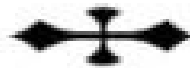


A Deadly Penance

A Templar Knight Mystery



MAUREEN ASH



BERKLEY PRIME CRIME, NEW YORK

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THE ALEHOUSE MURDERS
DEATH OF A SQUIRE
A PLAGUE OF POISON
MURDER FOR CHRIST'S MASS
SHROUD OF DISHONOUR
A DEADLY PENANCE

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List of Characters

PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS

Bascot de Marins—a Templar Knight
Gianni—a mute Italian boy, former servant to Bascot
Nicolaa de la Haye—hereditary castellan of Lincoln castle
Richard Camville—Nicolaa's son
Petronille de la Haye—Nicolaa's sister
Richard de Humez (Dickon)—Petronille's husband
Alinor de Humez—Petronille's daughter
Ernulf—serjeant of Lincoln garrison

KNIGHTS AND SERVANTS FROM STAMFORD

Stephen Wharton—knight
Hugh Bruet—knight
Aubrey Tercel—cofferer
Margaret—sempstress
Elise—maidservant

MERCHANTS AND TRADESMEN IN LINCOLN TOWN

Guild Leaders and Their Families

Gildas—barber-surgeon
Simon Adgate—furrier
Clarice Adgate—Simon's wife
Thomas Wickson—Chandler
Edith Wickson—Thomas' wife
Merisel Wickson—Thomas' daughter
John Sealsmith—seal maker
Imogene Sealsmith—John's wife

Other Merchants and Tradesmen

Hacher—barber-surgeon
Reinbald of Hungate—wine merchant
Harald—Reinbald's nephew

AT RISEHOLME

Stoddard—bailiff
Willi, Mark, Joan, Emma and Annie—foundlings

OTHERS

Pinchbeck—coroner

Everard d'Arderon—Templar preceptor

Lambert—clerk

Nicholas—groom

Hedgset—leech

Prologue



Lincolns hire—January 1177

THE AIR IN THE CONVENT CHAMBER WAS CLOSE, AND REDOLENT with the scent of purifying herbs. Outside, the stormy weather of the past few days had calmed, but it was still cold, and the casements were shuttered against the chill. The single source of warmth was from the burning embers of a brazier set in one corner.

Shadows danced and flickered from the light of candles set in sconces around the walls as the young woman sitting on the horseshoe-shaped rim of the birthing stool strained against the pain that had engulfed her for the last fourteen hours. Her long tangled braid of pale brown hair was darkened with perspiration, as was the thin shift she wore. Behind her stood a young and sturdy nun who provided a bulwark for the woman to lean against in the throes of her exertions. In front of the stool, crouching at the woman's feet, was an older nun, the infirmarian of the convent, who was massaging the swollen mass of the mother's belly with sweet oil of lavender and murmuring words of encouragement. The woman could feel her strength coming to an end. The room was beginning to swim in and out of her vision and she knew it for an incipient warning of unconsciousness. Against the incoming tide of darkness, she could hear the infirmarian's soft voice urging her on. "Just one more try," she said gently. "The babe is nearly here." With what she knew would be her last effort, the woman did as she was bid and, to her relief, the child, with an angry howl of protest, slipped from her womb.

With deft hands, the infirmarian cut and tied the natal cord and wrapped the infant in a length of clean linen. Handing the swaddled bundle to the sister who had stood behind the birthing chair, she signalled for her to take the babe from the room. Then she bent to attend to the afterbirth.

"It is a boy," she murmured as she helped the exhausted mother up from the stool and eased her onto a nearby pallet, "and he appears healthy. I have instructed that he be placed into the charge of a wet nurse, as arranged."

The woman nodded. She had seen the gender of the child as he emerged and also the fuzzy growth of down that, moistened by birth fluids, lay like a cap of molten gold on his head. She did not make any protest at his removal. As the infirmarian had said, it had been agreed. And she was exhausted. Her bones felt as though they had no substance and were incapable of sustaining even the slightest movement. All that consumed her now was a desire to sink into the oblivion of sleep.

The woman closed her eyes as the nun, with a cloth dipped in warm water, cleansed her body of the detritus left by the birthing. It was imperative that she regain her strength for the trials that lay ahead. Tears trickled down her cheeks as she thought of them, for she had no doubt they would be even more daunting than the long months of her confinement. She would need all her wits about her if she was to survive.

The infirmarian, her task finished, quietly left the room. Outside, the sister who had taken the babe away returned, her arms empty and her hands folded inside the black sleeves of her habit.

“She will sleep now,” the senior nun said as she removed the capacious apron she had worn to protect her clothing. “I will leave her in your care while I attend to my duties in the infirmary. Sit with her until she awakens and then give her a bowl of hearty meat broth and a cup of ale. Encourage her to take as much of both as she can. She is very weak and her spirits are low; nourishment will help restore her vitality.”

“Is it certain she does not want to see the babe?” the other sister asked, her young face creased into lines of sympathy for the suffering the woman had endured. “Mayhap she will change her mind now that he is born.”

The infirmarian shook her head firmly, her countenance regretful. “No, I doubt she will rescind her decision. Soon, the boy will be given into the care of another, one who will see to his future welfare.” She gave a little sigh. “We must offer up prayers that the child has not inherited the morals of the man who sired him. If he has, I fear his life will be naught but a travail of sorrow.”



Lincoln castle—Late February 1203

LINCOLN CASTLE STANDS HIGH UPON A KNOLL OVERLOOKING the rolling Lincolnshire countryside. Within the castle's large bail are two keeps, one a recently built fortress that is the main residence of the hereditary castellan, Nicolaa de la Haye, and her husband, Gerard Camville, and the other an older tower where the bottom floor is used as an armoury and the chambers above for the accommodation of visitors. Now, within the early darkness of a winter evening, the old tower was uninhabited except for a room on the top storey where a man and a woman lay languorously entwined after a brief but passionate session of lovemaking.

The woman, oblivious to the hardness of the floor on which she was lying, snuggled close into the shoulder of her companion, relishing the masculinity of his smell and the silkiness of his short beard. Solicitously, he kissed her tenderly and covered her with the cloak he had discarded so hastily a short time before.

"We will have to leave soon, my sweet," he said, fondling one of her thick auburn plaits. "Your husband may return at any time."

"If he does, he will go to the guest chamber below. He will not come up here," she replied petulantly. Their tryst had been far too short and she did not want it to end.

"And how will you explain your absence?" her lover asked in amusement.

"I will tell him I went out for a breath of cool air to relieve the headache I am supposed to have."

The man gave a chuckle. "I admit he is gullible, but I doubt that even he would believe such cold weather would serve as a remedy. No, you had best go now, before he decides to retire."

Reluctantly, she rose and started to straighten her clothing. As her lover began to pull up his hose, a slight noise came from the passageway outside. The man quickly doused the small rush light burning in a corner. "Hush," he warned her, and crept stealthily to the door.

He waited in silence for a few moments before deciding there was no cause for alarm. "Hurry," he said to the woman as he pushed the door open. "Go down and get into bed. I will wait at the top of the stairs to ensure you get to your room safely."

Swathing herself in the expensive fur-lined cloak she had been wearing when she entered the room

the woman did as she was bid, pausing only to give him a quick kiss before stepping through the door. The small landing beyond was shrouded in inky blackness and the man grasped her arm to steady her until her foot found the top step of the circular staircase. As she slowly descended, he held his breath and listened until she reached the lower floor and he heard the sound of the guest chamber door opening and then closing behind her.

He stood motionless for a moment, listening. He was certain he had heard a noise earlier but now it was quiet. On the other side of the landing was a small basin with a tap fed by water collected in a tank on the roof. An occasional drip from the faucet was all that broke the silence. Deciding he must have been mistaken, he turned to make his own descent to the lower floor when he heard a voice softly call his name. Startled, he turned in the direction of the sound, which seemed to be coming from an archway a few steps above the landing. He knew that the door within the arch gave access to a wooden catwalk spanning the gap between the top of the tower and the ramparts. Why would someone be standing up there? It led nowhere except out onto the parapet. And why would they have opened the door, which had earlier been closed, to let in the cold night air that was now sweeping around him in icy gusts?

As far as he was aware, no one had known of his intent to meet his lover. Could it be that one of the guards on the palisade had detected their presence and come to investigate? But if that was so, surely any of the men-at-arms would have issued a more forthright challenge. A thrill of dread ran through him as he wondered if it could be the woman's husband, but a moment's reflection dismissed the notion from his mind. He and his paramour had been most discreet in their meetings and he was certain that her spouse had no inkling of their liaison. And if, by some chance, the husband had come to see if his wife was recovering from her supposed illness and found her missing from the chamber where she should have been resting, it was unlikely he would have crept stealthily up two flights of stairs in an effort to locate her. He would surmise that she had returned to the hall and their paths had crossed unnoticed in the darkness of the ward. It was in the main keep that the husband would search for her, not within the top stories of the old tower.

Again the voice came, urging him to come through the arch and out onto the catwalk. The man's hand dropped to his belt and the small eating knife strapped to his side. He had no other weapon on his person, but the little blade was sharp and, if necessary, would provide a modicum of defence. He hesitated and the person spoke again, more commandingly this time.

Still, he vacillated, reluctant to step away from the security of the tower walls. Should he obey the summons or not? His heart leapt with hope as he wondered if the command came from the person he had recently been pressing for information. Was he finally about to receive an answer to the question that had all but taken over his life? The thought of such a lure was almost impossible to resist but, nonetheless, he took a deep breath and cautioned himself to be circumspect. He stood for a moment, indecisive, and then straightened his shoulders and laid a hand on the hilt of his small knife. If he fled, he would never find out.

Stepping through the arch, the frigid air struck his face like a blow. The sky above was a canopy of stars, pinpricks of hard brightness in the blackness of the cold night sky, but except for the distant figures of the guards pacing the crenellated ramparts surrounding the castle bail, there was no sense of any other human presence. Neither of the guards was near; in the dim light of torches placed at intervals along the perimeter of the walls, the outline of one man-at-arms could just be seen some hundred yards to the west and another soldier a similar distance to the east. Behind him the solid bulk of the old tower loomed, throwing the length of the narrow wooden bridge into deep shadow. Whoever had called must be hidden within that tunnel of blackness.

He took a step and halted at the edge of the wooden planking. "Who calls?" he said softly into the darkness. "Show yourself if you wish to speak to me."

There was no answer, only a small click and the soft whirr of a crossbow bolt taking flight. The missile ran true to its aim and took the man in the chest. So forceful was its thrust that it penetrated through his rib cage and beyond, severing his spine before exiting through his back. He fell without a sound.

IN THE GUEST CHAMBER ON THE BOTTOM FLOOR OF THE TOWER, the woman disrobed and climbed into bed. The room was moderately warm, heated by the coals of a brazier that a castle servant had lit earlier in the day. She lay in silence for a few moments, listening for her lover's step on the staircase beyond the closed door of the chamber to indicate that he, too, had left the building. After a few moments, she heard what she thought was the sound of his passage, the small noise of footsteps scurrying past the door and fading as they exited the tower.

Sighing, she lay back and snuggled into the warmth of the thick woollen blankets that covered her. Her lover was far too cautious, she thought. Her husband was not a man prone to suspicion; he had been solicitous when she had told him of her aching head and had even offered to keep her company while she rested. It had been easy to persuade him to stay within the hall and enjoy the company of the other guests gathered there. She felt a little sorry for deceiving him, but not much. He was a good husband, but elderly, and his lust had faded with the passage of years. Her involvement with her young lover provided an excitement she had never before experienced. The element of danger was so exhilarating that it overcame thoughts of the repercussions she would suffer if her adultery was discovered.

She closed her eyes and relived the stolen moments she and her paramour had shared in the chamber above. Her lover was a vigorous man and his embraces were all that a woman could ask for. She recalled how tenderly he had caressed her and the words of endearment he had murmured in her ear. As she drifted into slumber, her dreams were full of remembered passion, and she was completely unaware that, from that night on, memories would be all that were left to her.



THE BODY WAS NOT DISCOVERED UNTIL DAWN THE NEXT MORNING. Just before first light, Ernulf, the serjeant of the castle garrison, went up onto the ramparts, as was his habit, to oversee the changing of the guards from night patrol to the shift that manned the walls during the daylight hours. As he crossed the bail, all was silent. The previous evening Nicolaa de la Haye had invited a large company of guests to a feast in celebration of the opening of a new foundling home that she had spent many months in establishing. Also present had been Nicolaa's sister, Petronille, who had been on a visit to Lincoln since the season of Christ's Mass and had brought her daughter, Alinor, with her along with a small retinue of servants. The festivities had gone on until late and not only the guests but most of the servants were still abed.

Ernulf went up to the ramparts by means of one of the half-dozen ladders that gave access to the walkway that lined the inner circumference of the palisade. The ladder Ernulf was accustomed to use was near the old tower, and set a little way from the gatehouse that guarded the eastern entrance into the castle ward. Behind him, the four men-at-arms of the day shift were assembling for duty and Ernulf gave them a backward glance as he reached the top of the ladder to ensure all were present. The serjeant was a grizzled old campaigner who treated his men with a gruff fairness but could, nonetheless, mete out a harsh punishment to any who took advantage of his equable temperament. All of the men-at-arms under his command appreciated this and, for the most part, obeyed his orders promptly and without resentment.

The sky was almost fully lightened as he strode along the walkway to the gatehouse, where the men of the night shift would have gathered as the time approached for them to come off duty, his breath rising in steamy puffs on the cold air as he glanced southwards through the crenellations. From his high vantage point, the town spilling down the hillside formed a giant tableau, bisected by the great thoroughfare of Ermine Street, the high road that started in London and travelled the length of England to York. At the lower perimeter of the town, the Witham River traversed the plain. To the east, and sharing the height with the environs of the castle, was the Minster, where Lincoln cathedral was located, its spire sparkling brightly in the frosty air. Ernulf pulled his cloak close around him as he scanned the panorama below him; the weather was bitterly cold, with a stiff breeze that brought tears to the eyes, and he was grateful for the fur-lined cap he wore. In the gloom of approaching dawn the serjeant could see the gleam of frost on the slated rooftops of the houses. There were no coverings of thatch; a town ordinance had been instituted some years before forbidding the use of this combustible material in an effort to prevent the spreading of fire in the event of an accidental conflagration. Most of the houses were built of timber infilled with wattle and daub—only the more affluent of Lincoln's citizens could afford an edifice built completely of stone—and the chequered squares of the walls, usually white, were grimy and showed a sore need of their annual spring coating of lime.

Ermine Street had been renamed Mikelgate within the confines of Lincoln's town walls, and lesser byways branched from the thoroughfare in a haphazard manner, some running parallel to it, others

winding around in a crescent, many of them little more than narrow alleys, but most debouching into street that led to one of the two main entrances into Lincoln; Bailgate in the north, just below the castle precincts at the top of Steep Hill, and Stonebow at the southern end. Suburbs had sprung up in the lee of the walls, giving rise to an impoverished collection of hovels in Butwerk and a straggle of more affluent residences alongside Ermine Street below the river. Lincoln had prospered in the centuries since the Romans had built the first stronghold on the ground where the castle now stood and its good fortune gave no indication of diminishing.

Now, as Ernulf walked along the ramparts, he could see little sign of activity among the populace except for a few wisps of smoke from the ovens of the town bakers. Not only was it very early in the morning, but the cold weather was keeping everyone inside and, with the exception of a couple of stray dogs searching hopefully for scraps in the refuse channel that ran down the middle of Mikelgate the streets were empty. The serjeant nodded with satisfaction at the tranquility. He was proud of the town in which he lived, and even prouder of the mistress he served. He guarded both of them with the determination of a man of simple character and bluff honesty.

He entered the guard room at the top of the gatehouse and found the men of the night shift sharing cups of mulled ale that had been warmed over a fire burning in the middle of the low-roofed stone chamber, a brief respite they were allowed at the changing of the guard. With them was the gateward a man-at-arms who was approaching middle age and had been a member of the Lincoln garrison since his youth. His seniority earned him the coveted duty in the gatehouse and he had no need to venture out into the cold, his watch involving only the overseeing of the closing of the gate at night and surveillance over the entrance until the morning when he was relieved by the man-at-arms who performed the same duty during the day. When Ernulf came in, the gateward offered him a mug of warmed ale and the serjeant downed it gratefully.

“The night passed peacefully, serjeant,” the gateward said, “but since it’s colder than a witch’s head outside, I’m not surprised.”

Ernulf agreed and, as the men of the day shift came up to the tower and were handed mugs of warmed ale, he dismissed the men who had been on patrol during the night.

“Don’t take all mornin’ to drink that ale,” he warned the new arrivals. “S taying in here won’t make the day any warmer. And Lady Nicolaa doesn’t pay you for standin’ around being idle.”

Most of the men-at-arms smiled behind their ale cups as they nodded their acceptance of his admonishment. Ernulf had been in service in the castle since Lady Nicolaa had been a young girl and he was devoted to her. Anyone found guilty of negligence in their duty to the hereditary castellan of Lincoln castle would, at the very least, receive a severe chastisement from the serjeant, if not instant dismissal, but they accepted this easily; along with Ernulf, all of them held Lady Nicolaa in high esteem.

After they went outside, Ernulf’s routine was to pace the perimeter of the castle wall, leaving one of the men-at-arms at the south-eastern corner and one at the south-western, before stopping at the gate that led out from the western side of the bail into open countryside and checking with the gateward there that all was in order. Once that task was completed, he would continue his perambulation of the ramparts, leaving another soldier at the north-western corner and the last man at the north-eastern before completing his circuit back at the gate that led out onto Ermine Street. Behind him the soldiers would commence their slow pacing back and forth, keeping vigilance over the section of wall they had been allotted. The serjeant would repeat this procedure at dusk, when the guard changed again.

This morning, however, the twice-daily ritual had hardly begun before it was halted. By the time Ernulf approached the narrow bridge that connected the ramparts to the old tower, the sun had risen

and dispersed the shadows within its length, revealing the body that lay stretched upon the wooden boards. ~~Beyond the corpse, the crossbow quarrel that had killed him was embedded in one of the posts that formed the frame of the archway.~~ A layer of frost covered the bolt and its leather fletching and, as the rime slowly melted in the early morning rays of the sun, the flecks of gore along the shaft sparkled a deep pink. As Ernulf came into view of the gruesome spectacle, he stumbled to a startled halt and uttered an oath.

“So the night passed peacefully, did it?” he exploded. “I’ll have the flesh off the arses of those two who were guarding this stretch of the ramparts last night. This body’s already starting to stiffen, they must have passed it a dozen times, not to say never noticed somebody firin’ an arbalest right under their noses.”

The soldiers looked down at the body in horrified amazement. “But, Sarje,” one of them dared to protest, “they wouldn’t have been able to see anything. When it’s dark, it’s all in shadow along here, ’specially on the catwalk. . . .”

“Do you think you’re just up here to keep watch over where any fool can see?” Ernulf shouted. “Useless cowsons—I’ve told you time and again to keep your eyes peeled and that means checking every corner. . . .”

Ernulf bit off his words. He knew his anger was not really directed at the soldiers who had been on night duty; as the man-at-arms had just said, the narrow bridge was perhaps twenty feet long with side walls five foot in height and, at nighttime, its length would have been shrouded in darkness. No, his fury was at the villain who had killed the man lying at his feet, for the death would cause distress to one close to Lady Nicolaa. The dead man was well-known to Ernulf. He was a member of the retinue that the castellan’s sister Petronille had brought with her to Lincoln. His name was Aubrey Tercel.

LESS THAN AN HOUR LATER NICOLAA’S SON, RICHARD CAMVILLE, had been apprised of the situation and joined Ernulf up on the ramparts. Since Richard’s father, Gerard Camville, the sheriff of Lincoln, was at present away in London attending a convocation of the realm’s sheriffs ordered by the chief justiciar of England, the serjeant had reported the death to his son, who was deputising for his father in matters concerning the shrievalty.

When Ernulf showed Richard the body and drew his attention to the bolt that was lodged in the frame of the archway, the young man’s face became grave. He was a handsome well-built knight in his middle twenties, with his mother’s flaming red hair and his father’s restless manner, but now, as he viewed the corpse, his figure went still with disquietude.

“A nasty death, but a quick one,” he said. “The bow must have been fired at close range to have penetrated the body so forcefully. It went straight through his heart and beyond; he would have died in an instant.”

“The guards swear they saw no one on their rounds,” Ernulf said, “so the killer must have hidden himself here, on the catwalk.”

“Yes, that makes sense,” Richard replied, crouching down and gauging the distance to the doorway. “It looks as though Tercel came through the archway and the murderer was waiting for him here in the shadows. Once the bow was fired, and Tercel dead, the killer then stepped over the body and returned to the bail by going down the staircase in the tower, never once having been in view of the guards.”

“Got Tercel up here on some ruse, I expect,” Ernulf opined. “Even if he knew he was meeting an enemy, he wouldn’t have thought he was in much danger with the guards so close by.”

Richard nodded absently and then, stepping carefully over the body, inspected the crossbow bolt embedded in the frame of the door.

“Have you looked closely at this?” he asked.

“No, lord,” Ernulf replied.

“Then do so now,” Richard commanded.

Moving carefully around the corpse, the serjeant hunkered down and then gave a gasp of disbelief. “That looks like a quarrel from that old crossbow your grandsire gave to your mother.”

“I would swear it is the very same,” Richard confirmed. The shaft’s metal tip had not wholly penetrated the door and there, at the base, a tiny inscription could be seen—RH to NH.

“But that crossbow was never meant to be used as a weapon,” Ernulf exclaimed. “It is only a small replica that your grandsire had made as a gift to commemorate your birth.”

“Even so, it is capable of being fired.” Richard thought for a moment. “My mother keeps the crossbow in the armoury, does she not?”

“Aye, in a wooden box, along with a few of the bolts that was made to go with it. The castle fletcher has the care of it and sees that the mechanism is kept free of rust and regularly oiled, but other than that, it’s never taken out of its case.”

“Well, it was taken out last night,” Richard said, “for that bolt is too shallow to have been fired from a regular-sized arbalest. Loath as I am to say it, it would appear that whoever murdered Tercel used my mother’s crossbow to carry out the deed.”

Three



AFTER DIRECTING ONE OF THE MEN-AT-ARMS TO FIND SOMETHING to cover the body, Richard and Ernulf went down to the armoury and to the shelf where the box containing Lady Nicolaa's small crossbow was kept. The wooden case shone with a coating of linseed oil and was fitted with two simple catches to keep it closed. When they opened it, the crossbow lay on a bed of much faded green velvet, nestling in a space indented to take its shape.

Richard lifted it out. "Well, if this is the bow that was used, it has been replaced from whence it came. After the murderer had accomplished his purpose, he must have returned here and put it back in the box."

He lifted the arbalest up to the light coming through one of the narrow casements. It was well crafted, the stock made of yew that had been kept as polished as the box in which it rested, the winding mechanism, trigger and release nut all fashioned of steel, as was the curved portion of the bow. The bowstring of glue-soaked hemp looked fairly new, so it was apparent that the castle fletcher during his maintenance of the implement, had changed it recently. It was small, with a span of no more than eighteen inches, far less than the two to three feet of a full-sized crossbow. On one side of the stock was a small silver plate inscribed with the words—"To Nicolaa from her loving father, Richard de la Haye." In essence, it was a toy but, for all that, a dangerous one.

"I remember the day Sir Richard gave that to your mother," Ernulf said. "It was his gift to her in celebration of your christening and, after they returned from the service at the cathedral, your grandsire presented it to her and ordered a butt set up in the bail so she could test it. Although'tis difficult for a woman to wind a regular bow, that one was small enough for her to manage, and she did it well. Took aim and hit the center of the target with her first shot." There was pride in Ernulf's voice as he spoke of the incident.

"I recall my father telling me of that day," Richard said. "He said that my grandsire had never been sorry that he had sired only daughters, for my mother, his eldest and principal heir, had the heart and stomach of a man." Richard did not have any certain memories of the man after whom he had been named, for his grandfather had died when he was just a toddler, but he recalled an occasion when a tall man with a thatch of flaming red hair had tossed him high in the air and then, with a booming laugh, caught him to his chest. He had often been told by those old enough to remember that he resembled Richard de la Haye and he supposed that it was true, for he was much taller than his father and had his mother's bright colouring.

Ernulf counted the bolts laid in the box alongside the crossbow. "There are only seven quarrels here," he said. "I remember clearly that your grandfather had eight made, each engraved with his and your mother's initials."

Richard rubbed his hand along the groove in the stock and nodded in confirmation. "The layer of oil has been disturbed, as though it had been recently fired. I think, Ernulf, there can be no doubt that this is the weapon that was used."

He replaced the crossbow and closed the box, and then gave the serjeant an order. "Send a message

to Coroner Pinchbeck. Tell him there has been a suspicious death and he needs to come and make an inspection of the body. I don't suppose the lazy bastard will want to come out in this cold weather, but tell him my father is away and cannot, as he usually does, carry out a duty that is rightfully the coroner's. An inquest must be held and, since this death has been inflicted on the servant of a member of our family, I want all the niceties observed. We will leave the corpse in situ until Pinchbeck has been to view it. Tell him there will possibly be a deodand to collect and he will be more likely to get here quickly. If Pinchbeck runs true to his previous behaviour, once he has collected the monies, he will lose all interest in catching the murderer, but that is of no consequence. I am ready to act on my father's behalf in the matter."

Ernulf nodded. A deodand was the name given to any instrument that had caused a person's death, and it was within the province of the coroner to put a valuation on the object and take it, or its value, into custody until a law court decided if it was to be awarded to the family of the victim as a compensation for their loss, or kept for the monarch's purse. Any item could be declared such—an animal that had caused a person's death by a bite or a kick, a cart that had run over some unfortunate in the street and caused a fatality, or simply a weapon, such as a knife or, in this case, Lady Nicolaa's crossbow. While Coroner Pinchbeck was usually averse to expending his energies in any direction that involved actual effort on his part, he did relish collecting fees for the royal coffers, for he felt that by doing so he enhanced his prestige in the eyes of the king.

As Ernulf hurried away to Pinchbeck's fine stone house in Lincoln town, Richard left the armoury and strode across the bail in the direction of the keep. Even though it was still early, he would have to rouse his mother and aunt from their bed and tell them what had happened.

IN THE HUGE CHAMBER THAT FUNCTIONED AS THE HALL OF THE keep, servants were clearing up the remnants of last night's feast and placing scraps into baskets to be given as alms for the poor. The fire in the capacious hearth had been replenished with fresh logs and steaming jugs of mulled wine were being brought from the kitchen and placed on the trestle tables, ready to serve with the morning meal. Richard called to one of the maidservants and told her to go up to his mother's bedchamber and tell her he wished to speak to her.

The young woman returned a few minutes later, informing Richard that his mother was ready to receive him. Since Petronille was sharing Nicolaa's bedchamber during her visit, the castellan's son knew he would be able to speak to both women at the same time.

Nicolaa's bedchamber was a large one, fitted with a good-sized bed and a few comfortable chairs and stools. After knocking at the door and bidden to enter, Richard went in to find his mother and aunt seated at a table awaiting him; both wore bed robes of soft velvet and close-fitting linen bed-caps over their loosely braided hair. The resemblance between the two sisters was slight. Nicolaa had the bright red hair that Richard had inherited, but now, with the approach of her fiftieth year, was sprinkled with a few threads of grey. She was a small woman, a little plump, with slightly protuberant blue eyes that held a discerning look. Petronille, on the other hand, was dark haired and had an olive complexion, traits inherited from their mother. She was a little taller than her older sister, and had a softness about her that was not evident in Nicolaa. Consistently kind and caring, she regarded Richard with a slight anxious look in her dark brown eyes, concerned at the reason for such an early arousal.

Richard studied his aunt for a moment before he spoke. Petronille was still in a fragile state from the death of her young son, Baldwin, a few months before. Although of tender years, Baldwin had been

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