Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

A Burnable Book

Written by Bruce Holsinger

Published by HarperCollins

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

A BURNABLE BOOK



BRUCE HOLSINGER

HarperCollins*Publishers*

HarperCollins*Publishers*
77–85 Fulham Palace Road,
Hammersmith, London W6 8JB

www.harpercollins.co.uk

Published by HarperCollins*Publishers* 2014
1

Copyright © Bruce Holsinger 2014

Bruce Holsinger asserts the moral right to
be identified as the author of this work

Map of London and Southwark © Nicolette Caven 2013

A catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978 0 00 749330 2

This novel is entirely a work of fiction.
The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are
the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to
actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is
entirely coincidental.

Set in Sabon by Palimpsest Book Production Limited, Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be
reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted,
in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical,
photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior
permission of the publishers.



FSC™ is a non-profit international organisation established to promote
the responsible management of the world's forests. Products carrying the
FSC label are independently certified to assure consumers that they come
from forests that are managed to meet the social, economic and
ecological needs of present and future generations,
and other controlled sources.

Find out more about HarperCollins and the environment at
www.harpercollins.co.uk/green



Prologue

Moorfields, north of the walls

Under a clouded moon Agnes huddles in a sliver of utter darkness and watches him, this dark-cloaked man, as he questions the girl by the dying fire. At first he is kind seeming, almost gentle with her. They speak something like French: not the flavour of Stratford-at-Bowe nor of Paris, but a deep and throated tongue, tinged with the south. Olives and figs in his voice, the embrace of a warmer sea.

He repeats his last question.

The girl is silent.

He hits her.

She falls to the ground. He squats, fingers coiled through her lush hair.

'*Doovay leebro?*' he gently chants. '*Ileebro, mee ragazza. Ileebro.*' It could be a love song.

The girl shakes her head. This time he brings a fist, loosing a spray of blood and spittle from her lips. A sizzle on a smouldering log. Now he pulls her up, dangling her head before him, her body a broken doll in his hands. Another blow, and the girl's nose cracks.

'*Ileebro.*' Screaming at her now, shaking her small frame.

'*Nonloso!*' she cries. '*Nonloso, seenoray*.' She spits in his face.

He releases her and stands. Hands on his knees, he lets fly a string of words. Agnes can make nothing of them, but the girl shakes her head violently, her hands clasped in prayer.

'*No no no, seenoray, no no no*.' She screams, sobs, now whimpers as her softening cries fade into the silence of the moor.

When she is still he speaks again. '*Doovay leebro*?'

This time the girl hesitates. Moonlight catches the whites of her eyes, her gaze darting toward the dense foliage.

In the thick brush Agnes stiffens, ready to spring. The moment lengthens. Finally, in the clearing, the girl lowers her head. '*Nonloso*.' Her voice rings confident this time, unafraid.

The man raises a hand. In it he clutches a stick of some kind. No, a hammer. 'This is your last chance, my dear.'

Agnes's limbs go cold. *Perfect gentleman's English*. More than that, she knows this man's voice, has heard it close to her ear, though she can't summon the face. One of a thousand.

Now the girl throws back her head, lips parted to the dark sky, the dread ascending in a last flux of words: '*Though faun escape the falcon's claws and crochet cut its snare, when father, son, and ghost we sing, of city's blade beware!*'

English again, brushed with an accent, confusing the night with these strange portents hurled at the stars. She's taunting him, Agnes thinks. He hesitates, the hammer still in the air.

Finally it descends. There is a glint of iron, and a sound Agnes will never forget.

✣

For hours Agnes waits, as the moon leaves the sky, as the din of night creatures falls slowly into a bottomless silence. Now dawn, birdsong mingling with the distant shouts of

workingmen within the city walls. The priory rings Lauds, and light rises across the moor.

Time to move. She arms aside a span of branches, scoring her wrists on dense clusters of twigs and nubs. A tentative foot out among the primrose, a pale blanket of scent.

Her gaze glides over the clearing: the lean-to, the remnants of the fire, the body. Her killer has stripped the girl to the flesh. Not with unthinkable intent, but with a deliberation that makes clear his aim. He was searching her, picking at her, like a wolf at a fresh kill. No rings on the delicate fingers, no brooch at the slender neck, though a silver bracelet circles her wrist. With her right hand Agnes clumsily unclasps it, admiring the small pearl pendant, the delicate chain. She pockets it. The only other item of value is a damask dress, tossed over a rotten log. Too big and bulky to carry into the city, and too fine for Agnes to wear.

Her left arm, still pinned at her side, aches. The small bundle has been clutched too tightly to her breast, almost moulded to her body. A thousand thorns wake her limb as she examines what the doomed girl thrust wordlessly at her hours ago. A bright piece of cloth, tied in leather cord, wrapped around a rectangular object of some kind. She collapses on a high stone and rests the bundle on her knees. With one tug the cord comes free.

A book. She opens it, looking for pictures. None. She tosses the thin manuscript to the ground.

What she notices next is the cloth. A square of silk, the embroidery dense and loud, the whole of it still stiff with the volume's shape. She spreads the cloth to its full span. Here is a language she reads: of splits and underside couching, of pulled thread and chain stitch, an occulted story told in thread of azure, gold, and green. At the centre of the cloth appear symbols that speak of ranks far above hers. Here a boy, there a castle, there a king; here lions rampant, there lilies of France; here a sword, there a shield.

Agnes knows something of livery, suspects the import of what she holds. A woman has just died for it, a man has just killed. For what? She remembers the girl's last, haunting words.

Though faun escape the falcon's claws and crochet
cut its snare,
When father, son, and ghost we sing, of city's blade
beware!

The rhythm of a minstrel's verse, one she has never heard. Yet the rhyme will not leave her mind, and she mouths it as she thinks her way back through the walls. Which road is less likely to be watched, which gate's keepers less likely to bother with a tired whore, some random maudlyn dragging it into London at this hour?

Cripplegate. Agnes takes a final kneel next to the dead girl and whispers a prayer. She retrieves the book and wraps it once more in the cloth, hiding them both in her skirts.

Soon she has left the Moorfields and traced a route below the causeway, circling north of a city suddenly foreign to her, though she has spent nearly all her life between its many gates. She enters London dimly aware that she holds things of great value on her person and in her mind, though unsure what to do with any of them, nor what they mean, nor whom to trust.

A cloth, a book, a snatch of verse.

Which is worth dying for?

PART ONE

The Prince of Plums

Day xv before the Kalends of April
to the Ides of April, 8 Richard II
(18 March–13 April 1385)





ONE

Newgate, Ward of Farringdon

If you build your own life around the secret lives of others, if you erect your house on the corrupt foundations of theirs, you soon come to regard all useful knowledge as your due. Information becomes your entitlement. You pay handsomely for it; you use it selectively and well. If you are not exactly trusted in certain circles, you are respected, and your name carries a certain weight. You are rarely surprised, and never deceived.

Yet there may come a time when your knowledge will betray you. A time when you will find even the brightest certainties – of friendship, of family, even of faith – dimming into shadows of bewilderment. When the light fails and belief fades into nothingness, and the season of your darkest ignorance begins.

Mine fell in the eighth year of Richard's reign, over that span of weeks separating the sobriety of Lent from the revelry of St Dunstan's Day. London often treats the passing of winter into spring with cold indifference. That year was no different. February had been an unforgiving month, March worse, and as the city scraped along toward April the air seemed to grow

only more bitter, the sky more grey, the rain more penetrating as it lifted every hint of warmth from surfaces of timber and stone.

So too with the jail at Newgate: a stink in the air, a coating on the tongue. I had come over the bridge that leaden morning to speak with Mark Blythe, jailed on the death of his apprentice. I had come, too, as a small favour to the prior of St Mary Overey, the Southwark parish that Blythe once served as head mason. For years I had let a house along the priory's south wall, and knew Blythe's family well.

We had been chewing for a while on the subject of the coming trial, and whether I might help him avoid it. No fire in the musty side-chamber. I was losing my patience, and more of my vision than usual. 'You have no choice, unless you want to hang, or worse,' I told him. 'And there is worse, Mark. I've seen it. I've smelled it.'

'It was an accident, Master Gower.'

'So you've said, Mark. How could you have known the axle would break?' Despite the prison chill a bead of moisture, thick as wheel oil, cleared a path down his cheek. Blythe had lost three fingers, two from his left hand as well as his right thumb, his body marked with the perils of his craft, and Newgate's heavy irons had scored his forearms. I softened my voice. 'But the axle did break. The stones, half a ton of them, did spill out and crush that boy's legs. Your apprentice did die, Mark. And the soundness of that cart was your responsibility.'

'Not's how I saw it, and as for the axle . . .' His voice trailed off.

I heard a sigh, realized it was my own. 'The problem, Mark, is that the law sees different kinds of accidents. You can't claim accidental injury when your own negligence – when your carelessness has been taken as the cause of death.'

Blythe's hands dropped to the table.

'Please don't make me tell your wife you've just put your life in the hands of a petty jury.'

His eyes widened. ‘But you’d stand for me, wouldn’t you then, Master Gower?’

‘I’m not an advocate, Mark. What I have are connections. And money. I can put those at your service. But not before a jury.’ Poor timing, I didn’t say. Before the crackdown last year I could have bribed any jury in the realm.

His shoulders slumped. ‘No trial, then. How quick to get me out?’

I hesitated. ‘You’ll be here until next delivery. June, I would think.’

‘More time, sir? In *here*?’ He shook his head. ‘They’ll send me down, sir, down to the Bocardo. They press them down there, it’s said. Sticks them with nails like Jesu himself, do abominations each to the other. Don’t want the Bocardo, Master Gower, not by the blood.’

My hands settled on Blythe’s mangled fingers, stilling them against the wood. Mutilated, cracked, darkened with years of stonework, these fingers had shaped their share of useful beauty over the years: a lintel, a buttress, the pearled spans of a bishop’s palace, the mortaring so precise you would never know from beyond a few feet that what you saw was not a single stone. ‘Mark, I will do what I can to—’

‘Have an end!’

I flinched at the yawn of old hinges and half-turned to the door. Tom Tugg, keeper of Newgate, a cock in the yard. He swung a ring of keys, each a gnarled foot of iron. ‘Fees to be tallied and collected presently,’ he crooned, and two turnkeys did their work. Blythe moaned, the irons biting his swollen wrists.

It took a moment, but finally Tugg saw my face. Even in the scant light of three candles I caught his gape.

‘Whatsit – who let this *fiend* speak to my prisoner?’ He spun on his men. ‘Who put them in here?’

Your deputy. A small threat for a small thing. The turnkeys just shrugged.

'Take him back,' Tugg ordered, a spit of disgust. He looked at me, and got my heartiest smile. He licked his lips. 'Come along, then.'

I gave Blythe's broad back a pat before he was pulled in the opposite direction. Tugg led me along the passage to the outer gatehouse. A fight had broken out in the women's chamber, a crowd cheering the crunch of bone on the stone floor. At the gatehouse door Tugg turned on me. 'Well?' His chin was pocked, unshaved.

'I would like Blythe transferred to Ludgate until delivery.'

Tugg wrinkled his heavy brow. 'Ludgate, you say?' The new prison, recently completed at the western gate and now under the custody of the city chamber, housed those accused only of civil offences. So pleasant were its conditions that stories were circulating of inmates striking deals to remain jailed. 'You've got to understand my *situation* here, Gower,' he said with a slight twinge of his jaw. 'Newgate's abrim with spies.'

'So I've heard,' I said, prepared for this. 'Secret alliances with the Scots, French agents lurking behind every door.'

'Twenty of them at last count, held without surety.'

'All the more reason to move Mark Blythe, then, for he's no spy,' I said. 'Relieve the overcrowding, put a petty criminal out of your mind.' Almost there. 'You can say it was your idea, sound leader that you are.'

He blew out a breath. 'A pound, Gower. It'll take a pound to move him, what with that touchy keeper they got, dealings with the Guildhall—'

'Wonderful,' I said. 'We'll deduct it from your balance.' Tugg was still down to me many pounds; another handful of shillings would make little difference.

'See here, Gower—'

'Nothing to see, Tugg. I have your debt, I have your note. And I have the most horrendous bit of—'

'Ludgate, then,' he said, with another thick sigh. 'He'll be there till delivery.'

I gave him a hard look. '*Live* delivery.' He nodded.

Outside Newgate I retrieved my pattens, then trudged through the walls and up the muddy way to Holbourne, breathing shallowly on the bridge as I neared the outer reaches of the ward. Before the churchyard at St Andrew a wild-haired man preached to the drizzle, his only parishioners a crescent of nosing goats. I caught a snatch of verse as I ducked into the narrow alley just east of Thavie's Inn.

> 'Full long shall he lead us, full rich shall he rule,
> Through pain of pestilence, through wounds of
> long war.
> Yet *morire* is matter all sovereigns must suffer.'

All kings must die. True enough, and the lines were well wrought, though the preacher soon lapsed into the usual fare. Corruption, gluttony, lust, the coming holocaust of the unfaithful. I wondered how long the poor man would last before joining Blythe in his cell.

At street level Monksblood's stood open to the weather, a brick wedged beneath the alley door. I leaned in and gave a nod to the keeper. He tossed me a jar. At the foot of the stairs sat his daughter, a slight thing of about eight. With her foot resting on the next cask, she angled my jar beneath the tap and carefully turned the bronze spigot. I dropped a few pennies in her little palm. A wan smile, tired eyes bright for a moment beneath her shining brow, then she looked past me and up the stairs, waiting for her father's next fish.

With the sour ale on my tongue I surveyed the undercroft tavern, lit weakly by a row of lanterns dangling from heavy beams. The tables were nearly empty, just two groups of men clustered along the hearth. Masons, fresh from work on the bridge. I got a few sullen looks. Steam rising from damp clothes, the muffled clatter of boots overhead.

In the far corner my friend sat alone, frowning into his jar

as his finger traced a slow arc around its mouth. He seemed coiled on the bench, his brow knit, his eyes narrowed in concentration, the whole of him tensed against some unspoken thought.

'Geoffrey,' I said, and moved forward.

Half-turning with a start, he rose, his face blossoming into a smile. '*Mon ami*.' He spread his hands.

As my arms wrapped his frame I felt the familiar surge of anticipation: for court gossip, for poetic banter, for news of mutual acquaintances. Yet beneath the thin coat I also felt ribs, hard against tightened skin. Chaucer had lost a couple of stone that winter; there was less to him since his latest return from abroad, and his unfashionable surcoat, of undyed wool cut simply with straight sleeves, lent an almost rural aspect to his bearing. Normally he would dress like a bit of a fop. I wondered what explained the change.

For a while we just drank, saying nothing, two hounds sniffing around after a long separation. Eventually he leaned over the board. 'How has it been, John? You know . . .'

I looked away. 'Let's not bleed that wound, Geoffrey.'

He let that hang, then touched my elbow. 'I hope it has started to heal, at least.'

'I had her things removed and sold at Candlemas – most of them.' Candlemas: purification, purging, the scouring of the soul and the larder. I thought, as I hadn't in weeks, of Sarah's prayerbook, its margins and flyleaves full of her jottings. It was one of the few of her possessions I had kept.

Chaucer moved his hand away. I asked about Philippa. He picked a splinter from the table. 'Keeps to court, hovering around her sister and the Infanta. It doesn't help that I'm travelling all the time. Calais, the cinque ports.'

'And this recent trip, to Tuscany and Milan? The custom was able to spare you?' Back in November Chaucer had arranged for a deputy to step in for him at the customhouse. His trip south had been planned hastily, and for reasons he had kept to himself.

'Some negotiations for the chancellor: a bribe here, a false promise there.' He pushed a lump of talgar across the table. The Welsh cheese was an epiphany on my tongue: tart, rich, deliciously illegal. 'Though this trip was a bit less official than the last. *Inglese italianizzato, diavolo incarnato*.' He feigned a sinister smile.

An Englishman italianized is the devil incarnate. 'A judgment you inspired, I suppose?'

'You've been practising!'

I hadn't, though the odd lesson from Chaucer in recent years had taught me a few useless phrases. '*Donde il formaggio?*' I said awkwardly, pretending to look around for the cheese.

He smiled. 'It's *dov'è il formaggio*, John, not *donde*. Where *is* the cheese, not where is the cheese *from*.' He pushed the talgar my way.

'*Dov'è*. Right.' I knifed another wedge.

He went on about his trip. 'And the books! In the Visconti libraries you can't reach out a hand without—Speaking of books, I've brought you a little something.' From his bag he removed a volume and set it between us. '*Il Filostrato*. A work that has reminded me of you since I first read it years ago, though I can't quite say why. It's a tragedy of the Trojan War, and a story of love. Not to your usual tastes, though I have a feeling you'll enjoy it. And it will give me an excuse to teach you more Italian.'

I thanked him and stroked the embossed spine and cover. Calf, dyed a deep purple, cool and smooth. 'The writer?'

'Giovanni Boccaccio,' he said. 'I tried to meet him once, but he wouldn't see me. A recluse, practically a hermit.'

'Boccaccio.' A name, like the talgar, worth savouring. I mouthed the rubrics as I leafed, admiring the ghostly thinness of the abortive vellum. No full-page illuminations, but the larger initials were ornate, with gold flourishes, a full palette of inks, descenders reaching out to curl around the peculiar

beasts in the margins. There was a poem on the second leaf, a single stanza in a hand I knew well.

Go, little book, to our unfathomed friend,
Above his silvered head to build a shrine,
Retreat of Wisdom, Ignorance to mend.
Full oft there shall you comfort and entwine
His long limbs in bookish fetters benign.
Thou shalt preserve those aquamarine gems,
Or Gower's friend shall cast you in the Thames.

As always Chaucer's verse captured its subject with the precision of a mirror. My thinning hair, shot through with spreading grey. My long frame, which had two lean inches on Chaucer's, and he was not a short man by any measure. Finally the eyes. 'Gower green,' a limner I once knew named their shade, claiming no success in duplicating it. Sarah had always likened them to her native Malvern Hills at noon, though she had died without fathoming the truth about these eyes, and their diminishing powers. Only Chaucer possessed that knowledge, expressed in a touching bit of protectiveness in the couplet.

I looked up to see him staring vacantly at the far wall. I closed the book.

'Why did you want to meet here of all places?'

'I'm less known in Holbourne,' he whispered, in French, teasing, 'where there's smaller chance of recognition than within the walls.'

'Ah, I see,' I replied, also in French. 'I am the object of a secret mission, then. Like your visits to Hawkwood and the Florentine *commune*.'

His smile dimmed. 'Hawkwood. Yes. You know, I spent some time with Simon while I was in Florence.'

'God's *blood,* Geoffrey!'

He looked uncomfortable. 'You didn't write to him after Sarah died.'

'No.'

'He's your son, John. Your sole heir.'

The child who survived, when three others did not. I drained my jar, signalled the girl for another.

'Have you heard from him?' he asked, reading my thoughts.

A fresh dipper, and I drank deeply. 'Tell me about your sons instead,' I said, in a feeble change of subject. 'How is Thomas faring at the almonry?'

'Well enough, I suppose,' he said.

'And little Lewis?'

'With his mother, the little devil.' He gave a half shrug. 'Some call *him* the devil, our Hawkwood. But I suppose our king knows what he's doing when it comes to alliances.'

'What few of them he has left,' I said.

He looked at me, smiling. 'No King Edward, is he?'

I held up my jar. 'Full long shall he lead us, full rich shall he rule.'

His smile faded. 'Wherever did you pick that up, John?'

'A preacher, versing it up out on Holbourne just now.'

'Our sermonizers are quite poetical these days, aren't they?' he scoffed. There was a certain strain in his voice, though I thought nothing of it at the time.

'Fools, if you ask me, to versify on that sort of matter,' I said.

'Better to stick to Gawain and Lancelot, I suppose.'

'Or fairies.'

'Or friars.'

We laughed quietly. There was a long silence, then Chaucer sighed, tapped his fingers. 'John, I need a small favour.'

Of course you do. 'Go on.'

'I'm looking for a book.'

'A book.'

'I've heard it was in the hands of one of Lancaster's hermits.'

I watched his eyes. 'Why can't you get it for yourself?'

'Because I don't know who has it, or where it is at the moment.'

'And who does know?'

He raised his chin, his jaw tight. I knew that look. 'Katherine Swynford, perhaps. If a flea dies in Lancaster's household she'll have heard about it. Ask her.'

'She's your sister-in-law, Geoffrey.' I felt a twinge of misgiving. However innocent on its face, no request from Chaucer was ever straightforward. 'Why not ask her yourself?'

'She and Philippa are inseparable. Katherine won't see me.'

'So you're asking me to approach her?'

He took a small sip.

'Why me?' I said.

'How to put it?' He pretended to search for words, his hands flitting about on the table. 'This job needs a *subterranean* man, John. A man who knows this city like the lines in his knuckles, its secrets and surprises. All those shadowed corners and blind alleyways where you do your nasty work.'

I gazed fondly at him, thinking of Simon, and so much else. It was one of the peculiarities of our intimacy that Chaucer seemed to appreciate talents no one else would value in a friend. Here comes John Gower, it was murmured at Westminster and the Guildhall; hide your ledgers. Hide your thoughts. For knowledge is currency. It can be traded and it can be banked, and more secretly than money. The French have a word for informers: *chanteurs*, 'singers', and information is a song of sorts. A melody poured in the ears of its eager recipients, every note a hidden vice, a high crime, a deadly sin. Or some kind of illicit antiphon, its verses whispered among opposed choirs of the living and the dead.

We live in a hypocritical age. An age that sees bishops preaching abstinence while running whores. Pardoners peddling indulgences while seducing wives. Earls pledging fealty while

plotting treason. Hypocrites, all of them, and my trade is the bane of hypocrisy, its worth far outweighing its perversion. I practise the purest form of truthtelling.

Quite profitably, too. The second son of a moderately wealthy knight has some choices: the law, the royal bureaucracy, Oxford or Cambridge, the life of a monk or a priest. Yet I would rather have trapped grayling in the Severn for a living than taken holy orders, and it was clear that my poetry would never see the lavishments from patrons that Chaucer's increasingly enjoyed. Yet I shall never forget the thrill I felt when that first coin of another man's vice fell into my lap, and I realized what I had – and how to use it. Since then I have become a trader in information, a seller of suspicion, a purveyor of foibles and the hidden things of private life. I work alone and always have, without the trappings of craft or creed.

John Gower. A guild of one.

'You can't be direct with her about it,' Chaucer was saying. 'This is a woman who takes the biggest cock in the realm between her legs. She's given Lancaster three bastards at last count – or is it four?' He waited, gauging my reaction.

'What is this book, Geoffrey? What does it look like? What's in it?'

His gaze was unfocused and vague. 'To be honest with you, John, I don't know. What I do know is that this book could hurt me.' He blinked and looked at some spot on the wattle behind me. Then, in a last whisper of French, 'It could cost me my life.'

Our eyes locked, and I wondered in that instant, as I would so often in the weeks to come, what price such a book might extract from my oldest friend. He broke the tension with one of his elvish smiles. 'If you can do this for me, John, get me this book, I'll be greatly in your debt.'

As you are so deeply in mine, he did not say; nor did he need to, and in his position neither would I have. I left

Monksblood's that morning bound to perform this 'small favour', as Chaucer had called it, for the one man in all the world I could never refuse. The man who knew my own darkest song.