

Chapter 1

Monday, November 10, 1558

Winterset, Yorkshire

“They said I would not end well.”

“And so you have not.” The young man has an air of self-importance, something he should have outgrown by now—but perhaps not. He has, after all, arrested me; mayhap he should feel arrogant.

I walk toward the fire, smiling as he moves out of my way. “I did not begin well, I will grant you that. And my middle was...middling.” The heat warms my face, masking any flush of anger. “But my end is not yet accomplished.”

He speaks again, his confidence recovered. “For your nefarious history with Thomas Cromwell, for your role in the destruction of the monasteries, and your attempts to dismantle the one true church, for promoting Luther and the English Bible, Her Majesty charges you with heresy.”

I ignore him. “You, who have interrupted my supper with your warrants and demands, who are here to see me to that end—you have no idea of my beginnings.”

Mongrel, they called me. Bastard. Unloved, I should have withered. I did not. I forced myself to flourish, to prove the world wrong.

“The world did not, early on, consider me of enough importance to care whether I lived or died. Now, I have achieved importance in the eyes of some—though only some see my true value. Whether you come to see it remains to be seen.”

The young man—William Hawkins—snorts. A laugh? A sound of disbelief? He drops into my empty chair, his black boots stretched toward the blaze.

I watch him in the small convex mirror, which stands on the cupboard, a memento of my Venetian travels, just unpacked. “You were told I was clever, to beware my words. I do not appear dangerous, do I?” A man of fifty-odd, dressed in clerical black. Thin to the point of gauntness, though seemingly healthy. A man with few attachments in this life, and those well concealed. “I can see you are interested.”

Hawkins demurs, but his eye stretches at my words, and I continue, “The storm will not abate before morning. It is not solely in my own interests that I suggest you ask your men to stand down.”

Hawkins is unwilling but sees sense in the end. I try not to listen as he speaks to his men. Nine of them—as if I require an army to be brought to justice. They shed their wet cloaks and settle themselves in the hall. I’ll have ale brought out; their goodwill will be more easily won than my captor’s.

I look at him again. He gives the impression of wearing armor, but in truth, he has nothing more than layers of damp wool, like the rest of us, with a well-cut doublet on top to show his status. “We may as well pass the evening in conversation.”

Chapter 2

It is difficult to determine the truth about my parents from what I was told during my childhood. I believe, for example, that my father was a priest who did more than give penance to the young nun who bore me. I know for fact that I was born at Wardlow Priory in Yorkshire.

There I was housed with other foundlings and cared for by the nuns. When I was four, I was given over to a family who had lost two sons to the sweat and were willing to raise a boy of dubious parentage—and, if I am honest, of dubious physical charms, as well.

I was a sturdy child but not inclined to work. By six, I had discovered that the church was a haven where I could hide from my father's temper. The priest found me one day, sniveling in a corner. He dragged me out, stopped my bloody nose with his kerchief, and asked my name.

"Robin."

He cocked his head. Under his thick black brows, his eyes were gray—nearly the same shade as my father's—but kind. "Who are your parents?"

My nose tickled as more blood made its way down. "We live top of the hill, the falling-down alehouse." Most of the houses in the village looked to be falling down, but I knew no other way to describe my home.

"Wythe?" he asked. "Your father is Timothy Wythe?"

I nodded.

He led me outside to the well, his dusty black skirts flapping around his legs, and brought up the dipper. "Why have I never seen you at school? Or at mass?"

The water was so cold, it pained my eyes. "I'm not meant to," I said. "I help with the brewing." I was usually tied to a post in the brewing shed; as little as I liked it, it did not seem worth mentioning.

Father Gideon considered me. "You're a well-spoken lad. You should be in school, at least for a few years."

My eyes grew large. The idea of telling my father, who loomed enormous in his tattered smock and equally-frayed temper, was terrifying. I handed Father Gideon the dipper and sprinted down the lane toward our falling-down house.

It was more than a week before Father Gideon turned up at the alehouse door. Mother was tending a pot over the fire, and Father sat on a nearby bench with a mug of ale. My sisters—two older and one younger—were sewing by the window in the fading light. There were no customers; after an outburst, the men stayed away for a day or two but were drawn back eventually by the lure of cheap drink.

"He's going to want feeding." My father shoved back the bench. "Hide the meat."

One of my sisters scurried to do his bidding, and then the four of us retreated into the shed.

"Will he eat all our food?" little Mary asked. "He's almost as big as Father."

"Worry more that Father will fight him." Esther was my middle sister, almost ten, and she was the only person in the house I loved. She had long brown braids that got covered in burrs when we went foraging together, and she let me pick them off.

None of the others liked me to touch them; Dorcas, the eldest, tried never to look at me. Was it because she missed her brothers? I had never asked.

We huddled in the fetid straw, listening to the murmur of adult voices, smelling the food we could not eat. Finally, Father Gideon passed by in the lane, and we shifted our cramped limbs. Dorcas picked up Mary, who had fallen asleep, but before she could pass into the house, Father's bulk filled the doorway.

He hauled me up by my shirt. "The priest says you're to go to school." His sour ale breath filled my senses, and I was afraid he would beat me so that I could not go to the school. Instead of striking me, he shook me like a rag and threw me to the ground. "You'll go, but you'll earn the privilege. No supper for you. Stay out here, and think about your fine chances!"

I stayed in the cold shed all that night, my stomach rumbling, wondering what Father Gideon had gotten me into. Did I need another reason for my father to abuse me?

What chances did I have? And why did I deserve any? My mother told me often enough that they'd gotten a bad deal when they took me, wanting a strong boy to replace their dead sons and getting me instead—a lazy, disappointing dolt only fit to fetch water and stare at barrels.

I dozed near dawn and was awakened by a chicken that had found its way inside. It fluttered and clucked, then burrowed into the straw. I listened to the familiar sounds, and when it squawked once, loudly, I reached out and snatched the egg. The shell was warm, and the egg, which I cracked straight into my mouth, was hot and greasy, but it took away the worst of my hunger.

Chapter 3

Monday, November 10, 1558

Winterset, Yorkshire

Hawkins still wears his sword, but he has left his cloak and hat downstairs. There is a very fine dagger at his belt.

I have decided to placate him. “As much as I dislike your errand, I’m glad you got here before the storm struck.” I would not want anyone out in such a gale; the weather on the coast was extreme—our brief summers were glorious, but winter started earlier each year. “Your men are comfortable, bedded down in the hall?”

He nods, his expression less cocksure than earlier. Spending the night was not part of his plan. “They are well enough.”

“I am glad of it.” They are young, and have ridden far; they will sleep. We are not likely to, not with the rain lashing the windows so they rattle in their frames. Not with the threat of execution banging around in my brain.

Settling into a seat across from me, he says, “This is severe for November.”

“We get the sea storms.” When the wind subsides, I can hear—just faintly—the crashing of the waves. “I’m expecting my wife any day. I imagine the storm will delay her, as it holds us here.” I estimate how far he can be pushed. “I don’t suppose you’d consider waiting?”

“No.”

“I thought not.” I cannot just vanish; I will write a letter once he falls asleep.

He looks around my bedchamber, where we have removed to get away from the snores and mutters of his men. “This is a small room.”

“In a northern house, warmth is more important than show,” I say. “It contains everything I need to make a life, if I am permitted one.”

Those last few days on the *Unycorne*, I dreamed of this room. I rarely remember my dreams, but these were clear, yet so very ordinary. Dreams of my bed, with its heavy green curtains, a fire in the hearth, and a bowl of late apples on the table, lending their cider-scent to the air.

My tastes, despite appearances, are simple.

“If we cannot sleep, we may as well drink.” Hawkins looks in dire need of something, presented as he is with a willing captive, but weather which bars the door. “May I call for my servant? Sebastian only sleeps when I go to rest.”

He nods.

I decide to push him, just a bit. “You have the look of your parents about you.”

His blue eyes widen. “You know them?”

“I knew them both. In his youth, your father was strong for Queen Anne. Did your mother convince him to change sides, or did he simply dance to the king’s tune, as we all did, and end on the right foot when the music stopped?”

Even in the dim room, I can see him flush. He’s got her skin, as well as her eyes.

“My mother is dead. Don’t slander her.”

I hadn’t heard of her death, but why would I? For the last few years, I only kept up with news that touched my own life, and my eventual return. “She was a fine woman,” I tell him. “Give your father my condolences. I doubt I shall see him myself—unless he has become Constable of the Tower, which I do not think is in his remit.”

He's probably here in Yorkshire, or at one of his other manors, waiting, with his head down, as all sensible men are, to see what happens next.

Sebastian appears. He's been outside the door, waiting for my call, hoping to defend me from this undangerous young man. "Bring us some wine, will you, Seb?"

My captor looks away from the fire. "I don't want wine."

"I hope your men have left some ale, then. My uncle keeps a stock of perry, if you'd rather." I look to Seb for confirmation.

"I drink wine." His lip comes out, truculent. "I just don't like it much."

Was I this callow and easily offended at twenty-five? "We all have our preferences. I had no intention of slighting you—certainly you're accustomed to wine; we've just discussed your bloodline."

Seb shuffles his feet in the rushes; he will toss Hawkins through the shuttered window, at a word from me.

Instead, I say, "Bring a jug of wine for me, and some bread and cheese to toast over the fire. And some ale for my friend."

With a disappointed glance, he disappears.

"I'm not your friend."

I do not rise to his bait. "You object to the term? How then should I address you? As my enemy? My adversary? You are young, but I would not call you my inferior." I stretch my hands out toward the fire; the damp makes my joints stiff. "I prefer 'friend.' I've had few enough of them in my time. I'm trying to improve my standing in the eyes of God as I get closer to meeting Him."