

Fool's Assassin: Book One of the Fitz and the Fool Trilogy

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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

Nearly twenty years ago, Robin Hobb burst upon the fantasy scene with the first of her acclaimed Farseer novels, *Assassin's Apprentice*, which introduced the characters of FitzChivalry Farseer and his uncanny friend the Fool. A watershed moment in modern fantasy, this novel—and those that followed—broke exciting new ground in a beloved genre. Together with George R. R. Martin, Robin Hobb helped pave the way for such talented new voices as Scott Lynch, Brandon Sanderson, and Naomi Novik.

Over the years, Hobb's imagination has soared throughout the mythic lands of the Six Duchies in such bestselling series as the *Liveship Traders Trilogy* and the *Rain Wilds Chronicles*. But no matter how far she roamed, her heart always remained with Fitz. And now, at last, she has come home, with an astonishing new novel that opens a dark and gripping chapter in the Farseer saga.

FitzChivalry—royal bastard and former king's assassin—has left his life of intrigue behind. As far as the rest of the world knows, FitzChivalry Farseer is dead and buried. Masquerading as Tom Badgerlock, Fitz is now married to his childhood sweetheart, Molly, and leading the quiet life of a country squire.

Though Fitz is haunted by the disappearance of the Fool, who did so much to shape Fitz into the man he has become, such private hurts are put aside in the business of daily life, at least until the appearance of menacing, pale-skinned strangers casts a sinister shadow over Fitz's past . . . and his future.

Now, to protect his new life, the former assassin must once again take up his old one. . . .

Praise for Fool's Assassin

"Hobb knows the complicated workings of the wayward human heart, and she takes time to depict them in her tale, to tell her story sweetly, insistently, compellingly. . . . A book meant to be inhabited rather than run through."—*The Seattle Times*

"[FitzChivalry Farseer is] one of the best characters in fantasy literature."—*Fantasy Book Review*

"[Hobb's] prose sparkles, her characters leap off the page."—*Tor.com*

"Modern fantasy at its irresistible best."—*The Guardian*

"Fantastic . . . emotionally rich storytelling."—*Library Journal* (starred review)

Praise for Robin Hobb

"Fantasy as it ought to be written . . . Robin Hobb's books are diamonds in a sea of zircons."—George R. R. Martin

Robin Hobb is the author of the Farseer Trilogy, the Liveship Traders Trilogy, the Tawny Man Trilogy, the Soldier Son Trilogy, and the Rain Wilds Chronicles. She has also written as Megan Lindholm. She is a native of Washington State.9780553392425|excerpt

Liss / FOOL'S ASSASSIN

Chapter 1

Withywoods
Burrich, old friend,

Well, we are settled here, I suppose. It has not been a pleasant time for me, or for you if your somewhat terse message conceals as much as I suspect it does. The house is immense, far too large for the two of us. It is so like you to ask after our mounts before inquiring after my own health. I will answer that query first. I'm pleased to tell you that Silk has taken the change in stable quite calmly, as the well-mannered palfrey she has always been. Tallfellow, in contrast, has made a new hobby out of bullying the resident stallion, but we have taken steps to be sure their stalls and paddocks are well separated now. I've reduced his grain and there is a young stableman here named, oddly enough, Tallman, who was absolutely ecstatic to receive my request that he take the horse out and run him hard at least once a day. With such a regimen, I am sure he will soon settle.

My lady wife. You did not ask after her, but I know you well, my friend. So I will tell you that Patience has been furious, wounded, melancholy, hysterical, and altogether of a hundred different minds about the situation. She berates me that I was unfaithful to her before we met, and in the next instant forgives me and blames herself that she has not furnished me an heir, given that "it is evident that the problem is entirely with me." Somehow, we two will weather this.

I appreciate that you have taken command of my other responsibilities there. My brother has told me enough of your charge's temperament that I send my sympathy to both of you and my deepest thanks. On whom else could I rely at a time such as this, for a favor so extreme?

I trust you to understand why I remain circumspect in this regard. Give Vixen a pat, a hug, and a large bone from me. I am confident that I owe as much to her vigilance as to yours. My wife is calling for me down the halls. I must end this and send it on its way. My brother may have words for you from me when next your paths cross.

Unsigned letter from Chivalry to Stablemaster Burrich

Fresh snowfall perched in white ramparts on the bare black birch limbs that lined the drive. White gleamed against black, like a fool's winter motley. The snow came down in loose clumps of flakes, adding a fresh layer of glistening white to the banked snow in the courtyard. It was softening the hard ridges of fresh wheel tracks in the carriageway, erasing the boys' footprints in the snow and smoothing the rutted pathways to mere suggestions

of themselves. As I watched, another carriage arrived, drawn by a dapple-█ gray team. The driver's red-█ cloaked shoulders were dusted with snow. A page in green and yellow darted from the steps of Withywoods to open the carriage door and gesture a welcome to our guests. From my vantage I could not tell who they were, save that their garb bespoke Withy merchants rather than gentry from one of the neighboring estates. As they passed out of my view and their driver moved the carriage off to our stables, I looked up at the afternoon sky. Definitely more to come. I suspected it would snow all night. Well, that was fitting. I let the curtain fall and turned as Molly entered our bedchamber.

"Fitz! You aren't ready yet?"

I glanced down at myself. "I thought I was . . ."

My wife clicked her tongue at me. "Oh, Fitz. It's Winterfest. The halls are festooned with greenery, Patience had Cook create a feast that will probably sustain the whole household for three days, all three sets of minstrels that she invited are tuning up, and half our guests have already arrived. You should be down there, greeting them as they enter. And you're not even dressed yet."

I thought of asking her what was wrong with what I was wearing, but she was already digging through my clothing chest, lifting garments, considering them, and discarding them. I waited. "This," she said, pulling out a white linen shirt with ridges of lace down the sleeves. "And this jerkin over it. Everyone knows that wearing green at Winterfest is good luck. With your silver chain to match the buttons. These leggings. They're old-█ fashioned enough to make you look like an old man, but at least they're not as saggy as those you have on. I know better than to ask you to wear your new trousers."

"I am an old man. At forty-█ seven, surely I'm allowed to dress as I please."

She lowered her brows and gave me a mock glare. She set her hands to her hips. "Are you calling me an old woman, sirrah? For I seem to recall I have three years on you."

"Of course not!" I hastily amended my words. But I could not resist grumbling, "But I have no idea why everyone wishes to dress as if they are Jamaillian nobility. The fabric on those trousers is so thin, the slightest bramble would tear them, and . . ."

She looked up at me with an exasperated sigh. "Yes. I've heard it from you a hundred times. Let's ignore that there are few brambles inside Withywoods, shall we? So. Take these clean leggings. The ones you have on are a disgrace: didn't you wear them yesterday when you were helping with that horse that had a cracked hoof? And put on your house shoes, not those worn boots. You'll be expected to dance, you know."

She straightened from her excavation of my clothing chest. Conceding to the inevitable, I'd already begun shedding garments. As I thrust my head out of the shirt, my gaze met hers. She was smiling in a familiar way, and as I considered her holly crown, the cascading lace on her blouse and gaily embroidered kirtle, I found a smile to answer hers. Her smile

broadened even as she took a step back from me. "Now, Fitz. We've guests below, waiting for us."

"They've waited this long, they can wait a bit longer. Our daughter can mind them."

I advanced a step. She retreated to the door and set her hand to the knob, all the while shaking her head so that her black ringlets danced on her brow and shoulders. She lowered her head and looked up at me through her lashes, and suddenly she seemed just a girl to me again. A wild Buckkeep Town girl, to be pursued down a sandy beach. Did she remember? Perhaps, for she caught her lower lip between her teeth and I saw her resolve almost weaken. Then, "No. Our guests can't wait, and while Nettle can welcome them, a greeting from the daughter of the house is not the same as an acknowledgment from you and me. Riddle may stand at her shoulder as our steward and help her, but until the king gives his permission for them to wed, we should not present them as a couple. So it is you and I who must wait. Because I'm not going to be content with 'a bit' of your time tonight. I expect better effort than that from you."

"Really?" I challenged her. I took two swift steps toward her, but with a girlish shriek she was out the door. As she pulled it almost shut, she added through the crack, "Hurry up! You know how quickly Patience's parties can get out of hand. I've left Nettle in charge of things, but you know, Riddle is very nearly as bad as Patience." A pause. "And do not dare to be late and leave me with no dancing partner!"

She shut the door just as I reached it. I halted and then, with a small sigh, went back for my clean leggings and soft shoes. She would expect me to dance, and I would do my best. I did know that Riddle was apt to enjoy himself at any sort of festivity at Withywoods with an abandon that was very unlike the reserved fellow he showed himself at Buckkeep, and perhaps not precisely correct for a man who was ostensibly just our former household steward. I found myself smiling. Where he led, sometimes Nettle followed, showing a merry side of herself that she, too, seldom revealed at the king's court. Hearth and Just, the two of Molly's six grown sons who were still at home, would need very little encouragement to join in. As Patience had invited half of Withy and far more musicians than could perform in one evening, I fully expected that our Winterfest revelry would last at least three days.

With some reluctance, I removed my leggings and pulled on the trousers. They were a dark green that was nearly black, thin linen, and almost as voluminous as a skirt. They tied at my waist with ribbons. A broad silk sash completed the ridiculous garment. I told myself that my wearing them would please Molly. I suspected that Riddle would have been bothered into donning similar garb. I sighed again, wondering why we must all emulate Jamaillian fashions, and then resigned myself to it. I finished dressing, badgered my hair into a warrior's tail, and left our bedchamber. I paused at the top of the grand oak staircase; the sounds of merriment drifted up to me. I took a breath as if I were about to dive into deep water. I had nothing to fear, no reason to hesitate, and yet the ingrained habits of my distant boyhood still clutched at me. I had every right to descend this stair, to walk among the glad company below as master of the house and husband to the lady who owned it. Now I was known as Holder Tom Badgerlock, common-⁷ born perhaps but elevated

alongside Lady Molly to gentry status. The bastard FitzChivalry Farseer's grandson and nephew and cousin to kings had been laid to rest twoscore years ago. To the folk below, I was Holder Tom and the founder of the feast they would enjoy.

Even if I was wearing silly Jamaillian trousers.

I paused a moment longer, listening. I could hear two distinct groups of minstrels vying to tune their instruments. Riddle's laugh rang suddenly clear and loud, making me smile. The hum of voices from the Great Hall lifted in volume and then fell again. One set of minstrels gained ascendancy, for a lively drumbeat suddenly broke through the voices to dominate all. The dancing would soon begin. Truly, I was late, and had best descend. Yet there was sweetness to standing here, above it all, imagining Nettle's flashing feet and sparkling eyes as Riddle led her through the dance steps. Oh, and Molly! She would be waiting for me! I had become a passable dancer over the years, for her sake, as she loved it so. She would not easily forgive me if I left her standing.

I hurried down the polished oak steps two at a time, reached the hall foyer, and was there suddenly ambushed by Revel. Our new young steward was looking very fine indeed in a white shirt, black jacket, and black trousers in the Jamaillian fashion. His green house shoes were startling, as was the yellow scarf at his throat. Green and yellow were the Withywoods colors, and I suspected these accoutrements were Patience's idea. I did not let the smile curve my mouth but I think he read it in my eyes. He stood even taller and looked down at me as he soberly informed me, "Sir, there are minstrels at the door."

I gave him a puzzled glance. "Well, let them in, man. It's Winterfest."

He stood still, his lips folded in disapproval. "Sir, I do not think they were invited."

"It's Winterfest," I repeated, beginning to be annoyed. Molly would not be pleased at being kept waiting. "Patience invites every minstrel, puppeteer, tumbler, tinker, or blacksmith she meets to come and sojourn with us for a time. She probably invited them months ago and forgot all about it."

I did not think his back could get stiffer, but it did. "Sir, they were outside the stable, trying to peer in through a crack in the planking. Tallman heard the dogs barking and went to see what it was about and found them. That is when they said they were minstrels, invited for Winterfest."

"And?"

He took a short breath. "Sir, I do not think they are minstrels. They have no instruments. And while one said they were minstrels, another said, no, they were tumblers. But when Tallman said he would walk them up to the front door, they said that he needn't, they only wished to beg shelter for the night, and the stable would be fine." He shook his head. "Tallman spoke to me privately when he brought them up. He thinks they're none of what they claim to be. And so do I."

I gave him a look. Revel folded his arms. He did not meet my glance, but his mouth was stubborn. I found a bit of patience for him. He was young and fairly new to the household. Cravit Softhands, our ancient steward, had died last year. Riddle had stepped up to shoulder many of the old man's duties, but insisted that Withywoods needed a new steward trained. I'd casually replied that I did not have time to find one, and within three days Riddle had brought Revel to us. After two months, Revel was still learning his place, I told myself, and considered that perhaps Riddle had infused him with a bit too much caution. Riddle was, after all, Chade's man, insinuated into our household to watch my back and probably spy on me. Despite his current merriness and devotion to my daughter, he was a man steeped in carefulness. Given his way, we'd have had a guard contingent at Withywoods to rival the Queen's Own. I reined my mind back to the question at hand.

"Revel, I appreciate your care. But it's Winterfest. And be they minstrels or wandering beggars, no man should be turned from our door on such a holiday, or on such a snowy evening. While there's room in the house, they need not sleep in the stable. Bring them in. I'm sure all will be well."

"Sir." He was not agreeing, but he was obeying. I suppressed a sigh. That would do for now. I turned to join the throng in the Great Hall.

"Sir?"

I turned back to him. My voice was stern as I asked him, "Is there something else, Revel? Something pressing?" I could hear the tentative notes of musicians bringing their instruments into harmony, and then the music suddenly opened into blossom. I'd missed the start of the first dance. I gritted my teeth as I thought of Molly standing alone, watching the dancers whirl.

I saw his teeth catch for an instant on his lower lip. He decided to press on. "Sir, the messenger still waits for you in your study."

"Messenger?"

Revel gave a martyred sigh. "Hours ago, I sent one of our temporary pages looking for you with a message. He said he shouted it at you through the door of the steams. I have to inform you, sir, this is what comes of us using untrained boys and girls as pages. We should have a few here permanently, if only to train them for future need."

At my wearied look, Revel cleared his throat and changed tactics. "My apologies, sir. I should have sent him back to confirm you'd heard him."

"I didn't. Revel, would you mind dealing with it for me?" I took a hesitant step toward the hall. The music was rising.

Revel gave a minute shake of his head. "I am very sorry, sir. But the messenger says the

message is specifically for you. I have asked twice if I could be of any help, and offered to write the message for you." He shook his head. "The messenger insists that only you can receive the words."

I guessed the message, then. Holder Barit had been trying to wrangle me into agreeing that he could pasture some of his flock with our sheep. Our shepherd had adamantly insisted that this would be too many beasts for our winter pasturage. I intended to listen to Shepherd Lin, even if Barit was now willing to offer a decent amount of money. Winterfest eve was no time to be doing business. It would keep. "It's fine, Revel. And don't be too stern with our pages. You are right. We should have one or two on staff. But most of them will grow up to work in the orchards or follow their mothers' trades. It's rare that we need them here at Withy." I didn't want to be thinking about this right now. Molly was waiting! I took a breath and made my decision. "Thoughtless as it is for me to have left a messenger waiting so long, it would be ruder by far if I leave my lady unpartnered for the second dance as well as..."

Other Books

Fools and Folly During the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

“ . This fool is characteristically incircumspectus? "with- oute any wysedome." "one that dooeth a thing unadvisedly or without discrecion."7 To the vigorous disciplinarian these failures in achievement, these individual aberrations, ..."