



Mel Keegan

Fortunes
of War

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Fortunes
of War
Mel Keegan

DreamCraft Multimedia, Australia

FORTUNES OF WAR

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Fortunes of War

BOOK ONE: *The Black Sheep*

April - June, 1588

*Being your slave, what could I do but tend
Upon the times and hours of your desire?
I have no precious time at all to spend
Nor services to do, till you require:*

*Nor dare I chide the world-without-end hour
Whilst I, my sovereign, watch the clock for you,
Nor think the bitterness of absence sour
When you have bid your servant once adieu:*

*Nor dare I question with my jealous thought
Where you may be, or your affairs suppose,
But like a sad slave, stay and think of nought
Save where you are, how happy you make those;-*

*So true a fool is love, that in your will,
Though you do anything, he thinks no ill*
(William Shakespeare, Sonnet 57)

Chapter One

Candle shadows writhed about the walls from tapestry to shuttered window and it was difficult to see, but Dermot Channon knew the man was there. It was Walt Copeland, the brewer, the ambitious one who had wormed his way into the court with dubious services performed for dubious masters. Channon neither liked nor trusted him.

He had hidden, so he was equally aware of Channon. Both men stood against the wall while a guard clattered to duty. It was late. Music and laughter could still be heard but most of Hampton's apartments were shut up for the night.

Why would Copeland hide? Channon smiled faintly. Some clandestine affair, a lady's honour at stake? Honour was as insubstantial as virginity. Palace intrigue had ceased to amuse Channon long before. He turned his back on both Copeland and his business.

Footsteps shuffled away toward the servants' rooms, like the scuttling of a rat. Channon glanced after the man but saw only a flutter of brown cape before Timothy Bevan's voice called his name.

"Channon, is that you? Señor Channon?" Bevan's Castilian was thickly accented.

The use of many years brought the language to Channon's lips too. Its vowels came more easily than the barbarities of English. "I am looking for the physician, John Glover. He is not in his rooms."

"Are you ailing?" Bevan stepped into the light of a tall candelabrum. He was handsome, young, with a neat red beard. But he was soft, Channon thought, with soft hands, and none of the calluses earned upon the hilt of a sword. He was well suited to the court but in the field he would be carrion, despite Bevan's aspirations.

"I seek the doctor for my uncle," Channon told him. "Don Mauricio has seen better days than this."

Bevan made noises of agreement. "Aye, I was there. Captain Rothwell was in fine voice and hot temper. The Ambassador, your uncle, answered well —"

"Before being flayed," Channon retorted. "He is presently bleeding from those wounds."

"Frobisher must take Rothwell's part," Bevan mused as they walked on along the passageway. "It is not in his interests, nor the Queen's, to stand with Don Mauricio. You must have heard the rumors."

"That Her Majesty is Rothwell's investor?" Channon glanced sidelong at Bevan. "There's no proof. Even if there were, what of it? She may yet censure Rothwell, and there the matter ends."

Censure him, Channon thought bitterly. Sharp words or a reprimand, for grievous damage done a Spanish warship in the Channel. With a ball through the hull at the waterline, the *Alcanzar* wallowed in heavy seas like a pig. Six lads were killed by the shot that pounded the Spanish *galleasse*, or else they drowned in the flooding — lads for whom Channon felt a seaman's kinship. He could have been among them.

"Her Majesty is not fully accepting of Frobisher's and Rothwell's argument." Bevan's tone was conciliatory. "She might chastise the Captain. His neck could be the price for it, as your uncle demanded."

"One life for six." Who were those dead lads? Channon wondered. Had he known them?

"Six common monkeys," Bevan argued.

"Six men!" Channon snarled. "I was taught that all men are born equal before God." Bevan glared, then had the grace to bow. "It is for the Queen to decide," Channon added. "Don Mauricio has done all he can, and tonight pays the price for it. Have you seen the quack? Which wilting violet does he attend tonight?"

"Wilting indeed," Bevan agreed. "At last I saw, he was with my Lady Anne Page, who was taken ill at vespers."

The woman was one of those who waited upon the Queen. Channon halted beside a window overlooking the regimented garden. Moonlight silvered the lawns; a guardsman prowled, pike over his shoulder. The moonlight gleamed on his helmet.

"Will you take a message for me, Master Bevan? I imagine you will be returning to your lady love directly."

"Directly," Bevan confessed. "Ann and I shall wed, by and by. When she is ailing my place is beside her."

"Then impose upon the physician to prepare a sleeping cup." Channon watched Bevan's soft hands fuss with the froth of white lace at his chin. "I shall be waiting."

With an elegant bow, Bevan hurried away toward the women's apartments. The Queen's rooms were jealously guarded, especially at night. Not even Channon could walk those passages unchallenged, though the guards would be courteous, respecting his rank if not his race.

For some time he stood by the tall window. In the candlelight just half his face was illuminated, reflected in the tiny, diamond shaped glass panes. Saturnine, he thought. Bored, growing stale in this velvet prison where men smiled politely while their clasped hands concealed daggers.

He nodded goodnight to his reflection and walked back the way he had come. The lute and the psaltery called from John Woodland's rooms, where young men gathered for music, poetry ... some said for love. Often, Channon heard their pleasures and damned the rank that brought him here and at the same stroke set him apart. The lure of young men's guileless charm was acidly sweet.

But his place was with his ailing old kinsman, till this charade was over. Would Mauricio live to see the end? Channon was less certain with each day the Ambassador spent in verbal combat with men like Drake, Frobisher, Hatton. And with Elizabeth herself.

A fire blazed in the wide stone hearth. In the chair beside it the old man was frail, blue about the eyes with fatigue. The last in a succession of Spanish diplomats, Don Mauricio de Cervallo tussled with an impossible duty. He looked up as Channon entered, and found a smile.

"The physician is with Lady Anne Page." Channon warmed his hands at the fire. England was damnably cold, damp, though it was almost summer. "Bevan took a message and you shall have a draught. To bed with you, Mauricio. You are a wraith."

"I feel like one." The soft Castilian voice was balm on the ear. Mauricio rose stiffly. In the heavy red velvet robe he looked thin. "I feel my years."

He was fifty, no longer young, and in poor health. He had never enjoyed a soldier's constitution, Channon thought as he took the robe from him. Men like Mauricio were tutored for a different kind of battle. His weapons were words and law, but lately English privateers made a mockery of that law.

Verbal battle had ignited over the *Alcanzar*. Was the assault upon her an act of war or piracy? Spanish merchants and diplomats were still welcome on English soil, yet men like Charles Rothwell were free to fire upon a ship keeping to its own business in open water. And the wisdom of Court rumour swore Elizabeth was Rothwell's investor.

The mattress cushioned Mauricio's spine and he relaxed with a groan. Channon drew the bedcurtains and left him with a smile. "Look to your health, Uncle. Will you let these English pirates master you? What of family honour, answer me that!"

Honour was in ample supply within the Cervallo family. Little else was. Like many Spanish households, their purse was empty. Fierce dignity covered patchwork fortunes. Channon sighed as he settled in Mauricio's chair by the hearth to wait for the physician. Philip, His Catholic Majesty, was hungry for this island, at whatever cost. The price was paid by men like Mauricio, and the lads who had died on the *Alcanzar*.

The physician was a long time coming. Midnight was an hour past when Channon opened the door not to John Glover but to a young page. The lad was disturbingly pretty, with wide, clear blue eyes and hair like yellow silk beneath his cap. Channon arched a brow, and the boy held out a lidded pewter cup.

"From the physician, sir. A sleeping cup, Master Bevan's instructions."

Channon took it. "Thank you, boy. If you are returning to the quack, ask him to come personally in the morning. The Ambassador is ailing no less than Lady Ann." The page bowed politely and enormous blue eyes looked up at Channon with a guilelessness that almost made him mourn. Soon the lad's innocence would be gone forever. "What's your name, boy?"

"Stephen, sir. Stephen Tanner, in the service of Master Bevan since last year."

Was he twelve, thirteen? With another bow, he excused himself. The soldier lingered at the door to watch him go. He found more beguilement in a boy's beautiful innocence than in the paint-and-powder games of palace ladies, despite their undeniable charms.

"Dermot?" Mauricio pronounced the name with the full, rich accent of Seville.

And Channon was on the point of returning to the bed when he saw, again, the shifting candle shadows betraying a man not so artfully concealed as he hoped. Curious, amused, Channon stepped into the draughty passage and glimpsed a figure in a brown cape. Copeland — plying to and fro like a clandestine courier? On whose dubious errand this time?

"Dermot, have you gone?" Mauricio called sharply.

He would be out of bed soon, chilling himself in nightshirt and slippers. Channon bolted the door. "A lad brought the cup. Drink this and rest."

The bedcurtains were open. Mauricio held a sheaf of papers, and Channon frowned. "I've a score letters to write," the old man protested, gesturing with the crisp yellow sheets.

"Not tonight!" Channon took them and thrust the cup into his hands. "Master Guido can take down the letters for your signature, and morning is soon enough. I am here to safeguard you. Good Christ! How shall I guard you from yourself?" Mauricio's face creased in a tired smile. "Drink, and sleep. Fret over Philip's business when you've the health for it."

The cup was bitter with valerian, skullcap and willow. Peppermint and honey masked their vileness. Mauricio managed a drop and reached for a cup of wine. Channon stood over him like a father with a wilful child, but only a second drop had passed his lips when Mauricio began to gasp and curse.

Then he was retching violently. He heaved himself over the bedside as his belly emptied, and Channon saw blood. "What is it? Mauricio!" The Ambassador could not answer, but Channon could guess.

Poison. No sleeping draught would empty a man's stomach as soon as a drop was swallowed. Anger and fear took him to the door. The bolt slammed back and he summoned the guard with shouts that would rouse the whole palace. Doors opened at the commotion and a burly young sergeant rushed toward him.

"Fetch the physician," Channon snarled, "quickly. Tell him Mauricio de Cervallo is poisoned, by the very draught Glover sent. While you're about it find the boy, Stephen Tanner, of Bevan's household. It was he who delivered the cup."

Astonishment whispered along the passage as Channon slammed the door. By morning it would be all over Hampton, and Elizabeth would have the tale at breakfast. The old man lay weakly on the side of the bed. The air stank and blood soiled his linen.

"Mauricio?" Channon lifted his chin to look into his eyes. The pupils were dilated, but they were alive. "How much did you drink?"

"A drop only," Mauricio gasped.

The cup was in the bedding, half its contents spilled. Channon held it

to his nose, but to him bitter herbs all smelt alike. He would have held his breath and drunk in good faith ... he would have been dead. Mauricio was nearly so. His face was waxen, his mouth loose, head lolling.

A sudden battering announced Glover. He had been marched up by a guardsman, and Channon nodded his thanks to the man as Glover hurried inside. He was short, stout, in black robes; and he was frightened. Sweat beaded his bald head despite the night's chill.

"Poison?" Glover panted. Channon stood aside to let him work but never took his eyes from him. "Are you sure, Señor? I don't understand."

With the door bolted, Channon hovered over the quack as Glover looked into Mauricio's eyes, counted his pulse. "By God, if you made a mistake with the cup I'll have your hide!" It was a soldier's warning. Glover's face was white but he swallowed his protests as he saw the steel in Channon's eyes. Spanish eyes in an Irish face, at once compelling and disturbing, as Channon well knew.

He lifted the cup and muttered distractedly. "Hemlock, foxglove. By God, it did not come from my hands. I mixed the cup in Lady Anne's parlor while she slept, from medicinals in my bag." He looked entreatingly at Channon. "I swear, Master Bevan watched me. I don't keep hemlock and foxglove in my bag! Aye, I have them in my apothecary, but not here — I could never make this mistake."

The claim would easily be verified. Glover's bag lay at his feet, and Channon confiscated it. Its contents would be examined by an authority. Bevan could testify to the doctor's work when the draught was mixed.

Furious knocking took Channon to the door, where the guard sergeant had Stephen Tanner by the scruff of the neck. The child wept abjectly as he was thrust into Channon's hands. He knelt on the Persian carpet by the hearth, and Channon looked down into a lovely face that was pale with fright and bewilderment.

"Please, sir, what have I done?" Stephen begged. "They won't say what I've done!" He pulled off his cap and twisted it between his hands.

"You brought the cup that poisoned the Ambassador," Channon said softly.

"I —" Stephen's mouth slacked. "He is dead?"

"By fortune alone, he is not," Channon told him. "The physician swears it was but a sleeping draught when it left his hand. The only other hands to touch it were yours."

Stephen struggled to his feet. "I would not fetch poison to any man, let alone a Spanish knight."

"Yet only you touched it," Channon purred, "save Glover and myself."

"No, sir! I set it down —" Stephen's eyes widened. "Master Copeland asked for a taper to light his pipe. I set the cup down and had my back to it. When I returned he was by the table. I swear it, sir, I did nothing — nothing to be hung for!" He was begging, as if he expected to be locked away.

Copeland served several influential men; he ran errands, hid in the shadows, and scuttled like a rat when he was seen. Anger compressed Channon's lips. His fists clenched as he studied the boy. It could go badly

for Stephen. Copeland had friends, he would have doctored the cup upon instructions, and the same enemies of Spain who wished Mauricio in his grave would protect Copeland while a little page was punished.

A sigh whispered over Channon's lips. He set a hand on the boy's shoulder, felt his trembling. "I saw Copeland skulking earlier. And I told Bevan to send a cup, in clear hearing of anyone listening ... leave the brewer to me."

"You believe me?" Stephen hung his cap haphazardly on his head.

Channon straightened the cap and caressed his soft cheek. "This face could not lie. You think I don't know innocence when I see it?" He looked into the bedchamber. "It is past time you set your head down. Off with you. Send servants with fresh linen, and leave all else to me."

For a moment Stephen clutched his hand, then fled back toward Bevan's apartments. The crowd of gossips had dispersed but the sergeant who had found Stephen loitered, watching the Ambassador's rooms as if he must slam the stable door with the horse long gone. Channon beckoned the young man closer.

"Find the brewer, Walt Copeland, with all speed. And detain him. He will be charged on the morrow, not the boy."

A Cornish burr answered as the man shouldered his pike. "I know the man. Handy with bribes, if thee'll look the other way. If he's in the palace, I'll fetch him."

If he is in the palace. Channon's mouth hardened as he returned to the bedchamber. Mauricio was still retching, but less painfully, with dry heaves. Glover held a bowl at his side and Mauricio bled into it. Glover fussed, mopped his face, gave him water, and blood oozed from his wrist drop by drop as Mauricio lay in an exhausted daze. He licked his lips and focused on Channon's face with difficulty.

"Who?" he whispered. "Find him, Dermot."

"Copeland poisoned the cup, no mistake." Channon said bleakly. Glover shot him a glance. "Aye, physician, your neck is out of the noose thanks to Bevan's pretty little page. But who paid Master Copeland?" He watched Glover staunch the old man's bleeding with tight bindings. "It is a rare kind of compliment, Mauricio. Your arguments carry such weight with the likes of Drake and Frobisher that you arouse Spain's enemies to murder."

But Mauricio was asleep, and Glover stepped back. "He will rest now. He should stay abed for several days, then deal gently by himself."

"He speaks with King Philip's voice in Spanish affairs," Channon said doubtfully. "He has little time to rest."

"And what good will it be to the King if your uncle is dead?" Glover demanded. He drew the bedcurtains with sharp, angry jerks. "Guard him from his enemies, but guard him first from himself, his countrymen and his King, who will use him till he is worn down." He picked up his bag. "Am I at liberty?" Channon nodded. "Then, good night, sir. There will be uproar when the Queen hears of this!"

Alone, Channon stood by the hearth and watched the embers blacken.

He dozed in the chair until he heard the guard change. Dawn had flooded the sky, pink and gold with fragile beauty, when a discreet knock announced the Cornish serjeant. He brought unsurprising news.

"Copeland is not in the palace, Señor. We searched everywhere that can decently be searched."

"So he has fled." Channon dismissed the man with a nod of thanks. He must bathe, shave, change his hose and linen. Don Mauricio slept on, oblivious.

Just after nine, the Queen's private physician came politely to verify the tale, and wrote a curt report. The Queen, he said, would be furious. It was not that she entertained any love for Spaniards or Irishman — and Channon was both — but integrity had been compromised tonight. Murder was no fit substitute for diplomacy.

At noon the old Ambassador was on his feet, though he was weak and shaking. A liveried secretary ushered him into the Queen's office while Channon tarried outside and listened to the whisper of politely toned voices.

Lady Margaret Trewarne brought him wine and flirted coyly as he waited. Channon indulged her, unconsciously comparing her posing, powder and rouge with the guileless beauty of the manchild, Stephen Tanner. He flirted adeptly to please the woman, and she was satisfied.

He caught a glimpse of the Queen as the door opened. Mauricio bowed and closed it once more, leaving Channon with an impression of turquoise silk, flaming hair and skin the colour of the swan. "So?" he prompted as his uncle took a cup of wine from Lady Margaret's tiny, ringed hand.

The Ambassador's voice betrayed his ordeal. His face was the colour and texture of old parchment, and clothes that should have complimented a man's figure hung loosely. Flawless hose only displayed legs that had wasted. "I am to go," he said quietly.

"To Seville? Home?" For a moment Channon wondered if the embassy had been expelled, and if there had been a dispatch from Philip. Had Rothwell's attack upon the *Alcazar* been taken as an act of war?

"No, to the country, here in England, to rest." Mauricio sipped the wine, appreciating its tart, acid bite. "I have friends here. The Earl of Blackstead, Lord Armagh. I have spoken of William Armagh often enough."

"I know the name." Channon set down his empty cup. "And what of the plot upon you life?"

"The plot?" Mauricio's face darkened with an unhealthy flush. "It appears this man Copeland took it upon himself to murder me. This seems to satisfy Her Majesty."

"It would," Channon said bitterly as he led the way out past the courteous servants and guards. "It wouldn't do to look too closely into the matter. Who knows which head may find itself on the block? Damn!" They stood in the busy passage and he schooled his face to conceal his anger. The old man waited for him to speak again, and a faint, grudging smile quirked

one corner of Channon's wide mouth. "Leave matters to me. There are ... ways and means."

There were spies, and men whose tongues would loosen for a few coins. They went out on Spanish business with a guinea apiece for their efforts. But Antonio Diaz would take no payment for his services. It was enough to find Copeland and see the price of Mauricio's suffering settled, one way or another. Diaz served many diplomats as both secretary and spy. He passed freely along the river streets with the look of a merchant, and was often at Hampton with messages. Channon trusted him and needed only to wait.

The afternoon was warm. With his uncle asleep and time on his hands, Channon lingered to watch the young men playing shuttlecock on the lawns. A boy strummed the lute, a sweet, mournful madrigal for another lad whose eyes never left him. They were lovers, and in love, oblivious to the shrill squeals of the girls chasing croquet balls in the sun.

A shadow fell across the low wall where Channon sat, and he looked up at the man outlined against the sky. He was tall, broad and as swarthy as any Spaniard. A signet winked on his right hand; a rapier rode at his left hip. Channon stood and accorded the Captain a stiff half bow, which Sir Charles Rothwell did not return.

He was well into his thirties, ten years Channon's elder, with crinkly, dark brown hair receding from his forehead. His eyes were nested in deep creases, the legacy of many years at sea. Unlike Bevan, who merely aspired to glory, Rothwell had won his spurs. He commanded the respect and fear of his opponents. Save, Channon thought, for Mauricio de Cervallo, whose pedigree was older, and whose honour was not besmirched by allegations of piracy.

"Good day, Captain." Channon's English was rich with Irish vowels.

Dark blue eyes studied him from beneath lowered brows. Rothwell was silent for some time. His left hand rode the jeweled hilt of the rapier, as if he half expected to use it. He had that reputation. Several men had challenged him, and had died for the audacity.

"A fortunate escape for your uncle," Rothwell said at last, with spurious blandness.

"Fortunate?" Channon demanded. "I imagine a certain murderer is not so pleased as yourself, Captain."

"Murderer?" Rothwell echoed. "Don Mauricio lives!"

"By chance." Channon's narrowed eyes examined Rothwell, feature by feature.

Two weeks before this man had ordered his gunners to fire upon Captain Miguel Vasca's *Alcanzar*. If it was not an act of war, Channon did not know what else to call it, but Rothwell was a privateer, and Her Majesty was not responsible. No word of judgement on this account had been given yet, but Rothwell seemed unconcerned, as if he knew he had the Queen's favour. Elizabeth was still in conference with Drake and Burghley, while Admiral and Chief Minister argued different sides of a worn-out question. War was inevitable.

The boy with the lute began to play again and Channon turned his back on Rothwell. How preferable it was to watch the boys who sat in the sun at the corner of the croquet lawn, and share vicariously in the love of two handsome young men. Rothwell lingered a while, then stalked away. His heavy tread suggested a fury kept tight-leashed. Channon glanced after him, pleased to be rid of his company. More than once, that privateer had openly savaged Mauricio before the Queen.

It was two days later when Antonio Diaz sought him out. Maids were lighting the candles about the great dining room. From the kitchens came the aroma of venison and boar while minstrels tuned before the revels began. Her Majesty was entertaining privately. In her place, Burghley and Walsingham would argue at the head of the table, oblivious to the flirtations around them.

Diaz stepped into the hall, unnoticed. Channon lounged by the hearth, drinking madeira and whiling away the time as he waited for Mauricio, who could by now stomach a little plain food. Diaz bowed with a rustle of velvet and lace, and one hand offered a slip of crisp yellow paper, sealed with wax into which was stamped a signet Channon knew.

"From Bernard Smythe," Diaz murmured. "And for this you owe me a five guinea bribe, Dermot. Cheap at twice the price!" He was a slender man in wine red velvet, Channon's height, five years older, honey skinned and handsome.

The wax split and Channon unfolded the paper. The message was written in a bold, ill-tutored hand. Smythe's origins were as humble as Copeland's but his scruples kept him honest. Channon read the lines and nodded.

"Master Copeland is at a tavern called The Lancastrian. Where shall I find it?"

"In Cheapside, up from the river," Diaz told him. "Ask anywhere along the waterfront, it is well known, a haunt of sailors and cut-throats. Copeland must be at home there." He frowned inquiringly at Channon. "What is to be done with him?"

"He will die," Channon said mildly.

"Aye." Diaz rubbed his chin with one fine-boned hand. "I will do it, it you prefer. It need cost you no more than the guineas that bribed Smythe to betray him. I would be honoured."

But Channon shook his head as he slipped the folded paper into his doublet. "The duty is mine, Tonio. It is better done by my hand. Mauricio is blood of my blood." He touched the spy's shoulder gratefully. "I'll see to it tonight, before Copeland flies the coop again. Smythe is sure beyond all doubt that he is at this tavern?"

"He sold goods and chattels to him," Diaz whispered as servants passed. "He has dealt with Copeland before, and knows him well."

"Then the rest is simple." Channon smiled bitterly. "I shall not forget your service."

"As Don Mauricio shall recall these last few days!" Diaz melted away as laughter roared outside the wide, open doors.

The long, mauve twilight had faded before Channon left Hampton, alone in a coach. London seethed about him, fleeting images remembered forever while the greater picture would soon fade. The voice of the water carrier; the dirty face of the girlchild begging for farthings; the cries of strumpets touting for business from upstairs windows; the slender strength of the young acrobat performing tricks for a crowd that only pelted him with fruit.

The Lancastrian was not far from the river. Channon left the coach beside a reeking fishmarket, and the driver was too preoccupied with the whey-faced whores to see which way he walked as he hurried off. The crowd swallowed him. He passed by as an Irishman, a ne'er do well soldier of fortune who barely merited a glance as he moved from shadow to shadow.

A signboard creaked in the aromatic breeze off the river. At high tide, the pitch and tar of old boats, yesterday's fish and last week's refuse sullied the wind. Channon's nose wrinkled. It took a month on land to teach a man to appreciate the freshness of the sea wind.

The tavern smelt of pastry, smoke and ale. He heard singing, or what would pass for it, ribaldry and coarseness. Under the din he paid for a tankard and inquired after Copeland as if he were on business. The taverner sent him up to a bedchamber at the back, far from the taproom. A bedchamber where a man's cries would go unheard, his pleas unanswered.

The stairs creaked; the passage was dark. Channon stopped at the door to listen and lifted his cloak over both shoulders to clear his callused, soldier's hands. The rapier rasped out of its scabbard, and then the door banged inward on protesting pivots.

A lamp burned on the table. Copeland sprawled on the bed in his hose and little else. The bedcurtains were askew and a brace of old wheellock pistols lay beside the lamp. Channon saw all this in the split second as the door burst inward, before Copeland was even aware of the intrusion.

He scrambled off the bed and dove for the pistols, but Channon was too fast. He snatched them up and levelled one on Copeland's large belly. He smelt the unmistakable odor of gunpowder and knew they were loaded without looking at Copeland's frightened face. The brewer was small, with brown hair beginning to thin, a flabby body and sparse beard. He backed against the wall, eyes flicking between the weapons in Channon's hands — the Torino rapier in the right, a pistol in the left.

Channon kicked the door shut and leaned on it. He spoke in English, his tone as mild as the words were barbed. "I hope I find you in a state of grace, for you'll die tonight." He thrust the guns into his belt. "But first you will tell me who paid you to murder Don Mauricio de Cervallo."

Copeland shook his head. His gullet bobbed as he swallowed, his eyes bulged as Channon stepped closer. Perhaps he believed someone would intrude, fetch him to safety, for he never spoke a word, though a good deal of his blood spilled.

Shortly before dawn Channon left The Lancastrian with only the bittersweet flavour of vengeance to settle his temper. Walt Copeland took his master's secrets to the grave.

Chapter Two

Tara ran like the wind. She was four years old, bred to hunt and race rather than carry men into battle. Ten generations of the finest bloodstock culminated in her veins, and when she was mated to Connaught her colt would be worth a king's ransom.

Or a Queen's, thought William Armagh. He stood by the posterngate of Blackstead Manor, watching the big, red mare run between the river and woodland. Deer scattered into the trees as she thundered by. Her jockey had given the horse her head, and the earl grudgingly credited his youngest son. Robert was good for nothing but he rode well and Tara, who was still young and wary of riders, trusted the boy.

On the edge of the woods Robert turned her. She reared and sprang away again. Her hide shone in the bright May sun as Robert let her run for the joy of it. The earl stroked his bearded chin as he calculated the value of the mare and her progeny. The Armaghs were not wealthy, but they could be. Elizabeth had bought horses from the Blackstead stables twice before. A colt sired by the finest stud in the shire must catch the Queen's eye.

What price the fortunes of Irishmen into whose hands fate had placed an English earldom? William had ceased to wonder. Robert turned the mare again and was flat over her withers as he headed down the meadow toward the village of Ralston. He rode as well as any man, but praise came grudgingly to William's mind, and never to his tongue.

Beyond the woods he saw the spire of Ralston church; beyond that, the Scar, a hill undermined by the diggings which cut copper out of the earth. The ground had subsided in an odd manner, changing the profile of the landscape.

The boy turned the mare once more but she had slowed and he did not urge her. He knew when enough work was enough. The magic of handling horses was God-given, William thought. It could not be taught, nor learned, but was born in a man. Tara would be in the stable soon, rubbed down, her nose in a pail of oats. She and the stud, Connaught, were the Armagh fortune. Horses were the life's blood of a country. Without them, a man ranged only as far as his own feet carried him, and his trade was limited to what he could carry on his back. It took an Irishman, William was sure, to appreciate this.

He turned as a rumble of wheels caught his ears. A smart coach in blue livery, drawn by matched bays, was approaching from the road — north-

bound, from London. Curiosity stirred. Often there were dispatches from Master Tom Dandridge, whose dissolute nature and appetite for money made him the perfect hireling, and would one day be his undoing.

The vehicle would draw up to the manor's ivy-clad frontage. With a glance at his son and the mare, William hurried back to the servants' door and ducked in beneath the climbing roses. The house was dim and smelt of polish, pastry, tobacco. Old Edward had already opened to the visitor. He wore the Armaghs' emerald green livery, which honoured the family's heritage, and their bloody history.

William straightened his wind-tousled hair and glanced at his face in the hand mirror. A stern face, set in disapproving lines, with silvered hair and ice blue eyes. He tidied the lace at his throat and smoothed his black velvet doublet as Edward approached.

"There is a gentleman to see you, my lord."

The servant waited in the hall. The open door admitted the wind, and his blue-cloaked visitor was outlined against the light. The shape of a sword thrust back under the cloak. It was not Dandridge, but a slender Spaniard with the sharp, shrewd eyes of a spy. Armagh knew him, though not socially, and disliked him.

"Señor Diaz, an unexpected visit." He offered his hand. "What brings you here?" It could only be business.

Antonio Diaz took his hand briefly. His palm was cool, soft, the hand of a man who knew nothing of physical labour. He smiled politely and accorded the earl a stiff bow. "I shall not trouble you, my lord, save to water my horses, if I may. I have dispatches for you."

"From Master Dandridge?" Armagh's pale eyes lit.

The Spaniard looked sidelong at him. "You have the Irishman's habit of meddling in affairs which are not your concern. One day the English will lop every Irish head for it."

"An unfortunate day for your King if they do," Armagh retorted. "You imagine Spain can challenge England without the freedom of Irish ports, the succour of men who share your Church?"

With fat chuckle Diaz turned back to the coach. "I am but a humble messenger."

"Humble *spy*," Armagh corrected. He followed Diaz into the warmth of sunlight channelled by Blackstead's gabled wings. "Who buys your wine and women this year? Philip? Or do you spy for Frobisher and Drake?"

Diaz's eyes hardened, his mouth tightened. "I am a lapdog, but a loyal one, in the employ of a countryman." He leaned into the coach, produced two sealed letters and slapped them angrily into the earl's hand.

The first seal stamped into the scarlet wax was the Cervallo device, a falcon in whose talons writhed two serpents ... a letter from Don Mauricio. William's old friend wrote often, sometimes complaining bitterly of his treatment — he would say, persecution — at the hands of the privateers who were publicly denounced, privately celebrated.

"The other letter?" Armagh examined the second dispatch. "Ah, Dandridge's signet."

"Matters of meddling and mayhem," Diaz said acidly. "With your leave, my Lord, I'll water my nags and go. I am bound for York. The *Alcanzar* is on the river there."

"She is a warship," Armagh said pointedly.

"Under the command of Capitan Miguel Vasca." Diaz's dark eyes glittered with mischief, which annoyed Armagh. "She came up the Humber for repairs after she was fired on by a privateer." He glanced at Dandridge's letter.

The earl stepped back into the house as Diaz's coachman led the nags to the trough by the shadowed west wall. The spy strolled away, moving like a dancer, a swordsman. In his hands, Armagh knew, the rapier was a lethal instrument. The oiled oak door latched, and he hurried to his study for a dirk to split the wax.

He had not seen his son by the west gable. Robert leaned on the red bricking while Tara drank at the trough. Diaz smiled at the boy's wind-blown appearance: brown hose, white linen shirt, an Irishman's fair complexion and rich auburn hair. "Good day, Robin. Your father is in an evil mood." He spoke in his native Castilian, always fascinated when the young man responded in the same tongue, almost without accent. Despite his tousled looks, Robin Armagh was a scholar.

The remark brought a rueful smile to the boy's smooth face. "When was my father ever in better cheer?" The Spanish language left his tongue easily. "Is there news?"

"Dispatches from the Ambassador and that fool Dandridge." Diaz watched the horses drink. Tara nuzzled her jockey's shoulder until Robin stroked her velvet muzzle. "You would do well to caution the earl. If he meddles in matters which are none of his concern he might easily come to grief."

The boy's green eyes widened. "Caution him? I would sooner leap naked into a nettle bed! I can do no right by my father. If I tell the truth, I no longer even try."

The words were regretful and Diaz saw Robin's face darken. The coach's high wheels rumbled over the raked gravel as the vehicle turned, and the driver climbed back to his perch. For some time Diaz studied the boy. He knew two of the other Armagh heirs by sight. John and Richard were at Court; this one was not much like them, and Diaz approved.

He offered his hand in farewell. "If you cannot caution your father, stand ready to flee. Often, they empty the whole nest when they take the eagle." He dropped his voice. "If your father thinks to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds — give Elizabeth lip service and Philip his aid out of loyalty to his Catholic fathers — he could end as the hare, and the hounds will tear out his throat."

He said no more, and left Robin blinking after him as the coach rolled out and the horses set a good pace for York. Who knew what was in the earl's mind? Little ever passed his lips, least of all in the presence of the son he despised.

The warning of danger quickened Robin's pulse as he stabled the mare

and rubbed her down. She had run well, and he told her so as he groomed her. She was dozing when he left. He slipped quietly into the house and listened for his father's voice.

He was upstairs, punishing some unfortunate maid with harsh words and ill temper. The door to his study was ajar, inviting intrusion. Spying? Robin thought of Diaz's warnings.

The dispatches lay on the writing desk beneath an old dirk. The uppermost was from the Ambassador, Don Mauricio de Cervallo, and written in English, in his own hand:

My dearest William,

I find myself once more presuming upon your generosity, of necessity. This shambles will be the end of me! Not content to lambaste me, my enemies and, I imagine, the enemies of Spain, have taken sterner measures. There was poison for me two days ago and I am still weak, in mind and body both. I am under orders, a royal decree, to vacate my apartments at Hampton and recuperate elsewhere. When last we supped you extended invitations to return to Blackstead upon my pleasure, and I would avail myself of this kindness. I send this letter with a messenger, and will be arriving soon after, with your agreement. Blackstead beckons with its peace and the succour of a Catholic house. 'Til we sup once more, William,

*Vaya con Dios,
your servant,
Mauricio de Cervallo.*

How long had the two been nearer brothers than friends? Robin was unsurprised by the letter's affection. Blackstead was an Irish house. Father Michael Doughty heard confession and said mass in the Lady Chapel in the east wing. A Spaniard would be at comfort here as nowhere else in the shire.

The second letter was from Dandridge, written in the man's spidery script, which suggested haste and stealth:

My Lord of Blackstead,

In the matter of Rothwell, I bid you, say little and await Her Majesty's pleasure. The Spanish Ambassador has been most outspoken, and even Admiral Drake was compelled to yield before him in this instance. To invest in a privateer is, these days, a delicate affair.

We must nurture the face we show Spain. Rothwell's ships and mercenary soldiers are judged fine beyond doubt, but there is dissent at Court. Rothwell struck unfortunate prey upon his last voyage. It was he who harassed the Alcanzar, and Captain Miguel Vasca wrote to Her Majesty, he recognised Rothwell's ship, Rosamund. The Queen is his investor, you may be sure, but there remains the concern of our relations with the Catholic Empire. Rothwell may end on the scaffold without need of your involvement. Let vengeance be furthered without blood upon your own hands, I pray, if only in my Lady Catherine's dear memory. As to the matter of —

"Robert!" The study's door slammed opened and the letter was torn from Robin's hand. "You are a spy as well as a wastrel, are you? As I have long suspected!" The letters were tossed onto the desk and cupped palms boxed the boy's ears.

He cried out as pain pierced both eardrums. Dizziness shocked him and he sagged to his knees. "Father —"

"Silence from you, boy! There'll be no lies." Armagh's open hand smacked one smooth cheek, hard enough to rattle Robin's teeth. "Now, get you from my sight, and if I see you before morning I shall surely lay the whip across your back. Get out!"

He went, bitter and hurting, hands cupped to his head as his ears ached. He stumbled under the climbing roses, for the hundredth time fleeing from the anger and hate. All love had died. He had ceased to look for affection years before and would have been content with tolerance, but even this much was denied him. Bitterness warred with grief, and won, but it was an old bitterness. Its edges were dulled.

When the pain in his ears was only a nagging throb he went out to run over the same course as the mare had raced. He punished his body till exhaustion brought him an hour's escape into oblivion. Inside the walls of Blackstead, for Robin Armagh, there was little more.

Behind him, the old man brooded in the hallway. Anger diminished as he read Dandridge's letter again. Sir Charles Rothwell lived at the Queen's pleasure — and might as easily die at her pleasure. The promise of vengeance was consuming.

He gazed across the hall at the portrait which hung below the staircase. The woman's face was serene; a faint smile lifted her beautiful mouth. Catherine Armagh had been just twenty when it was painted. Ten years later she was still beautiful at an age when her peers were growing feeble. The portrait was twenty years old, painted before Robert was even conceived.

Catherine's green eyes, her nose, her lush, sensual mouth, were born again in Robin. To look into the boy's face was William's agony. But if the lad had done much to earn his father's anger, it was Rothwell who bore the brunt of the fury. And it would be Rothwell who bore the vengeance, when old accounts were settled at last.

Chapter Three

The lush English hills slipped by the coach windows, but with the fate of Captain Rothwell undecided Dermot Channon's thoughts remained at Hampton Court. Elizabeth was furious, and so was Drake. Past his prime, stout but still arresting, 'The Master Thief' echoed the angry words of Fro-

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