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NORTHSIDE MANOR,  
YORKSHIRE, SPRING 1685

Livia Avery came down the grand staircase of Northside Manor in a tailored black velvet riding habit, her gloved hand lightly on the bannister, the heels of her riding boots clicking on the polished wood. Her husband Sir James, crossing the stone-floored hall, looked up and noted the letter in her hand and the flush in her cheeks.

‘So, you finally get your wish,’ he said levelly. ‘You’ve waited most patiently. It’s been five years since you met the duchess, and now she is queen. I thought you had given up.’

She took a little breath. ‘I never give up.’ She showed him the royal seal.

‘Is it a royal summons?’

‘We can’t speak here!’ she ruled and led the way into the library. Large logs smouldered in the hearth; she undid the mother of pearl buttons on her dark riding jacket and pulled at the cascade of fine lace at her throat. He observed her beauty with nothing but weariness. She was like the classical statues she had dotted around his house and gardens – lovely to look at, but meaningless to him.

She sat in the great chair before the fire, leaning slightly forward, her face glowing in the firelight as if posing for a portrait. Her dark hair was shiny, the creamy skin smooth on her cheeks, a few light lines around her dark-lashed eyes. She waited for him to take his seat opposite her before she would speak.

‘I’m all ears,’ he said ironically.

‘I am summoned to court,’ she breathed. ‘James, Duke of York is to be crowned king, his wife is queen. There is no support for the late king’s bastard. James the Second will inherit without challenge and my dearest friend Mary of Modena will be queen.’ She was as exultant as if she had herself persuaded the people of England to crown the unpopular roman catholic brother to the king, instead of the adored protestant bastard son. ‘She writes that she needs me, she is unwell. I will, of course, obey.’

Still he said nothing.

‘You could come with me? I am to be a lady-in-waiting, we could open Avery House? I could get a place at court for you. This could be a fresh start for us.’

He cleared his throat. ‘I’m not sure that I want a fresh start. I doubt that I’d want anything you can give me.’

Her dark eyes flashed with irritation. ‘You cannot expect me to refuse a royal invitation; it’s practically a command.’

He turned his face from her show of temper. ‘Really? I imagine that you could very well refuse. But I am absolutely certain you have courted her – writing every week, sending little gifts, all your engaging tricks – I imagine you have begged her to invite you. And now: she does.’

‘You should be grateful to me . . .’

‘You can go.’ He had no interest in what she might say. ‘I will send you in the carriage. I imagine you will live at St James’ Palace while they rebuild Whitehall. I assume you will return here when they go to Windsor in the summer?’

‘You agree?’ she demanded.

He shrugged. ‘You may do as you wish. As always. You are aware that the court is famously—’ He broke off, searching for the right word. ‘Extravagant,’ he said. ‘Corrupt,’ he added. ‘Lascivious. But you will not mind that.’

She raised her eyebrows as if in disdain; but her face was pale. ‘You can hardly think that I—’

‘No, I believe that you are quite above weakness. I am quite

sure you will lock your bedroom door in London as you do here. Perhaps there, you will have reason.'

'Of course, my reputation will be without stain.'

'And you should be discreet in the practice of your faith.'

She tossed her head. 'Her Grace – I should say Her Majesty – and I are proud of our shared faith,' she said. 'She will open the royal chapel in St James' Palace. She is appointing the Benedictine order—'

'London will not tolerate roman catholics practising religion in public,' he told her. 'You may attend the queen's oratory inside the palace, but I advise you not to show off in chapels outside the palace walls. There's bound to be trouble, perhaps even worse than we've had already. Their Majesties should be as discreet as the late King Charles.'

'We're not all turncoats!' she flashed.

'I renounced my roman catholic faith to live my life as an English gentleman,' he said steadily. 'The Church of England is my faith; not a failing.'

She thought his whole life was a failure: he had changed his faith, he had betrayed his first love, Livia herself had played him for a fool, and trapped him into marriage for his name and fortune.

'I am roman catholic,' she told him proudly. 'More so now, than ever. All of England will return to the true faith, and it is you who will be in the wrong.'

He smiled. 'I do admire how your devotion increases with the fashion. But you had far better be discreet.'

She looked at the fire, the heavy wooden carving of his coat of arms on the mantelpiece, and then to him, her dark eyes melting, a little smile on her lips. 'James, I want to talk to you about my son.'

He settled himself a little deeper into his chair as if he would dig his heels into the Turkey rug.

'Once again, I ask you to adopt him and make him your heir.'

'And once again, I tell you I will not.'

'Now that I am bidden to court—' she began.

‘He is no more my son than he was before. And I doubt you were bidden.’

‘He has been educated at the best schools in London, he will eat his dinners at the Inns of Court, he is being raised as an English gentleman by the family that you chose for him. You can have nothing against him.’

‘I have nothing against him,’ he agreed. ‘I am sure he is being raised well. You left him with a family of high morals and open hearts. He can visit you in London if you wish – but you may not go to the warehouse and see them, his foster family. You may not disturb them or distress them. That was agreed.’

She folded her lips on an angry retort. ‘I’ve no wish to see them. Why would I go downriver to a dirty wharf? I don’t wish to speak about them, I never even think about them! It is Matteo! We are talking about my son Matteo . . .’ She put her hand to her heart.

Unmoved, he watched her dark eyes glisten with tears.

‘I have sworn that unless you make him your adopted son and heir, I will conceive no other,’ she reminded him. ‘My door will stay locked as we grow old, childless. I will never disinherit my boy. You will never have a legitimate son if you do not first give my son your name. You will die without a legitimate son and heir!’

He barely stirred in his chair, though she had raised her voice to him. ‘You do know that I have rights to your body by law?’ he confirmed. ‘But – as it happens – I do not assert my rights. There was never any need for you to lock your bedroom door. I don’t want to come in.’

‘If you want to live like a priest!’ she flamed out at him.

‘Rather a priest than a fool,’ he replied calmly.

She put her hand to the back of her neck, pinning back one of the dark ringlets that fell over her collar. She made her voice warm and silky. ‘Some would say you are a fool not to desire me . . .’

He looked at the flames of the fire, blind to the seductive gesture. ‘I was led down that road once,’ he said gently. ‘Not again. And you’re what? Forty-five? I doubt you could give me a son.’

‘I’m forty-two,’ she snapped. ‘I could still have a child!’

He shrugged. ‘If I die without an heir then so be it. I will not give my honourable name to another man’s son. An unknown man at that,’ he added.

She gritted her teeth, and he watched her fight her temper. She managed to smile. ‘Whatever you wish, Husband. But Matteo has to have a place of his own. If he cannot be an Avery of Northside Manor then he has to be da Picci of Somewhere.’

‘He can be da Picci of Anywhere; but not here. I have nothing against the boy, and nothing against you, Livia. I acknowledge you as my wife and him as your son. You won my good name when you deceived and married me, but that was my own folly and I have paid for it. Your son will not enter into my estate, but he is free to make his own fortune if he can, or batten off you if he cannot.’

‘If you’re still thinking of her and her child . . .’

His face showed no emotion. ‘I have asked you not to speak of her.’

‘But you think of her! Your great love!’

‘Every day,’ he conceded with a smile as if it made him happy. ‘I never pray without naming her. I shall think of her until I die. But I promised her that I would not trouble her. And neither will you.’