

MILLS & BOON

Lady in Waiting

Anne Herries



Vintage Historical

Anne Herries
Lady in Waiting

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Серия «The Elizabethan Season», книга 2

Аннотация

In the heated summer of Elizabeth I's reign Her hopes of marriage dashed by scandal, the crown under constant threat, Queen Elizabeth I takes a young, spirited woman into her close court circle. On her way to being presented at court, Catherine Moor fights back with spirit when she is attacked in a teeming London street. Tales of Cat's adventure reach the queen, who—impressed with the young woman's lively mind—claims her as a lady of the bedchamber. Alert against plots that threaten to overthrow the crown, Cat realizes everyone is suspect. Even the flattering attentive Sir Nicholas Grantly, a seductive rogue, has secrets to hide beneath his charming exterior.... The Elizabethan Season Glory and tragedy, love and betrayal in the age of Elizabeth

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“It would be sweet to know you better, Catherine,” said Nick.

“I am not sure that would be right or proper,” she replied.

“Ah, there you have me,” Nick admitted. “But love takes no account of these things. I would make you forget the foolish morality of a maiden’s world, my pretty wench, and give you more pleasure than you have yet known, I’ll swear.” He was breathing hard, and she felt the force of his passion as his mouth moved against her hair. “I burn for you, sweet Catherine.”

His words and looks were making her feel strange, and somewhere inside her there was a swirling heat that threatened to consume her.

“I think you are a rogue, sir...!”

Author Note

It has been a delight and a privilege to work on this Elizabethan series with Paula Marshall, an author I respect and admire. The Elizabethan age was a time when light began to penetrate the darkness of ignorance and suspicion, but it was also a time of danger and intrigue.

Each book is an individual love story but with a continuing undercurrent of mystery linking them. Through the eyes of young lovers, we have tried to portray the pageantry and ceremony of the four seasons of Elizabeth I's reign, from the spring of her joyous coronation through the summer of her life to a glorious autumn and finally to the chill of winter. We hope that you, the reader, will enjoy these stories as much as we enjoyed writing them.

Lady in Waiting

Anne Herries



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ANNE HERRIES,

winner of the Romantic Novelists' Association Romance Prize 2004, lives in Cambridgeshire, England. She is fond of watching wildlife, and spoils the birds and squirrels that are frequent visitors to her garden. Anne loves to write about the beauty of nature, and sometimes puts a little into her books, although they are mostly about love and romance. She writes for her own enjoyment and to give pleasure to her readers.

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Chapter One

September 1560

‘Come, Mistress Catherine, a visit to the fair will do you good on this bright day. And besides, I do not like to see you downcast, sweet Cousin. My good Aunt Elizabeth would have driven you out into the sunshine before this, I dare swear.’

Catherine Moor laid down her embroidery with a sigh. She would as lief have sat quietly over her work, though others had already left for the delights of the fair that had come to visit, but she knew only too well the determination of her cousin Willis Stamford. Both Willis and her aunt, Lady Helen Stamford, were concerned for her, believing that it was time she put aside her grief for her beloved mother. Lady Elizabeth Moor had died of a putrid inflammation of the lungs in the spring of the year 1560, and it was now September of that same year.

Catherine no longer spent hours weeping alone in her bedchamber, but the ache of loss was constantly present and she had no real wish to visit a fair, even though she had always loved them when her parents had taken her. However, Willis would give her no peace until she acquiesced, which she might as well do with a good grace since she knew him to be a kind-hearted lad, some five years her senior. Most lads of his age would not have concerned themselves with a girl of barely eight years.

‘Will you wait a moment while I fetch my cloak and purse,

Cousin?’

‘Martha has your cloak ready in the hall,’ Willis replied, smiling at her. ‘And you will have no need of your purse, as it is my pleasure to treat you to whatever you desire. You shall have sweetmeats, ribbons and trinkets, as many as you shall please.’

‘Then I can only thank you, Cousin.’

Catherine stood up, brushing the stray threads of embroidery silk from her grey gown. Her dress was very simple, the full skirts divided over a petticoat of a paler grey, and the laced stomacher braided with black ribbon. More black ribbons attached the hanging sleeves to a plain fitted bodice and were her only ornament apart from a tiny silver cross and chain that her mother had given her just before she died.

Martha, her nurse and comforter since Lady Moor’s death, was waiting to fuss over her in the hall, clucking like a mother hen with a chick as she tied the strings of Catherine’s cloak and warned her not to stand in a chill wind.

‘You take good care of her, Master Willis, and don’t let her overtire herself.’

‘Trust me, good mistress,’ he replied and planted a naughty kiss on Martha’s plump cheek. ‘I shall let no harm befall my cousin, I do promise you.’

‘Get on with you, you wicked boy!’ cried Martha, blushing at his teasing. ‘Or I’ll take my broom to your backside.’

The threat was an idle one, as both Catherine and Willis were well aware. Martha’s heart was as soft as butter straight from the

churn, and Willis knew exactly how to twist her round his little finger.

‘I hope it will not tire you to venture as far as the village,’ Willis said after they had been walking for some minutes. He glanced anxiously at Catherine’s pale face. She had been ill with the same fever that had carried off her mother, and though long recovered, he knew his mother considered her still delicate. ‘Perhaps we should take a short cut through the grounds of Cumnor Place?’

‘Do you think we ought?’ Catherine turned her eyes on him. They were wide and of a greenish-blue hue that made Willis think of a clear mountain pool he had drunk from on a visit to the Welsh hills as a young boy...deep and mysterious and deliciously cool. ‘Will the lady of the house not mind us using her grounds as a short cut?’

‘Poor Lady Dudley never leaves her bed they say. She has a malady of the breast and is like to die soon enough...’ Willis stopped abruptly, wishing he had cut his tongue out before saying those words to his cousin. He hastened to repair his slip. ‘Though I dare say that is merely gossip and the doctors will make her well again.’

‘You need not protect me, Willis.’ Catherine’s serious eyes turned to him and he thought how lovely she was; the wind had whipped a few hairs from beneath the neat Dutch cap she wore so that they clustered about her face in dark red curls. ‘I know that people sometimes die when they are ill, no matter how hard the physicians try to save them, as my dear Mama did. If we take

this short cut you know of we must be very quiet, for we do not want to disturb the poor lady.'

'As to that, I daresay she would be glad of some company, for it is certain that her husband is often at court and seldom visits her...but it is this way, Catherine.' Willis stopped and held out his hand to her. 'See the gap here in the hedge? If we squeeze through it will save us half an hour of walking.'

Catherine looked at the gap doubtfully. She could see that it was well used and realised that local people must often take this route rather than walking around the perimeter of the grounds. Willis was beckoning to her and she followed him through, looking about her guiltily as they began to walk across an open sweep of grass. The house was some distance away, and she was relieved to know that they could not possibly disturb the sick woman if she were resting on her bed.

Ahead of them was a small wood, and once inside it they would lose sight of the house altogether and would soon rejoin the common ground grazed by pigs and cows belonging to the village folk. Catherine glanced back at the house and paused for a moment, her eyes narrowing as her attention was caught.

What was that? She shaded her eyes, puzzled by what seemed to be happening close to the house. Something odd had occurred, causing an icy chill to fall over her. She could not see clearly enough to be sure, but it was like a creeping black mist that appeared to hover just above the ground. Where had it come from so suddenly? It had not been there a moment ago.

‘Willis!’ She called out to her cousin, pointing back towards the shadow, which had become more upright, looking almost like a man’s form now but less defined, not quite substantial enough to be human. A shiver of fear went through her. She was not a girl given to superstition, though she knew the common folk believed in all kinds of evil spirits and demons that stalked the night, but this was broad daylight! ‘What is that...back there...near the house? Do look, Willis.’

She tugged at his arm to make him look back.

‘What? I see nothing.’

‘There...’ But she had taken her eyes from it and when she looked again it had gone. ‘It was by the house. I cannot describe it...a strange shadow. It was sinister, evil. I felt its evil, Willis.’

‘A trick of the light, no more. I can see nothing, cousin.’ His eyes studied her with concern as she shivered. ‘Come, Catherine, you have let your imagination lead you astray. There is nothing there to disturb you. We must hurry or the pedlars will have sold all their best wares before we arrive.’

She knew he was right, and yet for a moment her feet seemed almost glued to the ground and she felt as if she were unable to move. A sense of some evil having taken place here seemed to hang in the air, making her throat tight so that for a moment she could scarcely breathe. Catherine felt cold all over, her skin covered in goose-pimples. The feeling of terror was so strong in her that she was afraid she might faint. She had seen something that had frightened her but she did not know what it could be.

‘Come along, Catherine!’

There was a note of impatience in Willis’s voice. Catherine found that her feet were no longer leaden and she hurried after her cousin. Since whatever it was had gone, there was no point in trying to explain to Willis. Besides, all she wanted now was to leave this place.

She would make sure that they returned home by another route.

April 1571

‘Do not look so at me, Catherine,’ pleaded Sir William Moor as he saw the mutiny in his daughter’s fine eyes. She was a beautiful girl of almost nineteen years, her long red hair flying about her face as she came in from some hard riding that morning. ‘Your aunt is determined on this trip to London, and, God forgive me, I have neglected the question of your marriage. It is time a husband was found for you, my dear child.’

‘Why must it be so?’ Catherine asked, fire sparking in the bottomless depths of those green eyes. Her life had been so peaceful and serene these past years, and now it seemed that all must change. ‘Why may I not stay here to take care of you for always, Father? Why must I marry and leave all that is dear to me?’

‘It is true that my estate is not entailed...’ Sir William hesitated as he sensed the mutiny in his much loved child. He had put this same argument to his sister the previous evening and been roundly scolded for his trouble. ‘But it would be selfish of me to

keep you here, Catherine. You must be presented at court—and a husband must be secured, if one can be found to please you.’ He looked at her doubtfully, knowing her stubbornness of old.

‘You will not force me to a marriage I cannot like?’ She seized on his hesitation like one of the little terrier dogs the bailiff used for chasing rabbits from their holes. ‘Promise me only that, dearest Father, and I shall go with a willing heart.’

‘When have I ever forced you to anything you did not like?’ He gave her a chiding look, for they both knew that he had spoiled her these last years, never remarrying after his beloved wife’s death as most widowers did to gain an heir. Catherine was child enough for Sir William and he would miss her when she married. ‘I swear I should not mind if you never married, my dearest Cat, but your aunt is determined you shall have the chance...and I believe my Elizabeth would have wanted this for you.’

‘Then of course I shall go,’ Catherine said, for any mention of her mother’s wishes was sure to soothe her rebellion. Their mutual respect for a woman still loved and missed was a bond between father and daughter. ‘But I wish you were coming with us, Father.’

‘I shall join you soon enough,’ he promised, eyes warm with affection. His Catherine was a high-spirited girl with a temper upon her when she chose, but he knew the sweetness and goodness of her true nature. ‘Go up and tidy yourself now, Daughter. Your aunt awaits you in the best parlour.’

Catherine nodded, walking slowly up the wide staircase of

the manor house that was her home. It was a sturdy building erected in the early days of King Henry VII's reign by her great-grandfather: half-timbered, with overhanging windows above good red bricks, it had a large open hall with stairs leading to a gallery above. Some of the walls were hung with bright tapestry, which lent colour and warmth to the rooms. Recently, Sir William had had the small parlour and the principal bedchambers panelled with good English oak in the latest fashion, and the new wood glowed with a rich golden colour.

Catherine's own bedchamber was furnished with an elaborately carved bed, which had two posts and a tester overhead; below the tester was suspended a canopy of silk tied with twisted ropes. Heavy brocade curtains could be drawn about the bed at night if the room was cold, though she seldom used them, preferring not to be enclosed.

At the foot of the bed there was a planked chest, and there was a counter beneath one of the small windows. This was a plain chest on joined legs that had once been used by the stewards for counting and storing money; but having found it lying neglected in a store, Catherine had had it removed to her own chamber, because the extra height made it useful for her personal items. She had spread an embroidered cloth over its scarred surface, and her beaten-silver hand mirror, combs and perfume flasks lay on top together with gloves, a string of amber beads and some feathers for a hat. Inside the cupboard were stored gloves, hats and various articles of feminine attire.

A number of triangular stools stood about the room, one by a harp, another in front of a tapestry frame, her much prized table desk set on a board and trestle with yet another stool near by; these, her virginals, several items of silver set upon the board and rich hangings proclaimed this the chamber of a privileged and favoured woman.

Taking a few moments to wash her hands in cold water from a silver ewer stored in a curtained alcove, Catherine finished her ablutions and then glanced in her mirror to tidy her wayward hair. Her careful work had restored the damage of a mischievous wind, and she was now neat enough to meet her aunt. Lady Stamford was a fastidious woman who always dressed richly, as well she might, having survived three wealthy husbands.

She was standing before the fireplace in the best parlour when Catherine entered, holding her hands to the flames of a fire that had been lit for her benefit. It was now April of the year 1571 and fires were seldom lit until the evening once the worst of the winter was over, because Sir William and his daughter, being busy about the estate, had no time to sit here during the day.

‘I hope I find you well, Aunt?’

Lady Stamford turned as she spoke. Eyes that had once been described as sparkling were a little faded now, as was the complexion she embellished with paint, and the sparse grey hair she hid beneath a wig as red as Catherine’s own hair. Painted cheeks and lips were the fashion for ladies of the court who needed a little artifice to aid their looks, but seemed strange to

Catherine, who was used to fresh-cheeked countrywomen.

‘Well enough, Catherine,’ Lady Stamford said and smiled thinly. It was more than four years since she had seen her niece, for they lived some many leagues distant and travelling was hard enough in summer, almost impossible in the depths of winter. She was pleased to find that Catherine had matured into a beauty. Taller than some men of the age, she was perhaps too slender to please those who found more roundness their ideal, but child-bearing would no doubt change that soon enough. ‘You look even prettier than when I last saw you. I had feared that at almost nineteen your looks would have begun to fade, but I see it is not so. I think we shall have no problem in establishing you at court, and then who knows? If Her Majesty is pleased with your conduct she may arrange a prestigious match for you.’

‘You are kind to trouble yourself on my account, Aunt.’

Catherine thought it wise not to impose her own thoughts and wishes too soon. She had her father’s promise and did not wish to quarrel with Lady Stamford for nothing. Her aunt had shown her great kindness over the years, especially when she had gone to stay at her home in Berkshire after her mother’s untimely death.

‘I have often wished for a daughter, but most of my babies did not survive their first year. Willis has given me my heart’s desire in part, for Margaret is a good wife to him, and they have a son already. A beautiful boy and strong, praise God.’

‘You must be thankful for it,’ Catherine agreed, only too happy to change the subject. ‘I trust the child will continue healthy and

that they will have more fine babies.’

In an age when babies were fortunate to survive their infancy, the need to produce strong sons was often paramount, second only to the importance of marrying for wealth and position.

‘I pray it may be so—but to other matters, Catherine. Your gown is sufficient for country wear but will not do in town. Before you can be presented at court you must be properly dressed. It is my intention to leave for London on the morrow. We shall have time to visit the silk merchants and my own dressmaker—a Frenchwoman of some skill—before we are summoned to attend the Queen.’

Catherine hid her sigh. Since both her father and her aunt were determined on this she must accept with a good heart. Yet she was aware of regret and an unease she could not name. Given her choice she would have remained at home, but perhaps no gentleman would be brought to offer for her and then she could return to her old pursuits in peace.

Catherine eased her aching limbs. They had been on the road for hours now, the unwieldy carriage lurching and bumping over deep ruts carved out by the frosts of the past winter and as yet unrepaired. Lady Stamford had insisted on travelling this way, with an entourage of servants in train, their baggage following behind on another even more cumbersome coach together with Martha and her ladyship’s maid.

Feeling bruised herself, Catherine pitied her elderly nurse, who had insisted that she must be the one to accompany her

young mistress to town. Out of consideration for her age, Catherine had suggested taking one of the other maids, but Martha would not hear of it.

‘And who is to put warm cloves in your ear when it aches?’ she demanded, though it was many years since Catherine had complained of the earache. ‘Only Martha knows how to make you a soothing posset when you have a putrid throat, my sweeting. Of course you cannot go without me.’

Listening to her devoted nurse, Catherine could not deny her, though once she went to court Martha would no longer be able to stay near her.

Catherine would have preferred to ride, being used to travelling that way with Sir William when they visited the county fairs, and she was sure that Martha would have been more comfortable riding pillion behind their trusty groom Jake. However, Lady Stamford would not hear of it, and so they were being shaken to bits in the uncomfortable carriages for league after league.

It was a relief when they saw signs of a busy inn ahead. The road had certainly improved for the past few leagues, and Lady Stamford told her that it would be much better now that they had at last joined the main highway for London.

‘Country roads are always the worst,’ she said as the jolting ceased at last and their groom came to open the door and let down the steps. ‘And I believe Cambridgeshire is worse than most.’

Refraining from answering her aunt’s comments on her home

county, Catherine followed her through the inn yard. A grinning urchin, who ran up to them holding out his hand, had swept the yard clean of horse droppings and straw.

Catherine placed a farthing into his grubby paw, and then, noticing the hubbub and crowd to the rear of the inn, asked him what was going on.

‘Why, ’tis the mummers, mistress,’ the urchin said. ‘They be giving a performance of a play.’

‘A play?’ Catherine’s interest quickened. She had seen strolling players perform religious plays at Christmas in the village square at home, and sometimes her father asked roving minstrels to come to the house at that season to entertain them and their friends—but this seemed different.

Leaving her aunt to enter the inn alone, Catherine walked under the archway to the large courtyard at the back. There was a raised dais at the far end in a position that gave watchers from the upper windows of the inn an excellent view. For those watching from the inn yard the view was somewhat obstructed by the milling crowds.

However, Catherine found a space at the back, and by standing on a metal anvil often used as a mounting block she had a clear view of the stage. One of the players was declaiming a speech in a loud voice, while another rolled about the ground at his feet clutching himself and groaning awfully.

‘He has been poisoned,’ a voice said close to her. ‘It is a Greek tragedy, mistress, and he is dying. He should lie still now, but

methinks he enjoys the part too much.’

It was clear the audience agreed, for there were shouts of ‘Die! Die!’ from the more rowdy elements, and as Catherine watched someone threw what looked like a rotten cabbage at the actor rolling on the floor.

‘Oh, the poor man,’ Catherine said moved to pity. She glanced at the boy who had spoken to her. He was a lad of perhaps six years or so, but with a bright intelligent look and a precocious manner. ‘Do you like to watch plays, young sir?’

‘If they are good plays.’ His mouth curled in scorn. ‘This is a very bad play. When I am older I shall write much better ones. People will not throw rotten vegetables at my actors.’

Catherine smiled to hear such a proud boast from one so young.

‘I shall remember that,’ she said. ‘May I know your name, sir? Then I shall know when one of your plays is being performed in the future.’

‘I am Christopher Marlowe, known as Kit to my friends.’ He bowed elegantly to her, showing more presence than any actor now performing on the stage. ‘Come to the theatre when my play is being performed and I shall remember you.’

‘I shall not forget, Master Marlowe...’

She was about to tell him her name when an uproar from near the front of the audience drew her attention. The group of rowdy gentlemen was throwing things in earnest now and shouting out rude remarks to the actors, and the man who had been rolling

about was up on his feet and throwing something back at his tormentors.

Catherine's eyes were drawn to one of the young men in particular. So far she had not seen him throw anything, and he neatly avoided what was thrown in his direction, but he was clearly enjoying the ruckus, his generous mouth curved in a smile, his eyes glinting with what she thought malicious amusement. It was unkind of him to mock the poor actor so!

He was dressed in a brown jerkin of leather with breeches of the same material slashed through to show a lighter coloured woollen cloth beneath. His boots were thigh high and looked well travelled, and the cloak slung over his shoulder was dusty and slightly shabby. Yet he looked a gentleman, tall, broad-shouldered, with a powerful air around him. He was an attractive, distinguished man, who ought to have known better than to associate with the clearly intoxicated young rogues about him. If they did not know better then he certainly ought, which was perhaps why she had picked him out for particular censure.

It looked very much as if the play was about to become a riot. Catherine was turning away when she heard her aunt's voice calling to her.

'Come away, Catherine. There will be a fight 'ere long. It is not a fitting entertainment for a young lady of your breeding. When we are in London we shall see something better than this mummerly.'

Catherine looked about for the young lad she had spoken

to earlier and saw that he too was being led away from the trouble by a man who looked as if he might be his father. She smiled to herself as she recalled his boast and wondered if young Kit Marlowe would achieve his ambition. And whether fortune would be kind to him if he did.

Travelling players were at the mercy of their patrons, as were ambitious playwrights. Rich men were sometimes moved to support a group of players they admired, but those less fortunate were forced to tramp the country performing where they could for whatever was given them.

Following her aunt into the inn, where a meal of cold meat, pickles and a dish of hot buttered turnips was being served, Catherine frowned over the behaviour of the young blades who had turned the performance into a brawl. It was monstrous unfair to treat the unfortunate players so, and had she been a man she would not have hesitated to tell them so. Indeed, had her aunt not arrived to take her away, she might have been tempted to speak sharply to the man in the brown leather jerkin.

It was growing dusk when Catherine heard the horrible snapping sound and their carriage jerked to a sickening halt. She was thrown from her seat, and after recovering her position scarcely had time to glance at her aunt before the flaps at the windows were pulled aside and the groom was apologising.

‘The leading pole has snapped, my lady.’

‘Can it be mended, Jake?’ Lady Stamford asked.

‘Not right ’ere, it can’t, my lady. We shall need to find a

blacksmith and 'ave 'im make a metal splint...'

'Then what are we to do? How far is it to the next inn?'

'Five miles or more, my lady.'

'I cannot possibly walk that far...' She glared at the hapless groom. 'Go and fetch the blacksmith or a carpenter. And be quick about it. It cannot be long before darkness falls and I do not wish to be sitting here all night.'

'No, my lady.' He looked at her hesitantly. 'Could you not ride in the baggage coach? We could mend the pole in the morning...'

'Pray do as you are told, sirrah. Go and see to it at once.'

'We shall need to lead the horses off the road, my lady—and the carriage is blocking the road. No one can pass until we move it to one side.'

'Well, do so then!'

'Yes, ma'am—if you and Mistress Catherine would be good enough to get down.'

'Get down?'

'It will make things easier, Aunt,' Catherine said, seeing that Lady Stamford was outraged at the idea. 'And the carriage might overturn if they have to rock it to move it.'

'In that case we shall oblige.'

Catherine smiled inwardly as her aunt was helped out of the carriage. The look of dismay on Lady Stamford's face as she stood at the side of the road was amusing, but after some minutes, while the coachman and groom attempted to move the cumbersome vehicle, the situation became less diverting.

Catherine had begun to feel uncomfortable herself, for it turned a little chilly and looked as if it might rain soon.

‘Where is the baggage coach?’ Lady Stamford demanded irritably, as her servants showed no sign of moving the cumbersome vehicle. It was obvious that she was beginning to think riding with the maids might be more desirable than standing by the side of the road. ‘Have all my servants deserted me? I am not accustomed to being so ill served.’

‘The coach is slower than our carriage—and poor Ben and Jake are doing their best, Aunt.’

‘Then their best is not good enough!’ She looked set for another angry outburst when they heard the sound of horses’ hooves approaching. ‘Ah, perhaps it... Oh, it is merely a rider.’ Lady Stamford’s face registered her disappointment, but in another moment she was smiling as the rider dismounted and came towards them.

‘You are in some trouble, ma’am?’

‘Indeed, sir, as you see.’ Lady Stamford threw out her hands. ‘These incompetent fools of mine make no progress and I fear a storm is imminent.’

‘I believe you may be right.’ The stranger glanced at dark clouds gathering overhead. ‘You need help, for it will take more than two men to move that carriage.’ He made her a little bow. ‘May I introduce myself, ma’am. I am Sir Nicholas Grantly and I have relatives living just a short distance away. If you would consent to accompany me I am certain they will offer you and

the young lady shelter and refreshment while their servants assist yours to clear the road.'

'Sir, I shall be delighted to accept your friends' hospitality, for I declare I am weary of standing here and turning chill.' Lady Stamford turned to Catherine, beckoning her to follow as Sir Nicholas offered to lead the way. 'Come along, my dear.'

Catherine hesitated, feeling oddly reluctant to go with him. She had recognised their rescuer as being the gentleman she had noticed at the inn. He had been in the midst of the rowdy element and laughing as heartily at the discomfiture of the poor players as the rest.

'You do not know him, Aunt,' she whispered, darting a glance of disapproval at Sir Nicholas's back. 'He might be anyone—a villain set to trap unwary travellers. Might it not be better to wait for the baggage coach, which cannot now be long behind us?'

'Nonsense!' Lady Stamford frowned at her. 'Sir Nicholas is clearly a gentleman and you should be grateful he came this way and chanced upon us, for in another ten minutes we should have been caught in a downpour.'

As a steady drizzle had begun to fall, Catherine was unable to contradict her aunt, though she continued to feel doubtful until the house was reached. For who knew what kind of a man he was or where they might find themselves lodged for the night?

The house was, however, as Sir Nicholas had stated, but a short distance down the road, and proved to be a simple but sturdily built country home of good proportions. One long

building had a sloping thatched roof, and ivy growing up its walls; it made no pretension of grandeur but was the home of a gentleman of some substance, glass windows having replaced the older shutters which were still in evidence but permanently nailed back.

They were welcomed at the front porch by an apple-cheeked housekeeper, who drew them in and clucked over their misfortune, promising to send Jed and Seth with the farm horses to sort the matter out.

‘For them fine carriage horses will be frettin’ themselves to a lather by now and nobody be better with horses than our Seth. He’ll see you right and tight, milady—and Seth can mend that pole of yours in a trice.’

‘I’ll take our guests into the parlour, Jessie,’ Sir Nicholas said. ‘Will you send in some wine and biscuits in a moment?’

‘Aye, that I shall, Master Nicholas. The mistress be always pleased with company.’

‘Ladies—this way.’ Sir Nicholas waved them through the rather narrow hall into a large and comfortable parlour. The wooden floor had been recently swept with sweet herbs that cast a delicate fragrance. The main wall had been hung with a fine carpet, and there was a court cupboard at one end set with burnished pewter. An elbow chair was placed to either side of the fireplace, which had a good blaze to welcome them, and there was a Gothic oak settle that looked as if it might have come from a monastery at the time of their dissolution. Stuffed cushions,

embroidered possibly by the lady of the house, had been placed against the carved back. Clearly the mistress of this home was accustomed to being indulged, for there were several precious items that showed that her husband had used his wealth to bring pleasure and comfort to his wife.

‘Ah, Sister Sarah Middleton,’ Sir Nicholas said, and held out his hands as a young and comely woman came flying towards him. ‘I find you well, I hope?’

‘Nick, my darling! At last you come,’ Sarah Middleton cried. ‘I have been expecting you two days and more.’ She turned sparkling dark eyes on Lady Stamford and Catherine. ‘But who have you brought to see me? You said nothing of guests, you wicked one.’

Her scolding tone was belied by an affectionate smile as she hung on to his arm. She was a pretty, plump woman of perhaps twenty, with soft dark hair that streamed from beneath a cap of fetching lace.

‘You must not scold your brother,’ Lady Stamford said, going forward to greet her. ‘For he found us stranded on the road after our carriage unfortunately broke down and took pity on us, which was exceedingly kind of him. I hope we do not trespass on your hospitality too much, ma’am?’

Sarah’s face glowed as she replied, ‘No, indeed, ma’am, for it is just what I should do myself and Nick knows it. He was perfectly right to bring you here and only just in time.’ The rattle of rain against the small panes of grey glass at the windows was

quite fierce. 'You must not think of leaving this night. Jessie can easily put a hot brick in the best guest room and Nick can spend the night in the nursery.'

'Where my nephew will ensure that I sleep not at all,' her brother replied. 'I thank you for your attention to my comfort, Sister, but you are perfectly right to offer shelter to these ladies, and I shall be happy to give up my room for their sakes.'

His grey eyes seemed to dance with wicked laughter for a moment as they rested on Catherine. Unwilling to be charmed so easily by a man she suspected of being a rogue, she gave him a cold look and saw the sparkle die from his eyes, which became rather serious and thoughtful.

Catherine's attention was drawn away by Sarah Middleton, who was insisting that Lady Stamford take the place of honour in the chair to the right of the fire. Rather than take the lady's own chair, Catherine went to the settle and sat on its hard seat. She was grateful for the cushions at her back after hours of wearisome travel and longed for the familiarity and comfort of her own bedchamber.

Lady Stamford and Mistress Middleton were talking easily to one another. The introductions made and refreshments brought by the smiling Jessie, they passed on to the topics of the day.

'You may depend that Her blessed Majesty will never be properly secure while the Catholic impostor lives,' Sarah declared. 'They do say that wicked plotter Norfolk would marry Mary of Scots if he could, and there is even talk that he planned

to have our Queen murdered...’ She looked at her brother appealingly. ‘Have you heard aught of this, Nick?’

‘There is much talk,’ Sir Nicholas said. ‘And everything is not yet clear, but fear not, Sarah, while Her Majesty has men like William Cecil about her such plots will always fail. Besides, the Queen likes not to hear criticism of Norfolk and for the moment he escapes the punishment he deserves. I should not let the gossip disturb you, Sister, for I dare say it will all come to nothing in the end.’

‘You always make me feel so much better,’ Sarah said and gave a little shiver. ‘I should not want to see another Catholic Queen on the throne of England.’

‘Forgive my impetuous sister if she offends.’ Sir Nicholas shot her a warning look. ‘Our family has reason to distrust such a regime, for my father suffered many setbacks and fines while Mary reigned, and was lucky to escape being burned as a heretic—but there are Catholic men I claim as friends.’

‘Oh, you need not fear to offend,’ Lady Stamford assured him. ‘Queen Mary of England burned my first husband’s elder brother as a heretic. To see our glorious Elizabeth replaced by a woman brought up amongst the Catholic French would go against all I have been taught to believe. I have heard she is a vain, flighty creature and would cause nothing but harm if she ever came to power. Besides, when I was young I was lady in waiting to Anne Boleyn— God rest her soul! In my eyes her daughter Elizabeth is our true queen and shall always be so; though others may deny

her I shall remain loyal.’

‘Amen to that,’ Sir Nicholas said. ‘For myself I would see no other than Gloriana on the throne.’ His eyes flicked towards Catherine, sitting silently on the settle. ‘What say you, Mistress Moor?’

‘I can only echo your sentiments, sir. I am persuaded you are wiser about such matters than I...’ She sent him a haughty look that would have disconcerted many a man, though he gave no sign of having noticed except for a faint gleam in his eyes.

However, the coolness of her tone brought a frown to Lady Stamford’s forehead. ‘Come, Catherine, you can give Sir Nicholas a fairer answer than that. Your father is staunch in his support for Her Majesty and you must have heard his opinion often enough.’

‘Indeed I have, Aunt, and my father is most loyal to Her Majesty. I meant no offence to anyone. I must blame my lack of courtesy on the long hours of travelling. Forgive me...’ She avoided looking at Sir Nicholas, making her apology to the room at large.

For a time there was silence, and then their hostess stepped in to the awkward moment with a little tutting cry of dismay.

‘You look exhausted, Mistress Moor,’ Sarah Middleton cried. ‘I am thoughtless to keep you talking when you must be longing to rest. Jessie shall take you to your chamber. We dine when my husband returns at seven. I pray you will forgive the lateness of the hour, but Matthew has been to inspect a distant field with his

neighbour and was not expecting company.'

'You are very kind, ma'am. My father often keeps late hours himself.'

Catherine blushed the more because she knew she had been rude to Sir Nicholas. She had come close to insulting her generous hostess's brother and it was very bad of her.

She was taken to task for it when she was alone in the bedchamber with her aunt.

'I do not like to see such manners in you, Catherine,' Lady Stamford said, looking at her with disapproval. 'Sir Nicholas has been all that is good. You might at least be polite if you cannot do better. If you behave like this in London you will never catch a husband.'

Catherine accepted the rebuke in silence, acknowledging it to be fair. Indeed, she was not sure why she had taken against Sir Nicholas, for he had done no more than laugh and call out to the actors. Perhaps she had been a little too harsh in her judgement.

If Sir Nicholas asked her opinion again on some point she would answer him with the consideration he deserved. She need not go out of her way to be friendly but there was no occasion to be impolite.

Chapter Two

Catherine would have liked to spend some time alone in the garden before joining the others that evening, but since it was raining it was barred to her and she did not want to go down too soon for fear of any inconvenience to her hostess. Lady Stamford took a long time over her toilette, and in consequence they did not go down until summoned by a maid. If she had hoped for a quiet moment alone it was not granted her.

Over supper she was given no opportunity to reveal her mellowed mood, because Matthew Middleton was a big, bluff man who talked and laughed a great deal. He had much to say for himself, and wanted to hear what his brother-in-law had to contribute on many topics, his loud voice dominating the conversation. However, Catherine found it interesting to listen, for in this way it was revealed that Sir Nicholas had but recently returned to England after some eighteen months of travelling on the Continent.

‘You wrote of your visit to Italy,’ Matthew Middleton said, attacking the good roast goose set in front of him with gusto. He ate with his fingers and a knife in the time-honoured way, using a trencher of bread to soak up the rich sauces, though all the ladies had been provided with both a knife and a spoon, a luxury not always to be met with in country houses. Besides each plate was a bowl of scented water for washing the fingers, and a napkin of

soft white damask. ‘I hear it is discouraged to visit the country now in some circles, for folk do say it is a place of devils and would have none of these canting Papists.’

‘You know I hold no love for Papists, Brother—but it does a man’s mind good to behold the wonders of Rome. There is beauty beyond imagining to be seen there, and it would be a sad day if religious prejudice ever prevented our experiencing such things.’

‘Well, well, I suppose you are right, Nick. I say only what is the opinion of many these days.’

‘Wait until you see the marble statuary I have brought for your beloved garden,’ Sir Nicholas said, smiling at his brother-in-law with obvious affection. Despite their banter there was clearly a good understanding between them, and Catherine found herself envying the warmth of this family circle. ‘And somewhere amongst the baggage that follows me I have a crystal posset set for Sarah that came from Venice. When you have seen these and more of the treasures I have brought back from my travels I’ll wager you will sing another tune.’

‘I trust you have not brought Matthew any indecent ladies?’ Sarah said, and then giggled at the mocking look in her brother’s eyes. ‘You will have our neighbours denouncing us as wicked pagans before the pulpit on Sunday.’

‘Only ladies swathed in folds to cover their charms—and a cherub or two, sister mine,’ Nick replied and blew a kiss to her. ‘Though for my own estate it is a different matter, and I have

some fine Greek gods in all their maleness—but I had best not tell you more lest I offend those innocent ears.’

Sarah dimpled and shook her head at her unrepentant brother, turning her bewitching smile on Catherine.

‘You will forgive us for neglecting you, Mistress Catherine, but it seems an age since my brother was here with us. He has sent messages and gifts from his journeying, but to have him here is a gift beyond price.’

‘Yes, I imagine it must be so. I have only my father, my aunt and cousin. It must be pleasant to have brothers and sisters.’

‘I have another sister,’ Sarah told her. ‘Agatha is some fifteen years older and has a different mother, but Nick and I are true brother and sister. We had another brother, Harry, but he died when travelling in Italy with friends. It was some years ago and I was but a child, so I hardly remember him, but Nick adored him of course.’ Following her gaze across the table, Catherine saw that the laughter had faded from Sir Nicholas’s eyes and wondered at it. What could cause him to look like that? There was bleakness and anger in his face, a kind of haunting sadness that somehow touched her heart.

‘That was sad for your family,’ she said. ‘It is always hard to lose someone you love.’

‘Yes, but much harder for Nick than me,’ Sarah said, seeming to become aware of her brother’s silence. ‘And Matthew has three sisters and two brothers, of course.’ She looked fondly at her husband. ‘We are truly blessed with our family in having many

of them close by.’

Her husband smiled at her and addressed some trifling remark to Nick about his journey. After that, the talk was turned to politics, touching briefly on the plot concerning the Duke of Norfolk’s alleged attempt to arrange a marriage with Mary of Scots without seeking the Queen’s permission, and then veering to the shocking prices of wheat and wool, before coming round to family matters. Catherine found the time passed very pleasantly, and though she said little herself she enjoyed the conversation of others.

She was aware that Sir Nicholas had given the evening a touch of spice with his stories, many of which she was sure he had invented purely for his sister’s amusement. That he was a clever man well able to hold his own in any company she could not doubt. However, she clung stubbornly to her picture of him as an idle rogue who wasted his time with feckless companions and thought it amusing to throw rotten fruit at a hapless actor.

It was past nine when Sarah took the ladies to her parlour for a sweet tisane, which she said would give them ease and aid their rest in a strange bed.

‘Matthew and Nick will talk long into the night,’ she said, ‘and my day begins at cockcrow. I shall bid you good night now, ma’am— Mistress Catherine. I wish you both sweet dreams.’

‘How fortunate we were to find such hospitality,’ Lady Stamford said, as they retired to their chamber to discover everything in readiness for their comfort, a warm brick passed

between the sheets and a small fire in the grate. 'Such open kindness is not often met with in strangers, Catherine. It has quite lifted my spirits and restored my faith in my fellow beings.'

So saying, Lady Stamford removed her wig, climbed into bed and fell asleep within seconds of her head touching the goose-feather pillow.

Catherine lay wakeful at her side for some time, listening to her aunt's gentle snoring and the creaking in the eaves. The moaning of a dying wind was not disturbing, for in such a solid house as this there was a feeling of safety. It must have been late into the night when she heard the tread of boots along the hall and Sir Nicholas's voice calling a cheery goodnight to his host.

And then she slept.

Waking at cockcrow, Catherine thought longingly of her day at home. She would have been out even now with her horses and dogs, riding the estate while the dew was still upon the ground.

Rising from the bed in which her aunt slept on, Catherine dressed quickly and went downstairs. It was a fine day, the only signs of the storm some debris strewn upon the ground, and with luck she would be able to escape into the gardens without being seen.

Sarah Middleton kept a good kitchen garden, with lots of soft fruit bushes, and spring vegetables beginning to push their way through the soft earth. Everything smelled so fresh and sweet after the rain, and Catherine stooped to pick one of the herbs used for cooking, rubbing it between her fingers and holding

them to her nose to catch the fragrance of rosemary.

‘You are abroad early, Mistress Moor. I had not thought to see you here this morning.’

Catherine jumped, swinging round guiltily to face the man who had spoken to her.

‘I hope I do not intrude,’ she said. ‘Perhaps I ought to have waited until we were summoned, but I looked out and was tempted. It is always my habit to rise early at home.’

Sir Nicholas looked at her, his eyes narrowing as they moved over her with slow deliberation. His study brought a flush to her cheeks, making Catherine catch her breath. There was something so essentially masculine about him then that she was aware of a feeling that disturbed her, though she did not understand it. Why did he look at her so? It was almost as if he were undressing her with his eyes! No man had ever looked at her that way before.

‘Do you ride, Mistress Moor?’

‘Yes, every day at home.’

‘You will miss that at court,’ Nick told her. ‘When in the country Her Majesty sometimes hunts and those ladies skilful enough to keep up with her may be invited to join in, but in London you will find scant opportunity for a good gallop.’

‘I believe I shall miss it a great deal,’ Catherine replied. She raised her head, a challenge she was unaware of in her lovely eyes. He should not look at her so! ‘You also keep early hours, sir—though I think you went late to bed last night.’

‘Did we disturb you?’

‘No, no, of course not. I was not asleep,’ Catherine said quickly, a flush in her cheeks. She could not meet his eyes. He would think she was criticising him again, and indeed she had not meant to. ‘I dare say it was all the excitement of the day.’

‘Yes, I dare say.’ His brow wrinkled as he looked at her. ‘Perhaps...’ Whatever he was about to say was lost as Matthew Middleton appeared. ‘Ah, my good Matthew comes. I must bid you adieu, Mistress Moor, for I have promised to ride with him. I wish you a safe journey onwards.’

Catherine inclined her head but made no comment. She envied them their early morning ride, and the thought of yet another long day in the uncomfortable carriage did nothing to raise her spirits. She found herself wishing that her aunt would be forced to delay their journey for a few more hours, and watched wistfully as the men rode out of the courtyard together.

There was, however, to be no such delay. Their smiling hostess greeted them with a hearty breakfast of coddled eggs and fresh muffins to eat with her own honey—and the news that the carriage was repaired and awaited their pleasure.

‘We must thank you for your kindness,’ Lady Stamford said. ‘Should you ever wish to be presented at court you must call on me to help you.’

‘Lord bless us, ma’am, what should I find to do at court?’ Sarah went into a peal of good-natured laughter. ‘Our Nicholas can play the fine gentleman when the occasion calls for it, though I have always thought him a countryman at heart, but I am mightily

content with my life here.’

‘And a very good life it is too, Mistress Middleton.’ Lady Stamford bit into a third muffin oozing with creamy butter. ‘You are fortunate in your cook, ma’am.’

‘Oh, I made those myself,’ Sarah said, and turned to Catherine. ‘So beautiful as you are, you’ll be certain to find a handsome husband at court, mistress—but make sure you choose a kind man, for in the end a peaceful, loving home is what makes a woman happy.’

‘I thank you for your good wishes, ma’am.’

Catherine wondered if Sir Nicholas would return before they left, but in the next breath Sarah told them that the men would not come home before the evening. Catherine was conscious of a feeling of disappointment; though she did not know why she should feel anything for a man she had met but briefly and would probably never meet again. He had been pleasant enough when they met in the kitchen garden, but the image of him amongst those drunken idlers remained with her.

‘Well, Catherine,’ Lady Stamford said when they were settled in their carriage having said farewell to their hostess, ‘I do hope that we shall have no more adventures on the road, fortunate as this one turned out.’

‘We were indeed fortunate, Aunt. Sarah and Mr Middleton were generous hosts.’

‘And Sir Nicholas.’ Lady Stamford looked at her hard. ‘I hope you will be more disposed to greet him kindly should he decide

to call upon us in London.'

'I was not aware he was intending to visit London.'

Catherine's heart had begun to throb rather oddly as she waited for her aunt's reply. It was most unaccountable! Why should she be so affected by the rogue?

'Indeed yes. Mistress Middleton told me that the Queen's most trusted adviser had summoned him there. Sir Nicholas was named for his father, who was a friend to Cecil. Unfortunately, the father died some three years back, having never quite recovered from a lingering illness he contracted while a prisoner in the Tower for some months during Mary's reign, and then the untimely death of his eldest son, Harry. It was because of that friendship between Cecil and Sir Nicholas's father that he may have a brilliant future open to him at court.'

Catherine wrinkled her brow in thought. 'Do you think Sir Nicholas an ambitious man, Aunt?'

'All men of sense are ambitious.'

Lady Stamford had settled into her corner, cushions at her back and a rug over her lap. She closed her eyes, leaving Catherine to stare out of the window at the countryside. Some of the land to either side of the high road was commons and grazed by animals belonging to village folk, but more often now enclosure was encroaching on land that had once been open to all. The walls of large estates had altered ancient boundaries, often causing hardship to the poor.

'It is so unfair,' Catherine had complained to her father when

one of their neighbours took away a stretch of land that had previously been common land. 'He has so much, and they have so little.'

'It is the fault of rising prices,' Sir William explained. 'Land owners can get no more rent for the land they have let to tenants for years past, but they must find more coin for everything they buy. Therefore, they must take more land into enclosure, and if they have title to it...the right is theirs.'

Put like that, Catherine could understand why some landowners felt justified in enclosing land, but she knew that their actions caused much suffering for others.

Were the Middletons like other farming gentry and forced to take land that had once been free for all? They had seemed prosperous to Catherine—and judging by the supper talk the previous evening, Sir Nicholas was a man of some substance.

Catherine's thoughts returned once more to the man who had rescued them the previous afternoon. Why could she not dismiss the incident from her mind? It mattered not if he thought her a cold, mannerless wretch. As indeed she had been the previous afternoon and evening, though she had tried to be more conciliatory in the garden—at least until he had looked at her so oddly.

He was charming, but undoubtedly an ambitious rogue and it would be better for her peace of mind if she instantly forgot him, as no doubt he had already forgotten her.

'What think you?' Matthew looked at his brother-in-law as

they surveyed the stretch of good land by the river. 'It has always belonged to my family, but we thought it well to keep it as it is, a pretty stretch of sweet grass that all may graze. In summer I may have a few sheep here myself, though 'tis oft flooded in winter.'

Nick's eyes were serious as they rested on the strong, rather craggy features of Sarah's husband. It had been a good match for his sister, one that he had approved soon after his father's death. He knew Matthew to be a good man and understood he was troubled by his conscience. He had waited for Nick's return before making any decision, simply because he found it a thorny problem.

'You have the right to erect your fences,' Nick said, knowing that Matthew would be guided by his opinion. 'But it will cause hardship for the villagers.'

'Aye, I know it,' Matthew replied heavily. 'It goes against the grain with me, but I need more land under cultivation...'

'Why not take that piece of scrub to the north border?' Nick suggested. 'It will need more work to bring it round, but you may call upon the village folk to help you. Make it clear that you need more land and ask for their help in preparing the scrub in return for keeping this wash open for all.'

The frown cleared from Matthew's brow and he smiled in gratitude. 'Aye, I'll do it. I've not asked for the accustomed days in labour for many a year, for we all pay in coin these days—but I'll take the labour in lieu of the land, and all may be satisfied. Sarah told me to consult you, and as usual she was right.'

‘My sister flourishes,’ Nick replied with a soft chuckle, affection and warmth in his eyes. He was fond of Sarah and she of him. ‘You have spoiled her and yet she is less fiery than of yore. Tell me, what kind of magic have you used to tame her?’

‘Tis love, nothing more,’ Matthew answered with a smile. ‘Speaking of fiery wenches... what of Mistress Moor? Think you she was an uncommon beauty? That red hair and those eyes, and the whiteness of that skin... such a woman might tempt any man to madness.’

‘Do not let Sarah hear you,’ Nick warned, his eyes full of wicked laughter. ‘She will take a broom to you, I swear! But you are right, Matthew, Catherine Moor is a beauty, though she seemed overly proud and a little cold to me.’

‘Cold?’ Matthew raised his brows incredulously. ‘No, Brother, you cannot be serious? I would swear there was fire simmering beneath the ice. She has a haughty bearing I’ll grant you, but that is but a façade I dare swear. I vow it would be entertaining to see what lies beneath that cool manner, and would be tempted to probe for it right lustily were I not a married man.’

‘I’ll admit that a wench of that ilk is tempting to any man,’ Nicholas said, a smile on his lips as he remembered the way Mistress Catherine had glared at him. Even in the garden she had still seemed reserved and cool, though she had blushed when he first caught her amongst the herbs. It was probably true that there was fire beneath the ice, and in other circumstances he might have been tempted to breach the walls of the citadel, for he was

a man of lusty habits and had taken his first wench when but fourteen in the hayloft of his home. Unfortunately, he had other more important matters on his mind and could not spare the time for dalliance.

‘When do you leave for London?’ Matthew asked as they remounted their horses, setting out to inspect further pastures that Matthew had a mind to plough up and put down to grain that year. The export of wool was frowned on these days, and the call was for more grain to keep down the price of bread, which like everything else had been rising of late. ‘Sarah is hoping you will stay a while.’

‘A few days at least,’ Nicholas replied. ‘I must be in town within a fortnight, but I have someone else I would wish to see first and it will take me some days to ride to Leicester and back. I may go tomorrow, then join you at the weekend again for a couple of days before I go on to London.’

‘You know your business best,’ Matthew said. ‘Sarah wishes you would marry and settle down, but I’ve told her you’ll find your own way when you’re ready. But we’ll say no more on the subject, for I see it vexes you.’

Nick was frowning to himself as his companion fell silent. He would have liked to confide in Matthew, for he was a good man and true to his principles, but in knowledge lay danger and Nick would not involve his sister’s husband in this.

There were but few men he would trust with the problem that was taxing his mind. The court was alive with intrigue, and one

could never be sure where others stood. This business of Norfolk had seemed settled after the failure of the Northern Earls in their uprising of November 1569. The Queen, reluctant to punish her cousin, had allowed him at least partial freedom—but there was treachery afoot, and if it were not for the vigilance of men like Francis Walsingham and Sir William Cecil England might even now be at war with a foreign invader.

Nicholas's business in London was important but not urgent. There was time enough for him to speak to the man he trusted most outside his family. Oliver Woodville was his late brother's closest friend, and the man who had brought them the news of Harry's death. He had broken the news first through a letter and then had come in person on his return to England.

Oliver had been very distressed by Harry's death, but though he assured the family that it had been caused by a common fever, which affected many travellers, Nicholas had always retained a faint suspicion that Oliver himself was not convinced. Or perhaps it was merely Nicholas who refused to be convinced, because his grief was too terrible to bear, his sense of loss too deep for a younger brother to accept. However, his reason for seeking Oliver out was only partially to do with his brother's death all those years ago; he had other concerns that nibbled at his mind, troubling him with a half-forgotten memory. More pressing perhaps was his secret work for Walsingham.

The Italian banker Ridolfi had most certainly been behind this latest plot, but was there also another hand involved?

Walsingham was uncertain, though he suspected something... something hidden beneath the layers of intrigue and deceit.

‘Ridolfi would seem the prime mover in this plot, for it is certain Norfolk hath not the stomach for it,’ Walsingham had told Nick privately in Paris at their last meeting. ‘Had he grasped the nettle in ’sixty-nine he might have raised the country and swept Elizabeth from the throne. There is much love for Norfolk, amongst commoners and nobles alike. Even Cecil likes the man, though they be on opposite sides in this matter, but he would not see him dead, and Her Majesty protects him. I believe him dangerous but not the prime mover in these plots.’

‘But once his true perfidy is proven? Surely Her Majesty will see he is a traitor and must be dealt with as such?’

‘As yet the final pieces have still to be found,’ Walsingham had told him. ‘We know much, but Her Majesty is no weakling to be directed against her will in this. She asks for absolute proof of his guilt and will not return Norfolk to the Tower until we have it.’

Nick nodded, looking thoughtful. He knew well that Elizabeth was made of stubborn material, and given now and then to sudden rages like her father. Despite gossip and the harm done by malicious tongues that had slandered Anne Boleyn, there was no doubt in those closest to Her Majesty that King Henry VIII had fathered the courageous, determined lady many called Gloriana.

But this was not the problem that Walsingham was currently trying to grasp. Nick looked at him for a moment, trying to fathom the working of this clever mind. ‘And you think there is

still another traitor involved in this plot—someone we do not yet know?’

‘I sense him... smell him,’ Walsingham declared. ‘There is the stench of evil about him, Nick, but I cannot name him. Nor can I say for sure that he exists outside my imagination.’ He shook his head sorrowfully. ‘I have my suspicions of John Dee, but he is Her Majesty’s astrologer and trusted by her. I do not like the man and think him a bad influence on the Queen, but without proof my hands are tied.’

‘You think Her Majesty’s astrologer may be involved in some plot against her? Surely not?’

‘Some writings came to my hand, from Dee to a man who had sought his advice on workings of the occult. There was nothing of treachery in them, but something...’ He shook his head. ‘I do not trust the man nor any that treat with him.’

‘But you have no proof,’ Nick asked and Walsingham shook his head. ‘Nay, I need not ask, for you would have moved against him had the evidence been in your hands.’

‘In my business I glean crumbs from time to time and in this way my bread is baked. If the man be in league with the Devil I shall find him out one day.’

Absolute proof was hard to find and must be sought thread by thread until the tapestry was complete. And that would be all the harder if, as Nick suspected, he himself had been followed to and from his last meeting with Walsingham. Could their conversation have been overheard—and who was the man he had caught a

glimpse of in the shadows?

He could not be certain. Indeed, he had seen the man in the shadows only briefly as they walked together in the gardens of Walsingham's house at dusk. That brief sighting had touched a chord in his memory when he recalled it later, taking him back to a time when he had been much younger. Yet was it possible? It seemed unlikely. He was most probably mistaken; it had more likely been a trick of the light or a face long forgotten remembered wrongly, but it would do no harm to ask Oliver for a name.

The remainder of Catherine and Lady Stamford's journey to town was uneventful, though they had to accomplish it without the baggage coach, which having somehow missed them on the road had continued on to London and awaited them at Lady Stamford's town house.

The house, situated just off St James's and convenient for the Palace of Whitehall, which was the Queen's main residence in London, although she had many other palaces within a short distance, was a tall, narrow building with overhanging windows and a timbered frame.

Catherine was surprised at the closeness of the houses through which they passed on their way to Lady Stamford's home. The streets were filthy and the smell that came from the rubbish-strewn gutters indescribably foul. She had expected her aunt's house to be larger, but Lady Stamford explained that as she came to town only occasionally she did not need anything grand.

‘We shall be out most of the time, and I do not entertain lavishly in town, merely a supper or two if I feel inclined to invite close friends. Indeed, if it were not for Willis I might be tempted to sell it altogether. My second husband, who had ambitions at court, bought the house as a gift for me. Unfortunately, he caught the pox and died before he had a chance to make his name. And then of course I married again, and when the young king was taken from us my husband felt it prudent to retire to the country. We did not come to town again for a long time.’

Many Protestant ladies and gentlemen had done as much during the reign of the Queen some named Bloody Mary. It had been safer and more prudent so.

The London house had been reopened after Elizabeth came to the throne amongst scenes of rejoicing by the common folk, Lady Stamford having attended the Coronation and been present in the Abbey. Her third husband had unfortunately died soon after of a putrid fever, and once again she had retired to her house in Berkshire. Now she had returned to London for Catherine’s benefit.

Inside, the furnishings were good solid oak, some of it worn to a mellow softness by time and wear. The unwarranted use of English oak for anything but shipbuilding was frowned on these days, because it had been over-used, and imported woods were beginning to take its place, walnut being a favourite for good furniture. However, there were rich hangings on the walls and a set of six beautifully carved elbow chairs with padded backs

covered in a bright tapestry. The stuffed backs made them more comfortable than any Catherine had ever used before and she remarked on it to her aunt.

‘They were a special present to me from my third husband for our wedding,’ she told Catherine. ‘He asked me what would please me most and I told him of chairs I had seen in Her Majesty’s bedchamber so he commissioned these for me. I liked them better than any jewel, and they have given me ease on many a weary night. There were ten of them in all but I gave four to Margaret when she married Willis, and I shall give you two as a wedding gift.’

‘They are indeed most handsome,’ Catherine said and thanked her.

She must be grateful for her aunt’s consideration. Such chairs were seldom found in even the best houses, and it was a generous gesture to give such a valuable gift. Clearly her aunt expected her to make a good marriage and Catherine hoped she would not be too angry if her plans came to naught.

The scolding she had received after her coldness to Sir Nicholas had chastened her and she had found herself quite unable to put the incident from her mind. But now that they were in London, she imagined it would be easier for there was so much to see and do.

Lady Stamford had talked constantly of the silk merchants they would visit, and over the next several days Catherine was shown a dazzling display of wonderful silks and velvets. So many

that she found it difficult to choose and spent an enormous amount of her father's money.

'My brother can well afford it,' Lady Stamford told her when she wondered what he would say at their extravagance. 'And you cannot go to court looking like a pauper.'

The merchants' shops had signs hanging above them, often brightly painted and in many cases depicting the nature of their trade or guild; they swung backwards and forwards in the wind, making a creaking noise and adding to the general hubbub. The market stalls abounded everywhere, crowding the narrow streets; meat, fish and vegetables were open to the elements and flies in the heat of the day, and sometimes the smell was enough to make Catherine retch.

At home she would have ridden to a local market or fair, but in London they found it more convenient to summon a chair to carry them about the city. Walking was out of the question, because the gutters were choked with filth and one had to watch for housewives throwing the contents of their chamberpots from an upstairs window with only a brief warning, which caught many unawares. She had seen more than one fine gentleman raise his fist in anger when slops splashed his hose or trunks, as he was slow to dodge the deluge from above.

It was often almost impossible to pass through the narrow, congested streets, which quickly became choked with the press of traffic. Sitting behind an overturned wagon that had spilled its load on the ground did not find favour with Lady Stamford, and

the best chairmen were adept at avoiding such disasters.

Catherine was in turn delighted and appalled by the sprawling city, which had spread out beyond its medieval walls, despoiling the countryside about it. The ditch outside those walls, which had once been a part of the city's defences, had become a narrow, silted channel that stank in summer and had been built over in places. However, the curving banks of the Thames were still green and pleasant in many areas, gentle, spreading trees gracing them with their tranquil beauty, and flocks of swans frequenting the clear water. Within the city itself it was possible to come upon orchards secreted behind walls or pretty private gardens, and the houses of the rich were sometimes very grand, often situated close by the river with long sloping gardens to the rear. Catherine thought how pleasant it would be to walk there on a warm evening, and regretted that her aunt's house had only a small walled courtyard.

The streets of the city were mostly dark at night, though lanterns hung outside the better houses and inns. It was, however, a risk to venture out late at night, despite the efforts of the watchmen.

'We shall be well escorted if we go out in the evenings,' Lady Stamford told her niece. 'But we must wait until your father arrives before we go to court.'

In the meantime Catherine was content to be taken about the city, visiting the newly opened Royal Exchange, the beautiful parks, so many shops that her head went spinning at all the frills

and trinkets she was shown. What she enjoyed most was being rowed down the river on a pleasant day to watch some sport or a play given in the courtyard of a superior inn.

Catherine was pleased to discover that the particular players she was taken to watch were under the protection of the Earl of Leicester, and vastly more talented than those she had seen on her way to London. While watching them she recalled the young Kit Marlowe, and thought he might have liked to be present for the performance. The behaviour of the audience, which was made up of richly dressed ladies and gentlemen, was better than that she had witnessed on the road, but there was still a rowdy element who called out occasionally, using the poor players as the butt of their wit.

‘It is always so at a public performance,’ Lady Stamford told her. ‘But you will see better manners at court.’

Catherine found herself looking about the audience. She scolded herself for her disappointment at not seeing the person she sought. How foolish she was! Sir Nicholas was undoubtedly still in the country with his sister. Besides, why should it matter to her? She would do best to put him from her mind!

It was as they were being rowed back up river that Catherine saw the heads on spikes outside Traitor’s Gate and shuddered. Public executions were not uncommon, and she had been forced to witness a hanging when on her way to a certain silk merchant Lady Stamford had praised for the quality of his wares, their chairmen having been unable to make a way through the press

of the crowd. However, the sight of blackened heads left to rot and be pecked at by the crows was one she would rather not have seen.

‘You must accustom yourself to such things and learn to ignore them,’ her aunt told her with a frown when she spoke of the barbaric behaviour of some in the crowd at the hanging. ‘Those men were enemies of the state and must be punished. After the attempted uprising in ’sixty-nine Her Majesty’s advisers are determined that this latest plot shall come to nothing, and she must be protected from those who would harm her.’

Catherine nodded, knowing her aunt spoke the truth, but the sight had cast a shadow over the afternoon and she was conscious of coldness at the back of her neck. The unease between Catholic and Protestant was a source of constant tension in England, and seeing those blackened heads upon spikes she could not help but feel sorry for the men who had died such a cruel death and for their families, who would naturally suffer grief and deprivation.

It was at moments like this that she longed for the peace of the countryside and wished that she might be back at home with her father.

However, her mood was soon altered, for when they entered her aunt’s house it was to find a bustle and a stir that could mean only one thing.

‘My brother has arrived at last,’ Lady Stamford said with satisfaction. ‘That means we may attend the court tomorrow. Her Majesty is to give a masque at Hampden and we are bidden to

attend...’

Catherine paid little heed to her aunt, giving a cry of delight as her father came into the hall and rushing to hug him. The shadows receded as he embraced her, then drew back to study her closely, taking in the richness and modish style of the gown she was wearing.

‘I see Sister Helen has been busy spending my money—and to good effect. You look beautiful, Catherine, though to my eyes you always have.’

‘Thank you, Father.’ She smiled at him as they went into the best parlour together. ‘Oh, I am so very glad that you are here...’

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