

ONE

London, 1589

Francis Bacon sat at his desk, the windows opened wide in a futile effort to relieve the fustiness of his chambers. In late July, the buildings surrounding the central yard at Gray's Inn trapped the breeze, freighting it with the smell of sunbaked horse dung before allowing a few meager breaths to rise up to the first floor. He longed to go lie down in his bedchamber, where the fresh wind blew in from flower-dappled fields, but he didn't want his clerk to catch him napping after dinner.

He picked up his pen to continue working on his latest advice letter, *An Advertisement Touching the Controversies of the Church of England*. His theme could hardly be more timely. The whole country was embroiled in a battle of pamphleteers, hurling scathing broadsides at one another over the proper constitution of the Church. That such a topic could become the dominant form of entertainment in the great city of London boggled the mind, but there it was.

One side was led by an anonymous zealot who styled himself Martin Marprelate. The clever name stated his purpose right from the title page. He meant to mar public opinion of the prelates of the established church, from the Archbishop of Canterbury on down. He'd published four fat pamphlets since last November while evading the archbishop's pursuivants. He'd fallen silent in April, around the time that a chorus of anti-Martins had raised their voices, issuing volleys of scurrilous ballads, mocking plays, and satirical commentaries. They'd succeeded in drawing Martin back into the fray with a new work.

Francis glanced at the door and picked up Martin's latest to read a little further. This one, titled *Theses Martinianae*, had ostensibly been written by one Martin Junior. He made a great play of wondering where his father had got to — a question that vexed even the Privy Council. The body of the work consisted of one hundred and ten demands for the complete reformation of the English church. Dry stuff on the whole, but framed by an introduction and conclusion peppered with the provocative raillery that won the applause of the masses. The demands crowded the border of treason, but the humorous passages were far more dangerous because they made the work so entertaining.

He read another passage and chuckled. *Outrageous! But what wit!*

A perfunctory knock on the door heralded the clerk's return. Francis stuffed Martin's pamphlet under a book, dipped his quill in the inkpot, and turned his face toward his letter.

Thomas Clarady strode in with his customary bounce and took up his stool, struggling, as always, to fit his long legs under his desk. Francis's previous clerk had been a mousy fellow of modest stature. Tom, a shade over six feet tall, grumbled daily at the confinement, when not quibbling over the tasks set for him.

Something had lifted his spirits this afternoon. His handsome features were alight with merriment — a welcome change. Tom was one of those men who grew handsomer with age. His blue eyes had depths now, and ruddy tints burnished his fair curls and short beard. He kept himself in top condition with fencing and dancing, like other young Inns of Court gentlemen, and made an impressive representative when Francis needed to send a confidential message. If only he would put away the absurd yellow pearl that dangled from his left ear. But no; his late father had brought it back from his round-the-world

journey with Sir Francis Drake, and no amount of argument or cajolery could induce him to remove it.

Tom waved a battered quarto. "Martin's back! I snagged this copy from a fellow reading it in the jakes."

Francis wished he would keep such details to himself, but he welcomed the rare good cheer. Tom's temper, once as mild as a summer morning, had grown peevish since his father died and his estate was turned over to a guardian, who happened to be Francis's aunt, Lady Elizabeth Russell. She'd reduced Tom's allowance to a fraction of its former bounty, paying his fixed expenses, like his fees at Gray's Inn, directly. She'd set him to work as Francis's clerk in exchange for tutoring in the common law. She even paid his tailor's bills herself, wisely recognizing that any coins given to Tom would swiftly find their way into the hands of lightskirts and tavern keepers.

Tom had endured this regimen with equanimity until the day he turned twenty-one. He had foolishly believed his estates would revert to him on his birthday by some inevitable natural process in spite of Francis's warnings. According to the law, a ward must sue for the livery of his estate on reaching his majority. Until then, everything remained under his guardian's control.

Furious, Tom had run wild, practically living in his favorite brothel, racking up mountainous charges for drink and other services and brazenly sending the bills to Lady Russell. She paid the first one, then had him arrested for lewdness, letting him stew in Bridewell for a few nights to reconsider his priorities. He'd returned to Gray's beaten but unbowed. He now devoted his leisure to studying the laws of wardship and devising ways to earn the money he needed to pay for his suit.

Francis sympathized. He had undergone a similar outburst of delayed grief after his father's equally unexpected death ten years ago. Nothing could replace the loss of a father's loving hand guiding one through the

rocky shoals of youth into the safe harbor of a profession suited to one's talents and station. Nothing.

Having five older brothers, Francis suffered from a lack of property rather than lack of control over a substantial inheritance, but the results were similar. While his mother fruitlessly battled his stepbrothers in the courts, he'd sunk into a state of complete rebellion, locking himself in his chambers at Gray's for a weeks-long orgy of Roman satirical plays. He still blushed to remember that period of intellectual debauchery.

In time, he'd joined the other members of Gray's Inn in the purposeful life of legal men, ordered by the annual calendar of the courts and given structure by the daily rhythm of prayers, meals, legal exercises, and administrative meetings. He found satisfaction — if little pecuniary reward — writing his letters of counsel for Her Majesty and members of the Privy Council. In time, Tom would settle into his destined role as well.

Tom slapped the pamphlet he was reading. "You'd think Martin would have the sense to stay hidden. I suppose he couldn't resist stabbing back at the anti-Martinists. Who could blame him? *Martin's Mirror Mar'd* was pure genius, starting with the subtitle: *A Poultice for a Poke-Prelate*. That would raise my hackles!" He twisted around to take another foolscap quarto from the shelf behind his desk and held it toward Francis. "Have you seen that one?"

Francis regarded it as if it were a cold bowl of greasy pottage. "You shouldn't be wasting your time on that rubbish."

"At least it's legal — unlike that copy of Martin Junior you've been sneaking peeks at all morning."

"I can't offer useful advice to counter Martin's influence without knowledge of Martin's works. My bookseller finds them for me. I don't ask where."

Tom smirked. “Well, you should take a peek at *Martin’s Mirror* as well. He seems to know who Martin is, or at least *where* he is.”

“Impossible. No one knows either of those things.”

“He knows something, this Pasquill Caviliero, whoever that is. He’s got a battle between the knight of the ants of the north and the king of the south. Ants of the north; that’s Northants — Northamptonshire. Get it?”

Francis groaned. Such was the state of English literature in 1589.

Tom laughed, heartily entertained by both the lame wit and his master’s reaction. “A knight of Northamptonshire. That’s fairly specific. I don’t know about the king of the south though. He can’t mean Spain, can he?”

“Hardly. Martin’s a Presbyterian, not a Catholic.” Francis sniffed to show his disdain, but the wordplay had caught his attention. “He could mean Surrey. ‘Sur’ is Spanish for south and ‘rey’ means king.”

“Good catch!” Tom snapped his fingers. “But does that mean Martin is north or south?”

“It’s nonsense. It doesn’t mean anything.”

“It’s better than that endless list of nattering *theses* you find so fascinating.”

“These ‘nattering theses’ amount to an explicit plan to demolish the established church!”

Tom cocked his head and pressed a thoughtful finger to his cheek. “Do you need a plan to accomplish a demolition? You could just get a catapult and start firing away.”

“Of course you need a plan. Taking buildings apart is more delicate work than you, apparently, can imagine. For one thing, there may be many salvageable timbers —” Francis broke off as Tom’s toothy smile told him he’d fallen into a trap.

Well, he wasn’t about to allow himself to be bested in a rhetorical contest by a testy clerk. He was composing a

sally that expanded on the metaphor established by the catapult when the door flew open and his fifteen-year-old servant popped in.

“More dignity, Pinnock, if you please!” Francis scolded.

The impertinent boy winked at Tom and slowed to a solemn march for the remaining few yards. He handed Francis a sealed letter, then folded his hands behind his back to wait for a reply.

Francis slit the seal with his knife and read the brief note. Then he waved it at Tom. This might well cheer them both up. “My lord uncle has a sensitive matter he wants us to look into.”

“Both of us?”

“Both of us. He doesn’t say what it is, of course.” One didn’t put such things in writing. “But if he wants you as well as me, it must be more than another advice letter.” Francis jotted a note agreeing to present himself as soon as possible, then he sanded, folded, and sealed it, handing the small square to Pinnock. “Run this down to Burghley House, quick as a bunny, then come straight home.”

After the door closed behind him, Francis picked up Martin’s *Theses* and read nearly a page before Tom burst out, “Aren’t you going?”

Francis allowed him a wry smile. “I wouldn’t want my uncle to think I’m just sitting here twiddling my thumbs.”

“Ah.”

Francis finished reading the whole pamphlet. For all he knew, it had something to do with his uncle’s request. Then he took a pair of pristine wrist ruffs and got up to let Tom fasten them. He went into his bedchamber to choose a hat, then returned to the front chamber and raised his eyebrows for his clerk’s approval.

Tom shrugged one shoulder. “It makes your point.” He tucked his tongue in his cheek, plainly wanting to add something.

“Yes?” Francis prompted.

“I know His Lordship won’t come right out and offer you payment. But if you could find a way to hint or suggest it, I personally would prefer cash to honors this time. I need money, lots of it, if I’m ever going to win back my estate.”

“I’ll do what I can, but remember that your guardian is his sister-in-law as well as my aunt.”

“How could I ever forget that?”

Francis left without further ado but had to pause on the landing to chuckle to himself. His uncle, the Lord Treasurer, was also the Master of the Court of Wards. Any sums he paid Tom for services rendered would soon find their way right back into his coffers.