



September, 1538

They had to act in secret, and in haste. It was not difficult to haul the wooden cover up to expose the golden shrine; this was a task they had done frequently to bring pilgrims closer to the saint. Opening the sarcophagus, however, was more difficult than any of them had anticipated in the darkness of night and with a desire for silence. Finally, however, they looked upon the skeleton of their saint. It had been laid carefully in the coffin three hundred years before, at the time of its first translation. The long bones of the arms and legs were arranged around the skull, which looked up at them with empty eye sockets from its place in the center of the coffin. When the prior reached in and pulled it out, everyone could see the hole in the crown of the head, where that part of the holy man's tonsure had been severed with a sword.

Four monks arrived with a much plainer coffin, buried in their own churchyard in 1167, the same year their saint had died. Carefully and reverently the two skeletons were exchanged. Three bones from the hand of the saint were kept back, as had been done the last time he had been translated from one tomb to another. The saint had been much taller than the common monk—a man who must have known him in life—but without the flesh, the saint's skeleton could be neatly laid in the smaller coffin.

The prior took the skull of the long-dead monk into his hand.

"What was his name?" he asked.

"He was Brother Osbert Giffard."

"Forgive us Brother Osbert," the prior whispered, kissing the skull, "and look down upon us from your place in heaven. We would not disturb your rest for anything less than to save our saint."

He held out his empty hand to receive a hatchet from one of his monks and gently tapped at the ancient skull until he had created a hole in the crown to resemble the wound of the saint, then he laid the skull of Brother Osbert Giffard, with his other bones, into the shrine of St. Thomas Becket. The sarcophagus was sealed again and the shrine covering lowered into place over it.

The plain coffin was hurriedly returned to the hole from which it had come in the monk's graveyard, though now with a more famous occupant.

"Who will watch this spot and keep the secret of its location?" the prior asked.

"I will," said Thomas Bokland, stepping forward.

Two of his brother monks came to stand beside him, each declaring their willingness to guard the knowledge with his life.

The prior solemnly handed each of them a bone. "Thomas Bokland, William Kent, and Dunstan Hockwold: You must guard this, and the knowledge that it represents, and you must pass it on to one person before you die. In this way, in each generation, three men will know the location of the saint until our holy church is restored in England and the relics of the saint may be returned to his shrine."

William Kent placed the bone of the saint in his pocket. As he walked away the prior stopped him. "Take one of these reliquaries," he said, giving him an enameled box that he had taken from the shrine. "It is a more appropriate home for the Archbishop's finger." William clutched the box to his breast; the smooth enamel was cool to the touch. Along one surface he could feel raised details with his fingertips. He walked quickly to the monk's lodging, where he wrapped the box in cloth and placed it in a linen bag. Then he moved, as ordered, to cheap lodgings near the west gate of the city.

The next day, the monks watched as the bones of Osbert Giffard were pulled from the coffin of Thomas Becket, burned and scattered. The shrine was hacked apart, the gold and jewels that covered it slipped into wooden chests to be shipped to the king, Henry VIII. In their greed and haste the marauding "Royal Commissioners for the Destruction of Shrines" did not even notice that the mortar holding the lid on the sarcophagus was barely dry.



Chapter 1

Lizzie Manning was convinced that if she lived in the same house all her life she would, by the age of seventy-five, have looked at every book on the shelves, no matter how many there were and no matter their condition. But that was before she saw the house of Alison Kent.

Alison's house was full to bursting with books, and with old newspapers and magazines, scholarly journals, marked-up typescripts, glasses of scotch, and overflowing ashtrays—where the long snake-like cylinders of ash indicated cigarettes that had been laid down soon after being lit and never picked up again. It was a curious ancient house, an Elizabethan half-timbered warren of rooms, with good, solid old furniture under the stacks of paper. Lizzie suspected that there might be animals nested in the crumbling thatch, but Alison did not acknowledge in her looks or her actions that anything around her was the least bit unusual. If she recognized that she and her house were eccentric she gave no hint of it.

It was necessary to clear a place for Lizzie to sit, as if the visit was unexpected, rather than an appointment made after almost two months of correspondence. Lizzie could tell that her hostess was scrutinizing her, and information about why she had been invited was parceled out reluctantly and in small pieces. They shared a common friend, George Hatton, who had recommended the American scholar as a competent researcher who might be able to help Alison with a project, but Lizzie still had to prove her worthiness by being sniffed, pawed and licked by Alison's two old hounds, and by a thorough interview. One of the dogs now lay heavily across Lizzie's feet, while she massaged the head and ears of the other.

“I’m not a Chaucer scholar,” Lizzie started. George had told her that the job had something to do with a manuscript of *Canterbury Tales*, but he hadn’t given her any details of what sort of assistance Alison needed on her project. Her affection for George, and the fact that she had already planned a trip to England, were the reasons Lizzie had agreed to meet Alison. She didn’t think there was enough overlap in their interests and expertise to make a collaboration realistic, and she had a pretty fair idea from Alison’s behavior that her hostess didn’t think so either. She must love George as much as I do, Lizzie thought as she waited for a response.

Alison was abrupt in her answer. “I can handle the literary end of the business.”

“Of course,” Lizzie said quickly, not wanting Alison to think she had implied any criticism of her scholarly credentials. “I know you are an English professor.” She didn’t know what to say next. It was difficult not knowing what the agenda was.

Sitting back in her chair, Lizzie perused the room as she waited for the older woman to decide when and how much information to share. It was a fascinating place, filled with wonders, and she looked about her curiously. Shelves crammed with books rose almost to the ceiling on every wall, and furniture filled most of the open spaces on the floor. The thing of greatest interest was an enameled box that sat on the table in front of her, and Lizzie could not keep her eyes from returning to it again and again. She had seen one like it before, with its dull gold sheen against a brilliant blue enamel.

“You may look at it if you like,” Alison said, gesturing at the box. “I can see you are curious about it.”

Lizzie thanked her and leaned over to examine the object before her. Though it had a substantial look as it sat on its four golden feet, she thought she could probably lift it easily with both hands. The lid was not flat on the top, but had two panels that met at a peak. Two scenes were visible on the side of the box that faced her. Along one of the long panels of the lid, a man was being laid into a tomb. On the side of the box were four golden figures, captured at the moment of a murder.

Taking a deep breath, Lizzie adopted her curator voice. “It is Limoges enamel, I believe.”

Alison nodded.

“And depicts the martyrdom of Thomas Becket,” Lizzie continued. She looked up to see that Alison was smiling at her.

“Very good,” the other woman said. “How did you know?”

“Partly from recognizing the incident,” Lizzie answered, pointing out the central figure in the bishop’s mitre, and the armored knights attacking him with raised swords. “And partly from having seen a very similar reliquary at the Victoria and Albert Museum,” she continued. “I think they bought it from Sotheby’s not too many years ago.”

“It was 1996,” Alison said. “And the museum paid four million pounds for it.”

“A lot of money,” Lizzie acknowledged. She had suspected the value of the piece when she first spotted it lying next to Alison’s ashtray. The hound at her feet stood up and sniffed it, as if he knew what they were talking about, then turned and gave it a quick polish with his tail.

“I suppose you think I should sell it or donate it, given its value,” Alison said.

“Not necessarily,” Lizzie answered. “If you need money, it could certainly bring you some, but the thing itself is so beautiful and of such historical interest and importance that it might as well be you who loves and appreciates it as someone else.” She couldn’t help thinking that Alison looked perfectly comfortable in her surroundings and didn’t seem to need much beyond a good housekeeper.

Alison was clearly pleased with the answer. She took a small golden key from a drawer in the table and gave it to Lizzie, inviting her to open the box.

The age and value of the artifact made her somewhat hesitant, but Lizzie found the key fit perfectly and turned easily. There was a satisfying click as the lock opened. Her hesitancy now replaced by curiosity, Lizzie put her hands around the box and with her thumbs on the two front corners of the lid, pushed it open and looked inside. She could see a leather-bound volume stuffed with extra pages. There was also

a small scrap of dark cloth, a bone, a scallop shell, and two round pieces of glass that looked like they might be lenses from an old telescope.

The book probably held the manuscript she had come to talk about, but the bone and the cloth were the things that captured Lizzie's attention. She tried to control the excitement in her voice as she asked Alison how long the box had been in her family.

"I don't know exactly how long," Alison answered, "but at least several centuries."

Lizzie took a deep breath before speaking. "Is it possible then, that these are actual relics of Thomas Becket?"

"I'm sure that whoever put them in the box believed them to be, but even if the bone has been there since the box was made, there is no guarantee that the relic is authentic." She pulled the bone from the box and held it up to Lizzie. "It is certainly a human finger bone, and I suspect it is from the hand of Thomas Becket, but we can't be positive, as there have been charlatans making substitutions and selling forgeries almost since the day he was murdered." She put the bone back in the box and pulled out the book. "Chaucer makes good use of one such faker in his character of the Pardoner in *Canterbury Tales*."

Lizzie had recently re-read the book in preparation for this meeting, and smiled as she thought of the character who sold chicken bones as relics of saints, and pillow cases as the mantle of the Virgin Mary. She touched the stiff fabric at the bottom of the box.

"Is this his blood, do you suppose?"

"There are good descriptions of people mopping up his blood and brains with towels and then cutting them up for distribution."

Lizzie picked up the box and looked closely at the exterior detail. The heads of the various people depicted on it were applied separately from the enameling, in what looked like gold. Along the crest of the lid, a decorative frieze held several semi-precious stones.

"A box like this, so beautifully made, and using such expensive materials, was certainly intended for a very special

relic,” she said. “Blood, brains or bones would certainly all qualify, and Thomas Becket was the most important of the English saints.”

“His martyrdom at the altar of Canterbury Cathedral is compelling drama,” Alison said, nodding at the depiction of it on the box.

Lizzie returned the box gently to its place on the table and looked at Alison, who held the small book and was now ready to talk about it.

“This is a very early edition of *Canterbury Tales*,” the old woman said. “Made by William Caxton around 1483; it is one of the first books printed in English.”

Lizzie could not help but think of the tremendous value of that small volume, possibly worth as much as the reliquary at auction. She did not want to ask for it and waited until Alison removed the manuscript pages from it and handed it to her. It was a small book, fitting easily into Lizzie’s hand. The binding was loose from having had those extra pages stuffed into it for so many years—maybe even since the book was new, Alison told her.

There was no introduction or title page and the first line was familiar: “WHAN that Aprille, with his shoures soote. . . .” As she leafed through the book, Lizzie saw several charming woodprints illustrating passages from the book, including one that showed the pilgrims sitting around a table sharing a meal that included wedges of cheese and the head of a boar. She could make out the text in only the most rudimentary way; she had struggled through Middle English texts, including this one, when she was in college, but the archaic language was coupled here with a heavily inked old-English typeface that was almost as foreign to Lizzie as any other unfamiliar language.

“George told me you had a manuscript of *The Canterbury Tales*,” she said. “But this early printed edition is just as interesting to me.”

Alison reached out to take back the book, which she put down on the table casually, as if its age of more than five hundred years was not impressive. She picked up the sheaf of loose hand-written pages that lived inside it and gently

touched the top page; this was clearly, to her, the greater treasure.

“There *is* a manuscript,” she said, “but it is not by Geoffrey Chaucer.” She gave Lizzie a searching look. “When I confided to George that I was having trouble finding someone to help me with an important project, I told him that my greatest concern was that I did not trust the people around me, and I did not know how I could trust a stranger.” She hesitated for a moment, and then said quickly, “George said that I could trust you.”

As she reached out to receive the manuscript, Lizzie studied her companion. She was a handsome woman, with a strong square jaw and blue eyes that had faded with age. Her white hair was pulled back into an elastic band at the nape of her neck. Lizzie found that she was warming to the woman as her crust came off.

The manuscript was made up of several dozen pages, neatly folded and covered from edge to edge with a small script similar to that on the printed page, but with a greater fluidity. Lizzie carefully turned over page after page; several words were obscured where ink had come too quickly off the quill and left a black spidery-edged blotch. The last few pages were covered with lines and squares that looked rather like elaborate games of tic-tac-toe.

“I can’t read it,” Lizzie said apologetically. “What is it?”

Alison sat back in her chair and lit a cigarette. She contemplated Lizzie and Lizzie contemplated her back. It had been a long time since she had seen someone smoke so casually, without any apology or explanation that she was quitting soon. The older woman inhaled deeply and then set her cigarette into an ashtray on the table beside her. She was a tall woman, and seemed stiff as she pushed herself up from her chair and went to a sideboard where she poured herself a glass of scotch and gave it a quick blast of soda with an old-fashioned siphon.

“Do you want one?” she asked Lizzie, holding up the glass.

Lizzie nodded and Alison made her an identical drink before returning to her chair. It was good scotch, strong and peaty. Lizzie wasn’t sorry that Alison had cut it with the soda,

which was nice and fizzy, though her husband would have hated to see such a good whiskey diluted.

“I’m going to trust you,” Alison said.

The eyeglasses perched on the end of her nose were small enough that Alison mostly looked over them, but now she tilted her head back to see Lizzie more clearly. Lizzie met her eyes calmly, curiously. She took a sip of her drink and let the fire of the alcohol sit for a moment in her mouth as she waited for her hostess to speak again.

“There are certain parties here in England, and in the larger world of Chaucer scholarship, who would love to get their hands on what I have here,” Alison said finally. “I am concerned about protecting it until I can publish it myself.”

People unaccustomed to the world of academia might have been surprised by such a suspicious approach to the work of an author dead for six hundred years, but Lizzie understood Alison’s concerns perfectly. Professional reputations, promotions and job security were all tied to original scholarship, documented and shared in publications. She assured her companion that she could be trusted to keep Alison’s information confidential until she was ready to share it.

“This is the diary of a woman who made a pilgrimage from Bath to Canterbury in 1387,” Alison said, taking the manuscript. “She was a weaver from Bath and her name was Alison. I am named for her.”

“Dame Alison?” Lizzie asked. “Like the Wife of Bath character in *Canterbury Tales*?” Even as she said it, she realized the potential importance of those old pieces of paper. “Do you think she could have been the basis for the character in Chaucer’s work?”

Alison continued to give her the same steady look. “I’m certain of it,” she said.

The importance of the diary was now obvious, but Lizzie still didn’t know what role she might play in any work to be done on it.

“If I don’t have expertise in the topic, how can I help you?” she asked.

“I need a smart and clever researcher,” Alison said, watching for Lizzie’s response. “Someone who might have new and

original ideas on an old topic.” She leaned forward in her chair. “And someone who can walk for me.”

“Walk for you? Where?”

“Across England,” came the answer. “From Bath to Canterbury to retrace the pilgrimage described in the diary.”

The request was so completely unorthodox and unexpected that Lizzie hardly knew what to think of it. “Isn’t that like two hundred miles or something?” she asked.

“Something like that.”

Lizzie laughed. “I think I could do the first part of what you describe,” she said. “I am a smart and clever researcher, but what made you think I could or would walk two hundred miles?”

Alison sat back again and shrugged. “It was George’s idea,” she said. “Frankly, when I saw you today my first thought was very similar to yours. You don’t look like much of a walker.”

Lizzie was offended by the comment. She was not, in fact, much of a walker, but she didn’t like to have it be observed so casually by someone who was still almost a stranger to her. She put her arm across the plump roundness of her mid-section as Alison continued.

“I don’t know what George was thinking. Ordinarily he gives me such excellent advice and recommendations.”

Lizzie took a long swig of the scotch. “Just because I am not in the habit of making long walks doesn’t mean I’m not capable of it,” she insisted impulsively.

She knew it was a mistake to make such a brazen declaration without considering the implications, but she could not help herself. It was not that she felt she needed to protect some image of herself as an example of physical strength or prowess; she had no pretensions to anything of the sort. She prided herself on being an intellectual—for her it was long stretches in the library and at the computer, not long rambles in the country. Maybe it was the strength of the scotch, or the personal nature of the challenge, or the obvious importance of the work, but even acknowledging the mistake of impulsiveness, Lizzie felt suddenly compelled to accept the strange job.

“When would I start?”

The look on Alison's face was a mixture of surprise and amusement. "Are you saying you would actually do this?"

"Yes," Lizzie said, nodding her head to convince both herself and her hostess. "Yes, I think I might." She asked again about the schedule. Her husband, Martin, had been commissioned to complete a work of public art in Newcastle. They were in England over the Christmas holiday to finalize the details, and planned to return in the spring when he would begin the work in earnest. Lizzie would teach the winter term at St. Patrick's College, and had arranged to take a sabbatical for the spring term to be in England with Martin. She had thought she would spend the time working on a book on museum collections, but every minute that her mind turned to the idea of Alison's project, with all its physical and intellectual challenges, the more she thought it was meant to be.

"When would I need to start?" she asked again, explaining her teaching schedule to Alison.

"The original pilgrimage began in the last week of April and took a month," Alison said, the tone of her voice making it obvious that she was not yet convinced that Lizzie was the right person for the job.

Lizzie pretended not to notice Alison's tone. "Of course," she said with a broad smile, "Wan that Aprille. . . ."

"There would be preliminary work," Alison said cautiously.

"I could be back here by the middle of April. Would that be enough time?"

Alison still hesitated. "George said you had an eye for detail, and that would be extremely valuable to me." She paused. "I need someone who will notice details in the landscape, in villages and churches, and be able to tie them to descriptions in the text."

There was a long silence as each woman considered the direction the conversation was going, and the implications of Lizzie undertaking the pilgrimage. It would put them in close contact and it would require that they trust each other.

Lizzie was the first to speak, asking Alison why she had not undertaken the project herself.

"I have a bad hip," Alison said matter-of-factly. "It's too

bad I didn't discover this manuscript twenty years ago, because I *was* a good walker."

Ignoring the insult implied in the comment, Lizzie asked if the route could not be retraced by car.

"Parts of it, of course," was the answer. "And I have driven back and forth to Canterbury dozens of times. But some parts of the path lie along ridge tops and through forests. They are not accessible by car."

Lizzie imagined herself out on a high ridge in the English countryside. In the hour they had talked she had gone from being skeptical about the project to having an earnest desire to undertake it.

"I'd like to do this," Lizzie said. "George was correct; I am the right person for this job."

When Lizzie left the house an hour later a deal had been struck between the two women. All that was left was to explain to her husband that she would be walking across England, and then to do it.