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Chapter One
Boy and Boar

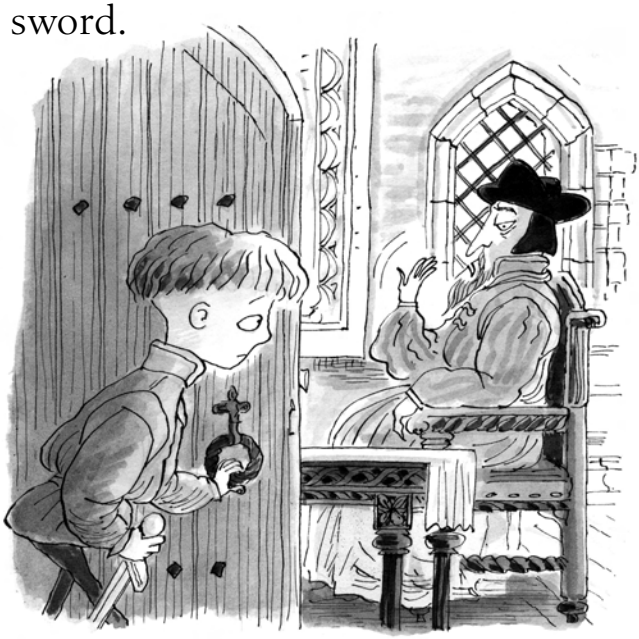
England, 1485

Sir Thomas Stanley sat at the window and enjoyed the late-summer sun. It shone through the diamond panes of glass and on to his velvet jacket the colour of rust. He chewed on a peach and looked out over the fine garden of his castle.



There was a soft knock at the door and Sir Thomas called, "Enter!"

A boy pushed open the door – a fair-haired, pale boy in a green tunic. He was carrying a wooden sword.



"Ah, George, my son! Come in, come in!" Sir Thomas said, waving a hand.

The boy stood in front of his father's chair. "You sent for me, Father?"



"I did, George, I did!" The man smiled. It was a wide smile and as honest as a snake that is just about to swallow a rabbit.

"I was practising my riding with a lance. Robin was teaching me."

"Good boy, good boy. We need all the knights we can get to fight our wars. There will always be wars and there will always be knights! Ha! Now, my dear, dear son..."

George blinked. His father had never called him 'dear' before. In fact, he thought his father hardly

knew he was alive and living in the same castle. At dinner, his father sat with his favourite knights and ladies at the top table. George sat with the children and the squires.



"As you know," Sir Thomas was saying, "when a boy reaches your age, he is sent away to live with another family. It's a chance for a lad to see how other great families do things ... get to see other parts of England ... meet new people."

"Yes, Father."

"Now, I have the most thrilling news. It is so exciting I can hardly believe it myself, my dear, dear son."

"You are sending me away to serve as a squire to a knight."

"Not just *any* knight."

"A great knight?"

"Not just *any* great knight!" Sir Thomas Stanley chuckled. "You, my dear son, are going to serve in the palace of the king himself!"

"The king?" George said. "Why?"

"Why? Why what?"

"Why me? The king has thousands of fine families to choose from. Why me?"



Sir Thomas shifted in his seat as if it were hot. "Don't ask questions like that, boy. Now ... turn around and kneel before King Richard III!"

George turned slowly. Sitting in a darkened corner of the room, was a man with skin as pale as plaster. Dark eyes burned in a sad face with

thin lips. The man was dressed in black. It was plain, black wool, not the fine silk George would expect from a king. Only a badge in the shape of a white boar on his riding cloak and a large golden ring on his finger gave some colour.

The king sat hunched in the chair and stared at George in a way that made the boy shiver.



A tall man was standing behind the chair. He smiled a sneering smile. George fell to one knee and bowed before the king.



King Richard spoke in a harsh voice. “Sir Richard Ratcliffe here will be your keeper,” he said.

The king stood up. He was not a tall man and he walked with a limp. He passed the kneeling boy and went to stand beside Sir Thomas. "He will do," he said.

Sir Thomas wrung his hands. "Oh, thank you, sire."

"Do not let me down, Thomas Stanley, or you know what will happen," he said quietly, and his voice was hard as frost.

Sir Thomas smiled a frightened smile and bowed low. Then the king was gone.

Ratcliffe slapped the boy on his back. "Get your servant – what's his name? Robin? Get him to pack your saddlebags. We ride for Nottingham Castle as soon as you are ready."

George hurried to the door.

"Goodbye, George," Sir Thomas said. There was something in the way he said it that made George think he meant 'Goodbye ... for ever'.

Chapter Two
Tudor and Traitor

Robin groaned as he packed George Stanley's saddlebags. Then he spoke a curious rhyme:

"*The Rat, the Cat, and Lovell the Dog,*
Rule all England under the Hog."



"What does that mean?" George asked.

Robin shook his head. He was an old man, wise in the ways of teaching a knight, but feeble in body now. "I shouldn't have said that! But ... but the Rat is the man you've just met ... Sir Richard Ratcliffe – one of King Richard's most trusted knights. The Cat is another ... Sir William Catesby. And Lovell is Lord Francis Lovell ... the king's favourite."



"They rule England?"

"With the help of the Hog – that's King Richard himself," Robin whispered.

"You can't call the king a hog!" George whispered back.

"It's his badge – a wild boar – a hog," Robin explained.



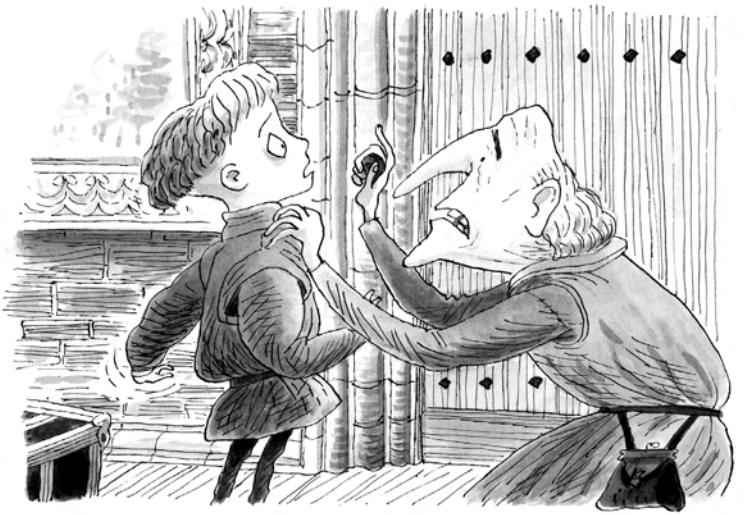
"Robin?"

"Yes, Master George."

"Why are we whispering?"

"Ah ... the man who made up that rhyme about the Rat, the Cat, and Lovell the Dog, was called Collingham. When the king heard about it, he had Collingham executed. So never call Ratcliffe the Rat!"

The old servant gripped the boy by the shoulders. "You are heading into terrible danger, Master George."



George shook his head.

"I'm going to train to be a knight. I may be knocked off my horse once or twice, but it's not real danger!" he smiled.

Robin did not return the smile. "Is that what your father told you?" he asked.

"Yes," George said. "Why? Would father lie to me? What is the truth?"

The door to George's room was open and Ratcliffe stood there with his sour mouth turned down at the corners. "Truth about what?"



George had learned Robin's lessons well – a knight does not show fear. "What is the truth about my journey to Nottingham?"

Ratcliffe glared at the boy. "England is in terrible danger," he said, and he sat on a stool by the door. He took out his dagger and used the point to clean his nails as he talked.

"*Danger*?" George asked.

"There is an enemy of the king called Henry Tudor – he has landed in Wales and he is gathering an army. He wants to take the throne from King Richard."

The boy gasped. "And the king wants *me* to fight?"

Ratcliffe sneered. "No, the king wants your *father* to fight. Your father and your uncle Will can command five or six thousand men. The king needs those men in his army. There is a great battle coming.

One of the greatest England has ever seen. King Richard has to win it."

"He'll win with my father's help," George said. He had seen the soldiers in the fields outside the castle, and watched them train, with the archers sending so many arrows into the sky that the sun turned dark.



Knights practised their fighting on horseback and on foot – swinging swords and axes and heavy clubs they called maces. They rode back into the castle each night to rest and seemed happy. The Stanley army was ready to fight.



Sir Richard Ratcliffe stood up and placed the knife point under the boy's chin. "Yes, young George. With your father's help we *will* win ... but what if your father does *not* help?"



"Not help?"

"What if your father turned traitor and fought for Henry Tudor? Then we would lose. You see the problem?"

"Why would my father fight for Henry Tudor?"

Ratcliffe nodded. “I suppose they don’t tell you things like that. Henry Tudor is your father’s stepson ... *your* stepbrother. Sir Thomas may switch sides and fight for Henry. So, we need a *hostage*.” The knife tip pricked the soft skin of George’s throat. “And if your father betrays King Richard ... then you know what will happen?”

Suddenly George *did* know. “You will kill me?”

This time, Ratcliffe gave a real, wide smile. “Oh, yes, little George. We will kill you!”