The LAST HOURS

MINETTE WALTERS

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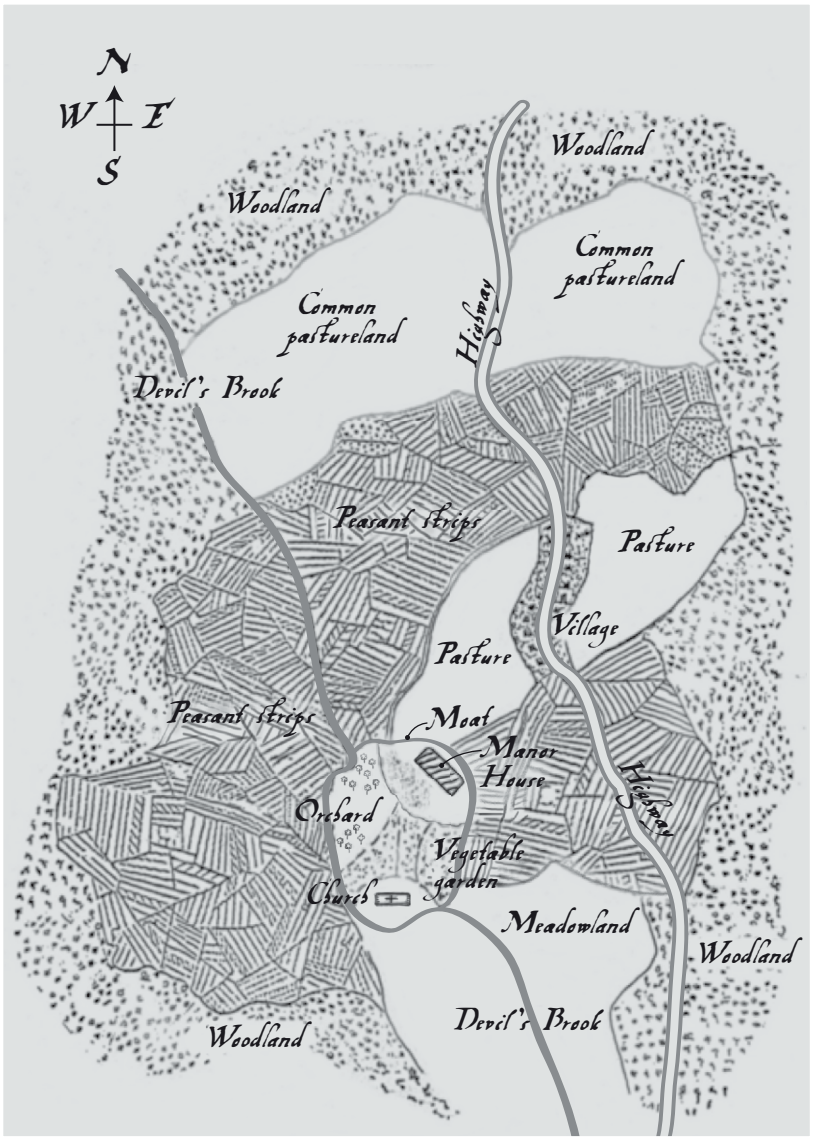
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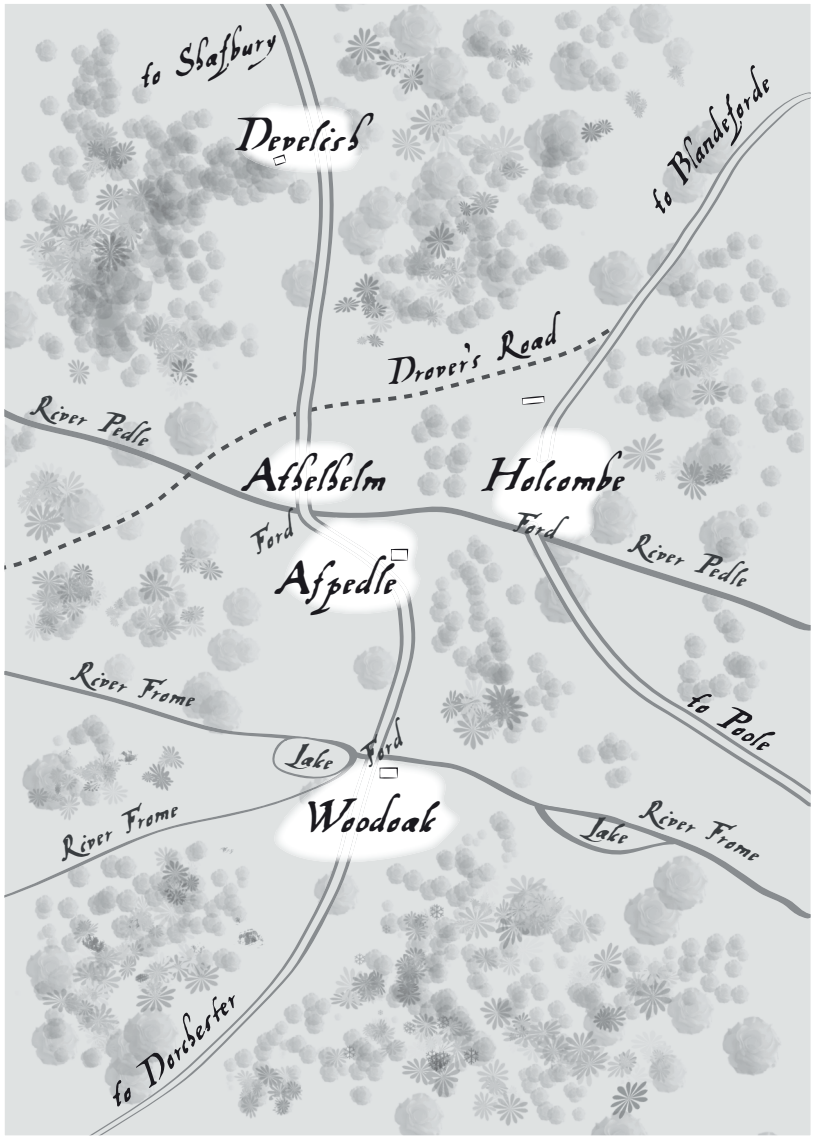
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For Madeleine and Martha

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Develish, 1348



Mid-Dorsetefshire, 1348

In Dorseteshire the plague made the country quite void of inhabitants so that there were almost none left alive. From there it passed into Devonshire and Somersetshire, even unto Bristol, and raged in such sort that the Gloucestershire men would not suffer the Bristol men to have access to them by any means. But at length it came to Gloucester, yea even to Oxford and to London, and finally it spread over all England and so wasted the people that scarce the tenth person of any sort was left alive.

Geoffrey the Baker,
Chronicon Angliae temporibus Edwardi II et Edwardi III

We see death coming into our midst like black smoke, a plague which cuts off the young, a rootless phantom which has no mercy or fair countenance. It is seething, terrible, wherever it may come, a head that gives pain and causes a loud cry, a burden carried under the arms, a painful angry knob, a lump. It is an ugly eruption that comes with unseemly haste. The early ornament of a Black Death.

Jeuan Gethin (d. 1349)

And there were those who were so sparsely covered with earth that the dogs dragged them forth and devoured many bodies throughout the city.

Agnolo di Tura, *Cronica Senese*

Men and women [of Florence] abandoned their dwellings, their relatives, their property . . . as if they thought nobody in the city would remain alive and that its last hour had come.

Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*

THIRD DAY OF JULY, 1348

One

Develish, Dorseteshire

The summer heat was sucking the life from Develish. Leaves wilted on trees, ponies stood heads down, too tired to crop the grass, chickens settled in the dust with their eyes closed and serfs leant heavily on their scythes in the fields. Only blowflies prospered, swarming around the mounds of dung-soiled straw outside the cattle sheds and buzzing annoyingly through every room in the manor house.

It was not a day for travelling, which explained Sir Richard of Develish's ill-humour. His voice rose in anger each time his steward or servants failed to react fast enough to his demands, and since the journey wasn't one he wanted to make, there was a good deal to rage about. Only the calming influence of his wife, Lady Anne, allowed the preparations to go ahead. Quietly, she overruled every decision Sir Richard made and ordered the servants to pack his bags according to her instructions.

Eleanor, their fourteen-year-old daughter, listened to it all from Lady Anne's chamber upstairs. She was as resentful about her father's trip as he was, and wished her mother in Hell for forcing him to take it. The girl should have been working on an

embroidered pillow for her trousseau but, instead, she stood at the window, watching a covered wagon being loaded with wooden chests of food and clothes, and money for her dowry.

Eleanor was spoilt and petulant at the best of times, but the heat made her worse. Her eyes were drawn to a serf who was weaving new sapling whips into the wattle fence that surrounded the orchard. He worked deftly, flexing the green wood with strong, sun-browned arms before threading it between the weathered wood of previous years. Only a foolish slave would labour so hard in those temperatures, and a satisfied smile lit Eleanor's face when she recognised him. Nothing pleased her more than to find reasons to belittle Thaddeus Thurkell.

Like all bondsmen, he was dirty and ragged, but he was half a head taller than most Dorset men, and his swarthy skin, long black hair and almond-shaped eyes bore no resemblance to the man he called father—short-limbed, weaselly-faced Will Thurkell. One rumour had it that Eva Thurkell had run away to Melcombe to sleep with a sailor, another that Thaddeus was the result of a snatched coupling with a passing gypsy.

Whatever the truth, the father hated the son and the son hated the father. The boy had been subjected to daily beatings while he was growing up, but these days Will was too afraid of him to lift the stick, for it was said that Thaddeus could bend an iron bar over his knee and fell a grown man with a single punch to the head. He paid lip service to his lowly place in Develish, ducking his head when he had to, but there was no respect in the way he did it. He looked past people as if they weren't there, particularly the man who acknowledged him as a son.

Will Thurkell was lazy and resented the *ad opus* work he was expected to do for the manor in return for his strips of land. Even as a young boy, Thaddeus had had to sweat in his father's place

on the threat that his mother would be given the rod if he didn't. A sad and sorry woman without an ounce of spirit, Eva had had more than her share of punishment down the years. Only the dwarfish, pale-skinned children who came after Thaddeus had been spared her husband's wrath.

This wasn't to say that Eleanor had any sympathy for Eva. The harlot had known the rules when she lay in sin with another, and it was her own fault if she couldn't pass her bastard off as Will's. Gossip said she'd tried to claim Thaddeus was the product of rape, but few believed her since she hadn't mentioned violation until the swarthy baby, so different from her husband, arrived. The stain of illegitimacy made Thaddeus as sinful as his mother, though you wouldn't think it to watch him. He carried his head high instead of hanging it in shame.

Eleanor liked the idea of bringing Thaddeus Thurkell to his knees. He was six years older than she was, and she dreamt of humbling him. As the temperature rose, he shed his tunic and laboured on in short hose and a loose-fitting shirt with rolled-up sleeves. It pleased the girl to spy on him; it pleased her even more to think he knew she was doing it. When he tied a piece of cloth around his forehead to keep the sweat from his eyes, he stared directly at her window and her cheeks flushed rosy red from guilty desire.

It was her father's fault for promising her to the ugly, pock-marked son of a neighbouring lord whose demesne, larger than Develish's, was two days' ride away. She faced a joyless future married to Peter of Bradmayne, who was so puny he could barely sit astride a horse. Eleanor's own pony, a pretty little bay jennet with white stockings, was cropping grass in the part of her father's demesne that lay beyond the moat. She was tempted to go outside and demand Thaddeus saddle it and assist her to mount. If he

dared to look at her while he was doing it, she would slice his face with her crop.

This amusing fantasy was cut short by the sound of her mother's footsteps on the stairs. Eleanor scurried back to her stool and her embroidery, and pretended industry where there was none. Her feelings for Lady Anne bordered on hatred, because Eleanor knew perfectly well that she had her mother to thank for choosing Peter of Bradmayne as a husband. Lady Anne preferred duty and discipline to love. She had been brought up by nuns and should have taken vows, since her favourite pastime was nagging and lecturing her daughter about her failings.

Eleanor could tell from the silence that Lady Anne was counting how many stitches had been added to the design since last she looked. 'It's too warm,' she declared mutinously. 'My fingers keep slipping on the needle.'

'You don't sew it for me, daughter, you sew it for yourself. If you see no merit in the task, then choose something more rewarding to do.'

'There is nothing.'

Through the open window Lady Anne could hear the shuffle of horses' hooves on the baked mud of the forecourt below as Sir Richard's retinue mustered for the journey. In the fields beyond the moat, she could see the serfs at the back-breaking task of making hay; closer in, Thaddeus Thurkell sweated over the wattle fence. It wasn't difficult to guess what Eleanor had been doing with her time. 'Your father summons you to say goodbye,' she said. 'He will be gone a fortnight.'

The girl rose. 'I shall tell him I don't want him to go.'

'As you please.'

Eleanor stamped her foot. 'It's you who makes him go. You make everyone do things they don't like.'

Lady Anne's eyes creased with amusement. 'Not your father, Eleanor. He may throw tantrums to remind us of the efforts he makes on our behalf, but he wouldn't be going to Bradmayne if it wasn't in his interests to do so.'

'What interests?'

'He's heard rumours that Peter of Bradmayne's childhood sickness has returned. He wants to see the truth for himself before he puts his seal to the marriage contract.' She shook her head at the sudden hope in her daughter's expression. 'Be careful what you wish for, Eleanor. If Peter dies, you may end up with no husband at all.'

'I won't shed tears because of it.'

'You will when your cousin inherits this house. Better by far to be mistress of Bradmayne than a lonely old maid relying on a relative's charity for bed and board.'

'The world is full of men,' the girl said defiantly. 'There are many more pleasing husbands than Peter of Bradmayne.'

'But none that your father can afford,' Lady Anne reminded her. 'Develish is Sir Richard's only demesne, and he has never been granted another. Do you not think he would offer a larger dowry if he could? He spoils you in everything else. Be grateful for Bradmayne and pray that Peter is strong enough to give you sons so that one may become Lord of Develish.'

Eleanor loathed these conversations in which her mother preached and she was forced to listen. 'Perhaps I'll be cursed like you,' she muttered spitefully. 'Father says it's your fault he has no heir.'

'Then you have a sad future ahead of you,' the woman answered. 'I mourn the lack of a son every day, and so should you.'

'I don't see why,' the girl said with a flounce of her long skirts. 'It's not my fault you never had one.'

Lady Anne despaired of her daughter's stupidity. Eleanor was an undoubted beauty, with her pale skin, blonde hair and startling blue eyes—a miniature of her father—but despite years of patient teaching, she was incapable of keeping a thought in her head. 'If you had brothers, My Lord of Blandeforde would have granted your father's applications for more lands on their behalf and he could have used the levies from the other estates to ensure your future,' she said quietly. 'As it is, he has been unable to persuade a man of wealth to overlook the paucity of your dowry. We have had many visitors here but none has made an offer for you.'

Eleanor's eyes narrowed. 'They're afraid I'll grow scrawny and ugly like you, Mother. Even Father can't bear to touch you any more.'

'No,' Lady Anne agreed. 'I count it as one of my few blessings, although I dislike the way you encourage him to put his hands on you.'

'You mustn't be so jealous. I'm not to blame if Sir Richard loves me more than he loves you. You should have taken care not to disappoint him.'

Humour glimmered briefly in Lady Anne's eyes. 'Your father loves many women,' she said, 'but you are his only child. If you didn't have his likeness he'd doubt your parentage.'

'You lie.'

The woman eyed her curiously. 'What offends you, Eleanor? That your father can't make sons or that he pretends I'm the only competition you have for his affections? Where do you think he goes when he rides from home of an afternoon? Who do you think he sees? He has as strong a taste for serfs as you do.'

The girl stamped her foot again. 'I *hate* you,' she hissed.

Her mother turned away. 'Then pray that Lord Peter is free of sickness and agrees with Sir Richard that you should be married

before summer is out. If your husband can overlook the selfishness of your nature, you should find him easier to tolerate than you do me.'

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Thaddeus Thurkell was careful to keep his contempt well hidden as he observed the daughter's farewell to her father out of the corner of his eye. Nothing about it was honest. Sir Richard and Lady Eleanor were too alike—self-satisfied and demanding of attention, each arrayed in brightly embroidered apparel—and the only purpose of their noisy parting was to make everyone aware of it. As always, their behaviour and dress eclipsed the quieter people around them and, as always, Lady Anne stood apart, unloved and unnoticed. She had none of the flamboyance of her husband and daughter, and Thaddeus liked her better for it. He knew that she'd spent time in a nunnery as a child, being educated by the sisters, and he assumed her quiet wisdom and knowledge of medicine came from that experience.

It wasn't Thaddeus's place to feel sorry for Milady—he had no business thinking about her at all—but he couldn't see her in the presence of her husband and daughter without being offended on her behalf. They paid her as little respect as his stepfather paid his mother but, unlike Eva, Lady Anne had too much pride to show she cared. She made it appear that she was standing apart by choice, and looked the other way when Sir Richard ran his ham-like fists over his daughter, pulling her close and planting juicy kisses on her lips before heaving his burly body onto his black charger and calling to his retinue to fall in behind him.

As the convoy set off, Thaddeus kept his head down and continued to weave the green hazel into the wattle fence. The sound of the cart wheels creaking over the rough track wasn't loud

enough to mask the swish of Lady Eleanor's embroidered gown as she walked across the forecourt towards him, but Thaddeus refused to give her the satisfaction of turning around and dropping to one knee. His penance would be a kick and a torrent of abuse for impudence, but he preferred that to paying homage to someone he despised. If there was any charity in Lady Eleanor, he had yet to see it.

To prove the point, the girl picked up one of his sapling whips and struck him with it. 'How dare you turn your back on me!' she snapped.

Thaddeus straightened and this time the whip, swung in an upward arc, caught him under the chin.

'Know your station,' Eleanor ordered. 'Lower your head and bend your knee. It's not for you to look at me.'

Thaddeus didn't answer, simply stooped to retrieve another sapling from the ground and began to feed it into the fence, ignoring the blow that landed across his shoulders. He was sure Sir Richard's new steward was watching from the house, and his penalty for breaking off from his work to humour Lady Eleanor would be severe. Gossip said the man had been brought in to raise extra revenue for Sir Richard's extravagances, and Thaddeus was disinclined to oblige him by paying a fine. He held Lady Eleanor and the steward in equal contempt, but he could take a thrashing more easily from a fourteen-year-old girl than his family could afford a pound of grain.

He was spared further punishment by Lady Anne. She caught her daughter's wrist and forced it down, removing the whip while congratulating the serf on the excellence of his work. 'You must excuse my daughter, Thaddeus. She doesn't know the difference between a job done well and a job done badly. You deserve much praise for what you do.'

He turned and bowed to her. 'Thank you, milady. I trust this day finds you well.'

'It does indeed.' She put her hand on Eleanor's arm. 'Come, child. We have things to attend to inside.'

Thaddeus watched them walk away, wondering why so little of the mother was in the daughter. The girl took after her father in everything—even cruelty—with only the neatness of her build resembling Lady Anne's. The woman was dark, the girl blonde like her father. Thaddeus's own situation made him peculiarly sensitive to family likenesses. He looked for differences between generations in the way a hunchback looked for telltale twists in the spines of others. It soothed a man's brain to believe he wasn't alone in his affliction.

As a child, Thaddeus had prayed his hair would change colour or his bones stop growing so that Will would look at him one morning and see something he recognised. But as he grew older and the beatings became worse, he learnt to glory in the fact that he had no relationship with the man. It wasn't by accident that Will's progeny were small and slow-witted, and Thaddeus was not. He couldn't remember the number of times his mother had begged him to play the idiot in front of Will. It was the cleverness of Thaddeus's mind that drove her vicious husband mad, not the darkness of his looks or his tallness. *Cover your gaze, keep silent*, Eva had urged. *Do not provoke him with the slickness of your tongue or the scorn that blazes from your eyes. He has none of your ability, and he knows it. Do it for me if not for yourself.*

Thaddeus had mixed feelings about his mother. She rarely showed him love for fear of Will's jealousy, but her need of him shouted from her pleading eyes and her desperate clutching at his tunic whenever she heard Will approach. She made Thaddeus promise each day that he would not abandon her, but it irked

him that she had never found the courage to defend him against Will's physical and verbal assaults.

He had heard his mother being called a whore all his life, and it was hard to think of her as anything else. When he was ten, he'd asked her who his true father was, but she'd refused to tell him. Will would beat it out of him and their situation would become worse. Her husband's rage would be uncontrollable if he had a name to brood on instead of believing that Thaddeus was the result of rape by a stranger.

Her answer had led Thaddeus to think his father must be known to Will. He studied his own face in the beaten metal plate that passed for a mirror in Will's hut and then searched the features of every man in Develish—rich and poor alike—looking for eyes, complexions and noses that resembled his. He didn't find them, and as time passed he came to accept the rumours that his father was a foreign sailor. He even liked the idea. There was more to respect about a man who travelled the seas than one who was bonded to a feudal lord.

Precisely what Thaddeus's status was in Sir Richard's manor had never been defined. As Eva's bastard, he had no right to inherit Will's holdings—several strips of land and the dwelling that went with them—but when Thaddeus asked the priest what would happen to him after Will was dead, the old man had shrugged and told him to work hard and keep improving his skills. As long as Sir Richard valued the quality of his labour, there was no reason for Thaddeus to concern himself with his future. Even slaves were well looked after when they had their master's approval.

It was Will's favourite taunt to call Eva's bastard a slave. He claimed he owned Thaddeus body and soul; that without his patronage the boy would have been left to die in one of the ditches outside Develish. He seemed unaware that serfdom itself was

a form of slavery, and that the oath of fealty he'd sworn to Sir Richard—*'I will not marry or leave this land without my lord's permission and I bind my children and my children's children to this promise . . .'*—tied him and his legitimate offspring to Develish in a way that it didn't tie Thaddeus.

The person who had explained this to Thaddeus had been Lady Anne. She had drawn him aside on Lady Day in his thirteenth year when he was cleaning out the poultry pens and told him the bailiff was coming for him. 'You must take care he doesn't find you,' she warned. 'This is the day when Sir Richard hears the oaths of bondage. Since you cannot be governed by the pledges Will has made, I urge you to be wary of making any of your own. Without land or dwelling, you will be dependent on my husband's goodwill for your food and board, and that is not a fate I would wish on you, Thaddeus.'

He didn't understand why Lady Anne took an interest in him but he owed her more than he owed anyone else, and she had never once asked for anything in return. 'If I escape the bailiff this year, milady, he will find me the next.'

'My husband's steward is unwell and not likely to live another twelve months,' she told him, 'and it's he who questions your position. Sir Richard will have forgotten the matter inside a week, and a new steward will know nothing of your circumstances. Every year that passes is a year of freedom gained. Remember that.'

Thaddeus thought of the punishment he would receive for leaving his work. When the bailiff had finished with him, Will would take over. Was it worth so much pain just to avoid mouthing a few words of servitude? 'Do freemen endure starvation more easily than slaves, milady?'

Lady Anne smiled. 'You know they do not, Thaddeus, but a slave will always die before his master does. If you value your life,

show care not to swear it away too easily, and take even more care to stay silent on the subject. If my husband is warned in advance that you have the right to declare yourself free of him, he will consult the bishop and use Church law to rule against you.'

The thrashings had been as bad as any Thaddeus had received but, as Lady Anne had predicted, the old steward died and his query about whether a bastard was bound by the oath of a man who refused to adopt him as his own was forgotten. It made little difference to Thaddeus's life except that he began to imagine a future outside Develish. His dreams were necessarily limited by his ignorance of what lay beyond the village, but they sparked a hope he'd never had before. He paid more attention to the stories told by the pedlars and merchants who passed through Develish, and listened to what the leading bondsmen said when they drove sheep to other demesnes or nearby markets.

He was most interested in descriptions of the sea which he knew lay to the south. His ambition was to reach it one day and take a ship to a foreign port where he would be known as something other than Eva Thurkell's bastard or Will Thurkell's slave. In winter, when the trees shed their leaves and he climbed the wooded slopes at the end of the valley to collect fallen branches to feed the manor house fires, he could see hills all the way to the horizon. They seemed to rise in height to shimmering purple in the far distance, and he convinced himself that his gateway to another world lay on the other side. But how far away it was, and how long it would take him to walk there, he had no idea.



Eleanor wrested her arm from her mother's grasp as they entered the house. 'Don't ever speak to me like that in front of a slave

again,' she stormed. 'Thaddeus was insolent. He deserved to be whipped.'

Lady Anne walked away from her. 'You behaved badly, daughter. Be grateful I spared you further shame.'

The girl pursued her. 'It's you who has a taste for serfs not I or Father. Do you think I don't see the way Thaddeus behaves towards you? When he makes a bow to Sir Richard, he does it to avoid a beating, but the ones he makes to you are genuine. Why is that?'

Lady Anne was surprised that her daughter was so perceptive. 'I gave him liniment once or twice for his bruises when he was a child. I expect he remembers.'

'He feels sorry for you. That's why he does it. I can see it in his eyes.'

Lady Anne paused before they reached the kitchen. The room was uncharacteristically silent, as if every servant inside was listening to the conversation. 'Then you see wrongly, Eleanor. Only God knows what is going on inside a person's head.'

The girl smiled. 'Thaddeus makes himself your equal if he dares feel pity for you. What is that if not insolence? Will Father say I behaved badly if I tell him Eva Thurkell's bastard assumes the rights of a freeman?'

Lady Anne studied her for a moment. 'I suggest you worry more about Sir Richard's displeasure when he learns how interested *you* are in Thaddeus Thurkell, Eleanor. There is as much to read in your eyes as there is in anyone else's.'

(EXTRACT FROM A PRIVATE JOURNAL KEPT BY LADY ANNE)

The third day of July, 1348

Sir Richard has left for Bradmayne, accompanied by 10 fighting men and the bailiff, Master Foucault. They take with them the gold I have preserved so carefully for Eleanor's dowry. I wonder if the effort was worth it when she curses me in one breath for not saving enough to purchase a better husband, and blames me in the next for preventing Sir Richard from gambling it away on games of chance. With no dowry, she would be unable to wed at all, and she assures me she would prefer that to being married to Lord Peter.

In my heart, I hope the rumours that the boy is ailing are true, for I see no happiness for Eleanor in Bradmayne. Her father has told her so many lies that she's ill-prepared for what she'll find there. It amuses him to belittle Lord Peter in her eyes for he's jealous of her affections, but he doesn't hesitate to paint Bradmayne as a place of beauty, wealth and wonder.

Such descriptions are quite different from the reports Gyles Startout brings me. If I thought Eleanor would believe me, I would try to advise her, but Sir Richard has made fine work of persuading her that I'm responsible for this match. Everything I say falls on deaf ears, in particular my attempts to portray Lord

Peter in a kinder light. If she succeeds in giving him a son, I fear the baby will be conceived and born in hatred.

I spoke with Gyles in private before Sir Richard left. He is more loyal than I and Develish deserve, tolerating insult from both my husband and the men he rides with in order to bring us news from the world outside. I have asked him to enquire of the Bradmayne servants how Eleanor might best make a friend of My Lady of Bradmayne—even the knowledge that My Lady has a fondness for ribbons would be of use. I fear Eleanor will suffer great loneliness without a confidante.