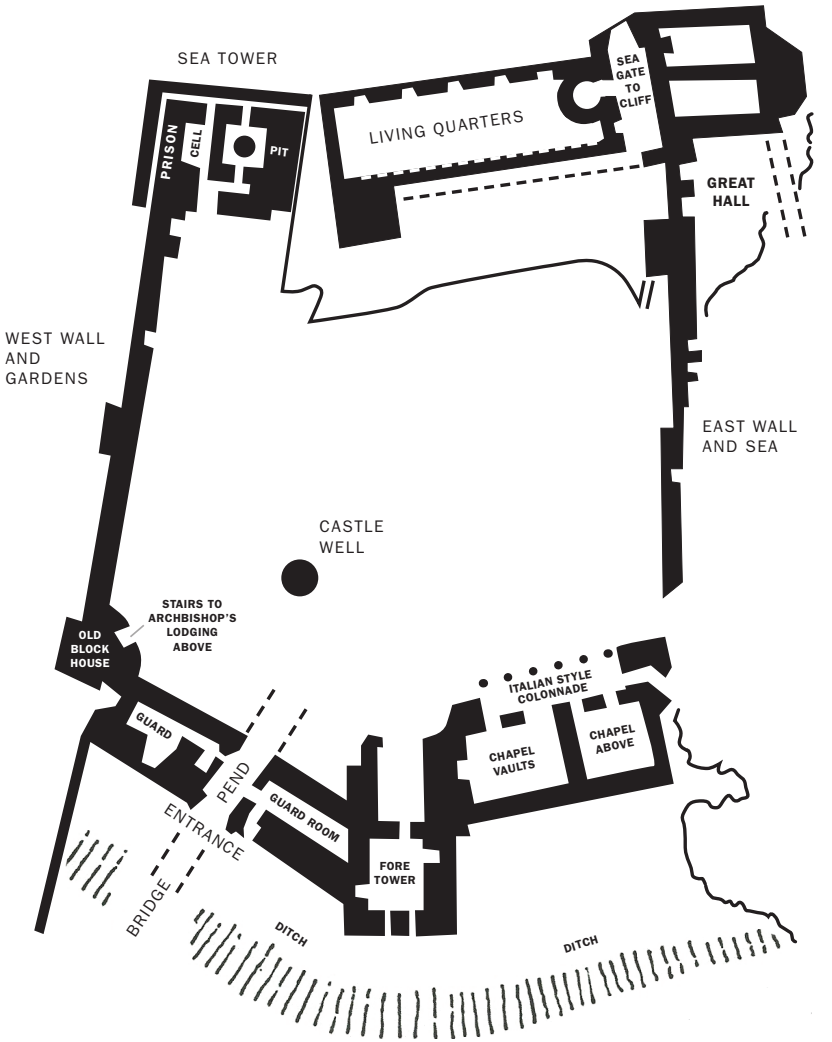
For all those ‘little, nameless, unremembered, acts of kindness’

To my friend John Beaton
and in memory of Jane

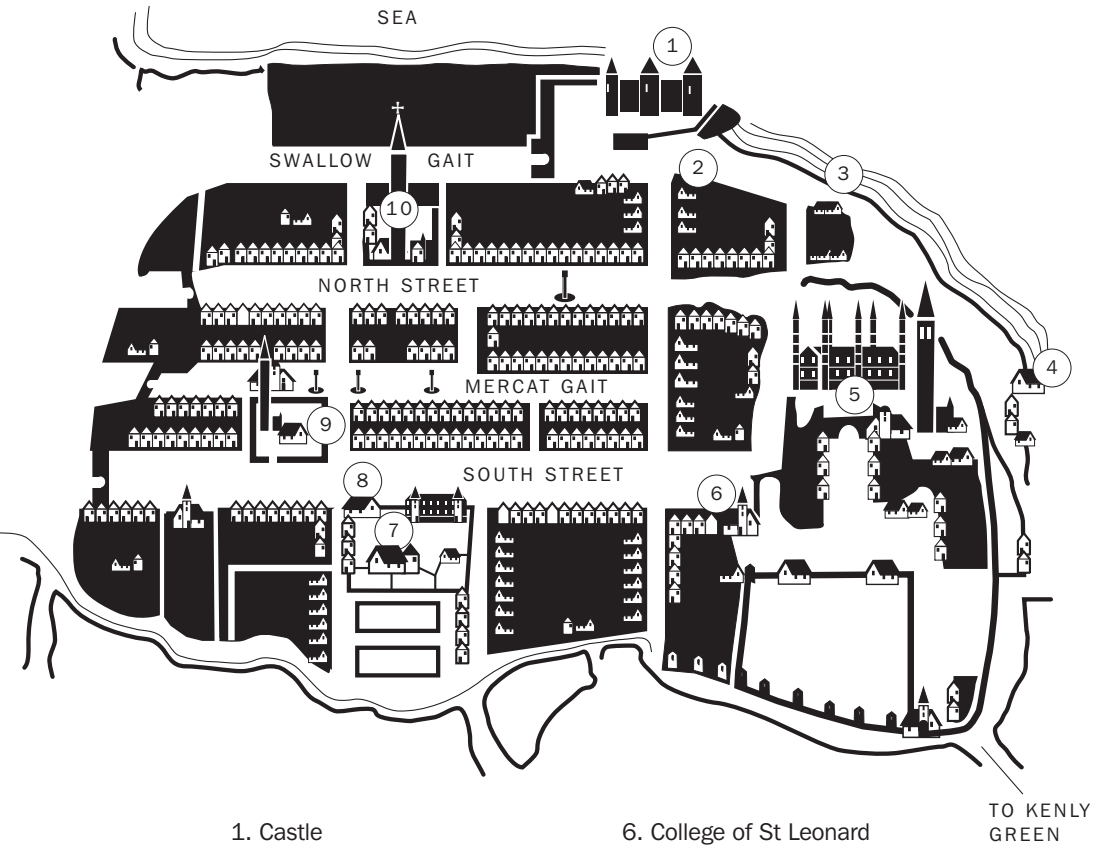
# *Prefatory Note*

*Friend & Foe* follows on from the third book in the series, *Time & Tide*, where Hew was sent to Ghent by the coroner, Andrew Wood, to find out the source of a Flemish windmill washed up in a shipwreck in St Andrews bay. Hew returns to his position at the college of St Salvator as lecturer in law, a post with no real purpose that brings little satisfaction. Working for Wood when the will takes him, Hew has remained his own man, while the coroner's motives are not always clear. King James VI meanwhile has lost his grip on both his court and kingdom, following the Ruthven raid of 1582.

# St Andrews Castle Ground Floor c1583



# St Andrews Town Plan c1583




1. Castle
2. House of Giles and Meg
3. Kirk Heugh
4. Harbour
5. Cathedral and priory
6. College of St Leonard
7. College of St Mary
8. House of Andrew Melville
9. Kirk of Holy Trinity
10. College of St Salvator

# *Chapter 1*

## *A Merry Month*

*Quhair thou was wont full merilye in May*
*To walk and tak the dew*

Henryson, *The Testament of Cresseid*

*St Andrews, Scotland*
*May 1st, 1583*

To those who watched, the house appeared asleep. But though the doctor and his wife had long since gone to bed, both were wide awake. Giles Locke lay still and thoughtful, muffled in his quilt. He heard Meg's footsteps cross the floor, through curtains she had closed on him against the cold night air, and felt his wife's departure with a sense of dread. The doctor sighed and shifted, finding out the place that held the scent and shape of her, willing her return. Matthew Locke slept on, his soft lips pale and puckered, plump and moist with milk. Meg blew out the candle flame, and let the darkness close.

In a loft upstairs, the doctor's servant Paul closed up his folding bed and dressed in bilious green. He listened to his mistress moving through the house, coming to the kitchen, past the sleepy maid. Canny Bett slept upon a sheepskin bolstering the hearth, wrapped up in a blanket blackened by its coals. Canny's limbs were slack, her mouth half-open still, a quarrel in full flight when sleep had overtaken her, her red cheeks pinched and scorched. She had left an egg to roast in the embers of the fire. Canny did not stir as Meg explored

the shelves, collecting things to fill a basket, small glass bottles, cloths and cups.

The house looked out upon the castle on the cliff. In daylight, it looked out upon the grey washed sky, on cliff tops bright with thistle heads and clumps of summer moss and white-flecked seabirds circling, on mellow stone and high arched windows, glancing on the street. The ringing out of hammermen, the hoarse cries of the fisherwives, the grumbling of the baxters and the brewers with their loads, forged a solid thoroughfare between the house and cliff, the castle falling back to bask upon its rock. At night, the forecourt stilled. The castle overlooked, its black hulk rising blankly from the darkened precipice, seabirds curling mute, invisible in crevices. Pinpoint pricks of firelight moved across its walls.

On the corner by the Swallow Port, a yellow lantern burned. Meg ducked beneath its light to turn into the Fisher Gait, and hurried out of sight. There were lanterns, too, outside the cookshops and the taverns on the far side of the Mercat Gait, and in the wynds and closes leading to the South Street, across the southern boundaries of the town. Here the yellow smoke gave way to natural light, the watered-grey, soft glancing of a quarter moon. Meg continued landward, keeping to the narrow path towards her brother's house. From time to time, she strayed closer to the shore, or through a copse of trees, conscious of a shadow at her back. She came into a barley field, and shook the drops of water from the morning rose, wiping with a cloth each sharp green stalk and leaf, milking the wet linen out into a cup. When the cup was full, Meg passed the water through a funnel drop by drop into a coloured glass – amber for barley, olive for the rose – sealing it with parchment and a plug of wax. She let a drop of barley water settle on her tongue, knowing she was watched. She had felt it at the sea-port to the harbour, and on the landward path that led out to the barley field. The gulls had woken up, and swept towards them, shrieking, through the pink-shot clouds. Meg took pity on the watcher: 'You may go now, Paul.'

'On my life, I cannot,' answered Paul. Paul had spent the last hour hiding in a sheep trough, the evidence of which was plain upon his hat. He gave up all pretence of coming there by chance, to shake the matter off. 'Doctor Locke insists on it. And he will have my carcass cut up on a slab, he will carve my corpse up as one of his experiments, if I neglect his charge.'

'He will do no such thing. And when were you inclined to do as you were told?' Meg brushed aside this argument, as Paul brushed down his hat.

The servant stood his ground. 'Twould ding his heart to shards, if harm should come to you.'

'What kind of harm,' protested Meg, 'can come to me, upon my brother's land? Where I have lived and wandered, since I was a child?'

'I ken that, mistress, yet he fears—'

They both knew what the doctor feared. Paul bit back the words. 'He telt me to lie low.'

Meg accepted with a sigh, 'Aye, and so you did. No matter, you shall stay, and help collect the dew. For that may serve you better than to lour among the sheep. Then, when we are done, you shall take some to your lass.'

'I have no lass,' he lied.

Together, they filled bottles, kneeling in the grass, until the sun broke tentatively through the clearing sky. The light brought lads and lasses laughing through the trees. Children gathered blossoms, trailing chains of buttercups and armfuls of white flowers. A girl ran through the barley field with petals in her hair, followed by a young man fumbling with his breeks. Paul's gaze fixed on the couple longer than was decent, and the lass stood still to flounce at him, poking out her tongue. The young man snatched his quarry from behind. He pulled her out of sight, into a clump of trees.

'There are violets in the wood. She will like those too,' Meg broke upon Paul's thoughts.

He spluttered, 'As I swear to you—'

'For certain, you must not,' said Meg. 'There can be no shame in it, that you should have a lass. Or is there some impediment, prohibiting the match?'

His mistress was a soothsayer, who saw into the heart of things. Paul had no idea how she could read his mind. He blurted out, 'It is the widow Bannerman, an honest, proper wife. But I must prove my worth to her, and she is brave and delicate, and till I am assured of her, I would not have my love laid bare for a' the gaping world. I cannot, for the life of me, think how you came to ken of it.'

'It was not hard to guess. You have trimmed your beard, and cut and combed your hair. And you are wearing your best clothes, my brother's gooseturd riding coat, and Kendal breeks and hat. And here we are in May, the merry lovers' month.'

Paul turned a livid purple, clashing with the green. 'Master Hew was good enough to give me his old coat. But do you think the colour is too keen? I must be bold, yet circumspect, if I would prove my worth to her. In truth, the case is intricate.'

Meg suppressed her smile at the language he had borrowed, like his bright green coat, from her brother Hew. 'True love often is. But I know Jonet Bannerman, and she will like you better, in your own, true, proper self. And if you wish to please her, take to her this water from the morning rose.' She offered up the dew, in a phial of coloured glass.

The morning light, it seemed, had worked to calm Paul's fears. He accepted eagerly. 'This water shall speak worlds to her. I thank you, with my heart. You will not tell the doctor, though?'

'Will not tell him what?' Meg teased. 'That I caught you spying? That you left my side? That you go a-Maying? That you have a lass?'

'All of those,' admitted Paul. 'Especially that one last.'

'I will not say a word.'

Meg's smiles gave way to thoughtfulness. She watched Paul set off down the track, the bottle of elixir warming in his hand. Daylight burned the vapour from the early dew. The lusty lads and lasses

went about their day, the children brought their blossom homewards from the fields. The world became quite still. Meg took off her shoes. She felt the blades of barley sharp against her feet, and found her cheeks were wet, despite the morning sun.

From the fore tower of the castle on the rock, the sergeant of the garrison looked out. He saw the bridge across the fosse, the stables and the cookshop, and the house of Doctor Locke, its chimney wisping smoke into the white-veined sky. He saw the woman turn the corner from the Fisher Gait, a basket on her arm. Tam Fairlie left his post, running down the stair to rap at Patrick's door. Patrick lay unbuttoned in a borrowed archer's coat, on the great bed of estate. His face looked sickly still, and in the morning light a little wan and flushed, pink-white, blotched and mottled like a bulbous flower. He perspired a little, though the air was cool.

The chamber had been dressed in shades of blue and green. That was Patrick's doing: 'For what would you have else, the colour of a cardinal?' and for his present purposes, the colours seemed to suit. The curtains round the bed were of a thick dark damask, green leaves stitched in silk. In places, they had faded to a dirty olive-grey.

'Olives,' Patrick said. 'Ewe's milk cheese and figs. *Ficus* is the fig. And *fica* is the common Latin for a woman's orifice.'

It pleased him to refer such matters to the Latin tongue, as though the lick of scholarship brought polish to the sin. To Tam's mind, Patrick talked too much.

'What you, as a soldier, like to call her scabbart. Her scabbart is so called, because she is the sheath, where I put my sword, and not because of scabs. She *may* be scabbed, of course.'

'Olives and suchlike are your steward's job,' said Tam.

'He asks too many questions, and he tells too many lies.' Patrick closed his eyes and sank back on the bed.

He did not look like a man with the mettle for the task, however bold he boasted of it, dressing up bare appetites in rags of foreign words.

'Succats, and sweet almond cakes, and flagons of red wine,' he added to the list.

The sergeant sighed. 'Aye, I will see to it.' Though Tam had never tasted olives, and had rarely eaten figs, he knew how to procure them with a minimum of questions – answered with his fists. 'And make a bonny brothel of the brave bed of estate,' he muttered to himself.

His master rallied, 'Say you? What was that?'

'She is here, my lord, waiting at the gate.'

'She has come too late. I have not the strength for her.' Patrick slumped again.

Tam Fairlie was accustomed to his moods. 'As you will, then,' he shrugged, 'I can send her away.'

'Ah, no, not at all.' Patrick shook his head, and sat up in the bed, smoothing out his coat. 'For we must take our remedy, though it may be bitter to us. I shall go up to the chapel now, while you prepare the chamber. After she has left me, I shall want my bath.'

Tam grunted, 'Aye, my Lord.'

In his latter months of sickness, Patrick had begun to bathe, a witless, witches' remedy, that he could not effect without calling on the garrison. Six strong men it took to carry in the vat, and fill it up with water, scalded on hot coals, and six men more to empty it, and lug it down again, while Patrick shifted, slippery, huddled in his closet. The closet had a stench and savour that the high draught of the chimney piece did little to disperse. It was like looking into a man's heart, and Tam felt sickened there, not by the dark stench of the close stool but the dark-filled rancour that was Patrick's soul.

'Pray dress the walls with carpets, and the bed with flowers,' Patrick rumbled on.

'The bairn has brought the May.' Tam cursed the words, and God, who had not stopped his tongue, as soon as he had spoken them. The bairn brought in the flowers and sunlight, and the song of birds. If Patrick did not see it, then the man was blind; and Patrick

was not blind, he saw the bairn too plainly, and what she meant to Tam. The mention of the child made Patrick stir and frown, like a sleeping leopard, startled from his dreams. 'Ah, yes, your little lass. The chamberlain has telt me that she is a thief.'

'Then he is a liar.' Tam made his protest brief and loud, to drown his beating heart.

Patrick said, 'Perhaps.' Like the leopard in the sun, he opened up an eye, lazily considering. 'But be that as it may, he caught her at the sugarloaf.'

Tam faced him, stiff and proud. 'She is six years old.'

'So I said to him.' Patrick lacked the will to follow to the pounce. 'And yet it is a fault in her,' he scratched his back and yawned, 'that ye must amend. I hear her, sometimes, at her play. And sometimes I am set to think, the castle is no place to keep so small a bairn.'

Tam was in a black mood then, before he reached the gate. The sentinel was Harry Petrie; Tam had seen to that. He did not trust the Richan boy, his long ungainly limbs and pale insipid looks, the queer way that he spoke to them: 'He's gaan to blaw agin the nicht,' when he meant the wind. What sort of fool said that? 'John Richan is a pestilence,' Tam had telt to Patrick. Patrick had smiled that smile of his, cunning like a cat. 'Ye maunna damn the man, Tam, for his Orkney speak. His father is an officer, in service to the earl.'

Patrick in the chapel, fallen to his knees, whispering his prayers up through the coloured glass . . . Patrick's gross allegiances were troublesome to Tam. He sailed his skift through narrow waters, closely to the wind. Robert, earl of Orkney was uncle to the king, and no one could be certain where his leanings leant, to king or to conspirators, the English or the French. They kent he was a bastard though, and that in every sense. Patrick made the earl his ally at the parliament. He had in mind a marriage for his middle daughter with the bastard's son.

'Besides,' Patrick said, 'the boy is an expert at shooting the bow.'

'What use were his arrows in a blockhouse built for guns?'

'If we had powder, Tam, if we had shot. But powder and shot are for kings. And pistoletts are pepper pots that scatter far and wide. You cannot hope to best a perfect archer's eye. The arrow at his heart strikes deadly, straight and pure. I will stand you one sound bowman for all your fleet of guns,' said Patrick, who kenned no more of battle plats than Tam did Latin prayers. 'He may be of use to us.'

So that was how it was.

Tam had trained the boy. He trained him up, by night and by day, for endless drills and exercises woke him from his sleep, until his green limbs bent and buckled at his bow, his sapling arm hung slack. And what use was an archer then, that could not lift his bow? No use at all, the sap.

At sunrise, Tam had sent John Richan out to see the surgeon. 'Show him your sore shoulder, son.'

The boy had answered warily. 'Ye telt me to keep watch.'

'And now I tell ye, go.'

The Richan boy had glanced the question back at Harry Petrie, and Harry Petrie nodded at him, whittling with his knife. Harry was a man that kent when he should speak, and when to turn his head away, and when to haud his tongue, that no amount of buffeting could teach the Richan boy. Harry was a proper man, a soldier born and bred.

Now Harry stood there talking to the porter at the gate, smiling at the lass, who made her way unsteadily across the wooden bridge. For form's sake, Tam called out, 'Ho, there, stranger! Stand!'

The silly wench blinked back at him. 'But surely you maun know me, Tam? I came as I was asked.'

'Oh aye, I ken you now. It is the physick wife, that brings his lordship's remedy,' Tam informed the world. The porter gave a nod, and let the woman pass. Tam took her arm and hissed, 'What mean you, wench, by coming late? We looked for you at dawn.'

The woman shook him off. 'I went to gather dew. And I will not have you call me, as I were some whore, that walks about at night.' She answered him, with spirit. 'Will Patrick take his physick now, or no?'

She looked, in light of day, a decent sort of wife. She came from a good family, she had told Tam once; scholars, men of learning, who had taught her secrets they had found in books. Though he had not believed her, he approved her plan. She was a subtle lass. 'What medicines have ye brought?'

'A pill to purge his stomach. Water for his eyes.'

Though Patrick's eyes were sharp enough, none sharper bar his tongue.

Tam had kept her talking as they passed the guardhouse, partly to distract her, partly for appearances, to satisfy the crowd. The castle's inner courtyard was a town within a town, and at this time of morning filling up with traffic, soldiers cleaning weapons in the sunlight on the green, stable boys and scudlars gathered round the well. Tam Fairlie scowled and snarled. 'Are none of ye at work today, that you must chat and clatter, littering the square? Here comes the physick wife.'

The woman clutched his sleeve. 'Tam, I am afeart.'

'What are ye afeart of, lass?'

'For that he is sick. I cannot make him well.'

'A lass like you? For sure you can!' He brought her to the place that Patrick had prepared for her, the cold north-western tower that looked out to the sea.

She whimpered, shrinking back. 'You never said in there. I will not wait in there. You cannot make me, Tam.'

She was, after all, a silly witless wench, and Tam could well have shown to her the error of her words. Instead, he murmured soft to her, and coaxed her like a bairn. 'See, lass, tis a play, a wee bit dressing game.' He opened up the door so she could see inside. A fine fair shift and cloak lay folded on a ledge, together with a girdle and a coronet of flowers.

'Put on the dress, and Patrick will come for you. You are his queen of the May.'

Tam whistled as he put the final touches to his lordship's room. He had brought a banquet, balanced on a tray, of sweetmeats, wine and fruits. He bent the boughs of hawthorn that the bairn had fetched and bound them to the bedposts, making up a bower. He lit candles in the passage next to Patrick's closet, where his lordship wrote his letters, did his easement, took his bath, and knelt on winter nights to say his blackest prayers. A thick curtain on the south side closed it from the draughts. Behind this, came a scuffling sound, which Tam put down to rats. At once, he drew his sword and pulled the curtain back.

'Mercy, but a poor blind clerk, helpless and unarmed!' A timid voice cried out. A figure flew up flapping, from the stool of ease, floundering and fummilling, falling on its knees. 'Murder! Mercy! Oh, my life!'

Tam put up his sword. 'Master Ninian Scrymgeour,' he acknowledged pleasantly. Patrick's privy secretary, stripped of breeks and spectacles, grovelled on the floor. 'Here ye are, a-scummering,' Tam said with a smile.

Scrymgeour squinted, whimpering, 'Mercy, who is there?'

'It is I, Tam Fairlie, Sergeant of the guard.' Tam found the missing spectacles, and gave them to the clerk. The clerk received them gratefully. With one damp hand he felt for them, and clasped them to his nose, and with the other pulled and pummelled at his clothes. 'Dear me, I thought . . . I thought . . . I thought to fetch a letter, that my lord has had me write for him, to take it to the town.' He gestured to the ink and papers on a little desk.

'And thought to use his close stool?' Tam supposed.

'I have not been well,' Scrymgeour said, defensively. The closet bore this out. 'And you yourself are here because . . .?'

'To mak the place secure for him. The physick wife is coming to advise his regimen. His lordship has instructed that they manna be disturbed.'

'Quite so, quite so. I see . . . I go . . . I am . . .' The small clerk turned bright pink, and clutched a sheaf of papers tightly to his chest. He asked no further questions in his haste to leave, but scuttled past the banquet and the flower-decked bed. Indeed, his sight was limited, a pitiful impediment, to plague a privy clerk. He saw the world but dimly, through thick slabs of glass.

'Have you done your office, now?' Tam pursued him playfully.

'Ah, yes, aye, indeed.'

'Then go about your business, sir. And take the scummer pan.'