

Prologue

Dartymore, 1368

Again his skin prickles. He stops walking and turns, half-expecting to see someone behind them on the track. A pedlar, perhaps, making his way back from market, or a drover – just like him and his father – who’s herded the last of the sheep down from their summer grazing and is hastening home before dusk. But although he scours the landscape, there’s no sign of anyone. Maybe a thief then – or a band of robbers in the ruins amongst the gorse! He grips the handle of his knife, his heart quickening. Everyone’s heard of them – outlaws to a man – who spring attacks on farms and hamlets, slaughtering the locals and looting what little they have. Except that doesn’t seem likely either, not here in Hundetorre. Burnt out and deserted for as long as he can remember, there are no pickings for anyone, not even crows.

Yet he can’t shake off the feeling he’s being watched, and if not by mortal gaze then by something wisht. It’s All-Hallow-E’en, after all – the night the dead rise from their graves and the Devil himself stalks the tors. And that means he’d do well to hurry home. But before he sets off again, he pulls his hood right down over his face. If it *is* a spirit – a slithering, soul-sucking Summat – he’d best disguise himself. Frittenings eat with their eyes. The less they recognise of their quarry the better. And the last thing he wants is to end up like the fool in a story, the one who ignores all warnings and comes to a sorry end –

‘Jevan! Get a move on! It’ll be dark before long!’

The boy starts. His father’s voice is distant. He’ll have to run to catch him up. Yet a lingering curiosity fetters his feet. He holds his breath. There it is again – that scratchetty sound, faint yet persistent. It’s like rats in an outhouse or cupboard – a knot of vipers rustling in leaves – a spider scuttling over the skin of somebody sleeping.

But when he tracks the noise back to its source, it’s no more than the scraping of stick upon stone. Not any stone, though – and not any old wood either. It’s the leafless branch of an overgrown rowan, clawing at the lintel of a fallen house like the withered hand of a corpse. And although the wind has dropped, Jevan shivers as he quickly turns away. Rowans are magical trees, planted at every door to ward off ill fortune. And that proves what he’s long suspected – that whatever disaster befell this village, it was something untoward. For why else would a lucky charm stand guard over such devastation?

His question hounds him all the way home and into the night. Even the games he plays with the other villagers and the meal they share can’t take his mind off it, and later still, when he stares into the fire, he sees the wreckage of crumbling dwellings in the embers. All that work gone up in smoke, all those hopes and dreams in ashes ...

He drags his gaze from the flames. ‘You’ve never told us what happened,’ he says to his father, who has just finished telling a story about Bolster the giant and is wetting his throat with cider. ‘At Hundetorre, I mean. It must have been summat bad – people would never have upped and left otherwise.’ He pauses. ‘Last time I asked, you said you’d tell us when we were older. And now we are.’

His father doesn’t move – in fact, he seems to have turned to stone, his pot halfway to his mouth. ‘I – I cry you mercy,’ he says at last, ‘but some tales are harder to tell than others.’

There’s a change in the way he’s speaking. The words are sticking like burs in his throat, and he takes another gulp of his drink as if to help him spit them out. ‘And once heard, a story can never be taken back.’

Jevan folds his arms with a frown. Although he can’t always see what the fuss is about, it’s a fact that his father is a champion teller of tales, the most celebrated on the moor. He can always pluck a thread of memory and weave it into a yarn. So for him to reject a challenge – well, it’s unthinkable!

‘Tell you what, let’s have a song instead,’ his father suggests, picking up his pipe and raising it to his lips. There’s a murmur of agreement at this but Jevan’s determined. ‘If you won’t tell me,’ he says, ‘I’ll find someone who will! You can’t keep it a secret forever.’

In the charged silence that follows, dark shadows come crowding in. Jevan glances around at the others – his younger sister wide-eyed, sitting with the other children, his mother and grandmother, all their neighbours looking anywhere but at him. Then his father sighs.

‘I suppose it’s time you young ones heard it. But I only know so much. There were rumours, of course – that was all we had to go on in them days. But I doubt there’s anyone still alive knows what happened for certain.’

His mother tucks her tumbling dark hair behind her ear. She looks as if she’s about to interrupt but the storyteller raises his hand. ‘So,’ he says. ‘Hundetorre was once a thriving village. Several families lived there – decent, hard-working folk they were. I knew some of the lads quite well. We’d have a laugh and a joke whenever we saw each other. Even kicked a ball about with them once, till our dad cuffed me round the ear for not minding the sheep. But that was before we were penned up in this valley, loath to stray for fear of pestilence – the Great Mortality, as it was known. And by the time it was safe to venture out again, Hundetorre was home only to ghosts.’

Jevan studies his face. It too is haunted. Whatever happened to those folk down the way affected him as well, but before he can ask how, his sister takes her thumb from her mouth.

‘Who’s Pesty Lance?’ she demands, squeezing between them. ‘And Great Mort Allity when he’s at home? Are they giants like old Bolster or Gogmagog and his screaming stone?’

Before Jevan can nudge her, their father intervenes. ‘A good question,’ he says, lifting her onto his lap. ‘Stories should always start at their beginning.’ He clears his throat. ‘The Great Mortality was the name folk gave to the plague when first it came amongst us some twenty years ago. Hundetorre was harder hit than most, so they say, though nowhere escaped it.’

‘What, not even Hextenworth? Out here, aback of beyond?’ Jevan leans forward. ‘But if it were as bad as that, how come you’ve never told of it till now?’

His father bows his head and for a long time he is still although his thoughts are in turmoil. Only when he’s sure he’s mastered them does he look up, but instead of Jevan’s enquiring gaze, he beholds the nightmare he’s failed to forget, coming closer and closer towards him, lips moving, oozing pus, its mouth a crater in a face already shrunken to the bone. And in its arms the heap of swaddling clutched to its mottled, rotting breast ... *Don’t look at it! Don’t look!* ... but he can feel its fingers on the back of his neck, forcing his head down, shoving the grubby bundle up. And he presses his fists into his eyeballs so clouds of darkness will blot it out ...

He surfaces, gasping. Everyone is watching, patiently waiting for him to speak. The storyteller looks around at them and as his glance meets theirs, he knows what he has to do. He has to tell it – to find the words to turn terror into a story. It’s the only way they’ll ever break its hold.

He takes another mouthful of cider and sets down the pot. Then, drawing breath, he begins.

*Black it was.
As black as a rainstorm riding
astride the four wild winds.
And pitiless as misery.
As blank as the gap in the mind
of an absent god.*

*There were those who said
it was a cloud of corruption,*

*a miasma of vipers and maggoty dragons
too tiny to see.
Others blamed the waters.
They claimed
each wellspring, stream and river
was running with bane.
Still more cursed the courses of the stars.*

*That a pestilence wound about this land,
holding it fast in its murderous coils
there could be no doubt.
But no one knew the nature of the beast.
And thus were we blind
to its portents and warnings,
its creeping attack.*

For my part, I venture only this –

*Think of a ship that steals into port
like a thief in the night
with a cargo of death.
Think of the taut and tattered wings
of a great black bird
spreading wide across the shire
from moor to moor, from sea to sea
over the wildwood and the commons
with the clouded hills between*

*and watch it circling the fastness
of Devonshyre's granite heart
questing shelter in the valley
of the ever-restless Dart ...*

Part I

Leaf-Fall, 1348

Chapter 1

The Crow

The young horse had clearly been stuck in the bog for some time. Only its head, neck and backbone were visible above mud churned to slop. But for all its wallowing it had merely sunk deeper, and now it drooped, close to exhaustion. An occasional flickering of ears – a vain attempt to drive off flies – was all that showed it was still alive.

Tobias Hext glanced back to where his father stood on firmer ground, his horse and dog beside him.

‘Well, go on then!’ shouted John. ‘We haven’t got all day!’

The boy removed his boots and stowed them carefully on a rock. The quag would suck them off his feet in no time if he kept them on. Then he peeled off his tunic and leggings, noticing how pale his skin was. Normally it would be burnt deep brown this late in the season, but the weather had been so wet it was still ghastly white. And this mire – it too was different this year. Someone used to its ways would expect to cross it in late summer without difficulty, but almost ceaseless rain since the previous winter meant it was all but impassable.

He lifted the coil of rope crosswise over his head and shoulder. It was heavy and the bristly hemp chafed his neck. Then he took a cautious step forwards.

‘Stick to the reeds!’ his father cried as he staggered and almost fell. ‘Make your way from one clump to another – like stepping stones. Remember what I always tell you – beasts go where tussocks grow!’

Not this one, thought Tobias, glaring at the crater his foot had made in the quivering ooze. Brainless creature! It didn’t deserve to be rescued.

All the same he set out, zigzagging from one hillock to another but always heading towards the trapped animal. At a command from his master, John’s dog, Pad, stopped barking, although he still ran up and down the edge of dry ground as if on patrol. Tobias swatted at a shimmer of gnats about his head. The further into the mire he went, the wider the gaps grew between patches of vegetation. Soon it would be a case of leaping stretches of mud; then, once they’d run out altogether, crawling on his hands and knees through the stinking morass. It wasn’t a prospect he relished. But just as he was about to turn back, the colt gave a weak whinny.

‘Get off with you!’

Tobias clapped his hands, then teetered, flailing, as a nearby carrion crow flew off with a croak. So those scavengers could sense death too, he thought. Although they wouldn’t bother waiting – they’d peck the beast’s eyes out while it was still alive. His father was right. He’d have to hurry.

He wobbled on as far as he could; then, on the very last clump of sedge, he dropped to a squat. It was hard to gauge the colt’s size since much of it was hidden beneath the surface of the bog, but now he was closer it looked like a foal, born just that spring. But although its lack of bulk would make it easier to pull out, he still quailed at the task ahead. It wasn’t that he was afraid of getting stuck himself, for even

grown men could cross mires as long as they kept their weight spread. It was just that animals, wild or otherwise, didn't always appreciate when they were being helped. And he knew all too well what it was like to be under attack.

He took off the coil of rope, looped one end about the tussock and tied the other around his waist. Then he stepped out onto the mire and sank up to his shins.

'Down!' bellowed John from behind.

'I know!' Tobias muttered.

He leant forward until his knees and forearms vanished into thick, smelly sludge. The foal raised its head to watch before letting it drop. The flies settled. All was silence save for the trickling song of skylarks. Tobias wiped the sweat from his face on his shoulder and began to drag himself forward. His legs and arms were already chilled, and he was glad no one but his father could see his skinny arse in the air.

He approached the colt with caution. It looked all in but even a doomed creature could summon the spirit to fight. The main thing was to keep out of reach of its head. It wasn't just its teeth he had to avoid; the skull itself could land a hefty blow if it caught him right. So he aimed instead for the animal's flank, murmuring all the while, 'Steady there ... steady ... stea-dy ...'

Behind him Pad barked the alarm as the colt plunged and thrashed in its trap. Tobias knelt out of reach until it tired again, using the time to tie a loop in the rope. Then, when it fell still, he crawled closer.

'I won't hurt you,' he explained. 'I'm just going to slip this on you, see? It'll pull tight but you're not to fret because that's how we'll get you out of here. And then you can join the rest of your herd. You'll like that, won't you, boy? Back with your mates again. But first -'

He broke off with the effort of trying to toss the noose over the foal's lunging head. Even though he'd moved as close as he dared, it still took him several attempts. Once it was secured, the knot snug behind the animal's ears, he waited for it to quieten. The scar above his eye felt taut beneath his muddy mask, and grit cracked between his teeth.

Back on dry land he could see a new arrival: a dark bay mare trotting up and down with anxious cries. The foal renewed its whinnying and tried to lurch in her direction. Tobias cursed and slipped clear. Then, taking care to keep hold of the rope, he began to plough back through the mire. It seemed twice as far this time, first to the tussock where he untied the end and then to where John stood holding his horse's halter, but at last he reached them and struggled to his feet. His legs were shaking beneath him, no longer from fear but exertion. He was as exhausted as if he'd spent the whole day digging, and there was barely an inch of his body not plastered in mud.

'About time!' John grumbled. 'Your sister would have been twice as quick. Kat don't muck about when summat needs doing.' He took the rope and tied it to the horse's makeshift harness. 'I'll lead Oke on. You give him a slap on the rump to get him going.'

Tobias clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth and his father's horse moved forward, his hooves slipping and then gaining purchase on the choppy ground. The foal whinnied as the rope grew taut but didn't budge.

'I said to give Oke a thump! And start hauling yourself!' roared John above Pad's urgent barking. 'God's blood, just do as you're told!'

Tobias obeyed but kept his head down, afraid of what he might see if he glanced up. If the bog didn't loosen its grip, the foal's neck would snap. Or the noose might pull so tight it would choke.

'It's almost out!' cried John as Oke sprang forwards on his hocks. 'Keep going!'

There was a loud sucking sound and Tobias looked up to see the foal prone at the edge of the mire, its sides heaving. John passed him his knife and the boy picked his way down to cut it free, anxious to see if it would get up of its own accord. He was just backing away when there was a whirl of hooves and teeth and a crunching pain in his side.

'Mind its mam, you clodpoll!' John shouted as the wild-eyed mare charged between him and her foal. 'You should know better than to get on the wrong side of a female!'

Tobias sidestepped a few yards and looked down at the ring of puncture marks on his hip. There's gratitude, he thought as the mare nosed her foal to its feet.

'Talking of which,' John added, 'your mother'll have a fit if she sees you like that. You know how

she gets. Best have a dip in yon Dart and wash the worst of that cack off.'

His father looked a lot happier now, Tobias thought as he found a deep pool on the far side of the river and ducked under the surface. Saving that colt would keep the reeve, Nicholas Mundy, off their backs for a while. He was even more of a taskmaster than John in his determination to ensure that the tenants in his charge did their share of work for the Crown. Although spending half a day unstogging someone else's horse was time he and his father could ill afford now the droving season was upon them. This spell between harvest and the onset of winter, by which time all the commoners' livestock had to be off the moor, was their busiest time of year.

He was knee deep on his way back out when a welcoming bark from Pad made Tobias cover his groin with his hands. Someone was coming – and his clothes were where he'd left them, thirty yards away! But as he gazed about him in panic John laughed.

'Look at you, blushing like a maid!' he snorted. 'It's only our Petrock – though the Lord alone knows what he wants!'

Tobias glanced over to where a small figure was scuttering around the edge of the mire, then turned away with a sigh. His father might be none the wiser but it was clear to him what his brother was after.

'What do you think you're up to?' demanded John as Petrock tripped to a halt. 'You're supposed to be helping your mother get ready for the fair in Tavystoke tomorrow.'

'She sent me.' The child dared to catch his father's eye. 'She said I had to check the snares with Tobias.'

He stooped so that the excited dog might lick the fib from his lips. Tobias dried off his legs with his hose and put them on. 'But it don't take two of us to do that,' he pointed out, 'and anyhow, I need some salve for this bite first.'

'Oh, get on with you!' John snapped. 'You'll never make a farmer if you fret about every nip or scratch. Besides, you'd best do as your mam says. You don't want to be getting on the wrong side of her, not when she's so busy.'

Tobias rolled his eyes as he fastened his boots. That was rich coming from him, since it was their father, not Nell, who demanded obedience at all times. And it wasn't just his side that needed attention either – the rope had ripped the skin from his palms and they were raw and bleeding as well. But it was no use arguing, not with John Hext, so he straightened up and gave Petrock a look. 'Hurry up then,' he said. 'If you're coming.'

'You were ignoring me on purpose,' said Petrock accusingly as the brothers headed back along the river towards the woods that flanked the stretch nearest their village. 'You always do that!'

Tobias wiped his sticky palms on his hose. He was in no mood for an argument, especially not one of Petrock's which had a tendency to drag on far longer than necessary. He was like their sister, Kat, in that respect – dogged and determined to win – whereas all Tobias wanted was a quiet life. 'You always find a way to tag along,' he replied eventually. 'I get tired of it sometimes.'

'Well, I like being with you,' Petrock insisted. 'I like it when you tell me stories. About hunting and killing and that. Like when you got they two snipe with the one arrow. And the time you saw off that boar – you know, the mad, frothing one that charged you down –'

'I didn't see it off, I keep telling you. It was sheer luck that it –'

'– and though it nearly had your eye out and you couldn't see for blood, you got your knife between its ribs and you stuck it – wallop! – right in the vitals!'

'That's enough!' Tobias licked the sweat from his upper lip. It was unfortunate that the tale which most enthralled his brother was the one he was keenest to forget. 'I wish you'd stop acting like I'm some kind of hero,' he added. 'It wasn't at all how you think. You weren't there, so you don't know.' He paused. 'And don't think that story about checking the snares fools me either. I know our mam would never send you out to do that, not when there's so much to be done at home.'

Petrock stole a look over his shoulder. 'She said I had to fetch Kat home to help cook supper,' he muttered, once he was sure they were out of John's earshot. 'She's with Beatrice out over Laddretorre. They're picking whortleberries to sell tomorrow. But I'd much rather be off out with you than chasing after

a couple of girls. I reckon they'll make their own way back soon enough.' He brightened. 'Got your nets, then?' he asked, eagerly. 'I fancy a bit of hunting. There's so little wind today even a hare would be hard pushed to smell us coming!'

Tobias spread his empty hands. 'Does it look like it?' he asked. 'Besides, it's too early. We'll find nothing worth stalking this side of sundown.'

'Not so. As a matter of fact, I sprung a rabbit on my way here and I could a-bagged it too, if Mam had let me bring your bow –'

'First thing in the morning,' Tobias interrupted. 'That's when it's best to go. Before dawn.' He yawned, bored by his brother's enthusiasm. 'Dad's right, you know. She's up to her eyes in it, what with the babby and Tavystoke fair tomorrow.'

'I don't see why 'tis I got to stay at home with her and Lucy.' Petrock sneaked a glance at his brother, trying to gauge whether his grievances would receive a sympathetic hearing or not. 'I'm easily so big now as you were when you started working with Dad.'

'Hogwash!' Tobias retorted. 'You're scarcely more than a weanling!' Then, seeing Petrock was about to protest, he added, 'It's for your own good, anyhow. Don't you remember what happened to that lad last leaf-fall? You know – Hugo Gyffard over at Pontesforde?'

Petrock shrugged.

'He was no older than you and cocksure with it – so much so his father gave in and let him goad the oxen while he was ploughing,' continued Tobias. 'Almost straight off one of them tossed him and pierced him clean through the side. Gore and guts everywhere, there was.' He swallowed. 'Before they'd even got him home he'd gone and died. Give a boy a man's job and that's what can come of it, see?'

'Droving's different. No one's ever been done to death by a sheep!'

'That's as may be, but even I've only been helping these last three summers so you'll have to bide your time a while yet. You'll get your chance when you're grown. Anyway, I can't think why you're so keen to trail after a load of bony, raddle-arsed ewes all day. Dull as ditchwater it is. You'll soon get fed up of it when 'tis your –'

He broke off, narrowing his eyes, and in that moment everything around him became sharp and clear, like when he was hunting.

'What's amiss?' whispered Petrock.

Somewhere a grasshopper rattled. Tobias slapped his hand over his companion's mouth. 'I dunno. I could a-sworn – summat over there in the trees – black and all hunched over –' He waited but the only movement was the river turning in its rocky bed. At length he shook his head. 'Must a-dreamt it.' He took one more look around to make sure and wiped his palm on his tunic. 'Right. Since you came here to check snares we'd best get on with it.'

Rubbing his smarting chin, Petrock followed his brother into the shadowy woods but although they searched each of their hiding places, they straightened up for the last time empty-handed.

Petrock's face fell. 'Bread and scrape tonight,' he moaned, 'or at best bean stew. God's guts, but I'm sick of the stuff!'

Tobias took no notice. He was still looking at the final snare. There was something curious about it, for although the noose hung empty, the ground beneath it was all churned up as if a life-or-death struggle had taken place. He crouched down again, examining the muddy gouges, the smudged dint of a boot that wasn't his. Then he rose to his feet, scowling.

'Looks like there's a thief amongst us – one who steals from his neighbours' traps! As if the likes of us have got food to spare!'

'But who'd stoop to summat like that?'

Tobias kicked at an arching bramble so it concealed the noose from sight. 'No one I can think of. Besides, only we know where we hide them.' He glanced over at Petrock who was picking his nose disconsolately. 'Look, we'll be busy tomorrow, what with going to Tavystoke and all, but you can help me find new places for our snares the day after. And then maybe we could go fishing. What would your Lordship say to a nice bit of trout?'

'Will you teach me that trick of Wat's – the one where he lies flat on a rock and lulls one into his

hand and then grabs it out of the water?' His brother snatched his fingers through the air. 'Like that!'

Tobias laughed. The shepherd's patience was fabled, born of years spent out on the hills tending his flock, and as for his speed and timing, not one of the other villagers could match him. 'Takes a deal of watching and waiting, does that one – not to mention a quick hand. I doubt you could hold still long enough.'

'I can be stiller and quieter than you think. You'd be surprised!'

Tobias grinned. 'Go on then,' he said. 'Show me!'

But Petrock was blithely plunging through the woods, gabbling on and on about the monstrous silver salmon in the depths of the Dart that would one day be outwitted by him and served up for supper. So taken was he by his imagined exploits that he failed to spot a movement in the bushes, along with what sounded like a smothered snort.

Not so Tobias. There was no mistaking it this time: they were being stalked. He spun around. Yes, there they were – two of them now – squat, shadowy forms ducked down behind the stump of an oak. He felt his mouth go dry as his mind raced. They were unlikely to be wolves as those wary creatures were only hungry enough to risk venturing into the valleys in deepest winter. Nor would any wildcat worthy of the name give its whereabouts away – the sole proof he'd ever seen of their presence on the moor was the occasional clawed corpse of a newborn lamb. But a pair of bristling, foam-flecked boars? His stomach shrank. Yet such blundering beasts would never have the wit to lie low and wait ...

He was still puzzling when a gleeful face bobbed up in a tremble of leaves, a warning finger clamped over its lips. Kat – of course! Which meant the other had to be –

He felt his heart lurch against his ribs but feigned calm with a wink and a smile.

'Pet-rock!'

An insistent, whispery summons came eddying through the trees with a surge and a sigh. The younger boy hesitated.

'What were that?' he breathed.

'What were what?'

'That sound. All ghosty-like. You must a-heard it.'

'What're you on about? I never heard anything.'

Tobias sauntered on, his arms swinging at his sides. His brother wavered, then hurried after him.

'A feast for all of us there'll be,' he called, 'with plenty left over for seconds. And –'

'Pet-rock!'

He sprang forwards, clutching Tobias's tunic with quivering hands.

'There it is again! Summat's calling my name!'

'You been out too long in the sun. Seems it's baked your brains.'

'Honest, Tobias – listen!'

They stopped, and through the shifting light came a rhythmic chanting.

'Dart! ...Dart! ... Wants a heart! ...Dart! ... Dart! ... Wants a heart!'

'It's the Cry of Dart!' whimpered Petrock. 'Dart's a-coming to sweep me away! O Christ on his tree, save me!'

Cackling helplessly, first one girl and then another tumbled out of the undergrowth and onto a patch of grass. Tobias turned back, joining in their laughter, but Petrock gave a roar of fury and threw himself at the instigator, his fists flailing.

'You hussy!' he raged. 'I hate your guts, Kat, that I do!'

The culprit sat up and snatched her basket out of his reach.

'Ow! Get off, will you? You're spilling Mam's berries! Anyway, it weren't just me – Beatrice was in on it too!'

'It was her who dreamt it up though, I swear!' insisted the other, blotting her eyes with the hem of her sleeve. 'She talked me into it, lambkin – you know what she's like – she never takes no for an answer!'

Petrock pouted. 'Don't care who started it. It isn't right the two of you done that. The river spirits don't like being made fun of. Amyas told me.'

Kat tousled her already dishevelled hair with both hands, scattering bits of bark and leaf-mould in

all directions.

'You believe every word he says yet it's only one of his yarns,' she said with a sniff. 'He makes them up as he goes along – isn't that so, Tobias?'

'He never does!' cried Petrock, scandalised. 'It's a fact – if ever you hear the Cry of Dart, calling out your name, death is never far behind. Everyone knows that.' Then, observing her purple smirk, he unclenched his fists. 'But give us some whorts and we'll be even.'

'Leave off!' She smacked his hand away. 'Hours we spent picking these. I never broke my back just so's you could stuff your gob and leave our mam with nothing to sell tomorrow.'

'But you've been scoffing them!'

'Picker's rights!'

'Here, Petrock, I can spare some.' Anxious to make amends, Beatrice scooped a handful from her own basket and tipped it into his palms. 'I never ate so many as she did. I got more than enough.'

Keeping his face turned away to hide his scar, Tobias slid a sidelong glance in her direction. Not for the first time he marvelled how someone he'd known all his life could have changed overnight into this wondrous stranger, at once so familiar yet new. Each time he saw her he'd notice something different. Earlier it had been the flash of a dimple when she smiled, now how a sleight of sunlight through the leaves could magick her hair to gold. And forgetting himself he gazed at her until her eye caught his and they both looked quickly away.

'Here, let me carry that. It's a good bit heavier than Kat's.' He grabbed her basket, his cheeks burning. 'We'd best hurry, we'll be late else.'

'Race you all home!' yelled Petrock, bounding over a fallen log. 'Last one back shuts up the hens!'

A robin burst from a nearby bush with a call of alarm but in their scrambling none of them noticed. Alone amongst the trees the watcher watched, his eyes sharp, acquisitive, missing nothing. Another nug of information to store for future use. He cocked his head and listened until he was certain they were gone, then he opened his bag and stuffed the limp hare inside it.

All in all, he thought, a good day's haul.

Chapter 2

Tavystoke Fair

Kat spat on her thumb and forefinger and put out the last of the rushlights. 'Because I can't abide him, that's why!' she said. 'He's bigetty and full of himself and every time he claps eyes on me, he looks me up and down as if I were horseflesh! And it's no good your telling me he's my best friend's brother,' she continued, picking up her basket of berries and heading for the door. 'I'd sooner walk to Tavystoke with Nick Mundy's stuck-up daughters than Serlo Crake!'

'It's all right for you,' Petrock complained, hurrying after her. 'You got Beatrice to keep you company. But Serlo won't let me walk with him and Tobias on account of him thinking I'm still a bratling, and that means I'll have to walk at the back with the women and the babbies.' He made his eyes all big and beseeching, forgetting that it was too dark for his sister to appreciate his efforts. 'But if you were with me, I'm sure he'd change his mind. You know, what with him fancying you and all!'

Kat looked about her. A group of moorfolk from Woghby, the village on the opposite bank of the Dart from Hextenworth, were toiling up the hill from the bridge and greeting their neighbours with breathless shouts, but even so she couldn't be certain none of them had heard. 'I don't know what you mean!' she hissed.

Petrock grinned in what he supposed was her direction. 'Come on, Kat!' he said. 'Anyone can see Serlo's got a soft spot for you!'

'I'd hold your tongue if I were you!'

Petrock didn't need to see her face to know he'd overstepped the mark. 'Sorry!' he squeaked, wondering where she was as he backed away. 'I was just pondering out loud, that's all. But say you will, Kat, just this once!'

'No, I told you. And get off my toe!' She gave him a shove. 'Anyhow, we'll be on our way any moment.' She pointed in the direction of the track, where a group of men were holding aloft flaming torches. 'Look, there's Joss and Ned over there with their fathers,' she added. 'They're your friends. Why don't you walk with them instead?'

'I would only Old Joan Scrapefoot made them promise to carry her greenery for her – you know, sprigs and cuttings and all that.' He pulled his coat about him defensively. 'And that means walking with those geese of hers and they're proper vicious. If you so much as slow down they peck you plumb on the bum.'

Kat bit back a smile. Old Joan Scrapefoot was the local wisewoman but although she had some skill in the healing of ailments, she was seldom consulted by the sick. You only had to look at her face to see why. Constant scowling had creased it like a lump of dough, and her small eyes were as sour and black as sloes. Petrock had done well to give that grimalkin the slip.

'Well, if you want to walk with Tobias and Serlo, that's up to you,' she said, 'but you're on your own.' She cleared her throat, restoring her voice to its normal pitch as Beatrice appeared at her side and took her arm. 'Mind you go steady now,' she added, in an unconvincing show of sisterliness. 'It's easy to miss your footing in the dark.'

If living with Kat had taught him anything, it was to recognise when he was beaten, so Petrock bumbled off under his woolpack, dodging straggling clumps of women and children until he reached the men and older boys at the front.

'I like a holy day, I do,' he announced, falling into step alongside his brother and Serlo. 'I like getting out and about. It's the fourth time already I been off the moor, least that I can remember, and next spring Father's taking me to the horse fair at Brente – he so good as promised.' He watched for interest from either of them. 'I see Wat's finally tamed that colt of his,' he ventured, when none was forthcoming, 'though he's still too flighty to ride when he's herding sheep. Wat says he's minded to call him Tavy after the river. All moor water's quick, so he reckons, but yon Tavy's quickest of all. What do you two think?'

Isn't he the finest horse hereabouts?'

Tobias looked over at Serlo but the older boy loped on in silence, his heavy black cloak flapping from his shoulders.

'Seen better,' Tobias said eventually.

'He got loads of spirit,' added Petrock, scrambling to keep up. 'Amyas says he has a spark of the Devil in him – that or he's a witch transformed!'

At this Serlo flicked a glance in his direction. It was so full of contempt that Petrock found himself wondering – not for the first time – how one person could differ so from the rest of his kin. It wasn't the case in his own family where all of his siblings were sufficiently alike to look as if they belonged together. But whilst Beatrice and her mother shared a pale sort of prettiness, and even bluff Matthew was fair beneath his ruddy bloom, Serlo's hard, dark sparkle was so alien you'd wonder where it came from.

'Amyas is an old rattle-bag,' he sneered, 'who's lately got so bad he sees portents and meanings in just about everything. And as for that claptrap he calls stories –' He broke off in disgust, slinging the bundle of pelts that dangled from his fingers over his shoulder. 'He even tried to talk me into learning them a year or so ago, and how to play that whistle of his – you know, the one he always toots on before he starts his blether. What's he call it? The storytelling pipe! Well, I reckon the dotard's guessed he's not long for this world and wants to pass it all on while he can, but he picked the wrong man in me. As if I haven't got better things to do!'

'Me too!' Tobias was swift to agree. 'If he asked me to, that is.'

'Well, I think his tales are good,' insisted Petrock, almost tripping into a thorn bush in his haste to put them right. 'Proper scary some of them are. Like the one about Jack o'Lantern ... you know, him with eyes of fire what lures nightfarers into mires and gulps them down like dinner. And then there's the wild hunt, when the Devil's after fresh souls – how his hounds chase folk over the cliff to their deaths and the river runs red with blood. I tell you, even our dad looks pale after that one!'

Assured of victory he looked up, only to find they'd pulled ahead of him and he was talking to their backs. With a groan he quickened his pace, but by the time he reached them again they were deep in a different conversation.

'I tell you, Tobias, she were a right handful!' Serlo gave a furtive snigger and flexed his fingers suggestively. 'Well, two if you know what I mean. Though as long as you tell her you love her, she'll do whatever you –' He stopped short as he noticed Petrock. 'Push off, runt! This here's men's talk and not for cawbabbies like you. So run along to your mammy now, there's a good boy!'

Too breathless to protest, Petrock dumped his woolpack on the side of the track. Now all that stood between him and the real babies was Kat, and then only if she'd put up with him. But it was Beatrice, peering through the dark, who spotted him first. 'Is that you, Petrock?' she asked. 'Did you get left behind?'

'Serlo's boasting about the size of his latest catch,' he grumbled, 'and it isn't fish he's on about neither. And then he told me to get lost.'

'Never mind. Walk with us instead.' She set down her basket and helped him hoist his pack onto his back. Then, with a placatory smile at Kat, she added, 'Did Serlo tell you about his new pup? He only got him yesterday, and he's the sweetest thing – all patchetty white, brown and black. He's going to train him to hunt rats and mice so he can take him round all the farms on the moor to rid them of vermin. He reckons he'll make more than a few groats doing that.'

Kat raised an eyebrow. 'Your father must be relieved,' she said.

'What d'you mean?'

'At least he's not breaking the law this time!'

Beatrice winced, but before she could reproach her friend, Petrock piped up. 'Where'd he get him?' he asked, quite forgetting his sulk.

'Off Robert Kece up at Blakefurses. Serlo's been after one of his pups for a while. He wanted to bring him along today to give him a bit of a run but our dad said no, on account of it being too far.'

'And there I was thinking it was Robert Kece's daughter he was after!' Kat's smirk was almost audible. 'Everyone's been going on about how he sniffs around Sarah!'

Beatrice groaned. 'Oh Kat, he's done more than sniff!' she blurted. 'In truth, he's been – ' She

faltered, switching her heavy basket from one hand to the other.

Kat frowned. Though it was still too dark to see her face, it was clear Beatrice was in distress. 'What's the matter?' she coaxed. 'Serlo's not in trouble, is he?'

'He – he's been what Father Walter calls Playing The Devil's Game,' Beatrice hissed, 'and not just with Sarah Kece neither. And there's your Tobias looking up to him like he's cock of the roost and hanging onto every word he says. I do wish he weren't so thick with him, for the way my brother's going ...' She tailed off with a shake of her head.

'Serlo was bad when he was younger, I'll give you that,' Kat said. 'Like when he set fire to your mam's hen coop. And the time Old Joan Scrapefoot caught him trying to drown her cat. Lord a' Mercy, if looks could kill, he'd've dropped down stone dead! But I thought he'd sobered up as he got older.'

Beatrice shook her head. 'He's just got more cunning,' she said. 'These days he's a tongue on him so smooth as scald cream, and as for not breaking the law –' Her voice wobbled. 'I shouldn't speak ill of him, I know, us being kin and all, but if he's not careful I fear he'll end up in Court!'

'Never!' gasped Kat. 'Whatever he's done, it can't be so bad as all that!'

'I never heard tell of worse!' Beatrice pulled her companion closer. 'Though if I let you in on it, you must promise never to pass it on.'

Kat gave Beatrice's arm a reassuring squeeze. 'Upon my honour!' she declared. She gave her brother a jab in the ribs. 'You too, Petrock.'

He scowled and rubbed his side. 'Promise.'

Beatrice sighed. 'It's like this. For a while now our Serlo's been going off for whole nights at a time. Not every night but often enough, 'specially when the moon's full. And come morning he won't say where he's been – he just spends the day abed. To make matters worse, some of the men have noticed and are starting to talk. So our dad's taken to covering for him. Only yesterday I heard him saying he'd been out a-courting – "sowing his wild oats" is how he put it – but in faith, it's worse even than that for as often as not he's off poaching with Richard Rauf!'

'What – him from Bremstoute?' Kat exchanged a glance with Petrock. The Raufs were nothing but trouble, they both knew that. No good could ever come of an association with them.

Beatrice dropped her voice to a whisper. 'A week ago they turned up lugging a dead deer between them. Claimed they'd spotted it near Swyncombmete, washed up on the bank, but there was a fresh wound to its neck and its hide was warm and dry. Well, our mam and dad were beside themselves, fearing they'd been seen. In the end they helped cut it up and salt it down, to get it over and done with quick. But there'd be no end of trouble if Nick Mundy were to hear about it. He'd have them up before Court in a blinking.'

Kat shuddered despite herself. Nicholas Mundy wasn't a man to be taken lightly; in fact, he was a nasty piece of work. She'd crossed him herself once and it wasn't something she was keen to repeat.

'He'd be bound to do it, though,' said Petrock unhelpfully, 'seeing as how he's reeve.'

Kat silenced her brother with a nudge, but when she searched for words to comfort her friend, she found none. Venison was strictly reserved for the King's table, every tenant knew that, and if he were ever sent to Lydaford to stand trial, the inside of the gaol's dank and dripping walls would likely be the last thing he saw, for the guards there were in the habit of gouging out the eyes of suspected poachers years before they were found guilty or innocent.

'Still, there's no need to worry about our Tobias,' she said, as much to comfort herself as Beatrice. 'He never goes out on his own after dark. I should know – I have to put up with him farting and fidgeting all night long!'

'But he's so easy-natured and trusting,' Beatrice replied, 'whereas our Serlo is clever and sly. He could easily get Tobias mixed up in it all unbeknownst and I couldn't bear for that to happen.'

Kat seized the chance to change the subject. 'Any more talk like that and I'll start thinking you've taken a shine to my brother!' she said. She reached out and touched her companion's cheek. 'Just as I thought – you've gone red as a robin! Wait till I tell our Tob –'

'Don't you dare! Not if you ever want me to speak to you again!' Still flushed, Beatrice bent to adjust her shawl. 'I just don't want him to get into trouble. That's all there is to it, I swear.'

'I won't breathe a word,' Kat promised, wondering how soon she could get Tobias on his own.

‘Though I’d a-thought you’d fall for someone more handsome than him!’

‘He’s not ill favoured,’ said Beatrice huffily, ‘and once that mark of his fades, you’ll scarcely notice –’

‘– that his right eye’s a good inch lower than his left!’ Kat gave her friend a pitying smile. ‘Marred for life is our Tobias, and don’t you fool yourself otherwise. Mind you, I’ve heard some maids like the odd scar or two and even deem them fetching!’

‘Love-blind!’ Petrock said with a knowing grin. ‘Well and truly, I’d say!’

But Kat had slowed her step. ‘Seriously though,’ she said, ‘don’t you think our Tobias can be a bit –’ She stalled, trying to find the right word. Not long before she and Tobias had overheard their father declaring that to his way of thinking, Tobias should have been the girl and Kat the boy, her being the bolder and more venturesome of the pair, at least since Tobias’s mishap with the boar. But whilst her brother had seemingly paid no heed – she wouldn’t mind betting he’d forgotten all about it – she’d been so taken with the notion that she’d often recalled it to cheer herself whilst doing her chores. ‘A bit on the timid side at times?’

Beatrice shook the hair from her eyes. The look in them was bleak. ‘Sooner that than be like Serlo. Besides, it isn’t as if I’m in love with him!’

‘Well, I know for a fact our mam and dad would welcome your betrothal,’ announced Kat. ‘When you’re both a bit older, that is.’

But Beatrice refused to be drawn, her silence forcing Kat into a moody truce that lasted at least a mile. Petrock looked at them both and sighed. This was no more fun than walking with his mother. Then, just as he thought their journey would never end, the stars began to fade, and by the time they reached the cross on the edge of the scarp, the pale morning sky was fired with light.

As soon as the line of wayfarers stopped to rest, Kat dumped her wares at her feet. ‘There it is!’ she declared, sweeping her hand across the horizon. ‘Tavystoke in all its glory!’

At the sound of her voice a pair of crows exploded into the air, skimming the wind high above the valley and on towards the dwellings massed beyond the river Tavy. She watched them until they were black specks in the distance, then elbowed her friend with laugh.

‘You and Tobias might be happy to stay put in Hextenworth,’ she said, ‘but I’ll be as free as one of they birds and fly wherever the fancy takes me!’

‘Me too!’ cried Petrock. ‘I’ll build a boat and sail down Dart to the ocean and on to the edge of the world!’

Kat snorted. ‘Dart’s too shallow for that. You’d hit a rock and sink!’

‘I’d wait till it were in spate and ride over the top!’

‘And when you do,’ cut in Beatrice, smiling, ‘be sure to bring back a whale for supper!’ Then, noticing that the men had shouldered their packs, she picked up her basket. ‘Though in the meantime we’re off.’

With each stride they took the landscape grew softer. Fields were no longer tracts of heath scattered with granite but lush meadows watered by leisurely streams, while the wind-warped thorns and rowans of the higher ground gave way to beeches and stately elms. Even the track changed as it dropped, growing wider and filling with all kinds of folk, from prosperous merchants and gentry to leprous beggars skulking in the hope of alms. By the time they were crossing the bridge over the bristling river Tavy, the current of the crowd was so strong that Petrock clung to Beatrice’s hand, fearing he’d be swept away. Dazed by the colours, the noise, the smells after the emptiness of the moor, he gazed about him. The towering walls of the abbey looked as if they were about to topple onto his head and the hard cobblestones underfoot jarred his legs. He felt like a ghost in a story, treading an older, lower road. It was most disconcerting.

Then, as they turned the corner, they found themselves on the edge of an open space crammed with pens, tents and booths. Everywhere he looked Petrock could see livestock: hardy working ponies from the moor and fancier mounts for the rich, oxen, cattle and sheep, and squealing pigs with notched and bleeding ears. Next came rabbits cowering in crates, and ducks and chickens glaring from wooden cages. Another turn and they were passing trestle tables laden with baskets and casks of wine, finely wrought

metal ware, pots and crocks, and stacked bolts of cloth. Then there were the fortune-tellers and soothsayers, the vendors of sweetmeats and snacks, and laughing women who didn't seem to be selling anything that Petrock could see but who beckoned to every man who glanced their way.

His mother skirted a heap of rubbish that had been swept into the aisle between stalls. 'You can go where you please,' she said, herding her children together, 'so long as you promise to look after each other. No getting into mischief, mind. And beware of thieves, for crowds such as these are where they like to work best.'

'And cut-throats!' Kat drew her nail across her younger brother's windpipe. 'Lots of foreigners come to the fair and I don't just mean Cornish neither!'

'Can we have some money to watch the pageant?' Petrock asked. 'Please, Mam?'

'That or fairings,' said Nell Hext firmly. 'We can't afford both.'

'Fairings!' they chorused in return. After all, it was possible to watch most of a play for free as long as you turned your back whenever anyone holding a collecting cap wandered by. But no one was prepared to give up the chance of boughten cake. Petrock pictured a piece of gingerbread, sweetened with honey and stuck with cloves. He meant to eat his as slowly as he could so he could gloat when Kat's was gone.

His sister gave him a shake. 'Look over there, you sluggard!'

He followed her finger, gaping, as a muzzled and blinded bear lumbered past. Soon it would be baited with dogs and for a moment he pitied its fate, but then another wonder hove into view and he promptly forgot all about it, for hard on the bear's heels came tumblers, jugglers and minstrels, and a troupe of mummers in garments of every hue – gorse gold, whortleberry purple, kingfisher blue. Not rough, mud-coloured homespun like moorfolk wore.

Beatrice steered Petrock to one side so that a haberdasher could squeeze past them, his tray of goods tilting precariously. 'I could do with some pins for my sewing,' she sighed, 'and a new needle. Mine's so worn it's blunt. I wonder if our mam'll think to get some – ' She broke off and clutched at Kat's sleeve. 'Oh, surely he isn't – merciful Mary, the shame of it!'

Kat glanced around to see Serlo dodge from behind the pedlar's back, at the same time stuffing a bunch of ribbons under his tunic. Once clear, he pulled them out and waved them at the girls. 'Want some, my fair damosels?' he asked.

'No!' they cried, horrified, although Kat couldn't help thinking she might have said yes, had it been anyone else who'd done the stealing.

He tossed his head so that his fringe flopped over his eyes in a way he obviously deemed dashing. 'Suit yourselves,' he sneered. 'I'll soon find someone who does!'

'See?' Beatrice wailed as he swaggered off. 'He's past caring. I mean, what if he got caught?'

Kat hesitated, loath to upset her friend even further. 'I suppose they'd likely strike off his hand,' she admitted. 'Or maybe worse.'

'Like branding!' Petrock made a sizzling sound like meat slapped on a griddle. 'On the forehead for all to see!'

'And our family name dragged through the dirt forever,' said Beatrice despairingly. 'Folk don't forget things like that.'

'No, they don't,' Petrock agreed. 'Not when there's a stump or scar to remind them!'

He skipped out of reach as Kat aimed a surreptitious kick at his shin, but Beatrice, who was watching Serlo strike a deal with a furrier for his pelts, was oblivious to them both.

'Where's he – oh, now what's he up to?' she fretted, as he headed across the fairground, his pouch bumping against his hip. 'Sakes, Kat, I can't bear to look!'

'He's over by the tavern.' Kat was standing on tiptoe. 'There's a couple of serving girls flouncing about and he's taking the ribbons over to one of them – the more comely of the pair, of course – and he's whispering in her ear and – oh, he's given her the whole bunch! T'other don't like that one bit – look at the gob on her! And now he's kissing the first one's hand, the better to peer down the front of her – '

'No more, Kat, please!'

'– and she's pretending to push him away but you can tell she don't mean it. God's bodkins, I know exactly what your mother would say about her!' Kat's voice took on a breathy petulance, not unlike

Gaynor Crake's. 'Flaunting herself in front of my son! Well, I don't take to her at all. And as for her friend – coarse as cow-cakes she be!'

'Stop it, I beg you!'

'Lord, but your Serlo will be in trouble if Robert Kece finds out! And knowing that old soaker, he's probably just t'other side of the tavern door, swilling ale. Our dad says he gets right nasty when he's had a skinful – 'specially when it comes to his Sarah's honour!'

'Your father's a fine one to talk!' retorted Beatrice. 'Who got cided up last Candlemas and punched Simon Rauf? And then there was the time Tobias got hurt and Robin Togot laid a wager he'd never see again. It took three men to stop your dad knocking him into next week –'

'He was provoked. Both times!' Kat glanced back at Serlo and the serving wench. 'Just like Robert Kece will be when he hears about this!'

'Well, I've had enough of Serlo's antics!' Beatrice was turning to go. 'I'm off to watch the pageant with Petrock. We're supposed to be keeping an eye on him, remember?'

But Kat, on whom curiosity had a far greater pull than duty, edged closer.

'Meet with you?' The taverner's daughter was batting her eyelids at Serlo. 'But I couldn't – not unless you find a suitor for my friend.'

The would-be lover smirked. 'As it happens, I know just the lad and a fine catch he'd make for any wench!' He cupped his hands around his mouth. 'Tobias! Come here!'

At his summons Tobias hastened over. He'd missed most of Serlo's flirting, having been distracted by a bunch of urchins playing with a heap of dead rats, but now he was keen to make up for lost time. 'What can I do for you, Serlo?' he asked.

Serlo caught hold of his friend by both arms and dragged him about-turn. 'Here he is!' he declared. 'Tobias Hext, pray make the acquaintance of this fine wench who goes by the name of Tiffany!'

The girl pouted. 'But he's right ugsome with that crooked eye of his – and he's little more than a stripling! What do you take me for – a cradle-snatcher?'

Still pinioned, Tobias stared at his feet as his hero threw back his head with a loud guffaw. Reunited against this new outcast, the two serving-girls joined in until a small but furious demon forced its way between them.

'Leave him be!' snarled Kat. 'He can't help the way he looks!'

Serlo laughed even louder. 'Lord a' mercy, Tobias, has it come to this – that you let that spitfire of a sister of yours fight your battles for you? I must say, I had higher hopes of you than that, you gutless, milk-blooded sop!'

Tobias struggled free, his cheeks prickling. Trust Kat to make matters worse! Instinctively he found himself looking for Beatrice, fearful that she too had witnessed his humiliation or worse still, assumed he'd been party to Serlo's plan – egged him on even. But the crowds between them had grown bigger and she hadn't noticed. Crushed yet at the same time relieved, he elbowed his way through the mass of fair-goers to stand a pace or two behind her; then, taking advantage of the press of people, he inched forwards until his nose was almost touching the back of her head, his mortification melting in the nearness of her.

Beatrice put her hand to her nape and glanced over her shoulder. 'Oh, Tobias, it's you! You're making my neck tickle!'

Her neck. He gazed at it stupidly. He should say something, but what? That it was the fairest he'd ever seen? Or how much he longed to kiss it? But what if she didn't feel the same way? After all, that other girl had found him repulsive. Mute with confusion, he rubbed his scar as if by wishing he could magic it away. A wink, he decided at last: a sultry yet nonchalant wink that would signal his interest yet wouldn't seem too eager. But by the time he'd made up his mind she was pointing out something to Petrock and he was left staring at her hair.

A familiar snigger sounded in his ear. 'You'd have to put up with Gaynor as your mother-in-law!'

He swung around and grabbed hold of Kat's wrist, appalled that she'd somehow discovered his secret.

'You look chop-fallen, Tobias,' she said, 'though I can't think why. It's plain for all to see you're

smitten!' Kat was clearly relishing his renewed discomfiture as he dragged her out of Beatrice's hearing. 'Though you're in luck for she's taken with you too – she as good as told me.'

Tobias glared into eyes that were bright with laughter. He had no way of knowing whether she was telling the truth, nor what he should do next. Although admitting his passion was out of the question: Kat would never let him live it down; in fact, she'd blab about it to anyone who'd listen. So until he had an inkling of how Beatrice felt in return, he'd no choice but to play it safe.

'I don't know what you're on about,' he snapped, 'but if you so much as squeak a word of this to anyone, that's me and you finished for good! And the next time Serlo's up to his foolery and you feel like sticking your nose in, do me a favour and don't!'

The last reds and golds of evening were draining from the sky by the time the weary band of tenants wound its way down the track towards Hextenworth. As the familiar scattering of dwellings came into view, Nell Hext wrapped her one free arm around the baby slung against her chest and heaved a contented sigh. They were a comforting sight after the hurly-burly of Tavystoke – sleepy and peaceful, like sheep drowsing before the gathering night.

'The Lord's looked kindly upon us,' she told the infant as their neighbours from Woghby took their leave and headed towards the river. 'We've earned money enough to pay this quarter's rent and buy all the salt we need for the cull. And that means we should have meat to see us through winter which is a lot to be thankful for, my sweet.'

But baby Lucy didn't stir, her face in repose as sober as a pope's. Nell rubbed her cheek against her velvety head, then searched for someone more responsive with whom to share her pleasure. 'How about you, Gaynor?' she asked her neighbour. 'Did you manage to sell all they whorts your Beatrice picked? I swear she had half as many again as our Kat.'

Gaynor Crake raised a hand to hush her friend. Despite having gossiped the whole journey home, she'd still noticed her husband Matthew's surly expression and the silence setting him apart from his market-merry friends, and now he was off to one side muttering with their son, she was determined to hear what was going on.

'A fine tell I had with Robin and Peter,' Matthew was saying. 'Full of tales they were, about you and some trollop you met at the tavern!'

Serlo, who was already angry at having to return home instead of staying late at the fair, stood his ground. 'Her name's Cysley,' he scowled, 'and she's not a trollop either – in fact, she's the maid I'll take to wife!'

'Not another one!' Matthew was close to boiling over. 'And just how do you suppose I'm to look Robert Kece in the face next time we meet, what with everyone expecting a handfasting between you and that maid of his?'

Serlo gave a nasty laugh. 'Sarah's no maid,' he said, 'and I never made her no pledge. As if I'd marry a slack-witted slut like that! Besides, with that cock-eye of hers she's more suited to Tobias. They'd make a matching pair!'

'Maybe she's not the most comely of girls,' admitted Beatrice in a troubled voice, 'but I know Sarah and she's a warm-hearted soul. And since you've sullied her good name, it's only proper you should put things right. I'm sure if you went cap-in-hand to Robert Kece first thing in the morning –'

'Over my dead body! My mind's made up. It's Cysley I'll wed and when her old man croaks his last, I'll take over his inn and run it as me own!' He threw their horse's rein at his father and turned on his heel. 'And if you don't like it, you can kiss my blind-cheeks!'

'Seems he's given up on rat-catching already,' whispered Kat to Tobias, 'though it's maybe as well if Tavystoke's anything to go by. There were dead rats all over the place. Looks like summat there's killing them off, don't you think?'

'It's him who's the rat around here!' snapped Tobias, still smarting at Serlo's jibe. 'Though he'd better hope Robert Kece don't get his hands on him any time soon. I shouldn't like to think what he'd do to him if he got the chance!'

But Kat was no longer listening. 'Hush!' she said, looking stricken.

‘I don’t understand it,’ Gaynor was complaining. ‘He’s that handsome, is my Serlo, he could have his pick of any of the maids round here.’ Her gaze slid irresistibly towards her departing son. ‘To tell you the truth, Nell, I’d half hoped he and Kat might be betrothed one day, to join our families together and make us kin. With her on his arm he’d soon forget that vixen in Tavystoke, not to mention the Kece girl. What do you think? Would you and John be agreeable?’

Nell hesitated, anxious not to cause offence. ‘Nothing would give us more pleasure,’ she began, turning her back on her glowering daughter so as not to be put off, ‘but if Serlo’s been seeing Sarah Kece, I doubt it would be proper. Besides, she’s nowhere near wife-old, is Kat, and even if she were, I can’t put my hand on my heart and say they’d be well-suited. I mean, she can be a right heller at times, you’ve said so yourself. And as for your Serlo –’

‘Though there’s more than one way to skin a cat!’ The subject of their deliberations could no longer hold her tongue. ‘For a start, there’s Beatrice and – ow!’

Tobias flashed a smile at Gaynor. ‘What she means is, Matthew and you are godsibb to Petrock and Lucy,’ he explained, grinding his heel hard into Kat’s foot, ‘and that makes our families kinsfolk in God’s eyes. So it’s safe to say the job’s been done already!’