

## *Chapter One*

THE CHURCHYARD was peaceful in the summer afternoon. Twigs and branches lay strewn across the gravel path, torn from the trees by the gales which had swept the country in that stormy June of 1545. In London we had escaped lightly, only a few chimneypots gone, but the winds had wreaked havoc in the north. People spoke of hailstones there as large as fists, with the shapes of faces on them. But tales become more dramatic as they spread, as any lawyer knows.

I had been in my chambers in Lincoln's Inn all morning, working through some new briefs for cases in the Court of Requests. They would not be heard until the autumn now; the Trinity law term had ended early by order of the King, in view of the threat of invasion.

In recent months I had found myself becoming restless with my paperwork. With a few exceptions the same cases came up again and again in Requests: landlords wanting to turn tenant farmers off their lands to pasture sheep for the profitable wool trade, or for the same reason trying to appropriate the village commons on which the poor depended. Worthy cases, but always the same. And as I worked, my eyes kept drifting to the letter delivered by a messenger from Hampton Court. It lay on the corner of my desk, a white rectangle with a lump of red sealing wax glinting in the centre. The letter worried me, all the more for

C. J. SANSOM

its lack of detail. Eventually, unable to keep my thoughts from wandering, I decided to go for a walk.

When I left chambers I saw a flower seller, a young woman, had got past the Lincoln's Inn gatekeeper. She stood in a corner of Gatehouse Court, in a grey dress with a dirty apron, her face framed by a white coif, holding out posies to the passing barristers. As I went by she called out that she was a widow, her husband dead in the war. I saw she had wallflowers in her basket; they reminded me I had not visited my poor housekeeper's grave for nearly a month, for wallflowers had been Joan's favourite. I asked for a bunch, and she held them out to me with a work-roughened hand. I passed her a halfpenny; she curtsied and thanked me graciously, though her eyes were cold. I walked on, under the Great Gate and up newly paved Chancery Lane to the little church at the top.

As I walked I chided myself for my discontent, reminding myself that many of my colleagues envied my position as counsel at the Court of Requests, and that I also had the occasional lucrative case put my way by the Queen's solicitor. But, as the many thoughtful and worried faces I passed in the street reminded me, the times were enough to make any man's mind unquiet. They said the French had gathered thirty thousand men in their Channel ports, ready to invade England in a great fleet of warships, some even with stables on board for horses. No one knew where they might land, and throughout the country men were being mustered and sent to defend the coasts. Every vessel in the King's fleet had put to sea, and large merchant ships were being impounded and made ready for war. The King had levied unprecedented taxes to pay for his invasion of France the previous year. It had been a complete failure and since last winter an English army had been besieged in Boulogne. And now the war might be coming to us.

## HEARTSTONE

I passed into the churchyard. However much one lacks piety, the atmosphere in a graveyard encourages quiet reflection. I knelt and laid the flowers on Joan's grave. She had run my little household near twenty years; when she first came to me she had been a widow of forty and I a callow, recently qualified barrister. A widow with no family, she had devoted her life to looking after my needs; quiet, efficient, kindly. She had caught influenza in the spring and been dead in a week. I missed her deeply, all the more because I realized how all these years I had taken her devoted care for granted. The contrast with the wretch I now had for a steward was bitter.

I stood up with a sigh, my knees cracking. Visiting the grave had quieted me, but stirred those melancholy humours to which I was naturally prey. I walked on among the headstones, for there were others I had known who lay buried here. I paused before a fine marble stone:

ROGER ELLIARD  
BARRISTER OF LINCOLN'S INN  
BELOVED HUSBAND AND FATHER  
1502-1543

I remembered a conversation Roger and I had had, shortly before his death two years before, and smiled sadly. We had talked of how the King had wasted the riches he had gained from the monasteries, spending them on palaces and display, doing nothing to replace the limited help the monks had given the poor. I laid a hand on the stone and said quietly, 'Ah, Roger, if you could see what he has brought us to now.' An old woman arranging flowers on a grave nearby looked round at me, an anxious frown on her wrinkled face at the sight of a hunchbacked lawyer talking to the dead. I moved away.

A little way off stood another headstone, one which, like

C. J. SANSOM

Joan's, I had had set in that place, with but a short inscription;

GILES WRENNE  
BARRISTER OF YORK  
1467-1541

That headstone I did not touch, nor did I address the old man who lay beneath, but I remembered how Giles had died and realized that indeed I was inviting a black mood to descend on me.

Then a sudden blaring noise startled me almost out of my wits. The old woman stood and stared around her, wide-eyed. I guessed what must be happening. I walked over to the wall separating the churchyard from Lincoln's Inn Fields and opened the wooden gate. I stepped through, and looked at the scene beyond.



LINCOLN'S INN FIELDS was an empty, open space of heathland, where law students hunted rabbits on the grassy hill of Coney Garth. Normally on a Tuesday afternoon there would have been only a few people passing to and fro. Today, though, a crowd was gathered, watching as fifty young men, many in shirts and jerkins but some in the blue robes of apprentices, stood in five untidy rows. Some looked sulky, some apprehensive, some eager. Most carried the warbows that men of military age were required to own by law for the practice of archery, though many disobeyed the rule, preferring the bowling greens or the dice and cards that were illegal now for those without gentleman status. The warbows were two yards long, taller than their owners for the most part. Some men, though, carried smaller bows, a few of inferior elm rather than yew. Nearly all wore leather

## HEARTSTONE

bracers on one arm, finger guards on the hand of the other. Their bows were strung ready for use.

The men were being shepherded into rows of ten by a middle-aged soldier with a square face, a short black beard and a sternly disapproving expression. He was resplendent in the uniform of the London Trained Bands, a white doublet with sleeves and upper hose slashed to reveal the red lining beneath, and a round, polished helmet.

Over two hundred yards away stood the butts, turfed earthen mounds six feet high. Here men eligible for service were supposed to practise every Sunday. Squinting, I made out a straw dummy, dressed in tatters of clothing, fixed there, a battered helmet on its head and a crude French fleur-de-lys painted on the front. I realized this was another View of Arms, that more city men were having their skills tested to select those who would be sent to the armies converging on the coast or to the King's ships. I was glad that, as a hunchback of forty-three, I was exempt from military service.

A plump little man on a fine grey mare watched the men shuffling into place. The horse, draped in City of London livery, wore a metal face plate with holes for its eyes that made its head resemble a skull. The rider wore half-armor, his arms and upper body encased in polished steel, a peacock feather in his wide black cap stirring in the breeze. I recognized Edmund Carver, one of the city's senior aldermen; I had won a case for him in court two years before. He looked uneasy in his armor, shifting awkwardly on his horse. He was a decent enough fellow, from the Mercers' Guild, whose main interest I remembered as fine dining. Beside him stood two more soldiers in Trained Bands uniform, one holding a long brass trumpet and the other a halberd. Nearby a clerk in a black doublet stood, a portable desk with a sheaf of papers set on it slung round his neck.

C. J. SANSOM

The soldier with the halberd laid down his weapon and picked up half a dozen leather arrowbags. He ran along the front row of recruits, spilling out a line of arrows on the ground. The soldier in charge was still casting sharp, appraising eyes over the men. I guessed he was a professional officer, such as I had encountered on the King's Great Progress to York four years before. He was probably working with the Trained Bands now, a corps of volunteer soldiers set up in London a few years ago who practised soldiers' craft at week's end.

He spoke to the men, in a loud, carrying voice. 'England needs men to serve in her hour of greatest peril! The French stand ready to invade, to rain down fire and destruction on our women and children. But we remember Agincourt!' He paused dramatically: Carver shouted, 'Ay!', followed by the recruits.

The officer continued. 'We know from Agincourt that one Englishman is worth three Frenchmen, and we shall send our legendary archers to meet them! Those chosen today will get a coat, and thruppence a day!' His tone hardened. 'Now we shall see which of you lads have been practising weekly as the law requires, and which have not. Those who have not –' he paused for dramatic effect – 'may find themselves levied instead to be pikemen, to face the French at close quarters! So don't think a weak performance will save you from going to war.' He ran his eye over the men, who shuffled and looked uneasy. There was something heavy and angry in the officer's dark-bearded face.

'Now,' he called, 'when the trumpet sounds again, each man will shoot six arrows at the target, as fast as you can, starting with the left of the front row. We've prepared a dummy specially for you, so you can pretend it's a Frenchy come to ravish your mothers, if you have mothers!'

## HEARTSTONE

I glanced at the watching crowd. There were excited urchins and some older folk of the poorer sort, but also several anxious-looking young women, maybe wives or sweet-hearts of the men called here.

The soldier with the trumpet raised it to his lips and blew again. The first man, a thickset, handsome young fellow in a leather jerkin, stepped forward confidently with his warbow. He picked up an arrow and nocked it to the bow. Then in a quick, fluid movement he leaned back, straightened, and sent the arrow flying in a great arc across the wide space. It thudded into the fleur-de-lys on the scarecrow with a force that made it judder like a living thing. In no more than a minute he had strung and loosed five more arrows, all of which hit the dummy. There was a ragged cheer from the children. He smiled and flexed his broad shoulders.

‘Not bad!’ the officer called grudgingly. ‘Go and get your name registered!’ The new recruit walked over to the clerk, waving his war-bow at the crowd.

A tall, loose-limbed young fellow in a white shirt, who looked barely twenty, was next. He had only an elm bow, and an anxious look. I noticed he wore neither bracer nor finger guard. The officer looked at him grimly as he pushed a hank of untidy blond hair from his eyes, then bent, took an arrow, and fitted it to the string. He pulled the bow back with obvious effort and loosed. The arrow fell well short, thudding into the grass. Pulling the bow had set him off-balance and he nearly fell, hopping on one leg for a moment and making the children laugh.

The second arrow went wide, embedding itself in the side of the butts, and the young man cried out, doubling over with pain and holding one hand with the other. Blood trickled between his fingers. The officer gave him a grim look. ‘Haven’t been practising, have you? Can’t even loose

C. J. SANSOM

an arrow properly. You're going to the pikemen, you are! A tall fellow like you will be useful in close combat.' The lad looked frightened. 'Come on,' the officer shouted, 'you've four more arrows still to loose. Never mind your hand. This crowd look like they could do with a laugh.'

I turned away. I had myself once been humiliated in front of a crowd and it was not something I relished seeing others endure.



BACK IN Gatehouse Court the flower seller was gone. I went into chambers, where my young clerk Skelly was copying out some orders in the outer office. He was bent closely over his desk, peering carefully at the document through his glasses.

'There is a View of Arms over at Lincoln's Inn Fields,' I told him.

He looked up. 'I've heard the Trained Bands have to find a thousand men for the south coast,' he said in his quiet voice. 'Do you think the French are really going to invade, sir?'

'I don't know, Skelly.' I smiled reassuringly. 'But you won't be called. You've a wife and three children, and you need your glasses to see.'

'So I hope and pray, sir.'

'I am sure.' But these days one never knew.

'Is Barak not back from Westminster?' I asked, glancing over at my assistant's vacant desk. I had sent him to the Requests Office to lodge some depositions.

'No, sir.'

I frowned. 'I hope Tamasin is all right.'

Skelly smiled. 'I'm sure it is only a delay getting a wherry on the river, sir. You know how busy it is with supply boats.'

## HEARTSTONE

‘Perhaps. Tell Barak to come and see me when he returns. I must go back to my papers.’ I went through to my office, little doubting Skelly thought me over-anxious. But Barak and his wife Tamasin were dear friends. Tamasin was expecting a baby in two months, and her first child had been born dead. I dropped into my chair with a sigh and picked up the particulars of a claim I had been reading earlier. My eyes wandered again to the letter on the corner of the desk. I made myself look away, but soon my thoughts returned to the View of Arms: I thought of invasion, of those young men ripped apart and slaughtered in battle.

I looked out of the window, then smiled and shook my head as I saw the tall, skinny figure of my old enemy, Stephen Bealknap, walking across the sunlit court. He had acquired a stoop now, and in his black barrister’s robe and white coif he looked like a huge magpie, seeking worms on the ground.

Bealknap suddenly straightened and stared ahead, and I saw Barak walking across the court towards him, his leather bag slung over one shoulder. I noticed my assistant’s stomach bulged now against his green doublet. His face was acquiring a little plumpness too that softened his features and made him look younger. Bealknap turned and walked rapidly away towards the chapel. That strange, miserly man had, two years ago, got himself indebted to me for a small amount. Normally bold as brass, Bealknap, for whom it was a point of pride never to part with money, would turn and hasten away if ever he saw me. It was a standing joke at Lincoln’s Inn. Evidently he was avoiding Barak now too. My assistant paused and grinned broadly at Bealknap’s back as he scuttled away. I felt relieved; obviously nothing had happened to Tamasin.

A few minutes later he joined me in my office. ‘All well with the depositions?’ I asked.

‘Yes, but it was hard to get a boat from Westminster

C. J. SANSON

stairs. The river's packed with cogs taking supplies to the armies, the wherries had to pull in to the bank to make way. One of the big warships was down by the Tower, too. I think they sailed it up from Deptford so the people could see it. But I didn't hear any cheering from the banks.'

'People are used to them now. It was different when the *Mary Rose* and the *Great Harry* sailed out; hundreds lined the banks to cheer.' I waved at the stool in front of my desk. 'Come, sit down. How is Tamasin today?'

He sat and smiled wryly. 'Grumpy. Feeling the heat, and her feet are swollen.'

'Still sure the child's a girl?'

'Ay. She consulted some wise woman touting for business in Cheapside yesterday, who told her what she wanted to hear, of course.'

'And you are still as sure the child's a boy?'

'I am.' He shook his head. 'Tammy insists on carrying on as usual. I tell her ladies of good class take to their chambers eight weeks before the birth. I thought that might give her pause but it didn't.'

'Is it eight weeks now?'

'So Guy says. He's coming to visit her tomorrow. Still, she has Goodwife Marris to look after her. Tammy was glad to see me go to work. She says I fuss.'

I smiled. I knew Barak and Tamasin were happy now. After the death of their first child there had been a bad time, and Tamasin had left him. But he had won her back with a steady, loving persistence I would once not have thought him capable of. I had helped them find a little house nearby, and a capable servant in Joan's friend Goodwife Marris, who had worked as a wet nurse and was used to children.

I nodded at the window. 'I saw Bealknap turn to avoid you.'

## HEARTSTONE

He laughed. 'He's started doing that lately. He fears I'm going to ask him for that three pounds he owes you. Stupid asshole.' His eyes glinted wickedly. 'You should ask him for four, seeing how the value of money's fallen.'

'You know, I sometimes wonder if friend Bealknap is quite sane. Two years now he has made a fool and mock of himself by avoiding me, and now you too.'

'And all the while he gets richer. They say he sold some of that gold he has to the Mint for the recoinage, and that he is lending more out to people looking for money to pay the taxes, now that lending at interest has been made legal.'

'There are some at Lincoln's Inn who have needed to do that to pay the Benevolence. Thank God I had enough gold. Yet the way Bealknap behaves does not show a balanced mind.'

Barak gave me a penetrating look. 'You've become too ready to see madness in people. It's because you give so much time to Ellen Fettiplace. Have you answered her latest message?'

I made an impatient gesture. 'Let's not go over that again. I have, and I will go to the Bedlam tomorrow.'

'Bedlamite she may be, but she plays you like a fisherman pulling on a line.' Barak looked at me seriously. 'You know why.'

I changed the subject. 'I went for a walk earlier. There was a View of Arms in Lincoln's Inn Fields. The officer was threatening to make pikemen of those who hadn't been practising their archery.'

Barak answered contemptuously, 'They know as well as anyone that only those who like archery practise it regularly, for all the laws the King makes. It's hard work and you've got to keep at it to be any good.' He gave me a serious look. 'It's no good making laws too unpopular to be enforced. Lord Cromwell knew that, he knew where to draw the line.'

C. J. SANSOM

‘They’re enforcing this. I’ve never seen anything like it before. And yesterday I saw the constables sweeping the streets for the beggars and vagabonds the King’s ordered to be sent to row on the galleasses. Have you heard the latest word – that French troops have landed in Scotland and the Scots are ready to fall on us too?’

‘The latest word,’ Barak repeated scoffingly. ‘Who sets these stories running about the French and Scots about to invade? The King’s officials, that’s who. Maybe to stop the people rebelling like they did in ’36. Against the taxes and the debasement of the currency. Here, look at this.’ His hand went to his purse. He took out a little silver coin and smacked it down on the desk. I picked it up. The King’s fat jowly face stared up at me.

‘One of the new shilling coins,’ Barak said. ‘A testoon.’  
‘I haven’t seen one before.’

‘Tamasin went shopping with Goodwife Marris yesterday in Cheapside. There’s plenty there. Look at its dull colour. The silver’s so adulterated with copper they’ll only give eightpence worth of goods for it. Prices for bread and meat are going through the roof. Not that there is much bread, with so much being requisitioned for the army.’ Barak’s brown eyes flashed angrily. ‘And where’s the extra silver gone? To repay those German bankers who lent the King money for the war.’

‘You really think there may be no French invasion fleet at all?’

‘Maybe. I don’t know.’ He hesitated, then said suddenly, ‘I think they’re trying to get me for the army.’

‘What?’ I sat bolt upright.

‘The constable was going round all the houses in the ward last Friday with some soldier, registering all men of military age. I told them I’d a wife and a child on the way.’

## HEARTSTONE

The soldier said I looked a fit man. I flipped my fingers at him and told him to piss off. Trouble is Tamasin told me he came back yesterday. She saw him through the window and didn't answer the door.'

I sighed. 'Your over-confidence will be the end of you one day.'

'That's what Tamasin says. But they're not taking married man with children. Or at least, not many.'

'The powers that be are serious. I think there is going to be an invasion attempt, or why recruit all these thousands of soldiers? You should take care.'

Barak looked mutinous. 'None of this would be happening if the King hadn't invaded France last year. Forty thousand men sent over the Channel, and what happened? We were sent running back with our tails between our legs, except for the poor sods besieged in Boulogne. Everyone says we should cut our losses, abandon Boulogne and make peace, but the King won't. Not our Harry.'

'I know. I agree.'

'Remember last autumn, the soldiers back from France lying in rags, plague-ridden, on all the roads to the city?' His face set hard. 'Well, that won't happen to me.'

I looked at my assistant. There had been a time when Barak might have seen war as an adventure. But not now. 'What did this soldier look like?'

'Big fellow your age with a black beard, done up in a London Trained Bands uniform. Looked as if he'd seen service.'

'He was in charge of the View of Arms. I'd guess a professional officer. No man to cross, I'd say.'

'Well, if he's viewing all the mustered men, hopefully he'll be too busy to bother any more with me.'

'I hope so. If he does return, you must come to me.'

C. J. SANSOM

‘Thank you,’ he said quietly.

I reached for the letter on the corner of my desk. ‘In return, I’d like your view on this.’ I handed it to him.

‘Not *another* message from Ellen?’

‘Look at the seal. It’s one you’ve seen before.’

He looked up. ‘The Queen’s. Is it from Master Warner? Another case?’

‘Read it.’ I hesitated. ‘It worries me.’

Barak unfolded the letter, and read aloud.

‘I would welcome your personal counsel on a case, a private matter. I invite you to attend me here at Hampton Court, at three o’clock tomorrow afternoon.’

‘It’s signed—’

‘I know. Catherine the Queen, not lawyer Warner.’

Barak read it again. ‘It’s short enough. But she says it’s a case. No sign it’s anything political.’

‘But it must be something that affects her closely for her to write herself. I can’t help remembering last year when the Queen sent Warner to represent that relative of her servant who was accused of heresy.’

‘She promised she would keep you out of things like that. And she’s one who keeps her promises.’

I nodded. More than two years before, when Queen Catherine Parr was still Lady Latimer, I had saved her life. She had promised both to be my patron and never to involve me in matters of politics.

‘How long is it since you saw her?’ Barak asked.

‘Not since the spring. She granted me an audience at Whitehall to thank me for sorting out that tangled case about her Midland properties. Then she sent me her book of prayers last month. You remember, I showed you. *Prayers and Meditations*.’

He pulled a face. ‘Gloomy stuff.’

## HEARTSTONE

I smiled sadly. 'Yes, it was. I had not realized how much sadness there was in her. She put in a personal note saying she hoped it would turn my mind to God.'

'She'd never put you in harm's way. It'll be another land case, you'll see.'

I smiled gratefully. Barak had known the underside of the political world from his earliest days, and I valued his reassurance.

'The Queen and Ellen Fettiplace in one day!' he said jokingly. 'You will have a busy day.'

'Yes.' I took the letter back. Remembering the last time I had visited Hampton Court, the thought of presenting myself there again set a knot of fear twisting in my stomach.