

Chapter One

1615

Marie Seton

As I lie on my bed, not far from death, I have asked Sister Agnes to bring me over my journals and my letters, which I have not looked at for so many years. I feel ready to reflect on my long life before I begin my journey into the next. I had just received news that Alexander Seton, now Lord Chancellor of Scotland, is to begin preparations for the royal visit from London to Scotland next year. The plan is for King James and Queen Anne to tour the country, from Dunbar to Aberdeen, presumably at great expense. The King never travels without hundreds of servants and horses and probably the entire Court and its attendant trappings. But my nephew Alexander has never been one to let the mere matter of money get in the way of his great schemes.

I believe he was generously rewarded for his guardianship of Prince Charles who, in his first few years while his parents were in London, was brought up by Alexander at his properties in Scotland, including Fyvie Castle. As well as receiving an annual income, my nephew was also made Earl of Dunfermline. And now that the young prince's elder brother Henry is dead, Charles will be the next king of England and Scotland. How Alexander will be rubbing his hands in glee that he brought up the future King Charles I of Great Britain.

But, as I lie here thinking about my life and my relationship with Alexander Seton and also with his first wife, Lilius, I wonder what would happen if his royal patrons knew what he actually was. Then perhaps he would not be lauded as one of the greatest men in Scotland, one of the finest legal minds and among the

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most gifted patrons of the arts. If only I had the King's ear, as I had his mother's ear during all my many years in her service. His mother is now more often spoken of as Mary, Queen of Scots, even though she was not only Queen of Scotland but also Queen of France, and her name, like mine, was Marie, not Mary.

I sigh as I think back to those times, when I was one of her four Maries, at first her childhood companions and friends in France, then later, at Court in Scotland, her ladies-in-waiting. But whereas the other three abandoned her when their men came courting, I was the one to remain loyal and true, though I too had to leave her shortly before her death. That I regret even to this day.

I force my ancient, arthritic bones upwards in the bed so that my head can rest against the cold stone wall. I pick up my diary and flick back through the pages to those happy times when, instead of wearing this simple habit of coarse grey wool, I would dress in fine Court attire, in gowns of silk and velvet, with gold and jewels woven into the fabric and pearls plaited through my hair, and all of this even more sumptuous and lavish at special banquets and assemblies.

I have a notion to read more about life back then and, in doing so, remember the conversations I'd always meticulously recorded. I had wanted my journal to be not just a written account of what happened, but a memory of all the voices. I inserted comments and addenda along the way in later years. And now I shall listen to them all again, whisperings in my ear of old promises and of secrets and lies.

Marie Seton

The Diary of Marie Seton

March 1565

Mary Livingstone's wedding was a splendid affair. The Queen had insisted the celebrations take place at Court, and she provided a lavish banquet of fine French dishes. The brilliant musicians ensured we could all dance until dawn, as if we were still young girls. She had paid for Mary's wedding dress too, but this was, in my opinion, far too ornate for a mere Marie. It was as if she were a royal bride. John Semphill's face when he saw his bride's gown was a picture. It was almost as extravagant as one of the Queen's own, studded with pearls and flecked with silver.

Our first names are never uttered by her, only our surnames; Mary is the name only to be used by Her Royal Majesty, she insists. And so we follow suit, obediently, though usually we call each other by our French name, Marie. As well as its meaning maid, the other definition of Marie - as a virgin - is also being eroded, as the first of us became married. I for one, however, do not intend to renounce my vow of chastity for any eager man, no matter what his standing. My brother George would not permit my marrying a man of lower status, but when the other Mariés and I had discussed whether John Semphill was of high enough rank for Livingstone, they did not seem to mind. And obviously the Queen did not either, so that was that.

The dancing at the wedding was joyful and raucous and as the day grew into night and more and more candles were lit, the jewelled tassels on the cushions sparkled and the gold thread on the wall tapestries glittered. It was already looking magical and then, just as the servants were refilling our goblets, she arrived. She had evidently decided she would not show up till late - she always liked to make an entrance. If this were anyone else, I might have wondered if it was deliberate, to upstage the bride, but with the

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Queen that was impossible, for she was always kind and loyal to her friends.

We Maries all bowed low, curtsying in our usual manner, with arms spread out as if in supplication. When we stood up tall again, Livingstone gushed with joy and rushed over to embrace her as if she were not just a Queen but a goddess. Then, as the music started up again and the Queen took to the dance floor, everyone gazed at her perfect face, flushed with colour, and at her beautiful purple gown trimmed with ermine, a new arrival from France. The only Marie as tall as she, I had, as usual, been the one to have had the honour to wear it in for her. I admit I did love the soft feel of the fur around my neck; it was wonderfully warm and sensuous.

Perhaps I was also the only one gazing critically at her red, lustrous hair, which would be dull and frizzy had I not attended to it some hours earlier, adding curl and bounce and sheen in the way, as she continually tells me, only I can arrange. Her crowning glory, she always says; well, wasn't that an ironic statement for a royal person? What would she do without me, she insists; yet where would I be without her, my Mistress, my friend, my Queen?

Mary Beaton sat down with a thump on the chair beside me. I smiled at my confidante and looked down at the fulsome figure bulging out of her blue gown. She leant forward to whisper in my ear.

"I can't shake him off. Can you please agree to dance with him?"

I looked around and asked who she was referring to, and she gestured over to a group of men, all white ruffs and glittering buckles and velvet doublets.

"You know, Randolph. "

"Oh, the English ambassador. Well, no, he's not exactly handsome, is he?"

“He’s also ancient. Same age as our parents.” She glanced around. “But it’s not just that: I’m convinced he is courting me to spy on our Queen.”

“Really? I’m sure he wouldn’t dare.” I shook my head and patted her plump hand. “Let’s go outside for a breath of air. I’ve had enough of the revelries for now.”

We descended the narrow stairs in the tower and pushed open the outer door. We looked towards the high crags silhouetted under a star-filled sky and shivered as we walked. The March night was cold and there was a chill breeze in the air. Mary pointed over to the south.

“You know there are some ladies who have climbed up those cliffs?”

“Really?” I said. “Why on earth would a lady want to do that? They’re so steep.”

She shrugged. “To prove to their male companions that they are as good as them?”

“Ha! We know we are – we don’t need to prove it!”

I chuckle as I recall saying that. There I was trying to insist that women were as able as men even though I knew then we were always physically weaker. And now I know we still have no agency, not an inkling of power – unless you are a Queen.

We stood arm in arm and I huddled close into her bosom for warmth.

I took one deep breath then shivered. “That’s enough fresh air now, let’s go back inside.”

As we turned around, we were greeted by two figures leaving the palace. Squinting in the dark, I made out my brother and his son.

“George, is that you?”

He strode towards me and the boy ran alongside. We gathered

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in the courtyard where there was a little light under the flambeau. George embraced me and his son bowed deeply as if before the Queen; he has always been a rather showy child, favouring the theatrical, which of course his royal godmother loves.

"Yes, I was trying to persuade Alexander that it was time he left for Seton Palace, but he is having none of it. Are you, my lad?" He looked down and patted the boy's head.

The lanky boy looked up at Mary Beaton and me and smiled. "Good evening, Aunt Marie. And Aunt Marie!" he sniggered as if he had just thought of the joke. Simply because he is the Queen's godson, he thinks he can get away with anything, and he likes to call all four of us his aunts, even though I am the only one officially qualified for that role.

"Is it not rather late for a ten-year-old to be out in the evening, young man?" Mary asked kindly.

He shook his head. "I'm nearly eleven. Besides, I can stay as long as I like; the Queen said so." He smirked and looked up at his father, whose devotion to his second son was rather too obvious, in my opinion; but what do I know about raising children?

I asked my brother when Alexander was due to go abroad for his education and he answered, with not a little pride, "He will leave in a few months for Rome and the College of Jesuits and then at some stage later, to Paris. It is all arranged. He should be away some ten years in all."

"Ten years! What a long time to be away from the family. And how do you feel about all this, Alexander?" I asked my nephew.

"It is God's will." He shrugged. "I shall learn as much as I can then come back to Scotland and take a wife who will bear me sons. Then I will take over from my father as Master of the Queen's Household."

I remember bursting out laughing. He was so assured for his age and had such ambition for a mere child.

“But surely that role would fall to your elder brother Robert. He is the one who will take over your father’s title, after all.”

The boy’s eyes narrowed. “Robert might become Lord Seton after father’s death, but I shall be a Lord in my own right. You wait and see, Aunt. I am already Prior of Pluscarden.”

“For one so young to be honoured is nothing short of a miracle. He has such spirit, I believe he will achieve something remarkable,” George said, patting his son on the shoulder and beaming with pride.

“But even if you should fulfil this dream and marry, Alexander,” I said, “there is a good chance your wife may also have daughters.” I smiled. “And then what?”

“That, Aunt, will never happen. Only sons can inherit, so what is the point of girls?”

I recall shivering once more, both with the cold and at the boy’s steely resolve. And so I took my friend’s arm and suggested we go inside.

I looked down at my nephew. “I await the next decade with interest, Alexander Seton.”

And under the light of the flame, I saw in his eyes such a look of chilling defiance and determination that I knew he would stop at nothing.