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Opening extract from

Treason

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treason

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The year is 1539. Henry VIII is King of England. All three of his wives, Katherine of Aragon, Anne Boleyn and Jane Seymour are dead. He has three children: Mary, Elizabeth and the long-awaited heir to his throne, Edward. Henry has broken away from the Church of Rome because the Pope would not allow him to divorce his first wife. Anyone who refuses to accept that he is the Supreme Head of the Church of England is accused of an offence that is punishable by death.

Treason.

The drowning

We jumped down from our horses and ran ahead of Father along the shore. Sand whipped into our faces. Waves hurled themselves against the rocks, sending cascades of spray high into the air, then rolled across the sand like hungry dogs, snuffling into every hole and hollow.

'I'll race you to the cave!' I gasped over my shoulder. Matthew strode on past me. An extra high wave filled his boots and he jumped sideways onto a boulder, waving his arms to keep his balance. I scrambled up after him and we staggered from rock to rock towards the cave.

'Don't go any further!' Father shouted. He had his hands cupped round his mouth. 'The tide's too high. It's dangerous.'

We ignored him. It was too exciting now to stop. We were above the waves, but the water curled round our feet and bursts of spray soaked right through our heavy clothes.

'We'll never make it to the cave,' I panted.

'We'll have to,' Matthew laughed. 'We're surrounded. Can't go back. Have to go on.'

'Come back!' Father shouted again.

Behind him, where the sand was till dry, Ned Porritt

the stable lad stood clinging onto the reins of the horses. He was hopping from one foot to the other. 'Master Matthew, Master William!' he mouthed. 'Come back!'

Matthew laughed across at me. 'That's got them worried. Not scared, are you?'

'Of course not!'

'Then follow me. Onward, ever onward!'

'I still think we should try to go back,' I said. I turned to look back at my father, and at that moment a tower of sea smashed against the rock, slamming me off balance. I flung my arms out as I toppled forwards, and grabbed wildly at my brother's sleeve. Then we both plunged helplessly into the sea.

I was being rushed along on the back of my pony. My eyes kept opening and shutting. I saw sky with huge clouds, and spatters of leaves and blinding sun, and black shadows. I saw the archway that led into the house, and the blue-painted wood of the ceiling above the stairs, and the dark curtains that draped over my bed. I saw my sister Margery's white anxious face peering down at me. I saw light and dark and light again. I heard muffled voices, and Father, far, far away, saying, 'I tried to save him. I tried, I tried. I could only save one of them.'

But which one? I tried to say, and couldn't. Am I alive, or am I dead? The voices were spinning away from me, fainter and fainter.

'Master Willim, Master Willim, wake up now. Sit up, come on, I'll help you.'

I opened my eyes. Nurse Joan had pulled back the

curtain from around my bed and was easing her arm around my shoulders. My head and my arms felt too heavy, my chest was tight and painful. I could hear myself moaning.

'That's a good boy. Have this food I've brought you, and you'll feel much better.' Joan pushed a cushion behind my back as I struggled to sit up. I took the wooden bowl and spoon and tried to swallow the salty gruel, but it came back up my throat again. I pushed the bowl away and sank back onto the pillow. Something had happened. I tried to remember what it was, and couldn't. Nurse Joan watched me gravely, as if she was waiting for me to speak. I couldn't find the words. What was it? What had happened?

She sighed and stood up. 'I'll send Stephen in to clean you up,' she said.

'Where's my father?'

'In chapel. Praying with Brother John. They've been there all day, and the vigil will go on all night, so don't ask for him.' She waited again as if she expected me to say something, and then turned to go.

'And Matthew?'

Nurse Joan stifled a sob and hurried out of the room, leaving the door open for the old servant Stephen. But it was Margery who ran in, as if she had been hovering outside the door all the time.

'Don't you know? Hasn't she told you?' Tears were streaming down her cheeks.

'What? What's happened?'

'Matthew's dead. He's drowned, Will.'

'You are alive'

In the weeks that followed, I hardly saw my father. I wanted to be with him; I wanted him to comfort me, to tell me it was all right, to make things better again. But it wasn't all right, and it never would be again, and Father kept away from me. Matthew hadn't been found, and Father went down to the shore every day, alone, watching. He loved Matthew more than any of us; we knew that. Nurse Joan told us he was breaking in half with grief. There was a weight of silence in the old Hall, and when Father came home in the evenings he walked on his own in the dark gardens as if he couldn't bear to be in the house with us. He had scarcely spoken to me or to Margery, hardly even looked at us. Our meals were sent to us in our rooms. I had to look across at the empty bed that Matthew and I used to share. I drew the curtains round it, but then the stillness scared me so much that I opened them again. The house was so quiet without his boisterous laughter that Margery and I hardly dared speak to each other, hardly dared cross the creaking floorboards between our rooms.

After the first month, Brother John asked me to go and see him in the rose garden outside the chapel. He was my father's cousin, and he used to live in a monastery,

before King Henry closed them all down and took their land and money to pay for his war with France. He was our tutor now. Matthew and I used to meet him in the rose garden every morning after Mass, before our lessons started.

'The fresh air will bring colour to your cheeks and light to your eyes,' he always said, in Latin. 'Healthy boys make healthy scholars.' He liked us to talk in Latin most of the time, but it was very hard, especially before breakfast. Sometimes he would notice how much we were struggling and he'd drop into English and tease us with a riddle.

It was still winter, and the grass was sharp and fat with ice. Brother John was bending down, hands on knees, looking at something on the ground.

'Something here has made me think of a riddle for you,' he said. 'I swim, but am no fish. I have legs, but am no man. When I'm full-grown, I leap across the land, but am no hare. What am I?'

I wasn't in the mood for riddles. Besides, I wasn't very good at them. Matthew was always the one to guess the answer first. He used to whisper it to Brother John, and then wrestle gleefully on the ground with me till I guessed the answer too, or until he shouted it down my ear.

'Come on William,' Brother John coaxed.

'I've no idea,' I said at last. 'Tell me.'

'Ah no. It's no satisfaction, if you're told the answer. Look at this now, what do you make of it?'

I squatted down next to him. There was a patch of ice across the path, but it was beginning to thaw in the pale sun. The surface ice was thin and hard, but

underneath it moving water squeezed and bubbled in dark blobs.

'You'd think it was alive, wouldn't you?' Brother John said. 'You'd think it was full of living creatures squirming to be let free.'

I watched the black wriggling shapes. 'They look like tadpoles.'

Brother John clapped me on the back. 'Exactly! Nothing in this world is quite as it seems.' He stood up and looked down at me. 'Death is not the end, William. Your brother is with his maker. He will have eternal rest. You are alive, and you bring hope to your father.'

'My father doesn't talk to me any more.'

'He will. He will come out of his grief, and you will be the one to help him. You are *alive*. Remember that. Remember it always. While there's life, there's hope. Who said that?'

I fumbled for the answer. No Matthew to prompt me or to try to beat me to it. 'Cicero?'

'Exactly – one of the greatest Romans. Aha, but can you translate it?'

It had always been a tussle, between me and Matthew, to get there first. Even though he was three years older than me, I usually had a fair chance of beating him. But there was no race today.

'Dum anima est, spes esse dicitur.'

Brother John beamed down at me. 'Good, good, good! What a splendid morning this is turning out to be! Time for breakfast, and then lessons. I think I shall invite Margery to join us now, instead of pining in her room. What does she do all day, William?'

I shrugged. 'She spends most of the time with Nurse

Joan, reading or sewing or something. She plays Mother's psaltery, but she's not much good at it.'

'Then she has time to join us. What an excellent idea.'

He strode back to the Hall so quickly that I had to run to keep up with him. It made me laugh, because I knew Brother John was doing it deliberately. I tugged the edge of his sleeve. 'Stop! I've worked out the answer to your riddle!'

Brother John spread out his hands questioningly. 'And? What am I?'

'You're a tadpole!'

When I arrived in the library after my breakfast I was surprised to find Margery sitting there already, practising her handwriting with a new goose quill. Brother John leaned over her shoulder, peering at her script.

'You read and write beautifully,' he told her. 'And there's room in your brains for much more than that, Margery. I should like you to learn French and Latin and Greek, like your brother. There's a place for you now, where Matthew used to sit.' He looked across at me. 'It's better with two, isn't it Will?' His kind brown eyes glittered as he spoke. 'I loved that boy.' He added quietly. 'We will never let him out of our thoughts.'

Then he smiled quickly at us, rubbing his hands together. 'Aha! I have a riddle for you both. This will get your brains moving. I have no sight nor hands, many ribs, a mouth in my middle. I move on one foot, I am swift as the wind. What am I?'

Margery giggled. 'Give us a clue of some sort,' she begged, but the monk shook his head, smiling, and pursed his lips.

'He never tells us the answer,' I warned her. 'We have to work it out for ourselves.'

'Here's an easier one. I am a thief in the darkness. I eat words. What am I?'

He looked brightly from one to the other of us. 'Quick now, quick.' His eyes flicked to the shelves and back again.

'Ah! I know!' Margery shouted. 'A bookworm!'

Brother John clapped his hands together. 'Exactly! And that's what I want *you* to be, Margery. Start chewing now!'

Is it wrong, I wondered? Is it wrong to laugh and joke, when the rest of the house is so wrapped in grief for Matthew? I saw how bright Margery's eyes were, and how her white cheeks were flushed with laughter, and how Brother John smiled. I imagined Matthew then, laughing and joking with us all. It made me feel a little better.

Up till that morning, it had always been Matthew and me: playing, riding, reading, joking, teasing, laughing, fighting. We were inseparable. Sometimes Ned Porritt, the stable lad, would be with us, especially when we went riding. And afterwards, when we were cleaning and brushing the horses together, Ned used to scare the wits out of us with ghost stories. And while the horses breathed and stamped in the darkness of the stables, Matthew used to hide in the shadows and suddenly jump out at me, making me yell with fright. And we used to run back to the Hall, clutching each other's sleeves, shrieking with laughter.

Margery was never part of that. She had a friend called Lady Catherine who used to come and stay

sometimes, and they used to play together at whatever it was girls played. But then Catherine moved to live in a fine mansion in London, too far away to visit us, and Margery wrote long letters to her. I suppose she was quite lonely, but Matthew and I never invited her to join in our games. But now she was having lessons with me, and I liked it. We shared the huge hole in our lives that Matthew had left. But we couldn't talk about it. We didn't know how. And still Father was hardly ever seen. He spent his time on the shore or in the chapel, praying.

'Come with me, and sit with Father in chapel,' Margery sometimes said, but I didn't. I desperately wanted to talk to him, but how could I, when he wouldn't even look at me? It was as if he didn't want to know me any more.

So nobody mentioned Matthew, except Brother John.

'Remember, children, Matthew is in heaven now. There's no need for grief. Pray for his soul, that he may have eternal rest,' he said.

But I couldn't imagine where Matthew's soul might be, except rolling backwards and forwards at the bottom of the ocean. How could it ever have rest, when the tides moved it constantly, when fishes drifted around it, day after day, night after night?

One day Margery and I went riding together. We cantered over the moors, setting the skylarks skittering away from us. And then, without really meaning to, we came up to edge of the cliff and looked down across the bay. The sea was winter blue and calm, with hardly a fleck of white. We stared down at it.

'Hard to believe,' said Margery at last.

'I know,' I agreed.

'I was watching from up here,' she said slowly. 'Nurse Joan was with me. We saw it happen. It was awful. I saw Father plunging in after you. He dragged you out, and then he went in again. He stayed in the water for ages and ages. Ned brought you back, but Father stayed, walking back into the sea, and running along the shore, and going back in again.'

I couldn't remember any of that, nothing at all. There was an empty place in my mind between clutching at Matthew's sleeve and waking up in my own bed. 'He wishes it was Matthew that he'd saved, not me.'

Margery turned her head slowly towards me, biting her lip. 'Don't be silly.' she said. But she didn't deny it. Then she kicked her pony's side and cantered back down towards the house.