



The Lacey Chronicles #1: The Other Countess

By Eve Edwards

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England, 1582

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Sparks fly whenever Ellie and Will are together, but circumstances—and the conniving interference of others—threaten to keep them apart.

From the Hardcover edition.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

EVE EDWARDS has a doctorate from Oxford University and thinks researching is a large part of the fun in writing historical fiction. She has visited Tudor houses, attended jousts, and eaten Elizabethan banquets to get the sights, sounds, and tastes right for this book. *The Other Countess* is her first young adult novel.

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1582

"There's no money left," the countess announced, leafing hopelessly through the family accounts. "The harvest returns were not good this year, so we have already run through our reserves."

Will stared out of the window, the tiny panes of glass distorting the forked trees. The snow lay thick on the ground. Deer wandered in the park, undisturbed today by any hunt. His quarry for the foreseeable future had to be coin, not meat.

"What are we to do, Mother? Do we have to bring James and Tobias home?"

The countess rubbed the bridge of her nose, a headache gathering. As Tobias was sharing a tutor at another noble family's house, the fees for her youngest son's schooling were due and James was sending in hefty bills from Cambridge.

"And there's Sarah's future to consider too." Will scratched at the frost on a pane with a fingernail, writing his initials. "Thank God, Catherine's well married, but I still owe Huntsford part of the dowry. He said he'd give us time to pay, but it is a stain on our family if I cannot come up with the rest. He's a good friend--and to be frank, it's embarrassing."

Will turned to glance up at the picture of his father hanging over the fireplace in his study. This is your fault, he thought. If you had paid more attention to your estate and your family, we would not now be in the mire.

Everyone expected him to step easily into the role of earl, but more often than not, Will felt like Atlas, carrying the weight of crushing responsibilities. In his case, the duties were summed up in the title Earl of Dorset; this splendid-sounding noble strutted around keeping up appearances while he, the real Will, staggered underneath the burden, trying to keep his footing. He knew he wasn't up to the task, but had to go on acting the part as so many depended on him. He'd begun to hate this Dorset fellow, whoever he was, and dreamt of casting him off like a snake sheds old skin.

Did you feel like that? he asked the portrait. Was that why you hid in your laboratory and let everything slide?

"Well, my dear," the countess said, pushing the ledger aside, "there is only one avenue still open to us. You must go to court and repair our fortunes. You must either win the Queen's favor or marry an extremely rich young lady."

Amused, Will quirked an eyebrow. "Simple as that?"

"Oh my, that does sound rather mercenary, doesn't it?" admitted the countess. "I meant that you should do your duty by our beloved sovereign and aspire to win the heart of some worthy--"

"I know what you meant, Mother." Will leant against the casement, crossing his arms and ankles, trying to ignore the fact that his hose were darned at the knee. "But I doubt I can afford to make an appearance that would not have our family dismissed in disgrace." He gestured to his outmoded velvet doublet, inherited from his father's wardrobe. "Not exactly the glass of fashion, am I?"

His mother smiled proudly. "My dear, what you lack in clothes you more than make up for in personal attraction, even if I do say so myself."

"And mothers are known for their impartiality?"

"Of course." She rose and went to the iron-bound coffer that stood against one wall. Taking a key from the chain at her waist, she opened the lid and took out a satin pouch.

Will, already guessing what she intended, held his hand out to stop her. "No, Mother, you can't."

"I can. My ruby set; part of my dowry. This should raise at least a thousand pounds--enough to equip England's most handsome lord with enough clothes and staff for his season at court."

A bleak sadness settled like a cloak on his shoulders. "If you sell that, then we really will have nothing left. I thought you wanted Sarah to have it when she gets married."

"I did, but the rubies will be scant comfort to us when we contemplate their beauty and starve this winter with the house falling about our ears."

Will approached her and took the jewels. Leaning down, he kissed her brow.

"I don't deserve you."

She poked his ribs playfully. "No, you don't, you scoundrel. Now go sell those and woo us a pleasant, wealthy girl, someone whom I won't want to strangle within a week of sharing the house with her."

"I'll do my best, Mother," Will vowed. "I'll get us out of this, I promise."

A particularly graphic curse shattered Ellie's concentration. Muttering a mild rejoinder as the word she'd been hunting for floated out of reach, Ellie looked out the window of her chamber, tucked away in an obscure corner of Windsor Castle. Below, the carpenters were preparing the lists for the Queen's jousting competition, the highlight of the St. George's holiday after the ceremony bestowing the Order of the Garter on the sovereign's most trusted men. Sawing, hammering and swearing filled the air, distracting Ellie from the manuscript she was translating for her father. She chewed on the end of her quill as she watched one broad-shouldered laborer strip off his shirt, revealing a torso to rival that of a Greek god.

"Don't wander, Ellie," she chided herself, while sneaking a second look.

The work had been going on like this for the past few days. The Queen and her retinue would be arriving within the week; hundreds of extra people to cram into the castle. The young bucks would be expected to display themselves to advantage on the field of chivalry; the girls to dazzle their suitors with their superior beauty and fine apparel. Youth was in fashion in the court of the aging monarch. Elizabeth's old favorite, the Earl of Leicester, had taken the unforgivable step of marrying; the situation vacant, all the young men were buzzing to court like bees to the honeypot.

Ellie yawned and rubbed her nose, not realizing she was leaving an inky streak across her cheek. It was all so tedious because she was on the outside of the excitement. To enter into the select group of gilded youth you had to have money, or the appearance of it, and influence. A scholar's daughter with a suspect Spanish inheritance was stuck somewhere between the kitchen and the great hall, belonging to neither.

Tearing off a crust from her manchet, Ellie tapped the crumbs so none fell on the page she was painstakingly inscribing. She took pride in her penmanship--very few women could read fluently, let alone write. The Queen could, of course, and Ellie admired her for it, mirroring herself on the monarch's accomplishment of translating one text into three languages while still in the schoolroom. Her own mother, the Lady Marta Rodriguez, Countess of San Jaime, had been a noted poet at the Spanish court--that was what had first brought her to Sir Arthur Hutton's attention and led to their marriage. Her father hoped that the fame of his erudite daughter would sweeten the Queen towards his own pursuits. He had urged to complete her translation of a work by his favorite alchemist, Paracelsus, before the court arrived so he could make a gift of it to Elizabeth. Ellie found the task of translating the old Swiss windbag monumentally boring, and she still had five pages to go. Worse still, she suspected that the Queen would be far less impressed than her father anticipated. Favor was given out for calculated political reasons, not from an overflow of heart.

"Plague upon Paracelsus," she grumbled, picking up her pen again. "May his quill shrivel." Pleased with the mildly obscene curse, she returned to her labors.

From the Hardcover edition.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Linda Yohe:

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