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Opening extract from

Bearkeeper

Written by

Josh Lacy

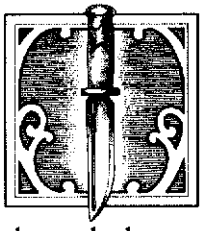
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1



One Sunday afternoon, not much more than four hundred years ago, a boy named Pip walked into the woods. He moved quickly, never pausing to look around.

When Pip first started wandering through these woods alone, at the age of five or six, they'd terrified him. Day and night, bizarre sounds echoed among the trees. Not just snapping branches and rustling leaves but weird whistles, odd coughs and all kinds of other unidentifiable noises. He used to hear footsteps behind him and see strange shapes lurking in the shadows up ahead.

Now he never felt scared. Over the years, he'd seen ferrets, toads, voles, moles, snakes, rats, wild boars and other, even stranger creatures that he could not name, but his fear had faded. Day by day, year by year, he came to

love the woods. He often got lost, but could usually find his way home quickly enough, wading through the undergrowth until he found a familiar landmark. Even the darkness lost its power to scare him. Most months, he would take advantage of the full moon and saunter through the woods at night, stopping to watch a family of deer or a foraging badger.

Just twice in the years that he had lived here, he had seen a shadowy pale shape which might have been a ghost. On both occasions it had stood between the trees for a few seconds, then melted into the air in front of him. The first time, when he told his mother about the ghost, she laughed. Since then, he'd never mentioned it to anyone.

That afternoon, as he walked through the woods, Pip saw nothing but birds chirruping wildly, and a single fox drinking from the stream.

He reached the clearing. Sunlight glistened on the wet leaves. A heavy rain had fallen overnight and the grass was still slippery. Pip would have to be careful. He didn't want to fall over and sprain his ankle or break his wrist.

He pulled his knife from its leather scabbard. Under his palm, he could feel the familiar pattern on the handle, the five-pointed star carved into the wood. He ran the fingers of his left hand along the blade, testing its sharpness. Yesterday morning he had sharpened it himself with a file, and it was still perfect.

He raised the knife, took up his position and waited for them to come. They would be here soon.

The first of them walks through the trees and emerges into the clearing. He is a heavyset man with a beard. Gripping his long sword with both hands, he stands opposite Pip.

They look into one another's eyes.

This is what Pip knows:

The more you have learnt about your opponent, the better you can fight him. You must watch him constantly. Study him. Search for his weaknesses. If he's brawny, use your speed. If he's scrawny, use your strength. If he has a limp in his left leg or a kink in his right arm, aim all your blows on that side.

Pip watches and waits.

Without any warning, hoping to take Pip by surprise, the bearded man hauls his sword into the air.

The bearded man is quick, but Pip is quicker. Twisting his body, he thrusts his knife forward and parries the blow.

A knife can often outwit a sword if you know how to use it, turning your opponent's strength against himself. The bearded man stumbles awkwardly, thrown off balance by the weight of his own weapon, and loses his footing.

Pip takes his chance. He plunges the knife into his enemy's throat. With a shriek, the bearded man staggers backwards, clutching his neck.

Pip turns a half-circle. Another man is already running out of the trees, armed with a short sword and a small round shield. At the last possible moment Pip ducks, letting the blade whistle over his head, then thrusts, slashing his opponent's fingers. Shocked by the pain, the

man drops his sword. Pip stabs him twice between the ribs. *Squelch! Squelch!* The man falls to the ground and writhes on the grass, yelling, but Pip hardly hears him. He's whirled round already, turning to face the next of his enemies.

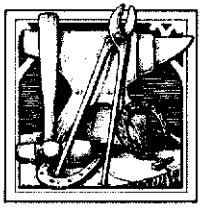
They keep coming. More and more of them. Short or tall, thin or fat, heavily armoured or bare-chested, they are all well armed. Between them, they carry every possible variety of weapon. Spears lunge at him. Swords slash him. Axes hack him. Voices taunt him, trying to distract him, but Pip's concentration is pure and clear. He ducks, darts, stabs and slices, then turns on the spot, knife raised, ready for the next one.

If you'd happened to be walking through the woods that afternoon, you would have seen a strange sight.

A boy was moving around a clearing. He was short and skinny. He had brown hair and brown eyes. His face was red and he was panting, but he never stopped to catch his breath.

In his right hand he was holding a short, sharp knife. He darted forward, plunged the knife into the empty air and twisted the blade. He jumped back, ducked, bent his body and thrust the knife in another direction. Once again he twisted the blade, withdrew and turned. And then he was off again, his hand carving the air, his feet dancing on the grass, his knife stabbing yet another imaginary opponent.

2



Six days a week Pip worked in the smithy with his mother's husband. Sunday was their day off. No one worked on the Sabbath.

Every Sunday morning the whole family walked to Mildmay, the nearest village, half an hour away, and went to church. On Sunday afternoons Pip was free. He could have picked blackberries, paddled in the stream, practised writing his alphabet or just fallen asleep in the long grass. Instead he walked into the woods, found a quiet spot and practised fighting with his father's knife. He spent the whole afternoon there, conjuring up opponents, giving them swords and spears, knives and axes, shields and helmets.

He was practising for the fighting competition at Bartholomew Fair. One day he was going to win it. Just

like his dad did. That's what drove him onward through that long hot Sunday afternoon, ignoring the heat and his thirst and all the bits of his body begging him to stop. That's why he kept imagining new opponents for himself, clothing them and arming them, then watching them stroll out of the forest and take up their positions opposite him.

One August, a few years from now, he was going to walk to London, find Bartholomew Fair, pay his penny and enter the fighting competition. To win, he would have to defeat experienced swordsmen and battle-hardened soldiers. Against them, he would have only three weapons: his speed, his cunning and his father's knife.

Apart from the knife, Pip had nothing of his father's. He wasn't even sure that he could remember what his dad looked like. He had a few vague memories of George Stone's face and voice, although he couldn't help worrying that he'd invented them, stealing bits of other children's fathers for himself, borrowing the sound of a voice, the smell of wet cloth, the feeling of a hand on the top of his head.

Seven years ago Pip's father had walked out of the house and never returned. At first Pip's mother, Isobel, had simply said that George Stone had gone away on business. He would be back next week, she promised. Next week had turned into next month and then next year, but George never came back. He stayed away on business. What was his business? Where had he gone? No one seemed to know.

A couple of years after George had left the house for the last time, Isobel knelt beside Pip. "I have to tell you some bad news," she said. "Something horrible has happened. Your father is dead."

Pip stared at his mother. He didn't know what to say. He had a lot of questions but didn't ask any of them, just kept quiet and listened as she explained that George Stone had been killed in a brawl, stabbed almost accidentally while defending a friend. Through his own strong sense of loyalty, George had been drawn into a pointless fight and murdered.

"I want you to have this," said Isobel. She was holding a small knife in a leather scabbard. "It was his." She pressed the knife into Pip's hands.

Against the soft skin of his palm, he felt the five-pointed star carved into the knife's wooden handle.

A few weeks later a man moved into the cottage. Pip knew him already. His name was Samuel and he was the village smith. He shod horses, sharpened knives and made scythes for the farmers. He was rumoured to be rich, a miser who made lots of money but never spent anything.

"This is your new father," said Isobel.

Samuel smiled. "I think we're going to be good friends, Philip."

Pip stared up at the smith, wrinkling his nose and saying nothing. He didn't want a new father. He wanted his own father back again.

Since then George Stone's name had hardly ever been mentioned in the house.

You don't speak of the dead. You let them sleep in peace.

That's what his mother said anyway. Pip felt differently. He quizzed villagers about his father, gathering facts and anecdotes, never quite sure which were true. George Stone was a soldier, said someone, fighting for Queen Elizabeth against the Spanish. George Stone owned a pet parrot, said someone else. George Stone sailed across the ocean to strange islands in the New World and met black-skinned savages who had never seen a white man before. George Stone captured Spanish galleons laden with tobacco and chocolate, silver and gold. When George Stone returned to Europe he travelled to the Low Countries with the English army and fought alongside Sir Philip Sidney. During one of their battles, Sir Philip was shot in the thigh and died from loss of blood. That was why George Stone insisted on calling his own son Philip.

Of all the stories, there was only one which Pip felt sure must be true. When George Stone left the army and got married, he didn't have enough money to buy somewhere to live, so he entered the fighting competition at Bartholomew Fair.

Every August, thousands of people poured into London to celebrate the feast of St Bartholomew. They took over Smithfield, an empty pasture on the north-western edge of the city, just outside the walls. For most of the year Smithfield was used as a cattle market, but for a week each summer, starting on St Bartholomew's Day, the twenty-fourth of August, the enormous field was transformed into Bartholomew Fair, a riot of buying and selling, eating and

drinking, performances and competitions. The most popular was the fighting competition. For an admission fee of one penny, anyone could enter, and the winner took home ten pounds.

Ten pounds might not sound like much to you, but it was a lot of money in 1601. Most working men – butchers, bakers, farm labourers – would be lucky to earn that much in a whole year. That's why several hundred men travelled from as far as fifty miles away carrying their weapons, and queued up at dawn to pay their penny. A crowd gathered to watch. As the day progressed, and only the better fighters were left in the competition, the crowd got bigger.

Most years, someone died. Many more lost a finger or an eye. And one was crowned champion.

About fifteen years before, Pip had been told, George Stone came to Bartholomew Fair and entered the fighting competition, armed with nothing but a knife. The other fighters laughed at him. A knife, they said. A knife! What are you going to do with that? Cut up your lunch?

George Stone just smiled and said nothing.

The other men showed him their weapons. One had a broadsword, almost as tall as himself. Another had a long-handled axe, big enough to chop down a tree with a single blow. A third had an Italian rapier forged by Antonio Petruccio, one of the finest swordmakers in Europe.

George Stone never said a word, just smiled and kept hold of his knife, fingering the five-pointed star carved into its wooden handle.

The competitors were called forward, two by two. The

crowd cheered and whistled. The fighters stood opposite one another, staring into their opponent's eyes, checking for signs of strength and weakness. When the referee shouted "Go!", they leapt forward and started fighting.

By the end of the day, George Stone was covered in cuts and bruises. His nose was broken. His clothes were soaked with blood, his own and other men's. But he had won ten pounds. Enough to buy a home for himself, his wife and the baby growing inside her womb.

3



When the sun had sunk low in the sky and the shadows had lengthened, Pip noticed he was tired. He slid his father's knife into its scabbard, left the clearing and strolled slowly through the woods towards home.

On the way, he glimpsed three deer, a hart and two hinds, but they bounded through the trees before he could get a good look.

He stopped to watch a scattered group of rabbits nibbling at the long grass. The nearest lifted its ears and tensed but didn't run away. Pip stood very still. After a moment, the rabbit relaxed and went back to its meal.

As Pip came closer to the house, he saw wisps of smoke rising above the trees and smelt cooking meat. Suddenly he felt hungry. On Sundays supper was always good. He

quickened his pace and jogged to the door.

All his life Pip had lived in the same small cottage surrounded by trees, not much more than thirty miles north of London. Till he was five, he lived there with both his parents. Then he lived there for a couple of years with his mother, just the two of them. Now Pip shared the cottage with his mother and her second husband, Samuel Smith, and their two young daughters, Bridget, aged one, and Susannah, who was almost four.

Pip ducked through the low doorway and went into the main room, which served as the workshop, the bedroom, the kitchen, the living room and the dining room. A pot bubbled on the fire, tended by his mother. She looked up and smiled. "Hello, lambkin. Where have you been?"

"In the forest," said Pip.

"Doing what?"

"Nothing."

"Pip." His mother grinned. "You've been gone for hours. What have you really been doing?"

"Just walking." Pip shrugged his shoulders. "I saw a good place for rabbits. Might go back and catch a couple tomorrow."

"That would be nice. We haven't had rabbit for ages." Isobel stirred the pot with a long wooden spoon. "Are you hungry?"

"Quite."

"We'll have supper soon."

Once a week Pip's mother bought a chicken or a hunk of mutton from one of the farmers in Mildmay. They ate

the meat on Sunday. On Monday morning Isobel boiled up the bones, adding onions, carrots, leeks, turnips or a few cloves of garlic, making a soup which kept them fed for several days, its taste thinner and weaker with each meal.

There were no shops in Mildmay – Pip had never been to a shop in his life – but you could buy just about whatever you needed from one of the villagers. For a penny or two someone was always happy to sell you a chicken, some apples, a big bunch of onions or whatever they happened to be harvesting. Anything else you could buy from one of the pedlars who arrived every few days. There was a weekly market in the nearest town, which you could reach in two or three hours at a brisk walk, but the residents of Mildmay rarely bothered. Many of the villagers went their entire lives without venturing more than a mile from their homes.

After supper, Isobel put Bridget and Susannah to bed. Samuel sat by the fire's dying embers, warming his feet. Pip said goodnight and went into the store, his bedroom, a tiny windowless space tucked into the back of the workshop. He had no candle, so he felt his way from the door to his bed. He pulled off his boots and sat down on the rectangle of cloth that served as his mattress.

Pip was used to the darkness. Before the invention of electricity most people went to bed at sunset. The rich used lanterns and candles, but the poor just adjusted the

routines of their lives to follow the sun, sleeping more in winter, less in summer.

He knelt beside his bed, clasped his hands together and muttered a few words, thanking God for the gift of another day. When his prayer was finished, he undressed and lay down, sliding his father's knife under his pillow.

4



A couple of months ago I went to Mildmay. I caught the train from London. The journey takes about twenty-five minutes, stopping at all the small suburban stations in between. Just enough time to drink a cup of coffee and read the paper.

I don't suppose you've ever been to Mildmay?

No?

I'm not surprised. There's not much reason to. Unless you live there, of course. Or have family who do.

Oh, there's nothing wrong with Mildmay. It's a nice little town. People are polite and friendly. Neighbours always have time for a chat. Kids play football and cricket in the streets. The gardens are packed with flowers. There are lots of good shops and some excellent schools. On Saturday nights a few rowdy drunks sometimes start fights

in the high street, but no one goes home with more than a bloody nose. Most of the time Mildmay is calm and peaceful. If you were looking for a quiet place to raise a family, you couldn't pick a better spot.

That day I walked round Mildmay for an entire afternoon, searching for something that Pip might have seen.

I wasn't expecting miracles. Four hundred years is a long time. I was sure that no trace of the Smiths' cottage would have survived, but I hoped I might be able to find something, anything, that would have been there when Pip was.

After I had walked for more than three hours, searching street after street, I began to think that my search was pointless. Everything looked so shiny and new.

Over the past few decades, since the arrival of cars, the landscape of England has been completely changed. Roads and houses have smothered the countryside. Where there were once fields and woods, there is now concrete and tarmac.

My searches weren't utterly hopeless. I saw a few gnarled, ancient, crooked trees which might have been saplings when Pip lived here. Down by the river there was a moss-covered wall made from great lumps of old stone. Pip might have watched a farmer rolling them out of his field, clearing a path for his plough and his horses. And then I found St John's.

I had already seen Mildmay's main church, a large Victorian building which hadn't been at all interesting. Late

in the afternoon, just as I was beginning to think about going back to the station, I was walking through a quiet part of town, a long way from the shops or the main roads. Tucked away at the end of a residential street there was a small church, surrounded by an overgrown graveyard.

St John's had the solid shape of English churches which have squatted in the same spot for the past seven or eight hundred years. I wanted to go inside and see if the vicar had written a little pamphlet describing its history, as vicars often do, but the big wooden door was locked. In the summer St John's probably saw a few marriages, and the odd funeral in the winter, but I couldn't imagine that many people worshipped there regularly.

I wandered through the graveyard, trying to make out the names and dates carved into the ancient stones. Most of them were illegible. Years of neglect had almost wiped them clean. But that didn't really matter. I had found what I was looking for. I could see Pip strolling through the churchyard on a Sunday morning, walking just behind Isobel and Samuel, making faces at the other kids from the village.

If you do ever to Mildmay, you should definitely have a look at St John's. It's a nice little church with a peaceful graveyard and some pretty yew trees. You can do what I did. Stand near the entrance. Listen to the birdsong. Feel the breeze on your face. You can tell yourself that you're standing exactly where Pip stood and doing exactly what he did, every Sunday, four hundred years ago.

5



On Monday morning, like every other Monday morning, Pip worked alongside Samuel, following his stepfather's orders. He wiped blades, tidied the workshop and kept the fire roaring. But that Monday, unlike any other Monday, they didn't work in the afternoon. That Monday was different.

When Pip woke up in the morning he lay in bed for a few minutes, listening to the sound of voices in the other room. Reluctantly, knowing he would get in trouble if he lazed around much longer, he rolled out of the warmth and pulled on his clothes.

In the workshop, Samuel was sitting on the floor, entertaining the girls, doing tricks with a wooden top. Bridget giggled and clapped her hands. Susannah said, "My turn! My turn! It's my turn now!"

"Morning," said Pip.

The girls looked up briefly and smiled at their brother, then returned their attention to the spinning top. Samuel said, "Morning, Pip. Sleep well?"

"Yes, thanks," said Pip.

"No more nightmares?"

"No."

"Good. We'll have breakfast in a minute."

Susannah tugged her father's sleeve, asking him to spin the top again. Pip walked outside. He had a pee in the woods, then hunched over a barrel of rainwater to wash his face. The cold water shocked him fully awake.

Pip liked his stepfather, but couldn't help feeling a bit contemptuous of him. Although Samuel Smith had fought in a few battles, he'd never actually killed a man.

Barely out of his teens, Samuel had been plucked from the village by a band of roving recruiters, enlisted into the Queen's army and shipped across the sea to Ireland, where he stayed for a couple of years. As Samuel himself was happy to admit, he had been a reluctant recruit, always trying to avoid trouble, spending most of his time working in the smithy, reshoeing horses and repairing broken weapons, dreaming about the day that he could return to Mildmay and sleep in his own bed.

If Pip went to war, he'd want to fight. Of course he would. That was the point of a war. He'd try to kill as many men as possible. He often lay awake at night, dreaming about battles, imagining himself striding forward with a sword clasped in his right hand, a shield strapped to his

left arm. He saw himself cutting a path through the enemy, swiping with his long blade, lopping limbs from anyone unlucky enough to come near him, leaving a trail of blood and fingers.

What little Samuel had learnt during those two years in the army he had now passed on to his stepson, showing him how to fight with a broadsword, a rapier, a spear, an axe and a knife. Pip learnt fast. Though he was half the size of his stepfather, he usually won their duels. He was more aggressive, more determined and gradually growing more skilful, taking his stepfather's few tricks and turning them against him, developing and improving what he had been taught. Pip was only twelve years old but, according to Samuel, he could already fight like an assassin.

After breakfast – bread and water, just as always – Isobel cleared away the dishes, then took her daughters outside. They would play in the garden while she weeded the vegetables and fed the hens.

Pip thrust some kindling on the fire and fanned the flames until they were blazing fiercely. The heat was astonishing. That's the worst part of being a smith: the constant heat, frying your eyes, scalding your skin, making your hair frizz. If the fire isn't hot enough the metal won't be bendy, and you can't shape it properly, which is why smiths have to keep piling wood on the flames, even on the hottest summer days.

Pip and Samuel spent the morning working together, sharpening some knives and fitting the handle on an old axe.

Just before lunch a tall thin man walked through the door, followed by a short fat man.

Pip stared at the two men and wondered who they were. Strangers didn't often come to the smithy unless they were selling something, and these two didn't look like salesmen. Pedlars usually wore old, dirty clothes, but these men were smartly dressed in clean black jerkins and leather breeches. They didn't have sacks slung over their shoulders. Nor did they start talking as soon as they came through the door, promising a bargain price on a saint's bone or offering a taste of some new herb from the other side of the world, just a penny a leaf. So, if they weren't selling anything, why were they here? What did they want?

One of them, the taller, had a lean body and an even leaner face, with high cheekbones and a cruel mouth. Pip immediately thought of a nickname for him. The Weasel. Yes, that was perfect. He did look like a weasel, thin and vicious, stealing eggs from a bird's nest or sneaking through the grass in pursuit of a mouse.

The other man was short and plump. Piggy little eyes peered out of his fat face. His belly flopped over the leather belt tied round his middle. He had wild hair, a straggly beard and thick, strong arms. Pip tried to think of a nickname for him too. Fatso. Cake-Lover. Lardy. Big Guts. Blubbermouth. They were all good names, but none of them were quite right. *I'll call him Pigface for now*, thought Pip. *Till I can think of something better.*

The Weasel glanced around the workshop, then pointed

his long forefinger at Pip's stepfather. "Are you Samuel Smith?"

"I am," said Samuel. "And who might you be?"

"We've travelled a long way to see you," said the Weasel, as if he hadn't even heard Samuel's question. "We've been told that no one in England makes a short sword with greater skill than yourself."

"Sadly that's not true," said Samuel. "I'm a smith, not a swordmaker. If you're looking for someone to make a sword, I can give you some names. Where do you come from?"

"London," said the Weasel.

Pip looked at the Weasel with more interest. Maybe later, when his stepfather was calculating prices for whatever the men eventually decided to buy, he would have a chance to quiz the Weasel about life in London. He didn't often meet people who had actually been there. He loved hearing their stories.

Samuel said, "You'll find a hundred good swordmakers in London. Better than me. Cheaper, too."

"You don't make swords?"

"The farmers round here don't have much use for modern weaponry. We mostly do knives." Samuel gestured at the blades arranged in a line on the floor. "Some scythes. The occasional plough."

The Weasel reached to his scabbard and pulled out a short sword. "What do you think of this? Is it a good sword?"

"Why are you asking me?"

"I'd like your professional opinion." He offered the sword to Samuel, handle first. "Go on, tell me what you think."

Samuel took the sword. He turned it over, then over again. He sniffed the handle, ran his finger down the blade and swung the sword through the air, back and forth, then handed it to the Weasel. "Not bad," said Samuel.

"Not bad? That cost me ten shillings."

"It's worth two," said Samuel. "Three at the most."

The Weasel laughed. "You see – you do know about swords. He said you did."

"He?"

"You have an excellent reputation, my friend. People were talking about you in the Bear Garden."

"About me?"

"Yes."

"I am surprised to hear that," said Samuel.

"Oh, yes, they told me all about you," said the Weasel. "They said there's a smith who lives in the woods. He makes a lot of money, but he never spends it. Has a bag of gold hidden in the house."

"That's a good story," said Samuel. "It would be even better if it was true."

"What's not true about it?"

"I have no gold."

"I don't believe you."

Samuel shrugged his shoulders. "Believe what you like."

"I will," said the Weasel. He took a step towards Samuel and lifted the sword, pointing the tip of the blade at

Samuel's chest. "I believe you have a bag of gold hidden in this house and I'd like you to give it to me. Right now."

At that moment, Pigface eased his sword from his scabbard and took up a position near the door, his bulky body blocking the exit, preventing anyone from escaping.

Pip stayed very still.

When you're being robbed, the worst thing you can do is make a sudden movement.

Keep calm, Samuel always said. *Don't panic. Wait for them to make a mistake. Don't worry, they will.*

And he was right – they always did.

Robbers came to the workshop every two or three months, attracted by the prospect of a wealthy smith working in the woods, half an hour's walk from the nearest village, out of earshot or eyesight of nosy neighbours. Most of them were just young lads, sixteen or seventeen years old, who had got bored of working in the fields and thought they could make some easy money. It was their first or second robbery. They didn't have a clue what they were doing. They were nervous and aggressive, and usually made their first mistake after a couple of minutes.

"Come on, my friend," said the Weasel. He didn't sound nervous or aggressive and he looked as if he knew exactly what he was doing. "Where's the gold?"

"People tell a lot of tales," said Samuel, shaking his head and smiling as if he hadn't noticed the sharp sword aimed at the middle of his chest. Pip could tell that his stepfather was making a great effort to stay calm. He wondered if the

Weasel could tell that too. "Who's been telling you these crazy stories?"

"A friend of yours," said the Weasel.

"Who?"

"Just a friend."

"I don't have many friends," said Samuel. "What was his name?"

"George Stone."

For a moment, Pip thought the Weasel had said *George Stone*. But that was impossible. His ears must have been tricking him.

Then Pip realized that he must have understood correctly, because Samuel had heard the same words too.

"George Stone is dead," said Samuel. "He died five years ago."

The Weasel smiled. "If he's dead, how did I see him last Friday?"

Pip stared at the Weasel. He could feel a strange sensation racing through his body, somewhere between terror and exhilaration. Could it be true? Could it?

Samuel said, "Maybe you saw a ghost."

"Then he's a ghost who owes me thirty pounds," said the Weasel. "Come on, my friend. Where's the gold?"

"I've told you already," said Samuel. "I have no gold."

The Weasel must be lying, thought Pip. *It's not true. It's not possible.*

For as long as he could remember, his existence had been defined by the death of his father. He was the boy without a dad. That was who he was, how he thought

about himself. But if his father was still alive . . . What would that mean?

If his father was still alive, where was he? In the Bear Garden? No, that made no sense. If George Stone was in London, only thirty miles away, wouldn't he have come to Mildmay?

Of course he would. Unless he'd been in prison. Or lost his memory. Or been forced to fight in a private army. Or. . .

No, no. The Weasel must be lying. That was the simplest explanation and therefore the best. He looked like the type of man who lied. He had a liar's eyes, thin and narrow.

The Weasel took another pace towards Samuel. Now the sword's tip was touching Samuel's chest, right above his heart. "Come on, my friend," said the Weasel. "You got his wife. You can pay his debts. Where's the gold?"

Samuel shrugged his shoulders almost sadly. "If I was rich, would I really be living here, mending knives?"

"Don't lie to me, my friend," said the Weasel, nudging the blade into Samuel's chest. "The gold. Where is it?"

Samuel was forty-three years old. He had grey hair and a bald patch on the top of his head. His skin was ruddy and coarse from years of working at the forge, standing over the hot flames. He was no match for two strong young men armed with swords. In a quiet, melancholy voice, he said, "Philip?"

"Yes," said Pip.

"Fetch the box."

"Right now?"

"Yes. Now."

Pip nodded and walked towards the door. He knew exactly what Samuel meant. They had talked about *the box* before.

The Weasel smiled and relaxed his arm, lowering the sword from Samuel's chest.

There, thought Pip. *Finally. He's made his first mistake.*