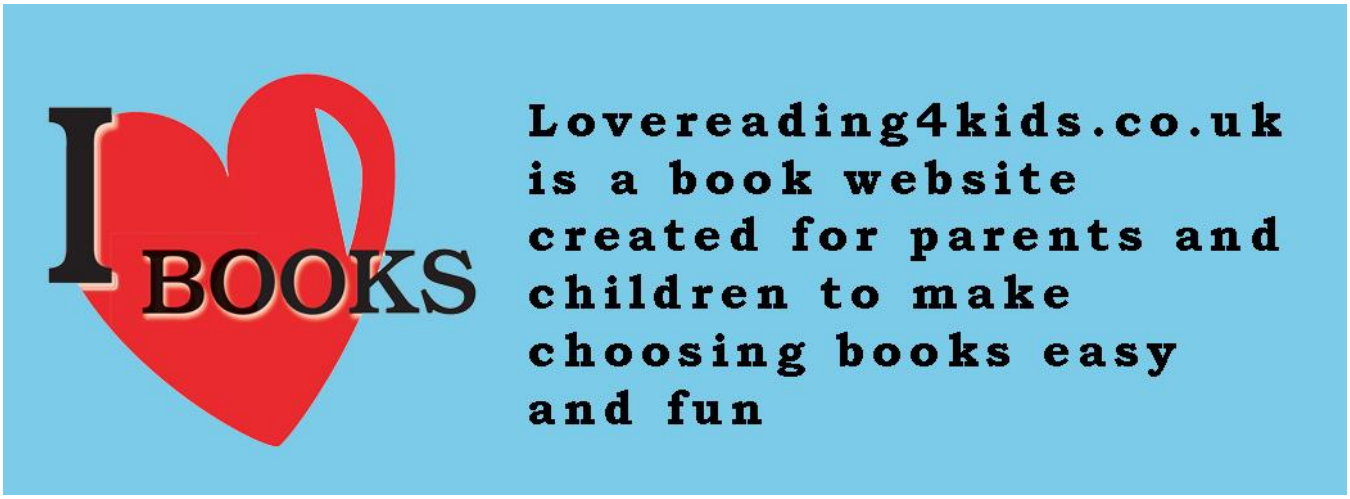


Opening extract from

Eliza Rose

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Lucy Worsely

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PART ONE

AT STONETON CASTLE





Chapter 1

'Today You Must Become a Woman'

6 November 1535
Elizabeth is twelve …

I'd always known that my adult life would begin once I was twelve. And that this would mean marriage.

Aunt Margaret had been working hard to prepare me.

'Duty, Elizabeth,' she used to say, thumping her walking cane down with every word, with every step. 'It is your duty to be a good daughter and, when your father has arranged a suitable alliance, it is your duty to be an obliging wife. You must be ready.'

Duty. A word as heavy as the thickest featherbed.

I would often lie in bed, wondering about my future husband. A prince? A knight? A duke? A stable boy? Of course, the last was a wicked fancy. Aunt Margaret often said I had the devil in me on account of my wild nature and red hair. I was inordinately proud of my long, red hair. I'd heard it was the same colour as the king's own and that of his daughter, the Princess Elizabeth. I wondered if they were plagued like me with blotchy freckles across my rather beaky nose.

'Of course you're not a beauty,' Aunt Margaret used to say, 'but it's the bloodline that counts. Our family is one of the oldest in Derbyshire.' So naturally I couldn't marry anyone I wanted. My father would make me a match into a family at least equal to ours in dignity and antiquity.

It was all very well to mull over whether I would rather be a princess or a duchess while safely tucked up in bed. But when Henny, my nurse, shook me awake on the November morning of my twelfth birthday, goose pimples spread all over my skin even before she had pulled back the slightly mangy fur coverlet.

'Hurry up, child,' Henny said. 'Your father wishes to speak to you.'

I began to yawn and stretch myself, but suddenly the thought of the cold was banished from my mind. 'Henny!' I said urgently. 'Have you forgotten what day it is?'

'It's Tuesday, my love,' she said, now with her back to me, pulling down the blanket we pegged over the window to keep out the worst of the draught at night.

'Henny!'

Her shoulders twitched. An instant too late I realised that of course she knew perfectly well that today was my birthday. She turned round with a broad smile.

'Gah!' I said, making a fist and tugging at my long braid. She had caught me out. But I could not help grinning back. A new thought struck me as I tossed my messy plait back over my shoulder. 'Henny, does my father want to give me a present?'

'I don't think so, not at this hour.' My father wasn't very good at remembering things like presents anyway. But Henny could be relied upon to have got me a sugar mouse or a new pair of velvet slippers.

bed for a pair of woollen stockings I had taken off last night. It had been too chilly to get out of my bed to return them to their proper place in the chest. As I threw off the coverlet and the rather threadbare linen sheets, Henny handed me my heavy velvet robe with the fur trim. It was a sumptuous garment that was sadly disfigured by a great stain down the front. Nothing in our house, Stoneton – a snake of ancient grey towers running along the top of a hill – was quite as grand as it seemed at first.

I did up my robe as quickly as I could. Catching a glimpse of freezing fog outside the window, I grabbed a shawl to go on top. I had hardly finished swathing myself in fabric when Henny prodded me towards the door. 'All right, all right!' I grumbled. There was never usually this level of urgency in our early morning routine, even on a birthday.

Henny shooed me down the uneven floor of the long gallery, and we passed by the door to the best bedchamber. It always stood empty, being saved for important guests who never came. Next to it hung a tapestry showing a forest in full leaf, which actually concealed a tiny little hidden door. This led to the

sally port, the secret staircase, and my favourite part of our house. The winding steps led upwards to the walkway that led around the high defensive walls, and downwards, they took you to the hidden entrance from the garden. I would often steal away to the secret stairs myself, looking for a place to hide when my father was in a bad temper. Henny spotted my hesitation by the secret door.

'You're not in trouble this morning, you know,' she said, giving my shoulder a little squeeze.

I shook her off impatiently. I quite often *was* in trouble, for making a smart answer or failing to keep my things tidy, and then the sally port became my refuge. Running down those stairs, I would pretend I was a knight like Prince Arthur of old, clanking in my spurs, ready to repel invaders. Running up them, I liked to reach the wall walk, and then climb to the top of our highest tower, imagining that all the land in every direction was my own.

It would have been, once upon a time, but the farms had been sold and forests felled. Indeed, in the middle of what should have been our finest

hunting park, a trembling column of grey smoke arose from the lead smelting concern that my father had set up with capital he could ill afford, and which had yet to produce any of the money we desperately needed.

Aunt Margaret constantly complained that we never had the kind of feasts and balls that she and my father had enjoyed in their youth. This was because of the Great Forfeit, which had been paid by my father's long-dead elder brother, the traitor Baron Camperdowne. But if I ever asked about him, she told me for the hundredth time that a maid should be seen and not heard.

The early hour, the unexpected summons and Henny's brusque kindness gave me a disturbing sense that something important was about to happen. I felt a little hollow inside. It had been a long time since last night's pottage and bread, and that had hardly been a feast. I dug my fingers into my palms to keep my hands from twitching with nerves. At Henny's nod, I knocked on the door to the Great Chamber.

Inside were huge windows cut into walls hung

with faded tapestries. Along one side of the room ran black-stained wooden panelling, from which the white painted faces of our ancestors peered down. I knew that they were watching and judging me. My grandfather was there in the line-up, and my mother, but one portrait was missing. There was a blank patch in the corner where Aunt Margaret had had a picture removed. My traitor uncle.

My father was standing at the window when I entered, his warm breath misting the glass.

His name was Lord Anthony Camperdowne, and he was the Baron of Stone. It was because he had no sons that Aunt Margaret was constantly drumming it into me that one day I would have to take on the responsibility for our great grey house of Stoneton. I knew that it was a very old and very important house, and that our family was very old and important too. But my father did not look important. He was a thin, wiry, short man, with a pointed little ginger beard and baggy breeches. He sometimes reminded me of a fox, his head constantly swivelling round in search of danger or opportunity. Now he swivelled it towards me and smiled.

'Elizabeth,' he said, gesturing me to join him near the window.

As I crossed the rush matting, I looked at him carefully. His face was creased and worried. He often looked like that in the morning when he had played cards all night with our very rare visitors to Stoneton. It was a warning to me that he might be in the mood when even a simple question would meet a barked demand for silence.

'Father, are you well?' I asked cautiously, not daring to mention my birthday.

'Quite well, thank you. This is a great day.' Despite his cheerful words, I noticed a catch in his voice and he turned back to look out of the window. I thought that he must be observing the broken pane in the corner, where the wind whistled in, but then I saw that his gaze had drifted out further over to the fields in the distance. 'Today you must become a woman.'

I was a woman already, I reminded myself, two years into double figures, and with a tiring woman of my own. I felt a little indignant that he had forgotten, and threw back my shoulders. At the

same time, though, a pin-prick of anxiety and curiosity had started up in my empty stomach. My father was still staring out of the window, and the silence began to drag. I opened my mouth to ask him what he meant, but thought the better of it.

'This day,' he said at last, 'I will accept the Earl of Westmorland's offer. You are to be wed to his son. Does that make you happy?'

For a second or two I could not think what I ought to say. My hands seemed to have crept of their own accord across my belly to comfort each other. Then it came to me.

'Of course, Father,' I said. I lifted the skirt of my gown, bobbing down and bowing my head submissively, just as Aunt Margaret had taught me. Inside, though, my stomach felt wobbly. I knew that I would have to marry, for the good of my family, but I hadn't realised it would be quite so soon.

'Happy? What has happiness got to do with it?'

The voice came from the doorway. I turned and saw Aunt Margaret standing there, black as a crow against the daylight from the gallery beyond. 'She understands her duty. I have made sure of that.'

'Leave us, Margaret,' my father snapped. His eyes were straying again, out of the window and across the sodden meadows beneath the castle keep. My aunt gave a loud tut. She swooped out of the room in a whoosh of black skirts and tapping cane.

Once she had gone and the door was shut, my father seemed to notice the shaking of my legs. He sat me down on the window seat and took my hand.

'Rosebud,' he said quietly, using his private name for me. 'Your mother would have been so proud of you.'

The lady Rose, my mother, died when I was just four, and my recollection of her was no more than the scent of the rose petals that she used to dry and bring into my nursery to make it smell sweet. I had no memory of her beyond the narrow, mournful face with dark eyes in the portrait above our heads. But I did have a great sense of loss, a loss that my quicksilver, unreliable father could hardly fill. This mention of my mother, however, of whom he almost never spoke, dented the armour of my adulthood. I felt tears cloud my vision. This time I dipped my head so my father wouldn't see.

'You do understand, don't you?' There was an almost pleading note in his voice.

I thought that grown-ups never cried. Aunt Margaret had certainly told me that fine ladies always controlled themselves. But now I could have sworn that my father, even though he was fully grown and a baron as well, had a tear in his eye.

'Yes, Father,' I said, tightening myself up inside just as Henny tightened the strings on my stays when she dressed me in fine clothes. 'I know my duty.'