

*King Henry's Last
Daughter*



Daphne Walter

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King Henry's Last Daughter

Tudor Series

Book 1

by

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Thank you.

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Prologue

Year of our Lord 1545

No God-fearing man would choose to leave his hearth and home to ride so recklessly over the rain-mired roads on such an evil night.

But then, the rider in black feared little. Few in England were as rich as he. Fewer still claimed as much power. Dukes never rode alone at night, risking the poisonous humors of the night air. They traveled in great pomp and with many servants to ensure their comfort.

The Duke had chosen with care this moonless night to ride in secret to the small manor house along the river Thames, not far from Hampton Court. No curious noses would peep out of cottage doors to spy on his doings. No indiscreet tongues would wag to treacherous ears.

He risked all on this desperate gamble. In these perilous times, the innocent act of being born into the wrong family could become a death sentence. How much more hazardous then, an act that history might call treason.

The Duke reached the manor well before dawn. A dagger to the throat soon awakened the door-keeper. Ere long, a woman hastened to force my lady from her slumbers.

My lady bustled into the chamber where the visitor awaited her and made her

deepest curtsey. The hood covering her hair was out of fashion and a nervous hand covered a spot where her once sumptuous gown had been patched. Though he had come at her suggestion, she fluttered before her lofty visitor. "Your Grace. You honor me—"

The Duke cut her off with an imperious gesture. "Send your woman away."

She waved at her servant. "Leave us. Speak of this to no one."

The tire-woman nodded and left them.

"Can she be trusted to be silent?" asked the gentleman, toying with his dagger.

"She will not betray me," my lady vowed.

Pitiless eyes stabbed her. "If she does, you know what befalls us. I should cut out her tongue."

"She will not betray us," my lady repeated, ashen but not backing down. "She has been with me for many years and has kept many secrets. Your Grace, may I fetch you a glass of—"

"There is no time," he interrupted her. "I must return before my absence is noticed. Fetch the girl. I would see her."

My lady paled and took a half step backward. "Your Grace?"

"The girl. Summon her to me. Now," he added, lest she mistake his command.

My lady curtseyed again. "As Your Grace wishes. I will send—"

"Nay, go yourself. And tell no one what you do."

Her jaw dropped a moment, but she quickly mastered herself, inclining her head in obedience before sweeping from the room.

The Duke stalked on silent feet to the doorway to watch concealed as my lady, his distant cousin by marriage, climbed the stairs to the top floor, huffing no doubt from the unaccustomed exertion. He distrusted women as a rule but he had no choice. He dared not show his hand in this affair openly.

Old Henry might be dying, but he wasn't dead yet.

Once the King took his last breath, the true struggle would begin. Young Prince Edward, Henry's sole legitimate son and heir, was only a child and a sickly one at that.

The Duke smiled without mirth. Children die.

Edward would not be King for long and what then?

Catholic Spain backed Henry's eldest daughter, the Lady Mary, as Edward's heir. In his mind, the nation's only hope rested with the Lady Elizabeth. Nothing must be allowed to harm her—least of all her sister.

The Duke took up a poker and prodded the fire to greater life, staring sightlessly into the flames. He and he alone stood between the realm and disaster—should his plan succeed.

If Edward died without a son of his own, the carrion crows would soon rip apart the nation with their scheming and then, Heaven help England.

* * *

Bess dreamed of summer and flowers and sunshine. And joy, of course, joy and freedom, such as she never knew in daylight. She came awake to a rough shake of her shoulder, crying out as her dream slipped from her. Her eyes focused on the Countess in alarm. Surely it was not morning already.

What had she done? My lady never sought her out in the small closet she shared. Bess put one hand up in anticipation of a blow. The Countess was not wont to trouble herself with a girl of no consequence. Surely my lady had not come to drag Bess from her bed in the middle of the night to dole out a whipping for some offense, imagined or real? "Madam?" Bess dared to ask.

"Come at once," my lady demanded in a harsh whisper.

She pulled the thin blanket from the bed and threw it around Bess's shoulders. Treble complaints from the bed's other occupant were hastily stifled with a slap courtesy of my lady. "Now."

Bare feet, aching from the chill of cold flagstones, followed obediently to the

chamber where the Countess received her visitors. A huge fire had been stoked in the hearth and spread its merry glow through the room, though the warmth had not penetrated far on such a cold night.

Bess hovered in the doorway. The grand gentleman in his black velvets and gold embroidery sprawled in the tall chair next to the fireplace. He was lean and muscular, reminding her suddenly of a kitchen cat, lazy at ease, merciless stalking a mouse. Bess hung back lest he see her. Was she his prey?

His gaze fell on her at once and he straightened, beckoning her in with a hand accustomed to instant obedience. Bess licked her lips, but found no spittle to moisten them. Despite her fear, the promised warmth of the fire seduced her deeper into the room.

Those magnetic gray eyes flickered toward my lady for a moment. "You spoke true. She is very like," he said to her, his gaze returning to Bess trembling before him. "Come here," he commanded. "I would look at you."

Bess swallowed hard, looking to my lady. No mercy there. She took three reluctant steps forward. His arrogant inspection scorched her. Her heart pounded.

Was she to be sold to this man? Bess had once heard talk of men who bought unwanted girls and carried them off, girls forced to spread their thighs for a half-penny in London's worst stews, until the French pox took them. Bess had thought it only a story meant to frighten the maids. Now she was less sure. Had the Countess decided to rid herself at last of Bess's inconvenient self?

The gentleman stood, the long face severe, not averse. She need not fear being carried off against her will, perhaps, but he wanted something from her and meant to have it.

Bess resisted the temptation to retreat and forced her chin up instead. One of his eyebrows lifted. Did she see approbation in his eyes? "She may do," he told my lady. "What is her name?"

"My sister named her Bess before she died," my lady answered. "We christened the babe Elizabeth."

"How long-sighted of her," the gentleman murmured. "One immediately sees the Tudor blood, of course. How old is the child?"

"Thirteen. She will be fourteen at Michaelmas."

His lip curled. "Indeed. How ironic. Even the same age as the Lady Elizabeth. Clearly Henry dipped his pen in more inkwells than Anne's, despite all her ambition."

Henry. Tudor blood. Bess strained to understand. She'd known all her life that she was an unwelcome bastard, suffered at my lady's board out of charity, never love. No man ever claimed her as his begetting. Servants' whispers could be ignored but not avoided. Bess hadn't understood them till now. *Blessed Jesu.* Had the King fathered her?

Bess clenched her knees to keep from staggering. It explained so many things: why my lady unwillingly kept the orphan, why her eldest son called Bess "Your Highness" with such scorn. All her life, she'd looked in vain to see some part of herself in the face of every man she met.

No wonder she had never succeeded. Her father was the King.

Being born a bastard wasn't the same if one's father was a King. Everyone knew the King had acknowledged his bastard son, the Duke of Richmond. Might His Majesty mean to do as much for her?

My lady bestowed a thin smile on her visitor. "I do believe the K— the gentleman of whom you spoke might have married my sister instead of the Great Whore, had she only had the sense to tell the gentleman first."

The man sneered. "Of what use that, since she didn't bear a son?"

"She might have lived to bear more children, had the Court doctors attended her instead of an ignorant country midwife."

"Enough!" The man in black held up one hand. "This is not the time for debate.

You. Girl. Have you a tongue?"

"I have." Bess spoke with all the firmness she could muster. "I also have a name. What do you want of me?"

This time both dark eyebrows shot up and something of both humor and respect bracketed his mouth. "Very good. I will get to the point of my visit. Tell me of yourself, Bess of the red-gold hair. Have you courage?"

What a strange question. "I do not shriek in fear when I see a rat, sir," she said, head held high.

"Your Grace," corrected my lady.

Bess said nothing, only kept her eyes on his.

"And your education?" he asked.

"She was educated with my own dau—" my lady began.

"I spoke to Bess," said the gentleman. "Your education?"

"I have studied Latin and French," said Bess. "I ... I like to read, Your Grace." She added the last almost with defiance.

The gentleman favored her with a brief smile. "As do I. And? What else?"

"I do fine sewing and play the lute."

"The lute." His Grace shook his head. "This will not do, madam. Summon the best tutors, if you must. Bess must learn Greek and Italian and ciphering. And lettering. The Lady Elizabeth has an exquisite hand."

"Who will pay for this teaching?" demanded my lady.

"I shall," said the Duke, drawing forth a purse from his doublet and tossing it to her.

She caught it with a deft hand and curtsied, all servility. "As Your Grace wishes."

Bess took a step closer, relishing the warmth in the stone underfoot. Her best dreams had never promised so wondrous an escape. At Court, she would never be cold or hungry again. She would wear fine clothes and eat the best food and—if she prayed

hard—perhaps find a man willing to marry her. Best of all, she would leave this house.

“Am I to come to Court then? To attend on the princess?” she asked, hopeful.

The gentleman took Bess's shoulders between his hands. “Now is not the time to speak. Learn your lessons well, young Bess. If you are clever and brave enough—well, I shall say only that you may play a greater role in this world than you now envision.”

She would study hard, Bess promised herself, and make the King, her father, proud of her.

Letting her go, he swept his cloak about his shoulders. The signet ring on his hand winked in the firelight: a dragon carved in gold. He held out his hand to show it to her. “Mark this ring well, Bess. When next you see it, do as you are told without question. Until then?” He cast down one last look at her, one almost of pity.

Pity? Bess searched his face. Why should he pity her? He had just changed her life for the better.

“Pray to God that Destiny passes you by.”

Chapter 1

My lord Duke of Northumberland—

Some days ago my sister and I were informed of the intrigue which your ambition has led you to undertake so that you may exclude us both from the succession to the crown. I hope that you may have time in which to repent of your plots against the King and our own welfare.

Elizabeth

10th July 1553

“The King is dead. Long live Queen Jane!”

Bess threw open the casement at the cry. She caught the herald's attention as he would have ridden past the shabby manor along the Thames and waved him over. “Queen Jane, say you?” she asked, tossing the man a silver penny. He caught it in midair.

The man gave her a sly look, dropping the coin into his purse which jingled a little, proving that she had not been the first to ask him such a question.

“Aye. Queen Jane.” He drew his mount closer and confided, “’Tis said that King Edward himself declared his cousin, the Lady Jane Grey, his successor before he died.”

“And what of the Lady Mary, his sister?”

“Declared a bastard, both she and her sister, Elizabeth,” he said. “’Tis proclaimed on every London street corner, so I was told. On His Majesty’s own orders.”

Turning the horse’s head, he continued on his way, accompanied by the tolling of the church bells mourning the young King’s death.

Bess said a small prayer for his soul. Poor boy. At long last free of Seymours and Dudleys. His so-called Councilors. Bess suppressed a snort. Gaolers, more like.

“What’s to do?” Bess’s cousin, Anne, fluttered to her side, needlework forgotten, and leaned out the casement in a most undignified fashion. “What did the rascal tell you?”

Lady Isabell, a year younger, but much on her dignity as the eldest surviving daughter of the house, followed at a more sedate pace. “The King has joined his father in heaven, you fool,” said Isabell to Anne. Anne rounded on her, but both girls stopped squabbling at Bess’s upraised hand. Isabell peered into Bess’s face. “You’re afraid, Bess. Why?”

Bess strove harder to control her features. It served no purpose to frighten the other girls needlessly. “’Tis nothing, just the uncertainty,” she said, “until everything is settled.”

“What is there to settle?” asked a puzzled Anne. “Jane Grey was declared Queen. Did not the herald say that?”

“He did, indeed.” Bess shooed them back to their sewing, but lingered at the casement, watching down the road where the herald could no longer be seen.

Bess kept her own counsel. Thanks to the fine education provided her by tutors the Duke had sent, tutelage worthy of a princess, she understood more of the day’s political intrigues than most folk. She doubted King Edward’s proclamation would hold.

To be sure, Queen Jane had powerful allies. Had not the Duke of Northumberland married her to his own son? She also had the blood, being the great-granddaughter of a king. Still, what mattered blood and birthright when greedy men

scented power?

Besides, bad old King Henry had restored his daughters, Mary and Elizabeth, to the succession before he'd died. Bess doubted the Lady Mary would so blithely accept being passed over. She too had powerful allies.

The next fortnight would tell. Either Jane would swiftly fall, or Mary would, or a piteous England would be rent in savage pieces like a luckless animal torn apart by curs.

God help them all.

* * *

So it proved.

On the tenth day, poor Lady Jane Grey, a mere 15 years old, was bound for the Tower of London while Mary Tudor mounted the English throne, proclaimed Queen. Northumberland's army had deserted him, some said. He had misjudged the loyalties of the common people. He had surrendered in Cambridge and would soon be tried for treason.

Bess did not doubt the verdict had already been decided.

"What are we to do, Bess?" quavered her aunt, upon hearing the news. The last years had not been kind to the Countess, who appeared far older than her actual age of forty-two.

Odd how their positions had reversed themselves in the years after the Duke's long-ago visit: the Countess's health had faded, leaving her more and more dependent on Bess to manage the household for her. Weakness in her legs bound her to a chair by the fire even in the midst of summer and only her strong will kept her alive. It did not seem so strong this day.

"Tis said that Queen Mary has already sent messengers to Spain, proposing an alliance." My lady held out a trembling, claw-like hand. "What if she restores the Catholic church? What if they bring the Inquisition here?" Hearing these words, Isabell

and Anne, wide eyed, clutched each other.

"Calm yourself, aunt." Bess patted the Countess on the arm and gestured to Anne to fetch the lady a cup of wine. "These are early days yet. We have nor wealth nor power at court that would draw any eye to us. We have but to go to Mass if we are commanded to do so as good daughters of the Church. Though I suspect," she added conscientiously, "it will do no harm to gather Cranmer's prayer books and store them in the cellars—or even to burn them if we must. We have only to be obedient to the Queen's commands and we will survive."

Taking the wine cup from Anne, she helped the Countess drink. The hearty Burgundy flushed the older woman's cheeks, bringing a glow of pretended health to them. My lady's hands shook beneath Bess's as they held the cup, hands that used to slap her often. Bess had not once been slapped since the Duke's visit though Bess had oft caught the woman gazing at her with an odd regret.

"I am glad you are here," the old woman said, letting Bess hand the cup back to Anne and collapsing against the back of her chair. Bess adjusted a screen behind her to reflect the fire's heat and pulled up a lap robe which had fallen unnoticed to the floor, tucking it around the invalid.

"I will gather the prayer books," said Isabell with a resolution beyond her years.

"I—" Anne's voice broke. "I will help."

Bess nodded to them. They were good girls.

A manservant entered the room and bowed to her. "Yes, John?"

"There is a gentleman come, Mistress. He asks to see you."

"A gentleman, Bess?" quizzed Anne, a roguish smile on her lips. "Come a-courting, think you?"

"You fly high," said Isabell, more censorious. "Do not forget your place, Bess."

"I expect it is more likely the butcher come, asking for payment," said Bess quellingly. John would never mistake a tradesman for a gentleman. She shook out her

skirts and tidied her hair as though her heart were not beating hard enough to batter the inside of her chest. "I will see him."

"If it *is* the butcher, Bess, see if you can charm a leg of mutton from him," Anne suggested.

It was not the butcher.

The gentleman stood at the window looking out. Though his clothes were plain, they were made of rich materials. His dark cloak was sewn of velvet. A jaunty velvet cap sat on his black hair framing a pleasant, clean-shaven face. He held himself proudly, reminding Bess of someone, but she could not think who. He whistled a haunting tune as he awaited her arrival.

"And who but my lady, Greensleeves?" Bess sang in a rich voice the last words to the song he whistled. He spun around, suddenly aware of her.

He gaped at her so long, Bess grew uncomfortable. It took all her effort not to shift on her feet. Instead she gave him a challenging look and asked, "Am I such a beauty, sir, to strike men dumb?"

The man recovered, grinning. "How shall I answer you, mistress? If I declare you a beauty, you will think me a deceiver, yet if I say you are not a beauty, I shall offend. Perhaps it would suit me best to say nothing at all."

Bess concealed a smile. "You say nothing so very well. And with many words."

"Mistress Bess Neville?"

"I am she."

"I have a letter for you." He held a folded parchment out to her.

It bore no seal. She took it from him. "Know you what this says?" she asked.

"No." He chuckled. "I do not read."

How odd. As a gentleman surely he was taught. Bess shrugged. Haply he had found it too difficult to learn. Many a clever boy might not take to his lessons, especially when whipped into him. It did not make him less clever. Perhaps this man had been

chosen as a messenger for that very reason, his lack of letters, though it was hardly a chore for a gentleman. She opened the note and read it.

Four words. "Come now. Bring nothing." No signature.

Bess hesitated, unwilling to leave this house with a strange man, however merry, without knowing who had summoned her or why. "Who sent you?"

The gentleman's smile faded. "I was told to show you this." From the depths of his cloak he withdrew a ring and showed it to her. A carved gold dragon.

She tried to take it from him, but he held it fast. She cupped it in both hands. She remembered that signet. The Duke.

Destiny had not passed by, after all.

She closed her eyes and willed herself to be strong. She bit her lip and stepped back. "It seems I am to come with you, sir."

He grinned again. "How fortunate, then, that I have with me a pretty mare, suitable for a lady to ride."

"Where are we to go?" Despite the command to bring nothing, she would need a change of linen at least.

"Not far. A few hours journey. Fear not, mistress. I will let no harm come to you."

She had not expected he would, nor even thought of the chance that he might harm her. Yet trust did not come so easily.

"How long shall I be gone?"

He shook his head. "I know not, mistress. You will not return to this house soon."

Bess's breath caught. She had not expected such news. She gathered her poise. "And when are we to leave? I shall need time to deal with household matters." At the very least, she would need to leave instructions with Isabell.

The gentleman waved away her concern. "Do what you must. We do not depart until nightfall. I shall return for you then."

He bowed and swept from the room before Bess could stop him. Dazed, she trod

the steps to her room.

Bring nothing.

How could she? She had not so many things, but what she had were dear to her. She trailed melancholy fingers over them. Her few books, her lute, the small portrait of her mother. These and a brace of spare gowns were all she possessed. Why must she turn her back on them? She almost decided to refuse to go.

Something held her back. She knew not what. Destiny, the Duke had said.

Bess took a deep breath. She would go where they bade her, but they could not force her to stay, even if she must walk the whole way back. With sudden determination, she threw open her trunk and began to pack away her belongings.

She paused, the tiny portrait in her hand. The only thing Bess had of the mother she had never known. Bess touched the painted face lightly. Who had she been? What had been her dreams? Had she chosen to try to catch King Henry's eye or caught it without the trying? Bess would never know the answers.

Reluctant, she put the portrait down on top of the other things, careful to lay a linen kerchief over it. She did not want it damaged. "That's the last," she murmured, looking at her lute, too large to fit in the trunk.

"You are leaving us," said Isabell from behind her.

Bess whipped around. The younger girl's eyes were solemn. Her chin wobbled a bit, betraying her youth. Despite her lofty manner, she was only fifteen. Too young for Bess to burden with the entire truth, even had she been granted leave to speak it. "Yes. For a while." Perhaps a long while. Perhaps forever. Bess made an effort to smile. "I am off to have an adventure."

Isabell didn't return the smile. "I'll have John carry the trunk down for you."

Bess shook her head. "I cannot take it with me."

"I will have him take it to the cellars, then, and keep it safe for you. I will keep the key myself," Isabell promised, touching Bess's hand.

Bess nearly lost control, but blinked back the tears searing her eyelids. Knowing her treasures were kept safe would be one worry less in the days to come. "You are very kind." She tried to say more, but feared her voice would crack.

Isabell took one step forward, then another, faster and faster, throwing her arms around Bess and hugging her close, sniffing. "I know not where you go or why it must be so secret, but know this: you are always welcome here, Bess. We love you."

One hot tear succeeded in streaking down Bess's cheek. She dashed it away. She never expected this. Not love. Bess returned the embrace, her throat threatening to choke her. "My lute. Give it to Anne, will you? I would have it played rather than lie in the cellars."

"She will never play it well," said Isabell, with a hiccough, "and her voice reminds me of a cow being butchered."

"But she tries so very hard." Despite themselves, both girls giggled. Anne truly did not know one note from another.

Bess sobered first. "There is much I need to tell you about managing the household. The bedsheets must be washed—"

"Fear not," Isabell interrupted her. "I know what to do."

Bess fell silent, biting her lip. They would survive without her.

"How soon must you go?" asked Isabell, casting an apprehensive look out of the casement at the waning afternoon.

"Soon. At nightfall." The merry gentleman with the smiling green eyes would return for Bess then.

Isabell nodded. "Will you take your leave of Anne and my mother?"

"No." Bess sighed. "It is best I go quietly. Tell no one the truth." Few cared enough to question her absence.

Isabell kissed Bess's cheek one last time. "God be with you, Bess, and good fortune. Take your warmest cloak. The night air might be chill."

"I will." Isabell left her, mercifully saving Bess from the need to pretend further. Strength leaching from her muscles, she stumbled to her narrow bed and collapsed on it to weep, but the tears refused to come. Perhaps she would need them later.

The time to dine came and went, but Bess didn't join the others for the meal. She had no desire for food, doubted she could force it down if she tried.

The sun blazed in scarlet glory then dipped below the horizon, bathing the world in a dusky purple for a brief time until the stars came out. The moon which had shone his face in the day had set as well, leaving none but the stars to see by.

The moment had come. For good or ill.

Bess made herself stand, pulling her shoulders back and holding her head proudly, and cast one last look around the humble room. She would never see it again. Once she left this house, she would never, ever return.

Her breath caught on a dry sob as Bess inhaled. She might not always have been happy here, but it was home. Familiar. Safe. She would miss Anne and Isabell in the days to come, but little else.

What was she leaving, truly? A life of servitude to the Countess. Bess did her work well. She had earned some respect, but what little she owned had been bought with my lady's coin.

Or rather, the Duke's.

Her life was now the Duke's property to do with as he chose.

Bess bit the tip of her littlest finger. What could his purpose be? Long ago, Bess had given up expecting the Duke's call. Women of high degree aplenty waited on the Lady Elizabeth. She had no need of Bess's meager talents.

Yet he summoned her now. Why?

Bess's hands trembled as she wrapped the cloak around her shoulders. In a few hours, she would know at last what the Duke wanted from her.

She took three steps toward the door then faltered and turned back. Unlocking

the trunk, she pulled out her mother's miniature and wrapped it in the kerchief, tucking the bundle safely into her bodice. Now she was ready.

She walked alone through the dim corridors to the door of the house, the sounds of familiar voices faint and distant. She lingered, branding the moment into her memory, then forced her feet on. Her path lay forward.

No one waited at the door either and she slipped out, closing the heavy wood panel behind her. As well no one observed her departure.

Bess looked about for her escort but saw no one. A January shiver shook her though the night air was still warm. She took a half-step back toward the door and home.

"Mistress," a soft voice called. Bess peered through the darkness, seeing the Duke's messenger a short distance away, well-concealed by a hedge. She struck across the greensward with steps firmer than she felt. He lifted her onto the mare, helping her adjust her skirts. Then he mounted his own horse and led hers into the deepest part of the night.

Chapter 2

To the Holy Roman Emperor—

We have been informed that last Thursday Madame Elizabeth acknowledged the error of her opinions regarding the new religion. Since then, the Princess was at Mass, from which however she wished to excuse herself, saying that she was ill.

The Spanish Ambassador

“Have we much further to go?”

They had ridden silently in the dark for hours, yet Bess’s companion showed no sign of stopping.

The gentleman halted the horses. “Some hours yet. You are tired?” Bess nodded. He led the animals off the road into concealment, before helping Bess dismount. Her legs ached in protest at the unaccustomed ride. She stretched the muscles as best she could, shifting from foot to foot in an effort to ease the uncomfortable prickling.

The night being warm and damp, Bess took the opportunity to remove her heavy cloak and tie it into a bundle attached to her saddle. She took care of nature behind a convenient clump of bushes while her companion stood guard. As she emerged, he

offered her a flask and she drank a swallow or two of the sweet wine to ease the dryness of her throat. She handed the flask back. He drank a few swallows himself before putting it away.

“Shall we go on?” he asked.

Bess shook her head, her legs cramping at the mere thought. “A moment more, I beg.”

He shrugged, barely visible in the dark. “As you wish.” Going to his horse, he gave the animal several soothing pats. The animal whickered in delight.

“May I know your name?” Bess asked after a long moment. “Or must it be a secret?”

“Tis no secret.” He swept her a magnificent bow, though she felt it more than saw it. “Lucas Payne, at your service, mistress.”

Demure, she dipped him a deep curtsy, her legs now in a more cooperative mood. “A pleasure, sir.”

“For me also.” His teeth flashed in the starlight. “I am not often tasked with the safe transport of a beautiful woman.”

“I thought you had decided that I am not a beauty,” Bess teased him.

“Your words, mistress. You will recall I chose not to quarrel with you.”

“So you did.”

He gestured in inquiry at the horses. With a sigh, Bess allowed him to lift her back into the saddle and lead the horses in a walk.

“We would arrive sooner did we travel faster,” Bess suggested. Though she did not often ride these days, she had been well-taught and was not afraid.

Lucas shook his head. “It would not do. Firstly, a faster gait could cause the muffles to come off.” Bess had noticed that the horses’ hooves had been bound in cloth to quiet them. “Secondly, ’twould not be safe. A misstep into a rabbit hole and the horse might break a leg, bringing one or both of us to grief. Lastly, we do not wish to attract

undue attention. A sleepless rustic might look out his door to see who would travel so incautiously at night.”

As she should have known without needing to be told, Bess chided herself. “I understand.”

“Fear not.” He grinned at her. “We will reach our destination not long after midnight, I promise you. Till then, best we not speak more lest our voices carry.”

“Of course.”

The slow, plodding pace of the mare and the lateness of the hour lulled her as they continued on their way. Bess found herself nodding off and jerked herself upright twice only to start to drowse once more. Lucas’s clasp on her arm startled a squeak from her, the alarmed look on his face bringing her to full wakefulness.

“Hush,” he hissed at her. “This way. Quickly.” He dragged her off the horse and led the mounts into the brush beside the road. Taking a scarf, he wrapped it around her mare’s muzzle and handed her the ends. “Can you keep it quiet?” he asked, clasping his own mount’s head in strong hands. “Your life may depend on it.”

When he said it in that way... “I will.” She stood on tiptoe to try to see the road. “What’s to do?” she whispered.

“Men. A large number of them not far behind us. Traveling on the road with some speed. We may have been seen.”

Bess held her breath as the noise of hooves grew louder. Her heart pounded in time with their pace. *What intrigue had she involved herself in?* This caution went beyond mere secrecy. This sort of wariness bespoke of treason. A trickle of something cold seeped down her spine.

Peering out between the branches, she saw a troop of well-armed men. The Queen’s guards? Bess’s mare shifted, pulling its head as though to call to the horses on the road. A hushed sound escaped and Bess tightened her grip on the animal. What would Lucas Payne do if she seized the mare and fled back home? Worse, what if the

soldiers heard her flight and pursued her?

The soldiers passed their hiding place without stopping. Bess sagged in relief and the stiffness of Lucas's shoulders eased. "We shall rest here a short while," he said with a conspiratorial grin. To allow the soldiers to gain some distance ahead of them, she guessed, rubbing an aching thigh through her gown.

Bess summoned her courage to ask, "What have we to hide? What would you have of me?"

Lucas's grin faded. "Of a truth, I know only that I must let none see you. As for the rest, you have but to listen to what they ask. If you do not consent, then there is an end."

"Consent to *what*?" Bess asked. What "end"? Her own? He *had* said she would not be going home soon.

"Tis not for me to say." Lucas took both her hands and drew her close enough to make out his face. "Trust me? If you mislike what you hear, I will see you safe. Will that content you?"

Bess wavered, looking up into his eyes. They were honest eyes and she believed him. He would keep her safe, just as he said. She nodded.

"Very well." Letting her go, he collected the reins of both horses. "Follow me."

He led her down a forest path away from the road, a track more frequented by deer than people, she suspected, following him on foot. Night animals rustled in the brush and an owl in a nearby tree hooted loudly, making her jump. Bess gathered her skirts against her legs, sidestepping a reeking pile of fresh horse manure. How did Lucas know this path? He must know the land well. Bess hoped that meant they neared their destination.

A short while later they emerged from the trees into a manicured park with a small lake beyond. Lucas put her up on the mare and mounted himself, setting off across the meadow on a path that looked to take them around the lake. Bess's attention

was caught by what lay on the opposite side.

A palace.

* * *

Lucas gave Bess little time to assess her surroundings or even to imagine what the great building must look like by daylight. Once on the far side of the lake, he galloped them up to the front door. Servants sprang from the shadows to spirit away the mounts before Bess could protest the loss of her cloak. As Lucas led her up the granite steps, the great oak portal opened. A man emerged, holding a single lantern high. "You are late. We feared you were taken."

The man at the door resembled Lucas to some degree: his hair was a lighter brown, more reddish in color than Lucas's, and his beard fuller. He carried a stone more weight, perhaps, though the elegant doublet of heavy brocade he wore might have made him only seem so. His eyes were brown, not Lucas's vivid green, yet their faces were so similar, Bess surmised they must be brothers. Even their voices were more like than unlike.

Yet, by his lofty manner, he must be the Duke's heir. Perhaps Lucas was a bastard like her.

"It could not be helped," Lucas answered with a careless shrug.

The other man's mouth flattened. "You were seen? Followed?"

"Nay," said Lucas. "There were soldiers on the roads."

"At night?" his brother asked, incredulous. "Under whose banner? The Queen's?"

Lucas shook his head. "I saw no banner, but deemed it wise to be wary." He lit a candle from the lantern. "They await her?"

The brown eyes looked Bess over from head to toe, returning at last to linger on her face. Recognition? "Wondrous. I had not believed," he breathed, then shook himself. "Aye, in the smaller chamber." He jerked a thumb in the direction of an unlit gallery. "Make haste."

Lucas hurried Bess past portraits in gilded frames and woven tapestries. Too swiftly, Lucas stopped in front of a cunningly carved door. He scratched on the panel and opened it. She stepped inside and waited for him to join her but he shook his head, gesturing her to proceed into the darkened room alone and closing the door with a finality that made Bess want to shiver.

A lantern near a chair next to the cold fireplace was the only light in the immense room. In the gilded chair sat the Duke. Bess recognized him at once. Though he had aged in the last ten years, he bore it lightly, mostly the wings of gray hair that adorned his temples and a thickening around his ankles. He did not rise.

"Bess? Come in." He gestured to her to approach. He looked off into the darkness to his left. "What say you? Is she not very like?"

"Her hair is too dark," complained a woman's voice. Bess turned her head in that direction but saw no one. "And her eyes are the wrong color. Nor is she tall enough."

"Minor faults, surely, and most within remedy?" asked the Duke, ending with a cough that crackled a little.

A middle-aged woman in a wine-red velvet gown emerged from the shadows to scrutinize Bess like a mare for sale at a May fair. Her spine stiffened with instant dislike.

"A wig?" The woman pursed her lips. "Nay, the ruse would be too easily discovered. A rinse of lemons, perhaps, to lighten the hair. Belladonna drops to make her eyes seem darker, at least. They are common enough and easily obtained. Her brows can be plucked to the proper arch. Her body has a pleasing shape, nor too buxom nor too small. If she has all her teeth, perhaps... but what of her height?" Bess silently dared the woman to demand she open her mouth.

"Wedges in her shoes?" the Duke suggested. "To lift her heels. At all events, the difference is slight."

"It might serve." The woman brooded, walking around Bess again. "But, no. She will not do. Kat Ashley would know."

"I agree. Mistress Ashley would be Bess's first test. She has attended on the Lady for many years. Still, if Bess plays the part ... if she can deceive Mistress Ashley, surely the rest of the world would be deceived also."

"What part?" Bess demanded, but they did not answer her.

"There is much for her to learn if we are to begin this," the woman said to the Duke.

"I have already undertaken her education," the Duke replied.

"I am doing nothing until you tell me why I am here."

Bess's words echoed with a remarkable emphasis around the chamber. The woman frowned at her and the Duke lifted an inquiring brow. Bess held her chin high, refusing to let either intimidate her.

"Are you a brave woman, Bess?" asked the Duke, not quite answering her. "What would you do to serve England and your people?"

"Speak plain," Bess insisted. "What would you have of me?"

The woman cast an uncertain look at the Duke, who seemed unconcerned ... nay, almost pleased with her.

"We would have you take the place of the Lady Elizabeth."

* * *

She must have water in her ears. "Nay. You must be mad. How could you think I would agree to ... to usurp the ..."

"Not usurp." The Duke held up a pale hand. "Take her place. For a short while." The Duke coughed again, clearing his throat.

"How short?" Bess demanded. "And why, for heaven's sake?"

The Duke shrugged. "How short a while? I know not. Until the Lady is out of danger. Why? Your tutors will have taught you why. The Queen hates her sister, Elizabeth. She calls her the daughter of the Great Whore. But mostly, she fears her."

Bess remembered the hours of lessons. "Because Queen Mary is a Catholic."

The Duke leaned forward. "More than that. Even if the Queen marries Philip of Spain as 'tis rumored, she is not a young woman. She may not be able to bear a child. What would happen, Bess, if she does not have an heir of her own body?"

"The succession would pass to Elizabeth," Bess answered at once.

"Who flouts the Catholic church," agreed the Duke. "So if Mary cuts Elizabeth from the succession, who is her next heir?"

"Mary of Scotland."

The Duke nodded at her answer. "Aye, who is a child and under French control. Queen Mary cannot let England dwindle into a satellite of our great enemy."

Nor could any red-blooded Englishman. Or woman.

"What heirs has she after Mary of Scotland?" asked the Duke, answering his own question. "The Greys. Jane Grey and her sisters."

The poor nine-day queen who still languished in the Tower. "Who, like Elizabeth, are Protestants," said Bess.

"Quite so," said the Duke, nodding in pleasure at her. "Queen Mary cannot risk disposing of Elizabeth yet, not until she has an heir. Yet she would sooner see Elizabeth dead than on the throne of England. Do you understand now?"

Bess thought hard. "Until Mary has a son, Elizabeth is next in line. Yet her beliefs are abhorrent to the Queen. Elizabeth is a potential rallying point for rebels wanting to bring back the Protestant ways."

"Exactly," the Duke affirmed. "Thus her life is in grave danger until the succession is secured. If we can conceal the Lady someplace safe whilst you are, to all outward appearances, Elizabeth, she can later resume her place without risk of being harmed."

Bess understood the Duke's unspoken words. If Queen Mary acted against the Lady Elizabeth, Bess would die in her half-sister's place. No doubt the Duke could prove the real Elizabeth had returned when that moment came. Of what use would it be to bring the true princess back from the dead if all believed her a mere pretender?

If by some miracle Bess survived and the Queen died without heirs, the Lady would return to rule as if nothing had happened. Bess would fade into the background, the deception unknown and unrecognized. Far more likely, Bess would lose her life to a headsman's axe. She took a deep breath. She might be a King's bastard, but she could die like a princess.

Only, she didn't want to die. She squeezed her eyes shut.

"Bess? What say you?" asked the Duke. "Will you do it?"

Bess took a deep breath. *Would she?* Her life meant naught to any save herself, yet despite the great risk they asked of her, she could help her family. "There is a price for my consent," she said at last.

"Name it." The Duke sat back in his chair watching her closely, his fingers steepled.

"The Countess, my aunt. She requires constant care."

"She shall have it," pledged the Duke.

"And my cousins Anne and Isabell. They must have dowries sufficient for them to marry men of good stature. Not great nobles, just men who will care for them well. I ... I would give them the freedom to choose men they love."

"It shall be done. And for yourself?"

Bess looked down at her twisting hands. "Your Grace cannot give me what I want."

"What is that?"

She met his gaze in full. "I would die an old woman in my bed."

* * *

9th February 1554

"No and no and no! You clumsy clod! What are you dancing? It certainly is *not* the galliard. One would think you never danced it before."

Bess glowered at Lady Smallthorpe with something near hatred. She had done

everything they asked of her in the last six months. She had been compelled to copy the Lady Elizabeth's handwriting for hours until her fingers cramped. She had been drilled by Lady Smallthorpe, one of Elizabeth's former gentlewomen, on every aspect of the royal Lady's life from her ancestry to Court etiquette. Bess had been cooped up in this unused wing of the Duke's house with no one for company save Lady Smallthorpe, not even allowed a brief hour in the gardens while summer had dissolved into autumn and autumn withered into winter.

During this time, her only visitors had been Lucas Payne, pressed into service to partner her during the daily dancing practice, and the young boy who played music for them. The New Year's holiday had passed with no word at all from home. Bess had no notion even if the house still stood.

She had borne this penance, reminding herself daily why she did it, yet nothing she did ever pleased Lady Smallthorpe. She would never have dared treat the real Elizabeth so.

"This is the Lady Elizabeth's favorite dance," the other woman insisted. "She will dance some half-dozen galliards every morning."

Bess made an effort to master her temper, sitting on a bench at the edge of the room. "Please, I need to rest a few moments." She had been dancing without cease for the last three hours.

Lady Smallthorpe clapped her hands. "No. No rest. Not until you master it. If you cannot, the entire court will know at once you are a fraud."

Unfortunately, she had a point. Bess dragged herself back into place, but this time Lucas backed away, comically miming fear like a nobleman's fool. Bess bit back an unwilling laugh.

"I must cry craven, Lady Smallthorpe," he whined. "I fear my foot is nigh broken."

He hobbled in an exaggerated fashion to the bench Bess had left, though she hadn't stepped on his foot *that* hard. Lady Smallthorpe had a strange look on her face,

halfway between indulgence and exasperation.

Lucas pulled off his shoe and massaged the injured foot. "Yea, 'tis broke for sure. Fetch a surgeon to me at once. I fear me the toes must be taken off. Or perhaps the entire foot."

"But then your dancing days would be ended," Bess shot back at him. Lady Smallthorpe frowned at her.

Lucas threw his head up in mock horror, as though the thought had not occurred to him. Bess bit the inside of her cheek not to chuckle and annoy Lady Smallthorpe further. "In that event..." He yanked on the shoe and leaped to his feet with a flourish. "I must dance on my broken foot, since I could not bear never to dance again."

"What of the pain?" purred Bess in seeming solicitude. "It must be excruciating."

Lucas limped onto the floor, dragging his foot behind him. "I shall bear it nobly, mistress, never fear. Only I beg you use me gently henceforth."

"Such nonsense," declared Lady Smallthorpe, apparently having decided Lucas's antics were to be indulged. Her mouth hardened as she turned her gaze at Bess. "Again," she said, gesturing to the musician, "the galliard. Bess, try to keep in time with the music on this occasion instead of lumbering like a cow."

Bess breathed in sharply. She *had* been in time with the music. Swallowing her anger, Bess went through the steps once more. Only she turned to the left when she should have turned to the right and accidentally kicked Lucas in the shin.

"What is the matter with you?" Lady Smallthorpe demanded shrilly. She stormed up to Bess and delivered a hearty slap to her face. "No one could be this maladroit. You country-bred, bacon-brained *dolt*."

Bess pressed one hand against her stinging cheek. "You will control your spleen, madam," she said at last, pinning the woman with a dagger-sharp glare. "I have endured enough of this and will bear no more! I came here for the sake of the Lady Elizabeth and, for her sake, I tolerated much. You have carped and scolded and

humiliated me yet I bore it with patience. I am to be the Lady Elizabeth? So be it. Henceforward, you shall treat me like the Queen's sister. My father was also King Henry, madam, and my mother gently bred. You will behave with courtesy or I..." What would she do? "I shall go home—and may the Devil take you!"

Lady Smallthorpe drew herself up, but Bess bolted from the room, hurtling down a maze of corridors until she found a door that led out into the garden. Even then she kept running through the slushy snow until her sides hurt and her sore feet protested further abuse.

There she halted to catch her breath and take stock of her surroundings. She had fled a goodly distance and found herself not far from the lake. The early February day was cloudy and cold; damp seeped into her bones. Sitting on a large rock at the water's edge, she wrapped her arms around her body for warmth.

She would have to go back and apologize to Lady Smallthorpe. There was too much at stake. The Lady Elizabeth was still in danger. Three months ago, the Queen had wed her Spanish consort by proxy. Chancellor Gardiner proclaimed Elizabeth illegitimate. To humiliate her further, lesser ladies at Court had been given precedence over her. There had even been at least one attempt to poison her.

A sudden warm weight settled over her shoulders and Bess welcomed her old woolen cloak, burying her cold nose in the soft cloth, fighting a sudden rush of tears. It had not been thrown away after all. She gathered it around her like armor, drawing comfort from the reminder of home.

When she looked around, Lucas Payne stood on the shore behind her. He joined her on the huge, flat rock, leaning back on his elbows, seeming unaware of the cold.

"Have you come to scold?" Bess asked, hunching her shoulders.

"I?" he asked with exaggerated astonishment. "Dear lady, I would not dare."

"Take me back, then?" a distrustful Bess pressed him.

"Nay, why should I?" He shrugged. "You'll return of your own accord when you

are ready.”

She wrinkled her nose. He spoke true, rot him. They sat without speaking for a long moment. Lured by their silence, a lean rabbit ventured near the bank to snatch a quick drink, scurrying away again as Bess and Lucas shared a smile. He was such a pleasant man, not the sort she'd expect to involve himself in dangerous intrigues.

She tilted her head to look at him. “Lucas Payne, why are you here?”

“To enjoy the weather, of course.” He grinned up at the oppressive clouds. “And to keep you safe. I promised you.”

His words warmed her deep inside. She had thought that task had long ago ended. Bess smiled at him. “I thank you—but that is not what I would ask. You are so ... so light of heart. I do not understand why you are a part of this.”

“This?” he asked in confusion. His face cleared. “Oh, you mean this desperate attempt to deceive the Queen?”

“At a word, yes. *Why are you here?*”

“Ah.” Lucas reached toward the edge of the lake where some cattails still fought the winter. He pulled a stem loose and drew trails in the lake water. “’Tis simple. This is my home. I was born here.”

Home? God 'a mercy. “Then you are...?”

“His Grace's youngest son.”

Bess nearly jumped from her skin. “I thought—”

The skin around his eyes crinkled. “That I was some sort of trusted servant?” Bess nodded. Thank God she'd never voiced her suspicion about his birth. “You were meant to, lady. What you do not know, you cannot betray.” His omnipresent smile turned sad. “Such a world we live in.”

Bess stiffened in mortification. How had she not guessed it? “Lu— My lord, I would apologize...”

Lucas lifted one hand in a gesture uncannily like his father's, though without the

imperiousness. "No need. My name is Lucas. I would have you use it." He grinned at her and her dismay eased.

She pulled up her knees and wrapped her arms around them. "It feels strange, knowing you are the Duke's son." And she was no one. Less than that. A bastard.

"Why should it? I am the same man I was an hour ago." His eyes took on a wicked cast. "Your crippled dance partner."

A laugh burst from Bess. Impossible to be punctilious with such a man.

His grin deepened. "Besides, your father was a King. Said you not so?"

So she had.

"I have something for you." He reached inside his doublet and withdrew a folded parchment. "A letter from home."

A cry of jubilation escaped Bess. She reached for the note.

"Leave behind any heartbroken swains?" Lucas asked, holding it high.

"Me? No. What man courts where there is no advantage?" She'd accepted that so long ago that his teasing didn't hurt. "My cousin, Anne, has some beauty and my cousin, Isabell, has an honored name. I have neither."

Lucas pulled gently on a red-gold strand that had blown free in the breeze. "You need to see with different eyes. There are things more important than beauty and money and names."

Most men of his class would not think so. What a different world he lived in from the one where she dwelled. She might almost let herself love him.

He let go her hair and stood up, handing her the note. "Read your letter. I will await you over there." He pointed at the bank.

How kind he was to discern she'd be starved for news of home. She opened the note. From Isabell, thanking her. The Duke had held up his end of their bargain. Two servants, paid by the Duke, now cared for the Countess's needs while Anne's flirtation with the son of a local landowner looked ripe to blossom into a betrothal, thanks to her

sudden acquisition of a dowry. Bess smiled. Anne would be well-settled.

Isabell denied any similar desire to marry, but let Bess know that the shabby little house on the Thames had been completely repaired and refurbished at the Duke's expense. Bess swallowed hard. She had not demanded that of him. The knowledge trapped her all the tighter in this Hell-begotten snare.

If Bess left now, she would feel obligated to return every penny—not that she had any means this side of Heaven do so.

“Bad news?” Lucas asked as she stood up.

“No, not at all.” Bess forced a smile and tucked the folded note into her bodice. “At home, all is well.”

A skeptical eyebrow rose.

“Truly,” Bess insisted. “It seems my cousin hopes to marry.”

Lucas extended a strong hand to help her off the rock and fell into step beside her. “You do not approve of her choice?”

Faith, he was too sensitive to her moods. She hastened to reassure him. “Nay, Will is a good man. Still, he was far above Anne's touch until your father provided her a dowry.”

“Ah,” Lucas said knowingly. Bess feared he did, in fact, understand all too well the obligation she felt. They walked in silence a short way.

“It is a good thing you do, helping us,” Lucas assured her, breaking the silence but not breaking stride. “It is not every woman who has your courage.”

“Is it courage?” Bess asked then. She didn't feel very brave.

Lucas halted at the edge of the garden and turned Bess to look at him. He had such an earnest face. “You have your father's heart.”

Bess tried to return his smile and failed miserably. “I never knew my father.”

Lucas's eyes took on a reminiscent cast. “I saw him once, long ago. He had just taken his fifth wife—the Howard girl. I was but a child, but even I could see how happy

she made him, if only for that brief while.”

Her sight blurred with unshed tears. How unfair that Lucas had known her father even so much but she had not, not at all. Shoulders slumping, Bess turned away to hide the bitterness of her jealousy and started walking again toward the house. “I know not if my mother ever told him of me.”

Warmth suffused her hand as Lucas took hers in his. It penetrated all the way to her heart. He offered no well-meaning lies and she respected him all the more for that.

“When I was young,” she dared to say, not looking up, “and lonely, I used to imagine that my father *did* know and that once he looked down at me in my cradle and kissed my forehead—and cared, a little.”

“Perhaps he did.”

Bess’s fleeting smile was bittersweet. “Perhaps, but surely my aunt would have mentioned a visit from the King, had it been so. And perhaps she might have been kinder to me. It is a hard thing to be unwanted.” Though the constriction in her throat threatened to strangle her, she spoke without emotion. The comforting squeeze of Lucas’s hand told her she had not fooled him.

They had arrived at the house. Lucas detained her when she would have entered. “Be patient with Lady Smallthorpe? It is very important you understand why—”

“I *do* understand,” Bess stopped him. “I would not be here else.”

Grinning in approval down at her, Lucas said, “My father chose you well. I would have you know one thing: I greatly admire your courage.”

The wintry day suddenly filled with summer sunshine. If only there could be more between them than this day, this hour, but no. She must not be greedy. Bess was not of his class. At best, she could hope only to be his whore—and not even that till the counterfeit be ended. She must take this moment for itself and let his liking warm her soul.

With a sigh, Bess let Lucas open the door for her to enter. “Time to face Lady

Smallthorpe and her scold." Like a wretched prisoner *en route* to the block, Bess dragged her feet as Lucas led her back.

Lady Smallthorpe stood silhouetted against the window light, hands on hips. "It is about time!"

Chapter 3

To the Lady Elizabeth—

Right dear and entirely beloved sister, whereas certain evil-disposed persons do induce our subjects to an unnatural rebellion against us, we do therefore think expedient you should come here to us. So shall you be most heartily welcome.

Your loving sister, Mary the Queen.

Bess braced herself, seeking the right words, apologetic but not servile. They refused to come.

“It’s about time you lost your temper!” Lady Smallthorpe said.

It took Bess several moments to realize the other woman looked on her with approbation, not pique. “What?”

“I was starting to wonder if you had any Tudor blood in you. My lady would have flown into a rage the first night.” Eyes a-twinkle, she dipped in a formal Court curtsy. “My Lady Elizabeth.”

With no effort on Bess’s part, her spine straightened and her head held itself high. Laughter in his eyes, Lucas bowed to her also. Bess held out an elegant hand for him to kiss, nearly ruining the grand effect by chuckling herself.

"As a point of fact," said Lady Smallthorpe, "you are doing quite well. His Grace will be pleased with your progress."

"He had better be," said an austere voice behind Bess. She spun around, recognizing Lucas's elder brother, though she had not seen him since her arrival.

"Braden," Lucas acknowledged him with the most cursory of nods. Bess looked at the newcomer with fresh eyes, noticing his mouth tighten at Lucas's unceremonious greeting.

"Is she ready?" Lucas's brother demanded of Lady Smallthorpe, a rude jerk of the head indicating Bess. She drew back in offense, then reminded herself she should expect no better from a man of his exalted rank.

"Th-there is much still to do," the woman protested. She faltered to a stop as Lord Braden held up a restraining hand.

"Nay, we have no more time," he snapped. "We act tonight or not at all. Will she serve, yea or nay?"

"What has happened?" asked Lucas, serious for the first time Bess had seen him.

"Wyatt rose up alone, the bloody fool." Braden spat into the crackling fireplace. He raked an impatient hand through his chestnut-brown hair. "Chancellor Gardiner discovered his plot to block the Spanish marriage, depose the Queen, marry the Lady Elizabeth to Edward Courtenay and place them both on the throne as our new King and Queen."

Courtenay had a remote claim to the throne himself, Bess remembered from her studies. The great-grandson of a king.

"Courtenay betrayed the plot to Gardiner. Suffolk, Carew and Croft were to rise up with Wyatt, but they panicked and were swiftly defeated. Wyatt marched on London alone while the Queen took refuge behind the city gates and rallied her own troops. They fell on the rebels at Ludgate and won the day. When Wyatt surrendered, my man

left the city to bring me word.”

Braden strode across the room to look out the casement, scanning the horizon. “It is only a matter of days before the other rebel leaders are taken prisoner. Who knows how far a weak and frightened Queen’s wrath will reach, now that she is safe?”

Lady Smallthorpe uttered a short cry and stumbled to a bench, clutching a handkerchief to her lips. “Have mercy, O God.”

“God may have mercy,” Braden chided her, “but the Queen will not. She summoned Elizabeth to Court when the rebellion began, but the Lady refused to come, claiming illness and danger on the road.”

“Was she in league with the rebels?” asked Lucas.

“Haply. Haply not. Certainly her disobedience was noticed by the Council. ’Twill not require much to persuade them to imprison her, even execute her.”

Bess’s hand crept to her neck as though she could feel the axeman’s blade cut through it. Her lungs twisted of themselves. She gasped for air. What falsehoods might men under torture confess?

Or what truths?

“We must spirit Elizabeth to safety at once, before the Council brings her to Court perforce.”

She caught a fold of her woolen skirt in her hand and worried it like a terrier with a rat. Had Bess wished less than an hour ago that she might know more days with Lucas? She had forgotten the fell purpose that had brought her to this moment. Her royal sister’s fate now rested in her hands. Hers and hers alone. She stared down at them as though they belonged to someone else. Did she dare?

She must.

“Then let us do it,” said Bess, striding forward. Her voice rang through the room in her best imitation of Elizabeth. “If there is no moment to lose, let us waste no more time.”

Lucas took her by the hand, gazing down into her eyes. "Are you certain, Bess? Once it is done, there must be no going back."

"It is too late for reluctance," Braden argued. "She has no choice in this."

Lucas did not waver, saying calmly, "Yea, she does. The choice is and must be yours, Bess." He gave her hand a gentle squeeze. For reassurance? Or something more? "If your whole heart is not in this, you will fail." Therein lay disaster for all of them, including her own family.

But Lucas erred. In truth, she had no choice, not since she had been a child, not since a visit by a duke in the unwholesome hours of the night. The moment she had dared to dream of a better life than God had granted her she had sealed her own fate.

She must be strong—for Elizabeth's sake as well as her own. Taking a deep breath, Bess said, "Yes. I am certain." She tried to smile for him, firming her chin when it threatened to tremble. "My mother dared to love a King. How can I be less brave?"

* * *

They rode through the night to Ashridge, the royal lady's current residence, Bess, Lady Smallthorpe and a troop of select men, determined to arrive before dawn. Bess must be accepted in Elizabeth's place before the arrival of the men who would be sent to arrest her or the Duke's plan would founder.

They dismounted a short distance from the house, concealing the mounts among the trees and crossing the remaining distance on foot under a sliver of a moon. Lady Smallthorpe led them to a small door. "It has no lock," she said in a hushed voice. It opened on well-oiled hinges to admit them.

Twisting sweating hands in her skirts, Bess followed Lady Smallthorpe to the royal apartments and the Lady's dressing room, while Braden led a pair of men to the bedchamber to remove Elizabeth from danger. Though Bess had memorized the Lady's entire wardrobe, seeing the grand gowns for the first time, even by the scarce moonlight, took her breath away. To think of owning so many dresses. Bess herself had

never owned more than three.

Lady Smallthorpe nudged her in the ribs. "Quick," she whispered. "Remove all your clothes."

Nodding, Bess stripped to her shift. The small portrait of her mother fell to the ground with a muted clatter before she could stop it.

"What is this?" Lady Smallthorpe snatched up the portrait before Bess could hide it. "You were told to bring nothing."

"It is my mother's picture," Bess protested. "It is all I have of her." With a swift tug, she plucked it back, stroking her mother's painted face.

"You cannot keep it," the other woman insisted. "The gentlewomen would wonder at it. The Lady Elizabeth does not even speak of her *own* mother."

"I will keep it hidden," Bess pleaded, pressing it to her bosom. "No one need know I have it."

"Hidden where? You will have no privacy from this moment. Every aspect of your life will be lived in full view of all, even your bath. You will never be alone." She held out an imperative hand. "Give it me."

Lady Smallthorpe was right, but Bess couldn't make herself surrender the portrait.

A soft scratch at the doorway preceded Lucas's entrance. He carried a white bundle which he shook out. A cloud of sweet perfume enveloped Bess. Grinning at her, he said, "The Lady's nightrail."

"I *do* hope she won't catch a chill," murmured Bess, taking the beautifully sewn garment from him.

"She won't," said Lucas, cheerfully. "Braden has her warmly wrapped, fear not. We'll dress her in your clothes for the return journey. Make haste."

Bess slipped the nightrail over her head, shrugging out of her own shift and letting it fall to the floor. It felt odd to wear another woman's clothes, to smell the other

woman's scent upon them.

Lady Smallthorpe bundled up Bess's clothes. "I shall dress my lady, not you, you lout." She said it with a certain severe fondness. Turning back to Bess, she said, "The portrait."

"What portrait?" asked Lucas.

Biting her lip, Bess showed it to him.

"You cannot have it here," said Lady Smallthorpe, implacable.

"Allow me to keep it safe for you, Bess." Lucas held out his hand for it.

He had kept his word to keep her safe until this moment. Now no man could do so. Instead, he would keep the tiny painting safe for her. She swallowed hard, squeezed her eyes closed and forced herself to give it to him. Her fingers itched to snatch it back.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Lady Smallthorpe handed Lucas the bundle of Bess's clothes. "Make haste now." She gestured Bess to follow her, while Lucas melted into the gallery in the other direction. Bess looked over her shoulder in hopes of one last encouraging smile, but he had disappeared. He had not even said farewell. Bess smothered a pang of loneliness.

"Guards?" she whispered. Was Elizabeth usually so ill-protected?

"They have been well-paid to look elsewhere this night," the other woman told her. Opening the bedchamber door, she pointed at a huge canopied bed and gave Bess a tiny shove, closing the door without further word.

No turning back.

The dim moonlight was even dimmer here. Pallets of sleeping gentlewomen covered the floor. To reach the great bed, Bess must tread between the stertorously breathing bodies as if she traversed a quagmire.

Heart pounding as fast as hummingbird wings, though with far greater force, Bess edged her way between them. How had Lucas's brother extracted the Lady with no outcry?

A girl no more than fifteen years of age moaned in her sleep as Bess passed. Bess almost stepped on an outflung hand. Bess froze, fighting for balance and praying that no alarms would be raised. To Bess's relief, the girl turned over and her deep breathing resumed.

Murmuring a soundless prayer of thanks, Bess contrived to reach the bed without further mishap. Parting the heavy curtains, she crawled onto the soft mattress and slid into the softer sheets. Were not her very life at risk, she might savor such delight.

The smell of the Lady was even stronger here, upon her pillow. Bess lay still and tried to slow the throbbing of her heart. Despite the desperate ride to reach Ashridge, she would not sleep tonight. Where were Lucas and the others? Bess had heard no loud cries. They must have Elizabeth safe away without being discovered. Still, it would be a long ride back and the last hours of it by daylight. Would someone see the Lady riding with them and wonder at it?

Bess dozed a little before dawn. The quiet rustling of the gentlewomen's gowns awoke her from a nightmare where she'd been forced to watch as Lucas's head was severed on the block. Not an auspicious way to begin her counterfeit.

"You are awake, my lady?" asked a soft voice.

"I am," Bess said with a firmness she did not feel.

The bed curtains parted, showering her with sunshine. She stretched in Elizabeth's manner as Lady Smallthorpe had taught her.

"Did you sleep well, my lamb?" asked a motherly woman. From her appearance, Bess guessed this must be the Kat Ashley who had attended Elizabeth for a score of years. If anyone discovered Bess's pretense, it would be Kat. Bess redoubled her efforts to remember her lessons.

"Passing well," Bess said, not needing to try hard to look listless. If Elizabeth had been ill of late, as Lucas's brother had said, this would not be exceptional.

Bess slid from the bed and yawned, finger-combing a snarl from her hair. She

caught Kat giving her a strange look. Had she been caught already? Was it the eyes? Elizabeth had darker eyes. Bess had forgotten the belladonna drops at the Duke's home. Besides, she had no place to conceal them. Lady Smallthorpe had forgotten that. "Is something amiss?" Bess brazened it out despite drought-dry lips.

Kat shook her head, looking less than convinced. "It is of no consequence. I thought, for a moment, that I smelled a horse."

Of course. Elizabeth's perfume had concealed the worst of it, no doubt, but Bess must smell of her overnight ride. "Then best I have a bath."

Kat dipped a small curtsy. "Of course, my lady. It is e'en now being prepared."
"Good."

The bath washed away the betraying odors of sweat and horse, covering Bess with more of Elizabeth's perfume, though it took all Bess's power of will to let herself be stripped naked in the midst of so many women. She forced herself to relax her muscles, lest the women feel her tension as they washed her. Bess did appreciate, though, when Kat washed her hair with soothing strokes, drifting near sleep from the tender care.

Bess rose from the tub, feeling pampered for the first time in her life. Kat wrapped her in a huge linen sheet and sat her in a chair by the fire to have her hair combed out.

Unable to stop herself, Bess moaned with pleasure. "How wondrous that feels."

Kat chuckled. "You say that always."

Too soon the indulgent ritual ended and Bess rose to let the women dress her, first a clean linen shift, then silken stockings tied with embroidered garter-ribbons and a damask satin skirt. A woman knelt before her and slipped soft leather shoes onto her feet.

Bess held her breath a long moment but the shoes went on with ease. As well they should. Lady Smallthorpe had made her wear an old pair of Elizabeth's shoes for the last half year.

They next presented a cunningly embroidered bodice for her approval. Bess nodded as if she had worn such beautiful clothes all her life and donned the garment.

“Tis more loose than before, my lady,” Kat observed, lacing the bodice up tight.

Bess’s figure must be more slender than Elizabeth’s. Still, Bess had her answer prepared. “I have not been well. When I am better, I am certain it will fit as it should.”

Kat and the other ladies accompanied Bess to the great chamber where the household gentlemen awaited Elizabeth’s pleasure. Already the benches had been moved aside to make room for dancing. Musicians had been playing a simple tune, but stopped the instant Bess arrived. Conversation halted. All eyes turned to her.

Now the masque begins in good earnest.

Bess strove to control the sick feeling twisting her belly. She must make no mistakes. The lives of everyone—Lucas, Lady Elizabeth, her own family and all the others—depended on her.

Pretending she hadn’t just wiped the sweat from her hands on the cloth of her skirts, Bess lifted her chin and walked to the center of the floor. Her women likewise took their positions and one gentleman for each lady joined them. At Bess’s nod, the musicians struck up their horns and lutes in a stately pavane.

Bess stepped forward and promenaded about with her partner. The slower dance was easier for Bess in Elizabeth’s gown, heavier than those she’d worn before dancing with Lucas, but a lively galliard soon followed. Bess had to swallow a groan. Pray God the cumbersome fabric not tangle itself around her legs.

Step-kick, step-kick. Bess hopped her way through the steps, now forward, now backward, now in a circle around the gentleman, then she waited as he danced around her. At last, Bess could hop her way to the side and let other dancers take the floor.

Too soon, a different gentleman step-hopped his way to her. Gritting her teeth not to sigh aloud, she let him lead her back into the center. Concentrating her mind on the dance, she didn’t particularly notice the man, just his hand as he guided her through

a complicated *riverenza* without a single misstep. He danced well, better than she.

The dance music finished with a fine flourish and the gentleman made a deep and graceful bow to her curtsy. Unable to stop herself, Bess grinned at her partner. Not one mistake! At the last moment, he lifted his dark head and winked a green eye at her.

Lucas!

Bess nearly cried his name aloud, struggling not to show her gladness. How did he come to be here? And where had he obtained those velvet clothes? She had assumed he must have ridden home with the others. Surely one of Elizabeth's gentlemen would question a stranger among them. But, no, no one made an outcry.

The music began again, a high-pitched flute carrying the melody this time. Lucas held out his hand to her. Unable to ask her questions, she took it with a slight flutter.

They had danced the steps together so often, Bess soon forgot to worry about her feet. Instead, she found herself more aware of Lucas than ever before. The strength, the warmth of his hand holding hers. The utterly male scent of him as he danced around her. The gaze of his eyes held her prisoner. She wanted the moment to last forever.

It became like a mating dance between a peacock and his hen. First teasing, then retreating; willing compliance and proud dismissal.

Lucas put his hands around her waist and lifted her in the air, setting her down on her feet. She swirled her skirts and tossed her head, letting her golden-red hair fly about her as if blown by the wind.

"How came you here?" Bess asked when he next came close.

His demeanor changed at once from devoted suitor to watchful guardian. Danger stood all about. She had let herself forget.

"I will be near," he whispered when the pattern of the dance permitted it, "as long as I may."

Bess turned her face away, careful not to let the attendants see as warmth spread through her at his pledge. If the worst came, Lucas could do naught to save her, yet to have him near ... she wanted to sing from the sheer joy of it.

"My lady!" cried the voice of a young boy, breaking into the music. "My Lady Elizabeth!"

Bess's foot caught in the hem of her damask skirt and she landed hard on her bottom. The music jangled into a discordant halt and the attendants stared, open-mouthed. Somewhere a woman giggled.

"Forgive my clumsiness, my lady, I pray you." Lucas broke the silence, helping her to her feet.

"G- granted," Bess managed to say, while the boy struggled to escape from the grasp of one of Elizabeth's gentlemen. Assuming a suitably commanding tone, she decreed, "Let the boy go."

The gentleman complied and the boy rushed to kneel at Bess's feet.

"My lady," the boy said. "I am sent to warn you. A troop of men approaches." The babble of murmuring voices around Bess fell silent.

Bess nodded, gesturing to one of the women. "See to the boy." Her gaze met Lucas's. Time to play her part. The Queen had sent an armed force to Ashridge for Elizabeth. Bess took a deep breath. In the oddest way, she was almost relieved that the waiting was over so soon.

She must show no fear. Bess tightened her knees when they threatened to give way. The gazes of a hundred attendants all scrutinized her, some fearful, some smug. Bess lifted her chin. The Queen would want her sister close, spied on. She had already summoned Elizabeth once and been refused. She would not countenance a second denial. What should Bess do?

She looked to Lucas for guidance, but he stared at her as if they had never met. She understood his unspoken message. She must rely on her wits from this moment

forward.

Plead illness, as Elizabeth already had. She forced her hands to release their death grip upon her skirts. "I fear I am too unwell to receive anyone," Bess said in a thin voice. "I arose from my sickbed too soon."

The attendants shifted on their feet. A couple of men grinned at each other. Her dancing *had* been rather energetic.

"I shall retire to my bedchamber the rest of this day," Bess said, lifting a hand to her brow. She did not have to feign its shaking. Giving the attendants no warning, she closed her eyes and collapsed, to the loud consternation of all.

Strong arms lifted her as Kat clucked, leading the way through Elizabeth's Privy Chamber to the bedchamber beyond. Bess breathed in the scent of Lucas and let her head loll against his shoulder. It gave her comfort, mad as the notion was. The gentlewomen trailed behind, gossiping in hushed voices.

Lucas crossed the floor with a swift, long-legged stride, laying Bess atop the cover of Elizabeth's bed. As he drew away, Bess felt his lips brush against hers. For courage? Oh, daring! Surely Kat and the other women would see him. Bess peeked between her lashes.

"Out with you," commanded Kat, shooing at him. "Men are not allowed in here."

Lucas made her a fine bow and let them hurry him from the room. The solace his presence had given her fled after him, leaving her empty.

Women hovered around her, twittering in concern. Gentle hands—Kat's?—laid a cool, damp cloth on Bess's brow. As if that would help. Better that, though, than to let the women see naked fear in her eyes.

Death stood close. Too close. Terror clawed at her. She could not do this! She tottered, a mere pawn, on a giant chessboard called England, while other hands moved the pieces. She should never have agreed to this mad scheme.

How foolishly she had assured Lucas she could be strong and carry out the

Duke's plan, when death and danger were far distant. Now her courage dried up, leaving empty vanity behind. It took all her resolve to lie still on the bed. Every nerve in her body exhorted her to run away.

A servant scratched at the door, speaking in a low voice to one of the women. Bess adjusted the cloth to see without being seen. The attendant approached Bess and curtsied.

"My lady, your kinsman, Sir William Howard, craves a word with you at once. Will you grant him an audience?"

Howard. One of Elizabeth's Boleyn cousins? No, her mother's uncle. Bess appreciated the irony of the Queen sending Elizabeth's own kinsman to bear her to prison.

The real Elizabeth would scorn to lie here like a sniveling child. Taking the cloth from her brow, Bess sat up. "I am far too ill. Desire my kinsman's indulgence, but I cannot see him today."

The attendant curtsied and passed the message to the serving man, sending him away.

Send them all away, her mind whispered.

"I would be alone—to rest," Bess added hastily as the women cast each other uncertain looks. She covered her eyes with the cloth and lay down. "*Now.*"

She should not have done that. Elizabeth was never alone. Lady Smallthorpe had taught Bess that. Had she roused suspicion? Would they disobey a direct command?

After a substantial pause, there came a murmuring of "Yes, my ladys" and the rustling of skirts told Bess they departed. Anonymous hands pulled Elizabeth's bed curtains closed. *At last.*

Bess sat up in the bed, tossing the cloth to the floor where it landed with a wet smack, echoing in the silence. The last scraps of bravery deserted her. Biting her hand,

she looked around wildly for any means of escape, seeing only fabric. She could not keep to the cursed bargain she had made. No matter the Duke deserved steadfastness, no matter she could never repay the money he had spent. She peeked out one corner of the bed curtains. Elizabeth's bedchamber lay on the ground floor. Might Bess slip out unnoticed through one of the windows and conceal herself in the forest?

On the other side of the curtains a throat cleared. Bess froze. Blessed Jesu! Sir William? Had he dared to invade Elizabeth's chamber without permission? Bess pushed the bed curtains aside and met Kat Ashley's shrewd gaze.

"Who *are* you?"

End of sample ~ Want to read more?