

A ROSE OF ENGLAND

~ONE~

FRANCE, JULY 1470

Elizabeth Hardacre snatched an urgent breath into her lungs. 'What if we are seen, Master Higgins?' she asked.

Higgins raised his thick grey brows. 'Seen, Elizabeth? Of course we shall be seen!'

Higgins had misunderstood her, but then he hadn't noticed the man follow them onto the boat at Dover; the man she knew she did not want as a witness.

Higgins leaned into her with the sway of the carriage. 'All will be well, Elizabeth,' he lisped. 'What could be more natural than offering your condolences and the condolences of your king?' He laid a gnarled hand on hers.

Elizabeth drew back from him into the close darkness of the carriage, still unwilling to tell him about the man she instinctively knew followed them to Valognes; the repulsive Higgins could not offer her comfort, only one man could do that and because of Higgins, her family and her own stupidity, she was about to betray him!

The chariot took them through the curling cobbled streets to the exiled Duke and Duchess of Clarence's lodgings. Elizabeth felt sick and not just from the closeness of Higgins; only a few days ago she had told Lord Wenlock, the Captain of Calais, that she was here only to comfort the Duchess of Clarence on the loss of her child and because of Elizabeth's past, Lord Wenlock had believed her! Elizabeth shuddered despite the summer heat; how many more lies and deceptions would there be before she could return home?

As soon as the chariot stopped Higgins opened the door, momentarily blinding Elizabeth with white sunlight. He hurried to confer with a slim man Elizabeth recognized: the Duke of Clarence's steward. She felt for the package concealed beneath her cloak, suddenly feeling its weight as though it would draw her down into Hell.

Higgins returned to the carriage and helped her down from it. The warm summer air was tempered by the smell of damp stone and the thick rich smell of roasting meat, which wafted down from the kitchens.

'Come, Elizabeth,' Higgins said brightly and offered her his arm.

Reluctantly Elizabeth took it, knowing that as they walked across the courtyard each step she took brought her closer to the dénouement of other people's plans she now wished to be no part of.

'We are fortunate, Elizabeth. The Duke of Clarence is at home.' Higgins smiled a lupine smile.

'Fortunate, indeed, Master Higgins,' she said without enthusiasm.

Higgins turned to her quickly. 'How else could your father's death be avenged, Elizabeth?' he asked sharply. Elizabeth sucked in her breath at the mention of her father; it was her promise, made to her father in his final hours, which had set her on this course.

'Elizabeth, answer me!' Higgins pushed. 'You know Warwick was to blame!'

'Does every death need to be avenged, Master Higgins?' she asked. She had once been as sure as Higgins and her family that the Earl of Warwick was culpable, but now, as the moment drew near, she was not so certain.

Higgins stopped walking and Elizabeth stood on the hem of her long gown.

'Christ's wounds, Elizabeth, how can you say such a thing? Your family all spoke as one! You know in this you have their blessing!'

'I know but...' she could not give voice to the doubts that were growing.

Higgins gripped her hand. 'Child, all will be well,' he said with surprising softness. 'I will be near. No harm shall befall you, I swear it!'

Elizabeth wasn't thinking of herself; she was thinking what the consequences might be for others. She drew her gaze up to his. 'Hasn't there been enough death, Master Higgins?'

‘Exactly so, Elizabeth, and the only way to end this is to support King Edward. Only he can bring peace to England.’

Elizabeth fixed Higgins’s eyes; for once he was speaking what he believed to be true. She no longer agreed with him, but what choice did she have?

‘Come, no more of this,’ he said gruffly. ‘Let us go in.’

They turned towards a dark doorway over which the Duke of Clarence’s banner hung, barely tugged by the breeze.

Once they were safely inside, beneath the glow of sooty lanterns, Higgins paused. ‘Let me see the letter,’ he said.

Elizabeth reached under her cloak and tore the flimsy pocket that had weighed on her so heavily. She pulled out the parchment. It felt cold in her hand as she studied the large smear of blood-red wax that bore King Edward’s mark. She handed it to Higgins. As she did so she noticed that there was something else there too. She frowned and Higgins marked her look of concern.

‘What is it, Elizabeth?’ he asked.

‘Another letter for Clarence, from his mother perhaps,’ she said, though the thumping of her heart told her she believed it was something very different. She took out the other letter and turned it over in her hand.

‘Santa Maria!’ she gasped, ‘it is for the Earl of Warwick!’

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‘Please forgive the intrusion, mademoiselle,’ the stranger breathed as he swept an elegant bow in the young servant girl’s direction.

Cheeks flushing, she dropped a swift curtsy. ‘You must be lost, my lord, for the Duke of Clarence’s quarters are across the courtyard.’

The stranger followed the gaze of her wide blue eyes, noting the man and woman as they entered the Duke of Clarence’s apartments, then he turned back to her. He smiled, held her gaze and then brushed a dark curl of hair away from his face slowly. ‘It seems His Grace has enough company, and I would not wish to intrude,’ he said smoothly. He bowed again to her as though she was the Queen of France. ‘Enchanté, mademoiselle. Perhaps we shall meet again? I truly hope so.’ Then he turned and strode away from her. After a few paces he paused and smiled at the girl over his shoulder and her cheeks flamed again.

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‘Why would King Edward write to the Earl of Warwick? Unless...unless he means to offer a pardon?’ Elizabeth asked, staring at the letters as if they were apparitions. ‘Surely he cannot believe Warwick would accept terms so given?’ Elizabeth remembered King Edward at their parting. He had said ‘letters’ but she thought he had meant more than one for Clarence; it had never entered her head that he might write to Warwick too! Yet his seal was unmistakable, as was the name written in a scribe’s clear hand.

Higgins frowned; evidently he was as puzzled as she was by the discovery. ‘What you say would make sense,’ he said solemnly. ‘A pardon. I cannot think what else it might be.’

Elizabeth studied his face. This letter was Higgins’s nightmare too – the last thing he wanted was for Warwick to be pardoned!

‘He must never see it!’ Higgins growled.

‘But what if the letter contains something else – something we cannot discern? Then to not give the letter to Warwick, to deny King Edward the opportunity to score whatever points were intended, well that is... treason.’

‘No!’ Higgins replied. ‘He must not see it!’

Yet the letter gave Elizabeth no less trouble. If she was brave or stupid enough to give Warwick the letter then he would ask her questions she would not want to answer. In short, he would learn of her meeting with King Edward: her betrayal of his cause. But yet the letter bore Warwick’s name, and it was right and proper that he received whatever

King Edward might send, only then would he have the full picture of the situation. She killed the thoughts in her mind. How could she ever see Warwick again? How could she look at his face, knowing that he had failed her and her father as Higgins had said?

Higgins was silent and Elizabeth thought it unusual that he offered no further guidance. King Edward had set them both a riddle that had no easy answer.

‘Come,’ Higgins said, ‘let us finish this.’