

COUNTERPOINT  
Henry, the King's Cavalier

The Lydiard Chronicles 1603-1664

A Companion Novelette to  
*Written in Their Stars*

ELIZABETH ST. JOHN

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## **The Lydiard Chronicles | 1603-1664**

### **The Lady of the Tower By Love Divided Written in Their Stars**

**Novelettes**

**Theo, Earl of Suffolk  
Barbara, Lady Villiers  
Henry, the King's Cavalier**

"Her world and characters are so real I wanted to remain there. I loved this book, and the Lydiard Chronicles are now on my list of all-time favorite historical novels. A fantastic read."

**Editor's Choice, Historical Novel Society Book Review**

"Ms St. John's writing is remarkable, with many a brilliant turn-of-phrase, stunning imagery, and delicately vivid depictions of the passion between the (mostly) happily married lords and ladies and their stalwart heroism A dramatic and romantic novel of courage and faith."

**Three-time BRAG Medallion Winner**

" Ms St.John has made history come alive and WOW, what a journey. This is a book that will break your heart, but at the same time, mend it. It is exceptional. When historical fiction is written this way, there is no such thing as too much."

**2019 Book of the Year, The Coffee Pot Book Club**

## **About COUNTERPOINT: Henry, the King's Cavalier**

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. A man may think his life is only measured by battles fought for the king. Until he meets a woman worth fighting for.

Here is a counterpoint to Nan Wilmot, from *Written in Their Stars*.

## **About the Author and The Lydiard Chronicles**

Elizabeth St.John spends her time between California, England, and the past. A best-selling author, historian and genealogist, she has tracked down family papers and residences from Lydiard Park and Nottingham Castle to Richmond Palace and the Tower of London. Although the family sold a few country homes along the way (it's hard to keep a good castle going these days), Elizabeth's family still occupy them - in the form of portraits, memoirs, and gardens that carry their imprint. And the occasional ghost. But that's a different story...

Lydiard House and Park, ancestral home of the St.John family, is a beautiful country house and parkland set in the Wiltshire countryside. Along with precious artwork and furniture within the house and the beautifully restored 17th century walled garden, the adjacent church of St. Mary's hosts one of the country's most exquisite collections of 17th century monuments.

The Friends of Lydiard Park is an independent charity founded in 2005 dedicated to supporting the conservation and continued enhancement of Lydiard House and Park.

<https://www.friendsoflydiardpark.org.uk>  
[www.elizabethstjohn.com](http://www.elizabethstjohn.com)

## **Characters**

Henry Wilmot, Colonel and Royalist

Allen Apsley, his friend

Nan, Lady Lee, Allen's cousin

John Cary, Nan's Steward

Sir John St. John, Nan's father

Charles I, King of England

Sir Edward Hyde, his counselor

## Counterpoint: Henry, the King's Cavalier

*"Now the king raised an army of 1000 men and 4000 horse. Before the flame of war broke out, the smoke ascended in every county."*

*Lucy Hutchinson*

Fueled by the king's brandy in my silver flask, the last sound horse in Worcester and I rode like hell into the night. The beast carried me through woods striped by a hunter's moon, naked October branches thrusting as lances, more lethal than any royal tilting ground. Thank God the track was frost-hard, well-beaten from messengers hastening back and forth these past two weeks.

And the brandy? Well, a man could never have too much Dutch courage. I had learned that on Flanders's battlefields. I could scent a skirmish like a hound raised a stag. No different in Germany's Lowlands or Scotland's Highlands. Now London lay in my sights.

Somewhere between here and the city, Parliament's army raced south for that prize. We'd collide again in England's belly by week's end.

Which is why we needed guns and horses. And plenty of them.

Allen Apsley's shout cut over the pounding hooves. "We've made good time. Ditchley Park lies three miles south."

He rode with me as a guide and procurer, appointed by the king's advisor. Sir Edward Hyde had commissioned his favoured relative to replenish supplies after our battle at Powick. A good lad, eager to prove himself. Had I ever been that young? In truth, there were only five years between us. Might as well have been a century when measured in men's lives lost.

Apsley's first battle. *And for me? Let the devil keep score, for I don't bother tallying. I've been fighting my whole life.*

"Ride hard and ride fast," I yelled back at him. "The king needs whatever weapons your cousin can spare."

My nag broke from the forest. A solitary inn stood at the crossroads, no windowsill candle burning to welcome travellers. Yet. I knew these roadside haunts of old. I'd visited enough in my time. The drill was always the same. Raise the landlord, demand his buxom daughter bring forth his best Madeira wine hidden in the cellar, compliment his wife until her cheeks blushed apple red and she slipped me a free dinner, and then ride hard for the next, driven by malmsey and a restlessness that urged me ever forward.

Another time.

Back to the task at hand. Munition, perhaps a horse or two, promised by Apsley's cousin. Apparently a woman of means, eager to help the king's cause.

I urged the mount across the final miles. An owl slashed the dark, soldiers' ghosts snared within its white wings, predicting victory for armies. As if I needed an omen. Our experience would crush Parliament's unskilled fighters. A triumph for the king, and I'd be home by Christmas. Wherever home lay.

Apsley held his hand up, slowing us to a trot. Ahead appeared a charred oak, long severed by a lightning bolt, and a dilapidated barn, roof gaping.

"We'll wait here, at Ditchley's boundary." He reined his horse, showing an impressive level of expertise. Apsley was a capable horseman and commanded a fine steed. He would fare well. "Cary, her steward, is meeting us. And then on to Prince Rupert and the king."

I peered into the darkness, the moon now swathed in clouds. A good night for smugglers and those about the king's business. "I don't see anyone. You're sure the message was delivered? Let's ride farther."

Apsley shook his head "Patience. They will come."

I turned my head sharply at a rustling in the hedge. Across the fields, a fox barked, followed by a rabbit's squeal. Faintly, the jingle of harnesses and the whickering of a horse trickled into earshot. Shadows blacker than the black night emerged on the track before us.

Good God. Ten, twelve mounts, fine chargers. Four pack ponies laden with bundles that could only be muskets. Six men riding and leading, all for us. I glanced at Apsley.

He grinned. "See? I said Nan would provide."

The riders dismounted and pulled their horses to one side. I did the same and walked forward with Apsley. Two men greeted us warmly while another showed me his back and busied himself with the packs. Rude fellow.

"Thank Lady Lee for her generosity, Mr. Cary," Allen addressed the taller of the two. "She has gone well beyond the king's call for arms by supplying us these horses and recruits."

The man nodded. "My mistress would do anything for you, sir."

A sudden crash made me spin on my heel. A pack had fallen from the horse and spilled its contents across the track. A dozen muskets glinted as the full moon swept from behind the clouds, shooting an unwelcome beam of light over our clandestine group.

"Steady there, you idiot!" I marched over. "Those are the king's weapons you're mishandling."

The foolish groom just ignored me before bending and feebly pushing the guns back into a pile. He was a weed of a man, the guns near as long as him. At that rate, we would be there all night.

I nudged him with my boot. "Don't be so bloody stupid, you whoreson. Get out of the damned way. Now."

The fellow snatched up a gun and pointed it at me. "And you don't be so bloody rude." In a swift motion, Allen seized the weapon and flung it to the ground—and then burst out laughing. I was still struggling to understand why a stripling whose voice had not even broken was on a mission like this.

Allen hugged the lad, knocking off his hat. The recruit laughed with a laugh that sent heat to my gut. And shook loose a wash of auburn curls.

"Allen!"

"Nan!"

"Dear God!" I exclaimed.

She swept me a look that would have stopped the Earl of Essex dead and saved us the trouble of fighting again that month.

“Where’s my brother?” she demanded of Apsley.

“With the advance cavalry, on his way to London.” He paused. “Ned’s perfectly safe, Nan. We meet up from here and ride together.”

She nodded in my direction. “Who’s this?”

“Henry Wilmot, at your service.” I swept my best bow. Somehow her attitude and the occasion demanded it.

“Should I know you, Mr. Wilmot?”

Again that arrogance. I just stared at her.

Apsley rushed to my rescue. “Colonel Wilmot is the king’s Commissioner General of the Horse. He leads the cavalry in his army, Nan. He is the most experienced military commander, second only to Prince Rupert.” He paused. “And more popular.”

She sniffed. “Let’s see if you can ride as well as you curse.” She turned to Apsley. “Give me a leg up, Allen. I’ll show you the shortcut across Ditchley Park. It’ll save you two hours on the track.”

This was too much. We did not need a woman slowing us down at this vital moment. “Can’t your men lead us? This is really no place for a lady.”

As Apsley cupped his hands and Lady Lee stepped up on her high horse—if it was even possible for her to climb any higher—her cloak swung open, revealing a pair of breeches and a man’s jacket, some kind of linen shirt and velvet waistcoat. None of which did anything to hide her figure nor her agility.

“Not what I had expected, Apsley,” I muttered under my breath. “Yet certainly more than I wished for.”

He grinned and quickly mounted, as did I. “Ride forward with Nan, Colonel, and I’ll bring up the rear to ensure the pack ponies don’t lag.” Canter down the track, he left me at his cousin’s mercy.

“Shall we go?” She shot me another glance. “Or are you concerned about keeping up with a woman in unknown territory?”

She urged her horse forward, her hair streaming behind like the mane of a wild filly.

I shouted over my shoulder to Apsley, “Move the damned horses. Steady pace. Don’t fall behind or I’ll cut you from my troop.”

And then I followed her myself, as excited as a bloody junior officer on his first campaign.

We rode in silence for five minutes until I broke it. I glanced across at her, face shadowed under the broad-brimmed hat again, hair tucked up, shoulders square under the borrowed jacket.

“Why did you come? It’s a dangerous mission to be out at night these times. And even more so on the king’s business. No place for a woman.”

She turned to me then. “I could not send Allen to war without seeing him. And the hope that my brother Ned might be with him too.” She shrugged. “Besides, it’s my land.”

I nodded. We fell into a rhythm, behind us the steward leading the extra horses, the groom with the pack ponies, Allen bringing up the rear. The earth settled around us, and for a while I could relax my vigilance. This was friendly territory.

“You are close to your cousin, Lady Lee?”

“Since childhood. My mother and Allen’s were dearest friends.”

Her demeanour discouraged further questioning. The country unfurled like a map, rolling acres of cleared earth, a copse to the east.

“Fine hunting land,” I remarked.

“One of King James’s favourite deer parks, by all accounts,” she replied. “And his son Henry’s. Before he died.”

“The Baronets Lee were close to the royal family.” I paused. “In the days of Queen Elizabeth and her successor.”

She turned her head slightly as if to listen more intently. “You know of them?”

“My father did.” No need to tell of old history. “A long time ago.”

“Much has changed since then.”

“Much,” I agreed. I wondered when she would raise the present loyalties of the Lee dynasty. If I had known this was Apsley’s family, I might not have agreed so readily to the supplies. Although every gun in the king’s control was one less for the rebel Parliament.

We continued in silence, her ability to keep quiet surprising. Unlike ladies of the court or wenches in a tavern, she didn’t have the need to fill every second with senseless chatter.

By the copse, stacks of fresh-cut pines were tidily arranged close to the track, ready for carting. “A good crop of timber,” I observed.

“Prices are up this autumn.” She appraised the lumber as if tallying the value. “And will increase even further as we go into winter. The war puts even bigger pressure on supply. The demand will yield a good return this year.”

“So your steward tells you?”

“So I know for myself,” she shot back. “John Cary works at my direction.”

“And your husband? Does he relish a wife with a head for business?”

“He died.” She urged her horse forward so she was slightly ahead of me. I gave her room.

A comely widow who smuggled guns, guided the king’s commander in the middle of the night without a second thought, and knew the economies of preparing timber supplies for war.

Interesting.

As we cleared the copse, a chill fell upon us, for it was that time of night when frost fingered the air and whipped the cheeks of riders. I pulled out my flask and took a gulp; brandy kept the spirit warm when the flesh was chilled. She must have been colder than me, for that ill-fitting jacket gaped around her smooth neck, and the cloak was so large it had slipped from her shoulder. As I turned to her, she looked at me, and I gestured with the flask. She smiled, a mere corner of her mouth twitching, as she reached over and took it from me, sipping delicately before handing it back. Unlike many

another, her mouthful was not followed by spluttering nor even watering eyes.

“You appreciate a good brandy, Lady Lee?”

“French is always the best,” she replied. “Despite it being Dutch courage.”

I laughed aloud. “You fought on the Continent too? There’s not many an English soldier who knows that term, let alone a lady.”

Her look was guileless. “I have my sources.” And then she turned serious. “If you are the king’s favoured commander, you must hold his thoughts, Colonel Wilmot. Does he dare risk a prolonged war against his own people?”

That was my hidden concern too. How could I explain this inexplicable man and his God-driven cause? “He does not see it as a war against his people, but a war for God. If his divine right to rule is usurped by radicals who wish to enact laws without the king, then the country descends into anarchy.”

“My relative John Hutchinson would say that the king enacts laws without a thought to his citizens’ well-being.” Lady Lee turned to check on the train in tight formation behind us and nodded in approval.

I followed her gaze, appreciating again the fine horses and bulging packs of weaponry. “Mr. Hutchinson sounds radical. Does he not trust the king to look to the welfare of his subjects?”

“No more so than my mother-in-law entrusts me to raise my sons in her beliefs. Lady Wortley thinks her grandchildren should grow up free to write their own laws and not pledge blind obedience to a papist king. She is convinced the king must obey his Parliament, for only they speak on behalf of the people.”

Curious. I wondered why Apsley thought he could depend on Lady Lee to keep her supplies to the king’s army secret when she evidently spouted Parliamentary credo. “So Ditchley Park is for Parliament? You must be conflicted, madam, when your cousin Apsley called upon you to give arms to the king.”

“Ditchley Park is for my children, my husband’s heirs,” she responded. “My late husband’s mother is a close friend of the Earl

of Essex and categorically supports Parliament's grievances. It is under her protection that I remain."

"And yet . . ." I glanced back at Apsley. "And yet it seems you are close to your cousin. And there is no greater Royalist than he."

"Loyalties lie where the heart directs," she replied. "And the heart is a fickle organ." She settled the hat back over her face and pulled the jacket around her shoulders.

The rest of the hour we rode in silence. Her words prompted me to think of times I rarely recalled . . . The battles I had fought. The spell I spent in the Tower. The empty chair by my own hearth where my dead wife once sat. I recoiled from the memory. I'd successfully kept that image buried with her. Why the hell did I think of her now? No need to revisit my sorrow.

And Lady Lee? I had no knowledge of her thoughts. She kept a close countenance. And yet I caught her looking at me with those searching eyes more than once. And when our glances did collide, we both quickly looked ahead again.

The land rolled to the distant horizon, the moon now shining over a patchwork of fields and forests. Farmers slept undisturbed by our intrusion, oblivious to our army fighting for their future, defending their faith. But for how long would this coverlet of ignorance cosset the earth?

My musing was broken by her words.

"We approach the boundary fence. My journey ends here. I return to my sons. You ride to battle."

She sprang down, tossed her horse's reins over its head and pulled on the gate latch. I don't know why, but I found myself dismounted and standing next to her. Apsley joined us.

"Thank you, Nan, with all my heart." He grasped her hands between his and then drew her into his arms. "Your generosity will make all the difference to us tomorrow—"

"— in the future," I interrupted. I didn't want her thinking we'd return the horses right away. Too valuable, too vital in this hasty mustering.

“Take care of yourself, Allen,” she replied. “And look out for Ned. He’s the better horseman, but you have your father’s military training.” Lady Lee reached up and kissed Apsley on his cheek. She turned to me.

I bowed. “Lady Lee, a pleasure to have made your acquaintance. I owe you much.”

She nodded. “You owe me nothing. I do this for the king. And Allen. Go to your men’s wars, your glorious fight. And remember the women left behind.”

Well, if she was going to be that ungrateful . . . I turned and mounted my horse. John Cary turned the lead over to Apsley and walked his horse to the shadow of a chestnut tree. Apsley arranged the men and horses in a troop and led them through the gate. I should follow, and yet something held me back.

And her too. She did not mount, but stood still, her face lit by the moon, her auburn hair springing from her high forehead, her hat removed.

“Good-bye, Lady Lee.” I swung my horse’s head and prepared to follow Apsley.

“Good-bye, Colonel Wilmot.” She turned. Did I hear the words “And God be with you”? I wasn’t certain. By the time I wheeled round, she’d slammed the bolt, swiftly stepped on the gate bar and mounted her horse. Still, I did not leave, and I watched her disappear back into Ditchley land until Apsley reminded me that we had several hours to ride before we met up with the king on the other side of Banbury. And between us were mustered five thousand enemy soldiers to avoid.

Edge Hill. Kinton. English village names. A fraughtsimple landmark. An ancient manor. And now blood-soaked and fraught with a new meaning. Battleground. Slaughterhouse.

England turned upon herself and consumed her own as the king and his fair young sons looked on from the high ridge above the plain.

Oh yes. I was battle-scarred and have fought since I can ever remember. That's why the king appointed me General of his Horse. Equal to Prince Rupert on the field. The troops trusted me; I could always coax the best from them.

I should have been glorying in our victory. We ploughed a furrow through the enemy trapped between the flanks of our cavalry and the thick hedgerows. They could not escape. We could not stop. A warhorse at full gallop, the way we rode, reins slack, sword extended? Once underway, there was no turning.

Not for men, horse nor cannon.

Except these were Englishmen. Horses bred on farms like mine. Cannon forged in the same foundry as the king's.

Englishmen. Slaughtered by my sword.

I picked my way through the dead and dying, the groans and shrieks of man and horse intermingled into a bloody hell of battlefield aftermath. I'd heard it all before. But not in English. Not an enemy pleading for help in an Oxfordshire accent, his words invoking my own village, my land.

My England.

I reached the pavilion pitched at the base of the hill, its colourful flags dull in the October twilight, the golden glow of candlelight a beacon in the dusk. Guards were posted at all corners; when I approached, they parted, let me through, faces solemn. I saluted abruptly. They had not seen the killing, but they knew their brethren had been slaughtered. Later they would walk the fields, searching for a brother lost, a dying cousin wrapped in Parliament's tawny sash.

The king sat at a long board, carpets draped over the rough wood, maps and documents spread carelessly about. A long fur mantle engulfed his slight figure. At the head of the table, Prince Rupert looked up as I entered, his hair plastered against his head, shirt untucked. He was as dishevelled as I had ever seen him.

The king's sons flanked Sir Edward Hyde, their protector throughout the day's engagement. Prince Charles caught my eye and smiled shyly. He was my favourite, a fine young man.

“Your Grace,” I knelt before them. “The Earl of Essex camps on the far edge of the plain. My spies tell me he is as exhausted as we are.”

The king gestured for me to stand. “You will charge again in the morning, Colonel Wilmot.”

I shook my head. “We are weary, Your Majesty. The foot soldiers have dispersed. The wounded are lying in the open fields with no protection against this freezing cold.”

He pulled his fur closer. “We have the advantage. We must finish them off.”

“Parliament’s reinforcements are arriving from across the county now,” I replied. “By tomorrow, they could be a thousand more strong.”

Prince Rupert picked up a red velvet jacket that had been thrown carelessly across the table and slid his arms into it. “Pish. Are you afraid of action, Wilmot?” The arrogance in his tone was intended to smite me, no doubt.

“I am concerned for my men’s safety, my lord.” I replied. “They are exhausted. And our numbers are sorely depleted. The battle is over, for I cannot run an army on fear.”

“Then they should learn courage through action, not sitting like old women around their fires.” Rupert paced the tent, his height and sanguinity filling the small space. The king gazed up at his cousin, admiration written all over his face. I disliked the braggart more today than any time in the previous engagements I had served with him. “Or would you prefer to stay with the women, Wilmot?”

*Bastard.*

Sir Edward Hyde moved to the king’s side. “Your Majesty, best we move toward London as soon as we can,” he said, glancing at me. He knew the real state of affairs. We needed to cut our losses and move forward. “We cannot risk defeat, and at this point we are the victors of this battle.”

“I’ll ride ahead now,” I jumped in. I didn’t know why I was so eager to leave. Normally I’d be drinking with my men, celebrating our victory. But tonight there was no room for both Rupert and me on the field. “We should head for Oxford, regroup

and replenish our supplies. And besides, we need a stronghold to store our plate and bounty. Oxford's colleges are loyal to our cause."

"You do not rest, Colonel Wilmot, or celebrate with your men?" The king stared at me.

"I would rather discover what lies ahead than relive what lies behind." I just wanted to be gone from this killing place, gather myself. I bowed again and stared at Sir Edward. He took the hint.

"Go set up the positions in Oxford, Henry," he said. "Find where we can rest, where you can billet your troops. We'll follow shortly."

"No," the king interrupted him. "Stop en route. Go to my palace at Woodstock, Colonel Wilmot. I would rest there with my sons, perhaps take in some hunting. Feast. Celebrate our victory and plan our next. Prince Rupert and I shall enjoy a few days at leisure before we engage again."

So the king intended to play while men died of their wounds in England's fields. I would have to be the one to care for my men, prepare Oxford to provision the army.

"I will ride to Woodstock, Your Majesty." I inclined my head, eager to leave. "And then on to Oxford." I did not meet Sir Edward's compassionate gaze. He and I knew we must protect the king. From himself as much as anything else.

I headed south toward Oxford, avoiding the lanes and well-travelled paths where the enemy might lay, their own men being equally weary and intent on finding a haven. From what I heard, the Earl of Essex's army had started leaving the field at sundown, and bands of soldiers now roamed the countryside between here and London, without command or direction as to where the next encounter might be.

Now I was clear of the battle, my mind emptied, for I gave myself up to my horse's rhythm. I'd switched to one of Lady Lee's, held in reserve by the king's tent, mine being exhausted from the fight.

I let his head drop and the reins loosen as we walked through the deep, cold night. A solitary bright star—Venus—hung as a lantern over the western sky. The moon had yet to rise. The land around me was still, holding its breath. I heaved a great sigh. Our skirmishes to date had been happenstance. A collision of armies on the move, accidental, even lackadaisical. This one, this Edge Hill, was structured. Swedish formation. Lined up as I recognised from every other bloody battle I had fought on the Continent.

An owl again, this time calling from a blasted oak as the moon finally rose and caught itself on a bare branch.

A blasted oak.

A dilapidated barn.

I was at the edge of Ditchley Park.

Whether by design or fortune, Lady Lee's horse had led me home.

I gave him his head, and he picked up his pace as we walked the track. By the time we crossed the pale, he was positively trotting, and as the outline of a considerable house appeared before me, he whickered and cantered into the gravel yard. I reined him quickly, hushing the sound of his hooves, and dismounted. A lad ran from the stable block and took the reins, smoothing the horse's nose, calming.

"Boy, send for Casey . . . Cary," I corrected myself. It was late, and a sudden deep weariness slithered across my shoulders. "Tell him a friend of Sir Allen Apsley seeks shelter tonight."

The boy gaped at me, shrugged and then walked the horse into a stall and disappeared. I was left standing in the well-maintained yard, not knowing why the hell I was here, but hoping I could pause on my journey. But if Cary took any longer, I would leave again.

"Colonel Wilmot," came a quiet voice behind me. I whirled around. I was losing my touch if a mere steward could surprise me.

"Mr. Cary." The horse had gone. I was committed to staying. "I travel on the king's business. He required me to head to Woodstock, which I understand is not far from here. I wonder if I

could beg upon your hospitality to rest a while and partake of victuals before I leave.”

Cary revealed no surprise at my midnight visit. “Of course. Come this way.” He turned to the house across the yard. As I fell into step by his side, he murmured, “You know, of course, that Lady Lee lives here in the household of her mother-in-law, Lady Wortley, Countess of Sussex. She is a devout follower of Parliament and reviles the king. We heard of the great battle at Edge Hill, that both armies now fan out across England, seeking enemies and allies alike. Your presence here is best kept secret, for it is not welcome. In fact, it is dangerous.”

I agreed. I still wasn’t clear why I found myself here when the king had commanded me to Woodstock.

Lifting his lantern higher, Cary’s eyes widened. I followed his gaze down my bloodstained leather jacket and grimaced. “Not mine,” I muttered.

He led me to an oak door concealed in an alcove, and we stepped into a marvellously warm kitchen, fragrant with cooking smells from a pot bubbling on the fire. The well-scrubbed table was stacked with pewter, and herbs hung from a drying rack. The hearth was wide and welcoming, with a bench on either side of the blackened brick. Cary gestured to me to sit and remove my hat. As I did so, he placed a cup of wine in my hand.

“Drink this and stay here,” he said quietly and left the room, leaving me alone with my thoughts and the crackling fire. Gradually, the discord of the battle died within me, and yet I observed myself as much as I inhabited my body. I would rest for an hour and depart for Woodstock.

A latch clicked. Cary slipped through the door, followed by Lady Lee. In the firelight, her hair glowed auburn, and her gown, wrapped securely, glistened like silver.

I jumped up, the bench scraping on the flagstone floor.

She greeted me with urgency in her voice. “Colonel Wilmot.”

“Lady Lee.” I set the empty wine cup on the table. “I apologise for arriving unannounced. I was on my way to Woodstock—”

“Where’s Allen? And my brother Ned?” Her face was white. “Please, have you news Colonel Wilmot?”

“Resting. At the king’s camp,” I was quick to reassure her. “No injuries. They hope to call upon you on their way to Oxford.”

She bowed her head for a moment, her lips moving in silent prayer. She crossed herself in the old way and glanced at Cary before speaking to me again.

“Colonel Wilmot, you do not realise the danger you have placed yourself in. We can offer you safety, but you must be concealed.” She turned to Cary. “Bring some stew, bread. And then hide him.”

“No need,” I assured her. “I do not intend to stay. I must be at Woodstock for the king’s arrival.”

She ignored me. “You look exhausted. Hide him well, Honest Cary, for my mother-in-law would as soon as turn in the king’s commander as blink. She’ll call the militia out immediately if she suspects him here.”

Cary approached the wood panelling where it joined the fireplace. He pressed a Tudor rose carved into the oak and slid his hand across the smooth surface. A click, and a hidden door swung open. Lighting a lantern with a taper from the fire, he gestured for me to follow him.

The priest hole yawned before me, a narrow space where a man’s shoulders could barely fit. The warmth from the chimney made it stuffy and close. As soon as I entered, the door shut and Cary lifted the lantern high. A narrow ladder before me ascended into darkness.

“Climb up and you will find a door at the top,” he whispered. “Press the panel and slide it to your left. You will find yourself in a secure chamber where you can rest.”

I hesitated. I would rather have slept in the decrepit barn and awoken free to leave than risk being trapped in a priest hole for days.

“Go,” Cary urged, “and I will bring food to you. I will tap twice on the door and turn the handle. But if you hear a sound that is not me, descend the ladder again and remain silent in this cabinet.”

He left the lantern on a shelf to light my way and departed. I climbed ten rungs in the musty darkness and reached the door, as he said. Pressing the panel, it slid open smoothly, and I found myself in a comfortable chamber with a large four-poster bed, a fire burning in the grate, and Lady Lee standing by a carved table. The walls glowed from the merry flames and a dozen or more candles on the mantelpiece. Heavy curtains were pulled across the windows. From outside, the room would appear uninhabited.

“Colonel Wilmot,” she began. “I appreciate you have sought haven here, and I would not turn you away, for Allen’s sake. But you cannot stay long, and you must remain hidden within this chamber. Lady Wortley is the most fervent supporter of Parliament, and while she lives in this house, we are under her rule.” She held out her hand. “Please remove your jacket, and I will ask Cary to clean the blood from it.”

The warmth of the chamber contrasted so much with the freezing night and bleak battlefield that I wondered if I had stumbled upon a dream world. Perhaps I was dead. Perhaps this was the heaven that soldiers went to.

“Thank you.” My words combatted my tiredness. I shrugged off the jacket and stood in my linen shirt and waistcoat.

Two taps on the door, and the handle turned. Lady Lee moved swiftly and opened it, taking from Cary a tray. She handed him my coat. I shut the door again while she placed the food on the table. A rich stew, a loaf of bread and a leather flask of wine. With two glasses.

“Allen has asked that I give shelter to any king’s man who requests haven.” Lady Lee busied herself pouring the wine and gestured to me to sit at the table while pulling up a chair of her own. “This old house has sheltered fugitives in the past when religion was the fuel and priests the defenders of the faith.”

“And now the king protects the faith against the incursions of the Puritans,” I replied.

She looked at me thoughtfully. “This battle, this fight you saw today. Did it come to much?”

I closed my eyes, but that did not vanquish the battlefield, blood pooling in the furrows, men and horses scattered in death heaps. I opened them again.

“As battles go, I’d say it was a serious engagement.”

She looked at me with puzzled eyes. “What does that mean? Were many killed?”

How to tell this woman there was no turning back from the carnage now?

War.

“Lady Lee,” I said as gently as I could, “Lady Lee, men died today. Many hundreds.”

She blanched but looked at me steadily.

“Perhaps even thousands,” I continued. “England has turned upon herself. And the conflict is anointed by the blood of its people, blessed by the presence of the king himself.”

“So war arrives.” Her words were soft, almost spoken to herself. “Thank God my sons are mere children, but my brothers are all for the king, my father too. My late husband and I were the lone supporters of his cause in this family . . .” Lady Lee stood, paced to the window and peered between the curtains, and then returned to the table and sat again.

I nodded. She obviously wanted to say more. I was eager to eat my stew and drink of the excellent malmsey. Especially at the cost of a Parliamentary wine cellar.

“Lady Wortley despises my own family, the St. Johns of Lydiard Tregoze,” she continued. “They are Royalists to their last drop of blood. She does not resist reminding me at every opportunity.”

“So leave,” I said through a mouthful of excellent venison. “Return to your father’s house at Lydiard. Find a new husband.” Usually a solution a woman would be happy with.

“I do not run away from my duties,” she shot back at me. “If I am to stay here to instruct my sons in their father’s memory, secretly and against Lady Wortley’s will, then I will do so with all

my heart.” She pulled her robe closer, tossed her head. “Besides, I find Lydiard a dull place. I would die of boredom. And if I leave Ditchley or marry again, I will be cut from my husband’s estate and left impoverished.”

I continued eating. The heat from the fireplace thawed my frozen body; the warmth from the malmsey warmed my spirit.

Lady Lee took a sip of her own wine. “Allen says the king is intent on his divine right to rule. Which means without Parliament or any man guiding him.” Her face grew serious. “And he’s prepared to die to defend that right.”

“He’s prepared for his army to die,” I replied. “We fight to protect him and the rights of his sons. England has always had a monarchy. And so it must remain.”

Somehow my voice cracked on the last words. She glanced at me sharply. “You do not believe?”

“I am laying down my life for that belief.” Anger bubbled that she should question my loyalty. “And slaughtering my own countrymen to uphold England’s law.”

In the empty space following my words, where the battlefield dead crowded my thoughts, only the hissing fire broke the silence. Above my head, a creak as a timber settled, reminding me I was hidden within the heart of a Parliamentary household. Anyone could discover me.

She caught my thoughts. “This was different, wasn’t it? This was different than any other battle you’ve fought before.”

I shrugged, refilled my wineglass.

“Allen says this confrontation will demand more of us than we could have imagined,” she continued.

“Women need to do very little except wait at home for their men to return,” I replied, pushing away the thought that no one waited for me.

“Or not,” she shot back.

“Or not.” I acknowledged. “Did your husband ever go to war on the Continent, Lady Lee?” She spoke as if from experience, and yet I had not come across the Baronet Lee in any of my Oxfordshire troops.

She investigated her wineglass, talking half to herself rather than to me. “We married when I was but sixteen. We lived a joyful life here and at our home in London. We have two fine young sons. And then the smallpox claimed him.”

A familiar story. “I am sorry, Lady Lee.” I paused, for I did not often speak of this. “My wife also died of the smallpox. While I was in Flanders. I did not have the chance to say good-bye to her.” And have never forgiven myself these three years since.

She lifted her eyes. “And your children?”

I shook my head. “We have none.” She had lost babies, never carried one to full term. Except one, a stillborn son. I cleared my throat, angry at the thickness that choked my windpipe. We’d mourned that child together. I’d promised her there would be more in our future, healthy boys to inherit my land, my father’s title. And they never came. I had not returned when I’d promised, the battles of men taking me from my duties as a husband. And in turn, God had stolen her from me.

Outside in the yard, a cock crowed, and I crossed to the window, parted the heavy drape. Black as pitch still, but the rooster knew dawn approached.

“Sleep for an hour,” Lady Lee urged and pulled the cover from the bed. “At dawn’s first light, you can be on your way again. Lady Wortley breaks her fast in her room, and you will be able to leave well before she rises.”

“I would not put you in danger,” I replied, but in truth the bed beckoned, for such weariness came upon me I could barely lift my head.

“No danger,” Lady Lee replied. “You are well hidden. Rest. I will see Cary has your jacket ready and a fresh horse.” She paused at the door. “Thank you, Colonel Wilmot, for your courage today. I feel it will be much needed in the coming weeks.”

She left and the room emptied. Did the fire then dim and the room grow colder? *Ridiculous*. This was no time for fancies. I stared at her vacant chair and then threw myself down on the bed and closed my eyes.

“Wake, Colonel Wilmot.” An urgent shaking on my shoulder and a whispered hiss startled me, and I bolted from the bed, reaching for my sword. Sunshine flooded the room from a crack between the curtains, lighting John Cary’s pale face.

“Good God, man, it is way past dawn,” I turned on him angrily. “How could you let me sleep—”

“Shhh.” He held up his hand and pulled the curtain slightly, gesturing for me to join him at the window.

I peered down and quickly pressed myself back against the wall. A troop of Parliamentarians wearing the Earl of Essex’s colours gathered in the courtyard below. Christ on the Cross, I should never have stayed.

Above my head, footsteps tapped on the floorboards.

“Lady Wortley rises,” Cary whispered. “She will want to welcome the troop, hear for herself the outcome of the battle. You must hide.” He hurried me towards the closet by the fireplace, from whence we had climbed up the previous night. Swinging open the door, he pushed the panel at the back of the closet and it slid sideways, revealing a yawning black hole that I knew led to the precipitous ladder.

“The tray. The remains of our food.” I turned. “The chamber pot.”

Cary nudged me forward. “Get in. I’ll dispose of them. Stay quiet until I come for you. You’ll find a candle and flint on a shelf by the top of the stairs. Do not step far, or you will fall.” And with that, I was fully in the priest hole, and the panel shut firmly behind me. To anyone outside the room, I did not exist.

I could not say how long I hid; after fumbling for the candle and lighting it briefly, there was no point in keeping it burning beyond guiding my way down the ladder. Better I waited at the bottom than the top, for if I needed to run, I should be prepared the moment the kitchen panel opened. The space was cramped, no more than a shaft where a man could stand, wedged between the bricks of the chimney and the framing of the house. The air was stale; I stood

and then squatted on my haunches and stood again. This was no space for a lengthy stay, just temporary concealment.

From the other side of the panel came the clash of pots in the kitchen and the chatter of the cook and scullery maids. And suddenly deeper voices, the pounding of hobnail boots on flagstones.

I braced, my hand on my sword, pressed against the chimney wall. Essex's men were in the kitchen. If I was to be discovered, I would take out as many as I could with me.

The dark enveloped me, and I grew warm from the fire on the other side of the brick. The men's voices rose and fell, and I guessed they were questioning the staff, asking if any stray Royalist had sought refuge at Ditchley, been given shelter, a spare horse. Dear God, I hoped the stable boy did not reveal his encounter with me last night. A clash of boots again, and then quiet.

Another hour or two or three passed. My legs cramped. My shoulders stiffened. And worse, my mind kept straying to our conversation last night. Her eyes in the firelight. Her auburn hair, pulled back from her smooth skin.

Ye Gods, I was hungry.

Dizzy.

Thirsty.

Her words echoed in my thoughts.

Who was this woman, this enigmatic widow who challenged my views, who bravely deceived her mother-in-law to hide a king's man and secretly raised her sons in the king's cause in defiance of family beliefs?

She intrigued me. And bothered me.

I needed to get to Woodstock. This diversion could cost me plenty. The king would expect me to have the palace alerted, beds aired, meals prepared for himself and Rupert, the young princes. God damn this delay. What did I know? He'd asked a soldier to do a steward's job. But I would remain loyal, serve the princes, ensure those precious boys were safe.

A rustling on the panel, and I clasped my sword again. There was not room to draw within the hole, but I would charge out running.

“Colonel Wilmot,” Cary’s voice filtered through the crack as it opened. I blinked in the daylight. “It’s safe to leave, but I cannot predict when more might arrive. You must go now.”

“Lady Lee—” I would see her before I left.

“—is with Lady Wortley, the last I heard. At the front of the house. Keeping her attention away from here.” Cary pressed upon me my jacket and hat, pushed me through the kitchen, opened the sturdy door and peered out. “Essex’s men have gone. For now.”

We walked briskly across the courtyard, my legs welcoming the stretch. The sun approached midafternoon. As we drew near the stables, Cary gave a low whistle. The boy appeared immediately, leading a muscled bay. I had to give Lady Lee her due. She maintained a high-quality stable.

“Woodstock is back the way you came,” Cary directed as I mounted. It was good to be on horseback, in familiar territory. “Go along the track, across the pale, and look for the oak tree and barn again. Turn south. You will meet up with the Woodstock road after three miles.”

I wheeled around, touched my hand to my hat. “Thank you, Mr. Cary. And please convey my gratitude to Lady Lee.”

His face brightened at her name. “God’s Speed, Colonel Wilmot. And I will tell her.”

Ditchley Park rolled before me, its rich land and valuable woods confirming the wealth of the Lee family. My own family’s land, twenty miles to the north, had been well neglected since my father’s sojourn in Ireland. But I could hardly expect Viscount Wilmot of Athlone to spend time in Oxfordshire when he had an entire county to run. Someday I would be expected to inherit the estate, do my duty by my tenants. Someday. When the war was won and life returned to normal.

I surveyed the landscape, aware I might encounter the enemy at any moment and yet confident that Ditchley would stand a secret haven for the king's allies. Now, more than ever, we would need these safe houses. And if Lady Lee could create one in the heart of a nest of Parliamentarians, where better?

I rode a while longer, thoughts of how best to bring this network together preoccupying me, returning me to the world of war. Sir Edward would know. His capabilities lay in schemes and designs, secret letters and undercover disguises.

A Royalist underground network.

And Ditchley Park would serve as the model.

Another half mile and I would cross Ditchley's boundary. I could just see the outline of the barn, the burnt oak etched against the sky.

Time to face forward. Ride on to Woodstock. Prepare the royal hunting lodge for the king and his sons. Perhaps take Prince Charles for a hunt. He was a boy I could love, pretend he was my missing son. I fought for him and his future as much as the destiny of his father.

The sun was now sinking behind the barn, dazzling my eyes as I turned west, creating deep shadows before the derelict building.

Where a horse cropped the grass and a rider stood still.

I slowed to a walk.

And met her at the boundary gate.

"No disguise today, Lady Lee?"

She smiled up at me. "No, Colonel Wilmot. Today you see me as I truly am."

"You risked much for me."

"And I would again," she replied. "I could not let you leave without my blessing."

I looked off to the distance, towards Woodstock and the king.

"And I will not leave without promising you a return." I smiled, and I thought she responded to me too. "I am in your debt, Lady Lee. For the horses, the guns . . . and my life."

“So keep yourself safe, and do not be captured,” she replied. “For I may not pay your ransom.”

I laughed. “You may have no need to pay my ransom if instead you capture my heart.”

She reached out then and pressed a scrap of lace into my hand, a favour such as ladies gave to knights.

“Ditchley will always be here for you,” she said. “And for Allen, my brothers, your men. We stand for the king. Hold that close to your heart, Colonel Wilmot. And return safely.”

And now came the time I would not share with any woman, for this was man’s war, in all its brutality and ruthless slaughter. Oh, I hosted the king at Woodstock, hunted stag with Prince Charles, drank the night away with Rupert. We secured Oxford for the Royalists, stored plate and money and jewels in the colleges for safekeeping. Parliament could hold London and its pox-ridden streets. We owned Oxford and kept the whole southwest under our watchful eye.

By December, when the first snowfall settled like patchwork on the gentle Cotswold hills and the weather set in for the winter, we were chasing through the counties after bands of soldiers, attacking them in spontaneous incursions and hedgerow warfare. No fields of battle, no Swedish formations, just hand-to-hand, horse-to-horse combat wherever we stumbled upon the enemy.

And then came Marlborough.

A sleepy market town whose only crime on that December morning was welcoming country people for the Goose Fair. While I was at Edge Hill and Powick, killing England’s roundheads, these people had gone about their business, governed by the ancient holidays and traditions. Until we brought the war to Marlborough’s crowded streets.

There they were, women, children, granddames. Slaughtered as they covered by men of war. Roundheads and Cavaliers. Royalists and Parliamentarians. Whatever our label, we owned the

carnage that day. And for what? To claim a piece of land. A piece of English land. For England.

Land.

The tempest that followed was the worst I had experienced since I sailed the Biscayne Bay, and all knew that storm-ridden sea attracted the most of hideous of weather. As I rode through the wind-swept, darkened streets, my horse's hooves slipping on mingled rain and blood, all I could pray was that the rain would sink those who struggled for their last breath, lying in the ditches and gutters. Death by drowning would be less painful than stuffing your own guts back into your belly.

My troop had found shelter in the Crown, a friendly coaching inn on the road to Swindon. I joined them in the taproom, and as the landlord brought food, I caught a name whispered at the next table.

"Lydiard Tregoze. It's a pretty prize."

I turned cautiously. Two men I did not recognize. Cavaliers, by their dress, and yet there was a wariness about them which made me think they weren't comfortable in their surroundings.

"A house loyal to the king," muttered one, oblivious to my gaze.

"Until we get there," replied the other. "I heard there's just an old man left in a big house on his own. We'll make ourselves welcome and then help ourselves to his wealth."

Lydiard. Lady Lee's childhood home. These men were not Royalists. I slowly turned my head back and concentrated on my food while my ears strained to hear their words. They mumbled a conversation I could not catch, and then a scraping as they pushed back their stools on the flagstones.

"Mr. Smith and his men will meet us along the Swindon road." The tallest one pushed his way past our table, his words falling behind him. "And then on to Lydiard."

I let them leave the inn and then gathered my gloves and hat.

"Enough food, and we'll drink later," I ordered my men. "Five of you, now, ride with me. We have a task ahead. Who knows this county?"

“My family farms at Wroughton,” said one. “I know this land well.”

“Captain Sheppard. Good.” I grabbed a chicken leg, stuffed bread in my pocket. “And Lydiard? How far from here?”

He nodded. “Lord St. John’s house? An hour, less if we travel the carters’ tracks.”

“Four more of you. We ride now, the fastest route. We should secure Lydiard before they arrive.”

And out into the storm we went again, where now the tracks through the valleys were hock-deep in mud in places, and yet still we pushed hard into the night.

Sheppard led us through a deep forest and across a flooded stream before pausing at a fence. A windmill stood guard, a grey sentinel against the storm. “Lydiard Park begins here,” he said. “And we travel along the fence line to avoid the ha-ha ditch. We’ll come upon the house in a mile or so.”

Following him, we picked our way through the wood. There was no sign of the Roundheads, and I surmised they had ridden to their assignation in Swindon before heading here. As we left the trees behind, parkland stretched before us to the foot of a gracious house. The driving rain did not make it easy to see, but it appeared similar to Ditchley, and the stable and service block stretched the whole length of its bowling green. All the windows were dark, and on this storm-tossed night, no candle burned a welcome.

“We line up here,” I told my men. “In formation. They will not be expecting us. And if I read them correctly, they will not know how to fight.”

In the pouring rain we waited, and as time passed I allowed myself to think of the girl who lived here once, who found it dull, who yearned to leave. And refused to come back. And then of her brother, fighting with Apsley in the east. And her other brothers who had followed the king to Cirencester, Edge Hill.

*Ditchley is safe for you and my brothers, she had said to me.*

*Well, I will save Lydiard for you, Lady Lee.*

“They come.” The man to my left gathered his reins. I glanced along the line. My troop was ready. From the woods came a cluster of riders, maybe a half dozen, haphazard and riding here and there. No leader, no organisation.

My men drew their swords, and the rain poured down, drenching the blades, running like blood down the hilts.

They were almost upon us when they caught sight of us, and instead of turning tail and running, the idiots must have pissed vinegar that night, for they attempted to charge.

I gave the signal, and with one pace we lunged forward. We showed them what a charge was on the bowling green in front of Lydiard, and from the clash of metal and screams, they soon knew they were lost. One fell, and the rest turned and disappeared into the woods.

As skirmishes went, it was over before it began. Roused by the clash of swords and shouts, the men of Lydiard stumbled forth from the service wing: an aged gardener, perhaps, two stable boys still wet behind the ears. I gestured to my men to head to the service wing, dry off, get some food. And as I walked toward the house entry, the door opened and a man stood there, another aged servant at his side. A single candle burned in a lantern.

“My Lord St.John,” I called as I approached, the gravel crunching beneath my boots, the rain still hammering on my shoulders. Dear God, what a night. “I am a friend of your family, Henry Wilmot.”

His servant lifted the lantern higher, and Lord St.John beckoned me in. “Mr. Wilmot,” his voice was quiet, well-spoken. “I owe you a great deal. I observed from the window your clash with the ruffians. I fear without you Lydiard would have been in grave danger.” He welcomed me, his hand out. “What possessed you to be here?”

I gratefully stepped inside and shook the rain from my cloak. The servant took it and my rather battered hat. I suddenly realised that I appeared a little unkept, not having seen a barber for many days. I smoothed my beard and hair as best as I could. For some reason, Lady Lee’s father made me anxious.

“Loose lips overheard in a tavern,” I replied. “When I was at Ditchley Park, Lady Lee told me of Lydiard. It’s not a name forgotten easily.”

He smiled at her mention. “You know my daughter? Then I am most grateful to Nan. My strong-willed girl. She left Lydiard in haste to be married. I am heartened that she did not forget us. Perhaps one day she will return.”

I did not tell him of her feelings, her plans to never come back.

“Will you take a respite, Mr. Wilmot? Your men will be well cared for by my steward.” He nodded at the man at his side. “Surely you will stay a while?”

“Thank you, but no. I must be at Oxford, for the king awaits news.” If I stayed, I would be tempted to ask all sorts of questions about his daughter. And the last thing I needed was further preoccupation.

“I understand. My own sons rarely stay now. They ride for the king and never return.” He gestured to a bench in the hall, ordered his steward to bring me wine and a plate of food. “Rest for a moment.”

He lit other lanterns and briefly disappeared through a hallway. I drank a glass of good wine and ate the bread and cheese. My interrupted dinner at the Crown Inn seemed a long time ago.

Returning with a paper in his hand, Sir John pressed it into mine.

“A letter. For Nan.” He said. “For if you travel to Oxford, it is a short diversion to pause at Ditchley Park.”

I started to protest and then looked at his face. It was lined, creased with worry. And the quiet house closed around me.

He caught my thought. “I miss her. Any opportunity to get a letter through I would seize with gratitude in these difficult times.”

I tucked the missive inside my jacket in a hidden pocket. I would ride to Oxford, send his letter with a messenger when I arrived. I had no need to visit Ditchley again.

“Very well.” Standing, I held out my hand. “My thanks, Sir John, for your hospitality.”

“Nothing to thank me for, Mr. Wilmot. Your actions saved Lydiard from those louts tonight. I am the one to thank you.”

“You should establish a guard, for this will happen again,” I replied. “These times are unpredictable.”

“Indeed.” He bowed and turned back to his darkened rooms.

The steward handed me my cloak, brushed dry from the worst of the rain. I thanked him again. If I was going to be in Oxford by tomorrow, I must leave now, ride through the rest of the night.

I told my men to travel on their way after resting. They were well cared for, and they deserved a good night’s sleep. I would find mine after I returned to court.

The rain had finally ceased, and a watery moon sailed through the ragged clouds. Once past Swindon, the way to Oxford was clear, and I rode through sleeping villages at a good pace. I was the only one about in the dark night, and my thoughts revolved around the campaigns ahead. And yet Sir John’s words repeated in my thoughts as I planned our strategy.

*My sons ride for the king and never return.*

*She left Lydiard in haste.*

*Perhaps one day . . .*

I groaned aloud. And as I approached the Oxford turn, I looked towards the city. No faint light of dawn in the eastern sky, just blackness in this long winter’s night.

Truthfully, I still had a few hours before the king expected me.

No harm to deliver a lonely father’s letter to the daughter he missed so much.

This time I walked my horse across the park and approached the house from the front. Its arms were open, for it was of the old queen’s style, two wings to enfold a center courtyard, an E in her

honour. I paused for a moment, studied this peaceful scene. A candle flickered in a downstairs window.

I dismounted and walked forward, leaving my horse tied to a post by the eastern wing. Drawn like a moth to a flame, I edged to the side of the window and peered in. Such a scene, for Lady Lee sat by herself, staring into the fire, her sewing lying untouched on her lap. Her hair was in a thick plait over her shoulder, her silvery gown shimmering in the firelight.

And a candle burned in the window.

I didn't know how long I stood there, watching her, drinking in the peaceful scene. But I knew somewhere deep inside my pain was cauterised. Perhaps I was fighting for something more important than men in their council chambers arguing over men's rights to decide men's futures.

She turned then and stared at the window. She could not have seen me, for the darkness was all-concealing. But something drew her to the glass, and she crossed the room, lifting the candle high, placing her palm on the pane.

I stepped forward and placed my hand over hers, and she started in surprise. But not shock. She gazed at me, our hands together, separated only by the glass. And then she put a finger to her lips, placed the candle back on the sill and disappeared.

The moment had passed.

I left the window to walk back to the stable block, deliver the letter and be on my way.

Until the front door opened.

"Colonel Wilmot," she called, her voice velvet in the night. "You have returned to Ditchley."

I hesitated.

"Come, come inside." She held out her hand. "I have waited for news."

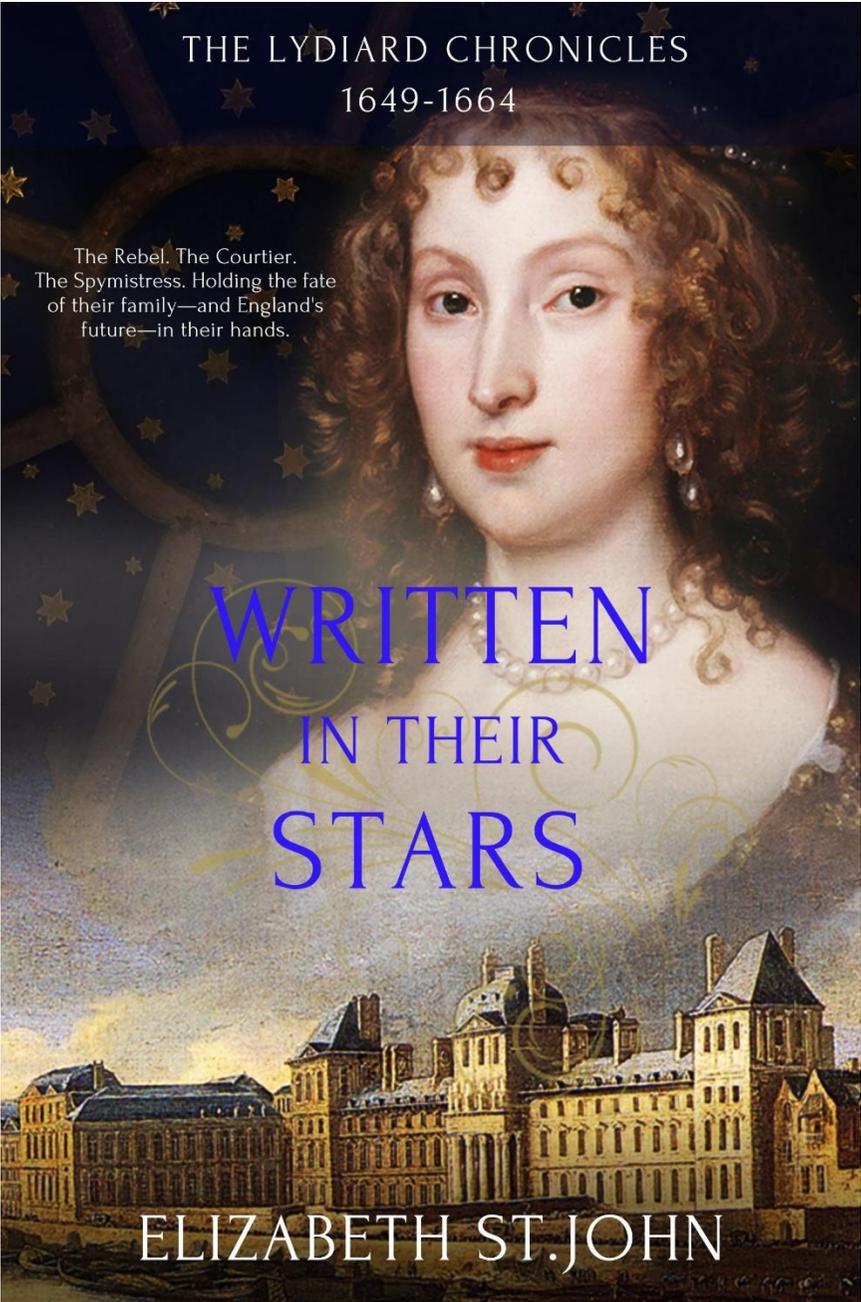
"I will not stay," I mumbled. "I am just here to deliver a letter to you."

I reached into my hidden pocket and withdrew the letter. With it, a tiny scrap of lace fluttered to the floor.

She broke the silence first, glancing at the letter and then up at me. “This is from my father?” Her eyes were puzzled. The lace lay between us, a white flag against the dark wood. “And you returned.”

“But not to stay,” I insisted.

“Take off that ridiculous hat and come inside.” She took my hand, hers soft and enfolding mine, and drew me into the light.



THE LYDIARD CHRONICLES

1649-1664

The Rebel. The Courtier.  
The Spymistress. Holding the fate  
of their family—and England's  
future—in their hands.

WRITTEN  
IN THEIR  
STARS

ELIZABETH ST. JOHN

For further reading, please enjoy this extract from the award-winning best-seller, *Written in Their Stars*

# Written in Their Stars

The Lydiard Chronicles | 1649-1664

ELIZABETH ST.JOHN

## Nan

Nan Wilmot stood at Allen's side, charged by her husband to witness the king's execution, pinned to the barrier by the silent crowd, frozen in place by London's stunned citizens and the bitter January weather. No matter she wore her favourite sables, for no luxury could thaw her heart.

"Do not flinch, darling Nan, do not turn your head when the axe falls, for fall it doubtless will," Henry had written in cypher from his exile with Prince Charles in Paris. "Even at this late date, the prince denies to himself they will dare to execute his father. You must stand strong and capture every moment. What he says, when he kneels, how he lays his head on the block. Listen for his words and look into his eyes. And when the deed is done, dip your handkerchief in his gore, for his is the blood of a martyr. One day, my dearest wife, you will travel here and tell us how the prince's father died."

So upon Henry Wilmot's encrypted orders, Nan fixed her eyes on this hellish scene.

Parliament's troops stood ten deep in front of the scaffold, crowding the entrance to King Street—how ironic the name—facing them down, horses skittish, men taut. To walk against this sullen horde was nigh impossible.

She would not move. Not even if Oliver Cromwell himself commanded. And Lord knew she'd challenged him a few times, whether he recognized her defiance or not.

She sniffed.

He may consider her a simpering lady of the manor, a grieving widow, a distracted bride marrying his greatest enemy. The Protector's God would not credit a woman the brain to think beyond planning the next dinner. Let him be content with that ruse all day long.

As before in these difficult war years, her cousin stood by her, as handsome as ever, his shoulders broad under his leather overcoat, his dark hair curling over the collar. But no light in his cloud-grey

eyes for her today. This morning Allen had brought his pretty wife, turned out in her fur-trimmed crimson wool. No sad Puritan colours for this beauty, casting aside even a linen cap in favour of a demure little hat tipped fashionably over her forehead. Frances Petre, of Devon. A family of the old religion, favourites at the court of King Charles the First of England and the Catholic Queen Henrietta.

“What’s keeping them?” Nan hissed at Allen. “Where is the king? Where is the executioner? Where is John? Is he standing on the roof with the other commissioners?”

Allen remained silent. As he had been all morning. His wife opened her mouth to speak for him. Nan turned away.

London’s citizens surrounded them, the brittle morning laden with sorrow and disbelief. She could not turn, pressed as she was, but the back of Nan’s neck ached with the burden of a hundred thousand eyes fixed in her direction. Never had she witnessed such a pouring of humanity from the alleys and streets. A steady tramp of footsteps, but no words, no talk. Dark clothes against a granite sky, snow threatening again. Ice hid treacherously between the cobbles, frost bruising her feet despite her elegant calfskin boots and warm silk stockings.

She looked up at Allen, his fine profile chiseled against the lowering clouds. “You’ve seen executions before. God knows when you and Luce grew up in the Tower of London, your father’s governance made you no stranger to the scaffold.”

He turned to her, his eyes blank.

She read his thoughts, as only she could.

Today was different. Today, their king was to be slaughtered.

Nan dragged her eyes from Allen to the face of the Banqueting House. A curious location. Here their family had made merry with the court. Enjoyed the masques so beloved by the king and queen. The name of the last one Nan performed in? The Triumph of Peace? How ironic. And here Aunt Barbara Villiers had encouraged their carousing under the masterpiece ceiling of Rubens, glorifying the king’s father, James Stuart, the Sixth of Scotland, First of England, First of Great Britain.

How the ghosts mocked their mood today.

The king's cause lost. God save the army and the Parliament.  
Did Allen remember those times?

"Do you recall the winter we danced here every night in the queen's entertainments, when John courted Luce?" Surely, he remembered. He must, for Allen and her brother Edward were inseparable then, and Whitehall had been their palace.

He faced forward still. "And Edward is dead and the king-killers compel Charles to walk his last under his painted ceiling." His voice broke. "Where his father looks down as the guard escorts him to heaven."

God Almighty. Was there no end to this commission's cruelty that they made each last moment on earth a sword-thrust in itself?

And now death, the ultimate Lord of Misrule, commanded her to change partners in the masque. Nan would take his bony hand and dance his volta. She cared not who she cavorted with, simply that she survive to the dance's end.

King. Parliament. King. Parliament. Turn.

Before the Banqueting House, in the direction of Charing, a wooden stage jutted from a tall open window. Nan forced herself to look to the platform, draped in black cloth so at his last the king would have his privacy. Only God and those who leaned on high from the windows and roofs would witness his final breath.

"The executioner. The executioner." A whisper shivered through the crowd, buoyed by shuffling as the people stepped forward as one.

There appeared the axe-man, with felt hat pulled over his masked eyes. Nan could not see the block. Thank God, for they must have built it low. At least death would come quick, the king prone, neck exposed for the axe's blow.

And there, crowded at the windows, were the murderers, the men who had signed, whose stroke of a pen was the stroke of an axe, the stroke of death.

There, somewhere, stood Colonel John Hutchinson. With the other king-killers.

And behind him, high in the spectator's balcony under the painted ceiling, watching with eager eyes, his wife, Allen's sister, her beloved cousin Luce.

Did she realize at this moment how John's signature was about to change the world?

Of course she did. Luce had written of the necessity for England's liberty from the god-king for years.

Nan's eyes met Frances's, who stared back at her and gathered Allen tightly to her side. His mouth formed a silent prayer. Was it for the king's soul, or John's? Nan could not surmise.

"The king. The king comes." Next to her a woman sobbed. Nan bit back her own tears.

And now appeared the king, dignified and delicate of stature, with his attendant bishop, and the star of George twinkling on his doublet. The anonymous crowd reduced to the mourners around her. A soldier with silent tears running ragged down his battle-scarred face. A woman clutching a child, holding him aloft to witness. A baby crying, and yet such silence.

The king's lips moved, and Nan strained to hear the words.