

A House Divided

Chapter 1

"Hold!"

The man's voice, throbbing with a note of urgency, took Maddy by surprise. She had not thought anyone else from court would have been abroad so early. Looking over her shoulder, past the darkened wake her heavy skirts had trailed through the silvered meadow grasses, she saw a group of horsemen, the heads of their hounds bobbing above the heavy mists that spilled from Tyburn's bank.

And then Piers, sleepy Piers, who had done nothing but yawn and knuckle his eyes in mute protest at being pried from his warm bed before even the sun was properly up, let out a shriek and began to run for the trees. The transformation from sluggard to manic action was incredible. His gangling limbs flapped and his neck bobbed as he ran through the blue green grasses, putting her in mind very forcibly of some long legged waterfowl trying to get up enough speed to take flight from a body of water as he streaked past her. If it hadn't been for the persistent, angry shouting coming from the group of riders by the river, she would not have been able to tear her astonished gaze from the phenomenon. As it was, she reluctantly turned to see what all the commotion was about.

The men by the river were milling about in a hubbub of cursing and neighing and baying of hounds, shattering the previously frozen stillness of the dawn. Apparently, the dogs were not very well trained. Else why would the kennel men be having such trouble whipping the pack into some semblance of order?

It couldn't be because they had seen Piers run, and were straining to chase after him, could it? The chill that had so far failed to seep through her dew-drenched skirts now numbed her legs, freezing them to the spot, as she noted the powerful shoulders and blunt nosed faces of the massive dogs. They couldn't be the king's alaunts, could they? Those massive hounds, bred for their aggression, then trained to bate bears, or bulls.

Her breath hitched in her throat as she saw two of the hounds break free from their handlers and bound straight towards her.

She willed her legs to move, to run, but all that happened was that her fingers clenched more tightly round the handle of the gardening trug she was carrying. Her horrified gaze fixed on two sets of open jaws, filled with enormous pointed fangs before she shut her eyes entirely, flinching as she felt two large bodies skimming past her skirts. They had bounded straight past her! They must have had their sights set on the fleeing pageboy!

A whimper escaped her throat as she let out the breath she hadn't realized she had been holding. Then she opened her eyes just a fraction, to see if she had truly survived.

The mist seemed to have grown thicker. She felt as though she were drowning in it, its chill seeping into her very bones. She drew her arms to her chest, instinctively trying to warm herself by wrapping them round her body. Just as she felt her trembling legs crumple beneath her, a third hound came leaping out of the mist at her. The wind was knocked from her lungs as they went down together. The dog's paws ground into her shoulders as its powerful jaws clamped on the trug, which she'd instinctively used to shield her throat. She didn't need to be a genius to know that

once the aunt had crunched her little wooden shield to matchwood, those fangs would sink into her neck, reducing it to so much mangled pulp.

The life-or-death tug-of-war over the trug went on for what seemed like an eternity, and yet still far too short a time, until there was nothing left of it but its flimsy willow handle. The dog paused before launching its final onslaught. As Maddy stared up, transfixed in horror at a great dollop of drool that was slowly spilling from the beast's quivering red maw, she became chillingly aware that these were her last moments.

She could hear her heart swooshing her life's blood through her ears, feel the frost melting through her cloak and mingling with the sweat of rank fear that beaded her spine. She could smell the aunt's hot pungent breath. Could almost feel those bared teeth sinking into her throat, severing arteries and tearing muscle. The dog drew back its lips in a menacing growl.

The drool splashed warmly onto her exposed throat.

Then, for Maddy, the darkness fell.

Sir Geraint Davies pulled Caligula's head round savagely, and kicked his heels against his flanks, urging the destrier into the ponderous gait that passed for a gallop, though he knew it was too late to do anything for the girl. He could only thank God it had been over so quickly. She barely had time to register her danger before the hound's massive jaws had closed round her throat. He'd heard tales of the treacherous brutes turning on their own masters, even slaying them, but never had he thought to witness such an appalling sight.

Frobisher had beaten him to the motionless heap of rags, grabbing the alaunt by its thick studded collar and dragging it off its kill before he could even fling himself from his saddle.

He dropped to his knees, reaching down to touch the body which lay in its nest of crushed grasses, though what he thought he could do at this stage...he shook his head, his face grim, recalling the attack in vivid detail. Once he'd brought the girl down, the dog had done what it was trained to do. Fastened its teeth in her throat and shaken her, like a terrier would shake a rat, until all signs of life ceased.

He reached out a hand that was not quite steady to close the girl's eyes, which still stared sightlessly at the sky. She'd had lovely eyes, he thought sadly. Wide and dark, set in a little round face above the tiniest nose. Her lips were bloodless now, but they were exquisite, too. The upper exactly as full as the lower. He traced the outline of that perfect mouth with his forefinger. What a waste that she had died before any man had a chance to taste its promise!

He snatched it back with an oath when the lips parted on a rasp of indrawn breath. Her glazed eyes flickered, then swivelled helplessly towards him.

My God! She lived still!

For the first time he forced himself to look directly at the wounds the dog had inflicted on her, frowning when he saw the brown pulp covering her throat and upper chest. There did not appear to be much bleeding...his heartbeat racing, he began to scrape it all away, determined to ascertain the extent of her injuries, and if it were, by some miraculous means, possible to staunch her wounds...

He straddled her prone body, intent now only on speed, his gaze fixed on the slender curve of her neck as he scrabbled away the remains of what appeared to have been something wooden, cursing again, in heartfelt relief when he got down to the

white, unbroken skin. The neck of her gown was torn, revealing one plump white shoulder and the upper curve of her breast, scored with three livid red weals. As he ripped the fabric further, desperate to assess how much damage the dog's claws had done her, her hands fluttered up ineffectually against his.

"This is no time for false modesty, you foolish wench!" Anxiety for her wellbeing had him slapping her hands aside rather more forcefully than was necessary. While she lived, if there was any bleeding at all, if he could only find it and stem it quickly enough...

He shut his ears to her shakily voiced protests, ruthlessly pushing aside the soft folds of cloth tangled round her arms and upper body. He could not believe she had managed to escape unscathed from the ferocious attack he had witnessed. Yet no matter how diligently he searched, he could find nothing beyond that one set of claw marks where the dog's heavy paws had torn through her threadbare gown. He leant forward, his fingers poised to examine those marks, needing to reassure himself that they had not broken the milky white skin...only to jerk upright in surprise when the girl delivered a stinging slap to his face.

"Sto...op!" she croaked. Then rather more coherently, after swallowing convulsively, "Stop mauling me, you great oaf!"

Sir Geraint froze in disbelief. What did the silly girl think he was about? Assaulting her? Didn't she know how close she'd just come to meeting her Maker? Couldn't she see that his heart had been in his mouth with the shock of thinking he'd just watched one of King Henry's fighting dogs kill an innocent little girl?

His chest heaved with indignation. As he ran his eyes one last time over the claw marks that scored a distinctly womanly breast, his brows knit in a scowl. This was no little girl at all. Her diminutive stature had deceived him into thinking she was

a little girl. Probably no innocent either, or she would not have been out here at this hour, making for the seclusion of the forest with that gangling youth. As his lip curled with scorn, the girl's own mouth firmed.

This time, when she went to slap him, he was too quick for her. Seizing both her wrists, he pinned them above her head, glaring with increasing ire as she began to struggle in earnest...

"Oaf am I?" He pushed himself to his feet, yanking her up with him as he stood.

"Better than being an empty-headed little trollop, I'd say!"

That temptingly kissable mouth dropped open in astonishment in the same moment her rumpled kerchief slipped slightly backwards. Sir Geraint now had to tamp down not only his desire to kiss the girl senseless in full view of all the kennel men, but also the urge to fling the scrap of linen to the ground and run his fingers through the lustrous mass of ebony silk that would tumble round her shoulders. Instead of doing either, he took those shoulders in his hands, giving the girl a little shake as he nodded in the direction of the forest.

"Don't play the innocent with me! Stupid you may be," he mocked. "God knows you must be to make the meadow where His Grace's alaunts are exercised your trysting place..."

Trysting place? Did this great bear of a man think she had come down here at dawn to tryst with, of all people, Piers? No wonder he had treated her thus far with such a lack of respect. She looked up, past a great expanse of leathern clad chest to peer into the face of the mountain of muscle that held her in its great rough paws. So far she had been too dazed to take in more than the fact that he was enormous, and angry, and strong. But now she registered a face sporting a russet growth of what

looked like several days' growth of beard, and a pair of stormy grey eyes glaring down at her from beneath a shock of shaggy chestnut curls.

When she remained mute, he shook her again. "Don't you realize these dogs are trained to kill, you foolish, foolish wench?"

His gesture put her in mind of the day she'd almost fallen from the top of the watchtower. She'd been leaning over the parapet in an attempt to discern her brother Gregory amongst the cavalcade that was wending its way over the moors and off to do battle with some disloyal noble whose name she'd never learned. William, her next oldest brother, had grabbed her by the scruff of the neck, and shaken her just like this.

"That's why Frobisher exercises them at dawn, in these meadows, where nobody with an ounce of sense would dream of setting foot. Everyone knows how dangerous it is to trespass here!"

"Everyone knows?" she echoed faintly. There was a peculiar rushing noise in her ears. Piers had surely not known. Or he would not have followed her. He would not have willingly put himself in danger, certainly not on her account. She shook her head. Not that she had told him where she was going, only that she had no intention of going alone, and that if he did not want a particular piece of information which she held from getting back to a certain lady, then he would escort her.

She'd felt ashamed of stooping to that level, but honestly, what choice had she had? If she had just gone to Piers, or any other of the pages who were theoretically there to assist her, and politely asked if he wouldn't mind getting up before dawn and walking to the forest with her, he would have laughed her to scorn. The one thing she'd learned during the few months she'd been living amongst Princess Elizabeth's ladies was that nobody did anything for anyone else, without a substantial motive.

She shuddered. From the first moment she'd entered the dark maze that was the Palace of Westminster, she'd been aware of a creeping sense of malice drifting along its corridors like some noxious miasma rising from some pit of corruption.

It must have finally infected her. In spite of trying to avoid the nobles who'd come pouring into Henry Tudor's new court with their elbows out, jostling for preferment, she had become just like them.

She had just been so excited at the prospect of escaping the stuffy room she shared with five other ladies of good birth to breathe air that did not reek of stale perfume, and listen to sweet birdsong instead of rancid gossip, above all, to be free, for at least an hour, from Lady Lacey's constant sniping, that she'd adopted the same, cruel manipulative behaviour she'd condemned in others.

Well, she had paid for it. But had poor Piers? She tried to turn from the scolding bear's rough grip to look towards the forest. She could see the two great dogs that had decided against breakfasting on her hurling themselves repeatedly against the trunk of a gnarled oak tree. A man with a leashed hound at his side was trotting towards them, clearly intent on calling them off. She supposed Piers must have got safely up the tree...

The bear, who had not slackened his hold on her one whit, shook her again.

"What on earth possessed you? What were you thinking of?"

Maddy blinked. She hadn't stopped to think at all. She'd only wanted to whoop with joy as she'd slipped the bolt on the heavy door which led from the ladies quarters where she'd been virtually confined since her arrival at court. After all, thanks to Lady Lacey's sudden whim to have a bowl of freshly dug crocuses, she had a legitimate excuse to get outside! It had been all she could do not to skip across the courtyard where Piers had been lounging against the wall, arms folded across his

chest. But at sixteen, as Lady Lacey persistently reminded her, she was a lady grown, and as such, must behave with decorum. So she had forced her feet to behave, and content herself with returning a sweet smile to every one of Piers's scowls.

It had felt wonderful to escape the atmosphere of suspicion that surrounded her. Out here, there was nobody to watch her every move, or question her motives.

But now she came to think of it, why would her cousin have sent her to pick a bunch of crocuses from the forest at dawn? It was almost as if she had deliberately sent her into danger! But that notion was unthinkable! Too horrible to contemplate. Yet if everyone knew about the alaunts...