

# Sanctuary

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Why? Mal thought, as he planted his rough staff into the muddy path and pulled himself forward. The remaining flecks of bark rubbed against his hand and flaked off to reveal smooth grey wood beneath, scraping Mal's hand as he dragged himself along.

Why? he thought and took another step. How could they... No, he thought, there's no sense in dwelling on it, there's no – The vision came back, arrows raining down, the sheriff cursing them to action. Mal drawing his sword as men crashed through the bush and the man... the man with one eye was upon him and stabbed him.

His side ached as the memory overwhelmed him. The sword slid in, and he fell forward. All he could see was that face, a ragged scar down the right side obliterating the eye socket. The man pushed him off, and the sword dragged back he – No, Mal thought, don't dwell on that, keep walking. You're nearly there, nearly at the harbour, escape was possible now. Just take a step, one more step.

Mal's foot hit something hard. He tripped and fell into the road and flung his hands out to break his fall. They sank into the cold mud that oozed between his fingers.

'Ow,' Mal muttered. He had no energy for more, no energy for the usual string of curses he might have spat out. Instead,

he pushed himself back onto his haunches and examined the thing that had stopped him. It was a milestone, tipped onto its side where the ground was so boggy from the rain that it had ceased to hold the stone upright.

Mal traced a muddy finger over the letters. He couldn't read them, but he didn't need to. He knew this land as well as if the whole county was his home. He'd travelled across it day and night, kept perpetually on the move by the sheriff.

Mal rubbed his hands down his front, wiping the worst of the dirt from his fingers. His rough brown homespun top was wet, soaked through by the mist. It didn't look like the kind of weather that could get you wet, but if you stayed outside long enough, each minute water droplet collected like a fine fuzz on the strands of your clothes and worked their way through all your layers till even your skin was wet, wet and cold.

Mal reached for the staff and pulled himself back to his feet. Then he looked up. He'd spent so much time with his eyes fixed on the road, or worse reliving the last few... He shook his head, don't dwell, no more dwelling.

He stood at the top of a rise that gave him an excellent view of the path ahead. At least it would have, but for the drifts of fog that turned the world an almost uniform grey. It cut visibility so that all he could see was the rows of fields, like so many gigantic, cabbage-encrusted caterpillars, leading the eye down to the murky outlines of a town and beyond that an iron grey sea that merged with a foggy grey sky. The town was Kirkthorpe. It had grown large from the trade brought in by the natural harbour. Like elsewhere, the plague years had afflicted it and the outer houses were now skeletal ruins that the remaining townsfolk had pillaged to repair their own homes. It gave the outskirts of the town a ragged edge.

A bell sounded across the valley, dulled by the damp air,

and Mal paused to listen. It came from the convent, the reason he was here. His gaze drifted to the south edge of the town and took in the fortress-like grey stone walls that surrounded the convent and kept the harbour firmly within their domain.

They need those walls, Mal thought, and his mind drifted back to the time, five years ago, when Baron Castlemere had ordered the sheriff in to defend the convent from the rage of the townsfolk. He seldom cared to know the reason for the violent work they were given, but he'd gathered that this one was to do with the greed of the convent. If the townsfolk were to be believed, the nuns had decided that they controlled all trade coming through the town and charged taxes on everything that was bought or sold within its borders. The townsfolk had had enough and were no longer willing to pay the tax.

The battle was a fierce one. It usually took neighbours to bring a level of hatred to a fight that you didn't see when armies from opposing sides clashed across a field of war. He wondered whether the townsfolk had forgiven the convent yet. They'd lost a lot of men in their attempt to burn the place down. All they'd actually managed was to scorch the great front gates with their bonfire when the sheriff and his men, Mal amongst them, swept in and set to hacking the townsfolk to pieces.

Once the job was done the sheriff led them away, as he always did. He never let them stay in the towns they pacified, or even the homesteads they overran. No, he kept that privilege for himself. He'd vanished into the depths of the convent for a week. No doubt stuffing his face with the fine foods a wealthy convent could provide and, some of the men muttered, making free with the nuns.

That thought shocked Mal, although he didn't know why it

would. He knew what manner of a man the sheriff was. He took whatever he wanted whenever he wanted it. He'd certainly looked smug when he returned to them and, as usual, led them away without a word of what he'd been up to. That was the last Mal had seen of Kirkthorpe.

He set his staff into the ground and used it to drag himself back into motion. It was time to see if they'd let him in. He prayed to the saints that they would, for the convent was a house of God, and surely they'd offer him food and a bed. More importantly, this convent was the gatekeeper of the harbour. And the harbour, with its ships, was his route away from here and to safety.



It smells of town, Mal thought as he took a deep sniff of mingled wood smoke and animal dung. He paused before the massive gates of the convent to assess the place. There were no townspeople by this entrance, although he'd passed a few who'd eyed him with suspicion. That didn't surprise Mal. He was dressed like a beggar. All the clothes he owned, that all the men of the sheriff's band wore, were taken by force from one unfortunate soul or another or pulled off the bodies of the fallen. He tried not to think of that.

He tried not to take from people who could ill afford it either, unlike some. As a result, his clothes were threadbare. He'd taken to layering one worn-out, holey garment over another and then binding the lot together with strips of cloth. Even his shoes consisted more of strips of cloth than leather. It might be unkempt, but it had the virtue of being warm. His only halfway decent piece of clothing was his hood. It was made of leather and long enough that it also provided cover for his shoulders and kept them and his head dry. It had been

quite a battle to get to it before any of the other lads.

‘Oy, oy, look out,’ a voice cried and Mal stepped aside as a heavily laden mule trudged past him, followed by several others. The train driver tipped his head at Mal, then turned back to his animals and flicked the rump of the mule he was walking alongside with a switch of willow.

Mal fell into step behind the last mule, happy to go at the slow pace the animal set, and passed through the convent gates. They were still blackened by the fire, he noted, but as sturdy as ever. This was where he needed to pay attention. This was his first test.

‘Sister Mary Constance,’ the trader said and pulled his cap off as he bobbed his head at a nun who stood at the convent entrance controlling access. ‘It’s good to see you again.’

‘And bang on time too, William. Now,’ the nun said, opening an enormous book she held in her arms and running her finger down the page, ‘you’re bringing in flour, is that right?’

So she’s the gatekeeper, Mal thought and stayed where he was in the shade of the gateway examining her. She was dressed in a black habit, hitched up on one side by a length of belt so it didn’t get in her way as she wove amongst the traders. A couple of strands of greying hair had slipped from her wimple, which showed that she was older than she looked. Her face was plump, reddened by the frigid wind, but unlined. Her mouth was firm, and she spoke brusquely. She was a big woman, fat but not tall, her bigness came from her air of authority. She expected to be obeyed, and everyone appeared to take their orders from her. Once she finished with the trader, she handed him off to a waiting lad who led the mule train across the courtyard to a large warehouse.

Mal took a deep breath and prepared himself. If he was to get into this convent, he had to get permission from this nun.

His courage nearly deserted him as he clenched his hands tighter around his staff. He hadn't spoken to anyone but his band of brothers and the sheriff in years. He wasn't sure how he should do it and if she turned him down... he didn't know what he would do.

Best not to stop, Mal thought, stepped forward and cleared his throat. 'M'lady?'

'What?' the nun said, and her eyes flicked from Mal's face to his feet and back up again. 'I don't have time for this. We're a trading convent, we don't give out alms.'

'Sanctuary,' Mal said, in a strained voice barely above a whisper.

'What? Speak up, man!'

'Sanctuary... Please.'

'We're a trading convent. There's a hospital order in the next town.'

Mal shifted on his feet and swallowed. This was harder than he'd expected. 'S—'

'I know, you've already said,' Sister Mary Constance snapped and glared at Mal.

He wondered what more he could say because at this moment she looked set to throw him out.

'Sister,' a trader said, 'I don't have a lot of time. Are you going to pay me or what?'

'Yes, yes, I'm coming,' Mary Constance said. 'You,' she said pointing at Mal, 'wait over there by the gatepost. And don't get in anyone's way!'

'Yes ma'am,' Mal muttered and backed away watching the nun who kept looking back at him.

She wasn't pleased and no mistake. He had to come up with something more to say to ensure she let him in. But for now, at least, he could rest and gather his strength. He leaned against

the gatepost and slid down till he was on his haunches, then he rested his forehead against his staff and looked around.

They definitely had money, these nuns. The courtyard was as fine as anything Mal had ever seen. Opposite the gates, at the far end, towering over all the other buildings, was an ornate church. The archway to the door was carved with scenes from the lives of the saints. The buttresses were ornamented with gargoyles, as expected, but also with carved stone flowers and twining stone cords so it looked like something designed by a woman rather than a man. He supposed that made sense for a convent.

For all its prettiness though, he didn't like it. The church loomed over everyone in the courtyard as if to say: you are nothing. It was an odd thought. How could a building send such a message? Maybe it was an omen. Maybe this wasn't the right place for him. Or maybe it was his tired and overactive imagination. Mal had rarely been in church and considering all he'd done... well, best not to think of that. Maybe it was his guilty conscience that made the church such a disagreeable building.

It was a good thing he had no intention of staying. His priority had to be finding the harbour which, despite knowing it was part of the convent's domain, he couldn't see. To his right were the warehouses that stood two stories high. In stark contrast to the church, they had no ornamentation. Doors that were wide enough to allow access to a wagon, and a large circular window above the door were the only things that punctuated the sheer stone walls. The circular window mirrored the window of the church but was empty, whilst the church rose was filled with a beautiful pattern of stained glass.

It made sense that the warehouses should be close to the harbour, and they were on the seaward side of the convent. He

assumed the buildings were so tall they hid the masts of the ships. The buildings formed a solid wall with no gaps between them, so it looked like access to the harbour had to be via the warehouses. He'd have to wait for the nun to find that out.

In the meantime, he could locate any sources of food and water. Which was easy enough. Opposite the warehouses was another large, almost featureless building with massive chimneys that produced a steady stream of grey smoke that mingled and vanished into the mist. That was most likely the kitchens. The men standing before it, chatting good-humouredly to each other, looked like traders. Most of them were holding a mug or hunk of bread. It made Mal's stomach clench with hunger, and he quickly looked away.

The rest of the courtyard held a few wooden storehouses, a pen filled with chickens and, ominously, a stone whipping post that stood right in the middle. It gave him little reassurance that nobody was tied to it at the moment. Near the kitchen door a trader was pumping water from a solid iron pump into the trough below for his animals. On the other side, by the warehouses, was another trough and a row of iron rings set into the wall where the traders had hitched a couple of their animals.

It was a busy place filled with people, wagons and loaded pack mules. Men shouted a greeting or instructions to each other, unloaded their animals and carried barrels and bundles of goods back and forth from the warehouses. In amongst them moved a couple of nuns but, aside from Sister Mary Constance, none of them seemed to have anything to do with the trade. Funny to see that, a woman in charge and not getting any backchat for it either.

By all that's Holy, I'm tired, Mal thought. How long had he walked? It felt like an eternity. His side ached and... the vision

reared up, the man with one eye running him through, that moment when he hung on the blade – Mal shook his head to break the spell and pushed a hand carefully against his side. It hurt even more. It wasn't healing, which wasn't a surprise. He'd not eaten in days. It couldn't heal if he had no food in him.

I shouldn't have gone home, Mal thought. The home he'd seen destroyed and burned down by the baron. The man who'd left the sheriff to do all his dirty work and scooped up the boys like Mal for his army. The man he had to avoid at all costs lest he hang him for desertion.

His eyes pricked at the memory, but no tears flowed, not anymore. He had no tears left in him. That was just as well. Now he needed to rest. Who knew if the nun would let him in and give him the food and a chance to heal that he needed before he could set off on the next leg of his journey? How to convince her? Mal thought. He was no persuader at the best of times.

His eyes drifted shut. It was so hard to keep them open, so easy to slip into deep oblivion, to just surrender to – 'No,' Mal muttered. He had to keep alert, keep watching the nun and be ready for when she came back.



Mal wondered how long had he sat in the courtyard as servants emerged from the depths of the convent to light the rushes that ringed the space. That was the problem with winter: it got dark early, especially on a day when the clouds hung heavy and grey over the land. Mal watched as the light flickered and sent up coils of black smoke. The rushes seemed to enhance the dark rather than banish it. His world got smaller. He could no longer see the buildings beyond, just the

circle of light cast into the courtyard, and the last few traders hurrying to load their goods and get on their way. A few were staying the night and were brushing down their animals in readiness for bed.

Mal looked around for the nun. He'd watched her for most of the afternoon, trying to work out how to best present his case and buy him the time he needed. She was a hard woman who took no nonsense from any of the traders who came into her domain. Domain, that was the right word. She was the mistress of this space, and she didn't let anyone forget it. She was as intimidating as any leader Mal had ever come across, and at this moment she held his future in her hands.

Mal's heart jumped with fright as he realised that the nun was heading towards him. He tried to stand up, but his legs had grown so stiff and cold that they refused. He grasped his staff with both hands and heaved himself upwards as pain shot through his legs. Still, at least he was up when the nun squared up to him and tilted her head examining him even more closely than she had done before.

The light of the rushes cast her face into flickering half shadows that did nothing to ease Mal's trepidation. Don't be stupid, he thought, she's only a woman, what can she do to you?

'Alright you,' Sister Mary Constance said. 'What's your name?'

'Mal,' he said and took an involuntary step back.

Sister Mary Constance closed the gap and said, 'Mal? That means evil in Latin.'

'It's short for Malcolm,' Mal muttered and took a quick, high breath, it hurt.

'And what was it you wanted? You said sanctuary, didn't you?'

‘Yes... please.’

‘Are you fleeing from the law?’

‘What?’

‘Only criminals request sanctuary.’

‘Cr...criminals?’

‘You didn’t know that, did you? Well, then, I don’t suppose you’re aware that sanctuary gets you forty days of protection. After that, you have to leave. And what do you suppose you’ll do then? You can’t go to another holy house. You have to spend forty days out fending for yourself before you can get sanctuary a second time and I don’t expect a vagabond like you could survive forty days on his own.’

‘Please, forty days is better than nothing,’ Mal said. He had no intention of still being here in forty days. With any luck, he’d be gone in four.

‘Have you been before a magistrate?’

‘A magistrate? No,’ Mal said. At least he was on firm ground with that question.

‘No? Then why on earth are you requesting sanctuary?’

‘I... I’m spent, I can go no further,’ Mal said. It was the truth, but he felt a fool to say it all the same.

‘I see. So if it isn’t a crime you’re fleeing what is it?’

‘What?’

‘People who turn up here looking the way you do... it’s usually down to some misfortune. So what is it for you? What turned you into a beggar, and not a very good one by the looks of you?’

‘I’m not a beggar.’

‘Is that so? They why, pray tell, are you dressed in rags and thin as a rake? And be warned I don’t like liars, and I can sniff out an untruth before it’s even left your lips.’

‘I... I recently lost my master,’ Mal said. At least it was the

truth although he had no idea what to say beyond that.

‘You lost your master, or you ran away?’

‘He died,’ Mal muttered and looked at his feet.

‘He died? Were you the cause of his death?’

‘No!’ Mal gasped. ‘By all that is holy I swear, I had nothing to do with his death. Please m’lady, don’t think so ill of me.’

‘Mmm,’ Mary Constance said. ‘Where was your master when he died?’

‘He was travelling.’

‘Were you with him?’

‘Yes but I could do nothing to save him.’

‘So you just left him and went on your way did you?’

How did he explain to this woman? Mal thought. At least, what could he say that wouldn’t get him into trouble. ‘There was nothing else I could do,’ Mal whispered, but he couldn’t hold the nun’s sceptical gaze.

‘Nothing? Are you so sure?’

‘I swear, upon my honour. He was beyond all help.’

Sister Mary Constance shook her head and kept staring at Mal. ‘So if you had a master, I assume you have a trade.’

‘No m’lady. I was nothing... nothing more than a servant.’

‘Of a master who apparently didn’t bother to provide you with decent clothing,’ Mary Constance said. ‘Very well, you at least have broad shoulders, now show me your hands.’

‘My hands?’ Mal said. What next? But he leaned his staff against his shoulder and held out his hands.

The nun examined them minutely and said, ‘Calloused, at least you’re used to doing work. What happened here? That’s a bad scar on your wrist.’

‘Accident,’ Mal mumbled and prayed to God she didn’t ask more. This avoidance was exhausting.

‘Accident? It looks like your wrist was half-sheared off and

put back none too professionally.'

'It wasn't...important...' he couldn't think what more to say so stared at the nun helplessly.

'Mmm, I suppose some masters might behave like that,' the nun said. 'Well, I'll tell you what. I won't offer you sanctuary-'

'Sister, please,' Mal gasped, 'please God, don't turn me away.'

'Let me finish,' Mary Constance snapped. 'As it happens I need a labourer. One of my men went off without so much as a by your leave. I'll take you on for a few days as a test, but you'll have to work hard to earn your keep, and if you're a laggard you're out on your ear. Do you understand?'

'You... you'll give me a job?'

'No need to sound quite so surprised.'

'No, I mean, yes, I mean-'

'Do you have any weapons?' Sister Mary Constance said.

Mal hesitated, was it wise to admit to this? Was it wiser than to hang onto his weapon? 'I have this,' Mal said and pulled his dagger out from amongst his layers of clothes.

'We don't allow weapons in the convent. If you're to stay here, you have to give it to me. When you leave, you can have it back.'

'Take it,' Mal said and held the dagger out to her which gained him another sharp considered look from the nun.

She took the dagger and said, 'You must really want to be here.' Since she spoke more to herself than him, he judged he didn't have to say anything about it. 'Do you have any money?'

'Money?' Mal said and felt in his clothes, by God, what did he do now? He didn't have any money. Surely she could see that? Why was she even asking? Why was he even pretending to reach for his purse?

'Keep it,' Mary Constance said, 'you'll need it for the first

few days. You'll be working in the warehouse, paid weekly. If I'm happy with what you've done, you can stay on.'

'Thank you,' Mal said. 'I am grateful.'

'Don't thank me yet. I'm only offering you the job because I haven't had time to find someone better.'

'No m'lady,' Mal said and wondered whether he should confess that he was only here so that he could get a ride on a boat. Best not to, he decided. It was more likely she'd throw him out straight away if he told her something like that.

'Follow me,' Mary Constance said. 'You can sleep in the small warehouse where you'll be working. There's a water pump by the kitchen door. You may have one bucketful of water a day. We are blessed with plenty of water as you can see. All the same, make sure I don't see you wasting any. But get clean, I can't have someone looking as ramshackle as you working here.'

'Yes, m'lady.'

'It's sister! I'm no lady, Sister Mary Constance.'

'Sorry,' Mal muttered and took a hasty step back; she had a quick temper this nun.

'This is it,' Mary Constance said and opened the warehouse doors. 'You'll have to shift the bales and barrels around to pack them best into the warehouse, and you'll have to help with taking goods in and dishing them out. My foreman's name is Ed. He'll show you what to do in the morning. In the meantime, be aware that we supply other convents with essential goods. So if you steal anything from these warehouses, you're stealing from the house of God.'

'Yes, sister.'

'Fine. We start work at dawn. I'll expect nothing less than your best. You may stop for a meal at midday which you can buy from our kitchens. A word of warning, relationships with

the town aren't good. You would be safest not stepping out of the confines of the convent.'

'I understand,' Mal said and reflected that he understood better than the nun realised. He doubted any of the townsfolk would remember his face from five years ago but judged it best not to test that assumption.

'Right, well, I'll leave you to it tonight. Don't make me regret taking you in,' Mary Constance said and closed Mal into the warehouse.



Is that it? Mal thought, staring in surprise at the closed warehouse door. No food, no bed just... this? Mal slowly turned around and blinked into the darkness. He wasn't even left a lamp by which to see. His eyes were adjusting to the gloom but not to the point where he could see much beyond looming piles of goods. He had an impression of a roof high above and could make out a circle of grey light that came in through the window.

By dear Saint Christopher, he'd been looking forward to a meal. He'd convinced himself that a convent would provide him with one, so this felt like a double blow. Here, he had to buy his food. And, like a fool, he'd given the nun the impression that he had money. He couldn't turn around now and ask for food. She'd made it plain she didn't like liars and wouldn't take his deception well.

Not that he'd intended it as a lie. He'd just reached for his purse on instinct and to buy himself time to come up with a plausible reason for why it was filled with stones. It was the nun who'd been quick to assume he had money. Not that he'd dare tell her that. With her temper, she'd throw him out for certain if he did.

So what to do? He supposed that at least he had permission to take some water. He was wary about drinking water. It could make you sick. It was safer to stick to ale, but at the moment he had no choice.

Mal eased the warehouse door open and with the additional light of the rushes looked around for a bucket. For once his luck was in, and he spotted a bucket just inside the door. He took it and stepped out into the courtyard. It was nearly empty now. The traders who remained around the kitchen door were so far away that Mal couldn't make out what they were saying. The only other people he could see were a couple of servants busy closing the convent's main gates. All clear, Mal thought and hurried to the pump.

Mal hefted his full bucket and slipped back into the small warehouse. He eased the door shut behind him, lifted the bucket to his lips and drank. By all the saints it was good and fresh and cool. He tipped his head back and gulped the water down. It splashed out the side of his mouth and dribbled onto his chest, and he drank till his stomach was so full it ached. Better, Mal thought and rubbed his hand over his tight belly. Not food, but it does feel better.

It was early still, despite the dark, but Mal decided it was best to sleep anyway. The day spent crouched by the gate hadn't been particularly restful, and as he was expected to work, he'd need some energy. He felt into the dark with his staff, poking at the contents of the warehouse to try and work out what they were. The place smelled musty, a mixture of wood and pelts and food. By Jove, food, it was stupid to think of food, it made his hunger worse. He prayed payday wasn't too far away. His staff hit something with give, so he shuffled forward and pushed at a bundle with his hand. He couldn't make out what it was, but it would do. It was soft, softer than

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what he was used to sleeping on. He climbed on top of the bales, curled himself into a ball and closed his eyes.

Despite his exhaustion, sleep was elusive. He was wet through from the mist, and cold to the bone. He was accustomed to that kind of discomfort. Although in the past he'd have lain huddled together with his fellow soldiers who provided a degree of warmth. He was also indoors. He wasn't accustomed to that either. He was hungry, and he was at the mercy of a grumpy nun. None of this boded well for the morning. Hopefully he could find a ship to take him away from here before the situation deteriorated even further.

Anne looked up from kneading her dough and took in all the familiar features of the kitchen. It was a mindless task that didn't prevent her imagination getting the best of her. So whilst she worked she tried to distract herself by watching everyone else. The fireplace was the first thing that drew her attention. It was large enough to be able to turn an entire ox on its mighty spit and have a cauldron to the side bubbling away with pottage. This evening the fire had died back to a few glowing embers in the far corner. A couple of kitchen women were sitting inside the fireplace absorbing the last of the heat from the glowing coals and supervising a big black kettle on an iron hook. It replaced the cauldron over what remained of the fire and one of the women got up to check on it from time to time and to add a handful more herbs.

A tea was stewing inside made from rosemary, chamomile and sage that was said to calm the heart and mind. The women of the kitchen had insisted on making the tea for her and even from here its pungent aroma wafted up her nostrils. It made her feel ill, or maybe that was just her nerves.

It was annoying that all the kitchen staff had noticed she was scared. As the head cook's daughter, she felt it her duty to be strong, to not show fear and act as an example to others. Still, there was no denying that she was nervous.

She tried to push the anxious feeling away and went back to examining the kitchen. She'd practically grown up in this room. Although room was an understatement, it was more like a great hall. Half the space was given over to cooking. The rest was filled with rows of tables that the convent staff and visiting traders could eat at. The nuns had their own dining room within the cloisters of the convent. Anne seldom ventured there except for on festive occasions when all were invited in for the celebrations.

The kitchen was well lit. It was necessary for the work that had to be done. You couldn't have someone chop off their fingers whilst preparing food for the mere lack of sufficient light. The rushes ringed the room, fixed in their sconces, and their light reflected in the copper pots that hung from the rows of poles above. An assortment of knives, spoons and cooking forks were laid out to make sure they were at hand when the kitchen was at full stretch cooking for the entire convent and their visitors. Father was proud of the fact that they kept around two hundred men and women fed every single day.

Right now the staff were preparing for the next day, from the butcher cutting up the meat, the man sawing slices of stale bread for the trenchers, the women chopping the vegetables and crushing the grains for the pottage, a couple more women brewing ale and others, like Anne, preparing the dough for the morning's bread. Standing over all this on a raised platform by the bread oven was her father, barking orders. He never missed a thing. It was just as well she had such a simple task to do, Anne thought and looked down at the lump of dough she was kneading. She was in no state of mind tonight to be able to make the creations usually required of a pudding maker.

She wondered whether she'd ever bake again if she became

Sir Ingram's wife and a wave of nausea washed over her at the thought. She'd been trying so hard not to think about it, and there it was. It just popped into her head.

She'd always known, of course, that she would get married and the idea generally pleased her. But that was when it was just an idea. This... this visit by a knight. A knight! He turned the whole possibility into all too sudden reality. She didn't feel ready. Especially not for this. She'd always assumed that she'd marry a man she already knew, most likely one of the men who worked at the convent.

In fact, she'd already narrowed her choices down to two. The first was John. He was a big handsome swarthy man who worked in the warehouses and behaved as though it was a foregone conclusion they would get married. That made her resist him more than she otherwise might. She balked at the idea of any man deciding her fate without speaking to her about it first. Maybe that was why she was also considering Henry, a sweet, fair-headed boy who worked in the laundry. Henry was the same age as her whilst John was older, and more self confident. They each had their good points and bad, and for that reason, she'd not said anything to her father about either.

It therefore came as a shock when Father, looking more sheepish than she'd ever seen him, said that he might have found her a husband. He'd told her the night before, when she'd been with Mother, drinking milk in their little kitchen at home before retiring to bed.

'You have?' Anne said.

'Who is it?' Mother said, looking far more excited than Anne herself felt.

'Well... that is... it's going to surprise you.'

'So it isn't somebody I know?' Anne said.

‘I don’t think you’ve met him although you might know him on sight.’

Anne was alarmed by how cautious Father was being. She’d have expected him just to look pleased. ‘Is it a townsman?’ she asked. That would be an explanation for not being acquainted but being able to recognise someone. ‘No wait... is it one of the traders?’

‘Neither. You’ll never guess who.’

‘Oh stop this funning,’ Mother said. ‘How can you keep us in such a state of suspense, Nicholas?’

‘The thing is... it’s rather impressive.’

‘Somebody impressive?’ Anne said, and she sensed... what? That Father wasn’t so sure of this news. That he wasn’t convinced it was good news and that made him hesitate as much as if he was tantalising them with a delicious secret. ‘Please Father, I don’t think I can stand this anymore.’

‘It’s Sir Ingram!’ he said. ‘One of the baron’s men. He sent word that he wishes to speak to me about you, Annie.’

‘A knight?’ Anne’s mother was so surprised her voice was soft and uncertain. ‘Can this be true?’

‘Now really, would I play such a trick on you?’

‘Sir Ingram?’ Anne said and tried to visualise anyone with that name. ‘What does he look like?’

‘He’s good-looking,’ Father said. ‘Just what a woman would like. He’s tall and well-built and fair of hair, and I’d say he only has ten years or a little more on you. So you don’t have to worry that he’s too old.’

‘A knight!’ Mother said and beamed at the two of them. ‘Bless my stars. Who’d imagine that our little girl would marry such an illustrious personage? Annie, this is more than I could ever have wished for you. To have such a great opportunity! He must be rich, and at the very least he has influence. You’ll

want for nothing my child. You'll be protected by both wealth and power.'

'Now, now, Agnes,' Father said. 'We don't know for certain that he is about to propose. Hold your tongue before you spread this amongst your friends lest you be embarrassed later.'

Anne hardly took that in and blurted out, 'Why is a knight interested in me?'

'For the same reason, all the men of the town fall over themselves when you walk by. You're pretty, Annie, like an angel with your blue eyes and your blonde hair. I know I'm partial, being your father and all, but I'd be a fool not to see it. Men fall over themselves to speak to you. You may as well make the most of it.'

Now Anne thumped her lump of dough and thought, that's how I got here. She'd been kneading for so long that it was as warm as her hands and soft and fine as silk. Still, she folded it over again and went back to pummelling it some more. Afraid as she was, maybe it was better that the knight got here soon. This waiting was more of an ordeal.



Anne had just finished sipping the tea, delivered with great ceremony by three of the kitchen women, when she spotted Father making his way over. She took a deep breath and schooled her face into what she hoped was a relaxed smile. The tea had been no use at all in calming her nerves.

'Are you ready?' Nick said when he got near enough so as not to be overheard by the rest of the kitchen staff.

'I just want it all to be over,' Anne said. 'But I have washed the flour off my hands and brushed my hair so I'm as ready as I can be.'

‘You look beautiful. And it will be over soon enough. Don’t fear that you won’t have any support either. I’ve asked Sister Mary Constance to bear you company and act as a chaperone.’

‘A chaperone? But... but I thought Sir Ingram was talking to you not me, so why do I need a chaperone?’

‘It never hurts to be careful,’ Nick said and tapped the side of his nose knowingly. ‘You’ll feel better having the support of a woman at this moment.’

‘I suppose so,’ Anne said, well aware that Mother wasn’t up to the job. She was a shy, retiring woman who kept to her house and her sewing and who would melt if she had to do anything in a crowded room. ‘But Sister Mary Constance?’ Anne said.

‘There is no tougher woman,’ Nick said. ‘I’ll fetch her now. You have another cup of tea.’

‘I doubt it will help,’ Anne said, but her father didn’t hear. He was already heading for the courtyard.

Anne shuddered, why Mary Constance of all women? Well... maybe that wasn’t such a mystery. Father would never ask any of the women in the kitchen to stand in as a chaperone. For one thing, they’d be likely to gossip about the meeting. For another, far more important reason, he wouldn’t want to owe any of the women a favour. If they did this for him, it made them close to his equal, and he wouldn’t want to disrupt the balance of power in the kitchen. Choosing Sister Mary Constance made sense then. None of the kitchen women could measure up to her in status so they’d not be able to complain that she was chosen over them.

Father was a shrewd man. He was right about the need for a chaperone as well. Anne just wished it was somebody she knew better.

Sister Mary Constance was the severe woman who was the

mistress of all the trade that came through the convent. She was also the hardest worker Anne had ever known. She seemed to always be at work in the small gatehouse she'd turned into her office. She was already there when Anne and Father arrived in the morning to get the kitchen ready for breakfast, and she was back in her office in the evening when Anne and Father made for home.

Father always gave her the same greeting, a shouted good morning or good evening. Sometimes the nun would look up from her ledgers, but more often she'd wave with her head still bowed over the books. Other than that, Anne would see her each day when she came to collect her food from the kitchen. She seldom joined the other nuns for their meals just took her food back to her office to be wolfed down before she returned to marshalling the traders.

Now, all of a sudden, she was to be a chaperone. Anne wondered what the nun made of that idea. She'd soon find out because Father had arrived back with Sister Mary Constance in tow.

'Well, well, this is good,' Father said rubbing his hands together. 'You should thank the sister for coming to your aid, Annie.'

'There's no need for that,' Sister Mary Constance said and looked Anne up and down. 'You look anxious child. I recommend a couple of good deep breaths. That always helps me.'

'You get nervous?' Anne said.

'Less so now that I'm older,' Mary Constance said. 'But when I was a girl I struggled a bit.'

'I see,' Anne said and wondered whether she'd ever develop the nun's apparently iron-clad confidence.

'I think that's him!' Nick said and turned to the kitchen

door. 'I hear horses.'

'So does everybody else,' Anne said and tilted her head in the direction of the kitchen. Everyone had stopped in their tasks and were watching the door.

'Back to work,' Nick bellowed. 'Or do you all want to look like a bunch of boobies when Sir Ingram arrives?'

Everyone hastily went back to their cutting, chopping and stirring but Anne didn't notice. Her gaze was fixed on the door waiting with a painful lump in her chest for Sir Ingram to appear.

A man stepped inside, stopped to take off his cap, smoothed his hair and looked around. He stood a good head taller than the rest of the men present. His embroidered tunic was a bit mud-spattered from his ride but still beautiful, and his cloak, slung back over one shoulder was deep green with an embroidered edge.

It left Anne feeling frumpy in her blue dress, even though it was the best dress she owned. It was prettier than any dress of the women in the town, but it was no match to Sir Ingram's finery.

His face was typical of his class. He looked like a Norman with his high cheekbones and full, firm lips. His hair hung down to his shoulders and in the light of the rushes appeared to be a dark blond. Try as she might Anne couldn't recall seeing him before. She wondered why he'd made no impression on her.

'Master Nick Cook,' Sir Ingram said and strolled over. 'It's a drag of a ride over to this convent. Let's get on with our business so that I can settle in at the guest hall and get warm.'

'Sir Ingram,' Nick said and bowed low. 'This is my daughter Anne.'

'Indeed,' Sir Ingram said. 'I have admired you from afar

Miss Cook. I look forward to getting better acquainted in the fulness of time. But for the moment I must speak with your father in private.'

'Yes of course,' Anne managed at a whisper as she sank down into a curtsy.

'You can arrange a bite to eat for my men and me and have it sent to the lodge,' Sir Ingram said over his shoulder as he headed outside followed by her father.

'Well!' Anne said. 'Is he always so... so-'

'High-handed?' Mary Constance said. 'I'm afraid that's Sir Ingram. He only gave the convent a day's notice that he was coming and that he'd be making use of the guest hall. If we're lucky, he'll leave tomorrow, otherwise who knows how long he'll decide to make use of our hospitality.'

'You don't like him?' Anne said.

'He's always a nuisance when he arrives in the baron's entourage. Some people are like that, no matter how well we treat him, how much care we provide, nothing is ever to his satisfaction.'

'I don't think I want to marry him,' Anne said.

'He would give you many advantages,' Mary Constance said. 'You would never have to work again, although you would have to manage his household.'

'Manage a household? How am I supposed to do that? I've no knowledge of how it's done.'

'Perhaps he has family who can show you, his mother or a sister maybe.'

'Do you think so?'

'I imagine so. I doubt he'd know much about household management himself.'

'Well,' Anne said and took a deep breath, 'It's a little reassuring to think there would be women who could help me,

I suppose.'

'That's the spirit.'

'I don't know. I've never felt more helpless in my life. How could this man appear and turn everything upside down? My mother is so excited, but I fear for the future. I wish he'd never come,' Anne said. 'He has made everything so complicated. Life would be so much simpler if the baron didn't keep visiting. Especially if he didn't insist on bringing his entourage.'

'Baron Castlemere is our patron, and his sister is our abbess,' Mary Constance said. 'This convent wouldn't exist without his family, and our licence to trade is within his gift too. That must be considered when dealing with the baron or his people.'

'But you must think he has poor taste in men to have such a one as Sir Ingram, don't you?'

'I doubt he had much say in that. We think the nobility, of all people, get to do as they please. But that isn't true. They must make alliances, and swear allegiance to a great network of men. Sir Ingram's family, for example, has connections to the king and, closer to home, to Sheriff Moore.'

'Now there's a man not to be crossed,' Anne said with a shudder. 'He and his men may have been fighting on our side, but he is evil pure and simple.'

'He was evil.'

'What do you mean?'

'I got news this morning that the sheriff is dead. He and his men were ambushed not twenty miles north of us, and they were all killed.'

'All of them? The sheriff put the fear of the Almighty into everyone. How is it possible he could be killed?'

'Possible or not, that is the news. I will await the arrival of

the baron for confirmation.'

'You won't ask Sir Ingram?'

'I speak to Sir Ingram as little as possible.'

'That's what makes me so nervous,' Anne said. 'If you don't like him, how can he possibly make a good husband?'

'I have no idea what kind of a husband he would make. It isn't my area of expertise.'

'No... I suppose not.'

'There is another option, you know?' Sister Mary Constance said.

'I don't think my father would allow me to marry another man,' Anne said. 'I have considered it though. Although in fairness it isn't like I love anyone else.'

'I didn't mean marriage. I doubt Sir Ingram would allow another man to stand in his way either. He's more likely to strike him down than allow that.'

'Do you think he would do something so terrible to get his hands on me?'

'He's a knight, they may have a code of honour, but it only extends to other nobility. They treat commoners with no equivalent respect. Sir Ingram would think nothing of running a rival through or setting them up on trumpeted up charges, so that they are executed.'

'How do you know these things?'

'Because I'm the youngest daughter of a knight. I understand them better than I understand anyone else.'

'I see,' Anne said. No wonder the nun could be so confident with the traders, Anne thought. She's used to being in command. 'So how is it that you became a nun?'

'I ran away from a marriage I didn't want. Ordinarily, my father would have turned up and dragged me back home, but fate intervened. He was struck down the day before he was due

to fetch me back. My brother, who took over, didn't care to make the alliance my father had planned so he left me in peace. I've been here ever since.'

'Are you saying I could become a nun to get away from Sir Ingram?'

'We could keep you safe here, with the assistance of our mother superior. If she can persuade her brother, he could keep Sir Ingram from trying to take you by force.'

'She would do that?'

'She is a holy woman who believes that she must protect anyone who wishes to devote themselves to God.'

Anne had never planned on being a nun. Her first instinct was to reject the suggestion outright. But now... maybe now she'd have to consider such a drastic measure. 'It's too soon,' Anne said. 'We don't know what Sir Ingram will propose yet.'

'Perhaps we're about to find out,' Mary Constance said as Nick walked into the kitchen.

Anne had never seen her father looking so grim, and it filled her heart with fear.

'No Sir Ingram?' Mary Constance said.

'He's gone to the hall,' Nick said, sat down at the table with a sigh and pulled his hand down his face till it was tugging at his jaw.

'Father, what is it?' Anne said.

'He's offered for you, Annie,' Nick said. 'And the bride price, well, it's generous.'

Anne went numb and could hardly breathe. It wasn't his words, confirming what she already feared, it was his expression. He looked like a man who'd just lost everything. 'Father, tell me, please, what's wrong?'

'He says you'll be an asset to him and he is confident that you will produce a strong and handsome heir to continue the

family line.'

'You spoke of children? Already?'

'The continuation of his family name appears to be his main concern.'

'It's a bit early, but not entirely unexpected. Surely that isn't what has upset you so much?'

'He had one condition,' Nick said with a great sigh, and his gaze slipped from Anne's face and fixed on the floor. 'He stipulated that once the two of you are married... you will no longer see us, your mother and I. He said... he said we would be beneath you.'

'No!' Anne gasped. 'How could he say that? How could he be so cruel?'

'He has a point, Annie. It isn't for the likes of a cook and a seamstress to hobnob with a lady.'

'I can't lose you, I can't,' Anne cried and flung her arms around her father's neck. 'Please, Father, don't make me do this.'

'I don't think I can stand against him, Annie,' Nick said. 'Sir Ingram ignored all my protestations. He said the next time the two of you meet it will be to discuss wedding plans.'

Mal lay on the row of thick bundles of sacks he'd made into his temporary bed and gazed up at the warehouse window. It was difficult to tell, but it seemed the grey disk of sky outside was getting lighter. It would be dawn soon.

He felt a bit better now, warmer and not quite as tired. His side still ached, that wasn't going to clear anytime soon, but the gnawing hunger in his stomach had subsided. He was familiar with that sensation too. There came a point, if you hadn't eaten for days, where you no longer felt hunger. It was a blessed relief, but it didn't always stay that way. Sometimes the hunger came back like a pack of ravening wolves so intense it caused you to double over with cramps.

Then again, lack of food made a man weak and less able to cope with the deprivation. His mind drifted to thoughts of the kitchen and the food it might produce when a slight sound distracted him. It was a scratching like mice digging into something and yet, not quite right. He tilted his head, searching for the origin of the sound, he hoped it wasn't a rat. He hated rats. The sound came again, more of a slithering noise now.

Mal pushed himself up and felt heavy and weak as he turned in the direction of the noise. It was familiar to him, but his brain was too befuddled by this place and fuzzy from lack of

sleep and lack of food. A hissing noise resolved suddenly into something he knew all too well, that every soldier knew. Every muscle tensed, his senses screamed that he must act. It wasn't scratching it was a sword, a sword being drawn, sliding from its scabbard with a hiss.

'Who's there?' Mal shouted and leapt to his feet, his every sense straining, his breath fast and shallow. 'Show yourself.'

He reached for his staff and swung it out in front of him. 'Come out you coward,' he snarled, and a shadow detached itself from amongst the boxes and leapt at him. 'No,' Mal cried and swung at the shadow. It was the man, the man with the missing eye. His face was so close to Mal's that he could feel the puff of his breath against his face and smell the iron and sweat from his body. 'Get away!' Mal screamed and swung his staff at the man's head. 'Get away!'

'What is the meaning of this racket?' Sister Mary Constance shouted as she threw open the warehouse door.

'He... he...' Mal said. His chest heaved as he gulped in air and pointed to the man, but there was no-one. 'He was there. He-'

'Stop,' Mary Constance said. 'There is nobody here but you. You must have had a bad dream.'

No, Mal thought. It wasn't a dream. I've had bad dreams before but this... this wasn't a dream. He couldn't say that to the nun though and not only her. A man was standing behind her watching him with a sardonically raised eyebrow. He must think I'm a lunatic, Mal thought.

'I'm sorry,' Mal muttered.

'Mmm,' Mary Constance said and gave him another of her appraising stares. He was already getting to know them, and they made him squirm. Then she shrugged and said, 'This is Ed. He's my warehouse foreman. He keeps all the warehouse

lads in line, and he'll show you what you need to know about the warehouse and how we work. Ed, this is Mal.'

'How do?' Ed said with a casual salute.

'You'll have to be quick with your training, Ed. I'm expecting a delivery of wool today,' Mary Constance said. 'Half needs to go to the back of this warehouse as it's staying for a couple of weeks before it goes out again, the other half is leaving today. Get Mal to move the barrels of salt pork to the harbour door; they're leaving today. Then shift everything along to make room for the new goods.'

'Yes, Sister,' Ed said.

'Get moving, the traders will be arriving soon,' Mary Constance said, hefting her big record book as she headed for the main gates.

Mal turned from watching the departing nun to look at Ed. The man had a thick bushy beard, a barrel body and surprisingly thin legs and was currently examining Mal as closely.

'You ever done warehouse work?' Ed said.

'I'm afraid not.'

'Well, rule number one is you don't sleep on the merchandise,' Ed said and kicked at the bales Mal had used overnight.

'What?'

'You can damage it. You might squash something or, if it's cloth, and you happen to be wet, you can stain the fabric or cause a mould to grow. And believe me, you don't want to be explaining to Sister Mary Constance how something came to be damaged when it was in your care.'

'No,' Mal said. He really didn't want to have to explain anything to Sister Mary Constance at all.

'Damned if I know why Mary Constance took you on,' Ed

said shaking his head. 'Oh well, no sense in pondering what's already done. Let's get this over with.'

'Why... why wouldn't she take me on?' Mal said. He couldn't help himself sometimes, and it seems unfair that this man was judging him so harshly.

'Because you look like a tramp. You don't actually look like you know how to work.'

'But I do.'

'We'll see,' Ed said. 'Now pay attention. There's two warehouses in this convent. There's the big warehouse; it holds five times the goods this one has, and it's newer. This little warehouse was built first, but the convent's trade grew and pretty soon they needed a bigger one. This one holds the overflow. It's the stuff that won't fit in the big warehouse, usually the stuff that's going to be with us for a while.'

'I see,' Mal said. This warehouse was really big. A stone building with a vast roof supported by impressive dark oak beams. It was hard to get a sense of the size of the place though because it was stuffed with goods stacked at points to well above his head.

'We have two ways of shifting the goods,' Ed said and headed to the other end of the warehouse and a similar set of double doors to the main entrance.

He pushed them open, and Mal gasped as an icy salt-laden wind struck him. Before him there were a couple of boats moored alongside a stone harbour wall that curved away in both directions. The sea was choppy and grey, the same colour as the overcast sky. Beyond the walls large waves rolled in and crashed against the outer wall sending up spray and foam.

'The harbour,' Mal said.

'That's right. Goods come in by boat and leave to go inland, or goods come from the countryside and leave on the boats.'

That's why this convent's so rich. They trade goods from all over the place. You'll have to juggle goods coming and going in both directions, and that takes some getting used to. Now come back inside, and I'll explain the sister's marking code.'

'Marking code?' Mal said.

'Sister Mary Constance checks the stock before it gets unloaded and marks all the produce, so we know what it is.'

'I see,' Mal said, although he didn't. This was more complicated than he'd expected. If he was going to leave in a few days anyway, did it matter whether he learned anything or not? It mattered, to him anyway. It would be foolish to do anything to jeopardise his chances of escaping so he had to listen and pay attention to what Ed said. Which was all very well but he was going so fast it was impossible to take everything in. To understand what all the goods were and the meanings of the chalk sigils. The chalk marks indicated not only what was in each delivery, but the expected time it was going to spend in storage.

'All right, you got that?' Ed said.

Mal caught his breath, what was he supposed to say? He barely understood half of it but feared he'd look a fool if he asked for more of an explanation. On top of that, it was lighter now, and the first mule train had arrived in the courtyard.

'Yes, I understand,' Mal said and regretted it the moment the words were out of his mouth, but it was too late to go back on it now.

'Good, then before I leave you to it there's just one more thing that needs to be done,' Ed said. He walked to the warehouse door, put his fingers to his lips and emitted a piercing whistle.

A couple of seconds later two men walked into the warehouse. The first was a tall well built man with black hair

and a somewhat beaky nose that prevented him from being described as outright handsome. The other was a young man, a couple of years Mal's junior at a guess, with a friendly open face and wide grey eyes.

'These are the other warehouse lads,' Ed said. 'The tall one's John, the other is Pete. I expect you to help each other out and if I'm not around, you can ask them for help too.'

'Welcome to the warehouse Mal,' Pete said with a huge grin.

John looked less impressed and said, 'Where do you come from?'

'Around,' Mal said. This was the problem with a place like the convent people would be asking questions.

'There's time for chat later,' Ed said. 'You can join us in the kitchen at lunchtime Mal. Now we've all got work to do so I'll leave you to it. But I'll be back to check on you and make sure you aren't making a complete mess.'

'Yes... thank you,' Mal said and then, because he had to know, he blurted out, 'When's payday?'

John raised a cynical eyebrow at Pete at that question and the lad just grinned at them all as he hurried away.

'Payday?' Ed said turning back.

'Sister Mary Constance said we were paid once a week. I... I was wondering...'

'Friday, you'll get your money on Friday. I suppose it's not surprising that's the only question you're asking.'

It was a mild enough rebuke, but Mal felt its sting nonetheless. 'What day is it today?' he said pushing on.

'You don't know what day it is?'

'I... lost track.'

'By all the saints, boy,' Ed said. 'You'll not get far with that lack of interest. But if you must know, it's Tuesday.'

'Thank you,' Mal said. He wasn't making a good impression,

but then again, he never had.

He watched Ed as he left muttering under his breath and shaking his head then Mal turned back to take a proper look at the warehouse. The gloom of the interior was barely improved by the pale blue light that spilt in through both doors. It was cold, and his stomach started to protest. Four days till he could eat, how was he going to make it through? So much for getting some rest and food before he found himself a boat. It would be better to leave as quickly as possible. But for now, there was a trader headed towards him, and he had work to do.



Mal wondered how many hours he'd been going as he manhandled a particularly heavy barrel into position in the warehouse. It was the second ship he'd dealt with so far today. It was called a cog apparently, and the size of the vessel was deceptive for it held twice the amount you might have guessed from looking at it. It was a large flat-bottomed boat with a single mast and a square sail. Not that he had much time to admire it for he was kept busy.

'Here's another one,' one of the sailors said as he slid a sack off his shoulder and let it drop beside the warehouse door.

He was followed by another sailor and then another. The crew of the cog were experienced unloaders. One man threw things to another above deck, who tossed it to a man standing on the harbour. He handed it on to the trio who carried the goods as far as the warehouse door.

'You pack it inside mate,' the sailor had said when they first reached the warehouse and dropped their goods at the door. 'We don't want to mess up your system.'

Which was all well and good if he had a system. It also left

Mal with an ever-growing pile of produce stacked up against the outer wall. I am going to be in so much trouble, he thought as he stepped outside and considered what to bring in next.

At this point he was doing little more than shifting the goods from the outside to inside and trying to keep similar looking bundles together. The ships brought in a vast array of goods. It would have helped if each of them carried only one product but no, it was as if they were plotting against him with their great variety.

‘Dear me, what a mess,’ Ed said as he strolled into the warehouse with the ship’s master in tow. ‘And it’s about to get worse because you’ve got to get the salt pork out. Sister Mary Constance did tell you. It’s going on the ship, along with half a consignment of that wool that arrived this morning.’

‘The... salt pork?’ Mal said.

‘It’s in the barrels with a cross. I told you that just this morning,’ Ed said and rolled his eyes. Fortunately, he was standing behind the boat’s captain, so he didn’t see it.

‘I’ll get it now,’ Mal said. He had a vague recollection of where Sister Mary Constance had pointed this morning but his brain was fuzzy from hunger and he had to pause to think before he headed in that general direction and to a rack of barrels. Thankfully they were marked with the cross. ‘They’re here,’ Mal said and turned back to discover Ed had already left and he was talking only to the ship’s captain.

‘I’ll get my men to pick it up,’ the captain said. ‘In the meantime, you’d better work out where my wool consignment is to be found.’

‘Yes sir,’ Mal said and prayed he’d find what he needed before the sailors were done shifting the pork. It wasn’t just that this was unfamiliar work, it was also hard. Shifting heavy barrels and bales all day long was exhausting, especially for

muscles that weren't used to it.

If he had to do a seven day forced march, he could have done it, but this.... His back ached, his arms and shoulders ached, even his legs ached, and he'd developed blisters on his hands from the rough ropes and hessian sacking that so much was wrapped in.

The sailors also seemed to find him amusing and grinned at him as he fumbled with the goods.

'It's tough being the new boy isn't it?' one of them said as Mal nearly dropped a barrel, caught it in time but wrenched his arm painfully as he scrabbled to keep it from rolling away.

Yet another ache to add to all the others he thought and grinned at the sailor. It was the best he could do. He had no energy to come back with a witty rejoinder.

'Right,' the captain said, breaking in on Mal's rumination, 'I'm off to settle up with the nun.'

Mal watched him go then ran for the pile of goods still stacked up outside. He had to get the damn stuff in before Sister Mary Constance got back and he didn't have much time. He was shaking with fright and exhaustion as he grabbed the sack closest to hand and threw it through the door, then the next one and the one after. He could organise it better once it was in, for now, he just had to shift it.

'Got a bit of a fire under you, don't you?' The ship's captain said as he walked past Mal who was toiling away. 'Well I'm off, can't stick around, we've got a way to go before nightfall.'

Mal had no idea what he could say in reply and watched the captain as he strolled down the harbour, with his swaying seaman's gait, to his boat. It was now or never, Mal realised. He had to speak to the captain. He had to get passage away from here, away from the danger and at this point the hunger too. But he was afraid, afraid the captain would rebuff him,

laugh in his face and tell him to get lost. Then again, it wasn't safe for him to stay. He risked death if he did nothing.

'Wait!' Mal shouted and ran down the harbour wall to the captain. 'Please, wait.'

'What is it?' The captain said. 'Am I missing something?'

'No,' Mal said and paused to take a breath. 'I was... I was wondering... do you have need of another man on your ship?'

'You?' the captain said, and his eyebrows rose.

'I can work hard.'

'Do you know how to sail? Have you ever even been on a boat?'

'Yes, I've been on a boat,' Mal said. He tried not to think about how ill it had made him feel all the way on their terrible voyage to Normandy and for what? Three months of misery on a campaign that ended in failure.

'What exactly did you do on the boat?' the captain said.

'I rowed.'

'Well, that's no use to me. Mine's a sailing boat. I don't use oars.'

'I... I could load and unload.'

'Like you did here?' The captain said looking back at the pile of goods that remained outside the warehouse. 'No, I need men who can pull their weight on land and at sea. I need sailors.'

'Please... what could I do to convince you to take me?' Mal said as a rising tide of desperation welled up from the pit of his stomach.

'Do you have money for passage?'

'Money?'

'Mmm, I didn't think so,' the captain said and walked away.

Mal felt stuck to the spot as he watched the sea captain shout final orders to his crew. They untied from the harbour

wall. Their sail was hoisted and caught the wind and, planks creaking, the ship drifted out of the harbour. An icy wind blew sea spray into Mal's face obliterating the tears that spilt from his eyes.

'Oh God, oh God, why won't you help me?' Mal cried. 'What have I done to...' What hadn't he done? He thought as a sob escaped him, then another and another. Dry, juddering gasps wracked his body. He fell to his knees, bent over double and wrapped his arms around himself. I'm trapped... I'm trapped, and I have no way out.



Anne felt numb as she removed her fig tarts from their moulds, as if she was in a dream, a cruel dream where she couldn't tell anyone how shaken she was and one that she couldn't wake from. Everyone in the kitchen had already wished her happy, and there were many bless me's and fancy that's over the wonder of it all.

It was two days since Sir Ingram had declared she was to marry him and the shock of it still felt sudden and raw. She'd lived her whole life in the town and the convent. She'd sat under the cook's tables as a little girl whilst Father, still the dessert maker at the time, slipped her sweet balls of dough as he worked.

It hadn't felt like it would ever change. She'd assumed that she would always be here, always be a cook in this kitchen even after she was married. That thought sometimes left her wondering whether life was a little dull, that it lacked a spark of excitement. Now, this. Now her whole world had turned on its head in one short meeting that she hadn't even been privy to. No, I was just informed once it was agreed, Anne thought, and it was bitter to face that fact.

Bitter to realise that Mother and Father had no power to protect her from this terrible fate and bitter that Mother couldn't decide what she felt. One moment she was cock a hoop about her daughter marrying a knight. The next she was in tears at the thought that they would never see each other again. She didn't rail against it though. She simply accepted and mourned the loss of her daughter as she'd mourned the deaths of all her other children.

When she did that Anne wanted to grab her and shake her and scream that it was unfair and that Mother had to do something. That she had to fight. She couldn't be so meek. She couldn't just accept.

Anne didn't though. It would make no difference and only cause Mother pain. So she said nothing at home.

She didn't say much on the way to and from the kitchen to Father either. He looked sorry, sorry for her and sorry that he couldn't do anything. She couldn't pretend otherwise, even though it hurt that her big strong Father was so helpless in the face of Sir Ingram's determination. He tried to cheer her up though, which had the effect of upsetting them both.

'Are you ready, Anne?' Father said.

'What?' Anne said looking up from her fig tarts.

'You're just standing there staring at your tarts.'

'They're ready,' Anne said, and for the first time in her life she couldn't look her father in the face.

'I'll have them taken to the dining room then. You get ready to start serving the lunchtime crowd.'

'Of course,' Anne said. She wiped her hands down her apron and hurried over to join the women who were preparing to serve the pottage.

She felt so odd and out of place. Everyone else was carrying on as if nothing had changed, whilst for her everything had.

She realised with a pang every time she did something that it might be the last time. The fig tarts were probably the last of those tarts she'd ever make because she'd used up the fig jam from Sister Benedict's carefully husbanded fig tree. She also saw the kitchen in a new light, taking in details like the huge copper bowls that hung beside the fireplace reflecting the glow from the fire as if for the first time. They were things she'd always taken for granted. She was going to miss all of it.

'Here they come,' Maisie said as the church bell rang noon and the carters and servants started filing in shouting cheerily to each other.

They had no idea her life was upended. They would expect her to be as cheerful and friendly as she always was. Only she didn't feel cheerful and now John had walked in looking black as thunder looming behind Ed. Obviously news of her nuptials had reached the warehouse.

'Well, well, well,' Ed said. 'I understand congratulations are in order.'

'Yes, congratulations,' Pete said beaming at her as he appeared from behind Ed.

'You've done well to attract a knight, young Mistress Anne,' Ed said.

'Don't,' Anne said. 'I don't want to talk about him.'

'So it's true is it?' John snapped. 'You'd throw me over for a knight?'

'I wasn't exactly given a choice, John. Sir Ingram simply told Father that he intends to marry me. I wasn't asked.'

'Is that so? Well, you don't have to accept then miss. You say you'll marry me and there's nothing Sir Ingram can do at that point but back down.'

'Or run you through,' Pete said. 'He has a fearsome temper after all.'

‘He has a point,’ Ed said. ‘You don’t want to mess with a knight.’

‘I could take him,’ John said.

‘I don’t need you to save me,’ Anne said. ‘I didn’t say I needed saving.’

‘You just said you weren’t given a choice,’ John said. ‘Now we see your true colours. You want to marry a rich man.’

‘Come now, John,’ Ed said. ‘Don’t be causing a scene, not when Mistress Anne is looking so low.’

‘I am not low, and I can fight my own battles, thank you, Ed.’

‘Then you’d rather marry a knight, is that what you’re saying?’ John said.

‘I didn’t say that either,’ Anne said holding up her hand to stop John who’d already taken a breath to butt in. ‘Neither did I say I’d marry you, John.’

‘You should have got in earlier,’ Pete said. ‘Sir Ingram asked first, John. You left it too late.’

‘I did not,’ John snapped. ‘I was waiting for a sign, but you miss were too busy playing games. You kept me guessing what you wanted, and now you see what’s come to pass. You brought this upon yourself.’

‘And I will solve it without you thank you very much.’

‘Will you indeed? Well, I look forward to seeing you do that and don’t come running to me when you fail.’

‘I won’t,’ Anne said. ‘You can be very sure of that. Now please step aside. I have lots more people to feed.’

‘Tell them to-’

‘Not now, John,’ Ed said and placed his hand firmly on John’s shoulder. ‘This isn’t the place for a fight. We need to eat up and get back to the warehouse. We’ve a ship to unload this afternoon after all. But before we go,’ Ed said and turned back

to Anne, 'I have one question. Do you know if our new warehouse lad has been in yet?'

'So that's true, is it? Sister Mary Constance found a replacement for James?' Anne said grateful that Ed had changed the subject.

'She has. Haven't you seen him yet?'

'I don't know. What does he look like?'

'You'd like to know that would you?' John said.

Anne turned pointedly away from John and said, 'We have a lot of people coming in, Ed, I doubt I could tell him apart from a trader.'

'Oh no, you could tell him apart,' Ed said. 'He's a vagabond.'

'A vagabond? He's dressed in rags? What else? Is he tall or short, fair or dark?'

'He's tallish.'

'And that describes half the men of the county,' Anne said. 'I have no idea now whether I've seen him or not.'

'Mmm, alright, he's slightly taller than average, but not by much. He's as thin as a stick and young, I'd say he's twenty or so, and he has unkempt brown hair.'

'He doesn't sound familiar.'

'Well not to worry, I doubt he'll last anyway,' Ed said. 'Nuns are great ones for dishing out charity and giving layabouts a chance to reform. At least Mary Constance will give him the boot when he doesn't shape up.'

'You think she gave him the job out of charity?' Anne said. Sister Mary Constance didn't strike her as a sentimental woman, let alone a sentimental nun.

'I heard he asked for sanctuary,' Pete said. 'You can't turn a man down if they ask for sanctuary.'

'Nope, you should just feed them and send them on their way,' Ed said. 'Best thing really, before they bring down

trouble.'

'You think he'll bring trouble?' Anne said.

'Only for me and my boys when he decides the work's too hard and he buggers off and leaves us to clean up his mess.'

'So you don't think he knows how to work?'

'If he could work he wouldn't look as ragged as he does.'

'No I suppose not,' Anne said. 'Now, I really do need to serve the others.'

'We're off,' Ed said, and the little group headed for the long bench near the kitchen door and joined several other convent workers tucking into their food.

Hunger lay like a stone in the pit of Mal's stomach, made worse by the smells all around him. It was dark in the warehouse, dawn had yet to come, but his hunger made his sense of smell doubly acute. He tried not to think about that and lay listening to the rain outside drumming on the roof. It sounded heavy, and wind buffeted the building and shot under the gap of the door, whistling as it came in.

He'd moved his sleeping spot to a point midway down the warehouse and found a couple of planks to raise himself off the ground and some hessian sacks to lie on. He'd also surrounded himself with goods to keep out the worst of the draught. After years of sleeping on the ground outside or in cowsheds this was almost luxurious. If only he had some food. By the Blessed Virgin, he shouldn't have thought of the food again. It was better to concentrate on the rain. It was going to be a foul day to be unloading goods, and it didn't sound like the rain was easing off.

I have to get ready, Mal thought and pushed himself upright. It was so difficult. He felt heavy as lead and as he straightened up dizziness made him feel like he was about to throw up. He couldn't keep going like this. He wondered which was worse, to pass out from lack of food before a trader or to throw himself upon Sister Mary Constance's mercy and

beg for food.

The very idea of pleading with the nun after he'd lied to her about having money doubled his nausea. No, he couldn't do that. So what could he do? Half the problem was being here in a damned warehouse packed with flour, honey, salted meats and cheeses.

No, stop, Mal thought and shook his head to clear it. Don't make it worse.

All the same, he made his way deeper into the warehouse and a rack holding jars of honey. He pressed his nose hard against the lid and took a deep breath. A scent so spicy and sweet it was intoxicating wafted up his nostrils, and his mouth started to water. No, he thought don't be a fool. Step away.

He clenched his fists and walked as fast as he could to the far end of the warehouse and flung open the door. A wall of water hit him square in the face, blown in on a powerful gust of wind. It was so cold it took his breath away, and he slammed the door shut again. Hopefully, with weather like this, the ships couldn't sail, and the traders might not wish to travel either. Was it hoping for too much that he might not have any crates and bales to lug today? That he might have a day to rest?

A moment's consideration drove hope away. A day without deliveries just gave him time to try and make some order in the chaos he'd created in the warehouse. It was his third day here and, aside from a few snide comments from Ed, he hadn't been told off for what he was doing. He suspected Ed was leaving him to make a spectacular mess so that he'd get thrown out.

Hopefully, they'd pay him for the work he'd already done, but he had his doubts about that. Heaven preserve him if he was thrown out. What would he do then?

The ache in his side began to throb. It was worse than before. Maybe it was time to take another look at it. He hadn't touched his makeshift bandage since the day he'd first bound up the wound, and he feared what he might see. The last thing he needed was to take a fever now. That would heap misery atop misery. So he fetched the bucket, braced himself against the weather, ran for the pump, and ran back slopping water as he went.

He was wet by the time he made it back to the warehouse, but his foray had confirmed one thing, nobody had arrived at the convent yet. It looked like the heavy rain was keeping people away for the time being.

He left the door open a crack, so he had light, dim as it was, to work by and pulled off his shirts. By all the angels in heaven, it was cold. He tried to ignore that, and the fact that his skin puckered into goosebumps, and unwound his bandage. It was soaked through with blood, but at least it was dry and dark, so the wound had stopped bleeding. He'd have to take care that he didn't pull the scab loose. He could ill afford to lose yet more blood.

As the bandage came away, Mal noted with relief that the wound was clean. It was still the full width of a broadsword, and it didn't look like it was healing. He rubbed his finger gingerly over the surface of a craggy scab. It came away feeling damp from blood that oozed through the cracks. So it hadn't entirely stopped bleeding.

He dipped a clean edge of the bandage into the water and dabbed at the wound. It hurt to touch it. It was probably best to just bandage it up again.

He undid one of the strips of cloth he used to bind up a sleeve and wrapped it tightly around his waist. His ribs stood so proud of his skin that it alarmed him, but he pushed his

fears away, there was nothing he could do about it anyway. He hurried to finish the bandaging, tied it up tight and scrambled back into his tops. Then he washed the old bandage. The blood was dry and soaked in so didn't come away. But it was brown and as most of his clothes were brown anyway, some of it from blood from his many battles, he doubted it would be noticed.

His hunger was back too, so he took a pebble from his purse and popped it into his mouth to suck. It might help fool his stomach as it fooled his mouth that filled with water just at the thought of food.

Mal froze as the hairs on the back of his neck rose. He was being watched. Very, very slowly, his ears searching for a sound, he turned around and took a frightened gasp of air. It was the one-eyed man. He stood in the shadows, barely visible, staring.

'What do you want?' Mal said his voice low.

The man didn't move, just stared at him with his one cold, glittering eye.

'What do you want?' Mal shouted.

'What should I want?' Mary Constance said from the doorway.

'Who... Sister?' Mal said. 'Do you see him?'

'See who?'

Mal pointed at the space, but the man was gone. How could he have.... Mal turned back to Mary Constance and realised something else, the nun was holding a trencher topped with pottage in one hand and a mug of ale in the other.

'What are you eating?' Mary Constance said.

'What?' Mal said, fished the stone out of his cheek with his tongue and palmed it. 'Nothing.'

'Open your hand.'

'I don't have anything,' Mal said but he was unable to look

Mary Constance in the eye, and he felt such an idiot for trying to lie.

‘Show me.’

Mal slowly opened his hand and held it out to her, his gaze fixed on the ground.

‘A stone?’ Mary Constance said. ‘You’re sucking on a stone?’

Mal didn’t know what to say. He had no words to explain.

‘Mmm,’ Mary Constance said. She didn’t look happy. She put the food down on a barrel and said, ‘Show me around.’

‘Around?’ Mal said, and he couldn’t stop himself from staring at the food.

‘Yes, around,’ Mary Constance said. ‘Ed tells me you’re struggling.’

‘I am trying my best,’ Mal muttered and his stomach started to tie itself in knots. He didn’t understand what was going on. If she was going to throw him out why did she arrive with food? Was it some cruel taunt to show him what he craved the most before he was thrown out with nothing. It wouldn’t surprise him. It was exactly what the sheriff would have done.

‘Well?’ Sister Mary Constance said.

It was almost impossible for Mal to tear his eyes from the food but he turned and waved his hand at the stores. ‘I’ve stacked things in as best I can,’ he said, but it sounded like he was whining. The sheriff hated whining, or anyone trying to explain their way out of trouble.

‘As best you can? Tell me, do you think it’s best for something in a heavy, wooden box to be placed on top of something soft and shapeless?’ Sister Mary Constance said as she stopped in front of a pile that leaned precariously to the left. ‘What if those sacks contained fruit? Or something breakable. I also wonder how you’re going to get those crates back down without walking all over the sacks.’

‘I... I don’t know,’ Mal said, and his gloom deepened. He was going to be thrown out for certain.

Sister Mary Constance shook her head and said, ‘It looks like today is going to be a quiet day. No ship can sail in this weather, so you need to go through this whole warehouse and sort it out. Do I make myself clear?’

‘Yes, sister,’ Mal said.

‘Fine,’ Mary Constance said. ‘Now, show me your money.’

‘What?’

‘When you got here you said you had money. I want to see it.’

‘You want to see it now?’ Mal said, and his hopes plummeted. What a fool he’d been to play this trick.

‘That’s what I said.’

‘But you have given me sanctuary.’

‘I gave you a job, that’s altogether different, but I won’t use people who are deceitful. Now you show me your money.’

Mal swallowed hard, and his fingers trembled as he reached inside his shirt. ‘Here,’ he said and pulled out a worn leather purse that looked full.

‘Give that here,’ Mary Constance said and snatched it from Mal’s resisting fingers.

He could hardly bear to look as she worked the drawstring loose and looked inside.

‘But... there’s no money here. It’s filled with stones, round, coin-shaped stones.’

‘There is money in there,’ Mal muttered but couldn’t hold Mary Constance’s gaze.

‘Is that so? Very well, show me.’

‘Here,’ Mal said. He dug around for a bit and pulled out two ancient degraded coins that barely passed muster as farthings.

‘Well, no trader would accept that.’

‘No,’ Mal whispered.

‘Why do you have a purse full of stones?’ Mary Constance said, and Mal shrugged. ‘Have you done this before? Pretended that you have money when you don’t?’

‘No,’ Mal muttered.

‘Mal, I don’t like liars.’

‘I’m... I’m not lying. I... I never said I had money.’

‘Yes you jo-’ Mary Constance stopped. ‘No, you didn’t did you? Well, it’s jolly odd.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘Were you ever going to tell me you had no money? Or were you just going to wait till payday?’

‘I was waiting,’ Mal muttered.

‘Have you eaten at all since you arrived?’

Mal shook his head, what could he say now?

‘For goodness sake, what foolishness. Why didn’t you tell me?’ Mary Constance said.

‘Because you didn’t want to let me in.’

‘And before you came to us? How long exactly is it since you ate?’

‘I don’t know... seven days, something like that.’

‘Well, no wonder you can’t learn, you damned fool. How do you expect to take anything in when you have no sustenance to keep you going?’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘What nonsense. I don’t like foolishness, Mal. Don’t do anything like this again, do you hear me?’

‘Yes, Sister.’

‘Fine, well, come with me,’ Mary Constance said and headed back to the entrance of the warehouse, ‘and have some food.’

‘That’s for me?’

‘Why else would I bring it here?’

Mal couldn't explain that he'd been taunted with the possibility of food more often than he'd been given it by the sheriff. So he just said, 'thank you,' checked that she hadn't moved, then took great lumps of pottage and rammed it into his mouth. He nearly choked on it in his haste to get it down. It vanished and was followed by the trencher, a stale piece of bread and hard as rock on the outer edges but soft and tasty where the juices from the pottage had soaked into it. Best not to risk the nun changing her mind. Then he took the mug of ale, wondered why the nun was still there, and downed it as quickly as possible. It was so much food his stomach ached with being overfull and a wave of nausea washed over him.

'There's no doubting you were hungry with that display,' Mary Constance said. 'Next time though, I want you to eat like a civilised human being not some kind of rabid beast.'

'Yes, Sister,' Mal muttered.

'Ed thought you weren't going to the kitchen because you were stealing food,' Mary Constance said and settled herself on a barrel.

'Did he?'

'He'll come round if you do a proper job and for that, you need to speak to him more. He tells me you haven't joined him and the lads for an ale of an evening either, even though you were invited.'

'I didn't have any money.'

'I am about to remedy that,' Mary Constance said and counted out a pile of pennies. 'I pay warehouse staff two and a half pennies a day. You've worked for me for three days so far, so that's six pennies and two farthings. Tomorrow, I'll give you your wage for Friday. After that you can wait for each Friday to be paid, is that clear?'

'Yes, Sister, thank you,' Mal said and picked up the money

with trembling hands. It was more cash than he'd ever held in his life.

'Sort out the mess in this warehouse, Mal, or your next pay will be docked, do I make myself clear?'

'Yes, Sister,' Mal said and watched the nun as she ran through the rain back to her office.

Then he looked down at the coins in his hand. He'd been paid, early and with no quibbles, and he'd been fed. This had never happened before. A most unaccustomed thought that he should do his best for Sister Mary Constance took hold of Mal's mind.

He opened his purse, counted out eight stones, put them in a little pile and put the coins in his purse. For the first time in a very long time, he felt a spark of hope.



Nearly noon, Mal thought, as he put a bale down and counted the chimes from the church bell as it rang the quarter-hour. He'd been counting down the time since the morning. He'd woken up hungry. Granted not as hungry as before, but hungry, and this time he was going to savour his food.

'You done there?' the trader said and put his bundle down on top of where Mal had put his.

'What?'

'You look distracted, young man,' the trader said, 'and I need to get my goods unloaded as quickly as possible.'

'Yes of course,' Mal said and headed back outside to take the next bale being untied from the back of a mule by a young boy. He hefted the bale and headed back to the warehouse, but his mind wasn't on it.

It was on the kitchen. The place that belched out the smell of baking bread and roasting meat and.... He couldn't have the

meat that would be more than he could afford and he had to watch his money.

The bells chimed again, this time for noon. Before the last bell had sounded there was a rush of people heading for the kitchen laughing and shouting greetings to each other. Finally, after watching all week, he was about to join them.

‘That’s it,’ Mal said as he brought in the last bale.

‘It’s about time,’ the trader said and rubbed his hands together. ‘I can’t wait for lunch.’ And with that, he was off.

Considering how eagerly he’d been waiting for the noon bell, Mal hesitated. Much as he’d hated the sheriff, he was coming to realise that his complete control removed the need from his men to plan their own lives. They trained, fought, cooked, ate and slept when he ordered it. If they needed anything else he left them to wait on the outskirts of a town whilst he went in to get it. It meant that Mal had never bought a thing for himself or spoken to anyone other than the men in the sheriff’s band. Now, for the first time in his life, he was about to buy his own food. He took a deep breath, squared his shoulders and marched resolutely to the kitchen.

It was hot, astonishingly so, almost like stepping into an oven after the cold of the day outside, and it was full of people. Half the men had their back to him in a queue that snaked towards the kitchen counter. The other half sat at the trestle tables near the door, wolfing down their food and deep in conversation.

Mal joined the queue, his heart hammering in his chest, as he slowly shuffled forward. So far so good, nobody was even looking at him, never mind challenging his right to be here.

And then the man before him took his food and walked off, and Mal was staring at the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen. Her face glowed with a sheen of perspiration. Her cheeks

were bright red from the heat, and little golden curls escaped from behind a scarf and framed her face.

‘Yes, can I help you?’ Anne said.

‘What?’ Mal muttered.

‘What do you want for lunch?’

‘Food,’ Mal said and felt an idiot.

‘I guessed that. Would you like some bread?’

‘Yes.’

‘Pottage?’

‘Yes.’

‘Fish?’

‘Fish?’

‘It’s Friday.’

It took a moment for Mal to understand then he said, ‘No fish.’

‘How about some ale?’

‘Yes,’ Mal said, ‘please.’ It was only then that he wondered whether he had enough money for this feast. Well, it didn’t matter now, for now, he could just watch as this perfect woman ladled the pottage into a bowl.

‘Are you the new warehouse man?’ Anne said.

Mal stared at her till she arched an eyebrow in query, watching him back. ‘Yes, yes I am.’

‘Welcome to the convent,’ Anne said. She cut a slab of bread, put that on top of the pottage and poured out a mug of ale from a large barrel. ‘There you go,’ Anne said. ‘You can eat it at one of the tables.’

‘What?’

‘Eat at the table,’ Anne said, waving him away, ‘I need to serve the next person.’

‘Oh... yes...’ Mal said and felt his face grow even hotter as he pulled out his money and stared at it for a moment, uncertain

of how to pay.

Anne looked into his hand, took a coin and said, 'go.'

'Thank you,' Mal muttered, gathered his food and hurried away. His original plan was to take his food back to the warehouse, but that had changed now, now he wanted to stay.

He selected the far end of a trestle table that was unoccupied and gave him a good view of the kitchen, including the serving girl, sat down and started on his food. It was funny that he'd thought of nothing else this morning, but now... now he had something else altogether to think about.

'Well, well, well, who do we have here?' Ed said looming into view. 'I see you've finally decided to join us.'

As Ed, John and Pete settled about him, Mal decided it was best not to point out that they were actually joining him. 'Yes,' he muttered.

'Why the sudden change of heart?'

Mal considered saying because he'd finally been paid but remembered that Ed had suspected him of eating the stock and he didn't want to give him anything to gossip about. So he said, 'It's warmer in here.'

'That's true,' Pete said. 'And easier to eat at a bench.'

Mal nodded and looked the lad over, he guessed he was around fifteen and skinny, he had yet to bulk out. The same couldn't be said of John who was also watching the beautiful kitchen maid.

'Do you know her?' Mal said and instantly regretted the question as John turned back to scowl at him.

'That's Mistress Anne Cook,' Ed said. 'The convent's chief pudding maker and the head chef's daughter'

'And she's mine,' John growled.

'Oh... are you betrothed?' Mal said.

'Not yet, but everyone knows she's going to marry me.'

‘No she isn’t,’ Pete said.

‘Shut up, Pete,’ John said.

‘I won’t, and you can’t make me. Everybody knows Mistress Anne is going to marry Sir Ingram.’

‘Aye,’ Ed said. ‘There’s no way you can beat one of the baron’s men, John. You might have good prospects but you ain’t nobility.’

‘She’ll never marry Sir Ingram over me. He’s an ass.’

‘A rich ass,’ Ed said, ‘and you’d better mind what you say about one of the baron’s men.’

Mention of the baron shook Mal out of his mournful discovery that the most perfect woman he’d ever met was already spoken for. ‘Which baron? Baron Castlemere?’ he said forcing the sound up through his throat. It cost him so much to ask it.

‘Who else could it be?’ Ed said. ‘Of course it’s Baron Castlemere.’

‘Of course,’ Mal said. What a bloody stupid question. Which other baron might it be in the man’s own county?

‘I’m not worried about Sir Ingram,’ John said. ‘When the baron comes for his visit you’ll see; Anne will send Sir Ingram packing.’

‘Why would she do that?’ Ed said. ‘You have to be realistic, man.’

‘What do you mean when the baron comes?’ Mal said breaking in.

‘He’s about due. He always comes just before Christmas to pay his sister a visit.’

‘His sister?’

‘She’s our abbess, boy you do still have a lot to learn,’ Ed said.

‘I suppose so,’ Mal said. By all the saints, what was he going

to do? He spooned up the last of the pottage, downed his ale and said, 'I have to go.'



Mal pushed his way out into the courtyard and gulped in the cold air. By all that was holy, what was he to do? He couldn't stay here it was far too dangerous. If the baron found him here he'd kill him for sure. He ran for the gate. It was wide open and only a few traders were milling about finishing off their lunch and packing their goods for their continuing journey. They wouldn't stop him, and he couldn't see any other of the convent staff who might recognise him.

He could go south, that would work. If he went far enough beyond the county's borders nobody would know him. He had some money now so he could at least buy food to get him part of the way.

What then though? What about when he ran out of money? He couldn't ask for sanctuary, and nobody else was likely to give him a job.

His dagger. He had to get that back, it was the only thing he had of any value and if the worst came to the worst he... What would he do? Was he really contemplating life as a thief? Did he have a choice? He was homeless, and he had no family. He had no resources other than the skills he'd learned under the sheriff, and that fitted him for two things only, to be a soldier or a thief. Anyway, what difference would it make if he was thieving for himself rather than for the sheriff who worked for the baron?

Mal stopped. This is crazy. I can't do this, he thought. I never liked the thieving and the killing. I don't want to do it. But then what?

Whatever it is, Mal thought as he turned to Sister Mary

Constance's office; I need the dagger.

His courage nearly failed him as he got to the door. He took a deep breath and knocked. There was no answer, so he eased the door open and poked his head inside. No nun. He looked back at the merchants. Nobody was paying him any attention, so he slipped into the office.

It was a simple room with a desk that occupied most of the space and a shelf behind it that was packed with ledgers. If the dagger was here, it was probably in the desk, and all he had to do was go round and help himself. It felt wrong though. Even if it was his dagger, he felt like a thief being in this office uninvited.

Mal chewed on his fingernail. This convent wasn't a bad place. He had a roof over his head and food, proper food, better than anything he'd ever had before. He was paid too, and even if Sister Mary Constance looked unimpressed, it wasn't only at him. She had that same expression for everyone. Plus there was that girl... Anne. Mal shook his head; now he was just being foolish.

'Mal?' Sister Mary Constance said as she nearly knocked him over with the opening door.

'Sister!'

'Is something wrong?'

'No,' Mal said, instant denial was always his default.

'Then why are you in my office?'

'I was...' come on say it, Mal thought, ask for the dagger.

'Actually, it's as well you've come,' Sister Mary Constance said. She squeezed past Mal and proceeded to rummage in the cabinet under the desk.

'I need-'

'You need what?' Mary Constance said. She straightened up and plonked a pile of folded clothes on the desk. 'Here, for

you.'

'What?'

'Clothes, a shirt, tunic, braes, hose and shoes. The baron's coming, and I can't have you looking like a beggar.'

'For me?' Mal said. He was stunned to be given clothes. He'd never had anything new before and everything he'd been given was brand new, never worn by a living soul before. He felt a mad urge to burst into tears of gratitude. At the same time the baron was on his way and he had to escape. He couldn't take these clothes, grateful as he was for them. It was impossible and yet, how did he tell the nun that?

'For you,' Mary Constance said. 'It is the duty of the employer to provide their workers with clothes and food. Most provide it instead of money, but at the convent, we decided to pay people instead. We usually give our staff a Christmas bonus so they can buy their clothes. But you haven't been here long enough for that, and as I said, we need you to look smart now.'

'I... I,' how did he ask for his dagger now? 'Need to go away,' he gasped.

'You need to go away? Don't be stupid. You've only just arrived. Besides, the baron brings a huge entourage. We need everybody working at full stretch to keep things going and the baron happy.'

'But I don't know how to serve,' Mal said wailing like a baby. It was futile anyway because Sister Mary Constance wasn't going to let him go.

'You will not be asked to do anything difficult, just fetching and carrying. The serving staff will provide for the baron and his men when they are eating. As for the rest, well the merchants keep coming despite the baron's presence so you will still be doing that and providing some muscle when

necessary the rest of the time. Ed will tell you what you need to do.'

'Yes, Sister,' Mal muttered.

'Well then, what are you waiting for? Take your clothes and go. I have work to do,' Mary Constance said. She sat down at her desk, opened her great book and lost interest in Mal as she became absorbed by her list of stock.

Mal stood watching for a moment feeling defeated. If he dithered much longer, he'd irritate the nun, so he gathered the bundle of clothes up and backed out of the office.

He stood out in the cold, sharp wind for a moment under the arch of the convent walls. To his right was the road out, through the town and away. To his left was the courtyard and the short walk back to the warehouse. If he went right, he'd get away but be forever on the run. He'd be a man who'd betrayed the trust of the convent. He'd taken all their generosity and, like a thief, slipped away to a life of crime and hunger. That would probably end badly with his body displayed at a crossroad as an example to others. If he went back to the warehouse, and the baron discovered him, it was his head on a spike at the baron's castle.

Neither option appealed, and he wished there was something else, some other choice, another way to escape his fate. But that was it, fate. He was born under an unlucky star, and no amount of praying was going to change that. Well... if he was fated to die anyway maybe it was better to do it here. He turned left and made a dash for the warehouse.

It was cold and dark inside, but thankfully there were currently no traders shouting for his attention, so he shook out the shirt from the top of the pile of clothes and examined it. It was a good sturdy woollen shirt, well made and clean. He rubbed the tips of his fingers over the surface of the fabric. It

was rough but nothing like as rough as what he was wearing, his collection of scavenged clothes. He'd never been given anything new, let alone a complete change of clothes. His eyes welled up with tears, and with a gasp, he shoved the shirt into his face to smother the cry that was threatening to come out.

How was it possible that he'd landed here amongst these people who treated him like a human being, not a savage animal? If it wasn't for the imminent arrival of the baron, he would have believed himself delivered to paradise. He pushed that thought away, ripped off his old clothes and scrambled into the new.

It was an astonishing difference not to be dressed in rags. He felt warmer and he would be able to step outside with his head held high. He no longer needed to be ashamed of how he looked. He might even be able to speak to the beautiful Anne. He laughed that thought away. The beautiful Anne was already spoken for. Even if he harboured foolish dreams about her, they would never be realised.

A shrill whistle from outside jerked him out of his contemplation. It was time to get back to work and whilst he could he was determined to work doubly hard to properly show his gratitude for the clothes. Maybe it would work as a disguise too. Would the baron still recognise him if he wasn't dressed in rags?

Mal stood with Pete and John in the large warehouse and wondered what they made of his new clothes.

None of them had mentioned it. Then again why would they? It wasn't as if they were friends. He also hoped they wouldn't take exception to the scarf he'd fashioned from his rags. He hoped it covered his face well enough and made him unrecognisable. At least Ed hadn't said anything about it when he'd shouted for Mal to join them in the large warehouse.

It was truly a wonder of human ingenuity the large warehouse. Mal was amazed at its size and the amount and range of goods crammed inside.

'The baron arrives today,' Ed said as he plucked a straw from a nearby bale and chewed on the end, 'and you know what that means. At least John and Pete do. Mal, as the new lad you have to follow our lead. It all gets a bit crazy because the convent staff always get into a tizzy about the baron and making sure they keep him happy. It leads to a lot of unnecessary running around and shrieking. We will ignore that.

'We'll carry the heaviest of the baron's luggage to the guest hall. Mal, follow Pete or John they'll show you where to put it when you get to the hall, and then we bugger off. No hanging

about. You loiter, and you're bound to be called on to do some other pointless task. So deliver and then run back to the warehouse and back to our merchants.

'Aside from that, we've got kitchen duty tonight. We carry the food to the door of the guest hall. There we hand it over to the serving staff and then back to the kitchen quick as you can for the next load. Again, don't dilly dally, you'll just get in the way. Is that clear?'

'We've done it before. We'll be fine,' John said.

'Make sure that you are, and you, John, make sure you don't pick a fight with Sir Ingram.'

'For the love of our Lord, leave it be, will you? I'll not say anything.'

Mal listened to the exchange in a distracted way. His mind was on the baron. He'd have to be doubly on his guard and make sure he wasn't seen. He had to keep his head down and his mouth shut. Keeping his mouth shut was the easy bit, as to the rest well... time would tell.

A horn sounded from outside, and Ed tossed away his straw. 'That's them, now remember, do your carrying and then leave.'

Mal hung back as the rest of the men hurried outside. He needed them to be his cover, so he brought up the rear. He arrived in the courtyard as a large muscular man with a ruddy face rode in. It was fifteen years since Mal had seen the baron, but he wasn't much changed. He was wearing the same metal breastplate over his jerkin, and his wavy red hair was blowing in the wind much as it had all those years ago.

Mal's nostrils were assailed by a pungent smell of burning houses. He staggered back as the world faded before his eyes. He was a boy again clutching his mother's hand as his father and oldest brother were dragged away. His mother was screaming something like words but not words, something too

dreadful to have words attached.

‘Hey, no shirking,’ John said and rammed his elbow into Mal’s ribs. ‘You take that animal.’

Mal was wrenched back, back to the convent and the courtyard and the row of pack animals that trotted in behind the retinue of around eighty tough fighting men that rode in beside the baron. He pulled his hood down to nearly over his eyes, dropped his gaze and followed John’s back to the mule train. He’d unloaded so many pack animals over the last week that it was easy for him to loosen the load, hoist it over his shoulder and follow John again. At least John was good and tall. If he could stay at his back, he should remain unnoticed.

For the first time, he was now in the convent itself. They’d passed through the door beside the church that led to the cloisters, and Mal found himself in another, smaller, courtyard. All around this courtyard was a covered walkway, a sort of half-open corridor that abutted the church on his left and, he assumed, the convent buildings that formed the rest of the square. There were more nuns here than outside but no sense of peace as he might expect. They were all rushing about as much as the servants. Truly, the baron did put everybody into an uproar.

Mal followed John across the courtyard to a set of double doors and into a large hall. It was sparsely furnished with one table at the head and two long tables that ran the length of the room. The walls were painted with scenes from the bible. At least, Mal assumed so although his actual knowledge of the bible was shaky.

‘Here,’ John said, as they reached the bottom end of the hall. ‘The baron’s servants will be along to unpack any minute now. We leave the luggage here.’

‘Right,’ Mal said. He slid the pack off his shoulders to the

floor and, being careful to stay behind John, hurried back to the main courtyard.

The courtyard was heaving with men and animals now. Mal estimated that there were at least double the number of servants to the fighting men who'd arrived. Truly the kitchen was going to be busy. The baron was still on his horse shouting orders that didn't, as far as Mal could see, improve the situation at all.

He ducked his head and made for a mule near the convent gate and as far away from the crowd as possible just as Sister Mary Constance emerged from her office and surged through the crowd making a beeline for the baron. He spotted her at the same time and to Mal's alarm kicked his horse and pushed through the heaving masses towards the nun. Dear God, he'll see me plain as day here, Mal thought.

He ducked down beside the mule and hunched over the ties keeping the goods strapped to the animal. If he kept his head down, hopefully, he wouldn't be noticed. His hands shook, and his fingers felt thick and stupid as he tried to release the ties and keep the animal from drifting too close to the baron.

They were so close he heard the baron say, 'Ho there, Sister. How are you and your fair nuns today?'

'Happy to see you and willing to serve,' Mary Constance said.

'Nonsense!' the baron said.

Mal couldn't resist and peeped over the top of the mule as the baron dismounted and gave Sister Mary Constance a firm back thumping. 'You're cursing us as a damned nuisance, but we'll be out of your hair in short order. I give you my word. I have a few things I need to discuss with your mother superior. And, if I'm not mistaken,' the baron said and sank his voice to a conspiratorial whisper, 'she has run all the way to get here.'

‘She is always eager to serve,’ Mary Constance said.

‘And quite breathless, so I will take my time on a slow stroll to greet her. In the meantime, you can tell me how my fair county does.’

‘I’m sure you know far more about that than I do, m’lord.’

‘Perhaps, but you have traders coming back and forth across the land, you’ll hear things I don’t hear.’

‘I suppose that’s true. There is some concern amongst the traders over the recent death of Sheriff Moore.’

‘Good God is there? I would have thought there’d be general rejoicing. The man was a damned bur under my saddle.’

‘They’re worried that his killers haven’t been found and that lawlessness is on the increase.’

‘Well tell them not to worry,’ the baron said. ‘As I told the king, I’ll deal with the outlaws. They present less of a nuisance than the sheriff did. Not that I said that bit to the king. Now I see my sister is quite recovered so I’ll leave you to look after the rest of my rabble.’

‘Yes, m’lord,’ Mary Constance said.

Mal clung to his mule, embracing its warm and bristly flank, his mind racing. The baron didn’t like the sheriff? How was that possible? The sheriff had always told them he was the baron’s man, that everything he did was sanctioned by the baron. But if that was true, why was the baron so pleased by the sheriff’s death? He’d described him as a bur under his saddle. If he’d been such a boon companion, he’d never say that.

‘What the devil! Look where you’re going, you fool!’ a man shouted behind Mal.

He swung around and found himself looking straight at Sir Ingram.

‘You bloody well stepped on my foot,’ Sir Ingram said and

swung a backhanded blow at Mal.

It caught the side of his face, and he staggered backwards. He could have ducked, but it was better to take the beating. Higher ups got angrier if you avoided punishment. He grabbed onto the side of the mule, turned to hide his face and muttered, 'Sorry, m'lord.'

'Sorry? You're sorry? You got mud all over my bloody boots. I should have you whipped for that!'

'Sir Ingram, how can I help?' Mary Constance said and pushed past a group of interested observers who'd stopped to watch what they hoped might turn into a fight.

'This fool of a servant got mud on my boot!'

Mal kept his back to the knight still clinging onto the mule but shot a quick look at the nun, who said, 'I am sorry. If you have your manservant bring it over once you've had a chance to change we'll have it cleaned for you.'

'I don't have time to change, and I want this man flogged for his clumsiness.'

'I will reprimand him.'

'Flog him.'

Mary Constance pulled herself up to her full height and said, 'I will punish him in the way I see fit, Sir Ingram. He labours under my rules. If you wish for more, you will have to take it up with the baron.'

'You can be sure that I will, you insolent woman. Who the devil do you think you are anyway? Now, have that kitchen girl sent to the hall I want a word with her.'

'I will inform her father of your wishes,' Mary Constance said and watched as Sir Ingram stomped off.

'I'm sorry,' Mal muttered and hoped his shaky voice wasn't obvious. That had been too close a call.

'You steer clear of Sir Ingram. He's always looking for an

excuse to get somebody flogged,' Mary Constance said.

'Yes, Sister.'

'And go back to your warehouse, I've just sent a trader there, he's in a hurry.'

'Thank you, Sister,' Mal said and dashed off. He knew Sir Ingram, that was a knight he was all too familiar with. Unlike the other knights that had arrived with the baron, he'd visited the sheriff often. He always arrived at night, slipping into camp when it was dark. Then he and the sheriff would go off somewhere they wouldn't be heard and set to whispering.

The consensus amongst the men was that the two of them were up to no good, but nothing beyond that. The sheriff never told them anything. He never explained any of their missions and would clobber anyone who dared to ask. So all they did was watch and stay silent.

At least Sir Ingram hadn't recognised him, and that was a relief. It wasn't entirely surprising, Mal thought. He was the kind of man who only cared about himself and ignored those beneath him. Mal doubted he'd have recognised any of the men in the sheriff's band. For the first time in his life, he was grateful that he was so insignificant, but he couldn't bet on remaining unrecognised by everyone. He was going to have to be even more careful.



Anne turned from the oven with her row of cakes balanced on the wooden paddle and nearly upended the lot on her father. 'Look out! You taught me never to walk right up behind somebody when they're at the oven. Now you're doing it yourself,' Anne snapped and then felt instantly sorry about it. Father looked flustered, and that could only mean one thing.

'Sir Ingram wants to see us, Annie.'

‘Now? When we are at full stretch getting ready to feed the baron’s horde?’

‘It can’t be helped. Sister Mary Constance passed on the message, Sir Ingram wants to see you now.’

‘But you’re needed in the kitchen.’

‘Joe will deputise, now come on, the sooner we go, the sooner we can get back.’

‘But I’m not even dressed to see a knight,’ Anne said and then shook her head. ‘I’m sorry. I’m just trying to put this meeting off.’

‘It’s alright,’ Nick said and held out his hand.

It had been years since Anne had felt the need to cling to her father. Still, she was grateful for this gesture and took comfort as his rough, hard hand enveloped hers. He squeezed her hand and the two of them threaded their way through the kitchen and out into the cold yard where the baron’s pack animals were still being unloaded by an army of men. Then they were across the cloisters, also alive with servants, and they came to an abrupt stop at the entrance to the hall.

‘Look out,’ a muffled voice said from behind them and Anne just sidestepped a man carrying a load so tall he could barely see over the top of it.

‘Sorry,’ Anne said and was about to look away when she took a second glance. He seemed vaguely familiar only she couldn’t place him for a moment. Then she realised it was the new warehouseman, Mal. He looked different, and she wondered why then dismissed it as he vanished into the hall. She had bigger things to worry about.

She took a deep breath and glanced up at her father. He gave her a tight smile of encouragement, and the two of them stepped into the hall. It was a long, barrel-vaulted chamber with deep shadows. It was heaving with people, but Sir Ingram

stood out, holding forth to a small ring of disinterested looking men.

‘Damn you all, we need to do more to find out what happened to the sheriff,’ he said. ‘I saw the site of the massacre with my own eyes. Not a single man was left standing. You tell me which band of robbers in this county could pull off such a feat. The sheriff and his men were all fierce fighters. Even in an ambush, they should have prevailed.’

‘They didn’t though, and no trace has been found of the attackers either. They melted away like the morning mist,’ one of the other knights said.

‘It’s not good enough. They must be found, and so I’ll tell the baron.’

‘The baron’s made it clear he’s not interested. You’ve already told him your suspicions.’

‘And anyone else who’ll listen,’ a third man said with a snort.

‘Damn you all; I’ll make him listen!’ Sir Ingram said.

Nick cleared his throat and said on a bow, ‘Sir Ingram, you wished to see my daughter.’

‘What? Oh yes, of course,’ Ingram said and turned around.

‘Is this your little kitchen maid?’ one of the men said.

‘Is she not a gem of the first water?’ Sir Ingram said.

‘Without a doubt, all the same, Ingram, a kitchen maid?’

‘I will marry whoever I choose,’ Ingram snapped. ‘Come this way, Cook,’ he said and guided Anne and her father to a quieter corner of the room. ‘So you see Mistress Anne, I said I would return so we could speak, and here I am.’

‘Yes, Sir Ingram,’ Anne said and was annoyed that her voice shook. It was more intimidating than she’d feared to be in this room full of knights who were looking her up and down in a

speculative manner.

‘You can go now, Cook. It’s your daughter I wish to speak to.’

‘That’s as may be, Sir, but she is my daughter, and I will not leave her without a chaperone.’

‘Are you telling me that you don’t trust me? How dare you, you... kitchen servant.’

‘I am the head cook and have good standing in my community. Even if I didn’t, no respectable young woman would ever be left alone with her suitor, and well you know it.’

‘You lower classes are such prudes.’

‘And I thought knights were more gallant,’ Anne said and bit her lip. Don’t be stupid girl, she thought and don’t embarrass Father.

‘Oho, so you think me ungallant, do you? What would you have me do? Put you on some pedestal? Get all my fellow knights to bow to you?’

‘No... I just... you could treat my father with the respect that is his due.’

‘And you will fight his battles for him will you?’

‘She doesn’t need to,’ Nick said. ‘I can fight my own battles, and whether you like it or not, Sir Ingram, I’m staying.’

‘You think you can speak to me in that tone of voice, do you? When I am by far your superior?’

‘If things go the way you want them to, you’ll be my son-in-law one day, no matter how much you try to distance yourself from us. How will that make you feel?’

Anne gasped to hear her father speak so boldly. Oh Lordy, what would Sir Ingram do now? He was actually turning red.

‘Hah!’ he shouted and forced a grimace Anne suspected was meant to be a smile. ‘You are right of course, and I am trying to win Mistress Anne’s heart, am I not? So let’s start again.’

‘If you really wish to win my heart Sir Ingram you won’t banish my parents. It is very cruel of you to say we may never meet again after... after the wedding,’ Anne said. Her heart beat uncomfortably fast with the sheer folly of speaking in such a way to a knight, but she couldn’t help herself, she couldn’t lose Mother and Father.

‘It would be impossible for them to remain in your life. You will be a lady, and a lady doesn’t mingle with peasants.’

‘They are my family, my flesh and blood. How could anyone, let alone a lady behave in such an unbecoming way towards the people who brought me into this world?’

‘They are being compensated handsomely for your loss. They won’t suffer once you are gone.’

‘Do you really think money can make up for being banished from somebody’s life?’

‘Of course it can. You’ll see that you too will be perfectly happy. My land and my house will provide for all your needs.’

Anne looked up into the knight’s face, trying to understand him. It seemed it was impossible for him to think anyone could be unhappy if they had money. ‘I’m not sure...’

‘Nonsense,’ Sir Ingram said. ‘It will be a fine place to raise our children. And once you have a child, you will forget your parents.’

‘Once I have a... a child?’ Anne said. This man was going to take her to his bed, and the thought made her feel ill.

‘Of course. Why else would I marry? I am the last of my line, and I am in need of heirs, good strong boys.’

‘But what if I can’t give you boys?’

‘Of course, you’ll give me boys and a few girls no doubt, but we need not trouble ourselves about that, as long as I have a clutch of sons.’

‘What if I can’t?’ Anne said and felt sick to do this, but she

saw a chance, a way of getting away from this man. 'What if... what if my children are all sickly?'

'What nonsense is this? You are a peasant. You are notorious for producing hordes of healthy children.'

'Not my mother. I... I'm her only surviving child.'

'Annie,' Nick said and let go of her hand. 'What are you doing?'

'It's the truth,' Anne said and kept her gaze fixed on Sir Ingram so she couldn't see her father's hurt expression.

'What happened to the others?' Sir Ingram said.

'They all died as children. None of them even made it to their second birthdays, they just got sick and wasted away, and nobody could work out why.'

'Is this true, Cook?' Sir Ingram said.

'Annie's different,' Nick said. 'She's a fighter. She was a determined child from the day she was born. She fought even when she got sick, and we thought she would die like the others. She struggled on, and she never gets sick now.'

'I see,' Sir Ingram said and examined Anne so closely it made her squirm. 'You look healthy. I will take that as a sign. We will marry before Christmas.'

'Before Christmas!?' Anne gasped and reached for the knight's hand. 'No, please! Please Sir Ingram, give me this one thing, allow me a final Christmas with my parents. Please don't take me from them before that.'

'This is very tiresome,' Sir Ingram said and shook Anne's hand free. 'But very well. This is my one concession. We will marry in the new year.'

'Thank you,' Anne whispered and bowed her head. She'd tried to stand up to this man and failed, and in the process, she'd embarrassed and hurt her father. It left her close to tears.

'I will discuss the details with your father later. You may go now,' Sir Ingram said and waved them away with both hands.

'You shouldn't have done that, Annie,' Nick said as he made his way back outside.

'I'm sorry,' Anne said.

'Your mother would be very hurt if she ever found out that you spoke of all our other children.'

'I was desperate, Father. Can't you see? I wouldn't have done it otherwise, but I don't like Sir Ingram. He cares for no one but himself. And despite what he says I doubt I will be happy just because I have money.'

'He's right about one thing though, once you have children of your own you won't miss us. You will have their needs to look to. They will keep you busy.'

'And do you think it won't break my heart that they'll never meet their grandparents?' Anne said. 'Father how could you?'

'All the same, Annie, no good will come from trying to scupper Sir Ingram's proposal. Especially not when you drag your mother's name into it. Think how ashamed she would feel.'

'And what about me? What about my feelings? Mother is willing to lose her only child just for some money.'

'Anne Cook, you take that back!' Nick snapped. 'Don't you blacken your mother's name.'

'I'm not... I just can't... I can't talk to you now,' Anne said and ran away so that Father wouldn't see the tears that threatened to overwhelm her.



Mal eased his bundle down onto the floor at the bottom of the hall, being careful to keep his face turned away from the knights who were milling nearby. He kept his ears open

though. He was alert to any sound of approaching people and he, like everyone else, heard what Sir Ingram had to say about the sheriff. He was so surprised that for a second he looked straight at the knights. Fortunately, they were distracted by Mistress Anne and took no notice of him.

Mal ducked his head and set off for another load of luggage, but his mind was filled with speculation. What did this mean? He wondered as he dodged the servants on his way back to the main yard. Was everything the sheriff told us a lie? I never trusted him, but this? Wasn't he as thick as thieves with the baron? He made us believe the baron stood at his back and approved of everything he did. But now the sheriff was dead, and no finger was being lifted to find his killers?

He'd been surprised to hear the baron's description of the sheriff but uncertain. Why would he tell a nun the truth after all? But who could deny the evidence of his inaction now? Even his own men could see he was content to leave the sheriff's death unresolved and unavenged.

So much for the baron coming down on anyone like a great avenging god. Not for the sheriff, Mal thought, and a laugh was surprised out of him. His smile vanished quickly enough. He knew, as well as any man could, what the baron was capable of. That was why he'd always believed the sheriff. For if he wasn't the baron's man why did he let the sheriff take him and all the other boys his fancy alighted upon in the county?

This was strange. Mal hardly noticed as he hoisted another bundle and made his way back to the guest hall. Why, if he didn't like him, had the baron allowed the sheriff such leeway? Why was he left to maraud across the county? Why did the sheriff make regular visits to the baron's stronghold if they weren't, as the sheriff had claimed, as close as brothers?

Not that we ever saw them together, Mal thought, and that

made him stop in surprise. That was true, they never saw them. The sheriff always left us camped out in a field with only a distant view of the baron's castle.

'That greedy bastard's going to a hall with a blazing fire. He'll eat till his sides ache and drink till he passes out and we're left out here in the cold and the rain,' one of the lads said the last time they'd been to the baron's castle.

There'd been muttered agreement. And Mal had huddled against a stone wall, wrapped in the remnants of a blanket he shared with two others while he contemplated the wonders of heat and food and his stomach rumbled in empty protest.

Now he wondered whether the sheriff had gone to the castle at all. He must have done. They'd watched his horse travel along the road to the front gate. But perhaps his welcome had not been as warm as he always led them to believe.

Mal checked the hall as he approached and slipped inside, confident he was being ignored as much as the other servants. He put down his load with care. Working in the warehouse had taught him to do that, rather than to just drop things. And he risked another quick look around.

Mistress Anne was leaving the hall with her father. He couldn't make out what was being said, but she didn't look like a happy bride. You'd have thought any woman would be glad to marry a knight. Then again, Sir Ingram was an ass. Maybe being married to him was like being tied to the sheriff. Mal dismissed the thought. It wouldn't be as bad as that. At least she'd have a roof over her head and food.

Not my problem, Mal thought and headed outside again. He hadn't believed Sister Mary Constance that they'd all be needed to look after the baron, but it looked like she was right. Why anyone travelled with this much luggage, he didn't know. Especially when the convent provided plentiful food and a

fancy hall. He looked over the remaining beasts in the main yard. More than half had been led away, and some were being brushed down to clean the mud off their legs before being put to bed.

Mal had been informed by the sister that some of the animals would be housed in the small warehouse as the convent didn't have much in the way of stables. He wasn't keen on having to share his space with the lad who looked after the mules or of having to make sure the mules didn't try and eat any of his stock.

There were only a few beasts still needing to be unloaded, so Mal headed for them when the one-eyed man stepped out of Sister Mary Constance's office. Mal froze.

'No, not here, not now,' he muttered.

The man stood, slapping his gloves against his thigh, as he surveyed the courtyard. Mal took a shaky breath and ducked behind a mule. Is he real? Is he here or am I seeing things? Mal wondered. His hands shook with such fright that it was impossible to undo the ties holding the luggage in place on the mule and he needed to know. Mal peered around the rump of the animal, trying his best not to be seen.

'You there,' the man said, looking straight at Mal.

'Dear God!' Mal cried and fell backwards. He slipped in the mud and landed squarely on his rump. He scrambled back onto his feet and, dodging between animals and people, ran for the warehouse.

'Hey, come back here,' the man shouted. 'I have need of you.'

Mal shot into the warehouse, leapt over a pile of goods and crashed into the gap between. He lay flat in the dark hollow praying to all the saints he knew that he wouldn't be found and wished to God he still had his dagger.

‘Are you alright?’ Anne said as she peered over the top of the goods to give him an astonished look.

Mal nearly jumped out of his skin to see her and hissed, ‘what are you doing here?’

‘I came to-’

‘Never mind,’ Mal whispered. ‘Is he here?’

‘Who?’

‘The one-eyed man.’

Anne looked over her shoulder, towards the courtyard and said, ‘He’s on his way over.’

‘So you can actually see him?’

‘Of course I can.’

‘Don’t betray me, please don’t tell him I’m here,’ Mal said and frantically looked around. How could he get away? Could he get from here to the harbour door without being seen? And could he get onto a boat if he did?

Anne vanished from sight, and Mal heard the one-eyed man say, ‘Have you seen a man come in here?’

‘I’m sorry, sir, I didn’t see anything,’ Anne said.

‘Odd,’ the man said.

Mal held his breath. How could this be possible? How could he be here? He’d attacked the sheriff, and now he was here?

‘It’s alright,’ Anne said looking over the bales again. ‘He’s gone.’

‘Do you know who he is?’ Mal said, got to his knees and peered over the top of his impromptu cover.

‘Of course. That’s Sir Hugo, everyone knows him. He’s the baron’s right-hand man. The two of them are closer than brothers. Sir Hugo lost his eye when he leapt in front of the baron when someone was about to cleave the baron in two. The axe hit Sir Hugo in the face instead.’

‘He’s the baron’s right-hand man?’ Mal said. None of this

made sense. Something else didn't make sense about this either. He examined Mistress Anne again. It looked like she'd been crying. 'What are you doing here.'

'Nothing,' Anne said and looked away.

'Do you need something from the warehouse?'

'No.'

'So... why are you here?'

'It's nothing,' Anne said, but a tear slipped from her eye.

'Here,' Mal said and held out the tip of his makeshift scarf. It felt an inadequate gesture, but he had no idea what to do about a crying girl.

'Thank you,' Anne said, dabbed at her eye then took a determined sniff. 'This isn't very clean.'

'Sorry,' Mal muttered. 'Is this about Sir Ingram?'

'I don't want to talk about it.'

Mal supposed he wouldn't want to talk about it either and gave her what he hoped was an encouraging smile. He had other things to worry about anyway. He needed to understand how Sir Hugo, who'd run him through, who'd led the attack against the sheriff, who'd wiped out every last one of his fellow soldiers... How was it possible that this man was the baron's man? Not just any man either, but the closest of all his people to the baron. The problem was so boggling he could hardly think straight.

'Are you alright?' Anne said.

'Yes, I'm fine.'

'So why do you look so shaken and why were you running away from Sir Hugo?'

'It's nothing.'

'It didn't look like nothing.'

'Well, it was, alright?'

'If it was, then you won't mind if I go and find him and tell

him you're here,' Anne said and turned to leave.

'No!' Mal said and grabbed Anne's sleeve. 'Please, don't say anything.'

'Why not?'

'It... it's complicated.'

'You didn't even know his name, but you're hiding from him. Did you steal something of his?'

'No!' Mal said. 'I wouldn't do that.'

'Wouldn't you?' Anne said and looked him up and down. 'You've got new clothes haven't you?'

'Sister Mary Constance gave them to me,' Mal muttered and felt himself flushing.

'But before you looked like a beggar and beggars are conniving, thieving types.'

'I wasn't a beggar, I was just poor,' Mal snapped. 'And I wasn't the one sneaking about where I don't belong.'

'I was not sneaking about,' Anne said.

'Then what were you doing in my warehouse?'

'I was checking on my puddings.'

'Your puddings?' Mal said and felt like he'd dropped into some bizarre dream where nothing made sense.

'I have them in a cupboard at the back of the warehouse to mature. The kitchen is too hot for them.'

'But you've never come here before.'

'How do you know? You've only just arrived at the convent.'

This was true, and Mal had nothing to say against it. 'Please don't tell Sir Hugo about me.'

'Alright I won't,' Anne said. 'But in return, you will owe me a favour.'

'To do what?'

'I don't know yet,' Anne said and ran off.

What a strange girl, Mal thought, climbed out of his hiding

spot and crept to the door. The courtyard was mercifully clear of Sir Hugo, or anyone else who looked like a knight. But by Jove, what did he do now?

The question that bedevilled him ever since the attack was back fourfold. Why were they attacked? It made no sense. It never had.

The sheriff enforced the king's law across the county and put down any bands of thieves that popped up the moment they appeared. There was no way they'd been attacked by a gang. Even if they had been, they were a big troop, and they could have seen any thieves off.

But this, the baron's right-hand man leading a band of equally tough soldiers, men who really knew how to fight. They'd come down upon them like wolves and hacked everyone to pieces. Mal had only been saved by chance. He'd fallen first and been covered by a couple more bodies. Those same bodies had been turned over and stabbed again once the attack was over. Surely God protected me, Mal thought. It was clear now that nobody had been intended to live.

That's what had been so strange. When the sheriff went after thieves, they captured as many as they could. So they could be taken to the nearest town and justice seen to be done. The attack on the sheriff, on the other hand... no witnesses were wanted. Which meant that he was in more danger than even he'd assumed.

And what was worse was that it was the baron who was behind it. Or maybe the baron didn't know what his closest man had done? No, that couldn't be right. He wouldn't be so relaxed about the sheriff's death if he didn't know who was behind it. But for certain if he wanted to keep it a secret, he'd have made sure there were no witnesses. What was a fact though was that Sir Ingram didn't know who was behind the

## Sanctuary

attack. Why was that? Was he as disliked by the baron as the sheriff had been?

## 6

It had been five days since the baron's arrival, and Anne was in hourly dread of being called back to see Sir Ingram, but as yet it hadn't happened. She couldn't relax though because the call might come at any moment. Equally, his apparent indifference was upsetting. It was clear he didn't love her, for if he did he'd want to see her. He'd want to speak to her and, at the very least, he'd want to win her over. But no, he didn't seem to care. His intention was obvious. He wanted heirs and a wife that others would envy. It felt so shallow it left Anne feeling sick.

She'd tried to convince her mother and father to turn Sir Ingram down but to no avail. That left her feeling more alone than she had ever felt in her life. It meant that after the first couple of days of her begging and pleading with them they'd all just fallen silent. Anne felt like she could no longer talk to them, that they were as immovable as the harbour walls being buffeted by stormy tides. Nothing she said would shift them.

Her mother exasperated Anne because she believed with all her heart that marrying a wealthy man was a good thing, no matter how horrible the man was, and accepted her loss.

'But I'm still here,' Anne had screamed at her last night. 'How can you give up on me now?'

Father's position was even more hurtful though. Anne could

tell he thought the marriage was a bad idea but that he was powerless to prevent it.

‘What can I do, Annie? He’s a knight,’ he would say over and over again, no matter what she said to him.

How was it possible that a man who was so big and strong, who was the master of his domain, could just crumple when faced with a knight? How could her protector, the man she’d believed to be invincible, let her down so badly when she needed him most?

‘Well if they won’t fight for me I’ll fight for myself,’ Anne said. She slapped down the cloth she’d been using to dry her pudding bowl and marched out of the kitchen.

It was cold outside where a strong breeze whipped across the courtyard, and Anne wished she’d wrapped herself about with her cloak. Well, too late to go back now, she thought and hurried to the small warehouse. That fellow Mal was inside, as she’d hoped, dragging a massive bundle across the floor with the aid of a rope wrapped around his shoulders. He looked very much like a horse pulling a plough across the fields.

‘What are you doing?’ Anne said.

Mal jumped at her words and blinked down at her. ‘I’m trying to carry more than I can on my back.’

‘Why?’

‘I thought it might be quicker,’ Mal said. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘I need your help.’

‘You need my help?’

‘That’s what I just said. You’re not very clever are you?’

‘Why my help? Why not your father’s or... or John’s?’

‘I’m not talking to my father and John, well, I can’t ask for his help with this. Besides, you owe me a favour.’

‘I didn’t agree to that.’

‘It would be very shabby of you to refuse now.’

Mal sighed and said, ‘What do you want?’

‘I want you to come with me to see the baron.’

‘What?’ Mal gasped and took a step back. ‘No, I can’t do that. Besides, why do you want to see the baron?’

‘I’m not telling you if you won’t come with me.’

‘Well, I’m not. What makes you think I could get to see the baron anyway? I’d just be sent off with a clip to the ear. You need somebody important to help you speak to the baron.’

‘Someone like who?’

‘I don’t know... maybe Sister Mary Constance.’

‘Sister Mary Constance?’

‘She seems to be on friendly terms with the baron. At least it looked that way when he arrived.’

‘And she’s the daughter of a knight too,’ Anne said, warming to the idea.

‘Is she?’

‘She told me so. Fine, then I will go and speak to her,’ Anne said and took a deep breath to steel herself. Sister Mary Constance was not going to be easy. ‘You still owe me that favour,’ Anne said over her shoulder as she hurried out of the warehouse.

Sister Mary Constance was talking to a merchant when Anne arrived, and her courage nearly failed her at the thought that she’d have to wait. She’d been away from the kitchen for a long time too. People would start to miss her. Still, she had to see this through.

She’d nearly given up when Mal turned her down. He, like Father, obviously thought he could get nowhere with the nobility. He was so dead set against it that she could tell immediately she wouldn’t be able to shift him and she was usually very good at getting men to do what she needed.

‘Are you waiting for me, Anne?’ Mary Constance said, breaking into Anne’s thoughts.

‘Oh, yes, I... I need to ask you something.’

‘Well come into my office. It’s too sharp a wind to stand outside.’

‘Thank you,’ Anne said but found her confidence draining away as the nun settled at her desk. What had seemed so straightforward in the kitchen was starting to feel impossible. ‘I... I need your help.’

‘Do you? And this is for something your father can’t help you with?’

‘He won’t,’ Anne muttered.

‘Sir Ingram?’ Mary Constance said. ‘Is it wise to go against your father’s wishes?’

‘It isn’t wise, not at all, and he’ll be so angry, but I can’t do it, Sister. I can’t marry Sir Ingram and... and he won’t take no for an answer either. He has already made up his mind that we are to marry in the new year.’

‘I see. So what have you decided?’

‘I don’t want to be a nun but if I have to, I will, anything not to be tied to Sir Ingram.’

‘So you have not come to see me to help you become a nun?’

‘No. I was hoping... I want to speak to the baron, to plead with him to intercede.’

‘And you think I can get you in to see him?’

‘Mal thought you might be able to.’

‘Mal? You spoke to him about this?’

‘He owes me a favour,’ Anne said, and her cheeks grew hot to be surveyed as closely as she was by the nun.

‘Mmm,’ Mary Constance said. Her gaze remained fixed on Anne’s face as the clock tower bell started to chime and stayed there all the way till it tolled twelve. ‘Very well, we’ll go now.’

These things are best done quickly, lest you lose your nerve.'

'Now? But I'm needed in the kitchen to serve lunch.'

'Will you get into more trouble being late considering what else you are attempting to do?'

'No. I suppose not,' Anne muttered.

'Then there is not a moment to lose, come on,' Mary Constance said. She leapt up, grabbed Anne by the wrist and dragged her back out into the cold.

She was walking so fast that Anne had to take a run after every couple of steps just to keep up.



'Are you sure about this?' Mary Constance said, as the two of them reached the guest hall.

'I'm sure,' Anne said although she was trembling and certain that the nun could see it too.

'He might not be here or be willing to see you now. You have to be prepared for that.'

'Yes, Sister,' Anne said.

'Fine, then in we go,' Mary Constance said and stepped into the hall.

It was full of men, some seated at the tables eating, one group was playing dice, a few were standing around chatting. Right at the end of the hall, at the table that was raised on a dais, was the baron. To his right sat Sir Hugo and opposite them, leaning over the table, was Sir Ingram.

He looked angry and was saying loudly enough to be heard by the entire hall, 'I don't understand why you had my cousin and his men buried in Alderham churchyard.'

'I've already told you, Ingram, because it was the nearest churchyard to where they fell,' the baron said.

'But the village is abandoned. There isn't even a parish

priest in attendance. And that's not the only insult. Why are you doing so little to find the killers?'

'Hugo is looking into it.'

'He isn't doing much of a job if he's sitting here.'

'My men are looking,' Sir Hugo said with a sardonic smile. 'But the heavy rain after the attack obliterated all trace and, as you say, locals are rather thin on the ground, so there is nobody to ask.'

'I can't do it,' Anne said and took a step back.

Sister Mary Constance's grip tightened on her wrist, and she said, 'If you give up now there will be no coming back.'

'But Sir Ingram is there.'

'He may as well hear it straight away. Or were you planning on only telling him after you got your wish?'

'What if the baron says no? What if he says I have to marry Sir Ingram? He'll know then that I didn't want to marry him.'

'Have you made him believe you would be happy to marry him?'

'No, I mean, I didn't say I wouldn't either, but I did try to hint him away.'

'And he ignored you, didn't he?'

'He's determined to marry me.'

'Then it will take some hard speaking to convince him, and that may as well come from the baron.'

'I don't know,' Anne said. She was terrified now that she'd got to this point and backing away so that she was pulling the nun's arm back with her.

'Sister Mary Constance, have you come to see me?' The baron shouted across the hall as he leapt to his feet.

The whole hall fell silent as every man turned to look at them and Anne felt like she might faint with fright.

'I've brought a young woman to see you,' Mary Constance

said. She pulled Anne along as she strode down the centre of the hall to the baron. 'This is Anne Cook. She would like to beg a moment of your time.'

Anne gave the baron and Sir Hugo a hasty curtsy and then cast Sir Ingram a glance before looking resolutely back at the baron. Sir Ingram didn't look pleased.

'What can I do for you, Mistress Cook?' The baron said grinning down at her.

'Please, sir,' Anne said, and her voice was soft and breathless. 'Sir Ingram has asked me to marry him.'

'Ah, so you're that young woman. Well, well,' Baron Castlemere said, 'you are a pretty young maid and no mistake. I can see why Sir Ingram speaks of little else. Some of his fellow knights have damned him to hell for boring on about you, but I have to say, his words don't do you justice.'

'It's as I told you, m'lord,' Sir Ingram said, 'she is a diamond of the first water. With a wife as beautiful as this, her ancestry is irrelevant.'

Anne was surprised by his interruption, but she supposed it was to be expected. Sir Ingram was unlikely to just stand by in this situation.

'Your mother came from lowly stock too did she not, Ingram?' the baron said.

Sir Ingram stiffened as he said, 'My mother was the daughter of a soldier, m'lord. It was a travesty that he was not knighted.'

'All the same, see how you reacted to that very mild question? How will your sons feel when they are grown up and asked the same question?'

'I will school her. Within a few months, you will never be able to tell she is anything but a lady.'

'There are conventions, Ingram,' the baron said, 'and they

are there for a reason. And all the training in the world won't remove the fact that you married a kitchen maid.'

'Sir James took a commoner for a wife, and you said nothing against her.'

'She was the daughter of a wealthy merchant and well educated in the arts of managing a house, sewing and music. What can this girl do?'

'She can learn anything she needs.'

'Can you, Mistress Anne?' The baron said looking at her in a penetrating way.

'I... I suppose so. I can read, and that isn't a common skill in a woman, as well as cook and sew although I have never attempted music.'

'Is that so?' The baron said with a chuckle. 'Maybe you will do after all.'

Anne took a deep breath and said, 'But what if I don't wish it, m'lord?'

'What do you mean?' The baron said and leaned forward so that his face was inches from Anne's.

'I... I don't like Sir Ingram,' Anne said. 'I don't want to marry him.'

'You insolent ingrate!' Sir Ingram snapped. 'Know your place! How dare you say such a thing before the baron.'

'I'm sorry,' Anne whispered. 'But you want to separate me from my family. I can't... I just can't do it.'

'You will adapt.'

'It seems she doesn't want to Ingram,' the baron said.

'It has nothing to do with her. Her father has agreed. Besides she will never get a better offer.'

'Well, Miss Cook?' The baron said. 'Are you going against the wishes of your father?'

'He... he didn't really have a say. He can't stand up against a

knight.'

'I imagine it's difficult, yes.'

'He wasn't at all reluctant,' Sir Ingram snapped. 'He was willing enough to hand over his daughter, and I wasn't stingy with the bride payment either.'

'Please, m'lord, don't make me marry Sir Ingram. My father will understand when I explain it to him.'

'Will he indeed?' The baron said. 'You are giving up the chance to change the fortune of your whole family after all.'

'I know,' Anne whispered. But she couldn't hold the baron's gaze anymore and found herself staring at the stained wooden boards of the table.

'You are being rejected, Ingram,' the baron said.

'Nonsense,' Sir Ingram said. 'She will marry me.'

'I don't think so,' the baron said. 'I was willing to consider the match if the girl was suitably presentable. She is that but, she doesn't want to marry you and that, you never told me.'

'She will come round.'

'Will you, Miss Cook?' the baron said.

'I would sooner become a nun, m'lord,' Anne said.

'That sounds definitive,' the baron said. 'The natural order would dictate that you don't suit. And the young woman would rather take up holy orders than marry you, Ingram. You must look for a wife elsewhere.'

'I won't have it, sir. She is mine.'

'She isn't. Let's have no more discussion on the matter. Sister, take this girl back to her father,' the baron said and waved them away.

'Yes m'lord, thank you,' Mary Constance said, grabbed Anne by the arm and pulled her away.

'Ouch, that hurts,' Anne said as she hurried past the staring men and out into the cloisters.

‘Better me than Sir Ingram,’ Mary Constance said. ‘You’ll have to be very careful now, at least till the baron leaves, for Sir Ingram won’t take this setback well.’

‘But the baron told him we couldn’t marry.’

‘That’s as may be, but men don’t take well to losing and you’ve just humiliated Sir Ingram in front of everyone.’

‘But you told me to speak to the baron with Sir Ingram there.’

‘Indeed, it couldn’t be helped. All I’m saying is that whether he heard there and then, or later from the baron, he’s never going to take this lying down. So you keep a watch on yourself.’

‘Fine, I will,’ Anne said, glad at this point to simply be away from the baron and Sir Ingram.

‘Will you be alright breaking this news to your father?’

‘Oh dear,’ Anne said. ‘I hadn’t thought of that yet, but yes. I can explain to Father on my own.’

‘Wait till after lunch,’ Sister Mary Constance said, gave Anne a nod and hurried away.

Mal, wake up,' the sheriff said and poked him hard in his side with the tip of his scabbard. Poke, poke, poke, he went. 'Wake up, wake up, wake up,' he said each time.

'I'm up,' Mal said, scrambled to his feet and forced open his eyes. It was pitch black and quiet. What? Mal thought, where am I?

Then it all came back, he was in the warehouse, the sheriff was dead, but his side was throbbing. It was time to check on his wound again. He'd been able to ignore it whilst the baron was here since he was kept busy shifting and carrying as well as avoiding the baron and all his men, most especially Sir Hugo.

Fortunately, that knight hadn't come looking for him again. It seemed that the first time in the courtyard he'd just been trying to get the attention of any labourer, and he'd hit upon Mal. That came as a relief, as did the knowledge that he could survive a visit from the baron without being spotted. In fact, it would be a miracle if he was able to get near the baron for he didn't encourage the common people to approach him.

At the same time, was it worth the risk to stay? Probably not, which brought him back to the ever present dilemma of how he got away. He'd done some asking around of the sailors and the cost of passage was higher than he'd guessed it to be.

When he worked out how much he was paid and how much he had left at the end of each week it would take him the better part of half a year to save up the fare.

He'd wondered about simply stowing on board till he overheard a couple of sailors talking about their last stowaway. That poor soul had been tossed overboard. There was also the question of what he did once he landed on foreign soil. It was hard enough to find work in a place where you spoke the language, how would he cope elsewhere?

No, it had been panic and fear driving him to want to cross the sea. Now he wondered whether he might be better off just leaving the county. If he was away from the baron's lands would he be safe? He'd never been quite certain of the relationship between the baron and the sheriff. Sometimes the sheriff would curse the baron and go on about how he was the king's man and reported straight to the king and at other times he seemed to bow to the baron.

All in all, the visit had given him a lot to consider, Mal thought as he reached for a small oil lamp he'd liberated from the kitchen and stored under his bed. He needed some light if he was going to check the wound for it was still dark outside. In fact, he had no idea what the time was, but his side ached too much to be able to sleep so he might as well check on it now.

He coaxed a small spark to light his lamp and then whisked off his top. He gasped at the cold; he had to get this done quickly. He undid his bandage and peered down at the wound. It was hard to tell in the dim flickering yellow light, but it looked like it was starting to heal. All around the edge of the scab was a growth of pinkish skin. What was more worrying was that the wound felt hot to the touch and tender. The throbbing got worse when he probed the wound with his

fingertips too. What could he do about it aside from bandaging it up again? If only he could reduce the pain.

‘Come in here,’ Sister Mary Constance’s voice drifted through the window.

Mal leapt to his feet as the nun pushed open the warehouse door and stopped dead, a torch burning in her hand. ‘Sister!’ Mal said, grabbed his shirt and held it in front of him hoping she hadn’t spotted his wound.

‘Good God, what happened?’ Mary Constance said.

‘Nothing,’ Mal said, turned his back and pulled on his shirt and tunic.

‘Well, I have a trader by the name of Hinch with some cock and bull story about needing to get back to his sick wife which is why I’m here at this ungodly hour. Take in what he’s got and then all the bales with the crescents have to go.’

‘Yes, Sister,’ Mal said. He pushed the warehouse doors open to find himself being examined by a well-dressed man. His cloak was edged with fur, and an insincere smile was etched across his face.

‘My boy will help with the loading,’ Hinch said and flicked his head in the direction of a lad who was already working to get the first bundle off a mule’s back.

‘As you’re in a hurry I suggest you help too, Hinch,’ Mary Constance said. Then, much to Mal’s surprise, she propped the torch in the sconce by the warehouse door and got to work bringing the bales with the crescents out of the warehouse. ‘And put out that damned lamp, Mal. It’s a fire hazard in this place.’

‘Yes, Sister,’ Mal said and snuffed the lamp out. He hadn’t realised it was a hazard, but it explained why Ed didn’t have any lamps either. As he worked, he also wondered exactly what the nun had seen and what she might say about it.

With the four of them hard at work, well three anyway, Hinch was not the sort of man to put himself out for anyone, the job was quickly done.

‘That’s it,’ Mary Constance said, ‘I’ll see you to the gate, Hinch.’

‘There’s no need for that, Sister.’

‘I believe there is, now come along,’ Mary Constance said.

Mal watched her walking along beside the merchant till he was out through the gates. The sky had started to lighten, and kitchen staff were drifting through the courtyard to start their morning shift. Mal watched them with only half his attention certain that the nun was going to come back and interrogate him. Instead, she headed for the kitchen and Mal heaved a sigh of relief. Maybe she had nothing to say after all.

As his day had clearly started and he was wide awake from the exertion of the morning, he decided to try and set the warehouse to rights. He was heading into his third week working here, and he was starting to get the hang of the job. He’d at least realised that a badly packed warehouse increased the hard physical work he had to do and took up too much time. So he’d taken to watching the men in the large warehouse. He’d become so good at passing unnoticed when he was with the sheriff that he’d become one of the man’s scouts. He now used his skill to good effect, watching Ed, John and Pete.

From them he’d learned all sorts of things that Ed hadn’t bothered to tell him, like the best way to stack the various goods, how to handle loads and even how to tie things up so that the knot didn’t slip resulting in a cascade of falling goods.

Fortunately, that had only happened once to him and not with anything breakable. So he’d been able to repack it before his mistake was discovered. It did leave him feeling annoyed

with Ed who clearly wasn't interested in having him around.

'Here, I brought you a caudel,' Mary Constance said from behind Mal.

It gave him such a fright that he jumped and then spun around and stared at her. 'What?'

'A caudal,' Mary Constance said and held out an earthenware mug filled with a gently steaming milky liquid.

'What's a caudel?' Mal said and took the mug cautiously from the nun. It was warm to the touch and perfect for his cold fingers to wrap around.

'Don't you know?'

'No,' Mal said looking down into the frothy interior. It looked good.

'They take the ale that's started to turn sour, warm it and whip in an egg and some honey.'

That sounded so ridiculously delicious that Mal wondered why it was being given to him. 'Thank you,' Mal said watching the nun as he took a sip. It was the most wonderful rich and creamy drink he'd ever had, and it took considerable discipline not to gulp it down. It was better to savour it, and that would be easier if the nun left.

Instead, she took a sip from her mug, found a place to sit down and watched him as closely as he was watching her.

'That injury you have. When did it happen?'

Mal contemplated denying that he was wounded then dismissed it; she'd already seen it anyway. 'A while back.'

'Before you first came to us?'

'Yes.'

'Show me.'

'There's no need,' Mal said and took a step back. 'It will heal.'

'Possibly, but it looked to me like you were run through and

I want to see it. I can't have my workers going off sick because they've picked up a fever.'

Mal examined her for a moment trying to decide what to do, then gave up the internal struggle. Who was he fooling anyway? She'd made her demand, and he had no choice but to obey or be thrown out. He put down his mug, turned his back on the nun and pulled his shirt off. Then he stood, shivering from cold and fear, holding his shirt clutched in front of himself, as if that would give him cover from her examination.

'This wound goes right through your side,' Mary Constance said as she examined first his back and then his front. 'How did it happen?'

'Accident,' Mal muttered

'Looks to me like you're very accident prone if all the scars on your body are anything to go by.'

'Yes.'

'What have you been doing for this wound?'

'I've kept it bound up tight.'

'Not this morning.'

'I didn't have a chance to do it before you arrived.'

'Alright. So let's see this bandage of yours.'

Mal reached behind the barrel where he'd hastily stuffed his bandage when the nun arrived and held it out to her.

'Mmm, this looks like rags made from your old shirt.'

'Yes, Sister.'

'You need a cleaner bandage. Follow me.'

'Into the convent?' Mal said. Bad enough that the sister saw his wounds but heaven help him if it became general knowledge that he was injured. That would lead to gossip and questions from all the wrong people.

'Yes, to the infirmary,' Mary Constance said.

'No,' Mal said.

‘Don’t be foolish. The infirmary has all the salves and bandages; it will be easier to treat you there.’

‘No, please.’

‘For goodness sake, man, why the devil not?’

‘I can look after the wound myself.’

‘I’m not so sure of that,’ Mary Constance said and glared at him.

Mal tried to hold her gaze, but in the end, he was forced to look away and fixed his eyes on the hem of her habit.

‘You’re a damned nuisance,’ Mary Constance snapped. ‘You wait here, and I’ll be right back.’

Mal picked up his mug and took a slow sip as he watched the nun vanish into the fastness of the convent. He tried not to think about her and what might happen next as he took another sip of the caudal. It was cooler now but still delicious. It’s rich creaminess enveloped his tongue, and the sweetness was like nothing he’d ever had before. Well... once before when he and a couple of the other lads had raided a farm and got into the farmer’s hive. They’d been stung good and proper too, but the sweetness of the honey had made it worthwhile.

He shook his head to banish that memory and polished off the last of the caudal. He gazed down into the brown bottom of the mug and wished it was full again whilst he savoured the warmth that crept over him and the pleasure of having a full belly first thing in the morning. He’d never been as well fed as he was at this convent. To have a guaranteed meal every day was a wonderful thing and every time he settled down to eat he thought about how much he’d like to stay.

But now that the nun knew about his wound, what would she do now? And why, if she was about to send him off, did she give him a drink?

His stomach lurched with fright as Sister Mary Constance

emerged from the cloisters and made her way back to him.

‘Alright let’s take a look at it then,’ she said, and Mal obediently removed his shirt again.

He was relieved that they were standing amongst the goods of the warehouse so that nobody else could see them. And he was relieved that Mary Constance didn’t insist on moving him to the entrance where the light was better.

‘I have a healing salve I’m going to spread over it, that and the clean bandage should do the trick,’ Mary Constance said.

She applied the salve with such vigour it was all Mal could do not to yelp and jump with pain. Instead, he clenched his jaw and stood as still as he could.

‘Done,’ Mary Constance said as she pulled the bandage tight and did it up with an intricate knot. ‘Now, we need to talk.’

Mal feared as much, but he could do nothing beyond saying, ‘Yes, Sister.’

‘Sit,’ Mary Constance said and settled on a box.

Mal sat down opposite her, making sure he didn’t select anything squishy and watched the nun all the while. She had a deep scowl etched across her brow.

‘I do believe,’ Mary Constance said, as she looked around the warehouse, ‘that you are one of the sheriff’s men.’

‘Me?’ Mal gasped, shocked that she just came out with it, and not even as a question.

‘I’ve been thinking about it for a while now. You appeared a couple of days after we’d heard about the sheriff’s death and you move like a soldier, not a beggar. There was something wrong with the impression of a beggar, but it took me a while to realise it was the way you carry yourself. Then I remembered that all the sheriff’s men were dressed in rags when they helped us hold off the town, and now this. That wound was sustained in a battle, and no farmer or merchant

would use a broadsword in self-defence.'

Blood drummed in Mal's ears, his head felt stiff and immobile, he couldn't speak, he couldn't even look up.

'The question is,' Mary Constance said, 'what I do with you now?'

'I will go,' Mal whispered.

'Well, that would be inconvenient. It's a damned nuisance training up men for warehouse work.'

'I... I don't understand.'

'I have invested quite a lot in you, Mal. You're being trained. I gave you clothes and a roof over your head. You can't just walk off.'

'But...' Mal said and stopped; he couldn't admit it. He couldn't say she was right but how could he stay under these circumstances?

'What I don't understand,' Mary Constance said, and it looked like she was checking the warehouse to make sure they were alone. 'Is why you have said nothing when you are the sole survivor of the attack, and the baron needs to know what happened?'

Mal took a sharp breath in, and the cold air cut the back of his throat. This was exactly what he couldn't tell her. 'I don't know what happened,' he whispered.

'You weren't there?'

Mal stared up at her, suddenly given a way out, an explanation he could use if he wanted to.

'Then how did you come by your wound?' Mary Constance said.

'I... I have nothing to tell.'

'Mmm, is that so? Well, we shall see. In the meantime I have to get to work, else we'll have merchants shouting the walls down in their impatience.'

## Sanctuary

Numbness stole over Mal's body as he watched the nun leave. He felt faint and breathless. That was too close. Mary Constance guessed his secret and even if he'd denied it she didn't believe him and what if she told somebody else?

Mal walked behind Ed as the man strolled down the warehouse, his hands behind his back, looking everything up and down. Every now and then he stopped to pull at a pile of goods to make sure it was properly secure. Mal hardly cared. Yesterday he might have, but that was before Sister Mary Constance had found him out.

The safest thing to do was to run, for surely the nun would tell somebody that he was one of the sheriff's men and that would eventually get to the ears of the baron. So he'd been thinking about his options. At least he'd kept his old clothes, bundled up into a pillow. He'd ripped up a shirt to make his scarf, but for the most part, it was all still there. So he could leave the clothes behind. They were a payment and one he hadn't fully earned yet so if he went off with them he'd be called a thief.

Mal nearly walked into Ed as he came to a stop and he realised, by the man's cocked head and look of enquiry, that he'd just been asked a question.

'What?' Mal said.

'I said, it's lunchtime, would you like to join us?'

'You're inviting me?' Mal said.

Ed shrugged and said, 'You're getting better at the job. Maybe one day you'll be a proper warehouseman.'

No thanks to you, Mal thought, but he said, 'Thank you.' It didn't matter since he was leaving and there was no sense in picking a fight. There never really was any sense in picking a fight.

Ed was watching him again, said, 'Head in the clouds,' and walked off.

Mal decided that he was supposed to follow him and had just caught up when they were joined by John and Pete.

'Have you heard the news?' Pete said, his eyes shining with excitement.

'What news?' John said.

'Something you'll really like to hear,' Pete said.

As Pete was grinning from ear to ear and not looking his way, Mal's first panicked thought that the news was about him subsided.

'Stop playing the fool and tell us,' John snapped.

'You take the fun out of everything,' Pete said.

'Why you little bugger,' John said and aimed a backhanded slap at Pete that he danced away from.

'Alright, I'll tell you, but only because it might pull you out of your doldrums. You've been a royal pain for days.'

'You still haven't said anything,' John said, 'and if you think I'm irritable now, you haven't seen anything yet.'

'You'll like this,' Pete said. 'I heard from one of the kitchen maids that Mistress Anne told Sir Ingram she won't marry him.'

'What?' John said and came to an astonished stop.

'It's true. Apparently Nick is so furious with his daughter that the two aren't even speaking. Which was how the whole thing came out, when the kitchen staff noticed the chill. I mean, usually Mistress Anne can do no wrong in Nick Cook's eyes, but this was surely a blow. I heard he was set to receive a

huge bride payment.'

So she'd done it, Mal thought. He'd wondered whether she might lose her nerve when nothing seemed to come from their talk for all she'd headed straight for Sister Mary Constance. He doubted he could have stood up to a knight and the baron and told them something they didn't want to hear. She was braver than him, that was for sure.

'She's not engaged to Sir Ingram?' John said.

'That's what I've just told you,' Pete said.

'Well, what are we waiting for?' John said rubbing his hands together with glee. 'I have a young maiden to speak to.'

'You and every other unattached man,' Ed said with a grin. 'Besides, what makes you think she'll accept you when she turned down a knight?'

Mal dropped back behind the three warehousemen as they joined the queue. He had no interest in what John thought, or in hearing about his passion for the girl. He was probably right to think he was likely to be looked upon with favour. He was a tall man, at least half a head taller than Mal, who was used to being one of the tallest men in the sheriff's company. It was surprising that he'd grown as much as he had considering how little the sheriff had fed them as boys. He assumed he came from tall stock, not freakishly tall mind you. Not like John. And John had a shock of unkempt hair so dark that it looked nearly black and a strong nose that prevented him from being described as handsome. Good enough, Mal assumed.

He leaned out of the queue snaking its way to the kitchen counter to try and see Mistress Anne. She was hard at work but looked wan and wasn't engaging in the banter she and the other serving girls usually shared. Evidently being in her father's black books was weighing on her.

Mal felt for his purse and squeezed it, trying to remember

how much money he had. Then he examined the produce in the kitchen. Maybe he could afford a rye loaf. That kept for a while, long enough for him to make a fast march south. London was his best bet. It was the largest city in the land and bound to have work for him. It had plenty of warehouses, and he could honestly say he knew how to do that now. London would be safer than Kirkthorpe at any rate.

He turned his head to listen, there were horses coming at speed. The thud of their hooves sounded loud in the paved courtyard and men were yelling at the intruders.

‘Out of my way,’ a voice shouted.

Mal recognised it immediately. He shot a look at Mistress Anne who’d turned white. She knew it too.

Sir Ingram burst through the kitchen doors, sword in hand and flanked by a group of armed men. ‘Anne Cook, I’ve come for you,’ he said.

‘No!’ Anne gasped. ‘Go away. The baron said I didn’t have to marry you.’

‘The baron be damned!’ Sir Ingram snarled. He strode towards her as people fell back tripping over each other in their haste to get away.

‘She doesn’t want you,’ John said as he stepped between the knight and Anne.

‘Out of my way, peasant,’ Sir Ingram said, flipped his sword and smashed John’s temple with the hilt.

He staggered sideways and collapsed, and Sir Ingram vaulted over the kitchen counter.

‘No, stay away,’ Anne shrieked and ran for the back of the kitchen.

‘You will be mine,’ Sir Ingram said, lunged forward, hooked her skirt and pulled her in.

‘Let go of her, you bastard,’ Nick said as he came at a run

swinging a massive frying pan. He brought it down on Sir Ingram but one of his men stepped in and the frying pan connected with his shield with an almighty clang. The man threw Nick off, and he crashed backwards into a kitchen bench, and crockery and food flew into the air in a cascade of flour.

‘I’ve got her, let’s go,’ Sir Ingram said as he wrapped his left arm about Anne and dragged her towards the door.

‘No,’ Nick yelled as he scrambled to his feet. ‘Don’t let him take her. Don’t be so damned cowardly you lot, stop them.’ He grabbed a cleaver from a nearby table and ran for the knight.

A cry went up. Half the men in the room, merchants mainly, bolted for the door. They were practically fighting with Sir Ingram and his followers in their urgent desire to get away. The rest snatched up whatever they could use as a weapon and ran, yelling, after them.

It had the potential to turn into a bloodbath. Mal had seen sufficient skirmishes between knights and enraged townfolk to know it never ended well. And it usually ended with the sheriff being brought in to round up the last of the troublemakers. Those who survived the process were handed over to the magistrates who inevitably sentenced them to death. A sensible man would therefore, keep out of this fight. Then again, nobody ever bothered to ask who’d been sensible. If you were in the middle of a mob, you were damned already.

Mal grabbed the nearest weapon to hand, a stone rolling pin, and ran after the retreating knights.

One of Sir Ingram’s men was guarding their backs as they pushed through the jostling crowd of enraged convent staff. Mal went straight for him. He raised the rolling pin as if he intended to strike from above and as the knight raised his shield Mal flicked the pin away and swooped downwards to

deliver a crushing blow to the man's knee. He howled in agony as he toppled over and men converged on him to kick and stamp at this now prone figure.

Mal leapt over him and kept going. He had one chance to get at Sir Ingram before he noticed his back was no longer protected.

The howling knight on the ground, yelled, 'Ingram!' just as Mal's blow aimed at the base of the knight's head was about to connect.

Sir Ingram swung round, sword at the ready and swiped at Mal as the rolling pin slammed into his jaw, and his grip on Anne loosened. Mal dropped the rolling pin, grabbed Anne's hand and pulled her out of Sir Ingram's arms. He dragged her back into the mass of convent staff as two of Sir Ingram's men closed about their knight.

'Get us out of here,' Ingram muttered. He clutched at his jaw and spat blood as he spoke.

His third man grabbed the collar of the man Mal had felled and dragged him away. The convent staff closed about Anne and Mal, howling their defiance as they backed off. But they kept their makeshift array of weapons at the ready should the knights change their minds. There was no risk of that, Sir Ingram and his men clambered onto their horses and took off at a gallop.

'And don't come back!' Nick yelled from the depths of the crowd.

'What the devil is going on?' Sister Mary Constance said as she arrived at a run.

'That bastard tried to take my Annie,' Nick said. 'But we're never going to let a knight bully us, are we lads?' he shouted to the crowd.

They were breathless and shaking with excitement and

dread in equal measure, but they gave a cheer nonetheless. It was false bravado, Mal knew. They'd already started to regret their actions and were wondering what would happen next. Mal was still standing next to Anne and her father who'd put an arm around the girl. She was white-faced, barely holding herself up and just short of bursting into tears if he was any judge of the matter.

'You attacked a knight?' Sister Mary Constance said to the crowd. 'Have you lost your minds?'

'He was about to take my Annie,' Nick said. 'And you know his intent was to ravage her so that she'd be forced to marry him. I couldn't allow that to happen.'

'Nick, you injured one of Baron Castlemere's knights. How well do you think he'll take this?'

Not well, Mal thought and sidled backwards out of the crowd.



It was only when he got back to the warehouse and felt something cold and slick dripping down his fingers that Mal realised he was injured. It looked like Sir Ingram had managed to slice his arm as he'd brought the rolling pin down. His sleeve was torn open and bloody. By all that's Holy, this was all he needed.

It left him queasy to examine the wound, one of the reasons he knew he wasn't born to be a soldier. Some of his fellows in the sheriff's band weren't bothered by the sight of blood. Fortunately, it looked like the cut itself was shallow. The damage to the shirt was more of a problem. Would he have to pay to have it fixed?

He shook his head. He didn't have time for that. He'd give it a rinse and then leave it. He was in enough trouble now that a

torn and bloody sleeve was the least of his problems. First, he had to bandage up his arm.

‘Mal, Mal are you in here?’ Anne said. She was speaking loudly, but not shouting, so he assumed she was trying to be unnoticed by the people outside.

Mal swore under his breath and stood up just as Anne rounded the barrels he’d set up as a temporary barrier around his makeshift bed. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘I came looking for you.’

‘Does your father know you’re here?’

‘He’s too busy fending off angry workers. Now that Sir Ingram has gone they’ve turned on him. I thought it best to play least in sight till they calm down.’

That wasn’t going to be for a while Mal realised and said, ‘I’m busy.’

‘And injured,’ Anne said as she spotted his arm. ‘Oh no, is it very bad?’

‘It’s fine. I just need to wrap it up tight, and it will stop bleeding.’ Mal said.

‘I’ll do that for you.’

‘There’s no need; I can do it myself.’

‘But you don’t have to. I can help you. And I can sew up your shirt too.’

‘Sew up my shirt?’

‘Well you don’t want it hanging open do you?’ Anne said and pulled a little cloth bag from a pocket in her skirt. ‘I have a sewing kit. You get that shirt off, and I’ll get it washed and sewn up like new before you know it.’

‘You have a sewing kit with you?’

‘Of course, you never know when it might come in handy.’

‘Oh,’ Mal said. It might be useful to have Anne fix his shirt, Mal thought. For one thing, she could take it to the trough to

clean the blood off. 'Alright,' he said. He stepped behind a pile of sacks of flour, whipped off the shirt and, keeping the flour between them reached around and held the shirt out to Anne.

'I won't be long,' she said.

Mal pulled the tunic back on. It was too cold to remain uncovered, and he examined the remnants of his old shirts deciding which was most expendable. He needed a bandage but it would mean one less layer to keep him warm when he escaped.

He should never have stayed, he thought, as he ripped a shirt to shreds and started tying it in a tight band around his arm. It was inevitable that something would happen to make him leave. This was the baron's land after all, and there was no escaping him.

'I'm done,' Anne said as she peered around the sacks, holding the shirt out in front of her. 'It's still chaos out there. Even the merchants are shouting at Father, those that haven't cleared out. Sister Mary Constance looks so angry. This is really serious isn't it?'

It was, but Mal didn't see the point of saying so. 'You'll be fine,' he said.

'But what about my father?'

Mal shrugged but was saved from saying anything by Sister Mary Constance who shouted in through the front door, 'Mal, I've got a boat for you to unload.'

'Yes Sister,' Mal said and gave Anne a meaningful look.

'Can't I stay?' Anne said. 'I promise I won't get in the way.'

'Why don't you go to the other warehouse?' Mal said and took back the freshly repaired shirt. 'Shouldn't you look in on John?'

'Why would I?'

'Because he took quite a blow to the head trying to protect

you and I thought you were partial to him.'

'I don't know,' Anne said.

'Well I don't understand why you keep turning up here,' Mal snapped and headed for the harbour still clutching the shirt. He felt bad to be so harsh, but it didn't really make much difference, after all, he was leaving.

He'd contemplated making a bolt for the outside immediately but he needed his dagger, and it would be better to have the cover of night. Then he'd have a good few hours before it was noticed that he was missing. So he made for the boat and tried to ignore the fact that his arm ached and lunch had been abandoned.

It felt like one of the longest afternoons of his life as Mal sorted out the cargo from the ship, but finally, they were loaded and headed back out to sea. Mal stripped regretfully out of his new clothes and scrambled into his old clothes. Then he spent some time tying the whole lot together again. He hated doing it, it reminded him of his old life, and he had no wish to go back to it. Then he folded the new clothes and put them on top of a barrel where they would be spotted eventually.

Keeping to the shadows, Mal made for the courtyard entrance and took a cautious look around. The place was unusually empty. Apparently, the merchants were steering clear till this situation with Sir Ingram was resolved. The staff were making themselves equally scarce. It looked like the people of the convent were holding their breath and waiting to see what happened next.

Mal spotted Mary Constance heading to the kitchen and decided this was his chance. He checked that nobody was looking, shut the warehouse door and hurried across to the nun's office. It appeared she never locked the door so he

slipped inside and took a look around. The dusk made the room look gloomy, but at least it was still light enough that he could make out the desk. He went around, pulled open the desk's cupboard and bent down to feel inside for his dagger.

'What the devil are you doing?' Mary Constance said from the doorway.

Mal's heart nearly stopped with fright as he shot up.

'Mal?' Mary Constance said. 'What are you doing here?'

'I need my dagger,' Mal muttered.

'Do you indeed?' Mary Constance said looking him up and down, 'and what do you intend to do then?'

'I... I have to leave.'

'You're running away? Now?'

Mal shrugged, what could he say?

'You're just going to leave the rest of us in the lurch?' Mary Constance said. 'After all, we've done for you?'

'I'm sorry,' Mal said, 'but I can't stay.'

'Do you want to?'

'What?'

'It seemed to me that you were settling in.'

'I was,' Mal whispered.

'And yet, after I took a chance on you, you run at the first sign of trouble?'

'I hit a knight. He'll kill me for it.'

'He'll be coming back one way or another. We humiliated him. And you know what he'll do to us if you run off don't you?'

'He'll take out his rage on whoever remains,' Mal said. He'd been trying so hard not to think about that as he'd plotted his escape. 'But that isn't my fault. Nick was the one shouting that everyone had to stop Sir Ingram.'

'So you know what will happen to him don't you?'

'Yes,' Mal muttered.

'Do you want to leave Anne without a father and at the mercy of Sir Ingram?'

'It isn't my fault!'

'You played your part, and if you truly want to be a part of this community, you'll stay and stand with the rest of us. You don't see anyone else running away do you?'

'They can't.'

'So why can you?'

'I have nothing to keep me here.'

'What about a job? What about people who care about you?'

'Who?'

'I quite like you.'

'You do?' Mal said and wondered whether the nun had gone mad. 'Why?'

'Because you're honest. You didn't steal any of the food even when you were starving, and you've changed your clothes. Another man might have gone off with the clothes.'

'The baron will kill me, and I don't want to die.'

'Why would the baron kill you?' Mary Constance said tilting her head as she considered this. 'Does it have anything to do with the sheriff's death?'

'Please... don't ask. Just let me go.'

'If you run now, Mal, you will be running for the rest of your life. It would be better if you stayed and faced up to what you've done. I have a feeling it isn't half as bad as you think.'

'What, battering a knight?'

'I will do what I can to help you, and I'll tell you something. The baron doesn't like Sir Ingram. I didn't mind taking Anne to see the baron because I had a feeling he'd take her side. He'll do whatever he can to disoblige Sir Ingram.'

'Why?'

‘I’m not entirely sure. Sir Ingram was a cousin of Sheriff Moore, and the two of them were thick as thieves. The baron never liked the sheriff, and by extension, he didn’t like Sir Ingram. Although you’ve met the man and know that he does nothing to ingratiate himself.’

‘How does that help me?’

‘You did what I suspect the baron would like to do; you nearly knocked Sir Ingram’s block off. He can’t make it too obvious, but it might save your life.’

‘It won’t,’ Mal said, and Sir Hugo’s face popped into his mind. He was more of a danger to the baron than the nun knew.

‘So you’ll take the coward’s way out?’

‘At least I’ll be alive,’ Mal muttered but the nun’s words hurt and he realised it was because he wanted her to like him. He’d never felt that for the sheriff so it came as a shock to realise he wanted it now.

‘I need you, Mal. John was knocked out cold and is still in the infirmary. He’ll not be able to work for a while and what with all the traders running off we’ll have a backlog when they come back.’

‘Wait... you just want a worker,’ Mal said and was filled with a tremendous sense of betrayal. ‘Anyone will do for you and... and you want a scapegoat. If I stay the weight of Sir Ingram’s wrath will fall upon me, and you don’t care about that. I’m the stranger, the one you can pick on. Who cares if I get killed?’

‘What nonsense,’ Mary Constance said and slammed her hand on the table. ‘And I’ll tell you one thing; you’ll never be anything but a stranger if you don’t stay. Communities need people who stick with them through the good times and the bad. You were happy enough to take my money when all was well but the moment it starts to look ugly you’re all set to

sneak off like a thief in the night.'

'I am not a thief!' Mal said, turned to the door and then back again.

'Then stay, and we'll do what we can to keep you safe.'

'What can you do?'

'Our abbess has some influence with the baron. On top of that, the convent is lucrative for the baron, so we have bargaining power. We won't abandon you.'

'It won't help. There's... there's more to this than you know.'

'So tell me.'

'It will put you in danger.'

'More than I am in already? Come on, Mal, you know as well as I do that confession is good for the soul.'

This was a choice, and Mal had never faced such a thing before. With the sheriff, he'd had no say in what they did and how they did it. Now, suddenly, he was faced with this; a place to work with a roof over his head, regular meals and, most astonishingly of all, a mistress who said she'd try to help. Who said he could be part of a community if he chose to be. It was so overwhelming a decision he felt sick.

He ran his hands through his hair, looked from Mary Constance to the door and the potential freedom beyond and said, 'The... the man who ran me through... it was Sir Hugo.'

For a moment it seemed the nun didn't understand then she said, 'Ah.'

'Do you see?'

'I think I begin to. The choice remains yours, stay or go. If you choose to stay then you and I will have to have a conversation with my abbess.'

'You still think you can help?'

'I believe so.'

Mal blinked at her and tried to think, but he was too

surprised for that. ‘Really?’

‘We look after our own, Mal. Now, I’ll leave you to make your choice. Your dagger is right at the back of the cupboard on the bottom shelf. If you decide to stay, we’ve got at least five days before the baron could get back. It’s two days ride to his castle, after all, and he only just left. On top of that, Sir Ingram has to catch up with him and convince him to come back, and Sir Ingram might not be in such a hurry to travel either because I suspect you broke his jaw. So we’ll only be seeing them after Christmas. Although we will remain on the alert in case Sir Ingram tries something more radical.’

‘Right,’ Mal said and watched in mounting surprise as the nun gave him a nod and walked away. He stared at the shut door and tried to gather his thoughts. He’d been so focused on running away that it was a shock to discover he had another option.

Mal lay staring into the darkness. In theory, he'd made a decision, he was going to stay. All the same, there was the possibility, the chance he could still run. His sensible side was yelling at him that he should take off. That he should go as far and as fast as he could, but his heart... for some reason, this convent was a sanctuary to him, and he didn't want to leave. He'd already tried to leave, three times, in fact, and yet he was still here.

If he could only be certain, confident in what he should do, then maybe he could sleep. The problem was, he had that doubt, at this time when it was quiet, when there were no distractions, when his mind could roam free, all his doubts came crashing in. And he was terrified.

Dark as it was, he knew he wasn't alone. He sensed the one-eyed man hovering a few inches above his face. Sir Hugo, staring back at him through the inky blackness. All his life he'd struggled to sleep and when he did his dreams were filled with nightmares but this was the first time those nightmares had followed him into the waking world.

'What do you want?' Mal whispered. 'Why do you torment me?'

He strained to listen, but all was silent. The being never spoke. He just appeared and stared and caused such terror

that Mal felt paralysed in his bed.

He feared that the spirit would always remain. No matter how far he ran, Sir Hugo would always find him. He couldn't understand how it was possible to be visited by the spirit of a living man. And how it was that the same living man didn't sense him. Mal doubted that he was being haunted by his spirit.

That almost made him laugh. He doubted his spirit could engender half the terror that the face with its dreadful scar caused him. He wished it did and that Sir Hugo was as uneasy in his bed as he was making Mal.

Dawn came as a relief especially because Sir Hugo's face didn't emerge from the gloom. Mal threw off his sacks and stretched, trying to shake the lethargy of a night without sleep.

'I see you decided to stay,' Sister Mary Constance said from the doorway.

Mal spun around, it was remarkable how such a big woman could move so silently, and gave her a shrug.

'That being the case,' Mary Constance said, 'put your decent clothes back on and follow me, our abbess wants to see you.'

'Now?'

'Yes now.'

'But it's only just dawn.'

'Our abbess is a lot like her brother; she acts quickly. And right now she's waiting for you so you'd best not tarry.'

'Do you know why she wants to see me?' Mal said and hurried after the rapidly departing nun.

'It could be because I told her all I know about you.'

'You did?'

'I told you I would.'

All the same, it came as a shock to Mal. Now even more people knew about him, and this one was related to the baron.

‘Was she angry?’

‘No,’ Mary Constance said, and made her way across the cloister courtyard to a broad staircase. ‘She is a confessor for her brother and knows far more than I do of what is going on in the county, and she merely seemed... intrigued.’

‘Intrigued?’ Mal said and didn’t know whether this was a good sign or a bad one.

‘Now,’ Mary Constance said as she stopped before a plain door. ‘Make sure you are on your best behaviour,’ and she knocked loudly.

Mal was shown into a large but sparsely furnished room. A crucifix hung on the wall over a bed, and on the side nearest the door a tall woman sat at a table writing. She was similar to the baron in that her face was liberally sprinkled with freckles and the hair that peeped from her wimple was a coppery gold. But she was far slimmer than the baron, and younger.

‘This is the man I told you about Mother Superior,’ Mary Constance said, put a firm hand on Mal’s back and pushed him forward.

Mal bowed deeply, straightened up and stared at the woman. He had no clue what he was supposed to say.

‘What is your name, young man?’ Mother superior Clara said.

‘Malcolm, my lady.’

‘Call me Mother Superior, no need for the lady.’

‘Yes, ma’am,’ Mal said and felt himself blushing.

‘And what is your family name?’

‘I don’t know ma’am.’

‘I see. Tell me, can you read?’

‘No, ma’am.’

‘And can you ride?’

‘Ride? Oh yes, ma’am.’

‘That’s good because I have a mission for you.’

‘For me?’

‘I want you to take a message to the baron.’

‘What?’ Mal said. ‘Forgive me, ma’am, but if I do that he’ll kill me.’

‘That is why I have written this letter,’ Clara said. She folded it and held a red tube of sealing wax over a candle so that the wax dripped onto the paper. She removed her ring and pressed it into the wax leaving a clear impression of a deer and a cross. ‘I was very angry that Sir Ingram dared to attack my convent and we have to act quickly to get ahead of him. Our message has to get to my brother before Sir Ingram can make his case to him. Mary Constance is of the opinion that you broke Sir Ingram’s jaw. I’m hoping that will delay him and that he may go home first to get treated and perhaps recover a bit before he continues his journey to my brother’s castle. I assume that you know Sir Ingram has an estate very near to us?’

‘Yes, ma’am. We went there a few times,’ Mal said. ‘It’s about a day’s ride from here.’

‘Precisely. So today he has probably arrived home. From his estate to my brother’s castle is another day. If he does decide to rest first, you have a day, two at the most, before he heads out to see the baron.’ The abbess stood and handed the letter to Mal, ‘Make sure you get there first.’

‘Yes, ma’am,’ Mal said and decided he was verging on madness even to agree to do this.

‘Mary Constance will help you prepare for your journey.’

‘Yes, ma’am,’ Mal said and bowed as he tucked the letter into his shirt. No doubt about it he was a massive fool.

‘Mary Constance,’ the abbess said as the nun ushered Mal out, ‘I hope you’re right about him.’

‘Right about me?’ Mal murmured as soon as the door was closed on the two of them. ‘What should you be right about?’

‘That you are trustworthy,’ Mary Constance said as she ran down the stairs two at a time. ‘All our safety relies upon you getting to the baron first. Now hurry. Go to the kitchen; Nick will have your supplies for the journey. I’ll meet you there with your ride.’

Mal was astonished at the turn of speed the nun could put on, it spurred him on, and he ran to the kitchen.

Everyone looked up as he dashed inside which made him come to a dead stop. It seemed the whole kitchen was expecting him. Nick was near the fire and, Mal noted, Anne was about as far away from her father as she could get.

‘I understand you’re going to see the baron,’ Nick said as he hurried over to the counter with a small cloth sack.

‘I am,’ Mal said.

‘Well I pray you can get us all out of this mess,’ Nick said lowering his voice so that only Mal could hear him. ‘I acted in haste yesterday, and I haven’t stopped regretting since. Not that I wanted Sir Ingram running off with my girl, mind you.’

‘Are you very angry with her?’ Mal said and flicked a look across to Anne who was watching the two of them with a mixture of bravado and fear.

‘Angry?’ Nick said. ‘No, I’m not angry. It would have been a wonderful thing to see my daughter a lady, and my grandchildren set up for life, and their children knights for generations to come but there’s no denying either that Sir Ingram is a bastard.’

‘Shouldn’t you just run away?’

‘And leave all I’ve built here?’ Nick said. ‘No. I’ll take my punishment and pray to God to protect me.’ He took out a small brown mug, filled it with a gently steaming liquid and

said, 'Here, have this, it's a fruit punch. It will give you the energy to keep going, and I've packed a meat pie for you along with the bread and cheese by way of a thank you.'

'A meat pie?' Mal said, suddenly things were looking up. He tossed back the punch the same way that Nick did and was bereft of breath and the ability to speak by the astonishingly alcoholic drink.

'God speed,' Nick said grinning at him.

Mal coughed his farewell, hoisted his supplies and, wiping the tears from his eyes, staggered outside.

'I'm guessing you've just had some of Nick's fruit punch,' Mary Constance said and held out a set of reins to Mal.

'Yes,' he wheezed. 'I've never had anything so strong in my life.'

'It takes a bit of getting used to,' Mary Constance said. 'Now, here's Brute. He's a mule, not as beautiful or fast as a horse, but he has stamina. Brute can keep going for hours after a horse would need to be slowed down to a walk to recover.'

'I like him,' Mal said and patted the animal on the shoulder.

'Also, your dagger,' Mary Constance said handing it over, 'and a cape. It's miserable weather; you'll need it for warmth.'

'Thank you, sister,' Mal said and hoisted himself into the saddle.

'We're all relying upon you, Mal.'

'I won't let you down,' Mal said and gave Brute a nudge with his heel. The animal trotted out of the convent and Mal guided him through the town at speed. The last thing he needed was an argument with a townsman today.

As they cleared the outskirts of the town, Mal pointed the mule down the path to the baron's castle. He resolutely ignored the voice in his head that said he was well dressed, well provisioned and had a mule and with that, it would be a

very easy journey to London.



Anne felt consumed by guilt as she watched Mal leave. This was all her fault. If she hadn't turned Sir Ingram down, none of the rest would have happened. Nobody would have got hurt. Nobody would be in danger, and nobody would have to be sent off to... she wasn't even sure what they were trying to do.

Nobody would tell her, so her imagination filled in the gaps with the most disastrous outcomes. The problem was, she feared her imagination wasn't wrong. Why else would people mutter, don't worry, when they couldn't look her in the eye and then hurried off so that she could no longer question them?

And her mother had been in floods of tears when Father told her what had happened. This was worse than the stony silence she'd had to endure from Mother since she told them she'd been to the baron.

'How could you?' Mother had gasped, looking genuinely shocked. 'How could you have been such a little fool?'

That stung and Anne said, 'He's horrible, Mother. How could you want me to marry such a monster?'

'You're spoiled. We gave you too much freedom and look where that has led us. You're a disobedient, spoiled girl who's ruined her chances at a better life. Nobody will want to marry such a headstrong girl.'

'I'm not spoiled. You don't understand. You never met him, and you wouldn't even fight for me when he said you could never see me again. How could you allow such a thing?'

Mother gasped, covered her mouth with her apron and said, 'You're a disobedient child!' And those were the last words she spoke.

Anne felt angry and hurt in equal measure and refused to unbend. Even after last night when Mother was behaving like Father was going to be killed. It shook her though, and prompted her to ask, as they were walking into the convent that morning, 'What's wrong Father? Why is everyone so afraid?'

He looked down at her, and instead of the disappointment she'd seen in his eyes for the last few days he just looked sad as he said, 'Never you mind Annie.'

'How can I not mind when everyone is so scared? What will Sir Ingram do? What will the baron do?'

'I don't know,' Father said with a sigh. 'But Mary Constance said the abbess has a plan.'

Which, Anne assumed, was why Mal was heading off with a bundle of food on the convent's mule. Even Sister Mary Constance looked grim as she saw Mal off which added to Anne's unease. She had to know what was happening, so she tossed her apron aside and hurried outside. Mary Constance would tell her the truth. She might not like to hear it, but she had to know.

She was about to call to the nun when John emerged from the cloisters, his head swathed in a bandage. Anne paused, she didn't want to speak to him. But she was in the middle of the courtyard staring straight at him so she couldn't pretend she hadn't spotted him.

'Mistress Anne,' he said as he closed the distance between them in a couple of long strides, 'how are you?'

'I'm fine, thank you,' Anne said. 'How... how's your head?'

'It feels like it's been split in two,' John said and attempted a smile, but it turned into more of a grimace.

'Should you be up? You look awfully pale,' Anne said.

'Aye well, Sister Mary Constance needs me, and we're a man

down. So I thought it best to leave the infirmary.'

'Do you know where Mal has gone?'

'How would I know that?' John snapped.

'I'm sorry, I thought you might know. Everyone is so on edge.'

'Probably best you don't know.'

'It isn't,' Anne said. 'I fear for my father's life.'

'It's a bit late for that.'

Anne gasped and said, 'don't tell me you think I should have gone willingly with Sir Ingram? Not you too, John.'

'Well no, I didn't mean that,' John said and winced as he took a step towards the warehouse. 'It's just... you don't attack a knight. Like you don't attack the baron or the baron's property. At this point, it's probably just as well the sheriff and all his men are dead, or we could expect a visit from them.'

'No,' Anne gasped. She was only thirteen when the sheriff and his band had turned up supposedly to protect the convent, and she'd never been more terrified. All the women were and with good reason as it had turned out. 'The baron won't punish us like that will he?'

'Who can say?' John said. He watched her for a minute before he said, 'You didn't come to see me in the infirmary.'

'I didn't go and see anyone,' Anne said, guiltily aware that she had run after Mal. 'It was all a bit chaotic yesterday.'

'Mmm, I thought you might care more for one who stood in Sir Ingram's way when he went for you. But then again, I wasn't the one who got you out of his clutches was I?'

'John... I never meant to lead you on. I'm sorry if you-'

'Leave it,' John said and turned away. 'No point in talking about that now.'

Anne nodded and watched as John made his slow way to the warehouse. It seemed every footstep jarred his head and

caused him pain. She should have felt worse for him, but she didn't. She also should have felt more grateful to him, she'd seen him step in front of Sir Ingram and be knocked down, but again, she didn't. Why am I so unmoved? Anne wondered.

That was something to be considered later. For now, she needed to talk to Mary Constance who'd just gone into her office.

'Where are all the merchants and traders this morning?' Anne said as she followed Mary Constance in.

'Watching and waiting,' Mary Constance said as she settled in her chair. 'But the need to make money will bring them back soon enough, and it's still early.'

'Sister, can I ask you a question?'

'If you must.'

'I need to know... that is, nobody will tell me, but I fear my father's life is in danger because of what happened yesterday.'

'I'm afraid you are right.'

It was a shock to have her fears confirmed so directly.

'Why?' she gasped and clutched the back of the chair that was drawn up in front of Mary Constance's desk to steady herself.

'Because commoners can't take up arms against the nobility. We might have got away with it if there had been a scuffle and Sir Ingram had won. But I'm afraid he lost and may have got quite seriously injured, and he won't have that.'

'He won't?'

'He's been humiliated, not once but twice,' Mary Constance said and opened her trading book. 'Once when you turned him down and the second time when he was outfought by a bunch of peasants who snatched you from his grasp. He will want blood, and the baron will have little choice but to give in to his demands.'

'But why?'

‘To set an example, Anne. The baron’s already had to deal with one peasant uprising so he’ll be sure to stamp down on anything that looks like the common people getting too uppity.’

‘And my father... he was the one who got everybody to help.’

‘In the normal scheme of things he could expect to be punished severely for that.’

‘Like the townspeople when they turned against the convent?’

‘Believe it or not, they got off lightly. Only the ringleaders were dragged off and executed. When the kingdom was shaken by the Great Rising the baron destroyed entire villages. He killed all the men and scattered the women and children. Even that was seen as generosity. Further south entire towns were wiped out when the peasants dared to march on London.’

‘So my father is going to be killed?’ Anne said, and her voice caught. This was what she’d feared all along but had been trying to deny. She felt sick and shaky. How could Father remain so calm with such a thing hanging over him?

‘Our Mother Superior is trying to prevent that.’

‘How?’ Anne said and walked agitatedly around the room.

‘By sending Mal with a message to the baron.’

‘Do you think it will work?’

‘I pray to God that it will.’

**B**rute was plodding along and Mal was so tired he didn't have the energy to push the beast any faster as they crested a rise and the baron's castle came into view. This was as close as he'd ever come to the castle. The sheriff had left them on this rise before he took the road that went down into the valley and then up again to the castle. The castle itself stood on the highest point of the coast at the top of a cliff. It looked particularly menacing today as black clouds piled above it in the dark grey sky.

Mal and the lads used to entertain themselves by imagining how they would assault a place like that and concluded it would be suicidal. The run up the hill would have exhausted most armies before they even arrived at the thick sheer stone walls. And all the while they could be picked off by bowmen and lobbed buckets of tar without a stick of cover to protect them. Nothing but grass, soft, tussocky grass, covered the hill. Hell to try and run through without tripping up and bugger all cover. All the rocks had been pulled out of the ground and used to build the castle. Any shrubs or trees cut up and used for firewood. The consensus was that the place was impregnable.

Even if it wasn't, this was the last place on earth Mal wanted to be. Yet, he'd pushed himself and his mount to their limits to

get here. He'd only stopped to snatch a couple of hours of sleep when Brute got too tired to carry on. After all too short rests for both of them, he got back up and urged the mule on his way. He was impressed by Brute's resilience. He also learned where he got his name because when he'd had enough he would come to a dead stop, and no amount of urging, cursing, pushing or pulling would get him to move.

The first time that happened Mal realised that in his haste he'd been pushing the animal along too fast. He had stamina, but no animal could keep running all day. So he dismounted, gave Brute some time to graze and took out the meat pie.

Despite the urgency of his mission and the pent up fear, the thought of having a meat pie had occupied much of his thoughts that first day. It was with pure delight that he bit into the perfect brown crust. Meat and gravy filled his mouth and he giggled at the pleasure of it. It was delicious. No wonder Nick was the master of his kitchen if he could produce wonders like this. Mal vowed that, should he survive this mission, he would save enough money to be able to afford a meat pie at least once a week. For some reason, that decision strengthened his resolve for his journey.

Now he dismounted and stood in the road examining the castle, certain that somebody was watching him back. There was no hiding on this ridge, and for sure the guards had their eye on the road that led nowhere else but to the baron's castle. He pulled the remaining half loaf of bread from its sack, broke off a piece, crumbled some cheese onto it, and took a bite whilst he contemplated his next move.

There wasn't much to consider. He had to ride there and announce that he had a letter for the baron. That would get him through the main gates. Then... then he'd have to face the baron, and he would know, without a shadow of a doubt, that

Mal was a deserter. The sheriff had drummed into them that the baron could sniff out deserters and would have them instantly put to death. If that wasn't bad enough, Mal was the only living witness to a massacre directed by the baron. As such he was a danger to the man, so another reason to put him to death.

For the hundredth time, Mal's sensible side told him to run. And for the hundredth time, he recalled that Sister Mary Constance had vouched for him. Nick Cook was relying on him to somehow save the day and Anne, well, he had a peculiar desire to protect her. They were paltry reasons when weighed against his own survival and yet it was enough to get him back on the move. He shoved the remains of the bread into his mouth, wiped his hands down his hose and got back into the saddle.

'Come on, boy,' he muttered as he flicked the reins, 'It's time.'

Mal kept his eyes fixed on the castle as they approached. He half expected soldiers to come flooding out to arrest him and was only slightly relieved when they didn't. Maybe the dramatic would have been better than this slow walk up to the gates being watched all the way by a couple of guards who stood at the entrance. Brute's hooves sounded loud on the drawbridge as they crossed to the first gate of the murder hole, the space between the two gates of the thick wall where defenders could trap and rain hell down upon any attacker in the form of arrows or burning pitch.

'What can I do for you, traveller?' the guard said as Mal pulled Brute to a halt.

Mal took a deep breath to steady his nerves and delivered the line he'd been rehearsing for the last two days. 'I have a message for the baron from the abbess at Kirkthorpe Convent.'

‘Is that so?’ the guard said and grinned at him.

Was he making sport of him, Mal wondered. Being laughed at was so far from what he’d expected that it threw him. ‘Yes, it is so.’

‘Let’s see this message then,’ the guard said, clicking his fingers as he held his hand out.

Mal had been obsessively careful with the letter all through his journey. He’d continuously checked that he still had it. All the same, he felt a moment of panic as he reached into his shirt for it. Thankfully, it was still there, and he held it, with the seal clearly visible, out for the guard to check. When the man looked like he was about to take it Mal flicked it away. ‘I have to deliver it in person.’

‘It doesn’t say that on the outside,’ the guard said, still grinning.

Oh, he was definitely enjoying himself, Mal decided, as he said, ‘You can read can you?’ The man’s face faltered, and Mal said, ‘I was ordered by the abbess herself to give this into the baron’s hands. So you won’t be touching it.’

‘All the same, young fellow me lad, we’re not letting you into the castle on the say so of a bit of parchment. You’ll have to show it to someone in charge,’ the guard said.

Pushing it up the chain of command was something Mal understood. He would never have dared to make a decision the sheriff might disapprove of later so he nodded and said, ‘Alright, call your sergeant so he can let me through.’ He felt a ridiculous amount of bravado to do it, but at the same time took comfort from his understanding. He knew the soldier’s life and the soldier’s ways, and it was easy to slip back into it.

‘You dismount in the meantime,’ the guard said. ‘I’ll get somebody who can read.’

Mal felt a prickle of premonition at that statement; it

sounded like the guard was going for somebody more important than the sergeant at arms.



Mal took his time dismounting and used it to get his bearings. The castle was quite basic. It had a squarish defensive wall that followed the shape of the bluff it had been built upon with fortified towers at each corner. On the furthest side, nearest the cliff, some buildings, stables, storerooms and barracks had been built against the castle wall. In the centre of the courtyard, a keep dominated the space and overlooked the castle walls.

This was the final position to fall back to should the first layers of defence fail. Its walls looked as thick as the outer castle walls and the massive doors no doubt hid yet another murder hole. They were closed, probably more as a defence against the weather than enemies today.

Aside from the guards at the main gate, and a troop of soldiers being drilled in the yard in front of the barracks, there were few people about. Certainly fewer than were regularly to be seen at the convent. That difference and the wind, Mal thought and pulled his cloak more tightly about himself. Nobody with sense would want to be out in it. It was bloody cold up here on the cliff edge, no matter how thick the castle's walls. He was grateful once again that Sister Mary Constance had given him the cloak.

The guards around him stiffened, it wasn't a big gesture, just significant enough for Mal to pick it up. Somebody important was on their way. He turned to look in the direction they were all now facing, and he froze. Sir Hugo stepped out of the keep, strolling along behind the guard that had gone off to find a superior.

Holy Mary Mother of God, what do I do now, Mal thought and risked a quick look outside. Was there enough time for him to take off down the hill on Brute? He doubted it. Besides, one well-aimed crossbow bolt would be all it took to stop him.

‘This is the man, Sir Hugo,’ the guard said and swept his arm in Mal’s direction.

Mal couldn’t move, his gaze was fixed on Sir Hugo’s face. He was so damned close he could see the red skin of the scar that made a jagged ruin of half his face and obliterated the eye socket. The other eye looked Mal up and down with scant interest.

‘You have a letter?’ Sir Hugo said.

Mal held it up before himself with both hands like a shield, ‘From the abbess,’ he managed to get out.

Sir Hugo leaned forward, so close now it was almost like when he’d run Mal through, and Mal felt he might keel over from fright.

‘Mmm, it looks right,’ Sir Hugo said. ‘Follow me, I’ll take you to the baron,’ and he turned back to the keep. Mal didn’t move, and Sir Hugo was a good ten paces away before he realised that he wasn’t being followed. ‘Come on,’ he shouted. ‘I haven’t got all day, and it’s damned cold out here.’

Mal forced himself into motion all the while praying under his breath that he’d get out of this situation alive.

‘In you go,’ Sir Hugo said as he held the keep door open. ‘The baron is in his hall, up the stairs,’ he said and pointed to a spiralling stone staircase that wound up around the inside of one of the keep’s towers.

Mal nodded and was about to head for the stairs when Sir Hugo tilted his head and examined Mal more closely.

‘Do I know you?’ he said.

Mal’s heart jumped, and he gasped, ‘No.’

‘You look familiar, but I can’t work out why.’

‘The convent,’ Mal said and hurried for the stairs. Good God but this was the wrong direction; he should be running for the outside not heading deeper into the keep.

‘I suppose it could be the convent,’ Sir Hugo said as he followed after Mal. ‘Have you been there long?’

‘No,’ Mal said and instantly regretted it. He should have said he’d been there for years but too late now. He had to climb faster and get away from these questions. So he put on a spurt of speed just short of a run.

‘You know, I don’t think it is the convent,’ Sir Hugo said keeping pace like some awful figure of doom.

‘I don’t know,’ Mal said and kept climbing upwards in a tight spiral. Where was that damned hall? How much higher did he have to climb?

‘I think it was somewhere else,’ Sir Hugo said and reached for Mal’s shoulder.

As Sir Hugo’s hand brushed Mal’s cloak, he shouted, ‘No!’ twisted his shoulder out of reach and ran up the stairs.

‘What the devil? Come here,’ Sir Hugo said and chased after.

Mal pounded upwards, gasping for air as he strained every muscle to get himself out of Sir Hugo’s reach. The knight was right behind him, his feet loud on the stone steps.

‘Get back here,’ Sir Hugo said and grabbed a handful of Mal’s cloak.

Mal twisted in his grip, landed on his side, kicked out as hard as he could, connected with Sir Hugo’s thigh and used the kick to propel himself upwards and out of the man’s grasp. He scrambled up the stairs on his hands and feet, kicked at Sir Hugo’s questing hands, managed to get back up and ran for the door a few yards beyond him. Sir Hugo crashed into him as he touched the door and trapped him against the wood with

the full weight of his body.

‘What the bloody hell are you playing at?’ he snarled and wrenched Mal around so that they were face to face, his breath blasting in gusts against Mal’s cheek.

Oh God, Mal thought and reached frantically with his free left hand for the door latch. He lifted it, and the two of them fell into the hall as the door swung open.

‘What the devil?’ the baron said as he leapt to his feet.

‘I have a letter from the abbess,’ Mal shouted as he wriggled out from under Sir Hugo and ran for the baron.

‘Oh no you don’t,’ Sir Hugo said. He grabbed Mal from behind by his collar, twisted it tight and practically hoisted him off his feet. ‘Don’t you move.’

‘I have a letter,’ Mal gasped. He pulled the now crumpled document from inside his shirt and waved it frantically at the baron who was staring at the spectacle in amazement.

‘What’s going on, Hugo?’ the baron said.

‘I’m not entirely sure, m’lord,’ Hugo replied.

His fate was now in God’s hands Mal decided as he stood on tiptoes so that he wouldn’t be throttled by the tight grip Sir Hugo had on his collar.

The baron gestured for one of his servants, all of whom had frozen as Mal came crashing in, to fetch the letter. He took it from Mal’s unresisting fingers and handed it to the baron with a deep bow.

‘Well, it is from my sister,’ the baron said as he first examined the seal and then broke it open and unfolded the parchment.

The baron’s face gave nothing away as he read. Mal tried to get his breathing under control and work out whether he could get at his dagger should things go badly. Was it better to attempt to fight his way out or to wait to be locked up,

tortured and executed? All in all, he'd prefer a quick death and trying to battle his way out would be the quickest death he could hope for.

'Mmm,' the baron said, looked up at Mal, folded the letter and said, 'everyone aside from Sir Hugo and his captive is to leave now.'

That's surprised them, Mal thought. He watched the servants and various hangers-on who'd occupied the room file out and cast him more than one speculative glance. He went back to watching the baron, surprised that he hadn't been sniffed out yet. Or maybe he had, and the baron was biding his time.

'Do I put him down?' Sir Hugo said.

'Not yet,' the baron said, rose from his chair, came round the big table he'd been seated behind and leaned on it to examine Mal.

I should be past caring, Mal thought. But to be examined this closely by one who had been a bogeyman to him his whole life left him feeling as frightened and helpless as a child.

'This letter,' the baron said waving the parchment, 'says you used to be one of the sheriff's men.'

Sir Hugo swore behind him in a manner that surprised even Mal. Well, that was it, now his fate really was sealed. 'Yes, my lord,' Mal said and was ashamed that his voice was so shaky.

'My sister tells me, furthermore, that you were present the day the sheriff was ambushed,' the baron said. Now he appeared to be speaking more to Sir Hugo than to Mal.

Sir Hugo spun Mal around, pinned him to a pillar and examined his face. His expression was so much like when he'd run Mal through that he thought he might collapse if it wasn't for the fact that Sir Hugo was holding him up.

'By God's blood and bones, that's why I know your face,' he

said, his head turned so that his one good eye could get a proper look. 'How did you survive?'

'Luck,' Mal whispered. 'Your sword went through my side.'

'Luck! You have the devil's own fortune to survive being skewered.'

'Apparently he does. For not only did he survive an attack by you Hugo, but my sister tells me,' the baron said waving the letter, 'That he also saw off Sir Ingram when the bloody idiot raided the convent to try and snatch away the kitchen maid.'

'You attacked Sir Ingram?' Sir Hugo said.

'With a rolling pin,' Mal muttered.

Sir Hugo laughed although Mal was failing to see the funny side to any of this.

'My sister was wise to send you to me,' the baron said, 'although she has sent me a very dangerous man indeed. Hugo, you can let go of him now.'

Sir Hugo didn't look inclined to let go but grudgingly stepped back. Mal took a deep breath finally able to fill his lungs as he turned to face the baron.

'I'm no threat to you, my lord, please, believe me.'

'My sister informs me you've been working as a labourer at the convent.'

'Yes.'

'Furthermore that you have said nothing of your past to anyone there.'

'If he said nothing how does the abbess have all this information?' Sir Hugo snapped.

'Apparently, because Sister Mary Constance found him out. And if anyone was going to do the finding out it would be her,' the baron said. 'She's a redoubtable woman.'

'All the same,' Sir Hugo said, 'we have a witness, and you were most specific about that.'

‘I was,’ the baron said and looked Sir Hugo up and down. He had the grace to look embarrassed.

Is this when they work out how best to kill me without anyone being any the wiser? Mal wondered.

The baron turned back to Mal and said, ‘Tell me, young man, where do you come from?’

Mal gazed in surprise at him for a moment, shouldn’t he know this? The sheriff said the baron knew everything, that he just had to look at you to know all your secrets. And then he’d punish you for them. ‘I’m... I’m from Alderham m’lord,’ Mal muttered.

‘Ah...’ the baron said. ‘Not one of my proudest moments that. How did you come to be in the sheriff’s hands?’

‘He... when we were fleeing from Alderham... I fell and lost the grip on my mother’s hand and at that moment... at that moment the sheriff galloped over, scooped me up and rode off before my mother even had a chance to turn around.’ It was the last he’d seen of his family, and his life had turned into a living hell, but he doubted the baron would care about that.

‘So you were one of his boy soldiers, were you? You did well to survive into adulthood.’

What could he say to that? He supposed it was true, but it was no help to know it.

‘You were with him for what, fifteen years or so?’

‘Yes,’ Mal muttered.

‘And yet, when your brothers in arms were killed your first thought wasn’t to find the law and get justice for them?’

‘Justice?’ Mal said. ‘I wasn’t cut out to be a soldier, m’lord. I felt sick to my heart every time I killed somebody and the men around me... I didn’t like them. They used us boys in any way they saw fit and...’ Mal stopped. How could he explain the horrors he’d endured?

'You didn't even want to avenge the other boys like you? The ones who'd been taken into this life without a choice either?'

'The boys who started out with me... the handful that survived into adulthood they... the older they got, the more arrogant they grew. We were used as the first line to be flung at the enemy, and we survived. It went to their heads. They'd go marauding into town womanising and getting drunk and causing mayhem as if they were the kings of the world.'

'So what did you do after the ambush?'

'I did what I've always wanted to do; I went home.'

'Why would you want to do that? There's nothing there now.'

'I know. I just wanted... I needed to go there. But there was nothing, and I couldn't even remember which pile of stones had been my home. I stayed for a while, lost, uncertain of what to do next. Till finally, I had to move...to find shelter and food.'

'And you went to the convent.'

'I was hungry, and the wound in my side ached. I hoped the convent might give me some food and a bed for the night and then I planned to find a boat that would take me away from here. Instead, Sister Mary Constance offered me a job.'

'She gave you work?'

'Yes, and money.'

'You had no money?'

'Sheriff Moore didn't allow us to keep any of the money we collected. We had to hand it all to him, and in exchange, he'd give us flat, round stones.'

'Stones! Why?'

'He had this game he liked to play. Every time we wanted something, like food, he'd make us pay him with our stones. Sometimes he'd give us what we asked for and sometimes he'd look at the stones and say, "What's this? This is just a stone,

boy. You can't buy things with stones," and throw it away.'

'That sounds like Moore,' the baron said.

Mal nodded, and that question that he'd had from the start came back. Now was the time to ask. If they were going to kill him he might as well have his answer. So he took a deep breath and said, 'Please m'lord... why did you have the sheriff killed?'

'Ha! Now that is the question, isn't it? Why, after all these years, when I have allowed him to run riot across my county, did I finally decide it was enough?'

Run riot? Mal thought, they'd certainly done that. But Mal had believed it was upon the baron's orders. 'You didn't want us doing... everything we did?'

'At times he was a useful bully boy, but for the most part, Moore caused me more grief than I liked.'

'So you had him killed.'

'He was plotting against me. I put up with his marauding because he was the king's tax collector, but that was too much. So I put a stop to it. The thing is, and this is why I believe my sister sent you to me, young master Malcolm; I suspect Sir Ingram was in league with him.'

'Oh!' Mal said. Suddenly all those clandestine night time meetings between the sheriff and Sir Ingram made sense.

'So now we have a common enemy, don't we?' the baron said.

Mal found the smile the baron turned upon him disturbing. At the same time, even if he was about to be used, he had a spark of hope that he might just get out of this alive after all.



'Hugo, get someone to bring us a drink. I need to think, and that requires lubrication,' the baron said.

Mal watched as Sir Hugo opened the door a crack and relayed the instructions. Mal took that as an opportunity to look around. The room was large but not as large as a hall, and it was highly decorated. Every wall was hung with tapestries mostly depicting young lords and ladies in woodland settings. The chairs all around were liberally supplied with cushions and heavy, embroidered throws. At the end of the room was a fireplace blazing away. Aside from the fire in the convent kitchen, Mal had never seen a larger fire indoors, and it made the place feel uncomfortably warm.

The baron's chair was placed directly in front of it so that when he was sitting there, he'd have his back to the fire and an excellent view of the room. The table was substantial and raised on a dais. The baron would look intimidating seated there, higher than the rest of his court with a raging fire behind him. Mal shuddered at the image.

'Sit,' the baron said and indicated a chair in the main part of the room, 'We need to talk.'

'Yes, m'lord,' Mal said and perched on the edge of the chair. The baron settled in the chair beside him, and Sir Hugo completed their semi-circle by occupying the chair opposite Mal. He leaned forward, watching Mal closely. Mal wondered whether he could take the two men if he had to fight his way out. He was the youngest of the three, but the baron was taller and heavier than him, and Sir Hugo was lean and wiry and as tough looking as any man Mal had ever come across. He didn't fancy his chances.

'Right,' the baron said. 'Tell us about Sir Ingram's attack. Leave nothing out. My sister didn't go into detail about it.'

'Well...' Mal said, paused to consider where he'd start and then described the attack in as much detail as he could remember. He finished with, 'I was aiming for the base of his

skull, but he turned at the last minute, so I landed up smashing his jaw.'

'You broke it?'

'I felt it give,' Mal said. 'And he was spitting blood.'

'So you broke some teeth too by the sound of it,' the baron said. 'On the other hand, if you'd hit his skull you'd have killed him and killing a knight brings a sentence of death. Which would have solved both my problems in one,' the baron said with a wolfish grin.

Mal decided it was best not to say anything. You never could tell with the powerful what it might decide them to do.

They fell silent when a servant bearing a tray with drink and three goblets tapped at the door and Sir Hugo let him in. Once he'd left Sir Hugo poured a golden yellow liquid into the finest goblets Mal had ever seen made from cut crystal and etched with gold. He was surprised to be included but grateful for the drink as his throat was raw and dry from his run up the stairs and scuffle with Sir Hugo. It was alcoholic though and burned his throat as it went down. Mal had no idea what it might be aside from sweet and intoxicating.

'Do you think,' the baron said, 'that Ingram knows it was you who hit him?'

'It's possible that in the chaos of the battle he didn't realise who hit him, but I wouldn't like to bet my life on it,' Mal said.

'Might he recognise you as one of the sheriff's people?'

'I doubt it. The sheriff made sure to keep himself out of earshot, and the two of them out of sight when Sir Ingram dropped by.'

'So he was a regular visitor?'

'More so in late months.'

'Mmm,' the baron said and stroked his beard. 'But you had no idea what they were plotting or even if they were plotting

anything?’

‘The sheriff never told us what he was planning. The first we ever knew of our missions was when we arrived somewhere, and he’d tell us to attack, or round people up. Even when we went to France, he didn’t explain till we merged forces with the rest of the army there.’

‘You went to France?’

‘I did.’

‘You must have been very young at the time.’

‘I was old enough to carry a pike.’

‘So you saw battle?’

‘I did.’

‘You’re tougher than you look.’

Mal shrugged, he’d never felt particularly tough.

‘The sheriff never held you boys back and left the fighting to the older men?’

‘He did the opposite actually,’ Mal said. ‘He threw the boys into the fray first like... like the first line of defence on a castle. Once we were knocked down, and the opposition was tired, the grown men stepped in.’

‘So you were the first wall of the castle.’

‘More like the grassy slope. We didn’t slow the men down greatly.’

‘Yet you survived that, made it into adulthood and even survived an attack by Hugo who is my best fighter.’

‘I got lucky,’ Mal said and glanced at Sir Hugo who was still sitting forward, watching him. He didn’t lounge back in his chair as the baron did.

‘Perhaps,’ the baron said. ‘But I find luck is augmented by practice and, say what you like about the sheriff; he produced fearsome fighting men. The question now is, what do I do with you?’

Mal had been wondering the same thing. That and trying to work out why he was being treated like a fellow soldier rather than a mistake from a mission that had gone awry. He was also trying to work out how he kept his neck from being stretched, and that meant making himself useful to the baron. Just as he'd known that to keep the sheriff from turning on you, you had to have some use for him. That was why, despite the risks of curiosity he said, 'Why do you think Sir Ingram is plotting against you?'

'At first, I thought it was only the sheriff,' the baron said, and he surprised Mal by being so forthcoming. He was more accustomed to being told to mind his own bloody business. 'He'd started to make moves on my northern border, strengthening his hold on the villages there, which you'll know.'

'Yes,' Mal said. He'd wondered about those attacks too. They had a different feel to them, as had the sheriff. He'd been like a man smouldering with an evil inner purpose but also, unusually for him, being very careful. Mal realised now it was so that he wasn't noticed by the baron.

'He was always ambitious,' the baron said, 'building his personal army to a size that was too big to be sustained by the county. But as a retainer to the king, he owed me no fealty. All the money he raised went to the king, and it would have been the king who complained if he started to cost too much.'

Not much risk of that, Mal thought, considering he barely paid his men.

'It was difficult for me to challenge him,' the baron said, 'even though I could see he was preparing for something. At first, I complained to the king that the sheriff was getting out of hand. That he was turning my own people against me, for they blamed me, not our far-off king, for what the sheriff was

doing. But the king... he has other problems,' the baron said with a shrug. 'So I dealt with my problem.'

He massacred the lot of them, and I would have been one of the unmourned dead too if not for luck, Mal thought with a shudder that he hoped didn't show.

'I thought I was done,' the baron said. 'Till Sir Ingram started making a fuss over the sheriff's death. As a member of the same family, he was bound to care more about his relative than the rest of us. But I suspected his motives and his excess of emotion on the subject.'

'And you don't like him,' Sir Hugo murmured as he took a sip from his goblet.

'He's a bloody nuisance, Hugo. He irritates you as much as he irritates me.'

'True enough,' Sir Hugo said.

'And now I discover from you,' the baron said turning back to Mal, 'that Ingram was a frequent visitor to the sheriff.'

'But why would he want to overthrow you?' Mal said. 'He has title and land, what more does he need?'

The baron roared with laughter, patted Mal on the shoulder and said, 'Just because a man has plenty, doesn't mean he doesn't covet what a richer man has. Besides, Sir Ingram, as it happens, is running rather low on funds.'

'He is?'

'Which is why he must be infatuated with the kitchen maid because she will bring no dowry with which to repair his fortune. It's a form of madness to marry the girl. He'd be better off taking some wealthy merchant's daughter and all the money her dowry brings to plough into his estates.'

'But he wouldn't need to worry about that if he became the baron,' Mal said.

'You begin to understand.'

‘But if he is plotting against you... why don’t you just do what you did to the sheriff?’

‘Because Sir Ingram is one of my people, my retainer, and I need evidence of his treachery so that he may be judged. Besides, it will stretch credibility if my mysterious band of robbers sweeps down upon a knight in my county. Not even taking into account that he doesn’t roam the land in one easy to ambush group of men. He tends, for the most part, to stick to his estates or travel with me.’

‘So what do you want from me?’ Mal said and wondered how foolish the question was. What if the baron decided he didn’t need him at all?

Before the baron could speak though there was a knock at the door, a servant looked in and said, ‘My lord, Sir Ingram is here, and he says he urgently needs to see you.’



‘Damn that man to hell and beyond!’ the baron snapped. ‘You, Malcolm, there’s an alcove behind the tapestry of the lovely lady with the unicorn. Get in there and make sure you aren’t noticed. Hugo, go outside and make sure nobody lets slip to Ingram or his people that I have a visitor from the convent.’

‘It will be done,’ Hugo said, bowed and left the room.

The tapestry was to the right of the baron’s table, and Mal just had time to slip behind it and still the heavy fabric when Sir Ingram was announced.

‘Dear Lord above, what happened to your face, Ingram?’ Mal heard the baron say.

He wished he could see the knight but at the same time was thankful that he couldn’t, tucked away as he was in this small alcove. It was a shallow stone space and, he suspected, that if he was to twist side on, he’d make a visible bump in the

tapestry. So he'd have to stay as still as possible and just listen. Light flickered through the thick weave of the fabric, but the gaps in the cloth were insufficient for him to be able to see anything.

'I was hit by a damned peasant,' came Sir Ingram's muffled and slurred voice.

'What's that? A peasant you say?' the baron said, and even Mal could hear the lack of sympathy in his voice.

'He broke my jaw and half my teeth,' Sir Ingram said. 'It's difficult to speak.'

'But then, my dear fellow, why did you come here? Why aren't you at home resting and recuperating?'

'Because I want justice.'

'Justice? Didn't you give the cur a thrashing already?'

'He's at the convent.'

'He claimed sanctuary?'

'No!' Sir Ingram snapped, and Mal could hear the annoyance in his voice although he was rather enjoying the baron's pretence of ignorance. 'He's one of their workers.'

'But then, Ingram, you need to speak to their Mother Superior. She will hand the man over.'

'Maybe not,' Sir Ingram said.

Mal heard a creak of a chair. Evidently the man had sat down.

'Now you intrigue me,' the baron said. 'Why wouldn't she hand the man over?'

There was such a long silence that Mal began to wonder what was going on when finally Sir Ingram said, 'I rushed the kitchen.'

'You rushed the kitchen? What do you mean you rushed the kitchen?'

Well, well, Mal thought, the baron was not making this easy

for Sir Ingram. He was rather pleased by that because his interview had been easier, even if he'd been trying to find a way out all the way through their conversation.

'I went to get the girl,' Sir Ingram muttered.

'After I forbade a wedding?'

The baron's tone put Mal on the alert. If anyone, especially the sheriff had used that tone with him he'd know for certain he was in grave danger.

Sir Ingram appeared to be oblivious though because he said, 'I can train her. She would make a good wife. I don't see why you would prevent the marriage anyway. It isn't for you to say who I should marry.'

'Ingram, you are my vassal,' the baron snapped. 'And I gave you a direct order to leave the girl alone. Now when you disobey me and come by your just desserts, you come running to me like a whipped dog with its tail between its legs and demand I do something. Why the devil would I do anything for you under these circumstances?'

'No peathant may attack a knight. You have to enforce the law.'

'Do you at least know who attacked you? Would you be able to point him out?'

'I would know him anywhere.'

'You don't deserve to be supported Ingram; you do know that don't you?'

'You mutht uphold the law.'

'And you must obey me, damn it!' the baron shouted. 'When I give you an order I expect you to keep to it. No doubt you caused such an uproar at the convent that I'll have one of their representatives turning up next to complain about you. The last thing I need is a damned feud between the convent and its nearest neighbour. If this can't be resolved amicably, Ingram,

I warn you, you will face my wrath. Now get out of my sight. Go home, heal that hideous jaw and in the new year I will pay a visit to my sister and get a full account of what happened.'

'The new year? When in the new year?'

'Soon, Ingram. I told everyone I'm spending Christmas here, with my family. Once that has passed, I will journey up the coast back to the convent. I need to give them fair warning that I'm coming so that they may prepare their supplies to host us.'

'But if you give them warning that you're coming the man who attacked me might sthlip away.'

That isn't my problem. The law might be on your side, Ingram, but you got what was coming to you so don't expect me to put myself out unduly for you. Be thankful I am doing anything at all. Now bugger off, you've angered me enough today. And go home. I won't provide accommodation for anyone who sows trouble in my county.'

'Yeth, my lord,' Sir Ingram said, and as much as he could employ a clipped, icy tone, he was doing so. 'I will await your visthit in the new year.'

The sound of footsteps followed by a slamming door gave the impression that he'd left, but Mal stayed where he was just in case.

'God preserve me from fools and cowards,' the baron muttered as he pulled the tapestry aside. 'Did you hear that?'

'Loud and clear, m'lord,' Mal said.

'He reckons he could identify you,' the baron said, drew Mal out of the alcove and indicated for him to take his seat again.

'That's probably true,' Mal said back to perching on the edge of the chair. This wasn't a very comfortable place to be or a comfortable man to be with.

'I wouldn't be so sure,' the baron said. 'He's not the kind of

man who looks very closely at peasants, but it might be more of a problem.'

'You sent him off easily enough.'

'And hopefully with a greater sense of outrage than he arrived with,' the baron said, and his face stretched into a sudden grin.

'You... wanted to make him angry?'

'Angry men ask fewer questions and make fewer demands before flouncing off. I'm also hoping it will drive him to do something even more stupid that I can hang him for.'

'Oh!' Mal said. This baron was more devious than he'd expected even if he'd always thought him a ruthless and knowing man. He was more subtle than the sheriff.

'Do you think you could best Sir Ingram in combat?' the baron said.

Mal realised that he'd been watched closely and he wondered whether the baron had guessed at his thoughts. 'I don't know.'

'Are you being modest, or were you always just a foot soldier and not that well versed in horse combat?'

'We were all trained in every form of fighting. It was the one thing the sheriff cared about more than anything else, that his men were the best fighting force in the land.'

'So you think you could take Ingram?'

'I would be foolish to try. If I killed him it would still be my neck for the noose.'

'Maybe,' the baron said, and Mal would have loved to ask him what he meant, but at that moment Sir Hugo slipped back into the room and shut the door behind himself.

'Has he left?' the baron said.

'I watched him and his men ride out. Judging by the look on his face he won't be back for a while,' Sir Hugo said. He turned

to Mal and said, 'You did quite a job on his jaw. The left side of his face is swollen to nearly double, and is spectacularly black and blue.'

'It was a stone rolling pin,' Mal muttered.

'All the same, you hit him one hell of a blow.'

'And now we must decide what we do next,' the baron said. 'Because, like it or not, I will have to visit the convent in the new year as promised. Which means that whatever plan we come up with to deal with Ingram needs to be put into action promptly.'

'I... I might have a plan,' Mal said and wished he sounded as certain of himself as the two men around him.

'You do?' the baron said. 'Well then let's hear it. Impress me.'

'Er... you want evidence that Sir Ingram is plotting against you, don't you?'

'More than anything,' the baron said, and his face stretched into that predatory grin Mal found so disturbing.

'What if... what if I go and see Sir Ingram and... and tell him that I used to work for the sheriff and know who attacked him.'

'That sounds like a bloody stupid plan.'

'No, I wouldn't actually tell him who. I'd use it... I'd go to him as if I wanted to beg him for mercy after my attack on him. I'd say I want to bargain my immunity for this information and in the process... I'd try and learn what it was he and the sheriff were planning.'

'If he does recognise you he won't give you enough time to say anything,' Sir Hugo said. 'He'd sooner run you through than stop and listen.'

'Maybe not if I took somebody with me.'

'Who?'

‘Mistress Anne.’

‘Who the devil is Mistress Anne?’ Sir Hugo said.

‘She... she’s the pudding maker at the convent. The one Sir Ingram wants to marry. If I arrive with her as a... as a peace offering then maybe he’ll listen to me.’

‘That’s crazy. If you hand the young woman over to Sir Ingram, he’ll ravage her. You’ll have ruined her within minutes. And I very much doubt her family would allow you to go off with her anyway.’

‘Under normal circumstances, her father would never allow it. But he led the convent against Sir Ingram and lives in daily fear of being put to death over it. So he might agree if I can convince him I can keep his daughter safe.’

‘But you can’t.’

‘I can if I get the information out of Sir Ingram first and then you... you come in and take him before he can touch her.’

‘That sounds ridiculous,’ Sir Hugo said. ‘Victor, you aren’t really considering this are you?’

The baron shrugged and said, ‘Ingram is hurt, angry, out of money and short on allies. If he is going to make a mistake, it will be now. Malcolm’s plan is a start; however, it can be improved upon.’

## II

Despite Anne's underlying fear, the Christmas Day feast was as fine as any the convent had produced, she thought as she looked across the guest hall packed with revellers. Even when the baron came to visit his staff didn't fill it the way they did at Christmas. An extra table had been brought in to accommodate everyone yet they were still so crammed up against each other on the long benches that they jostled elbows good naturally with their neighbours.

Mother Superior Clara sat at the head of the feast with all the most important nuns of the convent at a table garlanded with ivy and holly. Sister Mary Constance always managed to avoid the high table and had, much to Anne's surprise, squeezed herself in beside her and Mother.

It was a shame, Anne thought, that she couldn't join in with her usual enthusiasm but she was in daily expectation of the baron arriving trailing knights to haul Father off to his death. He was putting a brave face on things. Watching him, as he roared with laughter over some shared joke with the men at the far end of the table, you would never tell that he was worried. Mother was different, and Anne was more aware than usual of her sitting silently beside her. Usually, the party was enough to help Mother get out of her shell and join in at least to the point where she'd smile and talk to the people about

her. But not today.

Anne desperately wanted to tell her that it would be alright, but she couldn't because she feared she'd be lying. 'Try and eat something,' she said and put a morsel of fine rare beef on her mother's plate.

'I'm not hungry,' mother murmured.

'All the same, you should keep your strength up, and this is good food, and free, a gift to all their people from the convent.'

Agnes glanced past Anne at Sister Mary Constance and murmured, 'It's very nice, as always.'

'But the best will be the pudding,' Mary Constance said.

It surprised Anne, who'd thought she wasn't listening, busy as she was tucking into her dinner. 'I'm glad you think so.'

'I am particularly looking forward to your figgy pudding. I've been eyeing those muslin wrapped delicacies for weeks as they've sat maturing in the small warehouse.'

'I hope they live up to your expectations.'

'You've never let me down before, Anne,' Mary Constance said with a beatific smile.

'Oh dear,' Anne said as her breath caught.

'What is it?'

'I might not have let you down, but I have let my parents down,' Anne said with a quick glance at her mother who was pushing her food listlessly around her plate.

'You must have faith that God and our Mother Superior will see us safely through,' Mary Constance said.

'And Mal.'

'Aye, assuming he hasn't made for London. We are relying on him too.'

'Taken off to London? What are you talking about?'

'His life is in as much danger as your father's, possibly even more because he actually hit Sir Ingram. So I have a small

doubt, and that's all it is mind you, that he might have headed for safety rather than for the baron's castle.'

'But... why choose him as your messenger if he is such a risk? This is terrible. You should have gone with somebody more trustworthy.'

'There are reasons he was chosen, reasons I can't tell you.'

'So... when will we know?'

'If he rode like the wind and really pushed his mount, we might see him first thing tomorrow.'

'But that means he doesn't even get a Christmas feast.'

'I have asked your father to put some food aside for when Mal returns.'

'Yes... that's good,' Anne said. She prayed with all her might that Mal did return and that Sister Mary Constance's faith in the man was justified. 'I can't believe all our safety has been put into the hands of a man who has barely joined the community. We should have chosen somebody we knew we could trust.'

'Believe me, Anne, Mal was the best choice.'

Something in the way she spoke sent a prickle up Anne's spine. 'What do you mean?'

'I mean he's competent for the task.'

'Better than being a warehouseman?'

'He's trying his best at the warehouse, which is more than some of the people I've given that work to. He's made some stupid mistakes. But I've noticed that he only needs telling once about an error, and he fixes it and doesn't make the same mistake again. He's actually surprised me by how quickly he learned the ropes. Especially given that Ed wrote him off on the day he met him.'

'That's hardly surprising when he looked like a beggar and not even a good one. He's the thinnest beggar I've ever seen.'

‘He has been filling out.’

‘Not very quickly. It’s a shame he couldn’t be at this party if nothing else but to get some fat on his bones,’ Anne said and wondered why she was disappointed. It wasn’t as though Mal made much of an impression. He’d slip into the kitchen so silently that she barely noticed him. ‘And maybe he’d even talk to me here, which he doesn’t do in the kitchen or the warehouse,’ Anne said and flicked a guilty look at her mother. She didn’t appear to be listening but was watching Father in a rather mournful way.

‘You’ve spoken to him in the warehouse?’ Mary Constance said.

‘I’ve bumped into him a couple of times. He was polite but not exactly friendly. I thought if he had a bit more ale in him he might open up.’

‘It will take more than a feast and some alcohol to loosen Mal’s lips,’ Mary Constance said. ‘Although it might be a start.’

‘Would it be worth it?’

‘You tell me, Anne. Are you interested in him because, unlike most men, he hasn’t made you the object of his adoration or is there something more to it?’

‘Oh... I hadn’t really thought about it,’ Anne said and hoped it wasn’t too transparent a lie. For some reason, she did keep going back to Mal and trying to work him out. A part of her was annoyed that he never wanted to linger and chat, unlike almost every other man she’d met.

‘Time for the puddings,’ Nick said as he hurried down the length of the tables to join Anne and her mother. ‘Come along, Annie; you must lead the procession and enjoy the praise that comes with it.’

‘Gladly,’ Anne said. She didn’t think that she was a vain woman, but she did like the appreciative gasps when the

puddings were all brought in on a long tray held high above the heads of the two men who carried them. Anne, as had become the custom over the last few years, led that procession and presented the puddings to the abbess. The abbess would bless them, and then they'd be set down on the table to be devoured and three months of preparation and constant soaking with alcohol would vanish in the twinkling of an eye.

It was the highlight of her year, and she clambered out from between Mother and Sister Mary Constance and headed after Father to the kitchen to collect her little darlings.



Mal wondered why the town was so quiet as he rode into Kirkthorpe. It felt strange, different, but he couldn't work out why. He preferred being in the convent. He felt more vulnerable out here.

He shuddered as he crossed the town square. There was a body strung up in a cage, more bone than anything else but a crow still pecked hopefully at it. It paused to caw at him then flew off.

'Good riddance,' Mal muttered. He didn't like crows; they were always hanging about the dead. He didn't need a reminder of death right now. In fact what he wanted was sleep. He'd pushed himself to his limit and felt ready to drop.

The baron had at least given him some food and the offer of a bed. He'd not felt comfortable enough to do more than snatch a couple of hours sleep though before he headed back. Brute was less than happy to be forced out of the warm stable he'd been led to and objected loudly all the way down the hill. It was just as well he wasn't using the animal to sneak up on anyone because he had a tendency to bray whenever he was displeased. Being pushed as he was, he was displeased most of

the way home.

‘We’re nearly there, boy,’ Mal said and patted the mule’s thick shaggy neck. He didn’t need to tell him. Brute recognised home too, and his plodding gait had developed an urgency it had lacked for the last day and a half.

But disappointment awaited at the convent. The massive double gates that were usually flung wide were barred shut. ‘What the devil is going on?’ Mal muttered as he dismounted and stuck his face through the barred grill that punctured the gate. ‘Hello?’ he shouted.

The courtyard was also empty. This felt so wrong, where was everybody? Mal searched around for a bell or anything else he could use to try and gain attention as his heart beat faster and panic stole up on him. What could have happened?

A burst of laughter caught his straining ear. Seconds later Nick Cook stepped out of the cloisters followed by a couple of kitchen lads with Mistress Anne bringing up the rear.

‘Hey!’ Mal shouted. ‘Hey, let me in.’

‘Good Lord, well bless my soul, is that you, Mal?’ Nick Cook said.

‘Yes, it’s me, what in the name of all that is holy is going on? Where is everybody?’

‘They’re at the feast,’ Nick Cook said as he strolled over followed by his entourage.

‘What feast?’

‘Why? Christmas of course.’

‘It’s Christmas?’ Mal said, and relief washed over him. Thank goodness, that explained everything. ‘I lost track of the days.’

‘Well you couldn’t have arrived at a better time,’ Nick said beaming at him. ‘We’re about ready to serve up the puddings.’ Then he turned to the young men who’d followed him and

said, 'Come on lads, what are you waiting for? Help me with the bolts so we can let Mal back in.'

There were some muffled sounds of exertion, and with a creak the door opened, and Mal was staring at a beaming Nick, the kitchen lads and Anne who looked... He wasn't very good with women but she looked relieved, and that didn't seem right.

'Welcome back,' Nick said. 'I hope you bring good news.'

Mal shrugged, he had news, but it wasn't of the sort he could impart in front of all these people. Nor was it something Nick was going to like. 'I need to speak to the abbess.'

'She's at the feast,' Nick said and gave him a slight knowing smile. At least he'd realised what Mal's silence meant, now was not the time or place for discussion. 'We've kept some food aside for you,' Nick said. 'As fine a roast beef as you've ever experienced, not to mention goose, a multitude of pies, sausages, tarts and a meat pottage. And if you hurry, you can have some of Anne's fine pudding. There is none better in the land, I assure you.'

'Thank you,' Mal said, quite overwhelmed by the warmth of his reception. Nobody had ever been this happy to see him, and he wasn't sure how to take it. 'I need to get Brute back to the stable and clean up from the journey. I'm covered in mud, then I'll join you.'

'Don't take too long or you'll miss the lot,' Nick said, and with a friendly wave, he was off. The lads and Anne hurried after him, although Anne did glance back.

Mal spent a moment wondering why, then shook his head, now wasn't the time. Brute had decided he was for bed and was tugging forcefully on his reins and plodding towards the stables.

'Fair enough,' Mal said. 'I doubt you've worked this hard in

a long time. I'm half tempted to join you.' He was bone tired. He hadn't had a proper nights sleep in... well, who knew. Not since he'd attacked Sir Ingram and that felt like a lifetime ago.

On the other hand, he'd just been invited to a Christmas feast and if anything he was hungrier than he was sleepy. If he had to deliver the baron's letter to the abbess, and she was at the feast, he could do both at once. It also gave him a reason to join the festivities.

He was more pulled into the stables than leading Brute, and he needed no encouragement to step into his stall. Mal removed his saddle, bundled up some straw and wiped the thickest of the mud off his legs and then brushed the beast down to get the remains of the mud off.

It was good work for thinking, and it gave him time to consider the feast as he brushed. He'd never been to one before. The closest he'd come to a feast was the occasional nights when the sheriff had allowed them to run riot, hunt and gather up all the food they could find and gorge on it around a massive bonfire. It was always outside, and it was only ever with the other lads in the sheriff's army. It was also very infrequent and unpredictable. They never knew when they might get this sudden largess.

Thinking back Mal couldn't remember a feast over Christmas. That was always a day of misery spent huddled in the cold and the wet in a field. Hunger gnawed at his insides with the certain knowledge that almost everyone else in the land was better off. This sudden and unexpected invitation to join in left him feeling unbalanced and wondering whether he should go. A part of him was tempted to curl up in the straw at Brute's feet and give himself up to oblivion.

But then he'd miss the food, and the chance to see what a Christmas feast actually looked like. It was a terrifying

prospect, to insert himself into a group of people he hardly knew and a situation so unfamiliar it left him with clammy palms just to contemplate it. How was he supposed to act? What was he supposed to do?

In the end, his curiosity and hunger drove him to the doors of the guest hall. They were flung wide open, and he could feel the heat of hundreds of bodies and the noise was stunning in its volume. Apparently, musicians had been provided, and a mass of voices were raised in a carol accompanying the players. Yet again, this disadvantaged him as he didn't know any carols. Hopefully, it wasn't a requirement to sing for your supper. Mal took a deep breath and stepped into the hall. The place smelled of food, woodsmoke, wine and spices.

'Well, well, well, look who's here,' John said and staggered towards Mal. His face red from the heat and an excess of alcohol.

'Hello, John.'

'Merry Christmas, Mal,' Pete shouted. 'You've missed a great party but come on in there's still plenty of food. There's a fine roast. I'm sure we can get some slivers of meat off the bone for you.'

'Thank you,' Mal said, astonished by this warm welcome. 'But I've been told some food was kept aside for me.'

'Was it indeed?' John said. 'I don't see why anyone would do that. You're not wanted here. You're not wanted in the warehouse, and Mistress Anne isn't interested in you.'

'I was invited,' Mal said, and his eyes flicked over the crowd trying to find Nick or Sister Mary Constance to vouch for him.

'Doesn't matter, you should go now!' John said and gave Mal a mighty push.

At least he would have, but Mal sidestepped it. John was no match for him in a fight even when he was sober, Mal realised.

It wouldn't be fair to fight him when he was drunk.

'You bastard, come here,' John said and turned back to face him. 'You can't go pushing a fellow around.'

'Leave him be, John, he fought Sir Ingram too,' Pete said, 'and it's Christmas. This is no time to fight.'

'I'll do what I please,' John said and geared up for a second run. 'Everything was going fine till this miscreant turned up.'

'I'm not fighting you, John,' Mal said and looked about trying to work out what he did next. The last thing he needed was to be involved in a brawl before all these people.

His eye caught that of the abbess's, seated at the high table and she crooked her finger to call him over. Problem solved, Mal thought. He ducked John's next run so the man careened onwards and crashed into a group of carollers. A shout went up from them, and they pushed John back out again. Mal took the opportunity to duck into the crowd and make for the abbess.

It took quite a bit of twisting and shoving to get past everyone and work his way to the end of the hall. The abbess in the meantime turned back to the nuns sitting at the table and regaled them with a tale of such hilarity that they were all roaring with laughter when Mal finally broke through the last ring of people and came to a stop before the abbess. She turned a flushed face towards him. Evidently, she'd been partaking freely of the wine from the carafe set at her elbow. This was probably not the best time to deliver the baron's letter, but at the same time, he didn't really have a choice.

So he gave a deep bow, pulled the letter from his tunic and put it into the abbess's outstretched hand. She ripped it open, her eyebrows raised as she read, but aside from that Mal couldn't tell what she was thinking. Just like her brother, he thought.

She nodded, folded the letter up, tucked it into her habit and said, 'You did well, Master Malcolm. And you were remarkably quick getting here. So I suggest you eat your fill, get some sleep and tomorrow morning we will talk.'

'Yes, ma'am,' Mal said bowed again, hesitated, uncertain of where to go next then spotted Sister Mary Constance and Nick bellowing good naturally at each other and decided to get over to them. He took a deep breath and dived back into the fray. Rank had its privileges he decided, and one of those was having a decent amount of space kept free around you. The rest of the rabble were crushed together and apparently thoroughly enjoying it.

'Well, well, look who we have here,' Mary Constance said as Mal got to them.

'Hello, Sister,' Mal said. He removed the cape that was now far too warm for the hall, held it out to her and said, 'Thank you, it came in useful.'

She looked down at it and said, 'Yes? What am I supposed to do with that? If you're thinking I'm going to wash it for you, you are very much mistaken.'

'No,' Mal said, wrong-footed by that reaction. 'I'm giving it back.'

'Why's that? Is it not good enough for you?'

The hair prickled on the back of Mal's neck. This was the same kind of game that the sheriff had played on them, and it usually ended with somebody getting clobbered. 'It's... it's yours,' Mal said.

Something in his tone must have alerted Mary Constance because her smile faltered and she said more softly than she was used to speaking, 'I'm just funning with you, Mal. The cape is yours. Consider it payment for what you've done and,' she said and leaned so close only he could hear, 'for coming

back.'

'You're giving me a cape?'

'Merry Christmas,' Mary Constance said and patted him on the back.

'Have some something to eat,' Nick said and shoved a trencher piled high with food into Mal's hands. He looked down at a selection of slivers of ruby red beef, a wedge of what looked like chicken pie, the leg off a goose and a variety of sauced objects he couldn't identify. His face split into a grin and he said, 'Thank you, thank you very much.'

'Now there you go,' Mary Constance said. 'He likes your gift better than mine, Nick.'

'No I-'

'Sit,' Mary Constance said and steered Mal to the trestle table. 'Eat, that's all you need do now.'

Mal did as ordered, marvelling at the food. Never in his life had he had such fine food nor so plentiful a serving and he intended to enjoy every mouthful of it. He rubbed his hands together, skewered a morsel of beef and shoved it in his mouth. It was delicious, tasty, tender and juicy. Then he reached for the ale, poured himself a mugful that was brimming over and sipped the foam off the top.

Every now and then he paused from the serious business of eating and look about the hot hall filled with excited people. Most of them were standing now, stretching their legs after an epic feast. They were shouting and joking with one another, their faces glistening with grease and sweat as they chatted animatedly. Everyone looked to be having a jolly fine time.

My sides ache, Mal thought and looked back down at the food, he'd made a dent in it but not much more than that. Sweat beaded on his face and trickled down his neck too. It was so hot in here. At first that had been wonderful. To sit and

wallow in the warmth and eat was a new and wonderful feeling. But now he knew why so many people were groaning too. They were full, stuffed so tight that they could barely move. Mal looked down at his trencher and wondered whether he could take it back to the warehouse and have the rest later. And on top of that, he hadn't even tried the pudding yet, and he very much wanted to. Only now it would never fit.

He looked around, nobody was paying him any attention, so if he chose to slip out now, he wouldn't be noticed. Sleep also beckoned. It might only be late afternoon, but he'd had so little sleep that it was a struggle to keep his eyes open despite the noise bouncing off the stone walls and the excited people all around him. He double checked that nobody was looking at him, folded his now softened trencher over the remaining food inside, and hurried for the door.



Anne was waiting for her chance to speak to Mal, which required him to not be absorbed by his food, and for her father and Sister Mary Constance to move away. It also meant, somehow, getting away from Mother who was still sitting forlornly at the table when most others had got up to circulate. For the hundredth time, Anne glanced across at Mal, sitting on his own eating and saw him get up and slip out of the hall. He hadn't even had any of her pudding, which for some reason annoyed her.

I'll show him, she thought, carved a big slice out of the nearest pud, wrapped it in a fragment of the muslin and hurried after him.

It was unsurprising that he made straight for the small warehouse. He walked slowly though, and Anne caught up with him as he stepped inside. He was standing at the

entrance looking puzzled.

‘What’s wrong?’ Anne said.

‘What?’ Mal said, spun around and blinked at her. ‘Mistress Anne?’

‘Yes.’

‘You are surely not checking on puddings today.’

‘No, I brought you this,’ Anne said and shoved the wrapped pudding into his hand. ‘It’s figgy pudding. My speciality and a rarity in these parts, only possible because Sister Benedict has a fig tree.’

‘Sister Benedict?’ Mal said vaguely, his trencher in one hand and the pudding in the other.

‘Never mind that. Forget I brought it up. Why are you looking so confused?’

‘Somebody’s rearranged my warehouse.’

‘That was probably John. He’s been working here since you were away.’

‘I see,’ Mal muttered and looked none too thrilled as he walked down the centre of the warehouse and stopped about halfway down. ‘My bed’s gone.’

‘Your bed?’

‘I set up a couple of planks and some sacks here, and they’re gone.’

Probably taken down deliberately, Anne thought, John could be vindictive that way. ‘I’m sorry. Shall I help you track everything down and make the bed again?’

‘There’s no need,’ Mal said. He leaned his back against a pile of what looked to be bales of wool and slid himself down to the floor with a sigh.

As he reached the ground his eyes closed and Anne was struck by how very tired he looked. She squatted in front of him, examining his face and said, ‘Are you alright?’

‘I just want to sleep.’

‘You must have ridden very fast and really driven yourself to get back here so quickly. Sister Mary Constance thought the soonest you’d make it back was tomorrow morning.’

‘Aye well, it was urgent,’ Mal muttered without opening his eyes.

‘You can’t sleep here,’ Anne said, ‘and you can’t keep the food in your hands. The rats will have it and gnaw your fingers into the bargain.’

Mal grimaced and said, ‘I don’t want to move.’

‘Then give it to me. I’ll put everything where it will be safe,’ she said and took the food to the cupboard she used for her puddings.

By the time she got back, Mal had curled into a ball and wrapped the cloak tight about himself. ‘Mal? Mal, are you still awake?’

‘Mmm,’ Mal murmured.

‘Mal, I’m sorry to be badgering you now but... I have to know... can you tell me if my father is safe?’

Mal blinked his eyes open and stared blearily at her. ‘We have a plan.’

‘Who?’

‘The baron and I. We have a plan, and if it works, we should all be carried safely through.’

‘A plan but... I don’t understand. Surely the baron’s word is law? If he tells Sir Ingram to leave us alone, he can do nothing but leave us alone.’

‘That didn’t work so well before did it?’ Mal said. ‘Turns out being a baron is more complicated than I realised.’

‘It is?’

‘Yes,’ Mal said and smiled, the way a person might if they’d experienced a revelation.

‘But all the same, your plan will save my father?’

‘It should, but it’s dangerous for me and... and for you,’ Mal said and looked up at her again.

‘It’s dangerous for me?’

‘It’s complicated,’ Mal said, ‘and I need to speak to the abess before I can tell you.’

‘You tell me that I’m in danger and then you won’t tell me more?’

‘I can’t.’

‘But what if I don’t want to put myself in harm’s way?’

‘Then your father will suffer the consequences.’

‘No, how can that be?’

‘I will tell you in the morning.’

‘How am I supposed to sleep now with this unknown threat hanging over my head?’

‘I’m sorry,’ Mal said with a sigh.

‘Is there nothing you can tell me?’

Mal pushed himself upright and examined her face before he said, ‘You have had a very comfortable and easy life haven’t you?’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘Maybe that you got everyone into trouble because you are headstrong and you determined to get your own way even when it meant getting your father into trouble. Not to mention the rest of us when we went to your aid.’

It was like a slap to hear that, and for a moment Anne could hardly move let alone speak. ‘Are you saying I should marry Sir Ingram? He’s a horrible man with no interest in anything but owning me.’

‘I don’t know,’ Mal said and shook his head.

‘You don’t? After what you’ve just said?’ Anne said, and she was guiltily aware that Mal was only saying the same as her

mother. It was probably what the rest of the convent thought too, but didn't say.

Mal sighed and said, 'I landed up in the hands of a... monster when I was a boy. I would have given anything to get away from him, so I do understand why you feared the same fate. And if Sir Ingram is anything like my master, then your future would be miserable indeed.'

'So you do understand.'

'Maybe. I never stood up to my master though. Maybe I'm envious of you because you did.'

'Even if it brought down disaster?' Anne said and sat on the floor in front of Mal watching him even more closely.

'Even then. But now you must pay the price for your actions.'

'And do this dangerous thing you won't tell me about.'

'Not yet but soon enough.'

'Then I'll wait,' Anne said. Mal was detached, too tired to pay her much attention. She was about to leave and let him sleep when she remembered something. 'I made you a Christmas present,' she said and dug a small woollen ball out of her pocket.

'A present for me?' Mal said eyeing the object as if it was some curious unknown specimen. 'What is it?'

'Gloves,' Anne said and turned the top of the one glove over so that the other unfolded from inside it. 'Try them on.'

'Why did you make me gloves?' Mal said.

'I wanted to find a way to thank you for what you've done, rescuing me and going to see the baron.' Mal grimaced, and Anne said, 'Don't you want them?'

'I don't think I should take them. I mean, you're an unmarried young woman. I'm not sure it's proper for you to give me a gift.'

‘I can give whoever I like a gift,’ Anne snapped and stopped as Mal arched an eyebrow at her. ‘Oh! I’m being headstrong again aren’t I?’

‘Just a little bit.’

‘Please take the gloves. They’re good and warm, and I only wanted to be helpful.’

‘Thank you,’ Mal said, took the gloves and pulled them on. ‘They fit well.’

‘So they do, that’s wonderful,’ Anne said and clapped her hands. ‘I guessed your hand size, but I made them half the width of the ones I make for Father and that seems to be about right.’

Mal held his hand up and turned it about examining the front and then the back. ‘I’ve never had gloves before,’ he murmured. ‘They’re strange.’

‘You’ve never had gloves? But... what did you do in the winter?’

‘Go without,’ Mal said with a grin. ‘You don’t miss what you’ve never had.’

‘Do you think you’d miss them now?’

‘I don’t know yet.’

‘Where do you come from, Mal?’

Mal’s smile faded, but he said, ‘I was born in Alderham.’

‘The abandoned village to the north?’

‘It was burned down by the baron when the people rose up in rebellion against him.’

‘I didn’t know that.’

‘It was a long time ago,’ Mal said and gave a mighty yawn.

‘You should sleep,’ Anne said. ‘I’m sorry I’ve kept you up for so long. And I’m really glad... I’m glad you came back.’

Mal had a sense that he was being watched and cautiously opened one eye. Sister Mary Constance was leaning over examining him.

‘Ah, he wakes,’ she said.

‘Mmm,’ Mal groaned and pushed himself upright.

‘Are you alright?’ Mary Constance said.

‘I ache all over,’ Mal said. ‘I used to be able to do a forced march and ride without feeling this sore in the past.’

‘A march and ride?’

‘When your mount gets tired, rather than stopping to allow them to rest, you dismount and run alongside the beast.’

‘And Brute went along with that?’

Mal laughed and said, ‘Sometimes. He is a creature that knows his own mind though.’

‘So I have learned to my cost. However, he obviously complied sufficiently for you to be able to get to the baron and back in record time.’

‘And no doubt he is now thoroughly enjoying his rest in his stable,’ Mal said.

‘How about you? Aside from the aches, how is your wound?’

‘It is healing, but slowly. It still pains me which I don’t understand. That should have stopped already.’

‘It’s a very broad wound, give it time. I notice you also have

new gloves.’

Mal held his two wool covered hands up for inspection and said, ‘Mistress Anne gave them to me. It isn’t... it isn’t usual for a young unmarried woman to give a man gifts is it?’

‘I can think of only one circumstance where it might happen,’ Mary Constance said.

Mal felt uncomfortable at her evident amusement and said, ‘She is very forward for a young woman.’

‘You say forward, but I say brave. She knows her own mind and even if she is afraid she perseveres. You could learn a lot from her.’

‘Maybe. But I suspect she wouldn’t be half as brave if she got flogged every time she showed any sign of defiance.’

‘Good Lord, you would beat her?’ Mary Constance said. ‘No... you’re speaking of yourself. I noticed the scars on your back when I treated your wound. You got flogged and more than once going by what I saw.’

‘The sheriff would beat us for the most trivial infraction, and that was only one of his punishments. I learned quickly enough that it was safest to keep your mouth shut and do exactly what you were told.’

‘He was a brute,’ Mary Constance said. ‘I disliked him from the day I met him, and his men... well, they were a terrifying bunch who behaved like vicious killers. I’m sorry I didn’t realise that there were men like you amongst that band too.’

‘Men like me?’

‘An honest soul trapped in something not of his own making. I’m glad you finally got away from him.’

Mal felt himself blush to be praised in that way and to cover his embarrassment he got to his feet and brushed himself down. ‘Was there something you needed, Sister?’

‘The abbess wants to see you. But she said we were to take

our time. She's still suffering from the excesses of yesterday. The feast went on long after you vanished.'

'I was very tired.'

'I'm sure you were. Now, before we head off, you tell me something. What do you think of Anne, aside from that she is forward?'

'Why do you ask?'

'Because you, unlike the other men of this convent and all the traders that come through, seem to ignore her.'

'I don't ignore her.'

'You don't make up to her either, or make sheep eyes at her whenever she walks by.'

'What would be the point?'

'The point? Good God man, even the oldest and ugliest of men, thinks they would be a marvellous catch. It always amazes me how pumped up in conceit most men are. They all make attempts on far younger and prettier women than they are themselves. And then you come along, about the same age as Anne, and a good looking man and you, of all people, think you can't attach her affection?'

'You think I'm good looking?'

'You have a certain attractive quality.'

'Better than John?'

'Is that the problem? You think she's attracted to John?'

'He thinks so.'

'Well, Anne has never given him a gift.'

'So that is meaningful?'

'Would it make you happy if it was?'

'Yes,' Mal said, and it really did. It was a kind of runaway joy that might have him whooping with delight if he allowed it to build, so he resolutely pushed it down again. He had to think about it and what it meant. 'Do you think I'd be acceptable to

her father?’

‘Is that what’s holding you back?’

‘Honestly... I thought I had no chance with her. She is beautiful, and I could see how popular she was. I thought as I have nothing in the world to give her, I would be given short shrift if I ever made an attempt.’

‘Well, then you showed great discipline in keeping your distance.’

‘I’ve had a lot of training in denying myself,’ Mal said.

‘Apparently so. Now come along, we need to collect Nick and Anne from the kitchen. The abbess informs me that they are needed at this meeting too.’

They aren’t going to like what they hear either, Mal thought, as he followed Sister Mary Constance out of the warehouse. It was cold outside, a flat grey day in which all life had been sucked out of the world. It reflected how he felt now, any hopes he had that he might attract Anne were dashed. She and her father would hate him over the plan.

Nick and Anne were waiting by the kitchen door, and both looked tense. Nick was pale, a combination of a mighty hangover and fear Mal guessed. Not a surprise when he’d drunk as much as he had yesterday. Some men, Mal knew from experience, gained courage from alcohol and Nick was apparently one of them.

Anne was watching him; she looked wary but not as worried as she should. Maybe that was her bravery, Mal thought. He gave her a slight nod and what he hoped was an encouraging smile. She smiled back but that vanished when she realised her father was looking.

‘Come on,’ Mary Constance said. ‘No doubt Mother Superior will be ready for us now.’

She was, and impressed Mal by looking perfectly refreshed.

Nobody would guess that she was suffering from an overindulgent day yesterday.

‘Sit,’ she said and indicated the ring of chairs that had been drawn up to face her desk. ‘We have much to discuss.’

The abbess was so calm that it had a beneficial effect on everyone else. Mal had seen it often enough, people relaxed when they were in the presence of someone who took charge and looked like they knew what they were doing. He wondered why that magic didn’t work on him. He was jumpier now that the plan was going to be revealed. But he didn’t need the abbess’s meaningful look to know to keep his mouth shut and follow her lead.

‘I wish to thank Master Mal for being such a speedy and reliable messenger,’ Clara said with a nod in Mal’s direction. ‘He returned with a letter from my brother laying out what we have to do. We have not been given an easy path to tread but, by the Grace of God, if we follow it, we shall be brought to safety.’

‘I don’t understand,’ Nick said. ‘Can’t the baron just stop Sir Ingram?’

‘Not this time, Nick. To do anything against Sir Ingram, my brother needs him to do something incriminating first.’

‘More incriminating than going against the baron’s express orders and trying to snatch my daughter?’

‘The problem, Nick, is that you fought back. If you had allowed Sir Ingram to take Anne and then appealed to my brother he could have done more.’

‘But by then it would have been too late. Sir Ingram would have had his way with my daughter.’

‘All the same you, commoners, attacked a knight and according to our laws, you are more at fault than Sir Ingram. You could try and argue your case before a magistrate, but I

doubt you'd get far.'

'It isn't just!'

'My brother knows that, which is why he has come up with an alternative plan. It's a plan in which everyone will have to play their part.'

'Whatever it is I'll do it,' Nick said.

'I hope so,' the abbess said, 'because what you are asked to do will test you.'

'I'm ready.'

'Good,' the abbess said and cast a glance at Mal before she picked up the letter again. 'You need some information first. I need to tell you that Mal here, used to be one of Sheriff Moore's men.'

Anne gasped, and Nick looked more than a little shaken. Mal decided it was easier to keep his eyes on the abbess and pretend not to notice their reaction. He'd always known they weren't liked. People ran away when the sheriff came to town, hid in their homes and bolted their doors. He understood why, but it hurt to be so feared nonetheless.

The abbess said, 'Mal has information on who killed the sheriff-'

'Who?' Nick said.

'That I can't tell you because my brother didn't put it in his letter. You would be wise not to try and get it out of Mal either, do you understand?'

'Yes, Mother Superior,' Nick said his eyes wide with surprise and mounting apprehension.

He was out of his depth and regretting his inclusion in this meeting, Mal thought. He had good reason to be worried. At the same time, Mal was glad that the abbess wasn't telling Nick everything. It would put everyone in more danger if she did.

‘As you are probably aware,’ the abbess said, ‘Sir Ingram was very keen to find out who killed his cousin. Mal will use the fact that he has that information as a lever to get to speak to Ingram. It won’t be easy though because Mal did break Sir Ingram’s jaw. Sir Ingram has already been to my brother to demand recompense for his injuries. So he won’t let Mal in to see him with any grace, if at all, unless...’

‘Unless what?’ Nick said, and he was already bristling with suspicion. ‘This has something to do with Annie doesn’t it?’

‘If Mal tells Sir Ingram he has Anne-’

‘No!’ Nick said. ‘We fought to keep her safe. I’m not going to turn around and hand her to him now.’

‘She won’t be alone, Nick, Mal will be there, and my brother and his men will be nearby. They won’t let any harm come to Anne.’

‘Nearby? What does that mean?’

‘The baron will meet me on the outskirts of Sir Ingram’s land,’ Mal said. ‘I will hide Mistress Anne in a safe place and make my way to Sir Ingram’s house and try and speak to him. I will only tell him I have Anne secreted nearby if he doesn’t give me a chance to speak to him any other way.’

‘Then what?’ Nick said and folded his arms like a man who’d already made up his mind against the plan.

‘Then I will take my time leading Sir Ingram to the place in which I have hidden Mistress Anne. All the while I will be working on him to get the information the baron needs.’

‘Information? What information?’

‘It’s best you don’t know that either,’ the abbess said. ‘Leave that to Mal and my brother.’

‘But what if he doesn’t get the information? I can only imagine it’s something that’s dangerous to Sir Ingram and he’s unlikely to say anything to a man that he hates. He is vain, and

you disfigured him, Mal. He won't be able to forgive you.'

'His vanity is his weakness,' Mary Constance said. 'If Mal can appeal to that he may be able to get him to betray himself.'

'And if he doesn't?'

'Then I will hand Mistress Anne over to-'

'No!' Nick said. 'You can't hand her over.'

'I will stay with them and work on Sir Ingram all the way back to his house. At least he should be cock-a-hoop at that point and more likely to let something slip. I swear to you, Nick Cook, I won't let Mistress Anne out of my sight, and the baron and his men will be shadowing us too. We will keep Anne safe.'

'This is madness.'

'I can do it, Father,' Anne said and laid her hand on her father's arm. 'I brought this trouble down on everyone. I must play my part to fix everything.'

'Annie, this is far too dangerous,' Nick said, took her hand, drew it up to his lips and kissed it.

'But if it succeeds we will be rid of Sir Ingram for good, won't we?' Anne said and turned to Mal.

The abbess gave him a nod, so Mal said, 'That is the intention, yes.'

'Your mother will never agree to this,' Nick said.

'Then don't tell her, but, Father... I have to do this can't you see? If I don't then your life and Mal's is forfeit.'

'I did what I had to as any parent would. It isn't your fault.'

'All the same, I can help.'

'I don't like it.'

'It isn't like you have a better plan though, Nick, is it?' Mary Constance said. 'And don't give me your bravado saying you're willing to die for your daughter. It's foolish, especially when there is another way out.'

‘One that puts my daughter at risk.’

‘A risk she is willing to take.’

‘I should say no.’

‘But you won’t,’ Mary Constance said. ‘So let’s hear the rest of the plan.’

‘There isn’t much more to say,’ the abbess said. ‘Mal and Anne will have to leave tomorrow at dawn to arrive at the same time as my brother. We will keep everything we are doing secret from the rest of the convent so they mustn’t see the two of them leaving.’

‘I am doing this under protest,’ Nick said.

‘Yes, we understand,’ Mary Constance said. ‘Now we’d best get back to work before everybody else wakes and wonders where we are.’

Mal stood, bowed to the abbess and left followed by the rest of the band. He cast a furtive look at Anne and was sorry to see her stiffen and look away. The news that he’d been one of the sheriff’s men had apparently come as an unpleasant shock.

‘I’ll give Brute a walk this afternoon,’ Mal said to Sister Mary Constance. ‘That way he won’t stiffen and will be ready for tomorrow.’

‘Poor thing,’ Mary Constance said. ‘He isn’t going to be happy.’



Mal gave up trying to sleep when the bell rang for matins. If ever he needed a word with God this was it, although he doubted God wanted anything to do with him. He’d avoided the church so far, and nobody had said anything about it to him. He wasn’t sure if that was a good sign or a bad. Maybe they were all too busy and wrapped up in their own lives to care.

It was pitch black as he hurried across the courtyard and stopped at the double church doors. There was another side door in the cloisters that led into the church, and he assumed that was what the nuns used. He tested the latch on the smaller door inside the double doors, and it opened with a creak. Fortunately, the noise was covered by the sounds of the nuns trooping into the front of the church.

Mal wasn't sure what he was supposed to do so hung back in the deep shadows and watched as the nuns took up positions in three rows and Matins began with a reading. They stood in a pool of light that left the majority of the church in deep shadow, and their breath came out in clouds in the cold church air. It felt otherworldly, and then they began to sing. It started with one voice chanting in Latin. Then all the other nuns joined in. It was the most extraordinary thing Mal had ever heard.

He sank to his haunches alone in the dark and let the music wash over him. All those female voices singing in unison filled the dark spaces of the cavernous church. They turned it from a cold, intimidating space to a place of light and beauty. It felt like his prayers could drift up to God on such beautiful voices and he prayed that he could be forgiven for all he'd ever done.

The chanting had a hypnotic quality, and after a while Mal's eyes grew heavy and started to close. He was barely aware when the chanting stopped but not inclined to move, when a shadow loomed over him. His eyes snapped open to find Mary Constance standing over him.

'Sister,' he said and shot up to stand at attention.

'I've never seen you here before,' Mary Constance said.

'At matins?'

'Don't play the fool, Mal. I mean in the church.'

'You noticed?'

‘Of course I did. Does this coming mission worry you that much?’

‘I feel like my past is catching up with me,’ Mal said. ‘And Mistress Anne was clearly shaken to discover I was one of the sheriff’s men.’

‘Shhh, words carry in the church,’ Mary Constance said, took Mal by the elbow and hurried him outside. ‘We may as well fetch Brute; it’s nearly time to leave.’

‘Fine,’ Mal said. Mary Constance was back to her usual brusque self apparently and in no mood to chat.

She ignored him till they were in the stable and standing before Brute in his stall. ‘He isn’t going to want to move. In fact, he recognises you.’

That was true, Brute took one look at Mal and shifted backwards deeper into his stall. ‘I know, boy,’ Mal said and patted the mule’s neck, ‘but this will be a shorter and slower journey, I promise.’

‘Talking won’t shift him,’ Mary Constance said. ‘You take his halter and pull, and I’ll get behind and push.’

‘There’s no need,’ Mal said and tickled Brute behind the ears. ‘Come on, boy, you’ll be fine,’ he said, and the mule took a reluctant step forward.

‘Well I’ll be. I’ve never known anyone who could get Brute to leave his stall when he’s in a mood,’ Mary Constance said.

‘I have found kindness will get any beast to shift faster than cruelty. Failing that there is always food,’ Mal said and held out a ball of rolled up figgy pudding to the mule who eagerly stepped out to get at it.

‘You’re feeding Brute pudding? Don’t let Anne see that or she really will be offended.’

‘More than she is already?’ Mal said, threw a blanket over Brute’s back and got out his saddle.

‘The last time the sheriff and his men... you lot, were here, they ran amok and raped some of the women from the town. Anne is no doubt wondering what part you played in that.’

‘I had nothing to do with it,’ Mal said as he set to doing up the saddle.

‘Alright.’

Good Lord, Mal thought and straightened up to be able to see Sister Mary Constance. ‘You believe me?’

‘I do.’

‘Why?’

‘Because I have found you to be trustworthy.’

‘I see.’

‘Not that I’m the one you have to convince, Mal.’

‘Anne?’

‘Who else?’

‘It’s a waste of time. How could I possibly convince her when I have no proof. And the only reason I’d have for trying to get her to see me in a better light is if I wanted to marry her.’

‘Don’t you want that?’

‘No! At least... I haven’t thought that far. I have nothing to my name, and even if I do get Mistress Anne safely through this venture, I doubt her father would allow me anywhere near his daughter.’

‘Nick wasn’t always the upstanding pillar of the community you see today. When he was young, he was... disruptive. He came close to being sent packing from the convent due to his bad behaviour. Then the plague hit the town, and hundreds died, including Anne’s mother’s whole family. She was the only one left.’

‘She was a vulnerable young woman who was suddenly the inheritor of money and a house in the town. Men quickly

started sniffing around that prize. Then Nick stepped in, told Agnes he'd marry her and look after her. As some of the others looked like they might take her house by force and throw her out, it was a good offer. And to give him credit he has cherished Agnes ever since. But mark me, he wasn't motivated by affection at the start. He saw a way to gain property and a step up in life, and he took it.'

'And he was doing the same with Anne and Sir Ingram,' Mal said.

'Let's just say; he could see the benefits. But age has mellowed him, and there's no denying he loves his daughter. So he has tried to see things from her point of view at least.'

'I don't understand how that helps me.'

'Because Nick might benefit from being reminded of his humble roots too; should you manage to win Anne round.'

'Maybe,' Mal said. 'And maybe this is a pointless conversation, and we should just go.'

'I'll check the kitchen and see whether Anne and Nick have arrived. I'll meet you at the gate,' Mary Constance said.

Since he was out of his stall and fully kitted out, Brute decided there was no point in resisting and followed Mal out into the freezing dawn air. It would still be dark for a couple more hours, and there weren't even torches lit yet because it was too early. Which was just as well since they were trying to slip away unnoticed.

Mal headed for the main gates only half paying the route any attention. Sister Mary Constance had given him a great deal to consider, but he wondered whether it was foolish to plan for any future when he was setting off on such a risky venture.

He stood in the dark listening, at first all he could hear was a regular drip of water from the dense mist this morning. It

was collecting on the building and dripping off in a drumbeat pattern. This soft sound was joined by footsteps, and moments later Nick's great bulk emerged from the gloom followed by Anne. She was bundled up but shivering, and Mal wondered whether she was cold or scared.

She tilted a defiant face up towards Mal though and said, 'I'm ready.'

'Good,' Mal said. 'We're both riding Brute. I'll get up first and then pull you up after me.'

'Fine,' Anne said with a firm nod.

Mal wished he could give her a hug for being so determined not to let her fear show. Instead, he hoisted himself into the saddle and pulled Anne up so that she was sitting in front of him and he reached his arms around for the reins. She stiffened and made an effort to sit forward so that they weren't touching.

Nick grabbed Mal's arm and said, 'You bring her back safe. Or don't come back at all, you understand?'

'Yes, sir,' Mal said and wondered whether he would make it out alive.



A moment of panic washed over Anne as Mal urged their mount forward and they headed out into the swirling mist. What possessed me to do this crazy thing, she thought. She'd had a full day and sleepless night to consider, and no matter how long she looked at the problem she could see no other way out. To try and do anything different would mean going against the baron. Assuming she survived that, it would mean Father's inevitable death. So she had no choice.

Worse was having to do this with Mal. What a shock it had been to discover he was one of the sheriff's bully boys. She'd

spent more than half of her short night tossing and turning in bed trying, for the first time, to recall the events of five years ago and bring Mal's face to mind. She felt like she should have realised he was one of the barbarians because she remembered that they were all dressed in rags. But that was under their armour, so maybe that was why she hadn't made the connection.

Brute walked past her home, looking ghostly in the dark. The war against the convent had been particularly tricky for Mother and Father. Most of the convent staff lived in the convent, so their full loyalty lay with them. Mother was a townswoman and, although she never voiced it, Anne suspected her sympathy had lain with the town. All the same, for the duration of the battle, the whole family had moved to the convent and stayed within her fortified walls till they were given the all clear.

Their house was still intact when they decided it was safe to move back. It surprised Father who'd been expecting to find either a smouldering ruin or, at the very least, a ransacked building. It looked like it hadn't been touched. Relationships with the townsfolk were another matter and, five years on, had still not recovered.

That was easier for Anne and Father to cope with, they had friends at the convent. Most of Mother's friends refused to speak to her. The few that still did, told stories of the horrors the sheriff's men had perpetrated which Mother relayed breathlessly to Father by the fire at night. She'd always wait till she thought Anne was in bed and asleep, but she often wasn't sleeping, and the tales haunted her.

As did the memory of the townsfolk trying to burn the gate of the convent open. They'd stood before the bonfire shouting obscenities, their weapons at the ready for when the gates

came down. Anne, along with a few of the other convent children, had sneaked into the bell tower to watch. Not that their parents had known. They stood below in the courtyard waiting, weapons in hand, ready to repel any invaders.

At that moment the sheriff and his men came riding in and swooped down on the townsfolk. The men didn't stand a chance. Anne saw one man's head get lopped clean off before she ducked behind the wall and pushed her fingers in her ears to try and block out the sound of the screaming.

'Are you alright?' Mal said.

'Why wouldn't I be?' Anne snapped, grateful all the same to be pulled back from that dreadful memory.

'You shuddered.'

'It's cold.'

'You would be warmer, and more comfortable if you lean against me,' Mal said. 'It must take some effort to hold yourself so rigid and separate from me.'

'You would like that, would you? To have me lean back and have no consideration of who you are... what you are.'

'And what am I?'

'A monster.'

'Shhh, quietly,' Mal said. 'We're nearly clear of the town, but we could do without them hearing us.'

'Sorry,' Anne said, and half meant the apology to cover calling him a monster. He didn't seem particularly monstrous right now, with his arms loosely about her. But no, she had to harden her heart. She couldn't allow this apparently mild-mannered man to lure her into thinking he was trustworthy.

She refused to relax and looked about instead. They cleared the last few houses and were now walking down the road that led south to the baron's stronghold and Sir Ingram's estate. She'd never been further out of the town than a runaway girl

out looking for adventure could manage in a day.

'You told me at... at Christmas that your master was cruel,' Anne said. This despite the promise she'd made to herself not to find an excuse for Mal. 'Was that true?'

'Knowing what you do of the sheriff, do you think he would be kind?'

'No, I don't suppose he was,' Anne said. 'And you said he took you very young. How old were you?'

'I'm not sure, five or six I think.'

'Oh,' Anne said. 'That is young. Why didn't your parents stop him?'

'Because my father was dead, killed only moments before on the baron's orders. After that, we all fled and I was grabbed and spirited away before my mother could do anything. Although, there was nothing she could have done.'

'Did you ever see her again?'

'Never. When I was younger, I searched the faces of every woman of the right age I saw as we travelled across the county. But after a few years my memory faded, and now I can't call my mother's face to mind. If she is still alive, she will be much older now too so I doubt I would know her.'

'That's terrible,' Anne said and felt Mal shrug and waited, but he said no more. 'So... what did he do with you? I mean, why take such a young child? Most masters would want someone who was better able to look after himself before he left home.'

'I have pondered that question for years. I think he had two reasons. The first is that a young child's mind is easier to mould. He made us obey him without question, and he made us so terrified of what he would do if we disobeyed that we hardly ever did.'

Anne twisted around so that she could see Mal's face in the

early dawn light. He looked grimmer than she'd seen anyone look before. 'What was the second reason?'

'He took pleasure in inflicting pain and children... they aren't so good at hiding how hurt they feel. If you lash out at a child, they cry. You can see the suffering in their face. He liked that.'

'So... so he tortured you?'

'In a hundred different ways. After a while, you learn to hide your pain and your fear. He lost interest then and moved on to the next boy and the next, although.... He was incapable of anything but cruelty, so even the grown men in his army were treated badly. As he'd raised us all, we didn't dare go against him.'

'But if you'd all worked together, surely then, I mean, there were a lot of you. Couldn't you have overwhelmed him?'

'He had ways to prevent that.'

'How? How is it even possible for one man to hold sway over so many in such a cruel way?'

'Precisely because he was ruthless. On occasion, some did try to escape. My best friend when we were boys slipped away one night. He was recaptured within a day and when he was brought back to camp... no, I shouldn't tell you this,' Mal said and his gaze drifted out to the frosted fields with their blanket of low morning mist.

'Why not?'

'It isn't suitable for a young woman's ears.'

'Do you think me so protected, with my easy life, that you don't think I have known horror? I saw the Sheriff descend on the town. I saw the butchery, and I helped nurse one of the women... one of the women ravaged by... by a pack of men.'

'I'm sorry.'

'Were you involved? Did you do that kind of thing?'

‘I stayed away. I dislike violence and disliked most of my brothers in arms. So when they went to... take their payment, I stayed in the camp.’

‘I pray that is true,’ Anne said. ‘Now please... what happened to your friend?’

‘He was killed. The sheriff, knowing we were friends, gave me an ultimatum. I had to kill him. If I didn’t, he would let... he would let my friend kill me.’

‘That’s horrible!’ Anne gasped. ‘Surely you couldn’t do it.’

‘What choice did I have?’ Mal said, and his voice sounded flat. ‘I knew for certain my friend would take his one chance and kill me. He was more of a fighter. He’d resisted the sheriff all the way, even to running away. He would have done it without hesitation. I... I hesitated, but in the end, I did as I was ordered.’

‘That’s vile.’

‘It happened more than once, thankfully not to me. I made sure I had no more friends so I would never be called upon to do such a thing again. But with that tactic to install fear, the sheriff controlled us well.’

‘All the same, all of you, just accepting it?’

‘I suppose... it’s a little like your father. Even though he knows he is in danger, he hasn’t fled. One solution to your problem could have been to pack up all your worldly goods and vanish.’

‘I hadn’t even thought of that!’ Anne said. ‘You’re right; we could have done that. Father’s an excellent cook; he could have found work anywhere.’

‘There, you see. Sometimes we don’t even see the choices we have. Some of the sheriff’s men, me included, couldn’t see a way out. What would I have done if I left anyway? Unlike your father, I have no useful skills.’

‘You know how to fight.’

‘That’s not terribly useful.’

‘How can it not be useful? All the most powerful lords of the land need standing armies.’

‘And that was where the sheriff’s other tactic came in. He led us to believe that the baron was a boon companion and had near-mystical powers to be able to sniff out a deserter wherever they might hide. So, even if we ran away, he would hunt us down and kill us. Failing that the baron would do it for him.’

‘And you believed him?’

‘I did,’ Mal said with a laugh that reflected his embarrassment. ‘You have no idea how terrified I was when I first stood before the baron. I was certain he’d know me for what I was and order my execution on the spot, much as he did to my father.’

‘Then your going to see him was extremely brave and I thank you all the more for it,’ Anne said and leaned back to rest against Mal with a sigh. His story was shocking. It should have put her off him even more and yet it hadn’t. She felt a kinship with him as a fellow sufferer under the sheriff’s hand. Besides, it would have been hard to keep herself upright for the whole journey, and he was right, this was warmer.



Mal had never been as close to a woman as he was with Anne resting against him. The sensation was so overwhelming that he could think of little else. As Brute stuck to the road with barely any need for direction from Mal it left him free to wallow in the new experience. Her hair smelled of rosemary, and her body was soft and warm. Nothing like the hard bony bodies of his fellow soldiers when they’d all huddled against

each other to keep warm.

And it was a sign of trust when she finally leaned against him, as if his terrible tale wasn't quite as unforgivable as he found it. She was a good woman indeed if she could look past his crimes. What had possessed him to tell her the thing that shamed him the most? That surely put him beyond the pale as far as God was concerned, yet didn't unduly trouble her. No... he was being unfair. She was troubled, but she also seemed to understand. He wanted to cry in gratitude for that, to have someone who listened and didn't judge him harshly.

They emerged from the overgrown tangled thicket of a dark lane into unexpected sunshine. It was the soft watery sunshine of a winter's day, but still sunshine. How fitting, Mal thought, that the weather matched his mood. He felt like he was emerging from a lifetime in shadows as well. Whether he'd arrive in a sunnier place was still to be determined, but he'd take joy from where he was now.

He took a deep, satisfied breath as he examined the more open countryside. They were passing through grazing marsh. To their left, just visible past the marshes was the sea. To his right, on the other side of the path were the slightly drier grassland being grazed by a collection of sheep and cattle. Somewhere nearby then, would be a boy or boys watching over the animals. It was the nature of children to not always pay attention, so it was possible, given the fine weather, that they were engaged in a diversion of their own. It was safer to assume, though, that they were spotted. Which meant that come evening, when the animals were taken in, the children would report what they had seen to their elders. Fortunately, by that time the rest of his plan would already be put into action.

He tilted his head to listen and thought he heard a horse. It

sounded like it was travelling fast. He pulled on Brute's reins to slow them down whilst he eased them to the side of the road.

'What's the matter?' Anne said.

'Somebody's coming, I'm just getting out of the way,' Mal said. It also got him into a better position in case whoever was coming harboured ill intent, as he got Brute to stop.

The horse's hooves grew louder and then a rider came round the bend. He was bouncing up and down on the animal like a man who was unfamiliar with riding, and whipping the poor creature's rump as he cursed it to move. Since it looked old and unfit he was struggling.

'Good Lord,' Anne said. 'Isn't that John?'

Before Mal could reply, the rider pulled his horse to a halt beside them and gasped, 'Mistress Anne, thank God I got to you in time.'

'What is it John? Is something wrong? Has something happened to my father?'

'Your father?' John said and looked confused. 'No, your father is fine. I'm here to rescue you.'

'Rescue her from what?' Mal said although he was pretty sure he already knew the answer.

'From you, you blackguard,' John said. 'You've been conniving to get Anne for yourself from the day you came to the convent.'

'No, John, you don't understand,' Anne said. 'My father knows I'm with Mal.'

'I know that. I saw the two of you sneaking off with only your father and Sister Mary Constance to bid you farewell but there's no need to take such drastic action to get away from Sir Ingram,' John said and his horse sidled about in front of them reflecting John's agitation. 'You can marry me, Annie. I will

keep you safe.'

'John, you've misunderstood. Mal and I aren't eloping,' Anne said. 'He isn't carrying me off to safety. Quite the opposite in fact.'

'What are you talking about?'

'We're... we're on our way to see Sir Ingram to-'

'Beg him for mercy,' Mal said hastily. The last thing they needed was for John to know more than he should about what they were up to.

'Beg him for mercy?' John said ignoring Mal and addressing himself only to Anne. 'Sir Ingram? And you'd go with the man who broke his jaw? That isn't going to work. Be sensible. If you want to get Sir Ingram to forgive you... Why do you want his forgiveness anyway? He won't do it. He'll more likely snatch you up and take you for his own. What was the point of fighting him if you're just going to hand yourself over now?'

'Because it might save my father,' Anne said. 'I will do anything to keep him safe.'

'This doesn't sound right. Nick would never allow you to put yourself at risk just to save his own skin.'

'But I'm not putting myself at risk,' Anne said. 'Don't you see? This way I have a chance to save my father.'

'You want the money,' John said and he looked astonished. 'You play all coy but you actually want to be married to Sir Ingram.'

Anne gasped and looked like she might unleash a tirade so Mal said, 'this is none of your business John. Please leave before you cause any more trouble. Besides, Sister Mary Constance will be furious to have two of her warehouse men missing.'

'Don't you tell me what to do,' John shouted. 'I've had enough of you.'

‘Stop assuming you have anything to do with Anne’s future then.’

‘You bastard, you’ve had your eye on her ever since you arrived and don’t think just because you managed to get the better of Sir Ingram you can do the same with me.’

‘Is that a challenge?’ Mal snapped.

‘You got lucky with Sir Ingram and I can prove it,’ John said and jumped off his horse. ‘Come down here so I can show you how a real man fights.’

‘John, what are you doing?’ Anne said. ‘We don’t have time for this.’

‘Yes we do,’ Mal said. ‘I have to deal with him once and for all or he’ll keep on coming and I can’t allow that to happen.’

‘Don’t kill him, Mal.’

‘I won’t, don’t worry,’ Mal said as he slipped off Brute and handed the reins to Anne.

‘You kill me?’ John said and laughed. ‘I’ve been lugging bales my whole life. I’m twice as strong as you are and I’m taller.’

‘Maybe, but you only know how to brawl,’ Mal said and he knew how much of an advantage that gave him. He’d faced down plenty of strong men who thought they knew how to fight, but that was what he’d done all his life. It gave him an edge. The question now was, how thoroughly did he trounce John?

‘Take that,’ John shouted and swung at him as he dismounted.

Mal ducked the punch and sidestepped to get John away from Anne and Brute. He didn’t want either of them getting spooked.

‘Not much of a fighter are you?’ John said as he bounded in for another hit.

This time Mal blocked the swinging fist and added to John's momentum with a push so that he ran flailing into the marsh and fell flat on his face.

'You bastard,' John snarled and scrambled out of the mud with his arms wide, intending to grab Mal in a bearhug.

He was getting enraged and Mal didn't need that. He'd been trying not to hurt John but as a tactic it wasn't working so he stepped up to John and hit him hard in the diaphragm.

John doubled over as his breath came out in a gasp and he collapsed, writhing to the ground.

'Mal, what have you done?' Anne cried.

'He'll be alright,' Mal said, grabbed a hold of John's shirt and pulled him till he was sitting upright. He was gasping for air like a landed fish. 'That was just a single punch,' Mal said bringing his face close to John's steadily reddening face. 'I have a hundred more that I could use. You know nothing about proper fighting and if you ever go for me again, I'll kill you. Do you understand?'

John's eyes were bulging as he nodded, but he couldn't speak.

'It's going to hurt for a while, but you'll be alright,' Mal said. 'When you recover you go back to the convent, understand?'

John took a massive gasp of air, toppled over onto his side and nodded miserably.

'Anne was never yours, you know?' Mal said softly.

'She could have been,' John said as tears oozed from his eyes.

'No, she couldn't,' Mal said and walked back to Brute.

'We can't just leave him there,' Anne said. 'He needs help.'

Mal looked from John, lying in the road curled up into a ball, and across to his horse who stood aimlessly beside him and said, 'he'll be alright and it isn't that far back to the

convent. We can't hang about any longer, we have our own mission to complete.'



They followed the marsh road skirting the sea for the rest of the day. And as the sun began to set, their path angled upwards, the land dried out, and they were back in woodland. Here the leaves lay in thick blankets across the path, barely disturbed by what little traffic went through.

'Are you awake, Anne?' Mal said.

'Mmm,' Anne murmured. 'Oh, I'm sorry. I was so anxious last night I didn't sleep, but the warmth and the motion of Brute's tread must have lulled me into dropping off.'

'I'm glad you felt safe enough to do so,' Mal said. He reflected that despite the terror of the last few days he too had slept better at the convent than he ever had anywhere else.

'Now we must prepare for our next step.'

'So we are nearly there?'

'This is the wood where the sheriff always left us when he came to visit Sir Ingram. Since we had very little else to do, we explored it thoroughly. So I know of a couple of good hiding spots for you here.'

'And this is where we'll meet the baron?'

'If my directions were clear enough then yes, he'll find us at the hiding spot I suggested. So you see, you will never be left alone, you are either with me or the baron.'

'I'd rather be with you,' Anne said with a shudder. 'The baron is a disconcerting man.'

'He has real power, and he wields it without hesitation. That is frightening.'

'But we are on the right side in this argument aren't we?'

'Today we are, and if we play our parts, we will come

through safely.’

‘It’s reassuring to hear that.’

‘Mmm,’ Mal said, well at least one of them was reassured. Anne had a surprisingly sunny temperament. Even when she was in danger, she looked to the more positive outcomes. He liked that, it counterbalanced his ever-present sense of impending doom.

He rode up the path a way then veered off the track and deeper into the woodland. Brute’s feet crunched through the leaves, fallen wood and undergrowth. At least anyone trying to follow them would have similar difficulties keeping quiet. Yet another reason to use this particular hiding place.

‘There it is,’ Mal said and pointed at an ancient oak at the top of the mound. Its trunk was so thick it would take at least five men holding hands to circumnavigate it, but age had pruned its crown so that only a few stunted branches remained overhead.

‘It’s a little bit prominent for a hiding place, isn’t it?’ Anne said.

‘I had to choose something the baron could find. And Sir Ingram, if he doesn’t go along with our plan and bring me out to fetch you,’ Mal said, pulled Brute to a halt and dismounted. His feet sank to their ankles in the soft leafy ground. He hitched the mule to a low branch and held his hand out to help Anne down.

‘How can it be a hiding place though?’ Anne said. ‘I mean, it’s a tree, and one so thick you would have difficulties tying me to it.’

‘Come, I’ll show you,’ Mal said.

He took her hand and led her around the tree, the two of them lifting their feet high to wade through the deep leaf litter.

‘Here, you see,’ Mal said pointing out a tear shaped crack in

the ancient trunk. 'Look inside.'

'It's a bit of a tight squeeze.'

'If I can get in, you can too,' Mal said and pushed himself through the gap.

'Oh, wait for me,' Anne said and slipped inside.

It was dark and smelled of rich moist earth and mushrooms, and Mal grinned at her. 'What do you think?'

'It will do,' Anne said. 'It's a good hiding spot. Now, do you think there's time to eat something?'

'We may as well whilst we can still see what we're eating,' Mal said. He was looking forward to the couple of meat pies as well as a skinful of ale Nick had packed for them.

'I'll get it ready,' Anne said, slipped back outside and went for their sack of supplies.

Mal couldn't work out exactly what needed to be made ready with a pie but enjoyed the sensation of being looked after. So he spent the time scanning the wood, his ears straining to hear anything whilst his eyes checked every shade and shadow.

When he attacked the sheriff, Sir Hugo had sprung a magnificent ambush for he'd not been spotted till it was too late. It was a sign of his mastery and Mal was determined that he'd not sneak up on him again.

'It's ready,' Anne said, and Mal turned to discover that she'd laid the sack over a broad branch, with a pie on each end and the ale in the middle.

'That looks nice,' Mal said, and it felt homely, which was a funny thing to feel in the middle of a wood.

'I'm glad you like it,' Anne said and gave him a sunny smile that made him feel all funny. She settled on the log and, despite claiming she was hungry, only took a tiny bite of her pie.

Mal felt the need to stretch his legs, so returned to scanning the woods as he bit hungrily into his pie. If anything, this one was better even than the first pie he'd had. Probably a leftover from the Christmas feast, Mal decided.

'Are you looking for them?' Anne whispered.

'And listening. I'll hear them before I see them.'

'If they don't hurry it will be pitch black soon and then they'll never find you.'

'They'll be here,' Mal said, reached round and took a swig of ale. It felt good after the long ride and, weak as it was, provided his heart with some additional courage.

There was the faintest impression of a crack in the distance, and a surge of energy kicked Mal's senses into a peak. 'They're coming,' he murmured. 'Finish up quickly,' he said and shoved the last of his pie into his mouth with a twinge of regret. It would have been nice to be able to savour it.

Moments later he heard horses, but only a few of them and then two figures emerged out of the gloom and made their steady way up the mound.

'My lord,' Mal said and bowed. 'Sir Hugo.'

'Not bad directions,' the baron said as he dismounted. 'I was convinced we'd be chasing our own tails around this wood, but we found you quite easily.'

'Maybe too easily,' Sir Hugo said from his horse.

'We've discussed this, Hugo,' the baron said. 'We agreed it has to be easy for Ingram to find.'

Sir Hugo shrugged then spotted Anne and gave her a nod.

'Ah yes,' the baron said, 'our fair young temptress.'

'My lord,' Anne said and executed a curtsy. 'I am sorry to have brought down so much trouble.'

'Not at all,' the baron said with a broad grin. 'You have provided me with an opportunity my dear, and I intend to

make good use of it.'

Mal wondered whether the baron was going to tell Anne the full plan now and suddenly didn't want him to. Anne was in enough danger without adding to it. So he cleared his throat as respectfully as he could and said, 'Begging your pardon my lord, but is it just you and Sir Hugo?'

'Of course not young, Master Malcolm, the rest are hidden at a discreet distance. We can't have the ground disturbed by a whole horde of men, that will make Ingram suspicious.'

'Yes, of course,' Mal said with a quick accepting bow. 'They weren't the ones...' He left the rest hanging. He couldn't say, who ambushed the sheriff, with Anne there.

Fortunately, the baron was a sharp man, and he said, 'They are my most trusted, and loyal fighters.'

'I see,' Mal said.

'Now it's time for you to go, Master Malcolm, or else you will arrive too late to be given admittance at Ingram's hall.'

'Yes, my lord,' Mal said. 'You will... look after her,' he added and felt foolish and audacious in equal measure to say such a thing to the baron.

'Of course I will,' the baron said and gave him a hearty slap on his back. 'Now run along.'

'I'll leave the supplies. There's rope in the sack and a gag, so you can tie her up and get her into the tree if you see Sir Ingram coming.'

'Good, good. Hugo will go with you. We need somebody on the outside who can tell if everything is going to plan.'

'Of course,' Mal said as he hoisted himself into the saddle and pulled Brute around. He wasn't pleased to have his rest interrupted and gave an annoyed snort before he could be urged back down the mound. At least he'd not refused, point blank, to budge. That would have been humiliating.

Sir Hugo's horse fell into step with him as they got back to the track and headed in the direction of Sir Ingram's hall. Mal cast him a quick glance; it didn't look like he was being watched. Sir Hugo had his eye fixed on the path. Mal shuddered, it felt eerie to be out in this wood, a wood much like the one in which they were ambushed, with the man who'd tried to kill him. A man swathed in shadows like when he stood and watched in the warehouse.

'If you're outside, how can you possibly know what's happening inside?' Mal said by way of distraction.

'I have my methods.'

'You have a spy,' Mal said. It was the only logical conclusion.

'Why ask the question if you already know the answer?'

'I didn't, not immediately. Will you tell me who it is?'

'No chance,' Sir Hugo said and smiled.

It was an odd smile, not predatory like the baron's, maybe amused. Maybe it just looked strange because it was lopsided, deformed by the scar. 'But if you already have a spy,' Mal said, 'how is it that you don't know Sir Ingram's plans?'

'The spy is a late acquisition and still being tested. They'll do for keeping an eye on you, however,' Sir Hugo said. 'In the meantime, I should tell you a bit about Sir Ingram that might be useful to you.'

'Mary Constance said to use his vanity against him.'

'That's good advice. Ingram is the vainest man I have ever met. He was the only child of his shrewish mother for his father died when he was still very young. His mother took over the running of the household and always treated her son like a prince and made sure that all those around him did the same. His every whim was seen to; praise was lavished on him from morning till night. He grew up to be insufferably vain and have no regard for anyone but himself.'

‘Is she still around, the mother?’ Mal said.

‘She died recently. That’s when Sir Ingram took a turn for the worse. It’s when he started plotting with the sheriff and conceived his passion for the cook. Because mother, you see, not only spoiled her son, she also kept him on a short leash. I doubt he was aware of it though because he worshipped her.’

‘So he is vain, and he is stupid.’

‘He is the vainest and most stupid man you have ever met, and at this point, as you have disfigured him, he is in a rage at you.’

‘Of course.’

‘Not necessarily of course. We are not all as vain as him, some of us wear our scars as badges of honour.’

‘Like you?’ Mal said. ‘What happened to your face?’

‘One hell of a battle and a well-aimed axe,’ Sir Hugo said.

‘I was told you saved the baron’s life by getting in front of him.’

‘True enough.’

‘Were you wearing a helmet?’

‘It saved my life. But the metal from the helmet tore into my flesh as it was bent inwards by the axe, and ripped the skin when the whole bloody lot was removed. The eye was taken by a surgeon when they determined it was beyond saving. I still have it in a jar by my bed.’

Mal stared open mouthed at the man. ‘I see.’

‘Now your turn, Master Malcolm,’ Sir Hugo said.

‘Information never comes free. What is the little kitchen maid to you?’

An awful lot, Mal realised, so much so that he didn’t dare reveal how much. ‘She’s nothing.’

‘Then why are you putting yourself to all this trouble?’

‘For the convent.’

Sanctuary

‘The convent? Why?’

‘They took me in and made me a part of their community. I am grateful for that.’

‘Are you indeed? So it has nothing to do with the girl?’

‘She and I are just pawns in the baron’s game.’

‘Don’t you forget that either,’ Sir Hugo said. ‘And take this, it’s a hunting horn. You can use it should you find yourself in dire trouble.’

This is where I leave you,' Sir Hugo said as they came to the end of the wood. 'There's a lot riding on this, Master Malcolm. Make sure you do a good job.'

'I will try my best,' Mal said.

'Don't try, do,' Sir Hugo said. 'You'll find the baron is generous to those who please him.'

'Of course,' Mal said.

He'd never been comfortable with false bravado but knew that fighting men must never show weakness, and doubt was a weakness. He gave Sir Hugo a nod of farewell. Then he stepped out into a wide clearing of short mown grass that served as grazing for the knight's livestock. At the end of the road was a substantial homestead. A wall surrounded it and an older, stone building was built into the wall. That once served as the family quarters but was now for the servants. A newer house had been built inside the walls. It was as fine an example of a timber-framed house as one could find in the area. Mal knew, even if he couldn't see it in the dark, that it was painted a bright mustard colour. A few more buildings filled in the space inside the wall, and the wood resumed on the far side.

A stranger coming upon this house might assume it was in the middle of nowhere. But the road continued around a bend

to the village that housed Sir Ingram's tenants. The sheriff had forbade them from ever going in there. That didn't prevent them roaming about and watching the inhabitants whilst they waited for the sheriff to return. Mal wondered how frightened the villagers must have been to be watched in that way. It must have been worse than being circled by a pack of wolves. No doubt they cheered when they heard the sheriff was no more. A pang passed over Mal as he considered that. It wasn't a good feeling to know they'd been feared and despised in equal measure.

On the other hand, he had to tap into that now. He had to dredge up the arrogance his brothers in arms had. They instilled fear because they knew how much they could get away with. They knew how tough they were individually and as a group. He had to use that now because Sir Ingram would never believe that a meek man was part of the sheriff's old gang.

He took a deep breath as he approached the wide open main gates. Torches were burning on either side and made the whole scene remarkably welcoming. He'd be a fool if he thought this was anything but stupidly dangerous. He had to keep on his toes. Especially now as two men stood at the entrance watching him.

Mal pulled to a halt a few paces back from the men and dismounted. He walked closer, leading Brute and nodded his head in greeting.

'Is Sir Ingram home?'

He used his best imitation of the sheriff. He always implied he'd take a no as a personal insult.

'Who wants to know?' the man on the left said.

'My name is Malcolm. I've come from the convent.'

'The convent!' the man on the right said. 'You've got a nerve

showing up here. Sir Ingram's spitting feathers about you lot. He'll curse you to hell and back before he lets you in.'

'If he does that he'll not discover the convent's intentions.'

'What intentions?'

'He attacked the convent and angered our mother superior. Do you really think that could pass without a response?' Mal said. He hoped he sounded implacable as he slowly looked each man up and down. 'Now stop wasting my time and take me to your master.'

'This way,' the first man said and indicated for Mal to follow.

He was so surprised this gambit worked that it took a second for him to register that he was in. He snapped out of it and headed after the man.

'You can leave your mount here,' the man said and called a stable lad over who took Brute's reins.

Mal was loathe to give him up, but short of dragging the mule into the house, he had no choice.

It was astonishing, Mal reflected, that he was finally seeing inside so many of the buildings they'd been barred from when he was with the sheriff. Places, moreover, that he had no wish to enter. Sir Ingram's house was only one step down from the baron's castle on his list and yet here he was.

The place was clean and well kept. It was a tribute to well trained staff because he couldn't see Sir Ingram paying attention to that detail. It also didn't look like a property that was in financial difficulties. Then again, he was hardly skilled in spotting those signs. But if the baron said that was the case, it probably was.

The man leading him slowed as he arrived at a fine set of doors and said, 'It's not too late to change your mind.'

Mal was surprised by his consideration. It seemed he wasn't

that keen on his master either.

‘Announce me,’ he said.

The man shrugged, pushed open the doors and said, ‘One Malcolm from the Convent of Kirkthorpe, Sir Ingram.’

There was a second of stunned silence. Every person in the hall turned to stare at Mal their mouths agape. Mal took a breath.

‘You!’ Sir Ingram roared and shot to his feet. ‘Grab that man,’ he screamed and leapfrogged over his table.

Mal held his hands open and away from his body as he was rushed from both sides and grabbed. He kept his gaze fixed on Sir Ingram who shoved people aside in his haste to get to Mal.

Mal clenched his jaw and tensed as Sir Ingram took a running punch. It was one hell of a blow. Mal staggered backwards despite the tight hold of the men around him.

‘I deserved that,’ he muttered.

‘You deserved that? You deserved that!?’ Sir Ingram screamed. ‘Get me my mace. I’ll show you what you deserve. I’ll pulverise your bloody face. You’ll be such a mess we’ll be picking your teeth out through your skin.’ He looked around at his people and shouted, ‘Well? Where’s the mace?’

‘If you batter me I can’t tell you why I’ve come,’ Mal said fighting to keep calm. He had to talk this raging man down. ‘You need to hear what I have to say.’

‘I don’t need to hear anything the convent has to say,’ Sir Ingram spat. His face was so close to Mal’s that his blackened and bruised jaw shone in a rainbow of ghastly colour. It didn’t look to be healing well. ‘I’m guessing that the only reason you’ve shown up here is that the baron was as interested in your tale as he was in mine.’

‘The baron sent his sister word that he is on his way,’ Mal said. ‘We don’t know what his ruling is yet. A wise man like

you would know it's best to wait and find out before acting.'

'So if he hasn't given a ruling what are you doing here?' Sir Ingram said.

'I am not here for the convent. I'm here for myself. I have information you need. Something you've been asking about. I came to beg forgiveness and throw myself upon your mercy in exchange for my intelligence.'

'What information could you have that would interest me?' Sir Ingram said.

He held out his hand to the servant who'd arrived, breathless, holding an iron starred mace. Mal didn't like the look of the weapon nor the enthusiastic slap Sir Ingram gave its pointy head.

'I was one of Sheriff Moore's men.'

'You were?' Sir Ingram said. At least he looked startled, which shifted him a bit from his enraged state.

'I was there... at the ambush,' Mal said.

'You weren't killed?'

'I was run through and mistaken for dead, but I survived.'

'You were run through? There's no way you could survive such a thing.'

'Lift up my shirt; you can see the wound for yourself.'

'Do it,' Sir Ingram said.

A couple of the men converged on Mal, pushed up his shirt and loosened the bandage around his middle.

'I was lucky that the sword deflected off a rib bone and went through my side.'

'That wound could have come from anywhere,' Sir Ingram said. 'Prove you were at the ambush. Tell me more about it.'

'I don't have a lot to tell. I was one of the first to go down. I passed out and was covered by the bodies of the men who fell afterwards. When I came to it was dark and silent. I crawled

out from under the bodies to discover that everyone had been left where they fell although they'd been stripped of anything of value. All the armour and weapons were taken.'

'Which is how they were discovered a day later by a traveller. Their bodies were just left, desecrated in the rain,' Sir Ingram said. 'So you know that at least and you must also know who attacked you.'

'I do.'

'Who was it?'

'If I tell you, I have nothing left with which to stay your hand,' Mal said. He was thankful his voice sounded level and calm since he was far from feeling it.

'Well, what's the bloody point in coming here if you aren't going to tell me what I want to know?' Sir Ingram yelled.

'I was hoping we could come to an arrangement,' Mal said.

'What sort of an arrangement?'

'I have no wish to remain as a servant at the convent. I was a warrior with the sheriff; I can be the same for you.'

'You!?! Why would I take you? Look what you've done to my face! I'm in agony and I've only started to talk normally again today. On top of that, the surgeon had to pull a handful of broken teeth. The agony nearly put paid to me. Now you want me to take you in?'

'I acted in the heat of battle, and I am willing to take my punishment for what I have done. But I'd rather work for a great man like you, a relative to my sheriff, than I would work for a bunch of women.'

'They are annoying,' Sir Ingram said.

He appeared to lapse into dwelling on how much he disliked them. He shook his head to clear it and said, 'You will be punished. I don't care who you are, or what kind of information you have in that head of yours. You can't get away

with what you've done to me.'

'I understand,' Mal said.

'You understand,' Sir Ingram said with a laugh. 'You owe me a hundredfold over what I am about to do. This is only the beginning.' He turned to his men and said, 'Strip him, and tie him to the whipping post. I am going to give you a demonstration of how a proper flogging looks.'

It could be worse, Mal thought as the men pulled his clothes off and left him in nothing but his braes. He could take a flogging. He'd done it before and he could do it again. Sir Ingram might think he knew how to deliver a beating, but he doubted he could come close the savagery of the sheriff. At least, he hoped so.

He was pushed out of the room by the crowd, down the corridor and out into the cold night air. Men ran ahead of him with torches to light the short path to a whipping post. It didn't surprise Mal that Sir Ingram had such a thing, bullies often did.

His wrists were bound together and then lashed to the post. Then he was pulled up so that he was all but hanging by his arms. The men worked quickly. Obviously, they'd done this often.

'Step aside,' Sir Ingram said, and Mal heard the experimental swish of a whip.

He didn't bother trying to look around, he just braced for what was to come. The whip whistled through the air and hit his back with a crack. It stung like the devil and cut as it was drawn down. Blood oozed from his back.

Mal clenched his jaw, realised that it hurt too and braced himself for the second blow, and the third and the fourth. Sir Ingram crisscrossed his swing so that it first cut from right to left and the next cut from left to right. He had a determined

steady pace that felt like it might go on all night. The pain quickly became unbearable.

Mal knew from personal experience that a man could die from a flogging. As Sir Ingram drove on and on and the blood flowed down he back he began to fear that the knight might not stop in time.

‘Mercy,’ he cried. ‘Please... I can’t-’

‘Silence!’ Sir Ingram shouted and brought the whip down even harder.

Mal cried out, and his legs gave, ‘Please... I have... something else.’

‘Something else? Something like what?’ Sir Ingram said. He came right up to Mal and whispered in his ear, ‘Did you think I wouldn’t kill you?’

‘I have Mistress Anne,’ Mal muttered and spiralled into unconsciousness.



A bucket of ice cold water brought Mal round gasping and coughing.

‘Time to get up,’ a man said and tossed Mal’s clothes at him.

Mal felt grim. He was in more pain than he’d been in for a long time, and very stiff.

‘Where am I?’ he muttered. He pushed his way out of a pile of straw and dashed away the dripping water.

‘You’re in the stables,’ the man said.

He looked vaguely familiar. Mal had a feeling he was the guard who’d shown him to Sir Ingram’s hall the night before.

‘What happens now?’ Mal said as he pulled on his hose. Just bending over to do that was agony. His back must have scabbed over during the night, but it was fragile and cracked as he arched it.

‘Sir Ingram wants to know more about the Anne you mentioned before you passed out,’ the guard said. ‘Is she the kitchen girl he’s got a passion for?’

‘She is,’ Mal said and examined the man more closely.

For years he’d hidden his own feelings about his master. Because of that he’d got good at spotting people who felt the same. It was plain that this man didn’t like Sir Ingram. Maybe he was the spy. Either way, it would be good to cultivate an ally of his own.

‘He’s talked about her has he?’

‘All the time. I was expecting to see him bring home something resembling an angel. Instead, he came home with a smashed face.’

‘My fault,’ Mal murmured and eased on his shirt. ‘I couldn’t let him drag her away from her home against her will.’

‘More fool you,’ the man said. ‘Once he’s taken against someone Sir Ingram never forgives.’

‘I’m starting to understand that. Which is why I have my bargaining chip.’

‘You’d best hold onto it for as long as you can,’ the man said. ‘Now come on. He doesn’t like to be kept waiting.’

Mal shoved his feet into his shoes and shuffled after the man. It was going to hurt like the devil when he straightened up so far now; he’d keep the stoop. It might make Sir Ingram feel good to see him so bowed over too.

They were joined by another couple of men who’d been loitering outside the stable. Then they made their way across the yard back to the house. There were a fair few servants about, maybe more than was usual. Apparently, they’d all arranged their day to make sure they got sight of the prisoner.

It was probably the high point of their day, Mal thought. He turned his attention to his surroundings and tried to take in

more detail of the house and grounds. He might need it if he had to make an escape.

‘This way,’ the guard said and showed Mal back into the house.

This time they turned left rather than right and Mal was shoved into a small room. It was lined with a blue cloth embroidered with stars that covered the floor, walls and ceiling. Sir Ingram sat on something Mal could only describe as a throne which was raised on a platform. It was the most pretentious thing Mal had ever seen.

‘Kneel,’ the guard said. He clapped his hand on Mal’s shoulder pressing against his injuries and forced him to his knees.

‘Sir Ingram,’ Mal managed to say without it turning into a yell.

‘You look like hell,’ Sir Ingram said, and his voice oozed satisfaction.

Mal looked up at him and thought, you look worse you bastard. But he bowed his head and said, ‘Yes, sir.’

‘You now have two things you need to tell me about,’ Sir Ingram said and waved the guard away.

He stepped back, bowed and closed the door on the two men. Mal stayed where he was. There was no point in trying to move. His back felt like it was aflame and Sir Ingram was the kind of bastard who would take pleasure in keeping him in discomfort. So if he asked to stand, he would be denied.

‘What do you want to know?’

‘What you promised me yesterday. You will tell me who killed my cousin and your sheriff.’

‘Without your word that I won’t be killed? I’d be a fool to do that,’ Mal said. ‘Only my knowledge is keeping me alive, and even that isn’t doing a good job. You nearly beat me to death

last night.'

'You said you had Anne Cook with you. Where is she?'

'Safely tucked away where only I can find her.'

'You did come prepared.'

'I knew you would be angry,' Mal said and held out his hands, 'understandably. But I still came. Doesn't that show you that I have your best interests at heart?'

'When you smashed my jaw? I don't think so.'

'I acted without thinking. I have regretted it ever since. If I had a chance, I would have done the exact opposite. I should have helped you get Mistress Anne, and come away with you. The convent is no place for a fighting man.'

'Maybe not,' Sir Ingram said. 'Tell me what you knew of my cousin's plans.'

'His plans, sir? I don't understand.'

'His plans, damn it, what was he trying to do that got him killed?'

'You don't know?' Mal said. Was the baron wrong? Was Sir Ingram not in league with his cousin?

'Why would I ask you if I knew?' Sir Ingram hissed, but there was something... the way he spoke made Mal distrust him.

'The sheriff never told us anything,' Mal said. 'You knew him. You know I am telling the truth. He only told us when we were about to go into battle which side we had to take. Even then he didn't explain. I thought... I thought that as you two were cousins that he might have shared more with you than he did with us.'

'So you know nothing?'

'I can only speak to what we did last. In the weeks leading up to his death, we spent a lot of time in the north. The sheriff met with a number of prominent knights. On occasion, more

than was usual, we skirmished against others.'

'Could you name those men?'

'Of course,' Mal said.

'Were any of them involved in the ambush?'

'No,' Mal said. Despite the effort it took, he looked up at Sir Ingram. The knight looked shaken by the news.

'Who was it, damn you?'

'For me to tell you that, is dangerous. I need reassurance from you before I speak. I need some piece of information that is dangerous to you in return for something that is dangerous to me.'

'Don't tell me what to do!' Sir Ingram shouted. He pounced across the room and slapped Mal so hard he toppled backwards.

Mal pushed himself back onto his knees and said, 'I could give you a list of the knights from the north. Would that help?'

'It's a start,' Sir Ingram muttered. 'I will think about the rest whilst we fetch Mistress Anne.'

'You want to fetch her?' Mal said. He wished they hadn't reached this point. He was hoping he'd get more information.

'You can't leave her indefinitely. She'll die of thirst or be found by wild beasts. Unless you have her somewhere safe from all of that?'

'No,' Mal said.

'Well, then we must fetch her. I should have you flogged again for putting her life in danger. But I might just forgive you if she is still in one piece when I find her.'

'What about the rest of our deal?' Mal said.

'I will think about it whilst we ride. Now get up, you have to show me the way.'



‘How far away is she?’ Sir Ingram said as he hoisted himself into the saddle of his waiting horse.

‘Two, three hour’s ride,’ Mal said looking about.

They were only being accompanied by five other men. They stood by their horses, readying themselves for the ride. One of the men had a pronounced limp and glared at Mal. He was one of the lot that had accompanied Sir Ingram on his raid of the convent, Mal realised. And he was none too thrilled to be riding out with them. Another one to be wary of, he thought.

Mal used his legs as much as possible when getting himself into the saddle to try and keep the pain away from his back. He was only partially successful. Truly a flogging was a terrible punishment. The flayed and lacerated skin burned as if it was on fire. It was a pain that went on for days which was one of the reasons the sheriff was so fond of it.

At least Brute was alright and happy enough after a night in the stables to get back to work. Animals didn’t always react to tension between humans. This was just as well because he was heading out with an extremely mistrustful group.

To top it all, it started snowing. Big fat flakes drifted down around them. Looking at the clouds, it appeared they were in for a day of settling snow.

‘Come up front with me,’ Sir Ingram snapped. ‘I need you to lead the way.’ He didn’t wait for a response, just flicked his reins and trotted out of the homestead.

Mal followed him out, aware of the other three taking up the rear in a fan shape behind him. They would make sure he didn’t try and make a bolt for it. Not that he could outrun them. Brute had stamina, but he was shorter than the horses and was no match against them in a sprint.

He urged Brute closer to Sir Ingram and said, ‘Do you really have no idea what the sheriff was up to?’

‘I already told you, didn’t I?’

‘But then it makes no sense,’ Mal muttered.

‘What makes no sense?’

‘The ones who attacked us, they suspected the sheriff and believed he had an accomplice.’

‘You’re making that up!’ Sir Ingram snapped. But his gaze flicked past Mal to his men.

‘They don’t know about any of it do they?’ Mal said.

‘They mind their own business, as you should.’

‘If I minded my business, you’d be no closer to learning the truth about the ambush that killed your cousin.’

‘I feel like I’ll never bloody well get that truth from you either. You’re stringing me on.’

‘How about some honesty then,’ Mal said. ‘You tell me what you do know. You tell me what you and the sheriff were always meeting up about. Then I will tell you the rest.’

‘Now? Just like that?’

‘I still have Mistress Anne as a bargaining piece.’

‘What’s to stop you from running with this information to the baron to try and save your pathetic hide?’

‘The baron will kill me,’ Mal said.

‘What?’

‘If he ever saw me, he’d kill me without waiting to ask any questions. The sheriff warned us all that if we deserted, the baron would hunt us down and kill us.’

‘But you didn’t desert.’

‘Do you think the baron would see it like that?’

‘Possibly not,’ Sir Ingram said and gave Mal a thoughtful look.

Mal hoped he’d been suitably believable. It wasn’t a complete lie anyway. For most of his life he had believed the baron would kill him.

‘So what do you know?’

‘That Moore was going after the baron,’ Sir Ingram said and flicked another cautious look at his entourage.

‘He was going after the baron?’

‘That’s right. He promised me a fine bounty if I fell into line behind him. Some additional property.’

‘That’s it? You’d get some property?’

‘Sir Hugo’s property actually and that’s some sweet land. Only the baron’s estate is richer.’

‘You were going to betray the baron?’

‘Well? What has he ever done for me? I have this chicken scratch piece of land that can’t produce the income I need to live off. I’ve spoken to him about it before, but whenever it comes to handing out largess I never get a whiff of it. And when I find the woman I want to marry he turns around, on her say so, the say so of a chit of a girl, and tells me no. Well, I won’t have it!’

‘So what will you do now? Surely a man as cunning as you has a plan.’

‘I have a plan alright,’ Sir Ingram said. ‘I won’t let this thing rest.’

‘You’re going to take up from where the sheriff left off?’

‘I should think so.’

‘Then you really do need me so that you can know who he has already won round.’

‘I am not entirely ignorant. I made some of the introductions for Moore. He wasn’t the most popular man in the county after all.’

‘So you used your charm to smooth his way,’ Mal said.

‘That’s the size of it,’ Sir Ingram said.

‘I see,’ Mal said satisfied that he had what he needed. It would be his word against Sir Ingram in a court of law, but so

be it.

‘Now it’s your turn. Tell me who attacked the sheriff.’

What did he say? Mal wondered. If he told Sir Ingram the truth, that would also come out in court. That was a secret far too dangerous to share with the world at large. He was also loath to give Sir Ingram any leverage to use against the baron. ‘I will wait to see what you do with Mistress Anne before I divulge that information,’ Mal said.

‘So you go against your word already,’ Sir Ingram said.

‘Be patient, and I will tell you all,’ Mal said.

‘Don’t you tell me to be patient,’ Sir Ingram snapped. ‘You have a damned cheek. You’ll be lucky if I don’t still take my mace to your face. There is something devious about you, something I don’t trust.’

‘But you are the one who flogged me.’

‘Because you broke my bloody jaw,’ Sir Ingram shouted. It made him wince, and he ran his fingers gingerly over his bruised face.

‘I apologise and throw myself upon your wisdom and your mercy,’ Mal said. ‘A fine gentleman such as you knows that a commoner like me struggles to do the right thing.’

Mal felt like he’d laid his flattery on too thick. He was surprised when it appeared to mollify Sir Ingram. Then again, he wasn’t paying him attention anymore.

Sir Ingram was looking intently up the road. It was covered with snow. The whole scene glowed as the snow scattered light back up to a pale grey sky.

‘I do believe,’ Sir Ingram said. ‘That I know where you’ve put her.’

‘You do?’ Mal said.

‘Do you think I don’t know my own woods? You used the ancient oak, didn’t you?’ Sir Ingram said and urged his horse

to pick up its pace.

‘I may have done,’ Mal said. He was unhappy that the knight had worked it out so quickly.

‘Then I don’t need you,’ Sir Ingram said.

He barged his horse into Brute and aimed a solid kick at Mal. It hit him hard on his side and knocked him off his mount.

‘Bonham, he’s yours,’ Sir Ingram shouted and urged his horse into a trot.

Mal hit the ground hard, rolled in the fresh snow and leaped to his feet, ready for an attack. ‘Wait,’ he shouted, ‘You still don’t know who attacked the sheriff.’

Hopefully, the shout would alert the baron, if nothing else, that they were near.

‘I don’t think I care anymore,’ Sir Ingram said. He laughed as he galloped up the rise to the ancient oak followed by four of his men.

The fifth turned his horse to face Mal. It was the man with the limp. His nasty smile indicated that he also had a score to settle. What worried Mal more, though was Sir Ingram vanishing into the woods, straight for Anne, and the baron was nowhere in sight.

Sir Bonham slammed his heels into his horse. It reared with a squeal before charging straight at Mal. He threw himself to the side, off the path, and looked about frantically for something to defend himself with. The knight wheeled round and prepared to charge again. Mal jumped with all his might, grabbed onto the branch of an oak and swung himself up just as the knight swept past.

‘Fight like a man damn you,’ the knight snarled and pulled his horse about again.

‘Get off your horse and I will,’ Mal said and dropped to the

ground.

‘When you damn near broke my knee? Not likely.’

‘Then I’ll keep leading you a merry dance around these woods,’ Mal said and ran for a narrow gap between two trees.

It was also in the direction of the old oak. He prayed the baron was keeping Anne safe because at this rate he was her only hope. The problem was, Mal couldn’t hear the sound of fighting.

‘Oh no you don’t,’ Bonham said and charged around the trees.

Mal took off at a run and Bonham surged up behind him. He leaped off his horse and landed with his full weight on Mal.

‘I got you,’ he said as he grabbed Mal’s shoulders.

Mal jerked his head backwards hard. He connected with Bonham’s face, rolled over and rammed his elbow back into the knight’s body.

The man howled and tried to hang onto Mal. Mal pulled himself free, scabbled around for a weapon and his questing fingers found a rock. Mal brought it down on the side of Bonham’s skull. The knight rolled away, his eyes widened for a second and then he was out cold. Mal dropped the rock, ran for Brute, leaped onto him without slowing and urged him into a run in the direction of the old oak.

A hunting horn sounded from the woods, the baron’s signal, and was followed by the clash of metal against metal. Finally, Mal thought, what the devil had been keeping the baron?

Mal burst into the small clearing around the oak and into a fierce battle. Sir Ingram's men were engaged with the baron and his men. But in the chaos Mal couldn't see Sir Ingram.

'Where is she?' Mal shouted as he skirted the edge of the battle. He made sure to keep out of range of the fighting men. 'What's happened to Anne?'

'Ingram took her,' the baron shouted as he rained down punishing blows on the knight that was pushing horse to horse against him. 'Hugo went after them.'

'Where?' Mal said. He ducked a swinging sword as he looked for clues as to where they could have gone. Which was when he spotted the set of tracks away from the old oak and away from the fighting. He couldn't afford to get caught up in the skirmish. And the baron's men outnumbered Sir Ingram's so they didn't need his help.

'Right, I'm going after her,' Mal said. 'Brute, let's go,' he said and snapped the reins.

Brute shot forward at such speed that Mal shouted in surprise. He was an unfathomable beast who apparently had a passion for Anne too. Now that he'd got moving, he looked determined to keep going. Mal had only a moment to register one of Sir Ingram's men trying to block his escape as Brute

jinked past him. Then they were down the mound galloping into the woods after Sir Ingram and Anne.

Mal left the chaos of horses and soldiers moving against each other and the clash of body against body and weapon against weapon behind him. Sir Ingram and Sir Hugo had quite a lead but in this dense undergrowth Mal had an advantage with his smaller mount. Especially as one of the horses he was following looked like it was being pushed way too fast for the terrain. Mal suspected that was Sir Ingram.

Mal guided Brute into the trail left by Sir Ingram's horse and said, 'Come on, boy, you can do this. Don't let Sir Ingram's fancy bit of horseflesh outrun you.'

He was trying to get his bearings at the same time and work out where Sir Ingram was headed. It was hard to tell. The snow changed the landmarks and Sir Ingram didn't seem to be racing for a particular destination. His sole intent appeared to be to get as far away from the fighting as possible.

As Mal pushed Brute forward, he kept an ear on the fighting behind. It didn't go on for very long. Sir Ingram's men were outnumbered, and they were fully aware that it was suicidal to fight the baron.

A moment later a horn sounded. Was that the baron calling him back? Mal wondered just as he spotted Sir Ingram with Anne flung over the horse. Sir Hugo was hard on his heels. Mal groped down beside the saddle where he'd secured the hunting horn Sir Hugo had given him and pulled it out. Pounding through the snow, hanging on with one hand, he put the horn to his lips and blew.

The sudden loud sound acted as a spur to Brute who put on an astonishing turn of speed.

'That's it, boy!' Mal shouted.

He drew the dagger from the makeshift sheath he'd attached

to Brute's saddle. Thank God he'd done that and not had it with his clothes, or it would have been confiscated by Sir Ingram. Then he leaned further forward. He was standing on the stirrups he was so eager to catch Sir Ingram

'Come on Brute, you can do this,' he yelled.

A horn sounded behind him. This time it was accompanied by the muffled sound of horses ploughing through the snow. Hopefully, that meant the baron was on his way. Mal put the horn to his lips again and blew a reply.

Sir Hugo looked back and grinned at him but Sir Ingram was maintaining his distance. No matter how hard Brute worked he couldn't catch up. Then with a squeal and a shout, Sir Ingram's horse went over in a cascade of snow.

'Anne!' Mal shouted.

He pushed Brute forward at a speed that was far from sensible. He slipped past Sir Hugo and pulled Brute to a halt beside Sir Ingram's horse. It was struggling to get back onto its feet. Mal jumped out of the saddle before Brute came to a stop. Anne was lying still in the snow. But before Mal could get to her Sir Ingram rolled over, jumped to his feet and drew his sword.

'You traitor!' Sir Ingram said. 'Come here, and I'll give you what you so richly deserve.'

'I'm not the traitor,' Mal muttered and held his dagger at the ready.

'You dare to fight me now?' Sir Ingram said and got himself between Mal and Anne. 'I'll have your head.'

'Maybe,' Mal said. He was worried that Anne wasn't moving. 'But the baron will get you next.'

'Much good that will do you,' Sir Ingram said and lunged.

Mal sidestepped the thrust and tried to lead Sir Ingram away from Anne. He was having none of it though and stepped

back to where he'd been before, blocking Mal from getting to her.

'She could be hurt,' Mal said. 'You should look to Anne rather than fight me.'

'And have you sneak in an attack?' Sir Ingram said, standing on guard. 'I think not. But tell me, do you actually know who killed Moore?'

'I do,' Mal said as he tried to shift to Sir Ingram's right. The knight turned to face him again. His sword was twice the length of Mal's dagger, and it was going to be tough to get at him. But if he didn't, Anne would be in real danger.

'Tell me then, and I might let you pass.'

'I don't believe you,' Mal said, made a feint to the right, then stepped left and straight up to Sir Ingram so that he was too close for Ingram to use his sword.

'Back!' Sir Ingram snapped and pushed at Mal who ducked. As he slipped away, he managed to cut along Sir Ingram's arm.

'You damned nuisance!' Ingram said.

He launched a volley of swirling blows that Mal just managed to deflect. Left, right, left as he stepped back, trying to draw the knight away and keep the sword from connecting. Sir Ingram bounded after him. The knight's sword swung wide as he tripped midway through his lunge and Mal saw his chance.

Mal aimed a thrust as his belly as the baron shouted, 'no!'

Mal pause surprised by the baron's sudden arrival. Sir Hugo leapt from the side, wrapped Mal in a bearhug and the two of them crashed into the snow and rolled over a couple of times.

'Don't you kill him,' Sir Hugo muttered into Mal's ear. 'Not unless you have a death wish.'

'You're mine,' the baron snarled as he closed with Ingram. 'And I'll tell you what Mal has managed to keep from you. I

ordered Moore killed,' the baron said and ran Sir Ingram through.

'No,' Sir Ingram gasped as the sword was pulled from his chest. He looked down, bewildered, and collapsed. His blood squirted into the snow steaming as it hit the ice.

Mal scrambled over to Anne and shook her. 'Anne! Annie, are you all right?'

Anne blinked back at him and nodded.

'Ah, the gag, I'm sorry,' Mal said. He untied it as quickly as he could then he slashed at the rope tying her wrists and ankles. 'When I didn't see you moving-'

'I couldn't,' Anne said. 'I was trussed up like a pig.'

'Are you alright though, Mistress Anne?' the baron said. 'I didn't mean for you to be hauled off by Ingram. I'm sorry about that.'

Anne kept her gaze fixed on the baron, avoiding looking at Sir Ingram's body, and said. 'I'm fine thank you, m'lord. A little shaken from the fall, but the snow ensured I took no great hurt.'

'Good girl, you're full of spirit. Well done to both of you,' the baron said. 'Hugo tells me you got a flogging for your troubles, Master Malcolm.'

Mal glanced at Sir Hugo who was watching him with his lopsided grin.

'I was lucky that's all I got.'

'So I hear.'

'Your spy has kept you well-informed, m'lord.'

'He has indeed. Now, give me a hand with this body. Then we can make our way back to the ancient oak. Ingram's henchmen weren't half as keen to fight me as they might have been and gave up as meekly as women. We'll escort them back to the homestead where I will put all back in order.'

‘Yes, m’lord,’ Mal said and helped carry Sir Ingram’s body to his horse and tie it down.

Then, because nobody said otherwise, he led Anne to Brute and helped her mount. She smiled down at him which caused his heart to give an unaccustomed summersault, as he grinned back, and hoisted himself into the saddle.



‘Is it over?’ Anne whispered to Mal as he mounted Brute and settled behind her.

She wished she could cling to him. She was more shaken than she wanted to show by her close run kidnapping. As Sir Ingram had reached into the oak and dragged her out, she’d felt such a moment of panic. It felt like all their trials had been in vain and that despicable man was going to win the day.

Then they’d been chased. She was thrown right over the head of the horse and landed hard, despite the snow. And if that hadn’t shaken her enough, there was Sir Ingram’s grizzly end. Sometimes she was grateful she was a woman and not expected to see, never mind get involved with, killing people.

‘Can we go home now?’

‘I think so,’ Mal murmured. His gaze flicked across to the baron who was leading the way. ‘At least... hopefully soon. Were you all right last night?’

‘I was very well looked after. The baron and Sir Hugo were very considerate.’

‘Not so considerate,’ the baron said making it clear he’d heard every word so far. ‘We made Mistress Anne cook. I have to say, I’ve never had better fare upon a campaign.’

‘That’s very kind of you, m’lord,’ Anne said and felt herself blushing. She twisted round in her seat to check on Mal and whispered, ‘Were you flogged?’

Mal shrugged and said, 'It wasn't the first time. I'll recover soon enough.'

'But it must hurt.'

'Call it his punishment for attacking a knight, Mistress Anne,' the baron said. 'And we'll leave it at that.'

Anne sighed. She wanted so dearly to speak to Mal, properly, and in private, but that wasn't to be. She desperately wanted to reassure herself that Mal really was all right. He looked pale, now that she was close to him, and his face was tense. The flogging was more painful than he'd let on.

It made her reflect some more on what she'd heard the night before. It seemed to her that the baron rated Mal. He'd spent some time interrogating Anne on all she knew. Then he had a conversation with Sir Hugo about Mal when he'd returned to their camp.

'He's unexpectedly brave,' Sir Hugo had said as they sat around their campfire.

'He's one of the sheriff's men. To have survived this long he's either got the luck of the devil, or he's as tough as they come.'

'He doesn't seem tough,' Anne said.

'He underestimates himself,' the baron said. 'He's only ever known the sheriff and his soldiers. He has no idea how tough that makes him compared to any other Tom, Dick or Harry in my county.'

'Are you... are you planning on doing something with him?' Anne said. She was uncertain she could be asking anything of the baron.

'It might be a waste not to,' the baron said and gave her a huge wolfish grin.

'But what if he's happy at the convent?'

'A man should do what he's best suited to in life. I very

much doubt that's warehouse work for one such as master Malcolm,' the baron said.

'How would he know if he isn't given a chance to try?'

'So you think I should leave him to discover this for himself?' the baron said.

'I beg your pardon, m'lord,' Anne said. She was aware that this was the kind of plain speaking that had got her into her current predicament. 'It isn't my place to speak so boldly.'

'And especially not of Mal who, you'll forgive me for saying, should have no ties to you at all.'

'Why should he have no ties?'

'Because you are neither related by blood nor marriage. You have no call upon him. If he hadn't been the one who broke Sir Ingram's jaw, he may well have retained his anonymity at the convent. And I would have remained ignorant of the prizefighter at large in my lands.'

Anne found it difficult to reconcile the Mal she knew, even the Mal who'd taken a rolling pin to Sir Ingram, with this image of a warrior that the baron described. But now, wrapped about in his arms as he toiled Brute through the woods, she was starting to understand the baron's point of view.

There'd been no hesitation when Mal leapt off his mule to fight Sir Ingram. This even though the man had rank and a massive sword. She'd seen the calculation in Mal's eyes. She'd noted the way he'd weighed up his foe and the way he'd kept him at bay. She'd seen that Mal could have killed Sir Ingram if he hadn't been prevented from doing so by Sir Hugo, and this when all he had was a dagger.

So maybe the baron was right; maybe Mal had to aim for something more than working in a warehouse. Maybe he wouldn't be given a choice about that either. That would be a shame because she knew what a burden it was to have other

people's expectations given more weight than your own wishes.

She found herself wondering, as she savoured his closeness and his warmth, what it would be like to be married to Mal.

'Oh!' she gasped.

'Is something wrong?' Mal said.

'No, I'm fine,' Anne said.

She kept her face pointed away from Mal lest he see how flaming red it was. She'd not thought about marriage before. Not properly and suddenly it was very important for her. Suddenly knowing Mal's future had a significance for her own. At least... she had to make sure that it did.

'We're nearly there,' Mal said as they emerged from the woods and Sir Ingram's estate opened out before them.

'This is his home?' Anne said.

She shivered to think that it could have been hers if she'd been a properly compliant young woman. Then again, there was more to what had happened to Sir Ingram than merely trying to snatch her. Mal had pretty much said so. No baron would kill one of his own men for going after a girl either. So even if she had inherited the property, it probably wouldn't have been for long. As his wife she could even have found herself accused and punished along with her husband. That was too awful to contemplate.

'Do you like it?' Mal said.

'It's very fine.'

'Yes,' Mal said.

Anne was glad he didn't point out what she'd already thought because no doubt he was thinking it too. Now wasn't the time to consider it though as their party was spotted. All work ceased, and people came running to see what had happened.

‘It’s alright,’ the baron shouted. ‘I have brought Sir Ingram home.’

‘They don’t look that upset to see his body,’ Anne whispered as she watched the first few people approach Sir Ingram’s horse.

They merely looked curious as they examined what remained of their erstwhile master.

‘He was unloved,’ Mal said. ‘I’m not surprised. Are you?’

‘He must have been really bad,’ Anne said. ‘They aren’t even making a pretence. I’ve seen people change their tune overnight about a person simply because they died.’

‘He cared for nobody but himself. He has come by his just desserts. It is a lesson for us all,’ Mal said. He climbed down from Brute and offered Anne a hand to get down.

‘We’ll spend the night here,’ the baron said. ‘That way I can make sure Ingram’s estates are looked after whilst I find the property a new master. You and Mal can go back to the convent tomorrow, Mistress Anne. In the meantime, I recommend you find the serving women and make yourself comfortable amongst them. I’m sure they will provide for your needs. You, master Malcolm, present yourself to Sir Hugo and he’ll look after your back.’

‘Thank you, my lord,’ Mal said and executed a low bow. ‘But my back will heal on its own.’

‘I don’t want you getting the idea you can talk back to me, master Malcolm,’ the baron said with a wide grin. ‘You will do as you’re told.’

‘Yes, my lord,’ Mal said and bowed even more deeply, then gave Anne an apologetic smile.

She wished she could stay with him and help Sir Hugo to fix his back. She could see how stooped he was now that he was off the mule. But she, like him, had no choice and followed a

severe-looking woman into the depths of the house.

The woman gave her a considered look and said, 'Are you the girl Sir Ingram wanted to marry?'

'I am,' Anne said.

'Well you're pretty, but best out of it,' the woman said.

Mal was glad to have a day alone with Anne now that her problems were resolved. He'd been so eager for a return to hold her close that he was up at dawn and ready to leave.

The baron looked amused by that and said, 'Make sure you go straight home and don't tarry. And give my sister this letter so that she knows all that has happened.'

'Yes, my lord,' Mal said with a bow. While looking for Anne who didn't disappoint but came out of the homestead kitchen with a particularly determined expression on her face.

'Are we going home?' she said.

'As the two of you are so keen, I won't keep you any longer,' the baron said and waved them on their way.

Mal took the time on the journey back to savour the sensation of having Anne close to him. With her in his arms, he could forget his back. It was much improved after Sir Hugo's ministrations. This meant he could concentrate on what it felt like to be near Anne. He wished it could go on forever. He even kept the mule at a very sedate pace to enjoy the sensation for longer. But, inevitably, they arrived back at the outskirts of Kirkthorpe.

'We're nearly home,' Mal said as Brute ambled down the road that led to the convent.

The snow still lay thick on the ground but hadn't been added to overnight so was crisper and starting to look more like ice than snow drifts.

'What a relief,' Anne said. 'I never thought I would be quite so pleased to see the convent. And please, if I ever say I long for adventure, remind me of these last few weeks. I have never been less comfortable.'

Anne was endlessly charming, Mal decided. He liked the way she said exactly what was in her mind.

'Are you likely to need reminding?' Mal said.

'I have a terrible habit of forgetting bad times, which dooms me to repeating them, don't you think?'

'I have a feeling you get into trouble because of your unruly tongue, not your bad memory.'

'Now that's unkind of you to say so,' Anne said. 'And at least we can be certain to be greeted with joy. I am so convinced of a warm welcome I am even willing to bet that Father will give us a treat.'

'That is something to look forward to certainly,' Mal said.

He wished he could open up to Anne. There was so much he wanted to say. But on their whole journey back he'd been at a loss to know how exactly he phrased all the jostling thoughts he had in his head.

Anne swivelled around and said, 'Mal, you don't suppose...'

'Well?' Mal said. 'What should I suppose?'

'I just... we had a very good time together, didn't we?'

Dear God in Heaven, is she really about to do what I should be doing? Mal thought. 'I'm glad you have already forgotten all about being tied up and flung off a horse. If you think that was a good time I have my doubts about you.'

'No, silly,' Anne said on the gurgle of a laugh. 'I just meant well... We have spent a lot of time together. We know each

other far better than I knew Sir Ingram when he proposed.'

'I suppose we do.'

'Do you think then...'

Mal wasn't sure he was relieved or disappointed when Anne stopped. 'I think I need to establish myself before I could even consider approaching your father.'

'So you might... you might want to speak to him?'

'I would like to. I'm just... I'm not sure where my future will take me.'

'Is that because of the baron?'

'I have a feeling he has a plan for me.'

'Would that upset you?'

'I don't know. When I first came to the convent,' Mal said. 'I would have sworn upon my mother's soul that the last thing I wanted to be, the last thing I considered myself, was a soldier.'

'What has changed?'

'The baron is different to what I thought and he... he seems interested in me. Sir Hugo is the same. He's rather good at healing, and he took his time seeing to my back. That wasn't just out of the goodness of their hearts. Men like the baron and Sir Hugo only do things that gain them advantage.'

'So you think they will find you useful?'

'Something like that. And I have to think about what that means for me.'

'Couldn't you tell them you want to work in the warehouse?'

Mal laughed and said, 'Working in the warehouse is a better experience than I thought it would be. But I'm not sure it's where I belong.'

'Mary Constance will be sorry to hear that,' Anne said. 'I'm not sure I'll stick around to hear you explaining it to her.'

'Then you'd best run along,' Mal said as they arrived at the convent gate. 'Because there she is, in the thick of the

merchants, giving orders.'

Sister Mary Constance spotted them at the same time and surged across the courtyard to greet them. 'Well, well, you're back. And as you're both in one piece may I assume you have survived your ordeal and return with good news?'

'Sir Ingram's dead,' Anne said. She didn't wait for Mal to help her down but slipped off Brute and from between his arms.

'It's true,' Mal said in reply to Mary Constance's raised eyebrows. 'I have a letter for our mother superior. But the baron has said that the convent and everyone in it is safe.' He dismounted and said, 'Should I take the letter first or get Brute settled? He's in need of a good feed and a thorough brushing.'

'I'll get a lad to look after Brute,' Mary Constance said. 'You go to the kitchen first. Anne needs to set her father's heart at ease. And the two of you look cold to the bone and are no doubt hungry. In the meantime, I will take your letter to our mother superior.'

'Thank you,' Mal said and handed over the folded and sealed missive.

'Mmm,' Mary Constance said and looked him over.

'Did I say something wrong?'

'You've changed. I'd say you've gained in self-confidence. It's no bad thing. Now go. Nick is waiting,' Mary Constance said. She waved them away and then made for the cloisters.

Anne was watching him, Mal realised. 'You don't have to worry,' he said. 'I'm sure your father will be thrilled to see you.'

'All the same, I'm glad you're coming with me,' Anne said and took hold of his hand.

It was a familiar gesture. Mal had a feeling it was something

that should have been reserved for people with a more settled future. Still, he didn't want to let go of her hand. Instead he squeezed it and headed for the kitchen. He was apparently more eager to get there than Anne because as they got nearer Anne trailed along behind and Mal was almost dragging her.

'You'll be fine,' Mal said. He pulled her closer then put his hands on the small of her back and gave her a gentle push.

A hush fell over the kitchen as they were noticed. Nick slammed the big kitchen knife he'd been using to chop up a rabbit into the cutting block and cried, 'Anne! Annie, thank God you're back,' and hurried over to them wiping his hands on his apron.

'Father,' Anne said, and relief suffused her face.

'My girl,' Nick said and wrapped her in a bear hug, before pushing her back to examine her face. 'Are you alright?'

'I'm fine,' Anne said smiling sunnily up at him. 'Thanks to Mal.'

'Mmm,' Nick said and looked Mal up and down. 'So you brought her back.'

'As you see, perfectly unhurt,' Mal said. 'Our mission was successful. Anne played her part well, and we are free of Sir Ingram.'

'He's dead,' Anne said.

'And the baron?' Nick said. He looked more alarmed by the news of Sir Ingram than relieved.

'He told us we could go home. We'll have to wait for his visit before we know the rest,' Mal said.

'Well, well, well, that sounds better than I'd hoped for,' Nick said. 'Since you've brought my daughter back in one piece, master Mal, I'll invite you to the cook's table and feed the two of you. I've just finished baking as fine a brace of pigeon pies as you could taste this side of London. Come, sit down, eat and

tell us all about your adventure.’

The invitation to have a pigeon pie, the chance to stay with Anne a while longer, and the enthusiasm with which he was greeted was all unaccustomed. Yet instead of feeling uncomfortable, Mal was willing enough to talk to all the kitchen staff who gathered round.

Apparently, Nick was also happy for them to stop their work to listen to what had happened. It resulted in quite a crowd as Mal and Anne sat down at the table.

‘So, should I tell them what happened or will you?’ Anne said, twinkling up at him.



The church bell woke Mal who’d been drifting through light sleep peppered with half dreams. They all vanished like mist as he opened his eyes. He lay on his makeshift bed and thought about how comfortable life had become. With the sacks and the cloak Mary Constance had given him, he was actually warm. He reached under his shirt and ran his fingers over the scar of his wound. It was almost healed. A thin strip of a scab remained, but he’d removed the bandage the night before as it was no longer needed. He pushed gently against the wound and it didn’t even hurt. That was good.

He stayed on his side though. His back was still tender from the flogging. It had been a week since they’d returned and it was feeling considerably improved. He’d had a touch of fever for a couple of days, but even that had passed.

Mal pushed himself upright. The church bell sounding meant that mass was in an hour and he had to get ready. This was the first Sunday since he’d returned with Mistress Anne and he felt that he had much to thank God for. So, unaccustomed as he was to church, he’d decided he would go.

He took a deep breath and shook his head to drive away the last vestiges of sleep. As he looked up, Sir Hugo stepped silently from between the piles of goods in the warehouse. Mal sighed, he'd hoped, after all this time, that he would no longer be haunted.

'What do you want, huh?' he snapped. 'Why don't you leave me in peace?'

'I wasn't aware I tormented you,' Sir Hugo said.

'What?' Mal gasped and leapt to his feet. 'Sir Hugo, is it really you?'

'Who else could it be?' Sir Hugo said as he strolled towards Mal.

Mal couldn't stop himself and poked Sir Hugo in the shoulder with his finger. He felt solid and warm. 'It is you.'

Sir Hugo gave him a quizzical smile and said, 'Have I been hounding you?'

Mal shrugged, it felt stupid to admit it to the man's face.

'No really, Mal,' Sir Hugo said. 'Have I?'

'Yes,' Mal muttered. 'You kept showing up here just... staring.'

'Ah... have you ever heard of such a thing happening before? Maybe to your fellow soldiers with the sheriff?'

'No,' Mal said, 'but some of them... they did behave strangely. One we called Twitch, because he'd twitch and stare are nothing at all.'

'Fighting men seldom speak of it, but it's more common than you realise. If a man has been through a particularly tough battle, he sometimes lands up being haunted by an aspect of the fight. I've seen some soldiers who get pulled back into the battle itself. They behave exactly as if they are there. Even if you speak to them, they can't hear you through the dream that has taken hold of them.'

‘That hasn’t happened to me.’

‘Then you are lucky. Maybe now that you know me, you will see less of my alter ego.’

‘I hope so,’ Mal said.

‘In the meantime, the baron wants a word,’ Sir Hugo said and headed back outside.

‘Of course. I should have realised you hadn’t come alone,’ Mal said as he followed after. ‘Has he resolved the matter with Sir Ingram’s estate?’

‘He is getting there,’ Sir Hugo said as they made their way across the courtyard. The ground had been churned up by wagons and mules. It left the remains of the snow in dirty grey drifts in the corners.

‘Do you know why the baron wants to see me?’

‘Even if I did, it’s not my place to tell you,’ Sir Hugo said. They crossed the inner cloister and he waved Mal into the guest hall.

‘My lord,’ Mal said and gave his deepest bow.

The baron had just arrived and was standing in the middle of the hall pulling off his gloves. ‘Ah, Master Malcolm, just the man,’ he said. ‘You look rested.’

‘I am feeling much better, thank you, my lord,’ Mal said and double checked the hall. A couple of the soldiers who’d accompanied the baron to Sir Ingram’s were depositing their kit at the far end, but it was a smaller entourage than usual.

‘I am here for a short visit,’ the baron said watching Mal. ‘Then I will go back home to my wife and family. They have demonstrated great patience whilst I’ve dealt with Sir Ingram.’

‘Yes, my lord,’ Mal said with another bow. It was strange the way the baron spoke to him. It was almost like an equal which clearly they were not.

‘Hopefully not too short a visit,’ Mother Superior Clara said

as she stepped into the hall followed by Sister Mary Constance.

‘My dear, you would be sick of me if I stayed longer,’ the baron said. He crossed the hall and gave his sister a chaste kiss to her cheek.

‘You are always welcome here, Victor,’ the mother superior said. ‘Even if you do add work to Mary Constance’s already busy schedule.’

‘I apologise in advance,’ the baron said, grinning at the nun.

‘You are always welcome, my lord,’ Mary Constance said with a bow which might have surprised Mal more if he hadn’t got to know the nun fairly well. She wasn’t the sort to curtsy.

‘So, are we all gathered?’ Clara said and gave Mal a nod of acknowledgement.

‘We are indeed,’ the baron said, ‘I must just send the rest of my men to the kitchen for I want a word in private.’

Sir Hugo nodded at that and clapped his hands for the men’s attention. They must have been primed for it because as one they stopped what they were doing and trooped out.

‘Good,’ the baron said.

He settled in a chair near the fire and indicated for everyone to join him. As there was a chair for everyone, Mal decided that he was supposed to form part of this select group. He sat on the edge of his seat, watching. Oddly, he didn’t feel quite as out of place as he might have surrounded as he was by nobles.

‘My letter will have told you most of what you needed to know,’ the baron said. ‘Sir Ingram is dead, after confessing that he was in league with the sheriff. I have spent the last week getting to grips with his estate and understanding what he did to it. He was a poor manager, and the estate is short of money. It will take hard work to bring it back into good heart.’

‘Work, you have already made clear, that won’t go to the

convent,' mother superior said.

'Clara, I understand your enthusiasm for adding to the wealth of this convent, but this time you can't. You are traders, not landholders and so it should remain. If you grow too powerful, the town really will resent you. Be content with what you have, my dear.'

'I can't win this argument with you, Victor, so I shan't try. Tell me instead, who will you give the land to?'

'As I have said, it isn't a vast estate. Ingram always complained it was a chicken scratch piece of land that couldn't make any money.'

'Would it?' Mary Constance said.

'If it was properly managed it would provide a comfortable living but not a luxurious one,' the baron said.

'So?' Mother Superior Clara said.

'So I intend, with strings attached, to give it to Malcolm.'

'Me?' Mal gasped, 'Why me? I know nothing about land.'

'No, I don't expect you do,' the baron said grinning at him.

'But you have loyalty to the convent do you not?'

'Yes, my lord,' Mal said and flicked a glance at Mary Constance who gave him a cryptic smile back.

'And you are a very good fighter.'

'If you think so, my lord.'

'I know it, Master Malcolm; I have seen you in action.'

'Then why not take him as a soldier?' Clara said.

'Because I believe in rewarding people who are loyal to me,' the baron said. 'And Malcolm was loyal to me before he even knew me. He has also kept his mouth shut on the matter of the sheriff, and helped me to get rid of a conspirator. So I will set him up as one of my men. Sir Hugo will go with him to the estate and school him in all he needs to know. If he proves himself worthy,' the baron said fixing Mal with the most

severe stare he'd ever experienced, 'I might even make him one of my knights.'

'My lord I don't'

'Don't interrupt me, Master Malcolm, I find it annoying. And I'm not asking for your agreement or the convent's. This is my final word on the matter.'

'High handed as always,' Mother Superior Clara said. 'Very well, as you have decided, I won't argue. I assume you wanted Mary Constance and I here so that we may release Mal from any responsibility to us.'

'That's the sum of it,' the baron said. 'I will pay for his clothes by way of compensation.'

'It's a damned nuisance training a new man,' Mary Constance said. 'But I will release him. I suppose he has earned this change in his fortune after all.'

'So it's agreed,' the baron said. 'Good.'

By all that's Holy, Mal thought, I've just been traded. And... and... I might become a knight. It was such a stunning change of fortune. At best he'd suspected he'd be taken into the baron's army. This was so utterly unexpected.

'Thank you,' he blurted out.

'That's better. Gratitude,' the baron said. 'I like that.'

'Well if you have no more need for me and Mary Constance, we will get ready for mass,' Mother Superior Clara said. She bowed to her brother, gave Sir Hugo and Mal a nod and left.

Mal wondered whether he should follow afterwards. Then a thought landed in his mind like a seed and sent out deep and urgent roots.

'My lord,' he said, quickly so that he didn't lose his courage. 'Might I... might I propose to Mistress Anne?'

'The kitchen girl?' the baron said with a grin. 'You are rather partial to her aren't you?'

‘She is... something of a handful but... but I would really like to ask... I mean, is it appropriate?’

‘You would do better to marry that wealthy merchant’s daughter I keep talking about. But I could see you had a passion for her when we were out in the woods, so very well. You have my permission to approach her father. Sir Hugo will then school both of you.’

‘Thank you, my lord!’ Mal said. ‘I... I don’t know what to say. I am your servant always.’

‘Don’t you forget it,’ the baron said with his big toothy grin. ‘Now I dare say you have somewhere else you’d rather be. And I may as well get ready for mass.’

‘Yes, my lord,’ Mal said bowing again.

He caught Sir Hugo grinning as well, gave him a nod and ran for the outside and the kitchen.

The impossible had happened. He’d been given something worth more than land and gold. He’d been given a chance to marry Mistress Anne. He felt like he’d doubled in size. He felt like nothing could stop him now as he strode across the courtyard and into the kitchen.

His reception was a letdown. Nobody noticed his arrival. So Mal dodged between the kitchen staff till he reached Nick

The head cook was examining a roast and muttering, ‘A bit more notice would have been helpful.’

‘Master Nick Cook,’ Mal said. ‘Might I have a word?’

‘Now? When I have to cook for the baron and his men who descended without so much as a by your leave?’

‘It is rather important,’ Mal said and looked over Nick’s shoulder to find Anne. She’d finally noticed him and was watching from her side of the kitchen with a perplexed frown.

‘What is it?’

‘I...’ Mal took a deep breath. Maybe a moment to plan would

have been better. Never mind, the time was now. 'I've been recruited by the baron. He's going to train me to... to be a knight and give me Sir Ingram's land.'

'By all the saints!' Nick said finally giving Mal his full attention. 'Why is he doing that?'

'Because I helped him. It's my reward.'

'Well, you must have been exceedingly helpful.'

'He was,' Anne said as she popped up beside Mal. 'What has happened?'

'Land and title for Mal,' Nick said and gave him a more weighing up look. 'And something else I'm willing to bet.'

Mal nodded, he should have asked this without Anne here, but he couldn't stop now. 'I wish to ask for your daughter's hand in marriage.'

'Mal!' Anne squeaked. 'Really?'

'The baron has given his permission,' Mal said. He made sure he spoke to Nick even though Anne was tugging excitedly on his sleeve.

'How can I go against the baron's wishes?' Nick said.

'She will get the same property she would have with Sir Ingram and a title too,' Mal said. 'If I prove myself worthy.'

'And you won't forbid my parents from visiting will you?' Anne said.

'Of course not,' Mal said. He was worried by the cook's serious expression. 'Please, master Nick, will you give us your blessing?'

Nick's face creased into a wide grin as he thumped Mal on the back and said, 'Welcome to the family, Mal.'

It hurt like the devil, but Mal scarcely cared, 'Thank you, Master Cook, thank you very much.' Then he finally turned to Anne and said, 'Well? Will you marry me?'

'I thought you'd never ask,' Anne said beaming up at him.

‘Then perhaps... you can come to mass with me. I feel like I should give a great deal of thanks.’

‘Go,’ Nick said at his daughter’s enquiring gaze. ‘The kitchen can do without you for a while especially as I doubt you’ll be able to concentrate anyway.’

‘You’re right,’ Anne said. She took Mal’s hand and hurried outside with him.

‘Do you think we’ll be happy?’ Mal said looking down at Anne as they made their way to the church.

‘More than I could ever have hoped to be,’ Anne said with a contented sigh.

She was right, Mal thought, as he stepped into the church hand in hand with Anne. Life had turned surprisingly sunny.



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## About the Author

Marina Pacheco is a travelling author who currently lives in Lisbon, after stints in London, Johannesburg and Bangkok. She is an introvert who writes feel-good novels that are perfect to curl up with on a rainy day. Her books often have a strong romantic element where good triumphs over evil and the girl gets the boy in the end.

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