

PROLOGUE

29 December 1170 - The Altar of the Sword

Iron screeched hideously on stone as the men grappled with the priest, struggling to drag him from the transept. Their snarls and guttural growls reverberated around the walls of the choir. Wrestling his attackers with powerful hands Becket hurled them off, screaming in indignation. "Let go of me you pander - you owe me fealty and submission!!"

"I owe no fealty contrary to the king" bellowed the enraged Tracy.

A second man heaved his massive sword into the air and swinging it like a gladiator brought it crashing down.

Edward Gryme, the crozier, dropped the cross he was carrying and lunged forward in a desperate attempt to protect the priest. He scarcely saw the blade as it slashed downwards, slicing cruelly through flesh and muscle, fracturing the bone in his upper arm and spraying blood around the walls. Shrieking in agony he fell to the stone floor.

The tip of the blade connected with the skull of its intended victim causing him to lurch forward and crumple to his knees, blood spilling down his face. He clasped his head in his hands and raised his eyes to the heavens.

"O béni... Denys... O holy saint Elphege ...by the axe and the sword...into your hands... O Lord."

A third man stormed into the fray dragging the first attacker aside, viciously raising his sword. Gryme watched in terror as Brito's sword reached its zenith before being brought down with savage power, hacking the skull of the kneeling man with such force that the arcing blade sliced through the crown scattering bone, hair and blood across the altar, splattering tapestries on the surrounding walls. The blade continued on its downward path striking the flagstones, breaking it clean from the cross guard. An instant before the sword carved through its target he heard the rasping words of the dying man.

"Willingly I die in the name of Jesus ... in defence ... of ... the ... Church."

Brito lost his footing and stumbled but the other three men lunged at the dying priest, stabbing again and again at the stricken body. FitzUrse then flayed in a second time and with a brutish swipe at the dead man's crushed skull, scattered brains and bone around the choir. The panting aggressors crouched over the body of the priest.

Gryme heard a shout, "Il est mort. Notre travail est effectué".

"The king's men - the king's men!"

The crozier tried to drag himself across the flagstones to the slain priest but gagged in horror at what he saw. Brains and blood, speckled with splinters of bone and hair, oozed onto the stones.

Through a delirium of pain and anguish he saw a tableau of traumatized faces, monks and worshipers rushing into the choir.

The last thing he heard before he lost consciousness was the shrill sound of his own agony, screaming through the cathedral like a wailing banshee.

ONE

**Tell me not, in mournful numbers
Life is but an empty dream
For the soul is dead that slumbers
And things are not what they seem.**

1176

A flurry of wind whipped the old man's black robe around his frail legs, causing him to stagger. His arm shot out and William ducked as the priest tried to clip him on the ear. "Slow down lad!" he chided, stumbling on the uneven track. "You'll have me face down in the mire if you don't slow down." He gripped William's arm as they cautiously negotiated the deep, muddy ruts in the path gouged out by a multitude of feet, animal hooves and cart's wheels. His withered left leg, the result of a childhood illness, made it difficult for him to stay on an even keel forcing William to hold tightly onto his robe, clutching at the scrip with his other hand. Although they were only a few miles from London, the furious gales and torrential rains of the previous night had transformed the dirt tracks into a quagmire of mud, debris, stones and animal droppings. Heavy traffic on the road made it worse. Brooding on the skyline in cold smog was a vast grey forest of buildings and crumbling walls. Nothing could dampen William's rising excitement, not even the cantankerous old priest. The closer they got to the city the faster he wanted to walk. He had never been to London. He had never been more than a few miles from Dartford in any direction.

“Tell me again about the hospital,” he urged, “will we see the new bridge?” A new stone bridge was being built across the Thames which would eventually replace the wooden bridge. Twenty arches and stone piers were being constructed to support it and on either side of the drawbridge there would be shops, houses and even a chapel; an airborne village spanning the river.

He knew that much of the sprawling city of London, including the bridge, was destroyed in a major fire long before he was born. At the time it was rebuilt but the wooden bridge that had replaced the old one thirteen years ago was now making way for a massive stone structure. It would be over twenty feet wide and three hundred yards long. The king had imposed a tax on wool to raise money for its construction. This caused much discontent and grumbling amongst farmers, fullers and merchants, and many bailiffs were stoned and chased away trying to collect the bridge tax. Father Martel’s parents had been mill owners so he had some sympathy for the fullers but in church he preached a sermon about ‘giving unto Caesar that which belongs to Caesar’.

“Bartholomew’s Priory is where we are headed,” said Father Martel. “It is across the river, immediately beyond the walls, so we will cross the wooden bridge, but we should have a glimpse of the new bridge. One of our brothers from Saint Mary Colechurch designed the new bridge,” he added proudly. “We will stay at the priory for two days where you will be tested on your letters, grammar, arithmetic and scriptures. Father Gillies will take you to the hospital for your interview with the doctors. You did bring a clean robe, William?” he asked, looking at the boy with concern. William nodded. The clean robe was in his scrip together with the parcel he was to give to Father Gillies.

Father Martel had recommended William to his old friend Father Gillies at Saint Bartholomew’s Hospital as a candidate for further education in medicine at the University in Oxford. If his interview went well and, if he applied himself diligently to studies for the next two years, he might be accepted when he turned eighteen. Since childhood he had shown a natural flair for healing, raising fledglings, assisting with the birthing of lambs and piglets, and caring for sick and injured animals. His paternal grandmother had been a healer and although she’d passed on when he was a wee lad, his mother said that he took after her in looks and in ways. His mother’s father and two siblings died of the plague before he was born and they only had uncle George left. In the absence of a doctor he was already fairly skilled in treating wounds and blood-letting and was frequently asked to help Mrs Turner, the local healer, to treat workers wounded in the loam pits, chalk mines and limekilns in their shire. Much of what they learned about the use of local herbs and plants in poultices had been gleaned from travelling barbers.

The Turner children, Arthur and Gwen, were his best friends and they spent hours searching for plants, herbs and other ingredients for their mother’s remedies. Gwen had developed an eye for a special bark, tree root or flower and she helped him care