

ONE



WOOL QUAY, THAMES STREET AND
HARP LANE, LONDON

The 18th of November, Anno Domini 1580

In the 23rd year of the reign of Elizabeth I

The old wherry glided up the bank and halted in the thick silt. With practiced ease the boatman leaped out, ignoring the splash of muddy water spattering his breeches and stockings, and dragged the craft as far up the embankment as his strength allowed. Twining the rope around his elbow, he slung the remainder over his shoulder, then turned and gave a curt nod.

Caleb nimbly jumped over the side of the boat and, fortuitously, onto some rocks. Finding his balance, he held out his hand to proffer assistance. I gestured for Angela to precede me and watched as she maneuvered her girth over the edge and onto the embankment. Grunting as he took her weight, Caleb held her while she found her feet. I looked back toward the opposite bank and London's licentious cousin, Southwark, where, for a few joyous hours, I'd been able to forget everything. Watching the first performance of Caleb's new play, *Circe's Chains*, I was once again Mallory Bright, daughter of the finest locksmith this side of the Thames, a woman with a future as promising as her name.

Melancholy unsettled my brief happiness the way the wind snapped the pennants above the Tower looming to my right. Clouds lumbered toward the battlements from the east, foretoking yet another late autumn storm. In the time it had taken us to cross the river the wind had become stronger, its bitter bite stirring whitecaps on the water. There would be wild weather tonight, and other ships and barges on the river were being battened down in preparation.

“If my lady is awaiting an invitation, one will not be forthcoming from this quarter.” Caleb used the voice he usually reserved for the stage, catapulting me out of my reverie.

The boatman murmured something under his breath. I was sure I heard “popinjay,” and bit back a wry smile. It was an apt description. In his parti-colored hose, peascod-bellied doublet, polished buskins and marten-lined cloak to keep the chill at bay, Caleb Hollis was a picture of sartorial splendor. The debts he incurred to maintain such style he saw as a matter of necessity rather than something to concern him. I admired the colorful picture he presented, even as his mouth formed a moue that would have done Angela proud. Yesterday had been Queen’s Day, when Her Majesty’s accession to the throne was commemorated, and the annual tournament, with its tilts and other entertainments, took precedence, postponing the opening of Caleb’s play until today. Concern that patrons would still be recovering from the previous day’s revelries and unlikely to attend proved unfounded, as the courtyard of the inn was crowded. After the play finished, and despite the consternation its themes caused, the troupe had been called back to the makeshift stage not twice but three times to resounding applause and stamping feet before the place emptied of all but the excited players, friends and hangers-on. Even so, Caleb forwent his moment of glory in order to keep his promise to my father. Ignoring my insistence that he stay and enjoy the praise due to him as both playwright and leading actor, he insisted upon seeing Angela and me across the river to Wool Quay.

“I’ll be back anon,” he’d replied to the entreaties of the troupe’s book holder, his gaze lingering on the tankard of foaming beer being offered. “Please, crave his lordship’s pardon.”

The crush for watercraft at the busy docks at the Inn of Battle Abbey made me grateful for Caleb’s presence. Able to hail the boatman with

ease and assert himself so our passage was prioritized above others who also waited to cross, he ensured we were seated, warm and heading back to London before anyone realized their rights had been charmingly usurped. Shushing my protests that we were no more important than anyone else, Caleb gave an impudent flash of his dimples and, as we pushed away from Southwark's busy banks, begged us to review the play and his part. Though I had some reservations regarding the disputatious content and the potential it had for attracting undesirable attention from the authorities, who were always quick to pounce on those who dared to criticize the Queen and her council, it was no hardship. Caleb was among the most talented of those currently treading the boards and his reputation as a gifted playwright—albeit one with a knack for flying close to the wind—was becoming firmly established. Praise was the least I could offer him. Of all those I shared my home with, it was Caleb who most behaved as though the years I'd been gone were but the bat of an owlet's wing. It was he who picked up our friendship, developed over the many seasons he'd lodged within our home, where it had left off, and without the conditions attached to my other bonds. Indeed, I owed Caleb a great deal and hoped one day to repay him.

Still standing in the wherry, I continued to moss-gather, unaware of Caleb glaring at me until he waggled the fingers of his already outstretched arm and snapped them before my face.

"Out!" he said curtly. "Or do you intend to keep us waiting for what remains of the day?"

I flinched at the force of his words, and almost fell back into the boat. Caleb's hand shot out and prevented a tumble.

"Mistress, forgive me," he said quickly, shocked by my reaction.

Simultaneously surprised and embarrassed by my weakness, I quickly recovered and offered a small grin.

"'Tis naught, Caleb. Truly. Only you startled me." Before he could respond, I gathered my skirts, the burden of my Spanish farthingale and the yards of fabric sitting over it—never mind the pattens I was forced to don to protect my pumps from the feculence of the streets, Southwark's being even worse than London's—and levered myself onto the rock with all the refinement of a seagull. Disembarking was more a matter of strategy than grace, and I might well have fallen on

my hindquarters were it not for Caleb's firm hold. As it was, swaying precariously before I found purchase, I chose my dignity instead—something I'd thought forever lost to me.

"God give you good evening," I said to the boatman and placed a coin in his gnarled hand as I stepped onto the sand.

The boatman displayed what remained of his brown teeth. "May God save you and prosper you, mistress," he said, pocketing the coin and coiling the rope he still held tightly. "I'd not be loitering if I were you," he added, indicating the sky. "You neither, sir," he said pointedly to Caleb.

Offering an arm to Angela, Caleb ignored the wherryman and we made our way across the pungent slurry. Workers operating a crane upon a nearby ship paused to watch. We must have presented an odd sight—me in my widow's garb, Caleb pretty as a peacock, and Angela, my mother's companion and my chaperone for the day, who was plainly but sensibly dressed and needed both of us to steady her. A surly shout ensured activity on the ship resumed. As if responding to the order, we crossed the final section of shale and broken shells quickly and scurried up the steps, past the dock and the warehouses lining this part of the river, toward the houses and the network of lanes and snickets.

"For all that London is my mistress, I care little for her perfume," muttered Caleb, screwing up his nose.

The city glowed softly in the fading light. There was something about sunset that, like dawn, changed the filthy streets of London into an altogether different place. The approaching storm threw a shimmering veil over the churches and shingle-roofed houses. If you held your breath and pretended the chimneys and forges gave up heavenly clouds instead of choking miasmas, and closed your nostrils so the pungent streets became instead bowers of dewy blooms, then London and the churning wide waters of the Thames could be whatever you wanted them to be. At least, that's what Papa used to say. Once I'd thought never to wander its cobbled alleys again, and thus every hearth's smoky billow, every stinking carcass hanging from a rusting hook, every ring of a hammer, every grubby child, toothless slattern or blue-smocked apprentice and every step upon its mostly crowded and fetid lanes drew from me only gratitude; a new appreciation of the place I'd grown up in and to which, God be praised, I'd been returned.

Earlier that day, as Angela and I had made our way over London

Bridge, I'd felt the same. I'd persuaded her we should walk to Southwark and Lewes Inn, where Caleb's play was being performed, claiming I wished to see the sights. In truth, cowardice had also been a factor. The route I'd chosen meant I was less likely to encounter folk I knew—one particularly—especially since I'd selected a time when the stalls along Little Eastcheap would be so crowded the passing of two women would go unnoticed. And I'd been correct. My day thus far had passed in a fanciful haze, offering an ease I'd not felt for a long time. I could almost forget the recent past and the dolorous present, and appreciate the city's glories as if they were new to me.

Only God, my Lord and Savior, knew how much I was akin to the prodigal son, and how great a wastrel. All that was needed for my parable to be complete was for my father to embrace me. God knew, such an act was beyond my mother.

Pausing near Custom House, at the entrance to Water Lane, we said our farewells. Caleb was to quit our sight and, for the first time in over two years, I prepared to walk among those I had once called neighbors and who, I was certain, now waited to judge me. A thousand birds took wing in my chest. Sensing my mood, Caleb placed Angela's hand firmly upon my arm and held it there.

"Hold your lovely head high, Mallory. You've naught to be ashamed of and much to arouse pity." Though he gestured to my ebony garb, he was wrong. I was a sinner of the worst kind.

"I can remain by your side if you wish," he whispered, leaning so close his whiskers brushed my cheek, "but feel you should strengthen that backbone instead of allowing it to turn to eel jelly."

"Sirrah!" exclaimed Angela, her dark eyes flashing, her plump cheeks turning crimson. "You forget your place."

"Indeed, Angela," I reassured her, placing my hand over hers, "he remembers it."

Beneath Caleb's words lay deep concern, and I knew he meant to remind me of the person I once was, a person not inclined to fret over others' imaginings or to stand trembling before friends and strangers, but rather one who viewed the world as a dish created for my delectation and thus to be savored.

With an attempt at a careless "See you anon," I spun away with a brittle laugh. Caleb, with a flourish of his cap and a deep bow, hon-

ored my pretense and left. I didn't begrudge him his celebrations, but dear Lord, I wished he'd stayed. His departure forced me to rally what strength I possessed. I sent a swift prayer heavenward.

"Let us get home," I urged Angela, my throat tight, my thoughts flurried.

We continued along the lane, dodging the urchins chasing each other and any poor stray cat that crossed their path. A couple of gentlemen on horseback rode past, and a group of apprentices leered outside a small alehouse, tankards in hand, nudging and whispering. So little had changed. More people, more noise, more grime. Yet I feared what this suggested. How could so little have altered when I had undergone the greatest of transformations?

We reached the main thoroughfare of Thames Street and its canny vendors, waiting till last light and the distracted air of those traveling home, who tried to tempt us with stale bread, strings of shrunken onions, panniers of warm smelly oysters, cold soggy pies and other unpalatable fare they'd failed to sell during the day. Angela shooed them away with a gaze worthy of Medusa, while I pretended not to see them. It hurt to manufacture an indifference I didn't feel. Times were always hard for those who relied on what came from the land and sea for their keep, especially within the city walls.

Up ahead, a pack of dogs barked as a butcher unhooked the gutted pig strung up outside his premises, a swarm of flies lifting from the gray flesh as he hoisted it over his shoulder and leveled kicks and curses at the hounds. Nearby, a flower seller chatted to an old sailor with a wooden stump where his left leg should be. We entered an area I'd once walked with confidence and I stayed close to Angela, who'd begun to hum the ditty drifting from a nearby tavern.

A wider thoroughfare than some, Harp Lane was lined with two- and three-story houses, many with shops at street level, all with upper stories canting toward each other over the lane. They were like old friends, intent on sharing the secrets of those within.

For all that much was unchanged, there were strange faces, too. People constantly drifted in and out of the city, but here also were the lingering effects of the plague, and of the earthquake that had shaken the city earlier in the year and sent Londoners scattering into the countryside.

Just as these thoughts entered my mind, Master Swithin Hatty-

cliffe, weaver and local counselor, stepped outside his shop, hands upon his bulging stomach, his face upturned to the darkening skies. It had been a long time since we'd last encountered each other. Lost in his study of the oncoming clouds, he failed to see me. I hesitated just a second, then screwed my courage to the sticking place.

"God give you good evening, Master Hattycliffe." My voice was dry, odd.

Before he could reply, the door beside him swung open and out stepped the real reason I'd been reluctant to explore these streets: Isaac Hattycliffe, member of Gray's Inn and my one-time betrothed. He froze when he saw me.

Together, the men stared dolefully. Master Swithin's skin was pale and pitted and his eyes looked oily in the twilight. His son's gaze was like iron—cold, hard and unforgiving. There'd been a time when I had persuaded myself Isaac was moderately handsome. He was the wealthiest man of my acquaintance and, with a law degree almost complete and a prosperous business to inherit, possessed of unlimited prospects. He was considered a good catch—one I'd rejected in a public and shameful fashion.

Unable to speak, I nodded in his direction, trying ineffectually to impart so much with such a simple gesture. What could I say? I'd not only broken his heart but, worse, made him appear a buffoon. I was sorry for that, but dear Lord forgive me, I was not sorry we hadn't wed.

Isaac's lips thinned before he slowly and deliberately turned and walked back into the shop, slamming the door with such force it trembled in its wooden frame. At the sound, activity in the lane momentarily ceased; the chatter stopped and the flames of the braziers and the lamps dimmed. Eyes that had previously failed to notice my presence fastened upon me like gimlets, including those of the dog guarding the stoop of the house next door. A wave of whispers rose and fell. Master Swithin folded his arms and stared, a smirk tugging his mouth. I stumbled. Regaining my composure, I kept my chin up and, as we continued on our way, only the clop of my pattens and the swish of Angela's cloak could be heard.

Until a voice that once murmured ridiculous promises in my ear cried from a window above, echoing over the street, "Lock up your sons! Mistress *Blight* is back among us."

There were gasps followed by vicious and prolonged cackles. The looks became bolder, more appraising. Catcalls and taunts followed. Someone spat. Frigid cold then blazing heat replaced the blood in my veins. My vision blurred as tears began to well. I wanted to run, to be swallowed by the growing shadows. If it hadn't been for Angela's hold upon my arm, her muttered prayers, I think I would have bolted. I don't recall our next steps, but I gradually became aware the jests and attention had ceased and the lane's activity resumed. There was sing-song cheer from the alehouse, the screech of an alley cat and the caw of ravens winging their way home. My breathing steadied; my heart did not. This was guilt unassuaged—it would ensure I was punished over and over for my sins.

"Ignore that *bastardo* Hattycliffe," said Angela softly. "He is nothing more than a, what is it you say? A roaring boy—and all who live here know it."

I hesitated a second before responding, determined the wobble of my limbs would not infect my voice. "A coward and a bully he may be, but there's many would argue my actions created him—Mamma among them."

Mistress Blight. Dear God, is that how they see me?

We walked the rest of the way home without exchanging another word, aware of the gossip that would no doubt swell in our wake. Relief swept my body as the house came into view. I was a soldier returning from war, longing for the safety of those walls, even though the harbor they represented was only temporary.

On the corner of Harp Lane and Tower Street, our house was a fine three-story building with mullioned glass in all the windows and two parlors inside, all surrounded by a stone wall. The entrance was on Harp Lane, while access to Papa's shop was on Tower Street. His workshop was at the rear, separated from the main house by a small yard complete with chickens and a greedy cow. Just before the intersection with Tower Street there was a big old creaking gate, partially hidden by a huge elm tree. Mainly used by tradespeople and servants, it had always been my preferred entrance and exit.

Once inside, I would pay my respects to Papa, to my lady mother, and then lock myself in my room and never venture out again . . . This outing had been a mistake, a terrible, wretched mistake. I should never

have allowed myself to be persuaded. The play, for all its glory, was not worth it. Damn Caleb . . . and damn Papa for his acquiescence.

Just as I opened the gate, it was wrenched backward. In the gap, a grime-streaked face with large eyes appeared. It was my father's youngest apprentice, Dickon. Upon seeing me, he started, his neck and cheeks reddening.

"M . . . M . . . Mistress Mallory. I . . . I . . . I was just coming to find you."

"What is it, Dickon?" I asked and, casting etiquette aside, squeezed past him.

Leaving Angela to shut the gate, Dickon followed me then stopped, studying his feet, scraping them back and forth in the dirt, hands clasped behind his back, his blue shirt covered by his leather apron. Taken on by my father after I left, Dickon had heard the prate about his master's daughter and didn't know what to think when the subject of that tattle manifested as a living, breathing being. He had avoided me since I'd been home. Now he had no choice.

He swallowed a few times. "It's your pa. He needs you, mistress."

My heart gamboled in my chest. *At last.*

He locked eyes with me. He had lovely brown eyes, like our spaniels.

"Thank you, Dickon."

A long, low rumble of thunder sounded. As one, we glanced toward the heavens. The chickens squawked and the cat, Latch, scurried along the branch of the elm, leaping onto the rear wall. The dense, dark smell of moisture clung to every surface.

"M . . . Mistress, I feel I should tell you—" Dickon paused and gulped, his head swiveling to follow the cat. "The master's not alone. There is a stranger with him."

I turned toward the workshop. Light flickered through the closed shutters, smoke billowed from the chimney. "A stranger? Who?"

Dickon shrugged. "A gentleman . . . nay, a nobleman. I've not seen him before. Master seems to know him. Not certain if I should be telling you this, mistress, but he's not been himself since the gentleman arrived. Not at all."

The earth opened beneath me, a great maw into which I would sink. *No. No. Please God. Had damnation come to visit me?* I resisted the urge to clutch the locket hidden beneath my dress. Instead, I rested my

hand briefly over where it lay against my heart, cleared my throat, and pretended nothing was amiss.

“This man, he’s been here awhile?”

“Since the bells tolled three at least. Master told us to leave the workshop, even though tasks remain unfinished, what with the holiday yesterday and all.”

“I see.” This time when I met Dickon’s eyes, I saw something that reflected what lay in my own. Fear. I pulled my cloak tighter.

“Lead the way.” I mustered the warmest smile I could, considering the cold wrapping itself about me. The first drops of rain struck.

“Nay, mistress,” said Dickon, brushing water from his cheeks. “The master says I’m to stay in the house. You’re to go alone.”

The light was gloomy, the shadows growing. A gust of wind lifted my cloak, my kirtle, nipped my cheeks. The rain became heavier and still I didn’t move. A flash of lightning ripped the sky.

“*Vai*,” said Angela, giving me a little shove. “You go, Mallory. You must obey your papa.”

Indeed, from now on, I must. I promised. It was what we’d agreed, after all. A condition of my return. I would be a dutiful daughter.

Gripping Dickon by the shoulder, Angela maneuvered him before her, a shield against the weather. With one last reassuring look, she jerked her head in the direction of the workshop.

Left with little choice, I lowered my face and ran, wondering who this mysterious nobleman might be. The man who finally forced my father, a proud master locksmith, to acknowledge that he needed me still.

TWO



HARP LANE, LONDON

The 18th of November, Anno Domini 1580

In the 23rd year of the reign of Elizabeth I

I paused outside the workshop, took a deep breath and entered. Arthur and Galahad, our two spaniels, scabbled at my legs to attract attention. Trained not to bark lest they destroy Papa's or the apprentices' concentration, they were nonetheless active in their affections. I kneaded their ears and stroked their soft heads as I glanced around.

Papa was bent over the main table in the middle of the room. He raised a finger to indicate he knew I was there, and continued to concentrate on an object in front of him. As for the mysterious guest, of him there was no sign. Aside from Papa, the workshop and shop beyond were deserted.

Slipping the wet cloak from my shoulders, I studied the place where I'd spent a great deal of my youth. I had not graced its rooms since my return some weeks earlier. Everything appeared just as I remembered. So much so, I could almost persuade myself time stood still. The forge against the west wall glowed, its embers banked, its heat comforting. A pair of bellows rested next to it; the anvil squatted a few feet away. The larger tools sat in their holders nearby. Beneath the shuttered window was a bench strewn with instruments and bits

of solid metal. An assortment of keys and barrels lay awaiting ward and tumbler cuts, their shanks gleaming in the soft light. Beside them were locks in various stages of completion, not yet dressed for the occasion. Papa's work stool was abandoned underneath the bench. The half-eaten remnants of a loaf, some cheese and unwashed tankards sat on a smaller table. Above a large cupboard on the far wall hung a series of keys and an unfinished master lock—the work of Kit Jolebody, Papa's eldest apprentice, if I wasn't mistaken.

Though it had been a long time since I'd sat at these benches and tested my competence, I knew locks and their workings better than most.

I'd never sought to acquire such knowledge nor the skills that attended it. Up until the age of seven, I was like any other girl of my station, learning to sew, dance, paint pretty pictures and correctly address folk of all ranks. What set our family apart, aside from Mamma's origins and stubborn adherence to the old faith, was that our house was blessed with books—wonderful books, full of stories, ideas and so much more. The second son of a gentleman, Papa, like his brothers, had been given a good education. Able to translate from the Greek and Latin, he would read me stories of gods, goddesses and the mortals who both loved and defied them. I also learned of King Arthur and his knights, the Holy Grail, courtly manners and tales of damsels in need of rescue by sword-wielding lords with noble intentions, holiness and grace. I would imagine what it would be like to be the object of such intense passion that a man would forgo his dearest friends and his sworn oath in order to serve the woman who'd captured his heart and soul. I would sigh into my pillow, clutching the cat or one of the hounds until they wriggled free. My days were crowded with such stories and my nights with the dreams and longings they inspired.

Then Papa read Thomas Becon's book *The Catechism*, whose pages argued forcefully for the education of girls. Becon believed girls must be as learned as boys so they might grow into virtuous women who in turn would teach their children the benefits of godliness and morality. According to Papa, one had only look at Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth to see such principles in action. She was clever as well as virtuous and godly and her children, the good folk of England, reaped the benefits.

So would I.

It wasn't long after Papa had finished Becon's book that Master Fodrake, a teacher, sought lodgings with us. Papa struck a deal—Master Fodrake could have rooms and food provided he taught me my letters and, much to my delight, to read for myself the tales Papa had related. It was Master Fodrake, then a man of middle years with a straggly beard, kind twinkling eyes and a voice so mellow and soft that listening to it was akin to being stroked with feathers, who brought William Lily's Latin grammar book into the house and used it to add the language of scholars to the Greek he struggled to teach me, as well as the Italian, French and English with which I was already conversant. Within months, I was able to read the marvelous orations of Cicero and, against Mamma's wishes, the magnetic verses of Ovid and Virgil. Master Fodrake, my tutor and oft-times instructor to Papa's apprentices as well, also brought the musings of Plato, Aristotle and the works of the Saracen philosophers into my little sphere. Insisting my mathematics must be beyond reproach, he introduced me to William Buckley's *Arithmetica Memorativa*, a series of Latin verses that taught the rules of mathematics—so my Latin and numbers were improved in one fell swoop.

But all this learning, this vast pool of knowledge in which I swam with such pleasure, didn't compare to having the attention of my papa. Mamma may have labored to bring me into this world but it was as if once this maternal duty had been accomplished, she was not obliged to fulfill any others. It was no secret Mamma longed for a son, but no matter how many times her womb quickened, aside from me no child, male or female, survived more than a few weeks. Believing that somehow it was my fault and that my presence precluded her being blessed with any other babes, her relationship with me became increasingly strained. To say it lacked the fondness I enjoyed with both Papa and with Mamma's companion, her cousin Angela, was to understate the coolness that accompanied our every encounter. Over the years Mamma became an ever more distant figure of judgment and disdain. At first I sought to please her, but, as I grew older, I came to challenge and ultimately defy her.

Did Mamma's remoteness drive me into Papa's workshop, to hover by his side as he made beautiful intricate keys and locks? Did I understand, even as a young girl, that my bond with Papa was at the expense

of the one with my mother? I'm uncertain. In many ways I simply accepted that Mamma didn't hold the same fondness for me as Papa. It was the natural order of things and required no explanation.

I was my father's daughter. When I was with Papa, the hours became a solace, the workshop a refuge from the vexation my mere presence aroused in my mother. Indulgent, he would answer my endless questions, explain his techniques and allow me to file his carefully crafted keys to polished smoothness. At first he did it to humor a lonely child, but as he saw my enthusiasm and responded to it as a natural teacher does a willing pupil, these early lessons transformed into something more. My mornings were spent with Master Fodrake and my afternoons became Papa's. Mamma did not object nor change the manner of her dealings with me.

When I reached the age when I should have been learning how to run a house, make ale and perform any charitable works the parish required, I was not only burying my head in the work of the Romans and Greeks, I was also becoming adept at understanding the temperatures at which a forge must be kept in order to turn metal molten and make it pliable. When I should have been concerned with studying songs and perfecting my abilities with a musical instrument, I was learning how the instruments of a locksmith were used: the tongs, hammers, rods, stiletos, slim metal bars and bellows. Father would explain how someone who works with bronze, iron and steel or alloys must approach each task not only with respect for the material but with an awareness of the shape it would take. It was the master's role to understand what resided within the metal and to help it emerge. Only then could a locksmith bend the iron, for example, to the pattern in his mind or in the sketch before him. While the head held the Platonic and God-blessed form, the product of the hands was the imperfect earthly version. Though it never lived up to its heaven-sent ideal, it was incumbent upon the craftsman to seek perfection. I would watch as Papa sought to arrive at this destination daily. Though he believed he fell short, his many wealthy clients and the reputation he earned did much to counter that notion.

While fashioning keys and locks didn't require the strength of a blacksmith or an ironmonger, it was beyond my capabilities and sex—apart from filing the metal, Papa would never allow me to prac-

tice as his apprentices did. But testing the locks, seeing how resistant they were to the cunning of a lock-pick, this was within my ken and something Papa indulged. Lock-picking required an agility and firmness of purpose, a mind not shackled to the object itself and what it was designed to do, but to defeating the intentions of its maker. My nimble fingers and understanding of the workings behind the metal plates and elaborate escutcheons—the ornate frontispiece that often covered the keyhole—as well as the pins, springs and bolts, served me well. Undoing the locks, bypassing the wards and tumblers without the keys designed to open them, was something that came naturally to me. Being a girl proved no handicap—not while my skills were kept secret.

Before long, after the apprentices had retired for the night or were occupied with errands and other tasks, I was helping Papa test the locks his workshop produced.

It became a game between us—and as I grew older and more skilled, more often than not I emerged the victor.

Whenever Mamma saw my stained and calloused hands she railed at Papa before turning on me. Accused of taking no care over my appearance, of defeating her efforts to make me presentable and thus marriageable, I didn't argue. Instead of exclaiming over the silk and woolen garments she ordered so I would not shame her, the wife of a wealthy locksmith, in public, I would gladly cover the sumptuous fabrics and shuck on the leather apron and gloves of the trade, hiding my pretty skirts and bodice, tying back my long hair and tucking it beneath an ugly thick scarf instead of the fashionable coifs, caps and decorated bonnets designed to enhance my ebony locks. Shamefully, I sometimes paraded in this working apparel before Mamma simply to nettle her, but also to get her attention. With a slap across my face, or a hairbrush against my thigh, Mamma would demand I remove the filthy garments and, with loud prayers to blessed Mother Mary and all the saints, banish me from her sight.

In the privacy of my room I would smile through the tears, holding my hand mirror aloft, turning it this way and that in order to admire my strange ensemble before undressing. Mamma was mistaken in thinking I wasn't vain. I was. I relished every scald and scar, every broken fingernail, every scratch and torn piece of clothing. Her punishments

became part of my achievements, a sign I wasn't the curse of a female instead of a male child, or God's punishment for her sins, but a skilled and useful person. Dressing in my best for church each Sunday, I wore the badges of my secret ability the way other young women wore their ruffs, embroidered stomachers, decorated partlets, satin kirtles and farthingales. My indifference to her perturbation, my stubborn refusal to capitulate to her desires, infuriated Mamma and saddened Papa, who loved us both.

"She's a young woman," Mamma would screech. "Not an apprentice to be enslaved to a craft."

Papa would agree, reaching for his ale, and grin. "No less because she wears leather over her silks."

"You only say so because when she dresses like this, she resembles you. She's like an actor in costume. But God in His wisdom knows, there'll come a time when she must cast this playacting aside and be the woman she was born. It's not a profession she needs but a husband. If we're ever to see her settled in this world, out from under our roof, it's by marriage. Lord knows she'll have enough trouble finding a husband looking the way she does, let alone possessing a man's mind and skills. It's not natural," she would cry and then, lowering her voice and turning her head aside, would murmur, "Nothing about her is."

Defiantly she would stare at Papa, cross herself in the papist way and mutter words that, if they ever reached certain ears, would see her loyalty to the throne questioned. Despite how she sounded, Mamma's objections were never about our sovereign lady; they were about the woman I was becoming.

The pain Mamma's words aroused became another piece of my armor—chinks were not allowed.

"Let her be, Valentina," Papa would sigh. "You're too hard on the child. What harm is there if, for the time being, she continues to find pleasure unpicking locks? After all, she's very talented."

"At unmaking what you fashion, sir. This is not a gift but a curse you have bestowed. You're playing at God. Making her in your image," scolded Mamma. "No good will come of it. The smithy is no place for a woman. Look at what happened to the last one known to work the forge—she crafted the very nails driven into the palms of Our Lord

Jesus Christ. *Mio Dio!* As if we women don't suffer enough penance for our sins. The catalog need not grow, and not with your daughter's name upon it."

In attempting to shield me from her wrath, Papa was actually providing Mamma with more ammunition.

"She's a locksmith's daughter, that's all, and cannot be accused of the charges you would lay at her feet."

Mamma made a noise of disgust.

Unaware of the effect of his words, Papa would continue to defend and even praise me, and I loved him for it.

"She is my Athena, my Hecate, and, like these goddesses, she's but the key holder. She holds the keys to my heart, the city that is my forged mind." He would laugh at his joke. Mamma didn't. "One day I will pass these keys to the man who deserves her. Not before, Valentina, so hold your peace."

Mamma would throw up her hands and stride from the room. If she spied me hiding near the door, she never acknowledged it. I would wait until she ascended the stairs then enter the room and my father's arms.

And so, as I grew older and spent more time with Papa, the arguments would circle. Despite my joy in Papa's pride, I could not fault Mamma in her concerns. It didn't take much to disqualify a woman from the marriage market. Stories of spinsters with harelips, six toes, eyes that stared in different directions, hair that fell out when combed and monstrous growths upon their bodies abounded—any night I spent in the kitchen with the apprentices and servants I'd be regaled with tales of good fortune and woe. That all these deformities and many more besides became invisible depending on the size of the dowry, business or house a woman brought with her to a marriage bed was not lost on any of us. Alas, my dowry was merely adequate, Mamma said, and it was up to me to make up the deficit by making myself more desirable. My skills and even my education, according to Mamma, did naught in that regard.

Unspoken, but louder for that, was the fact that in a world where appearances counted for so much, I was already at a disadvantage. Physically I was most unfashionable. Uncommonly tall, slender as a willow stick but with olive-toned skin and jet-black hair, I was most often

described as ungainly and teased as the spawn of a blackamoor or a Romany. I looked nothing like Mamma, who had the fiery hair of our Queen, her creamy complexion and the voluptuousness of a woodland nymph. I'd taken father's height and build, but my hair, skin and eyes—which were a pale gray circled by dark rings (like a new planet gliding into our ken, Papa teased, while Caleb sighed at his poetry)—were my own.

“Your *nonna*, she had such eyes,” Mamma would say bitterly, as if I'd not inherited a familial characteristic but a malediction. “Your *zio*, your uncle, he too had the dark hair of Romans,” she would spit before once again rinsing mine in lemon juice in a useless effort to lighten it. If Papa's religion had allowed it, I knew she would have smeared my face with ceruse; anything to make my prospects more appealing.

It used to bother me that I didn't look like my parents, in the way that family are the first mirrors upon which we see ourselves reflected. As time passed and their faces wizened and their hair became sprinkled with gray, I understood that any resemblance was fleeting. If God had blessed us with three score years or more, we all looked alike, as if we belonged to a much greater family—and we did, according to our parish priest, Reverend Bernard—the good Lord's.

I don't know exactly when I understood that Papa, who'd never anticipated passing on his craft to me, had come to rely upon the expertise I'd developed. Only that one day, as he summoned me to the workshop when Mamma was out on errands, and I unpicked the locks he'd placed upon a noblewoman's *cassone*, testing their strength, it struck me that this was what had happened—despite Mamma's efforts to prevent it, and Papa's denials. Just as he envisaged what lay within the metal he melted and shaped, he'd seen what lay within me and forged accordingly. Papa had raised a daughter and created a lock-pick.

And, may God forgive my conceit, there was a time I was glad that he had.

My education and talent with locks did not, despite Mamma's fears, prevent someone she deemed worthy seeking my hand. She'd been so proud the day Isaac and his father came to the house with their proposal. Bestowing a kiss upon my forehead, she'd dismissed Papa's resistance to the match and my overt dismay with callous indifference.

What if Raffe had not appeared when he did, offering sympathy

and an alternative? What if Mamma had heeded my importuning and Papa's counsel that we wait and not force the betrothal to Isaac? Would things have been different?

Chiding myself for such thoughts, reminding myself the past could not be refashioned, I tiptoed over to open the workshop window. The tang of molten metal, the heady smells of leather, trapped smoke, male flesh and unwashed animals had made the room stuffy.

"Mallory? Leave the window." Papa's voice was gruff. "Come here."

I approached his side cautiously. Poised upon their haunches, as if anticipating adventure, the dogs were vigilant, their eyes shining in the light of the forge.

"Sir?" I said softly. "Dickon said you have need of me." Oh, how my heart sang to say those words. The workshop had been forbidden since my return. I smoothed my hands over the black I wore at Mamma's insistence. As long as I remained under their roof, it was to be in the colors of night; colors that supported the story she'd woven to explain my long absence. In this she would not be gainsaid.

I stood as close to Papa as I dared, certain he could hear the hammering of my heart. His arms rested on the table, either side of a *forziere*, a heavily decorated gilt-edged box. His hands were curled into fists, his eyes fixed upon the small chest.

"It's lovely," I said.

"Isn't it?" he replied absentmindedly, and it was as if I was nine again, learning at my father's knee, sharing the secrets of his craft, honing my skills.

Before I asked Papa where it had come from, I took a moment to study him. His thick pepper-and-salt hair was ruffled, his face pale, his dark eyes red-rimmed and his forehead creased with worry. Still wearing a leather apron, he had rolled the sleeves of his shirt to the elbow, exposing his sinewy forearms, the dusting of fine hair and the old scars. I'd barely seen him, let alone spent time with him, since he'd fetched me home. Though he'd deny it, and the admission pained me immeasurably, Papa had been avoiding me. I missed his company; I missed this, I thought, absorbing the workshop, the equipment, the smells.

Drumming his fingers on the table as he stared at the casket, Papa's agitation was palpable. I glanced around again, but could see nothing

out of the ordinary, though the hair on the back of my neck began to dance to a discordant internal tune.

“Dickon said you have a guest—a gentleman—?” I left the sentence unfinished. “Is there a problem? Is there any . . . news I should know?”

Stepping back from the table so suddenly I had to jump out of the way, Papa ignored my questions and gestured to the table.

“Tell me, what do you make of it?” He swung away toward the forge, lifting a poker to prod the burning coals. I was left to examine the small chest.

Sorrow welled. Whoever had been here, Papa wouldn’t tell me; worse, he could not bring himself to watch me work. No doubt recollections of happier times battled within him. With a small, sad sigh, I took off my gloves.

Pulling the candles closer, I unpinned my hat then tossed it to the side, and rolled up my sleeves. The bruises and scrapes that had once covered my arms—and so appalled Papa when he first found me, arousing in him tenderness commingled with rage that someone could do such damage to his flesh and blood—had all but faded. When I caught him checking, mayhap remembering, he lowered his gaze.

Large enough to be mistaken for a generous jewelry box, the casket had four panels and a painted lid ornamented with tiny iron gargoyles, one perched upon each corner. Jewel boxes were generally smaller but deeper, more feminine in their crafting; this was something else. Decorated with scenes from the Creation, the first panel showed Adam and Eve being expelled from the Garden, the serpent, and the Tree of Knowledge. The second told the tale of Cain and Abel. As I peered more closely, I noted that Eve was depicted with long red hair, white skin and an unusually high forehead.

Wiping my palms down the side of my kirtle, I was excited by what I was viewing, distracted by what this casket promised.

“This image of Eve, she’s been designed to look like Her Majesty,” I said. “Adam bears a close resemblance to the Spanish king, Philip.” A tiny exclamation escaped. “And the serpent wears the face of none other than the Earl of Leicester.” Father spun around as I examined the next panel. “And here”—I pointed—“Cain is King Philip also—and Abel—” My hand flew to cover my mouth. “Abel is Queen Elizabeth.” I gaped at my father. “What game is this?”

My thoughts flew to Caleb's play, to the risks he'd taken with the barely disguised politics he had enacted upon the stage; the criticism he'd dared to level toward our ruler and the religious tolerance he sought to espouse. Here were the same people playing biblical characters. The message was clear. What was happening?

"I would it were a game, Mallory. Continue." Papa's eyes darted toward the gloom collected around the door of the shop.

My heart beat faster now. Heat suffused my cheeks. This was no ordinary object but one that spoke of something darker, more dangerous . . . something heretical. While this false *forziere* might have been regarded as a parody, an ironic retelling of Creation, it was also, when read a particular way, a call to arms—a Catholic call to arms. The scenes on the rear of the casket were similarly rendered—Elizabeth, Philip and other members of the Queen's court, some of whom I didn't recognize, replacing figures from the Old Testament.

Crouching until my eyes were level with the middle of the box, I studied the escutcheon and ran my fingers lightly over the surface. I tried to prise it away from the wood, but it remained sealed. Tracing the embossed metal, I noted the chasing and central plate had a coat of arms engraved upon it. I searched for a hidden spring. Agitating the metal with my nail, I managed to slip a finger beneath a section of filigree. Pushing it gently, there was a slight noise and then a piece swung aside to reveal a keyhole. Raising a candle, I studied the clover-leaf shape.

"Ah," sighed Papa. I almost leaped out of my skin. He was right behind me and I hadn't heard him approach. "I'd forgotten the ease with which you could accomplish that." I raised a hand to touch his arm, to share a remembrance, but lowered it again. I didn't want to alter the sudden intimacy this mysterious casket had created between us. For the first time since I'd come home, he looked me in the eye.

"I need you to open this."

My heart soared.

"I will." It was a vow. But, at the back of my mind, a small voice chimed. *Why does Papa need me to open what is within his compass?* Ignoring my reservations, I turned my attention to the task.

"Be careful," he said, his manner more like that of old. He strode to the other table and threw me an apron, which I caught deftly. Drag-

ging his stool out, he offered it to me. “This is no ordinary container. Someone has gone to a great deal of trouble to ensure the contents cannot be easily accessed, that they remain secret.”

Taking the stool, I sat and chose what I required from the selection of tools upon the bench.

The room had grown uncomfortably warm. I could feel a trickle of sweat between my shoulder blades and another leave my temple and begin to course its way down the side of my face. I swiped it with my arm. Outside, thunder growled and the dogs gave their own muffled retort. Using two long metal picks—both bent in such a fashion that to an untrained eye they looked like castoffs from the forge, one possessing a small hook at the end—I positioned myself so I could work the keyhole from below. Inserting first the hooked rod, I slid the other in past it. Satisfied they were in position, I began maneuvering them, turning my head so my ear was close to the chest. The rods teased the opening—one at the top and one at the bottom. I looked as though I were driving a miniature cart as I held the picks like reins, rotating them slowly, my hands steady, my breathing deliberately measured.

Just as my fingers began to ache from lack of practice, there was a sharp click. The buried wards in the opening of the keyhole gave and simultaneously the lid came ajar.

“I knew . . .” began Papa, then a figure detached itself from the shadows next to the door to the shop.

I let out a small cry and dropped the rods. The dogs leaped to their feet, baring their teeth and snarling. The rods rolled and clanged, emitting a tinny fanfare. The fire in the forge sparked, sending a cascade of orange into the workshop. The triumphant rain beat hard against the window as a man walked slowly into the light.

“You were right, Gideon,” said a deep, clipped voice.

With the exception of a modest white ruff, the stranger was dressed completely in black. Wiry, with raven hair, swarthy skin, a graying beard and moustache, his lean face was topped by an ebony skullcap. Heavily hooded eyes appraised me quickly.

“You said you’d remain out of sight,” said Papa, anger marching across his face. He pushed me behind him.

My eyes strayed from the man to the *forziere* and back to Papa. My

insides were churning, my resolve to be calm melting away. Who was this dark man?

“Mistress Mallory,” said the stranger, stepping around Papa and taking my limp hand in his. “It’s a pleasure to finally meet you.”

I found my voice. “I’m afraid, good sir, you have the advantage.” I dipped a curtsey and tried to extract my fingers.

The man’s lips curled and he glanced at Papa, who, with a shake of his head that bespoke surrender, moved aside and mumbled, “Mister Secretary Walsingham, my daughter, Mallory. Mallory, this is Sir Francis, a member of Her Majesty’s Privy Council and an old friend.”

The room swam, my vision blurred into a kaleidoscope of tangerine and indigo. Oh dear God. Papa’s visitor, his old friend, wasn’t just a noble. He was none other than the most dangerous man in all of England.

The man from whom no secret was safe.