

## Prologue

# The Black Death

The first cases of the Black Death in England occurred during the reign of Edward III in the summer of 1348, and the disease spread quickly. By autumn, the plague had reached London, killing nearly half of the city's 70,000 inhabitants. Over the next two years, between thirty and forty percent of the English population, or approximately two million people, died of the plague. In Europe as a whole, it is estimated that at least twenty-five million people died between 1347 and 1351. Outbreaks continued to occur periodically for centuries, and the plague did not disappear from Europe until the eighteenth century.

## chapter one

# Lady Isabella

Lady Isabella Devereaux watched black plumes of smoke rise from the nearby village of Thornbury. More bodies were being burned. After that fateful day when it struck, the plague killed nearly half the population of England. All across the land, villagers and townsfolk built huge bonfires and dug deep pits to dispose of the ever-increasing number of bodies. The death toll was even higher in London. Isabella's late husband's relatives had sent word of the terrible tide of despair within its walls, only ten miles away. It seemed that no one would be spared the shadow of death that followed the plague's unrelenting path of destruction.

Isabella fingered her silver ring. It contained an amber stone, a reminder of happier times with her family. The terrible disease first took her husband, Sir Robert, then her two young daughters, Mary and Elizabeth. Isabella shuddered as she recalled the morning when she first saw the plague's telltale dark blotches on her husband's skin. Soon after he was buried, her poor daughters were also afflicted with the disease and died. Isabella's entire family had perished and she was alone. Since her home was now filled only with painful memories, Isabella elected to take refuge at nearby Thornbury Abbey, with the encouragement of the abbess, Margaret Bellmare. She'd been offered temporary accommodation with her husband's relatives at the White Swan, their London inn, yet she preferred to stay in the familiar surroundings of her own county.

Sir Edmund Courteney, the local sheriff, offered to look after Isabella's affairs. He arranged for his own men to till her fields and tend to her remaining livestock until she could decide what she wanted to do with her property. Sir

Edmund assured her that she could take as much time as she wished with her decision. Fortunately, Isabella's tenants and retainers had found employment on neighbouring estates and in the village of Thornbury. Because of the heavy death toll, there were labour shortages in every profession.

"Will that be all, my lady?"

Isabella turned to face her last remaining staff, Henry and his wife, Joan. Over the years, Henry had worked as the estate handyman and blacksmith, while Joan had supervised the kitchen. Their meagre possessions were now piled onto a small cart, which stood on the dusty track that led to the village. Earlier that year, they had lost their four children and elderly parents to the plague.

"Yes, thank you, Henry," said Isabella, pressing a few coins into his hand. "God bless you. I know how difficult it has been for you both. I am sorry that I have decided to leave the estate, but at least you will have work as a blacksmith with Sir Edmund. He is a good man and will be sure to look after you."

“Thank you, my lady,” said Henry, with a quick bow.

“Now, now,” Isabella declared, giving Henry’s wife a short hug. “No tears, Joan. You have my deepest gratitude for your faithful service to my family. You have both been so very kind these many years.”

Isabella waved to them as their cart disappeared down the road to the village. Then she packed her remaining possessions onto her wagon and gazed one last time at her home.

Just then, two men on horseback galloped up to the house. Isabella recognized the lead figure as Sir Roger de Walsingham, who was closely followed by Fitzwalter, Sir Roger’s overseer. A powerful man, Sir Roger owned vast estates in neighbouring counties and was master of the formidable Alversham Castle. He was a seasoned warrior and had fought bravely at King Edward’s side during the wars in France, receiving a number of serious wounds. His left hand was missing two fingers, and he had a long deep scar running down the right side of his face. Notorious for the

barbaric cruelty he showed to his enemies, he was also rumoured to have poisoned his first wife in order to inherit her considerable land holdings.

Almost immediately after Isabella’s husband died, Sir Roger had offered to marry her. But Isabella suspected his motives were far from romantic. She was certain that it was the Devereaux estate that he desired. Although Isabella politely turned down his proposal, Sir Roger would not give up, believing that once her grief had subsided she would change her mind.

Sir Roger approached Isabella’s loaded wagon, dressed in his customary black chain mail under a black surcoat that had a white stag embroidered on the chest—the de Walsingham family emblem. His dark hair, beard and black eyes complemented his grim apparel.

Fitzwalter kept his distance. As Isabella examined him from the corner of her eye, she could see why Sir Roger had chosen him as his henchman. Fitzwalter’s stocky body was made of pure muscle, and his pale blond hair, icy blue eyes and squat nose made him a frightening presence.

He was extremely loyal and had been in Sir Roger's service for many years, dealing mercilessly with every one of his master's enemies.

"So, my lady," Sir Roger began, "have you reconsidered my proposal?"

As he spoke, his smile accentuated the gruesome scar on his face.

"My lord," Isabella replied, "my answer remains the same. My mind is quite made up."

"But what of your estates and your retainers?"

"My people will be well looked after," Isabella replied, "and Sir Edmund has agreed to administer my estate."

"So it remains your intention to leave?" asked Sir Roger.

"Yes, my lord," Isabella replied. "I have decided to live out my remaining days at the abbey."

A sly grin crept across Sir Roger's face as he removed his chain mail gloves, exposing his deformed hand.

"Surely, it is not your plan to become a nun? A woman of your grace and beauty would be sorely wasted in the service of God."

"As opposed to becoming your wife?" Isabella shot back. "Thereby giving you title to my estate the moment we exchange wedding vows?"

"My lady, consider your situation," he said, calmly stroking his beard with the remaining fingers of his left hand. "Your husband is dead, and you need to remarry. My offer is more than generous. Imagine what your life would be like as Lady Isabella de Walsingham."

"A match with you, my lord, would be a match with the devil himself!" Isabella replied fiercely. "I would rather die!"

Sir Roger's eyes narrowed. He grabbed the whip from his saddle and raised it high in the air.

"You are exceedingly bold," he sneered, "but also most foolish. Mark my words; no one defies Sir Roger de Walsingham! I swear that you will pay dearly for this humiliation!"

Sir Roger turned his horse and galloped away, followed by Fitzwalter. Once she was sure they had gone, Isabella made her way quickly to the safety of her new home at Thornbury Abbey.