

# THE MARK OF CAIN

FROM THE WILD REEDS AND RUSHES SHE CAME...



BY THE AUTHOR OF *LONG LANKIN*

LINDSEY  
BARRACLOUGH

*Maiden in the Mor Lay—  
Maiden in the mor lay,  
in the mor lay—  
Seuenyst fulle,  
seuenyst fulle.  
Maiden in the mor lay,  
in the mor lay—  
seuenystes fulle ant a day.*

*Welle was hire mete.  
Wat was hire mete?  
The primerole ant the—  
the primerole ant the—  
Welle was hire mete.  
Wat was hire mete?  
The primerole ant the violet.*

*Welle was hire drying.  
Wat was hire drying?  
The chelde water of the—  
the chelde water of the—  
Welle was hire drying.  
Wat was hire drying?  
The chelde water of the  
welle-spring.*

*Welle was hire bowr.  
Wat was hire bowr?  
The rede rose and the—  
The rede rose and the—  
Welle was hire bowr.  
Wat was hire bowr?  
The rede rose and the lily  
flour.*

*Maiden in the Moor Lay—  
Maiden in the moor lay,  
in the moor lay—  
Seven nights full,  
seven nights full.  
Maiden in the moor lay,  
in the moor lay—  
seven nights full and a day.*

*Good was her food.  
What was her food?  
The primrose and the—  
the primrose and the—  
Good was her food.  
What was her food?  
The primrose and the violet.*

*Good was her drink.  
What was her drink?  
The chilled water of the—  
the chilled water of the—  
Good was her drink.  
What was her drink?  
The chilled water of the  
well spring.*

*Good was her bower.  
What was her bower?  
The red rose and the—  
The red rose and the—  
Good was her bower.  
What was her bower?  
The red rose and the lily  
flower.*

—Middle English lyric

SAINT MARK'S EVE — 24th APRIL 1567

*We hurry through the wood along the narrow dirt path that runs by the edge of the brook. Zillah's swollen-knuckled old fingers grip my small hand as I stumble alongside her.*

*"Keep up, child. We have to make haste," she urges. "It is not good for us to be so close to the watermen. We must take care not to be seen."*

*The wood begins to thin, and the stream, no longer confined by the narrow channel running between the alder roots, broadens out before winding its eager way through the water meadows and down to the river.*

*Zillah stops, raises herself as straight as her humped back will allow, shades her eyes, and looks every way about her, from the dark line of the woods behind to the tree-clumped horizon ahead.*

*A harsh cra-ak, cra-ak. Zillah's hand tightens for a moment as a few rooks rise out of the grass and fly off up to the clouds. She gently pulls me towards the sloping bank.*

*"This is the best place," she says. "For it was here that we found you, Aphra, just here, a little babe wailing by the water-side. Scrape up some mud, the softest you can find."*

*I hoist up my skirts, and with feet sinking into the moist dirt of the bank, find a patch between the buttery primroses and the bright spears of new reeds. A startled water hen, red beak bobbing, waddles off on huge starry feet then drops into the river and paddles away.*

*I bend down, push my fingers into the wet clay, and scoop two handfuls into the earthen bowl Zillah holds out for me, while her eyes dart about this way and that.*

*All at once she seizes my arm and whispers urgently, "Quickly, child, back into the trees—a waterman is coming!"*

*Zillah pulls me so hard I flounder up the muddy bank and totter along behind her as she dashes across the clumps of reedy grass towards the woods. From the dark shelter of the trees, while Zillah stands gasping and kneading her wheezy chest with her knuckles, I look down towards the water. A wherry passes by the bank where I dug out the mud. The old waterman, his weather-browned head bent almost to his chest, rows two men upriver a little before ferrying them across to the southern side.*

*"Is that where my mother came from?" I ask. "Did she bring me here over the water?"*

*Zillah is ready to move on. "We've told you often enough, child, she was long away when we found you, who knows where. Now come, you must find a small red stone."*

*I search among the roots, lift scattered leaves.*

*"That is too big . . . that too heavy . . . too grey." Zillah tosses them aside.*

*Then, under the shaggy roof of a toadstool, a gleam of jewel-red catches my eye. I stoop down. Nestled close to the stalk is a little gleaming garnet of a pebble. I hold it up to my eye and try to peep at Zillah through the tiny hole in its middle.*

*"Ah—you have found a bloodstone," she says proudly,*

*then bends in close to whisper in my ear. "Above us in the skies, the celestial spirits are forever in combat with the unquiet dead, and the blood drops of the fallen come down to earth as little stones like this. Keep it safe."*

*Back in the house in the woods, Zillah and I sit at the scrubbed table, heads together over the lump of mud. As she instructs me, I wet my fingers from the pitcher, take the clay, and shape a manikin, a small doll I can fit into the palm of my hand.*

*"Rufus Goode—think Rufus Goode," Zillah breathes as the light begins to fade behind the shutter. "See his face, Aphra, as you work him. Remember the filthy words he uttered."*

*Rufus Goode, this is your head, squashed into your shoulders, these tubes of clay are your arms and legs. I push them close in to your body, smear them with water and lavender oil from the flask.*

*"Now open his chest and put in the little bloodstone for his heart, Aphra," says Zillah. "And this one hair from his own beard. It is all you need. Work it into the clay. Now close him up."*

*Rufus Goode, here is your face: I am making it with a sharp stick, carving out your big watery eyes, your swollen nose, your thin-lipped, foul-speaking mouth drooping to the left.*

*Zillah shows me how to make a little shirt for him, from the sweat-soiled neckerchief which came loose from Goode's throat when I snatched at it to throttle him as he pushed me down into the mud. It was on this dirty rag that we found the hair.*

*“There is now a spirit thread between you, Aphra,” says Zillah. “You and Rufus Goode. Let him dry slowly. Not near to the fire or he will crack. You can do as you wish with him. Remember what that wicked man did. What does he deserve? Give curse for curse, Aphra.”*

*The door opens and Damaris ducks under the lintel, a basket under her arm, the limp claw of a dead chicken poking out from under the cloth.*

*“My, that is a good poppet, Aphra,” she says, drawing in to look, the thick yellow hair escaping from her kerchief and brushing my shoulders. “What will you do to him?” She glances at Zillah before moving away to pluck the bird.*

*In the evening I go up to watch the manikin drying where I have laid him, on the small chair beside my pallet under the eaves of the house in the woods.*

*Whispers creep up the ladder from the room below.*

*“You should not have shown the child how to make a poppet, Zillah.”*

*“That Rufus Goode is a filthy man, Damaris. He caught Aphra near the black pool. If I had not heard her screams . . .” She waits for a moment, then says, “He cursed the girl as we came away. You know as well as I, she must be the one to deal with that. We can only show her what she must do. . . .”*

*Damaris lowers her voice still more. I hold my breath to catch the words: “You know, there is something about the girl, Zillah. The spirits come to her.” Damaris pauses. “I—I have heard the child whispering in the voice of another.”*

I do not hear what Zillah says in answer, she speaks so softly.

*"Aphra has gifts beyond even our own, Zillah," Damaris continues. "Maybe her mother saw it in her—was afeared of her—and cast off her own infant in the river; if she ever had a mortal mother, that is, and was not just pushed up through the foul, black mud eight years ago for us to find. She should not learn those cursed arts, Zillah."*

*"But she found a bloodstone. . . ."*

*"Anyone can find a bloodstone."*

*"She was meant to come to us. We are the three-headed goddess, Damaris. I am the past, you are the present, and the child is the future. . . ."*

*Damaris says nothing.*

*"I have bound you to me, Rufus Goode," I whisper, running a dirty fingernail across his face. "I think I will rip out your heart."*

BELTANE EVE — 30th APRIL 1567

*I am in such an excitement I can barely wait for evening.*

*“Can we go yet?” I ask Zillah as the sun is still passing across the open sky above the clearing. She gives me pots to clean in the stream.*

*“Is it the time?” I ask Damaris as the sun dips behind the high leaves of the oak leaning over the cottage. She gives me twigs to twist out the cobwebs in the corners.*

*At last the hour comes.*

*As the shadows lengthen on the grass, I dance ahead of Zillah and Damaris into the woods, to collect green branches for the Bringing In of the Summer.*

*“Can I do it? Can I ask the hawthorn mother?”*

*“No—” Damaris begins, but Zillah raises her hand to quieten her and nods to me. Gleefully, I stretch my arms around the ancient trunk in the middle of the grove, rest my cheek against the gnarled bark, and whisper close, “Let us take your wood, hawthorn mother, to fill our house this Sabbat night. . . .”*

*A gust of wind creaks the tree, moves the branches, rustles the new leaves.*

*I smile at Zillah, then begin to twist one of the thorny boughs to break it. But the branch will not be snapped. It snatches itself back, whipping its barbs across my cheek, leaving rows of thin, bloody lines. In stinging tears, I run to Zillah’s arms. She glances at Damaris, then, without a word,*



*moves me to the edge of the thicket. While I wipe my face on my apron, the two women quietly gather the green branches, then we return to the house together, all subdued through the twilight trees, to hang them from the beams.*

*Afterwards, when the great glittering beasts, the Lion and the Bear, begin their nightly prowls across the sky, we carry bundles of dry sticks into the clearing in front of the cottage and throw them carefully together on the earth to make our Balefire. Zillah takes a brand from our hearth and sets the faggots all alight. For a short while the three of us forget what happened in the hawthorn grove, lift our skirts, and laugh and jig in and out of the fire, swift, and not too close to its leaping heart.*

*But into my head comes the little manikin under the eaves, almost dry, wrapped in his neckerchief shirt. I look up at the gable shutter and picture him there on my cane-bottomed chair.*

*“Aphra! Aphra!”*

*Damaris is shrieking.*

*I turn, look down at a huge spear of flame flaring up my skirts, flap at it with my hands. A razor-sharp stinging spreads over my leg. I suck in breath and smell roasting meat. Zillah pushes me to the ground, presses me down.*

*“Honey! Milk!” she screeches to Damaris.*

*With shuddering breath Zillah heaves me up in her frail arms and lurches towards the cottage. My head is pounding. I cannot be quiet. Birds clatter up out of the trees at my screaming as we stumble by.*

*In the cottage Zillah lays me down on the table, clamps a hand over my mouth, bends close to my ear.*

*“Hush that noise!” she urges. “Use the pain! Send it into the poppet up above. Use it for your hate. Use it! Do not cry out! Never cry out!”*

*While I whine between clenched teeth, tossing my head from side to side, Zillah busies herself with the muslin wrappings drenched in honey and the cooling milk-soaked cloths. Damaris, to the side, tears up plantain leaves, weeping, whispering through her tears. “It was the hawthorn mother that did this. Aphra did not please her. She should not have tried to break the boughs.”*

*“Nonsense,” says Zillah. “It was no more than a mishap. Give me the leaves. They should ease her pain.”*

*I try to do as Zillah says: send the pain into the little manikin drying on the chair up in the eaves.*

SAINT HELEN'S DAY—2nd MAY 1567

*I can make a fist, hold it in front of my eye, and blot out the new moon. That is the size of the burned flesh on my thigh. It is so sore it keeps me from sleeping. Zillah says the skin will never be smooth as it was before, but I should be glad that remedies were close at hand and that she and Damaris are healers. She says others have died from lesser wounds than mine.*

*She gently lifts the covering and I make myself look at the oozing, broken blisters. I remember the jagged, sizzling flame and the pain, and begin to tingle with sweat.*

*“Hush your grizzling,” Zillah says, bringing clean muslin and more soothing honey. “I told you before, do not waste your power crying out.”*

*Damaris comes with the news that Rufus Goode’s heart has burst in his chest, and the sexton of Saint Michael and All the Angels is even now digging his grave. I knew the moment it happened because I felt the spirit thread snap, but I did not tell my mothers. Damaris studies me with an anxious glance. I thought Zillah would be happy with me, but even she is uneasy; she had not expected a death, merely a sickness.*

*Here I am, a child, and Rufus Goode has died.*

*I will keep the little bloodstone close to me always, so I will never forget what I can do.*

*Two years later*

*SAINT JOHN'S EVE—23rd JUNE 1569*

*Sick, needy, miserable people come to the house in the woods—mostly women—mostly in the dark.*

*Many times I sit on my pallet above, curled hands around knees, and watch through the hole between the laths the darting spark of a small lantern approaching through the night trees.*

*I steal quietly from my bed and peep through a large crack between the boards that allows me to see almost everything that goes on in the room below. I watch and listen and learn secret things that Zillah and Damaris would not wish me to know at so tender an age. But at ten years I have already learned how artful they must be when laying charms; how all must be done in the proper order, all the words correct in accordance; that sometimes there is no remedy for a fault, an incompleteness in the charm, for then the spell can turn against the person who is casting it. Even cunning folk have died that way.*

*This is how it goes: a soft, nervous knocking at the door, murmuring, a fearful woman, low voiced, trembling, grabbing at Zillah's hand, whispering close in Damaris's ear. After a while the chanting begins, the swirling of water, the fragrance of wild plants crushed with a stone, mixing in a jug, the silver bowl, bloodletting, binding.*

*The house fills with spirits—the spirits that Zillah and Damaris call up to do their will.*

*I know them all: Tilly Murrell, the witch-child of Hungerhill, Little Clim, Dorcas Oates, Matty the Boy. They do my mothers' bidding, then float up to my place in the loft. I can just see their glassy forms on the edge of my eye as they sit on my shoulders, play with my hair, laugh in my ears in their airy way, and flit in and out of the rafters above me like darting swifts.*

*Sometimes the spirits try to climb inside my head and peer out of my eyes. Now and then I allow them, suffer them to speak out of my mouth for their play, but only when I wish it.*

*Matty the Boy laughs in his little high voice, and with my hands I let him beat on a horn cup with a tin spoon until Damaris calls up for me to stop the noise.*

*Dorcas Oates was drowned by her own people in the sea, and I cannot abide for long the feel of the close, cold water and the briny smell of samphire and bladderweed.*

*Little Clim shivers. His mother thought he was a changeling and left him out in the woods alone for the fairies to take back and return to her the child they stole away, but they never came. He tastes of earth and leaf mould.*

*Tilly Murrell I do not let in at all, for she is a sly, deceitful little spirit, and I might not get her out again.*

*I have no fear of them. Indeed, I know little fear at all.*

*Yet it is fear, though not mine, that saves me from the flames, this first time at least.*

SAINT JOHN'S DAY—24th JUNE 1569

*It is early evening, just at twilight. I am still below, laying down the fresh rushes on the floor, breathing in the scent of the water meadows from where Zillah has gathered them earlier in the day, when a timid knock rattles the latch. Damaris opens the door and a plain young woman, without beauty, grace, or a lantern, steps over the threshold, looking furtively behind her.*

*I must be studying the woman far too curiously, for Zillah, who is at the table binding herbs into bundles, glances at me.*

*“Up the ladder, Aphra,” she says, and I obey, but no sooner have I reached my little space under the eaves than I lower myself down to my knees and put my eye to the crack in the boards.*

*The young woman weeps and weeps. A few meagre coins spill onto the table. The charming begins; the air grows close and heavy with spells. I feel the spirits rise, chattering, buzzing up the ladder to draw close to me. Little Clim and Matty the Boy want to play, but tonight I shoo them quickly off. They dart away, one through the shutter and the other into the spaces in the thatch above.*

*I climb onto my pallet, listening to the murmuring voices below, and watch the evening draw in until the sky deepens to mid-blue, then indigo. The planet Venus hovers low over the treetops.*

*The young woman is ailing. There is something inside her withering away and she is brimful with poison. Although tonight she has made her way to us through the woods, in seven days she will be able to walk no longer, and in three days beyond the seven she will be dead. I know this because I can see the dying lights are already lifting off her skin; those tiny inside parts of the body that float away into the air, shimmering little points, as life begins to draw to its close.*

*When the dying lights are gathering, so the flesh becomes more and more like thin gauze, and I can pass through it even more easily. Zillah and Damaris do not know this, and they do not know I can see the lights.*

*I leave my pallet and lie close to the boards to watch the woman. I breathe in deeply, then swim lightly downwards through the air and into her skin. My own body waits behind, the eye still to the floor.*

*I am sitting in the rush chair.*

*A fierce pain surges up from my stomach through my limbs into my fingers and toes, which curl rigid like claws. Zillah's hands are on my head, warm and comforting but unable to ease the pain. Damaris rubs my arms with a paste of comfrey and rue. I drop my head so they will not see my eyes, which look out of hers, but I can bear the suffering no more than a few seconds, and am glad to return to my little space under the eaves.*

*Zillah calls up the ladder. "Aphra! Aphra! Up, child! Take this woman back to the wood's edge. She has no lantern and is fearful she will be lost."*

*I know my way through the woods in the darkness, but take a lantern to light the narrow way for the young woman's sake; wringing her hands and muttering to herself, she stumbles on the tree roots and gasps each time a low branch snatches her hair, thinking some demon has caught her. Having felt the pain she endures, I am surprised she can walk so far. She stops, whimpering at each owl's hoot, every brushing of the undergrowth by stoat or badger. At last I am glad to leave her under the silver birches near the earth track that leads to Beesden Parva, where she dwells, though not for much longer.*

*A low mist curls over the heath, but the moon is rising bright enough to light her way home.*

*I turn back and immediately stop in bewilderment, gripping one of the white birch trunks to steady myself. A red glow is swelling up over the treetops, a glow spangled with showers of sparks and flaming wisps of thatch that curl and drift before twisting into flickering trails of smoke. Threading my way swiftly in and out of the trees, I hear the clamour of voices and the roar and crackle of fire, feel its heat, smell the smoke and the sweet and bitter odours of burning.*

*I blow out the lantern and steal up quickly, silently, along the narrow hidden path.*

*Peering through the tree trunks, my face and arms hot and burnished in the reflected light, I watch a handful of men whooping with glee, kicking up their legs, and dancing around the house in the woods. Huge, vivid, snarling flames are eating up the blazing cottage. Tongues of fire lick the blackening*



*timbers, feast greedily on our stores of apples, fitches of bacon, herbs, potions, and unguents. I can hear our vessels—our flasks, bottles, and bowls—cracking, exploding in the furnace while the house whistles, whines, and groans.*

*Even the trees behind the cottage have taken fire, their leaves darkening and crumpling.*

*Two large men cross in front of my hiding place, the backs of their necks sweat-shiny, flecked with black flakes. I move back slightly into the shadows.*

*“Are you certain the cunning women were inside?” says the first.*

*“We heard them in there. We barred the door,” answers the other.*

*“Did you be sure to watch the chimney? They didn’t fly out of it on their brooms?”*

*“We looked most careful, and we heard them screaming. Can you not smell them? Like swine flesh.”*

*“What of the maid?”*

*“Don’t know, John. We hoped she might be in there also. We’ll know when the fire dies down.”*

*“She’s only a child.”*

*“Makes no difference.”*

*I slip away. I do not believe Zillah and Damaris are burned in the house. They would not have screamed like the man said they did. Zillah would have bade Damaris be quiet as she bade me when I was burned in the Balefire.*

*For days afterwards I wander the woods, calling for my*

mothers, seeking them in our familiar places. I sleep under bushes, wrapped close in my apron, eating mushrooms, roots, herbs, digging up chestnuts and beechnuts from the little winter stores the squirrels have forgotten, each morning hurrying back along the secret trails, the serpent's path and old Brock's track, to the house in the woods. Every day I expect to find it still, its whitewashed walls bowed under the low, curving thatch, woodsmoke trailing out of the chimney into the crown of the oak above. And every day I shudder at the sight of the heap of hot, burned timbers under a layer of whitening ash.

The men come, waiting for the embers to cool, but in the first days, the heat drives them away. Each day they return, and I am there hidden, watching as they poke among the smouldering ruins with long branches, turning over the scorched wood, searching, I know, for the remains of Zillah and Damaris. But so long as they do not find them, I seek them still, calling, waiting, and calling.

One morning, weary and aching through sleeping yet one more night in a damp hollow, I smell burning pitch, wood, and smoke and stumble back to the clearing. Even hidden in the trees, I feel the heat on my cheeks as another fire leaps and dances in the ruins of the burned cottage, consuming once more, and forever, the uncovered, blackened corpses of my two mothers.

"That's it, then, John. Gone for good now," says one of the men, who had been there on that other night. "No trouble from them two no more. Well burned twice—or they'll come back."

*“That’s right, you got to make sure,” says another. “He’s crafty, that devil, Old Nick. Knows all kinds of ways to bring them back to do his wickedness. Man over Medford way said a hanged witch came back in his wife’s body. Made no end of mischief. They hanged her again and that was an end of it.”*

*Another man approaches with a long branch to poke the flames.*

*“I heard of that one,” he says. “Didn’t pin her down proper the first time they buried her. Rushed it ‘cause it got dark. It’s like with these two here. We’ll have to keep going over this lot. Only takes a bit of skelton left unburned—then them Bonesmen can call up the spirit on their bone flutes.”*

*“Or grind ‘em down for magic potions.”*

*“Devil take ‘em, them Bonesmen. I’d like to see them strung up, I would, digging up the dead.”*

*“Didn’t find no child here, though, John.”*

*“No matter. She’ll die soon enough without no vittles, and even if she lasts until the winter, no Christian soul will take that one in.”*

*But I am not afeared of ice nor snow. I am a creature of the cold. I was found by lantern light, on the eve of Candlemas Day in the heart of the winter, and had not perished in that bitter place by the edge of the water. The frost suits my flesh. The season that brings death to others enlivens me, and I breathe in the north wind as the breath of life.*

*When the evening draws in and the men depart, I creep out and stand as close as I dare. While the hot smoke curls around*

*me, I cannot stop tears, spitting as they fall one by one onto the seared black earth around my feet.*

*Somewhere in that heap of burning wood and bone is my bloodstone.*

*Then I turn my back on the remnants of all I have known, keep my eyes and ears open, and learn how to stay alive.*

*Even as the summer passes and the days begin to shorten, the earth feeds me.*

*A turnip field, nuts, berries, and roots, a stream rippling with trout, a skylark baked over a fire in its own little clay oven, split the clay open and the feathers come away. Rabbits last a week, hares even longer if you can catch them, and the fur makes warm mittens. Hedgehogs are slow moving and cook up tender. Wrap a hedgehog in clay like the skylark, and the prickles are no trouble. Zillah showed me how to trap, Damaris to bake.*

*Wait for the goodwife to leave her cottage, then lift a shawl, a blanket, a piece of bread, some slippers, move on quickly. Move on. Stay in the shadows, be a shadow, round the edges, in the woods, under the thick trees when it rains, in the sheds and barns when the wind blows and the snow comes. Move on quick. Eat when you can, take when you can, sleep when you can.*

*I learned my craft, listening and watching.*

*I sought out the Bonesman, Micah, and his apprentice, Absalom, on the old pedlars' ways, but they found me first, on the hollow path beneath the arching trees at High*

*Missingham on the northern washes. They gave me a draught of bone ash and ale. Micah played his flute and I saw visions of the otherworld. Human bones make strong magic. It is said the Bonesmen can resurrect the dead and make them dance on their own graves.*

*Desperate women know where to find me, tell each other in whispers behind trembling fingers when I am about—a cake for a charm, a coin for a spell. They search for me, wait for me in the groves of ash, never rowan, elder, or holly, for to be near to the wood of those hallowed trees is a torment to me—the merest brush of their bark and my skin erupts into sores.*

*It gives me more pleasure to settle a debt or a quarrel by taking revenge, blowing an ill wind, raising boils, rashes, and consumptions, or worse, than ever it does to cure or bless. I know how to heal, but it is the dark and dirty work I am paid for, and relish.*

*Move on quick, behind the hedges, off the byways, through weeks, then months, then years.*

*Six years later*

SAINT BARTHOLOMEW'S DAY—24th AUGUST 1575

*On a yellow-hot day, they catch me for a vagrant over Hunsham way. In an unguarded moment, drinking from a stream in the evening sunshine, I am set upon by gleaners, returning home with the spoils of their day in the fields. They take hold of me roughly, keep me close in a barn, and at daylight stand me up before the Justice.*

*His Lordship looks down at me. I avoid his stare and remain steady on my worn, stolen slippers.*

*"We have no name for you. What is your family? Which is your parish?"*

*I do not wish to speak with him, and close my eyes to shut him out.*

*"We will keep you confined until you tell us your name."*

*I cannot bear to be locked in.*

*"Aphra. I am Aphra."*

*"And your family?"*

*"None."*

*"Your age?"*

*I am not certain.*

*"Your age?"*

*"Sixteen years, I believe, give or take."*

*"Your parish?"*

*"My parish is the reeds and the rushes."*

*"Aphra of the rushes, then—the law is plain," says the*

Justice. "You must be marked for your vagrancy, so others will not seek to follow your example."

He turns away quickly to address the two burly men holding my arms. "Do what has to be done."

They drag me outside and take me down through the village towards the smithy. A crowd is gathering. Some cross themselves as I pass by. A young woman spits at me, and many of the others begin chewing their cheeks to make spittle to do the same, but as my gaze falls on each of them in turn, they swallow it down and look away.

The larger of the two men, Slater, pushes me down in the dirt beside a broad tree stump, its flat top smeared with old dried blood. The other, Deeks, catches tight hold of my hands. I struggle, but the man is stronger than he looks.

"You ready, Jagers?" shouts Slater. He grabs my hair and winds it round his thick fingers, takes my head tight in his two chapped hands, and forces it down onto the top of the stump and holds it there. Splinters graze my cheek. Slater smells of ale and bad meat.

"Hurry, Jagers! She's a squirmer, this one."

Through my squashed eyes, I see a large man come out of the smithy. He wears a grimy leather apron. Huge veined muscles strain against the sleeves of his smock. In one hand he holds a foot-long iron rod, pointed sharp at one end, and in the other swings a heavy metal mallet.

I know him. I have come across him before, over Shersted way. He will not touch me.

*"Which ear?" Slater calls.*

*"Don't matter which one," shouts Jagers. "Stretch it out so there's enough skin to get me spike in. Hurry up! I've got a job waiting."*

*I let Slater fumble for my left ear. He pinches it tight and pulls the lobe flat against the top of the stump, pushing my face in the other direction.*

*I feel Jagers's bulk close to me, smell burned wood, iron, sweat, feel the point of the spike on my skin, his face leaning in.*

*I force my head sideways, open my eyes, and look into his.*

*"You!" He reels back slightly, his ruddy skin draining of colour, shiny beads appearing on his forehead.*

*"What you doing? Get on with it, man!" Slater shouts.*

*"I'm not doing it," says Jagers.*

*"It's the law, man," says Deeks. "She's a vagrant."*

*"Do it yourself," says Jagers, turning back to the smithy.*

*"Give us your spike, then!" Slater shouts after him.*

*"You're not doing it with my tools!" Jagers calls back, still walking away.*

*"Anyone got a spike?"*

*Slater and Deeks loose their hold. I stagger to my feet, wipe the spit off my face, rub my tender ear, and, once again, sweep my gaze slowly across the crowd.*

*A child begins to cry. The people study me curiously at first, then lower their eyes as mine meet theirs. One by one, they begin to move away, a few glancing back at me as they go.*



*Deeks looks me up and down. Then he lifts his foot and lands a mighty kick on my calf. The shock throws me off balance for a moment, but my eyes stay on his face.*

*“Get off!” he snarls. “Go away! But if you so much as come this way again . . .”*

*I draw back my lips and smile, brush the dirt off my skirts, and turn my back.*

*For a while I stand at the entrance to the smithy and stare at Jagers as he hammers the red-hot strip of metal on his anvil, then picks it up with his tongs and plunges it into the fire.*

*“I know you’re there. Leave me be,” he calls.*

*“How’s your sister over in Shersted?” say I.*

*“Go your ways,” he says, without looking up. “You know she’s like to die.”*

*“Is dead already, I believe. Maybe they han’t told you yet.”*

*“Go your ways.”*

*Six years later*

THE BLIND DAYS OF MARCH 1581

*Sometimes the weaknesses of the world catch up with me. It has rained for twenty days and my garments are sodden. The damp sits miserably in the plaid shawl I lifted from the charcoal burner's wife in the woods beyond Boxton Green. My worn slippers let in the muddy water.*

*I think of Zillah and Damaris, of the warmth of our little house, and find my way back to our old woods, thinking I will be met and welcomed there by my old life, that the dream I carry with me of the past will become real merely because I wish it so.*

*But there is nothing to be seen in our clearing. Not a clump of grass nor the smallest sapling has taken root in this dark, wet, barren earth, all these twelve years on.*

*I push a mush of dead leaves aside with my foot, disturb a piece of black wood which powders under my heel. The heavy raindrops spatter on the rotted crumbs, spreading them over the earth, uncovering and then washing clean a gleaming red pebble with a hole in its heart.*

*My bloodstone.*

*With disbelief, then delight, I bend down, take it out of the soil, and hold it to me like a treasure. I lift my face to the watery air, take a last look around the clearing, then turn my back.*

*I wander through the trees and on to the riverbank where I*

*once scooped out the clay for the manikin. The ground is thick with purple violets.*

*I stand by the water's edge, looking across to the south, still in a small flutter of childish fear that I should be seen by the watermen, still asking myself whether that is where I came from. I walk on by the alders and dipping willows until, in the last of the evening, I come to a ford and splash through the water to the other side.*

*On the second of the three Blind Days, when no magic, no divination can be done, a fever takes hold of me on the road from Shersted to Mistleham.*

*The Bonesmen cannot be called upon to mix a potion for me. They are men of the fen country and never stray so far south. The wise woman, Mother Winnery, who healed me once before, at a price, is far out of reach on the northern marshes. Wherever I go, word flies from one cunning woman to the next to be wary and not to cross my path, so there is none to conjure a charm to make me well. I have power over the life and death of others but have not the skill to cure myself.*

*The rain will not cease. I stumble from one dripping copse of trees to the next. There is little shelter away from the woods, and I am shunned and moved on from byre and pound, too sick and weary to force my will.*

*I keep walking as best I can, for the land is flat and marshy and there is nowhere to rest other than in the ditches. The early-spring meadows are sodden and do not yield up their nourishing plants.*

*I gather my wits enough to read a palm out on Hilsey marsh for a mouthful of bread and a rest in the sheep pen. I steal up in the night, let myself into the cot, and take the goodwife's dry shawl and shoes and leave the wet behind on the floor.*

*I find the path through the marsh by the light of the flickering corpse candles that Zillah told me were the souls of the unbaptized flitting between heaven and hell.*

*When the grey watery dawn rises over the reeds, I am long on the road from Hilsey to the sea.*

*And at last I come to Bryers Guerdon.*

*I seek charity at the house of the priest, Piers Hillyard. His vixen of a housekeeper will not allow me even one night's sleep in a corner of the barn, but Hillyard comes after me with some cheese and small beer, then sends me down to the marshes to seek shelter.*

*A track leads down the hill from the priest's house to his little church of All Hallows, set back in its protecting circle of trees. Priests are always good for scraps to eat, but I avoid their churches, for I cannot bear the touch of consecrated ground beneath my feet.*

*From the shelter of the tall hedgerow on the other side of the track, I pass All Hallows, my eyes firmly ahead.*

*But all at once my steps falter; my head spins. I feel a flush of sweat sweep over my body.*

*Swaying, I turn and look about for a place to sit, but all is wet grass, straggly bushes, and thick mud. If I passed into*

*the churchyard I might find refuge among the tombstones, or in the church itself, but nothing would induce me to walk that way.*

*The hedgerow wants its new leaves. Through the fretwork of black twigs I see, beyond the eastern wall of the church, farther than the last straggling headstones, a stretch of swampy ground and a pool overhung by an ugly, crooked tree.*

*The lychgate draws my gaze. As I run my eye over the wooden gates standing a little way open and the bowed, overhanging roof above, dripping in the endless rain, I realize that it is not the fever that has overwhelmed me but the gate itself. It is as if I have strayed into the shaded borders of the other-world, the spirit-world beyond our own. Here in this place of enchantment, the thin curtain between the worlds shifts and changes, conceals and uncovers without mortal aid.*

*A tingling runs through my body.*

*This is a place of ancient magic, on the margin of earth and water, sacred to the men of stone, bronze, and iron, long before time and memory.*

*I fear some terrible mischance here, think I smell smoke on the air. My burned wound aches. Confused and weakened, I trudge on but cannot resist looking back again and again.*

*The marsh-dwellers, in their huts of willow, mud, and reeds, have little to share and are wary of strangers. They look into my eyes and turn from me, threaten me with sticks, tell me to be gone.*

*I move farther away from the dwellings of the sheep and*

*cattle herders, where scrawny, wet ewes plod away from me and thin lambs skitter sideways out of my path. I tear up clumps of grass, rip up handfuls of drooping marsh flowers to grind with my teeth for sustenance, stumbling on through the high reeds alongside the channels of fresh water towards the wide open sea-mouth of the far river. From time to time I kneel and try to drink out of my cupped hands, but the water is becoming brackish; I am drawing ever closer to the salt creeks.*

*Forcing up my head, I see through a bleary haze a solitary withered tree. Almost hidden beneath it, among a tangle of scrubby bushes, is a small hut with earth walls and a roof of knotted reeds. I stagger towards it.*

*The crude door, of thin boughs bound together with twine, scrapes inwards against a heap of straw. The space within is damp and foul smelling. Deep shadows linger in the corners. A rough wooden bench, no more than a plank of wood resting on two gnarled tree stumps, runs along the wall under a small square opening of window, half covered with a mat of plaited grass, through which sprays of drizzle blow in. Hanging from hooks lashed to the rafters are carcasses of hare, rabbit, and weasel, dried fur clinging to bone, with all flesh and blood sucked, scratched, and picked out. A dun-coloured ragged garment hangs on the back wall, on a piece of branch thrust into the wattle.*

*I sink down into the dirty straw and know nothing more for a long while, drifting in and out of the world, sometimes*

*half opening my eyes and seeing the shimmer of stars against the black shape of night above the bench. In one strange dream, I think an angel comes to me where I lie. I feel his breath, see close to me the golden strands of his hair, but when the dawn inches its way across the walls of the shelter and I awake to the harsh croak of a crow on the roof above me, I am alone.*

*Another night, perhaps another day, passes by outside the dirt walls. The angel leans over me and I swallow water from a thick clay bowl that tastes of earth.*

*On the third night he bends over me once more and drips cool water between my parched lips. I open my eyes. The moon's yellow face fills the square of window and I look upon the angel at last.*

*I am not afraid, though angel he is none. The diseased and disfigured came to the house in the woods for solace and healing. I watched them from my loft. They did not repel me, and neither does he. This hideous, deformed creature has given me water—life. The well-favoured shunned and despised me, refused me shelter, but this brutish thing, more beast than man, yet man he is, affords me the refuge of his dwelling place, and I draw close to him, though his strange face and long arms bear the dreaded marks of the leper.*

*His speech is little more than rough sounds in his throat; perhaps he has never needed to utter a word to another human soul for a long time. He barks out his name to me—“Cain! Cain! Lan-kin! Lan-kin!” and repeats mine—“Aff-ra! Aff-ra! Aff-ra!”*

SPRING INTO SUMMER 1581

*Days pass, and clumsy words come to him, never clear, but I begin to catch some meaning in them. He shares his kill—raw coney, rat, goose, and crow, ripping them apart for me with his sharp teeth. When I am well again, I will make a fire to cook, but for now I need to grow strong, and have eaten bloody meat before.*

*When the rain eases, and my illness passes a little, Lankin carries me out into the wilderness of sea-channel and freshwater spring, of reed mace and tussock grass.*

*And I see that though the long man lives in a world of which the margins are water, he will not cross it, whether it moves or is still. He will not even pass over a place if he senses water running below the ground. He drinks hesitantly from one small spring only, bubbling out a short way from the hut, and if we draw near to a pool or stray too close to a ditch, the creature flinches and turns away.*

*When I ask, Lankin twists his face, trying to form words to tell his story, using dumb show when the words fail him. Water seems to mean for him a blinding tangle of choking weed and filthy, frothing green bubbles; young men laughing as they whip and thrash a misshapen, ugly boy back into the creek with springing willow wands, again and again. Water is lungs bursting on the edge of drowning, and the weakness that follows, for days and days.*



*He roams his own hidden paths and tracks, creeping round the pools and channels, skirting unseen the dwellings of those who make their rude living on the marshlands, but in the end he always comes to the water. He can never escape this place.*

# The Mark of Cain

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