

## Prologue

We hanged him in front of Kingsbridge Cathedral. It is the usual place for executions. After all, if you can't kill a man in front of God's face you probably shouldn't kill him at all.

The sheriff brought him up from the dungeon below the Guild Hall, hands tied behind his back. He walked upright, his pale face defiant, fearless.

The crowd jeered at him and cursed him. He seemed not to see them. But he saw me. Our eyes met, and in that momentary exchange of looks there was a lifetime.

*I was responsible for his death, and he knew it.*

I had been hunting him for decades. He was a bomber who would have killed half the rulers of our country, including most of the royal family, all in one act of bloodthirsty savagery – if I had not stopped him.

I have spent my life tracking such would-be murderers, and a lot of them have been executed – not just hanged but drawn and quartered, the more terrible death reserved for the worst offenders.

Yes, I have done this many times: watched a man die knowing that I, more than anyone else, had brought him to his just but dreadful punishment. I did it for my country, which is dear to me; for my sovereign, whom I serve; and for something else, a principle, the belief that a person has the right to make up his own mind about God.

*He was the last of many men I sent to hell, but he made me think of the first . . .*

# Part One

1558

# I

NED WILLARD CAME HOME to Kingsbridge in a snowstorm.

He sailed upstream from Combe Harbour in the cabin of a slow barge loaded with cloth from Antwerp and wine from Bordeaux. When he reckoned the boat was at last nearing Kingsbridge, he wrapped his French cloak more tightly around his shoulders, pulled the hood over his ears, stepped out onto the open deck, and looked ahead.

At first he was disappointed: all he could see was falling snow. But his longing for a sight of the city was like an ache, and he stared into the flurries, hoping. After a while his wish was granted, and the storm began to lift. A surprise patch of blue sky appeared. Gazing over the tops of the surrounding trees, he saw the tower of the cathedral – four hundred and five feet high, as every Kingsbridge Grammar School pupil knew. The stone angel that watched over the city from the top of the spire had snow edging her wings today, turning the tips of her feathers from dove-grey to bright white. As he looked, a momentary sunbeam struck the statue and gleamed off the snow, like a benison; then the storm closed in again and she was lost from view.

He saw nothing except trees for a while, but his imagination was full. He was about to be reunited with his mother after an absence of a year. He would not tell her how much he had missed her, for a man should be independent and self-sufficient at the age of eighteen.

But most of all he had missed Margery. He had fallen for her, with catastrophic timing, a few weeks before leaving Kingsbridge to spend a year in Calais, the English-ruled port on the north coast of France. Since childhood he had known and liked the mischievous, intelligent daughter of Sir Reginald Fitzgerald. When she grew up, her impishness had taken on a new allure, so that he found himself staring at her in church, his mouth dry and his breath shallow. He had hesitated to do more than stare, for she was three years younger than he, but she knew no such inhibitions. They had kissed in the Kingsbridge graveyard, behind the concealing bulk of the tomb of Prior Philip, the monk who had commissioned the cathedral

four centuries ago. There had been nothing childish about their long, passionate kiss: then she had laughed and run away.

But she kissed him again the next day. And on the evening before he left for France they admitted that they loved one another.

For the first few weeks they exchanged love letters. They had not told their parents of their feelings – it seemed too soon – so they could not write openly, but Ned confided in his older brother, Barney, who became their intermediary. Then Barney left Kingsbridge and went to Seville. Margery, too, had an older brother, Rollo; but she did not trust him the way Ned trusted Barney. And so the correspondence ended.

The lack of communication made little difference to Ned's feelings. He knew what people said about young love, and he examined himself constantly, waiting for his emotions to change; but they did not. After a few weeks in Calais, his cousin Thérèse made it clear that she adored him and was willing to do pretty much anything he liked to prove it, but Ned was hardly tempted. He reflected on this with some surprise, for he had never before passed up the chance of kissing a pretty girl with nice breasts.

However, something else was bothering him now. After rejecting Thérèse, he had felt confident that his feelings for Margery would not alter while he was away; but now he asked himself what would happen when he saw her. Would Margery in the flesh be as enchanting as she seemed in his memory? Would his love survive the reunion?

And what about her? A year was a long time for a girl of fourteen – fifteen now, of course, but still. Perhaps her feelings had faded after the letters stopped. She might have kissed someone else behind the tomb of Prior Philip. Ned would be horribly disappointed if she had become indifferent to him. And even if she still loved him, would the real Ned live up to her golden remembrance?

The storm eased again, and he saw that the barge was passing through the western suburbs of Kingsbridge. On both banks were the workshops of industries that used a lot of water: dyeing, fulling of cloth, papermaking and meat slaughtering. Because these processes could be smelly, the west was the low-rent neighbourhood.

Ahead, Leper Island came into view. The name was old: there had been no lepers here for centuries. At the near end of the island was Caris's Hospital, founded by the nun who had saved the city during the Black Death. As the barge drew closer Ned was able to see, beyond the hospital, the graceful twin curves of Merthin's Bridge, connecting the island to the mainland north and south. The love story of Caris and Merthin was part of

local legend, passed from one generation to the next around winter fireplaces.

The barge eased into a berth on the crowded waterfront. The city seemed not to have altered much in a year. Places such as Kingsbridge changed only slowly, Ned supposed: cathedrals and bridges and hospitals were built to last.

He had a satchel slung over his shoulder, and now the captain of the barge handed him his only other luggage: a small wooden trunk containing a few clothes, a pair of pistols and some books. He hefted the box, took his leave, and stepped onto the dock.

He turned towards the large stone-built waterside warehouse that was his family's business headquarters, but when he had gone only a few steps, he heard a familiar Scots voice say: 'Well, if it isn't our Ned. Welcome home!'

The speaker was Janet Fife, his mother's housekeeper. Ned smiled broadly, glad to see her.

'I was just buying a fish for your mother's dinner,' she said. Janet was so thin she might have been made of sticks, but she loved to feed people. 'You shall have some, too.' She ran a fond eye over him. 'You've changed,' she said. 'Your face seems thinner, but your shoulders are broader. Did your Aunt Blanche feed you properly?'

'She did, but Uncle Dick set me to shovelling rocks.'

'That's no work for a scholar.'

'I didn't mind.'

Janet raised her voice. 'Malcolm, Malcolm, look who's here!'

Malcolm was Janet's husband and the Willard family's groom. He came limping across the dockside: he had been kicked by a horse years ago when he was young and inexperienced. He shook Ned's hand warmly and said: 'Old Acorn died.'

'He was my brother's favourite horse.' Ned hid a smile: it was just like Malcolm to give news of the animals before the humans. 'Is my mother well?'

'The mistress is in fine fettle, thanks be to God,' Malcolm said. 'And so was your brother, last we heard – he's not a great writer, and it takes a month or two for letters to get here from Spain. Let me help with your luggage, young Ned.'

Ned did not want to go home immediately. He had another plan. 'Would you carry my box to the house?' he said to Malcolm. On the spur of the moment he invented a cover story. 'Tell them I'm going into the

cathedral to give thanks for a safe journey, and I'll come home right afterwards.'

'Very good.'

Malcolm limped off and Ned followed more slowly, enjoying the familiar sight of buildings he had grown up with. The snow was still falling lightly. The roofs were all white, but the streets were busy with people and carts, and underfoot there was only slush. Ned passed the notorious White Horse tavern, scene of regular Saturday-night fights, and walked uphill on the main street to the cathedral square. He passed the bishop's palace and paused for a nostalgic moment outside the Grammar School. Through its narrow, pointed windows he could see lamplit bookshelves. There he had learned to read and count, to know when to fight and when to run away, and to be flogged with a bundle of birch twigs without crying.

On the south side of the cathedral was the priory. Since King Henry VIII had dissolved the monasteries, Kingsbridge Priory had fallen into sad disrepair, with holed roofs, teetering walls and vegetation growing through windows. The buildings were now owned by the current mayor, Margery's father, Sir Reginald Fitzgerald, but he had done nothing with them.

Happily the cathedral was well maintained, and stood as tall and strong as ever, the stone symbol of the living city. Ned stepped through the great west door into the nave. He would thank God for a safe journey and thereby turn the lie he had told Malcolm into a truth.

As always, the church was a place of business as well as worship: Friar Murdo had a tray of vials of earth from Palestine, guaranteed to be genuine; a man Ned did not recognize offered hot stones to warm your hands for a penny; and Puss Lovejoy, shivering in a red dress, was selling what she always sold.

Ned looked at the ribs of the vaulting, like the arms of a crowd of people all reaching up to heaven. Whenever he came into this place he thought of the men and women who had built it. Many of them were commemorated in *Timothy's Book*, a history of the priory that was studied in the school: the masons Tom Builder and his stepson, Jack; Prior Philip; Merthin Fitzgerald, who, as well as the bridge, had put up the central tower; and all the quarrymen, mortar women, carpenters and glaziers, ordinary people who had done an extraordinary thing, risen above their humble circumstances and created something eternally beautiful.

Ned knelt before the altar for a minute. A safe journey was something to be thankful for. Even on the short crossing from France to England, ships could get into trouble and people could die.

But he did not linger. His next stop was Margery's house.

On the north side of the cathedral square, opposite the bishop's palace, was the Bell Inn, and, next to that, a new house was going up. It was on land that had belonged to the priory, so Ned guessed Margery's father was building. It was going to be impressive, Ned saw, with bay windows and many chimneys: it would be the grandest house in Kingsbridge.

He continued up the main street to the crossroads. Margery's current home stood on one corner, across the road from the Guild Hall. Although not as imposing as the new place promised to be, it was a big timber-framed building occupying an acre of the priciest land in town.

Ned paused on the doorstep. He had been looking forward to this moment for a year but, now that it had come, he found his heart full of apprehension.

He knocked.

The door was opened by an elderly maid, Naomi, who invited him into the great hall. Naomi had known Ned all his life, but she looked troubled, as if he were a dubious stranger; and, when he asked for Margery, Naomi said she would go and see.

Ned looked at the painting of Christ on the cross that hung over the fireplace. In Kingsbridge there were two kinds of picture: Bible scenes and formal portraits of noblemen. In wealthy French homes Ned had been surprised to see paintings of pagan gods such as Venus and Bacchus, shown in fantastic forests, wearing robes that always seemed to be falling off.

But here there was something unusual. On the wall opposite the crucifixion was a map of Kingsbridge. Ned had never seen such a thing, and he studied it with interest. It clearly showed the town divided into four by the main street, running north–south, and the high street running east–west. The cathedral and the former priory occupied the south-east quarter; the malodorous industrial neighbourhood the south-west. All the churches were marked and some of the houses too, including the Fitzgeralds' and the Willards'. The river formed the eastern border of the town, then turned like a dog's leg. It had once formed the southern border too, but the town had extended over the water, thanks to Merthin's bridge, and there was now a big suburb on the far bank.

The two pictures represented Margery's parents, Ned noted: her father, the politician, would have hung the map; and her mother, the devout Catholic, the crucifixion.

It was not Margery who came into the great hall but her brother, Rollo. He was taller than Ned, and good-looking, with black hair. Ned and Rollo

had been at school together, but they had never been friends: Rollo was four years older. Rollo had been the cleverest boy in the school, and had been put in charge of the younger pupils; but Ned had refused to regard him as a master and had never accepted his authority. To make matters worse, it had soon become clear that Ned was going to be at least as clever as Rollo. There had been quarrels and fights until Rollo went away to study at Kingsbridge College, Oxford.

Ned tried to hide his dislike and suppress his irritation. He said politely: 'I see there's a building site next to the Bell. Is your father putting up a new house?'

'Yes. This place is rather old-fashioned.'

'Business must be good at Combe.' Sir Reginald was Receiver of Customs at Combe Harbour. It was a lucrative post, granted to him by Mary Tudor when she became queen, as a reward for his support.

Rollo said: 'So, you're back from Calais. How was it?'

'I learned a lot. My father built a pier and warehouse there, managed by my Uncle Dick.' Edmund, Ned's father had died ten years ago, and his mother had run the business ever since. 'We ship English iron ore, tin and lead from Combe Harbour to Calais, and from there it's sold all over Europe.' The Calais operation was the foundation of the Willard family business.

'How has the war affected it?' England was at war with France, but Rollo's concern was transparently fake. In truth he relished the danger to the Willard fortune.

Ned downplayed it. 'Calais is well defended,' he said, sounding more confident than he felt. 'It's surrounded by forts that have protected it ever since it became part of England two hundred years ago.' He ran out of patience. 'Is Margery at home?'

'Do you have a reason to see her?'

It was a rude question, but Ned pretended not to notice. He opened his satchel. 'I brought her a present from France,' he said. He took out a length of shimmering lavender silk, carefully folded. 'I think the colour will suit her.'

'She won't want to see you.'

Ned frowned. What was this? 'I'm quite sure she will.'

'I can't imagine why.'

Ned chose his words carefully. 'I admire your sister, Rollo, and I believe she is fond of me.'

'You're going to find that things have changed while you've been away, young Ned,' said Rollo condescendingly.

Ned did not take this seriously. He thought Rollo was just being slyly malicious. 'All the same, please ask her.'

Rollo smiled, and that worried Ned, for it was the smile he had worn when he had permission to flog one of the younger pupils at the school.

Rollo said: 'Margery is engaged to be married.'

'What?' Ned stared at him, feeling shocked and hurt, as if he had been clubbed from behind. He had not been sure what to expect, but he had not dreamed of this.

Rollo just looked back, smiling.

Ned said the first thing that came into his head. 'Who to?'

'She is going to marry Viscount Shiring.'

Ned said: 'Bart?' That was incredible. Of all the young men in the county, the slow-witted, humourless Bart Shiring was the least likely to capture Margery's heart. The prospect that he would one day be the earl of Shiring might have been enough for many girls – but not for Margery, Ned was sure.

Or, at least, he would have been sure a year ago.

He said: 'Are you making this up?'

It was a foolish question, he realized immediately. Rollo could be crafty and spiteful, but not stupid: he would not invent such a story, for fear of looking foolish when the truth came out.

Rollo shrugged. 'The engagement will be announced tomorrow at the earl's banquet.'

Tomorrow was the twelfth day of Christmas. If the earl of Shiring was having a celebration, it was certain that Ned's family had been invited. So Ned would be there to hear the announcement, if Rollo was telling the truth.

'Does she love him?' Ned blurted out.

Rollo was not expecting that question, and it was his turn to be startled. 'I don't see why I should discuss that with you.'

His equivocation made Ned suspect that the answer was No. 'Why do you look so shifty?'

Rollo bridled. 'You'd better go, before I feel obliged to thrash you the way I used to.'

'We're not in school any longer,' Ned said. 'You might be surprised by which of us gets thrashed.' He wanted to fight Rollo, and he was angry enough not to care whether he would win.

But Rollo was more circumspect. He walked to the door and held it open. 'Goodbye,' he said.

Ned hesitated. He did not want to go without seeing Margery. If he had known where her room was he might have run up the stairs. But he would look stupid opening bedroom doors at random in someone else's house.

He picked up the silk and put it back in his satchel. 'This isn't the last word,' he said. 'You can't keep her locked away for long. I will speak to her.'

Rollo ignored that, and stood patiently at the door.

Ned itched to punch Rollo, but suppressed the urge with an effort: they were men now, and he could not start a fight with so little provocation. He felt outmanoeuvred. He hesitated for a long moment. He could not think what to do.

So he went out.

Rollo said: 'Don't hurry back.'

Ned walked the short distance down the main street to the house where he had been born.

The Willard place was opposite the west front of the cathedral. It had been enlarged, over the years, with haphazard extensions, and now it sprawled untidily over several thousand square feet. But it was comfortable, with massive fireplaces, a large dining room for convivial meals, and good feather beds. The place was home to Alice Willard and her two sons plus Grandma, the mother of Ned's late father.

Ned went in and found his mother in the front parlour, which she used as an office when not at the waterfront warehouse. She leaped up from her chair at the writing table and hugged and kissed him. She was heavier than she had been a year ago, he saw right away; but he decided not to say so.

He looked around. The room had not changed. Her favourite painting was there, a picture of Christ and the adulteress surrounded by a crowd of hypocritical Pharisees who wanted to stone her to death. Alice liked to quote Jesus: 'He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her.' It was also an erotic picture, for the woman's breasts were exposed, a sight that had at one time given young Ned vivid dreams.

He looked out of the parlour window across the market square to the elegant façade of the great church, with its long lines of lancet windows and pointed arches. It had been there every day of his life: only the sky above it changed with the seasons. It gave him a vague but powerful sense of reassurance. People were born and died, cities could rise and fall, wars began and ended, but Kingsbridge Cathedral would last until the Day of Judgement.

'So you went into the cathedral to give thanks,' she said. 'You're a good boy.'

He could not deceive her. 'I went to the Fitzgerald house as well,' he said. He saw a brief look of disappointment flash across her face, and he said: 'I hope you don't mind that I went there first.'

'A little,' she admitted. 'But I should remember what it's like to be young and in love.'

She was forty-eight. After Edmund died, everyone had said she should marry again, and little Ned, eight years old, had been terrified that he would get a cruel stepfather. But she had been a widow for ten years now, and he guessed she would stay single.

Ned said: 'Rollo told me that Margery is going to marry Bart Shiring.'

'Oh, dear. I was afraid of that. Poor Ned. I'm so sorry.'

'Why does her father have the right to tell her who to marry?'

'Fathers expect some degree of control. Your father and I didn't have to worry about that. I never had a daughter . . . who lived.'

Ned knew that. His mother had given birth to two girls before Barney. Ned was familiar with the two little tombstones in the graveyard on the north side of Kingsbridge Cathedral.

He said: 'A woman has to love her husband. You wouldn't have forced a daughter to marry a brute like Bart.'

'No, I suppose I wouldn't.'

'What is wrong with those people?'

'Sir Reginald believes in hierarchies and authority. As mayor, he thinks an alderman's job is to make decisions and then enforce them. When your father was mayor he said that aldermen should rule the town by serving it.'

Ned said impatiently: 'That sounds like two ways of looking at the same thing.'

'It's not, though,' said his mother. 'It's two different worlds.'

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'I WILL NOT marry Bart Shiring!' said Margery Fitzgerald to her mother.

Margery was upset and angry. For twelve months she had been waiting for Ned to return, thinking about him every day, longing to see his wry smile and golden-brown eyes; and now she had learned, from the servants, that he was back in Kingsbridge, and he had come to the house, but they had not told her, and he had gone away! She was furious at her family for deceiving her, and she wept with frustration.

'I'm not asking you to marry Viscount Shiring today,' said Lady Jane. 'Just go and talk to him.'

They were in Margery's bedroom. In one corner was a prie-dieu, a