

PLOT for a KING

by Lee Edgar

For Royalists Everywhere

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Published and Printed by
RegentLane Ltd
Devonshire Road Industrial Estate
Millom, Cumbria LA18 4JS
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ISBN 1 900821 31 1

sequels to this book
Plot to War
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The DeBosville Chronicles

Monday 5th February 1649

Andrew never did like goodbyes.

The arms of the good-looking woman were around his neck as she said farewell to him at Dover and his cheek rested on her breast as she stood in the boat and he could hear her heart beating through the soft material of her dress.

He had spent a lot of time with his elder sister since their mother had died and he had come to admire her fortitude and inner strength. As the sound of the waves lapped against the high water line, he dearly hoped that Carrie's health would hold out. The illness she had suffered when their mother died had laid her very low for over two years but right now she appeared to glow with health. Perhaps it was the thought of her impending marriage to Prince Philippe that was her inspiration.

'Look after John Henry for me,' she said to the brother who had come onto the scene pretty late in their parents' lives. 'He's still very young to be involved in this kind of thing.'

'Yes, Carrie. I'll do my best.'

It's funny really, Andrew thought, *she's not "stuck up" like some of the Ladies he could mention.* She had become Lady Caroline Ramsden nineteen years ago, but it had never gone to her head. After her aging husband, Lord Henry Ramsden, had died, she had lived all that time at Rettendon Hall knowing full well that, one day, she would hand it all over to their young son and, when that time had come, she had left Essex with hardly a backward glance. Everything was now in front of her—a new life, with a new husband, in a new land.

She smiled up at Andrew and winked mischievously. The tall, golden-haired girl with the deep, blue eyes was standing beside her and she and Andrew shook hands like strangers. Mary Beth did not go in for all this cuddling stuff so he quickly pecked her on the cheek as she blushed and held her nose in the air. *One day,* he thought wickedly, *that iceberg will melt and we'll all drown.*

There was damp sand on the hem of her white dress as she stepped over the high gunwale and climbed aboard the small boat which had come to fetch them and soon Carrie was waving as it finally disappeared into the early morning mist. As Andrew turned and strode purposefully up the beach towards the horses, he thought briefly of them crossing the Channel in winter time and said a little prayer for their safety.

UPON his arrival at Rettendon Hall, Andrew was greeted by his other sister, Rachel. He picked up her daughter and whirled her around. Antoinette had an infectious giggle and, at four, was a picture in her pink smock.

'And how's my favourite niece, then?' he said.

The little girl had her mind on other things. 'Daddy's gone with John Henry.'

Andrew smiled. 'Oh has he now? And what have you been doing with yourself all day?'

She proudly stuck her chest out. 'I've been helping mummy with the cleaning.'

'Well, that's a good thing to do. I bet she appreciates your help right now.'

'My mummy's going to have a baby,' she told him formally.

'Yes, I know.' They rubbed noses. 'Would you like a new brother or sister?'

Placing her finger on her little chin, she thought for a moment. 'A brother, I think. Yes, I'd like a brother.'

'Don't you go raising her hopes, Andrew Bosvile,' called Rachel from the doorway. 'The gender of the child is beyond my control and you know it.'

He stood up and walked to his sister, slipping his arms round her waist from behind and placing his hands carefully on that neat, round belly. 'And what does Mark prefer?'

'Oh, he wants a boy, too. But I can't just produce to order, you know.'

'I know that and I'll bet he'll be happy with whatever comes. And so will you, won't you, Toni?'

Antoinette came and hugged her mother's leg. 'Sometimes, I think that I would rather have another sister to play dolls with. Boys don't play dolls, do they, Uncle Andrew?'

He smiled. 'No, my chick, not normally. Boys like swords and things.'

'Some boys never grow up,' said Rachel with a sigh. Andrew dropped his hands from her and turned away with sadness.

Rachel must have sensed she had hurt her brother for she suddenly grabbed his arm and held him close. 'I'm sorry. I know that what you and John Henry are doing is for the best and you are

trying to serve King and country in the only way you can but I suppose it's all the intrigue and secrecy which frustrates me at times. What with you flitting about all over England and Scotland like a shadow, carrying secret messages between John Henry and Prince Charles. I do worry, you know.'

Her rounded belly rested against him and he could see why Mark loved her so much. Andrew smiled to himself. She was very like Carrie in her affection, if not alike in looks. They both got it from their parents, who loved each other and their children deeply. It was a shame Mary Beth was so cold. Carrie once told him that she had never seen Mary Beth's mother, Julie, smile. Upon reflection, Andrew had to admit that he have never seen Mary Beth actually smile - not with her eyes anyway, and that's where it really matters.

'A penny for them,' offered Rachel.

He shrugged and pulled away from her and sat in the big chair, looking out of the window. 'I was just thinking...'

'And I can guess where - en France, mon frère.' She sat on his knee. 'Don't worry, she'll be safe with Carrie. Carrie loves Mary Beth like her own, you know that. She won't let anything happen to her.'

'I know that. It's just...'

'Yes?'

'It's just that, I'm afraid that one day she will come out of her shell and...'

'That will be a good thing, won't it? Remember, she is yet fifteen and hasn't grown up properly. Soon, she will bloom like a summer rose, then things will work out.'

He shrugged. 'I just hope she is in my garden at the time.'

'Pessimist!' Rachel got up and took Antoinette's hand. 'Come and help mummy in the hall.'

Mother and daughter walked to the doorway where Rachel turned and looked back at him. 'Patience, brother dear. Patience.'

JOHN Henry and Mark got home in time for tea. They had been helping out at the hospital, not a mile down the road because, with all the men away at the war, help was needed at times and they all assisted as Carrie had done while she had been there.

'They got away safely?' the young Lord asked as he removed his boots.

Andrew nodded. 'Safe and sound.'

'What next, then?'

'I must go to Edinburgh to see the Kirk. Charles needs to know exactly where he stands with them.'

'Surely they have announced that they are prepared to make him a Covenant King?' spoke up Mark.

'Yes, they have. But what are the terms of the Covenant? What will they want Charles to do for them in return?'

'I have a feeling that Charles will accept almost any conditions right now to be accepted by them as King,' said John Henry.

'You're probably right. But will he live up to those conditions after they have crowned him?'

'Hmm. I guess the members of the Kirk must be thinking the same thing.'

'Yes. I'm sure they are. He is too like his father who promised them everything and gave them nothing.'

'I'm sure you are right, Andrew.'

'Dinner!' heralded the voice from the doorway and Rachel's look at Mark brought a twinge to Andrew's heart. If only Mary Beth would look at him like that, he thought. Once would be enough. Just once.

Wednesday 7th February 1649

It was dark as Andrew arrived at Hellaby in Yorkshire and sat on his chestnut mount beside the Bawtry Road, looking down upon the small hamlet nestled on the side of the hill. Mark, who had been there before with Carrie, had given him specific instruction on how to find the little cottage where his father's cousin lived.

It had seemed so straight forward at first but now he was having his doubts. Would he be welcomed by Thomas's widow? After all, it was Royalists who had murdered her husband so she had no reason to help anyone who was in league with the new King. In addition, father had told them how his old landlord, Squire Fretwell, had been a staunch Puritan and could well give Andrew away if the truth were to come to his ears. Rotherham, the main town nearest to here was one of the strongest Puritan towns in the North so Andrew knew he was deep inside enemy territory. Though he was dressed as a Puritan farmer, he had the message from Charles in the false lining of his saddlebag and so, if he was to be searched too closely, all would be lost. Twenty-year-old Andrew Bosvile was the main link in the chain between Prince Charles and his future.

He nudged his mount forward down the hill. Past Hellaby Hall he cantered and through the muddy ford at the foot of the hill. There was still a light in Alice's cottage so he dismounted and listened. All was quiet, at least, he had thought it was. Then he heard it - singing. Like a ghost, he crept through the darkness towards the window where the light was. But he was not careful enough. Stumbling on a pile of logs, he started the dog barking and the door suddenly flew open and a woman of about sixty stood framed in the open doorway.

'Who's there?' she called. 'Come on, show yourself.' The broom in her hand was her only weapon as she challenged her would-be burglars.

Andrew stepped into the faint pool of light from the doorway and removed his tall hat. 'It's only me, Aunt Alice. I'm Andrew from Essex.'

'Andrew?' She leant forward, peering at him and looked temporarily puzzled until a look of recognition came over her face. 'Well I never. Come in, boy. Don't stand out there in the cold.'

Andrew followed her into the parlour where a big fire roared in the hearth and the elderly woman fussed all over him, taking his hat and coat and ushering him into her big armchair.

'My you've grown,' she stated. 'Here let me look at you.' She sat opposite him in her favourite rocking chair. 'What brings you to Hellaby at this terrible time of year?'

'I...'

'Now here I go forgetting my manners,' she interrupted. 'Have you eaten?'

He shook his head and Alice Bosvile rose and put a big stew pot on the edge of the hearth where it could heat up.

'Carrie said that I would find a welcome here,' he stated.

'Of course you are welcome here.' Alice Bosvile frowned. 'What made you think you would not be?'

'Well. My father has told me how you are all Puritans here and my mother and sister did risk their lives to protect the Queen. I come because of your close friendship with my father.'

'Yes, Jack and my Thomas were very close, even for cousins. They tried hard to be neutral to the politics but circumstances made it impossible.'

'Yes, and it was similar circumstances which got mother and Carrie involved with the Queen.'

She looked him straight in the face. 'And where do your loyalties lie, young Andrew?'

Andrew found he could not lie to his aunt. 'I am working to reinstate young Charles as King.' He looked down. 'I'm sorry if this upsets you.'

'Not in the least. It was not the King as killed my Tom, just some of his over-zealous Cavaliers. In truth, we were all very sad when we heard the old King had been executed. No-one deserved to die like that, no matter what he did.'

'I will not try to defend him, Aunt Alice. He did a lot of things which were not good for the country. However, it is his son who now should rule. He will make a far better King for England.'

Alice frowned. 'You sound very sure, young Andrew.'

'I have spent many hours with him over the last couple of years. He does have much of his father in him, but he is far more astute. He also still has some rough corners, but he will learn.'

'I do hope so. Tell me, how can I help you?'

'I am acting in the capacity of go-between for Prince Charles. John Henry is now old enough to attend the House of Lords and so he plays the part of the good, loyal Puritan. I am now on my way to Scotland to arrange a meeting between the Prince and the Scottish Kirk.'

'Do you think they will help him to regain his father's throne?'

'I don't know. All the other rulers of Europe have pledged support to Charles, even the Republic of the United Provinces. The Pope has even offered his support through the Irish.'

'I didn't know that Prince Charles had become a Catholic,' she said, suddenly concerned.

'He hasn't,' Andrew said quickly. 'In fact, he is determined to re-establish the Anglican faith in England. The problem is that the Irish will only support him if he has England declared Catholic, the Scots will only support him if he makes the country Presbyterian and the Dutch will support him if he remains Protestant. So, he is in a cleft stick.' He sighed. 'If only they would all work together, there would not be a problem.'

'What would you see him do, Andrew?'

'I really don't know, Aunt Alice. I do believe in God, of course. But like Dad, I can't somehow relate Him to the pomp of the Catholic Church and, to me, Anglicans seem just like Catholics in disguise.'

'And Puritanism?'

'Puritanism? I don't know. It's certainly more down-to-earth but somehow, too unreasonable. I'm sure God didn't mean us to be so strictly dealt with all the time.'

Alice laughed. 'I think I know what you mean. When Puritanism started here, it was very welcome, being a refreshing change to High Church practices. But, just lately, it seems to have bred so many fanatics. I'm not sure of anything myself these days.' She suddenly smiled. 'Come, let me give you something to eat.'

Andrew ate with gusto and, when he was full, they spent another hour discussing old times. Then Alice showed her nephew into the spare room where he soon fell asleep. If he'd had any idea about what was about to happen, it is doubtful he would have slept so peacefully.

Thursday 8th February 1649

The wind was icy cold as Carrie stepped down from the coach. It had not been a good journey from the Channel coast and she rubbed her sore bottom. 'Well, Mary Beth. This is to be our home for a few days. What do you think?'

The unruffled teenager stepped down and looked around with her nose in the air. 'Not much different to England really. I thought it was supposed to be warm in France.'

Carrie laughed at her solemn face. 'In summer, I'm told it is beautiful and, after the wedding, we will be going farther south and there it will be much warmer.'

Mary Beth shivered. 'I certainly hope so. I'm frozen.'

'Never mind, we'll soon be inside.'

Carrie took her by the arm and they walked towards the big front door which opened by a footman as they approached. They were shown into a large reception room where they were greeted by a middle-aged woman dressed in black.

Princess Henriette Marie de Bourbon held out her hands to the friend who had hidden her often whilst on the run from Parliament. 'My dear Lady Caroline, welcome to Paris.'

Carrie curtsied low.

'Come beside the fire and get warm. Tell me, how was the journey?'

'Don't ask. I'm never going to set foot on a boat again. I've never felt so ill in all my life. And that coach... my bottom will be numb for a week.'

The Queen laughed. 'I have arranged for dinner to be served immediately. You must be hungry and, Mary Beth, you look frozen. Come nearer to the fire.'

Mary Beth sat on the edge of her chair and shuffled a little closer.

Henriette smiled. 'Come on, dear, I shan't eat you.'

Just then, a girl of about five came into the room and the Queen greeted her. 'Come in, Minette. Carrie, you won't have met my youngest yet. Her name is Henriette Anne.'

Carrie frowned. 'But you called her Minette.'

'Henriette Anne is her real name but young Charles started calling her Minette some years ago and I'm afraid the nick-name stuck.'

Henriette held Minette in front of them. She was a pretty girl with an impish smile who smiled broadly and held out her doll for Mary Beth to see. Mary Beth smiled.

Carrie was speechless. Mary Beth had actually smiled. Not only that, her adopted daughter held out her arms to Minette, who proceeded to sit on her knee.

'Well, Mary Beth,' said Henriette. 'You've found a friend there, haven't you? '

'How are the other children?' asked Carrie, sitting at her Queen's feet in front of the fire. 'Are they here?'

'No, Carrie, only Minette. Charles is still in The Hague waiting to hear from the Kirk. James is about somewhere, he has just got back from staying with my Mary, in Amsterdam. He's such a wild boy.'

'He must be growing up. How old is he now?'

'He's the same age as me,' spoke up Mary Beth.

'Sixteen?' said Carrie incredulously. 'And travelling about on his own? And what of the younger children?'

'I just have Minette here with me at the moment. Elizabeth and Henry are still with the Sidneys at Penshurst. I feel so dreadfully lonely at times. Not only have I lost my husband whom I loved dearly, I also seem to have lost most of my children. Mary is safe of course with Prince William, but the others seem to be spread out all over Europe.'

'Oh, my dear friend. What can I say?' Carrie rested her head on Henriette's knee and tried to comfort her and it was a long time before any of them spoke. It was the gong for dinner which broke the spell.

'You haven't come here to be sad, Carrie. You are to be married next week. It's a time to be happy. Come, let's eat.'

Carrie and Henriette wiped away their tears and walked arm-in-arm into the dining room. Minette followed, pulling a playfully reluctant Mary Beth along by the hand.

DINNER was superb. While they ate, Henriette brought them up-to-date with events. 'I'm afraid France is suffering from the Frondes at the moment.'

'Is that some kind of a plague?' asked Mary Beth.

'No!' laughed Henriette. 'It means "catapult" and it was once used to describe people who threw things at royalty as they passed by in their coaches. I'm afraid this particular one is even a bit more serious than that.'

'What is it all about?' Carrie asked.

'It is a bit complicated,' the Queen started. 'My brother, Louis the thirteenth, was king until he died six years ago. His son, another Louis, was only five so couldn't possibly reign at that age so his Spanish mother became regent. However, to prevent Spain taking control, my brother would not leave full control to her. He recognised just how crafty she could be so he left instructions, at his death, that her powers be limited.'

'How was that achieved?'

'Anne was to act only on the advice of a council which consisted of herself, my brother Gaston, Prince Louis of Condé and Anne's new fancy-man, an Italian by the name of Guilio Mazarini. They were to be assisted by officials such as Séguier the Chancellor, Bouthillier the Superintendent and Chavigny the Secretary of State.'

'That sounds pretty restricting.'

'Yes, but not for long. Anne's a scheming witch and Mazarin, as he has now become known, had similar interests. Gaston and Condé were permanently disagreeing over something or other but one thing they were agreed upon was their hatred of Mazarin, the pompous little man. Queen Anne realised this and pretended to agree with them and persuaded Parlement to grant her full regency. Parlement were in a difficult position. If they did nothing, war could break out between the two royal princes so they opted for what seemed, at the time, as the lesser of the two evils. They

granted Anne the regency.'

'So now Queen Anne rules France?'

'Not entirely. As soon as she was appointed, she about-turned and granted Mazarin the position of First Minister. Parlement has never forgiven her for her deceit and the fight now on is really to get rid of Mazarin. The country doesn't want the little rat as First Minister.'

Carrie laughed. 'It doesn't sound as if you like him either.'

'I loath him. And he is supposed to be the Papal Nuncoi.'

'The what?'

'Cardinal, my dear.'

'You say that the people don't want Mazarin. What is the alternative?'

'Louis is still only eleven so he's not old enough yet. Condé is too ambitious so Parlement seem to fancy young Paul de Gondi, though I can't for the life of me see why.'

'Is he not capable?'

'He is probably extremely capable, I don't know. I only know what I've heard. He wants to be Cardinal but he doesn't believe in God. He wants to be First Minister but has no political ability. He is little better than Mazarin.'

'What are they all trying to achieve?'

'Why, power, of course.' She leant forward conspiratorially. 'And the money that goes with it, naturally.'

Carrie smiled. 'Naturally. It all comes down to that in the end, doesn't it?'

'I'm afraid it does, Carrie,' Henriette said sadly. 'I'm afraid it does.'

AFTER dinner, they sat and discussed the plans for the wedding. Minette had taken Mary Beth off for a tour of the nursery so Carrie sat in front of the fire with Henriette Marie.

'Is everything ready for the big day?' the Queen asked.

'I hope so. It's all happened so fast, I hope I haven't forgotten anything essential.'

'Dress?'

'In the trunk. Rachel and I finished it before we left England.'

'Bridesmaids?'

'Just Mary Beth.' Carrie stopped and considered for a moment. 'Henriette, would Minette like to be a second bridesmaid?'

'Like it? I'm sure she'd simply love it.'

'Then it's settled. Is the church far from here?'

'No. Just nearby in the chapel. Originally, it was to have been at Fontainebleau but now this Fronde business has got Paris bottled up so that virtually no-one can get in or out. Do you mind?'

'Of course not. It's the marriage that counts, not where it is held.'

'Carrie, my dear,' said the Queen severely. 'One thing you will learn very quickly is that, in France, life is all about the "wheres" and the "with whoms". The "whats" are quickly forgotten. To coin a phrase, "it's not what you know, it's who you know" and, of course, "how well you know him."''

Carrie laughed so hard that her sides hurt. 'So France is not so different to England, after all.'

'I'm afraid not, Carrie. Life seems to be much the same the world over. "History repeats itself", they say, but we still seem to go on making the same stupid mistakes, don't we?'

Lady Ramsden sighed. 'Don't we just.'

'Well, so much for women trying to change the world. Let's get down to more serious matters - your wedding. What have we forgotten? There's bound to be something.'

'I do have one problem. I'm not a Catholic.'

'Nor was my husband. It's not terribly important in the long run.'

'It is to some. They fight about it all the time.'

'Not over religion. Only over the prestige it brings. And of course...'

'The money,' they said together and laughed for a long time.

MARK finished reading the story to Antoinette and kissed her goodnight. He closed the bedroom door quietly and went downstairs. John Henry and Rachel sat in the library, reading.

'Is she asleep?' Rachel asked.

Mark nodded. 'Like a baby.'

'But she is a baby.'

'She's not going to be the baby of the family for much longer, is she?'

'Oh, it'll be a few weeks yet. He'll come in his own good time.'

'He?'

'You want a boy, don't you?'

'I don't mind that much - just as long as he is fit and well, I'll be happy.' He tucked a pillow under Rachel's feet which rested on the low stool and then looked across at the young Lord Ramsden. 'You're very quiet tonight, John Henry.'

'I'm just thinking about tomorrow. My first day at the Lords, you know.'

'Oh yes, I'd forgotten. Will you leave early?'

The younger man nodded. 'I'd better. You never know about the weather at this time of year. It's pretty murky outside.'

IT was snowing hard as Andrew crossed the border into Scotland and wondered about the future. How would the Kirk react? Would they accept the message that he had brought from Charles? How would it all work out and, most importantly, would he ever see Mary Beth again?

Friday 9th February 1649

John Henry was learning much about the way that Parliament worked. He was the youngest active member of the House of Lords which was the only house left with any kind of power.

Two months previously, before the death of King Charles, the House of Commons had been much reduced in size by Colonel Pride's Purge and then had been compelled to be subject to the Army. In effect, the Rump Parliament wielded no power whatsoever. The Army was still led by Sir Thomas Fairfax, who had failed in his appeal for the King's life to be spared. He was a fair man who, though ruthless in action as a General was, nevertheless, a realistic man who played by the rules.

John Henry rose, eventually, to present his maiden speech. 'My Lords. I'm sure I will make you happy when I say that this, my first speech here, will not be a long one.'

A titter went around the House.

'However, I do have something to say which needs to be said.'

No titter this time. It was a time when outspokenness was regarded as sheer foolishness.

'I once heard my father described as the "last of the old school".' He paused for effect. 'They were wrong! I have spent much time reading the notes of his speeches and listening to my mother recall his views and I have to say that I wholeheartedly concur and intend to carry forward his moderate views.'

'He was known as a friend of the King - the first King Charles, that is. It is also well known that he did not agree with all the King's actions and neither do I. His claim to rule by the grace of God offended many as it did in his father's, day. However, despite his drawbacks, he was a King who loved his country.'

Murmurs of agreement. Not too loud in case someone was listening.

'I am here neither to excuse nor accuse him - the past is past. However, we can learn by it and influence the future by what we say and do at present. I have heard many of you bemoaning the current situation and you are right to be unhappy, but we must be constructive.'

Lots of surreptitious nods.

'I am young and have lots to learn from your good selves and your experience. I pray that where I lack, you will assist me to understand the implications of what is happening. I now seek to understand where we go from here.'

Flattery will get you everywhere, young John.

'I was most distressed by something I heard this morning. I was told that some of the leaders of the Army are claiming to govern by Divine Right. I am disturbed by this. How different is this to that which has been openly and repeatedly condemned as words of the former King? If we are not careful, then will we claim to rule by Divine Right? Will the Squire make demands of his workers by Divine Right? Will perhaps, a thief steal by Divine Right? Where will it end?'

Semi-uproar.

'I beg you, my Lords, to think ahead, to the future. If matters are allowed to continue in this matter, there will never be an end to this situation. Do not be misled into thinking this brief period of peace is the end to war. As I speak, plans are being made to install the young Prince Charles as King. He needs your support now; not as fighters, but as persuaders. The time to fight will come, but it is not now.'

A murmur broke out as the implications sunk in. John Henry waited until there was silence again.

'You may be surprised to learn that I have been contacted by Charles and he needs to know where he stands with yourselves. I am in no position to make demands of your Lordships, but he needs to know and he needs to know now.'

There was a hush as he sat down.

PRINCE Philippe arrived to see Carrie in the afternoon. He clarified the final arrangements for the wedding and agreed with her decision to use Minette as second bridesmaid. About three hundred guests would be present including Gaston, Duc d'Orléans.

BY the end of the day, John Henry had received promises of support from quite a number of the Lords. The most staunch supporters of the King were not present. Many had been killed in action and the best of the rest were in exile with the new King. But it was a start.

ANDREW Bosvile rode into Edinburgh Castle amid a blinding blizzard. He was not stopped by the soldiers on guard at the gate but inside, out of the wind, they were more enthusiastic and he was quickly surrounded as he dismounted.

'What is your business here?' he was asked.

'I come to speak with the Kirk on a matter of international importance.'

'I will need more than that before I disturb their lordships at this late hour.'

Andrew took out his dagger and reached towards his saddlebag. The sound of a musket being cocked behind him stopped him but the Captain nodded, watching carefully. From the false lining of his saddlebag, he cut away the papers from King Charles which bore the Royal Stuart seal.

The Captain glanced at them briefly before leading him inside. Their boots echoed as they climbed the stairs and walked along the stone corridor. At the end, the Captain knocked on a large door. After a moment's discussion, Andrew was led into the room.

A hawkish man greeted him. 'I am Archbald Campbell, Earl of Argyll. I understand you have come from the King.'

'Yes, my Lord. I am Andrew Bosvile. Lady Ramsden is my sister.'

He leant back in his chair which creaked. 'Ah, the formidable Lady Caroline, outspoken defender of the King. Is your sister well?'

'Yes, my Lord. She is to be married in a few days to Prince Philippe des Puys. Her son, Lord John Henry Ramsden is at Rettendon Hall now.'

'So what brings you to Scotland, laddie?'

'A message from King Charles.' Andrew proffered the papers and Lord Argyll bade him sit while he read them through carefully and then read them again. He rang for his adjutant and arranged for the Kirk to meet immediately. This was a man of action indeed.

Andrew was fed and watered while he awaited their decision but the meeting went on well into the night. It was almost morning before he was recalled into the room.

'Is the King still at the Hague, laddie?' Argyll asked on behalf of them all.

'Yes, my Lord. He awaits your reply.'

'Then we will meet him at the end of the next week. Not here, it is too dangerous. We will come to Holland, to the Hague. Please ensure he is there and that our time and journey are not wasted.'

Andrew bowed. 'I will do my best, my Lord.'

'My colleagues will want a guarantee.'

'I will guarantee to give the King your message and then leave it up to him. I can do no more.'

'Very well. I have given orders that you be escorted back to the border for your safety.'

'No, my Lord. It would be better if I travel alone. I have no wish to be compromised by anyone who may see me and so restrict my future ability to serve my King freely.'

Lord Argyll smiled for the first time. 'You are a determined young man. Very well, go alone. And may God go with you.'

Andrew bowed. 'Thank you my Lord.'

He left immediately but it was not long before he was soon to regret that he had been so stubbornly independent.

Saturday 10th February 1649

The weather closed in as John Henry travelled eastwards through Stepney and he was glad he had decided to use the coach rather than to travel on horseback. The vehicle did at least offer some protection from the wind and driving snow as he peered out of the window at the people as they hurried about their daily way of life.

Successive bad harvests had driven many people into the cities and prices were soaring everywhere. At this rate, he was not sure how long he was going to be able to keep the old Hall on but perhaps if this year produced a good harvest, all would be well.

It was growing dark as the coach swung in through the big iron gates at Rettendon and he wondered if there was news from Scotland yet. Andrew should be back any day and there would be news about the King's future.

THAT evening, Henriette Marie had a visitor. The fine coach drew up just as darkness fell and the sky looked overcast and full of snow. Perhaps it was a foreboding for the future.

Henriette greeted her visitor and introduced her to Carrie. 'Princess, this is Lady Caroline Ramsden from England. She is to marry Prince Philippe.'

Carrie bowed to this tall, fine lady who had arrived.

'Carrie,' the Queen continued. 'This is Anne-Marie Louise, daughter of my brother, Gaston.'

'Pleased to meet you, Your Highness,' said Carrie with a curtsy.

The Princess's long, fair hair fell out of her hood as the footman took her outer garment and she nodded to Carrie and smiled. Carrie guessed she was in her late teens or early twenties but already looked very confident and intelligent.

'I keep telling my Charles,' Henriette said to Carrie as they all walked into the library. 'Instead of gallivanting all over Holland and Jersey, he should be here, courting Anne-Marie.'

'Now don't you go spreading rumours, Aunt Henriette,' Anne-Marie scolded playfully. 'I like my

cousin a lot but I'm not sure whether marriage is on the cards.'

'I was teasing, Anne-Marie. I'm not convinced that Charles knows what he wants at the moment.'

'My dear Aunt Henriette, with all the things I have heard about his exploits and mistresses, marriage to me must be the very last thing in his mind.'

Henriette was appaled. 'Does he not treat you well?'

'On the contrary, he is always the perfect gentleman. He holds his hat in his hand whatever the weather, opens coach doors for me and is the model of politeness.'

'Then what is the problem?'

'We don't love each other. I get the impression at times that he is spending time with me only to please you and, when he is not here, his interests are elsewhere. This Lucy Walter, for instance.'

'But there is nothing serious in it.'

'No? I hear the young lady in question is expecting his child. That sounds fairly serious to me.'

'Well, yes. But Lucy will never make a queen. He knows that.'

'I certainly hope that he does,' Anne-Marie said a little pompously. Then, 'Of course, neither is there a guarantee that Charles will ever become King, is there?'

'That is true, Anne-Marie,' blushed Henriette. 'However, he is expecting news from Scotland any day now. Carrie's brother, Andrew, has gone to arrange a meeting between Charles and the Scottish Kirk. If the meeting is successful, my son could be King within the month.'

'We shall see, Aunt Henriette, we shall see.' The young woman turned to Carrie. 'Tell me, Lady Caroline, where will you live when you are married?'

'We hope to live at one of Philippe's Chateaux south of the Auvergne. I'm not sure exactly where.'

'Somewhere warm, eh? I don't blame you. Father and I seem to spend most of our time in The Palace of Luxemburg these days, and it's not too warm in there I might tell you. I think I should go and marry some Spanish Prince and live in the sun.'

'Don't be too sure of that, Anne-Marie,' said Henriette. 'There are more Spaniards in Flanders at the moment than in Spain itself.'

'Yes, don't I know it. If only Condé and father would patch up their feuding, I would feel much more secure. His troops next to ours would protect France perfectly.'

'You're right, Anne-Marie. A Spanish invasion is the last thing France needs right now. We're sandwiched between Spanish Flanders and Spain itself and, with our armies divided over this Fronde farce, we would be easy pickings.'

'I would hardly have called the Fronde a farce. Parlement are taking it very seriously. They want rid of Mazarin at any cost and Queen Anne too, if she gets in their way.' She sighed. 'If only Prince Louis was old enough to rule.'

'That's what I was saying to Carrie. With France and England both in Civil War, Spain and Holland look set to dominate Europe again.'

'Then we must do what we can to end the Civil Wars. If the men are too proud to do it, perhaps we women should do something.'

'Careful, Anne-Marie. That's what Queen Anne said, and look where it's got her - our country divided. Maybe we need a more subtle approach.'

'Yes, I think you're right.' She smiled mischievously. 'Henriette, why don't you and I do some plotting of our own?'

ANDREW did not see the Roundheads until it was too late. About a dozen of them came at him out of the blizzard and, although he protested his innocence, he was taken along by them. By nightfall, he was securely incarcerated at Berwick Castle.

The Commandant was an ugly man. He sat at a big desk with a junior officer either side of him and Andrew's chains scraped on the floor as he was ushered to stand before them. There were several other soldiers in the room which had stone walls and was cold despite the roaring fire. Out of the window, Andrew could see the sea - cold and grey with the low headland jutting out;

black cliffs covered with a thick white blanket. If he hadn't had the prospect of anything ahead of him but to spend the night in a cold, damp cell, he might have preferred to stay in Berwick rather than to travel south through all that snow. But that was foolish thinking. He had to leave and quickly. Both King and Kirk were relying on him for communication.

'What is your name, boy?' the Commandant asked eventually.

'Andrew Bosvile, Sir,' he replied, judging a certain measure of truth to be prudent at this stage in the proceedings. He was also glad he carried no items to could connect him with the Crown. If he had been caught on the northward journey and the King's papers found...

'What was your business in Scotland?'

'Just visiting relatives, sir.'

'Wrong!' The Commandant slammed his fist down upon the desk. 'You are a Royalist spy.'

Andrew's blood went cold. Did he know? If so, how?

'No, sir,' he decided to reply. 'I come from a good Puritan family in Yorkshire.'

'Whereabouts in Yorkshire?'

'From Hellaby, near Rotherham. My father is Sir John Bosvile.'

'Is your father a Puritan?'

'Yes, sir. He fought against the Cavaliers at the Battle of Rotherham.'

'One of Fairfax's men, eh?'

'No, sir. He has spent most of his time with Squire Cromwell at Huntingdon, training new recruits.'

'Hmm. And where were you going, when my men stopped you?'

'Back to Hellaby, sir.'

He leant back and smiled like a hungry wolf. 'Then my men shall accompany you on your return and check your story. We will be travelling south next week when the snow clears.'

'But, sir, my aunt cannot manage without me for so long,' he lied. 'She will start to worry soon because she has lived on her own at Hellaby since the Cavaliers murdered my uncle and I have moved to help her in her old age.'

Would they swallow it, he wondered? He could not afford to be trapped here for a day never mind a week.

'Your aunt, eh?'

Andrew stood silently and prayed.

'Sergeant Briggs?' the Commandant finally called.

A middle-aged soldier with a pike stepped forward. 'Yes, sir.'

'You served with General Cromwell, didn't you?'

'Yes, sir. For a short while.'

'Do you remember this John Bosvile?'

'Yes, sir. We knew him as Jack.'

He turned back to the prisoner. 'Boy, describe your father.'

'Well, sir. He was about my height with auburn hair and brown eyes. His face was scarred from burns.'

'Does the description fit, Sergeant?'

'To the letter, sir. Might I be permitted to ask him a question?'

'Of course, man.'

The sergeant turned to Andrew. 'Describe your father's sword.'

'I can do better than that, sir. I had it with me when I was captured.'

The Commandant sent for Andrew's belongings and they arrived a few minutes later.

The Sergeant took out the sword and examined it closely. 'There's no doubt about it sir. This is Jack's sword. It is unmistakable.'

'How did he come by such a weapon, boy?'

'It was hand-made by the local smith some years ago and it has fought in many skirmishes against the Papists both here and in France.' A little exaggeration went a long way.

For a long time, no-one said anything until the Commandant leant back. 'Very well. You seem to

be who you claim to be. However, you still may be a spy. My Sergeant and his men will accompany you to Hellaby on Monday, to check your story about this supposed aunt of yours. If you are telling the truth, you will be freed. However, if you have lied, you will be executed for treason.'

'Yes, sir. I understand that. You will find I have not lied to you.'

Andrew accompanied the Sergeant back to the soldiers' quarters where his irons were removed and he was given a good meal. There did not seem to be any chance of escape from the castle and so he decided to go along with it all and hoped that, when they arrived in Hellaby, his Aunt Alice would be smart enough to realise the sensitivity of the situation.

Monday 12th February 1649

The Roundheads were beginning to wish they had not left the safety of Berwick Castle. For five hours they had ridden through drifting snow and had covered not twenty miles as the snow blew horizontally, straight off the sea and they were turned in the saddle so their backs offered some protection.

Andrew risked a glance at them and it was painfully obvious that they could not keep it up for much longer. Sergeant Brigg's men looked thoroughly miserable. They had joined the army to fight glorious battles with Royalists and here they were, freezing to death in a snowstorm and not a Cavalier in sight. It was only two in the afternoon but it was already growing dark and they had two choices, carry on to Alnwick, another hour's journey, or return to Belford where an inn might be found. If it had been left to Andrew, he would have ridden till he dropped as it was imperative he contact the King as soon as possible. He could not convey that fact to these soldiers, of course, because he was supposed to be returning to an elderly aunt at Hellaby.

Sergeant Briggs opted for Alnwick though Andrew doubted it was out of regard for his urgency. There, the choice of available women was probably greater than in some isolated Northumbrian village. It was very dark when they arrived in the town and found rooms at the inn near the castle where horses were stabled and men were fed.

'Now don't you go running off tonight, young Andrew,' said Sergeant Briggs with the threat barely discernable in his voice. 'We don't want you getting lost, do we?'

Andrew had to admit, he had been sorely tempted. But it would do Alice Bosvile no good at all if he were to escape now. He shook his head and raised his tankard. Puritans or no Puritans, the ale flowed free that night and it was not long before all three soldiers had buxom wenches on their knees. So far, Andrew had managed to dissuade any advances from loose women. He had eyes for only one, though for the life of him, he couldn't imagine why. Eventually, he rose and made his way to his room, turned the door handle and then drew back; there had been a movement inside the room.

His weapons were still in the custody of Sergeant Briggs, so he slipped off his leather belt and wrapped the end round his hand, the buckle end hanging free, and gently pushed open the door with his left hand, ready for anything. All was still as he stepped cautiously across the threshold, looking carefully behind the door as the candle on the dresser flickered in the draught. Had he imagined it? A slight shuffle behind the curtains reassured him that he was not going mad so he carefully stepped over and threw the curtain aside. Behind them was a teenager who cowered against the cold window, his cap pulled down and his coat rolled up at the collar. He tried to slip past but Andrew caught him by the ear and prevented his escape. 'Now then, young fella, what are you after? Trying to steal, no doubt.'

The lad shook his head furiously and winced. 'I have a message for Mr Bosvile. That is you, sir, isn't it?'

Andrew's heart suddenly skipped a beat. 'Yes, boy. I'm Andrew Bosvile.'

'Sir. My apologies, but I was asked to be sure I found the right person.'

The boy wriggled to be free and Andrew let go of his ear. He sat on the bed while Andrew looked down at him for a long time. How did anyone know he was there? The overnight stop had not been pre-arranged.

Watching the lad carefully, he reached into his own cape pouch and pulled out his Bible. 'Can you read?'

The youth nodded so Andrew opened the fly leaf and showed him the writing which read: "To my dearest son, Andrew, from your loving mother, Sarah Louise Bosvile - December in the year of our Lord sixteen hundred and forty".

The youth reached into his pocket and brought out a dirty scrap of paper which Andrew unfolded and read carefully in the candle light.

Dear Master Bosvile

I know of your loyalty to the King and my heart is firmly with yours. It is too late for me now to help young Charles and by the time you get this letter, my execution will have been carried out. I was able to help King Charles once. Perhaps his son will help my own hour of need. I beg and pray that your heart will let you take my child with you to safety.

Your faithful servant,

SirAnthony Grenville.

Andrew read the letter twice and then looked down at the lonely, lost child. 'By what name do they call you?'

'Sam, sir.'

'Well Sam. How did you know I would be here?'

'I have been waiting for you almost a week. I knew you would take the coast road in winter because Dere Street across The Cheviot is impassable.'

'You put me in a difficult position, young man. Although I am here, I am not free. In fact, I am a prisoner of the Roundheads in a sense. They are travelling with me to verify the story I gave them.'

'You must take me with you, sir,' the youth pleaded. 'I have nowhere else to go.'

Andrew looked at him long and hard. He was filthy and had obviously kept up his vigil for days, never daring to leave the main road in case he missed his contact. He deserved something for that, Andrew thought, though how he was going to manage it, he hadn't a clue.

Sam sat on the bed and tears flowed so Andrew put his hand gently on the lad's shoulder. 'Don't worry, I'll think of something. In the meantime, we must get you tidied up. You can't see the King looking like a tramp.'

His smile beamed through his tears. 'So you'll take me with you?'

Andrew nodded. 'I'll find a way. Let's see what we can do to clean you up. Get undressed, I'll find some warm water.'

He left the reluctant-looking Sam sitting on the bed and slipped out with the jug. After persuading the landlord to allow him a little water from the stove, he carried it back upstairs. Sam was still sitting where he had left him.

Andrew poured some of the water into a bowl. 'Come on, Sam. You must get washed.'

He grabbed the youth by the arm and pulled him gently but firmly to his feet. Sitting on the bed, he stood Sam in front of him and started to undo the buttons of the dirty shirt. He pulled the shirt open and, embarrassed, looked up to Sam's face. 'You...You're not a boy.'

Sam sighed. 'No, sir. Never have been.'

Andrew had seen his sister, Rachel, without clothing many times when he was young and once, he even caught sight of Carrie on her veranda and was ashamed for a week afterward. Mary Beth

had always kept herself well covered up but here, standing half-naked in front of him, was a skinny girl.

He gently closed her shirt. 'Sam. How old are you?'

'Fifteen, sir.'

'Do you have brothers?'

'Five, sir.' The girl looked down at her dirty feet. 'All dead.'

'I'm sorry.'

Her eyes flicked to his. 'Are you going to help me wash now?'

'I'm not sure...'

'Please.'

'I'm not your brother, Sam.'

'I know. But my father told me you are a good friend of the King.'

Andrew sighed. Why can't everyone be as innocent as this? Reluctantly, he helped her to scrub her back and legs and then let her finish her own washing while he looked out of the window at the snow-capped roofs and candle-lit windows. The blizzard had stopped and everything sparkled as the moon started its journey across the cleared sky.

Sam finished, dried herself and put on a cotton nightshirt she had taken from her small bag of belongings. She thanked him and then climbed into the bed. Oh well, Andrew sighed, bang goes a good night's sleep. He slipped off his waistcoat and curled up on the floor. It was freezing.

Sam sat up. 'Why don't you come into the bed?'

'Because it's not done.'

'Why not?'

Her small, childlike face reflected the light and acted like a magnet to him and, as if in a dream, he climbed in beside her. She was warm as toast.

There was little room in that single bed and he lay on his back staring at the ceiling as the candle flickered its last breath. What was he going to do with this girl? How could he take her along? Was he guilty of leading her on? Promising something he could not fulfil? Just as the candle died, the door burst open and in staggered Sergeant Briggs with a tankard of ale in one hand and a buxom wench in the other.

'Just checking you've not run away,' he boomed as he swayed about in the doorway. 'Though I needn't have worried, need I?'

He laughed and practically fell outside as Andrew looked round and saw that Samantha was sitting up looking much more than her age in the poor light.

She looked at Andrew. 'What was that about?'

'That was my captor. He obviously thinks I'm bedding some town wench.'

'Oh,' she said, blushing.

He got up, closed the door the sergeant had left open and climbed back into bed in the darkness and pulled the sheet up to his chin. It sure was cold outside that bed.

Samantha's arm went across him and she wriggled until she lay close up. 'Now we've got more room, haven't we?'

He shook his head in the darkness, put his arms gently around her small body and, soon, she was fast asleep. Oh to be young again.

Andrew could not sleep. It was not just the presence of this sweet, innocent girl resting peacefully beside him, it was the responsibility he had taken on by promising to take her with him. But what other chance did she have? He finally convinced himself that neither of them had any chance but to stick together and make the best of it.

Tuesday 13th February 1649

In the morning, the men saddled the horses in the frosty air and the snow had a crust on it which crunched under their feet as they walked towards Sergeant Briggs.

He looked around as they approached, a wide grin on his face. 'Well, well. And what do we have here?'

His men were very much under the weather from the night's drinking, but it didn't seem to have affected the jolly sergeant one iota.

'Sarah and I have decided to marry,' Andrew lied.

They had spent an hour before breakfast ensuring their stories matched because, if it became known that she was the daughter of an infamous Royalist, they were in real trouble. For the time being, she was to be plain Sarah Wright, using his mother's maiden name.

'Look, young man,' said the Sergeant conspiratorially. 'If I was to marry every girl I bedded, I'd soon be like Solomon.'

Andrew tried to smile and look innocent while the terrified Samantha cuddled up to his arm. He was not any sort of expert in female make-up but had done his best with hair and dress to make her look older and more like the man-hunting tart she was pretending to be. The Sergeant did not object to her presence, so she climbed up behind Andrew on the horse though it produced great hilarity for many a mile as they headed southwards along the Great North Road.

RACHEL sat up in bed. She had not felt well and had laid in which was most unlike her and now she felt ill. She had slept badly due to worry and Mark had arranged to stay at home so that he was on hand. Her hands went to her expanded belly, which felt strange so she pulled the cord and Mark appeared.

'So, you're awake. Have you slept at all?'

She shook her head. 'No. I'm so worried. Andrew should be back by now. I know something's happened to him.'

'Your family sixth sense playing games again? Well, give him a chance. We've had a little snow here so it could be much worse in Scotland. Our Andrew's probably snowbound at an inn somewhere, tucked up in bed with some wench.'

'Don't joke, Mark. He's only twenty and far too young for that sort of thing. Anyway, there's Mary Beth to consider.'

'Ah, so there is. I'd forgotten about all the interest she shows in him. How she flirts with him and goes out of her way to show affection to him.'

'Don't be sarcastic, Mark. There are other ways of showing love.'

He sat down on the bed and put his arm round his wife. 'So there are. And how does she show her love, eh?'

'She's only sixteen. She hasn't learned how to show love yet. At least, not properly.'

'She hasn't met anyone else yet, that's why - because Carrie has kept her closeted up. Andrew and I are the only men she has ever spent any time with apart from John Henry and he's only interested in politics.'

'And what do you think of her?'

'Me? If I was her father, I'd put her over my knee and slap her bottom.'

'Well, you're not,' Rachel chastised. 'So don't you ever dare try.'

He looked playfully disappointed. 'Fat chance I've got anyway with her in France, living it up with all those handsome Frenchmen.'

'Do I detect a little jealousy, Mark Gresham?'

'Not at all.' He patted her belly affectionately. 'I've got everything I want right here.'

'Do you really think Andrew is all right? He should have been back yesterday.'

'I told you. He'll be back and with some filly.'

'Beast!' she said, and hit him with her pillow.

CARRIE'S dress fitted perfectly. She turned round in front of the mirror and Henriette held her hands together with glee. Why is it that weddings bring out the child in a woman? Just then, Mary Beth entered, Minette in tow and Carrie's mouth fell open. 'Mary Beth. You...you look amazing.'

You too, Minette.'

'Yes, Carrie,' said Henriette. 'We finally managed to match the material. Tomorrow is to be your big day and nothing must spoil it.'

'No, you're right.'

'Then why do you look so worried?'

'I don't know. I just have an uncanny feeling that something is wrong.'

'What do you mean?'

'I don't know how or why but we children have found that we have a kind of communication between us. If one is hurt, the others feel it.'

'And you feel the hurt now?'

'Not hurt exactly. Just confusion and upset. I hope Rachel's baby is all right.'

'I'm sure it is, she's in good hands, just as you are.'

'I wish Andrew and John Henry could be here. I do miss them.'

'Now, Carrie. Don't you go looking sad. They are both doing what they see is their duty, though I do know how you feel. My Charles, Mary and James seem to have spent most of their lives away from me and it is worrying for a mother.'

'Forgive me, Henriette. I keep forgetting that you have family problems, too. I must seem very selfish at times.'

'Not at all, it's only natural. At least Mary married well and she and Prince William are very happy and, if Charles would settle down, I would be even happier. I'm sure Anne-Marie would make him a good wife.'

'I'm sure she would. From what she said on Saturday, she must be one of the richest heiresses in France.'

'Probably the richest.'

'But does she love him? Or he her, for that matter?'

'It's difficult to tell.' The Queen turned. 'Do you have someone, Mary Beth?'

Mary Beth blushed deep crimson so Carrie put her arm round her closest companion. 'I think there might be a certain something between her and my brother, but time will tell, won't it, Mary Beth?'

'I'd rather not discuss it.'

Carrie and Henriette glanced at each other and winked.

ANDREW and his party made good progress that day as their horses cantered over the hard ground. The sharp cold had kept most traffic off the roads and the snow thinned as they got further south. Newcastle was busy as they got an early lunch and they crossed the Wear by mid afternoon. By evening, they were in Yarm, very tired and saddle sore. Samantha had coped well enough, though she now looked very stiff and cold. Andrew dismounted painfully and stood by her horse as she literally fell into his arms and he carried her into the inn. He helped her upstairs, took off her coat and put her, still dressed, into bed. No longer did she need make-up to look haggard and, for the first time, he was worried about her condition. Taking one last, long look at that brave, sleeping girl with red hair he stepped onto the landing. Having no wish to join the others in their heavy boozing, he stood listening to the voice of Sergeant Briggs coming up from the saloon, telling the crowd of the mad Yorkshire lad who wants to marry the first girl he ever bedded. Andrew smiled. The old soldier would have had a far better tale to tell had he known the truth.

Wednesday 14th February 1649

Carrie was up early. The big day had arrived and a servant brought her breakfast in bed, something she hadn't had since Lord Henry had died. Finished, she and the Queen held hands and talked over the last minute arrangements.

RACHEL did not sleep again and Mark was getting worried for her. She had only a few weeks to go till the birth and now was not the time for complications. It was only John Henry's promise to travel north to seek news if Andrew was not home by that night which reassured her. She stayed in bed all day, tossing restlessly.

THE travellers left without breakfast and, it seemed to Andrew, even the hardened Sergeant Briggs had suffered from the night's drinking. Had he been fully alert, it would not have happened.

CARRIE stood in the hall as the carriage drew up in the courtyard and the footman opened the door. *This is it*, she thought. A quick look behind at Mary Beth and Minette looking immaculate in their cornflower-blue dresses; a quick smile to Henriette Marie by the door, looking her usual regal self; a quick, deep breath, and she stepped forward towards her waiting coach and new life.

IT was Samantha who sounded the warning. The group of horses had just cleared Hampole Wood when Royalists struck and the Roundheads were surrounded quickly and ordered to lay down their weapons. The Sergeant looked stubborn and went for his sword.

'No!' Andrew shouted but his warning was too late. The musket ball caught Sergeant Briggs in the shoulder and he fell heavily to the ground. It spurred his men to action and, though outnumbered two-to-one, they fought bravely till they were all cut down.

Andrew jumped from his mount to attend to the wounded Sergeant as Samantha sat very still until it was over. The Cavalier Captain dragged Andrew roughly to his feet and raised his sword.

'Stop!' Sam called and the man hesitated, the anger gradually dissipating from his face, and he then pushed Andrew roughly to the ground. Andrew struggled to rise, but a blow from behind caught him unawares and he fell as if into a deep black pit.

RACHEL screamed and clutched at her unborn child and suddenly sat up. 'Andrew! No! Please, not Andrew,' she called out and then passed into unconsciousness.

CARRIE suddenly stopped and Mary Beth nearly collided with her. The music was still playing and Prince Philippe stood waiting, smiling. Her hand went to her chest as the stabbing pain started again, the pain she had known when her mother had almost died. She felt confused. Everyone was moving about. People turned to look at her as the music faltered and stopped. She gasped as the pain in her chest started tearing her apart. Looking up, she saw Philippe running towards her, shouting something she could not hear because of the loud buzzing in her head. Turning, she looked straight at the startled Mary Beth.

Shaking her head, tears pouring down her face, she simply dropped to her knees, whispering one word - 'Andrew!' - and then fell in a heap in the aisle.

WHEN Andrew came round, Samantha was there but it was so cold in the cart as they bumped along over the rough ground. On the other side of him was the heavily-bandaged Sergeant Briggs. 'Well, you sure fooled an old soldier, lad, I have to give it to you. Tell me, what would you have done when we got to Hellaby? I had my orders, you know.'

'I really do have an Aunt in Hellaby,' said Andrew, 'And she is a Puritan. I did not lie, I simply left out some of the important details.'

'And is this young lass who she says she is? Samantha Grenville?'

Andrew nodded. 'Yes, she is. How's the shoulder?'

'Och, it's well enough.' He looked at Sam. 'I owe you my life, girl. Yon Cavaliers wanted to kill me till you stopped them. I thank you for that.'

Andrew looked concerned. 'I still don't know what they'll do with you.'

'Well, I'll manage. I was fed up with the army anyway.'

The cart stopped at a lonely farm near Braythewell and Samantha and Andrew were helped down as the Cavalier Captain rode up behind them. 'Mr Bosville. It seems I have to apologise for the bump on the head. Miss Grenville tells me you are one of us after all.'

'Thank you Captain. The King will be happy to hear that he still has loyal friends in England, even if they do attack his messengers.' Andrew's smile took away the insult. 'I do have one favour to ask.'

'Just name it,' said the Captain.

'Allow me to take the cart and the Sergeant with me.'

'For heaven's sake, man. Why?'

'He will be out of action for some weeks and I know of someone who will look after him and take his mind off trying to catch you.'

The Captain sighed. 'Very well. We have nowhere to keep him here.'

'Good day, then, Captain. I hope to see you again.'

'Should we not escort you south?'

'No, thank you. We'll be safer travelling alone.'

'Goodbye then. Till we meet again.'

RACHEL woke and the labour pains had started. The doctor and Mark coped well and, after three hours, Rachel gave birth to a fine boy.

THE cart drew up outside the cottage as the sun set and Aunt Alice came to the door as Andrew dismounted. He went to her and held her close then took her hand and led her to the cart.

'Aunt Alice, I have two visitors for you. One who will stay the night, and one who will need your help for a little longer. Allow me to introduce Miss Samantha Grenville and Sergeant Arthur Briggs.'

Alice smiled a greeting at Samantha and then rushed to help the wounded Sergeant. Together, they helped him into the house where he was seated in front of the fire and fed.

Andrew and Samantha sat and watched and felt like matchmakers.

CARRIE'S heart could take no more and, despite the attention of the very best doctors in France, she gently slipped away during the afternoon. Henriette was mortified at the loss of her dear friend and, for the first time since she was a baby, Mary Beth cried.

Henriette found her, many hours after the last of the guests had gone, standing barefoot in the cold chapel. The Queen gently put her arms on the young girl's shoulders, turned her round, and held her tight as tears flowed freely from both of them. Eventually, they walked back together to the warm palace.

The Lady with the biggest heart in all Europe had gone forever.

Friday 16th February 1649

Mary Beth walked into the library at the Louvre where Princesses Henriette Marie and Anne-Marie Louise were sitting talking. They smiled at her, wondering at her state of mind following the greatest shock of her life.

'Henriette,' she accused. 'You and Anne-Marie are planning something, aren't you? Something

Carrie was to be a part of?’

Henriette looked at Anne-Marie who shrugged. ‘Yes, Mary Beth. We have been seeking a way to end the troubles and unite the nation by installing an acceptable ruler. We have yet reached no positive conclusions as to how but anything is worth trying.’

‘I thought so and, from now on, I wish to be involved. As a person who has had no political involvement, I shall be able to travel around freely so I shall be your ears and eyes.’

‘Mary Beth,’ said the startled Henriette. ‘Do you know what you are saying? This is dangerous activity and either side could be very upset if you are caught. With feeling running high as it is at the moment, your femininity would offer you no protection.’

‘Nevertheless, I intend to try - I owe that much to Carrie’s memory. She has been much more than a mother to me and what she could do, I can do. Better, perhaps, because of my youth.’

‘But, Mary Beth, you are only sixteen.’

‘Nearly seventeen,’ she corrected. ‘And I am hoping that my youth will be my protection. I can still dress young and pass myself off as a novice.’

‘You know you are welcome to stay here as long as you like but we do not expect you to be with us in the Plot.’

‘I know, Henriette. You have been most kind. You, too, Anne-Marie.’

The Princess smiled. ‘We loved Carrie, as well, Mary Beth.’

‘I know you did. That’s why I want to help you. So where do we start?’

‘Well,’ said Anne-Marie. ‘Whatever we do, we must secure the help of the Prince of Condé. Without him, we have no chance.’

‘How do we do that?’

‘We need to attract him, somehow.’

‘Then that will be my job. I think I can find a way to get round Condé.’

This was a side of Mary Beth unknown before and Henriette and Anne-Marie stared open-mouthed at each other. Mary Beth poured a glass of red Burgundy and raised her glass in her long, white fingers and looked at her co-conspirators with her deep, blue eyes. ‘To the Plot,’ she said, raising her glass. ‘The Plot for a King.’

Queen Henriette-Maria de Bourbon and Princess Anne-Marie Louise raised their own glasses in agreement. ‘The Plot for a King.’

THE wheels of the cart thundered on the hard, frosty ground. Andrew was driving the horses hard, perhaps a little too hard. He had finally persuaded Samantha to lay in the back on some straw bales as it was more comfortable than desperately trying to keep her balance on the narrow bench at the front. They had spent the night at Huntingdon and Andrew had wanted them both to be in separate rooms to avoid possible problems, but Sam had persuaded him that their pretence of being a married couple would allay suspicion better than any explanations.

She was right of course. Troops were everywhere as they were in the heart of roundhead territory and a lone traveller would have raised question, but the two of them together were hardly noticed. He refused Sam’s offer of sharing the bed once again and curled up on the rug in front of the dying embers of a log fire, thinking of all that was happening to him.

How different Sam was to Mary Beth, he thought to himself. Friendly, vivacious, without inhibition, she made him smile with her constant jokes and devil-may-care attitude toward life. He wondered if it was all a show to hide a deep-down distress at the loss of her father and brothers. Either way, he knew he would miss her when the time came for them to part.

A heavy mist lay in the Granta valley as they approached Cambridge and Andrew debated with himself as to whether it was prudent or worthwhile to stop and eat. Knowing his sister would be worrying because he was overdue, he opted to press on and give lunch a miss.

Deep in his gut, he felt that something was wrong. Ever since his knock on the head, he had felt strange. Knowing the family shared a kind of telepathy between each other, he was worried for his sisters. Had Rachel’s baby arrived early? Was she in trouble?

He smiled. At least Carrie was out of trouble and probably married by now. She was in good hands and her health would improve with the better weather in France.

As they approached Stump Cross, a rider loomed in the mist ahead and Andrew checked that

his sword was within reach. Was it friend or enemy?

The rider pulled alongside. 'Well, Andrew. You're a sight for sore eyes.'

Andrew smiled. 'You too, John Henry.'

'We were worried about you.' He saw Samantha and grinned. 'But now I understand why you are late.'

Andrew turned. 'Sam, this is my nephew, Lord John Henry Ramsden. And this is Sir Anthony Grenville's daughter, Samantha.'

They shook hands formally.

'I had a bad feeling,' said Andrew. 'Is Rachel well?'

John Henry smiled. 'She's all right now that she has a fine son.' He looked thoughtful. 'That's odd. It was your name she called out when the pangs started.'

'Mine? When did the pains start?'

He pondered. 'Wednesday - around lunch time.'

'That's when you were hit on the head,' said Samantha.

Andrew nodded. 'That explains it.'

'Then why do I still feel on edge?' said John Henry.

'Me, too. How does Rachel feel since the birth?'

'She is twitchy all the time - can't settle. We thought it was you who had come to harm. There is no-one else.'

Andrew's heart seemed to stop. 'Yes, there is.'

'Good grief. Mother!'

'Is this the sister you told me about?' interjected Samantha. 'The one who has gone to France?'

The two young men looked at each other for a long time before, sad in heart, they turned towards Rettendon Hall.

It was dark by the time they rode in through the iron gates. The porch lamps had been left burning and they cast a strange halo in the wet mist.

Mark rushed out to meet them. 'Thank heavens you're safe, Andrew. Rachel can stop worrying now.'

Andrew embraced his brother-in-law and then turned to help Samantha down. Mark's mouth dropped open. Andrew smiled wryly. 'Don't ask!'

Mark helped John Henry with the horses while the couple went inside. Samantha was cold and tired. In addition, neither of them had eaten since morning. After removing their outdoor clothes, they stepped into the parlour. Rachel struggled to rise but Andrew dropped to his knees beside her and held her close.

She started to cry. 'Oh, Andrew, I was so worried. I had the most dreadful feeling that something terrible had happened to you.'

He smiled. 'Nothing keeps a Bosvile down for long, you know that.'

Rachel held his face in her hands and stared into his face as if trying to read his very soul. In the end she held his hands tightly. Andrew kissed her forehead. 'Where's this beautiful son of yours I've been hearing so much about?'

'He's sleeping.' She dried her tears. 'I'll get him up later so you can see him.' She suddenly saw Samantha and frowned. 'Who's your friend?'

Andrew struggled to his feet. 'Sorry. This is Samantha Grenville. Sam, my sister, Rachel.'

The girls embraced and smiled. Rachel patted the settee beside her. 'Come and get warm by the fire. Then you can tell me how you came to be with my little brother.'

Andrew stood with his back to the roaring fire, gradually thawing out, as Mark popped his head in and promised imminent stew. Between them, they recounted all that had happened. Andrew told of his meeting with the Kirk, his arrest, Berwick Castle and Sergeant Briggs. Samantha finished with her long wait and their eventual meeting at the inn.

'And how did you manage to trick the Roundheads into believing you intended to marry?' asked Rachel.

Samantha laughed. 'The sergeant didn't need much convincing - not when he found us in bed together.'

Rachel looked horrified. 'Andrew, what have you been up to?'

Before he could answer, the young girl came to his defence. 'He has done nothing. Your brother has been the perfect gentleman throughout our journey. We were simply keeping warm.'

Rachel was not entirely convinced. 'Is this true, Andrew Bosvile?'

'Sam and I have become friends, nothing more.'

The discussion was halted by Mark who came in with stew. Andrew ate with enthusiasm but his companion left him far behind. She was starving.

'Andrew,' Rachel said as they finished eating. 'I'm worried about Carrie.'

Andrew nearly choked on his last mouthful. 'Why? What have you heard?'

'Nothing. I just have a terrible feeling that all is not well. I can't explain it but John Henry feels the same way.'

'So do I, Rachel. It can't be just our imagination. Perhaps we really do have some kind of sixth sense.'

'Cromwell would probably call it witchcraft,' said Mark as he collected the dishes.

'Cromwell calls everything witchcraft which does not fit his personal views,' spoke up John Henry. 'He's beginning to think he is the Messiah, appointed by God to convert the nation to his strict form of Puritanism. It comes out in all he says and a good many people are afraid of where it will lead.'

'I'll bet they are,' Andrew agreed. 'That's where Parliament found fault with the King. Now they are falling into the same trap.'

'What do you think has happened to your sister?' asked Sam.

'I don't know,' replied Rachel. 'I just have this terrible feeling of dread whenever I think of her. I can't give a logical explanation for it.'

'We must find out somehow,' John Henry said. 'I don't think any of us will rest until we are sure she is all right.'

Andrew stood up. 'But I must leave for Holland in the morning as Charles is waiting for my reply. The Kirk are on their way to meet with him and if I don't find him first, he won't know they are coming or where to meet them. They may be in Holland already for all I know.'

'Then I must go to Paris and see my mother,' said John Henry. It was the most natural solution, but why did Andrew feel a pang of jealousy that John Henry would be seeing Mary Beth and not he?

'Thank you, John Henry,' said Rachel, looking a little relieved. 'I would feel better if I knew she was safe.'

'We'll both leave in the morning.'

'Where will we sail from?' asked Sam.

Andrew glanced at her. 'We? You can't come. You must stay here with Mark and Rachel until I return.'

'I most certainly will not.'

Andrew was amazed. Do you know, she actually stamped her foot? He thought only children did that in stories. 'But it will be dangerous.'

'I can think of nothing more dangerous than what we've already been through recently.'

Rachel looked at Andrew imploringly.

He shrugged. 'I suppose she was good cover for me.'

Samantha was furious. 'Cover? If that's all I am to you, then go on your own and I'll find my own way.'

Rachel looked at Mark and smiled a cheeky smile. So this is just innocent friendship, is it?

Andrew opened his mouth to speak. Those fiery eyes and red hair looked comical but, eventually, they melted him. How could he refuse?

He faced her awhile, then held out his hands formally. 'Lady Samantha Grenville, please would you do me the honour of accompanying me to The Hague.'

Saturday 17th February 1649

The little boat pushed off as the first light touched the mist which lay over the Crouch Estuary and the soft shapes that constituted the village of Burnham faded as the oars pulled them towards the open sea. Soon, they would be able to raise the sail without fear of detection and the soft wind would carry them across the North Sea. John Henry had opted to ride to Dover by horse where a shorter sea crossing could be arranged and Andrew wished he had been able to do the same: but it was not to be. Thankfully, the heavy clouds overhead kept the wind minimal and the sea light.

Andrew looked ahead across the grey water, expecting any moment to see the coast of the United Provinces loom out of the mist, but he knew there would be many hours sailing before such a sight would be possible. He saw Samantha wrapped up warmly in the small forecabin which offered some protection from the damp morning air and then watched as sea birds rose with the sun's faint light and circled overhead.

What was he doing there? Where would it all end? What was he going to do with this child who had dared to accompany him across the water? Child she might be, but she infused a sort of inner strength into him. If she could face the uncertain future with such confidence, then so could he.

MARY Beth left the Palace at first light. The mist still hung over the Seine as her coach crossed the river and headed towards the walls of the city. The places she passed in the coach were alien to her, but then, so was much of England. She had rarely ventured from Rettendon, though helping out at the hospital had taught her much about life.

There was a lot of activity as she followed the route she had been given and rebels were in evidence everywhere. Paris itself was shut up like a clam by barricades so no one could enter or leave without passing this solid wall of defence. What did the Fronde really hope to achieve?

Henriette had given her very precise instructions on how to find Condé and, soon, his headquarters building loomed ahead. As her coach drew up in front of the tall, stone building, two soldiers marched forward as she gracefully stepped down onto the wide plaza in front of the doors.

'Mademoiselle?' one asked of the girl with the golden hair.

'Le Prince de Condé, s'il vous plait,' she replied confidently.

'Comment vous appelez-vous, Mademoiselle?'

'Je-m'appelle Marie-Élizabeth d'Angleterre, Monsieur le Capitaine. Je voudrai voir Le Prince tout de suite.'

She knew he could be no more than a foot soldier but flattery from a beautiful young girl usually worked wonders. Consequently, the soldier ushered her along a wood-panelled hall and then up marble stairs onto a wide balcony where she admired the architecture as she walked with her head high. He showed her into a large room with giant paintings on the walls where the Prince and several other important-looking men were engrossed - until they saw Mary Beth, that is.

Condé straightened and leaned forward, his hands on the large map which covered the table as she stood before him, looking deliberately wide-eyed and innocent and wearing the kind of smile which would undoubtedly have disarmed Gengis Khan.

He walked round his desk and took her hand. 'Mademoiselle, je-suis enchantée.'

He raised it to his lips and kissed her fingers softly. After several moments of looking into her deep, blue eyes, he dismissed the other generals and advisors who had been in conference with him and, eventually, consulted the note handed to him by the soldier. 'Vous êtes Anglaise?'

She curtsied. 'Oui, votre Hauteur.'

'You are speaking the French very well, mademoiselle.'

'Thank you, Monsieur le Comte. My mother and grandmother taught me. My grandmother lived for some years in your wonderful country.'

'The country is not so wonderful at the moment, mademoiselle. Like yours, my country has its...how you say...interior? problems.'

'Internal, monsieur. Yes, we are united in that.'

'To what do I owe the pleasure of your company? I am not so vain as to think you came simply to observe me at work.'

'Non, monsieur. I come to invite you to my party.'

'Party?'

'Oui, monsieur. A grand ball at the Palace where my Queen, Henriette Marie, is holding the party. I was alone and asked for a suitable escort and you came highly recommended.'

'You flatter me, mademoiselle.'

'Not at all, your highness. My mother always said "start at the top" so I came straight to you.'

'I am charmed. Do I know this very observant mother of yours?'

'Non monsieur, not personally. She was Lady Caroline Ramsden.'

He bowed slightly. 'My condolences on the loss of your mother, mademoiselle. I did not recognise you today. My mind has been on... other things.'

'I forgive you,' she bravely said then drew in her breath. 'Please accompany me to Henriette's ball tonight.'

'Tonight?'

'Oui, monsieur.' She looked straight into his eyes. 'You and me. Tonight.'

His mouth fell open. This was a brave girl, he thought. She looks no more than seventeen, but she invites me to woo her. I think this is one party Claire-Clémence does not get invited to.

He smiled. 'You intrigue me, mademoiselle. I will attend your party tonight. It really will be you and me?'

'I will not leave your side all evening, your highness. You have my word of honour.'

Your honour you might still have, thought the Prince as he once more kissed her hand. But not for much longer.

THE soft outline of the Dutch coast loomed ahead as the sun went down over England. Soon, the shape of Sheveningen Harbour was discernible through the slight mist. It was clear that little snow had fallen over the last few days and the haven looked black and uninviting. Their little boat offered no threat to the defenses and so was allowed under the harbour guns.

Andrew stepped out onto the hard quayside and turned to help Sam ashore. 'Well, the Hague at last. Now for the King without further delay.'

Soldiers waited for them as they stepped off the quayside. Neither of them spoke Flemish but he hoped one of them understood some English. Sam held Andrew's arm tightly as they walked toward them.

'Take me to your Captain,' Andrew commanded in the deepest voice he could muster.

'Follow me,' one said and they were led to the barracks beside the wharf. Andrew explained as best he could their urgent need to see King Charles. Soon, with young companion, he was on his way through cobbled streets to where his King awaited him.

PRINCE Louis de Condé was among the last to arrive at the ball. As he was announced, Mary Beth slid quickly to his side, slipping her arm through his as eyes looked from all over. Admiring eyes, gossipy eyes, jealous eyes. This would be talked about for months.

'I'm glad you could come,' she said, guiding him to where drinks were being handed out.

He took a large brandy and led her to an alcove beside a pair of miniature orange trees. 'How could I refuse such a graceful invitation, and from such a lovely host?'

'I was hoping you could not, your highness. I very much wanted you here.'

They drank for a while then danced until they dropped. He held her as close as he dared whilst in range of all those prying eyes. Eventually, they retired to the relative emptiness of the hallway. A walk in the moonlight was out of the question. Firstly, it was February, secondly, it was raining.

'You look very lovely tonight, Mary Beth.'

'You too, highness.'

'I can't help getting the feeling somehow that I am being manoeuvred.'

'Manoeuvred?' she asked, her blue eyes all innocence.

'Yes, manoeuvred. However, I can think of no better manoeuvrer than the present company.'

'Thank you, highness.' Mary Beth sighed. 'Yes, I admit I cannot lie. I have manoeuvred you here for a purpose.'

He stopped. 'You seek to compromise me in some way?'

'Not at all,' she laughed nervously. 'Nothing that sinister. Would you be so kind as to accompany me upstairs?'

Was his luck in? Surely this girl would not offer herself on a plate like this? She did not look the type of the usual court frillies who sought favours with royalty. Together, they ascended the stairs and entered the big bedroom where Henriette and Anne-Marie waited for them.

'You tricked me, girl,' he said viciously.

'No, highness. I promised to stay with you and stay with you I will. I will give whatever it takes to keep you here while we put before you a plan to end the Fronde and place you in control of France.'

That stopped him. An affair would be good. One with this apparently willing young lady would be even better, but rulership of France was a different matter. He sat down on the bed. The girl could wait.

In cool, calculating terms, Anne-Marie explained the plot and Henriette filled in the details while Mary Beth offered the reassurance he needed. Finally, Condé stood up and paced the room. It was very tempting. If these powerful, influential women were prepared to support him, he stood a chance. Why, they were stronger than an army. It would cost a fortune, but rulership of France? It was risky, but rulership of France? He turned. 'I agree. It shall be done.'

He looked at the three confident women and shook his head as he went to the door. As it opened, Mary Beth turned him and kissed his cheek.

'Mary Beth. Tell me. How far were you prepared to go to gain my agreement?'

'As far as necessary.'

'You would have risked carrying my bastard?'

'To bring peace to France? Of course. My whole family have spent their lives working for peace. My mother and her mother died seeking peace. I will do whatever it takes to do the same.'

'Would you have compromised me?'

'No, Monsieur le Comte. You are a gentleman, you deserve better than me. Go home to your wife and tell her how rich she will soon be.'

He shook his head as he smiled. 'Mary Beth. If France had more like you, there would never be wars again.'

Sunday 18th February 1649

It was morning before Andrew was allowed to see Prince Charles and he left Sam in the rooms they had been given and went into the palace.

'Mr Bosville. This way, please.' A tall Scotsman with cheerful smile shook his hand and led him down the corridor. 'I am James Graham, Duke of Montrose. The King has been informed of your arrival and is keen to hear your news.'

He pushed open a wide door and Andrew walked in. Charles rose to meet him. Andrew started to bow but Charles ignored it and warmly embraced him instead. In spite of everything, the King-to-be had not forgotten their childhood friendship. 'Andrew, it's good to see you again. Come and sit down and tell me all.'

Andrew sat with him on the window seat and recounted all his adventures. 'So, the Kirk are on their way here.'

'I was praying they had not arrived before me.'

The King shook his head. 'Being God-fearing Presbyterians, nothing will make them travel on the sabbath. You've had some lucky escapes, my good friend. I must reward your bravery.'

Andrew was shocked. 'Reward? I have not worked for reward.'

'I know that, but I feel compelled.' He stood up and paced, his hands clasped behind his back. 'I am limited in what I offer at the moment. My brother-in-law is Captain-General and has helped me all he can, but he is not yet ready to challenge the cautious burghers of Amsterdam for total support of my efforts.' He faced Andrew. 'However, what I can give, I do give. From henceforth, you are to hold the honorary rank of Captain. I can offer you no wages at present but, when I come to power, there will be back-pay and a pension.' He held up his hand to stifle Andrew's protest. 'I insist.'

Andrew smiled. 'Very well, Sire. I accept if it pleases you.'

'Good. Now for what pleases you. I can arrange for suitable... ah... companionship while you are here, to keep you warm in these cold evenings.'

'Thank you, Sire, but no. I brought my own companion.'

'Ah, the delectable Miss Grenville. I did hear of her escape. Is she well?'

'Yes, sire, although we've been through some pretty hairy adventures together.'

'And the same bed, I understand?'

'It was purely companionship, sire. At the moment, she has no family left so I feel responsible for her welfare.'

'Excellent principles, but do as you will with her. Have fun while you can.'

'But, sire, she is only fifteen years.'

'All the better for her youth, my friend.' Charles leant forward conspiratorially. 'Go, take her tonight before someone else does. She will not refuse you and you have my blessing.'

Andrew said no more about the matter. He did feel responsible for Samantha. But was that all? Time would tell. In the meantime, with unprincipled men like Prince Charles about, he was not going to let her out of his sight.

THEY attended chapel later that morning. the United Provinces were strongly Protestant and Catholicism was held in very low esteem. It was at chapel that Andrew was introduced to Charles's mistress, Lucy Walters. Her voice had a strong Welsh lilt to it which contrasted with Sam's broad Northumbrian accent. Lucy was not particularly beautiful but there was something there which stirred the soul despite her being seven months pregnant.

Andrew could see what Charles saw in her - her dark skin was flawless and her voice attractive. She and Andrew chatted together after the service about her childhood in the valleys and, in spite of the fact that her morals were clearly not of the highest order, he found he couldn't help liking the young woman.

Sam had borrowed a dress and, for the first time since Andrew had seen her as a boy in his room at the inn, she looked only her fifteen years. Somehow, it made him feel more strongly protective of her. He had brought her away from her home and country and he must now ensure that she came to no harm.

After the service, they walked along by a small river in the cold February sunshine and saw that, near the edges, the river was frozen and, in one spot, children skated on the ice. Together they stood and watched as the port sat quiet on this day of worship. At that moment, it was difficult to believe that France was at war with Spain, Holland on the verge of war with England, England at war with Scotland and Ireland, France at war with France. Where would it end?

Time marched on just as the waters of that river slowly but inexorably poured into the North Sea whilst even the deepest depths of winter could not halt its flow completely. Soon, however, Holland would be a blaze of colour as the bulbs sprang into life. Perhaps then, people would start to plan for better times.

Andrew and Samantha had been invited to a banquet that evening. Dancing was not to be allowed, but eating was permitted on the sabbath. The couple slowly walked arm-in-arm back towards the palace where they would meet more loyal supporters of their King. There they would again plot. Plot for a King to be installed in his rightful place.

ANDREW was honoured to meet Prince William and Princess Mary, Charles' sister. George

Villiers, Second Duke of Buckingham, was also there on a brief visit. He seemed to be a thoroughly bad influence on Charles and Andrew didn't like him at all. Lords Hamilton and Lauderdale were also there and they talked at length with Sam about her father.

Andrew and Samantha circulated and chatted with everyone. It was so informal, not stuffy like it usually was in England. William and Mary were quite natural and open and treated them as equals.

Soon, it was time for bed as there was much to do in the morning in preparation for the visit of the Kirk, arrangements to be made, people to consult. Andrew was also tired from chasing around so, tonight, he would sleep well.

Before he did so, he stopped Samantha at the door to her room and held her gently by the shoulders. 'Sam. Do you trust me?'

'That's a silly question, of course I do. I'd trust you with my life.'

He grinned wryly. 'It isn't your life which is in jeopardy right now.'

She frowned in the half-light. 'Whatever do you mean?'

This was not easy. 'Everyone thinks I'm bedding you.'

'And?'

'But I'm not, am I?'

'Of course you're not. You're a gentleman.'

'The King says that I should.'

She paused for a long time and finally looked down at the floor. 'Then you'd better get on with it. We cannot afford to displease the King, can we?'

'Sam. If making love to you was all there was to it, I would have done it many nights ago.'

She looked into his face. 'Now you're confusing me.'

'You're very young. Not a child any more, yet...still young and you have your whole life in front of you. Despite your age, people like Sergeant Briggs understand only one thing and, given the opportunity, would have bedded you without either hesitation or a trace of guilt afterwards. King Charles thinks I am mad and has made it quite clear that if I don't, he or someone like him will, without scruples. I want to protect you from that.'

'How? By taking me yourself?'

'No. That's not where my argument is leading. You are a very lovely person and I'm absolutely certain that whoever makes a woman of you will never regret it. I just don't want you to regret it either.'

'Then how can you help me?'

'By our continuing to convince others that you are my mistress.'

'Would you like me to be?' she asked quietly.

'Very much at times. At other times, I think only of your future.'

She thought about that one.

'Sam. Promise me something.'

Without hesitation. 'Anything.'

'It is a solemn promise that I will hold you to. If you break it, I will never forgive you.'

'What...what must I promise?'

'Promise me you will be really sure before committing yourself to anyone.'

'I promise.' She grinned. 'Will it be you?'

'I don't know.' He smiled. 'Maybe it will.'

'I hope so. I want it to be you who loves me. You must be the first.'

'I will only be the first if I am to be the only one. I will share my love with no-one. You must feel the same.'

A sly grin crept over her face. 'I will remember that when we are wed.'

Andrew kissed her forehead and turned towards his room.

'Andrew?' Sam called as he reached his door.

He turned, his hand still on the knob. 'Yes?'

She smiled. 'Thank you.'

Monday 19th February 1649

John Henry landed at Calais just before lunch. He managed to arrange for a coach and soon he was bound southward for Paris. Nothing was familiar. Bethune, Lens, Arras, Péronne, Senlis, Chantilly. Strange names for strange places. As the sun set, he smiled as he knew that soon he would see his mother and adopted sister again.

Soldiers were everywhere as the coach skirted the north of Paris and crossed the old stone bridge over the Seine. Soon, they were riding through the Park of St Germain and the house lay ahead. They would not be expecting him and, if all was well, Carrie would now be in the Auvergne. If not... Well, he would soon know.

The coach stopped in front of the house and he thanked the driver. The wheels grated on the gravel as it drove away and, eventually, all became still. *Strange*, he thought, *why has no-one come out to meet me?* He went to the door and pulled the rope and the bell sounded deep inside the house.

Eventually, a footman came to the door. 'Her Majesty is at the chapel, monsieur. Will you wait?'

'No, thank you. If I might leave my bag here, I will walk to meet her.'

It would be good to surprise them, he thought, so he walked toward the square but found it empty. The chapel also was empty. But, as he passed the end of the wall, he saw the group in the graveyard. His heart skipped a beat. No. Surely not? His walk turned to a run as he saw Mary Beth in a black dress and veil. People turned and Henriette held out her hands towards him as he stopped and looked into the tomb. No one spoke as Mary Beth stepped over and put her arms around him. She was crying and they held each other for a long time. When they looked up, only Henriette, Anne-Marie and Prince Philippe were left. John Henry raised Mary Beth's veil and wiped her eyes. In his heart, he had known. Henriette touched his arm and they followed her slowly back to the house where he walked in and sat down while Mary Beth sat at his feet and rested her head on his knees.

'How did it happen?' he eventually asked.

'Firstly, you must tell us,' said Prince Philippe. 'Is Andrew well?'

The young man frowned. 'Of course. Why do you ask?'

'Carrie called out his name,' said Mary Beth. 'She was walking down the aisle in front of me and she suddenly stopped. I almost collided with her. She turned round and went as white as a sheet then called Andrew's name and collapsed - right there in the church. It was just as it was when Sarah was ill, she was in agony, clutching at her chest. We waited for it to pass but she just...died and there was nothing any of us could do.'

John Henry nodded sadly. 'Rachel felt it, too.'

'Rachel?' Mary Beth was suddenly frantic. She jumped up and sat beside him. 'Tell me, is she....?'

He put his arm round her. 'She's fine. She called out his name, too. I gather he was ambushed and got hit on the head. Carrie and Rachel somehow...felt it.'

The young woman's eyes were wide. 'How can that be?'

'I can't begin to explain it. I felt something but not as badly. The shock terminated Rachel's pregnancy.'

'Then...?'

'A boy - Stephen.'

'Oh, thank goodness!'

Henriette did marvels. She skillfully turned the subject from Carrie to the baby and the atmosphere relaxed a little. John Henry then realised that he was still holding Mary Beth. He gave her a little squeeze and was surprised when she slipped her arm round his waist and put her head on his shoulder and held his left hand with her right. They stayed like that all the rest of the day and, somehow, it compensated for their loss. At bedtime, she held him very tight at the bottom of the stairs for a long time before she turned and, without another word, climbed the long stairs.

'She has changed, John Henry,' said Henriette from behind him. 'She is not the same girl any more.'

The Queen held out her hand to him and he allowed her to lead him back to the library where they sat a long time in silence.

'H..How?' he finally dug up courage to ask.

'She has become a fighter,' she said.

'A fighter? Shy Mary Beth? With respect, your Majesty, you must be joking.'

Henriette didn't take offense. 'John Henry, I have fought all my life. As a child, my father had to fight to retain the crown of France and I was barely a teenager when I married my Charles. He was kind to me, but many of his advisors were very cruel and I was subjected to a great deal of verbal abuse by some.'

'It must have been difficult for you.'

She nodded. 'It was. I tried to help my husband when he was in trouble and lots of people lied about me, saying I was a bad influence, being a Catholic. I fought during the Civil War as you well know and now am tired of fighting. However, in just one week, Mary Beth has eclipsed me.'

The young Earl was staggered. 'W..what has happened?'

'There is a small group of us who are determined to end the Civil War in France. The Court has installed Cardinal Mazarin as First Minister with almost unlimited powers and Parlement has rebelled because of it. They will not stop the warring until an alternative is found. Paris wants Paul de Gondi but we have decided on our own leader, at least as a temporary measure.'

'Who is that?'

'Prince Louis of Condé. His brother - Conti, and sister - Anne-Geneviève and her husband, have been persuaded to put him forward as ruler. It will satisfy Parlement who just want rid of Mazarin but the arrangement will also please the other Princes who are disturbed by the way the Fronde is continuing.'

'And where do you all fit in?'

'We provide the planning and, of course, some of the financial backing.'

'What about Mary Beth?'

'She has sworn to support us. She also did what none of the rest of us could do. She tricked Prince Condé into agreeing.'

'How on earth did she manage that?'

'She...offered him an...incentive he couldn't refuse.'

'She did what?' He couldn't believe his ears. *Mary Beth? Seducing a Prince? Surely not.*

'It came to nothing,' Henriette assured him. 'Though it could have been serious, very serious indeed. Condé's reputation is built on his conquests and not all of them have been on the battlefield. The problem is, she knows of the dangers but insists in walking straight into them with her eyes wide open.'

'What can I do to help?'

'You could take her away and marry her.'

'Andrew will be most upset,' he mused.

'John Henry. It's not just her honour which is in danger. Condé will not forget the trick she played on him but, if an English Lord were to wed her, he would think twice before attempting anything.'

'It's all so quick.'

'It has to be. Her life is in very grave danger.'

'I will talk to her in the morning.'

'No. Do it now.'

'But she will be in bed,' he protested.

'Then go to her bed, she will not refuse you.'

He looked down. 'I can't. Even if I were to do this, it would be taking advantage of her while she is emotionally disturbed.'

The Queen took his hands in her own. 'John Henry, see it as saving her life.'

He looked at Henriette for a long time, then rose. He would talk to her, nothing else. Besides, she wouldn't want him anyway. By the time he reached the top of the stairs, he found himself

hoping and praying that Mary Beth was already asleep.

She wasn't. She sat brushing her hair in front of an ornate brass-framed Venetian mirror and her long, fair hair shone in the candlelight. Not a word was spoken as she finished her hair, put down her brush and stood up. The candle lit her flawless skin and shining hair as she slowly walked towards him until, a foot from him, she stopped. After a few moments, she slowly lifted off her nightdress over her head. Her eyes searched his as he stood mesmerised by her naked beauty and the sudden turn of events. He was rooted to the spot. He opened his mouth to speak but words would not come. As it was, words were not needed as, together, they released their frustrations upon each other and it was nearly light before they were finally spent and slept the sleep of the innocent.

Tuesday 20th February 1649

The Kirk arrived early. They deliberately avoided speaking to the Duke of Montrose, whom they viewed as a fanatic and a traitor, but Charles greeted them warmly and they could not help but be impressed. He listened carefully to all their proposals and then consulted his advisors. In the private room with the King were Lords Buckingham, Hamilton, Montrose and Newcastle, Sir Edward Hyde as well as Captain Andrew Bosville who was introduced as the representative of Lord John Henry Ramsden.

The King spoke first. 'It seems I am to be offered the Kingship of Scotland with immediate effect.'

'That is good news, Your Majesty,' said Hamilton. 'But what are the terms?'

'I am to undertake to impose,' he looked up from his notes and stressed again, 'Impose, the Presbyterian faith upon England.'

'Never,' said the Duke of Buckingham. 'England would not accept so restrictive a religion.'

'That's not the whole of it, George,' said Charles. 'Also, this faith is to be imposed in Ireland.'

'The Catholics there will not accept that under any circumstances,' said Ormonde.

'I realise this but that is not all. You, James...' he looked straight the Duke of Montrose, '...are seen as a threat and are to be dismissed immediately.'

'I see,' the faithful Scotsman replied. 'What will you answer?'

He looked around the table. 'What is the feeling of your Lordships?'

'Preposterous!' said Sir Edward Hyde.

'Impossible!' added John Maitland, Earl of Lauderdale.

'Andrew, you met them in Scotland. What do you think?'

'I think they are bluffing, Sire,' the young Captain stated to open mouths. 'They know full well that these terms are not possible and that you would never agree to such conditions.'

'Well spoken, Andrew. I think I agree with you. What do you recommend?'

'I suggest you throw them out. They will go, full of righteous indignation, but I guarantee that within six months they will be back with milder terms. In time, they will see that they need your leadership qualities more than England needs Presbyterianism.'

'Hmm. You may be right.' He looked around the room. 'I feel I must also tell you that Argyll has offered me a further, personal, incentive.'

They waited to hear what sum of money the Scottish Laird had raised to offer as bribe to Charles if he would accept the terms of Clan Cameron in preference to the others.

He smiled. 'It seems I am to be granted the hand of his very delectable daughter.'

'In marriage?'

The King smiled. 'Eventually.'

Montrose smirked. 'I wonder how much of a say Lady Anne has had in all this.'

Charles raised one eyebrow. 'I doubt the young lady has had any say in the matter whatsoever. I fear that the Duke must be very determined indeed to prostitute his only child in this way.' He paused for a while. 'Well? What do you feel, my Lords?'

There was silence. Eventually Sir Edward spoke. 'What alternatives do we have?'

'Ormonde has just concluded a treaty at Kilkenny between Loyalists and the Supreme Council of Confederate Irish and is confident that an invasion could be launched within the year which

could crush the Ironsides.'

'Sire,' said Montrose. 'If that were possible, I'm certain I could raise an army from the Highland Clans. They hate the strictures of the Kirk.'

'Very well. Are we agreed?' The King waited as, one by one, their Lordships nodded. Finally, he looked at Andrew.

'I am sure I can vouch for the support of Lord Ramsden, Sire.' Andrew held up a large sheet of paper. 'I have here a list of English Lords who have privately pledged support for your Kingship. Personally, I am at your service in whatever capacity you command.'

'At the present, you are best kept incognito. I will contact you as and when you can help.'

'I can do better, Sire. If I may, I will remain with you for your immediate instructions.'

'Very well. I will be returning to Jersey soon where I can be on hand to give financial support to Ormonde's army and you will accompany me at least as far as Paris. From there, we will take events as they come.'

Andrew nodded. 'Very good, Your Majesty.'

'Why the delay, Sire?' asked Buckingham. 'Why not go now?'

'I await the birth of my child, George. Lucy has not long to go and, unless there is an emergency, my departure will wait till then.'

'Are you sure it is wise? After all, the girl is but another mistress.'

'So that's what you think, is it?' glowered the King. 'Just another mistress is she? It's my child as well, damn your hide.' He banged the table and they all jumped. 'Ask Andrew, he knows what it is like to have someone you love dearly. He would not leave his woman, and neither will I.'

Andrew suddenly felt embarrassed. He liked Sam vary much but she was carrying no child. However, if she had been, he was sure sure he would have felt the same way as Charles did.

He stood up and faced them. 'My Lords, would you have your King far away with his mind on uncertainties back here? If there is no good reason, would it not be better if he were in a position to care for all his responsibilities with a clear mind?'

They hated taking it from a mere Captain but had no logical argument against it. Eventually, they filed out to remeet the Kirk.

Charles placed his hand on his friend's shoulder. 'You'll go far, Andrew. You should be a politician.'

'No fear, sire. I'll stick to what I'm best at.'

'I heard about what you're best at this morning. You did well to take Miss Grenville before someone else did. Did it give you pleasure?'

'Immense,' he lied.

'Take my advice. Bed her night and morning for a month and she will never look at another man.'

'I will keep it in mind, Sire.'

IT was mid-day before John Henry and Mary Beth arose. They had woken during the morning but had some unfinished business to conclude from the night before and Henriette did not disturb them. She passed the foot of the stairs several times and paused only to smile. Just before lunch, she walked into the village where she knew a retired Protestant minister lived. After a conversation which the old man never expected to have with so devout a Catholic, he accompanied her back to the house. As they entered, the young couple were coming down the stairs.

'Good Morning, or should I say Good Afternoon?' she jibed. 'Come into the parlour, I have brought someone to see you.'

They entered and sat on the sofa together.

'Well then, children, what would your mother say now?'

'She would insist on marriage, I expect,' Mary Beth offered. 'She did with Rachel and Mark.'

'Right then.' She turned to the minister. 'Marry them.'

He hesitated. They smiled. He married them and they didn't notice him leave. They had lunch and then went upstairs after thanking Henriette, who saw no more of them for three days.

Friday 23rd February 1649

'Welcome to the land of the living,' greeted Henriette Marie as John Henry and Mary Beth came down for breakfast. 'And how is married life?'

'Exhilarating!' replied Mary Beth.

'Exhausting!' added John Henry.

'They say too much of it affects the eyes,' laughed the Princess. 'Look at me. After twenty-four years of married life, I'm as blind as a bat.'

It was good to hear them laugh, Henriette thought. In the last few years, they had both lost all parents and grandparents out of their lives. Also, separated from their friends and what little was left of their family, they deserved each other, especially now. They certainly looked happy together.

The first spring crociii pushed their heads through the soil that day and the early birds chirped incessantly along the banks of the Seine, mixing with the sounds of children playing across on the left bank. Perhaps life was not so bad, after all. She smiled as the two lovers walked in the gardens while she sat in the open window with Minette. Since Carrie had died, she had felt responsible for them, they being so young. But soon, they must return to England. John Henry was a Lord in the House and Mary Beth had now to learn to become a Lady - Lady Mary Elizabeth Rettendon, Countess of Ramsden. What a turnaround of events.

As the sounds of Mary Beth's laughter came to her across the garden, the Queen thought back on the last few years: her first meeting with Carrie on the day of her wedding to old Lord Henry; how Carrie had spoken to her in French when so many of the others tried to her ignore her for her Catholic ways; the disasters that nearly were when Carrie had repeatedly endangered her own life by hiding her when the soldiers were seeking her arrest; the outstanding devotion Carrie had shown, always being there when needed. A tear dripped onto her hand as she thought of the joy that might have been, that the young woman had deserved so much; the marriage which would have made her so happy; the love she had for her family which finally pushed the stress to breaking point and her heart had finally given up.

The love these newlyweds had for each other reminded her of her first meeting with the young Charles Stuart - how he had come to Europe seeking a Spanish bride but had been bowled over by her instead.

She knew, in her heart, that her husband may not always have been loyal to her but, somehow, it did not seem to matter. He always came home and that was good enough. This time, though, he would not return - he had gone forever. She vowed, at that moment, that the world would never again see her without the black of mourning.

LUCY was not feeling happy. She sat on the edge of her chair whilst the Prince of Wales paced before her.

'Now, of all times,' he said in anger. 'Can you not see the damage you might do?'

'But I was very careful.'

'I don't care, stay away from him. I don't know - playing fast and loose with all and sundry and in your condition, too. You ought to know better.'

'Sometimes, I think you only think of the child and not of me.'

'You leave me no alternative. Look, if you don't promise me to stop this playing around, I'll leave you now. Friend or no friend, I'll have George executed and leave you here while I go to Paris. Take your choice.'

'You...you wouldn't?'

'Want to bet? There'll be no inheritance for your precious child then, will there?'

She whimpered, 'Please don't do that.'

'There. Who's just thinking about babies and inheritances now? You complain when I bed other mistresses but then you run off with that fat little body of yours to George and goodness knows who else.'

Lucy sat in silence because there was nothing to say. She had tried to make Charles jealous by

flirting with George, but it hadn't worked out right and she had not seen the King so angry before. She would have to be very careful in future, but she was blown if she was going to stop her affairs now. Charles had not touched her for weeks due to his infatuations with others. She needed love herself and was determined to get it. Maybe she would wait until after the baby was born next month. Once the inheritance was confirmed, then she was a free agent to go with whom she wanted and as often as she wanted. For the next month, she would play the loyal mistress, if only to keep him from the latest addition to court. He had his eyes on the young girl Captain Bosvile had brought from England and he was a sucker for the youngsters, was Charles.

Lucy had only met them once at the ball. She had liked Andrew and he didn't seem the type who would bed a child. She suspected that the rumours of their amorous affair were just a smoke screen to protect the girl from people like Charles. If so, Andrew was more the man than most thought. He did well to consider his companion in this way, but he should be very careful that the truth should not leak out. If it did, his life and her honour would not last out the hour.

THE maiden in question was blissfully happy, having received what she had interpreted as a promise of a marriage if she stayed faithful until Paris. Some would say she was too young to make such a decision. Well she would show them. Tomorrow was her birthday, then she would be old enough to decide who to marry and who not to marry. No one else would touch her and she would make sure she kept her man.

One thing did confuse her. Who was this Mary Beth someone mentioned this morning? Was she another love of Andrew's? If she was, she would have to put a stop to that. Andrew was to be hers, and he was not going to wed some fancy woman from Essex. It was at that moment that the man of her thoughts walked in and she jumped up and ran to him.

Andrew held her briefly as she looked especially good that morning.

'How about a drink for a hard working master, then?' he teased.

She curtsied. 'At your command, kind sir. What shall it be? Wine, wine or wine?'

'Well one thing is certain. I don't intend to drink the water here. You don't know where it has been.'

'How was Court?'

'Finished. The Kirk are on their way home. Charles is just waiting for Lucy to drop her baby and then we're all off to Paris.'

'Drop her baby? What a way to put it. I hope you don't think I'm just around for "dropping babies".'

'Of course not, but any child you have will never be as important as this one is.'

'What do you mean, "not important"? If I ever have a child, it will be very important to me.'

'I'm sure it will, Sam. It's just that so much hangs on this particular child. The whole of Europe is watching and waiting. If it is a boy, he will be the first son of the future King of England, illegitimate or not.'

'And if it is a girl?'

'Then every Queen in Europe will want her for her son.'

'Even at that age?'

'Tentative decisions of that sort are sometimes made even before the birth as so much can depend on it. They can always revise the plans later if the sex turns out to be wrong.'

'It all seems very callous. Where does love fit in?'

'It doesn't. They cannot afford to let a little thing like love interfere with politics.' Andrew smiled wryly. 'It would spoil all their fun.'

'I'm glad you're not a Prince. You can choose your own wife.'

'And I will in my own good time, young lady. Now where's that drink you promised?'

Saturday 12th May 1649

His own good time came ten weeks later. It had been hoped that by now they might have been in Paris, however, with the Dutch, Spaniards, English and French all fighting in the Channel, it had proved impossible. Charles was being pressured into crossing by land but the Spaniards in the Netherlands were unreliable at the best of times. No one was ever quite sure just whose side they were really on.

Spring had been good to the girls. Lucy produced a fine son in April, much to the delight of the King. His sister Mary who was as yet without a child of her own, took great delight in holding her little nephew.

Then came the blow. A message had come from Rettendon in March and it had been signed Lord and Lady Ramsden. Andrew was in a foul mood for a week and very nearly drove Sam away altogether. In the end, he had become resigned to the fact that the one whom he had loved all his life had married his nephew. The letter from Rettendon also confirmed Andrew's worst fears for the future of England. John Lilburne, a dominant character with slickness of speech had attempted to represent the Levellers for democracy in the government. However, democracy was the last thing either Parliament or Army wanted - it would interfere with their dictatorship. Accordingly, a Council of State was elected made up of army generals and "good" Puritan politicians. The House of Lords was abolished, making John Henry unnecessary in the House. His letter said he would be back in Paris for their arrival. Andrew smiled. John Henry might have pinched his girl but it would still be good to see the little traitor again.

News also came through in dribs and drabs about the peace which had come at last to Paris. It seemed that the Fronde had suddenly ended. Now, it seemed, someone called Condé had been installed and, apparently, it had been the only way to please Parlement. An agreement on 11th March at Rueil had forced the Queen-Regent Anne of Austria to give amnesty to all the rebels. Condé and his family now virtually ruled France.

ANDREW arrived at his lodgings during the afternoon to find the place strangely quiet. Calling out for Sam, he got no answer. He frowned. It was unusual for her to go out alone so near to tea time. Pouring himself a cold drink, he wandered into the garden.

The blow on his head knocked him to the ground, made him dizzy and, worst of all, spilled his drink. He was roughly hauled to his feet by two men while the third prodded his stomach with a stout cane. 'So you are the one.'

Andrew shook his head, not so as to disagree, but to shake some sense back into it. Who were these men, and what did they want? And where on earth was Sam?

'Strip him!' the one with the cane commanded.

Still groggy, Andrew felt his shirt being ripped from him and his wrists being bound to the overhanging bough of the pear tree.

'So you would abuse your trust, would you?'

'Wh..what do you mean?'

'My brother left his daughter in your care. And what do we find? You have abused her and taken her as your mistress.'

'But..'

'Don't try and deny it. The stories of your conduct with her are all over the town. You sex-maniacs make me sick.'

At the word "sick" the stranger's cane caught Andrew squarely across the shoulders. In his fury the man lashed out at him repeatedly. The first stroke was the worst for, soon after that, the numbness came, but his tormentor didn't stop even then. Eventually, he stopped, breathless. 'And if she is with child, I will take great pleasure in personally castrating you.'

The words, 'She cannot be with child,' stumbled out of Andrew's mouth somehow.

'We'll soon know,' he said, producing a long, sharp blade. 'The doctor is examining her now. If it is positive...' His hand gave a little twist and Andrew shrank at the thought.

The congenial chat was disturbed by Sam's scream as she ran from the door and collapsed at Andrew's feet. 'What has he done to you? Oh Andrew.' She suddenly stood up. 'Uncle Peter, why did you do this?'

'Because of what he has done to you, my child.'

She looked daggers at him, then went up and stood on tiptoe before him, her face an inch from

his.

'He has not touched me!' she spat through clenched teeth, a syllable at a time.

'I'm afraid she's right, Sir Peter.' The voice came from a little bearded man with a black bag who emerged from the house. 'She is still whole.'

'Of course I'm whole, you pervert.' She was really angry and nothing was stopping her. 'You found that out didn't you? Molesting me with your dirty little fingers. You should be the one who is whipped, not Andrew.'

Into the ensuing silence walked James Graham who took in the scene with one glance. 'Sir Peter, I'll have you know that yon laddie you have beaten is the King's Ambassador and he will be most displeased at what you have done. I strongly suggest that you take Dorislaus with you and get the hell out of the country before King Charles hears of this.'

'Then I will take my niece with me,' said the defiant Peter Grenville.

'You dare defy me, sir? Do you not know who I am?' asked the Duke of Montrose.

Sir Peter put his hand up and his accomplices stood threateningly before the Duke while Sam was dragged away. The Duke cut Andrew loose as the doctor bathed his back.

'I am sorry, Mr Bosvile,' the healer said. 'I had no idea of what they would do.'

'I guessed that, doctor. Thank you.'

'Don't worry, Andrew,' said the Duke. 'Yon girl will be back before the day's out, safe and sound. Leave it to me.'

'Who's this Dorislaus you mentioned?'

'Isaac Dorislaus, Dutch lawyer, liar and traitor. Och, he was the one who helped prepare the trial for the Old King's death. It was his lying evidence and manipulating which convinced the court of his supposed guilt. Now, Parliament has the nerve to send him as special envoy to try to persuade the Dutch to hand over his son.'

'Sounds a nice little man,' gasped Andrew as the doctor applied the last bandage.

The Duke got slowly to his feet and placed a hand on Andrew's arm. 'Not for much longer, laddie. Not for much longer.'

Sunday 13th May 1649

Andrew had not cried since he was a child and now here he was, a grown man of nearly twenty-one, snivelling like a baby and feeling ashamed did not slow the tears. It was not the physical pain, though excruciating, which brought the tears, it was tears of total frustration and anger. If only he had left Sam in England, if only he had made her live apart from him, if only he had denied all the rumours; if - if - if.

The doctor called by in the morning to change the dressings and Lucy arrived while the others were at chapel. She was nothing but kindness and efficiency and brought two nurses from the palace who ran about after him all day. Andrew had to smile to himself. When the King's Mistress decided to do something, it got done.

When he asked for news of Sam, Lucy shook her head sadly. 'I'm afraid they have completely disappeared.'

'They will have sailed for England by now,' he sighed.

'No, they won't have done that, Andrew. James Graham was very fast and efficient in his plea to the Burghers. The port was closed within the hour and the borders are being watched continually. Those men will not be able to leave Holland.'

'The Dutch would all do this for Sam and I?'

'It's not just what they have done here, Andrew, it is who they are. Sir Peter is young Samantha's uncle but his loyalties are very different to those of her dead father. He and his henchmen came with Dorislaus to bribe, and even threaten, this country to hand Charles over to them so he could be taken back to England in chains. Prince William and the burghers would not hear of it and, after this incident, those men will find little sympathy anywhere in Europe.'

'What will happen to them?'

Lucy laughed as she stood up. 'That depends upon who catches them.'

IT was almost evening when the King arrived. With him, he brought wine, brandy and the Duke of Buckingham.

'Will you do me a favour?' Andrew asked Charles as soon as he arrived.

'If I can. What is your first wish? An island in the Orkneys? A Chateau on the Loire?'

'None of those,' he replied. 'Clemency.'

'Clemency?'

'Yes. For Sir Peter. He might have taken Sam away but he is, after all, her uncle.'

'Well. You are the forgiving one, aren't you? I'll see what can be done.' Charles smiled, then frowned. 'By the way, you have not been totally honest about young Lady Samantha, have you?'

'No, Sire.' Andrew didn't have the courage to tell the King that he was the main reason for the deception. It was not in his best long-term interests, he told himself.

'Andrew, take my advice - marry the kid. I don't care if she's fifteen years or fifteen months, save us all a lot of trouble and take her and use her, bed and abuse her. Do whatever you like, but do it before someone else does it for you.'

'I can't. She's not here.'

'And your second wish?' Charles clicked his fingers and George opened the door as Andrew raised his head painfully from his prone position. Standing in the doorway was the best wish he could ever have asked for. She was cold, tired and dirty but, to Andrew, very, very beautiful.

'Sam, marry me,' he said before she could speak and she fell to her knees before him and nodded through her tears.

The King smiled. 'And your third wish?'

THE wedding was a quiet one. Charles produced the special dispensation like a magician pulling a rabbit from a hat, his chaplain walked in and it was as simple as that. Andrew guessed that not many men are married lying down but it didn't seem to matter, he didn't hear most of it anyway.

During the evening, Sam went to sleep so Charles and Lucy explained how it had happened. Sir Peter had apparently taken Samantha to Sheveningen to try to get on a boat while Dorislaus and his cronies had attempted to get to Amsterdam but had been caught.

'What has happened to them?'

'Don't ask me,' said Charles. 'I'm keeping well out of it. Montrose has been dealing with it all while I've kept an alibi. We won't hear any more from them.'

'And Sir Peter?'

'I'm afraid he was dead before we found him.'

'But how?'

'Ask Sam in the morning. It will be best heard from her own lips.'

'No, Charles,' said Lucy. 'Don't make her go through that ordeal. You had better tell him or I will.'

Charles looked daggers at her for a moment and she smiled. He melted. What a sucker he was at times.

'What did he accuse you of, Andrew?' Lucy asked.

'Of assaulting and abusing his niece.'

'Well,' interrupted Charles. 'The world is full of hypocrites, Andrew. That pompous, self-righteous "gentleman" tried to rape his own niece.'

'What? He attacked her?'

'Not exactly,' said Lucy. 'Apparently he was more subtle than that. He promised to return her to you for certain...favours.'

'Then he..?'

'No, he didn't get that far. Samantha was so utterly disgusted that she stabbed him with her hair pin.'

'How terrible for her.'

'Andrew, look after her,' said Charles. 'When James's men found them, he had over a hundred wounds on him. She was still stabbing at him long after he had died and was totally unrecognisable. She is going to need all your help and patience for a while.'

'And love,' added Lucy.

Andrew nodded. The patience and kindness he could give her immediately but the love bit would have to wait until he had recovered and she was ready.

Wednesday 16th May 1649

Andrew made up his mind. He had laid around long enough and it was time to get up. He and Sam had their first real argument that day as he got dressed.

'But, Andrew, it's too soon. Your back is not yet healed. Give it another day or two, please.'

'I'm sorry, Sam,' he said as she carefully replaced the bandages round his body. She was right, of course. He had not yet healed and would not for several days. There were, however, some things more important.

'Andrew,' she said as he made to leave. 'Please be careful.' He kissed her briefly and headed for the palace.

Andrew was sweating by the time he arrived at the palace, not just because it was warm, but also on account of the agony he was feeling from his back which hurt more now than when it was done.

The King stood up as he entered. 'Andrew, you shouldn't be up yet,' he scolded.

'Sire, I must. I have had plenty of time to think these last few days and now realise there is no time to lose.'

'Sounds intriguing. Come and tell me more.'

Andrew sat beside Charles at the table which was covered in maps and notes. He had obviously interrupted an important planning meeting and apologised. The King waved the protest away with his hand.

'Sire, I must leave for England at once.'

'But I thought Lord Ramsden was meeting you in Paris next month and you were coming with me by sea.'

'I feel I cannot. If I am to remain in a position to help you the most, I should be away from here. I reasoned on the fact that if Dorislaus or any of his men had returned to England alive after having seen me here with you, my position would now be impossible. Eventually, they will send another envoy and I must leave before he arrives.'

'I can see the logic in that. But you have been with me for some time now and dozens of people have seen us together.'

'Yes, Sire. But they are either Royalists, in exile like yourself, or loyal Dutch people who have no reason to love the present English government.'

'It is true what you say,' the King pondered. 'When will you leave?'

'Today.'

'Today? That's impossible. There are arrangements to be made, a boat to be found.'

'No, Sire. You must not be involved. I will leave without notice and by a route which you do not know and, that way, we cannot be connected. I will find a boat in the same manner that I did whilst coming.'

'Very well. How will we make contact again?'

'May I offer a suggestion, Sire?'

'Certainly.'

'I recommend you also leave here yourself, soon, and do it without warning. One day, just get up and sail, it will be safer. When you get to Paris, Lord Ramsden will be there so use him to get a message to me if there is one. Make him leave immediately so that no collusion can be inferred.'

'A good plan,' Charles stood up, paced the floor and then decided. 'Go, Andrew and may God be

with you.'

With that Andrew left. The bulbs were out along the banks of the river while children played in the gardens. Soon, he was at their lodgings and his wife ran to meet him.

'Sam. I want you to get packed. Just take what we need for the journey and leave the rest. I have a feeling we shall be back.'

'Where are we going?'

'To England.'

'Now?'

'Now. We must catch the afternoon tide and, with luck, we should be in England by daybreak.'

They packed, they rode, they sailed.

PRINCESS Anne-Marie Louise was in a good mood. Arrangements had been finalised for the Grand Ball at the Palais de Luxemburg and her father had made available the palace and staff for this grand occasion.

'Ouch!' said Mary Beth as the pin went in. 'That hurt.'

The little man apologised. 'I'm sorry, Lady Ramsden, but you must keep still.'

'How can I with you pushing and pulling? Here, let me do it.'

'But, My Lady, it will not hang right.'

'Monsieur Dupont, you may well be the best dressmaker in Paris, but it is not what I want.'

'Madame,' he said, standing erect and mortally wounded. 'It is the finest dress I have ever made. How can it possibly be improved upon?'

'I want it cut lower.' She pointed. 'Here and here.'

'But My Lady, if you pardon me, it barely covers you now.'

'I think what he means,' piped in the giggling Anne-Marie, 'Is that you look in great danger of falling out of the dress.'

'That is the whole idea. If I am to maintain the attention of the Prince, that is exactly the impression I intend to convey.'

'My Lady,' interrupted the dressmaker. 'If I make it any lower at the back, it will not stay up at the front. It needs...support.'

Mary Beth looked playfully offended. 'Monsieur, I am seventeen years old and I assure you I do not need any...support.'

'But, My Lady. This is Paris.'

'Aha! You've noticed. Look, let me repeat my instructions. The shoulders must be bare, the back must be bare, to the waist. No, don't argue, to the waist. The length must be such that when I sit, my ankles are visible. The front must give the impression that I am about to spill into his hands. Now what could be wrong with that that?'

'Gravity, My Lady, is against you.'

'Then you must find a way to defeat Monsieur Gravity. I am in your hands.' Anne-Marie tittered and Mary Beth blushed. 'Not literally, of course.'

'Very well, My Lady,' he sighed. 'I will see what can be done at the last minute.' He took the dress, bowed and left the English girl standing in her petticoat.

'Mary Beth,' said Anne-Marie. 'I'm getting worried. What if this backfires on us? You could get very hurt.'

Mary Beth stepped to Anne-Marie and held her shoulders. 'If we all do our part, it cannot go wrong. We must convince the Prince to stay in control and that he has our support.'

'But the dress - the risks you are taking. What if it goes wrong?'

'Anne-Marie, I'm relying on you and the Queen. You must see to it between you that he is never allowed to be alone with me until I make the signal. If he touches me, my husband will challenge him and I'm afraid he will lose. The Prince is a soldier, John Henry is not.'

'Is your husband happy with all this?'

'He sees it as a necessity and has agreed to play the part of a fop, an English Lord with no

spine. He finds it hard but I find it funny. He's not at all like that.'

'Are you really going to wear that dress?'

'Of course.'

'Mary Beth,' said the Princess. 'Please be careful.'

THE completed dress arrived by mid-afternoon. It was white silk with layered lace diminishing in depth up the dress and Mary Beth giggled as she showed Anne-Marie the wire which had been carefully sewn into the front edge. The dressmaker was right, she might need no support but the dress did.

'My Lady,' stated the dressmaker supreme, 'It is finished.'

'Monsieur, I will let you into a secret. If this dress turns out as I have instructed, you will have many more orders for them tomorrow, just mark my words.'

'Lady Ramsden, I have done my best. If it does not work, my shame will great.'

'Monsieur. I thank you for trying.' She kissed his bald forehead and he left, severely embarrassed, while Anne-Marie went red in the face from holding in her laughter.

'Well,' she said eventually. 'Let's see how it looks.'

Anne-Marie had to admit that Mary Beth was right; there was no way she needed any kind of support. Stepping into the dress she slid it over her slim body and it fitted perfectly. The final hook was connected and she whirled around. Her smooth, cream back and shoulders contrasted with the brilliant white silk and she looked amazing. For the next hour, work was done on the hair which had been put into tight rolls earlier and, eventually, the golden ringlets cascaded from her hair band as she shook her head.

'Right, then,' said Anne-Marie. 'Let's see what happens when you walk.'

Mary Beth walked up and down with head high and it had just the right effect. She twirled and pranced about and just about remained safe. It was when she came down steps that she had to be careful. At the first attempt, all was revealed and they both fell about laughing as she hastily adjusted her neckline. It took three attempts before she found she could descend stairs relatively decently.

THE Prince was on time. His wife was a plain woman with narrow eyes and large mouth. Theirs had been a political marriage to keep the Cardinal happy. Mazarin's niece had been brought up in a convent and understood the company of women far more than the needs of her husband and Condé's eyes openly drifted around the assembled young heiresses with undisguised desire. Anne-Marie greeted them as they arrived and immediately got into conversation with Claire-Clémence. The Prince removed his gloves and turned at the voice. 'Monsieur Le Prince, how extraordinarily delightful it is to see you. You know my wife, Lady Mary, of course.'

John Henry bowed while Mary Beth curtsied low and silently prayed that gravity would not be too unkind to her as the Prince's eyes nearly popped out of his head. She raised her head and looked at him with her big, blue eyes, but it was not her eyes he was watching.

'My Lady. I am delighted,' he said, slipping a sideways glance to ensure his own wife was out of earshot. 'May I have the honour of the first dance?'

'Your Highness, I regret I am spoken for.' She looked sad. 'It will have to be the second dance.'

He beamed as she smiled mischievously from under those long eyelashes.

The first dance went well in spite of the fact that she had to hold her breath during some movements. When John Henry smiled at her, she winked back. She loved him very much. Her husband had promised not to feel jealousy this evening but she felt guilty about how she was to make him feel. However, if they were to keep Mazarin from ruling, Condé must be persuaded to feel that he had the complete support of the highly influential women of Court. But there was a limit to what Henriette could do alone as she could take no obvious part in the proceedings as her household was being maintained by Royal decree. The main part of the plot would be up to Mary Beth and Anne-Marie.

The dance ended and Mary Beth prayed and bowed. Nearly: she would have to be more careful

with that manoeuvre. She smiled at John Henry and turned to face the Prince who held out his hand while she took it gracefully.

'Well, goodbye for now, old girl,' said the young Lord Ramsden and, as arranged, she ignored him completely and stepped into the arms of her Prince.

They danced all evening and it was almost funny. Condé tried repeatedly to get alone with Mary Beth, but someone always came along. His fingers itched badly and he longed, deep in his heart, to have his hands full of her warm, soft flesh.

He tried the garden but Henriette was there. He tried the Dining Hall but Anne-Marie was discussing supper arrangements with the chef. He looked longingly at the stairs but her husband stubbornly refused to move from the bottom of them as he discussed gaming in England with various Dukes and Duchesses. By ten, Condé was thoroughly frustrated. Was all this for his benefit? Was she equally as desirous of intimate contact? Her smile told him so and her closeness and appearance reassured him. If he could just get her alone for five minutes, oh the pleasure that would be his.

'My Lord,' she said as they danced. 'I must return to England tomorrow so I regret I shall not see you again for some time.'

'Tomorrow? Must you?'

'It is my husband, Your Highness. He returns to his government and House.'

'Do you love him?'

'He is my husband, Your Highness.'

'That does not answer my question. Do you love him?'

'I think so. How can I tell?'

'By what he does in bed.'

'He sleeps in bed.'

'He sleeps?'

'Of course. Why else would you go to bed?'

'Do you not know?' She shook her head and his desire suddenly trebled. He was going to have her now, if it was the last thing he ever did.

'Your Highness,' Mary Beth said suddenly. 'Come out onto the balcony with me.'

Wow! he thought. She finally wanted him. Mary Beth led him through the french windows with an almost imperceptible nod to Anne-Marie. The balcony was deserted.

'Louis,' she said. 'May I call you Louis?'

He nodded. His time had come and she smiled at him as his hands caressed those bare shoulders in preparation for further exploration.

'Louis,' she said seriously. 'If you touch me, I will scream.'

His arms dropped from her as though he had been stabbed. 'What sort of game are you playing?'

She moved towards him and held his hands and he was now totally confused. 'Louis, I am trying to save your life. There is a Plot to return Queen Anne and Cardinal Mazarin to power and we would not like that.'

'We?' he asked suspiciously.

'The three of us you met earlier.'

'Then this is all some game, like before?'

'Louis, it was not a game before and it is certainly not a game now. Can I trust you?'

His eyes closed to slits. 'That depends.'

'Louis, I'm sorry if I've given you the wrong impression but we do need you.'

'You don't even like me, do you?' he said with a sneer.

'That's not true, you know. I happen to like you very much. I believe you to be an honourable man at heart and if I did not love my husband, I could fall for you.'

'But you said...'

A cheeky look came to her face. 'Yes, I did, didn't I? You should not believe all you hear, you know.'

He sighed. 'What is it you want from me this time?'

'Nothing,' she said.

'Nothing? All this melodrama was for nothing? What kind of a fool do you take me for?'

'Oh, no, Louis. Not a fool, never that. Let me explain. Henriette, Anne-Marie and myself have dedicated ourselves to ensuring the future of France. One day, the young King will reign, we all know that.'

'Yes, he will reign. I live for that day.'

'In the meantime, peace must be kept and this can only be done if you have the right sort of information. Henriette is not only at Court, but also at private meetings. Anne-Marie has the ear of her father and the other Royal Princes. My husband and uncle are in league with King Charles. I must be the go-between.'

'Go-between?'

'I must become your mistress.'

He grinned broadly. 'Now you are talking.'

'I didn't mean it literally. As far as the Court is concerned, I am your mistress whereas, in truth, I shall be feeding you with information from the Queen Mother.'

'You are not to be my mistress?' He grabbed her once more.

'I'll scream,' she smiled and he let her go.

'Louis. When I go inside, I am going to declare my intention to remain in Paris. Lord Ramsden will be furious because I will have decided to stay close to my loved one. Thereafter, you will see me regularly as your supposed mistress and have all the information you desire and France will have peace. However, if you dare lay one finger on me, all will be revealed and you will also lose your only source of reliable information. Is that clearly understood?'

'Lady Ramsden, I admire you. I must admit that my desire for you is very great but I will do as you have said. You are right, of course. Correct information will be very valuable at the moment so we will keep up the charade. We will meet, you will give me the information I need and I, in return, promise not to take you against your will.'

'Louis,' she said, facing him. 'Thank you. Now then, let's go back inside and give everyone who is searching high and low for us the impression that we have been in paradise together.'

'Mary Beth.' He smiled and held her bare shoulders in his hands as he took a last, longing look at her in the moonlight. 'That will not be at all difficult.'

Thursday 17th May 1649

The little supply boat crept slowly up the Blackwater. The sun had barely risen behind it but the fishermen were out already and, in the fields around, workers tended their crops. The water glittered in the early morning sun as they approached the port of Maldon. They berthed before noon and Andrew stayed awhile to help them unload. A few hours would make little difference to their short journey to Rettendon. Sam went to the market and fetched them food and the two of them ate sitting on the harbour wall as seabirds screeched overhead. Later, the young couple managed to procure a lift with a farmer returning from market and they sat on the back of his empty cart as it climbed the long hill towards Woodham.

'Isn't it lovely?' Sam said, pointing.

Andrew looked back towards Maldon and it was as if the whole estuary was laid out like a map below them. The islands of Northey and Osey were shadowed by the evening sun and the water sparkled as the returning tide filled the basins. Just then, it was as if war was far away, it was so peaceful. Sam laid her head on Andrew's shoulder and he held her hand. Soon, they would be at Rettendon and there was something he owed her which would wait no longer. Tonight, they would be really married.

The farmer stopped outside the big iron gates and they thanked him and his wife for their kindness. Then, arm in arm, they walked up the drive together as the windows glinted red in the last dying rays of the sunset.

It was Antoinette who saw them first and she went running out of the front door to meet them. She launched herself into the air and nearly knocked Andrew over with the ferocity of her hug and

Rachel came out behind her daughter, rubbing her hands on her apron.

'Oh, Andrew. You're back.' She hugged her brother while Sam just smiled. 'So, you brought your friend back with you?'

'Friend?' She is not my friend any more. Sam is now my wife.'

'Your wife?' Rachel looked thunderstruck. 'She is but a child.'

Sam's mouth dropped open and her face went dark as she began to step forward until Mark's voice came interrupted as he grasped his brother-in-law's hand warmly. 'Hello, Andrew. You two married yet?'

Andrew couldn't help laughing. Sam joined in and soon, even the old-fashioned Rachel had to see the funny side of it as Andrew carried Toni inside with his free arm around Sam's shoulders.

Rettendon Hall had not changed much. It seemed like years since they had left whereas, in fact, it was just three months. Rachel excelled with a meal and her brother brought them up to date with events in Holland although, in return there was not much to be said about England. Occasionally, soldiers were seen at Maldon. Otherwise, no one would guess there was a problem. There was no further news about John Henry.

Andrew heard how he had returned and caused quite a stir the previous month when he had announced his marriage and they couldn't believe it was the same Mary Beth. Where had that shy, cold girl gone?

GONE to Prince Condé, that's where Mary Beth had gone. Eyes looked and mouths whispered as she entered his state rooms, only to emerge later, straightening dress and hair. *We know what's going on here*, they thought. The Prince has found himself another mistress - the flighty, English one who danced with him. *Almost naked she was, at the ball. By the way, where can I buy a dress like the one she had on?* Mary Beth almost skipped as she crossed the gardens and entered the Palace where Henriette and Anne-Marie awaited her news.

'Everything went okay,' she informed them. 'He's quite nice really.'

'Mary Beth, you're playing with fire,' stated Anne-Marie. 'Are you sure you really want to continue to go through with this?'

'What harm can there be? Anyway, he needs us, doesn't he?'

'For a while, yes. But one day he'll get over-confident and that will be the time to get out, and fast.'

'Very well, I'll be careful though I'm sure he means me no harm.'

THE Prince smiled as she left. He was going to enjoy this. It was like baiting a salmon. She had already indicated some respect for him so he would lead her along for a while but she would not get away. Then, without her realising it, he would slowly haul her in and, when the time was right, the net would close round her. It had never failed.

He thought back on the other conquests he had made and the ways they had gone in the end. It might take a little longer this time because this one was too good to eat all at once. One day, she would simply disappear. In his imagination, he toyed with all the many and varied ways that he would use her nubile young body before disposing of her quietly. Yes, she would give him considerable pleasure before she died.

He grinned at the thought and marked an 'M' on his calendar beside the date he had decided upon for her total and absolute humiliation.

Friday 18th May 1649

Andrew awoke as the sun filtered in through the bedroom window. Long, yellow beams crept slowly across the carpet towards the bed upon which he lay with his newly-consummated wife. It was not very quiet in the house and he could hear Toni chasing the dog and calling to it in the garden. Rachel sounded as if she was feeding Stephen in the kitchen and there was the sound of someone sawing logs. He thought about getting up to help but the lump on top of him wouldn't let him go. Excuses, he thought, and tried to get up but the arms tightened around his neck and a

teardrop fell onto his cheek and startled him.

'Sam, what is it?' he asked, concerned that he may have hurt her.

'Oh, Andrew. I'm so sorry.'

'Sorry? Whatever for? You've made me that happiest man in the world and you're apologising? Don't be sorry.'

'It's not that.' She fought for the right words. 'It's just that I have deceived you.'

Deceived me? he thought. About what? 'Darling. There is nothing you could tell me which would make me angry with you. Tell me if you must but I will not stop loving you, I promise.'

'Andrew, you're so kind. And that's why it was so bad of me, and why it is so hard for me to tell you now.'

'Come on then,' he said kindly. 'You'd better get it off your chest.'

Sam kissed him gently and sat up astride him. Even in the morning light, she was gorgeous. It was, in truth, her chest that her hands went to and she did get it off her chest, literally. The pendant which had hung round her neck ever since Andrew had first met her, came open in her hands and, inside, there was a tiny portrait of a baby.

'That's me,' she informed him as he struggled to read the inscription on the other side.

'That's beautiful,' he said. 'Is it gold?'

'Yes, it is. But look at the date.'

'The date?' he read, still puzzled. '24th February, what's wrong with that? You had your birthday when we were in the Hague.'

'That's right, but look at the year.'

'1632,' he read slowly and tried to calculate. It didn't add up somehow. Forty-nine take away thirty-two, he now wished that he had paid more attention when Sarah had tried to teach him his numbers at Moor Hill. He knew it was wrong but couldn't see where.

'Andrew,' she said quietly to put him out of his misery. 'When you first saw me, I was alone and frightened. I didn't know you then and didn't know what you might do when you found out that I was not a boy as you obviously would so I lied about my age. I thought you would take pity on me if you thought I was just a lost young child. You took me for an over-developed fifteen-year-old when, in fact, I was an under-developed seventeen-year-old.'

His mouth dropped open. 'Then now you are...'

'Eighteen,' she admitted bashfully. 'I'm sorry. Once I knew you were not like other men, I tried to tell you but couldn't buck up the courage. I owed it to you when you asked me to marry you but we don't seem to have ever had any time together alone.'

He had to think this one through, although it changed nothing about the way he felt about her.

She started to explain. 'When I was young and at home, I was always the baby of the family. My brothers were all much older than I was and I would try to join in their games and didn't have dolls or pets like other girls. Instead, I climbed trees and went sailing with the boys. However, from time to time, as I grew up, other boys would notice me and I didn't like them, so we used to play a game. I was the baby, so I acted like one and they soon got bored and went away. It was the family joke and we all joined in. When I set out to find you, I didn't know what to expect. You might have been old or a sex maniac like George Villiers. At first, I tried the boy trick which has worked many times and being not very well-built, I can get away with it, you see.'

His hands strayed and re-affirmed that she was not totally under-developed.

'As soon as I saw you, I knew it wouldn't work; you were too much like my brothers who had always fought and protected their baby sister. I guessed that, maybe, you had a baby sister somewhere and would see me in that way so I tricked you into thinking I was your kid sister who needed a big brother to look after her.'

The tears started flowing again as she lay down on the bed beside him. 'You did a grand job, Andrew. Always the gentleman. Always full of kindness. I had no idea that I would fall in love with you.'

'And when did that happen?' he asked, consoling her.

'When you refused to obey the King.'

'When I what?'

'At the Hague. Everyone thought I was your mistress but you were too much the gentleman to take advantage of the situation. You could have taken me then and I would have loved you for a while. Now, I will love you forever.'

Andrew smiled as he traced his finger over her smooth skin. 'I would happily have waited until you were old enough.' He thought for a moment. 'One thing puzzles me, though. Didn't your uncle know your true age? He still called you a child.'

'He was always away at some embassy or other. He had a rough idea, of course, but the only time he ever saw me was at home when I was playing tomboy.' She hesitated for a moment. 'When he took me away that night, we had a furious argument and I told him I was almost eighteen and quite old enough to make up my own mind. It was then that he promised to let me go if I pleased him. It was horrible.'

It was Andrew's turn to apologise. 'I'm sorry, Sam, I didn't mean to remind you of that night.'

'I suppose we must tell your sister now. She'll feel better about you if she knows I'm older.'

He thought that one over. 'No. I don't think we will. For the time being, stay sixteen. Dress young when we're away from home and pretend you are my child mistress - it might aid us to help the King. When there is peace, we can reveal the truth.'

'I'd like that. I wish I had been your little sister. But then I suppose I wouldn't have been able to marry you, would I?'

'No, you wouldn't,' he laughed. 'Is it a deal?'

'It's a deal. People will talk, you know.'

'They already do and I don't let it worry me. You are far more important to me now than what they think. Anyway, I always wanted a child bride.'

'And now you've got one,' she laughed.

'In fact, there is only one thing more important than you at the moment.'

'And what is that, may I ask?'

'Breakfast,' he said and rolled off the bed before she could hit him.

IT was nearly midday as Mary Beth left the Prince's State Rooms and smiled at the sun and flowers as she crossed the Seine and walked back toward the palace.

Condé rubbed his hands and glanced at the calendar. He smiled, too. 'Soon, my lovely. Very soon.'

JOHN Henry arrived as dusk fell. He was very tired after his long ride and collapsed into the big armchair as Rachel brought him a drink.

'How was the crossing, Jack?' Mark asked, using the nickname he had acquired from Andrew and Rachel's father.

'Terrible,' he replied. 'We spent most of the night dodging the Parliamentary patrols. It's getting impossible to cross the Channel, even at night.'

'Was it very dangerous?' asked Sam.

'Darling,' Andrew said kindly but firmly. 'Could you leave us. This is man's talk. I need to discuss important matters with Jack and Mark.'

She pouted, picked up a book, stomped over to the settee and made a big fuss over sitting down. She is acting her part very well, Andrew thought.

'It was not just the crossing,' said Jack. 'Passing safely through London is not easy these days.'

'Perhaps we need to rethink our plans for crossing the Channel.'

'What alternative is there?'

'Well, I went direct from Cricksee to the Hague. It wasn't a bad journey and didn't seem to take much longer.'

'Getting a boat is the problem there. It is not always possible to find one available to take us.'

They thought for a while until Mark said 'I suppose we could almost do with our own boat. It looks as if we will be in need for quite some time.'

'Where on earth could we get our hands on a boat?' Andrew asked.

'I've got a boat,' said Sam quietly from the depths of her book.

'What?' the men all said together.

'I said, "I've got a boat,"' she repeated, in a very bored voice.

'What sort of boat?' Andrew asked, suddenly very interested.

'Oh, you know - a wooden one with a mast and sails.'

'Where?' he asked incredulously.

'Still in the boathouse at Alnmouth if the Roundheads haven't commandeered it.'

'Whyever didn't you say?'

'You never asked. It's men's talk, remember?' Her voice carried more than a hint of sarcasm and Rachel laughed out loud. From that moment onward, the two women became the best of friends.

'Of course, a dinghy would be no good,' said Mark. 'It wouldn't make it across the North Sea. We need a boat big enough to carry us quickly and safely across a lot of water.'

'Have you ever seen my boat?' asked Sam.

'Why, no,' said Mark, on the defensive.

'Then criticise it when you have,' she said and walked over to the window.

'What is happening to Mary Beth?' Andrew asked Jack quickly to change the subject.

'She's staying with Anne-Marie at the moment and I'm not too happy about it. I don't trust this Prince of Condé she's spying for. It seems all right at the moment but it could go terribly wrong and I could do nothing to stop it.'

'Jack,' Andrew said seriously. 'Tell me all you know about Paris. Draw me maps and things. I will go and see what I can do to help her.'

'Would you, Andrew? I really would be most grateful. I'm too well known there now to walk about without being recognised.'

'Well, I'm not. The only people who might recognise me at the moment are Queen Henriette and Mary Beth. And Charles, of course, when he eventually arrives. If I can get to Henriette and take her into my confidence, we could be a second string to the bow.'

'That's true.'

'I have also another ace up my sleeve.'

'Yes?'

'I have Sam. No-one there knows her at all and, therefore, she could mingle without anyone recognising her, except Charles, and I will ensure he knows of our plans.'

'Andrew, are you sure that's wise?' said Rachel. 'She is very young, and how will she communicate in a foreign land?'

Sam turned from gazing out of the window. 'Alors, je comprend bien le Francais.'

'Sam,' Andrew called into the ensuing stunned silence. 'Just supposing we can get hold of your boat, how large a crew does it take to sail her?'

'Daddy rigged it so that two could handle her if really necessary. Any more would be too heavy for her speed.'

'Her speed?' he asked, for the first time suspecting he was about to be made a fool of.

'Yes,' she said, matter-of-factly. 'Seagull is an ocean-going racing yacht, by far the fastest boat on the East Coast. Daddy has...had the cups at the castle and there is not another boat built that can catch her.'

'Where will we find a crew for her?'

She playfully looked daggers at him. 'You never listen to me, do you? I told you earlier how I used to sail with my brothers. Incidentally, I was helmsman on Seagull when she won all her cups. If necessary, I'll sail her myself, with a simple assistant, and you look simple enough for me.'

He had to laugh and so did she as he held out his arms and she sat on his knee. 'We'll make a Bosville of you yet, young lady.'

'Perhaps,' she said with a cheeky smile.

Wednesday 24th May 1649

Andrew never did suppose he would ever make a real sailor. But, Sam was a good teacher and he soon mastered the knots and lashings. Seagull was marvellous. Somehow, he had imagined a little rowing boat with a sail and was not even close. It had taken four assistants to help them to manoeuvre her into the estuary and, while she had looked ungainly and bulky out of the water, in the little bay at Alnmouth she looked sleek and low.

The journey north had gone without incident because, with little resistance from Royalists, the Roundheads had become idle. There was talk everywhere of an invasion of Ireland so Andrew listened and took note. If it was true, the King needed to be informed as soon as possible.

They had visited Andrew's Aunt Alice at Hellaby on the way north and found that Arthur Briggs was still there. He had retired from the army due to his disability and was happy with his new nurse and Aunt Alice had looked as if she was on a new lease of life. For the first time since the loss of her Thomas, she had something to live for and looked very happy.

The young couple decided to spend their last night ashore at the inn in Alnwick where they had first met and they even managed to get the same room.

On the spur of the moment, Andrew went and begged warm water and thus relived their very first night together, with certain differences.

Sam's hair was swept back from her face by the wind as Seagull leaned into the waves. She had not exaggerated the boat's speed and ability. There were handwritten charts of all the North Sea in the little cabin and Andrew tried to make sense of them as they shot southwards. He found that, when he was engrossed in activity, he was not seasick. Maybe that was the answer; keep busy, keep well. He was also learning a whole new vocabulary. In his mind, places like Flat Scar and Filey Brigg had never existed before. Stony Binks, Donna Nook and Moggs Eye sounded more like rare birds than places to avoid when sailing, and he was still convinced that Kentish Knock and Gabbard Shoal are types of fish. Another thing. He found there is much more to sailing than hitching a line and holding a rudder. Speed is okay but if you went speeding in the wrong direction, it could become painful.

Dengy looked different from the water and they could just see across the marshes to the farm at Moor Hill where Andrew had lived with his parents as a child and the square tower of Asheldham Church stood dark against the skyline. Soon, they rounded Holliwell Point and anchored off Foulness Island until the tide began to flood and then, slowly, Seagull edged up the Crouch past Cricksee and they were round Black Point and into Easter Reach. An hour later, they were berthed beside the mill at Battlesbridge, not a mile from the only real home they had.

MARK had been watching for them and met them as they stepped ashore. Sam looked fifteen again with windswept hair and skirts tucked into her belt.

That afternoon, they all worked at camouflaging Seagull. The yacht looked too useful to their enemies. It was a shame to spoil her but they felt it was urgent as they died the big sails black and spread dark brown paint along her sides. By nightfall, Seagull looked like a dirty old fishing boat and the family were all exhausted. After riding back in silence to Rettendon, they ate a hearty supper and retired to bed. Sam was asleep within minutes and Andrew followed her almost immediately.

'**ANNE-MARIE**, this has got to stop,' said Henriette Marie, 'And it's got to stop now. I am not going to risk that girl's life any more.'

'Do you really think it's as bad as that?'

'No. I think it's far worse and I no longer believe Condé has any intentions of living up to his side of the agreement. He has been boasting all day of his achievements and has convinced himself he doesn't need us. He is playing us along and that poor girl is the bait.'

'So? What does it matter if one girl gets hurt in the process? It will have been worth it in the long run, won't it?'

'Anne-Marie,' said the amazed Queen. 'I will pretend I didn't hear you say that. We got her into this and we've got to persuade her to draw out now, before it's too late.'

'Not yet, Aunt Henriette. There's one more meeting of the Royal Court next Monday and Mary Beth must convey the message to him that evening. It's the last meeting before les vacances and he knows that. I have a spy in his offices who told me he has marked his calendar for that day with a letter "M". "M" for meeting, surely.'

The Queen sighed. 'You're probably right, Anne-Marie. It's just that I feel responsible for her right now.'

'I know that, but this meeting is a very important one. He must get the news if we are to preserve peace in the city.'

'You're right. I suppose that it will not hurt for her to go to him one more time. I'll tell her that it will be quite safe for her to go to him on Monday. "M" day.'

'Right then. Let's drink.' She raised her glass. 'To "M" day.'

'To "M" day. The end of Mary Beth's involvement with Condé.'

MARY Beth slept soundly and dreamed of her last day with the Prince. Despite his overbearing attitude at times, she had become fond of him over the last couple of weeks. Surely, he meant her no harm. He was a gentleman and, if she hadn't married Jack, she could have fallen for him. Never mind, Monday will see the end of all this. She stretched in her sleep and dreamed of the Prince galloping away with her on a white stallion into the sunset. Ah well, she could dream.

Friday 25th May 1649

Andrew and Sam left with the tide and young Antoinette waved to them as they drifted down the Crouch towards the open sea.

'We must clear North Foreland,' Sam said. Andrew started to draw a straight line from Foulness Point to Kent and Sam laughed. 'No, not like that. You'll take us right across the Shingles.'

'The Shingles?' he queried. 'Isn't that a disease?'

Samantha laughed. 'No, silly, it's a sandbank and so are these other bits father coloured yellow on the chart. We can't cross them except at very high water and we would be better to avoid them altogether to be on the safe side. At low tide there is more sand than water between here and Europe.'

Andrew was puzzled. 'So which way do we go?'

Sam pointed to the chart. 'First, we must go North-East around Foulness Sands and then we have two choices. Head due east for Middle Deep and then South into Black Deep, or else South through Barrow Deep and then East along the North Kent Coast.'

'Which do you recommend?'

'Pass,' she said. 'I've never done either.'

Ah well, he thought, once more into the breach. Or was it the beach?

FROM North Foreland, they headed for the middle of the Channel in order to avoid government boats guarding the coastline. It was odd. They would be safe near the Dutch Coast, in danger off the Spanish Netherlands, safe off France and shot for certain if caught near the English south coast. The pair, therefore, had to head out towards Holland and then cut back towards Dunkerque and follow the French coastline pretty closely. From there, they decided to sail up the Seine, through Rouen right to the heart of the City of Paris itself. At least, that was the plan. It went completely wrong five miles South-East of North Foreland.

They had been concentrating hard on keeping their course and had been making two to three knots at the time due to the nearness of the sandbanks. So hard had they been concentrating that they did not see the Parliamentary cutter until the cannonball hit the sea in front of them and showered them with water.

'Ahoj there,' came the voice across the water as the cutter closed the gap. 'Heave to.'

Andrew frowned at Sam. 'What's this "heave to" business all about?'

'In layman's terms, it means "stop",' she replied with a smile and then stood up on top of the cabin with hair flying and skirts tucked up and waved to the cutter.

Andrew's heart sank. Is this where it would end? *Do we both spend the rest of our lives locked up in the Tower or do they still execute Royalists?*

Sam leant closer. 'When I say go, let go the rope on the port side and pull the helm hard over.'

He frowned. *Port? Now which side is port? Oh, yes, the left.* He undid the rope and held it with one loop as the cutter caught up with them and the guns threatened. This is where he had to place complete trust in his wife as he tried to dismiss from his mind what would happen to them if it all went wrong.

'Go!' she commanded and Andrew let go the rope and pulled over the helm as she jumped off the cabin roof and pulled him down to the deck. The tall mast keeled right over and they both held on tight for the capsizes which seemed inevitable. The bows swung round as the wind caught the big sail, and they dove under the cutter's stern with only inches to spare. *Wow*, he thought, *this girl really does know how to sail.*

Sam grabbed the rope and pulled it across the other side. 'Port helm.'

Andrew hauled on the bar with all his might and, slowly, the masts swung back upright. Sam ran along the deck and frantically adjusted all the riggings and the racing yacht leapt forward. The cutter tried to turn but was too cumbersome and slow. By the time she had gone about and set course, Seagull was going down-wind like a thunderbolt.

They were leaving the cutter behind but darkness would soon be falling with the tide and they could not go hurtling into the darkness with sandbanks all over the place. Sam consulted the charts for some time then told Andrew what to do. Twenty minutes of manoeuvrings later, they were heading south-east at full speed and the Parliamentary Captain was wondering how he was going to get his boat off the South Goodwin Sands.

DARKNESS finally fell as they anchored in the wide Somme estuary. They rowed ashore in the tiny dinghy stored on the cabin roof and bought Calvados and local cheese which they took back to Seagull and ate and drank by candlelight. Studying the chart in the poor light, they marked their position. Sam calculated the following day's run and pencilled an "S" for "Saturday", Honfleur. Another day's journey would take them to Rouen - another "S". She then marked the chart with an "M" for "Monday". If nothing went wrong now, Paris was "M" day.

They relaxed. After his first sea battle, Andrew had shaken like a leaf but the apple spirit had steadied his nerves. Soon, they would be in Paris and he would see Mary Beth once more. He grinned to himself as he thought of how events had changed all their lives. Still, he thought, she was his friend and he had a new marriage mate, too. He looked at the chart Sam had marked. "M" for Monday. Yes, he thought. And "M" for Mary Beth, too.

He rubbed his eyes with fatigue and looked down at Sam. She was drunk. Not tight, not tiddly - paralytic - flat out on the cabin floor. He tried to lift her into the small berth he but was in little better state himself. Collapsing beside her, he pulled a blanket over them both and they lay on the deck together as Seagull swung slowly around her anchor chain.

Monday 28th May 1649

They left Rouen just as the sun rose. Andrew had sailed Seagull almost single-handed on the Saturday as Sam had been very ill. The energy had drained out of her and she sat, listless, by the cabin door and gave Andrew the simple instructions needed for him to follow the French coastline.

Sunday was different. They travelled more slowly as they spent the day not only with the business of sailing but also avoiding the other river traffic. They passed under the ruins of King Richard's Chateau Guillard as the sun warmed up and finally reached Vernon where they stopped

for lunch. It was great sitting in the sunshine on the banks of the river, eating cheese. Sam had gone right off apples for a while.

PRINCE Louis of Condé was in conference. The little man opposite him had a sly grin on his face as a bag of coins passed between them. 'You know what to do?'

'Yes, monsieur le Comte. I wait downstairs in the courtyard and come to collect the girl when I get your signal.'

'And then?'

'Then I take her to Vincennes and leave her with a guard named Alphonse.'

Condé smiled his approval. 'Good. He knows what to do from there. They must not tie in her death with me, you understand?'

'Sir?'

'Yes?'

'What if she dies before I get her to the prison house?'

'Then you had better throw her body into the Seine. However, I strongly recommend you get her to Vincennes in one piece because if she dies in the dungeons no one will recognise her afterwards. The inmates there do not have a reputation for their gentleness, do they?'

'No.' The man grinned through broken teeth at the thought of a beautiful girl like Mary Beth totally at the mercy of so many notoriously vile and ruthless men.

'Poor Mary Beth.' The Prince shook his head almost sadly. 'I almost feel sorry for her. What a way to go.'

They laughed together for a long time.

ANDREW and Sam walked hand-in-hand through the gardens from the summer palace of St Germain as the sun began to decline in the sky. Henriette was not there, they were informed politely, and neither was Mary Beth. The footman had suggested the Louvre. The river traffic was considerable as Seagull approached the Notre Dame and soon, they would have to berth and walk. Andrew studied the plan John Henry had drawn for him and compared it with the buildings around him. The big building on the left must be the Louvre Palace, he thought, we'll try there.

As it turned out, Mary Beth had been there but had left to go to some secret meeting. The Captain of the Guard thought the Palace of Luxemburg was the most likely place.

ANNE-MARIE greeted them with a smile and Andrew explained who they were and what they were doing here. The Princess showed them into a big room where Henriette was and she rose to meet them. 'Andrew, how nice. How are Rachel and Mark? And that baby of theirs?'

'Very well, Your Majesty,' Andrew said as he bowed respectfully.

'And your friend?'

'My wife, Samantha Edwina,' he introduced.

'Your wife?' The Queen held out her hand. 'They certainly come young these days. How are you, my child?'

'Trés bien, merci,' said Sam as she curtsied. 'Please excuse my rudeness, your Majesty, but is Lady Ramsden here?'

The Queen looked apprehensive. 'She was but has just left.'

'Please, Your Majesty, to where?'

'I don't know if I can tell you. It is a matter of national security.'

'Queen Henriette,' Andrew said. 'I have reason to believe she is in very great danger.'

'Danger?' The Queen's hand went to her delicate throat.

'From a man called Condé. When is Mary Beth to visit him next?'

Queen Henriette Marie sat down and looked across at Anne-Marie, who shook her head.

'Anne-Marie, I must,' she said. 'If anything happens to her, I could never forgive myself.'

MARY Beth could hardly contain herself. She had positive news for the Prince and skipped down the empty street to his headquarters. Usually, it was a hubbub of activity but tonight it seemed strangely quiet. With a spring in her step, she entered the courtyard which she crossed carefully, looked up at the light in the Prince's rooms and opened the big door at the bottom of the stairs. It was very dark as she reached forward to climb the steps. Suddenly, she was caught and an arm was thrown tightly around her body, trapping her arms and crushing the breath from her lungs. She opened her mouth to scream but another hand closed over her mouth, stifling sound as she kicked and struggled but could not break free. Panic came into her throat as her unknown assailant held her tightly as she struggled, in vain, to break free. With a positive clang, the big oak door closed firmly and she was trapped in the total darkness with someone who had her totally at his mercy.

CONDE looked up as the door opened and then put down his pen and smiled as the young woman came towards him. As she approached, his desire grew and she walked slowly forward, the low neckline becoming visible first and then that beautiful face and long, golden hair.

She stepped forward until she was right before him and he slowly came from behind his desk looked at her long and hard. What a pity to waste all this beauty, he thought, but he had committed himself now. In her innocence, she smiled up at him as he slowly undid the tie at her neck and opened the front of her dress. His heart beat faster at the thought of the night of raw passion which lay before him.

She said, 'By the way, Louis. Have you met my brother?'

His hands stopped less than an inch from her soft skin and his eyes looked up. It was the sword he saw first as Andrew stepped slowly forward into the circle of light from the candle while the Prince looked frantically about for a weapon. In desperation, he grabbed open the drawer where his pistol lay but Andrew's sword practically broke the desk in two and the pistol clattered harmlessly to the floor. Mary Beth picked it up.

'You are Prince Louis de Condé?' Andrew asked.

'I am,' he replied, more than a little concerned as to where this might lead.

'What were you doing with my sister?'

'I...I...'

'You have attempted to assault her and I demand satisfaction.' It was not strictly correct to call Mary Beth his sister though they had spent much of their childhood growing up together in the same house. However, he was not going to explain all that to Condé. 'We came to France to fight for people like you and Mary Beth has news which would have saved your life. Instead, as a reward, all you can think of is abusing her.'

'Abuse her?' The Prince feigned anger. 'Never.'

'Guess who we found hanging about in the courtyard?' Andrew clicked his fingers and a nasty little man came staggering in, encouraged by Samantha's dagger. 'They will be disappointed at Vincennes.'

Condé scowled and looked guilty but all the fight had gone out of him. He was a courageous soldier when at the head of a large army but, face to face with personal death, he was not so brave. 'What are you going to do with me?'

Andrew shrugged. 'I think I'll let things take their natural course.'

He turned and started to walk away from the Prince who looked across at Mary Beth who raised her arms slowly. Time stood still as they faced each other: Mary Beth with the pistol, the glow of the fire flickering on her face as she cocked the hammer with her thumbs.

'You can't do this to me,' he implored of Andrew.

'No I can't, but my sister can. After all, it was her you were about to rape, not me.' He stopped by the door. 'By the way, Louis, she has never missed.'

Condé sat down and put his head in his hands.

'I wanted you dead tonight,' Andrew continued. 'But I've been outvoted. Apparently, you are still of

some use to the country, so we will let you live. But if you do not toe the line, or if anything should happen to any one of us, for any reason, all will be revealed to your wife, to the Court and to Parlement. You will be finished. The choice is yours.'

Condé was beaten and knew it. 'I understand. What do you want me to do?'

'You will hold power until the end of the year and then retire. If you do not, the Court will have you arrested along with your co-conspirators.'

'Very well. It seems I have no choice.'

'By the way, if I were you, I would take great care to ensure nothing bad happens to any of us.' Andrew put his sword to the Prince's throat and drew a little blood. 'When you attempt to rape my sister, you look death in the very face. I trust your self-control will be better in future.'

After ensuring his point sank home, Andrew stepped to the door, turned and looked at Mary Beth who was still holding the pistol pointed straight at Condé's face. Sam slipped out as he went back to Mary Beth and gently lowered the hammer and took the pistol from her hands. He dislodged the flint and threw the pistol to the Prince who jumped and dropped it as if it was red hot.

Outside, Andrew stopped and pulled together Mary Beth's dress, refastening it at the neck.

Mary Beth held her arms tightly around him for a moment. 'Thanks, Andrew. You know, you frightened me to death when you grabbed me in the doorway.'

He reassured her. 'I had no option. I was very short of time and couldn't risk you calling out.'

Mary Beth nodded, kissed his cheek, and led the way out.

'Andrew,' said Sam as they crossed the courtyard. 'You've made a powerful enemy in Condé.'

He smiled. You see, he had not told them everything.

Tuesday 29th May 1649

Andrew and Sam slept on Seagull that night and then walked hand in hand along the Cours La Reine in the morning sunshine. Andrew had a few bones to pick and the sooner it was done the better. They arrived at the palace around nine and were shown into the study to where Anne-Marie and Mary Beth came soon after. Anne-Marie was dressed, but Mary Beth was still in her nightgown, looking very sheepish.

'Who's idea was this plan?' he asked when the greetings were over.

Anne-Marie coughed. 'I'm afraid it was mine. Initially your sister, Carrie, and Queen Henriette joined with me to try to find a way to end the Fronde. It was a most dreadful business and was doing no good at all so, by uniting and supporting someone we felt we could trust, we managed to urge an early settlement which satisfied most parties.'

'Then why are you still plotting now the Fronde is over?'

'Because it is not over,' she told him. 'In spite of everything, the Queen Regent and Cardinal Mazarin are still conspiring to overthrow Condé and disturb the balance of power. I think we all see it as inevitable that they will gain power in the end but if it is too soon, the Fronde will start all over again and, this time, it will not just be Parlement who will rise up. The Princes themselves will rebel and that will mean Civil War with a vengeance.'

'And how does Condé fit into this picture?'

'He is not the best ruler in the world but he is the one whom the majority would accept. Having recently fought and won the Battle of Lens against the Spaniards, he is hailed as a hero at the moment. When the Euphoria dies down, they might think again but,' she shrugged, 'in the meantime, Condé is the one chosen.'

'Then you are really trying to maintain a status quo until other plans are made?'

'Over simplified, my dear Andrew, but yes.' Princess Anne-Marie paused as she paced around the state room. 'However, there is one problem we have only recently identified. The power has gone to Condé's head and I now believe he intends to remain in power indefinitely. Anne and Mazarin will not allow that. They would have war first.'

'Hmm,' Andrew said. 'I can see the predicament you are all in. How can I help?'

'You?' Anne-Marie whirled around and stared in amazement.

'Yes, me. And Samantha, of course.'

Taken aback, it took her several minutes to reach a conclusion. 'I don't know. Make peace with Condé, I suppose.'

'Right. It shall be done.' Andrew stood up and Sam looked apprehensive as he walked over to where Mary Beth stood by the window. 'And you, young lady, deserve a damn good hiding and right now, I'm in the mood for putting you over my knee and taking the skin off your backside.'

Mary Beth backed away from him, fully believing his declared intentions as he followed, his face close to hers. Eventually, she was cornered and looked frantically about for support which did not materialise.

'I have a job for you,' he said, his finger wagging right in her flinching face. 'And if you foul it up, I'm going to beat the living daylights out of you and then pack you off to your loyal husband with your very sore tail between your legs. Do you understand?'

She nodded, close to tears. 'What do you want me to do?'

'I want you to put on your prettiest dress and go and see Condé.'

Her mouth dropped open and her head shook a little.

'Don't worry,' he smiled wickedly. 'He won't touch you. If he does, I'll have his... his head.'

Andrew backed off and she shook her head. 'I c...c..can't.'

Without warning, he reached out and picked up his still-sheathed sword and advanced on her, grabbing hold of her nightdress by the hem, lifting it.

She screamed as he turned her round and raised his arm. 'I'll do it. I'll do it. Don't hit me.'

She collapsed in tears and Andrew felt sorry for what he'd had to do but was very careful not to show it. Anne-Marie only just succeeded in preventing laughter from showing through. Sam was horrified.

'Would you really have beaten her?' she asked when they were alone at lunchtime.

Andrew just looked at her.

'You would, wouldn't you? You'd have slapped her bare bottom wouldn't you?'

'Not with you watching,' he teased. 'If I had really wanted her bottom, I would have got her alone first.'

The plate only just missed him.

LADY Mary Elizabeth Ramsden walked with her head high in the afternoon sun but her heart beat faster as she entered the empty courtyard and started to climb the stairs. Would the Prince really have done what that horrid little man accused him of? He had taken a little persuading to own up and Andrew had seemed to enjoy persuading him.

Andrew had changed, she thought. When they were young, he had been so boring but now he was exciting. She smiled at the thought. This morning, he had threatened to strip her naked and spank her and she thought that, if they had been alone together, she might even have liked being dominated like that. Her tummy had butterflies at the thought.

Had she done wrong marrying John Henry? Probably not. But she really should behave herself. Perhaps she should go home to her husband and be a good little wife. One day, she thought, but not yet. She knocked on the door and entered the State Rooms.

The Prince turned and his mouth fell open. He stood up with a puzzled look on his face and looked around, expecting someone to be guarding her, but she firmly closed the door behind her. What game was this girl playing?

'Louis,' she said as she walked towards his desk. 'I have news for you.'

Condé sat down and couldn't believe what was happening to him. Calmly, she sat opposite him and gave him the outcome of the meeting the previous day. He listened with increasing interest and digested it well and, at length, he even began to feel guilty about what he had intended to do to this loyal servant of France. 'Mary Beth, I..' he began.

She reached out and put her finger on his lips and smiled. 'Enough has been said.'

He looked at his hands on the desk. 'I don't know what to say.'

'Then say nothing,' she said as she stood up to go. 'Do remember one thing, though, in case you are ever tempted to think of revenge of any kind. Andrew and I, along with our whole family, protected Queen Henriette for many years when she was being hunted in England so she would

let no harm befall any of us. My husband is in the House of Lords in England. The young girl, Lady Samantha Grenville, is from one of the highest ranking families in Britain and my brother, Andrew, is one of the closest friends of King Charles. Turn on any of us and you declare war on a very formidable enemy. And, by the way, my mother taught me to shoot. I really have never missed.'

Most of it was exaggeration, of course. Andrew had told her what to say but even he couldn't imagine half of Europe coming up in arms if Mary Beth came to harm. However, Condé didn't know that and he was more than a little worried by the implied threat and bowed his head as she left with head high, closing the door behind her as she went. Andrew stood in the hallway outside, leaning on his sword as she came out. He winked at her as she almost fell into his arms and he held her for a long time until her pulse rate returned to somewhere near normal.

THE Security Council met in the afternoon. Sir Thomas Fairfax, as Commander-in-Chief of the army, was there, as was Oliver Cromwell his second-in-command.

'Something must be done, gentlemen,' said Fairfax; 'Else the country will no longer support us.'

'If we had brought in Military Rule in the first place as I suggested,' said Cromwell; 'We would not now be in this predicament.'

'If we had brought in Military Rule, we would be more broke than we are at present,' said the Chancellor.

'Money's your problem,' said Cromwell sourly.

'It will become your problem, too, when more of your troops get sick of working without the pay they have been promised.'

'The troops will not revolt. They have more loyalty than that.'

'Sir, loyalty is commendable, but it does not feed the children. Already, your troops have revolted in several places.'

Cromwell turned away. 'Mere minor mutinies by traitors.'

'That's not what I've heard. When you had that "mutineer" who asked for democracy executed outside St Paul's last month, nearly the whole city followed his body to the grave.'

'You cannot say this is representative of true feeling in the country.'

'No? What about the three regiments which mutinied last week. Was that a minor incident? It took Sir Thomas days to catch them at Burford. Think of the time and expense involved, when we should be quelling the Royalist rebellion.'

'We have nothing to fear, God is with our cause.'

The Chancellor got to his feet, his face red with rage. 'Now don't you go blasphemously bringing God into this argument. Granted, the country is more religious now that Puritanism is the national religion. But don't tie God in with political motivations.'

Cromwell turned as his own anger escalated. 'Why not? Is it not God who has given us the victory? Is it not God who has established peace in the country? It will be God who brings the Catholics in Ireland to their knees. It will be in God's name that we shall rule.'

'Oliver,' spoke Fairfax. 'Pardon my interruption, but are we not getting away from the subject of the economical future of the country?'

'But Tom, how can we divorce the two?'

'If God has done as you say,' interjected the still-mad Chancellor. 'Will God now pay your men their back pay?'

'Who's being blasphemous now? We are his servants, we must make decisions in his name. We must establish a Commonwealth.'

'A Commonwealth?'

'A Republic which represents the people, in name at least. Of course, the real power must remain with the Army.' He sneered. 'For their protection, you understand.'

Fairfax frowned. 'The people will not fall for that one. They will be in revolt within the week.'

'No, sir. They will not. We will reduce taxation.'

'Reduce taxation?' spluttered the Chancellor. 'England is already on the verge of bankruptcy.'

'Listen to the rest of the plan. In a few months, we will have conquered Ireland. Then we will take

the land from the Irish who revolt and give it to loyal Protestants from England. Land will be better than money.'

'Mr Cromwell. What you are proposing is preposterous? Take land from the resident Irish population and grant it to English Protestants?'

'Exactly. Not only that - make it well known. I'll bet my boots that many a rebellious Royalist in England will throw in the towel at the promise of free land. We will be killing two birds with one stone.'

'Sir Thomas. Are you in agreement with Mr Cromwell's plan?'

'No, sir,' said Fairfax firmly. 'I believe it to be morally wrong. I have fought many a battle for my country and will continue to do so. If Mr Cromwell is commissioned to undertake this licensed murder, he does it with neither my blessing nor my assistance.'

'What if Parliament commands it?'

He stood up. 'Then I resign.'

There was silence in the room. They could not allow Fairfax to resign. It was only his leadership which was holding the army together at the moment. Cromwell could not command the same degree of loyalty from his men. No, Fairfax must stay. Cromwell must go to Ireland. Ireton will go with him. Twenty thousand men should be enough for the job. It was agreed.

'Sir Thomas, you must remain in charge of Britain's defence. Blake will resume command of the navy, Cromwell and Ireton will go to Ireland. Is it agreed?'

The decision was not unanimous but might prevailed over right.

THAT was the night Prince Charles arrived and there was much rejoicing in Paris. Even Anne-Marie put on her best dress and did her hair. Perhaps she was not so apathetic after all. However, she was much disappointed. The King made a big fuss of Lucy and proudly displayed his new baby, christened James Scott, for all to see. By his actions, he was making friends of some, enemies of others.

Andrew and Sam left before the banquet and Andrew managed a few minutes alone with the King soon after he arrived and then surreptitiously slipped away to join Sam at the helm of Seagull. Mary Beth was with them. She had little alternative as Andrew had practically dragged her along by the hair. She was going back to make her peace with her husband whether she liked it or not. She and Andrew made a pact. He promised to keep the details from John Henry if she promised to behave herself from now on. Mary Beth begrudgingly agreed, but obviously hated being taken away from all the fun.

The future was not up to them. Events were out their control and would take their own course. Andrew could only do so much to prevent her from getting herself in water which was much too hot and far, far too deep.

Friday 21st December 1649

It had been their return to England which had saved Rettendon Hall and Andrew took great delight in reminding Mary Beth of that every time her mind strayed away from home. She viewed her husband as very boring and dull. Now that she had tasted excitement, he was old hat. Somehow, it seemed that some latent power had been unleashed inside her, something which had been there since her childhood but suppressed, poised, ready to explode like some erupting volcano.

Andrew felt sorry for his nephew at times. John Henry did his best for her but he was no match for gay cavalier types like himself and, given half the chance she would spend all her time with him. There was nothing going on between them.

Andrew loved his adopted sister but he also loved John Henry and was definitely not going to run off with his wife. Villagers talked, but what else was there for them to do? Sam got jealous occasionally and Andrew had to make a lot of fuss of her. John Henry appeared not to notice as Andrew refused to draw away from Mary Beth. The reason was that Andrew was convinced that,

if he did, she would find someone else to spend her time with and then everyone would get hurt.

The golds of Autumn gradually turned to the white of winter and they were confined to the Hall for several weeks. As a result, they took the opportunity for a clearout. Mark and John Henry started on the stables while Sam helped Rachel to clean the kitchen, larder and cellar. Andrew and Mary Beth started at the top.

'Andrew, you can see the hospital from here,' she said, standing on top of a wooden chest and peering out of the high attic window.

There was not much room on top of that trunk but Andrew managed a quick look before the lid broke under their combined weight and they collapsed in a heap on the floor. Andrew lay for a while, winded, staring up at the roof which would soon need attention, with Mary Beth half on top of him.

'You love Sam, don't you?' she asked.

It was a stupid question. Of course he did and told her so.

'Are you going back to France?' she asked, curled up in the crook of his arm, fingering one of his shirt buttons.

'I don't know yet. I might have to, come the spring.'

She looked at him. 'Take me with you.'

'I'll be taking Sam,' he replied, avoiding the issue. 'She's the sailor in the family.'

'I know that. I do love you, Andrew, but will never come between you and Sam.' She looked at him with sad eyes. 'I promise.'

'Mary Beth, your place is here with your husband. He needs you. He might not show it very often but it is true.'

'I know that. I don't want to hurt him either, it's just...'

'Yes?'

'I'm so dreadfully bored.'

'Is there not enough for you to do? I'm sure that we can find a little work for you in the stables.'

She snuggled closer. 'Now you're teasing me.'

The snow started to fall onto the loft window and it began to grow cold.

'I want to thank you,' she suddenly said.

'Thank me? Why?'

'For treating me the way you did. I acted very childishly in Paris. You should have beaten me, I deserved it.'

'Do you know?' he said. 'Once upon a time, I would have given anything to smack that cute little bottom of yours. But now it's not mine to smack, even if you do deserve it sometimes.'

After a while, she said, 'Promise me something.'

'If I can.'

'If I misbehave again, beat me.'

'I'd love to but what would John Henry say?'

'He'd probably help you.' They both laughed. 'I'm serious, Andrew. I can't take all this "do as you please" routine. Look after me like you used to. When I get out of line, put me right, please.'

'You mean I even get a shot at that pretty little bottom of yours?' he joked.

Mary Beth did not joke. 'You ought to know by now that my bottom is yours whenever you want it.'

He lay and thought about what she had said for a long time. 'I'll take you with me to Paris on two conditions.'

'Anything.'

'Firstly. John Henry agrees to it without any unfair persuasion.'

'Of course. And secondly?'

'When we are there, you behave yourself.'

She rolled off him and giggled.

'Mary Beth, I'm deadly serious. If you start acting like a child, I will treat you like one, I promise you that. Now is it a deal?'

She sat up and faced her brother, deadly serious. 'I promise.'

The matter was forgotten for the rest of the day and they were suddenly brother and sister again. They threw out a lot of junk and repacked some of the trunks. They came across some of Sarah's things and Andrew couldn't bring himself to throw out anything which had belonged to the mother he had loved so dearly. Each item had its own memory: the hair slide she used to wear when working at the hospital; the dress she had worn when she and Carrie had sheltered Queen Henriette Marie from the Roundheads; her sword and pistol.

'Andrew,' Mary Beth called from the far side of the attic where she sat, cross-legged, sorting through some papers. 'What is this?'

It was a crumpled scrap of paper not three inches square. On one side were written the words "La Planque."

'It was the name of the house in France dad built for Sarah when she was ill.'

'But why is the name written here?'

'Dad left it as a message once.'

She turned it over. 'What's this on the back?'

Andrew frowned. 'On the back? Where? Show me.'

Mary Beth leant over and they looked at it together. It was a faint drawing of some sort and had a picture of a triangle, a tower and a hammer. He held it up to the light but inspiration didn't even flicker.

'Are you two never coming down?' came Sam's voice from below the stairs. 'It's awfully quiet up there. What are you up to?'

'Wouldn't you like to know?' called Andrew, winking at Mary Beth.

'You're not after her bottom again, are you?'

'Oh, no,' he called. 'I had that hours ago.'

'Andrew Bosvile, get down these stairs at once,' she commanded.

He obeyed. Can't have any fun these days.

OVER tea, they looked at the note. Sam insisted that her husband sit next to her while Mary Beth sat opposite, next to John Henry.

'Look, you two,' said Rachel as she came in with a bowl of piping hot stew. She placed it upon the table and pointed the wooden spoon at an embarrassed Mark. 'I had to marry my man because I kept touching his feet under the table. It makes you pregnant, I hope you know.'

Sam nudged Andrew and looked at his feet entwined with Mary Beth's. He tried to look "found out" and looked up at John Henry who raised his eyebrows and shook his head slowly, smiling. Andrew looked back to Sam who almost choked trying to swallow and laugh at the same time.

The drawing sat in the middle of the table and didn't make sense to any of them.

'Who drew it?' Sam asked as she finished her meal before the others as usual.

'I guess dad did,' said Rachel. 'Who else could have done it?'

'I think it's a plan or a map.'

'I do believe you're right,' said Andrew. 'That is certainly what it looks like.'

'Perhaps it was to tell mum where something was hidden.'

'Treasure?' said Mark.

'Don't be daft,' said Rachel. 'Dad didn't have any treasure. He just had a few horses and a bit of land on Dengy.'

'Then why would he leave a map?'

'Beats me. But where is it?'

'I don't know.'

'What do we know so far?' asked the ever-serious John Henry.

'It must be somewhere dad knew,' said his Aunt Rachel.

'It would also have to be somewhere Sarah would have recognised,' added Mark.

'Moor Hill?' suggested John Henry thinking of the place where his grandparents had lived.

'No.' Rachel shook her head. 'I would recognise it if it was there. It's not even vaguely like anything at the farm.'

'Cricksee Hall?' pondered John Henry.

'No. Sarah was never long at Cricksee.'

'There's another thing,' Mark added. 'Your father never said anything before he left for America.'

'Even though he knew Sarah had died!' exclaimed the excited Mary Beth.

'So who was the map for?' asked the confused Sam.

'Well,' said Andrew. 'I think we all agree it must have originally been for my mother, Sarah.' They nodded their agreement.

'So, when dad emigrated with Elizabeth, it had to be something Carrie knew about. Something she would recognise.'

'But she was leaving for France,' said Mark. 'Your father knew that.'

'Then who was left?'

They all looked at each other and, finally, all eyes rested upon Andrew.

He shrugged. 'It must be something I'm supposed to see. I must be thick, mustn't I?' He looked at Sam. 'Don't answer that.'

They sat in silence for a while.

'It wouldn't be Twigmoor Hall, would it?' asked Rachel eventually.

'No,' said Mark. 'It doesn't look a bit like anything there. What's that triangle? Or the hammer?'

'Hammer? The forge!' Rachel exclaimed, suddenly excited.

'The forge?'

'Don't you remember? Smith's forge at Asheldham.' She pointed. 'Look, that tower; it's the church and the triangle must be the village green.'

'The cross is just in front of the tower. What's that writing, Rachel?'

She squinted in the poor light. 'It looks like "ten".'

'Ten what?'

'Ten paces?' Sam offered.

'That's it. Something is buried ten paces from the front door of the church.'

'But what? Dad didn't have anything worth burying in a churchyard.'

'There is only one way to find out,' said Mark.

'And get ourselves arrested as body-snatchers?' John Henry joked and they all laughed.

The weather was closing in that night so a trip at that time was impossible. However, when the snow cleared, they were going on a treasure hunt.

Wednesday 26th December 1649

It was Boxing Day and lots of people were on the roads so they raised little attention as they headed eastwards towards Dengy. It was a tight squeeze in the coach because everyone was determined not be left behind. Antoinette was on her mother's knee, Sam on her husband's and Mark drove the horses while Mary Beth sat with John Henry opposite the others and they were all covered with lots of blankets.

They timed it to arrive as it was getting dark. Not that it was really black. The remaining snow reflected the faint light from the cloud-streaked moon as they quietly climbed from the coach leaving only Rachel and Toni in the relative warmth. Sam and Mary Beth kept look-out as the men paced out the spot.

'Well, here goes nothing,' Andrew said and began to dig.

The ground was relatively soft due to the slight thaw, but it was freezing that night and by early morning, the ground would be as hard as iron. They didn't know who's grave they might be digging into but Andrew hoped and prayed that what he found wasn't going to be soft.

It wasn't. He got to his knees and scratched as the last of the soil fell from the top of a heavy leather bag. He pulled it up and it jingled as he looked around at everyone then put his hand inside.

Coins, hundreds of them. He sat on the snow and looked in amazement as they glittered in the moonlight. There was only one metal which did that after being underground for years. GOLD!

They all sat and stood in silence. Where had it all come from?

'Well, there's no point in sitting here in the cold thinking about it,' Andrew said. 'Let's take it home and count it.'

'Is there just the one saddlebag?' Mark asked.

Good old Mark! They looked and found three more bags. It was a fortune. They hastily filled in the hole and kicked the snow about to cover the evidence of their digging and then climbed aboard the coach. Andrew climbed on top as arranged, to give Mark a break, and took the Latchingdon Road at a speed never before attempted by a coach and four. The horses galloped through the night and Andrew was sure there were only two wheels on the road as he turned into the iron gates and skidded to a halt on the ice in front of the door. Mark looked after the horses so John Henry and Andrew carried inside the heavy saddlebags.

'Ready?' Andrew asked.

They all were on the floor in the middle of the library so he upturned the first bag and sparkling gold coins poured onto the floor in a sequence of flashing reflections. He was feeling carefree so he poured another bag then another. Soon, there was a veritable mountain of coins on the carpet in front of the fire. One of the bags had contained silver coins now black with tarnish. It took five hours to count. Eight thousand crowns! They couldn't believe it.

'Hey!' exclaimed Rachel. 'There is a note in this one!'

'What does it say?'

'26th December 1607,' she read. 'Do you know, this money has been buried in that churchyard for forty-two years!'

'To the day,' added Sam.

'What do we do with it?' asked John Henry.

'Andrew must decide,' said Rachel.

'You're the eldest, Rachel. You decide.'

'Mark's the oldest.'

'Don't bring me into it. I'm not true family. I have no right to any of it.'

'Okay then,' said Andrew. 'Let's assume that this gold was owned by Dad and that, originally, he intended it for mum and the children - that's Rachel and I now. However, Carrie was alive then so her share must be split between John Henry and Mary Beth.'

'Why me?' asked Mary Beth.

'Because you were Carrie's daughter, to all intents and purposes. And secondly, because we say so.'

'It's a lot of money,' said Sam.

'Do we need it?' Andrew asked.

They all looked at each other. They didn't.

'May I make a proposal?'

They all agreed.

'I suggest that we use this...this fortune, in a Plot for the King.'

One by one, they nodded. The money would be used to assist a King to come to power. It was rebagged and hidden in the cellar.

'Right, then,' Andrew asked. 'How is it to be administered?'

'Administered?' John Henry asked.

'Yes. We are the trustees of a considerable sum of money. It must not be wasted.'

'Can't we just give it to the King?' asked Mary Beth.

'Not on your nelly. He and George will blow it on drink and parties within a week.'

'Can't we just leave it to you?'

'Can I make another suggestion?'

They all nodded.

'John Henry, answer me honestly. What is the financial state of the Hall?'

'Poor. Although we worked hard together this Autumn, we are still in the red.'

'How much?'

'Oh, two hundred pounds perhaps.'

'I vote we give three hundred pounds to John Henry for the upkeep of Rettendon Hall.'

'Why?' asked Lord Ramsden.

'Because it is the only secure headquarters we have. If we lose this Hall, where will we go? How could we help the King without a base?'

'Andrew's right,' said Rachel. 'It really is important that we have such a place so convenient for town and sea.'

'Okay,' said John Henry. 'But if I accept, we must pay Samantha for her boat.'

'Good gracious, no,' the young girl said. 'It was my father's boat and now, I suppose it's mine by inheritance and, what is mine is Andrew's. I want nothing for it.'

'Then at least our Plot Fund must pay for its maintenance and upkeep.'

'I'll agree to that if my husband does.' Sam looked at Andrew and he nodded his agreement.

'What about the rest?' Mark asked.

'Andrew must take charge of it,' proposed John Henry. 'If he sees a need, he must use it, without question.'

'No,' Andrew said. 'I think for your own peace of mind there should be a safeguard, someone I must get agreement from before I take it. Two heads are better than one.'

'Sam?' proposed Mary Beth.

'No, she's my wife. Too close.'

'Then it can only be one other person,' said Lord John Henry Ramsden. 'Mary Beth is going with you to Paris, so she must be the one.'

Mary Beth looked at John Henry with amazement. She shook her head.

'Don't be silly, girl. Of course you can go. I must stay and observe Parliament at work and no one else can do that. Rachel and Mark can't leave because of the children so you must go with them.'

'Oh, John Henry. I love you.' She leaned over and kissed her husband tenderly and then lay with her head in his lap.

Just for once, Andrew actually believed her.

Friday 18th January 1650

Andrew, Sam and Mary Beth crossed the Channel without incident, but then no one in their right mind would be on the water in mid-January unless they had a very good reason for doing so. On reflection, Andrew was very glad he had Mary Beth as the extra hand made all the difference. He had to admire her fortitude as she stood on deck with freezing winds on her face, tightening ropes soaked with salt water and half covered in a layer of ice. He couldn't help noticing she also had legs. Not that he had ever doubted it for a minute but it was the first time he had seen them since they were children. During that voyage, she had taken to tucking her skirts up in her belt like Sam did to allow freedom of movement, but there was one difference. Sam's legs, though nice, were a bit on the skinny side but Mary Beth's were like magnets for his eyes. Sam always stood on the boat barefoot, she could get better grip that way so Mary Beth did the same. That water was well below freezing point but he never heard a word of complaint from either of them. They anchored in their usual spot in the Somme estuary and then heated water on their little stove. The feet of both the girls were blue with cold and Andrew spent a good hour massaging all four with cloths soaked in warm water while they sat shivering, wrapped only in dry blankets. They retired in due course, Sam and Andrew in their own bunk, Mary Beth opposite. Andrew and Sam soon got warm together but felt sorry for Mary Beth who had no-one to cuddle. Sam woke him up a little later and pointed to where Mary Beth lay in her bunk, shivering violently. Pleadingly, Sam looked at him and he nodded.

'Mary Beth,' she called.

Mary Beth turned over and looked at her.

Sam gestured. 'Bring your blanket with you.'

It was cramped for the three of them in that single bunk and Mary Beth was frozen stiff but the other two held her close and, after a while, the shivering abated. Eventually, they found the most comfortable position. Andrew held Mary Beth close while Sam lay on top of them as she was the lightest. Andrew offered to go to the other bunk and leave the girls together but Sam refused to let him go. They both smelt like salty seaweed, he thought. But then, probably, so did he.

Saturday 19th January 1650

In the morning, the wind had not dropped. The sky was dark and the waves rolled relentlessly into the harbour and the boat could not leave. As there was nothing to get up for, the trio stayed in bed; it was warmer there. Around lunchtime, Andrew felt odd. Something was missing. Sam! He sat up - she was not in sight. Mary Beth still lay fast asleep so he tucked the blankets round her and put his head out on deck. Empty, and their little dinghy had gone, too. The wind had abated during the night and with it the seas so he went back down into the cabin where Mary Beth stirred.

'Come back to bed,' she said. 'It's cold without you.'

'Just the two of us?' her brother said. 'You do realise Sam has gone, don't you?'

'Of course, she told me she was going because we have almost run out of fuel for the stove. We've had it on a lot more than usual and it's nearly out.'

'But I could have gone. You shouldn't have let her go.'

'How could I stop her?' shouted Mary Beth back at him. 'It's her boat. I told her to wait but she said I was to hold on tight to you till she got back. Please come back to bed, I'm freeeeezing.'

This was a plea he was not going to ignore but, in spite of everything, he couldn't bring himself to cuddle her with Sam not there so he lay on his back. It was a mistake. In a flash, Mary Beth was on top of him. He grunted. She was heavier than Sam and her feet were cold. He pulled all the blankets on top of her and resigned himself.

'Andrew,' she said. 'Thank you for holding me. I'm not just cold, I'm lonely.'

'It's what big brothers are for, isn't it?'

'Yes. Hold me tight.' How could he resist an offer like that? He held her tight, his hands on her back while she wriggled her tummy against his.

He kissed her nose. 'How's the bottom?'

'Cold,' she said. She was right.

SAMANTHA returned an hour later and, closing the door, she took off her cloak and started to pour oil into the stove. 'Is Mary Beth still cold?'

Andrew nodded gently. 'She's asleep.'

Sam turned the stove up to full and climbed into the other bunk.

After another hour, it was almost warm enough for Andrew to put his nose outside the blankets and Mary Beth was awake, he could feel her eyelashes move on his neck.

'How's the bottom now?' he whispered.

'Much warmer now, thanks. You can let go of it now if you like.'

'Not likely, my hands will get cold.'

'I'm sure,' she said propping her chin up on her elbows; 'that there are other places you can warm your hands.'

'What are you doing with my husband?' called Sam from the other bunk.

'Just letting him warm his hands,' said Mary Beth with a giggle.

'Just make sure that's all you're warming for him.'

'Sam, you're jealous,' Andrew said.

'Too damn right,' she said. 'Make room for me, I'm coming over to share in the fun.'

ANDREW got up for nature's own reasons a little later and made some soup for them all. No wonder Mary Beth had been cold, he thought, she hardly had anything on because her clothes were so damp. He held them up in front of the stove and they steamed in the heat and, when they were dry and warm, he gave them to her. She thanked him and put them on under the blankets while he sat on the other bunk and thought of the future. He didn't know what they would find in Paris so he couldn't make any plans. By rights, Condé should have resigned last week. If he hadn't, there will have been trouble. But how bad was it? He looked across at his two sleeping beauties as they lay in each other's arms like children. He smiled at a memory which would remain with him for the rest of his life.

I think I'll write a book, he thought to himself. "One-Hundred-and-One Ways to Keep Hands Warm, Part One". He persuaded himself that he must do some additional research before he started on part two!

Sunday 20th January 1650

Mary Beth brought Andrew breakfast just after first light as he steered Seagull onwards with the rising sun behind him. The wind had risen again and Seagull was at a permanent list of about forty-five degrees, so she must have worked some kind of a miracle cooking broth under those conditions.

He estimated from the charts that they were close to Fécamp, but were making good time and he was pleased with himself. Andrew had never seen Mary Beth with her hair up before, it had always hung long on her shoulders. But now it was bunched up on top, transforming the shape of her face. He thanked her and they sat, huddled together, drinking soup and talking as the wind-blown spray beat against the screen he had rigged up to give some protection from the wind. After a while, Sam put her head out, saw they were all right and waved to them, slipping back quickly to preserve the heat inside the modest cabin.

The sun tried to peep through again around midday as Seagull turned southwards to follow the coastline towards Cap Le Hève. Andrew knew from the last trip that soon they would be in the more sheltered Seine Estuary. He just hoped that the river wasn't frozen. Seagull could cope with most things but an Icebreaker she was not.

An hour later, Sam joined the others on deck and helped to set sail for the turn into the estuary. Andrew was concerned that she seemed peeved that he and Mary Beth had spent the morning huddled together on deck, though talk was all that had been accomplished and his hands were still cold to prove it. He was sure that if Sam had not been distracted, she would not have fallen overboard.

In strong seas, they had made it a practice to rope themselves to a suitable part of the boat, just in case. Sam, in her lack of concentration, had forgotten. The sail went slack as Seagull turned to port and the boom came across with the wind. Andrew didn't see her go, he just looked across to see why the sail was flapping and saw that she was gone. Frantically, he shouted to Mary Beth who dived for the helm as he grabbed for the hanging rope. He hauled with all his might and, gradually, Seagull responded and came about. They could not see Samantha anywhere. The seas were not particularly high but a head in the water is not easy to spot even on a calm day. Andrew cursed himself for his stupidity and for not ensuring she followed her own rule of taking adequate safety precautions.

Going back the way they had come, they were against the wind and, therefore, tacked painfully slowly and he guessed his wife would not last long in that freezing water. It must have been after several minutes of circling that they saw her, lying face-down in the water. Before Andrew could stop her, Mary Beth was in the water, struggling towards Sam while he tried frantically to bring the boat round single-handed.

He lost sight of them. Oh no, he thought, now I've lost both of them. He tried to scan the surface

and keep an even keel at the same time, then saw the raised arm. He pulled the helm over and ran as near as he could to them. Tying a rope around his waist, he leaned out as far as he dare. On the first run by, Andrew grabbed Sam by the belt of her dress and hauled her out of the water and dumped her unceremoniously on the canting deck. He somehow managed to turn Seagull and creep back, looking for Mary Beth and it took a long time to find her.

She barely managed to raise her arm and it took all Andrew's strength to pull her shoulders over the gunwale, but she was too heavy for him to pull inboard and his own strength was going fast. In a flash of inspiration, he let go the port line and kicked over the helm with all his might. Instantly, Seagull righted and turned broadside to the wind and started to list to starboard and Mary Beth literally fell on top of him. Pushing her sodden body off him, he struggled to the helm to try to correct Seagull's swing before she went right over and it was a very close thing. Eventually, he managed to get the little yacht going South-Westerly so that she was at least upright. However, if they kept in that direction, they would soon be on a beach somewhere near Honfleur.

As quickly as he could, Andrew dragged both unconscious bodies into the cabin. He could not afford to be gentle as he had to get them out of that freezing wind. It took him ages and he could have just laid there himself and died. For all he knew Sam was already dead, and probably Mary Beth, too. Eventually, he forced himself to go back out onto the open deck and wrestled with ropes and helm and, gradually, managed to turn Seagull in full sight of the Normandy Coast.

It seemed safe ahead so he lashed the helm and made secure the ropes and rushed back to the cabin to examine his wife and sister. Sam was already blue and Mary Beth not far behind her. He knew little of first aid and just knew that he had to save their lives, somehow, if it was not already too late.

He lit the stove, a difficult and dangerous thing to do while Seagull was listing so steeply then, with little care for either minor injury or for their decency, he stripped them of all their wet clothing and lifted them onto the bunks. Mary Beth was breathing so he left her cocooned as best he could and started on Sam who was still full of water.

In desperation, he tried simple common sense. He simply turned her upside down and lifted her by the ankles. He was glad she was so light, he would never have been able to do that with Mary Beth. Sitting down, he squeezed her chest in his arms and pumped the water from her lungs. He then put his ear to her cold chest and could just feel a very faint heartbeat though she was not breathing. He tried alternately squeezing and relaxing to simulate breathing in the vain hope that there would be some response.

Andrew cried with frustration when she did not respond and slapped her bottom in pure rage. She jumped and his own heart leapt. Frantically, he tried the squeezing trick again and eventually, it worked and she started to breathe once more. Drying her off as best he could, he put her in with the still unconscious Mary Beth. He knew he should be in there with them, giving them some warmth, but dare not be off the deck any longer. Tying them into the bunk with every blanket and item of dry clothing he could find round them, he shot topside. They were dangerously near the southern bank of the estuary, in fact, had it not been high tide, they would already have run aground.

Andrew adjusted the course to one of being more central in the Seine and let Seagull have her head. He didn't know what to do. Should he head for land in the vain hope of finding a doctor somewhere who might be able to help them? Or find a secluded place to anchor where he could try to help them himself?

It was the onset of darkness which decided him. They were still a long way from Rouen and there were a lot of miles and several nasty bends in the Seine between Seagull and that city so he did not have the confidence to take them on alone in that cross wind. However, once deep into the estuary, they became more sheltered from the wind and Andrew decided to drop anchor off Honfleur and just hoped he was doing the right thing.

Lowering the sails, he lashed the helm for safety and hurried to the cabin, terrified as to what he might find. He turned the stove up full and wrung out their wet clothes, hanging them over the top of the stove and looked down at the still unconscious girls.

He was dead tired myself but couldn't stop now so he massaged feet and hands and covered them with everything he could lay his hands on. He even tried holding them tight and it was then that he fell asleep.

When he awoke, Mary Beth was looking at him. In the half-light, she smiled a little and he touched her cheek. He noticed that the wind had gone as he looked out and could just see the mud flats through the falling drizzle.

'Soup?' he asked and she nodded. Mary Beth was holding Sam tightly in her arms and Andrew put on the pot and went across and kissed her cheek, pulled the blanket aside and saw that Sam was still out.

'Andrew,' Mary Beth whispered. 'She has a fever.'

He felt her brow; red hot. 'What can we do?'

She shrugged. 'Don't take her away from me, she'll freeze.'

'Very well. Are you all right?'

Mary Beth nodded a little. She was clearly far from all right but she'd live. He just hoped that Sam would, too. Sitting on the edge of the bunk, he carefully fed Mary Beth some soup and her cheeks soon grew rosy red and this time the smile was real.

Later, Andrew took Sam from Mary Beth while she slipped on deck for a moment. Soup has that effect on people, especially after they had just swallowed half the English Channel. Andrew guessed that Sam must have swallowed the other half. Mary Beth soon returned and he watched her get dressed.

'It was very silly, but thank you,' Andrew said.

She simply smiled. 'That's what sisters are for.'

SAM got restless during the evening and Mary Beth took over from him as hopeless nurse while he took a quick look out on deck. It was pitch black in every direction and there was barely a breath of wind to flutter the surface of the water, pock-marked by millions of tiny raindrops. As if there wasn't enough water in the sea already.

The cabin got very warm towards the middle of the night and they carefully unwrapped Sam and gently wiped the sweat from her body as she lay on the bunk the only thing they could think to do in the circumstances, and she looked just like a child laying there, sick with some infant ailment. But it was misleading. After all they had done, Sam's life was draining away, slowly but resolutely.

Andrew went out on deck when the rain stopped and looked over the stern at the lapping waves. He had been there some time when Mary Beth came out and slowly walked up to him, put her arms round his waist, her head on his back, and cried like a baby. He knew then that they had lost the battle.

Andrew found he could not be angry, except with himself. He could not be sad, it had been inevitable from the moment she had fallen into that icy water.

He didn't know how she had lasted as long as she had; by rights she should have drowned and, if not, then frozen to death. Instead, fever had violently ravished her poor little body and then mercilessly stripped it of life.

He simply felt empty and could easily have stepped off the stern and been with her, wherever she had gone. From infancy, he had been taught that all good children go to heaven but he didn't know whether he believed it or not. If people were born simply to die, would it not be better never to have lived? That poor child had lost mother, brothers, father, friends and country in just eighteen short, cold years. Is this really what life is all about, he thought? Man, born simply to die? And for what? To populate heaven? That's ridiculous.

Maybe, someday, there will be something to live for, something to work for, something worth dying for, but not in this stupid life. In the darkness, he turned and held Mary Beth as if she was the only thing left in the world.

Monday 21st January 1650

For the first time in his life, Andrew was completely at a loss. He felt this huge burden of guilt slowly piling onto his shoulders. If only, if only, if only...

It was some time before he could bring himself to enter the cabin while Mary Beth sat staring out over the water, feeling the same way. Sam lay on the bunk as if asleep. Maybe she was not dead,

after all. He fell on his knees beside her and put his head to her bare chest. Nothing, not even a flutter. He pulled the blanket around her as if to keep her warm, but she was beyond warmth. She even seemed to smile a little, just like a sleeping daughter when she has just had a fairy tale read to her with a "happy ever after" ending. That's all she had ever asked for and what she deserved for her pains, not this. Not war, not heartbreak as her family died in front of her. She was just a child.

Andrew kissed her lips for the last time and then covered her face. As an afterthought, he carefully removed the gold chain and pendant from around her neck. He didn't know how long he sat there on the opposite bunk before he noticed Mary Beth sitting beside him and she too had nothing to say. She had risked her own life to save Andrew's wife and he felt he owed her something for that.

'Mary Beth,' he said. 'Can you keep a secret?'

'For you? Yes, of course.'

Andrew handed her the pendant which she held for a moment, saying nothing, and then carefully opened it. The baby's face smiled up at her until she read the inscription and looked at him as tears trickled down her face and dripped upon her hands in her lap. Andrew reached out and dried her cheeks with his fingertips.

'What are we going to do?' he finally asked.

'We must go on.'

'To Paris?'

'Yes of course. It's what Sam would have wanted.'

'I can't.'

'Why not?'

'I can't sail the yacht without her.'

'You did yesterday.'

'Yes but that was on the open sea. We are on the river now and it has bends and other boats. I can't do it.'

'Andrew.' She grasped his hands. 'I'll help you, but you've got to do it. We have no other choice now, you can't face the Channel again yet. We must get Sam to Paris where she can be... handled properly. Henriette will know what to do.'

Andrew sat for a long time. She was right, of course, but it was easier said than done. Had it really happened? Or was it just a nightmare conjured up by some warped side of his conscience? He looked at the wet clothes hanging near the stove, the blanket-wrapped bundle on the opposite bunk, the distraught Mary Beth by his side. It was true all right. By his carelessness, he had destroyed one of the few people he had really loved, who had trusted her life and future into his hands. He felt he had killed her as if he had put his hands round her throat and strangled her.

As if in a dream, they began to tidy things up, stowed away all the spare blankets and clothes, mopped up the water and made up the vacant bunk. Mary Beth cooked some soup but Andrew couldn't eat and neither could she. Eventually, he went on deck and checked the fastenings and unlashed the helm.

By the time that he had rolled up the big sail and let out the cruise, the first faint light of dawn had touched the mist ahead of them. Then, after hauling in the anchor, they were gliding smoothly forward. Andrew tried to memorise the movements as Seagull crept upstream with the wind on their rear port quarter. The two of them were alone on the river as the sun lifted its head above the low-lying mist. Andrew made numerous adjustments to the sail's pitch until the boat slid gently towards Paris.

A little later, Mary Beth came on deck wearing a pair of Andrew's breeches. They would have been miles too big for Sam, he thought with a big lump in his throat. Mary Beth looked like a real sailor with breeches and coat and cap over her rolled-up hair. From that moment, he knew that they were going to make it.

THE first bend was easy. A little slack in the sail and a turn of the helm and they were running south past Quillebeuf with the wind right behind them. Then a right-angled turn to port, followed by

another left and they were running north and had to tack against the wind and this was more difficult. The little barques which had started to appear on the river found it easy. For their thirty-foot yacht, it was more difficult. Like her namesake, Seagull was built to fly, not to wallow.

There must be more bends in the Seine between Le Havre and Paris than on any other river in the world, Andrew convinced himself that day. He was glad they were not going the opposite way, with the wind against them all the time, for their maiden voyage alone. Why did he keep thinking of words which made him think of Sam? They had known each other less than a year but had become inseparable in that time. What was he going to do without her?

It took all that day and much of the night but they finally arrived in Paris. In spite of the late hour, there was a lot of commotion in the city and few people took any notice of them as Andrew berthed close to the palace and went ashore and made enquiries as to Queen Henriette. She was at Court so messages were left for her return and he went back to the boat to find Mary Beth had gone.

Now what was he going to do? He had no alternative but to wait, so he did and, an hour later, Mary Beth returned with Anne-Marie and her father. Gaston's men were efficient and took care of Sam's body as Andrew followed in Anne-Marie's coach while she brought them up-to-date.

'Condé has been arrested and it has caused uproar. Mazarin has gone too far this time. He tricked them into coming to Court for a peaceful session and had them arrested right there in Court. Even General Turenne, one of the Crown's most loyal commanders, has come out on Condé's side. Fortunately, he just managed to escape and has gone to Stenay, on the border of Champagne, to join Condé's sister, Anne-Geneviève.'

'Why there?'

'Because he can enlist help from the Spanish Territories.'

'Is King Charles in Paris?'

'No. He has not returned from Jersey yet but has promised to let me know his movements so that his mother and I can help, if possible.'

'Doesn't it get confusing, trying to fight two wars at once?'

'It certainly does. Our loyalties lie with Condé and the Princes in principle. However, we dare not admit that or take an active part in the war.'

'Has it really come to war?'

'Not yet, but it will. The Princes will not take this sitting down and Mazarin will certainly not give in. He has had a taste of power and he is determined to keep it.'

As she said those words, the coach drew up at the dark shape of the Palace of Luxemburg and they followed Sam's body inside. A doctor was called as a formality because a postmortem of some sort would have to be done to determine the exact cause of death. They were shown to rooms and Andrew sat on the edge of the bed and thought about his circumstances. Apart from the recurring memory of Sam, there was also the intruding thought that they may have sailed out of the English frying pan straight into a French fire.

Tuesday 22nd January 1650

Henriette arrived in the morning. She was genuinely upset at Sam's death and showed it with feeling. Andrew always thought that queens didn't cry but Henriette's tears were real.

The doctor also came during the morning and spoke quietly to Anne-Marie who then looked distressed as she sat between them on the sofa for a long time before speaking. 'Andrew. I'm afraid I have more bad news for you.'

'How do you mean? What else could happen?'

'Your wife...Sam was...' She looked at him: '...pregnant.' Anne-Marie looked down at her lap. 'Four months, the doctor said. It would have been a boy.' Andrew was silent and Mary Beth's renewed crying spoke for both of them. 'The doctor said that is what finished Sam. He thinks the shock of the cold water killed the baby instantly, and then a reaction set in. He used bigger words,

but that, basically, was what he meant.'

There was little more to be said. It was a cold and sad day for everyone. To break the air of depression, Andrew walked out into the rain towards Vincennes. Mary Beth followed along behind, the mud splashing her dress. With the pass issued by Anne-Marie, they were permitted to visit the Prince who was shocked at the news.

I am most distressed.' He genuinely looked it, too.

'Louis,' protested Mary Beth. 'How can Andrew shout at you when you keep being so nice? Act natural.'

They all had to laugh at that, in spite of everything.

'Monsieur, you are an honest man. You were right about Mazarin. I should have listened to you.'

'If you had, you would not be here now.'

'Perhaps you are right. How can you help?'

'I don't know that I can right now, the feeling is too high, but we will keep in touch with Anne-Marie and Queen Henriette. When the time comes, they will know what to do.'

'Why would you fight for our cause?'

'Not because of your charms, that's for sure. However, for some unknown reason, my sister still has some respect for you. She believes you are not completely bad.'

'Tell me. Earlier, did you mean what you said about protecting her?'

'Definitely. Any man who touches Mary Beth signs his own death warrant.'

'Then take her away from here. Take her to England, Holland, Africa, anywhere. But take her away. I will not reveal the details at this stage but the next few months are going to be very hot in France. If you love her that much, you must take her home immediately.'

THE journey back was a quiet one. Mary Beth sat looking out of the window, saying nothing until the coach recrossed the Seine.

'Andrew,' she then said. 'Will you let me sleep in your room tonight?'

'Only if you promise to behave yourself.'

'I always behave myself when I'm with you.'

'What about when you're with the others?' he teased.

'There is no one else,' she replied matter-of-factly.

'There's always your loving husband.'

She turned to look straight at him. 'Andrew, you didn't hear me properly. I said "There is no one else."'

SHE went to him after dark. Andrew had already blown out the candle thinking she had forgotten or fallen asleep. On the verge of sleep himself, he felt the covers move and smelt the scent of flowers. She felt warm. Too warm.

'Hey!' he exclaimed. 'You've got nothing on.'

She giggled. 'I haven't, have I?'

Andrew rolled out of bed. 'You promised to behave yourself.'

'And I will. Come back to bed.'

'Not with you like that, I'm not.'

'Don't you love me?'

'Of course I do, but you are John Henry's wife. He trusted me with you and I do not intend to betray his trust.'

'But I need you, Andrew.'

'Then go and take a cold bath, but keep away from me.'

'You didn't mind cuddling me on the boat.'

'That was different. We were just keeping warm and, anyway, Sam was around. Now go and put some clothes on or I'll teach you a lesson you won't forget.'

'No!' she said.

Andrew stood up. He couldn't see her in the dark but knew just where she was. He went slowly round the bed to her and felt around until he found that smooth, rounded bottom. She screamed, but he did not stop until all his frustrations had been let out of his system and that took quite a while. She struggled but he was sitting on her back. She kicked but he was out of reach of her legs. She scratched but his nightshirt offered some protection. Andrew wanted this to be a lesson she would never forget because it might well save her life sometime in the future.

Eventually, Andrew was exhausted, and she was black and blue. He almost began to feel sorry for her because he doubted she would be able to sit for a week. He had never felt such anger in a long time and it had probably been unfair of him to unleash so much violence on one small bottom. Mary Beth just lay quietly sobbing while Andrew walked around to calm his feelings. He stood by the window and looked out at the few twinkling stars.

There would be a frost and he hoped the river would not freeze around Seagull. He had to get away from Paris. If Mary Beth would not see sense, he was going to leave her in spite of his promises. She was going to have to learn some self-control or it would be the death of her.

Andrew heard her leave but did not turn or acknowledge her. She was seventeen and was going to have to look after herself from now on. Perhaps, tomorrow, he would take Seagull out onto the North Sea somewhere and run her aground on some sandbank at low tide. Then he would just wait for the icy waters to claim their prey. He had given up. He had now lost everything.

Some time later, the door opened then closed again quietly but he did not turn. Soon, arms slid around his waist and he felt her silent tears soaking the back of his nightshirt. Andrew eventually gave in and turned to face her in the faint light from the window. She had on a long, woolly nightdress and her golden hair hung round her shoulders as he kissed her forehead and led her to the bed. No words were necessary as she lay beside him, her tears still dripping onto his neck. Perhaps he had not lost everything after all.

Tuesday 12th March 1650

The message they had been waiting for eventually came, Charles was on his way from Elizabeth Castle so they said their goodbyes to Gaston and sailed downstream with Henriette and Anne-Marie aboard. Negotiating the bends went better than expected as Mary Beth was proving quite a sailor.

In fact, he thought, she was proving to be a better person all round. Perhaps someone should have done what he had done a long time ago. But then, she never had a father and he could never imagine his sister ever raising a hand to her.

The sun was shining as they entered the harbour at Le Havre, the ancient port where the Romans had set out on their conquests of what they had called Albion, with its tall, white cliffs across the English Channel. The boat which had brought the King from Jersey was there already and they berthed Seagull as near as they dare. Charles's mother ran to her son and they embraced warmly and, eventually, he noticed Anne-Marie and politely greeted her. Andrew waved his greeting from a distance and left the King with his family while he made sure Seagull was securely tied up.

'I'm late,' said Charles as the two of them spoke alone later. 'I should be in Holland already. But I've only just heard that the Kirk's Commissioners have arrived there with an offer of further terms.'

'Will you accept?'

'I feel I may have no alternative. Montrose is headed for the Orkneys with five hundred Danish and German mercenaries. If they can unite with the loyal clans, they may make some impression but I fear it will not be enough.'

'Ireland?'

'Defeated to all intents and purposes. Cromwell has been utterly ruthless in his attacks. Churches have been destroyed, Masses forbidden, any resisters burnt alive as either traitors or witches. I fear that Scotland offers the only hope of success.'

'Will the terms be any better than before?'

'I shall fight for that but I am not confident I can alter them significantly.'

'Is there still a chance? Of your remaining King there?'

'I have to try. The country needs me more than at any other time as it is both bankrupt and corrupt. England is headed for disaster.'

'You don't have to tell me. Successive bad harvests have raised prices so high that many will now do whatever Parliament says to gain some benefit or other. Lord Ramsden is only just holding his head above water at the moment.'

'Yes, and I notice that you have the very delectable Lady Ramsden here with you. Lucky man.'

'Sire, it's not like that.'

'No, I suppose it isn't. It wasn't before, was it?'

'No, Sire. You will have heard about Lady Samantha's death?'

'It was the first thing my mother said to me. She cares, you know.'

'Sire, I never doubted it for one moment.' Andrew thought for a moment. 'May I make a suggestion?'

'Of course.'

'The Channel between here and The Hague is riddled with enemy shipping. Blake has the English fleet out patrolling and the Spanish are on the side of the Princes against Queen Anne in France. If I may say so, your ship is rather conspicuous.'

'What alternative do I have? It would be suicide to cross Spanish Flanders by land at the moment.'

'I'll take you in Seagull. Tell no-one. Your ship will sail as normal but you will not be on it. I know you can sail so we would make a good team.'

'Is she a good boat, Andrew?'

'The best, Sire. On one trip, we easily outran a cutter and outmanoeuvred its guns.' The memory of that day with Sam brought a lump to Andrew's throat. "We" had not done that, he reflected. "She" had done it with her skill and precision.

The King thought about it for a long time. 'When is high tide?'

Andrew looked at the log. 'Three in the morning, Sire.'

'Very well. I'll come aboard at two-thirty.'

'Sire,' he said. 'Please tell no-one.'

'Certainly not, Captain Bosvile.'

Andrew smiled. It was the first time anyone had used his honorary title and it sounded odd. Perhaps he would get used to it in time.

THE atmosphere had a certain air of festivity about it, despite the depressing news of the past weeks and the bleak prospects ahead. There was dinner at the castle and dancing afterwards. Mary Beth danced with just about everyone but she behaved herself like the Lady she now was.

Andrew had a quiet meeting with Henriette and Anne-Marie as he didn't know when he might see them again. 'I'm leaving with Charles at first light. It's his only chance of reaching Holland alive, I feel. No-one else knows about this, not even Mary Beth. There is going to be war again in England and I believe Mary Beth will be far safer here, in France.'

'You could be right, Andrew. We will look after her as best we can.'

ANDREW'S heart was heavy as he set sail before sunrise while Prince Charles sat at the helm, leaving France for a while. There would be peace there for a while though he did not know for how long. What Andrew did know for an absolute certainty was that when Charles went to claim his throne in England, Parliament would not give up power easily and many would die.

Mary Beth and Andrew would be apart for a while and perhaps that was a good thing. One more night together and he would have given in to her. He deeply loved his adopted sister but she didn't belong to him, she was John Henry's wife.

Andrew stared back at Le Havre as it faded into the darkness and said a little prayer for her

safety. Over the last year, she had come to rely more and more on him and he on her. When she woke in the morning, he would be gone from her life. He was unsure what the shock would do to her. He told himself that he had no right to think of her, but his heart knew that her absence would leave a hole in his own life as big as a cannonball.

Thursday 28th August 1651

The horsemen topped the rise on the Pershore road and drew to a standstill close to where it had all started - Powick Bridge - which lay just to the south of the city on the other side of the Severn. John Henry raised his hat and wiped his forehead. It had been a long ride from Rettendon but a necessary one. Now was not the time for secrecy but for action, and Charles needed every man who could be mustered as, within a few days, he could be installed as King in London. It would all depend on the outcome of this one battle.

Charles and Andrew had arrived safely in Holland just over two years ago where negotiations with the Commissioners of the Kirk had been arduous and protracted and Charles had had little choice but to accept the conditions enforced upon him at Breda. For the benefit of his country, he had agreed with all the terms including the promise to outlaw Catholicism and install Presbyterianism as the National Church for at least three years, after which, freedom of worship would be allowed. Seven weeks later, he had arrived in Scotland but had been allowed no power to speak of, being totally under the control of the Earl of Argyll's obliarchy. The Council of State in London had reacted predictably by immediately sending a force northwards to invade Scotland. However, without the leadership of Sir Thomas Fairfax, who had resigned rather than take part in what he saw as an illegal invasion of a neighbouring nation, they were a dispirited lot and it was only the actions of the Scottish Kirk which granted Parliament the victory at Dunbar.

The Scots' army under the leadership of the skilled and experienced Sir David Leslie had taken and held the high ground in the Lammermuir Hills whilst Cromwell's inferior, tired troops were trapped on the high cliffs overlooking the Firth of Forth. The ministers of the Kirk placed all their faith in the power of God and, after the fashion of the Biblical Gideon, dismissed any in the army who did not appear godly and pure. Unfortunately, that was most of the best-trained soldiers in the Scottish army. Even with that severe disadvantage, they would still have won the day had not the Kirk intervened yet again by trusting fully, and wrongly, in Divine Providence. With total disregard for the advice of the experienced leaders, they instructed the Scots force to move down from their elevated position and to fight on equal terms on the coastal plain.

It was an act of utter stupidity. Had those instructions not been sent, the King would have been in London last year and the nation would have been at peace. Thousands of lives already were lost due to those ridiculous orders and many more would lose theirs over the next few days. Why don't the godly stick to God and leave the fighting to those who know something about it?

Four months later, the Kirk gained a little sense and crowned Charles as King of Scotland at Scone. Charles immediately appointed the faithful Hamilton as Lieutenant-General and the experienced Sir David Leslie as Major-General. Over the next few months, there was much to-ing and fro-ing until, three weeks ago, King Charles marched south into England at the head of an army of thirteen thousand men. Messages were sent out to all the known loyal Earls to raise armies to join with this force and to meet at the City of Worcester, which now lay before them.

Andrew had sailed from Holland to Rettendon with a small force of Royalists and he looked back at them now. A poor crowd, they were really - John Henry and Andrew with the six men from Holland. They had insisted that Mark stay behind with Rachel and the children. He was not as young as he used to be and Rachel was expecting again and, therefore, needed him more than Charles. John Henry nodded to Andrew and they urged their horses forward towards Worcester, the place for the last stand.

They found the King at the home of Rowland Berkeley and he was very pleased to see them, though he looked extremely tired. He had been in Worcester for nearly a week, awaiting reports from the other Earls and news had come in from some. The Earl of Derby had arrived from the Isle of Man to raise an army in Lancashire, but they had been defeated at Wigan by Colonel Robert Lilburne.

'Well, gentlemen. It looks as if we fight with those we have here already.'

'Why such poor support, Sire?'

'Two reasons. Firstly, many still hate the Scots and see this as a Scottish invasion of England. Secondly, those stupid Kirk Ministers.'

'Now what have they been up to?'

'One of the conditions under which I was crowned was that I enforce Presbyterianism on England although they must have known this was impossible. I can encourage it as a wholesome religion, but I believe in freedom of religion.'

'So where's the problem?'

'The Kirk have sent out ministers all over England to proclaim the fact that they will all soon be Presbyterian and that they had better start to change their ways and quickly. Thousands who would have supported me do not want to become Presbyterian and I do not intend to force them. Unfortunately, I now do not have the time to go round and convince them all of my real feelings in the matter. I just wish the ministers would keep their mouths shut.'

He was both frustrated and angry, and who could blame him? They all knew that Cromwell was capable of raising an army which could overpower his forces and the battle which would ensue over the next few days would be no more than token resistance. In their hearts, they all knew it.

Wednesday 3rd September 1651

They walked together into the sunshine while Charles put on his gloves and greeted his Generals - Leslie, Middleton and Massey. As he had discussed tactics on the previous evening there was little to be said. It had been agreed that the King was to stay within the walls of the City and watch the battle from the tower of the Cathedral and his small force would be kept as a reserve. It had been estimated that Cromwell had at least twenty-eight thousand men, a vastly superior force, and it was only the fact that the City walls were a strong defence which contributed towards a balancing of strength.

'Andrew,' said John Henry as they waited for the action to start. 'If anything happens to me, look after Mary Beth for me.'

'Nothing's going to happen to you,' reassured the confident Andrew Bosville. 'You and I are to stay with the King and remain in reserve.'

'I am hoping that nothing happens, of course. But just in case...'

'Of course I will. But don't look on the dark side.'

'I can't help it, Andrew. I have had a lot of time to think while you've been running here and there with messages, being brave and taking risks, while I've sat at home, running the Hall. I am not used to this sort of thing.'

'Nor am I, Jack. Remember, most of my work has been sneaky and underhanded. I've fought in no major battles and I promise you I'm as scared as you are.'

'You are? You don't show it.'

'Somebody has to keep smiling.' He pointed towards the King and his counsellors. 'Just look at those generals. I think they have given up already by the look on their faces.'

'That's what worries me.' They stood in silence for a while. 'You will do it, won't you?'

'What?'

'Look after Mary Beth.'

'Naturally.'

'And Mark and Rachel?'

'Of course.'

'The Hall is yours, Andrew. I don't think you will throw them out onto the street, will you?'

'Certainly not.' Andrew placed his hands on John Henry's shoulders and faced him squarely. 'Look. When this is all over, I'm going to go to Paris and get Mary Beth and bring her back to the Hall. And you'll be there, waiting. So stop worrying.'

'You inspire confidence, Andrew. You should be in charge of propaganda.'

THE battle did not go well right from the beginning. The Scots deployed to the east of the city

opposite to where Cromwell had placed his cannon while Fleetwood attacked from the south, crossing the River Teme near Powick. Two bridges of boats were put across the Severn and Cromwell's troops attacked over them. Soon, command broke down. Massey was wounded and, later, Middleton. Hamilton lost a leg to a round of shot and a week later was to die from his wound. The Royalist army disintegrated.

'We have one chance,' said Charles. 'We must attack now, from the city, and catch them unawares. It's the last thing they will expect us to do.'

'Sire,' cautioned Captain Bosvile. 'There are only the reserves. We are right behind you to the death but we will be charging uphill towards them.'

'I know that, Andrew, but what other choice do we have?'

'None, Sire. Let's go, Jack.' They mounted and assembled beside the gate and the King himself led the charge out onto the open ground.

'Sire,' Andrew called when they were a short distance from the city. 'Your men.'

Charles came to a standstill and looked back. Out of all the remaining reserves, there was but a handful behind them. His personal servants were there, even some of the maids and women of the city but the main body of the men had panicked and run.

'Andrew,' John Henry shouted, pointing. 'Ironsides. They've seen us.'

'Back to the gate,' the King commanded.

He was very brave that day and waited until all the people were inside before entering himself. Andrew's respect for his King doubled with that one act of selflessness.

They were only just in time. 'Sire, you must escape,' said the elderly Lord Wilmott.

'But my things, I must get my maps and documents from the house.'

'Lord Wilmott,' Andrew suggested. 'Why don't you go to St Martin's Gate. Lord Ramsden and I will stay with the King and meet you there. Get some spare horses if you can.'

'Very well, Captain Bosvile.'

The three friends from childhood rode to the house and dismounted. John Henry stayed with the horses while Andrew helped the King with his things. Suddenly, the door flew open.

'Andrew,' called the young lord. 'They are coming down the street.'

'Come inside, Jack, and lock the door.' He did and they held their breath as the Roundheads approached. There was a heavy banging on the door and they looked at each other.

'The back way,' Andrew whispered and the King picked up his plans and headed for the back door. 'Jack, come on, quickly.'

John Henry Rettendon, Second Earl of Ramsden, pulled out his pistols. 'You go with the King, Andrew. I must stay and hold them here as long as I can.'

'But, Jack...'

'Go, man. While you have the chance.'

Andrew hesitated and the banging at the front door stopped while they were considering an alternative entrance. The window splintered.

'Get out, Andrew!' shouted John Henry. 'Look after Mary Beth!'

His pistol roared and a head at the window flew to pieces. As Andrew ran through the back door after the King, the front door gave in and there was one more pistol shot followed by a fusillade of musket fire. Then silence.

Andrew ran for his life and felt sick. He should have stayed, he told himself. He should have died instead of John Henry who should be now running across the rubble from the shattered buildings. How on earth was he ever going to face Mary Beth again?

The two fugitives wove their way through street after street, dodging soldiers at every corner, wondering if they were ever going to get away. True to his word, Lord Wilmott was waiting at St Martin's Gate with horses and they quickly mounted and rode out into the battle-scarred countryside to run the gauntlet of enemy troops. The small group was soon joined by others. Royalists from many regiments joined the King as they rode northward whilst what was left of the battle was being fought in the south of the City.

Everyone on both sides had about had enough killing for the day and, during the early afternoon, another bunch of fugitives joined the escapees. Andrew's heart sank at the sight of George

Villiers. However, he had news. Roundheads were searching high and low in the city for the King and, soon, they would realise they had been tricked and would look elsewhere. They were not so stupid as to ignore this long procession of weary soldiers which was the remnants of the glorious Scottish army.

'Sire,' Andrew said quietly to the King as darkness fell. 'We must part from this crowd. Once Cromwell realises he has been fooled, he will come north to look for you and you will be captured. We must avoid that at all costs.'

'You are right, Andrew,' he said. 'as usual.' He smiled. 'George!'

The Duke of Buckingham rode alongside.

'George, we must get away from this crowd before Cromwell catches up with us. What do you think?'

'Sounds good sense to me, but when? And to where will we go?'

'We'll decide on that later. For the time being, I suggest we stick close to the river. The crowd will continue north towards Stafford. Any better ideas, Andrew?'

'No, Sire. This part of the country is unfamiliar to me.' He looked at George Villiers. 'Where does the river lead?'

'The Severn? Upstream, it leads to Wales eventually. Downstream, to Bristol.'

He turned to the King. 'I may be thick, Sire, but why are we not going south? For the coast, and France?'

'Eventually, we will have to. But, in the meantime, we must find somewhere to stay the night, and maybe even the next few days so that we can think and plan.'

Eventually, they managed to slip away into the darkness near the village of Brewood and were led to Boscobel House. There were just a few of them, including Buckingham and Wilmott. They were all desperately tired and the King looked about all in. He was not only physically exhausted, but also had the mental pressure of defeat weighing heavily upon his shoulders.

Thursday 4th September 1651

There was little time for sleep. Soon after daybreak, Richard Penderell, who lived at Boscobel House, rushed in with the news that Cromwell's troops were approaching, looking for escapees from the battle. They left immediately. It was not fair on the Penderells for the fugitives to be caught there. Leaving the House, they headed for the woods, just as a squad of searchers marched up the drive.

'Which way, Sire?' George asked.

'Any way. We can't go far in this rain, we'll catch pneumonia.'

'Better than the chopping block.'

'George, how can you joke at a time like this?'

'I'm not joking, Sire. I'm deadly serious. If they catch you, you're dead.'

They hid all day in the woods and thicket at Whiteladies whilst troops passed by on Watling Street and beat the bushes nearby.

That day must have been at least a month long. What they needed, most of all, was sleep but, in pouring rain, with soldiers everywhere, real rest was impossible. By nightfall, they were all absolutely done in and thoroughly soaked as they crept back to the house and were fed and changed. They looked a pitiable lot, dirty and bedraggled and the King looked the worst of all.

'Sire,' Andrew said. 'May I make a suggestion?'

'Of course. You are more used to this sort of thing than the rest of us are.'

'Thank you, Sire. It is my opinion that we must change your appearance as much as possible so as to deceive our hunters as we cannot keep hiding indefinitely. Sooner or later, we must take to the road and we cannot keep dodging in and out of bushes each time we see another person riding along. In my experiences over the last couple of years, I have found that boldness often pays off.'

'Like you and Samantha Grenville?'

'Exactly. Do you know, we actually stayed at the Inn at Huntingdon, with Cromwell's soldiers in every other room and, because I had Sam with me, no one gave me a second glance.'

'Hmm. Andrew might have a point, George.'

'But, Sire,' the Duke protested, always the one to disagree with an idea if he hadn't thought of it. 'How can we change your appearance?'

'Simple,' Andrew interjected. 'What is it that identifies Charles as the King?'

'His height?'

'Well, we can't do much about that unless we cut his legs off.' They laughed.

George said, 'Cromwell would rather it be his head.'

'Yes, he would,' agreed the King.

'But we can do other things.'

'Such as?' scorned George.

'The hair. The King is easily identified by his long hair. It must be cut.'

'You would insult the King?' said Lord Wilmott.

'No, My Lord. I would rather save his life.'

'What else, Andrew?'

'Grow a beard, Sire. If you will forgive my saying so, the beginnings are already there.'

The King stroked his two-day stubble. 'That I can do. And the hair, I think. You are right, Andrew, as usual.' He placed his hand on his loyal Captain's shoulder and George Villiers turned a deep green colour.

'Tell me, Richard,' Charles said to one of the Penderells. 'Where can we cross the Severn?'

'There's a place not far from here, Sire, near Sutton. The river runs through a gorge and there are rapids at the southern end, where the water is shallow.'

'Then we must go there tonight. I will feel safer on the Welsh side of the river.'

'Sire,' Andrew said again. 'Might I make a further suggestion?'

'Of course.'

'If you go down there, George and I will go with Lord Wilmott and cause a distraction in the direction of Cannock. Perhaps then we can head back later and meet you when you are safe on the other side.'

'Good idea, Andrew. We'll do that. Everyone agreed?'

They were and did it. Leaving after dinner, the Royalists headed across Watling Street and, close to Wheaton Aston, came across their first Roundheads and made a big fuss over galloping away with them in pursuit. They lost them close to Penckridge and circled back around through Bradley and Weston to Boscobel, where they collapsed into bed exhausted. By now, they reckoned, the King would be safe on his way into Wales.

Monday 8th September 1651

They were wrong. Charles had been guided by Richard Penderell and had found the crossing place easily. Unfortunately, Cromwell's troops had thought ahead and the crossing place was well guarded so there was nothing to do but to return to Boscobel and try plan number two. By the time they had returned to the house, another visitor had arrived. Major Careless was not an appropriate name for someone who was to help save the King's life and he was shocked to see the condition of the King when he finally returned to the house.

Richard explained what had happened at the Severn as they all thought about alternatives.

'We did have a near thing,' he said. 'we had to cross the millstream on the way and the miller heard us and we had to run, hot-foot, to escape discovery. He came out after us with a blunderbuss.'

Major Careless suddenly burst out laughing. 'Yes, he will have been worried. He had a mill full of Royalists and I'll bet he thought you were Roundheads.'

They all laughed at that.

The next morning, the troops were about again. Andrew stayed in the house with the Penderells while George and Lord Wilmott went to Whiteladies and Charles went with Major Careless. The others could be recognised, but Andrew was relatively safe.

During the day, troops called at the house several times and Andrew played the part of the butler, much to Richard's amusement. Charles and the Major had spent most of the day hidden in a large oak tree in the grounds of the house while George Villiers and Lord Wilmott were hidden at the Priory.

Apparently, it had been a close thing. Charles had fallen asleep on the Major's arm which had gone numb but, when the troops got to the spot under the tree, the King had woken and they watched the pursuers beating the thicket within yards of their hiding place. It was getting too dangerous, the party would have to move on to escape detection.

Consequently, they moved on to the home of Colonel Whitegreaves where Lord Wilmott had found them temporary sanctuary. There, they met Father John Huddleston who was the local Catholic Priest. It was decided that they should then all transfer to the home of Colonel Lane. It was there that they held another meeting.

'Well,' said Wilmott, 'where do we go from here?'

'We cannot cross the river,' said George. 'It seems to be guarded the whole way.'

'Where do you want to get to, Sire?' Andrew asked.

'Anywhere where I can get a boat to get to Jersey. Eventually, I must get to France.'

'Then we must head south. We headed north to start off with so, perhaps if we now double back, we will outwit them.'

'How can we do that?' asked George.

'We do the Lady Caroline special.'

'The what?'

'The Lady Caroline special. You remember, Sire? Some years ago, your mother the Queen and yourself needed urgently to get to Naseby. Unfortunately, like yourself now, she was too easily recognised, so my sister dressed the Queen up as her maid and Prince Philippe as her coachman. In disguise, we all drove through the roadblocks and checkpoints virtually without hesitation.'

'I remember it well,' said the King. 'Yes, it worked, didn't it? I was just thirteen at the time and your sister took a great risk that day. But if you are suggesting that I dress up as a lady's maid, think again.'

Andrew laughed. 'No, Sire. Not as a maid, you're far too tall. Perhaps as a coachman or servant of some sort.'

'Sire,' said Colonel Lane. 'I have an idea.'

'Yes?'

'My daughter, Jane, has a pass to get her as far as Bristol, would that help?'

'Well, it's in the right direction. It's even possible there might be a boat there which could be commandeered to take us out of the country.'

'May I summon Jane?'

'Yes, please.'

He did and a very lovely young lady came into the room. She curtsied to the King and was introduced to all. Andrew liked her, but then so did everyone else.

'Miss Lane,' asked the King. 'How many is your pass for?'

'Just the two, Sire,' she replied with musical voice. 'For myself and my servant, Will Jackson.'

'What does Will look like, Jane?' Andrew asked.

'Nothing like the King, I'm afraid. But then the troops in the south do not know that, do they?'

'You've got a good point.'

'Well,' said the King. 'Do I risk it?'

'What if you are recognised, Sire?' asked George.

'What if? What if? I could be recognised anywhere. Maybe Andrew is right. Perhaps the bold approach is best. The last thing that they will expect is for me to ride down the main road as the servant of this brave young lady.'

So it was that this morning, Jane Lane set out for Bristol with Charles dressed as her servant. Lord Wilmott went on ahead as guide and Andrew followed with George as rearguard. Perhaps, at Bristol, they would find the answer to their problems. A boat could be found to take the King away to Jersey where he would be safe. Perhaps, too, Andrew would find a way to get back to Paris where a beautiful young widow waited patiently for news of her husband.

Tuesday 23rd September 1651

The King played his part very well, a little too well at times. George and Andrew nearly had heart attacks when Charles got into conversation with a blacksmith en route and began to discuss the outcome of the battle. Charles even called his own self a rogue and the blacksmith, who had Parliamentary inclinations, thought him a staunch opposer of Royalty.

It was unfortunate that there were no ships available at Bristol so the King stayed at Abbots Leigh while the others rested at an inn in Bristol so as to gain news. Reluctantly, they bid farewell to young Jane and were on their own again. Heading southward, they searched in an attempt to find a boat at a port on the south coast. It was at the Castle Inn at Broadwindsor that Charles and Andrew parted company again.

Charles was now just a short distance from Bridport where, it had been rumoured, there was a boat to take him to Jersey. If anything was to go wrong with the King's plans, he had the offer of returning to the home of Sir Francis Wyndham at Trent House. To reduce the size of the party and, therefore, the risk of detection, George and Andrew saw the King off with Chaplain Byam and Lord Wilmott, and then headed eastwards towards Essex. Mark and Rachel were yet unaware of John Henry's death and they deserved to know as soon as possible.

Tuesday 2nd December 1651

Charles got to Paris before them. He had been unable to sail to Jersey as intended because Admiral Blake, with the Parliamentary Navy, had sailed to invade Jersey so this left the King no alternative but to head direct for France itself. Following the south coast, it was the 18th October before they finally managed, with the aid of Colonel Gunter, to get a boat from Brighton. Its owner, Captain Tattersall, agreed to take them across the Channel and they sailed safely to Fécamp and, a few days later, his mother and younger brother, James, met him at nearby Rouen. The King was safe.

ANDREW and George had a more complicated journey to Rettendon. During that trip, Andrew found out a lot about George Villiers. It turned out he was very clever and could make up poetry and songs as he went along. At Rettendon, he played on Carrie's spinet, much to the delight of Rachel and Antoinette. At first, the family had taken John Henry's death badly but nevertheless were glad Andrew had returned safely.

They also saw the darker side of George. Andrew was already aware of his relationship with Lucy Walter, the King's mistress, and also knew that he had a very low opinion of women generally, thinking them only there for his pleasure. It was when he made advances on Rachel that Andrew decided it was time they both sailed for France.

THEIR journey had gone smoothly. Crossing by the usual route, Seagull headed across the Channel. Andrew arrived in Paris to find that Charles had renewed his friendship with Anne-Marie who had arranged to hold dances every night especially for his return. George was in his element immediately, with all the girls agog at the returning hero. Andrew guessed George would not have a cold bed for some weeks as women flocked to hear his exaggerated stories of heroism. He smiled to himself and thought of how they had both made a point of avoiding trouble the whole

way to Rettendon. If the listeners believed all that George Villiers was telling them, the two fugitives had just eliminated the entire Parliamentary army. Andrew hastened to get away from all the hero-worship, having a one track mind and she was not in sight at the ball. He was very tired from the journey but managed to get in just a few words with Queen Henriette before he retired. By means of a short conversation, he was able to ascertain that Mary Beth was staying at the Queen's Chateau of Chaillot, just a mile outside the city.

He did not take in all she was trying to tell him because of the noise, which was deafening, and his eyes, which were threatening to shut down on him at any moment. Consequently, he respectfully said his goodnights and made his way to the rooms he had been offered at the Chateau Royale. In the morning, he would go to see the one he loved.

Wednesday 3rd December 1651

Andrew's heart beat faster as he walked along the Cours La Reine and thought about the meeting ahead of him. He was split between feelings of joy and apprehension. How did Mary Beth feel about the recent death of her husband? Would she hate Andrew for leaving her at Le Havre? Would she be pleased to see him or upset? He walked up the incline towards the Chateau in the cold winter sunshine and then rang the bell beside the big, wooden door. It was very quiet as the Seine below where he stood flowed slowly and sluggishly down to the sea.

'Oui, Monsieur? Puis-je vous aidez?' said the female voice behind him. He turned to see that a small security grille had opened.

'Bonjour, Madame,' he replied. 'Je voudrai voir Mademoiselle Mary-Beth, s'il vous plait.'

A hesitation. 'Est-ce-que vous-êtes Anglais, Monsieur?'

He nodded. 'Oui, Madame. Je-suis Anglais.'

'Then I will be speaking in the English,' the woman conceded. 'I'm afraid there is no-one here of the name which you speak.'

'But, Madame, Queen Henriette sent me here to find my friend. She too is English; slim, with golden hair and blue eyes.'

'Alors! You mean Soeur Marie.'

'Sister Marie?'

'Oui, Monsieur. Did they not tell you? Chaillot is a convent.'

ANDREW was totally dumbstruck. Mary Beth a nun? So that's what Henriette had tried to tell him.

'Monsieur?'

'Pardon? Madame...er Sister.'

'I am....what you call?...Mère Supérieure.'

'Do I call you Mother?'

'As you wish, Monsieur.' She hesitated. 'Est-ce-que vous-voulez voir Soeur Marie?'

He nodded. 'C'est possible?'

'Oui, Monsieur. Entrez la.'

She opened the big door and Andrew stepped inside a long passageway.

'We are the nuns of the Visitation,' the old woman explained as they walked towards a room at the far end. 'We are dedicated to the meditation, works of charity and to the education of the jeunesse of the city. We do not lock ourselves away from the world entirely. Besides, all friends of our Patrone are welcome here.'

She showed him into a small room with just a table and three chairs and left him. Andrew did not sit, but stood staring out of the window overlooking a small, grassed quadrangle, until a sound made him turn.

He had not known precisely what to expect. During his wait, he had tried to picture in his mind how she would look. When she came, it was still a great shock.

'Hello, Andrew,' she said pleasantly, her hands clasped in front of her, holding a small bible. 'I didn't think you would ever come back to Paris.'

'I had to, Mary Beth. I had to come back for your sake.' He reached out to her but she backed away from his effort at reconciliation.

'It's good to see you. Are you keeping well?' She was very polite. Far too polite.

'I am very well now I have seen you again. I am very sorry about Jack.'

'Henriette said he died well. No one can ask for more than that.'

'He saved the King's life,' Andrew admitted, 'And probably my own.'

She smiled faintly. 'I'm glad you have lived through it.'

'How are you? Do they keep you well here?' He was finding it difficult to maintain the small-talk.

'We keep ourselves well. It is a poor order but we manage somehow. We take turns at the washing and the sewing.' Then suddenly - 'Why did you come back?'

'For...for you, of course.'

She looked genuinely taken-aback. 'For me?'

'Yes. I had hoped that...'

'That we would go away together? Just like that? After abandoning me at Le Havre and then leaving me without word for two long years?'

'Well...'

'I'm sorry, Andrew. I can't do that.'

'Can't?'

'Won't.' No anger. No disappointment. Just a definite statement of fact.

'Are you happy here?'

'Of course. I am helping to train the children.' She smiled. 'I have always loved children, you know.'

Andrew looked down. 'Oh!'

'Did you think I would rush into your arms and say; "Oh, Andrew, take me away from all this"? I'm sorry if I am a disappointment to you.'

He looked up quickly. 'Mary Beth. You could never be a disappointment to me.'

'Nevertheless, I must stay and pay penance to God.'

'Penance?'

She nodded. 'For my sins.'

'For how long?'

'Until they have been atoned for and my work is done.'

He paused for a long time, unsure as to what to say. 'May I see you again?'

'Yes. I would be pleased to see you often and to hear of your progress.'

'Do you really want to stay here?'

'Yes, I do. I will not come away with you, Andrew, not now nor at any other time so please don't try to persuade me. There is too much work to be done.' He looked very sad and she quickly added, 'But you will still come and see me, won't you?'

Andrew sighed. 'Of course I will. Anyway, have I ever tried to force you to do anything against your will?'

She looked straight at him. 'No, you haven't.'

'Then I am certainly not going to start now. I love you very much and want you as my wife but I will never, ever, force you. You are worth more than that to me.'

She ignored his plea from the heart. 'When will you come again?'

'May I come tomorrow?'

'Yes, in the afternoon.' She smiled broadly. 'I will look forward to it very much.'

Thursday 4th December 1651

Andrew spent the next morning scrubbing down the decks and bleaching the sails of Seagull and, by lunchtime, she looked a new boat. After a quick snack, he let her drift downstream until she was alongside Chaillot, where he moored her securely. Mary Beth answered his ringing and opened the door immediately. He may have been mistaken, but she did appear to be pleased to see him.

'Hello, Sister Marie,' he greeted her.

'Hello, Andrew. Thank you for coming to see me again. I wondered if you would.'

'How could I not do so? I love you.' She looked wary so he did not press the point. 'I have brought someone to see you.'

'Someone to see me?'

He held out his hand and, this time, she took it without hesitation. Perhaps there was hope for them yet. They walked down the slope together and over to the bank of the river. She smiled at the cool sunshine and at everything around her, but not at Andrew.

'Close your eyes,' he said and she obeyed. How he longed to kiss her just then, but it would have been very wrong of him. Instead, he led her to the water's edge where the spring-cleaned Seagull lay in all her glory. 'Right, you can open them now.'

Andrew was totally unprepared for her reaction. He had expected pleasure, excitement, even sadness, but not total horror.

Mary Beth put her hands to her face and screamed, and kept screaming as she ran all the way back to the chateau. Other sisters came out and surrounded her but they could not pacify her.

Andrew walked up, pushed through the throng and held her hands. 'Mary Beth. What's wrong? What is it?'

'Don't you understand anything? I'm guilty of a very great sin. That's why I have to be here.' The words seemed to fall through her tears. She was totally distraught.

'What are you talking about? You have never sinned.'

'But I have. Sam's death was no accident.'

'No accident? Don't be silly, woman.'

'But it wasn't. I killed her.'

'But...?'

She burst into full flood of tears and backed into the doorway. 'Don't you yet understand? I killed Sam! I murdered your wife!'

Friday 9th January 1652

Captain Andrew Bosville trudged slowly through the deep snow towards the chateau. Perhaps, he thought, she will see me today. He had called every day for four weeks and she had repeatedly refused to see him again. All he knew was, he would never give up. He would continue to call, forever if necessary. There was nowhere else for him to go.

Paris was almost deserted. Mazarin had joined the Court at Poitiers with a mercenary army from Germany and Anne-Marie had left with her father's army for the Loire for she was sure Mazarin would soon march on Paris and she wanted to stop him. Condé was also on his way from the South-West to join forces with Anne-Marie to prevent, at all costs, the return of Mazarin to Paris.

Anne-Marie had tried to persuade Andrew to accompany her as personal advisor and he had been very tempted at one stage, especially as the offer had implied that the relationship would be considerably closer than normal and any kind of relationship with the richest girl in France was bound to have benefits, hidden and otherwise. He declined, of course and, in the end, Anne-Marie had understood and respected him for it.

He rang the bell and the door was answered by the Mother Supérieure who shook her head sadly.

'Mother,' he said. 'May I speak with you?'

'Of course, my son. Come inside out of the cold.'

She stood aside and he entered into the small anti-room which was cold and damp. 'I'm afraid we use the ground floor very little but cannot invite you upstairs for obvious reasons. We must make do in here.'

'Mother,' he said eventually while the old lady waited patiently. 'I am at a loss. Sister Marie has it in her mind that she was somehow responsible for the death of my wife, but that cannot be. I have reviewed the events over and over in my mind. My wife was swept overboard during a storm at

sea and Sister Marie actually dived into the water to save her life. She could not have killed her as she has said.'

'Could it be that your wife was...pushed?'

'Definitely not. Samantha, that was my wife's name, was on the opposite side of the boat so Sister Marie cannot have pushed her and she must be made to see that. If anyone is guilty, it is I for not making sure she was wearing a lifeline.'

The old nun sat there for some time before she spoke. 'We must find a way of assuring her. Since she last saw you, she has hardly eaten and is very thin and not able to do any work. If she does not eat soon, she will die.'

'Mother, I must see her. I cannot sit quietly and let that happen.'

'Very well. But she cannot come down.' She thought for a moment. 'Wait here, I will arrange things.'

She was gone almost an hour and Andrew was frozen. After a while, one of the other nuns came down and lit a fire but it did little to warm the icy air and floor. Eventually, Mother Superior came back and beckoned to him. 'This way, my son. I pray we will be in time.'

Andrew's heart was in his mouth as he climbed the stone stairway to the first floor where everything was in poor shape. The building needed a considerable investment of capital and he vowed, there and then, that it would receive one. He was shown into the main dormitory where other nuns sat in meditation. Mary Beth looked terrible as he knelt on the floor beside the bed and took hold of her frozen hands. She looked up at him and, recognising his face, began to frantically shake her head.

'Mary Beth, no. Please.'

She hesitated but said nothing.

'Please, you're not only hurting me but all these other sisters who are trying to help you. Don't hurt us any more, please.'

She just looked at him as if not really believing he was there.

'Mary Beth. You are not guilty. I am.'

Mother Superior and two other nuns sat in silence.

'But I am guilty,' Mary Beth said faintly. 'I killed Samantha.'

'You didn't. You weren't even near her.'

'But I should have been. I should have been with her, helping her, instead of with you. I wanted you and was jealous of the love you had for each other. I needed you for myself and was blinded by that.'

'But it was me who was guilty. I was responsible. I brought you along on the trip so if anyone is at all to blame, it is me.'

'You don't blame me?'

'Of course not.'

'Then why did you leave me at Le Havre? You must have thought me guilty.'

'Quite the opposite. Sam's death was an accident, one of those unfortunate things that sometimes happens. You are not guilty in the slightest.'

'But I loved you. It was very wrong of me.'

'Mary Beth. I loved you, too. I still do. If you are to blame for Sam's death, then I am to blame for Jack's.'

'But you were not to blame for Jack's death.'

'I could have stayed with him. I could have forced him to leave the house and remained behind myself. One of us had to stay to prevent the King's capture, but he insisted that he be the one. If I had stayed, too, the King would probably have been captured and then, almost certainly, executed.'

'Then he really did save the King's life?'

'Definitely, and my own. He made me go.' He looked her straight in the eyes. 'There is one thing I must tell you - something you must know. The last thing Jack asked of me was that I take care of you. Just before he died, he made me promise that I would find you and take care of you and I gave him my word. So, if you die here I will have broken my promise to him and his sacrifice will

have been for nothing. Do you understand that?’

The nod of her head was barely perceptible.

‘I do not intend to let that happen,’ he said firmly. ‘He was my friend as well as my relative so I will not let him die in vain and, moreover, will not let you die. These sisters have tried reasoning with you, but if you will not pay heed to them and to me, you will die and will have sinned a far greater sin than the one which you have imagined. Not only will you die, but I will be guilty of breaking my promise to a man who was about to die.’

She shook her head and tears ran down her cheeks. ‘You are not guilty.’

‘I am if you don’t sit up right now and eat some food. I do not intend to break my promise to Jack so if you don’t eat, I will sit you up myself and force feed you. You do believe me, don’t you?’

She smiled a little through her tears and then gripped his hand tightly. ‘My dear brother. You always were a bully.’

Friday 2nd July 1652

After that, Mary Beth slowly got better. With Henriette’s permission, Andrew converted a couple of the downstairs rooms for himself but no-one else outside the convent knew of the arrangement.

He replaced windows, altered the doors so they would close properly and laid a rough floor. Soon, he had cleared chimneys and lit fires. Fires lit down below would warm the whole house and, for several weeks, he stoked them and kept the building warmer.

Mary Beth’s health gradually improved in spite of the Bronchitis she caught because of the incessant cold and damp. The sisters were wonderful. Though they were shy at first, Andrew soon learnt all their names and jobs. They would help him collect wood for the fires and he would do odd jobs around the chateau. Sister Jacqueline, he found, had a superb sense of humour whilst he felt uncomfortable with Sister Francoise. She watched him in a way he guessed would require a lot of “Hail Marys” to atone for.

During the spring, he would sit with Mary Beth on one of the little benches he had built around the front of the Chateau, where the sisters could sit and meditate overlooking the Seine and open countryside beyond.

Paris, though only a mile away, was a very different world: a world he hated to return to; a city of intrigue and political manoeuvrings he could not begin to understand. The reinstated Condé had retreated to the City following the defeat of the Princes at Etampes so the loyalist forces could not be far away. General Turenne, now leader of the Royalist troops, was getting nearer the city with each day that passed. Soon, the war would be in the City itself and innocent people would again be killed and maimed.

The Plot to keep Condé in power had failed, not because of lack of effort, but because of the very temperament of the Prince himself. Instead of giving in gracefully now that the decision had been made to install the young Prince Louis as the rightful King, he opted to fight it out to the bitter end. If it had not been for the ineffable charm of Anne-Marie, Andrew would have not been involved at all. In truth, it was Anne-Marie who was holding the whole affair together. She had an effect on people which somehow inspired loyalty as she continued to smile sweetly and to Plot. If she had not arranged the capture of the city of Orléans earlier in the year and, therefore, forced the Royalist army to cross the Loire at Jargeau, the troops would have been in Paris already.

Andrew looked across at her as she talked with Henriette on the next bench to his. Just turned twenty-two and she looked beautiful. Whoever married her would gain a prize indeed. Not just good looking, but very, very shrewd was our Anne-Marie.

She had managed to avoid an unsuitable relationship with Charles, and Andrew could hardly blame her for that, for he had just about given up on the King himself. Since his return to Paris, the two of them had drifted far apart. Charles was now on his seventeenth mistress and illegitimate children were cropping up with boring regularity. His mother, Henriette, too, seemed to have resigned herself to the fact that her son was to be King in name only. All attempts to re-establish Royalty in England had failed. Cromwell looked set to dictate the country for many

years to come.

It was as Andrew was mulling these things over in his mind that the rider arrived in a scurry of dust and just about fell from his horse due to his haste.

The messenger had a hurried conversation with Anne-Marie who then rushed over to him. 'Andrew, can you help? Turenne has tricked Condé and is approaching the city from the east. If we do not warn him, his troops will be caught in the Faubourg St Antoine. We must find a way to both warn Condé and also hold up the oncoming army until his men can get ready.'

'Of course,' Andrew said. 'What do you want me to do?'

'Can you warn Condé? You must hurry and get to him before it is too late.' She was on her knees in front of him, holding his hands, imploring him to help. He knew that her own freedom and possibly her life depended on keeping Turenne's troops out of the city until some form of peace treaty could be signed and amnesties granted.

'I'll go,' said Mary Beth who was glaring at Anne-Marie as if to say "get your dirty hands off my man".

'You?' said the amazed Princess.

'Yes, me. Condé will recognise me and trust my word.'

'It will be very risky, Mary Beth.'

'With my robes, I can get into places you will not get close to. I must go, Anne-Marie.'

'In the meantime, how can we stop Turenne?' Andrew asked.

'I don't know,' said Anne-Marie, biting her lips.

'The Bastille!' called Henriette. 'What about the guns of the Bastille?'

'Of course! Andrew, can you take us? They will let me in there, if I go personally.'

'I'm with you, Anne-Marie.' He turned to Henriette. 'Your Majesty, you must stay here. Mary Beth, come with us. We'll drop you near the Palace and then I will go with Anne-Marie to the Bastille.'

They climbed aboard Anne-Marie's coach and she gave orders to her coachman. Soon, they were rolling very fast along the Cours La Reine where the City gates were opened and then closed after them on Anne-Marie's instructions. The coach stopped by the river and Mary Beth kissed Andrew's cheek before jumping down from the coach, habit and all.

The others could not get right to the Bastille for barricades and so abandoned the coach a short distance away. They rushed with coachman and guards to the gates of the fortress and she ordered them opened. The Princess was good, Andrew gave her that, and was certainly a lady of action as she arranged for the guns of the Bastille to be re-aligned onto the Faubourg. Within minutes, Turenne's troops could be heard advancing through Forest of Vincennes, pipe and drum sounding the march, but as they broke cover, the first of the guns spoke and the approaching line hesitated.

Over the next hour, cannon boomed and muskets fired as the Loyalist troops were held at bay. Condé's troops arrived a little later and were able to carry on the defence of the city. By nightfall, Turenne had retreated and Condé was once again secure in Paris.

Andrew left the Bastille with Anne-Marie at sunset and they made their way to Condé's headquarters. Mary Beth was still there so Anne-Marie collected her and they made their way back. It was too late and too dangerous to attempt to take Mary Beth back the Chaillot so she stayed at the Palace of Luxemburg overnight.

'What are we trying to achieve?' Andrew asked Anne-Marie as they ate that evening.

'That's easy,' said the Princess. 'We want my cousin, Louis, as King and do not want Mazarin. If Parlement are prepared to accept Louis as King, then our Plot will have succeeded, not failed. Do you see that?'

'Not entirely. What part does Condé now play?'

'None, permanently. He was put forward as a stop-gap, to hold the kingdom together until Prince Louis was old enough. Now, both Parlement and the Princes are faced with two alternatives. Firstly, to let Anne and Mazarin rule until he is old enough, or secondly, keep Condé, or someone like him, in power until then.'

'Which would be best for the country?'

'Anything is better than Mazarin.'

'So Condé will remain in power, if he can?'

'Yes. Unless Parlement does a deal with Anne and comes to some sort of compromise which excludes Mazarin.'

'Will Condé let that happen?'

'Who knows? At this moment, his Spanish-Lorraine troops are on their way from Picardy and, if they get here in time, Turenne and Mazarin will be caught between that army and the city. Anything could happen then.'

'There will be much bloodshed,' said Mary Beth.

'Yes, my dear, I'm afraid there will. If the Loyalist troops do manage to break into the City, many will have to flee. My father will be safe, I expect, although Condé has gone to far, he will have to go. I will probably have to leave and go into exile somewhere. I would strongly recommend that you, Andrew, are far away from here by then and you, Mary Beth, must go with him.'

'But my place is at the convent,' she argued.

'My dear. You have been of invaluable help to the nation but the time has now come to return to England and await events there. You can be of more service to Charles there than you can be to either Charles or Louis here.'

'How long do we have?' Andrew asked.

'There will be an agreement sooner or later as even Parlement cannot procrastinate indefinitely. It could be a week, a month, or six months. However, long before then, it will have become too dangerous for you. Within days, Turenne could surround the City and it will then be impossible to leave. Condé's Spanish-Lorraine troops cannot get here that quickly.'

'Then you feel we should leave immediately?'

'Go, Andrew. Your work here is done. Go home, both of you, and make babies together.'

'I'm not going,' said Mary Beth.

'Then I shall stay,' Andrew said.

Anne-Marie faced them severely. 'You are both very stubborn. Do you want me to have you both thrown out? Go tomorrow, Andrew. Sail your yacht to the sea and England. I order it.'

'It looks like I have no choice.'

'Who will crew for you?' asked Mary Beth.

Andrew failed to keep the sarcasm from his voice. 'I'll have to manage alone, won't I?'

'You can't. It takes at least two to handle her.'

'Then come with me.'

She turned from him. 'I...I can't. I'm not ready yet.'

He grabbed her arm. 'I promised not to leave you again. I intend to honour that promise.'

'It's not fair, you're putting me under unfair pressure. Go away, you are under no obligation to me.'

He suddenly made up his mind and let go of her. 'In that case, I will go. I shall leave tomorrow at first light.' He turned towards the doorway. 'Goodbye, Sister Marie, it was nice knowing you.' He left.

For a long time, Mary Beth stared at the closed door before saying quietly, 'I shall miss you, Brother Andrew.'

Saturday 3rd July 1652

It was Anne-Marie who woke him. She shook him until his senses started to return and a glance at the window told him it was still dark outside. 'Andrew. Get dressed, quickly. There's not a moment to lose.'

'Why?' he said, slipping his legs into waiting boots. 'What's the problem?'

'The troops, they've surrounded the City during the night.'

'What?' he said, pulling on breeches while Anne-Marie paced and talked as if being with a man when he's dressing was an every-day occurrence.

'You must leave now. They may already have seen your boat and, if they have, they will

confiscate her and you will never get away. I just pray, for your sake, that she has not yet been spotted in the darkness.'

'How many troops are there? On this side, I mean?'

'Not too many yet and most of those are near the gates. So far, they seem to have ignored Chaillot.'

'How long will it be before it gets light?'

'An hour at the most. Come, my housekeeper is making soup. Have a few mouthfuls while I slip something on.'

Andrew followed her downstairs and into the big kitchen where he was given a bowl of broth as Anne-Marie vanished. It seemed just a few moments before she reappeared in breeches, coat and riding boots, her hair in bunches, looking like a schoolgirl going on her first riding lesson.

'Come,' she said, holding out her hand to him. Andrew strapped on his sword and slipped his short dagger into his leather belt. Pulling on his hat, he followed Anne-Marie outside into the darkness. Sounds of running footsteps behind them made them turn.

'Wait for me,' called Mary Beth.

She was breathless and it was evident she had dressed very hurriedly. Andrew and she followed Anne-Marie down to the river and looked across as the first tinge of dawn touched the eastern sky. What they saw made their hearts sink. The bridge was well guarded and movements of troops on the far bank suggested they were preparing for a full scale attack on the city wall.

'We're too late,' said Anne-Marie sadly.

'Maybe not,' Andrew said, looking around him. 'What lies downstream on this south side of the river?'

'Just common ground, marshy in places.'

'Passable on foot?'

'Perhaps. It has been dry lately, so there will be places where it will be safe to walk.'

'Then we must walk along this bank and then swim across the river.'

Her eyes went wide open. 'Swim the Seine? Are you mad?'

'Listen. The river is low at the moment so the current will be sluggish. We should be able to do it.'

'But it's impossible.'

'If we stay here, it means capture and almost certain death as spies,' said Mary Beth. 'We have to risk it, Anne-Marie.'

'Oh, my good friends,' she said, clutching at their hands. 'What would I have done without you lately? Come, let's find a way across the marshes.'

'No, Anne-Marie. You must stay. You have done enough for us already. Stay and help your father. We will go on alone.'

'Oh, Andrew.' She held his hands and kissed his cheek. The girls embraced tenderly as tears ran down both their faces.

'Say goodbye to Henriette for us,' said Mary Beth.

'Bon Voyage, mes amis,' said Princess Anne-Marie.

Andrew and Mary Beth crept along the left bank in the fleeing darkness. Yes, there were a good many soldiers on the far bank and they doubted if Condé's Lorraine troops would arrive in time to prevent the fall of Paris.

Soon, the two of them were opposite Seagull, which could now be clearly seen by anyone who chose to look. Andrew slipped off his boots, tied the leather thongs together and slung them round his neck. He left his cloak on the bank, he would be weighed down trying to swim with it.

'Mary Beth,' he whispered. 'Take your habit off, you won't be able to swim with that on.'

She shook her head.

'Don't be stupid, girl, it's half a mile and you'll drown with it on.'

Reluctantly, she slipped out of her habit and stood, shivering in the early morning dampness in only her shift, and Andrew held her hand as they waded into the cool water. At first, it was easy - the current was sluggish on the inside of the bend, but as the water got deeper, the current quickened and they began to drift downstream.

Andrew felt himself going under at one point, but firm hands supported him. He hadn't realised until then just how strong a swimmer Mary Beth was. Eventually, they both collapsed onto the muddy bank a few hundred feet downstream from Seagull. They could see, outlined against the rising sun, two soldiers who had seen Seagull and were standing by the gangplank, debating whether or not to go aboard or the report the find to a superior officer.

Before Andrew could stop her, Mary Beth slipped quietly along the muddy bank towards the boat and, as she got closer, she motioned to him to go around the other side of the boat. Andrew slipped back into the water and waded until he was upstream of Seagull. He was about to climb out of the water when a commotion broke out.

'M'aidez!' came the pathetic feminine voice. 'M'aidez, s'il vous plait.'

He stood half out of the water and saw that the soldiers had their backs to him, staring into the water. One jumped into action and clambered into the shallow water while the other watched more cautiously, carefully looking around him. When no-one could be seen, the man seemed to relax and stepped forward to help his colleague retrieve a beautiful mermaid from the water, dressed only in a light shift which, when wet, clung to her otherwise naked body like a second skin.

'J'ai tombé,' she muttered to them as they sat her, shivering, on the gunwale of Seagull. She patted the boat lovingly, 'C'est mon bateau,' she informed them.

They looked at each other. She tried to stand but collapsed into the arms of the nearest soldier. 'M'aidez, s'il vous plait. Je suis froid.'

The soldiers helped her aboard and to the door of the cabin.

'Merci, Messieurs,' she said to them, 'Attendez-ici, un moment,' and slipped into the cabin. The soldiers looked at each other again and one removed sword and belt and nodded to the other. It did not take much intelligence to calculate how it was that they intended to get their pleasure for the next half hour.

'Elle-est très belle,' said one, stroking his moustaches.

'Beaucoup de plaisir,' the other laughed, and opened the door to the cabin.

'Monsieur,' Andrew heard Mary Beth say. 'Je-suis une jeune fille.'

While their attention was elsewhere, he slipped towards the mooring ropes and made a decision. If he cut the stern line first, Seagull would swing round and the men would notice at once so he had to cast off the forward line first. He slithered in the mud and gently eased the rope out of the ring secured into the stone towpath.

Mary Beth didn't have much time before things would go too far for her to handle so he took a chance and climbed up the bank, her soft giggling in his ears, and headed for the stern line. It would not budge as the weight of the whole boat was now straining on it. So, slipping out his sword, he slashed at the line and the boat began to drift downstream. Jumping with all his remaining strength, he landed heavily, half on the deck and half across the gunwale, his sword slipping from his cold fingers. One of the soldiers burst out of the doorway and saw him. The man reached for his sword and Andrew had to roll frantically to avoid his furious attack. Dodging it, he saw, out of the corner of his eye, the other one pulling on his breeches. The soldier swiped and Andrew fell, his hand resting on his sword. As he rose, sword in hand, the frenchman hesitated. Andrew had no wish to kill a French soldier, even in anger, so he lunged as to miss so that the man was caught off balance. Then, with his free hand, Andrew caught the rope the man was standing on and pitched him overboard.

The other soldier observed this and drew his pistol. His arm came up and death looked Andrew in the face, literally. It was Seagull that saved his life. At that moment, drifting downstream, she chose to nudge the bank and the shot went wild. The soldier reached for his sword but collapsed in a heap as Mary Beth stood in the doorway, stark naked, looking at her dented cooking pot.

He was out cold, so the two of them grabbed him by an arm each and pitched him onto a sandbank bordering the river at that point. Seagull was beginning to swing round and a musket ball splintered to gunwale close to Andrew's hand. The other nearby soldiers, having heard the pistol shot were coming a-running so Andrew grabbed for the sail ropes and Mary Beth, as she was, ran to the stern.

'Get down,' he shouted. 'Lie in the bottom and I'll call out directions to you.'

Mary Beth obeyed and shots flew by as Andrew let down the sail. The wind was southerly, so

they needed to tack a for a mile before the river turned northwards around St Germain. They then realised they had a problem. The Seine makes a horseshoe turn around St Germain and soldiers on horseback would be able to cross the short headland and catch them on the other side. The boat was just out of range of the pursuing soldiers as they fired at it sporadically. They were not fools, they were trying to distract Andrew and Mary Beth while their colleagues tried to head them off.

Seagull turned the corner beside the Ile St Germain, and the big sail filled. Andrew checked the lines for speed as he had seen Sam doing before and they accelerated like a cannonball. But they were too late. Ahead, soldiers lined the shore with muskets. Fortunately, they had had no time to set up cannon, else the couple would have got no further.

'Lie down flat,' Andrew shouted to Mary Beth and she lay on the deck, covering her ears as dozens of musket balls whizzed over and splintered woodwork all around them.

Andrew crouched behind the little cabin and prayed for a hurricane as he peeked ahead every now and then and shouted instructions to Mary Beth at the helm as they somehow managed to miss the islands and moored boats along the long straight stretch running north-east towards St Denys. Eventually, the shooting stopped as Seagull swept out of range. They had been lucky that time. A few chips in the woodwork and a couple of holes in the sail but they were still alive. Sam would have had a fit if she had been able to see the mess they had made of Seagull.

Andrew realised they would have to be very quick and get to Rouen before any troops could head them off. If the river had been straight, there would have been no problem for Seagull could easily outrun a tiring horse. The problem was, the Seine bends and twists all the way to the sea and, if horsemen could get to Rouen before them, the cannon there would do more than chip the paintwork.

'Here,' Andrew said to Mary Beth, throwing her his shirt.

She thanked him and slipped it over her head, tying it at the waist with a short length of rope. The shirt had only reached to just below Andrew's waist. On Mary Beth, it was a little more decent, but not much.

The two of them worked together efficiently and quickly; tying, loosing, turning, lashing, while Seagull was in her element; skimming smoothly downstream through the water.

It was mid afternoon before they reached Rouen and took the left fork past Ile Lacroix. Andrew knew from previous trips along this stretch of river that the cannon lay ahead, guarding the Seine, so he let Seagull have her head and they waited - it was too late for anything else.

As they approached they could see soldiers lining the riverside and Mary Beth must have given them a thrill, standing and waving her arms above her head and laughing, the wind ruffling her now-short hair. Andrew believed she saved both their lives by that brave action. At a distance of fifty metres, good musqueteers could not have failed to miss her as she stood in the stern for all to see.

Suddenly, they were free. Andrew heaved a sigh of relief as the last buildings of Rouen faded into the distance behind them. There were still Tancarville and Le Havre to pass, of course, but the threat from them was not as great. The river mouth was wider there and it would be dark by then. If the French launched a boat, it would not be able to compete with the flying Seagull.

'Thank you for coming,' Andrew said to Mary Beth as they sat in the stern. 'I would not have made it without you.'

'I had to come. I couldn't trust you with Seagull on your own. You'd wreck her and Samantha's ghost would come back and haunt me for evermore.'

They laughed together easily and Andrew reached out to kiss her but she pulled away. 'Not yet, Andrew. It's too soon. Please be patient.'

'Of course. Anything you say, dear.' He must have hurt her by the sarcastic way he said that as he walked forward, but he only regretted his words later.

The evening sun was almost gone as Seagull neared Le Havre, the place where Andrew had abandoned her the last time they had sailed down the Seine. He felt a twinge of conscience and went aft and sat down with her.

'Mary Beth, I have a big mouth at times. I hope you'll forgive me. I am going to renew the promise I made at Chaillot.' He took her hands in his own. 'Whatever happens from now on, I will never leave you again. I don't care if you hate me, abuse me, ignore me even, I will not leave your

side. You can believe me or not. I love you and want you but, if I can't have you, so be it. But I will not leave you. Do you understand?'

She nodded and looked straight at him. 'I am yours,' she admitted. 'I could never love anyone else, but just give me time to readjust.'

'Of course. I do understand.' They were silent for a few minutes. 'By the way, will you marry me?'

She looked up at him and without a second's hesitation said; 'Of course. But you must realise that I have changed. I'm not the same girl you once knew.'

'I know that. You're even better now you've turned nineteen. A real old lady.'

'I'm just what you need,' she laughed. 'A mother-figure.'

'Not likely. If I had wanted a mother, I would have married Henriette Marie or the Mother Superior. Even Anne-Marie would mother me.'

Mary Beth grinned wickedly. 'Don't you dare. That young lady would eat you alive.'

'Perhaps I'll just stick with you.'

'Well. Someone has got to look after you.'

He squeezed her hand and kissed her cheek. 'You'll do.'

She smiled a little.

'When?' he asked.

'Soon,' she said, turning to face him. 'Please. Very soon.'

Sunday 4th July 1652

Andrew and Mary Beth spent the night sailing slowly north eastwards and dare not stop in case the French were following them. They both took turns to keep a look out, sitting in the stern looking up at the stars, while Seagull made hardly a sound as she slipped through the lazy water towards the Straits of Dover which they reached at first light. This was the dangerous part. They were running from both the French and English fleets and, as things were in the Netherlands, the Spaniards would probably sink them just for speaking a different language.

Andrew let the big sail have its head and, for the first time, rigged the spinnaker to give boost. In the cabin, he had seen some of Sam's drawings of Seagull at full speed with the racing sails billowing, so he knew she could do it, and she did. Through the Straits she flew like a dose of salts. Two cutters saw them and tried to head them off, but they didn't stand a chance. Seagull went right between them and they daren't open fire in case they sunk each other. One minute Seagull was there, the next she was gone.

It grew very hot later around midday and the wind dropped so Andrew kept a sharp look-out while Mary Beth lay on the cabin roof, getting sunburnt. He slipped into the cabin and produced some cream he had seen Sam use once and gently smoothed it into her bare legs and arms. The shirt lay partly open so he took some of the cold cream and slopped it on her chest.

'You beast!' She sat up with a squeal and chased him around the boat. There were not many places to go so he finally let her catch him and then held her tight. Suddenly, she remembered and tried to break free.

'Darling, it's all right,' said Andrew. 'I'm not going to touch you till we're wed, I promise. Just let me hold you for a minute.'

She relaxed and lay her head on his chest. 'I'm sorry. I love you.'

'Hmm!' he said, lifted her shirt tail and smacked her bare bottom. 'Go and find us some lunch.'

They saw little of other shipping during the afternoon. Andrew guessed that everyone was as becalmed as they were. It was very hot and sticky and they lay side-by-side on the cabin roof until the sun began to go down and Andrew leant up on one elbow and looked around at the empty sea. He then looked down at Mary Beth. She had been right, she was a different girl.

Physically, she had lost weight at the convent and there was not a trace of spare flesh in sight. But there was something else, something he couldn't quite put his finger on, something which nagged at the back of his mind.

His bride-to-be seemed to sense his inspection and opened one eye but said nothing nor

moved. He was sure that he could have taken her then and she would not have resisted but, instead, he gently kissed her warm lips and jumped down from the cabin roof. They had resisted thus far and one more night wouldn't hurt.

'Get dressed, else Rachel will have a fit,' Andrew said and threw her a clean shirt from the cabin. 'We'll marry tomorrow at Rettendon. It will be worth waiting for, I promise.'

'Andrew,' she said earnestly. 'Thank you for understanding.'

He grinned. 'That's what big brothers are for, isn't it?'

'Will we be able to wed at such short notice?'

'Of course. You are Lady Ramsden, don't forget. You can do anything.'

They laughed in the sunset. Tomorrow would be the happiest day of their lives.

A breeze came up as the sun finally set and they ran up the Crouch on the incoming tide. It was completely dark as they berthed and then walked up the hill to Rettendon Hall. Owls hooted in the woods but, other than that, all was strangely quiet as the two of them walked up the lane, hand-in-hand. It was still warm and the sky clouded over the moon as they turned into the iron gates and saw that the Hall was in total darkness. Andrew looked at Mary Beth and then they almost ran to the front door which was firmly locked. However, the rear door was open and they went inside. Andrew found and lit candles and they searched everywhere. Rettendon Hall was empty and horses in the stables had a neglected look so Andrew fed them some grain and ran water for them. Where was everyone?

His train of thought was jolted by a high-pitched scream from Mary Beth whereupon he ran around the house as she stood near the front door pointing in the dim light to two mounds on the front lawn, each surmounted by a small wooden cross.

'Rachel?' she said, pain written all over her face in the light from the flickering candles.

'No, not Rachel,' Andrew replied, remembering their sixth sense. 'I would have known.'

'Mark? Antoinette?' She was in shock.

'They'll know at the hospital,' he said. 'Let's get horses.'

They saddled two and rode over in silence, Mary Beth's long, bare legs which had looked so natural on the boat in the sunshine, now looking white and most out of place astride a horse in the semi-darkness.

They reigned in before the big door and the doctor staggered outside to meet them. 'Lady Ramsden, Mr Bosvile,' he said in greeting. 'Thank goodness you've returned. Come inside, please.'

They walked inside and the doctor looked almost horrified at Mary Beth's bare legs.

'Don't ask,' Andrew sighed. 'It's a very long story.'

The doctor quickly arranged for food and drink for them. 'Mrs Gresham has been very ill.' He bowed his head. 'I'm afraid we could do nothing for Mr Gresham nor the boy.'

'How did it happen, doctor?' asked Mary Beth eventually.

'Plague,' he replied. 'Mr Gresham caught it first and then young Stephen. Mrs Gresham spent many hours caring for them both and just about wore herself out trying to save their lives. Then she got it herself but somehow struggled through.'

'How about Antoinette?' Andrew asked with his heart in his mouth.

'For some reason, your niece only got it very mildly and has now completely recovered. She's upstairs, sleeping here for safe keeping.'

'Thank goodness,' breathed Mary Beth.

'Doctor,' Andrew said. 'Rachel... Mrs Gresham... was expecting. Is...'

'I'm afraid she lost the baby. In fact, I'm still quite worried about her. She has fully recovered from the actual plague, but she will not fight any more. She just lays in bed, thinking she's dying.'

'Can we see her?'

'It could be a strain for her, but I'll willingly try anything.' He stood up. 'Come this way.'

Without further ado, they walked up the big stairs and along a hallway into a small room where Rachel lay as if asleep.

'Mrs Gresham,' said the doctor kindly. 'I've brought someone to see you.'

Rachel opened her eyes and stared. 'Andrew!' she said, and burst into tears as she hugged her brother. 'Oh, Andrew. I'm so glad.'

'Well then, what are we going to do with you, eh?'

'What...what do you mean?'

'If you are to be Mary Beth's bridesmaid tomorrow so you are going to have to get out of bed.'

'Bridesmaid? Then...'

Andrew nodded, smiling, and Rachel clutched at Mary Beth's hands and tears flowed freely. The doctor smiled.

Rachel suddenly drew back. 'But, I can't.'

'Yes you can,' her brother said. 'Tomorrow morning, you are going to get your fat little body out of this bed and earn your privilege.'

'Andrew Bosvile, you just watch your tongue.'

'Rachel, you are my big sister. I have always loved you and always will, but for this once, I'm going to put my foot down. Either you get out or I'll smack your bottom and drag you out.'

Rachel looked horrified.

'He means it,' said Mary Beth. 'I didn't sit down for a week afterwards.'

'You mean he...? To you?'

She nodded. 'I deserved it.'

'Andrew,' Rachel said, pulling the sheets up to her neck. 'You dare lay a finger on me.'

'Then get up in the morning. We need you and so does Toni.'

'I'll see.'

'You see, then.' He stood up to go. 'I'll leave Mary Beth with you for a while. Give her a list of what you need from the Hall and I'll bring them first thing.'

He turned to the doctor. 'Is it all right if Lady Ramsden stays here the night?'

'Of course, Mr Bosvile. I'll have a bed made up for her at once.'

'Goodnight girls. I'll see you both up and about in the morning.'

Andrew walked downstairs with the doctor who shook his hand in the hallway. 'Thank you Mr Bosvile. In a few minutes, you've achieved more than I have in the last month. That was just what your sister needed.'

'I'm glad to have been able to help. But, remember, I know my sister. If I appear to bully her a bit, you'll know that it is the only way.'

'I understand. She's a very nice, kind person, your sister.'

'Have you ever married, doctor?'

'No, I've always been too busy. Now that I have the time, it's finding the right woman, someone who will live with my idiosyncrasies.' He smiled. 'There are not many of those left these days.'

'I don't want to appear to be matchmaking, doctor, but you could do worse than consider my sister. You don't need me to advertise her qualities, they are well known.'

'I would be honoured for her to have me. But, alas, there are plenty of better-looking and younger fish in the sea than an old fogey like me.'

'Old? I would not have put you above thirty-five.'

'You flatter me, Mr Bosvile. Nearer forty.'

'Doctor, to change the subject. Lady Ramsden has agreed to become my wife and I intend to try to arrange it for tomorrow. We'd both like it to be here, with your permission.'

'Mr Bosvile, I would be honoured. Ever since your mother and sister took an interest in what happens here, Lady Ramsden has been the patron of the hospital and whatever she wishes will be.'

'Then you are to be my best man. That being so, you had better call me Andrew.'

'Very well, Andrew. I am Donald.'

'Donald, I would ask you a personal question about your loyalties. Do they lie with King Charles or Mr Cromwell?'

'With the King, of course. I am a true Scotsman and Squire Cromwell is a bigoted scoundrel.'

'In that case, I will confide in you. My marriage to Lady Ramsden must remain a secret. To

everyone outside these walls, she is still my sister. Many think she is the illegitimate daughter of my sister whereas, in truth, she was adopted. We wish to aid the King, if possible, and I believe this can best be achieved by our maintaining a front. We may learn more that way. Do you follow?’

‘Er... I think so.’

‘I can’t explain it any better. I don’t even know it is the right thing to do, or what benefit there might be. I just have a feeling it will help.’

‘Then your secret is safe with me.’

‘Do you have anyone here who can go to market tomorrow?’

‘Of course.’

‘In the morning, I will give you money. I wish them to buy fruit and food for all the residents here. After our wedding, we are going to have a party.’

Monday 5th July 1652

In the morning, Andrew went to see the parson who, at first, hesitated about performing a marriage at such short notice. Two things convinced him - the fact that it was Lady Ramsden who was getting married and sight of the Royal Seal that King Charles had left with Andrew. He agreed also to maintain the secrecy as had the doctor and the wedding was arranged for two o’clock.

Andrew spoke briefly to Mary Beth upon arrival and cuddled the excited Antoinette. ‘Right then, my beauty. I need you to do a special job for me. Can you do it?’

‘What is it, Uncle Andrew?’

‘My, you’re getting heavy. Are you really only seven?’

‘Yes. Doctor Donald looks after me very well and gives me lots of dinner and nice presents.’

‘That’s nice. Now then, I need you to go with Mary Beth back to the Hall and look after her. Help her to dress and to get things ready and, when I see you again, I want to see you both in your very best dresses. Can you manage that, do you think?’

The little girl nodded enthusiastically. ‘Yes, I will.’

He turned to Mary Beth. ‘I’ll send someone for you just before two, okay?’

She nodded and he kissed her.

When Andrew got to Rachel, she was still in bed. He glared at her and she shrank back behind the bedclothes.

‘I’ve ordered a bath for you,’ he said. ‘So I want you out of bed right this minute.’

‘I’m not well,’ she said as two girls brought in the tin bath and filled it with warm water.

Andrew grabbed the sheets and stripped the bed. Rachel clutched her nightdress around her and whimpered.

‘I’m going downstairs now for five minutes and, when I get back, I want to find you in that bath else I’ll strip you and put you in myself, do I make myself clear?’

‘But, I can’t.’

‘Five minutes!’ he insisted and left.

Checking the arrangements for food, Andrew gave Donald the money and also arranged for two lads to clean out the coach, harness the horses and bring Mary Beth over at two. He then went back to Rachel, who was still in bed. Saying nothing to her, he grabbed her feet and dragged her off the end of the bed and she fell in a heap on the floor. Before she could recover, he had whipped her nightdress over her head.

‘Bath!’ he instructed and pointed. His sister was desperately trying to cover herself with her hands and barely succeeding as he turned his back whilst she climbed into the bath. Then, grabbing soap and flannel, he started on her back. Afterwards, he cut her hair between screams of protest. ‘If you don’t put your hands down, I’ll tie them up. Would you like that?’

She shook her head. When he had finished cutting, he washed her hair thoroughly and poured gallons of water over her while she spluttered and screamed.

'Get up!' he commanded and held up the big towel between them as she stood slowly and he wrapped the towel around her and held her tight. He had bullied her, but she was still his sister and it was for her own good.

'Rachel, look at me,' he said.

She did.

'Rachel, you are a wonderful person, do you know that?'

Her eyes opened wide.

'Tonight, I have arranged a party for all the residents and there will be dancing and you will dance the first dance with me.' He stifled protest with his hand gently over her mouth. 'I insist. Then you will dance with the good doctor.'

'But... Andrew?'

'No buts. There are only the two of us left of the family now and you and I must stick together. You are twenty-eight and still young enough to remarry and I want you wed before winter, do you understand?'

'How..?'

'I don't care how or who to for that matter. I just know that you are too good a person to throw your life away. Look at it as helping a man to gain happiness and a father for Antoinette who needs one who will love her and bring her up properly.'

She looked down for a moment.

'Your dress is on the bed. You are my sister and I am proud of that. Tonight you will outshine everyone - or else. Now, do you need any help?'

She nodded and then cried on his shoulder until he helped her to dress and then insisted on some extra items. Not only was she wearing Carrie's ball dress from the palace but also Sarah's diamond necklace. He dried her hair and put ribbons in it and white gloves on her arms. Finally, she was ready and Andrew held out his hands to her as she rose from the chair and stood in front of the mirror.

'You, my girl, will out-dazzle them all.'

He adjusted her neckline and she frowned. Andrew grinned. 'If you think that's low, you should see Mary Beth's.'

She looked horrified.

He smiled. 'Rachel. You will always look beautiful to me. And, now that I know how you can really look, I want you to look this beautiful always. Turn around.'

She did a twirl.

'It was worth it, wasn't it?'

She nodded and smiled.

'That's it. Keep that smile forever. The poor doctor will not know what's hit him.'

EVERYTHING went fine. The parson arrived, as did Mary Beth and Antoinette in their shining, clean coach. Andrew's three favourite girls looked stupendous; Mary Beth in primrose with Rachel and Antoinette in pale blue. The doctor looked dashing in his dark suit and Andrew wore his Captain's uniform. After the wedding, the party was hard work. Donald played his accordion while Rachel and her brother danced. He could have danced with her forever, she looked remarkable.

'Thank you, Andrew,' she said as they danced yet again.

'For what?'

'You know, for caring.'

'That's what families are for, isn't it?'

'Not all families are like us.'

'That's true. We're something else, aren't we?'

She laughed. 'Yes, we are.'

The music stopped and they clapped.

'Now you must dance with the good doctor. I think he wants to ask you something.'

Rachel looked puzzled but not for long. Mary Beth played music on the accordion that she had learned at Chaillot while the doctor was speaking to Rachel urgently and she shook her head from time to time. Andrew watched carefully until, eventually, she raised her head and looked him in the

eyes and then nodded. Andrew cheered and everyone stopped as Rachel blushed and he took her arm. 'Well?'

'I am to become Mrs Rachel Cameron.'

Andrew kissed her and kissed her again, and then shook hands with Donald.

'Thanks, Andrew. Though I don't yet know how we'll manage in my little flat.'

'Don't you dare even try,' said Mary Beth. 'The new doctor's quarters are at Rettendon Hall. As wedding present from Andrew and I, you will have the whole of the West Wing to live in. No sister of ours is going to live in an asylum and neither is our brother-in-law.'

The festivities went on very late and they were all done in by bedtime. Andrew drove the girls home to the Hall and Rachel and Antoinette thanked him and wished him goodnight and then went to their old rooms.

Andrew stabled the horses and locked the doors and, when he got inside, Mary Beth was sitting on the rug in front of the fire in the library. They were both much too tired to go upstairs so she slipped out of her dress and he his uniform and they lay half-dressed in each other's arms in front of the crackling fire, too tired even to talk.

Tuesday 6th July 1652

It was raining. Not drizzle or mist - rain. The french windows ran with it and the cold fireplace pattered with it. Andrew awoke first and found they had been covered with a blanket while faint sounds came from the kitchen. Good old Rachel, he thought and, rolling out so as not to disturb Mary Beth, he tucked the blanket round her and crept into the kitchen and put his arms round his sister, squashing her against the sink.

She slipped her arms round his neck. 'Good morning, brother dear. You're awake then?'

'No, just sleepwalking as usual.'

'I hope you don't do this in your sleep to all the girls.'

He smiled. 'Only the good-looking ones.'

She made a face. 'Flattery will get you breakfast provided you let me breathe long enough to do it.'

'Spoilsport. I'd rather cuddle you than eat breakfast.'

'What? With your brand new wife in the next room, desperate for your attention?' She looked at him sideways. 'She was brand new to you, wasn't she?'

'Yes, I had not touched her.' He laughed at her Puritanical attitude towards sex and marriage. 'You're old fashioned, you know that?'

'Old fashioned or not, it's the best way in the long run. How can you have complete trust in someone who's played around, even if only with yourself?'

'You're right of course. You usually are. Can I kiss you?'

'Certainly not, people will talk.' She laughed and pushed him away. 'By the way,' she asked with a twinkle in her eye, 'How was it last night?'

'It wasn't, we were both much too tired.'

'What?' She looked daggers at him and wagged her finger in his face. 'Now you listen to me, Andrew Bosvile. You go in there right now and pick up that wife of yours and take her to bed.'

'What?'

'Andrew, if you don't, I shall never forgive you. It's time you made an honest woman of her.'

'But breakfast...'

His voice went up half an octave. 'You can think of breakfast at a time like this?' She waved a paring knife at him and he backed around the room.

'Listen to me, young man. Yesterday, you bullied the hell out of me and humiliated me. You literally stripped me naked and treated me like a child. But now I'm going to give you your marching orders. You go and get that young girl of yours into bed right this minute and stay there, all day if need be, but go and... and... do what you should have done last night.'

'But...'

She pointed. 'Go!'

JUST before midday, the door opened and Antoinette came in and jumped on top of them.

Andrew gasped. 'Toni, you're a bully, do you know that?'

'Are you lazy people not getting up today?'

'Yes, I expect so. Why?'

'Mummy says that lunch will be on the table in five minutes. She has cooked something special for you.'

Andrew looked at Mary Beth who nodded. 'Go and tell mummy we'll be down in ten minutes.'

'Ten minutes?'

'Off you go. Mummy will understand.'

She went out and closed the door as Mary Beth looked up at him with those piercing, blue eyes. She raised her arms carefully above her head and smiled. 'What on earth can we find to do for the next ten whole minutes?'

He grinned. 'We'll think of something.'

LUNCH was superb and Rachel held nothing back. This was the old Rachel they knew and loved.

'You're going to have a baby now,' said Antoinette to Mary Beth.

'Whatever do you mean?' Andrew asked while Mary Beth went a bright shade of crimson.

Toni looked under the table. 'You're touching her feet again.'

They all laughed as Andrew cuddled her and sat her upon his knee. 'How would you like a new daddy?'

'Donald is going to be my new daddy.'

'So. She knows already?'

'Knows? She's nearly as bad a bully as you are. She's got everything worked out already - what we will do, when we will do it. I think I'll leave all the arrangements to her.'

Andrew looked at his niece. 'Proper little matchmaker, aren't you?'

'Well, I told mummy that you two would get married and you did. So I was right.'

'Yes you were,' he said and thought back on all the things that had led to that one important event.

'**DO** you know?' he said later to Mary Beth as she sat on his knee in the library while Antoinette helped her mother to clear up. 'I thought we'd never get to this point.'

'How do you mean?'

'Do you know that I nearly killed myself?'

She sat up suddenly. 'What? Why?'

'When I heard that you and John Henry had married, I got drunk for nearly a week and did some pretty stupid things.'

She seemed to look right into his heart when she said, 'I didn't know I had meant that much to you.'

'I have always loved you and was deeply shocked. Did you love Jack?'

She shrugged. 'I suppose I must have done.'

'Don't you know?'

'It all happened so fast. Carrie died and he was there. We needed each other and we, sort of, fell into each other's arms. Looking back, I'm not sure whether it was love or something else, but I did care a lot for him.'

'We all did. He was a good man.'

They were silent for a minute and she rested her head on his chest and drew up her legs in front of her on his knee. 'Did you really love Sam?'

'Yes. I have to say that. I suppose, initially, I married her on the rebound. I had lost you and she had no-one and we needed each other. It's as good a motive as any for marriage.'

'But you did love her, didn't you?'

'Yes, I did, very much and, after the marriage, it grew. Do you know, she was so upset over keeping her true age from me for so long that it made me love her more? When you have a secret, somehow it draws you together. When she revealed her secret, we fell deeply in love. It really was love.'

'I'm sure it was. You never do things by half measures, do you? It runs in the family.' She paused. 'I think you should tell Rachel about Sam's age.'

'It's not worth it now she's... gone.'

'Yes, it is. If I was Rachel, I would want to know.' She reached behind her neck, undid the clasp, and handed him Samantha's locket.

It was Andrew's turn to be surprised. 'You've been wearing it?'

'Yes. I loved Sam too, at the end.'

'I know you did. I was sorry that Sam died, but it was worth it to be where I am now.'

She frowned. 'In an armchair?'

'No, silly. In your arms, in your bed and things.'

'Oh, in my things.'

'What things are those, Mary Beth?' asked Rachel as she walked in.

Mary Beth blushed so Andrew quickly changed the subject. 'Rachel. As you have elected yourself our mother, we have decided to share a secret with you.'

Rachel put her hands on her hips and glared at them with mock anger and Andrew threw her the locket. She sat down by the hearth and opened it.

'What is it, mummy?' asked Antoinette, looking over her mother's shoulder.

'It's a locket, darling.'

'Can I see?' She looked. 'Ooh, it's a baby.'

Rachel looked, read, calculated and a tear came to her eyes. She smiled and blinked away the tears.

'Why are you crying, mummy?'

'Because....because this little baby died, and she was not such a baby after all.'

'What do you mean?'

'I'll explain it to you one day.' She looked at her brother. 'I'm sorry, Andrew. I misjudged you.'

'No you didn't, because I didn't find out myself until after we were married. I really am a child snatcher.' He looked at Mary Beth. 'Twice over, now.'

Rachel went out, a little embarrassed, as Andrew looked at his "child" and she kissed the end of his nose.

'I must go back to France,' he suddenly said.

She sat up, alarmed. 'Back to France? Why?'

'I owe a debt that must be paid.'

'To whom?'

'To Chaillot.'

'To Chaillot? The convent?'

'Yes. A debt of gratitude for looking after you. Will they accept gold, do you think?'

She laid her head on his shoulder. 'Oh, Andrew. I do love you.'

'More than Condé?'

She sat up again. 'Now go wash your mouth out. I never want to hear that man's name ever again.'

'I had to laugh at what you said. "By the way, have you met my brother?" You should have seen his face. He's half undressed you, has your prize assets at his very fingertips, is about to rape the hell out of you and you drop that one on him.'

'Andrew,' she said seriously as she fiddled. 'You must know something. It was not going to be rape.'

'What? Not rape? You were going to him willingly?'

'Yes.'

'Surely you didn't know then what he was going to do afterwards?'

'Not at first. I was just going for a night of passion to relieve my frustrations. But, before I went that night, Henriette tried to warn me of what he was capable of.'

'You mean you knew what he was likely to do?'

'Yes. When she told me, instead of feeling fear and revulsion as I should have done by all rights, I found myself wanting it. It was going to hurt me, almost certainly kill me, but I believed I deserved it.'

'But that man said... the pain... the humiliation... Why?'

'Because I thought I had lost you. I had married Jack, whom I didn't love while you had married Sam, whom you obviously did love. I could not live with that fact.'

'But to go like that?'

'I suppose I could have jumped into the Seine, but that was no use because I could swim. I could have stood in the front line of some street fight, but the soldiers would probably not have fired on a girl. So, that night, I went consciously and deliberately into a situation where I knew for an absolute certainty that I would not only be taken and used by the Prince for his pleasure but could possibly be used and abused by others, too.'

'Mary Beth, you shock me. You felt that strongly?'

'I felt the guilt that strongly, yes.'

He pondered for a moment. 'That's why you went to the convent, wasn't it? It was another form of abuse.'

'Yes it was. It was everything I have ever hated. I was guilty, I deserved it.'

He touched her cheek gently. 'No one is that guilty.'

She took his face carefully in her long, white fingers. 'You still don't understand do you, my darling? I told you once that I had killed Samantha but you refused to believe me because you didn't want to.'

'You didn't kill Samantha, you were nowhere near her when she went overboard.'

'But I wanted her dead, don't you see? I had planned to push her overboard and, when she fell into the water, it was my opportunity.'

'But you went into the water after her. You tried to save her.'

'You think I dived in to rescue her? Well, I didn't. I knew she was a strong swimmer, she'd have to be to sail yachts all over the North Sea. No father would take his daughter on a racing yacht unless he was pretty sure she could swim - and swim very well. I went into that freezing water for one purpose and one purpose only, to hold her pretty little face under the water until she drowned.'

Andrew said nothing.

Mary Beth looked away. 'I even failed at that. When I got to her, she was already blue and laying face-down in the water and had been for several minutes. I knew then what had happened as she had told me about the baby earlier in the day.'

'You...knew?'

'Yes. She was going to tell you that night. As soon as she told me, I knew I would have to act fast. If she gave birth to your baby, you would never have left her. I had to kill her, don't you see that?'

'But you didn't?'

'No, I didn't. As I grabbed her hair to hold her under, I thought of you and what it would do to you if she died so, instead, I found myself fighting to save her life instead. When she did finally die, I saw how hurt you were and was heartbroken myself. Later, when I saw your face as you learned about the unborn child, I felt as if I had stabbed you myself.'

'You certainly looked bad.'

'I tried to make love to you that weekend, to try to make it up to you, but you rejected me. Then, when you left me at Le Havre, I thought you had realised what had happened and I had lost any chance I might have had of providing recompense. That's when I entered the convent. Henriette bought the chateau from Marshal Bassompierre and I saw a chance of hiding myself away from life. I could live a life of self-pity and masochism and I would deserve every minute of it. The longer I stayed, the cleaner I might become.'

'Then I came back.'

'Yes. You came back and spoiled it all. You represented love, happiness and freedom, all the things I didn't deserve as I had not yet paid the price.' Her eyes met his. 'I still have not. I don't deserve to be here, now, with you. I should be in Paris, my body being abused by hundreds of vicious criminals, my life bleeding away all over the floor of some filthy prison. That's all I am worth.'

'You are worth more than that to me and, yesterday, you wiped the slate clean. The past is gone. I am here and there is no way I am going to leave you or let you leave me. Please don't ever think of those things again.'

'Why should I? I've got you now.' She thought for a moment and then placed her words very carefully. 'Andrew. I have to say this. If you ever do leave me, for any reason at all, I will do the same thing again as I cannot bear to live without you. I will die and I will choose to die in the most horrible way imaginable, I promise you that.'

He held her tight. She really meant it. Andrew was going to have to be very careful how he treated this girl whose own love could destroy her.

Saturday 5th February 1653

The day finally arrived for Rachel's wedding. She was dressed in cream and looked fantastic. Andrew was Donald's best man, and Mary Beth and Antoinette were bridesmaids. Mind you, Mary Beth did look a little out of place. It was still not that usual to use a bridesmaid who's pregnancy was now beginning to show quite clearly.

The Autumn had been a busy one: Andrew had taken on a new butler-cum-handyman and a housekeeper; Rachel spent most of her time at the hospital so the need was there; they had also employed a groom-cum-coachman and had bought a small herd of horses, so he was kept fairly busy at the Hall.

It had been impossible to return to the continent since their arrival, due to the fact that war had broken out between England and Holland over implementation of the Navigation Act. Parliament was using the Act, which forbade shipments into England on any other ships but British ones, as an excuse for establishing her authority over the seas around Britain. The end result to Andrew and Mary Beth was that any boat on the North Sea was liable to be sunk, without prior warning, by either side.

They were not too disappointed. It meant that he and Mary Beth could spend a lot of time together. Her golden hair was growing again and her times of suppressed tension grew less and less. The pregnancy had clinched it, she now felt as if she really belonged.

Rachel's wedding over, the newlyweds shook hands with, and thanked, all who had come. It was as they were all about to leave the church that the Roundheads arrived. There were six of them.

The Captain dismounted, leaving his soldiers mounted and wary. He removed his helmet and approached the parson. 'Sir, I am looking for Mr Andrew Bosvile.'

Seeing the minister hesitate, Andrew stepped forward, warily. 'I am Andrew Bosvile.'

'Then I must ask you to accompany me to London. I have a warrant for your arrest.'

Andrew was shaken. 'For my arrest?'

'Yes, sir. I'm sorry it had to happen on such a happy day.'

'What is the charge?' interrupted Mary Beth.

'Madam?' He looked puzzled.

'I am Lady Ramsden. Mr Bosvile is my brother. I believe I have a right to know.'

'Very well, my Lady. The charge is murder.'

'Murder? Are you mad?'

'No, My Lady. I have my orders and the warrant. I fear I do not know the details.'

'Then I will accompany my brother to London and we'll find out what this nonsense is all about.'

'As you wish, My Lady. Will you be safe in your er... condition?'

Mary Beth's eyes were like balls of ice. 'Of course.'

'Your husband, Lord Ramsden....?'

'Has died.'

'I'm sorry, My Lady. I did not know.'

'No, I can see that.' Her words carried enough venom to express all their feelings as she headed for the coach.

'Peter,' she said to the driver. 'We're going to London. I'm sure this ...gentleman will show you the way.' She climbed aboard and her husband followed.

The coach, with its armed escort, headed down the hill towards the Rumford road. Andrew blew a kiss to the gaping Rachel and mouthed a "don't worry". It was very cold in the coach and he covered Mary Beth well with the available blankets and held her hand until she eventually smiled.

'I wonder who it is you are supposed to have killed,' Mary Beth whispered.

'I have no idea. When I saw them arrive, I thought maybe treason was the charge, but murder...?'

They sat in silence for the rest of the journey, which took until evening, and were cold and hungry as they stepped out in front of the tall building.

London was a disgusting place. Houses overhung the streets which seemed to run with sewage and there was mud and filth everywhere. They were glad to get inside.

Taken along a corridor, they were shown into a small room with a blazing fire where a man sat at the desk with papers spread before him. The two of them stood before him and the Captain closed the door. It was a long time before anyone spoke, the crackling of the fire being the only sound to disturb the silence that was about as pregnant as Mary Beth.

The man looked up. 'You are Andrew Bosvile?'

'Yes, sir. This is my sister, Lady Mary Ramsden.'

He rose and bowed slightly, 'My Lady.'

'Why am I here?'

'Sit down, I have some questions to ask you. Please answer truthfully, your life may depend on it.'

They sat.

'My name is Sir John Grenville,' he said and then looked straight at Andrew. 'I see by your reaction that the name means something to you.'

'Yes, sir,' Andrew replied truthfully. 'Grenville was my wife's maiden name.'

'So, you have decided to be truthful. That is good.' He almost smiled. 'I presume it is my niece, Samantha, of whom you speak?'

'Yes, sir. I married Samantha.'

'And where is she now?'

'I fear that she died, sir.'

'It is her death which which you are being charged, Mr Bosvile. I need to know the exact circumstances so that I may know how to proceed.'

How much should they tell him? He will want to know why they were in the channel. How should he play it?

'I met her at Alnwick,' Andrew said. 'At an inn.'

'I know that. I have spoken to Sergeant Briggs who speaks well of you. Apparently, you saved his life when the Royalists attacked him.'

'It was really Samantha who saved his life. I just agreed to ensure his safe keeping.'

'He thanks you for that. Tell me, are you for the King or Parliament?'

'Neither. Like my father, I have tried to be neutral in the matter of politics. I would like to see England with a King, but not at any cost.'

'Who was your father?'

'Sir John Bosvile. He is a good Puritan and fought for Sir Thomas Fairfax in Yorkshire.'

'But you are not in the Army?'

'No, sir.'

'I have agents in Holland who have discovered this.' He held out Andrew's marriage certificate with its damning royal seal.

'Samantha and I were married in Breda. The King just happened to be there and authorised it for

Sam's safety.'

'Why were you with King Charles?'

The term "King" Charles did not go unnoticed as Andrew glanced at Mary Beth and saw that she had noticed, too. Had it been a slip of the tongue?

'I went to see what the King's true feelings were so as to decide whether to support him or not.'

'And what were your findings?'

'I found that the King was someone I could not entirely trust, even with my wife.'

He laughed. 'I've heard that no-one's wife is safe when the King is around. You did well to leave when you did.' He hesitated. 'What happened to Samantha?'

'My sister, Lady Caroline Ramsden, had gone to Paris so I went to visit her,' I deliberately over-simplified. 'I found that she had died and that my sister, the new Lady Ramsden, was there alone. The three of us left for Essex.'

'And then?'

'Then there was a terrible storm and she...she fell overboard. We tried desperately to save her.'

'Did you lose her then?'

'Not at first. Lady Ramsden dived in and rescued her but she died later. The full autopsy is on file in Paris.'

He paused for a long time and then sent the Captain for food. When they were alone, he spoke again. 'Mr Bosville, I have to tell you that I know all this.'

Andrew was shocked. 'Then why are you not satisfied?'

'I am totally satisfied. You see, I needed an excuse to see you. We are not all wholeheartedly behind Parliament. I pray that I can confide in you?'

'Yes, sir.'

'You understand that if you give me away, I shall deny all knowledge of this conversation and have you executed for treason?'

'You can trust us,' added Mary Beth.

'Very well. I need another agent on the Continent. I am acting on behalf of General Monck and Sir Thomas Fairfax who, as you may already know, strongly opposed the execution of the King. We are also very unhappy about the way events are heading in England but need to be sure we can trust the new King. If we cannot, we must make the best of the present circumstances.'

'What do you want me to do?'

'I want you to go to France and the Netherlands from time-to-time and keep us informed as to the current situation. You will be ideal. You speak French and you know the city of Paris and some of the Princes. I have the power to appoint official agents of Parliament so, on the surface, you will be the agent for the government. In truth, you will keep me informed of the true situation.'

'How do you know you can trust me?'

'By your replies concerning my niece. You had opportunity to lie or make up some cock-and-bull story but you didn't. You told me the truth which I already knew. If you had lied, I would have had no alternative but to have you imprisoned and then possibly executed.'

'Sir John, your trust is not misplaced. Like my father, all I want is a peaceful, united England.'

'Amen to that. There are fanatics in Parliament who will not have Royalty back at any cost and will fight to the death to retain power. Cromwell is starting to be like that and he has his relatives, Fleetwood and Desborough, pushing him forward so they can benefit financially. You see, it is not just Kings who can be corrupt. Some of our godly Presbyterian leaders are the most corrupt of all.'

'So I have heard.'

'Captain Bosville - you see I even know your rank - the moderates of England are placing their trust in you and the very future of England may depend upon what you now do. Are you willing to accept that load of responsibility?'

'Yes, sir. The future of the country is very close to my heart.'

'Then mention this conversation to no-one, army spies are everywhere. Speak only to myself, George Monck or Sir Thomas direct. Do you understand?'

'Perfectly. I have but one request.'

'Name it.'

'That my sister accompany me.'

He looked up. 'Lady Ramsden?'

Mary Beth nodded. 'I will accompany my brother wherever he goes.'

'You realise that I can offer you no security, don't you? Either of you. The most I can do is to show you on the government payroll officially. That will protect you from the army. However, if the truth becomes known, nothing will protect you from the vengeance of the Royalists.'

They shook hands as the Captain returned, looking puzzled.

'It appears there has been some mistake, Captain Thompson. We must find lodgings for them overnight and then you must escort these good people home in the morning.'

'Sir?' Mary Beth asked. 'Does London always smell like this?'

'No,' he laughed. 'In summer, it is much worse.'

'Does it not produce disease?'

'The doctors keep telling us it will cause a plague but I don't suppose it will ever get that bad. We've only had one outbreak in the South of England in the last year and that was in Westminster. Serves the politicians right, eh Thompson?'

The Captain was obviously reluctant to commit himself on such a controversial subject so he begged his leave and showed the couple where to eat and then where they could stay. The rooms were fairly comfortable, even for the bloated Mary Beth.

'Thank you for coming,' Andrew said to his wife as they lay in bed by candlelight.

'I was not going to risk you leaving me again, even if it wasn't your fault this time.'

'I did make you a promise.'

'And you had better keep it, too. You are not going galavanting all over France and leaving me behind.'

'But the baby?'

'Even babies like France, I hear. The baby comes, too.'

'I was thinking more of while it is unborn.'

'It will be born in April or May and I don't suppose it will be practical or possible to cross the Channel before then.'

'You are probably right. I guess things will wait until then.'

It was a long time before Andrew went to sleep. Something Sir John had said kept nagging at his mind. He couldn't place it, but he was worried. If half of what he suspected was true, the two of them were in far more trouble than they could ever imagine.

Saturday 19th February 1653

They arrived back at Rettendon by mid-afternoon and it was certainly a pleasure to be out of London. The fresh air, cold though it was, was better by far than an atmosphere one could almost taste. As soon as they arrived, Andrew sent Mary Beth upstairs to rest and cornered his sister in the library. 'Rachel. There is something I must ask and it is important you tell me the complete truth.'

'Andrew,' said his offended sister. 'I've never lied to you in my whole life.'

'I didn't mean to suggest you had,' he soothed. 'It's just that there is something I have to know and I need to know it all.'

'I'm all ears,' she said, facing him with her hands around her knees. He held out his hands and she looked puzzled but took them in her own.

'Rachel, when did Mark first get the plague?'

'Why, it was last May. Just after Donald took over from Doctor Hamish.'

'Where did he catch it?'

She shrugged. 'At market, I guess.'

'Was he ever away for several days at a time?'

'Andrew, what is this?'

'Please bear with me, this is very important.'

She looked at him for a long time, deep in thought. 'I don't think so. Wait a minute, yes, when the rains held him up.' She was suddenly concerned. 'Andrew, what's wrong?'

'Where did he go?'

'To Rumford. Tell me, what's the matter?'

'There was no plague at Rumford.'

'Then it must have been at Chelmers Ford.'

'No, Rachel. No plague at Chelmers Ford, nor Colchester, nor Maldon. In fact, in the whole of last year, there was only one outbreak of plague in the whole of the South of England.'

She let go of his hands. 'Tell me.'

'Westminster.'

'Westminster? Why on earth would my Mark have gone to Westminster?'

'Why indeed? Last February, Parliament passed the Act of Pardon and Oblivion which granted amnesty to some Royalists as well as promises of land in Ireland. It also meant that common people in England could have their land confiscated if they did not comply with certain conditions.'

'What are you trying to tell me?'

'Rachel, I don't know. It's just that there was something odd about the conversation I had with Sir John Grenville. He seemed to know a lot more about us than he should. It may have nothing at all to do with Mark. It's just that it is quite a coincidence, isn't it? The Act is passed in February, land is offered for the next few months by Westminster and, apparently, Mark goes to Westminster.'

'Are you trying to say that my Mark was a traitor? 'cos if you are...'

'No, not exactly. I just don't know. I am about to stick my neck out along with Mary Beth and there are things which don't sit right. Are we being played for fools? Is the whole thing going to backfire on us?'

'I can't believe Mark was a traitor.'

'I don't find it easy, either. But how else can you explain it?'

'I can't. What will you do?'

'We have no choice but to go ahead, but very, very carefully.'

THE blow came a fortnight later. Parliament met on the 16th and passed the Instrument of Government. Issued by Cromwell, it was a remarkable document. Cromwell himself was to be appointed Lord Protector, his powers limited only by the Council of State, who were to hold office for life. The Instrument redistributed Parliamentary representation. Seats in the House of Commons were to be spread much more liberally among the strongly Puritan manufacturing towns such as Manchester, Leeds and Halifax. Sixty seats were to be distributed among the Irish and Scots as Cromwell saw fit. The idea was to ensure that a more reliable, co-operative and effective Parliament was in power. In effect, Britain had become a republic with a dictator as its leader; a dictator who had become a religious fanatic, believing himself to be the Messiah. Laws were passed outlawing gaming, dancing, Christmas, drunkenness, adultery and many other things. Freedom of speech was curtailed and all books had to be licensed and censored. There was total freedom of religion provided you were either Puritan or Puritan and there were severe penalties for not attending and supporting the Church of Cromwell's choice. Andrew was beginning to understand what it was that Sir John had feared and it had now happened. This was not the way towards a peaceful England. Come the spring, he was going to be busy.

Monday 9th May 1653

One of the happiest days of Andrew's life. Mary Beth went into labour a month prior to her twentieth birthday and, just before six in the morning, presented him with a son. He couldn't stop talking about it and, by lunch time, the exciting news of a son born to the Countess of Ramsden

was the talk of the county.

It was a dark time to be born. Following the issue of the Instrument of government, Cromwell had unilaterally dissolved Parliament on 20th April. Receiving opposition from the Council of State for his action, he formally had it suspended and ordered his army officers to support him. At his orders, musqueteers cleared the House and prevented a return to Parliament and Cromwell and his close relatives, Lambert and Desborough, were now in complete control of the nation.

That afternoon, Rettendon Hall had a visitor. Captain Thompson and two soldiers reigned in at the front door, and Andrew hurried down to meet them.

'Good Afternoon, Captain Thompson,' he said, shaking hands with him. 'Do come in. You'll stay for tea?'

'That's very kind of you, Mr Bosvile.'

'Not at all. Perhaps your men would like to take the horses around to the stables to be fed and watered. I will arrange for food for them, too.'

'Thank you, sir.' He removed his helmet and sword, which was a good omen, and followed Andrew into the library. 'Is Lady Ramsden well?'

'She is in bed, Captain. The baby finally arrived.' Andrew saw no reason to be unco-operative with him. Whatever he had come for, he was merely doing his duty and not at all like some of his fanatical leaders.

'Congratulations to her. Boy or girl?'

'It's a boy. He has not been named yet.'

'Very good, sir.' He sat down and Andrew arranged with Annie, the cook, for food for Captain Thompson and his men.

'To what do I owe the pleasure of your company?' Andrew asked as they were eating.

'I bring a message from Sir John. I was asked to ensure you received it personally.' The Captain drew a sealed paper from his document case and handed it to his host. 'Tell me, sir. How well do you know the King?'

Was this a trick question? 'I once thought I knew him well but he has changed a lot. I have only met him a couple of times over the last year or so.'

'Does he really want to bring back Catholicism to England?'

Andrew shook his head firmly. 'Not likely. In fact, even his mother, Queen Henriette, has been very kind to many Protestants in France. Charles has insisted that his brother, Henry, is brought up as a Protestant like his sister, Mary. I can assure you, there is no danger of Catholicism being forced upon anyone.'

'How about Presbyterianism?'

'From what I understand, Charles has no desire to inflict any kind of state religion upon his people. Quite the opposite, in fact. He wishes to allow complete freedom of religion to all. That's where he fell out with the Scots.'

'You don't mind my asking, do you? We hear so many conflicting stories.'

'There are many things the King says and does which I do not agree with, particularly his views towards the sanctity of marriage. He has changed a lot since we were boys together.'

'I'm afraid power does that to you, Mr Bosvile. Nothing is certain anymore. Do you realise that the Army have not been paid for six months? That fact alone is a great test on the integrity of the most loyal soldier.'

'I'm sure it is.' Andrew looked at the paper Captain Thompson had given him earlier. 'Do you wish to take back a reply?'

'I do believe some sort of response is expected.'

'Very well, will you wait? Better still, do you wish to stay the night here?'

'I was going to arrange to stay at the inn at Wickford.'

'Then stay here instead. You will find that Annie is an excellent cook and my sister, Rachel, a charming host.'

'You have twisted my arm.' He smiled and sat down again.

'Very well. Make yourself at home while I arrange it and formulate a reply to Sir John.'

Andrew spoke briefly to Annie and then opened the letter. It read:-

Dear Captain Bosvile

I fear I must call on your services sooner than I had originally anticipated. Anne of Austria and Cardinal Mazarin have been re-installed at Court in Paris. Cardinal De Retz, has been imprisoned at Vincennes and the Prince of Conde has joined the Spaniards. De Witt has offered a peace treaty between England and Holland and such a treaty could seriously upset the balance of power on the continent. It is imperative that the true situation is ascertained as soon as possible. My agents in Holland are giving me feedback on the situation there and I have some news from Paris.

I now need someone who knows the Royalists, to go to the Spanish Netherlands and find out as much as possible. It is believed that Cardinal Mazarin is about to expel the Royalists from France. That being so it should be possible to gain all the known facts from a simple trip to Brussels. Please simply indicate a simple 'yes' or 'no' and the date to Captain Thompson and I will arrange with General Monck for the fleet to ignore your boat on its crossing. Please be assured of my support as much as is possible under circumstances I am sure you will understand.

Kindest regards,

J. Grenville

Commander-in-Chief: Military Intelligence

Andrew read the letter twice, pocketed it and wondered if Captain Thompson knew or suspected any of the contents. The seals had not been broken so he assumed not, but he could not afford to take any chances. It was not just his own life which was at stake, he also had a wife to consider, and now a small son. He must tread very carefully indeed.

'Well, Captain,' he said. 'You must be the first outside the family to see my new son. Come.'

Andrew led the way upstairs and knocked on Mary Beth's door. She responded and they entered.

'Good evening, dearest. You have a visitor. You remember Captain Thompson from London?'

'How could I forget? Welcome to my home. You will excuse me if I do not get up?'

'Of course, My Lady. I am pleased to see you are well. Is this the little one?' He reached his finger into the crib and touched the baby's cheek.

'Do you have a family, Captain?' asked Mary Beth.

'Two, My Lady. Both girls. Jane is twelve and Belinda is nine. They are at our home in Yorkshire.'

'My father was from Yorkshire,' Andrew said. 'From Hellaby, near Rotherham.'

'My family is from York. My father worked for the late Ferdinando Lord Fairfax on his estate at Denton. The Army suffered when Sir Thomas retired. He was a good, brave man who could be relied upon. You could always take his word as truth.'

'So I understand.' Andrew committed himself no further in that, being unsure of the Captain's loyalties.

After saying his goodnight to Mary Beth, the Captain went to ensure his men's welfare before retiring himself.

'Do you think you can trust him, Andrew?' asked Mary Beth.

'We may have no choice at the moment. He believes me to be working on behalf of Parliament and only Sir John knows the truth. I guess we just have to be careful.'

'Why did he come?'

'He brought a letter from Sir John.' He handed it to her and she read carefully.

'You wouldn't be considering going without me, would you?'

'I wouldn't dream of it. Anyway, I need you to help me with Seagull. The only problem is the baby.'

'Henry. After his adopted grandfather. What do you think?'

'All right by me. Yes, Henry sound fine.'

'What do you see as the problem with Henry?'

'I don't feel I want to risk him at sea right now. It could be dangerous. It also will restrict our movement and reduce our credibility as brother and sister.'

'Are you saying I can't come with you?'

'Not at all. I just think that Henry would be safer if you left him behind with Rachel.'

'Will she have him?'

Andrew smiled wryly. 'If I know my sister, she'll jump at the chance to play mother hen.'

'Very well. If I am to choose between him and you, I choose you. I'll arrange it with Rachel in the morning. Do we have to leave immediately?'

'Not for a few days. I must make sure you are well enough to travel.'

'I'll be fine. I've been in bed long enough already.'

'But Henry's not a day old yet.'

'That's plenty long enough to stay in bed.'

'You didn't say that just after we were married.'

'That's because we had something with which to occupy our minds.' She then laughed. 'Well, perhaps not our minds.'

Monday 15th August 1653

It was, in fact, three months before they could leave because Mary Beth had a reoccurrence of her bronchial infection after the birth of her baby and was in bed for several weeks afterwards. It was nothing too serious, but it did delay their departure until August. In retrospect, it was a good thing that it did.

They had sailed Seagull across the North Sea and up the Schelde estuary as far as Anvers and it was there they had been stopped by Spanish cutters. Andrew and Mary Beth smiled and were led respectfully to the Commandant. Andrew spoke no Spanish whatsoever, and the Commandant knew no English but understood enough of Andrew's French to realise he wished to be reunited with the other English Royalists. The uniformed official then used a name he had not forgotten. Taken under escort to Bruxelles, they were led to the Chateau Royal at Koninklijk.

'Generalissimo,' announced the Capitaine proudly. 'We have caught two French spies.'

'Fool!' roared the General. 'Have you not yet learned to tell the difference between French spies and English spies?'

The Spanish Capitaine withered noticeably and was dismissed from his presence leaving the couple to wonder what would come next.

Condé smiled. 'Can I never get rid of you two? Everywhere I go, you turn up eventually.'

'Bonjour, Louis,' proffered Mary Beth who went up to him and kissed his cheek, which went quite a long way to letting the wind out of his sails.

'Lady Ramsden, it is good to see you. Captain Bosville, I did not expect to see you again.'

Andrew bowed respectfully. 'Your Highness, we come as friends.'

'My memory is not so short. I have not forgotten your visit to me at Vincennes and it was a gesture not to be taken lightly. I have also not forgotten your brave action at the Bastille - you

saved my life that day. I am grateful for that and you are welcome anywhere in the Spanish colonies.'

'You are too kind, Your Highness. I am glad you were able to be released from the prison.'

'It took some time. I'm afraid I am not very popular in France these days. If I return, I am to be executed at once.'

'What went wrong with the Plot?' asked Mary Beth.

'Nothing. We achieved what was intended. Parlement have agreed to ensure that the Dauphin is crowned formally as King by next summer. By then, he will be sixteen and able to take on some of his responsibilities. His mother has been very ill of late and not able to share much in the regency. Mazarin is still there, of course, making trouble, as usual.'

'What has happened to the leader in Paris, De Retz?'

'Still in Vincennes, I'm afraid. We are unable to help him.'

'So are you still at war with the French Court?'

'Officially, yes. Though, at the moment, it is a matter of holding onto possessions in Picardy and Lorraine. I fear that, soon, France will attempt to reclaim some of these Spanish gains. There will then be war once more.'

'Could they do it?'

'Not alone. But there is talk that the English government will supply soldiers to France.'

'Where is King Charles at the moment?'

'He journeys between here and Cologne. If the English Parliament chooses to fight with Mazarin, your Royalists will fight alongside ourselves. Most of them are here, in Bruxelles, now.'

'I see.'

'And what is your position in the matter, Captain Bosvile?'

'I still hope to see peace. In England, things are very difficult. Cromwell is practically sole ruler and has brought in social and religious reforms that have infuriated the nation. I am here on behalf of those who would sue for peace.'

The Prince laughed. 'I never quite know whether I can completely trust you two devious characters.'

'Your Highness, we have never lied to you. Our position has always been one of neutrality as far as it is possible.'

'I can assure you that it is not possible. Neutrality went out of the window when Charles's father was executed. Now everyone has an ulterior motive. What's yours?'

'Peace. That is all.'

'Peace? In England?'

'In all Europe if that were possible.'

'What about you, Mary Beth? What are your desires?'

'My desires are what they always have been. Love of a good man, security for my family.'

'Family?'

'I have a son named Henry.'

'Then congratulations are in order to yourself and Lord Ramsden.'

Andrew smiled to himself. Condé obviously did not yet know of John Henry's death. Perhaps it was better that way.

Mary Beth thought much the same and simply said, 'Thank you, Your Highness.'

'Have you come in your little boat?'

'Yes. Seagull is berthed at Anvers.'

'The safest place. While you are in the Spanish Netherlands, you must have complete freedom of movement. I will trust you with a pass on two conditions.'

'And what are they?' asked Mary Beth warily.

'Don't look so suspicious, Mary Beth. They are simple ones. Firstly that you stay as my guests here at the Chateau.'

'And the second condition?'

'That you attend a ball tonight here in my honour. I respectfully request the first dance.' He took

Mary Beth's hand in his own. 'Please do not refuse me this time.'

Mary Beth beamed. 'Refuse you? I would be honoured. I will wear a special dress for you.'

'Then I will see you tonight at eight. I will instruct that fool of a Capitaine to take good care of you. A ce soir, mes amis.'

He rang a bell and the officer took them to their rooms. As soon as he had gone, Andrew crossed to Mary Beth's and knocked.

'Come in Andrew, it's not locked.'

'Aren't you taking a bit of a chance with Condé about?'

'Not a bit. He and I understand each other and it is like a game with us. I promise not to go anywhere alone with him, I'm not that stupid any more.'

'I'm sure you're not. I just worry for you. What's this business about a dress?'

'Oh, it's just a little secret we have.' She opened her wooden chest and drew out a ball gown with no shoulders or back.

Andrew looked astonished. 'You're going to wear that?'

'Of course. I shall be a sensation.'

'You will when you tumble out of it.'

'I didn't at Henriette's ball.'

'No. But don't forget that certain parts of you have developed a bit since you've been feeding Henry. You'll fall out every time you breathe in.'

She put her fingers to her mouth. 'Yes, I will, won't I?'

'Mary Beth. If you tease me, I'll get very angry.'

'Oh, Andrew,' she said, putting her hands round his neck. 'You'll be there and I won't embarrass you. I'll alter it a bit. Measure me, will you.' She handed him a cloth measure.

'Where do I measure you?'

'Well, I haven't grown up any further, have I? Start with the waist.'

He measured. 'Twenty-three inches.'

'The hips.'

'Hips?'

'Bottom.'

'Oh. Thirty-four inches. No, nearly thirty-five.'

'And the bust.'

'I know what that is,' he said as he measured. 'Thirty-six.'

'That's two inches more than last time. So, an inch extra on the waist. I think there is enough slack to allow for that. I will have to allow a bit at the top. Here, help me try it on.' She stripped off and slipped it over her head.

'Mary Beth, you worry me.'

'Andrew.' She kissed him then lay her head on his chest. 'Don't worry. I'll behave myself, I promise.'

'Look. I don't mind the flirting. It could be necessary to get the information we need. But, if I find out that someone has been going too far, I'll attack the both of you. He can tickle your feet, rub your tum, even blow in your ear but the minute he tries to bed you, he's dead, no matter who he is.'

'What if he's the King?' she teased.

'Especially if it's the King. Just think, if I killed him, Cromwell would probably make me Prime Minister.'

Mary Beth laughed. 'He probably would, but it will not come to that. You have my word on it. Tell me, though, does it work both ways?'

'Naturally. But it'll be easy for me. There is no-one here that fancies me.'

'Oh there will be lots of young, available Princesses, I'm sure. But I'll be good and level headed.'

'I'm more worried about a situation where things might start getting out of control.'

'Then I'd better alter my dress so that my things stay under control, hadn't I?'

EVEN with the dress adjusted, Mary Beth was the sensation of the evening. There was however, another person there who came close. Someone whom Andrew had not seen for some time. Someone who came with George Villiers.

'Hullo, Andrew,' she said with a Welsh lilt.

Andrew turned at the greeting. 'Lucy, how good to see you.'

She took his arm. 'What are you doing in Bruxelles?'

'It's a secret,' he whispered in her ear.

'You must tell me more of this secret. May I have a dance, later?'

'Aren't I supposed to ask you that?'

'Yes, but you are a gentleman. Is your little wife here?'

'I'm afraid not. You see, she died a while back.'

'Oh I'm sorry, Andrew.' She seemed genuinely upset. 'Does that mean you are single and fancy free?'

'In a manner of speaking.'

'What do you mean by that?'

'My sister, Lady Ramsden, is with me. She's dancing with Prince Condé at the moment.'

'Yes, I see her. Tell me, how on earth does she manage to stay inside that dress?'

'With great difficulty. If you hear a sudden hush come over the room, you'll know she finally had to breathe out.'

Lucy laughed pleasantly and stood very close indeed. George had brought her but seemed, for the moment, to be more concerned with two waitresses who had trays of drinks.

Andrew nodded in that direction. 'I see George hasn't changed.'

'Not a bit. He and I have fallen out. He's been trying to get to England to see Mary Fairfax.'

'Sir Thomas has a daughter?'

Lucy nodded. 'She is very young but, of course, that's not likely to worry George, is it? He tried every way he could to get his hands on Lord Argyll's daughter but she was shrewd enough to turn him down. I guess he sees bedding young Mary as a way to get his estates back from her father.'

'I can't see Sir Thomas allowing that to happen. Are you still seeing Charles?'

'Not any more. I'm much too old for him now I've turned nineteen. He likes his mistresses young. The one he's messing around with at the moment looks barely thirteen. I'm no use to him because I'm used goods.'

'Not too used, I hope.'

'I'll show you later,' she said from beneath long, black eyelashes and, before he could respond to such a blatant invitation which would have taken all his self-control to turn down, she said, 'come on, let's dance.'

They danced several dances and Andrew calculated very quickly that it would be impossible for anyone to dance with this dark-haired beauty without getting completely aroused. Whether it was the look in her eye or the way she moved herself tantalisingly, he didn't know. He eventually had to leave her before he did something they'd all regret.

Mary Beth had been right, there were a good many young Princesses and daughters of Nobles. He enjoyed very much dancing with Sir Edward Hyde's daughter, Anne, who was quite the opposite of Lucy: No suggestive comments or glances; no improper movements or advances; she was a well-bred young lady and her smile was warm and genuine. At the end of the dance, Andrew took her by the hand and escorted her back to her father, who smiled his thanks. She was very young but Andrew noticed she was already receiving many admiring glances and Sir Edward would be very wise to keep his daughter on a very short leash. Andrew thanked Anne and she smiled a smile that made him go wobbly at the knees. Mary Beth was dancing with someone different every time he saw her and she looked as if she was enjoying herself immensely, and he was happy for her.

It was about then that he first noticed Lucy was missing. Perhaps she has gone to powder her nose, he thought. It was not until sometime later, when he saw George Villiers walk in through the big, glass doors leading to the balcony, that he remembered he still had not seen Lucy for some

time.

Andrew didn't know what it was which gave him that twinge of apprehension. He was also more than a little worried by the sly smirk on George's face so, putting his glass of wine down, he made his way surreptitiously towards the entrance. When everyone started dancing again, he quietly slipped outside onto the wide balcony which was empty except for a couple chatting at one end. Then, walking slowly down the side steps, he went into the garden which also appeared empty. The big fountain looked magnificent in the moonlight as he walked around admiring it.

Carefully searching the lawns, he softly called out her name but with no response. He was about to go back to the house when he heard the moan and turned but could see no-one. Feeling his way towards the source of the sound, he almost fell over her in the darkness and bending down to look at her, was horrified.

If he had not known who he was looking for, he would not have recognised Lucy. Her beautiful party dress had been brutally ripped from her body and lay around in blood-soaked pieces. He was no expert but, by the look of the blood on her legs, she had been the victim of a vicious rape.

That was not all. Her lips and gums were bleeding and some of her teeth looked broken. Her face and eyes were puffy and swollen and her hair was matted with blood. Gently, he looked her over for serious injury and then picked her up carefully and carried her nearer to the fountain. There, he gently washed her with the cold water then held her in his arms like a baby as the spray from the fountain soaked them both.

'Lucy, who did this to you?'

'It was George,' she said with great difficulty. 'He's taken away my son.'

'Taken your son? How?'

'He tricked me into coming here so that his men could steal James away.'

'Why on earth would he do that?'

'He said I wasn't good enough to be the boy's mother.'

'How do you know they've got him?'

'George asked me to come outside with him. I thought he wanted a bit of fun, so I came.' Yes, she would. Lucy never could resist a bit of hanky-panky. 'Then he took sadistic delight in showing me the scarf James had been wearing when I had left him with his nanny. They'd taken him away to be brought up by Lord Crofts. I threatened to tell everyone that they had stolen my baby, so they took me.'

'They?'

'George had three men with him who hurt me a lot, and every time I cried out they hit me in the face. When they had finished, they told me I ought to go and kill myself. I shouted at them so they held me down and used a big stick on me.'

Andrew examined her as best he could. There seemed to be no broken bones, but she looked as if she had lost a considerable amount of blood. At her home, he undressed her and put her to bed.

'Don't go,' she said as he stood looking at her. 'Please stay with me. I promise not to seduce you.' She laughed and started coughing as Andrew nodded and lay on the bed beside her. In the condition she was in, it was going to be a long time before she seduced anyone again.

MARY Beth had danced with almost everyone. Some were gentlemen, others were not. One who was definitely not held her very close, smelt of Brandy and insisted on rubbing himself against her as they danced in an attempt to force her assets out onto the open market.

'George, behave yourself,' she said.

'But Lady Ramsden, I want you.'

'But you can't have me. I am spoken for.'

'Ah, the noble Lord Ramsden. I notice he has not come with you. Instead, you are with the gallant Captain Bosvile.'

'He is my brother.'

He allowed one of his hands to descend below her waist. 'So I've heard.'

'George, you're embarrassing me. Please move your hand, I don't like it.'

'Spoilsport. You have a lovely bottom. I could do things with a bottom like yours.'

'It wouldn't suit you.'

'Do not jest, my dear. I mean it.'

'Lord Buckingham, you're drunk.'

'Lady Ramsden. I am as much drunk as you are here on innocent business.'

'What do you mean by that?' she asked suspiciously.

'I believe you to be Parliament spies.'

'Don't talk rubbish,' she said with her pulse racing.

'Talking rubbish am I? Then where is the good Captain tonight?'

'Somewhere about, I expect.' She looked around her but Andrew was not in sight.

'I'll tell you where he is. He needs information for your precious Cromwell, so he is with the charming and very alluring Lucy Walter.'

'Don't lie to me.'

'Why should I lie? I know exactly where he is and what he's doing with her, because my men are watching him doing it.'

Mary Beth stopped. 'What do you mean?'

'I mean that I have you both just where I want you. The continued good health of Captain Bosville totally depends upon your attitude towards me for the next hour or so. Indulge my every whim and I will let him be. Refuse me and...'

She looked at him sharply. 'You wouldn't?'

'I would, and will. And it's not just your bottom I'm after.'

'I could call for help.'

'Yes, you could. But by doing so, you would sign your brother's death warrant. Anyway, you wouldn't want to interfere with his night of passion, would you?'

Mary Beth saw no option but to appear to give in and find out exactly what was going on. 'What do you want me to do?'

'In a moment, I will leave. You will smile sweetly, say your goodnights to Prince Condé, and then follow me to my coach outside. One night with me would not be so bad, I promise you. Lucy doesn't complain a bit.'

'Very well. You give me little choice.'

The music finished and the Duke of Buckingham headed for the door. Mary Beth gave her thanks and said goodnight to the Prince and walked out of the ballroom. George was waiting outside and he smiled a sly smile as she entered his coach. It was already dark and she felt cold in spite of the fact that it was a pleasantly warm evening. Not a word was spoken as they headed south, out of town for a mile or so. Eventually, the coach drew up in front of a dilapidated building and they got out. He pointed the way and she climbed the stairs onto a small landing and entered the bedroom as he firmly closed the door. The room was a large one, sparsely decorated, and contained nothing but a huge four-poster bed. The Duke guided her to the centre of the space at the bottom of it and sat down to watch.

For a long time, neither of them moved until he smiled. 'Take your clothes off, Lady Ramsden. All of them.'

Mary Beth hadn't know exactly what to expect as her fingers pulled at the ties of her bodice, but she knew he had brought her here for some grossly immoral purpose. She hated having to stoop to this level but if it was going to save Andrew's life, she would do anything, even if he had betrayed her and was now making mad, passionate love to that Lucy Walter girl. As the dress slipped from her body, she wondered exactly what sort of treatment George had in mind for her. She had heard a great many rumours so one thing was absolutely certain, he would make sure that whatever perversions he was about to inflict upon the more delicate parts of her anatomy, it would be excruciatingly painful. From the look on his face as her last item of clothing was removed, she also resigned herself to the fact that it would also be disgustingly obscene.

'Are you going to rape me now?' she asked as he unashamedly ogled her naked body.

'No,' he said as the door opened to let in three other men who stood looking and laughing at her

for a long time. 'They are.'

George Villiers laughed as the men dragged her to the bed and lashed her wrists and ankles firmly to the four corners of it, stretching her spread-eagle across it.

He stood looking down at her, running his hand over her bare skin. 'Now you will find out how we deal with Cromwell's spies, my dear Lady Ramsden. I'm sure you would have preferred a quick, painless death, but it would be a shame to waste such a lovely body on a hangman. This way is much better. You will find that my men are experts in a work they seem to enjoy immensely, so I wish you a very, very painful night, my dear.'

He turned and then stopped in the doorway. 'Oh, by the way, my men have already had some excitement this evening, so they may take a little longer than usual.'

He returned to the bedside and, pulling out his handkerchief, stuffed it into her mouth as she trembled violently. 'We wouldn't want you to keep the neighbours awake with your screams, would we?'

His smile was the smile of a wolf before he ate as he turned to their leader. 'This time, get it right. You've got several hours of darkness left so you don't need to rush. When you have finished using her, abuse her in any way you wish and then throw her mutilated body into the river.'

'Just leave her to me,' the leader said. 'I know exactly what to do.'

He pulled out a two-foot-long piece of rough wood and Mary Beth shook her head in stark terror as he held it front of her face so that she could see it clearly. For about half its length, it was covered with blood which had not yet dried.

Tuesday 16th August 1653

Prince Louis, Duke of Condé, was puzzled. Lady Ramsden had looked so happy earlier in the evening but she had said goodnight just now and looked terrified. From personal experience, he knew she was not one to be easily worried so he followed her out to the doorway, stroking his short beard.

So, she's going with George Villiers, is she? She has good reason to be worried. Now where would she go with him? And why? And where was her brother? Condé had not seen him for an hour or so. This smells bad. *Was this group of English Royalists planning some treachery?* He summoned his Capitaine. 'Some men, quickly.'

The officer went inside and came out almost immediately with a group of soldiers.

Condé pointed. 'To horse, we must follow that coach, but do not let them see us.'

They followed at a discreet distance until the coach stopped in the Anderlecht District. He saw Mary Beth and George Villiers step down and enter a disreputable looking house and, after a few minutes, another group went into the same house. They waited a few more minutes, but no-one else arrived.

'So, my little flower,' he said, mainly to himself. 'You would deceive your Prince, would you? Maybe a taste of Vincennes is what you need after all.' He spoke. 'Capitaine, you and your men surround the house. The rest of you, come with me.'

Condé strode forward and crept quietly up the stairs. At the top was a small landing and only one doorway showed light under it. He motioned to his men but before they could move, the door opened. He shot out his hand and grabbed the person coming out by the throat and pushed him roughly down the stairs to his waiting men. The Prince then drew his sword and entered the room and was horrified. Two men were molesting Mary Beth on the bed while the third was kneeling between her widely spread legs.

Condé's sword hit her attacker squarely between the shoulder blades. The others let go of her breasts so as to defend themselves but they were quickly overpowered. He grabbed the dead man by the hair and dragged him from the bed and cut Mary Beth free. She curled up into the fetal position and lay trembling violently, her body spattered with blood. Her rescuer looked at her for a moment, then took off his cape and lay it over her and sent his men away with their wounded prisoners. He then sat on the bed and held her hand. So she was not betraying him, after all. After a long time, she opened her eyes and he stroked her face gently. 'Nearly, my sweet.' He held up

finger and thumb, almost touching. 'You came this close.'

Mary Beth sat up and clutched at his arm, her head on his shoulder and, in time, the sobbing subsided.

After a few moments, he went to the next room and brought back water in a jug along with a metal bowl. 'I will wait outside.'

Twenty minutes later, she came down the stairs fully dressed.

'Are you all right?' asked the Prince.

She nodded, but she was far from all right and they both knew it. 'Louis, we must find Andrew.'

'Your brother? Where is he likely to be?'

'I have a feeling he may be at the home of Lucy Walter. Do you know where that is?'

'Of course. Jump up onto my horse.'

She did and they rode the short journey together. At the house, there was a faint light on upstairs but no sign of life. Condé had brought two soldiers with him in case of trouble, but there was no-one to fight. Condé motioned to his men to wait while he crept toward the house, Mary Beth right behind him. They went slowly and carefully up the stairs and, at the top, Louis signalled to Mary Beth to wait. He cocked his pistol and slowly pushed open the door. The light was dim but he could clearly see a girl lying, asleep, on the bed. He stepped carefully forward until the point of a sword pricked his neck.

'Come inside where I can see you,' said the voice and then, 'Louis, what on earth are you doing here?'

Condé glanced at the sleeping girl and then back to Andrew. 'I might ask you the same thing, mon ami.'

The young Englishman put his finger to his lips and indicated that they should go outside. Then he saw Mary Beth. He smiled at her but she did not smile back so he ushered them both into the room opposite and lit a lamp. 'How did you find me?'

Mary Beth was barely controlling her temper. 'The Duke of Buckingham told me where I would find you.'

'George? Where is he?'

'In prison by now,' said the Prince. 'What's going on?'

Andrew sighed. 'It's a long story.'

'I'll bet it is,' said Mary Beth, losing her self control altogether. 'I get dragged away by George Villiers, practically raped and beaten to death by a gang of thugs and then rescued by Louis, only to find you here, playing around with Lucy Walter.'

'But it's not like that,' he said quickly.

'I'll bet it's not. We made promises together. I've kept my side of the bargain but it's a shame you didn't think it was serious enough to keep yours.'

'But, Mary Beth...'

'Don't "But Mary Beth" me, Andrew Bosville. I've had about enough of men tonight - you included.'

'Let me explain.'

'You don't need to explain anything. Finding you alone here with her is explanation enough and I now know just where I stand. You never meant to keep your side of our deal at all, did you?'

'Yes.'

'Yes what? Yes, you lied to me or yes, you took the little Welsh tart to bed.'

'Neither.'

'Don't you try to confuse me with clever words. I hate you and I don't ever want to see you again.'

'Very well. But before you go, say goodnight to Lucy.'

'I'll do more than say goodnight - I'll wring her pretty little neck.' She stormed out, slamming the door after her.

'Mon ami,' said the Prince thoughtfully. 'If that woman is your sister, then I am the Queen of Sheba.'

'Louis, I will let you into our little secret. Two years ago, Lord Ramsden died saving King

Charles's life at Worcester and Mary Beth and I were married last year.'

'Captain Bosville, it seems I owe you an apology. I thought for a while that you were spying for England.'

'I am.'

'What?'

'I am spying for England but not in the way that you think. There are many people, Royalists and Puritans, in England who want to see an end to the current situation and seek peace. I am working on behalf of those. I give you my word that I will not do anything to compromise your adopted nation or my King.'

'Andrew, that's good enough for me. What will you do about Mary Beth? She is upset, I know about these things.'

'By now she will have seen the state Lucy is in. She has been raped and beaten and is in a terrible state.'

'How bad?'

'If I hadn't found her when I did, I fear that she would not have lasted the night. I am not so sure now, she has lost a lot of blood.'

'I'll see that someone takes a look at her in the morning.'

'Thank you, Louis.'

'De rien, mon ami.'

The door opened and a very sheepish Mary Beth stood in the doorway. Andrew spoke to her gently. 'Mary Beth. Will you do me a very great favour?'

She nodded.

'Stay with Lucy tonight. She needs someone desperately and you will be better than me. I'll go with Louis and come back for you in the morning. Will you do that?'

She nodded. 'Andrew...I...'

He kissed her forehead. 'We'll talk in the morning. Go and get some rest.'

She smiled. 'Of course.'

Mary Beth went back into the room and, taking off her dress, slipped into bed with Lucy who half woke and turned over. Mary Beth saw her face again and cried, not only because of what she saw, but because if it hadn't been for the prompt action of Condé, she might be looking like that - floating face-down in the Zenne.

ANDREW accompanied the Prince to the local prison and went straight to Buckingham's cell. 'George. You are in serious trouble. For what you have done tonight, Condé has every right to have you publicly executed.'

'He wouldn't dare.'

Andrew looked at Condé who turned to his Capitaine. 'Take this man outside and hang him.'

'But you can't!' the Duke shouted, clutching at the bars of his cell. The Capitaine's men grabbed his arms and pulled him forward. 'No!' he screamed.

The Prince held up his hand. 'Why shouldn't I? You have desecrated two fine women tonight, one of them beaten almost to death. Perhaps, instead, we will have a public trial. We'll call it "This is what English Lords do for sport". We'll have the two ladies give evidence and you know what will happen? All the English Royalists will be thrown out of The Netherlands and probably out of all Europe. It will be the end of King Charles's last chance for his Kingdom. What do you think he will say when he finds out who was responsible?'

'But they are both spies for Parliament who intend to join Mazarin in his fight against you.'

'Don't be so stupid! I have known Captain Bosville and Lady Ramsden for some years and they fought against Mazarin and saved my own life in Paris. They are no more spies than you are.'

'I'll tell you something, George,' Andrew said. 'Mary Beth left her tiny baby and a sick bed to come here to support our King. She risked her life both on the sea and in a foreign land, and you dare to accuse her of spying for Cromwell and try to have her mutilated and killed. She would die first, and so would I. Because of what you have done tonight, I think your welcome in Europe just

ran out. In fact, I ought to kill you myself and I feel just in the mood for it right now.'

The Duke shrank back into his cell. 'I did not know.'

'You didn't try to find out, did you? You just listened to rumours instead. And why did you attack Lucy?'

'Because she threatened to hold on to her son.'

'And why shouldn't she? James is, after all, her child.'

'But he is also the King's son.'

'Does that mean you have the right to steal him from his mother? I'll bet King Charles knows nothing of this.'

'He gave orders to... persuade her.'

'You certainly persuaded her, didn't you George? If she survives the night, she will be physically and possibly mentally damaged for the rest of her life. Is that what Charles wanted? Because if it is, I'll join Cromwell right now. He may be a religious nut, but at least he is honest.'

'Perhaps this Cromwell should meet Monsieur Villiers,' suggested the Prince.

'An excellent idea, Louis. I think I'll take him back with me and dump him on Cromwell's doorstep.' He looked at the Duke. 'He'd love to get his hands on you and this story. Royalists will be laughed out of every town all over the world. If anyone is the traitor, it is you, my Lord Buckingham, and I'm ashamed to be called English with pigs like you around.'

'Are you serious about taking him back?' asked Condé.

'Your Highness. This is your jurisdiction, you must decide. Hang him now for all I care but, if you decide against that, I will willingly take him back to stand trial in England.'

'One thing is certain. He must leave the Netherlands, dead or alive. If you can take him, do so. If not, I'll hang him today.'

'Well, George. What's it to be?'

'I'll go to England.'

'Very well. But remember one thing, Mary Beth will be with me. The perpetuation of your life will depend to some extent on her as well as me. If you were to slip overboard while I was not looking, it wouldn't disturb my sleep one little bit. Oh, one last thing. If I find she is pregnant from this little escapade, you will find the new English laws on adultery are right up your street.'

'But I didn't touch her.'

'Then let's hope nobody else did either, for your sake. Goodnight, George. Pleasant dreams.'

As they left, the Duke looked a very worried man indeed.

AT daybreak, Andrew went to Lucy's home. When he got there, Mary Beth was up and about, looking after her charge and she managed a faint smile as he arrived. After kissing Mary Beth he then, totally ignoring the state of her battered face, kissed Lucy.

'Thanks, Andrew,' the young woman said, 'I needed that. You've just done wonders for my self-confidence.'

'You need someone to look after you, you do. You can't even be trusted to go for a walk in the garden without getting yourself beaten up.'

'Where's George?'

'In prison.'

'What will happen to him?'

'Louis wanted to hang him.'

'Did he do it?'

'No. I persuaded him onto another course of action.'

'Thank you, Andrew.'

'You don't sound too full of vengeance to me.'

'I love him.'

'What?' said Mary Beth and Andrew together.

'I love him.'

'After what he did to you? Lucy, he's had you raped by anyone he could find off the street, he's beaten you till your friends can barely recognise you and you still love him?'

'Yes.'

'Lucy, you're crazy. Utterly crazy.'

'What will happen to him?'

'I will take him back to England to stand trial.'

'I won't testify against him.'

'Then I had better tell Louis to hang him now. He's not going to get away with this sort of thing. And what about your son?'

'Charles is right. I could not bring him up in the way he wants. I am a very poor mother really.'

'Lucy, you just get yourself better. We'll talk about the future another day.'

'Thank you, Andrew.'

At that moment, the doctor Louis had sent arrived to look at her so the English pair left her in his capable hands. Andrew put his arm around Mary Beth's shoulders and they went into the other room whilst he examined her.

'Are you all right?' he asked.

'I'm all right now. Oh, Andrew. I hate myself.'

'Don't say anything, please.'

'I must. I feel so bad about the things I said. I had no idea.'

'I know you didn't. You're like George, you jump to conclusions.'

'Don't liken me to that... that... animal.'

'Mary Beth, it's what war does to you. When I first met George, he was happy-go-lucky and gay. He writes and plays music, did you know? But, as the years have gone by, I've seen what the frustration has done. Men like George will now do anything they can to get themselves back into power.'

'Don't try and excuse what he did to Lucy and tried to do to me.'

'I won't even start. There is no justification for actions like that but, unfortunately, it is a fact of life. He honestly believed us to be spies for Cromwell, though I am at a loss as to see how he could have found out. There must be a leak.'

'A Leak? From London? And why react the way he did?'

'He would have seen me leave with Lucy and calculated that he enough time in which to deal with you. Afterwards, his men would have come to the place where they knew I would be, and dealt with me, too.'

'I feel so bad about not trusting you.'

'Don't. I'll let you make it up to me tonight.'

She smiled. 'It's a deal.'

A few minutes later, the doctor came out.

'Well, doctor?'

'She's in a mess.'

'She will survive, won't she?' asked Mary Beth.

'Perhaps. For a while.'

'Is she really that bad?'

'Oh, yes. Her external injuries are relatively superficial. She will never look quite the same again, but her broken nose will heal and no one will see her missing teeth as long as she doesn't smile - not that she has much to smile about. No, it's her internal injuries I'm mostly worried about.'

'Internal injuries?' Mary Beth asked, involuntarily clutching at her abdomen.

'I'm afraid someone wanted to make very sure she never has children again.'

'She won't? From a raping?'

'There is not a chance of her having children again. I would say it will be impossible for her even to have intercourse ever again.'

'What on earth did they do to her?'

'Do you really want to know?'

Mary Beth went as white as a sheet but nodded slightly.

'They raped her, of course. All of them. But that could not account for all the damage. No, I would say she was repeatedly beaten in the stomach and lower abdomen with something akin to a club.'

Mary Beth suddenly remembered the stick the leader of the group had carried. It had been Lucy's blood which had stained it. She ran outside to be sick.

'Tell me,' Andrew said.

'She was pregnant, did you know?'

Andrew shook his head.

'They could have killed her by hitting her on the head, but they didn't. No, someone just wanted to make very sure her pregnancy was terminated and they certainly achieved that. Her insides are a mess.'

'Lucy said they had held her down and used a stick on her, but she didn't say how or where.'

'Who would do this to a young girl who had her whole life before her?'

The light was beginning to shine brighter the more Andrew thought about it. 'Someone who wanted who make sure that the baby could not be identified as his own. The poor girl. She opened her legs once too often.'

'Well, she certainly won't open them again. I have not exaggerated the damage, it is considerable.'

'What are her chances of survival?'

'If she ever gets up, she will start the bleeding again and die very quickly. How long she lives will depend on how long she is prepared to stay in bed.'

'Poor Lucy.'

'Is Lady Ramsden all right?'

'Physically, yes. Mentally, emotionally, I don't know. Prince Louis was only just in time to prevent the same thing happening to her.'

'There may not be anything I can do for Miss Walter, but there is a cure for your wife's condition.'

'What is that?'

'I prescribe love. Three times a day before meals and again before retiring.'

'Thank you, doctor. I will ensure she takes her medicine regularly.'

NO-ONE saw the dark figure as it crept silently towards the room where the two surviving attackers lay chained to their beds. No one heard the chopping sound the long sword made as it severed the heads from the healing bodies. No one cared.

Friday 2nd September 1653

George Villiers looked terrible when Andrew saw him next. He had not shaved for two weeks and the news about the deaths of his co-conspirators had not cheered him up any. His cell door opened with the squeak of rarely-used hinges and the guard was dismissed.

'What do you want?'

'Lucy sends her regards,' said Andrew, standing before him.

'Don't lie to me,' spat the Duke.

'Why did you kill her unborn child?'

Buckingham was quiet for a while. 'So you know.'

'Yes, I know and Lady Ramsden knows. But Condé does not yet know. When he finds out, he'll probably split you down the middle and roast you over hot coals.'

'He wouldn't dare.'

'George, when will you realise that you are alone? How many of your colleagues have been to see you here? How much help have you received from them? Condé can do just as he likes and no one will try to stop him, because everyone is disgusted by your course of action. Believe me, no-one will lift a finger to help you.'

He made no answer.

Andrew changed the subject. 'Why did you take away Lucy's son?'

'The King ordered it.'

'No, he didn't. He asked you to persuade Lucy to release James to Lord Crofts to be brought up as one of his own children. The means of persuasion was to be the money he gave you. What have you done with it?'

The Duke was perplexed. 'How do you know all this?'

'Because I have just returned from Cologne and had great difficulty in restraining King Charles from returning here himself to deal with you. I offered to act on his behalf.'

'Don't make me laugh. You, a Captain, deal with me, a Duke?'

'Colonel.'

'Colonel?'

'Colonel. Me, now a Colonel. You, now an ex-Lord.'

'Ex-Lord?'

'Yes. Lords have land and you haven't any, despite the fact that you've been in communication with Parliament over getting back your sequestered lands.'

'How...?'

'Because, over the last two weeks, I've been putting two and two together. My brother-in-law did the same and he made it four, didn't he? He saw you in Rumford during May last year when you were supposed to be here in Bruxelles raising money for the King's restoration. Mark recognised you and followed you to Westminster, didn't he? That's where the King's money went, on your secret trip to England. I suppose Mary Fairfax was glad to see you, too.'

He swallowed. 'How do you know about Mary?'

'I know all about you, My Lord Buckingham, but it's a good job for you that her father doesn't yet know, he'd have your guts for garters. Is Mary pregnant, too?'

'Good heavens, no. She wouldn't let me touch her.'

'Good for her. It's a pity Lucy didn't have the same common sense. It was your child Lucy was carrying, wasn't it?'

Villiers was silent.

'You knew that if she gave birth to your child, you would lose your precious Mary and Charles would have you executed for playing around with his mistress. That about sums it up, doesn't it?'

'Does Lucy know?'

'The poor kid didn't even know she was pregnant. Do you know what your friends did to her?'

'I asked them to mess around with her a little so that she would miscarry.'

'Mess around with her a little? They practically tore her guts out. You saw the stick they threatened Mary Beth with?'

'The one they said they'd hit Lucy with?'

'Hit her with it? They didn't just hit her with it.' Andrew was furious at the Duke's pretence at innocence. 'The bastards used it to smash her unborn baby to pieces inside her and she's still bleeding from the attack now.'

Andrew never did like to see people being sick. If he hadn't seen Lucy when the Duke's men had finished with her that night, he might have felt sorry for him. But as it was, George Villiers could lie in his own vomit for a few days. As Andrew left, he instructed the guard not to help him as it wouldn't hurt him to suffer for a while. Lucy had sent him her love, but there was no way he

deserved that.

'Well?' said Prince Louis as Andrew re-entered the daylight and shielded his eyes from the glare.

'Give him another couple of days and he'll do anything you ask of him.'

'Tell me, mon ami. You wouldn't have had anything to do with the death of his friends, would you?'

Andrew didn't answer.

Condé grinned. 'Bon. I was rather hoping it was you. It saves me looking for the culprit.' He laughed and placed his arm around Andrew's shoulders. 'Not that I would have tried very hard.'

Andrew smiled. 'Louis, you'll go far.'

'Oh I hope so, my dear Colonel. I'm banking on it.'

They laughed easily together as Mary Beth skipped across the courtyard towards them.

She got between them and put an arm around each of their waists. 'And which of you two gentlemen is going to take me to the ball tonight?'

'My Lady,' bowed the Prince. 'I beg the honour to have the first dance. But I insist your husband has the last dance. I cannot afford to fall out with a Colonel in the British Military Intelligence.'

'Who could ask for more? To dance with two handsome gentlemen on my last night in Bruxelles.'

Condé frowned. 'Must you leave tomorrow, Andrew?'

'Yes, I must go to Amsterdam to see Princess Mary. I have an urgent message from her brother which will not wait.'

'What do you want me to do with George Villiers?'

'I suggest you throw him out. No one will help him now and he will not endanger your plans. He can crawl back to Charles or go begging to Cromwell again for his lands, I really don't care. If I ever see him again, I'll do a "Lucy" on him.'

'Andrew,' said a shocked Mary Beth. 'Don't be vulgar.'

'I'll be more that vulgar if he touches you again. Or anyone else for that matter.'

Louis playfully let go of Mary Beth's arm and stood clear. 'Perhaps, My Lady, you ought to have the first and last dance with your husband. I'd hate him to do a "Lucy" on me.'

Soldiers all around the courtyard looked at them as they roared with laughter together. It seemed like a good joke until Andrew remembered that it was only a short time ago when Condé himself had tried to do a "Lucy" on Mary Beth. They might laugh together now but he would always be wary of this devious Generalissimo.

ANDREW was not so wary so as to deny the Prince his first dance. Mind you, with the delectable Anne Hyde in his own arms, who would have noticed? Anne reminded him a little of Samantha. Young, vivacious and utterly innocent, which was a refreshing pleasure. It had not escaped his notice that he was the only man her father let her loose with. She was quite safe, Andrew had a great deal of respect for this honourable father and daughter.

'Anne,' he said as they walked through the gardens in the moonlight. 'Will I see you in Amsterdam?'

She looked puzzled. 'Would you like to?'

'Of course. When do you leave for there?'

'Father says in the next day or so. I'm looking forward to it.'

'It's quite a privilege for you, First Maid of Honour to Princess Mary.'

'I'm worried.'

'What about?'

'I might get it wrong.'

'Anne, you're worrying for nothing. Princess Mary is one of the kindest people I have ever met. Do you know that when I was last in Holland I was ill and she came to visit me?'

'She visited you? But you're not a Lord are you?'

'Nope. Just a faithful servant like your father.'

'Then why...?'

'Because she cares, that's why. You have nothing at all to worry about.'

She smiled. 'I feel better already.'

'Good. Promise me you'll come and see me.'

'Of course I will.'

'It's a date. The first ball, I want the first dance.'

'Colonel Bosvile, you are very kind.'

'Don't let this outward shell deceive you. Underneath there is a raving sex maniac waiting to break out and ravage you.'

She stopped. 'Don't, you are frightening me.'

He held her hands. 'I'm sorry. I get carried away when I'm in the presence of a beautiful girl. It must be the full moon.'

She frowned. 'What's the moon got to do with it?'

'Don't you find it romantic?'

'Should I?'

'Anne, promise me something.'

'I promise,' she said eagerly.

'But you don't know what it is yet.'

'I trust you.'

He put his arms around her waist and held her close and her big eyes opened very wide so that Andrew could see the reflection of the moon in them. 'Don't grow up and lose this innocence. Don't become like so many others girls, willing to lose their virtue for a favour at court. And, whatever you do, never, ever, trust a man who holds you in the moonlight and speaks flattering words.'

She laughed and he kissed her briefly and then led her back to her waiting father. On the way back, she walked as if on air and he suddenly wondered if that had been her very first kiss. She was growing up fast and Sir Edward would need all the power and diplomacy he could muster to protect her from a world full of perverted men like George Villiers and Andrew Bosvile.

MARY Beth was still enjoying herself so Andrew grabbed a waitress and gave her instructions. Curtsying low, the servant slipped out of a side door and, ten minutes later, she was back, whispering in his ear. Mary Beth saw this last act and frowned a query across the floor from behind the arm of the Spanish Colonel she was dancing with. Andrew pointed a finger and she smiled and nodded. Minutes later, he was climbing the stairs carrying a large basket in his arms. He knocked and entered. Lucy saw him and smiled. Her face was looking better already as he put the basket on the bed and kissed her cheek briefly.

'Is that all I get?' she asked cheekily.

'Wait till you see what I've brought you, then you can reward me how you like.'

'Promise?'

He bowed. 'Tonight, I am at your command.'

He opened the basket and her face lit up like a child's. He tried to remember that she was only a couple of years older than Anne, but she had seen the worst side of life and would not even live to be a woman. All he could hope to do was try to make her last few months good ones. The tears ran down her cheek.

'Lucy, are you all right?'

'Yes. It's just your kindness. Charles used to bring me nice things but only so that he could love me. George did but he, too, always had an ulterior motive. You have come tonight, when you could be at the ball, to bring me presents knowing full well that I cannot reward you.'

'Well, you are wrong, Lucy Walter. You can and will give me something I long for, something I desire more than gold and silver.'

She backed away a little. 'I cannot give you... anything.'

'You can and, if you won't give it willingly, I shall take it by force.'

'Andrew. The doctor said that if I let anyone... love me, it would kill me.'

'If I wanted to love you, would you let me?'

She thought for a moment. 'Andrew, you have been very kind to me. I would willingly give, not only my love, but my life, if you wanted it. My greatest wish is to die in your arms.'

'You would take the pain and even death for me?'

'Yes, willingly.'

'Then I will give you my love but not in a way which will harm you.'

'What do you want to do?' she asked, confused.

He opened the basket. 'I want to have dinner with you - just you and me together. It is my last night in Bruxelles and I can spend the evening just how I like. So I went and kissed Anne Hyde and now I'm going to have dinner with my favourite invalid.'

Lucy laughed aloud as he held her hands. 'Andrew, you're the sweetest person I have ever met. I bet Anne didn't know what hit her - she's a very lucky girl.'

'So am I. I get Anne Hyde for hors d'oeuvre and Lucy Walter for the main course.'

'And Mary Beth?'

'Will always be my sweet.'

'Aah. But I have given you nothing.'

A wolfish gleam came to his eye. 'Ah, but the night is yet young, and the moon is full.'

Saturday 3rd September 1653

The ball was over by the time Andrew returned to the Chateau and the last of the guests were just leaving. He had left Lucy sleeping peacefully on a full stomach and with a smile on her face which he knew could not last. Mary Beth was nowhere in sight, so he assumed she had retired for the night.

Condé was in a jovial mood, having had his and, by the looks of him, somebody else's share of brandy. He steered Andrew towards the drinks but the young man pleaded exhaustion and made his way upstairs.

Hesitating beside Mary Beth's door he decided against disturbing her. If she had gone to bed early, it was because she was tired. He opened his own door and smiled. So that's why she had retired to bed early, she was waiting for him in his room and he could see the outline of her body in his bed by the dim light from the candle on the dressing table. Well, he thought, perhaps he was not that tired, after all. Undressing quickly, he pulled back the covers and stood there looking down at her in the bed.

'At last,' she said.

He stepped back. 'Anne, what on earth are you doing here?'

She put her arms above her head. 'What do you think?'

Andrew dropped the bedclothes and sat down on the edge of the bed. 'I bet your father doesn't know you're here.'

'No he doesn't. Come and make love to me.'

'Not on your nelly. My sister could walk in on us.'

She shook her head. 'Not after what I put in her drink.'

'You put something in her drink?' he said incredulously.

'Don't worry, it's quite harmless but she will sleep for hours.'

'Anne. What's this all about?'

'I want to be your mistress.'

'Good grief, girl. You're only a child.'

'I'm fifteen, I'll have you know, and that's quite old enough to be a mistress.'

'Do you know what it means to be someone's mistress?'

'To be their friend, to have children for them.'

'That's all?'

'Oh yes. And to have people in the street say "that's Colonel Bosvile's Mistress. Isn't she lovely?"'

'Anne, sit up and put this shawl round your shoulders. I'm going to tell you a story.'

'How exciting.'

'Not for the person concerned, it's not - not any more.'

'I'm all ears.'

'I'm glad your not.'

'What?'

'There's much more to you than ears, young lady.'

'Then why do you not like me?'

'I do like you. But just listen to my story. Once upon a time there was a young girl, just like you. Well, not just like you. She had long, dark hair and she was a bit fatter than you.'

Anne giggled and looked down at her slim body.

'This girl was a friend of everyone, let's call her Lucy. She loved to dance and sing and she would skip and laugh in the sunshine. She had the whole world in front of her until, one day, she met someone she liked, someone who gave her nice things. We'll call him Charles, shall we? It's a common enough name these days.'

She was beginning to look puzzled.

'Lucy loved Charles a lot and wanted to be his wife. Unfortunately, he was not able to marry her.'

'Was he married already?'

Andrew nodded. 'In a manner of speaking.'

'Then what happened?'

'She became his mistress and was so proud that she told everyone. They would say in the street "Look, there goes Charles's mistress, isn't she lovely?" Lucy loved Charles very much and wanted to please him all the time but, after a while, because he wasn't married to her, he began to get tired of her.'

Her smile had disappeared. 'Go on.'

'She then did a very silly thing. She tried to make him jealous by flirting with other men. Not too seriously but, nevertheless, playing around. At first, it was all very exciting and it worked well until, after a while, he got tired of her again. Unfortunately, she had now become used to having lots of love and started to look somewhere else for it. Everyone needs love, don't they?'

'I know I do.'

'Well, she flirted and became someone else's mistress and the two men became angry with each other. They had always been friends and now they were like enemies, all because Lucy wanted to be loved. She used to have fun, playing one off against the other until one of them got really mad and hurt her.'

'Did they hurt her badly?'

'Do you want me to tell you?'

'Yes. This is exciting.'

'She had a baby inside her which was about three months old but one of the men didn't want the other one to find out about it, so he had it taken away.'

She was horrified. 'They took it from her?'

'Anne. They killed her baby while it was still inside her and also damaged her very badly.'

'You're making all this up to frighten me.'

Andrew grabbed her by the hand and dragged her out of his bed. 'Come with me and I'll show you a real Lucy who can never walk again properly, who will never have children and will never be anyone's mistress ever again. Anne, that girl is nineteen years old and she will be dead in a few months.'

'You're hurting my arm.'

'It's not just arms that get hurt, it's whole bodies and minds. You are not going to become my mistress. You are not going to become anyone's mistress, do you hear?'

'Yes.'

'Promise me.'

She was silent.

'Right then, come with me.'

'Where are we going?'

'To see your father.'

She looked down at her naked body. 'Like this?'

'Yes, why not? Mistresses spend most of their time without any clothes on so you'll have to get used to it. They also get beaten and left to rot when they become too old to give pleasure. Have you ever seen a man with a mistress who's older than thirty?'

She shook her head.

'Then what are you going to do in a few years time? No good man will want you when you've been used.'

'You wouldn't treat me like that, I know.'

'How do you know? You don't know me at all. I could take you now and we'd have fun. Then what about the morning? We can't keep Mary Beth drugged forever. I'd have to throw you out and then where would you be? Used, maybe pregnant, and with no-one to look after you. Your father would be very hurt indeed and would probably put you out on the street. You'd be just another Lucy, unloved and penniless.'

She looked down. 'What do you want me to do?'

Andrew opened his mouth to speak but a sudden idea flashed into his mind. He smiled. 'Kiss me.'

Her eyes went wide. 'What?'

'Kiss me. As often as you like. Just like you did earlier, but that's all. And don't you dare kiss anyone else.'

She giggled. 'I won't.'

'Promise?'

'I promise.'

'One day, you'll meet someone you love a lot and who will want you. But don't become his mistress. If he's worth having, he'll marry you properly and then you can make love as often as you like and it won't matter. Promise me that.'

'I promise I won't love anyone without asking you first.'

'That's my girl.'

'Can I kiss you now?'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'Get dressed first, then I'll kiss you as often as you like.'

'You have just committed yourself to an awful lot of kissing.'

'So? Who can I kiss if I can't kiss my own mistress?' Andrew slipped his breeches back on, escorted her back to her room, briefly renewed his acquaintanceship with her soft lips and patted her bottom as she entered her room.

Her father was waiting for her. 'And where have you been, young lady?'

'With Andrew,' she answered meekly.

Sir Edward Hyde looked at Andrew standing bare chested and barefoot. 'You scoundrel, sir. I trusted you and look how you repay me.'

'Father, I...' his daughter began.

'Silence, girl. I'll deal with you in the morning. Go to your bed.'

'No, father.'

'What?'

'No, I won't let you talk to Andrew in that way, he's a good man.'

'After what he's done to you?'

'Father,' she said, going up to him. 'Andrew has done nothing to me, I swear it.'

The Lord Chancellor looked accusingly at Andrew. 'Is this true, young man?'

'Sir Edward. For your own peace of mind, I recommend you have a doctor examine Anne in the

morning. You will find she has not deceived you.'

'Why were you in his room then, eh?' he asked his daughter.

'I..I..' she started.

'She came looking for Lady Ramsden,' Andrew lied. 'Anne could not sleep so she came to my sister for company and, afterwards, I told her a story about a friend of mine who didn't behave herself and told her she mustn't become like her. Sir Edward, you have a very intelligent daughter, did you know?'

The older man drew back his shoulders with pride. 'I always thought so.'

'She has agreed to become my mistress, if that's all right by you?'

He started to go purple. 'What?'

'Sir Edward, listen to me. Your daughter is very beautiful and you do well to keep her under control. Unfortunately, some girls are never safe until they become someone's wife or mistress, is that not so?'

'Yes, but Anne...'

'I have offered my protective services to her whenever she needs them. Whenever she feels threatened and you are not around to stand up for her, she can call on me. I have promised her to defend her honour with my life and I promise you that I will not abuse my trust.'

'Then what would you do it for? No man does things for a girl without wanting favours, not even you.'

'Sir Edward, I will not become offended because I have a deep respect for you and your daughter. You are right, I have demanded something in return, but something which will not compromise her future.'

'And what, pray, is that?'

'She has promised to give me the first dance at every ball we attend together. I will let you into a secret that very few know. You remember the girl I had with me last time I was here.'

'Your mistress?'

'That's what you were meant to believe. I know for a fact that, because people believed it, it saved her virtue which, incidentally, remained intact until we were married.'

'But how will Anne's pretending to be your new mistress help?'

'Two ways. I believe it will save her virtue until she is old enough to cope with it herself and that, my dear Anne, has suddenly become very important to me.'

'Why?' she asked.

'Because of what happened to Lucy.'

'Then your story was true?'

'Yes. Just a short distance from here, Lucy lays dying because she wanted to be someone's mistress.'

She sat down and looked very sad.

'What was the second reason for Anne's deception?' Sir Edward asked, seriously.

'So we can communicate. To show my complete trust in you, I will tell you that I have been enlisted in the British Intelligence Service. It is dedicated to bringing peace to Britain, if possible, with the King on his rightful throne.'

'I see.'

'You must gain a lot of valuable information about the activities of the King but if I spend a lot of time with you or any of the other known Royalists, my own position could be in jeopardy. However, you go to many places and speak with many people and, if Anne is my mistress, so to speak, we can communicate without too many people suspecting the real reasons for our rendezvous.'

'Tell me honestly, is this all you want of her?'

'It is all I ask, apart from a goodnight kiss from time to time just to mislead the opposition.'

Sir Edward went red in the face. 'You would dare to kiss my daughter?'

Andrew went and stood beside her. 'Like I would my own sister. With your permission, sir.'

He looked at Andrew, nodded and went out of her room.

Anne breathed out. 'Thank you.'

'For what? I haven't kissed you yet.'

'But you will, won't you? Often.'
'As often as you behave yourself.'
'I will, I promise.'
'That's my girl.'
Her lips were still soft.

THE sun was high in the sky as the sail opened on Seagull. There was little traffic on the Schelde and the surface was flat as they glided slowly north-west towards the sea.

'Mary Beth,' Andrew said as they sat down to let the wind do the work. 'Would you mind very much if I took a mistress?'

Fortunately, the water was quite warm when he hit it. He spluttered a little as he returned to the surface and started to swim after Seagull as she lazily slipped down the estuary. Mary Beth fended him off with the boathook. 'You're not coming back on board till you repent, you sex maniac.'

'Sex doesn't come into it,' he pleaded.
'It does with me. I'm not sharing you with anybody.'
'I don't expect you to. Let me explain.'
'Who is she?'
'Anne Hyde,' he spluttered.

The rope hit him on the shoulder and she hauled him in. 'I know you better than that. There is no way you would take Anne Hyde as a mistress.'

He sat rubbing his hair with a towel. 'But she is young and good looking, isn't she?'

'I suppose so, in a posh sort of way. Come on, tell me, what's this all about?'

Andrew explained everything and then Mary Beth laughed.

She didn't like getting wet either and Andrew trailed the rope just out of her reach. 'Andrew, stop messing about and let me back on board.'

'Give me one good reason.'

'I'm pregnant.'

In ten seconds, she was in his arms. 'Oh, Mary Beth. How long? When?'

'If you mean "who is the father?" it's you, you idiot. Whose baby did you think it was?'

'I don't know. I thought maybe...'

'Andrew, I keep telling you, those men didn't touch me. They came close but didn't actually make contact. Only you who could be the father. There is no-one else.'

'I love you.'

'And your new mistress?'

'And my mistress, bless her little white bottom.'

'And how do you know she's got a little white bottom?'

'I saw it, didn't I?'

'Hmm. I don't know whether to believe you or not.'

'Mary Beth, have I ever lied to you?'

'You had Anne Hyde naked in your bed and you really only kissed her?'

Andrew nodded.

'No wonder you were frustrated this morning. There I was thinking I had turned you on and, all the time, it was her. You were making love to me with a picture of her pretty little body in your mind, weren't you?'

'Naturally. I always do that, it's more fun that way.'

'You rat,' she said.

It was a good job he could swim.

IT was dark when they arrived at The Hague. Andrew's old lodgings were still much as he had left them. Some of Sam's things were there, too, and he felt a great sadness as he packed them up and put them in the cupboard. They had had some good times together and he smiled a little as he thought of the charade they had put on so that Sam would remain safe and now he was doing the same thing for Anne.

Andrew yearned for a time when the deception could end and they could all lead simple lives without danger from evil people. He, himself lived by deceit and, he thought, would probably die because of it one day. But not yet, there was too much to do. The Plot for a King was not yet complete, and the most dangerous part still lay ahead.

Monday 5th September 1653

It wasn't long before Andrew gained audience with Princess Mary with a view to conveying the King's message to her. He bowed low before her. 'Your Highness, may I present my sister, Lady Mary Ramsden.'

'Welcome to Holland, Lady Ramsden. I'm afraid the world is full of Marys at the moment. Doesn't it make you feel common?'

'Sometimes, Your Highness. My brother usually calls me by my full name, Mary Beth, to avoid confusion.'

'Then Mary Beth it shall be. I'm just plain Mary of Orange. Did you have a safe journey, Colonel Bosvile?'

'Yes, Your Highness. The sea journey was very peaceful.'

'I think De Witt and Cromwell will soon kiss and make up, then it will stay peaceful. This silly war is costing both nations a fortune in lost ships and men. Did you know that the burghers wanted to reduce our navy to a minimum? Only my late husband prevented that happening. If William had not intervened, I fear we would be subject to the English Parliament by now.'

'Would that have been so bad, your Highness?' asked Mary Beth. 'Are you not English yourself?'

The Princess laughed pleasantly. 'Scots, my dear. Since when has a Stuart been English?'

Mary Beth blushed. 'My apologies, your Highness.'

'You are forgiven. Ah, here's my youngest brother, Henry, the Duke of Gloucester.' The Princess gestured towards a young man of twelve who stood beside her.

'The letter you brought from Charles is with regard to Henry. He arrived here from England in the spring and now he is to be returned to his mother in Paris.' She hesitated. 'May I confide in you?'

Andrew nodded.

'I am concerned, and so is Charles, that an attempt may be made to force him to become Catholic. All his upbringing thus far has been along Protestant lines and this must continue.'

'Your Highness, if I may speak?' said Mary Beth. 'I was also brought up a Protestant by Lady Caroline and I married Lord Ramsden as a Protestant. However, when I was last in Paris, I had need for meditation and prayer and found the opportunity at Chaillot. While I was there, never once was there an attempt to convert me to Catholicism, even though the order was of the Visitation, so I feel confident that no attempt will be made by your mother to force the young Duke to change.'

'I am gratified to hear this, Mary Beth. He will, of course, have his tutor, Dr Lovell, with him. Nevertheless, I am reluctant to let him go. However, our mother's wishes must be respected.'

'I do understand your predicament, your Highness,' Andrew said.

'You always were understanding. By the way, what happened to young Samantha Grenville?'

'We married, your Highness. But she died.'

'Died? How terrible. And do you now have a new mistress?'

Andrew glanced quickly at Mary Beth who had to look away to keep a straight face. 'Yes, your Highness.'

'Do I get to meet the lucky girl?'

'Yes, Your Highness. Tonight at the Grand Ball.'

'Is she invited?'

'Yes, Your Highness. By yourself.'

'By me? Come on, you will have to tell me now. I cannot bear the suspense.'

'You may be upset.'

'Not unless it's one of my Maids of Honour, I won't.'

Andrew was silent. He hated to deceive the Princess, but it would be for Anne's own good.

'It is, isn't it?' she accused.

Andrew nodded. 'I'm afraid so.'

'Don't tell me. Not Anne Hyde?'

'Yes, Your Highness,' said Andrew, looking guilty.

'Goodness gracious. You do like them young, don't you? Does her father know?'

'Yes, Your Highness.'

'You are the dark horse, Andrew. I know of at least two dozen young men who, as we speak, are preening themselves ready to ask her for the first dance tonight. They are going to be very disappointed.'

He nodded. 'I expect so.'

'Well, good for you. I know you will take care of her, if I am a good judge of character.'

'I will certainly try.'

'Will you marry?'

'No, Your Highness. I still love my wife too much.' Yes, he did love his wife. But not the wife the Princess was thinking of.

'I think I understand,' she was saying. 'I still love my William and, though he's been gone nearly three years, I cannot forget him. I suppose this is why I want to hold onto Henry and protect him.'

'That is understandable,' said Mary Beth. 'We will take good care of him on the journey to Paris, I promise.'

'Right, enough sadness for one day. You two must go and get ready for the arrival of the delectable Anne, and I must put on my glad rags.'

Andrew bowed. 'Until later then, Your Highness.'

'Yes,' she smiled. 'Until later.'

ANDREW had arranged it so that he and Mary Beth didn't need to return to the Hague to get changed. She couldn't wear her ball dress, it was now too tight around the waist. Instead, she wore a dark red, flowing one which trailed behind her on the dance floor. It was very much admired and she soon had a list of dance partners lined up. It was quite late before Sir Edward and Anne arrived and were announced. Andrew smiled as several young men stood to attention and flicked non-existent pieces of fluff from their coats and tried to raise the necessary courage to invite the new Maid of Honour to dance and Andrew was almost embarrassed as she walked regally across the empty floor and took his hand as the music began.

He smiled. 'Anne, may I complement you on your dress. It is magnificent. Did you make it?'

'Yes, just for you.'

'It is appreciated, my dear.'

She moved closer and whispered in his ear. 'I have news.'

'Already?'

'Yes. After you left Bruxelles on Saturday, father had a visitor and the two of them had an awful row.'

'Who was it?'

'The Duke of Buckingham. He wanted to know where you had gone but father wouldn't tell him.'

'How well do you know the Duke?'

'Quite well. He's very good looking, isn't he?'

'And?'

'He's clever, witty. I quite like him.'

'Would you dance with him?'

'If father would let me.' She looked at Andrew from under long eyelashes. 'And if I had your

permission.'

'I wouldn't give it.'

Anne pulled her head back. 'You're jealous.'

'Am I? You remember the story I told you about Lucy?'

'Ye-e-e-es,' she said very slowly, her eyes going dark and wary.

'It was his baby which was killed.'

'Oh, poor George. I didn't know.'

'What you also don't know was that it was George who arranged it.'

'What..?'

They had stopped dancing and were standing in the middle of the floor while other couples moved around them. 'It was George who had his own baby killed. It was George who had Lucy broken and beaten. That good-looking, intelligent "gentleman" is a rapist and a murderer.'

She shook her head. 'How can you be so sure?'

'Because he tried the same thing on Mary Beth.'

Anne's hands went to her mouth. She was learning very fast about the darker side of life from which she had been carefully protected. She became very pale, so Andrew guided her to the anti-room where she sat on the long settee while he offered her a drink.

'What is it?' she asked.

'Brandy.'

'Father will have a fit.'

'So will you if you don't drink it.'

She drank and a little colour returned to her cheeks so Andrew took a chance and gave her another. It was a mistake, and he had a terrible job stopping her falling all over him. Posh Ladies looked down their noses. Young men looked daggers. Girls hid behind their fans and giggled.

'Feeling better?'

She nodded and smiled. 'Did they hurt Mary Beth?'

'Fortunately, no. Condé arrived just in time to prevent her being raped and killed.'

'You must be exaggerating, surely. George is not like that.'

'Ask Mary Beth. Ask her how he kidnapped her and arranged for three men to abuse her till she died.'

Anne instinctively held her legs tightly together as if it was happening to her and he could see that her mind at least could feel the pain inside her.

'Now you know why both I and your father worry about you. We care for you and don't want anything like that to happen to you. People can be very deceptive.'

'Are you?' she asked. 'Have you ever done anything like that?'

'I killed some men once.'

'Who were they?'

He looked straight at her. 'They were the ones who attacked Lucy and tried to hurt Mary Beth.'

'Would you protect me like that?'

'Naturally. I would kill any man who tried to harm you.'

'You must feel very strongly about it.'

'No girl should be treated in that way. She should be respected, wooed, cherished, not beaten and raped. Women deserve to be treated as equals not as servants.'

Anne giggled. 'Andrew, that sounded dreadfully sincere. You're not a woman yourself under all that uniform, are you?'

He laughed. 'Not a chance. Would you like to dance again, go for a walk, or just sit?'

'When are you leaving for Paris?'

'Tomorrow.'

'Then I want to stay with you for a while. I shall be lonely when you have gone.'

'No you won't. There'll be plenty to do. I'll ensure that Princess Mary looks after you.'

'Kiss me.'

'Not in front of all these people, no.'

'Then take me to bed.'

'You're drunk.'

'No I'm not, I'm in love.'

'Change the subject. What else did George want?'

'He just wanted to know where you had gone and got very angry when father wouldn't tell him. I thought George was going to hit him at one stage. I don't think I like him any more.'

'Anne, will you do me a favour?'

She nodded.

'I'm going to go and dance with Mary Beth. Stay here and talk to some of these young men who are desperate to get your attention. Sit with them, talk to them, but don't move. Understand?'

Her long eyelashes fluttered. 'Your wish is my command.'

'Good girl. Come here.' She turned, he kissed, she blushed, he went to Mary Beth, politely bowed and took her hand. 'Lady Ramsden, may I have the honour of the next dance?'

She playfully raised her nose in the air. 'Are you on my list?'

'I'd better be.'

'What was the name again?' she teased. 'Bonneville? Bootmeal?'

He smacked her bottom.

'Andrew!' She looked around and blushed as she stepped into her husband's arms.

'Come to bed.'

'It's too early.'

'Always some excuse. I expect you'll have a headache later.'

'It could be arranged. How's your mistress?'

'Don't rub it in. Guess who's been looking for us?'

'I can't imagine.'

'George Villiers.'

'George? What does he want?'

'He wouldn't say. He tried to bully Sir Edward into giving away our destination so I think we had better leave early in the morning as I don't trust him one little bit. He's up to something.'

'I wouldn't be surprised at anything he did any more.'

'How's the dancing?'

'Well, I've had two proposals of marriage and four offers of a Chateau in the sun in exchange for unlimited hanky-panky. Oh, and a groper.'

He laughed. 'A groper?'

'I'll show you my bottom later. I bet it's black and blue.'

'He's probably a frustrated Italian Cardinal.'

'Most likely. His hands were all soft and limp. I think he would rather have danced with you than me.'

Andrew laughed aloud and couples stared at them as Mary Beth blushed deep crimson.

'Aren't you tired?' Andrew asked.

'Mmm. I'll soon have had enough. Go and rescue Anne from the groper while I say our goodnights to Princess Mary.'

'Done.'

The groper with the soft hands stood up as Andrew approached. Anne tried to rise to meet her "lover" but her legs were made of rubber. Andrew caught her and whisked her off her feet to the amazement of onlookers.

'Scuzi,' he said to the Italian, making a small bow, and made his way towards the stairs.

He was about to put his foot on the bottom step when a hand was placed on his shoulder. Turning, a glove struck his face and he almost dropped Anne in a heap.

'Tomorrow at-a dawn,' said the man in black. 'Choose-a your weapon.'

He has to be a-joking, Andrew thought. *I have never fought a duel in my life.*

The Italian bowed, turned his back and left while his colleague waited for Andrew's answer. He shrugged, ignored the man and climbed the stairs. You could have heard a pin drop.

'Andrew, why did he challenge you?' asked Anne as he tucked her into bed.

'I don't know and I don't intend to wait around to find out.'

'Why not? You will be branded as a coward if you run away.'

'So?'

'But you're not.'

He turned at the door. 'Do you want me to fight him?'

'Of course not. He might kill you.'

'Thanks for the vote of confidence.'

'You know what I mean.'

'I have no intention of fighting that man on any terms. I know nothing about him and it is certainly not worth either of us dying over.'

'Have you no idea why he wants to fight you?'

'No, unless it's Mary Beth's bottom.'

Anne frowned. 'What has Mary Beth's bottom got to do with any of this?'

'He kept pinching it and making improper suggestions to her.'

'Then you must fight him.'

'Not a chance. I'm going to leave before dawn.'

'Then I won't see you in the morning?'

'No. And I don't know when I'll see you again. You will behave yourself, won't you?'

'For you? Of course, on one condition.'

'Yes.'

'Kiss me goodbye.'

He checked to make sure that her lips hadn't hardened any. They hadn't.

MARY Beth was in bed.

'How's the headache?' Andrew asked as he closed the door softly.

'The what?'

'You said you'd have a headache by the time we were ready for bed.'

She shook her head. 'No headache.'

'Sure?'

'Positive. What time are we getting up?'

'Very early. Prince Henry will be ready just before dawn. We'll leave on the morning tide and hope we don't meet George on the way.'

'That man worries me.'

'Your little Italian groper worries me too. He challenged me to a duel.'

She sat up. 'He did what?'

'He asked me to choose my weapon for a high noon at dawn.'

She looked puzzled. 'How can you have a high noon at dawn?'

'Simple. You leave in the morning while it's still dark.'

'Will you fight him?'

'Of course not. It's neither the time nor the place and we have work to do.'

'Andrew. I know you well enough to know that you are not afraid of him, but many will think you are.'

'Perhaps it's as well. It will keep them confused.'

'I'm glad you won't fight him.'

'Good. I'm happy someone's on my side.'

'Wasn't Anne, then?'

'Let's say she didn't exactly inspire confidence.'

'Then I will. Lie down, I'm coming on top.' She did.

'Ugh, you're putting on weight.'

'It's all your fault. You did it.'

'I'd better stop doing it then, hadn't I?'
'Don't you dare,' she said as the candle went out.

Tuesday 6th September 1653

The young Duke of Gloucester and his tutor were waiting for them in the semi-darkness as they carried their few belongings to the main entrance. Princess Mary embraced her brother briefly and they all said their goodbyes. As the carriage neared Leiden, things went wrong.

It was just beginning to get light when they were stopped on a lonely stretch of road near the lake. Andrew put his head out of the carriage and saw three dark figures on horseback blocking the road. One of them motioned for the driver and guard to descend and they had little choice when faced with levelled muskets.

Disarmed, they were made to stand by the side of the road whilst the leader of the group dismounted and strode to the coach. 'So, we meet again, Colonel Bosvile. If you would be so kind as to step down, you and I have-a some unfinished business to attend to.'

Andrew stepped down and faced the Italian.

'So you thought-a you would get away from me without my getting the satisfaction I deserve?'

'What is this all about?' asked Andrew. 'What do you want?'

'Want? Why you, of course. And that lovely sister of yours who will-a keep me warm at night during the cold Appenine winters.'

'My sister is not available, not to you nor anyone else.'

'My friend, you have-a little choice. You see, she is the reward.'

'Reward? For what?'

'For-a your death, naturally. But I am a fair man, I will give you the same opportunity I gave-a you last night. Choose-a your weapon.'

'Very well,' said Andrew reluctantly. 'Swords.'

'An ideal choice. I was-a personally trained by the great General Turenne. My colleagues will-a enjoy this.'

'Are you a man of your word?' Andrew asked.

'You doubt-a the integrity of a Mazarini?'

'If I win, we all go free?'

'Of course. But you will-a not win, my friend. I can almost feel the warmth of her body next to mine already. Shall-a we begin?'

Andrew nodded and drew his sword. Mary Beth's face looked white framed in the window of the coach while the young Duke and his tutor stood beside her, unable to offer much in the way of encouragement.

Andrew's father once told him never to watch the sword, always the eyes and, without heeding that advice, he would have been cut down within the first minute. He was very cautious and always on the defensive. Andrew had no fight with this mysterious Italian who had obviously made a deal with someone for his death and disgrace. George Villiers, perhaps? He doubted it. This was far too subtle for George. Cromwell? No, the Lord Protector would first ensure that Andrew yielded any information he had. Condé? Maybe, but again, the timing was wrong. Condé had nothing to gain by Andrew's death at this moment in time. This man had been hired to deliberately pick a fight. He first insults Mary Beth and when Andrew laughs, he makes a play for Anne, knowing that Andrew would intervene in some way. It was legalised murder, he knew. He just had to make sure he survived and that would not be easy against someone who had been hired specifically because of his skill at killing.

For a quarter of an hour, no progress was made. Andrew gained ground, then lost it again as the two of them thrust and parried in a grotesque dance of death. Andrew was getting tired but Monsignor Mazarini seemed as full of energy as at the beginning. Andrew began to feel he had to go onto the offensive and end it soon or the endurance of the better trained assassin would be the winning factor.

He struck as the rising sun caught the Italian's eyes and backhanded his heavier sword, stamping his riding boot onto the other man's blade as it fell and the lighter weapon snapped at the hilt. Andrew's blade at his throat, the assassin backed until he was against a tree.

'Who sent you?' Andrew asked. When Mazarini did not answer, a slight pressure made his blood trickle down the point of Andrew's sword. 'You made a big mistake when you mentioned my sister. She is not available to slobs like you and never will be. Now are you going to tell me or do I slit your throat?'

'I tell-a you nothing,' he said and spat in Andrew's face who should have killed him there and then.

'Go and tell your paymaster that he has picked the wrong scapegoat this time. Your shame will be well advertised. You couldn't even win a duel with the son of an English farmer. I won't kill you, it would be too good a death. I'll let you live with your shame.'

Andrew withdrew his sword and the other put his hand to his neck, and then looked at the blood which covered it. Andrew turned and walked towards the coach.

'Look out!' cried Mary Beth.

Andrew twisted round and felt a stabbing pain in his left shoulder as he fell to the ground. He rolled over and the Italian was above him with a long bladed dagger in his hand. He sneered and raised his arm to plunge but Andrew could not get his sword up in time so he lashed out at his legs instead.

Mazarini let out a scream of pain as the blade sliced through the tendons at the back of his knees and Andrew rolled over as the Italian fell where he had just been with pain searing through his shoulder and back. His left arm had gone numb as he staggered to his feet. Mazarini's dagger streaked towards his legs but Andrew's blade got in the way and dagger, complete with fingers, spun from his hand.

Andrew turned at the sound of a flintlock being cocked as one of the "colleagues" levelled his pistol from a distance too far away for Andrew's defence.

The man aimed carefully with a sneer on his face and the report shattered the early morning serenity as he fell, seemingly in slow motion, into the waters of the lake, raising flocks of squawking birds into the air. The other "colleague" looked at Mary Beth's smoking pistol with open mouth and ran for his horse as the coach guard ran to the coach and pulled out a long-barrelled musket. The rider was receding quickly as the guard sighted along the coach's bodywork. The shot was almost simultaneous with the upward flinging of arms as the rider pitched from his horse.

'Wow!' said the young Duke which just about summed up all their feelings.

The "colleague" in the lake was beyond help. Mary Beth's shot had taken away half of his head as he lay, face-down, in the lake, his blood streaking the muddy water. The guard who had run to check on the fallen rider shook his head and let the body fall to the ground.

A groan from Mazarini reminded them that one still lived. Andrew took his hand away from his damaged shoulder which was still bleeding and gave considerable pain. However, if Mary Beth had not warned him, it would have been Andrew lying on the ground and the Italian would now be standing over him.

'Your treachery will not go forgotten, my friend,' Andrew said. 'I think in all the stories I have heard, it is about now that you start to tell me who it was who hired you.'

None too kindly, Andrew turned him onto his back with the toe of his boot. As the Italian's sneer restarted, the swishing tip of Andrew's sword split the tip of his nose and he screamed as blood splattered all over his face.

'Andrew!' screamed the horrified Mary Beth, as she started to descend from the coach.

Dr Lovell came to Andrew's rescue by kindly, but firmly, pulling her back into the coach and sitting her down. She sat and flinched as two further screams emitted from Mazarini's lips. He didn't need ears, anyway, whereas Andrew's life and those of his wife, unborn child and their precious royal cargo, could depend on knowing what this was all about and what other dangers lay ahead for them all.

Andrew didn't kill Mazarini, though he deserved it for his treachery. However, the assassin would never look the same and might never walk again. He certainly would never hold a weapon of any sort again in his right hand. The few words he had spoken between the loss of his appendages

had been sufficient for Andrew to form enough of the picture to forearm him against the dangers ahead. He left him there, crying and bleeding, as they continued their journey towards Sheveningen where Seagull patiently awaited them.

THE weather was kind to them as they headed south-westwards into the English Channel. The sea war between Holland and England was virtually over. Admiral Van Tromp had been killed off the Wadden Island of Texel thus ending the Dutch effectiveness at breaching the English Blockade. Seagull crept along, close to the coast of the Spanish Netherlands, thus avoiding English Cutters. Andrew spent some time showing Prince Henry the basics of steering a yacht and the young Duke spent most of the rest of the journey at the helm with a broad smile on his face. Mary Beth spent some time in the cabin and when she came onto the deck, Andrew's mouth fell open. He remembered once when his mother had worn those clothes. Dressed like that, she had saved the life of Prince Henry's mother, Queen Henriette Marie. She had fought, with his sister, Carrie, against the Roundheads at Rettendon and the men who had abused the patients at the nearby asylum. Andrew's father had bought the clothes for her in the South of France when she had recovered from the rapings and beatings she had received at the hand of Ben Leeming and the original Plot gang. It seemed appropriate, somehow, that Mary Beth should now choose to wear those same leather boots, breeches and waistcoat that adequately represented positive action. Her long, fair hair was tied up and tucked into a scarf which encircled her head and she had the look of a pirate as she pushed up her white, silk sleeves and adjusted the rigging along the starboard side.

Andrew weighed up their assets in his mind as he watched the horizon for enemy shipping: a twelve year old boy who had spent most of his life sheltered by faithful Royalists; a schoolmaster with seasickness; a man of twenty-four with a stab wound in his shoulder; and a twenty-year old girl who was three months pregnant. What a navy!

THEY sailed on into the night towards France. Andrew insisted that Prince Henry and Mary Beth sleep in cabin whilst he sat with Dr Lovell at the helm as the soft easterly wind blew them gently south-westwards along the coast. There was no moon that night, but the faint luminescence from the waves as they broke to port, gave Andrew the marker he needed to keep parallel to the shore. He spent the time while they were alone thinking of their predicament because that is exactly what they were now in - a predicament.

But there was only one way he could go - forward. He had to deliver Prince Henry to his waiting mother in Paris, but knew that by doing so, he and Mary Beth were going to have to sail right into the very jaws of death.

Thursday 8th September 1653

Paris had changed little. Andrew moored Seagull at Chaillet and Prince Henry ran ahead of them towards the open arms of his mother. Tears ran down her face as she embraced him while nine-year-old Minette greeted Mary Beth warmly but seemed less pleased to see the brother she didn't remember. It was clear to see the jealousy on her face, as she watched her mother and brother walk hand-in-hand towards the Chateau.

Mary Beth got a mixed reception from the nuns as she now looked so different to when they had last seen her. Andrew had given her the privilege of handing over the heavy leather saddlebag they had brought from Rettendon and the gesture broke any remaining ice.

After a while, Henriette, Andrew and Mary Beth sat outside and brought each other up-to-date with news. The Fronde had ended and, now that there was peace, Gaston had returned to his estate in Normandy while Anne-Marie was in exile at Chilly. Paul de Gondi, now officially anointed as Cardinal De Retz, was still imprisoned at Vincennes for his part in the rebellion. Consequently, the only potential threat to continued peace came from Condé who still occupied most of

North-Eastern France with his Spanish-Lorraine troops.

The sun had started to go down when the soldiers arrived with the warrant for Andrew's arrest. Although he knew it was inevitable, he had hoped for a little more freedom first. As the soldiers approached, he insisted that Mary Beth go inside for she would be safe at the Chateau. Andrew was then escorted to the Louvre where he was taken before the First Minister.

'So, Colonel Bosvile, you finally did make it here, despite my arrangements.'

'Why am I here?'

'Treason against France, of course. I have warrants for yourself and another. Condé will wait but an English spy will not.'

'You seem surprised to see me, Your Eminence. Are you upset that your plot to have me murdered has failed?'

'I'm just puzzled as to how you made it here.'

Andrew smiled. 'Your brother was not the man you thought him to be.'

Mazarin stood up. 'You...you have killed Damian?'

'No. But he will display treachery no more. He challenged me to a duel and, when I defeated him, he attempted to stab me in the back. It seems that he has the same demented mentality as yourself.'

The Cardinal's face went dark with anger. 'What do you mean by that comment?'

'I believe you have no intention of having Prince Louis crowned. Condé is now poised to attack you and is waiting only to see if you are a man of your word. He thinks that because you are a Cardinal of the Church you will feel some responsibility to keep your word. I'm afraid he has yet to learn that the finest breeding ground for hypocrites and liars is the Church itself.'

'You are a brave man to speak like this.'

'Someone has to say it. All Europe is watching you at this moment and I know for a fact that if you refuse to enthrone Louis soon, France will disappear under the sheer weight of outraged enemies. It will not just be Spain whom you will be fighting, it will be Holland and England, too. Is France ready to go to war on such a scale?'

He sneered. 'France may not, but I am.'

'For what? Power? You would have thousands killed for personal prestige?'

'Is that not what your King Charles has done? You would give your life for him. Is what I am doing so different?'

'Yes, and I shall make it my duty to ensure that everyone is aware of it.'

'Then you give me no alternative but to ensure your very swift execution. You will not be missed.'

'That is where you are wrong. King Charles knows I am here, Princess Mary in Holland knows I am here and so does Condé. As a member of British Intelligence, my superiors in England also know where I am. If I am executed, the world will immediately become aware your true motives and you will lose any credibility you may have gained.'

'But they will never get to know, will they?'

'Yes. Lady Ramsden also knows where I am and awaits the outcome of this discussion. She will ensure that all are informed.'

'Then I must see that she is dealt with, too.'

'You would invade the sanctuary of Chaillot?'

'No. But one day, she will make a mistake and step outside the convent and, on that day, you will both die together. You will watch as she is publicly disembowelled and dismembered before facing a similar end yourself. In the meantime, I hope you like prison food.' He rang the bell on his desk. 'Guards! Remove this man from my sight. Take him to Vincennes and throw away the key.'

Thursday 10th August 1654

Cardinal Mazarin had been right about one thing - prison food was disgusting. Anything which could be called edible was brought in by outsiders. Andrew was lucky. He found that he had twenty-three sisters who felt it was their daily responsibility to provide him with a constant diet of

wholesome food.

The day after his arrest, Mary Beth had tried to leave the convent and the sisters had had to physically restrain her to avoid capture by the trio of vigilant soldiers who constantly occupied a position beside the Seine, not a hundred yards from the Chateau. In spite of her steadily worsening state of nerves, she satisfactorily gave birth to a baby girl one April morning. The child was the delight of the Chateau and the sisters took turns to care for her. Like her mother, she too was, in effect, a prisoner at Chaillot.

Andrew made few friends at Vincennes. Most of the inmates disgusted him and the ones who didn't, refused to trust an English spy. The exception was Paul de Gondi. Andrew made a point of getting to know him and it brought rewards. Five months earlier, this man had been appointed as Archbishop of Paris by Pope Innocenti, who had expected to gain his release by such action. However, the Pope had not reckoned with the renegade Mazarin who, by threats and coercion, "persuaded" De Retz to resign a few days later. The Holy Father, in a show of righteous indignation, refused to accept this enforced resignation and threatened to excommunicate Mazarin, whose murders and adulteries had shocked even the most understanding European ruler. Partly because of this, the Cardinal had been persuaded to allow the coronation of the sixteen-year-old Louis as King of France. The youth's mother, Anne of Austria, was retained as Chief Advisor but the real power remained with her lover, Cardinal Jules Mazarin. It soon became clear to most of the Princes and European rulers that they had been outwitted, so preparations began to secure the escape of De Retz from Vincennes.

There were to be the two of them. The guards had become careless and various implements and messages had been smuggled in by Andrew's "sisters" and, yesterday, they were both ready.

No one saw the three sisters who left the Chateau at midnight. No one saw two of them as they lifted the dinghy from the roof of Seagull's cabin and quietly rowed it upstream. The guards heard nothing as the little boat glided silently under the bridge they were guarding and passed the great building that was Notre Dame. No one noticed, half an hour later, as a group of men led a rebel leader and an English spy from Vincennes to the waiting boat. In the darkness, Andrew embraced Mary Beth briefly and then climbed aboard the dinghy which drifted quietly downstream, under the bridge once more and, soon, Seagull was in sight ahead. They steered alongside and Andrew jumped aboard and made firm the rope. Paul de Gondi and Mary Beth climbed aboard as the faithful Sister Jacqueline clambered up the bank to the Chateau, waving as she went.

The third sister handed a small bundle to Mary Beth, who held her and kissed her tenderly. 'Au Revoir, mes enfants,' said the Queen Mother, 'et bon voyage.'

'Au Revoir, Henriette. Thank you for everything.'

'C'est une plaisir, ma belle amie. Goodbye, Andrew. Take good care of them both.'

'I will, Your Majesty. Take care, yourself.'

'Goodbye, Your Majesty,' said De Retz.

'Bon Chance, your Eminence. Give my love to my son.'

The Archbishop bowed. 'I will.'

Henriette Marie stood alone on the bank of the Seine as Seagull slipped her moorings and drifted slowly downstream into the dense darkness.

BY morning, they were passing Le Havre and, by noon, Seagull was going like a tornado towards the Straits of Dover. Andrew knew it would not take long for Mazarin to realise his error and they wished to be clear of French waters by then. Unfortunately, they were too late. As the sun cleared the tall cliffs, they saw ahead three French cutters which had put out from Le Touquet to cut them off. The way that they were aligned, with guns at the ready, showed clearly that the boats were not out fishing.

The first gun spoke as soon as Seagull got into its range and a plume of water fell across her bows. It seemed that the French Navy had been given very specific orders and did not intend to take prisoners. Soon, all the guns were blazing as Seagull bravely pushed forward. They could not turn or they would become broadside on.

Mary Beth sat cuddling her baby in the cabin as water continually broke over the gunwales and Andrew set the helm to run Seagull between two warships and lay on the deck to escape musket

fire which had started to chip the woodwork.

It was the enormous explosion which made him look up. As the waters subsided, pieces of timber fell into the empty sea where the central cutter had been and the ship to its port frantically began to turn. It was far too slow. The triple rows of cannon of the Spanish man-of-war which had crept up on them unawares whilst all eyes had been on Seagull, spoke again and a sheet of flame leapt into the air. The third cutter had been badly holed and it slunk away with a heavy list to port and with smoke pouring from the fore-castle. It had gone almost a mile when the magazine caught alight and the boat disintegrated into a million pieces.

'Allo allo, Seagull,' came a familiar voice across the water. 'Are you all right, mes amis?'

'Oui,' Andrew called to Condé. 'We're fine, thank you.'

'De Rien. Where are you headed?'

'Bruxelles. Is that possible?'

'Naturellement, mon ami. Mary Beth, she is with you?'

'Oui, Louis. And the baby.'

'The baby?'

'Oui. A girl. We have called her Marianne.' Mary Beth stood on deck in silk and leather proudly holding up her bundle.

'Félicitations, mes amis. I'll see you this evening at Bruxelles.'

'Au revoir, Louis.'

'Au revoir, Andrew. Bon Chance.'

'Mazarin will not be too happy about this,' said De Retz as the man-of-war fell into position slightly behind Seagull.

'Too bad,' Andrew said. 'I don't suppose Condé is terribly bothered.'

The Archbishop smiled. 'No, I don't suppose he is.'

CHARLES met them in Bruxelles and embraced De Retz warmly and then thanked Andrew profusely. Mary Beth was a little taken aback by the ferocity of the kiss she received from her King, but was pleased with the attention he gave Marianne.

'Well, my friends,' he said. 'You must bring me up-to-date with recent events. I feel quite out of things down in Cologne. I have to come here to find out what is going on.'

'There is much to tell, Your Majesty,' said De Retz.

'Then come into the Chateau, we must have dinner together and all must be revealed.'

'We will tell you what we can,' Andrew said.

'First, how is my youngest brother?'

'Henry is fine.'

'My sister is very worried. She still thinks he is being forced to become a Catholic against his will.'

'Your mother, the Queen, has been very considerate with him,' said Mary Beth. 'It is your youngest sister who is causing any problem there may be.'

'Minette?'

'Yes, Your Majesty. She accuses him of being a heretic because he refuses to become Catholic. Henry loves his sister and cannot help being affected by her attitude.'

'Then Mary and I must visit them and get it sorted out, though I doubt it will be for a while. Paris is too hot at the moment.'

'It certainly is,' Mary Beth said with surprising vehemence.

'Well, let's talk about it at dinner.'

'Very well. May we pay a visit before dinner?'

'Of course. Give Lucy my love.'

'How did you know we wanted to visit Lucy?'

'George has told me of your concern for her.'

'George? He's here, in Bruxelles?'

'Yes, he seems to have turned over a new leaf. He's been visiting her and paying for her keep.'

'So he ought,' said Mary Beth.

'I understand your anger, Lady Ramsden. He has told me of the suspicions he had which prompted the action he took, but I think you will now find him a changed man.'

'Sire, with respect. I will believe it when I see it.'

The King laughed. 'Go, do your duty. I will see you both at dinner.'

ANDREW bought flowers and Mary Beth bought food and they climbed the stairs and knocked. Lucy opened the door to them.

'Lucy, you're up,' exclaimed Mary Beth.

'Andrew, Mary Beth. Come in, come in.' Tears of joy rolled down her cheeks as she stood back to allow them entry. She sat down and Mary Beth placed Marianne in her lap. Lucy clutched the baby to herself tightly.

'You're looking well,' Andrew said.

'Thank you. I feel much better.'

'How long have you been walking?' asked Mary Beth.

'About two months. I still can't go out, but I can get around my little flat without relying on others.'

'I hear that George has been helping you.'

'He's been very kind. He's tried very hard to make up for his...past. I really don't know what I'd do without him.'

'You're not tempted to try anything on, are you?'

'No. The doctor says it is still too dangerous. I might look well but I am not a whole woman. If anyone... touches me, I will almost certainly start bleeding again and die very quickly. He says that if I am careful, I may live for several years.'

'We're very glad for you. For you both.'

'I have no hold on George, I've made that very clear to him. What I can't give him, he must get elsewhere. We both know and accept that.'

'Good.'

'How long are you both in Bruxelles?'

'Just a day or two,' Andrew said.

'Shall I see you again?'

'Of course,' said Mary Beth. 'I must return on Saturday to collect Marianne.'

'To collect...?' Tears flowed again. 'You're going to leave your baby with me?'

'Just for a day or two.'

'Oh, Mary Beth. I'm so happy. Thank you. Thank you.'

'I'll pop in from time to time for feeding.'

'Can I try?'

'Of course you can.'

Lucy turned Marianne around and opened her blouse. She put the baby to her breast and Marianne was soon sucking away. Marianne didn't get much sustenance out of it but a look of intense satisfaction came over Lucy's face as she put her head back against the bedboard. They left her in ecstasy, both crying and laughing at the same time.

CONDE arrived in Bruxelles in time for dinner. He had, apparently, received short notice of the intended escape from Vincennes and had commandeered the Spanish man-of-war to meet them and ensure a safe passage. It was a good thing he had, else they would not have enjoyed that glorious dinner at the Chateau. They brought each other up to date with events in Europe and Andrew declared his intention to return to England as soon as possible. Sir John would be concerned that he had not reported in since his leaving England.

Charles was delighted with the news that there was a body, albeit small, of influential men in

England who welcomed a restoration of Royalty. 'You must return immediately, Andrew. I have a message for General Monck if you could ensure its safe delivery.'

'Of course, Sire.'

'He was acting Rear-Admiral for a while when the war over the Navigation Act was raging but, knowing George Monck, he'll be back at Coldstream by now.'

'Very well, Sire. It shall be done.'

'I have a further request which may be more difficult.'

'Anything, Sire.'

'I want you to take the Duke of Buckingham with you.'

Andrew was silent.

'Andrew. I would not request this of you unless it was important. You will have heard of his secret relationship with Mary Fairfax?'

'Yes, Sire. Lucy told me.'

'I want him to go to York and give a similar message to her father. George Monck and Sir Thomas Fairfax are both honourable men. With them on my side, the throne will be secure.'

'If it is that important, Sire, it shall be done, though I'll have to break it gently to Lady Ramsden.'

He laughed. 'A formidable lady, that. She reminds me so much of your sister, Carrie.' He looked straight at Andrew. 'My mother took Lady Caroline's death very badly, you know. She was a very brave lady.'

'Mary Beth is also brave, Sire. She saved Henry's life in Holland.' He explained the challenge, the duel and Mary Beth's winning shot.

Charles looked serious. 'So that's what it's about.'

'What, sire?'

'Monsignor Mazarini has been here, looking for you. He seems to have suffered some injury to his hand, face and legs, but he's breathing fire and death about English traitors. Watch your back, Andrew.'

'I've got pretty good at that lately.'

'I would watch Lady Ramsden's back, too. If he is able to recognise her, she will not be safe so do not let her out of your sight for a second. If he catches her, you will never see her again, at least, not in one piece. He is a sadist of the worst kind and definitely not to be trusted in any kind of deal.'

'It seems to run in his family.'

'Yes, of course. You met dear Jules at Paris, didn't you? Take my advice, do not trust an Italian when he's smiling. He will be planning something nasty.'

Andrew laughed. 'I will remember that, Sire.'

He was later to wish that he had taken closer heed of the King's advice.

Wednesday 6th February 1656

It was a year and a half before Andrew and Mary Beth returned to Europe and, when they did, it was with a certain amount of urgency. They had returned to England as arranged, leaving behind a happy and smiling Lucy and a King who, at long last, was beginning to see his throne in sight.

Much to Andrew's amazement, his wife and the wayward Duke got along fairly well on the trip. George's revived attention to Lucy had smoothed over the worst of the troubled waters and that went a long way in her showing forgiveness. Condé had arranged an escort most of the way though it had not been needed as the seas were peaceful once more. They unloaded George onto a deserted beach near Bridlington from whence he could make his way to Nunappleton where Mary Fairfax awaited him. After that, Seagull sailed north to Berwick near where they met with General Monck and delivered the King's message.

Things had not improved during their absence in Europe. Cromwell had fallen out altogether with Parliament and had initiated military rule in England. The country had been divided into eleven

districts with Major-Generals appointed in each. Soon, however, power-drunk despots like Desborough, Fleetwood and Goff were using their powers to their own ends and England groaned under the weight of tyranny with secret police snooping into all areas of private life.

Rettendon had not changed except for the herd of horses which had now reached thirty. An extra groom had been taken on as well as several village girls who exercised them regularly. Antoinette, at ten, was beginning to look very grown up. Rachel and Donald had looked after Henry as if he was their own and Mary Beth had a daily fight on her hands to keep Rachel from spoiling young Marianne. Unlike poor Lucy, Rachel had been able to feed Marianne and Mary Beth had become broody once more but the lack of conception made her frustrated and moody.

It was the message from Sir John Grenville which brought things to a head. After eighteen months of relative inactivity, Andrew was pleased he would now see further action. Cromwell's generals had met and agreed to support Cardinal Mazarin in his fight to regain Northern France from the occupation of Condé. Royalists from all over Europe were flocking to Bruxelles to offer their services to the Prince in his fight to retain his lands. Andrew had been asked to leave immediately to ascertain the true situation.

'I don't want you to go,' declared Mary Beth as he ate before preparing to leave.

Andrew shrugged. 'I have little choice. Charles and Sir John are depending on me.'

'Is your precious King more important to you than your wife and family?'

'No,' he soothed. 'Not more important but equally as important.'

'I know why you are so desperate to get back. You can't wait to get back into bed with that teenage slut, Anne Hyde, can you?'

Donald and Rachel sat, eating quietly, thoroughly embarrassed by the whole conversation and Andrew was quick to see this. 'Can we not discuss this later, Mary Beth, when we are alone?'

She slammed her fist onto the table and the milk jug tipped over. Marianne began to cry. 'No, it's time we got this out into the open. I've just about had enough of your going around secretly chasing women all over Europe; having affairs left, right and centre with all and sundry; while I stay loyal to you.'

'Mary Beth, you know that's not true. There has never been anyone else and there never will be. Be reasonable, if I had done what you say, one of them would be pregnant by now.'

'Pregnant? You haven't got it in you any more. You can't even make me pregnant.'

There was a shocked silence for a moment until Andrew slowly stood up, dropped his napkin onto the table and walked out of the room. Rachel cuddled Marianne in a futile attempt to stop the flow of tears while Donald stared at Mary Beth until she began to cry.

'Why are you doing this to Andrew?'

She said nothing coherent.

'Mary Beth, listen to me.'

She started to rise.

'Sit down.'

Mary Beth glared insolently at him but eventually obeyed.

'You've got to stop this. Can't you see what it's doing to you both? Andrew has done none of the things you have accused him of and you know it.'

'I hate him.'

'No, you don't. You are understandably unsettled by the events of the last few years but you now have two beautiful children, a fine home and a loving husband. What more could you want?'

'If you are going to take his side in this,' she screeched, 'then you had better get out, all of you. Get out of my home and take those horrible squawking brats with you.'

The report could be heard right through the house. Mary Beth recoiled from Rachel's slap as she almost fell over her chair and sat clutching at her face with wide eyes.

Rachel was livid. 'Don't you ever talk about my brother and his children like that again. Donald and I will go if that's what you really want. But you can keep your children and start acting like a proper mother instead of the high and mighty lady you're not.' She turned to her husband. 'Come on, Donald. I am not going to stay here one more day with this pompous bitch.'

'Wait!' said Mary Beth. 'I'm sorry. I didn't mean it, really.' She looked down at the table in front of her. 'I'm just so confused.'

'Then get off your lazy backside and bring your husband back. If you don't go and make it up right now, so help me I'll...I'll...'

Donald put his arm around his wife and led her towards the kitchen. He stopped at the doorway and looked back at Mary Beth with pity.

MARY Beth found Andrew an hour later. On the river bank, beside the place where Seagull was berthed, had been a young oak tree. Now, it was a mess. His sword had cut great gouges out of it and hacked its upper branches till it looked very sick indeed. In his fury, he had just about killed a perfectly healthy tree and he was sad about it. What had the poor tree done to deserve being mutilated like it had been? It had looked like Mary Beth, that's what it had done. In his mind's eye, he had just split her down the middle and chopped her into a thousand pieces.

Andrew was sweating profusely in spite of the cold air which formed clouds in front of his mouth. He would be happy to get away for a bit. Perhaps when he returned, Mary Beth would be more sensible, or at least have had the decency to die or something. He was going to go to Europe to have fun, being sick of remaining faithful and getting nothing but accusations for his trouble. Tonight, he would set sail alone and head for Bruxelles. He would find Mazarini, kill him, and then go and make a real woman of Anne Hyde and damn the consequences.

Mary Beth stood in front of him and he was sorely tempted. One swift blow and it would all be over: no more nagging; no more wild accusations; no more sniding, hurtful comments that stabbed right to his heart; no more Mary Beth. He yelled and threw the sword with all his strength and with the frustration of eighteen months and it buried itself deep in the trunk, less than an inch from her face.

She didn't even blink. 'If you go without me. I'll kill myself.'

'Good riddance,' Andrew said, sitting down on Seagull's bullet-scarred gunwale. The act reminded him of Samantha: she would never have spoken to him like that; she was a girl who knew her place, could be relied upon for support in times of need. Gradually, his breathing and heartbeat began to return to their normal pace.

'Please don't go without me.'

'You have got to be joking, woman. You think that I am going to take you along to get in the way? You'll spoil all my fun, you will. How can I make babies with Anne Hyde while you're watching? I bet she's got a lovely bedside manner.'

'Stop it, Andrew. Please stop.'

'Stop? I haven't even got started yet and there are plenty more where Anne came from. Huh! I might even catch up with the King one day.'

'Andrew, please. I'm sorry.'

'What was that again? I didn't hear you properly.'

'I said I'm sorry.'

'You're sorry? For what? For humiliating me in front of my family? For accusing me of things I've fought hard with my own conscience to avoid doing? Well, you're too late, I've had enough. From now on, I intend to live up to your expectations and you can go drown yourself for all I care. Better still, go and see George Villiers, I'm sure he could conjure up something really unpleasant for you.'

She said nothing but suddenly started to walk down the river bank and he forced himself to stay seated as he watched her walk into the freezing water, the ice crackling as she went deeper. She hesitated as the water reached her waist and he forced himself to look away. There was a little splash followed by a gasp as she sank up to her shoulders in that ice-cold water.

He sighed in resignation. 'Come out, Mary Beth.'

She climbed out and lay down in the snow on the frozen river bank. 'I'm going to stay here, like this, until you make love to me.'

'You'll freeze to death, girl.'

'So? There are plenty of other girls in Europe. Why should you care about me?'

'I don't,' he lied.

'Then go away and let me die in peace.'

Her words were becoming indistinct due to the chattering of her teeth and she was already turning blue against the brilliant white snow.

Andrew couldn't let her do it. Walking over to her, he picked her up and carried her on board Seagull. Ten minutes later, she lay on top of him in the small cot, covered in blankets, while the small stove threw out heat into the little cabin.

She kissed the end of his nose. 'Just like old times.'

Andrew was about to agree until he remembered something and a lump came to his throat. Last time, there had been three of them.

THEY sailed at midnight. The pacified Rachel had offered to play nanny again, this time to two babies. She was getting good at this but enjoyed every minute of it. Henry, now nearly three, was getting into mischief daily and Marianne, at two, was ready for weaning and Rachel was most disappointed. She had enjoyed feeding her as her own and would miss the comfort it had brought. George Villiers had arrived early in the evening, so they left as soon as they were ready.

Mary Beth stood in the stern guiding the course of Seagull by the light of the moon reflecting off the waters of the Crouch, wearing her cloak over her silk and leathers while George slept in the cabin, recovering from his long journey south from York. This time, they had kissed and made up, but would it last? What would she feel when Andrew talked with Anne Hyde? What would Andrew feel when Mary Beth spoke to Condé? What would either of them feel if they ever again got into the clutches of the brothers Mazarini?

Friday 8th February 1656

Andrew shouldn't have gone to sleep, he knew that, because the dream had come again, the one which had re-occurred a number of times since he had escaped from Vincennes. It always followed the same theme, though the place was often different. This time, his cries woke Mary Beth and he lay trembling and sweating from its memory.

She sat up in the big bed at the Chateau in Bruxelles and tried to soothe him. 'What is it, Andrew? Is it a nightmare?'

He nodded. 'It keeps coming.'

'Tell me, perhaps it will help.'

'No, I can't,' he said, turning from her. 'It's too horrible.'

Mary Beth took him by the shoulders. 'Andrew, listen to me. We don't have secrets from each other. How can I help, if I don't know the problem?'

'I can't tell you, I'm afraid.'

'You? Afraid? You're not afraid of any man.'

'The dream is not about me.'

'Is it me?'

'Sometimes. At first, it was only you but now it's others, too.'

'Here, drink this.'

He took the cup from her and felt a little better.

'Now tell me what this is all about.'

'About a year ago, I had a dream. I was frightened, but I convinced myself it was just a nightmare. A while later, the dream came again, much the same but with slight differences. A different place but the same people.'

'Who were the people?'

'You. And...'

'Yes?'

'The Mazarinis.'

'Oh. What happened?'

'In the dream, I was held. Not tied up, but restrained in some way, as if in a glass box.'

'And?'

'You were there, near me. Tied up like...'

'Yes?'

'Like a crucifixion. You were naked and being crucified. And you were...' He looked at her. 'Pregnant. Very pregnant.'

'And where did the Mazarinis come in?'

'I couldn't see them at first, but I could hear them talking. Damian said "I want his eyes and ears," and Jules replied, "You can have them".'

'Go on.'

'Damian said, "But he must see and hear his woman die first." At that, Jules got very angry and said, "You cannot kill a woman with child - it will anger the Blessed Virgin," so Damian replied, "Then we must take the child away." "How?" asked Jules. Then I saw Damian's arm and there was a hook on the end where I chopped at his hand. In the dream, he held it up for me to see and said, "With this." Then he...he...he... Oh God!'

'Tell me.'

He looked straight at her. 'He ripped you open with it and tore out the baby. There was blood everywhere, Mary Beth. He killed you both.'

She held his head against her breast as he cried down her nightdress. 'How many times have you had this dream?'

'About a dozen times. Sometimes, the place is different but the words are always the same. At first, it was always you that was...was...torn open.'

'Who was it tonight?'

'It was Lucy Walter. Am I going mad, Mary Beth?'

'No you're not. Your subconscious is displaying your worst fears, the death of the people you love by the people you hate the most. You love children so the death of a child, in this case unborn, is involved. Why you don't even know if Damian Mazarini is still alive. If he is, you cannot be sure that he has a hook for a hand, can you?'

He wiped his face. 'No, I can't. You're right.'

'And none of us are pregnant, are we? Lucy certainly isn't, and neither am I.'

'Are you sure?'

'No. But I'm the most likely to be and that's probably why it started with me and when I didn't become pregnant, your subconscious looked for other alternatives. It might be that, now you've told me, it will end. You have faced your demon and killed it.'

'I hope you're right. It is very real. Each time, I feel that I can touch you as you hang there, and when his hook starts tearing through your flesh, I can actually feel your warm blood splattering onto my face. It truly is that real.'

'That's it,' she suddenly exclaimed, standing up. 'The penny's just dropped. That's why you've hardly touched me in the last year. You're terrified I am going to become pregnant, aren't you? As long as I don't, your dream can't come true, can it? That's what's been wrong between us. I've been thinking you don't love me any more and you've been dreaming about the death of our child. Oh, Andrew. Why didn't you tell me?'

'I was scared that you would laugh it off and that you would get pregnant again and it would all come true.'

'Well, I'm not pregnant, so I won't laugh and it won't come true.'

'Are you really sure?'

'Well, as sure as I can be. I won't know the results of our little escapade on the boat for a while, but don't worry, even if I did conceive on Wednesday afternoon, we'll be back home before I get big enough to get into your dream. Now, come on. What can we do to take your mind off it?'

'Nothing that won't make you pregnant again.'

'Then we'll have to risk it, won't we? If you think I'm going to last out till we get back to England then think again. I need you, and I need you now.'

'But Mary Beth, it's cold.'

She lifted her top. 'Then warm your hands first.'

Sunday 10th February 1656

Andrew was surrounded, but he did not complain. Princess Mary arrived in the morning with Anne Hyde and they all stood in the little chapel in Bruxelles. Under Spanish domination, virtually everything had become Catholic orientated. However, pockets of Protestantism still remained and they accompanied the Princess to worship and, after church, they all walked in the gardens.

The snow had gone and the first bulbs were beginning to shoot through the soil along the beds and, in a month, these gardens would be a blaze of colour.

'Colonel Bosvile,' said Princess Mary. 'Have you heard from my brothers?'

'Yes, Your Highness. Charles is hoping to meet you at the cease-fire line near the Escaut River and then James will come out from Paris to meet you.'

'Is he still in the French army?'

'Yes. He's under the tutelage of General Turenne but, if Charles decides to ally with Condé, I expect James will have to come, too. I think he will object because he likes it where he is. Your mother likes having him near, too.'

'I can understand that. This visit is going to be the first family reunion in years. It's a pity my sister Elizabeth died at Carisbrook, else mother would have all her children together.'

Andrew bowed his head. 'I was distressed to hear the news, Your Highness.'

'Andrew,' said the Princess suddenly. 'Would you accompany me to Paris?'

'If that is your wish, your Highness.'

'It is, Andrew. I don't think Anne will object.'

Andrew smiled. 'No, Your Highness. I don't suppose she will.'

'Can you be ready to leave in the morning?'

'Of course. Do I have your permission to speak with Lady Anne?'

'I think you had better. She's beginning to think you are avoiding her, and that won't do at all, will it?'

He bowed. 'No, Your Highness.'

'Mary,' she corrected.

Andrew looked puzzled. 'Your Highness?'

'You must call me Mary. You call my brother by his given name, don't you?'

'Well...yes.'

'Then you must call me Mary when we are together. Titles are for formal occasions, not for friends.'

'I am honoured, Your H... Mary.'

Mary Stuart smiled and, suddenly, it was spring.

ANNE and Andrew sat in the sunshine and watched the children breaking icicles off the frozen fountain. It had looked magnificent with water flowing from it but, frozen, it was as if time itself was standing still.

'What is it like being a Maid of Honour to Princess Mary?' Andrew asked her eventually.

'It's amazing. The Princess is so kind and everyone in Court loves her.'

'Have you met any nice young men, yet?'

She blushed. 'Of course not. I have a lover to consider.'

'Anne, you're learning fast.'

'I ought to, I'm eighteen now.'

'Well, you are a big girl.'

'It's about time I got myself a real lover instead of you. I'll be left on the shelf soon.'

'Anne, my darling. You could never be left on the shelf. You have too much to offer to the right man.'

'Don't tease me. I'm missing out on all the fun.'

'No, you're not. What you're missing is not real. The right man will want to marry you, not just play around and have fun.'

'No one wants to ask me. They're frightened to death of you, did you know that?'

'Of me? Come on. Why should they be frightened of me?'

'It didn't take long for the story about your duel with Damian Mazarini to get about. He's a hired professional killer, and you defeated him.'

'It was a fluke.'

'Fluke or not, people remember and are wary of coming up against you. There's another thing, too. The news is getting everywhere that you are a double agent for just about all of Europe and everyone is scared stiff of the implications of getting on the wrong side of you. The political balance is very delicate, you know.'

'I didn't think it was that delicate.'

'Oh, but yes. Things are said in Holland that would not dare be spoken elsewhere. If France and England do now unite against Condé, there could be very serious repercussions, father said so.'

'Condé is only trying to protect his own lands.'

'Yes, but he's using Spain to do it, that's what is rubbing everyone up the wrong way. France and Spain have been traditional enemies for centuries so, in the average Frenchman's eyes, anything Spain does must be wrong. So, if the Spaniards support Condé, then he must be in the wrong, even if he's in the right. Have I confused you as much as I've confused myself?'

'I get the general idea.' He laughed and held her tight.

'I like that.'

'What?'

'You holding me tight. I could almost believe you care for me.'

'Anne, look at me.'

She turned to face him.

'I do care for you. That's not a pretence. I care very much about what happens to you and that's why I'm doing what I am doing. I'm protecting you from yourself.'

'What if I meet someone nice in Paris?'

'Then marry him.'

'You wouldn't mind?'

'Not as long as I get an invitation to the wedding.'

'You will, I promise.'

'Just play it cool. If someone wants you, he'll come and get you. Play hard to get, we men like that. And don't give anything away.'

'Spoilsport.'

'I mean it. Dangle yourself like a carrot if you must, but don't get bitten, not till you've got a commitment, preferably in writing. Better still, wait till you are married.'

'You're just plain old fashioned.'

'What? With a beautiful mistress like you around?'

They laughed together as the sun began to go down. Tomorrow was going to be a long day and, if half of what Anne had said was true, the whole year was going to be very long and very hard.

Monday 11th February 1656

The journey south was an easy one. Condé had given Andrew a pass for all the party to ensure their safe conduct both through his territory and through the war zone. The little convoy ran southward up the Zenne valley to Houdend and then westwards through Mons and Valenciennes. From there, it followed the Escaut through Cambrai. On the ridge of no-man's-land between the Escaut and the Somme, they met Charles, who had just arrived from Cologne and James, Duke of York, who had come with a military escort from Paris.

It was as the column stopped that Anne came running. 'Andrew, come quickly, it's Lady Ramsden.'

He turned his horse and followed her to the coach where she had travelled with Princess Mary and Anne Hyde. Mary Beth was lying across one seat of the coach and the Princess and her personal maid were mopping her brow. Andrew jumped from his horse and stepped into the coach.

Mary Beth opened her eyes briefly. 'I'm sorry. I just came over all faint. I'll be all right in a minute.'

'I'll look after her, Andrew,' said Anne. 'You go with the Princess.'

He took a last look at the deathly pale Mary Beth and hurried with Princess Mary to see her brothers. It was an emotional reunion and he stood, head bowed, as they exchanged fond greetings.

'Andrew,' called the King. 'Do I hear that Lady Ramsden is unwell? What can we do for her?'

'I don't know, Sire. She was well when we left. Perhaps in Paris someone can help her. There's nothing here.'

He looked around at the battle-scarred land in which they stood. Behind them was Condé's kingdom with the Spanish Netherlands beyond, the way by which they had come. Somewhere to their left was Lorraine and Germany. Ahead lay only Mazarin.

Arrangements were made and Mary Beth was made as comfortable as possible. They gradually proceeded deeper into France until a shout from Anne halted the procession. Andrew stopped by the coach and Anne looked very pale.

'What is it?' he asked.

She held up her hand. It had blood on it.

Princess Mary came running and pushed past him into the coach. After a few minutes she came out. 'How far is she gone?'

'What do you mean?' he asked, fearing the worst.

'For how many months has she been expecting?'

Andrew frowned. 'She isn't pregnant.'

'Of course she is. I'm a mother, I know these things. She's trying to have a miscarriage but before I can help, I need to know how long.'

'I don't know. The other day, she told me she wasn't expecting.'

'Well, she definitely is now. But she won't be for much longer if we don't do something about it.'

'What can I do?'

'We must stop and get her to rest. She doesn't stand a chance in this coach.' She turned. 'James!'

Her younger brother came quickly.

'Where is the nearest town?'

The Duke of York shrugged. 'Péronne.'

'Will it have a doctor?'

'I doubt it. You'll have to go to Arras for a doctor.'

'Then we must go to Arras immediately.'

'But, Mary, it's the wrong way. Arras is back in the war zone.'

'Your Highnesses,' Andrew interjected. 'If I might borrow a coach, I could take Lady Ramsden there and you could continue your journey and we could catch you up in a few days.'

'That makes sense,' James said.

'Very well,' sighed Princess Mary. 'Are you sure you can manage with your sister? She may feel a little odd with just you around. Or would you like Anne to stay and help?'

Andrew dismounted and pulled the Princess to one side. 'Mary, may I confide in you?'

'Of course.'

'By doing so, I must admit to deceiving you a little.'

The Princess smiled. 'Go on, tell me. She's not your sister at all. She's another mistress.'

'Nearly.' He looked down at the stony grey soil. 'Mary Beth is my wife.'

'Oh.' She looked taken aback. 'How does Anne fit into this? Surely it must be embarrassing for her.'

'No, Mary, it's not embarrassing at all. You see, Anne is not my mistress.'

'Not your mistress? I think you had better tell me what is going on.'

Andrew explained quickly.

'And Sir Edward agreed to this deception?'

'I think he had no alternative. I wish to stress to you that she is whole, at least as far as I am

concerned. Maybe she is now old enough to look after herself. I hope so.'

'Well the two of you certainly fooled me, the girl never stops talking about you. I will say one thing, though, I think it is more than a game with Anne. If I am any sort of judge of character, I would say she is deeply in love with you.'

'Perhaps a few months in Paris will change her mind. She can meet some nice young man.'

'It's obvious you haven't been to Paris for a while,' she laughed. 'All the nice young men have gone to war.'

'Mary, will you do me a favour?'

'If I can.'

'Look after her for me. Don't let her get too involved with anyone until there is some form of commitment. She is too good to waste on an affair. I want her to have what I cannot offer her - a husband, a family, a home.'

Princess Mary put her hands on Andrew's shoulders. 'You really care for her, don't you?'

He looked down. 'Yes, I think I do.'

'Then I will not let you down. I will protect her as much as I can. But aren't you coming to Paris to look after her yourself?'

'No, Mary. I'm afraid I cannot.'

'Why not? Paris will be good for your wife.'

'I don't think so. I just know that if she is pregnant, I cannot take her any further into France. I must leave as quickly as possible.'

'But, Andrew,' she said, touching his face as he tried to avoid looking at her. 'What is the matter? You look frightened. I've never seen you like this before.'

'Mary, I cannot explain right now. One day I will, I promise. You have been very kind to us all and I am very grateful. I'm sorry, I must leave you.'

'Andrew. I think I know you well enough to know that there is something very important behind this. You are not afraid for yourself. You think something terrible will happen to Mary Beth, don't you?'

He looked into her eyes. 'You are very discerning.'

She laughed. 'I hope so after all these years.'

He didn't know what she meant by that. She was younger than Charles and, therefore, couldn't have been more than twenty-four or five. Not exactly an old lady.

'Thank you, Mary.' He bent to kiss her hand, but her lips got in the way and then she turned before anyone else could see and left him standing there, amazed. He had kissed a Princess. Was he now going to turn into a frog?

Andrew walked back to their loaned coach after waving goodbye to the procession as it made its way southward towards Paris. Mary Beth lay where he had left her but the Princess had left her personal maid with them to help Mary Beth. He gave the coachman orders to head for Arras as smoothly but quickly as possible.

He was beginning to panic. It was stupid, he knew. It had only been a dream, but he felt that, now that Mary Beth carried a child, he had to get her out of France and as far away from the Mazarinis as possible. Somehow, their lives seemed to depend on it.

'My Lord,' said the maid. 'I have letters for you from the King and Princess.'

He opened the one from Princess Mary and then smiled. 'Well, Christine, it looks as if you and I are going to get to know each other better. Princess Mary has loaned you to us indefinitely.'

The young girl bowed her head. 'Yes, My Lord.'

Andrew smiled again. 'Not "My Lord", child. Just plain Andrew.'

'But, sir,' she said, looking confused. 'The letter from the King...'

He looked at the sealed document. It was addressed to "Colonel Andrew Bosville, - Third Earl of Ramsden."

The cunning old fox, thought Andrew. *Now he could be sure of my total loyalty.* Breaking the seal, he opened it carefully. It was not easy trying to read in that bouncing coach but, somehow, he managed it. It read:

My Dear Andrew

I hope you will forgive my little gesture. But you deserve it, you know. Over the next few months, I shall have need for your services more than at any time before. Mary, is expecting to be in Paris for about six months but I am fairly certain that Mazarin will ensure my early ejection from France. In case I am not around when she leaves, I would like you to ensure that Mary has a safe journey back to The Hague.

I have no one else I feel I can completely trust in this matter. Mary will send word to you in Bruxelles as soon as she is ready to leave. If the war breaks out sooner, James and I may already be there but you are my failsafe. Out of respect for your loyalty, I will personally ensure that no harm whatsoever comes to Mistress Hyde while you are apart.

Your very affectionate friend,

Charles R.

THEY pulled into Arras as Andrew finished reading the letter. It was just a small town cramped tightly around the river Scarpe, as many medieval towns are, and he found them rooms quickly and Christine went for the doctor. After a brief examination, he prescribed a few weeks of rest with her feet up. He also gave her something to sleep and Andrew left her, smiling, her eyes slowly glazing over and arranged for food for the coachman, Christine and himself. The coachman preferred to stay near the horses whilst Christine felt it her duty to be near Mary Beth. After an hour, she came out of the bedroom looking tired.

'I've got some food for you,' Andrew told her. 'Sit down and eat.'

'Yes, My Lord.' She curtsied and then sat with the food on her knee. She was a pretty girl and reminded Andrew of Carrie. Dark hair and eyes, ivory skin. She caught him watching her. 'My Lord?'

Andrew shook his head. 'I was just thinking how much you looked like someone else. Someone I once loved very much.'

'A mistress, My Lord?'

He laughed. 'No, my child. A sister.'

She blushed. 'Sorry, My Lord.'

'You are forgiven,' he said, 'One one condition.'

'Yes, My Lord?'

'That you call me Andrew. Everyone else does.'

The girl almost had a heart-attack at the thought. 'Oh, I couldn't do that, My Lord. It wouldn't be correct.'

He smiled. 'Very well, Christine. You must call me whatever you are comfortable with.'

'Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.'

They said their goodnights and she retired and Andrew sat in the armchair thinking about their circumstances. Mary Beth was safe, at least for the time being. The problem was, they were still within reach of the long arm of Mazarin. If anyone talked in Paris and he found that Andrew was in Arras, he would search until they were in his clutches. Andrew felt he dare not fall asleep and dream of what the evil Cardinal might do to Mary Beth.

They had another problem. Even if Mazarin did not catch them, they were right on the frontier between France and the Spanish Netherlands. At any time, war could recommence and armies of either side could advance with possibly fatal consequences. They were, to all intents and purposes, alone, immobile and unprotected, slap bang in the middle of the war zone.

Wednesday 18th June 1656

It was four months before Andrew was able to move Mary Beth. It was clear that the stresses of the last year or so had brought on a physiological tension which had caused her body to try to reject the baby. However, the rest did her good and she had never been looked after so well. Christine was full of dynamic energy and she proved to be a blessing during those lonely weeks.

Every day, Andrew expected the Mazarinis to appear on the doorstep and demand that Mary Beth's child be torn from within her, but they were left alone. The dream reoccurred only once and this time, it was Christine who was ripped open. Andrew was sick all night afterwards and didn't sleep for several nights thereafter. Christine couldn't for the life of her understand why he kept holding her tight and crying but Mary Beth saw his actions and was intelligent enough to realise what he was going through.

There were movements of troops almost daily and soon, Andrew knew, he would have to risk Mary Beth's life and move her. They did it one night, much to the amusement of their maid who thought the whole affair highly over-dramatic. But even she was alarmed when they were accosted by Condé's troops but relieved when, pass in hand, they were allowed safe conduct. More than that, the local Capitaine gave them a military escort back to Bruxelles.

Condé was his usual cheerful self. 'Can I never get rid of you two? Here I am thinking you safely in Paris and you turn up on my doorstep again like a couple of bad pfennigs.'

'I expected you to be at the front line somewhere by now. Mazarin's troops are on the move.'

'Are they now? And how do you know that?'

Andrew explained the last three months without giving reasons while Condé stroked his short beard and thought about it.

'I'm glad you're back, actually. A situation has developed that I don't know how to handle.'

'How can I help?'

'I don't know that you can, not permanently. Your Duke of Buckingham has been back in town.'

'In Bruxelles? You say "has". Does that mean he has now gone?'

'Yes. He escaped before I could hang him.'

Andrew sighed. 'What has he been up to now?'

'I think you had better go and see Lucy. She will tell you.'

'Lucy?' said Mary Beth. 'Is she...'

'Very ill, my dear. Very ill indeed. The doctor does not expect her to live more than a few days at the most.'

'But she was doing so well.'

'That was before the Duke returned. Go and see her, Andrew, before it is too late.'

'Very well, Your Highness. Thank you for your concern.'

He shrugged. 'De rien, mon ami.'

ANDREW took the stairs three at a time while Mary Beth followed with Christine at a more leisurely pace. The room was almost in darkness and smelt foul. Lucy was lying on the bed looking deathly pale as he opened the curtains and the window to allow fresh air into the room.

'Andrew,' she called from the bed. 'Is that really you?'

'Of course, my love.' He grasped her hand which was like ice, though the day was hot and sticky.

Pushing the hair from her eyes, he heard Mary Beth gasp as she entered and fell to her knees clutching at Lucy as if they were long-lost sisters. 'What has happened? You were so well last time we saw you.'

'I have been very stupid, Mary Beth. Very stupid indeed.'

'Tell me.'

'George was very good to me and, a week ago, he said he was leaving. He said he'd had enough of mollycoddling an invalid for nothing in return so I told him I would like to return his affections but was not able, it was too dangerous. We had a terrible row and he accused me of having an affair with Andrew on the side. I told him it was not true, but he wouldn't believe me.'

'What did he do to you?'

'He didn't force me, I let him.'

Andrew was furious. 'You let him make love to you?'

'I had to, don't you see? He was paying for everything.'

'No you did not have to. I would have helped you.'

'I know you would. But I had felt so good and I thought it wouldn't matter just once. It was wonderful at first, feeling him with me again, I'd forgotten what it could feel like. It was really wonderful but then I started getting hot and I felt something...give inside me. I bled all over him and he just...left me.'

'Just left you to die?'

Very faint. 'Yes.'

'I'll kill the bastard.'

'Andrew, no. It was as much my fault as his.'

They were all silent for a long time and little Christine was totally in awe of the whole situation.

'Are you well, Mary Beth?' Lucy finally asked.

'No she's not,' Andrew interjected. 'She should be lying down now but she insisted on coming here to see you.'

'Thank you, Mary Beth.'

'If my husband will let me speak, I'm going to give you an order you had better not disobey. Stay in that bed and don't move. Christine and I are going to look after you till you are well.'

'I'm not going to be well again. The doctor says the damage is permanent this time. Something has ruptured inside and it's only a matter of time.'

'He said that last time and you've lived two more years. Perhaps, with care, we can keep you going.'

'I don't want to. I just want to die.'

'Don't you dare die yet. In a few months, I am going to have another baby and you, my dear Lucy, are going to hold it for me and feed it like you did Marianne. If you go and die on me, I shall never speak to you again.'

Lucy almost laughed. 'Oh, Mary Beth. I'd love to hold your baby again. But I won't last four months, I know I won't.'

'Then you had better just make up your mind that you are going to. I'm not giving my baby to a corpse for anyone.'

'I'll try.'

'You will not only try, you will succeed or I shall get very angry.'

'I bet you're really beautiful when you're angry. Is she, Andrew?'

'She's beautiful all the time, just like you.'

'Oh, Andrew. You say the kindest things. Kiss me.' He did and Lucy cried again as she thought of how it might have been.

LATER that night, the letter came from Princess Mary. Andrew was to meet her at Midday on the 24th at Cambrai. So, he thought, action at last.

Tuesday 24th June 1656

Princess Mary and her party were waiting when Andrew arrived at Cambrai. Fighting had not yet broken out between the French and Spanish armies so it was still relatively peaceful. Condé had lent Andrew a squad of cavalry as escort for the Princess but he left them at the edge of the de-militarised zone and went forward, alone, to meet the royal party.

James, Duke of York, had led the group from Paris and he now said his goodbyes to his sister and handed them over to Andrew's safe keeping. 'Thank you, Lord Ramsden. This will not be forgotten.'

'It is my privilege, your Highness. It is an honour to escort so fine a lady.'

'I fear this may be the last time for many years, perhaps until the restoration. Times are getting very dangerous.'

'They are, your Highness. Please be assured I will ensure their safety to the Hague.'

'Thank you again. One day we shall meet again?'

Andrew bowed. 'I look forward to it, my Lord.'

The Duke and his French soldiers departed from the war zone and Andrew escorted the coach towards the waiting Spanish army. They pressed on with only brief greetings. Princess Mary looked very tired and Anne wouldn't meet his eyes. Andrew was going to have to have a long talk with her when they got to Bruxelles.

It was almost dark as the coach drew up outside the Chateau where Condé had offered to provide rooms for them overnight. He had already taken in Mary Beth and Christine and, in spite of his amusement at Andrew's insistence, had mounted a permanent pair of hand-picked guards outside their door with instructions to physically prevent their leaving if necessary. He was not going to have anything happen to them while he was away for a few hours.

Despite Andrew's elaborate precautions, things still went wrong. In his concern for Mary Beth's safety, he had forgotten something vital.

AS soon as the Princess was settled, Andrew went to see Anne. At first, she would not open the door to him, which he thought most odd. But then, there was something odd about her whole behaviour. Eventually, he persuaded her to open the door and then took her into the gardens where he had given her that very first kiss. It was that memory which made her open up to him.

'And how was Paris?'

'Oh, it was all right.'

'Any good dancing?'

'Yes.'

'Some nice partners?'

A hesitation. 'Some.'

'One in particular?'

She finally nodded.

'Anyone I know?'

'Yes. James.'

'The Duke of York?'

'Yes. He was very kind to me.'

'He does seem very pleasant and polite. Do you like him?'

'Yes. Very much.' Then she broke down. 'Oh, Andrew. I've broken your trust.'

She cried and Andrew put his arm around her like a good lover should. 'Tell me about it.'

'We danced a lot and he was so gentlemanlike. He reminded me a lot of you and I forgot what you had said.'

'What happened?'

'He... he touched me.'

'How?'

She looked up sharply. 'Do you really want me to spell it out?'

'And you let him?'

'I had little choice. He is the King's brother.'

'Of course you have a choice. Are you to become his mistress?'

'That's what he wants and he has asked me to stay here, in Bruxelles, until he arrives. Charles has instructed him to give up his position in the French army and come and fight for Condé, so he will be here in a few weeks.'

'Then you will not be,' Andrew insisted.

'What?'

'You must leave at once and remain at the Hague.'

'That's what Princess Mary said when she found out.'

'Then you must do as you are told. If James really wants you, he'll marry you. Don't become his mistress, I forbid it.'

She stood up. 'Don't you dare tell me what to do and what not to do. Who do you think you are,

my father or something?’

‘Does your father know about this?’

‘Not yet. I’ll tell him when I next see him around.’

‘No you won’t. You’ll tell him when you get to the Hague.’

‘I’m not going to the Hague.’

‘Oh yes you are, but first you are coming with me.’ He suddenly stood up and grabbed her arm.

‘Where to?’

‘Wait and see.’

He pulled her along but she bit him and he had to let go. She turned her back on him so he grabbed the nearest part of her - her hair. She screamed. He pulled. She staggered. He led. Across the garden scattering birds, along the street while people stared, she screamed and kicked while Andrew dodged and pulled. At the bottom of the stairs, he slapped her face hard and she fell silent. He then took her hand and led her up the stairs and pushed her into the little room at the top.

‘Anne,’ he said. ‘I’d like you to meet a very dear friend of mine. You already know her name - it’s Lucy.’

Lucy turned slowly in the bed and looked at Anne, who put her hands to her face, stricken.

‘Who is it?’ Lucy said, in obvious pain. ‘Is it you, Andrew?’

‘Yes, my darling. It’s me and I’ve brought someone to meet you; someone who wants to be Prince James’s mistress and needs to know how to go about it.’

‘Is...is she really that stupid?’

She didn’t need to say any more. The very sight of this poor, mistreated, abandoned girl said it all.

‘How would you advise her, Lucy?’

‘Don’t let her, Andrew. Please don’t let her become his mistress. If she insists, you must kill her; it will be a kindness in the end. Kill her now, please, so she can avoid all the pain and the frustration, the heartbreak and the misery. It’s just not worth it.’ Lucy broke down completely then, and cried the cries of the thoroughly miserable. Anne dropped to her knees and put her arms around Lucy and she, too was crying. At that moment, the door burst open. Before Andrew could move, two men rushed in and one hit him with something hard and heavy and he fell to the floor, bright stars covering the ceiling.

Into the milky way of flashing lights, limped the face he had hoped he would never see again. ‘So, Colonel Bosvile, you thought that you could get away again. You would have made it, too, if it hadn’t been for all the noise your mistress made as she came along the street.’

Andrew tried to stagger to his feet but one of the men hit him again and his mind teetered on the edge of unconsciousness while the other thug held Anne firmly with her arms pinned behind her back. She struggled but to no avail.

‘What do you want, Mazarini?’

‘Why. You, of course. But before I kill you, you must first watch the one you love most of all die most painfully.’

So the dream was coming true. Damian Mazarini held up his arm and there was the hook. Andrew nearly screamed himself.

Without warning, Mazarini slashed backwards with his hook and Anne screamed as the entire front of her dress was ripped away. A piece of cloth fell to the floor close to Andrew’s face and he stared at it. It had blood on it, her blood. *My God*, he thought, *he’s killed her*.

Mazarini slashed again and Anne screamed in agony as more of her clothing fell away. There was much more blood spattered all over her front, dripping onto the floor that Christine had recently scrubbed so clean. Anne’s exposed stomach and breasts seemed to be covered in blood as she was held there, helpless and screaming.

It’s all happening, Andrew thought in panic. The dream is coming true. Anne is being torn to shreds by this madman and I can’t stop him.

‘Say goodbye to her, my friend,’ the cruel voice said.

Mazarini nodded to his companion, who pulled Anne’s shoulders further back and tugged at her

hair, offering up to him her undefended throat, chest and stomach. The butcher stood back a little so that Andrew could clearly see her exposed body. Mazarini looked at her with sudden, undisguised sadism and then slowly raised his arm high over his head ready to bring it down and to rip her wide open, right down her front.

Everything then happened very fast. The brave Lucy, without a single thought for her own life and safety, launched herself at the madman from the bed and he fell heavily to the floor. Andrew thrust his head back hard and smashed it into the face of the man who had held and hit him. Blood gushed from the man's broken nose and before he could move, Andrew's elbow crushed his windpipe.

Andrew then staggered to his feet, his head in great pain as the room spun. Mazarini sat up and raised his hook to rip out Lucy's throat as Andrew aimed his foot at the sadist's head. He lashed out with all his pent-up anger and he was rewarded with the sound of a crack as Mazarini's neck broke. The third man turned to flee but Andrew kicked out at the door and his face cannoned into edge of it. As he reeled around, as if drunk, Andrew hit him with a chair and he fell headlong down the stairs and lay very still at the bottom.

Andrew had overlooked the obvious. Mazarini had seen him, not with Mary Beth, but with Anne. It had been Anne whom Andrew had taken from him at the ball; whom he had been carrying when Mazarini had tried to provoke him into a duel. In his concern for Mary Beth, he had forgotten poor little Anne.

Andrew felt very sick and dizzy but, somehow, he managed to drag the still form of Lucy off Mazarini and lifted her carefully onto the bed. He then turned to Anne, who had finally stopped screaming and was now staring, wide-eyed, at him and clutching her arms about herself. Andrew helped her from the floor where she had sat down and carefully laid her beside Lucy. Gently, he ripped away the rest of her dress and then sighed a long sigh. She had two nine-inch slashes across her stomach and breasts but, fortunately, they were fairly shallow. He got water from the next room and quickly bathed her to try to stem the flow of blood and, eventually, he succeeded and made wide bandages from the sheets.

His head was beginning to spin again so he sat down and tried to find the source of the damage. He had a couple of very tender spots on his head and it felt like his skull was in pieces, but he would probably live. He hoped the same was true of poor Anne as he could do no more for her. It was up to her, now.

Andrew heard the bottom door open and the scream which followed. He crawled to the door, peered around the landing and saw Christine at the foot of the stairs. 'Get a doctor, quickly. And then Condé, if you can find him.'

'What about Mary Beth? She's alone.'

He looked down and the body of Mazarini and said quietly, 'Tell her it's all right. She is quite free now.'

THE doctor came, looked at Andrew's attempt at bandaging Anne's stomach and chest, and pronounced him a qualified nurse. He also examined Andrew's head and Lucy's abdomen and shook his head at the latter. The bleeding rate had doubled. By her prompt action, she had saved the life of Anne Hyde but had reduced her own life span considerably.

Andrew, it turned out, had suffered a fractured skull and was sent to the hospital for rest. Mary Beth and Condé worked miracles for them and, an hour later, Andrew was in bed. On his left was Lucy, a broad smile on her face and, on his right, was Anne, under sedation. Playing at nurses were Mary Beth Bosvile and Christine le Fevre. What more could a man ask for?

Wednesday 25th June 1656

With what seemed like a determined purpose in her step, Mary Beth climbed the stairs to

Condé's offices and entered the official suite. The Prince rose to meet her.

How different she had become, he thought. He was not able to put into words just when the change had been made but he knew she was no longer the teenager who had flirted with him in Paris just seven years ago. Was it really seven years? A lot of water had flowed down the Seine during that time.

'Louis,' she said as her removed her light cloak. 'I come to ask a favour.'

'Anything, my dear.'

She explained.

He would not ask the obvious, she must have a very good reason for such a strange request. 'Of course. I shall arrange it immediately.' He smiled. 'How is that husband of yours?'

'A little better today, but the doctor has warned him to stay in bed for a couple of weeks at least.'

'And Mademoiselle Hyde?'

'Still sedated. The doctor is not particularly worried about her physical injuries. Fortunately, the cuts were not deep and Andrew's prompt action ensured that she didn't lose too much blood. It is her mental condition the doctor is most concerned about. It is a terrible shock to the system to be confronted with death at all, never mind one by being ripped to pieces by a raving maniac.'

He leant back in his chair and placed his fingertips together. 'You seem to survive these things quite well, Mary Beth.'

'I am different. All my life I have been involved with my adopted mother and her mother in intrigues with Henriette Marie. I suppose I have become a little used to it.'

'Ma chérie. I have been fighting all my life and have seen much bloodshed, but never can I say that I get used to it.'

'Perhaps it is because I am a woman.'

He grinned. 'That, my dear Mary Beth, has never been in doubt.'

ANDREW had a splitting headache, not surprising with what it had gone through in the last twenty-four hours. He looked at Lucy and she smiled back at him.

'Feeling better?' she asked.

'Not a lot. But thank you for what you did. It saved all our lives, you know.'

'Well, it is about time I did something useful in my life. I seem to have thought about myself most of the time so far so perhaps this makes up for all the bad things I have done.'

'You've never been really bad, Lucy. You've just been the victim of circumstances.'

She grinned broadly. 'You say the nicest things at times.'

'Has Anne been awake yet?'

'No. I think the doctor would like to keep her under for another day, if possible.' She thought for a moment. 'You knew it was going to happen, didn't you?'

'Lucy, you're very perceptive, and you're also right. I have been having this repetitive dream where the Mazarinis attack Mary Beth in a similar manner. The trouble is, I've spent so much time looking out for Mary Beth that I forgot about poor Anne.'

'Do you often have dreams like that?'

'Not often. In fact, there's only one other dream that I have sometimes.'

'Who is that about?'

'My sister, Carrie.'

'Do I know her?'

'No, she died in Paris a few years ago. You know, the dreams about her are so real that, at times, I can't believe she is dead.'

'Are you sure she is?'

'Yes. Mary Beth was at the funeral.' Andrew hesitated then suddenly sat up. 'That's it. That's what's been bothering me.'

'Andrew, be careful, you'll hurt yourself.'

'Good grief, it's taken a bump on the head for me to see it clearly.'

'Andrew, lay down. Then tell me.'

He lay back down and looked up at the ceiling and recent events started to jump into focus. 'It's Mary Beth.'

'What is?'

He looked at Lucy. 'Queen Henriette Marie once used an odd phrase. She said that Mary Beth changed when Carrie died. Princess Anne-Marie also admitted that she was a different girl, a girl with a purpose.'

'Go on.'

'On our last visit home, my other sister, Rachel, also said a strange thing. She said that Mary Beth had become just like Carrie. She was wrong. Mary Beth has not become LIKE Carrie at all - she has become Carrie.'

'How can that be?'

'Our family have always been close. Not just close like many families are but almost able to read each other's minds, do you know what I mean?'

'I'm not sure.'

'Do you know why Carrie died?'

'No.'

'Because she felt me get hit on the head.'

'That's not so unusual. I felt it when you got hit on the head in my house.'

'Yes. But, at the time of Carrie's death, I was in England.'

It was Lucy's turn to sit up. 'What?'

'Yes. I was in Yorkshire being attacked and got hit on the head. Rachel, two hundred miles away, felt it and gave birth prematurely and Carrie, four hundred miles away in Paris, had a heart attack over it. They both felt it as if they were there, don't you see?'

'Is that possible?'

'I don't know. All I know is that every time I look at Mary Beth now, I see Carrie.'

'Did they look alike?'

'Not in the slightest. Carrie, who was the split image of our mother, Sarah, was about five foot three and fairly slim. Not thin, but rounded.'

Lucy laughed. 'Do you mean she had a smashing figure?'

'Yes, I suppose I do. She was not a bit like Rachel and I, who are shortish and stockier. She was also very dark haired, almost jet black, but with ivory skin.'

'Not like Mary Beth,' Lucy conceded.

'No, not one bit. Mary Beth is more like five foot six and has golden hair and tans very easily. Mary Beth is also...bigger in certain places.'

'You men have a one track mind.'

They both laughed at their own jokes as the lady in question walked into the room. 'What's so funny?'

Lucy said, 'Andrew was just describing your...assets.'

'My what?'

'Your hand warmers,' Andrew added. Mary Beth blushed and looked down and they all laughed, which brought Christine and the doctor at the run.

'I hope you're not disturbing my patients, Lady Ramsden,' he accused with a chuckle.

'I've only just arrived. It's these two who are to blame.'

'Oh, are they? Perhaps I should give them what I gave Miss Hyde.'

'I don't think that will be necessary. I'll go. They seem to be a tonic for each other at the moment.'

'Mary Beth,' Andrew asked, frowning. 'What's in the box?'

She held up a square parcel in her hands. 'Just a present for someone.'

'For me?'

'No, you wouldn't appreciate it,' she said with a sly smirk he didn't understand. 'It's a going-away present for someone.'

'Oh.' Why did he feel a cold finger running up his spine just then?

Friday 11th July 1656

Queen Anne stirred as the maid opened the curtains at the Palace of St Germain. Jules was still asleep so she carefully slipped out so as not to disturb him. He would be busy later, at Court. Today, they must finally decide on whether or not to take up Cromwell's offer of troops to help them reclaim Picardy from Condé. The decision was, not whether to accept the help - that had already been decided - but whether the terms were right. Cromwell was insisting on owning Calais and Dunkerque in exchange for England's help and it was obvious why he wanted that. Whoever held these ports could control the Channel and, in effect, hold the whole of Europe to ransom over shipping rights to and from the North Sea. Still, it would be worth it, she thought, just to get their own back on Condé. Some of the Court wanted them to forget it, let him have his lands, they're mostly his anyway. But that's not the point. He made fools of them during the Fronde. It was not the land they wanted, it was revenge.

The Maitress de Maison entered with a small parcel on a tray and the Queen Regent picked it up and shook it. It rattled a little. It was not heavy although something solid was inside and the parcel was addressed to Monsignor Guilio Mazarini. So, she thought, *it is from someone who is aware of Jules' correct Italian name.*

The man in question stirred and smiled up at her. Their love affair was no secret. If King's could have mistresses, why can't a Queen and a Cardinal of the Church have an affair? There was nothing wrong with that.

Anne of Austria sat on the bed. 'Jules, I have a parcel for you. It has come by special messenger.'

'From where?'

'It doesn't say. Perhaps there is a note inside. Here, open it.'

With a smile, Mazarin sat up and carefully unwrapped the paper and opened the wooden box. Suddenly, he let out an exclamation and the box fell to the floor.

The Queen frowned. 'Jules, what is it?'

'It is a hook, a false hand.' He was holding it as if it was hot.

'From where?'

'It looks like Damian's.'

'Your brother's?'

'Yes,' he said weakly.

'Is there a note?'

'Yes.' He opened it carefully and uttered a strangled cry.

Queen Anne took the note from him and read:

Damian est mort.
Vous êtes au suivant.
M.

'Who is "M"?' Queen Anne asked eventually.

'I don't know,' he answered hoarsely. 'But the note says I am to be next.'

'You're not worried by a note, are you?'

'No,' he said and then shouted 'Capitaine!'

The Captain of the guard entered and stood by the door.

'Double the guard. At once!'

'It shall be done, Your Eminence.' He left.

'Jules, what is wrong?'

'I should have executed him while I had the chance.'

'Who?'

'That Colonel Bosville from England.'

'Henriette's friend?'

'That's the one. He sent it.'

'Why on earth would he do that?'

'Because...because, I asked Damian to assassinate him in the Netherlands.'

The French Queen stood up suddenly. 'What in God's name possessed you to do that?'

'Because he is a spy.'

'Jules, listen to me. If he is a spy for the British Intelligence Service, you must leave him alone. It could seriously jeopardise our negotiations with Cromwell.'

'But he's not acting for Cromwell, he's working with Charles Stuart.'

'How do you know that?'

'Because he is friendly with your sister in law and with that cursed Anne-Marie. They are traitors.'

'Are they? Who are the real traitors, Jules. Them or you?'

'What do you mean?' he asked warily.

'When will my son have his full rights to the throne?'

'Soon, I promised you.'

'Yes, you did. But you keep putting it off, don't you?'

'Only because of Louis' age. You know that.'

'It was true once. Is that still the real motive?'

'You know it is.'

'We shall see. I'm going to get dressed. Today I am going to Court.'

'But you are unwell.'

'Perhaps a little truth will improve my health, not that I shall hear much of that at Court. Court is the last place where one would expect to hear truth spoken.'

'But this note...'

'Burn it.'

'Burn it?'

'Yes, burn it. No man will get near enough to you to harm you. However, if you are worried, instruct the guard to stop and search all men that enter the grounds - just let the women through. You will be safe from a mere woman, won't you, Jules?'

'Oh, yes. There is not a woman alive who could harm the great Cardinal Mazarin.'

Saturday 12th July 1656

Anne Hyde got up. Her wounds had gradually improved over the last weeks and so had her mind. At first, she was afraid whenever a new face arrived at the little hospital but, now, she was almost ready to regain her position among humankind and, soon, she would be leaving Bruxelles to attend Princess Mary in Holland. Andrew had originally promised the King that he would go with them personally, but he was prevented from doing so.

Mary Beth had done wonders for them all over the past weeks. In spite of her own weak state, she had run hither and thither in the service of her patients but, yesterday, her bronchial condition returned and her incessant coughing was pitiable to hear. Last night, she took to bed with what the doctor had diagnosed as stomach cramp but in the early hours of the morning, her child was stillborn.

Mary Beth and Andrew naturally felt bad about it, but it was Lucy who took the loss the hardest. Mary Beth lay in her bed, staring at the ceiling and coughing occasionally, which seemed to give her great pain, while Lucy sobbed and sobbed.

In the last days of her stay in Bruxelles, Anne Hyde played nurse. She did not have the stamina of Mary Beth but her very presence inspired them all to continue regardless. Andrew's own headaches had abated somewhat and he was almost back to normal.

It was Condé who saw Princess Mary and Anne Hyde safely back to The Hague. Fighting had not yet broken out in the war zone between Flanders and France. There had been considerable

movements of troops, and ships were seen all along the coast, but something was preventing King Louis and Cardinal Mazarin from precipitating into war itself. Andrew guessed they would not have long to wait.

On the day of their departure, he said goodbye to Anne Hyde and Princess Mary then returned to Lucy and Mary Beth.

'How's the head?' asked Lucy.

'So-so. How's the belly?'

'Sore. It's all right if I keep still, but then my legs keep going to sleep.'

'Does the doctor know?'

'Yes. He says it is the better of two evils. If I move, I die. If I lay still, I lose the feeling in my legs. I'm not sure which is worse.'

'It's a miracle you survived at all.'

'Well, I couldn't let that moron tear Anne to pieces, could I? Do you know, he really seemed to enjoy cutting her up. I can understand a man wanting to rape a woman, horrible though that might be, but to take a beautiful, teenage girl and try to rip her open from throat to belly? Ugh, it's horrible.'

'It's not much worse than what they did to you, is it?'

'No, I suppose not. But then I deserved it, didn't I?'

'No, you didn't deserve it. You deserve to live a normal life like anyone else.'

'Fat chance of that now,' she said. 'And I shan't even be able to hold Mary Beth's baby, will I?'

He looked down and a lump came to his throat. It wasn't just that the baby had died. Mary Beth had so nearly lost it in France and its life had been touch and go for almost three months. No, it was the fact that, in spite of his death, Damian Mazarini had won. He had attacked Anne, but he had taken away Mary Beth's baby. Andrew was sure that that was what his wife was thinking, too. She was asleep, so he leaned over and kissed her gently on the cheek, then kissed Lucy and made her feel that life was worth living just a bit longer.

MAZARIN finally agreed on Dunkerque and Mardyke in exchange for receiving the help of six thousand veterans of Cromwell's Model Army. A formal treaty was to be drawn up and signed when the Army could be released from the service of the Major-Generals who were tyrannising England. Mazarin himself was constantly surrounded by a personal bodyguard of trusted soldiers. He was taking the threat to his life seriously, even if the Queen Mother thought it a joke. The only problem was, who was "M"? He had no enemy who had a name with that initial. It was all very puzzling. Who would gain by his death? He smiled to himself. Most of Europe!

Still, he would watch and wait. His would-be assassin would make a mistake and he would be caught and then made an example of. He would take his mind away from his fear of death by dreaming up some particularly nasty execution for this attempted murderer when he was caught. Hanging? No, too quick. Beheading? No, not nearly painful enough. Boiling in oil? No, too difficult for people to watch him die. He guessed he would think of something, given time. He sneered. First he will have to catch this mysterious "M". But catch him he would.

Friday 3rd September 1658

Lucy's wish finally came true. She had once said to Andrew that all she wanted was to die in his arms. He was helpless at preventing her inevitable death, as was everyone else, although they had stayed on in Bruxelles for one purpose and one purpose only - to make that wish come true. One cold night, the poor soul could take no more and she quietly slipped away. Her last words, spoken from within Andrew's arms, were to thank him. He gently kissed her, she smiled back and was gone.

They left Bruxelles the day after the funeral and arrived in London as shiploads of troops were embarking for Flanders. After reporting in to Sir John, they then made their way back to Rettendon.

The war went badly for Conde. In April, Admiral Blake destroyed the Spanish treasure fleet which had contained the wealth which could have supported and prolonged the fighting and, on the third of October, Mardyke fell to the French armies. In the following June, there was fought the Battle of the Dunes and Turenne led the Anglo-French troops to victory. The exchange had cost Britain dearly. Almost a million pounds was owed in back pay to the English army and navy and England was about to become bankrupt. In the middle of all this came the final blow. This morning, during a rainstorm, Oliver Cromwell died.

His assassination had been the theme of many a discussion among Royalists. George Villiers, in a secret meeting with the King, had even volunteered to do the dirty work himself and had come to England to arrange it personally but, in the end, it was no man who took away the life of the one person who had stood in the way of King Charles.

Mary Beth had settled at Rettendon during the intervening period. At home, she became a real mother and proudly escorted her children around the village, to church on Sundays and to market for produce. She had also become a proper Lady and, occasionally, held a ball at Rettendon. Ball was a poor name really. Dancing was forbidden by order of Parliament, as was singing and drinking, so they tended to be very sombre affairs. Mary Beth was the perfect host. Lords and Ladies of differing loyalties came to her parties and she strictly forbade any mention of politics or religion. It was at the ball tonight that the message concerning Cromwell's death came. It was Sir John who arrived during the evening and took Andrew aside to give him the news. Andrew thanked him, invited him to stay the night and hushed the assembled crowd.

'My Lords, Ladies and gentlefolk. It is with deep regret that I have an announcement to make. In the early hours of this morning, our Lord Protector, Oliver Cromwell, died.'

He waited until the hubbub died down.

'I know that you are of mixed loyalties and, for that I will say nothing except to say that an era has ended: an era of considerable change, bad for some, good for others. We now go forward into uncertain times where anything can happen. I pray that the ones assembled here tonight will learn from the last nine years and apply the lessons learned to the future. If we do not, we have no hope at all.'

The assembled crowd all stood for a moment, deep in thought and prayer, and then quickly and quietly dismissed. Only Sir John remained behind and Rachel slipped upstairs to make up a bed for him.

'Well, Sir John,' said Mary Beth. 'What will happen now?'

'It is probable that Oliver's son, Richard, will be appointed Protector. Unfortunately for the Council of State, he is neither soldier nor leader. His uncle and brother-in-law will no doubt try to use him as a puppet for their own ends as they have done with others to date but the nation will not like it.'

'So what will the people do?'

'They will revolt, sooner or later. The country is virtually bankrupt, taxes are higher than they have ever been and the Army has complete control. It cannot last. At least Cromwell had the personality to hold things together. Without his leadership, it will all fall apart.'

'So what can we do?'

Sir John smiled. 'I hoped you'd ask me that.'

'Go on,' she said with a sly grin.

'We have before us an opportunity that may never re-occur. We need to unite the factions which can work together. More than that, we need a leader.'

'The King?'

'Yes. It will not happen overnight. We have on our side two influential leaders who, I feel, will support the King's return.'

'Who are they?'

'Monck and Fairfax. However, there is one problem.'

'What is that?'

'John Lambert.'

'Lambert?'

'Yes, my dear. Desborough and Fleetwood are despots, not leaders, and, without the lead of

Oliver Cromwell, they will fall. Richard Cromwell cannot influence them in the same way, nor defend their actions. That leaves only General Lambert. I feel that he will fight to the bitter end.'

'So where do we come in?' Andrew asked.

'Nowhere in England. I need you in France.'

'How soon?' asked Mary Beth.

Andrew was a little taken aback by her enthusiasm for returning to Paris after the problems of last time, as she sat on the edge of her chair and smiled like a child waiting for a present.

'As soon as you are ready,' Sir John replied. 'King Louis is currently wife-hunting and the Court are keen to see him in a marriage which can bring peace. I simply need feedback on how they plan to do this. If a treaty of some sort is to be formed between France and Spain, it cannot help but affect England in some way.'

'How?'

'Well, the English troops will return for a start. Tell me, who is there that will support Charles?'

'Holland for one. His sister, Princess Mary, still carries a lot of weight there. Then there is Conde in Flanders and the King's mother and brothers in Paris could influence King Louis to stand for Charles.'

'Who is against him?'

'Well, Mazarin. But that is possibly only because of the current treaty. If the war was to end, then Mazarin may be forced to support Charles, too.'

'So you see what I mean? Whether or not Charles regains his throne in England will be as much determined by events in France as events in England.'

'Yes, I do see what you mean.'

'Can you do it?'

Andrew looked at Mary Beth and she nodded enthusiastically. Seagull was kept in permanent readiness so they could leave tomorrow.

KING Louis XIV of France sat at Court whilst his future was being discussed as if he was not there. He wanted to marry Mazarin's niece, Marie, who was very young and amazingly beautiful, but he was, instead, being offered his own niece, Marie-Thérèse - the illegitimate daughter of the King of Spain. Perhaps if the Court insisted on his marriage to Marie-Thérèse, he would keep sweet Marie as a mistress.

If that all fell through, there was always his other cousin, the delectable Henriette Stuart. Minette was yet only fourteen but she had already developed acute nymphomania which was virtually insatiable as he and his brother had regularly discovered over the last few years.

The Court was arranging to play a trick on the Spaniards. They knew that Spain wanted an alliance which would end the war and a marriage alliance would do nicely. However, Spain was holding out for better terms, ostensibly to marry Louis to Marguerite, the daughter of the Duke of Savoy. Instead, the French Court hoped that Spain would take the bait and change their offer. He felt sure they would do it as they were losing the war. He was looking forward to meeting this Marguerite at Lyon. Perhaps she was young and pretty. If not a wife, then perhaps another mistress. This was fun!

Sunday 13th September 1658

The crossing to Paris had gone without a problem due to the pass Andrew had been supplied with by Sir John. Seagull had been stopped near Calais and again off Le Havre, but an envoy of the British government was allowed free passage during the hostilities against Spain. After a brief pause at St Germain, they were directed to the Chateau at Colombes, where Henriette Maria

greeted them. Andrew had been pleasantly surprised at the warmth of the reception they received. Mary Beth was treated as a long-lost daughter and Andrew as a close friend.

'It's so good to see you, my friends,' the English Queen Mother said. 'How do you like my new house?'

'It's beautiful, your Highness,' Mary Beth replied 'Do you still have Chaillot?'

'Of course, my dear. There are twenty sisters there now. Will you visit them while you are here?'

'That depends on how long we are in Paris,' Andrew interjected. 'Is the Court still at Fontainebleau?'

'They were up until last week but now they have left for Lyon and I am very disappointed. There have been rumours for some time that King Louis will marry my Minette but the Court has decided against it. They want a political marriage and my Minette is not good enough for him any more.'

'Not good enough?' Mary Beth was almost angry. 'Whatever do you mean?'

'If Charles was now on his throne, they would break every rule to get Louis married to my daughter but, alas, he is not, so a better marriage is to be arranged. I fear Minette will be allied to Louis' younger brother, Philippe, Duc d'Orleans.'

'Henriette, we have news which could change things,'

Andrew interrupted. 'Cromwell is dead.'

Her hands went to her face as she sat down. 'Does this mean...?'

'It could, and very soon. We are going to see Charles when we leave here. Is he in Paris?'

'No, he is still in Flanders.'

'Then we must go there soon, but first, we must go and find the Court and make sure they are aware. Also, my superiors want to know the true situation.'

'Then it is to Lyon you must go. I will write you a note which will grant you total freedom. You speak French so it will be easy for you to circulate and I will also arrange a coach for your use. How else can I help you?'

'We didn't expect this much help, Highness.'

'Well, if the aunt of the King of France can't help her son to his throne, who can?'

THE journey south was a pleasant one. Neither of them had been in that part of the country before and the weather became warmer with each day that passed. From Paris, they followed the Seine East and then South through Fontainebleau and Troyes, right up to its source near Chatillon. Then, they crossed the flat Langres Plateau to Dijon, capital of Burgundy. After that, it was little more than two days' journey south to Lyon, which is an amazing town built at the junction of the Rhône and the Saône. Between the rivers and to the sides, were steep hills in places, giving the impression of a huge gateway right across the valley. The city itself, since Roman times, had closely guarded the route from Italy to northern France.

Upon arrival, the couple were informed that the Court was at the winter Palace.

'Your Highness, Your Eminence,' announced the Captain of the Guard when they arrived. 'There are two visitors to see you. They have the official seal of the English Parliament and have been sent as special Envoys.'

'Very well, Capitaine,' said the Cardinal 'You must show them in at once. We cannot afford to keep Cromwell's envoys waiting.' Mazarin turned to his mistress. 'Well, my dear Anne. News from England at last. I wonder what Cromwell wants now.'

The door opened and Mazarin felt his muscles slowly tighten as the Captain announced, 'Colonel Bosville, special envoy of England.'

His hands went to his throat and he began to choke. Queen Anne looked at him with a startled expression.

Andrew smiled pleasantly at the little rat while Mary Beth curtsied low. 'Bonjour, Votre Hauteure, Votre Eminence, May I present my sister, Lady Ramsden.'

'Bienvenue, Monsieur le Colonel,' said the Queen. 'Did you have a safe journey?'

'Oui merci. We have a message from England.'

Queen Anne indicated chairs. 'Sit down, please, What is the message?'

Andrew took a deep breath. 'Cromwell is dead.'

'Cromwell is dead?'

He nodded. 'On the third of September.'

'Ooh, la la. And where is the King?'

'At Bruxelles.'

'Are you staying here a few days?'

'Is that possible?'

'Oui, Monsieur. Would you and Lady Ramsden like to come to our ball this evening?'

Andrew smiled. They were being extremely diplomatic. 'I would love to.'

Having accepted the Queen-Mother's invitation to stay a few days, they were shown to rooms where they might stay while the Queen and Cardinal made their plans.

'Why did you invite them to stay?' demanded Mazarin.

'So you could lay your ghost to rest, my dear Jules. That man has no desires on your life.'

'But the hook, the note.'

'A joke, Jules. A mere joke.'

'I shall have him watched tonight to ensure he behaves himself.'

'As you wish, Jules. But you are worrying over nothing.'

'Maybe so. But I'm taking no chances.'

THE Ballroom was crowded as the Cardinal gave instructions to his Captain. 'I want the Englishman watched the whole time. It is important, do not let him out of your sight for one moment, but do it discreetly, I cannot afford for complications with the English government at the moment. For that reason, do not interfere with him, simply watch closely. Do not arrest him unless you actually catch him red-handed at something. Do you understand?'

'Yes, your Eminence. I observe closely but do nothing without consulting you first.'

'Exactly. Also, I think I will have a safeguard to protect myself. I will ask for the company of the very beautiful Lady Ramsden for the evening. He will not insult me by refusing and it will mean that I have a hostage in case of trouble.'

'She is indeed very lovely, your Eminence.'

The Cardinal looked both ways briefly. 'If... if she and I should disappear at all during the evening, do not worry. An hour alone with her will do neither of us any harm. Do not tell the Queen or King Louis, do I make myself understood?'

'Yes, your Eminence. If you are to slip away alone with Lady Ramsden, I am to ensure that both the Colonel and the Queen remain here at the Ball.'

'You are very perceptive, Mon Capitaine.'

'I hope so, your Eminence. Your happiness is my desire.'

ANDREW watched Mary Beth as she dressed in readiness for the grand ball. 'Mary Beth, you cannot possibly wear riding boots under a ball gown.'

'Why ever not? Carrie always did.'

'What if someone sees them?'

'Don't be silly. No-one's going to look up my dress, are they?'

'It doesn't seem right.'

'It's just that I am more comfortable like this. No one steps on my toes this way.'

'And how many partners do you expect to have tonight?'

'Oh hundreds, I expect. But remember, you are the first as well as the last.'

'Don't worry, young lady. I shall not forget that.'

'Well, go and straighten your collar while I powder my nose.'

Andrew left her and stood in front of his mirror. *What is that girl up to? There is nothing wrong with my collar.*

While he was out of the room, Mary Beth carefully opened her jewel case and took out two items: Carrie's diamond and sapphire necklace, which she adjusted around her neck; and

another longer, thinner object which she slid very carefully into the top of her right boot.

‘**AH**, Colonel Bosville, may I wish you a very good evening?’

Andrew greeted Mazarin in return and the Cardinal showed them both into the Ballroom, introducing them to several other guests.

After the first dance, he approached the couple again. ‘Lady Ramsden, may I have the honour of the next dance?’

‘Of course, your Eminence. I would be delighted if my brother does not mind.’

‘Of course not,’ Andrew smiled. ‘Enjoy yourself, please.’

‘Monsieur le Colonel?’ said a voice behind him.

Andrew turned. The Queen Mother introduced him to the young King Louis and then left the two men alone.

‘So, you are wife seeking, your Majesty?’

‘No, it’s all being done for me. I’m afraid I have little say in the matter.’

‘So I understand. I hope you didn’t mind my bringing my sister along.’

‘Not at all. However, you are a very brave man to trust her with Monsignor Mazarini.’

Andrew laughed. ‘Mary Beth is perfectly capable of looking after herself, your Majesty. She can shoot a good deal straighter than I and handles her dagger like a Saracen. I think she is quite safe with an aging Cardinal.’

The King also laughed at the thought. ‘If only I could have a woman like that. Everyone who is presented to me is either illiterate or sickly. Given the choice, I would marry Henriette’s daughter.’

‘Minette? Yes, she will make a fine wife for someone. Tell me, what are the chances of a treaty with Spain, Sire.’

‘Very good if I play ball. The respective governments would marry me to the ugliest, baldest girl in Europe if it would guarantee peace and prosperity.’

‘Well, Mary Beth is neither of those and I’m glad.’

‘Would you be offended if I asked her to dance?’

‘Offended? I would be highly delighted, Sire, and so would she.’

‘Thank you. Now if you will excuse me, I must circulate and speak to some very boring young ladies who are desperate to be my wife.’

Andrew smiled and bowed. ‘A bientôt, your Majesty.’

He did not dance much but enjoyed himself with the few that he did dance with. Marguerite de Savoy was a charming girl though terribly plain. Mary Beth seems to be enjoying herself with Mazarin, he thought, but then she hadn’t had the dream, had she?

‘**LOUIS**, you are not dancing,’ said the Queen.

‘No, mother. I am waiting for Lady Ramsden. Her brother has promised me a dance with her.’

‘Oh has he? And where is the lucky girl?’

‘She’s gone outside with Jules to cool off. They’ll be back later.’

Queen Anne smiled. ‘I expect so. If I know Jules, he will be wanting a little hanky-panky with her.’

‘Mother, why do you put up with him? Since father died, you have been faithful only to Jules but he continually has affairs with all and sundry. You ought to throw him out of your life.’

She placed a hand on her son’s arm. ‘One day, you will understand, my son. A man needs....distractions from time to time. You will need them, and get them, I expect.’

Louis smiled to himself. If she only knew what he and Philippe had already been up to with Minette on dozens of occasions, often with the help of a great many friends who never went home dissatisfied. ‘Well, it looks as if he’s going to be satisfied tonight. Lady Mary looked as if she was looking forward to a little... exercise... outside. In fact, she seemed very eager to be alone with him.’

Queen Anne stood stock still as if caught in the middle of some kind of nightmare. ‘Who... who did you say?’

‘Mary Beth, mother. You know, Lady Ramsden. Don’t worry, her brother says she is quite capable of taking care of herself. Apparently, she can shoot a pfennig in mid flight and is able to hit a charging horse in the eye with a thrown dagger.’

The Queen blanched and put her hands to her face. King Louis had to grab her shoulders to

prevent her falling. 'Mother, what is it?'

'M,' she blurted out.

'Who?'

The Queen was frantic. 'It's not him at all, it's her. Where did they go? Louis, we must find them quickly.'

'But what is it?'

'Lady Ramsden is going to kill the Cardinal.'

'Mother, stop. You must be jesting, surely.'

'She sent a note. A note saying that he was next. He is going to be assassinated like his brother.'

'Damian?'

'Yes. They killed Damian and now they are going to kill Jules and we've got to stop them.' She went as quickly as possible to the Captain. 'Come with me, Monsieur le Capitaine, we must find the Cardinal.'

'With due respect, Your Majesty, Cardinal Mazarin gave me specific instructions not to leave here under any circumstances. I must watch Colonel Bosville closely.'

'It's not him, you fool. It's her.'

The guard smiled at the Queen. *She must be getting old. A gorgeous blonde like Lady Ramsden? Hurt the Cardinal? Who does Queen Anne think she's kidding? She is just jealous like the Cardinal said she would be.*

'Which way did they go?' demanded the Queen.

The Captain pointed and the King and Queen Mother, accompanied by several servants and bodyguards, went in the opposite direction to that which Mary Beth and Mazarin had gone. He smiled. If the Queen had found the Cardinal up to his usual tricks in the Palace gardens, he would be an infantryman at the front by the morning. No, let the Cardinal have his bit of fun. It couldn't hurt him, would it?

THE two people strolled in the quiet garden, walking until they were right out of earshot of the palace. Mazarin steered the seemingly innocent and wide-eyed Mary Beth towards a hidden structure. 'And this, my dear Lady Ramsden, is the summerhouse. Do you like it?'

'Yes, Your Eminence. It is a very romantic spot. Can we sit here for a while?'

'Of course, my dear.' He gestured towards a double seat in the very darkest corner. 'But you must call me Jules.'

'Jules. Yes, I like that.' She patted the seat. 'Would you sit beside me, Jules?'

She took his right hand with her left and they sat, her right hand under her skirts as the crickets chirped lazily in the heat of the Autumn evening.

Mazarin moved closer. 'My Lady, you are truly the most beautiful woman I have ever met. May I be permitted a kiss?'

Mary Beth giggled playfully. 'Jules, what would the Queen say?'

'The Queen does not object to my love making. And neither will you.'

Their lips met briefly and Mary Beth forced herself to smile as his hand began to move in exploration.

'Do you always wear riding boots to a Ball, My Lady?'

'Always.'

'Colonel Bosville is very trusting this evening. I would have taken him for the protective type, particularly after our little... misunderstanding... in Paris.'

Her laughter was like a rippling stream. 'My brother is the forgiving type, Jules. He wishes you no harm.'

Mazarin frowned. 'He doesn't?'

'Not at all,' she said as she shuffled closer to him. 'My brother trusts me implicitly.'

'Then my life is safe?' He started to pull at the ties down the front of her dress. 'You enjoy this, don't you?'

'Yes,' she said with a sigh as the gnarled hand opened her dress, slipped inside and began to caress her soft, warm flesh. 'Very much. But you don't even know my name.'

'You are right' he said, moving his other hand up her smooth thigh towards paradise. 'How can I make love to a beautiful girl out here in the moonlight without knowing her name? Breathe it to me as I bring you ecstasy.'

She put her mouth very close to his ear and whispered: 'M.'

He suddenly stopped in mid grope and Mary Beth's right hand moved very fast. The moonlight glinted off polished steel just before the sharp pain in his stomach made him gasp. Her eyes seemed to glow in the dark as her teeth showed white against the darkness. 'Take your filthy hands away from me or I'll cut out your rotten heart.'

'Don't kill me,' he pleaded, sweating as the pain in his gut grew. He looked down and already, a dark stain was spreading across his white frock coat.

'Why shouldn't I? The blade is very sharp, Jules, I honed it myself.'

'No, please,' he whimpered. 'Don't kill me.'

'I lost a baby because of you.'

'I...I...'

'Give me one good reason for not killing you, here and now.'

He couldn't think of one. 'I'll do anything.'

'Anything?'

'Anything, I swear it.'

'Break off your treaty with England and support King Charles.'

'But how can I...I...I...I? She pushed a little. 'Aaagh! You're hurting.'

'Hurting, Jules? Swear it.'

'I swear it.'

'Swear by the Holy Virgin.'

'I...I...Aaaaah.' A slight twist of the wrist could work wonders.

Mary Beth gritted her teeth. 'I said swear it.'

'I swear it. I swear it by the Holy Virgin.'

She withdrew the knife and put the bloodstained blade to his throat. 'And you will, of course, forget this conversation?'

'Yes, yes,' he blurted out, relief flooding over him. 'Anything.'

'That's better. By the way, Damian died because he tried to tangle with Andrew so I suggest you do not give me reason to tell my brother about what you have tried to do to me. He is a very jealous man when it comes to the rape of his sister.'

His mouth dropped open. 'Rape? But you...'

'Did I? Who will believe you, Jules? The Queen, who knows you of old? The King, who is just waiting for an excuse to get rid of you? If he hears that you have attempted to assault an envoy from England, he will be most displeased. My brother will most certainly not believe you and will be extremely upset. I'm certain that he will suggest that you go to join your brother who was unable to protect himself.' She stood up and straightened her dress. 'As for me, I suggest you change your vest before anyone gets to find out what you have been up to.'

'I shall not forget this night,' he said quietly, regaining some of his composure.

Mary Beth smiled in the moonlight but the menace was clearly conveyed in the tone of her voice. 'For your own sake, I most certainly hope you do not.'

ANDREW didn't know what his wife had been up to. She just came back in from the gardens and the Captain of the guard saluted her, but where was Mazarin? She came up to him and smiled and they danced together for a long time. While they were dancing, he noticed the King and Queen Mother return from some place where they had recently left to visit urgently. He noticed them pointing. 'Mary Beth. What have you been up to?'

'Me? Why nothing. I just persuaded the Cardinal that it was in his best interests to support King Charles.'

'You did?'

'Yes, he didn't take a lot of persuading. In fact, he gave in quite easily.'

'Is that why you went off with him?'

'No, I took him outside to kill him.'

Andrew suddenly stopped dancing. 'You did what?'

'I took him outside to kill him.'

'Why?'

'For what he did to you and to our baby.'

'Good grief, woman. Do you know what he could do to us for that?'

'He will do nothing.'

'How can you be so sure?'

'I am sure. He will be here as soon as he has found a clean shirt and done something about his hands.'

'Clean shirt?'

'Yes, his other one became a little... soiled.'

'And his hands?'

'They were cold,' she said with a sly smile.

Tuesday 14th September 1658

The Court was gathered early in the morning. The King was wearing a broad smile and Mazarin a scowl while Gaston played with his plume as they waited. At ten o'clock, Andrew was shown into the room as arranged while Mary Beth sat on the bench outside.

'Entrez, Monsieur le Colonel,' said King Louis XIV. 'Asseyez-vous.'

Andrew sat at the place indicated and proceedings began.

'We have discussed the situation of our treaty with England in the light of the recent change of events and, after due discussion, the Cardinal has proposed we sever the present treaty relationship with the English Parliament. Though this does seem an obvious direction to follow, we are reluctant to agree to a complete change of loyalties whilst peace has not yet been settled with Spain. If we were to lose the aid of England now, Spain might be prompted to attempt to recover her gains.'

'I understand, Your Majesty. May I propose a solution?'

The King nodded.

'Where are the main areas under dispute?'

'Lorraine, Picardy, Roussillon and a few other insignificant odds and ends here and there.'

'Am I correct in assuming that the primary area of contention is Northern France, the part which Condé occupied during the Fronde?'

'Yes, I suppose it is.'

'Then if an amicable arrangement could be made with Condé which also has the agreement of King Philip of Spain, would you be satisfied?'

'Condé will not give in,' growled a subdued Mazarin.

'How do you know? Have you asked him?'

'You can't trust him and he will not trust us.'

'He will trust me.'

'You?'

'Yes. At the moment, he stands condemned by your mock trial, doesn't he?'

'It was not a mock trial, Monsieur.'

'Maybe not to you, but it was to him, wasn't it?'

'Yes.'

'Then just suppose Condé was to relinquish all his claims in Picardy, including those not taken recently, in exchange for his life and position. What would you say to that?'

'He would not do it.'

'What if he could be persuaded?'

'And what guarantee do we have that Condé will listen to you?'

'You have none, but what have you to lose by trying? With your permission, I would return to Picardy and speak with Condé while you continue to negotiate with King Philip. I'm sure some compromise can be worked out.'

'And what would you desire out of all this?' asked the King.

'If I succeed, I wish total support for King Charles.'

'Granted,' said King Louis with neither hesitation nor consultation. 'King Philip of Spain has offered his daughter as a wife along with a dowry of a half million crowns. It appears I am not permitted the possibility of a refusal and have just over one year to decide. In the meantime, hostilities will cease. I am willing to offer Condé a full pardon with all his lands back. All he has to do is agree to the terms we have agreed with Spain. Negotiations start exactly one year from today and arrangements to sign have been tentatively arranged for the seventh of November on the border between our countries in the Pyrenees.'

For the first time, the French Court wondered about what they had unleashed in crowing Louis as King.

'How soon must you know Condé's decision?'

'As soon as possible, but by next summer at the latest.'

'Very well, your Majesty. I am very confident of a successful outcome.'

'Let us all hope that our confidences have not been misplaced.'

Andrew stood up. 'Thank you, Your Highnesses. With your permission, I will return at once to negotiate with Prince Condé.'

'Colonel Bosville. Go in peace.'

'Thank you. Au Revoir.'

'Do we trust him?' asked the King after Andrew had left.

'We have nothing to lose,' said Gaston.

'Condé will not agree,' stated Mazarin obstinately. 'We will have to destroy him and continue the fight with Spain.'

'And Colonel Bosville?' asked Gaston.

'Will simply...disappear.'

'And what plans do you have for Lady Ramsden, might I ask?' asked the Queen.

'She will disappear...eventually,' said the Cardinal with a sly smile.

Friday 29th October 1658

Bruxelles was cold after the south of France and, already, the evenings were beginning to close in and the trees were shedding their leaves. King Charles and the Duke of York were both in the city, so a meeting was arranged with Prince Condé.

'Your Highnesses, I have just returned from negotiations with the Court at Lyon,' said Andrew. 'I would like to equip you with the details so that you are all aware of what is at stake. But first, a more important matter. The plot.' He waited until he had their complete attention. 'You will, by now, be aware of the death of Oliver Cromwell.'

They nodded.

He turned to Charles. 'For the first time in many years, you have a chance at your throne, Sire.'

'I am aware of this, Andrew. Already, supporters are gathering in London and the West Country.'

'Sire, you must stop them.'

'Stop them? But why?'

'Because their plot will fail.'

'Not now that Cromwell is dead...'

'Sire, with respect, do not underestimate people like Lambert and Fleetwood. They may not have the leadership qualities of Cromwell but Sir John assures me that they still carry much power. I implore you to delay any action until all your allies are united.'

'But that might take months, or even years,' interjected the Duke of York.

'Yes, it might. But look what happened in Scotland and again in Ireland. Those attempts failed, not through lack of loyalty or bravery, but because the forces were not united. A delay of a few months will be worth while if only to ensure a complete victory.'

'How on earth do we ensure unity?'

'Sire, that is where I come in.' He hesitated, 'and Condé.'

The Prince sat up and looked at him.

'King Louis is suing for peace with Spain and a suitable marriage is being arranged which will unite these countries. I have agreed to act as intermediary between Spanish Flanders and France.'

'How will that help me?' asked the King.

'Because King Louis, in return for my help, has agreed to give you his full support, politically and financially, if there is peace between France and Spain. Along with the help Princess Mary can raise in Holland, you have almost the whole of Western Europe behind you.' He looked at Condé once more. 'That just leaves you.'

Condé frowned. 'Me? How do I come into this picture?'

'By negotiating with France over the possessions you are holding in Flanders.'

'But they already have most of them back.'

'Louis, it's the principle. For a return of all the remaining lands, the Court is willing to grant you total amnesty, a return of your own position and possessions.'

'How can I trust them to do that?'

'Because I give you my word.'

'You trust Mazarin?'

'Not one bit, but I do trust the King.'

'I'm still not convinced.'

'Very well. I offer my own life as ransom. If all does not come about as I arrange, my own life is forfeit.'

'If you are to be executed, what will happen to Lady Ramsden?'

'She is yours.'

'You would offer me your own life and that of Mary Beth?'

'I am that confident, yes. And,' he indicated King Charles and the Duke of York. 'Could you ask for more prestigious witnesses?'

'Andrew, you are a brave man,' said Charles.

'Sire, this Plot to have you on your throne where you belong has become very important to me and to Mary Beth. If you fail, we fail. I will have failed yourself, Prince Condé, the King of France as well as failing England. I cannot afford to do that.'

'So you want me to hold fire until France and Spain are united?'

'To be sure of success, yes.'

'And how long might that take?'

'That depends on the Prince here.'

'I see. What are your feelings, Louis?'

'I, too would like to see an end to the war. However, I still do not trust Mazarin.'

'What choice do you have?' asked Andrew quietly.

Condé smiled. 'Probably none. When do you need to know?'

'We can do nothing yet, probably not till next year. With your permission, Sire, I will relay your answer to Sir John in London. He will then organise things to ensure unity in England.'

'What about Scotland?'

'Scotland will follow you if General Monck leads them.'

'Will George Monck do that?'

'Yes, Sire, but not until the time is right. Also, Sir Thomas Fairfax will only lead his troops if everyone is united. He will not risk angering Parliament with a half-hearted effort which might fail.'

'Andrew, you are right in principle. But as James has rightly stated, this could mean delay of a

year or more.'

'Yes, Sire, it could. But will it not be worth the wait to ensure a complete victory? If Condé agrees to make terms with the Court, Europe will be behind you as well as your own supporters. The Plot cannot fail.'

'Andrew, you have worked hard and risked much to do all this. How can I repay you?'

'I want your continued agreement to safeguard the honour of Anne Hyde.'

The Duke of York stood up. 'You dare insult me, sir.'

'My Lord Duke. It is but a request, not a demand.'

'I think you had better explain yourself,' said King Charles.

'Sire, in this world, there are the Lucys and the Annes - those who are destined to be great mistresses and those who should be great wives. I believe that Anne will make a good wife to someone but a very poor mistress. I would like to be sure there is some form of commitment made before further... advances are made towards her.'

'I have hardly touched her,' stated the Duke.

'Your Highness, I am not here to accuse you but to implore you. She is too good a woman to waste on a simple affair. If you are interested in her, then marry her, my Lord Duke, do not string the poor girl along.'

James went red in the face. 'You've got a nerve, speaking to me like that. I will do with the wench precisely what I please.'

After a moment's hesitation, Andrew stood up and looked at Charles. 'With your permission, Sire, I will return to Rettendon. I fear that I can help you no more.'

'Sit down, Andrew. If you leave, who will negotiate?'

'With respect, Sire. Your brother talks a lot. Perhaps he could do it.'

'Why you...' started the Duke.

'Sit down, James,' said the King.

'But he said...'

'Sit!'

He sat.

'Andrew,' said the King. 'If you can bring this off, I will wait. I will also ensure that nothing happens to Miss Hyde until she has a full commitment.' He glared at his brother. 'In writing and duly witnessed.'

'I thank you, Sire. I will not fail you.'

The King and fuming Duke left at that.

Condé faced Andrew. 'My friend, I will negotiate with you and if you fail, I will not ask for your life, only your exile. But I will ask for one other thing. I will take you up on the other part of your conditions. I want Mary Beth.'

'Louis, I swear that if I let you down, she is yours.' Andrew smiled at him. 'But don't raise your hopes too high. I have no intention of failing.'

Condé shrugged. 'I don't suppose she would come to me anyway.'

Andrew stood up to go. 'Don't you believe it. It was Mary Beth who suggested it.'

Monday 28th November 1659

Condé did finally agree. He really had no choice. In battles against the Anglo-French armies, he had lost most of the Flemish seaports and a good many men, so to continue the fighting would have been both pointless and expensive. It was now up to Andrew to negotiate the best deal possible for him with King Louis.

King Charles, on the other hand, didn't wait. He gave his support to two uprisings in England, both of which failed due to lack of unity. He was a very slow learner.

Andrew had reported in to Sir John Grenville in the Spring and he had immediately sent out messages to his British contacts for a systematic drive to reinstating Royalty.

Several things helped the Plot. Parliament and the army fell out at last and Richard Cromwell was forced to dissolve Parliament. However, he could not raise the same loyalty as his father so, on the twenty-fifth of May, he formally abdicated and retired to his farm. Sensing possible power in the offing, Parliament voted to have the Army's two strongest and most corrupt leaders - Lambert and Desborough - sacked immediately. As Britain fell apart politically, Andrew was in France with Charles, negotiating with the Court. They agreed to all the terms he had brought as suggestions from Condé. They too, wanted peace so that negotiations could proceed to end the very expensive war with Spain.

On the seventh of November, the Court went to the Ile des Faisans in the midst of the Bidassoa River in the Pyrenees, where terms were agreed upon for the new boundaries and acquisitions and also arrangements made for the marriage of King Louis to Princess Marie-Thérèse. Suddenly, after years of waiting, Europe was at peace.

For a year, Andrew had personally sweated blood over his own life and honour as well as that of Mary Beth and they were both exhausted from travels and negotiations. Without his wife's support, he would have stopped long ago. She had been a pillar of strength to him as well as a sign of integrity to the European leaders being the sort of woman everyone fell in love with at once. Andrew had been all over Europe that year, placing his own trust in and receiving trust of others. But it had paid off. Europe was at last united and could now provide the needed support for King Charles. He and Mary Beth escorted their King first to Calais and thence to Holland where he could be ready to sail for England at the drop of a hat. They were about to leave the Hague when a familiar figure ran to Seagull.

Andrew jumped ashore and held out his hands. 'Anne, how good to see you. You are looking well.'

'I had to catch you before you left, to thank you.'

'To thank me?'

'Yes,' she said, holding up her hand. 'For this.'

Her engagement ring sparkled in the sunshine as she held it for them to see.

'So he finally made up his mind,' said Mary Beth.

'Yes. We are to be wed when we get to England. Isn't it marvellous?'

'Anne, we are very happy for you.'

'Thank you both. You will come to the wedding, won't you?'

'You dare try to keep us away, young lady. Is your father happy?'

'I'm afraid not. He thinks I am marrying above myself. I firmly believe that he was happier when he thought I was having an affair with you.'

They all laughed. So it was working out well for Anne. She stood, waving, on the quayside as they cast off and let Seagull ride the wind toward the harbour entrance.

THE weather was not kind to them as they battled against wind and waves on the North Sea. Their first stop was to be Scotland but they had to get there in one piece. Originally, Andrew had intended to land at London or Essex first but Parliamentary forces were on guard preventing Royalists landing so they had no choice but to go to Scotland by sea. The waves breaking over the bows reminded them both of the last time they had battled against a storm like this and Andrew had lost a wife. He was determined not to lose another one the same way. Mary Beth worked as hard and as long as any man would as they tried to propel Seagull northward but they made slow progress and time was against them. After months of waiting, now was the time for action and every day counted as Seagull struggled against wind and waves. It was, therefore, a very battered Seagull which neared the Northumberland coast that afternoon, along with two exhausted sailors.

Andrew didn't even have the strength to row ashore, so they took a chance and ran Seagull onto a small beach near Berwick and made her fast, collapsing into each other's arms, and falling asleep immediately. The wind howled and the sea beat onto the beach but they were dead to the world. So dead that they did not see the soldiers approach through the blinding rain nor hear them as they surrounded Seagull. In fact, Andrew and Mary Beth knew nothing at all until they were

overpowered and dragged off to the dungeons of Berwick Castle.

IT was the first time Mary Beth had been in that room, but Andrew recognised it immediately. The view from the window was the same except for the absence of snow on the headland. He looked at Mary Beth, soaked and bedraggled, beside him, the iron bands on her wrists chafing her soft skin.

'You lied to me,' said the same ugly Commandant. 'You are a Royalist spy after all and you are not going to get away this time.'

They stood in silence. It was pointless denying anything.

'I do not have much time so I will ask you but once, where were you going and whom were you going to see?'

Andrew drew back his shoulders. 'I have nothing to say.'

'Very well. Sergeant, take his woman outside and hang her.'

The sergeant grabbed Mary Beth by the hair and started to drag her from the room.

'Wait!' Andrew cried.

Mary Beth turned on him. 'Don't you dare say a word, Andrew Bosvile. I haven't come all this way to see us fail now so keep your mouth tight shut. If you tell them anything, I swear I shall never speak to you again.'

'But, Mary Beth?'

'Andrew, I mean it. We'll meet again somewhere.' She looked at the Commandant. 'And I'll see you in hell.' Suddenly she was gone.

'You are very quiet, my Lord Ramsden,' said the Commandant.

'You know who I am?'

'Of course. I do keep my ear to the ground. Even up here in the north, we do get some news, you know.'

'Sir, you cannot execute a woman.'

'Why ever not?'

'She has no guilt.'

'Too bad. Any way, it's too late now.'

'Are you really going to hang her?'

'Oh, yes, but not for a while. You won't get my men out into the rain unless it is really important. They'll take turns at using her in the barracks until it clears up. After that...' He shrugged. 'Who would want her then?'

Andrew leaned as far forward as his chains allowed. 'You are an animal.'

'Not me. Just my frustrated men. They get few women up here so when they are given one on a plate, they make up for lost time.'

'Have you no principles? I thought Puritans were honest men.'

'Oh we are, when people are looking. Don't worry, you won't be seeing her again.'

Andrew stood up straight. 'What are you going to do with me?'

'Nothing. If I had more time, I'd try torture but I don't suppose you'd talk. No, I think I'll hang you, too. Guards!'

It's funny. Sometimes you think that you have no energy left for anything. Then, suddenly, some reserve comes from somewhere. Andrew dropped to his haunches as the guard went to grab his shoulder and then rolled towards the Commandant's desk. From behind him, he threw his chains over the evil man's head and pulled. The Roundhead gurgled as Andrew twisted the chain over the back of the chair. He had been ugly to start off with. With a face turning purple, he looked even worse.

'Drop your weapons,' Andrew commanded the men and they instantly obeyed.

'Now go and bring back Lady Ramsden. NOW!'

One left and was back in five minutes with a very bedraggled Mary Beth.

'What did they do to you?'

'They...they...' she mumbled.

Andrew looked at the Commandant. 'You hypocritical Puritan bastard.' He crossed the chains and pulled.

The Commandant's neck gave with a crack and he fell limp. His sergeant started to step forward and Mary Beth simply picked up the two fallen pistols, pointed one at his face and fired from point-blank range. She raised the other pistol and the other men called for mercy as they watched their colleague fall, dead before he hit the floor. Her knuckle was white on the trigger and they didn't dare move a muscle. Andrew went to the body of the Sergeant and took the keys for his chains from his pocket and had just finished using the chain to fasten the other two together round a pillar so they couldn't move when a frantic banging came on the door. He reloaded the spent pistol quickly and opened the door.

The first one lost his head, literally, to Andrew's sword as he fell headlong into the room when the doors opened. The second saw Mary Beth smile for a second and remembered what he had just tried to do to her as a hole appeared in his chest. The third turned to run but fell under a blow from the sword. Quickly gathering together the weapons they had, Andrew locked the doors which were heavy and would hold them out for a while. 'Are you all right?'

'Are you joking?' she replied, eyes aflame. 'Of course I'm not all right. I'm livid.'

'How many do you reckon are here?'

'There were about ten in the barracks and I saw another six or eight on guard duty.'

'Hmm, then there are those sleeping or eating. There are too many of them. One of us has got to go for help.'

'Andrew Bosville, don't you dare even think of leaving me.'

'I'm not going. It's you who's going.'

'Me?'

'Yes, you remember the way up the Tweed to Coldstream?'

'Yes, I think so.'

'Then you must ride there and get help from Genral Monck.'

'I c...can't.'

'You must, we can't hold them off indefinitely. I will lower you from the window and you must get a horse and ride for help.'

'But it's raining.'

'So they won't see you go. And go you must, for both our sakes.'

She finally nodded and Andrew opened the window. It was pouring with rain and visibility was virtually nil as he leaned out and lowered her almost to the ground. He then let go and she fell in a heap in a puddle and then ran towards the stables.

Fortunately, Berwick Castle was not a particularly well-fortified garrison and he heard no shots as he prayed she would get away safely. He might not leave there alive, but at least Mary Beth was in the clear. Andrew looked at his two remaining prisoners as they stood, chained, beside their dead colleagues.

Andrew had a choice. He could stay in that room and wait, but that might take some time. It was about twelve miles to Coldstream and even the furious Mary Beth would take nigh on an hour. Then there was the explaining and the returning. He realistically could not expect help for at least two hours. Perhaps, he thought, he could do some damage in the meantime.

He reloaded the pistols and went up to the younger of the two prisoners. 'Where is the armoury?'

'Don't tell him,' shouted the other.

At close range, a flintlock pistol usually makes a nasty mess and this occasion was no exception. Andrew simply pointed the pistol and fired, without comment. The surviving Roundhead suddenly became very helpful and gave Andrew full details.

It was still raining as he let go of the window cill and fell to the ground, crouching, listening, but there was only the sound of rain outside. Inside, there were people running about everywhere. Circling the building, he followed the instructions he had been given and, soon was outside the armoury.

The guard didn't know what hit him. One minute he was standing guard, hoping his colleagues would soon deal with these spies indoors, the next minute he was outside the gate with a

headache. Andrew spent five minutes with barrels and fuses while soldiers tried to gain entry to the Commandant's office.

He would not have got away with any of these things had it been a fine, dry night. But in the rain, he was virtually invisible. Packing a small barrel with powder, he ran back round to the window of the Commandant's office. As the door upstairs fell in, he lit a very short fuse. Soon, heads appeared at the window.

'This is for Mary Beth,' he said as he threw the barrel through the window. There was a cry of fear followed by a large explosion which showered glass everywhere. Andrew ran round to the front of the building and waited with the pistol inside his coat to protect the powder from the rain. He heard the survivors running down the stairs and aimed the pistol. As the doors burst open, he fired at the barrel beside the door and there were bits of men all over the courtyard. With the other pistol, he took careful aim at the third barrel in the doorway to the armoury and the explosion started a chain reaction. He ducked as pieces of the building fell around him. He waited, but there was no-one else left to come.

The cavalry arrived in less than two hours and Andrew opened the gate to General Monck and Mary Beth nearly knocked him over as she threw herself into his arms, tears of joy streaming down her face.

'Where is the Commandant?' asked George Monck.

'Dead, I'm afraid.'

'Guards?'

'Dead.'

'Armoury personnel?'

Andrew indicated the still figures all over the courtyard.

The General smiled. 'You've had a field day here, haven't you?'

'I was angry.'

'I'm glad you're on my side, Lord Ramsden. I would hate to have to fight the two of you. You girl here practically lifted me out of my chair to get me here.' He looked around and smiled. 'Och, but I'm glad I came. I wouldn't have missed this for the world.'

They stood in the rain, laughing, while soldiers gaped at them.

Eventually, they found a part of the barrack block that was untouched and got food and drink served as Andrew spent half an hour bringing the General up to date with situations in Europe.

He listened attentively then called his Captain. 'I want a dozen men to stay here and sort out the results of this... mutiny. Then, I want another dozen to come with me and the rest can return to headquarters. For the time being, nothing is to be said of this until we find out the extent of the problem. Do you understand?'

'Yes, sir. At once, sir.' The Captain went to carry out his duty, not fully understanding what it was all about.

'We must leave for Edinburgh in the morning and get the blessing of the Kirk and, as soon as the weather breaks, we march on London.'

'How can we help?'

'Well, our main problem will be Lambert. As soon as he hears of this, he will head north to deal with us. We must cut him off and that's where you come in.'

'Yes?'

'Get a night's rest then head back south. You must get to Sir Thomas Fairfax at York. Can you do that?'

'Of course.'

'Good. Let's get a night's rest.' He laughed. 'That is, if we can find any of the castle left in one piece.'

Monday 2nd January 1660

The Kirk took little convincing and the Scottish Estates voted General Monck money which would keep his troops paid until the Spring. He then purged his troops and removed over a hundred disloyal officers and replaced them with officers who could be depended upon and then left from Coldstream with his army and marched for London.

In the meantime, Andrew and Mary Beth headed south and, two days later, sailed up the Humber. Following the Ouse, they sailed past Goole and stopped overnight at Selby where they stayed at the inn and listened to the talk and it was all about the return of the King. Most of these men had fought under Fairfax and had left the army after Sir Thomas had gone into retirement as they felt they could trust no-one else.

Andrew quietly spread the word as they had in Hull the day before, about the imminent uprising by Monck and Fairfax against the tyranny of Fleetwood, Desborough and Lambert. Feeling was high and many went home that night to sharpen swords.

The time was right. Before the night was out, someone found a picture of the King and it hung proudly on the wall. Andrew could tell them a tale or two, but tales would wait. It was action first, tales later. He asked for directions to Lord Fairfax's estate and a dozen men offered to guide them. In the end, Andrew selected a man who had been a Captain for Sir Thomas, a man who had returned to the inn with sword and pistol.

In the morning, they were up early and, soon, left the Ouse and sailed up its tributary, the Wharfe. An hour later, their guide pointed to the right. 'That, sir, is Nunappleton beyond Mote Hill. That's where Sir Thomas lives when he's not at York.'

They got as close as they could and berthed alongside the estate as gamekeeper and dogs met them. They growled at Andrew but let Mary Beth pat them. Aren't animals funny?

They were shown into the drawing room to wait and a pretty girl of about nineteen came in to say that her father would be down soon.

Andrew smiled. 'Thank you, Mary.'

The young lady stopped and turned, a puzzled look upon her innocent face. 'How do you know my name, My Lord?'

'From George. He once described you but did not do you justice.'

She blushed. 'You know my husband?'

Andrew looked at Mary Beth. 'Yes, we know him all right.' A lot more than you do, I'll bet, young Mary, he thought. If you just knew half of what we know.

'He'll be here later this afternoon, he'll be glad to see you.'

Andrew smiled and she was gone.

Mary Beth broke into giggles. 'I just want to see the look on George's face when he arrives and starts thinking about what we might have told Mary or her father.'

In time, Sir Thomas arrived and Andrew gave him the news plus General Monck's letter. Without hesitation, the military leader summoned his manservant and gave a stream of instructions. Andrew and Mary Beth stayed to lunch and, during the afternoon, many men arrived from York and the surrounding area.

In the middle of it all, George Villiers arrived and his eyes nearly popped out of his head. He didn't know what to say or do and was acutely embarrassed and Andrew had no intention of helping him - he had broken all the rules in the book.

'Are you enjoying England, George?' Andrew asked him when they were able to talk.

'Yes, what are you doing here?'

'Doing what you should have done long ago. By the way, Lucy sent her love.'

The Duke leant closer. 'Is she all right? I had to leave in a bit of a hurry - business, you know.'

Andrew saw Mary approaching and, rather loudly said, 'Lucy died.'

He did not see the Duke's face, he was too busy watching Mary Beth's as she tried desperately not to explode with laughter.

George grabbed Andrew's arm. 'What do you mean, she died?'

'Just what I said, George. You did it to her once too often. You killed her.'

He suddenly noticed that the room was silent and Mary was stood, her mouth open, looking at

her husband. 'George, what is he talking about? Who was this Lucy who has died?'

The Duke shrugged. 'Oh, just someone I once knew in Bruxelles.'

The young Duchess of Buckingham was not to be put off so easily. 'Just...just how well did you know her?'

George didn't reply. Mary's father was standing behind her now and she turned to him with tears in her eyes.

'I'll get even with you for this,' George said to Andrew and walked off. Everyone in the room was looking at Andrew as he went to Sir Thomas and his daughter and apologised.

'Don't apologise,' replied Sir Thomas. 'I suspected something like this was going on but did not know to what extent. I don't blame you, I thank you. Tell me, did he really kill this Lucy?'

'In a manner of speaking, yes. He didn't strangle her or anything like that but he knew what he was doing would eventually cause her death and he thought only of himself. I'm afraid he is not alone in that. We live in a very selfish world.'

'We do, My Lord Ramsden. We most certainly do.'

SIR Thomas was very efficient and arrangements were made to assemble his army. Lambert's troops would soon be in Yorkshire and he wanted them caught in the trap. That evening, he met with his commanding officers and left late to start rounding up men. By the end of the next day, there must have been ten thousand men gathered in the snow outside Nunappleton Hall. News arrived the following morning that Lambert had reached Wetherby. Sir Thomas calculated and assessed that General Monck would be somewhere between Darlington and Ripon and the trap was set. He gave the order, and it was sprung on Marston Moor.

Lambert panicked as he realised he was trapped and, from before his eyes, his men left him and stood on the other side of the moor. They had no stomach to fight just to promote Lambert's self-interest. It was his own men who handed their selfish leader over to Sir Thomas and the battle was won without a shot being fired.

Next stop - London.

Saturday 3rd March 1660

Andrew was worried. Not because he feared that General Monck would meet with too strong an opposition, nor because Seagull seemed to be limping everywhere instead of flying, and certainly not because of the storms between Berwick and London. No, he was worried about Mary Beth. She had started coughing the day after they left Berwick and, though she coped with all her duties about ship, she was obviously in great pain.

Finally, they managed to get Seagull to Rettendon, where Andrew put Mary Beth to bed and left her in the very capable care of Doctor Cameron.

'Rachel,' he said to his sister. 'How have you been coping?'

'Very well, Andrew. But I do have one problem.'

'What's that?'

'Your children think they're mine.'

Andrew laughed. 'Yes, I expect they do. We must change that as soon as Mary Beth is well.'

'That won't be for some time,' said Donald as he came into the kitchen, wiping his hands. 'She has the worst case of Bronchial fever I have ever seen and she won't get over that in a hurry, especially at this time of year.'

'What can I do to help?'

'Take her back to France as soon as possible. It's the cold and damp of England which is slowly killing her.'

'Is it that serious?'

'Oh, yes. It is indeed that serious. Here, I will give her three or four years at the most, always supposing she recovers from the present bout.'

'I see.'

'Andrew, go to London, finish your work there, then take her to France as quickly as possible and keep her warm and dry.'

'As simple as that?'

'Nothing is that simple. First you have to get her there.'

'Hmm. And then there's the children.'

'Andrew,' interrupted Rachel. 'Why not take her now and I'll keep the children here for a while. When she has recovered, you can always come back for them. Another few months with me won't hurt them.'

'I suppose you're right. I'll talk it over with Sir John tomorrow.'

LONDON hadn't changed much. Not the smell anyway. Andrew found Sir John who listened carefully before making the necessary arrangements. Within a week, General Monck was in the City with Lambert in chains and after securing him in the Tower, he set about sorting Fleetwood out.

Fleetwood offered little resistance, he was not a brave man at the best of times. As a result, his army was split up and quartered well away from London to avoid problems of retaliation, Parliament was dissolved and peace ensued. Sir John was appointed Special Emissary and ordered to go at once to King Charles, informing him of the situation. He returned with Andrew to Rettendon, preparatory to departure for Holland.

Donald pronounced Mary Beth well enough to travel on the condition that her journey was one way, towards the sun, so they sailed with the dawn and, that night, they were in Breda where Charles met them. 'Andrew, Mary Beth, welcome. I hear that good news is in the air?'

'Yes, Sire. Provided you are patient.'

'That's what you said before, wasn't it? Why do I keep ignoring you?'

'It's your prerogative, Sire,' Andrew laughed. 'I have with me Sir John Grenville, who is acting as Special Emissary for General Monck.'

The men shook hands formally and Sir John was led into the drawing room where he and the King talked together for some time. Mary Beth coughed often but seemed otherwise well. It was not long before Andrew rose to take her to bed.

'Can I do anything for you?' asked the King.

'Just rest, Your Majesty,' she replied. 'That's all I need.'

'Very well, my dear. Sleep well.'

ANDREW lay awake for some time, listening to Mary Beth's coughing and wheezing. It sounded pitiful in the darkness as he held her close. She had been very brave and had worked very hard in the Plot for a King of France as well as a Plot for a King of England and he could not let her down now. He would have to act promptly if he was to save her life.

Friday 25th May 1660

Things were happening very fast. On the fourth of April, the Declaration of Breda, drafted by Lord Chancellor Sir Edward Hyde, was signed by King Charles and this was the last real obstacle to his throne. He offered total amnesty to England and Scotland and promised freedom of worship and, after the events of the last ten years, this was a welcome step. On behalf of Parliament, Sir Thomas Fairfax led a mission from England, formally asking Charles to return to England. He brought with him a chest containing £50,000 as an inducement. Not that Charles really needed one - it was the end of the Plot.

Today, his ship awaits the departure. The "Naseby", captured by the Dutch from Chatham and now rechristened the "Royal Charles", is to be his flagship. The fleet, led by Lord Montague,

awaits him in the Channel.

The King smiles. 'Well, Andrew. I'll see you in London.'

'No, Sire. At least, not yet. I have one more duty to fulfil in Europe, then I will see you in London.'

'You will not miss my Coronation?'

'Not a chance. I have worked hard to that day and would not miss it for the world.'

The King smiles. 'Then I will see you there.'

Charles shakes hands with those who are to follow and thanks them warmly. For once, he seems genuinely happy to be going home. There is still much work for him to do, and it will be an uphill struggle for many years, but it has been worth the wait; England will benefit from a more mature, tolerant King. Andrew knows that General Monck awaits the King at Dover and suspects that the ale will flow freely in London tonight.

He waves for the last time and walks from Sheveningen docks to his waiting coach. He has a promise from the King of a message concerning his coronation and also a lot of back pay to come. Not only that, as a full Colonel in the British Military Intelligence, he will most likely be used again in the service of his monarch.

Colonel Andrew Bosville, Third Earl of Ramsden, heads into the Hague through streets lined with flowers of all colours. They seem to represent the peace that has at last come to Europe. Had he helped? He likes to think so.

He also thinks, with some sadness, of those who have died in the Plot for a King: little Sam, the red-headed bundle of energy who would never take "no" for an answer; Lucy, the nymphomaniac with a heart of gold; his own sister, Carrie, who had come to France and had died because of her deep love for her brother; Mark Gresham, ex-coachman and brother-in-law, who's nose had smelt greed and treachery and who died because of his own loyalty.

But now, Andrew has a very special assignment, one that has the King's full blessing. Mary Beth awaits the carriage that will take her to the sun and restore her health. He must take her to his hideout and build her a chateau in some warm valley. After that, who knows what might lay ahead in Europe?

George Villiers had once sarcastically referred to Andrew and Mary Beth as the "Dynamic Duo". Maybe he was right.

Perhaps, soon, this Dynamic Duo will ride again in defence of their King.

Epilogue

CHARLES STUART was crowned as King of England in London on 23rd April 1661 and married the Portuguese Princess, Catherine of Braganza, in the following May. He reigned for many years and England remained at peace for most of the rest of his reign. His Queen remained totally barren and he had no sons born to him except for Lucy's child, the soon to be infamous Duke of Monmouth.

His mother, **QUEEN HENRIETTE MARIE**, lived until 1669 but suffered much pain in the meantime. Her son, Henry, Duke of Gloucester, died of smallpox just four months after Charles returned to England in 1660 and, three months later, the kindly Princess Mary of Orange tragically died of the same disease.

CARDINAL JULES MAZARIN died on 9th March 1661 at the age of fifty-nine, just six weeks before King Charles was crowned. His chief mistress, Queen-Regent Anne of Austria, wife of deceased Louis XIII, died soon after.

KING LOUIS XIV of France became one of France's greatest and best-known Kings. He built the famous Palace at Versailles and his interest in the arts gained him the title "Sun King". He married Princess Marie-Thérèse under the terms of the Treaty with Spain although the promised dowry was never paid. He had a long string of mistresses and an estimated seventeen children.

PRINCESS HENRIETTE ANNE (KNOWN AS MINETTE) was married to Philippe, Duc d'Orléans, the younger brother of King Louis of France. Philippe was a homosexual and neglected her considerably, turning her into a spiteful girl who became a drug addict and the mistress of anyone who would accept her favours, including the King of France himself. Her death certificate in 1670 stated "acute peritonitis" as the cause of her death at the tender age of twenty-five, but it was widely rumoured that her husband had poisoned her for her many embarrassing affairs.

ANNE HYDE finally married James, Duke of York, in September 1660 at the insistence of the King and her first child was born a month later. She remained completely faithful to her husband and had seven other children by him, six of whom tragically died. James was to become King of England upon the death of Charles but he was an intolerant King who was soon rejected by his people and made to flee.

Anne's eldest daughter, Mary, married her cousin, the younger Prince William of Orange, and they later became King and Queen of England. Upon their death, Anne's younger daughter, another Anne, ruled as Queen. The witty, lively Anne Hyde herself suffered continually from the wounds she had received and, sadly, died of breast cancer in 1671 at the age of 34.

GENERAL MONCK became Duke of Albermarle and a Knight of the Garter as a reward for his part in the Plot for a King. He also became Master of the Horse, Lord Lieutenant of Ireland and Captain-General, as well as Commander of the English Fleet.

PRINCE LOUIS OF CONDE received the good graces of King Louis XIV and returned to Court from January 1660 and received all his estates back as he had been promised. He loyally served King Louis until his retirement and subsequent death in 1686.

GEORGE VILLIERS, 2nd Duke of Buckingham, continued to Plot but now only for himself. Not satisfied with his long-suffering wife, Mary, he openly chased Minette and had many mistresses including the Countess of Shrewsbury, whose husband he murdered in a duel. Despite his reputation, he became a member of the Privy Council in July 1662 and, in spite of continued disloyalty and repeated imprisonments for treason, he was tolerated by King Charles until his death while hunting on his Helmsley Estate near Kirkbymoorside in North Yorkshire in 1687.

LORD AND LADY RAMSDEN?

You'll have to read "The De Bosville Chronicles" to find the answer to that one.