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## **THE TURN OF MIDNIGHT**

Written by **Minette Walters**  
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*The* TURN *of*  
MIDNIGHT

Minette Walters is one of the world's best-selling crime writers.  
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*The* TURN *of*  
MIDNIGHT

  
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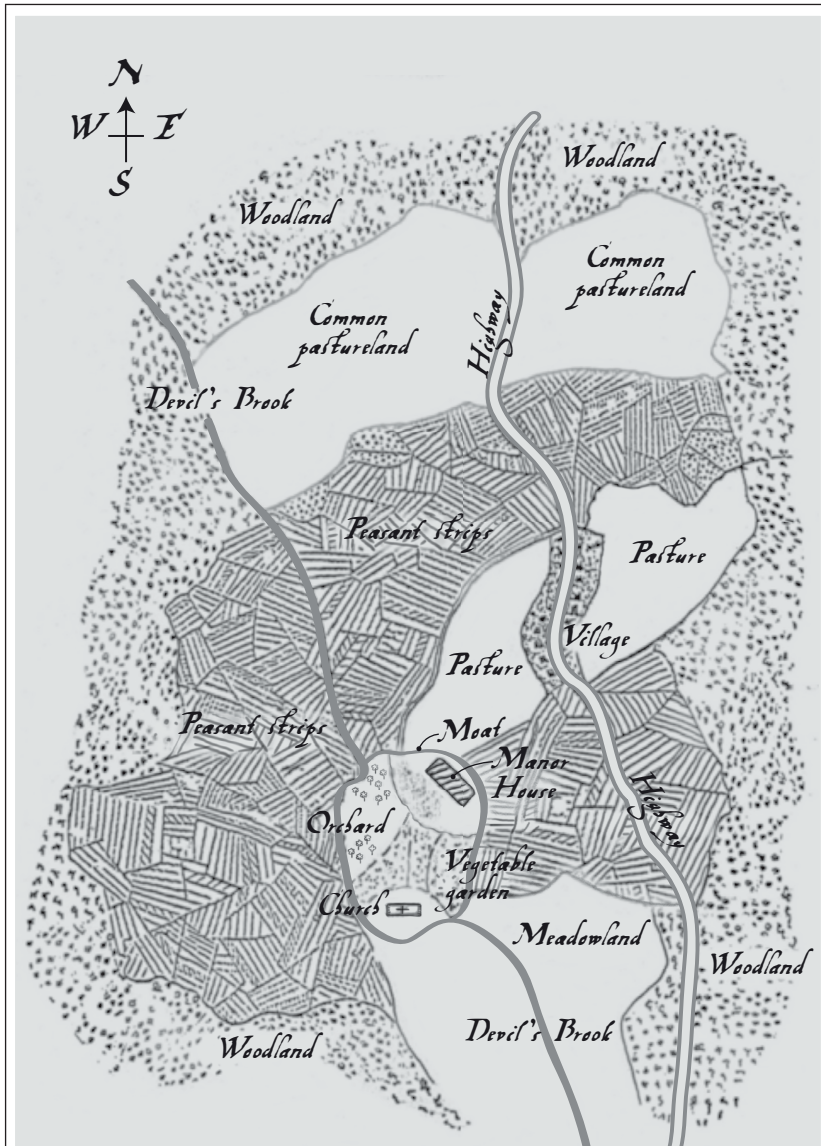
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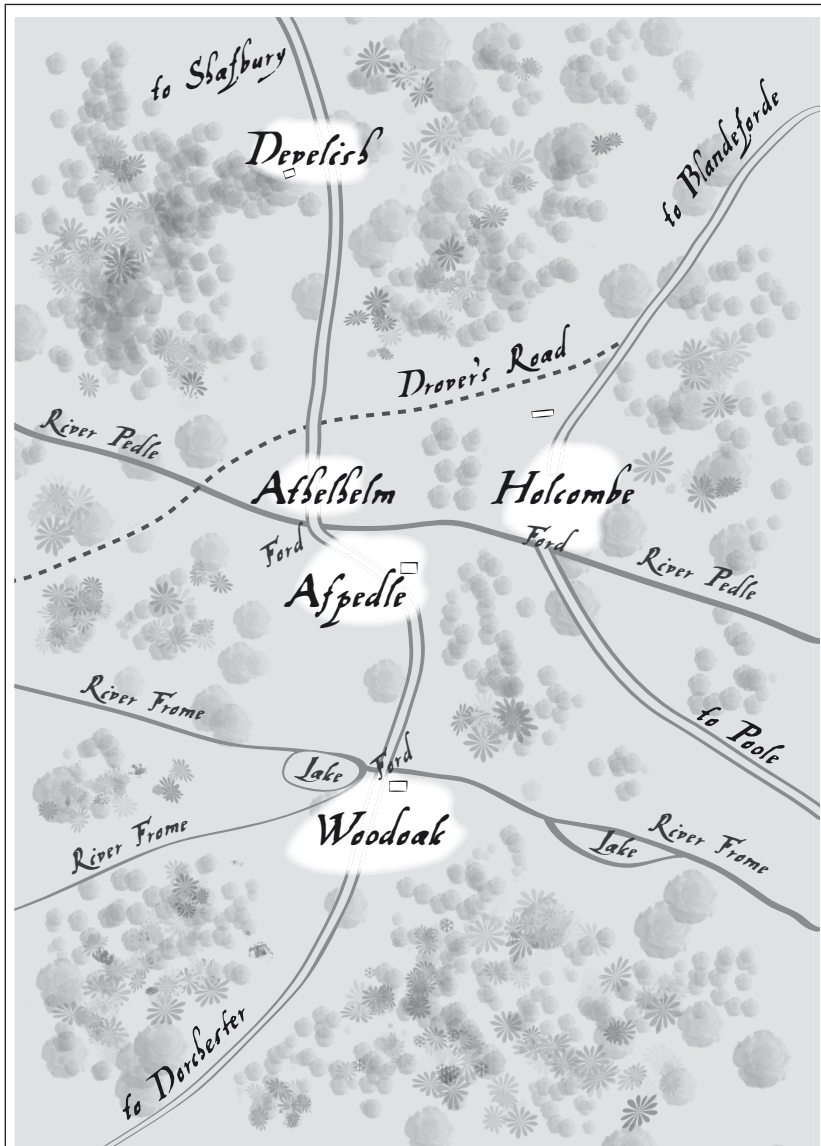
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Mike, Richard*

*and Patrick and Lynden in Australia*

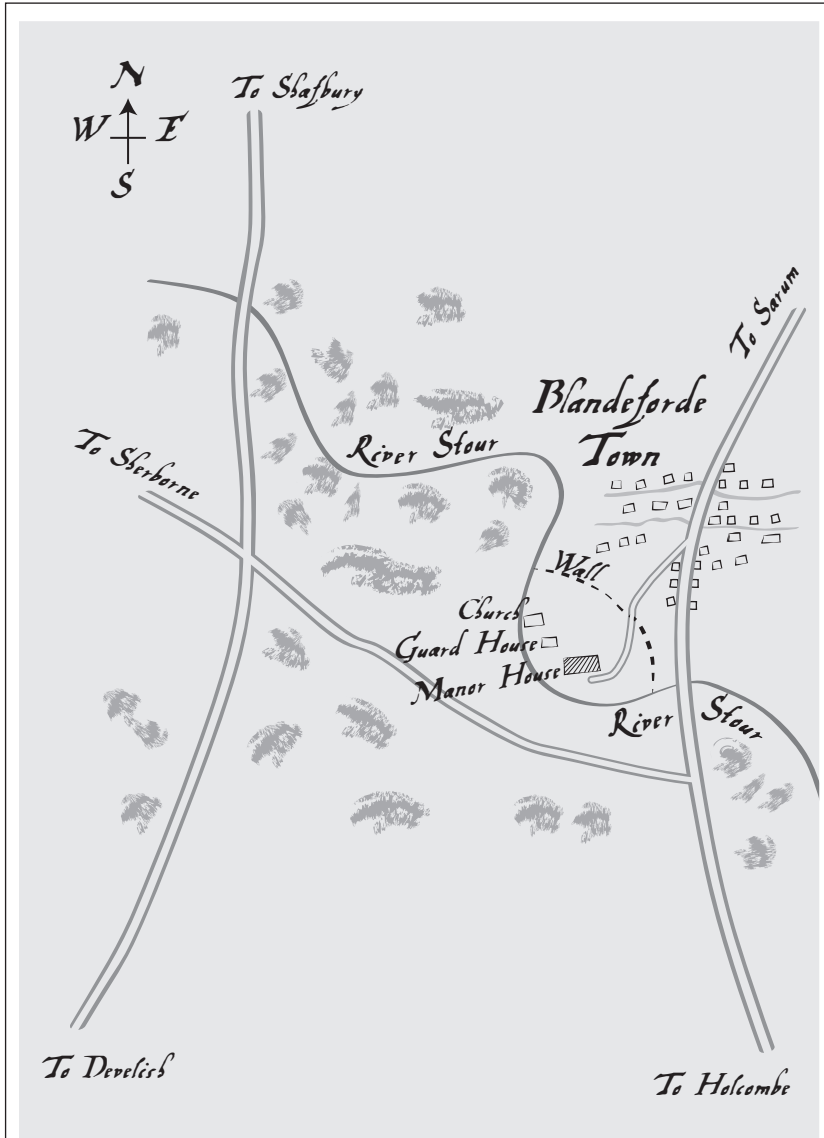


# Develich, 1348



# *Mid-Dorsetshire, 1348*





## Blandesforde, 1349

So great a plague has never been heard of from the beginning of the world to the present day . . . The sickness befell people everywhere . . . and generated such horror that children did not dare to visit their dying parents, nor parents their children, but fled for fear of contagion.

John of Fordun, *Scotichronicon*

Towns once packed with people were emptied of their inhabitants, and the plague spread so thickly that the living were hardly able to bury the dead. In some religious houses not more than two survived out of twenty. It was calculated by several people that barely a tenth of mankind remained alive . . . Rents dwindled and land was left untilled for want of tenants (who were nowhere to be found). And so much wretchedness followed these ills that afterwards the world could never return to its former state.

Thomas Walsingham, St Albans Abbey, *Chronicle*

Many villages and hamlets became deserted . . . Sheep and cattle went wandering over fields and through crops and there was no one to look after them . . . In the autumn [following the pestilence] no one could get a reaper for less than 8d, or a mower for less than 12d. Therefore, many crops perished in the fields for want of someone to gather them.

Henry Knighton, *Chronicle*

# Places, people and events from *The Last Hours*

## Places

**Melcombe**, the port in Dorsetshire where the Black Death first entered England on 24 June, 1348. Within days, many of the inhabitants were dead; within weeks, the sickness had spread to the rest of the county. One chronicler described it as ‘a pestilence that moved at the speed of a galloping horse’. All who contracted it died.

**Bradmayne**, a demesne of some four hundred and fifty people, situated a half-day’s ride from Melcombe, and an early victim of the pestilence. Upwards of one hundred perished in the second week of July, 1348, amongst them Lord Peter, the betrothed of Lady Eleanor of Develish.

**Develish**, a demesne of some two hundred people in mid-Dorsetshire, the fiefdom of Sir Richard, a brutish tyrant, who governed until his death from the pestilence in July, 1348. To make Develish

seem grander than it was, Sir Richard ordered his serfs to dig a moat around his manor house in 1338. This allowed the house and the handful of acres on which it stood to be quarantined when the pestilence came.

## The nobility

**Sir Richard of Develish** (48), an illiterate Norman, encumbered by debt and disowned by his family. To return himself to solvency in 1334, he took a fourteen-year-old Saxon bride with a generous dowry. Twenty years older than she, and finding her unappealing, he treats Lady Anne (a noble in her own right) as badly as he treats his serfs. Within a few months of marriage, and to avoid having to make monetary reparation for rape, he forced her to adopt and raise as her own a newborn girl, sired by him to the thirteen-year-old half-sister of his brother-in-law. Named Lady Eleanor, this is his only child. While on a visit to Bradmayne to formalise Eleanor's betrothal to Lord Peter, Sir Richard contracts the pestilence.

**Lady Anne of Develish** (28), educated, literate and skilled in medicine, she was married out of a nunnery and follows the teachings of Christ and not the Church. From the time she came to Develish as a young wife, she has worked quietly to improve the health, lives and knowledge of her serfs through education and care. To protect them from the pestilence, and in direct contradiction of the Church's teachings, she withdraws them inside the moat and burns the bridge to prevent anyone crossing; this includes her sick husband, who is left to die in the serfs' village beyond the moat.

She makes enemies of Sir Richard's steward, daughter and priest by doing this, but earns the gratitude and loyalty of her people. She assumes control of Develish on Sir Richard's death.

**Lady Eleanor of Develish** (14), only child of Sir Richard and adopted daughter of Lady Anne. Ignorant of her true parentage, she adores the father who spoils her and hates the mother who tries to discipline her. Wilful and cruel, her wild rages become worse after her father's death, and she denounces Lady Anne as a heretic when she learns that the woman is not her biological mother.

**Lord Bourne** (mid-60s), a King's treasurer from Wiltshire who plunders Dorsetshire gold with the help of eleven fighting men. On his first visit to Develish, he burns the village; on his second, his attempts to gain entry are resisted and he vows to take revenge.

## Freemen

**Father Anselm** (mid-60s), a drunken priest. He and Lady Anne are mutually distrustful. She believes him unfit to be a priest; he believes her to be a heretic. Lady Anne cannot forgive his exoneration of Sir Richard's brutal violation in 1338 of a ten-year-old serf girl, Abigail Startout, who died from internal rupturing and loss of blood.

**Hugh de Courtesmain** (29), a duplicitous Norman steward hired by Sir Richard to raise extra taxes on his serfs. He comes to Develish on the recommendation of Sir Richard's sister, Lady

Beatrix of Foxcote, who speaks highly of his zealotry in whipping defaulters. Arrogant, and with little time to establish his authority before Sir Richard dies, he finds himself friendless once Lady Anne assumes control of the demesne. Stripped of his position as steward and deeply resentful of Thaddeus Thurkell for taking his place, he looks to exploit Eleanor's hatred of both Lady Anne and Thaddeus Thurkell in order to wrest power back to himself.

## Serfs

**Thaddeus Thurkell** (21), a bastard-born slave who is hated by the man his mother marries. Dark-skinned, black-haired and a head taller than other men, he rarely speaks and gives respect only to Lady Anne, who has been tutoring him in secret for more than a decade when she makes him her steward after Sir Richard's death. As clever, literate and educated as she, he is unwavering in his loyalty and admiration for her, and together they strive to protect Develish while the pestilence rages outside. Their efforts are threatened when Thaddeus discovers the body of his half-brother Jacob, killed by a stab wound to his chest. Believing Lady Eleanor to be the culprit, and certain she intends to accuse the sons of Lady Anne's leading serfs of the crime, he persuades Lady Anne the death was an accident and, without her knowledge, removes the boys from the demesne. He leaves Lady Anne a letter excusing their absence on the need to replenish the demesne's diminishing stocks of food before winter sets in.

**Eva Thurkell** (37), mother to Thaddeus, she blames her son for her husband's anger at being duped into marrying a harlot

from another demesne. When Lady Anne appoints Thaddeus as her steward, and Eva learns how many secrets her son has been keeping from her (most notably his admiration for Lady Anne), she develops an intense and bitter jealousy of the woman.

**Will Thurkell** (44), an aggressive bully whose greatest frustration stems from the recognition that an unknown man's bastard is more intelligent than he is. As resentful as his wife of the secret teaching and encouragement Lady Anne has given Thaddeus, he aids and abets Eva in trying to unseat him as steward.

**Gyles Startout** (48), an English serf who was raised to the position of paid fighting man in Sir Richard's retinue in 1338, when Lady Anne demanded that her husband recompense him for the violation of his daughter Abigail. The preferment allows Gyles to accompany his hated master wherever he goes, and he does so willingly to report what he sees to Lady Anne. He is the lone survivor of Sir Richard's ill-fated visit to Bradmayne and waits for fourteen days to prove he's free of the pestilence before Lady Anne permits him to cross the moat. She appoints him her captain of arms and he trains the men of Develish in the use of weapons in order to defend the demesne against attack.

**John Trueblood, James Buckler, Adam Catchpole and Alleyn Startout** (brother to Gyles), leaders amongst the serfs and members of Lady Anne's advisory council.

**Martha Startout** (wife to Gyles) and **Clara Trueblood** (wife to John), leaders of the female house servants.

**Isabella Startout** (13), daughter of Gyles and Martha Startout, and younger sister of Abigail, she is chambermaid to both Lady Anne and Lady Eleanor. Recognising her cleverness, Lady Anne teaches her to read and write and she, in turn, teaches other servants in the household. The affection Lady Anne has for her causes jealousy in Eleanor. In the final pages of *The Last Hours*, Eleanor takes Isabella prisoner and tortures the maid before Lady Anne can rescue her.

**Robert Startout** (11), son of Alleyn and Susan Startout, cousin to Isabella and nephew of Gyles. Because he has some sympathy for her, he speaks on Lady Eleanor's behalf when she is tried by the serfs for her wounding of Isabella. His intervention is appreciated by Isabella, who has some understanding of why her young mistress is so disturbed.

### The five young men who depart the demesne with Thaddeus

Naive and bored, all are easily seduced into furtive assignations with Eleanor inside the church. Careless of her motives, they submit to her sexual games and find themselves implicated in the death of Jacob. While maintaining their innocence, they are nevertheless convinced that she plans to accuse them. At first reluctant to be taken from the demesne by Thaddeus, they commit themselves to searching out supplies for Develish.



**Ian and Olyver Startout** (15), identical twin sons of Gyles and Martha Startout, and older brothers to Isabella. Ian is the natural leader; Olyver the follower.

**Edmund Trueblood** (15), son of John and Clara Trueblood. As *The Last Hours* ends, he reveals the secret of Eleanor's birth to Thaddeus, having learnt it from his mother, who acted as wet nurse when Eleanor was first brought to Develish.

**Peter Catchpole** (16), son of Adam and Rosa Catchpole. Lazy by nature, he responds better to Thaddeus's leadership than his father's, though his commitment to proving himself is never as strong as his friends'.

**Joshua Buckler** (15), son of James and Jenny Buckler, he is the least confident of the youths. He gains in self-esteem when Thaddeus puts him in charge of seven hunting dogs found roaming a deserted demesne.

AUTUMN AND WINTER, 1348

(EXTRACT FROM A PRIVATE JOURNAL KEPT BY LADY ANNE  
OF DEVELISH)

*The night of the eleventh day of September, 1348*

**W**hen the hourglass tilts, midnight will have turned and  
a new day started. Yet I still can't bring myself to move.  
Once done, this cannot be undone, and the guilt will be mine.  
I should have been more of a mother to Eleanor, for I knew  
better than anyone the vileness of her father's nature. But would  
she have listened if I'd warned her that his love for her was  
unnatural? Will she listen now?

*I must put an end to indecision. Despite the vicious wounds  
Eleanor inflicted on her, Isabella Startout came in search of help  
for her, and the maid's sweet generosity should be my guide. In  
my heart I know I must act. To do nothing will be to betray the  
girl I have called daughter all these years.*

*God forgive me. I can surely bear Eleanor's hatred more  
easily than she will bear the slur of incest if this misbegotten  
child is born.*

*Mea culpa.*

# One

## *Develish, Dorsetshire*

THE NIGHT SEEMED DARKER WHEN Lady Anne took her leave of Eleanor and stepped away from the serf's hut. Perhaps she'd tarried longer than she realised in her attempts to persuade the girl to understand the stark the choices that faced her. There was no telling time with the moon hidden by cloud. She pulled her cloak tighter about herself as protection against the rising wind and felt her way blindly along the path to the manor house. Behind her, the church was lost in blackness; ahead of her, the glow of the six candles she lit each night in the south-facing window of her chamber was just discernible through the panes overlooking the forecourt. Their feeble light was all that was visible in the enshrouding darkness.

Only John Trueblood knew of her visit, for he'd had to open the padlock on the door of Eleanor's prison. She didn't doubt he would speak of it to Clara but hoped both would believe that her sorrow at being disowned by her adopted daughter had compelled her to come. Certainly, John had seen her sadness when she left; he'd given her arm a clumsy pat and begged her not to take Lady

Eleanor's hate-filled words of that afternoon to heart. Once the girl's strange madness passed, she would know that Milady was her true mother. Lady Anne thanked him for his kindness, but tears clouded her eyes as she made her way back to the house. She doubted Eleanor would ever come to see that an abortive of angelica, wormwood and pennyroyal was a gift of love and not hate.

She had left the girl to administer the purgative herself, saying the choice of what to do must be hers. If Eleanor decided to keep the baby, she must live with the consequences afterwards because Lady Anne could not protect her from gossip once her belly began to swell in earnest. She had warned Eleanor against repeating the lies she'd told Isabella about being raped by serf boys because all would guess the truth as soon as the infant was born. There wasn't a woman in Develish who wouldn't be able to name the real sire when she saw the baby's features and worked out from the date of delivery that Sir Richard, the girl's own father, was still in Develish at the time of conception.

She trod softly as she approached the forecourt, anxious not to be seen coming from the direction of Eleanor's prison, but loose stones shifted beneath her feet and her heart skipped a beat when a beam of light shone briefly on her face as the shutter of a lantern was opened and closed. It was impossible to make out who was holding it until she heard the voice of young Robert Startout. He sounded very frightened. 'Oh, milady, milady,' he stammered. 'My Uncle Gyles has need of you. He sent my mother to your chamber, but you weren't there—and nor could she find you anywhere else.'

She placed her palm against his cheek. 'I'm here now, Robert. Where is your uncle?'

The boy caught her hand and urged her towards the moat. 'Guarding the northern step, milady. Bandits have come across the hills from the south. My father and Master Catchpole say they're circling the valley to come at us on all sides.'

It was a second or two before the import of his words registered with Lady Anne. Her mind was so full of Eleanor's woes that she couldn't conceive of worse troubles elsewhere. Her steps faltered. 'Bandits?'

'Yes, milady. My father guards the eastern step, overlooking the highway, and he saw men in numbers some half-hour since; Master Catchpole likewise from his place on the southern step.' Robert sighed in relief as a shadow moved towards them. 'My uncle can tell you better than I.'

Gyles ducked his head to Lady Anne and placed a comforting hand on Robert's shoulder. 'Don't fret before you need to,' he urged the lad. 'Are you willing to be my messenger again? Then wait by the buttress until you hear my signal. When I whistle, rouse the men in the house and send them to me here. They must bring what weapons they can and find their way without lanterns or candles. Understood?'

Lady Anne waited until the boy was out of earshot. She could barely breathe for the sudden panic that gripped her heart. 'Is this true, Gyles?'

'It is, milady. Alleyn and Adam are certain of what they saw. They've been uncommonly vigilant since a torch flared briefly to life on the road to the south. The light lasted a bare second or two, but it showed a multitude of men beneath it. It speaks of what we've always feared—an army of serfs in search of food.' He put a hand beneath her elbow to steady her. 'Our best help will be rain. They'll not be able to burn us out if God brings a downpour.'

‘And if He doesn’t?’

‘We must fight, though I question whether our people have the will to kill Englishmen. I worry they’ll hesitate if a Dorsetshire voice begs for mercy.’ He felt a tremor of shock run through her. ‘You need to be brave, milady. Our people will lose heart if they see you afraid.’

He asked too much of her. ‘But I *am* afraid,’ she whispered. ‘Any courage I had is gone. I thought I could play the part of liege lord, but I was wrong. I am quite unable to shoulder the many burdens the position places on me.’

Gyles guessed Eleanor’s madness was the true cause of Milady’s anguish, and he cursed the girl roundly in his head. It seemed the pain she’d visited on his daughter Isabella wasn’t enough for her. She must destroy the people of Develish too by destroying their mistress. Without care for the impropriety of the gesture, he placed his arm around Lady Anne’s waist and drew her close.

‘I remember when you first came to Develish as a young bride,’ he told her gently. ‘You were barely older than my Isabella is now. I was on this forecourt, summoned to watch a flogging, and I recall the look in your eye as you stepped from the wagon and saw the poor wretch who was being whipped. I knew then we’d found a friend. Inside two months such brutal flayings had stopped and you’d drawn Sir Richard’s ire onto yourself. Will you show a lesser spirit tonight before a ragtag band of thieves?’

Lady Anne raised the hem of her cloak to her eyes. The last man who had held her in such a way had been her father. She took a long tremulous breath and raised her head. ‘I will try my best, Gyles. Tell me what you would have me do and I will do it.’

Gyles didn’t doubt her, for his faith in her was very great. ‘Assist Robert in waking the house and then barricade yourself

inside with the women and children, milady. Our men will fight better for knowing their families are under your protection.’ He narrowed his eyes to stare across the moat, but there was no seeing the road that led to the village nor the land that lay on either side of it. ‘You won’t know if we’ve succeeded until dawn breaks, so be ruthless in keeping the door barred. In this darkness, you’ll not be able to tell one Dorsetshire voice from another.’

Lady Anne didn’t argue with him. He knew as well as she that their men would be no better at telling friend from foe. To fight blindly was madness, yet what else could they do? There was no future for Develish if the walls were breached and the pestilence entered. She breathed a silent prayer that Alleyn and Adam were wrong, but even that hope was extinguished when a light, as small as a pinprick, appeared in the blackness ahead of them. By its direction, it seemed to be on the edge of the village but, as they watched, it began to move, growing brighter as it came towards them.

‘What is that?’ she whispered.

‘A burning torch, milady.’

‘Who carries it?’

Gyles looked at the distorted shapes that eddied and flowed beneath the flickering flame and, with a sigh, he eased away from her and took his bow from his shoulder. He’d left it too late. ‘The people we dread, milady. They’ve circled the valley faster than I expected. I see five or six in this group alone.’

‘Why do they alert us to their presence?’

‘As a signal to others in the valley that the attack is about to begin.’ Gyles looked towards the west, searching for signs of movement on the peasant strips. But the night was impenetrable. ‘You must leave,’ he said. ‘Go. Encourage our men to fight and



use your cleverness against these thieves to keep our women and children safe. Even under siege inside the house, a hundred can last well into the spring on the supplies that are left.'

With the hood of her cloak about her face, Lady Anne's expression was hidden from him, but he felt the brush of her fingers against his cheek. 'You are my dearest friend,' she whispered. 'Guard yourself well this night.'

Gyles forced a smile into his voice. 'Be sure of it, milady.'

*Be sure of it . . .* Lady Anne knew him too well to be deceived by such lightness of tone. He was bidding her farewell and a terrible panic overwhelmed her at the thought of trying to protect the people of Develish alone. Her steps faltered. Was God not content with death from the pestilence that He must set survivors against each other until no human life remained? Where was His love in this terrible world?

A small hand slipped into hers. 'Use some of my strength, milady,' whispered Robert. 'You will fall otherwise. Do you think Thaddeus knows there are bandits in the valley?'

The question was a strange one. Did he hope Thaddeus knew of their plight and would come to their rescue? 'Have you missed him, Robert?'

'Yes, milady, but he's foolish to lead his horse instead of riding it. He'll be attacked more easily on foot. My uncle should call out a warning.'

She squeezed his hand by way of comfort. 'Your uncle will do what is right. He always does.'

'I don't think so, milady, or he'd have done it already. He pretends he can see in the dark, but he can't. My father's the same. Me, I'd tell Thaddeus to stop being such a numbskull. The way he's walking even I could put an arrow through his heart.'

Lady Anne told herself it was fantasy, the imaginings of a frightened child, but she drew him to a halt. 'Look again,' she urged, turning him towards the moat. 'Describe what you see. Is it one man or many?'

'One, milady. He walks with his arms spread wide like Jesus on the cross. In his right hand he holds reins and in his left a torch. I think he worries the flame will frighten the horse. He wears a high hat and a long coat.'

'Can you really make out so much? Are you sure it's Thaddeus?'

'If it's not, it's someone tall who moves like him, milady. Now he's stopped to let the horse crop some grass at the edge of the road . . . and he's staring at the ground the way Thaddeus does when he's thinking.'

Lady Anne yearned to believe him. 'It's a strange hour for him to come. He knows better than any that all in Develish will be asleep.'

'Except the men on the guard steps, milady,' said Robert matter-of-factly. 'If my cousins are dead, Thaddeus will want my uncle to hear of it first.'

The same thought had occurred to Lady Anne. But who to trust when her own sight was better at reading ledgers than seeing into the distance? 'Give me your lantern,' she said with sudden decision, 'and then take your place beside the buttress. I'm putting much faith in you, Robert. If you're wrong and your uncle is right, there will be minutes only to rouse our men to defend the walls.'

'I'm not wrong, milady,' he answered confidently, letting go her hand, 'but don't blame me if there are bandits out there as well.'



Gyles lowered his bow when the flickering torchlight showed him his nephew was right. At fifty paces there was no mistaking Thaddeus's height and long, loping stride, never mind he was dressed like a lord in a wide-skirted, fur-lined coat with a beaver hat atop a chaperon hood on his head. 'My age is catching up with me, milady. I mistook the horse for men.'

Lady Anne suppressed a smile. 'I, too, my friend. There's less to fear than we thought.'

'Except bad news,' murmured Gyles. 'He wouldn't come when all are abed if he had something good to impart.'

Lady Anne handed him the closed lantern. 'Should we open it to show him we're here?'

'Not yet, milady. Let's hear what he has to say first.' He raised his voice as Thaddeus approached to within twenty paces of the moat. 'Are you well, Thaddeus?' he called.

A familiar voice came back to them. 'Is that you, Gyles? I am blinded by this torchlight but I feared an arrow through my heart if I approached unannounced.' He stooped to quench the flames in the dirt of the road. 'Are you alone, my friend?'

The careful way he asked the question persuaded Lady Anne to step behind Gyles. She was so slight his body hid hers easily. 'Say you are,' she whispered. 'He'll tell you nothing otherwise.'

'There are guards on the steps,' Gyles replied. 'If you don't want your words overheard, you must come to the moat and keep your voice low. What troubles you?'

Lady Anne heard the stamp of hooves as Thaddeus brought the horse to a halt on the bank, and the rattle of the bridle as it lowered its head to drink. 'First give me news of Develish,' he said. 'Is it as it was when we left? I saw candles in the window of Lady Anne's chamber. Does she look forward to our return?'

‘Of course,’ answered Gyles in obvious surprise. ‘We all do. Why would it be otherwise?’

There was a small hesitation before Thaddeus answered. ‘No reason. I promised your sons I would ask is all. They worry that you and Martha are angry because they didn’t seek your blessing before they left.’

‘I would have refused it if they had.’

‘They guessed as much.’

Gyles gave a grunt of amusement. ‘You put the fear of God into me by coming at this hour. I thought you were here to tell me they were dead.’

‘Far from it. All the boys live and are well. Develish can be proud of them. I could not have asked for braver companions. Their courage in the face of the pestilence has been as great as yours, and we’ve found plentiful supplies to restore the stocks here. Where people die, animals thrive and grain goes uneaten.’

‘Is it bad out there, my friend?’

Lady Anne heard a tired sigh. ‘It’s a wasteland, Gyles. Death sweeps all before it. I can neither rid myself of its smell nor erase the memories of what it leaves behind. To survive is to know damnation. This night I have walked in Hell.’

The words were so bleak that Gyles opened the shutter of the lantern and held it aloft. Thaddeus had removed his hat and pushed back his hood, and the beam of light shone on his drawn, exhausted face. Seeing him flinch at the brightness, Gyles dipped the beam to the water. ‘There was a glow in the sky to the south some five hours ago,’ he said. ‘I guessed it was Athelhelm being set ablaze. Was that your doing?’

‘It was.’

‘For what reason?’

‘To create safe passage along the highway from Afpedle to Develish. I would have delayed the burning another few days if I could, but the rain is almost upon us and would have made the task impossible.’

It took little imagination for Gyles to read between the lines of what he said. ‘Is the pestilence in Athelhelm? Are all infected?’

Thaddeus nodded. ‘All those that remained.’

‘And the dead lay unburied?’

‘Some had been placed in a communal grave but most were abandoned to die inside their huts. The body of a monk who’d been caring for them lay in a doorway, his face eaten by scavengers. I could see no course but to cleanse the village with fire. I called a warning of what I was about to do but none answered or came out.’

‘So what troubles you?’

There was a long pause. ‘A man begged for mercy even as I prepared to throw a flaming torch onto his thatch. I saw him through his open door. He was lying on rushes and turned his head to look at me. I could have stayed my hand but I didn’t.’

‘Did he try to rise?’

‘No.’

‘Then perhaps death was the mercy he wanted.’

‘He thought I was the Devil come to burn him. I read it in his eyes.’ Thaddeus cursed quietly to himself. ‘Pay no heed to me. I promised myself I wouldn’t talk of it. You dealt with worse when Sir Richard and your fellow soldiers were dying.’

Gyles recalled how Thaddeus had crossed the moat at night to keep him company while he tended the sick and then buried them. The younger man had always kept his distance but his presence had been a comfort. ‘And I was grateful to you for listening to

me. A trouble shared is a trouble halved.' Gyles paused. 'Were my sons with you?'

'No. Their consciences were pricked enough by what I asked them to do in Afpedle.' Thaddeus painted a brief picture of the previous fourteen days, detailing the demesnes they'd visited and the supplies of food they'd found. He spoke of finding a wagon and grain at Holcombe and two hundred sheep at Afpedle, but his descriptions of the smell of corruption that lingered over all the demesnes turned the stomachs of his listeners, as did his warnings about infestations of rats in the villages where people had died. 'The stores of grain attract them, and with more food they seem to be breeding faster. I don't know if they're spreading the disease—or how—but we found a handful of survivors in Woodoak who believe they're the carriers. You'd do well to keep a close watch for any that swim the moat.'

'There were rats in Bradmayne.'

'I remember you telling me.' Thaddeus fell silent for a moment to order his thoughts. 'Ian said you're never been bitten by fleas. Is that true?'

'It is.'

'The survivors in Woodoak spoke of how sufferers scratched themselves before they fell sick, and how the skin of the living crawled after touching the dead. Full immersion brought relief, as it did for you in Devil's Brook. Do you recall if Sir Richard or any of your companions complained of itching?'

'They all did. Bradmayne was a filthy place. Fleas and lice were as prevalent as rats. Sir Richard didn't know whether to envy me my thick skin or curse me for escaping my share of the bites. It's a good guess, Thaddeus, but is it true?'

Another weary sigh. ‘I don’t know, but it’s the only explanation I can think of for why the pestilence moves so freely between demesnes. Rats stay close to food but fleas travel with their hosts. Talk it through with Lady Anne. She’ll know better than I whether such a thing is possible. We discussed many times how a merchant or pedlar might carry the sickness without succumbing himself.’

Gyles half expected Lady Anne to declare herself, since there was no reason for her to remain hidden. But she didn’t. ‘Let me summon her so that you can talk it through with her yourself.’

Thaddeus’s refusal was immediate. ‘There’s no time. I must leave again within the hour. I came for horse collars, harnesses and rope to pull the wagon from Holcombe. I believe we stored all the tackle in Sir Richard’s chamber. I see you decided to leave the raft in the water, so can you send across enough for two horses? Also, put your mind to thinking which route we should take out of Holcombe. Do you have a good enough memory of the highways from when you travelled with Sir Richard to say if there’s a throughway to Afpedle? It would help if we could herd the sheep and drive the wagon together.’

Gyles pictured the roads in his mind. ‘I remember a drovers’ lane that leads to the west some five miles down the highway south out of Holcombe, and another a mile or so to the north which comes out above Athelhelm . . . but I wouldn’t advise taking either of them. You’ll become bogged down in mud when the rain comes. Your best bet would be to haul the wagon to Athelhelm and meet the sheep there. How far is it from your camp?’

‘Three thousand paces . . . maybe four . . . but the path along the bank is barely wide enough to take a horse. It won’t take the wagon.’

‘The river might. It’s not deep and has a gravel bottom if memory serves me well. I recall Sir Richard riding along it once

and marvelling at the trout swimming ahead of him.' Gyles shrugged. 'The work will be arduous but it'll make your journey a great deal safer than negotiating passage through demesnes you don't know. Would you like my help with the task? I'm sure Milady will grant me leave to accompany you.'

Lady Anne heard a low laugh. 'Nothing would please your sons less, old man. They want the glory for themselves.' Another hesitation. 'Is Milady well?'

'She is, and has promised a celebration to honour you and our sons when you return. She has named you as heroes and lights six candles in your memory every night. You saw them in her window as you came along the highway.'

'I did,' said Thaddeus. 'It's a kind thought, but a foolish one, perhaps, since it speaks of the presence of people here. What of Lady Eleanor? How does she fare?'

Gyles was unsure how much to say until Lady Anne whispered that he should be truthful. 'Not well. She seems to have lost her wits. In the space of a few hours this day, she attacked and wounded my Isabella; declared herself free of Lady Anne, claiming her real mother to be a child under My Lord of Foxcote's protection; and threatened to have us all burnt at the stake for refusing to acknowledge her as the true mistress of Develish. Her greatest rage was for Lady Anne's plan to give us our freedom. She'd rather watch us die of the pestilence than release ourselves from bondage.'

Thaddeus asked how bad Isabella's injuries were. 'I hate to think of her in pain, Gyles.'

'As do we all. She's pale and weak but able to walk. She took fifteen pricks from a bodkin but none was deep. Milady and Martha are caring for her and say she'll be recovered within a week.'



‘I’m happy to hear that. Her brothers will be, too. Did Lady Eleanor give a reason for her behaviour?’

‘Only mad rantings about Lady Anne usurping power that should have been hers. She seems unable to understand that, by keeping the secret of her birth all these years, it was Lady Anne who gave her legitimacy. Your stepfather pointed it out to her. You wouldn’t have recognised him, Thaddeus. He spoke in praise of you, saying he’d rather bend his knee to you than the ungrateful mongrel Lady Anne has raised.’

There was another quiet laugh. ‘I recognise very little of what you’re telling me, Gyles. How long has Eleanor known that Milady is not her mother?’

‘The mistress told her this afternoon in the hopes of curing her madness. Martha says she’s been acting strangely since her father died but never with such lunacy as today. She promises to have Milady condemned as a heretic if she’s ever given the chance.’

‘Has she been confined?’

‘In a serf’s hut next to John Trueblood. The enclosure has rung all afternoon with her curses and complaints.’

‘What form do her complaints take?’

It was Gyles’s turn to be amused. ‘Whatever comes to mind. Her worst slurs are against the men of the demesne—yourself included. When we’re not cowards and thieves, we’re base-born slaves with the appetites of dogs.’

‘Is there sympathy for her?’

‘Only from my daughter and young Robert. They see virtue in her that others don’t, never mind Isabella was within her rights to demand a stronger punishment than Robert’s suggestion of a day’s imprisonment for each prick she made. No one wants her released before her madness passes. She’s vicious enough to

kill next time, and she'll receive no mercy from me if she harms Isabella again.'

'Then detain her until your twins return. They've grown in courage and resolve through the death and misery they've seen and won't tolerate anger against their sister from such as Lady Eleanor. Make sure she understands that.'

'You ask for the moon. She refuses to listen to anything serfs have to say.'

'Will she listen to Master de Courtesmain?'

'He's afraid of his own shadow. He can barely stand for trembling at the thought of the vengeance the High Sheriff will wreak on us for daring to put Sir Richard's daughter on trial. You did Milady no service by handing him your position, Thaddeus. John Trueblood would have made a better steward than the two-faced Frenchman.'

'I thought it wiser to keep him at Lady Anne's side. He has a jealous nature and would have caused trouble for anyone else in the position.'

Gyles nodded agreement before changing the subject. 'How long before we see you again?'

'I'll send your sons and the sons of your friends with the sheep from Afpedle in three days' time. They'll need pens on this side of the moat to take the flock, and a shelter for themselves from the rain. Can the men of Develish build so much in so short a time? And will Milady allow them to cross the moat?'

'No reason why not. She gave permission for you to cross when I returned with Sir Richard. Will you be with the boys?'

'No. I'll bring the wagon later when I've worked out how to get it here. You should make them wait two weeks on this side of the moat. I'm as certain as I can be that they don't have the

pestilence, but you should still be cautious. They can use the time to slaughter the sheep and send the carcasses across on the raft.'

'Sheep won't be easy to drive through rain. A man should be in charge of such an undertaking. Let me return with you and take the lead.'

There was a brief pause before Thaddeus answered. 'I don't say I'm not tempted, but your sons have worked hard to prove themselves. Don't think of them as boys, Gyles. Greet them as men and you won't be disappointed.' He urged Gyles to make haste to bring him rope, collars and harnesses, also oats for the horse if there were any to spare. 'People will expect answers if they find me here, and I'm not a great talker. Any one of my companions will tell our story better than I can.'

Gyles made one last attempt to persuade Lady Anne to reveal herself. She'd seemed so keen to speak with Thaddeus when he'd first approached the moat. 'At least let me wake Lady Anne and bring her out alone. She has felt the loss of your counsel very deeply, Thaddeus.'

'And I hers . . . but I want no sweeter reminders of what I'm missing when even your gravelly old chords are tempting me to linger. Assure her of my loyalty when you tell her of this visit, but do not disturb her sleep on my behalf.'

'Is there anything else you'd like me to say?'

'Nothing you can deliver without blushing, old man. I find I'm more attached to Develish than I thought. It's not easy to break the bonds that hold us to the people and places we know.'



Lady Anne walked in Gyles's shadow to the house, slipping through the door first before instructing him to fetch the harness

and rope while she looked for oats. In the kitchen she made a package of bread, moistened with cold potage—all that was left from the night before—and added a precious hard-boiled egg, pickled in brine. Before she tied the corners of the small sacking bag, she hurried to the steward's office, lit a candle and penned a note which she folded and placed across the egg where Thaddeus would find it.

It was hard to know what Gyles made of this quiet visit by night, but Lady Anne thought she understood it. Almost every question Thaddeus asked had been designed to find out if Eleanor had made accusations of rape or murder against his companions, and Lady Anne knew he would not allow them to return if she had. She wished she could share everything with him, for he deserved an explanation of Eleanor's behaviour, but the girl's secret wasn't hers to tell. Instead, she prayed the words she had written would persuade him she had uncovered the truth about Jacob, and that Eleanor would cause him and his companions no more trouble.

Would he appreciate, or even understand, her need of his support? she wondered. She hoped most earnestly that he did, for a heaviness in her heart told her he was undecided whether to cross the moat himself once the sheep and the grain were safely delivered. He'd been so firm in his resistance to seeing her that, despite his words to Gyles, she feared his true intention was indeed to cut his ties with Develish.



*My Dear Friend,*

*I write this letter in haste while Gyles gathers what you need for your journey. I pray you find it and will be*

*comforted by my words when the sun comes up. I believe you removed yourself and the boys in secret to keep the harmony of Develish from being fractured, and I thank you for your kindness in doing so. I regret most deeply the manner of Jacob's passing—the details of which are known to me—but be assured he rests in peace and the problems you foresaw have not arisen. No one questions that his death was an accident or that your enterprise is noble—to seek supplies for Develish.*

*I envy you your freedom, Dear Friend, and will not take it from you at any price, but remember the hearts that beat for you in Develish. My guess is that you plan to leave again when you have fulfilled your promise to bring us food, but I beg you not to do so in a hurry. It will sadden me terribly if you arrive and depart a second time by night with only a wagon of grain to show you ever returned. Can you even begin to understand how much you've been missed?*

*You and I have achieved so much together and I believe you find my counsel wise. Please do not vanish again without allowing me to give you the benefit of my thoughts. You and I have long shared dreams of freedom for our people, but they will have little meaning if you are not amongst us when the time comes for us to break the bonds that keep us here. We depend on your strength more than you realise.*

*Perhaps you believe your life less necessary to the demesne than husbands and fathers like Gyles Startout and John Trueblood? If so, you are wrong. I have much need of you.*

*Yours in sincerity,*

*Anne*



It was an hour before Gyles came looking for Lady Anne in the steward's office to say Thaddeus had departed again. She was sitting by candlelight, drawing up plans to build pens outside the moat, and she smiled when he spoke of his joy on hearing that his sons were well. 'I'm glad for you, Gyles.'

'But now I have more reason to worry for their safety, milady. I informed Thaddeus of My Lord of Bourne's attack on us, and he shocked me by saying that My Lord and his fighting men were in Holcombe two days ago, a bare forty-eight hours after leaving here. He assured me that he and our sons weren't seen, but Develish will suffer badly if he's wrong. Bourne has only to bring the six of them here in chains and you'll be forced to bargain their lives against the two hundred inside the moat.'

Lady Anne's smile died. She had all but forgotten the evil old man in the tumultuous ups and downs of the day, yet she didn't doubt he would avenge himself on Develish if he could. To have his Norman army repelled by English serfs would have dented his pride, and his greed for the gold he believed to be in Develish's treasury would not have diminished. 'We watched him travel north. How could he have reached Holcombe so quickly? We killed four of his horses and injured more.'

'But not his tow-horses, milady. My guess is he did what I advised Thaddeus against and took a drovers' route. They're the shortest links between highways and, without livestock to hinder him and with enough men to keep his wheels turning, his carriage

could manage them easily. Being a thief, he'd prefer them. He's less likely to be seen or challenged if he stays off the public roads.'

'But why Holcombe?'

'Thaddeus says it's all but abandoned, milady. He watched it several days ago and believes only serfs remain in the manor house. He saw horses in the fields so I'm guessing My Lord has taken them to replace the ones he lost. Weapons and harness too, since no peasant would have the courage to gainsay him if he demanded them from their master's armoury. I fear our triumph against him was short-lived and it won't be long before we see him again—with or without Thaddeus and our sons.'

'Did you explain that to Thaddeus?'

'I did, and repeated my offer to accompany him, even suggesting we take James Buckler and Adam Catchpole. With more guards, we'll have a better chance of bringing the supplies home safely.'

'How did he answer?'

'He said you wouldn't permit it, milady. The defence of Develish is more important than sheep herding. He's right, of course, but it doesn't stop me worrying.'

'Nor I, Gyles. I hoped this day would end in the happy knowledge that all six are alive, but it seems our anxiety for them must continue a while longer.'

'Thaddeus looks to the weather to protect him, milady. He offered me a wager that Develish serfs and Afpedle sheep will take driving rain more easily than My Lord of Bourne and his men.'

Lady Anne smiled. 'Then I'll pray for a storm.'

Gyles studied her silently for several moments. 'You were quick to step behind me when Thaddeus approached, milady. What made you think he wouldn't speak freely if he knew you were there?'

There was barely a pause before she answered. 'He asked if you were alone. I understood why when he told you about burning Athelhelm. It's not something he'd want anyone else to hear.'

'Was that your impression, milady? I thought he seemed more worried about the welcome our sons would receive.'

Lady Anne placed her elbows on the desk and rested her cheek against her hands. If she confided in anyone, it would be Gyles. He had been her friend and adviser for ten years, and her affection for him and his family ran very deep. But how could she be honest without revealing why Thaddeus had removed his sons from the demesne? Gyles's pride would be much diminished if he learnt of Ian and Olyver's readiness to be whipped by Eleanor in return for a touch of her breasts.

She recalled the words Thaddeus had written in a letter Isabella had insisted on showing her when she came to tell her of Eleanor's pregnancy—*I do what I do to free your brothers and their friends, not to ensnare them in more intrigue*—and the sentiment was surely as true tonight as it had been two weeks ago.

'You must blame me for Thaddeus's caution,' she said. 'I refused him permission to leave during Jacob's funeral because I felt it spoke of a lack of respect for his brother. I imagine he came to discover if I'd made good on my threat to post him and your sons as absconders if they disobeyed me.'

Disbelief showed in Gyles's eyes. 'You're accomplished in many things, milady, but not in telling falsehoods. Perhaps it would be better to tell our people he came for horse collars and to request that sheep pens be built.'

'I'm sure that's wise.'

He made to turn away but changed his mind. 'Have I done something wrong, milady, failed you in some way, that you think



I can't be trusted with the truth? If I frightened you with talk of bandits, I most humbly apologise. Young Robert was right to say my sight is not what it was.'

Lady Anne shook her head in immediate denial. 'You're my closest friend and I would trust you with my life.' She searched his face for a moment. 'Let me pose a different conundrum for you. Would you have me tell you the mysteries of your wife's heart if I knew them?'

Gyles pulled a twisted smile. 'I'd not hear anything good about myself if you did.'

'Then it wouldn't be truth—just words said in a moment of irritation—and my betrayal would be the worse for stirring up trouble where none existed.'

He was too clever to accept such an anodyne excuse. 'But what if the trouble were real, milady? Wouldn't it be a greater betrayal to stay quiet when you know that harm may come to others from your silence?'

Lady Anne spread her hands in a small gesture of apology, praying he didn't think she'd known of Eleanor's plan to attack Isabella. 'I'm less accomplished at reading minds than I am at lying, Gyles. If I knew where harm was lurking, be sure I would tell you.'

He gave a small nod then moved to the door, pausing with his hand on the latch. 'Thaddeus asked me to thank you for the package of food. He recognised the way the bundle was tied and knew you must have prepared it. He thanks you, too, for the candles you light in your window each night.'

She smiled again. 'I heard him say they were a foolish idea.'

'He was jesting. I believe he knew them for what they were the moment he saw them—as I should have done the first day you lit them.'

‘And what’s that, Gyles?’

He eased open the door. ‘A sign that it’s safe for our sons to come home, milady . . . though I’m puzzled why they or Thaddeus would need such assurance.’



Two miles down the highway, Thaddeus wished he’d had the sense to bring a packhorse to carry the heavy horse collars that he wore around his shoulders and the tightly coiled ropes and harnesses that were balanced across his saddle and thighs. However delicately Killer picked his way around the ruts in the road, the collars drew blisters on his neck and the rope jabbed relentlessly against his groin.

The rain, which had begun as a fine drizzle when he left Develish valley, grew in strength the farther south he and Killer travelled, and both were as wet as if they’d taken a swim in the moat by the time they reached the open ground where he and the boys had left the highway a fortnight earlier. He considered looking for shelter under the trees that lined Devil’s Brook but doubted he’d ever get himself or the charger moving again. Instead, he gritted his teeth and closed his mind to discomfort, thinking instead about the letter he’d found in Milady’s package.

Even while Gyles had been narrating the story of how the serfs of Develish had repelled My Lord of Bourne’s attack, Thaddeus had been devouring the bread and the pickled egg. Both tasted the sweeter for being absent from his diet for two weeks, and now the only parts of him that didn’t hurt were his half-full belly and the patch of skin on his chest that was covered by the small square of parchment he’d tucked inside his tunic. Without light, he hadn’t been able to read what Milady had written but he was

sure her words were full of kindness, since she'd had no need to send him a message at all.

Gyles had been careful to hold the lantern at his side as he walked to the front door of the manor house, but Thaddeus's eyes were too well adjusted to the dark to miss the swish of a cloak behind his legs and the deference with which he shepherded a small, slender shadow inside.

He'd felt a brief hurt that Lady Anne had hidden herself from him until he remembered he'd asked Gyles if he was alone. He worried then that it was he who had hurt her by refusing Gyles's offers to fetch her, until the raft brought her package atop the harnesses.

'I saw you step aside to let her enter the house,' he'd confessed to Gyles as he ate the egg. 'Had I known she was behind you I would have tempered my language about what we've encountered. It wasn't my intention to frighten her.'

'She guessed as much, which is why she hid herself,' Gyles answered. 'But you're wrong to think she frightens easily, Thaddeus. My Lord of Bourne's captain gave a clear indication that the women of Develish, being free of the pestilence, would be as highly prized by his men as gold, so Milady gathered our wives and daughters in the church and armed herself with a dagger in order to kill the first soldier who entered. She knew she would suffer for it, but she intended to fight as fiercely as the men.'

And suffer she would have done, Thaddeus thought now. He could think of no quicker way to break her spirit—and the spirit of her people—than to strip her naked and force her to submit to a relay of soldiers in front of her own serfs. The same would be true if he and the boys were taken prisoner and brought to Develish for a hanging. Gyles had spoken honestly when he said

that, for all her strength of mind, Milady would surrender the demesne before she allowed six of her own to be strung from a gallows on the other side of the moat.

Nonetheless, Thaddeus thought Gyles's fears more alarmist than real, for the chances of Bourne finding their camp near the River Pedle were negligible. The greater threat was to Develish, not least because it offered comfort and safety from the storm. If Thaddeus was picturing the joy of being warm, dry and fed inside the great hall, how much more would My Lord and his men be coveting the same?

With sudden impatience, he dismissed Bourne from his mind. It was all too easy to give way to imagined fears when the brain was tired. The more urgent problem was how to move the grain from their camp to Develish. He was taken by Gyles's suggestion of hauling the wagon up the river to Athelhelm, although he worried about the water rising if the downpour continued. He and the horses might keep their feet, but the boys would not. They were too slight and too short in stature.

He recalled his angry denouncing of them the previous night. His mood had darkened after Edmund related the story of Eleanor's birth—a secret known only to Clara until she'd chosen to share it with her son—but he'd lost patience when the boys began to prance about the grass in front of the camp, wearing the clothes and wielding the swords they'd stolen from Holcombe. Their carefree antics were a bitter reminder of the childhood he'd never had, and every frustration he'd ever felt about his own birth had hammered inside his head. But he'd been wrong to lose his temper, and he wished now that he hadn't. They weren't to blame for his terrible sense of betrayal because Milady had allowed him to believe he was the only bastard in Develish.

He fell asleep to the slow, gentle rhythm of Killer's walk, and the beast, unaware of his rider's inattention, continued to feel his way around the ruts and holes in the road. It was what he'd been trained for; rare had been the journey when Sir Richard of Develish was sober enough to see where he was going.

It meant neither was alert to sentries at the end of the drovers' route above Athelhelm, or prepared for the sudden beam of light from a lantern that shone on Thaddeus's face and revealed him as a Develish serf.