

This is an excerpt from *The Duke*, the first book of a trilogy set in 17<sup>th</sup> Century England. Nicholas Bainbridge is the son of a hangman and we first saw him, as a young boy, waiting to watch the execution of Guy Fawkes. Things had not gone as planned and, instead of being hanged, drawn and quartered, Fawkes had eluded the grasp of Nicholas' father and jumped to his death from the scaffold.

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The Master's brother came again today with a man I have never seen before. Usually, when I hear the horses I look to make sure it's not him and, if it is, quickly walk off to the far end of the stables. But today I was in the middle of the yard drawing water from the well and the best I could do was duck my head and hope he didn't notice me. No such luck.

'Ah, Nicholas, no coal for me today?' He dismounts and hands me the reins before turning to his companion. 'Lad wants to be a coal miner, Pym. Think we can find a place for him?'

It's always the same joke yet the strange thing is he has never said anything to the Master. Not sure why but pray every night he never does. Sometimes weeks go by and I start to feel safe. Then something like today happens. The same old joke. The same laugh. What does he know? What does he remember? After all, it was a very long time ago.

We were only children and didn't know what we were doing. Oh, we knew it was wrong. Our real sin was thinking we could get away with it. We didn't and that's why I am here

shovelling shit in these stables and Cassandra – never Cass and definitely not Cassie – well, she isn't here. Or, as far as I know, anywhere else.

After the botched execution, Dad was sure he would be out of a job but, oddly, nothing happened and things went on as before. Dad said word went out that it would be best if the Gunpowder Plot, as it was called, and everything to do with it were quietly forgotten. And, though ordinary folk didn't forget - every year on November 5<sup>th</sup> you'll see plenty of bonfires blazing around London and thereabouts, each with the figure of Guy Fawkes stuffed with straw sitting on top - the crackdown on the papists everybody expected never happened. Dad said it was because there were plenty of powerful people who clung to the old religion and they'd still got the power to make sure there were not what Dad called 'repercussions'. There'd even been whispers that King James himself was a secret papist. But Dad said that was rubbish.

With Dad kept on at the job there was money for me to get some schooling. I learnt to read and write and do the numbers well enough for what my Dad had in mind. My brother Billy is two years older than me and was going to follow in Dad's line of work but there was not room for both of us - being a hangman is a specialised job; quite well-paid but, despite the large number of hangings each year in London, there really isn't a demand for many of them. Luckily, or so I thought at the time, Dad knew a man who knew a man who was looking to hire a smart young boy to work at Cranfield Manor. I would start in the kitchen but if I kept my wits about me, we were told, there was opportunity for advancement. I smile now when I think of that but, as a ten year-old lad, it seemed like a great adventure.

That sense of adventure didn't last long. The Manor stands in the Colne Valley about twenty miles west of London and I well remember the day I made the journey there by cart.

Once we left the streets of the city I was amazed to discover so much land we were travelling through was going to waste: no houses, just woodland and acres of what looked to me like empty fields. It was only later I learnt about farming and growing crops, I had never thought about where vegetables came from – not that we often ate them at home except potatoes – or how we got the flour to make bread. As I gazed around me from the back of the cart, I realised I was entering a completely different world from the one I was used to in the East End of London. At home, there were always hundreds of people on the streets; here there was no-one. At home, a thousand comforting sounds day and night; here, apart from the grinding wheels of the cart and the occasional birdsong, an eerie silence. It felt unnatural. As the cart got further and further from London I grew more and more frightened; there was just too much space, too much nothing. I was beginning to feel homesick, missing Dad and Billy. I wanted to cry but knew that was a bad thing to do so I dug my fingernails hard into the palms of my hand till the feeling past. That's when I first learnt to keep things buried inside me. Today people can look at my face as hard as they like and they'll never find out what I'm thinking.

The house is huge. I don't know how many rooms there are on the higher floors because, apart from the attic, I've never been permitted to enter any of them but down below there is an enormous kitchen, an equally large Servants Hall – where I sleep – and a dozen or so smaller rooms such as the scullery, buttery, ewery, cattery and such. On my first day I was led into the smallest of these, a windowless cell where I was put on the boots. I quickly discovered why I got the job. Nobody else wanted it. Learning to mix the blacking was easy enough – just get the right balance of charcoal, oil, treacle and vinegar – brushing it into the leather was the

problem. The stuff gets onto your hands and is impossible to wash off. There is one saving grace: the smell it leaves on your skin. Hard to describe and the best I can come up with that it's the smell of a sweet dying fire – if that makes any sense.

The work wasn't hard and I could go on polishing well after the boots needed it and no one ever bothered me. There were so many servants – over a hundred I was told – that there didn't seem enough work for everyone. I have to admit this was a guess because I never knew what most of them did and there could have been plenty of things to do upstairs that I was unaware of. I took to leaving the door to my little cubby-hole open so I could watch people passing by. At first, I thought I would be told to keep my door shut and I even came up with a reason for keeping it open – it let in enough light so I didn't have to waste candles – but nobody seemed to care.

I don't make friends easily and, though there were a few boys my own age I learnt to call by name, smile and say hello to, I kept mostly to myself. One person who caught my eye was a scullery girl a couple of years older than me. She had jet black hair the colour of my boot polish, a face so white it looked as if it had never seen the sun, and eyes a blue that was almost purple. It was days, if not weeks, before I saw those eyes because she always walked head bent down and, even when we were all eating in the Servants Hall, she rarely lifted them from her plate. But one day at dinner something made me turn in her direction and I caught her looking straight at me. She quickly turned away but not before I had seen those eyes. They were the eyes of an angry person, someone to avoid.

The other odd thing about Cassandra, for that I learned was her name, was that she never spoke a word. At first I thought she was like George, the mute who lived at the end of our

street when I was growing up. Eventually, I plucked up the courage to ask Mr. Wardle, the silverman – he was the one I took orders from there being no bootman at the Manor – and he set me straight.

‘No, she can speak all right. She just chooses not to.’

‘Why,’ I asked. Mr. Wardle just shrugged. ‘Some folk are like that.’ And that was the end of it. Mr. Wardle was not a talkative man himself.

Time passed but the promised advancement never came. After two years I had managed to foist the blacking job onto a newcomer younger than myself but I still worked under Mr. Wardle where my biggest job was helping to polish the silver every Tuesday morning. It was a task Mr. Wardle took very seriously and performed almost as a religious ceremony. First he would lead the way to the silver room and, once I was seated at a long low table, he would produce a large set of keys and carefully lock the door behind us. Then, walking over to a second door at the other end of the room, he would select another key to unlock it. This door led to a spacious area where the silver was kept when not in use. In a few moments he would re-enter the room bearing a wooden tray stacked with a large number of bundles wrapped in blue cloth together with a bowl containing sour white wine and a quantity of linen squares. He would very carefully place this tray on the table in front of me. Then he would return to where the rest of the silver was stored and make however many slow measured journeys it took to deposit all the larger silver items that needed cleaning on a table identical to mine placed on the other side of the room. Throughout this whole process I was to sit absolutely still and say nothing. Above all, he made it perfectly clear that I should not help him in any way.

Once he had taken his own seat he would always say, 'Are you ready, Nicholas?' To which I would reply, 'I am ready, Mr. Wardle.' Then he would say, 'Begin.'

I would unwrap one of my bundles to lay its contents bare. There would be two knives, two spoons and something which Mr. Wardle obviously held in disdain. 'It is called a fork. Comes from France, I believe.' Clearly not an origin that Mr. Wardle approved of. 'I have no idea to what use it is put.' Plainly a lie, the two tines were obviously for piercing morsels of food so they may be carried to the mouth, but I didn't make any comment.

Before I could start the cleaning work, I needed to use a piece of linen to wipe each item. Mr. Wardle had a fear of moisture and before storing cutlery would always sprinkle it with chalk dust. After ensuring the dust was completely removed, I would take another square of linen, dip it into the bowl of sour wine, and meticulously start the cleansing process, finishing with a rigorous polish using a third piece of linen. This I would repeat until all five items were sparkling, whereon, careful not to leave the slightest smudge, I would place them on their blue wrapping cloth. I would repeat this twenty-four times, till twenty-four sets of silverware lay gleaming on the table in front of me. No matter how slowly I worked, I always completed this task well before Mr. Wardle had finished his. Apparently this was not a problem for Mr. Wardle provided I sat upright with a rigid back, stared straight ahead and said nothing.

Once he was satisfied with his own efforts, Mr. Wardle would cross the room to inspect mine. I am pleased to say he never found fault in my work and, once the inspection was complete, Mr. Wardle would wrap the items five at a time into their separate blue cloths, stack them on the wooden tray and carry them back to the storage area. Next would be multiple journeys carrying his own cleaned pieces, after which he would once more produce his keys,

select one and lock all the silver away for another week. This was my signal to stand and cross to the main door in the room. Mr. Wardle would join me, select another key from the bunch and unlock the door. Opening it part way he would always pause, turn to me and, running his hand lightly across the top of my head, rest it on my shoulder. After a moment, it pains me to remember, he would always say, 'Thank you, Nicholas.'

Then we would leave the room together.

It was during my second autumn at the Manor that I first spoke to Cassandra. There was to be a small banquet that night and the cook had decided she needed some apples to make apple pies. I was about to leave the kitchen with a basket when the cook called after me, 'And take Cassie with you. Get her out from under my feet.'

So the two of us set out for the orchard with me carrying the basket and a short ladder while Cassandra, ignoring me completely, walked two paces ahead. That was fine by me, I didn't need her help and I was sure I'd get the job done all the quicker.

At the first tree I noticed there were some low-hanging fruit so, not bothering with the ladder, I reached up to take an apple growing on a bough close to the trunk. Now, I'd never picked an apple before and you can imagine my surprise when it didn't immediately come free in my hand. Instead the bough bent while the apple remained stubbornly attached. I felt a little foolish so I gave it a second tug, pulling as hard as I could. This did the trick and, without looking at my companion, I casually tossed it in the basket. That was when Cassandra first spoke to me – words I was to hear from her many times afterwards.

'You don't know much, do you?'

For some reason, I'd expected her to have a harsh, grating voice but when she spoke the tone was so warm and soft it took me a second to realise the insult for what it was.

Immediately on the defensive I managed, 'What's that supposed to mean?' in a tone which I hoped indicated that I really didn't care. By way of reply, she stepped forward and reached up to an apple just above her head.

'An apple is ripe if, when you cup it in your hand, lift and give a slight twist, it comes away cleanly in your palm.' Her actions matched her words and the apple was released without causing the bough to quiver even in the slightest. 'Also,' she continued, 'Never throw the fruit into the basket. Apples bruise easily.' She retrieved my apple and gave it a close look before tossing it away and carefully replacing it with her own. 'You will find that apples on the outside of the tree ripen more quickly than those near the trunk. Do you know why?'

I thought for a moment. 'Because they get more sun.' She nodded. 'Good, you're not completely stupid.' Before I could react to what I was fairly sure was a second insult, she had turned and moved off toward a taller tree, finishing her lesson as she did so. 'For the same reason fruit higher up should be the first picked. Fetch the ladder.'

We worked in silence for about an hour until the basket was full. I lifted it up and, hoisting the ladder onto my shoulder, started back for the manor.

'What's your hurry?'

I turned to find she had sat down on the grass. 'Cook needs these for her pies,' I said.

'She won't bake till this afternoon. You don't know much, do you?'

I had had enough. 'Look, I'm not a scullery maid. What happens in the kitchen doesn't concern me. I have better things to think about.'

'Like what?'

When I couldn't come up with a quick reply, she smiled at me for the first time and it was a beautiful smile. 'Come sit, Nicholas,' she patted the grass beside her. 'I think I might like you.'

I was a boy of twelve and no girl had ever said they liked me or even might like me. If that wasn't enough, she had remembered my name. I had been called Nicholas all my life but when she said 'Nicholas' it somehow felt like I was hearing it for the very first time. I knew I was starting to blush and turned away to hide it, using the need to put down the ladder as an excuse. 'All right, Cassie, but just for a few minutes.'

When I turned back the smile was gone and there were those angry eyes.

'Don't ever call me that!'

'But that's your name, isn't it? I've heard you called Cassie dozens of times'

She shrugged. 'They can call me what they like – I don't care. But if you want to talk to me, my name is Cassandra. If you want me to answer, that's what you must call me.'

I tried out the strange name. 'Cassandra. Right?'

'Do you know who she was?' I shook my head. 'Cassandra was the daughter of King Priam and Queen Hecuba of Troy.' I nodded as though I knew who she was talking about.

'She always told the truth but no-one ever believed her.' She gave me a half smile. 'Do you believe what I've just said, Nicholas?'

I was quick with the answer. 'Of course not.'

She laughed. 'Come, sit down. Have an apple. Or do you have too much work to do in the Manor?'

Now it was my turn to smile. 'I'm not too busy right now.' And then, just to say something to keep the conversation going, 'Actually, I'm never busy. I've been here for two years and I still don't understand it. Why so many servants when there is little real work to do? And they keep hiring more.'

'You don't know much-'She had the grace to cut herself off and give a little laugh – so melodic and sweet to my ears. 'The Duke of Essex has a household of one hundred and four. Servants, that is.' I must have looked puzzled because she added, 'We have one hundred and five. Or didn't you know?'

'No, I didn't. So?

'Sir Lionel Cranfield has to have the most of everything. The most servants. The most horses in the stable. The most chandeliers. Probably the most chamber pots. Old Lionel is a little runt who likes to boast of his belongings. To him, his servants aren't people. He doesn't care what we do. We're just numbers. He's going to bring in two new stable boys next week to keep well ahead.'

'How do you know that?'

'I listen.'

We must have gone on talking for over an hour – about what I don't now remember – but I had never been so happy in my whole life as I was on the walk back to the Manor, or at least for part of it. I had found a friend. Oh, there were a few lads I got along with well enough by this time but this was different: Cassandra was someone I could talk to. Somehow I felt I could tell her anything and she would listen. And she could tell me anything and I would listen.

Or we could be together, like now, and say nothing, content in a friendly silence. Then she stopped and spoke.

‘When we get back I want you to behave toward me just as you did before. Don’t talk to me, don’t smile at me. Ignore me, right?’

‘Why?’

‘I have my reasons.’

She didn’t have to say - the reasons were obvious. She would be ashamed to be seen having anything to do with me. And who could blame her? What would the most beautiful girl in the world want with Nicholas Bainbridge? I had been stupid to think she could ever be my friend, completely stupid. As we continued on, I clenched my teeth draining my face of all expression while digging the nails as hard as I could into the palms of my free hand. I was already starting to block her off, just as I had had to block off thoughts of Dad and Billy, when she spoke again.

‘We could meet at the old hunting lodge. Nobody ever goes there. I’ll let you know when. But here,’ she nodded at the Manor, now just steps away, ‘nothing.’ With that, she snatched the basket of apples from my hand and was gone.

Over the next two months, I came to believe Cassandra was in no way ashamed of me but she still wouldn’t tell me why we were never to show our friendship inside the Manor – just that she would explain at the right time. I didn’t care. All I wanted was to go on seeing her whenever we both could get away from the house. The old hunting lodge was the perfect meeting place. Built before the Manor itself, the lodge had been abandoned for years. Part of

the roof had collapsed but it provided welcome shelter as winter came creeping in. We even found some old straw to spread in the driest corner so we could lie down as we talked.

I learnt that Cassandra was Cassandra Thomas and that she had been brought up by her Aunt Jane. I learnt that when her aunt died three years ago, she was found a place at the Manor by the cook who was a distant cousin. I learnt she was fourteen years old. She learnt my father was a hangman. She learnt I had one brother, William. She learnt my mother had died the day I was born. She didn't learn my age. I lied to her and said I was fourteen too.

'Bit small for your age, aren't you?'

'Smallness runs in the family.' For some reason she found that funny and laughed.

One day I was talking about my schooling, bragging about my ability to read and write as well as my speed with numbers. I had just finished reciting my twelve times table and there was a lull in our conversation. Cassandra turned away and looked down. I worried I had annoyed her with my boasting but then she said in a quiet voice, 'I can read and write too.'

'Really?' I was surprised. 'Good for you.'

'You don't mind?'

'Why should I?'

'Some do. Aunt Jane taught me. Everyone said it was a waste of time for a girl, but Aunt Jane didn't think so. Here, what do you think of this?' She pulled a crumpled piece of paper from a pocket in her frock, smoothed it out, and read from it slowly. ' "Fie on the falsehood of men, whose minds go oft a-madding and whose tongues cannot so be wagging but straight they fall a-railing. Was there any so abused, so slandered, so railed upon, or so wickedly

handled undeservedly, as we women? Will the gods permit it, the goddesses stay their punishing judgements, and we ourselves not pursue their undoings for such devilish practices? Women are wiser than men. That we are more witty, which comes by nature, it cannot better be proved, than that by our answers, men are often driven to non plus.” ‘

I didn't understand very much of it and the part about women being wiser than men didn't seem likely to be true, Cassandra excepted of course, but then the only women I knew even slightly were those working in the kitchen so perhaps I was in no position to judge. I had the sense not to say any of that but merely remarked on how well it sounded. It was obviously the right thing to say because Cassandra looked pleased.

‘Aunt Jane wrote that. In a pamphlet called *Protection for Women*. It was published and is very famous. Of course, she couldn't sign it with her own name. Instead she called herself Jane Anger – just the right name, don't you think? Here, I've got another piece I copied down.’ I could see there was no stopping Cassandra so I settled back in the straw and let my mind wander. I would much have preferred talking about us and our own lives.

‘ “If a woman trust unto a man, it shall fare as well with her as if she had a weight of a thousand pounds tied about her neck and then cast herself into the bottomless seas. The filthy lusts that fill all men they blame on women's coquetry. But if we clothe ourselves in sackcloth, and truss up our hair in dishclouts, men will nevertheless pursue their pastime. If we hide our breasts, it must be with leather, for no cloth can keep their long nails from our bosoms.” ‘

I thought I understood this last part. And it was clearly false. I knew my Bible and the story of Adam and Eve. The priests had made clear to us in their warnings that it is women that lead men on, though lead them on to where, I was not sure.

'Nicholas, you're not listening.'

'Yes, I am. Honestly.'

Cassandra gave a sigh and threw herself down on the straw beside me. She rested one hand on my chest and started toying with the buttons of my doublet. 'You remember on the day we picked apples I said I might like you? Well I've decided I do like you.' By this time I was used to her abrupt change of subject and was quick with a response. 'I like you too, Cassandra, very much.' Her response was even quicker.

'How much?'

I don't believe I thought before replying. It was as though the words were already there in my mind fully formed and they flew out of my mouth before I could stop them. But as soon as I had spoken I knew that they were true.

'I love you, Cassandra.'

She turned away from me and said nothing. I closed my eyes knowing I had made a mistake. The next I knew, she was kissing me. Her fingers were unfastening the buttons of my coat, then sliding down the length of my body till they were pulling at the top of my britches. I opened my mouth to speak but she put a finger to my lips, hushing me. She kissed me again as she continued her exploration but suddenly she broke away and looked down to where her hand lay.

'I thought you said you liked me.'

'I do, Cassandra, I love you. I...'

No more words came as she tugged my britches further down.

'Then what's this? Why still so soft?' She took my cock in her hand. I didn't know what she meant. I was just a boy, ignorant of sex. I felt confused, so happy yet so completely lost at the same time. Again I started to speak. I had no idea what I was going to say but Cassandra stopped the words by placing her hand over my mouth and once again hushed me. Then she took away the hand and kissed me lightly on the lips.

'I'm sorry, Nicholas, that was cruel. I want you to know you are perfect.' She kissed me again, this time longer. 'Absolutely perfect. You are the most beautiful person I have ever seen.' This time the kiss opened our mouths and her tongue found mine. It was a sensation impossible to describe: both strange and wonderful. Afterwards, she sat looking at me for a long time. 'I only wish you could stay like this forever.' I didn't speak. I don't remember even thinking. I was just feeling. But later, when reliving the experience over and over again, I remember reaching the conclusion that the priests were right. And I thanked God for it.

After that day our relationship changed in subtle ways. We continued with our kissing and Cassandra said she never felt happier than when I hugged her tight but sometimes she would act more as an older sister than the lover I wanted. She was amazed I knew nothing about the mechanics of sex and told me not to worry that I'd never had an erection, some boys developed later than others. Of course, I worried all the more and tried in vain to produce something more than a faint tingling sensation. Cassandra's attitude didn't always help.

'Perhaps it's all for the best,' she said. 'As my Aunt Jane used to say: sex is the worst thing that ever happened to womankind. Without it she thought we might have had a chance of being treated as equals. I doubt it but I see her point.'

I had come to realise Cassandra was a strange person and had grown accustomed to her saying strange things but one day she outdid herself. It began with a conversation about happiness.

‘Are you happy here, Nicholas?’

‘I’m always happy being with you, Cassandra.’

‘No, I mean being at the Manor.’

I laughed. ‘Well, there’s not much work. Plenty to eat. Meat twice a day, usually. There’s people where I come from that live on bread and some that have to make do with nothing but vegetables. I’d say we have it pretty good.’

‘What about being stuck in the same place all your life?’

She had hit a sore spot; the advancement that I had been promised had never happened unless you count being taken off boots. ‘Well, I’m hoping things will get better.’ I knew it sounded weak and felt ashamed that it was the best I could do. But Cassandra wasn’t talking about my advancement. She was talking about something else entirely.

‘Do you think Lionel Cranfield and his sons and daughters, do you think they’re better than you, deserve better lives?’

‘Well, they’re them and I’m me, so-’

‘So because they were born into one life and you another they should get all the gravy and you should get all the shit?’

Cassandra rarely swore and I could see she was getting angry so I thought I would cool things down. 'It's the way of the world, Cassandra. It's preordained.' I was proud I could remember the word.

'Who told you that?'

'Why, the priests in school.'

'And who told them.'

This was getting silly. 'The bishops, direct descendants of the Apostles.'

'And who told them?'

'The King, leastways he appoints them.' I had been taught well.

'And who told him?'

Now I had to laugh. 'God directs the King, you know that.'

'I know nothing of the kind. Notice they are all men?'

'Well, of course they're all men-'

Cassandra cut across my words. 'Even God is a he.' Her voice had been getting louder but now she dropped it to almost a whisper. 'You think you're well schooled, don't you, Nicholas? Well, I'll tell you something. You don't know much. God does not exist. He's nothing more than an invention of the priests and the bishops and the King to keep us all in our proper places.'

It was then that I knew Cassandra was truly mad. There was a long silence before I finally said, 'I suppose Aunt Jane-'

'Yes, my Aunt Jane taught me everything I know.'

'Well, I've never heard anything so absurd.'

I hadn't seen the angry eyes for a long time but there they were. I thought she was going to hit me; instead she just gathered up her cloak and rushed out of the lodge. I didn't see her again for a week.

We never talked about that conversation when we eventually started meeting again and by Christmas I thought things were back to normal between us. Then she told me her plan. We would run away together and find work in London. I smiled. 'What kind of work, Cassandra?'

'We'd find something.'

'In the meantime how would we eat? Beg for food?'

'No, we need to have money before we go. Or, at least, something we can sell.'

'I've got sevenpence. You?'

She ignored this and instead said, 'Tell me about Tuesday mornings.'

And so it began. Cassandra wanted to know everything about the day I helped Mr. Wardle clean the silver.

'He brings me the cutlery wrapped in cloth on a tray. I unwrap the first bundle, wipe off the chalk dust-'

'No, Nicholas. I need to know everything, every detail. Start again at the beginning.'

So I told her, starting at the unlocking of the door until Mr. Wardle's final 'Thank you.'

Cassandra was quiet for a while, thinking things through.

'So, he fancies you.'

'What do you mean?'

'Why do you think he pats you on the head?'

'He doesn't exactly pat me on the head. Anyway, he's a man, I'm a boy.'

'So? But it doesn't matter. I doubt if he would hand over some silver spoons even if you... never mind.' She thought for a moment and I knew I had to speak now to put a stop to where this was obviously heading.

'You want me to steal some of it, don't you?'

'Yes, Nicholas, that's exactly what I want.'

'To sell in London?'

'Yes, Nicholas, to sell in London.' She was growing impatient and I knew she really wouldn't like what I had to say next.

'It won't work.'

'Why not, Nicholas?'

'Every knife, fork and spoon is engraved with Cranfield's initials. L J C in a fancy kind of lettering'

'Do you think I'm completely stupid? I know that and I have a solution. Now let me think.'

I knew Cassandra was quite mad and that whatever scheme she came up with was almost certain to end in disaster. But I loved her. I loved her more than I can ever love anyone for the rest of my life. So I knew whatever she asked me to do, I would do it.

After thinking for a few moments, Cassandra was ready with a new question. 'Tell me again about when he brings in the silver. After he's brought in the tray and goes back for the other silver, how long is he out of sight?'

'I dunno. Not long.'

'Oh, come on, Nicholas, you're not helping.'

She got up and walked across the room to the doorway. 'Pretend I'm Wardle. I'll go into the next room and you shout when you think he's had enough time to get his load of silver and come back. Understand?'

I was getting irritated with the way she was talking to me. 'I'm not stupid, you know.' She gave me her beautiful smile. 'No, of course you're not, Nicholas. It's just that this could be very important. Now, I'm going into the next room and you shout out when-'

'Yes, I got it.'

She gave me another smile, left the room and I did as I was told.

When she returned she looked pleased. 'Enough time. And how many loads does he have to get?'

'Depends. Could be three, could be four or five. Even six.'

'But never less than three?'

I thought for a moment. 'I don't think so. But what did you mean 'enough time'?''

'Enough time to take a bundle off the tray and hide it.'

'Oh, right, I'll stick it up my sleeve and walk out with it. Mr. Wardle won't ever notice the bump or hear the jangling it'll make.'

Cassandra seemed to take the suggestion seriously enough to pause before dismissing it. 'No, that won't work.'

'Or I could shove it inside my doublet.' We both knew that wouldn't work either. Low ranking male servants didn't wear livery but a black doublet of the flimsiest material. Anything

like a bundle of cutlery hidden underneath would produce a telltale bulge. ‘Besides,’ I decided to kill the whole crazy idea once and for all. ‘I told you Mr. Wardle counts everything after I’ve cleaned them. He would know if something was missing.’

‘You don’t know much, do you, Nicholas?’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘Wardle can’t count. Oh, he can count to five and make sure each bundle contains two knives, two spoons and a fork but counting to twenty-four is completely beyond him. So if you stole a single spoon he’d catch you. That’s why you have to steal a whole bundle.’ She paused to let that sink in. ‘Now think, is there anywhere in the room to hide it?’

After I pointed out that even if there was, which there wasn’t, it would be useless because we would never be able to retrieve it seeing as how the room was always kept locked, Mr. Wardle had the only key so far as I knew and that opening a door with a pry bar in the dead of night didn’t, in my personal opinion, seem like a viable option – anyway that was the gist, though I probably didn’t use those exact words. We talked on for a while longer without coming up with any useful ideas and by the time we had to go back to the Manor I was satisfied the whole mad scheme had been abandoned.

A few days later I woke in my makeshift bed in the Servants Hall to find my doublet, which I use as a second blanket, gone. I jerked upright in panic. To lose your doublet, even if it’s stolen, meant instant dismissal. But there it was neatly folded at my feet. Cassandra, I thought, it had to be Cassandra, and when I picked the doublet up I found it was much heavier than it

had been the night before. She had sown another layer of cloth inside the coat and to that layer were attached five long pouches – three on the left, two on the right.

In the beginning everything went according to plan. Mr. Wardle brought the tray of cutlery and went back for his first load. I dropped a bundle into my lap and uncovered the silver inside. Mr. Wardle went back for a second load. I slipped two knives and a fork into their pouches and the coat showed no noticeable bulge. Mr. Wardle returned and I grasped the two spoons ready for when he went back for a third load. And that's when things went wrong. Mr. Wardle sat down. I couldn't believe it. Only two loads of silver for him to clean, it was not possible.

'Are you ready, Nicholas?

'I am ready, Mr. Wardle.' I replied in as steady a voice as I could manage.

'Begin.'

Automatically, I reached for a bundle and started unwrapping it. There was no danger of Mr. Wardle seeing the spoons that were still in my lap, the table hid them completely from view. I told myself not to panic. There would be plenty of time to think of a solution while carrying out the mindless and repetitive task of cleaning. I managed to calm myself down but no solution came. After the seventh bundle, I knew I had to do something, however dangerous it might be. Picking up a fork in one hand, I scrutinised the tines as if I saw some blemish, while with the other I wrapped the hidden spoons in the cloth. As I replaced the fork on the table I lifted the small blue bundle and, in what I hoped was a casual way, placed it next to the others. Mr. Wardle did not appear to notice anything unusual. I had no idea what to do next.

I had cleaned fourteen bundles and was no closer to a solution. I had thought of opening the small bundle, express great surprise at finding only two spoons and tell Mr. Wardle that he must have forgotten to include the other silverware. But Mr. Wardle never forgot. Mr. Wardle never made a mistake. I discarded the idea.

On my twentieth bundle I decided I had only one chance and it all depended on Mr. Wardle's reaction. Lifting it up, I brushed the bundle hard against the bowl of sour wine, sending it clattering to the floor. Immediately I leapt to my feet. 'Oh, I'm so sorry, Mr. Wardle.'

For a moment he just stared at me. Then he smiled. 'Accidents happen, Nicholas.' It's going to work, I thought. He'll have to get me some more. But Mr. Wardle was already speaking. 'Here, Nicholas, you can have mine I've almost finished.' To my horror, he stood, picked up his bowl and carried it over to my table. It was then that I knew there was no way out. Mr. Wardle would discover the bundle with only two spoons; he would search for the missing fork and knives and finally discover them on my person. I would not only be dismissed, I would be hanged as a thief. And I would never see Cassandra again. Then Mr. Wardle spoke again.

'I'll just fetch some more for myself.' He picked up my bowl from the floor and slowly walked to the storage area.

My fingers wouldn't work, they were trembling so badly. Somehow I managed to unwrap and pick up the spoons but sliding them into the pouches seemed an impossible task. Finally, I found that in my desperation I had jammed both into the same pouch. I knew this was the best I could do and I grabbed up the blue cloth. I had just got it folded and was in the

process of slipping it under a linen square when Mr. Wardle returned. He walked with his usual measured gait to his table and sat down. Then he looked up at me and gave me another smile.

‘Continue.’

I wished I had had many more bundles of silver to clean in order to give me time to regain my composure and I took as long as possible over what I did have left. Mr. Wardle, for the very first time, completed his tasks before me but seemed content to wait for me to finish. When I had, he came to inspect my work: twenty-three sets laid out on twenty-three blue cloths. I waited for him to speak, to notice the missing bundle. But as Cassandra had predicted, he didn't.

While he took the tray back to the storage area, I rolled the linen squares into a ball with the extra blue cloth in the centre. Fortunately the two spoons had nestled one inside the other and when I moved my body I heard no clink. Nevertheless, when it was time to get up and walk to the door, I moved as slowly as Mr. Wardle himself.

There was the usual half-caress of my head, hand on the shoulder, and, ‘Thank you, Nicholas.’ Then we left the room.

I had expected Cassandra to be delighted at my success but all she said was, ‘I knew you could do it,’ so I didn't tell her how close I had come to failing. We were in the lodge on the day after Christmas and, as I watched Cassandra closely examine the silver items I had stolen, I realised I had given no thought to what would happen after the theft; the idea of running away from the Manor had until now seemed a vague, insubstantial idea which, if it happened at all, would only happen in some far, distant future. What had always seemed like an elaborate game

was becoming real and I wasn't sure I was ready for where it was going. Wouldn't it be better to stop now, return the silver somehow and go back to the way things were before? Cassandra had started scratching hard at the embossed coat of arms on one of the spoons with a stone but was making no impression. I wondered if she was feeling the same way I did but didn't want to say so. It was time to find out.

'So, what do you think we should do now?'

'Walk to London. On New Year's Eve. But we have to do something first the night before.' She had stopped scratching. 'Melt these down.'

She had it all worked out. 'Y'know the brazier behind the forge the gardeners use to burn the rotten wood no good for the kitchen fire? We'll fill it with coal and I found an iron-

'And where do we get the coal?'

'We steal it.'

I knew it was hopeless but I kept looking for some way out. 'The coal cellar's always locked.'

'I can get the key.'

'How can-'

'Don't ask.'

I was getting desperate. 'Are you sure a coal fire is going to be hot enough to melt silver?'

'Have you ever seen a coal fire? 'Course it is.'

She would light it first thing in the morning before anyone was about. 'If people see the smoke they'll think it's from the forge. And by night time it will be hot enough for what we need.'

Objections flashed across my mind. Jeremiah didn't start his fire till six, won't he see the smoke? What happens if the gardeners decide to burn that morning? Who would feed the brazier all day? But I could see any objection would be pointless. There was only one thing worth saying. The truth. That I now realised the whole thing was complete madness. I wanted no part in it. She was on her own. I would like to be able to say I didn't tell her the truth because I loved her and I was going to try and talk her out of carrying on alone. But that would be a lie. I knew she wasn't going to stop now. I didn't tell her because I was a coward. I didn't tell her because I knew she would despise me. So I didn't say a word.

The day before New Year's Eve was a Sunday. It began with one of those grey, misty mornings so common for December in this part of the world. Very little snow had fallen so far that winter and almost all of it had melted leaving only patches where it had drifted under the trees and hedgerows. There was no wind and as the day went on the mist grew thicker and thicker, perfect for what Cassandra had in mind.

I spent most of the day in the library helping Mr. Wardle hang and rehang a number of large oil paintings Cranfield had recently acquired. He directed our efforts himself and it was because of that, his changing his mind so many times as to what should go where, that the job took so long. As a result I did not get to see Cassandra till suppertime in the Servants Hall. As usual, we did not acknowledge each other but I saw she was wearing a pink ribbon, a sign we

had agreed upon to show everything was to go ahead as planned. The fact she was wearing a ribbon of any kind was not seen to be strange because tonight was the Servants Feast, the one time in the year we were given the best of meats: roast goose and turkey, partridge and jugged hare. Tomorrow there would be a banquet for the Cranfield family and favoured guests, but tonight was our chance to celebrate the coming of Sixteen Hundred and Thirteen. As well as the food there was plenty to drink and not just the small beer we were used to. At ten sharp, the Master of the Household, who had been hosting his own gathering of the more senior servants, came down to bring the Feast to a close. Cassandra and I were hoping everyone had drunk enough so they would sleep soundly and not notice when we slipped out of the house at midnight.

For two hours I lay under my blanket waiting for the clock in the bell tower to strike twelve. The chatter among the half dozen boys who shared my sleeping space in the Hall gradually grew less and less until it faded away completely, replaced by the sound of slow, even breathing throughout the room, and, by the time I had counted the clock's eleven chimes, I was certain that everyone but me was asleep. I knew I would have no trouble staying awake; I had drunk nothing but water all evening and even if I had drunk a whole hogshead of wine it would have made no difference. As I lay there the enormity of what we doing, the impossibility of it, rushed into me. It wasn't fear that I felt but a different sensation I had never felt before: a hollowness, an emptiness - it was as if I and the world around me no longer belonged together. A wave of utter loneliness swept over me and I felt my body begin to shake. I tried to calm myself by thinking of Cassandra, not melting the silver or going with her to London but earlier images, her biting into an apple, her smile, our first kiss. It worked a little and I was able to stop

the trembling but I knew I couldn't wait in bed for the next sixty minutes to crawl by. Getting up as silently as I could, I picked up my shoes and crept barefoot out of the Manor into the night.

Cassandra was already there behind the forge feeding lumps of coal into the brazier. Neither of us made any mention of the fact we had both come an hour early. As if by mutual agreement, we did not speak, touch, or even smile in greeting.

She had taken a small pair of tongs from the blacksmith's shop and now she used them to place a piece of flat iron on top of the coals. Then she waited. A minute passed, maybe two. I was about to speak but at that moment she must have judged the metal hot enough and, taking a spoon from the pocket of her cloak, she placed it carefully on the iron's surface.

Cassandra had made this part of her plan sound so simple that I think I half-expected the spoon to immediately melt into a pool of silver like a pat of butter in a skillet. Instead it stayed the same solid spoon: completely unchanged. We remained silent, our eyes riveted on the spoon as flames licked around the edges of the iron and slowly, ever so slowly, it lost its silver shine and began to turn black. Cassandra prodded it gently with the tongs but the spoon remained obstinately solid. She spoke for the first time.

'I hadn't expected it to melt completely, just enough so we can smear the initials. So no-one will know when we come to sell-' At that moment the coals shifted, the iron sheet tilted and the spoon nearly tipped into the coals. Cassandra was quick and trapped it with the tongs. Holding it in place, she was able to push down on the iron sheet till it was level again. For the first time that night, she turned to look at me.

‘Don’t worry, Nicholas, it’s just taking longer than I expected. We have plenty of time. All night if needs be. Here, take this.’ She handed me a bucket that lay at her feet. ‘We’ll need more coal. The cellar’s not locked.’

I was filling the bucket as quietly as I could and had almost finished when I heard the sound of a hunting horn. I froze and, standing there in the dark cellar, listened. I had just about persuaded myself it had been my imagination when I heard it again. This time it was much closer. Lifting the coal bucket I started up the stone steps two at a time and reached the yard just as three horses galloped through the gateway, each with a rider brandishing a burning torch. Behind them came the rumble and clatter of a coach and four filled, by the sound of it, with laughing women. The lead horseman had seen me and he veered across the cobble stones, reining in his mount barely a foot from where I was standing; so bewildered I was unable to move. He gave one last ear-splitting blast on his hunting horn and peered down at me. It was not difficult to tell that he was very drunk.

‘Take my horse, boy. We’re here to bring you the New Year!’ he bellowed. Then, looking more closely at my bucket, ‘Where have you been boy, down the mines?’ He seemed to find this extremely funny and turned as if to share the joke with his companions but they had already ridden through the yard and out of sight. At that moment the coach door swung open and four or five women tumbled out onto the cobblestones, shrieking with laughter while doing their best to prop each other upright, shouting for the champagne it seemed they had been promised. The horseman leaned down to speak over the noise.

‘Where’s your Master, boy? Where’s my beloved brother? Where’s all the festivities?’

‘But it’s not till tomorrow,’ was the best I could stupidly manage.

He laughed. 'Well, we've started early. And so should everyone else.'

I had no idea how to respond but didn't have to because, at that moment, there came a sound that cut through all the others: a woman's scream from the direction of the forge. It drove all other thoughts out of my head. I dropped the bucket and ran towards it.

There were five items on the table before me, two knives, a fork and two spoons. Four pieces looked clean and bright as if I had just finished with them on a Tuesday morning. The last, a spoon, was black and very slightly misshapen.

'You know what these are, Nicholas?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Did you steal them from the silver room?'

'No, sir.'

'Did you not hide them under your doublet or some other place about your person and take them from that room?'

'No, sir.'

My denials were automatic but I could hear my voice carried no conviction. I waited for the next question which would surely expose my lies for what they were. Instead, Mr. Stirk, the Under Head, got up from his seat on the other side of the table and walked over to the window, his back toward me. We were on the top floor of the manor, in his small private room. I remember thinking I had never been so high up in a house before, it was like standing on the top of a hill. If I followed Mr. Stirk's gaze, I could see a dark smudge on the horizon. Perhaps, it was London.

It was January the second, three days after the terrible events. A horse galloping past me as I ran toward the forge. The rider laughing as he wrestled with a struggling bundle slung across his horse's withers. Him shouting out, 'I found this lass tending a brazier. And she wasn't roasting chestnuts, I can tell you that!' The flash of silver caught in the light of his burning torch. The clear ringing sound of a knife striking stone.

'I believe you are telling the truth, Nicholas.' Mr. Stirk still had his back to me, looking out of the window. 'Mr. Wardle has told me it would have been quite impossible for you to take silverware without his knowledge.' He turned round and took the two short steps necessary to reach his chair. 'Mr. Wardle always counted them at the end of each cleansing session, did he not, Nicholas?'

'Yes, sir.'

'He also told me he thought you to be a thoroughly honest boy, Nicholas. Is that so?'

'Yes, sir.' I lied

Mr. Stirk sat down and picked up one of the knives, turning it slowly in his fingers before replacing it on the table. 'You are to be assigned to new duties. Report to the head groom, he is expecting you.'

'I am not to keep working under Mr. Wardle?' As I blurted it out I knew I would be severely reprimanded for my impertinence. But Mr. Stirk did not seem to notice. 'No, Nicholas, Mr. Wardle-' He hesitated and picked up the fork before finally finishing, 'is no longer with us.' He put down the fork. 'That is all, you may go.'

But I couldn't leave without asking the most important question. I had not seen Cassandra since that night and had no idea what had happened to her.

‘May I ask sir, where is Cassandra... Cassie?’

Mr. Stirk frowned. ‘Cassie?’

‘Yes, sir. Cassie Thomas. She works in the kitchen.’

Mr. Stirk looked me straight in the eye. ‘No-one of that name has ever worked at Cranfield Manor.’

When I got back downstairs to the kitchen it was to learn fresh news. Mr. Wardle always kept a special bottle of liquid in the silver room. It was to be used only if a piece of silver became badly tarnished, an event never likely to happen with the silver in Mr. Wardle’s care. He had warned me when I first started my work with him that I was never to touch the bottle and that he was the one person allowed to use its contents should the need arise. The news I heard was that early that morning Mr. Wardle had locked himself in the silver room, emptied the bottle into a silver goblet and drank it down. The liquid was a solution of cyanide of potassium. They had had to break down the door to retrieve his body.

I had asked several of the kitchen servants if they knew where Cassandra was but none of them had and, to be honest – and there is not point writing this if I am not totally honest – I was afraid to appear too inquisitive. I knew now why Cassandra had insisted we never acknowledged each other inside the Manor. That way if one was caught the other would not fall under suspicion.

It may sound like that day must have felt to be the worst of my life but I couldn’t stop feeling, awful though it may appear, an underlying elation that I had escaped unscathed and,

when I went to bed that night, I fell asleep without difficulty. I had a dream: a vivid dream about Cassandra, the details of which I shall not reveal, and when I woke from it in the middle of the night, I realised I had my first erection. Events of the last few days came flooding back and I was disgusted with myself. Any elation was gone and I felt total misery. I cried for the first time since I was a very small boy and, though I tried by digging my fingernails as hard as I could into my palms, I couldn't stop. So finally I just lay there and let the tears trail down my cheeks. After a while I reached down to touch myself. I was still hard. I wanted to ignore it, turn over on my side and try to get back to sleep. But, though I hated myself for it, I couldn't, I just couldn't. Afterwards, I felt totally exhausted and slept like a dead man.