

SURVIVAL

Or,

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

A Mercia Blakewood Special

DAVID HINGLEY

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INSTALMENT FIVE

PART TWO

VIII

Six weeks later. Six hot, uncomfortable weeks with little rain and less progress.

The earlier summer heat had only worsened. More and more often did Tom's workmen take their shirts off their backs, leading to more and more blistering sunburn; more and more did Mercia stay indoors, or else linger in the shade of her beloved trees, shunning the fierce afternoon sun.

Her investigations had come to naught: she had found no trace of the musicians, who seemed to have vanished as swiftly as they had arrived. All that remained of their presence was the mourning ring, which she kept locked in a secure box in case the trio should return. A second visit to the clearing in an evening of boredom had likewise accomplished nothing, save she had left a note in the gash in the fallen tree, in case the musicians returned there to seek the abandoned ring, although she had been careful not to identify herself by name lest more dubious searchers find it:

Return to the place you found sanctuary to retrieve what I found here

But she had placed that message five weeks ago, and nobody had come. Unable to let matters lie, she had returned to the clearing for a third time the week before, solely to check on the note, but the fragment was still in the tree, although covered in the slime of grubs. She had replaced it with a fresh one, written before she had set out in the expectation that the first paper would have turned as rotten as the hole in which it lay.

Nicholas too had long since been and gone, leaving his daughter in the safety of the countryside, an evacuee from the perils of London. It had been awkward at first, especially when he had confessed he hoped to head home as soon as Eliza was settled, uneasy to rest safe at Halescott while his family and friends took their chances. Nonetheless, he had promised to remain at Halescott if Mercia wished it, unwilling to presume Eliza could stay in her care without him, but she had dismissed the notion without hesitation, happy to do this favour for a man who had risked his life more than once in her service. It made her proud, in all truth, to think of Nicholas as he was now, Nicholas after the adventures they had shared, different to the man she had first met in that rough London tavern, different to the man who had needed to fight hard to regain her trust. He had said he was now in her debt forever more; she knew he had already paid that debt in advance.

Daniel had taken to Eliza straight away, excited to gain a sibling he had never before had, and as Nicholas had hoped, was already well on the way to teaching the young girl some letters. In time she barely seemed to miss her family, save for a few upset hours when she pined for home, but whenever Phibae appeared this seemed to calm her, and so the energetic maid's duties soon grew to include care of the child, at Phibae's own request. Mercia's heart soared to see the girl running free on the Halescott estate, away from the sorrows of London, and she could not help but picture herself as an infant, terrorising the grounds in much worse ways than Eliza was doing today.

Before Nicholas left, on a mangy horse bought cheaply in Oxford that would take him all the way now the coaches had stopped, she had told him the story of the mysterious musicians; he had been as intrigued as she was, and had promised to find out more back in London if he could. But for all that was a welcome possibility in her desire to get to the truth, the memory of Nicholas riding down the driveway in an early morning haze was engraved in her mind, for the fear she had felt for him on the sad morning of his departure had never gone away. Every evening she included him in her prayers, beseeching that he would be spared the plague's grasping claws.

And so the weeks had gone by, and Eliza's reading had improved, and the land had grown yet more scorched, until something happened that Mercia did not expect.

Now fully recovered from her wounds, Mercia had begun to turn her attention to the managing of the Halescott estate, which according to the terms drawn up when the manor was restored to her keeping, she was to run in trust for Daniel until the young boy came of age. She had once again summoned James Calthorpe, her adept land manager who had worked for her father before her, and who had stayed with the estate in the interregnum when her uncle had seized the land. Or rather, this time it was Calthorpe who had requested a meeting, and she had asked him to come to the house.

‘You seem cheerful, mistress,’ said Phibae, as Mercia was sat at her desk waiting for Calthorpe to arrive.

‘I do not know why, but I enjoy this,’ she said, tapping at a piece of paper full of neatly compiled figures in tables. ‘Reviewing the success or otherwise of the estate is an involving task. I like it.’

‘And Mr Calthorpe?’

‘What of him?’

‘You enjoy his company, I think.’

Mercia fixed her with a look. ‘He is a good manager.’

‘Of about your years.’

‘Yes.’

‘Handsome.’

‘Yes.’

‘Well, then.’

‘Phibae, he has a wife. And I am his. . .’ She widened her eyes. ‘. . . overlord.’

Phibae laughed. ‘Forgive me, mistress, I speak out of place.’

‘If I wanted maids who only spoke *in* place I should not have employed you, Phibae.’ Elbow on the desk, she played with a ringlet of hair that had come loose from the silver wire that was holding her style in place. ‘Besides, you are right. The man is able to hold a conversation and he is scarcely ill favoured in appearance.’

‘Indeed.’

‘Indeed? Now that is all you say?’

‘How long has he served here, then?’

Mercia chuckled. ‘James? He started his present duties three years ago, working for my father at the time. His own father managed Halescott even in my grandfather’s

time, staying with us until well into his sixties. John was one of those men for whom work and duty were his life.'

'And his son?'

'His son is no less assiduous, as you see from the detail on these papers he has drafted. He can be contrary, in truth, and his opinions are very – set, shall we say? But he is an excellent manager, and he has the trust of the men, so I am glad to have him.' She glanced towards the door at the sound of heavy footsteps in the corridor outside. 'And I think he is here. The way his heels strike the ground as he walks is most distinctive.'

'Indeed so, mistress. With your permission, I will get back to Eliza.'

'Certainly. Thank you, Phibae, for taking her under your care. I appreciate it greatly, as I know Nicholas does.'

'I do it gladly, mistress. Ever since Ayo and I . . . lost our own child. . .' She smiled sadly in remembrance. 'Eliza is a blessing to us all.'

With a light bow, Phibae opened the door and passed into the corridor. Almost immediately, a tall, long-faced man wearing a doublet as impeccable as it was dour entered in her place, closing the door behind him. He threw the wide-brimmed hat he was gripping between callused fingers onto the bar of a nearby high chair and bowed, just a little, in his turn.

'Mrs Blakewood,' he said, the pitch of his voice among the deepest she had ever known. 'I trust you are well?'

'Completely recovered now, James, thank you.' She indicated a vacant chair on the other side of her desk, upholstered with fine leather. 'Will you sit?'

Calthorpe nodded and took the offered seat, eyes sweeping across the papers she had laid out.

'You are satisfied with the accounts, I hope?'

'I am, although I have a few ideas about the estate I would like to discuss. Is it about the accounts you asked to see me?'

Left eye twitching at the mention of ideas, Calthorpe quickly cleared his throat and inched closer to the desk.

'In truth no, Mrs Blakewood. It is about those musicians you were so – intrigued by.'

The unexpected reply made her sit up straight. 'You have heard news?'

'More. . . a rumour. But you asked to be informed of anything new.'

The unnecessary pause as he pulled a thread from the braid of his doublet was maddening.

'Well?' she said.

He looked up. "'Tis one of the women who live just beyond the edge of the estate, Warwick way, in one of those three cottages in the middle of nowhere.'

'Ah yes. I know where you mean.'

'The young couple in the middle cottage – I employ the husband from time to time for farming work on the estate, and the wife does, I don't know, something with her wheel.'

'Something?'

'Makes clothes and the like, sells them at market to make more coin for the pair of them.'

'An industrious woman, then.'

'As you say. Her name is Mary Stevens. She claims to have heard something about the players at the market. I'm not sure how much credence to pay her, and so I was hesitant to bother you, but. . . she was insistent she would speak only with you.'

'Only me? Why?'

He shrugged. 'She's probably after some reward and thinks you'll give it her.' Again, he cleared his throat. 'But I have made her come here, which she was pleased to do. Wanted to get close to the house, no doubt, pry around where her husband gets his wage. I left her waiting at the other end of the garden. Away from the house.'

'Thank you, James,' smiled Mercia as she got to her feet, all thoughts of the accounts forgotten. 'Shall we go and find her?'

Mary was sitting in the shade of a mulberry tree, cooling herself with a colourful paper fan that served to dissuade a pair of inquisitive wasps as much as to provide a current of air. At Mercia's approach she quickly stood, her eyes seeming to stare straight past. She was wearing a simple woollen dress, and her boots were scuffed, although the ribbons in her grey hat complimented her fan in bringing cheer to the practical outfit.

'Is that Mr Calthorpe?' she asked.

The manager assented with a curt grunt. 'I have brought Mrs Blakewood, as you asked.'

'Ah, thank you,' said the woman, turning her gaze towards Mercia. 'Please forgive me if I do not look at you directly, Mrs Blakewood, but I cannot see more than the faintest of shapes.'

'Mary is blind,' explained Calthorpe.

'Not blind, precisely,' said Mary, 'but much lacking in sight. Thank you for meeting me, my lady.'

'If you will permit me?' said James.

'Of course,' said Mercia. 'But come back later, if you would, to discuss my thoughts on the estate.'

Assenting with a brisk nod, James walked off. Mercia turned back to Mary.

'There is a bench just there which I have always found most comfortable. Shall we sit and talk?'

'Thank you,' said Mary, following as Mercia walked slowly to the bench, where both women sat, guarding a decorous distance between them. Left alone with the lady of the manor, Mary sat stiffly with bowed head, pulling with her right hand at the fingers of her left.

'Now,' said Mercia, keen to find a way to put her at ease. 'Mr Calthorpe suggested you make clothes to sell at market. Why don't you start by telling me a little about that?'

THE SEAMSTRESS' TALE

'Mr Calthorpe told you I sew for extra coin? My husband works our small bit of land, but most months 'tis not enough, so he's pleased to be hired to work on your fields, tilling, reaping and the like. Still, sometimes we struggle, as all folk do, and he's glad to let me help. There's many a man wouldn't let his wife go to market to sell her work,

but he knows what starving's like from when he were a child, and besides, he's a kind soul, that one. Has to be, to put up with my temper, so he says, but I think he's only teasing.

It was my grandmother taught me how to sew. You may not be able to see much, she said, but you can feel your way round a wheel and thread right enough. And she was right, for I always sell what I make, little doublets for children, scarves for ladies – maybe you'd like one? – or gloves, though I don't think we need those this summer. I do darning for the men too, when they need it, which is often, as you can guess. You should see the state of some of their shirts, they sometimes come to me more hole than cloth.

I come from up near Daventry, though I married a man from round here, and so I know most of them who sell at Daventry market, and it's there I still like to go, even though it sometimes feels far, and if it rains hard on the way, half the time I turn right round. But when it's dry, like now, I'm glad to get out the house, although Robert, my husband, he rides with me when he can, or makes sure someone else does, just in case. And they look out for me, up at Daventry, if some thief tries to steal my wares, the men make sure he ends up in the stocks sooner than steal from a blind woman again.

Though as I said, I don't like to call myself blind. My father raised us after my mamma died bringing my youngest brother into the world, and with two young boys about I had to help keep house, so not seeing didn't come into it. He married again a while later, and my stepmother didn't care for us kids in truth, but my grandmother was an angel, and I grew to learn when to speak back, and when to mind my place, at least I hope. After we wed, Robert did try to stop me going to market, out of worry, but I want to, simple as that, and I'm sure you can understand why. I can tell when to move out the way, and I've got a cane to help when 'tis needed, and the kindness of strangers too if ever I need that.

Now, you'll be wanting to know what I've heard of these players. It were a woman buying from my stall who mentioned them, in more than passing, and I remembered what my Robert had said, that some strange folk from London had been staying in your land and then just up'ed and gone. There was talk of them having plague, he'd heard, but he didn't pay it much mind himself, though not all of the lads

who work with him agreed, if you want to hear the truth. Some of them were mighty afeared, for all they were strong men, and it were only Mr Calthorpe and that Tom fellow that got them out of their grumbling.

Me, I think it were right to help them out, not that 'tis aught of my business, and I hope you don't mind me speaking so plain. I won't say I'm surprised, mind, that folk were feared. I've heard talk of plague, how it takes a strong man, a strong woman, and lays them low so quick there's no time to think of saving them. Makes them into like beasts, they say, or as men bowsy on too much ale, unable to move, let alone speak. And the pain, they say, the fever, 'tis like the Devil himself has entered in, supping on all that is holy. And those awful swellings, all over, turning the skin black as darkest leather, the very picture of it makes you sick. An awful way to die, terrible. 'Tis to be hoped those swellings go by the time the sick come to Heaven, God have mercy on their souls.

In Daventry market too we had our scare, when a packet arrived from a London merchant, a pile of cloth that was damp and which stank and you should have heard the panic, folk running, folk screaming, and you can be sure how that was terrifying for me. The Lord preserve us, Mrs Blakewood, they say all over the land, people are being turned away, dying on the roads, while in London God has abandoned the town and they're rotting in the streets. I don't know how much is true, I only go by what I hear, but some of it must be right, and you can scarcely blame folk for their worry.

But that's by the by. Soon as I heard this woman at market talk of some queer musicians, I asked her to tell me what she'd heard, and it were this. Now afore I go on, Mrs Blakewood, I was wanting to know if you might see your way to – not give me charity, mind, I don't need that – but asking whether anyone in the manor might want aught? You'll wear much finer things than I can make, but you'll have maids and the like. If you could but ask, that would be a kindness. Oh thank you for that, Mrs Blakewood. Thank you.

So this woman, Lou her name is, from a village up near Rugby way, well, when I asked her, she told me these musicians had gone further north, all the way to Leicester she reckoned, where they spread word they came from Oxford and began to amuse with their playing. But then it came out they were from London, and even though

much time had now passed, some of the townsfolk still took scared of the plague, and seeing their untidy clothing, torn here and there from weeks on the road, their fright grew past reason, and the angry among them – you know the kind I’m sure– got the constable to declare them for vagrants, on point of them having barely no coin, and you know what that means. The men, the pair of them, were stripped to the waist, held fast in the pillory and flogged, and the woman – well, I’ll come to that, but let’s say for now that she wasn’t harmed. After they were whipped, they were thrown out the south gate and ordered to go back to London, and by all accounts that’s what one of them did, for the next time they were seen, near Rugby, the one fellow, the foreigner, he wasn’t with them. But there was a reason the other two stayed behind, and this Lou, she’s seen that for herself.

I know what you’ll say, why should I believe her, when folk make up tales all the time? And ‘tis true I don’t know her, but I’m sure she weren’t lying, for she came to my stall to find them something particular, something I always have because it’s quick to make, and she described them like Robert had done.

And so I’ll come to it now, the thing you’ll most want to know, that the woman – pretty name, Alena, that’s right – what she needed particular, it was a small tunic, a very small tunic, because – aye! – just last week, in the midst of her troubles. . . just last week, she gave birth to a little boy!

‘What?’ interrupted Mercia, leaping to her feet. ‘But she was only here a few weeks ago. I admit, I never spoke with her up close, but surely I would have noticed. . . I mean to say, she wore loose garments, but I thought that was for the heat. And even so.’

‘We’ve all known women who worked hard to hide a child,’ said Mary. ‘Apparently this baby came early. But it survived.’

‘A baby,’ wondered Mercia, pacing up and down. ‘God’s truth. I did not expect this.’

Next instalment coming soon

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