

Birthright

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Chapter One

Two hundred. Drip. Two hundred and one. Drip. Two hundred and two.

It had been an uncomfortable night, trapped in the close confines of her cramped Newgate cell. No sleep, of course. Not that Mercia cared for sleep, as she sat eyes closed on the sparsely strewn straw, the ever-falling droplet invading her troubled mind. Still, better to be caught in a counting loop than dwell on why she was in this stifling hole. *Two hundred and nine.* She wiped the sweat from her brow. *Two hundred and ten.*

Abruptly the dripping ceased, vanquished by the mad woman's fists in the next cell along, her surely bloody knuckles beating a discordant rhythm on their shared stone wall. The noise in the prison was infernal. Mercia had expected the stench, the darkness, but it was the sound that overwhelmed her the most. Her melancholy diffused through the putrid air. She waited, unmoving, struggling to comprehend what had befallen her.

The banging ceased, the unexpected silence forcing open her eyes. She returned to thinking through how she might be released, but then the drip renewed its attack and a piercing scream rang out, the mad woman striking at the wall once more. Mercia shuffled to the other side of her filthy cell, mumbling curses.

The little light that came through the bars of her door flickered.

She looked up to see a silhouetted guard passing in front.

‘Be quiet,’ he shouted into the adjacent cell. ‘By God’s truth, there are enough crazed devils here to send a man insane.’

The mad woman growled. Moments later she spat.

‘Right.’ The guard unlocked the woman’s door, crashing it hard against the wall. Mercia heard him stride in, his heavy boots pounding the floor. There was a small chink in the stonework she could have looked through to see what was happening, but she did not. Yet there was no avoiding the harsh sound of a fist striking ragged flesh, a thud against the wall signalling the woman’s collapse.

The door slammed shut. The light through Mercia’s bars wavered again as the guard walked back, except now it disappeared, blocked by his substantial bulk. He inserted a key into the lock and she looked up, fearful, remembering a moment from long ago. But he merely swung open the door.

‘Up you get.’ He motioned to her with a jerk of his head. ‘Warder says you can go.’

‘What?’ She stared at the shadowed guard in disbelief, her melancholy morphing into sudden anger. She staggered to her feet, but the feeling had gone from her legs and she had to rub at them for a while before she could hobble towards him. ‘I have been kept here in squalor since last night. And now I am just released?’

The guard shrugged, looking her up and down in the light of his near-spent torch. ‘Stay as you like. The lads could do with a bit of . . . company.’

Anger gave way to hope. Was there time? She had been here all night, certainly, but how many hours? She limped from the cell, stretching in the corridor, clammy and dark. More screaming sounded out from deeper inside the jail. She glanced at the mad woman’s door.

‘It was unjust, to strike her as you did.’

The guard stared. ‘From what the lads say you’re as handy with your fist as I am. Smacked old Dicken right in the mouth, teeth everywhere, that’s what I hear.’

She straightened up, pulling straw from the ringlets of her hair. ‘There was a disagreement. But teeth – you exaggerate.’

‘Imagine.’ The guard shook his head. ‘A woman striking a Tower guard as bold as that. Now, are you coming?’

He set off down the corridor, Mercia following as quickly as she could. As they turned a corner she looked back, struck by an unexpected sympathy.

‘What will happen to her? To that woman?’

‘Our Margie?’ The guard seemed surprised to be asked. ‘She’s been here near twenty years. She don’t even know the old King is killed, or that Cromwell has been and gone.’ He laughed. ‘I think she’ll be here for ever.’

They arrived at a large wooden gate. Three more guards perching around an oval table broke off their dice game to stare as she passed, but she ignored the leers. Emerging into chill dawn the heavy gate clanged shut behind her, releasing her into the dank London air. Despite the subdued light she screwed up her eyes, squinting. Her brown skirt was crumpled, the damp straw of the prison floor obscuring its criss-crossed pattern. Bending down to brush it off, a hand on her shoulder made her jump.

‘I am sorry.’ A tall man in a wide-brimmed hat stood before her, his dark eyes radiating concern. He held out a woollen cloak and wrapped her in its warmth before pulling his own firmly around him, covering the scar that protruded from under the simple neck frills of his shirt.

‘Are you unharmed?’ he asked. The furrows of his lightly stubbled face betrayed his worry. ‘I went to your uncle at once, but they refused to do anything until morning.’

She grabbed his arm. ‘Nathan, is there time?’ She looked at the sky, assessing the amount of light. ‘I think there must be. Please tell me there is.’

‘There is. But we must go now.’

She felt her heart beat faster. ‘Then come. I need to see him before he dies.’

* * *

The carriage trundled slowly down the London streets. Impatient, she craned her head through the window, silently cursing every lumbering cart, every rambling pedlar, every early-to-rise housewife who got in their way. She realised she was gripping the edge of her seat, and as she pulled her hands away she noticed a stained news pamphlet on the floor, discarded by a previous passenger. A grisly image of a man carrying his own severed head was emblazoned on one side. She snatched it up to read a sort of verse on the rear.

*Good Sir Rowland Goodridge knew
Where his deeds 'gainst the King would lead him
Now his head will be docked for a Stew
And they'll send it to Charles, to please him*

She tore up the paper and threw it onto the street.

'Why didn't they let me see him, Nat? I lost my temper, I know, but they would have prevented it anyway.' She ran her hand over her face; remembering where she had spent the night, she sat up straight. 'God's truth, how do I look? 'Tis a blessing this cloak covers me well.'

'You look fine.' Nathan's lips curled into a tentative smile. 'Curls, topknot, all still in place.'

'No straw anywhere? Dirt?'

'Your hair is as brown as mine.' He licked his finger, rubbing a couple of specks from her cheek. 'All gone.'

They lapsed into silence as the carriage jolted down the cobbled streets. Soon the shaking stopped and she looked out the window to see a row of similar carriages stuck one behind the other, not moving.

'Shall I drop you here by the Dolphin?' the driver shouted back. 'I don't think I can get any closer. Too many people up the Hill. Wish I could go myself, but the horses, you know.'

Covering her head with her hood, Mercia flung open the door and jumped out, oblivious to the rowdy group of blue-aproned apprentices

who were forced to duck aside. The teenagers swore at her but she took no notice. On the roadside Nathan slapped a silver shilling into the driver's outstretched hand and the carriage rumbled off into a side street, steering a path through the boisterous crowd that was making its slow way down Tower Street. All these people, thought Mercia, come to watch a man die. She fought back her tears as she allowed herself to be swept along with the mob, not wanting to show her despair.

A church steeple rose up from the crowd as they approached Tower Hill. She stopped, unheeding the grumbling melee around her. 'All Hallows,' she mumbled. 'Where they will put him afterwards.' The tears began to well, but still she fought them down.

Nathan reached out his arm. 'Think of it as a place of tranquillity where he will find peace.'

'He will not be at peace until he is brought back to Halescott.' She looked up at the steeple, her hand clutching her neck. 'All his life in the service of his country, ending like this. He was safe, by Jesus. There was no reason for the King to remove him. So why now?' She rubbed at her forehead. 'Damn them all. And damn myself. Useless, useless again.'

'You are not useless.' Nathan turned her to face him. 'You are the bravest woman I know.'

She forced a weak smile. 'You are a true friend, Nat. Thank you for coming with me to this . . . this place.'

'Of course I have come. We have been through a lot, these past years. I will always be here, you know that.'

She looked back at the deepening crowd. 'Well, then. Let us be brave.'

The noise on Tower Hill was incredible. It seemed as though all of London had turned out, more and more people gathering into ever smaller spaces. The wounds of the civil war that had set King against Parliament were fresh and unhealed. For some, what happened today was vindication. For others, it was a tragedy.

'There.' Mercia followed Nathan as he carved a path through the

tumult. ‘The family platform.’ She swallowed. ‘Near the front.’

He turned his head. ‘Keep your voice down. You don’t want people to know who you are.’

‘He is my father. I will not hide that.’

He pressed on, using his broad shoulders to intimidate less determined bystanders into giving way. But it took several minutes to reach the family platform, squeezing past the whole variety of London life – well-dressed men in fine wigs leaning on sticks, gangs of predatory pickpockets, hemp-clad women cradling dirty babies in their arms. At the platform steps Nathan kicked off two young girls whose poorly applied face patches were already slipping on their whitened cheeks. They fled, screaming unheard curses.

The roughly hewn steps wobbled as Mercia ascended to the fair-sized platform. Feeling ever more nauseous, she nodded to the three of her father’s old colleagues who had dared attend, amongst them Nathan’s neighbour, Sir Jeremy Princeton, whose lands he helped manage alongside his own farm. He doffed his hat to her in sympathy.

‘Is my uncle not here?’ she said, looking around. ‘I suppose I should not have expected it.’ She paused as her eyes fell on a portly woman standing under armed guard. ‘And yet Lady Markstone has come.’

‘She has not had far to travel,’ said Nathan.

‘Don’t jest.’ Mercia walked to the elderly woman at the back of the platform. Her covered head was thrust back, her fine silk dress of a purple so dark it was almost black. Seeing Mercia approach, she gave her a subdued smile.

‘Mercia,’ she said. ‘I am so pleased to see you, sad day though it is. I hope you do not mind my being here.’

‘It is a surprise today, Lady Markstone. I did not think it would be allowed.’

‘They let me out my prison to be here. I wanted Rowland to see he had at least some friends left.’ She leant in closer. ‘The guards say there was an incident yesterday.’

Mercia glanced at the soldier beside them. 'You are right. They would not let me see him.'

Lady Markstone nodded. 'They can be cruel, these Tower warders. They like to pretend they have power. But return soon to visit me. I will make sure they let you pass.' She hesitated. 'How is your mother?'

'As you would expect.' Mercia looked away. 'She does not know what happens here today. 'Tis her melancholy. Her mind will not accept it. But please, I should return to Nathan.'

Not wanting to talk further, Mercia pulled her hood tighter and moved to the front of the platform, standing beside Nathan who was speaking with Sir Jeremy. The crowd below now seemed an impenetrable horde. Many of them were staring up at her, wondering who she was. 'Must be his daughter,' someone guessed. 'Still pretty, though.'

She looked over the crowd at the castle beyond, desperate to avoid anyone's gaze. The Tower of London glared impassively back, its massive walls dismissing her silent entreaties for mercy as irrelevant. Spurned, her eyes rested on an empty platform between herself and the fortress: empty, save for the dented wooden block. She grabbed the rail in front of her. Small splinters of wood drove through her thin gloves into her palm, making her wince.

Nathan broke from his conversation. 'Do you want to leave? We can go whenever you want.'

She shook her head. 'I need to see him. I need him to see me. I am just glad I will not have to see him – afterwards.' She looked up at Sir Jeremy. 'Thank you for taking care of . . . that.'

Sir Jeremy nodded, uttering words she did not really hear. She dared a look back at the crowd, here to witness a bloody blow of the axe, a head severed, a man destroyed. She glanced again at the block, fighting her rising nausea. How would it feel, to be beheaded? They said it was quick, but sometimes the axe stuck. She fixed her gaze on a knot in the wooden rail, breathing in and out, steady and sure, as her husband had taught her before he died. Striving to ignore the scene

around her, she listened in to Nathan's resumed conversation.

'Some of my merchant friend's wine barrels were swept away,' he was saying. 'By the time he found them lower down the Thames they were being pilfered.'

'That flood was the worst I can remember,' said Sir Jeremy, grabbing his hat at a gust of wind. 'Water came into the palace itself. The corridors were full of dead rats.'

'Peter says a whole horse washed up in Greenwich. Bits of people too. That superstitious lot down Lambeth Marsh found a finger rotted right to the bone, thought it was sent by the Devil, the mad fools. And what of that jilt on Broken Wharf who brought in a skull? Peter reckons it was a client who refused to pay, and she took her revenge by cutting off—'

He held the finger he was running across his throat dead still. 'By the Lord, Mercia, I am sorry. I did not think.' He looked at Sir Jeremy, mortified, and both fell silent. But Mercia patted his forearm, and they waited.

Not for long. The great din of the crowd ceased as movement was spotted at the Tower's base. An unnatural quiet briefly descended, to be replaced by an ever-growing murmuring as a figure cloaked in a black hood approached, carrying a huge axe in his enormous hands. Gasps of horror and awe intermingled as the man who would deliver the fatal blow came ever closer. Who was he? Some said a pardoned criminal, others a sadistic nobleman, but nobody really knew.

Rejecting the need for steps, the axeman leapt onto the executioner's platform. With one gloved hand he slowly stroked the block. He waited a few seconds, the tension ever rising, before he advanced to face the crowd, and with a triumphant roar he thrust his axe to the sky for all the mob to see. Groans, gasps, cheers, all resounded round the crowd, the people's bloodlust dominant.

A drum began to beat atop the Tower. The axeman backed towards the block, his eyes invisible behind his black hood, his deliberate footsteps in time with the drum's monotonous thud. Then a door opened in the

Tower wall and more drummers emerged, adding their rhythm to the other. The crowd hushed, straining to see as the Tower disgorged a man dressed all in white, his grey hair loose around his face, a guard of soldiers behind. As he approached, a shout went up – *Sir Rowland comes, the traitor is here!* – before the mob let loose a baying, illiterate, cacophonous roar in anticipation of the spectacle to come.

Sir Rowland was pushed up the steps to the axeman's platform. He stumbled against the block, but immediately straightened himself. His face and clothes were clean, his beard trimmed. He did not shake. He walked forward to the edge of the dais, surveying the people around, then opened his mouth to begin his last speech.