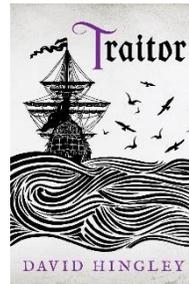
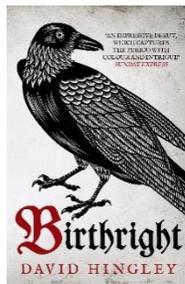


TORSTEN DANE:

DANE'S LAW

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One

I'd paid my shillings upfront, but coin scarcely mattered when I found Jemima dead. I creaked open the familiar door, expecting her to be waiting on the narrow bed, feigning that perfect smile of hers, but when I grinned in my usual ridiculous way and reached to pull off my shirt, she failed to compliment my not-quite-flawless body. Not that it's fat, mind, but. . . I miss the point. I let the shirt fall back loosely around my chest and leaned over her, chiding the poor girl for lack of respect, or some such pathetic complaint, and it was only then that I noticed the blood drying around her throat, the white neck slit open in so unfeeling a manner she may as well have been a miserable capon. In the state I was in, there was little I could do but swear:

'Fucking Christ!'

I don't usually swear, not often, no more than the regular man, the occasional 'By God's truth' or 'Hell's - ', whatever Hell happens to be owning that day, but this was a forceful curse, full of spittle and shock. I've seen death many a time, but I don't except to confront it when I'm hoping for a diverting - few minutes. Not that I come to the whorehouse often, well, not too often, only when I've been out drinking with Rich or Leo and the tankards pile up, the dice come out, the money is won, and I let them persuade me to spend it on a whore - sometimes one for them too, if I've won enough. I tend to win a lot.

Still, there I was with a dead jilt, a girl I had come to like over the months I'd been visiting Mrs Greenleaf's place, ever since our last house had disappeared into its own pit of pox - but don't worry, I'm careful, even if it does hinder the enjoyment - my own uncle died in blistered pain, so I'm not about to. I glanced around me, but beside Jemima I saw nothing amiss, not right then that is, but I was drunk at the time I found her, barely able to walk. God knows how I thought I'd be able to - well. You understand what I mean.

I staggered back through the doorway, banging my elbow against the jamb, and slammed the door shut, tumbling down the steep staircase to the parlour room where Greenleaf was playing melodies on her virginals to an audience of drunkards, the women on their laps pretending to laugh at the dull things any of them said. Leo was there, the arsworm, still half passed out on the floor, his shirt undone, the hooks of his breeches loose. No Rich tonight, thank God, else he'd have been even worse.

'Mrs Greenleaf,' I managed, lurching towards her. A candlelit listener opposite looked up, the furrows of her eyes creasing in impatience. 'Mrs Greenleaf!' I repeated, now at her side. But the madam refused to give up her tune. I was in no mood for politeness; I crashed my palms on the black keys. The resultant screech would have been heard throughout Southwark.

As one the whores let their mouths fall open in mocking surprise, raising their eyebrows, until their employer slowly turned her unbonneted head to face me, her hands still hovering over the virginals' keys.

'Mr Dane,' she said. 'You may be regular here, and regular drunk at that, but I will not allow poor manners in my house.' She breathed out, running her tongue around her cheek. She was attractive, and relatively young – younger than some of her brood, at least. 'If you have a complaint,' she continued, 'you know the rule on payment. Once made, it is mine.'

'Forget the coin,' I managed. By now the room was fair spinning: the memory of the bloody neck and the strength of the ale inside were competing to make me nauseous. 'Jemima – ' I paused, gathering strength to spit out the words. 'Jemima. . . she is murdered!'

The gasp of the women around me would have been heard much further afield than Southwark.

'Watch the doors!' ordered the madam, sharp as ever. 'Frogger, Steel, mind your posts!'

'What's the point?' said a frantic girl, not yet out of her teenage years. 'Whoever did it won't be here no more.'

I shook my head, setting the room back in its proper place. 'I'm not so sure, Bet. If anyone had left they'd be the first we'd suspect.'

I dashed to the front door, to Frogger; then to the back, to Steel. Both confirmed it: nobody had passed since they barred the doors near an hour ago, a lock-in to keep the constables out. And Jemima had been recently cut.

Bet paled, even under all the cochineal. 'You mean he is still here?'

'He or she.' I looked around the room. 'Didn't take much strength to do. . . that.'

'No!' Another girl, Sara I think, sucked in through the gap in her yellowing teeth. 'It can't have been one of us.'

One of the drunks staggered to his feet and threw up in the middle of the room. Frogger marched in to haul him out, but I dared a staying hand at the oversized brute.

'Nobody can leave. Throw him in a corner – and get someone to clean that up.'

'Whose establishment is this, Mr Dane?' said a presence behind me.

'Yours, Mrs Greenleaf. But the quicker we act, the easier we find who did this.'

'Just remember who's in charge – and who knows where you all live. Frogger, you make sure nobody leaves this room. Mr Dane, come with me.'

I obeyed the forthright woman, as ever in awe of her ability to command – if she'd been born a man, I could have pictured her on some battlefield, leading the charge into a horde of frightened pikemen. A modern day Boudicca, perhaps, queen of her own domain for certain. She led me up the stairs into Jemima's chamber.

'Hmm.' Unlike my own reaction, Greenleaf was decidedly nonplussed. 'Across the throat, then.' I looked at her as she leant over the corpse, feeling along its length. 'No other wounds that I can see.' She stared at the floor. 'No knife near either.'

I made a quick search of the room: there was hardly anything in it, just a table, a chair, a bed. On the chair, Jemima's bodice and skirt; on the table, a Bible of all things, well-creased and –

'Wait a moment.' My fingers drummed on the table. 'Could Jemima read?'

'Of course not.'

'Then why does she have a Bible? I never saw one in here before.'

'Not what you come for, is it, you lads? Not the sort of thing you'd bother to notice.' She looked at the red-leathered tome. 'But then I never saw her with a Bible either.'

I was caught by her sharp tone. 'You know a lot about the girls, I expect?'

'It's my job to, Mr Dane.'

'Then you would know why someone would kill her.'

'We should call in the priest.'

'Mrs Greenleaf?'

'I don't know, Mr Dane.' She sighed. 'She was a simple girl, from a simple home. Had a baby when she was young and came here to earn coin to feed it, then when the child died, she stayed. She needed to.'

'Needed?'

'What else was she going to do?' She made her way to the door. 'Now come back downstairs.'

Without waiting for a response, she left the room, leaving me alone with Jemima. The sight of the Bible had affected me, I'll admit – I'm not much religious, but I attend church now and then – and looking at her there made me hope her sins had been forgiven her, although from what the priests say, she was most likely heading the other way instead.

Still, here on Earth there was someone who could avenge her, and to my honest surprise I found myself wanting to. For all that I'd liked her company in – certain ways – she'd been a person, a fellow Londoner, underneath her paint the same as us all. Setting the Bible on the desk, I took a slower look around, and this time I found a tarnished locket beneath her discarded clothes. Prising it open, I uncovered a lock of hair. A token from her dead child, perhaps?

I turned again to the Bible – not for sacred comfort, friend, but because it still rankled that the Holy Book was here in the first place. I leafed through the fading pages, marked in places with observations, and again, I thought, it couldn't have been Jemima who wrote them.

A knock on the door. I looked round to see Leo's blinking face, and behind him on the landing, the impassive Frogger.

'She wants you to come down.' Leo lolled his head around, drunk, but at least he'd had the grace to do up his shirt. 'Some of them think you might have done it, you know. But I said no, Torsten's a good man, he'd never. . . 'And then he looked over my shoulder and his cheeks blanched as white as. . . hers.

'Because I found her, you mean to say?'

'Ye – Aye.' He intended to push open the door, I'm sure, but he rather slid through, saving himself from a fall just in time. Behind him Frogger looked in, but there was no telling the emotion on that face. 'And you've spent a lot of time with her, I suppose.'

Unlike Leo, my own head was now perfectly clear. Strange how shocks can do that.

'And pretending to care about her is my weak excuse, no doubt.' I reached out a hand to swivel him back to the door. 'Come then. Time to talk.'

I led him downstairs, clutching the Bible and hiding the locket in my pocket. Not much to go on, I know, but it was all there was, save the blade, which must be somewhere nearby. That, and a confession from the bastard murderer. Or murderess.

I paused on the bottom step. Is there such a word as murderess?

'Torsten.' Leo tapped my shoulder. 'Move.'

I cleared my throat, Frogger growling us into the parlour. Steel was standing with his arms folded, making sure nobody left, while everyone else was venting their anxiety, and above all at Mrs Greenleaf.

'Well,' she said as we entered, utterly unbothered by the melee around her. 'I've fetched everyone here. Three of us made a quick search. There's nobody else in the house.'

'A very quick search,' I said. 'Did you check the cellar? The attic?'

'The cellar, yes. The attic is locked. Nobody could get in there. This is everyone, Mr Dane.'

'Very well.' I surveyed the room – five women plus the madam; six men, including Leo and me. Steel and Frogger too, but to be honest they don't count as men, more as some breed of giant.

Why is he called Frogger, I wondered? I'd never thought to be bothered by it before. And then – why am I being bothered by it now?

Concentrate, Torsten. One of these people is a killer. Ruling out myself and Leo – because he was passed out the whole time, friend, not from any bias – and Frogger and Steel – because they would have been seen away from their posts – that still left everyone else, which as far as I was concerned included the madam herself. Who knows where she went when she laid off her music for an instant?

But I'll be honest – my heart was racing with excitement. I'd always fancied myself as a man who solves problems, and now here was my chance to expose a murderer no less. The dead woman was my means to show my mettle, to prove I wasn't such a . . .

My God.

The woman was dead.

I sat down, feeling sick, chastising myself for a self-centred princeton.

'What's the matter?' said Sara. 'Feeling guilty?'

I sprang to my feet. 'Where've you been this past hour, Sara?'

'Down here, where'd you think?' She glanced quickly around. 'Before that, upstairs with him.' She jerked her thumb at a fool in the corner, slumped against a chest cupboard. He was barely alive himself.

'Yes, he's drunk.' She threw back her head. 'Yes, I gave him the ale. He's not regular here, is he? Why shouldn't I take the chance to – raise my prices?'

'Even if he doesn't know they're being raised. Did you hear anything when you were upstairs?'

'The usual.'

'No screams?'

'Like I said. The usual.'

'No unusual screams, then?' She shook her head and I looked around. 'Anyone else?'

So noisy when I came back in, the group was now as talkative as a teenage boy forced to endure questions from his scolding mother. I should know. That boy was me, once. Now I became the mother.

'If you don't start speaking to me, the constable will get it from you.' *Translation: talk to me or your father will whip you.*

The sole lucid man among them scoffed. Robert, I knew he was called. Owned some business or other. Traded things. Don't know what.

'No, they won't,' he said. 'They never bother with these sluts.'

Nice man, Robert, but then he was rich, which was why Greenleaf permitted his heartless scorn. All he ever seemed to want was to tell the whores they were the lowest of London's low. Perhaps that was how he. . . got his enjoyment.

Perhaps this time his enjoyment went much too far.

My, Torsten – not bad.

'Where were you then?' I said, imbued with a peculiar confidence.

'In here.'

One of the girls coughed. 'Not all the time you weren't,' she said. 'I saw you. You went to use the pisspot.'

'Well, obviously I did that, but –'

'So you were absent for at least a few minutes,' I interrupted, and then I thought of the missing weapon. 'What say you show us what you have in your pockets?'

He pushed off from the wall. 'Do not seek to threaten me, my man.'

'All I asked was to see in your pockets. You let these ladies get close enough.'

He paused. 'Not unless everyone does.'

'Everyone will. But you first.'

'Why?'

'Because you were the one arguing with Jemima last week. We all saw you.' The young girl, Bet, was of a sudden alongside him, and before anyone could stop her, she reached into his jacket. Quickly, he brought round his hand to drag hers out; just as quickly I grabbed his arm to prevent it. And then her breathing seemed to stop.

'What is it?' I asked, still clutching Robert's wrist.

All she could do was shake her head. That, and pull a needle from his jacket.

A thick, sharp needle, covered in dried blood.

It fell to the floor, rebounding off the dirty boards. All eyes were transfixed by its horror.

All but two.

'Bastard,' cried Sara, her voice shrill as Bet backed towards the door Steel was guarding. Stooping for the needle, in one swift movement she lunged up with its point, aiming for Robert's throat. But it was a wild swing, and he managed to pull back his head.

'That's not mine!' His words came fast, as a blur. 'I don't know how it got there.'

Coming to my senses, I shoved Sara aside. A little forcefully perhaps, but the look on her face was pure murder.

And then I stopped.

Murder. . .

'Let him speak,' I said, easing the needle from Sara's grasp.

'Let him hang more like,' hissed Bet.

I ignored her, addressing Robert. 'Are you saying this isn't yours?'

'I never. . . I never saw it before.'

I looked at his face, all white and trembling – if his panic was an act, he should have been hired to the King's Playhouse. Uncertain, I turned to Sara: by contrast, her expression was fixed, calm almost, despite her violence. Lingered back, Bet was blinking fast.

'Sara,' I said, keeping the doorway at the edge of my vision. 'Show us your pockets next.'

'What?' She folded her arms. 'Why? We've found him out, haven't we?'

'Perhaps. Please.'

Her eyes darted from side to side, but then she sighed.

'God's wounds!' She reached inside her dress, pulling aside the fabric to reveal her rough white stays and a poorly sewn flap that passed for a pocket. 'Nothing in here. Feel for yourself if you don't believe me.'

'Sorry, but. . .' Not much doubting her sincerity, I still thought it best to do as she offered, circling a careful finger inside the pocket. 'Nothing,' I confirmed, and she narrowed her eyes.

Then I turned to Bet.

'Now you.'

She took a step back, as I feared she might.

'I will not.'

'Sara just did.'

'No.' A little further.

'Well, Bet.' I tilted my head. 'If that needle isn't his, someone put it in his jacket. And you were very quick to reach inside.'

Over my shoulder, I could hear the realisation in Greenleaf's sharp intake of breath. She snapped her fingers.

'Steel,' she ordered. 'Hold her.'

With a slight pause, Steel dragged Bet back in, clamping his palms on her shoulders. She wriggled, but she was going nowhere.

'Mrs Greenleaf,' she implored. 'Let me go!'

The madam did not reply, striding to take her turn to reach into Bet's dress. Without a care, she ripped the grey fabric, tugging out a makeshift pouch. When she turned it inside out, the cloth was stained blood red.

Steel growled, but it was Greenleaf whose gaze was burning.

'It was you.' As she pulled back her arm, her fingers went rigid, but then she stayed herself. 'Did you think we would believe it was him?'

'No,' I said. 'She knew she'd be found with the needle and took a desperate chance to confuse us.'

Bet swallowed, glowering at the madam with some expression. . . unknown. But then she was pushed to the side as Steel rushed forward, almost knocking me off balance.

'What in God's. . .' said Greenleaf as Steel wrenched the madam's arms behind her.

'Keep still,' the giant hissed, in some strange accent. Not London, for certain: I don't think I'd ever heard him talk before. 'Keep still,' he repeated, as if that was all he could say.

I held up my hands. 'You. . . and Bet?' It was difficult to believe. 'Why?'

'No business of yours, Dane,' he mocked, enhancing his patter. He retreated towards the door, the madam firmly in his grip, Bet free at his side.

'Damn you both.' A sudden anger consumed me as I thought of Jemima's pale face. I sprung at Steel without thinking, but he knocked me back with one outstretched arm, his other never flinching from the madam. Not that I'm weak, by any means, but the force in his muscle sent me staggering to the floor.

'We're going,' said Steel. 'And remember – I know where you all live as much as she does.' He shook his hostage as though she were straw. 'I wouldn't set the harmans after us, if I were you.'

'But why?' managed Greenleaf. 'What did Jemima do?'

'She turned her back on us,' said Bet, but there was a tremor in her words. 'Decided she was against us. Better than us.'

'Decided against you in what?' I said, rubbing my shoulder as I lumbered to my feet.

'As he said. No business of yours.'

'Then why kill her tonight?'

She swallowed, and of a sudden glanced down. 'She was going to tell her.' She jerked her head at the madam. 'I didn't want to. I . . .'

'God's truth, Bet! What is this about?' I was startled by a certain look in her eyes, a look I knew well from the battlefield. 'Is he making you do this?'

Just as quickly, the sureness returned. 'Him? He does what I tell him, not the other way around. Come, Mark. Let's go.'

It took me a second to realise she was talking to Steel, and by then the pair had backed from the room. Rushing to follow, I was barely in time to see Bet fumble in Steel's breeches – never a pleasant sight – to retrieve a ring of iron keys. Then she opened the door to the street and fled through. With a powerful thrust, Steel sent his captive tumbling into me; I fell against the wall, lucky for the madam but unlucky for me, and by the time I crawled from beneath her the front door had slammed and was locked from without.

As the crowd gathered behind us, the madam stared at the door. 'What in Hell's name happened here, Mr Dane?'

'I don't know,' I said. 'Except Jemima's murderer fair gave herself up and we let her go.' I banged my fist into the wall, knocking out a chunk of cheap plaster. 'But did you see that, in her eyes? For that instant?'

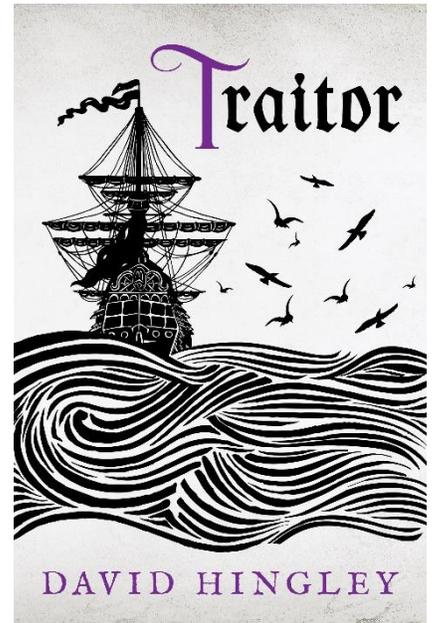
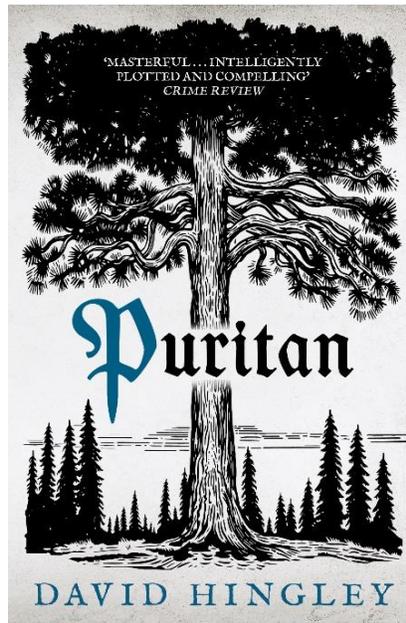
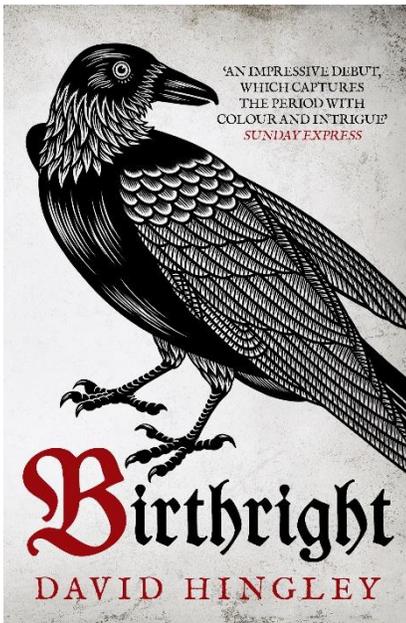
Greenleaf rubbed at her neck. 'I was facing the other way, if you hadn't remarked.'

'It was fear, Mrs Greenleaf. Desperate, simple – fear.'

She beckoned to Frogger, throwing him her own set of keys. 'Well? She'd been caught out. By her own stupidity. When I catch her, she's going to be a lot worse off than Jemima.'

'It was more than that. Something odd is going on, something – sinister.' For some reason, I shuddered – and I'm not a man to scare. 'But there's a dead woman upstairs, a dead woman I liked. If not in Hell's name, then in hers, I'm going to bring her peace.'

With the murderer unmasked, read the second part of Torsten's adventure coming soon! And if you enjoyed this beginning, why not try the Mercia Blakewood trilogy, my full-length historical crime series? Published by Allison & Busby, journey with Mercia Blakewood, Nathan Keyte and Nicholas Wildmoor as they combat murder and intrigue to regain her stolen home. Birthright, Puritan and Traitor – out now.



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