

## **A PLUNDER OF SOULS, book III of the Thieftaker Chronicles**

**By D. B. Jackson**

### **Chapter 1**

*Boston, Province of Massachusetts Bay, July 13, 1769*

Ethan Kaille knew that he was followed. Like a fox running before hounds, he sensed Sephira Pryce's tongs bearing down on him, snarling like curs, determined to rob him of spoils he had claimed as his own.

Even as the men closed on him, he himself pursued a thief who had stolen a pair of ivory-handled dueling pistols from a wealthy attorney in the South End. His quarry, Peter Salter, led him out along Boston's Neck, the narrow strip of land that connected the city to the causeway across Roxbury Flats. British regulars had established a guard post at the town gate, and so before reaching the end of the Neck the young thief turned off of Orange Street to cut across the barren leas that fronted the flats. Ethan could see the pup ahead of him, wading through the grasses.

The western horizon still glowed with the dying light of another sweltering summer day, and a thin haze shrouded the quarter moon and obscured all but the brightest stars in a darkening sky. Not a breath of wind stirred the humid air, heavy with the sour stink of tidal mud; even with the sun down, the heat remained unabated. The city itself seemed to be in the throes of ague.

Ethan's sweat-soaked linen shirt clung to his skin, and his waistcoat, also darkened with

sweat, felt leaden. His usual limp grew more pronounced with each step he took, the pain radiating up his leg into his groin. He hoped that the sound of his uneven gait wouldn't alert Salter to his pursuit, or allow Sephira's men to locate him too soon.

If not for the concealment spell Ethan had cast, making himself invisible to all, Sephira's toughs might have spotted him from a distance, and Salter would have needed only to glance back to see him. Still, Pryce's men dogged him, whether directed by his tracks or by Sephira's uncanny knowledge of all that he did, Ethan could not say.

Ahead, the young thief slowed, then halted. He surveyed the ground before him, turning a slow circle. After a few seconds of this he let out a soft cry and strode forward with greater certainty, taking three or four steps before stopping again and dropping to his knees.

Ethan crept after him, placing his feet with the care of a deer hunter, and drawing his blade with a whisper of steel against leather. He could barely see Salter, who was hunched over, no doubt digging up the goods he had stolen. The pup was of average height and build -- much like Ethan -- but he had a reputation as an accomplished street fighter. If Ethan could avoid a fight he would. He knew, though, that the chances of this were slim.

He continued to ease toward the man, but as he drew within a few yards, his bad foot caught on a clump of grass and he stumbled. He managed not to fall, but at the sound Salter leapt to his feet.

"Who's there?" he called, brandishing a flint-lock pistol.

Ethan cursed under his breath. Since the beginning of the city's occupation by British troops the previous autumn, it seemed that every man in Boston had taken to carrying a firearm. Every man but him. He scanned the ground at his feet and thought he could see a rock or clump

of dirt just in front of him. He squatted, wrapped his fist around what turned out to be a stone, and tossed it a few feet to his left.

It rustled the grass and landed with a low thump. Salter pivoted with lightning speed and fired off a blind shot. The report of the pistol echoed across the Neck.

Seeing no one there, the pup blinked once and let the hand holding his weapon drop to his side. Before the thief could do more, Ethan launched himself at him, covering the distance between them in three quick strides and driving his shoulder into Salter's gut. As they toppled to the ground, the pup flailed at him, using the butt of his pistol as a cudgel against Ethan's back. But Ethan had the advantage. With Salter pinned to the ground beneath him, he hammered his fist into the man's jaw once, and a second time. A third blow left the pup addled and unable to fight back.

Ethan rolled off of him and flexed his right hand. His knuckles ached. He took Salter's pistol, which lay on the ground beside them, and tossed it beyond the lad's reach. The weapon would have to be reloaded before it could be fired a second time, but Ethan didn't wish to be hit with it again. He picked up his tricorn hat, brushed a bit of dirt off of it and set it back on his head. Seeing that a thin trickle of blood ran from Salter's mouth over his chin, Ethan whispered a spell.

*"Fini velamentum ex cruore evocatum."* End concealment, conjured from blood.

His spell thrummed in the ground beneath him, deep and resonant, and the air around them sang with power. A ghost appeared beside him, like a flame suddenly igniting atop a candle. The spirit, which glowed with the deep russet hue of a newly risen moon, was the shade of an old warrior, dressed in chain mail, his tabard emblazoned with the leopards of the ancient

Plantagenet kings, his expression as hard and cold as a sword blade. Ethan called the ghost Uncle Reg, after his mother's waspish brother, though he didn't know for certain where in his family tree the man would have been located when he lived. So far as Ethan knew, his name wasn't actually Reg, either.

The ghost was a guardian of the power-laden realm between the world of the living and the domain of the dead. Without him, Ethan could not conjure. Reg regarded Ethan with bright, gleaming eyes, appearing annoyed at having been disturbed from whatever it was he did when Ethan did not conjure. Seconds later, he faded from view.

As the concealment spell Ethan had cast wore off, Salter stirred. He squeezed his eyes shut, opened them again. After a few seconds he tried to push himself up, but Ethan laid the edge of his blade against the pup's throat. Salter stiffened, his eyes going wide.

"Easy, lad. You wouldn't want my hand to slip."

"Who are you?" the pup asked, staring up at him.

"My name is Ethan Kaille. I was hired by Andrew Ellis to retrieve the dueling pistols you pinched from his home."

"I didn't--"

Ethan pressed the knife against Salter's neck and shook his head. "Don't lie to me, lad. I haven't much time, and I've even less patience."

Salter swallowed.

"You've buried the pistols here, isn't that right?"

The pup hesitated before nodding.

"You intended to sell them tonight? At the Crow's Nest, perhaps?"

“How did you--?”

“It’s not exactly a new approach to thieving.”

Salter scowled. “Well, it works for me.”

“You mean it has worked, up until now.”

The scowl remained on the pup’s face, but he said nothing.

“You’re in a bit of trouble, Peter.”

“From you?” Salter asked, sounding incredulous despite the knife at his throat.

“Aye, from me. And also from Sephira Pryce. She and her men are on their way here now.”

At that, the thief tried to sit up once more. Ethan pushed him back down and tapped the edge of his blade against Salter’s throat.

“For now at least,” he said, “you still have more to fear from me than from her.”

“But if she finds me, she’ll kill me.”

“She might. I can protect you, but I’ll need some help in return.”

Salter laughed, high and desperate. “How can you protect me from Pryce? I’ve yet to meet anyone who’s a match for her and her men.”

“You’d be surprised,” Ethan said. “I’ve dealt with Sephira for many years, and she hasn’t killed me yet.” He didn’t bother to mention that several years before she had killed one thief Ethan tried to protect, or that just the previous fall, one of her men had slit the throat of another, though Ethan managed to save this second man’s life. “Now, listen to me. If we work together, you’ll survive the night, and I’ll be paid what I’m owed by Mr. Ellis.”

“And what about the pistols I pinched?” Salter asked.

“Those have been forfeit from the moment I learned your name.”

The pup’s mouth twisted sourly. “So, you’re a thieftaker, too.”

“Aye.”

Salter narrowed his eyes. “Where did you come from, Kaille? Tonight, I mean. I didn’t see you before; not until I came to.”

Ethan glanced toward the spot where Salter had been digging. “What are the pistols in?” he asked. “A box?”

Salter continued to stare at him. “I’ve heard of your kind,” he said, his voice hushed. “You’re a witch, aren’t you? That’s how you crept up on me, and how you managed to knock me down without getting yourself shot.”

Conjurers didn’t think of themselves as witches. Witchcraft was the stuff of myth and nightmare, a term used by those who possessed no spellmaking abilities to explain powers they didn’t understand. Conjuring, on the other hand, was real. Nevertheless, the better part of a century after the tragic executions of twenty men and women in nearby Salem, so-called witches were still put to death in the Province of Massachusetts Bay. Ethan had hoped to finish this encounter without having to admit to Salter that he was a conjurer -- a speller, as his kind were known in the streets of Boston.

“What are the pistols in, Peter?” he asked, hoping to change the subject. He should have known that wouldn’t work.

“I’d wager Miss Pryce would be interested to know that about you. It might be worth some money . . .” He trailed off, his new-found confidence wilting in the face of Ethan’s laughter.

“She knows, lad. How do you think I’ve survived as her rival all these years? How do you think you’re going to survive the night?” He paused, allowing the words to sink in. “Now, the pistols?”

Salter didn’t respond at first, and Ethan had to bite down on his tongue to keep from hurrying him. A year ago he wouldn’t have feared a confrontation with Sephira. Yes, she was deadly, not to mention brilliant and beautiful. But he was far from defenseless. He could cut his arm to draw blood for conjurings, or he could use the grass growing around them to fuel spell after spell. Sephira’s men were as dangerous with their fists as they were with blades and pistols, but Ethan’s spellmaking was more than a match for them.

In the past year, however, Sephira had added a conjurer to her retinue of toughs. The man, a Portuguese spellmaker named Gaspar Mariz, had claimed Ethan as a friend after Ethan saved his life. But he still worked for Sephira, and Ethan had no doubt that he would follow any orders she gave him. With a conjurer in Sephira’s employ, Ethan’s one advantage over the Empress of the South End was gone.

Ethan heard voices coming from the direction of Orange Street. He gazed into the darkness for a second before facing Salter again. “Now, Peter. The pistols.”

“They’re in a sack,” the thief finally said. “Burlap.”

Ethan nodded. “Good. Quickly then, here’s what we have to do.”

He explained his plan, making every effort to be succinct.

For several moments after he had finished, Salter gaped at him. “That might be the most idiotic thing I’ve ever heard,” the lad said.

“Aye, but it will work.”

“All right,” Salter said. “Let me up and I’ll retrieve the pistols.”

Ethan read a different intent in the pup’s eyes and tone of voice.

“You do that, lad. And remember as you dig that with my . . . my witchery, I can turn you into a human torch with no more than a thought.”

Salter licked his lips and nodded, the defiance Ethan had seen in his eyes vanishing as quickly as it had come.

Ethan removed his knife from the lad’s throat and watched, wary and alert, as Salter resumed his digging and retrieved the burlap sack.

Sooner than Ethan would have thought possible, Sephira and her men emerged from the gloaming. She led them, and notwithstanding the dim light, Ethan could see that she looked as lovely as ever. Black curls cascaded down her back and framed a face that was as flawless as it was deceitful. She wore her usual attire: black breeches, a white silk shirt opened at the neck, and a waistcoat that hugged her curves like a zealous lover. Behind her strode Nigel, yellow-haired with a long, horselike face; Nap, dark-eyed, lithe, watchful; Gordon, hulking, ginger-haired, and homely; and Afton, as huge and ugly as Gordon. Mariz brought up the rear, appearing tiny beside the others, a knife poised over his bared forearm should he need to cut himself for a conjuring.

Nigel and Nap held pistols and kept them aimed at Ethan.

“Whatever you’re doing, stop it,” Sephira said, a note of command in her throaty voice.

Salter darted a nervous gaze Ethan’s way.

Sephira halted a few paces short of the hole Salter had managed to dig. “So good to see you again, Ethan.”

“I wish I could say the same.”

She pouted. "I would have thought you were expecting me. You know how I feel about you working for men as wealthy as Ellis."

"Aye, and you know how little I care."

Her expression hardened and she turned to Salter. "I take it this is our thief?"

The pup said nothing.

"Peter Salter," Ethan said. "He was just digging up the pistols for me."

Sephira's smile was dazzling. "I think you mean to say he was digging them up for me."

Ethan glared at her. "Ellis hired me, Sephira. That may nettle, but it's the truth."

"Yes, and you know as well as I how little that truth is worth. When I return the pistols to him, he won't care who he hired. He'll pay me the balance of your fee -- no doubt less than my services would have commanded, but I'm sure a substantial amount nevertheless -- and he won't give you a second thought." She reached out her hand toward Salter and nodded toward the mud-stained sack he held. "Give me that."

Salter looked at Ethan again.

Ethan grabbed the sack from him. "These are mine to give to Ellis. And that payment will be mine as well."

"I don't think so," Sephira said, her tone glacial. "Nigel."

Nigel and Nap turned their weapons on Salter. The thief stumbled back a step.

"Give me the pistols, Ethan, or he dies."

Ethan drew his knife once more. Mariz shook his head, his own blade still hovering over his arm.

"Do not try it, Kaille," the conjurer said, the words thick with his accent.

Sephira smiled again. “You see, Ethan? Even your witchery isn’t enough to save you anymore.” Her expression turned stony. “My patience has limits. Give them to me.”

Reluctantly, Ethan stepped forward and handed her the sack, her cool hand brushing his.

“Very good,” she purred.

“There’s enough grass around us for me to kill every one of you, Sephira,” Ethan said, his voice tight. “You’ve got what you wanted. Now leave.”

“Salter--”

Ethan shook his head. “You’re not to touch him.”

“Ellis won’t be happy.”

“I don’t give a damn.”

She smirked. “You’re too tenderhearted for your own good. You know that, don’t you?”

“Just go,” he said.

She continued to eye him, and Ethan wondered if she would make an attempt on the pup’s life, or on Ethan’s. But at last she nodded once to her men, and started to lead them away.

“My thanks, Ethan,” she said, holding up the burlap sack, but not bothering to look back at him. “It’s always a pleasure to do business with you.”

Ethan didn’t deign to answer. He and Salter watched as she and the toughs receded into the darkness. Only when they were beyond hearing did Ethan say, “That was well done, lad.”

“What do we do now?” Salter asked. “Before long, she’ll look in that sack and realize what you’ve done.”

Ethan retrieved Mr. Ellis’s dueling pistols from where they lay in the hole, brushing off the dirt and grass with which he and Salter had covered them in their haste. As an afterthought,

he also retrieved Salter's weapon.

"That's mine," the pup said.

"It was." Ethan glanced back to make certain Sephira hadn't decided to come back and kill them both after all. "Sephira is my problem, Peter. You're to leave Boston, never to return."

"But Boston is--"

"Your home," Ethan finished for him. He had heard similar protests from thieves in the past. He preferred to let them go free when he could. He had spent too many years as a convict to take lightly the notion of sending a young man to prison over a few baubles. "Aye, I'm sure it is," he said. "But you forfeited your right to remain here when you decided to do your thieving in the home of a wealthy man. Either you leave, or I'll place you in the custody of Sheriff Greenleaf. He's likely to be far less gentle with you than I've been. Or, if you like, I can leave you to Sephira and her men. As you say, it won't be long before she realizes that she's carrying your dirt-filled shoes instead of these ivory-handled pistols."

"Can I go back to my room and gather my things?" the pup asked. "Can I try to find another pair of shoes?"

"You can. But I assure you, Sephira knows where you live."

"How? Why? She doesn't know anything about me, at least she didn't before tonight."

Ethan sympathized with the pup. How many times had Sephira bested him by somehow knowing his every movement, his constant whereabouts? "Believe me, I understand. But she knows now who you are, and your room will be the first place she looks for you."

Salter's expression curdled. "So, I'm supposed to walk out of the city and across the causeway wearing nothing on my feet?"

Ethan grinned. "Be glad I caught you in July rather than January."

The pup didn't appear to find much humor in this. He nodded toward the pistols. "How much is he paying you to retrieve those?"

"Three pounds," Ethan said.

"I could have sold them for twice as much. Maybe more."

"Aye," Ethan said. "I'm sure you could have." After a moment's consideration, he tossed Salter's pistol to the lad before turning away and starting the long walk back to the home of Andrew Ellis. "But," he called over his shoulder, "they're not yours to sell."

## Chapter 2

Unfortunately for Ethan, Andrew Ellis's estate on Winter Street stood almost within sight of Sephira's mansion, which was located at the south end of Summer Street. Ethan had known since the day he took on this inquiry that it would be even harder than usual to keep Sephira from interfering with his search for the pistols, simply by dint of how close she lived to the client. But still -- whether out of bravery or foolishness he couldn't say for sure -- he had accepted the job anyway.

He made his way from the Neck along the unpaved lane that fronted Boston's Common, rather than following Orange Street back toward the South End. This allowed him to approach Ellis's house from the west, rather than the east. If Sephira and her toughs were searching for him, he would see them coming.

As he walked he felt the power of a spell hum in the road. At first he wondered if it was Mariz, perhaps casting a finding spell in an attempt to locate him. But in the next instant he realized that the spell had come from farther off. If he had to guess, he would have said that it came from the South End waterfront. He wondered if old Gavin Black, a sea captain and conjurer who had lived in the city for years, was casting spells. Or if perhaps there was a new conjurer in Boston. His eyes trained eastward, he walked on.

The Ellis house, an imposing brick structure with a semicircular white portico in front, and a sloping lawn bounded by rich gardens, stood on the north side of Winter, halfway between the Common and Marlborough Street. Candlelight glowed in the windows; a warm breeze

rustled the leaves of large elms growing in the yard, and Whip-poor-wills sang overhead. Ethan followed a flagstone path to the door, glancing toward the street, and listening for Sephira and her men. Upon reaching the door, he rapped once with the brass lion's-head knocker. After a short wait, the door opened to reveal an African servant wearing a white silk shirt and cravat, pale blue breeches, and a matching waistcoat.

The man regarded him with an expression that bespoke, in equal parts, indifference and disapproval. It occurred to Ethan that his clothes must look rumpled and filthy from his struggle with Salter, although as usual, the thought came to him too late to rectify the matter.

"Ethan Kaille to see Mister Ellis," he said, hoping he sounded more dignified than he appeared.

The servant looked him up and down once more. "A moment please." He started to walk away, but stopped and glanced at Ethan again, seeming concerned that Ethan might enter the house. Or rob it. "Wait here," he said, and shut the door.

Ethan did not have to wait long. The door opened a second time, revealing the bulky figure of Andrew Ellis. He was dressed in a green silk suit with matching coat, breeches, and waistcoat -- a ditto suit as such sets were known. A pair of spectacles sat perched on his crooked nose. His hair was powdered and pulled back in a plait, accentuating his steep forehead and dark, wide-set eyes.

"Mister Kaille," he said sounding surprised to see him. "To what do I--?"

Ethan held up the dueling pistols, one in each hand.

A smile split the attorney's face. "You've found them!"

"Aye, sir."

Ellis took the weapons from him and started to walk back into the house, examining the pistols as he did. "Come in, come in," he said over his shoulder, almost as an afterthought.

Ethan removed his hat, closed the door, and followed his client through the foyer and a large sitting room into a smaller study, the walls of which were lined with bookshelves. The house smelled of bayberry -- no spermaceti candles for a man of Ellis's means -- and some kind of savory stew. The aroma made Ethan's stomach rumble.

Ellis stopped in front of a writing desk on which burned an oil lamp, and eyed his weapons more closely. He brushed a small clump of dirt from one of the barrels, but then straightened and nodded.

"Well, these seem to have come through their ordeal relatively well." Facing Ethan once more, he asked, "What can you tell me about the thief?"

"His name is Peter Salter, sir."

"Salter," Ellis repeated. "I've never heard of him."

"I would have been surprised if you had, sir. He's a street tough, a pup with little sense and even less ambition. But he won't trouble you again."

He hoped that this would satisfy Ellis. He assumed that, like most of the men who hired him, the attorney would want to see the thief dealt with harshly. Ethan felt certain that Salter would leave Boston rather than risk Sephira's wrath or Sheriff Greenleaf's hard justice. He was less sure that the pup would manage to stay out of trouble in whatever town he settled in next, but that was not his concern. He had endured nearly fourteen years as a convict, and he had seen what Sephira did to the thieves who crossed her path. Salter was a fool and a ruffian; he was often in the streets on Pope's Day, brawling with the North End gangs. But Ethan couldn't bring

himself to destroy the pup's life over a pair of dueling pistols. He hoped Salter wouldn't be so careless as to allow Sephira and her men to find him.

"Very well," Ellis said. He pulled a small pouch from a drawer in his desk. "I paid you fifteen shillings when I hired you. I believe that leaves me owing you two pounds and five."

Ethan nodded. "Aye, that's my recollection as well."

The attorney counted out the coins, piling them carefully on the desk. When he finished, rather than picking up the coins and handing them to Ethan, he backed away from the desk, said, "There you are, Mister Kaille," and gestured for Ethan to take them himself.

Ethan thought this odd, to say the least. But after a moment's hesitation, he crossed to the desk. "Thank you, sir," he said, taking his payment and pocketing the money without bothering to count it.

"I hope that I will not require the services of a thieftaker in the future," Ellis said, facing Ethan. "Once was quite enough." A hint of amusement flickered in his features. "But if ever I should, I will not hesitate to engage you again."

"I'm grateful to you, sir."

Ellis led him from the study, back toward the front foyer. "Of course. If the opportunity arises, I'll recommend you to my friends and colleagues as well."

They reached the door, and Ellis pulled it open. Ethan proffered a hand, but the attorney looked down at it, wrinkling his nose. "I think not, Mister Kaille. Forgive me. But with the smallpox broken out in the city, I feel it best that we part with but a civil word."

Ethan dropped his hand. "I understand, sir. In that case I'll wish you a good evening and be on my way."

He replaced his hat and started down the path back toward Winter Street.

“You think me overly cautious,” Ellis called to him.

Ethan stopped, turned. “No, sir. But I fear that even such precautions as these won’t save us from infection if this outbreak is anything like those of Sixty-one or Sixty-four.”

Ellis walked out onto the portico, eyes wide with alarm. “Do you think it will be as bad as that?”

“I don’t know,” Ethan said.

“I pray it won’t.”

“We all do, sir. Goodnight.” Ethan started away again.

“Goodnight, Mister Kaille.”

He walked some distance with his head down, his eyes fixed on the street. The only light came from the moon and stars overhead, and from candles burning inside the homes that lined the lane.

So, had it not been for the soft scrape of a boot on cobblestone, Ethan would have had no warning at all. As it was, he barely had time to grab for his blade and push up his sleeve before hearing several sets of footsteps converging on him. *Sephira’s men*, he had time to think. *Mariz will be with them.*

He had but an instant to decide whether he was in greater danger from the conjurer or from Nigel, Nap, and the other toughs. He slashed at his arm.

“*Tegimen ex cruore evocatum*,” he said under his breath. Warding, conjured from blood. The conjuring rumbled in the cobblestones; his feet tingled with it. Uncle Reg winked into view next to him, his bright eyes avid, his brow furrowed.

Rough, powerful hands took hold of him, pinning his arms to his sides. One of Sephira's men tore his blade from his grasp. He struggled to break free and retrieve it, but to no avail. Nigel loomed before him, huge, teeth bared in a harsh grin. The tough hit him in the jaw, his fist as solid and heavy as a brick. Ethan tasted blood; his vision blurred.

*Ignis ex cruore evocatus!* Fire, conjured from blood! He recited the conjuring in his mind, using the blood in his mouth to fuel the spell. Power pulsed a second time.

Nigel staggered back, as did Gordon and Afton, who had been holding his arms and now lost their grip on him. But no flames appeared.

"They are warded, Kaille," Mariz said from the darkness. "We all are."

"What do you want, Sephira?" Ethan asked, ignoring the other conjurer.

"I want those pistols," she said. "I wasn't amused by that little deception of yours."

"Ellis has his pistols."

"In which case, you have his money. I'll take that, instead."

Ethan shook his head. "I don't think you will."

In spite of himself, Ethan had always enjoyed the sound of Sephira's laughter. It was throaty, like her voice, and unrestrained. Too often, though, it was directed at him. As it was now.

"How do you propose to stop us?" Sephira asked. "Mariz has rendered your magick harmless. Do you honestly believe you can fight off all of my men?"

She had a point.

"So much effort for two pounds," Ethan said, stalling now, wracking his brain for some way to escape with his nose unbroken and his hard-earned coin still in his pocket. "One would think you have one foot in the Almshouse."

“The money is of no concern. Surely you understand that, Ethan. But I don’t want you thinking that you can get away with such antics in the future. Shoes for pistols? You should know better.”

Ethan opened his mouth to respond, but as he did, he saw something flash in front of him and off a bit to the right. It took him a second to realize that it was one of the lenses of Mariz’s spectacles catching the candle glow from a nearby house.

An idea came to him.

“Are you listening to me?” Sephira asked, sounding angry.

“Of course I am. What was it you said?”

He bit down hard on his cheek, drawing blood again.

*Velamentum ex cruore evocatum*, he recited silently. Concealment, conjured from blood.

The spell thrummed, like the string of a harp. Reg grinned at Ethan.

“What did you do, Kaille?” asked Mariz, who, as the lone conjurer among Sephira’s men, was the one person other than Ethan who could have felt the spell.

But by the time the words crossed Mariz’s lips, Ethan was already moving. He stooped, grabbed his blade, and while still in a crouch, ran forward past Nigel and straight toward the other conjurer. He kept his shoulder lowered and barreled into the man, knocking him off his feet. Mariz grunted as he sprawled onto the street; his knife clattered across the cobblestones.

Ethan stumbled, but righted himself, a hand holding his hat in place, and ran on. He veered left and right, knowing that his spell would keep Sephira’s men from seeing him, but that his footsteps would give them some idea of where he was.

A shot rang out, echoing across the lane. A bullet whistled past, too close for comfort.

Reaching Marlborough street, Ethan turned left. He could hear Sephira's men pursuing him, and already his limp was growing more pronounced, his bad leg screaming. Still he ran, turning off of Marlborough at the next narrow lane and cutting down across Bishop's Alley and into d'Acosta's Pasture, a broad expanse of grazing land. Cows eyed him as he passed, his footfalls now muffled by the grass.

He emerged from the lea onto Joliffe's Lane, and from there followed back streets through the Cornhill section of the city. By the time he drew near to the Dowsing Rod, the tavern on Sudbury Street that he frequented, he felt reasonably sure that Sephira and her toughs had broken off their pursuit. Even Sephira would think twice before stepping into a crowded tavern and hauling Ethan off for a beating. He wasn't so foolish as to think that his escape would settle matters in any way; Sephira had a good memory and held tight to her grudges. But for tonight at least, he was safe.

He grinned in the darkness. Victories over Sephira were about as rare as audiences with His Majesty the King; he wanted to savor this one. He had money in his pocket, and his spirits were so high that not even the sight of British regulars patrolling the streets of the city were enough to dampen them.

Nevertheless, as he passed the regulars, still concealed by his conjuring, he slowed, so as not to give himself away with a false step or the jangling of the coins in his pocket. He turned a corner and halted, the scene before him like cold water on his mood.

A torch burned in a sconce mounted on one of the houses near the intersection of Hanover and Treamount Streets, next door to the Orange Tree tavern and just a stone's throw from the Dowsing Rod. And beside the torch, a red flag rose and fell lazily in the soft breeze

blowing in off Boston Harbor. A man stood outside the house, leaning against one of the iron posts that lined the street.

The red uniforms of the soldiers hadn't darkened Ethan's mood, but that red flag was a different matter. Smallpox. That was what it signified. The distemper had come to this residence, and those inside had chosen to remain in their home rather than be removed to the hospital in New Boston.

The flag was a warning, a symbol of infection, of quarantine. *Within this house dwells pestilence,* it said. *Fever, scarring, perhaps even death. These reside here now. Enter at your own risk.* And if the red cloth wasn't warning enough, the guard out front was there to keep away the concerned and the curious. No one could enter or leave, save a physician.

The flag had been up for several days now, but it still made Ethan's blood turn cold each time he saw it. He feared for Kannice Lester, who owned the Dowsing Rod, and who had been his lover for more than five years. He feared for those who frequented her tavern and who worked for her. And yes, he feared for himself. Smallpox was no trifle. The outbreak of 1764 had killed well over a hundred people, and those who were sickened but survived bore terrible scars on their faces and bodies. The practice of inoculating people against the distemper had proved somewhat effective, but it was an expensive process, one that few other than Boston's wealthiest families could afford. And many remained leery of the science cited by physicians; using the disease to fight the disease seemed to make little sense. Despite advances in controlling the distemper, every person in the city lived in fear of another epidemic. Many fled to the countryside at the first report of an outbreak. He had known people to refuse newspapers, food, and other goods, out of fear that they carried infection. Andrew Ellis's unwillingness to shake his

hand, or even place coins in his palm was more typical than he cared to admit. If more red flags appeared in the city, panic would set in.

Sobered, Ethan continued on to the tavern. Kannice, he knew, would be careful. But what if one or more of her patrons was less vigilant? If he had known a spell to ward Kannice and himself against the distemper, he would have cast it, but he wasn't sure such conjurings even existed.

Reaching the Dowser, he slipped into a narrow alley between two buildings. There he cut himself again and removed the concealment spell. Once he could be seen again, he returned to the main avenue and entered the tavern.

Upon stepping inside, he was greeted by the familiar din of laughter and conversations, and a melange of aromas: musty ale and savory stew, pipe smoke and freshly baked bread, and underlying it all, the faint, pungent smell of dozens of spermaceti candles. In spite of the apprehension that had gripped him upon seeing that red flag, he smiled, only to wince at the pain in his jaw from where Nigel had hit him. In his desperation to get away from Sephira, he had forgotten to heal himself. He considered retreating to the alley to cast another spell, but even as the thought came to him, the Dowsing Rod's massive barkeep, Kelf Fingarin, caught his eye, grinned, and held up an empty tankard, a question in his eyes.

He would heal himself later. He nodded and crossed to the bar.

"Good evenin', Ethan," said Kelf, speaking so quickly that his words ran together into what would sound to most like an incomprehensible jumble.

"Well met, Kelf." Ethan placed a half shilling on the bar as the barman set the tankard -- now full -- in front of him.

“That’s the Kent Pale.”

“My thanks.”

“Diver’s in his usual spot,” Kelf said. He gestured toward the kitchen. “And Kannice is in back, workin’ on another batch of the chowder.”

Ethan sipped his ale. “I’ll be with Diver. She’ll find me eventually. She always does.”

Kelf winked, already grabbing a tankard for another patron.

Ethan wended his way to the back of the great room, slipping past knots of wharfmen and laborers, and tables crowded with men drinking Madeira wine and eating oysters. A few people looked up as he went by; fewer still met his glance or offered any sort of greeting.

More than twenty years ago, he had been convicted of taking part in the *Ruby Blade* mutiny and sent to the island of Barbados to toil on a sugar plantation. The conditions had been brutal -- unbearable heat, food that was barely edible, sleeping quarters that were little more than jail cells crowded with vermin-infested pallets. A stray blow from another prisoner’s cane knife wounded his left foot; the resulting infection nearly killed him. The plantation surgeons removed three of his toes, and thus saved his life. But that was the least of what he lost during his fourteen years as a convict. His pride, his first and greatest love, the future he once had imagined for himself: all of this and more he left in the cane fields.

After enduring those conditions for fourteen years, he earned his freedom, returning to Boston in the spring of 1760. He soon established himself as a thieftaker of some minor renown here in the city. But those who remembered the *Ruby Blade* affair and Ethan’s role in it, still regarded him with suspicion. Others who were too young to know anything of the *Blade* took their cues from those around them. And still others, who cared not a whit about Ethan’s past as a

mutineer, might have heard rumors of his conjuring talents, and so shunned him because he was a “witch.”

Whatever the reason, Ethan had few friends here in the Dowser, and not many more beyond its walls. On the other hand, those he did consider his friends, he trusted with his life.

Among them, Diver -- Devren Jervis -- was the one who had known him longest. Diver was younger than Ethan by several years and though he was now in his early thirties, he still looked as youthful as he had nine years before, when Ethan returned to Boston from the Caribbean and almost immediately ran into Diver on Long Wharf.

At first, Ethan hadn't recognized his young friend; Diver had been but a boy when Ethan was convicted. But Diver recognized him right off, and greeted him as he might a blood brother. For Ethan, it was one of the few bright moments in an otherwise difficult transition back to life as a free man.

With his unruly dark hair, his dark eyes, and a roguish smile, Diver was seldom without a girl on his arm. For years it had seemed to Ethan that it was a different girl every fortnight. But for many months now, since the previous autumn, Diver had been with the same woman: Deborah Crane, an attractive redhead who lived in Cornhill, near Diver's room on Pudding Lane. The two of them sat together at a small table near the back wall of the Dowser. Seeing them engrossed in conversation, their eyes locked, their heads close together, her hand in his, Ethan faltered.

Instead, he found another empty table, also at the rear of the room, and sat with his back to the wall, looking out over the tavern and sipping his ale. A short while later, Kelf walked back into the kitchen, and emerged again with Kannice, an enormous tureen of fish stew, or chowder,

as Boston's residents had taken to calling it, held between them. Ethan saw Kelf whisper something to Kannice. She looked up, searching the room. After a few seconds, she spotted him and they they shared a smile. Just as quickly, her attention was back on her patrons and their empty bowls. She began to ladle out the chowder, saying something that made the men around her laugh.

Kannice was younger than Ethan by some ten years: a willowy beauty with auburn hair and periwinkle blue eyes. She once had been married, to a man who died of smallpox during the outbreak of 1761. She inherited the Dowsing Rod from him, and though barely more than a girl, managed to transform the tavern from a shabby, run-down haven for petty criminals and whores into a respectable public house that turned a tidy profit. She had a simple set of rules: Anyone was welcome in the tavern, so long as they refrained from fighting, whoring, or discussing matters that were likely to lead to a brawl. With Kelf behind the bar, implacable, as immense as a mountain, she had little trouble enforcing her decrees, though in truth, Ethan had met few men who would dare defy her and thus earn one of her legendary tongue-lashings. Kannice was as savvy as any merchant in the city, and as clever as Samuel Adams and his fellow Whigs. She also had a sharp wit and could tell stories that would make the most hardened sailor blush to the tips of his ears.

She loved Ethan, and had suggested with ever greater frequency that perhaps the time had come for him to join her in running the Dowser.

"You could live with me," she had said, the last time they discussed the matter, a few nights before. "We would share in the work and the profits, and you wouldn't have to worry about Sephira Pryce and her ruffians anymore."

It was never easy to say no to Kannice, and it was particularly difficult when she was resting on top of him, her smooth skin against his, her silken hair shining with candlelight.

“That’s a generous offer,” Ethan had said, taking care with his choice of words.

She smiled down at him. “But you’re going to refuse it anyway.”

“I’m a thieftaker, Kannice. It’s what I do.”

“Maybe. But you can’t do it forever,” she said. “Sephira can hire new toughs when the ones she has now grow too old. You’re on your own.”

“You’re saying I’m old?”

She ran her fingers through the hair at his temples, which had long since turned gray.

“You’re seasoned.”

Ethan laughed. “And you have a silver tongue.”

“Think about it?” she said, a plea in the words. “For me?”

He kissed her. “I will. For you.”

They both knew that he would have done just about anything for her, except he would not marry her -- after losing his betrothed when he was imprisoned, he had vowed never to wed -- and he could not yet bring himself to give up his work as a thieftaker. Of course he hated contending with Sephira at every turn, and looking over his shoulder for Nigel and her other toughs each time he ventured out into the streets. And it was true: He couldn’t do this forever. He would be forty-three in October, and there were mornings when he felt every year in his bones and aching muscles. Odd as it seemed, though, he enjoyed thieftaking. The challenge of each new inquiry, the pursuit of those who had done wrong, even the danger -- he found all of it intoxicating. In his heart, he knew that any other profession would bore him.

Kannice glanced up from the bowl she was filling and saw that he still watched her. Her cheeks colored, even as her lips curved upward again. After a moment though, her brow creased and she reached a hand up to her jaw. She had noticed the bruising on his face. Ethan mirrored the gesture and gave a small shrug. Kannice shook her head, though with a touch of humor in her eyes.

“Are you trying to avoid us?” Diver’s voice.

Ethan turned. Diver and Deborah had halted a pace or two shy of where he sat.

“Not at all,” Ethan said. He stood and indicated the empty chairs at his table with an open hand. “Sit. Please.

Deborah took the chair to Ethan’s left. Once she was seated, Ethan and Diver sat across from each other.

“I didn’t wish to disturb you,” Ethan said. “You appeared to be deep in conversation.”

She cast a look Diver’s way. Diver’s face turned red.

“That was kind of you,” Deborah said.

And at the same time, Diver said, “We weren’t talking about anything important.”

They looked at each other. Diver smiled; Deborah didn’t.

“You didn’t think it was important?” she asked.

Diver’s face fell. “I meant it wasn’t so important that he couldn’t have joined us. Of course it was imp--”

“You tell me if you think this is important, Mister Kaille. Derrey is thinking of asking the Selectmen to appoint him as watch on one of the infected houses.”

“Pat Daily and Ed Baker are doing it,” Diver added quickly. “They’re making good

money at it, too. Three shillings and four for each of them. That's per day," he said, glancing at Deborah. "I was making less than half that at the wharf. And with these non-importation agreements in place, a cove can't even make that much."

"Maybe," Deborah said. "But at the wharf you don't run the risk of being infected with smallpox." She faced Ethan, looking very young and very pretty. "Don't you agree, Mister Kaille?"

"It's Ethan," he told her, as he had several times before. "And I'm afraid I can't agree with you entirely. Diver risks infection each time he leaves his room. All of us do."

"But surely he would be in far greater peril were he to stand watch outside a house that had been visited with the distemper. Won't you even agree with that?"

Ethan chanced a brief look at his friend, who sat with his hands folded and resting on the table, his eyes downcast.

"I'm not sure I want to answer, Deborah," he said, meeting her gaze once more. "This is a matter for you and Diver to decide. I've no part in it."

Her expression turned cold. "I see." She cast a glance Diver's way, her lips pressed thin. "In that case, I don't have more to say to either of you. You should do as you please, Derrey. I believe you intended to anyway."

She pushed back from the table and stood. Ethan and Diver both jumped to their feet, but she didn't appear to notice. She walked to the tavern door without a backward glance and strode out into the night.

Diver stared after her, his mouth open in a small "o." Once the door had closed behind Deborah, he turned to Ethan. "What should I do?"

“You should probably go after her.”

“And should I tell her I won’t take the job?”

“That’s for you to decide. I can’t help you.”

“I need the money, Ethan. There’s little work to be had on the waterfront right now.

“I know.”

Diver stared at the door, a pained expression on his face. “I’m not very good at this.”

Ethan schooled his features. A year ago, this would have been the moment when Diver threw up his hands in frustration and moved on to the next girl. Deborah had changed him, and Ethan was glad. It seemed his friend was finally becoming an adult.

“You’re better at it than you think,” Ethan said. “Go on. If you don’t catch up with her soon, she’ll really be angry.”

A weak smile flickered across the younger man’s face. “Right. Goodnight.”

“Good luck.”

Ethan sat again, caught Kelf’s eye and held up a finger. The barman nodded and reached for another tankard.

Long after Kelf brought him the second ale, Ethan continued to sit and gaze out over the throng of customers. The Dowser was more crowded than usual this night, which was surprising with word of the distemper spreading through the city. But at last, as the hour grew late, the crowd began to thin.

Kannice made her way to Ethan’s table, her cheeks flushed, wisps of loose hair falling over her forehead. Reaching him, she stooped and kissed him lightly on the lips. Her breath smelled of Irish whiskey, as it often did after a long night in the tavern, and her hair smelled of

lavender.

“I see you’ve managed again to hit someone’s fist with your jaw,” she said, taking Deborah’s seat. She grinned to soften the jibe.

“Aye,” Ethan said, smiling as well. “I gave his knuckles quite a beating.”

“And who was this unfortunate soul?” Before Ethan could reply, she held up a hand. “No, wait. Let me guess. The yellow-haired one.”

“Nigel. Very good.”

She scrutinized the bruise, grimacing as she did. “Can I do anything?”

“I’ll heal it later.”

Kannice took his hand in both of hers. “You know, I was here all night, working. So was Kelf. And neither of us was hit even once.”

“Well, obviously you weren’t doing it right.”

Kannice laughed, throwing her head back.

Ethan dug into his pocket, pulled out the coins Ellis had given him, and placed them on the table in front of her.

Her eyebrows went up.

“My jaw will be fine by morning,” Ethan said. “And meanwhile I have this to show for my labors. And my bruises.”

“It could have been worse.”

“I passed the Tyler house on the way here. The flag is still out, and a man is standing watch on the street -- a friend of Diver’s, I think. I don’t need Sephira and her brutes to make things worse.”

“I know that but--”

“Let it be, Kannice.”

She nodded, her gaze fixed on their intertwined fingers. “Deborah looked unhappy when she left.”

“Aye. Diver wants to ask the Selectmen to put him on the watch.”

“To guard a quarantined house?” Kannice asked.

“Aye. And she doesn’t like the idea.”

“I can’t say that I blame her.”

“It pays well,” Ethan said. “And every job carries some risk.” She started to object, but he raised a finger stopping her. “Even running a tavern. There are fewer regulars in the city now, but remember how worried you were when the occupation began. If General Gage had chosen to billet his men in Boston’s publick houses, it might have put you out of business.”

He saw that she wanted to argue. They both knew, though, that he was right.

“It’s not quite the same,” she said after a brief silence.

“No, but a man has to make a living.”

“I know.” She pushed herself up out of her chair. “I’ve a bit more to do in the kitchen.”

She canted her head to the side, candlelight in her eyes. “You’re staying the night?”

“You don’t mind sharing your bed with a bruised old man?”

“Not any more than I did last night.”

He grinned. “In that case, I’ll stay.”

“Good.” She started back toward the bar before facing him again. “If you find yourself without anything to do, you can join us in back. There are a few dozen bowls that need

cleaning.”

He lifted his tankard. “I’ll be working on this, I think.”

“Aye, I’m sure you will.”

### Chapter 3

Ethan slept fitfully, awakened several times by what he thought were pulses of conjuring power shuddering in the walls of Kannice's tavern. He couldn't tell if the spells were real or if he had dreamed them, but imagined or not, they troubled his sleep. He woke for good early the next day. He had expected to slumber through much of the morning -- it had been late when he and Kannice finally went to sleep, and he was exhausted from his recent inquiry. But though he did not feel refreshed when he woke, he could not fall asleep again. He lay still, not wishing to wake Kannice. And his thoughts churned.

For all of his certainty about not wanting to give up thieftaking, he also knew that jobs were harder to come by now than they had been as recently as a year before. The arrival of British troops in the city had frightened away some of Boston's less desirable citizens. And, of course, Sephira had used every tool at her disposal to take the lioness's share of those clients who still required the services of a thieftaker. Despite Ethan's success the previous evening, he knew that his prospects were not good. Before Ellis hired him, he had gone two months without conducting an inquiry. Now that this one was finished, he wondered when he would be hired again.

He could live for some time on the coin Ellis had paid him, but he owed a month's rent to Henry Daal, the cooper from whom he let a room, and would owe him again come the middle of July. He didn't dare express his concerns to Kannice, lest she take this confidence as a sign that he was thinking of leaving Henry's shop to come live and work with her in the Dowser.

It occurred to him that he, too, could earn some coin watching a quarantined house. He couldn't ward himself against smallpox, but if Pat Daily and Ed Baker managed to take on these duties without being afflicted, so could he. Were it not for Diver's determination to secure one of the appointments, Ethan might have tried. But there weren't many watch postings available, and Diver needed the money more than Ethan did. For now, at least.

*Work will come*, he told himself. *It always does*. The king's army had not driven away every thief in Boston, and Ethan was not willing to concede every client to Sephira. He needed only to remain patient.

On this thought, he swung himself out of bed, taking care to make no noise. He dressed, let himself out of Kannice's room, and descended the stairs to the tavern's great room.

There, he walked back into the kitchen and took some bread and butter from Kannice's larder. He dropped a few pence in the bar till, and took a seat at the nearest table. He was just finishing his piece of bread when Kannice descended the stairs, dressed, her face still puffy with sleep.

"I'm sorry," Ethan said. "I tried to be quiet."

"You were. I just can tell when you're gone. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. Restless."

She nodded. "I can make you something. There's bacon, or a bit of last night's chowder."

He shook his head. "My thanks, but no."

Kannice narrowed her eyes. "You paid for that, didn't you?"

"Of course."

"Ethan--"

Before she could say more -- no doubt about how she didn't like to take his money -- there came a knock on the tavern door.

They shared a look.

"Kelf?" Ethan asked.

"It's too early for Kelf."

He thought back on his encounter with Sephira Pryce the night before. It wasn't like her to knock, but again, she was never one to limit herself to doing what was expected. He drew his knife and pushed up his shirt sleeve.

He nodded once to Kannice, and followed as she walked to the door.

"Who's there?" she called.

"Um, Robert, ma'am," came the reply. The voice was that of a boy.

The tension drained from Kannice's face. Ethan kept his knife poised over his forearm, but when she reached for the key, a question in her eyes, he nodded again.

She unlocked the door and pulled it open, revealing a boy in torn breeches and a white linen shirt that was far too small for him. He was alone, and he clutched a piece of folded parchment in one hand.

"I gots a message for Ethan Kaille," the boy said.

Ethan sheathed his blade and pushed down his sleeve before advancing into the daylight.

"I'm Kaille."

"In that case, this is for you, I guess."

Ethan glanced at Kannice and took the parchment. Unfolding it, he saw written in a neat hand,

*Please come to King's Chapel at your earliest convenience.*

*-- T. Pell*

"It's from Mister Pell," he told Kannice.

"Aye," the boy said, eager. "That's who gave it to me. The minister at the chapel; the young one. He said you'd give me a bit of coin for my trouble."

Kannice looked away, her eyes dancing.

"Did he?" Ethan asked. "Was this before or after he paid you?"

"Oh, aft-" The boy clamped his mouth shut, his face coloring.

"It's all right, lad," Ethan said, laughing now. He fished in his pocket for tuppence. "Here you are."

"My thanks," the boy said, beaming as he pocketed the coin. He started to turn away.

"Wait, boy. Did Mister Pell say anything more?"

"No, sir."

"All right. On your way then."

The boy hurried away.

Ethan pulled the door closed once more.

"I should go without delay. Pell wouldn't send for me if he hadn't need."

"Of course," Kannice said. "Come back later?"

"Gladly." He kissed her cheek and left the tavern.

King's Chapel stood a short distance south of the Dowser, on School Street, just off of Treamount. In order to reach it, Ethan had to walk back past the Orange Tree tavern and the Tyler house with its bright red flag. Daily was out front again, standing watch and looking glum, but

unmarked by the distemper. Perhaps Deborah would be reassured.

Though King's Chapel was home to one of the oldest and most influential congregations in Boston, it might well have been the city's least attractive church, at least from without. It had been rebuilt some fifteen years before, its graceful wooden sanctuary enclosed within a new granite exterior. The stone façade was proof against fires, and Boston had seen many in the years since the new exterior was constructed, including the devastating blaze of 1760, which swept through the Cornhill section of the city, destroying hundreds of structures. But the chapel now had a ponderous look that set it apart from the soaring spires and elegant lines of Boston's other churches. Worse, it remained incomplete, with no spire of its own to lessen the severity of its appearance.

Ethan entered the churchyard through a gate near the corner of Treamount and School Streets, followed a short path to a set of low stone steps, and walked into the chapel through a pair of thick oaken doors, removing his hat as he did. Inside, in marked contrast to the austere stone exterior, the church was as welcoming and handsome as any in the city. Columns, painted in shades of brown and tan, their crowns intricately carved, supported a high vaulted ceiling. Sunlight streamed into the sanctuary through banks of windows two stories high, reflecting off the polished wood of the boxed pews and the wooden floorboards of the central aisle.

Three men stood in the rounded chancel beyond the church's altar. One of them was tall and narrow-shouldered, with a sallow complexion and an expression to match. The second was shorter and rounder, with a far more pleasant aspect. Both of these men, Henry Caner, the stouter of the two, who was rector of the chapel, and John Troutbeck, the curate, wore black robes and the stiff white cravats that marked them as ministers. The third man, whom Ethan did not know,

was taller than Troutbeck and more rotund than Caner. He wore red breeches and a matching waistcoat, and had bone-white hair that he wore in a long plait.

Neither of the ministers harbored much affection for Ethan. Both viewed him as a servant of Satan, a witch whose use of magick was offensive to God and themselves. Ethan was sure that they would have been pleased to see him burned at the stake for his sins. Given the opportunity, they might even have thrust the first torches into his pyre. He expected that their large friend would feel much the same way.

Ethan's sister, Bett, and her husband, Geoffrey Brower, an agent of the Customs Board, were members of the King's Chapel congregation. They were no more fond of Ethan than were Caner and Troutbeck. Though the same conjuring blood that flowed through Ethan's veins also flowed through Bett's, long ago she had eschewed spellmaking in favor of piety. She made every effort to conceal her family history, and to deny that she had a brother here in Boston.

The one friend Ethan had in King's Chapel, Trevor Pell, the young minister whose missive had summoned him here, was nowhere to be seen. Ethan wondered if he had been foolish to come, and he thought about leaving the chapel before Caner or Troutbeck noticed him.

"Is that Mister Kaille?"

Would that he had thought to leave a minute earlier.

Mister Caner, who had spoken, was already striding up the aisle in Ethan's direction. Ethan had no choice but to fix a smile on his lips and walk forward to meet the rector.

"Well met, Reverend sir," he said.

"And you, Mister Kaille." Caner's mien remained somber, but he had not yet demanded that Ethan leave his chapel, which Ethan took as a small victory. He looked back at the altar.

“Mister Troutbeck, would you please find Trevor and tell him that Mister Kaille has arrived?”

Troutbeck scowled, but said, “Yes, Reverend sir,” and descended the marble stairway that led to the chapel’s crypts, where Ethan had spent entirely too much time over the past few years. At the same time, the third man walked toward Ethan and the rector with a rolling, lumbering gait.

“Mister Pell will join us in a moment,” the rector said, facing Ethan once more. “It was his idea to invite you here, so I prefer to wait for him before we speak of these matters.”

Ethan wasn’t sure what “matters” Reverend Caner referred to, but for the moment he kept his questions to himself.

“In the meantime,” Mister Caner went on, “I would like you to meet Doctor Silvester Gardiner, who is Rector’s Warden here at King’s Chapel. Doctor Gardiner, this is Ethan Kaille.”

Gardiner stared hard at Ethan, his expression so stern beneath his prominent brow that Ethan felt like a school boy caught in the glare of a displeased catechist.

They shook hands, Gardiner’s massive paw seeming to swallow Ethan’s.

“A pleasure to meet you, Doctor Gardiner.”

“I’m grateful to you for coming,” the man said, his voice far softer and more mild than Ethan had expected.

“As you might imagine,” Caner said, “Doctor Gardiner takes more than a passing interest in these events.”

Ethan frowned. “I’m sorry, Reverend sir. I’m afraid I don’t understand.”

“Didn’t Mister Pell tell you?”

“No. His message requested that I come here at my earliest convenience. It said nothing

more.”

Caner clicked his tongue and glanced at the warden. “I see. Well, I think I would prefer that he was with us for this conversation.”

“All right,” Ethan said, perplexed.

They did not have to wait long. The young minister emerged from the crypts with Troutbeck behind him, struggling to keep pace.

Trevor Pell had not changed at all in the four years Ethan had known him. He was lean and of medium build, with straight brown hair, bright blue eyes, and a face so youthful that he would have looked more like an altar boy than a minister if not for the robes and cravat that he also wore.

He walked with grim purpose, his expression uncharacteristically somber. “Mister Kaille,” he said, stepping past Caner and Gardiner to shake Ethan’s hand. “Thank you for heeding my summons so quickly.”

“It’s good to see you again, Mister Pell.”

“Mister Pell,” Caner said, “I thought you intended to tell Mister Kaille what has happened. He knows nothing right now.”

“Yes, Reverend sir,” Pell said. “You impressed upon me the need for discretion. I thought you would prefer that the note I sent to Mister Kaille be as vague as possible.”

Caner considered this. “I suppose you’re right.” To Ethan he said, “You’ll have to forgive me, Mister Kaille. I have little experience with affairs of this sort. But Mister Pell believes that you can help us, and despite our past differences, I am hopeful that he is correct.”

“What’s happened?” Ethan asked, eyeing the men.

The warden answered. "This church and its congregation have been the victims of a foul crime."

"More than one, actually," Pell said. "Over the past several nights, the sanctity of the King's Chapel Burying Ground has been violated."

"Resurrectionists?" Ethan asked.

Pell nodded. "I'm afraid so."

The practice of stealing cadavers from graves had been common in England for some time. Schools of medicine and private physicians alike needed bodies with which to study anatomy and practice dissections. At the same time, most churches prohibited any desecration of the dead, even if done in the name of science. As a result, a rather profitable market in corpses, particularly bones, had established itself outside the bounds of the law. In recent years, so-called resurrectionists -- grave robbers who spirited away the bodies of the dead -- had brought their grisly work to the American colonies. And with schools of medicine having been recently established in Philadelphia and New York, and likely to be founded in other cities as well, the demand for cadavers would only increase.

Ethan had heard as well of conjurers using bones for spells the way he used blood. Bones were said to be every bit as effective, and they eliminated the need for a spellmaker to cut himself. He also knew that Tarijanna Windcatcher, a conjurer who owned a tavern on Boston's Neck, sold ground bone in her tavern, along with oils, herbs, and minerals that were said to enhance the power of conjurings. Most of the bone Janna sold came from animals rather than people, but he wouldn't have been surprised to learn that she had vials of both. And there were those who trafficked in gruesome goods regardless whether or not they could cast spells. A

market for bone had thrived for years in this city, and thieves looked for profit where they could, caring not a whit for the sensibilities of others, even in matters of death and the sanctity of a grave.

“Members of our congregation deserve to know that their loved ones can lie undisturbed in their graves,” Caner said. “They should not have to fear that the poor souls will be profaned by rogues and craven thieves.”

“Of course, Reverend sir. I understand completely.”

“We wish to engage your services, Mister Kaille. We want you to find the villains who have been desecrating these graves. You will, of course, have our full cooperation. Whatever you need, Doctor Gardiner and Mister Pell will see to it. You have my word on that. In return, we are prepared to pay you five pounds. As I understand it, we would pay you some of that now, and--”

“No,” Ethan said. “I’ll do what I can to help you, but I won’t take your money.”

Pell shook his head. “Ethan--”

“I’ll not take payment from a house of God. Besides, if all you say is true, this is a dark business; no one should profit from it.”

Mister Caner blinked, but said nothing.

Pell glanced sidelong at the rector before saying, “Thank you.”

Ethan faced Caner again. “I’ll do my best to find those responsible, Reverend sir.” A small grin tugged at his lips. “And in deference to you, I’ll also do my best to . . .” His eyes flicked toward Gardiner. “To use conventional means to the extent possible.”

That, of all things, brought a smile to Reverend Caner’s face. “You’re most kind, Mister Kaille. I was reluctant to hire you, as you might imagine. But Trevor insisted that you were the

right person for this task. I see now that he was right. When can you begin?”

“Immediately. If one of you would be so kind as to show me the disturbed graves.”

The rector nodded. “Yes, of course. Silvester? Trevor?”

Gardiner gestured toward the chapel entrance. Ethan bid good day to Caner and Troutbeck, and allowed the warden and the young minister to lead him out into the sunshine.

It had been cool when Ethan left the Dowsing Rod a short while before, and dew had lain heavy on the lawns along Treamount Street. But the sun now hung higher in the morning sky, and already the air was turning uncomfortably warm. This promised to be another sweltering day.

Gardiner led Pell and Ethan around the side of the chapel to the old burying ground at the north end of the churchyard. As they approached the jumble of tombstones, Ethan spotted a man squatting in the shade over what appeared to be a disturbed gravesite.

“That’s James Thomson,” Gardiner said before Ethan could ask. “He’s our sexton.”

Marking their approach, Thompson straightened, and Ethan realized that he, like Gardiner, was uncommonly tall; he was also spear thin. Everything about him appeared stretched out, as if he had somehow survived years of torture on the rack. His limbs were spiderlike, his neck overlong and thrust forward at an odd angle. His steel-gray hair was tied back in a plait, and his face was weathered and lined. He wore a dark blue waistcoat over a white linen shirt that was stained dark with sweat under the arms.

Despite his awkward appearance, he came to greet them with long, loping strides that were almost graceful.

“Good day, Mister Pell,” he said, in a rough voice. “Doctor Gardiner.”

“Good morning, James,” Pell said.

“This our witch?” the sexton asked, turning to Ethan.

Ethan glanced at Pell, who stared at the ground, his lips pursed. Ethan had the feeling that the young minister was doing everything in his power to keep from laughing. Gardiner glowered at them all.

“Aye,” Ethan said, proffering a hand. “I’m your witch.”

Thomson gripped his hand firmly and nodded, oblivious of having given offense. “Glad you’re here,” he said, and returned to the disturbed site. He squatted once more and pointed down into the grave. “It’s grim work they did,” he said. “Not seen anything like it in all my years here.”

As soon as Ethan, Pell, and Gardiner joined him graveside, they were assailed by the smell of decay. Pell gave a soft grunt and turned away, covering his nose and mouth with an open hand. Gardiner retreated in haste, a look of disgust on his fleshy features. Ethan pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and held it over his face.

“They weren’t gentle about it,” Gardiner said, from a few paces away. “Seemed in a bit of a hurry, if you ask me.”

Ethan had to agree with the warden. Dirt had been hastily shoveled aside, and the coffin had been splintered, most likely by an axe. Through the broken wood, Ethan could see that the linen burial cloth had been cut open and pulled away from the corpse, exposing clothing and part of the neck and chest.

“They didn’t steal the entire body?” Ethan asked of the sexton, who seemed unaffected by the stench.

“No. They took the head, and the right hand off of each. It’s strange, isn’t it?”

“Aye,” Ethan said.

“Not only that, but they also took an article of clothing from each grave, or at least a piece of something.” He pointed down into the grave. “This one was wearing a cravat, and that’s gone.”

“Have you ever heard of other resurrectionists doing that?” Ethan asked.

The sexton shook his head. “No, but then again, I’ve not heard much of anything about their kind. And I would have been content to keep it that way.”

“I don’t doubt it,” Ethan said. “I gather that the family has already been here.”

“No, why would you think that?”

“Well,” Ethan said, “I didn’t expect that you could remember so clearly what the man was wearing when he was buried.”

“He only went in the ground nine or ten days ago.” Thomson swept his arm in a wide arc, encompassing more than half a dozen graves that also appeared to have been desecrated. “All of these sites were dug in the last four months or so.”

“Do you mean to say that every grave that’s been robbed is a new one?”

“Aye. And that’s not all.”

Thomson climbed down into the grave and unbuttoned the soiled linen shirt in which the corpse had been buried. In the middle of the dead man’s chest, carved into the rotting skin, was an odd symbol -- a triangle, its apex pointing toward the man’s chin, with three straight lines cutting across the shape from the left edge to converge at the bottom right corner.

“What is that?” Ethan whispered.

“I was hoping you would know,” the sexton said. “Come with me.”

He covered up the chest of the cadaver and nimbly climbed out of the grave. He straightened and strode to another grave that lay perhaps twenty yards from the first. Ethan followed, noting as he reached this second site that the gravestone was somewhat thicker than others nearby, and had more ornate carvings around the edges. The family name “Rowan” was engraved on the stone. Below etched in smaller letters, were the words “Abigail, Devoted Wife and Loving Mother, b. 23 September 1701, d. 28 May 1769.”

“Abigail Rowan,” Ethan whispered. “I remember hearing of her death. Her husband is a man of some repute.”

“Aye,” Thomson said, keeping his voice low, and looking back at Pell and Gardiner, who lingered near the first grave. “Rich men usually are.” He lowered himself into this grave, as well.

Ethan squatted beside the site and peered down at the broken coffin. Again, the wood had been shattered, and the body of poor Abigail Rowan uncovered. As with the last, it seemed that the burial cloth had been slit open with a blade. He could see that her body was badly decomposed.

“They took her head and right hand, just like with the last one,” Thomson said. “And they took a shred of clothing, too.”

“What shred?” Ethan asked.

“They cut a square from her dress. That’s not important.” He uncovered her chest. The symbol carved into her leathered skin was similar to the other one. Similar, but not identical. The lines within the triangle were curved, rather than straight -- like waves.

“Do you think that was intentional?” Ethan asked.

“I’m sure of it. Because every dead man who was dug up has the other mark, and every dead woman has this one. So tell me, thieftaker, what do you suppose that means?”

Ethan had no answer. “How many graves have been disturbed?” he asked instead.

“Nine of them, all told.”

“And you say all of them were newly dug?”

“Every one.”

“And over how many nights have the desecrations taken place?”

“Three nights. The first graves were dug up on Sunday last. The thieves came back on Tuesday, and again last night.”

“Can you show me more of them?”

Thomson stood again, and set out in the direction of the nearest open grave. He had started to favor his right leg. “You can see all of them for all I care. There’s not much difference among them.”

He pointed down into this third site. Ethan could see what he meant. The damage to the coffin was much the same; once again the burial cloth had been sliced open. The head was gone, as was the right hand. And the decaying skin over the woman’s heart had been scored just the way Abigail Rowan’s had been.

“Then maybe there’s no need for me to look at the rest,” Ethan said.

“Oh, I think there is,” the sexton said. “I expect you’ll be thinking of them differently once you’ve seen them all.”

“What do you mean?”

Thomson regarded Ethan through narrowed eyes. “Why don’t you walk with me for a

time, and look at each grave, and after you can tell me what you think I mean.”

“All right,” Ethan said.

For the next quarter hour, Ethan and Thomson walked from grave site to grave site, examining the exposed bodies, comparing the marks on their skin and taking stock of what clothing had been taken. Pell and the warden trailed behind them, both of them keeping silent. Pell still grimaced at what he saw in the broken coffins, but like Ethan, he seemed to have become inured to the smell. Gardiner had pulled out a handkerchief of his own, and he held it firmly over his mouth and nose.

After looking at all of the desecrated graves, Ethan circled back to take second looks at a couple of them. At last he halted near the first grave Thomson had shown them. He stared at the ground, trying to make sense of what he had seen.

“I was wrong before,” he said at length. “The warden and I both were. These men weren’t careless. They had a specific purpose in mind. I don’t know what it was, but they made their marks, they took the head and hand from each body, and they took the scrap of clothing as well.”

“Can you think of any reason why someone might do that?”

Ethan turned. Mister Pell stood a short distance off, his skin flushed, a sheen of sweat on his cheeks and brow. He spared not even a glance for the sexton. He had asked his question of Ethan alone, and Ethan could tell that he was asking him to respond not as a thieftaker, but as a conjurer. He thought once more of the spells that had awakened him during the night. Perhaps he hadn’t dreamed them after all. This last, though, he kept to himself.

“I can’t,” Ethan said. “Not yet. But there must be a reason, and a meaning to those symbols.” He thought once more of Janna. If anyone could tell him how a conjurer might use

what had been taken from the dead, it was her. "I can speak to some people. One person in particular, who knows more about this sort of thing than I do."

Pell nodded.

"But you should know, Mister Pell, that there is a chance nothing will come of these conversations. Sometimes -- most times, really -- a theft is just what it seems to be." He gestured back at the open graves. "The skull and the bones of the human hand would be of great interest to physicians, and therefore could be quite valuable. The rest . . ." He shrugged. "It could all be nothing more or less than superstition. I don't pretend to understand the workings of a resurrectionist's mind."

They all fell silent. Pell shifted his gaze to the sexton, who still stood beside Ethan. Gardiner had come closer as well, and it was he who spoke first.

"You haven't yet told him?" the warden asked, eyeing Thomson.

"No. I wanted him to see what there was to be seen. And I wanted to know first what he thought. As he says, it might all mean nothing."

"What are you talking about?" Ethan asked the sexton. "What haven't you told me? Was something else taken?"

"Yes," Trevor said, his expression pained. He faltered; he appeared not to know how to say what was on his mind. "Ethan," he went on at last, "every corpse in every one of those desecrated graves has had three toes removed from his or her left foot."