

SURVIVAL

Or,

**Tales Of Hope And Villainy
From A Time Of Plague**

A Mercia Blakewood Special

DAVID HINGLEY

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I

The library was as full of apprehension as it was of books. Books which bulged from each shelf, the spines jammed one against the other with barely a sliver of space left.

‘But do you need to go back?’ said Mercia. ‘After what the peddler said, would it not be safer to send word?’

Gripping the same tankard of weak ale he had been clutching for the past half hour, the young man she was talking to seemed ready to bolt. ‘Who else is going to fetch her?’ he said. ‘As it is I’ll have to be certain she’s not ill. God’s truth, I should have gone back already.’

Mercia looked out the window onto the flowering rose garden. ‘That is my fault, Nicholas. I have kept you here longer than you wished.’

‘It was my choice. I wanted to stay longer to help you put things in order. But now I have to go.’

‘I know you do,’ she said, turning to face the familiar eyes of green. ‘Then go down and come back as quickly as you are able. And – do not worry about cost. I will provide what you need.’

‘Thank you.’ He swallowed, running his free hand through his unkempt hair. ‘I know ‘tis an impertinence, but with the way things seem to be getting worse in the city –’

‘Nicholas, after all you have done for me, the cost of the carriage there and back is no such thing, nor so the care of your child once she arrives. The difficulty may be finding a coach to take you. Bethany thinks they may not be running as well as they did, if ever well is the word that could be used on that rutted route.’

‘I’ll have to try. If I ride to Oxford this afternoon, I can get the coach early tomorrow. There’ll likely be fewer people wanting to travel to London now, so there

should be room, even if 'tis on the roof. If it isn't running, I'll get them to hire me a fast horse and I'll ride myself.'

'If the coaches are all stopped, I doubt the coachmen would let you take a horse either. If needs arise, you can continue with mine all the way from here. 'Tis not as though you cannot shoe a horse yourself if one slips.'

'Can horses get plague, then?' he asked.

'To say true, I do not know. I do not think so. But you know how folk are. Rumour and panic oft fly swifter than truth.'

'Hell's teeth!' he swore. 'A year abroad and as soon as you're home in your manor house – this. I really don't want to risk. . . but I don't know where else to take her. If she falls ill on the way, I'll head straight back to London.'

'Let us pray for now that Eliza is well. The peddler may have been embellishing his tale. As for the plague, it will pass in time, as ever it does. But I wish there was more I could do myself.' Thinking, she sucked at her lower lip. 'Perhaps I should come to London with you and –'

Nicholas punched down his beaker, a little harsher than he intended. 'No. No, no. You will not come to London. No.'

Amused, she tilted her head, her hair's ringlets shimmering in the noontime light that was falling through the lead-paned window. 'I thought I was the one in charge here.'

The attempt at humour did little to break his sombre mood. He folded his arms.

'Well first, I'm no longer in your service, and second, even so, I'm still going to want to protect you. Mercia, there's plague in London. 'Tis getting serious. It seems we barely got you away in time. Even the King is on the cusp of leaving, if those reports are true. You have to stay here.'

'Still, I –'

'How many trials have you survived to get back here? What would be the point of them if you catch your death now?' The stern mask eased a little. 'I know I'm just a farrier and you're a grand lady, but that's the end of it. Besides, think of Daniel. Think of your mother.'

‘Thinking of Daniel and my mother is the only reason I agree with you. But there must be something I can do.’ She began to pace up and down the black and white tiles of the floor. ‘Besting murderers and spies seems easy compared to this unseen menace. ‘Tis precisely because I have faced all those trials, as you put it, that I find it hard to sit here while hundreds are at peril of death.’ She paused in her pacing, resting her outstretched fingertips on a pile of musty books. ‘There has been enough of that in this country of late. War, strife, war again. Now plague. Sometimes I fear we are cursed.’

‘Let’s just think on it,’ said Nicholas. ‘In the meantime, look to yourself for once. Let Phibae and Bethany take care of you.’ He glanced at the side of her dress, an elegant brown outfit slit at the front and tied fast at the back. ‘You’re sure you’re being honest when you say that doesn’t hurt?’

‘Well, the wound might ache at times, but I refuse to let it stop me dressing well.’

He sighed. ‘It was not so long ago you were near death. At least stop walking so much.’

‘I like walking.’

‘And I like rum, but I won’t be drinking it while I’m riding south.’ He reached out, but even with the bonds of their shared endeavours he stopped short of resting his hand on her shoulder. ‘Thank you, Mercia, again. I’d hoped not to be a burden, but offering to help – it means a lot. One day I’ll pay you back.’

‘You are always welcome, Nicholas. And you have already paid me back, countless times over. But do one thing for me?’

‘Anything.’

‘Ask your family if they would return with you. Your sister, her husband, their children. This house is large enough to provide sanctuary to them also.’

‘Oh. . . no, Mercia, I can’t ask that of you. Besides, I know my sister. She won’t want to leave home.’

‘Still, ask. And Nicholas?’

He bounced on his heels, impatient to prepare to leave. ‘Yes?’

‘Be wary as you go. Plague or no, there are plenty of villains about.’

Earlier that morning, Mercia's maid Bethany had appeared in the parlour of the house with a roughly dressed man in her wake. Dusty hat in hand, more like one of those the Puritans used to wear than anything in fashion now, his eyes roved the tidy room, settling everywhere but on the mistress of the house. Setting down the volume of poetry she was reading – a daily tonic for her recuperation – Mercia looked at Bethany with a querying eye.

'Sorry to disturb you, mistress,' she had said, 'but this man has news. He's a peddler from Witney, come to the house to sell wares he gathered at market, but I asked him to come and tell you what he just told me.'

Mercia nodded almost imperceptibly at her maid, an upright stalwart of around sixty years, immaculate as always in her crisp white bonnet and apron. 'Thank you, Bethany,' she said. Then she turned to the man, by contrast a nervous, ill-shaven individual, with a faded brown mark staining the patched waistcoat he had hooked into his woollen breeches.

'What is your name, sir?' she asked.

The man blinked more than once, but mustered the courage to look at her and bow. 'Roger Beech, my lady.'

Mercia rolled an internal eyebrow. 'There is no need to call me my lady, for I am not one. Mrs Blakewood will do.'

The man nodded, turning his hat round on the left thumb he had poked through the small hole in its apex.

'Your maid ask me to come and speak with you, Mrs Blakewood.' His eyes darted about once more, taking in the brightness of the space. 'I never come in before, I always ring at the door and get sent on my way, but it never hurts to ask.'

'I'm told Mr Beech only started visiting last year,' explained Bethany.

'I see,' said Mercia, her lightly cuffed wrist hanging over the thin arm of her chair. 'Well, Mr Beech, there has been a restoration of ownership at Halescott. As the King was restored to his throne, so I have been restored to my manor. You will doubtless find more welcome here now than when my mother-in-law was in residence.'

'If you say so, my lady, although your maid here is a fair fierce creature.'

Bethany sucked in indignant air, but Mercia could barely suppress her smile.

‘Pray, Mr Beech,’ she implored with a deliberate air of formality, striving to hide her amusement. ‘Tell me your news?’

The poor man swallowed. ‘Tis just what I heard about the plague, my lady. How it’s getting bad.’

Immediately Mercia’s frivolity vanished. ‘In scarce one fortnight? How so?’

‘They’ve started fleeing the city for places like here,’ he continued. ‘Merchants and the like, them that can afford to get out, they’re coming up to be safe. Some folk don’t like it, they reckon they might bring it with them, but I say good, let them come and sell me their things so I’ve got more to sell on.’ He cleared his throat. ‘I got a nice set of candlesticks in my basket out there, they’d look lovely in that grand hall you got.’

Mercia held up her hand. ‘No doubt the candlesticks are lovely. I am more concerned with what you have to say about the plague. I was in London all of last month, it was appearing here and there but it was largely confined. Has that changed?’

An image drifted into her mind of the haggard woman she had met on a crowded London thoroughfare, warning passers-by against walking down a particular street, where a red cross had been painted on one of the many doors. The woman’s unfeelingness had shocked her; she had thought on that moment often since.

‘Yes, my lady, and fast,’ said the peddler. ‘They’d hoped it was going down, but now hundreds are dead, more and more each week, and where one is ill, whole families are shut up in their homes with no hope of escape. Foreigners are to blame, some think, and it did start overseas. The King is running to Salisbury, ‘tis said, and Parliament is shut. The deaths can only increase.’

‘May the Lord have mercy,’ said Mercia, and then a cold, stabbing shock flashed through her body that had nothing to do with the wound she had suffered. ‘Dear God. Which parishes are worst hit, Mr Beech?’

‘St Giles is where it started, they say, but ‘tis spreading all over. The theatres are closing in Drury Lane. Holborn’s got it, Charing Cross near the palace, even the lawyers near Lincoln’s Inn, round Newgate, serve them right if it gets in there o’ course, Smithfield with the cattle market, getting round Cowcross and the like, even some the other way down in Westminster, now over the wall inside the city itself, they say a doctor got it there, and he shut himself up to stop the spread –’

‘Cowcross?’ said Mercia, and the cruel chill deepened. ‘You say Cowcross?’

‘Yes, my lady. And three days have passed since the merchants I spoke with left. Things must be getting worse every day. And ‘tis so hot in the city, they say, worse than here.’

‘Dear Lord.’ Mercia rubbed her temples, feeling sick. ‘Bethany, fetch Nicholas quick. Cowcross is where his family lives. And Mr Beech, thank you for your report.’ She reached into a purse and threw him a penny. ‘Please return with more news if you hear anything else.’

Beech caught the penny as Bethany disappeared through the door. ‘Thank you, my – Mrs Blakewood – I will.’ He shifted on his feet. ‘In the meantime, I don’t suppose – would you be interested in those candlesticks?’

Mercia dismissed him with a look. ‘Thank you, Mr Beech. In the meantime, I would not.’

II

Nicholas had been lucky in Oxford, finding a coach able to take him on the two-day journey to London as well as a seat up front. He had been obliged to sit outside, true, but the weather was dry and hot, and the prattle of the driver beside him had not always been unwelcome on what felt like a very long road. Now at journey's end, Nicholas leapt from the scuffed footboard and turned to watch his less fortunate travelling companion jump from his perch on the roof, the new boots Mercia had bought for the nimble boy skidding on the ground as he landed with a deft bump.

Dust was still swirling around the wheels of the coach, hanging steady over the alighting passengers in the absence of a dispersing breeze. Eight people had made the trip to London, and for a time all eight remained on the spot, surveying their surroundings as though uncertain whether to progress with their journey or return to the country right away.

'You take care now, Nick,' said the driver, a portly man whom Nicholas had got to know well following the hours squeezed up alongside. 'And your strange friend there.' He nodded at the teenager who had jumped from the roof. 'I go back in the morning at eight, remember, eight. I'm not waiting in this town any longer than I have to.'

'You're not anywhere near the town,' said Nicholas, taking in the fields around them. 'Tis still two miles off.'

'I'm not taking any chances. You saw the carts and coaches going the other way. Never seen so many panicked faces in my life.' He spat, rotating his shoulders as if to stretch away his worry. 'I don't mind bringing folk down if they've got to come,

but I'm not going into London myself. This is close enough for you to be there in an hour or two.'

'And what about her?' said Nicholas, gesturing towards an old woman his companion was helping retrieve a small case from the rear of the coach.

'She seems sprightly enough,' shrugged the driver, and then clearing his throat he raised his voice. 'Any of you wanting to go back after tomorrow, forget it. No one who's been in London for more than a day is getting on this coach or on anyone else's I know. Any of you feel ill, get a cough, start sweating. . . you're not coming either. I'll be watching you before you get on, so don't try to trick me 'cos I'll know. You can't hide the plague.'

Heaving himself back on his coach, he geed up his horses and set off in the direction they'd come, falling in line with a row of scurrying traffic to head for the coaching inn they'd passed a few miles back. Nicholas turned to his companion.

'Ready, Kwadwo?' The teenager nodded. 'Good. Then let's go.'

Pulling his bag over his shoulder, Nicholas led the way against the oncoming crowds, heading for the city of death.

The old woman was as vigorous as the driver had observed, keeping easy pace with Nicholas and Kwadwo as they walked towards the first houses that marked the edge of London. More than once they were forced to leave the road, until Nicholas decided that traipsing through the grass was preferable to the constant threat of being run down by a cart or bumping into an irate stranger.

'Tis just like the ride down,' said another of the passengers, an innocuous man of around thirty who was walking with their small group. 'I think my shoulder will be forever bruised from the number of times that coachman swerved to avoid the coaches fleeing north. Thank the Lord for his cursing, else we would have had no warning a jolt was coming at all.'

'I was more concerned with that abandoned cart,' said the old woman. 'A highwayman's ruse, ha!'

'The driver seemed to think it was.'

'Ha!' she repeated. 'Walk ten feet from the cart and you'll have found a body. Folk are dying in the roads, I'm sure of it.'

‘From. . .?’

‘From the plague, you can say it, man. They leave town and it overtakes them before they can get ten miles. You’re all too young to remember, but I’ve seen it all before.’

The innocuous man laughed nervously, then nodded up ahead where two of their fellow passengers had built up a steady lead, not waiting for anyone as they marched towards the town.

‘What do you think?’ he said. ‘Those two. Soldiers?’

‘You were in the coach with them,’ said Nicholas, wishing the man had marched ahead himself.

‘They didn’t say much. Nothing at all, indeed. Seemed quite perturbed when I asked them their business. And have you noticed,’ he continued, clearly enjoying his ruminations. ‘The other two from the coach, behind us, that strange man and his wife. Both times we’ve paused to rest they’ve lingered back. I wonder what they’re whispering about? They didn’t care much to talk with me on the journey either.’

I wonder why, thought Nicholas, but he merely shrugged, reaching to take his turn with the old woman’s case. ‘I tried to talk with them when we stopped for the night but they said they were tired. I think folk are just anxious, you can understand it.’

‘Why don’t you leave that, Nicholas,’ said the old woman, pointing to the case. ‘You’ll be wanting to see your daughter. Go on ahead.’

‘A few minutes longer on the road won’t hurt. And you’ll be wanting to reach home, just as quick. You don’t want to dally with all these madmen rushing past.’

‘I know, but – ‘tis not the same, is it? At least we old folk have had our time, it’s when the youngsters go it breaks your heart.’ She looked into the distance. ‘I’ve had twelve children, you know that? And only four of them passed their eleventh year. Never got any easier.’ She touched Nicholas’s shoulder. ‘Your child’s your first?’

He nodded, not much put at ease by her abruptness. But it had the effect of making the innocuous man drop back.

‘And your wife?’ the woman pursued. ‘What’s she look like? Pretty, I’m sure, handsome fellow like you.’

‘I don’t have a wife,’ he said, short in his turn. ‘My sister looks after my daughter while I try to earn money to feed them.’

‘Oh. Well, none of my business I suppose.’ She waited a moment. ‘Is the child’s mother. . .?’

Nicholas sighed. ‘I don’t know where she is. We knew each other for a short time, then she went away. A few months later she came back with a babe in her arms, told me to take what was mine, and left again. I’ve never seen her since.’

‘Oh! Cruel heart!’

‘Maybe. But she gave me Eliza, and I won’t ever regret that.’

The old woman linked his free arm with hers. ‘You’re a good lad, Nicholas. You get your daughter and leave the city as quickly as you can.’ She nodded. ‘A lucky lad, too. My niece I was visiting in Oxford, many a time she’s told me of the Goodridge family, or the Blakewood family as she is since getting wed, that – oh, what is her name. . .? Strange name, after some old kingdom or other.’

‘Mercia, you mean? Her father was keen on old times, from what she tells me, named her after something – Saxon, is it? Goes over my head, I tell you.’

‘Didn’t go over his head though, did it, when it got cut off his shoulders?’ The woman shook her head in pity. ‘More’s the shame. And her a widow so young.’ She sniffed. ‘Still, I’m glad she got her house back from them who lived there last year. My niece heard she kicked them out soon as she was back.’

‘News travels fast,’ said Nicholas.

‘Not as fast as the plague, son. You don’t take any chances.’ She glanced to her side, where Kwadwo was ambling along caught in his own thoughts. ‘How did you get to know this one?’

‘Would you believe me if I said at Whitehall Palace?’

‘Don’t be daft.’

‘Tis true! Mercia knows the King, in a way, and he put her in the palace to find out a traitor. I was her manservant, Kwadwo there was servant to one of the women she was after, although his mistress treated him like a dog. Mercia got him out of there, not two weeks back, so he helped her home and now he’s coming back, to see to a mate of his with all this going on.’

‘Another brave soul,’ she said. ‘Most would stay well away.’

‘Why have you come back, then? Couldn’t you have stayed with your niece?’ He smiled. ‘For all you like to talk, you haven’t said much about that.’

‘Saucy cove!’ She laughed. ‘Well it must be an hour ‘til we get to Soho. Plenty of time if you want to hear, though I might need to rest once in a while to catch my breath.’

THE OLD WOMAN’S TALE

‘How old do you think I am? Ha! That’s kind. No young man, I’m seventy one. I was born in the last century, when Good Queen Bess was still alive, a haggard, cantankerous old mare, much like I am now. Oh, you think not? There’s plenty wouldn’t agree.

Yes, I was a child when Guy Fawkes tried to blow up King James. Already old when they lopped off the first Charles’s head. Ancient before his son came skulking from his hiding place to take back the throne he said was his. Does it offend you that I spit at his name? No. I thought not.

I’ve lived through it all, see, that terrible war we had when you were just a babe, King against Parliament they said, like it were all so grand, though it were more brother against brother from what we could tell, men and lads killing each other over nothing – nothing! Then Cromwell and his lot, ending everything left and right, until the King come back, so tell me, what was it for?

Me, I look out for my own, I help those that need it, and I scold those that need that. I bested the last plague thirty year ago, and the one twenty year before that. Maybe this time it’ll do for me, or mayhap I’ll keep going for another ten year. ‘Tis in the lap of God, say the priests, but then the priests are often in the lap of something else – a rum lass most like – so they have little to say to me.

That’s right, my boy, this isn’t the first plague I’ve known. What was your name again? Kwadwo, you say? Hmm. Got any meaning to it, that name? Ah, born on a

Monday. Well yes, plague's nothing new for us London folk. When Queen Bess died, thousands followed not long after and the same happened when the Scot went, James, as if thousands couldn't bear to live without him. Peculiar, that, how plague came down on us twice then, yet I'll wager Charles is still alive, the randy dog, no kingly death to warn of this new sickness. Ha! He'll go on and on, that one, unless some rogue comes along and runs him through.

No, I don't much care for kings, you can tell. I'm more worried that my brother could get stuck in a loft, no one to pass the days with him if things get bad, if he falls sick and his lodgings are shut up. My brother, yes, who fought gladly for the King in that cursed war, and finished with nothing but an arm sawn away at the elbow and a payment promised but never got. No, don't you be sorry, young man. Don't you be sorry.

Me? I'm in rude health, and as you asked, I live with my son and his wife – and five of their children besides, although the two eldest are already flown – one a worker of metal like his pa, one about to have a child of her own, so soon! – 'tis cramped but we get by, I won't moan when I have a warm bed and a warm hearth. So many don't. But my brother's alone, his wife gone in childbirth, and his children, poor things, long since with our Lord. Me, yes I'm widowed, my husband's been dead near twenty year, taken by some consumption, and that were bad enough.

Our niece I've been with Oxford way, just out of town, she's widowed too, widowed in the war she was, but that's nothing strange, there's many a woman suffered that. Every year I go to stay, for a summer treat for us both, well more for me, I should say, being a whole score older. The sweet air is good for my humours, must be, and my son gets a rest from his ma. I pass a pleasant month but I'm not idle, no fear! I help with the household – when Annie's not telling me to sit, but I tell her right, ha! I'm not dead, I can work, better than she can with her back. Sometimes her sons come round too – twins, they are, about your age I reckon, they're good lads. But it's been hot this year, too hot.

Then same as you, I heard word the plague was getting bad and I thought of my brother and I had to come back. The babe of the family he is, at least to me, never mind he's past sixty. He'll always be my youngest brother, ever since he were a chit

and I helped him with the bullies in the lane, and he's the only one of my brothers and sisters I've got left.

How times have changed for us! Who'd have thought we'd have lived through so much, but that's the point, young man, we lived. Don't know why, or how, but we lived. Through plague and war, fights with the French and the froglander Dutch, bad harvests, cold winters, we got through it, London got through it, and through this new plague we'll get through it again. God's truth, there'll be bad times, and He knows there'll be villains as much as kind souls to bring us succour, but we'll fight and fight as ever we do.

I've seen it all, lad, and what do you think I've learnt from these many years I've been given? That who's above us, for all my talk, them lot's not important, what matters is who's about you, people who'll help each other to come through, stop us getting lost in our squabbling. After every storm there's a harbour waiting, that's what I say. And if I don't make it through this time, there's plenty who will. Those that die, we mourn them, but we think of the good they did, and we remember a friend worth having, and that has to be enough.

No, Nicholas, don't worry for me. Look to your daughter, give her a life as long as mine, not the same as mine, to be hoped, but a better one. You keep close with that Mercia, she seems like the sort to see you right. And you, lad – Kwadwo or whatever you're called, you don't take any chances, you hear me? You're only young, see to your friends but you see to yourself too.

You hear?'

Kwadwo rolled his eyes. 'I hear.'

'And here we are,' said Nicholas, accentuating the 'here'. 'Well, the edge of town, at least. Just down that road is Soho Square.' He looked at the old woman. 'You know, for all we should be worried by plague, I'm glad to be back.'

The old woman reached out a hand. 'Of course you are. For you and for me, this is home. 'Tis where we belong.'

Nicholas looked around him, at the boundary of field and town, and relinquishing the old woman's case to the innocuous man's grudging care, he shook out his aching arm and took a single step forward.

'Well,' he said. 'Shall we see how things fare?'

III

With Nicholas and Kwadwo in London, Mercia continued her recovery at home. But she was a bad patient, defying Bethany's protective wrath by walking ever longer routes through the Halescott grounds. The faithful maid's worries were allayed somewhat by Mercia's promise not to take her daily exercise alone, but the companion she chose, her new maid from her time at Whitehall, was beset by her own worries.

'I keep asking myself if I've done the right thing,' the young woman said, as they walked through the more formal part of the garden, past a succession of cherry trees fanned out on a sturdy stone wall. 'Poor Ayo! Every night I lie awake, thinking I should have gone with Kwadwo and Nicholas.'

'I know it is hard for you,' said Mercia. 'But Ayo will want you to be here, Phibae, and not to return to London until the plague is over. He could have come here too, gladly, with Nicholas when he returns with Eliza.'

'He will not leave London,' said Phibae. 'He will want to keep those in his care safe.' She smiled. 'Imagine the look on his face if I arrived home now. He would be furious, send me back here without a thought, never mind I am his wife. As it is, Kwadwo will receive a stern rebuke.' The smile faded, her lips setting in a grim line. 'And yet I do not know if I should have returned.'

'Tis strange, but I find myself worrying for my uncle just the same, even though I should be forgiven for leaving him to rot, may the Lord forgive me for saying so.' As she spoke, Mercia unconsciously tugged a loose leaf from a mulberry bush and crushed it in her palm. 'But perhaps he is safest in the Tower. Perhaps those thick walls will keep the plague at bay as much as they do any human enemy.'

‘You are a kind woman, mistress. Most folk would expect you to wish him dead after what he did to you.’

Mercia took a calming breath, inhaling the welcome scent of lavender as bees buzzed around their legs. ‘Then that is one good thing to come out of times like these. Despite their differences, people set rancour aside in the effort to comfort and help. Well, most people. And those that do not, perchance they cannot, or perchance they are simply afeared.’

‘Still, when you hear of the rich fleeing while the poor suffer, ‘tis hard not to feel aggrieved.’

‘Do not worry, Phibae.’ Mercia paused beneath an archway that led out to a wilder part of the garden; the stonework was covered in winding ivy, framing her entirely. ‘Ayo will get the letter you asked me to write, and he will know you are well. Should he wish to return with Nicholas after all, he will be most welcome.’

‘Thank you, mistress.’ For a moment Phibae’s eyes shone with the hint of moisture, but she quickly blinked it away. ‘That would make a nice portrait,’ she said. ‘You, in that arch.’

‘Looking like this?’ Mercia pulled a face. ‘I am hardly at my best, but thank you. Let us call the artist now.’

The joke succeeded, making Phibae laugh. ‘I think you must be better, mistress. You’ve walked further today than in the past week, and without pressing onto your wound.’

‘Tis good to hear you laugh, Phibae. And you are right. Come, then. Let us take a turn through the wood. The sun is so bright today.’

Phibae frowned. ‘Are you sure? When I said you were better, I didn’t mean – ‘

‘Trust me, this is the best tonic I could have. I have lain bored looking at the trees and hoping soon to walk among them.’ She winked. ‘Just do not tell Bethany.’

Passing round the house towards the gravelled drive at the front, Mercia approached a rusting side gate and squeaked it open. In the near distance, an uncleared wood provided a boundary between the manor house grounds and the wider estate beyond, and she led Phibae into its shadowed eaves, taking in the scent of a fresh, soily arena where rays of sunlight competed with indifferent trees for dominance of the airy space. Following a faint path traced out by years of regular use, Mercia felt less like an

adversary among them than a friend being welcomed back to a beloved childhood playground.

‘Look at that,’ she exclaimed, extending her fingers towards a broad chestnut tree that spread both sky- and sideward, its ancient base split hydra-like into three separate trunks. ‘That enormous branch there, about eight feet up – I used to sit on that all the time. I played at waiting in the wood to waylay an evil sheriff’s convoy, like a knight from my father’s books. Malory and Spenser, those were the tales I loved most, the stories about Guinevere and Britomart.’

Phibae gave her an indulgent smile. ‘Books seem a wondrous thing.’

‘Your reading is improving each week, Phibae. Soon you will be reading whole volumes.’

A wind picked up, rustling the thick leaves of the leviathan chestnut and its less extensive fellows, while the more delicate leaves of the beeches behind seemed to shake in the dappled light. A small bird, a robin perhaps, settled near Mercia’s feet, its small head tilted as if determining her intent, before flitting upwards and out of sight.

Mercia paused, enjoying the coolness of the shade and the breeze on her face, stopping simply to *feel*, in that way that seems all time has stopped, holding onto the infinite moment as though never wanting it to end. But the dart of time resumed its inevitable flight, and she reopened her eyes, took a sweet breath of warm air and continued with Phibae through the narrow wood, soon emerging on the other side where a glorious view opened up atop a gentle slope, across the shires of Oxford and Warwick and Gloucester beyond, the faint trace of far-off hills rising in the distance. For miles upon miles, forests and cleared land alike basked in the warmth of the sun, with scarcely a wisp of dishevelled cloud to cast its meagre shadow.

In the dip at the bottom of the slope, the carpet of yellow-green was interrupted by a stone barn, near which some of the men who worked Mercia’s land were congregating for a midday break. She had barely looked away when a blurred rush of movement drew back her attention and a discordance of gruff shouts resounded up the slope.

‘What is happening down there?’ she said, as much to herself as to Phibae. She squinted, screwing up her eyes so as better to see, and saw the group of men concentrated on one spot, brandishing tools or simply their fists. To their right, a lone

pair of figures stood defiant, although a third figure behind them was slowly backing away.

‘They cannot be fighting?’ said Mercia. ‘Well, Phibae. Here is a chance to show the mistress is back.’

She set off down the slope against the protestations of her maid. The sun was hot on her face, hotter beneath her cumbersome dress, but neither the heat nor her wound slowed her as she descended towards the barn. As the gentle green grass gave way to worn-away scuffs of earth, the shouts grew louder, and the diorama came into full focus.

‘Just go,’ one of the farmworkers was saying. ‘We keep asking. We won’t again.’

One of the pair of strangers Mercia had seen from a distance was standing with hands outstretched, scant defence against the vicious rake the farmhand was wielding.

‘And I keep explaining. All we wanted was somewhere to sleep. We weren’t intending to stay forever.’ He narrowed his eyes. ‘But take that back what you said.’

‘Why? You are diseased, must be!’

The stranger churned spittle inside his mouth. ‘You want me to spit on you so you can find out?’

The infantile threat forced all six labourers back. ‘You think we’re afraid,’ said their spokesman. ‘But you’ll be sorry you came here when I break your precious lute. See, I wager that’s worth something to you.’

The stranger swallowed. ‘It’s just a barn. ‘Tis not like anyone lives here.’

‘But it don’t belong to you, does it? Now fuck off.’

‘Aye, but I doubt it belongs to you either.’

‘No,’ said Mercia, ‘it belongs to me.’

As one, the labourers and strangers turned to face her. ‘Explain,’ she said, addressing herself to the farmhand with the rake.

‘Stand away, Mrs Blakewood,’ he said, not lowering his tool.

‘I beg your – ‘

‘For your own good, mistress. These lot have got plague!’

‘What?’ she said, taking an involuntary step back just as Phibae did the same behind. ‘You are sure of this?’

‘We do not have plague,’ said the stranger. ‘I keep telling them, look at my face.’ He jiggled his head, turning first his left cheek then his right towards her. His blue-green eyes stared out defiant, his jaw taut as he looked over a long nose that had clearly once been broken, but the effect seemed rather to enhance his sharp features. Then he pulled back his sleeve, already loose at the cuff. ‘And my arm.’ He looked Mercia up and down as he held out his bare forearm, strong and devoid of blemishes, although like his face, it was streaked with dust just as his thick brown hair was ruffled with strands of hay. ‘Are you the mistress of these lands?’ he asked.

‘I am,’ she said in an equally challenging tone. ‘Who are you?’

‘Mrs Blakewood,’ urged the labourer, ‘tis not safe, get back.’ Around him, his fellow workers murmured their agreement.

‘Tom, is it?’ she said, casting him a glance. The man nodded, eyes widening as though surprised to be remembered, but amongst his tanned creases were the same attractive features Mercia recalled from her teenage years, when this same man had worked the land in his youth. ‘See, I shall keep a few feet’s distance,’ she continued. ‘Now, stranger, I ask again. Who are you?’

‘My name is Joshua,’ he said. ‘Joshua Tanner. And these with me are my companions, Alena and Luis.’

She glanced at the woman beside him, and the man a short distance behind. The former was of an age with the speaker, early thirties she guessed like herself, pale-skinned, red-headed, aloof. The man Tanner had called Luis had raven black hair, a dark, tanned face, and was dressed in what would have been fine clothes were they not torn in places, the large rip in his tailored breeches exposing a patch of equally dark skin.

‘I am Mercia Blakewood,’ she said. ‘I own Halescott Manor. What brings you onto my lands?’

‘We are musicians,’ said Tanner. ‘From London. We ran from the plague but we do not have it ourselves. We have been on the road a full week so we would know.’

‘They cannot know,’ said Tom. ‘They smell like sh. . . I mean, they smell terrible.’ He looked at Mercia. ‘That’s how it spreads, isn’t it? Through bad smells?’

‘Miasma?’ she said, nodding. ‘Some think that is how it spreads, yes.’

Tanner gritted his teeth. ‘We smell like shit because we have spent a week being chased from place to place. We have scarce been able to stop to wash in a stream before some ignorant churl forced us on. We are tired, and hungry, and grieving for the loss of a friend. We just want to rest.’

‘Then what happened to that friend?’ shouted one of the other labourers. ‘He died of plague, must have. You’ve all got it, damned Londoners! Don’t bring it here!’

‘If you call off your dogs, Mrs Blakewood, I can tell you the truth of it.’ The men growled as if in answer to Tanner’s insult, but he ignored them. ‘Then harry us out of here, as you doubtless wish, but at least give me chance to speak plain.’

Mercia glanced between the musician and her men. The threat of violence seemed to have passed since her arrival, but she could tell the labourers had only held off before through fear he was carrying the disease.

‘Very well, Mr Tanner,’ she said. ‘But I suggest you stay back from my men.’

THE MUSICIAN’S TALE

‘We were five, in London. We spent our days together, evenings together, we drank together, entertained together. Now we are three. One died. One we have lost. We do not know where he is.

Back at home, we were a company of musicians, playing in parlours for gentlemen and their guests as often as at a jig in the tavern – the best taverns, mind. Alena sang, Luis played the violin, I sat at the keys of the harpsichord, Simon strummed the lute, and Mark. . . Mark made the angels sing on his flute the same as he’s doing now. It was an uncertain living, wandering from tavern to tavern, at summer from fair to fair, but we loved our music, and we made folk happy, for the most part, so it was good enough.

We lived in St Giles, most of us, although I was born in Kent, and Luis in Spain – did you guess? – while the others are from London proper. Do you know London?

Oh! At Whitehall Palace, in truth? I envy you, what we would have given to have performed for the Court, but we never made it that high, never had a Frenchman with us as the King seems to like, although I hear he favours Italian players now. No, we were just musicians, bringing harmony to people's lives for that short moment when they listened, hoping they would take the music with them once we'd stopped.

Last year we went around the country, visiting all the fairs, Stourbridge Fair up near Cambridge, oh what a thing to behold! Musicians come together, people live out in the fields, buying from the hawkers and making merry, losing their minds on too much ale and their coin on too much wagering, dancing until the fields turn to mud and you think you never want to return home. You should have seen it! Such a spectacle of folk all revelling in life's pleasures after the dark years, when music was silent. And then winter in London, still playing, when we weren't home taking a needed rest.

And then the plague came.

If you know London you'll know St Giles, aye, to the west of the city, where the poorest of God's wretches live crammed in their stinking hovels and in the next street along, the grand houses of the rich shine with all their finery. And they say plague doesn't judge, that it affects rich as much as poor, but you tell me, Mrs Blakewood, who do you think's dying in droves, and who's fled their homes and gone with what money they could? No, it doesn't treat all the same, and I won't believe those who say different. Not when I've seen what it does.

Oh, is that right? What did she call you – Tom? Aye, we got out too, we got out when we knew we would die if we didn't. I didn't claim I was poor, not back then at least. One or two started dying round by us, that wasn't anything new, but then it was three or four, then nine or ten, and soon the whole parish was afeared, and folk from outside would barely set foot in certain streets, and scorned us when we ventured out to play our music.

Then Mark, our friend, it got him. It got him and his wife and his little baby son and not one of us could stop it. Soon as he knew he had it, soon as the sweating started and the swellings appeared, he locked the door on us, ignored our banging on the wood. Soon enough word got round, a cross was drawn on the door, and a watch

set in the street to make sure no one went in, that no one came out. Not even his little lad.

And no one did come out, not living. One day they say the groaning stopped, that all they could hear was the cries of the child, until a neighbour with some kindness in her heart broke in to fetch him out, but it was too late for the boy, and soon it was too late for the neighbour. In time the searchers came, with the carters ringing their warning bell, and they carried out Mark and his wife, threw their scarred bodies on a wagon and buried them at night.

All this time we were helpless, trying to understand, we even went to the alderman, but he said there was no more plague than normal, that everything would be well, and this with our own friend dead. Damn that alderman. Damn him to Hell! The boy – named Mark too, for his father – was buried in the end, alongside the neighbour in some hastily dug grave. Heaven knows how they must have suffered in that house, Mark and his wife and his boy. But they suffered, shut up alone that the rest of us might live, so you, Tom, don't talk to me about plague, because you know nothing of it. Nothing, you hear?

Then crosses began appearing all over, and still the alderman refused to act, still he didn't set fires to clean the air, not even when it leapt into the next parish. Me, I don't know how this spreads, whether 'tis through demons or foul smells or 'cos folk haven't washed, but London stinks, it stinks, and 'tis crowded, so crowded, so why weren't the streets cleaned sooner, or folk asked to stay apart? But what do I know, well I'll tell you, I know that half the doctors fled as quick as the crosses were painted, and what does that say when learned men run that fast?

Luis and I stayed with Alena after that, at the house she shared with her mother away from St Giles, in a far part of the city where folk scarcely needed worry about plague, and it was her, Alena's mother, who said we should leave while we could, take our music where we could still bring cheer. That seemed a good purpose, a blessing we thought when we looked on Mark's flute, so we picked up our instruments, the flute too, and we left to make a living somewhere else.

And yes, hoping to save our lives. You men can scoff all you like, but you want to live as much as we do. There's nothing shameful in that.

So we ran, Mrs Blakewood, from St Giles. Simon was married, the only one of us who is, so he sent his wife to her sister out of harm's way, and Alena's mother we hope is safe where she is. Then we went west, thinking to go through the towns on our way to Salisbury where we hear the King's about to hide, hoping some of his noblemen might need someone to play. But when we got to Reading we were set upon, they'd had plenty of warning from the coaches fleeing ahead of us, and they were ready at the gate, the Reading men, blocking our passage, forcing us away. So instead we turned north, heading over the hills, hoping the scholars of Oxford would have more sense, but all folk everywhere seem to do is throw insult and rocks, thinking we're going to see them dead.

Aye, soon as folk found out where we were from, they threw us out of Oxford too, and we've already spent most of our coin. We've got a lute, a violin, a flute, a horse, and that's it. These last days we've been forced to steal food from where we could and snatch game from traps, cooking the meat on fires we've set in the wood – thank the Lord for this heat, making the tinder so dry! We slept in the open two nights back, but last night we came here, looking for some place to shelter from our fears. We're not thieves, least we weren't. We won't steal what's yours.

You see, we don't know what to do. Simon. . . Simon has gone. Some brigands must have seen our fire, or else some village folk, for we were attacked at our camp last evening, as Simon was washing the grime off in the river. We escaped by lying, pretending we were full of plague, and they backed off at that, let me tell you – no, you princcock, that was so we could escape, we are not ill, how many times! Alena went on the one horse we have left – that one you see there, by the barn – and Luis and I ran different ways, hoping to come to Simon, but in the darkness of the wood I heard him cry out, and by the time I got to the river all I found was his shirt and boots, abandoned on the ground. I called out myself, and the twigs snapped behind me, but it was only Luis, and we searched and we searched until the moon was passed half the sky, until Alena came back to us, but of Simon there was no sign.

And so we came here at dead of night, found this barn, the three of us scared and wretched, hoping we weren't followed, affrighted by what could have happened to one of our own. We hope he heard the noise of the attack and fled. We hope. . . but we did not sleep. And then your men chanced upon us, and I think you know the rest.

We're not villains. We're not sick. We're just musicians, good folk from London, hungry and hurt, our world fallen on its head.'

As Tanner progressed through his tale, the jeers of Mercia's labourers fell quieter and quieter until they were largely silent, save for the odd heckle quickly hushed. Now at its end, Mercia looked on the trio of strangers, evaluating whether the story was all truth or in part deception, and although she could tell there were details the musician was holding back, in the circumstances she thought he was allowed to be wary.

'Your tale is a sad one, Mr Tanner, and I grieve to hear it. Perhaps your companion is somewhere nearby. I will send men to search, if you can remember the place where the attack occurred.'

Clearly the chief among the labourers, Tom looked at his group and shrugged. 'I don't mind raising a party if you can spare me from my tasks, my lady.'

'Why does everyone want to call me –' She sighed. 'No matter. Thank you, Tom. Speak with Mr Tanner and choose a few men. But – do not get too close.' She held up a hand. 'I know you say you are free of plague, Mr Tanner, and though it seems you are well, you will forgive me if I insist on being careful.'

Tanner looked at her for a long while, then finally he nodded. 'I understand. We are grateful for your assistance. In truth, it is the first kind act we have encountered since leaving London, or at least. . . well. I thank you. We would like to help with the search. We are not sick, whatever you may fear.'

'Of course. Just trust to caution for a few days more.'

'A few days?' said Tom. 'How long are they to be here?'

'As long as the search takes,' said Mercia. 'We can do that for these people, at least.' She turned back to Tanner. 'I will order food and drink be brought to the barn, and blankets. You can rest here.'

'And nosegays for the men,' said Phibae. 'Rosemary and mint, to ward off any bad smells.'

'And nosegays. And then once the matter is resolved, and you are restored to better humours, there is one favour I will gladly take from you.'

‘And what is that?’ asked Tanner.

She looked at him and smiled. ‘You can play,’ she said. ‘You can bring your music to Halescott.’

IV

Nicholas stood back, as far as he could in the cramped room, grown uncomfortable from the day's heat. Taking a deep breath, he watched his sister busy herself with the pile of washed laundry that had been lying untouched since his arrival.

'Why do you want to take her at all?' she said abruptly, folding a small pair of woollen breeches. 'She's safe here. She's always been safe.'

'I'm not sure it is safe here, Eve. You must have heard things. I saw at least three houses with crosses painted on their doors just two streets back.'

'There aren't any crosses in this street, Nick. And if folk do get it, they'll be shut up.' She paused in her folding. 'Poor things.'

'That doesn't mean it won't spread. People get out. The smells get out. I just want her to be well.'

'And what will folk think when they hear Eliza's been taken away? Why haven't all the other kids been taken, that's what they'll ask. Why is Eliza so special, they'll ask. Half of them don't realise she's yours, not mine.'

'Eve, I think most everyone round here knows she's mine, whatever story we put about. And if we're honest, 'tis hard to know who's father or mother to quite a few of these kids round here.'

'You make it sound like we live in a whorehouse.'

'Well, there is that one down –'

'Don't get clever with me, Nick.' She glanced away. 'I just don't think. . . I don't think she should go to some strange big house where she won't fit in.'

‘Eve, ‘tis more than just keeping her safe, if she goes to Halescott for a few weeks she’ll have the chance to learn things. Jesus, Eve, she can learn to read. A child of mine!’

‘Aye, well.’ Eve shrugged. ‘Learn to read, eh? Lot of good that’ll do when she’s older.’

‘Don’t mock. I never thought it was worth it either, but since I’ve been with Mercia and I’ve learnt a few letters, it opens your eyes.’

Eve snorted. ‘How is the lady benefactress?’

‘Big word, Eve! You must have picked up a book yourself.’ He softened his tone. ‘No need to be bitter. Her family worked hard for what they’ve got, and her especially.’

‘I work hard, Nick, and look at what I’ve got. Six children, one of them yours – yes I know I agreed to it, and I’ve never regretted it – a husband who’s barely home and this palace.’

Nicholas surveyed the familiar room. It was small, barely space enough for the two of them and a table and chairs, let alone when the children were home instead of in the streets. A kitchen of sorts was adjacent, its one glass-paned window letting in what light the street could afford, its shelves stacked with herbs and papered blue as a remedy to ward off flies. Above, a partitioned bedroom provided sleeping space, which the residents often shared with smaller, furrer midnight intruders. Above that, on the second floor that jutted so far into the street its residents could reach through the window to touch the hands of the neighbours opposite, a barely lit garret space had been given over to another couple, a young butcher and his pregnant wife, who had moved in last year when the previous tenant had been taken much against her will to her new accommodation in Newgate.

‘Where is John?’ asked Nicholas.

‘Working in the yards, where do you think? Where he is from sunrise to sunset.’

‘Out somewhere he can catch plague, then.’

Immediately the words were spoken he regretted them. Eve seemed to pale, and her composed face crumpled under her dry blonde hair.

‘All’s well for you, Nick, isn’t it? Now you’ve got that Mercia you can come in, take Eliza, and go. We have to stay here, and John has to work, and yes he could get

plague, and then I could, and the kids could, however hard I try to keep things clean. But if he don't work, we don't get money, we don't get fed, and we die any way. There's no charity round here, and if there was, I wouldn't want it.'

'I've tried,' said Nicholas softly. 'You know I've still not been paid for those years I served on the ships, same as everyone I know, despite all my petitions. Despite Mercia asking for me.' He sighed. 'Eve, she's paid me well these past few months, better than I could have earned here, and you know it. I'm sorry I've not been around, but – that money's been of good use to you, I hope.'

'Aye, well, I won't deny that's helped. I thank her for that.'

He took a small step toward her. 'You could all come with me. She said so herself.'

'I told you. I don't want charity.'

'Not even for the kids? I could take them all with me. Take you.'

'And how's that going to go down in the country, all these ragged folk from London showing up? Besides, Robert and Jem have their own work. As for the rest of them. . . oh, Nick, maybe. I don't think even Eliza needs. . .' Her cheeks seemed to go rigid. 'Look. We can see. As it is I'm not going anywhere. I can't.' She held up the sheet she had unknowingly scrunched in her fist. 'Someone has to look after John.'

'John's big enough to look after himself. Damn it, Eve. Why are you always so stubborn?'

'I've had to be to cope with you, little brother.' Her eyes, pale brown to Nicholas's green, suddenly fixed on his. 'Everything. . . everything will be fine, won't it? There's no need to worry. . . surely?'

'I don't know, Eve. That's why I want to take her.' He frowned, noticing the uncertainty in her darting pupils. 'Is anything wrong? Is John –'

'Of course not,' she said, turning back to her laundry. 'She's yours, Nick. Do what you want, I won't stop you. Maybe you're right, maybe it is for the best.'

'What's that mean?'

'Oh, nothing.' She jerked her head towards the door. 'Now go and see Dapps and the rest of them. They'll be throwing them drunk out of the Star afore you get there.'

'They will that,' he agreed, reaching for the jacket he'd left lying on a chair. 'You're sure there's nothing amiss?'

'I'm sure. Will you be wanting supper?'

'I'll buy a pie out, don't worry about me. And I'll see what lodgings there might be for when I'm back again from Halescott. Thanks for letting me sleep down here tonight.'

'Don't worry,' she repeated under her breath. 'That's the problem. I always do.'

Eve was right: little in her crowded street seemed different from the narrow thoroughfare of aging hovels Nicholas knew of old. But when he passed through an alley and turned the corner into another, wider street, he was confronted by a scrawny teenager with a pole tucked into his belt, and opposite the boy, a succession of doors daubed with a red cross and the phrase 'Lord have mercy upon us' in variously jagged lettering.

'Hey', the lad called. 'Don't walk over that side. 'Taint safe.'

'No fear,' said Nicholas, stopping beside him. 'How long those houses been shut up?'

The boy shrugged. 'That far one, I've been watching it since I started a few days back. These two here, only yesterday.' He drew himself up. 'A right. . . pother it was when that one was shut up.'

Nicholas took in the way the boy was striving to hold himself erect, evidently keen to impress. In other circumstances the attempt would have been worthy of a jest.

'What kind of pother?' he asked instead.

The boy didn't answer, instead peering at Nicholas until –

'Are you Nick Wildmoor?'

Nicholas paused. 'Why ask?'

'You are, aren't you? Lord above!'

'Why say that, Lord above?'

'Because everyone round here knows you! God's truth!'

The admiration in the boy's eyes was as bizarre as it was unexpected. 'Erm, do they?'

'I'll say. Who else round here's been in the King's palace, or sailed to America and back? Besides, I'm Robert's mate.'

'Robert?'

'Your nephew.'

'Ah! The lad been talking, has he?'

'All the time! He's told everyone about that highborn gentry-mort you work for.' He leant in closer. 'What's it like at Whitehall?'

'Full of arsworms as you'd expect. And she's not that highborn.'

'You've spent too long away, mate! Have you seen this shithole of a street? She is compared to us.'

'Well, you're right there. Robert behaving himself?'

The boy smirked. 'Out bowsing ale, most nights, when he's not tiffing with some wench.'

'Where's he get the coin? No. Don't tell me.' He jerked his head in the direction of the boarded-up doors. 'Aren't you a bit young to be a watchman?'

'Kiss my blind-checks!' the boy retorted. 'All the crossed doors are to be watched after those orders came down last week. But the normal watch don't have enough men to do their rounds and stay on the doors too. So they need new people. In this street, that's me.' The same as before, he drew himself up. 'And I'm sixteen.'

This time Nicholas couldn't suppress a smile. 'Very well, watchman. You seem a fine one for babbling, so why don't you tell me how things stand?'

THE WATCHMAN'S TALE

'I've been here four days now, Nick. Day watch I am, six in the morning til ten at night, then night watch takes over, Gerard's his name, strange lad but honest, though I don't see how it stands I get sixteen hours and he gets eight. I'm ready for bed by ten, I tell you, but don't fear, I'm not about to fall asleep, no one leaves them houses. Your

family's safe. It's devil hot, mind, when the sun's right over. Morning's good – shade from that side; evening's good – shade from behind, but at noon, God's wounds, it's hot! Never known a summer like it.

A month or so back, we started hearing word from St Giles way that folk were taking ill, though we thought nothing of it til some old 'uns started getting sick here. You know what it's like, aside from them who's got to, most stay right near where they are. I mean everything's here, isn't it, and if we did need anything from down St Giles, we'd just fetch it from somewhere else.

But now it's here, don't know how, but it's here. I've heard tell 'tis bad smells cause it, so my ma's made this posy for me to keep beneath my shirt. Some of the lads banter me for that but I say fuck them, they won't laugh when they're shut up and I'm not.

A week back, the alderman gave word he needed men to watch the houses, same as women to search the bodies to be sure it were plague that took them and not something else. Why that has to be women I don't know, but that's the way of it. 'Tis not a task I'd want, but I reckon they get something from it, from the pockets and the fingers of the dead, if you know what I mean. Still, what else is going to draw them to such godless work?

So I said I'd help with the watching, 'cos I reckon them who can help should, and my dad says we've got to look after our own. Folk've been cleaning the roads, not waiting for them to get done, and I tell you, shovelling shit's not pleasant, whether it's from a man's arse or a horse. In truth 'tis a worry, we try to stop up the smells by wearing cloth round our face, but the smell still gets through, and no one knows if covering our noses helps any way. And 'tis funny, before we all used to walk at the edges of the street so as not to walk in the muck, but now we walk right in the middle of the road to be away from the houses, to guard some little distance from the sick. Odd how life changes like that.

But – 'tis hard, Nick, I don't mind saying so. I look at that ken where I'm supposed to keep them in, yes that house there, but I see the hands pressed on the window, and. . . I don't know. Down near the market, the night watchman got in trouble for letting this mort out to get food for her young 'uns, and I heard tell of another lad who got beaten half to death by some cull who wouldn't listen that he had

to stay home. Smashing him like the devil, they say this cove was, but you won't catch no one culp'ing me. Aye, that's why I've got my own stick at my side, I'll give anyone what he deserves, you know what it's like, and we don't want plague on the streets.

Here's another thing queer. A girl came by before, a wench like, and when she went past another stopped in front of me, saying I had rum ogles and would I like to take her out? Well, I do have good eyes, but not like she meant, for I could see that as she was talking the other lass was trying the door of the middle house yonder. So I had to go over to make her stop, and it got hot then, with the two of them in a fury, but I sent them on their way. Though. . . the girl at the door had been holding a basket of bread, and in the house, the old woman was looking out, and she started to cry. I. . . don't know what's best, Nick. I don't want folk to suffer, but. . . there's many more would if this gets out. That's right, Nick? That's right?

When I started this seemed like a rum bit of sport, but I'm starting to get. . . no, not afeared! Uncertain, perhaps. Two days back, the searchers came as I was finishing my time, into the house at the very bottom of the row, do you see, down there, and then a half hour later a cart came past, the driver ringing his death-bell, and they took a body out and drove it away. Then they shut up the house again, so there must still be folk inside – do you see that lad down there? He's the watchman for that corner. Those girls would have wheedled him.

And that pother I was talking of, in that house right here. I was on watch, as usual, when a doctor came round, two men with him, and they went in. Then there was a scream, and I looked up, and a woman ran out with a baby, begging for mercy for her child, and one of the men came after, and then her husband, with some sort of black boil on his face, cursing and shouting, but the man who'd come with the doctor just took hold of the woman, harsh like, it must have hurt, and he started to drag her back, while her husband, he couldn't stop him, he didn't have the strength, though he looked like he should have, and then the doctor and the other were by him, not too close like they didn't want to touch him, and you should have seen the street then, suddenly everyone's running, there's this hawker drops his knives, this milkmaid splashing all over, and the man, the husband I mean, he collapses, like that, and the doctor he don't know what to do, but the husband, I don't know how, he just stands up again, like he's found his strength, and he walks towards his house, calls his wife to

come back, and she starts to cry, shaking the man holding her off, but the husband says they have to think of folk, and she says what about the baby, and then a woman comes up, a friend from down the way, it seems, and she lets out a great sob, I'll never forget it, and she gives this woman the baby, and as quick as that like she's scared she'll change her mind she follows her husband in, and they shut the door, themselves, and the doctor turns to the woman who took the baby, but she's gone, who knows where, and out comes the paint, the red cross and the Lord have mercy, and the house is locked.

I keep thinking about that woman, and her baby. About how she got the child out, while they chose to lock themselves in, knowing they'll both be dead by next week. She could have run, that woman, in the hubbub. And I think, Mark – that's me, Mark – sometimes God is hard, sometimes people are, but in the midst of it there's folk prepared to do what's right. Good folk, putting themselves in harm's way to save their child, to save the rest of us.

Good folk like me? No, Nick, I'm no saint. I just watch. I don't know as I'd have the courage to shut myself up like those two did, or to go inside those houses like that doctor does. I think. . . I think I would, but knowing I'd face death so close, so soon. . . I can't be sure.

Can you?'

'I don't know, lad,' said Nicholas. 'I think I'd do what was best.' He clapped the boy on the back. 'What are you supposed to do if people try to get out?'

'Bring them back any way I can. Call the hue and cry if I have to.'

'Well, then. That would put you in harm's way, for certain.' He smiled. 'You're doing a good job, I'd say, better than some would.'

The boy shrugged, looking embarrassed. 'It's the doctors who have it worse. The ones that haven't run away, that is.' He looked up. 'I'd love to do what you did, once this is all over. Leave this shithole and sail to America. I think I'd stay there if I could.' He leant in. 'Got anything you can tell me about your gentry mort friend? Robert says she's got right nice –'

Nicholas snorted. 'You keep those rum ogles on the girls round here. And tell Robert to stop prattling. He's never seen her.'

'Aww!'

'Goodbye, watchman. You take care.'

'Bye, Nick. You take care too.'

Nicholas walked off, taking the young watchman's advice and sticking to the middle of the road. As he made his way to the inn where he was meeting his friends, the teenager's last words brought Mercia to his mind, and as he walked, avoiding the carts and the crowds, he wondered how she was faring in the country, and what she would think when he told her what he had decided he must do.

V

In a candlelit room at Halescott, Mercia sat back, letting her arms drop to her sides. She took a long breath, then turned to face her audience.

‘I told you I could not play,’ she said, raising her voice. ‘I am surprised I remembered even that old tune.’

‘Nonsense. You were marvellous,’ Tanner shouted back, illuminated by torchlight as Luis and Alena applauded politely alongside. ‘It is good to hear music in times like these.’

‘If only the music were better performed.’ She rose from the instrument, a polished virginals she had practiced on since she was a girl. ‘Luis, will you not change your mind and play? I have not heard a violin for a long while.’

‘I cannot while Simon is missing.’ Luis turned from the window the three were standing outside, looking in at Mercia from a cautious distance. ‘We should have stayed searching longer.’

Alena touched his shoulder. ‘You and Joshua were out all day, Luis, today and yesterday. There was little else you could do.’

‘No?’ he said, barely audible in his soft Spanish accent. ‘We may have had good fortune to find this sanctuary, you two and I, but he is still out there. Where is he?’

‘You are sure you saw nothing else?’ said Mercia as she approached, her shadow looming across the wainscot as she held her nosegay towards her face. In reality two days had passed since the musicians’ arrival, nearly a fortnight since they had left London, but she had promised Bethany she would use the sweet-smelling bunch.

‘No more than –’ began Joshua in reply, but Alena lightly shook her head. Joshua paused, trying to hide the interruption in a cough, but Mercia had noticed.

‘No more than what?’

‘Oh. Nothing.’

She looked between the three players. ‘I have learnt that any detail is important.’

Luis looked out into a darkness he could not have seen through. Joshua sucked in his lips.

‘There were some footprints in the mud where Simon was washing by the river,’ he said. ‘It does not do to dwell upon it.’

‘What footprints?’ said Mercia. ‘My man, Tom, did not mention any in his report.’

‘We. . . do not much get on with your man, truth be told. And we did not wish to trouble you with tales of false hope.’ Under her curious gaze, he flicked a seemingly carefree hand. ‘The footprints led off briefly but quickly disappeared. The ground is bone dry when you move from the river. We found them yesterday when we looked, and made a wider search of the area today. There was nothing.’

‘Indeed?’ Mercia frowned. ‘How many footprints? Were they of just one man?’

‘Yes,’ said Alena. ‘One man, Joshua, that’s what you said?’

He glanced at her. ‘One man, a few prints, nothing more.’ His mouth opened wide, finishing in an exaggerated yawn. ‘Mrs Blakewood, thank you for your music and for letting us near the house. But I fear we are tired, and should sleep. We hope to ride to some of the nearby villages tomorrow, if they do not turn us away.’

‘You are sure you are comfortable in the barn? I would have you in the house, but. . .?’

‘Quite comfortable.’ He doffed his close-fitting hat. ‘Well, ‘tis a fair walk, so I think we best start.’

He picked up the torch he had rested in one of the sconces set into the back of the house. As they wandered across the lawn, Mercia watched the flickering light fade into the dark as her suspicions flickered bright within her mind.

At very first light she got up, washed quickly in the rosewater Phibae had left in a jug in her bedroom, and dressed herself in a practical outfit that required little attention: a pair of men's breeches and a plain shirt, suitable attire for what she had planned. Taking what remained of yesterday's bread, she looked in on Daniel before leaving the house without a word to anyone, feeling alert in the sharp morning air as she walked out of the gates and towards the adjoining village. Once there, she climbed the path of a small cottage whose occupant would doubtless be preparing himself for his day's work. But when she knocked and heard footsteps approach, the door swung open to reveal he was not so ready as she had presumed.

'Tis barely past dawn!' he began. 'What do you mean by – ?'

Recognising his visitor, he cut himself off. With nowhere to hide, he folded his arms across his naked chest. 'I'm sorry, my lady. I didn't. . .' He looked her up and down. 'Why are you dressed as a man?'

'Forgive me, Tom,' she said, ignoring his tone of disapproval. 'I will wait until you are dressed.'

Stepping outside, she waited on the short path, looking down the dusty street. The sun's rays were yet to fall on the orange stone from which most of the houses were built, or the golden thatch of their rooves, but the scene was pleasing all the same. Just out of sight was the cottage she owned herself, the largest in the village where she had lived with her husband before the death of her father and her elevation to the manor house. What places she had seen since she had last left that cottage, she marvelled, where she and her friend Nathan had uncovered the hidden clue that had set them on her strange adventures in the first place! Indeed, she had been wearing similarly odd clothes that night, and maybe, she thought wryly, she had done better to stop then, to accept her fate and to remain in that cottage, than to become the peculiar creature she was sure she was now considered to be, rightfully restored to the manor house or no.

She laughed at the absurdity of the notion. And then her laughter ceased, and she found herself thinking of Nathan, how she had left him behind in America, and for the first time since returning home a dull melancholy took her, a sense that the village was somehow emptier now, without Nathan, without her husband Will who

was dead too soon, without herself in that old cottage. But then the door pulled open behind her and her reflections vanished.

'I'd never thought to see you here, my lady,' said Tom, now fully dressed. Behind him, his wife and children stood at the back of the one dark room, peering out despite the early hour. Swiftly, he pulled the door shut. 'How may I help?'

'I am sorry to disturb you,' she said. 'But I have need of a guide.'

'How so, my lady?'

'Tom. Can you not call me that? Mrs Blakewood will do. Now. I want you to take me to where our musician friends were attacked. I want to see for myself.'

Tom frowned. 'In truth? 'Tis not fitting, surely?'

'Come, Tom, I have done and seen too much to be bothered by such niceties. Perhaps you can tell from the attire I have chosen to wear.' She raised an eyebrow, trying to draw him into the conspiracy but merely succeeding in making him stare. She cleared her throat. 'I would be most grateful for your help.'

'I searched that area myself, Mrs Blakewood. That man they claim they've lost was nowhere to be found.'

'Claim?'

He scoffed. 'Them three aren't telling us the whole truth, by no means. Maybe they don't have the plague, I'll grant, but I wouldn't be surprised if there were no other man, or they've done for him themselves.'

'Indeed, Tom, but then why would they have told us about him at all?'

'I don't know. But I don't trust them, all the same.'

'Certainly they are not telling us the whole tale. They mentioned they had found footprints, but it seems they said nothing to you.'

'About footprints?' He cocked his head, at last taking an interest. 'No, Mrs Blakewood.'

'Well, then. Who knows what else may have been withheld, or overlooked?' She gave him a smile she knew full well would disconcert him. 'Come then, Tom. I am eager to start. Let us gather what provisions we need and be on our way.'

They rode quickly, their horses swift on the track that served as the first part of their journey, but as the road became rougher while winding through a wood, Tom signalled

they should leave it to pass among the trees. Immediately the going slowed as the horses picked their way through ferns and roots, and in the mounting heat, Mercia was soon glad of the weak ale they had brought to quench their thirst. Maggie, her faithful steed, was just grateful to reach the river where she could sate her own.

‘Not far now, Mrs Blakewood,’ said Tom at the water’s edge. ‘We should leave the horses here and finish on foot if you’re able.’ He looked at her. ‘You’re sure you want to carry on?’

She leapt from the horse, barely remarking the twinge in her side.

‘Of course. Would you like something to eat before we walk?’

She offered him a chunk of bread which he gladly took. Then she laughed.

‘What is it?’ he said, biting into the small loaf.

‘I took that from the pantry while no one was there. I am imagining the look on Bethany’s face when she reads the note I left. Hopefully Phibae will calm her down.’

Tom merely grunted. ‘Tis good bread still. Now, we go this way.’

Tying up the horses, he led her along the riverbank for several minutes. The wood was calm, no breeze today to ease the closeness. She looked at Tom’s back as they went, and thought how strange he must think it for the two of them to be out here together deep in the wood, and she found she was missing Nicholas in his place. But then Tom stopped.

‘This is where they say that Simon was washing.’ He gestured to his right. ‘And a little through there is a sort of clearing where they say they were attacked.’

‘*Where they say,*’ she repeated. ‘You are very mistrustful, Tom.’

‘I don’t see reason to trust folk who turn up uninvited in your barn, is all.’

‘No.’ She looked around. ‘Tom, what do you think of the plague?’

‘I think I don’t want to get it.’

‘What do you feel about it, then? When I was in London last month, I could tell people were becoming scared.’

‘It is something to be scared of, Mrs Blakewood. That’s why we don’t want folk from London stopping here.’

A niggling doubt entered her mind about the ease of Nicholas’s return; although he was hoping to stay elsewhere for some days first, if people everywhere felt

like Tom, he would not receive a warm welcome on the way. And would the Halescott villagers be happy to learn she was taking in his daughter here?

‘What would you have done to the musicians had I not arrived?’ she asked. ‘You were menacing them with a rake.’

‘I just mean to protect you, Mrs Blakewood. As I protected your father before you. As I mean to protect my own family. I would have sent them on their way.’

‘You imply I fail to protect my own son.’

The strong man swallowed. ‘I didn’t mean. . . I’m sorry. My wife’s always saying I don’t think before I speak.’

‘Don’t be sorry. I prefer to hear opinions firmly expressed. As for Daniel, you can be sure I would always hope to shield him from harm. Now.’ She turned her attention to the riverbank, looking up and down the meandering watercourse. ‘Does this not strike you as curious? Mr Tanner said there were footprints here, but I see nothing. Yet there has been no rain to wash them away, and if the mud had dried, it would have preserved the prints with it. But – ah, look here! This mud has been flattened, as though someone were deliberately erasing what was there.’

Tom came across. ‘It could have been an animal. A deer perhaps, rummaging near the river.’

‘I doubt it. And look there.’ She pointed up the far bank. ‘Another patch of mud, flattened the same. And another just past it, before the ground turns hard away from the running water.’ She looked at him. ‘You say you examined this place yourself?’

‘Yes. But we were searching for a man, nothing else. A body we thought most like.’

‘Did you look in the direction these flattened patches lead?’

‘I didn’t notice them.’

‘Wait here a moment.’

She walked a short distance in the direction the tracks had started, but there was not enough of a trail to be sure which way she should go. She turned this way and that, walking back and forth while peering at the ground, but the dense undergrowth revealed nothing. Then returning towards the riverbank, she raised her eyes and –

‘Tom!’ she exclaimed. ‘Look at this!’

Into the mutilated bark of an old chestnut tree were etched five words, carved in small, ragged letters, some barely discernible, but the message they delivered was stark. Five pleading words beneath a gouged-out cross, words that spurred a shiver through her heart:

†
Lord
Have
Mercy
Upon
Us

Next instalment coming soon

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