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Blood Will Out

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CHAPTER ONE

Henry Tulkington could make little sense of what had just happened. The multitude of angry shouts had registered, likewise the fusillade and muzzle flashes of muskets going off, followed by the subsequent cries of pain, without any real idea of who had suffered. In the melee, his right-hand man, in pulling him to the ground to then follow through, had landed heavily on his chest, leaving his less than robust employer winded.

‘Stay down,’ John Hawker commanded, as he raised himself to shout. ‘Put up your weapons all, or die where you stand.’

That his own men obeyed was hardly to be commented on: Hawker was respected by all, as well as the source of their prosperity. Their opponents did likewise and quickly, which came more from dread than command for the man issuing the instruction had a brutal reputation. Besides, they were outnumbered and had already suffered casualties, not least their own leader.

Dan Spafford was rolling on the ground, groaning and cursing, this mixed with earnest cries to the Almighty, pleas seeking what he had just witnessed was an illusion: his dearly loved but wayward son Harry, the cause of so much trouble in his life, shot by his father’s closest lifetime companion. Jaleel ‘Daisy’ Trotter had put a ball between Harry’s sneering eyes, cursing him as he did so.

Hawker's instruction came in time to prevent anyone reloading their weapons, which left him carrying the only primed and cocked pistol, this waved menacingly and just visibly in a clearing now poorly illuminated. The lanterns initially employed had been dropped when the shooting commenced.

'Get some proper light on matters. And disarm these damned Spaffords.'

Tulkington sat up, immediately feeling his ribs for any sign of impairment, relieved to feel no pain. Retrieving his own dropped lantern, he looked around to observe the ensuing activity: a couple of Hawker's men taking muskets off Spafford's crew, others picking up said lanterns to provide increased visibility with the man who'd ordered their activities circling, looking for others wounded, able to confirm, fortunately, it included none of his own followers.

By Tulkington's right hand lay the spread-eagled body of Harry Spafford, eyes wide open to show the shock of what had so suddenly befallen him. Gone was the conceited, unctuous smirk which nailed his disreputable character, to be replaced by a rictus expression of disbelief on the puffy, at one time handsome face. At Harry's feet lay the crumpled and riddled body of his nemesis, the pistol Trotter had grabbed from the belt of Dan Spafford still in his hand, the barrel smoking slightly.

'Spaffords, look to your master,' Hawker barked. 'And for the sake of Christ Risen, shut him up.'

Hawker came to stand over Henry Tulkington, holding out a hand to raise him to his feet, the one hissed word, issued when upright, a whisper into the Hawker ear. The men surrendering their weapons had not been the primary target of this ambushade, indeed they'd not been expected. The real objective, who had, was plainly not present.

'No sign of Brazier, your honour,' Hawker said quietly. 'He and his tars was bringin' up the rear, so got the chance to run when the

shooting started. I'd set one of my men to cover them, the best with a musket. Marker says he sent a shot after Brazier and saw the sod stagger, so it might be he was hit. Must have got clear, regardless.'

'So you could be said to have failed,' was the bitter response.

The tone of accusation was not well taken, so the reply was terse. 'You're still breathing, unlike the pair at our feet, so I'd say a thank you might be in order. Daisy Trotter could have put a ball in you as easy as he did Harry Spafford, given you was standing right by him. You was also in the firing line when Trotter got his reward, which is why I hauled you down.'

A glance at Trotter's crumpled corpse brought home to Henry Tulkington how close he had come to a similar fate, which caused him to shiver and clutch at the muffler round his neck. He could now see in his mind's eye the whole event as it unfolded, no more than a few seconds in extent, though seeming an age when recalled. The stand-off, as the shocked Spafford gang, caught in the centre of the clearing, halted in confusion. To their rear, less well-lit but just as surprised, Edward Brazier and his armed support.

He'd sneered at their crass ineptitude, crowing at the way he'd humbugged both Brazier and Spafford senior. The latter had come to rescue his boy from what he saw as the grip of Tulkington's clutches, unaware Harry was more than happy with such an estate. His pa had beseeched, if not grovelled, for his son to come home to the family hearth, an offer ridiculed and cruelly dismissed. So busy had Dan been with his begging, he'd not felt the pistol being lifted off his belt, nor had anyone else seen it happen. Only a few paces separated Daisy Trotter from the contemptuous Harry and they were quickly covered. The bitter words spat out were now printed on Tulkington's memory.

'An end to this, you ungrateful little shit.'

Right before him was the pointed pistol, as well as the determined eyes of the man holding it, quickly followed by the flash and bang

of the discharge, replicated by many more, weapons mostly loosed with little in the way of aim. Trotter was the main but not sole target and Hawker had spoken aright: had he not dragged his employer down, one or more of those balls could have stuck him, which made a retraction necessary.

‘The shock made me speak too harshly, John.’ Hawker waited for a more fulsome apology but this was, as it had ever been, in vain: Tulkington’s main interest was still paramount. ‘Where did Brazier go?’

‘Didn’t see, but if he had any wits, he’ll have scarpered back to Deal.’

‘We need to find him.’

‘Mr Tulkington,’ was delivered with an impatient sigh. ‘We need to sort out what’s afore us first. Dan Spafford has a belly wound that could be mortal, so we either put him out of his misery or call in a sawbones, one who can keep his mouth shut. There could be two more who’ll need seein’ to before we decide what to do with those unharmed, as well as two dead bodies.’

Tulkington ran an eye over the corpses once more to give himself time to think. There was no gainsaying Harry Spafford was deserving of the description by which Trotter had labelled him. He was indeed an ungrateful shit, as well as a dissolute drunk and lecher, who’d mocked his father with glee. In life he’d been no more than a tool for Tulkington’s needs, which precluded any feelings of remorse at his passing. Trotter he barely knew, so he was of even less concern.

Yet it did nothing to assuage the current predicament. For a man who held himself to be in control of every aspect of his life, Henry Tulkington was at a stand, stuck with a whirling set of possibilities and no clarity. His attention was drawn by a loud call, to say someone was coming from the house; hardly surprising, since the crack of multiple gunshots must have been heard several miles away.

‘Get everyone back to the slaughterhouse, John,’ Tulkington commanded as, lantern in hand, he rushed towards the waving lights of those approaching. ‘Wounded and dead included.’

The cursing such an instruction induced, heartfelt as it was, didn’t carry to Tulkington’s ears given the difficulties. But, even repeatedly expressed, there was nothing to be done other than obey.

‘Shut the bastard up, I say again,’ Hawker cried, pointing towards the groaning Dan Spafford. ‘Gag the sod if need be. One of you, go fetch the cart we came in and double quick.’

The lights towards which Henry Tulkington was hurrying jerked unevenly, as those carrying them moved closer, until he could identify a pair of his servants.

‘Hold there, all,’ he called.

The voice was recognised and, given such individuals feared to disobey him, they stopped immediately, leaving him to make the approach. Close to, he identified Grady and Creevy, the first who ran the house, the other the keeper of Cottington Court’s gardens. Behind them, wrapped in her outdoor cloak, stood his sister Elisabeth.

‘What’s going on, Henry?’

The peremptory tone of her demand rankled and rendered his response inappropriate. ‘None of your damned business.’

‘Guns going off in the middle of the night? It sounded like a war had broken out.’

‘We was concerned when it was found you weren’t in the house, your honour.’

‘Poachers, Creevy,’ Henry claimed hurriedly, the obsequious remark from his toadying head gardener giving him a second to think. ‘And, given the incursion has been seen to, it would be best if you all returned to your beds.’

The way the servants had split allowed Elisabeth to push through,

creating an arc of light, one strong enough to render visible her features, which reeked of suspicion. It also showed, under her partly open cloak, she was fully dressed.

‘Don’t tell me you took a slug like Harry Spafford with you to catch poachers. He’d be more likely to aid them than contest them and drink away anything gained. Come to that, given your aversion to the gun, it’s not a duty I see you undertaking either.’

‘How do you know Spafford was with me?’ This demand was issued before Henry realised the obvious: the servants, Grady probably, would have told her, but he had to stay off it as a subject. ‘Given you know so little of me, sister, I’m surprised by such certainty. Now go back to the house as I have commanded.’

‘These poor creatures are bound to obey you, Henry, for fear of dismissal. I will choose if I do so or not.’

‘Then you will be out here alone in the moonlight, for where they go, so goes the lantern light.’

‘I don’t fear the dark, Henry, as perhaps you should, for the devil will take what passes for your soul if he encounters it, only to find, in evil, he is much surpassed.’

The bitter laugh, loud and wounding, which came as his sister made to turn away, had Henry Tulkington wish he had brought a pistol, as well as the will to employ it in the same manner as had Trotter. But he did have a way of exacting retribution for her insults, which did not require firearms.

‘Grady, Creevy, leave one of your lanterns and do as I bid. You, sister, might as well wait and hear what I have to tell you. It will be of much interest, though of little cheer I fancy.’

Elisabeth spun back to glare at him, taking from Grady the lantern he was holding. That Harry Spafford was dead, which would relieve her, must remain a secret for now, but it was secondary. They stood, eyes locked in mutual loathing, until Henry reckoned the servants far enough off not to overhear his softly spoken words.

‘Brazier came for you again.’ He heard the catch in her throat, which was heartening. ‘And, as before, he fell afoul of a more acute mind.’

‘The shots?’

‘Do you ask if he has been killed or maimed? I wonder if I should tell you anything. Perhaps best if I leave you to stew.’

‘Resist telling me if he’d been shot? You couldn’t contain yourself.’

‘A pleasure I will have to forgo. Brazier ran like the coward he is. When you next choose a lover, perhaps it would be best to find one with a degree of backbone. Lord help the King’s Navy if Brazier’s an example of those who command his warships.’

‘He’s ten times the man you’ll ever be and has proved it.’

‘How repetitious you are for your paragon. Well, know this – if he sets foot on my property once more, he will indeed be shot and out of hand. No magistrate will blame me for what is a clear case of repeated and egregious trespass. So, if you’ve found a way to communicate with him, which I assume you have, since you’re up and dressed in outdoor clothing, I presume in preparation for an attempt at flight, it would be wise to tell him so.’

It was pleasing to see the face, so defiant and superior to begin with, crumple as he spoke. Much as Elisabeth tried to maintain her composure, the information he was imparting made it impossible. Then the countenance suddenly cleared as realisation dawned; he had as good as told her, much as he might hope otherwise, Edward Brazier was unharmed.

‘If I could tell him anything, Henry, it would be this. I will wait for him both day and night until he finally comes to take me away from you and everything this house represents.’

Elisabeth spun round, to make her way back towards the house, leaving her brother wishing he could say with certainty what John Hawker could only imply. Instead he was left to call out after her retreating figure, ‘Which you will do in vain as long as I have blood in my veins’, which even to him sounded very feeble.

‘Water fills your veins,’ was Elisabeth’s parting shot. ‘You’re too miserable a creature to run to blood.’

He watched the light from her lantern fade and, for reasons he could not quite comprehend, felt at a loss. There was, in addition, a slight sense of absurdity, given he felt in no position to move. He could not contemplate returning to the scene of the recent clash, the clearing up of which he had no desire to become involved in, seeing it as beneath his dignity. Yet nor could he bring himself to follow in Elisabeth’s footsteps and merely return to the house, there to face the thoughts his servants would harbour but dare not show.

This left him feeling, in his sense of indecision, like an interloper on his own property. Silently he cursed the name of Edward Brazier, the sod who lay at the seat of all his recent difficulties. He was the major disturber of what had hitherto been a peaceful polity, his arrival and aims spreading ripples of trouble into areas in which he had no concern. What should have been a minor inconvenience, soon dealt with, had become a major impasse; nothing he had said or ordered to be carried out seemed to do anything to deter the man.

The heavy beating, administered after Brazier had made his intentions towards Elisabeth plain, seemed to have strengthened his resolve, not weakened it. The ploy, which Henry saw as a stroke of genius, to thwart both him and his sister by marrying her off to Harry Spafford, was now worth nothing, the same as the putative husband. The sod was dead, and Elisabeth was a widow for the second time.

Henry shivered, which he mistakenly ascribed to the night-time chill, not his worrying cogitations. He pulled his coat tight as a hand went to his temple, to feel for any unwelcome heat, the kind which might precede the kind of fever that would play havoc on an extremely delicate disposition. In truth, he had no idea how to proceed, while the complications extended beyond the thought his sister would keep hoping to escape.

There was little doubt Brazier, assuming he was still fit to do so, would keep trying to snatch her away. Turning, he could see a multitude of bobbing lights, which brought back the reality of what he'd left John Hawker to clear up, the first of the problems being the use of weapons which had only been intended to threaten.

What explanations and complications would arise from this night's events? He might consider Dan Spafford a gnat, not a threat, but badly wounded he could be more trouble than he was whole. His wastrel son would not be missed except by his pa and the local whores and tavern keepers, but there was Trotter's body to dispose of too.

If he didn't know the man, he knew of his inclinations, for Hawker had told him. His disappearance would surely be marked by those with whom he shared what passion he possessed, the denizens of the Middle Street Molly-house: their orientation rendered them clannish and protective of each other out of shared necessity.

There were the wounded to be dealt with, who once recovered, and added to those of Spafford's crew who were unmarked, would be difficult to keep silent. This he must leave to his subordinate for now; let Hawker do that for which he was employed, which was to ensure no evidence of what had occurred was there to be seen when the sun rose, ensuring neither curiosity nor speculation on the estate.

He would consult with Hawker on the morrow, perhaps to give him his way, for he'd suggested a disposal of the entire Spafford gang not a week past, obviously put out by his employer's refusal to contemplate a mass disposal of those who had troubled their trade. A return to the house it must be, for he could not stay out here and risk his health, added to which there would be a fire in his study to see off any chill. When he began to move, he was wondering if what had been suggested previously might serve now. Hawker's notion had been to take the whole gang out in one of their own luggers, lashed to the hulls, then sink them beyond the Goodwin Sands.

It had been declined on compelling grounds: such an act, the disappearance of a known rival in the smuggling trade, however insignificant, must draw too much attention to the business in which they were engaged, one which required a degree of discretion. For all his prominence, indeed power locally, it rested on a solid base of understanding with the leading citizenry.

Some knew something, if not all, regarding his activities, while the rest expressed no desire to enquire. Many benefitted materially from the level of smuggling he and his forbears had brought to the East Kent coast. Others in the town turned a blind eye merely to avoid trouble, for it was known crossing the Tulkington family – and Henry was the heir to several decades of their undertakings – could be at best expensive and at worst painful.

All would look away as long as the public peace remained undisturbed. Minor infractions could be covered over and frequently were, but a major breach of the peace, the kind which brought interest from outside the district, even the military, might force them to act against him on the grounds of self-preservation. It was essential no word of this night's events should spread and this indicated the need for drastic measures.

This did nothing to resolve the problem of his sister's relationship with Edward Brazier. Perhaps he would be required to reprise a notion previously put aside, given the disposal of a post captain in the King's Navy could not even be considered: the ramifications of such might go anywhere. Could he have Elisabeth locked away as mentally deficient, which would serve two requirements, first to keep her out of her paramour's clutches, the other allowing him to continue to control both her affairs and her considerable personal wealth?

Grady was waiting to open the front door as soon as his master came into view, there to disrobe him once indoors. The suspicious glare the servant got as Henry Tulkington stood, waiting to have his coat and muffler removed, did not register. Grady kept his gaze firmly fixed on a point just above his master's head.

‘My sister?’

‘In her room, sir, and the door locked once more.’

‘Do I sense an opinion, Grady?’

‘Such a thing is far from my place, Mr Tulkington.’

‘Keep it that way and ensure you’re not alone. I won’t abide gossip, d’ye hear?’ Taking assent for granted, he added, after a weak cough, ‘Hot brandy and sugar in my study.’

‘Henry.’ The sharp call from halfway up the staircase obliged him to respond. There, wrapped in a dressing gown and under a mob cap, stood his Aunt Sarah, her face lined with concern. ‘What’s going on?’

‘Going on?’ was a growl, one which sent Grady off to do his master’s bidding.

‘Shooting, Henry, which I could not help but hear, then everyone rushing out of the front door as if we were under attack.’

‘It’s not something with which you should concern yourself. Indeed, it would be best if you go back to bed.’

‘Do I not qualify for some kind of explanation?’

Henry lost his temper then, the frustrations of the night building to boiling point. Before him stood someone he could shout at without fear of response or sarcasm.

‘I am not required to explain anything in my own house, which you would do well to remember, since you so recently have felt the need to set such a constraint aside.’

‘Your tone is unbecoming,’ was delivered in a hurt tone.

‘Have a care your being here does not render itself unbecoming. You reside at Cottington Court on my sufferance, which is mine to grant or withdraw.’

There was so much Sarah Lovell wanted to say in response but dare not. Henry had bellowed the plain truth; she was wholly dependent on his goodwill for the room she occupied and the food she ate. Yet there had to be some kind of retort, one to imply she was not totally submissive.

‘I will do as you ask, nephew, and wait until the morning, when I hope your mood will be more congenial.’

Henry replied as the weight of all which had happened this night bore down upon him. ‘It would be best not to presume it to be so.’