

Chapter 7



A Dark and Dangerous Web

The stage wagon had been positioned between two yew trees at Brother Ethelwig's request. He'd been very secretive about his latest invention and there was much speculation about the tangle of ropes and pulleys draped between the topmost branches of the trees. But all was revealed at last. Ethelwig, perched precariously on the highest of rickety ladders had finally attached the enormous straw star in position. His stomach bubbled with excitement. The black powder was in place. He'd measured it out carefully – just enough for the star to fizz across the stage with a tail of sparks, leading the shepherds to the manger. Too little and it would fizzle out ahead of time, too much and it would whizz like a firecracker – and that would spoil the effect.

The play was about to begin and baby Amos Pug was screaming lustily from the manger. Bessie sat beside the baron on the front row of rough benches arranged before

the stage, an honour reserved for Sir Ranulf de Lacy, the Lord of the Manor, and his party. Fustian, Sir Ranulf's clerk, perched on the bench behind. The baron squeezed Bessie's hand.

'Quite comfortable, my dear?' he said in a blast of onion breath. Fustian stared at the baron's fat neck. *What was Sir Ranulf thinking of, betrothing his lovely granddaughter to this coarse old mountain of blubber?* But then again, Fustian knew refinement wasn't everything. Sir Percy FitzNigel, his previous master, might have had perfect manners, but his heart was cruel as a crow.

Bessie, however, was pleased to be sitting at the front, even if it did mean sitting next to the lecherous baron. She peered hard at the stage. She couldn't see Tom anywhere. The chief novice always took the part of Joseph and yet it certainly wasn't Tom sitting by the manger with the Virgin Mary. Joseph's face was stained with walnut juice but there was no mistaking Odo's pompous expression. So where in the world was Tom?

Bessie had almost given up hope when suddenly her eyes were drawn to the donkey standing behind the manger. It seemed to be wagging its head in her direction. She leaned forward in her seat and the donkey leaned forward too and as it did, it raised a hoof. Bessie raised her hand and let it drop. The donkey dropped its hoof too. She nodded her head up and down. The donkey nodded in reply.

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In the cool sacristy at the east end of the abbey church, Abbot Fergus touched the golden casket with his finger. He really should hurry. He was already late for the novices'

play. He could hear the drums and bagpipes from across the cloisters. He picked up the golden chest and cradled it in his arm. *Why did it have this strange power over him?* He should lock it away now, but there was something about it, something that drew him back to the locked sacristy cupboard almost every hour – just to have another peep. He started violently and rushed to the door, staring nervously up and down the passage outside. He was sure he'd heard a scuffling sound ... but of course there was nobody there. It was Christmas Eve after all and everyone was waiting for him in the outer court.

But the abbot needn't have worried. In the bustle and excitement, no-one had noticed that Abbot Fergus was missing and the play had already begun. Sir Ranulf de Lacy assumed he was sitting with the monks, and the monks that their abbot had joined the Lord of the Manor's party. So there was nobody looking for him at all; no-one around to hear his startled cry. In fact the abbot himself had scarcely heard the slow footfall behind him. The hairs on the back of his neck had only just started to rise when he felt himself seized from behind. The arm that snaked around his neck was mahogany brown in colour, and in the hair's breadth of a second before he fell helpless to the ground, the abbot noticed an exotic smell. That same curious aroma that had dogged his every step from the city of Westminster on the great bow bend of the River Thames to Saint Wilfred's abbey on the peaceful tributary of the Twist.

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Meanwhile in Saint Wilfred's courtyard, the shepherds had gathered by the side of the stage, gazing anxiously up into

the branches of the yew tree for the signal from Ethelwig.

‘Ready down below?’ he called at last. The shepherds hitched their robes and began to scramble onto the stage.

‘The shepherds heard the story,’ they chanted

‘Proclaimed by angels bright

How Christ the Lord of Glory

Was born on earth this night.’

There was a hissing sound like a hundred serpents and a shower of sparks flew glittering into the trees. The ropes across the stage vibrated with a dull hum and the straw star began to move, shakily at first and then gathering speed, faster and faster it whooshed across the stage, scarlet flames streaming out behind like a comet’s tail. There was a flurry of applause, oohs and aahs of wonder, then all of a sudden, with a monstrous bang, the huge star turned a somersault and exploded into flames, lurching and spitting in the force of the blast until it came to a juddering halt, directly above the manger. Mary and Joseph leapt from the stage followed by a tumble of assorted sheep and oxen. The donkey shrieked and lunged for the manger, tearing baby Amos from the crib... just in time! For a second later and the smouldering star came plummeting down, landing with a fizz in the middle of the straw.

‘Water!’

‘A bucket!’

‘A blanket!’

Now the manger was on fire and the hay bales behind had also caught light. As the audience ran like frightened rabbits, Tom saw his chance. He thrust the howling baby into Mistress Pug’s arms and raced across the outer court

towards the dairy, elbowing his way through the crush of bodies without a backward glance. Thick smoke billowed from the burning stage. Tom could hardly believe his luck. Skirting the stables, he skidded on the slippery grass, around the back of the kennels, the laundry and the brew house. He paused to glance over his shoulder, praying no-one was hurt, then ran like a hare in the shadow of the great nave of the abbey until he reached the pile of rubble and scaffolding at the base of the bell tower. Rounding the corner, he flung off the donkey's head and leant coughing against the stone buttress at the east end of the abbey. Just where Bessie had said. Directly under the rose window and less than twenty paces from the sacristy.

Panting, he squinted into the darkness, smoke stinging his throat. He could see the river, curling away east in moonlight and shadow. The hubbub from the outer court was silenced now by the enormous bulk of the abbey that reared above him like a mountain. The cry of an owl made him start. Alone in the shadow of the tower, the night seemed full of threatening shapes and otherworldly sounds. And then, quite plainly, he heard a dull thud followed by a sound that was distinctly of this world; the splintering noise of breaking glass.

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Bessie too had grabbed her chance. She walked quickly across the cobbles, her hood pulled over her face. She didn't want to run for fear of attracting attention. Away from the outer court the lights were fewer, and deep in the shadow of the north face of the abbey, she picked up her skirts and ran awkwardly, the joy of escape mingled

with a hollow feeling of fear. She'd convinced herself she would run away, even if Tom wouldn't join her. But now she realised she'd been fooling herself. *What if Tom had changed his mind?*

Her heart thudding in her throat, Bessie crept around the huge stone buttresses at the base of the tower. She stifled a cry of relief. There was Tom, crouching in the shadows. She started towards him but something in his manner made her stop. 'Shhh!' he hissed, pointing up at the sacristy window.

Bessie shrank into the shadow of the abbey wall. A hooded form crouched on the wide sill, clinging to the stone gargoyles. And then the shape leapt, agile as a cat, landing with a crunch on the broken glass below. With a furtive glance over its shoulder, the figure peered back up at the window. A small dark object plummeted down, caught deftly in the intruder's outstretched hands. And then another hooded shape appeared and with equal agility climbed down the wall, feet sure as a goat in the footholds of the sandstone walls.

'They look like monks!' breathed Bessie.

'They're not our monks. Thieves more like. This is the sacristy. It's full of the abbey treasure!'

Suddenly Abbot Fergus's face swam into Tom's mind; that curious expression of greed and longing as he had gazed at the golden casket. *The golden casket! The one that Abbot Fergus had brought from London!* There was no time to explain to Bessie. The two figures were making off, racing across the moonlit snowfield leading to the eastern gate.

‘Quick, let’s follow them,’ whispered Tom, grabbing Bessie’s hand. ‘We can’t let them get away!’

Bessie snatched it back. ‘But what about our plan?’ she said indignantly. ‘I thought we were going to London!’

‘There’ll be time for that later. Come on! We must go after them!’ Tom broke into a run. ‘Thank heavens for the snow. We can follow their tracks.’

‘But Tom!’ hissed Bessie, stamping her foot, but Tom had already set off. There was no stopping him in this mood. So Bessie picked up her skirts and began to follow, keeping the snow tracks in view.

Tom gave no thought to what they might do if they caught up with the strangers. Tears of cold stung his eyes. Plans for escape would have to wait. All he knew for certain was that he had to follow the casket. If he stopped to fetch Abbot Fergus now, he’d lose sight of it forever.

For how was Tom to know that Abbot Fergus lay bleeding on the other side of the sacristy wall, sprawled under a pillar with a gash in his head, the blood still warm as it pooled on the cold stone floor? Nor could he ever have guessed at the threads of intrigue that joined the winding alleys of the city of London to the small coastal town of Saint Agnes Next-the-Sea. The strands were pulling together now, slowly but inexorably, and Bessie and Tom were being drawn into a dark and dangerous web.