



A Templar Knight Mystery

The Alehouse Murders

Maureen Ash

"An excellent mystery, very suspenseful and clever, with a sympathetic sleuth sure to captivate readers."—Sharon K. Penman, *New York Times* Bestselling Author



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One

Lincoln Summer 1200 A.D.

Heat hung like a sodden blanket over Lincoln town and the surrounding countryside. The air was heavy, almost too thick to breathe, wrapping itself around mouth and nostrils like a linen shroud. It made the atmosphere seem ominous; a feeling enhanced by the distant sound of thunder as it rolled and crackled, but did not give the gift of rain.

On the banks of a stream about two miles from the walls of Lincoln, a hawking party was engaged in the hunt. From behind the shelter of a stand of trees the sheriff of Lincoln, Gerard Camville, and his wife, along with their companions, watched as a falcon circled like a small speck high in the ceiling of the sky. Directly below the bird, hidden in the reeds of the river bank, lay the sheriffs falconer, directing her movements. At his signal the kennel master released his hounds and they surged forward, barking and yapping at the ducks bobbing unsuspectingly on the gently rippling surface of the stream. In alarm, the waterfowl took to the air and, as they rose up like a whirring cloud, the peregrine stooped, plummeting like a ragged stone to strike on a fat mallard that had been a little slower than the rest. The talons and notched beak of the falcon quickly extinguished the life from its prey.

The falconer swung his lure in a wide circle above his head, attracting the young peregrin and tempting her from her kill. Soon she was hooded and resting securely on her trainers wrist, the tidbit he fed her disappearing quickly down her sharp curved beak, while servants ran to secure the mallard in a rough cloth sack. The bird skittered and bobbed on the falconers wrist, pulling against the thongs that bound her. He calmed her by dribbling water from his mouth over the feathers on her back.

“Good man. Well done.” The thickly muscled figure of the sheriff, Gerard Camville, left the cover of the trees. He walked lightly for so large a man, but there was no doubting the aggressiveness of his personality. It was there in the forward thrust of his jaw and in the restless darting eyes. “You have trained her well, Eubold,” he said to the falconer. “I was right to buy her. These birds from the cliffs of Wales are far superior to those of Norway. I remember King Henry losing a fine gyrfalcon in combat to one of this strain some fifteen years ago. We will get some good sport from her.”

“And some tender morsels for the table as well, I trust.” Nicolaa de la Haye came to stand beside the sheriff. They were an oddly assorted pair, the sheriffs powerful figure seeming to diminish that of the small plump woman who was his wife. But only the most unobservant would not have noticed that they were more than equally matched in temperament. Camvilles fractiousness washed over the calmness of his wifes demeanour with the futility of a winter storm beating upon a rock. Both in their midforties, they had been married for more than twenty years, and although time had not softened the contrast in their personalities, it had taught them both to tolerate the differences.

The rest of the hawking party came to where they stood. It was a small group, with only a handful of the castles household knights and a few servants to carry the food and wine for their midmorning meal.

“We will go downstream,” Camville announced, “towards the marsh. Perhaps we will find some heron on which to test this beauty.” He reached over and took the bird from the falconer, securing her to his own gauntleted wrist and setting the bells on her jesses tinkling.

“Do you not think, Gerard, that it would be best to keep her to smaller prey at first?” Nicolaa asked her husband. On her own gloved wrist perched a merlin, the small falcon deemed suitable for a womans use. It was one of her favourites, and sat quietly, the rough spotted feathers on its breast ruffling lightly in the breeze. “Your bird is young yet; she will lose heart if you set her too hard a task before she is ready.”

Gerard turned to debate the point when he noticed a thin trail of dust rising above the trees that lay between the stream where they stood and the stone walls of Lincoln. Soon the muffled sound of hoof beats, moving at speed on the hard-packed dirt of the forest track, reached them and, moments later, a horse and rider broke through the cover of the trees into the clearing at the side of the stream. It was a man-at-arms from the castle garrison; the twelve pointed red star of the Haye family showing brightly on the breast of his tunic. Sliding to a stop in front of Gerard and Nicolaa he dismounted, leaving his horse standing foam-flecked and with heaving sides as he went down on one knee before the sheriff and his wife.

“Christs Blood,” Camville swore, “what is it now? Can we not have a mornings sport without interruption?”

“My lord, my lady,” the soldier panted, “Ernulf has sent me.” The man -at-arms was young, with a pasty face liberally scarred with boils. Sweat ran in rivulets from the lank brown hair that stuck out from beneath his leather cap, caused not only by the heat and the exertions of his ride, but also nervousness at being the center of his master and mistress attention. He hoped to draw the sheriffs well known irascibility away from himself by making it clear that it was the captain of the castle guard, not he, that was the cause of the intrusion.

Camville swore again, but Nicolaa laid her hand on her husbands arm. “Ernulf would not spoil your pleasure on a whim, Gerard. It must be important.”

Although Gerard was sheriff it was Nicolaa, through the inheritance of her father, who was castellan of the castle and responsible to the king for its security. Ernulf had been in her fathers service since she had been a child. His loyalty to her was unquestionable, as was his devotion to her well-being. If he had thought there was reason to disturb her, it would not be for naught. “What is the message from Ernulf?” she asked of the young soldier.

The lad took a great gulp of air, thankful for Lady Nicolaas calm authority, and now with relish he repeated the words he had been told to say. “There has been murder done in Lincoln town, my lady. Four people dead in an alehouse off Danesgate. All stabbed to death. Sir Bascot and Ernulf have gone to the place and to see the priest of St. Andrews. It was the priest who reported the crime.” The young man-at-arms face grew even redder with the excitement of his tale. The boils looked ready to burst.

“May Gods angels weep,” Camville exploded. “As if this hell -sent weather wasnt enough, we now have a murderer loose in Lincoln. And the fair about to begin. Someones guts shall spill for this.”

Although the news had shaken Nicolaa as well, she reacted with more restraint than her husband. “If these unfortunates were found in an alehouse, Gerard, they may only

be drunken sots who have killed each other over a game of dice, or a woman. It is most likely something of nothing.”

Camville was not much mollified, but he did grunt in assent to her reasoning, and he gave her no argument when she suggested that she return to the castle immediately to find out what was the truth of the matter. “It may be some hours before all the details are known, Gerard. I will go now and you can return at your leisure. There is no need for both of us to lose the mornings sport.”

At the sheriffs nod of agreement Nicolaa spoke to the messenger. “Return to Lincoln. Find Ernulf and tell him I am returning directly. Tell him also to be discreet and that he and Sir Bascot are to report to me with all haste, before this news is bruited abroad and alarms the townspeople and the visitors who have come for the fair. I shall await them in my private chamber.”

As the man-at-arms put his heels to his flagging mount and sped away, Nicolaa herself moved to depart, motioning for one of the servants to accompany her. “God grant these deaths were caused by nothing more than an alehouse brawl, Gerard. But if they were not, we shall need some good meat for the table to fortify ourselves for any trouble that may come. Perhaps I was wrong about your new falcon. It may be time to try her on a larger quarry.”

With a smile she disappeared down the track, the servant following behind. It was an old game between her and her husband. She bought his complaisance by pandering to his taste for the hunt and his disinclination to attend to the details of running the shrievalty and castle. In return she retained the power in her own hands, managing the garrison and Haye lands as her father had done before her. It suited them both.

Two

Lincoln castle stands high on the summit of a hill, sharing the height with the Minster and cathedral. Bisecting the area between the castle on the western side and the Minster on the east runs the old Roman road of Ermine Street which continues down the precipitous southern slope of the hill and converges at its base with the River Witham. On either side of this main street and below the confines of the castle and Minster lies the town, stretching out on either side like the outer edges of a leaf from the main stem. All of this area—castle, Minster and town—are encircled by a stout stone wall with an additional parapet encasing the top of the hill which can be sealed off from the lower reaches in case of attack. Within the large bailey of the castle, beside barracks, stable, chapel, smith and storehouses, are two keeps, one newly built and an older one which, although showing signs of disrepair, is still sound enough to house the armoury and a few sleeping chambers. When one of the town watchmen brought Ernulf the urgent message from Anselm, the priest of St. Andrews, Bascot de Marins was breaking his fast in the hall of the new keep. De Marins was a Templar, a member of the religious military order of the Poor Fellow-Soldiers of Christ and Temple of Solomon. He had arrived in Lincoln a few months before, in the dead of winter, clad in the white surcoat of a Templar, with the blood red cross of Christ emblazoned on its breast. He had been emaciated and weary, his only companion a young Italian boy, Gianni, riding pillion behind him. The boy, who was a mute, had looked in no better state than his master, for he was thin and shivering in the cold of a climate with which he was unfamiliar.

After a brief conference with Nicolaa de la Haye, the Templar had been given a room to himself in the old keep, and had not been seen for many days; only the boy appeared to take him his meals and bring back the empty vessels on which the food had been served. The boy, too, had otherwise kept to the chamber, seeming fearful of any who approached, and attempted communication only with the cook. To him, through a series of hand gestures, the boy conveyed the needs of himself and his master and gave his thanks by means of a shy smile and a grateful glance from beneath his mop of brown curls.

No one had been told why the Templar was in Lincoln. Gerard Camville had said in passing that de Marins had been on crusade in the Holy Land with the now-dead King Richard back in „91, and had been captured by the Saracens during a skirmish near Acre at the end of that year. After eight long years of captivity he had recently escaped. It was obvious that he had been tortured during his incarceration, for he wore a leather patch over the eye socket of his missing right eye and walked with a pronounced limp. When, early one morning, he came into the hall to break his fast after attending Mass in the castle chapel, all eyes had turned his way but, although polite, he had said nothing of his past and seemed disinclined to talk about it. Any question put to him that referred to his ordeal was met with a disarming silence and then a deliberate change of conversation that left no doubt that while he did not wish to give offence, neither did he want to confide.

He was a man of medium height, with skin burned by the sun to the colour of old copper, and hair and beard of dark brown that was prematurely threaded with grey. His

one remaining eye was blue, so pale in colour that it was startling in the burnished darkness of his skin, seeming like a piece of ice that the sun had failed to melt. As he began to recover his health, he had taken to practicing his combative skills in the yard, first with a blunted sword against the wooden stake erected for the purpose, and finally with Ernulf in mock battle using both sword and shield. While he seemed to have regained his former weight, his prowess with a sword was hampered by the lameness of his leg and the blindness of one eye. For all that, he still made a formidable opponent for Ernulf, who needed all the tricks he had learned in his many years as a soldier to keep pace with the Templar.

When Ernulf went into the hall that morning seeking someone in authority to accompany him in answering Anselms summons, there was little of the castle retinue stirring. A few servants had set out trestle tables and laid them with platters of cold meats and early summer fruits. The night shift of the castle guard were seated at the rear of the hall downing mugs of ale and some cheese before returning to the barracks for a few hours sleep. A couple of clerics and a smattering of Haye personal servants were drinking watered wine and munching on day-old bread while, in a corner, some of the pages were playing a game with a set of polished rabbit bones. Beneath the covered walkway from the kitchen to the hall a pair of serving maids giggled behind their hands. The heat of the last few days had permeated even the thick wall of stones with which the keep was built and the air was stuffy, redolent with the smell of smoke from the torches that lit the inner confines of the room mixed with the scent of the pungent herbs that had been scattered amongst the rushes on the floor. Of the household knights there was little evidence. Those that were not out on the hawking party with the sheriff and Nicolaa de la Haye were still in their beds sleeping off the effects of last nights wine. Only Bascot sat at the table below the dais that was usually used by those of knights rank, with the boy Gianni standing behind him in attendance.

When Ernulf approached and told him what had happened, the Templar readily agreed to accompany him to St. Andrews, asking only if the church was a far distance. "Too far for you to walk," Ernulf had said baldly, making a pointed reference to Bascots crippled leg. "I will order mounts saddled."

The Templar gave the Serjeant a small smile and rose from the table. He had a liking for the grizzled old campaigner and had learned that while he was phlegmatic and brusque, he was not surly. He also treated the men-at-arms under his command with a rough fairness that had won de Marins respect.

Gianni was hovering at Basco ts elbow with an anxious face and didnt seem at ease until his master spoke to him quietly and told him to wait in the hall for his return. Nodding, the youngster turned and slipped away to a corner of the large chamber, curling up between two of the castle hounds that lay there gnawing on the discarded bones of last nights meal. His eyes followed the Templar as he and Ernulf left the hall.

Outside the pair made their way to the stables, pausing only for Ernulf to call to two men-atarms lounging in the doorway of the barracks to accompany them. Once mounted, the small party headed out of the castle ward and, passing under Bailgate, the main gate into the town, they turned down onto Steep Hill. It was an apt name, for the drop it made from the higher ground on which the castle and Minster were situated down into the town itself was deep. The group rode their horses carefully on the

cobbled pavement before turning off onto Danesgate, a side street which led off in an arc towards the east before swooping still farther down the hill to Claxledgate. They passed a few early risers amongst the townspeople, but otherwise the streets were empty and it was not too many minutes until they were in front of the church of St. Andrew. At the mouth of a small side street was an alehouse, the sign of an ale-stake hanging over the doorway. Beside the sign was bunched a sheaf of greenery, the usual signal to let customers know a new brew was ready for consumption.

“The watchman told me that the alewife discovered the bodies earlier this morning,” Ernulf said to Bascot as they dismounted. “Luckily she went running straight to the priest at St. Andrews instead of screaming her head off in the street. The priest had the presence of mind to calm her, then went to the alehouse and barred the door before he sent to inform Lady Nicolaa. Probably be best if we went to see the alewife and the priest first.”

Bascot nodded and followed the Serjeants squat figure as he led the way into the church, a small one in comparison with many others in Lincoln, and down into the shadows of a short nave that was lit at one end by a torch flaring in a wall sconce. By its flickering light brightly painted scenes depicting stories from the Bible could be seen on every wall. Across the empty space, below the altar, Bascot could see the priest standing over a woman seated on a low stool. The woman was crouched over her knees, her broad shoulders shaking beneath the plain gown that she wore. Her sobbing was loud and grating. Upon her head was a piece of crumpled linen, looking as though it had been hastily donned for a makeshift covering. As Bascot and Ernulf approached she looked up and, at the sight of them, began to moan and cry in heartrending gulps. She was about fifty years of age with a florid face and pale eyes.

Wisps of fine grey hair escaped from the confines of her slightly askew coif. Despite the ravages of time and her present distress, there could be seen the shadow of a once fresh-faced comeliness. Her hands, wringing themselves together in her ample lap, looked strong and capable.

The priest, Anselm, a handsome full-faced man of about forty years of age, looked relieved to see Bascot. He had met the Templar once before, soon after Bascot had arrived in Lincoln, and he murmured a greeting before patting the distraught womans shoulder and saying, “Now, Agnes, you must compose yourself. Sir Bascot has come from the castle. You must tell him what you found this morning, just as you told me.”

The alewife gulped and, with an effort, managed to stem her tears. “I came down this morning, from my bed in our chamber above the taproom. I thought it strange that Wat— Walter—thats my husband—wasnt in bed beside me, but I thought as maybe hed got up early like. He does—did—sometimes, if hed taken too much ale the night before and it made his stomach bad.”

She stopped for a moment and wiped her running nose on the sleeve of her gown. “I went down to the taproom and opened the door, thinking Id pull him a draft, just to set him right, you know. When I went inside, it was still dark from the shutters being closed and I went... I went...”

Here she broke down and began to sob again. Father Anselm took up her tale. “Apparently she went to open the shutters and stumbled over something. As she fell she realised it was a person lying on the floor. She was not alarmed at first. It

seems”—and here he looked down with a stern but understanding expression at the woman, who was again hiding her head in her hands—“that there are often patrons who spend the night on the floor after they have had more ale than is good for them. However, when she managed to get the shutters open she found that there were not one but four prone figures on the floor, and that they were not insensible from drink, but dead. One of them was her husband.”

Bascot regarded the nearly incoherent woman and spoke to the priest. “The serjeant and I will go and see for ourselves what is at the alehouse. Please keep Mistress Agnes here until we return.”

Father Anselm, with a resigned sigh, agreed to do as he had been asked. The corners of his mouth turned down in an exasperated grimace as they left him to the difficult duty of trying to console the unfortunate alewife.

Coming outside from the dark interior of the church the light of the sun, which even this early had more heat than was usual, dazzled their eyes. They went across the cobbles to the door of the alehouse, ignoring the stares of a small crowd that had now begun to gather about the horses and men-at-arms, and removed the bar which the priest had placed across it. From the outside it had the appearance of a moderately well-run establishment. The walls had been freshly limed and the shutters were clean and in good repair. The sign above the lintel had been recently repainted. But as Bascot pushed the door open the smell of heat and death, wrenchingly familiar from the time of his captivity, rushed out to meet him. No amount of cleanliness or industry could defeat that stench.

Ernulf told the two men-at-arms to remain where they were, then he and Bascot went in, finding themselves standing on a small threshold just inside the door. To the right was the entrance to the taproom, in front of them a passage with what appeared to be an open door leading outside at its end, and to their left a flight of narrow stairs presumably giving access to the floor above. Both men drew their swords and, moving swiftly, made a thorough search of the premises. They found no sign of any intruder.

Returning to the taproom they stepped inside, the death smell more pungent here. The interior was dim, lit only by the glare of the sun glancing off the wall of the building opposite through the one open casement which the alewife had unshuttered. The bodies lay like piles of unwashed linen on the floor and Ernulf stepped around them to throw open the other casement. The scuttling of rats could be heard, and the insistent drone of flies.

The task was unpleasant, but necessary, and one by one Ernulf and Bascot went to each body and examined it. There were three men and a woman. One of the men was elderly, and wore the long beard of a Jew. Nearest to the door, he was half-propped against a three-legged stool. At the front of his gown was a long rent through which the marks of a dagger thrust could be seen just below his heart; a thin trickle of blood mixed with the grey hairs on his chest. The exposed tissue had a drained look and was tinged a bluish white. His face was the colour of clay, the mouth hanging slackly and the lids of his eyes not quite closed. His hands lay one on each side of his body, loosely, palms up. The left one bore evidence that the rats had begun to feed.

The body in the far corner was that of a young man, plainly dressed in sturdy clothes. He was fair of hair and face with a broad sprinkle of freckles across his nose. A crease of skin at the side of his neck showed the scar of an old injury, possibly a

burn. This victim had been stabbed from behind and he was slumped forward, as though he had obligingly offered his back to his attacker. Again, there was only a small stream of dried blood from the wound on the back of his jerkin.

Bascot and Ernulf moved to where the woman lay, halfway between the Jew and the young man, in front of one of the casements. It must have been her body that the alewife had tripped over. She was slightly turned onto her side, and one arm was flung out in front of her as though in useless supplication. She was wearing a gown of cheap but bright material with sleeves of green. There was no covering on her head and her hair, the shade of pale honey, tumbled down her back in riotous disarray. Nearby lay a wig such as those worn by prostitutes, made of hair taken from the mane and tail of a horse and dyed. The colour of this one was a deep dark red. Ernulf turned her over. Even though dead, she had a fair prettiness that was marred by the vermilion face paint daubed on her cheeks. Like the Jew, her breast bore the marks of a dagger thrust above the low neck of her gown, with a small stain of blood smearing the lace just below it.

The last victim was a man of late middle age, with thick shoulders and a large stomach barely contained by the black leather belt that encircled it. He was sprawled on the floor beside a cask of ale, face down in the rushes, his limbs stiff. The back of his skull had been smashed in. Beside him lay two empty ale cups.

None of the victims had purses at their belts or were wearing jewellery of any kind. If any of the men had been equipped with dagger or sword, these too had vanished and there was no trace of any blade that might have been used in the stabbings.

Bascot looked at Ernulf. "Except for the alekeeper, these bodies have been dead longer than since curfew last night."

Ernulf agreed. Both were too familiar with the state of bodies during the aftermath of battle to mistake the length of time it took for the telltale signs of deterioration to show.

"The death rigor has come and gone except for Wat. And theres precious little blood for three people stabbed. The walls would be spattered with it if the deed was done in here. And theres no sign of a struggle, either."

Bascot knelt down beside the Jew, the nearest corpse to him. He lifted the hand that had not been molested by the rats. The nails were free of any skin or material that might have been torn from an attacker and, apart from the rent made by the dagger, his clothes seemed untouched. The young man and womans bodies and clothing were in a like condition. "I would think that all three were dead before they were stabbed," he said. "The blood had already settled and the hearts ceased to pump when these wounds were made. There are no bruises. Whatever the means of their deaths, it has not left a mark." He looked up at the serjeant. "Do you recognise any of them?"

"Two," Ernulf replied succinctly. "The Jew— his name is Samuel. Cousin of Isaac that lives in the big house in Mikelgate. And the one over there"—he nodded in the direction of the body lying beside the ale cask—"thats Walter, the alewives husband. The other two Ive never seen before. The girl looks, by her dress andwig and face paint, to be a harlot, but shes not a regular from the stewes down in Butwerk. Id recognise her if she was." He rubbed his stubbleencrusted jaw. "'Course, with all the strangers that weve got in Lincoln right now she could be some newly arrived country

girl who decided to turn bawd in the hope of earning a few pennies. If she is she might have strayed out of the whores patch.“

The serjeant waved his hand towards the young man. “Dont know about the lad. Could be a visitor come for the fair, or perhaps an apprentice new to Lincoln.”

If Ernulf did not know the two young people then it was most probable that they were strangers. In his short time at the castle, Bascot had come to realise that Ernulf seemed to know every person that dwelt within the precinct of the town walls as well as having an almost intimate knowledge of most of the buildings. Since Ernulf had spent all his life in the town, except for occasional sojourns abroad in the service of the Hayes, this was not surprising.

As fresh air came into the room from the opened shutters, it became a little easier to breathe in the fetid atmosphere. Bascot and Ernulf moved back towards the door. Near the entrance was a table, on its surface a candleholder with a burnt down stub and a pair of dice. Apart from that, and the two empty tumblers on the floor, the place was tidy and seemed to have been scrubbed within the last few days; even though the reek of ale was exceptionally strong, there were no obvious spills and the rushes on the floor looked fresh.

“Why bring three dead bodies in here and stab them?” Bascot mused. “Why not leave them wherever the deed was done? It is most strange.”

The serjeant shrugged. He had seen death too often to be much affected by it, and the bodies in the chamber were not, as far as he knew, anyone of importance—two strangers, a Jew and an alekeeper. “Ill send for the infirmarian at the Priory of All Saints. The monksll take the bodies and see them ready for burial—the Christian ones, that is. The Jewsl want to take care of their own, I reckon. Good fortune that one of the dead was a Jew. Otherwise the whole lot of „em would be blamed for the murders. Thats usually the way it is. And thats the last thing Lady Nicolaa needs, right in the middle of the biggest fair of the year, a hue and cry after any member of the Jewish community. Not good for trade, is that.”

Bascot flinched inwardly. His enmity towards the Jews had been the same as that of every other good Christian until he had been captured by the Saracens. It had seemed logical and just that they were to be hated as the race who had crucified Christ. But during his years of captivity there had, at times, been Jews imprisoned with him, especially after the great infidel leader, Saladin, died and his unruly family fought for control of the Muslim world. Bascot had come to know one of them well, a young Jewish lad named Benjamin. He and the Jew had never become friends, but with the enemy a common one, they had helped each other and it had been Benjamin who had been instrumental in Bascots escape from his Muslim captors. That Benjamin had lost his life in aiding the Templar was a fact that Bascot found hard to forget, just as it also made it difficult for him to blindly accept the premise that all Jews were unworthy of any emotion but contempt from a Christian.

Uncomfortable, he made no reply to the Serjeants comment and Ernulf continued, “Will you want to talk to the alewife again? Seems strange she slept upstairs all night and didnt hear her husband havin,, his head bashed in.”

Bascot, remembering the near hysteria of the alewife, reluctantly agreed that it seemed necessary to question her again and instructed Ernulf, while he was seeing her, to send news to the Jewish community of Samuels death.

Ernulf nodded in a brisk fashion at the instructions. "I'll send one of my lads to do that after he's been to the Priory. In the meantime, I'd best stay here. That crowd outside is not going to be satisfied until they find out what's happened and it might need a firm hand to curb their questions. When you're ready, we'll go back and report to Lady Nicolaa."

Bascot nodded, taking a last look at the bodies, particularly those of the woman and the young man, before he left. Death was fast removing the bloom of youth from the faces of these two, but there still remained vestiges of their vitality: the smoothness of the unlined cheeks, the bright hue of their hair, so similar in colour. It had been too soon for them to die, these two youngsters, especially from a cause as foul as murder. To die on a battlefield was one's own choice; for a life to be taken in stealth and for the purposes of another was a grievous offence, not only to man but to God Himself.

Outside, as Ernulf had predicted, the number of curious people had grown and they were pestering the two men-at-arms, who stood firmly silent, about what had happened. When Bascot appeared, they drew back a pace, respectful of his knight's rank and not a little intimidated by the small replica of the Templar badge he wore high on the shoulder of his tunic. He walked, unaccosted, across the street and into the church. The coolness of the interior and the smell of incense were welcome after the stifling aroma of death.

Three

Several hours later, in a small carpentry shop hard by the church of St. Mary Crackpole near Mikelgate, the alewife, Agnes, sat with her sister, Jennet. She had ceased to cry but an occasional sob would still shake her ample frame and she was having difficulty sipping the posset made of herbs and honey that Jennet had prepared for her.

The two sisters were very different in appearance, for Jennet was tall and slim and the carrotcoloured hair that framed her thin sharp face still bore no traces of grey even though she was only three years younger than Agnes. In one respect, however, they had a similarity, and that was in strength. Agnes possessed it in her thick bones and sturdy flesh; in Jennet it evidenced itself in her mind, which was aggressive and quick.

The younger sister regarded the older. Jennet bore no grief that her brother-by-marriage was dead. She had thought Agnes a fool for marrying him and was not sorry to see him gone except, perhaps, for the manner of it and how it would affect her sister.

“You must try to calm yourself, Agnes,” she said sternly. “The monks have taken Wat. They will see that he is prepared right and laid out for his burial. Which wont be delayed too long,” she added thoughtfully, “because of this hot weather.”

This unfortunate but true observation set Agnes off into a fresh paroxysm of tears and Jennet lost her patience. “Why do you carry on so? Wat were not a good husband to you, as Ive told you many a time. How many beatings have you had off him since you married him two years ago? More times than you can count, Ill warrant. I thought you would have learned your lesson with that other wastrel our da wed you to when you was young. Even though he didnt raise his hand to you, he was the laziest swine Ive ever met in my life. And when he died, not beforetimes I might add, from drinking too much ale, you went and married another useless oaf, twice as worse. And he was your own free choice, too. God forgive me for saying so, but its maybe not a sad matter that none of your babbies survived to grow. Theyd never have thrived, not with the husbands youve had.”

“Oh, Jennet, dont scold me,” Agnes sobbed. “Its bad enough Wat was killed the way he was, and those others—stabbed right in my own taproom. But I could have been murdered, too. Havent you thought of that? Its making my flesh creep, knowing I was there while... while...” She started to cry afresh.

“Well, you werent murdered, were you? Whoever did it wasnt after you, was he? If he had been, you wouldnt be here in my house now.”

Jennet looked at her sister, purposely stifling the pity she felt. She had learned through their years of growing up that if you once gave Agnes any compassion she would give herself over completely to self-pity. The only way to get her through any difficulty was to bully her out of it. Their father had been the same, and Jennet had learned how to deal with Agnes by watching their mother. As Agnes began to recover somewhat and took a sip of her posset, Jennet looked at her consideringly. There was something more to Agnes tears than grief. She was frightened alright, but Jennet was sure there was something else, something she was not telling. Agnes could be sly at

times and secretive, just like their old dad, but Jennet could usually worm any secrets out of her sister, most of them anyway.

“When Father Anselm sent for me and I came to the church this morning, that Templar knight was asking you some strange questions. What did he mean about anything hidden in the ale house?” Jennet had arrived at St. Andrews just as Bascot was about to leave and had only caught the last part of the conversation between him and Agnes.

“I dont know, Jennet, truly I dont.” Fear now completely took over Agnes. It was plain in the way her hands and voice shook. “He said that them bodies—the others, not Wat—might have been in my house or yard the day before. But I never saw anything. We had our custom as usual and I served up the ale. The taster even came and said Id made a good brew. I dont know anything about any bodies, or anything else...”

Jennet took a seat beside her sister. The table at which they were sitting was good and solid, as were the four chairs arranged around it. She was proud of the few bits of furniture she had, for her husband, Tom, who was a carpenter, had made them. He wasnt a master craftsman, but he belonged to the town guild and earned a reasonable living making simple items and doing repairs in the yard out behind their little house. He was a good man, worked hard and never took too much ale or hit her even though, by law, he was allowed to strike her if she gave him just cause. And they had raised three children; the two girls married well, one to a freeman with a small holding outside Lincoln and the other to a tanner, while the boy, her youngest, helped his father. She felt pity again for Agnes in her plight and unhappy life, but quashed it down. She didnt want her to start crying again.

“Did Wat come to bed with you last night? Or did he stay up?” Jennet asked.

Agnes looked at her sister, then her eyes slid away. Jennet knew there was something she was not telling. “He always stayed up after curfew, just for a little while usually. To have a last glass of ale, or...”

“Play at dice?” her sister finished knowingly. “But last night? What did he do last night?”

“The same,” Agnes mumbled.

“If there was something different, you had better tell me,” Jennet said firmly. “If that murderer missed you by mistake and you know something—well, he might just come back to finish you off. If theres anything you havent told, the more that know it the better. Youll be safer that way.”

Agnes eyes rolled in her head and she began to shake again. Jennet gripped her by the arms with surprising strength in her bony fingers. “What happened, Agnes? Tell me.”

“Wat said... Wat...” Agnes began to stutter and Jennet shook her so hard that her sisters large bosom wobbled beneath her gown.

“Tell me,” she demanded.

Agnes gulped. “Last night Wat told me to go up to bed and not to come down, not for anything. He said if I did, Id be sorry. When I asked him why, he said someone was coming to see him and whoever it was wouldnt take kindly to me being about. I thought it was just another of his dice games and said so, but he gave me a slap and said Id better keep my mouth shut and put myself out of sight.” Agnes stopped for a moment and wiped the wetness of her tears from her face with the hem of her gown.

“And...” Jennet prompted. “Did you not hear anything, screams or summat? With four people being murdered, Id have thought there would have been some sort of ruckus.”

“I heard nary a sound. I did just as Wat had said. I didnt want a beating. Wat had a heavy hand, as well you know.” Here she hastily crossed herself, for forgiveness in speaking ill of the dead. “But, Jennet, that morning Wat had told me not to touch anything in the yard. I was just to pour the ale, not draw it. And he wouldnt let me even go out to the latrine, at the back. I had to use our old pot in the house. But, Jennet, if Wat had known there was to be murder done, why was he murdered himself? It doesnt make any sense.”

“Did you tell the Templar about this when he asked you?”

“No, he scared me. He looks so... like a heathen, with his dark skin, and theres that eye patch. Its like he could be a murderer himself.”

“Thats silly,” Jennet exclaimed. “Hes a Templar, swore his life to Gods service, he did, and spent years in a cell at the mercy of them same bloody infidels you say he looks like. If you could trust anyone, its him. Even more than the priests, because most of them are more interested in the pennies we give than in saving our souls. You dont see them giving up everything they possess for the love of God, like he did.”

“Father Anselm isnt like that,” Agnes protested. “He was kind to me this morning and helped me when I was all alone.” There was an accusatory tone in Agnes voice, as though her sister should have known of her distress and been there when it happened.

“Well, some of them are alright,” Jennet conceded. “There are a few good ones, I suppose, even if Father Anselm is a bit too well favoured for a priest, and knows he is, and all. But the Templar is from Lady Nicolaa, not from her husband, the sheriff. Gerard Camville is none too gentle a creature, as you well know. If he sends one of his men-at-arms to question you, youll be made to tell what you know, right enough. And they wont be asking you quiet like the Templar did. Theyll take you up to the castle and beat the truth out of you.”

Jennet wasnt too sure if this was true or not, about the Templar being sent by Nicolaa de la Haye, but she had heard a man-at-arms from the castle telling the Hays Serjeant that Lady Nicolaa would be waiting for their report in her own chambers so there was a good chance that the castellan had sent them. Whether it was so or not, Jennet wanted to scare her sister into doing as she was told, and Sheriff Camville was enough of a devil to scare anyone.

“Oh, Jennet,” Agnes wailed, “what am I going to do?”

“Tomorrow well ask Father Anselm to tell the Templar you want to see him, and then youre going to repeat what you told me. Ill go with you,” she added, seeing the distraught look on her sisters face. “The sooner the task is done, the sooner youll be easy.” She looked down sternly at her sister. “There isnt anything else youre not telling me, is there?”

Agnes shook her head and swore that there wasnt. Jennet was not confident that her sister was telling the truth, but she decided not to press the matter because Agnes truly did look as though she might swoon from the torment of emotions that her ordeal had caused. Later, when Agnes had rested, Jennet would question her again. She was sure there was something her sister was hiding.

Finally allowing the compassion she felt to come to the surface, Jennet took her

sister by the arm and led her up a flight of narrow stairs to a bedchamber above. “You lie down on our pallet and sleep now, Agnes. I’ll come up later and fetch you a bit of food for your dinner.”

Willingly letting her sister take charge, Agnes crawled under the thin cover and closed her eyes. She didn’t know what she would have done if she hadn’t been able to come to Jennet.

Once Jennet heard her sister’s breathing begin to grow slow and regular, she left her. There was more to this coil than could be seen, she was sure of that. Just as she was also sure that Agnes could be blamed in some way, if not for the actual killing, then for having a helping hand in it. She hadn’t suggested that to her sister, for it would scare her even more than she already was and, besides, Jennet was sure that Agnes was innocent. She was a trial sometimes, and could be unexpectedly stubborn, but she would never hurt anyone. Why, if she had been that kind she would have fought back at Wat when he hit her. She had enough strength to lift a cask of ale, she could have defended herself. But even when she was being beaten she had never tried to hurt the one who was doing it to her.

Of one thing Jennet was sure, and that was that she didn’t really want her sister to be taken in for questioning by the sheriff’s men. Gerard Camville was a brutal man, and crimes committed by anyone other than himself were harshly punished. And he would be looking for a solution to this murder. It would be bad for custom in the town to have an unknown murderer on the loose and he was fond of his silver, was the sheriff. Just let him see a drop in the tolls and taxes the fair would bring and he would be angry, angry with that cold fury he was capable of—and would look for someone to blame it on. No, she had to get Agnes to tell what she knew and preferably to someone not directly connected to Camville. If she had put the right interpretation on what she had overheard, then the Templar was Lady Nicolaas knight, not Camville’s, and it would be much better for Agnes to be under the jurisdiction of the castellan rather than the sheriff. Lady Nicolaa was stern, but she was fair, unlike her husband. Yes, Jennet decided, she would take Agnes to the Templar. Besides, he was a monk, God’s own man, and despite her remarks to Agnes about clerics, she did believe that some of them were good, especially one who had risked his life in the service of Christ amongst the heathens. Muttering a prayer beneath her breath she asked for God’s help and that her instinct about the Templar prove true. She had always tried to protect her sister and often failed; she implored God for assistance in safeguarding Agnes now.

Four

After he and Ernulf had made their report to Nicolaa de la Haye, Bascot left the keep, motioning for Gianni to follow him. Outside, the bailey of the castle was a mass of moving men and animals as visitors arrived for the fair and castle servants rushed about unloading baggage and arranging for it to be stored. Along the perimeter of the castle walls outbuildings were packed close together—smithy, granary, the garrison sleeping quarters and stables, and space allotted for use to the carpenters, fletchers and coopers. There were also pens for sheep and swine, an area for poultry and, at the far north side, walled in for protection against a stray four-footed intruder, Lady Nicolaas herb garden. Adjacent to the garden were the mews where the castle hawks were kept.

Bascot and Gianni threaded their way through the crowd, making for the tall tower of the old keep, and Bascots room at the top. The Templar knew it was a rare privilege, and in deference to his standing as a member of the Order, that he had been given a private chamber, for the majority of Haye retainers made up their pallets on the floor of the great hall. Although he was grateful for the privacy, the room was almost at the top of the narrow tower, and he cursed his aching ankle as he climbed the circular stairway to the third storey. Once inside, he sank down gratefully onto the shelf that held his pallet and told Gianni to pour them ale from a leather flagon standing in the corner. Reaching into a bundle by the bed, Bascot brought out a small leather sack. In it was a supply of the lumps of boiled sugar that were sent to England from Templar property in the Holy Land, made from sweet canes that grew in the fields near Acre. The Arabs called them *al-Kandi*, but in England they were known simply as *candi*, and were one of the items the Templars used in trade to raise funds for the upkeep of their Order. Bascot was very fond of them, even though they made his teeth ache if he ate too many. He tossed one to Gianni and watched the boys delighted expression as he popped it into his mouth and let it roll on his tongue.

Bascot sipped his ale and sucked the *candi* thoughtfully, his mind on the meeting from which he had just come. Lady Nicolaas husband, Gerard Camville, had been present, just returned from a mornings hunt. Bascot was reserved in his opinion of the sheriff. Ostensibly the Templar was a guest in the retinue of his wife, for it had been to her that his introductions had been directed when he had arrived last year, but Camville was her husband and, as such, was lord over both her and her offices and possessions. The sheriff was an impressive man, massive with thick black hair cut high on the nape of his neck in the old Norman fashion and a heavy jaw that he kept clean shaven. He seemed as broad as he was tall, with thick shoulders and thighs that swelled beneath the rust-coloured jerkin and hose that he wore. But his unpredictability disturbed Bascot, for his moods were as restless as his body seemed to be. All the time Bascot and Ernulf had been giving a report of their findings at the alehouse, the sheriff had prowled back and forth in front of them and behind. It was as though he found the walls of the private chamber in which they were holding the meeting too small to contain his wide frame.

When the tale had been finished, Gerard had muttered an oath and said, “And tonight we can expect a deputation from the town officials, come to complain about a murderer being loose, spurred on by their wives and daughters. Every female in

Lincoln will be seeing a bloody fiend behind her bed curtains, or lingering malevolently near her privy. Damn the deed, and him who did it! My men are stretched as far as they can be at the moment, protecting visiting merchants from outlaws on the road and from thieves in the town. I cannot spare any to go hunting this miscreant.”

He banged the wine cup, from which he had been drinking, down on the table in front of his wife. “And, if these two strangers are found to be of more than lowly station their relatives will come dunning me for recompense. It all means more silver to be paid out, silver I will have to make up out of my own coffers, for the king will say it is my responsibility, not the crown’s.”

Lady Nicolaa had sat silent throughout her husband’s tirade. What Camville had said was all too true. As sheriff, he was responsible for the safety of travellers to the fair and if he was found wanting in his duties, he would have to pay the cost for that failing to any family member who had suffered from the loss of the deceased. Even villeins, absconded from a lord, would merit a few pieces of silver as a consideration to their master. Bascot knew that Camville was nervous of the new king, John, who had ascended to the throne the previous year after the death of his brother, Richard. This was so even though, while Richard had been away on Crusade, Camville and Prince John—as he had been then—had conspired to overthrow the chancellor that Lionheart had left to rule England in his stead. Reprisals had been heavy on Camville when Richard returned to England after being imprisoned in Austria on his way home from the Crusades. The king had taken the shrievalty away from him. Although John had restored it when he had gained the crown, the new king was not as trusting as his brother and watched Camville with a wary eye, for he knew how easily he could be swayed to betrayal. Had it not been that John regarded Nicolaa de la Haye as an old and trusted friend, it was doubtful he would have reappointed Camville to his post, and the sheriff was aware of how tenuous his position was. If the people of Lincoln complained loud enough about their sheriff, the king would have no recourse but to listen and perhaps give the lucrative post to another.

When Nicolaa spoke, it was quietly. “The alehouse is on land held in fee from the Haye demesne, Gerard. Anything that happens on property from which the Haye coffers gain revenue is ultimately my responsibility. It is, therefore, right and proper that I personally oversee the search for the perpetrator of these murders. At least initially, just until the fair is over and our visitors have left, which is only a matter of a week or so. And, I think, the townspeople will accept my guidance. If they do, it will soften any complaint they may make to the king.”

Camville relaxed enough under her suggestion to stop his pacing. He nodded. “You will use Haye men?” he asked.

“De Marins and Ernulf have already viewed the bodies. They can make further enquiries into the matter and I will inform the coroner what is being done.”

Nicolaa, with a concise movement of her hands, pressed them down on the table top and rose, signifying the end of the discussion. “See if you can find out the identity of the two strangers, de Marins. Also enquire about the Jew—his own people may be able to tell you if he had incurred the enmity of a disgruntled creditor or was, perhaps, at odds with one of his own race.” She thought for a moment, then said, “This alewife—were she and her husband complaisant with each other, I wonder? It may be she

knows more than she is telling. Could she have been responsible for the deaths, do you think?"

Bascot shook his head. "She has the strength, I think, but not the wits or the boldness. And it took wits and boldness to kill and hide three bodies unseen for at least a day."

Lady Nicolaa gave his words some thought. "Still, it is worth investigating," she said. "See her again. Be discreet, but thorough. You may call on Ernulf whenever you require his assistance."

With that, he and the serjeant had been dismissed and Bascot had left the chamber, feeling a tinge of admiration for the economy of Lady Nicolaas direction and the ease with which she had quelled the uncertain temper of her husband. Such diplomacy was a rare gift.

Bascot ruminated on the task he had been given as he sipped his ale and enjoyed the delicious sweetness of the brew. How was he to set about finding out the identity of two strangers in a town half-full of people not ordinarily resident here? The smell of the ale in his cup rose strongly to his nostrils and he felt a jog at his memory. The reek of ale in the taproom earlier that day had been just as powerful, the room filled with the odour even though there had been not a drop poured in any cup, and the room clean of spills. It was not unusual for a taproom to smell so, but it had been powerfully strong, almost overwhelming, as though a barrel had been standing open in the middle of the floor. Even the bodies had stunk of it.

He began to ponder on this when Gianni made a movement and attracted his attention. The lad, though mute, had developed a series of gestures that Bascot easily interpreted. Now the boy was rubbing his stomach and pointing to his mouth. Bascot grinned. It was time for the midday meal and Gianni was hungry.

"I cannot face those stairs again in such a short time, Gianni. Go down and see the cook. Get us some food and bring it back here. When we have eaten, there is work to do."

The boy scampered away, and Bascot lay back on his pallet and lifted the patch that covered the place where his eye had once been, rubbing the socket gently. Not vanity but pride accounted for the fact that he did not like anyone, even Gianni, to see the wound uncovered. It was a grisly sight and for a moment the pain that had burned and taken away his senses when a Muslim lord had ordered the hot iron to sear his flesh returned like a flash of lightning, then receded. He would not think on that, he decided, the memory was too painful, not for the loss of his eye but for the helplessness he had felt afterwards, and the deep anger that followed.

He got up and moved to the tiny window slit. Overhead the sky was a clear translucent blue, a heat haze shimmering over the fields and woods beyond the castle walls. Down in the bailey he could see Gianni running back across the ward towards the tower, the dark curls on his head bouncing as he struggled to balance two wooden bowls filled with food, one on top of the other. Bascot was glad to see that the boy was beginning to fill out, to put some flesh on his slight frame. When the Templar had found the lad on a wharf in Palermo the boy had been fighting with some mangy street dogs over the body of a dead pigeon, his bones protruding sticklike under a thin covering of skin. The lad had been starving, covered with the festering sores of malnutrition and eyes no more than black circles of pain. Bascot, his soul stirred by