
TALES OF MEDIEVAL ENGLAND
The Secret in the Tower
Andrew Beattie

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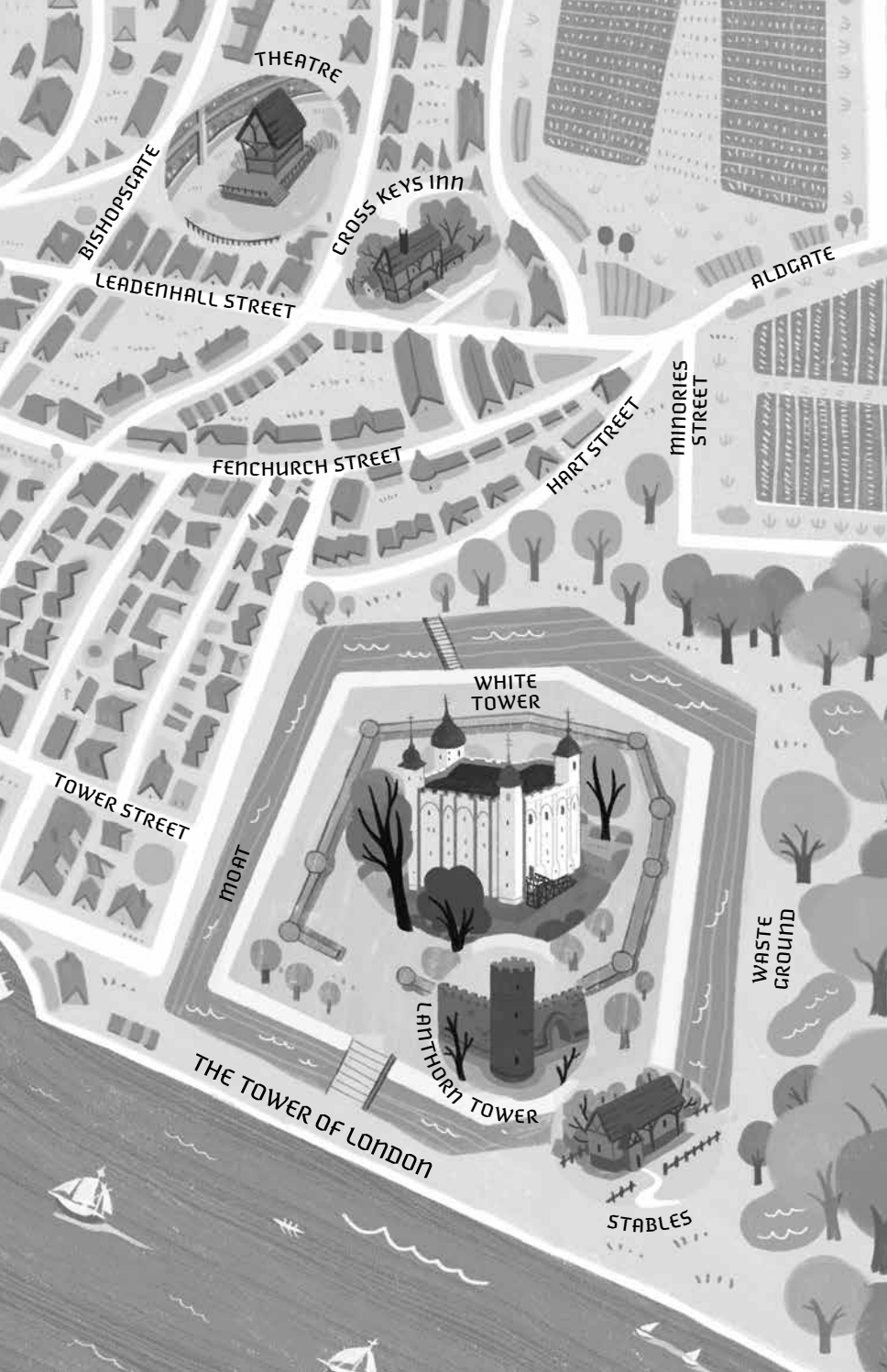
The Secret in the Tower

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Illustrated by Corinne Caro

Sweet Cherry


MARKET & APOTHECARY
CHEAPSIDE
ST PAUL'S CATHEDRAL
JACK'S SCHOOL
LOMBARD STREET
WATLING STREET
KNIGHTRIDER STREET
THAMES STREET
MILITARY PRISON
NEW FISH STREET
RIVER BANK
LONDON BRIDGE
SOUTHWARK


THEATRE
BISHOPSGATE
CROSS KEYS INN
LEADENHALL STREET
ALDGATE
MINORIES STREET
HART STREET
FENCHURCH STREET
WHITE TOWER
TOWER STREET
MOAT
WASTE GROUND
LANTHORN TOWER
THE TOWER OF LONDON
STABLES



London, August 1485. A time of violence, turmoil and dark secrets.

King Richard III has been on the throne of England for two years.

For three decades the country has been torn apart by the conflict later known as the Wars of the Roses.

Soon Richard, of the Royal House of York, will march north to meet his sworn enemy Henry Tudor, of the House of Lancaster, in battle.

The outcome of the battle will determine who will govern England.





Chapter One

The part of London where Jack Broom lived was a seething knot of twisting streets. They were jammed with stalls and carts and animals. Even though it was the middle of a summer's day, the overhanging upper storeys of the houses meant that the spindly lanes were gloomy as evening.

Jack dodged this way and that through the maze of alleyways, sploshing through the filth and grime in his torn leather shoes. There had never been a time in Jack's life when he hadn't known these streets. He could probably find his way through them blindfolded. A left turn by the animal carcasses that hung outside a butchers, busy with flies in the drowsy heat of early

August. Then a zig-zag down the hill and a sharp cut right. He would pass through the great arched outer gateway of the Tower next, and a shiver would tingle his spine. It always did as he tried not to look up at the toothy portcullis that hung from chains just above his head. After that there were only a couple more streets and he'd be home – facing Old Mother Cobb and, likely as not, her swishy willow cane.

A sickly feeling rose in Jack's stomach. Being late home meant only one thing. *Old Mother Cobb will scream at me through a shower of spittle,* he thought. *'The afternoon is already here, and you haven't even started on grinding the pomegranate seeds!'* Her shrieks would be accompanied by a series of stinging thwacks with the cane, leaving him too sore to sit down for the rest of the day.

Jack felt in the pocket of his breeches for the four ravens' eggs. Old Mother Cobb would be glad to see those. *I'll show her how big the eggs I've collected are. She'll forget all about how late I am and–*

CRASH!

For an instant Jack was stumbling around in blackness. Bright pinpricks of light danced around him like fireflies. Before he could work out what had

happened, a large hairy hand had pulled him round by the scruff of his neck.

Jack had emerged from the warren of narrow lanes and had collided headlong with a man standing in the centre of a wide street, awash with sunlight. The man's chest was as large as an ale barrel, and his face above his beard was so red, it looked as if it might explode.

'Stand aside now!' the man blasted, his breath washing over Jack's face in a sour cloud. 'Did you not hear the cry?' His stubby fingers shoved Jack hard against the wheel of a horse-drawn cart, and Jack felt his bones rattle inside him. 'Why are you London boys always in so much of a hurry?'

'I'm sorry,' Jack gasped. 'I ...'

His words stuck in his throat when he saw the expression that crossed the man's face. What *was* that look? Suspicion, for certain. But something else too. Jack would have sworn it was recognition. *But I've never seen this man before in my life ...* Before he could think any further, the wooden rim of the cartwheel digging painfully into his shoulders brought him back to his senses.

'Hold your noise!' the man snarled at him. Then he stooped slightly so that his face was level with Jack's.

'The order was to stand aside. That applies to you too. Or is there some reason why you shouldn't show the King of England the respect he is due?'

Of course – the man was a soldier. A sword hanging from his belt momentarily caught a brilliant glint of sunlight.

The soldier starting bellowing up and down the busy street. 'The King! Make way for His Majesty King Richard, the third of that name, King of England and Lord of Ireland!'

The King! King Richard was approaching!

'Clear a path!' cried another voice from the crowd.

Along the street people ducked to either side, dragging children and animals with them. Jack gasped as he saw a small hunched figure dressed in a flowing velvet gown coming towards him on a magnificent white horse. The rider flicked a leather whip at the beast's shoulders as he weaved his way between some honking geese that had wandered from their herder.

A hand grabbed Jack's arm and he swung round to find a woman scowling at him. She was bald-headed, with teeth as black as coal. 'Boy!' she hissed. 'What do you think you're doing? It's time in the stocks for anyone who looks straight at the king! Or worse!

Don't you know that?' She knelt down and tugged at his shirt tails. 'Get down!'

The king was almost upon them. Jack fell to his knees, along with everyone else on the street, and fixed his eyes on the rough paving slabs in front of him. With a rush of noise the hooves of the king's horse clattered past just a few hands' lengths away from him. He sputtered as clods of dirt flew into his face. Jack knew that he shouldn't raise his eyes. Looking at the king was forbidden. People said he was deformed. He had a crooked spine, and that was why people called him Richard Crouchback. It was also why no one was allowed to look directly at him.

But I'm going to do it, Jack thought to himself as the last horse of the entourage trotted past. *I'm going to sneak a look!*

He raised his eyes just enough to see the receding figure of the king. From this distance, his deformity was clear. He seemed to be slumped on his horse instead of sitting on it bold and upright like his guards. His head lolled to one side as if it were too heavy for his neck. Pity surged through Jack.

People were beginning to rise to their feet now. But instead of carrying on with their business,

they gathered in tight knots. From each group of people, a jabber of talk arose like steam from a boiling pot. The king was rarely seen out on the streets. Everyone knew that whenever he was, it meant trouble.

'The invasion's coming!' the black-toothed woman fretted. 'Like everyone said it would!'

'He's just showing himself to his people, to let us know he's still in charge,' another woman hissed.

Jack's chest tightened. There had been talk all summer that Henry Tudor would launch an invasion. Jack remembered what had happened two years ago, when King Richard had tricked his way onto the throne by pushing aside the two young princes who'd had a better claim on it than he did. He remembered how Dr Vogler, his schoolmaster, had explained what was happening to him and the other boys in the school. 'These are dangerous times,' he had told them. 'Mind who you speak to and what you say.' Tension had hung in the streets like mist during those days, and Jack had watched as people were dragged away and thrown into the dreaded prison at Newgate for what seemed like no reason. Then he remembered what he was supposed to be doing. *Old Mother Cobb!*

The ravens' eggs! As he brushed the grime from his breeches to resume running home, Jack sensed the cool shadow of the soldier loom over him once again.

'Hang on. I've not finished with you yet.' Two powerful fists grabbed Jack by the shoulders.

'Please let me go.' Jack struggled. 'I'll get a whipping from my aunt if I'm late home.'

The soldier shook him. 'You best look where you're going in the future, then!'

At last the soldier let him wriggle free. Jack, breathless, looked him up and down. His hair was close-cropped and his eyes were like musket balls, small and hard. Everything about him seemed rough and spiked, like the twisted shards of iron from wrecked boats that the Thames deposited on its banks with each high tide. A thick leather tunic covered his upper body, and his muscled torso seemed to be trying to break out of it like a caged animal. On the breast of the tunic was the image of a white boar. Jack's heart skipped a beat.

'Ah, you've noticed the emblem!' The soldier thumped it proudly with his open palm. 'You know what it is?'

'The personal emblem of King Richard,' Jack replied in awe.

'That's right. And I wear it with pride!' the soldier growled. 'My name's Blaybourne. I'm not just any soldier. This emblem marks me as a member of the king's personal militia, and I will defend him to my death!' He reached under the thick covering of the cart he'd pushed Jack against earlier and pulled out a musket. 'With one of these, see?'

He jabbed the end of the musket barrel at Jack's chest so forcibly that Jack stumbled backwards and nearly lost his footing. Blaybourne let out a booming laugh. Then he swept the cart's covering right back to reveal more muskets, along with shields and pikes, stacked up in bristling piles. Jack glanced along the street. There were more soldiers and more carts, similarly piled with supplies, juddering slowly towards him. This confirmed it. *London was in danger!*

'Sparked your interest now, haven't I?' Blaybourne barked. He turned to a neighbouring cart and yanked aside its heavy cloth with a flick of his thick hand. 'Barrels of salt beef too,' he explained. 'Hungry folk, us soldiers!'

He spoke in the rough tongue of the English north country. Jack had never been out of London but he

knew the north to be a place of treacherous hills, battered by fierce winds and rain that fell in torrents. He had even heard stories of half-human monsters that lived in caves there.

'There are more of us soldiers coming every day, from King Richard's own blessed county of Yorkshire. We're his men. Loyal, we are. Glad to do his work and to defend his capital.'

Jack wondered why the soldier was so keen to tell him all this. Then he realised: he was showing off. *He's no better than a swaggering boy at school with a new dagger on his belt!* Jack thought.

'But we don't understand you London folk,' the soldier continued. 'Always in a rush. And rude with it!' The soldier delved inside one of the barrels and picked out a green object with a stalk, a little larger than his fist. 'You seen one of those before?'

Jack shook his head.

'How old are you, boy?'

'Twelve,' Jack replied.

'Hah!' the soldier scoffed. 'Twelve years old, and never seen a pear before!'

Jack frowned. 'Is it a kind of fruit?'

'Of course it is!'

Jack reached up cautiously and took the fruit in his hand. Its skin felt rough.

'King Richard loves pears,' Blaybourne said. 'These are for him.'

Jack peered closely at the pear's skin. 'It looks a bit rotten. Like an insect's got inside it.'

Blaybourne peered at it as well. 'You're right. Well, King Richard won't be wanting this one served up to him,' he said. 'Take it for yourself, boy!'

Jack felt his eyes widening. 'Is it like an apple?' he asked.

Blaybourne tipped his head back and laughed hard enough for ripples to spread across his enormous chest. 'Try it and be off with you, London boy!'

Jack crunched into the unfamiliar fruit, marvelling at the sweetness of its flesh – before he took off along the street, yelping as the soldier's tough leather boot helped him on his way.