

# The Jacobite's Wife

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## Foreword

This novel is based upon the true story of Winfred, 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 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!'

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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 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.'

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

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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, 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 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 ... Winifred, 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

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

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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 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.'

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'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.

'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 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

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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 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.

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.

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'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 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?'

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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.

'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.

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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

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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

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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.'

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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.

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'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.

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

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

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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 your 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

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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.'

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‘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.’

‘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

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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.'

**Chapter Four**

Two frustrating years followed. I lost contact with William after his release from the Tower, since he was not welcome to live with either of my sisters and there were rumours that if found, he was to be arrested again. Day followed dreary day of morning lessons and afternoons filled with the quacking of Jacobite wives. I lived for Lucy's rare letters from France but there was little of the news I wanted to hear, of young men, dancing and new dresses. I wasn't interested in her role as assistant governess or the rituals of life in the exiled court, nor did I have much sympathy for her complaints that I wasn't there to release her.

One evening, Anne asked me to remain behind after our evening meal to hear news from her husband. Carrington wiped his mouth, as uncomfortable with our proximity as I was. He stared into the distance before speaking, rearranging the position of his bowl and glass as if their precise location was essential to what would follow.

'Lady Herbert,' Carrington enjoyed formality, 'a courier came to the house this morning. He brought three passes from the French government, one for you and two for accompanying servants. Your father has sent money for your passage. I assume you will want Grace Evans to accompany you and I suggest you take that new man, the one who's just started in the stables.'

I knew the boy he meant and was certain he was of simple mind. My mind swung between hope and fear. It might all be for nothing if Grace and I weren't safe on this journey.

I fixed his shifting eyes with a stare. 'Thank you Francis, but Grace and I would be safer on our own. We will dress as boys and will not be troubled.'

Carrington sighed. He liked a quiet life above all else and I'd guessed he would back down. 'If the stable boy is not to your liking then by all means travel with John, the gardener's assistant, but he must come home immediately. Instruct your father to pay for his return passage.'

I almost hugged him but the flicker of recoil in his small eyes stopped me. Instead I curtsied and ran towards the door, keen to tell Grace the news.

'Winifred,' he called. I paused and turned back. 'You will leave the day after tomorrow.'

The household went into turmoil as Anne set everyone confusing and contradictory tasks and made lists which she left all over the house. The head gardener, infuriated by my brother-in-law's decision, confronted him loudly in the hall but although the gardener won the shouting match, to my relief Carrington's decision prevailed. My clothes, such as they were, were packed and unpacked. Anne wailed at their dowdiness and tried to make me take two of her gowns, despite the fact that both Grace and I would fit inside each one. She fussed in the kitchen over what

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she should send to Mother, then sobbed at the table, certain that Mother would have everything she needed at St Germain.

The night before we left, Anne insisted we have baths. This involved the whole household in boiling water and searching for enough clean drying cloths and required a team of maids to mop the wooden floor of my bedroom. Grace and I sat together, drying our hair in front of the fire. The scent of my mother's rosewater mingled with the smell of fresh sap from the apple tree logs. Alone at last, a single word hung between us, unspoken. *Freedom.*

At Dover, I leaned over the rail of the small packet boat and breathed in the odour of tar and rotten fish from the quayside, watching as ropes and barrels were loaded aboard. I looked along the deck to my two companions. Young John, a dark-haired boy with round cheeks pink with excitement, and Grace, leaning back and laughing, her clean hair loose and tossed by the salt spray. Behind them the sky was almost black, crying seagulls caught like silver arrows in the last of the sunlight. Men scrambled onto the rigging and our crumpled sails became taut, straining to hold the force of the gusting wind. The boat began to creak and shift its way out of the dock towards the harbour entrance. We turned our backs on England and breathed deeply, filling our lungs with joy.

John wanted to go below and play cards with other travellers, so Grace and I linked arms and strolled along the deck, talking about the other passengers until the rain fell in heavy, round drops and thunder grumbled around us. We retreated to our cabin and for the next two days we were trapped, as the boat heaved and bucked against the storm. We took turns to weave along the dark galley to empty our slop bucket, barely able to contain its contents as the ship lifted and dipped. The floor was wet and the air sour with vomit, spilt where other travellers had tried to navigate the corridor. We brought back ale to sip and damp cloths to wipe our hands and faces. Day and night merged. We hardly spoke except to check that each was still alive and sleep was only possible in snatches. Finally, the storm ended and we gingerly climbed on deck to join other whey-faced passengers. The clouds broke from the horizon and a torn strip of blue sky framed a slash of dark coastline that must be France. I waved to John who stood with the other male servants and he hurried over. 'Yes, my lady?'

'Stay with us, John. We shall stand together as we sail into Calais.'

I had imagined running across an empty quay and into Lucy's arms, with Father possibly hovering in the background. Of course, Mother wouldn't be there. Instead we had to wait while the boat inched towards the quay and men with ropes secured her tossing hulk to the dock. Next, the crew tumbled the cargo and baggage onto the quayside. The servants disembarked first and stood guard around their employer's trunks and boxes. At

last, a whistle blew and we were allowed to inch down the gangway. The quay was crowded and I had no idea where to look for the carriage we had been promised. I felt suffocated by the crush of bodies that smelt and sounded utterly unfamiliar. French and Irish voices mingled and I understood neither. I wanted to run back to the safety of the ship.

Carrying our trunk on his shoulders, John used his height and weight to force a way through the crowds. I clung to his waist, and Grace held on to mine. As the passengers and crew thinned, John put down the trunk and we scanned wooden sheds, barrels, coils of rope and stragglers making their way to the town. To our left, a path which was little more than a farm track had waiting carriages along its verge, their drivers idly flicking at passing flies while the horses pulled at their bridles to crop the thin grass. By the first carriage, a tall woman stood alone, shading her eyes and watching the groups of travellers mingle and separate. She could have been my mother and my heart leaped, but it was Lucy. I called and she turned towards us, searching for my voice. Grace and I waved and John did that two-fingered whistle that only boys can manage. Between us, we picked up the trunk and staggered towards her. Facing Lucy after all these years, without a farewell between us, I felt immediately awkward and curtsied, as if she were royalty. In the same moment, Grace and John became servants and fell back, busy with our baggage.

Lucy lifted my hand and turned it over, then stepped forward and touched my cheek. 'Winifred,' she said softly. 'You've grown up.'

In the carriage, I found I wanted to look at Lucy without her seeing. Her gown was plain, cut higher across her breasts than was fashionable and she wore her hair pulled back tightly across her crown, without ornament or headdress. At her throat she wore a simple crucifix. She saw me looking and smiled.

'I'm entering a convent in Bruges and the queen is expecting a baby. Now that you've arrived, I'm free to go. Thank you for coming, Win, Mother would never have allowed me to leave if you hadn't agreed.'

'The queen is having another baby?' This was amazing, a miracle in fact. No wonder Mother had asked me to come.

'It's due next spring. I'll stay for a few months to help you find your feet.'

There was so much else I wanted to ask but I felt self-conscious in front of Grace, my closest friend for three years but who was a stranger and a servant to my sister. I nodded and said nothing more, ashamed that my stare had made Lucy apologise for the plainness of her dress, which was nonetheless cleaner and newer than anything worn by me. I looked out of the carriage at the darkening French countryside, which was much like England except that the cottages were white with red tiles and there were more trees. Lights began to glow from windows and I felt an unexpected loneliness for Anne's chaotic household in London.

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Lucy pulled curtains across the carriage windows and I buried my cheek into upholstery that smelled of hair oil and sweat. We had lost the contents of our stomachs several times while crossing the channel and I felt hunger fight with nausea as I tried to doze. I thought it would be childish, like the Winifred that Lucy had left behind, to ask if we were there yet or if we would ever stop to eat. I shut my eyes and allowed my head to roll back and forth with the uneven rhythm of the carriage, and in that strange place between wakefulness and sleep I remembered playing with Lucy at Powis Castle, whinnying and tossing our heads as we cantered imaginary horses down the long gallery until our nurse shouted at us to stop. The shouting became a man's voice. There was a man in the gallery, chasing us. The movement stopped and I was shaken awake.

The carriage door was open and Lucy was gone. Grace cradled my head against her shoulder. 'It's only me, Win, don't worry.'

I pulled back and tried to focus on her face. 'I must have fallen asleep. Where's Lucy?'

'We've stopped here to eat and wash. Lady Lucy has gone inside with the men to find a room.'

I sank back against the cushions and waited, holding Grace's hand, feeling the splintered comfort that rises when a bad dream fades. Lights flickered as the door of the inn opened then closed and men called to each other in French. The voices seemed to roll back and forth across the courtyard and although my teachers said I was fluent, I couldn't understand anything that was said. The horses stamped and blew and I guessed they were being rubbed down and watered. John's face appeared in the door and he gestured that we follow him. He helped us down from the carriage and led us across the courtyard and into the inn. Through the open door to the bar I saw a crowd of men, their voices roaring in a senseless babble and loud laughter that cut through the thick smoke. I lifted my petticoats and quickly followed John to the top of the stairs. He held open a door and we ducked our heads to enter a warm, low-ceilinged room, where food was laid out on a rough-hewn table. Lucy gestured to a bowl and towels where I could wash. She touched Grace on the arm and pointed her back through the door, to an adjoining room, using an authoritative voice I didn't recognise.

'Evans, you will wash and eat in there. You may join us in the carriage for the rest of the journey. We must be quick as the Duchess is waiting to see Lady Winifred.' Lucy startled as she found me standing close behind her. 'For goodness' sake, Winifred, go and get washed.'

'You don't understand,' I hissed. 'Grace is my companion. She must eat with me.'

Lucy steered me back to our room, where she closed the door. All her movements were calm and measured as if she had already entered the convent. 'These are Mother's instructions. Grace can't be your companion. It's best she understands that now. She will be your lady's maid and will assist our mother,

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who is now the Principal Lady of the Bedchamber. That's the best we can do. Money is very scarce at St Germain.'

'But Anne arranged it all,' I pleaded, hoping that our older sister's authority would carry some influence.

'I know. But there is no place for a companion. You will be part of the queen's court and will support Mother. Please get washed. I will go and explain to Evans. And Winifred,' Lucy hesitated, 'please wash thoroughly, you're both a little ...' She screwed up her nose and left.

We rode hard through the dark for at least another hour until Lucy pulled back the carriage curtains. In the distance a building rose like a crouching cat, dotted with lights that grew brighter as we approached. There was nothing gentle or gracious about St Germain-en-Laye. It grew out of the landscape like a cliff face.

Once the horses caught sight of home, their canter became a gallop, throwing us from side to side as the coachman negotiated the bends in the road. The lights grew brighter and the chateau filled the carriage window then disappeared as we raced under an archway and clattered to a halt in a central courtyard. The coachman opened the door and pulled down the steps. Grace was out first and helped me down. Men and women appeared from dark corners and, in the confusion and noise, Grace and John disappeared. I looked above me at row upon row of lights as the chateau rose into the night sky.

Lucy gripped my arm and led me to a staircase. We climbed at least three flights of stairs, each turn only dimly lit and stopped in front of a door, already open. Somehow, my trunk was in the room, next to a wide bed. A very young maid curtsied and left. I started to cry and Lucy pulled me to sit next to her on our bed.

'It's strange at first but you will be happy here with our mother and father. The queen is lovely and the prince is ...' Lucy hesitated and her eyes searched for the right word, '... the prince is a lively little boy. Come now and change into this dress. We're pretty much the same size. Mother is waiting.' I was exhausted and nervous and wished this meeting with Mother could wait until morning, when I would be cleaner and more awake.

Back down the same staircase and across the courtyard we entered a wide, better lit set of stairs and climbed to the first floor to reach our parents' suite. A servant led us into an elegant, mirrored drawing room and I tried to balance on the edge of a chair which was not designed for comfort. Lucy sat to my left and folded her hands elegantly in her lap, as if she had spent the day on embroidery. I saw myself reflected from different angles and was pleased at the sight of my fine, slightly pointed nose and quizzical, arched brows.

A rustle of petticoats and Mother hurried into the room, her expression preoccupied, as if she had put something down only a moment before and now couldn't find it. Lucy and I rose up

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together and curtsied. Mother saw me and held out both hands to take mine.

‘It’s like seeing myself in a looking glass! My darling Winifred, you are so beautiful, the loveliest of all my daughters.’

I turned to see Lucy’s reaction to this unkind comparison but she smiled without envy and I thought that her mind must now be occupied by higher things than earthly beauty. Mother sat down on a third chair and sent a servant for chocolate. We talked of the journey and she asked for news of Anne and Mary. I learned that our oldest sister Frances had remained in Scotland as her husband had returned from Ireland. Without being asked, I told her about William, incarcerated for too long in the Tower and now disappeared. She frowned at me with what might have been grave concern or grave displeasure and turned to Lucy to speak about things that meant nothing to anyone ignorant of life in the exiled court.

Free to study her, I saw that Mother was thinner than I remembered and the light from the candles cast deep shadows under her eyes. She had been right to send for me. She was too old, I thought, to be looking after young children. As she enquired more about our family, the servants, England, I tried to remember loving her. She seemed nothing like the mother who had left me, the mother of my memories. That mother had been scented, soft to touch. This mother was aged, with stiff hair piled high in the new, unflattering fashion and skin that was heavy with powder. She smelt like a stranger.

Lucy took a long time to come to bed; her prayers seemed to go on for ever and I wondered how anyone could be so religious when they were also so tired. I had almost fallen asleep when I felt a cool draught on my shoulder and the mattress dip, as Lucy pulled back the covers and climbed in beside me. We lay side by side in the shared bed. I had not slept beside another human being in my entire life, at least not that I could remember, and I was aware of her body and the importance of not touching. We lay in silence and I tried to match my breathing to Lucy’s to help me sleep. Then she spoke.

‘What did you think of Mother?’

What could I say? That she seemed old, that I had felt nothing? I hesitated. ‘It was wonderful to see her again. I thought she looked tired.’

There was another silence, we both held our breath, then Lucy spoke again. ‘I wondered if you’d notice. I thought it might just be me, imagining things. She’s looking more and more tired. I’ll speak to Father Innes tomorrow. I think she should see a physician.’

I nodded, even though it was dark. ‘Who’s Father Innes?’

I felt Lucy shift onto her elbow. ‘He’s Lewis Innes, the most wonderful man. He’s principal of the Scots College in Paris but he spends a lot of time here because the king trusts him. He has a room on this floor and has stayed with us since the king

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returned from the war. I talk to him about my faith and it's through his help that I'm going to Bruges. Mother adores him too so she'll listen to him.'

I could feel a change in the warmth of Lucy's body as she spoke of her friend Lewis Innes and wondered whether she should be going into a convent. Perhaps that was why she had to go, she loved someone who would never love her in return. I turned over and sighed, enjoying the sadness.

'Another really important person here is John Drummond, the Earl of Melfort. He's just back from Rome. The queen likes him but no one else does. Keep out of his way. I'll point him out tomorrow.'

'Do you know everyone here?'

'It's a very small place and we can't go anywhere else except Rome. So yes, you do get to know everyone, at least by sight. It's harder now that so many Irish are here but they'll move on soon.'

'Why are there so many Irish? They thronged the quayside at Calais.'

'I'm sure you heard that James was defeated at the Battle of the Boyne by your king?' I felt there was an accusation in this, a suggestion that I had some personal responsibility for the actions of William of Orange but I also knew from the Jacobite meetings at Anne's that her king, James, had fled the battlefield after only a few hours and run back to France.

'Well,' Lucy continued as if this were a history lesson, 'William of Orange and the king of France have just signed a treaty ending the Irish campaign and all the Irish officers who fought for us have been allowed to leave Ireland. Of course, they've all come here but I've heard that Louis is creating a new regiment for them. He's calling them the Wild Geese. Don't you think that's lovely?'

I didn't answer. My mind had already drifted to a sunset-red sky behind Powis Castle, veined with the dark symmetry of wild geese in flight. The lonely sound of their leaving filled my head and I turned away from Lucy, pulling my bolster over my ears.

**Book 2: 1691–1699**

***Chapter 5: 1691***

Despite my exhaustion, any sleep was broken by the unfamiliarity of another person moving beside me and restless, wakeful dreams of searching for something I had lost. Just after dawn, Grace moved quietly around the room, picking up underclothes from the floor and hanging our dresses in the closet. She threw more wood on the fire and noticing I was awake, hurried across to my bedside.

'I'm sorry, I'm sorry,' I whispered in case I woke Lucy.

'I'm fine, Lady Winifred,' Grace pushed the hair back from my face. 'This is an adventure for me. There isn't room here, so I'm billeted with the other servants in the town. I'm sharing with two girls from Wales. John has gone home already. Everyone is impressed by my French but they say I've an odd accent.'

I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand. 'I saw my mother last night. She looks very old and Lucy says she's ill.'

'I met her this morning,' Grace frowned. 'She does look tired. She said I was to be a lady's maid to you and Lucy and run errands for her to the town. Don't worry about me, my lady. This is easy work. From what I hear, I think you've drawn the short straw having to help with the prince.'

I sat up and pulled my knees towards my chin, guessing at what words might have passed between Grace and my mother. 'Tell me about the prince, is he that bad?'

'The other servants tell me he brings new meaning to the word brat.'

Lucy turned over and sighed so Grace put her fingers to her lips and walked over to the closet. 'Your mother,' she whispered, 'says I've to dress you in something of Lucy's when you meet her later. All your old dresses are to be mine. You're going to be fitted for some new gowns.' She clenched her fists in excitement then waved farewell.

I waited for Mother in her private rooms, which were luxurious apartments with walls of duck-egg blue, panelled with frames of embossed gold plaster, like the crimped edges on Cook's pies. Framed within these panels were paintings of decorative bunches of grapes and sheaves of corn, covered in gold leaf. Faded silk curtains were bunched and draped at the windows, with gold and blue shutters behind to match the interior of the room.

I sat on a chair covered in matching silk and shifted uncomfortably to stop from sliding off. A servant brought coffee and I shuddered at its intense sweetness and bitter taste. From the window, I watched the endless scurrying activity in the

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courtyard below until footsteps told me that my mother was on her way. I lifted my petticoats and hurried back to my seat.

Mother was still in her night clothes, a white embroidered shift with a grey, silk robe draped across her shoulders. She gave a slight bow of her head and sat at her dressing table, a frothy affair covered in white silk, with frills that fell right to the floor and a mirror veiled in matching drapes. Mother observed me in her reflection while her maid brushed her hair. She must have seen my eyes dart around the room.

'I know what you're thinking, Winifred, but we haven't spent a thing since we arrived. This suite of rooms was used by the French king before he generously gave St Germain to our king. I'm told he'd only just finished this apartment before he left. It's not to my taste but we're lucky, others have had to wait for their apartments to be decorated and the king and queen have had terrible disruption with theirs. The queen keeps changing her mind on where she wants to live and with another baby expected, I'm sure she'll be on the move again. She might even want these apartments.'

I nodded, uncertain whether I was expected to comment. It seemed that Mother found it easier to speak with her back towards me. I couldn't imagine this mother humming amongst the terraces at Powis, filling a basket of figs and peaches for the kitchen and lifting me to reach the fruit. I remembered her kissing me as she put me down and telling me that my cheeks were as soft as the peaches.

I watched the maid arrange my mother's long grey hair, weaving the strands precariously on top of her head and fastening it with ribbons and feathers. I was so fascinated by the intricacies of her hairstyle that I only half listened to Mother's description of my duties but I did grasp that I was to spend my time with the young prince, perhaps help him to practice his French and once the infant was born I was to help with the baby.

Mother stood to be dressed and I turned my head while the maid removed her robe, but in the mirror I caught sight of her sagging breasts and the bones standing out from her back like angel's wings.

'So can you dance, Winifred?' She was seated back at her dressing table, applying layers of powder and rouge to her skin.

'I have been taught some English and Scottish country dances but have had no opportunity to dance outside my lessons.'

'Why is that?'

'Our family isn't welcome at court. Other Catholic families made their peace with the king but we were never invited to do so.' I saw my mother frown. 'Sorry, I meant William of Orange.'

'We are not just a Catholic family, Winifred,' my mother explained. 'We're a Jacobite family, dedicated to the restoration of James II to the crown of England. You should have had plenty of opportunity to mix with other good Jacobite families.'

How could I tell her that too many of the Jacobite families of England had given up on James II and were pinning all their

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hopes on the brat; that they sat around in stuffy rooms and drank too much and bored each other with past glories?

I looked around at the glittering façade of St Germain. 'Yes Mother,' I replied, 'but we didn't have any dances.'

'What musical instruments do you play? Do you write any Latin?'

'I can read and write some Latin and play the harpsichord. I think I'm a fair singer. Anne has taught me embroidery and I'm fine with simple sewing but I'm too clumsy to make my own clothes, or so I'm told.' Mother seemed satisfied but she didn't tell me what use this knowledge might be to her.

Satisfied with her toilet, Mother stood and brushed her hands across the folds of her gown, adjusting the creases. She dismissed the maid with a stream of French too fast for me to follow. 'One more thing, Winifred. You may not be aware but your father is now the Duke of Powis and I am the Duchess, just in case you accidentally refer to me as the Countess.' She saw me smile and frowned, snapping her fan. 'Did I say something amusing, Winifred?'

'Mother, our estates have been taken by the government of England. How can you have forgotten? You are a Duchess only in this building. At home you aren't even a Countess.'

Mother stood quite still, as if I had slapped her and her face coloured in patches beneath the thick powder. I felt ashamed, this was my mother and she was ill. Why had I said those words?

I watched as red blotches crawled up her décolletage and spread across her neck. 'I'm sorry, Mother.'

'I'm sorry too, Winifred. We left you too long in England. You have been ruined.'

I lay on my bed crying and raging between self-pity, anger and shame. I wanted Lucy or Grace to find me but no one came and I had no idea how to look for them. I was hungry and didn't know how to get food. This miserable place was a prison, nothing more than a prison. I hated it. I hated Mother and I wanted to go home.

There was a tap on the door. I sat up, wiping my nose on my sleeve. 'Go away!' I shouted.

There was another tap, louder this time. 'Please, my lady, I have to measure you for a gown. It's an order from the Duchess. I have to make you something to wear for dinner tonight.'

I opened the door and a small woman in a white cap pushed her way in, trailing fabric samples and ribbon. She looked up at me with small, screwed up eyes then quickly looked away.

'Are you alright, my lady?' The seamstress spoke English, with a Welsh accent, and to my shame, I started to cry again. She kept her back to me, laying her bundle of fabrics on the bed and pulling pins and measures from her apron pocket.

'Where is everybody?' I pleaded. 'I haven't had anything to eat.' I heard the whining petulance in my voice.

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'Now, now,' she fussed, still not looking at me but surveying the room with her hands on her hips. 'I'll need to find a boy to light the lamps, it's too dim to work in here now the light's gone. You come with me and I'll show you where to get your meals. You'll still be able to get something. They never stop cooking down there. Everyone eats together, you see. Servants in one hall, gentry in another. It saves money in the long run. Except if there's a special dinner, like the one the Duke and Duchess are having tonight. You're to be there at eight. You and Lady Lucy.'

She bustled out of the room and I followed close behind, trying to memorise the way. We went down to the ground floor and crossed the courtyard, entering the chateau again through an arched doorway. The smell of food – baked bread, roasting onions, frying meat – caught in my throat, growing stronger as we turned down a spiral staircase into the basement. Here was a long, wood-panelled room, lined with tables and benches. The seamstress told me to sit down and she disappeared. I waited, watching boys light candles and men lay a fire in the great fireplace in readiness for dinner. The seamstress appeared again, only her white apron visible, making her seem like a headless apparition, followed by a girl carrying a tureen of soup and a platter of bread.

'You eat that, my lady, and I'll make sure the room is lit and warm for your return. You can find your own way back?' She patted my arm.

I nodded and began shovelling huge spoonfuls of fragrant meat broth into my mouth, dipping the heavy bread into the liquid and allowing the juices to run down my chin. I was glad no one could see me. I had never felt so hungry.

In the bedroom, Lucy arrived as my new friend, her lips tight around a row of pins, fastened swathes of embroidered silk around me. I could see that Lucy was angry but neither of us spoke until the seamstress was satisfied and left us alone. I pulled a robe over my petticoats and sat on one side of the fireplace. Lucy moved another chair to the fireside and sat opposite me, staring at the burning logs.

'Where have you been today?' I asked her.

'With our mother, helping with her work. It's what I do every day. Mother says you are to join us tomorrow.'

'She told you what I said?'

'She did. I can't imagine why you said that. Mother was so upset. You should have spent the day with us and met the women of the queen's household but she didn't want you near her.'

'I didn't know where anybody was. I didn't know how to get any food.'

'Mother would have explained all that if you hadn't been so stupid. The dinner tonight is in your honour, so please don't let the family down. The Earl of Melfort and his wife will be there and Lewis Innes. Mother and Father are very important people here. Don't forget it.'

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I felt my cheeks redden but I needed her to understand that the people here were living a fantasy.

'Lucy,' I explained, hoping she would listen if I spoke like an adult, 'at home you're not Lady Lucy Herbert you're just Lucy Herbert. Our titles have been taken from us.' I paused to gauge her reaction. 'And you know that our brother was imprisoned in the Tower of London.'

'Winifred, I'm warning you, let it drop or ask Father to send you home.' Lucy's eyes were bright and round in the light from the fire. 'Our mother is ill. I've spoken to Lewis and he will try to persuade her to see a surgeon.'

'Lucy, you can't ignore me. Why did Mother and Father make no attempt to have William released?'

She stared at the fire for several more minutes and with too much care, placed a fresh log onto the already generous flames. 'Because of what you say. There are no estates left for him to manage so what could he do? I overheard Father say to Mother that William was better off where he was. What was the alternative, to get drunk in London with his disinherited friends?'

'That's dreadful, Lucy. Couldn't he have come here?'

'There's no role for him and I've heard he's not to be trusted. But I've already said too much. Please, Winifred, we must never speak of this again.'

The formal dining room in my parents' apartment was grander even than the dining room at Powis. Tall, arched windows draped with heavy curtains and plaster columns rose to the cornice. The ceiling was decorated with a lively fresco of cherubs trailing garlands and the walls covered with cameos of even more cherubs playing with wild animals. Triple candelabra blazed from every wall, making the room as bright as daylight.

My new dress was gathered tightly across my chest and round my back. The bodice ended in a bow just above my bottom from which the fabric fell in generous waves. The sleeves were gathered three times, ending in lace just above my elbow. Underneath the gown, which parted at my waist in the French style, I showed layers of petticoats trimmed with the same fabric as the dress. Grace had woven my hair high on top of my head and pinned it with ribbons to match.

I felt beautiful and elegant and turned my head to catch my reflection in the many mirrors that circled the room. I had plenty of time to admire myself because, after I had been introduced, no one spoke to me.

The table was set with a confusing collection of glasses and cutlery that danced with the flickering light from the candles. I knew I would have to watch Lucy closely to make sure I made no mistakes. Mother sat at one end of the table and was her usual gracious hostess. Father sat at the other end, next to me. He took my hand and patted it but on the one occasion he tried to speak to me, he struggled to remember my name, running through

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Mary, Anne, Frances and Lucy before abandoning the attempt altogether. One daughter too many, I thought.

Everyone listened when Lewis Innes entertained us with stories and reflections in his soft Scots accent. I could see why Lucy loved him. Although almost forty, he was a handsome man with warm brown eyes that crinkled at the corners when he laughed, which he did a great deal. She kept her eyes downcast but every so often, she raised her head and smiled at him, colouring as she did so. Poor Lucy. I could see that her feelings were not returned. Lewis Innes was generous and entirely without prejudice in his distribution of affection. He made everyone feel special. Even the tiny, bird-like wife of John Drummond, the Earl of Melfort, flushed in the glow of his attention. It was the high-coloured, silent Melfort that I watched. Although he rarely spoke, he missed nothing, settling steel grey eyes on whoever was talking. He answered whenever Mother asked him a question but his accent was so thick, I found him impossible to understand. There were others at the table whose names I forgot as soon as I had been introduced.

The huge bow at my backside made it impossible to lean back in my chair and my neck and shoulders ached with the strain of sitting on the edge of my seat. I ate little, constricted by my corset, and my head throbbed with the unfamiliar wine and the effort to hear over the clatter of glasses and porcelain. The servants demanded attention with an ever-changing menu of food, so I didn't notice immediately that the Earl of Melfort had addressed me until Father touched my arm.

'My dear, the Earl is asking you a question.'

The conversation around the table had stopped, and everyone waited as I strained to understand him.

'Lady Winifred,' he said in his broad accent, 'what support is there at home for the return of the king to his throne? I'm told that he will only have to step on to English soil and the people will rise up to support him.'

I looked at Mother, whose eyes narrowed. Lucy gave a tiny shake of her head. All eyes, even Father's, were turned towards me, bright with hope.

'I didn't involve myself with politics at home. I was too busy helping my sister in her charitable work with less fortunate Jacobite families. Nonetheless, I am sure your information is correct.' I bowed my head.

'Well spoken, lassie,' the Earl seemed pleased with my response, 'there's nae place in politics for girls.'

'However,' I went on, ignoring my mother's threatening frown, 'my brother was imprisoned in the Tower of London on account of my parents' actions. I used to visit him every week. He had no support from any quarter,' I looked at Father, 'for his release. He's been freed but he's a young man whose life is slipping away. I wondered if there was a role for him here?'

'That's enough, Winifred,' Mother snapped. 'No one wants to hear our private business. I'm sorry Melfort,' her tone

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became languid and apologetic, 'my daughter has been allowed rather too much freedom at home.'

The Earl held me with his hooded eyes and spoke slowly, enunciating every syllable. 'We are troubled here with spies and people we cannot trust. Watch out for them, young lady, and be careful what you say. Follow your mother's example and do your duty to your family and your king.'

It was a warning. I lowered my eyes and looked down at my hands. The conversation climbed with a roar of relief and laughter thundered around me. I dared to look up. Lewis Innes turned from his conversation and saw me watching him. It was imperceptible but it was there. He had winked at me.

**Chapter 6**

I had no experience of children, so was of little help with the prince. I struggled to change his soiled clothes as he fought with me, I gave in to his every whim to stop the screaming and I slipped him sweetmeats when he refused the bland nursery food he was expected to eat. Despite the criticism and disapproving looks of the other women, I was proud to be my mother's daughter. Every day I followed her around, listened to what she said and in the evenings, by candlelight, I wrote down everything I could remember.

At night, when Grace brushed my hair, I looked at her reflection in the mirror and told her everything I had seen.

'My mother manages a staff of eleven as well as servants and footmen ... eleven staff, Grace ... all for one little boy they call the Prince of Wales.'

'The Duchess managed a much larger staff at home, both in London and at Powis,' Grace reminded me. 'You're seeing her at work now, that's what's different.'

'All the other women talk about their babies that have died and their sickly children, as if it's to be expected, but my mother has six living children, all of us healthy.'

'Whatever anyone says,' Grace replied, frowning as the hairbrush caught in a tangle of hair, 'her skills aren't miracles or magic but learned and you should go on listening.'

'And when she's with the prince he eats his food, does what he's told and is a happy child. It does seem like a bit of a miracle.'

'I've heard rumours amongst the servants that even the queen struggles to manage his temper.'

'He's tiny, Grace, but already so clever. He knows the weakness of every person who cares for him, including me, but my mother never raises her voice to him or punishes him. She expects him to behave and he does.'

'Perhaps that's it,' Grace smoothed a recalcitrant strand of hair into my night-time ribbon. 'She doesn't stand for any nonsense. It's a pity he doesn't have many other children to play with. It doesn't seem right that he's surrounded by all these adults.'

'The new baby might help, or perhaps not given how jealous he's likely to be. There are so few children here and we've been told to be careful who he plays with. My mother said that the queen is worried that people might seek favours if their child becomes his companion.'

'My lady, this is not a place for children,' Grace mumbled through the hairpins between her lips.

'And not likely to become so in future,' I laughed, 'because apart from the queen, and us of course, everyone is so old!'

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Mother died just before Christmas, taken from us one ordinary afternoon. I had been playing with the little prince, helping him build a tower of wooden blocks, when a servant interrupted our game and whispered that my father needed to see me urgently in his apartments. Excusing myself to my mother's staff, I heard the little boy wail at being abandoned. I lifted my skirts to run across the courtyard, fearing news from William or one of my sisters. When I saw Lucy entering the staircase to our parents' rooms, I knew that it was indeed a serious family matter. We waited together in the anteroom, seeing the surgeon leave and women from the queen's household hurry past. I felt a low growl of fear from my stomach. Servants arrived with cloths and bowls of water. I noticed Grace, her eyes and lips raw with pain and when she saw me, she stopped and shook her head before being chivvied away by the Countess of Errol.

'Dear girls,' said the Countess, taking one of each of our hands in hers as we rose, 'your father is waiting for you in your mother's room.'

Father knelt by mother's bed, his forehead resting on his clasped hands. The shutters were drawn, making the light poor, and there was a smell of dust and lavender. As my eyes adjusted, I saw her lying on the bed, pale and still with a rosary twisted between her fingers. This body looked the same as my mother's but her eyes were closed, although she was not asleep. She was an absence, an emptiness where my living mother should have been.

'Father, what has happened?' Lucy spoke first.

'She has left us, my dearest children. She's gone.'

Lucy rested a hand on his shoulder. 'Poor Mother. She's at peace now, her work is done. We should be glad she didn't suffer.'

I felt rage rip through my chest and into my throat, so that when I spoke my voice growled, hoarse and low. 'She worked too hard. This shouldn't have been expected of her. You have killed her.'

'Winifred, please,' Lucy begged, 'not now.'

'But she hadn't finished being my mother,' I cried. 'I haven't had enough time with her.'

'She didn't choose to leave you,' Lucy's voice was firm. 'Go back to our room. I'll stay with Father, he needs me.'

'She did choose to leave me,' I shouted. 'She chose all of this, instead of me.' I waved my arm in a futile gesture that included my father, Lucy, these artificial rooms and the vast, cold space of St Germain-en-Laye.,

Lucy pushed me through the door but as we parted, she held me close and I could feel her breath in my ear. 'It's God's will,' she whispered, 'you will learn to accept this in time. Go and find Grace and weep.'

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After Mother's death, I heard people talk about her in the crowded stairwells and meeting places of St Germain. The gossips said she should have cured herself, if she knew so much about healing, but her close companions, the women she worked with every day caring for the young prince, wept bitterly and blamed themselves for not urging her to see the physician. But I think Mother knew that her heart was going to let her down and that is why she told no one. Being my mother, she would have understood that nothing more could be done.

In the long nights before the funeral I clung to Lucy and begged her not to leave me. I went with her to stand by our mother's body in her resting place, a freezing basement barely lit by candles. In our room, we wept and talked until dawn, reminding each other of tiny details from our shared childhood at Powis Castle before Mother was imprisoned. During the day, when Lucy worked for our mother's replacement, the Countess of Errol, I was excused duties and Grace stayed with me. We walked the miles of garden and forest that surrounded the chateau, the sterile formality of the gardens and dank, decaying, winter forest echoing my emptiness. I felt no sadness, only anger. I had been cheated of the mother I thought would stand by me and help me bear and raise my own children. I had expected to have years of her wisdom and now there was nothing except my memories and a few scribbled notes.

At the entrance to the chapel were two paintings I had passed many times, barely glancing at them but on the day of Mother's funeral, an ochre light fell across Goliath's head hanging by the hair from David's hand. Flooded by memories of my childish nightmares of Mother's execution, I gasped and wanted to run but Lucy, sensing my anguish, gripped my hand in hers and led me to my seat.

Despite storms in the channel, my sister Mary had managed to reach St Germain in time for the funeral and she stood beside my father at the high altar, supporting him by his elbow. I hadn't seen him since the day he told us our mother had died. He looked now as then, grey and shrunken. As ever, the chapel was dark since it was winter and little natural light filtered down from the high windows. Above Mother's coffin was a painting of the Last Supper, with Jesus leaning towards St. Peter as if they were sharing a secret. I stared at the painting, trying to focus on the detail but I couldn't still my thoughts and sweat and fear ripped through me. As the mass mumbled around me and sacred music from the choir roared and faded, I could think only of Mother's head rolling from the executioner's platform on Tower Green.

Following my family back down the aisle, I looked up to the gilded balustrade of the tribune and saw the queen, Mary Beatrice, leaning against the Duchess of Tyrconnel. Without my mother, how would she keep her baby safe from harm?

After the funeral, I ran from the demons in my dreams and through the day I walked for miles with Grace, my head down, my pace fierce, to keep the panic from twisting my heart, my breathing, my hands. It felt as if there was a hole in my chest

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where the cold winds of January and February had free passage. Lucy and I ate with Father, in private, once a week. He chewed his food in silence, staring at Mother's empty place, his bald head seeming too small now for his shoulders. Yet, when I stared down into the busy courtyard during the day, waiting for Grace, I saw him cross and re-cross on the king's business, urgent, erect and still powerful. He had his work and that would save him. Lucy had her faith. What would save me?

Before she died, Mother had remarked on my superficial grasp of our religion and arranged for me to have weekly lessons with Lewis Innes. I enjoyed these as he made no attempt to teach me but allowed me to talk freely, respecting my views as if they were worth serious consideration. He allowed me to be critical of the exiled court and sometimes laughed when I made fun of the ladies who worked with my mother. After Mother died, I found it hard to say any words to Lewis, obsessed as I was with the horrors of death but I went every week and he allowed me to sit in silence and sometimes I was able to cry. It was Lewis who noticed that I wasn't attending chapel.

'Winifred, has your faith entirely abandoned you?'

I shook my head and tried to swallow. What could I say to him about severed heads?

'Do you know there is another chapel in the chateau?'

I shook my head again.

'Would you like me to ask if you can use it?'

I wasn't sure. Faith had not helped me in the past and I saw little use for it in the future. Religion had destroyed my family. But I nodded because a refusal might make him suspect that my faith had indeed gone and I didn't know what would happen if my father was told. I might be sent to the convent with Lucy.

The following week, Lewis took me to part of the chateau I had never visited. Across the staircase from the queen's apartments, he showed me into a small room, almost like a convent cell, but washed in sunlight. It was the queen's private chapel. As long as I avoided certain times of day I could worship there, Lewis said. Queen Mary Beatrice liked to pray alone.

I went out of duty, in case Lewis thought I was ungrateful but then I found some peace in the gentle light and I liked to look at the painting of the Virgin Mary and Jesus that hung over the simple altar. I didn't pray but allowed any terrors that needed to escape to come freely and because I wasn't trying to hold them down, they slowly lost their power. I had been visiting the little chapel for a month when, one day, I stood up to leave and saw the queen at the entrance. The queen's ladies frowned at me and I remembered to curtsy.

'I'm sorry, your majesty, I didn't know you were expected. I will leave at once.'

The queen was heavy with child, and she sat down on a gilt chair that Lewis had warned me was for her personal use.

'Wait, Lady Winifred. We have never spoken but I miss your mother every single day and my son has been so distressed.'

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'Thank you,' I replied, unsure how to address her. 'I miss her every day too. My family has suffered a great loss.'

The queen nodded as if I had said something important. 'We have all suffered a great loss. You must come and see me. Speak to the Countess of Almond and arrange it. Come soon, this week if you can.'

It troubled me, the prospect of being in the company of the queen. She might expect me to have my mother's skills and would be disappointed. However, I soon learned that she was looking for companionship. Although she was fourteen years older than me, she was still young and beautiful and the women of her household were matrons and well past child-bearing age. The queen's invitation to become one of her household gave me work and I started to heal. The other women feared favouritism and I found myself allocated the most menial of tasks such as writing letters but Mary Beatrice sought me out every day to walk with her in the formal gardens. We would sit by the fountains and trail our fingers in the water and I would listen and laugh while Mary Beatrice talked. It would have been ill advised to raise topics or talk about myself.

'I'm not worried about having this baby, Winifred. Your mother taught me so much.' Her eyes were clear and untroubled.

'What did you learn, your majesty?'

'Your mother said all that was needed was milk from a woman's breast and everything being clean. That's all. If this baby suffers like poor little James, I won't listen to learned men. Your mother said to keep feeding the baby, no matter how often it might vomit and the sickness will pass. I've arranged to have many wet nurses, so even if this baby is sickly too, we will save him.'

Since Mary Beatrice had the same body as other women, I wondered why she didn't consider that she could feed the baby herself but I would not have dared express such an opinion.

'You are lucky,' the queen continued, 'when you have a baby, you will deliver it in peace and privacy with only a woman present. Do you know that I must give birth in the presence of the court so the legitimacy of the baby is not in doubt?'

The shock of imagining her being exposed during such an intimate act must have shown on my face. Mary Beatrice smiled. 'I can see you are horrified and you haven't yet borne a child. When you have, think of me and your sympathy will be all the greater.' She laughed, her head thrown back, and stood so that we might continue down the central boulevard to the large fountain at the end of the garden.

'Enough of babies,' she linked her arm with mine, 'I have some exciting news. The French court is to visit here in two weeks, so you must help me plan the entertainments. You have been in mourning long enough. It's time to have some fun.' It was characteristic of Mary Beatrice to promise too much and I knew that jealousies would not allow me to be involved in any planning, but we walked on, talking about the music and dancing, both of us pretending that it would be otherwise.

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I only had a brief glimpse of the Sun King and his wife Madame de Maintenon at the moment of their dramatic arrival through the arched gateway. Like the other ordinary residents of St Germain, Lucy and I had been told to stay in our room since the courtyard was narrow and this was a private visit between the two royal families. We stood at either side of the window and, looking down, saw only the gold top of the Sun King's coach below us in the courtyard. It was smaller than I had expected with one coachman and two white horses. Louis' face was hidden beneath his wide-brimmed hat, which was fringed with feathers, and he wore a long wig that curled over his shoulders. He strode across the courtyard towards our queen and took both her hands in his. Madame de Maintenon was helped from the carriage by one of her ladies and for a moment she steadied herself, looking up at our watching faces. A black hood fell from her hair and draped across shoulders covered by a deep blue cloak, lined with white fur. I almost waved.

'He's never admitted openly that they're married,' Lucy told me, as we saw her pale face scan the ranks of windows. 'That's why she's not the queen.'

'But that's awful. If she's his wife, she should be recognised.'

Lucy hesitated. 'It's something to do with the difference in rank. I think she understands and has to accept it. Everyone says he adores her.'

We watched James hurry across to bow to Madame de Maintenon and kiss her ring. I wouldn't accept it, I thought, regardless of how much I was adored. Our royal household lined the path towards the staircase for the king's apartments and as the two royal couples passed, the group sank low in greeting like a wave. I saw our father amongst them, standing a little too close to an elegant woman I hadn't met. Now other coaches swung into the courtyard and one by one deposited the household of the French royal family, their servants and luggage.

'Have you noticed all the young men, Lucy? Things are going to be very different here, just for a few days.'

Lucy smiled. 'For some, perhaps.'

I was of too low rank to participate in any of the activities shared by the two royal families but every night there were dances to which I was invited and beautiful young Frenchmen jostled each other to dance with me. Their manners were exquisite, yet their conversation was peppered with sexual innuendo and each night I ran up our stairway to Lucy, my cheeks flushed with more than the exertion of the dance. Lucy no longer had any interest in dancing, being in the process of withdrawing from society to prepare for her entrance to holy orders but in the day she joined me for more respectable and sedate entertainments.

Mary Beatrice's master of music, Mr Fede, had composed new works in the Italian style and the theatre company presented

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a ballet by Lully. I sat through these in the pretence of improving my education but really I was hoping to catch the eye of one of the young courtiers, so that we might walk in the gardens and flirt before the evening entertainment.

The departure of the French court made our daily lives even more mundane, especially as we had to make savings to compensate for the money we'd spent on hosting the royal family. Meals were sparse and entertainment was of the most basic, home-grown kind, all too familiar from the tedious Jacobite gatherings held in my sister's home. Mary Beatrice withdrew into her confinement and didn't ask me to stay with her, preferring those who had experience of childbirth.

Something else was happening. Our king had disappeared along with the French court and I heard muttering in corners and men stopped talking and stroked their chins if I came too close. My father walked so fast across the courtyard, his legs seemed to be clockwork, but other important men were rarely to be seen, apart from the Earl of Melfort. Soon we learned that there had been a failed attempt to invade England, resulting in the destruction of the French fleet. Nothing was announced or openly discussed, since maintaining a belief that James would be restored to the crown of England was the whole purpose of our existence. But my father, in a careless moment at dinner, revealed that Louis XIV felt he had been misled by false information from St Germain. This was the whispered shame of the exiled court.

One morning, a servant knocked on my door, summoning me to the Earl of Melfort and my stomach felt as if it had turned to liquid. I was escorted to the Earl's quarters and the manservant waited, clearly under instructions to guard me. The door to Melfort's room was opened from within by yet another servant and inside was dark and hung with tapestries of Old Testament stories. It smelled of that particular animal odour of sweat and food that hangs around men who are not particular about their grooming. Melfort sat at a table, reading a letter. He did not look up or indicate that I should sit. I stood before him, studying his small mouth, pursed as if he had eaten something sour.

'This letter is for you.' He tossed it across the table as if it were soiled. 'You may read it.'

It was my brother's handwriting. William began by expressing his sorrow and regret at the death of our mother but I read on with dismay.

*'Your king is about to invade England. He has deluded himself into believing that many will rise to support him but being the fool he is, he has announced his intentions in advance and has issued a proclamation to the people of this country which has only served to rally support around William of Orange. If the invasion goes ahead it will fail. Be warned, my little sister. Your loving brother.'*

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I felt my skin flush. William's words rang with the disgrace of having been read first by the man in front of me. These words, which would be regarded here as treason, had come from my brother and I would be included in his treachery.

'I am sorry,' I whispered. 'I knew nothing of an invasion. My brother has views that my sister and I do not share. I am loyal to King James II and the Jacobite cause.' I looked down at my hands, hoping that Melfort had forgotten my outburst from the previous year.

The Earl's words were measured. 'Everything that is received here and sent from here is scrutinised by me. I know every movement, every thought, every single breath that you people make. There are spies here from the English government, the French government, the Spanish government and Rome. Sometimes I think that every fucking soul within this chateau is a spy.' He spat the word at me. 'Are you a spy, Lady Winifred Herbert, because if you are, not even your father will be able to save you. People disappear from this chateau with puzzling frequency. They are no loss. A girl like you would not be missed. Do I make myself clear?'

Tears coursed down my face. 'I am not a spy. You can trust me,' I whispered, my voice hoarse, my throat tight.

'Do you have any idea,' Melfort's voice rose, 'what might happen if letters like this got into the hands of a French spy and thence to the French government? We must maintain French support. I saw you dancing with those young fools from the French court. What would you not have done to gain their favour? Would you have passed this letter to one of them if he had asked you for it?' Melfort stared at me with contempt. 'Is your brother in the pay of the French?'

I shook my head. 'He was a prisoner in the Tower of London and he's lost his title and our estates. He's bitter but means no harm. He is an angry man, nothing more.'

Melfort placed his hands together into a steeple and rested them against his lips. He looked at me from under his brows. 'It is lucky for you,' he said, 'that you have become something of a favourite of the queen. I question her judgement. Don't forget, I am watching you. Always.'

A different servant escorted me to my staircase. My limbs were weak and carried me with difficulty up the three flights of stairs. Alone in my room I lifted my gown and stripped away my petticoats. Like a child, I had wet myself.

After my terrifying meeting with Melfort, I hurried to see my father.

'Elizabeth, you must write to William,' he advised, 'and ask him never to contact you again.'

'Father, I'm Winifred not Elizabeth. Mother's name was Elizabeth.'

He peered at me. 'Ah yes, you're so alike. Nevertheless, write the letter and I'll show it to Melfort. It will be proof of your loyalty.'

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I imagined William's reaction to reading such cruel words and said, 'I don't wish to write to him like that. I came to you to seek your protection.'

'I can't protect you,' my father touched some papers on his desk and I saw his eyes glance eagerly over what was written there. 'I'm often away with the king or caught up in his affairs. If you write to William as I've said and stay in favour with the queen, you'll be safe.'