ONE

I knew that I was being followed long before I saw or heard my pursuer. I felt it by some instinct that by now had been sharpened by experience; a shifting of the air, a presence whose movements invisibly shadowed my own. Someone was watching me and had been for several days: from the mouths of alleyways, from behind pillars or walls, amid the crowds of people, carts and animals that thronged the narrow streets of London or out among the river traffic. At times I even sensed eyes on me in the privacy of my room at Salisbury Court, though that was surely impossible and could only have been the tricks of imagination.

It was the twenty-third day of July, 1584, and I was hurrying to deliver my new book to my printer before he left London for the rest of the summer. A merchant ship from Portugal had recently docked at Tilbury, at the mouth of the River Thames. Plague was raging in Lisbon and the crew had been forcibly quarantined; despite these measures, rumours that the infection had begun to claim English victims were spreading through the city quicker than the disease itself ever could. Outbreaks of plague were common enough during London summers, I had been told, and any Londoner with

the means to move to healthier air was packing as fast as they could. At the French embassy, where I lived as the Ambassador's house-guest, whispers of the black plague had sent the household into such a frenzy of imagined symptoms that the Ambassador had dispatched his private secretary to enquire about country houses in the neighbourhood of the Palace of Nonsuch, Queen Elizabeth of England's summer residence.

Fear of the plague had only added to tensions at the embassy in the past few days. Our peace had been shattered the previous week by the arrival of the news from the Netherlands that William the Silent, Prince of Orange, had been assassinated, shot in the chest on the staircase of his own house in Delft by a man he knew and trusted. I imagined that in all the embassies of the Catholic and Protestant powers throughout the greatest cities of Europe, men and women would be standing much as we did when the messenger arrived, speechless in the face of an act whose repercussions would shake the world as we knew it. The shock and fear occasioned by the deed were still palpable in the streets of London; not that the English people gave two figs for William himself, but it was well known that the Catholic King Philip II of Spain had offered a reward of twenty-five thousand crowns for his murder. And if one Protestant ruler could be knocked down as easily as a skittle, there was no doubt that Queen Elizabeth of England would be next on Philip's list. The sense of foreboding was all the greater at Salisbury Court because William's assassin had been a Frenchman.

John Charlewood, my printer, had his lodgings at the Half-Eagle and Key in the street known as Barbican, just to the north of the city wall. He also had a press nearby at the Charterhouse, the old Carthusian monastery which had been converted into a grand private residence, but I refused to visit his business premises; the Charterhouse was now owned

by Thomas Howard, half-brother to the young Earl of Arundel. I had made enemies of the Howards – the most powerful Catholic family among the English nobility – the previous autumn and preferred to avoid the possibility of running into any one of them. This amused Charlewood, but he never asked questions; he was sufficiently eccentric himself to tolerate the apparent caprices of others, or else shrewd enough to realise that, in these days of tangled loyalties, it is often safer not to know another man's business.

The sun was already high when I set out from Salisbury Court with a leather satchel containing my manuscript pages slung around my back. Sharp diamonds of light glinted from the windows of the buildings on Fleet Street, mostly printers and taverns that served the nearby law courts. As I walked, my feet scuffed up clouds of dust from the cobbles; occasionally I had to step aside to avoid a heap of fresh horse dung, but elsewhere the heat had hardened older piles into dry, straw-scattered crusts. The smell of rotting refuse and the sewage stink of the Thames weighed down in the still air; I pressed the sleeve of my linen shirt over my nose and tried to breathe through my mouth. The sun beat hard on a street that was curiously quiet. The law terms had finished now, so Fleet Street was missing the bustle of the Inns of Court, yet one would have expected more traffic on the main thoroughfare from Westminster to the City of London. I glanced around. Perhaps people were staying indoors for fear of the plague; perhaps they had all left for the countryside already, and the few souls remaining at the embassy were unwittingly living in a ghost town. This thought made me impatient; life was so fraught with natural hazards and those we invite on our own heads that if you were to spend your life hiding from the prospect of trouble, you would never leave your chamber. I should know, having spent the past eight years on the run through Europe with danger's cold

breath constantly at my neck, ever since the night I fled from my monastery in Naples to escape the attention of the Inquisition. Yet my life had been fuller, more vivid and infinitely more precious to me during those eight years, when I had come close to losing it several times, than in the thirteen years I had lived safe inside the sacred walls of San Domenico Maggiore.

I had just crossed Fleet Street and turned into Shoe Lane when I saw it: a disturbance at the edge of vision, brief as a blink, and then it was gone. I whipped around, my hand flying to the hilt of the bone-handled dagger I had carried at my belt since the night I became a fugitive, but the lane was almost empty. Only an old woman in a thin smock walked towards me, her back bent under the weight of her basket. She chanced to glance up at that moment and, seeing me apparently reaching for my knife, dropped her goods and let out a scream that echoed across the river to Southwark and back.

'No, no – good madam, don't be alarmed.' I held my hands out, palms upwards, to show my innocence, but hearing my accent only made things worse; she stood rooted to the spot, shrieking all the louder about murdering Spanish papists. I tried to make soothing noises to quieten her, but her cries grew more frenzied, until the door of a neighbouring house opened and two men emerged, blinking in the strong light.

'What gives here?' The taller glared at me from beneath one thick eyebrow. 'Are you all right, goodwife?'

'He went for his knife, the filthy Spanish dog,' she gasped, clutching at her chest for good measure. 'He meant to cut out my heart and rob me blind, I swear it!'

'I am sorry to have caused you any alarm.' I held up my empty hands for the men to examine. 'I thought I heard someone following me, that is all.' I glanced up and down

the street but there was no sign of movement apart from the shimmering heat haze that hovered over the ground up ahead.

'Oh yeah?' He tilted his chin at me and gave a little swagger. 'Likely story. What business have you here, you Spanish whoreson?'

'Stand back, Gil, he might be one of them with the plague,' his companion said, half-hovering behind the big man's shoulder.

'Have you come here bringing plague on us, you filth?' the man named Gil demanded, his voice harder, but he took a step back nonetheless.

I sighed. Most Englishmen, I have discovered, know of only two other nations, Spain and France, which their mothers used interchangeably to frighten them as children. This year it was the turn of the Spanish. With my dark hair and eyes and my strange accent, I found myself accused several times a week of wanting to murder honest English folk in their beds in the name of the pope, often while I was simply walking down the street. In some ways, London was the most tolerant city I had ever had the good fortune to visit, but when it came to foreigners, these islanders were the most suspicious people on earth.

'You are thinking of the Portuguese. I am neither Spanish nor Portuguese – I am Italian,' I said, with as much dignity as I could muster. 'Giordano Bruno of Nola, at your service.'

'Then why don't you go back there!' said the rat-faced fellow, glancing up at his friend for approval.

'Aye. Why do you come to London – to murder us and make us bow down to the Pope?'

'I could not very well do both, even if I wanted,' I said, and quickly saw that humour was not the means to disarm him. 'Listen, good sirs – I meant no offence to anyone. May we all now go on our way?'

They exchanged a glance.

'Aye, we may . . .' said the big man, and for a moment I breathed a sigh of relief. 'When we have taught you a lesson.'

He thumped one meaty fist into the palm of his other hand; his friend cackled nastily and cracked his knuckles. With a reflex quick as blinking, my knife was out again and pointed at them before either of them had even stepped forward. I did not spend three years on the road in Italy without learning how to defend myself.

'Gentlemen,' I said, keeping my eyes fixed on them both as I shifted my weight on to my toes, primed to run if need be. 'I am a resident of the embassy of France and as such a guest of Queen Elizabeth in your country and under her protection. If you lay a finger on me, you will answer directly to Her Majesty's ministers. And they will know where to find you.' I nodded towards the house behind them.

They looked uneasily at one another. The smaller one appeared to be waiting for his companion's verdict. Finally the bigger man lowered his hands and took a pace back.

'Piss off then, you pope-loving shit. But stay away from this street in future, if you have a care for your pretty face.'

Relieved, I sheathed my knife, nodded, straightened my shoulders and walked on, bowing slightly to the old woman, who had stooped to gather up her fallen wares. I almost offered to help, but the force of her glare was enough to keep me moving on. I had barely walked ten paces when something whistled past my left ear and clattered on to the ground. I leapt aside; just ahead of me a stone the size of a man's fist was rolling to a standstill in the dust. Whipping around, I saw the two men cackling as they stood together, legs planted firmly astride, arms folded. With more bravado than I felt, I seized my knife again and made as if to come back for them; they faltered for a moment, then the smaller one tugged his friend by the sleeve and both retreated hastily to their house.

I put away the knife once more, wiping the sweat from my upper lip. My hands were shaking and I could feel my heart hammering under my ribs; those two louts had meant to frighten me, but they could not have known how well they had succeeded. Last autumn, I had almost been killed by just such an attack, a rock hurled at my head with no warning, out of the night. If I had become more skittish since then, it was not without reason. I looked around, still taut with fear, one hand laid protectively over my bag. The old woman had almost reached the far end of the street; otherwise there was no sign of life. But I thought I knew who was stalking me through the streets of London; I had been half-expecting him since last year. And if I was right, he would not be satisfied until I was dead.

'Giordano Bruno! Come in, come in. What's happened, man? You look as if you've seen the Devil himself.' Charlewood flung open the door of his lodgings, took in my appearance with one practised glance, and gestured for me to come inside. 'Here – I will have the housekeeper bring us something to drink. Are you in trouble?'

I waved his question aside; he called down the corridor while I went through into his front parlour and began the task of unpacking my manuscript from its satchel and linen wrappings.

'Well?' He followed me in, rubbing his hands together in anticipation. 'Is the masterpiece finally ready? We don't want to keep Her Majesty waiting, do we?' He grinned, stroking his pointed beard.

What I liked most about Charlewood was not his willingness to print and distribute books of radical and potentially inflammatory ideas, nor that he was well travelled, spoke several languages and had a much broader mind than many of the Englishmen I had met; it was the fact that he was an

unapologetic rogue. A slightly built man of about forty-five, with reddish hair and mischievous eyes, Charlewood so crackled with restless energy that he seemed barely able to stand still for five minutes together, and was constantly picking, fiddling, hopping from one foot to another, tugging at his sleeves or his beard or the little gold ring he wore in his right ear. He cared nothing for what was said about him and he was as unscrupulous as the business required; more than once he had been in trouble for printing illegal copies of books to which he had no licence, and he was happy to dress up any book with invented credentials if he thought it would help the sales. But to his authors he was always loyal, and he was fiercely opposed to any censorship of books; on that point, we agreed wholeheartedly. His latest innovation was to publish works by Italian authors for what was still a small but elite aristocratic readership in England. I had been introduced to him by my friend Sir Philip Sidney, the unofficial leader of the little group of liberal-minded intellectuals at Queen Elizabeth's court who gathered to read one another's poetry and discuss ideas that many would regard as unorthodox or even dangerous. It was Sidney who had told Charlewood that the Queen was interested in reading my work-in-progress; naturally the printer saw an opportunity for his own advancement and had gone so far as to create a fictitious Venetian imprint to add authenticity. Queen Elizabeth was fluent in Italian, as she was in many of the languages of Europe, and was reported to possess a formidable intellect and an unusual appetite for new and experimental ideas in science and philosophy, but even her broad mind might baulk at the audacity of my latest work. I looked at the carefully written pages in my hands and wondered if Charlewood really had any idea of what he was undertaking.

Laying aside the linen cloth that had wrapped the manuscript, I handed him the bundle, bound with a silk tie. He

accepted it reverently, smoothing the topmost page with the palm of his hand.

'*La Cena de le Ceneri*. The Ash-Wednesday Supper.' He looked up, his brow furrowed. 'We might need to work on the title, Bruno. Make it a little more . . .' He waved his fingers vaguely in a circular motion.

'That is the work's title,' I said firmly.

He grinned again, but did not concede anything.

'And will it be wildly controversial? Will it set the cat among the pigeons in the academies?'

'You are hoping the answer will be "yes", I can see,' I said, smiling.

'Well, of course,' he said, loosening the tie that held the pages. 'People love the thought that they are reading something the authorities would rather they didn't see. On the other hand, a royal endorsement . . .'

'She has not said she will endorse it,' I said, quickly. 'She has only expressed an interest in reading it. And she doesn't yet know of its contents.'

'But she must know of you by reputation, Bruno. The whispers that followed you from Paris . . .' His eyes glinted.

'And what whispers are those, John?' I asked, feigning innocence, though I knew perfectly well what he was talking about.

'That you dabble in magic. That you are neither Catholic nor Protestant, but have invented your own religion based on the ancient wisdom of the Egyptians.'

'Well, I have been excommunicated by the Catholic Church and imprisoned by the Calvinists, so I suppose that much is true. But it would take a man of extraordinary arrogance to dream of creating his own religion, would it not?' I raised an eyebrow. One corner of his mouth curved into a smile.

'That is why I can believe it of you, Bruno,' he said, giving me a long look from under his brows. He tapped the pages

with the back of his hand. 'I will take this with me to Suffolk to read over the next few weeks. There will be no business done in London anyway until this blasted heat abates and the plague threat is over. But come the autumn, we will produce a book that will cause the biggest stir in Europe since the Pole Copernicus dared to suggest the Earth is not the centre of God's creation. Let us hope no one else is assassinated in the meantime to steal its thunder. Agreed?'

He held out his hand and I shook it in the English fashion. The door creaked open and his housekeeper appeared, head lowered, carrying a tray with an earthenware pitcher and two wooden cups, which she placed on the oak dresser that stood against the back wall of the room. Charlewood laid my manuscript on a stool and crossed to the dresser.

'Here, Bruno.' He poured a cup of small beer and passed it to me. 'This weather, the dust sticks in your throat, does it not? It is a little early for good wine, but let us drink to a successful partnership. The manuscript is not your only copy, I trust?'

'No.' I took a welcome sip of beer. Though warm, it was at least fresh-tasting. 'I made another which I have locked up at home.'

'Good. Keep it safe. I will guard this with my life, but with so many travelling out of London at this time, there are plenty of cutpurses and bandits on the roads. You do not mean to stay in London, do you?'

'The Ambassador would like to move the household near to the court if he can find somewhere. I am in no hurry to leave.' I shrugged. 'I see no evidence of plague.'

Charlewood shook his head.

'By the time you've seen the evidence, it's too late. Take my advice – get out of the city. We cannot have you struck down at – what age are you now?'

'Thirty-six.'

'Well, then. You want to be alive to present this book to the Queen in person, don't you? And the next one, and the next. A dead author is no use to me.'

I laughed, but my mind flashed back to that stone rolling in the dust at my feet and the unseen presence that had been haunting my steps for the past days. If my pursuer had his way, I would be lucky to see the autumn, plague or no plague.

I left Charlewood's house with a lighter heart, encouraged by his enthusiasm. The streets around the Barbican were still unusually empty, the sun overhead bleaching colour from the red-brick houses that lined the roads. Behind the rows of chimney stacks, the sky was a deep cloudless cobalt, almost as blue as the skies I remembered from childhood over the village of Nola, at the foot of Monte Cicada. I had not known England was capable of such a sky. My shirt stuck to my back with sweat and I loosened the lacing of it at the collar as I walked, glad that I had always avoided the English fashion for wide starched neck-ruffs; the young dandies at court must be desperately uncomfortable in this heat.

As I crossed Aldersgate Street and was about to turn into Long Lane, I sensed it again: a flicker of a shadow, the merest hint of a sound. I spun around, hand to my knife, and for the first time I caught a glimpse of him, perhaps fifty yards away, just before he vanished between two houses. I had no time to make out more than a tall, thin figure, but my blood boiled and before I had given thought to my actions I was hurling myself after him, feet pounding through the dust; if I must fight, so be it, but I would not be made to live this way any longer, always looking over my shoulder, feeling vulnerable at every corner like a hunted creature.

Slipping into the alley where he had disappeared, I spotted the fellow running out of the far end, heading northwards up Aldersgate Street. I forced my legs to a faster pace; I may

not be excessively tall like some of these Englishmen, but I am lean and wiry and can move at a clip when I choose. Emerging from between houses, I saw him clearly and realised with a sinking feeling that he was heading towards the Charterhouse. But I was too fired up and too determined to shake him out of this cowardly pursuit to worry about Howards.

As I drew closer, he scuttled out of sight around the corner, keeping close to the boundary wall that enclosed the maze of old buildings. All I had seen of him was that he wore a brown jerkin and breeches and a cloth cap pulled down low over his ears, but even at a distance he didn't look like the man I had expected to see, the one I feared was after me – unless the man in question had lost a lot of weight since the previous autumn.

I had no time for such considerations, though; as I rounded the corner, my quarry was attempting to scale a low wall that separated the lane from Pardon Churchyard, the old plague burial ground that formed part of the Charterhouse lands. He threw himself over; I scrambled up in pursuit, landed on the other side and then I had a clear view of him across the graveyard, with no more buildings to hide behind. He moved nimbly, dodging tussocks of grass and the crumbled remains of old headstones, aiming for the wall on the far side and the backs of the houses on Wilderness Row. With one determined burst of speed, I gained on him enough to grab at his jerkin before he reached the wall. He twisted away, the fabric slipped from between my fingers; my foot turned on a rabbit hole in the bank and I almost fell, but just as he jumped for the wall, I threw myself at him, caught his leg and pulled him to the ground. He fought viciously, lashing out with his fists, but I was the stronger, and once I had him by the wrists it was no great effort to pin him face down in the grass and keep

him there by kneeling astride him until his struggle subsided and he lay still.

His cap had come off in the tussle but he pressed his face into the grass; I grasped him roughly by the hair and pulled his head up so that I could see his face. I was not sure which of us cried out the louder.

'*Gésu Cristo!* Sophia?' I looked down, incredulous, into the face of the girl I had known, and briefly fancied myself in love with, more than a year ago in Oxford. I barely recognised her, and not just because her hair was cut short like a boy's. She had grown so thin that all the bones of her face seemed sharper, and those wide tawny eyes that had been so bewitching were now ringed with dark circles. She muttered something I couldn't make out, and I leaned closer.

'What?'

'Get off my hair,' she hissed, through her teeth.

Startled, I realised I was still gripping her hair in my fist. I released her and her head sank back to the grass, as if it were too heavy to hold up.

'Sophia Underhill,' I repeated in a whisper, hardly daring to speak her name aloud in case she should vanish. 'What the Devil . . .?'

She twisted her face to look up at me, blinked sadly and looked away.

'No. Sophia Underhill is dead.'