

# CHAPTER 1

## **Devonshire, England: August 1348**

Lord Thomas de Chiddleigh dropped the cloth bag at his feet and slouched against the familiar grey stone wall of the cloisters.

It wasn't *fair*. He didn't want to go home. He liked being a scholar in the monastery with its regular bells and prayers, and he was the favourite to win top scholar. He'd never get that now.

The once welcoming quadrant was deserted and as grey as the clouded sky. In his memory, Thomas could see a line of brothers crossing the cobbles on their way to the chapel, faces hidden within their cowls and hands tucked away in their wide sleeves. He could hear their melodious chants and the crunching of their steps keeping time as clearly as if they were there.

When would he see them again? Would he ever race across those same cobbles in the pouring rain, holding his hood over his head with one hand and clutching his precious parchments under his surcoat with the other, knowing he was late for his lesson but still trying to shave as much time off his tardiness as possible? Despite the monks' best efforts, punctuality was a virtue Thomas still struggled with. Many was the time he thought he'd been on time, only to burst through the door to find Brother Luke seated behind a neatly lined row of sharpened quills, his fingers drumming on the waxed oak table and lips pursed in disapproval.

A few days ago, everything had changed. Lessons had been cancelled, and the monks had huddled in dark corners and spoke in hushed whispers. Yesterday, Abbot Bartholomew had gathered the scholars in the refectory and broken the news to them that the Pestilence

was sweeping the town, and they had to go home. Most had left as soon as their belongings could be gathered, and now Thomas was the only student remaining.

He could hear the townspeople of Tavistoke beyond the walls, their screams loud and desperate, their fists hammering on the doors demanding sanctuary. The noise had started before sunrise and been growing steadily since then. Crossing himself, he prayed the doors would hold.

Above the din, the midday bell tolled, its solemn notes an ugly counterpoint to the noises outside. Thomas counted the strikes and kicked the cloth bag at his feet.

‘Thomas!’ Brother Luke’s voice pulled him out of his mood, and Thomas turned, hope fluttering in his chest. Was Brother Luke about to tell him that things had changed? That he could stay after all?

Brother Luke’s leather sandals slapped on the flagstones as he hurried towards Thomas, the rope cord around his habit swinging back and forth with every step. Hopes of a reprieve faded with the echoes of the midday bell as Thomas saw the agitated look on the monk’s face.

‘What are you still doing here?’ Brother Luke demanded. ‘The last of the other scholars left before prime bells.’

‘I couldn’t find my almanac, and I had to say farewell to the bees and tell them I’d be back.’ Thomas’s chin wobbled, and he bit his lip, furious at his weakness. At fifteen summers, he was too old to cry. ‘I will be back, won’t I?’

Brother Luke placed his hands on the boy’s shoulders. ‘Do you not hear the sound of the townsfolk pounding on our doors? As God’s servants, they believe we can save them from His wrath.’ He squeezed Thomas’s shoulders hard, bony fingers digging into the boy’s

flesh. 'They are wrong. When they hear the door bolts grate and the bars slam shut, they'll be angry, and angry folks are dangerous. You must go home, Thomas. Go, while you still can.'

Thomas looked into Brother Luke's eyes and asked the question he'd been too frightened to hear the answer to before. 'What is this deadly Pestilence that sweeps our lands?'

Brother Luke released him with a sigh, looking older and more tired than Thomas had ever seen him. 'Truthfully, we don't know for certain. Some, like myself, believe that it's sent by God to cleanse the world of all sinners. Our physician, Brother Leviticus, says it was predicted in the stars and is being spread by people's bad humours. Maybe it's both, but whatever it is, it sweeps through the land leaving nothing but death in its path, and we are powerless against it. We must pray for God's mercy and do what we can to save ourselves.'

Fear seeped through Thomas's body at the monk's words, turning him cold. If the holy men themselves were powerless, what hope could there be for ordinary people like him?

He was afraid of the Pestilence, and of the growing number of people outside. A metallic clanging had been added to the hammering, suggesting that at least a few of them had acquired weapons or even simple farming implements. But he was even more afraid of what might be waiting for him at home.

'*Must* I go?' he said.

Brother Luke nodded. 'Yes, you must.'

'But...I can come back, can't I?' Thomas persisted. 'I haven't finished my Greek transcription yet. I...I took my writing quills and ink and some parchment; I hope you don't mind.'

Brother Luke smiled. 'Of course I don't mind, and you will always be welcome. You're the best pupil I've ever taught. I pray that one day you'll take your place at the

University of Oxford, but maybe God has other plans for you first. You're a man now, Lord Thomas de Chiddleigh, and as such, you have responsibilities to your family and your people. In these troubled times, they need you more than ever, and your duty is with them.'

He didn't feel like a lord, and the thought of responsibilities scared him. His mother, Lady Joan, had run the estate ever since the death of Thomas's father, Sir John. She was the one their people needed, not him.

'But I want to stay here and go to Oxford and learn to be a physician, like Brother Leviticus.' He could hear the whine start to creep into his voice and looked down, biting his lip as he scraped the stones with the side of his boot.

'Thomas, we can't wait. The hordes grow as we speak, and I must bar the gates and doors. Your horse is ready and waiting. Leave by the back way – it's safer – but keep your wits about you. Remember, people are desperate; don't stop for anyone. Take this.' The monk held out a dagger. 'It's dangerous to travel alone, now more than ever. Come!'

Brother Luke picked up Thomas's bag and strode across the quadrant, ducked under a low stone arch and led Thomas along a gravelled path through the herb gardens. He stopped before a small faded wooden door in the wall. 'God's speed,' he said, his face grim.

Thomas ducked through the door and found his horse saddled and waiting, just like Brother Luke had said. He secured the bag to the saddle and mounted, turning his horse's head for home. He glanced back for a final farewell, but Brother Luke was gone and the door already firmly barred.

The journey was twelve miles across the moor, and he wasn't looking forward to it. Alone, outside the safety of the monastery's walls, the world was a large and scary place. Grey clouds were scudding across a wide and darkening sky, bringing the smell of rain.

Thomas gathered up his reins and attempted to do the same with his courage. He was no longer a boy scholar. He was a lord, and his first task was to get home safely to Mama and his people.

With the cries of the mob fading behind him, he trotted past the pillory on the town green and turned into Tavistoke's main street where he brought his horse to a walk. The shops were shuttered and barred with red crosses painted on most of the doors. He had no idea what the crosses meant but they added a sinister feel to the eerie silence.

On his right, above the cordwainer's shop, the wooden shoe swung above the boarded door. Thomas had been in there only last week to collect his brand-new boots. Back then, it had been bustling and full of life, like the street itself. Now both were deserted.

Thomas sniffed as he passed a narrow alley, but the customary waft of fresh baking from the cloam ovens was absent. The entire town was abandoned, and he kicked his horse into a trot, tension churning in his stomach.

As he approached a line of tall narrow merchants' houses, a stench spread through the air like a blanket, making him rein his horse in and grapple inside his surcoat for his kerchief. It wasn't the open sewer – he was used to that smell – but something else, something vile and evil that made him want to heave.

Despite the kerchief held to his nose, the stench grew stronger as he rode forward and, glancing down, he saw a pile of rags discarded on the side of the road.

He was almost on top of it when it moved, causing his horse to shy. Thomas stared down at the bundle, tilting his head one way and then the other. He couldn't make it out. Rats, perhaps? But no, rats wouldn't be interested in discarded rags.

The stink was making his eyes water, and he nudged his horse forward, intending to ride on past, when a man's head emerged from the pile of filthy rags, lolling to one side. He

was dying, his eyes already a bloodied pecked mess where the crows had come for him.

Grotesque black pustules bulged from his neck.

The Pestilence.

Thomas crossed himself, his heart suddenly pounding in his chest. No wonder folks were scared. But how could it have happened so quickly? He'd been here only last week, and the place had been packed with bustling crowds, mercenaries and street entertainers.

Maybe Brother Luke was right. Maybe this was God's vengeance. It seemed impossible that a simple disease could spread so fast without divine intervention.

Ahead of him, the east gateway loomed high and grey. It was the way out of town, but hordes of townsfolk were pushing and shoving trying to squeeze through the narrow archway. Babies wailed, women screamed, and men shouted. Thomas watched with horror as an ox lunged, and escaping the hands of its owner, trampled a crippled man on crutches as it charged through the crowd.

An overwhelming sense of panic surged through him. Praise God for Brother Luke! If he hadn't insisted Thomas leave, it would have been too late.

He had to get out, like the monk had said. Get out, and *stop for no one*. Gripping his reins, he took a deep breath, rammed his heels into his horse's sides and raced for the arch.

Galloping as though the Devil was behind him and scattering people to right and left, he ignored the guard's shouts to stop. Skidding on the cobbles, he swung sharp right over the river bridge and was still galloping two miles on as he passed the boundary stone to Tavistoke.

The road forked around a triangle of grass where the gallows stood empty. In a cloud of dust, Thomas went right onto a wide track heading straight across the high Forest of

Dartmoor. He cast a glance over his shoulder, saw that there was no one chasing him and slowed his blowing horse to a walk. Heart pounding, he wiped his shaking hands on his hose.

Miles of open moor stretched steeply to the horizon. Creamy white sheep grazed contentedly amongst the heather, and brown wild ponies lifted their heads as he passed, entirely ignorant of what was happening only a few miles away. A few late skylarks trilled so high above Thomas's head that, no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't see them.

He inhaled deeply. The air was filled with the sweet peaty smell of drying grass, hinting at autumn to come.

Everything was normal as though he'd ridden through a bad dream. Maybe the Pestilence wasn't God's work after all, but the Devil's. Either way, he was glad to be out of it.

A mile on, the track curved back on itself and wound steeply into a narrow valley. If there were any waiting road thieves, this was a likely spot. Trembling, Thomas checked the dagger on his belt. It was still there.

His father, Sir John, had died at the hands of such men eight months ago. He had been a large, forbidding man, so what chance did Thomas have in a fight? He wasn't good at wrestling. He wasn't good at any sport, unlike his older brother. Richard de Chiddleigh who had died at the Battle of Crecy. For Thomas's whole life, he couldn't remember a time when he hadn't been unfavourably compared to Richard; brave, strong Richard, who had fought and died in a blaze of honour and glory.

Mama liked Thomas, but she'd been the only one, and you could argue that it was a mother's duty to like her sons. Even some of the scholars at the monastery had teased him, calling him *Delicate Thomas*, and saying he fought like a maid.

The path descended, and the trees closed in around him as though he'd just ridden into the mouth of a huge, wooden beast. Goosebumps crept up Thomas's arms and the hairs rose on the back of his neck.

There! Was that a shadow? His heart hammered and his pulse drummed in his ears. Fumbling for the dagger, he dug in his heels. The trees towered thickly overhead, making it difficult to see. The path twisted and turned before plunging steeply to a stream at the bottom. The horse took a huge leap over the water, his hooves slipping as he landed. Struggling for a foothold, he began sliding back into the stream.

The shadows were closing in. Thomas could feel them stretching out long, black fingers to pluck him off the horse, black like the pustules on the dying man's neck.

'Get up, you mucky nag!' he yelled and, fearing for his life, whipped his horse hard with the end of the reins. His hand white on the dagger, he braced for figures to loom alongside and pull him down.

His horse scrabbled his way to the top where the trees thinned and the path opened out. Gasping and sweating and not daring to look back, Thomas kicked his horse on, driving the exhausted beast into a stumbling canter and not daring to look back over his shoulder until the wood was far behind him.

All was quiet. There were no demonic shadows, no bandits running after him. He pulled his horse to a stop and shook his head, wiping the sweat from his brow. What a cloth head he was. There was no one there, only harmless shadows in the trees. He sheathed his knife, gave his horse a grateful pat on his neck and with a relieved laugh, continued across the moor at a sedate walk.

The worst of his journey was over. Soon, he'd be home with Mama. He couldn't wait to see the look on her face when he arrived.



After six miles, Thomas left the moor behind and with the sun on his face, he breathed in the smell of the gorse and ling as he crossed the rough grazings. He passed Ellyn and Annie-healer's cottage on his left but there was no one home. Their cottage was typical of the peasants' homes on the estate: a poor squat cruck house put together from sticks and mud with bracken thatch for a roof, a tiny door at one end and sacking nailed over a small opening on one side. A hazel wattle fence surrounded a small front garden, well-tended with herbs, flowers and vegetables. Annie had been as busy as usual. She must be out tending to some of the peasants on the estate.

He was nearly home. Standing in his stirrups, Thomas punched the air and let out a whoop of joy, startling a few fowl scratching the dirt. Laughing, he cantered along the familiar path to Court Barton, his manorial seat.

*His manorial seat.* How strange that sounded. People would call him *Lord Thomas* and doff their caps or curtsy to him. He wasn't sure he'd like that. It would make him feel too responsible.

He hadn't seen Mama since Papa's funeral, eight months ago. Even then, he'd only been home two days; Mama had sent him back to school as soon as the service and the feast were over. He'd missed her, but tonight they'd sit down to a hearty meal in the grand hall, and he'd tell her that he had been the favourite to win top scholar. She was always proud of his achievements and didn't mind that he couldn't string a bow or fly a hawk. He smiled. Mama would help him be a lord, she always knew what to—God's teeth!

He pulled hard on the reins and skidded to a stop inches before crashing into a barricade. It towered above him, taller than even the monastery walls, and spanned the entire lane. It looked like it had been thrown together with everything from stones and logs to

upturned wagons and anything else the builders could lay their hands on. There was no way around it.

‘Turn away, stranger!’ The deep voice from above made Thomas jump. ‘You’re not welcome here.’

A man with a thick dark beard to his chest and dressed in a brown tunic with the hood pushed back, stood on the top. He held a longbow with the arrow nocked and aimed straight at Thomas’s chest.

Thomas swallowed and looked up, his eyes fixed on the arrow. ‘I’m no stranger. I’m Thomas. Lord Thomas de Chiddleigh. I’ve come home to see Mam—Lady Joan.’ He hoped the man didn’t notice the tremor in his voice.

The man peered forward, his arm steady on the bow. Thomas put a hand to his dagger, although it would be useless against such a weapon.

The guard lowered his bow. ‘Prithee, my lord, you’ve been away, and I didn’t recognise you. Lady Joan said as how I was to let no one in. I’ll tell her you’re here.’

‘What’s happened?’ Thomas called out but the man had already gone.

Had a mob from the village come to the house as they had the monastery? Was that why the barricade was there? But—no, that couldn’t be it. Any mob would have reached the house long before a barricade of this size could have been built.

Nervously, he glanced around. He could try and climb over, but he couldn’t leave his horse to wander off and what about his bag? Mama would soon be here and explain.

He tapped his fingers on his thigh, his mouth bone-dry. What he’d give for a cup of ale or mead.

Hurried footsteps stopped on the other side of the barricade and his mother's welcome voice reached him. 'Thomas! I'm so glad you've come! I thought my message hadn't got through, or maybe—but praise God you're safe.'

It was good to hear her again. 'I received no message, Mama, but when the Pestilence reached Tavistoke, the crowds were trying to get into the monastery and the monks sent us home. I came as fast as I could. What's this wall for?'

'Simon said we needed it to keep people out and stay safe from the Pestilence, but it doesn't matter now.'

At least, he thought that was what she'd said. The barricade wasn't helping, and her voice was quieter than usual. 'Mama, I can hardly hear you. Wait and I'll climb over.'

'No!' The fear in her voice brought him up short. He couldn't remember ever hearing his mama sound so frightened. 'Stay there!'

'I'll be alright, Mama. I'm sure I can do it.'

'Thomas, you don't understand.' Lady Joan's voice cracked a little. 'The Pestilence is already come.'

An image of the hideous head in the street loomed in Thomas's mind.

'No. No, it can't have. We're too far from the town.'

'I prayed for that to be true, but this evil knows no boundaries. Our stableman, Mark, died of it two days ago. There was nothing I could do. I tried to comfort him, but he sent me away. He knew he had it and wanted me to save myself.' Now his mother – his brave, strong mama – was sobbing. 'May God forgive me, but I was afraid, so I did as he asked and left him to die alone. I should have stayed with him.'

He'd never heard his Mama weep before. It was unnerving and he wasn't sure what to say.

‘Now one of the stable lads has black lumps on his neck and under his arms,’ Lady Joan continued. ‘He’s in such agony, it’s hard to hear it. If God is merciful, He’ll take him soon.’

‘But then—Mama, you must leave before this evil takes you too.’

‘It’s too late for me, Thomas, but you can still save yourself. You must go.’

Too late? Did that mean—Tears pricked the backs of Thomas's eyes, and he wiped at them with the back of his sleeve. ‘But as the new lord, my duty is here. Brother Luke said so.’

‘Brother Luke was right but you’re no good to your people if you die, and I couldn’t bear it.’

‘I can’t be a lord without you. I don’t know how.’

‘You will. My cousin Eleanor and your sister Maria are with Simon. Pray God they escaped this evil. You must make haste and go to them, and I must stay here.’

Thomas shook his head. ‘I can’t ride away and leave you here.’

‘You *must*.’ Now she sounded more like his mama; the strength in her voice was back. ‘I have peasants and their families living in the house with me. Each man has his job, we guard the barricades and have provisions. The women and children exercise daily, going no further than the orchard. All is as well as can be. With God’s blessing, we shall be saved.’ She was trying to be strong, but she didn’t fool him, he could hear the quiver in her voice.

‘Mama, the people can manage. You must come—’

‘My place is here, Thomas. No one knows why one person gets this and another doesn’t, but I won’t risk you or the girls. If God is cleansing the lands of sinners, as the priests say, then I shall accept His judgement. The Lord knows that I have sinned more than most,’ Lady Joan added in a much quieter tone.

His mother, a sinner? That couldn’t be right.

‘When will it be over?’ he asked.

‘I don’t know. We’re all in God’s hands, now. Thomas, listen to me. You must stay safe. Do whatever you can. You are the lord, and when God sees fit to end this Pestilence, I know you will return.’

Her words hung in the air. For a second time, he didn’t know what to say. ‘Mama, I shouldn’t be the lord. Richard was the firstborn; he was the one whom Papa was training to take over.’

The silence from the barricade lasted so long this time that Thomas started to wonder if his mother had walked away.

‘Thomas...’ Her voice shook a little. ‘Thomas, before you go, I want to tell you something. Something I think I should have told you many years ago, but...’ She broke off, a sob choking in her throat.

‘Mama? What is it? What do you want to tell me?’

Now she was crying, sobbing in a way that suggested her heart was being torn out of its chest. Even the birds seemed to have stopped singing to listen.

‘Another time.’ Her voice was raw now. ‘May God in His mercy forgive me, but I can’t tell you like this. When this is over, if God spares us both, we’ll have a long talk then.’

‘And if God doesn’t spare us?’

‘If God takes me, and if certain...knowledge should come your way—Thomas, promise me you will remember that it wasn’t her fault. We did what we thought was best. I have begged for God’s forgiveness ever since that day. If we are spared to each other, I pray for the chance to beg yours as well.’

Thomas frowned. ‘What wasn’t her fault? Mama, I don’t understand.’

‘Pray God you never do.’ Her voice was so soft he had to strain to hear it.

‘Mama—’

‘And in the dark times to come, think of the fun we had. Do you remember our picnics by the river and the day you showed us how to, what was it? Tickl—’

‘Tickle for trout. Mama, tell me what you meant—’

‘That’s it, tickle for trout. I slipped on a rock and got soaked. Didn’t we laugh?’

‘I remember.’ He forced a smile onto his face. ‘We used to play bears around the trees with Eleanor and Maria. They never growled as well as me.’

She laughed a little. ‘No, they didn’t, did they? When all this is over, we shall have the biggest picnic ever. I’ll get Cook to make your favourite oatie cakes.’

Mama was trying to give him hope, he knew that, but he wasn’t sure he believed it any more than she did.

‘And pray, my son, as I shall pray that we’ll survive this. Promise me you’ll look after your people and be a fair and just lord. Swear on your soul.’

It sounded so adult, so final, but none of this felt real and he’d soon be back. ‘I swear on my soul I will be a good and fair lord. I promise.’

‘I know you won’t let me down and now I’ll rest easy in my mind. God spare you and never forget that I love you, Thomas. Now make speed.’ He heard her sobbing and then the sound of her steps as she turned away.

‘I promise, Mama, and I love you too,’ he called after her.

Staring at the wall, he strained his ears, hoping to hear her run back and say she’d changed her mind, but her steps grew faint until there was nothing but silence.

She’d gone. Turned him away, just as Brother Luke had. Thomas reached up and rested a hand on the barricade as though it had been Lady Joan’s face. He stood there for a few moments, wiped a final tear from his eye and slowly turned away.

He gazed across the fields to the high hills and beyond, to the moor and then up to the vastness of the sky. As his vision blurred, the world became a large and forbidding place and he had never felt so frightened or alone.