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opening extract from

The Lady in the Tower

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PROLOGUE



1540

I used to be happy here. In the days when happiness still dwelt within the castle walls. Mother's merry laugh could often be heard ringing out in the great hall and Father's voice echoed cheerfully as he shouted orders to servants and played games with us.

Four Years ago, when I was just eleven years old, a day came that altered everything. A day that is burned into my memory like a brand that will never fade. It changed my life and it changed me.

These days I move about like a ghost or a shadow. I slip quietly up spiral staircases or hide behind tapestries to avoid being seen. I overhear much, but take part in nothing. I'm still Eleanor Hungerford, daughter of Lord Walter Hungerford, but I eat my meals with the servants. I shun my father's presence.

Often my thoughts stray to the south-west tower, where sometimes I glimpse my mother's face, pale and wan, imprisoned behind the high windows. The Lady Tower, they call it now. The door to the tower is kept locked and I cannot go to her.

I'm older now. I am turned fifteen. And though I am grown sadder, I've grown wiser too.

CHAPTER ONE



Winter 1536 (four years earlier)

I gripped the reins tightly in one hand and my practice lance in the other. I could sense my horse Arianna gathering herself beneath me, waiting for the moment when I let her go.

‘Don’t let me down this time, Arianna,’ I whispered. I could see her ears pricking up as she listened to my words. She had tried every trick imaginable this morning already. If she had set out to prove herself an unsuitable mount for me, she could not have succeeded better. This was her last chance.

‘We have to best Gregory’s performance,’ I told her fiercely, as I watched my cousin limping back up the meadow towards us, muddy and humiliated, leading his horse.

We were riding at the quintain, a target attached to a long arm that swings away as you strike it. We had used it often enough before, but today a heavy sack of meal had been tied to the other end of the arm. The sack would swing round and catch an unwary rider in the back. This is how it would be done in a real tournament. It had unhorsed my cousin twice.

‘Good luck, Eleanor,’ said my little brother Walter. At just four years old, he looked tiny on horseback. His legs did not reach to the bottom of the saddle. But like me, he had been riding since before he could walk.

‘Your turn, Eleanor!’ ordered the castellan.

At my slightest urging, Arianna sprang into a swift canter. She fought with me to turn our controlled charge into a headlong gallop. I held her steady and on a straight line to the quintain.

The target was looming closer. My heart was pounding with excitement. I could feel wild energy coursing through my veins like fire. I eased the reins a little more and Arianna quickened her pace. Her hooves were thundering on the meadow now, sending pieces of turf flying into the air.

I levelled the lance and raised myself a little in the stirrups, taking careful aim. As my lance struck the centre of the target, I gave a cry of triumph.

But the thud of the lance on the wood and the jolt that accompanied it brought Arianna up short. She shied, leaping wildly into the air. I kept my seat without difficulty, but the sack of meal that should have passed harmlessly behind us came flying straight at me. It all happened so fast I had time only to throw myself forward onto Arianna’s neck. The sack struck me a heavy blow on one shoulder, knocking the breath from my body and sending me sliding across the saddle. I grasped my horse’s mane, righting myself, but to my shame the lance slipped from my grip and tumbled to the ground.

I paused a moment before dismounting to retrieve it. I didn’t want the others to think I had fallen. Arianna

stepped sideways and threw up her head as I bent to collect the lance, dragging me through the muddy grass. I held on to her reins grimly, and once she had calmed down, I began to trudge back up the meadow to rejoin the others. I was bitterly disappointed.

‘Bad luck, Eleanor,’ said Gregory sympathetically. He was back up on his horse, but with a huge smear of mud across one cheek.

I scowled at him, knowing he felt better because I had failed.

‘If you are going to insist on taking jousting lessons with the boys, Eleanor,’ the castellan said severely as I reached him, ‘you will have to ride a suitable horse.’

Dropping the lance at my feet, I pulled Arianna’s head down and smoothed her velvety nose. Her glossy neck, normally gleaming, was dark with nervous sweat.

‘She’s already learned to let me ride astride,’ I protested. ‘And she is beautiful. The best horse in the world.’

I had only had Arianna for two months. She had been an eleventh birthday present from my father. He was surely the kindest and most generous father to bestow such a costly gift on me. Arianna was part Arab and the most graceful and elegant horse I had ever seen.

‘Perhaps,’ agreed the castellan unenthusiastically. ‘But she’s also nervous and flighty. You’ll never make a tournament horse of her. She’s putting you in danger with her tricks. I agreed to keep teaching you with reluctance. This is no sport for a girl. If you argue with me, I shall have to exclude you from these lessons.’

‘Yes, Johnson,’ I said meekly. I knew very well how

fortunate I was to have been allowed to continue riding lessons with the boys once they began training to tilt. My mother considered that it would be more appropriate for me to improve my stitching and learn to read and write better. Luckily, Father had overruled her, saying I might continue riding lessons for at least a few more months. He was proud of my riding skills and despised book learning of any kind.

But the castellan, our teacher and the head of castle security, was not a man to be argued with. I knew if he told Father I was putting myself in danger, Father would call a halt.

‘You are possibly the best rider of your age I have ever seen, Eleanor,’ the castellan added in a gentler tone. ‘But you are not doing yourself justice. Have Beau saddled next time.’

The lesson was ended for that day. I felt dispirited as I accompanied Gregory and Walter across the river Frome and back up the hill to the castle. I had failed to avoid that sack, I had dropped my lance, and Arianna was in disgrace.

‘What a long face, Eleanor,’ remarked my cousin. ‘If the castellan had spoken of my riding like that, I should be overjoyed. He’s pretty sparse with his praise.’

I managed a small smile.

‘And you still have Arianna to ride whenever we are not jousting,’ added Gregory. ‘I don’t see the problem. In fact I think it pretty unfair that you should be the best rider of us. I mean, you are just learning for fun. You will never be allowed to ride in a tournament. It will be Walter and I who do that. So what use is it to you to be skilled with a lance?’

‘Why won’t Eleanor be allowed to ride in a tournament?’ asked Walter.

Gregory rolled his eyes.

‘Because she’s a *girl*,’ he sighed. ‘Girls can’t enter tournaments. They are men’s sport.’

I frowned at being reminded of this. Riding was my favourite occupation.

We reached the stables and Tom, the stable boy, came hurrying up to us. He took hold of Arianna’s reins and held her while I slid to the ground.

‘How did you do, Mistress Eleanor?’ he asked me eagerly.

‘Not well, Tom. I’m to ride Beau next time,’ I said sadly.

‘I told you so,’ Tom remarked.

‘Damn your eyes, Tom,’ I said rudely.

He laughed. ‘Your cousin looks as muddy as a pig in a midden,’ he added for my ears only. ‘I’m guessing he took a tumble?’

‘Two,’ I said with some satisfaction. I was very fond of my cousin, but he had only been at Farleigh a year. He had come here as pageboy to my father. Tom, on the other hand, had been a friend and confidant all my life. He was also the best source of useful vocabulary anyone could want. My mother would have fainted on the spot if she had heard half the stable language I knew.

‘Are you two laughing at me for falling off?’ asked Gregory and grinned good-humouredly. He never minded me teasing him.

‘Only a little,’ I promised him. ‘Come, Walter!’ I cried, wanting to shake off my disappointment. ‘Let us ride to find Mother!’ I neighed and crouched down on the

cobbles ready to be his steed. Tom swung Walter onto my back and I cantered him across the stable yard and over the bridge into the inner court of the castle. I snorted and whinnied as I went and Walter shrieked with delight. Gregory caught me up, neighing and pawing the ground.

‘Faster, Eleanor!’ shouted Walter, kicking me as if I were really his pony. ‘Gallop!’

But we had reached the steps to the keep now, and I slowed as I mounted them.

‘You are growing heavy, Walter,’ I complained.

‘Horses don’t talk,’ shouted Walter.

So I raced across the Great Hall and along the passageways of the castle, my skirts swishing around my ankles, and entered the family apartments in a riot of noise.

Mother covered her ears and raised her eyes heavenwards in mock anguish as we passed, but once we had taken a couple of turns about the room and returned to her, she was laughing. We collapsed in a breathless heap on the sheepskin rug before the fire, Walter’s arms still twined tightly about my neck. Gregory threw himself down beside us, a huge grin on his face.

As we calmed down, I saw Mother compose her face and look serious: ‘Eleanor,’ she said. ‘There is a grave matter about which I must speak to you.’

I untangled myself from my brother at once and stood before her, hands folded, eyes downcast.

‘Yes, Mother?’ She looked at me severely and I searched my mind for some transgression, but could think of none. She rarely disciplined us, and I could not imagine what I might have done wrong.

Mother fished in her workbox and lifted out a piece of embroidery. It was much crumpled and stained, with every stitch either strained tight or loose and sagging. I knew it well. Mother held it distastefully between finger and thumb and frowned mightily.

‘What, may I ask, Eleanor, is this meant to be?’

‘My most recent sampler, ma’am, if it please you,’ I replied, sweeping her a deep curtsy, peeping through my lashes to see whether she was serious or merely teasing. I thought I could see a twinkle in her eye.

‘I feared as much. It does not please me, Eleanor. In fact it offends the eye. I would expect better craftsmanship from the gong farmer.’

Little Walter, who had been looking anxiously from one to the other of us, hooted with laughter at this. ‘But, Mother, he’s the man who mucks out the moat below the latrines! He doesn’t sew!’

‘My point exactly,’ agreed Mother cheerfully. ‘I fear there is only one thing to be done with this, Eleanor,’ she told me, and cast it into the fire. I gasped as it caught and shrivelled. I did not care about the hated sampler, but turned and stared at Mother, looking for some sign of how angry she really was. She tried to look severe, but then her dimple peeped out. I heaved a sigh of relief and grinned mischievously.

‘And what is my punishment to be, ma’am?’ I asked.

‘You will begin a new one tomorrow. And I shall pray that we can find a husband for you who cares little for the domestic virtues, my daughter.’

‘Lord, yes!’ I agreed cheerfully. ‘For I’ll be damned if I’ll ever be good at stitchery.’

‘I am aware of it,’ remarked Mother, a genuine frown now furrowing her brow. ‘But in all seriousness, Eleanor, you must rid yourself of the language of the stables! It is one thing to be unable to sew, but quite another to swear like a groom.’

‘Sorry, Mother,’ I murmured, aware that I had gone too far.

She smiled, and her face lit up. ‘And now that I have done my duty by you, shall we all have a game?’

We had just had time to become engrossed in a round of tables when we heard the commotion of an arrival below in the outer court. Not just one or two horses. By the sound of it there were many.

‘Who can that be?’ I asked Mother. ‘Surely it cannot be Father?’ Mother shook her head, but I could tell by the light in her eyes and the softening in her face that she thought it was.

‘I dare not hope so,’ she said. ‘He is not due back from London for another week at the least. When last he wrote he was much taken up with business at Court. We are fortunate that he finds so much favour with the king.’

I thought as she spoke that she did not look very happy about it. I was surprised. We were all so proud of Father. But before I could say anything, my brother interrupted.

‘The king is King Henry the Eighth, and he lives in London,’ Walter announced importantly, showing off his knowledge. He had climbed up to one of the narrow windows, and was craning his neck to get a view of the stables. Then his voice changed abruptly. ‘It is! It is Father!’ he screeched. My cousin grinned, I felt a rush of

excitement and saw the joy written plainly on my mother's face.

'Mother, can I run down and see if he's brought me a present from London?' begged Walter.

'No, Walter. We shall receive your father here with dignity, if you please.'

Breathlessly, we awaited the familiar tread across the main hall, and for Father's cheerful, blustering voice. He would be pleased to see us, and to be home again. He would pretend not to have presents for us, but of course he would have. He always did. He would stroke his red beard and guffaw and eventually bid us look in his saddlebags.

But today we heard only silence. For a long time. Even the usual castle bustle seemed hushed.

Then came the sound of tramping feet across the hall. Several pairs of boots, but no cheerful voices. I was still excited, but the first icy trickle of premonition ran down my back. Something was not right.

Two of my father's knights entered, their faces expressionless. I looked to my father for reassurance as he came in, but received none. His face, usually red, was pale and sickly. Another man stood beside my father. His clothes were plain, and he had not the look of a fighting man about him. As he stood there, slightly stooped with inky fingers, he seemed sinister somehow. Then I recognized him: Thomas Cromwell. He was a close friend of my father, and adviser to King Henry.

We stood in silence a moment. I felt Gregory take my hand and gripped his fingers, taking comfort from the clasp. I could feel the happiness draining out of me,

leaving me hollow and sick. Something was terribly wrong. Gregory felt it too.

My father glanced at us and looked irritated at the sight of our clasped hands.

‘Hungerford,’ he snapped, using my cousin’s surname, ‘there is a gift awaiting my son in the schoolroom. Please take him there!’

Gregory cast me a frightened glance as he left the room.

Little Walter looked surprised, but went willingly enough, giving Father a hug on the way out.

‘Sir Walter?’ asked Mother tentatively. ‘Is something amiss?’

‘Amisss? Indeed it is!’ he barked, with none of his usual warmth. ‘*You* are amiss, my *lady!*’ The emphasis turned my mother’s title into an insult, and she paled, grasping at a chair for support.

I stared at my father in disbelief. Where was my happy, loud, blustering father? He was transformed.

One of the men stepped forward.

‘Lady Elizabeth, you are under suspicion of practising witchcraft and of infidelity,’ he stated coldly. ‘You are to come with us.’

I felt my insides freeze as the words sank in. Witchcraft? Not my mother. The memory of the village woman who had been burned at the stake as a witch returned painfully to my mind. I was eight when it happened. I remembered her screams, the stench of burning flesh, and the way her long hair had caught and burned like a torch.

I began shuddering, my breath coming short. I looked at my mother in disbelief. She was white about the lips.

‘Walter, dearest . . . ?’ she faltered. ‘Is this some terrible jest?’

That’s it, I thought. It’s a jest. He’s teasing, just like she teased me about my dreadful sewing earlier. Like he teases us about the presents. In a moment he’ll laugh and they’ll hug each other.

‘Do you deny, ma’am, that you have lain with other men in my absence? That you have brewed potions to ensnare me anew on my return?’ My father’s voice was cold and hard. I gasped with shock.

‘Walter, please . . . our daughter. Eleanor,’ whispered my mother disjointedly.

‘Do you deny the charge?’ Father demanded, his voice icy, and his eyes not quite meeting hers.

‘I never . . . no, I mean yes. Of course I deny it. Walter, please, what madness has come over you? I pray you, end this foolish game.’

‘I’m ending it now, ma’am.’ He turned to his knights. ‘Seize her. Take her to the top room of the south-west tower. My chaplain has prepared it for her reception.’

‘No! Walter, no!’ my mother cried out. She reached out her hands to him, desperation in her face. ‘God be my witness, our children have been my companions by day and my only bedfellows by night! Who has told you such lies?’

Sir Walter ignored her, merely nodding to his men.

At once they seized Mother by the arms and began dragging her away. She struggled and cried out, but then went limp, as though resigned to her fate.

Until that moment, shock and disbelief had held me frozen in passive horror. It suddenly lifted. I ran to my mother and flung my arms around her.

‘No, Father!’ I cried. ‘You can’t! It’s not true . . . ’

I could not believe this could be happening. What was my father thinking of? Or was it another man, a stranger, pretending to be my father?

Another guard stepped forward and tore me away from my mother. As she was taken from the room, I wrenched myself free of my captor and seized Sir Walter by the arm, shaking it urgently.

‘Father! She’s done nothing wrong! Tell them to let her go!’

‘Be silent, girl!’ He glared at me a moment, and I saw his eyes dancing madly and beads of sweat standing out on his forehead. I recoiled slightly and he shook me off in disgust, as though I were a rat or a cockroach, giving me a shove so that I fell to the floor. I was furious. My mother had often deplored my temper. It flared now. Here I was in this room which just a few moments ago had been bright with happiness. It was all gone, and in its place were swirling mists of pure rage. I got up and punched Father in the stomach. He did not flinch. I had forgotten his chain mail beneath his tunic. The pain in my hand merely fuelled my anger. I began to kick his shins and yell.

‘You piece of filth!’ I shouted. ‘You madman! Let Mother go, at once!’

He went to push me again. This time I caught his hand and sank my teeth into it until I tasted blood.

Sir Walter’s scream of pain echoed around the chamber. I heard him yell. ‘You witch’s spawn, you’ll pay for that!’

His voice had a high-pitched, almost insane note in it.

I heard him yell an order and the next thing I knew I had been lifted bodily off the ground and was being carried out of the room. I lashed out with my feet at my captors. My foot sank into soft flesh more than once. They grunted, but didn't slacken their hold.

'Lock her in one of the top rooms,' snarled my father. 'Perhaps a couple of days with no food will tame her.'

I was dragged roughly up the spiral staircase. I fought the men every step of the way. Then, sitting on the dusty floor of an empty room with the door locked behind me, I wrapped my arms around my knees and rocked myself to and fro, shaking.

'I'll rescue you, Mother,' I vowed quietly, in a voice that sounded quite unlike my own. 'If he doesn't realize his mistake first, I'll set you free myself.'

I was young then, and did not realize that the very power and wealth I admired in my father would be turned against me. Petted and indulged as I had been up to that point in my life, I did not understand how impossible it is for a child to set herself against an adult.