



COUNTERPOINT
Barbara, Lady Villiers

The Lydiard Chronicles 1603-1630

A Companion Novelette to
The Lady of the Tower

ELIZABETH ST. JOHN

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The Lydiard Chronicles | 1603-1630

The Lady of the Tower

A Novel

Counterpoint: Theo, Earl of Suffolk

A Novelette

Counterpoint: Barbara, Lady Villiers

A Novelette

By Love Divided

The Lydiard Chronicles | 1631-1646

A Novel

About COUNTERPOINT: Barbara, Lady Villiers

When I wrote *The Lady of the Tower*, the story revealed itself in the narrative of my ancestress, Lucy St.John. But, as with all novels, other characters appeared, and their voices grew strong and insistent, demanding their own story be told. I decided to give them a say in these glimpses of incidents within *The Lady of the Tower*, told from their perspective. This is Barbara's counterpoint to chapter thirty-one in the novel, where a prisoner in the Tower of London holds the keys to unlocking her character.

A counterpoint is a melody played in conjunction with another, or an opposing viewpoint in an argument. Our lives are complex, and each one of us carries within us a counterpoint to another's story. Here is Barbara's, to Lucy St.John, the lady of the Tower.

Characters

Lucy St.John, Barbara's sister (*The Lady of the Tower*)

Barbara St.John, Lady Villiers

Sir Edward Villiers, Barbara's husband

George Villiers, Earl of Buckingham, Edward's brother

Theophilus Howard, Earl of Suffolk

Frances Howard, Duchess of Somerset, Theo's sister

Robert Carr, Duke of Somerset, Frances's husband

“There were not in those days so many beautiful women found in any family as these, but my mother was by the most judgments preferred before all her elder sisters, who sometimes envious, used her unkindly.”

*Lucy St. John
Tower of London
1618*

When Theo Howard, the heir-apparent to the Earldom of Suffolk, fell in love with my sister Lucy, I knew I would die with envy. Or destroy her first. That green-eyed, sharp-toothed worm of jealousy crawled into my bosom and wriggled into a hidden cavity in my heart, empty since my mother’s death.

Ah, such tragedy when first love strikes and is repelled. And that day when we all met for the first time at Charlton Park, almost ten years ago, still nourished my covetous heart.

Tonight, I will see Theo again. Tonight, I will gamble with destiny. And how fitting it should be in my sister’s company in the Tower of London.

I smiled at my reflection in the glass and carefully smoothed cochineal on my cheekbones and lips. I had already charcoaled my eyebrows to contrast them to the lustrous golden brown of my hair. And a delicate line drawn under my blue-green eyes accentuated my best features. How useful these years at court, where we had the best cosmetic artists, dressers of hair, and maids to pamper and primp us for display. And how beneficial that I spent many of those years in the company of Theo’s sister, Frances Howard, the reigning beauty and queen of hearts at Whitehall.

I paused my adornment for a moment, reflecting on those hedonistic times when we danced and gambled and feasted, nights blending into weeks and months in the rarified air of court. How Frances ruled our world, her husband then the king’s favorite, and she the most gorgeous of all.

“Come, Barbara, sit by me while I play a hand of Maw,” I remember her calling to me, laughing, her beautiful face radiant. Her henchwoman Anne Turner had just read Frances’s palm, and Lucy was next. “I predict you will bring me much luck tonight, and the fortune I need is one to pay my debts, not foretell my future.”

Silly bitch. Anne Turner betrayed her and then twisted at the end of the hangman’s rope, and the fortune Frances sought surely would have been better to predict her fate, not settle her bills.

How far Frances fell after her witches and necromancers deceived her into believing she was immortal, above prosecution from an earthly justice. And how deep her disgrace when she and her sycophant husband were hauled from the splendor of Whitehall Palace and thrown into the Bloody Chamber in the Tower. And how useless Theo was in pleading with the king for leniency. The most he could gain was not to have her exquisite head removed from her body.

All because of her deadly, jealous rage.

I knew a thing or two about jealousy and rage. For did not that star illuminate the heavens at my birth? Venus was in Scorpio, and the eighth house ruled my nativity. I had no choice but to submit to my horoscope, and thus was my life path determined.

“You look positively delicious, my dear. That gown becomes you, especially in the cut and the cloth.” Thick with lust, my husband’s voice interrupted my reverie. “How unfortunate you prepare yourself for another, and not for me.”

This was his clumsy attempt at flattery.

Standing, I shook the folds from my velvet-and-silk dress of a glorious crimson, bejeweled and cunningly embroidered in gold threads with our family crest of the falcon. I tugged the diaphanous muslin neckline lower, thanking the lotions of milk and honey that kept my bosom white and full, even at the age of six and twenty. My appearance in the glass, captured in the small mirror from my lips to my breasts, tantalized.

“Edward.” I arranged a wistful smile on my face and turned to face him. “How unfortunate, indeed.” I neatly sidestepped his damp hand, for I did not want my fine silk streaked with sweat. “And yet

my efforts will benefit you when I return home with our desires accomplished.”

A frown clouded his perfect brow. In truth, he was a fair image of his handsome brother. But where George Villiers’s beauty was reinforced by his sweetness and charm, Edward was an empty vessel, his intellect unequal to his visage.

“You will take care not to mislead Theo beyond his means, Barb? George says his debts rival those of the king, so deep in gambling is he. I would not want my friend to be broken by your dealings.”

Foolish man. As if I would sabotage my own plan. Just enough pressure to persuade Theo to part with something precious in return for a favor that none other could grant. I’d discussed this already with George. As Earl of Buckingham, and the king’s favorite, he knew how to lever the patronage that came with privilege and influence. I did not need Edward’s blundering interference.

“I will treat Theo as if he is my own brother,” I replied smoothly, stroking the side of Edward’s freshly shaven cheek and caressing his beautifully combed beard. Truly, he was handsome to view, with his sensual mouth and fine complexion. That at least made our lovemaking bearable. “You know I respect your oldest friend. I would not betray him. And now that he has come into his title, he has much to offer us.”

“I know. But he is desperate to sacrifice much to free his sister from the Tower.”

“And I will do anything to ensure our family gains from Theo’s desire to release Frances.” Dropping a kiss on Edward’s lips, I gave him a reassuring pat on the arm and a full look at my cleavage. That should keep him preoccupied while I was gone.

Tonight was my destiny. But I decided my fate. For I would dine in the Tower of London with my sister Lucy, her ex-lover, the Earl of Suffolk, and his sister, the prisoner who was once my best friend. *Frances Howard, your fortune is about to change again. This time, I determine the next chapter in our lives.*

Who would win, and who would lose?

Assuredly, I would not tolerate defeat.

I crossed over the moat and entered through the Byward Gate, ordering my escort to drive past the Bell Tower and pull up outside Wakefield. No matter my carriage blocked the street, the guards could manage any inconvenience to the citizens and visitors. The advantage of being the Earl of Buckingham's sister-in-law was that no one was going to question me. The outer ward thronged with the usual pitiful visitors to the Tower, and, ignoring the outstretched hands and called-out blessings, I hurried through the archway past my sister's precious physick patch. Each time I visited more plants appeared, until it now had the semblance of Lydiard's walled garden. Typical of Lucy, that she would waste her efforts there rather than investing her time at court.

I followed a guard up the narrow stone stair, drawing my cloak closer against the chill sinking into my bones. It was not just the air that was cold—the very walls themselves were infused with the wretchedness of the prisoners who dwelt in these cells.

“Who invited you?” Frances demanded as I slipped into her chamber on the second floor. “I did not ask you to attend this evening.”

“George Villiers,” I replied simply and looked around for a servant to fill a glass. “Where's your husband?”

She settled down at George's name, and gestured for wine. “Upstairs in his own quarters. I do not care to know how he fares, for he does not concern me.” She turned again to me. “Why are you here?”

I noticed my sister was also in the room, and I nodded at her. As usual, Lucy had that air of coolness about her that I found so annoying. Not only was she beautiful, she cared not one whit who saw it or not. I could see where her unconcern for appearance could be intriguing to court's hot-blooded nobles.

Still, I attempted to bring some manners to my deportment. “Sister. How fare you?”

“Well, thank you,” she responded quietly.

“And your young son? Your husband?”

“They are well too.” Lucy stared at me as if I was about to bite her. Perhaps I was.

The candles flared as a gust of wind preceded Theo’s arrival, throwing dancing shadows on the walls and creating dark corners in Frances’s prison. He had aged these five years since last I saw him, his face thinner, his auburn hair glistening with several silver threads. But he still moved with that easy grace, and as he entered the stone chamber, Frances threw herself upon him, sobbing his name. They embraced, their shadows mingling to make one that stretched upon a wall and the low ceiling, looming over us.

As he stroked her hair and murmured soft words, Theo glanced at me sitting at the table and then looked across at Lucy. I was curious to see his expression—yearning quickly replaced with indifference.

“You have restored old acquaintances, Sister.” His voice was just as melodious as I recalled. “I have been gone too long. I did not expect to share our reunion with an audience.”

Frances glared at me. “They attend uninvited, Theo. I no more want them here than you do.”

“Uninvited, perhaps, but maybe welcome.” I stood and curtsied deeply to Theo, my silks rustling in the quiet chamber. I could see he appreciated the cut of my gown. “I come on behalf of George Villiers, the Earl of Buckingham, who is eager to hear how you are, Theo.”

“And he could not ask for himself when I am next at court?”

“Let us just say that this is a family matter and not for the ears of those supplicants who haunt his privy chamber.”

Theo pulled his eyes from my neckline and addressed my sister. “And you, Lucy, what brings you to this reunion? Tired of your old husband’s company?”

“I—”

“She is my gaoler,” Frances interrupted, her voice cutting.

“I am simply doing my duty.” Lucy’s voice was surprisingly firm. My baby sister had acquired a dignity with her position as the Lieutenant of the Tower’s wife.

“Lucy’s husband leaves her to tattle tales while he fills his pockets with the king’s gold. One a grocer, the other a spy.” Frances turned to Theo. “Do not share with her any confidences, for she is not to be trusted.”

Enough attention on Lucy. I placed my hand on Theo’s tawny velvet sleeve and drew him closer to the fire. I could feel the muscle in his sword arm, strong and lean. Delicious.

“Come, drink a cup of sack with us. I would gladly offer you our hospitality, for although my sister is Frances’s keeper, I have taken the liberty of ordering her husband’s finest wines from his supply.”

Lucy said nothing. How could she? If it were not for Edward and George, she would not be in the favored position she now held. And her husband would certainly not be able to afford the wines that stocked his cellar.

Our talk ranged wide as dinner was served. My husband, George, and Theo had studied together in France and knew each other of old. Theo had chosen to stay close to George while Frances’s husband reigned supreme in the king’s favor. As with the Villiers, Theo’s loyalty lay with whomever was in power. Or being groomed for succession.

“You trod a dangerous course, Frances.” Theo had availed himself of most of the pitcher of wine, and his words ran loosely. “I told you from the beginning that your liaison with Carr likened to a moth flying too close to a flame. You may have been successful in divorcing your first husband, but you went straight back into the fire when you married Robert Carr.”

She shrugged, a gesture familiar from the days when anything she didn’t like could be removed by a simple signal. An impotent first husband, or a competitor for a lover’s attention.

“Life is not worth living if you dwell in the shadows, Theo,” she replied. “Would that I never had met my husband’s servant, but I regret nothing of my time at court.”

Theo glanced up at the ceiling, presumably where Robert Carr lurked in his chamber, sulking.

“Your husband does not care to join us?” he asked. “Surely he is interested in George’s proposal.”

Frances laughed, though with no mirth. “My husband still refuses to accept that he is even guilty of this crime of murder. How can he seek redemption when his soul is untainted and his conscience clear?” Her expression of disgust was unmistakable. “He is only concerned with his own legacy and cares not for any other life. Including mine and my daughter’s.”

I picked up my own glass and took another sip. Interesting. This was how it was between Frances and her husband. Nothing but ashes left of the passion that burned between them.

“And what do you hear from the king, Frances?” I asked innocently. “Does he not have a care for your and your husband’s future? After all, he overturned the sentence of your execution, even when you were proven guilty of murder.”

She reached for Theo’s hand, her own trembling. “The king will never speak to Carr again. We are on our own, forever imprisoned in the Tower. Robert lost his influence a long time ago.”

I knew from the start that Carr would not be able to keep the king’s affection, for surely his pretty face concealed a vacant mind. Frances was the intelligent one in that marriage. As I was in mine. She may have saved her head, but she was still caught like a rat in a trap in the very prison where her own foul deed had been conducted.

A silence fell over the table, and I smiled sweetly in the light of Lucy’s accusatory stare. She was not one who enjoyed the gossip of court, especially of the occasions when she was part of it. It was not always easy to rewrite one’s past when the reminders constantly surrounded you.

“Edward has done well; his star ascends.” Theo stretched back in his chair, the meal complete. He edged closer to me. I sipped my wine, conscious of the play of firelight across my bare shoulders and bosom. I smiled encouragingly, ignoring Lucy’s pained expression.

“It does. He has been appointed Comptroller of the Wards, Master of the Mint, and holds the patent for gold and silver thread. Next, we hope for Master of the Jewel House, perhaps Comptroller of the Household. All lucrative but still tied to commerce.”

Watching Theo watch me, I caressed a large jewel that nestled between my breasts. “Titles will follow.”

Theo’s eyes followed my fingers. “Does George not indicate more is ahead in the way of perquisites?”

“It takes time. And he values Edward as his intermediary when men ask for favors of him that he does not wish to grant immediately. Edward has the common touch, and men do not fear to approach him. It is a convenience for the Earl of Buckingham to listen but not decide. There are many fees to collect as messenger. Too grand a title for Edward, and George will lose his conduit to the voice of the people. We amass much in the way of wealth to support our titles when they do arrive. And, of course, our heirs will benefit much from our estates.”

He nodded, his expression hidden by the shadows. “Money is always useful to support one’s lifestyle at court. It’s an expensive proposition, keeping up with the king and his circle.”

Here was the opportunity I was waiting for. “But tell me, how fare *your* children, Theo?”

He glanced at Lucy, who sat as still as stone across the table. A shadow crossed his face. “Well, Barbara, thank you. My wife breeds consistently.” He did not say more, and he avoided Lucy’s stare. I don’t think she had taken her eyes from his face since he first arrived in Frances’s miserable chamber. My sister was obviously still in love with him, even though she was married to another and had borne a child to prove the fruitfulness of her bonds. A vulnerability in Lucy, to be sure. I must remember that useful fact.

“And you have sons? Daughters?”

“We have been blessed with both.”

“And now that you are the Earl of Suffolk with all the expense that entails, I am sure there is much planning for their future and maintenance.”

Theo moved his eyes from Lucy and fixed upon me. I thought so. Rumors of his debts were already being whispered at court. George had identified my opportunity correctly. His intervention may not be direct, but his intelligence was flawless. As always, he manipulated his network of secrets and spies into profit. And if it

involved bettering his family, then all the more power to him...and me. Time to draw close the net.

“My sons and daughters thrive too,” I continued. “They grow fast and have great financial prospects, with the Earl of Buckingham as their uncle.” I sipped again from the wine and fell silent. I never felt uncomfortable in those pauses that came when adversaries wrestled with a decision.

Frances and Theo exchanged a swift look, and Frances nodded to Theo, her eyes fixed on him. He sat straighter in his chair.

“Are your children yet pledged, Barbara?”

“We have had discussions with many. But I have not yet settled on who might be an appropriate match for my second son and daughter. In the meantime, we have, of course, established their financial surety.”

“Two children, then, you seek to contract in a marriage bond.”

“Yes. To the right family, to one that has an established title and lands that would make a worthwhile match.”

“And in return?”

“Wealth. Influence. The king’s ear . . . pardons . . . redemption . . .”

It was really so very easy. So easy that there was no fun to the game. Frances gripped her vessel with whitened fingers. Fortunately, it was silver and not Venetian glass. I swear she would have snapped it in half, such was the tension in her.

“So a promise for a marriage alliance and in return a pledge for freedom?” Theo’s hand covered Frances’s, stilling the tremble.

“It is worth considering.” I stood. The fly was in the web. No need to prolong my stay. “I shall let George know how pleasant our dinner has been and how I find you both. He will be delighted to hear your family thrives, Theo. Healthy children are always beneficial to one’s well-being. Captivity does not suit you, Frances, and it would be a shame for you to live the rest of your life in the Tower.”

Frances glared at me. “I would rather be a prisoner of the king, than be captive to ambition. For those that are born to rank have no need to horse-trade to achieve greatness.”

I smiled sweetly at her. Ah, a flash of her old spirit. Frances's temper always betrayed her. "Would you like me to tell George that you are desirous to live your life out in the confines of the Tower, then?"

Theo stood too, and placed his hand on Frances's shoulder to keep her still. "Tell George we accept your proposal, Barbara." He looked vulnerable, tired. For a moment I almost felt sorry for him. Fortunately, that curious emotion passed as quickly as it arrived.

Stepping outside the Bloody Tower into the cold, starlit night, I took a deep breath and quickly brought my pomander to my nose. A piquant scent of oranges and cloves filled my nostrils. The fetid moat, lapping oily on the stone just a few feet away at Traitor's Gate, reeked. There was no escaping the stench of decaying animals, sewage, and other noxious substances that floated in the black water. I waved my guard to stay at a distance, for I wanted a moment for myself before journeying back to Whitehall and Edward. Lucy's garden beckoned, and although I was not one to spend time grubbing in the dirt, the sweet fragrance of some night-blooming plant lured me through the gate.

I needed to clear my thoughts of the tension of the past hours before I resumed my role at the palace.

The latch lifted easily under my hand, and by the gate a path twisted past a white climbing rose. I walked a few paces in, where I could be concealed from any late passersby. Curfew had not yet been called, my head ached, and I craved privacy.

Another disaster for our expanding family averted. Left to himself, Edward would let our children fall back into his country clodpole ways and no more think of their welfare than he would the sheep he used to herd.

Truly, Edward's ability to keep hold of his money or negotiate to any advantage was pathetic. And I was growing tired already of bearing the burden of ensuring our children's financial well-being.

A small wind sprang up from the Thames, shaking the heads of the roses, and a few loose petals blew across my skirts, falling as

snowflakes across the velvet. A browning of their ruffled edges signified the first frost had arrived.

It was winter in my heart too.

And yet I had tonight arranged hugely advantageous marriages for my children with the most aristocratic family in the country.

Why did I feel so empty?

“Procuress.” The whisper, sharp and deep, cut through the dark. “Procuress. Are you content with your night’s work?”

“Lucy.” I squared my shoulders and turned to face my sister.

“Are you pleased with your bargain?” Lucy stood before me, framed by the rose, the White Tower rising behind her. Quite dramatic, considering how often we had played this scene, she always critical of my cunning negotiations. “Selling your children to a debtor so the Villiers’ influence can release a murderess from prison? Once more you’ve achieved what you set out to gain. Are you pleased?”

“Are you?” I retorted. “It seems to me that you have less to report to the Earl of Buckingham than I do on the Howards.”

“What do you mean?”

It was ridiculously easy to throw her on the defensive. Truly, she had no aptitude for subterfuge. Or confrontation.

“You are charged with capturing every word, every meeting that Frances Howard has while under your husband’s guard.”

“And I will.”

I shrugged. “It appeared to me that you were more intent on Theo than his sister.”

“I was not.” Her denial was vehement and belied the truth. My dagger found its place too quickly for sport.

“What did you think of Frances’s position?” I paused. The clock on St. Peter’s struck the hour. I did not have much time left to waste here before the Tower closed its gates for the night.

“She wants her freedom, of course,” Lucy replied. She took a step closer, and again I was reminded of our childhood and all the times we had stood at combat. She had no idea how to deal with me.

“At what cost?”

She avoided the question. “And Theo is no better than any of you, throwing his children’s future into the gambling pot.”

I laughed. “He has little else to speculate with. I hear his debts exceed his resources by far. He stays one step ahead of debtor’s prison himself.”

“Do you ever do anything that doesn’t have a purpose to help yourself?”

Oh, how righteous was our dear Lucy. Even when Theo had pursued her at court and her indiscretion had been on the tongue of every courtier, still she’d proclaimed her innocence. The thought of her promiscuity burned a hole in my mind.

“And you don’t, sweet sister?”

She smiled just enough to annoy me with her placidity. “No. I don’t.”

“Interesting. For if it was not for you being my sister, your husband would not have the position he does. Your child would not be brought up in luxury. You would not have your jewels, your gowns, your portrait painted at court.” I was enjoying this. “You really don’t think it was on your husband’s merits that he was offered the lucrative position of Lieutenant of the Tower, do you?”

Her face was pale, matching the luminescence of the wretched rose bush she had so tenderly planted in her precious garden.

“He is a good man, experienced. He earned the opportunity to serve the king here.”

What naivety. Really, one would think she’d never been to court, never seduced the most eligible man in the land.

“You seem to be enjoying the fruits of your advantageous marriage very nicely, Lucy. And certainly, it’s better than exiling yourself in Guernsey to wear your life out in the service of God. I’d say you made the right choice to serve the Earl of Buckingham instead.”

“I serve my family, my God, and my husband,” she replied in her infuriatingly calm way. “Which is more than you ever have. Do not think I am unaware of your trickery and deceit, the intentional hurt you have caused me, and do not ever consider yourself better than me because of the company you keep.”

I gathered my skirts and pushed past her. There was one more conversation to be had tonight, and then my work was done.

“Think well how you view me, Sister.” I couldn’t resist a parting shot. “I know you have always considered me your enemy. As a child, you would have been left behind, a neglected orphan, if I had not insisted you come with me to Aunt Joan. You would have withered away and died alone and uncared for. But still you have no sense of the real world of favors and court and politics, or what it takes to survive. Ask your husband, Lucy. He appreciates the efforts I make to raise our family to the heights we deserve. And without me and the Earl of Buckingham, your lives would be nothing.”

By the time I arrived at Whitehall, my mood lightened, for George had arranged for his musicians to preview the music from his newest theatrical piece. He kept only the best artists with coins from his bottomless purse. Such was the court’s love of masques there was always a desire for music and song; he ensured it was on hand for the king’s and queen’s pleasure. And his dwelling within Whitehall was the heart of pleasure for this decadent court. Lit by a thousand tapers and stuffed with the best furnishings King James could lavish on his favorite, George’s opulent apartments were the most desirable place to spend an evening. And after a night of work in the Tower, I deserved some amusement.

Walking through the apartments in my gloriously embroidered gown, it pleased me to see the deference with which I was greeted. Even countesses and duchesses inclined their heads in a polite manner, their heads together in whispers as I passed. Not only did they acknowledge my beauty and fine dress, they conversed no doubt of my success in winning the Earl of Buckingham’s affection.

Of course I had his affection. I was married to his idiotic brother.

I approached Edward and George at the card table, where a pretty young woman jumped up and scurried away, almost upsetting her chair in her haste to make room for me. I lifted an eyebrow at Edward, and he gave me his doltish smile.

“She was about to leave,” he mumbled. “Just holding your place until you arrived.”

It wasn't worth an answer. Instead, I took my seat next to the earl and accepted his kiss on my cheek. George's sensual mouth burned on my skin, and for the hundredth time I fretted that his brother bore none of his gifts and all his flaws.

“You once again lead the court in fashion, my lord,” I remarked once my heart had calmed down. “A lovelock suits you. I am sure your wife is most flattered.”

He laughed, the sound so captivating that I could not help but be charmed. “My wife is most jealous,” he replied. “For I dedicate this to the king, not her.” George wrapped the two curls that descended over his left shoulder around his finger and brought them to his mouth for a kiss. “They point to my heart, the fount of my love for him”

He certainly knew how to flatter and charm, I'd give him that. No wonder the king drooled and dribbled whenever he was near, his dirty old fingers fiddling with his codpiece and his thick tongue crooning in George's delicate ear.

What we do for love. Or ambition.

“How was your evening?” George's whispered question pulled my attention back to his handsome face. On his other side, Edward eavesdropped intently. That was his only asset—listening. He couldn't direct a drunk in a brewery.

“I'd consider it successful, my lord,” I replied. “I will write a report for you tomorrow.”

“Tell me now,” he demanded. And who was I to resist?

“Frances Howard dines distant from her husband. Carr sulks alone in his chamber. And her allegiance can be bought for the price of a marriage contract with the sister-in-law of the most influential man in England.”

George smiled and continued to wrap and unwrap the curls around his finger. In any other man, this gesture would have been feminine. In him, it was purely provocative.

“And Carr's ambition?”

“No more danger to you than a wooden marionette, my lord,” I replied. “He is struck dumb with the terror that falls over most who dwell in the Tower. No matter he heard my voice and Theo’s as we dined with Frances, he made no move to see us or join in our dinner.”

“And therefore . . . ?”

“And therefore, my lord, your star is in full ascendance. E’en if the king desired to see his companion once more, there is no danger that Carr will attempt to reclaim his place as the king’s lapdog, and Frances is so disgusted by him that she wants no truck with his life.”

George nodded slowly. He licked his lips, and even that gesture sent a quiver through my breast. I knew what his brother’s kiss was like and wondered how it would taste when driven by George’s allure.

“What did you promise in return for her allegiance?”

“Her freedom.”

He raised an eyebrow at that. “You promise much, Sister.”

“And her silence. She will not stir anyone against you. The Carrs are truly finished.”

“Go on.”

“Theo was there too, as you had anticipated.” I dragged my thoughts back to the other man who was out of my reach, who was also so attractive to me.

“My old friend. It is a shame that conditions are such that it would not appear right for me to associate with the brother of a convicted murderess.” George leaned forward, his eyes intent on mine, ignoring the protesting squeak of his brother, who was now effectively blocked from our conversation.

“It was as you predicted.” I shrugged, mindful of how carelessly elegant the gesture had appeared on Frances’s slim shoulders. “I simply suggested that a match of two of my children to Theo’s would bring him wealth and advantageous relationships—and in return, a title and a position in society for mine.”

“And he bit?”

“He did when I added that Frances’s freedom was also in your hands.”

George laughed again. Truly, I was enjoying myself this evening. This was my element.

“You did well, Barbara. Very well.” He leaned back, and Edward leaned forward. He was ridiculous—his actions reminded me of a child’s puppet theatre.

“Thank you, my lord.”

“So well, in fact, that I think you deserve special recognition for your efforts.”

I smiled up at him and pressed my elbows to my sides, effectively pushing my bosom out of the neckline of my gown.

His eyes remained locked on mine.

“We’ll keep your sister at the Tower, and you may continue your access to the Howards on my behalf,” he said. “I am not ready to release them yet.”

Good Lord. Did that mean I would have to spend more dinners in Lucy’s company, watching her moon over Theo while pledging love for her husband?

“It will be a pleasure, my lord,” I replied, swallowing my irritation.

“The pleasure is all mine, Barbara. For to thank you and your family for your assistance, I intend to elevate your uncle, Oliver St. John, to Viscount Grandison. After all, his service in taking Carr into his custody when the Overbury murder scandal first broke was much appreciated.”

Well, that was all fine and good. But how did that help me?

“As you know, rewarding Edward with too many titles will not serve my position well at court,” he went on to say. “But that does not mean I cannot help your family.”

I knew George could see my eagerness to hear more. He leaned forward and caught my hands, bringing them to his heart. His doublet was stiff with jewels and gold wire thread, and although the velvet was of the very best quality, the true nature of the fabric was lost under the ornamentation. A fine allegory for our lives, perhaps.

“I will ensure that Oliver’s title reverts to your firstborn, William, upon his death,” he said. “No one will be able to question that succession, for it is a family matter, and one that will run

smoothly and swiftly. William inherits the title of Viscount Grandison, the lands, the perquisites, the advantages of that position, regardless of whatever other prizes you and my brother win . . .” and here he looked at Edward, “. . . or lose in your lifetime.”

I nodded, looking down with modesty to conceal the triumph in my eyes.

Later, much later, I sat down at my glass and stared at the woman reflected in the mirror. When my maid came to help me disrobe, I dismissed her immediately upon unlacing me, for I had no wish to share this moment with anyone. I could pull out my own hairpins, wipe my face with a linen, and remove the cosmetics that masked my complexion.

What else did they hide?

A woman who lived a lie.

A woman who could not escape from the life she created.

A woman who loved, but was not loved in return.

A procuress.

Lucy’s word plagued my thoughts, for each time I reveled in the triumphs of the evening, her accusation blanketed my joy, and I did not understand why her words would not leave my mind.

I picked up the linen and started cleaning the cochineal from my cheeks, softly wiping so as not to deepen the fine lines that were appearing beneath my eyes.

Surely there was no harm in arranging the best outcomes for those you loved.

The linen turned pink as the cosmetics transferred from my face to the cloth.

Surely there was only one way to achieve these outcomes, and that was through ambition and cunning and persistence.

I dabbed more, scrubbing my cheek in the dim candlelight, seeing more pink on my skin, and less on the cloth.

Surely perseverance would win, and those who were the beneficiaries would repay with the love they gave freely to others.

Lucy. Edward. My young son, William. All have been rewarded by the commitment I have made to their well-being. All enjoyed better lives because of me.

I scrubbed harder, my cheek raw under the cloth. Still, the color on my skin remained, grew darker.

And what price on love?

My cheeks were fever-bright now, and my eyes stared back at me, wide and wild.

There was no price for love. And I had yet to understand the value others placed on it. Perhaps because I had never been loved for myself.

I smiled at my reflection, and the vivid cheeks and staring eyes dissolved into the charming, coquettish, seductive woman the world knew me to be.

I may not be loved. But I always got what I wanted.

And that would suffice.

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the **Lady of the**
Tower

The Lydiard Chronicles 1603-1630

ELIZABETH ST. JOHN

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The Lady of the Tower

The Lydiard Chronicles | 1603-1630

ELIZABETH ST. JOHN

PROLOGUE

God, who holds my fate in Thy hands, give me strength, I implore, for today I enter a prison like no other on this earth, and perhaps one that even Hell does not equal in its fiery despair. Give me fortitude to walk through those gates where so many traitors have gone before and never left. Give me compassion to hear the cries of forgotten men and not turn my head away. Give me, above all, Heavenly Father, courage to bear myself with dignity and Your grace when I am inwardly trembling with fear at the horrors that lie behind those walls.

Lucy

23 March 1617

Silver drizzle veiled the stone walls rising from the moat's stagnant water. To the north, the White Tower glistened but bade no welcome for all its shining. Gabled roofs with ornate chimneys pierced the mist and hid again, hinting at a house within the fortress. I was not comforted, for it reminded me that the kept must have their keepers.

Thunder resounded through the fog from water swirling around the center arches of the bridge, just upriver from our tethered barge. The first time I was rowed in a shuddering boat through the narrow span of columns was terrifying. "Shooting the bridge" the locals called it, the currents created by the arches manifesting river water into whirlpools. Recollections of impaled traitors' heads grinning from the pikes appeared before my closed eyes. What hell's gate was I approaching?

"Ho! Tie here!"

A clash of metal resounded as the pikemen stood to attention on the wharf. I pulled my mind back to the present.

"Aye, make way for the lady."

Roughened hands guided me from the rocking boat, and I carefully picked my way up the water steps. My heart beat faster as

I gazed up at the sheer ramparts. They loomed over my head, broken only by a low arch with an iron portcullis. Blackened bars jutted forth, a reminder I entered a prison.

I shivered from the damp air, and not a little from apprehension, and stood still on the wharf. Behind me, the Thames ebbed now, and the ferrymen urgently called patrons to catch the running tide. In front, the moat lay impenetrably black and still. The cold seeped through the soles of my shoes, for in my anxiety I had forgotten my pattens. Out of the gloom, a man appeared beside me.

“Princess Elizabeth paused here,” the Keeper spoke quietly, his words brushed by the lilt of an Irish accent. “She declared she was no traitor and refused to enter through that arch, for those who arrive through Traitors’ Gate do not leave again.”

The dark water gate, its walls defining the width of the ramparts above, did not welcome guests. I thought of the young princess defying her guards, perching on a wet stone on a rainy day similar to this, her own future cloudy with doubt and dread. I recalled the moment I heard I was to enter the Tower and how my stomach twisted with fear at the news.

“When I served her, none could see the frightened girl behind the majesty,” he continued, “for we were all in love with her, each one of us outdoing the other in deeds and poetry to gain her favor.”

The Keeper waved the bargeman away, and the boat was quickly untied and pushed from the wharf, the crew not looking back as they rowed rapidly upriver.

“Her ‘adventurers,’ she called us, and all through her life she played us one against many, declaring her affection and encouraging our competition—who could sail the farthest, dance the longest, fight the strongest.” He pulled his black leather cloak closer against the cold. “She challenged us, and she baited us like dogs to a bear.”

I looked at the Keeper, his faded blue seafarer’s eyes gazing toward invisible horizons as he sailed into memories. Briefly, I glimpsed the queen’s man in his prime, standing tall and strong, bronzed by foreign suns, his white beard a rich chestnut brown, his shoulders broad.

“Another woman whose own sister betrayed her, who knew not whom she could trust.” My voice competed with the rushing water; there was no telling if he heard.

“All the princess recalled that sorry afternoon was her mother, who entered the gate at the king’s command and never left.” He turned away abruptly and hailed a guard standing by.

Just as I am commanded.

“Escort my lady to her lodging. Ensure my steward is there to greet her and introduces her to her household. I shall be at the armory.”

He strode off, leaving me lonely on the wharf, my skirts heavy with the weight of the rainwater, thoughts swirling. I followed the guard along a narrow path to a bridge across the moat and toward the gabled house I’d glimpsed earlier.

Married to a man I trusted not, parted from family and friends, I entered the Tower of London. A bleak March morn in the year of our Lord 1617, and I was the new mistress of the prison.