

Bloody Beginnings

Susanna Gregory

and

Simon Beaufort

Prologue
Oxford, St Eligius' Day, 1209

The scholar stared at the body in mute horror. He had not meant to kill Alice Spicer, but she had taunted him, and the knife was out of its sheath and in her chest before he could stop himself. She had staggered, fallen, and then died without so much as a whisper. He took a deep breath, to calm himself. When he raised the alarm, surely everyone would see it was her own fault? She had a cruel tongue, and he was not the only one to have fallen foul of it – several of his colleagues at Stone Hall had complained about her vicious goading.

Yet, as he stared at her long fair hair and blue eyes, he knew she would be badly missed by more than a few. Academics were not the only ones to enjoy her favours: she counted Mayor Kepeharm among her clients, too. Kepeharm was besotted with her, and would leave no stone unturned to catch her killer. Moreover, despite her wanton ways, Alice hailed from a powerful family: the Spicer clan would not look the other way while one of their own was dispatched by a member of the University – a hated foundation they had never wanted in Oxford in the first place.

Fortunately, the scholar, like all his kind, could claim benefit of clergy – he could read, and had taken minor religious orders, which meant the secular law could not touch him. He would be tried by an ecclesiastical court, and they were far more lenient than civil ones. Mere townsmen would not be able to wreak their violent vengeance on *him*. Or would they?

King John had recently quarrelled with Pope Innocent III, and England was currently under an interdict: the entire country was debarred from ecclesiastical privileges and functions. Many bishops had left the country, and certain basic ceremonies – such as communion, confession, and burials within sacred ground – had ceased. To show he cared nothing for the Holy Father's proclamations, the King had begun challenging ecclesiastical authority in any way he could. Supposing he decided to deny scholars benefit of clergy? Then there would be no immunity from being hanged from the town walls like a common criminal!

But the Church would not stand for that, even in its weakened state. There would be an uproar, and the seculars would face terrible reprisals – fines that would cripple them for years, and reprimands to make their toes curl. Of course, none of that would help the scholar if he were dead, and suddenly, it did not seem like such a good idea to confess to what he had done.

Bending down quickly, he wiped the blade of his knife on Alice's gown. It was night, and the inn where she held her assignations was dingy. No one had seen his face as he had opened the door and crept up the stairs, because he had taken care to conceal it with his hood – relations with the town's women were forbidden to scholars, and he had not wanted to be caught breaking the rules. So while

the patrons sitting over their ale downstairs would certainly have seen a man aiming for Alice's chamber, they would not be able to identify him personally.

Turning his back on the body, he made for the door, but then hesitated. There was a badge on his cloak that indicated he was a member of Stone Hall. His academic residence was older, larger and grander than most others, and its four doctors and seven bachelors were proud of it, so they wore the badge to declare their affiliation. And the scholar had not been so preoccupied with hiding his face as he had slipped up the stairs that he had missed the drinkers grinning knowingly at each other – smirking that yet another hypocritical academic was availing himself of the town's forbidden fruits. They would remember the badge, and Kepeharm and the Spicers would learn that Alice's murderer hailed from Stone Hall.

But with eleven members, how would they know who was the guilty party? Alice was popular in Stone Hall, and some, like the rebellious student Geoffrey Gryme, were brazen about their association with her. They would all declare their innocence, and Kepeharm would be unable to identify the real culprit. He could scarcely prosecute an entire foundation, so he would be forced to admit defeat. And with all the turmoil and uncertainty arising from the interdict, Alice would soon be forgotten.

Before he opened the door, he glanced back at the woman whose life he had taken in one white-hot moment of rage. Blood had pooled beneath her, and her face was already waxen. It was a pity: she *had* been comely. But what was done was done, and he did not see why he should hang for something he had not intended. Of course, it would not do for him to forget the crime too quickly – there was his immortal soul to think about, after all – so he stepped over to her and cut a curl from her golden hair. He would carry it with him as penance, to remind him to pray for her.

He pulled up his hood, making sure his face was well hidden, then arranged his cloak so it concealed his badge. With luck, the drinkers might not have noticed it earlier, and Stone Hall might yet escape untarnished. When he was ready, he pulled back his shoulders and marched out, putting a spring in his step, as though he had not a care in the world.

I

Oxford, 6 December 1209

Adam Gryme's terrified protestations of innocence were soon silenced, and then all that could be heard were his strangled gurgles as the noose tightened around his neck. It took a long time for him to die, much longer than Tom Chestertone, who dangled at his side.

Geoffrey Gryme struggled with all his might against the hands that held him down. Stone Hall was no longer safe, so its members had secretly relocated to Corner Hall, a house hastily abandoned after the arrests of Adam and Chestertone had thrown the University into turmoil. Unfortunately, it stood next to the castle, where the executions were taking place, so Geoffrey could hear every choking gasp and every creak of the rope. He did not know how his colleagues could bear to listen without racing to intervene. Adam was his brother and their friend! How could they do nothing? He fought harder to escape, but it was no use. There were simply too many of them.

Judging from the sullen mood of the crowd that had gathered to watch the executions, Dr John Gryme – the oldest of the three brothers and Stone Hall's Principal – had saved his colleagues' lives when he had ordered them into hiding. The tale that Alice Spicer had been murdered by someone from Stone Hall had spread through the town like wildfire, and Mayor Kepeharm had vowed to see every one of its scholars at the end of a rope. Adam and Chestertone had been seized before Gryme could secure a safe haven, but the others had managed to go into hiding. Now they were trapped in Corner Hall like rats, not daring to set foot outside for fear of what might happen.

The spectators cheered when the hangman pronounced his victims dead, and when they had quietened again, Kepeharm started to make a speech. Dr Gryme made an urgent gesture for John de Foxton to clap a hand across Geoffrey's mouth, to prevent him from shouting out. It would be a pity for his outrage to give away their location now.

'We did not invite scholars to our town,' Kepeharm was declaring. 'They just arrived, and began to multiply like locusts, until we are overrun with them. They hide behind the Church whenever they break the law, but no more! From today, scholars will face true justice.'

There was a roar of approval from the throng, although now two men were dead, there was a degree of uncertainty in it. Some onlookers were intelligent enough to know that there would be consequences to Kepeharm's actions, and whereas the University might be unpopular in Oxford, it had powerful supporters elsewhere.

'Alice Spicer was murdered by a Stone Hall man,' Kepeharm ranted on. 'These two claimed they were innocent, but could not prove it to my satisfaction, so here they hang. The rest will soon follow.'

There was more cheering, but he was losing his audience. While executions were entertaining, people were loath to waste time listening to the Mayor's bluster. Stone Hall's scholars listened, however, unsettled by the intensity of his hatred for them. The bachelors were white-faced with fear, while the doctors exchanged appalled glances. From his position on the floor, Geoffrey wondered which one was such a rank coward that he would let Adam and Chesterton hang for something he had done.

Haughty, aristocratic and with a natural authority, his brother John had been elected *Magister Scholarum* – the University's highest ranking scholar – for several years, and even after resigning that position he remained one of the most powerful men in the University hierarchy. Geoffrey did not think John would sacrifice Adam to save himself, but the older Gryme was a pragmatist, and might well have reasoned that two lowly bachelors were less significant than a respected Doctor of Theology.

Geoffrey's gaze passed to Stone Hall's other masters. Dr Richard de Leycestria was florid of face, but possessed a strength of character that made him a good leader. He was a lawyer, and it was said he was destined for great things. He was standing next to Dr John Blund, amiable but weak, with blunt, ugly features. The fourth, Dr Robert de York, had not been seen since Alice's death.

The three lads who, with Foxton, held Geoffrey down were Stone Hill's remaining students, none eager to join their friends on the gibbet, so willing to prevent him from putting them in danger with reckless heroics. Foxton was trying to be gentle, although the same could not be said for John de Storteford, Nicholas Derlega and John de Malketon, and it would not surprise Geoffrey to learn one of *them* was the culprit. Only Foxton had muttered an apology for laying hands on him, and he was also the only one whose eyes showed the same anguish that Geoffrey was experiencing – the others were concerned solely with their own safety.

Only when Kepeharm finished speaking, and left the gallows with the Spicer clan, did Gryme indicate that Geoffrey could be released.

'You could have done nothing to stop it,' he said kindly, helping him to his feet. 'Had you tried, you would be hanged, too. And I cannot lose a second brother today.'

'Moreover, you would have put the rest of us in danger,' added Malketon. He intended to take the cowl when he had completed his studies, and considered himself a cut above those of his colleagues who would only be lawyers. Geoffrey thought him a sanctimonious hypocrite.

'Where are you going?' demanded Leycestria, as Geoffrey made for the door.

'To cut them down.'

'No, you are not!' exclaimed Leycestria, grabbing Geoffrey's shoulder. 'Kepeharm will use the same rope to hang *you*. But before that, he will drag from you details of our whereabouts, and we will all be doomed.'

Geoffrey tried to shrug him off, but Leycestria's academic robes concealed a powerful physique, one that was well able to deal with recalcitrant students, as Geoffrey had learned to his cost in the past. He could no more break free and race outside than he could fly to the moon.

'We will go together, after dark,' said Blund in a low voice. He rarely spoke above a whisper, which meant his students often missed sizeable chunks of his lectures. 'I will help you.'

'This is York's fault,' said Leycestria, eyes flashing with indignation. 'He should be ashamed – murdering women, then running away, leaving us to bear the consequences.'

'You cannot know he is the culprit,' said Dr Gryme reasonably. Leycestria and York had never seen eye-to-eye, and loved nothing more than to denigrate each other. However, accusations of capital crimes had never featured in their spats before.

'No?' demanded Leycestria. 'Then where is he? Term does not end for ten days, and he has no right to disappear when there is still teaching to do.'

'Term is effectively over *now*,' whispered Blund. 'Our colleagues are leaving in droves, and word is that a *recessus* will be ordered – that we will abandon Oxford until Kepeharm acknowledges he cannot string us up like common criminals.'

'York's father is unwell,' explained Foxtan. 'He showed me the letter. So he went to—'

'A letter he received three weeks ago,' interrupted Leycestria. 'Why did he wait? Because he murdered Alice, and is using his father as an excuse to disappear to safety!'

'Well, whoever killed her, it was not Adam,' said Malketon. 'Like me, he intended to join the Benedictine Order, so was thus beyond reproach. But Chestertone regularly debased himself with that acid-tongued whore, so perhaps Kepeharm got one culprit right.'

'How do you know she was acid-tongued?' pounced Geoffrey. 'You said you never met her.'

'I have not,' said Malketon hastily. 'I just listened to the rest of you discuss her.'

'Malketon is right, though,' said Derlega, a large, stupid lad patently unsuited to academic life. He and Malketon enjoyed a symbiotic relationship – Derlega's ready fists protected the weaker man during brawls, while Malketon helped Derlega to cheat during examinations. 'Alice could say some very nasty things. During our last session, she called me a...' He trailed off guiltily.

'You said *you* had never met her, either,' said Geoffrey, narrowing his eyes.

Derlega became flustered. 'I did not...It was...well, you see...'

Malketon appealed to his Principal. 'Will you let him accuse us *all*, Dr Gryme? I have already said that Chestertone was probably the culprit.'

'He was not,' said Geoffrey before his brother could respond. 'And neither was Adam. I know this for a fact, because they both had an alibi. Tell them, Foxtan.'

It was generally agreed that Foxtan was bound for sainthood, with his kindness and dreamy smile. Several people believed his prayers had cured them of debilitating illnesses, and his services

were in constant demand. He was the last person in the University to lie, and Geoffrey had been shocked when Kepeharm had refused to grant him an audience. He could only suppose that, as no townspeople would have countenanced Kepeharm arresting that particular member of Stone Hall, the Mayor had simply declined to hear his testimony instead.

‘Alice died on St Eligius’ Day,’ obliged Foxton. ‘And I conducted a vigil in St Mary’s then – from sunset until nocturns. As Alice was seen alive after dusk and found dead before midnight, no one who was with me can be the culprit.’

‘I was with you,’ said Malketon quickly. ‘Remember?’

‘Only for the first part,’ replied Foxton apologetically. ‘The only three to stay the course were Adam, Chestertone and Geoffrey, although the last two dozed through most of it—’

‘You mean they were sleeping off their excesses after spending the afternoon in a tavern,’ muttered Leycestria. He deplored Geoffrey’s brazen disregard for the University’s rules.

‘But I can say for certain that they did not kill Alice,’ finished Foxton. ‘I would have noticed them leave, and so would several scholars from St Edmund’s Hall, who were with me.’

‘I *wanted* to stay all night, but I was preparing for my next disputation,’ said Malketon sullenly. He was jealous of Foxton, whom he knew was the better man. ‘However, just because I cannot prove my whereabouts at the salient time does not mean I am guilty of...’ He waved a vague hand.

‘I have an alibi,’ said Derlega brightly. ‘I was with my horse in the stables.’

‘Yes, but unfortunately,’ drawled Storteford, ‘when I asked her to confirm the tale, she declined to speak. So you, like me, cannot prove your whereabouts. I was out walking – alone.’

‘Well, *I* have a credible alibi,’ declared Leycestria, looking around at his colleagues with lofty distaste. ‘*I* was here, in Corner Hall, dining with its Principal.’

‘But unfortunately, John de Horningsea is not here to confirm it,’ said Storteford. ‘He followed York’s example, and left town.’

Gryme’s expression was pained. ‘We are nine, but only Geoffrey and Foxton can prove their whereabouts when Alice died,’ he said softly. ‘I was reading in my room; Malketon was preparing for his disputation; Storteford was walking; Derlega was with his horse; Blund was asleep in the kitchen; Leycestria’s witness is unavailable; and York is not here to say whether he had one or not.’

‘In other words,’ said Geoffrey, regarding them one by one, noting who met his eyes and who looked away, ‘any one of you might have murdered Alice.’

The previous occupants of Corner Hall had stripped it of anything portable before they had fled from Oxford, so Stone Hall’s scholars spent another uncomfortable night huddled in their cloaks on the bare floor. It was freezing cold, but they dared not light a fire, because the building was supposed to be empty, and smoke issuing from the chimney would have given them away.

Geoffrey lay apart from the others, wondering which of them had stabbed Alice. Personally, he had not minded her sharp tongue: most of Oxford's whores were rather eager to please, hoping flattery would earn them extra money, and it was refreshing to meet one who spoke her mind. But he understood why his colleagues might have objected – Alice had been clever, and none would have appreciated being defeated in verbal badinage by a woman.

And which of them *had* employed her? Storteford had owned up instantly, Derlega had had to be coerced, while Malketon's denial was clearly a lie. And the masters? Geoffrey had seen Blund, Leycestria and York emerging from her lair at one time or another, and, although he could not imagine his brother frequenting such a place, Gryme was a man, with a man's needs and passions, so who really knew?

He winced as he recalled his foray to rescue Adam's body earlier. Blund and Leycestria had been the only ones brave enough to help him – Leycestria on condition that Geoffrey helped him reclaim some of his possessions from Stone Hall first, and Blund for reasons he declined to share. They had cut the victims down, and dug them hasty graves in a ditch – the interdict meant burials in churchyards were forbidden.

Of course, the interdict was ignored when it was convenient, thought Geoffrey bitterly. The churches were supposed to be closed and sacraments forbidden, but he had witnessed the funeral of a rich merchant only the previous week, while many priests still kept their offices. He wondered how long it would be before he could reclaim his brother's body and lay it in St Mary's, where it belonged.

'Do you believe those witnesses who say they saw Stone Hall's badge on the killer?' came Leycestria's voice out of the darkness. 'They may have been mistaken. Or lying.'

'They were not,' replied Foxtan, while the others sat up or stirred restlessly, happier talking, even about a grim subject like murder, than waiting for sleep that would not come. 'They were members of the Spicer clan, and they want the *real* killer punished. And they want his colleagues hanged with him. They will not rest until every one of us is dead.'

'Except you, I suppose,' said Malketon snidely. 'Our resident saint. The only one of us who can still walk the streets without fear of attack. It is a pity you only used your immunity to go to St Mary's to pray, and did not think to bring us bread. I have not eaten properly in days.'

'That would have been noticed,' said Gryme sharply. 'Kepeharm would have been told if Foxtan had loaded himself up with food, and then hunger would be the last thing on our minds.'

'But if the Spicer men *saw* this scholar,' pressed Leycestria, 'why do they not identify him? Then those of us who are innocent could go home.'

'True,' agreed Storteford. 'Kepeharm cannot hang us all if the culprit says the rest of us had nothing to do with his crime.'

‘You delude yourselves,’ said Gryme harshly. ‘Alice’s death has hit Kepeharm hard, and he is a vengeful fellow, with a deep-rooted hatred for the University.’

‘But it would clear the air if the culprit were to step forward,’ whispered Blund. ‘And while I shall be sorry to see another member of Stone Hall hang, he has only himself to blame.’

Malketon’s voice was cloyingly pious. ‘If I thought that would work, I would make a false confession, to save the rest of you. But such a sacrifice would be futile, so I shall not do it.’

‘Alice was popular with many scholars,’ mused Storteford. ‘Perhaps her killer was not one of us at all, but someone from another hall, who wore our badge as a disguise.’

‘Unlikely,’ said Geoffrey, who had spent almost every moment since Adam’s arrest pondering the known facts. ‘If he wore a disguise, it means he went intending to harm her. But witnesses say he and Alice were together for a long time, suggesting they passed most of it amicably. Everything points to a crime committed in the heat of the moment. *Ergo*, he could not have anticipated the need for a disguise.’

‘So there is no doubt, then,’ said Derlega, a tremor in his voice. ‘One of us *is* the culprit.’

‘Without question,’ replied Geoffrey flatly.

‘When I went to tell Kepeharm that Adam and Chestertone were innocent,’ began Foxtton tentatively, ‘his sergeant told me that Alice had discussed her clients with her sister. Margaret Spicer can name everyone at Stone Hall who—’

‘And Kepeharm believed her?’ demanded Malketon, outraged. ‘The sister of a whore?’

‘Then let us have this list,’ said Leycestria wearily. ‘Which of us has Margaret accused?’

‘Well, most,’ said Foxtton quietly. It was too dark for Geoffrey to see his face, but he could hear the sorrow in his voice. ‘Geoffrey and Storteford never hid their association with Alice, while Margaret says Derlega and Malketon were also regulars.’

‘I have never...’ spluttered Malketon, mortified.

‘Margaret says our doctors hired Alice, too,’ Foxtton continued quietly.

‘Then she is lying,’ declared Leycestria. ‘I do not hire whores.’

‘She is not lying,’ said Blund with a weary sigh. ‘I am sorry Leycestria, but you know we both visited her on occasion. So did York *and* Principal Gryme.’

‘Did you?’ asked Geoffrey of his brother.

‘Once,’ said Gryme stiffly. ‘When *your* riotous behaviour was leading me to distraction, and I felt the need for relief. Adam told me she was discreet. Clearly, he was wrong.’

‘Clearly,’ said Storteford, laughter in his voice. ‘So, none of us except Geoffrey and Foxtton have alibis, and we were all intimately acquainted with the victim. No wonder Kepeharm wants us dead!’

‘I do not like it here any more,’ said Derlega plaintively. ‘And I am frightened.’

‘You should be,’ said Leycestria bluntly. ‘We are all in mortal peril, thanks to a man who could not control his temper.’

‘Stop,’ ordered Gryme sharply. ‘Perhaps one of us *did* murder Alice, but eight of us did not. And it is time to protect the innocent among us – as we failed to protect Adam and Chestertone.’

‘What do you propose?’ asked Leycestria warily.

‘Kepeharm will not rest until he has had his vengeance, and if we flee the town, he may attack another hall in our stead. We cannot let that happen. So I suggest we invoke a *recessus*, and close the University.’

‘You are not *Magister Scolarum* now,’ whispered Blund, shocked. ‘You cannot make that sort of decision. Master de Lucy is in charge – *he* must do it.’

‘De Lacy fled days ago,’ said Storteford acidly. ‘He is no fool!’

‘But we have never invoked a *recessus* before,’ said Leycestria worriedly. ‘And if we leave, we may never be able to return. This is the only University in the country, and to close it down...’

‘It is a risk we must take,’ replied Gryme. ‘We cannot function under these conditions anyway. If Kepeharm refuses to acknowledge our benefit of clergy, it is only a matter of time before more of us die. And how many of our privileges are we prepared to surrender in order to stay?’

‘True,’ acknowledged Blund. ‘The Church cannot protect us here, so we should go to a town that does not hate us.’

‘Although that will change the moment we arrive,’ muttered Storteford caustically. ‘University men are mostly rude and arrogant, so it will not be long before we earn the antipathy of any new place. It is something we are rather good at, I think.’

‘Where shall we go?’ asked Malketon. ‘Northampton? That is a pleasant place with plenty of grammar schools.’

‘I would rather it were Reading,’ whispered Blund. ‘It is not so far to travel when we eventually return to Oxford. Of course, there is nothing there, except an abbey...But it is de Lacy’s home, and I am sure he will welcome us.’

‘Cambridge,’ stated Gryme. ‘We shall go to Cambridge.’

‘Cambridge?’ echoed Derlega, horrified. ‘But it is miles away, and December is a bad month for travelling.’

‘True, but many of us hail from the area,’ said Gryme. ‘Our families are respected there, and they will help us settle. And the churches of St Mary-by-the-Market and St Bene’t will serve as our lecture halls. It will not be for long, anyway. We will soon be back.’

‘I hope you are right,’ said Blund unhappily. ‘Because if you are not, we shall end up with a “University of Cambridge”, and that has a very peculiar ring to it.’

‘But one I could come to like,’ mused Leycestria. ‘When shall we go?’

‘Now,’ said Gryme, reaching for his tinderbox so candles could be lit. ‘While it is still dark. I shall write the proclamation, and Foxtton will nail it to the church door and ring the bell. There will be so much confusion that we shall be able to slip away without the guards recognising us.’

With the others clustering around him, he wrote out the order that would tell every scholar to leave Oxford and either join him in Cambridge, or de Lacy in Reading. Foxtton disappeared with it, and it was not long before the bell began to chime – the signal that told scholars something momentous was in the offing, and that they should hurry to the church to find out what. The *recessus* was official.

‘It is the right thing to do,’ Gryme said to Geoffrey as they hurried through the dark streets with bundles of their scant belongings. ‘I know you would rather stay here to prove Adam’s innocence, but you will die before you have answers.’

‘Actually, I am glad we are leaving, and when – if – the University does reconvene, I will not be part of it. I hate this place.’

‘We may be gone for years,’ said Gryme, smiling patronisingly. ‘You will feel differently—’

‘Never! But it was not Kepeharm and the Spicers who killed Adam. Our treacherous colleague did that when he stabbed Alice, and let two innocent men hang rather than confess—’

‘A confession would have made no difference,’ snapped Gryme. ‘There would just be three men buried in a ditch, instead of two.’

‘But Adam and Chestertone would not have died believing everyone thinks them killers. I will catch this monster, and when I do—’

‘Be careful of wild words,’ Gryme interrupted, alarmed. Geoffrey was a notorious brawler, and he did not want Stone Hall tainted with another murder.

‘They are spoken carefully, and after a good deal of contemplation. None of our colleagues have alibis, and everyone except Foxtton hired Alice’s favours. You have trained me in logic, so it should not be too difficult to deduce which of them is the culprit.’

‘I have no alibi,’ said Gryme quietly. ‘And I hired Alice. Will you investigate me, too?’

Geoffrey nodded without hesitation. ‘I *will* have the truth, no matter where it leads.’

II

Cambridge, January 1209¹

It was a bitterly cold day, with the wind scything across the Fens, turning rain into a stinging sleet. It had been easy to forget Cambridge's harsh winters in the more ameliorative climes of Oxford, but the first few days in the little Fen-edge town quickly reminded the scholars of Stone Hall what they had left behind.

'Whose idea was it to come here?' grumbled Malketon, as he stood with Geoffrey outside the Church of St Mary-by-the-Market, waiting for the vicar to come and unlock the door. He shivered and drew his cloak more closely around him. 'Was it your brother?'

'Yes, but you agreed.' Geoffrey had come to dislike Malketon even more since their flight from Oxford, and wished the man would make good on his promise to take the cowl. The nearest Benedictine house was in Ely, some fifteen miles distant, although even that was too close as far as Geoffrey was concerned.

Their journey from Oxford had taken them through Reading, where *Magister Scholarum* de Lacy had already established a temporary *studium generale*. Geoffrey had been astonished when his brother had brazenly selected the best scholars to accompany him to Cambridge, leaving the hapless de Lacy with the trouble-makers and idlers. It was a pity, he thought sourly, that Gryme had not managed to lose Malketon.

'It seemed a good idea at the time, but it was a mistake,' Malketon went on. 'Kepeharm's fervour will have faded by now, and if we had stayed, he would be begging our forgiveness.'

'You are wrong,' said Geoffrey shortly. 'He tracked us for days before finally turning for home. No Stone Hall scholar will ever be able to return there as long as he lives.'

'I fail to understand his persistence,' said Malketon sullenly. 'She was only a whore.'

'I imagine that is what her killer thought,' said Geoffrey, treating him to a hard stare. 'That her life was expendable, and not worth as much as his own.'

Malketon groaned. 'Enough, Geoffrey! Even your brother is tired of your obsession with this matter. And the rest of us have accepted Storteford's conclusions – that the murderer *did* intend to kill Alice, and wore one of our badges as a disguise.'

Geoffrey said nothing, although he was puzzled by Storteford's insistence that the culprit was not from Stone Hall. There was no doubt in Geoffrey's mind that the killer was one of their own, and it

1. The date at which the year officially commences has varied at different periods and in different countries. In England, between 1155 and the acceptance of the Gregorian reform of the calendar in 1752, the legal and civil year was reckoned to begin on 25 March – the Feast of the Annunciation, or Lady Day. Thus, 24 March was the last day of one year, and 25 March the first day of the next. Therefore, January 1209 followed directly from December 1209. Despite this, 1 January was commonly spoken of as New Year's Day, as Julius Caesar had fixed it in 45 BC.

occurred to him that Storteford's real intention in claiming otherwise might be to deflect suspicion from himself. He thought the same about Malketon, who was also eager to pass the blame to another foundation.

'You cannot expect to solve the crime now, anyway,' Malketon continued. 'So you should concentrate on your studies instead. Dr Leycestria told me yesterday that you are badly behind.'

But how could Geoffrey immerse himself in books when his brother's soul cried out for vengeance? He had done his best to find answers on the way from Oxford, but even the most garrulous of his colleagues had been battered into silence by the atrocious travelling conditions. He *had* enjoyed a modicum of success, though: from their own hall opposite, two scholars named Mauncestre and Driffeld had seen Blund fall asleep in Stone Hall's kitchen at around sunset, and had been amused when he had not woken for several hours. They had been able to say, without question, that Blund had not murdered Alice. Their testimony brought the number of potential culprits down to six.

Of these, Storteford and Malketon were Geoffrey's prime suspects. Storteford claimed to have been walking around Oxford all night, something most scholars avoided because it was dangerous. Geoffrey had questioned dozens of witnesses, but not one had seen him. When coupled with his curious insistence – against all logic – that Alice had been murdered by someone from another hall, Geoffrey could not but help be suspicious.

Meanwhile, Malketon claimed to have attended part of Foxton's St Eligius' Day vigil, then passed the rest of the night preparing for a disputation. But reliable witnesses said Malketon spent only moments at the vigil, and he had failed his examination. So far, Geoffrey had been unable to ascertain whether his poor performance was because he was not as good a theologian as he wanted everyone to believe, or because he had spent the night doing something other than studying.

This left Derlega, whose instinct had been to lie when asked about Alice, and whose alibi was a horse; Dr York, who had left Oxford the day after the murder, and had not been seen since; and Gryme, who had also concealed his relationship with Alice, and who claimed to have been reading when she died. It also included Leycestria, who also had initially denied an association with Alice, but whose alibi in Corner Hall was likely to bear out. When it did, Geoffrey's list would be down to five names.

'Here is Father Gervaise, at last,' grumbled Malketon, stamping his feet in an effort to warm them. 'Where has he been? It is freezing out here!'

Gervaise was a short, fat man with thin brown hair. He had been delighted when Gryme and his scholars had announced their intention of residing in the town until it was safe to return to Oxford. A clever man himself, he relished the company of other sharp minds.

Mayor Dunning had also welcomed the scholars, and so had his burgesses. The newcomers needed houses in which to live, food, ale, cloth, furniture, fuel for warmth and cooking, and materials for writing. They also needed servants – laundresses, barbers, bakers and cooks. Unfortunately, it had not taken long before the town worthies were also treated to a glimpse of the negative side of the scholars, and why they had not been popular in Oxford. Gryme had done his best to exclude the more rowdy elements from his flock, but it still included young men partial to taverns and loose women. Several fights had already broken out between locals and scholars, and several more between rival halls.

‘Did you hear about the brawl last night?’ Gervaise asked chattily, opening the church with an enormous key. ‘It was over who should have the house opposite St Michael’s Church – it was promised to Mayor Dunning’s nephew, but Master Mauncestre wants it, and offered to pay more.’

‘We *should* take precedence over townsmen,’ said Malketon, following him inside. ‘We have graced this undistinguished town with our presence, so the least it can do is give us what we want.’

‘Oh, it will,’ said Gervaise. ‘There are too many lawyers among you for it to do anything else.’

St Mary-by-the-Market was the town’s largest church, and had been one of the first buildings the scholars had elected to occupy. It was still open to parishioners – who were, of course, obliged to pay for its upkeep – but only when scholars were not using it. The same was true of St Bene’t’s and All Saints, and with more students arriving daily, it was only a matter of time before they laid claim to other churches, too.

Geoffrey paused to admire the building. It was a still, peaceful place, with real glass in its chancel windows. The floor was flagged, and its walls covered in paintings depicting the lives of saints – a riot of reds, yellows and greens. There were also wreaths of greenery set on the windowsills, adding an earthy aroma to the sweeter scent of incense.

Malketon knelt in front of the altar, and began to say his prayers, while Geoffrey helped Gervaise light candles and lay out the vessels for the mass. An almost unlimited supply of unpaid assistants was another reason why the vicar liked scholars.

‘Reading Abbey is not holding masses,’ remarked Geoffrey as he worked. ‘It is following the prohibitions laid down by the interdict.’

‘I have exempted myself from that,’ replied Gervaise haughtily. ‘How am I to earn a crust, if I do not serve my people? Besides, who will stop me? The Bishop? He is not even in the country!’

Geoffrey had learned from his first day in Cambridge that Gervaise was very interested in earning crusts. Somehow, his brother already knew about the vicar’s fondness for lucre, and a veritable fortune had passed into his hands to ease the scholars’ arrival in their new home.

‘Dr York arrived last night,’ Gervaise went on when there was no reply. Not for him silent contemplation before his offices – he loved to gossip. ‘The last surviving member of your hall. Will

you question *him* about the murder of that unfortunate lady? I know you are still interested in the matter, despite your brother's orders to let it lie.'

Geoffrey's pulse quickened. 'Where has he been?'

'Visiting his sick father, apparently. No, do not dash away now! You have not finished your duties here.'

'Malketon will do it.' Geoffrey itched to be gone. He had waited far too long to see York.

'Malketon!' spat Gervaise. He lowered his voice. 'He will do well with the Benedictines – all show and no substance. Look at him now! He pretends to pray, but you can see from here that his mind is elsewhere. Perhaps he is afraid York will have evidence that shows *he* killed the whore.'

Geoffrey supposed Malketon's demeanour did suggest his thoughts were on something other than his devotions, and took a step towards him, but Gervaise shoved a chalice in his hand.

'Polish this,' he ordered. 'And incidentally, Storteford should watch himself, too. Oxford may look the other way while stable-boys are seduced, but we take a dim view of that sort of thing in Cambridge.'

Geoffrey stared at him. 'But he was one of Alice's—'

'Oh, I am sure he said so.' Gervaise's eyes were bright with malice. 'But it would not be true. Many of the town's loose women come to me for confession – I believe it is morally wrong to obey the interdict and deprive the desperate of the chance to save their souls by confession, especially if they can pay – and although the rest of you feature regularly in their tallies, he is remarkable by his absence.'

The moment the mass was over, Geoffrey left at a run, aiming for the house on Foule Lane, where Stone Hall had made its new home. It was a drab building with a thatched roof in desperate need of repair, and comprised a single chamber for teaching on the ground floor with three poky rooms for sleeping above. Its yard had a stable and a separate kitchen, while a gate led to a tangle of brambles that would have to be cleared before planting vegetables in the spring. It was hardly what they had been used to in Oxford, and 'hall' seemed altogether too grand an appellation. Storteford had wryly dubbed it Foule Hostel, a name that had stuck.

Gryme was lecturing on Lombard's *Sentences*, and Dr Blund, Foxton and Storteford were listening, taking notes on the wax tablets they held on their knees. Derlega was gazing absently out of the window, while Leycestria dozed by the fire – which meant York had not yet arrived, or they would be squabbling. Deprived of his primary target, Geoffrey grabbed Storteford's arm instead, and hauled him outside, ignoring the outraged objections of his brother. Storteford tried to resist, but Geoffrey was an experienced brawler, and more than a match for him.

‘Why did you not tell me?’ he demanded, shoving the other scholar against the wall in the yard. ‘You let me think you enjoyed Alice’s favours.’

Storteford’s eyebrows shot up in surprise. ‘I did enjoy them! What do you want? Details?’

‘You never met her,’ snarled Geoffrey in disgust. ‘Because you prefer—’

‘What I prefer is none of your damned business,’ hissed Storteford, alarm in his eyes.

‘No,’ conceded Geoffrey. ‘But it means you did not kill Alice.’

‘Is that what this is about?’ Storteford sagged in relief. ‘I thought you intended to expose me. I should have known that *you* would not have taken exception to my—’

‘Your walk that night? Was it to see a stable-boy?’

‘No.’ Storteford looked around quickly, then lowered his voice. ‘It was to see John de Horningsea. He is an influential scholar, so you will appreciate why I had to keep his name quiet.’

‘He arrived here three days ago,’ said Geoffrey.

‘Yes, and I have been obliged to avail myself of stable-lads in the interim. Unfortunately, that damned vicar found out. I wondered how long it would be before he gossiped about me.’

Geoffrey rubbed a weary hand over his eyes. ‘So why did you lie about Alice?’

‘Why do you think? It is better to be considered a whore-monger than a man whose tastes run in other directions. I did not want to become the butt of jokes.’

‘I would not—’ began Geoffrey.

‘Malketon would have mocked me, while your brother’s disapproval would have known no bounds.’ Storteford sighed. ‘I considered asking Horningsea to testify for my whereabouts that night, but I did not want him dragged into Stone Hall’s mire.’

‘I wish I had known this sooner – I would not have wasted hours trying to question you,’ said Geoffrey, thinking his list of suspects was now down to five.

‘Christ’s blood!’ groaned Storteford. ‘Here comes your brother, wanting to know why you so rudely intruded on his teaching. Will you tell him what you have learned about me?’

‘No, but Gervaise will. And you will have to pay for *his* silence.’

Storteford took one look at the furious expression on Dr Gryme’s face, and promptly made himself scarce; Geoffrey had seriously overstepped the mark when he had disrupted a lecture, and he did not want to share the blame. Leycestria and Blund were at Gryme’s heels, also outraged that he should dare interrupt the academic musings of a Doctor of Theology.

‘Explain yourself!’ shouted Gryme angrily. ‘Why did you storm into my hostel and use physical force on another scholar?’

‘I was eliminating a suspect for Alice’s murder,’ replied Geoffrey. ‘Storteford is innocent.’

‘Really?’ asked Leycestria in surprise, when Gryme only gaped at his brother’s insolence – and his complete lack of remorse. ‘He is my second favourite suspect – after York – because there has always been something a little peculiar about him.’

‘I hear York arrived in Cambridge last night,’ said Geoffrey. ‘Where is he?’

‘Stop!’ snapped Gryme angrily. ‘You will leave York alone. He is a University doctor, and it is not for you to interrogate him. Do I make myself clear?’

‘Quite clear, but—’ began Geoffrey.

‘Your brother is right,’ whispered Blund. ‘We are all weary of hearing about Alice. And about Adam and Chestertone, too, if the truth be told. We are sorry for what happened, but dwelling on the matter will do no one any good.’

‘Exactly!’ snarled Gryme. ‘It is not easy starting new lives here, and we cannot afford to let past events divide and distract us.’

‘Adam is not a “past event”,’ declared Geoffrey hotly. ‘And five members of Stone Hall remain on my list of suspects – and will do until they are properly eliminated. They are York, Malketon, Derlega, Dr Leycestria and you.’

‘How dare you!’ cried Leycestria, while Gryme’s jaw dropped a second time. ‘I am above reproach, and so is your brother. So are the rest of your colleagues, although York...’

‘Make him stop this madness, Gryme,’ whispered Blund. ‘Or he will see us exiled from here as well. I do not want to have to return to Reading. It is a little too primitive for my tastes.’

‘I will expel you if you persist in this matter, Geoffrey,’ declared Gryme coldly. ‘And you know me well enough to appreciate that I do not make idle threats.’

‘You cannot expel me from a University that does not exist,’ retorted Geoffrey.

‘I am a scholar,’ said Gryme between gritted teeth, his voice full of the ruthless authority of a man who had brought about a *recessus* with a few strokes of a pen. ‘Trained to find ways around such niceties. Defy me at your peril.’

Far from deterring Geoffrey, the warning made him all the more determined. Leycestria started to follow him as he left Foule Hostel, and Geoffrey was sure he had been detailed to ensure he did as he was told. But it was easy to lose the older man in the warren of lanes around the Market Square, and as soon as he did, Geoffrey turned towards Horningsea’s home. He believed Storteford, but there was no harm in having the alibi confirmed. And when he had finished, he would hunt down York.

Unfortunately, when he arrived at ‘New Corner Hall’, Horningsea was out. Geoffrey waited impatiently, hearing the bells marking the offices of prime and then terce. Outside the window, townsfolk were grumbling – the arrival of scholars, many of whom kept monastic offices in

defiance of the interdict, meant the bells were used rather more frequently than previously, and the residents found the constant jangling an annoyance.

Eventually, loath to waste more time, Geoffrey returned to Foule Hostel. He knew something was wrong as soon as he opened the door and heard furious voices. He stepped inside, disappointed to note that York was not there. Neither was Storteford.

‘This is your fault!’ Malketon jabbed a shaking finger at Geoffrey. ‘He mentioned new evidence to help catch Alice’s killer, and the next thing we know, he is dead!’

‘Who is dead?’ asked Geoffrey, bewildered. ‘York?’

‘No, although he is probably the culprit,’ said Leycestria. ‘I doubt I am the only one who thinks it odd that York should arrive last night, and Derlega is dead this morning. Stabbed, like Alice.’

‘Derlega?’ echoed Geoffrey, shocked. ‘But I saw him in John’s lecture—’

‘That was two hours ago,’ said Blund softly.

Stomach churning, Geoffrey followed his brother up the stairs to the chamber Derlega had shared with Malketon and Leycestria. Derlega was slumped over a table in the window, where spilled ink and a pen said he had been writing when he had died. Geoffrey had never seen the man’s hands so dirty, stained not only with the ink, but with soot, too. Foxtton was kneeling next to him, his face ashen as he prayed.

‘I found him a few moments ago,’ explained Leycestria, also pale. ‘After Dr Gryme’s lecture, he said he had business to attend, and came up here alone. When I came to fetch him...’

‘Did anyone hear anything suspicious?’ Geoffrey asked, recoiling when he saw the ugly wound in Derlega’s back. ‘A struggle? A cry?’

‘Dr Gryme’s lecture was complex, and we all felt the need for fresh air afterwards,’ explained Foxtton. ‘We each went our separate way – to the yard, the kitchen, the stable, the street...’

‘I would never have left him had I known...’ Malketon began to cry, although Geoffrey looked at him sharply. There was a forced quality to the sobs, as though they were being produced because they were expected of him, rather than from any genuine emotion. Moreover, he had not entered the room, but was standing outside it, almost invisible in the shadows.

‘Could someone have come in from outside?’ Geoffrey asked, struggling to suppress his natural dislike of Malketon and review the situation objectively.

‘York,’ replied Leycestria promptly. ‘Malketon says Derlega had uncovered new evidence about Alice’s murder, so York must have determined that it would never come to light. He stabbed Derlega and stole whatever he was writing. You can see there is pen and ink, but no parchment.’

‘No,’ said Foxtton quietly. ‘To enter Foule Hostel, Dr York would have had to come through the front door. And he did not, because I was sitting on the step the entire time – from the moment Dr Gryme finished his lecture until Dr Leycestria raised the alarm.’

‘And no one entered?’ pressed Geoffrey. Had it been another of his colleagues replying, he would have treated the testimony with caution, but Foxton never lied.

‘No one.’

Geoffrey felt slightly sick. Logic dictated that there could not be *two* ruthless knifemen in one hostel, and now Derlega was dead, and York could not have entered without being seen by Foxton, it meant only Malketon, Leycestria and Gryme were left on his list. He sincerely hoped he could prove Malketon or Leycestria guilty, because he did not want to learn that one of his brothers had let the other die a dreadful death.

‘So are we to understand that Derlega uncovered a clue about Alice’s murder?’ asked Blund uncertainly. ‘But was stabbed as he was writing it down?’

‘Yes!’ declared Malketon. ‘He was putting it all in a letter to the Bishop. He discovered something at dawn, and was mulling over what to do about it during Dr Gryme’s lecture. Afterwards, he told me he had made his decision, and asked me to leave him alone while he wrote his missive.’

‘Why the Bishop?’ asked Geoffrey. ‘*I* am the one who has been trying to solve the case. And the Bishop is not even in the country.’

‘He said you are still too angry to act rationally,’ replied Malketon with calculated spite. ‘And he wanted the Bishop to resolve the matter legally – as should have happened in Oxford.’

‘I applaud his sense of justice,’ sighed Gryme. ‘But I said no good can come of pursuing the matter, and it is time it was forgotten before anyone else dies.’

‘It will never be forgotten,’ vowed Geoffrey. ‘Not by me. And not by the Church, either – the bishops cannot afford to overlook two scholars hanged by a secular authority without a proper trial.’

‘True,’ agreed Leycestria. ‘It is only a matter of time before the King loses this contest of wills with Rome, and then Oxford can expect some very heavy reprisals. Its relations with the University will become more strained than ever, and I cannot help but wonder whether it will ever be safe to return. Perhaps we should stay here.’

‘You mean establish a University of Cambridge?’ whispered Blund, startled.

‘Why not?’ asked Gryme softly. ‘England is under interdict, and our King is excommunicated. It might be years before Oxford is forced to apologise for what it has done, and I am more than happy to make our situation here permanent. Indeed, I have already raised the possibility with the Bishop’s representative in Ely. The Archdeacon thinks it is an excellent notion.’

Geoffrey looked sharply at him. Had that been his brother’s intention from the beginning? Since resigning as *Magister Scholarum*, Gryme’s power in Oxford had waned, and he had been very quick to order a *recessus*. Had he decided he wanted a University of his own, with scholars of his own choosing? Was that why so many trouble-makers had been left behind in Reading? And if that were

the case, had Alice's murder and the subsequent executions been a useful coincidence, or part of a carefully laid plan?

'It is a fine idea!' exclaimed Malketon with a grin, grief for his friend forgotten. 'We shall have to oust townsfolk from some of the better houses, and lay claim to more parish churches, but there should be no problem with that.'

Geoffrey scowled at them all. 'We can discuss this another time, when Derlega does not lie murdered in front of us. What did he learn about Alice's murder, Malketon? Did he tell you?'

'No,' sniffed Malketon resentfully. 'But it must have been something he saw as we all got up this morning, because he confided in me shortly afterwards.'

'Then a search of everyone's possessions should tell us what he found,' said Geoffrey, thinking he would start with Malketon, then move to Leycestria, and only inspect his brother's if nothing came of them. It would not take long, because they had left almost everything in Oxford.

'No!' stated Gryme firmly, his voice the loudest in the immediate clamour of objections. 'I forbid it. It will set a dangerous precedent.'

'And what precedent is that?' demanded Geoffrey. 'One that exposes killers?'

'One that fosters an atmosphere of suspicion and distrust,' snapped Gryme.

'As opposed to one that sees us murdered for uncovering the truth?' asked Geoffrey, struggling to keep his temper.

'There is the bell for sext,' said Foxton, his calm voice cutting across the furious response his Principal started to make. 'So I suggest we all repair to the church, and pray for Derlega's soul. I doubt his killer granted him absolution before striking, so he will need our petitions.'

'And so will his killer,' muttered Geoffrey blackly. 'When I find him.'

There was a great deal to do after Derlega's death. Gryme did not want his hostel befouled with the taint of murder, so arrangements were made with Gervaise for a quick interment in St Mary's churchyard. Unfortunately, Mayor Dunning happened to be passing, and came to make solicitous enquiries. Gryme's vague replies made him suspect plague, so more lies needed to be told in order to alleviate his concerns. Geoffrey hoped his brother would remember all the tales he had told, because he had spun a complex web, and it would be easy to trip up with contradictions later.

Word soon spread that Derlega had fallen prey to a strange malady, and scholars from other hostels came to offer their condolences. They did not discuss Derlega's fate for long, however: Gryme, Leycestria and Blund were eager to share their plans for a new university. The reactions of the more influential visitors told Geoffrey it was not the first time the subject had been aired, and that preparations were already further forward than its instigators wanted most to know.

During the afternoon, the Archdeacon appeared. He had taken to visiting Cambridge often since the scholars had arrived, partly to ensure there was no trouble between them and the town, but also to make use of their expertise – there were always deeds to be witnessed in his line of work, and it was convenient to have a supply of literate men on his doorstep. Geoffrey wondered whether he would be quite so eager to help establish a permanent *studium generale* in Cambridge if he knew a murderer was going to be among its founding members. The question had no sooner formed in his mind when the Archdeacon asked it.

‘There was no truth in those allegations,’ replied Gryme firmly. ‘Oxford hanged two innocent scholars – one of them poor Adam – but the truth is that a *townsman* killed Alice.’

He did not look at Geoffrey, but Geoffrey could still feel himself being warned to stay silent. His brother, he realised again, was possessed of an extremely powerful persona.

‘Quite,’ added Malketon, speaking boldly for a junior scholar. ‘Mayor Kepeharm hates the University, and the dead woman was his mistress. He was deranged by grief, but will be sorry he accused us when he comes to his senses.’

‘Please, no more of this unsavoury subject,’ declared Leycestria. ‘Let us discuss how best to proceed with our new University. I have a number of ideas you may find interesting.’

The discussion became drearily detailed, and Geoffrey slipped away, confident in the knowledge that it would keep his three surviving suspects and Blund occupied for hours. Meanwhile Foxton had gone to pray at Derlega’s grave, there was still no sign of York, and Storteford was reading. It was the perfect opportunity to search his colleagues’ belongings undetected, and see whether he could find whatever it was that Derlega had discovered.

He lit a candle, and crept up the stairs. He entered Derlega’s room, and knelt next to the little chest that belonged to Malketon, swearing under his breath when he found it locked. Trust a prospective Benedictine to look after his personal possessions, he thought irritably. Having never picked a lock before, he was not sure where to start. He sat back on his heels, then spun around in alarm when he heard a sound behind him.

‘I came to help,’ explained Storteford softly. ‘I liked Derlega, and while Gryme and Leycestria seem happy to see him shoved in the ground with no questions asked, I am not.’

‘Keep watch, then,’ instructed Geoffrey. ‘I would rather not be caught doing this – my brother will expel me for certain, and then I will never have answers.’

‘Hurry, then. And do not forget to look in Derlega’s bag.’

Geoffrey frowned. ‘What would be the point of that? *He* was not the killer!’

‘No,’ said Storteford, ‘but he found something that told him who is. I doubt he left whatever it was where he found it, lest the killer destroyed it. So, he will have hidden it somewhere safe.’

‘Not in his bag, then,’ determined Geoffrey. ‘That would not be safe. In fact, I doubt anywhere in Foule Hostel is – communal living does not lend itself to privacy.’

‘Perhaps he had some secret place. I certainly do – I do not want my intimate letters from Horningsea found and read by the rest of you.’

‘The chimney!’ exclaimed Geoffrey suddenly. He saw Storteford’s bemusement, and hastened to explain. ‘I saw soot on Derlega’s hands earlier, which was most unusual.’

He crouched by the hearth and began to poke around inside it, dislodging clots of soot as he did so. Eventually, he detected a loose stone. It was not easy to remove, and clearly involved some knack known only to Derlega, but he managed eventually, letting it fall with a clatter. Then it was the work of but a moment to withdraw a piece of parchment from the recess it had concealed. Sensing his excitement, Storteford came to kneel next to him, holding the candle while Geoffrey unfolded the parchment. Inside were a few strands of hair, the colour a deep gold.

‘Alice Spicer’s?’ asked Storteford in a whisper. ‘Did the killer take them as some kind of trophy? How macabre!’

‘There is a reddish stain here,’ said Geoffrey, squinting in the unsteady light. ‘Either blood from her wound, or from the killer’s hands. Clever Derlega!’

Storteford frowned. ‘What do you mean? Derlega was the last man in Foule Hostel who could be described so – indeed, he was fortunate that Masketon helped him with his academic exercises, or he would have been sent down in his first term.’

‘Well, he was clever in this instance. The killer almost certainly claimed more than these few hairs, and probably uses something to tie them together, too – a piece of ribbon, perhaps. Derlega took a sample to show the Bishop, leaving the bulk of the “trophy” with the killer, to incriminate him later.’

‘Then *I* know the killer’s identity, too!’ exclaimed Storteford, regarding him in horror. ‘I have seen such an object with my own eyes! He keeps it wrapped in red twine, and wears it around his neck. When I asked about it, he said it belonged to his mother—’

‘Who?’ asked Geoffrey, his heart pounding. He could hear the meeting breaking up downstairs, and the Archdeacon urging the participants to go with him to the church, to pray for the venture’s success. There was a lot of laughing and bonhomie, indicating some sort of agreement had been reached – and that the scholars were delighted.

‘I will tell you,’ Storteford was saying. ‘But like Derlega, I want the matter handled by the Church, not by you. You must promise not to charge off—’

Geoffrey was so intent on Storteford that he had forgotten all about staying vigilant, and did not see the shadow that had crept up behind them. Storteford issued a strangled gasp as the knife entered his back, and, falling, dropped the candle, plunging the room into almost complete darkness.

Geoffrey staggered to his feet, but the killer was waiting, and there was a searing pain in his side. He tried to shout for help, but his cry coincided with a gale of laughter from below. The last thing he knew was Alice Spicer's hairs being tugged from his hand.

III

Cambridge, March 1209

Snow still lay on the ground, the wind seemed unceasing, and Geoffrey was not alone in wondering whether the decision to found a permanent University in Cambridge was a wise one. The newcomers complained unendingly about cold feet, chilblains and coughs, and when Foxton spotted a crocus poking through the frigid earth, the scholars of Foule Hostel were sufficiently heartened to hold an impromptu celebration.

Geoffrey had been quiet and withdrawn since the attack that had cost Storteford his life, unable to shake the conviction that it had been his fault: he had known the killer was ruthless, and it was inexcusable to have lowered his guard. Moreover, his own wound had left him delirious for several days, and by the time he had remembered the hairs, there seemed little point in mentioning them to anyone else. The killer would certainly have disposed of them, and his inability to remember much immediately after the assault meant his colleagues were likely to regard resurfacing memories with scepticism.

He was not sure what manner of investigation had followed the incident, but he knew it had done little for University–town relations. His brother had blamed the townsfolk, the Archdeacon had supported his contention, and the town had been fined. The patent unfairness made Geoffrey wonder how long it would be before Mayor Dunning followed Kepeharm’s example, and hanged a few scholars to express *his* feelings towards the new foundation.

‘You will be one of our first graduates if you continue in this vein,’ said Gryme, beaming at him at the end of a morning’s lectures. ‘I always knew you had it in you to be a scholar. And I cannot recall the last time you enjoined a drunken brawl, either. That attack must have knocked some sense into you. Perhaps I should have done it years ago!’

‘Is that a confession?’ asked Geoffrey coolly.

Gryme rolled his eyes. ‘Do you really see me as a man who stabs people?’

Geoffrey did not reply. He had done his best to recall what had happened that night, straining at elusive memories for a glimpse of a robe or a boot that would identify the culprit. But the whole event was a blur, and even if something did occur to him, he knew it might be the product of wishful thinking. He had watched Leycestria, Malketon and his brother carefully, but to no avail. He was as far from unveiling the culprit in March as he had been the day Adam was hanged.

York had returned to the fold while Geoffrey was still confined to bed, and had immediately resumed his state of animosity with Leycestria. There was something oddly comforting in their familiar bickering, although Geoffrey put as much faith in Leycestria’s claim that York had stabbed him, as he had in York’s whispered assurances that Leycestria was responsible.

York had arrived in Cambridge with lofty ambitions, and had decided he would be Bishop of Ely when the current incumbent vacated the post. He had gone there the previous week, taking with him several barrels of wine to start buying the monks' favour. Leycestria moped with no one to fight, and was testy and uncommunicative.

Foxton and Blund were also in Ely, the former having taken holy orders in the Benedictine Abbey, and the latter having secured himself a lucrative position as the Archdeacon's Clerk. Meanwhile, Dr Gryme spent every waking moment working to ensure the University was at Cambridge to stay, and Malketon was his obedient servant, seeking to haul himself up the greasy pole of success by hanging to the hem of a more able man.

Geoffrey was sorry that the once-proud Stone Hall, bursting at the seams with eleven active members, should be reduced to himself, his brother, Leycestria and Malketon, all rattling around Foule Hostel like peas in a coffin. And Gryme's remark about Geoffrey's recent good conduct had nothing to do with a willingness to conform, but the fact he no longer had anyone with whom to misbehave – Adam, Chestertone, Derlega and Storteford had been lively companions, and he missed them.

He left Foule Hostel when the Archdeacon arrived with more University business, and went for a walk. He could smell soggy earth from a recent downpour, the dank stench of the Fens, and the sewage and rubbish that festered in piles along the sides of the road. But there was something sweeter, too – the white blossom that was beginning to unfurl in the hedgerows and the scent of new growth from the fields across the river.

As he passed St Mary's churchyard, he realised it had been some time since he had visited Derlega and Storteford. He knelt in the long grass, and was just muttering pithy oaths at a dandelion that stubbornly resisted his efforts to remove it when Gervaise came to stand next to him.

'Make sure you get the root, or it will be back next week,' the vicar advised. 'And speaking of unwanted weeds, have you heard that John de Horningsea returned today? He has been in Reading for the last couple of months, poaching the best scholars from Master de Lacy, so we will be a better rival to Oxford when the *recessus* ends.'

'Horningsea?' Geoffrey knew the name, but could not place it.

'The Principal of New Corner Hall,' explained Gervaise impatiently. 'He was ordered away from Cambridge the morning before Derlega and Storteford died, which was odd, because I am *sure* Horningsea was Storteford's lover. Do you remember me telling you so, back in January?'

Geoffrey winced when a vision of him shoving Storteford against a wall came to mind, and his bullying tactics in forcing his friend to reveal the identity of the man who would give him an alibi for Alice's murder. He had tried to check it, he recalled, but Horningsea had been out, and there had

been no point once Storteford was dead. Not that he could have questioned Horningsea anyway, of course, if the man had been sent off on official business.

‘He was ordered away to poach students the *morning* before Storteford died?’ he asked, puzzled.

Gervaise nodded. ‘So I took it upon myself to inform him of his lover’s fate, by letter, although he did not have the grace to acknowledge my consideration.’

‘But the decision to found a permanent University was not taken until the evening,’ said Geoffrey. ‘When the Archdeacon came. Along with Mauncestre and Driffeld from St Edmund’s Hall. How could anyone have known to send him sooner?’

Gervaise shrugged. ‘If you want my opinion, the decision was taken before you even left Oxford. I have nothing to prove it, of course. Just intuition.’

Bemused, Geoffrey left the churchyard, and began to walk towards Horningsea’s home, thinking it might be a kindness to tell him that Storteford had died quickly and without pain. No one else would know to do it. He was conducted through a hall that smelled of boiled onions, and out into a scrubby garden, where the man himself was sitting pensively on the edge of a well. He smiled wanly as Geoffrey approached, and indicated he was to perch next to him.

‘Storteford’s friend,’ he said softly. ‘Gervaise wrote to tell me he was dead, yet my thoughts have been full of him since I arrived back today. Gervaise said he was murdered by drunken townsmen. If I had not agreed to leave that day, we would have been together – and he would not be dead now.’

‘I came to see you that morning,’ said Geoffrey. ‘I waited between prime and terce for you to return, but you never did.’

‘I was receiving orders from your brother,’ said Horningsea ruefully. ‘But he had finished by terce, so you only missed me by moments. I was on the road to Reading before noon, though – Dr Gryme would countenance no delays. Why did you come that day?’

‘It does not matter now,’ replied Geoffrey. ‘What orders did my brother give you?’

‘To inveigle myself into the community of scholars at Reading, and encourage certain ones to abandon de Lacy and come here instead. And what I should say to de Lacy, should he ever discover what I was doing and demand an explanation. It took me four months, but I believe I have done well. We shall have a University to be proud of.’

‘Is it ethical, do you think?’ asked Geoffrey uncertainly. ‘The *recessus* will end eventually, and many scholars will return to Oxford. But it will not be the same place if the best minds are here.’

‘I *hope* it is not the same,’ said Horningsea with a wry grin. ‘We will be competitors – and as the younger foundation, we shall need all the advantages we can muster.’

‘My brother is determined the University here will succeed.’

‘Oh, yes!’ agreed Horningsea. ‘He will stop at nothing to ensure it does. In fact, Storteford wrote me a letter the day I left, and gave it to some pilgrims to deliver. It arrived weeks after his death, of

course, but it was of comfort to me. He told me you had discovered our secret, but that you were no *John Gryme*, to cast judgement and see us banished.'

'John would not—'

'He will permit *nothing* to taint his new school,' interrupted Horningsea. 'And you would be wise to remember it. Storteford also said you might ask whether he was with me the night Alice was killed, and I can tell you that he was. Several of my colleagues at Corner Hall will confirm it, too – they tended to watch our comings and goings for salacious amusement.'

'I believed him anyway.' Geoffrey shrugged. 'I only came to be thorough.'

'As your brother taught you, I suppose. Storteford wrote that he would help you find Alice's murderer, but he also said he had a feeling you might be stopped.'

Geoffrey stared at him, not sure what he was saying. 'Are you suggesting John—'

Horningsea's eyebrows shot into his hair. 'Good Lord, no! However, I doubt he was overly sorry when those robbers broke into Foule Hostel and prevented the two of you from meddling.'

Geoffrey took his leave, his thoughts a dark, frightening turmoil. *Had* his brother dispatched Derlega and Storteford, to ensure neither should tarnish the reputation of the growing community of scholars in the Fens? He had been very quick to assure the Archdeacon that no scholar had murdered Alice, when he knew for a fact that the culprit was a member of his own foundation.

Geoffrey had no recollection of what had happened after he had been stabbed, but his brother claimed to have been the first on the scene. Malketon had later revealed that Gryme's clothes had been drenched in blood from his efforts to save Storteford, but the killer's would have been drenched, too. Foxton had added that there had been so much confusion and panic that it had been difficult to know who had done what and when. But they both agreed that it had been Gryme's idea to blame the attack on the town.

Geoffrey leaned against a wall, feeling sick. His brother must have dispatched Alice to precipitate a crisis that would allow him to order a *recessus*, and had even sacrificed Adam to ensure his plans came to fruition. He had almost sacrificed Geoffrey, too, because it had only been by luck that he had survived the attack. Perhaps the delirium that had followed, and his disinclination to resume his investigation afterwards, had saved him from further violence.

He began to run, a vision of Adam's face filling his mind. His brother had suffered a terrible fate because John Gryme had wanted to found a University to rival Oxford! As he tore along, Geoffrey vowed that John would pay. He reached Foule Hostel and burst in. Gryme was lying on the floor, groaning. Geoffrey skidded to a standstill in confusion.

'Geoffrey,' gasped Gryme. 'Thank God! I should have listened to you, because...'

He moved his hand to reveal a patch of bright blood. Geoffrey darted to his side, pulling the material away to inspect the wound underneath.

‘The killer!’ Gryme’s voice was weak and frightened. ‘I found a lock of hair in a ribbon. It was Alice’s hair – I would know it anywhere, God rest her soul.’

‘Would you? You claimed you only lay with her once.’

Gryme ignored him. ‘He must wear it round his neck, like a lover’s token. Or perhaps to remind him of the terrible thing he did. But the string broke, and I found it on the floor...It was not there earlier, and you have been out, so it can only belong to one of two others.’

‘Malketon?’ asked Geoffrey, not sure whether to believe him. ‘Or Leycestria?’

‘Malketon! I was turning it over in my hands, pondering its significance, and suddenly there was a searing pain in my back. He snatched the ribbon from me, and was gone, leaving me to bleed to death. Thank God you found me! No! Do not go! He may come back!’

‘I should fetch a surgeon—’

‘There was murder in his heart as he surged towards me,’ whispered Gryme, gripping Geoffrey’s hand hard. ‘All grey cloak and flashing blade.’

‘Are you sure it was Malketon?’ asked Geoffrey. ‘Because Leycestria has a grey cloak, too.’

‘Of course I am sure! You were right all along – we should never have ignored the threat he posed. Now he will add me to his list of victims, and destroy my University into the bargain. It will never survive without me to guide it through its infancy.’

‘You are not dying,’ said Geoffrey, taking a clean cloth from the drying rack over the hearth and using it to bandage his brother’s shoulder. ‘I am sure it is painful, and a surgeon will be needed to stitch it, but you will live to father your damned school.’

Gryme gazed at him in disbelief. ‘But there is blood! Pots of it!’

‘Yes. And all from your right shoulder blade – at an angle that makes self infliction unlikely.’

Gryme’s jaw dropped. ‘You think I did this myself?’

‘Not now. Moreover, the amount of blood on the floor indicates you have not moved since the assault, but the lock of hair is gone. You did not kill Alice, either.’

‘Of course I did not kill Alice!’ snapped Gryme. ‘I told you so at the time.’

Geoffrey helped him sit on a bench, and fetched him watered wine. It was not long before the colour began to seep back into the Principal’s cheeks. Geoffrey sat next to him.

‘I thought she might have been murdered to engineer a *recessus*,’ he said quietly.

Gryme grimaced. ‘You have a nasty mind, Geoffrey! A *recessus* was a foregone conclusion the moment the Pope placed the country under interdict and excommunicated King John. It was obvious John would challenge the Church by attacking its clerics, and life in Oxford was growing untenable long before Alice died. She meant we went a little earlier, but that is all.’

‘But you threatened me with expulsion if I continued to look into her death.’

‘Of course I did! Your reckless questions were earning you enemies, and I wanted to protect you. But I have not forgotten her – or Derlega and Storteford. I have been exploring their murders, discreetly, ever since. You gave up after you were stabbed, but *I* have not stopped asking questions and gathering evidence.’

‘I have not seen you,’ said Geoffrey suspiciously.

‘Obviously not,’ replied Gryme, smiling for the first time. ‘Because then it would not have been discreet, would it? I had narrowed my list to five suspects – unlike you, I declined to dismiss the possibility that someone wore our badge in a deliberate attempt to mislead. But after the murderous attack on me it is reduced to one.’

‘Malketon?’

‘Malketon.’

Neither Geoffrey nor Gryme could begin to guess where Malketon might have gone, and Gryme was in no condition to engage in chases. He insisted that Geoffrey stay with him until the surgeon had finished, although Geoffrey suspected it was a ploy to keep him from tracking Malketon alone.

‘He will not have gone far,’ said Gryme, as the daylight faded, and a damp, drizzling dusk set in. The wind was picking up, too, whistling down the chimney, and making the fire gutter and flare. ‘He is not such a fool as to leave the town alone. The roads are too dangerous, and he knows it.’

‘He knows he might hang for murder, too,’ said Geoffrey. ‘And even if the Church intervenes, and he finds himself exiled to some pleasantly remote priory, he will still have to answer to me.’

‘And to me.’

‘How did you know about the hair?’ asked Geoffrey. ‘Storteford and I discovered it, but the only other person who can know is the killer himself.’

‘And the man who sat with you during your delirium,’ said Gryme. ‘It was difficult to make sense of your fevered ramblings, but I managed eventually. I learned that Derlega had found the talisman, and had removed a few strands. And that the killer took them, believing you were dead.’

‘Would you have stopped Derlega writing his letter?’

‘Of course,’ replied Gryme, unabashed. ‘But by reasoning with him, not by killing him. The Bishop does not need to know our unsavoury secrets.’

‘Because he would decline to support your new University?’

‘He will not let a few murders interfere with that! He stands to benefit greatly from a *studium generale* in his diocese – it will provide an endless stream of learned men to witness his charters, and he can pick and choose who he will hire to help him run his see. He has already secured Blund and Foxton – both excellent catches.’

‘Then why?’

Gryme shrugged. ‘Because it is *our* business. We will deal with these matters ourselves. But I was right to break away from Oxford. It is growing fat and complacent, and a little healthy competition will do us all good. Besides, other countries have more than one University, so why should we not?’

Suddenly, the door opened. Geoffrey came to his feet fast when Malketon entered, Leycestria at his heels.

‘God and all his saints preserve us!’ exclaimed Malketon, the colour draining from his face as he stared at the floor where Gryme had been lying. ‘Is that *blood*?’

And without another word, he fainted.

‘I have always had weakness over blood,’ said Malketon, after Geoffrey had splashed water on his face and settled him on a bench, a cloth hiding the offending stain on the floor. ‘The very sight of it makes me...’

‘Do not think about it,’ advised Geoffrey, seeing him begin to reel again.

‘You did not swoon when you drove a blade into my body,’ said Gryme accusingly. ‘You were perfectly strong then.’

Malketon shook his head weakly. ‘How many more times must I say it? I have not stabbed anyone. I would be incapable!’

‘You are not!’ declared Leycestria. ‘Gryme saw you, and he is not a man given to flights of fancy. You killed Alice – we all knew you were lying when you claimed you had never visited her – and you have no alibi. Moreover, you murdered Derlega and Storteford, too.’

‘Do not deny it,’ said Gryme, when Malketon opened his mouth. ‘You are caught. And there are three of us now, so do not think you can defeat us all. Besides, Geoffrey knows how to brawl.’

‘No!’ cried Malketon. ‘I could never—’

‘You must have steeled yourself to the sound of the blade as it penetrated vital organs,’ said Geoffrey, watching him closely. ‘And the splatter of hot blood that followed was—’

He jumped forward and caught Malketon just before the scholar’s head struck the floor.

‘He is pretending,’ said Leycestria in disgust. ‘What shall we do with him? Or will you and I go upstairs, Gryme, and let your brother mete out a little vengeance with his fists?’

‘No,’ said Geoffrey, as Leycestria started to haul Gryme to his feet. ‘He is telling the truth. Look at the pallor of his face – it would be impossible to engineer that.’

‘And he would have done himself a serious injury had you not caught him the second time,’ added Gryme. ‘Had he been acting, he would have arranged to land more gently. He is not lying – it was not Malketon who stabbed me.’

Leycestria grimaced. ‘But you *said* you saw him.’

‘I saw his grey cloak,’ said Gryme softly. ‘But you have one of those, too. The villain is not Malketon, it is you.’

‘Me?’ Leycestria glanced at Geoffrey. ‘Has shock deprived him of his wits?’

‘He is quite rational,’ replied Geoffrey. ‘I should have guessed Malketon owned an aversion to blood when he declined to step into the room where Derlega was murdered. Everyone else stared at the corpse, but he did not even try.’

‘Probably because he could not bear to look at his victim,’ stated Leycestria. ‘And—’

‘No,’ said Geoffrey sharply. ‘*You* are the killer. You lied about not knowing Alice, when you enjoyed regular assignations with her—’

‘We all did,’ snarled Leycestria. ‘Even your dear upright brother. It means nothing!’

‘And you lied about your alibi,’ Geoffrey went on. ‘You said you were dining with the Principal of Corner Hall, but we were never able to confirm it, because he fled Oxford so quickly. But the Principal of Corner Hall is John de Horningsea, and I know for a fact that he was with Storteford the night Alice was stabbed – not you – because he told me so today.’

‘You enjoyed the luck of the damned, Leycestria,’ said Gryme, ‘because I sent Horningsea away in the nick of time – just as Geoffrey was about to question him about Storteford’s alibi. Had they spoken, you would have been exposed as a liar – and a murderer – in January.’

‘You followed me when I went to speak to him,’ recalled Geoffrey. ‘I assumed John had told you to do it, to see whether I would defy his orders. But you were acting of your own volition.’

‘Shortly afterwards, you were obliged to kill Derlega because he found the bloodied lock of hair and was planning to send a few strands to the Bishop,’ said Gryme. ‘And you murdered Storteford because he had seen you wearing it, and was about to tell Geoffrey so.’

‘What hair?’ demanded Leycestria. ‘I know nothing of any hair.’

‘When we discussed Alice’s murder back in Oxford, you said you did not see why we should all suffer because of a man who could not control his temper,’ said Geoffrey, ignoring the question. ‘And that is exactly what happened: Alice taunted you, and you reacted with rage. But how could you have fled from the scene knowing you would place your colleagues in danger?’

‘I knew nothing of the kind!’ snarled Leycestria. He flushed when he realised what he had said, and tugged at the clothes around his throat, as if he they were suddenly too tight. ‘What I mean is that this is all conjecture and lies. You have no *evidence*.’

‘*There* is the evidence,’ said Gryme, pointing. ‘Around your neck is the ribbon holding the lock of Alice’s hair. I can see it from here – and I know it well enough, because I was holding it when you stabbed me.’

‘It is nothing of the kind,’ blustered Leycestria. ‘It is a ring from my father. And I would show it to you, but you insult me with these preposterous accusations.’

‘And you insult us with your lies,’ snapped Gryme. ‘Seize him, Geoffrey. You have my permission to use violence, if necessary. God knows, he has unleashed enough of it on us.’

Suddenly, there was a knife in Leycestria’s hand.

‘Touch me and you die,’ he hissed. ‘I have had enough of this nonsense. I am going to the Archdeacon to report that you have both lost your wits, and should be removed from office before you do any harm. You will not—’

Geoffrey took several steps towards the man responsible for so many deaths, but Leycestria lashed out at him with his dagger, forcing him to jerk away. Leycestria began to edge towards the door, and without a weapon of his own, Geoffrey knew he could not stop him. But he had reckoned without Malketon, who had been listening from his prone position on the floor. Malketon grabbed Leycestria’s ankle, and when Leycestria stumbled, it was enough to allow Geoffrey to power into him and knock him from his feet. The knife flew from Leycestria’s hand, and he landed so heavily that the breath was driven out of him. Even so, he cowered when Geoffrey raised his fist.

‘Kill him!’ shouted Malketon furiously. ‘He was going to let *me* take the blame for his crimes, and I might have hanged, like Adam! Kill him, Geoffrey! Dr Gryme will arrange for his body to be buried with no questions asked.’

‘I cannot stop you, Geoffrey,’ said Gryme softly. ‘But whatever you decide, remember that you will have to live with it for the rest of your life. Think on that first.’

Epilogue

Cambridge, 4 June 1225

It was a glorious day, with fluffy white clouds dappling a serene blue sky. The fields were deep green with the promise of a plentiful harvest, and a cuckoo called in the distance. St Mary's Church gleamed honey-yellow in the morning sun, and the low mounds where Derlega and Storteford had long before been laid to rest were invisible under a bright carpet of summer flowers.

The road outside the church was full of scholars, many in ceremonial robes of red, trimmed with fur, and others in more sober religious habits. There was a buzz of excitement, because it was the day the University was going to install its first Chancellor.

'It should have been you,' said Geoffrey to his brother. 'You are the one who has worked so hard to turn this dream into a reality.'

John Gryme had not fared well since the flight from Oxford. His hair was white, his health was poor, and his eyesight was failing. By contrast, Geoffrey looked much the same, with the exception of a dusting of grey around his temples. He had surprised himself by electing to stay in Cambridge, and was now Principal of his own hostel – a fine house near St Bene't's Church, which attracted students who were rich and intelligent, but given to riotous behaviour.

'It is a post for a more vigorous man,' replied Gryme. 'One with the ambition and strength to take us to new heights of prestige and recognition. And I am tired now.'

'Personally, I do not see what all the fuss is about,' said Foxton, who was standing with them, his Benedictine robes clean but threadbare. His gentleness and compassion had strengthened further still through the years, and he was one of his Order's most beloved members. 'What was wrong with a *Magister Scholarum* running the place?'

'A *Magister Scholarum* is the master of a haphazard collection of schools,' explained Gryme patiently. 'Whereas a Chancellor is the head of a University. It means we are now a distinct and independent canonical authority within the diocese.'

'Besides, Oxford has one,' added Geoffrey wryly. 'And we cannot afford to lag behind them.'

'They would love to see us suppressed, and all our best scholars absorbed into their own halls,' said Gryme. 'But that will not happen now we have a Chancellor.'

'It is a pity we owe our origins to bloody murder, though,' said Geoffrey.

His thoughts had been full of Adam that day, long since taken from the ditch in Oxford, and laid to rest in hallowed ground. The town had suffered for Kepeharm's actions once the King and Pope had resolved their differences: scholars now revelled in cheap rents and victuals, and the town was obliged in perpetuity to subsidise poorer students and provide them with a handsome feast on the anniversary of the hangings.

‘Not so,’ argued Gryme. ‘As I have told you countless times, it was not just Alice Spicer’s murder that led to the *recessus* at Oxford – an excuse would have been found to flout canon law regardless, so the King could show the Church who was in charge.’

‘I might have sympathised with him, had Kepeharm hanged Leycestria,’ said Geoffrey bitterly. ‘It *is* unfair that men who can read should be treated more leniently than those who cannot. But Kepeharm executed two men he knew were innocent.’

‘I heard Kepeharm died when he learned how much Oxford was going to have to pay the University to make amends,’ said Foxton. ‘From shock.’

‘Had a secular killed Alice, he would have been hanged,’ Geoffrey went on. ‘But Leycestria murdered a woman in a fit of pique, stood by while Adam and Chestertone were executed for his crime, and then dispatched Derlega and Storteford in order to save himself.’

‘And attacked both of us,’ added Gryme. ‘My health has never been the same since his assault.’

‘Yet his only punishment was a few years of exile in the Fens,’ said Geoffrey. ‘Perhaps I *should* have battered out his brains, and let Gervaise bury him secretly.’

‘He spent years in prayer and reflection,’ said Foxton, always willing to look for the good in people. ‘And now he is back – a contrite and chastened man, who is willing to spend the rest of his life making amends by serving the community of scholars he once so harmed.’

‘He is not contrite or chastened,’ argued Geoffrey. ‘He is as arrogant and uncompromising as he ever was. As far as I am concerned, what is happening today is a travesty of justice and fairness.’

‘Perhaps,’ said Gryme with a smile. ‘But, as I said, we need a man with ambition and strength to carry our University forward, and Leycestria has both in abundance. Personally, I think he will make a splendid first Chancellor.’

Historical Note

Through the years, there have been many theories as to why a University developed in the Fens. Some have been fanciful, such as that it originated with Alfred the Great or a charter by King Arthur dating to 531, and were probably invented to make Cambridge older, and therefore more venerable, than The Other Place. But A.B. Emden, M.B. Hackett, R.W. Southern, Hastings Rashdall and Christopher Brooke have suggested more plausible explanations, and we have used their work to write this fictional account.

Emden noted that Eustace, the Bishop of Ely (1197–1215), used many more masters to witness his various deeds and charters than had his predecessors. William Longchamp (1189–97) rarely used more than two – whose academic credentials are open to question anyway – but Eustace regularly employed four or five, and sometimes as many as nine. The inference, therefore, is that Eustace had a convenient repository of learned men to draw upon – a fledgling University at nearby Cambridge.

England was not a peaceful country in the early years of the thirteenth century. King John was engaged in a dispute with Pope Innocent III that had seen his realm put under an interdict, and he himself was excommunicated in December 1209. It is likely that in the same month, the scholars at the University at Oxford decided to stage a walk-out, abandoning their schools and teaching, and setting up shop elsewhere. The contemporary English chronicler Roger of Wendover (in *Flores Historiarum*) claims that this was because two (or possibly three) scholars had been hanged, although Roger didn't always get his facts right.

According to him, the scholars had been executed because they had happened to lodge with another member of the University who had murdered a woman. The culprit had fled, so his housemates were seized in his place. Normally, this would not have been a problem. As clerics, scholars had special privileges in law, and this included not being executed by secular authorities. However, as the country was under an interdict, it was difficult for the Church to press its rights, and within a few days, the hapless men were dead. Records show that the 'mayor' of Oxford from 1205 to 1209 was Laurence Kepeharm, while the Spicers were an important and influential family.

Shocked by what had happened, the scholars called a *recessus* before any more of them could be dispatched. Records do not tell us who was *Magister Scholarum* in 1209, but John Gryme held the office in 1201, and Geoffrey de Lacy by 1216. Some of the scholars went all the way to Paris; some only went so far as Reading, perhaps because it wouldn't be too far to return once the trouble had died down; others chose Cambridge.

Why Cambridge was chosen will probably always remain a mystery. It was a long way away, it had no tradition of scholarship, and it was at the edge of the Fens – an unhealthy, inhospitable

region of bog and marsh. Yet the names of some of the witnesses in Bishop Eustace's charters – John de Foxton, John de Stortford and John de Horningsea – give us a clue: these scholars may have hailed from the Cambridge area anyway. It seems that the Gryme (or Grim) family was well-respected in Cambridgeshire, and Geoffrey and John Gryme are listed as witnesses (1198–1215) for Eustace's business. Hackett went so far as to suggest that John Gryme was one of the driving forces for leading the scholars to Cambridge, rather like a thirteenth-century Moses.

In other words, some of these migrating scholars just went home. And that would have had its advantages: local connections would get them decent lodgings, the right to use the churches for teaching and prayers, and perhaps even cheap ale and bread, too. The journey must have been made in the midst of winter – one of the conditions for the scholars' later return to Oxford was that the town paid for a feast every 6 December, which has been suggested as the anniversary of the executions – so it would not have been easy. The scholars therefore must have been fairly confident in their undertaking.

One can only imagine what they found when they arrived. The town was an agricultural centre with a castle, good water communications to the coast, and a fine legacy of Roman roads leading north, south, east and west. The number of churches, probably at least a dozen, indicates a degree of prosperity, and they must have known suitable buildings would be immediately available for them to rent. The largest church would have been Great St Mary's (not so called until St Peter's became St Mary the Less in the fourteenth century; it may have been designated St Mary-by-the-Market in the early 1200s). A deed of 1205 indicates that one Gervaise was installed there as vicar for life.

Unfortunately, there is no record of the names of the very earliest foundations, but Oxford tended to use the term 'hall', while Cambridge preferred 'hostel'. The names were various, and included the names of saints, who owned the building, and even what they were made of (*i.e.*, Tyled Hostel).

Of the men who made the precarious journey, we know Geoffrey Gryme later held two Cambridgeshire rectories: Somersham in 1221, and Sutton at some point between 1215 and 1225. John Gryme, who was a Doctor of Theology by 1201, when he was Oxford's *Magister Scholarum*, is credited with writing *Summa super canonem missae*, but this is uncertain.

Other names in Bishop Eustace's Episcopal register include Nicholas de Derlega; Stephen de Mauncestre (who was a canon in Salisbury in 1236); Thomas Driffeld; John de Malketon; John Blund (who later became Eustace's clerk); and Robert de York (who was elected Bishop of Ely in 1215 after Eustace's death, only to find himself in competition for the post with another contender). John de Foxton witnessed charters pertaining to Cambridge between 1220 and 1225, but died in London, where miracles were attributed to his tomb.

By 1214, the crisis was over, and many scholars would have drifted back to Oxford. But some remained, and a deed dating to 4 June 1225 mentions a chancellor, suggesting the University was

now reasonably well established. The first chancellor's name is not known, but Hackett proposed one Richard de Leycestria (or Wethersette) for the honour. Leycestria wrote a popular manual for parish priests and confessors – the *Summa* 'Qui bene presunt presbiteri', and may have held office until as late as 1246.

Perhaps one day a store of documents will be discovered that will answer many such questions, or historians will develop new ways to interpret the old ones. Until then, however, the misty image will continue to exist of a small group of men trekking eastwards through the winter of 1209, and taking up residence in an undistinguished little settlement on the edge of the marshes. Would they be surprised to know it has survived 800 years, and has emerged as the finest academic foundation in the world? Perhaps not.

Sources

- Binns, J., and P. Meadows (editors). 2000. *Great St Mary's: Cambridge's University Church*. Great St Mary's the University Church.
- Brooke, C.N.L. 1985. The churches of medieval Cambridge. In: Beales, D., and G. Best (editors). *History, society and the churches: essays in honour of Owen Chadwick*. Cambridge University Press: 49–76.
- Cobban, A. 1999. *English university life in the Middle Ages*. UCL Press.
- Emden, A.B. 1963. *A biographical register of the University of Cambridge to 1500*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hackett, M.B. 1970. *The original statutes of Cambridge University: the text and its history*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hackett, M.B. 1984. The university as a corporate body. In: Catto, J.L. (editor). *The history of the University of Oxford. Vol 1: The early Oxford schools*. Oxford University Press: 37–96.
- Leader, D.R. 1988. *A history of the University of Cambridge. Vol 1: The University to 1546*. Cambridge University Press.
- Rashdall, H. 1977. *The universities of Europe in the Middle Ages. Volume 3: English universities – student life*. Oxford University Press.
- Southern, R.W. 1984. From schools to university. In: Catto, J.L. (editor). *The history of the University of Oxford. Vol 1: The early Oxford schools*. Oxford University Press: 1–36.
- Stokes, H.P. 1924. *The mediaeval hostels of the University of Cambridge together with chapters on Glomery Hall and the Master of Glomery*. Cambridge Antiquarian Society.
- Taylor, A. 1999. *Cambridge: the hidden history*. Tempus Publishing.