Edwards Eve. The Other Countess - part 3

Will watched her go with regret. His attraction to the dark-haired lady with her execrable embroidery had taken him by surprise. She’d been laughing at his brothers – that was what had done it. Her eyes had sparkled with humour, her smiling lips just begging for a kiss.

Will sighed. He was here on serious business and could not afford to be distracted.

James scratched his chest and yawned. ‘Who was she, Will?’

‘I’m not entirely sure. A connection of Mountjoy’s.’

‘Money?’

Will shrugged.

‘Oh well, with our luck she’ll either be already taken or penniless,’ James said philosophically.

‘She’s lovely, like a spring morning.’

James gave a mock shudder. ‘Spare us – write her the sonnet, but don’t try it out on me.’

Will rubbed his close-trimmed beard. He was rather proud that he was now of an age where he could sport one. ‘I think she might like a poem. She had ink on her fingers.’

‘An educated female – the good lord defend us from that unnatural tribe.’

‘Careful, James. Remember whose court this is.’

James was not so reckless as to dig a deeper hole for himself. They might not think they were overheard but, as the lady had just proved, they could take nothing for granted. One whisper in the Queen’s ear against them and they would be out in the cold. ‘So if she’s not eligible, what are you going to do about the lovely little lady?’

‘I’ve just this moment met her, Jamie. Your thoughts are running away with you as usual.’ Will handed over the feather and continued walking.

‘You could set her up as your mistress. A prime piece like that won’t stay unclaimed for long: if you don’t, someone else will.’

‘I’m here to find a wife, not a leman.’

‘Then you don’t mind if I try for her?’ James expertly ducked the blow he knew he had coming.

‘You don’t go near her.’

‘Like that is it?’

‘Oh, shog off, Jamie.’

‘Yes, my lord.’

Tobias was waiting for them by the steps to Lord Burghley’s private apartments. All three Laceys were intrigued to know why Elizabeth’s most trusted adviser sought this meeting. Among his many responsibilities, Burghley was Master of the Court of Wards, which meant he administered the Lacey estate until Will reached his majority at twenty-one. He doubtless enriched himself by creaming off some of the profits from his ward’s income, as was the accepted practice for a placeholder at court. Burghley was a man to keep happy as to be on the wrong side of him was tantamount to losing the Queen’s favour.

A clerk ushered Will into the inner sanctum, bidding his brothers remain outside. Will entered the brightly lit room, finding Burghley standing in a commanding position by the window, dressed in rich black velvet robes trimmed with gold buttons. A small ruff fitted snugly under his mink brown beard. A cluster of white hairs sprouted at each corner of his mouth, reminding Will of cat’s whiskers, alert and twitching for the presence of vermin nibbling away at the fabric of the kingdom. Dark eyes surveyed the young earl, weighing, judging and, fortunately, not dismissing him.

‘My Lord Burghley.’

‘Dorset. Good to see you at court.’ Burghley gestured to a chair, taking his position behind his desk. Behind him on the wall was Saxton’s new map of England and Wales, the first ever to show accurately the Queen’s domains. Will’s eye was drawn briefly to the spot on the Thames occupied by his own lands, lying just south of the centre of the chart and not that many miles from Windsor. ‘How did you leave your lovely mother?’

‘The countess is well, sir.’

‘But she’s not come with you?’

They hadn’t been able to afford the clothing for more than himself and his brothers. As Burghley probably knew, his mother and sister would have to wait until the family fortunes improved. But still the polite dance had to be performed.

‘Not this year, sir. She prefers the quiet of the country.’

Amusement flickered in Burghley’s eyes. ‘That’s not the lady I knew in her youth.’

‘Age mellows us all.’

Burghley smiled at that. ‘Not all, young man, not all. I do not believe the Lady Dorset would ever mellow.’ He picked up a decanter standing on the desk and poured two small glasses of red wine, pushing one towards Will. A good sign. If he had fallen foul of canny Lord Burghley, he surely would not be offered refreshment?

Unless it was poisoned.

Will dismissed that wild thought. He’d been watching too many plays.

‘I expect you are wondering why I requested that you call on me.’

‘Yes, sir.’ Will sipped, relieved to find no suspicious aftertaste.

‘I’m always on the hunt for good men, Dorset, and reports about you have been favourable.’ He waved negligently to the pile of papers on his left-hand side. ‘Steady, making sensible steps to restore your family’s wealth, loyal. In short, a fine young man. Your father would’ve been proud of you.’

Will swallowed the bitterness that he always felt when the last earl was mentioned.

‘Thank you, sir.’

‘The Queen is, as you well know, the fount of all favour at her court, and doubtless you are here to win her regard, but I do have some discretion to employ people under my own aegis.’

Will’s ears pricked up. ‘Sir?’

‘How is the land around Lacey Hall at this time? Quiet? No sign of Catholic agents?’

‘No, sir.’

‘The families of the old persuasion not brewing trouble?’

This was trickier. Will did not like to be put in the position of telling tales on his neighbours.

‘None that I am aware of, sir.’ Which was true. Old Dame Holton’s adamant rejection of the new ways in the parish church was a matter of local interest only, and no threat to any but the vicar’s peace of mind.

‘Good, good, that chimes with the other reports I have received. What would you say if I asked you to be my eyes and ears in Berkshire?’

Will swallowed. ‘I … er … would count it an honour to serve the Queen in any capacity Her Majesty wishes.’

‘This is my wish, Dorset. And I’m not asking you to betray the foibles of your friends and neighbours; I have no time to police everyone’s conscience. I am requesting that you keep any questionable characters under surveillance and report any treasonous behaviour to me.’

Put like that, Will could hardly refuse. ‘Well, of course, sir.’

Burghley held his wine up to the window where it shone the colour of newly spilled blood. ‘We continue to walk the knife’s edge, Dorset. Spain and the Pope look on us with ravenous appetites. It is no easy matter to be charged with the defence of the realm. The threat and the plots are all too real, as Campion proved.’

Will was well aware that the Jesuit had been executed in December with two other Catholic missionaries; their crime to try to upset the delicate religious balance in the country that Elizabeth and her advisers were adamant had to be maintained. No sensible person wanted to return to the bloodletting of Queen Mary’s reign. Peace was an aspiration Will could fully support.

‘I will do as you ask, sir. I would have reported any worrying signs to you without this request.’