Dark Fire

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Chapter One

I HAD LEFT MY HOUSE in Chancery Lane early, to go to the Guildhall to discuss a case in which I was acting for the City Council. Although the far more serious matter I would have to deal with on my return weighed on my mind, as I rode down a quiet Fleet Street I was able to take a little pleasure in the soft airs of early morning. The weather was very hot for late May, the sun already a fiery ball in the clear blue sky, and I wore only a light doublet under my black lawyer's robe. As my old horse Chancery ambled along, the sight of the trees in full leaf made me think again of my ambition to retire from practice, to escape the noisome crowds of London. In two years' time I would be forty, in which year the old man's age begins; if business was good enough I might do it then. I passed over Fleet Bridge with its statues of the ancient kings Gog and Magog. The City wall loomed ahead, and I braced myself for the stink and din of London.

At the Guildhall I met with Mayor Hollyes and the Common Council serjeant. The council had brought an action in the Assize of Nuisance against one of the rapacious land speculators buying up the dissolved monasteries, the last of which had gone down in this spring of 1540. This particular speculator, to my shame, was a fellow barrister of Lincoln's Inn, a false and greedy rogue named Bealknap. He had got hold of a small London friary, and rather than

bringing down the church, had converted it into a hotch-potch of unsavoury tenements. He had excavated a common cesspit for his tenants, but it was a botched job and the tenants of the neighbouring houses, which the council owned, were suffering grievously from the penetration of filth into their cellars.

The assize had ordered Bealknap to make proper provision but the wretch had served a writ of error in King's Bench, alleging the friary's original charter excluded it from the City's jurisdiction and that he was not obliged to do anything. The matter was listed for hearing before the judges in a week's time. I advised the mayor that Bealknap's chances were slim, pointing out that he was one of those maddening rogues whom lawyers encounter, who take perverse pleasure in spending time and money on uncertain cases rather than admitting defeat and making proper remedy like civilized men.

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I PLANNED TO RETURN home the way I had come, via Cheapside, but when I reached the junction with Lad Lane I found Wood Street blocked by an overturned cart full of lead and roof tiles from the demolition of St Bartholomew's Priory. A heap of mossy tiles had spilled out, filling the roadway. The cart was big, pulled by two great shire horses, and though the driver had freed one, the other lay helpless on its side between the shafts. Its huge hooves kicked out wildly, smashing tiles and raising clouds of dust. It neighed in terror, eyes rolling at the gathering crowd. I heard someone say more carts were backed up almost to Cripplegate.

It was not the first such scene in the City of late. Everywhere there was a crashing of stone as the old buildings fell: so much land had become vacant that even in over-

crowded London the courtiers and other greedy men of spoil into whose hands it had fallen scarce knew how to handle it all.

I turned Chancery round and made my way through the maze of narrow lanes that led to Cheapside, in places scarce wide enough for a horse and rider to pass under the overhanging eaves of the houses. Although it was still early, the workshops were open and people crowded the lanes, slowing my passage, journeymen and street traders and water carriers labouring under their huge conical baskets. It had hardly rained in a month, the butts were dry and they were doing good business. I thought again of the meeting to come; I had been dreading it and now I would be late.

I wrinkled my nose at the mighty stink the hot weather drew from the sewer channel, then cursed roundly as a rooting pig, its snout smeared with some nameless rubbish, ran squealing across Chancery's path and made him jerk aside. A couple of apprentices in their blue doublets, returning puffy-faced from some late revel, glanced round at my oath and one of them, a stocky, rough-featured young fellow, gave me a contemptuous grin. I set my lips and spurred Chancery on. I saw myself as he must have, a whey-faced hunchback lawyer in black robe and cap, a pencase and dagger at my waist instead of a sword.

It was a relief to arrive at the broad paved way of Cheapside. Crowds milled round the stalls of Cheap Market; under their bright awnings the peddlers called 'What d'ye lack?' or argued with white-coifed goodwives. The occasional lady of wealth wandered around the stalls with her armed servants, face masked with a cloth vizard to protect her white complexion from the sun.

Then, as I turned past the great bulk of St Paul's, I

heard the loud cry of a pamphlet seller. A scrawny fellow in a stained black doublet, a pile of papers under his arm, he was howling at the crowd. 'Child murderess of Walbrook taken to Newgate!' I paused and leaned down to pass him a farthing. He licked his finger, peeled off a sheet and handed it up to me, then went on bawling at the crowd. 'The most terrible crime of the year!'

I stopped to read the thing in the shadow cast by the great bulk of St Paul's. As usual the cathedral precincts were full of beggars – adults and children leaning against the walls, thin and ragged, displaying their sores and deformities in the hope of charity. I averted my eyes from their pleading looks and turned to the pamphlet. Beneath a woodcut of a woman's face – it could have been anybody, it was just a sketch of a face beneath disordered hair – I read:

Terrible Crime in Walbrook;
Child Murdered by His Jealous Cousin

On the evening of May 16th last, a Sabbath Day, at the fair house of Sir Edwin Wentworth of Walbrook, a member of the Mercers' Company, his only son, ***a boy of twelve***, was found at the bottom of the garden well with his ***neck broken***. Sir Edwin's ***fair daughters***, girls of fifteen and sixteen, told how the boy had been attacked by their cousin, ***Elizabeth Wentworth***, an ***orphan*** whom Sir Edwin had taken into his house from charity on the death of her father, and had been pushed by her into the deep well. She is taken to ***Newgate***, where she is to go before the Justices the ***29th May*** next. She refuses to plead, and so is likely to be ***pressed***, or if she pleads to be found ***guilty*** and to go to ***Tyburn*** next ***hanging day***.

The thing was badly printed on cheap paper and left inky smears on my fingers as I thrust it into my pocket and turned down Paternoster Row. So the case was public knowledge, another halfpenny sensation. Innocent or guilty, how could the girl get a fair trial from a London jury now? The spread of printing had brought us the English Bible, ordered the year before to be set in every church; but it had also brought pamphlets like this, making money for back-street printers and fodder for the hangman. Truly, as the ancients taught us, there is nothing under the moon, however fine, that is not subject to corruption.

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IT WAS NEARLY NOON when I reined Chancery in before my front door. The sun was at its zenith and when I untied the ribbon of my cap it left a line of sweat under my chin. Joan, my housekeeper, opened the door as I dismounted, a worried expression on her plump face.

'He is here,' she whispered, glancing behind her. 'That girl's uncle—'

'I know.' Joseph would have ridden through London. Perhaps he too had seen the pamphlet. 'What case is he in?'

'Sombre, sir. He is in the parlour. I gave him a glass of small beer.'

'Thank you.' I passed the reins to Simon, the boy Joan had recently employed to help her about the house, and who now scampered up, a stick-thin, yellow-haired urchin. Chancery was not yet used to him and pawed at the gravel, nearly stepping on one of the boy's bare feet. Simon spoke soothingly to him, then gave me a hasty bow and led the horse round to the stable.

'That boy should have shoes,' I said.

Joan shook her head. 'He won't, sir. Says they chafe his feet. I told him he should wear shoes in a gentleman's house.'

'Tell him he shall have sixpence if he wears them a week,' I said. I took a deep breath. 'And now I had better see Joseph.'

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Joseph Wentworth was a plump, ruddy-cheeked man in his early fifties, uncomfortable in his best doublet of sober brown. It was wool, too hot for this weather, and he was perspiring. He looked like what he was; a working farmer, owner of some poor lands out in Essex. His two younger brothers had sought their fortunes in London, but Joseph had remained on the farm. I had first acted for him two years before, defending his farm against a claim by a large landowner who wanted it to put to sheep. I liked Joseph, but my heart had sunk when I received his letter a few days before. I had been tempted to reply, truthfully, that I doubted I could help him, but his tone had been desperate.

His face brightened as he saw me, and he came over and shook my hand eagerly. 'Master Shardlake! Good day, good day. You had my letter?'

'I did. You are staying in London?'

'At an inn down by Queenhithe,' he said. 'My brother has forbidden me his house for my championing of our niece.' There was a desperate look in his hazel eyes. 'You must help me, sir, please. You must help Elizabeth.'

I decided no good would be done by beating round the bushes. I took the pamphlet from my pocket and handed it to him.

'Have you seen this, Joseph?'

'Yes.' He ran a hand through his curly black hair. 'Are

they allowed to say these things? Is she not innocent till proven guilty?'

'That's the technical position. It doesn't help much in practice.'

He took a delicately embroidered handkerchief from his pocket and mopped his brow. 'I visited Elizabeth in Newgate this morning,' he said. 'God's mercy, it's a terrible place. But she still won't talk.' He ran his hand over his plump, badly shaven cheeks. 'Why won't she talk, why? It's her only hope of saving herself.' He looked across at me pleadingly, as though I had the answer. I raised a hand.

'Come, Joseph, sit down. Let us start at the beginning. I know only what you told me in your letter, which is little more than is in this foul pamphlet.'

He took a chair, looking apologetic. 'I'm sorry; I've no good hand at writing.'

'Now, one of your two brothers is the father of the boy who died – is that right? – and the other was father to Elizabeth?'

Joseph nodded, making a visible effort to pull himself together.

'My brother Peter was Elizabeth's father. He took himself to London as a boy and got himself apprenticed as a dyer. He did moderately well, but since the French embargo – well, trade has gone right down these last few years.'

I nodded. Since England's break with Rome the French had banned the export of alum, which was essential for the dyeing trade. It was said even the king wore black hose now.

'Peter's wife died two years ago.' Joseph went on. 'When the bloody flux took Peter last autumn there was barely enough left to pay for his funeral and nothing for Elizabeth.'

'She was their only child?'

'Yes. She wanted to come and live with me, but I thought she'd be better off with Edwin. I've never married, after all. And he's the one with the money and the knighthood.' A note of bitterness entered his voice.

'And he is the mercer the pamphlet mentions?'

Joseph nodded. 'Edwin has a good business head. When he followed Peter to London as a boy he went straight into the cloth trade. He knew where the best profits could be made: he has a fine house by the Walbrook now. To be fair, Edwin offered to take Elizabeth in. He's already given a home to our mother – she moved from the farm when she lost her sight through the smallpox ten years ago. He was always her favourite son.' He looked up with a wry smile. 'Since Edwin's wife died five years ago, Mother has run his household with a rod of iron, although she's seventy-four and blind.' I saw he was twisting the handkerchief in one hand; the embroidery was becoming torn.

'So Edwin is also a widower?'

'Yes. With three children. Sabine, Avice and – and Ralph.'

'The pamphlet said the girls are in their teens, older than the boy.'

Joseph nodded. 'Yes. Pretty, fair-haired and soft-skinned like their mother.' He smiled sadly. 'All their talk's of fashions and young men from the Mercers' dances, pleasant girlish things. Or was till last week.'

'And the boy? Ralph? What was he like?'

Joseph twisted the handkerchief again. 'He was the apple of his father's eye; Edwin always wanted a boy to succeed him in his business. His wife Mary had three boys before Sabine, but none lived past the cradle. Then two girls before a boy who lived, at last. Poor Edwin's grief shot. Perhaps he spared the rod too much—' He paused.

'Why do you say that?'

'Ralph was an imp, it must be said. Always full of tricks. His poor mother could never control him.' Joseph bit his lip. 'Yet he had a merry laugh, I brought him a chess set last year and he loved it, learned quickly and soon beat me.' In his sad smile I sensed the loneliness Joseph's rupture with his family would bring him. He had not done this lightly.

'How did you hear of Ralph's death?' I asked quietly.

'A letter from Edwin, sent by fast rider the day after it happened. He asked me to come to London and attend the inquest. He had to view Ralph's body and couldn't bear doing it alone.'

'So you came to London, what, a week ago?'

'Yes. I made the formal identification with him. That was a terrible thing. Poor Ralph laid on that dirty table in his little doublet, his face so white. Poor Edwin broke down sobbing, I've never seen him cry before. He wept on my shoulder, said, "My boykin, my boykin. The evil witch," over and over.'

'Meaning Elizabeth.'

Joseph nodded. 'Then we went to the court and heard the evidence before the coroner. The hearing didn't take long, I was surprised it was so short.'

I nodded. 'Yes. Greenway rushes things. Who gave evidence?'

'Sabine and Avice first of all. It was odd seeing them standing in that dock together, so still: I believe they were rigid from fear, poor girls. They said that the afternoon it happened they had been doing tapestry work indoors. Elizabeth had been sitting in the garden, reading under a tree by the well. They could see her through the parlour window. They saw Ralph go across and start talking to her. Then

they heard a scream, a dreadful hollow sound. They looked up from their work and saw that Ralph was gone.'

'Gone?'

'Disappeared. They ran outside. Elizabeth was standing by the well, an angry expression on her face. They were afraid to approach her, but Sabine asked her what had happened. Elizabeth wouldn't reply and, sir, she has not spoken since. Sabine said they looked down the well, but it's deep. They couldn't see to the bottom.'

'Is the well in use?'

'No, the groundwater down at Walbrook's been foul with sewage for years. Edwin got a founder to make a pipe to carry water underground from the conduit to the house not long after he bought it. The year the king married Nan Bullen.'

'That would have been expensive.'

'Edwin is rich. But they should have capped off that well.' He shook his head again. 'They should have capped it.'

I had a sudden picture of a fall into darkness, a scream echoing off dank brick walls. I shivered despite the heat of the day.

'What did the girls say happened next?'

'Avice ran for the house steward, Needler. He got a rope and climbed down. Ralph was at the bottom with his neck broken, his poor little body still warm. Needler brought him out.'

'Did the steward gave evidence at the inquest?'

'Oh, yes. David Needler was there.' Joseph frowned. I looked at him sharply.

'You don't like him?'

'He's an impertinent fellow. Used to give me sneering looks when I visited from the country.'

'So, according to their testimony, neither girl actually saw what happened?'

'No, they only looked up when they heard the shout. Elizabeth often sat out in the garden alone. Her – well, her relations with the rest of the family were – difficult. She seemed to have taken a particular dislike to Ralph.'

'I see.' I looked him in the eye. 'And what is Elizabeth like?'

He leaned back, laying the crumpled handkerchief in his lap. 'She was like Ralph in some ways. They both had the dark hair and eyes of our side of the family. She was another that liked her own way. Her poor parents indulged her, being their only one. She could be malapert, coming forward with opinions in an unmaidenly way, and she preferred book-learning to ladies' concerns. But she played the virginal well, and enjoyed embroidering. She's young, sir, young. And she has a kind nature – she was always rescuing cats and dogs from the street.'

'I see.'

'But she changed after Peter died, I have to admit that. Not surprising, her mother gone then her father and then their house sold. She withdrew into herself, sir, stopped being the eager, talkative girl I knew. I remember after Peter's funeral, when I said it would be better for her future to go to Edwin rather than back to the country with me, she gave me such a look, such anger in it, then turned away without a word.' I saw tears come to the corner of his eyes at the memory. He blinked them away.

'And things did not go well when she moved to Sir Edwin's?'

'No. After her father died I visited them several times. I was concerned for Elizabeth. Each time Edwin and my mother said she was becoming more difficult, impossible.'

'In what ways?'

'Refusing to talk to the family, keeping to her room, missing meals. Not even taking proper care of her clothes. If anyone tried to chide her she'd either say nothing or else fly into a screaming rage, calling on them all to leave her alone.'

'And she was on bad terms with all three of her cousins?'

'I think Sabine and Avice were confused by her. They told the coroner they had tried to interest her in womanly things but Elizabeth just told them to go away. She is eighteen, a little older than them, but they should have been all girls together. And Edwin's children moved in higher social circles, they could have taught Elizabeth much.' He bit his lip again. 'I had hoped for her advancement. And it has led to this.'

'And why do you think she disliked Ralph so much?'

'That I understood least of all. Edwin told me that lately, if Ralph came near Elizabeth, she would give him such looks of hate it was frightening to see. I saw it myself one evening in February. I was at dinner with the family, all of them were there. It was an uneasy meal, sir. We were eating beefsteak, my brother enjoys it very rare and I do not think Elizabeth liked it – she sat toying with her food. My mother chid her but she wouldn't reply. Then Ralph asked her, quite politely, if she was enjoying her nice red meat. She went quite pale, put down her knife and gave him such a savage look I wondered—'

'Yes.'

He whispered, 'I wondered if she were ill in her mind.'

'Elizabeth has no cause to hate the family that you know of?'

'No. Edwin is mystified, he has been mystified by her since she came to them.'

I wondered what had gone on at Sir Edwin's house, whether there were things Joseph knew but would not say, as is common enough in family matters, though he seemed frank enough. He went on, 'After they found the body, David Needler locked Elizabeth in her room and sent a message to Edwin at the Mercers' Hall. He rode home and when she wouldn't answer his questions he called the constable.' He spread his hands. 'What else could he do? He feared for the safety of his daughters and our old mother.'

'And at the inquest? Elizabeth said nothing then? Nothing at all?'

'No. The coroner told her this was her chance to speak in her defence, but she just sat looking at him with this cold, blank look. It made him angry, and the jury too.' Joseph sighed. 'The jury found Ralph had been murdered by Elizabeth Wentworth and the coroner ordered her taken to Newgate to face a murder charge at the assize. He ordered her to be kept in the Hole for her impertinence in court. And then—'

'Yes?'

'Then Elizabeth turned and looked at me. Just for a second. There was such misery in that look, sir, no anger any more, just misery.' Joseph bit his lip again. 'In the old days when she was small she was fond of me, she used to come and stay on the farm. Both my brothers saw me as a bit of a country clod, but Elizabeth loved the farm, always rushing off to see the animals as soon as she arrived.' He gave a sad smile. 'When she was little she'd try and get the sheep and pigs to play with her like her pet dog or cat and cry when they wouldn't.' He smoothed out the torn, creased handkerchief. 'She embroidered a set of these for me, you know, two years ago. What a mess I have made of it. Yet

when I visit her in that awful place she is now, she just lies there, filthy, as though waiting only for death. I beg and plead with her to speak, but she stares through me as though I was not there. And she is up for trial on Saturday, in only five days' time.' His voice fell to a whisper again. 'Sometimes I fear she is possessed.'

'Come, Joseph, there is no point in thinking like that.'

He looked at me imploringly. 'Can you help her, Master Shardlake? Can you save her? You are my last hope.'

I was silent a moment, choosing my words carefully.

'The evidence against her is strong, it would be enough for a jury unless she has something to say in her defence.' I paused, then asked, 'You are sure she is not guilty?'

'Yes,' he said at once. He banged a fist on his chest. 'I feel it here. She was always *kind* at heart, sir, *kind*. She is the only one of my family I have known real kindness from. Even if she is ill in her mind, and by God's son she may be, I cannot believe she could kill a little boy.'

I took a deep breath. 'When she is brought into court she will be asked to plead guilty or not guilty. If she refuses then under the law she cannot be tried by a jury. But the alternative is worse.'

Joseph nodded. 'I know.'

'*Peine forte et dure*. Sharp and hard pains. She will be taken to a cell in Newgate and laid in chains on the floor. They will put a big, sharp stone under her back and a board on top of her. They will put weights on the board.'

'If only she would speak.' Joseph groaned and put his head in his hands. But I went on, I had to; he must know what she faced.

'They will allow her the barest rations of food and water. Each day more weights will be added to the board until she talks or dies of suffocation from the press of the weights.

When the weights are heavy enough, because of the pressure of the stone placed underneath her back, her spine will break.' I paused. 'Some brave souls refuse to plead and allow themselves to be pressed to death because if there is no actual finding of guilt one's property is not forfeit to the State. Has Elizabeth any property?'

'Nothing in the world. The sale of their house barely covered Peter's debts. Only a few marks were left at the end and they went on the funeral.'

'Perhaps she did do this terrible thing, Joseph, in a moment of madness, and feels so guilty she wants to die, alone in the dark. Have you thought of that?'

He shook his head. 'No. I cannot believe it. I *cannot* believe it.'

'You know that criminal accused are not allowed representation in court?'

He nodded glumly.

'The reason the law gives is that the evidence needed to convict in a criminal trial must be so clear no counsel is needed. That is all nonsense, I'm afraid; the cases are run through quickly and the jury usually decide merely by preferring one man's word against another's. Often they favour the accused because most juries don't like sending people to hang, but in this case' – I looked at the wretched pamphlet on the table – 'a child killing, their sympathies will be the other way. Her only hope is to agree to plead and tell me her story. And if she *did* act in a fit of madness, I could plead insanity. It might save her life. She'd go to the Bedlam, but we could try for a pardon from the king.' That would cost more money than Joseph had, I thought.

He looked up and for the first time I saw hope in his eyes. I realized I had said, 'I could plead,' without thinking. I had committed myself.

'But if she won't speak,' I went on, 'no one can save her.'

He leaned forward and clutched my hand between damp palms. 'Oh, thank you, Master Shardlake, thank you, I knew you'd save her—'

'I'm not at all sure I can,' I said sharply, but then added, 'I'll try.'

'I'll pay, sir. I've little enough but I'll pay.'

'I had better go to Newgate and see her. Five days – I need to see her as soon as possible, but I have business at Lincoln's Inn that will keep me all afternoon. I can meet you at the Pope's Head tavern next to Newgate first thing tomorrow morning. Say at nine?'

'Yes, yes.' He stood up, putting the handkerchief back in his pocket, and grasped my hand. 'You are a good man, sir, a godly man.'

A soft-headed man, more like, I thought. But I was touched by the compliment. Joseph and his family were all strong reformers, as I had once been, and did not say such things lightly.

'My mother and brother think her guilty, they were furious when I said I might help her. But I must find the truth. There was such a strange thing at the inquest, it affected me and Edwin too—'

'What was that?'

'When we viewed the body it was two days after poor Ralph died. It has been hot this spring but there is an underground cellar where they store bodies for the coroner to view, which keeps them cool. And poor Ralph was clothed. And yet the body *stank*, sir, stank like a cow's head left out in the Shambles in summer. It made me feel sick, the coroner too. I thought Edwin would pass out. What does that mean, sir? I have been trying to puzzle it out. What does it *signify*?'

I shook my head. 'My friend, we do not know what half the things in the world signify. And sometimes they signify nothing.'

Joseph shook his head. 'But God wants us to find the true meaning of things. He gives us clues. And, sir, if this matter is not resolved and Elizabeth dies, the real murderer goes free, whoever he is.'