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Wars of the Roses
Book One: Stormbird

Written by Conn Iggulden

Published by Michael Joseph

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Wars of the Roses
Book One: Stormbird

King Henry V – the great Lion of England – is long dead.

In 1437, after years of regency, the pious and gentle Henry VI, the Lamb, comes of age and accedes to the English throne. His poor health and frailty of mind render him a weakling king – Henry depends on his closest men, Spymaster Derry Brewer and William de la Pole, Duke of Suffolk, to run his kingdom.

Yet there are those, such as the Plantagenet Richard, Duke of York, who believe England must be led by a strong king if she is to survive. With England's territories in France under threat, and rumours of revolt at home, fears grow that Henry and his advisers will see the country slide into ruin. With a secret deal struck for Henry to marry a young French noblewoman, Margaret of Anjou, those fears become all too real.

As storm clouds gather over England, King Henry and his supporters find themselves besieged abroad and at home. Who, or what can save the kingdom before it is too late?

Conn Iggulden is one of the most successful authors of historical fiction writing today. *Stormbird* is the first book in his brilliant new series set during the Wars of the Roses, an extraordinary period of British history. His previous two series, on Julius Caesar and on the Mongol Khans of Central Asia, describe the founding of the greatest empires of their day and were number one bestsellers. Conn Iggulden lives in Hertfordshire with his wife and children.

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Wars of the Roses

Book One: Stormbird

CONN IGGULDEN

MICHAEL JOSEPH
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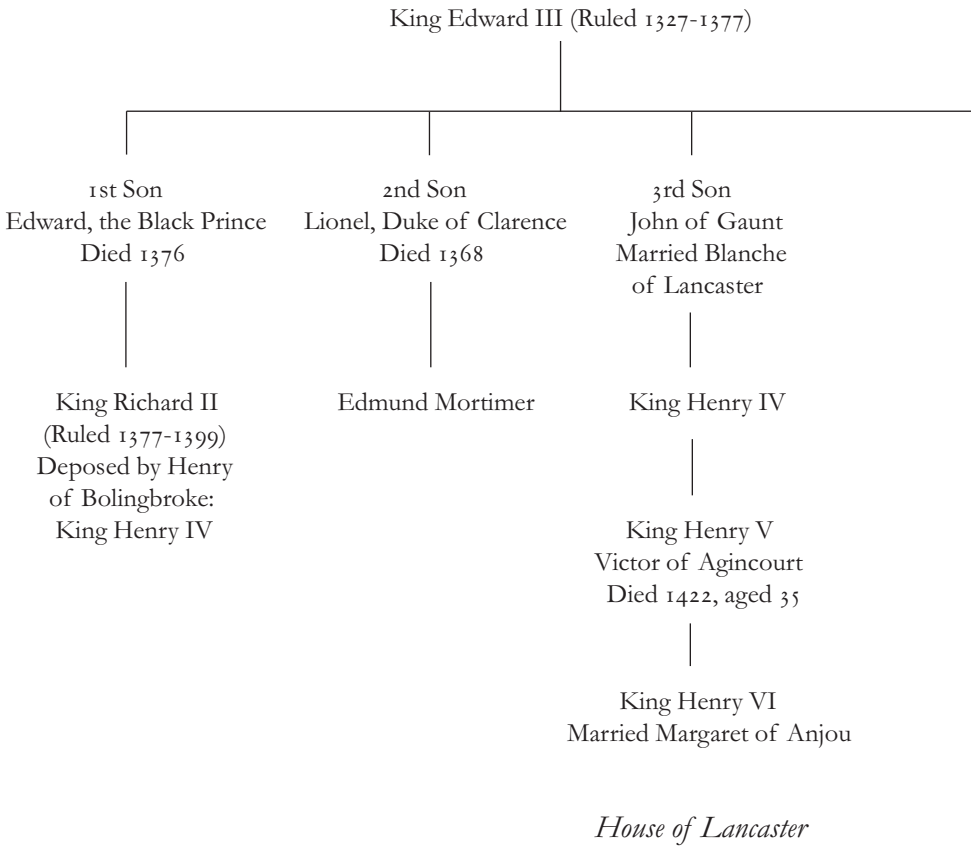


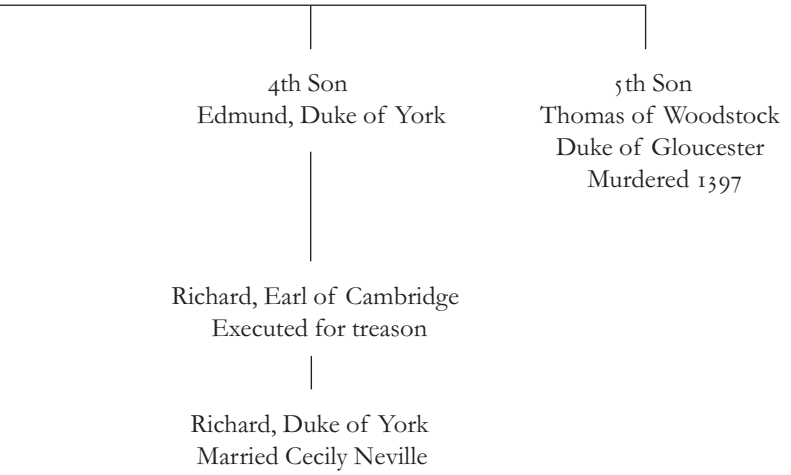
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ALWAYS LEARNING PEARSON

Stormbird

Royal Lines of England





House of York

Prologue

Anno Domini 1377

Bowls of dark royal blood lay beneath the bed, forgotten by the physician. Alice Perrers rested on a chair, panting from the effort of wrestling the king of England into his armour. The air in the room was sour with sweat and death and Edward lay like his own effigy, pale and white-bearded.

There were tears in Alice's eyes as she looked on him. The blow that had struck Edward down had come from a clear spring sky, unseen and terrible on a warm wind. Gently, she leaned forward and wiped spittle from the side of his drooping mouth. He had been so strong once, a man among men, who could fight from dawn till dusk. His armour gleamed, yet it was marked and scarred like the flesh it covered. Underneath it, muscle and bone had wasted away.

She waited for him to open his eyes, unsure how much he still understood. His awareness came and went, moments of fading life that grew fewer and shorter as the days progressed. At dawn, he'd woken and whispered for his armour to be put on. The doctor had jumped up from his chair, fetching another of his filthy draughts for the king to drink. Weak as a child, Edward had waved away the stinking mixture, beginning to choke when the man continued to press the bowl against his mouth. Alice had felt her resolve firm when she saw that. Over the doctor's

furious protests, she'd shooed him out of the king's rooms, snapping her apron at him and ignoring his threats until she was able to close the door on his back.

Edward had watched her lift his chainmail from the armour tree. He'd smiled for a moment, then his blue eyes had closed and he'd sagged back into the pillows. For the next hour, she'd grown pink at the labour, wiping her forehead with the back of her hand as she struggled with leather ties and metal, heaving the old man back and forth without his aid. Yet her brother was a knight and it was not the first time she'd dressed a man for war.

By the time she pulled the metal gauntlets over his hands and sat back, he was barely aware, groaning softly as he drifted. His fingers twitched on the crumpled blankets until she gasped and stood, realising what he wanted. Alice reached out to the great sword standing against the wall of the room, having to use both arms to place it where his hand could take the hilt. There had been a day when Edward had wielded that blade as if it had no weight at all. She wiped hot tears as his hand closed on it in a spasm, the gauntlet creaking in the silence.

He looked like a king once more. It was done. She nodded to herself, pleased that he would be seen as he had lived when the time came. Reaching for a comb from her pocket, she began to smooth out the white beard and hair, where they had become matted and tangled. It would not be long. His face drooped on one side as if warm wax had melted and his breath came in crackling gasps.

At twenty-eight, she was almost forty years younger than the king, but until his illness, Edward had been vigorous and strong, as if he might live forever. He had ruled all

her life and no one she knew could remember his father, nor the great Hammer of the Scots who had ruled before him. The Plantagenet family had left a mark on England and torn France apart in battles no one thought they could win.

Her comb snagged in his beard. Blue eyes opened at her touch and from that ravaged body, her king looked up at her. Alice shuddered under the fierce gaze that had brought its own form of weakness in her for so long.

'I am here, Edward,' she said, almost in a whisper. 'I am here. You are not alone.'

Part of his face pulled into a grimace and he raised his good left arm to grip her hand and lower it, with its comb held tight. Each breath was drawn roughly in and his skin flushed with the effort to speak. Alice leaned close to hear the mush of words.

'Where are my sons?' he said, raising his head so that it left the pillow, then falling back. His right hand trembled on the sword hilt, taking comfort from it.

'They are coming, Edward. I've sent runners for John, to bring him back from the hunt. Edmund and Thomas are in the far wing. They are all coming.' As she spoke, she could hear a clatter of footsteps and the rumble of men's voices. She knew his sons well and she prepared herself, knowing her moments of intimacy were at an end.

'They will send me away, my love, but I will not go far.' She reached down and kissed him on the lips, feeling the unnatural heat on his bitter breath.

As she sat back, she could make out the braying voice of Edmund coming closer, telling the other two of some wager he had made. She only wished the oldest brother

could have been among them, but the Black Prince had died just a year before, never to inherit his father's kingdom. She thought the loss of the heir to the throne had been the first blow that led to all the rest. A father should not lose sons before him, she thought. It was a cruel thing to bear, for man or king.

The door came open with a crash that made Alice start. The three men who entered all resembled their father in different ways. With the blood of old Longshanks running in them, they were some of the tallest men she had ever seen, filling the room and crowding her even before they spoke.

Edmund of York was slim and black-haired, glowering as he saw the woman sitting with his father. He had never approved of his father's mistresses and as Alice rose and stood aside, his brows came down in a sour expression. At his side, John of Gaunt wore the same beard as his father, though it was still rich and black and cut to a sharp point that hid his throat from sight. They entered first and stood over their father, looking down on him as his eyes drifted closed once more.

Alice trembled as she stood with her head bowed. The king had been her protector while she amassed a fortune. She had grown wealthy from her association, but she was well aware that any one of the men in the room could order her taken on a whim, her possessions and lands forfeit on nothing more than their word. The title of Duke was still so new that no one had tested their authority. They stood over earls and barons almost as kings in their own right, finding their peers and equals only in that room, on that day.

Two of the five dukes created by Edward were absent. Lionel, duke of Clarence had died eight years before, leaving only a baby daughter. The son of the Black Prince was a ten year old boy. Richard had inherited his father's duchy of Cornwall, just as he would inherit the kingdom itself. Alice had met both children and she only hoped Richard would survive his powerful uncles long enough to become king. In her private thoughts, she wouldn't have wagered a penny on his chances.

The youngest of them was Thomas, duke of Gloucester. Perhaps because he was closest to her in age, he had always treated her kindly. He was the only one to acknowledge Alice as she stood and trembled.

'I know you have been a comfort to my father, Lady Perrers,' Thomas said. 'But this is a time for his family.'

Alice blinked and nodded, though Edmund of York spoke before she could move.

'He means you should get out, girl,' he said. He didn't look at her, his gaze held by the figure of his father lying in his armour on the pale sheets. 'Off with you.'

Alice left quickly at that, brushing tears from her eyes. The door still stood open and she looked back at the three sons standing over the dying king. She closed the door gently and sobbed as she walked away into the palace of Sheen.

Alone, the brothers were silent for a long time. Their father had been the anchor on their lives, the one constant in a turbulent world. He had ruled for fifty years and the country had grown strong and rich under his hand. None of them could imagine a future without him.

'Should there not be a priest?' Edmund demanded

suddenly. 'It's an ill thing to have our father attended by a whore in his last moments.' He didn't see his brother John grimace at the loudness of his voice. Edmund barked at the world with every word, unable to speak quietly, or at least unwilling.

'He can be called yet for the last rites,' John replied, deliberately gentling his tone. 'We passed him in prayer in the little room outside. He'll wait a while longer, for us.'

The silence fell again, but Edmund shifted and sighed. He looked down at the still figure, seeing the chest rise and fall, the breaths audible with a deep crackle in the lungs.

'I don't see . . .' he began.

'Peace, brother,' John said softly, interrupting. 'Just . . . *peace*. He called for his armour and his sword. It won't be long now.'

John closed his eyes in irritation for a moment as his younger brother looked round and found a chair to suit him, dragging it close to the bed with a screeching sound.

'There's no need to stand, is there? Edmund said smugly. 'I can at least be comfortable.' He rested his hands on his knees, looking across at his father, before turning his head. When he spoke again, his voice had lost its usual stridency. 'I can hardly believe it, still. He was always so strong.'

John of Gaunt rested his hand on Edmund's shoulder.

'I know, brother. I love him too.'

Thomas frowned at both of them.

'Will you have him die with your empty chatter ringing in his ears?' he said sternly. 'Give him silence, or prayer, either one.'

John nodded, gripping Edmund's shoulder more strongly as he sensed his brother would reply. To his relief,

Edmund subsided with ill grace, only to speak after barely a beat.

'Have you thought, John, that there is only a boy between you and the crown? If it wasn't for dear little Richard, you would be king tomorrow.'

The other two spoke at once in anger, telling Edmund to shut his mouth. He shrugged at them, removing John's warning hand from his shoulder.

'You won't say you haven't thought of it. God knows the houses of York and Gloucester won't see the throne come to them, but you John? You are just a hair's breadth from being royal and touched by God. If it was me, I'd be thinking of that.'

'It should have been Edward,' Thomas snapped. 'Or Lionel, if he'd lived. Edward's son Richard is the only male line and that's all there is, Edmund. God, I don't know how you can have the gall to say such a thing while our father lies on his deathbed. And I don't know how you can call the true royal line a "hair's-breadth" either. Hold your wind, brother. I'm sick of hearing you. There is only one line. There is only one king.'

The old man on the bed opened his eyes and turned his head. They all saw the movement and Edmund's tart reply died on his lips. As one they leaned in close to hear as their father smiled weakly, the expression twisting the good half of his face into a rictus that revealed dark yellow teeth.

'Come to watch me die?' king Edward asked. They smiled at the gleam of life and John felt his eyes fill with unwanted tears so that his vision swam. 'I was dreaming, lads. I was dreaming of a green field and riding across it.' His voice was thin and reedy, high and weak so that they

could barely hear. Yet in his eyes, they saw the man they had known before. He was still there, watching them.

'Where is Edward?' the king said. 'Why isn't he here?' John rubbed fiercely at his tears.

'He's gone, father. Last year. His son Richard will be king.'

'Ah. I miss him. I saw him fight in France, did you know?'

'I know, father,' John replied. 'I know.'

'The French knights overran where he stood, yelling and smashing through. Edward stood alone, with just a few of his men. My barons asked me if I wanted to send knights to help him, to help my first born son. He was sixteen years old then. Do you know what I said to them?'

'You said no, father,' John whispered. The old man laughed in short, painful spasms.

'I said no. I said he had to win his spurs.' His eyes turned up to the ceiling, lost in the memory. 'And he did! He fought his way clear and returned to my side. I knew he would be king then. I knew it. Is he coming?'

'He's not coming, father. He's gone and his son will be king.'

'Yes, I'm sorry. I knew. I loved him, that boy, that brave boy. I loved him.'

The king breathed out and out and out, until all breath was gone. The brothers waited in terrible silence and John sobbed, putting his arm over his eyes. King Edward the Third was dead and the stillness was like a weight on them all.

'Fetch the priest for the last rites,' John said. He reached down to close his father's eyes, already lacking the spark of will.

One by one, the three brothers bowed to kiss their father's forehead, to touch his flesh for the last time. They left him there as the priest bustled in and they walked out into the June sunshine and the rest of their lives.

PART ONE

Anno Domini 1443

Sixty-Six Years After the Death of Edward III

'Woe to Thee O land, when thy king is a child.'

Ecclesiastes.

Chapter One

England was cold that month. The frost made the paths shine whitely in the darkness, clinging to the trees in drooping webs of ice. Guardsmen hunched and shivered as they kept watch over the battlements. In the highest rooms, the wind sobbed and whistled as it creased around the stones. The fire in the chamber might as well have been a painting for all the warmth it brought.

'I remember Prince Hal, William! I remember the lion! Just ten more years and he'd have had the rest of France at his feet. Henry of Monmouth was my king, no other. God knows I would follow his son, but this boy is not his father. You know it. Instead of a lion of England, we have a dear white lamb to lead us in prayer. Christ, it makes me want to weep.'

'Derry, please! Your voice carries. And I won't listen to blasphemy. I don't allow it in my men and I expect better from you.'

The younger man stopped his pacing and looked up, a hard light in his eyes. He took two quick steps and stood very close, his arms slightly bent as they hung at his sides. He was half a head shorter than lord Suffolk, but he was powerfully built and fit. Anger and strength simmered in him, always close to the surface.

'I *swear* I've never been closer to knocking you out, William,' he said. 'The listeners are *my* men. Do you think

I'm trying to trap you? Is that it? Let them hear. They know what I'll do if they repeat a single word.' With one heavy fist, he thumped Suffolk lightly on the shoulder, turning away the man's frown with a laugh.

'Blasphemy? You've been a soldier all your life, William, but you still talk like a soft-faced priest. I could still put you on your backside, William. That's the difference between you and me. You'll fight well enough when you're told, but *I* fight because I like it. That's why this falls to me, William. That's why I'll be the one who finds the right spot for the knife and sticks it in. We don't need pious *gentlemen*, William, not for this. We need a man like me, a man who can see weakness and isn't afraid to thumb its eyes out.'

Lord Suffolk glowered, taking a deep breath. When the king's spymaster was in full flow, he could mix insults and compliments in a great flood of bitter vitriol. If a man took offence, Suffolk told himself, they'd never get anything done. He suspected Derihew Brewer knew the limits of his temper very well.

'We may not need a "gentleman", Derry, but we do need a lord to deal with the French. You wrote to *me*, remember? I crossed the sea and left my responsibilities in Orléans to listen to you. So, I would appreciate it if you'd share your plans, or I'll go back to the coast.'

'That's it, isn't it? I come up with the answers and I'm to give them to my fine noble friend so he can reap all the glory? So they can say "That William Pole, that Earl Suffolk, he's a *right* sharp one", while Derry Brewer is forgotten.'

'William *de la* Pole, Derry, as you know very well.'

Derry replied through clenched teeth, his voice close to a snarl.

'Oh yes? You think this is the time to have a nice French-sounding name do you? I thought you had more wits, I really did. Thing is, William, I'll do it anyway, because I care what happens to that little lamb who rules us. And I don't want to see my country ripped apart by fools and cocky bastards. I do have an idea, though you won't like it. I just need to know you understand the stakes.'

'I understand them,' Suffolk said, his grey eyes hard and cold.

Derry grinned at him without a trace of humour, revealing the whitest teeth Suffolk could remember seeing on a grown man.

'No you don't,' he said with a sneer. 'The whole country is waiting for young Henry to be half the man his dad was, to finish the glorious work that took half of France and made their precious Dauphin prince run like a little girl. They're *waiting*, William. The king is twenty-two and his father was a *proper* fighter at that age. Remember? Old Henry would have torn their lungs out and worn 'em as gloves, just to keep his hands warm. Not the lamb though. Not his boy. The lamb can't lead and the lamb can't fight. He can't even grow a beard, William! When they all realise he ain't *never* coming, we're all done, understand? When the French stop trembling in terror about King Harry, the lion of bloody England coming back, it's all finished. We'll be the ones who lose it all. Maybe in a year or two, there'll be a French army clustering like wasps to come for a day out in London. A nice bit of rape and slaughter and we'll be taking off our caps and bowing whenever we hear a French voice. You want that for your daughters, William? For your sons? Those are your stakes, William *English* Pole.'

'Then *tell* me how we can bring them to truce,' Suffolk replied slowly and with force. At forty-six, he was a large man, with a mass of iron grey hair that spread out from his wide head and fell almost to his shoulders. He'd put on bulk in the previous few years and next to Derry, he felt old. His right shoulder ached on most days and one of his legs had been badly gashed years before, so that the muscle never healed properly. He limped in winter and he could feel it sending fingers of pain up his leg as he stood in the cold room. His temper was growing short.

'That's what the boy said to me,' Derry replied. "Bring me a truce', Derry, he says. "Bring me peace". *Peace* when we could take it all with one good season of fighting. It turned my stomach – and his poor old dad must be turning in his grave. I've spent more time in the archives than any man with red blood should ever be asked to do. But I found it, William Pole. I found something the French won't turn down. You'll take it to them and they'll fret and worry, but they won't be able to resist. He'll get his truce.'

'And will you share this revelation?' Suffolk asked, holding his temper with difficulty. The man was infuriating, but Derry would not be rushed and there was still the suspicion that the spymaster enjoyed having an earl wait on his word. Suffolk resolved not to give Derry the satisfaction of showing impatience. He crossed the room to pour himself a cup of water from a jug, draining it in quick swallows.

'Our Henry wants a wife,' Derry replied. 'They'd see hell freeze before they give him a royal princess like they did with his father. If they do that, they know it will come back to bite them. There's already two kings in France, if you count their Charles the way they do. No, he'll keep his

daughters close by for Frenchmen, so I won't give him the pleasure of turning us down. But there is one other house, William – Anjou. The Duke there has paper claims to Naples, Sicily and Jerusalem. Old René calls himself a king and he's ruined his family trying to claim his rights for ten years now. He's paid ransoms greater than you or I will ever see, William. And he has two daughters, one of them unpromised and thirteen.'

Suffolk shook his head, refilling the cup. He had sworn off wine and beer, but this was one time when he truly missed the stuff.

'I *know* Duke René of Anjou,' he said. 'He hates the English. His mother was a great friend of that girl, Joan of Arc – and you'll recall Derry, that we burned her.'

'No more than right,' Derry snapped. 'You were there, you saw her. That little bitch was in league with someone, even if it wasn't the devil himself. No, you're not seeing it, William. René has the ear of his king. That French peacock owes René of Anjou his crown, *everything*. Didn't René's mother give him sanctuary when he tucked up his skirts and ran? Didn't she send little Joan of Arc to Orléans to shame them into attacking? That family kept France in French hands, or at least the arse end of it. Anjou is the key to the whole lock, William. The French king married René's sister, for Christ's sake! That's the family that can put pressure on their little royal – and they're the ones with an unmarried daughter. They are the way in, I'm *telling* you. I've looked at them all, William, every French "lord" with three pigs and two servants. Margaret of Anjou *is* a princess, her father beggared himself to prove it.'

Suffolk sighed. It was late and he was weary.

'Derry, it's no good, even if you're right. I met the duke more than once. I remember him complaining to me that English soldiers laughed at his order of chivalry. He was most offended, I recall.'

'He should not have called it the Order of the Croissant, then, should he?'

'It's no stranger than the Order of the Garter, is it? Either way, Derry, he won't give us a daughter, certainly not in exchange for a truce. He might take a fortune for her, if things are as bad as you say, but a truce? They aren't all fools, Derry. We haven't had a campaign for a decade and every year, it gets just a little bit harder to hold the land we have. They have an ambassador here and I'm sure he tells them everything he sees.'

'He tells them what I let him see, don't you worry about *that*. I have that perfumed boy sewn up tight. But I haven't told you what we'll offer to make old René sweat and pull on his king's sleeve, just begging his monarch to accept our terms. He's poor as a church mouse and part of that is because he's stuck without the rents from his ancestral lands. Why? Because *we* own them. He has a couple of derelict old castles that look out on the best farmland in France, with good Englishmen and soldiers enjoying it for him. Maine and Anjou entire, William. That will bring him to the table fast enough. That will win us our truce. Ten years? We'll demand twenty and a bloody princess. And René of Anjou has the king's ear. The snail-eaters will fall over themselves to say yes.'

Suffolk rubbed his eyes in frustration. He could feel the taste of wine in his mouth, though he had not touched a drop for more than a year.

'This is madness. You'd have me give away a quarter of our land in France?'

'You think I like it, William?' Derry demanded angrily. 'You think I haven't sweated for months looking for a better path? The king said "Bring me a truce, Derry" – well, this is it. This is the only thing that will do it and believe me, if there was another way, I'd have found it by now. If he could use his father's sword, Christ if he could even lift it, I wouldn't be having this conversation with you. You and I would be out once more, with the horns blowing and the French on the run. If he can't do that – and he *can't*, William, you've seen him – then this is the only way to peace. We'll find him a wife as well, to conceal the rest.'

'Have you told the king?' Suffolk asked, already knowing the answer.

'If I had, he'd agree, wouldn't he?' Derry replied bitterly. '"You know best, Derry", "If you think so, Derry". You know how he talks. I could get him to say yes to anything. Trouble is, so can anyone else. He's weak like that, William. All we can do is get him a wife, bide our time and wait for a strong son.' He saw Suffolk's dubious expression and he snorted. 'It worked for Edward, didn't it? The Hammer of the bloody Scots had a weak son, but his grandson? I wish I'd known a king like that. No, I *did* know a king like that. I knew Harry. I knew the lion of bloody Agincourt and maybe that's all a man can hope for in one lifetime. But while we wait for a proper monarch, we have to have a truce. The beardless boy isn't up to anything else.'

'Have you even seen a picture of this princess?' Suffolk asked, staring off into the distance. Derry laughed scornfully.

'Margaret? You like them young, do you? And you a married man, William Pole! What does it matter what she looks like? She's almost fourteen and a virgin, that's all that matters. She could be covered in warts and moles and our Henry would say "If you think I should, Derry" and that's the truth of it.'

Derry came to stand at Suffolk's shoulder, noting to himself how the older man seemed more bowed down than he had when he'd entered.

'They know you in France, William. They knew your father and your brother – and they know your family has paid its dues. They'll listen to you, if you take this to them. We'll still have the north and all the coast. We'll still have Calais and Normandy, Picardy, Brittany – all the way to Paris. If we could hold all that and Maine and Anjou as well, I'd be raising the flags and marching with you. But we can't.'

'I'll need to hear this from the king, before I go back,' Suffolk said, his eyes bleak. Something of the same expression made Derry look away.

'All right, William. I understand. But you know . . . no, all right. You'll find him in the chapel. Maybe you can interrupt his prayers, I don't know. He'll agree with me, William. He always bloody agrees.'

Across a swathe of frozen, crunching grass, the two men walked in darkness to the Windsor chapel, dedicated to the Blessed Virgin, Edward the Confessor and St. George. In starlight, with his breath misting before him, Derry nodded to the guards at the outer door, passing through into a candle-lit interior that was almost as cold as the night outside.

The chapel seemed empty at first, though Suffolk sensed and then caught glimpses of men standing among the statues. In dark robes, they were almost invisible until they moved. Footsteps on stone echoed in the silence as the watchers walked towards the two men, faces hard with their responsibility. Twice, Derry had to wait until he was recognised before he could go further along the nave, searching all the while for the single figure he knew he would find at prayer.

The monarch's seat was almost enclosed in carved and gilded wood. Looking out over the altar, the man in it was lit by dim lamps hanging above his head. Their bronze gleam revealed a face held up in rapture. Henry knelt with his hands out in front of him, tight-clenched and rigid. His eyes were closed and Derry sighed softly to himself. For a time, he and Suffolk just stood and waited, gazing on the face of a boy, lit gold in the darkness. He looked angelic, but it broke both their hearts to see how young he seemed, how frail. It was said his birth had been a trial for his French mother. She had barely survived it and the boy had been born blue and choking. Nine months later and his father Henry V was dead, torn from life by simple sickness after surviving a lifetime of war. There were some who said it was a blessing that the battle king had not lived to see his son become a man.

In the gloom, Derry and Suffolk looked at each other in silence, sharing the same sense of loss. Derry leaned close.

'It could be hours yet,' he whispered into Suffolk's ear. 'You'll have to interrupt or we'll be here till morning.'

In response, Suffolk cleared his throat, the sound louder than he had intended in the echoing silence. The king's

eyes drifted open, as if he was returning from very far away. Slowly, Henry turned his head, taking in the two men standing there, waiting. He blinked, then smiled at them both, crossing himself and muttering a final prayer before rising on legs made stiff from hours of stillness.

Suffolk watched as his king fumbled the latch of the monarch's seat, stepping down and approaching him. Henry left the pool of light behind, so that they could not see his face as he came close.

Both men knelt at the same moment, Suffolk's knees protesting. Henry chuckled over their bowed heads.

'My heart is full to see you, lord Suffolk. Come now, stand up. The floor is too cold for old men. I'm sure that's right. I hear my chambermaid complaining, though she doesn't know I'm there. She's younger than you, I think. Up, both of you, before you catch a chill.'

As Derry stood, he opened the lamp he carried, spreading light across the chapel. The king was dressed in the simplest of clothes, just plain dark wool and blunt leather shoes like any townsman. He wore no gold and with the look of a boy, he might have been an apprentice for some trade that did not require too much strength.

Suffolk searched the young man's face for some trace of the father, but the eyes were guileless and the frame was slender, showing no sign of the massive strength of his bloodline. Suffolk almost missed the bandages on Henry's hands. His gaze snagged on them and Henry held them up into the light, his face flushing.

'Sword practice, lord Suffolk. Old Marsden says they'll harden, but they just bleed and bleed. I thought for a while . . .' He caught himself, raising one bound finger to

tap lightly at his mouth. 'No, you have not come from France to see my hands. Have you?'

'No, your Majesty,' Suffolk answered gently. 'I am here for only a short while. Can you grant me a moment? I have been talking to master Brewer about the future.'

'No beer from Derry!' Henry said. 'The only Master Brewer with no beer!' It was an old jest, but both the older men chuckled dutifully. Henry beamed at them.

'In truth, I cannot go from this place. I am allowed to take a break each hour, for water or to fill a pot, but then I must return to my prayers. Cardinal Beaufort told me the secret and the burden is not too great.'

'The secret, your majesty?'

'That the French can't come while a king prays, lord Suffolk! With my hands, even bandaged as they are, I hold them back. Isn't that a wonderful thing?'

Suffolk took a moment of silence to curse the young man's great-uncle for his foolishness. There was no purpose in having Henry waste his nights in such a way, though Suffolk imagined it made it easier for those around him. Somewhere nearby, Cardinal Beaufort would be sleeping. Suffolk resolved to wake him up and have him join the boy in prayers. A king's prayers could only be gilded by those of a cardinal, after all.

Derry had been listening closely and he nodded sharply to himself.

'I'll clear the men away, my lord Suffolk. Your Majesty, with your permission? This is a private matter, best not overheard.'

Henry gestured for him to carry on while Suffolk smiled at the formal tone. For all Derry's bitterness and scorn, he

was cautious in the presence of the king. There would be no blasphemy in that chapel, not from him.

The king seemed not to notice the half-dozen men Derry ushered out of the chapel into the frozen night. Suffolk was cynical enough to suspect one or two remained in the darkest alcoves, but Derry knew his own men and Henry's patience was already wearing thin, his gaze drifting back towards his place of prayer.

Suffolk felt a surge of kindness towards the young man. He had watched him grow with the hopes of an entire country on his shoulders. Suffolk had seen those hopes falter and then crumble into disappointment. He could only guess how hard it had been for the boy himself. Henry was not stupid, for all his strangeness. He would have heard every barbed comment made about him over the years.

'Your majesty, master Brewer has vouchsafed a plan to bargain for a wife and a truce together, in exchange for two great provinces of France. He believes the French will deliver a truce in exchange for Maine and Anjou.'

'A wife?' Henry said, blinking.

'Yes, your majesty, as the family in question has a suitable daughter. I wanted . . .' Suffolk hesitated. He could not ask if the king understood what he was saying. 'Your majesty, there are English subjects living in both Maine and Anjou. They would be evicted if we give them up. I wanted to ask if it isn't too high a price to pay for a truce.'

'We must have a truce, lord Suffolk. We must. My uncle the cardinal says so. Master Brewer agrees with him – though he has no beer! Tell me of the wife though. Is there a picture?'

Suffolk closed his eyes for a moment.

'I will have one made, your majesty. The truce though. Maine and Anjou are the southern quarter of our lands in France. Together, they are as great as *Wales*, your majesty. If we give such a tract of land away . . .'

'What is her name, this girl? I cannot call her "girl" or even "wife", now can I, Lord Suffolk?'

'No, your majesty. Her name is Margaret. Margaret of Anjou.'

'You will go to France, lord Suffolk and you will see her for me. When you return, I shall want to hear every detail.'

Suffolk hid his frustration.

'Your majesty, do I have it right that you are willing to lose lands in France for peace?' To his surprise, the king leaned in close to reply, his pale blue eyes gleaming.

'As you say, lord Suffolk. We must have a truce. I depend on you to carry out my wishes. Bring me a picture of her.'

Derry had returned while the conversation went on, his face carefully blank.

'I'm sure his majesty would like to return to his prayers now, lord Suffolk.'

'I would, yes,' Henry replied, holding up one bandaged hand in farewell. Suffolk could see a dark red stain at the centre of the palm.

They bowed deeply to the young king of England as he walked back to his place and knelt, his eyes closing slowly, his fingers lacing together like a lock.

Chapter Two

Margaret let out a gasp as a hurrying figure thumped into her and they both went sprawling. She had a blurred sense of tight-drawn brown hair and a smell of healthy sweat and then she was going down with a yelp. A copper pot crashed to the courtyard stones with a noise so great it hurt her ears. As Margaret fell, the maid flailed to catch the pot, but only sent it spinning.

The maid looked up angrily, her mouth opening on a curse. As she saw Margaret's fine red dress and billowing white sleeves, the blood drained from her face, stealing away the flush from the kitchens. For an instant, her eyes flickered to the path, considering whether she could run. With so many strange faces in the castle, there was at least a chance the girl wouldn't recognise her again.

With a sigh, the maid wiped her hands on an apron. The kitchen mistress had warned her about the brothers and the father, but she'd said the youngest girl was a sweet little thing. She reached down to help Margaret to her feet.

'I'm sorry about that, dear. I shouldn't have been running, but it's all a rush today. Are you hurt?'

'No, I don't think so,' Margaret replied dubiously. Her side ached and she thought she had scraped an elbow, but the woman was already shifting from foot to foot, wanting to be off. Back on her feet, Margaret smiled at her, seeing the gleam of sweat on the young woman's face.

'My name is Margaret,' she said, remembering her lessons. 'May I know your name?'

'Simone, my lady. But I must get back to the kitchens. There's a thousand things to do still, with the king coming.'

Margaret saw the handle of the pot sticking out of the trimmed hedge by her foot and picked it up. To her pleasure, the woman curtsied as she took it back. They shared a smile before the maid vanished at only a fraction less than her original speed. Margaret was left alone to stare after her. Saumur castle had not been this busy for years and she could hear her father's deep voice raised somewhere nearby. If he saw her, he would put her to work, she was certain, so she headed in the opposite direction.

Having her father at home had been a novelty at first. The man was a stranger to her, having spent eleven of her thirteen years away on campaigns. Her mother spoke of his great bravery and honour, but Margaret had seen the blank spaces on yellowing plaster as paintings and statues were quietly taken and sold. The jewellery had been the last to go and she'd observed her mother's pain as men from Paris arrived to appraise them, staring through their little tubes and nodding before handing over gold coins. Every year had brought fewer luxuries until Saumur was stripped of anything beautiful, revealed in cold stones. Margaret had grown to hate her father by then, without knowing him at all. Even the servants had been dismissed one by one, with whole sections of the castle closed and left to grow blue with mildew.

She looked up at the thought, wondering if she could get up to the east wing without being spotted and put to a task. There were mice running freely in one of the tower

rooms, making their little nests in old couches and chairs. She had a pocket full of crumbs to entice them out and she could spend the afternoon there. It had become her refuge, a hiding place that no one knew about, not even her sister Yolande.

When Margaret had seen the men of Paris counting the books in her father's beautiful library, she'd crept in at night and taken as many as she could carry, stealing them away to the tower room before they could vanish. She felt no guilt about it, even when her father returned and his booming orders echoed around her home. He was the stranger there, for all her mother fawned on him. Margaret didn't really understand what a ransom was, or why they'd had to pay one to get him back, but she cherished the books she'd saved, even the one the mice had found and nibbled.

Saumur was a maze of back stairs and passages that could confuse and confound a stranger. Yet it had been her world for as long as she could remember. Margaret knew every route through and after rubbing her elbow, she went quickly, crossing a corridor and clattering through a wide, empty room panelled in oak. If her mother saw her running, there would be harsh words. Margaret caught herself dreading the footsteps of her governess as well before she remembered that terror of her youth had been dismissed with all the others.

Two flights of wooden stairs brought her up to a landing that led straight across to the east tower. The ancient floorboards were bowed and twisted there, rising away from the joists below. Margaret had lost entire afternoons stepping on them in complicated patterns, making them

speak in their creaking voices. She called it the crow room for the sound they made.

Panting lightly, she paused there to look down on the banqueting hall, as she always did. There was something special in being able to lean over the vast space, up at the level of the chandeliers, with their fat yellow candles. She wondered who would light them for the king's visit now that the tallowmen no longer called, but she supposed her father would have thought of it. He'd found the gold somewhere to hire all the new servants. The castle teemed with them like the mice in the tower, rushing hither and yon on unknown errands and all strangers to her.

Onwards through the library, which made her shiver now that it was bare and cold. Yolande said some great houses had libraries on the ground floor, but even when they had been rich, her father had cared little for books. The shelves were thick with dust as she passed, idly drawing a face with a finger before hurrying on. At the library window, she looked down on a courtyard and her face scowled out at the sight of her brothers practicing sword drills. John was battering little Louis to his knees and laughing at the same time. With a glance around to make sure no one was watching, Margaret pointed her finger at her brother and cursed him, calling on God to give him a rash in his private region. It didn't seem to affect his cheerful blows, but he deserved it for the pinch he'd given her that morning.

To her horror, John suddenly looked up, his gaze fastening on hers. He gave a great shout that she could hear even through the diamonds of glass. Margaret froze. Her brothers liked to chase her, imitating hunting horns with

their mouths and hands while they ran her down through the rooms and corridors of the castle. Surely, they would be too busy with the king coming? Her heart sank as she saw John break off and point, then all three went charging from sight below. Margaret gave up on the idea of going to her secret room. They had not discovered it yet, but if they came to the library, they would hunt all around that part of the castle. It would be better to lead them far away.

She ran, holding her skirt high and cursing them all with rashes and spots. The last time, they'd forced her into one of the great kitchen cauldrons and threatened to light the fire.

'Maman!' Margaret yelled. 'Mamaaan!'

At full speed, she barely seemed to touch the steps, using her arms to guide her as she hurtled down a floor and cut across a corridor to her mother's suite of rooms. A startled maid jumped back with a mop and bucket as Margaret shot past. She could hear her brothers hallooing somewhere on the floor below, but she didn't pause, jumping down three steps that appeared in the floor in front of her, then up another three, some ancient facet of the castle's construction that had no clear purpose. Gasping for breath, she cut through her mother's dressing room, looking wildly around for sanctuary. She saw a huge and heavy wardrobe and quick as winking, opened the door and shoved herself into the back, comforted by the odour of her mother's perfume and the thick furs.

Silence came, though she could still hear John calling her name in the distance. Margaret fought not to cough in the dust she had raised. She heard footsteps enter the room and held herself as still as any statue. It was not

beyond John to send little Louis out in another direction, while John crashed around and gulled her into a feeling of safety. Margaret held her breath and closed her eyes. The wardrobe was at least warm and they surely wouldn't dare search for her in their mother's rooms.

The footsteps came closer and with no warning, the door of the wardrobe creaked open. Margaret blinked at her father in the light.

'What are you doing in here, girl?' he snapped. 'Do you not know the king is coming? If you have time for games, by God, you have too *much* time.'

'Yes, sir, I'm sorry. John was chasing me and . . .'

'I don't care what you were *doing*, just keep your filthy hands off your mother's dresses. Look at them! Margaret, you are *not* a child. Can you see the marks you have made?'

Margaret dipped her head, clambering out of the wardrobe and closing the door carefully behind her. It was true that her palms were black with grime, picked up in her wild run through the upper rooms. Resentment grew in her. Lord René may have been her father, but she had no memories of him, none at all. He was just a great white slug of a man who had come into her home and ordered her mother about like a servant. His face was unnaturally pale, perhaps from his years in prison. Small, black eyes glared at her, half hidden by heavy, unwrinkled lower lids so that he always seemed to be peering over them, his head tilted back to see the world. He had clearly not starved in the prison, she thought. That much was obvious. He'd complained to his wife about the tailor's fees for letting out his clothing, leaving her in tears.

'If I had a moment to spare, I'd have you whipped,

Margaret! Those dresses will all have to be cleaned.' He shouted and gestured angrily for some time, while Margaret stood with her head bowed, trying to look properly ashamed. There had been maids and house servants once, to scrub every stone and polish all the fine French oak. If dust lay thick now, whose fault was that, if not the man who had ruined Saumur for his vanity? Margaret had listened to him complaining to her mother about the state of the castle, but without an army of servants, Saumur was too just too big to keep clean.

Margaret remembered to nod as her father raged. He called himself the King of Jerusalem, Naples and Sicily, places she had never seen. She supposed it made her a princess, but she couldn't be certain. After all, he'd failed to win any of them and a paper claim was worthless when he could only froth and strut and write furious letters. She hated him. As she stood there, she flushed at the memory of a conversation with her mother. Margaret had demanded to know why he couldn't just leave again. In response, her mother's mouth had pinched tight like a drawstring purse and she had spoken more harshly than Margaret could ever remember before.

Margaret drew her thoughts back as she sensed the slug was coming to an end of the tirade.

'Yes, sir,' she said humbly, nodding.

'What?' he demanded, his voice rising. 'What do you *mean*, "Yes, sir"? Have you even been listening?' Spots of colour bloomed on his white cheeks as his temper flared.

'Just get out!' he snapped. 'I don't want to see your face unless I call for you, do you understand? I have better things to do today than teach you the manners you obviously lack.

Running wild! When the king is gone, I will consider some punishment you won't forget so easily. Go! Get out!'

Margaret fled, red-faced and trembling. She passed her brother Louis in the corridor outside and for once he looked sympathetic.

'John's looking for you in the great hall,' he murmured. 'If you want to avoid him, I'd go round by the kitchen.'

Margaret nodded. Louis thought he was clever, but she knew him too well. John would be in the kitchen, or close by, that much was obvious. They would not be able to put her in a cauldron, not with so many staff preparing a king's feast, but no doubt her brother would have thought of something equally unpleasant. With dignity, Margaret walked rather than ran, struggling with tears she could hardly understand. It didn't matter to her that the slug was angry, why would it? She resolved to find her mother, somewhere at the centre of the bustle and noise that had been quiet just a few days before. Where *had* all the servants come from? There was no money for them and nothing left to sell.

By sunset, her brothers had given up their hunt to dress for the feast. The population of Saumur castle had increased even more as king Charles sent his own staff ahead. As well as the cooks hired from noble houses and the local village, there were now master chefs checking every stage of the preparation and half a dozen men in black cloth examining every room for spies or assassins. For once, her father said nothing as his guards were questioned and organised by the king's men. The local villages all knew by then that there would be a royal visit. As darkness fell, with swallows

wheeling and darting through the sky, the farmers had come in from their crofts and fields with their families. They stood on the verges of the road to Saumur, craning their necks to catch the first glimpse of royalty. The men removed their hats as the king passed, waving them in the air and cheering.

King Charles' arrival had not been as impressive as Margaret thought it would be. She'd watched from the tower window as a small group of horsemen came riding along the road from the south. There had been no more than twenty of them, clustered around a slender, dark-haired figure wearing a pale blue cloak. The king did not stop to acknowledge the peasants, as far as she could see. Margaret wondered if he thought the world was filled with cheering people, as if they were part of the landscape like trees or rivers.

As the royal group passed through the main gate, Margaret had leaned out of the open window to watch. The king had seemed rather ordinary to her, as he dismounted in the courtyard and passed his reins to a servant. His men were hard-faced and serious, more than one looking around them with an expression of distaste. Margaret resented them immediately. She had watched her father come out and bow stiffly to the king before they went inside. René's voice carried up to the windows, load and coarse. He tried too hard, Margaret thought. A man like the king would surely be weary of flattery.

The feast was a misery, with Margaret and Yolande banished to the far end of a long table, wearing stiff dresses that smelt of camphor and cedarwood and were far too precious to stain. Her brothers sat further up the table, turning their heads to the king like travellers facing a good

inn fire. As the oldest, John even attempted conversation, though his efforts were so stilted and formal that they made Margaret want to giggle. The atmosphere was unbearably stuffy and of course her sister Yolande pinched her under the table to make her cry out and embarrass herself. Margaret poked her with a fork from a set of dining silver she had never seen before.

She knew she was not allowed to speak; her mother Isabelle had been quite clear about that. So she sat in silence as the wine flowed and the king favoured her father or John with an occasional smile between courses.

Margaret thought King Charles was too thin and long-nosed to be handsome. His eyes were small black beads and his eyebrows were thin lines, almost as if they had been plucked. She'd hoped he would be loud and bearded, or at least wearing a crown of some kind. Instead, the king fiddled nervously with food that obviously didn't please him and merely raised the corners of his lips when he attempted to smile.

Her father filled the silences with stories and reminiscences of court, keeping up a stream of inane chatter that made Margaret embarrassed for him. The only excitement had come when her father's waving hands had knocked over a cup of wine, but the servants moved in swiftly and made it all vanish. Margaret could read the king's boredom, even if lord René couldn't. She picked at each course, wondering at the cost of it all. The hall was lit with expensive fresh tapers and even fine white candles, which were usually only brought out at Christmas. She supposed the costs would mean months of hardship to come, when the king had gone. She tried to enjoy it all, but the sight of her

father's long head bobbing in laughter just made her angry. Margaret sat sipping cider, hoping they would become aware of her disapproval and perhaps even abashed. It was a fine thought, that they would look up and see the stern girl, then glance at plates heaped with food they would barely touch before the next course came. She knew King Charles had met Joan of Arc and she longed to ask the man about her.

At the king's side, her aunt Marie sat and listened to René with a disapproving expression much like Margaret's own. Again and again, Margaret saw her aunt's gaze drift to her mother's throat, where no jewels lay. That was one thing René had not been able to borrow for the dinner. Her mother's jewels were all gone to finance his failed campaigns. As the king's wife, aunt Marie wore a splendid set of rubies that dripped right down between her bosoms. Margaret tried not to stare, but they were meant to attract attention, weren't they? She would have thought a married woman would not want men to stare at her bosoms in such a way, but apparently she did. Marie and René had grown up in Saumur and Margaret saw her aunt's assessing eye flicker from the bare ears and throat of her mother to the fine tapestries hanging along the walls. Margaret wondered if she would recognise any of them. Like the servants, they were borrowed or leased for a few days only. She could almost hear her aunt's thoughts clicking away like a little abacus. Her mother always said Marie had a hard heart, but she had won a king with it and all the luxury of his life.

Not for the first time, Margaret wondered what could have brought king Charles to Saumur castle. She knew

there would be no serious talk during the dinner, perhaps not even until the king had rested or hunted the following day. Margaret resolved to visit the balcony above the main hall when she was allowed to go to bed. Her father took honoured guests in there to enjoy the great fire and a selection of his better wines. At the thought, she leaned closer to Yolande, just as the girl was trying to tweak her bare arm in pure mischief.

'I'll twist your ear and make you shriek if you do, Yolande,' she muttered. Her sister pulled her hand back sharply from where it had been creeping over the table. At fifteen, Yolande was perhaps her closest companion, though of late she had taken on the airs and graces of a young woman, telling Margaret pompously that she couldn't play childish games any more. Yolande had even given her a beautiful painted doll, spoiling the gift with a dismissive comment on baby things she no longer needed.

'Will you come up the back stairs with me after the feast, to listen at the balcony? By the crow room.'

Yolande considered, tilting her head slightly as she weighed her exciting new sense of adulthood against her desire to see the king speak to their father in private.

'For a little while, perhaps. I know you get frightened in the dark.'

'That's you, Yolande and you know it. I'm not afraid of spiders either, even the big ones. You'll come then?' Margaret could sense her mother's disapproving stare turned on her and she applied herself to some cut fruit. It was delicious and she could hardly remember when a meal had finished with such fine things.

'I'll come,' Yolande whispered, barely moving her

mouth. Margaret nodded, knowing better than to risk her mother's wrath with another word. Her father was telling some tedious story about one of his tenant farmers and the king chuckled, sending a ripple of laughter down the table. The meal had surely been a success, but Margaret knew he hadn't come to Saumur for fine wine and food. With her head low, she looked up the table at the king of France. He looked so very ordinary, but John, Louis and Charles were apparently fascinated by him, barely touching their food at the slightest comment from his royal lips. Margaret smiled to herself, knowing she would mock them for it in the morning. It would pay them back for hunting her like a little fox.

Chapter Three

The crow room was silent as Margaret moved across it in bare feet. She'd spent part of the previous summer sketching the floor in charcoal on the back of an old map, marking each groaning joint or board with tiny crosses. The light from the fire in the great hall spilled up over the balcony and she crossed it like a dancer, taking exaggerated steps in a pattern that matched the one she saw in her memory. The crows remained silent and she reached the balcony in triumph, turning back to gesture to Yolande.

Lit by flickering gold and shadow, her sister gestured in frustration, but she had caught the same illicit excitement and crept out across the polished boards, wincing with Margaret as they groaned under her. The two girls froze at every sound, but their father and the king were oblivious below. The fire huffed and crackled and an old house always moved and shifted in the night. René of Anjou didn't look up as Yolande settled herself beside her sister and peered down through the upright wooden balustrades onto the scene below.

The great hall had survived the stripping of Saumur almost intact. Perhaps because it remained the heart and centre of the family seat, its tapestries and fine furniture had been safe from the men of Paris. The fireplace was big enough for a grown man to walk into without dipping his head. A log the size of a small couch burned merrily there,

heating black iron pokers laid across it until the tips glowed gold. King Charles sat in a huge, padded chair drawn close to the flames, while her father stood and fussed with cups and bottles. Margaret watched in fascination as René plunged one of the pokers into a goblet of wine for his king, sending up a hiss of steam and sweetening the air. She could smell cloves and cinnamon and her mouth quirked as she imagined the taste of it. The heat did not reach as far as her hiding place, unfortunately. The stones of the castle sucked warmth away, especially at night. Margaret shivered as she sat there with her legs curled up to one side, ready to dart away from the light if her father looked up.

Both men had changed their clothes, she saw. Her father wore a quilted sleeping robe over loose trousers and felt shoes. In the flickering light she thought it made him look like a sorcerer, gesturing with steam and fire over the cups. The king wore a heavy garment of some shimmering material, belted at his waist. The fanciful idea pleased her, that she was witness to some arcane rite between magic workers. Her father's unctuous tones shattered the illusion.

'You have brought them to this position, your majesty, no other. If you had not secured Orléans and strengthened the army into the force it has become, they would not be pleading for a truce now. This is a sign of our strength and their weakness. They have come to us, your majesty, as supplicants. It is all to your glory and the glory of France.'

'Perhaps, René, perhaps you are right. Yet they are cunning and clever, like Jews almost. If I were dying of thirst and an Englishman offered me a cup of water, I would hesitate and look for the advantage it brought him. My

father was more trusting and they repaid his goodwill with deceit.'

'Your majesty, I agree with you. I hope I am never so trusting as to shake the hand of an English lord without checking my pockets afterward! Yet we have the report of your ambassador. He said their king hardly spoke at all to him and he was rushed in and out of the royal presence as if the room was on fire. This Henry is not the man his father was, or he would have renewed their wanton destruction years ago. I believe this is an offer made from weakness – and in that weakness, we can regain lands lost to us. For Anjou, your majesty, but also for France. Can we afford to ignore such an opportunity?'

'That is *exactly* why I suspect a trap,' king Charles said sourly, sipping his hot wine and breathing in the steam. 'Oh I can believe they want a French princess to improve their polluted line further, to bless it with better blood. I have seen two sisters given over to English hands, René. My father was . . . inconstant in his final years. I am certain he did not fully understand the danger of giving Isabelle to their king Richard, or my beloved Catherine to the English butcher. Is it so surprising that they now claim my own throne, my own inheritance? The impudence of them, René! The boy Henry is a man of two halves: one angel, one devil. To think I have an English king as my nephew! The saints must laugh, or weep, I don't know.'

The king drained his cup, his long nose dipping into the vessel. He made a face as he reached the dregs and wiped a purple line from his lips with his sleeve. He gestured idly, lost in thought as Margaret's father refilled the cup and brought another poker out of the rack in the fire.

'I do not want to strengthen their claim with one more drop of French blood, lord Anjou. Will you have me disinherit my own children for a foreign king? And for what? Little Anjou? Maine? A truce? I would rather gather my army and kick them black and blue until they fall into the sea. That is the answer I want to give, not a truce. Where is the honour in that? Where is the dignity while they sell wheat and salt peas in Calais and polish their boots on French tables? It is not to be borne, René.'

Above, Margaret watched her father's expression change, unseen by the gloomy king. René was thinking hard, choosing his words with great care. She knew her mother had been feeding him oil and senna pods for his constipation, one legacy of his imprisonment he seemed to have brought home with him. The heavy white face was flushed with wine or the heat from the fire and he did look congested, she thought, a man stuffed full of something unpleasant. Her dislike only deepened and against reason, she hoped he would be disappointed, whatever it was he wanted.

'You majesty, I am at your command in all things. If you say it is to be war, I will have the army march against the English in spring. Perhaps we will have the luck of Orléans once again.'

'Or perhaps the luck of Agincourt,' king Charles replied, his voice sour. For a moment, his arm jerked, as if he was considering throwing his cup into the fire. He controlled himself with a visible effort. 'If I could be certain of victory, I would raise the flags tomorrow, I swear it.' He brooded for a time, staring into the flames as they shifted and flickered. 'Yet I have seen them fight, the English. I remember those red-faced, shouting animals roaring in triumph. They have

no culture, but their men are savage. *You* know, Rene. You have seen them, those ham-hocks with their swords and bows, those great fat blunderers who know nothing but slaughter.' He waved a hand in irritation at dark memories, but Margaret's father dared to interrupt before the king could ruin all his hopes and plans.

'What a triumph it would be to take back a quarter of their land in France without even a battle, your majesty! For a mere promise of truce and a marriage, we will win more than anyone has in a decade or longer against them. They have no lion of England any longer and we would have denied them the heart of France.'

King Charles snorted.

'You are too obvious, René. I see very well that you want your family lands returned to you. The benefit is clear to your line. Less so to mine!'

'Your majesty, I cannot disagree. You see clearer and further than I could ever do. Yet I can serve you better with the wealth of Anjou and Maine in my hands. I can repay my debts to the crown with those rents, your majesty. Our gain is their loss and even an acre of France is worth a little risk, I am certain.' He warmed to his theme, seeing the king's grudging approval. 'An acre of France returned is worth a great deal, your majesty, still more when it is returned from the old enemy. That is a victory, whether it is brought about by French negotiation or French blood. Your lords will see only that you have won land back from the English.'

The king nodded, setting his cup down onto the stone floor to rub his eyes.

'Your daughter will be an English queen, of course, if I agree to this. I take it she is of sound character?'

'Your majesty, she is the very soul of demure nobility. It can only strengthen your position to have a loyal member of my family in the English court.'

'Yes . . . there is that,' Charles said. 'But it is close to incestuous, René, is it not? King Henry is already my nephew. Your daughters are my nieces. I would have to apply to the Pope for special dispensation – and that has its costs, at least if we want it granted within the decade.'

René smiled at the signs of progress. He knew the English would send to Rome for the dispensation if he demanded it. He was also aware that his king was bargaining for a tithe in exchange for his agreement. The fact that Saumur's treasure rooms were filled with empty sacks and spiders bothered him not at all. He could borrow more, from the Jews.

'My lord, it would be honour to meet those costs, of course. I sense we are very close to a solution?'

Slowly, Charles dipped his head, his mouth working as if he had found a morsel in his back teeth.

'Very well, I will be guided by you in this, René. You will be lord of Anjou and Maine once more. I trust you will be suitably grateful.'

René flushed with excitement and pleasure.

'I am your man, your majesty. You may depend on me for any task, even to my life's blood.'

Margaret saw her father kneel and kiss the king's hand. Her eyes were round and wide as she turned away. Yolande was staring, her mouth hanging open. Reaching out, Margaret closed it gently with a finger, though she saw her hand was trembling.

'I am already promised,' Yolande whispered. 'Father would not break my engagement.' In silent accord, they

crept back from the light, with Margaret wincing as the boards complained under them.

Away from the balcony, the two sisters stood up in the gloom. Yolande was flushed with excitement and she gripped her sister's hands, almost hopping in place as if she wanted to dance.

'You'll marry a king, Margaret. It *has* to be you.'

'An English king,' Margaret replied doubtfully. She had always known her husband would be chosen for her, but she had assumed her mother would make the choice, or at least be involved in it. She looked irritably at her sister, bouncing like a robin in the shadows.

'I have been bargained for like a prize heifer, Yolande. You heard them. It is . . . overwhelming.'

Yolande drew her still further away, into another room that was even darker without the spilled gleam from the balcony. In pale moonlight, she embraced her sister.

'You will be a *queen*, Margaret. That is what matters. Their Henry is young, at least. You could have been given to some fat old lord. Are you not thrilled? When we are grown, I will have to bow to you when we meet. Our brothers will have to bow to you!'

A slow smile spread across Margaret's face at the thought of her brother John forced to acknowledge her superior rank. It was a pleasant image.

'I could have some English guardsman stuff him in a cauldron, perhaps,' she said, giggling.

'You could, and no one would stop you because you will be a queen.' Some of Yolande's uncomplicated pleasure reached her and the two girls held hands in the darkness.

*

The city of Angers was beautiful in the evening. Though it was the capital of Anjou and so under English authority, the inhabitants rarely encountered the foreign oppressors, outside of the courts and tax-gatherers. Reuben Moselle had invited many of the English merchants to his house on the river as he did every year. In trade alone, the party always paid for itself and he considered it a fair investment.

In comparison to the French and English, he dressed very simply, in dark colours. It had long been a habit of his not to show his wealth in his attire. It did not matter that he could have bought and sold many of the men in the room, or that a third of them owed him a fortune in gold, land, or liens on their businesses. Away from his bank or in it, he was the soul of modesty.

He noted that his wife was talking to lord York, making him welcome in their home. Sara was a treasure, finding it far easier than Reuben did to speak to the bluff English rulers. On the whole, Reuben preferred the French, whose subtle minds were more suited to the nuances of business. Yet York commanded the English soldiers in Normandy and had been invited as a matter of course. The man controlled contracts for vast sums, just to feed his men-at-arms. Reuben sighed as he rehearsed his English and approached them through the crowd.

'Milord York,' he said, smiling. 'I see you have met my wife. It is a great honour to have you in my home.' The nobleman turned to see who addressed him and Reuben forced himself to smile under a stare that was full of disdain. The moment seemed to last a long time, then York nodded, the spell broken.

'Ah, the host,' York replied. 'May I introduce my wife, duchess Cecily?'

'Mon plaisir, madame,' Reuben said. She did not extend her hand and he was caught in the act of reaching for it, covering his confusion by fiddling with his wine glass. Diamonds sparkled at her throat and she looked well-suited to her English husband, with cold eyes and thin lips that did not smile. Everything about her looked stern and humourless, Reuben thought. Her eyebrows had been plucked almost to nothing and across her white forehead she wore a band of lace sewn with gems.

'You have a fine house, monsieur,' the duchess said. 'My husband tells me you are in trade.' She spoke the word as if she could hardly bear to dirty her lips with it.

'Thank you, madame. I have a small bank and supply house, a local affair for the most part. Your husband's valiant soldiers must be kept fed and warm in the winter. It falls to me to provide some of their comforts.'

'For a fortune in gold,' York replied. 'I have been considering other suppliers, monsieur Moselle, but this is not the place to discuss such things.'

Reuben blinked at the tone, though he had heard it before in men of all stations.

'I hope I can dissuade you, milord. It has been a profitable association for us both.'

The wife's mouth twisted at the mention of profit, but Reuben continued to smile, trying hard to be a good host.

'Dinner will be served very soon, madame. I hope you enjoy what small pleasures we can provide. If you have a moment, the orangerie is lovely at night.' He was on the point of excusing himself when he heard coarse voices

raised in the garden. Reuben frowned. One of the local farmers had been trying for some time to bring him in front of a magistrate. It was a trivial matter and Reuben knew the city officials too well to be worried about some poor peasant with a grievance. It was not impossible that the fool had come to the annual party to cause a disturbance. He tilted his head, exchanging a glance with his wife that showed she understood.

'I should go and see to my other guests. Lady York, milord. I'm very sorry.'

The noise was increasing and he could see dozens of heads turning. Reuben moved smoothly through the crowd, making his excuses and exchanging a few words here and there with those he knew well. His wife would entertain the English lord and his cold wife, making them both welcome, he thought. Sara was God's gift to a devout man.

The house had once belonged to a French baron, a family fallen on hard times and forced to sell their properties after disasters in battle. Reuben had bought it outright, much to the disgust of local noble families who objected to a Jew owning a Christian home. Yet the English were more relaxed about such things, or at least easy to bribe.

Reuben reached the great windows in clear glass that opened out onto the lawn. They were folded back that night, to let in the warm air. He frowned as he saw soldiers standing with their boots on the neatly trimmed grass. His guests were all listening of course, so he kept his voice calm and low.

'Gentlemen, as you can see, I am in the middle of a private dinner for friends. Can this not wait until tomorrow morning?'

'Are you Reuben Moselle?' one of the soldiers asked.

The voice contained a sneer, but Reuben dealt with that every day and his pleasant expression didn't falter.

'I am. You are standing in my home, sir.'

'You do well for yourself,' the soldier replied, looking into the hall. Reuben cleared his throat, feeling the first tingle of nervousness. The man was confident, where usually he might have expected a certain wariness around wealth and power.

'May I have the honour of knowing your name in return?' Reuben said, his voice shading into coldness. The soldier did not deserve his courtesy, but there were still too many interested heads turned in his direction.

'Captain Recine of Saumur, Monsieur Moselle. I have orders for your arrest.'

'Pardon? On what charge? This is a mistake, captain, I assure you. The magistrate is inside, in fact. Allow me to take you to him and he will explain . . .'

'I have my orders, monsieur. An accusation has been made, at Département level. You'll come with me now. You can explain yourself to the judge.'

Reuben stared at the soldier. The man had dirty hands and his uniform stank, but there was still that unsettling confidence about him. Three more men showed yellow teeth at his back, enjoying the discomfort they were causing. The thought of being forced to go with such men made Reuben begin to sweat.

'I wonder if I can be of help, monsieur Moselle?' a voice said at his shoulder. He turned to see the figure of lord York standing there with a glass of wine in his hand. Reuben breathed in relief. The English noble looked like a soldier, with his jutting chin and wide shoulders. The French soldiers were instantly more respectful.

'This . . . captain is saying I am to be arrested, lord York,' Reuben replied, deliberately using the title. 'He has not yet mentioned the charge, but I am certain there has been some sort of mistake.'

'I see. What *is* the charge?' York said. Reuben could see the soldier consider an insolent reply, but then the man shrugged. It was not wise to irritate a man of York's reputation and influence, at least not for a lowly captain.

'Blasphemy and witchcraft, milord. He'll have to answer at the court in Nancy.'

Reuben felt his mouth fall open in surprise.

'Blasphemy and . . . this is madness, monsieur! Who is my accuser?'

'Not my place to say,' the soldier replied. He was watching lord York, fully aware that the man could choose to interfere. Reuben too turned to the Englishman.

'My lord, if you will have them return tomorrow morning, I am certain I can find witnesses and assurances that will reveal this for the falsehood it is.'

York looked down on him and his eyes glittered in the lamplight.

'It does not strike me as a matter for English law, monsieur Moselle. This is no business of mine.'

The captain smiled wider at hearing that and he grew bold enough to step forward and take Reuben by the arm in a firm grip.

'Begging your indulgence, monsieur. Come with me now. I don't want to have to drag you.' The grip grew stonger, giving the lie to his words. Reuben stumbled with it, unable to believe what was happening.

'The magistrate is in my house, captain! Will you at least let me bring him out to you? He will explain it all.'

'It's not a local matter, monsieur. Why don't you say something else and give me the pleasure of knocking your teeth into the back of your throat?' Reubens shook his head, mute with fear. He was fifty years old and already breathing hard. The violent threat astonished him.

Richard, duke of York, watched his host taken away with something like amusement. He saw his wife come through the crowd to stand at his shoulder, her expression delighted as the elderly man stumbled out through the gardens with his captors.

'I thought this evening would be terribly dull,' she said. 'That is the only way to deal with Jews. They grow too bold unless they are reminded of their station. I hope they beat him for his insolence.'

'I'm sure they will, my dear,' he replied. In the main hall, they both heard a shriek as the news reached Reuben's wife. Cecily smiled.

'I think I would like to see the orangerie,' she said, extending her arm for her husband to guide her inside.

'The charges are rather serious, my dear,' York said thoughtfully. 'I could buy the house for you, if you wish. Angers is splendid in summer and I have no property here.'

Her thin lips curled as she shook her head.

'Better to have it burned and rebuilt, after the previous owner,' she replied, making him laugh as they went in.

Chapter Four

Reuben could taste irony and his own blood as he staggered sideways across the road. He could smell the unwashed crowd as they bayed and spat at him, calling him "Christ-killer" and "blasphemer", their faces red with righteous indignation. Some of them threw stones and cold, wet filth that struck him on the chest and slithered inside his open shirt.

Reuben ignored the outraged citizens. They could hardly hurt him worse than he had been already. Every part of him was bruised or battered and one of his eyes was just a sticky blind mass that seeped a trail of fluid down his cheek. He limped as he was pushed along the street of Nancy, crying out as his feet bled through the wrappings and left red prints on the stones behind him.

He had lost something in the months of torture and imprisonment. Not his faith. He had never doubted for a moment that his enemies would receive the same punishments. God would seek them out and bow their heads with hot iron. Yet his sense of decency in men had been crushed along with his feet. No one had come to speak for him, or claim him from the courts. He knew at least a dozen men with the authority and wealth to secure his release, but they had all stayed silent as news of his terrible crimes became known. Reuben shook his head wearily, washed through with a sense of fatalism. There was no

sense to any of it. As if a man of his standing would spend his evenings drinking the blood of Christian children! Not when there was good red wine in his cellar.

The charges had been so monstrous that at first, he had been certain they would be revealed as lies. No sensible man could believe any of it. Yet the city judges had screwed up their fat mouths as they stared down at the broken, battered figure dragged up from the cells. They looked on him with disgust on their faces, as if he had somehow chosen to become the shambling, stinking thing the court inquisitors had made of him. Wearing black caps, the judges had pronounced a sentence of death by flaying, with every sign of satisfaction at a job well done.

Reuben had learned a sort of courage in his cell, with the boot they made him wear that could be wound tighter and tighter until his bones creaked and broke. In all his life, he had never had the strength or the wind to fight. With what God had given him, he had made himself wealthy: with his intellect, secretly scorning those who paraded their ability to lift lengths of iron into the air and swing them. Yet, when the pain was unbearable, when he had stripped his throat raw with screaming, he had still not confessed. It was a stubbornness he had not known was in him, perhaps the only way left to show his contempt. He had wanted to meet his execution with that shred of pride still intact, like a last thread of gold in a worn cloak.

The senior judge from Nancy had come to the cell after many days. Jean Marisse looked like a cadaver, holding a pomander of dry petals to his nose against the stink. Masked in dried blood and his own filth, Reuben had glared up at him through his one good eye, hoping to

shame Marisse with something like dignity. He could not speak by then. His teeth had all been broken and he could barely take in the mush of porridge they brought each day to keep him alive.

'I see the devil's pride is still in him,' Jean Marisse had said to the guards. Reuben had stared in dull hatred. He knew Jean Marisse, as he knew all the officials of the region. It had once seemed a profitable enterprise to learn their habits, though it had not saved him. The man had a reputation among the whores of the town as one who preferred to whip rather than kiss. There was even talk of a girl who had died after an evening with him. No doubt Marisse's wife would have been scandalised at the news, Reuben was certain. His mind had swirled with his own accusations, but there was no one to listen and his tongue had been pulled to its full extent and mangled with pincers designed for the purpose.

'Your questioners tell me you will not confess to your sins,' Jean Marisse had said. 'Can you hear me, Monsieur Moselle? They say you will not sign anything, though they have left your right hand untouched for that purpose. Do you not understand this could all end? Your fate has already been written, as sure as sunset. There is nothing left for you. Confess and seek absolution. Our lord is a merciful God, though I do not expect one of you Abrahams to understand. It is written that you must burn for your heresies, but who can say, truly? If you repent, if you confess, He may yet spare you the fires of hell.'

Reuben remembered staring back. He'd felt as if he could channel all his pain into his gaze, until it would strip away the man's lies and flesh and open him down to the

bone. Marisse already looked like a corpse, with his thin face and skin like wrinkled yellow parchment. Yet God did not strike him down. Jean Marisse had thrust out his chin, as if the silence itself was a challenge to his authority.

'Your property is forfeit, you understand? No man may profit from an association with the devil. Your wife and children will have to make their own way in the world. You have made it hard enough for them with your rites and secret magic. We have a witness, monsieur Moselle, a Christian of good standing and unimpeachable honour. Do you understand? There is no hope for you in this world. Who will take in your family now, when you are gone? Shall they continue to suffer for what you have done? Heaven cries out, Reuben Moselle. It cries out against the pain of innocents. Confess, man – and this will end!'

In the street, Reuben staggered against a shouting peasant, his broken foot betraying him. The burly apprentice struck out immediately, cracking Reuben's head back and sending a fresh flow of blood spattering from his nose. He saw bright drops of it gleam on the straw and filth that made up the road to the town square. One of the guards was bawling at the apprentice, shoving him back into the crowd with a pike pole held across his chest. Reuben saw the young man was grinning, delighted to be able to tell his children he had landed a stroke on the Jew's head. He staggered on, his mind fluttering in and out of clarity. The road seemed to go on forever and every step was lined with men, women and children come to see him die. Some snot-nosed urchin stuck out a foot and Reuben fell with a grunt of pain, his knees striking the stones so that a lance of pain went up his legs. The crowd laughed,

delighted that some part of the scene would play out in front of them. The ones lining the route at that stage could not afford to bribe their way into the main square.

Reuben felt a strong arm lift him up, accompanied by a smell of garlic and onions that he knew well from the prison. He tried to thank the guard for his help, but his words were a senseless mush.

'On your feet,' the man growled at him. 'It's not far now.'

Reuben remembered Jean Marisse leaning over him, like a crow examining a body for some part still worth eating.

'There are some who wonder how a Jew could carry out such filthy spells and rituals without his wife and children knowing. Do you understand me, monsieur Moselle? There are some who whisper that the wife is surely as guilty as the husband, that the children must be as tainted as the father. They are saying it would be a crime to let them go free. If you do not confess, it will be my duty to bring them here to these cells, to put them to the question. Can you imagine what it would be like for a woman, monsieur Moselle? Or a child? Can you conceive of their terror? Yet evil cannot be allowed to take root, or to spread. Weeds must be torn out and cast on the fire before they spread their seed on the wind. Do you understand, monsieur? Sign the confession and this will end. All this will end.'

Just a year before, Reubens would have laughed at such a threat. He'd had friends and wealth then, even influence. The world had been an ordered place where innocent men did not find themselves held down and screaming as strangers worked on them, with no one coming to help, or one word of comfort to be had. He'd learned what evil really

was in the cells beneath the prison yard at Nancy. Hope had died in him as his flesh was burned and broken.

He'd signed. The memory was clear in his mind, looking down on his own shaking hand as he put his name to lies without bothering to read them. Jean Marisse had smiled, his lips peeling back from rotting teeth as he'd leaned close. Reubens still remembered his warm breath and the fact that the judge's voice had been almost kind.

'You have done well, monsieur,' Marisse had said. 'There is no shame in telling the truth at last. Take comfort in that.'

The town square was packed with onlookers, leaving only a narrow path lined with guardsmen. Reuben shuddered as he saw cauldrons of bubbling water on either side of a raised platform. The manner of his death had been described to him with relish by his torturers. It had amused them to make sure he understood what awaited. Boiling water would be poured over his skin, searing it from the bones and making it easier to strip long pieces of steaming flesh from his arms and chest. It would be hours of impossible torment for the pleasure of the crowd. Reubens knew with a shudder that he could *not* bear it. He saw himself becoming a screaming animal before them all, with all his dignity ripped away. He dared not think of his wife, or his daughters. They would not be abandoned, he told himself, shaking. His brother would surely take them in.

Even the thoughts of his enemies had to be squashed down to a small corner of his mind. He was half-certain he knew the architect of his fall, for all the good it did him. Duke René of Anjou had borrowed fortunes in the months before his arrest, against the security of Saumur castle.

The first tranche of repayment was due around the time the soldiers had come to arrest him. It was not such a great leap to see a whispered accusation as an easier path than paying debts.

Reuben's wife had advised against making the loan, saying it was well known that the Anjou family had no money, but then a lord like René of Anjou could ruin a man just as easily for a refusal. As Reuben was bound to poles facing the crowd, he tried to resist the gibbering terror that screamed inside him. It would be hard, as hard as they could make it. He could only wish for his heart to give way, the frightened, leaping thing that pounded in his chest.

The men on the platform were all locals, paid a few silver deniers for the day's work. Reuben did not know any of the faces, for which he was thankful. It was hard enough to have strangers howling and raging at him. He did not think he could stand to see the faces of men he knew. As his limbs were fastened in place with harsh tugging, the crowd pressed in to see his wounds, pointing them out in fascination.

His gaze swept across the empty, roaring faces, then stopped suddenly, the mist clearing from his good eye. A balcony hung over the square and a small group of men and women rested there, watching the proceedings and talking amongst themselves. Reuben knew lord York even before the man saw him looking and met his stare with interest. Reuben saw the man catch his wife's attention and she too looked over the railing, pressing her hand to her mouth in delighted awe as his bony chest was revealed.

Reuben looked down, his humiliation complete. The men on the platform had stripped his shirt away, revealing

a mass of colourful bruises in all shades of yellow and purple, down almost to black where his ribs had been kicked and cracked.

'Baruch dayan emet,' Reuben muttered, pronouncing the words with difficulty. The crowd did not hear him bless the only true judge that mattered. He tried to press them away from him, closing his eyes as the first clay jugs were dipped into bubbling water and the long knives were shown to the crowd. He knew he could not bear it, but neither could he die, until they let him.

Portsmouth was loud with street criers and the bustle of one of the kingdom's great ports. Despite the anonymity of the busy street, Derry Brewer had insisted on emptying the inn of all customers and staff before he spoke a word of private business. He had three burly guards outside, facing disgruntled patrons unable even to finish their beers.

Derry crossed to the bar and poured a pint of frothing porter into a pewter tankard, raising the black ale in a mock toast as he sat back down. Lord Suffolk poured from the jug of water on the table, emptying his cup and smacking his lips as he refilled it. Eyeing him, Derry pulled a satchel around from his back and rootled around in its depths. He held up a roll of parchment, sealed with wax and wrapped in a gold ribbon.

'It seems the pope is willing enough, William. I am amazed at such a spiritual man finding some purpose for the chest of silver we sent him, but perhaps it will go to the poor, no?'

Suffolk chose not to dignify the mocking question with

an answer. He took another long drink to wash the taste of sea-salt from his mouth. He'd spent the last six months travelling back and forth from France so often that the Portsmouth dockers greeted him by name as they doffed their hats. He was weary beyond belief, sick of discussions and arguments in two languages. He eyed the bound roll in Derry's hands, aware that it signalled a fast-approaching reality.

'No congratulations?' Derry said cheerfully. 'No "well-done, Derry"? I am disappointed in you, William Pole. There's not many men could have pulled this off in such a time, but I have, haven't I? The French looked for foxes and found only innocent chickens, just like we wanted. The marriage will go ahead and all we need to do now is mention casually to the English living in Maine and Anjou that their service is no longer appreciated by the crown. In short, that they can fuck off.'

Suffolk winced, both at the word and the truth of it. The English in Anjou and Maine ran businesses and huge estates. From noble lords with power and influence to the lowest apprentices, they would all be enraged when a French army came to evict them.

'There is one thing though, William. One delicate little matter that I hesitate to bring up to a fine lord of your exalted station in life.'

'What *is* it, Derry?' Suffolk replied, tried of the games. His cup of water was empty again, but the jug was dry. Derry had barely sipped his porter and showed no sign of rising for another.

'They've asked for the marriage to take place in the cathedral at Tours, that's what. Land that will have the

French army camped outside, ready to take possession of the price of the truce, that's what! I'm not letting Henry walk in there, William, not while there's life in me.'

'You're not *letting* him?' Suffolk replied, raising an eyebrow.

'You know what I mean. It would be like dangling a bit of beefsteak in front of a cat. They'll never let him out of their clutches, I'm telling you now.'

'So change the venue. Insist on Calais, perhaps. If he's not safe there, he wouldn't be safe getting married in England.'

'Those letters you have carried back and forth for months were not just make-weight, William Pole. They wouldn't accept Calais, where all their fine royals would be surrounded by an English army. I wonder why that is? Here's a thought. Could it be for the same reason we wouldn't agree to Tours? Give me credit for having some wits, William. I tried to insist, but they wouldn't budge a bloody inch. Either way, no matter where we hold it, we have another problem, don't we? Our Henry can't be allowed to speak to the French king. Just a short chat with the lamb and they'll be blowing their own bloody trumpets and looking across the channel.'

'Ah. Yes, that is a problem. In Tours or Calais. I can't see . . . is there not some neutral position, half-way between the two?'

Derry looked up scornfully at the older man.

'What a shame I never had your fine mind to help me when I was poring over the maps looking for just such a place. The answer is no, William. There is English territory and French territory. There *is* no in-between. Either we

give way or they do, or the whole thing comes to a stop and there'll be no marriage and no truce. Oh, and we haven't solved the problem of the lamb having to remain silent for the entire service either. Do you think he'll accept that, William? Or is it more likely that he'll tell them he holds their ships back with his bloody hands each night? What do you think?'

William saw Derry was smiling even as he announced the certain failure of months of work.

'You have a solution,' he said. 'Is that it?'

Derry raised his beer at last, tilting it back and swallowing for a long time until he gasped and put it down empty.

'Nice drop, that. Yes, I have an answer to your prayers, William Pole. Or an answer to his royal ones, maybe. He'll get married at Tours, all right. He just won't be there.'

'What? Is this some sort of riddle, Derry?' He saw the other man's eyes grow cold and he swallowed.

'I don't like being doubted, William Pole. I told you I had an answer and there aren't three other men in England who could have thought their way through the wisps of fog the French have wrapped around this. You know what they're like, so cocksure of their own superiority that they can hardly believe we keep thrashing them. It takes a certain kind of arrogance to ignore getting your backside tanned for you so many times, but they do manage it. Don't ask me how.' He looked at the confusion in Lord Suffolk's expression and shook his head.

'You're too kind for all this, William. It's what I like about you, mainly, but you need to be an adder-tongued bastard to get one by those sods. We'll agree to the church in Tours, but our little lamb will be ill at the last moment,

when it's too late to call it off. That's the sort of news that will set their own tongues wagging with excitement.' He attempted an atrocious French accent as he went on: "Lak 'is fadder! 'E is tekken with the sickness! Peut-etre 'ee will not live." But you'll be there to exchange rings and vows in his place, William. You'll marry little Margaret for him.'

'I *won't*,' Suffolk said firmly. 'I'm already married! How can something like that even be legal? I'm forty-seven, Derry, and married!'

'Yes, you said. I wish I had considered it before. Honestly, William, I don't think you have the brains of a fish. It's just for show, isn't it? A service in Tours, with you standing in for Henry, then a real marriage when she is safely home in England. All legal. They'll go along because it will have taken them months just to sort out the places at the wedding dinner. We'll present it so they have no choices left but one.'

'Dear lord,' William said faintly. 'Someone will have to let her know, the girl.'

'No, that is one thing we *won't* do. If she's told before the wedding day, the French king will have time to call it all off. Now look, William. We've brought this gilded peacock to the table. I am not letting him get away now. No, this is the only way. They find out on the day and the service goes ahead with you. Isn't that a reason to have a beer for once, William? They do nice chops and kidneys here as well, once I let them back in. Let's toast your second wedding day, William Pole. Doesn't your heart sing like a bleedin' lark at the thought? Mine *certainly* does.'

Chapter Five

The summer sun rose over a clear horizon at Windsor, lighting the great walls in red-gold as the town around it grew busy. Richard of York was dusty and tired after a long ride from the coast, but sheer simmering anger lent him the energy to banish weariness. The three soldiers with him were all veterans of fighting in France, hard men in well-worn leather and mail, chosen for their size and the ability to intimidate. It was not difficult to guess why the duke had summoned three of the most brutal soldiers under his command for the night crossing and hard ride. Someone, somewhere needed killing, or at least the threat of it. His men were enjoying the sense of authority that came from being in a duke's wake. They exchanged glances of amusement as their patron bullied his way past two outer rings of castle guards. York didn't suffer fools and he would not be brooked in his desire to see the king that morning.

Somewhere close by in the complex of buildings and towers that made up the sprawling castle, they could hear orders being roared and soldiers tramping towards their position. York's forward movement towards the king's private rooms was about to be met by armed men. The three with him loosened their swords in the scabbards, cracking knuckles and necks with anticipation. They had not spent years getting soft in England like the king's

guards. They were looking forward to meeting men they felt were only barely on the same side.

The duke loped forward, his strides long and sure. He saw two solid looking pikemen guarding a doorway ahead and barely checked his pace as he came right up to them.

'Stand aside. I'm York, on urgent business for the king.'

The guards stiffened, their eyes staring. One of them glanced at his companion and the man shifted his grip on the pike uncomfortably. He was due to come off watch as soon as the sun cleared the battlements and he looked irritably at the gold thread showing. Just a few minutes more and he would have been in the guardhouse, eating his breakfast and wondering what all the noise was about.

'My lord, I have no orders to admit you,' the guard said. He swallowed nervously as York turned his full glare on him.

'That is the nature of urgent business. Get out of my way, or I'll have you flogged.'

The guard swallowed and opened his mouth to reply, already shaking his head. As he began to repeat himself, York's temper snapped. He gestured sharply and one of his men stepped forward and grabbed the guard by the throat with a gauntleted hand, pushing him off his feet as he crashed back against the door. The sound was loud, echoing around the outer walls. Someone walking up there yelled an alarm.

The guard struggled wildly and his companion jerked his pike down. Another of York's men stepped inside the range of the heavy iron head and thumped a blow to the man's chin that sent the pike and its owner clattering to the ground. The first guard was dispatched as quickly with two fast punches that spread his nose across his face.

A troop of running guards appeared fifty yards away around a corner, led by a red-faced sergeant with his sword drawn. York barely glanced in their direction as he opened the door and went through.

Inside, he stopped, looking back.

'Francis, hold the door. You two, come with me,' he ordered.

The biggest of the three men grinned as he stepped inside and dropped a locking bar, holding it in place with one big fist. He was barely in position when it shuddered under a heavy blow. The duke broke into a run through the room. The king's private suite lay ahead and he knew Windsor well enough not to hesitate. At speed, he went across a tall-ceilinged empty hall and up a flight of steps, then skidded to a halt, his men barely managing to avoid running into him from behind. The three of them stood breathing hard as York glared at the sight of Derrihew Brewer leaning back against a low stone window that looked out over the vast hunting park of Windsor.

'Morning, your grace. I'm afraid the king isn't feeling well enough for visitors, if that's who you're after.'

'Stand up when you're talking to me, Brewer,' the duke snapped, coming further into the room and stopping. His gaze swept around suspiciously, looking for some explanation for the spymaster's confidence. With a sigh, Derry pushed himself away from the windowsill and yawned. On the floor below, they could all hear a rhythmic thumping as the guards outside began to batter the door down.

Derry glanced out of the window at files of soldiers running in all directions.

'Bit of a brawl out there this morning, your grace. Your work, is it?'

York eyed the door he knew led directly to the king's apartments in the castle. It was solidly shut against him, with only Derry in the waiting room. Yet something about the man's insolent smile pricked at his nerves.

'I've come to see the king,' the duke said. 'Go in and announce me, or I'll do it myself.'

'No, I don't think I'll be doing that, Richard old son. And I don't think you will either. The king calls for *you*, or you don't come. Has he called for you? No? Then you know what you can do with yourself, don't you?'

As Derry spoke, York's face grew dark with affronted rage. His men were as surprised as he was to hear a lord addressed by his common name. Both men stepped towards Derry and he squared up to them, still smiling strangely.

'Lay a hand on me, lads, please. See what you get.'

'Wait,' York ordered. He could not shake the feeling that he was being trapped, that something was wrong. It was almost the sense of having eyes on him that he could not see. The two soldiers loomed over Derry, though he was as wide as either of them at the shoulder.

'Good to see you still have a few wits knocking about,' Derry said. 'Now lads, that door downstairs won't last longer than a heartbeat. If I'm not here to stop them cutting you down, I don't think your master's title will hold them back, do you? Not next to the king's rooms it won't.'

York swore to himself, suddenly understanding that Derry was deliberately wasting time. He strode to the oak door, determined to see the king that morning, no matter what else happened.

As he moved, something flashed past him. A snapping sound like a beam breaking made him jerk to a stop, his hand still out to take the door's handle. York stared at the black iron bolt sticking out of the oak at head height.

'That's the only warning, Richard old son,' he heard Derry say. 'The next one goes through your neck.'

The duke spun round in time to see a ribbon of dark purple curtain flutter to the ground. In its fall, it revealed a long slit that ran around the ceiling on one side, almost for the full length of the room. Three men lay flat in the gap, so that he could see only their heads and shoulders as well as the terrible weapons they were aiming at him. Two of the three watched him coldly as they stared down the sights of crossbows. The third shuffled back on his elbows to reload. York gaped up at the men, seeing the sunlight gleam on the polished bolt-tips. He swallowed as Derry laughed.

'I told you, Richard. The king calls or you *don't* come.'

Below their feet, a great crash told them all the outer door had given way at last. The two soldiers with the duke exchanged a worried glance, their good mood evaporating.

'Lads, *lads*!' Derry said, taking a pace towards them. 'I'm sure his grace will explain this is all some sort of misunderstanding! No, *don't* back away from me. I have a few things I'd like to say to you before we're done.' The clatter of running soldiers grew louder and voices shouted a challenge as men poured into the room.

'I'd lie down if I was you,' Derry told the two soldiers. They dropped quickly, holding their hands out empty so as not to be run through by one of the red-faced bawling men as they came in.

York remained standing and folded his arms, watching with cold eyes. He knew none of the men-at-arms would dare to touch him. When his soldiers were trussed securely on the floor, they all seemed to look to Derry for new orders.

'That's better, Richard,' he said. 'Isn't that better? I think it is. Now I don't want to be the one responsible for waking the king up this morning, if we haven't already. How about we take this outside? Quiet as mice now, lads.'

The duke strode through the assembled guards with his face a shade of dark red. No one stopped him heading down the stairs. To Derry's eyes at least, it was almost comical the way the guards picked up their prisoners as quietly as possible and trooped back down after him.

York did not pause at the body of his biggest soldier by the shattered outer door. His man Francis had his throat slashed open and lay in a spreading pool of blood. York stepped over him without a downward glance. The bound prisoners moaned in fear as they saw their companion, so that one of the guards reached down and cuffed the closest one hard across the face.

The sun was bright after the gloom of the inner rooms. Derry strolled out behind them all and was immediately approached by the sergeant-at-arms, a man who sported a huge white moustache and practically shook with anger. Derry accepted his salute.

'No harm done, Hobbs. Your men deserve a pint on me tonight.'

'I wanted to thank you, sir, for the warning,' the sergeant replied, glaring at York as he stood watching. For all the gulf between their ranks, the security of Windsor was

the sergeant's personal responsibility and he was furious at the assault on it.

'It's no more than my job, Hobbs,' Derry replied. 'You've one body to clear away, but that's all. I think our point has been made.'

'As you say sir, though I don't like to think how far he reached. I will still make an official complaint if you don't mind, sir. This is not to be borne and the king will hear of it.' He spoke for the duke's benefit, though York listened without any visible reaction.

'Take our pair of trussed chickens to the guardhouse would you, Hobbs? I'd like a word with them before I send them back to their ship. I'll deal with his grace myself.'

'Right you are, sir. Thank you, sir.' With a final glare hot enough to melt iron, the old soldier marched his men away, leaving Derry and York alone.

'I wonder, Brewer, if you can survive having me as an enemy,' York said. He had lost his red flush, but his eyes glittered with malice.

'Oh I dare say I can, but then I've known much more dangerous men than you, you pompous prick.' There was no one to hear and Derry's mask of wry good nature dropped away as he faced the duke and stood threateningly close to him.

'You should have stayed in France and carried out your king's orders,' Derry said, poking him in the chest with a stiff finger. York clenched his fists in rage, but he knew Derry would beat him into the ground at the slightest provocation. The king's spymaster was known to frequent the fight rings in London. It was the sort of rumour he made sure all his enemies heard.

'*Are* they his orders?' York grated. 'A wedding and a truce? My men to remain in Normandy? I *command* the army, Brewer. Yet I get no word until now. Who will protect the king if I stay in Calais? Have you even thought of that?'

'The orders were genuine?' Derry asked innocently.

York sneered.

'The *seals* were correct, Brewer, as I'm sure you know. I wouldn't be surprised to hear it was your hand on them, melting the wax. I'm not the only one who thinks you have too much control over king Henry. You have no real rank, no title, yet you issue commands in his name. Who can say if they have truly come from the king? And if you poke your finger at me again, I will see you hanged.'

'I could have a title,' Derry replied. 'He's offered me one before. I think though that I'm perfectly happy as I am, for the moment. Perhaps I'll retire as Duke of York, who knows?'

'You couldn't fill my shoes, Brewer. You couldn't even fill my codpiece, you low-born . . .' the duke was interrupted as Derry barked a laugh at him.

'Your cod-piece! That's a fine jest. Now why don't you go back to your ship? You're due at the king's wedding next month. I don't want you to miss it.'

'Will you be there?' York asked, his gaze sharpening. Derry didn't miss the implication. It was one thing to scorn the man's authority in Windsor, while surrounded by the king's guards. It was quite another to consider how the duke of York might act in France.

'I wouldn't be absent for such a fine occasion,' Derry replied. He watched as York smiled at the thought.

'I'll have my personal guard with me, Brewer. Those

pretty orders don't prevent that. With so many bandits on the roads, I won't feel comfortable with less than a thousand men, maybe more. I'll speak to the king then. I wonder if he knows half the games you play.'

'Alas, I am but the agent of the royal will,' Derry replied with a smirk that hid his dismay at the threat. 'I believe the king desires a few years of peace and a wife, but who can know his mind, truly?'

'You don't fool me, Brewer. Nor that bootlicker, Suffolk. Whatever you've offered the French, whatever you've concocted between you, you're both wrong! That's the worst of it. If we offer a truce, do you think the French will leave us in peace? It makes us look weak. If this goes ahead, we'll be at war before the summer is over, you poor dullard.'

'I am tempted to risk the king's anger just to see you knocked out on this grass, your grace,' Derry said, standing very close to the other man. 'Give me a moment to consider the pros and cons, would you? I would enjoy breaking that sharp beak of yours, but then you are a duke and you have a certain level of protection, even after the prick you made of yourself this morning. Of course, I could always say you took a tumble when the guards chased you away.'

'Say what you like, Brewer. Your threats and prods don't frighten me. I'll see you again, in France.'

'Oh, are you off then? Very well. I'll send your men on in a while. I'll look forward to continuing our chat at the wedding.'

York marched away back to the main entrance of the castle. Derry watched him go, a thoughtful expression on his face. It had been a little closer than he'd hoped. He'd

heard the duke was coming two nights before, but the guards at the outer gate should have been warned. York should never have reached the inner keep, never mind the door to the king's own rooms. As it happened, Henry was still praying in the chapel, but the duke didn't have that vital piece of information.

For a moment, Derry considered the conversation. He had no regrets. A man like York would have tried to get him killed just for the scene at the king's rooms. It didn't matter that Derry had made it worse with insults and threats. It couldn't *be* worse. He sighed to himself. Yet he couldn't let the outraged duke see the king either. York would have had Henry agreeing to everything and the whole subtle arrangement and months of negotiations would have been wasted. Derry had known when he woke up that it would be a bad day. So far, it had met his expectations in every aspect. He wondered what odds he could get on surviving the wedding in Tours. With a rueful grin, he realised he should make preparations for not coming back.

He remembered old Bertle doing just the same one more than one occasion. The spymaster before him had survived three attempts at poison and one man waiting for him in his rooms with a dagger. That was just part of the job, Derry recalled him saying. A useful man made enemies, that was all there was to it. If you were useful to kings, your enemies would be quality. Derry smiled at one memory of the old man speaking the word with relish.

'Look at his clothes, lads. Look at this knife! *Quality,* lads,' he'd said, grinning at them as he stood over the body of the man found in his rooms. 'What a compliment to me that they sent such a fine gentleman!'

Old Bertle may have been an evil old sod, but Derry had liked him from the start. They'd shared a delight in making other men dance, men who never even knew the choices they made were not their own. Bertle had seen it as a fine art. For a young man like Derry, fresh from war in France, his teachings had been like water to a dry soul.

Derry took a deep breath, feeling calm return to him. When Bertle had summoned his six best men and gave his authority to one of them, you knew things were serious, that he might not be coming back from wherever the work took him. Each time it was a different man, so that they were never sure which one of them was truly his chosen successor. Yet the old man had died in his bed, slipping peacefully into sleep. Derry had pad three physicians check the corpse for poisons, after, just to be sure he didn't have to track someone down.

At peace once more, Derry cracked his knuckles as he strolled towards the guard-house. It wouldn't make things worse for him to give the two soldiers a proper beating. He was certainly in the right mood for it.

It promised to be a glorious summer's day as the sun rose, with the air already warm and the skies clear. In Saumur castle, Margaret was up before the light. She was not sure if she had slept at all, after so long lying in the heat and darkness, her mind filled with visions of her husband and not a little fear. Her fourteenth birthday had passed a few months before, almost unremarked. Yet Margaret had noticed, not least because she had begun to bleed the following morning. The shock of that was still with her as she bathed and checked herself in the light of a night-lamp. Her maid had

told her it would come each month, a few miserable days of bundling rags into her undergarments. It seemed a symbol of change to her, of things going so fast that she could barely comprehend a new discovery without a dozen others clamouring for her attention. Were her breasts fuller? She thought they were and used a looking glass to pinch and squeeze them into something like a cleavage.

The castle had hardly gone to sleep, of course. Wherever her father had found his new funds, he had spent gold like a river over the previous months, employing a vast staff and even bringing dressmakers from Paris to do their best with his daughter's skinny frame. Seamstresses had been working every night in the castle rooms, sewing and cutting cloth for her sister and three cousins come from the south, who would accompany her at the ceremony. Margaret found the girls slightly irritating as they preened and giggled around her over the previous days, but somehow she had gone from knowing the wedding was far off to the actual morning, without any sense of how the time had vanished. She could still hardly believe today was the day she would marry a king of England. What would he be like? The thought was so terrifying she could barely give voice to it. Everyone said his father had been a brute, a savage who spoke French like a dithering geck. Would the son be the same? She tried to imagine an Englishman holding her in his powerful arms and her imagination failed. It was just too strange.

'Good morning, my . . . husband,' she said slowly. Her English was good, so her old governess had said, but then the woman had been paid to teach her. Margaret blushed furiously at the thought of sounding like a fool in front of king Henry.

Standing in front of the glass, she frowned at her tangle of brown hair.

'I do take thee to be my husband,' she murmured. These were the last moments she would have alone, she knew. As soon as the maids heard her moving, they would descend in a flock to primp and colour and dress her. She barely breathed at the thought of it, listening with half an ear for the first footsteps outside.

When the knock came, Margaret jumped, gathering a sheet around her. She crossed quickly to the door.

'Yes?' she called. The sun was not yet up. Surely it could not be time already?

'It's Yolande,' she heard. 'I can't sleep.' Margaret cracked open the door and let her in, pushing it gently shut behind her.

'I think I slept,' Margaret whispered. 'I remember a strange dream, so I must have dozed for a while.'

'Are you excited?' Yolande was staring at her with fascination and Margaret drew the sheet around her shoulders with some attempt at modesty.

'I am terrified. What if he does not like me? What if I say the wrong words and everyone laughs? The king will be there, Yolande.'

'Two kings!' Yolande replied, 'and half the noblemen of France and England. It will be marvellous, Margaret. My Frederick will be there!' She sighed deliberately, swirling her nightshift hem over the stone floor. 'He will look very handsome, I know. I would have married him this year if not for this, but oh! Margaret, I did not mean anything by that. I am content to wait. At least father has restored some of the wealth we lost. It would have been a pauper's

wedding last year. I just hope he has left enough to marry me to Frederick. I will be a countess, Margaret, but you will be a queen. Only of England, of course, but still a queen. Today!' Yolande gasped as it sank in. 'You will be a queen today, Margaret! Can you conceive?'

'I believe I can bear one or two,' Margaret replied, wryly. Yolande looked blank at her pun and Margaret laughed. Her expression changed on the instant to one of panic as she heard trotting footsteps coming along the corridor outside.

'They're coming, Yolande. Bloody hell, I'm not ready for them!'

'Blerdy 'ell?'

'It's an English saying. John told it to me. Bloody *h*ell. It's like "sacré bleu!" he said, a curse.'

Yolande beamed at her sister.

"Bloody hell, I like it!'

The door opened and the room seemed to fill with servants, bearing steaming buckets of water and armfuls of strange looking implements to work on her hair and face. Margaret blushed again, resigned to hours of discomfort before she would be allowed into the public gaze.

'Bloody hell!' Yolande murmured again at her shoulder, awed as the room filled with bustling women.