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The Assassin's Prayer

Written by Ariana Franklin

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The Assassin's Prayer

Ariana Franklin

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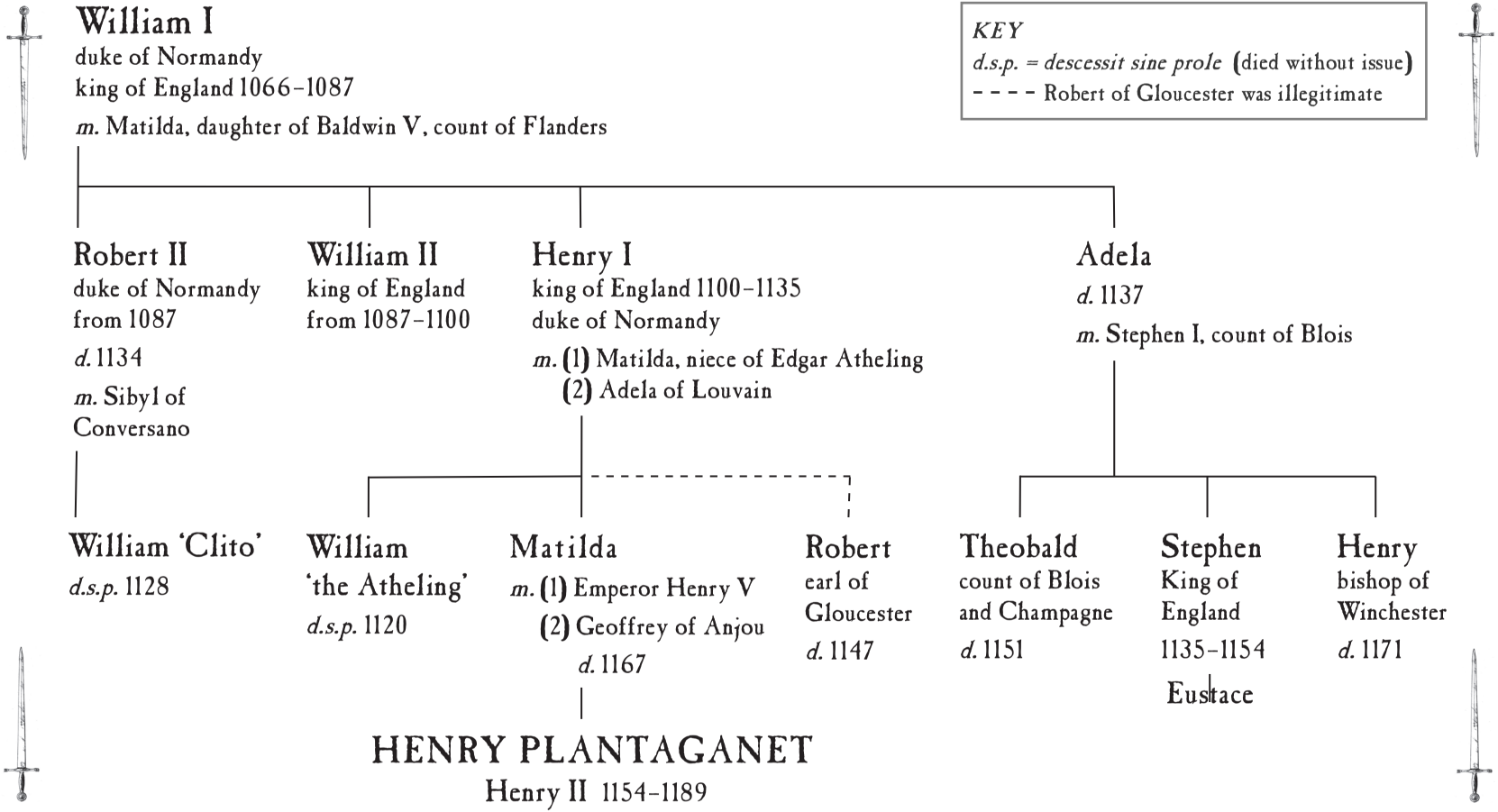
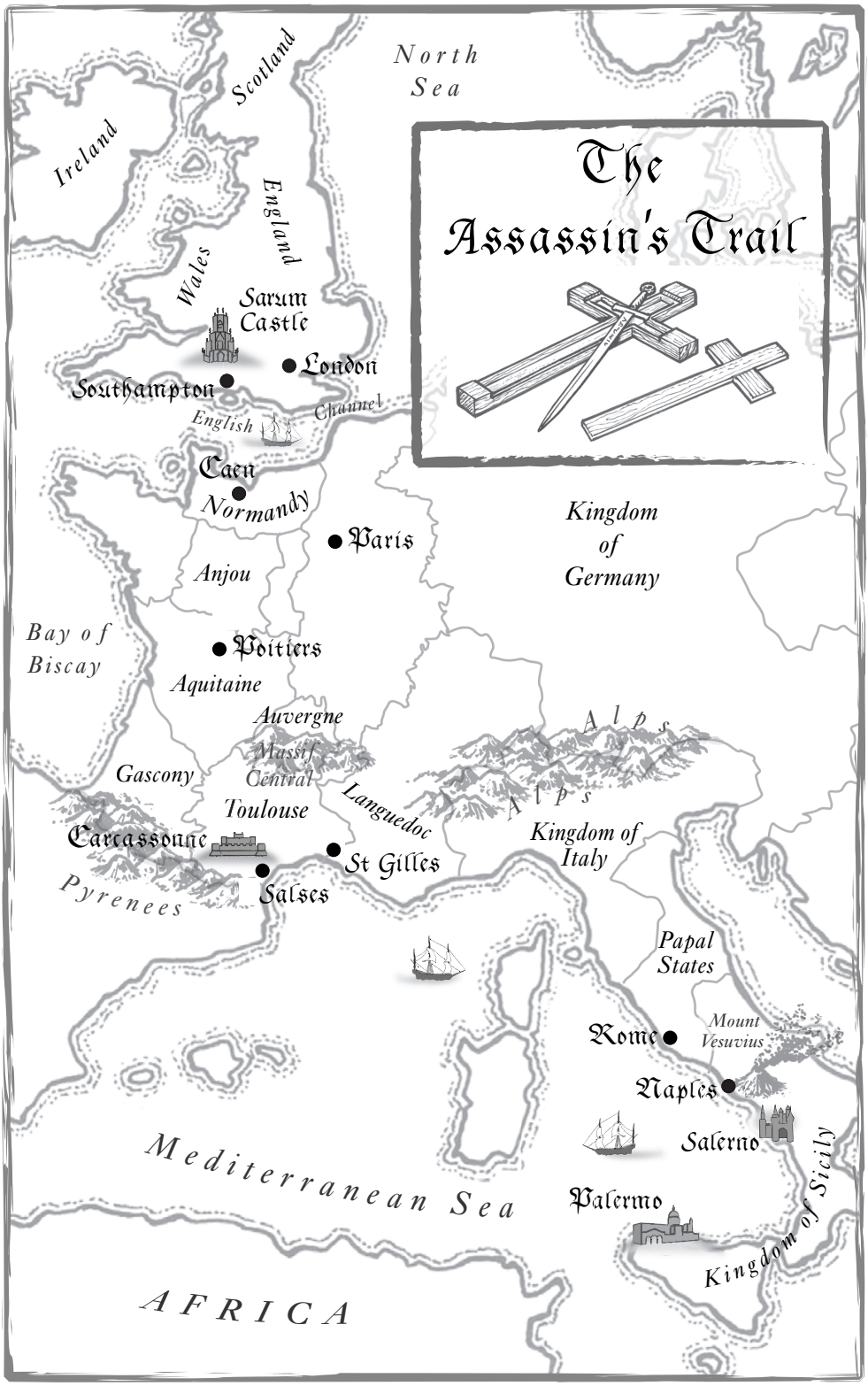
· From William the Conqueror to Henry Plantaganet ·

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Part One

Chapter One

Between the parishes of Shepfold and Martlake in Somerset existed an area of no man's land and a lot of ill feeling.

Just as the nearby towns of Glastonbury and Wells were constantly at odds, so were these two small villages. They disputed constantly over whose pigs had a right to graze on the beechmast of the intervening forest, which stream was diverted to irrigate whose crops, whose goats trespassed over the boundary and ate whose laundry . . .

Today, Lammas Saturday, after a fine summer that had enabled the harvest to be brought in exceptionally early, the two sets of villagers, everybody who could walk and even some who couldn't, faced each other across this strip of ground. A dais had been erected to accommodate Lady Emma of Wolvercote (her manor was in Shepfold) and her husband. With them were Sir Richard de Mayne (his manor was in Martlake), the two parish priests, an Arab doctor, his attendant and an elderly woman. Before them lay a ball the size of a good pumpkin, consisting of

tough leather stitched over a globe of withies stuffed with sawdust.

Father Ignatius (Shepfold) made the last of many appeals to prevent what was going to happen.

'My lady, Sir Richard, it is not too late to avert this evil and send all home . . . the sheriff has specifically banned . . .'

His protest fell on stony ground. Staring straight ahead, Sir Richard said: 'If Shepfold is prepared to be humiliated yet again, who am I to disappoint them?'

Lady Emma, also refusing to turn her head, breathed heavily through her pretty nose. 'This year it will be Martlake who are humiliated.' Master Roetger, the tall German leaning on a crutch beside her, gave her an approving and husbandly pat on the back.

Father Ignatius sighed. He was an educated and civilized man. Tomorrow, Sunday, he thought, these people will dress in their best to bring sheaves and fruit to church and give thanks to God for His infinite bounty as was right and proper. But always, by some hideous tradition peculiar only to them, on the day before Harvest Festival they revert to paganism and turn the eve of a Christian festival into something resembling the excesses of a Lupercalia. *A madness*.

Adelia Aguilar sighed with him and mentally ran through the medical equipment she'd brought with her: bandages, ointments, needles, sutures, splints. It would be nice to think they weren't going to be needed, but hope was outweighed by experience.

She looked up at the tall Arab eunuch standing beside her. He shrugged helplessly. Sometimes England baffled them.

They'd travelled a long way together. Both of them born in Sicily, that melting pot of races: she, an abandoned baby, probably Greek, rescued and brought up by a Jewish doctor and

his wife; he, later taken into the same, good household to be her attendant, once a lost boy with a beautiful voice whom the Latin Church had castrated so that he might retain it.

Circumstances – well, that damned King Henry II of England really – had plucked the two of them away from Sicily and dropped them down in his realm. And now, several extraordinary years later, here they both were, on a bare piece of land in Somerset with two villages out to maim each other in what they called a game.

'I just don't understand the English,' she said.

Gyltha, standing on the other side of her, said, 'Somerset folk ain't proper English, bor.' Gyltha was a Cambridgeshire woman.

'Hmm.'

For God's sake, she was a trained doctor, a specialist in autopsy, a *medica* of the Salerno School of Medicine in Sicily – probably the only foundation in Christendom to take women as students – *and this is what I've come down to.*

It wasn't even that she could officially practise her craft. In England? Where the Church regarded a woman with medical knowledge as a witch?

Ostensibly Mansur had to be the one attending the wounded while she must seem to be carrying out his orders. It was a thin pretence but one that saved her from ecclesiastical punishment; also one to which, trusting them both, the two villages paid affectionate lip-service.

The crowd was becoming restive. 'For love of Mary, get *on* with it,' somebody called out. 'Afore us bloody melts.'

It *was* getting hot, early morning though it was. The sun that had ripened wheat and barley so beautifully was now slanting on yellow-white stubble in which rooks pecked up such corn as the gleaners had left them, brightening the forest beeches where

some leaves were already showing autumn colours. On the balk strips, bees and butterflies were making free among trefoils and cornflowers.

Father Ignatius gave in and turned to his fellow priest, Father John. 'To you the honour this year, sir, if honour it be.'

Father John, a Martlake man and therefore a lout, picked up the ball, raised it above his head, shouted: 'God defend the right,' and threw it.

'That wasn't straight,' Father Ignatius yelled. 'You favoured Martlake.'

'Bloody didn't.'

'Bloody did.'

Nobody paid attention to the scuffling priests. The game had begun. Like great opposing waves, and with much the same noise, the two sides crashed together, their women and offspring skittering around the edges, screaming them on.

A Martlake boy emerged from the scrum, the ball at his twinkling feet, and began running with it in the direction of the Shepfold parish boundary, a mob of howling Shepfoldians at his back. Lady Emma, Sir Richard and Master Roetger followed more sedately, while Adelia, Gyltha and Mansur, carrying their medicaments, accompanied by Adelia's six-year-old daughter and Emma's four-year-old son, Lord Wolvercote, brought up the rear.

They paused at a safe distance to watch the scrimmage as the Martlake lad was brought down.

'There goes his nose,' Mansur remarked. 'Is it not against the rules to kick in the face?'

'Better get the swabs out,' Gyltha said.

Adelia delved into her doctor's bag. 'What rules?' There were

supposed to be some: no swearing, no spitting, no picking the ball up and carrying it, no gouging, no biting, no fisticuffs, no women nor children nor dogs to partake, but Adelia hadn't seen any of them observed yet.

Gyltha was lecturing Adelia's daughter. 'You listen to me, dumpling, you get into a fight this time, an' I'll tan your little backside.'

'That's right, Allie,' Adelia said. 'No brawling. You and Pippy are not to take part, do you understand me?'

'Yes, Mama. Yes, Gyltha.'

By the time she'd dealt with the Martlake broken nose, children, ball and contestants had disappeared. Distant howls suggested that the match was now in the forest. On its edge, Adelia's old friends, Will and Alf, were lounging against a tree, waiting for her to come up.

'Go home,' she told them – they were Glastonbury men. 'Don't get involved, I won't have enough bandages.'

'Just come to watch, like,' Will told her.

'Observers, we are,' Alf said.

She looked at them with affection and suspicion. In their rough smocks, they looked like common, respectable countrymen, though she had reason to know that both were frequently on the wrong side of the law. Will was the elder of the two and a dour man, who, along with the simpler, gentler Alf, had come into her life in fraught circumstances at Glastonbury two years before. They had since appointed themselves her guardians and providers of poached venison. They'd been hanging around her more than usual lately. But there was no time to wonder about it; screams from within the forest suggested that there were wounded to be attended to. Will and Alf followed her in.

A broken leg, two twisted ankles, a dislocated shoulder and five scalp wounds later, the supply of injuries temporarily dried up. Mansur hoisted the protesting broken leg over his shoulder and set off to take it home to its mother. Gyltha was mopping up Allie. The noise had dwindled to isolated shouts. People were beating the undergrowth.

'What are they doing now, in the name of God?' Adelia asked.

'Lost the ball,' Will said laconically.

'Good.'

But her eye fell on a Martlake woman with a bulging midriff under her smock who was wending her way smartly along a nearby badger track. 'Where are you going, Mistress Tyler?'

'Back home, i'n't I? 'Tis too much for I, what with the babby due and all.'

For one thing, Mistress Tyler had shown no sign of pregnancy while in church the previous Sunday. For another, the badger track led in the direction of Shepfold. For a third, Lady Emma was Adelia's good friend – so that, despite her pretension to neutrality, Adelia really wanted Shepfold to win. 'You put that ball down,' she shouted. 'You're cheating.'

Mistress Tyler, holding tight to her protuberant and wobbling waistline, began to run.

Adelia, chasing after her, failed to hear the 'whoomph' of an arrow burying itself in the tree beside which, a second before, she'd been standing.

Will and Alf looked at it, looked at each other and then hurled themselves in the direction from which the flight had come.

It was useless; the marksman, having chosen a clear shot, had made it his only one before melting into a forest in which a hundred assassins could be hiding.

Returning to the tree, Will pulled the arrow out with some effort. 'Look at that, Alf.'

'We got to tell her, Will.'

'We got to tell somebody.' They had a high regard for Adelia, who had twice saved them from a desperate situation, but, though agonized for her safety, they'd not said anything to her, wanting to preserve her peace of mind.

They advanced to where she was tussling with Mistress Tyler.

At that moment, the ball fell to the ground from under the Martlake woman's skirt – and was spotted.

Before the two Glastonbury men could reach their heroine, she and her opponent had been overwhelmed by a pile of players. In trying to get her out, Will and Alf lost their temper and put their fists and boots at the disposal of the Shepfold team.

So did Adelia . . .

Some five minutes later, a familiar voice addressed her from its height on a magnificent horse: 'Is that you?'

Muddy and panting, Adelia extricated herself to look up into the face of her lover and the father of her child. 'I think so.'

' 'G'day, Bishop,' said Mistress Tyler, trying to restore order to her smock.

'And a good day to you, madam. Who's winning?'

'Martlake,' Adelia told him bitterly. 'They're cheating.'

Looming over her was a tall man in his thirties, to her the most attractive being in the world, though his critics, of whom there were many, found his usual humorous expression unfitting for the highly ecclesiastical office he held. He was in travelling clothes today, the excellence of his boots and cloak marred by dust. He swept off his cap, revealing curly, dark hair, and pointed with it to where a round object shedding pieces of bracken

had flown up from a group of fighting players. 'Is that the ball?'

'Yes.'

'Thank God, I thought it was somebody's head. Hold my horse.' Dismounting, flinging away his cloak and cap, Rowley waded in.

That night there was weeping and gnashing of teeth in the parish of Martlake while, three miles away in Shepfold, a limp piece of leather was carried high on a pole into the great barn of Wolvercote Manor with all the pomp of golden booty being brought back to Rome by a triumphant Caesar.

Outside, carcasses of pigs and sheep turned on spits and hogsheads spouted best ale to all who would partake of it. The Lady of Wolvercote herself, limping slightly, deftly flipped pancake after pancake from the griddles into the hands of her villagers while her husband, who had used his oak crutch with effect during the match, poured cream on to them.

A Welsh bard, another attachment to Lady Emma's household, had abandoned his harp for a vielle and stood, sweating and bowing away, in the doorway so that parents and children danced to his tune in long lines around the victory fires. Beyond, in the shadow of trees, young bodies rolled in celebratory copulation.

Inside the barn, Adelia sternly regarded the Bishop of St Albans sitting beside her daughter – and his – on a hay bale. The resemblance between father and child was enhanced by the black eye sported by each. 'Look at you. I hope you're both ashamed of yourselves.'

'We are,' Rowley said, 'but at least we didn't kick Mistress Tyler.'

'*Did* she?' Allie was charmed. 'Did Mama kick Mistress Tyler?'

'Hard.'

'I'll fetch some pancakes,' Adelia said, and then, over her shoulder: 'She kicked me first.'

While she was gone, Will, holding a mug of ale, came up to ruffle Allie's hair and doff his cap to her father. 'I was wondering if I could have a word, Bishop. Outside, like . . .'

Adelia returned and took Allie back to bed through the weave of dancers, bidding goodnights, throwing a kiss to Mansur who was executing a sword dance for Gyltha, the love of his life and Allie's nurse.

For perhaps the first time in her life, she realized, she was content.

When, seven years ago, the King of England, who was troubled by a series of unexplained killings in his county of Cambridge, had sent to his friend, the King of Sicily, begging for a master in the art of death from the famed School of Medicine in Salerno, it was Vesuvia Adelia Rachel Ortese Aguilar who'd been chosen to go.

It had occurred neither to the Sicilian king nor the school that they had made an odd choice; the school took female medical students as well as male, and Adelia was the best they had.

However, her arrival in England, where women doctors were anathema, had caused consternation.

Only by the subterfuge of Mansur pretending to be the medical expert and she merely his assistant and translator had Adelia been able to do her job. She had solved the murders – and done it so well that King Henry II had refused to allow her to return to Sicily, keeping her as his own special investigator.

Damn the man. True, England had given her the happiness of friends, a lover and a child, but Henry's requirement of her had

more than once put her in such danger that she'd been deprived of the tranquillity with which to enjoy them.

The Church had driven her and Allie, Mansur and Gyltha from Cambridge, but Emma, out of gratitude for being allowed to marry as she pleased – a boon that Adelia had successfully begged the King to grant his rich young ward – had built her a house on the Wolvercote estate, thus giving her the first home of her own she'd ever had.

Gyltha and Mansur had settled down together – to everybody's surprise but Adelia's. In Sicily, it was not unusual for eunuchs to have happy sexual relationships with women – or another man, for that matter; castration didn't necessarily mean impotence. In England, where eunuchs were a rarity, that fact was unknown; it was thought merely that Mansur had a peculiarly high voice, and that he and Gyltha were just . . . well, peculiar.

And for the last two years, Henry II had not interrupted this idyll by asking Adelia to do anything for him. In fact she wondered if he might perhaps – oh joy – have forgotten her.

Even her fraught relationship with Rowley, begun during an investigation and before the King had insisted on elevating him to a bishopric, had settled into a sort of eccentric domesticity, despite his extended absences as he toured his diocese. Scandalous, of course, but nobody in this remote part of England seemed to mind it; certainly Father Ignatius and Father John, both of them living with the mothers of their children, had not seen fit to report it to Adelia's great enemy, the Church. Nor was there a doctor for miles around to be jealous of her skill; she was free to be of use to suffering patients in this part of Somerset, and be beloved for it.

I have found peace, she thought.

She and Allie put the hens away for the night and released Eustace, Allie's lurcher, from the confinement that had been necessary to keep him from joining in the football match. 'We beat Martlake, we beat Martlake,' Allie chanted to him.

'And tomorrow we shall all be friends again,' Adelia said.

'Not with that bloody Tuke boy, I won't. He poked me in the eye.'

'*Allie*.'

'Well . . .'

The door to their house was open – it usually was – but the creak of a floorboard inside brought back unpleasant memories and Adelia clutched her daughter's shoulder to stop her from going in.

'It's all right, Mama,' Allie said. 'It's Alf, I can smell him.'

So it was. Beating off Eustace's enthusiastic welcome, the man said: 'You ought to keep this old door o' yours locked, missus. I saw a fox gettin' in.'

Considering that it was dark and that Alf had been dancing in the barn a hundred yards away, Adelia marvelled at his eyesight. 'Is it still there?'

'Chased it out.' With that, Alf lurched off into the night.

Lighting a candle to escort her daughter upstairs to bed, Adelia asked: 'Can you smell fox, Allie?'

There was a sniff. 'No.'

'Hmm.' Allie's nose was unerring; her father had remarked on it, saying that she could teach his hounds a thing or two. So, sitting beside her daughter, stroking her to sleep, Adelia wondered why Alf, most honest of men, had chosen to tell her a lie . . .

*

In Emma's rose garden, the Bishop of Albans held the arrow Will had given to him so tightly that it snapped. '*Who is it?*'

'We ain't rightly sure,' Will said. 'Never got a glimpse of the bastard, but we reckon as maybe Scarry's come back.'

'Scarry?'

Will shuffled awkwardly. 'Don't know as if she ever told you, but her and us was all in the forest a year or two back when we was attacked. Fella called Wolf, nasty bit of work he were, he come at her and Alf. He'd've done 'em both but, see, she had this sword and . . . well, she done him first.'

'She told me,' Rowley said shortly. Jesus, how often he'd had to hold her shaking body to fend off the nightmares.

'Well, see, Scarry was there, he was Wolf's lieutenant, like. Him and Wolf, they was . . .'

'Lovers. She told me that, too.'

Will shifted again. 'Yes, well, Scarry wouldn't've taken kindly to her a-killin' Wolf.'

'That was two years ago, man. If he were going to take his revenge, why leave it for two years?'

'Had to fly the county, maybe. The King, he weren't best pleased at havin' outlaws in his forest. Cleaned it out proper, he did. Had 'em in bits hangin' off the trees. We hoped as Scarry was one of 'em, but now we ain't so sure acause if it ain't Scarry, who is it? She's well liked round here, our missus.'

'And he's trying to kill her?'

'Don't know so much about that. He'd be wantin' to frighten her to death first, that was more Scarry's style. Me and Alf, we been watchin' out for her, and we found an animal pit somebody dug along a path she takes often. Covered it was, but us filled un in. An' then Godwyn, him as owns the Pilgrim and takes her out

regular to Lazarus Island to tend the lepers, well, last week, his punt began to sink when they was halfway there and the both on 'em had to make their way back on foot across the marshes, the which is always chancy acause of the quicksand. Alf and me, we poled out later and raised that punt to look at her and found a neat hole in her bottom, like someone'd taken a gimlet to her. We reckon as whoever it was'd filled the hole with wax, like. And then there was . . .'

But the Bishop of St Albans had left him and was striding towards Adelia's house.

Alf met him at the door. ''S all right, master, I checked the rooms afore she came. Ain't nobody in there.'

'Thank you, Alf. I'll take over now.' And he would, Christ's blood he would. How many times did he have to rescue the wench before she saw reason?

The fear Rowley felt when Adelia was in danger always translated itself into fury against the woman herself. Why did she have to be what she was? (The fact that he might not have loved her if she hadn't been was invariably set aside.)

Why, when they'd been free to marry, had she refused him? Her fault . . . a babble about her independence . . . an insistence that she would fail as wife to an ambitious man . . . her damned fault.

No, she'd had it her own way and Henry II had immediately pounced on him, insisting that he become a bishop – well, the King had needed *one* churchman to be on his side after the murder of Archbishop Becket – and he, in his resentment and agony, had acceded. He still blamed her for it.

They'd been thrown together on investigations since and found that neither could live without the other. Too late for

marriage, though, celibate as he was supposed to be, so they'd finished up in this illicit relationship which gave him no rights over either her or the child.

But this was the end of it. No more investigations for her, no more touching the sick, no more lepers – *lepers*, God Almighty. She must finish with it. And for the first time the King had given him the means to see that she did.

Raging though he was, Rowley had enough sense to consider how he would break the news to her and stopped in the doorway to ponder.

The two Glastonbury lads were right; she should not be told that there was an assassin after her – but they were right for the wrong reason. Rowley knew his woman; an assassin wouldn't scare her away from this country hole she'd dug herself into; *she'd refuse to go*. She'd spout her bloody duty to her bloody patients.

No, though he had an iron fist, he'd put a velvet glove on it and give her King Henry's orders as if they were inducements . . .

But he was still very angry and he didn't do it well. Going into her bedroom, he said: 'Start packing. We're leaving for Sarum in the morning.'

Adelia had prepared herself for something else. She was awaiting him in bed and, apart from a strip of lace over her dark-blonde hair, she was naked, bathed and scented. Her lover was able to visit her so rarely that their encounters in bed were still rapturous. In fact, she'd been surprised to see him arrive on a Saturday; usually he was preparing for the next day's service in some far-flung church or another.

In any case, he never shared her bed on Sundays – a ridiculous decision perhaps, and certainly hypocritical, but one which,

knowing how it weighed on him to preach abstinence to his flock while not practising it himself, Adelia was prepared to countenance . . . and, after all, it wasn't midnight yet.

So, bewildered, she said: '*What?*'

'We're leaving for Sarum in the morning. I came to tell you.'

'Oh, *did* you?' Not for love, then. 'What for? And anyway, I can't. I've got a patient over in Street who needs me.'

'We're going.'

'Rowley, I am *not*.' She began to grope for her clothes; he was making her feel foolish without them.

'Captain Bolt is coming to escort us. The King wishes it.'

'Not again, oh God, not again.' *Le Roi le veult*. For Adelia, the four most doom-laden words in any language; there was no appeal against them.

Drearily, she poked her head through her smock and looked at him. 'What does he want this time?'

'He's sending us to Sicily.'

Ah, now that was different. '*Sicily?* Rowley, how wonderful. I shall see my parents. They can meet you and Allie.'

'Almeisan will not be coming with us.'

'Of course she will! Of *course* she will. I won't leave her behind.'

'No. Henry's keeping her here to make sure you come back to him.'

'But Sicily . . . we could be away for a year or more. I can't leave her that long.'

'She'll be well looked after. She can have Gyltha with her, I've seen to that. They'll be lodged with the Queen at Sarum.' This was both *suggestio falsi* and *suppressio veri* on Rowley's part. Henry Plantagenet would have been perfectly content for Allie to

stay where she was, at Wolvercote in the care of Emma. It had been Rowley who'd begged him to allow the child to move in with Eleanor, and then got the Queen to agree.

It was the only thing King and Queen did agree on. Since Eleanor of Aquitaine had joined the rebellion – the *failed* rebellion – of the two older Plantagenet princes against their father, things had, to put it mildly, been strained between royal husband and wife.

Adelia put her finger on it. 'Allie can't stay with Eleanor, the Queen's in prison.'

'It's a prison anyone would be happy to be in; she's denied nothing.'

'Except freedom.' There was something terrible here; he was frightening her. Panic restricted her throat and she went to the open window to breathe.

When she'd got her voice under control, she turned around. 'What *is* this, Rowley? If I have to go . . . if I must leave Allie, she can stay here with Gyltha and Mansur. She's settled, she's happy here, she has her animals . . . she has an affinity with animals.'

'My point exactly.'

'She has an instinct, a genius. Old Marly called her in the other day when his hens got ill; she cured Emma's palfrey of the stifle when Cerdic couldn't . . . What do you mean, "my point exactly"?'

'I mean I want my daughter to have the feminine arts that Eleanor can teach her. I want her to become a lady, not a misfit.'

'What you're saying is that you don't want her to grow up like me.'

In his fear and anger and love, that was what it came down to. Adelia escaped him, she always had; there must be something of his that wouldn't get away.

'No, I don't, if you want to know. And she's not going to. I have a responsibility for her.'

'Responsibility? You can't even publicly acknowledge her.'

'That doesn't mean I don't care for her future. Look at you, look at what you wear.' Adelia was now fully clothed. 'Peasant dress. She's a beautiful child, why hide her light under that dowdy bushel? Half the time she goes about barefoot.'

It was true that Adelia was in homespun; she had agreed to become the bishop's mistress but, when it came to it, she'd drawn the line at being his whore. Though he urged money on her, she wouldn't take it, and dressed herself out of her small earnings as a doctor. She hadn't realized until now how much that irritated him.

This wasn't about Allie, this was about her.

But she fought on the ground that he'd chosen, their daughter. 'Education? And what sort of education would she get with Eleanor? Needlework? Strumming a lyre? Gossiping? Courtly blasted love?'

'She'd be a lady. I'm leaving her money; she can make a good marriage. I've already begun looking around for suitable husbands.'

'*An arranged marriage?*'

'Suitable, I said. And only if she's willing.'

She stared at him. They had loved each other desperately and still did; she thought she knew him, thought he knew her, but now it appeared they understood each other not at all.

She tried to explain. 'Allie has a gift,' she said. 'We couldn't

exist without animals, to plough, to ride, pull our carriages, feed us. If she can find cures for what makes them ill—'

'An animal doctor. What life is that for a woman, for God's sake?'

The quarrel degenerated. When Mansur and Gyltha entered the house it reverberated with the yells of two people verbally disembowelling each other.

'. . . I have a right to say how my household should behave—'

'It's not your household, you hypocrite. The Church is your household. When are you ever here?'

'I'm here now and tomorrow we go to Sarum and Allie comes too. The King's ordered it—'

'You made him do that? You'd give her into slavery . . . ?'

Gyltha hurried to Allie's room in case the child should be listening. Eustace the lurcher lifted his shaggy head as she came in but Allie was sleeping the sleep of the innocent and unknowing.

Gyltha sat by her bed just in case, and glanced with despair at Mansur, who was shaking his head in the doorway.

'. . . I'll never forgive you. Never.'

'Why? *You want her to end up killing a man like you did?*'

If he'd been in his senses Rowley would not have said it. The outlaw called Wolf had tried to kill her and she'd been forced to kill him instead; the act had hung a millstone around Adelia's neck. Time and again Rowley had reassured her that the monster was better dead; she had saved Alf's life as well as her own; there was nothing else she could have done; but still it weighed on her that she, who was sworn to preserve life, had taken one.

After that the voices stopped.

Gyltha and Mansur heard the bishop clump down the stairs to

make up a bed for himself on a settle. Distressed beyond measure, they went to bed themselves. There was nothing to be done now.

The last revellers in the barn went home. Lady Emma and Roetger returned to the manor house; their servants scattered to their various sleeping places.

Silence descended on Wolvercote.

On a water butt outside Adelia's window where it has been crouching in shadow, a figure stretches its cloaked arms so that, for a second, it resembles a bat unfolding leather wings ready to fly. Noiselessly it jumps to the ground, overjoyed with what it has heard.

His god – and Scarry's god is not the Christians' God – has just granted him the boon of boons, as Scarry was sure He would, sooner or later. He has poured the elixir of opportunity into Scarry's hands.

For Scarry's hatred of the woman Adelia is infinite. During two years' enforced exile from England, he has prayed to be shown the means of her destruction. Now, at last, the stink of his loathing has reached Satan's nostrils and its incense has been rewarded.

Once, in a Somerset forest not too far from here, the woman killed Scarry's joy, his life, his love, his mate, his Wolf. And Scarry has come back, with Wolf howling him on in his head, to rend her to pieces. How stupidly he has done it; how ineffectually. Arrows, pits, attempts to frighten her; she hasn't even noticed; the two oafs who watch over her have seen to that.

Unworthy of an educated man, which is what Scarry is. A way of passing the time, really, until the true and only God should show him the way. Which He has, He has. Dominus illuminatio mea.

Wolf never killed a female until she was squirming in terror and

pain – the only state in which Wolf, or he himself, could have sexual congress with the creatures. Timor mortis morte pejor.

But now, Lord, in Your infinite wisdom, You have manifested to me all that I need to hear and see and learn that Your will and Wolf's may triumph. The woman shall be reduced by slow torture, so much more satisfying, chop, chop, piece by piece, a capite ad calcem.

At this point Scarry is out of the view of the house, and he twirls as the shimmering, hot night enfolds him.

How curious that she didn't ask her lover why the King was sending her to Sicily.

But he, Scarry, knows. By a great coincidence – no, not coincidence but, manifestly, by the workings of the horned God in whose hand he rests – Scarry is intimately cognisant of the journey the woman is about to take.

And will be going with her.