

SURVIVAL

Or,

Tales Of Hope And Villainy From A Time Of Plague

A Mercia Blakewood Special

DAVID HINGLEY

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SURVIVAL

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INSTALMENT SIX

IX

London, August 1665. Each week the Bills of Mortality came in; each week the numbers of dead kept rising. A month before, when Nicholas had left for Halescott with Eliza, hundreds had died that same week. Just yesterday, a slumped friend had told him of the latest Bill. Now the toll was in the thousands, five, six thousand a week and getting worse.

‘Will it ever stop?’ said Eve, who made Nicholas call by each time he heard the latest. ‘I’d be scared to go out the house if I didn’t have to. I know life wasn’t perfect, God’s truth, but at least it was life, however poor. I can’t keep mourning friends, Nicholas. Whole families buried in dead of night, no one allowed to go and say goodbye.’ Expressionless, she looked at her brother. ‘You should have stayed in the countryside.’

‘You know I couldn’t, not when there’s you and John and all the rest here.’ Stood in the doorway he glanced down, a numbed sadness lowering his eyes. ‘That young lad round the corner I got used to speaking with, the watchman. . . you know they buried him last week, in some common grave?’

Eve closed her eyes. ‘Another mother grieving her son, if she’s not dead already herself. Another marriage that’ll never happen, children that won’t ever be born.’

‘It will pass, Eve.’

‘And how many of us will see it?’

‘Most folk will. Keep thinking about that.’

‘I don’t care about most folk, I care about my children.’ She sighed, throwing down the cloth she was holding. ‘I don’t mean that. Of course I care. I’m just tired, Nick. Tired of fetching whatever next door wants, tired of John moaning, tired of

hearing them upstairs arguing, tired. . . just tired. And in this heat too.’ Unconsciously, she shuffled the yellowing sprigs of herbs she had laid about the table. ‘Everything stinks.’

‘At least we are still here. You know the boy I came down with – Kwadwo? He tells me things are rough down where he is. And if it gets into the safehouse. . .’

‘Safehouse?’

‘The place where they hide the runaway servants.’

‘Oh, you did tell me. I can’t remember anything at the moment.’

‘Not that I know where it is exactly, I’m not meant to. Mercia hid there, apparently, when she went on the run from the Tower. But point is, if the plague gets in there, that’s a certain death trap.’

‘We’re all living in a death trap, Nicholas. It’s called London.’ She sighed. ‘Why’ve you got to go out and look for those musicians now? That Mercia wouldn’t want you risking yourself on the streets.’

‘I know but. . . I’ll be careful.’ He shrugged. ‘London’s always a place of death.’

‘It’s one big plague-infested shithouse. What’s the use of them setting up plague houses outside the city when it’s just as bad all over? To hide sick folk away to make things look better than they are, that’s why. Thank God Eliza is away from all this.’ Finally, she allowed herself a faint smile. ‘You’re not a bad father, Nick, when all’s said. Taking her away from here.’

‘Could be better. Reckon I’ll spend more time with her when this is done.’

‘Let’s hope you get that time. I’m worried about that new room of yours.’

‘Yes,’ indulged Nicholas. ‘I know.’

He left not long after, heading back into the eerily quiet streets of London, with barely a wanderer about. Since his return from Halescott, he had managed to rent a small place not far from Eve’s, where he enjoyed a whole room to himself with a door that just about closed, if he pushed it hard enough, and a disconcerting view onto the narrow alley behind. Indeed the edge of the room jutted right over the alley, and in the corner furthest from the door, he could dangle the tip of his foot out into the space beneath, although some feral crow would likely try to snatch it away. But it was the only room he could find at short notice – the only room where the previous occupant

hadn't died of plague, or so the lackadaisical woman who owned it had claimed. Once the plague was over, he would find a more suitable abode, so he hoped, something that needed work that he could rent cheaply in exchange for carrying out the renovations himself.

But his ramshackle room wasn't his present destination. Based on what Mercia had told him about the musicians' life in London, over the last couple of weeks he had asked around and managed to track down both the house where Alena's mother lived – where some of the musicians had stayed before leaving the city – as well as where Simon, the vanished flautist, had sent his wife to live with her sister. It was even possible, thought Nicholas, that Simon could be safe there right now, returned from his harrowing journey weeks ago, and so it was there he decided to try first. Visiting the plague-ridden district of St Giles, the first epicentre of the outbreak where the musicians had all had their own homes, was out of the question: nobody dared venture there now, save the bravest and the criminal.

After a brisk walk made brisker by the absence of traffic, Nicholas stood in front of a bakers at the far end of Thames Street, near to the river as the name implied. Simon's sister-in-law's home occupied the middle storey; the bakery below it was shut, and evidently had been for some time. But the building appeared reasonably maintained, if unwashed, and the entrance was thankfully free of a red cross or any other warning against the plague.

Passing beside the bakery, Nicholas climbed a set of narrow steps to reach a tiny landing where the staircase turned back on itself, the door he was seeking almost hidden in darkness. Although the street had been quiet, a little river noise had found its way across, the shouts of watermen or murmurings from those people who had ventured out, eyeing each other up with nervous looks. But here in the stairway all was silent, that oppressive kind of silence that can almost be heard, and Nicholas was taken with an uneasy feeling, as though it were an effort to remain in the oppressive stillness rather than return to the open street.

Well I'm here now, he thought, and lightly knocked on the door.

No answer.

He knocked again, a little firmer.

Still no reply.

Again.

'Who is it?' hissed a woman's voice, close behind the door.

'Good morrow. I'm looking for Simon,' he tried.

'I've already told you, I don't have it. I don't know where he is.'

'Sorry, I reckon you must. . . I've never been here before.'

A slight pause. 'Aren't you with them?'

'Who's *them*? No, I'm here on my own.'

'I don't believe you.'

'Look, I don't know who you've got me confused with but I'll go as soon as we've talked. We can do it through the door if you want, but it'd be better face to face.'

He waited, hoping the reassuring tone he'd attempted had been enough to put the woman at ease. Still, it was a few seconds before the bolt on the other side screeched across and the door opened just a crack, revealing a querying eye.

'Who are you then?' asked the woman.

'I'm a friend of. . . a friend of a friend. I'm looking for news of a musician named Simon and I heard this is where his sister lives. Have you seen him of late?'

'Why?'

'Tis just a question.'

A light appeared through the crack, illuminating the eye as it looked him up and down. 'Simon's my husband. But he left here weeks ago, after the plague got bad.'

'He still not back to London, then?'

The eye narrowed. 'Why should I say if he was?'

'I only want to know if he's safe. Last I heard, he was with a group of musicians. That right?'

'Musicians.' She scoffed. 'He spends more time with them than he does with me. That's what he said he was doing, yes. He also said it'd be safe for me here, away from St Giles. Shows how much he knows.' She opened the door a tiny bit further.

'Go on, then. Who's sent you? Lion?'

'Lion? What kind of a – no, like I said, I've come for a friend.'

'This friend, she a woman?'

'Yes.'

'Ha! She can keep the faithless arsworm.'

‘God’s wounds, no, I don’t mean it in that way. She tried to help his group when they needed somewhere to stay, but they left without a word. She’s. . .’ he searched for the right word. ‘. . . concerned.’

‘So what’s your role in this?’

‘Me? I’m just the errand boy.’

‘Then it’s none of your business what he does, is it? Tis barely any of mine. I’m past caring.’

‘If you don’t want to talk to me, that’s your choice, but. . .’ He cleared his throat, uncertain how much of Simon’s fate he should reveal. ‘Listen, I don’t want to be the one to tell you, but your husband got. . . separated from the rest. We only want to know where he is. Maybe he just wandered off, but if you’ve seen him, it would ease a bit of worry.’

‘He’s always wandering off, usually towards the nearest lass.’ The woman stared at him. ‘You sure you’re not from them?’

‘Who’s this *them*?’

‘If you don’t know, you can leave well alone, and if you do know, you’re lying. Either way I don’t know who you are, and I don’t see I need to believe anything you say.’

‘Come, I’m not after your husband for anything. I just said I’d see if I could help.’

‘Sound like prying to me.’

‘I’m not –’

She shut the door on him before he could fully retort. Shrugging to himself, he turned back down the stairs and went out onto the street.

The woman was right to be sceptical, he thought – it really was none of his business, although he still couldn’t decide if he would have done better to tell her the whole truth, that her husband’s band had been attacked. But it was best not to worry her, he reasoned, at least not for now, especially when there was nothing she could do. But she was clearly agitated about something, or someone, and he wondered what she had meant when he’d knocked on the door and she’d said she didn’t have *it*.

Now he turned his attention to the part of town where Alena's mother lived, a marginally more attractive district where the houses were less steeped in the grime of ages. After a half hour walk along roads he still couldn't believe were this quiet, even with the ban on selling wares in the streets, he found himself standing once more outside an unfamiliar residence on a corner plot, this one much larger than the last, occupying the whole of a two-storey building some way distant from London's walls. There was another, more harrowing difference. The door to this building had a cross daubed onto its wood, and the familiar refrain of *Lord have mercy upon us* was scrawled in hurried brushstrokes beneath.

'Shit,' he swore. He looked up and down the street, and sure enough red crosses had been painted on a number of doors, over half it seemed. 'It's even got out here.'

'It's got everywhere, love,' said a woman who had come up to perch on the low wall behind him. 'You think you're safe, cos you're a certain age, a certain sort. Have a certain wealth.' She sniffed, examining the backs of her hands. 'But plague don't care 'bout that. You looking for someone in particular?'

Nicholas turned to look at her. She was neither old nor young, a little older than Mercia if he had to guess, but she was filthy, her hair streaked with soot, her face and hands spotted with red paint, her clothes unremarkable. A childish grin spread across her freckled face as she cocked her head to the side, running her hand through half-finished ringlets.

'The woman who lived in this house here,' he answered.

She kicked at a shrivelled cat mewling at her feet, the emaciated creature more bones than flesh. With a wild screech the terrified animal fled.

'Damn things should all have been killed in the cull. Was she family?'

'No.'

'Friend?'

'No.'

'Then you won't mind me telling you, I saw her carted off two weeks back.'

'She's dead?'

The woman nodded. 'A nasty death it was, more of them horrible boils than I've seen on any other poor devil I've searched.'

Nicholas winced. 'What do you mean, you searched?'

'I mean I'm the searcher round here.' She laughed. 'That cat got your tongue, did it?'

THE SEARCHER'S TALE

'I know what you're thinking, I don't look the part – not some haggard old crone like you expect a searcher should be. Not too bad for my age, eh, all of thirty five! I'm part time watchman too, you know, ever since the coves who were meant to be doing that died of plague themselves, Devil take them, and that's why I come up to see who you were, well that, and because you're a handsome sort, if I'm honest.

Aye, plague took both of the poor bastards, day watch and night watch alike. Do you think I'm sitting here for my health? But soon as there's a death roundabouts, well, more like a few hours later – no sense in not taking care – I get myself up, go in that house, no mind the danger, and check it were plague. That's my job, see, as a searcher. Not pleasant, I'll give you, but someone's got to do it. I search the dead to be sure it were plague. And it don't take much searching on some of them, let me tell you. Them blisters, so black it makes you sick.

If they are dead of plague, first thing I do is – well, first thing I do is get out quick, and second I tell the alderman's lot, the examiners they call themselves, and they add the tally to the numbers of dead. Though between you and me, and I'll tell you as 'tis scarce a surprise, the alderman likes us to take a few off the numbers, a few more each week to speak true. They don't want news getting round things are this bad, see, though any fool on the street who's chanced on a body can tell. We get a small fee, course. A woman's got to live, don't she, minded she's not coughing her last herself.

Don't say that, you'll make me laugh, and 'tis not seemly in this day and age, though if you can't laugh, what can you do, that's what my uncle used to say, least 'til he tumbled into the same sodden grave as half his wretched street did. 'Tis to be hoped

he's laughing in Heaven, but I doubt that, he was a stingy sort with coin as he was with kindness, saying one thing and acting another, less stingy with his strap. His wife, my aunt, she took ill too, she did, but she survived, and she's inherited his trade, having no child, and a good trade it is too, not that she'll let me near it, the untrusting mare. So don't tell me plague brought no one good luck, for it turned out good for her.

But I was saying, don't make me laugh, what, you think all we searchers do is go in, glance at the body, help ourselves to whatever we can carry, and run back home quick as like? Ha! Have you seen the most of what folk round here own? There's not much I'd want, I'll tell you, and if there is, well, why shouldn't I take a little bit, I could die going into them homes, and 'tis most like their kin are lying in their own graves, or fast on their way there, so who else will want that pretty bracelet, or that handsome watch? I can clean such as that up, get rid of the smells, and keep them or sell them, no trouble. I won't take the linen though, nor the clothes, I don't trust them, and besides, examiners say nobody should be taking them from out of a house that's had plague, whoever you are. Still, no mind the orders, there's plenty of searchers who do, though some of them I never see again, and you can guess why. Aye, thrown into them graves just the same.

No wonder I'm scowling. Them common graves, have you seen them, or the plague houses outside the city? They try and keep them out the way, so people don't see them, but I make it part of my business to go, and I tell you, every time I do I cross myself for safety, though I don't believe in all that crossing, being a believer of our English Church, and not of Rome. Not that it makes much odds what you believe with this sickness. Ha! Lord have mercy upon us, that's what they write. I've written it myself where I've been asked to, just look at the paint on these hands. My God, look at the calluses, the creases. . . do you know, there was a time when these hands were smooth? And yes, I can write, what do you think I am? Well, I can write that at least, and that's what's needed for now.

Yes, most of the time it don't do you no good, however you pray, save for comfort when I'm up there, 'tis a horrid, terrible sight, and no wonder we searchers grow such a thick skin, same as on these hands, having to see all that. Them lads with the carts who take the bodies up, they have it worse, they have to load their carts with the dead – grab them, like, close – drive all the way with rotting corpses on back, tip

the carts up, hear them squelching in among the rest, and then come back and get some more. I don't know who it is covers the graves when they're full, but it must take a big lot of shovels, the width of them holes – holes straight down to Hell! 'Tis us who keep the streets clean, us, the carters, the diggers, the doctors too I suppose, and the nightmen, them who clean up the shit. You know the carters have stopped ringing their bells, there's so many dead they'd be ringing all the time, so folk can scorn us all they like, or spite us for taking a thing or two in payment, but without us there'd be many more dead, so folk should be grateful we do it. Most would not dare.

So you want to know about that woman who lived over there? I know of her, is the pity, she was reasonable liked in these parts, a decent old widow with three sons and two daughters, the sons were fine lads, until two died too young, and the daughters, one of them married a farmer and left town, and the other – well, a vixen is all I'll say, taking up with a group of four men like that, a group of musicians no less, and traveling about the city, and now the country so they say. Well, I don't know much about music, save I like to dance a jig in the alehouse, at least I used to, but I know the virginals is means to be an upright instrument, but there's nothing virginal about that one, I can tell you. Ha, ha! A singer, she fancies herself, and to give her due she does sing fine, like a bird she sings, and she wears nice clothes, and does her hair and face so as you'd think she had a temper as angelic as her voice. But that's where the likeness ends, and if you think I'm being loose with my tongue about a woman who's not here to speak up herself, 'tis to warn you to take care if ever you see her, for with those looks of yours she'll be on you right enough.

Well, yes, yes, you're probably right, maybe I am being a little unjust. Truth is I wish I could sing as she does. But tell me then, why are you here, what is it you want to know? See, I was right, it is about that girl, that Alena! Always the same. Yes, she was here a few weeks back with two of them musicians, a Spaniard the one was, and another cove, though he never said much, at least not to me. They were in mourning, it looked like, for they were wearing black, or black bands, but that's not surprising. Most of the city is black with grief these days, and some of that grief's even real. Like the grief these musicians had, that seemed real, and it turned out sure enough it were a friend of theirs met his maker.

Here, you're not with them other lot, are you? Not that it matters to me, you understand, but I like to know who's who and what's what. No, you've never been here before? That's a relief, after what I've been rattling on! Because let me tell you, not long after those musicians came, a group of other lads turned up, right angered, and well, I didn't know what went on at the time, but the day after, the pair of them musicians just left with that Alena, leaving the old woman on her own, poor thing, although afterward she said it was her idea they should go, to bring cheer to the countryside with their music. Cos we don't need cheer here, do we? Still, there was no reason to doubt her word.

What were they like, this other lot? Not very friendly is all I'll say. I never saw them round here before, which was why I just asked if you were with them, cos you're not either, but you say you're not, and you don't act like them, so I don't doubt you. There were three of them, I think, three rough looking lads who didn't fit in, and I gave them a good look over, you know how it is when you see strangers round where you live. Two were. . . about your age – middle twenties? – while the other, the one in charge, he were a lot older, forty five, fifty? They weren't here long, but they didn't look happy. Came back a couple days later, too, after them musicians had gone, and this time they left in a right fury, got into a fight with young John Lee down the way, but don't go thinking to ask him about it, for he's died of the plague since.

Seems to me half round here have gone, though maybe that's cos even them that aren't sick are locking themselves away, sealing up the draughts to stop the smells getting in, no matter 'tis so hot, only coming on the streets to find what they need or when their confinement's got too much. It's grown too familiar now, to speak true, sitting here and watching them doors, calling the alderman's lot to say another house needs boarding, or another soul needs taking to the pits, but I'm alive, aren't I, and that's a blessing lots don't have. Although this heat, sometimes it makes me think the Devil's taken up all of London and cast us down in Hell, cos I can't imagine Hell being much worse than this, save the pitchforks and demons and imps. Though the look on them men that fought with John Lee, they weren't far different from such creatures, no they weren't.'

‘And you’ve no idea who they were?’ said Nicholas.

‘None, and if I were you I’d stay clear. I wouldn’t fancy being one of them musicians just now.’

‘Why say that?’

‘Because during that fight they had with John Lee, nobody could avoid hearing it, the streets are so quiet now, the one told the other to leave off, for it weren’t that lad they needed to fight, they had to go for the players, wherever in England they’d gone.’

Nicholas whistled. ‘Have they ever come back?’

‘I’ll say so, couple of weeks back, but by then the old woman was dead, and maybe that were a good thing, for they were raging, and I reckon it were only fear of the plague that stopped them pillaging the house. Since then, I’ve never seen them again. Wherever they’ve gone, they’ve either found what they were after, or –’

‘Or they’re still searching,’ said Nicholas. ‘Shit.’

X

Mercia felt uneasy as she rode to the coaching town of Dunchurch, the best part of a day's ride north and east from Halescott. Not with the usual nerves heightened in travellers by the possibility of highwaymen, or any disquiet about spending the night in an unfamiliar coaching inn – she had spent enough nights in much more adventurous places of late – but troubled by the ring she was carrying in her pocket, lest she lose it or yes, lest it be taken from her by force. But the ride was more dull than eventful, uncomfortably warm as was usual for that summer, her steed Maggie sweating with the effort of carrying her to her goal at her usual brisk pace.

Although she had set off early, it was late afternoon by the time she arrived in Dunchurch, her journey lengthened by a needed break for a lunch of apples and cold meats that Bethany had prepared the night before. But when she rode into town from the Oxford road the sun was still bright, the bells of St Peter's chiming four times as she handed over her horse at the inn where James Calthorpe had recommended she stay. The friendly stable boy greeted her with a warm welcome, which she rewarded with a smile and a penny for his kindness.

According to Mary, Dunchurch was where Alena had given birth, and needing time to recuperate after a difficult delivery, she and her companion had been put up at one of Dunchurch's other many inns, or so the seamstress's local acquaintance from Daventry market had said. Not wanting to waste any time, Mercia refrained from changing out of her riding dress and headed there now, hoping the pair would still be at their inn, but if they had left, hoping to learn where they had gone.

Just south of Rugby, Dunchurch formed the crossroads of two major coaching routes, the one from London to Birmingham, the other from Oxford to Leicester. As

a result, the village seemed to be made up more of inns than houses, and the sheer number of taverns astonished Mercia as she passed along the street, walking with purpose towards a run-down establishment called the White Horse that might have been pleasant when the first Charles was alive, but which had lost much of its appeal today.

When she arrived, she was immediately struck by the smell of uncollected horse manure as she entered through a narrow passage and across a cobbled square with stables set along two of its ragged sides. The large cellar doors set into the ground were wide open, and the sight of them made her nauseous, reminding her of the terrible events that had befallen a similar inn in Harwich during her previous mission for the King. But she forced the bad memories aside, and went into the inn proper through an uneven doorway that likely hadn't been renovated since the year it was built, most likely a century before.

An elderly woman barely taller than Daniel was leaning against a scratched bar directly opposite the door.

'Good evening,' said Mercia. 'I am looking for two friends of mine, a man and a woman. Joshua Tanner is the name of the man.'

The woman barely looked up. 'No one staying here by that name.'

'Has there been? I think you would have remembered. The woman had a baby last week.'

'Oh, her,' said the woman, seemingly indifferent. 'Aye, she was here.'

'Was?'

'They left for another of the inns. That interfering busybody made the girl move, said it wasn't clean here.' She snorted. 'This here's as clean as any a place you'll find in Dunchurch. You want a room, love?'

'Thank you, I already have one. Do you know which inn they went to?'

'If you don't want a room then – ' she narrowed her eyes – 'no.'

'No?'

'No.'

Mercia held the gruff woman's gaze, hoping for more, but to no avail. 'Thank you,' she sighed, aware the woman probably knew precisely where the players had gone. But the news the pair had remained in town was encouraging, and so she left the

sorry inn and made her way back to the street. Standing clear of the once-white wall, she looked left and right, taking in the number of inn signs steady in the lack of wind, a dozen or more, and that was only along the road she could see.

Only one thing for it: visit each of the inns in turn and ask.

A whole ten inns later, the only thing Mercia had learnt was that the spread of gossip in a coaching town like Dunchurch could clearly outdo the spread of the plague. Despite various embellished tales about the manner of Alena's delivery, she had received no definite news of her whereabouts, other than a faint hint that she and Tanner might have been moved towards the edge of town, but even that clue was uncertain, and she decided to stick with her methodical approach of moving from inn to inn. She was beginning to wonder if the musicians had left town altogether, when in the more enticing surroundings of a spruced-up hostelry at the sign of the Dun Cow, she yet again put her same questions to its rotund landlord.

'Joshua Tanner,' he mused out loud. 'And Alena. . . yes, we heard about that. Think the whole town did, it were almost like the Christmas story what with them looking for an inn and her giving birth in more or less a stable and all, but no, there's neither her nor any other wench here with a newborn, no children at all, but – wait a moment.'

Mercia waited with set teeth: she had now heard the Christmas joke for the fifth time that evening, and each time, the storyteller had thought they were the first to make it. This particular raconteur tucked his towel into his hooked breeches and raised his voice.

'Peter,' he called. 'Hoi, Peter me lad, pay me some mind!' He rolled his eyes at Mercia. 'Fool boy never listens. Peter!' he shouted again. 'Did you hear aught about that woman with the new baby? This lady here wants to know where to find her.'

The boy continued sweeping under the tables, ignoring the customers legs as much as he ignored the landlord's question.

'Peter!' resumed the landlord. 'You heard anything about that woman with the new baby? God's wounds! Peter!'

Finally the boy looked up. 'Don't know,' he said in a monotone. 'Ask him, he's the one come here to get away from her.'

Almost taking the head off a surprised woman sat alone at the table behind him, Peter swung his broom round to point past the unlit fireplace, shaking the loose bristles at a shadowed bench set the other side of the cavernous inglenook. There was a man sitting there, or there had been, for he was already almost on his feet, but now he shot fully up, pulled his hood across his face and began to push his way to the door.

‘Hey!’ shouted the landlord. ‘You haven’t paid for that ale!’

‘Mr Tanner?’ said Mercia as the man reached the door. He paused, the briefest of moments, before pulling his hood closer and hurtling out of the inn.

‘Get after him, Peter, I’ll never catch him!’ ordered the landlord, and this time the boy responded, throwing down the broom with a mischievous smile and racing out in pursuit.

‘God’s wounds,’ he grinned as Mercia followed. ‘I love it when they don’t pay!’

Out in the street, she saw Peter running in the direction she had been heading before, past the crossroads in the centre of town and up the Birmingham road to the west. The street was busy, full of travellers enjoying their stopover in the warm open air, and the crowds were impeding Tanner’s progress, while the younger Peter dodged nimbly – and less caringly – left and right. Mercia hurried after them, easily weaving through the crowd now it had been separated by Peter’s passing, the surprised pedestrians cursing the young lad who had trodden on their feet or elbowed them to the side.

Up ahead, she saw Tanner step into the middle of the road, straight into the path of an oncoming coach, but the gasp she let out was unwarranted, for the horses were merely trotting along, and he had no difficulty jumping past. Peter was forced to continue on this side of the coach, but losing patience at the horses’ slow pace he grabbed a case piled on the back and used it as a pivot to swing himself round, speeding him back on his way while tumbling the case to the ground in the process. No time to stop, Mercia stepped around the fallen case, following Peter as best she could, or more properly following the trail of bemused onlookers he was leaving in his wake.

At the sign of the Three Horseshoes near the edge of town, Tanner seemed to hesitate, turning his head towards the door before accelerating on. But Peter was persistent, and swifter, and in the thinning crowds soon narrowed most of the distance between them, while Mercia pressed on in her turn, thankful she was wearing her more

forgiving riding dress than her usual attire. Still, for a moment at the end of the street, where the last house gave way to fields, she thought she might have lost them, but emerging into an open meadow, at its far end she enjoyed the amusing scene of Tanner taking cover amongst a herd of cows as Peter was nearly upon him. And then she winced as Peter finally caught up with his quarry, pushing the unfortunate musician face down to the ground with a disgusting squelch.

She hurried towards them, stepping carefully around the cows that were lowing at the unexpected intrusion. The scene was comical, she thought despite herself, and so it continued, with Peter knelt astride Tanner, holding him down with wicked enthusiasm, but Tanner was strong, and he managed to push the slender boy off. He stumbled to his feet, his hood falling from over his face, but by now Mercia was alongside him, and she stopped him with the palms of both hands as he walked directly into her path. Raising his head, he stared at her from annoyed eyes.

Startled, she took a step back.

'You're not Joshua Tanner,' she said, taking in the man's dirty blond hair and proud face, in difference to Tanner's more swarthy appearance.

'Josh? Why would I be Josh?' said the man, and now he laughed. 'This is an amusing turn, Mrs Blakewood. It is Mrs Blakewood, I take it?'

'You seem to know me, and yet I cannot say the same about you. Keep an eye on him, Peter, please.'

The man was still laughing. 'Don't worry, I won't run. The others said you were a stubborn sort.'

She tilted her head. 'Who are you?'

'Who do you think?' he smirked. 'I'm Simon, of course.'

Next instalment coming soon

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