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Traitor's Kiss

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Pauline Francis

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For Lynda

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"I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but
I have the heart and stomach of a king."
Queen Elizabeth I, 1588



Prologue

Hatfield Palace, Hertfordshire
21 January, 1549

A scream comes through the open window, so piercing that it stabs me into waking. Who is it?

Kat will know.

But Kat is not in her bed, although her clothes are scattered on the floor, twisted like bodies in the gathering light.

I run downstairs, two steps at a time. At this hour, laundry maids should be crossing the courtyard. Master Parry should be giving orders to the servants. Roger

Ascham, my tutor, should be in the schoolroom, for he likes to read before breakfast.

But all is silent, except for the distant thud of horses' hooves and the wind whining between the tall chimneys.

Something is wrong.

"KAT! KAT!" I stand under the oak and scream into the wind. Dawn lifts the mist around its crown and softens the frozen grass that chills my bare feet.

I am Princess Elizabeth, daughter of King Henry the Eighth and Anne Boleyn, both dead. Kat is my only constant now. Without her, I do not know what to do.

Shall I pray? No, I do not want to kneel. When my mother knelt for her execution, she did not know that the sword was already hidden under a heap of straw; so the swordsman struck off her head suddenly, from behind, and she knew nothing of it. Full of pity for her, he had taken off his shoes so that she would not hear him coming.

That is the only good thing I have ever heard about my mother: that she died swiftly. As for how she lived, I have had only gossip to tell me.

"KAT! Where are you?" The wind hurls sleet into my mouth.

"Call as much as you want, but she will not come." It is a man's voice, just behind me. His peppermint breath warms my neck. He must have crept from the shadows of the tree with the stealth of my mother's swordsman. I turn my head, take in his short hair and beard, his face bloated from Christmastide although Twelfth Night is two weeks past. Envy bites. I was not at court. The new King – my little brother Edward – did not invite me.

I recognize this man. He was a gentleman in my father's privy chamber and Master of the Horse to my stepmother, Catherine Parr, when she was Queen.

I shift from one frozen foot to the other. "Sir Robert Tyrwhitt?" His bow is so brief that he hardly bends his back. "What brings you uninvited to my draughty palace on a winter's day?" I try to keep my voice light, like the snowflakes settling on our heads, but I am chilled with fear. "Where is Kat?"

"Mistress Ashley? She has gone away for a while."

His voice slaps me like the wind.

That is what they said when my mother stopped

coming to see me. I am two years old again and my throat tightens at the memory. I burst into tears as I did then, although I dislike the taste of salt. Now I tug at the collar of his fur cloak. "Is Kat dead?" I ask.

"She might be soon," he whispers. "She has gone to the Tower with your steward. He was the one who screamed just now."

"Why?" My voice dies in my throat.

He stares straight into my eyes. "To find out the truth," he says.

It has come to this. In my heart, I knew that it would. Too many things happened last year when I went to live in London. But Kat has done nothing – except love me. My tears double. I know what truth-seekers are like. I am one myself, and it has taken me to a place worse than hell.

With little concern for my tears, Tyrwhitt commands me to meet him in the schoolroom when I am dressed.

I stiffen. I am a princess. *I* give the commands.

It is my palace. Not his.

Then he is gone, in a swirl of snowflakes, as if I have dreamed him, and I stumble back to my bedchamber,

drenched with sleet, reeking of fear – and anger.

Why did I blubber like a baby in front of Tyrwhitt? He will think I am easy prey.

Have I learned *nothing* this past year?

Kat has not laid out my clothes. Blanche Parry has not brought water for me to wash. I call for her; but she does not come either. I run backwards and forwards, like a headless hen, searching for something to wear. Where is the sombre silk from yesterday? Where are my velvet shoes?

I find the dress folded on Kat's chair. It stinks. But so do I now. I put it on, fastening the buttons wrongly so that the collar lies crooked and the bodice is not tight enough to stop my heart racing. I splash myself with Kat's perfume to hide my sweating fear and let my hair remain as crinkled as autumn leaves for I cannot find my comb.

There are wooden steps that lead from the garden to the schoolroom, and I take them instead of the ones from

the Great Hall, although I am chilled to the bone. I want to look through the window before I go in. If Tyrwhitt does not choose his words carefully, he will feel the lash of my tongue.

The schoolroom window glows with candlelight.

I stand on tiptoe.

Tyrwhitt is seated in my tutor Ascham's chair. He has put on all his finery: his sleeves are of scarlet silk to match the feather in his cap. His fingers are as slender as mine, flashing their rainbow rings: emeralds, rubies and sapphires.

In this schoolroom, I learned to read and write at Kat's knee. Here I read Virgil and Horace and Cicero. It is a room for royal children, its walls warmed by tapestries and cushions, softened by books and maps, perfumed by ink and parchment and warm candle wax.

It is *my* sanctuary and I do not want Tyrwhitt in it.

He has seen me and opens the door. I go in, and in spite of my dishevelled appearance, he sweeps off his feathered cap in a deep bow. Then he waves me to my chair. Ascham always keeps his chair close to the fire.

Mine is close to the window and the garden door, for I hate to be shut in.

I remain standing, stamping my foot, forgetting that my brother, the King, must have sent him. "You cannot come to my palace unannounced and take my personal servants to the Tower without my permission," I protest, breathless.

"Oh but I can, Your Grace. The King's Privy Council has commanded it."

"Well, I am the King's sister and he will help me. And if *he* doesn't, I shall ask my stepfather, Thomas Seymour. He is the King's uncle."

"Your *stepfather*…" He lingers on the word, "…is no longer at home. He has also gone to the Tower."

I am slow to understand. "Is my *stepfather* to question *my* servants? He should have asked me first."

"Ah – no. He is a prisoner too."

My knees buckle.

Tyrwhitt waits for me to ask what he has done wrong. I do not. When I was very young – after my mother died – I learned one thing: if you watch in silence, you will hear more. I sink into my chair.

His chains of office clink as he fidgets. "Your stepfather, Thomas Seymour, has entered the King's bedchamber in the middle of the night, and killed his spaniel when it barked," he says. "He has boasted of becoming your brother's Protector…and of marrying you, now that his wife, Lady Catherine, is dead."

I want to cry again at the mention of Lady Catherine. She was my father's sixth and last wife. A few months after his death at Greenwich Palace almost two years ago, she married Thomas Seymour. I loved her dearly and I curse him in my mind. *He* is the reason that I did not see her before she died in childbed.

Tyrwhitt smiles like a fond father. "Let us talk of Thomas Seymour and you."

"There is no 'Thomas Seymour and me'. He is old enough to be… He is almost forty."

"Yet there are things" – he lowers his voice – "which you might want to confess to me now, before Mistress Ashley is forced to confess them…shameful things that we might attribute to, let us say, youthful folly."

The day has barely lightened beyond grey at the window. It was at such times that Thomas Seymour

came to my bedchamber… I am close to fainting. Hunger gnaws at my stomach. I have not eaten this morning. "What do you mean?" I whisper.

"You were seen in Lord Seymour's barge on the Thames last Shrovetide…alone…and before that…" He coughs.

The door creaks. Blanche Parry comes in, her eyes swollen with weeping. She does not look at me, but, clumsy with nerves, bangs a silver dish onto the table between us – a dish of sugar roses.

My breathing quickens. My cheeks flush. Nobody makes sugar roses for me here. I do not permit it.

Tyrwhitt *knows*.

I do not know how this will end, but I know how it began – little more than a year ago, when the leaves curled like flames, on the morning of my fourteenth birthday…

…with a sugar rose….

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