

Foreword

This novel is based upon the true story of Winifred, Countess of Nithsdale (1672 – 1749). The story of her husband, William Maxwell, and his escape from the Tower of London is well known but looking further into this, I realised that Winifred was by far the more interesting character; her life shaped by the turmoil of late seventeenth century politics and her family torn apart by faith and loyalty. Winifred's motives for attempting to rescue her husband from the Tower remain a puzzle, since she was not a young woman and she stood to lose everything: her home, her children and even her own life if she failed. I have used my knowledge of child development to help me try to understand Winifred and the forces that drove her to save her husband but there remains much scope for conjecture and for readers to reach their own conclusions. While the most important events happened as written, some names, details and dates have been altered to suit my purpose as the author. The personalities of the characters, their motives, desires and conversations are entirely fiction and bear no resemblance to how they may have actually thought, acted or spoken.

Book 1: 1688–1690

Chapter One: 1688

I can hear a thump, thump, thump like someone is bouncing a ball along an empty corridor then a man's voice, hushed by a woman. I listen and listen until my ears crack and pound to the rhythm of my pulse. There are no more sounds. I reach for my comfort cloth, torn from Mother's petticoat when she was taken to the Tower of London. But it's lost in the folds of my bed and my hands sweep across the counterpane searching for the touch of silk. My fingers find its ruffled edge and I burrow back under the covers.

Now I hear hooves scrape on the cobbles and the jangle of a harness. There are horses in the yard below my window. Through the open hangings at the end of my bed I see that the fire is out. It must be very late.

There's a strip of grey light, where the shutters on the windows don't quite meet, and I feel my way down the bed and slide over the edge, my toes finding the carpet that lies at the foot of the bedstead. It's so cold. Outside the horses snort and whinny and I hear the stable boy slap at their necks to calm them. The sound echoes in the courtyard like the noise the maids make when they shake out sheets to air. I hold my comfort cloth to my cheek and feel my way across the room, recognising familiar pieces of furniture by the smooth turns and ridges in the

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wood. I think about being blind, like the old man who begs in the street by our square.

I prise open the shutter with my fingers. The glass is frosted on the inside and I use my cloth to rub at the ice. Our carriage is below and boxes and bundles are strapped onto the roof behind the coachman. I recognise him by his hat and I can see by the way he pulls at the reins then lets them go again that he's impatient. A light falls from the door to the kitchen and two servants, dressed for night travel, carry blankets and parcels of food into the carriage. The pane mists with my breath and I smear at it with my fist. Droplets of water trickle down my wrist. I hold my breath. Father stands in the light thrown from the kitchen. Shrouded in steam, a tall woman reaches for his hand and he helps her up the steps into the carriage. It's Mother. There's someone else, another woman, and I recognise my sister Lucy from the hood of her winter cloak. My father embraces her then closes the carriage door, hard. The coachman snaps his whip, the coach jolts forward and disappears beyond the frozen panes.

I hear someone scream. 'Mother!'

I awoke to a full fire, stacked high and glowing. The room was warm and I could see my clothes airing to shake off the damp of the night. I closed my eyes and listened as my maid moved around the room. She wasn't rushed, there was no difference to her routine ... perhaps it all had been a dream and Mother and Lucy were waiting for me downstairs. It was nonsense that they would disappear in the night without me, it was a nightmare, nothing more. I parted my eyelids

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just enough to see Grace pull the curtains apart, her heavy brows set in their perpetual frown of concentration. Her pretty face with wide-set brown eyes and a scattering of freckles was unmarked by anxiety or fear. Perhaps it was safe. I could rise and face the day ahead.

‘Are you awake, Lady Winifred? They’re all downstairs having breakfast. Your father has asked that you join them as soon as you can. Your sisters arrived an hour ago.’

I turned on my side, my back to her, and pulled the coverlet over my face. ‘Why are they here? What do they want?’ I felt the mattress sink as Grace sat down behind me.

‘My lady, such a fuss last night. Cook had to get out of bed to prepare a meal for the travellers and then your sisters asking for an early breakfast. Cook’s in a foul mood. I’d get up if I were you or there will be no food left. You can’t expect anything special today.’

I pulled the sheet down from my face and looked at Grace. Her brows were knitted but in the half light her eyes shone. I felt my throat tighten and something drop inside my stomach. ‘Last night ... I thought I saw Mother leave with Lucy. Is it true, have they really gone?’

‘Come on, out of bed before your water cools. I’ll tell you while you dress.’

Grace had chosen a simple home dress and I turned first one way then the other as she threaded my arms into the sleeves. She tugged at my bodice and I felt the bones of the corset tighten across my ribs and lift my breasts. ‘Cook says that the queen has had to flee to France because the king fears for their lives. The Countess and Lady Lucy have gone with the queen and the new baby prince.’

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I felt a chill, as if icy fingers had touched the back of my neck. 'But she's my mother.'

'The queen asked for her specially. Cook says the queen wouldn't go without her.'

'Why didn't she take me?'

'You're all grown, Lady Winifred. You don't need a mother now. That little prince is poorly. Cook says he needs your mother because of her special skills.' A pink flush of excitement had spread across Grace's cheeks and neck.

I sat down in front of the mirror so that she could brush my hair. 'What special skills? She's only my mother.'

'Your mother understands things, midwife things, healing things. You know how she makes all her medicines and visits the sick. Cook says she knows about babies and how to keep them well, so the queen couldn't leave her behind. What if the prince fell ill in France? The queen couldn't take the risk.'

'But I might fall ill,' I protested. 'Who will look after me?' I stood up and turned to Grace, who took both of my hands in hers.

'My lady, I will.'

My father sat at one end of the dining table with his back to the window and my older sisters, Anne and Mary, on either side. The table had been cleared but an empty place remained for me; a bowl, a knife and a cup waiting as a rebuke for my lateness. Father wasn't wearing his wig and his round, bald head seemed too small for his neck. In silhouette he looked like a turnip. My curtsy towards him was swift and shallow and I dipped my head towards my sisters who lowered their eyelids in return. I sat in my place,

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next to Anne, and a servant brought me bread and cold meats from last night's dinner. My throat hurt as I thought about last night's meal with Mother and Lucy and their casual talk. They had lied to me. I pushed the meat away and insisted on currant jelly. Mary rolled her eyes, so I took care to eat my bread and jelly in tiny pieces, chewing each small square until it was liquid in my mouth. When I had finished, the servant poured some quince wine which I swallowed in small sips, dabbing the corner of my mouth with a napkin and fixing my gaze on my plate. I finished at last and my father flapped his hand at the servant clearing my plate, 'Go now. We are not to be disturbed. Close the door behind you.'

He cleared his throat and waited until all our eyes were upon him. 'Winifred, your mother and your sister Lucy had to leave suddenly last night ...'

'They didn't say goodbye to me.'

'Don't interrupt your father,' said Anne, interrupting him.

'There was no time,' Father frowned. 'Our queen and the infant prince have been forced to flee for their lives because of the invasion of our country by the king's ungrateful son-in-law, William of Orange. God willing, they should all now safely be in Calais. Your mother is to be governess for the prince and since she's not a young woman, she has taken Lucy to help.'

'She should have taken me.'

My father sighed and rubbed his eyes. 'You are too young and your other sisters are all married. Your mother had no choice.' His voice rose. 'Do you really think, young lady, that I would allow my dear wife to travel to France

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without the support of one of her many daughters?’

This wasn't a question that expected an answer. I looked down at my hands.

‘What I am going to say next will go no further than this room. You ... Winfred, look at me ... must not gossip about this with that little maid of yours, or you will both go to the Tower of London. I shall also be leaving for France, imminently, with the king. I can't say when but William of Orange's army is already moving towards London and there is a possibility the king may be taken prisoner. A messenger will call for me, probably in the middle of the night. One morning, soon, you will find me gone.’

Mary and Anne both reached for my father's hands and he leaned back in his chair. ‘The consequences for those of you left behind may be serious. When it becomes known that the Countess and I have chosen to remain loyal to the king and queen, you may be harassed or worse. Remember what happened after I was released from the Tower of London?’ My father paused, measuring the impact of his words. As if we needed to be reminded of men hunting us in the night with torches, the flames licking at the bottom of the stairwell, the smell of our burnt-out home.

He smiled at Mary and Anne, showing his long brown teeth and squeezed their limp hands: ‘I want you to live here with Winifred. Your husbands may join you if they wish. Your sister Frances will be safe in Scotland with her family. Your brother William is travelling from Powis and should be here this afternoon. The household must be protected and I want the family to stay together until the political situation is more

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secure. I believe you will be safer as one unit and your brother can act as head of the family and manage the estates in my absence.'

I spoke quietly. 'It's not fair.'

Father frowned at me. 'Winifred ...' his voice was low but heavy with threat.

I felt a thunder cloud burst in my chest and stood up, my hands clenched tight into fists. 'It's not fair, it's not fair, it's not fair!' I screamed, astonished at my own behaviour. 'I don't want them to live here.' I gestured wildly at my sisters. 'I want my mother back. You should both stay here with us. You don't belong to the king and queen.'

I turned and ran; terrified of my father's anger, terrified I might be guilty of treason. I pushed past the servants hovering behind the door and almost tripped over the maids who were sweeping the staircase. At the top of the stairs I stood between two pillars that rose to the ceiling and grasped the solid wood of the banister. I felt I was on a stage and looked down at the upturned, astonished faces of my audience. I thought of throwing myself over the edge to punish my parents but knew it would make no difference. Self-pity drove me along the hall and under my bed, where I lay in the cold and dust and waited, picking at threads from underneath the mattress. The smell of old dog surrounded me; a rank mixture of damp hair and sweat. I listed the family in order of my hatred. Father was at the top of the list, with Mother a close second. Despite his fears for our safety, he hadn't been able to hide his pride and arrogance at being chosen by the king. In fact, it was Mother that they wanted, not him. My mother had left me so that she could protect a new child

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that wasn't even hers. My parents were strangers, abandoning me again because of their beliefs.

I waited, aching with cold as the wooden floor bit into my shoulder blades. I listened but there were no sounds; no one was coming to find me. I pulled myself from under the bed, dragging my back along the floor by tugging on the frame.

I knew I must be covered in dust but could only reach far enough to brush my shoulders and the back of my head. Where was Grace? My fingers felt stiff with cold and when I blew on my hands, I saw my breath mist. I needed to find some warmth. The drawing room always had a fire but as I eased open the heavy door, I heard my sisters talking in low murmurs and retreated, allowing the door to close silently. Father's study would have a fire but I wasn't going near him. The remaining option was the kitchen but Grace had already warned me about Cook's mood. I went anyway, tiptoeing down the servants' stair to the long, dark corridor that led to the kitchen. Out of habit I went into Mother's stillroom, wishing that she might be there. The room was empty but her handwriting was on the labels of the jars, listing the ailments the medicines were used to cure. I ran my finger along the shelves, reading aloud: *'cough, cold, swelling, itch, cramp, bloody-flux, worms, gout,'* my words becoming quieter as the empty room swallowed my voice.

The kitchen door was always open because of the heat. Cook sat alone at the scrubbed table, with a mug of ale, and I thought I would risk her temper. She rubbed her hands across her oily, polished face and pulled so hard at her lips it looked as if she might strip the skin from the bones beneath, like a carnival mask. She looked

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more weary than angry. The fire lay behind her and I crept through the door, keeping my back to the wall. If I stayed very quiet, she might not even notice me. I eased into one of the wooden chairs and felt the cold seep from my bones.

Sleep prickled across my eyelids and I jumped at Cook's voice.

'Lady Winifred,' she turned towards me and nodded. Cook had long given up curtsying to anyone in the family except Father. I moved across to sit next to her, my back now warming against the fire.

'This is a terrible thing, the Countess going off, leaving us all. We'll not see her again, you mark my words.' Cook wiped her eyes on her apron then pulled herself out of her chair, resting her knuckles on the table before waddling across to the range where she lifted some bread wrapped in a cloth from the warming oven. She fetched cold butter from the pantry and another bottle of ale. I darted across to the sideboard and brought two plates and another mug. At last, an adult was on my side. We ate in silence, butter sliding from the warm bread down my chin.

'What about the sick? How will they fare now? Old Mrs Austen is dying, Mr Crouch isn't well and Mary Price's daughter's due in a few weeks.'

I noticed that my loss wasn't mentioned.

'And what about Christmas? Lady Mary says you'll stay here and not go to Powis.'

'Not go to Powis?' I echoed.

Cook nodded. Things were getting worse by the hour. I couldn't remember a Christmas when we hadn't been at Powis, even during the long years of Father's imprisonment.

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'I won't be able to go to my sister's.' Cook's eyes were shining, like the glaze of butter around her lips.

I wasn't used to tears from adults, let alone Cook, whose emotions usually swung between rage and a terrifying jollity. A weight settled on my shoulders. Christmas here, in London, without my parents or Lucy and worse, Cook thought that my mother might never come home. I turned away so that she wouldn't see that I was fighting my own tears. Behind me, the table creaked as she pushed herself up. I heard bowls and knives thrown onto the table and could smell onions. Cook bellowed out of the open door to the kitchen maids. If I stayed, I risked being asked to help make lunch.

'Where's Grace?' I asked, biting a fingernail.

'You leave that girl alone, she's got work to do,' Cook snapped. I waited until she went into the pantry for the meat and slipped away.

'Grace, do you still have a mother?' We lay side by side on Grace's narrow bed in her attic bedroom. I liked to come to her because if we stayed in my room, she would sort and tidy and not sit still. 'You never see her. Do you ever go home?'

'I think I must have been about ten when I came here first. I'm the eldest girl and my mother and father thought it was a great chance for me. Of course I go home. What do you think I do when you're at Powis?'

I'd never considered that Grace had a life beyond me, assuming she stayed in our house in

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Lincoln's Inn whether I was there or not. I felt ashamed and quickly changed the subject.

'I hate my mother,' I announced. 'I hope I'm never a mother.'

Grace screwed up her nose. 'Lots of girls our age are already mothers. My younger sister's a mother.'

'But we're only sixteen,' I protested.

'You can be a mother from when you start to bleed and we've been having those for two years.'

I sat up, horrified. 'I could be a mother?'

'You'd have to do *it* first. You won't catch a baby otherwise.'

Grace and I often talked about *it* but I hadn't fully understood that you needed to bleed and have sex to have a baby. Mother had never talked to me about those things. I'd thought sex was about giggling and boys touching you. Once, we'd watched a gardener's boy take one of the kitchen maids on the compost heap behind the glass house but their clothes had got in the way of a clear view. Grace had to hold onto my arm, so I wouldn't run off and reveal our spying. We'd talked about it for months, making a list of all those in the household who might have had sex. It was our favourite game and the list was regularly updated. I'd reluctantly agreed to include Mother and Father because Grace had explained to me that sex was supposed to happen after you were married. The thought of my sisters and their husbands having sex made me sick but I'd had to concede because, apart from Lucy, they were all married. We felt certain that Cook hadn't, which made her a virgin. We'd fallen from the bed laughing at the idea of Cook

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as virginal. We were virginal; young and pretty with firm breasts and shining eyes. Not Cook.

'So which of the boys here, in this house, would you want to do it with?' I asked.

Grace shook her head, then touched my arm and put her fingers to her lips. 'Listen ... horses ... in the stable yard. It must be your brother.' She smiled a soft, secret smile. 'If I had my pick, it would be him.'

I leaned over the bed, pretending to vomit. Grace pushed me onto the floor. 'It's time you got ready for dinner. Remember I have to dress your sisters as well.'

We hurried to my room and Grace brought a jug of rose water from Mother's stillroom and hung my favourite dress to air before the fire. It was a deep pink with an embroidered bodice and turned-back sleeves. She said I should wear it in honour of my brother's safe arrival and chivvied me to wash and dress.

Grace hurried away to help my sisters and I sat in front of my own fire trying to read. It was dark and the candles only helped to make the room seem cold and secretive beyond the circle of fire. I thought I might try to find my brother because he often teased me in a way that was fun and not cruel. He could be funny about our parents too, making me laugh by copying their voices and gestures, although afterwards I often felt ashamed.

I heard the raised voices from Father's study when I was still some distance away. There was no need to try and hide my approach as both men were shouting at full pitch. Never had I heard men bellowing as if they were bulls in a field and I listened at the door, ready to flee.

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First my brother's angry voice: 'You're nothing but a bloody, selfish old fool.'

'And you are betraying your religion and your monarch,' my father shouted.

William yelled back, 'And you're betraying this family and our inheritance. Your misplaced loyalty will mean the loss of our estates ... everything we've worked for. You'll put our lives at risk ... again.'

'Some things are more important. There are principles that must be upheld, justice for our monarch, the future of this country for people of our faith!'

My heart pounded and jumped in my breast and the tight bodice threatened to make me faint.

'How can you do this to us? Have you gone mad? Did six years in the Tower teach you nothing?' William demanded.

Outside the door, I cheered him.

'I have no choice.' My father sounded weary, as if he had lost the will to fight. 'He is my king, chosen by God. It's my duty as a member of the Privy Council. Can you imagine how the king feels, to be betrayed by his daughters?' Father's voice drifted for a moment, as if he had turned away.

I would betray you, I thought.

I guessed they had moved away from the fire towards the tapestry hangings on the opposite wall. Anxious to miss nothing, I leaned closer to the door but their voices had become indistinct. I ran back to my room and waited, crouching by the fire until the gong echoed in the empty hall.

At dinner we ate in silence. William smiled at me when I entered but kept his eyes focused on the carvings around the fireplace, as if they

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were of unusually great interest. I was glad to see that father was wearing his wig. It helped him look more authoritative, as if there was a chance he might still be a man we could rely on. But he sat in his place at the end of the table and chewed his food as if we weren't there. His eyes were in a far-off place and occasionally he muttered aloud, conversing with someone who wasn't present. He was already in France.

Chapter Two

Without Mother in the house, my sisters were determined to keep me occupied by teaching me how to run a household. Mary, the eldest, spent much time with our father. I'm sure, like me, he would have preferred to be left alone but I imagined she kept him busy with lists and plans about how we would manage once he was gone. When he wasn't with Mary, Father spent time at Whitehall with the king, no doubt also with lists and plans.

Anne had decided that she would be in charge of Christmas and had ambitions to have a turkey, since it was the new thing and she spent hours trying to track down a supplier, with me trailing along behind her. We always had goose at Christmas and I resented her changing things, as if she had already replaced our mother. My brother William disappeared every day on business but Grace said that she saw him go into Jonathan's Coffee House in Change Alley.

One morning, Father called us to his study after breakfast with news from Mother and Lucy. They were safe but the royal party were being treated as hostages by the king of France. I couldn't understand why our king would send his wife and baby son to somewhere they weren't welcome and risk the lives of my mother and sister as well.

'Weren't the French expecting them?' I asked, looking between the adults. 'Shouldn't the king have checked first before sending my mother and sister off to be taken hostage?'

My father sighed and shook his head.

I turned to William but he stared out at the garden beyond the study window. My sisters exchanged a glance beneath their lowered lids.

Angered by the adults' refusal to acknowledge me, I ran outside and stumbled along the paths of the parterre until I found my favourite bench in the rose garden. It was a still, damp morning and mist drifted around the statues, so that they formed and disappeared like apparitions from the next world. The garden was drained of colour but birds searching for insects amongst leaf litter sounded like gravediggers. I missed Lucy. Together, we would have talked about what all this meant. Lucy listened to me and thought about her answers, as if my questions mattered. She never said things just to sound as if she knew, when she didn't.

I heard my brother's footsteps long before I saw him. The pattern of his footfall sounded like searching; he was looking for me and I wanted to be found. 'Hello,' I called out like a bell. William shouted back and I saw his shape form and vanish in the fog until he appeared distinct and solid. His head was bent inside the hood of his hunting cloak and his hands were wrapped in its folds. He sat down beside me and nudged me with his elbow, so that I would look at him.

'I thought you might want some company?'

I kicked hard at a stone. It arced towards a robin, who flew only a few paces and studied me with one eye.

'Why is the French king treating Mother and Lucy as hostages?' I hoped William would notice that I was indifferent to the fate of the queen and her brat.

'Some people say James is very wise. Some say he's very stupid.' William shrugged. 'In trying to please everyone he has managed to make enemies of all, including the French king. The gossip in the coffee shops is that Louis doesn't know where he stands with our king, he doesn't trust him.'

'Why wouldn't he trust him? They're both Catholic kings. They're cousins.' My only teacher, our priest, had a simple view of political matters.

'Win, I'll try to explain. You know that the king's son-in-law marches on London. Louis has been warning James for months that William of Orange was arming his fleet but our king's answer was to throw the French envoy into the Tower of London. Our Catholic king has managed to anger the very monarch who should have been his closest friend. Not well done. Also, why on earth did he allow his daughter to marry William, a declared enemy of France?'

Such talk was treason and I glanced behind me, horrified that we might have been overheard. Father had been imprisoned during my childhood for less than this. 'Don't say such things ... we can't talk like this.'

'We're safe here, no one is listening.' William gripped my upper arm. 'Try to understand. There is much you have to know or whatever happens next will make no sense. You will have to make decisions too, starting with where your loyalty lies.'

I hesitated. 'So why does Father admire James?'

William leaned back and stared into the fog. His lids drooped and his eyes were emptied of colour, like the mist around us. 'Because our father is a fool, like James II. Fools attract other fools.'

It felt as if William was addressing some other audience, not me. These were words he had rehearsed.

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'Catholic families like ours should live quietly and not attract attention. We'll lose everything, absolutely everything.' William slammed a fist into a cupped hand. 'When news of our family's involvement in the king's desertion gets out, the mob will come again, like last time. You remember when Father was released from the Tower? I'll never forget seeing our house burn, Winifred, never.' William leaned forward and pressed his brow into his fists.

I was frightened. I wanted to be reassured, not treated like an equal. I didn't want an older brother who reminded me of the terror of that night, fleeing through flames and choking smoke. I shifted along the bench to be closer to him but felt no warmth as he linked his arm through mine. I pulled my cloak tightly around me and shivered. The fog was heavier and the robin's busy presence could only be guessed at by the sound of leaves turning.

My movement roused William and he lifted his head. His eyes widened as he turned to me. 'Don't worry about Mother and Lucy. It's just posturing. As soon as the king arrives in France they'll all be freed. I'm quite sure they're being treated well. Louis XIV is a gentleman and I'm told he likes pretty women, so he's not likely to treat the queen badly, or even our mother.' William winked at me but there was a bitter edge to his words.

This sounded worse. How could Lucy and Mother be safe if their security relied on a powerful man finding them attractive? 'I thought Mother had been chosen by the queen to look after the prince; not because she's beautiful, but because of her healing skills. I hate hearing you talk about her like that.'

'I'm sorry, Win,' William moved his hand and squeezed my elbow. 'I was trying to make you smile but it wasn't funny.'

I had another worry. 'What if the king is captured by William of Orange and kept prisoner? Or he might even be beheaded. What will happen then?'

'He'll be allowed to escape. William and Mary don't want to imprison him, he'd just attract rescue attempts and they won't behead him either. Mary would never kill her own father.' He shook his head, 'Once he's gone, the story will be that he abdicated. That means he gave up the crown willingly.'

William was trying to make me feel better but anger threaded through his words and there was something else.

'Are you frightened?' I dared ask. William stared into the depths of the fog, struggling with his answer. I saw his shoulders drop. 'I'll be imprisoned, Win. I don't know what will happen to the rest of you. And it's all because of our mother's interference.'

'How can you blame Mother?'

'She saved the life of the baby. Think about it, Win, a Catholic prince, James Francis Edward Stuart.' William's voice rose and cracked with emotion, as it had when he was fifteen. 'Parliament wanted the child to die. If our mother had let nature take its course, if she hadn't meddled, we would still have James II on the throne. Yes, a Catholic king but one who would have passed on the throne to a Protestant daughter. William would never have invaded. Our family might have lived in peace for generations.'

I had a memory of a mewling child down in the bowels of the house. The maids had rushed around with hot water and towels, everyone had frowned and whispered and meals were late.

'The baby prince was here, wasn't he? She brought him to our home to cure him. What was wrong with him?'

'He wouldn't take the nurse's milk. The country's most learned physicians couldn't help him. He was dying. But our mother saved him. There's even a rumour that she swapped him for another child.'

I jumped from the seat to face him. 'Mother wouldn't do that. She wasn't trying to save a prince, she was trying to save a baby. Grace says that she's learned how to do it, to help dying babies and heal other things as well.'

'So Grace knows everything ... it must be fact then.' William's voice was heavy with sarcasm.

'Cook told her.'

William stood and tossed the folds of his cloak across his shoulder, his eyes dark and blank. 'Well that settles it, Win. Perhaps the king should take Cook to France, not our father.' He turned from me and disappeared into the hoary mist.

Alone again on the cold bench I removed my glove to feel the warmth vanish from where my brother had been. I knew he spoke the truth. My mother's loyalty lay not with us but with her faith and her monarch. I understood, finally, why people would hate us in the months to come. We were finished.

On Christmas morning, our father was gone. Nothing was said. Father's place was empty at breakfast but at dinner, my brother took his seat at the head of the table.

For once, the house was warm and scented with the sap of fresh-cut logs. Mary had instructed that there should be fires in every room. In the dining room and drawing room, the fireplaces trailed with foliage from the garden. Anne hadn't been successful in finding a turkey so we had goose as usual and Christmas

pottage and later, some sugarplums in the drawing room. We tried to laugh and pretend that everything was the same but our efforts flickered and then died away, like the ash in the grate. William sat slouched in his chair, his wig at an awkward angle, from the effects of too much wine. My brothers-in-law smoked pipes and murmured over a game of cards and my sisters were at either side of the fire, working a tapestry.

By late afternoon, I felt restless and walked the long, silent corridors of the house. Anne had decided that after dinner was served, servants who had family in London would be free to visit them, so the lamps were unlit and fires now smouldered untended in empty rooms. My father would never have allowed the house to be left in darkness. The familiar corridors seemed full of shadows and I hurried to Mother's room. Some remnant of late, grey afternoon light filtered through the small window panes and I pulled from her closet the gowns, petticoats and stays she had left behind. I piled them onto her bed and burrowed deep into the scented mound of cloth.

I woke, stiff and chilled, to hear muffled sounds from the street. At first it was just a murmur, as if two men were passing the time of day. I sat up and listened, pushing the clothes from me and allowing my eyes to adjust to the moonlight slicing through the un-shuttered windows.

A soft whistle rose from the street, like a man calling a dog. The uneven glass of the window panes sparkled and lights flickered from below. I tiptoed across and knelt on the box under the window to look down. It was men with torches. I ran back across the room, tripping on the edge of a rug and falling hard against the fender around the dead fireplace. I stumbled out of the door, nursing my bruised elbow and ran down the empty corridor, my voice echoing ahead of me. 'They've come! They've come!'

Candles guttered in the galleried landing. I lifted my petticoats and ran down the stairs, calling to my brother, 'William! They're here.'

William opened the door of the drawing room, staggering backwards as I pushed past him. 'For heaven's sake, Win, what on earth's the matter?' His voice was slurred and he had to prop himself upright against the doorframe. My sisters and their husbands froze like a tableau as I fell into the folds of their tapestries, wiping the soot and tears from my hands and face.

'Men are outside,' I wailed. 'I saw them from Mother's room. They've got torches and sticks.'

My sisters' husbands, neither of them fit men, rose in alarm from their game of cards and looked first at their wives and then across to my brother, now slumped forward in a chair, rocking and moaning. In that instant we all understood. We had no idea how many manservants remained. Apart from the men in the room, we were undefended.

William rose, holding himself steady against the back of his chair. 'We have to fight them. Let's fight them. Come on, Carrington! Are you scared, Molyneux? Are you both cowards?'

Viscount Carrington pushed my brother back into his chair. 'Sit down.' He steered Lord Molyneux towards the door by his elbow. 'All of you remain where you are. We'll judge the situation, determine what to do.'

But I knew that our situation was beyond any judgement. I'd already seen it all. At least twenty men in the street and more to come, here to destroy us just like before. But we waited, silent, listening to small cracks and shifts from the dying fire. Anne rolled up the tapestry and William cradled his head beneath his folded arms.

The two men returned, their ruddy complexions glistening with exertion and fear. 'It looks like we're outnumbered,' wheezed Viscount Carrington. 'Are there any records of which servants remain or those who might have returned?' Mary exchanged a glance with Anne who frowned and pursed her lips. 'But what shall we do?' Anne asked her husband and both sisters looked towards their husbands for help. In turn, Carrington and Molyneux glowered at my sobbing brother.

Someone had to act. I stood up and caught my reflection in the mirror, as tall as any of the men. We must flee and I knew how to lead us to safety. 'We need to check the servants' quarters and rouse any who are here. Carrington and Molyneux should go to the men's quarters and Anne and I will do the women.'

Everyone turned towards me, even William lifted his head to listen. 'Tell them to gather in the hall. Mary, you count heads. We'll escape through the garden. There's a gate at the back that only the gardeners use. Be quick,' I clapped my hands. 'There isn't much time.'

I ran to Grace's room and burst in without knocking. She jumped from the bed, her hand over her mouth.

'Quickly, Grace. We have to leave. There's a gang of men in the street who look as if they're going to attack the house. We'll have to show everyone our secret way out through the garden. We're the only ones who can do it. Hurry, go to Mary in the hall.'

I ran to my room and pushed my nightshirt and Mother's old, torn petticoat into the embroidered purse that Anne had given me for Christmas. Instead of joining the others as I should have done, I ran towards Mother's room at the front of the house. I had to see the men again. Keeping my head away from the window, in case my shadow attracted attention, I now counted about fifty. Some carried torches, others

sticks or swords. A group at the front had their heads bent together in low talk and the rest were waiting. Last time they had shouted. This silence felt worse.

Down in the hall my brother-in-law took charge by counting heads but Grace beckoned from the front that the group should follow her down the servants' stairs and along the narrow corridor that led to the kitchen. I kept to the rear of a ragged line of servants; those who were orphaned children or not quick-witted enough to create a fictitious family. As the line paused at the exit to the garden, I stole into Mother's stillroom to slip a bottle of rosewater into my purse.

Grace called over the line of waiting heads that we must walk through the garden in absolute silence and carry no lamps. While they shuffled behind her in single file, I remained for a few seconds at the outside door until I was sure that no one was left behind. We crept through the stable yard, fearful that the horses might whinny in fear or pleasure and give us away. There was no moon and with each step through the formal garden, I expected the dark shapes of the statues to jump out and grab me by the neck. I imagined a sword through my heart, or worse, to be stolen from the end of the line by a group of men. The paths narrowed and I feared that the women's petticoats made too much noise against the foliage. Someone stumbled and called out and we stood still, our breath frosting in the darkness, hearts bumping in our chests, waiting to hear the mob bray with delight that we'd revealed ourselves.

I followed the group into the kitchen garden, past the rows of turned earth ready for planting in the spring. We squeezed through a gap between the glasshouses and staggered over the stinking heap of rotten vegetables and fallen apples that the gardeners thought useful. At last, my family and our servants gathered, silent and expectant, waiting at the solid garden gate. A sound of glass breaking carried across the garden from the house.

Although I knew where the key was kept, our urgent need to escape seemed less important than hiding from my older sisters that I had used this gate before.

'Come on, girl!' Viscount Carrington growled at me through clenched teeth. 'I thought you knew of a way out.'

While Grace fumbled with the heavy key, Carrington spoke over our heads too loudly, as if addressing troops. 'Once we're on the street, we head for my residence.' I glanced over my shoulder, terrified we'd been heard. 'Keep together and don't attract attention to yourselves,' he intoned. 'If any servants have family nearby, make your way there. It's best if we're not too big a group.'

I allowed my brother-in-law the dignity of being the leader. I bowed my head to him, the senior man in the family, a role that ought to belong to William, who swayed between two gardener's boys. I watched my family push ahead of the servants to be first through and waited with Grace to lock the gate. The refugees shuffled ahead of us down the narrow gardener's passage, their small bundles held close. Grace and I pulled our capes over our heads, our faces hidden. She looked up at me from under her hood and I took her hand. 'Don't go home to your mother. Stay with me, please,' I whispered.

I was used to the smell of fire from fireplaces and garden bonfires but this odour was so different from the smell of ash or charcoal. It was damp and sour and grew stronger as we pushed deeper into the ruins of our home. I searched the broken rooms with my sisters, picking our way amongst the shattered glass and sodden rugs. A mouldering, acrid, rotten stench caught in the back of my throat and I covered my face with my cloak. Anne, Mary and I entered each room, the skeleton chairs, broken glass and twisted metal a choking reminder of the power of fire. Inexplicably, recognisable objects remained exactly where they had been dropped and isolated corners of rooms remained untouched, framed by blackened walls. Doors had been left ajar for us by the servants who had been first to check on the house but the door to Father's study had been left shut. Anne pushed through the door, only to close it sharply behind her and bar my way from entering.

'There's no need to see what's in there. There's things written on the walls ... vile words ... I don't want you to read them.'

'What is it?' Mary joined us from the drawing room.

'There's words on the walls ... written in excrement, I think, describing what they want do to the women. I don't think Winifred should see it.'

'Quite right, Anne, and I don't think I want to either. How much worse this might have been – at least no lives were lost. I'm glad we decided to let the servants have the evening at home. It was better for us to escape rather than try to fight back.'

I didn't agree. Had our able men been with us like last time, they might have helped to defend the house. If the mob had met some resistance, perhaps there would have been less damage and I wouldn't have been left without a home.

'Perhaps they knew that we were practically alone. That's why they chose Christmas Day,' I murmured.

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Mary turned to me. 'Winifred, you can't mean that one of our household betrayed us?'

'That's exactly what I mean. I'm glad no-one was hurt but perhaps we wouldn't have been attacked at all if they'd thought we were defended. It wasn't a good decision. We've lost our home and all the servants have lost their positions.'

Anne's face reddened and I was afraid I'd said too much but it was Mary who spoke, her calm words more terrifying than any anger. 'I don't recall that you expressed a view at the time, Winifred, although the decision about the servants was known to you, as it was to everyone else. The only people who are worthy of blame are the men who were hell bent on destruction. You are lucky to have a home with Anne and not be sent to Frances in Edinburgh.'

'I'm sorry, Mary,' I felt my skin flush and lowered my gaze.

'Remember Father's words,' Mary continued. 'We must stick together and think of others, not just ourselves. Now wait here and reflect on what I've said while Anne and I make a quick inventory of any furniture that can be salvaged. Don't use the staircase, it might not be safe.'

Of course, I disobeyed her. The upstairs rooms were strangely unaffected, although everything was covered in a fine, greasy layer of soot. From my room I took my hairbrush and comb, from Mother's a perfume bottle and from Lucy's her old doll, left behind in her rush to France. I tucked these treasures under my cloak and by the time my sisters returned I stood exactly where I had been left.

Chapter Three

My sister's carriage dropped us at the Middle Tower. It was a warm day but Grace and I pulled the hoods of our cloaks over our faces to walk up Water Lane. The path was uneven and the walls high, one side in full sun the other in deep shade. We kept close to the dark wall and turned left through an archway, past the Bloody Tower on our right-hand side and climbed the steep incline to Tower Green. I heard footsteps and the high voices of women and children, but kept my eyes down. They might, like us, be prison visitors and therefore deserving of a warm smile but, more likely, they were the wives and children of the wardens, disparaging of treasonable families like ours.

I stopped at the royal chapel on the green and pulled back my hood. The stone shimmered like rich butter toffee. I looked down at the small crosses that marked the executions of Anne Boleyn, Catherine Howard and Lady Jane Grey and frowned. A soft wind lifted strands of my hair, which drifted across my cheeks like cobwebs. It was too peaceful here for violent death.

'Grace, my mother might have been executed right here. Yet I had to pass this place every time I came to see her. I'd been told the stories of the executions and at night I used to imagine my mother's head rolling on the ground.'

Grace pulled me away. 'Don't think about it, Winifred, you'll start your nightmares again. I've never understood why the Countess was accused of treason. I was only a scullery maid at the time and not allowed to ask questions.'

We joined arms and walked slowly down to the Lieutenants' Lodging, where my brother William was imprisoned along with other male prisoners of rank. The sun shone in my face and I threw back my head to feel its warmth in my hair.

Grace sat on a mounting block with her back to the wall. 'I'll wait here for you. It's so dark inside that place.'

I sat down next to her, delaying my visit to my brother's unwelcoming rooms. 'Do you remember a woman called Elizabeth Cellier? She often visited my mother at our Lincoln's Inn house.'

Grace shaded her eyes and frowned. 'I didn't like her. She always made Cook annoyed because she used the kitchen to boil herbs.'

'I didn't like her either. She and Mother were always out, trying to heal the sick. Anyway, they started visiting Catholic prisoners and met a man called Thomas Dangerfield, who accused them of plotting to kill the king.'

'That's ridiculous,' Grace interrupted.

'It is ridiculous,' I continued, thinking of my elegant mother and the hatchet-faced Mrs Cellier conspiring to commit murder. 'But he had planted some evidence which was taken seriously and they were both arrested. I wasn't told much about the trial but I remember my father saying that Mrs Cellier was very convincing in court.'

'I remember her arguments with Cook. She usually won and that didn't happen often.'

'Mother didn't see much of her once they were both released. I don't think my father wanted it. Mother never spoke of the matter again. I've often thought about how things would have turned out if she'd been found guilty. I was only eight and my father was in the Tower too.'

Grace frowned and rested her hand on my arm. 'It would have been awful for a little girl to lose her mother like that but it didn't happen. You had her with you until you were sixteen. It's best not to dwell on what might have been.'

'I also wonder how things would be right now if Mother had never met Mrs Cellier. My mother's chance friendship with this woman has brought so much harm. If the baby had died, the people might have been happy to keep James as king and we wouldn't be having all these terrible battles. It frightens me that so much can depend upon such a small thing. Maybe it would have been better for everyone if my mother had been executed.'

'Winifred, please, I don't like to hear you speak about the Countess like that.' Grace looked around her. 'I can understand why you must hate this place but what has Mrs Cellier got to do with your mother saving the baby prince?'

'She taught my mother everything. She was a midwife. She knew about babies.' I felt sullen and angry with Grace for taking my mother's side. I heard myself speak to her as if she were stupid. 'Don't you see? This is all Mrs Cellier's fault,' I sulked, 'every bit as much as my mother's.'

Grace leaned forward and her shadow shielded my eyes from a sun dropping low in the sky. 'We can't predict the future, Win. When we learn something, we can't be sure how we'll use it. We'll be with you

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mother soon enough and you'll have the chance to ask her about these matters and try to understand what happened. Hurry or you'll be late for William and this food is spoiling.'

She handed me the basket from my sister's kitchen and I walked on to the Lieutenant's Lodging. I wanted a row but it wasn't going to be with Grace. I followed the guard upstairs and waited while he searched through the keys on a heavy ring, worn on a belt around his waist. I had been visiting William for months, always on the same day of the week and always at this time, but every week the guard studied each key as if it was fresh from the blacksmith until I slipped him a coin of enough weight to allow him to find the correct one. I knew I should give him the bribe immediately but I felt we would both miss the pretence.

The guard bowed low as he held open William's door, announcing 'Lady Herbert' as if William might have had a steady stream of visitors through the day. William looked up from his book in surprise. I knew he would have heard the guard's measured tread and heavy breath as he climbed the stairs and listened to the rattle of the key but this was our ritual; William would act as if he wasn't expecting me and I would pretend I was pleased to see him. I pulled my cloak from my shoulders and handed over the basket of simple food and ale from Anne's kitchen. It was a meagre offering and William didn't bother to look inside. Since we had lost Powis Castle and all our houses and estates there was no money. William often complained that his rooms received no natural light apart from early in the morning and had asked to be moved but we couldn't pay what was asked. This room was furnished with a few pieces from the Lincoln's Inn house that hadn't been destroyed the night it was ransacked and retained a slight smell of soot, alongside damp and mice.

My brother's cheekbones stood out, chiselled from his face, the last of the light catching their sharp angles in deep shadows. He hadn't shaved, nor was he wearing a wig. He gestured that I sit down on the other side of the empty grate.

He cleared his throat before speaking, as if his voice had not been used that day.

'Any money from our esteemed parents?'

'They send what they can. Mother says life is very frugal at St Germain. The French king has been generous to fund so many émigrés but she says that more arrive every day. But she's well and Lucy too, although she's worried about Lucy's decision to enter a convent, as you might expect ...'

'I'm sure it's a hard life at the court of Louis XIV.' William interrupted me, trying out a Welsh accent which only made him sound bitter rather than funny. I stood at the window and looked out at the chapel, still glowing with late autumn sunshine, then turned back into the pall of the room.

'They're not part of the French court. It's the English court in France. There are many mouths to feed and everyone has lost their estates, just like us.'

He snorted and folded his arms across his chest but he didn't argue. I was glad because I needed to tell him something difficult.

'I want to be in France with our mother and Lucy. I've asked her to send for me.'

'So my little sister will abandon the family as well? I thought you hated her.'

I felt my chest tighten. 'So what if I do? Why shouldn't I go to France?' I grasped the back of his chair. 'You'll be out of here soon. Everyone's being released. Then you'll be free to live again. You're still young, you can find a wife, a position. But look at me. I'm seventeen and I never meet anyone my own age. Our sister's house is filled with boring old Jacobites and I'm not welcome at court. I have no dowry. I'm as much a prisoner as you. I'm so dowdy. Look at this gown.' I held up its pitiful folds then let them drop, as if my fingers were soiled.

'Have you considered living with Frances in Scotland? I've heard the young Scots lords are a wild and handsome bunch.'

'The Scots are savages, everyone knows that! Anyway, there's no future for anyone of the Catholic faith in Scotland. The clans have retreated and Presbyterianism is the established church. Not even the Episcopalians are safe.'

'So my little sister is a Jacobite after all. You've been taught well by Anne.'

I sat down in the empty chair and rested my hands in my lap, trying to ignore his taunts. 'Lucy's letters show her devotion to our faith and her vocation is clear. She's determined to join a convent, so Mother will need my help with the prince. When it comes, I want to take my chance.'

'With the hope of balls and parties and young men to dance with?' William's tone was conciliatory.

I smiled at him, putting my anger aside. 'You've no idea what life is like with the esteemed Viscount and Lady Carrington. He chews his food like this.' I rolled my eyes and ground my jaw. William gave a yelp of laughter.

'I've been made to study French and Latin and needlework and dancing, but for what? At St Germain, I can use my learning. I have to get away from here ... and you will likely be freed before I go.'

William's expression closed, 'Neither Anne nor Mary has been to visit me. Only you come, every week.'

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'They're so busy,' I lied. 'I'm sure they'll visit soon. You know that we can't afford the price of your bail,' I said, rehearsing familiar arguments, but I had little confidence that either of my brothers-in-law had tried particularly hard to have him released. William must know that our sisters believed he had let us down on that dreadful night we'd escaped from the mob. We'd never spoken of it but I had overheard from their whispered conversations that they thought he was a drunk. My own role on that night had been forgotten and I'd had to sit through many accounts, each more vivid than the last, of Carrington's quick-witted bravery in leading the household to safety through the garden.

'And your young maid, Grace,' William broke into my thoughts. 'Will she accompany you?'

'She's not my maid, she's my companion. I have no other. It was Anne's decision and it has made me very happy. I would have gone mad without her.'

William stood to light his lamps and I watched his careful use of the ends of candles that Anne's servants would have thrown away. I thought I saw loneliness in his sloping shoulders and rounded back and resolved to try to be more kind and to bring whatever the kitchens could spare, until I was called to France. I said farewell and as he pressed my head into his chest, I smelt mildew from his clothes.

Grace and I walked down the hill to wait for Lord Carrington's carriage at the Middle Tower. From dark corners, soldiers wounded in James' war in Ireland, where he fought against his daughter's husband, called out for alms and waved their fetid stumps. I had nothing to give. We wrapped our cloaks tightly around our worn petticoats, glad of the night, as carriages full of beautiful young men and women passed by on their way to parties and dinners. I was tired of hiding from society. I couldn't wait to be gone.

I sat in the middle of the long oak table with Anne at one end and Francis Carrington at the other. They had not been blessed with children and as I looked from one to the other it was easy to see why. Both were rotund with overindulgence and I imagined that, even if both were willing, which I doubted knowing my sister, the mechanics of the act of procreation were probably an impossibility. We ate in silence, the noise of Francis' few teeth occasionally colliding in his cavernous mouth. I refused the orange cream and stewed pears, leaving more for them. They licked their lips and spooned down the nursery food like naughty children.

Anne wiped her chin with a napkin and looked at me. 'How was our brother?'

'He looks thin and pale but then he never gets out and probably doesn't get enough to eat.'

'Did he send any word of thanks for the bread and jugged hare?'

'Yes, of course, he thanked you both for your kindness and asked after your health.'

Carrington gave a slight tilt of his head in acknowledgement.

'My lord, he's looking forward to you visiting him and awaits with anticipation your petition to the House of Lords for his release.'

Anne sniffed and put down her napkin. 'I don't know where he thinks we'll find the money.'

I ignored her and took the chance to raise my own situation. 'He suggested I go to Scotland to live with Frances, instead of going to France.'

She rose and bowed to her husband, signalling that she was leaving. 'I think you'll find that Frances and her children are hoping to join our mother in France. Her husband, the Earl of Seaforth, is fighting in Ireland. You will be invited to travel only when you are needed. In the meantime, you must learn patience, as must our brother.'