



Prologue



England 1470

Brother William gazed into the ball of polished glass. Tantalizing glimpses of the future, shrouded in mist and shadows, flickered and disappeared. Carefully, he put the ball back into its velvet sack and ran his fingers over the exquisitely decorated box in front of him. It perfectly matched the image that he had just seen.

He heard footsteps coming up the stairs. That must be the queen, he thought, opening the door. She has come at last.

"Your Majesty," he said, bowing as she swept into the room.

"Brother William, I presume," said the queen.

"Yes, Your Majesty."

She walked over to the tiny window and peered down at the unmarked carriage waiting below.

"I risk a great deal coming here," said the queen, lowering the hood of her cloak. "My enemies have spread rumours that I practise the dark arts. My own brother-in-law, the duke of Gloucester, believes that I bewitched the king into marriage. It will do me no good if I am seen with you in this inn. It is said you are a sorcerer."

"Your Majesty," protested Brother William, "I am but a humble monk."

"You were a monk," the queen corrected him, as she sat at the table. "I know your story, Brother William. You were banished from the monastery, and now there is a price on your head."

"Your messenger said you had a vision that harm would come to my son and that you would give me something to protect him." She pointed to the box. "Is this it?"

"Indeed it is, Your Majesty."

With trembling hands, Brother William gently pushed the box across the table toward her. The queen studied the painted figures on the sides, lifted the lid and peered in.

"It seems an ordinary box to me. My son's christening is on the morrow. What more can you tell me?"

Brother William shook his head. "One day the prince will be in grave danger; this box will protect him. He must always keep it close at hand."

"But how does it work?"

"When danger is near, he must place a letter inside the box, and it will bring him aid when he most needs it."

"You speak in riddles, old man!" snapped the queen, grabbing the box. "I can tarry no longer."

Without a backward glance, she hurried from the room, clutching the box tightly under the folds of her cloak.

Brother William quickly gathered up the velvet sack and prepared to leave. Moments after the queen's carriage departed, he heard a loud pounding at the door and shouts from the street below. It was the sheriff's men.

By the time they reached the upstairs room, Brother William had disappeared.

THE MESSAGE

I



JACK LAY AWAKE IN A DIMLY LIT ROOM WITH CARVED STONE WALLS AND A SINGLE ARCHED WINDOW. MOONLIGHT ILLUMINATED THE OUTLINE OF A SLEEPING BOY IN A BED AGAINST THE FAR WALL. THE DOOR TO THE ROOM CREAKED OPEN, AND THE SHADOW OF A MAN SILENTLY MOVED TOWARD THE SLEEPING BOY. JACK GASPED AS THE SHADOWY FIGURE TURNED, REVEALING A GRUESOME SCAR WHERE THE MAN'S LEFT EYE SHOULD HAVE BEEN.



"Come to breakfast, Jack!" his mother called from downstairs. "It's your day to help Dad at the shop."

Jack woke with a start, gasping for breath. He couldn't remember the last time he'd had such a terrible nightmare. He shook it off, rolled out of bed and stooped to pick up the history book he'd been reading when he fell asleep. He'd just started a chapter about Richard III and the Princes in the Tower.

Jack set the book down on the desk, next to a small antique wooden box that had been in his family for generations. The box looked medieval, with faded artwork on the sides and lid. Glancing at the box, Jack noticed that the drawer in the base, which had always been stuck closed, had popped out slightly. It was stiff, but he managed to tug the drawer open.

Inside lay a small roll of parchment tied with a silk ribbon. Slipping off the ribbon, Jack carefully unrolled the scroll and spread it out on his desk.

I haue grete nede. My
modir bad me, in tyme
of peril, that I sholde
write a lettir and
seeke sucoure, and
that I sholde putte
the lettir in thys box.
Who euer shal finde
this lettir, I preie
hym deliuere me fro
thys prison in the
coure of London.

EDW REX

Anno domini 1483

I wonder how long it's been in the drawer, Jack thought. The paper doesn't look that old.

Jack recognized the writing as Middle English, but to him, it was like a foreign language.

Dad might know how to read this.

His father had an antique shop in the village where they lived. The shop had a small collection of medieval documents with similar writing. It was the final week of school holidays, and Jack had been helping his father at the shop all summer.

He rolled up the parchment, got dressed and headed downstairs for breakfast.

"Morning," said Jack's mother, as she poured herself a fresh cup of tea.

"Didn't think you were going to make it," added his father, looking up from his newspaper.

"Sorry," Jack apologized. "I didn't sleep very well."

"Burning the midnight oil again?" asked his father, peering at him over the morning headlines.

His mother placed a plateful of toast in the middle of the table.

"Just because we allowed you to grow your hair doesn't mean that we've relaxed the rules about bedtime too," she said.

"Okay, okay."

Turning to his father, Jack held up the scroll and said, "Remember that old box you gave me? I found *this* in its drawer. It looks like it's written in Middle English."

"That drawer has never opened before," his father said, putting down the newspaper. "Let me have a look at that."

Jack handed him the scroll. His father unrolled it and spread it out on the table.

"The script does look like Middle English, Jack, but the parchment seems new."

"You two had best get moving," Jack's mother said, "or you'll be late opening the shop."

"That's right," said his father, looking at his watch. "Come on, Jack, and bring that scroll along. We'll see if we can figure out what it says."

Jack nodded and hurried after him out the door.

"Didn't you tell me that the box was once owned by the king of England?" Jack asked as they got into the car.

"If I had a penny for every time I heard a story like that about an antique, I'd be a rich man."

"So it's not true?" Jack asked, disappointed.

"Could be. But in my experience, when it comes to antiques, the more fabulous the story, the less likely it is to be true. All I know for certain is that the box has been in our family for generations, but nobody knows where it originally came from."

As they drove through the village, they passed The Sorcerer, an inn dating back to the Middle Ages. A colourful sign hung over the door. It depicted a white-bearded old man dressed in a dark robe embroidered with gold stars. According to local legend, a mysterious monk who dabbled in the supernatural had once lived at the inn.

They parked the car, and Jack followed his father into the cluttered shop. Mismatched pieces of furniture were on display in the front window, and stacks of paintings lay against the far wall.

Clocks, jewellery boxes, figurines and books filled the shelves. On the wall behind the counter hung two long menacing English broadswords.

As Jack catalogued a collection of rare books in the tiny back office, the bell above the shop's door jangled. Jack came through to the front to see who it was. His father was talking to an eccentric-looking old man dressed in a shabby raincoat.

"A rare find, that's certain," proclaimed the old man, handing over a wooden box.

Jack drew closer to see what it was.

"A rare find," the old man repeated, as Jack's father removed an antique pistol from the box and turned it over repeatedly in his hand, feeling the weight of it.

The man was almost completely bald, but he had a thick unkempt white beard and sharp blue eyes that twinkled in his deeply lined face.

"I'll have to take a closer look at the markings. I'll take it into the back office," said Jack's father. "It'll take a few minutes."

The instant Jack's father closed the door to the back office, the old man reached across the counter and grabbed Jack's wrist with unexpected strength.

Jack was too startled to utter a word.

"The drawer of the box opened!" whispered the old man. "You found the letter, didn't you?"