



COUNTERPOINT
Theo, Earl of Suffolk

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
A Companion Novelle to The Lady of the Tower

ELIZABETH ST. JOHN

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The Lady of the Tower

The Lydiard Chronicles | 1603-1630

A Novel

Counterpoint: Theo Howard, Earl of Suffolk

A Novelette

By Love Divided

The Lydiard Chronicles | 1631-1646

A Novel

Praise for The Lady of the Tower

#1 Amazon Best Seller, UK and US

BRAG Medallion Honoree

Discovering Diamonds, Reader's Choice, Chill with a Book Awards

"Elizabeth St.John has brought the early Stuart Court in the years before the English Civil War vividly to life."

Historical Novel Society

"The Lady of the Tower is a beautifully produced novel with a well-crafted story that will keep you both engaged and entertained

Writers Digest 24th Annual Book Awards

" Elizabeth St John brings these years of Stuart England to the fore, bringing the known facts of her ancestor's life together with richly imagined scenes creating in the process a believable heroine, an intriguing plot and an enjoyable novel. "

Discovering Diamonds

"A riveting tale of Jacobean England"

Amazon

About COUNTERPOINT: Theo, Earl of Suffolk

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 do not intend to write another book of this time and this generation. But I do give them a chance to speak in these glimpses of incidents within *The Lady of the Tower*, told from their perspective. This is Theo's counterpoint to chapter six in the novel, in which Theo meets and falls in love with Lucy St.John.

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 one to Lucy St.John, the lady of the Tower.

Counterpoint: Theo, Earl of Suffolk

“Till one of greater name, estate and reputation happened to fall deeply in love with her.”

*Lucy St. John
August 1607*

This prosperous Wiltshire countryside, these thriving deer forests and ripe fields of burnished wheat were all mine. Well, mine to inherit. Along with the palace in London, the other country houses, the revenues, the patents and offices; all were possessions my father had worked so hard to secure, rebuilding the Howard dynasty after the disastrous season we experienced under the Tudors.

And yet why did I ride to the house party at Charlton Park with a cloud over my head and a weight in my heart?

Simple. An age-old question wrestled with throughout eternity by kings and the nobility. An arranged marriage.

When a girl-child is betrothed at the tender age of six to a man of two and twenty years, is he bound by such an arrangement?

This question plagued me heavily today, for my father insisted that the freshly inked agreement was legal and binding. Perhaps if King James himself had not stood witness, the girl being the daughter of his favorite, the Earl of Hume, I could challenge this.

“Bad luck, Theo,” my sister had scoffed, she who rages about the folly of childhood contracts and disavows her own disastrous union with the Earl of Essex. “I shall divorce my impotent husband, you wait and see.”

Divorce? Unheard of. But still, Frances gave me hope I may be able to void a contract that hangs around my neck like a millstone. So much for choosing a bride I might find comely or interesting. What promise did a scrawny six-year-old offer?

“Ignore Frances, for she will grow accustomed to her marriage,” my mother had countered. “You, Theophilus, are the celebrated heir of the Howard family, Earls of Suffolk, and the proudest nobles in England. Your betrothal stands, for with a heritage such as yours comes the responsibility of securing the dynasty.”

Our record of preserving family succession left much to be desired. Cousins imprisoned, grandfathers executed, and so many relatives in the Tower of London that the fortress could be one of our residences.

And so here I was, doomed to a lifetime affixed to some Scottish earl’s daughter. Dear God. I might even have to remove to Scotland. I shuddered.

“Why so glum, Theo? Anyone would think you were attending a funeral, not a party.” Edward’s voice interrupted my musing. I grunted a reply and gathered up my horse’s reins. He and his Villiers brothers thought of little more than entertainment. But then, as far as I could tell, they had few other responsibilities in their meager Leicestershire manor. Come to think of it, until my succession, neither did I.

The majestic towers of Charlton Park appeared over the new-growth forest. My thoughts slithered from the prison sentence of my betrothal and jumped to the delightful company awaiting me. I may be betrothed, but since when did obligations stand in the way of enjoyment?

“Frances promised a celebration to rival that of any at court,” continued my friend as he rode alongside, his horse easily keeping pace with mine. The mount should do so. He picked one of the best in my stable. “And I have heard she brings Will Shakespeare and the King’s Men to perform for us. His stories of unrequited love are bound to wake the passions in a few of the maidens attending.”

“Edward, do you think of nothing save women?” I was parched. Female company would be pleasant right now, but the dust from the road had worked up a great thirst for ale in my throat.

“Is there else to think of? If I consider my finances, I become most sorrowful. I would rather dwell on opportunity than loss,” he replied, cheerful as always in the face of his problems.

I laughed aloud at that, for God knew Edward borrowed more from me than the Jews lent in Florence. But his merry company

provided just compensation, and he knew me better than many a friend who had schooled with me on the Continent.

“Come, Frances and the players lie ahead,” I called. “And we’ll have the devil to pay if we keep my sister waiting!”

I urged my tired horse forward in a gallop in my eagerness to reach Charlton Park and the promise of a glorious week of dancing, music, and feasting. Edward gave a whoop of excitement and rode neck and neck with me. My betrothal could wither in the dust at the side of the road as far as I cared. And Edward was never one to remind me of my commitments.

Charlton Park stood before me, a thousand panes of glass flashing in the hot August sun, the Suffolk pennants flying from every pinnacle. I must admit even I was impressed. No longer was this an old country estate, my mother’s simple childhood home. This was a palace, a house of great note. “Look at me,” the mansion boasted. “Look at me and be awestruck. The Earl of Suffolk has money, the king’s ear, and a quiver full of sons to carry on the name.”

“So all this will be yours,” Edward remarked as we drew our horses up in front of the palace. We’d left the baggage carts and our servants far behind. And glad I was to travel lightly. The king might like to go on procession across the land like a caravan of gipcians, but I preferred to travel swiftly and alone. I was not one for ceremony; give me a handful of trusty friends and a swift horse to ride. I would rather a hunting party than a hundred court progressions.

“One day, yes,” I replied. In truth, I was more interested in the fair that was situated at the foot of the house, for I spied colorful minstrels and dancers. An oud player sat cross-legged on a platform, plucking the strings in a rapid crescendo of notes, while tabors and tambourines pulsed a rhythm that perfectly matched my racing heartbeat. The music called to me; I have always had an ear for a melody, and these plaintiff strains carried an echo of the Moors about them.

“Listen, Edward, tell my mother that I am caught up with the baggage train and not likely to arrive for several hours.” I gave him my

most winning smile. He grinned back and held out his hand. I dropped a few gold coins from my purse into his palm and clapped him on the shoulder. "You are a good friend. The last thing I need is my mother's recounting of commitments, now I am betrothed."

I looked over at the gaily patterned tents, where a crowd had gathered around a female dancer. A gauzy golden veil covered her face. Cymbals clashed from her hennaed fingers. Frances had hired the best performers outside of the Pleasure Gardens. I needed to give this amusement my full and devoted attention.

"You'll not get far disguised in that jacket." Edward eyed my doublet, and I looked down at the gold-threaded azure silk. The piece probably cost more than his entire inheritance. Sheep-farming was a solid trade, but he had several other brothers who demanded a share of the proceeds.

"You're right." I looked at his dusty green doublet, which had seen better days. Many better days. I dug in my purse for another coin. "Lend me your coat, and say nothing to anyone. I would for once be concealed, and no one would expect the future Earl of Suffolk to wear that."

Edward laughed and quickly shrugged off the jacket, his usually rosy cheeks even brighter with mirth.

"Fine clothes maketh a man," he said. "I'll gladly swap your coat for mine, Theo. Just don't ask for it back in a hurry." He grabbed my horse's reins as I dismounted. "Have some pleasure, my lord. Looks like there's plenty to be found. And don't worry, I'll make an excuse for you. It wouldn't be the first time."

Pulling Edward's green jacket over my white lawn shirt, I laced the front where I could, although my frame was larger than his. The fair beckoned, and after all, a man close to relinquishing his independence deserved some joy. Best take my pleasure where I could before my mother demanded I sit with her and plan the rest of my indentured life with the Scottish heiress, and my sister harassed me with the appalling complaints of her mismatched husband. Did true love not exist in this rarefied world of ours?

I plunged into the crowd of fairgoers with sport on my mind. The raucous music and laughter swirled around me, bringing me back to the fetes in France, when Edward and I would leave our lessons in the dim university library and venture into the town for our real education. Ah, the wine was sweet and the women sweeter that golden summer we were at Angers together.

This crowd appeared mostly a mishmash of my mother's courtier friends, delighting in the deceit of the entertainment, pretending they too were simple country folk enjoying the bucolic pleasures of the land. Some pretense. These courtiers only ever viewed the land from their carriages and palaces. At least I knew the feel of dirt under my fingernails, for the growing of rare plants was interesting to me, and at our home in Suffolk I supervised the cultivation of crocus for its precious saffron. I knew how important those revenues were to sustaining our wealth. I didn't believe anything grew in the wilds of Scotland.

I shoved the unpleasant thoughts away and stared at the girl by the flower stall. A shaft of August sun burnished her golden-brown hair, worn long and loose, maiden-style, with just a few flowers intertwined in the tresses. A lavender-seller she appeared to be, for her dress was of the lightest mauve blue, and she carried a basket over her slim bare arm. And that, along with her slender figure, caught my attention. No one I knew in court circles exposed their skin to the sun. As I pushed through the crowd, I think she felt my gaze upon her, for she looked up from the dried flowers displayed in the stall. Her wide blue eyes contained the boundless freedom of the bright summer skies.

Was she placed in my path by a sympathetic angel who knew of the torment within my heart? Perhaps Cupid had finally taken pity on my plight, knowing that my betrothed was not a love match, but one born out of commerce and bartering. *Item, we shall trade one oldest son for an heiress daughter and all the land and riches accompanying her, so that in itself is a match made in heaven.*

She now looked around the congested stalls, the tiniest of frowns puckering the delicate skin of her smooth forehead.

"May I assist you?" I bowed low, hoping that Edward's doublet would bear the strain.

Her cheeks colored prettily as she curtsied to me, and as I raised her, she took a step, as if planning an escape. “Do not be fearful. This is no St. Bartholomew’s, where the urchins and ’prentices are out to cut purses.” I held out my arm to her. “Come, let us walk a while. Here in Charlton Park, there is no crime nor hardship, for this is like the Elysium Fields, and no sorrow shall enter.” She surely could not resist my learning nor my assurance.

The girl smiled, and as her hand touched mine, a jolt that I had not felt before struck my heart. Strange. I needed to know more.

“Thank you,” she replied simply, no acknowledgement in her voice of my station. Perfect. Edward’s tattered doublet was serving its purpose. Looks could be deceiving after all. Her voice was low pitched, distinctive. “I have lost my sister-in-law in these crowds.”

“Perhaps she was distracted by the musicians and remains to listen to their playing.” I started to walk a little, and it would have been discourteous of her to refuse to join me. “She will come to no harm,” I reassured her. “I will help you look for her.” *And take my time about it too.*

“Don’t be concerned,” I continued. “You will not find your purse stolen or your modesty affronted by a vagabond apprentice. Come, let us find your sister.”

I escorted her through the crowded paths, where the merriment was reaching a higher pitch of abandonment and my courtier compatriots were rapidly quaffing the strong local ale. Fortunately, none recognized me in my artful disguise, although I was conscious that my French-cut riding breeches were far better quality than Edward’s secondhand doublet. I prayed that my newfound friend would not notice this tailoring conflict.

“The music is most pleasant, is it not? And such a charming setting. One could believe all of England lived in such a bucolic world.” I carefully steered her around Lord Newcastle, who, despite his disguise as a jolly baker, did not appear to hold his drink well. He suddenly spewed on his shoes in our path. “And many do. Believe, that is.”

“You do not?”

“I have seen enough to know the underbelly to this chimerical life.” Would she agree, or did she not question her surroundings?

“These people are deluded. They have no understanding of the true meaning of the old country ways.”

“Ah. That is a strong opinion, my lady. And you do?” This was becoming more and more interesting. My lavender-seller had an educated brain on her.

“I have seen enough to know that even in this land of wealth and luxury, poverty and sickness lie waiting at its gates.”

This brought me up short. I stopped, although conscious of the curious glances from a group of courtiers who had to step around us.

“Such a dire outlook from one so young.” I looked down at her with a teasing glance.

“It is just my experience. This world is alluring, but it is an illusion.” Spirited too. She made to walk on, but I could not let her go yet.

“But what if you had the means to maintain that illusion, with no cause to step outside the gates?” For in truth, that was my world.

“And would that shallow life satisfy you? One where all opinions were shared, all experience traded? Such a world does not appeal to me.” She removed my hand again. I was losing her.

“You speak from experience? What know you of a world outside of the court?”

She laughed then, genuinely, without pretense. “I am no courtier’s daughter. I am here as a country cousin. Do not look for me in White Hall.”

“So you prefer the land to the city? Are you not dying to attend court? Most girls are.” In fact, all the girls I knew only fixed their minds on this one desire.

“I would see for myself all that it is. And then return to the true world.” She peered again into the crowd. It seemed my company was tiring on her.

“I share your thoughts. I love the land where I am from, and it is most dear to me.” I spread my hands wide, so she might see the calluses on the palms and think those from a shovel, not a sword.

She touched my hand, and her gentle stroke induced a shiver in the August heat. “You enjoy the country too?”

“I do. And your name, country cousin? Can you tell me that?”

“Lucy. And yours?”

“Theo.” What else could I do to distract her from her mission to reunite with her sister? “Are you hungry? Come, let’s share a plate of roast meat and cider. Even serfs must eat.”

We walked to the shade of a sturdy oak, and I sat her on a bench while I fetched food. As we rested and shared our meal, we observed the manners of the overdressed ladies and the posturing of the gallants. We laughed aloud as a portly shepherd in a highly embroidered smock lost control of his small flock of sheep. They scattered amongst the stalls, causing the women to shriek aloud as they were tripped and butted by the confused animals.

And we talked, of books and agriculture. I spoke of my home in Essex and my work in the crocus fields. She told of home not far away, Lydiard Park, and a joyful time spent in Hackney with Matthew L’Obel. We discussed the crops of crocus that thrived so well in the chalky soils of the land in Suffolk and discussed how saffron was well known to be the most efficacious cure for the plague. I smiled inwardly at her observation that its expense prevented all but the richest of patrons from acquiring it.

Throughout that warm afternoon we lingered, a shepherd boy and his sweetheart, two lighthearted lovers with no care in the world. Well, that’s how I felt anyhow. And she? She warmed to me quickly, her speech direct, with no court-raised false flattery. And yet she was educated and opinionated and passionate about her gardens and medicinals, familiar with subjects from agriculture to the classics. As I concentrated on her words, my eyes were transfixed by her intriguing lips, cherry red and curling with an amusement that beckoned and teased to distraction.

“Who are you?” I demanded. “Where do you come from with this knowledge of the old country ways and yet quoting Plato?”

She laughed again. “My uncle, where I was brought up, boasted a fine library.” A cloud crossed her brow. “My childhood was not always happy. His books were my constant companions.”

Was it that time stood still, suspended until we lost all track of it? I know not, except that I had never before talked to someone who could finish my sentences, understand my heart’s longing, and fit in my soul as if she had been molded from mine own rib as God created

Eve. To quote the only ancient I really paid attention to, I knew I was experiencing love's arrows.

“As soon as I had seen her, I was lost. For Beauty's wound is sharper than any weapon's, and it runs through the eyes down to the soul. It is through the eye that love's wound passes, and I now became prey to a host of emotions.”

She appeared a little taken aback that I, a lonely shepherder in a tattered green jacket, albeit with fine French riding breeches, could quote Achilles Tatius. I was sure it only added to my mystery.

Around us, twilight crept over the land. As candles were placed in the windows of the house and lanterns lit on the roof, I was aware of the passage of time. In the deepening dusk, her eyes gleamed, and her skin was luminous. In truth, I was not sure how much longer Edward could keep my mother at bay. It was time to move to the next phase in our journey along the path of love. Glancing toward the house, I saw the stage was now transformed into a palace, and the actors were taking their places. Lucy's eyes followed mine, and I knew that if I did not kiss her now, she would return to wherever she came from, and I would lose her.

I took her hand and raised her from the bench, and as she stepped forward, it was only natural that I bend my head and kiss her beckoning mouth. Surprise first barred the way, but with a little insistence from me, she responded to my kiss, and soon we were bound in an embrace. All sounds and sights faded from my senses, for in truth I had never kissed or been kissed like this before. Deeply and thirstily, I drank from her sweet mouth until I was satisfied that our lovemaking had incited her to another level of desire. I broke free in spite of my urge, for I must confess, confusion was conflicting my desire.

Without words, I took her hand so she would not leave and led her to a quiet corner apart from the play. Together, we watched Mr Shakespeare's play of star-crossed lovers and were transformed into his world of faeries and woodland nymphs. She laughed at Bottom, she cried at Helena's lovesickness, but most of all she did not leave go of my hand. And I? I found the irony of the triangle of love in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* most disturbing. On the boundary of this magical night waited my betrothed, my wedding, my future. At my side

stood a girl who was surely my destiny. And when Lysander spoke, I could not but agree. The course of true love never did run smooth.

No sooner had the play finished than we were assaulted by three women who rushed at us from the darkened gardens like the very sprites from Mr. Shakespeare's imagination. From what I could gather, this was Lucy's missing sister-in-law, along with a fierce dragon of a lady and a voluptuous version of Lucy, dressed in the most modish court fashion. The old woman was angry with Lucy, and so I immediately ingratiated myself to her with my most charming bow and flattering talk. I was winning her over when one of the girls burst into laughter.

"Theo?" she cried. "How? What?"

It was my cousin Anne, whom I had not seen since White Hall, when she lived there with her mother, Lady Elizabeth Knollys. Of course, we immediately fell to talking, my disguise forgotten, and it was while I still held Lucy to my side that I realized the old harpy and the young hussy were looking at me as if they would eat me.

"Theophilus Howard," I introduced myself. "Welcome to Charlton Park." The old bat dropped a clumsy curtsy while sizing me up at the same time.

"Joan, Lady St. John," she announced. "And my niece Barbara St. John." The younger one arched an eyebrow and stared at me coolly. I must admit it was a little unnerving to find my newfound love's visage reflected in this alluring woman.

"My lord, we thank you for your hospitality. We had feared greatly for the safety of my niece. I see she has been in safe hands."

I bowed, wondering what would come of this encounter.

"Lucy," commanded her aunt, "you tally too long. It is time to return to our rooms."

My sweetheart followed obediently, and as her hand left mine, a hole yawned in my soul that was more than her physical absence. I stood mournfully by the stage while the players packed away the set and the audience departed for dancing and feasting inside the house. She turned and gave me a half smile over her shoulder, and in that moment hope and love and anticipation filled up my heart again.

“Courtly love,” announced Edward, his mouth full of roasted swan, “is overrated and overused in the seduction of maidens and the retention of lovers.”

“What would you know?” I demanded as I tipped back my third glass of Rhenish. “You’ve yet to succeed in winning over a milkmaid, let alone a lady. And give me back my jacket before you ruin it.”

We stood within the grand dining hall, surrounded by a flock of courtiers who chattered and screeched like a collection of parrots in an Italian street market. The fresh oak paneling gleamed golden in the candlelight, and I stood in such a way to admire my portrait adorning the wall over the fireplace. Painted to celebrate my twenty-first birthday, the painting showed me at my best, with an emphasis on my broad shoulders, fine legs, and thick auburn hair. And then I shuddered. Unfortunately, this fine work of art was also a gift from my betrothed’s father, the Earl of Dunbar. I did not need reminding of him and his daughter at this moment.

“Besides,” I continued, “I am confident that my ardent attention to Mistress Lucy St. John will result in a successful entertainment later this evening.” I turned from the painting and positioned myself before the expensive gilded mirror above a sideboard laden with grapes and other delicacies from our hothouse.

Edward snorted. “Are you so confident that she is available, Theo? It appears to me that her aunt has other ideas.” He nodded across the table where, between the ornate marchpane turrets of a model of Charlton, Lady St. John and her niece Barbara appeared. Lucy and Anne were nowhere to be seen. I stared despairingly across the cook’s ornate confection, urging Lucy to appear.

The familiar scent of orris root drifted into my senses, and I turned to embrace my sister.

“Frances,” I cried. “In God’s eyes, I would recognize you in the darkest of nights, for the scent of Venus in your perfume is as unique as a signature on a love letter.”

My sister laughed, and all the bells of heaven tinkled in her voice. “Theo, do not waste your inspiring words. This is me, not your latest amour.” She caught her bottom lip with her pearl-white teeth and looked up at me through her curling lashes. “Speaking of which,” she

followed my gaze to Barbara St.John, “who is this who catches your fancy now?”

Before I could explain further to Frances that the object of my desire was in fact her absent sister, Barbara and Lady St.John reached our side.

“My lord,” fluttered the old harpy, even more aptly named since vanquishing my love. “My lord, may I say what a delightful pleasure it was to make your acquaintance at Mr. Shakespeare’s play this evening. Your presence added much to the magic of the evening.”

’Struth, did she have to layer the compliments so thickly?

I bowed stiffly. “Lady St.John, my compliments to you,” I turned to Barbara, “and to your charming niece.” I stepped back slightly so I could detach myself from her grasp. “And, er, your other charges?”

Barbara swept a rather magnificent curtsy to both myself and Frances and stayed in position for perhaps a beat too long. Frances raised an eyebrow at me as she caught my glance at Barbara’s full bosom.

“My Lady Essex, my Lord Howard,” said Barbara as she rose again. “My sister and sister-in-law are resting, for their youth prevents them from joining us at such a late hour.” I must admit, the likeness to Lucy disconcerted me. To be sure, this night grew warm. Rubbing my forehead with a linen handkerchief to blot the sweat on my brow, I longed for my simple lavender-seller, not this unsettling likeness of her.

From behind her fan, Frances’s voice vibrated with amusement. “And you are . . . Mistress Barbara St.John?” I knew Frances well enough to know that she was entertained by Barbara’s boldness.

“Yes, Lady Essex.”

To complete the introductions, Edward leaned forward and kissed Barbara’s hand while pronouncing his name with a flourish. Fortunately, he had swallowed his swan and wiped his mouth so as to not leave a greasy imprint on her hand.

“Would you care to dance, Mistress St.John?” he asked. Trust Edward to cut to the heart of the matter. She smiled at him and tilted her head. I caught the quick glance she gave me, as if challenging me to overrule his question. I remained silent, for I had no wish to entangle myself in that one. I knew her type. Let Edward find out for

himself the true cost of courtly love. I gazed beyond the windows to the silvery parkland beyond. Not even Mr. Shakespeare's players strolled under the moonbeams. Was the whole afternoon a dream, and Lucy an illusion of my sad imagination?

"With pleasure, Mr. Villiers," she replied. With another deep curtsy to me, uncalled for but not unwelcome, she allowed herself to be led to the line for the pavane. Fortunately, at the same time the harpy retired to the bench where sat half a dozen other old ladies, roosting like starlings on a bare winter's branch.

"So, Theo, she interests you?" Frances was never one to hold her tongue. "Mistress St. John has an appeal, for sure."

Shaking my head, I watched Barbara flirt with Edward as he faced her in the dance. They were actually well matched, for what Edward lacked in sophistication he made up for in his enthusiasm. They danced well together. I hoped perhaps the musicians would strike up a volta. I would enjoy watching Barbara perform the outrageous dance that revealed exciting flashes of leg and gave the man permission to grasp his partner in the most intimate of places. That would make Edward very happy.

"Theo?"

"Actually, it is Barbara's sister that I pursued today. An intriguing innocent with a bewitching smile."

Frances nodded, her eyes following Barbara, who now fanned Edward's flushed cheeks, causing his usual ruddy complexion to inflame even more.

"How delightful. More entertaining than your child bride, I am certain."

I shuddered. "Frances, it is a betrothal, not a wedding. There are many years ahead before she is of an age to marry."

Frances grimaced. "They move all too swiftly. And then the disappointment and horror becomes a reality." Her full mouth, a physical feature we shared, turned down.

"Is it bad?" I asked gently. As my favorite sister, I was most grieved to see her so saddened by this unwelcome marriage. It perturbed me even more to think that I might be the next Howard to be so plucked, trussed, and presented for consumption in the marriage arena.

“He is awful,” she replied passionately. “He is uncouth, a coward, and is not capable of performing his function as a man. Not that I welcome those attentions from that lily-livered weakling.”

“What would you do?” I asked, horrified. What words would my child-bride describe of me?

Watching Barbara dancing with Edward, Frances smiled and turned to me with wide-eyed innocence. I knew that look from old. The last thing on her mind was virtuousness. “Take my pleasure elsewhere.”

The night stretched before me, interminable now the company of my newfound love was denied me. Instead of dancing away my frustration, I settled for sitting at an inlaid mother-of-pearl table in the long gallery and a game of primero with Frances, playing against Edward and Barbara. We knew our opponents may not have the means to gamble at the level we did, and so Frances and I set them up with a generous pile of coins at the outset and settled down to play. Before an hour was up, I was convinced that Barbara knew every cunning trick and turn of the game, and the talents these sisters possessed intrigued me.

I beckoned the page for another flagon of wine. “Your sister is versed in agriculture and the ancient philosophers,” I said to Barbara. “And you dance like an angel and play cards like a Spaniard. What other skills do you and Lucy possess?”

She laughed and gathered the cards up. Edward leaned closer to her and blew gently on a curl of chestnut hair that had escaped her jeweled net.

“Many,” she replied. “Some to share, and some to keep private.”

Poor Edward. He didn’t stand a chance with one so devious and elusive. How I longed for my plain-speaking country girl.

The wine coursed warm in my blood now, and Edward’s eyes drooped with the effects of the Rhenish. Frances clapped her hands, and the musicians strolled closer, their drumming and plinking loud in my head. In all, my senses were overstimulated, and keeping a clear head became most challenging.

Frances caught hold of Barbara’s hand as she shuffled the cards.

“You have a way about you that would shine at court,” said my sister. “Why are you not there?”

“My brother keeps us all in the country and takes his position as our guardian most seriously,” replied Barbara. “But in truth, I fear I will wake one morning and find that my feet have grown into roots and my hair into spider webs, and I will never be able to leave.”

“Such a waste that would be,” Edward slurred. “You should return with us to White Hall, Barbara. You would mesmerize the courtiers and charm the king.”

Brilliant Edward. Even in his cups, he could come up with a good idea.

“And bring your sister with you,” I added. “And your aunt as chaperone. If she knows the Howards request your company, I feel that she would not refuse.”

Frances sipped from her own goblet delicately, watching Barbara closely. “I would welcome a friend such as you, Barbara. You have beauty and a clever mind. It is not often I find others such as me.”

Barbara flicked the cards down as she dealt them to us. They sounded like little smacks as she laid them on the polished surface, making me slightly uncomfortable. “And what would you want of my sister, Lord Howard?”

“Company,” I said vaguely. “I would know her better.”

“And your betrothal? Edward said you were recently contracted to the Earl of Hume’s daughter.” Barbara was another such as Frances. She did not mince her words.

“A simple contract.” I threw back the last of my wine and held the goblet out for more. “One that could be ignored . . . or broken.”

Barbara looked at me and leaned forward. Edward gave a shrug, his face despondent. Too many times he had lost a wench to me. I felt sorry for him. If I could steer Mistress St. John his way, I would. It was not that he was ugly, or even unattractive. He was just a bit slow to grasp the essentials of love-making. Still, with my continued instruction, he may have a chance. His ambition would drive him more than his intellect.

“And how would you ignore such a contract, my lord?” She breathed the words softly, such that I could barely hear. And yet this time no lust rose in my loins. A sensual woman, no doubt, and in so

many ways she resembled my lavender-seller. Why did I not respond? Because this woman presented herself like too many in my world: as full of playacting and cunning and magic as Mr. Shakespeare's production.

Give me simplicity, not duplicity.

"My position is not your concern, Mistress St. John."

She recoiled as if slapped. "You are sure of this? For if it is my sister your eyes are upon, she is not versed in cunning or deceit." Playing with a necklace at her throat, she caressed the stone as if it were alive. "Be warned that there is often more pleasure in the hunt than in the kill."

To be fair, she did not give up easily. I detected jealousy beneath her bold words. I wondered if this caused the childhood sorrows Lucy spoke of earlier.

"A contract may be set aside if one has the leverage." I looked again at Frances and remembered her earlier words. "I take pleasure where I find it. And the Howards have influence. And determination. We shall find our way at White Hall, of that I have no doubt." I pushed my pile of coins to the middle, and Frances and Edward did the same.

Barbara surveyed us all and turned over her cards. Her bluff had won again. "In that case," she said, "let us drink to court and all the rewards White Hall may bring us."

The next morning, I awoke with a pounding head and a mouth full of sawdust. I knew not who lay in bed next to me, but I gave her some coin and sent her rapidly on her way. I remembered little after Barbara's discussion at the card table, for having given up on seeing Lucy again that evening, I took my pleasure elsewhere. Now, before it was too late, I had to secure a promise from Barbara and Lucy that we would see each other again. Pulling on a pair of breeches and tugging on a fresh linen shirt, I shrugged on the azure doublet I had retrieved from Edward.

Stepping into the dazzling sunshine, I glanced to where several parties of travelers were already mounted and ready to depart. My heart thumped. Surely I was not too late? And then I saw her, next to

Barbara, elegant on a tall bay, her head twisting as she looked around the crowd. Could it be she was searching for me?

“You did not think to leave without saying farewell?” I grabbed her horse’s bridle and smiled up at her.

“You deceived me,” she replied. She did not meet my eyes, and she tilted her chin high, pride squaring her shoulders. “You let me think you were a simple man, a houseguest, not Lord Howard.”

“And you bewitched me,” I responded. Here was familiar ground. “For you are my Titania, and I am your Oberon, and we must dwell in enchantment forever.”

She colored and looked down. My heart beat a little faster, for in truth I was expecting a witty retort, yet I was happy that she had none. I did not want a slippery, silver-tongued lady of court. I wanted my lavender-seller, the girl who read Plato and cultivated her medicinal herbs.

“We shall call on both of you.” The elusive scent of orris root again. Frances joined us and stood next to me in the yard. “Lydiard is not far, and I promised Barbara last night that we would save her from the boredom of the country. If she cannot travel to the court, then we shall bring the court to her.”

Barbara laughed aloud. “I should love your company,” she cried. “And we must continue the friendship we started last night.”

Lucy dropped her eyes to mine, and again I felt a lightning bolt strike me. The infinite promise of those blue orbs fed my soul.

“You will come?” she asked. The question hung in the air, a whisper beneath Barbara’s strident laugh.

In the silence that followed, both Frances and Barbara exchanged glances.

“I am commanded,” I replied. “For if Frances decides it is her pleasure, then none can stop her.”

“None do stop me,” repeated my sister. Her hair, dressed with charming ribbons and jewels, rippled like gold thread. Her dress, cut a sliver too low to be seen before evening, pushed the limits of modesty. All eyes were drawn to her, and she knew it.

“Then we shall call on you within the month.” I remembered my promise to myself and inclined my head to Barbara. “And bring with

us Edward. He would have the pleasure of your company again, Mistress St. John.”

“That is settled,” Frances responded briskly. Her attention turned away from the yard and back to our mansion. “Theo, please let us go back inside, for I fear this bright sun is bringing me a freckle!”

I kissed Lucy’s hand and bowed to Barbara. Holding out my arm to Frances, we strolled together across the courtyard, back to Charlton House and the pleasures it held.

She tipped her head and whispered to me, “We will have fun with your girl, Theo. She is ripe for you.”

I laughed with the anticipation of all the living that lay before me. My betrothal was already a fading signature on a document. Who knew what obstacles could prevent the contract’s completion? Many things could happen to a child of six before she reached the marrying age of twelve. Frances made all things possible. And she would stop at nothing.

For further reading, please enjoy this brief extract from *The Lady of the Tower*.

Orphaned Lucy St. John, described as "the most beautiful of all," defies English society by attracting the eye of the Earl of Suffolk. In 1609, the court of James I is a place of glittering pageantry and cutthroat ambition, when the most dangerous thing one can do is fall in love. Lucy's envious sister Barbara is determined to ruin her happiness and drives Lucy into exile from the court. Heartbroken, she has to find her own path through life, becoming mistress of the Tower of London and gaining a fortune through the patronage of the Duke of Buckingham. But with great wealth comes betrayal, leaving Lucy to fight for her survival—and her honor—in a world of deceit and debauchery.

Elizabeth St. John tells this dramatic story of love, betrayal, and loyalty through the eyes of her ancestor Lucy and her family's surviving diaries, letters and court papers.

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.