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Double Homicide

Faye & Jonathan Kellerman

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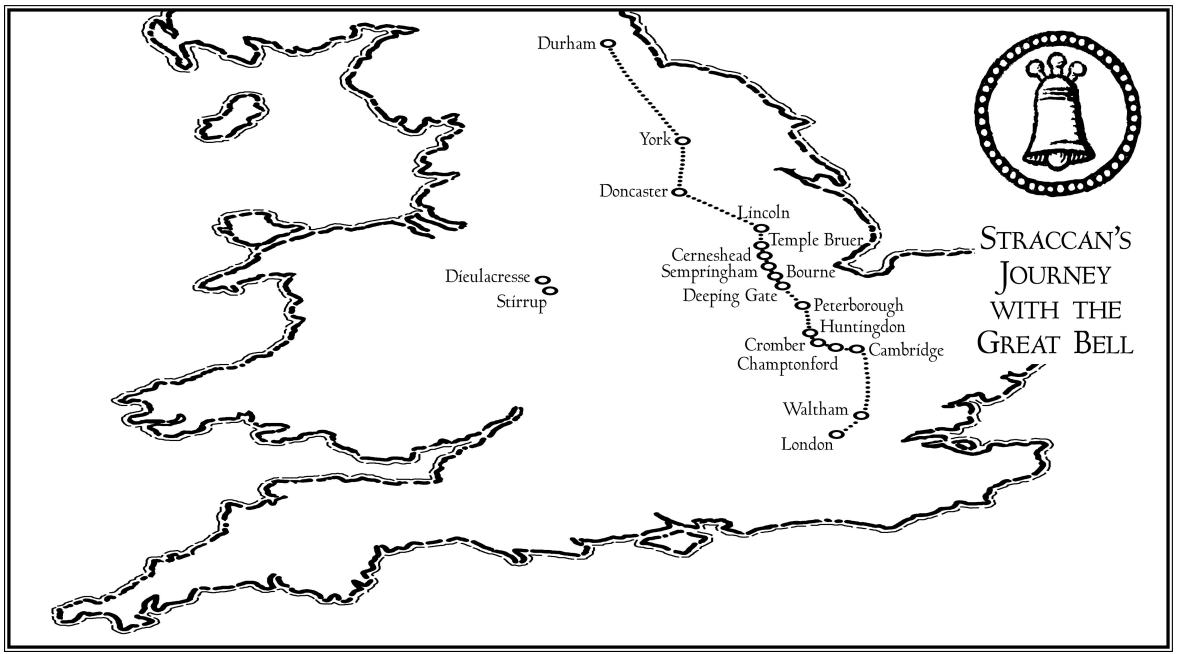
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Cast of Characters

Abdul al-Hazred	Arab necromancer
Adeliza	Straccan's housekeeper at Stirrup, wife of Cammo
Aidan	Novice of Coldinghame
Ailith	Young woman of Waltham
Angels	Michael, Samael, Uriel. Knights of the White Brotherhood
Bartimeus	Monk of Cerneshead Abbey
Blaise d'Etranger	Knight, friend of Straccan
Brigid	Nun, prioress of Bedesdale
Cammo	Straccan's steward at Stirrup
Christina Aurifer	Young woman of Cromber
Countess Judith	Sister of Peter des Roches, widow of Earl Joceran
David d'Ax	Orphaned boy, kinsman to Blaise d'Etranger
Durand	Knight Templar, commander at Temple Bruer
Earl Joceran	Husband of Countess Judith
Emma	Sister to Ailith
Eustace de Vesci	Baron, traitor

Finan	Novice of Coldinghame
Fulk de Marseilles	Bishop of Toulouse, leader of the White Brotherhood
Garlanda	Countess Judith's laundress
Gaudy Company	Piper, Will, Tim, Pernelle. Travelling players
Giles	Cowman in charge of ox team
Gilla (Devorgilla)	Straccan's daughter
Hawkan Bane	Straccan's servant/companion
Hugh Tapton	Bailiff of Cromber Abbey
Isabel	Queen of England
Janiva	Straccan's betrothed
Joanna	Princess of Gwynedd, bastard daughter of King John
John	King of England
Kepp o' the Dykes	Water guide at Ravenser
Ketil and Edmund	Sons of Kepp
Lawrence Boteler	A crippled boy, pilgrim
Llywelyn	Prince of Gwynedd, husband of Joanna
Lucius	Monk of Dieulacresse, physician
Lucy Boteler	Lawrence's mother, pilgrim
Maître Deil	Bishop Fulk's secretary
Master Hare	Bell founder of London
'Mercredi'	Master of King John's intelligence network
Miles Hoby	Knight, friend of Straccan
Mungo	Monk, sub-prior of Coldinghame
Nicholas	Novice of Dieulacresse
Odo	Captain of archers at Stirrup
Osyth	Anchoress of Pouncey

Paul	Countess Judith's chaplain
Peter des Roches	Bishop of Winchester, friend of King John
Peter Martel	Straccan's clerk at Stirrup
Radulfus	Prior of Coldinghame
Ralf Tyrrel	Queen Isabel's champion
Raimond de Sorules	Gleeman
Richard Straccan	Knight, dealer in holy relics
Robert fitzWalter	Baron, traitor
Roslyn de Sorules, 'Sorrow'	Gleemaiden
Starling Larktwist	Spy
Thomas	Nuns' priest at Bedesdale
Tobias	Potter of Pouncey
Widow Trygg	Innkeeper of Locksey
Wilfred	Crippled pilgrim


Durham
York
Doncaster
Lincoln
Temple Bruer
Cerneshead
Sempringham
Bourne
Deeping Gate
Peterborough
Huntingdon
Cromber
Champtonford
Cambridge
Waltham
London
Dieulacresse
Stirrup
STRACCAN'S
JOURNEY
WITH THE
GREAT BELL

Chapter 1

Countess Judith kept her husband's head in a box. At night it perched on the pillow by her side, at meals it sat on the board by her plate, and her household feared it almost as much as they feared her. She talked to it, they whispered among themselves, and who was to say it didn't answer?

In life Lord Joceran had escaped his wife as often and for as long as he could. Eight years on crusade, two more as a prisoner of the Turks and every chance he got thereafter, until in the end he died, as all must. After that she had her will of him.

The head was all she had. True to form, the earl had been on pilgrimage when he died, in Spain. His body was buried there, and his squire had brought home the head, that being his lord's dying wish, to be entombed in the Benedictine abbey at Coldinghame, in the Lady Chapel he'd paid for; but his widow bagged it instead.

Minstrels sang of her great love and her grief, but if the truth were known Judith did not grieve. At last she had her husband where she wanted him. Hers entirely, at bed and board: under her eye, under her hand, under her thumb for the rest of her life.

As far as souls went, Judith had no fear. She had long since prayed Joceran out of purgatory and into paradise, and had no doubt that was her own eventual destination. The head would lie in the tomb with her, close-clasped to her breast, inescapably hers until all Christian bones and dust were summoned before God at the Day of Judgement. She was content.

Until the letter came from Coldinghame, from Prior Radulfus. She had never liked the man, a true Cuthbertian, barely able to be civil to a woman. A wicked, monstrous letter that forbade the coffining of the head with her body when she died, for Joceran had died an excommunicate and was still under the Church's ban.

It couldn't be true! But enquiry proved it, and it had come about thus: Joceran's squire, wishing to forsake the world for the life of a monk at Coldinghame, confessed to Prior Radulfus that his lord had slain a man in Spain on holy ground; not *in* a church, exactly, but at its very door. The man was nothing, a peasant who truculently refused to get out of the great lord's way; it was so minor an episode that Joceran would have forgotten it had not a priest in wrath taken up bell, book and candle and cast him out from the family of God. And before he had the chance to buy his way back in, Lord Joceran was killed that very night, in an earthquake that shook the town. God's judgement, the townsfolk said, on the wicked foreign lord; though why God should take thirty innocents at the same time was a mystery.

What could be done? Judith crushed the letter in her hand, dropped it, ground it under her heel and ordered her household to prepare for a journey. She would ride her

palfrey, she said, at which her ladies' voices rose in a chorus of dismay. At this time of year any journey, let alone such a one as she proposed, was most dangerous (no one dared say foolhardy). She had been ill, she had a cough and a pain in her chest; she was not as young as she once had been.

She brushed aside their concerns. Old she might be, but not feeble. No, she would not ride in a litter, nor would she write letters. She must go herself. Go where? They asked. To whom? To her brother, of course! Radulfus would have to listen to the Bishop of Winchester! It was unfortunate that Peter should be so far away, two hundred miles and more in London, but this was too urgent to be entrusted to messenger or letter. She must speak to him herself. Peter would make that insolent prior eat his words; if Judith had her way they would be crammed down his throat with the ill-cured parchment they were written on, but that was too much to hope for.

It was fine weather, dry and frosty; if it held, the journey south would not be too arduous. Good hunting weather. She would have ridden out herself, hawk on wrist, but for this unforeseen emergency; hunting was her favourite pastime. Peter's too, although he had few occasions for it since becoming so great a man – Bishop of Winchester, king's confidant, courtier, statesman, diplomat.

The last of the servants came running to the carts that would carry them in shocking discomfort to London. Father Paul, her chaplain, edged nervously out of the countess's line of sight and scanned their faces anxiously until he found the one he sought. There she was! Garlanda! He had feared she might not be coming. His leman, his love! A round, rosy

countenance framed in stubborn curls that defied all attempts at straightening, merry eyes and a merry mouth. She saw him at the same time, and winked as she scrambled into a cart. A flush of pleasure rose warmly from his throat to his brow, all else forgotten.

Judith's voice cracked like a whip: 'Father Paul, attend me!' His flush paled instantly as if a hand had wiped it off. Hastily, clumsily, nervously he mounted his mule and took his station at the countess's side. Her palfrey stamped, eager to be off. The bone of contention, the skull in its casket, was safe in her saddlebag – it went everywhere with her. She drew on her gloves, sniffing the crisp air like a hound, which she rather resembled; colour tinged her sallow cheeks as she shook the reins. Her cortège – ladies, men-at-arms, servants, cook, chaplain, physician and fool – moved off at a pace they could never keep up. Ride in a litter? Pah!

Chapter 2

Sir Richard Straccan reached the inn towards the end of a bitter March day, chilled to the bone and bone tired, only too thankful to reach shelter before dark. The stable was almost full, which meant a dozen other wayfarers – pilgrims, judging by the profusion of holy medals dangling from their bridles – were already inside. He hoped there'd be some supper left. Heaving Zingiber's saddle off, he checked the stallion's hooves, rubbed him down, and left him munching contentedly in his stall.

This inn was no different from the hundred others he'd stopped at during the past year: a long, low, thatched building, with the hall at one end, and sleeping quarters at the other where all the guests lay down together in their clothes to get what sleep they could. The cheerful noise of many voices and a warm, moist gust of sweat and onions greeted Straccan as he shoved the damp-swollen door open. At its tortured squeal a brief silence fell as the pilgrims looked up from their suppers, assessing the newcomer – tall and broad-shouldered, warmly cloaked, face scarred, the hilt of a sword jutting up over his shoulder: a knight. Still, it took all sorts, and with a matey chorus of 'God save yous' they shuffled their bottoms along the benches to make room for him, and

resumed their interrupted meal and talk.

When he'd finished eating, Straccan brought out a folded piece of calf skin and opened it to display a drawing, inviting his table companions to look.

'Anyone here seen anything like this? Anyone know where it is?'

They bent over it, frowning at the curious rune-like symbol – a vertical stroke with two branches on the right side, slanting upwards. They pursed their lips and shook their heads with the same blank lack of recognition he'd met everywhere, and his heart sank.

'No . . . never seen that . . . no . . . Sorry, me lord.'

Another dead end. Sighing, he put the sketch back in his scrip. It was all he had to go on, and after all these months it had got him nowhere.

Janiva, he thought, with a fresh pang to the ache of longing that never left him. *Janiva, where are you?* He could picture her so clearly in his mind's eye – her smile, the full-lipped oval face, red-brown braids lying over her shoulders, her green gown . . . When he closed his eyes it seemed he could even smell the scent of her sun-warmed skin, the sharp clean perfume of rosemary that she loved.

Impossible, unthinkable that he should never find her! Yet after so long . . .

More than a year had passed since Janiva's escape from her home village of Shawl, where she had been imprisoned on a malicious charge of sorcery. Her friend, the forester Tostig, had promised to take her to a place of safety, but had dared tell no one where lest they be forced into betrayal. They had ridden into the greenwood, and vanished. Straccan had been

back to Shawl half a dozen times since then, hoping for word of them, but no word came, and Tostig had never returned. Everyone at Shawl thought him dead, and if he had perished, surely Janiva had too: by now their bones lay somewhere in the deeps of the forest, and would never be found. Tostig was a man of resource who knew the forest as a villein knows his strips, but outlaws, like wolves, hunted prey in packs; what chance would one man and a young woman have if they met with a band of armed ribauds?

The pot boy refilled Straccan's cup, and he drank and set it down. Had he been wrong to put his faith in the drawing? Sitting alone by the embers after the others had trooped off noisily to their pallets, he remembered the night his daughter Gilla had come barefoot to his bed.

'Father,' she'd said. 'I think I can find Janiva. I can scry for her.'

She had that gift: the ability to see, in water or flame, places and people far away. Scrying, it was called. Awed and uneasy, he'd watched while she stared into the candle flame and described what she saw – a high cliff face split by an outcropping of quartz shaped something like a forked branch and shining brilliantly white against the grey rock, a steep path leading to a terrace halfway up the cliff and a small stone house, clinging like a snail shell to the cliff face.

She drew the outline of the quartz mark for him. He sent copies to his agents, and to Templar commanderies and preceptories throughout the kingdom, where he had friends, certain that someone would recognise it and tell him where to find it. Back then, at the beginning, he never doubted he would find her. Each morning he awoke with the expectation, *today*, *today*!

But the days passed, and no one came forward to say, 'I know the place, it lies thus-and-so,' and weeks crawled by, and hope bled out.

After two months, wild with impatience, Straccan left his steward in charge of his manor, his clerk in charge of his business (he bought, sold and occasionally 'liberated' holy relics), and with his servant, Hawkan Bane, he took to the roads, showing the drawing at every vill and manor, every town, and asking every traveller they met. More than once, riding through a town, a market, a fair, he'd seen a green gown, a thick braid of russet hair, and reached for her, crying her name, only to see a stranger's startled face and know the bitterness of disappointment.

After six months he and Bane split up, to cover twice the ground and double their chances. Weather and roads permitting, they met or left word for each other in York. He was on his way back there now, weighted down with defeat after weeks lost following false leads, while expectation leached away and hope turned sour.

Given an enemy to fight, a tower to storm, some innocent to rescue or a relic to steal, Straccan was in his element. But *this* – this futile, unending riding from place to place, showing the damned drawing, asking the same damned question over and over . . .

He stared at the dregs in his cup. There was another thing – the guilty knowledge that this was all his fault, that the loss of Janiva and the suffering she had undergone was because of him. Two summers ago in Wales he'd challenged Lord William de Breos (whom the Welsh, who knew him best, named 'the Butcher') to battle on holy ground, violating

Sanctuary. He made no excuse. He'd known full well what he did and how grave the sin; his intention was to kill, and the fact that things hadn't turned out that way made no difference. Afterwards he'd sought absolution, but his confessor held the matter too serious to pardon without consulting his bishop – an everyday, if costly, business, if it had not been for the Interdict.

For four years England had lain under the Pope's ban – its people cut off from the benefits and graces of Holy Church: no Mass, no sacraments, no bells, no burials in holy ground – all because King John refused to accept as Archbishop of Canterbury a man whom the Pope was determined to force upon him. Caught between papal displeasure and the king's wrath, every bishop in England save one had fled into exile, and until the Interdict was lifted – which looked like being never – there were no bishops to consult. Until there were, Straccan must carry his burden of sin unabsolved, and he and all those dear to him would be the worse for it.

That was the trouble with sin, he thought morosely. It wasn't just the guilty who paid the price.

He touched the paternoster beads he wore under his collar, but felt no comfort, just desolation. Was this it, then? Time to give up and go home? Time to stop this fruitless waste of love and life and spirit. He had failed. It wasn't fair to his daughter or his people, and it was time he came to his senses. He would go to York, leave word for Bane to follow, go home, and take up his abandoned life. The joyless prospect stretched ahead, every bit as unappealing as his present situation.

God's precious blood, he swore to himself. What was he

doing, sitting staring into a common clay cup as though he might find his answer there? *Go to bed, fool!* He banged the cup down on the board, startling the pot boy from his puppy-like doze in the warm ashes. What was the alternative? Was he to search the kingdom for the rest of his life until he grew gaunt with age, white-haired like some old madman from the tales of King Arthur's court, cursed to wear out his life on a hopeless quest?

Yes, if I have to!

It was late; the pilgrims were snoring, and as Straccan started to get up, yawning and ready for bed, the sleepy pot boy jumped up too.

'More ale, me lord?'

He lifted the jug, but Straccan turned his empty cup upside down to show he wanted no more . . . and stood like an image, staring, unbelieving, at the bottom of the cup, at the mark scratched in the clay.

Hauled from his warm bed and his wife's embrace, the innkeeper struggled futilely in Straccan's grip.

'Put me down, you mad sod! Let go! Oh, it's you, me lord – what's up?'

Straccan dragged the wriggling man to the dim light of a rush lantern hooked up beside the door, and shoved the little cup under his nose.

'Look, there! What's that?'

'It's a cup.'

'Not that! *That!* See? What is it?'

The man squinted at the cup's base. 'What, you mean the potter's mark?'