

VICTORIA LAMB

Desire and power
collide in the court
of Elizabeth I

A close-up photograph of a person's hands holding a large, vibrant yellow rose. The person is wearing a blue, textured historical garment with wide, ruffled cuffs. The background is a warm, golden-brown color, possibly a wall or a piece of fabric. The overall mood is elegant and historical.

*the
Queen's
Secret*

About the Book

July 1575

Elizabeth I, Queen of England, arrives at Kenilworth Castle amid pomp, fanfare and lavish festivities laid on by the Earl of Leicester. The hopeful earl knows this is his very last chance to persuade the queen to marry him.

But despite his attachment to the queen and his driving ambition to be her king, Leicester is unable to resist the seductive wiles of Lettice, wife of the Earl of Essex. And soon whispers of their relationship start spreading through the court.

Enraged by the adulterous lovers' growing intimacy, Elizabeth employs Lucy Morgan, a young black singer and court entertainer, to spy on the couple. But Lucy, who was raised by a spy in London, uncovers far more than she bargains for.

For someone at Kenilworth that summer is plotting to kill the queen. No longer able to tell friend from foe, it is soon not only the queen who is in mortal danger - but Lucy herself.

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The Queen's Secret

Victoria Lamb

In memoriam
Charlotte Lamb, 1937-2000

Prologue



The outskirts of London, May 1575

LUCY MORGAN PEERED OVER THE HIGH WOODEN SIDE OF THE swaying cart. A group of soldiers trotted past, sunlight glinting off their helmets, their dusty blue livery announcing their allegiance to Lord Leicester. Staring back down the road, she could no longer see the distant towers of Richmond Palace, their bright pennants fluttering in the breeze off the River Thames, but only wooded hills and high green hedgerows as the road deepened into countryside.

‘I’ve never been so far outside London before.’ She glanced around, but no one in the cart seemed to be listening. Some of the older women were slumped over, asleep in the sunshine, their mouths open. The carts had left London just after dawn and Lucy was tired too, but unwilling to miss anything by closing her eyes. ‘Where will we sleep tonight? How will they feed so many of us?’

The woman to her right, plain-faced and soberly dressed in widow’s black, tugged irritably at her gown. ‘Sit down, girl.’ Her voice was sour. ‘The cartmen are staring.’

But Lucy did not want to sit down. Even the six months she had spent at court had not prepared her for the activity of the past few days, watching Queen Elizabeth’s servants make ready to depart London for the summer months. Wagon after wagon had lumbered off in advance of the Queen’s private entourage, creaking with furniture, chests packed with clothes and books, the bric-a-brac of the royal

household. Nor had she expected this sweating crush of bodies, jammed in against each other with little more dignity than plague victims flung on a cart. She had seen royal officials and their wives crowded together with their liveried servants, lowly stable boys and gongmen riding the covered wagons of the provisions train, potmen shouting crudely to each other above the grind of wheels, and the women of the Queen's household crammed without ceremony into old wooden carts without seats: seamstresses, laundresses, cooks, serving maids, and court entertainers like herself.

At that moment their cart juddered over a deep yawning rut and Lucy gave a cry, clutching at the side to save herself from falling.

'I told you to sit down,' the woman beside her remarked, and folded her arms as though satisfied that she had been proved right, closing her eyes against the sun's glare.

Lucy had come to court the autumn before, at the age of fourteen, and this was her first summer progress. The court had rarely stayed in any one residence above seven or eight weeks that first autumn. Even once the cold weather had set in, they had been forced to pack up and move to another royal residence as soon as the stink of human refuse grew too powerful to be ignored. It was not always a good thing to be in a new place. In one of the smaller houses, out on the periphery of the city, the female entertainers had slept in a curtained-off corner of the dining hall, and at another place had been herded ten to a chamber, sleeping on filthy rushes through a lack of bedding. The stench had become so bad, it had been almost impossible to breathe some nights, let alone sleep.

Now this: a sweet-smelling wind in her hair, newborn lambs in the fields, eglantine and the white wood anemone shining out from the hedgerows.

The widow tut-tutted as Lucy settled back on the floor of the cart, wriggling to make herself more comfortable on

the unyielding wooden boards. There was little room for them all in the open cart and the boards bristled with splinters, making any sudden movements risky. It did not help that two of the seamstresses were fat-necked, broad-chested peahens, slumped drowsily with clog-heavy feet shoved out in front of them, taking up more than their fair share of space.

'Sorry, mistress,' Lucy offered, more from politeness than genuine concern, having accidentally jabbed the older woman in the ribs as she tried to find a more comfortable position.

'Did your mother never tell you not to fidget, girl?'

'I cannot tell you,' Lucy countered sharply, 'for I never knew my mother.'

She wished she had kept silent as both seamstresses raised their plump, pink-cheeked faces to stare across at her, suddenly no longer asleep. Uncomfortably aware that she was the centre of attention, Lucy added hurriedly, 'My mother died when I was born, you see, God rest her soul.'

The widow crossed herself superstitiously, muttering a quick prayer under her breath. But at least she shifted sideways after that, drawing her cloak a little closer. This gave Lucy room to settle her buttocks squarely on the hard boards, balancing on her palms as the jolting cart rattled on into the countryside.

It was a common enough reaction. A black girl was strange enough in England. But a motherless black girl was bad luck, a curse, someone to be avoided - almost as though Lucy had taken a hand in her own mother's death. Which was true in a way, she supposed, since her mother had died giving birth to her. Or so Master Goodluck had told her.

It was not only the superstitious who shunned her, of course. The kindly gentleman who had employed her at court last autumn had praised her singing, saying with astonishment that she had 'a voice like a skylark'. Yet Lucy

had not yet been permitted to do more than sing with the chorus and dance in a few of the set pieces performed each month before the visiting ambassadors and dignitaries. Perhaps old Mistress Hibbert, who supervised the female entertainers, was afraid the Queen would take fright at her African skin and eyes, her unrestrained barley-twists of black hair. So Lucy had been hidden discreetly behind the others every time she sang, hair tamed beneath the smooth white wings of a cap, dark skin concealed by a shawl draped about her shoulders and knotted tight at the throat.

That spring though, the favourite of the troupe, the boastful Peggy, had been found with child and dismissed. Then two of their most experienced singers had come down with the shaking sickness. Even Mistress Hibbert herself, who had hated Lucy from the very first day she arrived at court, had been deemed too old for travel and told to remain behind.

Perhaps this summer, as one of the few sopranos left in the troupe who could sing the full scale, she might at last find herself face to face with Queen Elizabeth – whom she had only ever seen as a pale but beautiful figure above a mass of courtiers' heads.

'When does the court return to London?'

The woman next to her had fallen asleep at last, slumped in her black cloak, but one of the heavy-breasted seamstresses opposite gave her a sympathetic smile. She was yellow-toothed, her cheeks flushed from the sun.

'Summer's end, child,' she soothed her. 'Come September, we'll all be home again.'

Lucy frowned, trying to suppress a flutter of panic. 'But it's only May. Must we stay away so long?'

'Bless your ignorance,' the woman laughed comfortably, 'of course we must, for the Queen herself orders it. Her Majesty won't risk the plague by staying in the city over the summer, and who can blame her with the stench of the palace sewers so bad last week? So we're bound for

Grafton House now, then we'll take the road up to Warwickshire and rest a month or so at the castle of Kenilworth, they say - or until the Queen tires of his lordship's attentions.'

The woman chuckled before continuing, as though at some private joke. 'Beyond Kenilworth, I cannot tell you which road the progress will take, though it's rumoured the Queen's to visit some of the grand houses of Staffordshire this year.' She smiled at Lucy's dismayed expression. 'Thirsty, child?'

Lucy nodded thankfully. She accepted a half-full bottle of ale from under the folds of the seamstress's rough white apron. The ale was warm - not surprisingly, given its hiding place - but it refreshed her.

'Thank you. Do you know where we'll stop tonight?'

'Wherever there's a space set aside for us to sleep, my poppet. And no need of a hedge, either. A grassy field and a hunk of bread and cheese each, that will do me nicely. For there'll be no rain tonight to wet us. Not with this hot sun.'

With another chuckle, the seamstress took a generous swig of ale herself, then tucked the bottle safely away under her apron, shooting a surreptitious glance at the sour-faced woman as though to check she had not seen.

'Best get some sleep now, child. There'll be no stopping again till past noon.'

The open cart rumbled on in the sunshine, mile after mile taking them further away from London and the familiar mud-thick stench of the Thames. Lucy tried not to doze off, watching the trees pass overhead and delighting in the sun on her face. But eventually she too fell asleep, her knees relaxing, her head nodding on to her chest. Her dreams were confused, filled with grinning cartmen chasing her down green country lanes which seemed to go on for ever. In her dream, someone was calling out behind her, reaching out to grab her shoulder.

She woke to urgent cries, finding herself slumped sideways in the cart, her cap askew, her skirts soiled with straw.

'The Queen! Look, child, it's the Queen!'

The whole cart was in uproar. Even the sour-faced widow had struggled to her feet, calling excitedly to the snoring laundress on her other side to wake up, that the Queen's party was bearing down on them and would soon be passing the cart.

Lucy stretched out her limbs, stiff with the tingling cramp of sleeping too long in one position, and immediately felt a very real and pressing need to relieve herself. Except there was nowhere to do so but publicly, in a little tarred quarter-barrel assigned for such needs and then emptied over the side of the cart in full view of the driver and his mate, a thought which dismayed her.

Then she realized belatedly what the others were shouting and lurched to her feet, as eager as everyone else to catch a glimpse of the Queen.

'Look!' someone cried as the first outriders of the Queen's guard came into view, though all she could see was a cloud of dust rising on the road behind them, and the coarse linen hood of the woman in front of her.

The wagon swayed perilously and Lucy was thrown against its rough wooden side, banging her knee. The driver swore an oath she had not heard since her childhood on the streets of London, and called for the 'idiot women' to sit down again before they upset the cart. But none of them paid the man any attention.

The guards came first in their leather jerkins, buckles and mail-coats flashing in the sun. Then she saw the familiar figure of the Earl of Leicester cantering ahead of the royal party, his swift gaze examining the faces of those in each cart he passed. It was almost as if he were looking for someone, Lucy thought curiously, except for the casual turn of that dark head, one gloved fist resting arrogantly on

his hip, reins held seemingly slack in the other. She had seen him at court often enough - though he had never noticed her, Lucy was sure of it. And why should he? The earl's feathered cap was pitched at an angle, and he seemed to be controlling the animal with just his knees and booted feet, unconcerned by the speed at which he was travelling.

Reaching the party of foot soldiers, the earl pulled the animal up and spoke softly to them for a moment, then wheeled his sweating black stallion about and rode back towards the Queen.

Lucy turned her head and craned to see the royal entourage as it passed their cart. Her view was impeded by the guards riding in strict formation beside the Queen, their horses almost nose to tail. At first, all she could see was a frilled white-gold canopy supported by four outriders, then the young guard nearest her fell back a pace or two, fumbling with his reins as the horse shied, and she caught a fleeting glimpse of the Queen herself.

Perched on a white horse, Queen Elizabeth sat pale and straight-backed under an elaborate headdress, her glorious red hair coiled high with pearls, a vast ivory ruff fanning out like angel wings on either side of her head. Her face was set, but her eyes seemed fixed on the Earl of Leicester's figure as he saluted her briefly, threw a laughing comment towards one of her immaculately groomed ladies, then brought his dancing stallion round to the rear of the column where the chief courtiers rode.

'God save Her Majesty!' Lucy called out impulsively, if rather too late, as the white-gold canopy swayed out of sight.

The Queen's horse moved on, and Lucy was left feeling a little foolish, leaning out over the side of the cart, gritty dust in her face, with nothing to see but the liveried rumps of the guards' horses.

But someone had heard her. The Earl of Leicester had dropped to a more sedate trot beside one of the courtiers in the Queen's train, a stately old man with a grizzled beard and a heavily ornate gold chain about his neck. Now he paused in his conversation, a courteous smile still on his face, and turned his head in the direction of that shout, swift and alert, like a hound questing for a hare.

His dark eyes found her, and Lucy, forgetting for the briefest of moments to lower her gaze before his as a servant should do, smiled back at the earl.

'Oh now, look you. He's a proper one for the ladies, he is!' The seamstress nodded at Leicester's departing back, then chuckled as her stout companion gasped and nudged her in the ribs. 'These Dudleys. Always one hand on the crown and the other on my lady's crotch. Young Robin Dudley was Master of the Horse when I first came to court. Now he's Lord Robert, if you please, master of the Queen - and father to her children.'

Lucy sat down again in the rocking cart, shocked and staring, appalled by the woman's story. 'Queen Elizabeth has *children* by the Earl of Leicester?'

'Two, so they say,' the seamstress confided, not even bothering to lower her voice, 'and both hidden away safe in the country where the Scots Queen may not find them and murder the poor babes in their beds.'

'Stop peddling your filth to this foolish child, Mistress Cubbon, or I'll report you to the chief steward for speaking treason against the Queen.' The widow shook her head in disgust, her face stiff under the plain black hood as she turned to Lucy. 'Girl, don't endanger yourself by listening to this woman's nonsense. I know her type - little better than a common drunk, for all her skill with a needle. Everyone knows our queen is a chaste, God-fearing virgin and will remain so until her wedding night. And the Earl of Leicester is a wise and sober gentleman of the court, who

has not so much as looked at another lady since his own poor wife died.'

'Aye, and by whose hand did his poor wife die?' the seamstress snorted. But she shrugged uneasily at the widow's furious glare and looked away. 'Well, well, that was long ago. And it may all be nonsense, after all. God save Her Majesty and preserve his lordship.'

Lucy said nothing after this, fearing what might come of such a dangerous conversation, and the women's talk soon died away to bitter murmurs, lost in the creaking sway and judder of the cart.

Desperate now to relieve herself, she sat for the next few miles in an uncomfortable silence, head bowed in her neat white cap, attempting to suck an evil-looking splinter out of her finger. She had decided it was probably best not to mention that the Earl of Leicester had winked at her.

One



Kenilworth Castle, Warwickshire, Wednesday 6 July, 1575

EVERY EVENING SINCE his arrival, Walsingham had come down from his rooms in Caesar's Tower to take his customary walk along the water's edge before retiring. He tended to keep early hours in the country, and until the court came to Kenilworth the Queen's chief secretary had no reason to change his routine. Three days he had been in residence, having excused himself early from the progress through Oxfordshire and travelled on ahead to check that security was in place for the Queen's arrival at Kenilworth.

The sundial on the mereside wall was in full shadow by the time Walsingham appeared on the third evening, descending from the Italian elegance of the keep's arcade into what would be the Queen's Privy Garden for the duration of her stay. The hem of his cloak brushed the clipped box hedges as he moved slowly between the formal beds, pausing to examine a particularly exotic-looking musk rose entwined with eglantine, or crush fragrant lavender between his fingertips.

Stretched out on his belly along the gnarled branch of an oak, concealed by a riot of lusty green foliage, Goodluck watched Master Walsingham approach, and smiled.

His target was laughably unprotected, considering he was one of the most powerful and influential men in England. His elevated status was not obvious at a glance. Walsingham wore a simple black skullcap and plain ruff,

having dined alone that evening, and had brought no company with him. True, there were two guards down at the Watergate and probably half a dozen yawning at their posts beyond the archway into Caesar's Tower. But nobody within earshot.

It was growing dark, the sun's heat had long gone and the cool shadows were lengthening. The gardens would soon be closed.

If Goodluck were to drop down on him now, clap one hand over his mouth and slide a stiletto blade between his ribs, Walsingham would be dead within seconds, and no one any the wiser until the man's body was found in the morning.

Walsingham passed beneath him, humming gently under his breath, adjusting the expensive lace at his wrist. He was so close Goodluck could see the fine gold ring on his finger, and a few grey hairs sprinkled among the black at his temple.

Holding his breath, he swung himself soundlessly down from the oak branch, hung there a second, eyeing the distance to the ground, then dropped. Straightening from his crouch, Goodluck waited for Walsingham's leisurely tread to take him round the corner and behind a massive yew hedge that divided the garden from the castle walls.

Then he followed Walsingham into shadow, silent-footed and intent.

But just as Goodluck came up behind him, poised to spring, Walsingham suddenly whirled about and seized his right arm, twisting it painfully behind his back.

Something cold flashed at his throat. Goodluck focused on the thin blade pressing hard against his skin; there would be a prick-mark there in the morning.

'In general, a man talks more easily without a dagger to his throat,' he said conversationally, and smiled down at the blade. 'Of Florentine design. I know the Italian who makes these. Lightweight, but deadly once you have the knack of

them. An excellent assassin's weapon, to be cunningly concealed up a sleeve or down the side of a boot.'

'Well, if you will creep up on people ...'

The slender blade was withdrawn and once more concealed in Walsingham's generous sleeve.

Goodluck rubbed his neck with a rueful smile. 'I had forgotten your reputation.' Respectfully, he swept him a bow. 'Sir.'

'And I had forgotten your odd sense of humour,' Walsingham replied testily.

With one accord, they moved further into the shadow of the yew hedge, Walsingham almost invisible against the thickening dusk in his sombre black suit and cloak. Cautious as ever, he had not used Goodluck's name.

'I received your note,' he murmured. 'Though your news was slender. Has the code been compromised again?'

'I suspect it must have been. There was an incident when I landed at Dover.' Goodluck shrugged off the memory. 'So we move on.'

'Indeed.'

'The castle is being watched, sir.'

'I expected no less.'

Walsingham had lowered his voice until it was a mere thread of sound, barely audible above the wingbeats of a flock of geese passing overhead. They both fell silent for a moment, watching the white geese disappear into the dusk.

'You've seen those who watch? You know who they are?'

Reluctantly, Goodluck shook his head.

'Then why risk meeting like this?' Walsingham sounded impatient. 'Secrecy is everything. Is it money you want? Because my man in London is the person to see.'

'No, sir.'

Goodluck turned his head and listened, holding up a hand for silence, not much caring if Walsingham found this impertinent. But the sound he had heard was only two of the guards patrolling the entrances to Caesar's Tower; he

caught the quiet scrape of a weapon, then a muttered word, and boots going heavily back up the steps. He waited another moment, but there was nothing except a warm, fragrant wind shivering over the knot garden and rustling the yew hedge.

‘I came to give you information, sir. Something I did not wish to put in a letter.’

Walsingham’s eyes narrowed. ‘Go on.’

‘Following your orders, I posed as a Catholic and stuck close to the Lorenzo family for almost a year. One night, just after Easter Sunday, a man came secretly to their house. From the way he was treated, I would guess him to be one of the old blood, born of an important family but perhaps not a nobleman. I was not privy to everything that passed between him and Lorenzo, but it was common knowledge the man was in search of money.’

Walsingham frowned, apparently mesmerized by a tiny periwinkle growing wild in the sandy verges of the path. ‘To what end?’

‘That I was unable to discover. But it’s my belief he was seeking Catholic funds for a fresh attempt on the Queen’s life.’

Now he had the attention of the Queen’s secretary. ‘His name?’

‘They used no names, which aroused my suspicions at once. But afterwards I heard several mentions of a man they called the “Bear”. From what they said, I would guess him to be the assassin they wished to hire. Unfortunately, the man arrived hooded at Lorenzo’s, stayed only one night, and left before I was able to get a proper look at him. I remained with the family another fortnight, hoping to glean some useful information from Lorenzo or one of his more zealous followers. You know how these devout, old-family Catholics love to boast of their plans to put a monarch of the true faith back on the throne of England. But no one was talking. Indeed, the more I probed, the

more suspicious they became, however much I clowned and acted the fool. I was forced to leave rather abruptly in the end,' Goodluck smiled grimly, 'having outstayed my welcome in Pisa.'

'And his mission to obtain funds?'

'It may have been successful, but I cannot be sure. Before he left, Lorenzo took his guest into town with him, and did not return until the following day. I tried to track their movements all that day and evening, but they kept giving me the slip. With insulting ease, in fact. Either this man was an expert at espionage, or a year playing Eduardo the simpleton had slowed me up.'

Walsingham allowed himself a fleeting smile. 'I should have liked to see you as a simpleton.'

'And a hunchback, no less. From the Pisan countryside. I had to chew grass all day and roll my eyes like an idiot.'

'And now you come to Kenilworth to play ... what? The courtly hanger-on? The lovesick suitor? You have essayed those roles before, as I recall.'

Goodluck fingered his beard ruefully. 'It took me the last few months to grow back my beard. Some judicious padding, false eyebrows, and I shall be Goodluck once more, master of a troupe of travelling players.'

'In which guise I presume you plan to join the Queen's progress.'

Walsingham began to walk back in the shelter of the yew hedge, and Goodluck fell in silently beside him. The dark gleam of the lake was just visible through the waterside gate. Their footsteps made only a little grating sound on the sandy path.

'Her Majesty should be here in state within a few days. Leicester writes that the court will arrive on Saturday, and the Queen herself some time in the early evening.' Walsingham hesitated, his tone thoughtful. 'If you have brought a troupe, you will need lodgings for yourself and your men.'

'A place to set up a tent near the castle walls, sir, that's all we'll require. It would be prudent not to draw attention to ourselves with any special treatment.' Goodluck produced from his pouch a somewhat dog-eared piece of paper and unfolded it. Inside were a few lines in a distinctive, flowing hand, with a faded cloverleaf stamped underneath: Walsingham's personal device. 'As for introductions, this should see us right.'

Walsingham nodded, turning his head aside to cough. 'Better speak to one of the castle steward's men tomorrow, before it is too late to secure yourself a place close to the castle. And keep your eyes and ears open for the slightest hint of this new Catholic plot. Report back to me at intervals. Discreetly, of course. Your instincts are correct: if our codes have been compromised, we must commit nothing to writing until new ones are established. I shall set that in motion. Watch for the usual signal.'

Goodluck inclined his head. 'Sir.'

They walked another moment in silence, listening to the far-off amorous bellow of a bull in the fields. Stopping just short of the waterside gate, where torchlight could be seen glinting off the helmet of a guard on patrol, Walsingham felt within his cloak and brought out a few gold coins.

'Take them,' he murmured, and pressed them into Goodluck's hand. 'Despite my letter, you will need to produce a bribe for the steward's men, as is customary in these last-minute matters. Otherwise they will be less than helpful.' He glanced at the sundial on the wall as though to check the time, but its gilt face was shrouded in darkness. 'And now I must get myself to bed, for my health is no better this evening, despite the herbal remedies Leicester's physician has prescribed. Ursula joins me tomorrow, and she always knows when I have been staying up too late. I don't believe you ever took a wife, did you?'

'No, sir.' Goodluck laughed softly. 'Nor am I ever likely to marry. I've never felt the need for such a shackle,

however attractively disguised.'

They parted with a nod under the gnarled oak tree. Goodluck shinned back up the trunk and settled himself down for another few hours in its uncomfortable branches, arms folded, booted feet tucked up safe out of sight of any passing patrols. He resigned himself to boredom; he would have to wait until the guard was changed on the north gate at midnight before making his exit.

He watched as Walsingham slowly ascended the steps back into the Warwickshire stronghold that was Caesar's Tower, heard the guards' challenge at the entrance to the arcade and the great man's quiet reply. The garden was empty once more. A warm breeze ruffled the oak leaves, wafting a delicious fragrance of thyme and rosemary from the knot garden across his hiding place.

I don't believe you ever took a wife, did you?

Unwillingly, Goodluck recalled bright fearful eyes in a dark face, a woman's sweating body as she laboured to bring forth her child, and the long silence that had come after.

If he had ever considered taking a wife, it had been for only the shortest and cruellest of moments, and never again since.

Two



The forest at Long Itchington, Warwickshire

SHADOWS WAVERED AND shrank outside the tent wall, human figures half glimpsed through a ripple of silk. Drowsy, in nothing but her underwear, Elizabeth lay curled on her daybed as though on her royal barge. One hand trailing in imaginary water below, she delighted in the whisper of beech trees above the roof of her tent, sweet country air masking the scent of sweat and unwashed bodies, enjoying the idle warmth of an English summer.

‘Is Her Majesty still asleep?’ A pause, then another hurried whisper. ‘We must move by five, or risk coming to Kenilworth after nightfall.’

Her eyelids flickered, then closed again stubbornly. Elizabeth knew that male voice, would have recognized it anywhere, even heard against the frustrated droning of a bee caught between two folds of the tent.

The guard at the entrance spoke again, and Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, made a reply, too low to be heard. But she thought there was a hint of impatience in his tone.

Minded to sit up and call for her favourite, Elizabeth forced herself to remain still on her cushioned daybed, to taste the sweet agony of this self-denial a few moments longer. An old hare tastes better left to stew, she reminded herself, and stretched her arms above her head.

Besides, she could not be private here with Robin, as she liked to call him when they were alone, still using his

pet name from when they were young. Her ladies lay about her on the floor of the tent, wilting like caged birds in the heat, their black and white plumage bedraggled after several hours in the saddle. What a glorious hunt it had been! They had eventually brought the panting stag to bay on the wooded banks of a stream, trapped between a line of snarling hounds and Robert's huntsmen armed with sticks and horns.

Turning on to her back, she stared up at the gently billowing tent roof. Robert had been at his most charming this past year, barely leaving her side, his lavish gifts and attentiveness so marked that everyone at court was once more predicting a royal marriage before Christmas. Poor wag-tongued fools, no doubt they thought the Queen would not get to hear their stable-yard gossip. But while darling Robert might be her 'Eyes', she had her 'Ears' at court as well, and those ears were very long indeed.

Despite this, their gossip was not far off the mark. There could be no mistaking the signs. Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, intended to make her another proposal of marriage this summer.

Elizabeth closed her eyes. Nothing had changed. She would as soon relinquish her throne to her poisonous cousin Mary as marry and bow to her husband's rule as every good wife must. By Christ, though, she was growing no younger, and the country knew it as well as she. Her chance to make an heir for England would soon be past and forgotten, her womb withered, unused as any prune-faced nun's.

Surely now she must accept her fate and marry, as her own royal physicians had advised her, before it was too late to conceive a child?

But did she truly wish to marry a Dudley, one of her servants - however faithful and desirable - when at the snap of her fingers she could have any unmarried prince in Europe?

Still, the thought of lying with Robert all night in a legitimate bed, waking to him each morning as her sworn husband before God, their union sanctified by the tiresomely disapproving archbishop himself, brought another luxurious smile to her lips. Oh yes, there would be compensations for such an unsuitable match, and not before time.

Robert's low voice came again, outside the tent entrance, enquiring if she was awake. He was right, of course. It was time for her to be out and about, ready for the ride to Kenilworth, although it seemed barely an hour since she had lain down to sleep, drowsy in the afternoon heat after half a day's good hunting and a pavilion lunch under the trees.

Preparing to rise, Elizabeth stirred, but halted at the sight of one of her ladies already on her feet, shaking out a dark crumpled gown before tiptoeing on bare feet to the entrance.

The afternoon sun glinted off a tawny red head, the modest simplicity of her wifely cap removed while she slept, hair arranged in pretty ringlets looped about her ears, her hips swaying with the sharp sensuality of a woman determined to make the most of the man she has caught.

Lettice.

Frozen in disbelief, Elizabeth watched as the two shadows - one graceful and full-skirted, the other tall and bowing gallantly at his lady's approach - drew their heads close together outside the tent and conversed in whispers she could no more hope to catch than she could understand the birdsong fluting in the branches above. How many moments passed while she lay still as death and listened, Elizabeth could not be sure. Somewhere nearby a hound began to bark excitedly and was hushed. She could hear the jangle of horses' bits, orders being given, the crack of hooves over the forest floor.

Soon, the other women were stirring, sitting up and talking among themselves. Lady Helena, the sweet girl, fetched a glass of wine, then knelt and held it to her lips.

Elizabeth drank, her face composed, and watched as Lettice, Countess of Essex, re-entered the tent. Lettice's face was flushed, her eyes lively as a young girl's fresh- come from her lover, and she took up her plain white cap with unsteady hands, setting it to cover that tawny tumble of hair as though concealing her shame.

Too late, too late, Elizabeth jeered inwardly. But her lips did not form a single word. She allowed Helena to dab her mouth dry with a white damask cloth redolent of lavender water.

With her ladies gathered about her, she stood for the heavy gold-embroidered foreskirt to be fitted. Turning full circle, she raised her arms to allow them to fix and pin the magnificent cloth-of-gold bodice tight about her chest.

Let Robert and Lettice whisper and play at lovers. I am the Queen and I shall make a triumphal entry into Kenilworth.

Yes, her people would fall to their knees before her unmatched splendour, and she would raise them up with her hand. She had no time for this courtly art of dalliance, for clandestine meetings and secret looks. She was a Tudor – blunt as a stone in love, but lion-hearted in a fight. As her enemies would soon witness, the Countess of Essex foremost among them.

She stretched out an arm for the heavy jewelled sleeve, releasing her breath very slowly as each ribbon fastened it to her bodice. *Gird me for battle. I shall neither fail nor faint.* Her ladies drew the laces tight, and slipped sturdy riding boots on to her feet. Her wigs were brought forward for her to choose from, her complexion gently rubbed and refreshed with scented oils before the smoothing white paint was applied.

'On to Kenilworth, ladies!'

Her voice rang sharp through the crowded tent, heads turning in her direction, sleepy and surprised. Only her cousin Lettice, still gartering one of her stockings with bowed head and slow, deliberate hands, did not look up at the command.

The women hurriedly cleared a path as Elizabeth left the tent, only Lady Helena having the presence of mind to seize her stiff jewelled train and run behind with it, holding it up out of the dirt.

Outside the sun was beginning to dip into early evening, its thin reddish light burning through the trees. Someone had kicked over their camp fire to quench it, and the drifting smoke left her eyes smarting.

Robert stood waiting like Herne the Hunter under the leafy vastness of an ancient oak, as sturdy as that wood. Age had not diminished his physique, superb in dark red jerkin and doublet, slashed sleeves glinting with gold, his cap feathered and set at an angle. She still thought of him as a young man, so gloriously handsome, his dark eyes bright with ambition and unfulfilled promise. Nonetheless, she did not fail to notice how his face had tightened with the years, the smudges under his eyes gradually deepening, his mouth smiling more warily these days, watching her as much with frustration as desire.

Once, in his youthful pride and arrogance, Robert had only thought to ask her 'When?' Now he knew better than to ask at all, seeming to prefer silence to outright rejection, though even his customary reticence was wearing thin. Whatever would follow it, she was yet to discover.

Her tone was clipped. 'My lord Leicester.'

'Your Majesty,' he replied, bowing low, and Elizabeth felt a stab of satisfaction, glad that he was uncertain of her, remembering perhaps that she was his queen, not some other man's wife whom he must fumble in doorways or under cover of darkness.

She swept past him to where her young page crouched, waiting to help his royal mistress step up into the covered wagon.

'Good lad,' she said with a sudden rush of affection, and tousled the boy's head before setting her foot in his obediently cupped hands. 'May you always serve your queen so well. And *up!*'

Three



The Brays, Kenilworth Castle

THE DAY HAD been the hottest she could remember. Lucy's forehead was damp with sweat. She shook out the crumpled skirts of her gown and swayed, almost too weary to stand, peering down the narrow leafy lane that led towards Long Itchington. That was the direction the Queen's entourage would take, or so everyone seemed to believe.

Furtively, she wiped her face with the torn shred of fabric that had been pressed into her hand an hour before.

'Here,' the man had muttered to each of those waiting at the front of the row. 'Keep one for yourself and pass the rest back. Everyone's to have a flag. As soon as you see the advance party, wave your flags high in the air and don't stop until the Queen has passed through on to the tiltyard.' The man had repeated these instructions in a hoarse yell as he shuffled along the assembled rows. 'Is that understood? Keep waving and cheering until she's out of sight.'

Their carts had been bouncing over rough tracks and through stifling, green-lit woodlands since early morning, and had only reached the vast reddish-brown walls of Kenilworth in the late afternoon. To the south of the castle lay great defensive earthworks, a series of rolling slopes covered in turf. Yet with the gate standing open it became a sun-baked valley through which the Queen's entourage was to pass, while her people cheered her on from the high

banks on either side. On arriving at Kenilworth, they had been herded into this place like cattle, allowed barely a jug of warm, metallic-tasting ale between ten, and a few loaves of bread dipped in gravy. The more senior women had been allowed to rest in the shade, but when Lucy tried to sit down on the grass verge to eat her meagre ration of bread, one of the men in charge had prodded her with the tip of his boot, shouting, 'Get up!'

One of the older women there, a matron in a stiff linen cap, had dared to protest at this treatment, and the man had raised his heavy whip to them both, his thick Warwickshire burr hard to follow. 'There's to be no sitting down. You'll wait in rows like you were told. We have to be ready for when the Queen arrives, see? That's his lordship's orders, good and simple, and any man, woman or child caught out of line will spend the night in the stocks. Is that clear?'

Gradually the sun began to dip below the horizon and the day grew less hot, to everyone's relief.

A hard-faced, yellow-haired man in the now-familiar blue livery of Leicester's staff came riding out along the line of earthworks Lucy had heard called the Brays, slowing to inspect the crowd assembled there on either side of the track.

As he drew level with her, the rider came to a halt. His horse fidgeted as he tightened his grip on the reins.

'You there,' he called down to her, his voice fierce and blunt. 'Give me your name, girl, and tell me what your business is here.'

'Lucy Morgan, sir. I travel with the Queen's household.'

'What position do you hold there?'

'Entertainer, sir.'

'You're an *entertainer*?' His watery blue eyes narrowed as once more he examined her from head to toe. There was a cold, sneering note to his voice. 'What does that mean, I wonder?'