

“Sweeping . . . full of intrigue, conspiracy, and spies; not far below the surface is a sizzling romance. We are in the hands of a master.” – ROBERTA RICH, author of *The Midwife of Venice* and *The Harem Midwife*

*The*  
LICENCE  
OF WAR

*A Novel of the 17th Century*

CLAIRE LETEMENDIA

AUTHOR OF *The Best of Men*

*The*  
LICENCE  
OF WAR

CLAIRE LETEMENDIA



McCLELLAND & STEWART

## PROLOGUE

Seville, Spain. 4th October 1643

At the holiest moment in the Mass, as bread and wine became the body and blood of Jesus Christ, Don Antonio de Zamora was counting under his breath. *Uno, dos, tres, quatro* . . . He had spied his target on the previous Sunday, only to lose her among the faithful crowded into the vast nave of Santa María de la Sede, yet today God had placed her conveniently close: a row ahead of him, just across the aisle. *Cinco, seis, siete* . . . It would take no more than twenty, he estimated. *Diez, once, doze* . . . She began to fiddle with a hairpin in her expensive lace mantilla. *Diez y seis, diez y siete* . . . Her spine stiffened; he might have stroked his finger along it. *Diez y ocho, diez y* . . . On the count of nineteen she turned, as if he had tapped her on the shoulder, and the look upon her face confirmed what he already knew: that he was as handsome and desirable as in his youth. Regretfully, he lowered his eyes. While he needed a new mistress, he could not afford another spendthrift *sevillana*. He might ask Gaspar to find him a simple country girl and employ her at El Caballo Blanco, to save on her keep and enable him to visit her at his pleasure.

When Mass ended, Antonio ushered his family from the cool, dim cathedral into the blinding autumn sunlight, past the beggars gathered at the steps: the maimed on crutches or dragging their sad carcasses through the dirt, and a gaggle of gypsies and their children, whining and flattering. An ancient wretch with stumps for arms had

the effrontery to pester him. "I fought in the northern wars as you did, sir – spare an old soldier a coin!"

"It is the Feast of St. Francis," Antonio's wife said, reaching into the pocket of her gown.

"A saint who chose poverty over riches," Antonio reminded her. "And each Sunday it is the same with you, Teresa. Cease your foolishness, or we'll soon be begging ourselves."

They walked in procession towards their coach: he and Teresa; their surviving son, twelve-year-old Felipe, and sole unmarried daughter, María de Mercedes; Teresa's elderly widowed aunts; and lastly the servants. Antonio felt both pride and a secret amusement that the crest of his parentage, de Zamora y Fuentes, was emblazoned on the door of the battered vehicle. He could maintain the semblance of rank. But what was rank without money? He was even in debt to Gaspar. The mistress might have to wait.

His cogitations were interrupted by a harsh breath from Teresa, who dropped her hand from his sleeve. "Look over there."

She pointed to a gypsy standing alone, vainly trying to soothe the fretful child she was carrying. The girl wore a ragged dress and shawl faded to dingy grey, and her black hair was matted with dust. The set of her features and her large dark eyes possessed striking beauty. Such a waste, thought Antonio: her charms would coarsen with breeding and hardship. And however boldly they sang and danced, full-blooded Roma women could not be had, except by force. Intimacy with an outsider meant exile from their kin.

"I agree she is an alluring creature," he observed.

"I am not speaking of her," said Teresa. "Look at her babe."

The brown-skinned boy was around six months of age and resembled his mother, except Antonio was shocked to see that his irises were a distinctive pale green. "How very strange," Antonio said. "Do you honestly believe . . . ?"

Teresa was already advancing on the pair. "What is your name, girl?"

The gypsy bowed her head obsequiously; she had not yet noticed Antonio. "Juana, my lady."

"Show me your son." Juana held him out; he was whimpering, clinging to her dress. "Who is his father?"

The girl opened her mouth to reply. But when Antonio approached her, she jumped back as though bitten by a snake. He shivered. Gypsies were supernaturally gifted; he had never encountered this one before, to his recollection, so what had she detected in him?

"She has told me all I need to know!" said Teresa, turning to sweep off to the coach.

Antonio restrained her. "My dear, you have woken in me the spirit of Christian charity. When did you last eat, Juana?"

"Three days ago," the girl said, staring at his face.

"And your boy?"

"He had a crust dipped in water this morning."

"Why are you by yourselves, and not with the rest of your tribe?" Juana said nothing. "Follow the coach to my house, and my servants will direct you to the kitchen, where you shall be fed."

"Don Antonio, you are shameless," Teresa scolded.

"On the contrary, *amor de mi vida*, I wish to correct your assumption. Are you going to let your son starve?" he inquired of Juana, who had not moved an inch.

"For his sake, sir, I accept."

"When you have eaten, you must promise to come and thank us."

"Yes, sir," she said, as if she were granting him the favour.

He and Teresa joined their family in the coach, and the gypsy trailed behind a smaller cart bearing their servants. Silence reigned on the brief journey to the de Zamoras' dilapidated ancestral home; and during the midday meal, Teresa darted peevish frowns at Antonio.

"Where is the girl?" he asked the servant clearing the table.

"She's gobbled her weight in bread and soup, sir, and is reading palms in the kitchen," the servant said.

"Fetch her."

"What madness, Don Antonio," complained Teresa. "She will seize the chance to steal a piece of our silverware."

"Unlikely, my dear," he said. "Practically every bit of it has been sold."

Juana padded in with the child draped sleeping upon her shoulder. The food had brought colour to her cheeks, and a confidence to her bearing. She scrutinised each member of the family, and next the room. Antonio wondered if she could judge the state of his affairs from the peeling walls, woodworm-riddled floorboards, and moth-eaten tapestries. Then she performed an odd obeisance, half bow, half curtsy. "May the saints bless you, for rescuing me and my sweet innocent boy when we were at death's door."

"Answer me, Juana," said Antonio, "who fathered your son?"

She hesitated, scuffing at the floor with a dirty toe. "He was . . . an Englishman, sir."

"An Englishman, in Spain?"

"No, sir: I met him in The Hague two winters past."

"What was his business?"

"He'd been a soldier."

"Where is he now?"

Her lip curled. "God knows. He left me as soon as *he* knew I was carrying his child. And my people wouldn't have me any more, because he was a *gajo*."

"A *gajo*?" echoed María de Mercedes.

"He was not a gypsy," Antonio explained; so Juana was indeed an exile, and vulnerable. Yet her reply had elicited in him a peculiar unease. "How could you be certain he was from England?" he demanded of her.

"I myself thought he was lying, he was such a dark man. And he talked a lovely Spanish – as lovely as yours. He spoke many tongues, besides. I wouldn't understand them, being as I am an ignorant gypsy," she added, with the false humility of her race.

"What was his name?"

"In The Hague they called him Monsieur Beaumont."

Antonio leant closer. "*Beaumont?*"

"So he was French," said Teresa.

"He told me his father was from England, my lady," Juana insisted. "And his mother was a noble lady from Seville."

Antonio's heart thundered within his ribcage. Grabbing his wine glass, he swallowed a large gulp.

"As I remember," put in Teresa's senior aunt, "one of the de Capdavila y Fuentes wedded an English lord."

Antonio forced a shrug; Juana was edging towards the door. "Ah yes," he said, "I forget his name."

"What is that stink?" exclaimed María de Mercedes.

"The baby has soiled itself," Teresa said, covering her nose. "Please, Don Antonio, get rid of them."

"Anything to oblige you, my dear." Antonio leapt from his seat, strode over to Juana, and snatched her by the wrist. She had to run to keep up with him as he marched her through the house and into the courtyard. Neither spoke a word until they arrived at the gates to his property; by some miracle, the child still slumbered, oblivious.

"Ay," cried Juana, "you are hurting!"

Antonio tightened his grip. "What did you see in me today?"

"I saw Monsieur. You would be his image if he was older."

"How old was he?"

"Five and twenty, or a little more – I couldn't say. You *gaje* are different from us. Why, who is he to you?"

Antonio's head was spinning as though he had drunk a whole cask of Malaga. "You're to go back into the city, Juana, to an inn, El Caballo Blanco, near the church of San Pedro. Tell Gaspar Jimenez that Don Antonio de Zamora wants you to stay there."

"When will you come to me?" she asked warily.

"When I choose," he said. "And if I don't find you, I swear by the devil, I'll hunt you down. You can watch your child die first, before you meet your Maker."

# *Part One*

England, October–December 1643



## CHAPTER ONE

### I.

**K**ing Charles was hunting stag in the royal forest, with his party of lords and gentlemen, and a pack of eager hounds. They had disappeared from view into a thick mist that drifted through the trees. Like smoke on a battlefield, Laurence thought, as he reined in to wipe sweat from his eyes. He did not enjoy the chase.

“Your Highness, you must be more careful,” he warned the young Prince, who had pulled up impatiently at his side; the boy was riding too fast, and his horse had already stumbled once on a tree root.

“If we don’t hurry, Mr. Beaumont, we may lose them,” Prince Charles shouted. “I want to watch the kill.” Before Laurence could stop him, the boy put spurs to his mount and galloped ahead, vanishing among the trees.

Laurence became aware of an extraordinary silence. No birdsong or sougling of branches above, no rustle of animals in the bushes. He was alone. Then Sir Bernard Radcliff emerged out of the mist and walked towards him. Laurence felt astonished: he had last seen Radcliff in the grounds of the Earl of Pembroke’s London house, dying from a multitude of wounds inflicted by the Earl’s guards.

“I understand your surprise,” remarked Radcliff, with a superior smile. “But don’t forget, your precious tutor Dr. Seward instructed me in magic, as well as in the casting of horoscopes. The dead can be revived, sir, if one knows the proper rituals.”

“You were wrong about the King’s death,” said Laurence, his voice sounding puny as a child’s in the vastness of the forest. “It wasn’t to happen when you predicted.”

"It will happen soon, nonetheless."

Radcliff's smile faded as spectacularly as he did, dwindling to a wisp of fog; and now Laurence discovered himself in a small clearing where the King's body was laid out upon a makeshift bier of bracken and dry leaves. Pembroke stood over the bier, like an old vulture in his sombre cloak, leaning on a cane. Nearby were his guards with Prince Charles, who was kneeling, white-faced, wrists and ankles tied, a rope around his neck.

Pembroke turned a bleak stare on Laurence, and shook his head in reproof. "I had planned that he would reign under my authority, after his father's tragic accident. Alas, he watched the kill. That was your mistake, Mr. Beaumont. You ought to have kept him by your side."

Trembling, Laurence drew his pistol from the holster of his saddle. "You'll never get away with the murder of two kings." He fired. The shot ricocheted off Pembroke's cloak, as if he were wearing steel. Laurence gaped in terror as the speeding ball changed course, and plunged into the Prince's breast.

Laurence jolted awake and tasted blood in his mouth. Exploring with his tongue, he identified the source: he had bitten into the tender flesh inside his lower lip. Dawn was breaking, and he could hear the Oxford bells chime seven.

Isabella slept on next to him, one shapely arm flung over the counterpane, her peaceful expression a contrast to his unquiet mind. He longed to rouse her and tell her about the nightmare and what had inspired it: how through the initial year of this civil war he had helped thwart a conspiracy to kill the King. It frustrated him that the criminal designs of Pembroke and Radcliff had to remain a strictly guarded secret: in Radcliff's case, to protect his widow; and in Pembroke's, because the King had chosen not to expose his former friend as a traitor. Yet what troubled Laurence far more was that in the domain of politics and intrigue he could not be open with the woman he loved. Isabella was still close to the man who had once been her guardian, the

new Secretary of State, Lord George Digby, whom Laurence trusted no further than he could spit.

He sank back and nestled against her, inhaling the scent on her naked skin: attar of roses, orris root, musk, and frankincense; and a more animal trace, from their passion of the night before. Yesterday he had asked her a second time to marry him, and she had refused. "Must we fight everyone?" she had said. "That is what our marriage would entail." He was prepared to fight. But was she?

## II.

"I opened Pandora's box, and evil flew out," Seward muttered, as he hurried along Merton Street. He could imagine what Beaumont would say: that he should not have upset himself by gazing again into the King's future.

Passing Oriel College, he turned north, and threaded his way up to Broad Street, into St. Giles. As if in defiance of the war, Oxford was stirring to its usual business: traders were setting up their stalls, servants emptied slop buckets into the gutters, drovers plodded behind sheep and cattle, and carts rolled in loaded with hay from the countryside. Near the Church of St. Mary Magdalen, Seward's path was blocked by a troop of laughing soldiers headed for their billets after night patrol on the city defences. He waited impatiently for them to go by, then carried on at a frantic pace up the Woodstock Road, dived into a side street, and arrived breathless at Mistress Savage's house.

The door stood wide, and a young maidservant was sweeping the threshold. She stopped when she saw him, her broom in mid-air. "I am Doctor William Seward, of Merton College," he panted. "I have urgent news for Mr. Beaumont."

"Please sit in the parlour, sir," she said, "and I'll wake him."

Seward fell into a chair, and mopped his brow with a corner of his cloak. A few minutes later, Beaumont ran down the stairs, his pale green eyes anxious and his inky hair tangled from sleep. He wore just his breeches, which hung dangerously low. Even agitated, Seward could

not keep his own eyes from lingering on that smooth, olive-toned body, so youthful despite its many scars.

"What's wrong, my friend – are you ill?" Beaumont asked, crouching beside him and laying a hand on his thigh.

"No, Beaumont," Seward said. "I have been working through the night."

"It's too much for you, at your age. What's your urgent news?"

"I was working on . . . a horoscope."

"A royal horoscope? Oh Seward, I thought we were finished with all that."

"I could not rest until I had drawn His Majesty's chart again, now I had the true hour of his birth," Seward whispered. "I *had* to learn how far Radcliff had erred in calculating the date of his decease with the incorrect hour."

Beaumont rose and took the chair opposite, propping his elbows on his knees. He cupped his chin in his hands and squinted at Seward through his lashes, as he had been wont to do as a gangly boy of fifteen when concentrating on his lessons. At one and thirty, he was lean-muscled and broad-shouldered, and more graceful, yet his movements had not lost their impulsiveness; nor had his character. "What did you find out?"

"By my reckoning, His Majesty has about six more years to live. Not even six; to be exact, five years and a little over three months – and he will die on the thirtieth of January."

"Then you needn't have been in quite such haste to tell me," Beaumont said, with a slight smile.

"Radcliff did not err, as to the circumstances: the King *will* perish by violence."

"Is that so surprising? We *are* in the midst of a war, though I pray to God it doesn't last five more years."

"If I have read his stars correctly, it is a war he might lose, together with his life."

"Will you alert him?"

"You know very well it would be high treason to predict his death."

Beaumont hesitated. "Last night I dreamt of him dead, perhaps as you were at work on your calculations."

While he recounted the dream, Seward listened intently. "It is a clear warning to you, about the future," he said, at the end.

"No, Seward: though I admit I was disturbed by it, I see it as a mess of my past worries and complete nonsense." Beaumont began to laugh. "Still, Radcliff resurrected gave me a bit of a scare. And I had to envy Pembroke his armoured cloak."

"Don't be flippant. It is telling you that while you may not be pleased to serve Lord Digby, you must serve him as you served Lord Falkland, may God rest his soul, if you are to protect the lives of your King and Prince Charles."

Beaumont relaxed back, and crossed his long legs. "How are things at Merton these days, with the Queen in residence?"

Seward snorted. "Now you are being evasive."

"What would you prefer me to say? I am *not* pleased to be in Digby's service. I'd rather have stayed in Wilmot's Lifeguard."

"Your talents would be wasted in the ranks. Besides, Lord Wilmot is an arrogant, immoderate fellow."

"Minor flaws, compared to those of certain others in His Majesty's camp," Beaumont said, shrugging. "And he's also the King's Lieutenant General of Horse and one of our best commanders. Most important to me, he was a true friend when Falkland died."

"He kept you drunk."

"Yes, for which I'm eternally in his debt," retorted Beaumont, with a heartfelt emotion that made Seward a little sheepish.

"I understand how stricken you were by Falkland's demise. And I know you do not have a great respect for Lord Digby," Seward added, more quietly.

"You're wrong there," said Beaumont, not bothering to lower his voice. "I have the greatest respect – for his guile and utter lack of scruple. Without those qualities of character, he'd never have obliged me

to work for him. In my view, his appointment will be disastrous for the royal cause, and I dread to think what sort of cunning schemes he'll suggest to the King, now he has more power in His Majesty's Council. I'll be his spy as I was Falkland's, out of duty to the King and the Prince, but I won't pretend I like it."

"As I did once observe to you, Doctor," remarked a husky drawl from the stairs, "if only Beaumont were not so useful."

Isabella Savage unnerved Seward on most occasions. This morning as she came towards him he could hardly look at her. Her satin robe clung to the curves of her body, her dark coppery hair flowed loose, and her feet were bare. "Madam," he said, getting up to bow, "excuse my early visit."

"It's a pleasure to receive you." She strolled over to Beaumont and caressed his cheek with her fingertips. "I trust you were not among the scholars evicted from your chambers upon Her Majesty's installation at the College?" she asked, as Beaumont slipped an arm around her waist.

Seward felt his cheeks redden. The heat between them was always palpable, yet today it seemed to him almost a physical presence, as though living in sin under her roof had intensified their sensual bliss. "No, madam: age has its privileges."

"Indeed it should. To quote the wise Cicero, it is a burden as heavy as Aetna."

Seward did not respond. Beautiful women were dangerous enough without an education; but that Mistress Savage should dip her nose into the classical authors and then flaunt her learning struck him as the height of immodesty, no less offensive to him than her *déshabille*.

"And to quote my father, Seward is a veritable jewel in Merton's crown," Beaumont told her, drawing her closer and leaning his head against her hip.

Seward rose, now thoroughly unsettled. "I should leave you in peace."

Beaumont gave one of his wicked smiles, flashing his white teeth. "Small chance of any peace: my mother is in town, determined to

arrange another betrothal for me. You might encounter her at the College. She's lodged near to the Queen."

"She called on us yesterday, Doctor," Mistress Savage said. "How Beaumont takes after her – even in that flare to her nostrils."

"Much as his brother Thomas resembles his lordship their father as a young man," said Seward, wondering what had transpired at the meeting between these formidable females.

"I must visit her around midday," said Beaumont. "If you're not busy or sleeping, Seward, I could pass by your rooms."

"Please do."

Beaumont sprang to his feet; someone was rapping at the door. "Dear me, I hope that's not her," he exclaimed, with a comical frown at Mistress Savage.

He went and opened to a man in the Secretary of State's livery; Seward thought he had the air of a weasel. "Good morning, Mr. Beaumont," he said, studying Mistress Savage with salacious interest. "His lordship requests that you attend him immediately at his offices."

"Would you remind me of your name, sir?" asked Beaumont.

"Quayle, sir."

"Mr. Quayle, pray inform his lordship that I'll attend him as soon as I'm more decently dressed."

"I can wait for you, sir."

Seward took the opportunity to leave. "Until later, Beaumont. Good day, Mistress Savage."

On his way down the street, he heard a door slam shut. He glanced over his shoulder to see Quayle snooping through her front window.

### III.

Lord Digby sat at Falkland's old desk, his round visage freshly shaved and his blond hair impeccably curled. He was still in his dressing gown, a quilted garment of scarlet satin, and on his head was a lace cap. To Laurence, he resembled some sleek Flemish cardinal in his Vatican chambers.

"How are you, Mr. Beaumont, and how is our darling Isabella?"

"We're well, thank you, my lord."

He surveyed Laurence keenly with his protuberant blue eyes.

"Have you broken your fast yet?"

"No, my lord," replied Laurence. "I was in too much of a rush to obey your summons."

"That is lucky for you: what I have to show you might otherwise upset your digestion, as it did mine."

Digby motioned to Quayle, who advanced with a small package of rolled-up linen held at arm's length. "Where should I deposit it, my lord?"

"On the floor. Have a look, Mr. Beaumont. It was in a bag of correspondence that arrived this morning from London."

An ominously ripe odour emanated from the package. Laurence squatted down and unfurled the linen. A pair of human ears fell out of the cloth onto the flagstones with a wet splat; they were blackened and oozing decay. "Oh Christ," he said, recoiling. "Whose are they?"

Digby clapped a hand to his mouth. "Had they been yours, sir, I might have recognised them from the gold ring in your left earlobe," he said, in a muffled voice. "On more careful examination, you will behold a pearl earring." Laurence now noticed it, beneath the gore. "The ears belong, or should I say *belonged*, to an agent of mine, Hector Albright, who ran certain errands for me in London – soliciting funds and pledges of more active support from our Royalist friends, and so on. I assume that he was seized and tortured under questioning by whoever committed this barbarity."

"Was there any message for you, apart from his ears?" Laurence asked, straightening, nauseated by the smell despite his empty stomach.

"None at all. I tend to doubt he survived the mutilation. In his last letter to me, he wrote that Parliament, under the auspices of John Pym and his ludicrously titled Committee of Public Safety, had imported a spymaster from the Low Countries to root out suspected Royalists in the City. He might be the butcher."

"Did Albright know his name?"

"Unfortunately not." Digby gestured for Laurence to cover up the ears. "It could, however, be on the list that I inherited from my Lord Falkland." Producing a sheet of paper from his desk, he flourished it at Laurence, who inspected it as if he had never seen it before. "Five names, of purported rebel spies. Are they familiar to you?"

Falkland had posed Laurence the same question; and he gave Digby the same answer. "No."

"I told you I want you to investigate it, as your first assignment in my service. Falkland notes here that he got the names from a Sir Bernard Radcliff, with whom I believe you were acquainted, yet he did not say who Radcliff was to *him*. What can you tell me about Radcliff, Mr. Beaumont?"

Again, Laurence would have to twist the truth to keep secret the plot against the King: although the list itself was not connected, Radcliff had given it to Falkland as part of a desperate bid to save his own neck after his guilt was revealed. "I was introduced to him by my friend Walter Ingram," Laurence said, starting with the truth. "He married Ingram's sister. I met him just a couple of times. He was killed back in August – I can't remember how he died," he added mendaciously. "But Prince Rupert might: Radcliff was an officer in his Horse. I was unaware of Radcliff's association with Lord Falkland."

"What rubbish," Digby said. "You were Falkland's chief agent. You knew all of his spies."

"No, my lord: as you had your Albright, Lord Falkland must have had his Radcliff – without my knowledge."

Digby cast him a sceptical glare. "At any rate, I am sending you into London, sir, to find out about this list, the rebel spymaster, and what happened to Albright. I have someone to accompany you. He has served as courier to Their Royal Majesties in many a delicate situation. He is a goldsmith by trade – ample justification to visit Oxford frequently, bringing wares from his shop. Quayle, get rid of that package and fetch in Mr. Violet," Digby ordered.

Quayle reluctantly scooped up the offensive bundle and carried it out.

Laurence, meanwhile, felt a mild foreboding: he had heard of Violet as a slippery character who managed to elude arrest by the authorities in London. Might Violet be playing on both sides of the game?

A man not much older than himself entered and bowed, doffing his hat. His plain fawn suit matched his complexion, and his sparse hair, and beard. "Your lordship – sir," he greeted them, in a reverent tone.

"Mr. Violet, this is Mr. Laurence Beaumont. We were discussing Albright's fate."

"Dreadful, my lord, very dreadful."

Digby made a humming noise in his throat. "Old Queen Bess used to call *her* spymaster Walsingham 'Moor,' and 'her Ethiopian,' because of his swarthy skin," he said. "The title would fit Mr. Beaumont admirably, don't you agree, Mr. Violet? His mother hails from Spain." Violet appraised Laurence, as if not sure how to answer. "His exotic charms prove an invaluable asset to him with the ladies," continued Digby, "yet they render him conspicuous, as does his height. He was nearly seized in London this spring, when we last attempted to encourage an uprising for His Majesty."

"Might he adopt the guise of a foreign merchant, my lord? I have truck with Venetians, now and then. Do you speak Italian, Mr. Beaumont?"

"I do," said Laurence.

Digby beamed. "An ingenious idea, Mr. Violet. Prepare to travel with him tomorrow. How long will the journey take, in your estimation?"

Violet scratched his nose pensively. "If we set out in the morning, we should be in Reading by dusk, my lord, and the next day ride on to the City outskirts, to the house of friends of mine. We'll bide there overnight, and then pass through the fortifications on the morrow. I can accommodate you at my establishment in Cheapside, Mr. Beaumont."

Laurence merely nodded; about sixty miles to London and his Arab stallion could ride forty a day without tiring. In less than the

time estimated by Violet, he could be with his own trusted friends in the heart of Southwark.

"Thank you, Mr. Violet," said Digby. "Is he not the quintessential mole?" he inquired of Laurence, when Violet had gone.

"He appears so, my lord."

"He disappears, sir, unlike you," Digby said, with a feminine giggle.

"My lord, when you asked me to serve you, you suggested that you would give me *a free hand*."

"How I appreciate your gift of memory – but those were your words, not mine."

"Whatever the case, let me deal with this investigation as I think fit."

"I am sorry, sir," Digby responded unapologetically. "I cannot afford your capture by Parliament, and Violet is a native of London. He knows his way around far better than you."

"I'm sure he does, my lord. But wouldn't it be wiser for us to travel and operate separately, to avoid suspicion? I have my methods of coming and going, as he has his. If he's seen with me in Cheapside, we may both be in danger of arrest."

"No, you must stick with Violet. And in case of any difference of opinion as to your work, you are to follow his advice. You shall spend this morning together organising your plans. And don't forget to copy out that list of names. He should have a copy, also." Digby tossed the sheet at Laurence, who returned it.

"I have it memorised, my lord."

Digby was twirling a blond lovelock between his well-manicured fingertips. "You must invent some excuse to Isabella for your absence. We cannot have her fretting about you."

"With respect, she's not a child and I'd prefer to be honest with her."

"My dear Mr. Beaumont, honesty is not in your nature. And in your duties for me, I have every right to command your discretion. Is that understood?"

"Yes, my lord."

"*I* can still see the child in her," Digby said, more amiably. "And years of caring for her as my ward have endowed me with an acute understanding of *her* nature."

"Of course, my lord," said Laurence, imitating Violet's reverential tone.

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