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Revelation

C. J. Sansom

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Extract

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Chapter One

THE HIGH CHANDELIERS in the Great Hall of Lincoln's Inn were ablaze with candles, for it was late afternoon when the play began. Most members of Lincoln's Inn were present, the barristers in their robes and their wives in their best costumes. After an hour standing watching, my back was starting to ache, and I envied the few elderly and infirm members who had brought stools.

The performance of a play at Lincoln's Inn, traditionally held in March, had been cancelled earlier in the month because of heavy snow; late in the month now, it was still unseasonably cold, the breath of actors and audience visible, wafting up like smoke to the high roof-beams. The play that year was a new Interlude, *The Trial of Treasure*, a heavy-handed moral fable with the gorgeously robed actors portraying the vices and virtues of mankind. As the actor playing Virtue, resplendent in pale robes and a long, white, false beard, lectured Dissimulation on his deceitful ways – appropriately, perhaps, to an audience of lawyers – my attention wandered. I cast my eyes over the shadowed faces of the audience. Treasurer Rowland, a thin-faced, acerbic old man, was eyeing the actors as though wondering whether it might have been better hiring a troupe with less expensive costumes even if this play required no elaborate scenery. Across from me I saw my old enemy Stephen Bealknap, his greedy pale blue eyes studying his fellow lawyers. Those eyes

were never still, would never meet yours, and as he saw me looking at him his gaze slid away. He was perhaps the crookedest lawyer I had ever come across; it still smarted that eighteen months before I had been forced to abandon a case against him through the ruthless machinations of his patron, Richard Rich. It struck me that he looked tired, ill.

Some distance away my friend Roger Elliard, to whose house I was invited to a dinner afterwards, held his wife's hand. A new scene had begun; Lust had made a pact of fellowship with Inclination To Evil. Embracing him, Lust was suddenly seized with pain and crouched on his knees.

> Out alas, what sudden passion is this,
> I am so taken that I cannot stand,
> the cramp, the cramp has touched me,
> I shall die without remedy now out of hand.

The actor, struck down by divine judgement, stretched out a trembling hand to the audience. I saw Bealknap look at him with a sort of puzzled contempt; Roger, though, turned suddenly away. I knew why; I would talk to him later.

At last the play ended; the players bowed, the audience clapped, and we got our cold limbs into motion and stepped out into Gatehouse Court. The sun was just setting, illuminating the redbrick buildings and the melting snow in the courtyard with an umber light. People walked away to the gate, or if they lived at Lincoln's Inn stepped homewards, wrapping their coats around them. I waited in the doorway for the Elliards, nodding to acquaintances. The audience were the only ones abroad, for it was a Saturday out of law term, Palm Sunday Eve. I looked across to the Elliards' lodgings. All the windows were lit and servants could be seen within, bustling with trays. Dorothy's dinners were well known around the Inn, and even at the end of Lent, with

red meat forbidden, I knew that she would have large tabling and good belly cheer for the group they had invited.

Despite the cold I felt relaxed, more peaceful than I had for a long time. In just over a week it would be Easter Sunday, and also the twenty-fifth of March, the official start of the New Year of 1543. Sometimes in recent years I had wondered at this time what grim events the coming year might bring. But I reflected that now I had only good and interesting work, and times with good friends, to look forward to. That morning while dressing I had paused to study my face in the steel mirror in my bedroom; something I seldom did, for the sight of my humped back still distressed me. I saw streaks of grey in my hair, deepening lines on my face. Yet I thought perhaps they gave me something of a distinguished look; and I had passed forty the previous year, I could no longer expect to look young.

That afternoon, before the performance, I had walked down to the Thames, for I had heard the ice was breaking up at last after the long, bitter winter. I stood at Temple Stairs and looked down at the river. True enough, huge chunks of ice tumbled against each other with great crashes and creaks amid roiling grey waters. I walked back through soft, melting snow, thinking that perhaps spring was coming at last.

Standing in the doorway of the Hall, I shivered suddenly despite my heavy fur-lined coat, for though the air was definitely warmer today it was still chill and I had never put back the flesh I lost in my bad fever eighteen months before. I jumped slightly as someone clapped me on the shoulder. It was Roger, his slim form swathed in a heavy coat. Beside him his wife Dorothy, her plump cheeks red with cold, smiled at me. Her brown hair was gathered under a round French hood set with pearls.

'You were in a brown study, Matthew,' Roger said. 'Reflecting on the high moral sentiments of the play?'

'High as a house but heavy as a horse,' Dorothy said.

'That they were,' I agreed. 'Who chose it?'

'The Treasurer.' Roger looked to where Rowland was talking to an ancient judge, nodding his head gravely. Roger lowered his voice. 'He wanted something that wasn't politically contentious. Wise in these days. But an Italian comedy would have been better.'

We walked across the courtyard together. I noticed the snow on the Gatehouse Court fountain, which had been frozen this last three months, was almost gone, revealing patches of grey ice. Soon perhaps the fountain would be working again, its gentle plashing sounding across the court. A few coins were exposed on the ice; even with the fountain frozen people still threw money in with a prayer for victory in a case or luck in an affair of the heart; for though they might deny it, lawyers were as superstitious as other men.

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ROGER'S STEWARD, an old man called Elias who had been with the family for years, greeted us at the door and took me upstairs to wash my hands. Then I went into the parlour, where fat candles cast a warm buttery light on the chairs and cushions. A dozen guests, all barristers and their wives, already sat or lounged, served with wine by Elias and a boy. A roaring fire warmed the room, bringing sweet smells from the scented herbs on the wooden floor, its light glinting on the silverware on the cloth-covered table. The walls were decorated with framed portraits in the new fashion, mostly of biblical characters. Above the large fireplace stood one of the best pieces of furniture in Lincoln's Inn, Roger's pride and joy. It was a large, carved wooden frieze of intricate design,

the branches of trees in full leaf interlaced with flowers and fruits, the heads of animals peering through, deer and boar and even a unicorn. Roger stood beside it, talking to Ambrose Loder from my chambers. His slim form was animated, his fine hands waving as he made some point to the plump barrister, who stood immobile, a sceptical look on his red face.

Dorothy stood beside him, wearing an expression of good-natured amusement, her colourful clothes a contrast to the black robes of the two lawyers. She wore a green damask dress with gold piping down the front, and a high collar open at the throat; it suited her well. Seeing me, she excused herself and came across.

I had known Dorothy near twenty years. She was the daughter of a serjeant in my first chambers. We had both been in our early twenties then and I had at once been attracted to Dorothy's elegance, wit and kind nature – a rare combination. She seemed to like my company too, never seemed to mind my bent back, and we became good friends. After a while I dared to think of trying to turn friendship into something more. I had given no signs of my real feelings, though, and therefore had only myself to blame when I learned that Roger, my friend and colleague, had already proposed marriage and been accepted. He later said – and I believed him – that he had not realized my feelings for Dorothy. She had guessed, though, and tried to sweeten the pill by saying she had had a difficult choice to make. I had found that hard to believe, for Roger was handsome as well as clever, with a quicksilver, energetic grace to his movements.

Dorothy was, like me, past forty now; though apart from little wrinkles visible around her eyes she looked a good deal younger. I bent and kissed her on her full cheeks.

'A merry Palm Sunday to you, Dorothy.'

'And to you, Matthew.' She squeezed my hand. 'How is your health?'

'Good these days.' My back had often given me trouble, but these last months I had been conscientious in the exercises my physician friend Guy had prescribed, and had felt much better.

'You look well.'

'And you look younger each New Year, Dorothy. May this one bring peace and prosperity.'

'I hope so. Though there has been a strange portent, have you heard? Two huge fish washed up by the Thames. Great grey things half the size of a house. They must have been under the ice.' The twinkle in her eyes told me she found the story, like so much in the world, delightfully absurd.

'Were they alive?'

'No. They lie on the mudbanks over at Greenwich. People have been crossing London Bridge in hundreds to see them. Everyone says that coming the day before Palm Sunday it portends some terrible happening.'

'People are always finding portents these days. It is a passion now among the busy Bible-men of London.'

'True.' She gave me a searching look, perhaps catching a bitter note in my reply. Twenty years ago Dorothy and Roger and I had all been reformers, hoping for a new Christian fellowship in the world. They still did. But though many of their guests had also been reformers in the early days, most had now retreated to a quiet professional life, frightened and disillusioned by the tides of religious conflict and repression that had flowed ever higher in the decade since the King's break with Rome. I wondered if Dorothy guessed that, for me, faith was almost gone.

She changed the subject. 'For us at least the news has been good. We had a letter from Samuel today. The roads to

Bristol must be open again.' She raised her dark eyebrows. 'And reading between the lines, I think he has a girl.'

Samuel was Roger and Dorothy's only child, the apple of their eye. Some years before, the family had moved to Bristol, Roger's home town, where he had obtained the post of City Recorder. He had returned to practise at Lincoln's Inn a year before, but Samuel, now eighteen and apprenticed to a cloth merchant, had decided to stay behind; to the sorrow of both his parents, I knew.

I smiled gently. 'Are you sure you are not reading your wishes into his letter?'

'No, he mentions a name. Elizabeth. A merchant's daughter.'

'He will not be able to marry till after his apprenticeship.'

'Good. That will allow time to see if they are suited.' She smiled roguishly. 'And perhaps for me to send some spy to Bristol. Your assistant Barak, perhaps. I hear he is good at such jobs.'

I laughed. 'Barak is busy with my work. You must find another spy.'

'I like that sharp humour of his. Does he well?'

'He and his wife lost a child last year. It hit him hard, though he does not show it.'

'And she?'

'I have not seen Tamasin. I keep meaning to call on them at home. I must do it. She was kind to me when I had my fever.'

'The Court of Requests keeps you busy, then. And a serjeant. I always knew you would reach that eminence one day.'

'Ay.' I smiled. 'And it is good work.' It was over a year now since Archbishop Cranmer had nominated me as one of the two barristers appointed to plead before the Court of

Requests where poor men's pleas were heard. A serjeancy, the status of a senior barrister, had come with the post.

'I have never enjoyed my work so much,' I continued. 'Though the caseload is large and some of the clients – well, poverty does not make men good, or easy.'

'Nor should it,' Dorothy replied vigorously. 'It is a curse.'

'I do not complain. The work is varied.' I paused. 'I have a new case, a boy who has been put in the Bedlam. I am meeting with his parents tomorrow.'

'On Palm Sunday?'

'There is some urgency.'

'A mad client.'

'Whether he is truly mad or not is the issue. He was put there on the Privy Council's orders. It is one of the strangest matters I have ever come across. Interesting, though I wish I did not have to tangle with a Council matter.'

'You will see justice done, that I do not doubt.' She laid her hand on my arm.

'Matthew!' Roger had appeared beside me. He shook my hand vigorously. He was small and wiry, with a thin but well-favoured face, searching blue eyes and black hair starting to recede. He was as full of energy as ever. Despite his winning of Dorothy all those years before, I still had the strongest affection for him.

'I hear Samuel has written,' I said.

'Ay, the imp. At last!'

'I must go to the kitchen,' Dorothy said. 'I will see you shortly, Matthew. Talk to Roger, he has had an interesting idea.'

I bowed as she left, then turned back to Roger.

'How have you been?' I asked quietly.

He lowered his voice. 'It has not come on me again. But I will be glad when I have seen your doctor friend.'

'I saw you look away when Lust was suddenly struck down during the play.'

'Ay. It frightens me, Matthew.' Suddenly he looked vulnerable, like a little boy. I pressed his arm.

In recent weeks Roger had several times unexpectedly lost his balance and fallen over, for no apparent reason. He feared he was developing the falling sickness, that terrible affliction where a man or woman, quite healthy in other ways, will periodically collapse on the ground, out of their senses, writhing and grunting. The illness, which was untreatable, was regarded by some as a kind of temporary madness and by others as evidence of possession by an evil spirit. The fact that spectacular symptoms could erupt at any moment meant people avoided sufferers. It would mean the end of a lawyer's career.

I pressed his arm. 'Guy will find the truth of it, I promise.' Roger had unburdened himself to me over lunch the week before, and I had arranged for him to see my physician friend as soon as possible – in four days' time.

Roger smiled crookedly. 'Let us hope it is news I shall care to hear.' He lowered his voice. 'I have told Dorothy I have been having stomach pains. I think it best. Women only worry.'

'So do we, Roger.' I smiled. 'And sometimes without cause. There could be many reasons for this falling over; and remember; you have had no seizures.'

'I know. 'Tis true.'

'Dorothy tells me you have had some new idea,' I said, to distract him.

'Yes.' He smiled wryly. 'I was telling friend Loder about it, but he seems little interested.' He glanced over his guests. 'None of us here is poor,' he said quietly.

He took my arm, leading me away a little. 'I have been

reading Roderick Mors' new book, the *Lamentation of a Christian against the City of London.*'

'You should be careful. Some call it seditious.'

'The truth affrights them.' Roger's tones were quiet but intense. 'By Jesu, Mors' book is an indictment of our city. It shows how all the wealth of the monasteries has gone to the King or his courtiers. The monastic schools and hospitals closed down, the sick left to fend for themselves. The monks' care was niggardly enough but now they have nothing. It shames us all, the legions of miserable people lying in the streets, sick and half dead. I saw a boy in a doorway in Cheapside yesterday, his bare feet half rotted away with frostbite. I gave him sixpence, but it was a hospital he needed, Matthew.'

'But as you say, most have been closed.'

'Which is why I am going to canvass for a hospital funded by the Inns of Court. With an initial subscription, then a fund for bequests and donations from the lawyers.'

'Have you spoken to the Treasurer?'

'Not yet.' Roger smiled again. 'I am honing my arguments on these fellows.' He nodded towards the plump form of Loder. 'Ambrose there said the poor offend every passer-by with their dangerous stinks and vapours; he might pay money to have the streets cleared. Others complain of importunate beggars calling everywhere for God's penny. I promise them a quiet life. There are arguments to persuade those who lack charity.' He smiled, then looked at me seriously. 'Will you help?'

I considered a moment. 'Even if you succeed, what can one hospital do in the face of the misery all around?'

'Relieve a few poor souls.'

'I will help you if I can.' If anyone could accomplish this task it was Roger. His energy and quick wits would count

for much. 'I will subscribe to your hospital, and help you raise subscriptions, if you like.'

Roger squeezed my arm. 'I knew you would help me. Soon I will organize a committee—'

'Another committee?' Dorothy had returned, red-faced from the heat of the kitchen. She looked quizzically at her husband. Roger put his arm round her waist.

'For the hospital, sweetheart.'

'People will be hard to persuade. Their purses smart from all the King's taxes.'

'And may suffer more,' I said. 'They say this new Parliament will be asked to grant yet more money for the King to go to war with France.'

'The waste,' Roger said bitterly. 'When one thinks of how the money could be used. But yes, he will see this as the right time for such an enterprise. With the Scotch King dead and this baby girl on their throne, they cannot intervene on the French side.'

I nodded agreement. 'The King has sent the Scotch lords captured after Solway Moss back home; it is said they have sworn oaths to bring a marriage between Prince Edward and the baby Mary.'

'You are well informed as ever, Matthew,' Dorothy said. 'Does Barak still bring gossip from his friends among the court servants?'

'He does.'

'I have heard that the King is after a new wife.'

'They have been saying that since Catherine Howard was executed,' Roger said. 'Who is it supposed to be now?'

'Lady Latimer,' Dorothy replied. 'Her husband died last week. There is to be a great funeral the day after tomorrow. 'Tis said the King has had a fancy for her for some years, and that he will move now.'

I had not heard that rumour. 'Poor woman,' I said. I lowered my voice. 'She needs fear for her head.'

'Yes.' Dorothy nodded, was quiet for a second, then raised her voice and clapped her hands. 'Dinner is ready, my friends.'

We all walked through to the dining room. The long old oaken dining table was set with plates of silver, and servants were laying out dishes of food under Elias' supervision. Pride of place went to four large chickens; as it was still Lent the law would normally have allowed only fish to be eaten at this time, but the freezing of the river that winter had made fish prohibitively expensive and the King had given permission for people to eat white meat.

We took our places. I sat between Loder, with whom Roger had been arguing earlier, and James Ryprose, an elderly barrister with bristly whiskers framing a face as wrinkled as an old apple-john. Opposite us sat Dorothy and Roger and Mrs Loder, who was as plump and contented-looking as her husband. She smiled at me, showing a full set of white teeth, and then to my surprise reached into her mouth and pulled out both rows. I saw the teeth were fixed into two dentures of wood, cut to fit over the few grey stumps that were all that was left of her own teeth.

'They look good, do they not?' she asked, catching my stare. 'A barber-surgeon in Cheapside made them up for me. I cannot eat with them, of course.'

'Put them away, Johanna,' her husband said. 'The company does not want to stare at those while we eat.' Johanna pouted, so far as an almost toothless woman can, and deposited the teeth in a little box which she put away in the folds of her dress. I repressed a shudder. I found the French fashion some in the upper classes had adopted for

wearing mouthfuls of teeth taken from dead people, rather gruesome.

Roger began talking about his hospital again, addressing his arguments this time to old Ryprose. 'Think of the sick and helpless people we could take from the streets, maybe cure.'

'Ay, that would be a worthwhile thing,' the old man agreed. 'But what of all the fit sturdy beggars that infest the streets, pestering one for money, sometimes with threats? What is to be done with them? I am an old man and sometimes fear to walk out alone.'

'Very true.' Brother Loder leaned across me to voice his agreement. 'Those two that robbed and killed poor Brother Goodcole by the gates last November were masterless servants from the monasteries. And they would not have been caught had they not gone bragging of what they had done in the taverns where they spent poor Goodcole's money, and had an honest inn-keeper not raised the constable.'

'Ay, ay.' Ryprose nodded vigorously. 'No wonder masterless men beg and rob with impunity, when all the city has to ensure our safety are a few constables, most nearly as old as me.'

'The city council should appoint some strong men to whip them out of the city,' Loder said.

'But, Ambrose,' his wife said quietly. 'Why be so harsh? When you were younger you used to argue the workless poor had a right to be given employment, the city should pay them to do useful things like pave the streets. You were always quoting Erasmus and Juan Vives on the duties of a Christian Commonwealth towards the unfortunate.' She smiled at him sweetly, gaining revenge perhaps for his curt remark about her teeth.

'So you were, Ambrose,' Roger said. 'I remember it well.'

'And I,' Dorothy agreed. 'You used to wax most fiercely about the duties of the King towards the poor.'

'Well, there's no interest from that quarter, so I don't see what we're supposed to do.' Loder frowned at his wife. 'Take ten thousand scabby beggars into the Inn and feed them at High Table?'

'No,' Roger answered gently. 'Merely use our status as wealthy men to help a few. Till better times come, perhaps.'

'It's not just the beggars that make walking the streets a misery,' old Ryprose added gloomily. 'There's all these ranting Bible-men springing up everywhere. There's one at the bottom of Newgate Street, stands there all day, barking and railing that the Apocalypse is coming.'

There were murmurs of agreement up and down the table. In the years since Thomas Cromwell's fall, the King's patronage of the reformers who had encouraged him to break with Rome had ended. He had never fully endorsed Lutheran beliefs, and now he was moving gradually back to the old forms of religion, a sort of Catholicism without the Pope, with increasingly repressive measures against dissentients; to deny that the bread and wine of the sacrament were transformed into the actual body and blood of Jesus Christ was now a heresy attracting the death penalty. Even the doctrine of purgatory was becoming respectable again. All this was anathema to the radicals, for whom the only truth was to be found in the Bible. The persecution had only driven many reformers towards the radical fringes, and in London especially they were daring and vocal.

'Do you know what I saw in the street today?' another guest said. 'Outside one church people were laying branches in the snow for the Palm Sunday ceremonies tomorrow.

Then a rabble of apprentices appeared and kicked the branches away, calling out that it was a papist ceremony and the Pope was the Antichrist!'

'This religious radicalism gives apprentices another excuse to run wild,' Loder observed gloomily.

'There could be trouble tomorrow,' Roger said.

I nodded. On Palm Sunday the traditional churches would be having the usual ceremonies, the churchwardens dressed as prophets and a child riding in on a donkey, while the radical preachers in their churches would be calling it papist blasphemy.

'There'll be another purge,' someone said gloomily. 'I've heard rumours Bishop Bonner is going to crack down hard on the Bible-men.'

'Not more burnings,' Dorothy said quietly.

'The city wouldn't stand for that,' Loder said. 'People don't like the radicals, but they like burnings less. Bonner won't go that far.'

'Won't he?' Roger said quietly. 'Isn't he a fanatic too, on the other side? Isn't the whole city becoming divided?'

'Most people only want a quiet life,' I said. 'Even those of us who were once radicals.' I smiled wryly at Roger. He nodded in acknowledgement.

'Fanatics on both sides,' old Ryprose said gloomily. 'And all we poor ordinary folk in the middle. Sometimes I fear they will bring death to us all.'

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THE COMPANY broke up late, and I was one of the last to leave. I stepped out into a night that had become colder again, refrozen slush crunching under my boots. My mood was much less cheerful after the conversation round the dinner table. It was true that London was full of both beggars and

fanatics now, an unhappy city. And a purge would make things worse. There was, too, something I had not told the company; the parents of the boy in the Bedlam were members of a radical Protestant congregation, and their son's mental problems were religious in nature. I wished I had not had to take the case, but I was obliged to deal with the Requests cases that were allocated to me. And his parents wanted their son released.

I paused. A quiet footstep, crunching on the slush behind me. I turned, frowning. The precincts of Lincoln's Inn were supposed to be secure, but there were places where entry could be gained. The night was dark, the moon half hidden by clouds, and at this hour only a few lighted windows cast squares of light on the snow.

'Who's that!' I called.

There was no reply, but I heard the slush crackling again as someone walked rapidly away. Frowning, I followed. The sound came from the far end of the building where the Elliards lived; it adjoined the rear wall of Lincoln's Inn. I put my hand to my dagger as I rounded the corner of the building. The outer wall was ahead of me. Whoever was there was trapped. But no one was there. The little square of ground between the buildings and the twelve-foot-high rear wall, lit by the windows of the Elliards' apartment, was quite empty. A shiver trickled down my spine.

Then I saw the snow on top of the wall had been disturbed. Whoever it was had climbed over. I stood and stared; to scale that wall would require a good deal of strength and agility. I was not sure I would have said it was possible, but the empty yard and the disturbed snow told their own tale. I frowned and turned away; I would tell the watchman that broken glass should be set atop the wall.