





The Familiars

STACEY HALLS



ZAFFRE

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FOR MY HUSBAND



*IRISH
SEA*

*Lancaster
Castle*

*Forest of
Bowland*



Barton



*Pendle
Hill*

Colne



Read Hall



Halifax

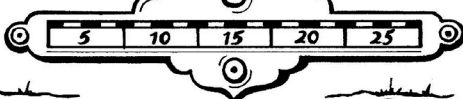
Gawthorpe

Liverpool

Manchester



*County of
LANCASTER
And the
surrounding area*



PART ONE



THE COUNTY OF LANCASTER (NOW
LANCASHIRE), EARLY APRIL, 1612

Be ever well in blood, for otherwise she will
not long be at your commandment but make
you follow her.

The Book of Falconry or Hawking,
George Turberville, 1543–1597

Prudence and justice

Shuttleworth family motto

CHAPTER 1



I left the house with the letter because I did not know what else to do. The lawn was wet with late morning dew that soaked my favourite rose silk slippers, for in my haste I hadn't thought to put on pattens. But I did not stop until I reached the trees overlooking the lawns in front of the house. The letter I had clutched in my fist, and I opened it once more to check I hadn't imagined it, that I hadn't drifted off in my chair and dreamt it up.

It was a chill morning, misty and cool with the wind racing down from Pendle Hill, and though my mind was in turmoil, I'd remembered to take my cloak from its place at the end of the wardrobe. I'd given Puck a perfunctory stroke and was pleased to see my hands weren't shaking. I did not cry, or faint, or do anything at all except fold

what I had read back into its old shape and go quietly down the stairs. Nobody noticed me, and the only servant I saw was a brief glimpse of James sitting at his desk as I passed by his study. The idea that he might have read the letter himself crossed my mind, as a steward often opens his master's private correspondence, but I dismissed the thought quickly and left through the front door.

The clouds were the colour of pewter jugs that threatened to spill over, so I hurried across the grass towards the woods. I knew that in my black cloak I'd be conspicuous among the fields from servants' prying eyes at the windows, and I needed to think. In this part of Lancashire, the land is green and damp, and the sky wide and grey. Occasionally you see the flash of a deer's red coat, or a pheasant's blue neck, and your eye is drawn swifter than they can disappear.

Before I reached the shelter of the trees, I knew the sickness was coming again. I pulled the hem of my skirt away from where it splattered the grass, then used my kerchief to wipe my mouth. Richard had the laundry-women sprinkle them with rose water. I closed my eyes and took several deep breaths, and when I opened them I felt slightly better. The trees shivered and birds sang merrily as I went deeper, and in less than a minute I had lost Gawthorpe altogether. The house was as conspicuous as I was in these parts, made of warm golden stone and set in a clearing. But while the house couldn't keep you from the woods that seemed to draw ever closer and were

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visible from every window, the woods could keep Gawthorpe from you. Sometimes it felt as though they were playing a game.

I took out the letter and opened it again, smoothing out the creases that had formed in my tight little fist, and found the paragraph that had left me reeling:

You can divine without difficulty the true nature of the danger that your wife has been in, and it is with solemn regret that I impart on you my professional opinion as a physick and expert in matters of childbed: that upon visiting her last Friday sennight, I drew the deeply unfortunate conclusion that she can not and should not bear children. It is with excessive importance that you understand if she finds herself once more in childbed, she will not survive it, and her earthly life will come to an end.

Now I was out of sight of the house I could react with some privacy. My heart was beating furiously and my cheeks were hot. Another surge of sickness overcame me, and I almost choked on it as it burnt against my tongue.

The sickness came morning, noon and night, wringing me inside out. At the most, it was forty times a day; if it was twice I felt lucky. Veins burst in my face, leaving delicate crimson stems around my eyes, the whites of which turned a demonic red. The awful taste in my throat would last for hours, sharp and choking as the blade of a knife. I couldn't keep food down. I had no appetite for

it anyway, much to the cook's disappointment. Even my beloved marchpane lay in broad, unsliced tablets in the larder, and my boxes of sugar candy sent from London gathered dust.

The other three times I hadn't been this ill. This time it felt like the child growing inside me was trying to escape through my throat instead of between my legs like the others, who announced their untimely arrivals in red rivers down my thighs. Their limp little forms were grotesque, and I watched them being wrapped like fresh loaves in linen.

'Not long for this world, the poor mite,' the last midwife said, wiping my blood off her butcher's arms.

Four years married, three times in childbed, and still no heir to put in the oak cradle my mother gave me when Richard and I married. I saw the way she looked at me, as though I was letting them all down.

Still, I could not fathom that Richard knew what the doctor had said, and had watched me fatten like a turkey at Christmastide. The letter was bundled in among several papers from my three childbeds, so it was possible he could have missed it. Would he have done right by me in withholding it? Suddenly, the words seemed to fling themselves from the page and wrap around my neck. And written, too, by a man whose name I did not recognise, so wreathed in pain was I when he visited that I could not recall a single detail about him: his touch, his voice, or whether he was kind.

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I'd not stopped to catch my breath, and my slippers were truly ruined now, soaked with greenish mud. When one of them got stuck and came off, sending my stockinged foot into the wet ground, that was more than I was prepared to take. With both hands I made the letter into a ball and threw it as hard as I could, taking a brief moment's satisfaction when it bounced off a tree several yards away.

If I had not done that, I might not have seen the rabbit's foot a few inches from where it landed, nor the rabbit it belonged to – or at least what was left of it: a mangled mess of fur and blood, then another, and another. I hunted rabbits; these had not been slain by a hawk or a falcon making a neat little kill before circling back to its master. Then I noticed something else: the hem of a brown skirt brushing the ground, and knees bent, and above them a body, a face, a white cap. A young woman was kneeling a few yards away, staring at me. Every line of her was alert with an animal tension. She was shabbily dressed in a homespun wool smock with no pinafore, which is why I did not see her straight away among all the green and brown. Flax-coloured hair spiralled down from her cap. Her face was long and narrow, her eyes large, their colour unusual even from a distance: a warm gold, like new coins. There was something fiercely intelligent, almost masculine, in her gaze, and though she was crouched down and I standing, for a moment I felt afraid, as though I was the one who had been discovered.

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Another rabbit dangled from her hands, one eye resting unblinkingly on me. Its fur was stained with red. On the ground next to the woman's skirts a roughly hewn sack lay open. She got to her feet. A breeze rustled the leaves and grasses around us, but she remained perfectly still, her expression unreadable. Only the dead beast moved, swinging slightly.

'Who are you?' I asked. 'What are you doing here?'

She began bundling the little bodies into her sack. My crumpled letter lay pale and bright among the massacre, and she paused when she saw it, her long fingers hovering, stained red with blood.

'Give it to me,' I snapped.

Picking it up, she held it out from where she stood, and in a few quick strides I'd snatched it from her. Those golden eyes did not leave my face, and I thought a stranger had never looked at me so hard. Briefly I wondered how I must appear, with no outdoor shoes and my slipper lying in the mud. No doubt my face was flushed from vomiting, and the whites of my eyes would be red. The acid in my mouth made my tongue sharp.

'What's your name?'

She did not speak.

'Are you a beggar?'

She shook her head.

'This is my land. You have been poaching rabbits from my land?'

'*Your* land?'

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Her voice broke the strangeness of the situation like a pebble tossed in a pool. She was just an ordinary village girl.

‘I am Fleetwood Shuttleworth, the mistress at Gawthorpe Hall. This is my husband’s land; if you are from Padiham you would know that.’

‘I am not,’ was all she said.

‘You know the penalty for hunting on another man’s land?’

She took in my thick black cloak, my gown of copper taffeta peeking through the bottom. I knew my skin was dull; my black hair made it sallow, and I did not wish to be reminded of this by a stranger. I suspected I was younger than her, but I could not guess her age. Her dirty dress appeared not to have been brushed or aired in months, and her cap was the colour of mutton’s wool. Then my eyes fell on hers, and her gaze met mine, level and proud. I frowned and raised my chin. At four feet eleven inches, everyone I met was taller than me, though I did not intimidate easily.

‘My husband would bind your hands to his horse and drag you to the magistrate,’ I said, more boldly than I felt. When she did not speak, the only sound the trees hissing and shuddering, I asked again: ‘Are you a beggar?’

‘I am no one.’ She held out the sack. ‘Take them. I did not know I was on your land.’

It was a strange answer, and I wondered what I would tell Richard. Then I remembered the letter in my fist. I squeezed it hard.

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‘With what did you kill them?’

She sniffed. ‘I did not kill them. They were killed.’

‘What an odd way of speaking you have. What is your name?’

I had barely finished when, in a flash of gold and brown, she turned and ran away through the trees. Her white cap flitted between the trunks, the sack bouncing against her skirts. Her feet thudded into the earth, quick and deft as an animal, before the woods swallowed her whole.

CHAPTER 2



The sound of Richard's waist belt preceded him everywhere. I think it made him feel powerful – you heard his money before you saw it. Now, as I heard the familiar jangle and the tread of his kid leather boots on the stairs, I took a deep breath and brushed some imagined dust off my jacket. I stood as he entered the room, bright and invigorated from a business trip to Manchester. His gold earring caught the light; his grey eyes gleamed.

'Fleetwood,' he greeted me, putting my head between his hands.

I bit my lip where he kissed it. Could I trust my voice to speak? We were in the wardrobe, where he knew he would find me. Even though nobody had lived at

Gawthorpe before us, it was the only room that truly felt mine. I had thought it very modern that Richard's uncle, who designed the house, had thought to include a room just for dressing when he had no wife. Of course if women designed houses they would be as much a part of the plans as a kitchen. Having come from my own house of coal-coloured stone under grey skies, Gawthorpe, with its rich, warm colour, as though the sun was always rising on it, and three floors of gleaming windows, bright as the crown jewels, and the tower in the middle, had made me feel more like a princess than a mistress. Richard had led me through the maze of rooms, and all the fresh plaster and shining panels and little passageways teeming with decorators and servants and carpenters had made me feel dizzy. I tended to stay at the top of the house, out of the way of everyone. If I had a baby in my arms or a child to take down to breakfast I might feel differently, but while I didn't, I kept to my rooms and my wardrobe, with its pleasant view of the rushing River Calder and Pendle Hill.

'Conversing with your clothes again?' he said.

'They are my constant companions.'

Puck, my great French mastiff, roused himself from the Turkey carpet, stretching and yawning and revealing a jaw so wide it could fit my head inside.

'You fearsome beast,' said Richard, going to kneel by the dog. 'Not for long will you be the singular object of our affections. You will have to share them.' He sighed

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and got to his knees, weary from a long ride. 'You are well? And rested?'

I nodded, tucking a loose strand of hair under my cap. Lately it had been falling out in great black clumps when I combed it.

'You are troubled. You have not . . . You are not . . .'

'I am fine.'

The letter. Ask him about the letter. The words hung thick in my throat, an arrow poised on a pulled bow, but there was nothing but relief in his lovely face. I held his stare for a moment too long, knowing my opportunity to question him was passing, slipping through my fingers like sand.

'Well, Manchester was a success. James always thinks he should go with me on these trips but I fare just as well alone. Perhaps he is only exasperated because I forget to write down receipts; I've told him I keep them as well in my head as in my jacket.' He paused, ignoring Puck sniffing at him. 'You are in a quiet mood.'

'Richard, I read the midwife's correspondence today. And the doctor's, who delivered the last.'

'That reminds me.'

He reached deep into the emerald velvet of his doublet, his face lit with a childlike excitement. I waited, and when he withdrew his hand he dropped into mine a strange object. It was a small silver sword, long as a letter opener, with a shining gold hilt. But the end was blunt and all over were little spheres dangling from miniature hooks. I

turned it over in my palm and it made a pleasant tinkling sound.

‘It’s a rattle.’ He beamed, shaking it so it jangled like horses coming to a halt. ‘They are bells, look. It’s for our son.’

He did not even try to disguise the longing in his voice. I thought of the drawer that I kept locked in one of the bedrooms. Inside were half a dozen things he’d bought the other times – a silk purse with our initials, an ivory horse that could fit in a palm. In the long gallery was a suit of armour he bought to celebrate the first time my stomach grew. His faith that we would have a child was clear and strong as a stream, even when he was trading wool in Preston and passed a trader selling miniature animals, or when he was with our tailor and saw a bolt of silk the exact colour of an oyster’s pearl. With the last one, only he knew if it was a son or daughter, and I did not ask, because I was still not a mother. Every gift he gave me was a token of my failure, and I wished I could burn them all and watch the smoke rise from the chimney and be swallowed by the sky. I thought about where I would be without my husband, and my heart was full of grief, because he had given me happiness, and all I’d given him were three absences, their souls extinguished in the gentlest breeze.

I tried one more time. ‘Richard, is there anything you wish to tell me?’

Richard’s earring glinted as he considered me. Puck

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yawned and settled on the carpet. A deep voice called Richard's name from a distant floor below.

'Roger is downstairs,' he said. 'I should go to him.'

I put the rattle on the chair, eager to be rid of it, leaving Puck to sniff curiously at it.

'Then I will come down.'

'I came upstairs only to dress; we are going to hunt.'

'But you have been riding all morning.'

He smiled. 'Hunting is not *riding*, it is hunting.'

'Then I will go with you.'

'You feel fit for it?'

I smiled and turned back to my clothes.



'Fleetwood Shuttleworth! My eyes, look how pale you are!' Roger's voice boomed across the stable yard. 'You are whiter than a snowdrop but twice as beautiful. Richard, have you not been feeding your wife?'

'Roger Nowell, you do know how to make a woman feel special.' I smiled, drawing up on my horse.

'You are dressed to hunt. Have you accomplished all your ladylike pursuits of a morning?'

His voice carried to every beam and corner of the stable yard as he sat astride his horse, tall and broad, a grey eyebrow raised in question.

'I have come to spend time with my favourite magistrate.'

I pushed my horse between the two men's. Roger Nowell was easy company, and I admit now that I suppose I was a little in awe of him, having no father to compare him to. He had enough years to be mine or Richard's father – grandfather, even – and as ours were both long dead he became a friend to us when Richard inherited Gawthorpe. The day after we arrived he rode over on his horse carrying three pheasants and stayed all afternoon, explaining the lie of the land and everyone in it. We were new to this part of Lancashire, with its rolling hills and shadowy forests and strange people, and he was a wealth of knowledge. An acquaintance of Richard's long-dead uncle, who had been the chief justice of Chester and provided the closest link the family ever had to the Crown, Roger had known the Shuttleworths for years, and settled himself in our household like an inherited piece of furniture. But I liked him from the moment I met him. Like a candle, he burnt brightly, and his mood would flicker easily from one moment to the next, bringing warmth and knowledge wherever he went.

'News from the palace: the king may finally have found a suitor for his daughter,' Roger announced.

The hounds in their kennels were driven wild by the sound of us and were brought out, teeming and panting around the horses' legs.

'Who is it?'

'Friedrich the Fifth, Count Palatine of the Rhine. He

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will come to England later in the year and hopefully put an end to the parade of jesters trying for the princess's hand.'

'Will you go to the wedding?' I asked.

'I hope to. It will be the grandest the kingdom has seen in many years.'

'I wonder what sort of gown she will wear,' I thought aloud.

Roger didn't hear me over the barking hounds, and he and Richard moved out of the yard to begin the hunt. With the hounds on leashes I realised the quarry would be hart, and I wished I had asked before. A hart at bay was not a friendly sight, with its antlers slashing and eyes rolling; I would have preferred almost anything else. I thought about turning around, but we were already in the forest so I kicked my horse onwards. Edmund the apprentice acted as whip, riding alongside the dogs. As we went through the trees I heard snatches of their furtive conversation and rode silently behind them, half-listening. An image from the day before came to me: spilt blood, glassy eyes and the strange golden-haired woman.

'Richard,' I interrupted. 'There was a trespasser on our land yesterday.'

'What? Where?'

'Somewhere south of the house, in the woods.'

'Why did James not tell me?'

'Because I did not tell him.'

'*You* saw him? What were you doing?'

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‘I . . . went out walking.’

‘I told you not to go out alone; you might have got lost or tripped and . . . hurt yourself.’

Roger was listening.

‘I am *fine*, Richard. And it was not a man but a woman.’

‘What was she doing? Was she lost?’

That’s when I realised I could not tell him about the rabbits, because I had no words for what I’d seen.

‘Yes,’ I said eventually.

Roger was amused. ‘You do have a wild imagination, Fleetwood. You had us thinking you were attacked by a savage in the woods when really a woman had only got lost?’

‘Yes,’ I replied faintly.

‘Although now even that isn’t without harm – you may have heard of what happened to John Law the pedlar at Colne?’

‘I have not.’

‘Roger, you don’t need to frighten her with tales of witchcraft – she already has nightmares.’

My mouth fell open and my face grew scarlet. That was the first time Richard had told anyone about The Nightmare, and I would never have believed it of him. But he continued ahead, the feather in his hat trembling.

‘Tell me, Roger.’

‘A woman travelling alone is not always as innocent as she seems, as John Law found out and will never forget

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as long as he lives – and that might not be long, Lord have mercy.’ Roger settled back in his saddle. ‘Two days ago his son Abraham came to me at Read Hall.’

‘Should I know him?’

‘No, because he is a cloth dyer from Halifax. The lad has done well for himself, considering his father’s trade.’

‘And he found a witch?’

‘No, *listen*.’

I sighed and wished I hadn’t come, wished I was sitting in the parlour with my dog.

John was travelling on the woolpack trail at Colnefield when he came across a young girl. A beggar, he thought. She asked him to give her some pins, and when he said he would not – he paused for effect – ‘she cursed him. He turned his back and next thing, heard her speaking softly behind him, as though she was talking to someone. It sent a shiver up his spine. He thought at first it was the wind, but he looked back, and her dark eyes were fixed on him, and her lips were moving. He hurried away, and not thirty yards on, he heard running feet, and then a great thing like a black dog began attacking him, biting him all over, and he fell to the ground.’

‘A thing *like* a black dog?’ Richard asked. ‘You said earlier it *was* a black dog.’

Roger ignored him. ‘He held his hands to his face and begged for mercy, and when he opened his eyes the dog had disappeared. Gone. And the strange girl with it. Someone found him on the path and helped him to a

nearby inn, but he could barely move a limb. Nor could he speak. One of his eyes stayed shut to the world, and his face was all fallen down on one side. He stayed at the inn, but the next morning the young girl appeared again, bold as brass, and begged his forgiveness. She claims she wasn't in control of her craft, but that she did curse him.'

'She admitted to it?' I remembered the girl from yesterday. 'What did she look like?'

'Like a witch. Very thin and rough-looking, with black hair and a sullen face. My mother says never trust someone with black hair because they usually have a black soul to match.'

'I have black hair.'

'Do you want to hear my story?'

My mother used to threaten to sew my mouth as a child. She and Roger's mother would have plenty to discuss.

'I am sorry,' I said. 'Is the man well now?'

'No, and he may never be again,' Roger said gravely. 'That is worrying in itself, but there is something that troubles me more: the dog. While it is free to roam Pendle, no one is safe.'

Richard flashed me an amused, sceptical look before tearing ahead to keep up with the hunt. The thought of the animal did not frighten me – after all, I had a mastiff the size of a mule. But before I could point that out, Roger began again.

'At the inn, a few nights after it happened, John Law

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woke to the sound of something breathing over him. The great beast was stood over his bed, the size of a wolf, with bared teeth and fiery eyes. He knew it to be a spirit; it was not of this earth. You can understand his terror: a man who is unable to move or speak, save for groaning out. Then who should be there by his bed in its place not a moment later, but the witch herself.'

I felt as though my skin had been brushed with a feather.

'So it turned into the woman?'

'No, Fleetwood have you knowledge of familiar spirits?' I shook my head. 'Then I will direct you to the book of Leviticus. In short, it's the Devil in disguise. An instrument, if you will, to enlarge his kingdom. This girl's is a dog, but they can appear as anything: an animal, a child. It appears to her when she needs it to do her bidding, and last week she told it to lame John Law. A familiar is the surest sign of a witch.'

'And you have seen it?'

'Of course not. A creature of the Devil is hardly likely to appear to a God-fearing man. Only those of questionable belief might sense its presence. Low morals are its breeding ground.'

'But John Law saw it; you said he was a good man.'

Roger waved me off, impatient. 'We have lost Richard; he will not be happy with me for tongue-wagging with his wife. This is what happens when women come on hunts.'

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I did not point out that it was me indulging him – if Roger had a story, he wanted it heard. We set off at a canter, and slowed down again when the hunt came back into view. We were a long way from Gawthorpe, and now I was here I was not in favour of the thought of a full afternoon's riding.

'Where is the girl now?' I asked as we fell behind again.

Roger adjusted his grip on the reins. 'Her name is Alizon Device. She is in my custody at Read Hall.'

'In your *house*? Why did you not put her in the gaol at Lancaster?'

'She is not dangerous where she is. There is nothing she can do – she would not dare. Besides, she is helping me with some other enquiries.'

'What kind of enquiries?'

'My, my, you are full of questions, Mistress Shuttleworth. Must we *talk* the quarry to death? Alizon Device is from a family of witches; she told me so herself. Her mother, her grandmother, even her brother all practise magic and sorcery, no more than a few miles from here. They are also accusing their neighbours of murder by witchcraft, one of whom lives on Shuttleworth land. Which is why I thought your husband over there ought to know about it.'

He indicated his head at the expanse of greenery before us. Edmund, Richard and the hounds were again nowhere to be seen.

'But how do you know she is telling the truth? Why

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would she betray her family? She must know what it means to be a witch – it's certain death.'

'Your guess is as good as mine,' Roger said simply, although I detected something beneath his words. He could be forceful and bullying when he wanted; I had seen it with his wife, Katherine, who was a tolerant sort of woman. 'And the murders she claimed her family are responsible for all happened.'

'They have *murdered*?'

'Several times. You would not want to cross a Device. Do not fear, child. Alizon Device is safe in custody, and I am to question her family tomorrow or the next day. I shall have to notify the king, of course.' He sighed, as though it was an impediment. 'He will be pleased to know it, I'm sure.'

'What if they escape – how will you find them?'

'They'll not escape. I have eyes all over Pendle – you know that. Not much gets past a high sheriff.'

'Former high sheriff,' I teased. 'How many years has she? The girl with the dog?'

'She does not know, but I would say she is seventeen or so.'

'The same as me.' After a moment of thoughtful silence, I spoke again. 'Roger, do you trust Richard?'

He raised a bushy eyebrow. 'With my life. Or what's left of it – I am an old man now, with my family grown and the best days of my work behind me, most regrettably. Why do you ask?'

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I'd tucked the doctor's letter into my pocket, deep beneath my riding clothes, and it beat against my ribs like another heart.

'No reason.'