

The Christmas Hunt

By

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ONE

Wakefield, December 23rd, 1330-ish

The villager, a young man with a shock of sandy hair and large sideburns, slammed his palm onto the table making the ale in the mug in front of him slosh over the sides. His face was red with frustration and he let out a bitter oath as he looked up at the enormous man sitting across from him. "I'm done with this, John," the villager grouched. "You seem to win every game!"

John Little, the fabled former outlaw who was employed nowadays as a part-time bailiff, raised his eyebrows in an expression of innocent surprise. "I'm just lucky," he replied defensively. "I can't help that, can I, Edward? Blame it on God." Grinning, he reached out, scooped up the two silver pennies resting beside Edward's mug and dropped them into his coin purse. He picked up the dice and rattled them in his hand. "Want another game?" he asked.

"No, I bloody don't," the young villager retorted, standing up and wandering away to sit at another table, leaving the bailiff shaking his head with merriment.

"He thinks you've been cheating," said Will Scafflock, who was also smiling at the lad's display of poor sportsmanship. "A bad loser."

"Me? Cheat? While this fine servant of God looks on? Never!" John reached out and patted the other man left at their table, a rotund, cheery friar everyone knew as Tuck, despite the fact his real name was Robert.

"No, fair enough," Will admitted. "You're many things – hairy, ugly, smelly, and as stupid as my little dog, Mite – but you're not a cheat."

John eyed his old friend with a mixture of anger and amusement. They'd spent many years in one another's company, as outlaws in the greenwoods of Barnsdale and Sherwood, and latterly as friends on the right side of the law in Wakefield. Humour, sometimes quite vicious humour, had been one way they kept themselves entertained on the long days and nights. One developed a thick skin when it came to Will's humour.

"Stupid, Scarlet?" John demanded, using Will's infamous nickname which had been earned on account of his ferocious temper. "Your dog isn't stupid." He looked down under the table at the little brown terrier lying contentedly at Will's feet and ruffled the dog's ears.

"He is," Will said. "My other one, Holdfast, is much smarter."

"Where is Holdfast anyway?" Tuck asked, drawing his cloak around himself as the tavern door opened and another patron was blown inside in a flurry of snow. "Why did you only bring Mite with you?"

"Holdfast doesn't like too many people around him," Will said. "Doesn't trust them. Mite likes people, which is why he's not very smart!"

"You're a cynical one," John grinned. "Not all people are bad. I mean, you're a twat, but Tuck's alright." He leaned back, still grinning as he looked about the tavern, wondering who might take Edward's place for a game of dice. No-one met his eye, and, when he called out to a few drinkers, asking if they'd play, he was met with blunt refusal.

"See, your reputation's preceded you," Will cackled. "Everyone knows what you're like. No wonder they won't play you."

"Well, what are we going to do for the rest of the night then?" John demanded, putting his dice away in his purse with a dejected look.

"Drink!" Will replied, lifting his ale mug in the air.

"And eat," Tuck added, gesturing to the man behind the bar. "Bring us some of your stew, Alexander," he called. "Make sure it's nice and hot, eh? It's cold out there tonight."

"It is indeed, Brother Tuck," the portly tavern keeper agreed, wandering over to the hearth and putting another log into the flames. "There, that should keep you nice and cosy while I get your food ready. You got enough ale? Aye? Good. I'll be back shortly then."

"Drinking and eating are all very well," John sighed, stretching his enormous legs out beneath the table and placing his hands behind his head. "They're two of my favourite things, to be honest. But I fancy some entertainment. Why are there no minstrels around here?"

"I could sing you a carol," Tuck offered with a glint in his eye. "It's only two days until Christmas after all. What about the one I wrote myself? 'A Child Is Boren Amonges Man'?" Without waiting for an answer he began to sing,

"Hand by hand we shule us take,

And joye and blisse shule we make;

For the devel of helle man hath forsake—"

"No, you're alright thanks, Tuck," Will Scarlet interrupted loudly. "Maybe save your voice for Christmas Day, eh?"

"Aye, you'll drive all Alexander' customers away," John said, and he and Will laughed together like daft boys.

"You can sing hymns any time you like in my establishment, Tuck," the tavern keeper said, bustling over with three bowls of piping hot stew which he expertly placed on the table without spilling a drop. "There you go, lads. Enjoy." He smiled at them, purple nose almost seeming to glow in the firelight, then went off to fill mugs of ale for other patrons as a blast of wind rattled the shutters.

"Since there's no minstrels likely to be on their way here to entertain us in this weather," Will said, "how about we try this thing my old captain used to do with us when I was in the army?"

John and Tuck shared a look then the giant bailiff said with a sardonic laugh, "I'm not sure we want to play those kind of games, Scarlet."

"Shut up, you bloody oaf," Will retorted. "Look, this is what you do." He looked about the room, eyes travelling across the patrons drinking at their tables, past the merrily blazing hearth, and on to the tavern keeper who was chopping up winter vegetables ready for his next batch of famous stew. "Right," Will said to John. "You close your eyes. In fact, here, put your cloak on back to front and cover your face so you can't see anything."

"I told you, we weren't playing those—"

"Shut up, John, and do as you're told," Will interrupted. "Go on. You wanted to be entertained didn't you? Well, this always entertained us in the army."

With a slightly worried glance at Tuck who merely shrugged and smirked back, John reluctantly did as he was told, putting his cloak on back to front and pulling up the hood so it covered his face. While he was doing that, Will got up and walked across to Alexander, inspecting the basket of vegetables before finally lifting a carrot and winking at the tavern keeper who stared at him as if he'd gone mad.

"What are you doing," John asked in a muffled voice as Will sat down at the table again. "Better not be any funny business, Scarlet, or I'll punch your fu—"

"What have I got in my hand?" Will demanded, brandishing the carrot in front of the blindfolded bailiff's face.

John thought about it for a moment, then he said, "How the hell should I know? I can't see anything!"

"Listen, John, I'm going to send you an image of this object, right? Straight into your brain. And you have to tell me what it is, or at least try to describe it. All right? Now, think." Will stared at the carrot, taking in the pointed, purple vegetable with its green top and ridged, earthy body. "Think," he repeated, eyes straining hard at the carrot.

John had finally understood the point of the game and he sat quite still for a long moment before asking tentatively, "A dagger?"

Will looked at Tuck, smiling and nodding.

"Close," he said.

"Close?" the friar demanded. "It's nothing like a dagger!"

"It bloody is," Will replied. "It's a similar shape."

"Pfft, I'd like to see you stabbing someone with that, Scarlet."

"I'll stab *you* with it in a moment, Tuck, if you don't shut up!"

"A sword," John asked.

"No. Think!" Will commanded, staring hard at the carrot again. "I'm sending it to your mind, John. Can you see it? What colour is it?"

John thought about for a long time, really trying to enter the spirit of the game, before he shrugged and said, "Green?"

Tuck laughed, but Will nodded, glaring irritably at the friar. "Part of it's green, aye."

"Holly!"

The tavern was bedecked outside with holly and ivy for the Christmas season, but Will shook his head. "Try again."

"I don't know, this is stupid."

"Try again," Will repeated. "Try to see the image I'm sending into your head."

John sat quietly, picking at the skin on his fingertips, before guessing, "A log for the fire."

"It's a carrot," Tuck said, frowning, as Will swore and John pulled the hood down from his face to see the purple vegetable for himself.

"Why did you ruin the game?" Will demanded, brandishing the carrot as if it was indeed a dagger. "It takes time to build a connection between the two people playing. We used to get them right all the time back in my army days."

"It's unholy, Scarlet," Tuck proclaimed as he finished spooning the last of his stew into his mouth.

"What? How's it unholy?"

"It's not natural is it?" The friar was indignant now that his meal was over and he no longer had to concentrate on feeding himself. "You're trying to harness demonic forces to put the images into John's head. It's not Christian."

"Bollocks," Will said hotly. "How d'you know it's not God himself that's putting the image into John's head?"

"Well, if it was, he didn't do a very good job of it," John muttered, beginning to eat his own stew, still with his cloak on back to front.

"Let's try again," said Will. "Come on, once we get a connection, John, you'll be amazed how well it works. You go and pick an object for him to guess, Tuck."

The friar huffed and shook his head muttering that no good could come of such ungodly games, but he got up and looked around the room as John, with loud protestations, stopped eating and covered his face again. Will's little terrier, Mite, jumped up into his lap and sat sniffing at the bowl in front of his master.

Soon, Tuck was seated once more, and holding a jug filled with water which he handed to Will, refusing to take any other part in the game.

"All right, John, what have I got this time?"

Sighing, John held up his palms and tilted his hooded head to the side. "I dunno. A jug."

Will barked with laughter and looked at Tuck. "See? I told you it worked!"

The friar made the sign of the cross towards the jug and muttered a hasty Pater Noster as John pulled down the hood and smiled in disbelief.

"I was right?" demanded the bailiff, as if he'd been tricked somehow.

"Aye, you were right," Will confirmed.

"I saw it," John said. "Like, in my mind's eye, I could see a jug." He shook his head, astonished to have felt this incredible connection with his old companion. "All that time listening to your old stories and putting up with your pungent stench when we were living close together as outlaws in Barnsdale seem to have counted for something, eh, Scarlet?"

"I know," Will nodded. "We must have a bond, John. Mental."

Tuck snorted derisively. "You're mental all right. Both of you." He downed the remainder of his ale and got to his feet, rubbing his belly as he eyed the empty bowl of stew. "That was as tasty as ever, Alexander," he called to the tavern keeper. "I'm for my bed now though, I'll see you all another day. And I'll say a prayer for your souls," he told John and Will. "Goodnight."

He went out into the snow, pulling up the hood on his grey cassock as he did so, and then his baritone voice could be heard singing 'A Child is Boren Amonges Man' as he trudged through the darkness towards his quarters in St Mary's.

"You want to try again with a different object?" Will asked John, stroking Mite's head as the little dog licked and nibbled at a paw.

"Aye, let's see if we can repeat our success," the bailiff agreed. "But first, Alexander! You got any of that stew left?"

"More?" Will asked. "You eat more than the friar!"

"Well, I'm bigger than him."

"You're bigger than anyone I've ever met," Will admitted. "You're still a greedy bastard though."

John ignored the insult, pulling his hood up over his face again. "Right, go and find another object then, Scarlet, and I'll try to guess what it is."

By the time Alexander kicked them and the rest of his patrons out into the whirling, glistening white flakes that were quickly forming a blanket on the ground the pair of former outlaws had tried their experiment a number of times.

Had Tuck still been with them he'd undoubtedly have accused them of being in league with Satan, for John managed to guess the mystery object 8 times out of 10, a success rate far higher than chance would allow for.

It truly did seem as if the friends had some kind of strange mystical bond.

TWO

Although thick grey clouds covered the sky the following morning no more snow fell, but the ground was treacherous for man and beast so there were fewer travellers than usual passing through Wakefield that Christmas Eve.

Little John had not heard from Sir Henry de Faucumberg, the Sheriff of Yorkshire and Nottingham, for a couple of weeks so, with no bailiff duties to attend to, he'd spent much of his time decorating his and a few neighbour's houses for the Christmas period.

Those who were too old or infirm to climb rickety ladders in the frost and snow had been glad John was around to hang boughs of holly and ivy on the outside of their doors and windows. It was easy for him as, being so tall, he didn't need to climb on anything to reach the high places. The green leaves and red berries contrasted beautifully with the white, snowy landscape, cheering everyone as they looked forward to the coming holidays.

On Christmas Eve, John spent the morning tidying the houses near his that had lost their holly and ivy in the previous night's wind. He also went out with a shovel and cleared the paths of his elderly neighbours so they could make a visit to the tavern or to buy supplies for the festivities. Considering Little John was widely known throughout all England as either a bloodthirsty outlaw or a no-nonsense bailiff, his own neighbours thought he was just about the nicest man they'd ever known.

"That's a good job you've done this morning," his wife, Amber, told him as he stamped the snow from his shoes and came into their house, ruddy cheeked from the cold. She took his cloak from him and hung it up near the fire so it would be warm if he went out again, then gave him a bowl of hot meat broth and a chunk of black bread to dip into it. "No doubt you'll be wanting to visit the tavern again later on?"

"I don't mind staying home if you want," John shrugged, getting stuck into his meal with relish. His wife was a fine cook, making the best soups and broths even at this time of year when tasty, wholesome ingredients weren't so easy to find. "I was looking forward to trying Will's mind game again though. Why don't you come along with me tonight, and you can see it for yourself?"

"No thank you," Amber replied. "I'm going out myself, to visit some of my friends. Marion, the miller's wife, has brewed some wassail and she's invited a few of us to go along and try it."

John grinned and stopped eating for a moment. "You'll be tipsier than me when you come home then, eh? I remember Marion's wassail last year – the miller could hardly speak after a few cups! You be careful walking home in the dark then. The ground's treacherous and it'll likely snow again later. You want me to come and walk you home?"

"Walk me home?" Amber laughed, running a comb through her hair as she sat by the hearth. "Like young lovers? No, the water mill is in the opposite direction to the tavern, I'm sure I'll be fine."

"Well, don't drink too much wassail, I'm looking forward to dinner tomorrow and you know I can't cook as well as you."

"Speaking of which," Amber said, pausing her combing and growing serious. "I wanted to make a cheese tart for tomorrow, but we don't have any soft cheese. Could you—?"

John finished his broth and stood up, nodding. "Market isn't on today," he said, lifting his cloak and pulling it about his enormous shoulders. "But I'll try the baker – he'll probably have some I can buy. We can't have Christmas Day without your cheese tart – old Ivor along the road loves it."

"And you don't?" Amber demanded as he went out the door, ducking so he didn't crack his head off the frame.

"I love everything you bake!" he called over his shoulder and pulled the door shut behind him, stepping out gingerly onto the path, Amber shouting her requirements for the cheese behind him.

There weren't many people out in the streets that day but those he did pass seemed full of Christmas spirit and offered the bailiff hearty greetings which he returned happily. His life was a far cry from when he'd been part of Robin Hood's outlaw band, hiding from the law in the forests, with the constant threat of death hanging over them. From being a 'wolf's head' who any man could lawfully kill, to being a respected member of the community and even a lawman himself, it had been quite a life.

He came to the baker's shop and went in. It was wonderfully hot inside and the baker, Thomas, was there, kneading dough, face red from the warmth of the oven.

"What can I do for you, John?" asked the baker, not stopping his work, pummelling and rolling the lumpy mixture expertly. The man had arms as big as any longbowman and his wife, Joan, who appeared from a room in the back, wasn't much smaller.

"Some of the honey cakes you love so much?" she asked, reaching up and effortlessly lifting down a trencher laden with savouries.

"Well, go on then, just one though," John agreed, patting his belly. "I don't want to get fat. But it's some soft cheese I'm after. We've run out and Amber wants to make a cheese tart for the Christmas feast tomorrow."

Joan nodded and raised a finger. "I know exactly the stuff she means, give me a moment." She placed one of the honey cakes on the counter before him and scurried out the back to the larder, where the cheese was stored to keep it fresh. It wasn't long before she came back with it and handed it to him, telling him how much the two items cost.

He paid and, wishing both a happy Christmas, wandered out into the cold again. After the warmth of the bakery it was quite a shock to stand in the cold street, especially as it had just started to snow again. Pulling his hood up, he bit into the honey cake, savouring the sweetness as he headed back home. As he walked, a red-breasted robin flitted across the ground and landed at his feet, disappearing again in a blur of wings once John had thrown it a tiny piece of his cake. Then, looking up with a smile, the bailiff saw a slim woman in her early thirties walking quickly along the frozen road with a little boy.

"Elspeth!" he called, recognising Will's wife and son immediately.

She turned at his booming shout and her face twisted in what seemed to be a mixture of relief and anxiety. Pulling the child along, she practically ran across to John.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Have you seen Will?" she gasped.

"Today? No. Should I have?"

Elspeth shook her head, her eyes roving all about the village and down at little Blase before turning back to John. "We had...I don't know, outlaws or something, at our farm during the night. Will took the dogs and went out to chase them off. Bloody idiot, I told him not to, but you know what he's like. Never one to back out from a fight."

John nodded grimly. Will wasn't known as Scarlet for nothing.

"But he's not come home. One of the dogs did, Holdfast, but Will and the other dog are..." Her voice cracked and she looked back in the direction of their farm, tears filling her eyes and pulling Blase in against her so the child wouldn't see her crying. "It's Christmas, John! People are supposed to be kind to each other!"

John reached out with his free hand and put his great arm about her.

"What's wrong, Uncle John?" Blase asked. "Where's my da' gone?"

His high, small voice brought another sob from Elspeth but John grinned and reached down to brush flakes of snow from the boy's hair. "Your da' just went out to chase some silly oafs and got lost in the snow. Don't you worry, lad, I'll soon find him and bring him home."

"Oh, thank you, John!" Elspeth cried, dashing the tears from her face. "I'm worried that..." She broke off, not wanting to alarm her son any more than he already was.

John smiled and patted her arm reassuringly. "I know, the weather makes it more of a worry. But don't fret, I know these lands like the back of my own hand." He held it out to Blase, who eyed it solemnly. "I'll find Will, and if there's anyone trying to be bad to him, they'll get this right across the back of their head!" He mimed slapping someone and pretended to be the victim, sent flying with a daft expression on his face. The boy gave a small chuckle at his silliness which was so at odds with Little John's fierce appearance.

"I don't know what to do now," Elspeth said. "Should I go home, in case Will comes back?"

John shook his head. "Might not be a good idea if outlaws are about. I'll need to go home to get my horse, come with me and Amber will look after you for a bit."

The snow had grown quite heavy now and, by the time the trio made it to John's house it was starting to lie on the ground again. Of course, Amber was friends with Elspeth and welcomed her and Blase into the house, making sure they were comfortable. John strapped on his sword and lifted his enormous quarterstaff, then filled an aleskin and packed it along with a loaf of bread into a sack.

"Shouldn't you get the foresters to help look for Will?" Amber asked. Their own son, also named John, was employed as a forester and knew the area around Wakefield as well as any man.

"No time. Not with the weather so bad. Here." Little John handed her the soft cheese he'd bought at the baker's. "Maybe Elspeth and Blase will give you a hand baking that tart. I'm looking forward to tasting it!" He ruffled the boy's hair and, kissing Amber goodbye, promised to be careful and went out to make his horse ready for a journey into the whirling snow.

"God," he said, squinting into the falling flakes as his mount walked through the town towards St Mary's church where Friar Tuck lived. "Why do you always bring us trouble like this when it's snowing and I should be indoors by the fire, supping ale and eating sweetmeats?"

THREE

It didn't take long before John and Tuck had reached the Scaflock farm. They considered taking Will's other dog, Holdfast, to see if it could track its master's last movements, but Elspeth had locked it up inside the house and it didn't seem worth riding back to John's to get the key from her. Most of the dwellings in Wakefield did not have expensive locks, but Will was a wealthy man from his days with Robin Hood, and liked to keep his home secure.

So, without the help of Holdfast, and kicking himself for not bringing the key to let the hound out, John led Tuck to the east, in the direction Elspeth told him Will had gone searching for the troublemakers.

"This snow isn't helping," Tuck grouched, as they searched for signs of their friend. They'd tethered their horses in Will's stable and come out to look for footprints or other marks that would lead them to their quarry. Tuck's hood kept blowing down, revealing his tonsured head which soon became red raw from the cold.

John had a full, unruly head of hair and a thick beard to keep his head warm but he too was feeling the effects of the weather. His hands and feet were numb and, by the time they'd lost sight of Will's farmhouse, the bailiff was shivering, making him fear he was coming down with a fever. "God's blood," he cursed, the words muffled by the falling snow. "Only Scarlet would be stupid or angry enough to go out in this looking for a fight with a bunch of wolf's heads!"

"Aye," the friar agreed, trying once more to get his hood to stay up. "I'm getting too old for this nonsense. Not used to being out in this kind of weather. Still, at least if we get into a fight with some outlaws it'll warm us up!" Like John, Tuck carried a quarterstaff, and he was just as adept at using the massive polearm as the bailiff. They'd spent many hours sparring with one another, and the rest of their gang, over the years, and it had stood them in good stead, helping them survive even when the odds were stacked heavily against them.

Had Will Scarlet finally taken on one fight too many, though? If he hadn't been killed outright by whoever he went hunting for, if he'd been left lying injured somewhere he wouldn't last long in this cold.

"It's starting to stop," John said, looking up at the sky with relief as the heavy flakes were not falling so fast anymore.

"Starting to stop," Tuck murmured sardonically, but was too chilled to make any other comment on his friend's choice of words.

"Aye," John said. "It'll be dark soon though, and we're getting nowhere." He stopped and gazed around at the landscape. All they could see were snow-blanketed fields, and leafless trees. "He could be anywhere."

"Will!"

John flinched as Tuck's voice suddenly boomed out across the land, carrying well enough now that the snow had lessened.

"Scarlet!" John joined in, and then they paused, looking at one another hopefully, straining for some reply. It never came.

"What are we going to do?" Tuck asked. "We could wander around here all day without finding him. He might be in some nearby village tavern, waiting until the weather's better before he comes home of his own accord."

"Aye, or he could be dead and lying underneath the snow right in front of us and we'd never know," John muttered balefully.

Again, they stared at one another, wishing they had some means of locating their old friend, and feeling utterly helpless and impotent.

"Maybe we should go back to Will's house and break the door down," Tuck suggested, turning his back on the wind and hugging himself almost desperately. "Get Holdfast and pray to God the beast can track for us."

John stood in thoughtful silence, knowing it would take a miracle for a dog to find a scent with all the snow to mask it.

"What?" Tuck demanded, seeing John's face suddenly light up. "What have you thought of?"

"I'm just thinking of our game in the tavern the other night," replied the bailiff, and his voice grew more excited as he went on. "We had some kind of connection between us, me and Will, didn't we, Tuck? Even you can't deny it."

Tuck blessed himself and touched the wooden pectoral cross he wore around his neck. "You think you can find him by picturing his location? That's madness, John, and dangerous too. I'm telling you, it's akin to witchcraft and heresy, and you remember how that ended for Lady Alice de Staynton not so long ago, and not so far away from here."^[1]

"Do you have a better idea?" John demanded, anxiety for his missing friend making him angry with the jovial friar.

"No," Tuck admitted. "But I don't think it'll work. Still, if you want to chance losing your soul to the devil, on your head be it. Go ahead. I'll pray while you do it, and hopefully God will forgive us."

"If God doesn't want us doing it, it won't lead us to Scarlet," John pointed out, and Tuck nodded before taking his cross in his hands and beginning the Lord's Prayer.

John stretched up to his full height, looking at the sky as he silently begged God to help him find Will. Then he closed his eyes and dropped his head, focusing every fibre of his being upon the task at hand.

Little John was not one for much prayer or silent contemplation, so this kind of thing did not come naturally to him, but he instinctively knew that slowing his breathing while shutting out the world around him would somehow open up his mind to receive the information he needed. That was what he'd done in the tavern the night they'd enjoyed so much success, and so that was what he did there, in the middle of that remote, snowy field.

Soon, the sounds of Tuck's murmured prayers and even the icy, cutting wind ceased to register in John's mind, and the discomfort in his frozen extremities was forgotten, replaced by a feeling of complete serenity. It was a sensation he'd rarely, if ever, felt in his life before and then, as if placed there by divine hands, Little John saw three trees in his mind's eye, bereft of foliage, branches stretching up to the sky like bony, eldritch fingers. As he focused on them, relaxed, not trying to force anything, he was somehow on the other side of those trees and looking at a black void in the landscape, just about big enough for a man to fit in.

He opened his eyes with a gasp, shaking his head to clear it, wondering for just a moment where he was and what the hell was going on. And then the image of those trees returned to him, and he gaped at Tuck with an expression of fierce hope.

"I think I know where he is! Come on, Tuck, we have to hurry!"

FOUR

The snow might have stopped but with nothing around them to shelter them from the wind it was hard going forging through the thick snow. Little gusts would whip up every so often, blowing frost into their faces and even Tuck was muttering curses as they put one foot in front of the other, heading in the direction of the sun. It still hadn't quite broken through the clouds, and would not before it set, but John walked towards it, much like the wise men made for the star that heralded Christ's birth over thirteen hundred years before.

"Where are we going?" Tuck demanded breathlessly, trying to make out their destination on the horizon. "My feet are so cold, John. I don't know about Will, but I don't think I can survive much more of this without warming up some."

John reached out and patted his friend on the back. "I know, it's hard for you, being so old, but we're nearly there."

"Old?" the friar cried in outrage. "I'm fitter than you! It's just bloody freezing out here and it's not like I had time to look out suitable clothing."

John grinned at him. "Don't worry. Look." He pointed and a wave of relief washed over him for the three trees he'd seen in his mind's eye were visible now. Behind them John knew there was a drop, and a very short distance away a stream snaked through the land.

"Wait, I recognise this place," Tuck said as they trudged closer, cold feet forgotten. "Didn't we—"

"Aye," John said, breath steaming from his mouth as he pushed ever harder through the snow. "We used this place as a camp once when we were outlaws. It's a good place for it, with shelter beneath those trees, and water nearby."

"We should be careful," Tuck cautioned, eyes scanning the landscape warily. "Will was chasing outlaws, you said. Well, it would make sense that he'd end up here, if the wolf's heads are doing as we did, and using this as a place to make camp."

"Good point," John agreed. "I don't want to waste time scouting about though. Will's in grave danger. We'll go quietly, but there's no time to check if anyone's around."

They continued in silence then, the earlier grumbles about the cold and discomfort forgotten as they instinctively moved back into their personas as expert woodsmen. They reached the three trees and halted, crouching down and hiding behind the trunks. It was getting dark already, the sun hidden by a larger forested area a mile or so in front of them.

John looked at Tuck and the friar slowly shook his head, lips pursed. John nodded, he could hear no signs of human activity either. Raising a hand for Tuck to remain where he was, the bailiff slowly, silently moved forward until he could see over the ridge the trees stood on. Below was the site he remembered from years ago, and signs that it had indeed been used recently as a camp. There was evidence of a fire that had burned within the past day or two for it had not been covered entirely by snow. There were also a couple of crude shelters and even a small barrel which most likely had contained ale but would surely be empty now.

"It looks abandoned," John said, standing upright and gesturing for Tuck to follow him as he slowly made his way down a section of the ridge that wasn't as steep as the rest of it. Even so, the snow made it impossible to walk with any degree of control and he found himself falling onto his backside before momentum carried him the rest of the way down and he rolled into the campsite with as much grace as a drunk with a broken leg.

Tuck suffered the same fate, falling, rolling, and crashing into John just as the bailiff regained his feet. At any other time they'd both have laughed, but they did not even smile as they hastily got to their feet, mud and wet snow clinging to them as they clutched their quarterstaves and stared about at the seemingly deserted camp.

"There's no one here," Tuck said at last, huge disappointment evident in his tone.

John said nothing, wondering if he'd brought them here for naught. Where the hell was Will Scarlet? If he wasn't here, why had John seen those trees in his otherworldly vision? Then he remembered the hole that he'd seen in that vision and looked about for it.

"There!" he cried, spotting the gaping dark void just a few feet away from them. "In there, Tuck, help me."

They ran across and knelt beside the hole, peering into it. "Will!" John called down, but there was no reply. "Scarlet! Are you down there, you ugly turd?"

"I can't see a thing," Tuck muttered, eyes straining. "Where did this hole even come from? I don't remember it being here before."

John shook his head in exasperation. "I don't know, does it matter? Maybe the men that were camping out here dug it to hide stolen goods. Or maybe it's a sink hole that just opened up for no reason one day. Who cares?"

Tuck had wandered off and the sound of flint striking steel came to John. The friar had taken out his little pouch of kindling and, using the wood that was already in the extinguished fire, very quickly had a fresh blaze going.

"Move back," Tuck said, carrying a burning stick across to the hole and holding it over the top. They peered down, praying they would see Tuck, but even with the light from the fire it was hard to make anything out.

"He's there!" John finally exploded. "My vision was right! I see his hair. He must be sitting up, but...unconscious." He didn't look at Tuck and was glad the friar didn't say what they were both thinking. If Will was down that hole and not moving or making a sound, it was highly likely he wasn't simply unconscious. In this cold, he would be dead.

"You'll have to go down," Tuck said.

"Me? Why can't you go?"

"I'm too wide," the friar replied, hurrying away and searching the ground. "And you're taller so you don't have as far to fall. Go, John, time is of the essence. I'll find a long branch you can use to climb back out."

"Climb back out? While carrying Will?" John gaped at Tuck as if he'd gone mad.

"First, we need to make sure he's alright. Now, go, John, before it's too late!"

Muttering terrible, un-Christmas-like oaths, John heaved a great sigh and sat down on the edge of the hole. "God save us," he said, and then spun on his backside and used his arms to lower himself down gently into the gloom.

"Is he there?" Tuck demanded, forgetting his branch-hunting duties for a moment and looking down at John.

The bailiff was crouching, staring silently at what he'd taken for Will's hair.

"Is it him?" Tuck cried. "Why are you just sitting there, by God? Is he alive?"

"Bring that burning stick back over, Tuck, and stop shouting," John called up. "Hurry."

A moment later the interior of the hole was lit by flickering orange firelight and John was standing up, great arms cradling the victim they'd come there to rescue.

FIVE

"That's not Will," Tuck said, dumbfounded.

"Thanks for letting me know," John retorted sarcastically. "I wasn't sure." His words were acid, but his tone was gentle so as not to cause any more fright to the already terrified, shocked bundle he'd found in the hole.

It was Will Scarlet's dog, Mite.

"Get that branch, Tuck," commanded the bailiff. "This poor little thing is freezing and terrified."

While he waited for the friar to find something big enough, and strong enough to take John's weight, he wrapped the end of his cloak about the shivering dog and held it in close, sharing his body heat. The dog was alive, and seemed to be in one piece with no obvious injuries, but he'd either fallen or been thrown into that hole after being witness to God knew what and the whole ordeal had terrified him. "We'll take care of you," John murmured soothingly, stroking the dog's ears. "You're safe now, little one."

It took a while but, at last, Friar Tuck returned with a thick, straight log about four feet long. When John propped it up at an angle against the wall of the hole it was just enough for him to reach up and hand Mite to Tuck, before clambering out himself.

The anxious dog did not attempt to run away, or even jump out of Tuck's arms as he took a seat on the ground by the fire. John came and flopped down beside them, exhausted from the day's efforts.

"What do we do now?" Tuck asked. "Will was obviously here at one point, and led you here with that blasphemous mind connection thing you two seem to share, but he's not now."

John stared at the dancing flames, almost entranced by their movement. All he wanted to do at that moment was rest, and then, perhaps, have something to eat and drink for he'd not eaten anything since the baker's honey cake hours ago and he was starting to feel shaky.

"Let's get warm," the bailiff said at last, tearing his gaze away from the crackling fire. "Let Mite get over his fright."

"And then?"

"And then we'll continue the hunt for Scarlet."

"In the dark?" Tuck asked quietly, and with little enthusiasm.

John didn't reply. There was no need. It didn't matter how dark it got, or how cold – their friend was in trouble and they would search until they found him.

SIX

It had been bitterly cold during the day, so John was worried the night would be unbearable as they resumed the hunt for Will Scarlet, but the wind had died down and, since it was no longer snowing, they were more comfortable as they walked. The fire, and some well-earned food, had warmed them all both inside and out, and even Mite appeared happier.

"We might not have found Will yet," Tuck said, his hood staying up now, making him considerably less grumpy than earlier. "But Mite seems to have his scent."

It was true, the little brown terrier was proving a Godsend, for he was leading the way, following the course of the nearby stream closely, in such a way that it was clear he knew where he was going. Of course, the dog might simply have caught the scent of a deer or a rabbit, but the men had no choice but to follow.

John had borrowed the rope Tuck used to keep his grey cassock tight around his waist to fashion a lead for the hound. If they stumbled across the outlaws who were somewhere nearby, they didn't want the dog giving them away.

It was hard to tell what time it was, for the clouds obscured most of the sky, but with the glimpses they did manage to get of the stars John thought it was close to midnight when they heard, a short distance ahead, raised voices.

Immediately, both men halted, and John lifted Mite, holding the dog close, ready to clamp its muzzle shut should it start barking. Mite had been trained by Will to hunt though, and made no sound as they listened.

They'd lost track of the stream a while ago, but it – or perhaps a different one – was beside them now, carving its glittering path through the dark, frozen landscape. It sounded as though there were men ahead, and the presence of the water supply would, as before, provide a good location for a camp. Why else would there be men out here in the wilderness in the middle of the night, if they were not sheltering there? It had to be a camp.

Slowly, silently, John led Tuck on, senses straining for signs of lookouts. Whoever was talking was making no effort to be quiet, though, suggesting they'd also not have bothered posting a watch. Either they were too arrogant, or too stupid, to expect trouble.

As outlaws, John and Tuck had soon learned that trouble was never far away, be it from the sheriff's soldiers, or some other group of criminals living in the forest and eager for plunder.

"Stay here, lad," John murmured, tethering Mite's leash to a sapling. "We'll be back soon." He petted the dog, smiling reassuringly. "You be good, alright?"

"How d'you want to do this?" Tuck asked, gazing in the direction of the camp. "It sounds like there's at least two men there. Perhaps more, if some are asleep."

John thought about it. They could deal with two enemies without trouble, he was sure of that. God, he could defeat two men himself, and Tuck was no slouch when it came to a fight. Still, the friar was right, it was possible there were more men in the camp than they could hear. He shrugged. Cunning plans had never been John's thing.

"You go to the left, I'll go to the right. If there's only a handful of them, and they're looking for trouble, we give it to them. Right?"

Tuck grinned, nodding enthusiastically. "I like it."

"Give me enough time to get in position, and then you wander into their camp playing the part of the lost friar. If you need me, I'll be there."

"God protect us," Tuck said, blessing himself and grasping John's wrist in farewell. "Take care, my friend," he said, and then he'd disappeared into the night, swallowed by its black embrace.

The giant bailiff turned in the other direction and started to move, making sure he made no sound as he went which wasn't too hard as anything that might have given him away, such as a dry twig, was covered by hard packed snow. It would hardly matter even if he'd snapped a dozen brittle twigs anyway, he thought, for whoever was camped ahead was talking as loudly as if they were safe and snug in a tavern. If these were outlaws, they wouldn't survive long, thought the bailiff as he took up a position behind a hawthorn bush.

A fire blazed merrily in front of him, beside the stream. By the fire's light he could see two men, hunched over as they laughed and joked. Their conversation confirmed their status as outlaws, for they were discussing thefts they'd committed, and how they'd evaded some foresters that morning. There were shelters constructed against four of the trees beside their fire, much like the ones John had seen at the camp where they'd found Mite.

There was no sign of Will Scarlet.

John could not decide if that was a good or a bad thing, but he didn't have long to think on it, for the tonsured head of Friar Tuck suddenly appeared, framed in the firelight, his familiar jovial smile playing across his round face.

The two men beside the fire cried out in alarm and jumped to their feet. John cursed silently as he saw the glint of steel blades in the light from the flames.

Should John move now, before Tuck was beset by the armed men? Or give the friar time to talk to them and, hopefully, set them at ease?

"My children!" Tuck was already speaking so John decided to give him a chance to discover what he could.

The men looked at one another in confusion, and then another scruffy-looking individual came stumbling out from beneath one of the shelters, wrapped in bulky furs and appearing as if he'd not had a wash in months. He seemed to have been drunk for a similar length of time and he gaped at Friar Tuck as if Jesus Christ himself had wandered into their camp on Christmas Eve.

"My children," Tuck was saying, smiling, hands spread wide as if addressing the congregation in St Mary's. "It's a miracle I stumbled upon your camp!"

"Who the hell are you," one of the men demanded, hand on something John couldn't make out at his waist. "How the hell did you get here, in this weather?"

"I'm a wandering friar," said Tuck, walking across and warming his hands by the fire, still beaming merrily. "I was robbed by some outlaws a few miles back, however, and they stole all my supplies. With no way to make a fire, and no food, I thought I might die. I prayed to God, and he led me here, to you. You men have saved my life!"

There was a sudden loud mumbling and a thumping sound and John's eyes snapped to the other of the crude shelters. Now he could see someone's feet, tied at the ankles and hitting against the ground. John couldn't see the person's face, but they were clearly being held prisoner by the three men. Was it Will? It was too dark to see, despite the campfire.

"We're not your saviours, friar," the drunk man slurred, pulling a knife from his belt and showing it to Tuck. The blade was in poor condition and so dirty that it barely even reflected the firelight, but even a poorly maintained knife could kill. "Be on your way," the drunk went on, and his two companions flanked him now, all three in a row, staring down Tuck.

"But I'll die out there," Tuck cried as if he were terrified. "It's Christmas. Would you turn a man of God away on such a night? Are you monsters?"

The drunk, who appeared to be the leader of the group, was clearly uncertain but he brandished his knife again. "It's none of your business who or what we are. We've nothing to share with you, we don't even have enough for ourselves, so leave."

John had seen enough, and he stepped out from behind the hawthorn bush, walking forward into the light. He made no attempt to move silently and all three of the outlaws turned at his approach. If they'd been surprised by Tuck's sudden appearance, the sight of the biggest man they'd ever seen wandering into their camp must have been a terrific shock.

The drunk acted on instinct, charging at John and swinging wildly at him with his dirty knife. Unfortunately for him, he was too inebriated to judge distances properly and his blade whistled harmlessly through the air before the butt of John's quarterstaff came around and cracked him across the side of the head.

"I know you!" one of the other two men shouted, backing away from John, eyes wide in fright. "You're that wolf's head."

"I thought *you* were the wolf's head," John replied, moving forward, quarterstaff held menacingly before him. "Who's that you've got trussed up like a Christmas goose in the shelter there?"

The man stammered a reply, but he'd forgotten Tuck. The friar had taken out the cudgel he'd carried with him for decades – the very same one he'd used to knock Adam Bell out cold in Barnsdale years before. He hit the unsuspecting man across the back of the head with it now, dropping him senseless to the frozen ground.

Only one man remained, and he had no heart for a fight.

"Throw down any weapons you have," John commanded, his voice heavy with the threat of violence.

The final outlaw did as he was told immediately, dropping a short knife and then spreading his arms to show he was not a threat.

"Free their prisoner," John said to Tuck and the friar hurried to do so, lifting the outlaw's knife as he passed and using that to cut the bonds that held the captive. It was Will Scarlet, and, when his hands were free he pulled down the rope that had been tied around his mouth to keep him quiet and released a stream of curses and oaths so extreme that Tuck bowed his head and made the sign of the cross.

Before the circulation returned to his limbs and he launched an attack on the three men who'd tied him up, however, a little brown shape tore through the camp, jumping at Scarlet's face with excited yelps and whimpers.

"Mite!" Will laughed, rage momentarily forgotten as his face was licked repeatedly and he was forced to fend off the terrier's affections. "I thought you were dead!"

"He would have been," Tuck told him. "If we hadn't found him. Oh, will you look at that, he's chewed right through my belt, that's how he's got free! By the body and blood of Christ, Will, what's been going on out here?"

"Let him gather himself before he tells us," John said. "Come and get heated up by the fire, Scarlet. Have some of the food and drink these wolf's heads have got lying about. They weren't lying though – they've not got much at all."

Tuck threw him the three sections of rope that had been used to bind Will's hands, legs, and mouth, and he took them now to tie up the outlaws who offered no resistance whatsoever, which was a wise move on their part.

For a while, the camp was quiet, apart from Will's muttered complaints and threats aimed at his captors, but, when he was seated by the fire and furnished with some ale and small cuts of rabbit that the outlaws had been roasting on a spit, even he quietened down. He chewed like a man who hadn't eaten in a week, although he did share some of the gristly parts of the rabbit with Mite who appeared to be fully over his own ordeal now.

Tuck and John were almost as glad as Will to get some food and drink and warm their bones by the fire for it had been an exciting night, but a long, exhausting one too.

So exhausting that by the time they'd finished eating and John and Tuck were ready to hear Will's tale, they noticed he was lying on his side, snoring loudly, with Mite cuddled in against his chest, also fast asleep.

"By all the saints, we do all the work to rescue him, then he's the one that gets to sleep while we're left on watch," John growled, but he was smiling, just happy that everything had turned out well in the end, and they were all alive and uninjured.

The clouds parted overhead and Tuck looked up, admiring the stars.

"We've been out in this all day," John noted. "It's past midnight."

"It is," Tuck agreed cheerily. "Merry Christmas, John! And a Merry Christmas to all." He turned to the three captive outlaws with a beatific smile, but, from the muttered oaths they returned in his direction, they did not share in Tuck's joy for Christ's special day.

SEVEN

The journey back to Wakefield was nowhere near as hard or as stressful for John and Tuck as the previous day's had been. Will slept all through the night, while the bailiff and the friar took turns on watch. All three felt quite rested when they awoke, being used to sleeping deeply whenever they got the chance, even now, so many years after their days as wolf's heads were behind them.

The three outlaws who'd taken Will prisoner were quiet and more frightened than sullen and, since they couldn't just let them go until they knew who they were, John took them back to Wakefield. Mite bounded along at their feet, like a shepherd's dog, making sure they didn't stray from the pack as they walked through the snowy fields back to town.

It was a crisp, dry morning, not windy, and the sun even came up to guide them homewards. Truly, it was a blessed morning.

Well, unless you were one of the three outlaws.

"Are you going to tell us what happened yesterday, Scarlet?" John had asked as soon as the journey began.

"No," Will replied. "I'd just need to repeat myself when we get to Wakefield. So I'll save my story until we're there, in St Mary's, nice and cosy, and I've got a cup or three of wassail down my neck."

That was his final word on it and he wouldn't change his mind, despite John and Tuck's demands, so they walked across the fields mostly in silence, heading for Scarlet's steadings in case Elspeth and Blase had returned there.

It didn't take too long to reach the farm – they'd been closer to it than any of them had realised – but it was deserted, apart from Holdfast who was glad to see his master, and his little companion, Mite. The reunited dogs were fed and watered and then left safely locked within the house as John, Tuck, and Will took their horses from the stables and rode for town with the three prisoners tethered behind them on foot.

Since Will wouldn't tell them anything about the previous day's events, John had no idea what the prisoners had done, what they were capable of, or why they were running from the law. The fact that Scarlet had not given any of them a good beating spoke volumes, however...

"What are you going to do with us?" their scruffy leader, who had by now completely sobered up, asked nervously as the town buildings came into sight and the bell of St Mary's rang out across the countryside proclaiming Christ's birth.

"I don't know yet," John replied. "I don't know what you've done!"

"You were an outlaw," the man said. "You know what it's like. You know how easy it is to get on the wrong side of a crooked bailiff."

John turned in his saddle and looked at the man, who he had to admit spoke the truth. "We'll know soon enough what's to be done with you," he said. "We're nearly there."

A crowd of children had spotted their approach and began to crowd around them now. "Hey," John called down to them. "Go to my house and bring my wife, and anyone else that's there, to the church. All right? A farthing to whoever gets there first!"

The boys and girls sprinted off, screaming and jostling one another in their haste to earn the money. A farthing was a fortune to a child, and more than any could expect even on Christmas Day.

The town headman appeared then, striding out into the narrow, muddy street and staring at the riders and their captives. He did not look terribly surprised by what he was seeing, for John and his friends were often involved in strange situations with strange people. He did ask what was happening, however, and was happy to take the three outlaws into custody, calling a few of the younger, bigger, local men to assist him. They led the men behind as John, Tuck, and Will continued to St Mary's.

With it being Christmas Day the church was busy, and would remain so into the night. Already the priest, Father Myrc, had said Mass, but now, as it approached mid-morning tables and benches were being setup, ready for food and drink to be laid out for those who would come and enjoy the festivities there. Carols would be sung, games played, stories told, perhaps even a play, and

through it all the people of Wakefield would enjoy much ale, wassail, and better food than they'd enjoyed for a long time.

Word of the three former outlaws riding into town with another three wolf's heads had quickly spread, and people began flocking to St Mary's to enjoy the excitement. Amber arrived soon, running into the building with Elspeth and Blase in tow, and the two wives enjoyed happy reunions with their husbands, while Tuck stood by smiling and rubbing his belly at the sight of all the food being placed on the tables around him.

"Where the hell have you all been?" Amber demanded. "When you didn't come home last night we feared you'd been killed!"

"Killed? Me?" John asked, eyebrows raised. "Who could kill me?"

"I bloody will if you ever disappear like that again, you big oaf," Amber retorted, but it was hard to be angry at Little John for long and her frown quickly turned into a smile.

Elspeth was not so easily mollified, demanding answers from Will and berating him loudly for chasing after the outlaws alone in the first place.

"It's time you told us all what happened to you yesterday," Tuck said, his rich, powerful voice filling the church and drawing excited nods from the people gathered there.

"All right," Will agreed. "But it's not a very long, or exciting tale."

"Just get on with it," Elspeth commanded, folding her arms and tilting her head to one side.

"Well, I saw those three scruffy bastards hanging about near my barn," he said. "It was obvious they were up to no good. I watched them for a bit, and saw them lifting one of my hens and walking off with it. I went after them but they killed the bird before I could catch up to them."

"It was making a lot of noise," Elspeth said.

"Exactly," Will nodded. "That's why they killed it. And that's when I told you I was going after them and to lock the door until I came home."

"But you never did!"

"They ran away from me," Will said. "When they saw me coming after them with my dogs, they didn't have the balls to stand and fight. Three of them, against one, yet they ran away." He shook his head with a disgusted laugh. "They don't make outlaws like us any more," he told John and Tuck, who both murmured agreement.

"Just as bloody well," Amber said. "Or you'd be dead now."

"Probably," Will admitted ruefully. "But they ran, and I chased them, taking my dogs with me. They ran for a long time. I must admit, I'm not quite as fit as I used to be and they lost me, but Holdfast was able to track them. It started to snow though, and Holdfast didn't deal with it too well. He was shivering and frightened so I sent him home."

"That just scared me even more," Elspeth said. "When the dog came home without you."

Will nodded apologetically and went on with his tale. "Mite led me on. He's a hardy little thing. The snow started to get really heavy then, though, and I lost sight of him. He must have caught the scent of the bastards somewhere close and went after them himself."

"He's as daft as his master," Elspeth grumbled, drawing laughs from the villagers gathered about. Even Father Myrc was grinning.

"Then what?" John asked. "Did you find them and get into a fight?"

Will frowned and reached up to touch the back of his head. "No. I don't really know what happened next. One moment I was walking through the snow, slipping about, and the next thing I knew I was tied up and lying in the outlaws' camp where you found me."

John and Tuck shared a look. That was it? They'd assumed Will had attacked the three men and been overpowered.

"Not a very exciting story," an old woman in the crowd piped up. "I was hoping to hear something with more action and adventure in it."

"I was expecting there to be a lot more fighting in it," someone else said. "Usually Will Scarlet likes to get into fights."

"Well, there was a fight," John said defensively, feeling somehow as if he and his friends were being slighted. "Me and Tuck knocked a couple of the outlaws out."

"I was roaring drunk," the scruffy outlaw leader called out. "Anyone could have knocked me out."

"You're sober now," John retorted. "You want me to do it again?"

"Aye, do it, John," the old woman cackled. "We don't want any outlaws near Wakefield."

"What about them?" the scruffy wolf's head demanded, pointing at John, Tuck and Will. "They were outlaws, and you all loved them. Everyone in England knows the stories!"

"They were alright though," said the tavern keeper, Alexander. "The rest of you are a bunch of bastards."

"What's your name?" Elspeth asked the outlaw leader. "Why didn't you kill my husband? And how did he end up at your camp?"

"My name is Simon. I saw your man slip and fall," he replied. "We were hiding from him when he took a tumble. Cracked his head off a rock that was underneath the snow. We couldn't just leave him there in that weather, he'd have died."

John was frowning. "So you saved his life? But why tie him up and cart him away to your new camp?"

"We had to tie him up," Simon replied as if John was stupid. "He was bloody furious at us for stealing his hen. He'd have killed us if we didn't tie him up." He shrugged. "And, like I said, he was unconscious. We couldn't just leave him there in the middle of nowhere to die. So we carried him on a makeshift stretcher all the way to our new camp, where you and the fat friar attacked us."

"What about the dog?" John asked.

"Crazy little bastard came charging at us when we were putting him onto the stretcher," the outlaw replied, nodding towards Will. "That dog is a demon! It attacked me, biting my feet and stuff, but it didn't notice the big hole and fell in."

"You left it there?"

"Would you have tried to get it out?"

John had to admit that he probably wouldn't, given the fact that Mite had been trying to kill them, and they were already dealing with the unconscious Will Scarlet.

"Why are you outlaws at all?" Tuck asked. "What's made you so desperate that you're reduced to stealing hens from farms?"

Simon sighed, but the look of sadness that had been on his face was soon replaced by one of anger. "The bailiff in Rotherham," he growled. "We are, were, traders there. Doing well too. But the bailiff, Roger Attemill, decided he wanted a cut of our profits. Threatened to burn down our warehouse if we didn't pay him to 'look after it'. We refused, and the next thing we knew the warehouse, with all our stock in it, had been set alight and the bailiff had witnesses who said we'd been seen setting the fires."

Tuck gave a low whistle. Everyone knew how seriously fire was taken in a town – with the buildings packed close together, and made mostly from materials like wood and thatch, even a small fire could quickly spread and become a raging inferno that killed and destroyed everything in its wake.

"We couldn't let them arrest us, could we? You all know how things would have turned out for us. We'd have been torn apart by the mob that bastard bailiff had stirred up. We were lucky to escape into the forest and we've been running ever since." He shrugged with a sad smile. "We're not very good woodsmen. It's been hard."

"We've been forced to become the criminals the bailiff said we were," one of the other outlaws added.

"Lost everything, so we have," the third nodded. "And now, you'll send us back to Rotherham and that'll be it."

The three men were utterly dejected and their gloomy words were met with silence by those villagers who'd managed to cram into St Mary's. The sombre atmosphere was not in keeping with the spirit of the day at all.

"Maybe not," said John.

"What d'you mean?" asked Simon.

"I know that bailiff you mentioned, Roger Attemill. The man's an arrogant arsehole, and I know the sheriff has long suspected he was crooked. This could be just what Sir Henry needs to prove it, and have the man removed from his post."

"That would mean you three would be off the hook," Tuck said, beaming again.

The outlaws gaped at them, open mouthed, desperate to believe them but afraid to.

"That would truly be a Christmas miracle," muttered Simon, and Father Myrc laughed.

"That is exactly what these gentlemen seem to deliver every year around this time! It's become something of a habit."

"Well then," said Will, putting an arm around his wife and son and grinning broadly. "If that's all done with, let's get those three untied, and someone pour the wassail! It's Christmas!"

The church erupted in cheers and everyone began pouring drinks, laying out food, wishing one another the compliments of the day, and some even struck up a carol. With the holly and ivy decking the place with green leaves and red berries, and a tree in the corner bedecked with apples and gingerbread, it was a wonderfully festive scene, especially when the snow started to fall once more outside.

Tuck wandered about the room, searching for tasty morsels the villagers had brought in for their fellows to share, while John and Will stood with their wives and young Blase, filling them in on what had transpired over the last twenty-four hours in more detail.

"What I don't understand," said Elspeth, biting into a slice of Amber's cheese tart which the two women had baked together the day before. "Is how you and Tuck actually found Will at all. What led you in the right direction?"

John smiled proudly and put his arm around Will in a rough hug. "We have a connection, me and Will," he pronounced, tapping first his head, and then his friend's. "We discovered it at the tavern the other night, I told you about it Amber."

His wife's face twisted in a cynical frown.

"It's true," John protested. "I just tried to picture the place where Will was in my mind, and he must have sent the image of it to me. Three trees, with the hole we found Mite in. I recognised it immediately as our old camp."

Will was frowning even harder than Amber and he stepped back, staring at John. "But I was never at that old camp, John," he said. "Not awake anyway. Remember, I fell and knocked myself out before I reached it. The outlaws carried me there when I was out cold, and then carried me across the fields to their new camp." He bit into his own slice of the cheese tart, crumbs tumbling from his mouth as he finished, "So you can't have had any connection with me to lead you there, John."

They stood in thoughtful silence then, eating and drinking.

"Well, something led me to Mite," John said at last, and then he paused, realisation dawning on him. At the same time, Will was reaching the same conclusion as his big friend.

It had been the dog that John had the connection with, not Will Scarlet!

"Mite was there at the tavern the night we were playing the blindfold game," Will burst out, a huge grin on his face. "Sitting right there on my lap for most of the time."

Amber and Elspeth looked at one another, frowns changing to amusement as they too began to understand what had happened.

"I always said you were about as smart as a dog, John," cackled Tuck, appearing behind the bailiff and stealing some of the tart from his hand. "But I never realised you were *actually* a dog! Still, dogs are God's creatures, just like us."

For once, Little John was absolutely speechless.

"Dog or not, all's turned out for the best," said Amber. "The outlaws should get their lives back, with John's help, and Will is home safely again."

"As is Mite," Tuck added, winking at John who was still too shocked to respond with even a crude gesture.

"To you, John," said Will, raising his cup of wassail in the air and grinning at the bailiff as everyone nearby joined in with the toast. "To you, and your strange connection with farm animals!"

Little John had finally got over his surprise and even he was laughing now, for it truly had been a miracle that brought them all safely together in St Mary's that Christmas Day.

"To me," he shouted, hoisting his own cup aloft. "And a merry Christmas one and all!"