

The Book of the Lion

Bibliomysteries

by Thomas Perry, 1947–

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Dominic Hallkyn played back the voicemail on his telephone while he took off his sport coat and hung it up to dry in the laundry room. The smell of rain on tweed was one that he knew some people might say was his smell, the smell of an English professor. The coats—tweed or finer-spun wool in the winter and

seersucker or summer-weight fabrics in the late spring and early fall—were his work uniform, no different from a mechanic's coveralls. He wore them to repel the skepticism of the young.

The first couple of calls were routine: a girl in his undergraduate medieval lit course had been sick, so could she please hand her paper in tomorrow? Of course. He had plenty of others to deaden his soul until that one arrived. Meg Stanley, the Department Chair, wanted him to serve on a Ph.D. oral exam committee. Unfortunately, he would. Reading the frantically scribbled preliminary exam and then asking probing questions in the oral would be torment to him and the student, both of them joined in a ritual of distaste and humiliation, all of it designed to punish them both for their love of literature, but it was part of his job.

The last call was not routine. "Professor Hallkyn. I know you are considered one of the two or three best living experts on medieval English literature." In spite of Hallkyn's contempt for academics who fancied themselves the best or the most famous, he was irritated at the "two or three." The two were Hallkyn, and Bethune, who was at Harvard. Who did this man think was the third? So when he heard the next sentence, he was already in a bad humor. "I have *The Book of the Lion*. It's written in a fine court hand on thin vellum, legible in its entirety. I will be in touch."

Hallkyn could feel his heart pounding in his chest, and yet he felt light-headed, as though he were being strangled. He realized after a moment that he had forgotten to breathe, and he placed both palms on the table to hold himself up while he corrected the oversight, taking a few deep breaths while he thought. Of course it was a hoax. Nobody could have *The Book of the Lion*.

The book didn't exist except as a reference in Chaucer's Retraction at the end of *The Parson's Tale*, where he listed all of his greatest works by name: "*The Book of Troilus*; also *The Book of Fame*; *The Book of the Five and Twenty Ladies*; *The Book of the Duchesse*; *The Book of Seint Valentynes Day of the Parlement of Briddes*; *The Tales of Canterbury* (thilke that sownen into synne); *The Book of the Leoun*; and many another book (if they were in my remembrance) and many a song and many a lecherous lay—that Crist for his grete mercy foryeve me the synne."

Those colleagues who took the retraction seriously had always amused Dominic Hallkyn. He couldn't fathom how they could profess to know Chaucer and not notice that he had a wicked sense of irony. The Retraction wasn't a confession. It was an advertisement.

The thought brought him back to the tantalizing nature of what he had just heard. In his Retraction, Chaucer did not list everything he had written. He listed only masterworks. He listed only those poems that six centuries later still made up a fair portion of the reason that anyone cared about Middle English literature. He listed them in an order ascending to his sublime achievement, *The Canterbury Tales*. And then, after that, he listed one more work by name, and only one—*The Book of the Lion*.

Chaucer, first of the big three of English—the one from whom Shakespeare learned his true trade, not plays but deep understanding of human beings, and from whom Milton learned to write poetic narrative—was the one who wrote when the language itself was still in its childhood and could be exercised by one writer

to grow into its mature strength. And what if, contrary to what everyone had thought for over half a millennium, a copy of *The Book of the Lion* had survived?

Dominic Hallkyn thought, and like any thinking man, he drank. He sat in his library on the leather couch near the 18th-century writing desk, staring past it at the wall of bookshelves. And because he was in a place that was the physical embodiment of his mind, his eyes knew where to focus. He looked at the fifth shelf, where Geoffrey Chaucer resided. There was the familiar Donaldson edition of 1975; the Blake edition including the corrections from the fragmentary Hengwrt Manuscript; the Fisher, with its generous supporting materials and critical essays. And a special purchase from his own graduate school days, the seven-volume Skeat edition of 1899. And because Hallkyn loved the twenty-three painted pictures, including the one of Chaucer the pilgrim, he kept the facsimile of the Ellesmere Manuscript at the end of the row.

Hallkyn drank a single malt scotch that tasted to him like the breath of the British Isles, its rich peat and wet moss and damp air and time. He considered the slim likelihood that there was going to be a second chapter to this experience, and then he made a telephone call.

The call was to the private number of a man named T.M. Spanner. Spanner's personal number was sought-after, a number that powerful men carried in their wallets on small pieces of paper with no notations written beside it. Spanner's wealth was old and hard to trace—it was reputed to have come originally from one of his ancestors inventing the tool that Americans perversely called a wrench, although its true name in English was spanner. But even when Hallkyn had met T.M. Spanner as an undergraduate at Yale, he was already the sort of man who stimulated curiosity. The imagination was always ready to supply speculation and wild stories.

Hallkyn heard the answer, "T.M. Spanner," and the voice impressed him again. He had an accent that retained a trace of the south, a slower Virginia tidewater cadence that had somehow survived the years of northeastern prep schools and universities. The voice conveyed the conviction that the man had the ownership papers in his back pocket to the ground beneath his feet, the air he breathed, and all the things he could see from where he stood.

"T.M.," said Hallkyn. "It's Dominic."

"Herr Doktor Professor," said Spanner. "It's always a pleasure to hear your voice."

Hallkyn hoped that it was a pleasure. If so, it could only be because, unlike most people who called Spanner, Hallkyn was not in any business, and didn't want Spanner's advice, his help, or his endorsement. What he and Spanner always talked about was what had drawn them together thirty years ago—books. "You too, T.M. I hope I'm not bothering you."

"Not at all. I'm sitting at home looking at a television show. I hesitate to say watching, because that implies that I'm actually following along. I have the sound off and I'm gazing at a pretty moving picture of the Alps. What's new with you, Dom?"

"Until a few minutes ago, not much. I've got to tell you, I got a message on my phone that set off a lot of emotions."

“What? You’re not sick or something, are you?” There was genuine concern in Spanner’s voice.

“No, nothing like that. This isn’t even personal. It’s intellectual. Literary and historical. A man who didn’t identify himself called and said he has *The Book of the Lion*.”

“*The Book of the Lion*,” Spanner repeated. “The Retraction.”

“Yes,” said Hallkyn. “That’s right. When Chaucer apologizes for the sin of writing his greatest works, it’s the last one in the list.”

“Hold on a second, Dom. I think I see my old *Canterbury Tales* on a shelf right now. Hold on. It’s not more than fifty feet away.”

Hallkyn heard the phone click on a hard surface. He was experiencing again who T.M. Spanner was. He was a man of the financial world, and that meant politics and manufacturing and trade and the shrewd application of power, but he had also studied literature with a sincere appreciation and humility. He was at once a man who could own a library where “only fifty feet away” was nearby, and a man who *would* own a library that size, and know where everything was. Hallkyn heard him pick up the phone again. Hallkyn said, “It’s at the end, after *The Parson’s Tale*.”

“Got it,” said Spanner. “Oh, yes. ‘*The Tales of Canterbury* thilke that sownen into synne; *The Book of the Leoun*, and many another book... and many a song and many a leccherous lay.’ And *The Book of the Lion* has never been found, right?”

“Right. This person who called me claims to have a copy on thin vellum in a fine court hand, legible throughout.”

“Do you think it’s possible?” said Spanner.

“I doubt it,” he said. Then he added, “But it’s happened before. People find things, incredible things.”

“What is it that you want me to do?”

“I don’t know,” said Hallkyn.

“That sounds a little disingenuous,” Spanner said. “You called an old friend who is probably also the richest man you know.”

“I’m sorry,” said Hallkyn. “I didn’t mean it to sound that way. I want help of some kind, but I don’t know what I need yet. I haven’t known about this for more than a few minutes. I had to tell somebody, and this isn’t the kind of thing you can tell just anybody. I need an old friend who understands the problem to puzzle this out with me—one who has lived a different sort of life, who can probably smell a fraud coming better than I can. This man—this voice—called me, and said he had the book. Maybe he’s crazy or a hoaxer or a dupe. But maybe he has the most precious lost manuscript in history.”

“You got this voice on a phone message?”

“Yes. He said he had it, but not who he is, or where he is, or what he plans to do with it. Part of me wishes he’d call someone else—and maybe he already has. He might have called Gerald Bethune, and that pompous bastard is scratching his head now.” He paused. “I guess what I really wish is that this man really has the genuine *Book of the Leoun*, in a fair court hand on the finest thin vellum, legible in its entirety. That’s what he says he has. And I hope he called me because he wants to know which institution I think he ought to donate it to.”

Spanner said, "I take it that's not what you believe is going to happen."

Dominic Hallkyn swirled his glass, and watched the amber liquid move around, staring into its deep glow. "Libraries and museums all over the world are full of things that people gave them," he said. "I've seen great acts of generosity, not the least of them from you. I've also seen acts of selfishness and deceit that I would not at one time have imagined. I don't know which this is."

"Or something in between?" said Spanner. "A simple sale?"

"Yes. That too," said Hallkyn. "Or an undergraduate prank. It might be fun to hire some old bar character to call your professor. For the price of a drink you could talk forever about how the mere mention of a long-lost Chaucer poem made the professor's hands shake."

"Maybe," Spanner said. "So let's get practical. How should we handle this?"

"We should think it through, so we're prepared for the next stage before anything happens. We should expect to wait a long time for the next call, and then when it doesn't come, to forget the whole thing. That way, we won't be pining forever for something that was never possible."

"And if the call comes?" said Spanner.

"Then we must be fully ready to guide events in the direction we want them to go."

And in what direction do we want to push?" Spanner asked.

"Maybe I can talk him into giving it to a university, or to a trust, or to the British government, or to the Huntington Library in California. They have the Ellesmere manuscript."

"If he's wealthy, he would be able to write the value of it off against his income for tax purposes," Spanner said. "It might be worth more than he could get for it on the market."

"We could agree to have the manuscript called the Whatever-his-name-is manuscript of Chaucer's *Book of the Lion*. Like the Ellesmere manuscript."

"Or the Elgin Marbles," Spanner said. "But maybe he hasn't got a hungry ego, and maybe he isn't wealthy enough to care about tax breaks."

"We still have to come up with some way to get control of the manuscript. The last major work of Geoffrey Chaucer—what would that be worth in dollars? We have to be sure the manuscript doesn't get to auction, or there will be a bidding war with a bunch of Oxford-educated Arab princes, three software companies, and an Australian billionaire or two. This would be like what happened in the art world—Van Goghs going for the price of a medium-sized company."

"You want me to offer to buy it," Spanner said.

"I've been thinking about that," Hallkyn said. "But it's too much to buy alone, even for you. What we should probably do is put together enough money for a pre-emptive bid. But I don't want to offer him any money. I just think we should have it waiting, in reserve."

Spanner said, "That seems wise. Let's come up with an estimate. What do we need? What do things like this go for?"

"There is nothing like this. In 2001 a copy of Shakespeare's First Folio was sold at Christie's for about six million dollars. But the First Folio is only a printed book. There are forty surviving copies, and hundreds of millions of reprints. *The Book of the Lion* is vellum—each sheet a sheepskin cured and hand-rubbed with stone to

make it smooth, and then covered with calligraphy and paintings—one of a kind. A work of art.”

“Okay, so what is the physical manuscript worth? What’s the most it could be worth?”

“We’d have to see what the object looks like. In 1983, a group of Germans paid nearly twelve million dollars for a Romanesque gospel. It was beautiful. But nobody ever spent twelve million because he was wondering what a Bible was going to say, or six million because he didn’t know what was in Shakespeare.”

“We need a number.”

“I don’t know,” Hallkyn said. “Or maybe I’m afraid to think it through.”

“Try.”

“All right,” said Hallkyn. “Figure that the physical book is, in today’s dollars, worth at least five million. It’s probably not going to be as pretty as the Ellesmere, but it’s much rarer, because there are other manuscripts of the *Canterbury Tales*. Assume this is the last major missing work of the first great writer in English, like finding the last living dinosaur there is or will ever be. Are you with me?”

“Yes. Go on.”

“Also, the contents of *The Book of the Lion* are utterly unknown. The first thing a responsible owner would do is publish three editions of it. First would be a facsimile; second, a popular reader’s edition; third, a scholarly edition with footnotes, a historical introduction, and a critical introduction. Possibly there would also be articles by major experts. We don’t know the length of the book. It could be just 1,300 lines of poetry, like *The Book of the Duchess*. But *Troilus and Criseyde* is over 8,000 lines, in five sections. If *The Book of the Lion* isn’t as good as the other works, it will still be of equal importance to scholars.”

“I’m starting to see a way of recouping some of the price,” Spanner said. “The publishing rights might help.”

“It probably wouldn’t be a crowd-pleaser,” said Hallkyn. “But it would sell to scholars in every English speaking country. The United States, Canada, England, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Ireland—”

“I’m familiar with the English-speaking countries.”

“And it would keep selling modestly forever. Every student who studies Chaucer would read it. And not every student of English literature is from an English-speaking country. Two thirds of Germany and Switzerland speak English, eighty-five percent of Sweden and the Netherlands, twenty percent of India.”

“All right,” said Spanner. “We can estimate that whoever owns the manuscript would be able to defray a tiny part of what he paid for it from sales.”

“There might also be grants from foundations or even the government,” said Hallkyn. “But that all takes time, and they might not add up to much.”

“We still have to come up with an idea of what the manuscript is worth if we want to deal with this man,” Spanner said. “Suppose we add the twelve million paid by the German cartel for the old gospel in 1983 and the six million paid for the Shakespeare folio in 2001. That’s eighteen. I think eighteen million is our number. At least it’s based on something real. And it’s a number that shows we’re serious.”

“I think so,” Hallkyn said. “Is it possible to get that much?”

"I'll see what I can do," Spanner said. "We'll need investors. It's going to be tricky. We can't tell anybody what the investment is, or we'll be turning our allies into competitors. They'll have to be willing to put up money without knowing what I want to buy with it."

"Are there people like that?"

"We'll see whether my reputation is good enough to make some. Have another scotch, put your feet up, and remain calm. I'm going to start making some calls tonight. The more money we have lined up before this person calls again the better."

Hallkyn slept fitfully that night. Whenever he woke up, he would go over the whole topic in his mind, separating dream from memory until he had them clear, but then couldn't get back to sleep for a time.

He waited for the second call. A day passed, and Hallkyn could hardly bear it. Then a second night passed, and he began to feel unsure of himself. He played back the voicemail from the caller a dozen times, trying to be sure he hadn't misunderstood or missed any part of it—a phone number, a name. Then he called the phone company to be reassured that the messages could not have been cut short by the company's equipment. Yes, they were sure. The plan that Mr. Hallkyn had been paying for would have allowed a message several minutes long. Everything was digital, and so there was not a question of a tape running out. There was no tape. And the caller's number was blocked.

The day after that Hallkyn had to go to the university and teach his classes—a morning medieval survey that the undergraduates had decided to call "*Beowulf* to the Bowel Shift." That was quick and simple. His goal was mostly to infect the little cynics with the enthusiasm he felt for the early period, and once again the literature itself was doing the job for him. The graduate seminar had been a tedious business—John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, a perfectly fine and masterful work, but today he kept thinking that Gower was no Chaucer. Nobody else was Chaucer either. Not even the Pearl poet or the Gawain poet had been capable of the breadth of vision, the fascination with humanity, the sheer ambition of Chaucer.

Hallkyn rushed home, swerving into his driveway too fast and nearly hitting the line of privet hedge beside the pavement and then coming too close to the side of the garage door opening. Then had to squeeze out of the driver's seat with the car door too close to the garage wall to open far enough. He hurried into his house, picked up his phone, and listened to the messages.

Nothing. Well, something, but not the call he had been hoping for. First were just a few more undergraduates who had dire symptoms that made paper-writing impossible. Next, that graduate student wanted his oral exam the Tuesday afternoon after the written. Fine. Why prolong the ordeal? Next, his friend Norman Sammons had called inviting him to contribute an article for a collection on Gawain and the Green Knight. He would say yes to that, of course. It would give him an excuse to rework the article he'd done ten years ago for the *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*. Anybody who remembered the JEGP article would be delighted to see how much he'd learned since then.

Hallkyn hit on a new idea. He would change his phone message. He punched in the code and said in his best professorial tones, "This is Dominic Hallkyn. You

may leave a message at the tone, or you may call me on my cell phone. The number is,” and then he recited the number and hung up. Then he called himself and listened. Perfect. Now he would not have to live in torment, thinking that he might be missing the crucial call from the possessor of *The Book of the Lion*.

Hallkyn spent four full days and nights enslaved by his cell phone. He tested its ring repeatedly to be sure he would hear it over any of the sorts of noise he might encounter in his mostly quiet life. He kept the vibration on too so if the call came, he would feel it, and then kept checking the messages to see if he had missed the call anyway.

And then, like a fever breaking, his worry passed. The call must have been a silly prank. If someone had a treasure like that, he would hardly neglect to do something with it. And no matter what he wanted to do, he would need to have an expert authoritatively authenticate the manuscript. He would have to get somebody like Hallkyn to say “Yes, this is the real thing.” The caller had never even mentioned that.

Hallkyn let himself settle back into a normal frame of mind. Normal was restful. He didn’t have any responsibility for this supposed manuscript. There was no crisis. He went on with his life.

He had only one problem, which was that his cell phone number was now too easy to get. Undergraduates were calling him past midnight with their excuses and brown-nosing questions, as though his phone were a twenty-four hour emergency literature help line. The department chair had started using his cell number to invite him to her damned cheese and sherry gatherings, making him invent his alibis on the spot.

Hallkyn recorded a new message, left out his cell number, and substituted, “If your business is urgent, you may leave a message after the tone.” He was pleased, because the message signaled a more restrictive policy than before the Chaucer hoax.

Still, he didn’t call Spanner immediately. It was one thing to change his message to institute a new regime of sanity in his personal life, and another to say good-bye to a glittering possibility by telling Spanner it was a hoax. For about a week he was able to put it off, but then he called.

Spanner answered, and then said, “I was just thinking of calling you. Is it all right to tie up your phone line?”

“Sure. It won’t matter.”

“I’ve done it,” said Spanner.

“Done what?”

“I’ve lined up the financing,” Spanner said.

“Eighteen million dollars?” Hallkyn felt sick.

“I used some properties I own in Europe and one in Virginia as collateral for letters of credit. I also spoke with a few friends in hedge funds and banks who were willing to invest a bit of money without knowing what it is I’m buying. They’ve all agreed to have the money available instantly if we need it.” “I’m so sorry, T.M.” said Hallkyn. “I’ve heard nothing. I should have known the whole thing was too good to be true. I’m almost certain I’ve been duped.”

“Almost certain,” Spanner simply repeated it.

Hallkyn was quiet for a moment. “I’m pretty sure. And it was so unlikely to begin with. Over six hundred years have passed, without even a rumor that the book still existed.”

“I respect your telling me, and I thank you for your apology, Dom. But if you don’t mind—and even if you do—I’m going to keep the money available for the moment. No money has actually been borrowed, nobody has had to sell anything. We’ve only agreed to keep some assets liquid for a while.”

“You don’t have to,” said Hallkyn. “I feel pretty stupid about this, and I don’t want you to risk your reputation on a hoax.”

“No harm done,” he said. “We won’t worry about this for now. Just be aware that the money is going to be available.”

The call came seventeen hours later. Hallkyn was on his way to the university in his car, and when his cell phone rang and vibrated it startled him. He pulled his car over to the curb and answered. “Yes?”

“Hello, Professor Hallkyn.” The voice was unmistakable—a bit nasal, pitched a tiny bit higher than the ear liked to hear, the diction formal. Hallkyn had listened to the message so many times that he recognized every tone, every inflection. “Is this a good time for us to speak?”

“I’ve pulled over to the side of the road,” said Hallkyn.

“I assume you got my message.”

“I got a message,” said Hallkyn.

“Yes. I only called once. And then I gave you some time to think about it, and then to prepare to talk in specific terms. I have what I believe is the only remaining copy of *The Book of the Leoun*.” This time he pronounced it using Middle English vowels. “For all we know, it might be the only one ever made for public use after Chaucer’s personal draft.”

“What makes you think it’s genuine, or that it’s *the The Book of the Lion*, by Chaucer? There were plenty of lion images throughout medieval literature, and plenty of people with that nickname—Henry the Lion, Duke of Saxony, for instance.”

“It says it’s *The Book of the Lion* by Geoffrey Chaucer on the first page. I had a snip of the vellum carbon-dated, and it dates to the mid-1390’s. The poetry is, like everything else Chaucer wrote, flawless, earthy, brilliant, spiritual, funny, dirty.”

Hallkyn tried to sound less enticed than he was. “When can I see it?”

“Now. I’ve sent you a précis and some sample pages already.”

“How?”

“It’s an email attachment. You can look any time you want.”

“Are you expecting me to authenticate a manuscript, particularly one of this importance, to risk my reputation and credibility without so much as inspecting it in person?”

“I’m not expecting you to do anything. I’m just giving you the opportunity to look.” And then the man hung up.

Dominic Hallkyn sat in his car by the side of the road, watching the windshield wipers sweeping back and forth to clear the water away, *bock-bock, bock-bock*. While he hadn’t been paying attention, the rain had picked up. The wipers’ speed was now too slow, so every time the wipers passed, the rain gained back all the territory that had been cleared before the blades swept back.

Hallkyn realized that he hated the man with the book. He was arrogant, Hallkyn could tell, and he was enjoying holding the prize and making the world wait and drool like starving dogs—making Dominic Hallyn wait and drool like a starving dog, actually. He'd implied Hallkyn was the only one who knew so far, but there was no way to determine whether even that was true. It took Hallkyn five minutes of sitting in the car, letting every other vehicle speed through the puddle beside him and throw a big splash against the window beside his face, to get through the moment of hatred.

Hallkyn watched his mirrors and found an opening, then pulled out onto the road and drove to the university to his assigned parking space, number 364. He had chosen it himself as an Assistant Professor and waited years for it to become available. It was just a few feet from an arbor, so in the summer it was partially shaded, and in winter it gave him shelter from rain. He got out of his car, snatched his briefcase, ran to the arbor, walked with calm and dignity to the end of the covered sidewalk, then launched himself into a full sprint to the alcove where the door to Bacon Hall waited.

He went directly to his undergraduate lecture and performed brilliantly, acting out the lines his memory presented for recitation, varying tone and pitch to portray each character who spoke, his Middle English pronunciation natural and unhalting. Then he gave a concise and fascinating talk about what the works meant, leaving his listeners in a state far beyond the mere enthusiasm he generally aimed to arouse in them.

Hallkyn had achieved a small victory, and that helped. He had spent an hour resisting the temptation to cancel the class and go look at his email. The loathsome man who had sent the email would undoubtedly have a way of knowing when Dominic Hallkyn opened it. This way he would at least have spent an hour wondering if Hallkyn was even going to bother to look.

And then he was in his office. The room was a sanctuary and a workshop, and after thirty years of use, it felt like it belonged to him and not the university. The dark wood paneling and matching bookcases pre-dated his era by three generations, but all of the books were his. The collection of treasures—small fragments of illuminated manuscripts, a few pages from medieval church registers and government lists, were on loan from the university's collection. But by long tenure here they felt like his.

He closed the shade and locked the door. Then he turned on his computer and scanned the list of emails until he found one that said it was "B of L." As he clicked on it he had an instant to hate the man again, and then he forgot about the man.

He could see a page on the screen and he enlarged the image of the first letter at the top left. It was an inhabited initial in the style that had originated with the St. Petersburg Bede of 746, with a picture of a lion in gold leaf inside the frame of the letter I. There were demivinet borders along the left margin like the ones beside the columns of calligraphy on the Ellesmere Chaucer. He enlarged the picture as much as he could, with a bit of both pages together. He could tell the difference between the first page, made of the inner side of the calfskin, which was slightly lighter and much smoother, and the other page, made of the outer side of the hide. It had pores and a couple of places where he could detect imperfections. He looked

more closely at the script. It looked very much like the work of the scribe whom Chaucer referred to as “Adam Scriveyn,” identified by most scholars as Adam Pinkhurst. And then he looked again at the letter I, done not by the scribe but by a painter. “In,” the poem began.

In th’olde dayes of the King Richard,
Ther nas but hevinesse and much rue,
For the King, that was goode and Trewe
As fare as any man in Engelond
Was in the German Henry’s honds.

And then he was lost. He had begun to read, and the parts that he could see drew him in. He read the two pages of text that he could enlarge enough to see clearly. He compared each letter to the style of the Ellesmere. He studied the specifications the man had supplied, the descriptions of the sections, the physical measurements and specifications.

When he looked up again, he saw that the narrow margins of light around his window shade had gone dark. He stood up and realized he was stiff in the hips and knees. His spine had been bent forward for hours. A headache announced itself, and he realized it had been building behind his eyes for some time.

Hallkyn saved what he had been reading for the eighth time, then emailed it to his laptop at home, to his second university email address, to Iron Mountain for safekeeping, and then to T.M. Spanner.

Next he dialed the telephone, and heard it ring five times before he heard Spanner say, “Hello, Dominic.”

“Spanner,” Hallkyn began.

“Glad to hear from you, Dom,” said Spanner. “Do you think this can keep for a little while? I’m entertaining a dear friend right now.”

Hallkyn heard a woman’s laugh, a musical sound that made him feel several unrelated emotions. Of course Spanner, being the wellknown T.M. Spanner, would have a woman with a voice like that with him at this hour. He controlled his envy. Everything about T.M. Spanner’s life was better than anybody else’s. Spanner’s good fortune was part of the order of the universe. But what was this hour? Nearly one a.m., damn it. This was humiliating.

“T.M., I’m so sorry. I’ve been working all this time, and I paid no attention to the clock until this second. I’ll call you again tomorrow.”

“Just tell me this much now,” said Spanner. “Are we going to need the money?”

“Yes, I believe we are.”

“Great.”

Eight hours later Hallkyn’s cell phone rang, and he said, “Hallkyn.”

“You sound as though you were waiting by the phone, Dom.”

“I was,” said Hallkyn.

“It’s that big a deal to you?”

“It’s that big a deal. Period.”

“Tell me what you’ve learned.”

“He sent me a teaser, a sample. There’s a photograph of the first two pages of the manuscript, and a set of specifications. The book is six thousand, nine

hundred and nineteen lines of verse.” His voice fell to just above a whisper. “It’s exactly what we were hoping for, T.M. It’s the actual *Book of the Lion*, the last major work that Chaucer wrote, begun just before, and finished just after, *The Canterbury Tales*.”

“What is it like? I mean the words, not the physical manuscript.”

“It’s beautiful. I could only read two pages of actual lines in the photograph, just enough to be sure it’s Chaucer. The frame tale is the story of Richard Coeur de Lion. It’s about him and his awful brothers, primarily John, quarreling over the throne of England and the family possessions in France, and takes place during Richard’s captivity by the German Emperor Henry VI. By then he was already Richard the Lionheart, having been in several wars, fought against Saladin in the crusade, and so on. While he’s locked in a German dungeon, the ghost of Aesop comes and tells him the story of the Lion and the Mouse—how the weak can free the strong, as ordinary Englishmen eventually did by a tithe to pay his ransom—and then tells him about Androcles and the Lion, the recurring value of good deeds. Then Daniel appears and tells him his story of being thrown into the lions’ den. You remember the lions left Daniel alone and ate the bad advisors of the king. It’s a treatise on politics, alliances, wise government, rewards and punishments. What’s the use? It’s about everything.”

Spanner said, “What did happen to Richard I, anyway? I always had the impression he never did much governing.”

“That’s right. He was killed by a crossbow bolt from a young boy during a siege in 1199. That’s the tragedy in the work, the grim twist of fortune. His brother, John Lackland, the bad guy in the Robin Hood story, lost wars, faced a revolt of his nobles, and was forced to sign the Magna Carta in 1215. People in the 1390s still thought Richard would have been a great king and made everything better for everyone forever. This book is in that vein. Richard is being taught how to be a good king, first by a classical, then by a Biblical, teacher. He’d had a taste of greatness, and now he was brought low, sitting in a dungeon. But they’re preparing him for another rise, if he’ll change his ways, stop warring and start governing. He didn’t, and fortune’s wheel brought him down for good. The wheel of fortune was a classical theme everybody knew, mostly from Boethius. Chaucer translated Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*, remember.”

“But is this thing real? Are we about to get our hands on the real lost masterpiece?”

“I think so.”

“When?”

“He said he’d call me again.”

“When he does, call me. I don’t care what time it is, or where I am, call me.”

“He doesn’t strike me as a person who will donate the manuscript to a library. He seems to enjoy holding it over everyone’s head too much.”

“So we’ll negotiate with him.”

“Should I make him an offer?”

“Only if he asks for one.”

“How much?”

“Say you have five million on hand, and can make the deal right away, no waiting or speculating.”

“And if he refuses the offer?”

“Then tell him you have to talk to your backers, and then call me.”

“All right.”

When the next call came he felt ready.

“Professor Hallkyn,” said the voice. Hallkyn once again thought that the speech was foreign, but he couldn’t identify it with a region, or even a country. For the first time, he began to think it might be an idiosyncratic accent, which would be a very bad sign. The man might be mentally ill. “Have you examined what I sent you?”

“Yes.” There was no longer any point in pretending to be unimpressed or uncaring. “How did you come by it?”

“Are we really going to be reduced to that kind of discussion?” the man said. “I’m sure you could have guessed. Or did you guess and feel reluctant to take the risk of being wrong, and looking foolish?”

“I suspect it was in the library of some ancient noble family, probably in an area other than London. A family seat in the north of England, probably.”

“Why not London?”

“Too much change. There hasn’t been much London real estate that has sat idle for six hundred years. And there was the blitz in World War II—lots of residences blown up, but this wasn’t in any of them. The owner of this manuscript was undoubtedly very rich, and possibly even royal. That would lead me to think it was John of Gaunt. He was Chaucer’s patron and close friend, and they were married to a pair of sisters. The manuscript could have been lost in one of John of Gaunt’s estates. Maybe in Lancaster.”

“Bravo,” said the man. “And why do you suppose nobody knew it was there?”

“I don’t know. John of Gaunt and Chaucer died in 1399 and 1400, very close to each other. The next generation of the Lancaster family were dispersed all over Europe when John of Gaunt died. One daughter was queen of Portugal, and one was queen of Castile. The son Henry was exiled for life, returned to fight for the throne, and then became King Henry IV. It’s possible that when John died, some servant was tidying up and put the manuscript in a cubbyhole with a hundred others. John of Gaunt would have been horrified, but most common people were still illiterate, and wouldn’t have known what it was.”

“I can see I selected the right expert,” said the man. “I had considered Bethune at Harvard, and a few others, of course. But you know medieval people as though you meet them on the street every day.”

“Thank you,” said Hallkyn. Maybe he had misjudged this man, based on a mistaken impression of his manner. “I assume you brought the manuscript to my attention because you’d like my advice, and I’d be happy to help. Are you planning to donate it to a library or a university?”

“No, I’m not,” the man said.

Hallkyn’s heart sank. “What, then? Are you putting it up for sale?”

“Not quite,” said the man. “I’m holding it for ransom. If I don’t get the right price, I’m going to kill it.”

“What?” said Hallkyn. “I don’t understand.”

“Sure you do,” the man said. “There are rich men who want to own things—a Rembrandt, Da Vinci’s sketches, Lincoln’s letters. Ordinary, serious men such as

you never expect to be the sole owner of an essential piece of our culture. All you care about or need is that it exists. For scholars like you, the manuscript of a great work is only of value because it bears the clear authoritative text. Once the text is reprinted, you can study the work, no matter who owns it. So regrettably, the people I'm threatening directly are those like you. If I don't get my price within a week, *The Book of the Lion* will go back to not existing. It will die."

"But then you'll have nothing."

"No, you'll have nothing. I've read it," the man said. "I'll call you again soon."

"How soon?"

But the man had hung up.

The next call came two days later, and this time Hallkyn had prepared and rehearsed. As soon as he knew whom he had on the line he said, "I've made some effort to come up with an alternative. I would like to buy the manuscript from you and donate it to Oxford or Cambridge—either one, if you have a preference."

"No."

"I've collected a fund for the purpose—five million dollars. You can have it in cash."

The man laughed. "What does five million dollars in cash even look like? Do you know?"

"I imagine like fifty thousand hundred-dollar bills," Hallkyn said. "It's a ridiculous amount of money. I'm told it will arrive in five large boxes, a million dollars to a box."

"I won't sell anyone the manuscript," the man said. "But I've decided that the ransom will be five million dollars."

"That was an offer to buy."

"You're a genuine expert on this piece of merchandise, and you believe that it would be rational to pay five million dollars to own it. It's actually worth more, but I follow your reasoning. But you've tipped your hand a bit. I believe you will pay five million to keep the work in existence. You won't have it, but it means that there is a possibility that some day it will be published, rather than burned right away."

Hallkyn felt sweat forming on his scalp and his forehead. He had bid too low. "If we could increase the price, would you sell?"

"No. It's not for sale. Five million dollars keeps it in existence for now."

"Please," said Hallkyn. "It's worth so much more than one person's whim."

"I'm glad you think so," the man said. "Get the money together, and have it in the city of Boston, loaded in a black Cadillac Escalade before seven a.m. on the day after tomorrow. Please repeat what I said."

"You want the money in a Cadillac Escalade in Boston at seven the day after tomorrow."

"Don't sound so hang-dog. I'm giving you what you really want."

"What makes you think I want that?"

"It's what you *should* want. You could never own such a priceless object under any circumstances. You have backers, and the work would be under their control, not yours. The important thing is that the world won't lose it. A scholar of medieval literature should be better at taking the long view."

Hallkyn said, "I've spent a lifetime studying these works because I love them and have a great deal of curiosity about them, even the ones I know well. I want to read this one."

"Good answer," said the man. "I'll call on Wednesday to tell you where to bring the Cadillac."

"Me? I wasn't planning—"

"Then all is lost. The driver has to be someone who knows what is at stake—you."

"All right," Hallkyn said.

Hallkyn tensed, waiting for more patronizing patter, but all he heard was absence. The man had said all he wanted to.

When Hallkyn called Spanner, he was both afraid to tell him and afraid not to. He repeated, as well as he could, everything that the man had said.

Spanner was silent for a moment. "All right, Dominic. You've done as well as anyone could. It was always possible that this man would turn out to be a lunatic. You still believe that he has the real manuscript?"

"I do," said Hallkyn. "The work that's summarized in his email is exactly the work that Chaucer would have done just at that time of his life. The style of writing in the passages I could read is right. Even the physical manuscript is right for that period of his life—thin vellum written in a fine court hand. Chaucer was already rich and well-known. It all fits too well to be a fake."

"Then let me take over from here and make a few arrangements. You fly to Boston. Stay at the Lenox, so I'll know where to find you."

"But what are you planning to do?"

"For one thing, get a Cadillac Escalade to Boston with five million dollars in cash inside it. Just get settled in Boston, wait for his next call, and do what he says. Whatever happens, we're going to try."

"But what are you thinking?"

Spanner sighed. "I'm thinking that we've reached the point where we can use some professional help. I know some people who will be useful in this situation." Spanner seemed distracted. "Excuse me for a second." In a moment he was back. "Okay. We've got a flight for you and a reservation at the Lenox. Be at the airport tomorrow morning and take the 11:15 flight to Boston."

"But are you sure that's—"

"Yes, I am," he said. "Extorting money in exchange for not destroying a missing piece of the world's cultural history is undoubtedly illegal. Destroying it would be worse. In any case, we have to fight this and preserve it. Get packed."

The next evening, Hallkyn was in his room at the Lenox Hotel when his cell phone rang. He looked at it as though it contained a poisonous snake, but he reached for it anyway. "I know what you thought," said Spanner. "But it's only me. I'm downstairs in the lobby. Come down."

Hallkyn put on his sport coat and hurried to the elevator. When the shining brass door opened he charged out, turned right past the front desk, and spotted Spanner sitting in an easy chair in the lobby, alone.

He realized that he had almost forgotten the most distinctive part of Spanner's appearance—his ease. His elbows rested on the chair's overstuffed arms, and his

legs were extended, crossed at the ankle, and his head rested against the chair's back.

When he saw Hallkyn he jumped up and shook his hand. "Dom!" he said. "So glad you could make it."

And then there was an extraordinary thing. He said, "Let me introduce you." He turned his head and two men on a nearby couch stood. "This is Mr. Hanlon, Mr. Stokes." He turned his head the other way. "Mr. Garner. Miss Turner, and Miss Day."

Hallkyn realized that the entire lobby was, at this moment, occupied by Spanner's operatives. The five all seemed very different at first. Hanlon was at least fifty, with gray hair and the build of an old football coach. Stokes and Garner were shorter, one light-skinned with reddish hair, and the other black. The two women were about thirty and both slim but unremarkable looking. Then the five began to seem alike to Hallkyn. They all had the eyes of police officers—patient and observant, but not optimistic, as though they expected everyone they met to do something disappointing very soon.

Hallkyn made a point of going to each one and shaking hands, not only because he knew it would help him remember their faces, but also because of a sudden urge to prove to them that they were wrong about him. He saw that it didn't change their opinion of him. The eyes were still on him, waiting for the inevitable disappointment, and it occurred to him that everybody probably tried to persuade them of his innocence.

Spanner said, "Come out with us," and headed for the door.

Hallkyn hurried to catch up with him, and in a moment they were through the circular door out on Boylston Street. As they walked, Hallkyn looked over his shoulder, wondering if all of them would be walking along Boylston Street like a parade. He was instead mystified by the fact that the others had already faded into the landscape. The two women were walking along talking animatedly to each other, both now unaccountably equipped with shopping bags from nearby stores. They stopped to look in a shop window. Hanlon was lumbering along by himself twenty feet ahead of them. Garner and Stokes came last, and it was difficult to tell whether they were together, much less that they had anything to do with the others. Garner was talking on a cell phone, and Stokes seemed to be looking for a cab.

Hallkyn asked Spanner, "Are they police?"

"Not at the moment. They all have been, of one sort or another. Now they work for a security corporation. They've all handled kidnappings and ransom exchanges, mostly in other countries. That's one of their specialties."

They walked two blocks before Spanner said, "Up here at number 800 is the Prudential Center parking garage. The Escalade is parked there."

They entered the lobby of the building and took an elevator down to the second level. When they got out, the Escalade was in front of them. "An ungainly, ugly car," Spanner said. "But it's all yours for a day."

As they walked closer, the others of their party arrived. Mr. Hanlon began the tour. He opened the back door. "Here are the boxes. The suspect probably won't keep the Escalade because he'll expect that it's bugged, wired, and packed with

transponders so he can be located. He'll dump it. The only thing we can be sure he won't dump is the money."

"Wait," said Hallkyn. "You're planning to follow me?"

Hanlon looked at Spanner.

Spanner said, "Of course."

Hallkyn felt desperate. "But if he sees he's being followed, he'll destroy the manuscript."

Hanlon said, "We're fairly certain that this man is not going to be there himself. He'll have an accomplice drive the car. He'll be someplace safe, far away. But you're right. If his co-conspirator doesn't perform some prearranged signal at a certain time, he may very well destroy the property. We'll be sure to stay out of sight, and we have no plan to interfere with the co-conspirator's actions."

"What is the plan, then?"

"To find out where the accomplice takes the money," Hanlon said. "We expect that the money will be moved to a second vehicle, and probably this man is smart enough to leave the boxes in the Cadillac and take the money in some other method of containment. And that is why—" He paused to build suspense. "The money itself holds the transponders."

He reached into his coat pocket and handed Hallkyn a stack of hundred dollar bills with a paper band that said, "\$10,000." Hallkyn wasn't accustomed to handling banded cash, but it looked about the way he had imagined, black printing on a white band, with the numerals apparently embossed, slightly raised. He held it out to give it back to Mr. Hanlon, but Hanlon only pointed at the band. "The chip containing the circuitry is in the first of the zeros, the other zeros are power storage batteries, and the dollar sign is a thin wire antenna. There are five hundred of these bands, of course."

The "of course" caught Hallkyn by surprise, but he remembered that five hundred wasn't really a choice, just the number of ten thousand dollar stacks in five million dollars. "Yes, I see."

"No matter how many times they change vehicles, or what the new container is, the money is sure to find its way to this extortion suspect."

"What if the co-conspirator takes the money to a bank?" said Hallkyn.

"If he puts it in a bank's safe, we'll know which bank. If he deposits it in an account, the bank has to report the transaction to the federal government. Even if he deposits it in five hundred banks, they'd all have to file reports."

"The money could be traced," said Spanner. "It's another of their specialties."

Hallkyn spent most of the next day waiting for the call, sitting alone in his hotel room. He had brought nothing with him to read. He barely dared to watch the television, but after he had set the volume so low that he could be sure he would hear his phone ring, he tried. He had not watched television in years, and found that the picture was much better than it used to be, but the programs were still of little interest to him. Late in the afternoon, the phone rang.

"Are you still interested in paying me five million dollars not to destroy my manuscript?"

"Yes," Hallkyn said.

"Then drive the money across the Charles River to Cambridge."

"That's it?"

“Yes. When you’re there I’ll call you again.”

Hallkyn practically ran to the Prudential Building garage where the Cadillac was parked. As he approached it, he saw Mr. Stokes and Mr. Garner both sitting in cars in different parts of the garage.

He started the Escalade and drove. He knew that the other security people would be somewhere on the streets, watching for the man. Hallkyn had been told that the man wouldn’t see the security team, that they would be following the signals that five hundred paper bands would be transmitting.

When he had crossed the bridge to Cambridge, his cell phone rang again. The man told him to drive west, and when he had driven nearly to Waltham on Route 20, the man called to tell him to go down to the Massachusetts Turnpike and drive east.

As Hallkyn drove, cars passed him on the left and on the right, and sometimes the people inside seemed to be studying him. It occurred to him that maybe the man wasn’t just sending him on a crazy drive. Maybe he was one of those men driving along beside him, studying the Cadillac, or looking for signs he was communicating with a security team. Maybe the man had helpers searching the traffic lanes for followers.

He had no choice but to follow the man’s orders. None of this mattered, he knew, because Spanner’s people were following him electronically. He took the exit the man told him to. He drove up one street and down the next as the man directed, and then the man said, “There’s a bus stop a block ahead to your right. Pull to a stop there.”

When he did, an older man in a coat sweater and brimmed hat who was sitting on a bench there got up, ran to the driver’s side, and flung the door open. He said, “Go around to the passenger side and let me drive.”

This was not at all what Hallkyn expected. As the man climbed in he retreated to the other seat, and got out the other door. “You can leave me here,” he said.

“No. Get in.”

Hallkyn obeyed.

The man pulled the car out and accelerated down the street. He turned abruptly without signaling, sped up, turned around, went up an alley, then across several intersections that had no traffic lights, and then into another alley. Hallkyn was both intimidated by the skill of the maneuvers and frightened by their recklessness. He wanted to tell the man that he was risking their lives for nothing. His allies were following them electronically.

The second alley was long and narrow, and seemed more like a conduit than a possible destination, but the man passed a big garage door, stopped beyond it, and backed into the garage. The garage door hummed and came down in front of Hallkyn’s eyes. A man stood beside the door, where Hallkyn noted there was a box with two buttons that controlled it. The driver said, “Stay in the car,” and got out.

Three younger men ran to the back of the Escalade and the driver unlocked the tailgate and then joined them in the job of removing the five boxes of money. They worked fast, taking the boxes to the side wall of the building, where there were five business machines and five duffel bags waiting.

The machines looked familiar to Hallkyn. They were gray with a texture to their housings. There was a small digital display near the top, and a small tray-like

surface in front. And then the men began to work and he remembered where he'd seen machines like that—at his bank. They were counting machines, like the ones that tellers used.

Each man would pick up a ten-thousand dollar stack of money, slip off the band, and place the stack on the machine. The machine whirred as it counted the bills, and the man took the stack off and dropped it into a duffel bag at his feet.

A man a bit older than the others, with graying hair that was trimmed in a buzz cut, stepped up to the window beside Hallkyn. "You look surprised. Didn't you think I'd count it?" The voice was unmistakable. Hallkyn hated it even more now than he had before. He thought he caught a slight resemblance to the driver. Were they a pair of brothers?

"Of course," Hallkyn lied. "Not like this, maybe. Not right away."

"Did I strike you as a trusting soul?" He stared hard at Hallkyn. Then he turned his head and called to the others. "Find anything wrong yet?"

"Not yet," said one. "Nothing," said another. None of them looked up. They were working at a furious pace.

Hallkyn watched. Five boxes, a hundred stacks each. Slip the band off onto the floor, set the stack on the counting machine, and while the machine whirred through that stack, strip the band off the next stack so the machine never stopped. Each man was getting through his hundred stacks at an incredible speed.

The gray-haired man walked toward the counting machines. He bent over to pick up something.

Hallkyn's breath stopped in mid-inhalation. The man was picking up the bands from the floor and putting them in an old-fashioned galvanized trash can.

Hallkyn was desperate to get him thinking about something else. Even a minute might help. "Can you at least let me see it?"

"See what?"

"You know."

The man shook his head. "It's not here. I don't carry it around with me." The man stopped moving, his eyes on the floor. He looked puzzled for a second, then different—suspicious. He spun his head to look at Hallkyn. He picked up a band, then tore it. He ran to the wall, picked up a push broom that was leaning there and ran with it along the line of men at the counting machines. He swept the bands into a pile, and threw them in double handfuls into the trash can. He shouted, "Stop the counting and strip off the rest of the bands. Put them in this can as quickly as possible."

As the men complied, he moved back to the wall, and picked up a small can that looked as though it held kerosene. He poured the clear liquid contents onto the money bands. He took a pack of matches out of his pocket, struck one, and tossed it.

The fire caught with a *poof*, the flame four feet high instantly. He shouted, "Strip all the bands and put them in the fire. Don't do anything else, and don't miss any."

The men obeyed, burning the bands as quickly as they could. When they were finished, he called out, "All right. Toss the rest of the money into the bags and carry them to the street."

The men each lifted a duffel bag and carried it through a man-size door on the side of the building away from the garage door where Hallkyn's Escalade had entered.

The man with the gray hair stepped close to Hallkyn's window. "We had an agreement, and you cheated," he said. "You stupid, stupid man." Then he turned and ran through the doorway where the younger men had taken the duffel bags.

Hallkyn heard a car start, and then drive off.

The five young men each took a counting machine and carried it out through the mansize doorway. He thought about stopping them, but he had no idea how to stop five men from doing anything. Stopping one would probably get him beaten senseless.

He sat still in the passenger seat of the Cadillac Escalade, watching. The men ignored him, as though they had forgotten he was there, and it was a relief to Hallkyn. A moment later, they were gone. There was another engine sound. They were driving away too.

Hallkyn sat in the passenger seat of the Escalade, watching the fire in the trash can burn down to nothing and go out. The bands had been consumed, and now the igniter was exhausted too.

He took out his cell phone and dialed Spanner's number.

"Where are you?" said Spanner. "The security people said the transmitters went dead."

"They were burned," said Hallkyn. "The man realized they were a trick. He was furious. Now I don't know what he's likely to do."

"Where are you?"

"One of his men drove me up an alley to a place that looks like a warehouse or a garage. He took the keys with him."

"Can you go outside?"

"I think so."

"Then do it, and look for a street sign. I'll hold on."

Hallkyn went out the man-sized door where the others had gone and found himself on an ordinary Boston street. People walked past him on the sidewalk, went into stores and restaurants. It felt like he'd gone through a door to another, calmer, ordered world. At the corner he saw a sign for Beacon Street.

An hour later Hallkyn and Spanner crossed the carpeted floor in the lobby of the Lenox Hotel.

"I need a drink," said Hallkyn.

"So do I," said Spanner. He stepped to the door of the bar and opened it, and they entered the dimly lighted, comforting space.

Hallkyn's phone rang. He pulled it from his pocket and swiped his thumb across the screen to answer it.

There was a picture—a video, he realized after a moment. It was a shot of a thick sheaf of elongated sheets a bit yellowed, with neat lines of black ink in a single column of writing down the center, and a demi-venet border on the left margin. Hallkyn thought he saw a glow of gold leaf at the top left that could be an illuminated letter. "Oh, my God," he said.

Spanner leaned close and looked at it too. "Is that it?"

A pair of hands picked up the stack of sheets. The familiar hated voice came over the picture, filled with contempt. "Your word was worthless. My word is true."

The hands set the stack of pages on a shiny metal tray.

Hallkyn said to the phone, "Please don't do this."

There was no reply, and he realized this moving image wasn't live. This had already happened, and nobody was listening. The right hand poured a can of liquid on the sheets. The hands struck a match and tossed it onto the tray. The bright yellow flames rose, flickered and wavered. There was a blue aura around the top as they fluttered a little. Then the picture went black. The video was disconnected.

The two men looked at each other, speechless. After a thirty second silence, Spanner was the first. "I'm sorry," he said. "I'm so sorry, Dominic."

Hallkyn gave a little start, as though he had been wakened from sleep. "Eh? No, T.M. It wasn't your fault. You did everything you could, so generous and brave, as always. It was my fault."

The bartender materialized in front of them like a specter. "What can I get you gentlemen?"

Spanner said, "Single malt Scotch."

Hallkyn nodded, more at Spanner than the bartender.

The bartender said, "We have several single malts. Do you have a favorite?"

Spanner glanced at the row of bottles on the third shelf above the bar. "That one should do it."

"Laphroaig?"

"Fine. We'd like two glasses and the bottle."

The bartender poured the first round, and Spanner poured the second round less than a minute later. They slowed their pace after that, and drank in silence for a time.

Finally Hallkyn spoke. "I've lost your money. I'm afraid it's much more than I can repay, more than I'll have in my lifetime. I feel terrible."

"I don't want it repaid," said Spanner. "I can cover that much by myself. The backers I had lined up won't lose anything. I'll just send each of them ten percent of what he'd promised to invest, and call it a profit. They'll all be delighted." He looked into Hallkyn's eyes, and his expression changed. "Here's the important part. This has to remain our secret. Forever. If the people I deal with knew I had been so foolish, my reputation would be destroyed. I rely on investors who trust my judgment and bet billions on my being right. I have to ask you to swear to me that you'll never tell."

Hallkyn leaned back and focused his eyes on Spanner. "Do you think I want this known? If you lost your career now, you'd still be pretty much the man you are—a winner. But all I have is my reputation as a medieval scholar. Do you have any idea what the people in my field would think of the man who got some lunatic to burn Chaucer's *Book of the Lion*? I'd rather die than tell anyone this happened. I'll swear gladly."

Behind the garage of a house fifty miles away, the man finished cleaning up the residue of the little fire he had lit a couple of hours ago. He'd had to wait until the tray was cool enough to touch. Now the ashes and burned remnants had been bagged, then double bagged, and put in the garbage can. It had been an expensive

fire. He had bought the vellum from a company that printed diplomas, rough cut and trimmed the sheets himself, and used a projector to trace the design of the top page so it would look like the real *Book of the Lion* on a video. He'd been pleased. It really had looked a lot like the real one that Uncle Reg had found in the trunk he'd bought at the farm sale in Lankashire after the war. That one was in the climate-controlled room where it belonged.

He hosed off the tray, wiped the surface dry with paper towels, and then took the tray back into the house and set it on the shelf under the counter in the kitchen. He looked at his watch. It was getting to be just about time.

He went into his study and sat down at the desk. He scanned his list of names and numbers, and then took out one of the pre-paid cell phones from the drawer on his right. He dialed.

He waited through four rings and then heard the voicemail message. When it was time he said, "Professor Bethune, the reason I'm calling is that you are one of the three or four most respected medieval scholars in the world. I have what I believe to be the only remaining copy of *The Book of the Lion*. It's on thin vellum, in a fine court hand, legible throughout. I'll call again."

