

BLOOD BETWEEN QUEENS

by

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Historical Preface

In 1560 the young English queen, Elizabeth Tudor, in the second year of her reign, feared a French invasion through Scotland. To prevent it, she sent an army to back Scottish rebels who had risen up against their mighty overlords, the French. The nominal queen of Scotland was Mary Stuart, but she had gone to France as a child to marry the heir to the throne. He had become king and she, at seventeen, was queen of France. The leader of the Scottish rebels was Mary's half-brother, the Protestant Earl of Moray, and with Elizabeth's help he and his fighters beat the French army, ending French domination in Scotland and putting a Protestant government in power. Elizabeth's victory over the French in Scotland was a turning point in her fledgling reign. By gambling on intervention she had defied the great powers of France and Spain, elevating her status at home and in the eyes of all Europe, whose leaders had to acknowledge her as a formidable ruler. She did this at the age of twenty-six.

Elizabeth could not have realized that her problems with Scotland had just begun. Mary Stuart had a claim to Elizabeth's throne. They were cousins: Henry VII was Elizabeth's grandfather and Mary's great-grandfather. The following year Mary's husband, the French king, died, and she, a widow at eighteen, came back to Scotland to take up her birthright as its queen. She also publicly maintained her claim to the throne of England. But first she had her own people to contend with. Her return upset the balance of power among the Scottish nobility, setting off a cold war between Mary's supporters, who were mostly Catholic, and those of her Protestant half-brother, Moray, the de facto head of the government. For six years this unrest smouldered. Mary infuriated Moray's party when she married a young Englishman, Lord Darnley. She gave birth to a son, but the marriage quickly turned sour and Mary began to rely on the tough, soldierly Earl of Bothwell; many whispered that the relationship was adulterous. In the winter of 1567 the rivalry between the power-seeking factions came to a head when Lord Darnley was killed in an explosion: the house he was staying in was blown up with gunpowder.

Three months later Mary wed Bothwell. Suspicion for Darnley's death fell on them both. Moray acted quickly to take power. He indicted Mary for masterminding her husband's murder, took charge of her baby son, and imprisoned her. Bothwell fled. Mary Queen of Scots, at age twenty-four, had lost her kingdom.

Mary's prison tower rose from an isolated fortress, a castle on an island in Loch Leven. In May 1568 she had been a captive for ten months when one of her young supporters helped her slip out of the castle dressed as a country woman. He rowed her the mile across the lake. Waiting on the other side were her loyal nobles.

All of Europe gasped at the news of Mary's escape. She was notorious for the scandals that had swirled around her: Was she a murdering adulteress who had deserved to be deposed, or an innocent victim horribly wronged? Everyone had an opinion – and waited to see what would happen next. It held enormous significance for every leader. The kings of Spain and France, fiercely Catholic, were eager to see Moray's Protestant government destroyed. If Mary ventured to reclaim her throne it could start an international war. Elizabeth, once again, feared invasion.

Mary quickly gathered an army. So did Moray. They faced each other on the Glasgow moor near the village of Langside. As Mary looked on from a hilltop, her commander Lord Herries led a cavalry charge that forced Moray's men to retreat. But when another of the Queen's commanders led his infantry through the village's narrow street they met close fire from hackbutters that Moray had placed behind cottages and hedges. Hundreds of the Queen's men fell under the gunfire. Moray's main force, moments ago in retreat from Herries' cavalry charge, turned and attacked. Mary's demoralized men began to flee, deserting. Moray's men chased them. The Battle of Langside was over in less than an hour. Mary had lost her kingdom for a second time.

She panicked. She galloped down the slope, terrified of being captured again. Lord Herries and a dozen others loyal to her rode after her. Herries begged her to take flight for France, but Mary galloped south. In her terror she wanted to put Scotland behind her as quickly as she could.

She rode for England.

Chapter 1

Alice

The night of the fireworks changed the course of many lives in England, though no one suspected the dark future as hundreds of courtiers stared, faces upturned in delight, at the starbursts of crimson, green, and gold that lit up the terraces, gardens, and pleasure grounds of Rosethorn House, the country home of Richard, Baron Thornleigh. That night, no one was more proud to belong to the baron's family than his eighteen-year-old ward, Justine Thornleigh; she had no idea that she would soon cause a deadly division in the family and ignite a struggle between two queens. Yet she was already, innocently, on a divergent path, for as Lord and Lady Thornleigh and their multitude of guests watched the dazzle of fireworks honoring the spring visit of Queen Elizabeth, Justine was hurrying away from the public gaiety. Someone had asked to meet her in private.

"Who is it, Timothy?" she had asked the footman when he reached her beside the goldfish pond. She was shepherding three of Lord Thornleighs' grandchildren in a game of tag, and had to raise her voice above their squeals. They were a rambunctious trio, excited at being allowed to stay up late for the revels.

"I know not, my lady. She would not say. Just asked for you."

"Behave yourselves," she told the little ones. "Katherine, watch them, will you?" The eight-year-old took an instant tyrannical pleasure in ordering her brother and cousin to sit.

Justine hurried along the path through the knot garden crowded with strolling courtiers. She was hurrying because she wanted to get the interview over with quickly, whoever it was. She had something more exciting on her mind. She'd been told that Lord Thornleigh's nephew, Will Croft, was somewhere among the guests. An ambitious law student, Will was never far from his patron, Sir William Cecil, and Cecil, the Queen's most trusted councillor, was never far from her court. Tonight, most of the court was here at Rosethorn. Justine was determined that as soon as she had fulfilled her promise to entertain the children, and their nursemaid had taken them off to bed, she would find Will in the throng. One word from him, one look even, would thrill her more than all the fireworks in the kingdom.

Nevertheless she slowed, a little in awe, as she passed the open-air banqueting pavilion where the queen was making merry with her hosts and closest courtiers. Justine had never

spoken to Queen Elizabeth face to face, an honor she hoped one day to be worthy of, and it was thrilling to see her bantering with Lord and Lady Thornleigh. The three were old friends. Naturally, Justine thought with a glow of pride, for no monarch could ask for a more loyal nobleman than Lord Thornleigh. So commanding a man, tall, erect, with his close cropped iron-gray hair and the leather patch over his lost eye while his good eye, a blazing blue, missed nothing around him. Lady Thornleigh, elegant and gracious as ever, would always have Justine's affection and respect, but his lordship had Justine's love.

And what magnificent entertainment he had laid on for the Queen! The pavilion, built for her visit, was on a raised platform to give her the best view. Its canopy of scarlet silk rippled faintly in the breeze, and torches flared around it. The vista she looked out on was a dazzle of fire and water. On the terraces, fountains shot up bursts of wine that sparkled in the torchlight as if mimicking the fireworks. The man-made lake reflected the torch flames that ringed its shores. Windows in the four-story house appeared ablaze as they, in turn, reflected the burnished lake. Even the crowd shimmered, Justine thought, all the lords and ladies in their satins and silks of every jewel hue. She hoped her own finery did justice to the family; she had carefully chosen a velvet gown of cornflower blue spangled with silver stars. Lady Thornleigh had approved it for the grand event and Justine knew the color set off her fair hair well. Yet she felt a pang of regret, as she often did, at looking so unlike a Thornleigh. Her ladyship, and her daughter and step-son and all their children were dark-haired, and Justine often wished that her own hair was not so brightly blond nor her eyes so very blue. Still, she took a secret delight in sharing that blue trait with Lord Thornleigh. It made her feel as though she alone was his daughter.

Trumpeters blared a fanfare. Drummers rumbled a drum roll. A signal that the next fireworks fusillade would be the crowning event? Every guest looked to Queen Elizabeth, and so did Justine. Slender at thirty-four, dressed in lustrous black and white satin, her red hair studded with pearls, Elizabeth stepped closer to the pavilion's rose-wrapped railing to watch, a wine glass in her hand. The barrage that followed was stunning: twelve canons boomed from earthen ramparts, shooting balls of fire high into the blackness. Justine felt the ground tremble from the blasts. People cheered. She caught the expectant looks of Lord and Lady Thornleigh standing beside their royal guest. Had this magnificent display they had arranged been worth the enormous expense?

The Queen quaffed back the last of her wine. She rapped the goblet against the railing and the bowl of the glass shattered. She stuck the broken stem in her mouth, then grinned. Sugar glass. Courtiers around her followed suit, smashing their glasses in a shower of brittle sugar, and munching the shards that their servants scrambled to retrieve. The Queen threw back her head and laughed. Lord and Lady Thornleigh beamed.

Definitely worth the expense, Justine thought with a smile.

Once past the Queen's pavilion she hurried on up the crowded terrace steps, making for Lady Thornleigh's rose garden where the unnamed guest was waiting. The rose garden lay at the far side of the terrace, beyond the torches, and she could make out no figure yet in its shadows. Who could want to see her? She recalled that a place for a lady-in-waiting to the Queen had recently opened up. Could this visitor be the widowed Lady Denny come to solicit her to get Lady Thornleigh to put her daughter's name before the Queen? Or could it be the scholar's wife from Oxford who had grabbed her sleeve on the Whitehall Palace wharf at Lent, asking her to recommend her son as a tutor to Lord Thornleigh's eldest grandson? Justine was determined to protect her guardians from excessive demands on their largesse. She would take Lady Thornleigh only the petitions of the deserving.

Another fusillade of fireworks burst behind her with such a mighty noise, a whoosh like a thousand arrows let fly, she stopped and looked up. Five enormous bursts of fire hung suspended for a moment, then rained down in a shower of gold. Justine had to admire the wild beauty of it. It was as if the stars were falling from the sky. It gave her goose bumps, for it seemed to herald success with her vow to speak to Will before the night was out. This time, she would let him know her heart. Unmaidenly behaviour, no doubt, but she didn't care.

She had loved Will Croft from the moment she first saw him. Eight years ago when Lord Thornleigh had brought her into his London home she was a frightened ten-year-old whose world had been devastated. Bewildered and withdrawn, she had responded to Lord and Lady Thornleigh's gentle questions with tight one-word answers, for although they were kindness itself she had so much anxiety knotted up inside her she was afraid to open her mouth lest her fears shoot out in words and turn these good people against her. They had taken her in, telling everyone she was the orphan of a distant Thornleigh relation. No one beyond the immediate family knew the truth: that she was the child of a traitor. One evening, creeping into the parlor as the family went into the great hall for supper, Justine had stood in lonely silence, trying to rouse

courage to join them, to speak, to allow herself to hope that they really would accept her as one of them.

“I’m not too hungry myself,” a voice said, startling her. She turned. He was sitting on the window seat tucked into an alcove, reading a book. A lad a few years older than Justine, thirteen or fourteen she guessed, lanky, his long legs stretched out along the window seat, perfectly at home. He glanced up at her, pushing aside a lock of his thick dark hair that had tumbled over his eyebrow. “Ever read Leland’s histories?”

She shook her head. But said not a word. Who was he?

“He says there actually was a King Arthur of Camelot. Says there’s evidence to reconstruct Arthur’s lost tomb at Glastonbury Abbey. Ever been there?”

Another shake of her head.

“I haven’t either. I’d like to, though. What’s even more interesting, he identifies the hill fort of Cadbury Castle in Somerset as Camelot. Listen to this.” He read: “At the south end of the church of South Cadbury stands Camalat, once a famous castle town, upon a tor or hill, wonderfully strengthened by nature. The people there have heard say that Arthur much resorted to Camalat.”

Curiosity tingled her. “Isn’t King Arthur just a fairy tale?”

He looked up at her over the page. She realized she had spoken her first sentence in weeks. The smile in his gentle brown eyes told her that he knew it too. He said, “I like to have all the facts before I make up my mind.”

Suddenly, so did she.

“Sit down,” he said, “and I’ll read you about Queen Guinevere. She was his love, you know. He would have laid down his life for her.”

Shyly, Justine perched on the edge of the window seat.

He smiled. “I’m Will. They won’t miss us in there.” He flipped a page. “Listen to this.”

And he read to her. For maybe half an hour, maybe an hour, she was too enthralled to notice. By the time he closed the book Justine was curled up in the other corner of the window seat, dreaming of how, if Will ever should need it, she would lay down her life for him.

But the next day he was gone. To Oxford, she was told. Thirteen was when promising young gentlemen started their studies at the university, and Will Croft, Lord Thornleigh’s nephew – for that’s who they told her he was – was preparing for a life in the law. Justine

thought about him often, and whenever she opened a book it was his voice she heard reading, but she did not see him again for eight years. Then, four months ago, at the Queen's Twelfth Night revels at Hampton Court, there he was. Justine's heart had leapt. He was a man now, twenty-one, almost as tall as Lord Thornleigh, but with the same boyish lanky limbs she remembered, the same gentle brown eyes, the same lock of thick dark hair tumbling over his eyebrow. He had looked at her in surprise, as though astonished to find her grown up too.

"Did you get to Glastonbury and find King Arthur's tomb?" she asked, unable to mask the glow that radiated from her heart.

He smiled. He remembered! "Not yet. It's good to have a mystery or two waiting to be unlocked, don't you think?"

She had danced with him, and wished the music would never end. Not that he was the best dancer. Rather gangly, really. No, it was the way he answered her questions about the Inns of Court in London where he was now studying law – answered as if he were struggling to keep his mind off her. And the way he pushed back the curling lock of hair that kept falling in his eyes – pushed it as if annoyed at it for breaking his concentration on her. By the time he had made of point of dancing with her three more times that night, Justine was sure he felt as she did. Every day since then she had relived the thrill of his hand on her hip in the dance. But, maddeningly, they had seen each other only twice more, both times at Whitehall Palace, surrounded by people, no chance to talk. There might as well have been a wall between them. Tonight she was bursting to open a door in that wall.

She reached the rose garden and passed under its brick entrance arch. Inside, the trellised walls reached as high as her shoulders. The blooms, dusky red in the darkness, perfumed the air. The light was dim, the torches now so far away, but moonlight silvered the foliage. The voices and laughter on the terrace sounded fainter, and Justine's footsteps crunched softly on the gravel path. She stopped. Trellised alleys radiated out from the arch, but she saw no one. A bat flitted down the right-hand alley. In the distance behind her, musicians struck up a tune. The Queen will be dancing, she thought.

There was a rustling as from a satin gown. She looked down the left alley. At the far end a figure stood in shadow, her dark red satin cloak the color of claret, like the roses. Justine went to meet her, thinking how odd it was that the hood of the lady's cloak was pulled up, putting her face in even darker shadow. The night was warm, no need for a hood.

“You came,” the lady whispered when Justine reached her. The two words carried surprise and relief. And a touch of fear, Justine thought.

“Madam? May I know your name?”

The lady threw back her hood and lifted her head so that the moonlight made her features clear. Justine gasped. Could it be? “Alice?”

A smile. “Justine.”

It had been eight years! Justine had been ten when they’d parted, Alice twelve. But she would know Alice Boyer anywhere, the dearest friend of her childhood. “Good heavens!” she cried.

“Shhh!”

Justine grabbed Alice’s hands in delight, but was immediately shocked at the feel of her skin, as rough as a field worker’s. From the time Alice was seven she had been a seamstress in the household of Justine’s father. By twelve she was an expert needlewoman, the kind that ladies vied for. But recently, it seemed, her hands had been at work far harder than plying a needle.

Alice flinched at the reaction and pulled her hands free. Justine took in her friend’s whole appearance. Under the fine satin cloak she wore a dress as brown as a burr and of a wool almost as coarse. It was frayed at the neckline and smelled faintly of bacon fat. She wore no jewellery. Nor needed any, Justine thought. Though a servant, Alice had a beauty that would put any great lady to shame. Lustrous auburn hair, skin like cream, full lips, and a statuesque figure that gave her the bearing of a duchess.

“I lifted this from the Marchioness,” Alice said, fingering the fine cloak. “To get me in here.” A sly smile. “What odds she never noticed? She has five others.”

Justine was a little shocked but had to laugh. Alice, always the bold one. She remembered how, as a child in her father’s great house, Yeavinger Hall, she had followed Alice to the top of the bell tower. They had climbed through the window, hopped down to the roof of the great hall, then crawled out along the leads. On their stomachs, heads over the edge of the roof, they had gazed out on the moors that stretched over Northumberland, the cold wind in their faces. Justine had never felt so excited. And would never have had the courage for such an adventure without Alice leading the way.

“Where have you sprung from?” she asked. “How did you find me? And why have—“

“Shh,” Alice said again, imploring.

“Oh yes, of course,” Justine whispered, realizing her mistake. She glanced over her shoulder to make sure they were alone. It would be dangerous for Alice if anyone saw her here, a common interloper and, regarding the satin cloak, a thief. The shadowy alley was vacant, no one around. Justine was relieved, and not just for Alice’s sake. She had her own secrets to guard. If she were seen with Alice, questions could lead to trouble, for she was not who everyone here thought she was – not a distant Thornleigh relation but the daughter of a traitor. Her father, Sir Christopher Grenville, had helped plan an aborted uprising against Queen Elizabeth. Justine shivered at the thought of him. Eight years ago she had cut her former life adrift, gladly letting it sink under the sea of the Thornleighs’ love and care as they gave her their name and brought her up like a daughter. Now, with Alice, that abandoned life had resurfaced.

Alice must have seen the shiver. “Forgive me,” she said. “I would not have come if I . . . if I didn’t need . . .”

“Need what? Alice, what’s wrong?”

“You may as well ask what’s right. That tale is shorter.”

“Does the Marchioness mistreat you? In your last letter you made her sound a shrew.”

They had written to each other a few times a year. Justine had been careful to keep the correspondence secret, but she would not have lost the connection with Alice for the world. Though no scholar, Alice sent jesting letters that made Justine laugh. “Is she so hard a mistress?”

“She sacked me.”

“Good heavens. When?”

“Christmas. Quite the gift.”

“But why?”

“Her son. She didn’t like the time he spent below stairs.”

With Alice. That was the unspoken, damning detail.

“But, how have you got on since then?” Alice’s needlework had supported not just her but her sickly parents, too.

“Haven’t, not really. Da’s leg has festered. Mam prays a lot.”

“And you, Alice?”

“Been taking in washing.”

Of course, Justine thought in dismay. The chapped, rough hands. “You’re far from home. How came you so far south?”

“A man. A silky-talking, honey-voiced bastard of a man. Brought me to London. To marry me, he said. Then left me in a tavern by Holborn Hill. If I never see him again, it’ll be too soon.” She gave a laugh, but it was all bravado, Justine saw, and it ended in a shudder that Alice could not hide. “Oh, Justine.” Tears glinted in her eyes. Justine reached for her hand and squeezed it.

“All I need is a few shillings. Just to get me home. I hate to bother you, and I swear I’ll never . . .” She swayed, unsteady on her feet. Justine grabbed her by the shoulders, afraid she might faint.

“Come. Over here.” She guided Alice to a stone bench. “Sit down. You look exhausted.” No, worse than exhausted, Justine thought in alarm. She looked weak. From hunger? “Where are you staying?”

“Staying?”

“Have you a bed for the night?”

“The stable at the village inn. Straw’s bed enough for me.”

This appalled Justine. “I’ll send a boy to you with some money. In the morning.” She would have to wait until breakfast to ask Lord Thornleigh’s master clerk; he was in charge of the money she had access to for charities and gifts. Still, she could not ask for more than a few sovereigns. Everything she ever needed or wanted, from books to new clothes to jewellery, was handled by Lady Thornleigh. “I wish I could give you a hundred pounds, Alice. And more. But I’m afraid I have only—” She stopped. “No, wait.” She lowered her head and unfastened the clasp of her necklace, a silver chain with a sapphire pendant. “Take this.” She took Alice’s hand and dropped the necklace in her palm. She pulled off her ring of lapis lazuli, too. “And this.”

Alice gaped. “No . . . it’s far too much. You can’t—”

“Sell them.” She folded Alice’s fingers around the jewels. “Take the money to your family.”

“Justine, I—”

“And you need a position. Let me think.” She glanced back toward the festive lights. “I know! I shall speak to Lady Isabel. She’s here with her children for the Queen’s visit. I dare say she’ll be glad to get an expert seamstress.” It was a happy thought – until a darker one struck. “Unless . . . do you mind working again at Yeavinger Hall?” When her father’s treason had shattered Justine’s young world, his property had been forfeited. The Queen had given

Yeavinger Hall and all its lands to the Thornleighs' daughter Isabel and her husband. They lived there now.

"Mind? No," Alice said, still overwhelmed by the jewels. "I'll be right glad to have work anywhere. Ghosts don't bother me."

"Good, then Lady Isabel shall employ you. I promise you, Alice. Leave it to me."

Alice gazed at her, gratitude shining in her eyes. "Your mother would be proud to see you now. So pretty. So kind." Justine waved away the compliment, though it pleased her. She remembered her French mother's quiet, calm ways. Justine had been named after her. She'd died when Justine was seven. Alice asked, "Do you still jabber in French like you did with her?"

"Little need for it," she answered with a shrug. "Only when there's a French diplomat to curtsy to."

Laughter sounded nearby. They both tensed and looked down the alley toward the brick entrance arch. A couple sauntered past, the lady giggling.

"I must go," Alice whispered.

"Yes."

"God bless you, Justine."

They clung to each other for a long moment. Then, Alice was gone.

Justine made her way back across the crowded terrace, and back to the children, shaken by Alice's plight. She would speak to Isabel first thing in the morning. Employment would go a long way to reducing her friend's woes.

When she reached the three children she was surprised to find Katherine and Robert's mother with them. Frances Thornleigh had kept to her room for the festivities. She was in a kind of mourning. Not officially; no fatal word had come about her husband, Sir Adam, Lord Thornleigh's son, but it had been over a year since he had sailed away in command of his ship, one of a small fleet making a trading voyage to the West Indies. Everyone was anxious about him, but everyone hoped for his return. Frances, however, dragged around as if she were already a widow. Justine felt sorry for her.

Yet she always felt uneasy around her, too. Frances, born a Grenville, was her aunt. She had married Adam Thornleigh long before Justine's father had tried to depose the Queen, and after that calamity Frances had been eager to avoid the taint of her brother's treason and so became a willing accomplice to the Thornleighs bringing up Justine as one of them. She lived in

London and did not go out much in public. Justine wasn't sorry for that. Her aunt was a dark reminder of her true blood, and her father's crimes.

"I'm glad you decided to join us, madam," she said, trying to mean it, for she really did pity Frances. Sad and sallow, she looked almost too old to have children as young as Katherine and Robert. At the moment they and their little cousin Nell were poking sticks at the goldfish.

"I was hoping," Frances said, "to ask Sir William Cecil for news of Adam."

"Oh?" Justine's desire to see Will surged back. Cecil was his patron. "Did you find him?"

"No, he is gone."

"Gone?"

"Back to London. Something about the Austrian Archduke's suit for Her Majesty's hand, so I was told."

"At this hour?"

"Affairs of state," Frances said with a disinterested shrug.

Justine felt her hope plunge. If Cecil had gone, so had Will. She had missed her chance. It might be months before they would be in the same place again. His duties kept him in London, at Whitehall or Hampton Court or wherever Cecil went. Her place was with Lord and Lady Thornleigh, and it could be weeks before they left Hertfordshire to return to their London house. She suddenly wished the Queen loathed fireworks and was calling for her carriage at this very moment to take her back to London. The longer the Queen stayed, the longer Justine would be away from Will.

"Justine's back!" cried six-year-old Robert. "Now can we go see the fun, Mama? Justine promised. One more hour."

The three small eager faces turned to Justine and she clamped down her disappointment about Will. "I did, didn't I." She turned to Frances, "All right?"

"Of course. Enjoy yourselves." Frances, an affectionate mother, kissed her two children on the tops of their heads, then turned and drifted away toward the house.

Justine looked at her charges. "Well, you lot, what shall we do?"

"To the acrobats!" Robert cried, pointing to the island in the lake where jugglers and tumblers, ringed by torches, performed their antics to an admiring crowd.

"No, storytellers!" his five-year-old cousin Nell insisted.

“Acrobats!” Robert tugged Justine’s arm to pull her along the path to the lake.

“Storytellers!” Nell tugged her other arm to go the other way. Though the youngest, she was pulling the hardest.

Justine winced. “Ow!”

“Let her be,” Katherine chastised the little ones, always ready to exert her power as the eldest. “I vote for storytellers. Grandmamma hired them specially for us.” On the terrace near the Queen’s pavilion, a storyteller held forth under a tent, where several children sat on rugs, listening, like Persian princelings.

Robert broke away and started running down to the shore. “Robert!” Justine called. “Where are you going? Stop!”

“To the boat,” he called over his shoulder.

She had to admire his initiative. He was voting with his feet. “Come on,” she said, beckoning the girls. “To the island.” She picked up Nell and made for the path to the lake. Katherine accepted Justine’s fiat and followed at her heels.

The path to the jetty was spread with pure white cockleshells for the Queen’s visit. Justine and the girls passed the people strolling with goblets of wine. One lady led a pet monkey on a leash. Holding Nell, Isabel’s youngest, Justine planned how she would approach Isabel in the morning about a position for Alice. She would praise Alice’s mastery of the needle and it would be no lie.

“Hurry,” Robert cried as they reached the jetty.

“The last boat,” Katherine pointed out.

Justine saw that she was right. Earlier, a half dozen boats had lined the jetty and servants had waited to row guests to the island’s entertainments. Now, only one boat remained; the rest were at the island. And there was no servant. Robert was untying the boat, about to climb in.

“Wait for us,” Justine told him as Nell squirmed in her arms. Nell wriggled free and slipped to the ground and grabbed Justine’s leg to hold her back, crying, “No! Storyteller!”

Robert fumbled the line and it slipped into the water. The boat began to drift.

“Catch it!” Justine called.

Robert flopped onto his stomach to try to grab the boat, but his arm was not long enough. Justine pried the little girl away from her leg and dashed to the jetty edge. She dropped to her knees and reached out over the water, stretching to reach the boat, and finally she snatched the

bow. She handed the dripping line to Katherine, saying, “Hold this,” then pried her skirt loose to get up off her knees. But before she could straighten up, Robert jumped onto her back with a laugh. “Horsey! Horsey!”

Nell plopped down on Justine’s foot and hugged her shin. “You tell us a story!”

Weighted down with Robert, unable to budge her foot with Nell clamped on it, Justine struggled to keep her balance on the jetty edge, afraid she would tumble over the side, taking the children with her.

Suddenly, the burden lifted from her back. Then a hand pulled Nell off her foot. Free, Justine turned, and looked up into the face of Will Croft.

“You are Atlas,” he said with a wry smile. “The weight of the world on your back.”

She could not think of a single word to say.

Will set Robert down, then said, “Katherine, make fast the boat. And you two,” he told the little ones, “stop pestering Mistress Justine or there’ll be no candied apricots before bed.”

She found her voice. “Thank you, sir. In a moment I fear we would all have been swimming.”

He smiled. The breeze toyed with the shirt lacings at his throat above his doublet of moss green wool. Justine felt pulled into the warmth of his eyes. “You did not go to London,” she said, wanting to stay like this, him smiling at her, forever.

He looked perplexed. “London?”

“With Sir William.”

“Tonight?”

“About the Austrian Archduke?”

He shook his head, still perplexed. “No. We bide here with my uncle.”

Thank goodness! “Only a rumor, then.”

“Ah, I see. Yes, they spring up around Sir William like mushrooms in the night.”

Again, he smiled, and again words fled Justine. To think that she had intended to tell him her heart. She could not collect enough wit to speak even of the weather.

The children were restless. Robert had climbed into the boat and was struggling with an oar. Katherine had got little Nell to sit still on the jetty edge, but Nell was fidgeting to climb aboard too. More fireworks burst overhead. Some flew off at angles, skimmed the surface of the lake and sank below, then shot up again with garish flashes and bangs like gunshots.

“We’re missing the acrobats,” Robert complained.

Will looked at the island. “Is that your destination?” He looked back at Justine, clearly disappointed. “Now? I wanted . . . that is, I’d hoped . . . to speak to you.”

Her heart leapt. “Oh?” She wished the children would evaporate. She yearned to hear what he had sought her out to say.

“Look, a fire-eater!” Robert cried, eyes on the island.

“Story,” Nell pouted.

“Two competing claims on you, it seems,” Will said. His tone turned serious, his voice low. “And I would make it three.” He reached out and took her hand.

At his touch, her breath stopped. She felt as if her very heart might stop.

He said, “Mistress Thornleigh, we have not known each other long, but—“

“Long enough.”

He looked startled. Happily so. “Long enough, indeed.” He squeezed her hand.

“Jugglers! Look!”

Will did not take his eyes from Justine, nor she from him. “I know this is hardly the time nor place—“

“It’s perfect,” she said, a thrill coursing through her.

“Is it?” He looked eager, hopeful, but not quite trusting his luck. “I would wish perfection of time and place, indeed, if I were to ask you to be my wife. For I would be asking you to take a man who’s far from perfect.”

All she heard was wife. She blurted, “Yes!”

He seemed crestfallen. “Ah . . . I dare say you know my flaws.”

She laughed. “No, I mean, yes I accept.”

He understood then, and his eyes went wide. The air felt charged between them. Fireworks sizzled overhead. On the shore, three fire-wheels as tall as trees spun showers of flame in green, gold, and purple. Justine felt sparks shoot through her as Will slipped his arm around her waist and pulled her close. “I love you, Justine,” he whispered. She lifted her face to his, yearning for his kiss. He hungered for it, too, she knew. But people were everywhere. He withdrew his arm, clearly conscious that he should not compromise her.

“I’ll go and find my uncle,” he said, his voice intimate and low. “And get his consent.”

“Oh, Will.” She had never felt such happiness. Like fire-wheels inside her.

He grinned. “And I’ll ask for his assurance that we are not cousins, you and I. I don’t want to wait for a church dispensation.”

He was jesting, she knew. Only royalty required a dispensation. But it sent a shiver up the back of her neck. He thought she was a remote Thornleigh relation. He didn’t know who she really was. And never will, she silently vowed. She would keep her past life banished forever. But marriage! Overjoyed though she was, this posed a wrinkle she would have to smooth out with Lord Thornleigh. “No, not just yet,” she said. “It will be too much of a surprise for him. Let me speak to him first, prepare the way.”

“If you think it best.”

“I do.”

“Can you talk to him tonight? Now?” His wry smile returned. “I told you, I don’t want to wait.”

Justine wanted him so much she was afraid she might kiss him, never mind the people all around.

“Master Croft?” a voice called.

They both turned. Frances was hurrying down the jetty toward them. “Will Croft, it is you,” she said, reaching them. She looked pale and a little out of breath. “I come for news. I was looking for Sir William.”

“Lady Frances.” Will’s bow to her was stiff. “How can I help you?”

His sudden coldness shocked Justine. He knew, as everyone connected with the family did, that Adam Thornleigh had been at sea for over a year. Was he really making Frances ask? It seemed cruel.

“Has Sir William any word yet of my husband?”

“Nothing.” Another stiff bow. “Now, if you will excuse me.” He stepped away from her as if from a felon, his face hard. Justine could not account for it. Why should he be so unkind to Frances? Then he said to Justine, his voice warm again, as if they were alone, “I leave you, Mistress Thornleigh, for I would not keep you from your task. And if—“

A man’s shout made all three of them turn. It came from the Queen’s pavilion. The words were indistinct but the tone was one of alarm. There was a commotion at the pavilion, people rushing this way and that. “Make way!” a herald cried, and Justine glimpsed Her Majesty

moving quickly down the stairs, making for the house. Her ladies rushed after her in a flurry of colourful silks.

What was happening? Was Her Majesty ill? Justine looked for Lord and Lady Thornleigh. In the moving mass of people she could not see them.

The crowd on the lakefront path, too, was suddenly abuzz. The cheerful mood had turned tense. A man leaving the pavilion area on the run came down the cockleshell path and passed the jetty.

“Sir Henry!” Will called to him. “What’s amiss?”

The man stopped. “A messenger, Will. News from the north. Have you seen my wife?”

“Not bad news, I hope, sir?” Justine asked.

“You be the judge, mistress,” was the enigmatic reply. “Mary, Queen of the Scots, has been routed in battle and has crossed our border. She has arrived in Cumberland with nothing but the clothes she stands up in. She has thrown herself on the mercy of Her Majesty!”