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Spymaster's Web

(Formerly: Web of Secrets)

Tudor Series

Book 3

Chapter 1

24th August 1572, Saint Bartholomew's Day, Paris

Two more steps to safety.

Trapped by the jostling crowd on the *quai*, her heart pounding so hard it threatened to burst, Ursula Walsingham clutched her four year old daughter tight against her breast, one hand over Frances's other ear, trying to muffle the ugly taunting all around them.

They must reach the ship. Ursula tried to shove herself two inches forward and failed utterly, impeded by the unwashed mob surrounding them. The overwhelming mass of the *canaille* fought back, obstructing her way.

Her eyes flooded with frustrated tears. Why had she come to Paris? When her husband had entreated her to join him, she had come without question, eager to see the famous, beautiful city. She never expected this ... this ugliness. The unreasoning mob crushed the small party of desperate English trying to flee for their lives, held back only by a handful of French guards charged with protecting them. Under her breath, a trembling Ursula uttered a prayer for the safety of her daughter, herself and her companions — and her unborn child.

Who had started the *mêlée* Ursula didn't know, didn't want to know. It might have been the Huguenots, French Protestants who wanted a freer practice of their evangelical religion. It might have been the *duc de Guise*, manipulating the mobs of Paris's poor and hungry to redouble his own power. Rumors carried into the ambassador's residence by terrified Englishmen claimed it was the Queen Mother herself, Catherine de Medici, who ruled France because her weak, indecisive son, the King, could not.

A house several yards away burst into flames to the howling approval of the rabble, sending screams and black smoke into the air. The acrid odor of burning flesh and hair stung Ursula's nostrils. Acid seared the back of her throat. By the Blessed Savior, how were they ever to escape this madness?

A large, muscular man brandished a heavy club to block them from reaching the

safety of the ship. "Your recusant legs we will tear apart, you godless bitch," he jeered, barring the way between the clutch of cowering English and the shelter of the ship that would carry them home, if they could but reach it. He made an obscene gesture at Ursula. Against her will, she shrank back, her chest tightening. "You will beg mercy of the one true God as we plow your white belly until you are dead."

"Then we will spit your heretic child," shrieked a furious, ragged woman by his side, gouts of saliva spurting from between toothless gums as she waved a sharp-pointed stick at Ursula. "We will put her over our cook-fires and burn her alive!"

Little Frances wound her arms tighter around her mother's neck, one hand tangled in Ursula's hair, too young to understand the words, but recognizing the menace in them. Ursula staggered as if someone had punched her in the belly. *Dear God.* She must get Frances to safety, but how? They couldn't move.

Ursula crushed her little daughter's head tighter still against her chest. The clinging child was frightened enough by the noise and the jostling and the stench of blood and smoke and death. She didn't understand why she must leave the pretty house where she had lived for over a year, why she could no longer play in the tranquil garden along the river as she had only one week ago. Ursula couldn't understand either. She shifted the precious burden higher, heavy in her weary arms. How had Paris come to this ... this lunacy?

The French guards surrounding Ursula thrust the jeering woman back, brandishing their pikes, trying to force a safe path through the buffeting crowds for the wife of Francis Walsingham, English Ambassador to France, and the handful of horror-struck English expatriates who had managed to find sanctuary with her husband.

One more step to safety.

Shouts grew shrilly excited as the bloodthirsty mob dragged a man, a printer of books by his garb, to the center of the Pont Notre-Dame reaching over the Seine a short way downriver. Lifting him high into the air, the mob threw him off the bridge into the churning water below, ignoring his frantic pleas of innocence.

In the water, men waited in boats, pursuing the luckless fellow as he tried desperately to swim away. They forced his head underwater until he drowned, joining

the host of pale, bloated dead in the blood-stained river. Ursula cringed and murmured a prayer for the soul of the poor, murdered man even as she begged the good Lord again for the blessed deliverance of herself and her children.

The unruly mob pressed again, forcing the party of terrified English back. *Three steps further away now, God help us.* Beside her, her husband's friend, Philip Sidney, drew his sword and held it high. Her heart contracted. Oh brave, foolish boy. Did he even know how to use it as a weapon? He wore a ceremonial sword, not one meant for war. Faith, was it even sharp? The crowd hesitated a moment, assessing the new threat. Ursula bit her lip. Would it suffice, that one sword, or would it only enflame the mob to fresh violence?

During their brief moment of uncertainty, the French guards broke through the mob. Young Philip, the gallant fool — only seventeen — thrust Ursula onto the gangplank, barring the way to all others until she reached the ship. Several hands threw stones at her as she propelled herself up the rickety plank. Little Frances clung tight, almost strangling her mother. Arms aching from the strain of carrying her, Ursula tried to shield her, interposing her own body between her child and danger.

Several rocks rattled against the sturdy hull of the ship, but a few pelted their target, Ursula's back smarting despite the thick cloth of her gown. Her heavy skirts fought her legs, her thighs burned from the effort and the narrow plank flexed perilously underfoot, yet she forced herself ever forward, dreading every moment that she might drop her daughter into the dark, swirling water below.

One stone dealt a glancing blow to her cheek, knocking her off-balance, and she staggered, almost falling. Stomach pitching, Ursula redoubled her grip on her daughter. Shifting some of Frances's weight to her hip, Ursula climbed the last two feet onto the ship's deck. She touched the wound with one hand, feeling the swelling flesh, the sting, the trickle of oozing blood.

Aboard at last, she pried Frances loose and set her down on the deck, the muscles of her arms and shoulders screaming from abuse, unable to carry her daughter a moment longer. Frances buried herself in Ursula's skirts, clinging to them as if she would never let go.

Ignoring her dark red hair undone and whipping in the wind, Ursula stood at the

ship's rail while Philip and the other Englishmen clambered aboard in haste as the French guards held back the rabble. The gangplank groaned and bent under their weight. *Please, God, let the others reach the ship safe — Philip, most of all.*

For a long moment it looked as though the straining wood might buckle, throwing the precious lives into the water, but it held. Ursula held her breath as the men scrambled aboard in a single mass, gallant, reckless Philip coming last, still brandishing that sword lest the throng pursue them up the plank. More stones clattered against the hull, one striking a fugitive on the brow just as he reached the top, sending him tumbling to his knees. The others trampled over the poor fellow in their desperation to escape.

The sailors kicked away the gangplank as Philip leaped the last two feet. It dropped into the water with a large splash. Philip missed the deck by an inch, but strong hands grabbed him by the arm and coat to drag him the rest of the way. Ursula closed her eyes in thanks, knees trembling so hard she almost collapsed to the deck. One unsteady hand covered her mouth. *Praise be to God.* The rabble could not reach them now. At last they were safe.

With a deafening roar, the angry mob, deprived of their quarry, fell upon two stranded Englishmen as they arrived late, separated from the larger group protected by the French King's own guards. "Help them!" she cried out, one fist pounding the rail, but her cry carried away in the wind.

The throng hacked apart the unfortunate men alive and screaming before Ursula's very eyes as the mob bellowed its triumphant approval. She gagged at the appalling sight and crossed herself. The French guards had made no effort to stop them. "Cravens! For shame, sirs. For shame!"

Yet — had they waited the additional minutes for these men, might the mob have taken the ship and murdered all aboard?

"My lady," urged Philip, tugging at her shoulder, his coat torn. "Come below. It is not seemly for you to see such things."

Ursula pulled free, tears streaming unrestrained. "It is not seemly that those men should be slain with such bestiality for no crime but that they are English." A ragged woman in the crowd below lifted blood-stained hands, dancing about waving them in

the air. Ursula retched at the gruesome sight. She swallowed hard though she held her head proud. "I would dishonor them ... and England ... by turning away."

"Lady, please, you must think of your child," Philip persisted. Another volley of stones hurtled toward them, accompanied by a burst of French curses. He raised an arm to deflect one from her face, catching the blow on his forearm. The stone fell harmless into the water. "This is not good for your daughter." He looked oddly thrice his years this day, yet despite a long, nasty cut on his right cheek, a swollen nose and a bent sword, his brow creased with concern for her. By all the saints, how must she look to him?

Above their heads, the sails unfurled and caught the wind, praise God. Ursula's knees shook. The vessel creaked and groaned, lurched and rocked as it wended its way into the river current, past more bodies, men and women, young and old, rich and poor. Some drowned, some hewn with knives, others riddled with arrows. None were spared. Ursula stared without comprehension.

A doll drifted nearby, face-down, long brown hair floating in the water. It turned over as she watched. No doll. A child, her daughter's age, perhaps a few months younger. Ursula bent heaving over the rail. Such wickedness done and all in the name of religion. *Do we all worship the same God? How could He let this be?*

Poor little Frances. The waif, dark eyes huge, still huddled against her, sucking a thumb, something she hadn't done for almost a year. Ursula sighed and let Philip draw her away from the rail at last. "Aye, you are right. We should go below and get your wounds tended."

Separating Frances from her leg, she crouched and picked up her daughter. Frances clung like a limpet, her brown hair matted with sweat and spittle. Sidney gave his useless sword a look of disgust and threw it overboard, saying, "I have no more need of you."

Ursula hoped he spoke true.

Philip stood back to let her enter first. The small cabin was stifling hot, dark and over-crowded, the reek of blood, sweat and urine competing with the rankness of dead fish. More than one of their number had pissed himself. She couldn't blame them. She feared her own under-linen would bear no close examination.

The young looked old and the old looked ancient. Merchants, laborers, servants, even a few English noblemen, they all resembled survivors of a battle. Not one had reached the ship intact: all bore dirt and cuts and scrapes on their faces, two cradled broken arms and one unlucky man had lost an eye.

She hung back near the door, the men whimpering and moaning while the ship's surgeon did his overburdened best to tend their injuries, but one young fellow with a dislocated finger and a broken tooth nudged the wounded man beside him, his knee skinned, a huge bump on his forehead. Bashfully pulling their forelocks, both stood by silent, mutual agreement to give Ursula and her child their space on a small bench. She gave them a tremulous smile of gratitude and collapsed onto it with the last of her strength, her free hand curling around her belly and the tiny life deep within.

Closing her eyes, she leaned her head back against the wall, unable to hold it up. Of a sudden, Ursula stiffened and sat up straight, breathless. Oh God, she had left her dearest Francis back there. Vomit rushed up her throat. Unknown hands gave her a bucket and she emptied her stomach of bitter bile, too weak to keep it back any longer.

"How can this have happened?" an old man quavered, one of the English refugees who had sought the Ambassador's protection, his face all bloody, his doublet half torn off. "Has all Paris gone mad?"

The ragged group looked to her as if she knew. Ursula shook her head though, of course, she knew a few essential facts. Her husband's web of spies kept him well-informed — and if he deemed it prudent to keep much of it from her, she couldn't help it if her husband sometimes spoke in his sleep.

"It was Queen Catherine's doing," one of the noblemen spoke up, holding a bloodied rag against his face. Once it had been the leg of his silk hose. "She insisted Prince Henri of Navarre, who is a Huguenot, come to Paris to wed the King's sister, a Catholic princess — to end the civil war and bring the people of France, people of all religions, together."

Most nodded. Many a royal marriage ended wars.

"Only then, once the bitch had the leading French Protestants gathered in the city for the wedding," said Philip Sidney, flinging up a bitter hand, "she ordered them

murdered, even the King's own guests at the Louvre Palace. Henri de Navarre himself barely escaped death."

"How do you know?" a sullen merchant challenged him.

Philip drew himself up to his full height. "I saw some of the killings with my own eyes." His face darkened. "Some of them were my friends." His shoulders sagged. "I could not help them."

Several men swore harsh oaths. Afterward somehow the lawless mob had been set loose to loot and pillage. What mattered it if a man prayed to God in French or Latin if he had gold or jewels to steal?

Ursula's hands began to tremble uncontrollably. This was the Paris she had just fled, leaving her beloved husband behind to face alone. She doubted they had seen the worst yet.

God — any god out there listening — help him. Protect my dearest Francis. Bring him home safe.



April 1573

How good to smell England again.

Sir Francis Walsingham disembarked from the ship that had carried him from France and mounted a horse to take him home to Barn Elms, his country house in Surrey. He had had his fill of foreign lands.

He left behind a France in turmoil. Thousands of Huguenot Protestants dead. The mob spared neither child nor woman nor old man. It cared not if its victims were innocent of any offense in its thirst for blood.

Now the worst was over, the murderers confessed to their Romish priests who absolved them of the sin of murder with a few small penances. Marry, some priests even praised the mob —the fewer heretics, the better, they said. Even the Pope celebrated the murders, declaring the massacre an act of divine retribution against the ungodly.

Francis rubbed his forehead. His Protestant conscience wasn't so easily appeased.

The French had forced him to give up François de Beauvais, the Seigneur de Briquemault, a Huguenot noble who had taken shelter in the English Embassy. The price of safety for his daughter and pregnant wife. Francis closed his eyes a long moment, seeing again the unfortunate man's horrific death.

No, he would not easily forget his time in France. Queen Elizabeth had sent him there to support the Huguenots. Now, no man would admit to being one. Still, he had saved all the Englishmen within his power. He must take comfort in that.

Recognizing a familiar landmark, Francis spurred his horse to greater speed, eager to be home. It had been months. Ursula must have given birth by now. Had she survived it? Was she well? He wanted to bury himself deep his wife's arms and forget, if only for a moment, the killings in Paris.

He reached Barn Elms shortly before dusk. At his approach, the porter swung wide the gate and let him into the courtyard. Dismounting, he left the beast with a respectful stable-man. He took the steps two at a time, wishing he were the sort of man to bellow for his wife.

No need. Ursula ran toward him like a girl half her age. A grin almost escaped him. She looked better than well, her face aglow. She slowed at the last to a ladylike walk to meet him at the top of the steps. She dipped into a demure curtsy.

"Husband. Welcome home."

He wasn't fooled, letting his hot gaze speak for him. "Madam," he said, outwardly cool.

"I am pleased you are home and safe," she replied, as cool as he, giving naught away to the watching servants.

Taking her by the hand, Francis led her into his private study and closed the door. Away from prying eyes, he shoved her hard against the door and thrust his tongue deep into her mouth, a kiss that left them both breathless and eager for more. After tasting her sweet response, he wrapped his arms around her and buried his nose in her dark red hair. He loved the smell of her, roses and lavender and a touch of rosemary, underlaid with the scent of woman. *Now* he was home.

He was not a man given to emotion, yet he could not stop the damp gathering in his eyes.

“Ursula,” he whispered, barely getting the words past a tight throat.

“Francis.” She clutched him as though she intended never to let him go. He too wanted to press his body against the length of her, to know for certain that he hadn’t imagined her.

“I worried so,” she said, leaning her head against his shoulder, nestling against his neck. “Every moment you were in Paris, I feared for you. I could not sleep.”

“And I feared for you, until I received your letter that you had come safe home.” He pressed a fierce kiss onto her hand, then stood back to look at her, holding her by the shoulders. “You look well. The babe?”

“You have a fine daughter, born three months ago. I named her Mary, after your sister. I ...” She looked at her feet and twisted her hands. “I am sorry she is not the son we hoped for.”

Francis hugged her tight. “I care only that you are safe and she is healthy. The rest is in God’s hands.”

She met his gaze with a serious one. “I am no longer young, Francis. What if I never bear you a son?”

He shrugged. “Then I shall have none. I am no great lord who needs a son to inherit his lands and titles. Come, my love. Show me my daughter.”



Francis stared down at his sleeping infant daughter in her cradle. Mary had Ursula’s dark red hair and fair skin. “She is perfect, beloved.”

In a cot nearby, his other daughter, Frances, struggled heavy-eyed to awaken, thumb in mouth, plump cheeks flushed with sleep. Her hair, the same walnut-brown as his, clung damply to her head. He ruffled her hair, then let Ursula urge the child back to bed, his heart bursting with love for these, his women.

Watching them, he made a silent vow. He would do anything he must, sacrifice anyone he must, to keep England safe. The Papists must never be allowed to threaten those he loved.

The massacre at Paris must never touch his home.

Part I
Chapter 2

To Sir F. Knollys —

My debts at the least are two or three and twenty thousand pounds. If I should not speed well, I will never live to see the end of my poverty.

R. Essex

March 1590, seventeen years later

“But Father, the man does not love me!”

Sir Francis Walsingham eyed the seething young woman before his desk. So emotional. So unlike him and his wife. The bright late winter sunlight streaming through the window sparked lighter tones of red and gold in her dark brown hair, making the strands look almost chestnut in color. Her dark eyes snapped like —

He forced his mind back to the problem at hand. “What matters that?” he asked with a shrug. “The Earl of Essex is already a rising star at Court, eclipsing his step-father, Robert Dudley, as the Queen’s favorite. Essex will make you a countess. Is that not enough?” For any other woman but Frances it would be. He stiffened at a sudden, sharp twinge in his back and smothered a gasp. *No, not yet.* He needed all his wits about him just now.

“Not for me!” Unaware, Frances flounced to the window and whirled, striding back to his desk and leaning over it with both hands. “Did it not suffice I married once to please you? You promised me then that I might please myself for my second husband.”

He pursed his mouth. “Was I so foolish to promise that?” He doubted it. She had gone starry-eyed into that marriage, full of hope and bright expectations. A pity she had found reality a cold bed-fellow. Perhaps he should not have encouraged her dreams. Then again, at the time, how could he ever have denied her? “Sir Philip Sidney was a good man, dearling. A great soldier, a brilliant scholar, a celebrated poet—”

“Who died with another woman’s name on his lips.” She smote the heavy wood

desk-top with both fists and glared at him. He marveled at the splendid woman he had raised. Another father might have tried to beat her into submission. This woman knew no fear.

“Know you who she was, Father? Lady Rich. The inspiration of all his poetry.”

Unfortunate that Sidney’s dallying had destroyed her trust. Walsingham needed Frances’s assent, but he must win her with logic, not flattery or force. “Penelope Devereux,” he said without heat, stroking his beard. “Essex’s sister.”

“Aye, his sister. And you would have me smile ...” she bared her teeth, “and pretend ...” Frances simpered and plied an imaginary fan, “and feign ...” her eyes sparked with fury, “as though I do not wish to plunge a dagger into her black heart?”

“You malign the lady.” Propping his arms on his desk, Walsingham steepled his fingers, trying to ignore the growing ache deep in his belly. “Common report would have it she is unhappy with her husband.” More than that, she already had taken a lover in Charles Blount, if his sources were correct — and they always were.

“Thus it follows I must be unhappy with mine?” she retorted with an instant flash of her eyes. How easy it was to provoke her. Just like her mother.

He suppressed a sigh. He had wanted Robert Cecil for her but Burghley’s younger son had married another woman last year. Brilliant of mind, he could have matched Frances well. Essex had little to recommend him but a handsome face and royal favor. Walsingham shrugged. Not all matches ended in a love such as he and Ursula had found.

He tapped his steepled fingers against his lips. “Why must you be unhappy with Essex? You hardly know the man. You seemed happy enough with Sir Philip. They are much alike,” he said mildly.

“Too much alike,” Frances insisted. She stomped back to the window, heavy brocade skirts swinging. He shifted in his chair when she wouldn’t see, trying to ease the torment in his belly searing its slow way across his back. “I knew my duty to my husband. I never once refused him in the night, even when he stank of cheap women and vile liquor.” Her head tilted up as though she looked at the heavens and her fingers curled into claws. “Or *her*.”

She spun around to face him, more earnest, voice softening. “I know he was your

friend, Father, and I am grateful he saved Mother's life in Paris, but my husband's heart was already taken long ere he met me. I gave him a daughter, but he cared nothing for her." Her face crumpled, unshed tears glinting in her eyes. "Or me."

He sympathized, truly, but couldn't let that sway him. He had run out of time. "Sidney must have cared, my dear," said Walsingham, steeling himself. "Did he not commend you into Essex's care on his deathbed?"

"Aye, and then he composed a song to be sung whilst he died." Frances growled and rubbed her temples. "Why he troubled to leave me to Essex, I cannot imagine. I am no hound or jewel or sword to be bequeathed."

Walsingham hid a smile at her sudden peevishness. She possessed a far greater value than she knew. Pray God she need never learn it. "You carried his child."

"And lost it the moment I reached England's shores," she retorted. A darkness flickered in the back of her eyes. She had cared more about the lost babe than she wished to reveal. He knew how she wept at night in the dark of her room.

A sharp pain stabbed him deep in the bowels, cutting off his air. He fought it and won. "Sidney felt responsible for you. Perhaps you should not have fled the Spanish Netherlands so soon after his death."

"Had I not, you would already be calling Essex 'son,'" she countered. "*Against* my will." Frances huffed and sat on the edge of his desk, crossing her arms.

Walsingham stood with some effort and looked down at her. So beautiful. So young still. Only twenty-three. By the same age, he had already fled England with other Protestants when the Catholic Mary Tudor had become Queen. Fate had forced him to become a man grown at too young an age.

Sir Francis had known, of course, of Sidney's infidelities, of his passion for another man's wife. It was his business to know. Little happened in any corner of England without his spies learning of it. He frowned. He had *not* wanted Frances to learn she wasn't Sidney's first choice for a bride. He hadn't wanted her hurt.

A shame, perhaps. One far past remedy. He had always taken pride in her sharp skills of observation, even as a young girl. Had she not helped him bring down a plot to free the Queen of Scots, finding the key to a secret cipher when his best men had failed for months? He needed that now. He trusted only her.

Walsingham knew his duty. He embraced it willingly. He had imposed it upon himself long before.

He must keep England safe. No matter the cost. This would be a heavy one, but he would sacrifice anyone, even Frances, for England's sake.

There was little time left. Almost none, in fact. He must make Frances understand. He must.

"I am dying."

It cost him dear to say those words without emotion. He wanted to rage at it, but raging changed nothing. The tumors deep in his belly didn't lie. Sometimes he longed for the relief of death. So soon now.

"What?" Frances scoffed. She waved the words away. "Nonsense."

He smiled a little at that. Count on his Frances, never giving an inch. "A fire burns in my belly and there is blood in my piss. When I can piss." Taking her hand, he gave her his most earnest look. "Hear me, Frances. Your husband left behind nothing but debts. Sidney's funeral beggared me. What little I have left, I leave to my wife, except for a tiny pension, an unworthy sum, for you and your daughter."

Her eyes narrowed, searching his for the truth. She paled and her stiff back softened. "This is no deception, is it, Father?" she asked, reading his face. "You truly *are* d-dying." Her voice caught on the last word.

"Essex is not the man I wanted for you," he admitted. "In fact, I had a very different man in mind —" Agony swept over him like an ocean wave, catching him unprepared. To his shame, he gasped aloud, too weak to conceal it from Frances. Brow creased in deep concern, she rushed to his side but he waved her away. He leaned heavily on the sturdy desk for support. He waited, breathing hard, until it passed. "— but at this moment, Essex's offer is sent from Heaven."

"Heaven sent? The poorest Earl in all England?" she shot back. She leaned closer. "Father, what are you not telling me?"

He had known she would suspect. She was too clever. Walsingham held onto his secrets with the ease of long practice. "He is rich in the Queen's favor. She will ensure that wealth flows into his coffers." Or would, if only the arrogant wretch were grateful and obedient. "You have only to be patient."

“Patient!” Frances stormed away from him. Walsingham made to follow her, halting in place as a sharp pain stabbed him deep in the kidney. He groped his way blindly to his chair and half-fell into it.

“Father!” Frightened, Frances ran back and hovered over him. He watched her face harden with resolve. “I shall fetch Mother at once.”

“Nay.” He grabbed her by the arm, but with a grip so feeble Frances might break it with ease if she chose. She did not. “Ursula can do naught to help. Seeing me like this ...” He gasped for breath several times. “It would only distress her.” He took another deep breath, trying to control the pain by force of will. “Marry the Earl of Essex, girl. This is important.” He tried another tack. “If you ever loved me, Frances, obey me in this,” he rasped.

“I *do* love you, Father, but we do not have the Queen’s permission to wed,” Frances protested in tentative notes. “Surely we must wait —”

“There is no time,” Walsingham insisted with the last of his strength. “I have not long. It may not be comfortable for a short while, but the Queen will soon forgive him.” He hoped so, for Frances’s sake. He regretted he must coerce her like this but he no longer had any choice. “In time, Her Majesty may even be ... pleased.”

Frances’s lips twisted in disbelief. Perhaps she was right. Her Majesty had been known to slap her ladies who transgressed with men. His thoughts darkened. Even the Queen’s own cousin had been imprisoned for marrying the wrong man.

At least he need not fear that unkind fate for Frances. The Queen hadn’t objected — much — when Sidney asked to marry the girl, back when Frances served her as a Maid of Honor. Her Majesty might oppose her latest favorite marrying Frances, but Essex’s silver tongue would soon charm her into a better mood and, if he could not, the powerful Cecils would smooth it over. Besides, short or long, exile from Court wouldn’t trouble his Frances. Sir Francis was more concerned she might fall in love with her handsome, feckless husband.

If aught went wrong, this Queen in a rage might take an action she later regretted but could not undo. Then again, perhaps his concerns were unfounded. Essex might gain wisdom with added years. He was too much like his heedless father with not enough of his mother’s shrewdness. Pray God Walsingham’s fears were just those of

a dying old man.

“Frances ...” He reached a trembling hand out to her.

She sighed in surrender. In that moment, Walsingham knew he had won. “Very well, Father, I will marry Essex for you.” He closed his eyelids in thankfulness. “But,” she added with spirit, “if I marry a third time, I marry to please myself.”

A faint smile stretched his lips. He would not be there to stop her. “I would expect nothing less, dearling.” He squeezed her hand hard. “Send my secretary to me,” said Walsingham in a thin, weary voice. “I must write to the Earl of his good fortune.”

Frances straightened, visibly reluctant to go. “I will — and shall send you a beaker of good wine to bring you strength.”

“And I ...” His body refused to obey his will another moment and collapsed against the chair-back. “I shall drink it.”

Walsingham stared at the door of his study long after she had left. Now he could die in peace. He had just performed his last task to protect England. He had done more than find Frances a husband.

He had placed a spy in the Earl of Essex’s household.

Chapter 3

*'Tis but the shadow of a wife you see:
the name and not the thing.*

*All's Well that Ends Well
William Shakespeare*

“Should not a bride be happy on her wedding day?”

Frances hastily wiped wet eyes with the backs of her hands before turning to face the intruder. She hadn't seen him in years, but she knew him at once. The Earl of Essex.

The man who teased her bore some similarity to his cousin, her dead husband, though younger and darker, his complexion unmarred by the smallpox. The Earl had a good leg, she noticed, a trim waist and a pleasant clean-shaven face.

She made herself curtsey, a sour taste tickling the back of her throat. “My lord of Essex,” she greeted him with studied propriety. “You have come in good time.”

He must have wasted none, but come at once upon receiving Father's letter. Frances smothered a sigh. Why could she not have been born a son? There would be no need for any of this. She might have earned her own advancement as Father had.

Her husband — or he would be by nightfall — made her a graceful, courtly bow, his dark curls ruffled by the cool, early spring breeze. His silver and black brocade doublet became him well. How could a man with no money afford such fine garments?

Those clothes were immaculate, too, as if he hadn't just sailed a fast ship across the Narrow Seas and pelted for miles along muddy roads to the Walsingham house on Seeding Lane in London. The scents of salt-water and horse-flesh blended with the aroma of attractive male. She stole a deeper inhale. The heady, not unpleasant musk awoke her senses. Sir Philip had never stirred her like this, just by being. Frances wasn't at all certain she liked the feeling. She trusted it not.

Essex gave her a cheeky, charming smile. Something indefinable tugged at her, made her want to sigh like her silly, unmarried self at fifteen. “Lady Sidney,” he said

with a Welsh lilt. “Did you think I would not make all haste to claim my bride?” She caught herself smiling back at him, her spirits lifting. Perhaps this marriage might not be such a disaster after all.

“But why are we so formal, my lady? We are soon to marry. You must call me your dearest Robin and I shall call you my sweet Frances.” She squirmed, lowering demure lids at this bit of courtly silliness. She had already agreed to wed him. What more did he want?

Essex took her shoulders in his hands — he had long, slender hands — and pressed his full, warm lips against hers, the kiss not quite chaste. A strange, spidery feeling rippled down her back, settling in her belly with an odder feeling, as though her womb danced a jig. She took in a sharp breath. Mercy!

Frances had known a faint thrill of desire once or twice in the past at the sight of a handsome man, though never before with such vigor — and never caused by her husband, Sidney.

Releasing her, Essex drew to a small bench of cleverly wrought iron, moving with exceptional grace. He slid one hand down her arm to the wrist, spawning shameful ripples of lusty craving all the way to her loins. “But come, my dear. Sit.” He took the place beside her, sitting just an inch too close, resting a proprietary arm on the back of the bench. She edged away from his thigh, not far enough. He teased the back of her neck with an idle finger. “Tell me why you weep.”

Why? Reminded of her grief, Frances’s eyes flooded anew, but she blinked it back. She had come into Father’s garden in search of solitude, but the sight of the May-rose buds, too early to bloom, had only reminded her of the gentle, precious man who lay abed in the room overlooking this garden.

Sir Francis would never see his beloved flowers bloom once more, never walk in this garden again. An invisible blade stabbed her through the heart. Father had no strength left, not even to stand. Instead he lay in his bed all day, a shrunken relic of his former self, waiting to die.

In her deepest heart, Frances knew her wedding to Essex was the only thing keeping him alive. Fighting the ache consuming her, she clutched her hands together in a stranglehold.

God's fury, if only she could somehow will the strength of her own body into his failing one. She wanted Father hale and whole again. She wanted the vigorous man who used to take her up before him on the saddle when he rode. She wanted back the man who had held her tenderly when she cried at her sister, Mary's, death, blinking back his own tears.

She wanted the man who had opened her eyes and her mind to a world far beyond a woman's usual lot of wife and mother. A life not allowed her ladyship, the Countess of Essex.

She dared say none of this to the Earl. They were all but strangers. She ducked her head and looked at her throbbing, tight-clenched hands. She forced them apart. "I weep for my father, sir," she answered at last.

With one finger, he tipped up her chin to meet his gaze, the beautiful dark eyes solemn. She lost herself in them. She could gaze into those eyes forever. Her breath caught. Would he kiss her again? "Ah, a worthy reason, indeed." He stroked a gentle thumb across her cheekbone, finding a trace of moisture that had escaped her. "I lost my own father when I was but a boy, but withal, one too old to be allowed the surcease of tears. I wept for him, but in secret."

Frances's heart softened. *Oh, the poor child, forced to cry alone and uncomforted.*

He leaned closer and confided, "My mother would have had me whipped for it, had she known."

Her insides quivered, a wave of dizziness sweeping over her. *Faith, even his breath smells sweet.* Frances pulled herself together and tilted her head to one side. "Your mother did not weep?"

"I never asked her," he said with a shrug. "She married again, when her two years of mourning ended. A practical woman, my mother." His last words held a trace of pride, but then, his mother had earned it. Only an extraordinary woman might steal a favorite away from a queen.

Frances herself had heard a rumor the Countess, his mother, had been with child by the Earl of Leicester, but if true, no babe had ever come of it.

Essex caught a wayward strand of her hair and twirled it around his finger. Her knees began to tremble and her mouth went unaccountably dry. Sidney had never

played with her hair. “My mother is pleased,” he continued, “that you agreed to honor your husband’s dying wish consigning you to my care, Frances.”

Her father’s dying wish carried the greater weight “Why should *you* wish to honor it?” she asked, forthright. “We barely know each other.”

“Is that why you fled the Spanish Netherlands when my cousin, Sidney, died four years ago?” he asked, sitting back.

True enough. Frances bit her lip and lowered her eyelids a long moment, twisting her old wedding ring around her finger. How might she answer without insulting Essex?

The skin around his eyes crinkled. “There was no need to fear, Frances. I would have given you time to come to know me, as indeed I shall. As for the rest, it is more than my honor.” He took her hand in his. The air suddenly seemed thinner. “I have long admired you. Few ladies would risk their safety to join their noble husbands at war in a foreign land, yet you did. My cousin was wounded unto death and yet you nursed him, seeing to his every comfort before seeking your own.” Essex stroked the hand he held.

Frances’s cheeks warmed, gratified that someone had noticed, even if her late husband had accepted it as his right.

“If that were not enough, my dear, you are so very beautiful, you know.” He tucked the loose strand of hair behind her ear. She shivered all the way down her back at the warmth, the slight roughness of his skin against hers.

“Me?” Frances squeaked. Hardly. She was no beauty. Her nose was too big and her face too narrow — and as for her mouth...

“You.” He carried her hand to his lips and kissed its palm. Frances trembled a little at the intimate touch. Courtly gestures had never been Sidney’s way — not to his wife, at least.

Like a kitten tasting its first cream, she decided she could come to like courtly gestures. Had Father the right of it? Perhaps, if she tried very hard, she might teach herself to love Essex. His dark eyes looked deep into hers as though he sought her soul. Her mouth parted. Perhaps she wouldn’t have to try so very hard, after all. Frances licked her lips. Essex’s broadening smile told her he guessed the effect he

had on her. She wanted to resent it, his ease with women.

“And it has long been my wish for closer ... ties ... to your family.”

Why? Frances wrinkled her brow, trying to cling to logic. The Walsinghams were good enough people, but of ordinary birth. True, her father wielded much power as the Queen’s Principal Secretary, though that meant nothing to a nobleman already high in the Queen’s favor. Nor could Father exert that power on his behalf much longer. So, why would Essex risk imprisonment by marrying Frances without Her Majesty’s leave? “I do not und —”

“Mama, Mama!” A five year old whirlwind burst from the house, racing across the garden with a small black puppy on her heels. Frances pulled her hand free, cold reality rushing in, unsure whether to be glad or sorry for the interruption. The girl hurled herself into her mother’s arms while the puppy yapped, leaping on two legs and demanding to be noticed.

“Elizabeth!” Frances gave her dearling a loud, smacking kiss. Belatedly remembering Essex, she flushed dully and slid the child off her lap, smoothing away the wrinkles from her skirts. “You will make our guest think you have no manners.” The reproof came out more indulgent than scolding. What would Essex think? The puppy yapped and pawed Frances’s knee.

“Malin, be quiet!” Frances reprimanded the puppy to no discernible effect.

“Malin?” Essex quizzed, chuckling despite his prospective bride’s inability to control either dog or daughter.

“Mama says it means ‘little warrior,’” Elizabeth confided in a loud, juicy whisper, leaning closer.

“Is that so?” Essex asked the girl, eyes dancing. She nodded vigorously. Essex picked up the pup by the scruff of the neck. Legs paddling the air, Malin strained to lick the Earl’s face. “An apt name for such a fierce animal.” The little girl preened. He set the puppy down again and addressed himself to her. “So, you are Sidney’s daughter.” To Frances, he added, “She has grown so much!”

Of course she had. Elizabeth had been a babe in swaddling when her father died, not that Essex had seen her above twice. “Elizabeth, make your curtsy to the Earl of Essex,” said Frances in her best “mother” voice, straightening the rumpled black wool

skirts and tidying her daughter's dark brown hair. The little girl obeyed with the appealing awkwardness of her years, falling on her rump when Malin chose that precise moment to run between her feet.

Essex picked her up and swung her into the air while Frances snatched up the puppy to prevent further catastrophes. "Hello, Elizabeth," he greeted her with a great big buss on both cheeks. "My name is Robin."

The girl tolerated the kisses, but soon wiggled to be free. Taking no offense, Essex let her go. "Mama, Grandmama sent me to tell you that you are wanted in the house."

The priest must have arrived. A leaden weight filled her throat before dropping into her stomach with a splash. She found herself avoiding Essex's gaze. "Tell her I come." Frances's reprieve had ended.

Taking back her puppy, Elizabeth ran back into the house. Frances made to follow her but Essex took her hand again, holding her back. She searched his eyes. "It is a delightful child. I want you to know, Frances, that my cousin's daughter will be cherished in my house. I will care for her as if she were my own. I thought you would want to know that."

Her heart warmed. It did give her some comfort. What more could she ask for? Love? She must be grateful for his kindness and frame her will to align with his.

It would be very difficult. Obedience wasn't her strongest trait, but she had done it before as Philip Sidney's wife. She must do it again. For Father's sake.

Essex held out a courtly arm to her and Frances accepted it. Whatever Fate brought, she could not change it. Perhaps it wouldn't be so very bad. She might even enjoy marriage this time, if no woman came between her and Essex.

A servant opened the door to them and Essex stood aside to let Frances go in first. A charming laugh like the tinkling of tiny bells grated on her ears. Frances froze, her stomach giving a vicious twist.

By my holidame, what is that woman doing here?

Essex had brought his sister, Penelope, Lady Rich.

My enemy.

The poxy bitch! How dare she?

Frances clenched her fists until the nails dug deep into her palms. Was it not enough that she had ruined any chance that Frances might find happiness with Sir Philip Sidney? Must the woman destroy Frances's second marriage before it had even begun?

She looked well, even Frances admitted, if only begrudgingly, in a fine black velvet gown worthy of Court itself, the skirt split in front to display a silver satin petticoat embroidered cunningly with white and black pearls. Her ruff, the finest, most intricate lace this side of the Narrow Seas, stiffened with starch, framed her face and set off her golden curls to perfection.

Frances's mouth flattened. Outshining the bride.

Well, of course, she must. Penelope, Lady Rich, commanded every room wherein she stood. Poets wrote sonnets to her dark, dark eyes, and not all of them writ by Sir Philip Sidney, either. The most graceful of the Queen's ladies envied Lady Rich's elegant movements. Her singing put the nightingale to shame. As for her face, 'twas widely said she surpassed even her mother, the famed beauty Lettice Knollys.

Frances hadn't had to look once to know herself a troll by comparison. Her dark brown hair was soft and clean, but straight and ordinary. Her black gown, the best of the six she owned, embroidered with silver thread by her own fingers, became her well enough, but would never be worthy of Court. While Essex had called her beautiful just now, she knew all too well a strong, very English nose dominated her face, giving it a severe and disapproving cast. Even Sir Philip had once in a bad mood likened it to Her Majesty's.

Frances pulled back her shoulders and lifted a defiant chin. She might not rival Penelope Rich for elegance or accomplishment, but she would not creep away and hide, not on her own wedding day.

Lady Rich turned to face the new arrivals, summing up and dismissing Frances's appearance with a single contemptuous glance. "Lady Sidney, you have been gardening?" she purred, gesturing at Frances with her wine-cup. "You will wish to change your gown for your wedding, I am sure."

Meow. Would you like a dish of milk? Gritting her teeth, Frances forced a pleasant

expression onto her face. “No, I shall wear this. I prefer its simplicity to courtly ostentation.”

Lady Rich blinked a moment, then her mouth tightened. Had she expected Frances to surrender as easily as she had the last time? Not this time.

To her private gratification, Frances imagined Penelope’s face dripping that wine onto her bodice and making that extravagant lace ruff wilt. “I would not wish my gown to outshine me on this day of all days.”

“Small chance of that,” Penelope said with a nasty smirk. “Do you not agree, brother?”

Essex gave both of them a baffled smile. “Joy makes my bride the loveliest of women.” Frances looked away, rolling her eyes. At least he had stood up for her, but had he even heard his sister’s insults?

Mother joined them, a flowered garland in her hand. Fresh flowers being hard to come by so early in the year, her clever fingers had fashioned ribbons into roses instead. “Come, my dear,” she said, settling the garland onto Frances’s head, looking pleased to have her contrary daughter well-married. “It is time. The contracts are signed and the priest awaits.”

She led the way up the stairs to her husband’s bed-chamber. They made a solemn procession, more like a funeral than a bridal. No one spoke, except in the softest whispers, not even little Elizabeth, who seemed somehow to know she must be quiet and very, very good.

Sir Francis, his skin dark yellow and shrunken, lay propped against the pillows of his bed, though he wore his best doublet and a black velvet cap. Mother took a place beside him, taking his frail hand in hers. Elizabeth climbed onto the bed and cuddled against his other side, one hand clutching his doublet over his heart. Lady Rich found herself a place along the wall.

Beaming with pride, Essex took Frances’s arm and led her to stand before the unfamiliar priest in drab, black robes who awaited them at the end of the bed. A carved wooden chest had been moved to the center of the room to serve as a makeshift altar, the dark wood draped in a white altar cloth. Mother had topped it with a silver wine cup and two golden candle-sticks bearing two of her costliest bees-wax

candles. Soft cushions waited before it. Frances and Essex knelt before the priest.

He dipped his head to Lord Essex and to Father, who looked quite pleased. “Dearly beloved friends, we are gathered together here in the sight of God to join together this man and this woman in holy matrimony, an honourable state, instituted by God in the time of man’s innocence, signifying the union between Christ and his church.”

The priest cleared his throat. “I charge you that if either of you do know any impediment why you may not be lawfully joined together in matrimony, that you confess it.”

The chamber hushed as though all present held their breaths. What on earth was she doing? All Frances’s objections to this marriage rushed back at her. She scarcely knew Essex. There had been no banns, no consent from the Queen. Impediment enough, if Frances raised it. Others had gone to the Tower for such disobedience.

Father and Mother knew well Frances opposed this marriage. She had made no secret of it. Essex seemed pleased with himself. Lady Rich too appeared oblivious to the danger they all courted, but no one spoke. This was Frances’s last chance to refuse. If she would do so, she must speak now.

Frances took a deep breath and cast an imploring look at Father. *Please spare me this.* The look he gave her in response begged her to keep her word. She let her breath out with a long sigh. She had promised Father — and she must give him this solace. *So be it. Let us get it over with.*

Catching the priest’s eye on her, she gave him a tiny head-shake. Giving a nod of satisfaction, he continued, “My lord of Essex, will you have this woman to your wedded wife, to live together after God’s ordinance in the holy estate of matrimony? Will you love her, comfort her, honor and keep her, in sickness and in health, and forsaking all other, keep you only to her, so long as you both shall live?”

“I will,” said Essex in a strong voice that commanded the room. Frances contemplated him through narrowed eyes. He performed no mere duty to a cousin this day. He radiated confidence, even triumph. Why? To marry Frances Walsingham? It made no sense. Who was she? No one. What did he really want?

“My lady, will you have this man to your wedded husband? Will you obey him,

love him and serve him and forsaking all other, keep you only to him, so long as you both shall live?"

Iron bands constricted Frances's chest. Next to the bed, Mother sniffled, wiping away a sentimental tear with her hand-kerchief, while Father carried her other hand to his lips with a gratified look that suggested he saw not his daughter, but his own wedding day, long ago. Beside Frances, Essex watched her, intent as a hawk seeking prey. Did he expect his bride to cry "No!" and flee the chamber?

Not that Frances wasn't tempted.

She stole a quick peek at Penelope Rich, catching a scowl on the lady's face. Of course, the attention of all centered on the bride, not her own precious self — and yet, there was something more to it, something Frances couldn't quite put her finger on.

Seeing Frances's gaze on her, Penelope smirked, as if she knew something Frances did not. Did she think Frances feared to wed Essex because of her?

Frances lifted a defiant chin and drew herself up. "I will," she said in her strongest voice, one she hoped sounded as confident as her soon to be husband's — as if that might quell all her doubts. Essex's tight stance relaxed. Her brow creased. Why? What could he possibly gain from this marriage that he would risk the Queen's wrath?

"Who gives this woman to be married to this man?"

"That do I," said Father, the words barely audible.

The priest took her right hand and gave it into Essex's keeping. Essex spoke the vows, prompted by the priest. She did the same, though she remembered them well from the day she had married Sidney. Such a young fool she had been that day, so full of hope and excitement. Frances was far older now. A lifetime older. This time, her eyes were open. *Oh God, let this marriage turn out better than my first.*

Letting her go, Essex took the wedding ring and laid it on the Book of Common Prayer.

Her wedding ring. God 'a mercy, she still wore Sidney's on her left hand. With a quick wiggle, Frances slid it off and dropped it on the cushion. It rolled under the bed while the priest blessed her new ring. Despite the solemnity, Frances almost giggled. *Farewell to the past.* She must remember to have a servant collect it later. One day

her daughter, Elizabeth, might want a remembrance of her own father.

Receiving the new ring from the priest, Essex slid it onto Frances's bared fourth finger, saying, "With this ring, I thee wed; with my body, I thee worship; and with all my worldly goods I thee endow." The priest gave him the kiss of peace, which Essex then passed on to her.

The priest prayed over them for an exceedingly long time. Frances's knees became sore as if she knelt on small, sharp pebbles and her back ached from holding it straight. At last he gave them Holy Communion to sanctify the marriage. Her ordeal was almost over.

One final benediction and the priest allowed them to stand. Ignoring the prickling in her lower legs while a happy Essex joined his sister, Frances went to her father's bedside and bent over that he might kiss her brow. "Be happy, my girl," he said. Pulling her closer, he added for her ear alone. "When Essex's fortunes swell, set aside what silver you can and conceal it well. Then none can take it from you no matter what may chance."

She blinked. What a peculiar thing to say on her wedding day. She kissed his cheek, whispering back, "I will, I promise." Anything to ease his mind.

He fell slack against the pillows, the last of his strength spent. "Now I can die."

She opened her mouth to deny it, but could not evade the truth. Her chin trembled and her throat choked. *No, Father, do not die. Not now. I need you.* Her eyes filled with tears, but she blinked them back hard lest he see them. She must not be selfish. She had fulfilled his last wish. Let his suffering end. She took up his claw of a hand and pressed a fervent kiss against its back. "Be at peace, Father. I will love you always."

"And I, you," he said, the words almost inaudible, "daughter."

Mother, too, kissed Frances but on both cheeks. "There is a small bride-feast prepared below," she said, briskly. "Take Essex and his sister down to the hall."

"But, Mother ... you are not coming?"

The two women exchanged a look. "Nay, I shall linger here with my dear Francis." That Mother wished to stay with Father until his final moments lay unspoken.

So did Frances. Never had she felt less festive. "I have no appetite. I would rather

remain here with you and Father.” She lay an earnest hand on Mother’s arm. “Let me stay and comfort you.”

Ursula’s face grew severe. “Nay. Do not shame me and our house. You must tend our guests. Your duty is to your new husband now. Go now and act the hostess in my place.”

Hurt, Frances drew back. Essex would have the rest of her life. Could he not spare her one hour with her dying father? She swallowed hard. “As you wish, madam.” She made an obedient curtsy and sought out Essex. “My lord?” She curtsied formally to him as well. “May I offer you the hospitality of Walsingham House? My mother has prepared viands to celebrate our nuptials. They await your pleasure, if you will come with me?”

He beamed at her and held a courtly arm out to her. “It is much to my liking.” He offered his other arm to Penelope. “Come, sister. Let us dine.” The priest joined them, following behind.

A lone lute-player began to play softly as they entered. The priest fell to with such haste Frances wondered if his usual meals were far less plentiful. She gave little Elizabeth a dish filled with her favorite tit-bits before sending her off with her nurse-maid.

Frances turned back and caught her new husband’s gaze studying her. Her cheeks filled with guilty warmth. Oh, ought she to have seen to his needs first? “My lord?” Was that her voice, so thin and breathy?

He didn’t appear wroth with her. “Permit me, my lady, to prepare a plate for you,” he asked with a graceful sweep of his hand. “What are your favorites?”

“I am easily pleased,” said Frances, gratified. “Let it be as you wish.”

“Nay, my lady,” he replied with an easy smile, “This is your wedding-day. Today I am your servant.” Warmth suffused her breast. “Come, tell me what pleases you.”

She could like these sweet courtesies. Sidney never — but no, it was unfair to compare the two men. She must never do so again. “I am particularly fond of veal in German sauce,” she admitted with a pretty sweep of her lashes.

“Veal, it is.” He gave a pointed look at the waiting serving-man who hastened to obey. “Porrets?”

Frances liked the tangy sweetness of the early young onions. “Yes, please.”

“Fish?” Essex cocked his head. “Nay, as I recall, you rarely ate fish, even during Lent.”

“You noticed?” She hadn’t expected it. They had rarely eaten at the same table in the Spanish Netherlands. “I do not much like fish,” Frances confessed. She ate it on fast days when she had no other choice, of course, but as little of it as possible, preferring to eat bread.

“May I tempt you with these little cakes?” he asked, gesturing at a platter. Frances’s mouth watered. The little cakes with honey and almonds were her very favorites. Their fragrant aroma wafting from the kitchens had tempted her all morning. Essex nodded at the servant who added one cake to her plate. Frances twisted her hands, wondering how she might ask for another. Essex gave her a conspiratorial wink and gestured with two fingers at the servant. Frances looked down, unable to stop the betraying flush. Impassive, the man added a second cake.

A few more choices and Essex led her to the table, the servant placing her meal before her. Lady Rich was already seated and nibbling at her food. The priest belched and took his leave before the servant returned with a plate for Essex.

Frances let the priest go. Though none would question a priest visiting a dying man, the fewer to suspect an illicit marriage had taken place, the better.

Another servant bearing wine poured some into her cup, a light perry. Essex took her cup before she could reach for it and raised a toast. “To my bride!” He handed her the cup and let her drink. The sweet, pear-flavored liquid lingered pleasantly on her tongue.

Taking back the cup, Essex set his lips to the precise spot hers had touched and drank, his intent eyes never leaving hers. Frances’s cheeks burned. A lover’s toast. All too soon she and Essex would go above to her bed-chamber and consummate the marriage.

Her stomach clenched and her mouth went dry at the thought. Frances chewed the morsel of almond cake for several long minutes, unable to swallow, though why that should be so, she knew not.

She was no maiden shy to fear the marriage bed. She had wed before, given her

husband a daughter. Her shoulders straightened and her chin lifted of their own accord. Well, then. If Essex was a stranger, so had Sidney been. He had been her father's friend, not hers. She had survived a bedding then as had countless other women before her. She would survive this one too. A sudden, wicked thought made her smile to herself. She might even enjoy bed-sport — with him.

Frances stole a glance at Penelope Rich on Essex's other side. What did she think about Essex's sudden marriage? That lady ate and drank heartily, chatting easily with her brother, giving none of her thoughts away.

Turning a pleasant expression on her new husband, Frances laid a wifely hand upon his sleeve. "I hope to learn something of your plans, my lord. Do we depart in the morning for your London house — or to Chartley in Staffordshire? I confess I am quite eager to see my new home." She would need to set her tire-woman, Jane, to packing her movables. Poor Jane, she would be awake half the night. Frances had put off the task for too long.

Essex's face changed, forearm muscles tensing beneath her palm. Avoiding her gaze, he drained his wine-cup and held it out to the manservant to refill. "Your father did not tell you? I thought you understood."

Pardieu. Her stomach twisted. He didn't intend to take her with him?

"It would not be ... wise for you to come with me now, that is, not until I have spoken to the Queen," he added quickly, with another hasty gulp of wine. "She might not be best pleased that I have married without her leave. Besides, your mother will need you in this unhappy time." He warmed to his theme. "Aye, as you will need her."

He meant while they mourned Father's death, of course. Frances's chest ached as if he had struck her a blow with his fist, overwhelming her, first with grief, then anger boiled over. She wanted to feel gratitude for his kindness, mayhap, or relief that she need not play the wife so soon to a man she scarcely knew, yet she felt neither.

Her thoughts spun around inside her head instead. Had he wed her only to abandon her? To leave her half a wife in her mother's house, chaste as a Papist nun, but without the comfort of prayer? She had hoped for better.

"I do understand, my lord," she lied, her eyes stinging and throat so tight she

could barely speak. Had Penelope known? Frances wanted to steal a peek at the woman, but couldn't bear to see her suspicions confirmed. "You are very considerate."

Essex's easy smile returned and he relaxed back in his chair, patting her hand as if he soothed a child.

Frances wanted to fling his touch away but forced down her unruly emotions. She had just pledged him obedience and must not break that vow on her wedding-day. "And I look forward to the day when we must no longer conceal our union," she said with meaning.

Essex took up her hand and kissed it in a courtly fashion. Penelope glared daggers at her. "As do I, lady. Until then, my sister will gladly be mistress of Chartley in your stead." He beamed down at her, obviously pleased with himself for solving the dilemma. "Will you not, sister?"

Penelope's sulk changed into a smile of pure spite. "Aye, brother. I will. For as long as you wish."

Of course she would. Frances gritted her teeth. What had become of the Earl's sweet love-making before the wedding? Had he only meant to make sure of her? Now she bore his ring, Essex the eager lover vanished, replaced by a heedless boor unaware of the insult he dealt to his new bride, raising his sister over his wife. She dropped her lashes to hide a glare.

This was all *her* fault, the pox-ridden slut. Lady Rich must have planned this, just to humiliate her rival. *I may have no power to oust you now, but once I am truly Essex's wife, I will send you back to your husband — if he will have you.*

Weaving a trifle, Essex rose up, swallowing the last of his wine and tossing the cup onto the table. It wobbled and tipped over before Frances could catch it, dribbling a narrow trail of wine across the cloth. "Here, sirrah!" Oblivious, her husband snapped his fingers at the musician. "Play us a more sprightly tune. This is a happy occasion, not a funeral." He lifted Frances to her feet. "My lady, will you dance?"

Flustered, Frances sought for the right words. She dared not refuse, yet it would look strange to be dancing while her father lay dying. A sudden flurry at the doorway saved her.

A small, dark man with a thin face and pointed beard entered, dressed all in black, but for a simple white ruff around his neck. He doffed his cloak and handed it to a servant. Though less than thirty years of age, he looked much older, his eyes hooded from care and overwork.

Robert Cecil. The man most like to become the Queen's next Principal Secretary after Father.

Frances suddenly wanted to puke.

The lutenist hit a sour note and ceased to play. Essex's face froze in a courtier's mask, while Lady Rich's became as vacuous as a child's puppet. With a quick motion, Frances snatched the flower garland off her head and thrust it through a slit in the seam of her gown to hide it in the pocket tied underneath.

Cecil came toward them, his sharp eyes taking in the three of them and the supper dishes that hadn't yet been cleared away. Had he seen the bridal garland she had worn? How much had he overheard? Thank the blessed Lord that Father chose his servants well.

Hoping to distract him, Frances approached, gesturing the servant with the wine-pitcher forward. "Master Cecil. You have come to visit my father? You have traveled a very long way." She cringed inwardly at the false note in her voice and strove to do better. "May I offer you a cup of wine? We have some perry here. Or I can send a man to fetch some sack or Rhenish, if you would prefer something more substantial?"

"Perry will do," said Master Cecil, accepting the cup. He didn't drink, his impassive eyes instead darting around the room, taking in everything. A strand of her hair had come loose when she had torn off the garland and Frances tucked it behind her ear. He saw that too, she realized, but said nothing. Waiting with the infinite patience of a spider for them to betray themselves?

His expressionless gaze settled on the Earl and his sister. Lady Rich stared at the ceiling, suddenly fascinated by bare whitewash. Essex coughed, breaking the silence. "You must wonder —"

"Master Cecil, you do not drink," Frances intervened hastily. "May I offer you something else? Some food perhaps?"

One dark eyebrow rose. "No, thank you, my lady. Aye, I am come to speak with

Sir Francis. I am told he lies very near death. There are matters of state we must speak of.”

“I will take you up at once,” said Frances, but Cecil lifted a delaying finger and walked past her into the room. He sketched a slight bow to her husband.

“My lord of Essex. Lady Rich.” He acknowledged her as well. “How odd to find you both here.” His voice was soft and placid, yet Frances detected a dangerous undercurrent lurking below the surface. “I had expected you both to be at Court.”

Essex squirmed, shifting on his feet, though kept his face impassive. “As you see, sir, we are here.”

“Consoling the widow?” purred Cecil. Penelope Rich’s mouth dropped in some dismay. “Ah, but which widow? That is the question that interests me.” Cecil’s piercing gaze raked Frances from head to foot. She stiffened. One hand strayed to her pocket to be sure no part of the garland stuck out.

Cecil turned away again without remark, though his gaze flickered an instant to capture the movement. “Or I should say, the question interests Her Majesty, and I, her loyal servant, obey her in all things.”

“As do I,” said a defiant Essex.

Cecil gave him a faint smile. Handing the untouched wine cup to Frances, he said, “My lady, I will see your father now. There is no need to show me the way. I know it well.”

He left them as abruptly as he had arrived.

“He knows.”

End of Sample ~ want to read more?