



Witchfall

VICTORIA LAMB

Do her darkest dreams foretell the nightmare to come?

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About the Book

London, 1555. The court of Mary Tudor is terrorized by the Spanish Inquisition, and life is safe for no one. But Meg Lytton has more reason to fear than most - for Meg is a witch, and the discovery of her craft would mean certain death. Even more perilous, Meg is secretly betrothed to the young priest Alejandro de Castillo; a relationship which they must hide at all costs.

In service to the Queen's sister, Princess Elizabeth, Meg attempts to foretell her mistress's future. But when terrible dreams begin to haunt her, Meg fears she has released a dark spirit into the world, intent on harming everyone around her.

The darkly magical and passionate sequel to *Witchstruck*

Winner of the Romantic Novelist Association YA Novel of the Year



Witchfall

VICTORIA LAMB

RHCP DIGITAL

For my father, Richard Holland



Howl, howl, howl, howl! O, you are men of stones.
Had I your tongues and eyes, I'd use them so
That heaven's vault should crack. She's gone for ever.
I know when one is dead, and when one lives.
She's dead as earth.

William Shakespeare: *King Lear, Act V, Scene iii*



Who owns the whole rainy, stony earth? Death.
Ted Hughes: *Examination at the Womb-Door*

PART ONE

Hampton Court

Spring 1555

ONE

Scrying

I had been here before in a dream. I was standing in a high place, buffeted by winds and wrapped in a reddish mist that stretched into cloud a few yards ahead. My loose hair whipped about my face, longer than it was now. The wide skirt of my gown billowed around my ankles, flapping like a ship's sail. Power prickled at my fingertips, tingling with familiar heat. Yet I was not permitted to use magick. Not in this place. My senses strained for clues as to my whereabouts, catching strange sounds, a rushing noise like wings.

Sensing movement above my head, I glanced up. A hawk came soaring out of the sunset. It screamed impatiently, tilting its barred body as though hunting for a place to land.

When I looked down again, Marcus Dent was standing in front of me, clothed all in black.

'You always knew it would come to this, Meg Lytton.' His words echoed in my mind. 'Didn't you?'

I stared at him, too horrified to speak.

I had to get away from him, yet seemed unable to move. My arms hung stiffly by my side, my feet rooted as though tied to a stake.

'You bested me with your girl's magick last time we met. But now you will find I have the advantage.'

The witchfinder showed me what was in his hands: a broad-headed axe, shiny and cruel, its thick shaft wrapped thrice about with holly.

'No,' I managed hoarsely.

Marcus Dent watched as I struggled to break free from whatever supernatural hold he had asserted over me. His blue eyes gleamed with malicious amusement.

‘Why waste your last moments on this tiresome show of resistance? Accept your fate and kneel for the axe. You have tried before to escape me – and might have succeeded with a little more talent. But you are a mere girl. It is your destiny to die at my hands. You have neither the strength nor the knowledge to fight me. I will always be stronger than you, and your blood spilt in this place today will prove it.’ With the axe, he pointed to the stone between us. ‘Now, down on your knees!’

Sweat broke out on my forehead as I battled to break free of Marcus Dent’s hold over me. How had the witchfinder managed this feat, binding me so tight to this time and place that I could not escape?

‘I will not kneel to you, Dent. I refuse!’

‘Meg,’ he said deeply, leaning closer. The axe blade flashed in my eyes, dazzling me. His voice grew urgent. ‘Meg! Meg!’

Then a hand came down on my shoulder and I turned, looking up into Alejandro de Castillo’s concerned face.

The young Spanish novice was balancing a tallow stump on his palm, its flickering flame reflected in his eyes. As though I had never seen him before, I drank in the sight of my secret betrothed: strong cheekbones, dark hair swept back from his forehead, a burning intensity about him – and yet a steadiness too, like a rock set in the midst of a wild torrent.

‘Meg, it is time to go.’

I closed my eyes, dazed and confused as reality flooded back. I was no longer standing in that high place, about to have my head chopped off by the witchfinder Marcus Dent. Instead, I was kneeling on the dirt floor in a tiny disused storage room adjacent to the kitchens of Hampton Court Palace.

My heart was juddering, my palms clammy. It was hard not to let my frustration show as I stumbled over my words. 'I must keep scrying . . . just another few minutes.'

'The kitchen servants are assembling to carry the dishes into the Great Hall. Your absence will be noted if you are not at the princess's side when the banquet begins.'

'But I must finish the vision! I must see how it ends.'

Alejandro pointed to the ground. The copper scrying bowl had been tipped over, the wine almost drained away into the dirt. 'Forgive me, I had no choice. It was the only way to wake you.'

'You had no right to interfere, Alejandro. What I see in these visions is important.'

Alejandro helped me to my feet, brushing the dirt from my skirts. '*Mi querida,*' he murmured, his Spanish accent pronounced, 'your fury is quite charming. As is the flash in your eyes when you say "Alejandro" in your very English voice. Have I ever told you that?'

'The Lady Elizabeth has ordered me to keep scrying and consulting my books of magick, looking for any threat that may lie ahead for her,' I countered, ignoring his question as deliberately provocative. He put his arms about me, and it was hard to push him away. 'Be serious, please, just for a moment.'

'I am always serious with you. I know you serve *la princesa* well, but might I suggest you find somewhere less dangerous to practise your scrying?' His slow, warm smile made my heart flip over. 'Now that I have found the woman of my dreams, I would hate to lose her to the Inquisition.'

The woman of his dreams? I was hardly that. Not only was I that most forbidden of creatures, a witch, but I was also in the pay of the Lady Elizabeth, whose dislike for the Catholic faith was widely whispered at court. Yet there was no denying the heat between myself and Alejandro. That passion was what had led him to offer me marriage, and although I felt the same about him, I had not yet been able

to give him a final answer. Life would not be easy for such an ill-matched pair, after all.

I turned away, tucking the copper scrying bowl away out of sight under a dusty shelf, and stoppering the wine bottle I had used to fill it before carefully hiding that too. They would be needed next time I came here to scry in silence and solitude.

‘I am safe enough from the Inquisition,’ I insisted, though the black-robed priests who prowled the court looking for heretics made me very nervous indeed. I halted before him and smiled up into his eyes. ‘They do not even know of my existence. Give me your patience a little while longer.’

Frustration flickered in his face, though he did not refuse. Instead, he put out a hand and tucked a loose strand of hair back under my courtly hood. ‘You are beautiful, Meg, but vulnerable too. Do you have any idea of the horrors in store for you if these activities should be discovered?’

How could he ask that? Alejandro had been present at the horrible execution of my aunt, burned at the stake as a witch and a heretic. He must know that my last glimpse of Aunt Jane, screaming in agony as she was consumed by smoke and flame, had been scorched into my mind’s eye for ever.

‘I shall be more careful in future,’ I promised him.

‘But you will not stop.’ It was a statement, not a question.

‘I cannot,’ I whispered.

‘Not even for my sake?’ He held up the candle to see my face better. ‘Not even though I am your betrothed and ask it of you?’

Beyond the closed door, I could hear clattering and shouts from the vast roaring kitchens as hundreds of servants bustled about, preparing a feast fit for the royal court.

I placed a hand on his chest, feeling the thud of his heart beneath my fingers. ‘I was born into this path. I cannot be other than a witch, any more than you could turn away

from your training in the priesthood. Please do not ask me to change who I am, Alejandro.'

He looked deep into my eyes, then nodded slowly. 'So be it.'

For a long moment we gazed at each other without speaking. It was the first time in weeks we had managed to be alone together, and heat bloomed in my face at the sheer intensity of his look. Was this how love always felt, this exquisite tenderness, as though my emotions had been scraped raw and could not bear to be touched? I wanted so badly to speak, to admit that my love for him was as strong as ever, despite the obstacles that fate had thrown between us. Yet I did not wish to break this love-spell with the clumsiness of speech. And what if he did not feel the same way?

Alejandro bent his head and touched his lips to mine.

My arms clasped about his neck, and I kissed him back, temporarily pushing all my fears to one side as I let my heart rule my head.

We swayed together, tangled up in each other like strands of wild honeysuckle, then his arm came round my waist, pulling me even closer. Still I did not resist, lost to reason, wanting the moment to last for ever.

He made a strangled noise under his breath, and the heat of his kiss increased. Then suddenly he took an abrupt step backwards, holding the candle in a less than steady hand. 'Meg, we cannot . . .'

My cheeks were on fire. I knew he was right. But that did not make the trembling ache inside me any less of a torment.

'Yes . . . I mean, no. We should . . . go,' I managed unevenly, but could not resist brushing his cheek with my fingertips.

'That would be wise,' Alejandro agreed with a crooked smile, 'before I lose my head.'

It was only a joke. But I remembered Marcus Dent with his axe, and shuddered.

After the witchfinder had put me through a sickening trial by water – bound and thrown into a pool, to drown if innocent, to be hanged if I survived – my banishing spell had tossed him into the void. I had thought him gone for ever. Yet now Marcus Dent was appearing in my visions, seemingly unharmed by his ordeal. What could it mean?

Alejandro opened the door and bowed, allowing me to go through before him.

‘Meg, the Lady Elizabeth awaits you,’ he reminded me softly when I hesitated.

I nodded and squeezed past him in the dark narrow space. These were dangerous times at court, and I needed to focus on survival, not on the prickling heat I felt whenever I looked at Alejandro.

I had heard nothing of Marcus Dent since the Lady Elizabeth had been summoned back to court earlier that spring. Now summer was approaching fast, and every day I feared Dent’s arrival. I did not know where he had vanished to after Woodstock, nor how long my spell to silence him might last.

It was not a comfortable thought that my vision could be a premonition of my death. If Marcus Dent had indeed returned from some otherworldly void, and was perhaps free to accuse me of witchcraft once more, I would have no chance against him. The word of a witchfinder must outweigh the word of a suspected witch every time.

I rejoined the Lady Elizabeth in the Great Hall, sidling in behind her chair on the high dais and hoping that no one had noticed my absence. I had only slipped away for half an hour during the dancing, after all, and with the Queen still keeping stubbornly to her apartments, these royal banquets never dragged on much beyond nightfall anyway.

Blanche Parry shot me an accusing look but said nothing, pursing her lips and folding both arms across her ample chest as I begged a passing servant for a cup of ale. The princess's lady-in-waiting knew better than to draw attention to my absence when the King might overhear and punish our mistress for it instead.

'Forgive me,' I whispered to Blanche. 'I forgot the time.'

Mistress Parry's gaze flicked across the Great Hall to where Alejandro had joined the black-robed priests at the back wall, his cowl drawn forward to hide his face.

'Indeed,' she said drily. 'At your prayers again, were you? They'll make you a nun soon, you are so keen on your devotions.'

I ignored her jibe, turning to watch the princess. Since Queen Mary had summoned her to court from imprisonment at Woodstock Palace, the Lady Elizabeth had become a favourite with the courtiers. Some said too much of a favourite, and that the Queen would send her sister away again once the royal baby had been born.

Deep in conversation with His Majesty, the Lady Elizabeth was seated on the left hand of the King, simply dressed in a plain black gown with a net of tiny pearls in her hair. Elizabeth laughed at all King Philip's jests and smiled in a flattering way, her face flushed and animated.

I spoke little Spanish, so could not follow what the princess and King Philip were saying to each other. But courtiers throughout the Great Hall were openly staring at the couple, their heads so close together - the Queen's dark-haired Spanish husband and her slim-waisted sister. Indeed, it could not be denied that the princess's youth and shining reddish-gold hair were in contrast to Queen Mary's dour looks.

Not that the court had seen much of Queen Mary in recent months. She still kept to her state apartments, insisting that her baby was late. But King Philip showed so little interest that few still believed their Queen to be with

child. Instead, the whispers spoke of a sickly Queen and a young princess who might well be married to the grieving Philip before the year was out.

The dishes were brought out in a long procession that passed in front of the high dais for the King's approval. He applauded them politely, then the cloth-covered board was crowded with platters and wine cups, with honey-glazed pork flesh and a vast roast swan cut open at table that released half a dozen tiny wrens flapping their wings in panic as they flew upwards, seeking the rafters. The whole court exclaimed in delight and clapped vigorously when the spit-cook was brought forward, red-faced and still in his leather apron, to receive the King's compliments.

At one point between courses, the Lady Elizabeth turned to me with greasy fingers. 'Meg?'

Hurriedly, I passed her ladyship a bowl of lemon-scented water and a clean white napkin, freshly starched and folded.

Still listening to His Majesty, Elizabeth dipped her long white fingers in the lemon-scented water without even glancing at me. She dried each finger meticulously, draped the napkin over her shoulder to protect her costly gown, then turned back to the King with an apologetic smile.

A sudden shout at the back of the hall stilled the revellers. A courtier, his face pale with terror, was being dragged from the hall by two of the black-robed priests of the Inquisition. His voice could be heard even after he had been removed, raised in high-pitched protest of his innocence. The Spanish priests paid no heed, however, their cowls hiding their faces as they took him away. Those priests who had remained walked among the courtiers with watchful eyes, as though hoping to catch another 'heretic' by his guilty expression.

Blanche shivered and crossed herself. 'Poor soul,' she muttered, but was careful not to speak too loudly, in case she was next.

I saw Alejandro frown at me from across the room, and lowered my gaze with difficulty. He was right. Even to stare could be deemed a sign of guilt or complicity. I wondered how long the Spanish Inquisition would stay at court, their black-robed presence more sinister and alarming with every day that passed. Such arrests had become a common occurrence in recent weeks, as the King and Queen ordered a purge of anti-Catholic feeling at court. Yet none of us dared ask why some courtiers were taken for questioning and not others, nor why a few never came back from the terrifying cells of the Inquisitors.

After the banquet had finished, we were allowed to grab a few mouthfuls of manchet bread and roast meat from the sideboard while the top tables were being pushed back for more dancing. Torches were trimmed and brought forward, for the summer evening was already darkening to dusk in the high windows. The musicians struck up to the swift beat of the tabor, the hautboys carrying the lively tune, and soon my foot was tapping. The Lady Elizabeth began the dancing with a swift-moving galliard, supported in her leaps by the handsome Spanish King, whose hold on her waist seemed rather too intimate for a married man.

‘Do you see that?’ Blanche nudged me as she watched the royal couple dancing and leaping together. She whispered in my ear, ‘They’re saying King Philip married the wrong sister.’

With so many courtiers crowded about us this was dangerous talk, even if it was no more than the truth. I silenced Blanche Parry with a warning frown. ‘He married our Queen,’ I replied warily, ‘and will soon be father to a Tudor heir, God willing.’

‘Aye, God willing,’ she agreed, seeming to recall her surroundings. But she continued to watch our mistress and the courtly Spaniard with an eager, narrowed gaze.

As the music and dancing began to draw to a close, I hurried back from the Great Hall to prepare the Lady

Elizabeth's bedchamber for her return. The sheets and bed-covers would need to be shaken out and freshened with herbs, her pot wiped clean and any soiled rushes swept away. Down one of the darker corridors, with only one guttering wall torch to light the way, I found my path blocked by a tall hooded man in dark robes.

'Forgive me,' I murmured, and tried to slip past the stranger, but he caught me by the arm.

'Not so fast, Mistress Lytton.'

A Spanish accent. I looked at the man more closely, seeing a cruel dark face under the cowl of his robes. It was one of the Catholic priests who surrounded King Philip at court, whispering poison in his ear against the English. I disliked being cornered by such a man, particularly in this lonely place, surrounded by long and menacing shadows that seemed to creep in closer as we faced each other.

My tone was cold. 'Do I know you, sir?'

He looked down at me through the flickering torchlight, studying me as a man might study an insect before he crushes it beneath his heel. 'Not yet,' he said lightly. 'Nor should you ever wish to. My name is Miguel de Pero of the Inquisition.'

I shuddered. So he was one of *them*, the terrifying Spanish priests whose sole purpose was to torture and destroy any who did not follow the Catholic faith - but most especially those who professed any heretic beliefs or who were suspected of witchcraft. Against my will, I recalled Alejandro's grim description of the Inquisition's methods. Red-hot irons taken straight from the fire and applied to the flesh, spiked cages and barrels to break the limbs, heavy stones and chains that loosened the tongue, and the fearsome rack that could stretch a man's spine until it snapped: these were but a few of the horrors in store for those under suspicion, innocent or not, who did not immediately confess their guilt.

'I see you know our reputation,' he murmured, the shadows thickening around us as he spoke. 'Though a girl who consorts so frequently with a novice of the Order of Santiago de Compostela need not fear the Inquisition, surely?'

My heart ran cold at these words. What did he know?

Señor de Pero nodded, seeing my expression. 'Yes, your growing intimacy with Alejandro de Castillo has not gone unnoticed at court. He may seem a humble novice to you. But Alejandro is the son of a great nobleman, with a wealthy family awaiting his return in Spain. If Alejandro marries at all, he will be expected to marry a woman of noble Spanish blood.' His voice grew stern. 'Not the serving girl of a suspected traitor.'

'What do you want from me?' I whispered, guessing the answer already but needing to hear it from his lips.

But the priest did not reply. He had stiffened, staring over my shoulder with a hint of anger in his frowning eyes.

I turned. Alejandro was striding along the dark corridor towards us, his cowl thrown back to reveal a tense expression. At the sight of him I wanted to shout his name with relief, yet somehow managed to bite my tongue. I did not want him to get into trouble with his superiors. Finishing his training meant so much to Alejandro, I could not have borne it if my words or actions meant he were refused a place among the other priests of his Order.

'Meg?' Alejandro demanded, reaching me swiftly. He caught my hands in his, his intent gaze searching my face. 'Why are you so pale? What was Señor de Pero saying to you?'

'Señor de Pero? Oh, he was just . . .'

I hesitated, not wishing to be the cause of an argument between Alejandro and his masters. But when I turned back, the corridor was empty except for its host of listening shadows.

The black-robed priest had vanished.

‘He was just asking me to convey his compliments to the Lady Elizabeth on her dancing,’ I finished lamely.

Alejandro did not believe a word of my explanation, I could tell by his frown. He must have already been warned away from me by his masters and knew their disapproval of our relationship. But the danger had been averted for the moment, and at least the Inquisition did not seem aware that I had once been accused of being a witch. They merely saw me as a threat to one of their young Spanish novices, an upstart nobody who must be removed before she ruined a promising career in the priesthood.

‘I see,’ he said drily.

He raised my hand to his lips and touched his lips to my skin. I remembered how passionately he had kissed me before the banquet, and felt my cheeks flare with heat again.

His voice was deep and exasperated. ‘Don’t wander off on your own like that again, do you hear me? I was frantic. I didn’t know where you’d gone. With the Inquisition on every corner, looking for ways to trick *la princesa* into some confession of Protestant guilt, you can’t be too careful.’

‘Yes, Alejandro,’ I said meekly, pretending to agree, but I knew he was not deceived.

‘The Queen only allowed her sister to return to court so she could humiliate her with the birth of this new heir to the throne. Do not be deceived into thinking the Lady Elizabeth is a free woman. The slightest indiscretion could see her back in prison – and you with her, Meg.’ His gaze burnt into mine. ‘Your lack of caution terrifies me. I know these men. They will *hurt* you, and enjoy their work.’

Slowly, Alejandro kissed my hand again, his mouth lingering on my skin, then released it. My hand tingled with the invisible imprint of his kiss, and I found it hard to breathe. Suddenly I could not look him in the eye, fearing the intensity of the emotions his touch stirred in me.

Alejandro insisted on escorting me back through the torchlit maze of courtyards and passageways to the Lady Elizabeth's apartments, and for this I was secretly grateful. In my heightened state of anxiety, it seemed to me that one of the darker shadows had detached itself from the palace wall and slithered behind us most of the way. But I chose not to look at it too closely.

TWO

The Inquisition

'On days like this, I almost wish I could be back at Woodstock Palace. At least there I was permitted to roam the grounds with a single guard. Here I am free in name only. I must ask permission even to descend to the courtyard gardens. And then it seems I must make my intention known to the Captain of the Guards and wait for proper accompaniment, whatever that entails!'

The Lady Elizabeth turned from the elegant leaded windows to look across at me with small hooded eyes that seethed with frustration, like a hawk kept too long on the wrist. Beyond the castle walls, it seemed summer was almost at hand. May sunlight lay in golden strips across the rushes between us. I could see the river gleaming brightly at the princess's back while young lambs played in the lush green fields on the far bank.

'And I miss my old governess, Kat Ashley. More than a governess, for in truth we are so close, she has been like a second mother to me. I had such a nightmare last night,' she shuddered, 'and when I tried to wake Blanche, she just snored. Kat would have known how to comfort me. But my sister's advisors consider Kat too Protestant a companion for me. So they keep her away from me.'

'A nightmare, my lady?'

Her face was a little flushed that morning, as though she had indeed slept badly, but she had tamed her hair into shining tresses and looked remarkably calm considering the danger of her position.

Since her sister the Queen had relaxed the terms of her imprisonment, Elizabeth had blossomed into a regal lady of the court. She still wore the most sombre gowns among those offered to her by the Queen's wardrobe mistress, declining to outshine her sister in cloth of gold or russet satin, and wearing her hair demurely loose as befitted an unmarried lady of the court. Yet there was something about the way she held herself which told the world she was a princess born, and the legitimate daughter of King Henry, whatever the law might say on that contentious matter.

No doubt King Philip's special attentions had helped the Lady Elizabeth feel more confident at court, I considered, then chastised myself for such uncharitable thoughts. The princess was not interested in her sister's husband, and could hardly help it if he was attracted to her. But she was clever enough not to spurn the King too openly, for one day she might need his protection against her sister's ill will.

'Oh, just some hideous creature watching me from the shadows. It was nothing, a foolish dream.' The Lady Elizabeth forced a smile. 'What else could it have been?'

The door opened and Blanche Parry came staggering in, red-faced and breathless under the weight of a great heap of silver and black cloth.

'Look what I managed to glean from the royal wardrobe,' Elizabeth's lady-in-waiting exclaimed, laughing at our bemused expressions. 'Come, Meg, help me with this and there could be a new gown or wrap in it for you. Why, you silly goose, don't frown. You are permitted to look your best. You are at court now, remember?'

'Why can we not go down into the palace gardens again, as we did when we first arrived, and play a game of croquet or quoits?' Elizabeth demanded, watching us rummage through the pile of fine clothing. 'I need the sun on my face. I cannot breathe in this stuffy room.'

Sitting down heavily beside me on the settle, Blanche Parry shook her head and comfortably began unstitching

one of the sleeves.

‘Now, my lady, be patient and do not fuss so loud. You know well that the Queen’s Grace cannot bear to hear any sound outside her window, so the gardens have been forbidden to us until her child is born.’

‘That wretched child!’ Elizabeth exclaimed, forgetting to lower her voice. ‘We have been waiting weeks for him to make his appearance. I never heard of such a lengthy pregnancy. My sister must be an elephant, carrying her child a full year. I swear the Queen has been with child since late last summer. Will this much-awaited son and heir never be born?’

Blanche set aside the sleeve she had been working on, its silver stitchwork hanging loose. ‘Hush, my lady!’ she hissed, glancing at the door in case we were overheard. ‘The dear little prince will be born when he is born, God bless his soul. It may be divine will that his birth is delayed. The stars may not yet be auspicious.’

‘Then perhaps they should have consulted the Queen’s astrologer on the matter, rather than calling him a magician and dragging him to the Fleet prison in disgrace.’ The Lady Elizabeth nodded when I looked up in surprise. ‘Yes, Meg, I heard of his plight yesterday. Master Dee’s house has been searched, his books and papers removed by the Inquisition.’

Blanche was even more horrified than before, rolling her eyes towards the door. ‘My lady!’

‘Yes, yes, I know. I must mind my speech and keep my own counsel on this matter. I have not forgotten my precarious position at court.’ Yet far from taking her own advice, Elizabeth strode restlessly back to the window and stared down at the rolling Thames. Her severe black gown did nothing to disguise the burnished red-gold of her hair, shining in the sunlight. ‘Poor Master Dee. I only hope they do not find anything dangerous amongst his papers.’

She glanced at me, and suddenly I remembered how we had visited the astrologer one night at Woodstock, meeting him secretly at the village inn and discussing Queen Mary's horoscope. But I said nothing, catching a warning look in her face. Blanche Parry was aware that her mistress had gone to see John Dee that night, but knew nothing of what had been discussed. Which was just as well, for it could cost all of us our lives if it ever emerged that the Queen's horoscope had been on the table between us.

'Perhaps once the heir to the throne is born, my sister will allow me to leave court and live quietly in the country.' Elizabeth leaned her chin on her hand, looking broodingly across at the shepherds in their fields opposite the palace. 'I wish that I was back at Hatfield. Now that would make a pretty prison. Do you know Hatfield, Meg?'

'No, my lady.'

'It is not so large and handsome a palace as Hampton Court, but it is homely and quite beautiful in the spring. Soon the musk-roses will be budding and there will be young cuckoos calling in the groves. I miss . . . ah, so many things, Meg, I cannot begin to tell you what a wonderful place Hatfield is. Perhaps one day I shall be allowed to return there, and Kat Ashley will once again be my companion. Then we shall—'

The door to her apartments opened without any knock and the Lady Elizabeth turned, her body stiff at the suddenness of the intrusion.

'How dare you, sirs—!' she began, then bit her lip and fell silent, seeing at once who it was.

Three black-robed members of the Spanish Inquisition stood in the grand doorway to her apartments. As the princess curtsied, the men grimly inclined their heads, displaying only the slightest deference to her status as the Queen's sister.

I recognized one of the priests and scrambled to my feet in sudden fear, setting aside the book I had been leafing

through. It was Señor Miguel de Pero, the priest who had warned me to keep away from Alejandro.

Father Vasco, the irascible old priest who had made our lives so miserable at Woodstock, came hobbling in behind them, his face greyer than ever, leaning on the shoulder of a young novice.

Alejandro!

My face flushed at the sight of Alejandro, and I had to look carefully at the ground, willing my cheeks to cool down. But it was hard not to remember his kisses in the disused storeroom, the warmth of his arm about my waist as he drew me closer. What if he had not stopped there?

Furtively, I tidied my cap and gown, then despised myself for such a show of vanity. Was there no end to my foolishness? I had only seen Alejandro yesterday, yet I was behaving as though we had been apart for months.

'I am always delighted to welcome those who serve Her Majesty, my sister,' Elizabeth was saying, cleverly reminding her visitors of her own royal lineage.

In a pointed manner she spoke English rather than Spanish, despite her proficiency in that language. Perhaps she hoped that would give her some advantage.

'But I fear the abruptness of your entrance has left my nerves jangling. Do you always barge into the rooms of royalty without knocking or asking permission to enter, sirs?'

'You must forgive us the ignorance of foreigners, my lady,' replied Señor de Pero in his heavily accented English. He was taller than the other two men; a great wooden crucifix hung from his belt, and his neatly trimmed beard gleamed with oils where he had recently groomed it. He threw back his hood and smiled, his thin-lipped mouth cruel. 'We are not used to your quaint English customs. In our own blessed country of Spain, the Inquisition comes and goes as it pleases, even in the great palaces, even amongst princes and nobles.'

Elizabeth shivered at these words. But her chin was raised. She was not ready to show fear before these foreigners. 'What is your name, sir?'

'My name is Señor Miguel de Pero and I have come to ask you a few questions on a matter pertaining to Her Majesty's safety,' he told her shortly. 'These other gentlemen are here to keep a written record of whatever is said by yourself or your servants, so there can be no denials later. I trust this will not be an inconvenience to you, my lady.'

'How could it be?' the princess countered sharply. 'My royal sister's safety is always my greatest concern.'

'Just so.' The Inquisitor turned with a bow to indicate Father Vasco. 'We have brought a priest with us whom I believe you already know from your time at Woodstock. I fear Father Vasco has not been well since accompanying your household to court, which has sadly delayed his return to Spain. But he is one of our most respected elders, my lady, and it was felt his presence might render our visit less of an intrusion.'

Elizabeth curtsied low to the old priest. 'I am sorry indeed to hear of your continuing ill health, Father Vasco. Would you care to sit?' she asked him politely, and nodded to me.

Hurriedly, Blanche and I cleared a place for him on the high-backed wooden settle where the remnants of silver fabric had been laid, then stood back as Alejandro supported his elderly master to the seat and made him comfortable there.

Straightening from his task, Alejandro met my gaze briefly. *Be careful*, his look seemed to say. Then he turned and bowed to Elizabeth with his usual deference.

'My lady,' he murmured.

We waited in silence for the interview to begin, the Inquisitors seating themselves at the table where they

whispered together, then took out quills, ink and a roll of paper.

Why were the Inquisition here? Could they have some new evidence against the Lady Elizabeth? I remembered my brother William's warnings about Queen Mary's marriage to a Catholic prince, and how England would soon be overrun with the priests of the Spanish Inquisition, hunting down heretics and burning them at the stake. I had thought William too gloomy about England's future. But it seemed he was right. The Inquisition had followed King Philip here from Spain, and now they had come to the princess herself, looking for an excuse to accuse her of heresy - and inflict the death penalty.

I schooled myself to seem as calm as Elizabeth herself, for to show fear in front of these men would be to compound their suspicion that Elizabeth was guilty of some crime. I even tried not to look at Alejandro, though I was sharply aware of his presence in the room, my skin prickling at every slight movement he made. Whatever passed here in the next hour must surely decide my mistress's fate, I thought.

Pale and determined, Elizabeth settled herself on her cushioned seat by the window and spoke briskly to the lead Inquisitor. 'Come, Señor de Pero, I am ready whenever you are. Pray ask your questions on whatever pressing matter brings you here. I am my sister's faithful and true subject, and have nothing to hide.'

'*Muy bien.*' Miguel de Pero drew up a chair opposite her. His tone was smooth, as though they were discussing the weather. 'You will know that the Queen has asked for our aid in purging the court of the evils of Protestant heretics. Unfortunately, some of our enquiries have led us to your household, my lady. Do you know Master John Dee, my lady?'

'Is he not the Queen's astrologer, sir?'

'Master Dee has been sometimes in that position, yes. But this past year he has overstepped his mark and done much to displease Her Majesty.'

Elizabeth said nothing but waited, her face cool.

'So you do or do not know Master John Dee,' Señor de Pero repeated, writing something on the paper in front of him. When Elizabeth still said nothing, he frowned and looked up at her. 'I require an answer to my question, my lady.'

'Forgive me, señor, I did not know that it was a question.' Elizabeth lowered her gaze to the floor and pretended to muse. 'Master John Dee . . . yes, I may have seen him once or twice about the court. Just as I have seen many others in my sister's service about the court.'

'But you have never met with him privately?' he persisted.

Elizabeth raised her eyebrows. 'Must I repeat myself, sir? Has it been claimed that I have met this man privately?'

Miguel de Pero's eyes narrowed on her face. He looked thoughtful. 'What makes you ask that?'

'Only that I know Master Dee to be under some kind of suspicion and now you are here, asking if I have met with him privately. For a maid to be alone with any man would be a sin, but for the Queen's unmarried sister to meet privately with a man now accused of some conspiracy would be not only sinful but also treasonous.' Her voice became icy. 'I am no fool, sir. I can see a trap when it is set so clearly before me.'

Miguel de Pero's mouth tightened with fury. He stared at her for a long while without speaking, his nostrils flared and his eyes as fierce as if another word would see the Lady Elizabeth dragged away to the stake. I guessed he had not often met with such defiance, especially from a young woman in fear for her life.

Eventually he stood and walked about the room for a few moments, his head bowed in thought, hands clasped behind

his back. When he returned, he managed a strained smile as he sat down before the princess again.

‘Forgive me, my lady, I did not mean to imply that you are in the habit of meeting men privately. It is just that some papers have come to light with your name on them, in connection with this astrologer, and your sister is keen to learn what you know of this matter. Dee is indeed accused of treason, by way of calculating the Queen’s horoscope, a charge he does not deny but claims to have done in order to benefit the Queen.’

I recalled our secret meeting with John Dee at the Bull Inn in Woodstock. I myself had seen and read the Queen’s horoscope that night. My cheeks grew suddenly hot and I felt my palms dampen. Could they see the guilt in my face?

Elizabeth sounded perplexed. ‘I do not understand. Is it now a crime to cast a horoscope?’

‘When it could be used to discover secret information about Her Majesty’s health or to time an assault against her throne, yes.’ The Spaniard gave her a dry smile. ‘But you stray from the point. How did your name come to be on certain private papers belonging to the Queen’s astrologer?’

‘I do not know, señor, nor am I able to hazard a guess. Perhaps Master Dee intended to draw up my horoscope and read my secrets too, but I can assure you that I gave him no such instruction, nor asked any other person to do so on my behalf. Sir, let me make myself plain. These questions insult me and I do not wish to answer them any further.’ Elizabeth drew herself up in her seat, cold and straight-backed as though on a throne herself. With that instinctive and princely air of command, I could see why her sister continued to regard her as a threat. ‘Until you have some proof that I am more than just a name on a piece of paper to Master Dee, I bid you leave me and my ladies in peace.’

The Inquisitor stood up and glanced back at his men. Some message seemed to pass between them, then he