

CHAPTER ONE

ORLÉANS

MONDAY 24TH FEBRUARY 2014

02:00

Encore un feu...

Again, another fire, and this one a vast, leaping beacon, fit to melt the rooftops of slumbering Orléans.

Picaut can see the glare from the window as she throws on jeans and jacket. Outside, she navigates by its light, following the scorched sky through winding streets in her car and then on foot.

A paved courtyard ten metres deep acts as a break between the fire and the road. This close, a savage heat sucks the breath from her lungs, dries the film of tears from her eyes. The flames are many times higher than the building on which they feed and brighter than any man-made light.

The roar is deafening, loud enough to swamp the traffic and mute the many sirens. This fire is bigger than any of the three that have come before it and this, unlike its predecessors, has been lit in the old town, in the pattern of narrow, cobbled streets between the cathedral and the river. Nothing is isolated here: tonight, Orléans could lose its ancient, beating heart.

Worse, the air is dense with the taste of evaporating iron, of molten plastic, glass and mortar, but under these, threading through them, rising, is the stench of burning hair and blood and bone and this is new. Before, the fires ate buildings, not people. This one is feasting on flesh and, by the look of the municipal police and state police and random hangers-on all standing at a safe distance, no-one can get close enough even to begin to find out who the victims are. Were.

'Capitaine!'

The call comes from behind, away from the fire. Turning, Picaut takes a moment to see who has called her, and then wishes she hadn't.

She nods a kind of greeting. 'Lieutenant Garonne.'

When they were lieutenants together, he was Guillaume and she was Inès and they were as close as any professional relationship could be that stood just on the safe side of intimacy. They were matched in temperament and style and had forged in the furnace of detection and risk, a friendship that was greater than the job, or so they told themselves.

But that was then and this is now, and now he speaks to her only when he has to, which is more often than either of them would like.

Garonne is a soft man in a hard man's frame which has begun to revert to type. He is of an age where the last round of promotions was his final chance to make Captain. Nine months later, he carries his disappointment in bags beneath his eyes.

Tonight, though, he arrived at the crime scene several minutes before Picaut and he wishes her to know this. His notepad is thick with new writing and he flourishes it as evidence that he is the better officer, she in dereliction of her duty.

He reads by blistering firelight. 'Hôtel Carcassonne. Owned and run by Mme Foy, who was present when the fire began. She had seven patrons; six are there—' He gestures over his shoulder to the refugees clustered at the margins of the fire's light. 'The seventh remains unaccounted for.'

Even by the standards of the last few months, Garonne is angry with her, which is saying something. His eyes search her for hidden clues. He called her home number and she wasn't there and she didn't answer the mobile until the seventh ring, or maybe the eighth and so he knows that she knows that he knows that she didn't spend the night at her apartment, and, because this is the way of things, he suspects that, wherever she slept, she wasn't alone. And she knows,

and he knows that she knows, that he's Luc's friend now, not hers, and will report anything and everything that he suspects.

A pair of wraparound shades rests on his brow, a ridiculous affectation in the middle of the night. Looking into the lenses, Picaut sees herself reproduced twice over; small, slim, slight-of-build, with short-ish, ragged-ish, unruly hair, that is never quite blonde. She thinks her face is too freckled for grace, her grey eyes set too wide for beauty. Luc, at his most romantic, called her 'fascinating.'

She is not fascinating now. She is tired and fed up and wants to go back to bed and where that is, and with whom, if anyone, is her own fucking business.

She doesn't smell of sex, she isn't wearing lace underwear and because she's wearing what she always wears, which is yesterday's jeans and a sleeveless white t-shirt that wouldn't hide anything, under an oversized buckskin jacket, Garonne, and so Luc, should know that she has nothing to hide.

She presses her fingers to her face, crimps her eyes, shuts out the past. 'Who's the seventh patron? The one left inside?'

'Mme Foy can't remember his name. He booked in this afternoon, but she was talking on the phone to her pregnant daughter who has just had a scan and has discovered that she's carrying twins. In her excitement, Mme Foy failed to commit her new client's name to memory. He was tall, moderately good looking, but not excessively so. He was white, dark haired. She thinks he is English, or maybe American. Which is to say his French was perfunctory and he spoke his English with an accent.'

Which narrows it down not at all. 'Fucking wonderful.'

'The German—' Garonne jerks his thumb over his shoulder, 'thinks he was American.'

'Why?'

'He overheard a phone call at dinner at which our missing man referred to colleagues at Cornell University and said he had asked them to "expedite the results."' "

'How good's his English?'

'Better than mine.'

That sets the bar fairly low, but not impossibly so. Picaut turns to look. In the sorry huddle of the former hotel's patrons, any one of the men could be German.

The women though... there's one that catches the eye; set apart from the rest.

'What about her?'

'Who, the black?'

Oh, dear God. To Guillaume Garonne, anyone is black who can't trace a dozen generations of pure white French ancestry to before the First Republic, but just this once, he's right: this woman is not the Arab-black that is really olive brown, but ebony black, West African black, tall, lean savannah-black with brilliant black hair that falls to her shoulders in an avalanche of polished treacle.

She is interesting, that's the point. Anyone who stands out from the crowd is interesting and tonight, in this company, this woman is the shining jewel in the coal pile, the bird of paradise amongst sparrows.

The rest are no different to anyone else who has been dragged out of bed in the pit of night at the time when plasma cortisol runs well below coping levels, saggily uncomfortable in hotel dressing gowns and bare feet.

The woman, by contrast, sports an effortless Paris chic: Agnès b meets Jean Paul Gaultier with just the right hint of nostalgia for Galliano's bad-boy Dior. She could grace the front cover of Vogue. She probably has.

'Who is she?'

Garonne consults his notes as if she hasn't burned herself onto his memory.

'Monique Susong. She's from Paris. She...' His eyes grow tight at their corners.

'Why is that funny?'

'Never mind.' It's late. Picaut is tired. A year ago, less, he would have seen the humour in this. A year ago, he wouldn't have thought it necessary to state the obvious in the first place. She hasn't the energy to cosset him. She

substitutes briskness for what once would have been humanity. 'What's she doing here?'

'What do you mean?'

'It doesn't look to me as if the Hôtel Carcassonne is – was – a five star venue. What's someone like Monique Susong doing in a place like this?'

'I haven't—'

'Find out. And get any CCTV from the area and have it ready viewed by tomorrow morning with notes of anyone or anything that might give us answers.'

Picaut spins back to the hotel. 'Is he definitely inside, our missing man?'

'Nobody knows. They all followed the fire drill – there are cards prominently displayed in every room, we are not to suggest otherwise – and came out when the alarm rang. By the time Mme Foy had counted them and realized he was missing, the fire was too fierce for anyone to go back in. She swears she didn't see him leave at any point but that's no guarantee when—'

'When her family's fecundity is quite so mind-numbingly astonishing. So we need to start taking statements from anyone and everyone, particularly from the German who sort-of speaks English and our Parisian peacock. Find their home addresses, why they're here, how long they were planning to stay, what they ate, thought, said. Get their mobile records, everything. Then we can... Thank, Christ. At last.'

With flashing lights and screaming brakes: the Fire Department. In truth, it hasn't been long since the proprietor first rang with the news; just that time becomes more flexible when there's a fire at hand.

The small square in front of the burning building knows a brief, frenzied chaos, but they have had three nights of practice within the past three weeks and the disorder resolves itself with remarkable speed into the kind of order that kills fires, even this one.

The river runs less than three blocks away and the winter has been a wet one. They have enough water to drown the town; all they need do is get it to where it needs to be, and they are good at this.

Presently, a dozen jets of water arc into the fire's heart, wearing it down. In the morning, Picaut and her team will be permitted to don hard hats and sift through wet soot and falling masonry in an effort to work out who did this and why.

Actually, if this fire is remotely like its predecessors, a coded call will come in to the central office in west Orléans any time now from a man with a strong (and therefore possibly fake) Malian accent, claiming to represent 'Jaish al Islam'.

He will tell them that his group lit the fire as 'a statement against the infidel' which represents a part of the ongoing retaliation for France's role in the internal affairs of that small African state. An hour later, he will email a .wav file of his statement to the national and international news agencies and by dawn, therefore, it will be playing in every household in France.

To date, these 'statements' have detailed the destruction of the homes and/or businesses of: a professor of literature; the owner of a small boutique wine grower who sells well into London and New York; and the leader of the Orléans branch of the Young Socialists.

All three are women. All three have written a post at some point in the last year on a blog called, 'La Femme du Jour', which claims to be dedicated to 'celebrating all that is best of French women'.

All three are also Caucasian, middle class and attractive and while they have not died, they have been rendered homeless, their livelihoods assaulted, their very Frenchness sullied. Their portrait photographs have graced a series of front pages whose editors have wept tears of unrestrained joy with every new addition.

Everyone else has wept over the front pages, too, though not with joy. It is an election year – in France, when is it not? – but this year more than most, the popular fury is a palpable thing. Last year's gay marriage demo-riots have

segued into running battles with the police sparked by anything from the rising price of bread to youth unemployment to a ship load of illegal immigrants found at a southern ferry terminal.

Orléans was a bastion of relative calm until the fires began. Now, even here, small clots of disaffected youths prowl the streets seeking reasons to turn feral. In the living rooms of their elders, with the ballots due to be cast in just short of a week's time, the polls are shifting increment by increment away from the parties of liberal ideals, towards those who favour an all-white France, populated by real men who will defend their women to the death if necessary, from coloured incomers who choose to tell them what they can and cannot do.

Lieutenant Guillaume Garonne is thrilled by this: in his lifetime, his dream of white supremacy may come true.

That time has not yet come and, in the meantime, as Picaut points out, Garonne is obviously aching to return to his taking of statements from the hotel's owner and her four surviving clients.

Glowering, he leaves her. Picaut is about to join him, to interview the alarmingly chic Monique Susong, when her Nokia rings.

'Picaut.'

'It's Patrice,' says Patrice cheerfully. Patrice Lacroix is the team's technological wunderkind. A skateboarding, kitesurfing computer gamer, he lives on a diet of Red Bull and coffee and seems never to sleep.

'Your call's come,' he says. 'Same voice, same signal. See if you can hold him on the line.'

'I won't be able to. He never says anything beyond his prepared statement.'

'Still, try. I need just shy of thirty seconds. Ask him out on a date; tell him how hot you are for him. Anything to keep him on the line.'

'Fuck you, too.'

'Anytime.'

They are recording this call. In the old days, you could tell by the hollowness when a line was being recorded. Now, it sounds the same as all the rest. Picaut waits to hear it connect.

'Ici L'armée du Prophète, Jaish al Islam...'

The call lasts twelve seconds. Patrice does not get a trace. Picaut watches the fire fight against the water, spitting steam and ash and smoke. The roar becomes a wail, undercut by a tympanic stutter of things warped and stretched beyond the laws of physics.

Garonne martial all the hotel's residents and stakes out his territory right across the courtyard. He may be angry with her, but he is good at this: the traumatised men and women, even Monique Susong of the black skin and wild hair, will feel safe in his hands.

Leaving him to it, Picaut steps around a corner, and then, because she can still smell smoke, can still feel the falling cinders, and truly, she thinks better in the quiet dark, she steps around another, and another until the flames are barely a sulphured rent in the sky, showing through to a hell of others' devising.

Four fires in under three weeks and only this one with a body inside. Why change the pattern now? Did he die by accident, caught in the fire? Or was the fire lit to kill him?

And before all of that, why here? Of all the places in France and the world, why light four fires in Orléans?

Ideas come best to a free mind. Picaut tilts her head back, looks up at the obsidian sky, at the orange tint along the western edge, at the pinhole pricks of stars. Clouds streak across that at any other time would be whispers of wind, bearing the promise of rain, but here, tonight, now are too much like smoke.

Her gaze comes to rest on a plaque on the opposite wall.

SIEGE D'ORLEANS

OCTOBRE 1428 – MAJ 1429

LA VILLE D'ORLEANS RECONNAISSANTE DEDUE CETTE
PLAQUE EN HONEUR DES SOLDATS ECOSSAIS DE L'AULD
ALLIANCE VENUS COMBATTRE POUR LEVER LE SIEGE
D'ORLEANAIS...

The Auld Alliance: Scots brogue carved into immortality. If she is not careful, she will start to see her father here, which is impossible. By chance – it does feel like chance – Picaut has come to his place of pilgrimage, the stopping-place where he rested when his breathing was bad but he could still walk down to the river, and long before that, it was the place he brought her to when she was too young to walk, but old enough to listen to the stories that fired his passion.

'It was here, *cherie*, in the heart of France, that the tide of English ambition broke and broke and broke and was turned back. See? Their names are here...'

JOHN STUART OF DARNLEY, PATRICK OGILVY, HUGH KENNEDY, THOMAS BLAIR: She knows the names by heart. As a child, she stood in her father's study and recited them as a way to lift a smile. For a while, say, until she was ten, this strategy worked. They were the good years, when he was free of the world's scorn. She remembers them as she remembers old films, as an interesting narrative of someone else's life. THOMAS BLAIR, THOMAS HOUSTON, EDWARD OF LENNOX, MICHAEL NORWILL...

'Papa, why did they come?' She is six years old, perhaps, or seven. Old enough to know that dying is not good, young enough not yet to know that sometimes it is better than living.

'Because the enemy of my enemy is my friend.' Her father's laughter is dry. In retrospect, it perhaps harbours layers of inference she does not understand at the time. 'The Scots hated the English with a passion and when a whole succession of English kings tried to claim France as their own, generations of Scots came here to fight them off. They were more loyal to our king than was his

own cousin, the Duke of Burgundy. The Burgundians fought on the English side then, to their eternal shame.

'But it was the Maid who broke the siege. She led the army out against the English.' This she has known from her earliest years.

'She did indeed. The Scots may have helped to hold the walls, but it was the Maid who turned the tide. Close your eyes. Can you see her? There she is, astride the king's great, white war horse, clad in the unmarked plate, lance in one hand, small-axe in the other, riding out of the gate at the head of the army.

'Think of that! In a world where women were chattels, she was passion incarnate. France had lost so many battles then, many they should have won when they had superior numbers, superior arms, still, they lost. Our knights were demoralised, our armies shrunk to nothing: who wants to fight when they're guaranteed to lose?

'Then the Maid arrived. She took the war-weary, war-fearful, war-lazy men of France, and she shamed them all into action, until even those who didn't want to fight found themselves winning, and once they were winning, they found that they liked it.'

He scoops her up, her father, whirls her round, sends the stars spinning. 'But the old goats who surround me, even now, in the twenty first century, are so afraid of the idea of a girl who can fight, that they clothe her in magical myth...

And he is off again, staring out into the place only he can see, where past and future come together and a wrong is put right and the frayed fabric of history is made whole again.

Except, of course, that it is not. He is ruined, his reputation shredded by the old goats who had no qualms about assaulting anyone who had the temerity to question the sanctity of their beliefs.

And he is dead.

He is dead and his obsession is dead with him and if there is grief, there is also an overwhelming relief and one day she will come to terms with the uneven balance of these.

In the meantime, she has a fire to contend with, and a whole new set of enemies, far less evident than the English, who would make of her city a battleground in a war for which she does not yet understand the reason.

She salutes the plaque in the way she has done for almost all her life and retraces her steps round one corner and another and back to the smouldering wreck of a hotel, which is now the site of a murder.

CHAPTER TWO

THE SIEGE OF ORLÉANS

THE FINAL DAY

7TH MAY 1429

In the late afternoon, a lance of naked sunlight spears the gun smoke and strikes Tod Rustbeard square on the chest. Looking down from the height of the stone and timber rampart on which he stands, he thinks a shot must strike after it, or a bodkin, or a French axe hurled up from below. He will die filthy: his beard a clot of spittle, his mail a mess of crusted gore, brown as cow dung, rough as a ploughed field, textured with the other men's deaths.

But not his own. From somewhere behind his left shoulder, an English gun vomits another round into the ranks of the enemy. Smoke lurches skyward to kill the sunlight and he is still alive, unshot, unstruck, undead. He peers through the haze to the waves of Gallic fury heaving at the foot of the balustrade.

Fuck them and fuck their mothers. They don't know when to give up. They, too, are filthy now, who were crimson and nettle-green and white this morning; Frenchmen who have found their fighting spirit.

It wasn't supposed to be like this. They should have surrendered a week ago. Rustbeard knows; he spent five stinking winter months masquerading as a Frenchman in the heart of Orléans, speaking in dusty corners with men whose ears were open to gold and promises.

Listen to me, your weak and mewling king does not love Orléans; he languishes in Chinon and will not send aid. Send word to the English that you'll open the gates after Easter and we shall all be safe, our fortunes made. William Glasdale commands them and he's a decent man. He will not sack a city that has opened its gates. Let it only get to Easter and you will have done your duty...

Gold makes men nod. Promises extract oaths and the gates would have swung smoothly back on Ascension Day, except that a letter came near the end of Lent, *To the citizens of Orléans, in God's name, from the Maid...* and all his work undone.

And now this.

The smoke drifts and sways, a traitor-curtain hiding attackers and attacked alike. But in the mess below is order, and — Ladders? *Fuck!* — 'Arms! God damn you! Arms to the south wall!'

His sword is not sufficiently long, but there are weapons enough here for the end of days: hammers, archers' mauls, falchions, big two-handed bastard swords, daggers, pikes, all manner of pole arms; dead men's weapons.

A hammer lies to his left, three feet of ash haft, leaden head. Tod Rustbeard is not the tallest man in the English army, but his chest is broad and he can lift gun stones one in each hand and run with them; he has the power of a smith if not the skill.

The big two-handed hammer floats to his grip. He braces his feet, sweeps and sweeps and makes the sweep a swing, a full circle-spin, a whirl that lifts an ox-head's worth of weight in a cartwheel of death and when he has it up to speed he aims himself at the ladder that has come up over the stone lip and the face that is appearing there and he lurches one step, two and the wheeling lead barely falters as he makes contact and the face dissolves in a bright, bright splash of blood.

More spit in his beard. More gore on his mail. And fragments of bone and tooth and eye.

He kills two more, still spinning, but there are more and ever more. He sets the head of the hammer on the ladder's top rung, braces one foot on the wall and shoves. The ladder falls back, taking men screaming to their deaths.

Men with pike staffs come running at last to fend off this and other ladders, for there are more now, sprouting left and right, bringing Frenchman into the

fastness of their stone and wood boulevard. Here to help are Walter Golder and Jack Kentishorn, John of Gayleford and Alfred Rake. And then Sir William Glasdale, commander of the heights, himself in full Italian plate which has not yet lost its lustre.

'Push them back! Send them crashing! Will you be beaten by Frenchmen? Are you children? You! Rustbeard! Swing that hammer harder!'

Here is the best of English soldiery. Here is the reason England will prevail and France is doomed. Glasdale's voice is the bellow of a bull, of a bear, of thunder, of God Himself. Men find strength who were losing it, and apply themselves anew to the job of sending ladders back to the earth.

The enemy have pikes, too. On a ladder? Are they insane? Mad or not, they are certainly ardent. One skewers past his face and he ducks only by chance and instinct and slashes back and here's a long sword, swinging, and an axe, striking overhand, seeking faces, bare hands, anything.

Jack Kentishorn goes down, gargling on his own blood. A new man takes his place. Oliver? Or maybe a Harry, there are many of those about these days. The hammer head is wedged now in the top of the ladder. A blade screams down, strikes sparks from the stone by his elbow. Oliver-or-Harry thrusts a sword forward, and misses.

'For God's sake, man! Can you not strike a Frenchman at two paces? We'll have to—' But what they'll have to do is lost, because he has seen what nobody else has seen and his stolen-borrowed hammer won't do for this. He drops it and spins round, unarmed, frantic, looking for whatever he can find that... a bow!

He leaps on it, fiercely. He is not an archer, to send a dozen arrows a minute with such accuracy that he can hit a wren's head in a summer-leafed oak at three hundred paces, but it isn't summer and there are no leaves and his target isn't a wren's head, nor even an eagle's.

He's aiming for a slight figure in unadorned plate, standing in the press at the foot of a ladder on the north side of the boulevard of les Tourelles which is itself

on the south side of the Loire outside the city of Orléans and he knows this shape, has been trying to find it in the havoc all day.

And here, now...left hand to bow-belly, fingers to string, arrow to nock. A good arrow, with a savage, bodkin blade to the head that will pierce plate, even good plate. Even plate commissioned by the weak-chinned, jug-eared idiot who calls himself king of France but never stirs himself to fight. What kind of king doesn't fight?

Rustbeard draws with the best smoothness he can muster, feels his shoulders bunch and sigh. He is a mess of contrary levers, and yet the bow is drawn, his lips kiss the string, his best eye sights along the arrow head and she is there, the demon in white plate, or the witch, or the heretic, or the boy, pretending womanhood because that kind of thing boils French blood and makes them go back on their winter promises of surrender.

Eye. Bodkin. Armour. All in line. Others might send a prayer with the loose, but he's not that kind of man. He sends hatred instead. Die, God damn you. Die.

And...loose.

A hit! He hears a curse in French, sees the white armour topple, hears a name shouted, feels horror ripple through the mess of men below.

'She's hit. The Maid, she's hit. The Maid! The Maid! The Maid!'

'Nicely done!' Glasdale's plated fist fetches him such a blow between the shoulders that he thinks he's been shot. He staggers forward. Glasdale catches him in his other hand, lifts his bow arm, and the bow in it so everyone must stop and turn and see him.

Glasdale's bull-voice bellows out across the barbican. 'See? Rustbeard is more a man than the rest of you put together. It's not a demon if it bleeds. It's not a demon if an arrow can send it back off a ladder. We'll beat the fuckers now. Get to the walls and build up the breaches and we'll have the bastards and

their shitty little town by sundown. Tomorrow, we'll have their bastard king's head on a dish.'

A sword cut to his head slices open the red-gold light and nearly blinds him.

Rustbeard ducks sideways, stabs forward clumsily, puts his shoulder behind the thrust and a Frenchman falls. He is too tired to feel the surge of satisfaction that fired him through the day, but at least there is space and he can take another step back and chop with his axe to the left and slash-skitter his sword off someone else's mail and another step back and Glasdale is off to his left somewhere, in the gloaming, and the sun is leaching the life from the sky and all he can hear is the surf of his own blood in his ears in the echo of his helm, and the ring of iron, as it has rung all afternoon, for the French saw the swing of the witch's standard and found their courage again.

French. Courage. Tod Rustbeard never thought to stitch those two words together in the same hour, never mind the same breath. He squeezes his eyes tight, takes another step back. There is stone in front of him now, which is something. He is nearly free of the rampart and back onto the tower proper: Les Tourelles. Only a temporary bridge to cross and he'll have real walls between him and the oncoming French. Someone passes him water. He drinks and tips back his face and splashes it on and feels it trickle back behind his ears, over his jugular, and the hot, hard pulse. He is not going to die here. He has orders, and they require that he remain alive. He has a plan, only that he has not yet worked out how to make it happen.

A shout from his right. He snaps upright. The French are coming again, damn their black souls, armed with hammers and pikestaffs, culverins and petit culverins and someone with too good an eye for a shot has already hit Stephen of Dulwich and Gereint the Sheep who came from Powys and should have been on

the French side, hating the English, but for the small matter of an ewe smuggled to the wrong side of a ditch, or maybe a whole flock, and a warrant out to stretch his neck on the border marches, so he must come to France and fight for England. And die.

'Back!' Glasdale is close now, standing on what's left of the wall, dull indented plate. 'Back into the Tower!'

His commander's voice is gone; he can't shout over the guns any more, but word passes man to man, and nobody will look anyone else in the eye now. This is the way of men facing defeat, who have known nothing but victory for years. 'Back across the bridge.'

Behind are ramparts of stone and oak and mud that was the boulevard of the Tower; a safe place, built through the winter, or so they had thought. Beyond them is the tower itself. Stone walls too high for a ladder, and arrow slits, and maybe a fire and food and wine; safety.

Tod Rustbeard takes a breath, strikes out again. Again. Again. He is an automaton, made for fighting. The sun has abandoned them, the evening is a tepid grey, until suddenly it isn't. Brilliant gold light spumes off a helm to his left, slices wide on a blade to his right, lights his feet. He looks down. The sun is below him and it is not a sun, but a fire. The fucking French have lit a fire on a barge, floated it down the river and moored it directly beneath the bridge. *Damn* them.

'They're firing the bridge! Back!' It's a wooden bridge and the French have put pitch and oil in the fire. Flames dance and dart at his feet. The smoke is treacle-thick and strong. The French stop coming. They're happy to stand at the edge and watch Englishmen burn.

Rustbeard's standing in shadow; a habit that has kept him alive this far. If he had a bow...but he doesn't, not any more. He has an axe and a sword and neither can reach the men who gather to watch the bridge burn, and any English foolish enough to stand on it.

In time, the fire-sun beneath him begins to set. Down in the river, the barge is moving, towed by an iron hawser; it has done its job. Opposite, the French call back to summon up planks, ready to throw them across. They didn't want to destroy the bridge, just drive the English back into the Tower. Someone on their side has a brain and is using it. This in itself is a wonder. Nobody on the French side has had a brain to speak of since they lost all their decent fighting men at Agincourt in '15.

Half of them are Scotsmen, small, swarthy lowlanders with cudgels or big red-haired Strathclydemen wielding bastard swords and small, wicked spikes in the offhand. Did not the Pope in Rome say that the Scots are a sure and certain antidote to the English? Maybe one of these is doing the thinking.

'Rustbeard?' Glasdale appears his left hand. Inside his armour, the English commander is a shrunken man. He is not used to defeat. Red-eyed, he stares out across the charred bridge to the mass of French beyond. 'Is she there?'

'The witch?' He stares into the dusk. In all the fighting, he'd forgotten she existed. 'I can't see her. She might be dead?'

'No, she's alive. I heard them shout it half way through the afternoon. She had them pull out the arrow and pack the wound and she's back leading the assault.'

The distress in Glasdale's voice, the shame... They have lost to a woman. Or a boy dressed as a woman. It doesn't really matter which, the dishonour is visceral and deadly. Glasdale has traded insults with her these past few days. She sent them a young herald with a letter telling them to surrender. When the lad was arrested and chained to a post and threatened with burning, she shot arrows at them with messages attached. And the French allowed it.

Tod Rustbeard spits. His mouth tastes of bile and filth; the taste of defeat. The Tower is holding, but it won't for long. He has his own plan, growing by the moment.

He says, 'My lord, you'll be ransomed.'

Lords don't die, except by accident or at Agincourt, when things got out of hand. Things often did when Henry was leading, but he's dead and William Glasdale is a gentleman. The French will know him from the quality of his armour and they'll have him inside the walls drinking wine by moonrise; knights always cleave together when the mess of killing is done.

'No.' Glasdale, too, is looking down at the river. 'Tell the king...'. He shakes his head, starts again; the king is six years old. Woe to thee oh land... Everything bad can be charted back to the king's death, the late king, Henry, fifth of the name, victor of every battle he fought, more or less. He may have been a hard bastard, but he was *their* hard bastard and he won for them. Oh, my king. Why did you have to die when we were winning?

Glasdale fixes his mournful gaze on Tod Rustbeard. 'You are Bedford's man?'

'My Lord?' That's like saying, 'You are English?' Which of course he is, at least half-English, and that's the half that counts. John of Lancaster, first Duke of Bedford was brother to the late king Henry. He is now, therefore, uncle to the infant king Henry, sixth of the name, and now Regent of England, which post he will hold until his nephew comes of age. Or dies. True-born kings have reigned for less time and transformed the fortunes of their nations. Sickly princelings have died in fewer years. 'I serve my lord of Bedford with all my heart.'

'Of course you do.' A scowl creases Glasdale's much-creased face. 'I mean, you are his *man*. His...' A wave of his fist says what words cannot. Bedford's agent, his spy, his knife-in-the-dark, his hammer in sunlight, his to order, his to command, his in heart and soul. His to send into the dark places where decent men do not venture to do the things that decent men cannot do.

Glasdale is not supposed to know this, but Glasdale is a lord and the workings of almost-royalty are not the same as those of other men.

Tod Rustbeard bows. 'I am, my Lord, and at your service.'

'You have to go back to the French side.'

'Lord?'

'Stop playing with me, Rustbeard. I have my own spies. You were in there through the winter.'

Ah. Now, that is interesting.

'Lord.' A nod. A tacit agreement. Nothing said aloud, not even here.

'So now you have to go back.'

'To kill the witch. Yes.'

'No!' A hard fist catches his arm. Glasdale's face is an inch from his, less. Nose to nose, eyes to mad-red, desperate eyes. 'Not just to kill her. You have to *destroy* her. You have to find out who she is. The men say she's a demon, but I know she's—'

'A girl from Lorraine sent by God to aid the French.' Really, everyone knows this, they just don't want to admit it.

'Ha!' Glasdale's laugh is raw and ugly. 'I will not believe that God changes sides. I shall meet Him before sundown and if I am wrong, it may be that I shall burn in everlasting hell for saying this, but He was with us at Agincourt, at Vernueil, at all the battles between and I tell you that God does *not* change sides.'

'There's a prophecy...' Even the English have heard it. A seer-woman has written that France will be redeemed by a maid from Lorraine. Aided by God, of course, that goes without saying. The French want God to change sides, just as much as the English want Him not to.

Scorn sweeps Glasdale's countenance. 'Is Bedford so desperate that he takes on fools? Truly, I had thought better of you.'

'My lord?'

'Think, man. Had you heard this prophecy-nonsense before Advent? Had anyone? And yet by the New Year, it is old news and everyone has known it all their lives. Ha! This girl came out of nowhere, and nobody does that. Nobody. She is not what she says.'

'What, then?'

'How would I know? But you listen to me, Tod Rustbeard. It is not enough that you kill her; you have to expose her for the liar she is, and then use that lie to destroy every part of her memory. You must shatter the myth, choke it stillborn before it has a chance to grow. Do you understand?'

'I do, my lord.' He does not necessarily agree, but then he doesn't have to. Bedford's orders have priority and they are to kill her, however he can. When she's dead, the stories will wither without his help.

For now, though, his nod is enough. Glasdale relaxes his grip, forces a smile, of sorts, looks over his shoulder to where the French are striving to lay their temporary bridge. In the set of his shoulders is a new certainty. He begins to push his way through to the breach in the wall, that lets out onto the river below.

It's not far: four paces, maybe less. Halfway, he turns back, meets Tod Rustbeard square in the eye. 'Tell my lord of Bedford that I died with honour.'

Oh, sweet Christ.

'Lord... No!' He lurches to grab at a cuff, a belt, anything. But Glasdale is already filling the breach. One raked look east to west, to the evening star, to the red line of the sun's last edge, and he steps off the edge into nowhere.

A short drop. A sound like a horse, drinking. Just once. Sixty pounds of plate armour and a man, into the mud-silt waters of the Loire. Nothing shows where he hit, and there are no bubbles to show he has breathed. Death may be swift this way, but Tod Rustbeard doesn't want to think how the last few moments will feel.

He backs deeper into shadow. He is surrounded by death; it is nothing new. But here, now, he can feel its cold breath on the nape of his neck, the suck and sigh of it, the temptation to follow Glasdale. He looks across at the French, at the smug torch-lit faces, the smirks, the pumped hands, the cheers as a good man, a decent, honourable man of courage drowns in that fucking French river.

He knows these men, French and the Scots alike; he has spent a winter clasping their craven hands, buying wine for their pig's bladder bellies. He notes

one without hair, another with a nose hooked as a hawk's beak, a third with blazing red hair and beard that are brighter, fierier twins to his own, so that they could be brothers. It's not impossible; who knows when else and where else his father sowed his bastard seed?

Patrick Ogilvy of Gaerloch, I know you. And Ricard the crossbowman. And Hugh Kennedy and Georges and Raoul d'Autet. I know every man of you. Celebrate all you like now, you bastards, for soon I will kill you with my bare hands, half-kin or not. I will tie anvils to your necks and watch you drown in horse piss. I will...

He backs away before the heat of his fury touches them. They still don't know he's there; too busy staring at the place where Glasdale fell in case iron turns to cork and he bobs back up. They have a woman who fights; all the laws of God and man have been overturned. Today, anything might happen.

He slips away. He is thinking now, fast, clear-headed, certain. There are more ways to skin a bear...

In the tower are long shadows and the approach of night. He knows how it is: curving stairs cut out of raw rock with rooms off to left and right. On the top storey, bedrooms and a dining room. On the ground storey an armoury, with the main door opposite, barred with oak, and a postern on the other side. He runs down on memory and hope and yes, it is as he remembers.

Nobody is near the stairs. The eighty or so English men at arms still living are all at the front, barricading the main door. These are his brothers in arms. He knows them and they know him. He calls out as he runs down the last steps.

'Cyril! Stephen! Here to me. We have to block the postern gate or they'll come in at us from the back!'

They trust him; he is ever the one with a good idea. Cyril arrives first. Sword and shield, no helm. Stephen is heavier, and slower. Mail shirt, a borrowed helm tied on with leather, mail gloves, a bastard sword, held two-handed. Stephen first, then.

The armoury is on his left, the racks emptied of weapons but for a pike with a shattered haft left leaning on the wall.

'Damnation, I thought there'd be more shafts here.' He spins on his heel, a man with fortitude, in the midst of a defence. He flashes a bright smile. 'Cyril, find us a pike or two. Anything long with something on the end sharp enough to kill a few Frenchmen. Stephen, help me break up the racks. We can jam them across the door.'

Cyril runs back for the pikes; he's young and ardent and doesn't want to die. Stephen... Stephen is already dying, his throat sliced raggedly open, scalding blood a fountain in the air – step sideways, now, don't get caught by the spume – his last breath frothing out as he tries to shout a warning – Tod Rustbeard! Traitor! – and finds his voice doesn't work and he can't think why, and already the light is fading from his eyes and he falls back into Rustbeard's waiting arms, to be lowered to the floor; just in time.

'I got the best I could, but there isn't mu—*oof!*' And thus Cyril poleaxed, the hilt of a sword smashes into the bridge of his nose so hard that the bones pop and his eyes are split open and he is crumpling before he can bring up the shield or the sword or the three pikes he has balanced across his forearms.

They clatter as they fall, but none of his fellows is listening; they're all at the front gate, placing barricades on barricades, getting ready to hold it for the night, for the next day, for as long as it takes for reinforcements to come. It's not a bad plan, it just needs to fail.

Cyril is still alive. Rustbeard rams his sword into his unarmoured gut. It's blunted with a day's use and won't bite properly, so the first strike is a mess of mangled jerkin and barely a cut.

He gives up and uses the back edge of his axe in a short, savage chop to the temple. He's a hammer-man out of choice, and the dent it leaves is satisfyingly deep, ramming hair and skin into bone and brain. He lets the lad's body fall back so he can drive his sword home properly, up through the belly into the air-filled

mess of the chest. He feels the sudden release of pressure, the pad-pad of a just-beating heart, stilled.

There's blood everywhere, but that is rather the point; blood and heroism are welded one to the other in French minds and he needs to be enough of a hero not to die as soon as they see him. He strips off his English colours, the red and the white, and wrestles them onto Cyril, who has lost his somewhere in the fight.

At the front gate, French rams are pounding, but he knows this gate; it will not break easily; that's why his offer of a back route in will be so very welcome. He straightens, runs his hands through his hair so it sticks up, stiff with blood, red as a cock's comb, and as rigid. He thinks of childhood, and summer rivers, and his mother calling across the orchards. *Cherie! Viens ici.*

The postern gate is the height of a man, wide enough only to let through two at a time. It is held shut by three iron bolts, all well-oiled. The hinges sigh on goose grease; other men than him have planned secret entry or exit from here. Outside, the evening air is mellow. In Orléans, they are lighting fires of celebration, and on the south bank of the Loire. Bastards. Fifty yards away, two hundred Frenchmen are assaulting the front gate with rams and torches, pitch and hammers, blades, fists and feet.

No going back now. He steps outside, where he can more readily be seen, brings to mind the names of those he saw on the tower top, cups his hands to his mouth and shouts, 'Patrick! Georges! Ricard! Venez ici! Ici, en nom Dieu! Ici! Aidez moi!'

A dozen men peel away from the mass and run towards him, blades out. He doesn't raise his sword. In fact, he slams it hard and clearly into the sheath at his belt, and continues to shout. 'Guillaume de Monterey! Laurent de Saval! I know you're out there. Come to me here, in God's name. Come!'

They come as a pack, and he knows none of those at the front, nor they him, and his hand is heading down towards his blade, because if he's going to die, it won't be empty-handed, when he sees—

'Patrick Ogilvy! You red-haired bastard! It's me! Tomas! Here! Gaerloch to me! Patrick, in the name of God, come to me here! Tell them I'm the king's man! Tell them I'm for France!'

They are running flat out, but Ogilvy is a Strathclydeman, half Norse, with the fire-hair of the Vikings and a big, broad-shouldered body to match – truly, they could be brothers – and he breasts through the crowd, slamming men left and right, taking liberties that on other days would see him stabbed between the ribs by his own side, but this time he's a captain, friend of the Maid and he's shouting, 'Leave him! Leave him! It's Tomas Rustbeard. He's one of us! Leave him!'

And they are together, clasping arm to arm, beard to beard, chest to chest, and Patrick Ogilvy is gabbling in a mix of French and lowland Scots 'Tomas? We thought we'd lost you. We thought you'd gone over to join the bastard English.'

Well that's reasonable, because he had done exactly that and it would have been fantastically unlikely if nobody at all on the French side had seen him these past few days. Which is why he is ready with an answer that makes sense of it all.

'I did. And now I've come back. I did say that I would.' Stepping aside, he gestures back to the broken remnants of Stephen and Cyril and all their blood.

'My God...' Ogilvy is a fighting man of many years' experience, but he grows white now, and cannot find words. A crowd gathers and, gratifyingly, more men than just the Scot are crossing themselves.

Tod Rustbeard, also known as Tomas, whose mother came from Normandy and who claims his Frenchness more with each passing word, claps the big Scot about the shoulder. 'You can kiss me later, but for now, get your men in here fast, or the English will hear us and more will die who don't have to.'

Ogilvy can move swiftly, when things are explained to him simply. One meaty arm sweeps back at his fellows. 'Swords up, *mes enfants*. Let's take these Godless bastards from behind. Tomas, you coming?'

'Aye.' He has not forgotten Glasdale, not his death, nor the promises made above the water in which he died. Later, he will honour them. Today, here, now, he is Tomas Rustbeard who smiles to the French and to the Scots and nods forward to the ram-pounded gate. 'Quietly now. Shields up, swords out, and don't miss when you're close enough.'

He helps them with the killing and if some amongst the English side recognise him, it is only with their dying breaths and they are not in a position to do anything about it. The battle of the gate is short, and fast and ugly and of the garrison of five hundred English men at arms, the last fifty surrender.

Tomas doesn't stop to herd them into the city, but seeks out Patrick Ogilvy. If anyone can get close to the Maid, it's him: with his red hair and his Scots air of casual brutality, he's always close to the leadership in any fight. Tomas clasps him, arm to elbow, draws him close, brother in arms, at the end of a victorious battle. 'We won! By God and all the saints, we won!'

'By the Maid.' Ogilvy can't stop grinning. He has no idea the effort of will it takes not to cut his throat. 'By the Maid we won, and will keep on winning. You're in good hands now, Tomas. The bastard English are learning what it's like to be on the losing side at last. We'll push them all the way back to Normandy and beyond. We'll be in London drinking wine from gold cups by the year's end, just see if we're not.'

He will not be. Here, now, Tomas swears an oath to the memory of William Glasdale that, whatever else the fucking French may be doing, Patrick Ogilvy will be dead by the year's end, and the Maid with him.