



**THE RAVENS OF
BLACKWATER**

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Prologue

Blackwater Hall seemed to hover like a bird of prey over the river estuary whose name it held in its eager talons. Built on a grassy knoll, it stood a mile or so below the town of Maldon and commanded a superb view of the battlefield where the Danes had won a famous victory almost a century earlier. Northey Island looked much now as it did then, a triangular lump caught in the very throat of the river and linked to the mainland by the slender causeway across which the invaders had surged at low tide. Saxon courage had not been able to withstand the might of the Danish army and Northey was a sad memento of defeat. Beyond it was the oval shape of Osea Island and beyond that the River

Blackwater pursued its serpentine course past a succession of creeks and inlets, which were fringed with marshes, mud flats, salt pans, and sandbanks.

The house was imposing. Most of the dwellings in Maldon and the surrounding area were built of timber and roofed with thatch or shingled wood. They were simple structures. Blackwater Hall bore no resemblance to the long, low manor house that it had so comprehensively replaced. Constructed of stone, imported for the purpose from Caen, it was proud and tall with a menacing solidity. Its ground floor was used for storage. The main hall was on the first floor, reached by an exterior flight of stone steps. Above the hall was a gallery off which the various apartments ran. Narrow arched windows looked out with cold disdain. A tiled roof added to the sense of strength and invincibility. Blackwater Hall was like the keep of a Norman castle, an impression that was reinforced by the outbuildings, which were grouped around it to form a courtyard and by the high stone wall, which enclosed the whole property. It was at once built for defence and poised for attack.

Algar despised the place. As he stood there shivering in the courtyard, he had no time to admire the house or to enjoy its splendid view. Nor did he wish to be reminded of the Battle of Maldon even though he had named his son after one of its most noble heroes. Wistan, the Saxon warrior, had killed three Danes before being overwhelmed; Wistan, the fifteen-year-old boy, was being forced to watch his father's punishment. Algar could cope with his sickness and could endure the pain that was coming, but he could do neither if his only son

was there to witness his humiliation. It was too much to bear. In the bright sunshine of a summer afternoon, Algar was shaking uncontrollably.

‘Hold him still!’ ordered the steward.

The soldiers tightened their grip on the hapless slave. When Wistan took a protective step forward, a mailed fist knocked him unceremoniously away. His face was on fire and blood trickled from his nose but there was nothing he could do. The steward had four soldiers to help him and a dozen more within earshot. The handful of villeins who lurked by the stables were too frightened to protest, let alone to interfere. They were creatures of the lord of the manor and he had taught them their place. Another lesson was now about to be handed out.

‘Where is the rogue!’

‘Here, my lord.’

‘That miserable bundle of rags?’

‘His name is Algar.’

‘I can smell his stink from here.’

‘He refuses to work.’

‘He has no *right* to refuse!’

Guy FitzCorbucion was striding arrogantly towards them from the house. At his side, with a quieter tread and a more composed manner, was his younger brother, Jocelyn. They were the heirs of Blackwater, the sons of the mighty Hamo FitzCorbucion, a Norman knight who had fought with such ferocity and distinction at Hastings that he had been rewarded with substantial holdings in Essex as well as in other counties. Hamo lived in Maldon and held his honorial court there. When his father was absent – Hamo

had returned on business to his native Coutances – Guy was in charge of the estate. It was a role that he relished.

He confronted the miscreant with derisive contempt.

‘Look at this pile of ordure!’ he sneered. ‘The cur cannot even hold himself like a proper man.’

‘The fellow is ill,’ noted Jocelyn with a distant sympathy. ‘He has the ague upon him.’

‘No!’ said Guy. ‘He is trembling with fear and so he should! I have important concerns here at Blackwater. I do not like to be troubled by a lazy, good-for-nothing slave.’

‘I am not lazy, my lord,’ croaked Algar.

‘Be quiet!’ yelled Guy.

‘Fever has made me weak and—’

‘Silence!’

The command was accompanied by a kick in the stomach, which made the Saxon double up in pain. Wistan’s anger stirred but he stood rooted to the spot. He and his father were the lowest of the low, mere slaves on the estate of a Norman lord, tied to an existence of unceasing and unvarying toil. They had no freedom, no hope, no right to reply. Hamo FitzCorbucion owned them. His sons could treat them like the beasts of the field that they were.

Algar mastered his distress and pulled himself upright. He wanted at least to offer a token show of defiance in front of his son, but his strength failed him. Worn out by work on the land, Algar had now been wasted by fever. He was barely forty, yet he looked like a decrepit old man. He managed to throw a glance of hatred at Guy FitzCorbucion. The young man exemplified the family name. Corbucion. The raven. A harbinger of death. Guy had the same jet-black hair, yellow

eyes, and beaklike nose as his father. His voice was the same insistent caw. He fed on carrion like Algar.

Guy flashed a look of disapproval at the steward.

‘Why do you bother us with this offal?’ he said.

‘I warned him, my lord.’

‘You should have beaten him soundly.’

‘Why, so I did,’ said the steward, ‘and the marks are clear upon him. But still he would not give service. I told him that he would be brought before you. He ignored me.’

‘Vile wretch!’

‘He feigned illness.’

‘Saxon cunning.’

‘He will not work.’

‘Wait till *I* have finished with him!’ said Guy darkly. ‘The insolent dog will *beg* me to let him work.’

He turned back to Algar with a malevolent smile. The slave shuddered. He knew what to expect. Norman overlords were a law unto themselves. They dispensed summary justice on their estates. Guy FitzCorbucion was typical of the breed and symbolised the hideous changes that had afflicted the county. When the manor had belonged to Earl Derwulf, there were freemen and smallholders in abundance. Algar had been a cotter on the estate, rendering service to his lord in return for a cottage and a tiny patch of land. Now he had been reduced to the status of a slave. Since the Conquest, everybody in Maldon was worse off. Freemen lost their freedom, sokemen surrendered their rights, and smallholders had their land confiscated.

While Algar shivered in his rough woollen tunic, two young Normans stood over him in their rich mantles. While

the peasant and his son struggled to survive, the ravens of Blackwater lived in luxury. Algar felt that he was no longer a true man. His bones had been picked clean by the invaders.

Guy indicated a post on the far side of the courtyard.

‘Tie him up!’ he snarled. ‘I’ll whip some obedience into his miserable carcass!’

‘Wait!’ said Jocelyn, hand raised to stop the soldiers from dragging their cargo away. ‘You are too harsh, Guy.’

‘Keep out of this, brother.’

‘It is a matter for Father.’

‘Father would run the man through with his sword.’

‘He would at least hear the fellow speak.’

‘A slave refuses to work. That says all.’

‘Suspend judgement until Father returns.’

‘And let them call me weak?’ said Guy vehemently. ‘Never! I hold the reins here. When an animal falters, it must feel the lash of my displeasure.’ He leant in to glare at his brother. ‘You are too soft, Jocelyn. They will not respect you for it. Saxons only understand one thing.’ He pointed once more to the post. ‘String him up!’

But Algar would not submit to an ordeal that he knew would kill him. Guy FitzCorbucion was a big man with a strong arm. The whipping would be merciless. Algar was not going to be flayed in front of his son. He wanted to leave Wistan with a sense of pride in his father and there was only one way to do that. Therefore, as the two soldiers tried to pull him away, he summoned all of his remaining energy and struck. Breaking free of their hold, he flung himself at Guy and got angry hands around his throat. It was a bold bid but it was doomed to failure.

The young Norman reacted with speed. Incensed that the slave should dare to attack him, he beat him to the ground with pummelling fists, then reached down to lift him bodily into the air. Algar was held briefly above Guy's head and was then dashed into a trough with ruthless violence. There was a loud crack as the slave's head hit the thick stone and his whole frame sagged lifelessly into the brackish water. Wistan ran forward to help his father but he was far too late. In trying to escape one death, Algar had met another, but at least he had done so with a degree of honour.

Wistan lifted his father gently from the trough and embraced the sodden body. Tears ran down the boy's face but rebellion was burning inside him. Algar's death had to be avenged and Wistan made a silent vow to his murdered father. However, when he looked up to direct his venom at the culprit, Guy FitzCorbucion was no longer there. Laughing aloud, he was sweeping towards the house with his dark mantle flapping behind him like a pair of wings.

Chapter One

It was late when they reached London and the sonorous hell of St Martin's-le-Grand was signalling the curfew as their horses clattered over the wooden bridge, which spanned the broad back of the Thames. A long day in the saddle proved exhausting and all that most of them sought was simple refreshment and a comfortable bed. Early the next morning London awakened them with its urgency and clamour. It was a large city with almost fifteen thousand inhabitants, all of whom, judging by the uproar, seemed to have converged on the various street markets to buy, sell, haggle, or solely to contribute to the general din. Visitors used to the quieter life of Winchester were at first startled by the boisterous

activity. After a hasty breakfast, they went out to take stock of this deafening community.

Ralph Delchard's attention went straight to the Tower.

'Look at it!' he said with an appreciative chuckle. 'A perfect monument to our victory over the English.'

'It's a sign of fear,' said Gervase Bret.

'Normans fear nobody!'

'Then why build such a fortress, Ralph, unless it be to have a place in which to hide in safety?'

'We have no need to hide, Gervase. All this is ours. We *own* London. The Tower was built to remind its citizens of that fact. Besides,' he added, waving a dismissive hand at the dwellings all around them, 'would you have King William live in one of these wood and wattle huts that will blow over in the first strong wind? A conqueror's head cannot lie beneath a roof of musty thatch. He demands a castle.'

'In order to feel secure.'

'In order to proclaim his position.'

'And fend off apprehension.'

'No!'

Ralph Delchard did not like to be contradicted, at any time, even by such a close and valued friend as Gervase Bret. The former was a Norman lord, the latter a Chancery clerk; they worked supremely well together in the royal service but there were occasions when their differences showed through. Ralph tried to win the argument by pulling rank.

'I fought at Hastings,' he said.

'So did my father,' countered Gervase.

'Indeed, he did – God rest his soul! A mere Breton he may have been but he chose the right leader to serve. Your

father died in battle, Gervase. I went on with Duke William to complete the Conquest of this troublesome land.'

A deep sigh came from the younger man. 'Yes, Ralph. You have recounted the story often.'

'Not often enough, it appears,' said the other, 'for you have forgotten some important details. We marched north from Sussex towards London and Duke William, as he then was, asked to be admitted, but the city was full of stubborn Saxons and the portreeve refused to open the gates to us. That made William angry. So he led us in a great circle around London, destroying and burning everything in our path. The city found itself at the centre of a ring of fire and devastation.'

'It will never forget that – or forgive it.'

'When William came back to London, they let him in.'

'Only in return for a charter that guaranteed their ancient liberties. His welcome was conditional.'

'I was *here*, Gervase,' said Ralph, grinning proudly at the memory. 'We entered the city like conquerors.'

'Then built fortresses to skulk in.'

'No!'

'We spent the night in one of them,' observed Gervase with a glance over his shoulder. 'Castle Baynard. Close by it stands Montfichet Tower. Even they and this stronghold in front of us are not enough to calm the Conqueror's nerves for he built another castle downstream at Windsor.'

'Be careful, lad. Do not mock the king.'

'Then do not overpraise him.'

'We are his servants, Gervase, and that demands loyalty. You sometimes forget which side you are on.'

‘I am on the side of justice.’

‘*Norman* justice,’ said Ralph. ‘Rights of conquest.’

There were seven of them. Accompanied by five men-at-arms, Ralph Delchard and Gervase Bret were sitting astride their horses in Cheapside, the main thoroughfare and marketplace of the city. People thronged and gave them the usual collection of resentful looks and watchful stares. Ralph was a big, powerful man with a mailed jerkin beneath his mantle and a sword and dagger at his belt. The knights, all part of his personal retinue, wore the helms and hauberks which were now such familiar sights all over England. Gervase was of medium height and slighter build than his companions. The studious air and the sober attire of a clerk concealed a wiry body, which was well able to take care of itself in physical combat. Ralph and the others were essentially Normans; however, Gervase came of mixed Breton and Saxon parentage. He saw things through somewhat wider eyes.

The Tower of London dominated the city. It was a three-storeyed palace-keep with dressings of Caen stone and it rose to a height of ninety feet. At its base, the walls were fifteen feet thick although they narrowed slightly as they climbed up towards the turrets. Work still continued on the interior of the building but its chill message was already delivered by the daunting exterior. The Normans were there to stay. In the most uncompromising way, the Tower announced the strength of the invaders and the irreversibility of their daring conquest. Ralph Delchard thought it made the surrounding Saxon and

Viking architecture look rickety and insubstantial. In his heart, Gervase Bret would always share the feelings of the underdogs.

Ralph chuckled and clapped his friend on the back.

‘Come, Gervase,’ he said. ‘Let me show you the sights.’

‘I have been to London before, Ralph.’

‘Not to this part, I warrant.’

He threw the remark to his men, who guffawed at the private joke. They knew where they were going and what they expected to find there. Ralph’s knees nudged his horse forward and he cut a path through the crowd for the little cavalcade. They went past tables loaded with fruit, baskets filled with vegetables, stalls festooned with animal skins, and cages alive with squawking poultry. Pungent smells blended into a universal stench that assaulted the nostrils. The cacophony was unrelenting. Ralph struck off to the left and took them through a maze of streets and alleys whose names made no attempt to disguise the nature of the business that was transacted there. Gropecuntelane brought a blush to Gervase’s cheeks and a chortle of approval from those who could translate the blunt Anglo-Saxon into its vulgar equivalent in Norman-French.

They turned into an alleyway that was no more than a strip of mud between a series of thatched huts, which clung to each other for mutual support like drunken revellers. Ralph lifted a hand to bring them to a halt, then he drew his sword and went on alone at a rising trot, slashing at the doors of the stews with cheerful brutality and yelling at the top of his voice.

‘Come on out, you lechers! Out, out, out!’

Response was immediate. Protests and abuse were thrown in equal measure and the contents of a chamber pot missed the intruder by a matter of inches. As Ralph hacked at the last door with his sword, it swung open to reveal an ancient priest who was pulling on his cassock over a naked and scrawny body. In the blindness of his panic, he ran straight into the flank of Ralph's horse and bounced off it before looking up with contrition and crossing himself three times.

'There was sickness in the house!' he gabbled.

'Then you'll have caught a dose of it!' said Ralph.

He and his men roared with amusement as the old priest scurried off in the hopes of outrunning eternal damnation. Faces had now emerged from other houses and three of them belonged to the remaining members of the armed escort. As they pulled on their helmets and buckled their sword-belts, Ralph upbraided his men with mock annoyance. They soon mounted their horses and took their places behind him. All ten of them now cantered out of the alley and woke up anyone who had so far managed to sleep through the barrage of noise. Gervase rode beside his colleague.

'How did you know where to find them?' he asked.

'They are soldiers,' said Ralph easily. 'They take their pleasures where they can find them.'

'But there must be dozens of such places here.'

'These were the ones I recommended.'

Gervase was shocked. 'You *sent* them here?'

'This is London. I could not stop them. If they seek enjoyment in the stews, they might as well get the best.' He laughed as his friend coloured again. 'The king is my

lord and master in all things, Gervase, and I learn from him. He has raised castles to secure the kingdom and monasteries to sing the praises of the Almighty, but he has not neglected the baser needs of mankind. William the Conqueror owns three brothels in Rouen alone. I'll show you around them one day.'

'No, thank you!'

'It will broaden your education, Gervase.'

'I'll take your word for it.'

Ralph enjoyed teasing him. Gervase was no stranger to lustful urges but he would never satisfy them in the houses of resort, which existed in all the major cities and towns. Alys was waiting for him back in Winchester and the thought of her was enough to keep him pure in body if not in mind. Ralph had many sterling qualities but there was a sensual side to him, which could tip too easily into coarseness. Gervase was grateful when the bulk of St Paul's Cathedral loomed in front of them to distract his friend. Two figures stepped out of a shadowed doorway.

'You are late,' scolded Canon Hubert.

'A few of my men were delayed,' said Ralph.

'Keep a firmer grip on them.'

'Someone else was doing that.'

Ribald laughter came from the knights. Canon Hubert shot them a look of disgust, then let Brother Simon help him to mount the spindly donkey he always rode. Hubert and Simon completed the party. While the others had spent the night at Castle Baynard – or in the arms of the city whores – they had sought shelter with the regular canons at St Paul's. Despite an outward show of piety, Edward the Confessor had

not turned London into the centre of Christianity he had envisaged. Apart from St Paul's, the only religious house in the city was St Martin's-le-Grand and even that had worldly associations. There was a decidedly secular tenor to London and it had not pleased Canon Hubert and Brother Simon.

'Let us ride out of this sinful city,' said Hubert.

Ralph shook his head. 'If you had a horse instead of that ass, we could quit the place a lot faster.'

'A donkey was good enough for Jesus Christ.'

'I did not realise you intended to travel exactly as Our Lord travelled,' said Ralph. 'We will wait for you here while you walk on water across the Thames.'

Hubert snorted. 'This is no time for blasphemy!'

'When is?'

The soldiers laughed irreverently and the prelate swung the head of his donkey around so that he could face them all. Canon Hubert was a short, fat, fussy, middle-aged man who had acquired extra layers of pomposity with each year that passed. Brother Simon, by contrast, was a walking skeleton in a black cowl, a nervous, reticent, and inoffensive soul who echoed all that Hubert said and who challenged nothing. The prelate rid himself of a burst of self-importance.

'Please bear in mind, sirs,' he said pointedly, 'that I was chosen for this assignment by the king himself, plucked from my sacred work in Winchester to perform this temporal office. I deserve and demand total respect. In short, sirs, *I* lead where the rest of you but follow.'

'One moment,' said Ralph, bridling. 'You take too much upon yourself, Canon Hubert.'

‘Someone has to show a sense of responsibility.’

‘I am appointed to lead this commission.’

‘You but take the chair,’ said Hubert with flabby condescension. ‘It is I who lend spiritual weight and substance to our dealings.’ His voice rose to quell the general snigger from the escort. ‘I insist on obedience.’

‘Then you must earn it,’ said Ralph, determined to win the tussle for power. ‘My men answer to me, Hubert.’

‘And you answer to the Church.’

Brother Simon actually spoke for once without being prompted. ‘Canon Hubert represents the Church.’

‘There is a faint resemblance, I grant you,’ said Ralph.

‘Cease this mockery!’ hissed Hubert.

‘Then do not try my patience. You may stand for the Church, but I have the State at my elbow and that puts me in complete control. If you question my authority again, we will ride on without you and discharge our business accordingly.’

But the prelate made no reply. It was neither the time nor the place to pursue the argument. Seated on a small donkey amid a cluster of knights on their huge destriers, he was at a severe disadvantage. His attempted rebuke had failed so he would have to assert his authority in other ways at a later date. Ralph Delchard celebrated his small victory with a broad grin.

‘We see eye to eye at last,’ he said. ‘Let us have no more battles between Church and State, if you please, because I will always win. Look at the Tower of London over there,’ he advised with a nick of his hand. ‘It is the emblem of power of the State. King William and his army subdued

this land. Swords and arrows won the prize, not prayers and hymns. See that Tower and you see true Norman might. What part does the Church have in that?’

Gervase Bret did not wish to undermine Ralph’s argument or he would have pointed out that the Tower of London had, in fact, been designed by Gundulph, a monk from Canon Hubert’s old monastery in Bec. Church and State were more closely intertwined than Ralph Delchard cared to admit and the uneasy relationship between them was reflected in the constant jousting between him and Canon Hubert. Gervase did not want to throw fuel on the flames of another debate. Therefore, as the party set off, he held his tongue and contented himself with one last glimpse of the Tower. It was as grim and intimidating as ever, standing at a spot on the river that had been chosen for strategic importance, and maintaining close surveillance both of the city itself and the main approaches to it. Gervase noticed that it now contained a feature, which had not been there before, that caused a slight shudder to run through him.

Perched on the turrets with a proprietary air were a dozen or so large, black ravens, and many more were circling the building, which had become their natural home. It seemed to him an omen.

Essex was curiously isolated from London. The River Lea with its variegated courses and its undrained wetlands near the Thames served as a most effective barrier. Most of inland Essex was characterised by heavy clay and extensive woodland. As soon as they left Stratford, the travellers encountered the lower reaches of a royal forest, which stretched in a wide

swathe almost as far north as Cambridge. Royal forests were subject to forest law whose harsh statutes were savagely enforced, as Ralph Delchard and Gervase Bret had learnt in Wiltshire, when their work took them to the town of Bedwyn and the Savernake Forest. Their new assignment was carrying them to a coastal region but they would have to negotiate a great deal of woodland on the way. It was a fine day and birds celebrated the sunshine with playful sorties among the trees and sporadic bursts of song. The mighty oaks and beeches, the cool glades, and the sudden patches of open land reminded Gervase very much of Savernake, but Ralph was thinking only of their destination.

‘I hate the sea,’ he confided.

‘Why?’ said Gervase.

‘Because you can never control those damnable waves in the last resort, you’re always at their mercy. That was the only part of the invasion that frightened me – crossing the Channel. I’ll fight any man on dry land without a qualm but do not ask me to sail into battle again.’

‘Is that why you stayed in England?’

‘It is part of the reason.’

‘You inherited estates back in Normandy.’

‘Yes, Gervase, beautiful pastureland near Lisieux but there were richer pickings over here. And no voyage to endure across choppy waters.’

‘You will never make a sailor, Ralph.’

‘The very sight of the sea makes my stomach heave.’

‘Then you’ll have a queasy time of it in Maldon.’

‘That is why I am so keen to get there, discharge our business as swiftly as possible, and leave.’

‘It may not be as simple as that.’

‘We must *make* it simple.’

‘There may be problems and delays.’

Ralph slapped a thigh. ‘Sweep them aside.’

They were riding slowly in pairs past a copse of silver birch. Ralph and Gervase led the column. Behind them were four soldiers followed by Canon Hubert and Brother Simon. Four more soldiers brought up the rear with baggage horses trailing from lead reins. Ralph and his knights were all mounted on destriers, sturdy warhorses that had been trained for battle and had already proven themselves in combat. The animals could run straight at a mark without guidance from their riders and they could be trusted not to bolt during a charge. Like his men, Ralph sat in a padded war saddle with high guard boards at the front and the back to protect his waist and loins. When business had drawn them to Savernake, they had only ventured into the neighbouring county and four knights had been deemed a sufficient escort. This time they were striking out much further from their base in Winchester and Ralph had selected eight of his best men to accompany them into a county known for its hostility towards the Normans.

Gervase Bret rode a hackney, a brown beast, that was sound in wind and limb but lacking any of the breeding so evident in the destriers. Canon Hubert’s donkey was picking its way beside Brother Simon’s pony, a gaunt, flea-bitten creature from Devonshire that matched its rider perfectly in its shuffling angularity. Simon was trying to minimise the discomfort of travel by meditating on the psalms but Hubert had more earthly concerns.

‘We should reach Barking Abbey soon,’ he said. ‘I hope they will have suitable refreshment for us.’

‘I am not hungry, Canon Hubert.’

‘Food keeps body and soul together.’

‘Will we stay there long?’ asked Simon anxiously.

‘As long as I deem necessary. Why?’

‘I do not like the company of women.’

‘They are holy nuns.’

‘Females unsettle me.’

‘Fight hard, Brother Simon,’ urged Hubert with a stern countenance. ‘Subdue your fleshly desires. Be true to your vow of chastity and control your lewd inclinations.’

The monk was thrown into disarray. ‘But I *have* no lewd inclinations!’ he exclaimed. ‘I have never known what lust is nor ever wished to learn. All I am saying is that I seek and prefer the company of men. I feel safe among them. I have an appointed place. With women, I have no idea what to say and how to say it. They unnerve me.’

‘Even when they are brides of Christ?’

‘Especially then.’

Brother Simon took refuge once more in the psalms and buried himself so deep in contemplation that he did not even notice the buildings that began to conjure themselves out of the trees in the middle distance. Painful experience had brought him around to the view that the best way to deal with members of the opposite sex was to pretend that they were not actually there. His own mother – now long dead – had herself been consigned to the realms of non-existence. Simon preferred to believe that he had been brought into the world by a more spiritual agency than the female womb.

The thriving village was one of the earliest Saxon settlements in Essex. Situated at the head of Barking Creek, it was largely a fishing community but religion had invested its name with a greater significance. Barking Abbey was the most famous nunnery in England and its distinguished history went back over four centuries. Erkenwald, Bishop of London, had built abbeys at Chertsey and Barking. While he himself ruled at the former, his sister, Ethelburga, became abbess of the later, partly to serve God more dutifully and partly to avoid marriage to the pagan King of Northumbria. Both brother and sister were later canonised and their relics produced a steady crop of miracles over succeeding years. Ethelburga was not the only nun whose path to sainthood at Barking Abbey involved a detour around an unwanted husband.

Ralph Delchard was the first to spot the place.

‘Here we are at last!’ he said. ‘A house of virgins! I wonder if there will be enough to go around.’

Gervase suppressed a smile. ‘Show them some respect.’

‘I will do. I’ll thank them afterwards most respectfully.’ He lowered his voice to a confidential whisper. ‘It is one experience I have never tried, Gervase. To lie with a nun for the good of my soul.’

‘Do not jest about it.’

‘Celibacy is a denial of nature.’

‘That is its appeal.’

Ralph gave a ripe chuckle then made his horse quicken its pace and drag the column along more speedily. They were soon entering the main gate of the abbey and

looking up at the great, stone-built, cruciform church, which towered over the whole house. When they had dismounted, the soldiers were taken off by the hospitaller to be fed in the guest quarters. Ralph Delchard, Gervase Bret, Canon Hubert, and the now terrified Brother Simon were conducted to the parlour of Abbess Aelfgiva. She was a stately figure of uncertain age but her virtue was so self-evident that even Ralph's jocular lasciviousness was quelled. Abbess Aelfgiva accorded them a warm welcome and a light meal of wine, chicken, and bread was served. Simon was too busy reciting the twenty-third psalm in Latin to put anything else into his mouth but the other travellers were grateful for the repast.

'Where is your destination?' asked the abbess.

'Maldon,' said Hubert, assuming immediate authority now that they were on consecrated ground. 'We are dispatched on the king's business.'

'It is a pity you did not arrive an hour earlier.'

'Why, my lady abbess?'

'Because you could have accompanied my other visitors,' she said with mild concern. 'They had but four men by way of an escort. A detachment of Norman knights would have made their journey a lot safer, I think.'

'Where are they headed?' said Ralph.

'Maldon Priory.'

Hubert was surprised. 'The town has a priory?'

'A recent foundation. This abbey is the motherhouse.'

'How many nuns does it hold?'

'Only a token number at the moment,' she explained, 'but it will grow in size. Mindred will ensure that.'

‘Mindred?’

‘The prioress. She spent the night here with one of her nuns. They set out within the hour.’

‘Then we may overtake them,’ said Ralph. ‘Ladies travel slower. If we coax a trot out of Hubert’s donkey, we might run them down before the end of the afternoon. We will be pleased to offer them our protection.’

‘That reassures me greatly.’

‘Then let us not tarry,’ suggested Gervase. ‘We must press on as far as we can today.’

‘Yes, yes,’ muttered Brother Simon, still puce with embarrassment at the thought of being inside a nunnery. ‘We must go at once.’

‘All in good time,’ said Hubert, devouring the last of the chicken and washing it down with a mouthful of wine. ‘I must have further conference with Abbess Aelfgiva.’

‘Then I will leave you to it while I round up my men in readiness,’ decided Ralph, getting to his feet. ‘Eight lusty knights set loose in a nunnery – I must call them to heel before they are converted to Christianity.’

Hubert shot him a look of reproof but the abbess gave him a discreet smile from inside the folds of her wimple. When Ralph expressed his thanks for her hospitality and withdrew, Simon saw his opportunity to follow suit. Gervase remained in the parlour with the others. Highly aware of Hubert’s many shortcomings, he was not blind to the man’s abilities and these were now put on display in the most convincing manner.

Barking Abbey was not just another Benedictine house dedicated to the greater glory of God. It was the spiritual

centre for the whole region and the repository of an immense amount of news and information. When anything of importance happened in the county of Essex, the abbess soon heard about it and time spent in her company was highly rewarding if a way could be found to draw her out. Canon Hubert did it with consummate skill, first winning her confidence with a soft but persuasive flattery and then extracting all that he needed to know. It was done in such a swift and painless manner that Abbess Aelfgiva hardly knew that it was happening. When the two men finally bade her farewell, they were armed with a deal of valuable intelligence about the shire through which they were travelling.

Ralph Delchard took the column of horses off on the next stage of its journey. Riding beside him, Gervase talked of the cunning interrogation he had just witnessed.

‘Hubert was masterly.’

‘I refuse to believe that.’

‘He turned the abbess on like a tap and information poured out of her. It was a striking performance.’

‘Between Hubert and a woman! Never!’

‘We heard much praise of Maldon Priory.’

‘Spare me the details, Gervase.’

‘And much criticism of Hamo FitzCorbucion.’

‘Now, that *is* more interesting,’ conceded Ralph. ‘We will have to call Hamo before us on many charges. What did the noble lady have to say on that disagreeable subject?’

‘Exactly what the documents tell us,’ said Gervase as he patted the leather satchel, which was slung from the pommel of his saddle. ‘FitzCorbucion is a notorious land-grabber, feared by all and sundry, rejoicing in that fear. He is entirely

without scruple and will fight over every inch of land and blade of grass we try to take from him.’

‘Then we must fight harder.’

‘Abbess Aelfgiva warned us to move with care.’

Ralph was scornful. ‘We have a royal warrant to support us,’ he said. ‘That means we can slap down any man in the land if he obstructs our purpose. The abbess may treat Hamo with caution but I will stand for none of his antics. I am not riding all this way to be thwarted by a robber baron.’ He relaxed slightly and tossed a glance over his shoulder. ‘What did you think of the place?’

‘Barking Abbey? I was most impressed.’

‘So was the Conqueror,’ said Ralph. ‘He stayed there until they had built enough of the Tower of London for him to be accommodated in the city. It is one of the reasons why he acknowledged all of the abbey charters. Barking lost none of its holdings.’

‘Unlike Waltham.’

‘Yes, Gervase. Unlike Waltham.’

Barking Abbey was one of the wealthiest of the nine English nunneries. Only Wilton and Shaftesbury had richer endowments and a larger annual income. The Conquest had inflicted little damage on these houses but the same could not be said for Waltham Abbey, which lay not far north of Barking. The college of secular canons was founded by King Harold and punished because of that association. Before he succeeded to the throne, Harold was Earl of Essex with over thirty manors in the county. William the Conqueror seized these, along with the estates formerly owned by Waltham Abbey, feeling that he had

just cause to strip the latter of its bounty. Gervase Bret reminded his companion why.

‘King Harold was buried at Waltham,’ he said.

Ralph tensed. ‘*Who?*’

‘King Harold.’

‘Edward the Confessor was the last king of England.’

‘Apart from Harold Godwinsson.’

‘He was a usurper.’

‘Not if you are a Saxon.’

‘Do not provoke me, Gervase,’ said Ralph wearily. ‘Only those who win battles are entitled to write about them. We did not defeat a lawful sovereign at Hastings. We killed an upstart earl with too little respect for Duke William’s claim to the throne. Harold was hit by a Norman arrow and cut down by Norman swords. It was no more than he deserved.’

‘That is a matter of opinion.’

‘And a statement of fact.’

‘Whatever you may say, he ruled as King of England.’

‘Well, he was not buried with the honour due to a royal person,’ said Ralph. ‘His mistress, Edith Swan-neck, had to scour the battlefield to find his mangled corpse. It was she who brought the bag of bones all the way back to Essex.’

‘This was King Harold’s county,’ said Gervase with quiet compassion. ‘It has suffered cruelly as a result.’

‘It will suffer even more when we get to Maldon!’

As soon as he spoke the words, Ralph wished that he could call them back because they did not represent his true feelings. He was fiercely proud of the Norman achievement in England and determined to do all he could to enforce it, but that did not mean his view of the

Saxon population was completely heartless. Gervase had caught him on the raw by reviving the eternal argument about Harold's right to be called the King of England. In fact, Ralph had some sympathy for the people of Essex. There was no shire in the realm where the hand of the Conqueror had fallen more heavily. They were riding through dispossessed territory.

The party made good progress, breaking into a trot from time to time and increasing it to a canter when they came to suitable terrain. After a couple of hours, they paused to water the horses, stretch their legs, and empty their bladders. Then they were back in the saddle again. Another hour had passed before they heard the commotion ahead of them. At first they thought it was the sound of a hunt, pursuing deer or wild boar through the forest, but the scream of a young woman suddenly cut through this illusion. Ralph's sword was in his hand on the instant and he raised it aloft.

'Follow me!' he commanded.

He spurred his mount into action and his men galloped after him with their weapons drawn. Gervase Bret went with them and Canon Hubert was left behind with Brother Simon. The two of them kicked maximum speed out of their unwilling animals and wobbled off after the others. Ralph and his men thundered through the undergrowth as if they were in a cavalry charge, their harnesses jingling and the hooves of their destriers sending up such a flurry of earth that the ground was pitted for hundreds of yards. The noise ahead grew louder and the scream took on a new intensity. Snapping off branches and scattering leaves, the

soldiers rode hell for leather towards the sounds of a brawl and the cries of distress.

When they came out of the trees, they found themselves in a field that sloped gently away towards a coppice below. A dozen or more figures were engaged in a bitter struggle and the clang of steel rang out across the grass. In the very heart of the melee were two nuns, clinging for dear life to their horses and totally at the mercy of the violence that raged around them. Ralph Delchard assessed the problem at a glance. The visitors who had left Barking Abbey were the victims of an ambush. Instant rescue was needed to save their lives. Letting out a piercing battle cry, Ralph held his sword straight out like a lance and his men fanned out in a line behind him. Destriers bred for battle could finally show their paces. Men-at-arms who were trained for combat felt their blood race with excitement. The troop came hurtling down the slope like an avenging army.

Down by the coppice, there was a break in the fighting. The attackers were burly men in nondescript armour and an array of helms. Their ambush had been successful. They had hacked one of the armed guards to the ground and wounded another so badly that he was hardly able to defend himself. But they had reckoned without interference, especially of so fearsome a nature, and they rightly judged that they would be no match for the posse of Norman knights now descending upon them from the trees. Their leader barked an order and they fled at once. Deprived of the chance to fight, Ralph vented his spleen by berating them for their cowardice. He and his men pursued them for half a mile but they had too big a start and too good a knowledge of the woodland to be

overhauled. Ralph eventually called a halt and the sweating steeds dug their hooves deep into the ground.

When the knights got back to the coppice, they found Gervase Bret kneeling over the fallen man and Brother Simon attending to the wounded rider. Canon Hubert was trying to comfort the two nuns who had dismounted from their horses and were holding on to each other. Ralph came up to be introduced to Prioress Mindred and Sister Tecla, both of whom were still shaking at their ordeal. The prioress was a tall woman in her fifties with a nobility of bearing that soon reasserted itself and skin as white and shiny as a bowl of melted wax. Pale blue eyes shone out of the glowing mask. Sister Tecla was a slim young woman of middle height with delicate hands that fluttered like anguished butterflies. Even the wimple could not fully conceal the haunted beauty of her little face.

When Ralph gave her an admiring smile, she lowered her eyes in confusion.

‘Who were they?’ he asked.

‘We do not know,’ said Mindred.

‘Were they hiding in the coppice?’

‘They took us unawares.’

‘What were they after?’

‘What every band of robbers is after,’ said Hubert testily. ‘Money. Those villains had no respect for God. They were ready to lay violent hands upon two sacred ladies.’

Ralph ignored him. ‘We arrived in the nick of time,’ he said. ‘Did you carry anything of particular value?’

‘No, sir,’ said the prioress. ‘Except for a few items we picked up at Barking Abbey.’

‘Items?’

‘A holy relic and a number of books.’

‘Such things are of priceless value,’ noted Hubert.

‘Only to us,’ she said, then afforded herself a gentle smile. ‘What we carry is some of the precious earth taken from the spot where St Oswald was killed in battle against the heathen. It is the merest handful, but its power saved us from harm. It brought you to our rescue.’

Four guards had escorted the nuns, lightly armed Saxons who were overwhelmed by the surprise attack. The man on the ground was unconscious and severely injured, but Gervase was confident that he would live. Brother Simon was already binding the gashed arm of the other man to stem the flow of blood. It was important to get the wounded to a place where they could be given proper treatment and the nuns clearly had no enthusiasm for much further travel that day. Ralph announced that they would head for the nearest village and one of the Saxon guards named the place.

‘We will spend the night there,’ said Ralph, ‘and give you the opportunity to recover from this vile assault. You need have no more worries about safe conduct to Maldon.’

‘We are deeply obliged to you,’ said Mindred.

‘And to St Oswald,’ added Hubert.

‘Will you stay long in Maldon?’ she asked.

‘Unhappily, no,’ said Ralph, flicking a wistful glance at the demure Sister Tecla. ‘We are royal commissioners on urgent business. When we have banged a few heads together, we must be on our way. There is nothing, alas, that will delay us in the town of Maldon.’

* * *

As the royal commissioners proceeded with their charges, a boat nosed its way slowly into the shallows of the River Blackwater near Maldon. After one more pull on the oars, the man hauled them into the craft and let it drift through the thickening reeds and the lapping water. When he hit something solid, he thought he had reached the bank but he turned round to find himself still several yards away from dry land. Something else had stopped the boat, a piece of driftwood perhaps or some other obstruction that had floated into his path. He clambered up to the prow of the boat and peered into the gloom, using one of the oars to prod about in the water until he encountered what felt like a solid object. It was nothing of the kind. When he pressed down hard, it sank briefly into the mud of the River Blackwater, then shot back to the surface and bobbed there defiantly. He was petrified. Lying on the water in front of him, hideously disfigured and staring up with sightless eyes, was the half-naked body of a man.