A Cruel Necessity

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Felony & Mayhem Press • New York

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CHAPTER 1

Night, June 1657

It was the small things that kept you alive in this curious world of espionage. Spotting the shadow ahead of you in the alleyway. Noticing that a once-closed door was now open just a crack. Noticing that the wine was slightly cloudy when it should be clear. You developed an instinct for it. That's how he knew something was very wrong tonight.

The woman who had brought him here had been pleasant enough and well spoken. It was just that—how could he put it?—she had seemed in her careless chatter to be playing a part that she had rehearsed. In the same way there was, at first sight, nothing wrong with the place. It was ideally suited, one might say, to a clandestine meeting of a Royalist agent with some good-hearted gentlemen still loyal to a long-exiled king. But was it a little more private than it needed to be? Wouldn't a chamber at the inn have been safe enough?

He listened carefully for approaching footsteps, but as yet there was no sound. The fact that he had been asked to arrive first and await the others was not necessarily to his detriment. Arriving first meant that he could look around, see how the land lay, work out

which way he would need to go if he had to leave in a hurry. He had the advantage that he would be able to watch them come and observe the clumsily concealed weapons beneath an unneeded cloak. He himself was armed only with his gully knife, but his preference was to kill with no weapon at all where possible. Or to bluster and threaten his way out. That was good too.

There were, of course, days when he wondered whether it was all so much wasted skulking and duplicity. Ten years had passed since the old king had been executed and six since his son had even dared to set his foot on English soil. Lord Protector Cromwell's grasp on power was as firm as ever. Soon the English Republic would peacefully enter its second decade. Espionage as a trade was dying on its feet. No doubt about that. Perhaps it was time to slip away and quietly become somebody else.

He eased a small gold signet ring from his finger and dropped it into his breeches pocket, where it rested snugly. For a moment he massaged his hand, as if to obliterate any faint mark it might have left. So, then, what was this obvious thing that he had missed?

He held up the lantern that the woman had left him. The single candle cast a dim light from behind the horn panes, reflecting dully on the rough wooden walls and the straw-covered floor. He could see clearly enough from here to the only doorway. Still nothing stirred. Well, let them come whenever they wished. Friend or foe, he was ready for them.

It was only when a strong arm seized him from behind that he realised that he had not, after all, been the first to arrive. He felt something lightly brush his throat, then a warm dampness spread quickly over the front of his shirt.

'So sharp, I almost didn't feel it,' he thought.

It was his last thought before the darkness closed in. It was, in fact, the last thought he ever had.

CHAPTER

2

A Little Earlier

I raise my wide arms to the stars. They are my friends.

I am here, at the crossroads of the village. I am here because I am no longer at the inn. And I am no longer at the inn because, because…

Have patience, and very soon I shall explain to you why I am no longer at the inn. In the meantime, let us both breathe in the cool night air, which speaks to us of everything that is in this village to which I have just returned—the sweet white roses over the door of that beshitten cottage, the damp-leaf smell of the green orchard beyond and the rich, many-coloured stink of the cowshed. And above all—because you too are my friend—let me share with you this wonderful silence. Cambridge was never completely quiet, even at this strange hour, though the inns were friendlier.

But I am no longer at the inn. Why? I frown, not because I don't like you but because frowning may help me remember.

The stars above me turn slowly, drifting across the black sky. I hear the sound of a horseman approaching. As the stars

complete another circuit, he comes into view. Perhaps he too is my friend.

'You, boy—are you drunk? Or is your strange posture some new Anabaptist form of prayer?'

I lower my arms to my sides. I consider this question carefully from all points of view. Have I inadvertently become an Anabaptist? Or *am I drunk*? At the inn I argued that I was not—argued most forcefully and persuasively that I was not. Argued long and manfully that I was not.

'It is not some new form of prayer,' I say.

'Then stop turning round and round like a heathen dervish and answer a question for me. 'Od's teeth, boy! Are you *completely* drunk?'

I lower my arms again and consider this question carefully from all points of view. If I had been permitted to stay at the inn, I would have quaffed another tankard of ale. Then I would have been drunker than I am now. Therefore, I am not as drunk as I might have been. Therefore, I cannot now be completely drunk. I feel that my tutor would have been impressed with this logic if only he were here now rather than snoring in noisy, friendly Cambridge. But it is some time since I said anything, and the horseman is growing impatient for a reply.

'I am not *completely* drunk,' I say. I speak slowly and carefully as evidence of this, though saying 'completely' is, I find, not as easy as I thought it would be.

'Then, my partly drunk friend, can you tell me if Ben Bowman still keeps the inn?' He pats his horse, which seems to think we have all been kept here too long. The animal shakes its head, rattling bit and bradoon.

I look at the rider curiously. He is tall as well as impatient, and he is dressed in dark clothing, though in the moonlight, black, grey and dark blue are all as one. His boots are new and glossy. His horse is grey and muddied from a long journey. His broad-brimmed hat is pulled low over his face. His voice is muffled, *and I know why*. I think all of these things, but wisely I do not say any of them.

'Christ's bones, boy! It's not that difficult a question. Does he or doesn't he still keep the inn? You must recall who was serving you.'

'Ben Bowman was certainly serving *other* people,' I say.

The rider laughs. I fancy I may have said something clever.

'Then my thanks, and please take this…friend…for your trouble!'

His right hand holds the bridle, and, with his left hand, he tosses something that makes a graceful silver arc in the moonlight. A star perhaps? Or a dream? I reach for it, fumbling with both left and right, but it falls on the ground. Its light goes out.

The rider seems minded to go on his way; then he pauses. 'What's your name, boy?'

'John Grey,' I say.

'John Grey?' asks the rider, which is odd because I have just said precisely that. Perhaps he is hard of hearing. I repeat it. It has, in my view, a pleasant ring to it.

He too is silent for a moment. Then he says softly: 'Go home, John. Go home to your mother.' He looks me up and down. He seems sad. Then he kicks the tired horse into a walk. I listen to the slow, uneven sound of the horse's hooves. The horse is lame. I should have noticed that before. The clop of hooves on road grows quieter. Then it stops.

Silence.

I breathe in the cool night air, which speaks to me of everything that is in this village to which I have just returned—the sweet honeysuckle in the hedgerow; the bright stars overhead; the fine aroma of horse that has lingered in the rider's wake. And the silence.

So, what would you have me do? Shall I return in this fragile, starlit silence to my mother's house—the thing that both Ben Bowman *and* the rider have proposed that I should do? I would not wish to awaken my mother, as I fear I might if I tried, for example, to open the front door or walk up the stairs—both activities that cannot be accomplished, as you well know, without a great deal of falling, stamping and swearing. Opening the front

door might be better done in the clear light of day, though preferably while my mother and Martha are still asleep—if Martha ever does sleep. But Martha is my friend and will not tell tales.

Very well then. Since you propose no other course of action, I shall rest here against the cottage wall, safe and dry under the overhanging thatch, where the logs would be if it were not June, and enjoy the sweet scent of the white roses. But before I do so, I raise my wide arms once more to the stars. They are my friends.

CHAPTER 3

Dawn

'There is,' says Ifnot Davies, 'no justice in this world.'

'Seemingly not,' I say cheerfully.

'Thy head should ache like God's wrath on Judgement Day, considering the ale thou didst consume last night.'

I wince, not because my head resembles God's wrath in any way, but because I have been thou'd twice in one sentence—and that before the day has properly begun.

'God is merciful,' I say. I wink and am not immediately struck down by a divine thunderbolt for my levity.

'God is merciful to the young, John Grey,' says Ifnot. His gaze, though compassionate, suggests that he knows the state of my conscience and the secrets of my soul. I do hope he doesn't. 'Try that in ten years' time,' Ifnot adds, 'and see what God's views on strong drink are then. Try it in twenty years' time, and see what God's views are on catching rheumatics if you sleep out of doors. Thou hast spent the night there, under the eaves of Harry Hardy's cottage?'

'Thou' again. But, now I look around me, I am indeed under the eaves of Harry Hardy's modest home. When did that happen?

I stand up and dust off my hat, on which my head has rested for the night. I try punching it back into shape, but it has lost the will to be anything other than a pillow. Ah well, who needs a hat on a morning like this one? The sun is but a hand's breadth above the horizon. The whole green world's bedazzled now with dew. And the voice of the cuckoo is heard in the land. Five o'clock, as near as any man might judge, on a fine summer's morning. It already promises fair for a hot day, but Ifnot is dressed in a thick leather jerkin. If your normal place is beside a blacksmith's furnace, the rest of the world must feel cold.

'You're up betimes yourself, Ifnot,' I say, giving the brim of my pillow another tweak. 'Or didn't you go to bed either?'

'I need more charcoal for the forge, John Grey,' he says vaguely. 'There are half a dozen horses to shoe this morning. Apparently.'

His smile has faded a little, probably because he doesn't like being called Ifnot. It's what we all call him though. He gets his revenge, in a way, by addressing everybody as 'thou'. He's a Quaker obviously.

'The stranger's horse seemed a bit lame,' I say as we stroll back to the crossroads. 'Maybe he's one of your customers.'

'Stranger? What stranger?'

'A rider—last night. I saw him here, just where we're standing now. He asked for directions to the inn. You must have still been there when he arrived.'

'I didn't see no stranger,' says Ifnot. 'But maybe I left soon after thou didst.'

'Maybe thou…you didst…did. Well, you'll see him later, like as not,' I say. 'He'd had a long journey, I think, and may sleep away some of the morning.'

Ifnot is about to reply but then bends suddenly and picks something up. 'A shilling,' he says as if he has never seen one before. In this village shillings stay safe in purses; they rarely lie long in the road. 'And one with the head of our late and unlamented King Charles upon it.'

'That must be what the stranger threw me last night,' I say.

'Then, 'tis thine, John Grey,' says Ifnot, holding out the coin in his left hand. That's Quakers for you—they may have strange ideas about personal pronouns, but they're honest. It's what comes of having God watching you the whole time. In Cambridge we got God's attention half an hour a day at the most.

'Keep it,' I say. 'I did nothing that I can recall to merit payment.'

He places the small silver coin firmly in my hand and his vast blacksmith's paw closes over it. I couldn't open my hand again if I wanted to.

'I render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's,' he says, giving my fist another agonising squeeze. The sharp edges of the shilling dig into my palm. 'And unto God that which is God's. As I hope thou doest. Welcome home, by the way, and please give my respects to thy good mother.'

I agree that I shall do this, and in return he consents to let go of my hand. He continues on his way, taking the road south, while I prepare to go north, towards the family home and my hopefully slumbering family.

Others are slumbering too. Behind the shuttered windows of the decaying lime-washed cottages, under each untidy mass of grey thatch, they and their fleas sleep soundly—four or five human souls to a bed. Soon the village will be scratching itself, sniffing its armpits and pulling on its breeches. But for now the road lies empty, the air is sweet and, in the fields hard by the village, birds peck unhurriedly where the ripening corn casts long shadows.

From here I can see almost the entire village. Four dusty tracks approximate to the four points of the compass, taking their respective and equally leisurely paths to Royston, Cambridge, Saffron Walden and—more distantly—London. The road to London has always seemed, to my eyes, a little wider and a little grander than the other three, but each thoroughfare is lined with rows of timbered cottages in various states of disrepair, some pressing into the roadway, others set back behind vegetable gardens. Facing me, the high walls of the Park belonging to

the Big House present their blank brick visage for half a mile or more, running out into the countryside way beyond the last cottage. The wall is well maintained. (When it comes to keeping people out of things, you can't be too careful.) Ancient elms and oaks rise green above the soft red brickwork, hinting at a lost paradise that lies beyond. Which, in a sense, it does. But I have admired the view for longer than four streets of one very ordinary village deserve. I am bound for my mother's modest dwelling, currently just out of sight on the Cambridge road.

At the stream I stop briefly to splash its water, clear and cold after the cloudless summer night, over my face and hair. Then I press on apace, skipping lightly over the stepping stones, in the sure knowledge that my mother was ever the early riser—though I am still torn between claiming that I have been asleep in my bed since midnight and, arguing in the alternative, that I met Dickon Grice and spent the night at his house. Neither is creditable in the sense that I had undertaken to be home by ten of the clock, but both are probably better than admitting that I was thrown out of the inn and proved too drunk to walk very slowly from one side of the village to the other. Of course, my mother may get to hear the truth very soon anyway, because I fear there is no longer enough silver in my purse to buy the silence of everyone who witnessed last night's events.

But there are always those who are less fortunate than you. As I pass the village dung heap, I see a pair of feet sticking out from behind it. I at least had the good sense to find the shelter of a cottage wall. I wonder which of my drinking companions could have come to this pass. He is lying facedown, and I do not recognise his back or the soles of his shoes, which are all he has chosen to present to me. He cannot be comfortable in that position—kinder, then, to wake him before he gets a stiff neck. I kneel down and give him a friendly pat on his dew-covered shoulder.

Then I see what I should have seen long before. He will certainly never have the misfortune to awake with a stiff neck. His throat has been cut clear across from side to bloody side. I lift him slightly, and he grins at me through a gaping, wine-coloured gash.

Perhaps you secretly hope, as Ifnot probably would, that God is finally about to punish me for a hard night's drinking and that I will now spew my guts over the dung heap. But I have seen death before in its many colourful forms. And indeed, this was a good death—a kind and considerate one. Whoever this is—and he is a stranger to me—died quickly, his blood spilling out and the darkness closing in almost before he would have known what was happening to him.

I crouch beside the body, any thoughts of my mother's reproaches deferred, and examine the wound more closely. A clean cut with a very sharp knife—probably made with a single, skilful movement of the arm. The killer would have approached him from behind, seized him, pulling his head back, and cut quickly from right to left. The cut is deeper on the right, where the knife entered the flesh. I re-enact the deed in my mind and frown. He would have been held firmly by a strong man, unless… I check the dead man's wrists. No, there is no sign of chafing from a rope. So he would have died suddenly and probably much to his wonder. But he died in another place, not here. I look around to see if I can tell where he died, but I cannot, which is passing strange. Passing strange indeed, my masters. He has travelled some way since he breathed his last.

I place my hand under one shoulder and lift him a little to peer at the ground beneath him. The man's head twists slightly as I do so, as if he is reluctant to look me in the eye. He guards his secrets still. But I know one more thing about him—the ground is wet underneath the body, so he must have arrived here after dewfall.

While I am pondering all this, Ben Bowman appears from the direction of the inn on some early-morning errand of his own. He smiles as if to chide me for enriching him last night. Then he sees the corpse, and he stops and shakes his head.

'So, the silly fool got his throat cut, did he? Well, that's not much of a surprise, is it now?'

CHAPTER 4

I Am Introduced to Death—1646 or Thereabouts

I had seen death before in its many colourful forms.

I blame my mother, of course, for this and much else. It was she who introduced me to the dead, though she in turn might have justifiably blamed my father. For this and much else.

My father, Matthew Grey, was, during the late wars between the King and Parliament, a surgeon in the Royalist army. Being more inclined to wield a knife than a pen, he sent letters to his family occasionally at best, and any rumour of troops on the march would have us packing bags and saddling horses to ride and enquire whether my father was living or no. There must have been less arduous ways of answering the same question, but my mother preferred to travel. Perhaps it was the thought of finding my father dead on some bloody field that kept her so cheerful through that long civil war.

Thus I saw the aftermath of many fights, but we were rarely the only ones picking our way amongst the debris. The dead—or at least those who meet a violent end in conflicts—have many friends. Those friends who arrive first relieve the dead of their

burdensome purses and rings. A little afterwards others come for their slightly less portable but still very desirable swords, pistols, muskets, helmets and breastplates. Later still come those who would like a pair of boots or a good buff coat as a memento. Often the dead were reluctant to give up these last few trifles, willingly though they had surrendered their gold. Removing a pair of breeches from a five-day-old corpse is not as easy as you might think.

In crossing and recrossing the battlefield, my mother tended to avoid the more obvious freebooters, since they were sometimes careless as to whether they took the purses of the living or the deceased, and by midday they were usually well armed. She proceeded discreetly and without drawing much attention to herself. I, marvelling at the novelty of it all, escaped her apron strings as often as I could and found much to amuse me.

Perhaps it was because my father was a surgeon, and I was used to the sight of blood and the many gleaming instruments that can be employed to produce it, that I accepted whatever I found on the battlefield with no more horror than if I had been visiting the butcher's shop at home. Thus it was that in the year 1646 (or thereabouts) in the sunny Oxfordshire countryside you might have seen a small boy giving a wounded soldier water from his flask while politely questioning him on how he came by the wound and how many hours it was since his companion, now stiff and cold, breathed his last. You could say that I learned a great deal in a short time, and I might have become a surgeon myself had my mother not taken an aversion to that or anything else connected with my father and decided that a strong stomach would assist me every bit as much in the practice of Law.

After the war, the men started to return to the village, but not my father. Ifnot Davies returned from fighting for Parliament with a permanent limp but with his blacksmith's strength otherwise unimpaired. And at least he had been on the winning side. Sir

Felix Clifford, who had joined the King's army on the first day of the war, returned to discover that he was ruined and that his wife had packed her bags and left. He had, it is true, been doing his best to bankrupt himself for some years before the Civil War and might well have completed the task unaided. But the voluntary loans that he had been obliged to pay to the King and the fines that he had later had to pay Parliament for 'malignancy'—that is to say for not minding being owed money by the King—had speeded the process more than a little. The Cliffords' days as lords of the manor were numbered. What remained of their estate was sold to a London banker to pay the last of the fines, and the banker sold it on at a speedy but substantial profit—the market for large houses proving better than Sir Felix had been given to believe—to one Joshua Payne, formerly Colonel of Infantry in the Parliamentary army, who took up residence in what had always been known in the village simply as the Big House.

Thus, in the space of less than a paragraph, the Cliffords learned the useful lesson that they should have placed their trust in neither kings nor bankers. Colonel Payne agreed to let the previous owner live in the Steward's cottage on the edge of the Park—for which Sir Felix was charged, but never actually paid, a nominal sum on each quarter day. Sir Felix's daughter, Aminta, also returned to live with him, but his son, Marius, like my father, remained absent and unaccounted for. As did Lady Clifford.

Any question of my father's return passed imperceptibly into the realms of vague conjecture. My mother dismissed all of our servants except Martha and Nathaniel, who was too old to go anywhere and hadn't seen a penny in wages from her since Lady Day 1647, and settled down at the New House to a life of genteel poverty, neighbourly slander and preserving fruit. I, in due course, was entered for Magdalene College at the University of Cambridge, with the intention that I should study there for my BA before completing my legal education at Lincoln's Inn in London.

It was during my first Long Vacation that I said to my mother: 'I often wonder at which battle my father died.'

'Battle?' she spat back at, me. 'He went off with Bess Clifford.'

'Sir Felix's wife?'

'Of course it was Sir Felix's wife. Lord! How many Bess Cliffords are there in this village?'

'None at all,' I said.

CHAPTER

5

Morning, June 1657

I stand up and brush the pale dust off my hands and then, with more or less clean palms, from the knees of my new green velvet breeches. Sadly, they look a little less new than before, and I have not yet paid for them.

'You know him then?' I say to Ben.

'I saw him at the inn,' says Ben. He clearly expects better of his customers than that they should fall victim to footpads. 'Flashing his money about. Doesn't do. Not that folk are dishonest in these parts—but it still doesn't do to show your purse too openly. In these troubled times, John Grey, wise men hide their money in their boot when they are on the road.'

'If everyone hid their money in their boot,' I say, 'the stratagem would deceive nobody.'

Ben has no reply, as is not uncommon with him. He tries a dismissive look, but his smooth, pink face isn't quite up to the mark.

'We'll need to report this to the Magistrate,' I say. 'Then he'll have to inform the Coroner. No point in telling the Constable—he won't be up for an hour or two yet.'

It's a quiet village. There's not much work for the Magistrate to do. Or the Constable. (The inn's busy, though, and so is the midwife.) The Magistrate is Colonel Payne—that's something that comes with owning the Big House. Will Cobley is the currently slumbering Constable. He'll be cross he's missed a murder.

Ben and I look at the stranger again. He is not a tall man, and our angle of view foreshortens him further. Whoever he is, he is not the impatient rider I saw last night. One further detail immediately strikes me: he has an old scar on his chin. Maybe it's not the first time he's come off worst in a scrap. He is, I should add, a little plump and more than a little bald. No hat of any sort.

'I suppose he didn't tell you his name when he was at the inn.'

'Not that I can recall,' says Ben. He scratches his head as if to encourage thought. There's a first time for everything.

'There could be papers on him that would identify him,' I say.

'I'd leave that to the Colonel,' says Ben, pulling a face. 'Best not touch, eh?'

'No, I'll check now,' I say.

I kneel down again. I hope that it will be worth recoating my knees with dust. The dead man is dressed in black breeches secured with greenish, frayed ribbon, and an old-fashioned black doublet tailored from good-quality woollen cloth, now sadly worn and shiny. The buttons are silver and are all in place, except where a loose thread bears witness to the loss of one.

I pat the clothing politely, working from his shoulders downwards. There is no jingle of coins or rustle of papers until I reach his breeches pockets. I put my hand carefully into the right pocket and withdraw a worn leather purse. On examination it contains twenty-two shillings and a few pennies.

'He was not murdered for his money then,' I say.

Ben shakes his head sadly. This has not been done well. He really ought to have been murdered for his money.

'So, why *was* he killed?' I say.

'He also had a ring,' says Ben as if with sudden inspiration. 'A gold one.' Perhaps the thieves will have failed in their duty here too, but Ben need not have feared. I check his fingers. I feel again inside both pockets; there is no ring. Ben nods approvingly. That's better.

'You see, he was flashing the ring about too,' says Ben. I think I have heard Ben on this subject before. If I let him, he will probably conclude by saying that the ring should have been hidden in his boot.

Of course, a well-made boot with a broad, flapping top to it *is* a handy place for keeping things. The inside of a hat is good too, but our man has none. Boots it is then. I slide my hand as far as I can down the side of each in turn. Ben watches anxiously; he doesn't think I should be doing this. Perhaps he's right. Again, I am quickly rewarded for my efforts, but not quite as I foresaw. I draw out not a ring but a sheet of thin paper, folded several times into a compact though rather grubby little wad.

'What's that then?' asks Ben. The unexpected always worries him. You'd think he'd never seen paper before in his life.

I open out the document carefully, because it seems much used and it is not only grey but rather thin at the edges. I frown at the contents.

'It's some sort of cipher,' I say, showing the page to Ben. There are three rows of letters and matching numbers. I notice that *A* is represented by 7 and by 14 and 15. *E* is represented by 1 and 9 and 16 and 23 and 49. All of the other letters, in fact, seem to have at least two numbers assigned to them. There are also numbers for whole words. General Monck—who is he exactly?—is allocated 101, and General Harrison is 999. This is no simple substitution cipher; a word like 'the' or 'and' could be coded in a completely different way every time it was used in a message.

'A man with secrets, it would seem,' says Ben. He is less impressed than I am at the sophistication of the system. But at least he now knows that the paper won't bite him.

'Had he been flashing this around too?' I ask.

Ben looks at me sideways, unsure whether I am making fun of him. If he is really in doubt, then I'll need to make my sarcasm a touch less subtle in future. He settles on slightly wounded dignity for his reply. 'No, just the purse…and the ring, like I say. And the idiots clearly took the ring.'

I nod. The silver could have been spent in any inn on the road, but the ring will be difficult to dispose of at anything like its true value. Our man has had the misfortune to be killed by stupid people.

'Footpads,' says Ben, shaking his head. 'Suffolk men like as not. Nobody from the village would do a thing like this. Whoever it was will be long gone, I'm thinking.'

I'm thinking that too, but it strikes me that I might just have seen the murderer—indeed, I may have his shilling in my purse. 'What about the stranger on horseback?' I ask.

'Stranger?' asks Ben.

'The one in the dark clothing and cloak. Big, broad hat. He was riding a lame grey. Arrived from the direction of London a bit after midnight. Went to your inn.' That should narrow things down for him.

Ben shakes his head. 'Nobody like that came anywhere near the inn.'

'Yes, he did. I saw him. He asked me the way.'

Ben's look says it all.

'I was *not* drunk, Ben,' I say. 'Well, not completely. Anyway, when I saw him, he had only a few yards to ride. He can't possibly have got lost. Why would he say he was going to the inn if he wasn't?'

'Not having had a chance to discuss it with him, I couldn't rightly say,' says Ben.

'But here's his shilling,' I say, taking it out of my purse. 'He gave it to me.'

Ben looks at it. I can see that it is not in itself conclusive of anything.

'Now then, Master John,' says Ben, 'what are we to do with a dead man on a fine summer morning?'

I frown at Ben, but he seems to have said all he is going to say about my horseman. Of course, what we do with the gentleman in front of us is a pressing matter.

My first thought is to leave the body where it is and to fetch the Colonel, but two of the village dogs are already showing an unfortunate interest, albeit from a distance at present. They imply they'd like a taste when we've finished with him. 'We should take the body across the fields to the church, where it may rest with some dignity. Then I shall go and inform Colonel Payne.' I am pleased with my tone of authority. Perhaps there was some point in studying Law after all.

'I'll get Harry Hardy to give us a hand,' says Ben. 'There's a wisp of bright new smoke from his chimney, so he'll be up and doing.'

We carry the stranger on one of Harry's newer hurdles over the fields to St Peter's. Once or twice Harry tries to ask us questions, but each time Ben hushes him and says we must maintain a respectful silence. In this regard he shows an unusual delicacy of feeling, and I do not protest. For a while the only sound is the tramp of three pairs of feet and the swish of the long grass against our legs. Indeed, not another word passes our lips until we have reached the Rector's house, hard by the church. Ben and Harry feel that explaining away a bloody corpse on a hurdle is rightly lawyer's work, so I tell the Rector what little I know and leave the others to proceed in a decorous manner to the crypt, where the body is to be laid for the time being. Harry is also to let my mother know that I will be a little later than planned. It may be that a small part of her wrath will descend on his broad shoulders and not on mine.

Thus it is that I take the road alone eastwards to the Big House with the purse and the strange paper securely about my person, and with a story to tell that I expect will surprise the Colonel a great deal.

'You did right to report this to me first, John,' says Colonel Payne. He's a brisk, neat little man. His hair is short even for a Roundhead and is, I notice, now almost entirely grey. He strokes his closely shaven chin, newly scraped this hour, and his piercing blue eyes look out of the window into his Park. In the distance, beyond the trees, is the Steward's Lodge, where Sir Felix lives cheaply. 'I can contact the Coroner later, after I have viewed the body myself. The poor fellow is still lying where he fell?'

'We put him in the crypt at St Peter's,' I say. 'The chill there will stop him stinking. And the dogs were looking for a free meal. Ben Bowman and Harry Hardy helped me carry him thither on a hurdle.'

'I should perhaps give them some money for their trouble?' For Colonel Payne, being Lord of the Manor remains a burden and a puzzlement. Sir Felix would have known the right thing to do, what was customary, how much they might expect. The new Lord of the Manor looks at me quizzically in case I also know the right thing to do, what is customary, how much to expect. He hopes I will tell him.

'If you wish,' I say.

'I'll consider the matter later,' he says with a sigh. He runs a small hand over his grey head. There's no spare flesh on those fingers or anywhere else on the Colonel. The skin is taut and pale over his cheekbones and lined above from much frowning. He is frowning now. Anyone who spent five minutes with the Colonel would realise that he is a man of military briskness and determination. But another five minutes in his company would reveal the doubt that so often follows each of his decisions, and the gentle drift back to where he started or to some other comfortable place. There was a time when Colonel Payne had seemed destined for greatness—a respected soldier and a close friend of both Cromwell and my Lord Fairfax—but he lacked the guile to be any more than that. Peace has undone him every bit as much as the war undid Sir Felix.

It's a while since I was last at the Big House. I'd forgotten that time seems to run more slowly in these echoing oak-panelled rooms, or how the light slants in through the tall leaded windows. I watch the gleaming motes of dust hanging in the still air.

'You think the dead man was a spy then?' the Colonel says eventually, sinking onto a hard wooden chair. He seems tired. He thought that he had bought a pleasant country house in which he could live at his ease. Nobody warned him about the possibility of dead Royalist agents.

'Surely the cipher he was carrying proves it?' I say.

'That would be jumping to conclusions on the basis of very little evidence,' says the Colonel. 'What do people like us know of ciphers anyway?'

I do in fact know quite a lot about ciphers but wonder if it would be polite to correct the Lord of the Manor so abruptly.

'He has special codes for General Harrison and another general,' I say.

'Monck,' says the Colonel.

'I've heard of Harrison. He was cashiered and imprisoned, was he not? Who is Monck?'

'Commander in chief in Scotland,' says the Colonel. As a soldier he knows that. He's probably served with or fought against anyone in England who can call themselves a general. 'Monck was a Royalist once, but not any more. One of Lord Protector Cromwell's best and most trusted commanders. Unlike that dangerous fanatic Harrison.'

Well, at least I know who Monck is now. An important man it would seem. Harrison was important also once, but Cromwell is ruthless with those who cross him. Harrison is now almost as forgotten at Westminster as Colonel Payne must be.

I try to explain to the Colonel about the dead man's wound and the lack of blood on the ground close by. 'And he was killed some time after midnight,' I add. 'Or at least the body was most certainly dumped at the dung heap after midnight. There was dew on the ground beneath it.'

I expect the Colonel to nod sagely and compliment me on my observation, but he seems to be preoccupied with his fallow deer, which are grazing just beneath us, outside in the Park. When he turns again, he just says: 'You say you saw Ifnot Davies out this morning?'

'He needed more fuel. I imagine he was on his way to the charcoal burners' huts in the wood to bespeak another load.'

'Why is he called Ifnot? Is it a Welsh name?'

'Not as far as I know. He's a Quaker, but his parents were Puritans. He was baptised If Jesus Had Not Died For Thee, Thou Hadst Been Damned. So we call him Ifnot. Hadn't anyone told you that?'

'No,' he says. 'Nobody ever tells me anything about the village. They think I won't be here long enough to need to know. Did you see anyone else abroad other than Ben and Ifnot?'

'Not this morning. There was a stranger who rode into the village last night and went to the inn.'

The Colonel rubs his eyes. Perhaps he did not sleep well last night. It was a hot one, unless you chose to sleep out of doors.

'Another stranger?' he asks. 'I mean, could this rider not have been the same person that you found killed?'

'No, the dead man is quite short. The rider was much taller. Dressed in dark clothing. Mounted on a grey horse.'

Surely I must recall more than that. I am beginning to wonder if Ben wasn't right that I had drunk slightly more than I should.

The Colonel does, however, take the most charitable view that he could.

'I suppose there was no light to see him clearly?' he says.

I think back to the muffled voice.

'No, there was a moon, but he held his cloak across his face. That was odd on a warm summer night, don't you think?'

If the Colonel does find this strange, he does not say so. 'You say the man just asked for the inn?' he says.

'Yes,' I say. There was also, as I recall, some discussion of Anabaptists, but I decide not to trouble the Colonel with this.

'So, Ben must have seen him?'

'Ben says not.'

'Then he didn't go to the inn,' says the Colonel.

'But he must have stopped here in the village—for a while anyway. Perhaps at some other house… The horse couldn't have gone further. Might he not have been the killer? Or have seen something at least?'

'Your rider went off in the direction of the inn—that is to say, the Saffron Walden road? Not along the Cambridge road, where the body was found?'

'Yes,' I say.

'And he didn't come from the direction of Cambridge?'

'No, I'm certain he came along the London road.'

The Colonel takes a deep breath. 'Then he never went anywhere near where the body was found. Wherever he went, I don't think that he need concern us. You saw nobody else abroad last night?'

'Not on the road. There were plenty at the inn. Ben Bowman obviously. And Nell Bowman. Roger Pole. Dickon Grice and his brothers—Nathan and young Jacob. William Warwick. William Cobley. Ifnot was there too but says he left the inn shortly after I did.' Then I feel obliged to add: 'Roger Pole left before me.' Pole is the Colonel's secretary and the man for whom the words 'prating coxcomb' were specifically invented. I am sorry to have to mention him at all.

'That's right,' says the Colonel approvingly. 'He returned here, to the manor house, around nine o'clock, I think. Not that I could have suspected Roger of any involvement in this business.'

Would it be tactless for me to say that I think Pole would cut anyone's throat if he found it mildly amusing and the blood didn't splash on his lace cuffs? But Roger Pole has an impeccable witness to say that he retired at a spinster-like hour to his own bed. That is a pity, but it cannot be helped.

'And where was the village Constable?' Colonel Payne suddenly demands. 'By the sound of it, he was tippling while a murderer was running loose in the village. He might at least have reported the discovery of the body.'

'I suspect Will Cobley is still abed,' I say. 'I'm sure he'll report to you once he is up and people have told him about it.'

'Asleep now and drunk when the murder occurred?' the Colonel demands. He apparently feels that the Constable could have performed his duties better.

'So it would seem,' I say. 'But I doubt that Cobley sober could have prevented a murder any more than Cobley drunk.'

'Isn't the suppression of drunkenness also one of his duties?' asks the Colonel.

The post of Constable has many cares and is, like that of watchman, entirely unpaid. It isn't something that most people are anxious to do, especially at harvest time or sowing time or haymaking time or shearing time or when they might be doing anything more useful than poking into other villagers' business. Those eligible for election often spend the whole year thinking of reasons why it is somebody else's turn. Cobley has obligingly undertaken the role for a while now. Of course, it has one or two useful benefits.

'Yes, he has to suppress drunkenness,' I say. 'That's why Ben lets him drink free of charge.'

'I shall speak to Cobley severely for failing to set a watch,' says the Colonel. 'I may have to fine him a pound for his negligence…'

'I doubt if Will Cobley has ever seen twenty shillings all together in one place. He says in any case that since he was elected in 1649, his term of office was up long ago. He says he's only doing it because nobody has appointed a successor.'

'Really? Who is responsible for making the appointment?'

'You,' I say. 'As for levying fines, we may be fined ourselves if we don't quickly inform the neighbouring magistrates that a murder has been committed—and that a stranger passed through the village the same night.'

The Colonel clearly does not need to be reminded of his obligations, at least not by a half-trained lawyer. 'Cobley should be aware of his duties and the penalties.'

I would seem to have made Will Cobley's normally happy existence slightly more onerous. But perhaps I can still rescue

him. 'I doubt that Sir Felix would have fined him,' I say, 'in the days when he was magistrate here. Sir Felix was loyal to anyone who sincerely believed they were trying to serve him, however incompetently. As for any drunkenness… Cobley did not drink thus before the death of his son.'

The Colonel scowls, but I can see that my arrow has struck home. When he speaks again, it is not to talk of fines, and his tone is almost placatory. 'We may at least be sure that the killer has fled. Back to wherever he came from probably. Nobody who lives in this village would commit murder, John. You know that and I know that, don't we?'

'Yes,' I say, mentally excluding Roger Pole from this general amnesty.

'And if it wasn't one of *us*,' continues the Colonel, ignoring the fact that few of the villagers think of him as anything but an upstart outsider, 'then it must have been a stranger. Do you see my argument?'

'Yes,' I say. It's not a difficult argument to see. If it wasn't one of us, then it was one of them. Throats don't cut themselves.

'Footpads like as not,' says the Colonel. I wonder whether, like Ben, he will add that they must be from Suffolk, but the Colonel has not lived here long enough to have learned that honesty and decency are considered to stop short at the county boundary. The Rector referred to 'Suffolk and Gomorrah' in a sermon recently and nobody even thought to correct him.

'So, you will send to the other magistrates? It may be that it was footpads as you say, but we should at least tell them to watch for the horseman.'

'Your description of him, if I may say so, John, is hardly clear. And all we know about him is that he was asking for the inn at which the dead man was staying. What am I to say to the other magistrates? Please arrest a man on a grey horse? They'll laugh in my face!'

I think that my description was slightly better than that, and I doubt that the magistrates in Saffron Walden will find a killing as amusing as the Colonel suggests. Humour and murder

are strange bedfellows. But that is not the point I wish to raise with him.

'*Was* the murdered man staying at the inn?' I ask.

I have caused the Colonel to look bemused. 'So I understood…Wasn't that what Ben told you?'

'He said the murdered man had been to the inn, not that he was staying there. He said he didn't know the man's name.'

For a moment the Colonel does not seem certain how to reply, then he pats me on the shoulder in a fatherly manner. 'Very well, John. I'll send out a description of your rider, if that is what you would like. In the meantime we'll have the other poor fellow buried at St Peter's. I'll pay naturally.'

'Once the inquest has taken place,' I say. 'The Rector won't be happy to bury a stranger without some sort of inquiry, surely?'

'Abraham Reading? Oh, he'll not cause us any trouble,' says the Colonel. And for the first time he actually smiles.

CHAPTER 6

Late Morning

'The hair of the dog that bit you, young Master John,' says Ben Bowman, pushing a grey, dented tankard across the counter. Having come from the Colonel's lofty drawing room, I am aware how low the ceiling is in this smoke-blackened parlour, with its massive, gnarled beams, its great stone fireplace and the light creeping in cautiously through the tiny leaded panes of greenish glass. If I were to raise my hand, I could touch with ease the sooty timbers that support the floor above.

But it is my purse that I reach for. I am pleasantly surprised, in view of the amount I allegedly drank last night, how full it still is. Indeed, with the shilling I acquired this morning, I would appear to have sixpence more than I left Cambridge with. Hardly a night of debauchery then.

'No, put your money away,' says Ben with previously unrecorded generosity. 'Accept this as small apology for politely asking you to leave last night.'

Actually, I don't remember him being polite. Agitated possibly. Insistent definitely. But not polite. Nor did I have much

support from my fellow drinkers when I raised reasonable objections. Still, I may as well let bygones be bygones.

'Both apology and ale accepted,' I say, taking a deep draught. It is cool, golden, nutty and aromatic, straight from Ben's excellent cellar. Bowman rubs his hands together while he waits for me to say how good it is. Unlike Ifnot and Sir Felix, he did not fight in the war. Had he fought for Parliament, he says, he would have lost his Royalist customers, and had he fought for the King, he would have lost his Roundhead customers. When men shot each other at Marston Moor, Ben was brewing ale. When young Mark Cobley was breathing his last at Naseby, Ben's plump red hands were soapily washing tankards.

'As good as ever you brewed,' I say, setting the mug down.

Ben nods as if at a self-evident truth. 'Been home yet?' he asks.

'I sent a message by Harry Hardy to say that I had to go and see the Colonel up at the Big House.' I wonder if my mother threw anything breakable at Harry while he was delivering the message. Probably. I'll check later.

'So, what did the Colonel have to say?' Ben has started to polish a tankard that is already as bright as it is ever going to be. The exertion threatens to make him breathless. He is perhaps a little too fond of his own ale and of Nell's food.

'Not much,' I reply. Indeed, I am troubled now by how little the Colonel said. I am not sure what I had expected of him, but more perhaps than the dismissive conclusion that the killers must have been footpads and that an inquest was optional under English Law. There is no sign of the Colonel arriving to make further enquiries in the village, so I may as well ask Ben a few questions myself.

'Ben,' I say, 'you said you didn't know the name of the man we found.'

Ben shrugs and starts rearranging his tankards on their shelf—misshapen pewter objects of all possible sizes, each allegedly capable of containing an honest pint.

'But he was staying here at the inn, wasn't he?' I say to the back of Ben's shirt. I am slightly put out that I have had to

discover this for myself, when we had carried the heavy hurdle between us from the dung heap to the church. I was content to comply with Ben's injunction that there should be a respectful silence as we carried him, but I might at least have been given that snippet of gossip as we struggled across the field.

'Didn't I say so?'

'You just said that he'd been to the inn.'

'Been at. Staying at. It's all the same, isn't it?'

'No,' I say. 'It's not all the same.'

'Maybe I'm just not good with words like you lawyers. You won't hold that against a simple innkeeper, young Master John. Stop treating me like a witness in one of your courts. You've been studying Law too long for your own good, it would seem. Anyway, where else is a traveller supposed to stay?'

'He would have had little choice,' I say more grudgingly than I really intended. 'But if my rider was the murderer, it would explain why he was asking for the inn.'

Ben pivots round suddenly. 'I keep a respectable house here. He certainly wasn't murdered at my inn.'

I'm not sure that's quite what I meant, but my reassurances on this point do little to repair the damage. Ben isn't happy to have his inn even tenuously linked to a killing, which largely explains his earlier silence on the matter. Nobody's going to want to sleep in a room where a murder has taken place—or even where a murdered man was lately staying. Ghosts are amongst the more rational superstitions of people round here. Most of them have seen a hobgoblin clear as day. Don't even ask them about witches.

'Anyway,' I add, 'if our dead friend was staying here, you ought to have his name.'

'Maybe,' says Ben. The good thing about Ben is that you can see from a couple of miles off when he thinks he is being cunning. I'm quite a lot closer than that.

'*Maybe?*' I say.

'I think he said he was called Smith,' says Ben.

'Your memory's clearly improved,' I say.

'Nell reminded me,' says Ben. 'I asked her when I got home. She's the one with book-learning. She's the one who remembers things. "Murdered man?" she says to me. "That would be our Mr Smith." "So it was," I says. "Mr Smith."'

There is scarcely a word in this last utterance that you would trust to give you the right change of a florin. Ben has no idea that it is possible to lie and still speak in your normal voice.

'Smith? Just that? No Christian name? No travel pass signed by a justice of the peace for you to demand and then tut over?' I ask.

'I wouldn't trouble a *gentleman* for a pass. Mr Smith clearly wasn't a vagrant or a troublemaker.'

This is an unusually generous act on Ben's part. His natural distrust of strangers normally contends awkwardly but on an equal footing with his chosen vocation as an innkeeper.

'When he arrived,' Ben continues, 'he just said he was Mr Smith. From London Town.'

'Then we might be able to discover his family there,' I say. 'In London Town. We ought to try anyway.'

Ben's expression tells me that London is a big place and I can try if I wish, but he's not coming with me.

'I still don't understand, though, why the rider never came here,' I say.

'Changed his mind,' says Ben. 'Went to Saffron Walden.'

'No. His horse was lame, and he definitely asked…' What had he asked? I try to remember. He hadn't just enquired whether there was an inn close by—he wanted this one. Normally, Ben would have no difficulty in believing that of all the inns in Essex, his would be the one that a traveller would seek out. Yet he is now trying to persuade me that somebody with a crippled horse would willingly press on into the dark night, forgoing his legendary hospitality.

'Never saw him,' says Ben.

'Then maybe he went to some other house in the village…' I say. Because he might have ridden on to Ifnot's cottage and forge, or even to the Big House itself. But why, then, not ask for either

one of those? He asked for the *inn*. How did he just vanish on that short stretch of road?

'Are you sure I can't get you some more ale, Master John? On the house of course.' Well, that makes two more offers of free ale than I have ever had from Ben.

'Thanks,' I say, 'but I'd best be getting home.'

To do this, I have to pass last night's resting place. Harry Hardy is working in his garden in front of the cottage. He is picking beans in a leisurely way but slowly straightens his back when he sees me and nods a greeting. He's old enough to remember my great-grandfather lived in the Big House.

'How did things go with the old Colonel?' he asks.

'Well enough,' I say. Then I add, because I am sure the Colonel would wish me to say it: 'Colonel Payne asked me to thank you for helping to carry Mr Smith to the church.'

'Them thanks don't come with any money, I takes it?'

Ah yes—money. I realise that, in trying to be fair to the Colonel, I have deprived Harry of payment. I reach into my purse and, though I can ill afford it, take out the King's shilling. There's no reason why Harry should suffer for my negligence.

'That's kind of the Colonel,' says Harry, pocketing my silver. 'Or better than usual anyhow. He were called Smith then—that fellow we took to St Peter's?'

'So Ben says.'

'Friend of your'n?'

'Not that I know of.'

'Did you owe him some money then?'

'Not unless he's a Cambridge tailor.'

Harry pauses. He's not sure whether to tell me something, but my shilling tips the balance. 'You know he were axing a'ter you?'

'When?'

'Heard him at the inn, yesterday a'ternoon, axing Ben Bowman. Wanted to know if a John Grey lived in the village.'

'What did Ben say?'

'Not much. Just looked a bit mazed, like he'd never heard of you.'

'Maybe Ben misheard.'

'I heard clear enough, and I'm twice Ben's age.'

'Why should a Royalist spy ask after me anyway?'

Harry pauses again. 'Couldn't rightly say for why. But I just thought you should know. I'm not planning to tell anyone else of course. Not unless you want me to.'

'No,' I say. 'I don't want you to.'

I wish him good morning and continue on my way, but a little more slowly than before.