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**Opening Extract from...**

# A Court Affair

Written by Emily Purdy

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# A Court Affair

EMILY PURDY

AVON

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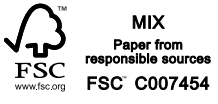
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*Carnal marriages begin in joy but end in sorrow.*

—Sir William Cecil commenting on
the marriage of Robert Dudley and Amy Robsart

# Amy Robsart Dudley and Queen Elizabeth I

*I used to think of her. She used to think of me.*

# PROLOGUE

# Elizabeth

*The Church of Our Lady in Oxford*
*Sunday, September 22, 1560*

I told Kat to fetch a chair and be my dragon, to sit outside my bedchamber door and guard my lair after I was gone.

"Let no man or woman cross my threshold and enter here. Say I have a black and red *beast* of a headache, and any who dare disturb my rest do so at their own peril," I instructed as, one by one, the regal layers of pearl-and-jewel-encrusted, gold-embroidered, white-brocaded satin tumbled to the floor, followed by the cumbersome farthingale, stays as stiff as armour, rustling layers of starched petticoats, bejewelled ribbon garters, and the silk stockings Robert bought me, specially ordered from Spain by the score—twenty pairs at a time, in a typically extravagant gesture—and, lastly, like a bridal veil, a shift of cobweb lawn thin enough to read a book through if the light were good and the ink black enough.

With all my court finery pooled around my naked feet, the jewels on my discarded gown seeming to float like ruby red and sapphire blue flowers upon a froth of rich cream, I stood straight and breathed deeply, stretching my arms high above my head. If Robert had seen me thus, he would no doubt have compared me to Aphrodite emerging newborn and naked from the surf. But I could not think about that now; I could not think about Robert. I took another deep breath before stepping out of the rich, luxurious fab-

ric froth and trading it all for a shirt of unbleached linen and the plain brown leather and cloth of a common man's clothes.

I ignored Kat's concerned queries and anxious pleas as I sat and pulled on the high leather riding boots while she circled and flapped around me like a bird futilely squawking and batting its wings in a gilt-barred cage, pinning my hair up tightly even as she implored me not to do this foolish, insane, and dangerous thing.

The moment my telltale flame-coloured tresses were tucked out of sight beneath a brown cloth cap, I stood and imperiously waved her aside, cutting off Kat's chatter like a headsman's axe with one flourish of my long-fingered, marble white hand. And, in the stark silence that followed, I snatched up the leather gloves and riding crop and headed for the secret door and stairs that descended into my private garden, where I so often walked in the mornings still wearing my nightgown before I girded myself in queenly regalia to face the business of the day, the heavy responsibility of ruling the realm, and feeling, sometimes, like one lone woman against the whole world.

I hugged tightly to the wall as my booted feet felt carefully for each one of the stone steps in the dim and close torchlit stairway. *A staircase,* my mind kept repeating. *It all ended with a staircase. By mishap or murder, it all ended with a staircase.*

A common hired barge waited for me upon the river, then a horse, a fleet bay stallion, muscular and lean, yet another gift from Robert. It was a dangerous and heady sensation to be out in the world anonymous and alone. I, the Queen of England, unencumbered by escorts, chaperones, and guards, was making my way as a lone woman, disguised in male attire, on a secret pilgrimage. *Anything* could happen. I could be set upon by a gang of ruffians or thieves; I could be murdered, or, if my sex was discovered, raped, then left for dead in a ditch, or, my identity unknown or disbelieved if I proclaimed it, forced to live out my days catering to the lusts of men as a prisoner in a bawdy house. Every step I took was fraught with danger, but we were old friends, danger and I; danger of one kind or another had dogged my steps since the day I was born. Safety was a stranger and a state more illusory than real to me. I had outlived the shifting moods and murderous rages of my father, and even when my own sister wished me dead and futilely

and painstakingly sifted the haystack to find a shiny silver needle of guilt with which to condemn me, still I managed to prevail and preserve my life.

I was alive, but another woman was dead—a life for a life. She had died alone and unloved with no one to protect her from danger, to keep Death at the hands of cruel Fate, her own desperation, fatal mischance, or all too human villainy, at bay. That was the reason for my solitary journey; that was why I had stripped myself of my royal persona and raiment and was riding hard to Oxford in a pouring rain that cloaked my sorrow as silent tears coursed down my face.

I was in time to see the funeral procession pass. Mourners, and those just curious to catch a glimpse, lined the roadside and stood bareheaded in the pounding rain, the men clasping their caps over their hearts.

I closed my eyes and thought of Amy, weeping and raging, pounding her fists upon the mattress of the bed she should have been sharing with her husband in a home of her own instead of sleeping in alone as a perpetual houseguest of some obliging friend or gentleman retainer of Robert's, eager to do the high-and-mighty lord, the Queen's Master of the Horse and rumoured paramour, a favour by providing lodgings for his unwanted and inconvenient wife. How she must have *hated* me and raged against the unfairness of it all: at the cancer marring the pink and white perfection of her breast and stealing her life away, sapping her vitality and strength like an ugly, bloated, blood-hungry leech that could never be sated until her heart ceased to beat; at the husband, once so in love with her, who desired her death and might even have schemed to hasten it, so he could have another who came with a crown as her dowry; and at the woman—the Queen—she thought had stolen the love of her life away. She had every reason to be angry, bitter, and afraid, and to hate me.

When the embalmers opened the body of my father's first queen, the proud and indomitable Catherine of Aragon, they found her heart locked in the ugly black embrace of a cancerous tumour. Some took it as a sign that the woman who had used her last reserve of strength to write to my father, *Lastly, I vow that my eyes desire you above all things,* had actually died of a broken heart. Was

Amy's deadly malady of the breast also physical proof of the pain inside it, a visible manifestation of the broken heart of a woman mortally wounded when Cupid's arrow was forcibly pulled out? If that were true, the gossip and rumours were right: we—Robert and I—*had* murdered Amy. Robert had pulled the arrow out, carelessly and callously, leaving her alone to suffer and bleed, while he gave his love to me. And I, a selfish and vain woman, exulting in the freedom and new-come power to control my own destiny, eager for passion without strings, had accepted it, like an offering of tribute and desire laid at the feet of an alabaster goddess.

The black plumes crowning the staves carried by the men who walked before and aft the coffin hung limp and bedraggled, beaten down by the rain, like squiggles of black ink running down a wet page, like the tearstained letters Amy used to send her husband. The eight-and-twenty men—one for each year of Amy's life—who walked in solemn procession, two by two, down that long and winding road, escorting Amy to her final rest, wore long, hooded black robes. I shivered, remembering the letter I had once found on Robert's floor, crumpled into a ball on the hearth. He had flung it at the fire in a fit of annoyance but had missed. He hadn't cared enough to disturb himself and rise from his chair and cross the room to pick it up and feed it to the flames. Instead, he had left it lying there, where any, whether they be servant, queen, or spy in the Spanish Ambassador's pay, might pick it up and read those smeared, hysterical words scrawled frantically across tearstained pages about a phantom friar who haunted Cumnor Place in a grey robe with a cowl that hid his face—*the face of Death!*—in blackest shadows no human eye or light could pierce. *I* know *I have seen Death,* Amy had insisted. *He is stalking me!*

Now, as the church bells tolled mournfully, robed men with hoods that hid their faces in black shadows carried Amy to her tomb on a grey and gloomy day when even the sky wept. The coffin was leaden and heavy, and they took turns shouldering it, those who had borne the burden falling back to walk in seamless step whilst others took their places beneath its weight; it was all done as precisely as military manoeuvres, as perfectly choreographed as a court masque, with not a single stumble or misstep. What little family she had and the women and servants who had borne her

company at Cumnor followed the casket, a few of them weeping copiously and volubly, the others enjoying the notoriety of being, however slightly and momentarily, at the centre of a maelstrom of raging scandal. Each of them was outfitted in new mourning clothes paid for by the absent widower, who remained closeted in his milk white mansion at Kew, feeling sorry for himself instead of grieving for the wife whose so-convenient death he now realised was a grave inconvenience. And a choir of solemn-faced little boys in white surplices brought up the rear, clutching their black-bound songbooks and singing dolefully.

At the black-draped, candlelit Church of Our Lady, as the boy choir sang, the coffin was opened and draped with black sarcenet fringed with gold and black silk, surrounded by candles and mounted escutcheons supporting the Dudleys' bear and ragged staff, and Robert's personal emblem of oak leaves and acorns, and Amy lay in state, to be entombed in the chancel on the morrow.

The Doctor of Divinity, Dr Babington, a round little man with a bald pate ringed by a fringe of grey, and lopsided spectacles slipping from his nose, then came forth to preach his sermon, "Blessed are they who die in the Lord," but few bothered to listen and instead sat in the pews or stood in the back with their heads bent together, gossiping about how Lady Dudley had met her death, by villainy or mischance or, "God save her," her own desperation, and the fact that her absent husband was rumoured to have spent the astounding sum of £2,000 on this splendid funeral, and that not counting the cost of his own mourning garb, which was said to be the very epitome of elegance. But there was a gasp and a lingering, horrified pause when Dr Babington misspoke and recommended to our memories "this virtuous lady so pitifully *slain*". He stood there for a moment with his mouth quivering and agape. "Oh, merciful Heaven, did I *really* say *that*?" he gasped before he hastily continued and completed his sermon in a babbling rush, his face highly flushed as he stumbled and tripped over the rest of the words as though his own poor tongue were falling down a staircase, going from bad to worse with each bump and thump. Then the mourners came forward, in solemn procession, to pause for a moment by the coffin and pay their last respects to Lady Dudley. For those who needed more than a moment, Robert had thoughtfully

provided a pair of impressive—and no doubt expensive—mourning stools fringed in Venice gold and black silk and upholstered in quilted black velvet, placed at the head and foot of the coffin, so that any who wished to might sit and mourn in comfort.

As the mourners filed out, to go and feast at the nearby college and honour Lady Dudley's memory, a plump, greying woman—she reminded me of my own dear old governess, Kat Ashley—her round, wizened face red and swollen from crying, lingered to lovingly lay a bouquet of buttercups upon the coffin before she buried her face in her hands and, her shoulders shaking convulsively with loud, racking sobs, turned away and followed the others out. "Mrs Pirto," I heard someone in the crowd say, identifying her as Amy's maid, who had "loved her lady well and dearly and been with her her whole life long".

When the church was quite deserted, I steeled myself, squared my shoulders, and approached the black-draped bier, supremely conscious of the sound of my booted footsteps upon the stone floor; no matter how softly I tried to tread, they rang like a tocsin in my ears, and more than once I glanced guiltily back over my shoulder as though I were committing some crime by coming here. I knew I was the *last* person Amy would have wanted or expected to come; she would have thought I came to gloat over her coffin, to bask in my triumph, now that she was dead and Robert was free to marry me.

Tall white tapers, arranged like a crescent moon, stood behind the coffin. Had someone known that Amy was always nervous of the dark, afraid of the encroaching shadows and what they might hide, and ordered the candles placed there as a comforting gesture just for her, or was this merely thought a becoming touch, or done for the simple sake of providing light?

Burnished golden curls, perfectly arranged, gleamed in the candlelight, framing her pale face, white as the candle wax. A wreath of silken buttercups crowned those perfect curls; real ones would have soon wilted and withered away within the coffin. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust; so it is in the end for all that lives, from buttercups to beautiful girls too young to die. Who had fashioned that wreath of yellow silk flowers and her hair into those perfect curls? Surely it must have been the devoted Mrs Pirto. I could picture

her, near-blinded by grief, sitting by the fire, tears dripping down onto the gnarled and thick-veined hands that laboriously cut and stitched silken semblances of the yellow flowers that had always been Amy's favourite as a final act of love. Amy loved buttercups; I remembered that from her wedding day, when she had carried a great bouquet of them and worn a crown of them upon her head and had them embroidered in gold upon the creamy satin field of her gown, the very one she wore now. Amy was going to her grave in her wedding gown. Mayhap in death, I prayed, she would find a love better and more worthy of her than she ever found in life.

"Love," I softly mused aloud, "so kind to some, so cruel to others." That fickleness was one of Life's harsh realities that blessed some and damned others.

She was much and sadly altered, though the times I had gazed upon her were scant—a mere three times, twice up close and once from afar—and the difference was startling to behold. The first time I saw her, on her wedding day, I thought this petite, plump, buxom blonde would soon be as round as she was tall with all the children she would bear. I thought surely to hear that she was pregnant every year. With her full breasts and round hips, she looked ripe for motherhood, born for breeding. But it was not to be. Amy Robsart had prospered neither as a wife nor as a woman; even the joys and consolations of motherhood had been denied her. And now she lay pale, wan, and wasted in her coffin, cancer had consumed her curves, and Life and Love's cruelties had taken all the rest. This was a woman whose hopes and dreams had died long before she did.

Her wedding day—that beautiful June day—had been the happiest day of Amy's life. And I had been there to bear witness to it. I had seen the joy alive and sparkling in her blue green eyes, and the radiant smile of pure delight that lit up her face, the love and trust that shone from her, like a sunbeam, every time she looked at Robert. It had felt like an intrusion, almost, to witness it, and I had felt something else: the hard emerald bite of envy when I looked at the bridal couple, resenting them—resenting Amy, to be more honest and precise—for something I could never have and wasn't sure I even wanted. Watching her, I had felt a tug-o'-war within my soul; part of me wanted to be her, yet another part of me obstinately

pulled back, remembering my mother's warning, urgently spoken the last time I saw her, *"Never surrender!"* and in my memory's eye at the foot of my bed the ghost of Tom Seymour, winking and grinning lasciviously, his cock pointing adamantly out at me from between the folds of his brocade dressing gown, before he leapt and pounced on me, the giggling, giddy girl I used to be, writhing and revelling in my newly awakened sensuality.

Now Amy lay in her coffin. The future that had seemed so golden had turned out to be as false as the trinkets the peddlers at the country fairs sold to the gullible, touting them as genuine gold and gems, though they were in truth but glass and tin from which the gold paint would all too soon flake to reveal the base metal beneath. All that glitters is not gold.

Her hands were folded across the bodice of her gold-lace-garnished wedding gown. The vast golden profusion of buttercups embroidered all over the cream-coloured satin seemed to sway as if caressed by a gentle breeze, an illusion wrought by the play of the candles' flickering flames upon the gilded threads, tricking out their shimmer, causing them to appear to dance. How sad that the flowers on Amy's gown seemed to live when she herself lay dead.

Someone—Mrs Pirto's loving hands?—had filled in the low, square bodice with a high-collared yoke of rich, creamy lace veined with gold and topped by a tiny gold frilled ruff to support her broken neck and hold it properly in place. If I looked closely, I could just discern the white bandages beneath, wound tightly—too tightly for life—lending further support to that frail, shattered neck. And, as another remembrance of the happiest day of her life, someone had tied around her waist the frilly lace-, pearl-, and ribbon-festooned apron she had worn over her brocaded satin gown. I could picture Mrs Pirto leaning down as she dressed her lady for the last time, stroking that pale face, tenderly kissing the cold brow, and whispering in a tear-choked voice, "Take only the happy memories with you, my sweet, and leave all the rest behind."

Amy's hands, I noticed then, were nude and nail-bitten, gnawed painfully down to the quick; they must have throbbed and bled. Robert would not want to waste jewels upon the dead; to him that would be the same as throwing them into the Thames. Even the golden oak leaf and amber acorn betrothal ring had vanished, just

like the love it had once symbolised. Where had it gone? I shuddered and hoped fervently never to find it on my pillow or presented to me in a velvet box.

It wasn't right; Amy, who so loved pretty things and delighted in the latest fashions—Robert complained that she ordered as many as fourteen new gowns a year—*should* have something more than lace and flowers, even if they were silken and embroidered.

I took off my gloves and stared down at my hands, perfect, gleaming nails on long white fingers sparkling with diamonds her husband had given me. In my haste, I had forgotten to remove my rings. All save the gold and onyx coronation ring that had wedded me to England were gifts from Robert; he stroked my vanity like a cat and loved to cover my hands with cold jewels and hot kisses.

She really *should* have something! I started to remove my rings, but then I remembered that Amy didn't like diamonds. I could hear Robert's voice cruelly mocking her, calling her a fool, insisting that *every* woman *loves* diamonds and would sell her soul for them, adopting a high-pitched, timorous, quavering parody of a woman's voice, parroting words Amy had once spoken, likening diamonds to "tears frozen in time". Yet somehow now it seemed most apt; Amy herself, at only eight-and-twenty, had become a tear frozen in time.

I took the rings from my hands and, one by one, put them onto the thin, cold, death-stiffened fingers, knowing all the while that not all the diamonds in the world could make up for all the tears that Robert and I had caused this woman to shed. And she had shed tears aplenty—oceans and oceans of tears. She had been drowning in tears for two years at least, perhaps even longer. Robert's love had died long before Amy did. Love is cruel; it kills its victims slowly.

I gave a dead woman a fortune in diamonds, but not even I, the all-powerful Elizabeth of England, could give her back her life or undo the hurt I had caused her. Robert had married her in a flight of youthful fancy fuelled by hot-blooded young lust, a fit of impulsive passion for a pretty country lass of rustic, pure, unvarnished, fresh-faced charm, lacking the hard, sophisticated polish and rapier-sharp or flippant wit of the bejewelled silk-, satin-, and velvet-clad ladies of the court with all their exotic perfumes, ostrich plumes,

intricate coiffures of coils, curls, and braids, artfully plucked brows, rouged lips, and painted faces, a woman he went to bed in love with and woke up to find he had nothing in common with. Robert came to resent and blame her for the rash act that had bound him to her. Though he was quite a prize for a squire's daughter, as a duke's son he could have found himself a far better dowered and pedigreed bride, as his father, brothers, and friends had all tried to tell the deaf-to-reason, love-struck lad of seventeen who was determined to listen to the bulging and throbbing need inside his codpiece rather than good common sense. Robert had married in haste and repented at leisure. And his kindness, often doled out as a careless afterthought, eventually turned cruel as, more and more, he repented his youthful folly, and because of me, a woman he wanted but could not have, a woman who could, if she would, make him king but wanted him only in her own way and would not wear the ring of a subservient wife or bow to any man as her master. Robert thought he could change my mind, and others feared he would, and Amy, like an innocent child wandering into the midst of a raging battlefield, got caught in the cross fire.

I had wanted to protect Amy, though I doubt any would believe that if they knew. And for that I cannot fault them; if I weren't me, I wouldn't believe it either. My failure was a secret I kept locked up inside my heart in my private lockbox of regrets. I could not save Amy from a marriage where love was only in one heart, not in two, and I could not save Amy from cancer, her husband's ambition, or my own cruel, coquettish caprice that kept me dangling myself before Robert as a prize almost within his grasp, which he could even at times hold in his arms and kiss and caress but could never truly win. I played with him like a cat does with dead things, the way I toyed with all my suitors; Robert was unique only in that I loved him. But even though I loved him, I had no illusions about him. My love for Robert, in spite of what others thought, was *never* blind; I always saw him as sharply and clearly as if I were blessed with a hawk's keen and piercing sight. Life long ago taught me not to idealise Love; I leave that to the poets and ballad singers. I learned the hard lessons taught by Love's illusions long ago; I was scarcely out of my cradle before the lessons began. My father and his six wives, amongst them my mother and cousin, whose lives ended upon the

scaffold; my stepfather, Tom Seymour, that handsome and foolhardy rogue who bounded into my bedchamber each morning to tickle and play and teach me anatomy in an infinitely more intimate way than is printed in books; my poor, mad, deluded, love-starved sister, pining her life away for want of Spanish Philip; and my cold and imperious Spanish brother-in-law, who courted and caressed me behind his wife's back, hung my neck with jewels, and even had a tiny peep-hole drilled so he could watch me in my bath and as I dressed and undressed and availed myself of my chamber pot—they were all *excellent* teachers, and all my life I have been an apt pupil, and education doesn't begin and end in the schoolroom.

I will always love Robert Dudley; he has been my best friend since I was eight years old, and would be—if I let him—my ardent lover and husband; but there is something he worships and adores more than England's Virgin Queen—Ambition is his guiding star. I've seen men ruined before by this elusive, tantalising, sparkling star that they spend their whole lives chasing after, leaping and grasping for, sometimes snaring a little stardust but more often crashing empty-handed back down to earth. And Robert, for all his fine qualities—his smouldering dark eyes, his heart-melting, knee-weakening smile, towering height, handsome horseman's legs, and hands both gentle and firm, callous and soft, his intelligence, charm, wit, and passion, his showmanship and debonair flair on the tennis court, dance floor, and tiltyard, his supreme confidence and courage riding to the hunt or charging into battle, his feats of daring at the gambling tables—is still Ambition's catamite and fool.

My eyes are not starry-blind with love for him; romance doesn't soften and tint everything all rosy pink and beautiful for me. I love Robert, but I see him for what he is, and, though I love, I often do not like. There is ice beneath the fire, steel beneath the softness, and the hard armour of cruelty beneath the plush velvet cloak of kindness. I have often wondered if I were a mere woman—a squire's daughter perhaps, just like Amy, instead of England's Queen—would his passion for me have ever flared so high or burned so brightly and constantly? I think not. Or perhaps it is merely that I have lost the ability to believe in anyone's sincerity. I trust no one; I cannot afford to. I am a queen before I am a woman, England *always* comes before Elizabeth, and though there are

times when my passions flame high and I resent and rage against Fate, I will *not* bankrupt my soul or my realm by giving too much of myself to the *wrong* people. My subjects as a whole always come before any individual, and that includes myself. Though I am the Virgin Queen, I regard myself as the mother of many.

There's something in Robert's blood he inherited from his father and grandfather that makes him willing to do *anything,* and risk *everything,* to rise the highest and shine the brightest, to eclipse even Ambition's own lustre and luminescence. But all that glitters is not gold. My mother once spoke those very words to my father when he asked why she preferred the doltish Harry Percy, who was, I have heard, as clumsy as a newborn foal, to the more elegant, polished, and cocksure men of the court.

Robert and I, we are the scandal of the civilised world. There are many who would wager all that they possess that I would have him for my husband and no other. I have at times indeed spoken such words myself to confound and cloud the issue of my refusal to marry; the more perplexed and puzzled my suitors are, the better I like it. Even my cousin, the Queen of Scots, has been heard to quip that the Queen's Master of the Horse murdered his wife to make room for her in his bed. Well, let the gaggles of gossipmongers wager all they wish—*they will lose!* I let them think that, but it was all part of the merry dance and mad whirl that always kept them guessing and wondering as so many men vied for my hand; but though the dance must of necessity go on, it must slow now to a stately pavane from a galloping galliard. I am Elizabeth of England, mistress with no master; I call the tunes, and my musicians play them, and my courtiers dance to them; and so it has ever been and always will be until the day I die. There will be no King Robert I of England, or a king by any other name, in *my* lifetime!

I reached out and gently straightened a ruffle of lace on Amy's wedding apron and tweaked a silk bow, adjusting the sunny yellow ribbon streamers and the strands and loops of tiny seed pearls until they lay just right. I could still smell the lavender and rosemary from when the apron had been lovingly packed away, no doubt with dreams of the daughter Amy longed to have, and of tying it around her waist, with a mother's love and kiss, on her own wedding day. A dream sadly fated never to come true.

At least Robert had not begrudged her her lace. Amy loved lace; she said it was "like wearing snowflakes that don't melt". I hadn't actually heard her say it, only Robert's cruel parody when he slapped his hand against the tailor, Mr Edney's, bill, loudly complaining, "Lace, lace, and more lace!" Laughing at and belittling her. Robert left her alone in the country, foisting her off on his friends instead of giving her a home of her own and children, while he danced attendance on the Queen of England, showered her with jewels, lost hundreds of pounds at cards and dice, spent excessively on his own ornate wardrobe and lavishly laden table, and was known to every moneylender in London, yet he begrudged his wife a few lengths of lace. That was one of the times when I did not like the man I loved.

Sometimes I sent Amy lace and other pretty baubles, trinkets, and tokens in Robert's name—a bolt of bright blue silk the colour of bluebells; a pretty white silk headdress edged with silver braid and embroidered with violets and pinks; a Venetian looking glass framed in enamelled flowers; and dusky-rose-coloured gloves fringed with gold and embroidered with bright pink rosebuds for her birthday. I *knew* he would not deny the gifts; he would rather be worshipped like a gilded god, basking in her humble, loving gratitude, even if it were for a gift he had not actually given. I know something of this too. I am the living embodiment of chaste Diana, the Virgin Queen, a secular Holy Virgin; I am worshipped and adored, the subject of poetry and songs. It would be all too easy to let this adulation go to my head like strong wine, and though some may think I have done just that, I have not, for I also know that no one sits easily upon a throne; for all its gilded, jewel-encrusted glory, it is as insecure as a high, rickety stool with one leg shorter than the rest, and no crown fits so firmly that it cannot be knocked or tumble off. The higher the pedestal, the farther the fall; no one who rises to power should *ever* forget that.

Amy's little notes of love and gratitude were proof Robert could point to that he had always been a good husband. And always I would ponder the perversity that it is often the lot of womankind to give our love to those who are unworthy of it, like my sister, who destroyed herself all for love of Spanish Philip. We do it, I think, because we fear that if we withhold our love, we may never find a

truly worthy recipient for it, so with the largesse of a rich philanthropist we give the precious gold of our affection away rather than be miserable misers and hoard it. What good does a fortune do a spinster on her deathbed? Better to have lived well and spent it. And so we do, we spend our love, though very seldom wisely, and many of us die paupers for it.

Amy's love of lace—"like wearing snowflakes that don't melt"—was just one more of those little titbits Robert's tongue had casually let fall, scornfully, mockingly, or exasperatedly dropped over the years, which my mind had gathered up. As I stood there gazing down at her in her coffin, I staggered under the realisation that perhaps I, Amy's glittering and much resented diamond-and-pearl-encrusted-alabaster-tower-of-confidence-strength-and-pride rival, the woman, the Queen, who all the world thought had stolen her husband's love away from her, had known and understood Amy better than her own husband ever had throughout their ten years of marriage, from the first stirrings of the wolf of lust hiding under the sheep's clothing of love, to the death of that lovely illusion, and the loneliness and hurt, the estrangement, indifference, and callousness that came afterwards.

Robert wanted something he couldn't have, something that was not his right—my crown, to rule England. And I was guilty of the same, of wanting something I couldn't have, that I had no right to, something that didn't belong to me. I wanted a handsome, fun, virile man whose company I could revel and delight in, someone whom I could be free and just be me with, to just be Bess with, not Queen Elizabeth, someone who could never truly hold and chain and enslave me in the bonds of holy wedlock. I wanted to be free, but I wanted love, passion, and excitement; I wanted a lover, not a husband, and certainly not an ambitious schemer after my throne. I had known and loved Robert Dudley since I was eight years old, and I eagerly let myself believe his assurances that he and Amy were estranged, that the love betwixt them had long ago died; I didn't think to look, to inquire, whether there was truth or lies behind his words. And even if I had, would I have released him, would I have let him go? My head says yes, but my heart says no. And a woman lies dead because of this game Robert and I have been playing with each other, this taut and tense flirtation, a wild

dance, a chase, but at the end . . . only Death has made a conquest, a helpless and innocent bystander who unwisely but all too well also loved Robert Dudley, and with more right than I had to, as she was his lawful wife.

We are—we were—a triangle, with Robert at the apex and Amy and I on the sides, but at the bottom, I like to think two arms, two hands, stretched out to form that short, straight line. If I had been kinder and reached out an understanding hand to you, Amy, would you have reached out and taken it, or would you have bitterly, angrily, or fearfully pushed it away? Now, when it is too late to make amends, I want so much to stand before you, a living, breathing woman, not a cold, dead corpse, and touch your chin, to stop its trembling, look into your eyes, glistening like rare blue green jewels beneath the tears, and say, "You don't have to be afraid of me, Amy; you never did." Could I, if I had it to do over again, in all my glittering, regal, emerald green jealous, possessive pride have done that, and could you, timid, hurt, afraid, sick, and lonely, simmering—and rightfully so—with resentment, have believed and accepted? That is yet one more mystery the answer to which we may never know, just like how you met Death and how He came to leave you lying broken at the foot of that staircase. Did He hurl you down violently or lay you down gently? Will we *ever* know?