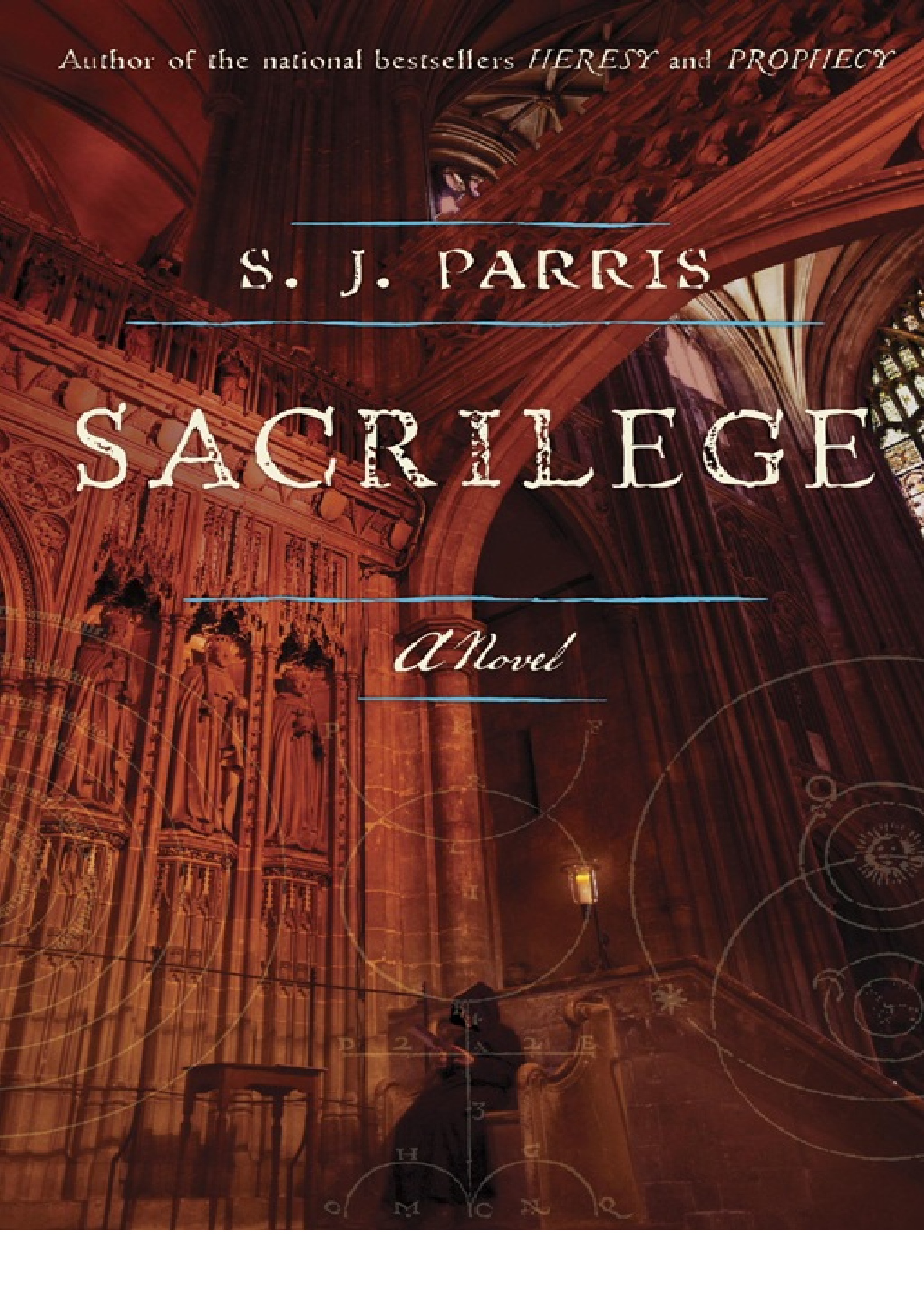


Author of the national bestsellers *HERESY* and *PROPHECY*

S. J. PARRIS

SACRILEGE

A Novel





Sacrilege

{ A Thriller }



S. J. Parris

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Chapter 1

I knew that I was being followed long before I saw or heard my pursuer. I felt it by some instinct that by now had been sharpened by experience; a shifting of the air, a presence whose movements invisibly shadowed my own. Someone was watching me and had been for several days: from the mouths of alleyways, from behind pillars or walls, amid the crowds of people, carts, and animals that thronged the narrow streets of London or out among the river traffic. At times I even sensed eyes on me in the privacy of my room at Salisbury Court, though that was surely impossible and could only have been the tricks of imagination.

It was the twenty-third day of July 1584, and I was hurrying to deliver my new book to my printer before he left London for the rest of the summer. A merchant ship from Portugal had recently docked at Tilbury, at the mouth of the River Thames. Plague was raging in Lisbon and the crew had been forcibly quarantined; despite these measures, rumours that the infection had begun to claim English victims were spreading through the city quicker than the disease itself ever could. Outbreaks of plague were common enough during London summer. I had been told, and any Londoner with the means to move to healthier air was packing as fast as they could. At the French embassy, where I lived as the ambassador's houseguest, whispers of the black plague had sent the household into such a frenzy of imagined symptoms that the ambassador had dispatched his private secretary to enquire about country houses in the neighbourhood of the Palace of Nonsuch, Queen Elizabeth of England's summer residence.

Fear of the plague had only added to tensions at the embassy in the past few days. Our peace had been shattered the previous week by the arrival of the news from the Netherlands that William the Silent, Prince of Orange, had been assassinated, shot in the chest on the staircase of his own house in Delft by a man he knew and trusted. I imagined that in all the embassies of the Catholic and Protestant powers throughout the greatest cities of Europe, men and women would be standing much as we did when the messenger arrived, speechless in the face of an act whose repercussions would shake the world as we knew it. The shock and fear occasioned by the deed were still palpable in the streets of London; not that the English people gave two figs for William himself, but it was well known that the Catholic King Philip II of Spain had offered a reward of twenty-five thousand crowns for his murder. And if one Protestant ruler could be knocked down as easily as a skittle, there was no doubt that Queen Elizabeth of England would be next on Philip's list. The sense of foreboding was all the greater at Salisbury Court because William's assassin had been a Frenchman.

John Charlewood, my printer, had his lodgings at the Half-Eagle and Key in the street known as Barbican, just to the north of the city wall. He also had a press nearby at the Charterhouse, the old Carthusian monastery which had been converted into a grand private residence, but I refused to visit his business premises; the Charterhouse was now owned by Thomas Howard, half brother to the young Earl of Arundel. I had made enemies of the Howards—the most powerful Catholic family among the English nobility—the previous autumn and preferred to avoid the possibility of running into any one of them. This amuse-

Charlewood, but he never asked questions; he was sufficiently eccentric himself to tolerate the apparent caprices of others, or else shrewd enough to realise that, in these days of tangled loyalties, it is often safer not to know another man's business.

The sun was already high when I set out from Salisbury Court with a leather satchel containing my manuscript pages slung around my back. Sharp diamonds of light glinted from the windows of the buildings on Fleet Street, mostly printers and taverns that served the nearby law courts. As I walked, my feet scuffed up clouds of dust from the cobblestones; occasionally I had to step aside to avoid a heap of fresh horse dung, but elsewhere the heaps had hardened older piles into dry, straw-scattered crusts. The smell of rotting refuse and the sewage stink of the Thames weighed down in the still air; I pressed the sleeve of my lined shirt over my nose and tried to breathe through my mouth. The sun beat hard on a street that was curiously quiet. The law terms had finished now, so Fleet Street was missing the bustle of the Inns of Court, yet one would have expected more traffic on the main thoroughfare from Westminster to the City of London. I glanced around. Perhaps people were staying indoors for fear of the plague; perhaps they had all left for the countryside already, and the few souls remaining at the embassy were unwittingly living in a ghost town. This thought made me impatient; life was so fraught with natural hazards and those we invite on our own heads that if you were to spend your life hiding from the prospect of trouble, you would never leave your chamber. I should know, having spent the past eight years on the run through Europe with danger's cold breath constantly at my neck, ever since the night I fled from my monastery in Naples to escape the attention of the Inquisition. Yet my life had become fuller, more vivid, and infinitely more precious to me during those eight years, when I had come close to losing it several times, than in the thirteen years I had lived safe inside the sacred walls of San Domenico Maggiore.

I had just crossed Fleet Street and turned into Shoe Lane when I saw it: a disturbance at the edge of vision, brief as a blink, and then it was gone. I whipped around, my hand flying to the hilt of the bone-handled dagger I had carried at my belt since the night I became a fugitive, but the lane was almost empty. Only an old woman in a thin smock walked toward me, her back bent under the weight of her basket. She chanced to glance up at that moment and, seeing me apparently reaching for my knife, dropped her goods and let out a scream that echoed across the river to Southwark and back.

"No, no—good madam, don't be alarmed." I held my hands out, palms upwards, to show my innocence, but hearing my accent only made things worse; she stood rooted to the spot shrieking all the louder about murdering Spanish papists. I tried to make soothing noises to quieten her, but her cries grew more frenzied, until the door of a neighbouring house opened and two men emerged, blinking in the strong light.

"What gives here?" The taller glared at me from beneath one thick eyebrow. "Are you a right, goodwife?"

"He went for his knife, the filthy Spanish dog," she gasped, clutching at her chest for good measure. "He meant to cut out my heart and rob me blind, I swear it!"

"I am sorry to have caused you any alarm." I held up my empty hands for the men to examine. "I thought I heard someone following me, that is all." I glanced up and down the street but there was no sign of movement apart from the shimmering heat haze that hovered over the ground up ahead.

“Oh yeah?” He tilted his chin at me and gave a little swagger. “Likely story. What business have you here, you Spanish whoreson?”

“Stand back, Gil, he might be one of them with the plague,” his companion said, hovering behind the big man’s shoulder.

“Have you come here bringing plague on us, you filth?” the man named Gil demanded, his voice harder, but he took a step back nonetheless.

I sighed. Most Englishmen, I have discovered, know of only two other nations, Spain and France, which their mothers used interchangeably to frighten them as children. This year was the turn of the Spanish. With my dark hair and eyes and my strange accent, I found myself accused several times a week of wanting to murder honest English folk in their beds, the name of the pope, often while I was simply walking down the street. In some ways London was the most tolerant city I had ever had the good fortune to visit, but when it came to foreigners, these islanders were the most suspicious people on earth.

“You are thinking of the Portuguese. I am neither Spanish nor Portuguese—I am Italian,” I said, with as much dignity as I could muster. “Giordano Bruno of Nola, at your service.”

“Then why don’t you go back there!” said the rat-faced fellow, glancing up at his friend for approval.

“Aye. Why do you come to London—to murder us and make us bow down to the pope?”

“I could not very well do both, even if I wanted,” I said, and quickly saw that humour was not the means to disarm him. “Listen, good sirs—I meant no offence to anyone. May we now go on our way?”

They exchanged a glance.

“Aye, we may ...” said the big man, and for a moment I breathed a sigh of relief. “When we have taught you a lesson.”

He thumped one meaty fist into the palm of his other hand; his friend cackled nastily and cracked his knuckles. With a reflex quick as blinking, my knife was out again and pointed at them before either of them had even stepped forward. I did not spend three years on the roads in Italy without learning how to defend myself.

“Gentlemen,” I said, keeping my eyes fixed on them both as I shifted my weight onto my toes, primed to run if need be. “I am a resident of the embassy of France and as such a guest of Queen Elizabeth in your country and under her protection. If you lay a finger on me, you will answer directly to Her Majesty’s ministers. And they will know where to find you.” I nodded towards the house behind them.

They looked uneasily at each other. The smaller one appeared to be waiting for his companion’s verdict. Finally the bigger man lowered his hands and took a pace back.

“Piss off then, you pope-loving shit. But stay away from this street in future, if you have any care for your pretty face.”

Relieved, I sheathed my knife, nodded, straightened my shoulders, and walked on, bowing slightly to the old woman, who had stooped to gather up her fallen wares. I almost offered her help, but the force of her glare was enough to keep me moving on. I had barely walked ten paces when something whistled past my left ear and clattered onto the ground; I leapt aside. Just ahead of me a stone the size of a man’s fist was rolling to a standstill in the dust. Whipping around, I saw the two men cackling as they stood together, legs planted firmly astride, arms folded. With more bravado than I felt, I seized my knife again and made as if to

come back for them; they faltered for a moment, then the smaller one tugged his friend by the sleeve and both retreated hastily into their house.

I put away the knife once more, wiping the sweat from my upper lip. My hands were shaking and I could feel my heart hammering under my ribs; those two louts had meant to frighten me, but they could not have known how well they had succeeded. Last autumn, I had almost been killed by just such an attack, a rock hurled at my head with no warning, out of the night. If I had become more skittish since then, it was not without reason. I looked around, still taut with fear, one hand laid protectively over my bag. The old woman had almost reached the far end of the street; otherwise there was no sign of life. But I thought I knew who was stalking me through the streets of London; I had been half expecting him since last year. And if I was right, he would not be satisfied until I was dead.



“GIORDANO BRUNO! COME in, come in. What’s happened, man? You look as if you’ve seen the Devil himself.” Charlewood flung open the door of his lodgings, took in my appearance with one practised glance, and gestured for me to come inside. “Here—I will have the housekeeper bring us something to drink. Are you in trouble?”

I waved his question aside; he called down the corridor while I went through into his front parlour and began the task of unpacking my manuscript from its satchel and linen wrappings.

“Well?” He followed me in, rubbing his hands together in anticipation. “Is the masterpiece finally ready? We don’t want to keep Her Majesty waiting, do we?” He grinned, stroking his pointed beard.

What I liked most about Charlewood was not his willingness to print and distribute books of radical and potentially inflammatory ideas, nor that he was well travelled, spoke several languages, and had a much broader mind than many of the Englishmen I had met; it was the fact that he was an unapologetic rogue. A slightly built man of about forty-five, with reddish hair and mischievous eyes, Charlewood so crackled with restless energy that he seemed barely able to stand still for five minutes together, and was constantly picking, fiddling, hopping from one foot to another, tugging at his sleeves or his beard or the little gold ring he wore in his right ear. He cared nothing for what was said about him and he was as unscrupulous as the business required; more than once he had been in trouble for printing illegal copies of books to which he had no licence, and he was happy to dress up any book with invented credentials if he thought it would help the sales. But to his authors he was always loyal, and he was fiercely opposed to any censorship of books; on that point, we agreed wholeheartedly. His latest innovation was to publish works by Italian authors for what was still a small but elite aristocratic readership in England. I had been introduced to him by my friend Sir Philip Sidney, the unofficial leader of the little group of liberal-minded intellectuals at Queen Elizabeth’s court who gathered to read one another’s poetry and discuss ideas that many would regard as unorthodox or even dangerous. It was Sidney who had told Charlewood that the queen was interested in reading my work in progress; naturally the printer saw an opportunity for his own advancement and had gone so far as to create a fictitious Venetian imprint to add authenticity. Queen Elizabeth was fluent in Italian, as she was in many of the languages of Europe, and was reported to possess a formidable intellect and an unusual appetite for new and experimental ideas in science and philosophy, but even

her broad mind might balk at the audacity of my latest work. I looked at the carefully written pages in my hands and wondered if Charlewood really had any idea of what he was undertaking.

Laying aside the linen cloth that had wrapped the manuscript, I handed him the bundle bound with a silk tie. He accepted it reverently, smoothing the topmost page with the palm of his hand.

“*La Cena de le Ceneri*. The Ash-Wednesday Supper.” He looked up, his brow furrowed. “You might need to work on the title, Bruno. Make it a little more ...” He waved his finger vaguely in a circular motion.

“That is the work’s title,” I said firmly.

He grinned again, but did not concede anything.

“And will it be wildly controversial? Will it set the cat among the pigeons in the academies?”

“You are hoping the answer will be ‘yes,’ I can see,” I said, smiling.

“Well, of course,” he said, loosening the tie that held the pages. “People love the thought that they are reading something the authorities would rather they didn’t see. On the other hand, a royal endorsement—”

“She has not said she will endorse it,” I said, quickly. “She has only expressed an interest in reading it. And she doesn’t yet know of its contents.”

“But she must know of you by reputation, Bruno. The whispers that followed you from Paris ...” His eyes glinted.

“And what whispers are those, John?” I asked, feigning innocence, though I knew perfectly well what he was talking about.

“That you dabble in magic. That you are neither Catholic nor Protestant, but have invented your own religion based on the ancient wisdom of the Egyptians.”

“Well, I have been excommunicated by the Catholic Church and imprisoned by the Calvinists, so I suppose that much is true. But it would take a man of extraordinary arrogance to dream of creating his own religion, would it not?” I raised an eyebrow. One corner of his mouth curved into a smile.

“That is why I can believe it of you, Bruno,” he said, giving me a long look from under his brows. He tapped the pages with the back of his hand. “I will take this with me to Suffolk to read over the next few weeks. There will be no business done in London anyway until the blasted heat abates and the plague threat is over. But come the autumn, we will produce a book that will cause the biggest stir in Europe since the Pole Copernicus dared to suggest that Earth is not the centre of God’s creation. Let us hope no one else is assassinated in the meantime to steal its thunder. Agreed?”

He held out his hand and I shook it in the English fashion. The door creaked open and his housekeeper appeared, head lowered, carrying a tray with an earthenware pitcher and two wooden cups, which she placed on the oak dresser that stood against the back wall of the room. Charlewood laid my manuscript on a stool and crossed to the dresser.

“Here, Bruno.” He poured a cup of small beer and passed it to me. “This weather, the dust sticks in your throat, does it not? It is a little early for good wine, but let us drink to our successful partnership. The manuscript is not your only copy, I trust?”

“No.” I took a welcome sip of beer. Though warm, it was at least fresh-tasting. “I made

another which I have locked up at home.”

“Good. Keep it safe. I will guard this with my life, but with so many travelling out of London at this time, there are plenty of cutpurses and bandits on the roads. You do not mean to stay in London, do you?”

“The ambassador would like to move the household near to the court if he can find somewhere. I am in no hurry to leave.” I shrugged. “I see no evidence of plague.”

Charlewood shook his head.

“By the time you’ve seen the evidence, it’s too late. Take my advice—get out of the city. We cannot have you struck down at—what age are you now?”

“Thirty-six.”

“Well, then. You want to be alive to present this book to the queen in person, don’t you? And the next one, and the next. A dead author is no use to me.”

I laughed, but my mind flashed back to that stone rolling in the dust at my feet and the unseen presence that had been haunting my steps for the past days. If my pursuer had his way, I would be lucky to see the autumn, plague or no plague.



I LEFT CHARLEWOOD’S house with a lighter heart, encouraged by his enthusiasm. The streets around the Barbican were still unusually empty, the sun overhead bleaching colour from the red-brick houses that lined the roads. Behind the rows of chimney stacks, the sky was a deep, cloudless cobalt, almost as blue as the skies I remembered from childhood over the village of Nola, at the foot of Monte Cicada. I had not known England was capable of such a sky. My shirt stuck to my back with sweat and I loosened the lacing of it at the collar as I walked, glad that I had always avoided the English fashion for wide starched neck-ruffs; the young dandies at court must be desperately uncomfortable in this heat.

As I crossed Aldersgate Street and was about to turn into Long Lane, I sensed it again: a flicker of a shadow, the merest hint of a sound. I spun around, hand to my knife, and for the first time I caught a glimpse of him, perhaps fifty yards away, just before he vanished between two houses. I had no time to make out more than a tall, thin figure, but my blood boiled and before I had given thought to my actions I was hurling myself after him, feet pounding through the dust; if I must fight, so be it, but I would not be made to live this way any longer, always looking over my shoulder, feeling vulnerable at every corner like a hunted creature.

Slipping into the alley where he had disappeared, I spotted the fellow running out of the far end, heading northwards up Aldersgate Street. I forced my legs to a faster pace; I may not be excessively tall like some of these Englishmen, but I am lean and wiry and can move at a clip when I choose. Emerging from between houses, I saw him clearly and realised with a sinking feeling that he was heading towards the Charterhouse. But I was too fired up and too determined to shake him out of this cowardly pursuit to worry about the Howards.

As I drew closer, he scuttled out of sight around the corner, keeping close to the boundary wall that enclosed the maze of old buildings. All I had seen of him was that he wore a brown jerkin and breeches and a cloth cap pulled down low over his ears, but even at a distance he didn’t look like the man I had expected to see, the one I feared was after me—unless the man in question had lost a lot of weight since the previous autumn.

I had no time for such considerations, though; as I rounded the corner, my quarry was attempting to scale a low wall that separated the lane from Pardon Churchyard, the old plague burial ground that formed part of the Charterhouse lands. He threw himself over; scrambled up in pursuit, landed on the other side, and then I had a clear view of him across the graveyard, with no more buildings to hide behind. He moved nimbly, dodging tussocks of grass and the crumbled remains of old headstones, aiming for the wall on the far side and the backs of the houses on Wilderness Row. With one determined burst of speed, I gained on him enough to grab at his jerkin before he reached the wall. He twisted away, the fabric slipped from between my fingers; my foot turned on a rabbit hole in the bank and I almost fell, but just as he jumped for the wall, I threw myself at him, caught his leg, and pulled him to the ground. He fought viciously, lashing out with his fists, but I was the stronger, and once I had him by the wrists it was no great effort to pin him facedown in the grass and keep him there by kneeling astride him until his struggle subsided and he lay still.

His cap had come off in the tussle but he pressed his face into the grass; I grasped his hair roughly by the hair and pulled his head up so that I could see his face. I was not sure which of us cried out the louder.

“*Gésu Cristo!* Sophia?” I looked down, incredulous, into the face of the girl I had known and briefly fancied myself in love with, more than a year ago in Oxford. I barely recognised her, and not just because her hair was cut short like a boy’s. She had grown so thin that all the bones of her face seemed sharper, and those wide tawny eyes that had been so bewitching were now ringed with dark circles. She muttered something I couldn’t make out, and I leaned closer.

“What?”

“Get off my hair,” she hissed through her teeth.

Startled, I realised I was still gripping her hair in my fist. I released her and her head sank back to the grass, as if it were too heavy to hold up.

“Sophia Underhill,” I repeated in a whisper, hardly daring to speak her name aloud in case she should vanish. “What the Devil ...?”

She twisted her face to look up at me, blinked sadly, and looked away.

“No. Sophia Underhill is dead.”

Chapter 2

We walked side by side down Long Lane towards Smithfield Market. She said nothing, her boy's cap pulled low over her eyes once more, and I did not press her. She seemed dramatically altered since I had last seen her, waving goodbye to me from an upstairs window in her father's lodgings, that I could only guess at the circumstances that might have brought her to London in such a state. But I knew that bombarding her with questions would be the surest way to make her retreat from me. I stole a sideways glance as we walked in search of a tavern; her beauty seemed undiminished, even enhanced by her gauntness because it lent her an air of fragility. I had to remind myself that in Oxford Sophia had not shared my feelings; her heart had been entangled elsewhere. Yet she had come to London to seek me out, or so it appeared. I could only be patient and wait to hear her story, if she was inclined to tell it.

As we neared the marketplace, the bleating and bellowing of livestock rose into the air with the sharp tang of animal dung, fermenting in the heat. Fear of plague had not stopped the business of commerce here, and we made our way around the edge of the pens where cattle and sheep jostled in their confinement and pressed up to the fences, snuffling frantically, while farmers and butchers bartered and haggled over prices. Sophia covered her mouth and nose with her sleeve as we passed the animals; I was more intent on watching where I was putting my feet. At the entrance to St. Sepulchre's Lane, which the market traders called Pie Corner, gaudy painted tavern signs hung from the houses and a couple of girls waited listlessly in the shade, trays of sweating pies slung around their necks. I indicated the tavern on the corner, under the sign of the Cross Keys. On the threshold, Sophia hesitated and laid a hand on my arm.

"My name is Kit," she whispered. "I am come to London to look for work, if anyone asks."

I stopped, my hand on the door, and stared at her, searching her face. These were the first words she had spoken since announcing her own death in the churchyard. She looked back at me with earnest eyes and in that moment I recognised her haunted, fugitive look and cursed myself for being so stupid. She was on the run from something, or someone; this was why she was disguised as a boy. I knew that look only too well; once I had spent three years travelling through Italy under a different name. I understood what it meant to be a fugitive: always moving on, never trusting a soul, never knowing if the next town where you stopped for food or shelter might be the place they finally caught up with you. I nodded briefly, and held the door open for her.

"Well, come on then, Kit. You look as if you need feeding up."

The tavern was a functional place, catering for the needs of the market traders; the taproom smelled as strongly of animals as the square outside, but I found the corner of a bench by a window and ordered some barley bread and a jug of ale. I leaned back against the wall and watched Sophia as she hunched into herself, tugging her dirty cap farther down and glancing around nervously. When the bread arrived, she tore into it as if she had not eaten

some time. I sipped my ale slowly and waited for her to speak.

“Forgive me,” she said with her mouth full, wiping crumbs away with the back of her hand. “I have forgotten all my manners, as you see. Whatever would my father say?”

There was no mistaking the bitterness in her tone. Her father, the rector of Lincoln College, had disowned her when he discovered she was with child, and sent her to live with an aunt in Kent; this was the last I had heard of her. When I left Oxford she had given me the aunt’s address and asked me to write, but I had never received any reply.

“I wrote to you,” I said, eventually. She looked up and met my gaze.

“I wondered if you did. I had no letters. I expect she burned them all.” Her voice was flat, as if this no longer mattered.

“Your aunt?”

She nodded.

“Do you hear from your parents?”

She stared at me for a moment, then gave a snort of laughter.

“You *are* joking, I suppose?”

I both wanted and did not want to ask her about the child. She would have expected it by now. It was November, so it must be eight months old by now. If it had lived.

“Why did you say you were dead?” I asked, when it became apparent that she was not going to elaborate. She gestured to her clothes.

“Look at me. This is who I am now. The girl you think of as Sophia Underhill no longer exists. She was a fool anyway,” she added, with venom. “A naïve fool, who believed that books and love were all she needed in life. I am glad she is dead. Kit has no such illusions.”

I was shocked by the force of grief and anger in her words, but on reflection I should not have been. She was only twenty and already life had dealt her some cruel blows: her beloved brother had died young, the father of her child was also dead, and her family had abandoned her. A sudden image flashed into my mind, of Sophia running towards me across a garden in Oxford, her long chestnut hair flying out behind her, laughing, eyes bright, hitching up the skirts of her blue dress as she ran. She had been well educated, beyond what was expected of a young woman of her status; her father had planned a respectable marriage for her. But her independent spirit and determination to shape her own life had brought her, in the end, to this.

“You didn’t need to skulk around in the shadows after me, you know,” I said gently, as she ripped into another hunk of bread. “You could have just knocked on my door.”

“On the door of the French embassy? You think they would have received me? Invited me to dinner, perhaps?” She swallowed her mouthful and fixed her eyes on the table. “In any case, I didn’t know if you would want to see me. After everything that happened.” She did not look at me, and her words were barely audible, the scorn melted away. “I told you, I never had any letters from you. I wanted to find out about your situation before I made myself known. I—I was afraid you might not want to know me.”

“Sophia—” It took a supreme effort of self-control not to reach across the table and take her hand in mine. The ferocity of her warning look confirmed that this would not have been welcome. I was finding it difficult to remember that she was supposed to be a boy. “Sorry—*Kit*. Of course I would not have turned you away. Whatever help you need—if it is in my power to give—”

"You might feel differently when you know the truth," she mumbled, picking at a splinter of wood on the tabletop.

I leaned closer.

"And what is the truth?"

She looked up and met my eye with a flash of her old defiance.

"I am wanted for murder."

A long silence followed, filled by the clatter and hubbub of the tap-room and the farmyard noises and shouts from beyond the window. Motes of dust rose and fell in the sunlight that slanted across our end of the table. I continued to stare at Sophia and she did not look away; indeed, I could swear there was a hint of a smile playing at the corners of her mouth. She seemed pleased with the effect of her announcement.

"Whom did you murder?" I asked, when I could bear the silence no longer.

"My husband," she replied, quick as blinking.

"Your *husband*?" I stared at her in astonishment.

She smiled briefly. It did not touch her eyes.

"Yes. You did not know I'd got myself a husband, did you?"

I could only go on staring in amazement.

"You are thinking that I don't waste any time, eh? Barely finished pushing out one man's child before I've married another?"

"I thought no such thing," I said, uncomfortably, because the idea had fleetingly crossed my mind.

"My aunt sold me like a piece of livestock." She gestured towards the window. "Like one of those poor bleating beggars in the pens."

"So you *murdered* him?" In my efforts to keep my voice down, it came out as a strangled squeak.

Sophia rolled her eyes.

"No, Bruno. I did not. But someone did."

"Then who?"

This time she could not disguise the impatience in her voice.

"I don't know, do I? That's what I want to find out."

I shook my head, as if to clear it. "Perhaps you had better tell me this story from the beginning."

She nodded, then drained her tankard and pushed it towards me. The ale was not strong but drinking it fast had brought a flush of colour to her hollow cheeks.

"I'll need another drink first."



"THERE IS NO use in dwelling on all that happened before you left Oxford," she began, when a fresh jug of ale had been brought and she had finished a second piece of bread. I mumbled an agreement, avoiding her eye. I wondered if she remembered the night I had kissed her, or if that memory was buried in all that had happened after. I remembered it still, as sharply as if it had been a moment ago.

"My father sent me away to my aunt in Kent, as you know. My mother cried when I left and promised it was only for a season, until my *disgrace*, as she put it, was past, but I could

see by my father's face that she was fooling herself. The stain to his reputation and his standing in the town was more than his pride could bear. I truly believe he would rather have died than brought him a bastard grandchild."

"He as good as said so to me," I recalled.

"Well, then. I was under no illusion when I set out to Kent in the company of one of my father's servants. I had been cast off by my family for good and I had no idea what my future was to hold. It was several days hard riding and I was near four months with the child by then. I was ill the whole way and I feared ..." She looked down at the table, suddenly bashful. "I knew so little of such matters, I feared the rough journey would dislodge it before its time. Stupid." She shook her head, embarrassed.

"Not at all," I said. "It would be an unnatural woman who did not worry about the safety of her unborn child."

"It turns out they are tougher than you think, these creatures," she said, allowing herself a soft smile. "In any event, I was safely delivered to my aunt—my father's elder sister, so you may imagine she took the insult to his honour very much to heart. She was widowed, with modestly comfortable means, and she made sure that I was adequately fed and housed for the duration of my confinement. But it came at a price. The state of my immortal soul was her real project." She grimaced, and paused to take another gulp of ale. "I was allowed no books except the Bible and a book of prayer. Naturally, I was not permitted to step outside the house—she had told her neighbours that I was sickly and likely to die and that she was nursing me through my last months. Whether they believed her, I have no idea, but I was shut in my room whenever she had visitors."

"You were not moved to any religious feeling, despite your aunt's efforts?"

She snorted and tossed her head in a way reminiscent of how she was before, when she still had long hair to toss.

"I told you, Bruno—I am done with religion, of any stripe. If there is a God, I am sure He must look with despair on His representatives, endlessly bickering over trifles. For myself, I would rather live without it."

"That makes you a heretic," I said, suppressing a smile.

She shrugged.

"If you say so. It does not seem to have done you any harm."

"Oh, Sophia. Sorry—*Kit*. How can you say that? Do not take me as your model. I can never return to my home because I am called a heretic, you know this."

"Neither can I," she said, pointedly. "We are in the same boat, you and I, Bruno. We both live in exile now."

I was tempted to detail for her all the ways in which our situations could not be compared, but I wanted to hear the rest of her story.

"So your aunt was determined to make you repent ...?"

"I never knew how much my father had told her of the circumstances that brought me to her house. She was certainly of the belief that I had been wilful and disobedient and had made my long-suffering family pay the price for my dishonour. And she made it very clear that I would have no choice about the life I lived from then on, if I expected to be given food and shelter." She stopped abruptly, looked away to the window, and swallowed hard. I sensed we were nearing the heart of her story; she had kept up the careless bravado

convincingly so far, but I noticed she had barely mentioned the child. Perhaps she found too painful to talk about.

“Her plan was this,” she continued, when she had taken another drink. “That I should wait out my confinement in her house, hidden away, stuffing my head with Bible verses day and night. Then, when the child was born, if it was healthy and a boy, it would be adopted by a couple of some standing in a neighbouring town, who could not have a child of their own. She had it all worked out, it seems, and I am certain that money changed hands, though I never saw a penny of it. But she was very insistent that a boy would be the best outcome for all concerned—as if I could influence what was in my belly.”

“And if it was a girl?”

“I suppose they would have found a place for her, somewhere. There’d have been a reward, though.”

“But it was a boy?”

Finally she looked up and met my eye.

“Yes. I had a son. And he was healthy—so I was told. I only held him for a few minutes. They didn’t even let me nurse him. She said it was best that my body did not get used to him, nor him to me. Someone came at night to take him away, under cover of darkness. Those people—the people who *bought* him—they had a wet nurse ready, I’m told. So I’m sure he was well looked after.”

Here her voice cracked a little; I wanted desperately to reach out for her hand, but she held herself proud and upright, and simply clenched her jaw together until the danger of showing emotion had passed.

“I don’t remember much about those days, to tell you the truth, Bruno. I was in a lot of pain while my body recovered from the birth, but that was nothing compared to the blackness that descended on me after they took him away. I had always believed I was someone who could bear grief with fortitude—I had done so in the past—but this was different. I could not eat or sleep nor even cry. All I was good for was lying on my back, staring at the ceiling, and wishing it would all come to an end somehow. At first my aunt was terrified I had taken an infection and would die—she had the physician out to me every day at her own expense, and she had to pay extra for his discretion. I foolishly imagined she was doing this out of genuine concern and a sense of family duty.”

“It must have been terrible.”

She shrugged again.

“I suppose it was. But I had reached a point where I no longer cared what happened to me. I could feel nothing—not hope, nor fear, nor anger. Only blankness. I thought my life was over. I might as well have taken my chances being drowned on a boat to France.”

She held my gaze steadily as she said this, and although she had spoken the words gently, they cut to my heart. The previous spring, Sophia had been all set to flee Oxford for the Continent; it was my actions that had prevented her. I had intervened because I believed—with good reason, I still felt—that by stopping her flight I was saving her life, and that of her child. Over the months since then I had thought of her often and wondered how her life had unfolded as a result of my interference; I remained sure that I had done the right thing, but there was always room for a sliver of doubt. I feared, however, that even now she clung to her romantic hopes, and blamed me for stealing from her the future she had planned.

“But then your child would not have lived,” I said softly.

She lowered her eyes and picked another splinter from the tabletop.

“True enough. And he is alive and well, somewhere, I trust. I hope they are kind people,” she added, with sudden force. “I wish I could have seen them, to know what they are like.” Her voice shook again, and she wiped her eye brusquely with her sleeve.

“They must have wanted a child very badly, whoever they were. I’m sure they will treat him like a little prince.”

She looked up, her lashes bright with tears, and forced a smile.

“Yes. I’m sure you are right. So I lay there in the dark, day after day, until eventually the bleeding stopped and the milk dried up, and my body was my own again. I’m sorry if the detail offends you, Bruno, but it is a messy and unpleasant business, being a woman.”

I spread my hands out, palms upwards.

“It is difficult to offend me. But I am sorry to hear you suffered.”

She watched me for a moment, her expression guarded. Did she blame me for her suffering?

“The physician came and bled me daily, which only made me weaker, but he could find nothing wrong. Of course, once my aunt was satisfied that I had no bodily affliction, she concluded it was just monstrous idleness and warned me repeatedly that as soon as I was able I would be expected to take on some of the household chores. Hard work was the best cure for melancholy, in her view.” The note of bitterness had crept back. She took a deep breath, steadied herself, and continued. “One morning I woke—I think it was around the Feast of Saint Nicholas—with the sun streaming in through the shutters, and for the first time in weeks I felt like getting up. It was still early and the household was asleep, so I put on some clothes, wrapped myself in a woollen cloak, and went outside. My aunt lived on the outskirts of a small town with rolling countryside all around, and in the early-morning sun, all laid with frost, the view was so beautiful it took my breath away. I walked for an hour, got myself lost a couple of times, but although I almost wore out my poor exhausted body, I felt I was coming back to life.” She smiled briefly at the recollection. “My aunt was furious when I returned—I think she feared I’d run away. She railed at me: What if the neighbours had seen me in that state, looking like some wild woman of the woods? She had a point; I had not washed in weeks and I was thin as a wraith. In any case, she made me undress and looked me over thoroughly, as you would with a horse, then she heated water to bathe me and spent a long time untangling my hair and washing it with camomile. I was surprised, as you might imagine—she was not usually given to such extravagance. She fed me well that evening and told me I was welcome to walk in the countryside if I chose, so long as I stayed away from the town and one of her housemaids accompanied me. So over the next few weeks, this is what happened. I recovered my strength, and something of the balance of my mind, or at least I learned to lock away my pain where it could not be seen and appear human again on the surface. But I was suspicious of my aunt’s changed attitude—she seemed almost indulgent towards me, and I knew enough of her to doubt that this was prompted by affection. She had also taken to locking me in my room at night.”

“What happened to the household chores she had threatened?”

“Naturally, I wondered. Until the child was born, I was protected, because they needed me. I had tried not to think too much about what my life would be once I’d served my purpose—

supposed that at best she would use me as some kind of cheap servant in return for a roof over my head. I expected her to hand me a broom the moment I was on my feet again, but instead, she started coming to my room in the evenings to comb out my hair—it was still long then,” she said, rubbing self-consciously at the back of her neck—“and smooth scented oil into my hands. Not what you’d usually do for someone you mean to do laundry or wash floors.”

“She had something else in mind.”

Sophia nodded, her mouth set in a grim line.

“I found out a few days before Christmas. She came into my room one morning with a blue gown. It was beautiful—the sort of thing I used to wear—” She broke off, turning away.

I remembered how she used to dress in Oxford; her clothes were not expensive or showy, but she wore them with a natural grace that cannot be purchased from a tailor, and always managed to look elegant. Very different from the dirty breeches, worn leather jerkin, and riding boots she was dressed in now.

“I hadn’t thought I cared about such trifles anymore,” she continued, “but when she laid out on the bed, I couldn’t conceal my pleasure. She told me it was an early Christmas present and for a moment I really thought I had misjudged her, that there was a buried vein of human kindness under that crusty surface. I was soon disabused of that, of course.”

I was about to reply when the serving girl appeared at our table to enquire whether we wanted any more of anything. I asked for cold meat, more bread, and another jug of ale. Sophia’s tale clearly demanded some effort and I felt she should keep her strength up. When the food had been brought and she had helped herself to the cold beef, she wiped her mouth on her sleeve and resumed her story.

“She made me put the dress on and turn around for her. She seemed satisfied with the result. When she had pinched my cheeks hard to put colour in them, she stood back, looked me up and down, and said, ‘You shall do very well, as long as you keep your mouth shut. Only speak if he asks you a question, and then make sure it’s a “Yes, sir” or a “No, sir.” Understood?’ When I asked whom she meant, she merely tutted and shoved her sour old face right up to mine. ‘Your husband,’ she said.”

“I imagine you took that well,” I said, breaking off a piece of bread, a smile at the corner of my lips.

“I screamed blue murder,” Sophia said, a grin unexpectedly lighting her face. “I’d have bolted if she hadn’t locked the door. As it was, she had to slap me around the face twice before I would be quiet. Then she sat me down on the bed and made me listen. ‘Do you know what you are?’ she asked me. ‘You’re a filthy whore, that’s what, with no respect for God nor your family. Plenty in your situation have no one to look out for them, and they end up making their living on the streets, which is no more than you deserve. But you can thank Providence that I have found a better arrangement for you. A decent man, respectable, with a good income, has agreed to take you to wife. You can change your name and leave your whole history behind you. You’re still young and can be made to look pretty. All you have to do is be obedient and dutiful, as a wife should be. If you’d learned those qualities as a daughter, your life might have been very different now,’ she added, just to twist the knife. ‘What if I don’t like him?’ I asked. She slapped me again. ‘It’s not for you to like or dislike a hussy,’ she said. ‘You can marry Sir Edward Kingsley and live in comfort, with the good

regard of society, or you can make your own way. Beg for bread or whore for it, I care not. Because if you mar this on purpose, girl, after everything I have done for you, don't expect me to feed and clothe you for one day more.' So saying, she locked me in the room and told me I had until the afternoon to make my choice."

"Sir Edward Kingsley?" I rubbed my chin. "A titled man. You'd think he'd have his pick of women—no offence, but why would he choose a wife whose history could bring him disgrace, if it were to become known? What did he get from the bargain?"

Sophia's face was set hard.

"Control, I suppose. He got a wife who was young and pretty enough—though that's a gone now," she added, passing a hand across her gaunt cheek.

"Not at all," I said, hoping it did not sound insincere. A flicker of a smile crossed her lips.

"The fact that I had a past to hide appealed to him," she continued. "He thought it would be a way of keeping me bound to his will. He imagined I would be so grateful to have been saved from a life on the streets that I would put up with anything, not daring to complain. Absolutely *anything*." She fairly spat these last words. "Of course, I didn't learn any of that until after we were married. He could be very charming in company."

"So you agreed to marry him?"

There was a long pause.

"Don't look at me like that, Bruno. What choice did I have? I had nothing left—nothing. You of all people should understand that. The hotheaded part of me thought of running away, of course. But perhaps having the child had changed me." Her voice grew quieter. "I knew I would be hopeless—I had seen beggar women and whores in the street, I knew I would not survive long like that. Besides, I had formed an idea—you will think it foolish ..." She looked at me tentatively.

"Try me."

"I thought that one day, when he was older, he might somehow be able to find out my name and come looking for me."

"Who?"

"My son, of course. I had this idea that, when he grew, he would realise he did not look like the people he believed to be his parents, and then the truth would come out, and he might want to learn of his real mother. I didn't want him to find me dead or living in a bawdy house if that day came. And this Sir Edward seemed affable enough, when he came to visit. The way my aunt fawned on him, you'd have thought he was the Second Coming. So I made my choice. I would swallow my pride and marry a man I did not care for. I would not be the first woman to have done that, in exchange for security and a house to live in."

She fell silent then, and picked at her bread.

"Tell me about this Sir Edward Kingsley," I prompted, when it seemed she had become sunk in her own thoughts.

"He was twenty-seven years older than me, for a start." She curled her lip in distaste. I tried to look as sympathetic as I could, bearing in mind that I was a good sixteen years her senior and had once desired her myself. And did still, if I was honest, despite the alteration in her. I could not help wondering how she would feel about that; would the idea prompt the same disgust that she expressed at the thought of this aging husband?

"He was a magistrate in Canterbury," she continued. "Do you know the city?"

“I have never been, but of course I know it by reputation—it was one of the greatest centres of pilgrimage in Europe, until your King Henry VIII had the great shrine destroyed.”

“The shrine of Saint Thomas Becket, yes. But the cathedral dominates the city even now—is the oldest in England, you know. I suppose it would have been a pleasant enough place to live, in different circumstances.”

“What was so wrong with your situation, then?”

She sighed, rearranging her long limbs on the bench in an effort to find a more comfortable position, and leaned forward with her elbows on the table.

“Sir Edward was a widower. He had a son of twenty-three from his first marriage, Nicholas, who still lived at home. They didn’t get along, and he resented me from the outset, as you may imagine. But that was nothing compared to my husband. Sir Edward was of the view that behind closed doors a wife ought to combine the role of maid and whore, to save him paying for either, and do so meekly and gratefully. And if I was *stubborn*, which was his word for refusing his demands, he whipped me with a horsewhip. In his experience, he said it worked just as well on women.”

She kept her voice steady as she said this, but I noticed how her jaw clenched tight and she sucked in her cheeks to keep the emotion in check. I shook my head.

“*Dio mio*, Sophia—I can’t imagine what you have been through. Was he a drinker, then?”

“Not at all. That made it worse, in a way. There are those who will lash out in a drunken rage—that is one kind of man, and they will often repent of it bitterly the next day. My husband was not like that—he always seemed master of his actions, and his violence was entirely calculated. He used it just as he said, in the same way that you would beat an animal to break it through fear.”

“Did anyone know how he was treating you?”

“His son knew, I am certain, but we detested one another. And there was a housekeeper, Meg, she’d been with Sir Edward for years—I’m sure she must have known, though she never spoke of it. She was afraid of him too. But she showed me small acts of kindness. Other than that, I only had one friend I could confide in.”

“And I suppose she could do little to help you.”

“*He*,” she said, and took another long draught of her ale. Immediately something tensed inside me, a hard knot of jealousy I had no right to, and for which I despised myself. Of course it was absurd to think that Sophia could have lived for months in a new city without attracting the attention of some young man, but whoever this friend was, I resented his invisible presence, the fact that he had been there to comfort her. Had he been a lover? On the other hand, I tried to reason against that voice of jealousy, where was he now, this friend? Had she not found her way to London, in her hour of desperation, in search of me? I composed my face and attempted to look disinterested.

“*He*, then. He could not help?”

She shook her head. “What could anyone have done? Olivier listened to me, that was all.”

Was it really, I thought, and bit the unspoken words down. I felt as if I had a piece of bread lodged in my throat.

“Your husband did not mind you having friends who were ...?” I left the sentence hanging.

“French?”

“I was going to say, men.”

Sophia's teasing smile turned to scorn.

"Well, of course he would, if he'd known. He didn't even like me to leave the house, but fortunately he was out so often at his business that I sometimes had a chance to slip away on the pretext of some chores. Olivier was the son of French weavers—his family came as refugees to Canterbury twelve years ago, after the massacre of Saint Bartholomew's Day."

I shivered, despite the stuffy air; the mention of that terrible event in 1572, when the forces of the French Catholic League rampaged through the streets of Paris, slaughtering Protestant Huguenot families by the thousand until the gutters ran scarlet with their blood, never failed to chill me to the bones. The memory of it was kept fresh in England, as a warning of what could be expected here if a Catholic force were ever to invade.

"I had heard that many Huguenots came to England to escape the religious persecution," she said.

"Canterbury is one of their largest communities. They are really the best of people," she added warmly, and instantly I disliked this Olivier all the more.

"But tell me how your husband died, then," I said, wanting to change the subject.

Sophia passed a hand across her face and held it for a moment over her mouth, as if gathering up the strength for this part of the story. Eventually she laid her hands flat on the table and looked me directly in the eye.

"For six months, I endured this marriage, if that is what you want to call it. I was known as Kate Kingsley, and my official history was that my father, a distant cousin of Sir Edward, had recently died, leaving me an orphan with a useful parcel of land in Rutland. I suppose he thought that was far enough away that no one would be likely to check. When I appeared with him in public, I was demure and well turned out, which was all anyone seemed to expect of me. And at home, I was regularly beaten and forced to endure what he called my wifely duty, which he liked to perform with violence, though he was always careful never to leave marks on my skin where it might show." She flexed her hands, trying to keep her expression under control.

"How did you bear it?"

She shrugged.

"It is surprising how much you can bear, when you are obliged to—as you must know Bruno. My greatest fear was that I would get another child, he forced himself on me so often, and I knew I could never love any child of his. With every month that passed, I worried my luck would not hold. Lately I had started to think about running away. Olivier was going to help me."

I'm sure he was, I thought, uncharitably.

"Did your husband suspect?"

"I don't think so. He was always preoccupied with his own business. In fact, from the first days in that house, I'd begun to notice odd things about my husband's behaviour."

"Aside from his violent streak, you mean?"

"Odder than that, even. He was often out of the house at strange hours, leaving in the dead of night and returning towards dawn. Once I asked him where he'd been when he got into bed with the cold air of night still on him, and he fetched me such a slap to my jaw that I feared I would lose a tooth." She rubbed the side of her face now at the memory of it. "After that, I always pretended to be asleep when he came in."

“So he was a man with secrets. Women, do you suppose?”

She shot me a scornful look.

“When he had a whore ready at his disposal in the comfort of his own home, at no extra charge?” She shook her head. “I told you, my husband didn’t like to part with money if it could be avoided. No, there was something else he was up to, but I never found out what. Underneath the house there was a cellar that he always kept locked, with the key on a chain at his belt. And sometimes his friends would come to the house late at night.” Her face darkened. “By his friends, I mean some of the most eminent men of the city. My husband was a lay canon at the cathedral, as well as being magistrate, so he was a person of influence. They would shut themselves in his study and talk for hours. Once I tried to listen at the door and it seemed they were arguing among themselves, but I could not stay long enough to hear anything useful—the old housekeeper found me there in the passageway and shooed me out to bed. She said Sir Edward would kill me if he caught me there, truly kill me, and she had such fear in her face that I believed it was a serious warning, honestly meant.” She paused to take another bite of bread. “But two weeks ago he had been up to the cathedral, to a meeting of the chapter, as he often did, and afterwards he was to take his supper with the dean. He never came home.”

“What happened?”

“One of the canons appeared at my door, about nine o’clock at night, with two constables. He had found Edward’s body in the cathedral precincts. He must have been on his way home when he was attacked.”

“How did he die?”

“Struck down with a heavy weapon from behind, they said, and beaten repeatedly while he lay there until his skull was smashed. They said his hands were all broken and bloodied, as if he’d been trying to cover his face.” She pressed her lips together. “I wasn’t sorry—the man was a brute. But it must have been a dreadful way to die. His brains were all spilled over the flagstones, they told me.”

“His brains ...” The detail sounded familiar, as if I had heard the description before, but I could not place it. “You did not have to see it, I hope?”

“No, they took the body away. It was a vicious act. The killer must have been someone who violently hated him.”

“Were there people who hated him that much?”

“Apart from his wife, you mean?” She gave me a wry glance.

I acknowledged the truth of this with a dip of my head. “But you said no one knew how he treated you in private. So how did they come to suspect you?”

She poked at a piece of bread and leaned in.

“I had the wit to realise when the canon came that if I didn’t give him a good show of shock and grief he would find that curious, to say the least. He handed me the sword that my husband had been wearing, still sheathed, and his gold signet ring, all daubed in blood. I played the distraught widow, thinking that would make them go away.”

“I find it hard to imagine you in that role,” I said, with a fond smile. She almost returned it.

“Oh, you would be surprised, Bruno, how convincing I can be. He said the body had been taken to the coroner and asked if I wanted someone to sit with me that night, to save me

being alone. I thanked him and said I had old Meg, the housekeeper, for company—that was stupid of me, because it was Meg's day off and she had gone to visit a friend, but I just wanted him to go so I could stop pretending to cry and enjoy an untroubled night's sleep. I could hardly explain to him that I wanted more than anything to be left on my own, for good once."

"Did he know you were lying?"

"Not at the time. He went away, and perhaps an hour later my husband's son, Nicholas, came home, with the smell of the alehouse on him. The constables had found him in the street with his friends and given him the news. He was cursing and shouting at me in his drunken rage that it was all my doing. He said nothing had gone right in that house since the day his father brought me into it." She paused, and I saw the anger flash across her face before she mastered it. "Then—well, I'll spare you the details. Suffice to say, he thought he could take his father's place in the marriage bed."

"Holy Mother!" I drew a hand across my mouth and felt my other fist bunch under the table.

"Don't worry, I fought him off." She gave a brief, bitter laugh. "I was damned if I was taking that from the son as well. Fortunately, he was too drunk to put up much of a fight. But when he was sober enough to be angered by the refusal. He told me I would get what was coming to me, gave me a slap for good measure, and stumbled and crashed his way to his own room."

"What did he mean by that threat?"

"I hardly dared sleep that night—I thought he might come in and attack me while I lay in my bed. But I heard him leave the house early, at first light. I fell asleep again and the next morning I knew, old Meg the housekeeper was shaking me awake, whispering frantically that I had to run."

"Run? Why?"

"She'd met the cathedral gatekeeper on her way back to the house. He'd come to find her to say that the constables had discovered evidence at the scene to arrest me for the murder of my husband and were on their way round. I barely had time to get dressed. Fortunately, I knew where my husband kept his strongbox."

"In his mysterious locked cellar?"

She shook her head.

"No. Whatever was in there, it was not money. He kept that in various chests in the room he called his library, and the keys were hidden in a recess in the chimney breast. I took two pursesfuls of gold angels, which was all I could carry, and fled through the kitchen yard."

"So ..." I sat back, feeling almost breathless at the pace of her tale. "Where did you go? What was this evidence—did you ever find out? Surely this Nicholas had something to do with it?"

"One question at a time, Bruno. I ran through the back streets to Olivier's house. His parents had already heard about Sir Edward's murder—news spreads quickly in a cathedral city, where everyone knows everyone. But they didn't know I was to be accused of it. They offered to hide me for a while, but I was afraid it would be too dangerous for them—the Huguenots are already treated with suspicion in the city, just because they are foreigners who keep close within their own community and try to preserve their own customs. We English

are not terribly accommodating in that regard, I'm afraid."

"I have noticed."

"Later that same day, old Meg came by to tell us she had been questioned by the constables. They learned, of course, that I had lied about being at home with her the previous evening—poor thing, she had no idea I had told them that. But apparently early that morning someone had found a pair of women's gloves, stained with blood, thrown on the ground in the cathedral precincts. Put that together with my lying about my alibi, stealing my husband's money, and taking flight, they think they have all the answer they need."

She folded her arms and dropped her head to stare at the table, as if the account had exhausted her.

"Well, that is absurd," I said, indignant on her behalf. "Were they your gloves?"

She hesitated.

"I don't know—one pair of gloves looks much like any other, doesn't it? I certainly wasn't wearing them. But how am I to prove otherwise? When my husband was respected and influential, and I have no money of my own even to pay a lawyer? I'm sure it won't take long for someone to uncover Mistress Kate's real name and past, and that will be seen as proof of my degeneracy."

"Someone has tried to ensure you were blamed for this murder. Did this Nicholas, the son, know who you really were?"

She shook her head.

"No. But it was plain he hated me."

"Hated you and desired you."

"Isn't that often the case with men and women?" She lifted her chin and fixed me with a twisted smile.

I was on the point of arguing when I recalled a woman I had known last year, and the memory gave me pause. I did not answer one way or the other.

"What about the key?" I asked.

"What key?"

"The one to his secret cellar, that you said he wore at his belt. If this canon gave you the valuables he took from the body, was the key not among them?"

She stared at me, her lips parted.

"No! By God, with everything that happened after, I never once thought of that key. You mean the killer could have taken it?"

"I don't know. Only it seems that, if he was found with a gold ring and a sword still on him, the killer was not interested in robbery. Perhaps the key was not given to you because the person who found him didn't regard it as valuable, that is all."

"Or because they knew precisely what it was and kept it." She frowned. "You think someone wanted to find out what was in that cellar?"

"I don't know. But surely any sane person would force the lock rather than hack a man to death for the key? I was only thinking aloud. So—then you came to London?" I said.

"As you see," she replied. "It took over a week."

I shook my head, half in disbelief, half in admiration.

"You are fortunate you were not robbed or killed on the road, or both. Did you travel alone?"

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