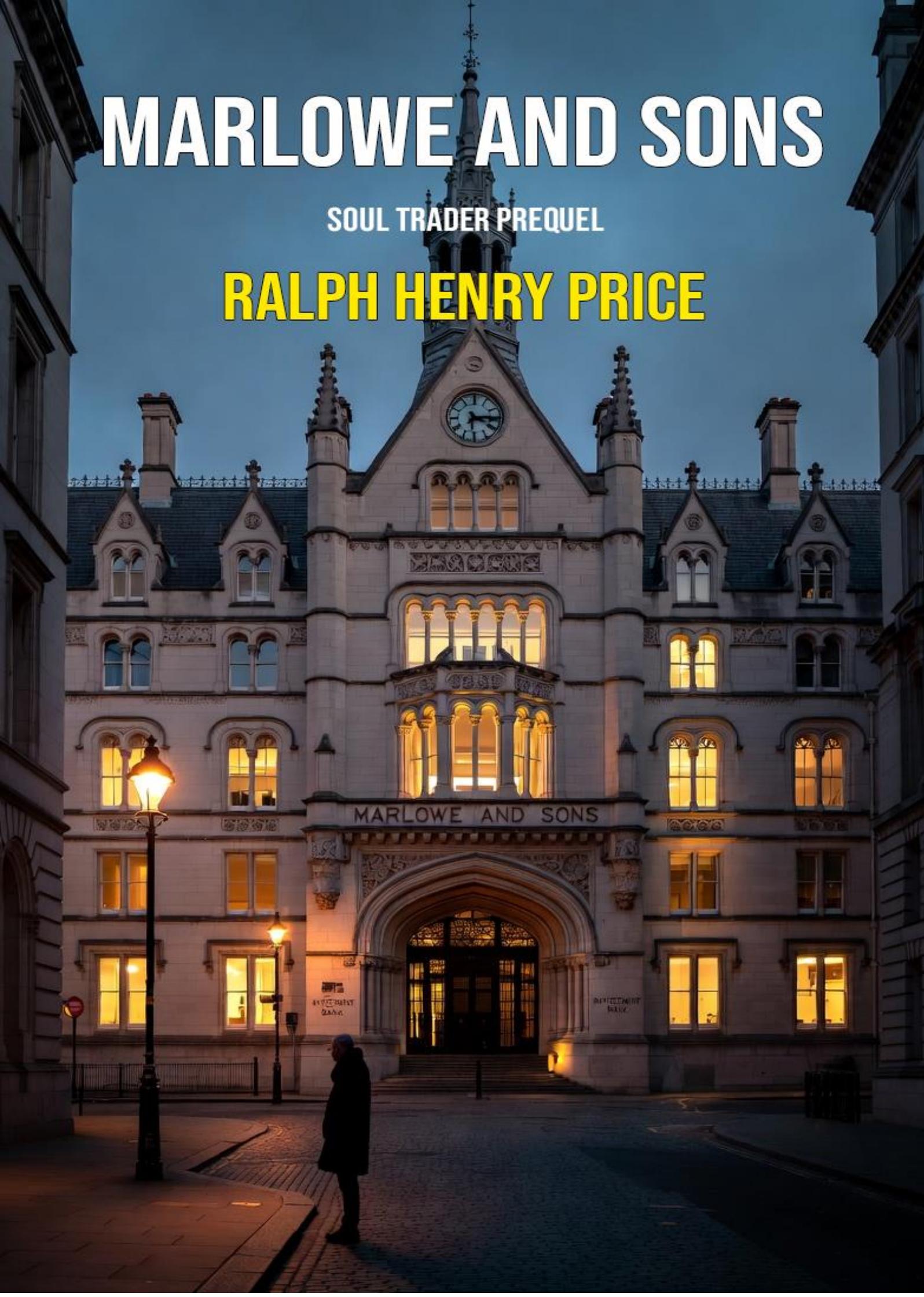


MARLOWE AND SONS

SOUL TRADER PREQUEL

RALPH HENRY PRICE



MARLOWE AND SONS

A Soul Trader Prequel

Marlowe and Sons

Ralph Henry Price

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CHAPTER ONE

The Judgement

Spring rain lashed the leaded windows of the Scriveners' Hall on Noble Street, each gust rattling the ancient glass as though the City itself were trying to break in. Inside, the air hung heavy with the scent of damp wool, beeswax candles, and fear. Two hundred guild brothers packed the benches, their livery gowns dark with rain, muttering prayers and crossing themselves when they thought no one watched. The Worshipful Company of Scriveners had not gathered like this in living memory—not for a mere debt, not for broken ordinances, but for something that smelled of witchcraft and heresy.

Mr. Marlowe stood alone in the centre of the hall, hands clasped lightly behind his back, perfectly still. A faint smile played at the corners of his mouth, as if he were attending a mildly amusing play.

The Master rose from his carved chair, elderly and grey-bearded, ceremonial robes heavy as lead. His ivory-headed staff of office struck the floor once.

“Brother Marlowe, you stand accused before this Court of Assistants and the full livery of grave offences against God, against the Company, and against the natural order ordained by His Majesty’s charter. Witchcraft. Heresy. Blasphemy. Corruption of apprentices. And the most damnable of all—trafficking in immortal souls. How plead you?”

Marlowe tilted his head, eyes glittering.

“Plead? I am no prisoner at the Old Bailey, Master. I am a brother of this Company—or was, until this farce began. But since you ask so prettily... I plead that you are all frightened children playing at power you do not understand.”

A ripple of outrage swept the benches. Master Warden Thomas Blount, red-faced in the front row, slammed his fist on the oak.

“By God’s wounds, hear how he mocks us already!”

The Master’s staff slammed down again, the sound cracking through the hall.

“Silence! We shall hear the charges read in full. Clerk?”

The guild clerk, a pinched man with ink-stained fingers, unrolled a parchment. His dry, official drone filled the room.

“First: that on divers nights in the month of March, in the year of our Lord 1665, the accused did practise arts forbidden by the statute of the fifth year of King James, to wit, conjuration, sorcery, and witchcraft. Second: that he did blaspheme the Holy Trinity by summoning entities not of God. Third: that he did corrupt three apprentices of this Company with forbidden knowledge. Fourth: that he did endanger the immortal souls of honest citizens by bargains most foul.”

Marlowe’s laugh cut through the hall like a blade, soft yet impossible to ignore.

“Bargains most foul? Pray, Master Clerk, read the exact words of the statute you so love. It speaks of pacts with the Devil. Yet I have seen no Devil here—only men who fear the dark because they have never bargained with anything greater than a tankard of ale.”

The Master’s hand tightened on his staff.

“Call the first witness.”

Young apprentice Will Carver shuffled forward, cap twisting in trembling hands, no more than fifteen.

“I—I swear by the Gospels, sirs... I saw candles in Master Marlowe’s workshop arranged in a circle what hurt the eyes to look upon. And he spoke words... Latin, but not Latin. My teeth ached and my stomach turned. When I touched the parchment he bade me fetch, my palms burned—look!”

He thrust out both hands. The blisters were perfect circles, edges crisp as if branded by something colder than fire.

A second apprentice, pale as milk, stepped up beside him.

“He told us... he told us the stars themselves could be made to listen. Said the saints were weak and that real power answered only those who dared call it by name. He showed me a book, Master. The pages moved on their own.”

From the back benches came a roar.

“He corrupts the young! Expel him! Hand him to the constable!”

Marlowe turned slowly, gaze sweeping the room.

“Corrupts? I offered knowledge. You offer only the whip and the loom. Tell me, Brother Carver’s master—do you still beat your apprentices for reading the Bible in English? Or is that heresy only when I do it?”

The Master’s face darkened to thunder.

“Enough! Call the chaplain.”

Old Father Ambrose rose on shaking legs and gripped the lectern as if it were a shield.

“I... I went to bless the workshop as the Master bade me. Holy water in a silver vial—blessed that very morning at St. Mary Woolnoth. The instant I crossed the threshold it boiled, brothers. Boiled and turned black as pitch. The vial cracked in my hand. And from the shadows... something laughed. Not human. I ran. God forgive me, I ran.”

Shouts exploded across the hall.

“Witch!” “Demon!” “Burn the workshop with him in it!”

A burly guild brother—one of the searchers—surged to his feet.

“I heard the chanting through the wall at midnight! Voices from nowhere—screams that weren’t screams! Lights the colour of no earthly flame! This man traffics with Hell itself!”

Marlowe raised one hand. The noise died as every ear strained toward him.

“Do you question the existence of our Lord? For if anyone here should know of the Lord’s existence, it is I. I have spoken with powers that make your saints seem like beggars at the gate.”

The chaplain crossed himself violently.

“Blasphemy!”

Master Warden Blount surged forward, face twisted in rage.

“Which Lord do you mean, you devil’s whelp? The Prince of Lies himself, no doubt!”

Marlowe smiled thinly, turning to face the warden directly.

“The Devil? Come now, Brother Blount, as far as I am aware there is only one Lord. If you have other theories, if you imagine rival lords or hidden powers that I might serve, then let us hear them. Pray tell, which one do you fear most? For then we shall all know who the true heretic stands among us.”

Blount’s mouth opened, closed, then opened again in furious silence. The hall erupted once more.

Marlowe simply waited, letting their own words choke them.

Master Warden Blount could contain himself no longer. He shoved past the bench and strode forward, face purple.

“You dare twist Holy Writ against us? You stand here accused of summoning devils and you preach to us?”

Marlowe smiled wider.

“I twist nothing, Warden. You bind yourselves to dead traditions—ancient oaths to powerless saints painted on church walls. You traffic in parchment and respectability while the City starves and dies around you. You measure a man’s worth in bolts of serge and guild fines. I bind myself to living forces. And you call it witchcraft because you are too craven to call it what it truly is.”

Blount’s fists clenched, now only feet away.

“What is it, then?”

“Necessity. You pray to gods who do not answer. I summon forces that do. You fear the dark. I use it.”

Blount lunged, meaty hand swinging for Marlowe’s collar.

“I’ll drag you to the river myself—”

Marlowe stepped sideways, neat as a dancer. Blount stumbled past him into empty air and crashed against a bench, scattering brothers like startled pigeons.

“See how your fear makes you clumsy? You demand my expulsion because you cannot bear the thought that one among you found power you lack. You call me heretic for speaking to what you dare not name. Yet every one of you has bargained away something—your honesty for profit, your courage for comfort. Whose soul is cheaper, Warden? Mine, or the ones you sell daily on Cheapside?”

Chaos erupted. Brothers surged to their feet, some drawing daggers halfway, others shouting for the constables. The Master hammered his staff again and again until the stone floor cracked beneath it.

“Order! By the Company’s charter, order!”

His robes trembled as he drew a ragged breath.

“Brother Marlowe, you admit these practices?”

“I admit to power. Call it what you will to comfort your trembling souls. The label changes nothing.”

The Master drew himself up, face ashen.

“Then the Court has no choice. You are hereby expelled from the Worshipful Company of Scriveners. Your name shall be struck from every record. Your workshop, your books of record, your notarial seals, your stocks of parchment and ink, and all instruments of your trade are forfeit to the Company. You are barred from every guild within the City walls. May God have mercy on your corrupted soul—if any mercy remains for such as you.”

The Common Paper was brought forward at once. The Master took up the quill and struck Brother Marlowe’s name from the roll with a single black line, the physical severing of fellowship made real. The chaplain’s words of excommunication came in a cracked mumble. Several older brothers wept openly; no man had been cast out in such fashion since the days of Queen Elizabeth.

Marlowe watched it all without expression. When the Master’s quill had scored the final black line through his name, he surveyed the hall once more, meeting every eye that dared meet his.

“You have made a grave mistake.”

“The only mistake was admitting you among us.”

Marlowe walked slowly toward the great doors, rain still drumming outside. At the threshold he paused and turned.

“This City belongs to the guilds. Your charters. Your precious traditions. Built on wood and thatch and the belief that what has always been will always be. But when the next plague comes... when the next fire comes... remember who you cast out this day. Remember that you had the chance to welcome power and chose fear instead.”

He stepped into the storm. The doors boomed shut behind him.

Inside, stunned silence lasted only seconds before the hall erupted in frantic, fearful babble.

Outside, Mr. Marlowe walked the narrow streets of London dry as bone despite the deluge. Rain hissed and vanished against his coat. In the darkest corner of the hall he had left behind, something that had not been there at the trial's beginning now waited—patient, interested, hungry.

Within a month, three wardens would die of illnesses no physician could name. Within six, the Master himself would follow.

That night, in a bare rented room in Southwark—beyond the City's jurisdiction and its guilds—Mr. Marlowe spread his maps across the floor by candlelight. London lay before him in crude ink: guild halls crossed, churches circled, the river and bridges marked. The shadows that gathered around him waited.

"They rule through order. Their charters. Their hierarchies. Everything documented, everything proper."

A shadow coalesced at his shoulder, frost rimming the window. It extended a tendril of darkness and traced a line across the map, marking the first warehouse with unnatural precision.

"We give them chaos. Death. Transformation."

His finger stopped at Pudding Lane.

"Here. This is where it begins."

The shadows rippled with eagerness.

"First plague. Then fire. Then we rebuild—on our terms. In our image."

Another sharper question.

"How many souls can you take during a plague?"

Marlowe looked to the two motionless figures standing in the deeper dark—human-shaped yet wrong. Soul Collectors. One raised a pale hand; a small glass vial materialised between its fingers, glowing faintly with a soul already trapped inside. The other waited silently. The number flooded his mind: thousands. Tens of thousands.

"Good. Start tonight."

The shadows flowed out through the walls like smoke. The Collectors simply ceased to exist.

Mr. Marlowe sat alone with his maps and smiled the same smile he had worn in the hall.

The guilds thought they had won. They had no idea what they had just begun.

The Company of *Marlowe and Sons* would rise from the ashes they were about to create. And souls would be its stock-in-trade.

CHAPTER TWO

The Plague

Summer came early and stayed late in 1665, turning London into a furnace. The kind of heat that baked the mud in the streets into cracked mosaics, that made the Thames stink worse than usual, that drove people indoors during the day and turned them feverish and short-tempered. But the heat wasn't the problem. The heat was just the precursor.

The sickness started in the poorest parishes. A few deaths at first—nothing anyone noticed. Then the deaths increased. Then they spread.

A woman leaned from an upper window in St Giles-in-the-Fields, eyes wild, clutching a child whose neck bulged with dark lumps. "You there—stranger! Why do you walk so free? The pestilence takes everyone!"

Marlowe paused beneath her sill, tilting his head. "Because I have already spoken with it, goodwife. It knows better than to bite the hand that feeds."

She recoiled, slamming the shutter so hard the wood splintered. "Devil! The devil walks among us!"

Further along the alley, two watchmen dragged a body from a doorway, faces wrapped in vinegar-soaked rags. One straightened, wiping sweat that ran black with soot. "Another night, another score. How many more before the Lord sees fit to end this?"

His companion spat on the cobbles. "End it? The preachers say we brought it on ourselves with our whoring and our playhouses. But look at that one—he walks the streets like it's May Day. No cross on his door, no fear in his step. What sort of man laughs at the plague?"

Marlowe stepped between them, voice smooth as oiled silk. "The sort who has already paid his tithe, watchman. Tell me—would you like to pay yours now, or wait until the cart comes for your wife?"

Both men crossed themselves and backed away without another word.

The dead carts came through at night, drivers ringing bells and calling out in voices hoarse from overuse. "Bring out your dead! Bring out your dead!"

One driver, a hollow-cheeked man named Jem, reined in his horse when he spotted Marlowe standing in the shadows. "You again. Every night I see you. Never sick, never afraid. What bargain did you strike, stranger? Tell me plain—I've buried my own three lads this week."

Marlowe rested a hand on the cart's rail, unbothered by the stench. "A simple one. I give them what they crave in their final breath. They give me what they no longer need. Care to make the same arrangement before your turn comes?"

Jem's knuckles whitened on the reins. "Keep your bargain. I'll take the cart and the bell and whatever coin they throw me. Just... just stay away from my door."

Marlowe laughed and continued on his way, bargaining with the desperate across the City.

Inside a plague-marked house in Bread Street, a man lay on a straw pallet, skin blotched black, breath rattling. His wife huddled in the corner with their daughter, both already coughing.

The man's eyes found Marlowe. "Water... anything... I'll give you anything to save them this suffering."

Marlowe crouched beside the pallet. "Anything? Even your soul?"

The man clutched Marlowe's sleeve, fingers burning hot. "Yes—take it! Just let them live!"

Marlowe drew a pen and parchment from his breast pocket and handed them to the man. "Just sign your name or make your mark."

Drawing himself up, the man scribbled on the parchment then fell back, the quill still trembling in his fingers.

Marlowe rose. "The bargain is sealed. They will not suffer long."

The Watchers slipped through the walls like smoke, carrying the fresh contract away. Marlowe stepped back into the street. One more name. One more soul added to the tally.

Word spread through the stricken streets that bargains could be struck. Men far from God saw only their duty to their kin. A sick merchant stumbled from a doorway, face grey with terror, clutching a small pouch of coins. "Master Marlowe—please! My wife is inside, burning with the fever. I'll give you everything I own if you spare her. Anything!"

Marlowe turned, voice calm. "Everything? Even the soul you still pretend belongs to you?"

The merchant fell to his knees in the filth. "Yes! Take it! Just let her live!"

Marlowe studied him a moment, then nodded once. "Done. The Collectors will visit tonight. Your wife will wake tomorrow. You will not." The merchant's face crumpled in horror as the shadows around him thickened and the deal was sealed.

Marlowe continued on his way. By August the deaths reached a thousand each week. By September, seven thousand. The wealthy fled. Those who remained locked themselves indoors, burning herbs that did nothing, praying to saints who didn't answer.

Mr. Marlowe met his first agent in a narrow alley off Fish Street. The man's face was hidden under a wide-brimmed hat. "The deeds for the Pudding Lane house are signed in your name—through me, as you ordered. No one will trace it back."

Marlowe pressed a pouch of gold into the man's trembling hand. "And the others—Thames Street, the warehouse on Bridge Lane?"

"Already yours on paper. Plague prices. Cheap as dirt. But if the guild searchers come asking—"

Marlowe's smile never reached his eyes. "Then you will tell them nothing. Or my associates will visit your wife the way they visit many unfortunates tonight."

The agent swallowed hard. "I understand. It's done."

Marlowe worked alone in the attics after midnight. In one house he scored a beam with a small blade, testing the cut with his thumb. A Watcher worked beside him.

Marlowe pointed to the cavity in the wall. "Sulphur there. Pack it tight."

The shadow flowed, carrying the yellow powder as though it weighed nothing. Another nudge and the Watcher spread pitch across the joists, thick and glistening.

"Oil rags in the roof space. Linseed. Every beam weakened just enough."

The shadow rippled in answer, moving faster.

Marlowe checked the next house the same way, then the next, until twenty buildings along his mapped route stood ready—silent fuses waiting for the spark.

September brought another kind of preparation. The plague was ending. People started emerging from their locked houses, cautiously at first.

Marlowe found his first recruit in the Blind Beggar tavern in Southwark. William Hicks sat alone, working through a bottle of gin, face scarred, eyes empty.

Marlowe slid onto the bench and placed a gold sovereign on the scarred wood.

Hicks looked up. "Don't know you. And I don't take charity from strangers."

"It's not charity." Marlowe's fingers rested lightly beside the coin. "It's an advance. When the time comes, you'll block a street. You'll prevent the fire engines from passing. Nothing more."

Hicks's drunken fog cleared a fraction. "Fire engines? What fire? The plague's the only thing burning this city."

"You'll know the fire when it starts. And when it's done, there'll be nine more of these."

Marlowe tapped the sovereign. "Ten gold pieces. Enough to leave London forever. Enough to forget the faces of your dead children."

Hicks reached for the coin. Marlowe's palm covered it first.

"But if you betray me, you won't burn in any ordinary fire. You'll burn in something that remembers your name long after your bones are ash."

The candles flickered. Shadows thickened. Hicks's face drained of colour. "I... I understand. I'll do it."

By October Marlowe had thirty men like Hicks, each bound the same way—gold in their hands, terror in their hearts. He tested them in small ways: moving bodies, stealing from empty houses, spreading the right lies at the right time.

One test was more elaborate.

Late October, midnight. Five recruits stood at the edge of the Clerkenwell plague pit, handkerchiefs pressed to their faces, shovels in hand.

Marlowe arrived, cloak swirling. "Dig."

The largest, former sergeant Cobb, gripped his shovel tighter. "This is madness. Those are plague dead. Touch them and we'll all be next."

Marlowe's gaze never wavered. "Dig. Or join them."

They dug. When they had six bodies out, Cobb dropped his shovel. "No. This is wrong. This is blasphemy. I didn't sign on for grave-robbing—"

He clutched his chest, gasped once, and collapsed.

The others froze. Tanner wiped his mouth with a trembling sleeve. "What... what did you do to him?"

"Nothing you won't suffer twice over if you disobey again. Pull the bodies out. Arrange them exactly as I said."

They obeyed with shaking hands.

The Collectors materialised. The men watched in horror as the corpses withered, flesh evaporating, bones crumbling to ash. The sound—like wind through dead leaves—filled the pit.

One recruit tried to run. His legs gave out. He fell to his knees, paralysed.

Marlowe raised one hand. The Collectors withdrew.

"You've seen what they are. What they do. Obey me, and they feed on plague dead. Betray me... and they feed on you. While you still live."

Tanner dropped to his knees. "We'll obey. God help us, we'll obey."

"Bury the remains. Fill the pit. Make it look undisturbed. Then go home. Say nothing. Remember everything."

They worked with desperate speed. Marlowe handed each man silver. They took it without a word and fled into the night.

December came cold and hard, killing the last of the plague-bearing rats. People emerged from isolation. Commerce resumed.

Marlowe walked through his twenty prepared buildings one final time. In the last attic he ran his hand along the scored beam, then looked to the shadows.

"Everything is ready."

He stepped out into the cold London night. Now he just needed the spark.

CHAPTER THREE

The Bargain

Summer came early again in 1666, the second blistering year running. Londoners woke each morning checking throats and armpits for black swellings, whispering that the plague had only been sleeping. But the rats stayed dead, the sickness stayed gone, and slowly the fear eased into something thinner—cautious relief that tasted like ash in the mouth.

The heat never broke. Week after week without rain, the Thames shrank to a sluggish trickle, exposing stinking mudflats. Every timber house, every thatched roof, every warehouse stacked with pitch and hemp and tar dried until it rang like a drum when you knocked. The fire wardens walked the streets at dusk, muttering about how one careless spark could finish what the plague had started.

Late August, the sun bleeding out across the rooftops. Thomas Farynor walked home along Pudding Lane, baker's apron still dusted white, hands crusted with flour and dough. His three-storey house rose ahead—ovens on the ground floor, family sleeping above. Honest trade. Good standing in the Worshipful Company of Bakers. The plague had passed them by; business was booming again. Life, people kept saying, was returning to normal.

Something waited beside his door.

Farynor stopped, key hovering at the lock. The street was empty—supper hour, shutters closed against the heat. Only lengthening shadows and a feeling like cold fingers on the back of his neck.

"Master Farynor." The voice slid out of the darkness, smooth as oil, cold as midwinter. "We should speak."

Farynor turned. A man stepped forward—well-dressed, respectable, could have been any merchant. Except the eyes. They reflected the last light strangely, like a cat's, like something that had never needed to blink.

"I don't know you."

"You will." The man's mouth curved, all teeth, no warmth. "My name is Mr. Marlowe. I have a proposition."

Farynor's hand dropped to the knife at his belt. "I want nothing from you."

"Your son. William. Fourteen. Learning the trade."

Farynor's fingers locked white around the hilt. "If you so much as look at my boy—"

"Threaten?" Marlowe spread his hands, the picture of injured innocence. "I merely observe. Fourteen is a dangerous age in a bakery. Ovens burn hot. Flour dust explodes with one stray

spark. Heavy sacks crush small bones. Knives slip. Accidents happen every day. So many ways a young apprentice could be taken.”

The threat floated between them, quiet and absolute.

Farynor’s mouth went dry. “What do you want?”

“Two weeks from now. The second of September. You will make a small mistake.”

“What mistake?”

“You will bank your ovens improperly. Leave them hot through the night. Human error. These things happen—especially when a man is tired. Distracted. Perhaps thinking about his son’s future. His safety.”

Farynor’s stomach lurched. Every baker knew the rule: damp the ovens properly or you burned your shop, maybe the street, maybe the city. “You’re mad. I could lose everything.”

“You will lose William if you refuse.” Marlowe’s voice never rose, never warmed. “Tonight. An accident in his sleep. Suffocation. Tragic, but these things happen. Boys pile blankets too high. Roll over. Stop breathing. No one’s fault.”

No shouting. No rage. Just fact, delivered in that same velvet tone.

Farynor’s knife hand fell to his side. He was beaten and he knew it. “Why? Why would you do this?”

“London needs renewal.” Marlowe’s smile widened. “The plague was only the beginning. Fire cleanses what disease leaves behind.”

“You’ll kill hundreds.”

“Thousands, more likely.” Marlowe shrugged, almost apologetic. “But that is not your concern. Your concern is William. His safety. His future.” He extended one pale hand. “I swear to you—your son will live. Your family will escape unharmed. Only your bakery will burn, and the King will compensate you for the loss. You will rebuild. You will profit, in the end.”

Farynor stared at the offered hand. He thought of William upstairs, fourteen years old, laughing at supper last night about the girl who bought twice-weekly loaves. He thought of his wife, his daughters. He thought of the thousands who would die if he took that hand.

His own hand shook as he reached out.

The grip was instant ice. Not winter cold—grave cold. Something that had never known warmth and never would. Farynor’s breath misted in the August air.

“Excellent.” Marlowe released him and stepped back. “Second of September, Master Farynor. Bank the ovens poorly. Go to bed. By morning everything will be different. But your son will wake beside you, safe and whole. You have my word.”

“The word of a devil,” Farynor whispered.

Marlowe's smile sharpened. "The word of something far worse than any devil your priests imagine. But binding nonetheless. I keep my bargains. Always."

He stepped backward into the shadows. They folded around him like ink, swallowed him whole until only ordinary darkness remained in an ordinary alley.

Farynor stood alone, hand still burning with cold, stomach churning with horror at what he had just sold. He looked up at the second-floor window where candlelight glowed behind the shutters. William was up there, probably reading when he should be sleeping, dreaming about the day the bakery would be his.

Two weeks. Then London would burn.

And Thomas Farynor had lit the match with his own hand.

He unlocked the door with fingers that refused to steady. Inside, his wife looked up from the table, worry creasing her face. "Thomas? You look like you've seen a ghost."

He forced a smile that felt like broken glass. "Just the heat, love. Got to me today."

From upstairs William's voice floated down, bright and ordinary. "Father? Is supper ready? I'm starving!"

Farynor bit the inside of his cheek until he tasted blood. He wanted to scream at the boy to run, to take the whole family and flee the city tonight, anywhere, anywhere at all.

Instead, he called back, voice steady as he could make it, "Coming, lad."

They took supper. Listened to William chatter about the new batch of manchet rolls, about the girl who smiled at him twice this week. Laughed in all the right places. Kissed his daughters goodnight. Kissed his wife and told her he loved her.

All while counting down the days until he became the man who burned London to the ground.

The spark was set.

The fire was coming.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Fire

September second arrived like any other day—hot, dry, another in the endless summer that had baked London into kindling. Thomas Farynor moved through his bakery like a man already dead, mixing dough with hands that refused to stop trembling.

William, his fourteen-year-old apprentice and son, slapped flour from his apron and grinned across the kneading table. “Father, you’re quiet today. Still thinking about that new batch of manchet rolls? They sold out before noon yesterday!”

Farynor forced his eyes down to the dough. “Just tired, lad. Heat’s getting to everyone.”

Evening came. The ovens cooled—or should have. Farynor stood alone before them, the last customer long gone, the street outside empty. He stared at the glowing embers.

Bank them properly and William dies tonight. Bank them wrong and the City burns.

His hands shook so hard the poker clattered against the bricks. “Forgive me,” he whispered to no one. “God forgive me.”

He left the ovens hot. Left gaps in the damping. Left air where none should flow. Every instinct of a lifetime as a baker screamed at him to fix it. He ignored every scream.

Upstairs he served supper with a smile nailed to his face. His wife passed the bread. “Thomas, you’re pale. Eat something.”

“I’m fine, love. Just the heat.” He ruffled William’s hair, letting the touch linger. “Sleep well tonight, son. Dream big.”

Farynor lay awake beside his wife, staring at the ceiling, listening to his family breathe. Waiting.

Past midnight the City fell silent except for the Thames and the occasional drunk. Exhaustion finally dragged him under.

Then the smell of smoke—acrid, thick, hungry.

He was on his feet before his wife stirred. “Fire! The bakery’s burning! Everyone out—now!”

Chaos exploded. William and his sisters tumbled from beds, coughing. His wife grabbed the girls. “Thomas—the servant girl! Where is she?”

“Downstairs—go! I’ll get her!”

They stumbled into Pudding Lane in their nightclothes, gasping. Flames already roared behind the bakery windows, far hotter and faster than any oven fire had any right to be.

Farynor counted his family—wife, William, both daughters safe. The servant girl was missing. He lunged back toward the door but the heat slammed him like a wall. Smoke poured out thick and black.

Inside, a girl's scream tore through the roar—high, terrified, cut short.

Farynor dropped to his knees in the street. His wife clutched his arm. "Thomas, we have to run!"

He couldn't move. He listened to the girl die because of him. Listened to his bakery become Mr. Marlowe's first torch. Listened to the fire leap to the Star Inn next door with impossible speed, thatch igniting as if soaked in oil.

Within the hour half of Pudding Lane blazed. Farynor stood with his family and watched London begin to burn, knowing thousands more would die because one father had chosen his son over the City.

Any father would have done the same, he told himself again and again.

It still didn't help.

Samuel Pepys woke to his servant shaking him hard. "Sir! Fire! There's a fire in the City!"

Pepys waved him off, half-asleep. "London always has fires. Let the watch handle it. I have Navy Board business tomorrow."

"Sir, you need to see this."

Something in the man's voice cut through. Pepys rose, pulled on his dressing gown, crossed to the window. An orange glow stained the sky across the river. Bigger than expected. Still... fires happened.

He went back to bed.

Two hours later the servant was back, voice urgent. "Sir, it's much worse."

This time Pepys dressed properly and stepped outside. Seething Lane already filled with carts piled high with possessions. People streamed past, faces lit by the distant inferno.

He walked toward the flames. The heat hit him blocks away—shimmering waves in the air. Flames leaped from roof to roof faster than any natural fire should. The wind... the wind was wrong. It shifted constantly, always driving the blaze deeper into the City.

Pepys ran first to the Navy Board, then to Whitehall. King Charles listened, face grave. "Firebreaks, Pepys. Demolish buildings ahead of it. Starve the beast."

"Already ordered, Your Majesty. But the fire moves faster than the orders."

By afternoon Pepys stood on Tower Wharf watching London die. Smoke turned day to twilight. The roar was deafening—collapsing timbers, screaming horses, people fleeing in every direction.

Buildings fell before flames even touched them. Fire spread in patterns no wind could explain.

He pushed back through the crowds toward home, stopped to catch his breath near Fish Street, and that was when he saw the man.

Well-dressed. Calm. Standing motionless while everyone else ran. Watching the destruction with something that looked disturbingly like satisfaction.

Pepys approached before he could think better of it. "You seem remarkably calm, sir, for a man watching his City burn."

The man turned. His eyes caught the firelight and threw it back strangely. "I'm merely observing the natural order. Everything burns eventually."

"Natural?" Pepys gestured at the inferno. "There is nothing natural about this. Buildings collapsing on schedule. Flames leaping exactly where they shouldn't. The wind itself seems to obey someone's plan."

The man smiled, and the smile made the August heat feel like midwinter. "Everything burns eventually, Mr. Pepys. I'm simply accelerating the inevitable."

Pepys stiffened. "How do you know my name?"

"I know many things. Including what happens to men who ask too many questions."

The threat hung in the smoke-choked air, quiet and absolute.

"Who are you?"

The stranger's eyes sent a chill right through him. Eyes that reflected the light strangely—as if not human. He stood motionless while the world burned around him, hands clasped lightly behind his back, the picture of perfect calm.

The man turned and walked away, vanishing into the swirling smoke with unnatural ease. London would not see him again for six years.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Resurrection

Six years passed while London rebuilt itself in stone and pride. Wider streets, fireproof walls, Wren's churches stabbing heavenward like fingers accusing God of neglect. The Guildhall rose again. Respectable London told itself the Fire had been a cleansing. Divine judgment followed by divine mercy.

They had no idea what else had been built beneath their feet.

Mr. Marlowe acquired the building in the fourth year of reconstruction. Cloth Fair, three storeys of solid stone bought through layers of shell contracts no one could trace. The sign went up on a spring morning: *Marlowe and Sons Est. 1672*. Above ground, clerks would soon shuffle papers and pretend this was legitimate commerce.

Below ground, the Watchers had carved the Vault.

Mr. Marlowe descended the spiral stairs into darkness lit by candles that burned with flames that were never quite any single colour. The chamber stretched far beyond the reach of light. Shelves of stolen grimoires and ledgers lined the walls. One hundred thousand plague souls captured inside glass vials, emitting a faint light high up on the stacks.

However, tonight, the Vault would serve a different purpose.

The centre of the chamber had been cleared. A circle of complex symbols had been drawn in chalk and blood. Black candles stood at the cardinal points. A Roman stone slab lay at the heart of the circle, and on it: bones.

The priestess stood beside the slab, iron shackle cold around her ankle. West African, perhaps twenty, dressed in robes no English guild would recognise. She spoke no English and needed none. Power needed no words.

Mr. Marlowe had shown her what he wanted—bring the dead back. Not a spirit. Flesh. Life. Someone dead for centuries.

She was terrified, but refusal meant death and she wanted to survive.

The Watchers gathered in the corners. The Collectors stood motionless against the far wall.

Midnight came.

She began.

Her voice rose in Yoruba, then Fon, then older tongues her mother's mother had taught her. Words that made the air thicken and the stones tremble.

"Papa Legba... ouvri baryè pou mwen... the gatekeeper, the one who stands at the crossroads... the dead one has slept too long. Bring him back. Blood call blood, bone call bone!"

She moved around the circle, sprinkling herbs that smelled of earth and iron, powders ground from animal bone mixed with ash from funeral fires. She drew the veve of Papa Legba with grave-dust and her own blood, the cross and crossroads shape twisting on the stone as if alive.

“Legba! You master of the gate, lord of the road! Take this offering — rum for your throat, tobacco for your pipe, blood for your hunger!”

She poured rum across the bones. It hissed. She lit a twist of tobacco and blew the smoke over the skeleton, whispering, “Smoke carry spirit back... smoke open the road...”

Her body moved with the chant, feet stamping the rhythm the Watchers echoed in the shadows. Blood ran from her nose and ears. She cut her palm with a blade of volcanic glass and let the blood spatter across the skull, the ribs, the hands that had once commanded legions.

“The general... the lord of many lands... now he comes back! Ancestors, hear me! Loa, take my blood, give him flesh again!”

Mr. Marlowe stepped forward and spoke his own words of binding — Latin, Greek, older tongues that made the air vibrate and the candles gutter.

The Watchers poured their gathered power into the circle. The priestess screamed, a sound that was neither pain nor ecstasy but something beyond both. The power tore through her.

“Papa Legba! The gate opens! The man comes!”

The bones began to change.

Flesh knitted itself from nothing. Muscle, sinew, skin — all rebuilding in reverse, obscene and beautiful at once. The body on the slab became whole. Naked. Perfect.

But not yet alive.

The priestess collapsed, blood-spattered and spent, her voice failing mid-chant.

Mr. Marlowe placed his hand on the cold chest and spoke the final command.

“I call you from death. From oblivion. From the darkness between worlds. You were a Roman, a conqueror, a man of power. Murdered and forgotten. But I remember you. I call you back. I give you life where they gave you death. Return. Serve. Remember. Return and live again.”

The Watchers released everything they had. Candles blew out, then roared back with flames ten feet high. The cold became absolute. The stones cracked.

The chest rose once. Then again.

Breathing.

The eyes opened.

The body convulsed, sat upright with jerky movements, and the corpse lived.

Mr. Marlowe looked into the pale eyes of the resurrected man. "Titus. Welcome back. Welcome to Londinium. Your first time here I believe."

CHAPTER SIX

The Chains

Titus stood on the private dock where customs men knew better than to come. He watched the ship with Dutch flags and English crew make fast after its inbound run from the Barbary Coast. The captain knew the rules: unload the legitimate cargo first — barrels of North African spices, bolts of silk, and sacks of dye — then load the real freight after dark, take the gold, and ask no questions about where the human cargo was bound.

The last barrel rolled down the gangplank as the final light bled from the sky. Only then did the warehouse doors open.

Eighty English girls and women emerged, chained wrist to wrist, some no older than twelve, others mothers torn from their children the night before. Street orphans sold by parish beadles, daughters snatched from Southwark alleys, young wives taken while their husbands worked the docks. Their eyes showed the dull horror of people who already knew they would never see London again — only the galleys, the harems, or the auction blocks of Algiers and Tunis.

The captain, a hard-faced Moor with a salt-crusted black beard and a jagged scar running from eye to jaw, descended the gangplank, curved dagger glinting at his belt. “Winds were foul the whole way back. Spices and silk are good quality. Now load your damned English cattle and be quick about it. I want no part of your devilry, but the gold better be waiting or I’ll cut your throat myself.”

Titus’s lip curled. “Spare me your conscience, Captain. You were paid well enough. How much of the spice and silk was lost on the inbound passage?”

“None worth mentioning,” the captain muttered, already turning away. “A few sacks of dye ruined by seawater. I delivered the goods. You do your best with what I give you.”

Mr. Marlowe arrived moments later, moving through the torchlight like a shadow that had learned to walk. He wore fine merchant’s clothes but carried the air of something far older. He walked slowly along the chained line, examining faces, build, the look in their eyes.

“These seventy-seven,” Mr. Marlowe said at last, gesturing to the larger group. “Send them to the usual buyers. Algiers. Tunis. The harems and galleys of the Barbary Coast. Standard rates.”

Titus made notes in his ledger. “As you command.”

Mr. Marlowe stopped before three captives — a strong young woman, a fit girl of fourteen, and one older woman whose eyes still held defiance. “These three... different market.”

The air grew thick. The temperature dropped sharply though the summer night was humid.

The Collectors appeared.

They did not walk out of darkness. They simply were there, standing directly behind the three chosen ones. Too tall. Joints wrong. Eyes like holes that had never known light.

The young woman screamed first — a raw, animal sound that tore from her throat. “No! God help me! Please, no!” The girl and the older woman joined her, yanking desperately at their chains and crying out for their mothers and children. The entire line of eighty jerked and swayed with their terror.

The Collectors reached out with bony hands. Fingers brushed skin.

The screaming stopped instantly.

Not silenced. Ended.

The three went slack. Their eyes emptied like lamps blown out. Whatever had made them human — will, fear, soul — was simply gone. They stood breathing, hearts beating, but hollow.

“Take them,” Mr. Marlowe said quietly.

The three walked obediently into the deeper shadows, following the Collectors without a single word or backward glance. The darkness swallowed them whole.

The remaining captives stared in stunned horror. Several wept silently. One girl began muttering prayers in a language Titus didn’t know.

The captain’s hands shook as he counted his payment. “God have mercy on us all,” he whispered. “What... what are those things?”

Titus’s voice was flat. “You were paid to transport cargo, Captain. Not to ask questions about what happens after. Be grateful you only deliver. Some of us must live with what comes next.”

The captain took his gold and fled back to his ship, shouting at his crew to cast off on the next tide. He would never sleep well again.

Later, in the Navy Office overlooking the Thames, Titus sat across from Samuel Pepys.

Pepys tapped the contract with one precise finger. “Two hundred muskets. Fifty barrels of powder. Four bronze cannons. The price is generous, Master Titus. Almost too generous. I need assurance of quality.”

Titus leaned back, the picture of a confident merchant. “*Marlowe and Sons* uses the same foundries that supply the Tower. Any piece that fails, we replace at our cost. Delivery in three weeks.”

Pepys studied him carefully. “Your firm has grown remarkably fast since the Fire. Some might find that suspicious.”

“Opportunity favours the prepared,” Titus replied smoothly. “While others rebuilt churches, we rebuilt supply lines. The Navy needs weapons. We provide them. Simple commerce.”

Pepys signed with his careful hand. “Very well. The Board will approve. But tell me honestly — these weapons will only go to His Majesty’s forces?”

Titus smiled thinly. “They will reach the hands that need them most, Mr. Pepys. You may rest easy on that.”

What he did not say was that identical weapons would soon arm privateers in the Channel and certain coastal smugglers who sometimes worked for England and sometimes against her. Business was business.

Winter brought the soul trade.

A merchant stumbled down the spiral stairs into the Vault one bitter evening, sweating despite the cold. The man was well-dressed and successful-looking, but his eyes held the look of someone who had finally understood the true cost of his bargain.

“I have paid!” he declared, voice cracking. “Three years of profit, every farthing on time. The contract is fulfilled. I demand my release!”

Mr. Marlowe sat at the long table, turning pages in a thick ledger by green candlelight. He did not look up at first.

“Your coin debt is cleared,” he said calmly. “That much is true.”

The merchant’s face flooded with relief. “Then I am free—”

“However,” Mr. Marlowe continued softly, “you signed in blood. That creates obligations beyond mere coin.”

The merchant’s relief died instantly. “That was never written! You never said—”

“I never needed to.” Mr. Marlowe finally looked up, eyes ancient and pitiless. “You signed in blood. Blood always demands more than gold.”

The merchant spun toward the stairs. “This is monstrous! I will go to the authorities! I will...”

He never finished the sentence.

The Collectors appeared behind him.

The merchant’s scream was short and terrible. It ended as though cut by a blade. His body went rigid, then slack. When the Collectors withdrew, only an empty shell remained, breathing but hollow.

Titus watched from the stairs. “How many this month?”

“Eleven,” Mr. Marlowe answered, already writing the new entry. “The Vault grows.”

By December, the first formal meeting of *Marlowe and Sons’* inner circle took place in the main hall above ground.

Twelve men sat around the long oak table. Ten gang leaders. Titus at Mr. Marlowe's right hand. The Watchers coiled in the corners like living smoke. The Collectors stood motionless against the far wall.

Mr. Marlowe rose. The room fell silent at once.

"Gentlemen," he began, voice quiet but carrying to every ear. "Four years ago this was only a name on a sign. Now we move thousands in the flesh trade. We arm both the Navy and those who prey upon it. We collect souls faster than we can spend them. We hold secrets that could topple half the great houses in London."

He looked slowly around the table.

"The guilds believe power comes from royal charters and ancient tradition. They are wrong. True power comes from supplying what men truly need — even when they pretend they do not. We are the shadow they cast. And shadows, gentlemen, outlast the things that cast them."

One of the Southwark leaders, a hard man named Thomas, cleared his throat. "What of rivals moving into our territories?"

Titus answered before anyone else could. "We remove them. Thoroughly. Permanently. In ways that make others lose all appetite for competition."

The Watchers rippled, shifting their attention onto Thomas. He swallowed and said no more.

Mr. Marlowe continued. "*Marlowe and Sons* will endure long after the Scriveners are dust and the Worshipful Company of Bakers is a footnote in history. Because we trade in necessity. In sin. In the one commodity that never runs dry — human weakness."

He placed both hands on the table.

"Welcome to the real empire, gentlemen. The one that never burns."

The meeting lasted until dawn. Plans laid for expansion that would reach far beyond London.

Below them, in the Vault that none of the gang leaders had ever seen, the collection grew. Books and contracts and souls, stored and catalogued. A library of the damned.

And somewhere among those carefully organised records was the contract that bound Titus himself—the debt of resurrection, terms unspecified, duration potentially eternal.

He had time now.

All the time Mr. Marlowe chose to grant him.

And in that time he would help build something that would make Rome itself look small.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Accident

Winter bit deep into London that January of 1676, filling the Thames with dirty ice and turning every breath into a white cloud. Samuel Pepys sat in the Navy Office with a coal fire roaring in the grate, yet his hands stayed cold inside two pairs of gloves. Grey sky pressed against the windows. The river flowed past with its usual indifference.

He was halfway through a stack of supply contracts when William burst in without knocking.

“Heard something curious about that supplier you favour,” William said, dropping into the chair opposite. “Marlowe and Sons. The one with the suspiciously good prices.”

Pepys set down his pen. “What about them?”

“Odd lot. They deal in more than muskets and powder, apparently. Slaves, for one. And worse, some whisper — though no one will say what ‘worse’ actually means. The owner — Mr. Marlowe — has strange eyes, like something not quite human. Stood there with his hands clasped behind his back, calm as stone while I talked, never blinked once. Gave me the chills, I can tell you. Claims he knows you.”

William watched him closely. “Rings any bells?”

It rang every bell. Six years since the Fire. Six years since the face he had seen amid the flames, the man who had stood motionless while London burned. Pepys had buried that memory under paperwork and denial. Now it clawed its way back up.

“Where is this *Marlowe and Sons*?”

“Cloth Fair. Stone building, respectable enough on the outside. But the rumours... they cling like smoke.”

Pepys stared at the contracts in front of him. Perfect terms. Perfect timing. Perfectly suspicious.

“I’ll pay them a visit tomorrow,” he said quietly. “Due diligence. Can’t have the Navy entangled with anything that might embarrass us later.”

“Want me along?”

“No. Routine inquiry. No need to alarm anyone.”

William left. Pepys sat alone, listening to the fire crackle and the river slap against the wharf outside. He told himself it was professional caution. He knew it was something far more dangerous.

The next afternoon Pepys walked Cloth Fair with measured steps. The street looked ordinary — rebuilt stone houses, busy merchants, normal winter traffic. But the moment he

stopped before the black-and-gold sign, the air changed. Cold that had nothing to do with the weather seeped from the walls.

He knocked.

A young clerk opened the door, pale and nervous. "Yes, sir?"

"Samuel Pepys, Navy Board. I wish to speak with Mr. Marlowe about our contracts."

The clerk swallowed. "One moment, please."

Pepys waited in the entrance hall. Ledgers lay open on desks. Papers rustled somewhere deeper in. Everything appeared legitimate. Yet the shadows in the corners seemed deeper than they should be, and the temperature dropped the longer he stood there.

The clerk returned, looking even more uneasy. "Mr. Marlowe will see you. This way."

They walked corridors that felt longer than the building's frontage allowed. Up stairs that seemed steeper than physics permitted. Each step pressed the wrongness deeper into Pepys's bones.

The clerk opened a final door. "Mr. Marlowe's office."

The room was simple — desk, chairs, shelves of ledgers. A window showed the ordinary street below. Perfectly normal.

Except for the man behind the desk.

Mr. Marlowe rose smoothly. Six years had not aged him. Same calm posture. Same eyes that caught the grey daylight and threw it back wrong.

"Mr. Pepys." The smile showed teeth but no warmth. "What an unexpected pleasure. Do sit."

Pepys sat. "I am here on Navy business. *Marlowe and Sons* has supplied us at very favourable terms. Due diligence requires me to understand our suppliers more thoroughly."

"Of course." Mr. Marlowe settled back, fingers laced. "Ask whatever you wish."

"I hear you trade in more than naval stores."

"Quite true. Many respectable houses do. The colonies require labour. We provide it. Everything properly licensed by royal charter."

Pepys leaned forward. "And what else?"

Mr. Marlowe's smile never wavered. "Various commodities. Some more conventional than others. All legal. All profitable."

"I remember you," Pepys said quietly. "From the Fire. Six years ago. You watched the city burn as though it amused you."

The room grew colder. Mr. Marlowe's expression did not change. "Memory plays strange tricks during disasters. You recall what suits you."

“Did you start it?”

Mr. Marlowe laughed — soft, genuine amusement. “A baker’s oven, Mr. Pepys. I was excommunicated from the Scriveners long before that night. Stripped of everything. How could I possibly have arranged a fire that began in a trade entirely unrelated to my own?”

“Through agents. Through preparation. Through—”

“Through sorcery?” Mr. Marlowe’s voice stayed mild. “Are you accusing me of witchcraft in the heart of the City? Shall I expect witch-finders at my door tomorrow?”

“Prove you did not.”

“Prove I did. The burden lies with the accuser, does it not?”

They sat silently for a moment.

Pepys stood. “I have learned what I came for.”

He turned toward the door.

“Mr. Pepys.”

He stopped against his will.

Behind Mr. Marlowe’s desk, in the doorway that had been empty a moment earlier, something stood.

Human-shaped yet profoundly wrong. Perfectly motionless in a way nothing alive could manage. Eyes like holes that had never known light.

A Watcher.

Pepys’s mouth went dry. His mind tried to reject what his eyes reported. Every instinct screamed *run*.

“Who...” The word would not finish itself.

Mr. Marlowe glanced back without concern. “An employee. Pay him no mind. He is merely... observing.”

The Collector did not blink. Did not breathe. Its presence pressed the air until Pepys could hardly draw it in.

“I should leave,” Pepys managed.

“Yes,” Mr. Marlowe said pleasantly. “You should. And Mr. Pepys? The City is dangerous even for careful men. Accidents happen. Offices burn. Records vanish. Even to those who know better than to ask questions they cannot afford to answer.”

Pepys found the door, found the stairs, found the street. He did not remember descending. He only knew that when the cold winter air hit his face he was shaking so hard he had to lean against a wall.

January twenty-ninth. Pepys worked late reviewing documents, trying to bury the memory of that thing in Mr. Marlowe's doorway. Mid-afternoon he stepped out for a meeting with another supplier. Two hours. Routine.

When he returned, smoke poured from the Navy Office windows.

His office.

Flames licked the glass. Firefighters were already forming bucket lines, but the blaze had taken hold with unnatural speed.

Pepys ran forward. "My papers! My records!"

Strong hands caught him. "Too late, sir! The floor's gone!"

He watched his life's work burn. Watched years of careful documentation turn to ash. Watched the window shatter and glass rain down like judgment.

And he heard Mr. Marlowe's voice in his mind: *Accidents happen.*

This was no accident. This was a message delivered with terrible precision. Not his life. Not yet. Just everything he had built to protect himself.

When the fire was finally beaten back, Pepys searched the wreckage. His private diary — the one locked in the drawer, the one containing every note about Mr. Marlowe and the Fire — lay water-damaged but intact.

He clutched it to his chest and knew exactly what the warning meant.

That night he sat in his locked study while his wife slept in the next room. He turned the warped pages slowly, reading the smudged ink of his own suspicions.

He thought about reporting it. About doing his duty. About taking the next step.

Then he thought about the thing that had stood in Mr. Marlowe's doorway. About his wife breathing peacefully a few feet away. About what might happen if he pushed any further.

He closed the diary.

He chose silence.

He chose survival.

Outside, London slept under its winter sky. Ships moved on the icy Thames. The City breathed on.

And beneath Cloth Fair, in the Vault that should not exist, the collection continued to grow — books, contracts, souls — patient, permanent, unstoppable.

Marlowe and Sons had taken root.

Pepys understood that now. Understood that some truths were too heavy to carry.
Understood that sometimes the bravest thing a man could do was decide to live.

He locked the diary away for the last time.

Tomorrow he would recommend other suppliers to the Board. Tomorrow he would limit *Marlowe and Sons'* influence wherever he could without drawing notice.

But he would ask no more questions.

He would not become the next warning.

He would simply wake beside his wife each morning and be grateful he still could.

Sometimes, he told himself as the fire in the grate died to embers, that was the only victory left.

Author's Note

The Great Fire of London began September 2, 1666, in Thomas Farynor's bakery on Pudding Lane. It burned for four days, destroying 13,200 houses, 87 churches, and most of the City's ancient institutions. The Great Plague of 1665 killed approximately 100,000 Londoners.

Samuel Pepys documented both in his famous diary, providing the most detailed contemporary accounts we have. The Navy Office did burn on January 29, 1673. Pepys saved many of his papers.

The Worshipful Company of Scriveners is real and ancient. The excommunication in this story is fiction.

Marlowe and Sons is fictional. The darkness it represents is not.

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