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LANCASHIRE, ENGLAND, 1590



lies were at him, but the larger animals hadn't gotten there yet. Richard and his men were out hawking when they found the poor priest next to a clump of gorse. If he'd fallen victim to robbers, they were scared off, for the blood-smearred purse he clutched was swollen with gold. Field and vale, even the bosky banks of the river, were parched and rattling from weeks without rain. And now, word of the deed spread through the estate as quickly and willfully as a torch to dry scrub.

Mercy came running, eyes wide, fresh milk spilling from her pails. She tried to curtsy.

"Speak," said Katharine. She held a basket of herbs and had just cut a sprig of thyme with her thumbnail.

"His throat is slit, my lady," the dairymaid said, looking down at her milk-wet wooden shoes.

"Whose?"

"The sad fellow . . ." Mercy's raspy voice sounded older than her years. Her russet hair was plastered to her sunburnt forehead. "Who



learnt the lads yonder,” she said, cocking her head in the direction of what used to be the family chapel but was now the schoolhouse.

“Master Daulton?”

Mercy nodded. “He’s on a plank behind the kitchens,” she said, then added, “Stabbed in the heart, too.”

If Mercy knew that Father Daulton was a priest, she was not letting on. That was the protocol at Lufanwal Hall. He was Master Daulton to the outside world and Father Daulton to the family.

By the time Katharine reached the courtyard, the men had covered his corpse with a cloth. She knelt, made the sign of the cross and placed the herbs she had gathered on the body. It was the fifteenth of August, Assumption Day. In the past, these sweet bundles of nature would have been blessed by a priest and then used as remedies and to ward off harm. But the blessing of the herbs and the feast to celebrate the Virgin’s ascension had been banned.

Richard approached on horseback. In spite of the heat, he wore a black cloak flecked with dirt. When he saw his cousin he frowned. “Nothing you need to see,” he said, dismounting.

“I came to pay my respects,” Katharine countered, still kneeling.

“Don’t worry, we’ll give him a proper funeral,” he said, stalking into the house through the kitchens and knocking into one of the scullery maids. A pot crashed to the floor.

Father Daulton had left that morning dressed as a schoolmaster in a white cambric shirt, black linen jerkin and large black-rimmed hat. He had said he would be gone less than a fortnight. He did not say where he was going, and Katharine had not asked, thinking perhaps he was on a mission for the Jesuits. While she’d watched him set out on his journey, she had prayed for his safety. Now she wished that weeks ago the young man with the chiseled chin had burned the forbidden chasuble and fled—that he’d gone to France, Italy, Spain or the Low Countries on the North Sea. He often said he wanted to live where he could hear the

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waves, breathe the salt air, and she'd taken to imagining him in his life after Lufanwal, alone, reading, in a whitewashed cottage by the sea.

Katharine was tempted to pull the cloth back and place her lips on his forehead, but she'd seen too much death over the years, and she wanted to remember Father Daulton alive, not as he was now: a reliquary of bones and rotting flesh. She pushed herself up, wiped the tears from her eyes and brushed the dust from her skirt. On his last evening, the young priest had given her a copy of the New Testament in English, translated by a group of exiled priests. The inscription was in Latin . . . *date et dabitur vobis* . . . give and it shall be given unto you . . . *Dei gratia* . . . by the grace of God . . . *amicus usque ad aras* . . . a friend until the altars, until death; and below those words he had signed his name. Then as a post-script he had added, *Deus nobiscum, quis contra?* God is with us, who can be against us?

Who indeed? Katharine thought as she walked toward the house.

The priest sent by the Molyneux family had skin so pale that Katharine wondered if he was a visitation from the great beyond. In the dim light of the secret chapel his face was translucent, a stain of blue beneath the white. He was tall but frail—the space between skin and bone hid no fat—and he seemed no wider than the flickering taper next to which he stooped. His chasuble dripped from his arms like wax. “Domine, Jesu Christe, Rex gloriae . . .”

Katharine recalled how Father Daulton believed the hidden chapel was a triumph, a symbol of their resistance. The entrance looked like a grand fireplace and was constructed between the great hall and a stairway to the second floor. The cross, the altar cloth, the altarpiece, the missal and the chalice had been brought from the old chapel. A large painting of the Virgin Mary with John the Baptist, Michael the Archangel and the Saints Anthony and Paul hung on the sidewall. In truth,

Katharine had never liked this inner chamber, for the narrow walls and want of windows made it feel cramped and confining.

Only the De L'Isle family, their steward Quib, the chief usher, Sir Edward's valet, Lady de L'Isle's gentlewoman and a boy from the kitchens were present at the requiem. Father Daulton's head faced the altar; the tapers' yellow flames outlined his bier. The shroud had been tied at the head and the feet by the women who had bathed the body. The scullery boy with knuckles red and raw had been hastily pressed into service. Fear filled his eyes as he swung the incense pot: the heady smell of spice cloaked the scent of white roses strewn upon the wood floor.

Lord Molyneux's priest had arrived disguised as a groom. No servant had walked through the estate that morning ringing a bell to call the mourners to mass, nor had the bell tower in the old chapel tolled before the service—both rituals were stamped out when the reformers took hold. The preparations for the mass had been furtive. The family had filed into the chamber in silence.

The borrowed priest's solemn prayers hovered with the haze of incense above Father Daulton's shroud. Katharine watched the purple clouds lift into the air and evaporate.

When Katharine was ten and her daub-and-timber house burned to the ground, she tumbled awake to black smoke forcing its way through the walls and wild flames darting through the floorboards like knives. She didn't try to find her little sister, her brother or her parents. She tried to find a window. She tried to find a door. After stepping off the stairs, she turned to see the whole staircase collapse behind her—it was then she heard her mother call. She didn't stop. Outside, before rolling down the frozen hillside, she smelled her own flesh burning.

The fire was in 1569—the eleventh year of Elizabeth's reign—a few weeks after the Northern Rebellion when the earls of Northumberland and Westmorland tried in vain to rescue their faith. The times for Catholics turned sharply for the worse after the uprising. No mass was held

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for Katharine's family. Trust was thin, fear thick and worry constant that at any moment servants might betray their masters. Now, one and twenty years later, their church was still condemned, and the torture and slayings continued.

Father Daulton had described the horrors fellow seminarians—charged with high treason for refusing to take the Oath of Supremacy or for allegedly plotting the queen's death—endured at the hands of Her Majesty's interrogators: rackings, whippings and mutilations, being shackled to the wall for hours on end. The tortured were lucky if they could ever walk again. Father Daulton had recounted a friend's plight, where after the rack the priest's hands and feet were numb—he could not rise. When he could finally hold bread, he looked akin to an ape, for he had to use both hands to eat. And those were the poor priests who lived to tell their tales. Others were burned at the stake or hanged, drawn and quartered, with their dismembered remains fixed atop poles on the major roads for all the world to see.

Since the discovery of Father Daulton's body, Sir Edward had held meetings behind closed doors with his older sons, Richard and Harold, other relatives and various Lancastrian lords. Edward's wife, Matilda, looked hard at everyone; Lady de L'Isle had never been a woman of warmth, Katharine could count on one hand the number of times her aunt had smiled, but now her large blue eyes were edged with worry. Was it the young priest's murder? Or the scorched wheat, barley and rye? Or was it that their son Ned, dear, sweet Ned, was somewhere in Italy, drinking too much wine and spending every coin he wrapped his beautiful, slender fingers around?

"Dies irae, dies illa," the priest pleaded, day of wrath, day of mourning, *"solvet saeculum in favilla"* . . . day the world will dissolve in ashes. What sorrow was this, what sadness, what sins? In the Bible, in Zephaniah, *dies irae* was a day of whirlwinds, calamity, darkness, distress and misery. What would this deadly battle between the churches bring? Day

of wrath or day of judgment? Or would it beget the end of the world? This sickness, this canker King Henry had passed on to his heirs, was now eating the flesh of his people.

Sir Edward, Matilda, their daughter Isabel and Matilda's mother, Priscilla, were closest to the bier—their married daughter, Grace, lived too far north to journey for this day. Behind Edward were Richard and Harold, his sons by his first wife. Richard stared ahead, his brows knit, his jaw hard. At one point he turned and spat on the floor. His blond wife, Ursula, waved her fan while staring up at the ceiling, then occupied her time by changing the many rings around on her fingers. Her eldest daughter, Joan, tried to keep the three younger children quiet.

Harold, whose mother died giving birth to him, had red hair and freckles that spoke of Scottish blood. His left arm was smaller than his right, and he often hid his hand by resting it on a dagger in his belt. Harold's wife Mary's dark hair was neatly coiffed and her somber attire without satin or lace. She was no beauty, but she was perhaps the most pious member of the household after Sir Edward. Katharine sat next to their two sons. The trusted household servants stood in the back.

When Katharine first came to Lufanwal, Matilda barely spoke to her, and Sir Edward's two oldest sons completely ignored her. As time progressed, Katharine never penetrated those particular fortresses, but she made loving inroads with Edward's younger children, Grace, Ned and Isabel. Her cousin Ned was the special one. As children they had created imaginary worlds with long and ever-changing stories of adventure; they would play knights and ladies, whose bravery and cunning helped them survive tempests and plagues, cruel kings and dragons. With Katharine's own family gone, Ned had seemed a gift from heaven, and she cherished him. But Ned had been away from Lufanwal for seven long years.

"De profundis clamavi ad te, Domine," the mourners recited. Out of

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the depths I have cried unto Thee, O Lord. “*Domine, exaudi vocem meam.*” Lord, hear my voice . . .

A black bird swooped down, darting above the heads of the mourners. Katharine soon realized it was not a bird but a bat with winged limbs opening for height, then closing as it dove. As the priest groaned on with the mass, Katharine watched the flying creature. Its movements were sharp and erratic. At one point it dropped quickly and she could see its bared teeth. Finally, it disappeared into a crevice in the rafters.

“*Non intres in iudicium cum servo tuo,*” chanted the priest. Enter not into judgment of thy servant . . .

Katharine could not concentrate on the rest of the mass. She shut her eyes and tried to focus on the *Pater noster*, but saw the grinning bat instead, with wings spread and claws sharp and ready.

Katharine did not go down to supper that evening. Wishing solitude for her sorrow rather than company, she slipped out the door and strolled through the rose garden and past the ivy wall to the orchard. The lack of rain had dwarfed the apples, turned their skins a mottled brown. Many had fallen to the ground. As she stood under an apple tree, breathing in the savory scent, she remembered a moment with her father on a warm autumn day. She was a girl dancing, twirling round, and he said, “Kate, I fear for the man who marries you, for you are a horse that will never be tamed.”

Her father could have said *filly*, but he had chosen the word *horse*, a grown animal, solid and not necessarily feminine. Had she now—at one and thirty years—been tamed? Not by a husband, surely, for he had died too soon. By what, then? Time? Loss? Loneliness? The books she read? The plodding of the days? She ate well and slept comfortably most nights, and her tiffs and annoyances with the women at the hall were

petty, not painful; she never let them ruffle her for long. People visited and reports arrived from contacts at court and abroad, but most days were little affected by the queen and her constant wars—though the grisly discovery of Father Daulton could prove that was changing.

For the five years Mary Tudor had ruled, with much torture and bloodshed, she'd brought back priests, inquisitors and the Church of Rome. When her half-sister Elizabeth became queen, she returned the country to Protestantism. Elizabeth had reigned for more than thirty years since, and at every instance pressed on with her father's battle against the foreign Pope.

Katharine walked through the orchard to a path that wound behind the house to the old chapel. The old chapel had two doors: one that opened to the path she was on and another that led internally to the great hall. When open worship became impossible, her grandfather had built the hidden chapel and converted the old chapel to a schoolhouse. The wall paintings of Saint George, the dragon, the princess, the king and queen, two images of the Virgin Mary, and several saints were white-washed, and the old papistical books, the chest full of vestments, damask copes and tapestries, and all the other relics of the family's long bond with the Roman Catholic Church, were removed. Even stripped of its finery, the old chapel still felt holy, and Katharine was comforted every time she entered.

She already missed Father Daulton. He was quiet, but they had taken long walks and sat peacefully reading in front of the fire. When he did speak, he'd chosen his words carefully. As Katharine stood on the threshold of the old chapel now, she thought of how the young priest had been a good man and a brave man, and he deserved to be remembered as such. These were not times for the tame or the meek. Her father's words from long ago rushed back to her again, and she said them out loud as she pushed the door open.

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The chancel and the stained glass from the old chapel still remained, and in the early evening the windows caught the light in a maze of ruby, sapphire, emerald and topaz. Katharine had the urge to genuflect and started to walk down the aisle, but stopped. A man was laid out on the long wooden table in the center of the room. The colors shining through the windows glittered across his body like scattered gems. She moved closer. Another corpse? She leaned over the man and peered into his face—at the same moment his eyes opened wide. She gasped and pulled away.

“A horse that will never be tamed,” he said. “Did you speak those words just now?”

The young man rose up, swung his feet over the side of the table and sat staring at her. His green eyes gleamed with an unnatural light.

“I pray I didn’t frighten you,” he said, pushing himself off the table. He did not move toward her.

“I expected no one here,” she said.

There was silence—save the chorus of crickets outside in the dry brush.

“I was startled,” she continued, focusing on the table now empty behind him. “I thought you might be . . .” she began.

“Asleep?”

“Dead,” she said. “Were you . . .”

“Dead?” he asked.

“No, asleep?”

“No. I was thinking.”

“I see,” she said, standing, not looking him in the eyes. “Good. Sorry to disturb—”

“Was that you, then? Shouting about the horse?” he asked.

Katharine tried to place his station by the cut of his cloth: his doublet traced the line of his broad shoulders, but the fabric was coarse and the

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stitching not particularly fine. Her eyes traveled from his boots, which were rather worn, up the hose and shape of his legs, and from his breeches back to his doublet.

“I was not shouting,” she said.

“I was lying here in the quiet when those words came galloping at me from somewhere. I do think it was your voice.”

“I . . .”

“So tell me about this fine horse. This *Equus caballus*. Was it a courser? A stallion? A charger? A scudding steed?”

“My good sir, I . . .”

“A stud.”

“No,” she said.

His gaze was fastened upon her.

“Me,” she said.

“You.”

“My father said it of me ages past.” She regretted this confession the minute the words flew from her mouth.

“You frown,” he said. “But come, ’tis a compliment. Cannot be tamed. No iron bit ’tween your teeth.”

“Pray, sir, do you know me?”

“Aye. You leap, you neigh, you bound, you care not for curb nor pricking spur.” He paused. “Round-hoofed, sure-jointed, broad breast . . .” He began to walk round her, his hand on his chin, gathering her, appraising. “Legs—I imagine—are passing strong, round buttocks, tender hide, thick chestnut mane, crest rising, slender head . . .” He was standing in front of her. “Wondrous eyes, aquiline nose, dimples . . .”

“I crave your pardon . . .”

“Ruby lips.”

“Who *are* you?” she asked.

“A horse trader,” he said.

“From?”

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“Warwickshire.”

In a flash, equal to a few breaths in and out, she felt the contest, but she had lost the round, turned soft when she should have stayed strong. An odd feeling swept over her swiftly and without warning, like the onset of a fever. She glared at the stranger, then sucked in her courage, walked past the danger, and, indeed, as a horse breaking free from a stable, she burst out of the old chapel into what was now night.